

Hail Mighty Fizgig.

Chapter 1-Payload

Delta's arms clinked as he folded them, a subtle reminder that the arms he'd been born with had been hacked off and replaced with cybernetic implants. They made him stronger, but that did nothing to dull the horror of having lost parts of his own body. Not that he'd had any choice in the matter. None of them had.

"Is the docking complete?" Doctor Reid asked, ducking through the hatch onto the corvette's tiny bridge.

The gaunt man's long blond hair had been tucked into a simple ponytail, and his glasses bore a thin layer of grime. His gaze was even more feverish than usual.

"Almost," Delta said, nodding at the man in the pilot's chair. *Man* was a general term. Martel had been an excellent soldier, but so much of his body had been replaced with cybernetics that very little of the Marine remained.

The view screen showed a cylindrical station, growing ever larger as they drifted toward one of four docking ports. None of the other ports were occupied, which was hardly surprising. Very few people visited mining stations, unless they were doing a quarterly ore pick up. That was part of why they'd chosen this

station, after all. It had just sent its ore back to Corporate three days ago, so it would be off the grid for another three months.

"Docking complete," Martel said. His voice was completely devoid of emotion, his mechanical eyes unreadable as he glanced back at them.

"Okay, let's get this over with," Delta said, suppressing a sigh. He slipped past Doctor Reid, trotting down the metal stairs to the airlock.

His squad was already waiting, two cybernetically-enhanced *things* that had once been Marines. All three carried silenced pistols that fired rubber bullets. They were enough to incapacitate, but not kill. The largest Marine carried a bulky black box with a collapsed hose fixed to the side.

"Follow me," Delta ordered, tapping the red button next to the airlock. It turned green, and slid open to reveal the station's flat grey metal.

Delta tapped the red button in the station's keypad, stepping back as the door slid open to reveal the station's inner airlock. He holstered the pistol that he'd half drawn, breathing a sigh of relief as he stepped into the airlock. It was unlikely that any of the station personnel would have investigated the docking that quickly, but he didn't take

chances.

"Winter, you're on point," he said, nodding to a small man cradling twin pistols.

Winter didn't nod, or acknowledge the command in any way. The Marine simply glided into the airlock, tapped the release button, then stepped into the station's hallway once the airlock door opened. Delta followed, scanning the empty corridor for any threats as they trotted towards the center of the station.

They met no one as they approached the oxygen recycling station--which had been the plan, of course. They'd docked at 2 a.m., station time, for a reason. Most people were asleep, and anyone awake was likely to be too lazy to find out why an unscheduled docking had occurred.

"Deliver the payload," Delta commanded, gesturing at the large oxygen processor in the middle of the room. It scrubbed CO2, then delivered breathable air to the entire station. The processor had multiple redundancies, for obvious reasons. It could detect contaminants, but Doctor Reid had apparently found a way around that.

Winter guarded the door while the thing that had once been Davis attached the hose from the box he'd been carrying. He pressed a blue button on the side, and the box began to whirl.

"How long until they're asleep?" Reid's voice demanded over

the comm.

"Sixty seconds," Delta replied. He pulled his rebreather from his belt, affixing the mask to his face, and watched as the payload left the black box and flowed into the station's air supply.

The Marines around him put their masks on as well. It wouldn't do to be knocked out by their own chemical weaponry.

"Hurry this along," Reid ordered.

Delta ignored him. He might be compelled to serve, but he didn't have to like the guy.

"Winter, take deck one. Davis, you're on two. I want those bodies loaded into the tanks in the next ninety minutes," Delta ordered. It bothered him that both the former Marines were able to keep their names when Reid had deprived Delta of his. Even thinking it would drop him to the deck in writhing agony. He'd learned that the hard way.

Delta ducked out of the oxygen processing room and headed for deck three. Carrying eighty unconscious people to the tanks Reid had set up was going to take the rest of the night. Thankfully, they had plenty of time. It would be weeks before the OFI figured out that something was wrong. Longer, if they were lucky.

Chapter 2- Anomaly

Nolan strode onto the command deck, accepting a tablet from his aide as he approached the half-circle of stations. Each terminal was manned, and all faced a massive screen that covered the entire south wall. A dozen feeds played across the screen, many showing various news stations found on the Quantum Lite network.

"What have we got today, Becca?" Nolan demanded. He trotted down the steps, passing the stations as he approached the view screen.

"Not much in the last six hours, Commander," Becca answered. The stocky soldier leaned over her terminal to peer at him. "There was an anomaly. I'd have ignored it, but you asked us to keep a special eye on the stations in the periphery."

"What have you got?" Nolan asked, setting the tablet on his desk, then turning back to Becca.

"The power usage has dropped forty percent over expected in the last eight hours," Becca said, brushing a lock of red hair from her face. "There could be a lot of reasons for that, but it was one of the metrics you flagged for monitoring."

"Put it up on screen," Nolan ordered, turning expectantly

to the massive view screen.

The screen shimmered, and all the currently displayed data was replaced by dozens of data feeds from the X station, including the one tracking power. That data was normally used for billing purposes by Coronas Corp--they technically owned the station's reactor, and charged residents for power.

"It looks like the power curve has been flat since about ten PM," Nolan said, thinking out loud. He pursed his lips as he studied the data. "Overlay normal power usage. I want to see a graph."

A green line appeared over the red. They paralleled each other from ten p.m. to six a.m., which made sense. People used less power when sleeping, and most people were in bed. The red line stayed flat after that, while the green spiked a little after six a.m. People were waking up, and that dramatically increased the power consumption. That hadn't happened this morning, and Nolan was positive it wasn't a reporting error. He'd seen exactly the same anomaly at the last two stations that had been hit, and its meaning was clear: those people weren't waking up, because they were either dead or taken.

"What is it, sir?" Becca asked. None of the rest of his command spoke, but they were all eyeing him curiously.

"Alert the admiral," Nolan ordered, picking up his tablet

and opening a new document. "Tell him I'll be filing a report within the hour. Coronas station 127 has been hit by the same pirates that took out 19 and 89."

Chapter 3- The Admiral

Nolan rapped three times on the door, though he knew the man inside was already aware of his presence. The security in OFI was beyond top notch; it set the standard the rest of the galaxy followed. Admiral Mendez would have been aware of Nolan the second he left his command deck.

"Enter," called a slightly accented voice.

The door slid open and Nolan stepped inside. He'd never seen the admiral's office, though he'd spoken to him often during the previous year. Admiral Mendez sat behind a massive mahogany desk, flanked by bookshelves. A potted plant sat in the corner, and it looked real from a glance at the soil. There was little in the way of decor, just three Tigris bayonets on one wall.

"I've read your report," Mendez said, gesturing at a chair on the other side of the desk.

Nolan sat, shifting in the too-soft chair. It looked ancient, the type of thing Abraham Lincoln might have had in his office.

"Sir, was there some point in the report that you wanted clarification on?" Nolan asked. He forced his breathing to

remain regular, though he was more than a little terrified to have been called into the admiral's office. The wreckage of careers littered the hallway leading into this room. Admiral Mendez was universally feared among the OFI.

"I want your hypothesis, Commander," the admiral said. He opened the top drawer of his desk and withdrew a thick cigar. Nolan could smell the tobacco from where he sat; it had to be fresh. "Someone is hitting our stations. Why? Human labor is cheap. The sex trade isn't profitable enough. So what makes it worth the expense of outfitting a crew?"

"They're remote," Nolan answered, almost without thinking. He'd been rolling this case around for days, and already had his own theories. "No one goes to most of these stations, except when they're dropping off supplies, or picking up cargo. By the time OFI hears about the attack, they're long gone."

"Yes, but what do they *get* out of it?" the admiral pressed. He snipped off the end of his cigar, and clamped it between his lips. A lighter flicked, and a curl of pungent smoke wafted toward the ceiling.

The admiral's question was a good one, one that Nolan had considered for a long time. "I don't know."

"Then I need you to find out," the admiral said, exhaling a mouthful of smoke.

"Yes, sir," Nolan said, automatically. He paused. "Sir, I'm not sure how to go about that. Our data is limited."

"Extremely limited. I realize that," the admiral said. He leaned back in his chair, studying Nolan. "I'm impressed that you put together the bit about power usage. If you're right, we can get to the stations these pirates are hitting within hours instead of weeks."

"Has a team already been dispatched?" Nolan asked.

"No," the admiral said, tapping ash into an impeccable ashtray. "Because you're on the team. Report to the *Sparhawk*. She's docked in aft. I'm giving you operational authority."

"Sir, I'm not a field agent," Nolan said. He straightened in his chair, wishing the back was more firm. He kept sliding.

"You've had OFI training, and you're obviously a quick thinker," Mendez said. He took another puff from the cigar, then met Nolan's gaze. "More importantly, I trust you. That trust is a rare commodity these days. What I'm about to say doesn't leave this room."

Nolan's heart was thundering. Whatever this was, it was big. "Of course, sir."

"I think there is a rogue agent within the Admiralty," Mendez said. He paused for a long moment, finally speaking again. "I believe this operation is a part of that agent's

agenda. This is our chance to smoke them out. If we can stop whoever is doing this, we may expose the rogue."

Chapter 4- Sparhawk

Nolan ducked through the hatch into the chaos of a busy interstellar port. Dozens of ships were coming and going, ranging in size from tiny four-man corvettes, all the way to capital ships that held thousands of Marines. He hoisted his duffle over his shoulder, and started walking down the wide metal platform ringing the docks. Docking tubes extended from it like the spokes of a wheel, and a steady stream of traffic walked to and from along those spokes, coming and going from the vessels.

It didn't take long to find berth 16, and Nolan caught his first look at the *Sparhawk*. She was a newly-minted vessel, not more than a year out of dry dock. She was Photos class, the most recent to come out of fleet R&D. Her black curves would be difficult to spot against a star field, and she came equipped with a number of stealth systems to aid that.

Nolan walked into the airlock, tapping the button next to the door. It turned green, and the door slid open with a hiss. Nolan entered the *Sparhawk*, which had narrow hallways and low ceilings. He paused as the door hissed shut, listening for any signs of crew activity. Nolan wasn't really sure what to expect.

Photos class vessels were designed to hold a crew of four, but could be run by a single person since most systems were controlled by a virtual intelligence.

"Welcome to the *Sparhawk*," came a pleasant voice. Nolan looked around, and realized the voice had originated from the ship itself. "My name is Em. If you proceed to the CIC I'll introduce you to the commanding officer."

A glowing white arrow appeared on the floor, pointing deeper into the ship. Nolan followed it, staring around him curiously as he threaded down the narrow corridor. This ship was relatively small, but packed with state of the art technology. Whoever commanded it definitely had friends high up in the Admiralty.

The corridor ended in a small room with a narrow table and four chairs. One of those chairs was occupied by a woman with dark, curly hair. A familiar woman. Nolan stiffened as he recognized Kathryn Mendez.

He hadn't seen her since the academy, when they'd been fierce rivals. Kathryn had graduated top of the class, and been give the choice assignment she'd been after. Nolan had risen higher since, hitting full Commander while she was still a Lieutenant Commander.

"Hello, Adam," Kathryn said, coldly. She rose to her feet,

folding her arms across the chest of her fleet jacket. "Welcome to the *Sparhawk*. My ship."

A black screen lit up on the wall next to Kathryn, and a blue holographic woman appeared. She had white hair and digitized skin. The woman waved cheerfully. "We're so pleased to have you on board, Commander Nolan."

"Yes, thrilled," Kathryn said, her tone giving lie to the words.

"Hello, Kathryn," Nolan said, neutrally. "Nice to meet you, Em. Where should I stow my duffel?"

"The bunks are up the corridor, toward the bridge," Kathryn supplied. She studied him with those unreadable brown eyes.

"Great. Let's get underway," Nolan said, inching past Kathryn and into the corridor leading deeper into the ship. There wasn't much to it, just four narrow bunks and a room big enough for a pilot and co-pilot. He dropped his duffel on one of the unoccupied bunks, and slid into the co-pilot's chair. Nolan had never flown, but from what he understood Em would do most of the work anyway.

Kathryn entered behind him, dropping silently into the pilot's seat. "Do you have a destination, *sir*?" The last word was spat with a great deal of venom.

"We're heading to Coronas station 127," Nolan said. He

swiveled the co-pilot's chair to face Kathryn. Might as well get this dealt with. "Listen, Kathryn, I know we weren't friends at the academy. I know you don't like having me on your ship. I don't care. We have a job to do. Admiral Mendez put me in charge. If you have an issue, take it up with him."

"My father wouldn't listen and you know it," Kathryn said, tapping a series of switches on the console in front of her. She wrapped her hands around the yoke, and the *Sparhawk* began inching from the station. "OFI is a boys club, so I'm not surprised he put you in charge. I'm just a little protective of my ship. We've seen a lot, and our record to date is flawless. I just don't want you ruining that."

Nolan gave a soft sigh. This mission was going to be so much fun.

Chapter 5- Coronas 127

"Commander," Em's soft voice echoed through the cockpit. "We're exiting the sun's photosphere and entering the corona now. ETA twenty-two minutes."

Nolan started at the voice, momentarily assuming she was speaking to him. She wasn't, of course. It was Kathryn's vessel, and Em was clearly addressing her. It amused him that the AI respected the chain of command.

"Acknowledged," Kathryn said, releasing the yoke. "Em, take over piloting. Nolan and I have some talking to do."

Kathryn turned expectantly toward Nolan, but didn't say anything.

Nolan eyed her for a moment. "How much did Admiral Mendez tell you?" he asked. He didn't want to assume.

"My father told me that I was to be at dock 16 at 8 a.m.," Kathryn said, mildly. She tapped a button on the console, and the view screen lit up to show the storm of fire they were passing through. "He didn't tell me anything about the mission. Why are we here, *sir*?"

"We're here because the entire populace of stations along the periphery have disappeared," Nolan said, his knuckles

turning white as he gripped the arm of the chair. Kathryn had a gift for pissing him off, but he wasn't going to let her attitude get to him. "Yesterday evening, station 127's power consumption fell outside normal levels. That fits the pattern we've seen at the other ten stations that have disappeared over the last five weeks."

"When you say 'disappeared,' what do you mean?" Kathryn asked.

"The personnel are missing. All of them. Rescue teams have shown up to find each station intact, but no sign of the crew. They haven't found any signs of a struggle either," Nolan explained. "Whoever is responsible for this has a way of subduing the populace without bloodshed. We don't know why, or what they're using the people for."

"Lovely," Kathryn said.

The ship finally emerged from the sun's corona, breaking away from the sea of fire and plasma as they headed toward one of the largest asteroid belts Nolan had ever seen. Millions of rocks floated in a dense cloud, and on the edge of that cloud he could see a large, silver cylinder. Coronas 127, one of the many stations owned by the Coronas corporation.

The station slowly grew larger on the view screen as the minutes crept by. Nolan waited until they were within a few

minutes of docking before speaking. "Em, is there any comm chatter? Are there any vessels in system?"

"Negative," Em said, cheerfully. "We are the only vessel in system, and I detect no communications coming from the station."

"That fits your narrative about station personnel being gone," Kathryn said. Her attention was fixed on the view screen.

"Seems to," Nolan said. On the one hand he was pleased that his theory was correct, on the other he was deeply concerned for the people who'd been taken. "Lieutenant Commander, pick a berth and get us docked. Let's have a look inside and see if the perpetrators left anything behind that might help us identify them."

"Yes, sir," Kathryn said, without sarcasm this time.

The *Sparhawk* drifted closer, finally slowing as it approached a docking tube. There was a gentle thump, then the seal engaged and they were locked into place against the station's hull.

Chapter 6- Mining Drone

"The security footage has been wiped," Nolan confirmed, leaning back in the ripped leather chair. He was staring at the administrator's terminal, a simple computer system. "In fact, all log data has been purged--everything that could be directly accessed from this terminal."

"Are there any other data sources we could check?" Kathryn asked. She was leaning against the corner of the administrator's chrome desk, looking over Nolan's shoulder.

"Not any that would help. It's possible people kept personal logs, but if it were me doing this I'd have wiped those, too," Nolan said, pushing away from the desk. He rose to his feet and walked to the window.

It seemed strange to him that someone would risk putting a glass window on a space station, even if it was ultra-dense glass. But the view was spectacular. Mining drones zipped from the station at regular intervals, little octopus-like craft with spindly arms. Each arm was equipped with a laser drill, and the drones used high-tensile mesh to gather their haul.

One of those drones was approaching the station now, with a full load. It towed a huge black mass behind it, several

thousand credits worth of precious metals embedded in the rock. Nolan watched the drone dock, tapping his cheek with his index finger as he considered.

"Any ideas?" Kathryn asked. "It seems like whoever did this covered their tracks pretty well. Do you have any clues from the other stations?"

"Maybe," Nolan said, absently. He was still staring at the mining drone, which had dropped its payload and was zipping back toward the asteroid field. He turned to Kathryn. "Can you have Em tap into the control matrix for the drones? I want to see if they have internal logs."

"Sure," Kathryn said, though she was eyeing him skeptically. "What are you hoping to find?"

"The drones run continuously, which means some of them would have been in the belt when the station was attacked," Nolan said. "If we're lucky--very lucky--one of those drones may have recorded the vessel that approached the station."

"Good thinking," Kathryn admitted. She tapped the comm on her wrist. "Em, can you tap into all mining drones? I want a compiled file of footage. Run a scan on that data, and see if you can pick up any vessels arriving or departing in the last twenty-four hours."

"Of course, commander," Em's cheerful voice came over the

comm. "Processing. This query will take four minutes to complete."

"Is there anything else you think we can do on the station itself?" Kathryn asked.

"I doubt it," Nolan said. "We had techs go over every inch of each of the previous stations. They didn't find anything of note. The miners were just...gone. Again, no sign of a struggle. No damage to the station. Whoever took the people didn't even bother to rob the miners. Scrip notes were found in many of the miner's quarters."

"Shall we head back to the *Sparhawk*, then?" Kathryn asked.

Nolan considered her question. Was there anything else he could learn here? He looked around the administrator's office, but couldn't think of anything they might find that would be of real use.

"Yes, let's head back. If we're lucky, Em will have something. If not, I guess we head back to OFI headquarters and you get your ship back," Nolan said. He didn't like the idea of returning empty-handed, but what choice did he have? There just wasn't enough data to work with. Whoever was behind this had done a masterful job of covering their tracks.

Chapter 7- A Piece of the Puzzle

The *Sparhawk* was just pulling away from the Coronas station when Em's voice chimed in the cockpit. "All footage from mining drones has been parsed. It appears Commander Nolan's hunch was accurate. One of the drones captured footage of a vessel leaving the station."

"Put it on screen," Kathryn ordered.

The view screen shifted from a view of the sun to a shot of an asteroid. The camera canted crazily, then showed the station. The drone flew closer, and as it approached the station Nolan could see a vessel docked not far from the port they'd just left. It was larger than the *Sparhawk*, though not by much.

"Is that a Venerable class starship?" he asked, leaning a bit closer to the screen. Both the vessel and the station grew larger as the drone flew closer.

"I think it is," Kathryn confirmed. They were both on their feet now, leaning in toward the screen. The level of detail wasn't what he'd have liked, but it improved as the recording continued.

"The colors are off, but that's definitely a fleet vessel," Nolan confirmed. The footage ended abruptly as the drone reached

the station. He turned to Kathryn. "We need to get this back to the admiral. There can't be many Venerable class vessels unaccounted for."

"You're right," she said, nodding. "I have no idea how these pirates got hold of a state-of-the-art Fleet vessel, but that's almost a good thing. It will make finding them that much easier."

Nolan smiled. It wasn't a big piece, but this bit of the puzzle was more than they'd had before. Hopefully it was enough to track the bastards who'd done this.

Chapter 8- Face to Face

Nolan settled into the chair across from the admiral. Kathryn set next to him, studiously avoiding looking at her father. Nolan didn't know much about their relationship, but there was enough tension to make him feel claustrophobic.

"I've had a look at the footage you brought," Mendez said, resting his elbows on his desk. His gaze swept back and forth between them. "The idea that a fleet vessel has been coopted is more than a little terrifying. Fortunately, you were right. There is only one Venerable class cruiser unaccounted for. I've done what I can to secure information on that vessel, but with limited success."

Mendez looked down at his desk drawer, the same drawer Nolan had seen him withdraw a cigar from the last time he'd been in the office. Then the admiral looked at his daughter. He sighed, but didn't open the drawer.

"The cruiser belonged to a Captain Edison. He was working with a geneticist named Reid. The pair were detached from regular fleet operations, but there are no details in the system about what they were investigating," Mendez said. "Three months ago the Starrunner disappeared, and this is where things get

more interesting. Edison reported to Admiral Chu, but Chu never filed a report on the disappearance. He should have raised one hell of a ruckus, but never said a word."

"Is this some sort of black bag op? Sanctioned by OFI?" Nolan asked. He didn't like to think that his own government could be behind these disappearances, but he wasn't naive enough to discount it.

"Maybe. I'll speak to Chu and see what I can find out," Mendez said. "In the meantime, I want you to continue your field operation. You're the best analyst we have, Nolan. I need you to find the pattern we're not seeing. Get to the next station, before Edison. We've got to stop this."

"So you want me to chauffeur Nolan around the galaxy searching for a needle in a haystack of needles?" Kathryn broke in, bristling. She leaned over the table, spearing the admiral with her gaze. "I had cases I was working. Cases that are going cold, because I'm wasting time."

The admiral's face hardened. All he did was stare at Kathryn, but she subsided instantly. "Lieutenant Commander Mendez, your vessel is at Commander Nolan's disposal. You will escort him wherever he needs to go, and you will provide him whatever aid he requires to complete his mission. Am I making myself understood?"

"Yes, sir," Kathryn said, without meeting his gaze.

The admiral turned back to Nolan. "If I'm able to get answers from Chu, I'll be in contact. Before I dismiss you two, there's one more matter I wanted to discuss. This isn't the first incident of the Admiralty covering up something they should have been stopping. It's happening with alarming frequency, and there's only one conclusion I can draw. The Admiralty has been infiltrated. Someone is working for a third party."

Nolan went cold. The Admiralty was the core of the Fleet. Who or what had enough clout to infiltrate them?

Chapter 9- Admiral Chu

Admiral Mendez tapped the ash from his cigar, staring hard at the terminal. The trail was almost invisible, but it was there if you'd spent enough time stalking the data patterns. Too many of Chu's documents had been sanitized. Too much of his budget was obfuscated behind a wall of obviously fake projects. In short, Chu was hiding something big.

Mendez savored a quick pull from his cigar, enjoying the mellow taste of the fine Ceres tobacco. Chu was one of the seniormost admirals. His clout had been waning in recent years, but his connections ran deep. Was he selling them out to line his way to retirement? If so, who would he sell them out to? The Tigris were too aggressive for this sort of tactic, and the Primos just didn't care enough about humanity to do it.

"Clever bastard," Mendez muttered, as he tried and failed to gain access to the details of the project Captain Edison and this Doctor Reid had been assigned to. Chu would see in the logs that Mendez was attempting to access them, which meant the time for stealth was over. He needed to confront the man directly.

Mendez tapped the Contacts icon, then Chu. The Quantum Network logo flashed on the screen. It lasted for several

seconds, then resolved into Chu's leathery face. He wore his usual thick-rimmed glasses, and stared hard at Mendez from countless miles away.

"You're snooping around in my files. Why?" Chu asked, without preamble.

"Because one of your pet projects has gotten out of hand," Mendez replied. He took another puff, drawing the moment out as he watched Chu. There was no crack in the man's composure.

"Let's talk about Doctor Reid."

"I'm not familiar with that name," Chu lied.

Mendez felt the lie to his core. "How about a missing Venerable class cruiser assigned to your command?" he pressed.

"Edison, I believe the captain's name was."

Chu was silent for long moments. Mendez merely waited.

"All right, Mendez. If you're dead set on meddling in this, then I'm willing to bring you up to speed," Chu conceded. "Not over Quantum, though. Come to the Ternis system. I'll explain everything, provided you agree it goes no farther."

"I can't guarantee that without knowing what it is," Mendez countered.

"You'll have to let your conscience decide," Chu said, heaving a long-suffering sigh. "I'm confident you'll do the right thing, once I've shown you the truth."

Chapter 10- Sector 12

Nolan set his coffee on the table next to the holoterminal, then flicked on the power. It showed a three-dimensional logo, then faded to a menu screen. The interface was clean, well-designed, and expensive as hell.

"My father provided some pretty nice toys," Kathryn said, walking into the tiny mess from the cockpit. She sat at the other side of the table.

"I've heard of these, but this is the first time I've used one," Nolan said, swiping at the hologram with his index finger. It slid to the next three-dimensional screen.

"What are you researching?" Kathryn asked.

"I'm hoping to find a pattern in the attacks," Nolan said, finally finding the area he wanted. He touched the screen he was after and watched as the holographic display exploded into a network of stars, creating a cube about two feet across. It was so much more impressive than any two-dimensional map.

"You can do it manually, but there's a much easier way," Kathryn said, giving a half smile. "Em, plot the station attacks on the map Commander Nolan just brought up."

"Of course, commander," Em's voice came from the speaker in

the wall. Red dots appeared throughout the holographic cube, each one with a tiny label showing the station name.

"They're dispersed pretty evenly," Nolan said, leaning up from his seat to peer at the side of the hologram. "No two of them are in the same sector."

Kathryn leaned around the same side of the hologram, peering into the cube. The light reflected off her pupils as she studied it. "You're right. Any idea why?"

"I'm not sure yet," Nolan said. He caught himself looking at Kathryn sidelong, and forced himself to focus on the hologram. "Em, can you put a green dot into the model for every station in the periphery?"

"Done, commander," Em said cheerfully from the wall.

Green dots appeared all over the map. There were about ten times as many as the red, nearly a hundred and forty stations in all. Nolan looked at their placement, considering. "Em, can you highlight the largest area of space unaffected by the attacks?"

The hologram shifted again; this time a blue tinge filled the entire upper right corner. "There have been no attacks in this area of space. It contains four mining stations."

"Which of those stations has been recently re-supplied?" Kathryn asked, half a second before Nolan asked the same question.

"Coronas 6 was resupplied two days ago. Coronas 112 was resupplied eleven days ago," Em supplied.

Nolan met Kathryn's gaze. For the first time she gave a real smile, "I think you've done it, Nolan. That's the station they're most likely to hit next."

"If they continue their current pattern," Nolan said. He sat back down, watching Kathryn while she studied the hologram. She really was beautiful, even if she was a little too hotheaded for his tastes. "Assuming they do, it looks like this would be the last area of space they'd need to hit. I don't know much about this doctor Reid that your father mentioned, but if he's a geneticist then maybe he's running some sort of experiment."

"It makes sense," Kathryn said, brushing a lock of curly hair from her eyes. "Given the pattern of attacks, maybe this doctor wanted a wide pool of test subjects."

"It's the only real lead," Nolan said. "We'll report back to the admiral, and ask how he wants us to handle that."

"Are you sure that's wise?" Kathryn said. "Adam, I know you like to play it by the book, but we don't have time to report back just to get our orders stamped. If we don't get to that station now, it might be too late. This could be our last chance to catch these bastards."

Nolan drummed his fingers on the table. The smart thing to

do was report it to the admiral, but Kathryn was right.

Chapter 11- Chu

Delta settled in at the mess counter, where his men had dined when he'd been the true captain of this vessel. He ate mechanically, spooning brown protein into his mouth. He had no idea what the flavor was supposed to be, but it tasted like leather. Old leather.

He glanced up when Doctor Reid entered the mess. If the scientist had been gaunt before, he was becoming skeletal now. Delta watched as Reid sat next to their Quantum Terminal. The man seemed agitated, and Delta watched him with interest as Reid's call connected.

He couldn't make out the screen, but he recognized Chu's voice. "We have a serious problem, Doctor. Mendez is close to the truth, and he's got the clout to shine a very large light on your activities. You need to get out of there."

"I will not leave before the experiment is complete," Reid snapped. He leaned in close to the terminal. "How long before Mendez can bring official pressure to bear?"

"I've asked him to meet with me first, so we have at least a day," Chu said.

Delta spooned up another mouthful of leather-flavored

protein. Interesting. Someone was fighting back. Delta suppressed a grim smile.

"That will have to do. Where is this meeting taking place?" Reid asked. Delta noticed that the doctor's hands were trembling. Was that rage, or was his condition deteriorating?

"The Ternis system," Chu answered. "We meet tomorrow, at 8 a.m. Fleet time."

"He's coming to your vessel?" Reid asked. His eyes were feverish.

"Yes," Chu confirmed.

"Excellent," Reid said. His grin was ghastly enough that Delta lost his appetite and set the spoon down. "Here is what you will do...."

Chapter 12- Turned

Admiral Mendez actively disliked commanding starships. He shifted uncomfortably in the captain's chair, reaching habitually for a cigar that wasn't there. He still remembered the first time he'd lit one, at Elbas station after the final battle in the eight-year war. He'd driven back the Tigris, and impressed them with his ferocity--enough that they'd called a truce out of respect.

That was over a decade ago. Now he was a tired old man, and he missed his creature comforts.

"Sir, we're approaching the *Ghost*. Shall I provide a boarding escort?" a young ensign asked. The kid couldn't have been more than nineteen. When had Mendez gotten so old?

"Negative," Mendez ordered. He rose from the captain's chair, but managed to resist the urge to pace. "Tell Admiral Chu that he'll be coming aboard the *Juggernaut*. I'll await him in my ready room."

"Yes, sir," the ensign said.

Mendez left the bridge, ducking instinctively as he passed through the hatch. Older vessels were tight enough that you'd bang your head otherwise, but these newer models were a

different story. He didn't need to duck, or scrunch sideways while making his way down the smaller corridors.

Mendez headed for his ready room, sitting down at the desk. He withdrew a cigar from the drawer, but didn't light it. He rolled it between his fingers as he considered. If Chu was unwilling to come aboard the *Juggernaut*, it would mean only one thing: that he was a traitor. If it came down to a fight, Mendez had no doubt he'd win. He knew that Chu knew it was well. The *Juggernaut* would overwhelm the *Ghost*.

Would Chu run? Mendez had no idea. All he could do was wait--so that was what he did. Long minutes passed, but Mendez didn't allow himself any distractions. He didn't surf the Quantum Network, or even light the cigar. He sat in silence, contemplating. It was a ritual he'd perfected over the years. Total focus was vital when dealing with a canny opponent, and he had a feeling that was exactly what he was about to do.

"Sir?" the ensign's voice echoed over the comm.

"Go ahead," Mendez said.

"Admiral Chu's shuttle has docked. Would you like him brought to your ready room?"

"Yes. Have a pair of Marines escort him. They'll be required for the duration of the encounter," Mendez ordered.

"Yes, sir," the ensign said, then the comm went dark.

Mendez waited. A few minutes later, the door slid open and Chu stepped inside. His hat was tucked under one arm, and his uniform had been pressed that morning. He was only one shade away from parade dress.

"Sir?" one of the Marines said through the doorway.

"Wait outside," Mendez said, waving in the Marine's direction. The door hissed shut and Mendez turned to Chu. "Have a seat, Admiral. Welcome to the *Juggernaut*."

"Thank you for agreeing to a face-to-face," Chu said. He set the hat down on the table, the brim facing Mendez, then deposited a data pad next to the hat. "You'll find the details of project Eradication on that tablet. Give it a look, and you'll see why this is such a grave matter."

Mendez set down his unlit cigar, and reached for the tablet, then recoiled when a jet of green gas shot from the brim of the hat. A foul odor washed over his face, and he instinctively inhaled as he pulled back. Mendez stood, sucking in a breath to call for the guards. Then his body betrayed him. He slumped back into the chair, his arms flopping down next to him. His attempt to yell for help came out as a low wail.

Mendez tried to stay calm. He could move his eyes, but nothing else. He tried to understand what was happening, looking for an angle that could save him.

"You're no doubt looking for a way out of your predicament," Chu said, leaning across the desk until his face was mere inches from Mendez's. "You're wondering what I dosed you with, and how long it will last. If you could just move your hand, you could tap the alarm on the bottom of your desk, or maybe knock something on the floor to get the Marine to poke his head inside."

Mendez thrashed weakly, but that was the limit of his defiance.

"I wasn't lying, Admiral," Chu said, giving a slow smile. He pushed the tablet a little closer to Mendez. "The details of Eradication are on that tablet. I also wasn't lying when I said that I was confident you'd do the right thing once you knew the truth."

Chu reached into the jacket pocket of his Fleet uniform and withdrew a tiny vial, no longer than his thumb. He unscrewed the top, then moved around the desk to stand next to Mendez.

Mendez tried to thrash, to struggle wildly. His body twitched, but he couldn't force it into any coherent action. Chu easily restrained him, cupping Mendez's chin in one hand. "Don't struggle, Admiral. This will be over in a moment."

Chu upended the vial into one hand, then pressed his hand against Mendez's cheek. Something cold and slimy began to inch

its way across Mendez's face. It crawled toward his nose, ever so slowly.

"I know you're a man of logic, Mendez," Chu said, stepping back around the desk. He watched Mendez impassively as the creature inched toward Mendez's left nostril. Mendez could see its terrifying grey form out of the corner of his eye, its antenna twitching as it crawled still closer. "You want to know what's happening. The Gorthian larva will connect to your brain stem. When its work is complete, you will be a new man. You'll finally understand the truth, and you'll see what needs to be done."

Chapter 13- Decision

"So what's our destination?" Kathryn asked as she settled into the pilot's chair.

Nolan considered his options one last time. The smart thing to do was still to go back to Admiral Mendez. They could get a detachment of Marines to help them, or just turn over the entire matter. The problem was that in this case the smart thing wasn't the right thing. If they went back to the admiral, odds were good the Coronas 6 would be gone by the time whoever they alerted arrived.

"Plot a course for Corona 6," Nolan ordered.

"Aye, sir," Kathryn replied, without her usual mockery. She gave him a half smile as they powered into the Helios Gate. There was a moment of weightlessness, then they were on the other side.

Kathryn smoothly guided them into the star's core, and they waited for long minutes while the vessel pushed toward the surface. If not for the inductive field, their ship would have been incinerated in an instant. The field drew upon the star's own power, which protected the vessel as it passed through one of the hottest, densest places in the known universe.

The *Sparhawk* finally emerged into the sun's corona, an undulating field of towering flares. Kathryn expertly guided them higher until they broke free of the sun's gravity well. They powered toward a tiny silver speck on the edge of a vast field of asteroids. At this distance, it was indistinguishable from the last station they'd visited.

"Em, are you picking up any comm chatter?" Nolan asked.

"Yes, Commander," Em confirmed. "The station's Quantum Lite network is active. At least one member of station personnel is broadcasting."

"Okay, let's see if we can mobilize this station," Nolan said, turning to Kathryn.

"Do you have a plan?" she asked, blinking.

"If we're right, then odds are good this Captain Edison will be invading with a squad of Marines," Nolan said. He gave a heavy sigh. "Resisting that kind of firepower will be tough, but we may have the advantage of surprise. You're more experienced at field work. Do you have a suggestion?"

"A few, but I need to know what we're dealing with first. Let's alert the station, then we'll see what we have to work with," Kathryn said.

Chapter 14- Coronas 6

The large gunmetal door slid up into the ship, and Nolan's ears popped as the pressure between the sealed airlock and the Coronas 6 station normalized. An oily little man stood waiting, his dark hair styled into something approaching a horn. He rubbed his hands together nervously, giving them a wide and obviously fake smile.

"Welcome to Coronas 6. I am Administrator Bock. So, uh, what brings such esteemed agents to our little station?" Bock asked. His nasally voice added to what Nolan's father would have called a 'very punchable' face.

"I'm Commander Nolan of the OFI," Nolan said, stepping forward and holding up his ident badge. "This is Lieutenant Commander Mendez. We have reason to believe your station is in danger. Do you have somewhere we could discuss this privately?"

The airlock opened up into a docking bay where ships could unload cargo. Nolan realized that at least half a dozen miners were peering at them. One of those miners strode up to the administrator, a shotgun resting on one shoulder as she approached. She wore dirty leather pants, matching boots and gloves, and a jacket older than Nolan.

"Something going on that we need to know about, Bock?" the woman asked. She leaned forward, her eyes locked on the weaselly little man. She spat a gob of something dark near his feet.

"Not at the moment," Bock said, taking a half-step back from the woman. "Annie, as you can see, I need to assist these fine people. Why don't you track me down after--"

Bock trailed off as Annie's free hand shot out and wrapped around his throat. "You wouldn't be trying to put me off again, would you, Bock? You promised me payment, and I ain't seen it for the last two shipments."

"A-are you sure you won't accept Coronas scrip?" he choked out.

"I told you I ain't accepting that pink toilet paper. I want real credits," the miner growled. She released the administrator, but still loomed over him. "Now, you deal with these fine people, and then you come find me. If you don't, I'm going to come find you, Bock."

Annie turned on her heel and strode out of the dock, up one of the airlocks to where Nolan guessed her ship was still docked.

"Please excuse the interruption," Bock said, withdrawing a clean blue handkerchief from the pocket of his vest and mopping at his brow. "If you'll follow me, I'm happy to discuss whatever

business brought you to the station."

Bock turned from the airlock and hurried up a metal stairwell that led to the station's next level. Nolan and Kathryn followed him into a small office, with an appropriately-sized desk just large enough for Bock to squeeze behind. There wasn't enough room for Nolan to sit, so he and Kathryn stood as the door hissed shut behind them.

"Now, what is this danger?" Bock asked. His eyes were wide, and he looked like he desperately wanted to be elsewhere.

"We have reason to believe that a rogue vessel may dock at your station in the next twenty-four hours," Nolan began. He paused, trying to decide how much to reveal. Too much, and Bock might break down. Not enough, and he might underestimate the threat. "We expect a team of Marines to break into your facility. Their likely aim is to abduct all station personnel."

"That's awful. What is the OFI going to do about it? I hope you're not all the help they're sending," Bock said, his voice getting faster and rising half an octave by the end. His eyes were like saucers now.

"We're it, I'm afraid," Nolan said. He glanced at Kathryn. She gave a reassuring nod. Nolan turned back to Bock. "Do you have any weapons? Are any of the miners experienced in combat?"

"Coronas policy doesn't allow us to stock weapons," Bock

said, apologetically. His obsequious nature reasserted itself, seemingly mastering the fear. "The only person who might be able to fight is Annie. She spent time in the infantry, and as you can see she's armed."

"Is there anyone else who can handle a weapon if we provide them?" Kathryn asked. She looked at Nolan. "I have a small armory on the *Sparhawk*."

"There might be a few people," Bock said.

"Gather your personnel," Nolan ordered. "We're going to return to the *Sparhawk*, but we'll be back with all the ordinance we can muster."

Chapter 15- How Many Rounds

"Annie, I want you to take charge of the station personnel," Nolan said, holding Annie's gaze. "Can you handle that?"

"They'll listen to me," Annie said, nodding once. Her tone was loud enough to carry, and she gave a booming laugh. "Firing one of those dinky little handguns you brought ain't that tough. They'll do just fine." Annie's tone dropped to a near-whisper, and her smile faded. "That'll only last until the first one drops. Then they'll scatter like collision debris. You got a plan for when that happens?"

"No," Nolan said, glancing at Kathryn. She was instructing a small cluster of miners how to fire the pistols they'd brought from the *Sparhawk*. Nolan had even given up his sidearm, and was now using a TX-30, the assault rifle of choice for Fleet Marines. He'd never fired one, but he was fairly sure he could figure it out.

Boots pounded down the metal stairs behind him, and Nolan turned to see a young teen sprinting up to Annie. "Ma'am, we got a ship emerging from the Helios Gate. Just left the sun. It's a Vegetable class, like you told us to watch out for."

"Good boy, Tim," Annie said, mussing the boy's hair. "Get back to your quarters, and stay put. Don't come out till someone comes to get you."

Nolan waited until the boy was gone before speaking. He walked to the center of the dock, sucked in a deep breath, then used his best parade voice. "Everyone, *listen up.*"

Miners all around him stopped what they were doing. Kathryn lowered the pistol she'd been holding up for the few she was training. Even Annie stood at attention.

"We've got confirmation that a vessel is inbound. That vessel has nasty intentions for everyone aboard this station," Nolan boomed, turning in a slow circle. "They're going to be well-armed, and some of us are probably going to die. I know that's hard to hear, but you need to be ready for what's about to go down. If you break, if you run when you see someone get shot, then these bastards are going to kill us all. We need to stand together. We have the higher ground, and we have the element of surprise."

"I'm not going to die to protect Coronas equipment," a man called. He was tall, hairy, and not overly acquainted with hygiene.

"You're not hearing me," Nolan said, raising the volume of his voice back to parade level. "These people aren't coming for

your ore. They don't care about this station. They are here for you. We don't know what they intend, but our suspicion is some sort of genetic experiment. Do you really want to find out?"

Dead silence.

Nolan began to turn again, his gaze touching every miner, one after another. "Screw Coronas. Are you ready to defend your lives?"

"Yes, sir," Kathryn boomed. A chorus of miners echoed her.

"Now get to your assigned position," Nolan said, resting the barrel of his assault rifle on his shoulder, just like Annie was doing. "Let's give these bastards hell."

Chapter 16- Complications

Delta rubbed at the scar on the back of his neck, then stopped the instant he realized he was doing it. It happened often, whenever he was about to do something that would have horrified him back when he was allowed to have a name. Like he was doing now.

"Winter, dock on the lower ring, right next to that Photos class ship," Delta ordered. He turned to Reid, who was consumed with his comm. The doctor scrolled through data feeds, ignoring everything around him. "Doctor Reid, we have a situation."

Reid finally looked up. He blinked owlshly, then pasted the usual sneer back in place. "I don't employ you to bring me problems. You exist to solve those problems. So, whatever it is, solve it."

"Doctor Reid," Delta said, rubbing the back of his neck. "There's an OFI boat parked at the station. There's no way that's a coincidence. Someone knew we were coming. We could be walking into a fully-armed Marine squad. At the very least, the populace has been alerted. We won't be able to take them while they're sleeping."

"What are you saying, Delta? That you can't do it?" Reid

said. He rose to his full five foot seven, somehow managing to look menacing. "Storm the station. Kill the defenders. Bring me every last person onboard. Or die in the attempt."

Delta considered arguing. He considered asking Reid to be content with the stations they'd already collected. He didn't, and the reason shamed him: he was afraid. If he argued, then Reid would use the chip, and Delta wasn't sure he could take that again.

"Yes, sir," Delta said. He turned to the three cyber Marines. "Martel, Davis. Heavy load out. If it shoots back, I want it dead."

The two Marines didn't respond, instead turning wordlessly and heading for the armory. Their lack of emotion, or of thought, terrified him. The chip had broken them, and it could break him too. Maybe Reid was giving him a way out here. If he died, he'd be free.

Chapter 17- Chaos

Nolan stared down the sights, aiming the barrel at the airlock door. It wasn't hard to see, as the only light was centered around the airlock. One of Annie's ideas had been to turn off most of the lights. They could see their foes, but their foes couldn't see them. In theory, at least. Marines were canny opponents, and would almost certainly have night vision goggles available.

Metal pinged and popped on the other side of the airlock as the Venerable class docked. It went on for long seconds, and Nolan didn't realize he'd been holding his breath until the sounds finally stopped. He released his breath, trying to focus.

"Get ready," he called, softly. It carried in the gloom. People scuffled around him as they found final cover. He couldn't see them, but hoped they all had their weapons trained on that door.

The station door began to rise, slowly at first, then with increasing speed. It took perhaps two seconds, and the instant the door disappeared hell began. Three grenades came sailing into the darkness, each emitting a hypersonic tone. Nolan scrambled up the stairs, rolling over the top a split-second

before the pulse grenade detonated. Those around him who hadn't moved as quickly slumped to the deck, unconscious.

"Incoming," Annie yelled.

Sporadic gunfire came from the miners. It was answered by concentrated fully automatic fire from within the airlock. Three miners dropped, their bodies jerked about like rag dolls as they fell limply to the deck. Two Marines came striding into the room, both using single shots from their rifles to take down any miner with a gun. If the lack of light hampered them in any way Nolan couldn't see it.

"We have to get out of here. We can make the *Sparhawk*," Kathryn panted, sprinting up beside Nolan. She dropped into a crouch next to him.

"You're right," Nolan said, sizing up the battle. Annie's shotgun had stopped firing, but he couldn't see her anywhere. Everyone else had broken, or been gunned down. "But we're not going to try for her."

Nolan raised his assault rifle, sighting one of the Marines. The deck provided great cover, shielding his profile from the his target thirty feet below. The weapon kicked hard, three times. The rounds took the Marine in the face, and he slumped soundlessly to the deck.

"You're crazy," Kathryn said, but she pivoted to stand on

the opposite side of the stairwell. "Lay down a cover burst, and I'll try to take out the second one."

Two more Marines burst from the airlock. They carried weapons, but weren't firing. Nolan had just enough time to wonder why, but then they dropped out of sight.

"They're going for the station's power core," Kathryn called.

Nolan nodded, let out a burst of suppressive fire. The remaining Marine ducked back into the airlock, presumably to give his companions time to reach the reactor.

"If we don't stop them, none of what we do here matters," Nolan called back. "Do you know of another way we can reach the reactor?"

"The Coronas stations are small," Kathryn yelled. "The only way down there is the way they went."

"All right, into the hole then," Nolan yelled back. He burst from cover, firing another three-round burst at the airlock. The Marine inside returned fire, and Nolan was forced to dive back behind the stairs.

Kathryn used the opportunity, sprinting down the stairs and diving into the hole the two enemy Marines had disappeared into. Nolan waited three agonizing seconds, then Kathryn popped out of the hole and fired into the airlock.

Nolan leapt down the stairs, his attention all on the little stairs she was perched on. They disappeared down into darkness. He skidded across the deck, tumbling down the stairs into a heap at the bottom.

Chapter 18- On Your Feet

"Get back on your feet, kid," Annie drawled from the shadows near him. Nolan rose into a crouch, picking up his assault rifle and scanning the darkness. There was no sign of the two Marines they were pursuing. The corridor ended at an intersection.

"Is there any way to get to the reactor ahead of those two?" Nolan asked.

"That what they're after?" Annie said, a little surprise in her voice. "Won't they die, too?"

"Death doesn't matter. The mission does," Nolan said. His father had been a Marine. He knew how determined they were. "We need to stop them. How can we do that?"

Kathryn's rifle fired above them, the muzzle flashes briefly illuminating the darkness. "Nolan, do you have a plan that gets me out of this stairwell?"

"Annie?" Nolan asked. "Give me something."

"We can trail after them. They need to stop at three different doors to get to the reactor. Opening the last one will take time. They might even have to cut through it. If we can come up on 'em while they're doing that, might be we can gun

them down," Annie said. Smoke still curled from her shotgun, catching the light as it drifted toward the ceiling.

"Kathryn, let's move," Nolan called up the stairs. Then he advanced up the corridor. "Annie, circle around me and take point. You've done that before, right?"

"Son, I was infantry," Annie said, giving him the kind of stare his mother used to when he'd said something particularly idiotic.

Annie plunged into the darkness like a ghost, making no noise as she advanced up the corridor. Nolan followed after, relying on the little bit of illumination drifting down the hallway rather than lighting his flashlight.

He could hear Kathryn pounding down the stairs behind him. She slowed when she neared, then turned around and started inching backwards up the hall. "As soon as he figures out we're down here, that Marine is going to come after us. I'll keep him off."

Chapter 19- Final Confrontation

Nolan pounded down the metal deck, struggling to keep up with Annie as she leapt over a crate. Then she abruptly slowed, and raised a fist. Nolan skidded to a halt, using the crate as cover. There was more light here, coming from the room ahead. Nolan could here a repeating *thrum, thrum, thrum*. Definitely the core.

Annie caught his gaze, beckoning him forward. Nolan moved slowly, careful not to make any noise. He stopped next to Annie, sinking slowly into a crouch. Inside the room, two Marines stood before a door. Both had acetylene torches out, slicing through the dense steel more rapidly than Nolan would have expected. Each worked on his own half-circle, and the torches were about to meet at the bottom.

Nolan raised the butt of his rifle to his shoulder, nodding to Annie. She did the same with her shotgun. Then they both fired. Nolan caught a large black Marine in the back, the rounds pinging off like they'd hit armor. The man was knocked into the door, dropping his torch.

The Marine that Annie had targeted took the slug to the back of the neck. He collapsed wordlessly to the deck. Annie was

already pivoting to aim at Nolan's target, and he reminded himself that he should be doing the same.

Nolan took aim, but his target rolled behind a pile of crates. A second later, he bounded over the top of them like a gazelle, sprinting across the deck toward Nolan. Nolan took aim, letting off another three-round burst. The big black man ducked low, dodging Nolan's shots. Annie's shotgun roared, but the man was blindingly fast.

He took Nolan in the chest with a kick that launched Nolan into the wall. Nolan's head rang, and he fell to the deck. It was all he could do to keep hold of his gun. Then the man was on Annie. He grabbed her by the neck, hoisting her effortlessly into the air. Annie ripped a combat knife from her boot, slamming it into the hand holding her. The tip snapped and the blade skittered off, drawing a line of sparks along the Marine's metal arm.

"He's enhanced," Nolan roared. He brought his weapon up, then took aim at the man's knee. Nolan squeezed the trigger, and the rifle kicked back into his shoulder, three times. The smell of hot gunpowder washed over him.

His aim was good. All three rounds hit the back of the right knee, which wasn't a cyber replacement. It all but exploded, dropped the suddenly one-legged man to the deck. Annie

tumbled down next to him, raising both hands to her neck as she gasped for air.

The Marine rolled onto his one good leg, using it to launch himself into the air. Nolan was dimly aware of blood leaking from the man's stump as he came down on top of Nolan. Nolan was knocked to the deck, the heavier man on top of him. Something slammed into his jaw, and his head rebounded off the deck. Black spots danced across his vision.

Nolan jerked right as a pair of cyber spurs snapped out of the Marine's metallic wrist. The Marine rammed the blades down at Nolan's face, slamming them into the deck where he'd just been. Nolan thrashed, trying to free his rifle, which was trapped under the Marine's good knee. The Marine rammed the blades down again, and this time Nolan screamed as the blades punctured his shoulder, pinning him to the deck.

He fought past the pain, knowing that he was dead if he didn't. The Marine's weight had shifted when he attacked, so Nolan bucked his legs up. The Marine tilted forward, and Nolan's rifle came free. Nolan whipped it up, planting the barrel against the Marine's jaw.

"You're going to want to pull those spurs out of my shoulder," he growled through gritted teeth. His opponent looked like he might try something, but Annie's shotgun cocked behind

him.

"Boy's right. We've got you dead to rights. Get off him, and crawl your crippled ass a pace or two back. Slow, like," Annie said. She took a step back as the big mercenary levered his weight off Nolan.

"I'm not terribly mobile with one leg," the man said, dragging himself back from Nolan. He rested against the far wall. The blades disappeared into his wrist again with a single flick. "Just kill me. Please."

"I'd love to," Nolan said, feeling his jaw with his free hand. "But we need answers. Assuming you don't bleed out, you're the one who's going to give them to us. You have a name?"

Footsteps came pounding up the deck, and Nolan pivoted, raising his rifle. Kathryn trotted into the light, slowing as she reached them. "I got the last one. I think we're clear."

"Annie?" a voice crackled over Annie's comm. It was the boy Nolan had seen earlier. Tim, he thought the boy's name was.

"I told you to stay in your quarters, boy," Annie growled into the device.

"Their ship is leaving," the boy said. "I thought you'd want to know."

"Shit," Annie said, she leaned gingerly against the wall. "Gather up the others, and tell Bock to get any wounded down to

the med center. If he gives you any grief about scrip, you tell him he'll have to deal with me, and he won't much like it."

"You asked what my name was," the man against the far wall said. His teeth were gritted, his fists clenched. He looked like he was battling an immense amount of pain. "It's Edison."

Chapter 20- Celebration

"Y'all done a good thing, here," Annie said, offering Nolan her hand. He took it, and wasn't surprised by how firm her grip was.

"Thank you for your help. We'd be dead right now without you," Nolan said, pumping her hand once before releasing it. He smiled at Annie, clapping her on the back. "We need to get the prisoner back to OFI. Will you be okay if we leave?"

"I'll keep Bock in line, no fear of that. We'll be all right. You do what you have to do," Annie said. She rested the barrel of her shotgun on her shoulder, pulling up her scarf to cover the bruise on her throat. "You ever decide to take up mining, you come on back."

"Maybe I'll do that," Nolan said, giving a quick wave as he headed into the airlock. He waited for it to close behind him, then tapped the red button on the *Sparhawk's* outer hull. The airlock activated, and the door slid up.

Nolan ducked into the *Sparhawk*, smiling in spite of himself. True, Edison hadn't given up anything beyond his name yet. But he would, back at headquarters. OFI was very, very good at prying secrets from people who didn't want to part with them.

"Nolan?" Kathryn called from the cockpit.

"We're clear for take off," he called back, moving into the mess. Edison sat at the far corner, his now-bandaged stump resting on the bench next to him. Nolan sat across from him, making sure he had the big man's attention before speaking. "You feel like talking?"

"Do you have any idea what it's like not to feel pain?" Edison said. He looked down at his stump. "I didn't feel the bullets. I didn't feel my leg being cut in half. I can't feel it now."

"I'm sorry," Nolan said, and meant it. He didn't like having to maim another soldier, no matter the reason. "What can you tell us about this Doctor Reid? That *is* who you work for right?"

"The only pain I feel," Edison said, as if Nolan hadn't spoken. "is the chip. He presses a button, and I flop about like a fish. It lasts forever, and you aren't ever the same after it finally goes away."

"Doctor Reid presses the button?" Nolan asked.

The big man looked up. His dark skin was spattered with blood, but his eyes were calm. "Yeah, that's right. Doctor Reid. He turned my men into monsters."

"Why? Why were you taking people?" Nolan asked.

"We were putting them into tanks. I don't know why," Edison said. He shook his head sadly. "I know it was wrong, but it was the chip. He tortured us for weeks, and...I just couldn't do it anymore. I stopped fighting."

Nolan glanced up as Kathryn ducked into the mess. She sat down next to him.

"So Doctor Reid put them into tanks?" Nolan asked.

"Yeah," Edison said. He refused to meet Nolan's gaze. "We dropped the tanks off at different places, usually another vessel. Once or twice abandoned stations. I don't know who picked them up, or what they were doing."

"Who did Reid work for?" Nolan asked, straightening.

"I don't know, but he worked very closely with Admiral Chu," Edison said, looking up. His cheeks were covered with tears. "Chu knew about everything. He gave us to that monster."

Chapter 21- Hung out to Dry

Nolan was still smiling from his lunch with Kathryn when he reached the admiral's office. It had been a harrowing few days, and they'd earned a little R&R. He'd asked her to spend it together, and she'd agreed. Now he just needed to find a quiet luxury suite.

The door slid open before Nolan could knock, so he entered. He straightened his posture, marching with pride toward the admiral's desk. Nolan faltered a bit when he saw the look on the admiral's face. That scowl dropped the temperature in the room by at least ten degrees.

The doors hissed shut behind Nolan with immense finality.

"Sit down, Commander Nolan," the admiral said. He reached into his drawer, withdrawing a cigar. He made a great production of snipping, then lighting it. He didn't speak again until after he'd taken several experimental puffs. "What made you think it was okay to go to Coronas 6 on your own? You defied protocol, broke at least a half dozen laws, and did several million credits worth of damage to Coronas property."

"Sir, I don't think--"

"That's right," Mendez thundered, surging to his feet. He

pounded the desk, spittle flying as he roared. "You don't think. Not unless I tell you to. You gather data, and you bring it back to me. Or at least, that's what you *used* to do."

"Sir?" Nolan asked, blinking. He struggled to get his brain around what was happening. "We saved those people, sir. We brought back a prisoner who can corroborate everything. We can nail Admiral Chu. Sir."

The rage seemed to leave Mendez. He studied Nolan coldly again, then his eyes narrowed.

"I can salvage your career, but only just," Mendez said. He sat again, taking another puff. Then he shook his head sadly. "I'm going to put it out that you behaved inappropriately with Kathryn. I've already spoken to her, and she's agreed to testify to that fact, if necessary. The alternative is both of you being court-martialed."

Nolan balled his fists and clenched his jaw shut around the words that fought to get out. Then he forced a deep breath before speaking. "You're hanging me out to dry?"

"Would you prefer the alternative?" Mendez said, tapping ash from the cigar. "If I bring you up on insubordination charges you'll be stripped of rank, dishonorably discharged, and possibly imprisoned. You'll take Kathryn down in the process. Would you prefer that route?"

Nolan very nearly said yes. It might end his career, but at least he'd end it with the truth. "Sir, if you put out rumors about Kathryn and I, there's no way my command crew will respect me enough to do my job."

"That's an excellent point," Mendez said, pointing his cigar at Nolan. "That's why I'm relieving you of command, and reassigning you to the 14th."

"The 14th," Nolan said, struck by how bitter the words tasted. The 14th was the home of every malcontent, criminal, and animal the rest of the fleet didn't want. Going to the 14th was exile. There was no coming back from that.

"You'll be made XO of a ship. Not a capital ship, but a frigate or maybe even a destroyer," Mendez offered, his tone suggesting that Nolan should be overjoyed at the news.

"Wherever you see fit, sir," Nolan said. He clasped his hands behind his back and stood at attention.

"This isn't the end, son," Mendez said.

"Sir, may I ask you a question off the record?" Nolan said. He needed to understand why. He'd done everything the admiral asked. What had changed so dramatically? Why had the admiral done it? Why turn on Nolan, when they were on the cusp of catching Chu?

"No, you may not. Dismissed," Mendez said. He turned back to his terminal, and Nolan strode slowly from the office. His career had just joined all the corpses littering the hallway, and he didn't even know why.

Chapter 22- Problem Solved

Mendez waited several seconds after Nolan had departed his office before activating the terminal. He flipped a switch on the tiny black box affixed to the side. The scrambler applied an extra level of encryption. One could never be too careful, especially now that Mendez understood the scope of what they were trying to achieve.

The Quantum Network logo flashed across his screen, then faded to show a warehouse-sized lab. Large rows of tanks filled the background behind Doctor Reid, hundreds upon hundreds of them. Almost all were occupied.

"Ahh, Mendez," Reid said, giving a sickly smile. His eyes were feverish. "Have you dealt with our little problem?"

"It's been dealt with," Mendez said. He took another puff, enjoying the savory flavor. Tobacco had tasted even better since his joining. "Nolan will no longer be a problem. I've discredited him, and exiled him to the 14th."

"You let him live?" Reid roared, his face twisted with rage.

The sudden mood change surprised Mendez. Perhaps Reid's joining had been imperfect.

"Of course I did," Mendez replied. He set down his cigar, leaning toward the screen. "Leave military matters to me, Reid."

Reid closed his eyes, visibly struggling to calm himself. When he opened his eyes, he'd at least partially succeeded.

"Yes, yes, of course. Military matters are yours. Why are you letting him live?"

"Because if I kill or discharge him, it will raise uncomfortable questions," Mendez replied, partially mollified by Reid's change in demeanor. "We have a foothold in the Admiralty, but the situation is delicate. Kelley still wields a lot of power. If we arouse his suspicions, it could lead to discovery. The masters wouldn't be pleased about that."

"No, no, they wouldn't," Reid said, shoulders slumping. "I suppose you did the right thing. What about Delta?"

"Delta works for me now, Reid," Mendez said, something hot flaring in his vision. The way Reid had broken Edison horrified Mendez, even after the joining.

"And what am I supposed to do?" Reid said, petulantly.

"I'm having a new vessel prepared, one that will allow you to capture far more subjects," Mendez said. He picked up his cigar again, enjoying the pungent curl of smoke wafting from the end. "Go to the Ghantan system. I'll have the coordinates sent to you."

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