



RICH MAN'S WAR

ELLIOTT KAY

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BY
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Acknowledgments

As a general rule, I like to know how the real world works before I take things off the rails in a sci-fi or fantasy story. Books with space navies and laser pistols are never all that realistic, but stories are better when the writer at least has some good benchmarks. In addition to a lot of Internet searches, endless demonstration videos on YouTube, Crossfire specials on the economic meltdown of 2008 and my collection of military and survival manuals, I owe thanks to several people who shared their professional knowledge with me.

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Lastly, and of great importance: thank you to everyone who wrote reviews on Amazon, Smashwords and elsewhere for *Poor Man's Fight* and my other books, and thank you to everyone who emailed me directly. By definition, a writer should be able to put emotions into words, but I can't express just how much those reviews and those emails have meant to me, and how much they have contributed to the overall success of my work. Thank you for that, and thank you for picking up this book, too.

One last note: if anyone's wondering, my copy of Sun Tzu's *The Art of War* is the translation by Samuel B. Griffith (Oxford University Press, 1963).

To my sister, Jennifer

“War is a racket. It always has been. It is possibly the oldest, easily the most profitable, surely the most vicious. It is the only one international in scope. It is the only one in which the profits are reckoned in dollars and the losses in lives.”

--*War Is a Racket*, 1935

Major General Smedley D. Butler, USMC (ret.)

Two-time recipient of the Medal of Honor

“Everyone loves a hero story, okay?” said Maria Pedroso, NorthStar’s Executive VP of Risk Management. “But we shouldn’t let Archangel’s hype take us for a ride. That Malone kid was rescued just like everyone else, by a Union Fleet battleship—not by the Archangel Navy. And if Archangel had not unilaterally ended corporate security fleet coverage, the whole incident wouldn’t have happened. Archangel doesn’t have the ability to fully protect itself and its interests across the Union. They need us. It’s only a question of how long it will be before Archangel realizes that, and how much harm the system does to itself in the meantime.”

--“Archangel Sticks to Her Tiny Guns,” *The Solar Herald*, March 2276

“Archangel has not seceded from the Union, nor will it. We have only withdrawn from some bad business relationships. It appears those businesses would have the Union believe this is no different from secession.

“We remain committed to the Union,” President Aguirre continued, expecting neither applause nor murmurs of agreement from his audience. He knew how many delegates to the Union Assembly were bought and paid for—and how many others simply couldn’t risk the confrontation that Archangel now faced. “We support the common causes of humanity, such as a unified diplomacy toward our alien neighbors and a common defense. We also support the rule of law. We believe in paying for services rendered. We also believe that when those services are not rendered, as has been the case with NorthStar, with Lai Wa and the CDC, that no payment is merited and further services should not be pursued. The current corporate educational regime has not served our young people well, and thus we have decided to provide for our own educational needs. Our security contracts have gone unfulfilled, as was made plain by incidents reaching back as far as the loss of the *Aphrodite* and the later loss of ___“

Peanuts bounced against the flat image of President Aguirre as he spoke. “I’d pay good money not to hear about the fuckin’ *Aphrodite* ever again,” grumbled Ranjan at the bar.

“Shut up,” snapped the pirate beside him. “I’m listening to this,” Trevor said.

Ranjan glanced over his shoulder to take a look around the dimly-lit dive. He saw little interest in the news broadcast on the large screen behind the bar. He also saw little in the way of customers other than his shipmates. “Yeah, you and all the other political junkies in here. Just download this shit to your holocom and let’s get the bartender to put on something interesting.”

Baleful blue eyes looked up at Ranjan from behind Trevor’s long blond hair. “I’m not payin’ six creds to watch the news when it’s on here for free.”

“You don’t have a subscription service?”

Trevor made a face. “Do you? What the hell do you put down in your subscriber info? You still have a bank account?”

Ranjan blinked. He glanced at his other shipmates at the bar, feeling awkward. “No,” he lied. “Look, I’m just saying I’m sick of hearing about *Aphrodite*. We knocked over a fuckin’ planet, but you don’t hear him—“

“He just did, but you were talking.”

“And shut up about that,” hissed a shipmate opposite Trevor. Shahal leaned in with a scowl. “We’re not on Paradise anymore!”

“Have you seen a single badge the entire time we’ve been on this rock?” Trevor asked, though he

did lower his voice. “We didn’t park the *Guillotine* at the spaceport because of the tight security service. We could land here with every gun turret exposed and nobody’d bat an eye. And I’d be happy if you’d both shut up.”

“As anyone might expect, these changes have led to disagreements on all sides,” continued Aguirre in a calm, reasoned tone. “We disagree on payment of primary debts and the terms of debts owed by individual citizens. We disagree on compensation for the state takeover of corporate property within Archangel territory, such as educational facilities. Careers and lives have been disrupted. We do not dispute that these changes are difficult matters.

“Yet when the corporations involved escalate to economic warfare—when they not only sever the ties of interstellar commerce and communication, but indeed act to disrupt Archangel’s efforts to provide such services for itself—then matters go beyond simple business relationships. At that point, the governments of the Union must ask, who really governs the Union?”

“He had to know they’d cut Archangel off from their packet ship services,” Shahal noted.

“That’s not the point,” Trevor said, shaking his head. “Did you listen? It’s not that they cut off service, it’s that they’re putting up barriers to Archangel taking care of itself. It’s one thing not to deliver the mail, but it’s another when you won’t even let a guy pick it up himself.”

“Why do you care so much?” asked Ranjan. “You aren’t from there. None of us are.”

“You don’t think this will wind up affecting us?”

Ranjan frowned. “I don’t see how.” His eyes drifted to the door to the back room. Almost as if he’d given a cue, the door opened and Hannah Black walked out. The three pirates rose to meet their ship’s elected captain. “How’d it go?”

“Well enough that I don’t want to talk about it in here,” Hannah grunted. Shahal returned her pistol as she passed, walking for the door with her long black coat billowing in her wake. The other crewmembers present, some of them closer to the exit, rose as soon as they saw her. By the time she stepped out into the night, her pistol tucked safely in its underarm holster, the crew had formed a pack around her.

The planet Edison had been settled early in the second wave of expansion from Earth. Though the world enjoyed rapid growth, later expansion developments and the whims of the markets left its economy crippled, leading to its current status as an urbanized backwater. The spaceport city of Stilwell exemplified that demise, with miles of towers, bridges and highways now showing far more decay and vandalism than its original, ambitious beauty.

At this hour, not too many people roamed the streets. Even the homeless and the criminals had to sleep sometime. One could see scattered pedestrians and vehicles here and there—people did still live and work in this city, though few prospered—but Hannah and her crew walked unimpeded. “We’ve got a lead on a target,” she said, “but I’m not sure everyone’s going to like it.”

“What’s the trouble?” asked Ranjan.

He could see Hannah’s frown and one blue eye looking at him from under her long black hair. “The info is an astronavigation protocol, not an actual flight plan. We’ll have to park ourselves in one of three locations and hope we’ve picked the right one.”

“One-in-three odds is still better than roaming around aimlessly,” Shahal shrugged. “These are cargo ships, right? Should be a decent haul and not too much risk for the *Guillotine*.”

“It’s a matter of location. Like I said, not everyone’s going to like it. And some people on the crew might like it too much.” Hannah paused. “I don’t think our seller was out to make a profit on stolen shipping data. This smells like someone pushing an agenda. He sold pretty cheap given what he had to offer, and now that I know the location I understand why.”

“Where?” asked Ranjan. Hannah didn’t often go for ominous hints.

She held her hand up, nodding and looking forward as they entered a wide pedestrian tunnel under

one of the city's major highways. A tall, young black man and a girl of Asian descent approached from the opposite direction, walking close together. Ranjan thought the girl was hot. Her tight pants and boots hinted at a great figure. The other pirates began their inevitable catcalls and whistles.

It hardly mattered if the girl turned away or walked in silence, or if she responded with a rude word or gesture, or if she politely asked to be left alone. The pirates would do whatever they felt like doing. That was the nature of pirates. Unfortunately, she made the worst of all possible choices: she smiled nervously and made eye contact as she passed.

Trevor reached for her ass as she came within reach. Other men let out further catcalls. The girl slapped Trevor's hand down but turned as she kept going in the same direction, walking backward to keep her eyes on the pirates. The tall black youth with her scowled, of course, but he didn't put up an sort of fight. Like his girlfriend, he just kept moving.

Ranjan quickly forgot the pair. "Hannah, what's the deal?"

Again, the captain shook her head and nodded forward. Yet another pedestrian approached on the bridge, this one a black woman wrapped up in a large grey overcoat. Ranjan paid her no mind. She'd inevitably step to the side. Anyone with sense would want to be on the outside of such a rough-looking group.

"Fuckin' random pedestrians, who cares?" Ranjan muttered. He glanced over his shoulder. The young couple was already at the end of the pack of pirates.

"I'm of a mind to be careful right now," Hannah replied quietly.

"Why?" he asked. "What's the deal?"

Fuming, Hannah looked to Ranjan and hissed, "Our contact had NorthStar Risk Management written all over him. Those coordinates are in Archangel space."

"What?" Ranjan blinked.

"They want us to do their dirty work for them. Now shut up. We'll talk about it on the ship."

Ranjan caught sight of the black woman again in his peripheral vision. She hadn't made a course correction. She walked between the pair of pirates in front of the group, directly into Ranjan's path.

He tried to say something, but the woman's elbow went right into his throat. Hard.

At the back of the group of pirates, Alicia Wong saw Janeka's first blow all but lift her target off the ground. The big overcoat fell from the gunnery sergeant's shoulders as she turned on her next opponent with a roundhouse kick, but Alicia had no time to watch. She and Ravenell had jobs to do—quickly and quietly.

A knife take-down from behind was easier for Ravenell, given his height. The last two pirates in the group never saw him coming, having discounted him as a wuss for not defending his girl and now distracted by Janeka. Ravenell's big hand wrapped around his target's mouth from the left while his knife plunged into the side of the man's neck from the right, then punched straight out in a rough, ugly and well-practiced motion.

Alicia didn't have Ravenell's stature to work with, but size rarely held her back. Given an unawared target, she had no reason not to commit her full power to her first move. Alicia drew the thermal dagger from her jacket sleeve, raised it to the base of her target's skull and then yanked back on the man's hair to pull him onto the blade. Precision and six inches of strong, laser-hot metal made for an effective job. Alicia tugged to the right and then left to jerk her sizzling weapon free. She had her sights on the blond bastard just a couple meters ahead before her first target hit the ground.

The blond pirate's first reaction when violence erupted in front of him was to go for his gun without looking behind. As with her first victim, Alicia tugged back fiercely on the man's conveniently long hair. Taken by surprise, he staggered backward as she planned. Alicia brought her blade around his chest and slashed upward, slicing his neck open in a vicious arc.

She didn't try for grace. These people were all mass-murderers. Alicia had to break each man and move on to the next as quickly as possible, before anyone could fire off a gun or make other attention-grabbing noise. The next pirate in line recognized the threat in time to meet her approach, but not quickly enough to do much about it. The young woman didn't try to dodge his meaty fist. Alicia endured his awkward but heavy punch so she could step in close enough to stomp on his foot and throw him off balance. The pirate took a blade up under his ribcage and into his lung.

Bracing with both feet and twisting hard, Alicia flung her third victim to the ground. He had just enough fight left in him to break her grip on the dagger as he fell. With her targets down, her eyes quickly swept the field.

Ravenell's second target had reacted quickly enough to put up a fight, but Ravenell seemed to have the upper hand. The pirate leader, Hannah Black according to the briefing, staggered back after a kick from Janeka while the gunny turned to deal with the last of the men standing nearest to her. Hannah reached inside her long coat, clearly going for a gun in a shoulder holster.

Alicia grabbed at Hannah's wrist and pulled. She slammed her free hand against the pistol. The push-and-pull motion took Hannah's arm one way and sent the gun in another, breaking her grip on the weapon at her thumb.

Hannah got one solid shot in across Alicia's cheek with her left hand. The pirate captain knew how to throw a punch, but Alicia had endured much worse. Tangled together in a standing grapple, both women struggled to apply the right footwork to throw the other off-balance.

The contest was never in doubt, though Hannah couldn't have known it. They had a moment to lock eyes as they struggled. Alicia saw rage and a rising sense of panic. Hannah saw controlled ferocity. Then Hannah's whole world spun as Alicia got her leg around the back of Hannah's and shoved the pirate into the wall beside them. The back of Hannah's head hit hard against unyielding concrete. She blacked out even before Alicia's knee came up into her groin.

Alicia surveyed the field again. She saw Janeka's heel come down on a man's neck and saw Ravenell rise from the body of his defeated opponent. Alicia did a quick body count: the three she took out, plus the captain, Ravenell's two, and the three men lying at Janeka's feet. They'd made a clean sweep of their enemy.

"You're both okay," observed the gunnery sergeant, receiving nods of confirmation in return.

"I got the captain," huffed Alicia.

"Is she dead?"

"Shouldn't be," replied the younger woman, kneeling down to check. "No, she's still good. Dunny if she'll be up for answering questions right away, though."

"Doesn't need to answer anything yet. We just need her warm and breathing in case we need her biometrics. And her holocom. See if you can find it."

The order wasn't necessary. Alicia had already turned to searching their captive. "Wow, I am never wearing my hair long again after this," she said, still rocky with adrenaline.

"Take a couple deep breaths," said Janeka. "Shake it off. Stay focused." As the gunnery sergeant spoke, she slid one finger over the holocom riding her wrist and then tapped it twice to signal the rest of their team.

"Ravenell, watch the tunnel entrance," Janeka instructed. "Stay calm, you got me? Breathe. Focus. Get over there, stop and breathe again, then watch. Understand?"

"On it," Ravenell nodded and hustled off.

"Got a couple of data chips here," Alicia announced quietly, stuffing her pockets with items taken from her unconscious captive. She kept patting Hannah down until her fingers touched the pirate captain's earrings. One of them let out a beep. "Got it," she said, and then worked to unclasp the large pricy jewel that held Hannah's personal holocom. "Pretty sweet miniaturization here. These are

expensive.”

“Lotta money to be made in her trade, I guess,” Janeka muttered. Her attention was focused on a small black orb in her hands. It projected a small screen of orange light, into which the gunnery sergeant waved her fingers. The lights quickly went out with a beep.

“Anything else we should grab?”

“Just collect the guns. I’ve got the bag. We’ve gotta get gone.” She knelt beside the dead man at her feet and placed the orb in his pocket. Inevitably, some random passerby would discover the body. That person would likely then try to call for help with a holocom, but the orb would jam signals going out of the tunnel. It would buy at least another minute or two for their getaway.

“I’ll take her,” said Janeka, stepping up to Alicia and her captive. She grabbed the unconscious woman’s wrists. “You’re on point. Head out and let’s get to the car.”

* * *

Spaceport security and control varied dramatically from one planet to the next. Some worlds could afford tight restrictions and offered considerable equipment and infrastructure. Planets with sparse settlements sometimes had no control over interstellar traffic at all, and an incoming vessel could land practically wherever its crew pleased.

Edison fell somewhere in the middle. All of the heavy lifting to create the spaceport’s infrastructure had been done long ago, but the planetary government couldn’t afford to keep its systems up to date. Old scanners and chem-sniffers were easily spoofed. Sparsely-allocated guards and other personnel could be bought. Alicia found it all mind-boggling, especially in light of what their captive and their remaining targets had done on Qal’at Khalil little more than a year ago.

Targets, she thought, crouched in the shadows with the other plainclothes Archangel marines and their Intelligence Service “liaisons.” That’s what those people were now. They had to be. If she stopped to think of the bastards as people, she might hesitate. She couldn’t have that.

Fuckers didn’t hesitate to drop a fuel-cell bomb on a city, she reminded herself once again. Nor did these pirates, to be more specific, hesitate to hose down a spaceport with their ship’s illegal weaponry.

Nor had anyone done anything about these particular pirates until now.

The spaceport berth was little more than a circular wall. Earlier reconnaissance revealed that the retractable roof was open and possibly inoperable. Inside the berth sat the *Guillotine* and her remaining crew, estimated to be around eighteen or so in total. After the fight in the tunnel, it didn’t sound like such bad odds. Alicia wondered if perhaps the quick and dirty skirmish had made her cocky.

“Corporal Wong?” said Agent Willis, interrupting her thoughts. “Sorry, I mean Lance Corporal, right? Looks like we’re partners for this one. You ready?”

Alicia blinked. The Intelligence Service agent hadn’t spoken to her much during the mission, but he hadn’t been standoffish, either. He worked mostly with the higher-ranked marines. “I thought you were with the gunny?”

Willis shook his head. “Doesn’t fit with the layout. We need her in the middle guiding the operation with Lieutenant Crowder.” He smiled a bit. “Don’t worry, I’ve been through most of the same training you have.”

Though she kept her thoughts to herself, Alicia’s eyes flicked over to Ravenell and Janeka. For all the agent’s training, she doubted he had run nearly as many mock boardings on as many different spacecraft as they had. Still, Alicia nodded, and when her holocom buzzed with a final check-in signal, she tapped it to confirm her readiness.

Sound-suppressed rifles coughed up above her on the wall of the spaceport berth. Knowing his cue, Ravenell activated the electromagnetic breaching pads on the nearby bay doors, forcing them open. “Go,” ordered Janeka. Alicia and three others rushed through the entrance, weapons out and ready.

Though barely longer than a corvette, the *Guillotine* offered a broader profile to allow for extra space and comfort. She’d been built as a luxury yacht, but her original design hosted hidden weaponry and military-quality hull reinforcement, along with a power drive to match any corvette. Her crew, however, was not up to military grade service, demonstrated by the way her entry ramp was still down and extended. The bodies of two sentries, shot by the snipers on the walls, lay to either side.

The *Guillotine* didn’t take up the full space offered by the landing berth. That left the marine assault team with a few uncomfortable yards to cross before they came under her curved wings, but they’d been trained for actions like this. The team knew how to stack up, how to cover one another upon entry and how to pick targets. They also knew not to squander the element of surprise, moving inside aggressively and gunning down the first handful of pirates they found with their pulse lasers.

Ravenell’s team, leapfrogging Alicia’s, broke off to head for engineering. Alicia followed Agent Willis through the passageways, eyes sweeping this way and that for targets as shouts and gunshots rang out. A tattooed, scraggly-haired man at the bottom of the steps leading up to the next deck had his weapon out as Willis and Alicia appeared. His panicked shots hit neither of them before they put him down with quiet blasts of blue light that burned through his torso.

Willis ran for the ladder well. Alicia followed, then felt her heart stop when he yelled, “Grenade!”

She saw the little orb clatter down onto the base of the ladder in front of them. Willis jumped to the side. Alicia grabbed the body of the man they’d just killed and heaved it over the grenade before jumping back and away to curl up in a ball on the deck.

Despite the body smothering the grenade, the explosion still shook the passageway. Alicia felt bits of debris and gore strike against her body. Something burned her leg, but she knew right away that it wasn’t serious. When she raised her head, she found that Willis had recovered a heartbeat faster than she had, and now hurled his own grenade up the ladder. Unlike the pirates, Willis knew how to time his before throwing, thereby leaving the enemy above less of a chance to react.

They heard screams amid the boom of the grenade. A bloody, smoldering woman fell dead through the ladder well. Willis covered the opening with his pulse laser while Alicia got to her feet and followed up with a second grenade, this one built to stun with flashing light and booming sound. As soon as it was out of her hand, Willis followed after it. Alicia stuck close to him.

As expected, they found the bridge locked up tight. Alicia set up her breaching kit while Willis shouted, “Surrender now and you’ll live through this!” By the time they were ready, other marines caught up to them. Perhaps two minutes had passed since the first sniper shots took down the sentries outside.

The team stacked up at the hatch. Alicia got behind Willis, passed the breaching activator to the marine behind her and held her weapon ready. As soon as the breaching unit opened the hatch, Willis and Alicia opened up with their guns. The team did everything right, yet that didn’t make anyone invincible. Willis caught a gunshot in the face. He went down in front of Alicia, who in turn cut down one of the three remaining pirates on the bridge.

Lasers and bullets flashed by her in both directions. Alicia looked for targets and fired. Another gun went off beside her, almost right next to her head, thankfully firing lasers rather than solid shells that would have deafened her despite the miniature baffles plugged in her ears. Someone else on her side screamed. She stepped into the bridge compartment, took cover behind a console and forced herself to aim before shooting lest she wreck vital controls.

Again, the laser rifle beside her flashed distractingly close to her head. It cut down the last of the

pirates, ending the fight. “Clear,” Gunny Janeka announced, placing her hand on Alicia’s shoulder.

The younger marine swallowed hard. “Clear,” she replied, and looked back at the others. She didn’t know when Janeka got there. Of the three men who’d breached the bridge with her, only one still stood. Willis lay dead in the entryway. Another marine slumped against the wall, clutching a wound on his arm that wouldn’t likely be fatal.

“Breathe,” said Janeka once more, looking each of her marines in the eye. “Stop and breathe.”

The quick pause made all the difference. “Wong, take the helm. Fire it up. Lieutenant Crowder, do you copy?” Janeka asked over her holocom link. She glanced at the wounded marine, who winced but nodded. Then she grabbed the hatch to the bridge and pulled it shut again, setting the magnetic locks to reboot.

“Lieutenant Crowder took a pretty bad hit, Gunny,” reported another voice. “We’re working on him, but I don’t know if he’s gonna make it.”

“Engineering is secure,” added Ravenell. “Not much damage. Primary systems were kept warm. Life support looks good. We put down a bunch of targets in the galley, too.”

“Exterior remains secure,” reported one of the snipers.

“Then I’m assuming command,” said Janeka. “Everyone get on the ship and secure for lift-off. We are extracting immediately.”

She sat down beside Alicia, who dutifully had her station powered up, but Alicia’s eyes were turned toward the closed hatch. Agent Willis lay dead on the other side. He wasn’t alone.

“Wong. Listen to me. Breathe.”

“I’m breathing,” Alicia said, nodding and turning back to her work. She checked the skies and traffic above them and started up the systems diagnostic. “Are you breathing?”

“Breathing is for lesser mortals,” said Janeka, her hands moving over the controls.

Alicia froze. She blinked and turned to Janeka. “Okay, now I know I’m too ramped up, because you made a joke and I’m not laughing.”

“You did good,” Janeka told her. “Real good, like I knew you would. You fought like a marine and now you’re gonna run the helm like a navy crewman, just like you were taught. We’re gonna make our rendezvous and FTL it straight home to Archangel. We’ll be back on the *Los Angeles* in a week.”

Alicia nodded. She turned back to her controls and watched the condition tracks run up toward full readiness. “Gunny, thanks. For picking me for this, I mean. Not ‘cause I enjoyed the fight, but...”

“I knew you had what it took. That’s why I picked you.”

Again, Alicia nodded. She glanced once at the gunny, then away, and then something jerked her attention back to the older woman. “Did you just smile?”

“I did not smile, marine. *I do not smile.*”

“Right. Understood,” said Alicia, turning her face dutifully back to the controls.

“You’re bleeding from your leg,” Janeka observed without looking. “Tend to it when we get clear. I’ve gotta look after Hernandez over there.”

Alicia looked down at her thigh. Sure enough, she had taken a bit of shrapnel from something—probably the grenade on the lower deck—and hadn’t noticed.

Janeka rose from her station to see to the other wounded marine. As she passed, she laid a hand on Alicia’s shoulder and gave a single, warm squeeze.

It occurred to Alicia that it was just as well that this whole op was covert and classified. No one would ever believe Janeka would show such affection anyway.

* * *

“Tight-beam transmission from *Guillotine*,” announced the comms tech. He read from a screen a

his station, not turning around toward the ship's captain or first officer. A navigational display near the tech showed the former yacht passing by. Both ships were just outside the two light-minute safe navigation zone around Edison.

"How'd it go?" asked the gravelly voice of the captain. He stood from his chair to walk over to the comms station. His first officer, Aaron Hawkins, stuck close to his side.

"*Guillotine's* captain is in custody, all other hostiles KIA. Three friendly casualties including Agent in Charge. Marine team leader also seriously wounded." He paused and then looked over his shoulder. "The acting mission leader is asking to speak to the captain."

Hawkins opened his mouth to speak, but found himself cut off. "The captain is unavailable," said the captain. "Acknowledge their report and tell them to hold to the original plan. They jump to FTL as soon as they're outside Edison's gravity well."

"Aye, aye, sir."

Hawkins eyed the ship's captain. Though officially the first officer, Hawkins had much more of a background in intelligence and covert operations than ship handling. Few first officers had to keep their captains completely restricted to the ship as part of their duties. "Looks like all the intel on where we'd find the *Guillotine* and her crew was right on the money," said Hawkins.

"Yeah, what a shock," came the somewhat annoyed reply. Casey looked his personal watchdog in the eye before passing him on the way back to his captain's chair. "Can't imagine who gave them all that great info."

* * *

"Yup. Request denied, hold to the original plan." Alicia looked over to the gunny. She'd known Janeka long enough to learn the nuances within Janeka's repertoire of expressions of displeasure. "Is that dodgy?"

Janeka glared at the large ship on the holographic display. "Only because the captain never met with Lt. Crowder, either," she frowned. "Or Willis."

"That's weird?" asked Alicia. Their course was locked in. Janeka and the computer had done most of the work. Alicia gave the ship on the screen another look. Her recruit company had received more than a little training in ship recognition from Janeka and Chief Everett, but the vessel on the display didn't look familiar to her at all. It might have been a stock passenger liner once upon a time, but had clearly been through considerable modification.

"At your rank, it wouldn't be weird for you not to meet with a ship's captain, no," explained Janeka. "At my level, one would at least expect a handshake. But this ship brings us into a sovereign system for a covert op and the captain doesn't want to meet anyone in charge? That's dodgy."

Considering it further, Alicia suggested, "Maybe it's for the sake of deniability?"

Janeka shook her head. "No. A ship's captain doesn't get to play dumb. He has to know everything that happens on his ship. Doesn't matter if he's military or civilian. They hung around to monitor, to not just drop us off and go on their way."

"FTL jump in sixty seconds," Alicia noted. They wouldn't be outside Edison's legal FTL line for it, but that paled in comparison to the other laws they'd just broken. Alicia dutifully announced the countdown as *Guillotine* passed out of the gravity wells of Edison and its moons. Laws against FTL jumps within a system existed for good reason, but at this distance from large bodies, the risks of a gravitic disaster were reasonably low.

Janeka input the commands to execute. Everyone on the ship felt the lurch as the ship transitioned from well below light speed to something far beyond it, but the lurch was much less pronounced than on most other vessels. It was a reminder of *Guillotine's* original purpose; once upon a time, she'd

been a luxury yacht built for a smooth and pleasant ride.

~~That thought pushed Janeka out of her seat once she was satisfied with immediate responsibilities~~
“Keep everything under control here,” she said. “I’m gonna make the rounds.”

“Aye, aye, captain,” Alicia grinned. She dared a wink when Janeka looked back at her.

The gunnery sergeant checked in on the wounded. She surveyed engineering and made sure someone was already dealing with the dead pirates strewn about the ship. She gave instructions to collect all the small arms on board. These were all necessary steps, but she had one other duty to fulfill. For that, she retrieved the big grey overcoat that she had ditched just inside the ship’s entryway upon boarding.

She found Hannah Black in a chair in the ship’s galley. The pirate captain had her hands and feet tied to the chair, which was itself securely bolted to the floor. Awake and aware of her surroundings, Hannah watched but said nothing until Janeka stepped up to her.

“You’re military,” said Hannah. “Whose?”

“You’ll figure it out before too long.”

Hannah scowled and spit on the deck. She noted the look in Janeka’s eyes. “Have we met?”

“Not personally, no,” said Janeka. “I’ve wanted to meet you for a long time, though.”

Hannah didn’t respond. She just watched and waited.

Janeka reached into her coat. She drew a soft, stained bit of comfort and warmth and put it on the table in front of Hannah. Then she walked away, leaving Hannah under the lifeless stare of an old, battered, bloody teddy bear.

Chapter One

Pieces on the Board

“Primary debt is a specific subset of sovereign debt. It’s the long-term debt owed by an extraterrestrial colony for all those massive start-up costs of getting out into the stars in the first place. The Big Three of Lai Wa, NorthStar and CDC own almost all of that debt. Ironically, the government of Archangel is in the position to break from corporate dependency precisely because its primary debt is among the lowest in the Union, thanks to the financial support of the Catholic Church during the Expansion Era.

“Archangel’s economy is the strongest of any state based around a single star and the ninth strongest in the Union overall. Yet the system’s anti-corporate stance and cessation of primary debt payments have sent Archangel’s credit plummeting to the bottom of the Union’s ranks. Given the enormous costs of the services Archangel must now provide for itself, it’s anyone’s guess as to how badly the system’s economy will tank.”

--Matt Gao, “Can Anyone Go It Alone?” Union Business Review, April 2276

“We’re looking at open warfare breaking out on Scheherazade within the month, sir,” explained David Kiribati, head of Archangel’s Intelligence Service. He leaned in close beside President Aguirre as he moved his fingers through the holographic projection in front of them, starting with a projection of the multiple stars that made up the Kingdom of Hashem and then zooming in on a single system, enlarging the fourth planet out from its star. “This system is nominally under Prince Kaseem’s oversight while remaining loyal to the king, but in reality the security forces, the government and most of the big domestic businesses are split between Prince Kaseem and Prince Murtada. We know Murtada is covertly stockpiling weapons and troops on the planet. The king knows it. NorthStar and Lai Wa know it. And given all that, it’s hard to believe Kaseem doesn’t know.”

“What makes us think NorthStar and Lai Wa know?” asked President Aguirre. Numerous advisors and aides filled the president’s comfortable office, some seated and some standing. Only a handful would do the talking unless called upon.

“We have reason to believe that NorthStar has decided to back Murtada, sir.”

Aguirre looked up with surprise. “I thought they wanted to tamp down on this whole feud before gets worse. We expected them to back the king.”

“Murtada’s political and religious platform makes him more attractive than the status quo, sir,” explained Theresa Cotton, Aguirre’s foreign minister. “For one thing, Murtada takes a much stricter line over the *Hajj*. He was deeply inspired by his own journey years ago, and—“

“I don’t need the theological underpinnings,” Aguirre cut her off. “What’s it all mean strategically?”

Theresa managed to control her frown. “It means a significant long-term uptick in travel if Murtada comes out on top, which puts easy money in NorthStar’s pocket. This also puts a theological twist on what was initially a straightforward fight for succession that will draw religious conservatives to fight for Murtada.”

“People will shoot each other over how low they set the economic bar for going to Mecca?”

“Mister President,” spoke up Admiral Yeoh, cutting through the room with her soft tone, “we still have communities in this system who denounce you as a false pope, when you’ve never claimed any religious authority. We humans seem bent on finding ways to separate ourselves from one another.”

Aguirre blinked at that, as did several others, mostly because Yeoh rarely offered existential

commentary. She usually concerned herself with empirical matters—as did the president. “So what do we expect?” he asked, turning his attention back to Kiribati. “If they start up a fight over Scheherazade, doesn’t the whole kingdom wind up in a civil war?”

“It seems likely, sir,” said Kiribati. “That may not happen right away, but in the meantime a ground war will break out on Scheherazade. Most of the serious combat spacecraft are on the other side of the kingdom facing off over the shipyards. When this gets rolling, we’ll see an initial rush to secure strategic assets on the ground. Government installations, the ground-side spaceports, infrastructure.

“And it’ll be ugly,” he added. “Part of the reason we know about this movement is that we were able to identify particular officers in Murtada’s forces. A lot of them were involved in the initial massacres on Qal’at Khalil after the pirate attack there. Murtada has a thing for strong-arm tactics.”

“What are the other parties doing about this?”

“Union Assembly diplomats are making the usual overtures, but they’re toothless. Lai Wa seems content to let NorthStar take the lead in Hashem; we think there’s probably a *quid pro quo* arrangement there in exchange for concessions elsewhere in the Union. NorthStar has offered up intelligence and planning aid. They may even provide some of the heavy lifting to transport Murtada troops. It’s also possible they plan on providing manpower later to help stabilize the situation under a peacekeeping contract. We’ve got reports that they’ve increased training and simulations for occupation ops.”

“And what are we doing?”

Kiribati glanced at Yeoh before answering. “We’re moving in assets for evacuation. We have an Archangel Navy corvette in the system and a covert vessel under an Independent Shipping Guild registry should be there the day after tomorrow.”

“Is that enough to evacuate our people? We’ve got a full consulate staff there, right? Some civilian business operations?”

“Yes, sir,” Kiribati nodded. “The covert vessel should be able to handle the load.”

Admiral Yeoh spoke up. “It wouldn’t hurt to have more in the way of military assets present, sir. Right now Prince Kaseem accepts his father’s instructions to allow foreign naval traffic, probably because it complicates Murtada’s plans. If and when Prince Murtada attacks, he’ll order all foreign vessels out of the system. That will naturally leave foreigners in the middle of a war zone until Murtada decides to let them go, and no one can say how long that might take. We need to be able to get in and get our people out as soon as the shooting starts—if not sooner,” she suggested pointedly.

“It’s complicated either way,” Theresa said with a shake of her head. “If we wait too long, we put our people in jeopardy. However, if we pull out based on these suspicions, we could damage our relationships and maybe be blamed for creating a crisis atmosphere—especially if the king or Prince Khalil has some sort of diplomatic work going on to settle things down.”

“More importantly, we risk tipping our hand if we move in too soon,” frowned Kiribati. “Keeping one or two ships in the area seems like a reasonable precaution. If we evacuate preemptively, we’ll give the impression that we know too much, which will jeopardize our sources.”

“I understand,” Aguirre said, holding up his hand. “Admiral, we can’t pull out now. I know it’s tough, but we have to wait and see how this unfolds.”

“Then as I said, sir, more overt military assets would help in the event of violence,” Yeoh replied.

Aguirre glanced toward Kiribati, who nodded. “We can’t send in a large force,” Kiribati warned, “but even adding one more Navy ship to the mix is a definite improvement.”

“I don’t see a drawback either, sir,” Theresa concurred. “We have every legal right to extract our citizens if fighting breaks out.”

“All right, fair enough,” nodded Aguirre. “Admiral, go ahead and move some more people in, but

don't send anything big. We want to get *un-involved*, not sucked deeper into our neighbors' mess." He stared at the holographic star system and snorted. "NorthStar's planning to put people on the ground stabilize all this?"

"I think so, sir," Kiribati replied. "And frankly, the more deeply they're involved in someone else's civil war, the better off we are. It'll take their attention off of us."

"I'm afraid I must disagree, sir," said Admiral Yeoh. Again, eyes turned toward her.

"You heard what David said about them training for an occupation?" asked the president.

"Yes, sir. I've seen the reports."

"You don't think they're doing that to get ready for this?"

"No, sir," maintained the admiral calmly. "I don't believe that it's the Kingdom of Hashem they plan to occupy, sir."

She didn't say the rest. It would have sounded alarmist. Her warning carried more weight if it went unsaid.

"That sounds like a topic for another meeting," noted Victor Hickman, the president's chief of staff. He looked at the time on his holocom.

Aguirre took the hint. "Right. We're late for the next one. I've got a line of CEOs outside the office waiting to see me. It's one thing to alienate the Big Three, but I don't want to leave our homegrown companies feeling snubbed, too. Was there any other urgent business?"

"No, sir," answered Kiribati, Yeoh and the other officials simultaneously.

"Thank you, ladies and gentlemen," said the president. Everyone else stood as he rose. The meeting promptly broke up.

Yeoh ducked out of the conference room before Kiribati and his people. She dismissed her aides outside the office and then waited. Standing with her hands clasped behind her back just outside the door, Yeoh caught Kiribati's eye as he walked out with a couple of aides in tow. "David. A word?"

He nodded to his companions to send them on their way, then moved a few steps down the hallway with her. "What's on your mind, Admiral?"

She noticed the change in his tone. He knew he was free to use her first name. Aguirre tried to maintain a collegial atmosphere among his top advisors, but Kiribati's walls were up. She knew then that she would get nowhere, but she might as well ask and watch his reaction. "I had some questions about the operation on Edison. A few points were not covered in the briefing documents."

"Such as?"

"The initial insertion," Yeoh said, looking at him directly. The poker face Kiribati presented fit her expectations. "You listed a vessel under a 'covert private registry' out of New Corsica, but no other details. I'm aware that it was a large ship, perhaps a converted passenger liner?"

"More or less."

"Is it an Archangel asset, or some external resource?"

"It's one of ours. I wouldn't outsource something like this. What are you getting at, Admiral?"

Yeoh didn't blink, but the man's attitude raised her concerns. "The Intelligence Service has always had vessels of its own, but something of that size surprises me. Mr. Kiribati, who is the captain of that ship?"

"As I said, it's one of ours. I'm afraid the details are on a need-to-know basis."

"You don't believe I have a need to know about a combat-ready ship of that size operating in tandem with our military?"

"Admiral, all I can tell you is that the president has been fully briefed, and you do not have a need to know. I'll thank you for leaving the matter alone." With that, he turned and left.

Yeoh watched him walk away with thoughtful, narrowed eyes. She'd expected polite lies, not stonewalling. She'd smelled something fishy when Kiribati first proposed the operation—lacking

pertinent details then just as now. Given the value of the mission, she'd agreed to provide a strike team, but her concerns remained. She was unable to relay her suspicions to those marines and still expect the operation to go smoothly. She had, however, made sure to fill the team with smart, observant people who'd think for themselves. They reported back to her that the insertion vessel was most certainly not just an ordinary passenger liner.

Unfortunately, none of them got the full tour during their brief time on board. They didn't get to meet the captain, either, which increased Yeoh's concerns. Archangel held only so many people qualified to run a ship of that size and complexity who could also be trusted for dangerous and cover ops. Yeoh could account for all of them—those on active duty, the retirees and those in the private sector. As Kiribati had said, it wasn't like him to outsource such a matter, so he wouldn't have hired someone from beyond Archangel... would he?

Given the impending problems on Scheherazade, it seemed likely that the ship would be in play again soon. Once the shooting started, the ships' captains on scene would have to take charge and make decisions on behalf of all Archangel... and Yeoh had no sense at all of who commanded the largest ship.

Yeoh headed out toward the elevators. The admiral quickly dismissed the idea of approaching President Aguirre directly on the matter. Kiribati's bonds with the President ran deeper than those of a career military officer who'd been in place well before Aguirre was elected.

She couldn't let this go, but she couldn't make noise about it, either. Military intelligence would likely be too unreliable here; the bonds between that division and Kiribati's Intelligence Service were too widespread. Someone, perhaps even a well-meaning subordinate, would inevitably tip her hand.

Her current approach had gotten her this far. Yeoh could probably get further on simple passive research. Still, her ploy on this last operation had borne some fruit. She'd put good people in the field and trusted in their abilities, and they had delivered. Her mind began considering other personnel who might be good to put into play. It wasn't long before she decided which ship she would send, based largely on its captain. Concerns about her staff also came to mind.

Stepping out of the elevator, Yeoh walked into the upper lobby overlooking the grand entrance to Ascension Hall. Below, tourists filed past the original oversized paper copies of Archangel's colonial charters. Two marines in full dress regalia stood guard beside them.

The sight triggered an idle thought. She walked to a navy crewman posted at the top of the stairs, also in dress uniform. His posture stiffened just a bit and he saluted sharply for the head of Archangel's military. "Crewman Jones," she said, reading his nametag as she returned his salute, "I'm looking for another member of the honor guard. Do you have today's duty roster on your holocom?"

"Yes, ma'am," he said. Technically, he did not break the stance of attention—he looked straight ahead, remained stiff and didn't turn his chin, but something in his expression lightened as if to affect a grin. "But I imagine I can tell you where to find who you're looking for off the top of my head."

* * *

Nothing surprised him more than the frequency of one question: "Hey, would you mind if I took a picture with you?"

He'd gotten it from celebrities, ambassadors, wealthy political donors to the president and politicians in offices high and low. Six months ago, the most sought-after personalized souvenir of any visit to Ascension Hall was a picture of oneself standing alongside the president. While everyone still wanted that picture, they now also wanted their picture taken with Tanner Malone.

His fifteen minutes of fame seemed mostly over. He didn't hear his name on the news anymore, nor were there requests for interviews. Talk of film adaptations of his experiences died off. He'd

expected to fade back into obscurity. Yet there was still this.

~~At times, he was flattered, even excited. At other times, less so. He didn't agree with the politics or practices of everyone who came through the palace doors. Yet as a member of the honor guard, he had a responsibility to be respectful, politically neutral—politically mute, to be more accurate—and exceedingly, unfailingly polite.~~

As such, he didn't feel he had much of an option to decline.

Tanner answered the request before him as he always did: he smiled, stepped around from the desk to stand with the petitioner and said, "My only condition is that I get a copy, sir." He shook the man's extended hand. Tanner wore his dress uniform, with medals and badges and well-polished sidearm just as regulation required for duty at Ascension Hall. The man who stood beside him with a well-practiced smile and perfectly groomed goatee wore a business suit that cost at least three months of Tanner's base salary.

"I'm Jonathan Hartmann," said the gentleman, "though I guess you might've already heard that," he added, gesturing toward the civilian receptionist.

"Yes, sir," Tanner replied with a friendly nod. "Briarwood Capital is the largest independent investment firm in the system."

Hartmann seemed gratified by that. "It's always nice to be recognized, isn't it?"

Tanner kept his mouth shut. He made a habit of looking up every individual scheduled on the guest book upon arriving at his post. People who entered Ascension Hall through this checkpoint tended not to be ordinary, anonymous citizens. They also enjoyed being recognized.

The man's aide pulled her holocom from its earring mount, activated it and took a few steps around the pair to get a solid frontal-arc image. Few people went for the full three-sixty recording. Soon, Tanner instructed his wrist-mounted holocom to receive a tap-transfer and touched it against his slick, state-of-the-art device.

"That's a nice piece," Tanner said idly as the holocoms executed the file transfer.

"Thanks," she smiled at him, and then tilted her head curiously. "Hey, you're wearing an earring. I thought servicemen weren't allowed to wear those?"

"Old naval tradition, ma'am," Tanner explained. He hadn't meant to draw any attention to the humble gold bead in his left earlobe. "Sailors who survived a wrecked or sunken ship were entitled to wear one." He gave a little wink. "I'm pretty sure it's more myth than tradition, but if it lets me get away with pushing the uniform boundaries, I'll take it."

"I had a couple of friends on the *Pride of Polaris*," said Hartmann, his glowing and genetically perfect smile still on display. "I heard the whole story from their perspective, so I've wanted to shake your hand ever since."

"Thank you, sir," Tanner replied. "Pleasure to meet you."

"Mr. Hartmann," spoke up one of the civilian staffers, "I'll show you in. Right this way."

Tanner walked back around the desk. Predictably, with Hartmann out of earshot, the needling from the woman who ran the reception desk began. "Sooner or later, one of these people will just come straight out and ask if they can adopt you."

"They're not that interested in me, Beth."

"Oh, please. 'Oooh, you're Tanner Malone! Can I have your picture? Will you sign my briefcase? Are you doing anything later?'" she mimicked.

Tanner rolled his eyes. "I have never once been asked out while on duty—"

"That you actually noticed," Beth smirked, "but you are a little dense."

"—and who actually uses briefcases anymore?"

"I've seen a few. Besides, it's either that or sign a napkin. Or someone's breast, but you'd probably get in trouble for doing that here." She paused. "You've never been asked out while on the

job? Some people might presume you and Andrea Bennet are still seeing each other, but it's not like that ever stopped anyone in this town."

He bit down on his first response. Beth was just teasing him, and he knew it. He also knew her last comment was a marginally subtle probe. He didn't feel like opening that line of discussion. "They're not actually interested in me. They just want the picture."

"You don't think people want their picture next to you because they're interested in you?"

"I think they want the picture so they can show it off to create a certain impression." Tanner jerked his thumb in the direction Hartmann had taken. "It lets big, important people like him show that he associates with ordinary, everyday people like me."

Beth frowned at him. "You aren't ordinary people, Tanner."

"Yes, I am. There are hours and hours of media stories to tell you so."

"You don't think that proves my point?"

"I think it proves that not everyone understands the concept of irony," he quipped.

Rather than let him get away with that by laughing, Beth smacked him on the shoulder. Tanner accepted it without complaint. "Still. That's a pretty cynical view of things, isn't it?"

"How long have you worked in Ascension Hall?" Tanner asked. "You haven't gotten cynical yet?"

"Oh, I'm plenty cynical," she shrugged, "but you've only been here a few months. I figured it'd take at least a year or two for a kid like you to get that way." Beth looked at him thoughtfully. "You've never been asked out?"

"Not the way you're suggesting, no. Have I been asked out? Sure. Have women dropped hints? Sure. But nobody just walks up to me while I'm here in my shiny dress uniform and—"

Tanner always kept his eyes on the hallways. His job mostly involved simple crowd control, courtesy greetings and a certain amount of pageantry. Dress uniforms were part of the spectacle of the palace. But neither he nor his sidearm were purely for show; he was also a part of the building's security force, and as such he kept his eyes and ears open at all times.

He saw the admiral coming well before she was within conversational range, but popped to attention the instant she appeared. Unperturbed, Beth merely turned her eyes back to her computer displays.

"Crewman Malone," said Admiral Yeoh, "how are you?"

"Fine, ma'am. Thank you for asking, ma'am."

The corners of Yeoh's mouth cracked in just the slightest show of amusement. "I wondered if you might join me for some coffee."

"Yes, ma'am. Soon as I can get relief here, ma'am." He wasn't due to have a break for another hour, but this was Admiral Yeoh. Every officer in the guard would tell him that his break would happen whenever the admiral damn well pleased.

"Excellent. I'll see you in the south dining room."

"Yes, ma'am."

With that, Admiral Yeoh turned and headed back down the hall. Tanner relaxed his posture. He glanced at Beth and then grimaced at her amused expression. "Don't," he warned in vain.

"Don't what? I was just gonna say she's still rather pretty, especially given her age. You like that don't you, Tanner? Pretty, powerful and much, much older than you?"

Tanner let out a loud, grumbling sigh. He tapped his holocom to call his watch commander.

Beth didn't bother to restrain her teasing. "So, I want to know: is it the feeling of conquest that draws you to women like that? Or are you only interested in women who can conquer you?"

"That's exactly it," Tanner replied. "That's why I have erotic dreams every night about Gunnery Sergeant Janeka from basic training."

"Wait, you have dreams about *what*?" asked the voice of the watch commander on his holocom.

“So, what are your thoughts on choosing a rating?” Yeoh’s eyes stayed on him as she sipped her cup of coffee. A handful of the other tables also hosted people in dress uniform—all of them officers except Tanner—but by a wide majority, occupants of the south wing dining room wore civilian business wear.

“I’m sorry, ma’am?” Tanner had yet to touch the drink on the table in front of him. He sat up straight with his hands on his lap.

“Tanner, it’s one thing to observe military etiquette, but you don’t have to call me ma’am with every sentence,” she smiled. “This isn’t the first time we’ve met. Or even the third. Relax.”

His lips tensed for a second as he processed his reactions, but he nodded. “Yes, ma’am,” he exhaled, and then grinned a bit at himself. “Meeting with you still isn’t something I would expect to happen on a random Tuesday.”

“No, but you interact with plenty of other VIPs and dignitaries here on a daily basis. You are not so tongue-tied with them. I’ve seen you be perfectly friendly and laugh in such company. Some people come to that sort of grace naturally. Others have to learn it. I think you’re more of the latter, but you’re quick. I only adapted gradually as I climbed through the ranks. What’s your secret?”

“I’ve learned not to put people up on pedestals.”

Yeoh gave the slightest of nods. “Andrea?” She waited for an answer, but heard none and couldn’t blame him. “This is the point at which a lowly crewman can tell the head of the military that something is none of her damn business, Tanner. But I suspect you don’t have many people you feel comfortable talking to about it. For what it’s worth, I’m not judging.”

“Yeah, that’d make you about the only person in this town. Ma’am,” he added gratefully.

“Politics makes for a rough game. Andrea is very good at it, but even she takes hits. You might consider that she thought you’re worth taking a few.”

“It’s not just about politics,” Tanner replied, shaking his head. “At least, not that kind. I appreciate your offer, but I’m not sure this is a good time and place to get into it. But thank you.”

“Then back to my question: you must have given thought to choosing a rating. You’re twenty-two months in. By now you could be in a rating school... but you aren’t.”

“I wanted to do a tour here at Ascension Hall, ma’am.”

“And after what you went through and what you accomplished, you had your choice of billets,” Yeoh nodded. “You could have named your duty station. You chose to stay here and open doors for people coming to meet the president.”

“People work pretty hard to get this post, ma’am,” Tanner pointed out.

“Most of them aren’t trying to hide in plain sight,” she countered gently.

Tanner blinked. The heavy, unsettling sensation he’d felt in his stomach from the moment Admiral Yeoh asked if he wanted to grab a coffee break with her intensified. “Ma’am?”

“I don’t actually know what ratings might appeal to you, but if I made some educated guesses, they would all require a full year of time in a starship billet. You have nine months.” She paused, watching his reactions. “That sort of detail wouldn’t slip by you. At first, I thought you requested this duty to be close to Andrea. But after I gave it some serious thought—the kind of thought you would give it—I believe you knew the odds of that relationship going the distance. From the start, I’d imagine. And yet you still requested duty with the capital honor guard.

“As I said, any duty in the service would’ve been open. No one was going to break any rules for you. It wouldn’t have looked good. But if you’d needed to fulfill some prerequisite or qualification, plenty of people would’ve made that happen. I think you knew that when you requested this

assignment over all the other options.

“You’re hiding out, Tanner. You’re hoping to go unnoticed.”

“I like this assignment, ma’am.”

“Oh? Tell me why.”

The answers came to him with agonizing sluggishness. “I’ve got a regular schedule here, ma’am. The capital’s a great city. I can take—I have taken classes here. I get weekends off. I get along with my roommates in the barracks. And I’ve learned a lot just by being here, about how the government actually works, about things most people only read about in news articles, and...”

His voice faltered under her skeptical gaze. She ran her finger across her holocom to activate its display, projected a small file and turned it toward him. Tanner saw a record of his military passcard use. Every visit to a military or affiliated facility spread out before him. “Two visits a week to the tactical shooting range at Fort Bentley,” Yeoh noted. “Twelve hours every week at the gym at the Joint Capital Security Services complex, including their hand-to-hand classes and their urban obstacle course. You completed the two-week wilderness survival course at Camp Horizon and a refresher course in advanced first aid. The only remotely academic course you’ve taken is Introductory Arabic

“...you’ve been checking up on me that closely?”

“I’m the head of the military, Tanner. Your training records are only under the lowest privacy classifications. I looked them up while waiting for you to join me.” She tilted her head. “And while the honor guard looks pretty and performs ceremonies, I know the training this post involves. You aren’t here just for show. But to add all of that extracurricular activity on top of the day job? That’s a awful lot of active training for someone who’s happy to spend the rest of his enlistment on a safe and stable groundside billet.”

Tanner wasn’t sure what to say. He felt himself being backed into a corner. This conversation felt more and more like a chess match that he was bound to lose. “I had a long talk with my psychiatrist about whether or not this was paranoid behavior, ma’am.”

“And what did your psychiatrist say?”

“He said it was fine if it left me feeling more empowered and less vulnerable. And as long as I was ready to question myself on it, I shouldn’t worry too much.” Tanner paused. “I’m not sure he’s such a good psychiatrist, to be honest.”

“Is that why you’re going to all this effort?” she asked, indicating the training record. “Paranoid behavior? Empowerment?”

“No, ma’am.”

“Then why?”

He couldn’t meet her eyes at first. Tanner looked around at the people in fine, formal business wear in the ornate but comfortable dining room. The setting felt peaceful. Everyone seemed to be at ease, or at least perfectly accustomed to a high-pace, high-stress lifestyle. Tanner could name more than a few of them off the top of his head, and identify what made them important enough to be at Ascension Hall.

He read the guest book every day. He knew who was here, and he could easily guess why.

“They’re coming for us, aren’t they, ma’am?”

“Who?”

“NorthStar. Lai Wa. CDC. Maybe with friends.” His eyes came back to hers. “We’re not trying for any reconciliation. I’ve seen the president’s speeches. He’s not dialing anything back. The Navy is at its maximum fleet size—beyond it, depending on how you count—but we’re still recruiting like it’s going out of style. The incentives keep getting better.

“We’re moving further and further away from the corporations while they’re preoccupied with the mess in Hashem, but when that’s over, they’re gonna come after us. It’s not going to stop at punitive

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