

KONSTANTIN **3030**

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*“This is a world where a clerical error might cost a million lives.
That’s just the trade-off. That’s just how big we live.
You don’t like it? Go to Jupiter—stay there.”*

*-Prime President Jack Walton-Bush-Clinton-Glock-Hershey-Bell (Jr.)
2907 Pre-Impeachment Address*

01 Constellations & Condiments

Things tend to scatter when left alone for long enough. It's true of life on Earth and ketchup packets in zero gravity. The red and white balloons shed their sugary blood. Fake tomatoes grown on a fake farm under fake sunlight. Floating in the same listless patterns as the asteroids outside.

Jupiter's trojan belt blazed a shining path, spotted by the dark silhouettes of ships and space junk. Their yellow glow shone on the chamber of a rusty Smith & Wesson sport revolver with a shoestring-wound grip. The pistol shoved aside ketchup packets on its trek across the cabin. Away from the thin, round-edged rectangular windows like those found on a pillbox bunker, it barrelled through a handful of bullets and slipped under a curtain of shadow, exchanging places with a faux-gold Timex watch: the only thing allowed to wake Adler up.

Its brass bells were deafening in the small capsule. The sound folded into itself until it was one ear-splitting ring, then was snatched out of the air. Adler snorted awake and fumbled and the watch barked between his fingers before finding the tiny button that wound it down. He set it adrift toward the front of the cockpit. Gripped the handles by his sides, launched off the magnetic pads on the walls. Half-asleep, almost automatically, near weightless he swung over the space between the two seats. Artificial gravity was more of a burden for these two. He tried to maintain whatever silence was left in the cabin, but accidentally knocked loose a can from the six-slot cupholder, sending it into a spin into the upper corner. He caught the can, but the liquid still splashed out. With a sigh that spoke disappointment at another day (if it could be called a day) he looked to the boy across the cabin: a slender being with flowing black hair.

Young was much younger than Adler and understandably air-headed. He was lanky due to his 'longbones,' the layman's word for long-term spaceflight osteopenia, a near ubiquitous development in folks born in the open abyss. Because of it, the wispy boy stood to nearly Adler's height, though he was only maybe fifteen. His thoughtless face was obscured beneath a billowing flame of long black locks with cheeks round and shiny as the distant moons, but nowhere near as cratered. With that head atop his skinny body, he seemed ready to tilt at any moment under his own weight and spin eternally.

Though he didn't have a thick, black beard, the boy looked much like Adler. They had the same sharp lips, the same wide ears, the same smooth skin—a warm olive color in the darkness such that Young would often question if they were of Persian origin, Greek, or perhaps from Tangier. How the boy knew so much of a planet neither had ever set foot on, Adler could only assume. In the ship's blue lights, they both took on a paleness from forehead to their spacesuits' chrome lapels.

The boy was so quiet and motionless that for a moment Adler panicked internally. He wondered, "You still alive?"

Young looked his way with big Earth-colored eyes and slack lips. "Uh-huh," the boy answered, then he went back to staring out the window. Adler let out a satisfied breath.

Slipping into the leftern of two front seats, he only noticed the pistol as it was nearly at his head. Close enough to discern the club insignia and the characters stamped into its barrel: '467 evolver' (the 'R' having been erased by a ricochet scar). He snatched it, checked the cylinder—empty, thankfully—and let out another breath, this one full of scorn. Carbon steel slapped onto the magnetic holster at his hip.

“Were you playing with this?” he demanded. His voice was sharp and clear. It reverberated in the plasteel panels, as if the ship agreed. It hummed nasally in the aquiline nose they both shared.

Young didn’t reply at first. His attention was wrapt in a tiny 3-dimensional screen that floated a few millimeters off the communications array, droning on endlessly. He wasn’t allowed to use their one working waveband (he wasn’t allowed onwave at all), so the boy would watch nature documentaries on the tiny utility screen, paying special attention to any animal subjects. The creeping eyes of alligators, herds of bison, and flocks of birds against a blue sky, stuck inside a cage made of light. But at that moment he was channel surfing.

A preaching ecclesiastical turned to a commercial for the Golden Goblin Casino to the tumultuous storm of animated characters and games and raids and sex and gore and everything else from mem- and sim-vendors like Limina_J, or pirate wavecasters such as Proppa-G. This far from the sun, their networks could easily overwhelm the signals from the watered-down media outlets of Earth, Mars, and Luna—colloquially known as ‘the North.’ When the ship left the shadows of asteroids, PoliTalk would return, droning, always droning. Nothing good was ever on.

“Hey,” Adler called. He leaned against the auto-buckles as they worked into his suit. “Did you take the gun off me while I was asleep?”

“No.” The boy didn’t turn his way.

“It’s not a toy. Remember? I’m getting tired of telling you this.”

“It’s not loaded,” replied Young with a tone too airy to be argumentative.

“Doesn’t matter,” he snapped back. “When I tell you to do something, you do it. When I tell you not to do something, you don’t do it. Got it?”

“Yeah,” came that child voice again.

Adler muttered to himself, “Yeah, but somehow I don’t think you do.”

He cradled his watch before it collided with the dashboard, slipped it on his wrist. A flashing array of manual levers and buttons, screens and dials and holowares tunneled around him. Most of these analog switches were seldom used. He wiped crud from a display with a little fuel tank icon on it. Beside it were six rectangles like bricks: three of them lit orange and three dull grey. With the deft automatism of a flock of birds at a fruit tree, his hands shifted between buttons and dials and projected letters, meanwhile organizing the mess on the center console between the two front seats.

The table was a simple thing and a marvel. Black panels of magiton nodes covered in glassteel. Put simply, it was a foam gel suspending fragile nanomachines, projecting short-distance magnetogravitic waves, coated in a nearly impenetrable translucent shell. Put even more simply: a shiny surface that held onto things. In this case it held a treasure trove of junk and wrappers, Mithrafilm two-use tools, sundries and print-pocket ration packs and spent ketchup sleeves, all of which would remain where they were even when flipped upside-down in ten-g barrel rolls. They had a plastic black-and-white cat labeled ‘swear jar,’ but in it were more bullets and a few more ketchup packets and not many coins (which were actually a rare commodity in that day and age), and there was a spot where a thumb-sized round was lodged into a shallow grave. It was only a hollow jacket, though, engraved with the letters ‘KIM,’ and repurposed as a shot glass that stank of rum.

Spinning above all that junk like a comet made of pristine silver was their waveband, a personal computer the shape and size of a wingless dragonfly. Adler plucked it and stuck it to the right side of his head. Fake sugar stuck the device to his fingers and he found the deep red crud stained the white walls. He traced the streams back through the cabin, past Young, and said, "Didn't I tell you to clean up?"

"Sorry," said Young, and just as he said it Adler did mockingly as well.

"Sorry."

"I forgot," the boy added.

"Every day, every single day," whispered Adler, then said, "you forget again, I might write it on your forehead. C-L-E-A-N, *clean!*"

Young pondered, then asked, "How would I read it?"

He heard Adler's fiddlings halt for a moment before a reply came. "I'll get you a mirror."

Then Adler started about his driving routine, sharp breaths and a slap or two across the face—not hard enough to hurt, just wake him up. Sucking into nostrils and then through a fist, rubbing his hands together for the warmth. He would scratch at the back of his ear regularly, to the point that the skin there was raw, and flip up the lapels of his charcoal grey suit in a way that he knew seemed flashy, but it was just so they wouldn't chafe. He let the magnetic zipper of his suit slack, baring his low-cut shirt and hairy chest, and the scar on the right side of his neck.

When he was finally comfortable (and it did take some more fidgeting, and Adler considered breakfasting first), his eyes closed and his mouth went slack. He froze, but the light of the waveband on his head began to flicker and soon it synced with the patterns of all the consoles in the ship.

While he waited to join to the wavenet—a web linking the various networks of the solar system—Adler wondered, "Anything new?"

"A few shuttles passed by, if that's what you mean." Young was watching one drifting along just then. It was battered by dust and thundering gas, a passenger train sailing through a star-speckled monsoon.

Adler exhaled a long while, then muttered, "How about the war?"

Young had kept his mind away from that as much as he could. He changed the channel whenever the topic sprung up. He could no longer stomach the sight of the ring of fire spreading halfway through the asteroid belt, but there it was. Mountainous chunks threw shade as if embarrassed by the event themselves. He could feel them in his stomach, in his chest cavity and his inner ears. He could hear the effortless twisting of thousand-ton slabs of metal and the haunting caterwauls somehow resonating through the dead of space. "Still going," Young said.

"Don't sound so broken up," Adler said, a little slurred. "War's kept us in business. That and the *Fate*." He knocked the lever beside his right hand with two knuckles.

Suddenly Adler made a sound as though he had been stuck by a needle. He tensed, then dropped flaccid in his seat. Neon dials and buttons spiraled and the ship began to light up: plain white panels folded open, images projected by holoware covering the bone-white interior with a vision of open space. All around them was the surface of the hollow asteroid they had taken refuge in the night before. Behind them was the rig that they had hijacked from a pair of U-huffing simheads who were quicker with a gun than Adler expected them to be. And in front of them was the burning field.

For Adler, however, another reality layered itself on top. The wavenet working into his neural pathways conveyed information in a map of pings attached to events updating in real-time via a quantum-entangled chain ledger made up of other users and stations and super-computers and there were so many various nodes and strings that he opted instead just to ask Young, “How long til the next town comes by?”

The boy was staring out into a wall of rock. The channels flipped again, though he didn’t touch the dial. He squinted, as though he could see through solid stone. Then he answered, “About ten minutes, I think. We’ll hit it if we go straight and to the left a little.”

“Alright,” Adler answered. “Sit down. I’ll cruise us to speed.”

Young hurried to do just this. Among what few lessons he had yet retained, these two were deeply impressed: that takeoff was often the most dangerous part of a flight, and whanging one’s head on a bulky auxiliary engine housing hurt awfully.

Drifting out from the hole in that giant jagged pebble, their slender knife of a ship pierced the dark. Behind it slunk the stolen racing jet: yellow and teal and pink and, as ugly as it may sound, even worse when compared to the sleek hull of the *Blind Fate*.

In the open they passed by a buoy with blaring orange hologram signs. It was one of many in a network orbiting the station at Jupiter, and cycled through an advert that read ‘*CCash Jobs & CCasinos! The Clockwork Dave! 10,000km that way!*’ with an arrow that pointed the direction from which they’d come. It went by as unassuming as any single post in a vast cattle fence.

Flying toward the half-ring of fire they locked onto the path of an asteroid settlement called Patterson’s Rock. Adler began an open broadcast. Among thousands of semi-local names shuffling before his vision he noticed the dim green glow of a few friends, most of whom he had never met in person.

He began gathering his words. He didn’t need to peer back to know the look on Young’s face. “What?” he asked him.

“It’s just,” started Young, “I thought you said ‘no strangers on the ship?’ Didn’t you say that?”

Adler muttered, “You remembered. That’s a start.” When Young asked what he’d said, however, he modified it: “We gotta make money somehow.”

Then his voice converted from its usual sarcastic drawl into the calm baritone of a pilot. This was more for himself than for the waveband adapting his thoughts, which didn’t even have a microphone. “This is Konstantin Adler, at 0-9:22 on March the third, in—damn, I always forget what year it is. We’re sitting south of the belt, pushing by the last signposts for the *Dave*. Seeing nothing but red all the way to Encke. If you’ve been listening, you know what that means.”

An avatar flickered before his vision with a waveform carrying the motions of Brother Lazard’s voice. He said in his preacherly tone, “Yea, and guard thyselves against the fire which has been prepared for the unbelievers.” Whatever the weight of his statements, his voice was always full of mirth.

Duke responded. His aged, smoked, South Carolinian twang itched in their ears. “My and what a revelation, father. Fire and steel in a warzone—who’da thunkit?”

Tawny let out a disapproving click in her teeth. “More like fire and plastic. MarSec builds in bulk. Quantity with no quality’s what that is.” Her sound and icon flickered in and out. One can’t expect a stable connection from pirates in hiding.

When Duke's voice came back, it was at the end of laugh. "You ain't really think the C-O-Dubya's gonna fly in the big guns for a bunch of fart-farmers, didja? Ooh-rah."

"Sorry, you're cutting out," Tawny replied. "You'll have to come tell it to me south of the belt sometime, old man."

"Already there, sugar! I'll be at Callisto's tonight—first round's on me," and he blew her a pair of kisses her way.

Another beacon passed by, bright and flickering. "If we're through with the romance," Adler cut in, "what it means for you civilized folk out there is, you still won't find any easy way across, no matter how nice you ask your onboard qomps. It means, you need a ride." Before going on, Adler slipped a thin, silvery packet from a stack on the surface between himself and Young. He offered it to the boy, but Young wouldn't eat. He wasn't hungry that day. He rarely was. Adler shook the packet by an end and the cells inside began to thicken. His voice turned almost comforting.

"But," he started again, and he couldn't help but motion like a traveling salesman with his hands, "right at this moment—and only for a short window of time—there's a narrow passage to the northern system, through the belt, around the war. Guaranteed free of Kessler trash and hellfire. That is, if you ride with me. I've marked the path for any window shoppers. Feel free to take a look—shel, feel free to try it out, if you think you can make it. A half-competent crew *might* be able to cross in one piece. On grav sails, you'd be looking at about a two-and-a-half-day flight, nonstop. Ride with me though, and you'll coughing up red dust in six hours or less, guaranteed." Adler unwrapped the cake-like product while he waited. Before biting in, he queried "Any takers onwave?"

Duke was first to chime in. "Sorry, Addy, but me an the boys're headed right opposite to ya. May'n use a guide in a couple days, provided you swing on back. And that's with a mighty nan of a prayer it don't take all month to get my cargo outta the cesspools that is the Jupiter shipyards."

"Hallelujah, amen," chimed in Lazard.

"None for me either, K," said Tawny. "I'm still warranted north-side."

"Wohnted," corrected Duke. "Ya's *wan-ted*, ya got warrants *on* ya. An I'm a-gonna pretend it was somebody else't said that, only cause I love ya, Tawn."

She poked back, mimicking his accent, "Well, shuck a bucket! And here I was thinking you didn't give a lick about little ol me." Duke's laughter galloped over from his end, along with that of one or two of his sons. Then Tawny added, "I'll ask around for any takers, King K. Say 'nii-ow' to the kid for me."

Holding in his discontent, Adler answered, "Sure thing."

They sat a while in quiet. Another buoy went by. It was wrapped in foggy plastic space junk, like a dying jellyfish caught by an arm.

Something brushed against Adler's cheek and he was instantly pulled back into reality. He struck himself out of sheer surprise. Three ketchup packets were deflected to the back of the ship. One read '*Blew's Tavern*,' a joint they had stopped at a few weeks previously on one of Jupiter's moons. It featured the titular blue moon character smiling away with big cartoon eyes. Adler wondered if Young would ever remember being there, and how excited he was to see that giant holoware character jumping over craters and domes. Wondered if the kid would ever remember anything else.

He wondered if they had any more Jupiterian soy sauce, the stuff they put on roasted crickets in the *Dave*. Adler had to have his sauces. Ten packets on him anywhere he went. Another hundred or so in various compartments around the ship. Print-pocket rations (a celgel product) were, as he would often grumble, "Shit to the tongue." They're also the cheapest and easiest meal this far south of the asteroid belt, so he was often due for a refuel of the stuff.

It had been almost thirty seconds when Adler realized the tune humming softly in his ears. Lazard was singing his morning hymns. "You know," said the blackcoat, his voice light and airy, "you don't need to dress up your dailies with all this pretense. You get lonely out here; we all do. It's okay. If you want to talk, you can just say 'hello.'"

And with that, Adler's mood was improved for the next few hours at least. Before biting into his flavorless ration, he snickered.

Then he answered, "Preach: fuck you."

Lazard snorted, then replied, "And also with you."

02 Ownership

Asteroids moved together in a slow ballet like the teeth of huge turning gears. Before them, an oblong shadow hurdled, three or so glowing orifices, cracks in its hull. Work lights criss-crossed all around it and sparks flared from superheated plasma injected into the little pebbles whose shadows blared across its face.

Adler pushed a beat-up old book back into a nook that they used as their little slanted library. He fastened a strap across spines reading *Jules Verne, Roadside Picnic, The Odyssey*. Sat to his right, Young was reading an old yellowed copy of Mark Twain's *Roughing It*. It used to be his favorite book. It was dented and stained with thumb marks and its edges were raw and nearly folded off, and it featured a caricature of the author on the cover whose thick mop of brown hair and eyebrows, mustache which occluded all intention, and whose stoic stance Adler could not help but consider were the opposite of the boy with the book in his hands. He noticed at the top of the cover the price the text sold for in the year it was printed: a grand total of seventy-five cents.

The news had faded to noise while they'd cruised along, but his attention was snagged by something they said. According to the disembodied voice of the PoliTalk newscaster, a peace summit was to be held in Earth's orbit aboard the "never-before-seen" supercruiser *Heiress Shuruppak*. Of course, it had been before-seen, just not in a lifetime or more.

The *Heiress* had been a gift from Jack Walton-Bush-Clinton-Glock-Hershey-Bell (the second) to his inhumanly beautiful mistress, given decades before he disappeared for good. It was crewed by a troupe of emissaries known as "The Foundation," and his same widow was at their helm. Nearly a hundred years earlier, she and her flying castle the size of a city had steered into the unimaginable openness of deep space in a period of hopeful search and, later, mourning—gone but not forgotten. In the decades that had passed, the rumors surrounding Jack Jr, the Mistress, the *Heiress* and her crew had mutated and expanded, nearly died, and now returned.

Adler raised the volume with a thought, but the meat of the story had been missed. He only caught the broadcaster's last note: a hope that "the Intrastellar Market the Foundation is currently building might start a snowball effect of peace between the worlds."

Adler shot out a scoff and muttered, "Fool me twice, won't get fooled again."

And a more cynical broadcaster seemed to concur. "Personally, I'd give them a snowball's chance on the sun," he droned.

Young's face ruffled, and Adler knew a question was coming. "What *is* snow, anyway?" the boy wondered.

"Frozen water," he answered inattentively. He was searching for something in his pockets and the various messes strewn about.

Young held his page with a thumb and thought on this a moment. His eyes slivered and he asked, "So then, what's ice?"

"Frozen water," Adler repeated.

"But, those are two different things."

"Yeah, well, sometimes two different things can be the same thing." He swept through the dashboard, pulling up crumbs and trash lodged between buttons. Coming

up empty, he leaned back into his seat. “Damnit. Forgot to grab the DNA chit out of that scrapheap behind us. Remind me when we stop.”

Young seemed to recall something, however. He unfastened the magnetic latch on his suit’s breast pocket, and drew from it a grey electronic no larger than a tooth. “You mean this?” he asked, holding it up.

Adler looked as though he’d seen a ghost. “Yeah,” he answered, trying not to sound astonished, though it was all over his face. “How did you-” he started, but trailed off. He was going to say ‘remember,’ but its not as if the kid would know, and he figured it best not to get him thinking on the subject.

“Nevermind,” he said, and snatched the chit. He held it up and the waveband on his temple showed him the data encoded as a DNA imprint inside. Adler announced with a sort of game show host’s tenor, “And the name of the ugliest rock-hopper I’ve ever seen is: one Mrs. Ethel Ward.” A smiling old woman hovered in his vision.

“Was Ethel the one who gave you that?” Young asked with complete sincerity, gesturing to the faint bruise on Adler’s cheek. Adler didn’t answer so he followed with, “You think he’ll want his ship back?”

“Nah,” Adler responded, his sarcastic tone lost on the boy. He cleared a small space to set the chit down, then picked up a quick-soldering tool from the table.

“How will he get home?” Young wondered.

Adler told him, “He’ll figure it out.” Then he smashed the chit into pieces with the butt of the tool.

They dove through waves of dust, the asteroid’s wake, chasing its blinking blue landing strip into the light of civilization. The *Fate* dropped through a hole in its surface, into a grungy bay to await an oxygen recycling pass.

They could see the main mall’s location by the turning of a giant gravitational wheel. It was old and scrappy, but painted and lit stark white. Protective insulant gel dripped from between plasteel panels. Adler swore he heard a rivet or two fall off while they were there. Colorful advertisements carpeted every meter. What few permanent structures stood around it were built into the edges, shining like liquid collecting at the rim of a dark pan. Each available surface was drilled into and used. Layers of biospheres bloomed with patches of corn, green and yellow. Bright floodlights cut swathes into the bleak.

There was no checkpoint at which to offload weapons, though Adler figured it would take much more than his gargantuan pistol to pierce those walls. There wasn’t even a docking station; only a glaringly-lit platform where incoming shuttles would land. After the huge inner hatch creaked open and its spinning orange lights sank into the floor, he moseyed them into the manure-scented expanse. At least a thousand bright holoware lights (two to each tractor) hovered between the innumerable platforms. Steel lamps hung over crops on steel shelves so that at a distance each resembled a spinach sandwich on steel bread. The great white eye of the mall stared them down, turning, turning. A marquee in simple white letters flashed to life before them: ‘*Welcome to Patterson’s Rock.*’

They landed in a flat yard where a lamppost's light hardly tickled the ground. Adler made sure not to let the racer drag when artificial gravity set in. The *Blind Fate* came down as smooth as a falling leaf. He tried to park it out of sight.

The forward hatch opened and tilted up. Adler leapt out first then bade Young to follow. "Watch your head," he reminded, but heard a knock as the boy exited the shallow cockpit.

"Ow."

The treads of their boots cracked on the asphalt, kicked up gravel at balking chickens. Adler kept an eye on the bright shuttle bay as they made their way toward the ring in the center. A tram was just leaving. Orange holoware signs told that the next one wouldn't come for another six hours.

They passed farms full of workers who likely had their own secrets to keep, and idiotic automatons falling one at a time off the same ledge. A small chorus of young, pipe-thin prostitutes groping, pleading, "How long you on the Rock, babe? Ten minutes for a hunnerd CC!" and a crowd of filthy drunks that came to sweep the girls away. A mangy cat on a stoop watched them with slivered eyes. They were strangers there, yet Adler still looked over his shoulder now and then as if anyone would recognize him. Whenever they found themselves among a crowd, he always seemed to develop a crook in his neck.

He waited at the counter of a dark pawn shop while its elephantine owner went out to grade their haul. Neon-lit dispensers clung to a wall behind a thin wire-link fence. Cat-7, Samsara, and H+H flavored opiates, among various other pick-me-ups and put-me-downs. There were black bricks of 'biofuel premium' dressed up in yellow wraps like charcoal logs and there were stacks of packages of NoAg, a potent anticoagulant for those still riding in old-fashioned starships. Lain out on three shelves were all manner of pistols and pneumatic weapons. Most everything else was useless or half-broken. Young fiddled with a one-armed automaton caked with years' worth of dust, and Adler held back from commenting on how dim the both of them were.

The combined repair/pawn shop made up the brunt of the mall's bottom floor. Sporadic bouts of welding sparks from the warehouse on the left painted the stacks of junk in white flickers, while the tavern that the shop shared a door with lent a consistent tinge of blue.

Wrapped in a sleepy melody and the drone of newscasters, Adler leaned to catch the sentiments of a gaggle of farmers: the mightiest wealth of gossip in any small town. Nothing could be seen of any of the speakers but a few backs as wide as billboards over which shiny nyfarb clothes were stretched taut.

One had just come in, and he could be heard stomping mud off his boots. The bartender quipped to him, "Ah, Bell's hell," in that loose English cockney only found on the *Clockwork Dave*. "Been naught but calm without your wide mouth round ere. Thought you was coming back next month?"

"Thought I might, too," the large man answered. He had the Western drawl typical to Martian folk. "But my pilot caught hisself a better ticket, so I had to hitch a ride back in a hog-hauler's trailer."

"That's what you get for pissing off rock-jocks," another said. "Shoulda known he'da left a cheap bastard like you stranded for holding out on his cc."

His stool screaming under his weight, the large man started on the first of many long-winded retorts. “Well, shuck me down for not taking too kindly to the idea of smashing into Ceres at the hand of a catted-up flyboy! Now, if any of those limp-limbs could hold in a pint of liquor—or if granddaddy Jack had been kind enough to bring his ass back from Gods-knows-where fifty years ago—then a pristine soul like mine wouldn’t have to dilly around with such filthy kin as cel-harvest piggies.”

“But kin they are, and dilly you did,” burred another. A refrain of chuckles and bemused hums followed.

“You better cherish those nights in the pigsty, cause there may not be too many more of em,” said a young man, who nodded toward the holoware screen above the bar. Local news sources were just as fixated on the return of the *Heiress* as everyone else. “Those ladies been on one,” he said. “You hear they’re building a Wal-Street in space now?”

“The things you can get done when you own half the worlds,” said a woman sardonically.

“Same as the old boss,” a man muttered into his glass.

“Ten c’s says they finally found Jack Jr and that damn engine he left with.”

“It’d be about time,” groaned the traveler.

A particularly drunken voice wondered “Where you think he ended up, anywoo?”

“Gone down the same way as bananas, I’d wager,” said the bartender.

“Froze up and shared by the richest fuckers in the worlds, like everything else that’s any good? Actually, that’d be a fair end for that ancient prick.”

“Hey, dirty old ear that Jack might’ve been—” said the young man.

“Mighta been,” he says,” another interjected.

“Bell Techtronics is the reason any of us is here.”

“And bless those rich bastards’ hearts for it,” said the sardonic lass.

“Besides, all those things they said he did, it’s still only rumors.”

“Kid, rumors is half of all that’s real.”

Despite the sounds of agreement, the young man went on. “Folk are quick to forget all the change he done for the better. Not to abdicate for shit-kicking crooks in general, but: mag-engines, graverators, photon shooters, BioGen. They made the first chewteins that ain’t tasted like boot mold and sheeit. You know he cleaned the trash out of Earth’s oceans in the 2800s? Just as a favor. I can’t imagine how he did that, but to Jack? A wave of the wand. Snap of the fingers.”

“Just like rape, murder, and ruinin lives. Here to Luna and back.”

And while a number of others muttered agreements, the young man stipulated: “*Allegedly.*”

The traveler butted back in. “The day I give a damn about some dead corpo is the day I shake a fart-farmer’s hand and don’t wipe my own.” They laughed and he went on. “Though I will say this much: if you gotta hitch, hitch it with Dixon & Sons, or an Asuran, or a cob-jammed Xisthenes pirate if you can—so long as you don’t gotta resort to a ride on the bacon express. I tell you, it’s filthy, dank, crowded—and the smell. Actually, come to think of it, a bit like it is with you all in here.

“I tell you what, them hogs is not to be truffled with. Each of em musta weighed at least two-fifty kilo. Big sons of em. Wrapped in these straight-to-gut feeders and tubes that shot their piss and shit straight out into space.”

Someone interjected, "As if we need any more junk in the pass."

He continued, "Makes me sick to just think of, conditions they keep them cellsacks in. I tell ya, I ain't eatin printed food again as long as I live.

"And the driver—and this was the strangest thing—he'd call back in some language I ain't never heard, and whenever he did you'd forget the hogs was ever there by the way they'd listen to this man. Then—every time, like clockwork—they'd turn up into this ungodly, high-pitched 'weeee', and all the sudden they'd all drop at the same time. I tell you, it was the *strangest* thing I ever did see. I'd call something up at him and he'd pound back and yell his hibble-bibble and all them piggies sat up at attention and 'wee'd. Man was like a god to them—the same one taking them to farm, course how they ever gonna know that? I sure warn't telling em. Then they'd sit down in their filthy coats, back to business as usual. Looked like them soldiers off one them ancient history programs. Like the one about that feller what almost took the world back twenty-thirty-nine. Shuck, what in bells was his—Hitler, that was it."

"Hitler. Was he the feller that crossed them Earth mountains on an elephant?"

"What in the worlds is an elephant?"

"World War One, I b'lieve," the storyteller said. "Wa-hey back when there was just the one world to war over."

"You sure that was in the twenty-aughts? I could've sworn it was further back."

But he insisted, "Yes, siree—twenty-thirty-nine, that's when it was. Bout a hundred million dead, if I recall correctly."

"Ha," ejected a man with a helping of pride. "That all? Hunded million, that's a good day on the *Dave*."

"Anyhow," continued the narrator, "and I'm making a cane out of a sugarcube, but, one of these valiant soldiers, I guess he'd decided he'd had enough with having me in his pen. As I was pounding and yelling at his master, he came up behind me and snuck his snout into my mag-pipe. He'd got it into his fat head he was on a mission to find whatever it was he figured was up in my ass."

There came a group of hearty chortles, then a hawk and a spit.

"I think that old-world jibberjaw up front musta blowed some kinda pig-whistle or somethin, cause I spent all the rest of the day with the big feller holding me up like I was the Jupiter's Claw. Had to brace myself inside and out, and so I couldn't pound or holler no more—lest I be utterly sodomized, once and for all. I reckon the driver knew as much, too, the cob-jammed bastard, but he didn't do nothing about it. And you'll say, 'well what could he do?' And I'd tell you, 'how about speed the hell up?' But anyhow all'a sudden the doors sling open behind us, and I seen the light. I tell you, I'd have been a cog in the hands of the Church then and there if they'da had me. I never been more happy to see the open range in all my days. The big feller—and this was another odd instance, though not quite s'much as how they'd hailed to their chief—but this fat, sluggish pig shot straight out into the dome like a jockey after a job. Took the hoses and trenchcoat and all with him. Musta hurt like hells too, by the way he was squealing. But just like that, he was gone. Nothing but a streak of piss and shit and blood floatin off in his trail. I tell you now, for certain—I seen it myself—and I only seen it for a moment, but I tell you, it was in his eyes: that pig yearned for the stars."

There was a moment of quiet, then they burst into uproarious laughter. One of the men fell off his stool.

“I swear it! I swear it to you,” the storyteller continued. “More than any man or woman I’ve ever met, that pig yearned for the open frontier—and I thank cob for that fact! We looked for him—on account the homelander blamed me, or at least I reckoned so by his tone. So I followed him out into the dark edge of the dome, torch in hand. Fore long the trails begun to go a-splatterin against the walls. Never did find nothing, so, by and by, we turn about and come back, dodging the droplets that’s still in the air like they was death incarnation. But finally—and not too far off from the inn there, the coziness of rest right there in front of us, waiting up on the hill—we’s in the shadows at this point, and the hauler felt something on his shoulder I guess, so he starts to yappin and falling around like an automaton on its back. Lo and behold, I could swear a comet was fallin on top of us. I covered my eyes before its white tail come our direction, and then just as sudden I hear something *WHAM* into the dirt, kicked up dust through the whole dome, lets out nothing but a gi-mongous crash—”

“It’s a Uranian space worm,” said the woman in a hackneyed voice, receiving the obligatory chuckles that follow such folksy references.

“Well,” said the narrator, all attention on him. “I bout struck myself into the ground hard enough to dig a crater. When I’d gathered my wits, I looked and found my Earthan friend had fell into a spell. I had to drag him and Harold—that’s what I’d took to calling the pig by this point; seemed only right, us being so familiar—I drug em both on back to the station’s inn, must’a been a half-kilometer from where we was.

“I was lucky the hauler couldn’t speak a lick of Spaceish, too. Furrow-faced, squat-chested homelander. Looked like a big hairy bug. I knew what he’s thinking the whole time over supper—bushy eyebrows shunted my way, it was hard not to. But he couldn’t speak a word of it. Or wouldn’t. Never have met a man like’at and I hope never to again. Thank cob we had two rooms and a supper of cel-cakes between us, and only one day’s trip.”

Someone wondered, “What happened to Harold?”

Then the narrator snickered. “Blast his heart, Harold died doing what he loved: shoving his head into holes. Well, as we learned later, he’d bucked off the ground a few feet past arty-grav, and into a zero-G tumble. That’s why we never caught up with him. He must’ve hit the ceiling, jammed his snout into an oxygen chute, cause when we left off this morning, by oath, we seen his whole head or-bittin the station. Harold finally found his way home.” Their laughter roared and spiraled down into satisfied sighs. The narrator had one last notion to add. “But, I tell you what—and this is for certain: whatever you heard about *real* bacon, it’s true.”

Suddenly the choir was drowned out by the clangor of stacks of metal objects sliding and crashing to the floor. Young tried to stop the spill he had initiated accidentally, but was already too late.

A few of the patrons leaned back to look into the pawn shop but would see only Adler shaking his head.

Soon the front door jostled, dinged, kicked open. The owner shoved his gut in and said, “You break anything, you’re buying it,” and hung his head so as not to scrape the ceiling with it. His gut pressed Adler out of his path and squeezed behind the counter to settle into the space like a crab into an ill-fitting shell.

A hologram projected from the device on his wrist. Adler noticed he was inspecting a simulated version of the *Fate*, despite distinctly advising that it wasn’t for sale. The

man's heft leaned over the counter and he whistled and told Adler, "That's a fancy cruiser you got out there. Not often you see a beauty like her. You could probably net a few hundred for her on the market. I'd set up a buy if you want."

Before he had even finished, Adler said, "Just the racer."

"You sure?" No answer. "Alright," hummed the broker with a tone as if to remind what he was missing out on. "The racer, for her I could give you eleven, tops."

"Elev—eleven?" choked Adler. "You know damn well that thing's worth forty, at least."

"I got customers waiting," (the shop was empty save for the travelers), "and I'd be losing business, since I figure I gotta strip her down fast. Now, it'd be one thing if you had the owner's chit, but," and he trailed, knowing it best not to pry.

A glance to the shuttle station, and Adler let out a breath between his teeth. "Eleven," he conceded. The man rapped on the counter. He used the holoware on his wrist to make the exchange. His huge fingers would hover deliberately before pressing the buttons that somehow seemed greasy without even being real. It sent a prompt to Adler's waveband, accepted with a thought. A blaring negative number in his right eye increased to three-thousand and change. "Out of debt, at least," Adler muttered.

After all was said and done and the man had leaned into the workshop to ask whoever was welding to stop and lend a hand with the vehicle, he asked Adler, "So, oath, who'd you pick her up off?"

"Somebody who picked it up off of somebody else," said Adler.

The broker shrugged. "Long as it don't come back on me."

Then the broker slinked down, nodded toward Young and said with a quiet intimacy, "He yours? If you want, I could get you another five for him. Maybe ten."

Adler's enterprising eyes looked the boy over. He answered, "He's mine. But he's not for sale." Before the pawn man could press him further, Adler went on, and by his tone one might think that he needed to vent. "You wouldn't want him, anyhow. Kid's a fine navigator, but he's... not all there." He tapped his head. "Can't remember a thing I tell him. Can't aim to save his life. Can't leave him on his own for a minute without getting lost or in some kinda trouble. Sometimes I worry he'll forget how to wipe his own ass. Plus, the longbones. Just another headache. Point is, he's more trouble than he looks. And on top of that, the kid's—he's just odd."

"Yeah?" The pawnshop owner was watching as Young tried to reconcile the purpose of a straw hat. "He's weird, huh?"

"I said odd."

"How so?"

Adler looked over the boy and turned back to the broker. He leaned in so Young wouldn't hear and drew the man in with a few fingers—then once again, beckoning until their faces were inches away. He knew he had him then. Adler let out a disbelieving huff and told him: "The kid says he sees the future in his dreams, and he remembers the day he way born."

The broker pulled back and shot him the look that they all do after Adler tells folk what he tells them when he wants to keep them distant. Chins jiggled and wide eyes scanned the kid at the back of the shop with a quizzical look. Then he whispered that sentiment they often would whisper after Adler had told them this fact:

"That is... weird."

03 One in a Billion

Out he came from the blood-pinked fluid. A bright light waited beyond. Wide, confused eyes sought. Extruded, he was grasped and pulled at and dropped onto a rough, rubbery surface. There followed a squelch. The womb was deflated like a broken, papery egg. There was no crying as he came slowly down the conveyor.

Like the bedding beneath him, the chamber was narrow and white. It blocked out the world beyond in a haze. All the arms and apparatuses cleaning and preparing and swathing him were matte black with grey labels, with defined semi-human muscles, featuring delicate fingers and scanners, needles and toys to distract.

The plastic sheen that swaddled him and warmed him and bathed him and dried and fed him with microscopic intravenous injections was grey, though it faded into transparency and then was gone. Sensors whirred and beams of light scanned the baby. Just as Young could hear it well up in fear, they ceased. The arms tucked away. The machine hummed. The child watched a holoware toy, a green dragon weaving through the stars. He couldn't know how this machine held his life in its hands.

Or how it should have. But the machine was cut open abruptly with a *clunk* and a single slice that left red edges. Whatever thought it had was gone.

Then the baby closed its eyes and it became hard to see. The light of reality was far harsher than in his cradle in the clouds. The silhouettes of four heads appeared above, one-by-one, one closer than the rest. This man took up the baby. "Here, I've got him," he whispered.

"I've got a good feeling about him," a woman remarked.

"You always say that," he said. He wore a dark blue suit and a shiny black helmet. His face could not be seen yet. "Get the door. Quickly; we have to go. The Mistress is up." Other groups of feet could be heard hastening away nearby.

Through the halls at a quickened pace, but with composure enough not to arouse suspicion from passers-by. The baby could see that all four were donned in the same jumpsuits of varying colors. Blue and white, green and orange-red.

"Almost there," said the woman in white. "How is he?"

"Just fine," answered the man holding the baby. His voice was deep but crisp and youthful. It resonated from in its smooth black helmet, which warped and bent gold shapes. The familiar voice added, "He's not even crying. I thought they always cried."

Suddenly, they halted and almost collided. All four appeared stunted. A sharp gasp stole the peace from the air. From beyond the next hallway they could hear her, a lash of thunder from nowhere.

"What are you doing? Aren't you meant to be watching over the children?" Whoever she'd caught squeaked something out but she struck through. "What is it? What could possibly be so alluring that it tempts you away from the most important task on this entire ship? *Your* entire livelihood." The small voice tried again, but its fumbled words wouldn't warrant a quote. Then something wrapped in plastic was snatched away. She let out a single laugh, which seemed to take a long time to travel the distance of her neck. Voice almost a purr, she said, "Dried, salted, meat. An old world pleasure. Some other time, I might've forgiven you for this." But she stood and her shadow loomed down the hallway, red and crooked. "Take him," she said, and the fear that struck into that meek voice as he was dragged away struck the same into anyone that heard it.

Meanwhile, the four debated in whispers, "We need to go back!"

"No! We're almost there. We move on."

"How do you expect to—" argued the man holding the child.

"Through here," replied the woman in white, and tore at a loose panel of the wall.

It seemed she had been through this process many times before. The man in orange helped her, and was equipped with just the hand-tool to unbolt it.

"What will you," the man holding the baby started to say, but she interjected.

"It's alright. We'll stall her," and the other two in black masks glanced to her, uncertain. She pushed him into the maintenance halls beyond the walls. "Don't worry about us, just go," she told him, and they closed up behind him. Next came a silence reminiscent of the moment before one is walked onto a gallows.

Seconds after the light had been cut off from their new world of pungently stale air, he heard her footsteps coming around the corner. Stilettos clacked like talons. Young heard her muffled, angered voice demand, "And what are you doing in this sector?"

"Nothing, Mistress. On our way to new duties and, crossed paths."

The silence held a tension that seemed capable of rupturing the walls to pull them all out into space. Finally the Mistress gave her retort.

"Is that so? It seems odd, the three of you together. A chemist, a launch assessor, and a meditech. The three divisions, they're not all that close together, are they?"

The man within the wall waited, but no answer came. His breath was held so tight he could feel his heartbeat in his helm. The baby made only the slightest burble and he shushed the boy and stroked at his soft pale cheek. He was a rogue in a dragon's cave and in his arms was nestled one of its most favorite treasures.

He heard a deep sigh from beyond, emitting not so much rage, but disappointment. Though soft, it shot pins and needles into the small hairs on his neck.

Suddenly something dense fell to the ground, letting out a particularly sinister *clonk*. Whatever it was rattled to and fro on the floor until it stilled. Then the Mistress told them, "I'm tired. You'll punish yourselves."

And they did. One of them picked up the baton. He could hear the long stride of her footsteps fading, along with her harem of vanguards. Before the first blow was delivered, however, and they began to shriek out in pain, the man had removed his helmet and cradled the baby carefully inside it. He stuffed a white synthetic cloth undershirt under Young's head so as to muffle the noise.

Adler—or, at least, it looked just like Adler with short hair, albeit years older and with cheeks even more hollow—looked down on the baby with a twist of emotions that the child could not come near to understanding even after all this time. His nose was dribbling, and his dark brown eyes were far more soulful than Young had ever seen them. They welled with a liquid that he quickly wiped away. Yet they seemed cheery. A smile played at the corners of his lips. Fading beneath the muffled sound of his footsteps were the muted screams of his last living friends, and the repetition: *thud, thud, thud, thud*.

Soon they were alone in the thin maintenance halls. Each grated surface was covered in a coat of white dust. Simple holoware lights flickered on and then off as he passed and the air clung with spider webs through whose dapples projected patterns on the walls much like the stars Young was all too familiar with, but which the baby hadn't

yet seen. Now and again the man would hear muffled voices pass and he'd halt and soon enough they would be on their way once more.

A sideways label read 'Sector 7.' He heard a familiar voice that made his tensed shoulders ease. There he found drag marks in the dust on the floor.

He slid the wall carefully open. Dropped out with hardly a sound. Lady Astra was there waiting, nervous, her eyebrows arched up in worry, her deep eyes shining like Earth's oceans, her simple black gown draped over ivory silk and porcelain skin. At close observation, when drifting through the cones of soft light lining the hallways, she seemed to emit a doppler glimmer in the same way a distant sun shifts red or blue at its ends. Light itself was devoured in her raven black hair. It twisted and twinkled in her braids like warping stars and galaxies.

He crept near enough to get her attention with a whisper. "Lady Astra," and she swirled to him, unclutching her hands and gown. She waited while he unraveled his helm and from beneath the unassuming bundle, showed her the child.

She smiled and brought the baby into her grasp, up to her shoulder and resting on the slight of her breast. She looked into the boy's eyes of green and blue, like hers and like his. The three of them smiled, glad to share one moment of peace. Adler asked, "You're sure this is the right thing to do?"

"No," she said, moving to the next room. "But if everyone agrees that it will help, I will do it."

"And how will we know?"

She stopped before the hallway to face him and said, "Hopefully, we won't ever have to find out."

Before they went on, she beckoned him to wait a moment and both ducked beside an archway. At first it seemed no one was around.

Silence is the mark of the Hunter. Among them there was not one more cunning, more inexplicable, or known. Hetzen struck fright into every millimeter of the ship, bow to its stern. Hetzen hunted any and all defectors—always caught them. Always brought them home to the Mistress. Hetzen, by his sheer brutality, could surely take the reins of any uncivilized faction on Earth or Mars or in space and to disastrous ends, but he seemed to savor his services here too much to go anywhere else. Hetzen was an animal, but not a relic like most men like him. He was man no longer. Too much of him had died and been restored. He moved along in silence, nearly immobile except for the skittering, spider-like fingers at the ends of black metal wings. His plaskin and glassteel chest was branded with the number 01. In the center of his helm was a single red eye which surely did not glow the day he was born. Hetzen was a hound to the sheep, of whom stories were told at night between the little ones. He halted in the hallway by the arch where they waited, holding a moment so he could pick up a scent. Then he was gone.

The pair leaned slowly out into the hallway, keeping out of view. Lady Astra rushed across to old forsaken rear-artillery bay. The giant cylinders there were designed for explosive payloads, but would serve just as well for a tiny escape pod.

"Did you take the boy's DNA marker?" she asked. The man felt around his pockets and produced the small grey chit. She took it and said, "Thank you. Please, the door."

He shut it and a clearance symbol flashed, and the lock ground closed inside. He turned again and a young woman who'd slipped out from her hiding place startled him, and he grabbed for his gun but kept it holstered.

"About time," she hissed, hurrying to them. She had dark eyes and hard cheeks and her platinum blonde ponytail whipped with each step. She must have been a launch technician, judging by her orange suit, yet something told him she wasn't. She took the DNA chip and held it up to look over its information. "Let's see who you are, little guy."

"Konstantin," whispered the Lady, gesturing to a handle on a bulky chute. He opened it, and found inside was a shuttle like an armored bean pod, with blankets in a small shelf with a windowed hatch. Astra placed the baby there and kept beside him. Young could see the stars passing from where he was lain. Konstantin tried to take back his syncloth shirt, but the baby clutched and gnawed at it and he couldn't possibly wrest it from him.

"I'll say what you're thinking," said the blond woman. "He's one of them. It's written into his DNA. Mid-to-high caste, I think. Hard to know for certain."

"But he is one of us," asked Konstantin.

"One in a billion," she assured.

"And it's, dominant, in him? You would say?"

"It's obvious. But we can't really know how acute it is until they show us themselves."

This left him unsatisfied. There was a measure of quiet while he studied Lady Astra, who had deceived him. He understood, and accepted it. Her face spoke an apology, but not a plea for forgiveness. She sat beside the baby, fixed his blankets, bundled the shirt beneath his head.

At this moment, someone tried the main door from outside. Muffled shouts and pounding fists followed, and then some ordered them to "Open up in there!"

"We have to send him," said Lady Astra.

"Where's the pilot?" the technician asked.

"We were caught. I had to leave the others behind."

"Bastard sun!" she exclaimed. "Okay, to the core with it, I'll figure it out."

"You're not a mechanist, then, are you?" Konstantin surmised. She glanced his way, but didn't respond.

Lady Astra, soothing as always, "We will find a way, Eve. I am sure of it."

"Is anyone going to tell me what's really going on?"

"Pod's ready, I just need to line up the chamber and cycle ox." Eve was layers deep into holoware dialogs she didn't understand. "Hold on, little guy. I'll get you out of here."

"You told me we were sending off one that could change it all, one that had to be sent. Straight to your most hidden safehouse. This is no quiet way to send a baby, a seven-pound baby, off to your safe safe place. Look at me, Lady Astra, and tell me: is this one special? Is he worth it?"

She did and smiled easily and said "All of them are." Then she whispered to the infant, "Goodbye, and I hope by the stars you never return," and with this, she shut up the pod. The black-haired boy wouldn't hear the rest, yet somehow Young could still hear them in his dreams.

The pounding was swelling. It sounded as though they were trying to break the foggy glassteel down. Their shoulders wouldn't do it, but a plasma torch might. Konstantin stood at the door, sidearm at the ready. The pounding came to a stop. "My Lady?" called a muffled voice from outside. "My Lady, you must allow me in," Commander Moss implored.

Konstantin looked to her and as she cast her eyes down, she seemed to consider it. If they were to be caught, it would be best to be at his mercy. But she kept on with sealing the outer locks of the carriage. She pressed it in and bade Konstantin to help her close the hatch. "There, he's ready. Eve, have you found a way to send him?"

"I'm trying, I'm trying," the technician fumed. The walls were pounding and shouts growing and it had begun at every entrance, rumbling in the floors. All at once her screen shifted to a map with coordinates. "I think—I got it," said Eve, surprised at herself. But though it listed its mechanisms as 'active,' green lights lit the screen and the big gun hummed, there was still a glaring problem: the blast doors were closed.

An arc of flame split through one of the huge double doors. A laser had begun to cut it open. A crowd had gathered outside. Their shadows projected through the foggy material. At their center was a giantess in red.

Eve continued at the terminal, though it seemed she couldn't command the gun open. Her hands had begun to shake. "Almost there, almost," she had repeated, sounding more worried each time.

Astra brought her dainty hand up to the housing of the cold machine. Felt the energy flowing through transistors and contacts. She watched the baby in its little window, smiled as he rocked back and forth.

Suddenly—as if by miracle or magic—the doors of the cannon began to slide open. They could hear its old, unused pieces grind, and it showed from a viewbox on the holoware screen.

Eve exhaled. "Good work, m'Lady." But a horrified look flashed across her when she looked to Astra. She stifled it and got to work. "Should just be a few seconds now."

Lady Astra shivered. Tears of blood flowed from her right eye to her chin. She kept a hand against the machine, holding her composure, and dabbed with a sleeve of her silk gown. As soon as it came away she faltered, and there came another bright red drench rushing over her cheek into the textured patten of her dress to the white floors it slicked like iron rain.

Konstantin rushed to help her, as did Eve—right after she'd told them, "Ready!"

The side door they came in through unlocked and slid open. Commander Moss had a small legion at his back, but he stepped in alone.

Looking them over, he seemed mostly unsurprised. Then he studied Konstantin and knew him. He whispered, "K.C." He gathered all that he needed from the sight of the two of them propping up the Lady who had been drained to a pallor, and the child locked into the chute. Then he sighed with disappointment heavy in his long jowls. The grey in his short, coarse crop of hair reminded of his wiseness, jaded though he was. wrinkles in his forehead were rigid and dark and unwavering as the most hellish mountains on Proxima b. His scowl never changed, and so whatever his ambition, it could hardly be told. He came slowly to them, no floating, no weapons drawn.

He held his hand out. "Give me the boy's marker," he said.

They glanced one-another. Lady Astra nodded, and Eve handed it off to a man in a grey suit, who handed it to again to Moss. He slipped it away into a pocket. When he was near to Konstantin, he spoke in a low voice, saying, "Do you have any idea how this affects your brothers? How it affects you?"

"Either she will kill me, or they will."

"Most probably the former."

“Then let it end things.”

“But your brothers will never be looked at the same way again. First the joy-rider, and now this. Your names and those you share them with will never live down the disgrace. They won’t be looked at the same, or spoken to. They’ll be watched. It won’t be the end. If you do this, it will be the beginning of a chain reaction of sorrow.”

Konstantin thought not to reply, but said, “Then there is no child more fit to go.”

Moss looked to the baby, as beautiful and ordinary as any other baby. He saw the holoware panel, the launch systems ready. He told them, “Send the child.”

All were nonplussed, especially Konstantin whose hand had been hovering near his pistol. Eve nodded, commanded the ship off and said, “Good luck, little guy,” and it launched. The silver-white carriage disappeared, gained momentum out the window, rocketed out of view—disappeared into the darkness. In a matter of seconds, Eve confirmed, “He’s hit dash-m speeds. There’s no catching him now.” Unassuming as it might have looked, the little pod was outfitted with their most recent prototype of the fastest engine unknown to man.

Eve and Astra sighed thankfully. Konstantin wasn’t sure whether to be horrified or reassured. Then Eve was taken by a burst of energy, and she whooped and laughed and took Astra by the hand, over by the hatch to assure it was empty. They looked to other stars, and Eve walked the length of the window, wondering if children had been sent to them as well. Finally, she exhaled, dropped into the seat beside her and started to say something to the effect of “Thank the stars it’s done,” but was shot in the neck.

There was no shriek, although the echo of the round itself seemed to cry for what it had done. Commander Moss held the smoking Lorentz pistol. There was no happiness about it. Lady Astra fell again, the cold white floor slapping and falling silent.

“No!” shouted Konstantin, drew his pistol and leveled at Moss who had already done the same for him. Moss said quietly, “I am sorry.”

In the next moment the doors were sliced open, slammed once and fell spilling sparks and molten goo. Engineers in boxy masks hustled from the steam and out of the way. Boots and black masks marched in—Hetzen’s demonic red eye among them. Commander Moss called out, “I’ve got them. Stand down.”

Technicians set immediately to the control panels behind them, ignoring the bone fragments, blood and bits of matters both grey and white. Seeing the corpse, Hetzen commented only one word: “Beauty.”

The crowd parted for the Mistress. She needn’t say a word. She towered six feet over the tallest of them, her shiny red dress rippling to the floor. Her face was eerily flawless, unsettlingly unwrinkled, with muscles tightened in furor. Like fangs her black eyes sank into Lady Astra, the only one who wouldn’t shrink from her gaze.

She didn’t speak. It was too late and she knew it. It was already done.

Commander Moss stepped to them, as if to wedge between the two. “My apologies, Madame Cavorra. I was too late to stop them.”

She made her way toward the window in graceful ten-foot strides. He had seen her in the halls before, but never more than glances. A moment before she was gone, or she appeared suddenly. It is unsettling, to see only space suits your whole life, then one day here’s a woman in a red one-shoulder cocktail dress walking the halls alone.

He remembered, when he was a child, a time that the whole ship celebrated waking her from slumber, and he didn’t even think of her as a real person but more as

this representative figure, which stood for all of that life outside of the *Heiress*, where many of them aspired some day to go. He was as certain he would never meet her as any citizen is of their nation's royals, but then he received a commendation for his time in surface combat and behind Commander Moss and behind the Airmaster who pinned the badge to his lapel, up past the generals and the Hunters, sat on a grand throne on a ledge in the dark where few others could see, there she was.

He had seen her sporadically from then on. A passing in the hall, or spotted behind a door before it closes. She would disappear for years at a time and then suddenly she was there. He never questioned her or what she was; no one did. She seemed absolutely integral, all-encompassing, everywhere at any time, and when she walked into a room, the people in it worked. He figured her for a caretaker presiding over the children—they were all she ever inquired about anyway. That night he had come to understand her as much more. The ceilings were vaulted but her head nearly touched. Her legs must have been his height or more. Her waist was as thin as his head, and her mouth, uncannily wide. Her black eyes only blinked because they felt they should.

She spoke, and her voice was operationally clear. "The blood," she asked, "did they take it? Do you have the chit?"

Moss dropped his head and answered. "They must have sent it with the baby."

"Find it," she said. Hetzen needed no more, he was first out of the room. "Bring it back! Bring back my child!"

"He isn't yours," said Lady Astra weakly. Five scarlet beings appeared to take her away. Konstantin fought the torturers, was consumed by their robes until he pulled one out and onto the floor and struck it with his pistol, was reigned back by the others, his gun went off and the e-bullet bounced on the ceiling. He wrestled for the gun and was thrown to his knees and then something hit the back of his head hard enough to knock it clear from his hand. It skittered over the floor. Commander Moss' guard stood over him, but backed off when the Commander took his leave.

"They aren't yours. We don't belong to you!" Astra spent the last of her strength to scream this and repeat it down the hallway to wherever it was they dragged her, which seemed like it must have been a mile off. Konstantin watched his gun. The Hunters watched him.

Silence fell over the room again, except for that constant hum that pervaded the ship. Watching the stars out the window, deep in thought. Grasping for them, as if her fingers could slice them out of existence. "He," she said finally, surprised, and curious. She huffed in the way that people do when they ruminate. Even this small sound was amplified by her swanlike features such that he could feel it in his gut.

She returned to the door soundless but the faint ripple of her dress and the heavy *tink-tink* of heels or claws. Konstantin felt her pass above him. Suddenly she was gripped by a thought, and another word that Lady Astra had said bubbled from her throat, burning with epiphany: "*They.*"

She commanded the troops, "Check the flight decks, all of them. I want every ship accounted for," and they turned to go with officers parroting her words. Konstantin lunged for his gun but was tripped and her talons would reach across the length of his body to reel him in. She hoisted him with one hand, his head set between her fingers, and said, "You will be forgotten. You must."

The child had seen none of this. He would only learn about it after. To him the conversation had been silent up until the moment he was launched. All he would recall for years were the stars passing overhead, aberrating and collecting into lines then waves then shapes, shining bright before him, leaving only darkness behind. The very fabric of reality seemed to ripple. The tube he passed through existed, surely, but the many branches at its edges could not all have. They pooled and separated like liquid. They tubed and connected to outlets like misshapen windows whose inhabitants lived and died at unimaginable speed. There were seams of abyssal nothing, and seams that lead out into the frontier. He watched the universe mutating before his eyes.

The baby was long gone. In his memory, she had only been imprinted a moment, the Lady in Red. He didn't see her for himself, so why is she still in his dream? Nothing of the giant of a woman taking him up by either side of his jaw, how she raised as easily as one raises a glass. He didn't know the futile struggle, or the woman who gazed into his eyes in the same way that a snake does when it hypnotizes its prey. His mouth and his ears began to bleed and while he fought she observed without an ounce of pity or remorse—yet not without care. At the corners of her lips there was a twinge of disappointment, of hurt. Young never experienced the tortures lain on them. He never wore a silver collar on his neck. He bore no witness to the grinding *crunch* when her sleek, shimmering, ivory white talons broke through his savior's skull. Never saw how his eyes watched the stagnant flickering of distant worlds. He saw nothing of the young man who sacrificed all for a hazel-eyed baby. A man who fell limp and was dragged across the crimson-slickened floor.

As she turned and drifted away, not a sound could be heard hemorrhaging from the long, inscrutable tails of her gown. She left the rest to mop up all the signs of disorder. Before reaching the threshold, the Lady in Red released his bleeding corpse like a broken toy.