

Ferrik Dominion

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Chapter 1

Fringe Space - Ovan Tertiary - Hab Block 4 - Uncomfortable corner - Quentin Kallard Tachryn

Kal could see the bounty's heat signature two rooms away. Thanks to Qane's modifications, his neural chip had been able to access the heat cameras in hab block 4, and was overlaying the information onto his vision.

Just behind the red and yellow heat marker was a blue one. Friend. Drake was giving chase, driving the bounty toward the trap.

Kal used his neural interface to pull up the contract they'd taken out, and checked the status. "Alive". Good. No one needed to get hurt.

He closed the contract down and squeezed himself tighter into the corner he'd chosen as his hiding spot, the small cargo boxes huddled around him.

A door slammed open as the heat signature burst into the room next to his. Kal knew there was no other way out of that room, they'd barred the windows, and the floor and ceiling would

require heavy explosives to breach. The bounty *had* to run into the trap, and if he did it with the same force that he'd used to open that door, then this would be the easiest bounty yet.

Kal flinched as the unmistakable sound of a gunshot rang out from the next room. The heat signature started moving away from Kal. And away from Drake.

Drake's blue outline reached the room of the gunshot, and his voice came into Kal's neural comms. 'Window!'

That bounty must have had one hell of a gun to clear those windows! Kal reacted immediately by letting his instincts throw him over the cargo boxes, and ran for the other door, leading away from where the bounty escaped.

The door flew open as Kal burst outside and gave chase, the loud metallic clanging of the deck making it obvious for the bounty that they were still after him. Kal threw back his long-coat and pulled his las-pistol out of its holster, ready to take the shot.

The red blip had rounded a corner and was waiting there. Catching his breath no doubt, he'd been sprinting for far longer than he should have been able to. Probably drugs.

Pistol outstretched and set to stun, Kal skidded round the corner ready for an easy to handle, out-of-breath bounty.

The metal bar slammed into the side of Kal's face, and he fell to the ground. He couldn't open his eyes, but could feel the blood streaming from his nose. The back of his head tingled with static as his neural chip rebooted after the heavy impact. He groaned, but forced one eye open.

The bounty loomed over him, holding a gun pointed at the ground. Kal quickly realised that there hadn't been a metal bar. It was just a House Phestus handcannon. An excellent blunt instrument that never failed - or your money back - as well as the kind of projectile weapon that explained how the guy took out those barred windows with a single shot. Kal didn't think that getting shot by it could possibly hurt more than running straight into it like he had, but he didn't really want to test that theory.

'Where's the other one?!' the bounty shouted, looking around frantically.

Kal mumbled a few words before realising he wasn't saying anything recognisable. He tried again. 'I'd tell you, but something tells me that you'll shoot me once I do.'

'I'll shoot you right now if you don't tell me!'

His gun was still pointed at the floor. It may have been a single handed gun, but it was so solidly built that a normal human couldn't keep it trained on a target for long without assistance.

'I'll be honest with you,' Kal said. 'I can barely even see *you*, let alone the other guy. It's your own fault.'

Finally the chip finished rebooting, and Drake's voice came over it. 'Damn it, kid. Keep him busy but don't piss him off! Gonna get yourself shot.'

How sweet, Kal thought to himself. The old man cared way too much for a veteran bounty hunter.

The visual overlay came online, and for a split second Kal's eyes were flooded with light before the chip loaded up his preferences. He liked to keep things as uncluttered as possible. He didn't need a constant heads-up display about which particular alloy composition the floors and walls around him were likely comprised of, or the make, model, and pin of every weapon he saw. With his vision returned to normal, there was just a faded blue "6" hanging in the hab's skybox.

The bounty shrugged off Kal's complaints of not being able to see. 'You shouldn't have been trying to kill me—'

Kal attempted to lift his las-pistol and wave it at the bounty, as he pointed out, 'It's set to stun. I don't kill. Besides, our contract specified we take you alive.' But it turned out that he'd dropped his pistol when he got hit, and was left just shaking a hand around.

'I don't give a Trok. Point a gun at my face, and you're trying to kill me!'

'In my defence, you clocked my chip before I could do that—'

'Your partner sure as void did!'

Kal made a cutting motion across his neck. 'It's possible we're getting slightly off track here. Look, we just want to bring you in and make enough money to keep our ship in space, and food in our bellies. We picked your contract because it said that you were on the list, not because you're a criminal, but because they wanted to help you. We're practically on a humanitarian mission here!'

With shaking hands, the bounty raised the handcannon as if to hit Kal again. Kal flinched away. 'All right, all right, just saying...'

'Look, I don't want to kill you, but I don't want their "help". So tell me where this other guy is, I'll tie you up, and we're all good.' He nodded meaningfully at the handcannon. 'Otherwise...'

Kal slowly hauled himself up to his knees. 'All right. I'm tracking him, he's right...'. Kal looked around theatrically before spinning back to face the bounty. 'Behind you!'

Kal flung himself to the side to avoid a stray shot if the bounty decided to get trigger happy. Sure enough the man spun to check behind him, realised no one was there, and opened fire. The handcannon ripped a hole in the floor where Kal had been, sending shrapnel ricocheting

through the confined alley. Kal felt a chunk rip through his long-coat as it lagged behind. He braced his feet beneath him, and threw himself at the bounty.

There was just enough time to close his eyes, brace himself, and think, "That void forsaken weapon!" Then it hit him in the face again. The bounty shifted to the side, and Kal ended up slamming face first into the metal wall.

When he came back round, the back of his head tingling with static again as his chip tried to reboot itself *again*, he felt a painfully warm piece of metal held to the back of his head, joining the static. His one good eye opened, but all he could see was the dull metal of a hab block floor and its associated gloom.

'Void take you!' the bounty spat.

A gunshot rang out in the silence of the artificial night. A second gunshot sprayed hot metal from the deck into Kal's face. Kal's brain thought he was definitely dead, but his body had no hesitation as it instinctively threw itself to the side, away from the burning pain.

He heard the carefully paced clinks of Drake's boots on the hab floor. 'Void, kid. What did I tell you?'

Kal rolled his head to the side. The bounty lay next to him. Half of his head was missing. The chip finally booted back up. As information flooded his eyes once more, he picked out the most useless of it - a small note next to the bounty's name. "*Deceased*". Kal rolled his head to the other side to see Drake stood over him.

Tall, dark skinned, dressed all in black. It was only his grey hair that made him noticeable against the darkness around him. Another note annotated itself next to his head, and when Kal focused on it, the chip brought it into the foreground. "*Drake Farland. Friend.*"

Kal would have to downgrade that.

'What in the Dominion's giant spheres were you thinking?' Kal said. 'Why'd you kill him?!'

Drake rolled his eyes. 'Total mystery, who knows?'

'We needed him alive! And I've told you, no killing!'

Drake reached out to help Kal up, but Kal slapped his hand away.

'Oh come on, kid. Not this again. He was going to blow your damn head off. He almost did.' His voice was calm as always. Kal hated that Drake could kill and not care. 'Look through my feed, your face is half missing. You'll be needing the rest of our med supplies to come close to looking normal again, that's for sure.'

Kal struggled to get into an upright position, leaning against the hab wall. 'I don't need to see it, I can feel it. And we'll buy more medi-bots, don't worry. From now on, we stick to smuggling. Captain's orders.'

Drake crossed his arms and gave Kal a look that said he wasn't budging. In Kal's Heads Up Display he could see the invitation to Drake's feed. He sighed and accepted. Half of his vision was taken up by Drake's view.

'Well throw a Trok in a void beacon, and you've got how messed up I look.' Kal could see himself sitting on the floor, legs splayed out before him. It must have been more than a single piece of metal flooring that had torn through his coat, as it was half in tatters. And his face...

'You can say that again. Oh, and you're welcome, by the way,' Drake said.

Kal winced as he saw himself. Gone were his sleek face and high cheekbones, his brown eyes and long hair, his carefully maintained stubble - the last vestiges of the nobility that he tried to hide. Turned out that a gun to the face fixed that. It was hard to see through the soot marks and blood all over his face, but the entire right side was flecked with metal shards.

'Right. Thank you.'

'No need to mention it, Captain.' He shut off the feed, kicking Kal back into his own eyes. Drake offered his hand again. 'And we're still taking bounties. We need the creds.'

Kal took the hand, and for the sake of his pride pretended not to notice how much Drake had to muscle him into a standing position. 'We'll talk about the bounties later. Shockingly, I'm not feeling up to an argument right at this moment.'

Drake pulled out a small capsule and twisted the top and bottom apart.

Kal held up his hand. 'Wait, wait. I don't need it. We don't have the creds.'

'I've seen dead people that need this less than you. Put your arms down. Stay still.'

As Drake kneeled next to him, Kal said, 'That's because they're dead. The dead don't get much benefit.'

'Shut up.'

The medi-gel from the capsule dripped onto Kal's face, and he could feel it expanding to fill all of his pores, nooks and crannies, and then his nose. Once it stopped and solidified, he peeled the gel over his nose off. It may have been attracted to damaged tissue, but he prioritised breathing over healing.

'And stop your sulking. We'll make enough to buy more. Saving your pretty boy looks is more important. Without those, you got nothing.'

'You're a real comfort. It's just a shame I couldn't have done the same for your huge facial disfigurement. Oh wait, no, that's just how you were born.'

Drake chuckled and then said via his chip comm, 'Come on over.'

Kal looked around and saw the second blue blip in the distance. Valco. The only Praltus on the crew, the alien had proven extremely useful in the three months since he came onboard along with Qane as his bodyguard. It had made Zara nervous at first - with two people to act as the ship's muscle, she thought she'd be out of the job. No human could compete with a Praltus mercenary. But they'd made it work so far. Mainly because she was barely conscious enough to start a fight with him.

'You know what you remind me of?' Drake asked.

Kal shook his head limply.

'A fried Slithol's clutch.'

'Void. That's a bit dark. I dread to ask why you know what that looks like.'

'Sil and Taz, long time ago, messy accident.'

Kal chuckled. Or tried to, but it was kind of hard with half his face on the verge of being officially "missing". 'Please never tell me that story.' He looked around to see the blue outline of the Praltus closing in on them rapidly. 'We should take that gun. It'll sell.'

'Oh sure. Anything Phestus will sell,' Drake agreed. 'You got a nice close up of it though, so I'll take your word for it.'

'Oh yeah. Great craftsmanship as you'd expect. Pretty sure they made the entire thing from a solid block of lead. Very sturdy'

'Reliable, too.'

'Sure. If I had to guess, I'd say that you could smack a guy in the face at least twice, and still have it fire no problems.'

'Quite the recommendation. Maybe you should use it yourself?'

That jogged Kal's memory. 'Hey, pass me my gun. Don't want to forget that.'

'Finally decide that losing it the first two times was enough? Don't want to try again?'

'How very droll of you. Just lean me here against the wall. I probably won't fall.'

Drake unhooked himself from holding Kal, and picked the las-pistol up. He looked it over before handing it back. 'Sure you don't want to switch this to Eliminate sometime soon?'

'Neutralise is a great setting, thank you very much.'

Before the old argument could start up again, a loud thwump of flesh hitting metal crashed next to them. The shadowy form was crouched from its landing, but drew itself up quickly. It

stayed hunched over, relaxed. Like most Praltus, it had mottled brown, grey, and black skin stretched over its avian frame. Its short, stubby beak snapped open and shut a few times. A series of low screeches and chirps came from its vocal cords. The translator box around its throat lit up to indicate its wearer was the one talking.

Through his chip, Kal could hear the translation. The standard Praltus greeting about “good hunting, prey, heights, trees” etc. In fact, it was literally that. The Praltus weren’t much for flowery words.

‘Could have used you about two minutes earlier, Volco,’ Kal mumbled through his numb lips. ‘We’ll have to talk to Qane about letting you get your beak dirty, hey?’

‘Yes.’

‘I’m sure that’ll go great,’ Kal said. ‘Volco, would you mind doing the honours, you strapping young Praltus, you?’

Volco tilted his head quizzically.

‘Stop trying to be funny. You know you can’t talk to him that way if you want to get anything done,’ Drake said. ‘Volco, pick up the body.’

Volco moved forward, each limb moving further than Kal expected, reminding him that Praltus liked to hide their real size. It was some predator, showing off thing. He’d never spoken to one before Volco joined the crew. Sure, he’d seen them around before he’d... apprehended his current ship, but they weren’t common in House Tachryn’s line of work. Not that House Tachryn didn’t need all the bodyguards they could get, but Praltus were only mercenaries. So if the Dominion fleet decided to do a spot check, and you had a crew full of Praltus...

‘Kal!’ Drake shouted.

Kal lifted his head up and tried to focus on the blurry figures in front of him. ‘Sorry, I started drifting off. Head wounds, huh?’

Drake shook his head. ‘Let’s get you back to the ship before we hand this in. Before any permanent damage sets in. Who knew that all it would take to get through your thick skull was a handcannon.’

Kal waved Drake away, and pushed himself up off the hab wall. He stumbled around for a bit as his legs remembered how they were supposed to work. ‘See, I’m fine. Let’s turn it in. If they’ll even accept *this*.’ Kal looked at the body. The head was hanging at an unnatural angle. Probably because the bounty was exceptionally dead.

‘You don’t ask, you don’t get,’ Drake said, shrugging.

‘But there are limits.’

‘Good for a man to know his limits. Let’s go find them.’

Kal tuned inwards to his neural interface, and pulled up the path to the nearest bounty office, glad that he didn’t have to remember - he wasn’t sure he’d be able to. They were common enough in places like this where the Dominion wasn’t around to enforce order and people needed money. The knowledge that someone with nothing to live for would be hunting you down was a great motivator. No need for the Dominion. It just kind of worked itself out.

Once he’d selected the route for maximum privacy, the usual green arrows overlaid themselves onto hab walls and floors telling him where to go and how long it would take. With a sigh of relief that the walk should take them no more than ten minutes, Kal motioned to Volco to bring the dead body, and set off to lead the three of them to the main street.

After a few near misses with the ground, Kal got the hang of things. They walked in silence for a bit, partly because talking when your face was a third degree burn and embedded with more metal than seems polite was rather tricky, but also because Kal was still focusing on the fact that the bounty had died because of him. He may as well have pulled the trigger himself. Running round the corner like that. *What was I thinking?!* he chided himself.

But it was the constant reminder that was really grating on him. He turned to look at the weight over Volco’s shoulder. But it wasn’t over his shoulder like Kal had assumed. He was dragging it.

‘Void forsaken spire riot, pick him up!’ Kal snapped.

Volco stopped and looked at the body. Kal was more focused on the trail of blood they’d left behind them.

Volco shrugged, hauled the bounty up on to his shoulders, and they all kept walking.

As they neared the bounty office, they found themselves walking through the main street for hab block 6. Neon flashing lights with arrows invited them into everything from weapons stores and bars, to House recruitment centres. The Dominion didn’t recruit from places like this. Maybe from the capital of a world this far out, but not in this backwater here. The Houses however, were always looking to expand. If Kal remembered correctly, they were just on the edges of House Xeride’s territory. His memory was questionable right then though, as his chip flickered in and out. The visual overlay flashed off for a few seconds, all of the lights disappeared, no longer being projected into his chip’s augmented HUD. He knocked the chip that ran from behind his right ear to the top of his spine. It booted up again.

Drake had stopped walking. They must have arrived.

‘You got this, kid.’

‘Really? Looking like this? I guess I’m going to play the intimidation card instead of trying to sweet talk whoever’s in there.’

‘Play to your strengths.’ Drake shrugged and pointed to Kal’s face ‘And no pressure, but we need this for... that.’

Kal sighed. He looked at the tattered ruin of his long-coat. He was about to complain, but thought better of it. He hadn’t run away from his House just to fall into old habits like complaining about tailoring issues. He stepped forward and pulled on the door.

Then he pushed the door and it opened.

‘Great start, kid,’ he heard Drake laugh from behind as he followed him in. The awkward lope of Volco’s talons was unmistakable as he joined them. Didn’t even have to be told. He was getting better.

The inside was brightly lit compared to the night cycle outside. The room was more of the same boring, drab metal that the rest of the hab was made of. A panel of different coloured metal was built into one wall, and when Kal looked at it, all available contracts displayed for him to cycle through. He ignored them. A door at the back of the room led to something that Kal hoped was more interesting than this box room. A desk was in front of the door, with a Slithol sat behind it. The Slithol was prodding something mechanical. An engine maybe? Kal didn’t have the tech knowledge to know. The Slithol didn’t look up.

‘Got a bounty to turn—’ Kal began, but the Slithol held up a finger on one of its free hands, the other three still prodding industriously.

He looked back to Drake who was leaning against the rear wall looking as unconcerned as possible. Kal waited. They were at the mercy of this Slithol, so he had to play nice. Looking the Slithol over, he guessed it was male judging by the deep black at the end of its tail. He always had trouble telling Slithol apart, but since meeting Tazeel and Silaas on the ship, he’d at least learned male from female. The males were smaller than the females, and couldn’t control their colour shifting as well. This included the inability to match the tip of their tale to the rest of their bright green bodies.

After a minute, Kal decided he’d waited long enough and stepped forward to lean on the desk. ‘Hey. Turning in a bounty here.’

The Slithol croaked out a sigh, and slowly put down the tools it was holding. It looked over Kal, Drake, and Volco with its beady, lizard eyes. It’s high pitched, hissing voice squeaked out.

‘Where is it?’

Kal had to pause for a second. 'The dead guy.' He brought up the contract and sent it to the Slithol via his chip.

The Slithol looked over to the dead bounty and then back to Kal. He slowly blinked his inner eyelids, something that Kal now knew was voluntary. 'It says "Alive".'

Kal cleared his throat. 'There were some complications.'

'I can see.' The Slithol finally turned away from his tinkering and faced Kal squarely. 'I can't pay you.'

Kal stood upright and gestured to the bounty. 'Look, I'll be the first to admit there's some wear and tear, but we got him off the streets at least. There must be *something* you can give us?'

Drake coughed from behind him. *Right*, Kal thought, *Bargain with strength. Asking a question is not strength. Unless it's rhetorical and you're making a point.*

'It's missing half its face. The chip half. How am I supposed to ID it?'

'The old fashioned way. Fingerprints, DNA, all that good stuff.'

The Slithol leaned back in his chair and narrowed his eyes, resting two of his arms behind his head, and the other two on his hips. Not that Slithol had hips. 'Still, the contract says alive, and he's very dead.'

'Not just a little dead?' Kal smirked.

'Not just a little dead.'

'Look at us,' Kal gestured to his face. 'Does it look like we don't know what we're doing?'

'If you did, maybe you wouldn't look like that, yeah.'

Kal heard Drake chuckle, but powered through. 'Funny. We all agree that the guy is no longer a threat. This was a Dominion contract, not private, so they didn't *really* need him alive. They'll just tick a box at whichever facility he was meant to turn up at, and *nobody at all* will care. We can then guess that because this bounty was effectively a number counting exercise for the Dominion, that the vitality of the bounty is irrelevant, and there will be a standard clause that will allow the bounty office to release funds for a semi complete contract. So...'

Kal allowed himself a self-satisfied smile. He'd known all that studying would pay off. Well, Drake knew. Kal just tolerated it. Barely.

The Slithol smiled, flicking its tongue out between its sharp teeth. 'The release of funds is actually an incentive to be given out *before* the contract if no one shows interest.'

Kal slowly threw back the good side of his long-coat, unholstered his las-pistol, and placed it carefully on the desk. 'I think you're missing the point.'

The Slithol lowered its arms, losing the grin on its face. 'Let's not do anything stupid.' He raised his hands placatingly. 'You don't fulfill the requirements. I can't give you creds.'

Kal picked the gun up a handspan and slammed it on the metal table making the Slithol jump and instantly start sweating. 'Why are you lying to me? Do I look like I won't leave you bleeding to death on the floor, you lizard-shit?'

Kal stood up, grabbing his pistol, but not aiming it at the terrified Slithol. With any other race, he'd have gotten closer, maybe smacked them around a bit. But not a Slithol. Their response to fear was to sweat profusely. A bit disgusting, sure, but it did two things. Fight or flight, it worked for both. Firstly, it was a strong lubricant, allowing them to escape from the tightest of grips. It also stopped their suction fingers from working so they couldn't climb anymore - evolution sucked for Slithol when they got scared climbing a cliff. On the flip side, their sweat was poisonous, and when combined with their weapon of choice being their teeth, that meant bad things for Kal. Also, the open wound that was his face was ripe for poisoning even without being attacked.

'Transfer the creds, we'll leave the bounty, and we all walk away,' Kal said. 'Do the smart thing. It's the Dominion. No one will notice, and even if they do, they won't care.'

Luckily for Kal, this guy didn't seem like much of a scrapper. He nodded shakily. 'Yeah. Yeah okay. I'll transfer the earmark.'

Kal saw the transfer of funds notification, and a small video that he couldn't stop played for a few seconds. He raised his one remaining good eyebrow and made a mental note.

'All right. See, we're all good here.' Kal smiled. He had meant it to be a relaxed, calming smile to defuse the tension, but from the way the Slithol shrunk back, his burned face must have made it horrifying.

He turned his back on the contract clerk and looked at Drake, who now held his gun at his side. Drake spoke just loud enough for Kal to hear. In this room that meant everyone could hear, and Kal wondered how long it would be before they upgraded chip tech to be able to send messages via thought instead of just being able to control basic HUD functions. 'I got Qane checking, and he didn't send out a distress call, but an enforcer patrol is in the area. Not close to get us on foot, but they'd catch up with the ship.'

Kal nodded and turned back around. The Slithol was backing up, pressing itself into a corner, naked fear in its eyes.

Kal raised his pistol and shot it. The small body spasmed and slumped to the floor.

'Didn't want to reassure him it was only on stun?' Drake asked.

'Oh, I thought about it,' Kal said. 'But ultimately it doesn't matter. He'll figure it out when he wakes up. No point keeping him in fear.'

Drake nodded approvingly. 'Volco, leave that body here.'

Volco shrugged the body off, and it hit the floor with the thump only a dead weight could make.

'One moment,' Kal said, and walked over to the Slithol. He raised his hand to check for a pulse but pulled back at the last second. He didn't dare to touch it, just in case some of the sweat got into his bloodstream, but once he saw the Slithol's chest rise and fall, he was satisfied. 'All right. Back to the ship.'

Chapter 2

Fringe Space - Ovan Tertiary - Hab Block 4 - Dock - Quentin Kallard Tachryn

'Your face always been like that? Looks fresh and shiny,' the dock guard said.

Kal had been nervous on the way back to the dock. Would the guard have some intuition that something was wrong and call the enforcers? Maybe the enforcers had already been called? But then Kal had seen the chubby guard, and he'd lost his concern. The man was crammed into a small booth, little more than a glorified ticket machine.

'Just a little bit of trouble with a bounty,' Kal's half face twisted into an obscene smile. The medi-gel had stopped the brunt of the pain, and the damaged tissue itself was numb. He could still feel the heat from the wound in the good half of his face, stretching down into his shoulder which he noticed he now couldn't hold up. He'd developed a limp.

'Yeah. I could have been a bounty hunter, you know? But the wife said no. Said there was too much risk.' The guard leaned forwards as if to speak conspiratorially to Kal. 'I still did a contract once though. Went behind her back.' The guard leaned back and then looked around as if his wife may have heard. Kal struggled to keep his eyes open at this fascinating regaling of the man's life. 'Still, didn't end up as bad as you. Maybe giving it up was a good thing.'

'That's an... a really... that's a story, I guess,' Kal said, then pointed to his face. 'Love to stay and chat, but the quicker I get to a medic the better, wouldn't you agree?'

The guard seemed placated after being allowed to tell part of his story, and tapped some keys on his holo-display. 'Clamp's released. Have a good night.' As Kal walked off, he could see the guard load up a book onto the display. It was the latest swashbuckling romance.

Kal limped slowly towards the Torpid Rebel. The crew never asked how he managed to own such a magnificent vessel - they knew better than to ask how someone that hired you to smuggle and hunt bounties had ended up owning anything. It wasn't the biggest or the fastest or the most heavily armed, but it was the finest the House Tachryn production lines had to offer. It blended the maneuverability of a luxury yacht, the cargo space of a traditional cargo hauler, and the fighter bays of a frigate. Kal knew every hide-hole and loose panel on the ship. He couldn't keep a smile off his face as he limped towards it. He ought to know it well, it had been built for him, finished on the day of his birth, twenty eight years ago.

And it had become truly his when he ran away from his House six months ago. He hadn't told the crew his last name, and he'd set his chip's ID settings to private, so they couldn't find out from a casual glance. Being a House noble on the run was working out well for him so far. The life suited him. He touched the side of his face and couldn't feel anything.

Kal could just make out Drake and Volco walking up the cargo ramp of the Torpid Rebel. He grumbled to himself. Maybe that wasn't Drake and Volco? It was a bit blurry on account of him having lost the vision in his left eye. He looked the ship over to make sure he could still see through the good eye. The sleek lines mixing with bulky practicality were there. The three flight points were just rotating their bays, bringing the fighter craft inside for take off. The House colours were still their usual bright and vibrant greens and whites. No sign of the emblem marking it as a personal vessel of a son of House Tachryn remained after the work he'd done to it, but he still checked to make sure it hadn't magically returned every time he saw the outside of the ship. Most cargo haulers would have containers lining the flanks of their ship, but the Torpid Rebel was part luxury yacht, so didn't have the connection points, having only its innards for storage. The innards were empty right now since they'd made the delivery to this planet, but no one wanted to send anything off-world at their rates. Kal crossed his arms to stop himself touching his face again. No legitimate cargo to haul anywhere, and only part payment on their bounty. Not even any smuggling to be done, as Kal had been too busy using his face as an anvil to the Phestus gun's hammer.

He continued his limp onto the cargo ramp, not enjoying the steep incline. Drake was waiting at the top, talking to Tazeel Slaan.

'Wasn't sure you were going to make it,' Drake said with genuine worry in his voice. 'Get to the medic.'

'If you weren't sure, you could have helped,' Kal said.

'You keep saying you want me to stop calling you kid, but you don't stop acting like one.' Drake chuckled to himself and walked into the cargo hold.

Tazeel skittered down the ramp and offered to help Kal. Kal waved him off - a nice gesture, but if Kal actually rested his weight on the Slithol, he'd probably crush him.

'Look at this, Taz,' Kal said, pointing at his face. 'I don't think a kid would be handling this as well as me.'

Taz patted Kal on the lower back soothingly. 'Sure, sure. He's just messing with you. When he stops calling you kid is when you want to worry.'

'Half my face, Taz!'

'Okay, okay. No need to drag it out. Just get to the medic.'

'I am the captain here. I'll go to the medic when I want.'

'Of course, of course. When do you want to go to the medic?'

'Right now.'

'Okay, okay. Let me know if you need help. I've got to go and help Sil strap everything down.'

Taz sped away taking the stairs up to the ship's warrens.

Kal took a moment to inspect the cargo hold. He tried not to show how hard he was breathing, and how he suddenly felt kind of dizzy. The hold had metal grating for all of its floors - the one he stood on now, the stairs, and the walkways above - in case it ever needed to hold liquid and then be drained. The walls and roof were polyally panels - the same stuff most bodyarmour was made out of, light enough to lift and move around, but still strong enough to take a beating. The lights were bright enough to be uncomfortable to his damaged eyes, as they would be all over the ship in preparation for take off - so there were no shadowy corners for stowaways to hide. There were three ways in or out. The cargo ramp that he just entered on the bottom floor, and then on the opposite wall one floor up, there was a door to the left and right. They both connected to the network of corridors that could take him anywhere in the ship, but the left went to the cockpit in a more direct route, and the right to the engines - where Taz had just run off to.

Having caught his breath, Kal headed up the stairs, his boots clanging as he went. He walked at a monastic pace, but progress was progress. He considered turning right and heading straight to the medic, but decided that figuring out where they should head next was more important. He took the left door and entered the warrens. Most ships followed a very similar layout when it came to the interior corridors. A treaty all of the Houses had to agree to, the idea being that if a security team ever had to sweep a ship of hostiles, they'd already know the layout. Cargo holds, weapon batteries, flight decks, or anything else, could be placed anywhere - the Houses has rallied against that as they all wanted their own flair added to their production lines to differentiate themselves - but the crew quarters and communal areas were all supposed to be uniform. However, this only applied to House ships that were to be sold. Technically, this was a private ship, not held to the same standards as commercial ships, and so somewhere in its design process and the mixing of cargo hauler with luxury yacht, someone had overlooked the uniformity. Hence, the warrens. Kal was the only person that knew his way around the twisting corridors. The rest of the crew still sometimes got lost, and on occasion would have to comm Kal for help.

Kal passed the truewood wall of the dining cabin, and continued up and past the reccy and the living corridors, until he found himself standing in front of the cockpit bulkhead.

Access Denied the message in his HUD read. He hadn't realised it, but his HUD was flickering with static. Oh dear.

He panned through his list of nearby contacts and found "Qane Kroqanii. Chip and Ship." Kal remembered that now he knew about more about the Erudama, he should change that, but right now he opened comms.

'Qane, it's Kal. Can you open the cockpit.'

Without a response, the cockpit door receded into the ceiling, and Kal hauled himself over the threshold.

Inside the cockpit were four seats, all facing towards the front of the ship, with a view of the Torpid Rebel's nose. Two were at the front, and two were at the back, all with access to a holo-panel. The Erudama was in one of the rear seats that he'd reclined so far back he was practically lying down. Qane's red scaly skin had a much paler complexion than Kal had seen on any Erudama, but whenever he'd mentioned it, Qane waved the issue away saying it was normal.

'Still nothing on the comms?' Kal asked.

Qane's seat moved into an upright position, and his head slumped forwards, his flat, long, green hair hanging in front of his face. After a moment he lifted his head, and swept his hair out of the way. 'No, captain. We should have another few hours until the bounty officer wakes up to report us, based on the charge level you hit him with.'

'And by then it won't matter since he didn't get our ID. Good.'

Kal shuffled around, feeling the ache over his entire body as he eased himself into a front seat. He could feel Qane's gaze on his ruined face. He swivelled the chair to face him. 'Yes?'

'You've damaged your Braxus chip. You'll need a new one.'

Kal smiled. 'Yes. Can you repair it?'

Qane closed his eyes for a moment, and Kal saw that someone was running a chip diagnostic on him.

'No. But not to worry. I had some free time and I've designed something a bit more robust - elegant, if you will - that I've been wanting to try out. I'll have the fab-bot build one.'

'Oh good. I've always wanted to be a crazy scientist's guinea pig.'

Qane laughed. 'Always happy to oblige, captain.'

Kal turned back to the holo-terminal and absently flicked through jobs in nearby systems. Qane worried him. He was clearly a scientist or chip engineer of some kind. And he had the money to hire Volco as a bodyguard on a permanent basis. He definitely knew enough to have cracked the ID block on Kal's chip, so must have known he was a son of House Tachryn. But he'd never mentioned it, and so Kal returned the favour, trying not to pry into Qane's past too much. The only thing Kal knew for certain was that Qane was a Braxus addict - the addiction that was named after the chip, that was named after the inventor of the framework that all chips used. Qane hadn't left the ship since he'd boarded three months ago, and was always in that chair, which provided him with a hardpoint connection to the Dominion Network Authority - the network that all chips ran off. Still, when not plugged in he seemed pleasant, was always polite, and had no problem paying his way and helping the crew. Which was more than Kal could say about some of the others.

'Oh, Qane, when I received the payment from the bounty officer, I had an ad play.'

'That's not possible,' Qane mumbled. 'Well, if it did happen then it was probably because of the physical damage to your chip. I can hardly be held accountable for your clumsiness.'

Hearing the heat in his voice, Kal tried to placate him. 'I don't know if clumsiness is the right word there, but—'

'I'll check it, then send out an update to the crew. *If* it's needed.'

Kal heard Qane's chair recline. He focused on the holo-screen, and the jobs it flashed up that the Dominion thought would be relevant for him based on his past contracts and ship size. A few very boring cargo transfers. Nothing close, so they'd all require a run to the void beacon for a system jump. Kal swiped his hand through the holo-screen, flipping it around. It changed from a brightly glowing blue interface, to red and black, and nothing was highlighted.

'Straight to the VoidNet?' Drake asked, entering the cockpit.

'Maybe if legitimate work started paying better, I wouldn't have to.'

'No bounties?'

'Just hauling. Unless you want to join the Dominion Army - they haven't stopped recruiting since The Swarm arrived.' Kal flashed a smile.

Drake cursed and took the seat next to Kal and started hitting buttons on his holo-screen. 'Used to be, a man could make a living honestly out in these parts of Fringe Space.'

'Are you building up to a lecture? There's nothing wrong with some harmless smuggling.'

Drake nodded absently. 'Sure, nothing wrong with harmless smuggling. What was it we carried last time, again?'

'You know that's not fair,' Kal argued. 'That job alone paid well enough to keep us on the move for a month. And well fed at that. Odin was having a great time with all the exotic food he picked up from that.'

'Yup. Never made a species extinct before. Felt odd. Can't say I liked it much.' Drake was watching the pre-launch system checks run off.

'Well, yes. I can't say I much enjoyed that little tidbit of knowledge. I thought he was going to keep them as pets, not eat them.'

Drake looked away from the progress bars to catch Kal's eye. 'Nobles, huh? Strange bunch.'

Kal peered closer at his own holo-screen. 'Never met any.'

Drake tutted and slowly went back to his own screen.

'Feeling like an Independent, Dominion, or House?'

Without hesitation, Drake said, 'No Dominion.'

'They're not traps. Sometimes the Dominion needs to break their own rules, and personally, I'm more than happy to help.'

'No Dominion.'

'I'm bored of Fringe Space. Let's go to an interim world. Get a bit of luxury back in the crew.'

'How are we going to pay for this missing luxury of yours?'

'Thee jobs in Interim Space pay better.'

'Living costs more too.'

'Such is life,' Kal agreed. 'All right, we've got a House salvage, or a... House assassination! Ooh, don't get those turn up often, you know? They normally have go-to guys for that kind of job. Could be a good money-maker.'

Drake removed his hat and ran his hand through his hair thoughtfully.

'Oh wait, no. Nevermind,' Kal said. 'They want the leader of House Xeride killed. He's too nice a guy, I couldn't pull the trigger.'

'Thought you never met a noble?'

'Just in the news. They're always building habships, and how can anyone be against that?'

'Shouldn't kill him then. I like nice guys. Also, you have that whole "I don't like to kill people boohoo" thing going.'

'I'd totally forgotten! So instead of that we've got a House sabotage. Some mining world. Wants a shipment diverted to delay production.'

'Salvage or sabotage?' Drake shrugged. 'Take your pick. Either way, get to the medic, kid.'

Kal tagged the two jobs for his chip's HUD, and struggled his way out of the chair. After a moment of dizziness, heavily scrutinised by Drake, he nodded and left the cockpit.

Drake's shout echoed down the living quarters corridor. 'And we're taking off, so brace yourself!'

Kal passed the ten hatches that led to the crew's cabins, almost stopping at his for a quick nap, and took the steps down into the warrens. He ran his hands along the truewood that marked the dining cabin, when the wooden portal opened, and Zara Yilang staggered out.

'Thought I heard you coming, cap.'

'Zara, how's the kitchen holding up under your relentless attack?'

She shrugged and mumbled something.

'And I see you've laid down a withering crossfire on our alcohol supplies.'

She smiled then hiccuped. 'As you say. It was a fire, so I needed to put it out.'

She slumped down onto the corridor floor. She was a large woman, a shade taller than Kal's average height, with a healthy layer of fat covering the muscles Kal knew she had beneath.

'Void, Zara, you've drunk enough that you need the medic more than me. Or shall I just get Odin to carry you to your cabin and let you sleep it off?'

'Oh yeah. That's why I wanted to see you. Heard your face got messed up.'

Kal waited a moment. 'If you want to see it, then maybe try looking at me instead of down at the floor.'

She laughed, but didn't look up. Kal peered into the dining cabin, but couldn't see anyone.

'Odin, are you in your room?'

A deep, booming voice - unmistakable as a Dithrak - that didn't need to shout thrummed down the only wooden stairway in the otherwise closed off truewood room. 'Yes, captain. I am up in my quarters.'

'Has Zara been drinking and eating the entire three days we've been off ship?'

'Hmm.' The thoughtful hum reverberated through Kal's chest, and he had to hold back a cough as things started shaking loose. 'Yes.'

'Did you try and cut her off at some point?' Kal shouted up the stairs.

'I did. She had strong opinions about the validity of my parentage, and was rather sure that she could best me in a fight.'

'I'm sorry about that, Odin. She's, uhh, got some issues.'

Another thoughtful hum. 'Most ex-soldiers do, captain. At least under our care, she hasn't hurt herself.'

Kal looked down to the slumped, blob of a person at his feet. 'I wouldn't be so sure about that. I'm going to the medic – can I leave you to make sure she finds her cabin? And sobers up. She's going to be needed for our next job.'

'Of course, captain.'

Kal stepped over Zara and carried on through the twists and turns of the warren, glad that he knew where he was going, because his chip was still fuzzing in and out.

Dithraks were, as a race, pacifists and philosophers. They were so big, it never occurred to them to hurt anyone else, because nobody else could hurt them. Their tough, leathery hides could turn away all small arms fire, whether laser or projectile. The few that did fight were a terror to behold. And yet, underneath that deadly potential, Odin showed more compassion for a drunk woman who he hadn't known six months ago, than Kal's family had ever showed him. One of many offspring in House Tachryn, Kal had been raised by a servant, and any time he'd spent with his parents had to be booked weeks in advance, if not months. Sure, he'd had everything he could want, including this multi billion credit ship, but it was all for show. A show to other Houses that money was no object, and that House Tachryn prospered. And of course any flaws were quickly dealt with, swept away like they never happened. After a particularly bad trade deal, one of Kal's older brothers had found himself enlisted in the Dominion Army. Not as a general, either. No one was sure how long he'd lasted, because he'd been shipped out to a world that The Swarm hit, and all planets that found themselves behind the infestation wall had never been heard of again.

And still, even as someone that was paying most of the people on the Torpid Rebel to be here, he felt more love from them than he ever had from his House. It felt strange. He didn't know if he trusted it. Was he buying their love? Would they abandon him the second the money ran out?

Kal's thoughts had run away with him, as he passed through the final corridor, feeling the heat from the engine room below, and into the medic room. A single chair held pride of place in the centre of the sanitary white room. He sat down, and an arm-mounted multi-surgeon tool descended from the ceiling. This room alone held half of the ship's worth. A soothing voice entered his chip telling him to relax, and that everything would be just fine when he woke up. The chair reclined and flattened itself.

Kal heard the vents turn on, filling the room with sleeping gas.

Chapter 3

Fringe Space - Tanis - 20km from The Swarm beachhead - Trench B - Sarkon Ward

‘It’s been two days with no sightings, sir!’ the Tanis Lieutenant shouted.

Commander Sarkon Ward had gotten used to the Tanis’ lack of formality. They weren’t as well trained or equipped as the Dominion Army, but they had heart and wanted to defend their own world.

‘Calm, Lieutenant Jaith. You’re too eager to face The Swarm.’

The other Lieutenants around the table that were poring wearily over the tac-map holo mumbled their agreement with Jaith.

‘I know you’re all restless,’ Ward began, looking down on the assembled officers, ‘but holding the line here, keeping The Swarm contained, giving the cities and hab blocks time to evacuate - these are *real* things. Tangible. Every hour we hold this position is another ten thousand lives saved. I say, the longer The Swarm leaves us alone, the better.’

‘Maybe we missed them?’ Jaith said. ‘Maybe the other battalions are already wiped out!’

Ward looked over to the Slithol comms officer, who returned his questioning look with a shake of her head. ‘The Swarm is deep enough into this planet that the mist has stopped any long range comms. We just have to trust that each battalion can hold their choke point until the arranged fall-back time.’

‘Sir, perhaps we should—’

‘Lieutenant Jaith,’ Ward said in a low growl. ‘Your feelings are noted, but we are not abandoning these trenchworks.’

Lieutenant Jaith cast his eyes to the floor but stayed silent. Ward knew how the Tanis Guard viewed him. Some resented him, an outsider that had to be brought in, a stain on their great national pride. Others saw him as an almost god-like saviour that could banish The Swarm with a word.

Commander Sakron “Defender of Akron Prime” Ward. The only planet to ever successfully repel The Swarm, led by Ward himself.

Ward was about to pinch the bridge of his nose to clear the headache he felt building. The calm before the fight was all politics and trying to get reason through people’s skulls. He

stopped himself partly so he didn't show his fatigue to the Tanis that looked up to him, and partly because he was still in his House Phestus Titan Armour, and his gauntlets would have crushed his nose.

Instead he clapped his hands together, getting everyone's attention. 'All right. Good meeting, everyone. Back to your posts. Jaith, hold a moment.'

The dozen or so Lieutenants filed out of the bunker, letting the glare of sand and sunlight fill the room, until it was just Ward, the Slithol comms officer, and Jaith left.

Jaith wore the same as all the other Tanis soldiers. House Xeride armour in a desert pattern camo, with beige cloth extending from his undersuit to wrap his head. He'd pulled the face coverings off, but would replace them before he went back outside. Like most of the Tanis, he had dark skin with blonde hair and blue eyes.

'At every meeting, you've spoken out against me,' Ward said.

Jaith lifted his chin with pride, but stayed silent.

'The others seem to follow your lead even though you're all the same rank.'

'It's the Tanis way, sir.'

Ward accepted this with a nod. 'Come with me for my evening rounds. The third squad Lieutenant can take over for you, and we'll make that a double strength unit.'

Jaith looked as if he was about to protest, but held his tongue.

'What is it?' Ward asked.

'I just don't get why, sir.'

'I'm on a planet I don't know, surrounded by a people I don't know. Void, I know The Swarm better than I know your customs.'

Jaith took a moment to decide if that was an insult, but decided it wasn't. 'Okay. I'll follow you.'

'Let's be clear, I want you to follow my footsteps, but not my decisions. I need you as a dissenting voice.' Ward cut him off before he could ask the question. 'Since Akron Prime, the Dominion Army has been nothing but yes men, assuming that I can magically save any world they send me to.'

Jaith's voice was very quiet as he asked, 'Can you not?'

Ward looked down at his gauntlets and flexed them against the rising heat he felt in his gut. 'I wish I could. I'll do my best. But as I see it now, and I barely see it thanks to the mist, there's no way to save Tanis.'

Jaith nodded solemnly. 'Then we're fighting for honour?'

'Honour?' Ward laughed deep and honestly. 'Honour doesn't exist, Jaith. There are very few who know that better than I. Didn't you hear me a minute ago? We fight for the lives of the good, the honest, the hard-working people of Tanis.'

Jaith gave a sly smile. 'You say that like we're not?'

'I don't know about you, but I'm not. Most men who join planetary armies have some issues. Perhaps a bloodlust that can't be sated legally.'

'There are many good men and women in the Tanis Defence Force.'

'I've no doubt. That's why I'm not going to waste their lives. Anyway, let's do the rounds together. Show me up as much as you can, okay?'

'Sir?'

'I've seen enough of the Tanis to know that you're fiercely proud of your planet. If they see you putting me in my place, just a bit, it will give them the boost they need. They'll stay a bit more vigilant when they want to slack. Aim truer when they'd otherwise slip. Maybe we'll save a few lives in the next hour without even knowing it.'

Jaith smiled and looked at Ward with something approaching admiration. 'You're devious, sir.'

'I do what I have to.' Ward turned and addressed the Slithol in the corner. 'Lex, let me know if *any* comms break the mist. Interrupt anything that's happening, understand?'

'Yes, sir,' Lex hissed.

She was one of the Dominion Army that he'd managed to bring with him, and Ward knew she'd follow his orders to the letter. 'And give your patch to the Lieutenant.'

Lex immediately unlocked the Dominion Army patch on her arm and passed it to Jaith.

'Sir?' Jaith asked.

'Put it on.'

'I don't think it's such a good idea, sir. No one else wears one.'

'Exactly. Stroke their national pride, and remind them they can keep it while helping the Dominion.'

Jaith sighed, and clamped it to his left shoulder pad.

Ward exited the bunker, and the blazing sun hit him in the face. He cursed, accessed the Ferrik chip that linked to his Titan armour, and ordered his helmet to engage. The pillar behind his head shunted armour plates out until they'd formed a jagged helmet. The suit darkened the eye slits until he didn't need to shade himself from the sun. A fan activated and began maintaining his body at the optimum temperature.

He turned to see Jaith with his beige facemask in place, and Lex with her Dominion Army helmet on. She must have been suffering inside, and this entire deployment had been such a rush of activity that none of the Dominion squad he'd brought with him had had time to modify their suits at all.

'We'll start with the outer trench. Disturb them while it's quiet.'

'It's been quiet for days, sir.'

'Good.'

They made their way through the concentric rings of the trenches. It would have been much easier to jump a trench wall and walk the two kilometres to trench F, but Ward knew he had to take the long route. It gave him a chance to check the sturdiness of the fortifications again, at least.

Several of the trenches had been blocked, or the House Xeride rapi-fort panels had given way under the strain of the nightly sandstorms. It gives something for the troops to be doing, keeps their mind off the impending attack, Ward thought. Something familiar that everyone here grew up with. Ward could have used a similar distraction. He kept seeing the shadows of The Swarm round every corner. He hadn't slept last night. Hadn't had a good night's sleep since Akron Prime, six months ago.

After the third blocked trench, Ward ordered Jaith and Lex to help with clearing it. Ward helped too, using his massive gauntleted hands as scoops, and punched away large chunks of sand. Some of the Tanis stifled laughs as he did it, and Jaith suggested that his Titan armour took up too much room, and perhaps he should leave the Tanis to it.

'Unless you want to show us all what that Ferrik chip can do?' Jaith said.

Ward wasn't sure if Jaith had seen the distinctive chip, connecting his spine to the back of both ears, running forward to his temples - as opposed to the standard Braxus chip that all the Tanis had, only connecting to behind the right ear and spine. Maybe Jaith had just heard the stories of Akron Prime.

'Never seen one in action?'

All the Tanis stopped digging and stepped away from the wall of sand. 'No, sir. So uncommon, I haven't heard of anyone on Tanis having the ability.'

Despite the Titan armour's limited movement Ward nodded his helmet in understanding. 'It's not uncommon for a an entire planet's population to skip a few generations in producing a Ferrik chip compatible user.'

'Void wielder,' Jaith said.

Ward barked a laugh. 'All right, a Void wielder, then.'

'So you'll clear it for us?'

'And rob you of the satisfaction?' Ward said in mock outrage. 'I'd never dream of it. Carry on, men!'

It was nightfall by the time the trench runs were clear, and the group of three had made it to the front line trench. Not the quick morale boosting chat that Ward had intended, but there wasn't anything else to do, and he'd learned just why the Tanis had been trained for trench warfare despite the constant threat of sandstorms - they'd never had a war. Not even an uprising. They were following doctrine from other worlds, because their generals had never been in a situation where they needed to challenge it.

Right now Ward was kneeling down, peering intently at a picture one of the Tanis was drawing on the ground. The Tanis stopped drawing and looked up to Ward with mischief in his eyes. Ward stared intently at the drawing before finally saying with a bemuse smile, 'I don't get it. What is it?'

The knot of Tanis around him burst into laughter. Middle aged, old, barely old enough to hold a rifle, they all laughed. Such pure and genuine joy despite knowing their world was lost. Ward smiled a smile they couldn't see behind his helmet. Sure, they were laughing at him, but it felt good to hear happiness.

He didn't feel Jaith's hand on his shoulder, but his chip was linked with his armour, and gave him a heads up. 'Nothing to worry about, sir. It happens to all men at some point!'

Ward stood up, towering over them all thanks to his armour, and said, 'Keep up the good watch, men.' And turned to move down the trenches to the next squad.

Half way between the two nests, Ward noticed that Jaith had stopped and was stretching.

'Tired, Lieutenant?'

'Sorry, sir. It's just been a very long day.'

'Take a moment to collect yourself.'

Ward looked at Lex, and even she was showing signs of fatigue. 'I'm so used to being tired, I forgot others might want a rest. Lex, take a seat too.'

'Don't sleep good, Commander?' Jaith asked.

'Not for a while now, no.'

'Why's that?'

A loud cry echoed down the trenches from the soldiers they'd just left. Then the harsh whip-crack of las-rifle fire. And then - oh void - then the inhuman chattering and screams of The

Swarm. The grinding of chitin against chitin. At the noise, Ward could picture the first wave being sent in. Their bleached bone carapaces and red murderous eyes.

Ward shook himself out of the memory, and pounded back the way they'd come. The trench around him sprung to life as Tanis infantry poured out of their rest holes, and the constant flash and snap of red laser fire brought an eerie glow to the night sky.

His Titan armour took him faster than Jaith or Lex could keep up, but he couldn't wait for them. The squad came into view as he rounded a corner in the zig-zagging trench, and there was no one left standing. His legs carried him into the middle of the nest. He trod carefully around the bodies. They'd been laughing just minutes before.

Not again. He couldn't handle this again. His suit was suddenly too small for him, and he retracted his helmet, breathing in the fresh air of the desert. It was hot and gritty, and he started breathing too fast and too deep. He dropped to one knee and squeezed his eyes shut. 'Not again,' he whispered.

He heard footsteps behind him. Jaith. 'Void. How did... More!'

Sarkon's eyes flew open at Jaith's final word. Leaving thought behind, he turned and jumped up, using his suit's power to take him over the top of the trench wall. He saw The Swarm. As he came back down, he activated his Titan gauntlets.

The first one jumped over him, landing between him and Jaith. Lex didn't hesitate, using her position from the back of the nest. The small beast's head exploded, the laser cooking its brain. A second jumped into the trench without thought, and Sarkon jumped up, his powered fist connecting with it in flight. All that landed in the trench was a broken carapace, and spilt ichor.

Sarkon knew these were the throw away troops of The Swarm. Small, no weapons aside from tooth and fang, and easy to kill - if you saw them coming, which the Tanis in that nest hadn't. They always came before the big push. He turned to face the oncoming attackers, and backed up, getting in line with Jaith, and the other Tanis that had retaken the nest after the initial shock.

The Titan's short range threat detection started beeping until Sarkon's radar showed nothing more coherent than a red blob in front of him.

'They're coming!' Sarkon shouted to the Tanis at his side. 'Rifles up!' Rifles clanked to shoulder pads. The red closed in on Sarkon's vision, and he had time to give one last order before he was taken by battle. 'Die for Tanis!'

Three beasts jumped over into the trench. The size of a large dog, with misshapen knives for hands, they were bred only for killing. Like all of the Swarm they were a blotchy white in colour apart from their too large, deep red eyes. They were kin to the larger swarm - the ones that

human nightmares were borne of. They were the form you thought you saw in the corner of your eyes. The instinctive fear of the dark.

And everyone in the trench blew so many holes in their chitin, that they evaporated in a flash of red light.

Their nightmares conquered, the men by his side had proven themselves to Sarkon. The rest of the beasts began to flow over the top of the trench. Ones and twos at first, then threes and fours. It was only The Swarm's ragged attack line that allowed that part of the trench to not collapse.

Sarkon held himself back. The Tanis were handling it like they'd drilled for this all their lives. Professionals. But each time a beast died, it died half a step further forward than the one before it. They were gaining ground, and there was nothing the Tanis could do.

Sarkon decided that now was the time to join the battle in earnest. He'd crushed a few that had gotten too close, but he didn't want to show his hand. He knew The Swarm learned, and once they knew he was there, they'd hit the Tanis lines even harder next time.

'Lieutenant Jaith!' Sarkon shouted over the crack of laser shot, and the life affirming battle cries of his men. 'Hold the line here. Lex, stay with him. I'll give you a reprieve!'

Sarkon spun up the chaingun under his right gauntlet, and ignited the star thrower under his left.

A gout of flame and the nest was cleared. The heavy gasps from his men as they hastily reloaded spent batteries, and the hissing from cooked innards escaping carapaces, was all that could be heard for a second.

Sarkon charged forwards, jumping over the trench wall in a single leap. Before he could even see the enemy he opened up with both of his weapons, molten Osmium rounds tearing through everything on his right, and a fire so hot it rivaled the stars themselves burning anything stupid enough to get close to him on the left.

He let his weapons cycle down. Suddenly there was complete silence. He couldn't see far in the dark or through the alien mist. But he could make out a single creature looming in front of him. It wasn't one of the twisted dogs. This was one of Ward's nightmares. But Ward had surrendered his fear when this battle started, and Sarkon didn't hesitate.

He charged the lone creature. It was the same blotchy white as the dogs with glowing red eyes, and a bleeding maw too wide for its face. But it stood taller than a man, the same size as the titan armour. It didn't move to defend itself as Sarkon leaped into the air, pulling his fist back and screaming his hatred of the abomination. The powered gauntlet struck with enough force to

rip the creature's head off. Its body spasmed away its last spurt of life, and Sarkon spat away the ichor that had sprayed against him.

His radar still showed nothing but red around him. Enemy contacts. But he couldn't see anything. He spun around to face the trenches. The night no longer glowed red. The fighting had stopped. Was that good or bad?

He walked back to the trenches and opened comms to Lex. 'The line held?'

'Yes, sir. A similar probing tactic to what we've seen before.'

'Understood. Coordinate with Jaith and rotate all of the frontline squads to the back. Bring up fresh troops.'

'Understood, sir.'

Sarkon hopped down the trench wall, his Titan legs absorbing the impact. Aside from the initial surprise, The Swarm hadn't taken anyone else at his nest. Hearing the reports come in from the rest of the Lieutenants, the fighting was heavier on the right side of the trench. Three squads wiped out. Another dozen at half strength.

Ward deactivated his gauntlets, and carefully wiped his face. It could have been much worse, but he knew this was just the initial probe. Had that final nightmare been the scout? Been the one that would tell the rest of The Swarm what capability this battalion had? Once they'd lured Ward out there, The Swarm had scattered and vanished. It felt like they were taunting him personally. But that was crazy, surely?

The Tanis moved fast, and in only half an hour Ward was standing watch in one of the front nests along with one of the newly rotated squads, when Lex commed him.

'Sir, we just received outside comms!'

'Where are you?'

'Trench C, bunker 12.'

'I'm coming to you. Who was it and what did they say?'

'It's the 12th battalion. A distress signal.'

Ward cleared his mind of The Swarm. 12th battalion were stationed on his battalion's flank. Commanded by General Ablov. He'd come across as old fashioned in the strategy meeting before deployment. Too aggressive and wasteful. Even if Ward ignored his own distaste for throwing away lives so recklessly and just viewed soldiers as resources, Ablov simply didn't have enough resources to fight the way he wanted to.

'Do we have a position?' Ward asked.

'Just a direction, sir.'

If it was close enough to pierce the mist, then the 12th must be horribly out of position. They could be fleeing from their fortifications, or they could have attempted to attack but gotten lost in a sandstorm, or...

'Comms officer Lex, prepare the armoured column, and co-opt any Tanis on rest as a Strike Force. Including my command vehicle. Have them deploy ready to move in the direction of the distress signal.'

'Yes, sir.'

Perhaps Ablon had been overwhelmed. Maybe he'd done something stupid. It didn't matter. Ward wasn't going to let his own battalion's flank protection fall and open him up to a pincer move. He also wasn't going to let an entire battalion be wiped out. For any reason.

'And Lex. Tell the Dominion Army squads to ready up. I want them with me.'

Braxus Chip = Normal chip

Ferrik Chip = Psyker chip

Chapter 4

Core Space - Lumiere Prime - Ferrik's Spire - Council Meeting Room - Dominar Vigil

Her bodyguard pulled out the shining silver chair for her, and Dominar Vigil sat. 'Thank you, Alpha.'

She'd given up trying to remember their names long ago. Now she just called her two bodyguards Alpha and Beta. They didn't care - they rarely stayed alive long enough to care. And, quite frankly, she didn't care if they cared.

The man to her left greeted her. He wore an Admiral's suit in the yellow and black of House Aeliph. Double breasted, high collar, peaked cap, and the House emblem of a bird on his left arm.

'I apologise, Master Aeliph. I was detained by a particularly stubborn engagement beforehand.'

The old Master patted her arm gently and said, 'Not to worry, dear. We all know the demands of business.'

She smiled politely, but noticed Alpha had tensed up at her being touched. He must have been the same Alpha that saw her break a man's arm the last time someone touched her, but not have been to a council meeting before.

She was the last person to enter, although House Tachryn had sent a representative, and her fellow Human councilor was only a small hologram on the table in front of his designated seat.

It was the turn of the Dithrak to hold the meeting, so she mentally prepared herself for it to take an exceptional amount of time. Even for a council meeting. One of the Dithrak stood and called everyone to order. As they went over the minutes of the last meeting, Vigil had time to see who had turned up. To her surprise, there had been no changes to any of the councillors. All twenty one around the table were the same as last time. *An unprecedented time of peace*, she smiled to herself. Even the Houses had started trying to not destroy each other. *Truly remarkable*.

The master of each of the four Houses, two representatives for each of the five Ferrik Dominion races, seven military leaders, and two emissaries - one from the Void Wardens and one from the AI.

The Void Wardens were religious fanatics that had managed to carve out their own niche in space around a particular Void Beacon, but they played by the Dominion's rules, so they were left alone. But the AI... Vigil stared at the hooded figure. Two blue dots glowed inside its hood. The AI were the real cancer of the Dominion. She knew it, but everyone turned to them for their "logic". They couldn't see what she saw.

'Dominar Vigil?'

Vigil looked away from the AI. 'Yes?'

'Any pertinent updates?' The Dithrak asked.

She rattled off some dry statistics, and at the end of her spiel she received a round of approving nods. In truth, she didn't do much "ruling" herself. That wasn't why she was on the council. As one of the two Human Race seats, she rose to being a councilor by spending a lot of money, and calling in a few favours when the vote came.

'Any new business?' The Dithrak said.

Master Xeride stood, his blue and black Admiral's dress immaculate, and began, 'I believe that the habship initiative needs to be given more focus.'

House Phestus and House Aeliph both scoffed, but it was one of the Praltus who stood. His neck mounted voice modulator hissed out the conversion of his squawks. 'You speak of habships when there is war on our borders. A ridiculous notion, and everyone knows it.'

Vigil knew how the rest of this argument would go. The Houses and races that benefited most from the increased manufacturing of the war would oppose the draw of funds that the habships would impose, and only House Xeride, who had already invested heavily, and were the only ones that could profit from habships, would be for them. In the past, Vigil had kept quiet about the subject, but after the last meeting, she now knew where everyone fell on the subject. Apart from the emissaries.

Master Xeride countered. 'We must look past the war. The Dominion is big enough to support the war on the East, but still continue with normal life elsewhere.'

Before anyone else could argue, Vigil joined the standing. 'I agree with House Xeride. We can't put all of our plans on hold just because of a few border skirmishes.'

A moment of silence hung in the air as everyone realised the significance of Vigil taking a side. Specifically, *Dominar* Vigil. No one wanted to oppose a Dominar. Of course, as a member of the Ferrik Dominion council, her personal role shouldn't have been an issue, but a Dominar can do as they please with little repercussion. The irony being that technically, everything a

Dominar did was sanctioned by the council without ever needing their approval after their initial rise to Dominar.

The same Praltus as before spoke, 'No one here will be swayed by such words. "Border Skirmishes" is just insulting.'

Vigil shrugged. 'It's all a matter of scale. What do our emissaries think of the situation?'

The hooded figures stood as one. The first to throw his hood back revealed pale flesh that hid underneath radiating lumo-tats. The Void Warden's High King. His voice was barely more than a whisper, and Vigil's chip had to enhance his speech. 'This is a delicate issue. The Swarm must be defeated, of course, however humanity must come first. We appreciate that House Xeride provides dedicated Void Warden spaces aboard its habships, but in this instance, we believe that our focuses must be directed to the Eastern threat. Void's will.'

Vigil hid her annoyance. She hadn't known which way the High King would fall. The High King raised his hood.

The second hooded figure lowered his hood to reveal the bare metal beneath. A mixture of matte and shiny abstract blocks knotted through his head, and ultimately created a facsimile of a human's face.

'I am in favour of destroying The Swarm.' He raised his hood again, and both of the emissaries sat down.

Master Xeride nodded to Vigil, and then sat. Nineteen to two wasn't a strong position. Especially when both emissaries were against you. Vigil took her seat. No need to throw her weight around on such an unwinnable issue.

'Besides,' the Praltus continued, 'the first habship sent out two decades ago heading for where ever it was. Has there been any contact?'

Master Xeride cleared his throat. 'No. It's still lurching between the galaxies. No new communications. It's still headed towards the outer part of a spiral arm of some galaxy after its accident.'

The meeting continued, and Vigil had to struggle not to let her mind wander. War in Eastern fringe space, Interim mining worlds halting production, Core worlds supporting everything and the Houses shouldn't forget it etc. etc. just another boring council meeting.

Vigil didn't begin tapping her fingers on the table, didn't begin to slouch in her seat, didn't stare out at the view of Lumiere Prime, resplendent heart of The Dominion. She stayed focused and nodded politely, and did everything that a councilor was supposed to do.

Finally the ending was called, and Alpha pulled her chair out for her, and she left the room along with the other councillors and their bodyguards. Master Xeride stopped her in the hallway outside and thanked her for her support. An ally to call in a favour when the time came.

‘Yes,’ Vigil agreed. ‘Such a shame that the other councillors can’t see the bigger picture like we do.’ A few of the passing councillors shot her some looks, but most ignored the obvious bait. Except for House Phestus and House Aeliph, who pushed themselves inbetween Vigil and Xeride. Well, the bulk of Master Phestus pushed them apart, and then Master Aeliph passed through the chasm that was left in his wake.

Master Xeride raise his hand and began to speak, but Vigil stopped him. ‘Please, Master Xeride. Let the insult pass. Certainly I’ve never seen the two of them agree on anything before. Quite the novelty.’

Master Xeride lowered his hand, and they continued walking to the grav-lift. More pleasantries were exchanged, but Vigil decide to take the next lift down after the two emissaries passed by her.

As they waited for the lift to return, Alpha spoke up. ‘Was there something wrong, Dominar?’

‘I’m becoming impatient to pick up where I left off before this waste of time began, but I’m not going to stand on a grav-lift with an AI.’

Alpha stayed silent for the rest of the walk back to her quarters within Ferrik Spire. Detecting her chip, the doors opened. The room was in the same style as every Core world. Silver and white were the major colours. It made a stark contrast to the bronze and blacks that covered all of the House controlled Interim space she’d been staying in recently. Her quarters were large, yet without opulence. They had everything she could ever need, but no luxury. This was by her own choice, and purely pragmatic. She was rarely here, so there was no need to cater for some of the eccentricities that the other councillors had. Everything here was purely functional and in pursuit of her being able to further The Dominion the best way she knew how. As a Dominar.

Alpha went in before her, riot baton, and checked the room. Vigil entered once Alpha had given the all clear, and made her way over to the drinks table. A modest selection of liquids and powders in silver canisters. She pulled on her gloves, and poured water into a cup. Turning, she motioned for Alpha to continue.

Alpha turned to the panel of bare metal behind him and felt around the edges for a recess. He found it, and notification popped up in Vigil’s HUD asking if she wanted to open the door now that the physical switch had been triggered. She accepted, and the panel opened inwards.

Alpha entered the dark room. Vigil walked across her quarters, expecting the all clear. Instead she heard grunts and the sound of feet scuffing the floor.

‘Alpha?’

A strangled noise, and then the sound of meat hitting meat.

‘I don’t want to have to put my water down. Do hurry up.’

A loud crack, and Alpha commed her, breathing heavily. ‘The prisoner had escaped. Beta is on the floor but I haven’t checked on him. It’s clear to enter.’

Vigil walked into the room and ordered the lights turned on. The cell was half the size of her quarters, so still outlandishly large compared to any prison. A chair was in the middle of the room. Another chair and a small table with wheels were pushed against a far wall. The sanitary white of the walls, floor, and ceiling were ruined by the pool of blood gathered around Beta’s head, and the smears left behind by the prisoner’s broken arm.

‘No need to check on Beta. Just clear him out.’ Alpha moved to follow the order. ‘*After* you’ve reseated the prisoner.’ Alpha hauled the unconscious prisoner up from the floor and dropped him into the chair, resetting the restraints. He then dragged Beta out, smearing blood as he went.

Well, this was an inconvenience. She had wanted to come back and get right on with the questioning. Keeping the cup in her left hand, she walked over to the small table and glanced down at the selection of instruments. Nothing.

She opened her comms. ‘Alpha, I need your riot baton briefly.’

A few seconds later, Alpha entered, baton drawn. He hurried over to her, but she held up a hand. ‘Jolt the prisoner, then leave.’

Alpha activated the baton and electrocuted the prisoner. After a violent convulsion, he started lolling his head back and forth. Alpha left the room.

‘You’re stronger than I gave you credit for.’ Vigil said, walking to stand in front of the prisoner. ‘Stronger than Beta gave you credit for too, it seems.’

The prisoner lifted his head now. He tested his restraints, the muscles under his lumbo-tats rippling as he did.

‘That arm looks painful. Let me fix it for you?’

The prisoner raised his eyes to the Dominar, and bared his teeth.

‘No, of course not. How silly of me. At least let me hand you some water. I’ll release your hand and you can drink it yourself.’

The prisoner thought for a moment before nodding.

‘Just tell me your name.’

The prisoner shook his head.

‘Oh, come now, the Void wouldn’t begrudge you a drink, would it?’

The lumo-tats on the prisoner’s face were modest, not the extreme canvas that the High King had made of his face.

The prisoner swallowed, and Vigil could see how difficult it was for him.

‘Initiate Kravik.’ The prisoner said.

‘See, that wasn’t so difficult, was it?’

Just before she handed over the water, a notice flashed in her HUD. The bounty she had set on Ovan Tertiary flashed up as complete. The bounty had been... killed? Suspicious, to say the least.

She passed the water from her hand to his, and she could see the desire in his eyes. He hadn’t had anything to drink for at least twenty hours now. And then she saw his eyes shoot wide, as the cup dissolved at the oils from his skin. The water hit the floor.

She laughed, and ignored his curses towards her, and promises to the Void, as she walked back to the table. She ran her hands over the tools. Cutting, pulling, pushing, cavities, sewing, she could do it all.

She turned back to Initiate Kravik and studied him in his writhings of rage. Cutting would need to be a finisher for him. ‘I don’t want to underestimate you again, Initiate.’ She delicately picked up the pliers, and prepared herself for a long session.