

When everyone
else dies trying,
they call her



A STAR NATION IN PERIL

ROGUE AGENT

SKYLER RAMIREZ

ROGUE AGENT

A Star Nation in Peril, Book One

Skyler Ramirez

Persephone Entertainment Inc.



Copyright © 2024 Skyler S. Ramirez

All rights reserved

The characters and events portrayed in this book are fictitious. Any similarity to real persons, living or dead, is coincidental and not intended by the author.

No part of this book may be reproduced, or stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, or otherwise, without express written permission of the publisher.

Print ISBN: 9798873660414

Cover design by: Persephone Entertainment Inc.

Published by: Persephone Entertainment Inc.

Texas, USA

Printed in the United States of America

To the readers who made Dumb Luck and Dead Heroes into the successful series it is today. This new book and series, set in the same universe, are for you. Enjoy!

CONTENTS

[Title Page](#)

[Copyright](#)

[Dedication](#)

[Foreword](#)

[Prologue](#)

[Chapter 1 – A New Assignment](#)

[Chapter 2 – Arrival](#)

[Chapter 3 – Making a Plan](#)

[Chapter 4 – Widows and Bombs](#)

[Chapter 5 – Aftermath](#)

[Chapter 6 – Shopping](#)

[Chapter 7 – Pickup Lines](#)

[Chapter 8 – Ambush](#)

[Chapter 9 – Crime Scene](#)

[Chapter 10 – A Fake Marriage](#)

[Chapter 11 – Reopening the Case](#)

[Chapter 12 – The Embassy](#)

[Chapter 13 – The Arms Dealer](#)

[Chapter 14 – Bomb Fragments](#)

[Chapter 15 – The Assault](#)

[Chapter 16 – The Aftermath](#)

[Chapter 17 – Falling Out](#)

[Chapter 18 – Showdown at the Diner](#)

[Chapter 19 – Fleeing the Scene](#)

[Chapter 20 – The Cabin](#)

[Chapter 21 – Trying to Figure It All Out](#)

[Chapter 22 – Murder Board](#)

[Chapter 23 – The Simple Joy of Fishing](#)

[Chapter 24 – Waking Abruptly](#)

[Chapter 25 – Surveillance](#)

[Chapter 26 – The Minister](#)

[Chapter 27 – Movie Night](#)

[Chapter 28 – Terrible Conclusions](#)

[Chapter 29 – An Unlikely Partner](#)

[Chapter 30 – The Body](#)

[Chapter 31 – A Matter Between Friends](#)

[Chapter 32 – Jimmy Goes to the Big City](#)

[Chapter 33 – Absolutely Sure](#)

[Chapter 34 – Taxi](#)

[Chapter 35 – An Old Friend](#)

[Chapter 36 – Showdown](#)

[Chapter 37 – No More Tears Left to Shed](#)

[Chapter 38 – Standoff](#)

[Chapter 39 – Farm Boy](#)

[Epilogue](#)

[Books by Skyler Ramirez](#)

[About The Author](#)

FOREWORD

If you've read [*The Worst Ship in the Fleet*](#) and the rest of the *Dumb Luck and Dead Heroes* series, then you've already met the protagonist of this new series. *A Star Nation in Peril* is the story of Heather Kilgore, Agent of the King's Cross, the same woman who helped Brad Mendoza and Jessica Lin fake their deaths, got high on truth serum with Brad, and... Well, I won't spoil those other books for you in case you haven't read them. **Because, even if you haven't, you can still enjoy this story you're about to read.**

In writing this new series, I asked myself a question. What if you took a competent, intelligent, and generally well-meaning person and put them in the service of a group of people for whom morality was only a construct designed to further their own interests? Heather Kilgore is not a hero. Nor is she a villain. The people she serves—the kingdom she serves—are sometimes the good guys and, at other times, very much the bad guys. You might call Heather an anti-hero. I simply call her human.

So, sit back, grab your favorite beverage (this time of year for me, it's a steaming mug of hot cocoa, marshmallows required), and get ready for a twisting and action-packed adventure that explores what it might be like to be an assassin, spy, and detective all rolled into one.

Like my other books, there is no swearing, nor are there any graphic romantic scenes. I always try to write books that I wouldn't be ashamed for my teenage children to read.

I hope you enjoy this new series! I've sure enjoyed writing it for you.

Thanks,

Skyler Ramirez



PROLOGUE

He knew he was the best at what he did. Sure, there might be others who were marginally better, but he made it a rule never to dwell on that possibility. Because to do so would invite doubt, and doubt would cause hesitation. And in this business, hesitation was the difference-maker. Hesitation meant death.

Like now, as he scaled the side of the building, his adhesive gloves giving him purchase even on the stone façade. Twenty stories up, he climbed, and he never once looked down. Not because of a fear of heights but because looking down would be the same as looking back. Forward, always forward. Looking back served no purpose.

He arrived at the window, the sixth one from the right, twenty-first floor, and stopped. Slowly removing one glove from the building and testing the strength of the other to ensure it would continue to hold his weight, he removed the glove from his free hand using his teeth and reached around to the back of his belt, unclipping the device waiting there.

Forward, no hesitation. He held the device against the window, pressed the large button in the center, and watched it work. There was no sound; cheaper models of the device made a high-pitched whine, but he'd paid extra for the silence. Seconds later, the dim light on top turned from red to pale green, signaling success.

He reached up, grasping the device with his free hand, and pulled. Away it came from the window, and with it, a piece of reinforced glass, cut by the device's precision laser, creating a hole just large enough to allow him entry. He let the piece of cut glass go; by the time someone figured out where the falling glass had come from, he expected to be long gone.

No hesitation. The man levered himself silently through the small hole in the window, his mind briefly registering the thick edges of the bullet-proof but not laser-proof glass. Once inside, he removed the second glove and clipped it on his belt along with the other.

Crouching just inside the window, he surveyed the room, quickly verifying that the floor plan matched the one he'd studied. Satisfied, he crept forward, staying low in the darkness, letting himself blend in with the shadows. Forward; no hesitation. To his left was a door, and he knew his target slept behind it. He let his hand lightly grasp the knob, turning it slowly and silently, not wanting to alert his quarry.

Inside the bedroom, he looked around, seeing no one other than the sleeping form on the bed. Staying on his toes in the soft shoes he wore—perfect for moving quietly through the night—he made his way slowly but surely to the side of the bed. No hesitation, especially now, so close to his target.

With a smooth, practiced movement, he removed the syringe from its place at his belt, readying it for the instant he reached the target's side. From here on was the important part, but also the simplest; he'd already made it around the man's security screen. The target would be dead, and he would be far away, before they even realized it.

He could hear the man in the bed snoring softly and saw the blankets rising and falling slowly in rhythm. The target had the sheets pulled up high, so he reached out and lightly moved them aside just enough to expose the sleeping man's neck. An injection there would work fastest, and until the medical examiner eventually found the small pin prick from the needle, the substance inside the syringe would make the death look natural.

Preparations done, he jabbed down with the needle in a sure, swift movement toward the man's exposed neck. But just before it could pierce the skin, he felt himself seized from behind in an iron grip, his assailant pulling him *and* the needle in his hand back away from the sleeping target.

That's all he had time to register before the blade cut his throat, and the would-be assassin slipped to the hotel room floor, dead.

The man in the bed sat up abruptly, awakened by the dull thud of the body hitting the soft carpet. In the pale moonlight that filtered through the room's curtains, he could see the dark form of the body on the hotel floor but nothing else. Still, he scanned the room, finding no one, but spoke aloud to the empty air anyway.

"A little close, don't you think?"

What looked like a shadow in one corner of the room moved toward him,

slowly materializing into the silhouette of a woman. As she moved through the beams of moonlight, he had the impression of hair the color of flames and a lithe body that would not be out of place on either a magazine cover or a soccer pitch.

“I had to make sure he didn’t hear me coming,” the woman responded. “Sometimes it pays to hesitate, to make sure your footing is sound so that your target doesn’t know you’re there. He got cocky; he assumed he’d already gotten around your entire security team.”

The man in the bed smiled. “Well, given that my entire security team thinks you’re just my girlfriend, it’s no surprise he didn’t expect you either.” The last few words dissolved into a yawn, and he checked the time on his implant.

“Three AM,” he said. “Why can’t you assassins ever pick a more convenient hour to kill somebody?”

The woman gave no response, but he saw her crouch in the dim light and heard her start rifling through the pockets of the dead would-be killer.

“At least it means your mission was a success,” he said in her direction.

“Just a little cleanup to do,” she agreed. “Then we’re done. Agent Lowry should have taken out his handler across town by now as well. That means you’re safe. Mission accomplished. You should be able to finalize that arms treaty with the Koratans later this morning as planned.”

“Which means you’re leaving.” He tried to say it in a flat voice, but it came out slightly petulant, like a child who was being robbed of his favorite toy.

No response from the woman.

“Any chance you could delay your mission completion for an hour or two?” he asked hopefully. “It is quite late—or rather, early—after all.”

He finally heard her react as she let out a long sigh. “And what would that accomplish?” she asked in a low voice. “You’d still be staying here, and I’d still be leaving.” She said it in a matter-of-fact tone, and had he not known better, he might have thought she didn’t care about their impending separation. But he’d learned that this was how she processed emotions she didn’t want to deal with: by suppressing them entirely.

“Stay with me.” The words were out of his mouth before he could stop them—he wasn’t even sure he *wanted* to stop them.

The sounds of her searching the dead man ceased abruptly, and she went so still that, to his eye, she almost blended back into the darkness entirely. Then he saw her stand and move closer to the bed.

“Do you realize what you’re asking?” she said harshly, showing emotion for the first time that night. “What I would be giving up?”

He shook his head, knowing that she could probably see him better than he could see her. “I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have asked.”

“The Order is my life,” she said, her voice softening only slightly. “And even if I wanted out, there *is* no out. That’s not how it works. I explained to you from the beginning that this could never go beyond what it was.” At the last part, her voice took on an angry edge.

“I’m sorry,” he repeated. “I just didn’t know I’d feel this way about you.”

Silence greeted him, but he waited, letting her process. He knew that she could be unbelievably fast in action, her brain somehow seeming to slow down everything happening around her during periods of stress. But he also knew that same talent didn’t extend to her emotions. Those, she needed time to think through.

“I hope you have a nice life, Connor,” she said softly. Then, without further word or sound, she turned and walked from the room. As she left, the moonlight glinted off her face in a way that gave the impression of tears.

Commander Connor Monroe of His Majesty’s Promethean Navy watched her go with a frown. He wanted to leap out of bed and pursue her, but he knew that doing so would never change the outcome. It would just make it harder for both of them. So, instead of running after her, he got up and padded into the bathroom. Soon, his official security detail would arrive to dispose of the dead assassin’s body on his hotel floor. But even after that, he knew he’d get no more sleep today.

CHAPTER 1 – A NEW ASSIGNMENT

Three years later

The man struck quickly, a killing blow aimed at the woman's throat. But when his hand arrived, her throat was no longer there. She had already crouched down, landing her own blow to his kidney, hard, and causing him to grunt in pain.

Still, his body didn't slow down, and he brought his knee up, aiming for her crouched form. But again, she moved faster than him, springing backward and staying low, then launching herself back toward him, a fist driving into his gut and knocking from him the little wind he had left after the kidney blow.

She followed it up quickly with a leg sweep that brought him to the floor, his back landing hard against the barely padded surface. Before he could regain his breath or plan his next move, she was on him, straddling his chest, her knees painfully pinning down his upper arms as her fist moved with lightning quickness straight at his nose... and stopped a mere centimeter away, so close his eyes had to cross to keep it in sight.

"Yield," he said lightly, though the word wasn't needed. It was clear to both of them that she had already won. "You're getting better," he added as she moved off him and then helped him to his feet.

"I've had a good teacher," came the calm response.

He smiled. “A teacher whom you’ve now surpassed, I’m afraid. But I take solace in the fact that I’m old enough to be your father. Still, a year ago, you’d have been the one lying there gasping on the mat.”

Her response was only a returned smile and a nod of acknowledgment. Then she turned and walked to the edge of the exercise area, grabbing her towel to start wiping off the sweat from the exertion of the sparring match. The image of a news report on the viewscreen in the corner of the room caught her eye as she did so.

“What happened at Yolandra?” she asked the older agent-become-combat-instructor.

He grunted. “Convoy attacked, supposedly by pirates.”

She gave him an inquisitive look. “Supposedly?”

He frowned. “They were actually Leeward Republic privateers. Briefing came down this morning. You know, if you bothered to read those, you’d already know all this.”

Shrugging, she didn’t respond.

“Anyway,” he continued. “It wasn’t a simple food shipment from Denton III to Hothan like the news is telling it. The convoy was carrying some very special starship components for the naval shipyards in Kipling. And I mean *special*. Inner Rim parts.”

She actually found herself very surprised by that little fact. It was a well-known reality of humanity that the further away a planet or star nation was from Earth, the further behind it was on technology in general. Sure, every once in a while, some nation in the Outer Rim or even the Fringe had a technological breakthrough, but none of them could come close to equaling the industrial and scientific might of the planets closest to the homeworld.

That fact extended to their militaries as well. Promethean Navy ships were among the most advanced in the Fringe, but if they ever met an Inner Rim ship, they wouldn’t last more than a few minutes. For King Charles to have secured warship components from the Inner Rim—especially given the interstellar arms trade embargos meant to prevent that exact thing from occurring—would have made for a huge shift in the balance of power in this sector. Not even the mighty Leeward Republic could stand against a smaller but more technologically advanced Promethean fleet.

Which is no doubt *exactly* why the Republic had taken the convoy out.

“How did the Reps know where to find it?” she asked the man as she continued to towel off the sweat from her medium-length red hair.

He sighed in frustration. “The *Intrepid* task force was supposed to be guarding the thing, but the stupid vice admiral in charge thought it would be too obvious to provide direct escort. So, he left the convoy alone with nothing but two destroyers and then shadowed it from one jump away. Then, some equally stupid senior lieutenant on one of *Intrepid*’s escorts gave her dad the task force’s itinerary so he could meet her in the Hothan system. It turns out he was a Rep spy, a pretty highly placed one. The rest is history, as they say.”

She frowned. “I hope the King ordered them both killed, the admiral and the lieutenant, I mean.”

He frowned back at her. “You always are quick to judgment, aren’t you? Well, the truth is neither one of them is going to suffer much in the way of consequences. The rear admiral is the Duke of Serravo’s cousin. And the senior lieutenant; well, Naval Intelligence convinced the King it would be better to keep her alive and use her to feed false intel to her father and the Reps. Go figure.”

“Naval Intelligence,” she scoffed. “I’m surprised those idiots know where to find their own bunks. They should have just sent us to kill both those officers and gotten it over with.” She perked up. “Maybe that’s my new assignment. I wouldn’t mind hunting an incompetent admiral and a traitor.”

He laughed lightly. “Always eager. Though if you don’t hurry, you’re going to be late for that new assignment, and then you’ll be in it for sure.”

Checking her implant’s clock and seeing that he was right, she finished toweling off her hair and then quickly tied on her tunic. Bowing to her sparring partner, she turned and left the room without further conversation.

Three minutes later, she was in a far different kind of room. The office was spartan, with carpet barely a thin veneer over the hard concrete floor and nothing at all to hide the industrial quality of the concrete walls themselves. No pictures adorned the space. The man sitting behind the small, utilitarian desk was not the type to keep a vanity wall or any record of an outside life, not that he had one.

“Another training session?” he asked, taking in her flushed appearance.

“How is Rutgers?”

“Feeling his age, now with a few more bruises,” she answered honestly, taking the proffered seat—a hard metal chair like his—across the desk from him.

“We have a new assignment for you,” the man said without further preamble. “Sending you to the Line.”

She nodded, mildly disappointed she didn’t get to go kill the two incompetent officers from the Yolandra disaster. The ‘Line’ he referred to was the Harper Line, a string of systems in disputed territory between her star nation and their primary enemy. The Federated Systems of Prometheus had been in a state of cold war with the Koratan Confederacy for the better part of three hundred years, and the Harper Line, three adjacent systems officially claimed as colonies by both star nations, was a hot point in that otherwise chilled conflict.

No less than four times in the last century, there had been actual fighting on the Line: three naval actions and a ground action on one of the inhabited planets. Luckily, in all four cases, the fighting ended as quickly as it began, with relatively small loss of life and lacking the momentum to spread to other parts of either star nation. But she and the man sitting across from her, more than most, knew just how close the area continuously teetered on the brink of all-out war.

“Who’s the target?” she asked matter-of-factly. Neither of them was much for small talk.

“We’re not sure yet,” he admitted, eyeing her closely. “This is an investigative mission to start. There’s been a death under mysterious circumstances. We need you to go look into it, determine if it was foul play, and prosecute those responsible if necessary.”

She frowned in bemusement. It wasn’t an unheard-of assignment for their Order, but the fact that they were being called in meant that whatever had happened was far beyond the capabilities of local law enforcement or the in-system naval investigators. Either that or the Crown wanted the investigation kept out of official channels for some reason.

“Who is the deceased?” she asked.

He frowned, watching her with his cold blue eyes but not responding for a

few seconds. Then he shoved a folder full of actual physical paper documents across the desk to her, grabbing her attention further. The use of paper meant that the mission was so sensitive that it was not to be trusted to even the most secure electronic channels. In a world where implants were supposedly unhackable, that meant an extremely sensitive set of information.

The red-haired woman accepted the folder without comment, waiting until he nodded consent to open it and examine the documents and photos inside. At the top of the stack was a photo of the victim, and the sight of it made her stop cold.

Noticing her reaction, indeed expecting it, her superior nodded toward the photo. "I recall you protected him from a Koratan assassination attempt three years ago."

"Yes," she answered simply. "That was six months before..." She trailed off, not wanting to finish the sentence, still not *believing* it despite all the evidence.

"Before he defected," the man finished for her. "Before he betrayed Prometheus and joined the Koratans for money." He spit out the last word like it was the vilest reason a person could betray their King and star nation, which she supposed it probably was.

She nodded slowly. "Yes, before all that. Back when he was the principal arms negotiator on the Line. I stopped the assassin the Koratans hired while another agent tracked down and took care of his handler. The failed attempt threw the Koratans off in the negotiation, and Commander Monroe was able to resolve them in our favor, especially once he threatened to reveal news of the attempt to the press." She recited all of this as if it was simply another briefing packet and not as if the man had actually meant anything to her.

But her superior knew better, though he held his tongue for now.

"Dead from a heart attack," she observed next, reading the first few lines of the medical examiner's report under the photo. "What makes us suspect foul play, and why are *we* investigating this? He's not one of us anymore, is he?"

He ignored the small glint of hopefulness that colored her tone, pretending as if he hadn't heard it at all. "No, to answer your last question, he was still very much with the Koratans when he died. And to answer your first question, besides the fact that heart attacks are incredibly easy to fake, it's *where* he

was found dead that makes us think it wasn't from natural causes.

The woman raised an eyebrow and then turned her gaze back down to read the rest of the report. "Hmmm," she said upon finding the information she sought. "What was he doing right outside our embassy?"

"That," the man said somberly, "is what we need you to find out. Along with who killed him, assuming it isn't all just some massive coincidence." His tone made it clear what he thought about that possibility.

"Why me?" she asked frankly. "Is this because of my past assignment with him or in spite of it?"

He regarded her for a moment, in the way he had that sent shudders of apprehension even amongst the group of icy killers he oversaw. This man was, many believed, the third or fourth most powerful in the Kingdom of Prometheus, though few, even in the circles of power, knew his name or face. If anything, that made him *more* powerful; he operated in the shadows and only reported to one man: the King himself.

"I am well aware of the relationship you had with him while on assignment," he said coldly. "Never think that anything you do escapes the attention of the Order. We chose to... overlook your indiscretion because, despite your personal entanglement with the man, your mission was a success. And," his eyes softened only slightly, "because you were young, and even agents of the King's Cross are not perfect."

She nodded, saying nothing in reply but acknowledging both his rebuke and his tacit forgiveness for her error.

"But that is not the reason we are sending you. You are being sent because of this," he said, drawing another printed photo from a desk drawer and sliding it across to her. She studied it, and a lump rose in her throat. "This was found in Monroe's coat pocket," he explained.

She didn't respond, not trusting her voice. The photo was of a small piece of paper with four handwritten words on it: 'Heather Kilgore, find Nightshadow'.

Seeing her reaction, he asked, "Do you have any idea who or what Nightshadow is? Perhaps something from your time together?"

Slowly, she shook her head. "I've never heard the name before, assuming it even is a name. He certainly never mentioned it."

Her superior frowned. “If it were up to me, Agent Kilgore, I would keep you far away from this one. But based on the contents of this note, His Royal Majesty felt differently.” He paused, and she looked up in surprise. The man was the King’s right hand, his most loyal and trusted agent. Their very Order had been established to do the King’s—or occasionally, the Queen’s—will without question. That the head of the Order now would admit, even indirectly, to having a disagreement with His Royal Majesty conveyed the very real depth of the reservations he had about sending *her* on this mission. It was sobering, to say the least.

“Which is why I’m not sending you alone,” he continued. “While your prior relationship with Monroe might help you determine what the man was doing that got him killed, it might also cloud your judgment. To prevent that, I am partnering you with the resident agent on the planet—someone with more experience to guide your efforts.”

“Who?” she asked evenly, though she already had a suspicion, and it was giving her another sinking feeling just to contemplate it.

“Tabitha Lowry,” he said with a finality that brooked no argument. “And I am aware that she was your mentor, that she was your partner on the original assignment with Monroe, *and* of the falling out the two of you had a year later. You are going to have to reconcile with her, at least enough to fulfill this mission. But be careful. Things are especially tense on the Line right now.”

“More so than usual?”

He nodded. “The Koratans have been making more noise than is typical for them. It may be just the usual posturing leading up to their next presidential election in two months, but it might also be more than that. The King has dispatched Second Fleet to Kipling so that they’re within two jumps of the Line. Any closer than that might be seen as an outright provocation, but it will let us react within days rather than weeks if the Koratans try something.”

“And do you *think* they’ll try something, sir?”

He mulled over her question for a moment like it had a sour taste. Then he frowned. “The biggest risk of a conflict that lasts as long as ours with the Koratans without outright fighting, is that it can lure us into a false sense of security. You’ll need to watch yourself while you’re there and do your best not to rile up the Koratans more than they already are. That means keeping a

low profile. Which means you'll need to follow Agent Lowry's lead. Understood?"

Heather nodded, even though the thought of once again being under Tabitha Lowry's thumb was more than upsetting to her. She also bristled at the implication that she needed Lowry's help—or anyone's—to keep a low profile.

"Good. This mission is important, Agent Kilgore. It cannot fail."

Those three words, uttered about *every* mission on which a member of the Order of the King's Cross was dispatched, were no less powerful for their frequent usage. Instead, they served as a reminder that when all else failed, the King's Cross did not.

"I *will* not fail," she said in reply, giving the standard but no less meaningful response.

"A naval transport is departing in two hours for the Harper Line and the planet Hudson. I expect you to be on it," he said, his eyes going out of focus as he started to interface with his implant, clearly moving on to his next bit of business for the day and just as clearly dismissing her.

Heather Kilgore, Agent of the King's Cross, stood from the hard metal chair and, without argument or further question, turned and left the room, the paper file folder held securely under one arm.

She had not allowed herself to think about Commander Connor Monroe for almost three years since the last time she'd seen him. Now, thoughts of the man brought back a confusing flood of emotions as she made her way down the narrow concrete corridors of the 'Dungeon', as some clever person had long since named the secret underground headquarters of the Order of the King's Cross on Prometheus.

Kilgore quickly tamped down the emotions she felt thinking of Monroe, but that allowed her mind to drift to another person. It would be strange to see Tabitha Lowry again. The two once-friends hadn't spoken in two years. They'd only even seen each other on two occasions since then, passing in the Dungeon halls but neither even acknowledging the other. There were few people in Heather's life that she despised more than Lowry.

This mission was going to be complicated.

CHAPTER 2 – ARRIVAL

“Ma’am, we’ll be arriving at Hudson Station in ten minutes.”

The calm, efficient words of the Navy midshipman brought Kilgore from a dead sleep to instant wakefulness. She’d long since mastered the art of waking quickly, with none of the sleep-induced hangovers most people struggled with in the first few seconds or even minutes. It was a requirement for agents to be able to go from rest to action in moments, and it was second nature to her now.

She nodded at the young man, who for a second looked like he might open his mouth to say more. But something in Heather’s expression stopped him, and he hastened down the aisle to wake the transport’s remaining passengers.

Of the thirty-seven passengers and eight crew of the naval transport ship, Kilgore was one of only three civilians. One of those was a naval contractor on his way to consult on the repairs of a heavy cruiser, the *Layton*, that had collided with a micrometeor in Hudson’s outer system. The man was single, never married, and desperately lonely, which he tried in vain to make up for by flirting with the two pretty young ensigns on the transport’s crew.

The second was the wife of a naval officer on long-term assignment to the Line. She was expecting her first child and had decided to finally join her husband, though the baby wasn’t his. He didn’t know that, of course.

Kilgore knew all of this not because she’d spoken to either the man or the woman. Rather, she knew what she did from simply listening. It was amazing how much a person could learn by not talking but instead listening to all that went on around them. She also knew exactly how much money the man had in his bank account, the gender of the woman’s baby, and a whole host of other things that neither of them would have any memory of having spoken

of in the week-long journey from Prometheus to the Harper Line.

As a civilian on the transport, she had to wait to exit until all of the officers were off the ship. It was part of naval tradition, even though, as a member of the King's Cross, she technically outranked *all* of them. Even admirals couldn't issue a command to a member of the Order, and they would disobey one from an agent only at their own peril.

But no one on the transport knew who she really was or what her mission here was. The manifest simply listed her as a consultant for the Navy, a vague enough role that she could craft it into whatever was needed at the moment but specific enough to allow her to use naval resources when necessary and without having to reveal her true identity or position. It was convenient.

What wasn't convenient was that, once the ship had docked with the station and all the officers had disembarked, Heather still sat there. She couldn't actually explain why, but she waited solemnly for the young officer's wife from a few rows back to pass by on her way to the airlock. The woman moved slowly, one hand resting protectively on her showing stomach and a look on her face somewhere between nauseous and terrified.

"He'll find out," Kilgore said as the woman passed by her seat. The mother-to-be stopped and stared down in confusion. "Your husband will find out, eventually," Heather clarified, meeting the woman's startled gaze levelly. "So, you have two choices. Tell him now, and hope he forgives you. Or leave him now. Either way, that's the only way you can avoid months or even years of anxiety until the inevitable reveal that will end very poorly for both of you."

"How?" the flustered young woman asked.

"Not important," Heather replied. "Just some friendly advice."

The woman, still wide-eyed, nodded slowly and then continued on toward the port-side airlock to the station. Kilgore didn't get up and follow immediately. She had no desire to continue the conversation. And, if she was honest with herself, her stalling on the ship had little to do with saving the pregnant woman's sanity or marriage. Rather, Heather herself was not looking forward to who she would meet on the other side of that airlock.

Frankly, she also wasn't all that excited to investigate the death of a man she

had... loved? She'd thought it was love at the time. Walking out of that hotel room three years ago and never seeing Connor Monroe again had been one of the hardest things she'd ever had to do. She'd almost turned around and gone back to the man, even though she'd known what the consequences would have been for that move.

Instead, for both their sakes, she had left without looking back. Then, she'd done her best to forget about Connor and the way he'd made her feel. That got markedly easier when, six months later, he turned out to be a traitor to the Crown. It had made it easier for her to convince herself that none of it had been real.

Sighing, she stood up, gathering her things from the overhead compartment. She only had two bags, a backpack and a small duffel. Heather had learned to travel very light over the years. The only weapons she even carried with her were her knife and a compact silenced pistol. If she needed anything larger, she knew how to procure it at her destination, through legal channels or otherwise.

With a grim expression, she hoisted her backpack on one shoulder and her duffel onto the same, habitually keeping one arm free and making it easy to dump both bags in one fluid motion if it became necessary. Then she squared her shoulders and marched down the aisle, through the airlock, and into the over-circulated air of Hudson Station.

There, waiting for her a few meters from the docking airlock on the station side, was Tabitha Lowry. The older but still attractive brunette woman regarded her soberly, her eyes betraying nothing. Without a word, she turned and beckoned Heather to follow as she led the way deeper into the station.

Kilgore sighed again. This was going to suck.

CHAPTER 3 – MAKING A PLAN

“What do we know so far?” Kilgore asked, her tone as businesslike and neutral as she could make it as the two female agents rode together in the shuttle from the orbital station to the planet’s surface.

“It’s good to see you again, Heather,” Tabitha Lowry said with a wan smile.

“Did the medical examiner find anything that wasn’t in the report?” Heather asked, ignoring the other woman’s statement.

“Heather, Agent Kilgore,” Tabitha said with a small shake of her head, “we need to clear the air and talk about what happened—”

“No, we don’t,” Heather said firmly, unable to keep the anger from her voice. “We have a mission to complete, and we cannot fail. We must stay focused on that.”

Tabitha shook her head again, more emphatically this time. “Sooner or later, we’re going to have to talk about it. We might as well get it out of the way. It will make us a more effective team.”

“Did the ME find anything not in the report?” Heather asked again, emphasizing each word and meeting the other woman’s gaze without flinching.

Tabitha's shoulders slumped. But when she spoke again, her voice was as businesslike as Heather’s. “Nothing. A full tox panel showed nothing in Commander Monroe’s system that could have caused a heart attack. But he did note that there are entire classes of drugs that would metabolize quickly

and leave no trace for him to find. So, it doesn't really tell us anything."

Heather nodded, relieved to finally be focused entirely on the case and to have dodged, at least for now, the more uncomfortable conversation, as if talking about a former lover's death wasn't uncomfortable enough.

"What do the locals think?"

Tabitha's frown deepened. "They don't think anything, officially. Former Promethean Navy officer, defected to the Koratans and thought to be off planet since, shows up dead next to *our* embassy. I've heard the local police precinct has a betting pool on whether we or the Koratans did it, but otherwise, the locals are staying squarely out of it. They've accepted the ME's official findings of natural death and closed the case. Things are complicated enough for them without putting themselves into the middle of this."

That last part was an understatement, Heather knew. Hudson, like the other two star systems on the Harper Line, was claimed by both the Prometheans and the Koratans, though the planetary government officially claimed independent status. Unofficially, the governor had one of the hardest jobs in the galaxy, working to placate two superpowers—by Fringe standards—giving deference to both while desperately trying not to get caught in the middle when the inevitable shooting war came.

Of course, that shooting war still hadn't happened after three hundred years, but that didn't mean it would never happen. But until then, Hudson was one of the few places where Prometheans and Koratans worked shoulder-to-shoulder, sort of. While the higher-ups from each star nation on the Line did their best to ignore the presence of the other, Heather knew that at the lower levels, and even amongst the respective navies, there was quite a bit of 'cultural interchange'. In particular, she'd heard of and had even sat in on a few underground poker games between officers of the Promethean and Koratan navies. The games were friendly, all things considered, but, like everything else on the Line, fraught with subtext and tension.

Tabitha continued. "Luckily, the locals don't know about the note in his pocket, nor do the Koratans; one of our embassy's Marines found that when they stumbled upon the body and gave the note to the deputy ambassador. Not that your name would mean anything to the locals, but it might have still complicated matters. Funny that after all these years, he had your name on

him when he died.”

“What about the Koratan investigation?” Heather asked, ignoring the other agent’s implied question.

“Ongoing, like ours,” Tabitha answered. “Their embassy issued an official statement acknowledging the local ME’s findings and expressing their dismay and sympathy at the death, just like ours, but they’ve got people working it in the background as well.”

Kilgore nodded; she had expected as much. “Any idea of *who* they’ve got on it?”

Lowry shook her head. “They’ve been cagey about it thus far. They haven’t made any overt moves that tell me who they’ve got assigned, though there’s an unsubstantiated rumor that the Guard has a new resource on planet.”

Heather felt herself let out a deep breath. That was bad news, if not unexpected. Just like the Order of the King’s Cross was the shadowy arm of King Charles himself, the Koratan Confederate Guard was the more-or-less personal assassination and espionage force of their president, Francisco Ignacio Juarez. Heather had never clashed directly with the Guard, but she’d spoken with a few agents who had, and the story was of agents trained *almost* as well as those of the King’s Cross, and it wasn’t certain to Heather how much of that ‘almost’ was institutional pride versus actual inferiority on the part of the Guard.

“So, where do we start?” she asked her former mentor.

“Well, unless you have some sort of information you’re not sharing on this Nightshadow Monroe’s note mentioned...” She paused, studying Heather, but the younger woman just gave a small shake of her head. “Then I suggest we start with the man’s widow,” Tabitha finished, her voice neutral. As the senior partner by command of the Order, she actually didn’t need to ‘suggest’ anything to Kilgore, but Lowry always had been very diplomatic, something that had never quite rubbed off on her brash mentee.

Still, Heather looked at her sharply. “You haven’t done that yet?”

“I thought it prudent to wait for you.”

“Thanks,” Heather bit off, failing to keep the sarcasm out of her voice. Had Tabitha really been sitting on her hands the entire three weeks since Connor’s death, simply waiting for Heather to arrive? If so, it would be out of character

for the woman Kilgore had once known and called friend. Lowry had always been thorough, if nothing else.

She checked her implant to see it was late morning in the planet's capital.
“We'd better get going as soon as we land then.”

CHAPTER 4 – WIDOWS AND BOMBS

Connor Monroe's widow lived in a high-rise near the center of Hudson Yard, the planet's capital city. Records showed that she and her husband had only moved into the building a month ago, just a week before his death. Prior to that, it was believed by crack agents of the Promethean Security Service—ProSec for short—that the two had been living somewhere in the Confederacy, as if that were unexpected in any way. Still, no one knew better than intel weenies how to take an obvious conclusion and package it up in sixty-four pages of self-congratulating fluff. It was one of the reasons Heather hated reading the endless stream of intelligence briefings made available to the Order.

Monroe's widow herself was Koratan, and she'd only been married to Connor for a year prior to him moving himself and her back to the Line, though their purposes for returning to the scene of his betrayal were unknown, especially given the risk he incurred in doing so.

Luisa Monroe was a short, pretty Latina woman with a tiny waist above round hips that sashayed when she walked. She sat Heather and Tabitha down and insisted on making them cups of coffee before they got down to business. Based on the redness around her eyes, she was still very much mourning her husband, and it seemed the serving of guests gave her an excuse to turn her mind to other things, so the two agents allowed it.

Of course, they both surreptitiously ran scanners over their steaming cups to check for unexpected substances before they took a sip. Even when the scans came up negative, by unspoken agreement, Tabitha waited about a minute after Heather sampled hers with no ill consequences before taking her first

sip.

“I still can’t believe he’s gone,” Luisa Monroe said, dabbing her cheeks with tissues to soak up the tears that started falling the second she finished serving the coffee and sat down to get to the reason for their visit. “I keep expecting him to walk out of his home office and come talk to me in the kitchen like we used to do.”

Heather set down her cup of coffee, trying hard to keep a sympathetic look on her face and not let her suspicion show. For all they knew, Luisa herself had killed Connor Monroe, and until they knew differently, she was just as suspect as anyone else. Maybe even more so.

“How much did you know about your husband’s past?” she asked carefully, drawing a sharp look from Tabitha. But then again, the older woman always had favored a less direct approach than Heather. Too bad.

Luisa frowned. “If you’re asking if I knew he was a former Promethean Naval officer who defected to Koratas, then of course I knew. Connor kept no secrets from me, nor I from him. I knew all about his past.”

That was surprising, but Heather didn’t let it show. “Why did he risk coming back to the Harper Line?” she asked next.

Luisa’s frown turned to a grimace as she looked over at Tabitha and then back at Heather. “That I admit, I am less clear on. He would only tell me that there was something he needed to do here. We rented this place on a monthly basis because he wasn’t sure how long we would be staying.”

There was a tickling feeling in the back of Heather’s mind suggesting to her that the woman knew more than she was letting on. She’d allowed them to come and speak with her as ‘representatives of the Promethean embassy’, sent to express their condolences for the death of a former Promethean citizen. But she didn’t seem surprised that, instead of simply expressing condolences, Heather and Tabitha were asking her probing questions about her husband’s death.

“Listen, Mrs. Monroe,” Tabitha broke in, casting a disapproving glance at Heather, “we’re not here to dredge up more pain for you. Our government is just trying to find out what happened. Your husband may no longer have been a Promethean citizen, but we still watch out for our own. And his death so close to our embassy shook a lot of our people. We want to make sure that

the local police didn't miss anything that could threaten our own people or the citizens of Hudson."

The Latina woman scoffed at this. "You mean, you want to know if I think it was your government that killed my husband."

Tabitha frowned and hesitated, so Heather used the opportunity to jump back in.

"Do you?" She could see Lowry give her a subtle but no-less-angry glare out of the corner of her eye, but she kept her own gaze squarely on Luisa Monroe. The small woman met her gaze without flinching.

"It wouldn't surprise me," Luisa admitted. "But you'd have to be seriously stupid to have left his body outside your own embassy if that were the case."

"But you don't think he died of a heart attack like the ME said." It was a statement, not a question.

"No, I don't," the Koratan woman replied bluntly. "The locals are so worried about offending my government or yours that they couldn't get the case closed quickly enough. Besides, Connor was in terrific shape. He swam daily for exercise, ate well, and his doctor gave him a clean bill of health at his annual physical just a few weeks before we came here. There is no way my husband's heart failed; not like that. And not right outside *your* embassy. Go look at the body yourself if you don't believe me. But I know the truth!"

Heather had the brief memory of watching Connor Monroe swim laps in the hotel pool three years ago while she lounged poolside pretending to be his vacuous girlfriend instead of his personal bodyguard. She'd always enjoyed his swim workouts...the way the water would...

She mentally shook herself back to the present. "Mrs. Monroe," she continued, taking advantage of the woman's willingness to talk to them even if she was semi-hostile about it, "did anything in Connor's—I mean, Commander Monroe's—behavior in the weeks leading up to his death make you think he was worried about his safety or yours?"

The woman regarded her for a long moment, her mouth a thin line and her puffy eyes hard. Heather didn't expect her to answer the question but also didn't say anything more, letting silence fill the room.

Finally, making a decision of some sort, Luisa's shoulders relaxed marginally, and she shrugged. "Now that you mention it, there was *one* thing

that happened right after we arrived on Hudson. I didn't think anything of it at the time, but I have a friend from my childhood working at the Koratan embassy here. She's a minor trade attaché, and I have not seen her in many years. I was excited to reconnect, but Connor asked me not to call her yet. He said that not everyone at the embassy knew he was here, and it would be a few weeks until it was announced formally. He asked me to hold off until then so as to not spread rumors, or so he said."

Heather cocked her head at this. If true, it was a clear indication that Monroe had *not* been operating with the blessing of Koratas, or at least not openly. But the way Luisa had said it sounded strange to her ears like it was almost... rehearsed.

"Mrs. Monroe," she asked, leaning forward to spear the woman directly with her gaze. "Does the name Nightshadow mean anything to you?"

There it was! A flash of recognition in the Koratan woman's eyes, but it was gone as quickly as it appeared, and she simply shook her head. "No. What is Nightshadow?"

Heather opened her mouth to press the woman, but Tabitha cut her off first.

"Thank you," the older agent said to Connor Monroe's widow. "We know this must be hard for you, but we'd like to thank you for your time and for sharing what you have. Would it be OK if we called or visited later if we have any more questions?" She ignored Heather's urgent glare.

Luisa Monroe nodded, staring down at her own untouched cup of coffee on the short table. Then she looked up directly at Heather instead of Tabitha. "Just don't come back later today. I have a dentist appointment at a place Connor recommended from the last time he was here."

The puzzling non sequitur stayed in Heather's mind as she stood and silently followed Tabitha out through the apartment door. But once they were back out in the hall, Kilgore exploded on her partner. "What was that?! She was talking, and she clearly knew more than she was saying. Why did you have us leave?"

Tabitha led her further away from the apartment door, stopping them once they were around a corner in the building's long hallway. "I agree she's hiding something, but you just gave her our *only* clue. I was working up to the question about Nightshadow, but you went ahead and spit it out like a

rookie agent. If she *was* involved in Commander Monroe's death, or knows who is, you may have just warned the killer that we're on to them."

Heather threw up both arms in frustration, bristling at being called a rookie and even more at Lowry's condescending tone. "But we're *not* onto them! And we won't be unless you let me go back there now and—"

Whatever she was going to say next died on her lips as a massive explosion ripped through the building, the shockwave rounding the corner hard enough to put both her and Tabitha Lowry down on the floor in an instant.

CHAPTER 5 – AFTERMATH

By the time the fire department and paramedics arrived, it was too late for Luisa Monroe. It had been too late, in fact, the very instant the explosion obliterated her apartment and those to either side, above, and below. Three other people died in the microseconds after Luisa, and the death toll would have been much higher if it weren't the middle of the day when most of the building's tenants were out at work or errands.

As for Heather Kilgore and Tabitha Monroe, the paramedics checked over them quickly after tending to the more seriously injured, and neither had any injuries beyond a few bruises and scrapes. The medics let them go without more than an admonishment to visit a hospital if they had any symptoms of concussion or anything else later. However, the local police were an entirely different matter.

“Tell me again what the two of you were doing in the building,” a tall man with black hair slowly being encroached upon by a few silver strands asked Tabitha, his eyes showing a keen interest in the answer, even if he was otherwise trying to look as if this were all routine.

“Visiting a friend in apartment 27D,” Lowry answered, “Cindy Booker. Is she OK? They won't let us in the building to check on her.”

The tall detective's eyes went unfocused for a moment as he checked his implant. “I'm afraid she was one of the casualties. I'm sorry to have to be the one to tell you.”

“Oh no,” Tabitha said, tears instantly springing to her eyes. “Poor Cindy. She was so young and had so much potential. What happened?” It was a

convincing performance, even for Tabitha, who had always excelled at this type of subterfuge; Heather had always preferred a more direct approach.

“Did you happen to know a woman by the name of Luisa Monroe?” the detective—he’d introduced himself as Gentry—asked, ignoring Tabitha’s question.

Tabitha looked momentarily confused. “No, why? Is that the woman whose apartment blew up? How terrible. Is she OK?”

“Unfortunately not,” Gentry answered, frowning.

“Do you know what caused the explosion?” Heather asked next, trying to sound as shocked and dismayed as Tabitha but falling short in her own estimation.

“Fire department is still investigating that,” the detective admitted. “Could be nothing, just a gas leak. It’s still the major energy source for this part of the planet. Cheap and abundant here on Hudson. What planet did you say you were from?”

Heather fought the urge to frown. The man had seemed to accept without question that Tabitha was from Hudson, but apparently, Heather hadn’t done a good enough job mimicking the local accent. She was about to respond with her cover story, but Tabitha interjected first.

“This is my cousin from Kipling,” she said. “She’s visiting me for a few weeks.”

Gentry nodded. “Thought I detected a Promethean accent. Well, you ladies stay safe. I may contact you again with more questions. And sorry about your friend.”

Without waiting for their response, he walked away, moving toward the next group of haggard survivors huddled near one of the ambulances that had arrived late enough that there weren’t enough of the few seriously injured but living to require its services.

“Gas leak my eye,” Heather said in a low voice to Tabitha. “I’d wager a month’s stipend that was C8. It burned too hot and too fast to be much else.”

“I agree,” the older agent replied. “Someone wanted Luisa Monroe dead.”

“Which is definitive proof that Connor Monroe’s death wasn’t by any natural cause,” Heather said sharply.

Tabitha regarded her for a moment, her mouth a thin frown, but then sighed and nodded. “I agree. It looked unlikely before, but it’s pretty much a certainty now. And the fact that his killers were willing to confirm that for us in such an obvious fashion means that something has changed. Why go to so much trouble to make Commander Monroe’s death look like an accident and then be so brazen about the wife’s death?”

Kilgore considered this for a moment. The same question had been bugging her since she and Tabitha had awoken in the hallway several minutes after the explosion that had knocked them both off their feet. Only the fact that they’d been around a corner from Monroe’s apartment had saved them from far more serious injury.

“It’s a major escalation,” she agreed, “and it means one of two things to me. Either it was done out of expediency—someone knew we were visiting Luisa Monroe and either felt they had to shut her up fast or were hoping to catch us in the apartment with her—or it’s a misdirection.”

Tabitha looked at her sharply. “Explain.”

“What if the explosion was set by another party to make us or someone else *think* that the same people who killed Connor—Commander Monroe—killed the wife as well? We could be looking at a frameup job, maybe even directed at *us*.” She nodded meaningfully toward the departed Detective Gentry, who was questioning a young couple from the building now but had been casting glances back at the two agents the entire time.

“You think someone wants to make the police think that we blew up Monroe’s apartment so they’ll also think we were responsible for the commander’s death?” Tabitha asked, though not as a challenge. “That actually makes sense. And it means we’ve probably already lingered as long as we should. Time to make our exit.”

A few minutes later, a very distressed Detective Timothy Gentry pulled up short, frowning as he stared into an empty dead-end alley, where he was *sure* he’d seen the two mysterious women ‘visiting a friend’ disappear a few moments before. Frowning and shaking his head, he turned to make his way back to the vainly waiting ambulances and the other denizens from the apartment building. There were a lot more questions that needed to be asked, especially now that the arson inspector had called down with his definitive finding that the explosion had *not* been an accident.

CHAPTER 6 – SHOPPING

“Why didn’t the Koratan Embassy know that Commander Monroe was back on the Line?” Heather asked once she and Tabitha were safely several blocks from the damaged apartment building. “And why was he so worried about them finding out that he wouldn’t even let his wife reach out to her friend? Surely they would have been keeping tabs on him, and he wasn’t even renting the apartment under an assumed name, so he wasn’t trying to keep his identity a secret.”

“Actually, we don’t know that,” Tabitha disagreed. “Sure, he rented the apartment under his real name, but building a fake identity strong enough to pass a credit check for housing is a lot harder than building one to buy a ticket on a jump liner. And out of expediency, the governments and embassies here keep a pretty close eye on who comes and goes, but they can’t keep track of all two billion people on the planet. I only found the wife’s records and address because I went looking for them. If they arrived under different names, it’s possible that not even the Koratans had flagged them as being on planet.

“We should double-check that he and his wife arrived under their real names before we make any assumptions.” She said the last part in the chiding tone of a mentor explaining something simple.

Heather once again fought not to take umbrage at the woman’s tone—still talking to her like she was a trainee and not a full agent—and she held back her kneejerk response, not wanting to get into it right now. “Fine. I’ll check,” she hissed instead, pulling up a program on her implant that gave her a backdoor into local spaceport and station records and running a cursory search.

It took about a minute, and Heather tried not to sound upset that Tabitha had been right. “There’s no record of a Connor Monroe arriving on Hudson anytime in the last few months. In fact, the last time was still when he was in the Promethean Navy and was one of our arms negotiators on the Line. And there’s no record of a Luisa Monroe arriving on the planet *ever*.”

“Hmmm,” Tabitha mused as they walked along a busy street in one of Hudson Yard’s commercial districts. Around them, shoppers went to and from the various stores, carrying bags full of purchases and generally unaware of the other people around them or that four people had died violent deaths just a few kilometers away. For the two agents, it was the perfect place to blend in while they considered their next move. “So obviously, she *knew* this wasn’t just a simple trip or even a reassignment to Hudson for her husband. She was lying to us, though it’s not clear about which parts or everything.”

Heather nodded as the two women stopped and pretended to check out the clothing on several mannequins in a store window but instead used the reflection in the glass to check for any possible tails behind them. Satisfied that they weren’t being followed, they resumed walking, just two friends out for an afternoon shopping excursion.

“What’s our next move?” Heather asked.

“Not sure,” Tabitha admitted. “I was going to suggest that we do some undercover work tonight and try to get information out of some of the Koratan Embassy employees, but under the circumstances, I’m not sure that’s wise.”

“Actually, I think this would be the perfect time for that. Whoever blew up Luisa Monroe might think we died in the explosion, and if they know we didn’t, they’ll be expecting us to lay low until we figure out who’s after us or to avoid the police investigation into the bombing. The last thing they’ll expect us to do is show up where the embassy employees gather, *especially* if it’s the Koratans behind all this.”

Lowry was silent for a long while as they continued walking along, though they both gestured here and there at displays in store windows to keep up appearances. After about half a block, she finally spoke.

“You’re right, but I think you’ll have to handle this part alone. Let’s be honest; I’m a little old for the bar scene on Embassy Row. You’re fifteen

years younger than me and look five years younger than you are. Plus, whoever is after us will be looking for two women together, and one alone is unlikely to trigger the alarm bells as easily.”

Heather considered this for only a couple of seconds, knowing the other agent was right, and actually relieved at the prospect of escaping her awkward company for a few hours. “Well, then, I guess I need to get something to wear.” She pulled up in front of a clothing store window, studying an eye-catching black dress on a mannequin to one side.

“Best we separate here,” Lowry said in a low voice so a few nearby shoppers wouldn’t hear them. “I’ll make sure I’m within implant range of embassy row tonight, so if you need backup, just holler. And I’ll be able to pick you up when you’re done.”

Without waiting for a response, the older woman was gone, quickly blending into the surrounding crowd. Heather didn’t turn to watch her go but stepped inside the store to inquire about the dress.

CHAPTER 7 – PICKUP LINES

It had been a long day for Fernando Nuñez. But then again, every day was long as an intelligence agent in the Koratan Embassy on Hudson. Being a spy on the Harper Line was a full-time job. It was one of the few posts where there was constantly a game of give and take being played with another hostile star nation. Worse, he couldn't ignore his cover job as a commercial analyst at the embassy. It wasn't that anyone considered it more important than his true job, but in an embassy where nearly everyone was a spy, if they all didn't do their cover jobs, the legitimate work of the Koratan Confederacy in the Hudson system would come to a grinding halt.

Which is why he spent most nights joining his colleagues for a few drinks at a bar just a block away from the embassy. It was a higher-end place, and while most of them didn't really make all that much on their government salaries—even taking their real jobs into account—they had the typical government employee's inherent need to feel that they were important. Hence, they wore nicer suits than they could afford, ordered top-shelf liquor, and drank at a bar that charged a premium for it and served them the cheap stuff anyway because they couldn't tell the difference.

Of course, most of them had an ulterior motive as well for coming here. This particular bar was near one of the nicest hotels in Hudson Yard. Business travelers from systems all over the Fringe, who had dealings on the Line—one of the few places where you could facilitate the transfer of trade goods, legally or otherwise, between two hostile star nations—regularly stopped here on their visits to the planet. It was, as the military would put it, a target-rich environment for a spy like Fernando, and a good portion of the sources

he now regularly relied on had been cultivated in this very bar over expensive drinks.

Except tonight, Fernando wasn't here looking for new sources. Sure, he'd take one if it fell in his lap, but it had been an exceptionally long day at work, not to mention a boring one. He'd spent literally the entire day on his cover job, helping prepare for the visit of a trade delegation from the Jutzen Collective. It was distasteful work as well. The notoriously racist Jutzens were nearly universally hated across the Fringe, but their money still spent, so it was up to Fernando and his coworkers to put on a good show and *pretend* they weren't going to have to sit in a week of conferences with a bunch of neo-Nazis who looked down on them for being any color other than white.

So tonight, Fernando was looking to blow off some steam, which led him to this bar for the *other* reason it was a favorite watering hole for embassy staff. A high-end bar near a high-end hotel frequented by the wealthy was an excellent place to find the type of women—and men—who were in the market for a wealthy boyfriend or girlfriend or even just a fling that ended with expensive presents.

And Fernando, like any good spy, was very adept at pretending to be someone else. Tonight, he was wearing his most expensive suit, a knockoff watch good enough to pass for the real thing, and a look on his face that said, 'I just got out of a day's worth of very expensive board meetings where millions of credits were at stake'.

It was the perfect way to reel in a fish, like the one eyeing him now from across the bar. And it was a nice-looking fish, a red one. Fernando *loved* redheads.

Of course, a fish as expensive looking as this one—that dress alone must have cost a few thousand credits—wasn't just going to come to him. He had to extend the bait first. So, he had the bartender deliver to the woman a much more expensive version of the drink she'd been nursing the past half hour.

The noise of her high heels clacking on the wood floor as she walked across the bar to his small table was full of the sound of promise. As was the short black dress she wore and the smile she gave him as she seated herself across from him.

"Thanks for the drink," she practically purred, and he smiled at her.

When Fernando woke up an hour later, he had the worst headache of his life and a dull pain in his crotch. He was in an unfamiliar hotel room, passed out on a couch, a half-empty bottle of wine on the coffee table, two empty glasses, and no redhead in a short black dress anywhere to be seen.

He moaned as he lay back on the couch, closing his eyes tightly against the pounding pain, not sure if the night had gone really poorly or really well, and wishing he could remember any of it.

CHAPTER 8 – AMBUSH

The first guy Heather approached had been useless to her. He was a relatively junior embassy employee, even if, as with most Koratan officials on the planet, he was really a spy. It took her about two minutes to determine that he certainly wasn't an important spy, at least outside of his own estimation. She'd tried to gently disengage herself, but the guy wouldn't let her go. He'd obviously already had a few too many drinks, was looking to blow off steam, and was on the verge of making a scene until she agreed to take him back to 'her' hotel room.

Of course, it wasn't her room at all, just a random one she picked the lock to and found blessedly empty. The knockout drops she put in his glass of wine had him snoring on the room's couch within another minute, allowing her to leave him there and go searching for a bigger fish. She decided just before leaving to reward him for trying to grope her in the hotel elevator and kicked him in the crotch while he slept.

An hour later, she found a more promising target. He was a senior cultural attaché as if that wasn't a dead giveaway. In the history of embassies in human society going back thousands of years, Heather thought that there might have been three cultural attachés that *weren't* spies. In her experience, no one was sure what a cultural attaché even did. She didn't care.

All she cared about was that this guy was clearly a spy and a senior one at that. But despite being experienced in espionage and counterespionage, he was a sucker for young redheads. By the third drink, he had told her all sorts of things that he probably should have kept to himself, all in an effort to impress her enough to go back to his apartment with him. Among those tidbits of knowledge were a few golden nuggets directly relevant to the Connor Monroe investigation.

She didn't use the knockout drops this time, nor did she actually go back to the guy's apartment. The first would have been too much of a dead giveaway to the guy; unlike the younger buck she'd drugged, this man was experienced enough not to simply think he was waking up from a bender. He would suspect, rightly so, that she had drugged him. And despite the fact that it had been part of her *training* that she might have to sleep with men to complete her missions, Heather Kilgore had thus far in her career avoided it, and she didn't want to break that trend tonight... or ever, really.

After all, she had a history with such things and not a willing or happy one. She guarded her affections carefully, only letting in a few men in her life even casually. Connor Monroe had been the only one she'd ever gotten in deep with. Which made this entire investigation stir old feelings she'd long since battered down.

So, instead of drugging or sleeping with the guy, she made an excuse about an early meeting and beat a hasty exit before he could argue too much. Unlike the younger idiot from before, he didn't follow her or insist too aggressively; he was old enough to know when a cause was lost.

Now, the mission a success, Heather was walking a few blocks away from Embassy Row before she called Tabitha for a pickup. This would give her time to identify and shake any tails before making her escape.

As she rounded a corner two blocks away, she found the three men waiting for her.

"Hey, little miss," one of the men said, leering at her in the too-short dress and high heels she wore. "You look like you're a long way from home. Looking for company?"

She fought not to roll her eyes at the man, but then she noticed the other two moving slowly and deliberately to either side of her, maintaining a couple of meters of distance, hands in their coat pockets. Alarm bells went off in her head, and she instantly tensed, regretting that the little black dress hadn't given her room to stow her gun. She also wished she wasn't wearing the spikey high heels.

Or maybe...

The man on her right took his hand out of his pocket. She registered the gun he held in a clinical way, her brain kicking into a sort of overdrive that took

all the adrenaline of a normal human's fight-or-flight reflex and, through years of training and experience, directed it *all* to fight. Her muscles received strength, her senses heightened, and she moved faster than any of the three men now surrounding her.

The man on the right, the one who had first pulled his gun, sank to the ground, clawing at his throat as a knife appeared lodged there, almost as if by magic and not as if it were thrown underhand from its hidden place strapped to Heather's thigh. The man collapsed, gurgling and choking, to the pavement, the gun forgotten and skittering a few meters away, too far to do Kilgore any good.

The next man who moved was the one in front of her, who had first catcalled her. He didn't go for a gun; whether he had one or not, he clearly didn't expect to need it. Instead, he lunged toward her with a speed that belied his large size. But he also came up short when Kilgore's foot lashed out, burying the hard point of one of her heels right into his upper leg, just below the crotch. She wrenched it out with a twist and another kick, tearing his femoral artery in the process, and his fight and life were over. She flung the heel off her foot; the seemingly hard plastic around the icepick-like blade built into the shoe's spikey heel had broken off as intended when she'd kicked the guy, and the shoe was no longer good for walking.

She kicked the other heel up and into her hand, brandishing it like the weapon it was as she turned to face her last attacker.

The third guy was more wary. He actually took a few steps back, watching her carefully. His hand held a silenced weapon he'd drawn from his pocket, but he seemed to be thinking about whether or not he should use it. Kilgore was sure these guys had been told to make her death look like an accident, perhaps a mugging gone wrong, or something more nefarious but almost equally as mundane. But with his two buddies bleeding out on the sidewalk, he was thinking through the angles and trying to find a way to still make the death look like it wasn't the professional hit it surely was.

Heather decided not to give him any more time to think but instead sprang forward, brandishing her remaining high heel. As she did, his gun came up, but he was too slow, and she was almost to him—

She heard the spit of a silenced weapon firing but didn't stop moving. Her adrenaline was pumping so hard that she knew she could have been shot in

the chest, and she wouldn't feel it for several more seconds. And in those seconds, she intended to avenge her own death.

But, to her shock, the guy in front of her dropped his gun and crumpled to the ground. That's when she saw the hole in the side of his head.

"You OK?" Tabitha Lowry called from ten meters away. Heather turned to regard the woman in confusion. Where had *she* come from?

"I was tracking your implant so I could be ready to pick you up," the older woman explained as she jogged forward toward Heather, who was still brandishing her high heel like a hammer. "I saw you stop here and figured something must have happened to you. Got here just in time."

Heather nodded her thanks. Then she let the other agent lead her away to the waiting car just as the sound of sirens filled the air in the distance.

CHAPTER 9 – CRIME SCENE

“Are you sure they said she was a redhead?” Timothy Gentry asked the uniformed cop who had taken down the witness statements.

The woman nodded in reply, her face green as she looked past him toward the blankets that now covered the three dead bodies on the broad sidewalk. She'd been first on the scene, and the medical examiner had needed to take a DNA sample from her to exclude it in their crime scene investigation, given that the contents of her stomach were liberally splattered near and even on the bodies. She'd actually tried administering CPR to one of them, which was ridiculous given that the guy's femoral artery had been severed. He would have bled out in minutes, and no amount of chest compressions could have ever fixed that.

Gentry gently reached out and took her by the arm, turning her away from the grisly scene, and spoke to her in a low tone. “Go home, Officer Milner. You've done your job for the night. Try to get some sleep. Drink if you have to, but you might find it's actually easier to sort through your feelings sober. Trust me on that.”

She nodded weakly, and he released her arm so she could make her way back to her squad car. As she did so, Gentry considered things.

Two murder scenes in a single day, both of them dramatic, to say the least. While the apartment explosion had happened a couple of kilometers from here, they were still both within the confines of Gentry's precinct. As the head of the homicide division, that meant it was his job to solve them.

Lucky him.

Fortunately, two people had been watching from their apartment windows when this particular murder had gone down. They both told the same story. Three men had surrounded and started to attack a red-headed woman in a black dress. But they hadn't gotten far; she'd proceeded to destroy her attackers, though one of the witnesses thought there was a second woman who had fired the gun that was the cause of the only shooting death among the three men. Their canvas of the area had found one pistol, but it hadn't been fired. So, the murder weapon—if it could be called that in a potential case of self-defense—was somewhere else.

A red-headed woman.

Despite millennia of speculation and doomsaying, redheads had never actually gone extinct. But that didn't mean they were all that common, though so many women dyed their hair whatever color they wanted that it was often impossible to tell what they really were. Except the woman he'd encountered at the bombing scene earlier the same day; she had *clearly* been a natural redhead. The overly fair skin and abundance of freckles were a dead giveaway. However, that didn't mean they were the same woman.

Still, Gentry hadn't risen to be Hudson Yard's top homicide detective by believing in coincidences, and he didn't believe in this one.

"Figueroa," he barked at his latest partner. The younger man looked up from where he was talking to the ME. "Get me the port records. I want to know about every redheaded woman who has arrived on planet in the last forty-eight hours."

"Got it, boss," the junior detective called back. He'd been with Gentry for three months now, but it was long enough that he'd learned to do first, ask second, just like Timothy liked it. He was always happy to explain his hunches and decisions to others but grew angry quickly when valuable time was lost. Figueroa had learned that the hard way early on, but he hadn't needed to learn it twice. The kid had potential.

Now, Gentry turned back to study the sheet-covered bodies on the sidewalk. The way they were spaced out told of a dynamic fight against a foe that could move quickly and cover a lot of ground between attacks. He tried to picture what it might have been like: the woman walking down the street, suddenly surrounded by three men with murderous intent. For any normal person, it would have been game over. The dead men hadn't all moved in at once, but

they'd maintained a good distance to cover each other.

Yet still, she had killed them all, though perhaps with a little help at the end. Either way, it spoke of a woman used to dealing death. And now she was doing so in *his* city.

He crouched next to one of the bodies, pulling up the sheet to take a look. According to the ME, this guy had been killed with something resembling an ice pick, though they'd found nothing like it nearby. Gentry cast his eyes around the dead man, searching for anything the uniformed officers might have missed canvassing the scene. His eyes locked on something on the ground, and he got up and walked over to it, bending down to pick it up with a gloved hand.

It was a piece of what looked like plastic. He looked around a bit more and found another piece just like it. Holding them both up under the light of the closest street lamp, he tried to think what they might be. Turning them around each other a few times, he finally found that the two pieces fit together like a puzzle.

Together, they reminded him of the heel from a women's high-heeled shoe. Only hollow...

CHAPTER 10 – A FAKE MARRIAGE

“**W**hat did you learn?” Lowry asked after she had thoroughly debriefed her younger partner about the fight on the deserted street.

“The Koratans are as puzzled by Monroe’s death as we are. They didn’t say it explicitly, but it’s clear they’re all worked up about something over there, and the timing coincides. Both guys I spoke to complained about not getting a lot of sleep the last three weeks. I think it’s safe to say they’ve been scrambling to investigate. I’m starting to think they had nothing to do with it, or if they did, it was a compartmentalized operation.”

Lowry nodded, sitting down on the couch opposite the one Heather was curled up on in the small apartment. “That’s a lot to conclude from two conversations in a crowded bar. How sure are you?”

Heather shrugged. She had already put aside the attempt on her life. Later, she might feel something more about it, but right now, she was all business, turning her mind toward a clinical analysis of everything that she’d heard and done since the two women had parted company earlier that day. “The second guy made it sound like they hadn’t even known Monroe was on the planet; that they’d maybe even lost track of him a few months before he arrived. I admit, it’s not much to go on, but my gut is telling me that the Koratans aren’t involved here.”

Tabitha didn’t immediately argue with that. King’s Cross agents were trained to trust their guts but not to do so without question. Both of the women knew that it would take more than a gut feeling to solve this increasingly

convoluted case but that such a feeling could often be the result of the brain subconsciously processing information too subtle for the conscious mind to parse. An experienced agent ignored those subconscious feelings at their own peril.

“Well, I did some digging tonight as well,” Tabitha reported. “Went deeper into the transit records, using facial recognition algorithms this time. Sure enough, Monroe and his wife arrived on the planet a month ago. But here’s the kicker: they didn’t arrive together.”

“Really?” Heather asked, perking up.

“Really. She actually arrived first, on a Friday. He didn’t arrive until that Sunday. Both traveled under assumed names but from *different* planets. He came from Umbral on a jump liner, but she arrived from Tigris on what I can only describe as a tramp freighter.”

Now, she really had Heather’s attention. “Those systems aren’t even in the same direction. Are you saying they came in from completely different parts of the Confederacy?”

Lowry nodded. “And get this. The tramp freighter she came in on was shipping large amounts of seafood here from Tigris for sale with the local restaurants. With no oceans of its own, that’s a lucrative business here on Hudson. But when I checked the manifest of the freighter, it only showed ninety percent loaded.”

Heather knit her brows together. “Sounds pretty full to me.”

Lowry shook her head. “Seafood may be expensive here, but those tramp freighters still run on razor-thin margins. Why cut ten percent off your total revenue? No captain worth anything would do that.”

“So, you’re saying that there was something in that ship’s cargo bay that *wasn’t* on the manifest?”

Tabitha nodded. “And I’m willing to bet it belonged to our *mysterious* Luisa Monroe.”

“Why do you say it like that?” Heather asked.

“Because there’s more. “Monroe; there’s no record of him ever getting married. Nor is there any record I can find, anywhere, of a Luisa Monroe even remotely affiliated with him.”

“How can you be sure? They might have kept it out of public records, given his status.”

Lowry shrugged. “I have a back door into the Koratan Embassy’s systems. Not the really confidential ones, but it gives me access to search records not usually available to the public. If Connor Monroe ever married a woman named Luisa, or anyone else for that matter, it was never reported to the Koratan government.”

Kilgore let Lowry’s words sink in for a few moments, considering the implications. Then, she saw a hole in the entire story. “Wait, if there’s no record of them being married, how did *you* know that she was his widow and that we should visit her?”

Lowry smiled. “Because there was *one* record.” Kilgore’s implant pinged and she accepted a file transfer from Tabitha’s and examined it.

“Looks like a perfectly valid marriage certificate to me, dated a year ago, just like Luisa said,” she told the older woman, starting to get annoyed that Tabitha wouldn’t just come out and say what it all meant.

“Look at the metadata, not the surface stuff, but the root stuff.”

Heather did as instructed and shook her head in dismay at seeing what she missed. “This file was created six weeks ago and then backdated. The blockchain decay rate is off, though someone did a pretty good job of trying to fake it.

“So, what we know,” Lowry said, “is that Connor and Luisa Monroe—or whatever her real name was—weren’t married, but they wanted everyone to *think* they were, including people in the Koratan Embassy. And it sounds like whatever they were doing here wasn’t sanctioned by the Koratan government, and—assuming your gut is as right as it usually is—their subsequent deaths also weren’t committed by any official arm of that government. Which leaves us with...”

“Someone working unofficially within their government, *or* a third party. Any chance it was someone working unofficially on our side?”

Lowry shook her head. “I know the identities and locations of every Promethean on the planet at any given time, whether they check in with the embassy or not. We’ve got the normal contingents of intelligence officers, including ProSec and Naval Intelligence, but so far as I know, I was the only

legitimate Promethean assassin on the planet until you arrived.

“It’s possible someone slipped past my detection algorithms, or an amateur got lucky, but Occam’s Razor suggests we’re more likely looking at a third party. Because I assume the Koratans have similar controls in place for their people.”

“Simplest explanation is usually the right one,” Heather agreed. “But now that leaves us with a big open question.”

“Who is the third party?” Lowry finished for her.

Both of the women were silent for a couple of minutes, thinking hard and considering the quasi-conclusion they’d just arrived at, searching for and poking holes in it until they both became increasingly convinced it was the right theory.

It was Tabitha who finally broke the silence. “Listen, Heather, I’ve been wanting to talk to you since you arrived. About what happened—”

“No.” The one-word response from Kilgore was cold and hard and stopped the older woman mid-sentence. “Not now. Not ever,” Heather finished and then got up and started walking out of the small living room in Tabitha’s apartment to the tiny guest room the older woman had loaned her for her stay.

“We need to figure out our next move,” she said as she was about to enter the bedroom, “but first, I need to shower and get this blood off me.”

CHAPTER 11 – REOPENING THE CASE

“No luck, boss. No one matching the description of our redhead showed up on any of the incoming passenger manifests or port video feeds,” Figueroa told Gentry the next morning, poking his head into the senior detective’s office on the second highest floor of the Third Precinct building in downtown Hudson Yard.

“Official and unofficial search?” Gentry asked, his tone dubious. If Figueroa had forgotten...

“Checked ‘em both, boss, twice,” the younger man confirmed. “Went back a whole month, not just the forty-eight hours you told me. Even checked the naval and government gates at both the Promethean and Koratan orbitals. I’ve got people in both who trade favors with me, though I owe them both some pretty expensive whiskey and tequila now. Not sure if I can afford it, honestly.”

“Any anomalies?” Gentry asked, ignoring the implied request for help making payment.

“Just one,” the man said, stepping further into the room but not taking a seat. Junior detectives didn’t sit in Timothy Gentry’s office unless invited to first. That was a lesson they each had to learn only once. “Naval gates at the Promethean station had a camera outage for six hours yesterday morning. My guess is she came in during that time. But three different ships docked during that period, and another eight were docked already that could have had a passenger or two hiding on board and waiting for the cameras to go out. And since the Promethean Navy doesn’t share passenger manifests or even allow

them to be stored in the local systems...”

“We don’t have a way to check the records of incoming people without those camera feeds. Tidy.”

Figueroa smiled. “That’s what I was thinking, boss. Too tidy. Reeks of government intervention. I’m thinking we might have an ‘extra’ or two on planet.”

‘Extra’ was the informal term members of the Hudson police force used to refer to extra-governmental agents on their planet. They were men and women operating outside of normal channels, even as convoluted as those normal channels often got on a planet unwillingly claimed by not one but *two* star nations.

“Well, that’s not good. And if that’s the case, it’s almost certainly connected to the death of Connor Monroe.”

Figueroa looked confused. “But boss, wasn’t that just a heart attack?”

“Shut the door, José, and have a seat,” Gentry told him. The man excitedly jumped to do both, and Tim had to try hard not to shake his head in exasperation.

“We both know,” he continued once the younger man was seated, “that the Connor Monroe investigation was closed way too quickly. Even though we had nothing that indicated foul play, we also didn’t really take the time or make the effort to *find* anything.”

Figueroa’s confused look deepened. “You mean a coverup?”

Gentry wagged his head back and forth. “Not sure I’d put it in quite that way. More like a subtle but firm suggestion that it would be much easier for all of us if the cause of death was what it appeared to be at first glance.”

The younger detective thought about that for a moment, then frowned. “All due respect, boss,” he said carefully, “but aren’t you always the one who tells us not to let *anyone* pressure us on an investigation until we’re sure we’ve got the truth? Why would you stop investigating Monroe’s death then?”

Gentry regarded the young man solemnly for a moment, and Figueroa started to squirm a bit under the scrutiny. Then, the older man sighed and raised his eyebrows. “What makes you think I actually closed the investigation?”

“But I saw the records myself, boss, they... Oh.” A light came on in the

young detective's eyes as he stared back at his superior. "You mean, like you kept it open in an 'extra' way?"

Despite himself, Gentry smiled. "Exactly, José. I closed it officially, but that doesn't mean I stopped investigating it. And from all that's happened in the last twenty-four hours, I'm certain that it *wasn't* a natural death. Someone murdered Connor Monroe, ex-Promethean officer and traitor to the Crown. Then, for some reason, they sent two extras to murder his wife, but with an entirely different M.O. And that's the part I can't figure out: why use a massive bomb to kill Luisa Monroe after going to such trouble to make Commander Monroe's death look like a heart attack? And then, why did one of the extras get attacked by Embassy Row? Nothing is adding up."

He wasn't expecting an answer to his questions, but Figueroa was game and gave him one anyway. "Sir, what if the bomb was aimed at killing Luisa Monroe *and* the extras? I mean, why let yourself get that close to the bomb if you were the ones who planted it."

Gentry abruptly sat up straight in his chair, spearing the younger man with his gaze and making Figueroa jump a little in his seat. "José, you might be onto something. What if the extras are here to *investigate* Monroe's death? It could very well be that whoever killed the commander is trying, rather clumsily, to cover his or her tracks. That would also explain the attack on the redhead woman last night. Good thinking."

The junior detective beamed.

"It's still all supposition until we have actual evidence," Gentry said, causing Figueroa to deflate slightly. "But at least it's a working theory." The young man perked up again, and Gentry allowed himself another small smile.

CHAPTER 12 – THE EMBASSY

It had been a slow morning. Both Tabitha and Heather had largely stayed in their bedrooms, using their implants to connect to the planetary network and search cyberspace for any clues they could find to fill in the many massive blanks they still had.

Heather spent the entire time running every search she could on the name Nightshadow, including trying variations of it in Spanish, the principal language of the Koratan Confederacy. She even tried a few other languages, all to no avail. There wasn't a single business on Hudson with the name, nor was it the first or last name of any of the planet's inhabitants. Not that she expected it to be *that* easy, but the lack of even a single hit was disheartening.

Lunch was a solemn and silent affair as they briefly shared the very little they'd each learned while they prepared the food and then ate without so much as another word spoken.

But when they were done eating, they were faced with the investigator's dilemma. As much as they might have nothing to really go on, they also needed to do *something*. After all, it was obvious that no further leads were just going to fall into their laps. So, they finally, grudgingly, spoke to each other, brainstorming plans. Thirty minutes later, they were in Tabitha's car on their way to the Promethean Embassy.

At the main gate, their understated government credentials let them through to the parking lot. Then Tabitha whispered something to the Marine officer stationed at one of the back doors, causing him to leave them there and disappear inside. Five minutes later, he returned, an older man with graying

hair trailing in his wake.

The Promethean ambassador on any planet was a political appointee. Most of them got their positions as a result of some favor they'd done the Crown. The ambassador on Hudson was no exception, having gotten his role by making massive contributions to the campaigns of several members of Parliament loyal to King Charles.

But the man who greeted Heather Kilgore and Tabitha Lowry now was *not* the ambassador. His name was Sir Steven Kim, and he was the *deputy* ambassador. And on Hudson, as with most other planets, that meant he was the man who *actually* ran things. While the ambassador went to dinners and parties and shook a lot of hands, it was Steven Kim who made sure that the true interests of the Federated Systems of Prometheus and the Promethean Crown were carried out on Hudson. Together with his counterparts in the Harper Line's two other systems, they represented the true civilian leadership in this part of space.

"Ladies," he said politely while still within earshot of the two Marine guards. "It's a lovely day. Why don't we go for a walk?"

He led them away from the building toward the gardens that rested in the middle of the embassy compound, surrounded on four sides by the embassy and various residential and support buildings. The gardens themselves, as was the case on virtually all planets where the Promethean government maintained an embassy, were full of plants, shrubs, and trees native to Prometheus itself. In this case, given the temperate weather of Hudson's northern continent, that meant mostly evergreens and Promethean aspens interspersed with a large variety of flowers and ferns. Heather found herself liking the mix.

"My office in the embassy is swept for bugs every two hours," Kim explained as they reached the gardens, "but I still don't trust it for the most sensitive conversations. The Koratans are constantly getting things past our security. The gardens, on the other hand, have enough ambient noise that we'd practically have to be speaking right into a bug for the person on the other end to hear it. And we keep a drone bubble with active jamming around the entire compound, so we don't have to worry about anyone using a directional mic to listen in out here. Now, what can I do for the King's Cross?"

The two women regarded him with flat expressions. “You know,” Tabitha said first, “that even if we *were* members of the Order, we would never admit it.”

He waved a dismissive hand. “Yes, quite. Regardless, there are few people on this planet, and virtually *none* that I do not already know quite well, with that code phrase you gave to the Marine lieutenant outside. So even if you’re not King’s Cross, you are highly placed indeed. Enough for me to give you whatever it is you need.”

“OK,” Heather said, taking her normal tack of eschewing small talk and diving right in. “We want to know if any of your people, officially or otherwise, killed Connor Monroe.”

The man neither reacted noticeably to her brash question nor to the direct way in which she asked it. “As I thought. I’ve been expecting someone to come and ask me that question ever since the body was found three weeks ago. I have to say, I’m not disappointed that it comes from two lovely creatures such as yourselves.”

Heather involuntarily smiled. Steven Kim had a sort of old-world charm that reminded her of Promethean noble families, not the ones closest to the King always jockeying for power or position, but the ones from the lesser houses, who sometimes treated their nobility as a means to help the people beneath them, as well as to help their nation. Of course, based on his title of ‘Sir’, he *was* likely from one of those lesser families.

“But you didn’t travel all this way for an old man to expound upon your beauty, ladies,” he said next. “So let me tell you everything I know.”

Which, it turned out, wasn’t all that much more than they already knew. But it was helpful to hear that the deputy ambassador had already done his own checking, and he was ‘quite sure’ that no members of the Promethean or Koratan governments had a hand, officially or unofficially, in Monroe’s death. He’d also been horrified to hear of the bombing that had killed Monroe’s wife, though he knew nothing of the later attempt on Kilgore’s life, nor did the two agents tell him much of it. Nor did the name Nightshadow mean any more to him than it had to Heather and Tabitha.

When they were about to leave his presence thirty minutes later, they had little to go on except for a single name of a person he suggested may have knowledge of the means by which Monroe was killed. It was a name that

surprised Heather Kilgore. She knew that deputy ambassadors often dealt with... less savory characters to further the interests of the Crown, taking on those dirty assignments to help the often hapless ambassadors keep their hands clean and their minds free to fulfill their many social obligations.

But despite knowing all that, she was truly surprised to hear that Sir Steven Kim, a gentleman and minor noble, was 'quite well acquainted' with a notorious Koratan arms dealer.

However, as they turned to go, he stopped them for one last thought.

"Be careful out there," he advised. "Tensions with the Koratans are high. We think they might be planning something, some grand gesture ahead of their presidential election. You may not be aware, but the King actually offered a Bounty on any information that might help discover and prevent whatever it is the Koratan are intending to do. Can you imagine it? A King's Bounty!"

Heather frowned. King's Bounties were exceedingly rare. In fact, she'd only ever heard of a handful. The winner of such a Bounty could essentially name his or her price for services rendered to the Crown. Furthermore, they would have all past sins against the Crown irrevocably pardoned and expunged from their record. Heather had seen otherwise good men and women *kill* for the chance to get the King's Bounty. It made her wonder if it might be connected to the events here on Hudson.

"That's unusual," she said simply, still frowning.

Steven Kim returned her frown while Tabitha watched silently. "Indeed," he said, "and I fear that the Bounty only makes the stakes that much higher. Be careful, you two."

CHAPTER 13 – THE ARMS DEALER

They took Lowry's car again, but this time Kilgore drove. The two women spent the hour-long journey in silence, a thick awkwardness between them ever since the previous evening when Kilgore had flatly refused to discuss Lowry's past transgressions against her. Heather had no desire to dredge up the events of two years ago that had ended her friendship with Lowry. She kept it locked in a distant and dusty corner of her brain, next to thoughts of Connor Monroe's betrayal of his King and nation. In neither case was she particularly excited to revisit the memories.

Still, they made it to their location without any further arguments, and when they got out of the car, they looked in bemusement at the large, very modern industrial building that greeted them.

"A drone factory," Lowry said, shaking her head. "Fits, I suppose."

"I don't care where he hangs his shoes so long as he can give us a lead," Heather replied.

"Hat."

Heather looked at Tabitha in confusion.

"It's where he 'hangs his hat', Agent Kilgore," the older woman said gently. "That's the more common idiom. You always did have a hard time shedding the Edmonton lingo from your speech. Better to adopt the more common phrases so that it's never immediately apparent to anyone where you're from."

"Are you done?"

Lowry frowned at Heather's combative tone but didn't press the issue, and the two women walked slowly toward the building's main entrance, both of them scanning for threats and making a note of each surveillance camera and hovering security drone they saw.

"Your two o'clock," Heather whispered just loud enough for Lowry to hear.

"Yes, I noticed that. A T2000 sentry gun. I've rarely seen those outside of military installations. And I've *never* seen one designed to look like a tree stump."

"This guy either has a lot of enemies, or he's incredibly paranoid," Heather observed dryly.

"I find that the two are often not mutually exclusive," Lowry replied lightly.

A minute later, they walked up to the main reception desk, where an overly made-up but otherwise very pretty blond was watching them expectantly.

"We're here to see Mr. Jones," Tabitha said.

"I'm sorry, who?" the young woman asked, blinking and staring at them as if she were truly as vapid as she first appeared. But there was a sharp intelligence behind her eyes that Heather didn't miss.

"I believe he's the head of sales and procurement here," Lowry replied. "We met him on Spartacus a few months back, and he invited us to dine with him if we were ever on planet. Said he cooks the best mushroom risotto this side of Kate's Hope."

The young woman's eyes widened in recognition of the code phrase given to them by Kim. "Oh, yes, of course," she said with a smile. "Mr. Douglas Jones."

"No, I'm quite sure his name is Peter," Lowry said, finishing the recognition code.

"Of course," the receptionist said, her smile not faltering. "Right this way."

She left the desk unattended and led them through a nondescript-looking security door that had built into it at least four passive sensors and three active ones that Heather could pick out. Then they went down a short hall where she counted no less than six hidden defense turrets and even saw a system for evacuating all of the hall's oxygen and dropping anyone unlucky to be caught inside when it happened. It made her glad that Tabitha had

insisted they leave all their weapons in the car; this was a truly paranoid arms dealer with the firepower to back it up. One sniff of even her usually hidden blade and she could imagine she and Tabitha each leaving through multiple small body bags.

Finally, the bubbly young receptionist, whose outfit matched her role but still managed to hide a knife and a silenced pistol on her inner thigh—plus likely a few more weapons that Heather missed—stopped at another nondescript but heavily reinforced door.

“This is Mr. Jones’ office,” she told them cheerfully. “I’ve let him know you’re coming.” Then she scanned a card on the lanyard around her neck and let a camera by the door scan her face and retinas. All that done, the door finally clicked open, and she ushered them through, staying out in the hall and pulling the door shut behind them with an ominous click.

Kilgore and Lowry found themselves in what looked like a small, utilitarian waiting room, with a few plain wooden chairs and a low table with some actual printed brochures and magazines that touted all the many products made by the Genesis Drone Foundry. One other door graced the room, and it was closed with no handle or controls on their side.

“State your business,” a robotic voice sounded from overhead. Lowry nudged Heather and pointed to the room’s single light fixture, which both women could tell housed another AI-controlled defense turret, the likes of which they’d only seen before in the royal palace itself on Prometheus.

“Steven Kim sent us. He thought you might be able to help us,” Lowry said evenly. “We’re investigating the death of Connor Monroe.” Kim had advised them not to try any subterfuge with Jones. Those who did, he’d explained, were often never heard from again.

“I see,” the robotic voice continued. “And you are?”

Heather frowned at the question, but Lowry forged ahead. “Agent Tabitha Lowry and Agent Heather Kilgore of ProSec.” ProSec, the Promethean Security Service, was the second most-feared organization in Prometheus—a very *distant* second behind the King’s Cross, though most people thought the Order was a fairy tale to scare young children and unruly nobles.

There was silence for a long time, and then the robotic voice came back, sounding, of all things, a little frazzled. “You may enter.”

The door on the other side of the room clicked open, and the two women made their way around the low table and the chairs and pushed it open, entering one at a time as if they were breaching a target and finding themselves... in a richly appointed office with thick carpet, dark wood paneling, and enough heavy wood furniture that it would take nothing short of a battleship to lift it all into orbit. At the far end, there was an ornate wooden desk. And behind that desk was one of the shortest, roundest *women* Heather Kilgore had ever seen. Kim had been cagey about the mysterious Mr. Jones, but he could have at least mentioned her real gender!

“So, Steven sent you, did he?” the woman said in a surprisingly low voice as they made their way across the room toward her. “Either that or you tortured and killed him for his passphrase. I’ve got people checking on that. Even if you are the King’s Cross, if I think for a moment you harmed the old man, you’ll never leave this room alive.”

“We didn’t say—” Heather started, but the woman cut her off with a chop of her hand.

“Please. I’ve dealt with ProSec. They’ve even visited me here a number of times, and *none* of them noticed nearly half the weaponry you did on the way in. So, either ProSec has seriously upped their recruiting standards, or you’re with the Order.” She smiled in a way that reminded Kilgore of a cat who had just eaten the proverbial mouse.

“To answer your real question,” Tabitha broke in, “Sir Steven *did* send us, and he was fine when we left him. I suspect your people will find that he still is.”

“Time will tell,” the short woman said ominously, but then her features broke out into a big but wary smile. “So, what can Mr. Jones do for you? I thought the King’s Cross had their own weapons suppliers. Unless you’re sick of working with those joke handguns made in Prometheus and want something really good. Jutzen, perhaps?”

She studied the two women for a moment with an ascertaining eye. “Nope. Something Inner Rim. I’ve got genuine Glocks from their factory on Eridani B2. Even some Berettas from Alpha Centauri if that’s more your style. It’ll cost you, but your King *probably* has enough funds to cover it.”

Ignoring the slights to both their King and their nation’s weapons manufacturers, the two women sat in the cushioned chairs the small woman

indicated. Heather spoke next. “As we said outside, we’re investigating the death of Connor Monroe. He ostensibly died of a heart attack, but that seems increasingly unlikely. And there are plenty of compounds that could have caused the same symptoms, even some that would metabolize quickly enough not to show up in a tox report. But only a few that would *also* fail to be detected by his military implant’s screeners. We assume that if anyone on this planet would have supplied such a substance, it would either be you or someone you know of, and that you would be able to tell us *who* purchased it.”

“Girl, you get right to the point, don’t you?” ‘Jones’ asked, casting a glance over to Lowry. “She always this fun?”

“You have no idea,” Tabitha responded dryly. “But her question stands.”

“Well, see, that’s a problem then,” Jones said, leaning back in her chair and steepling her hands together over her round stomach. “Because anyone with the connections to procure and supply such a substance would also have a reputation to maintain, and selling out his or her clients would be a sure way to destroy that reputation.”

“What would you call those clients blowing up a housewife and trying to kill an agent of the King’s Cross?” Heather asked, not raising her voice but giving it a hard edge. Tabitha shot her a look at her explicit admission of their identities, but Heather ignored it; the arms dealer had figured it out already anyway. “Perhaps you’ve heard of the King’s Cross Death Cry?” she finished.

Jones shuddered involuntarily. “You mean the thing where anyone even tangentially involved in the death of an agent can expect to be hunted down and killed along with their entire family? Yeah, I’ve heard of it. And now that you mention it, you’re absolutely right. Assuming a person like me had a client like that, they would be in gross breach of contract by not acting with discretion. It’s so hard to find quality business partners these days.”

“So, you did sell the compound,” Lowry observed, matching her hard tone to Heather’s.

Jones shrugged nonchalantly, or at least tried to. The movement came out jerky and forced. Then she leaned forward and gave them a grim look. “Let’s cut the crap, shall we? I never liked these stupid shadow games. And you’re right; my clients have been making quite a mess. I was about to send out my

own people to track them down and put an end to it, but it seems much more fitting to point two agents of the King's Cross at them. Can't be traced back to me that way, either. Plus, I like Steven. He's terrible at poker, and he paid for one of my kids' dental work. So, this is your lucky day.

"The folks you're looking for are part of one of the Namoran syndicates. They moved into Hudson Yard a couple of years ago, but this is the first time they've come to me on anything. They tried to talk tough and claim that they wanted Monroe dead for something he did to them, but I could tell they were just the hired muscle. Find them, and maybe you can find out who hired them."

"And just how would we best go about finding them?" Lowry asked dryly.

"If you can promise it never gets back to them that I was involved, I'll tell you." She looked back and forth between the two agents for confirmation.

Tabitha nodded; Heather just glared at the arms dealer.

"Great," the woman said, lightly slapping the desk in front of her with both palms. "Because even someone like me doesn't want to mess with the Namorans unless I absolutely have to. Their planet may be all the way on the other side of Promethean space from here, but it's never a good sign when they start moving in. You'll be doing me a favor by getting rid of the... infestation." She said the last word with a big grin.

"Tina at the front desk will give you an address," she finished, and then she clammed up. The interview was over. For a moment, Heather was about to ask her if she knew what Nightshadow meant, but another stern look from Tabitha with a head jerk in the direction of the door stopped her.

Five minutes later, an address in hand on an old-fashioned piece of paper, Lowry and Kilgore left the drone factory and its diminutive yet rotund resident arms dealer behind.

CHAPTER 14 – BOMB FRAGMENTS

“**W**hat have you got for me, Chuck?” Gentry asked as he walked into the Third Precinct’s basement-level forensic office, Figueroa trailing silently behind him. The head of the bomb disposal unit looked up from the eyepiece of a microscope.

“Ready for this?” Chuck McGarrett asked with a small grin that was almost hidden underneath his massive bushy mustache. “Come over here and take a look.”

Gentry fought the urge to sigh in frustration. McGarrett was the best bomb tech on the planet, but he had a flare for the dramatic that was annoying at the best of times. With two multi-victim homicides in just the last two days on his plate, Timothy Gentry was not in the mood.

“Just tell me, Chuck. I don’t have time.”

The overweight bomb technician frowned but then shrugged. “Fine. The C8, that was easy. Disappeared from a Koratan Navy shipment last year. Though this is the first time we’ve gotten confirmation it was used. They never solved that theft, if you recall.” He paused, waiting for Gentry to respond. When the detective didn’t, his frown deepened, but he continued. “Otherwise, it’s a dead end. That C8 could have been resold to a dozen different parties by now. But the detonator is another matter. Wasn’t much left of it, mind you, but I found a small part of the AI controller.” He paused again, looking expectantly at Gentry.

The detective sighed and answered sarcastically. “That’s just great, Chuck. Real crack police work. Now, if you don’t mind, tell me what you found so I

can go try and *catch* the bad guys, will you?”

Chuck looked like he was sucking on a lemon and glanced over to Figueroa for support. Finding none there, he shrugged again and kept talking. “As I was saying, I found a small part of the AI controller. Recognized the pattern; looks Namoran. I’m thinking the syndicate, you know, the one that moved in a couple years back and started making noise.”

Gentry considered this for a moment. “Certainty?”

Chuck shrugged again. “Call it seventy percent. About the best I can give you with a C8 explosion. Doesn’t leave a whole lot behind. We found this fragment on the street outside. Lucky we did too, because—”

“Good enough,” Gentry interrupted him, whirling and leaving the room without a backward glance. Behind him, Figueroa shot an apologetic smile at Chuck and then hastened to catch up to his boss.

“What now?” he asked eagerly.

“Now, we need a warrant for a raid on the Namoran syndicate. Which means I have to find a judge that the syndicate *doesn’t* already own.”

CHAPTER 15 – THE ASSAULT

Boris Gusev was struggling to stay awake. After four hours on guard duty, during which nothing ever happened, he was counting down the remaining two hours until Pyotr would finally come and take over for him. It couldn't happen soon enough.

It was almost four AM, and, as it did every day around this time, the assault rifle in his hands was starting to feel like a lead weight. He hated carrying the thing everywhere he went, but the last man who had simply slung it over his back had incurred the boss' wrath, and no one wanted the boss mad at them. The offender wasn't part of the organization anymore... or part of the living. So, Boris carried the heavy gun held across his chest at the ready in case the boss or one of his lieutenants happened to walk by, even at this horribly early hour. Better safe than sorry.

Still, his eyes were heavy, and as he paused to peer out a window from the third-floor corridor, gazing out into the moonlight, he fought to keep his vision from going out of focus and his eyelids from closing. He was just so— Boris never got to finish that thought. He didn't register the whisper of footsteps sneaking up on him or the cold steel of the knife that slit his throat from behind. Nor did he make a sound as his attacker caught his limp body and lowered it carefully to the ground.

Heather Kilgore wiped both sides of her blade on the clothing of the dead man and then crept onward. As she did so, she sent a simple ping from her implant. One floor down, mirroring her movements, Tabitha Lowry sent an answering ping. The second and third-floor corridors that connected one

warehouse to the other were now clear of live enemies.

The place was dark, but there was enough light trickling in through windows from the parking lot lamps outside that Heather had to take care as she moved, not always able to stick to the shadows where she would be difficult to see in her all-black clothing and light body armor. And even in the darkest of spaces, the human eye is adept at detecting motion. So, she moved lightly on her toes, choosing her steps carefully and scanning ahead and periodically behind for any additional enemies, ready to freeze in place at the merest sound or movement of air until she could assess the threat and adjust her tactics appropriately.

Three men already lay dead behind her. She and Tabitha had entered through the east warehouse, finding it mostly empty except for several parked cars with cold engines, the equivalent of the syndicate's motor pool. But as they'd made their way upstairs to the long, narrow corridor that connected the eastern warehouse to the western one, they started encountering guards.

Luckily, the criminals that inhabited the place were either stupid or had grown lazy; perhaps they were just arrogant enough not to be worried. Either way, the guards the two King's Cross agents found were alone, and their patrol patterns barely overlapped. It had been almost too easy to catch them out of sight of their comrades and dispatch them one at a time.

Heather neared a closed door at the end of the hall, a dim light showing from underneath. Reaching down, she stuck the little finger of her left hand under the door. In her mind's eye, her implant pulled up a video feed from the small camera integrated into the finger of her combat glove, and she moved her pinkie around to catch a view of the entire space on the other side of the door.

There were two syndicate thugs in the small room. One was dozing in a chair with his legs propped up on the corner of a desk. The other looked like he was playing solitaire on the other end of the desk. Withdrawing her finger, Heather reached around to the small of her back and unholstered a pistol with an integrated silencer. She didn't need to rack the slide or make any noise with the weapon. As was her habit, she had loaded it herself, primed a round in the chamber, and then not let it out of her sight since. It would be as ready to fire as it had been when she'd left Tabitha's car with the other woman to infiltrate the warehouse complex.

Slowing her breathing to bring her heart rate to a level well below the resting

rate of most people, she carefully turned the door handle and pushed inward, moving quickly into the room behind it. Her gun spat twice, first taking out the man playing cards before he'd even finished looking up to see who had opened the door, then taking out the dozing man without him ever waking to see his attacker.

A quick check showed her both men were dead, and no follow-up shots were needed. She moved quietly across the room to the only other door, this one open ajar. She was about to repeat the trick with her pinkie camera when her implant pinged her twice in rapid succession. Then, there was a crash and the sound of automatic weapons firing from the floor below.

Heather swore silently. Tabitha had been discovered; the syndicate knew they were here.

Before she could react, the door in front of her swung open, revealing a large man with a red face, eyes wide in shock at seeing her waiting there. Her bullet took him in the Adam's apple before he could cry out, but as he slumped to the ground, she heard shouts behind him.

Heather dove to the side and down as a line of bullets stitched across the air where she'd just been. A man cursed loudly, and she heard running footsteps coming toward her down the corridor.

Calmly, she rolled over once, bringing her right into the open doorway, her pistol pointed down the hall and up from her place flat against the floor. She pulled the trigger twice, taking the man running her way in the chest and then in the head. More automatic weapons fire came her way, and she could feel the bullets ripping through the air centimeters above her prone body, but she didn't move out of the way. Taking careful aim, when the shooter popped around the corner he'd been hiding behind to take another shot, she drilled him in the head from ten meters away.

Silence. She heard no further shots on her floor or the one below but did now hear shouting up ahead. A quick check of her implant's tactical map showed the glowing green dot representing Tabitha almost directly below her. She pinged the woman's implant once, received her answering ping, and then got to her feet and started moving quickly down the new corridor, Tabitha's green dot moving in sync below.

This hall, unlike the other, was lined with doors on both sides. Most were closed, and she ignored these, needing to move quickly and trusting that she

would hear them open behind her if someone tried to use one to sneak up on her. Two doors were open, and she lost precious seconds quickly clearing those rooms, both empty offices.

Then she came to another door at the end of the hall. Her pinkie camera showed her that this one opened onto a catwalk that encircled a vast open warehouse space. The area was brightly lit, and she could see people running around both on the catwalk and down on the warehouse floor. She was close enough now to distinguish individual voices among the shouts, and she heard one man yelling orders and others yelling back and forth to each other.

Tabitha pinged her once, then again, her green dot showing she had made her way down a short stairwell and was standing at an entrance door two stories down, even with the warehouse floor.

On a slow count of five, taking a deep breath and letting it out, Heather opened the door and leaped through, hitting the catwalk and somersaulting up to a kneeling position, hand with the pistol outstretched in front of her and her other hand meeting it to steady her aim.

Her first two shots took out a man twenty meters away on the catwalk who was aiming squarely at the door, expecting someone to come through, but too slow in pulling the trigger of his weapon, probably still adjusting his aim to where Heather knelt, lower down than he'd expected.

Then she spun to take in the other side of the catwalk that extended to her left, pulling her trigger two more times and dropping a man running toward her there with an assault rifle. He spasmodically pulled the trigger as he fell, but his shots sailed harmlessly overhead and peppered the warehouse ceiling as he landed on his back. He was dead before his head hit the catwalk.

A quick glance through the metal mesh below her showed that Tabitha had likewise taken out a trio of enemies on the warehouse floor. But another man was running away toward a small interior office set against the opposite side of the large building. Heather lifted her gun to sight at the running man's back, but her implant flashed a red outline over her view of the target, causing her to stop and relax her finger on the trigger. Either Tabitha had marked the guy as their primary target or her own implant had done so based on a behavioral analysis of the battle. Either way, they probably needed the running man alive.

But there were four more targets interspersed around the warehouse floor,

hiding behind various boxes and crates and shooting toward where Tabitha was crouching behind a crate near the door. In the heat of the battle, none of the remaining syndicate members had noticed Heather yet, so she crept quickly along the catwalk, staying close to the wall to reduce her exposure to the men and women firing below. Then she peered over the edge and quickly picked off the two closest to her once she had an angle around their cover.

At the same time, Tabitha moved, skirting around the stack of boxes she'd been hiding behind and sprinting across the warehouse floor as the attention of the only two remaining shooters turned to Heather up on the catwalk.

Automatic rail gun fire peppered the catwalk all around Kilgore, and she fired back quickly at one shooter and then the other, not able to steady her aim but forcing them to duck back down under their chosen cover. Five seconds later, both lay dead as Tabitha took them from behind.

An eerie silence descended over the warehouse, replacing the pure chaos of a moment before. The primary target had disappeared, but Heather's implant had kept track of him, showing a red ghost trail leading to the door of the interior office she'd spied earlier. Suddenly, she saw Tabitha sprinting toward that door.

She didn't cry out at the older woman to wait. Even though she desperately *wanted* Tabitha to follow protocol and delay her attack until they could take the man together, calling out to her would only warn the target she was coming.

Instead, she swore softly to herself as Tabitha disappeared through the office door. Heather pulled the end of a cord out of her belt buckle, fixing it to the metal catwalk railing in front of her. Then she vaulted the railing and let the cord extend, lowering her almost in a free fall to the floor two stories below but braking just before she hit it, slowing her barely enough to land without injury. A flip of a switch released the other end of the cord from her belt—she didn't have time to let it retract—and an instant later, she was sprinting toward the open office door.

Reaching it, she stood off to one side and used her pinkie camera to take a look. She saw no one, but there was a short hall with two doors on each side; apparently, the interior office had been subdivided into multiple smaller office spaces. She made her way into the hall, checking each door as she passed it.

She found the target on the second door to her left. She spun around, and into the doorway, her gun raised and aimed squarely at the man's forehead. But she didn't fire, not just because they needed him alive, but also because, in front of him, the man held the form of Tabitha Lowry with an arm around her neck and his other hand holding a pistol against her temple.

"Take the shot!" cried Tabitha, but Heather ignored her. They both knew they needed the target alive to question; no doubt Tabitha was trying to confuse the guy.

So, Heather didn't fire, even though she was reasonably sure she could drop the target before he could pull the trigger and take out Lowry. Instead, she kept her gun pointed at his head and spoke. "We just want to talk."

The man considered this for a second. His eyes showed none of the panic Heather had seen in some of the other syndicate members. Instead, she saw in them cool and calm calculation. It immediately told her that not only was this guy genuinely the local syndicate leader they sought, but that he was also a very dangerous man.

"Kill her, I kill you," she added. "But answer my questions, and we all walk away alive."

Again, the man seemed to consider, but suddenly, Tabitha wrenched in his grip, jamming her elbow hard into his solar plexus and twisting out of his hold, her own gun coming up quickly.

Heather found herself seeing all this happen in a sort of slow motion, and she reacted instantly. "No!" she cried, leaping at her partner and pushing Tabitha down before she could pull the trigger and end their target's life. The man also reacted, recovering and bringing his gun around to point at Tabitha again. Heather spun, her foot flying high as she kicked it out of his hand. Then she landed, planting herself back on the ground, and delivered another kick, this one a straight-out sidekick, to his stomach, causing him to double over and fall backward into the office's sole chair.

Tabitha glared at Heather from the floor where she'd been pushed. She still had a grip on her gun, and it was pointed at the target. For a moment, Heather thought the older woman was going to pull the trigger. But then Lowry relaxed her grip on the gun and smiled in embarrassed fashion up at her. "Sorry, got a little battle fog."

Heather frowned but accepted the woman's explanation, and as Tabitha levered herself back to a standing position, Kilgore turned back to the target, roughly checking him for weapons. Then she pointed her pistol at his head, and he looked at its borehole with a disdainful sneer, but she could see in his eyes that he was genuinely worried now.

"Why did you kill Connor Monroe?" she asked the man without any small talk.

He regarded her with a hard gaze but said nothing. So, she shot him, shifting her gun to take out his right kneecap. He screamed in agony as the bullet shattered the joint and let loose a string of invectives in Russian. Heather understood most of them, having learned the language on a prior mission, but she found herself wishing she *didn't* understand some of the more inventive ones about her gender.

"Next shot hits the other knee," she told him coldly once he'd stopped screaming enough to hear her. "Then I take your manhood. Vy ponimayete menya?" He sneered again when he heard her ask if he understood in Russian but slowly nodded.

"Good. Why did you kill Connor Monroe?"

For a long moment, he said nothing. Heather saw his eyes flick behind her and to her left, to where Tabitha stood as if looking for the other woman to save him. Then he turned his gaze back to her. "I have nothing to say, you—" Whatever clever name he planned on calling her died in screams as her bullet shattered his left kneecap. Again, she waited for him to stop and then leaned down, digging the barrel of her gun hard into his crotch.

"Why did you kill Connor and Luisa Monroe?" she hissed.

The man sucked in the air painfully. When he spoke, his accent was thick, and his English halting. "Fine. It was job. No more. I don't know why they want them dead."

"Who hired you?" she asked, her voice a low growl as she twisted the gun, causing him to wince.

"I don't know! They never show their face. It was woman; called herself Nightshadow. Is stupid name, but lots of money." He said this last part like it justified everything he'd done.

“And this intermediary hired you to kill Monroe *and* his wife?” Heather demanded, trying to sound stern and angry despite her excitement at someone on this cursed planet *finally* knowing something about the mysterious Nightshadow.

“Da, but I never meet woman. I don’t know who she is!”

“I don’t believe you,” Heather hissed and made a big show of slowly squeezing her gun’s trigger.

“Zhdat! Zhdat!” he cried, holding up both arms in surrender. “I swear I never see face. But one of my men track comm code. I have data. I give it to you now.”

Heather accepted a ping from the man’s implant and saw him transfer over a comm code and a geolocation tag along with a few other bits of useful information, including a call log for his communications with the number.

“What about the attack on me by Embassy Row?” she asked once she’d verified the data as received.

The man suddenly looked confused through the pain. “What attack? I never see *you* before today.”

Heather frowned, detecting no lie in the desperate man’s tone but still not believing him. She opened her mouth to ask another question.

“Police are on their way!” Tabitha’s voice stopped her. “Four minutes out. We have to go *now!*”

Heather grimaced but knew the older woman was right. She looked back down at the Namoran man, who looked suddenly hopeful at the prospect of anyone, even the police, saving him from the two women. That look of hope was the last expression he ever wore as Heather’s bullet entered his skull.

“We got what we came for,” she told Tabitha. “Let’s go.”

CHAPTER 16 – THE AFTERMATH

“It looks like a slaughterhouse in here,” Figueroa said as he finished dry heaving in the corner of the small room.

Two dead men, both shot through the head, one obviously while sleeping, greeted the detectives, and Gentry leaned down to get a better view of the sitting corpse, examining the bullet hole in its temple.

“Small caliber,” he said, mostly to himself. “One shot each. Probably a pistol.”

“What’s it mean?” Figueroa asked, moving up beside his boss to peer at the same thing, though definitely not seeing everything Gentry was.

“It means, José, that whoever did this was good, professional even. And definitely not a rival syndicate—they would have come in with large caliber and automatic weapons blazing. What we have here is precision work despite the blood and brains on the wall. I expect we’ll find the same thing throughout the warehouse. And when they process the crime scene, it likely won’t give us many clues to the identities of the killers.”

“Huh,” Figueroa said, looking thoughtful. “But wouldn’t they have left behind some sort of trace evidence? I mean, unless they were wearing vacsuits, there has to be hair at least, right?”

Gentry stood up from his examination of the dead body, regarding his junior partner. “You’re right.” The other man’s face lit up. “But you’re also wrong.” His face sank again.

“You see,” Gentry went on to explain, “we’ll likely find plenty of trace

evidence. But I don't expect it will lead us anywhere. Even DNA has to have something to match to. And I'm betting that whoever did this isn't going to be in *any* of the databases."

"The extras?" Figueroa asked wide-eyed.

Gentry didn't answer; he was already walking out of the room, and his junior partner hastened to follow him. At the end of a short hall peppered with bullet holes, they stepped out onto a high catwalk that hung out over the warehouse floor.

"Detectives, over here!" one of the uniformed officers called, motioning them over to a spot thirty meters along the catwalk to the right, where it skirted one of the warehouse walls.

Gentry and Figueroa joined the man a few seconds later, peering at where he was pointing. What they saw was a small metal cylinder, barely the size of a button, stuck to the railing, an incredibly thin cord attached to it. Gentry peered over the rail, following the long, wispy cord down to the warehouse floor, where it hung and swirled in the light breeze from the building's air conditioners, looking like a spider web, only appearing when it caught the light.

Reaching out a gloved hand, Gentry grabbed the cord a few centimeters from the cylinder affixed to the metal rail and tugged experimentally. Even when he tugged harder, the button-sized cylinder held fast.

"Magnet," he mused. "Powerful one. Tiny too. And that thread isn't something you can just buy off a shelf. I've heard of things like this in the Promethean and Koratan militaries. Special forces use them. Which supports this being a *very* professional job."

"The extras, for sure," Figueroa said quietly beside him.

"It's looking that way."

"Detective Gentry," called another uniformed officer. "I think we found the syndicate boss, sir. He's in an office over there," he gestured toward an enclosed space, almost like a smaller building built against the warehouse's far interior wall. "Looks like he was tortured before he was killed. Shot in both kneecaps. Then shot in the head. It's ugly, sir."

Gentry considered this for a moment and didn't like the implications. He'd known he wouldn't like it the moment he and the SWAT team had arrived to

raid the warehouses and found nothing but dead bodies waiting for them. But the fact that the syndicate boss had been tortured suggested that the extras—the redhead and her brunette friend, no doubt—had come for information and probably gotten it. And that meant they were still a step ahead of him.

He was thinking through his next move when another shout from below drew his attention again. “Sir, one more thing,” the same uniformed officer called up. “We found a hair. Long, like a woman’s. It’s red, sir.”

Somehow, the confirmation didn’t make Gentry feel any better.

CHAPTER 17 – FALLING OUT

“**W**hat in Hades is wrong with you?” Heather Kilgore demanded as soon as she and Tabitha were far enough away from the warehouse and back in the sparse flow of traffic going to and from the capital at this early hour. “How’d you let that guy get the drop on you?” “I’m sorry,” Tabitha responded meekly, not taking her eyes from the road. “Getting old sucks; guess I’ve lost a step.”

“You got sloppy; that’s what happened! First, you get detected on our way in, and then you chase that guy into those offices alone. You’re supposed to be the more experienced agent, so why all the stupidity?” The words were harsh, but Heather was genuinely upset, though she’d managed to hold it all inside while they were in the warehouse itself. But now, on the road with Tabitha, it was all coming out.

Lowry didn’t respond at first, her eyes still fixed on the road in front of her. When she finally did speak, Heather had to strain to hear her near-whisper. “Twenty years of service to the Crown, and this is it.”

“What are you talking about?” Heather demanded.

“Haven’t you ever thought—I mean *really* thought—of what comes after this life?”

“You mean like about God and heaven and all that stuff?” Heather asked in confusion.

“No, not like that. I mean, what happens when we’re too old to be effective agents anymore? What happens then?”

“What do you mean? When we’re done, the Order sets us up with new identities and a stipend so we can go live in peace. They teach trainees that in the first week.”

“And trainees believe it...” Lowry trailed off, but the implication was clear.

“But you don’t?”

“Remember Dorsey?” Tabitha asked.

“Sure. Big guy, always cracking jokes even when they were completely inappropriate.”

“He and I...” Tabitha trailed off again.

“Really? I thought he annoyed you.”

“It was years ago when I was closer to your age. Relationships within the Order aren’t prohibited, but they’re not exactly encouraged either, so we kept it all under wraps. Broke it off pretty amicably, too. When he retired, he approached me and told me he was going to get himself a little house on Madras and that I should look him up when my own retirement came.”

“OK, so what?” Heather didn’t mean the question to sound so brusque, but she was getting annoyed with the meandering way Tabitha was telling the story.

“I didn’t wait until retirement. A year after he left, I was on assignment near Madras, so I took a short detour and went looking for him. I never found him, and I knew him well enough that I’m pretty sure I would have if he’d been there, no matter what identity he was using.”

“OK, so maybe he didn’t go to Madras after all?”

Tabitha turned and regarded Heather with a haunted look. “Or maybe it’s all a lie. Maybe there *is* no retirement for us.” She stopped, letting that hang in the air between them while she turned her eyes back to the dark road. It was still an hour before sunrise, and they were far enough on the outskirts of the city that it was nearly pitch black except for the glow of the car’s headlights and those of the few other cars around them.

“Heather,” Tabitha continued. “We *have* to talk about what happened two-and-a-half years ago. I need to explain why I did what I did. I can’t let you leave this planet without clearing the air between us.”

“Pull over. Now,” Heather demanded.

Tabitha threw her a distressed look. “Come on, Heather, we’re in the middle of nowhere. Be reasonable; let’s just talk.”

“Now, Tabitha. Pull. Over.”

Sighing but not arguing any further, Lowry took the next exit off the dark highway and pulled over to the side of the frontage road. Heather got out, slamming the passenger door shut as she did so, and started walking.

The older agent kept her car sitting there, and for a moment, it seemed like she might try and call the younger woman back. But then she pulled back out onto the road and a few seconds later was back on the expressway heading toward Hudson Yard, the whine of her car’s repulsors dying away into the distance.

Kilgore walked along the lonely road in quiet rage for a kilometer or so. The first thing she and Lowry had done upon reaching their car back at the warehouse was to shed the black tactical suits they’d been wearing. It would have been no use to escape the warehouse and then immediately get pulled over for looking suspicious, not to mention that both suits were liberally splattered with blood. Makeup wipes cleaned that off each of their faces, and they had quickly changed into civilian garb before speeding away.

Unfortunately, they’d also ditched their guns a few kilometers from the warehouse in case the police thought fast enough to set up roadblocks. That would have been fine—Tabitha had plenty of extras hidden in her apartment—but now Heather felt slightly naked without hers. At least she still had her knife strapped beneath her flimsy gray t-shirt to the small of her back, hilt down for fast access.

She knew it was only a matter of time until someone picked her up. In her t-shirt and cutoff shorts, she looked like any other civilian, and if there was one thing most men couldn’t resist, it was a pretty girl in distress. And Heather knew, in a clinical sort of way, that she was more beautiful than the average woman. It wasn’t vanity; it was simple reality, and like anything else, it was a tool she used when required to accomplish her missions.

Therefore, she wasn’t surprised in the least when the first car that passed just twenty minutes later pulled over to the side of the road ahead of her. It was a ratty old pickup truck of the kind that seemed to grace the rural areas of just about every colony world humanity had ever settled, and its electric motor sounded like it was on its last legs.

She walked calmly up to the rolled-down passenger window, one hand near her back to grab the knife there if she needed it, and peered in at the car's occupant. What she saw in the dim illumination from the truck's overhead dome light was a tall, lanky farm boy that reminded her, oddly enough, of a boy she'd once known on her home planet of Edmonton. Before... the incident that had ended that part of her life. But a farm boy was good because she still remembered enough from her own childhood on the farm that this was a man she could relate to; she could manipulate him. That he was near her age was a bonus; it would mean he'd be more susceptible to her charms, especially because she didn't see a wedding band.

"Need a ride?" the boy asked cheerfully, and Heather smiled widely back.

"My hero!" she said, making her voice just a little higher pitched than normal. "I was out with some friends, and they were driving drunk. I made them let me out of their car, and I've been walking along this road for two hours, and you're the first gentleman who's stopped for me." Butter him up; let him think he really was the hero of the story. "Do you think you could give me a ride back to the city?"

"Of course; glad I came along when I did," the boy said with an even bigger smile. "Name's Jimmy. Hop in, Miss..."

"Dawn," she told him, using one of the many fake identities she had courtesy of the Order. "Thank you, Jimmy."

"Now, you're sure you're not a murderer?" he asked in good humor as she got into the passenger seat and fastened her safety belt.

"No promises," she said in a playful tone. Joking about it would put him more at ease than a straight denial.

"Well, Miss Dawn, if you're a murderer, then I'm fit to be murdered."

Returning his laugh, even though she didn't feel it inside, she watched as he pulled the vehicle back onto the road and started to follow it, passing right by the onramp to the expressway.

"This old truck is plenty reliable," he told her by way of explanation, "but it's a lot slower than it used to be. People tend to get mad when you drive so far below the speed limit on the highway, so I keep her to the side roads. Hope that's OK; makes the trip into the Yard a bit longer, but the scenery is better."

"No complaints from me," she told him, then went silent, contemplating her

next move.

“Running from or to?” the boy asked after a minute or so.

“Excuse me?”

“Pretty girl like you, walking before sunup on a lonely road outside the city. I know what you said about your friends, but I figure you must be running from or to something to be out there like that. So, which is it?”

“Oh.” She stopped to consider her answer, upset with herself that she hadn’t sold her lie. Instead of answering him, she decided to deflect with a question of her own. “You from outside town?”

“Yeah,” he replied. “Parents got a farm about a hundred kilometers out. Whole other world here in the city, but someone has to come and pick up some things we can’t get out there. So here I am.”

“You enjoy it out there?” She realized as she asked the question that her tone sounded wistful.

He turned his head slightly to eye her and then shrugged. “It’s a living. Can’t afford my own plot yet. So, I help my parents with theirs. It’ll be mine someday, I suppose. But for now, I’m working for them. How about you? If you don’t mind me saying, you’re definitely not from around here.”

“What gave it away?” she asked cautiously.

“Your accent. Doesn’t sound like anything I’ve heard before in the city. Could be from another part of the planet, but sure ain’t from around here.”

She considered this with chagrin. It was the second time someone had used her accent to peg her as an off-worlder, and that could be a deadly outcome in her line of work. Lowry had always lectured her on the need to blend in with her surroundings and the natives. But Heather had never been good at the spy part of their job; on the other hand, she was *great* at the assassination part.

Her mind turned now to Tabitha Lowry, and she found herself getting angry at the older woman’s insistence on opening old wounds. When she saw her again, she would have to—

“Something I said?”

“Huh?” she asked, looking over at the boy, Jimmy, who was studying her intermittently when he wasn’t looking at the road.

“The expression on your face. You look upset. Still pretty, but not happy.”

Despite herself, Kilgore smiled. The boy was harmless. After... certain events from her youth, her radar for predators pretty much ran in overdrive all the time. Nothing about this boy was spiking her readings. He was just what he appeared to be: an innocent boy from the farms who saw a pretty girl on the side of the road and decided to help. His motives probably weren't entirely pure, but he certainly wasn't going to force himself on her or take her out to a secluded spot and murder her.

Of course, if he tried, he was in for a surprise.

“It's nothing,” she said to his question. “Just a rough morning. That's all.”

“Wanna talk about it?”

She smiled again. From the way he asked the question, he was genuinely trying to be helpful, not to pry. “That's OK. Nothing to talk about. Just a falling out with a friend. Uh, you know, the one who was driving drunk.”

He nodded knowingly. “Been there. Grew up with a tight-knit group. Weren't all that many folks my age in our little town to begin with, but it seemed there was always a spat between at least a couple of us. Looking back now, it was always over silly stuff, but we sure didn't see it that way back then.”

The boy paused, inviting comment or response. She considered her next words carefully.

“Look, no offense, but I really don't want to talk about it.”

“No problem,” he said, still cheerful. “Let's talk about something else then. Got a boyfriend?”

The non sequitur and brashness of his question surprised her so much that she laughed out loud.

“No. Why do you ask?”

“Oh, no reason,” he said through a wide grin. “Just wondering if you need someone to show you around now that you're not with those friends of yours. I come to town a couple times a month. So, I know the Yard pretty well. Besides, like I said, you're awfully pretty. And my dad always says you never let a pretty girl get away without at least a good try.”

She regarded him for a moment. His honest, if forward, approach was so wildly different from the men she was used to, especially the two that had

tried to pick her up in the bars the previous evening. She found she liked this boy. But that brought up another problem. Trouble seemed to follow her at the best of times, and she was out of her element here on Hudson, playing the role of detective instead of the hand of the King's justice. She found herself starting to worry that the trouble that seemed to follow her on this Fringe-forsaken planet might extend to young Jimmy if she stayed with him for too long.

She grimaced at the thought of putting him in danger, and he caught it.

"Oh my, where are my manners?" he said in dismay. "Here we are, early morning, and I didn't even stop to ask you if you're hungry. Allow me to take you to breakfast?"

That hadn't been the reason for her grimace, but now that he mentioned it, the events at the warehouse had burned a lot of calories, and she *was* pretty hungry. Still, she almost refused his offer, but the earnest look on his boyish face had her saying yes before she even knew what she was doing.

Ten minutes later, he pulled his truck off the road and parked next to a silver-skinned diner of the type that could be found on any planet in human space. He led her inside, and one of the waitresses found them a booth to one side, not that there were many people there to compete with at this early hour. The sun was up now, at least, but it was a weekday, and most people were either fighting traffic or riding public transit to get to work, not stopping at an out-of-the-way diner for breakfast.

The other denizens of the small restaurant included what looked like a handful of freight haulers and day laborers, plus, oddly enough, a woman dressed in a business suit who was halfway through a large plate of pancakes.

"What's good here?" she asked Jimmy.

He shrugged. "Don't know. First time here."

"Oh hey, Jimmy!" called one of the waitresses from behind the counter, waving at him.

He grinned at Heather. "OK, I lied. I'm a regular. Stop here almost every time I go through town. Just didn't want you to think I was taking your company for granted. If you'd said no, I would have skipped it this time."

The ridiculousness of his little white lie amused her, and she smiled back at him.

“Anyway,” he said, nodding to the old-style laminate menu in front of her. “Just about everything’s good, but if you want my advice, go with the biscuits and gravy. You won’t feel like moving for thirty minutes afterward, but they’re the best anywhere in the Yard. Almost as good as what my mom makes.”

The waitress arrived at that moment to pour them some steaming hot coffee and ask them what they wanted to drink otherwise. They told her, but as the young woman turned to go, she eyed Heather appraisingly and then threw a wink at Jimmy. “Where’d you find this one, Jimmy? She’s way too cute for you.”

“Well, Debra,” the boy said with a broad smile. “Found her wandering all alone on the side of the road. Chivalry demanded I give her a ride and bring her to the best diner this side of the Yard.”

The young waitress, Debra, smirked. “Don’t let George hear you say that. He’s adamant this place is the best on *both* sides of the Yard.”

She and Jimmy shared a brief chuckle. Then the waitress turned and eyed Heather again. “And just what are your intentions, Miss, with our Jimmy here?” She said it in a playful fashion, but Kilgore could see real concern in the woman’s eyes. She was obviously sweet on the boy, even if Jimmy seemed oblivious to the fact.

“Nothing sinister,” she replied with her own smile. “He just helped me out.”

“Gonna show her around later, too,” Jimmy announced proudly. Heather tried not to wince. She actually hadn’t agreed to anything of the sort yet, but she also hadn’t told the boy no.

“Oh yeah, from out of town?” the waitress asked, eyeing her with even more suspicion.

“Yeah,” Heather admitted. Then she had a thought. “First time in Hudson Yard. Came here to visit some friends. They drank a little too much last night, and we were on our way home. I didn’t feel safe with them driving, and they wouldn’t let me take their keys, so I made them let me out of the car. Jimmy found me a couple of hours later,” she repeated the story she’d told the farm boy, but then she added a part. “And I’m sure glad he did. A few minutes before that, some big guy in a shiny car tried to stop and pick me up. Sounded Russian, I think, and I didn’t like his look or the way he talked.

He called me a name and sped off when I told him no thanks.”

The suspicion in Debra’s face fled, instantly replaced by a knowing grimace. “Yeah, not surprising. A bunch of those guys come in here once a week or so. They flirt shamelessly with all the waitresses, but that’s all it’s been so far, mostly. They tip well, but they give me the willies.”

“What are they doing all the way out here in Hudson?” Heather asked, eyes wide with unfeigned interest. “I didn’t think there were any Russian colonies nearby.”

The waitress cocked a hip to rest the elbow of the arm supporting the coffee mug, obviously settling in for a longer chat. “They’re not from around here,” she said conspiratorially. “I heard one of them mention Namero, Namorey, something like that.”

“Namora?”

“That’s it! Showed up a couple of years ago, always dressed in business suits with their hair slicked back. George, he’s the owner, had to talk to them a few times when they got a little handsy with the help early on. Since then, they’ve mostly behaved, but funny thing is, George looks a little scared every time they come in. I hope it’s not a sign of trouble. I need this job.”

“What are they doing here on Hudson?” Heather asked. It was amazing what you could get out of people looking for a chance to gossip.

Debra shrugged. “Not sure. Heard one of them talking about some sort of shipments one day, but didn’t say what kind, and I didn’t ask. Honestly, didn’t really want to know. They smell like trouble, and I’ve got enough of that in my life, thank you very much.”

Heather nodded sympathetically at the girl, though she doubted the waitress had actually *ever* met a piece of information she genuinely didn’t want to know. Then, the girl got called away to help another customer, leaving her and Jimmy alone.

They made small talk for the next forty minutes as they ordered and then ate their food. He told her all about growing up on the farm, and she told him all about life on one of the Koratan colony worlds. She’d been there once on an assignment, so she knew enough to describe it and fool someone who had never visited. Jimmy, he admitted with a blush, had never even been off planet. In fact, his trips into ‘town’ constituted the only real travel he’d done

in his life.

She found herself laughing a lot at the things he said. He had an easy humor, and not all of it was intentional; he was so refreshingly naïve that she couldn't help but shake her head and chuckle several times.

Finally, their food done, he paid the bill over her protests and then led her out of the diner with a hearty wave goodbye to the staff. They exited the building and walked around the corner to where he'd parked his truck, then stopped dead.

Four large men stood in a loose semi-circle in front of Jimmy's truck, waiting for them.

CHAPTER 18 – SHOWDOWN AT THE DINER

In her peripheral vision, Heather saw Jimmy go rigid next to her as he took in the four large men in tracksuits blocking the way to his truck. She could spy guns underneath at least two of their loose windbreakers, but their hands were luckily empty, probably due to an overabundance of confidence in their superior numbers.

“Uh, what do you guys want?” Jimmy asked, trying to sound firm but with a clear tremble in his voice.

The thugs ignored him, their eyes fixated on Heather. “Kill the boy; bring the woman with us,” one of the men in the center rumbled, and the two guys on the end started walking toward her and Jimmy.

Heather braced herself, going up onto the balls of her feet, taking a defensive stance, and cursing herself for getting out of Tabitha’s car just because she’d gotten angry with the woman. It was a stupid rookie move, and she was going to pay for it now. Worse, Jimmy would probably be paying for it with her.

She was calculating angles and how to take down the two approaching thugs without opening herself up to fire from the two who had stayed by the truck. And that’s when Jimmy intervened.

To her shock and horror, the boy stepped in front of her, between her and the approaching thugs.

“Dawn, run!” he cried, balling his hands into fists.

Idiot!

Springing forward, she shoved him roughly out of the way. By that point, the closest man was only two paces away, so she used the momentum of her shove off Jimmy to propel her in his direction, seemingly by accident, as she faked a stumble. The approaching thug opened his arms to grab her.

In one fluid move, Heather grabbed the knife from the small of her back, whipped it out and, in a quick slashing motion, severed the guy's carotid artery. Blood sprayed on her as he fell, and she leaped sideways toward the other closest thug, who was fumbling for his weapon at his belt.

He dodged her first swipe with the knife and lifted one of his beefy arms to block the second, crying out in pain and rage as the blade bit deep into his forearm. He lowered the arm and instinctively grabbed at it with his other hand to stop the bleeding, leaving him open to another slashing attack by Heather that didn't miss the mark this time.

She whirled next to face the two other men, both of whom now had their guns out and were raising them to point at her. They were four and five meters away, much too far for her to reach them before they could get off a shot. So, she flipped the knife in her hand to grasp it by the blade and threw it at the closest of the two. The hasty throw took him in the chest, not the neck where she usually aimed, but it was enough to make him drop the gun and stumble to the ground with a cry of surprised pain.

But the final thug now had his pistol pointed squarely at her, and she was completely unarmed. She prepared to leap to one side and approach him in a zigzag pattern that would hopefully spoil his aim, but she knew deep down there was little chance of him missing at this range. She could only hope his first shot simply injured her and that she could get to him before he had a chance to fire a second. It was very much the same situation she'd found herself in with the thugs near Embassy Row, but this time, there was no Tabitha Lowry to appear out of the darkness and save her at the last second.

"Dawn, catch!" a voice cried—Jimmy's.

Heather whirled to catch the gun that Jimmy tossed her. But his aim was off, so she had to dive for it. A boom sounded in her ears, and she felt something rip through her upper thigh as she flew through the air toward the tossed weapon, her unexpected dive making the thug miss hitting anything vital with his shot.

She grabbed the pistol out of the air, turning as she fell so that she landed hard on the pavement with one shoulder, scraping it and one arm painfully as she slid across the hard asphalt, thankfully not landing on the same side that had been shot. But she didn't let the fall or the injury distract her. With her other hand, she lifted the pistol Jimmy had thrown her and put a bullet right in the thug's chest.

For a second, the man looked surprised at being shot, and he kept tracking Heather's movement with his own gun. But then his hands went limp, and the pistol clattered to the pavement; he followed it, slumping to the ground and laying still.

Getting unsteadily to her feet and testing her injured leg to see if it could bear weight, Heather saw Jimmy crouching next to the body of the first thug she'd downed, trembling. He'd obviously crawled over to the man's body while she was fighting the other three, retrieved his pistol, and had the presence of mind to throw it to her. But now, he looked like he was going to be sick, and she could clearly see the shock setting in.

There were screams from inside the diner, the staff and remaining patrons reacting to the close sound of the two gunshots outside. That meant the police would arrive shortly, and their drones would precede the squad cars and officers themselves, so she needed to act quickly. She surveyed the scene, absorbing it all in a second. Three of the thugs were dead—the man she'd hit in the chest with her knife was still alive, though he was coughing up blood. There were no windows on this side of the diner, so no direct witnesses she could see, but plenty of people who saw her and Jimmy leave moments before the gunfire.

All bad. Protocol demanded she do two things. First, kill the remaining thug. Second, either kill Jimmy and steal his truck or leave him alive to take the heat and steal his truck anyway. The latter might actually give her more of a head start; after all, Jimmy had handled the pistol he'd thrown her way, so his fingerprints would be on it as well as hers, and hers wouldn't show up in any database—plus she had the means to change them if they ever did. If the cops were eager and stupid, they might just assume Jimmy had killed all four men. Even if they didn't, they would lose valuable time interrogating him before they finally realized they had the wrong man. And by then, she would be long gone, and nothing she'd told Jimmy would help the police find her.

Jimmy would be fine... probably. But he also might not be.

And there was also the problem of who had sent these thugs and how they had found her.

Ignoring the trembling Jimmy on the ground, she limped over to the one living thug. He screamed as she crouched down next to him and pulled out the knife, and then started swearing at her. She gave him a second to get the worst of it out, and then she slapped his face hard, stopping him mid-
invective.

“Who sent you?” she asked the dying man calmly.

He swore at her again.

With no further warning, she reached down with one hand and violently jammed her fingers into his bubbling chest wound. He shrieked in agony, his voice going higher than she would have imagined it could from a big guy like him.

“I said, who sent you?” she asked, this time in a growl that promised far more pain if he didn’t answer.

“Don’t know,” he said, gasping for breath. “Name... Nightshadow.” Then he passed out from the pain.

Heather could hear sirens now in the distance, coming closer, which meant the drones might be just seconds away, so she had to move fast. She reached down with the knife and, without thought or sympathy, slit the unconscious thug’s throat. He let loose one last gurgling gasp and lay still, a second pool of blood forming beneath him.

“What did you do?!” a voice wailed, and she turned to see Jimmy staring at her in horror.

She sighed, limping over to him. He looked like he might get up and run from her, but he stayed rooted to the spot, his fight or flight reflex probably in overdrive so that he was literally paralyzed with fear. The sirens were much closer now, and she looked off into the distance in their direction and reached a decision.

“They’re coming,” she told Jimmy as she ripped off a strip from the bottom of her t-shirt and used it to bind her leg wound, grunting at the pain as she pulled it tight. “And they’ll arrest both of us for defending ourselves against

these men. I'm an undercover cop, and I can help you, but only if you come with me *right now*. Then I promise I'll explain everything, and you won't go to jail; you did nothing wrong here today. In fact, you saved my life. So, I owe you one."

For a second, he stared at her uncomprehendingly, but something in her words got through to him—false though they may all be—and he slowly reached up to take her hand. She painfully pulled him to his feet and led him as fast as she could move to his truck, putting him in the passenger seat, then taking the driver's seat herself and rapidly pulling out of the parking lot and back out onto the road, heading in the opposite direction from the sirens, back the way they'd come.

CHAPTER 19 – FLEEING THE SCENE

“**W**hat did you do? That guy was already down. But you cut his throat!”

Heather resisted the urge to roll her eyes. Jimmy had been repeating much the same over and over again in the thirty minutes since they'd fled the diner and the scene of the attack. And while she liked the kid, he was starting to get on her nerves with his little mental breakdown.

On top of that, having him crying like that in the passenger seat was a stark and continual reminder that she'd broken protocol. Bringing the farm boy with her didn't benefit her in the least. The diner's staff and patrons would be able to describe her to the police as well as he could, and nothing she'd told him in their time together was true or could lead the authorities to her. Not to mention that, by bringing him, she'd sacrificed any delay leaving him behind would have caused the police.

In fact, bringing him along was a *huge* risk. He was a civilian and could only slow her down. Plus, the more time he spent with her, the more he *would* be able to tell the local authorities about her when they inevitably caught up to him.

Which all begged the question of *why* she'd done it. She actually wasn't sure. Maybe it was the kind way he'd treated her, or maybe she just didn't like seeing an innocent man potentially go to prison for her actions. But neither of those things changed the fact that she had just broken a half dozen of the Order's unwritten laws and even a few of the written ones.

Heather took a quick moment to make a comm call in her implant to Tabitha.

She subvocalized an update of the attack and her injury to the other woman so that Jimmy wouldn't overhear, leaving out the part about taking the boy with her but otherwise giving a full description of the attackers and where they'd found her. Lowry was more worried about the bullet hole in her leg than anything else but promised to look into the attack. She suggested Heather lay low somewhere outside the city for the next few days at least.

Kilgore was going to argue, but the older woman's words made sense. Not only would her leg wound slow her down—the pain had been getting progressively worse now that the adrenaline of the attack was wearing off—but the police would be setting roadblocks all around Hudson Yard. It would be far too risky for Heather to try and get back in the city. She would have to rely on Tabitha to keep digging into Monroe's death and the mysterious Nightshadow.

But that didn't mean she liked it. Being out of the action, even for just a few days, was going to wear on her. Still, every cop in Hudson Yard would be looking for a pretty redhead fitting her description, and even dying her hair might not be enough to throw them off the scent. So, there was nothing to do but agree with the older woman's suggestion and promise to contact her in seventy-two hours.

She hung up and checked her mirrors for the hundredth time and then craned her neck to check the sky through the windshield for any drones above. Once she was confident that the police still weren't following them, she turned to the boy. "Jimmy, I need you to pull yourself together. We need to make a plan. I promise you; you haven't done anything wrong. Those men were going to kill us both, and throwing me that gun saved us! But I need you to talk to me so we can figure out our next move. Do you know a place we can hide that *no one* will be able to find? Preferably one without a lot of people around so we don't endanger anyone else. I can keep *you* safe, but it'll be easier in a secluded place."

Slowly, the boy stopped blubbering and seemed to consider her question. It took some more coaxing and multiple assurances that, yes, she was an undercover cop, but no, she couldn't call in the local police because she was in deep cover. She wasn't making it up on the spot; it was all a pretty standard cover story for dealing with situations like this, even if situations like this were *never* supposed to happen.

After calling Tabitha, she had immediately shut down her implant's outbound signals. Until she turned them back on, it would be impossible for anyone, Tabitha included, to track her that way. Now, as Jimmy thought of a place for them to lie low, she tried to talk him gently through doing the same with his own implant.

"Don't have one," he said, his voice still shaky. "Mom and Dad couldn't afford one for me. Most kids in my town never got the things."

Heather had her implant scan the boy's head to confirm he was telling the truth. That he was came as a shock to her. Even on Edmonton, a hick planet by Promethean standards, *everyone* got an implant; the government paid for them. But at least Jimmy's lack of such a device would eliminate the chances of anyone tracking them through it. A scan by her implant of his truck also revealed no signals like those she would expect from a tracking device. She did make him remove the battery from the handheld comm he carried and then give it to her so he wouldn't be tempted to use it.

Then she set her mind to trying to figure out how the attackers had known to find her at the diner. Either she and Tabitha had gotten sloppy, and a drone had trailed them from the syndicate's warehouse, or...

Or Tabitha had sent the thugs, tracking Heather's implant. She immediately discarded that thought. Tabitha Lowry, for all of her flaws, was still an Agent of the King's Cross. Not only that, despite their falling out, she knew that the older woman still thought of her as a friend and protégé. To think that Tabitha had ordered an attack on her was absurd. They *must* have been followed by a drone.

So who had the drone belonged to? The syndicate? So far as she knew, they were all dead. But it was possible someone had survived and had them followed. Or maybe it was the arms dealer, 'Mr. Jones', wanting to tie up loose ends now that they'd eliminated her troublesome clients.

But the fact was, the last living thug had given the name Nightshadow. Whoever this woman—or man—using that name was, they seemed to continuously be one step ahead of Heather and Tabitha. The implication that *anyone* could be one step ahead of two experienced King's Cross agents was mildly terrifying.

"The cabin," Jimmy said, interrupting her thoughts.

“Huh?”

“We can go to the cabin,” he said. “You asked where we could lay low. We can go to the cabin. No one will ever find us there.”

“You’re sure no one knows about it?” she asked dubiously.

He shrugged, which didn’t inspire a lot of confidence. But when he spoke, he sounded certain. “Just me and my Dad. We found it years ago, abandoned. We used to sneak over there to fish every once in a while, but we kept it secret so that others wouldn’t come and ruin it.”

“Won’t your dad tell the police about it?”

“I doubt it. We haven’t been in five years or so. Life got in the way, and we’ve been too busy. And there’s no way he would ever think I’d take someone there unless I trusted them.”

“You trust me?” Heather asked in a small voice, so quiet that she was sure Jimmy couldn’t hear her. But she suddenly found her vision swimming as a strange wave of emotion overcame her. The truck started drifting toward one side of the road.

“Hey, you’re bleeding!” Jimmy exclaimed. It was enough to snap Heather back to full attention and bring the truck back to the center of her lane.

“We need to get you to a doctor,” the farm boy insisted.

“No doctors,” Heather said, shaking her head. “It’ll blow my cover.”

“Then get ready to pull over. There’s a drugstore coming up.”

She shook her head again. “They’ll have cameras. Can’t risk it.”

To her surprise, he laughed, though it was more of a short bark than anything cheerful. “You kidding? Cameras? Out here? Dawn, no one has cameras in their stores out here. Can’t afford ‘em. And if they did, you can be sure they’re not connected to the police. No one wants their entire life being on film out here.”

It took a little more coaxing, but the boy was right. Heather had no painkillers for her leg and, more importantly, nothing to clean out the wound and prevent infection. She knew the bullet had gone through, so she didn’t have to worry about digging it out, but if she didn’t at least treat the wound, she’d end up in a hospital whether she liked it or not.

Still, she almost drove past the drugstore anyway, only pulling off the two-lane highway into the parking lot at the last minute. There, she realized she had another problem.

“I can’t go in,” she said looking down at her blood-soaked clothing. “They’ll ask too many questions, maybe even call the police.”

“Then I’ll go in for you,” Jimmy offered.

Heather thought about that for several seconds. It was a huge and probably stupid risk to take on a day already full of stupid risks. Letting Jimmy out of her sight would give him the opportunity to call the police on her, and she would have no way of knowing until the first drones found them.

She was about to tell him no, but then she felt his hand on her shoulder. Looking over, she saw him staring at her intently. “Dawn,” he said in a serious tone, “I got this. You can trust me.”

Whether it was the way he said it, so earnest that it hurt, or the fact that she literally had no other choice, she let him get out of the truck and go into the store with a mental list of things she needed. Then she waited.

It was late morning, well outside of rush hour now, and there were few cars on the rural highway. The skyscrapers of Hudson Yard were still visible in the middle distance, but out here, there were few buildings and even fewer travelers. But that didn’t stop her from flinching at every car that drove by and almost getting out of the truck to go and find Jimmy at least four times.

So it was with massive relief that she finally saw him come out of the store carrying two plastic bags full of supplies. He got back in the truck, and she pulled out of the lot and back onto the highway as quickly as she could.

CHAPTER 20 – THE CABIN

They passed through several small towns on their drive away from Hudson Yard until they came to a sign announcing a lake to the left.

Turning at Jimmy's instruction, Heather took the truck along that road for several more kilometers before he directed her to take another turn. Then, he had her slow down as he watched carefully for something along the side of the road.

"There," he told her, pointing to what looked at first like any other patch of the dense forest that had dominated the drive's scenery for the last twenty minutes. But on closer inspection, she could see the vague outlines of a trail that looked barely wide enough to fit the truck between the trees. At Jimmy's urging, she turned and followed it, moving even slower now.

Ten minutes of crawling down the trail later, they arrived at an overgrown yard with an old, rundown-looking log cabin, like something straight out of a horror movie or an old painting from a history book. She parked the truck under the wide branches of a tree where not even satellite imaging would be able to see it.

Then Jimmy led a dubious Heather inside, flipping on the lights and introducing her to his 'getaway'.

"My dad actually found it," he explained. He was slowly overcoming his shock at the events of a couple of hours ago and, besides the occasional pause where he looked like he might break down again, was almost speaking normally. Being in the familiar setting seemed to calm him by measures as well.

“We used to come fishing at this lake all the time. One day, Dad spotted the trail and followed it on foot, finding this place. Far as he could tell, no one had been here in years. He even checked the county records and couldn’t even find an entry for the place. Even so, every time we came out and used it, he’d always leave a little cash in a jar by the door to compensate the owners in case they ever came back, but after fifteen years, no one has ever come to collect, and the only sign of habitation we’ve ever found is our own and the occasional critter that gets in from outside.”

“Perfect,” she observed. “An off-the-books hideout.”

Jimmy shrugged. “I guess that’s what it is now.”

He led her toward the front door, insisting that she lean on him for support, but something stopped her as she painfully made her way up the two short steps to the porch that encircled the entire part of the cabin she could see. Whether it was Jimmy’s blind trust in her, the warmth of his body as he helped her hobble along, or just the emotional stress of the mission and the partnership with Lowry, she didn’t know. But she felt something hot on her face, and suddenly, her eyes were watering up. It was a relatively new experience for her. She hadn’t cried in front of another person since... since the time she didn’t like to think about. Ever since, she’d kept her emotions locked deep inside, except for the anger; it was always right there near the surface. Only with Connor Monroe had she ever let herself show some vulnerability, but she’d never cried in front of the man. And now, here she was, tearing up like a baby just because some hick farmer from a dead-end planet trusted her enough to bring her to his secret hiding place!

Pathetic.

But that didn’t stop the tears and she quickly made a show of rubbing her face as if she were simply tired. Her next words surprised her. “Jimmy, you should get as far away from me as you possibly can. Take the truck and go. Tell the police everything that happened, but tell them I kidnapped you. Tell them whatever you need to so that they leave you alone and come looking for me. I’ll be OK. I can handle myself.”

She kept her hands over her face, hiding the hot tears that were coming faster, not slower. All the stress and emotion of the last two days—of being almost blown up, getting stopped and attacked in the darkened street, meeting the arms dealer, assaulting the warehouse, arguing with Lowry, and finally

confronting the thugs in the diner parking lot—came crashing down on top of her, and couldn't make it stop.

Jimmy said nothing, just led her through the front door and into the small living room inside, helping her sit on the threadbare couch. Then she buried her face back in her hands, and she heard him leave the front room and start poking around the small cabin, ostensibly preparing it for their stay but just as obviously getting out of her way to let her process things. By the time he made it back to the front room five minutes later, she'd collected herself enough to put her normally impassive expression back on her face.

"There's, uh, only one bedroom," he said shyly. "You take it, and I'll take the couch."

She opened her mouth to argue with him, to tell him again that he should just leave her and go to the cops, but she knew that to do so would be to ignore the answer that he'd already effectively given her.

"OK," she said softly instead.

"You, uh, might want to clean up," he said, his eyes flicking to the dried blood on her torn shirt and shorts and the bloody bandage around her leg. "My dad left some changes of clothes here. Not sure if anything will fit you, but I can check. There's a bathroom and shower through there," he pointed toward a short hall on the room's far side. "If you want to go in there and take a shower, you can hand me your clothes, and I can use the washing machine. It worked five years ago, at least."

He stopped and looked at her awkwardly. "Do you need help with that hole in your leg?" His gaze went to her thigh, her *upper* thigh, and he looked for a second like he was simultaneously blushing and nauseous.

She smiled at him despite the pain. "No. It won't be the first time I've had to sew myself up. I can handle it. But thanks."

Jimmy still looked like he might be sick but nodded gratefully. Five minutes later, Heather was alone in the bathroom, sitting on the toilet, holding in a scream of pain as she poured disinfectant all over the two holes in her leg.

It took her about twenty minutes to clean her wound and then carefully shower, letting the warm water wash away the blood and the emotions that had overcome her. When she was done, she cleaned the wound again and then started the very painful process of closing both holes with the sewing kit

she'd had Jimmy purchase, but not before she gulped down much more than the recommended dose of some over-the-counter painkillers.

Finally, the wound treated the best she could without a real doctor, she put on a ratty old robe she found hanging in the bathroom and hobbled her way out into the hall.

Jimmy blushed as she came out, despite the robe covering her even more than her clothing had. Then he rushed to grab a stack of clothes from the couch and hand them to her.

"Your shorts were OK," he said, nodding down at them on the top of the small pile. "Even got most of the blood out. But your shirt was a total loss. It just started unraveling in the machine. I found an old T-shirt from when I used to come here. Hopefully, it fits."

Smiling gratefully, she limped back into the bathroom and shut the door, slowly changing, moving gingerly so that she wouldn't rip open the newly sewn stitches. A few minutes later, she was back in the living room, lowering herself carefully onto the couch. Once she was situated, she let out a little sigh of relief.

"Anything to eat around here?" she called to Jimmy, who was across the room fiddling with the viewscreen on the wall. It was nearing lunchtime, and despite their meal at the diner, she was hungry again.

"Sure," he replied. "Dad kept some canned food in the cupboards for when we came out. Nothing perishable, I'm afraid. But if you like baked beans and creamed corn, you're in for a treat."

CHAPTER 21 – TRYING TO FIGURE IT ALL OUT

While he bustled around the small kitchen, Heather leaned back on the couch and closed her eyes, not sleeping but running through the events of the last two-and-a-half days in her mind, along with what she'd learned so far.

Connor Monroe had been killed by Namorans, hired by someone codenamed Nightshadow, and then dumped by the Promethean Embassy. Somehow, he'd known enough ahead of time to leave a note in his pocket fingering Nightshadow. For some reason, he'd also mentioned Heather.

Was he just hoping that the King's Cross would investigate? Or was there something he felt only *she* could find out on Hudson?

Then, the same Nightshadow had hired the Namorans again, this time to kill Luisa Monroe. Except, instead of a stealthy kill made to look like natural causes, they had blown up her apartment and the ones surrounding it, making the kill as obvious as it could get. Why the change in M.O.? Was that the Namorans getting sloppy, or had the exact means of death for both the Monroes been explicitly ordered by the mysterious Nightshadow?

And there were the two different attacks on Heather to consider. Though only the second one, at the diner, had included a mention of Nightshadow, it was reasonable to assume that the mysterious woman—possibly a man—was behind both. Wasn't it? Or was there another party involved?

Also, she still didn't have a good explanation as to how Nightshadow was tracking her. Though it was a good sign that more goons hadn't shown up at the cabin, so hopefully, the killer had lost her trail.

Heather grew increasingly frustrated the more she thought through things. Even with all that had happened in the mere forty-eight hours since she'd arrived on Hudson, all she had were more questions than answers. She was tempted to call Tabitha and see if the older woman had learned anything new in the hours since they'd last spoken but stopped herself. It would do no good to broadcast her position if Nightshadow were somehow tracking her implant's signals, especially since her leg wound was too fresh to allow full freedom of movement. With that and Jimmy dragging her down, she'd be a much easier target.

Then, her eyes flew open, and she sat up, wincing at the pain in her leg as she did so. In the excitement and tumult of the day thus far, she'd completely forgotten about the comm code and geolocation tag the Namoran syndicate boss had given her at the warehouse right before she'd ended his life. She pulled up the data now and examined it. The comm code looked standard. She briefly considered calling it but rejected that idea for the same reason she couldn't call Tabitha.

So, she checked the geolocation tag that the Namorans had appended when they'd traced the call. Her implant had a fully loaded map of Hudson Yard in its memory, so she was able to see that the tag led to a convenience store on a corner in the northern part of the capital, about as far away from the Promethean and Koratan embassies as one could get without leaving the city. According to the records, *both* calls to the Namorans, the one hiring them to kill Monroe and the other to kill his fake wife, came from that same store. Which meant it was probably close to where Nightshadow was living and/or hiding.

But could the mysterious killer, who always seemed one step ahead of them, really be so stupid as to make his or her location so easy to find? Then, Heather pulled up the stats on that part of the city, and she understood. The convenience store was in a neighborhood of high-rise apartments. Close to a million people lived within four blocks of the store, and as long as Nightshadow didn't go back there, they would have no hope of actually finding them simply based on that one store's location. In fact, making the call from the same place twice actually made it *harder* for them to find the killer, as they didn't have multiple locations from which to try and triangulate a position.

So the Namoran data, like everything else they'd found so far, was probably a

dead end.

That meant...

“Lunch is ready!” Jimmy called out, jarring her from her thoughts. “If you enjoy five-star cuisine, this ain’t it!” His words were joking, but his tone was still haunted by all that had happened that day.

She gave him a courtesy laugh to hide how much she was also brooding and made to get up to move to the kitchen, but he came out carrying a plate and waved her down. After getting her situated, he came back with his own plate and sat on the couch next to her, careful not to jostle it too much and hurt her injured leg.

They ate in relative silence, both lost in their own thoughts. A few times, one of them tried to draw the other out in conversation, but their talk ended quickly in each instance as they retreated back into their reflections.

Finally, done with lunch, Jimmy made an excuse about wanting to use the shower next, and Heather sat back on the couch to think more.

Within minutes, she was asleep.

CHAPTER 22 – MURDER BOARD

Timothy Gentry sat in his office, stared at the virtual murder board his implant projected into his vision, and thought hard. He now had four seemingly connected events, starting with the murder of Connor Monroe—he was now all but certain it had been murder—and culminating in a knife and gun fight outside a small diner on the outskirts of Hudson Yard.

For that last, he'd interviewed all the diner's staff and patrons and knew the redheaded woman had been there like at the other scenes. He also knew that she had escaped with a young man named Jimmy O'Neal. But interviews with his extremely worried parents had yielded no clue as to where she might have taken him, nor had they been able to locate his truck since it had left the diner.

Hudson was a planet full of fiercely independent people—you kind of had to be when two different star nations tried to claim you as unwilling citizens—and there were hardly any cameras around the city or its outskirts. The public uproar every time they'd been proposed had always prevented it. And all the satellites in orbit were unfortunately owned by either the Prometheans or the Koratans, so he was out of luck there without weeks of red tape to then probably still be told no to access by both governments.

It was a dead end, but it all came down to the redhead. She was the key to everything. First, she'd been a supposedly innocent bystander at the apartment explosion. Then she'd been seen killing the three thugs near Embassy Row, though from all accounts, she'd acted in self-defense, and there had likely been a second woman there, probably the brunette. They'd also found a strand of what he was certain was the redhead's hair at the

warehouse massacre. And finally, she'd seemingly defended herself again at the diner, as the crime scene suggested that she hadn't started the fight but had certainly ended it, and alone this time without the brunette to help her. He was sure the farm boy O'Neal would have been no help.

There was no longer any doubt in his mind that the redheaded woman was an 'extra'. But the question remained of which government had sent her. Promethean, most likely, given Figueroa's theory that she'd arrived via an incoming military flight during the camera blackout on the Promethean orbital.

But why were people trying to kill *her*? She hadn't even been on the planet when Monroe had been murdered; he was almost certain of that. Was she somehow connected to the former Promethean in other ways? Was she the perpetrator of the bombing that had killed Monroe's wife, or was she another intended victim? And who was the brunette woman? Another extra? Or just a local contact? By the brunette's accent, she had seemed more like a long-time resident of Hudson, though that meant little.

If he believed the redhead hadn't been responsible for Connor Monroe's death, did that mean she'd been sent by the Prometheans to investigate it? The timeline fit for how long it would have taken for word to get from the Harper Line to Prometheus and for someone to hop a jump ship back to the Line. There was even some wiggle room for the time it would take the Promethean government to decide on the appropriate response.

One thing was certain: he needed to catch her. If she was the aggressor on his planet, as her actions at the warehouse would suggest, then he needed to stop her before she killed again. If she was an investigator trying to stop the killing, then he needed to learn what she knew and maybe even keep her safe. Both would be far easier to do if she was in his custody, safely behind bars.

Regardless, he felt no closer to finding or understanding her than he did when she and her friend had somehow escaped him by disappearing into the dead-end alley after the bombing. And the longer it took to find her, the more people he was certain were going to wind up dead. The next one was likely to be Jimmy O'Neal, the boy who had kindly stopped to pick up a pretty redhead hitchhiker and got a wolf in sheep's clothing instead.

Because even if he accepted that the redhead was an investigator and victim, all the crime scenes told of one thing: a cold-blooded and highly effective

killer.

CHAPTER 23 – THE SIMPLE JOY OF FISHING

The boat rocked gently in the twilight as Jimmy pulled back his rod and then cast it forward, the lure at the end of his line plopping into the water about ten meters away, where he started to slowly reel it in to simulate moving prey for the largemouth bass that inhabited the small lake. The movement calmed him and helped him process the terrible events of earlier in the day.

It wasn't doing the same thing for Heather Kilgore. Next to him, fidgeting uncomfortably as she tried to find a position that didn't hurt her leg, she sat scanning the shore, checking first the location of the old cabin, invisible through the overgrown brush, and then looking up and down the shoreline on both sides, searching for threats. Her hand kept going absent-mindedly to the pistol—the one she'd taken off the thug at the diner—tucked into the waistband of her shorts.

“You know, most people find this relaxing,” Jimmy said wryly as he pulled up his lure and prepared for another cast.

“What?” she asked, looking over at him, shielding her eyes from the setting sun that silhouetted him.

“I said...”

“No, I heard what you said. Just wondering why you don't think I'm relaxed.”

He eyed her skeptically. “Please. You look like a deer worried there's a hunter behind every tree. I've seen squirrels less nervous than you. When that

fish jumped a few minutes ago, I thought you were going to whip out that pistol and shoot it.” He finished his assessment with a small grin, taking some of the sting out of the words.

“Oh,” she said. What she wanted to do was jump out of the boat, swim to shore, and race back to Hudson Yard and find out just what in Hades was going on there. But she couldn’t tell him that. “I guess I’m just not used to it.”

“To what? Fishing?”

“No, to relaxing.”

“What,” he asked, starting to reel his line back in, “undercover cops don’t get to relax much?”

She let out a long breath, seeing he wasn’t going to drop the topic. “No. Not really. When you’re pretending to be someone you’re not, you can’t ever let your guard down. Relax even for a moment, and you can die. Simple as that.” She frowned to herself when she finished, realizing how true her statement was, though the basis was a lie. She really hadn’t *ever* felt she could relax, and she’d rarely felt that she could be herself. Even with Connor, she was always on edge, always looking for the next threat, always feeling like the woman he’d fallen in love with was just another persona and not the real Heather Kilgore. Maybe she wasn’t even sure who the real Heather Kilgore was.

Apparently painkillers made her self-reflective; she wasn’t enjoying that little side effect.

“Sounds terrible,” Jimmy said as he wound up for yet another cast.

“Maybe,” she admitted. “But you know you’re doing something important, so it doesn’t feel all that bad.” That was mostly true as well. The vast majority of her missions felt like she was making a real difference, not just for King Charles, but for the people of Prometheus. But then there was the occasional assignment... She pushed that thought aside. There was no use dwelling on those.

“So, you like it?” he asked, his voice somehow taking on the easy rhythm of his clicking reel as he started his lure back in their direction.

Heather thought about her answer for a moment. There was something about Jimmy made her feel oddly at ease, and his earnest and open nature made her

want to be earnest and open with him, at least as much as she could be.

“I don’t know,” she finally answered honestly. “It’s all I’ve known for a long time.”

“How did you get into it?”

She didn’t want to answer that, but it was as if Heather’s rational brain were no longer in the driver’s seat. Maybe it really was the painkillers, or maybe she was just so sick of bottling everything inside. Whatever part was driving just started talking. “Someone tried to hurt me when I was a kid. I vowed I would never let it happen again.”

“What happened?”

“I don’t want to talk about it.”

“OK.” His one-word response held no recrimination, no pressure to continue. He lifted his lure up out of the water and wound up to cast again.

“I was fourteen,” she said in a small voice, surprised to hear the words coming from her. “It was my stepfather. He tried to...” Her voice trailed off. Heather had never been able to talk openly about this part, even with the other members of the Order. Instead, she’d buried it deep down, so deep that she’d almost convinced herself she had forgotten.

But you never forgot things like that. No matter how hard you tried.

Jimmy stayed silent; he just sat there, casting his line, reeling it in, and casting it again. After two more casts, Heather continued.

“Anyway, I fought back. In the process, I killed him. The cops came and arrested me. He’d been a cop himself; they all treated me like a killer and not a victim. I was tried as an adult, convicted, and sent to prison for the rest of my life.” She paused, still not sure why she was even telling Jimmy any of this. It was the actual truth, after all. A truth that she’d never told anyone else who hadn’t had an ironclad reason to know. If anyone in the Order ever found out she’d shared this much with the boy...

“Sounds like a real miscarriage of justice,” Jimmy observed, casting his line out again.

“Look at you with the big words, Mr. Farm Boy.” She meant it to come out playfully, but her tone was flat. He grinned anyway at the jab but kept his eyes on his fishing, giving her the space she needed.

She continued after another cast. “In prison, I killed again. A girl came at me with a shiv. I defended myself, and before I knew it, she lay dead on the floor, beaten to a bloody pulp with the shiv in her neck. They put me in a little square room with no windows for a month, washing me down with a firehose and only bringing me two small meals a day.

“When I got out, the girl’s friends came after me. It was three against one, a little girl against three nearly grown women. By the end, two of the three were dead, and the third was in critical condition. They threw me back into solitary confinement. I decided it was time to die as soon as I got out of there. That the next time, I wouldn’t fight back; I’d just let it happen.”

Jimmy was silent, still not looking her way. Reeling in. Casting again. Repetitive. Comforting.

“That’s when *he* came, the day before I was set to rejoin the general population again. They led me into a small interview room, chained me to the table, and he came in and sat across from me. He made them unlock the chains, gave me a soda, and talked to me like I was still a human. Then, he offered me an alternative to prison. Told me that if I came and worked for his organization,” she’d almost, to her horror, said the word ‘Order’, “that I’d be free.”

Another long pause. Cast. Reel in. Repeat.

“And are you?” Jimmy asked in a low voice, eyes still on the water. “Free?”

“I thought so,” she admitted. “But sometimes I’m not so sure.”

The sun was almost behind the trees now, and long shadows were settling over the lake. Jimmy cast again, started to reel in the line, and there was a jerk and a little exuberant cry from the boy. Heather watched in strange excitement as he fought the fish for a minute and then reeled it up and into the boat, where it flopped around on the bottom.

She looked up to see him smiling widely at her. “Looks like we’re not eating canned food tonight,” he told her with a wink.

CHAPTER 24 – WAKING ABRUPTLY

The fish was only seasoned with salt and pepper. It was all that the cabin had. Heather, who had eaten in some of the best restaurants Prometheus and other major planets had to offer, took her first bite, closing her eyes and savoring the flavor.

It was quite possibly the best thing she'd ever tasted.

The relatively small fish disappeared quickly between her and Jimmy, and it didn't take much convincing for him to get her to agree to an early morning outing on the water to catch more. After all, she had another two and a half days to kill before she could even call Tabitha, much less go back to Hudson. The police were likely still out in force looking for her, and it would take at least a day or two for the heat to die down.

After they ate, Heather excused herself and went into the bathroom to check her stitches, clean her wound, and change the dressings. Then she returned, limping to the living area, and sat back on the couch.

Crickets chirped outside, and Heather felt herself actually relaxing with a full stomach. She'd spent most of her adult life in cities. There'd been a few outings in the country, mostly around the estates of various nobles in the Federation. Once around a country inn, where a high-ranking Koratan Embassy official was meeting his mistress. She'd been in a ghillie suit for that one, and the diplomat had never heard the shot that killed him from a kilometer away.

And then, of course, there was her childhood on the farm. She wondered what Jimmy would think if he knew she was a genuine farm girl. Those

childhood days had been the last time she'd actually been in the country and enjoyed it. That all ended when her real father died and got worse when her abusive mother remarried a year later. From that point onward, the farm had become a living hell.

Now, hearing the crickets, she found herself remembering the good times. Part of her was still antsy, anxious to get back to Hudson Yard and to her investigation, worried that important things might be happening without her. But the rest of her was oddly content laying on the small couch, drifting off to sleep to the sound of the crickets while Jimmy stoked a fire in the cabin's old wood stove.

She dozed off again.

Then she awoke with a start, her hand naturally forming a fist and lashing out toward the shadow standing over her. She felt her blow encounter the softness of a stomach, and she heard a hard grunt as the man doubled over in pain.

She was about to leap to her feet and probably tear her wound open again in the process, but then she recognized the figure of the man as he fell to the carpet floor, holding his stomach and struggling for breath. With chagrin, she realized that the farm boy had only been shaking her awake.

"Jimmy, I'm so sorry!" she said, reaching down to help but stopping when she felt her stitches start to pull.

"It's...OK..." he said between fish-like gasps for breath. "Happens...all...the time."

Despite herself, she laughed at his good humor. She'd assaulted him, even hurt him, and he was joking about it!

Twenty minutes later, the sun still not risen, the early morning air crisp, and Jimmy still wincing a little each time he moved a certain way—though he still insisted on helping her walk once outside the cabin—they were back out on the water. Unlike the evening before, he rowed the small boat out only a short distance and started casting his line toward shore, where the roots of large trees descended into the water. She watched him cast and reel back in and even took a few turns herself when offered.

Half an hour later, she fell asleep in the boat to the gentle rocking and the repetitive sound of Jimmy casting and reeling in his line. When she woke up,

the sun was up, and there were two fish in the bottom of the boat. They ate well again that morning.

CHAPTER 25 – SURVEILLANCE

Tabitha Lowry had also examined the copy of the comm code and geolocation tags they'd gotten from the Namoran crime boss. Unlike Heather, she actually tried to call the comm code but found it disconnected. A search of not-so-public records found it belonged to a prepaid handheld comm purchased with untraceable blockchain credits at the same convenience store from which both the calls to the Namorans had originated.

A dead end.

She took her car and drove to the store anyway. The owner turned out to be an older man in his sixties. Tabitha flirted with him unabashedly, spinning a story of a deadbeat husband who had fled with his girlfriend, cleaned out their blockchain accounts, and left her with two small children and no money with which to raise them.

The owner, a grandfather himself, was sympathetic. But he simply didn't remember who had purchased the comm, nor did he recall any man or woman making multiple calls from his store. She believed him. Tabitha could always tell when a man was lying, and the old guy was so smitten with her *and* sympathetic to her story that she didn't think he was holding anything back. Which wasn't good. At least if he'd been lying or withholding information, she could have threatened or tortured it out of him.

Instead, she thanked him and left the store, getting back in her car but not going anywhere. She sat there, watching the people as they came and went on the off chance that the mysterious Nightshadow would reappear.

After all, unlike Heather Kilgore, Tabitha had a fairly good idea of *who* she was looking for.

CHAPTER 26 – THE MINISTER

Detective Timothy Gentry was not a happy man. For two days straight, it seemed that every time he turned around, someone was dying in a violent fashion. Then, for the last twenty-four hours, nothing. No more deaths, but also no leads, no progress, and no light at the end of the tunnel.

Every avenue of inquiry around the mysterious redheaded woman turned up nothing. None of the roadblocks had caught her, nor had the people he'd placed in the various ports. It was like she didn't exist, and had he not met her himself, he might have believed they were chasing a phantom.

"Uh, sir," a timid voice said from his office doorway. He looked up in annoyance to see José Figueroa poking his head in with an apologetic expression.

"What is it?" he asked, unable to keep a little of the frustration out of his voice. Figueroa winced.

"Sir, Minister Gonzalez is here."

Great. Frowning deeply, Gentry stood and followed his junior partner across the bullpen to the elevator and then up to the top floor, where the precinct's captain, Gentry's boss, kept his office.

José hung back in the captain's outer office while Gentry went in.

"Ah, Tim," his superior greeted him with a wary look. "You know Minister Gonzalez, of course."

"I do," Gentry said, trying to keep his voice neutral. "Good to see you again, Minister."

“And you,” said the oily voice of Miguel Castro Gonzalez, the Koratan government’s ‘Minister of Planetary Affairs’ for the world of Hudson. His role was an anomaly. While most of the planetary government’s business with the Koratans, just as with the Prometheans, was through their embassy, Gonzalez’s role was a more aggressive one aimed at keeping up the fiction that Hudson was an actual part of the Koratan Confederation. The man acted like a king on the planet, ordering around the local government as if he were truly in charge. The Hudsonites humored him, to an extent, being just respectful enough not to start a war.

“The minister is inquiring about your investigation into the Hudson View Apartment bombing two days ago,” Captain Clancy said with a tone of one both imparting information and giving a subtle warning.

“I see,” Gentry responded. “And what is the Koratan government’s interest in the event?” he asked cautiously.

Gonzalez frowned, which wasn’t unusual for him. “Do we need a reason to be interested in the assassination of one of *our* citizens on one of *our* colony worlds?” he asked in a challenging tone.

“No, of course not,” agreed Clancy quickly. Gentry just returned the minister’s frown, keying in on the fact that the man had used the word ‘assassination’ and not ‘murder’ or ‘death’. Oddly specific.

“And what have you discovered thus far?” Gonzalez demanded. From the corner of his eye, Gentry saw Clancy give him a quick nod.

“Not as much as we’d like,” the detective responded honestly. “We traced the C8 back to a shipment stolen from your military last year. The detonator led us to a Namoran syndicate operating on planet. But when we went to question them, they were gone.”

“You mean dead!” snapped the minister. “And you thus far have no leads on who killed them? Whoever did so is almost certainly their employer covering his or *her* tracks.” The way the man said ‘her’ immediately put Gentry on alert.

“No leads thus far,” he said slowly. “But the investigation is ongoing.”

“And we are confident in getting results,” Clancy added. “We will, of course, keep you up to date on our findings, Minister.”

“Tell me, Detective,” the man said, ignoring the captain, “have you ever

heard of the King's Cross?"

Gentry was taken aback. "Only as a fairytale told to scare young children," he answered honestly and bluntly.

Gonzalez looked like he'd sucked on and then swallowed a lemon. "I assure you, Detective Gentry, they are quite real. And my government has reason to believe they are operating here on Hudson."

"Here, sir?" asked Clancy. "What would a Promethean kill squad be doing on our planet?"

Again, the minister ignored the older man, keeping his focus on Gentry, studying his face closely for any tell as to what he did or didn't know. "It would be in your best interest, Detective, to consider that the King's Cross may indeed be on planet, and that they are likely the ones who killed Connor Monroe *and* his wife."

Gentry took that in, considering his next words carefully. "I thought, Minister, that the Koratan government had ruled Commander Monroe's death by natural causes." Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Clancy now give him a frantic head shake, but he watched the minister closely for his reaction.

The man's frown, if anything, got even more pronounced. "Some new information has come to light, and we now believe the Prometheans are behind the deaths. Commander Monroe was, after all, a *liberated* Promethean, fleeing to and requesting political asylum from my star nation, which we graciously extended to him."

"Of course you did," Gentry said neutrally. "Do you mind if I ask what this new information is?"

Gonzalez's face turned hard. "I'm afraid that's classified, Detective. You understand."

"Of course, sir," Gentry said, returning the man's hard look.

Minutes later, Gonzalez departed with yet another firm admonition that Gentry look into the Prometheans and their mythical King's Cross. Once he was gone, Timothy sat across from his boss in the otherwise empty office.

"You're playing with fire, Tim," Captain Bob Clancy said with clear disapproval. "Gonzalez may be a pompous windbag, but he's the most powerful Koratan on the planet. Our own president is likely to tell me to fire

you if it comes out that you antagonized the man. We're at a delicate juncture with the Koratans right now. *And* with the Prometheans. This whole Monroe business is like a damaged reactor waiting to go critical.

"When *aren't* we at a delicate juncture with the Kories and the Proms?" Gentry asked, using the derogative slang terms for both nations, causing his boss to wince and look guiltily toward the door through which Gonzalez had departed as if he were worried the minister might be outside with an ear pressed to the door, listening.

"Just be careful, Tim. If Gonzalez decides to file a formal complaint, I won't be able to protect you. And who knows, maybe there is some truth to this whole King's Cross angle. There have been rumors, after all."

"Bob," Gentry said, "if we chased every rumor of boogeymen under the bed, we'd never solve any actual crime. I don't care if it's the King's Cross, the Ancient Roman Praetorian Guard, or a Yeti that killed Monroe and the rest. I just want to catch them and put them behind bars."

The constable general mulled this over for a moment, then gave him a dour look. "OK, but don't be a hero. If this really is some sort of Promethean... or even Koratan kill squad operating on planet, chances are they'll be well provisioned and supported. You'll have all the backup you need, but try not to start any interstellar wars while you're at it."

"Of course, Bob. I wouldn't dream of it."

CHAPTER 27 – MOVIE NIGHT

That night, Jimmy put on a movie after they'd again eaten their fill of fish. He settled onto one end of the small couch while Heather sat on the other. Her eyes were on the small old-fashioned screen on the far wall, but her mind was elsewhere. Every second she sat here, she was shirking her duties, and despite her moments of relaxation fishing on the lake with Jimmy, it was driving her mad.

This life of lounging around a lakeside cabin in the woods was all well and good for some people, but she was a member of the Order of the King's Cross. She had responsibilities and duties to help the citizens of the Federation, and right now, she was ignoring those responsibilities and duties while doing what? Playing house and eating fish with a farm boy?

Her mind was spinning around and around when she finally heard Jimmy clear his throat. "You know, movies are more fun when you actually watch them."

She looked over to see the boy grinning widely at her. Guess she wasn't fooling him at all, though she was pleased to see his sense of humor bouncing back so quickly after the events of the previous day. It probably helped that he could focus on helping her out of her funk rather than dwelling on his own.

"Sorry. My mind is on what I need to do after tomorrow," she admitted.

"Want to talk about it?"

"Yes. No. I mean, yes, but I can't. It's better for you, really, if you don't

know more than you do now. Safer that way.”

He nodded, accepting even if not agreeing with her assessment. “OK, but that’s two days from now. And if I know you—and let’s face it, we’re old friends at this point—then you’ve already considered every angle and every step you’re going to take when that time comes. So why not let the future take care of itself and bring yourself back here, now, so you can watch this amazing movie I found deep in the viewscreen’s memory?”

Heather couldn’t help it. She scoffed and threw a pillow at Jimmy, who pretended to be terribly injured by it. After they were both done laughing, he picked up the viewscreen’s remote. “I’m going to start this movie over,” he told her, his tone serious. “And you’re going to watch it, or else!”

Fifteen minutes later, Heather was laughing along to the movie with Jimmy while he kept pointing out obscure little facts about his favorite parts. Half an hour in, she found herself scooting just a little closer to him on the small couch. Twenty minutes after that, her head was resting on his shoulder.

Heather never saw the end of the movie. She fell asleep, her head on the farm boy’s shoulder, the warmth of him draining away much of the stress bottled up inside her. Jimmy, for his part, didn’t move or flinch; he just let her sleep cuddled up to his side. He eventually drifted off to sleep like that as well.

CHAPTER 28 – TERRIBLE CONCLUSIONS

Heather didn't sleep much that night. She woke up just a few hours after drifting off during the movie, surprised to find herself still huddled against Jimmy and even more surprised that she had absolutely no desire to move away from the boy.

So, she lay there against him, thinking, attacking the problems of her investigation from every angle she could think of.

The Namoran syndicate's murders of the Monroes.

The fake marriage of Connor and Luisa Monroe and the woman arriving on a seafood freighter with a missing spot on its manifest.

The two attacks on Heather, both times when Tabitha wasn't around, and both possibly ordered by the same mysterious character, Nightshadow, who had also hired the Namorans.

Something nagged at her, some thread that seemed to weave through seemingly unrelated facts...

The cause of death, so similar to the attempted assassination she'd managed to thwart three years ago.

Missing space on the freighter's manifest. Something that needed to be kept cold.

Her name on the note in Connor's pocket.

And Luisa Monroe had mentioned the dentist.

Four things pointing to one startling truth.

In a moment of watershed clarity, she gently disengaged herself from the still sleeping Jimmy, scribbled a quick note on an old pad of paper she found in the cabin, and then took the keys to his truck and left him there, still asleep.

Despite her still-not-healed injury, she had to get to Hudson Yard as quickly as possible. If she waited any longer, everything would fall apart.

CHAPTER 29 – AN UNLIKELY PARTNER

Detective Gentry was even less happy this morning than he had been the previous day. Two days now had passed without any additional leads, and Minister Gonzalez’s office had been calling Captain Clancy every few hours asking for updates.

“Here you go, Detective,” a gruff voice said to him, and he turned to grab the coffee the man was holding out for him. Every morning, he got the same coffee from the same little cart run by the same old guy who never seemed to get any older. Every morning for twenty years.

“Thanks, Carlos,” he said. Maybe it wasn’t that Carlos never got older; maybe it was that *Gentry* was getting older so that the coffee vendor’s age seemed to stand still by comparison. Cheery thought.

Still, Gentry sighed in satisfaction as he took the first sip of his morning brew. He’d hated coffee for the first five years of his career, actually preferring tea. But the police precincts on any planet were fueled by the stuff, and eventually, he’d given in. Perhaps it said something about the beverage that it took him five *years* to develop a taste for it.

At this point, he felt he couldn’t live without it.

He was halfway down the block that separated the coffee cart from the precinct building when he felt something hard jab into his ribs.

“Keep walking,” a cold female voice said. “Take a right at the entrance to the park.”

Curious and more than a little alarmed, Gentry did as instructed, turning into

the small park that dominated the corner just before the precinct. He took note as they walked that the woman was favoring the side opposite him. That fit with the blood they'd found on the scene at the diner, the small amount that hadn't belonged to any of the four dead men.

They stopped at a bench, and she told him to sit as she gingerly lowered herself beside him, keeping the gun pressed to his side.

"King's Cross, I presume?" he said before the woman had a chance to speak, playing a hunch.

"Nice try," she said, her voice still cold. From the corner of his eye, he could see a shock of red hair escaping out the back of the ball cap she wore, further confirming her identity despite large sunglasses covering half her face and the long coat she wore that obscured her figure. "If I was King's Cross, I wouldn't tell a local cop."

"Let's assume you're not then," he said carefully. "What do you want? You know that all it takes is for me to shout, and at least twenty officers are close enough to hear me and come running."

She scoffed lightly. "Sure. But you'd already be dead when they got here, and I'd be gone."

"I concede," he said. "So why am I not dead yet?"

"Because I need your help," she said frankly.

A long pause as he waited for her to say more. When she did, her voice was even lower so that he had to strain hard to hear.

"I know you've been looking for me. But I'm not the one who killed Connor Monroe. I wasn't even on the planet at the time."

"I'd actually figured that out," he agreed.

"Good. Saves us time. Nor did I have anything to do with Luisa Monroe's death, though I'm pretty sure I know who did. And the guys in the street near Embassy Row and outside the diner were just self-defense."

"And the syndicate warehouse?" he prodded.

A long pause. When she finally responded, her voice was just as emotionless as before. "That was me. They're the ones who carried out the hit on Monroe and his wife. Though she wasn't really his wife."

“She wasn’t?” Gentry asked dubiously, looking around surreptitiously to see if he could spot any colleagues out for a morning stroll in the park. No such luck.

“No, though I actually haven’t figured out much beyond that yet, at least about her. But I’m sure I can, with your help.”

“And why would I help you?” he asked, holding his breath afterward.

“Because you’re like me: you want the truth. I have a good chunk of it already, and together we can get the rest.”

“For someone asking for help, you have a funny way of going about it.”

She snorted again. “Would you have listened if I marched into the precinct and turned myself in?”

“Yes,” he admitted, “but you’d be behind bars.”

“As expected, but this only ends well if we work together on it as... partners.” She said the last word slowly, like it tasted funny in her mouth.

“And what happens if the truth leads me back to you?”

“It won’t,” she said frankly. “But we’ll cross that jump point when we get to it.”

“So, what do you actually need from me?” he asked, realizing at the same time he did so that he’d already decided to help her.

“I need to see Connor Monroe’s body.”

CHAPTER 30 – THE BODY

The medical examiner had looked at Gentry funny when he'd asked for time alone with Connor Monroe's corpse but had shrugged and given him his wish. After all, what was the senior detective going to do with a body that had been ruled a natural death and was only still being held because no one could agree on whether to release it to the Koratans or the Prometheans?

When the man was gone, Gentry opened the door to the hall, and the red-haired woman slipped in.

"There are cameras here, just so you know," he warned her. "I don't have a way to shut them off without someone coming down to investigate."

She shrugged. "Your precinct uses a lower-end civilian surveillance package. My implant is already hacked in and editing me out of the feed in real-time. Anyone watching will just see you talking to yourself like you're crazy."

He scoffed a bit. "Wish I had tech like that. Must be nice."

She didn't respond, instead walking over to the sheet-covered body in the center of the room. He heard her take a deep breath before she reached out and pulled the sheet down, exposing the man's face.

"You knew him," Gentry said, moving up beside her. It was an observation, not a question.

"A long time ago. Well, maybe not that long, but sometimes years feel like decades," she said cryptically.

"Really?" he said. "You can't be older than twenty-five. A long time ago for me, you would have been in grade school."

She ignored his attempt at a quip.

“Did they do a full autopsy?” she asked, tracing the X in the dead man’s chest where the medical examiner had sewn him back up.

“Just the basics. Once it was ruled a heart attack, there was no reason. Plus, we couldn’t decide which government could authorize it.”

She just nodded. Reaching down, she traced her fingertips across the corpse’s jawline and chin, almost like a lover’s caress. Then she pulled out a knife, causing him to put a hand warningly on the pistol at his hip.

“Relax,” she said wryly. “Just playing a hunch. Something his wife said to me...” She reached out with her left hand and pried open Connor Monroe’s mouth, then put in the blade, pushing on each one of the man’s molars with its tip. Finally, she used the knife to pry one of the teeth out, reaching in with the fingers of her other hand to catch it when the knife popped it free.

“That’s disgusting,” Gentry observed. “And I’ve been a homicide detective for eighteen years.”

She shrugged but said nothing, holding the tooth up for him to see and so that she could examine it in the light.

“Why the tooth?” he asked her.

“Ping it with your implant,” she told him.

“You’re joking.”

“Just try it.”

He focused on the tooth, commanding his implant to bracket it and send a targeted query. To his surprise, he got an answering ping back.

“It’s an implant?” he asked incredulously.

She nodded. “More like a storage drive with only a very basic AI to guard access. Enter the wrong passcode more than once, and it wipes the drive.”

“And you know the passcode?”

She shrugged again, which wasn’t confidence-inspiring. Then, to his further surprise, the tooth implant suddenly pinged him that it was ready to share its data.

“What did you use?” he asked her.

“My name.”

“Seriously?”

“What else would it be?”

He had no answer for that. This was a *strange* woman, simultaneously melancholy yet so sure of herself. Then he saw what was on the implant, and all thoughts of the redhead’s weirdness fled.

Timothy Gentry swore as the data poured in. If what he was seeing on this mysterious implant was true, everything he knew and loved was about to fall apart in violent fashion.

CHAPTER 31 – A MATTER BETWEEN FRIENDS

Tabitha Lowry had taken a morning run virtually every day for the last twenty-five years, ever since she'd been 'admitted' to the training center for the Order. She felt it not only kept her in outstanding shape, even as she got older, but also helped her start the day with a clear head.

This morning was no exception, though she'd gotten in late the night before from her fruitless surveillance of the neighborhood around the convenience store. She had let herself sleep in about an hour, though, so she was returning much later than she normally would.

When Tabitha finally arrived back at her apartment, she made a quick check of her door before going in. She froze. Every morning before leaving, as was her habit, she would pluck a long hair from her head and place it just so in the doorjamb. This morning, it was gone, which meant someone had opened the door.

She reached around to the holster hidden under her jogging sweats, pulling out the small pistol she carried on her runs every morning. Then she unlocked her door with a mental command from her implant and pushed it open with her foot, quickly entering with the pistol held out straight in front of her.

She relaxed. "You know, you could have called first," she told the woman casually sitting on her couch.

"Couldn't," Heather Kilgore said. "I'm still not sure how those thugs tracked me to that diner. Still limiting my implant's outbound comms just in case they somehow got a tap on it."

“Wise,” Tabitha said, keeping her gun in her hand but lowering it to her side. “How’s the leg?”

“Better than it looks. Through and through. No big deal.”

“And how’s the farm boy?”

“Alive.”

“You sure that’s wise?”

“Tell me,” Kilgore said, ignoring the question, “what do you recall about the day we had our... falling out?”

The older woman frowned. “I thought you didn’t want to talk about that, ever.”

“Humor me.”

Tabitha sighed and shrugged. “Simple. You did your job, and I got mad at you for it. You followed protocol, and I got upset. My problem, not yours. And I’ve regretted it ever since.”

“Interesting,” Heather said, raising her eyebrows. “I remember you getting more than upset. You called me a murderer.” Her voice was mostly devoid of emotion, but Tabitha detected a small crack at the end of her statement.

“Well, at the time,” Lowry replied, “I thought... that’s not important. The point is, I was wrong. You just did your job. End of story.”

“But it’s not, is it?” Kilgore asked, leaning forward, her green eyes flashing. “Because you were right. I was a murderer that day.”

“You were only following orders.”

Kilgore scoffed. “Come on, even in the King’s Cross, they teach us about Nuremberg on Old Earth. No one wants Prometheus to turn into the Jutzen Collective. What I did was wrong, plain and simple, orders or not.”

She stood, walking over to the floor-to-ceiling window with a barely noticeable limp and peeling back the closed curtain, looking at the street below. Then she turned back to face Lowry. “I killed a child.” She said it frankly, but to Tabitha, who knew her well, her tone was brimming with emotion.

“A traitor to the Crown,” Lowry disagreed, though her heart wasn’t in it. “An insurrectionist.”

“Not him. His father was the insurrectionist. The boy was innocent.”

Tabitha shook her head. “His father was a *duke*, the King’s own cousin. And after he disowned his oldest, that child would have been the next duke. You know as well as I do that at those levels of nobility, the office and the person are never separate. The duke had to die, and so did his heir. Otherwise, the King would have remained at risk.”

“Funny, that’s the argument I made to you two years ago. Interesting how the tables have turned.”

“What do you mean?”

Heather Kilgore ignored the question, but the wan smile she’d worn for most of the conversation turned into a thin line. “You never asked me why *I* was so angry with you afterward, did you?”

“It’s not as if you would even talk to me after that, but I just figured you were upset at me for getting mad at you for doing your duty,” Tabitha replied slowly.

“That’s just it. Or rather, that wasn’t it at all.”

“Then I don’t understand.”

“You were my mentor, my *friend*, Tabitha,” the younger woman said, her voice suddenly brimming with anger and hurt. “And you didn’t *stop* me.” She paused, letting that hang between them.

“I still don’t understand, Heather,” Lowry said, more wary now.

“No. You don’t. You knew as well as I did that the duke’s son had to die. He was only ten, but he was a threat to the Crown, and we protect the King, above all else. You’re right; he would have simply taken up his father’s banner. Who knows, the rebels might have even rallied *more* behind him. Imagine it: a heroic boy survives his father’s assassination as rumors swirl of King’s Cross involvement. They would have eaten that up and probably gained millions of new followers.

“You knew all of that, Tabitha, but you also knew that killing the boy was *wrong*. Yet you did *nothing* to stop me.”

Tabitha chose her next words very carefully. “I’m not sure what you mean, Heather. I thought I made my feelings on the matter clear at the time.”

“You did. *After* I pulled the trigger that ended that boy’s life, when it was

already too late. Only *then* did you censure me for what I did. You waited because you knew that if *I* didn't do it, *you* would have to. So, you let me execute our duty and that child, and *then* you took the moral high ground when it was too late to change anything. You were a coward, Tabitha. And I never forgave you for it."

"And now?"

Kilgore took one step forward, closing the distance with Lowry. Tabitha's hand tightened around the grip of the pistol, still held at her side.

"Now," Kilgore said in almost a whisper, "I forgive you."

Tabitha breathed a sigh of relief, noticeably relaxing.

"I forgive you, Tabitha, for what you did back then," Kilgore continued, her voice so low that Lowry had to strain to listen. "But not for what you're doing *now*."

The knife appeared from nowhere; it had always been Heather's preferred weapon, even over the far more effective sidearms and even military assault rifles that the King's Cross had access to. Heck, a member of the Order could requisition a *battleship* in the King's name if needed. But Heather had always preferred the simple blade. She'd once told Tabitha in an unguarded moment that it was because that's how she had killed the man—her stepfather—who had tried to rape her, with a simple kitchen knife.

The knife that embedded itself near Tabitha's collarbone now was not a simple kitchen knife. The dagger was two-sided and weighted perfectly for throwing. Only Lowry's last-second twitch to one side kept it from piercing her heart.

Kilgore was already moving, diving down behind the apartment's lone couch, where she'd been sitting moments before, reaching cover just as Tabitha's pistol spit three times in rapid succession, two rounds harmlessly impacting the thick bulletproof glass of the window behind the couch and another throwing up feathers from one of the couch cushions.

The next few seconds were a whirlwind of activity. Tabitha skirted around the counter that separated the small apartment's kitchen from its living room. Tile cracked above her head as rounds from Kilgore's now-drawn pistol shattered the backsplash behind her stove. The shots from the unsilenced weapon she'd taken off the thug at the diner boomed like thunder in the

enclosed space.

Then Tabitha heard the apartment door open. She waited a moment, expecting subterfuge from the younger woman, but after a few seconds, cautiously peeked her head above the counter to see the door wide open and no sign of Kilgore. Still, she waited, in case the other woman was hiding somewhere in the apartment, setting an ambush.

By the time Tabitha felt safe moving, Heather Kilgore was long gone, leaving behind a blood stain on the white carpet behind the couch. Only once she was *sure* of that did Lowry pause to withdraw the knife from her shoulder.

CHAPTER 32 – JIMMY GOES TO THE BIG CITY

“**E**xcuse me, sir, but you can’t be here unless you’re a Promethean citizen or have an appointment with someone in the embassy.”

Jimmy O’Neal frowned at the stern Marine guard outside the Promethean Embassy and then used the phrase Dawn had told him to say in her note. The other man’s eyes widened, making Jimmy smile for the first time since he’d woken up to find Dawn—Heather; the note had contained her real name—gone. He hadn’t even smiled when his very confused father had come to pick him up from the cabin and take him into Hudson Yard as he’d requested.

Less than a minute later, another Marine showed up, this one maybe an officer by the way he ordered the other one around. Three minutes after that, Jimmy was shown into an office bigger than the ground floor of his family’s entire farmhouse!

An Asian man with graying hair stood up from a massive Hudson red oak desk, dismissing Jimmy’s Marine escort with a wave of one hand and then moving around the desk to grab Jimmy’s and shake it warmly.

“You have a message for me, young man?” the older gentleman asked in one of those fancy accents, kind of like Dawn’s—Heather’s.

“Heather Kilgore says to enact protocol thirty-four,” he recited from memory, forming the words carefully to make sure he got them right.

“Thirty-four?” The older man’s eyes went wide. “You’re sure?”

Jimmy nodded. “That’s what she said. Oh, and she said you could help me

find my truck.”

The man nodded absently, clearly distracted, which didn't fill Jimmy with a whole lot of hope he'd ever see that old truck again. Maybe a night with a really pretty girl, even if all she did was fall asleep on his shoulder, was enough. But his dad was going to *kill* him if they lost that truck.

CHAPTER 33 – ABSOLUTELY SURE

“**Y**ou’re absolutely sure? No doubt whatsoever?”

Timothy Gentry leaned forward across Bob Clancy’s desk, staring the head of the precinct right in the eye. “I have a copy of the data myself, Bob. I’m sending it to your implant now.”

Clancy’s eyes went out of focus for a few minutes. When he focused them back on Gentry, they looked both shocked and haunted. “Tim, this changes everything. We have less than a week!”

“Yeah, but it doesn’t have to be that way.”

Then Timothy Gentry explained the plan to his boss that he’d cooked up with Heather Kilgore as soon as they’d discovered what was on the tooth. As he did so, Clancey’s expression changed from despair to grim determination. Then, the police captain placed a call to the Promethean Embassy and asked for Steven Kim.

CHAPTER 34 – TAXI

Tabitha Lowry waited on the corner for her autotaxi to arrive. In the precious minutes it had taken her to stop the bleeding from the knife wound Heather had given her—it was amazingly hard to stitch up a hole near one's own collarbone—the younger agent had stolen Tabitha's car!

Luckily, this time, Heather had turned her implant on and *left* it on, allowing Lowry to track it with or without the younger agent's consent or knowledge. It was a handy bit of software she'd gotten from her new employers.

When the cab finally arrived, she gave it an address on the other side of the city, back in the direction of the convenience store she'd staked out the other day, and it sped off. While she was in transit, she used her implant to place a call to the Promethean Embassy, where she asked for Sir Steven Kim. She needed to warn him not to trust Heather Kilgore.

"I'm sorry, but Mr. Kim is not available right now," a woman on the other end told her.

"Tell him it's Tabitha Lowry," she replied, sharing her code phrase with the woman.

But instead of the code phrase immediately bringing a flustered Steven Kim to the phone, the line cut instead. Tabitha swore. Heather had gotten to the old man first.

She used her implant to connect to the autotaxi's AI controller and overrode its speed governor. She needed to get to her destination faster.

It was time to end this.

CHAPTER 35 – AN OLD FRIEND

Heather Kilgore parked Tabitha Lowry's stolen car three blocks away from the convenience store that the Namorans had tagged as the source of both of Nightshadow's calls to them. Looking up at the tall high-rise in front of her, she squared her shoulders and moved with a small limp resolutely up to the building's front entrance. There, she used her implant to hack the virtual doorman and, less than a minute later, was riding the elevator up to the thirty-eighth floor.

Once there, she walked slowly down the hall and stopped in front of apartment 38E. She knocked and heard rustling on the other side.

Then the door opened, and she rushed inside and grabbed Connor Monroe in a hug that she wished would last forever.

CHAPTER 36 – SHOWDOWN

Tabitha Lowry got out of the cab right next to her parked car and looked up at the same building Heather’s implant signal had entered moments before. The signal had finally cut out now, but not before she’d tracked it to one of the apartments thirty-eight stories up.

The message was clear. ‘Come and get me.’ The younger agent was looking to bring things to an end. She’d always been impetuous like that, despite Tabitha’s best efforts to train it out of her.

Lowry walked over to her car, parked where Kilgore had left it, and opened the trunk, using her implant to open a hidden door underneath the thin carpeting. She pulled out a railgun assault rifle, hiding it quickly in the folds of the long coat she wore. Then she made her way to the door of the apartment building, unknowingly following Kilgore’s example and hacking the virtual doorman.

Like Heather, she rode the elevator up and then withdrew the rifle from her coat, holding it in front of her where she could see its laser sight as she walked slowly down the hall to apartment 38E. Once there, she hacked the door controller and then kicked it open, moving quickly inside in a crouch and sweeping the gun across the room for threats.

“Tabitha, what took you so long?” an aristocratic Promethean accent greeted her.

She grimaced as she took in former-Commander Connor Monroe, with blond hair and icy blue eyes, sitting calmly on the apartment’s plush couch, only the tenseness of his jaw betraying his surprise at seeing her.

“Where is she?” she asked.

“Heather? She just left. If you hurry, you might catch her,” the man said nonchalantly.

She didn’t believe him for a second.

“Pardon me,” he continued, “but you don’t seem all that surprised to find me alive.”

She ignored him, knowing he was trying to keep her talking to distract her from Heather’s inevitable attack. She kept her eyes scanning the room, watching for movement and paying especially close attention to the kitchen counter that blocked part of her view and the short hall that led into the apartment’s other rooms. For good measure, she also kept one eye on the couch where Connor Monroe still casually sat, in case Kilgore was hiding behind it.

“Heather!” she called out. “We need to talk. This isn’t what you think.”

There was no response. But she felt the barest whisper of air behind her and spun, bringing the gun around to face the doorway she’d just come through.

She was too late. The knife didn’t connect with her back, but it sunk into her forearm and made her lose control of the assault rifle for a moment, which was all the time Heather Kilgore needed to knock it out of her hands completely, though the knife stayed in Tabitha’s arm in the process.

With a grunt of anger and frustration, ignoring the blood seeping from her forearm, Tabitha took up a defensive stance, facing down the woman she had once taken from young, impetuous girl, to a grown, efficient killer. Then she smiled again, pulling the knife out of her forearm and wielding it in the other hand against her now-unarmed opponent. It was time for the final lesson.

Heather came at her, feinting a blow to the left but then jabbing with her right. It was one of her signature moves. Tabitha had *taught* her that move and easily countered it, dodging the blow and landing her own punch to the younger woman’s cheek, just missing her nose and not connecting hard enough to break her jaw. It hurt her injured forearm and pulled at the stitches near her collarbone, but the adrenaline was pumping enough that the pain was little more than an inconvenience.

Kilgore grunted but didn’t fade back. Instead, she moved in for a strike to Tabitha’s face, connecting before her former mentor had time to reset, then

following it up with a knee to Lowry's stomach, which Tabitha barely deflected with a low forearm block with the hand holding the knife, using the trajectory to scrape the blade against Kilgore's stomach, drawing a line of blood that quickly soaked the front of the younger woman's white shirt to match the blood already seeping from her injured leg. But Heather blocked the follow-up thrust with the knife, her forearm connecting hard with Tabitha's wrist and knocking the blade out of her hand.

The two women traded blow after blow like that, both unarmed, back and forth, for seconds that seemed to stretch into hours. Time slowed for each of them, though to Connor Monroe, watching entranced from the couch, they moved faster than he could follow, each appearing to anticipate the other's moves and then have their own counter moves further anticipated. They maneuvered so quickly, in fact, that he was never able to get a clear bead on Tabitha using the pistol Heather had given him in case things went poorly for her.

Tabitha landed another blow to Heather's face, causing her nose to crunch. What would have sent a large man reeling didn't even phase Kilgore, who landed her own blow to Lowry's jaw, hearing a satisfying crack. Then she tried to crouch and extend a leg to sweep the older woman's legs out from under her, but Tabitha jumped backward, narrowly avoiding being tripped.

But Heather was ready for her to do that and came out of her crouch in a flying sidekick that connected solidly with Lowry's lower stomach, driving the breath out of the more experienced agent despite also drawing a pained grunt from Heather. Tabitha tried to recover quickly and launch her own kick at Kilgore, but the younger woman caught her leg and then jammed her other hand up into it... hard.

Tabitha fell to the ground, staring in dismay at the hilt of the knife lodged into her inner thigh. She was already feeling lightheaded and knew that she had mere minutes to live as the blood pooled underneath her from her severed femoral artery. She looked up from her sitting position at Heather Kilgore, who stood over her with a sad expression.

"Good move, using that crouch to cover picking up the knife," Tabitha said with a wan smile.

"I learned from the best," Heather replied softly. Then she blinked away tears. "Why, Tabitha?"

Tabitha smiled at her, feeling her life slipping away. “That night with the duke’s child. You were right. I let you do it because I knew it was wrong, and I couldn’t do it myself. And then I hated you for it. But only for a little while. Then, I hated myself. But finally, I hated Charles. King Charles, the man who would have us kill *children* to safeguard his power.”

Tears were streaming down Heather’s face now as she listened to her friend. Tabitha’s voice was getting slower as her life literally seeped out of her. “Besides, there is *no* retirement for people like us, Heather. It’s all a lie. And I wanted out. So, I made a deal with the Koratans. I joined the Guard as a double agent. Two years, that’s all I had to give them, and then I’d be free, living in luxury on one of their worlds. I’m only three *months* away from that time, Heather. Just three months. Can you imagine it?”

“No, I can’t,” Kilgore answered honestly. “But that still doesn’t tell me why. Why now? Why me? Why send those men to kill me?”

Tabitha smiled, though she was having trouble keeping her head up on her shoulders now. So, she let her body lay back flat on the apartment’s thick carpet; yes, that was so much more comfortable. “He was going to ruin everything.” She tried to look over at Connor Monroe, still seated on the couch but found she couldn’t move her head that far. “Had to stop him. Or...” She trailed off, her vision growing dark at the edges, until all she could see now was Heather Kilgore staring down at her, face wet with tears.

“Good girl,” she whispered to the woman who had once been her best friend, now her killer. “Good girl, Heath...er. Always...knew...it would...be...you.”

Then Tabitha Lowry closed her eyes and was still.

CHAPTER 37 – NO MORE TEARS LEFT TO SHED

For a long time, neither Heather nor Connor spoke, both of them staring at the almost peaceful form of Tabitha Lowry. To Heather, the woman looked so much younger now that the ever-present tension was gone from her features. She wondered soberly if that was what would happen to her when she eventually died violently as well.

Connor moved first, standing up from the couch and walking to where Heather stood, putting his arm around her shoulder. At first, she tensed up, but then she let herself go limp and fell into him, forcing him to hold her up as she sobbed into his chest. They stood like that for a long time until Heather Kilgore, Agent of the King's Cross, had no more tears left to cry.

When she was done, he led her to the couch, where he sat next to her. She moved away from him, the moment between them now over, and her face became all business again.

“You’re not dead,” she observed matter-of-factly.

“Indeed,” he said, shrugging. “What gave it away?”

The weak attempt at levity didn’t even register with the woman. “Luisa’s comment about the dentist, then that false tooth. It was a good touch. Is everything on that implant true?”

He nodded. “All of it. I recalled our conversation from three years ago. When I asked you the best way to smuggle information across a border, you took it as idle chit-chat, but I was already planning. I have to admit when you told me about false tooth implants, I thought you were joking. It all sounded so

dramatic. But it worked. Even if it technically wasn't my body the tooth ended up in."

"Clone?" she asked.

He nodded. "Never officially alive. Not even the Koratans have figured out how to do that part, but it was grown to resemble me perfectly at my same age, existing only in a vegetative state. I kept it that way for a full year. It was my insurance policy in case I ever needed to disappear. And it worked. It was enough to fool the Namorans when they injected the toxin into what they thought was me asleep in my bed. Then they dumped the body near the embassy to throw suspicion off themselves, just like I'd hired them to do. It even fooled the Koratans into thinking I was dead."

He studied her for a long moment. "How did you figure it out?"

"I remembered our conversation, too. I thought back then it was idle curiosity, but after you defected, I knew it was more. Plus, I knew your fake wife, Luisa, arrived on planet with a large crate of some kind that had been kept in a cold storage cargo bay for the entire journey. Figured it could be a clone in a life support capsule."

Connor smiled but said nothing.

"Then there was your scar. That was the final confirmation for me. They got it wrong on the clone. It was too fresh. Who was Luisa, by the way? That's the one part I never figured out."

"A sympathetic Koratan intelligence agent. My handler. But an agent with a conscience. Can you imagine? A Koratan agent with a conscience? Surprised me, but she believed as much as I did that it had to be stopped. We started planning all of this two months ago, you know, as soon as we found out what they were planning."

"The fleet? Is it really as big as the data on the implant says it is?"

He nodded. "If not bigger. The entire Koratan Third Fleet. It will be here in a week if it's running on schedule. But I knew if I just walked up to the Promethean Embassy, I'd be shot or worse. Either way, they'd never have believed me. I also knew I couldn't let the Koratans know I was about to betray them. So, I faked my death before they could find and kill me."

"It was a gamble—a big one."

“Indeed,” he admitted. “But I knew that they’d likely send the King’s Cross to investigate. I wasn’t sure they’d send you, of course, but I hoped the note would help with that. Still, I figured once an agent arrived—almost any agent—they would go talk to Luisa, and I could make contact through her.”

“Why didn’t you? She pretended to know nothing.”

He frowned. “If it had been only you, she would have told you the truth. But I’d seen Tabitha once, visiting the Koratan capital. She didn’t see me at the time, but their intelligence chief let me watch her interrogation from behind a two-way mirror. He did it out of pure pride, bragging to me about how he’d managed to turn a genuine King’s Cross agent. I didn’t know she was already set up here on Hudson as the Order’s resident agent until too late, though.”

“And the Namorans?”

“Useful pawns. Nothing more. Though it seems that they decided to play both sides. I contracted with them to ‘kill’ me, using the codename Nightshadow, but it was Tabitha, I think, posing as Nightshadow, who ordered the bombing.

“And then the attacks on me,” Heather said grimly. “She’s the only one on planet who had the codes to track my implant. I think the first attack was to throw me off the trail and for her to ingratiate herself with me by saving me at the last second. But the second attack reeked of more desperation. Still, she wanted them to capture, not kill me, so there was that.”

“Good thing it didn’t work regardless.”

She regarded him soberly. “It almost did.”

They were both silent for a long minute. Then Heather stood up, wincing as doing so aggravated her wounds. “I assume you want to come back in from the cold now?”

He nodded, standing up after her. “I realize I made a mistake. I miss Prometheus, and I never got over my loyalty to King Charles. I’ve felt terrible since the day I defected, and once I saw the Koratan plans to invade the Line in force, starting at Hudson, I knew I had to do something. I couldn’t stand by and watch all those people die.”

Heather said nothing for a minute, stepping over to the body of her dead mentor and friend and pulling the knife from Tabitha’s leg. She wiped the blade off on the dead woman’s shirt and then stood back up, the knife

disappearing into her own clothing.

“Their fleet won’t find the Line undefended,” she told him softly. “Second fleet will get here first. The call went out already. They’re just two days away on patrol at Kipling. You did it, Connor. You prevented war.”

He smiled at her, though she didn’t smile back. “And you and me?” he asked quietly. “You know, there’s never been another for me since then,” he added. “It’s always been you.”

She finally returned his smile, though sadly. “And you for me. But you know I can’t. My life is the Order.”

Monroe frowned. “I thought that perhaps in light of recent events,” he inclined his head to indicate Tabitha Lowry’s dead body on the floor, “that you might rethink your commitment.”

She didn’t answer, but Heather stepped toward him and wrapped an arm around him, resting the other lightly on the side of his abdomen and burying her face in his chest again. “I loved you, Connor,” she said softly. “And maybe I always will.”

Then he gasped, stepping back and looking down to see the hilt of her knife protruding from his side. Disbelieving, he looked back up at her to see her face still wearing the same sad expression as before.

“But you’re still a traitor to the Crown,” she said softly. “And I’m still an agent of the King’s Cross.”

Connor Monroe took a step back from her, his legs hitting the couch so that he fell back onto it. He gasped in pain and tried to pull the knife from his kidney, but she stepped forward and stopped him.

“Besides,” she said sadly, “I know you’re not the white knight you claim to be. Tabitha couldn’t have been the one to hire the Namorans to kill Luisa; she didn’t even know about them yet. And both the calls for your death and Luisa’s came from the same number. Which meant it couldn’t have been Tabitha who ordered the bombing; it was you, Connor. Why? After Luisa *helped* you?”

For a moment, he said nothing, still staring down in stunned disbelief at the knife in his side and the blood that was staining the couch cushions beneath him. Then he looked up at her, eyes wide.

“She wanted half the money, didn’t she?” Heather continued with a frown. “You knew about the King’s Bounty. You saw a way to get forgiveness *and* riches, even more than you got from the Koratans. But you didn’t want to share it with Luisa.”

He looked at her, his eyes pleading.

“Oh, Connor,” she said in a low, husky voice full of emotion. “You almost had me fooled, but then you got greedy and reminded me of who you really are. Nothing but a traitor for sale to the highest bidder.”

Slowly, carefully, she reached down and pulled the knife from his side, causing him to cry out in pain. Then she placed the tip over his heart.

“I’m sorry, Connor,” she whispered as she drove the knife in one last time. But she didn’t cry. Heather Kilgore had no more tears left to shed.

CHAPTER 38 – STANDOFF

Exactly six days later, the Koratan fleet arrived at Hudson. **E** “Sir! Ships detected at the jump point!” the young lieutenant commander at the tactical station of *HMS Queen’s Pride* called out in an overly excited voice.

“On screen,” came the captain’s much calmer reply from his command chair.

As the tactical officer on the Promethean Navy heavy cruiser obeyed his captain’s command, the executive officer stepped over and whispered a soft reprimand to the young woman for her outburst. Then, he made his way to stand by his captain, who was studying the sensor plot on the bridge’s forward viewscreen.

“Looks like the Kories are right on time,” the XO mused.

“They sure are,” the captain replied thoughtfully. “Say what you want about them, but they know how to keep an invasion on schedule.”

The XO smiled ruefully. “What do you think old Hobart is going to do now that they’re here? I’ll wager you a hundred credits he sends an advance element forward just to scare the Kories. It’ll make him look good in the next promotion review.”

The captain smiled thinly, shaking his head. “I’ll take that wager. Admiral Hobart is *way* too conservative these days for that. Besides, there’s a rumor circulating that he’s getting ready to retire.”

The XO looked surprised by that. “I thought he was avoiding retirement. Something about really not being able to stand his wife.”

Now, the captain's mouth broke into a grin, and there was laughter in his eyes belying the stress he felt at facing down the entire Koratan Third Fleet. "Now, that's disappointing, Commander," he said with mock severity. "You're much further behind on the scuttlebutt than any King's officer has any right to be. *Everyone* knows that Hobart's wife divorced him seven months ago. The scoundrel has a new girlfriend already, a little slip of a girl in her twenties who is keeping him quite busy. I think he'll have to retire just to keep up with her. He's certainly not going to take any unnecessary risks with *that* waiting at home for him."

The XO shook his head. "Brad, I don't know how you keep all the gossip straight. It's unbecoming of a Promethean senior officer, I'll tell you that much. It's a wonder Carla puts up with you." His laughing grin took any possible sting out of the words.

Newly promoted Captain Brad Mendoza raised his nose and sniffed imperiously. "Careful, Commander Jansen, or I may have to have you flogged for gross insubordination. But, if I keelhaul you, then I won't be able to collect on our bet, which I should be able to do right about... now!"

"Skipper," called out the junior lieutenant at *Pride's* comm station. "We're being copied on a system-wide transmission from the flag. Shall I play it on bridge speakers?"

Brad winked at his XO. "Go ahead, Tyson, let's hear it."

"Attention, Koratan Fleet," came a deep, scratchy voice transmitted from the Promethean flagship. "This is Admiral Langston Hobart III of His Majesty's Ship *Indomitable*, commanding the Promethean forces currently in this system. We welcome you to Hudson. We are here on a humanitarian mission to the system's outer mining settlements. You will observe, of course, that we are properly outside of the inner system demarcation line as agreed upon in the Treaty of '64. Please state the nature of your visit."

"Sir," Lieutenant Tyson called out again. "Orders from the flag: 'All units hold position.'"

"Told you," Brad whispered to his XO. "Pay up, Ryan."

Commander Ryan Jansen huffed an exasperated sigh and transferred a hundred credits to his captain's implant. Then, they waited for the message to make its way across the distance to the Koratan fleet and for their response to

come back. It finally came just over an hour later—a very tense hour for everyone involved.

“Promethean Fleet,” a stern female voice broke in over the bridge speakers. “This is Admiral Juanita Torres of the Koratan Confederacy Ship *Raven*. We are here on a routine outer system inspection of Hudson.” There was a pause, and the woman’s next words sounded like she’d just swallowed something exceedingly bitter. “We also will stay outside the demarcation line as demanded by the treaty. *Raven* out.”

There were smiles across the bridge, as well as a few sighs of relief. No one had really wanted a war to break out. Only Captain Mendoza looked a little disappointed.

“You OK, Skipper?” asked Jansen.

“Huh?” Brad asked, looking up at his XO in surprise. “Oh, I’m fine. It’s almost a shame, you know? We come all the way to the Harper Line, and we don’t even get to shoot anything.”

“Oh, perk up,” Jansen said with a grin. “It’ll be at least a few days before that Koratan admiral swallows her pride enough to turn tail and leave the system. You might get your shooting war after all.”

It was to both Ryan Jansen’s and Brad Mendoza’s supreme relief that just two days later, the Koratan Third Fleet began to exit in waves from the same jump point by which they’d arrived. As soon as the last Koratan ship was gone, Admiral Hobart sent the order for the Promethean Second Fleet to withdraw in similar fashion. Both fleets left behind only small token forces in orbit around Hudson, two light cruisers each, as per the treaty.

Open war on the contested Harper Line had been averted, for now at least.

CHAPTER 39 – FARM BOY

Jimmy O’Neal grunted as he tried to turn the socket wrench on the tractor’s stubborn engine cover. Whoever had designed the stupid thing had neglected to build it in such a way as to make repairs easy or even halfway convenient. So even something as simple as replacing a few of the capacitors made Jimmy feel like he should have trained with the circus to be a contortionist and a strongman.

Finally, the stubborn bolt turned and came loose, and he sat back on the stool he’d brought over to work on the old tractor, wiping the sweat off his brow with the back of one greasy hand.

“Jimmy!” he heard his mother’s voice call through the old comm his father had installed in the barn. “Someone’s driving up. Looks like they may be lost. Can you see what they want?”

“Sure, Mom,” he called back.

“What?” came the scratchy reply.

“I said sure!” he called back louder, almost yelling to be heard. Stupid microphone. He wasn’t as good with smaller electronics as he was with old tractors, but his dad was even worse. He’d have to try fixing the comm next. They couldn’t afford a new one right now. Not until the harvest.

Standing up and stretching, he walked to the barn door and out into the yard. He lifted one hand to shield his eyes and saw the truck approaching. It was a modern job, not anything like the old one he’d lost after Heather Kilgore had parked it in a not-so-nice part of the city. He felt a pang of guilt about that.

Despite the best efforts of both the Hudson Yard Police Department and the Promethean Embassy, that old truck hadn't been found until car thieves had stripped it for parts. His parents were still fighting with their cut-rate insurance provider over it. It didn't help that he couldn't tell anyone the truth of how he'd come to lose the thing.

Stepping out further into the yard, he waved down the truck before it got too close to the house. The sun in his eyes, he couldn't see through the dark windshield, but he heard the driver lower the window. Expecting some lost city dweller whose implant took them on a wrong turn, he stepped around the truck's hood and made his way wearily to the driver's side window.

Then he stopped. Smiling at him from underneath a pair of large sunglasses was a beautiful redhead.

"Howdy, farm boy," Heather Kilgore said playfully. "I heard you lost a truck. I'm here to deliver a new one."

He laughed, and she followed suit.

She was gone after three days. But years later, his parents still loved to tell the story of that strange redheaded woman who brought them a truck they won in a contest they couldn't even remember entering and then stayed with them for three whole days, doing quite a bit of fishing with their son.

EPILOGUE

The time with Jimmy had been too short, and Heather Kilgore was unusually melancholy as she stood on the roof of the Promethean Embassy, alone save for a very nervous-looking Sir Steven Kim. When she'd first met the deputy ambassador, he'd struck her as the kind of person who let nothing rattle or excite him too much. But right now, he looked like a schoolboy about to be sent to detention.

Not that she could blame him. *She* was rather on edge at what was about to happen.

“He gave no indication as to why he was coming *here*?” Kim asked for perhaps the sixth or seventh time.

Tired of answering the question and maybe not fully trusting her own voice to be steady, Heather just shook her head.

“Well then,” Kim said with a frown.

It was a foggy morning in Hudson Yard, and they heard the ship well before they could see it, a sharp guttural whine that only came from ion engines working inside an atmosphere. Then, a dark shape started to materialize above them, and Heather had the distinct impression of a bird of prey swooping down to grasp a couple of mice in its talons.

As the ship neared, it took on more detail through the fog. They could see clearly now its matte black paint scheme and reflective cockpit glass, as well as the triple laser turrets on its ventral hull that bristled threateningly even if they weren't pointed in their direction.

Another sound rose, a harsh roar as two fighters shot by overhead, moving so quickly they left nothing but holes in the fog that also gave the impressions of predatory raptors. Two other fighters materialized next, these hovering to either side of the larger descending shuttle. Never before would the Prometheans have so blatantly flashed their military power in Hudson's atmosphere—sending fighters from the fleet carrier that had arrived in the

outer system wasn't *technically* against any treaty with the Koratans, but it was a clear provocation, nonetheless.

However, the Koratans were huddled in their embassy in damage-control mode over the failed attack, especially now that a reporter in Hudson Yard, by strange coincidence the brother-in-law of Homicide Detective Timothy Gentry, had broken the story with full copies of the documents from Connor Monroe's tooth implant. Those same documents had even implicated Miguel Castro Gonzalez, the Koratan government's Minister of Planetary Affairs for the world of Hudson, as having been a key part in planning the attack. He had already been recalled back to Koratas.

All this left no one to dispute Heather's star nation their right to display their military might.

Finally, the matte black shuttle extended its landing gear and set down almost gently on the landing pad built into the embassy's roof. As it did so, its wings swept backward and up to take up less room. Then the craft was down, and the engine whine faded, though three more laser turrets on the dorsal hull, invisible to her and the deputy ambassador until now, rotated and panned the sky for any potential threats that might get past its four escort fighters.

Next to her, Heather saw Steven Kim wince as the airlock hatch on the shuttle's starboard side opened ponderously, and a small ramp extended from it to the ground. For a moment, nothing else happened; then, two black-clad figures descended the ramp, the armor plates affixed to their skinsuits making them look like strange bugs rather than men. The two surveyed the landing pad, assault rifles held at the ready, and one of them nodded toward Heather and Kim in silent greeting. Then, they both went to rigid attention on either side of the ramp as a third figure began his descent.

The head of the Order of the King's Cross rarely left Prometheus anymore, and then only for the most sensitive assignments. Which meant that Heather Kilgore had absolutely no idea why he'd traveled the full week all the way out to the Harper Line. His message had told her nothing other than to prepare for his arrival.

The wiry older man—one of the most powerful men in the Promethean Federation—who looked like he had never smiled in his life, reached the bottom of the ramp, casting his eyes around at the fog-enshrouded city, and looked momentarily like he'd bit into something sour. Then his eyes locked

on Heather's, and he began walking directly toward her, his two bodyguards following.

She knew that despite the heavy armor those bodyguards wore, neither one of them was an agent of the King's Cross. They were Marines from a unit specially assigned to guard the Order's most senior individuals. And that unit was far from the most capable the Marines had to offer. In fact, by tradition, it was average at best. Such had it always been for the King's Cross; it sent a clear message: 'Come after us, and we'll kill you ourselves. The Marines are just window-dressing.'

The head of the Order of the King's Cross stopped in front of Heather and Kim, giving a curt nod to the deputy ambassador and then turning his dark eyes toward Heather. "Leave us," he said in a tone that brooked no argument, and the two Marines turned heel and marched back to the shuttle. The deputy ambassador hesitated, but the look the man shot him next was enough to have him bow quickly and then disappear through the rooftop door that led back into the embassy building.

"It's a pleasure to have you here," Heather said evenly.

"No, it's not," the man replied just as evenly. "But it is expedient. The King sent me."

Despite herself, Heather's eyebrows raised. That meant that there was nothing routine or pedestrian about this visit, not that she would have expected such.

"The Koratans have gone too far this time," he continued without further small talk. "And a message must be sent. In blood."

Heather nodded but said nothing. It wasn't surprising, and she'd expected this part, at least. They'd probably have her arrange an accident for the local Koratan ambassador or perhaps a few senior members of his staff. Though why her superior had felt the need to come all the way here just to tell her...

"You have been assigned as the new resident agent on Hudson," he said next, surprising her, "effective immediately. Assume that everything Tabitha Lowry touched is tainted. You will need to create an all-new network of informants and pawns, and funds will be provided for new safehouses and weapons caches. I assume you can find local sources for the weapons themselves."

It wasn't a question, but Heather nodded, her mind flashing to the diminutive arms dealer, 'Mr. Jones'.

"Good. But before you get settled in your new role, I have an assignment for you directly from His Royal Majesty. An assignment so sensitive he insisted I deliver it in person. We are sending you after Francisco Ignacio Juarez."

Heather was shocked, and the words escaped her before she could give them enough thought. "The Koratan President? Are you sure that's wise?"

Her superior gave her a hard look that made her involuntarily take a step back. "If the King commands it, we obey," he hissed. "Never forget whom you serve, Agent Kilgore."

Swallowing with a suddenly dry throat, Heather nodded. "I live to serve the Crown, sir."

"Good. But you will *not* kill the President."

"I won't?" she asked, failing to keep the hope from her voice. It wasn't that she would feel the slightest ounce of remorse for killing the man, but she also knew that doing so would start the same all-out war she'd just worked so hard to prevent. Millions more, if not billions, would die in the aftermath.

"No," her superior said with a frown that belied perhaps his own hesitancy at the order he was about to give. "You, Agent Kilgore, will kill the man's wife *and* daughter. That will send the message our King intends. This mission *cannot* fail."

Heather gulped again. She knew in that moment she had a choice to make, and either path led to death, hers or that of the wife and daughter of a tyrant, but death either way. But one direction, at least, would also lead to war.

"I understand, sir," she said slowly. "I *will* not fail."

The expected and ritualistic response given, her superior nodded once.

"Good. Let us show the Koratans the price of challenging His Royal Majesty and Prometheus."

THE END

Enjoyed this story? Subscribe to my newsletter for more!

<https://www.skylerramirez.com/join-the-club>

BOOKS BY SKYLER RAMIREZ

Dumb Luck & Dead Heroes

[The Worst Ship in the Fleet](#)

[The Worst Spies in the Sector](#)

[The Worst Pirate Hunters in the Fringe](#)

[The Worst Rescuers in the Republic](#)

[The Worst Detectives in the Federation](#) (coming early 2024)

A Star Nation In Peril

Set in the same universe as *Dumb Luck and Dead Heroes*.

[Rogue Agent](#)

[Suicide Mission](#) (coming early 2024)

The Brad Mendoza Chroncles

Set in the same universe as *Dumb Luck and Dead Heroes*.

[Saving the Academy](#)

The Four Worlds

[The Four Worlds: The Truth](#)

[The Four Worlds: Subversion](#)

[The Four Worlds: Wrath of Mars](#) (coming 2024)

[Revolution: A Four Worlds Story](#) (coming early 2024)

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Skyler S. Ramirez



I just love writing. It's as simple as that. My goal is to write books that my readers enjoy and that celebrate everyday imperfect heroes. I want to show that everyone, no matter how life has dealt with them or how they've dealt with life, deserves a second chance and can go on to do amazing things. Just look at Brad and Jessica in *Dumb Luck* and *Dead Heroes* or Jinny and Tyrus in *The Four Worlds*.

It's important to me that everyone be able to read my books, including my teenage children, so I purposefully leave out any swearing or graphic scenes. In this, I follow a tradition set by many (far better) writers before me, most notably in my life, Louis L'Amour. I can only aspire to write even half as good as Mr. L'Amour!

As for the personal side, I live in Texas with my wife and four children (and

often a revolving door of exchange students), and I work for a major tech company for my day job. But writing is my passion, and I often toil into the early hours of morning, especially on the weekends, and it's all worth it when I see people enjoy my books.

Thanks for reading.