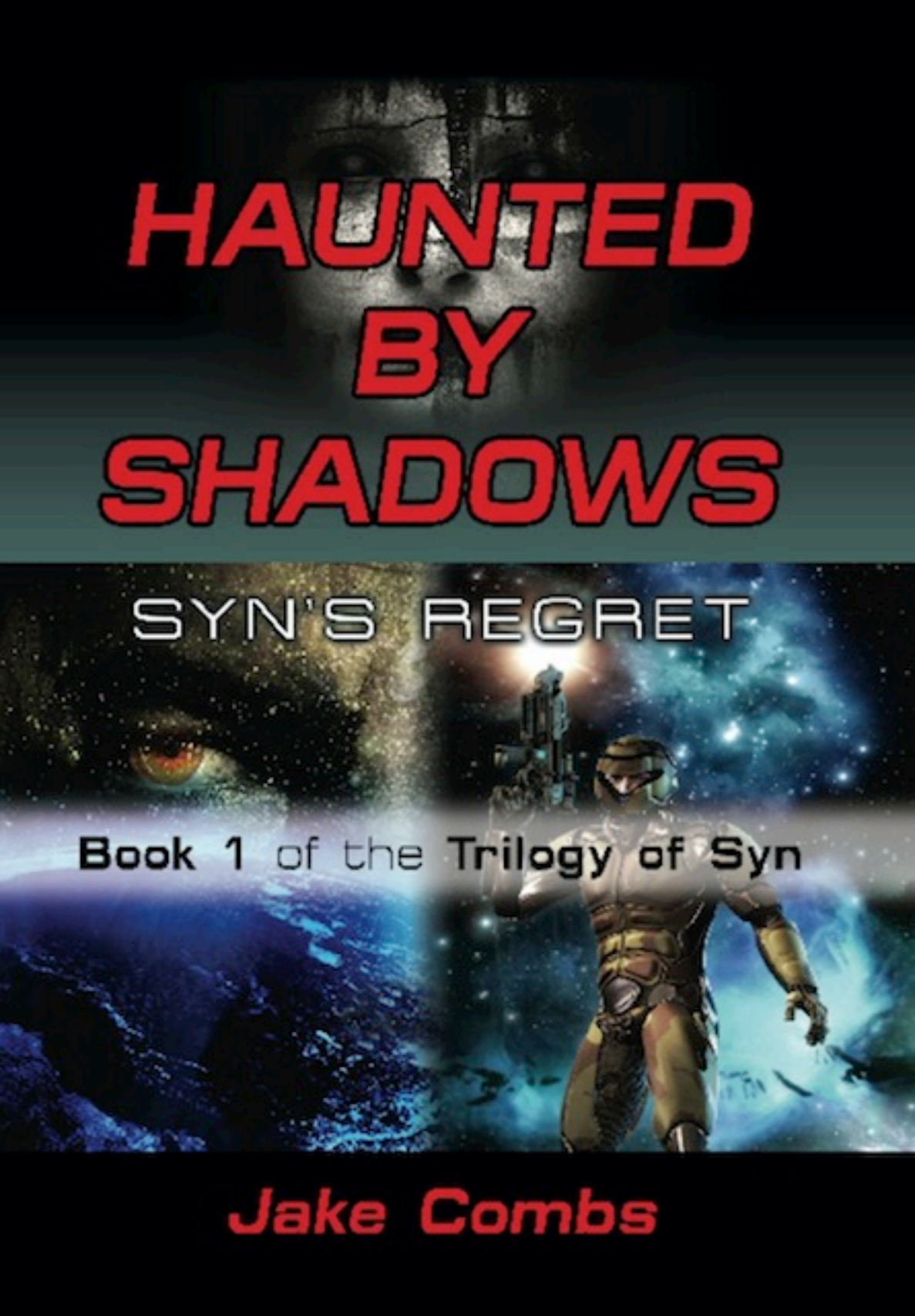


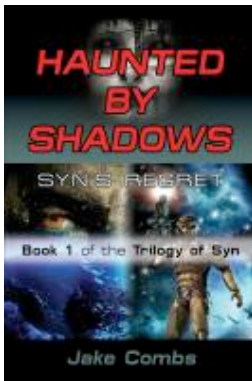
HAUNTED BY SHADOWS

SYN'S REGRET

Book 1 of the Trilogy of Syn

The book cover features a central figure of a soldier in a futuristic, gold and black combat suit, holding a large, futuristic rifle. The soldier is positioned in the lower right quadrant. The background is a dark, starry space scene with a large, glowing blue nebula on the right and a large, glowing orange and yellow eye-like structure on the left. The overall tone is dark and mysterious.

Jake Combs



What happens when those in a position to lead do so only for their own gain? Syn must follow every instruction from his superiors, and hopefully find the cure to save his family from a man-made disease. The disease that afflicts them is so heinous that it not only kills the infected, but brings their corpses back to life. In a world without law, if the gangs don't kill him, the environment surely will...

Haunted by Shadows

Syn's Regret

The Trilogy of Syn Book 1

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Haunted by Shadows

Syn's Regret

The Trilogy of Syn Book 1

Jake Combs

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2014

First Edition

Dedication

This book would not have been possible without the love and support of my beautiful wife Afton and our wonderful children Zia and Merrick. You guys never stopped believing in me and for that I will be eternally grateful.

This is also dedicated to my mom as well as a handful of others.

Mom for imparting her love of writing and being at the ready to critique and for suggesting some of the more twisted sections of the book.

To Aj for helping to inspire the story.

To Odiumar, BigPapa and SirJohn for being there the nights when I needed to vent and offer suggestions when I was stuck.

To Rick, without his help this would probably still be sitting on my hard drive for many more months and for keeping me on track.

To the wonderful people in TF for their moral and financial support along the way.

And lastly to you, the reader, thank you for your support.

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Chapter 1

Part 1 - Things to come, things that were

Razzen is a world known for many things throughout the centuries. This planet was home to the rare ficen crystals, whose worth could buy a large city with only a pocket full of unrefined material. These rare crystals were known to heal wounds if ground up, as well as used by the Federation of Planets as a focusing device for their laser rifles. Four hundred years of mining had left this world a nearly barren waste. There are no longer mining projects due to the fact that all known sources had been removed from the planet and the growth period of new crystals required an estimated two thousand years to reach their mature stage and can then again be mined and taken off planet. The days here are long, consisting of thirty six hours, thirty of which are daylight fueled by the twin suns. Near constant electrical storms, caused by solar radiation further adds to the visible light.

Nearly six thousand years have passed since the last crystal mining operation had ceased to operate, leaving the Federation to seek other minerals to make their weapons operational. With the lack of a need for this barren planet, the Federation had instituted Federation Mandate AW331, re-commissioning the entire planet to serve as a prison for the many hardened criminals. The prison system thrived here for over six hundred years before the Federation stepped in again to make changes. Federation employees had been removed from the planet, leaving the criminals to fend for themselves.

As the centuries passed, citizens began flocking to this nearly forgotten world, searching for entertainment. Now the home of the Suicide Games, corporate sponsors would fund the winner's tickets off world.

As fewer people came to the world, the corporate sponsors agreed to visit the planet for the games once every fifteen years to host the games. Thirteen years have passed since the last game.

Part 2 - A Woman Scorned

Generations have made their homes here, many stemming from the prison population left to rot. Many people living from day to day, doing everything they can to merely survive, become hardened and many losing any sense of morals they may have had to begin with. Nearly everyone here was armed with some sort of weapon, and even more knew how to use them.

A select few have the rare chance to make a life for themselves on world, and even fewer can get off. Sky, a mother of two, and well known racer needed to win only one more race. Her win that morning meant not just to win the circuit, but to pay off the men who had kidnapped her son of two years. Leaving her six year old daughter, known around the garage as Hex, with her racing manager, Sky drove out to the meeting spot.

Twenty miles from the nearest settlement was an abandoned refueling station that had long since been pumped dry. This building, made of corrugated metal and scraps of wood butted up to the bottom of the cliff face. After the fuel wells dried anything that could be used was removed, including all electrical wiring and any metal not home to numerous amounts of rust or bullet holes. As per their instructions, Sky left her racing buggy about one race track away and walked the remaining distance to the station.

Looking around for the first time, taking in her surroundings, she realized that with the exception of the buggy, there was nothing behind her for as far as she could see but a lone shrub, growing despite the elements against it, just like any person that had a chance of living to get off world. Walking just as slowly as she had been

instructed, Sky notices for the first time a glint of metal at the top of the cliff.

“I knew they’d have a spotter. Okay Sky, it’ll be okay,” she mutters to herself out loud, knowing that she just needed to keep taking each step if there was any hope of saving her son. The racer inside reminding her to keep her head up to look for both the nearest threats and those hiding behind the next bend.

She saw the smoke trail before the crack of the rocket fired hits her ears. Looking up just in time to see the missile pass over her head, quickly turning as she hears the whistling report followed by the detonation of the rocket as it collides with the buggy.

“I get it you assholes, I’m at your mercy. I have your money, let me see my son!” she yelled to the cliff. An engine roars to life from the shadows of the garage of the station. With a screech of tires, a refitted supply truck speeds forward and swerves to hit the mother. Diving out of the way, she collides with the ground hard. The truck quickly stops, just passed where she had been moments before. She looked up to see six rifles aiming at her head. Seven men stood on the flatbed of the truck, all of them wearing a combination of camouflage pants and shredded shirts of various colors, with pieces of metal woven in to add a sort of body armor in close fighting. The one man without a rifle jumps down, landing inches from Sky’s head.

“Give me the bag, and if you twitch in a manner that I dislike, the men will open fire and then we will go and take both of your kids to have in any way we please.”

Pulling the bag off of her back, she quickly hands it to the closer of the men, noticing the smell of blood on his clothes. While grabbing the bag from her, the man pulls out his hard round pistol sticking out of his waistline. Quickly aiming, he fires two times into the side of her left leg calf muscle.

One of the men made to jump from the truck.

"Where are you going?" the leader demanded.

"Her brat bit me. Now I'm going to take it out on her ass," he said unbuttoning his pants.

"Not this time. We have places to be."

Quickly jumping back onto the truck, the man then hit his fist onto the brown truck cab. With another rev of the engine, the truck quickly drives away. His voice trailing away as he adds, "Let's go get our money."

Waiting until the truck could no longer be seen on the horizon, she lifts herself off of the sand covered ground. Favoring the wounded leg, she slowly walks the remaining distance to the doorway of the station. In the dark, she approached cautiously, looking for traps. Finally seeing the outline of a small figure tied to a chair, something didn't sit right with her.

Then, hearing the silence for the first time, she moved to the boy faster. At the same time she reached the chair, her eyes finally adjusted to see into the darkness. She inhales a short breath and collapses to her knees as she sees that her perfect boy was missing his head, which lay in his own lap, mouth open as if he were screaming. She didn't scream. Gritting her teeth, she rose and saw the shovel lying on the floor. Hands clenched tight enough to draw blood from her palms; she knew what had to be done.

Hours of digging, followed by laying her son's body in the grave and covering his already cool corpse, led to her slowly walking the twenty miles to the settlement known as Reach. Each step was excruciating but she trudged on.

As she approached Reach, the first thing she saw was the large tower near the one entrance. Quickly followed by the large metal walls, already rusted, blocking out the view of all buildings within. Seeing large dried pools of blood on the road as she got closer to the tower, she slowed her step, knowing that her best chance would be to allow those watching her to realize that she's not a threat to them. Each step brought more pain, and a new resolve to get back to her daughter.

Waiting for the report of a weapon fired, or the threats of a watching guard, Sky continued her slow walk into the town until reaching a small town square. This square, if it could truly be called that, consisted of an empty fruit stand on the east side that not only lacked any merchandise, but the vendor as well. Looking to the remaining building on the west side, a one story, windowless building made of red clay that when set resembled the color of dried blood. In the center of the square were three bullet ridden tires stacked on top of each other. Continuing to walk past these derelict structures on a path that was barely wider than her former buggy, found the one building that she knew would have some life in it, the single three story building in the entire town, the Riz Inn.

Upon reaching the doorway to the inn, she quickly realized that a very large man was blocking her path. The bouncer stood with arms crossed, covered in both old and new scars, and wearing a pair of dark lens mining goggles, only grunted at the approaching woman.

“I’m looking for transport, is there anyone inside that can help me?”

“Ten creds entrance, and talk Milo behind bar,” the bouncer said holding out his right hand, while resting the left on his worn leather holster at his waist. Sky quickly complied, placing the last few credits she had into the large gloved hand. The large man stepped aside, allowing her to enter the dark establishment. With eyes adjusting quickly to the gloom, she walked as quickly as her

wounded leg would allow toward the bar and the balding man behind.

“Are you Milo?” she asked as soon as he looked at her. The short man barely came up to her shoulders, forcing her to look down while speaking to him. The man made a quick nod in reply.

“I’m looking to get transport back to Fuez City, how much will that cost?” she asked, ready to do anything to secure transport home.

The man gave her a smile before replying, “For you Sky, nothing.”

Taken aback, she stammered forgetting that she was a well-known racer, “How, how do you know me?”

“I watched that race where you beat both of the Scolary brothers, causing them to crash. That day the odds were paying out 400 to 1 if you won, and I bet everything I had that day. Thanks to you winning, I was able to buy not only the Riz, but all of Reach,” he told her very quickly, nearly bouncing up and down as he shook her hand.

“Brun get in here,” the short man yelled out, followed by the large bouncer coming from the doorway.

Brun grunted at his much smaller boss. “I want everyone out, we’re closed until tomorrow, once they’re all gone you’ll be driving the lady and I to Fuez.”

“Everybody Move!” the first words from Brun were yelled out in a growling roar. The few patrons quickly rose out of their chairs and ran for the door. Immediately following their movement, Brun called out to his brother, “Brind, watch place, boss back soon.”

A man entered the bar from another door, appearing to be an exact copy of the bouncer at the entrance, but instead of a holster at his waist, he carried an oversized four barrel scattergun. As soon as the

large man double checked the ammo loaded on his belt as well as in the breach of the gun, the trio turned and exited the building through the main entrance.

In a single file line, with Brun in front, followed by Sky and Milo in the rear, the group walked around the side of the inn and approached a large vehicle that resembled a cross between a military off road buggy and an armored personnel carrier. The large all black vehicle, starting to fade from exposure to the harsh sun, was surrounded by a trio of dead bodies.

"Oh my shit!" she exclaimed, noticing that the visitors were all dressed in the same fashion as the bandits whom had taken and defiled her son.

"Brun, when we get back, cut off your brother's little toe as a reminder," Milo began to raise his voice, "NO ONE EVEN GETS CLOSE ENOUGH TO TOUCH MY FUCKING RIDE!"

Brun only grunts in reply. "Sorry you had to see that. They know the rules, and sometimes you must enforce them. I have a stocked med kit under the seats, plus I used to be a cutter, so I can help get whatever round is lodged in that leg of yours. Now, tell me how you came to Reach, needing my help." Milo says with a smile, all the while helping Sky step into the large vehicle.

Meanwhile, back at Sky's garage, a large truck pulls to a stop behind the building. The bandits that had tormented Sky jumped off of the flat bed and began walking inside. The leader turns to look at his masked driver, "Keep it running, won't be long." He then turns and enters the building.

The man walked straight for the staircase in front of him, leading to the manager's office overlooking the maintenance bay of the garage. "Suphen! Get your ass down here worm!" the man calls. A short balding and wrinkled man limps out of the office.

"Is the job done?" Suphen asks.

"You can say that. She won't be racing anyhow," the man says with a smirk.

"Good, Mister Scolary will be very pleased, just to be sure, take the daughter with you, she's in the office, all tied up," Suphen pauses as he reached in the drawer of the old metal desk and pulling out a small, but full bag. "Here's your money."

The man takes the offering and peers inside. "Looks like it's all here. Next time you need the Renegades let me know. Alright boys, grab the girl and let's roll," he says as he turns to leave.

A muffled scream followed by a deep thump precedes two members of the Renegades as they carry the bound child to their truck.

Two hours later and still twenty minutes out of town, Milo finishes patching the bullet wounds that Sky had received.

"You're lucky they used the cheap rounds, anything else and you wouldn't have a leg anymore," Milo says looking up at Sky from her wounded leg. "Brun, when we arrive, walk the lady inside and make sure no one is waiting for her." Brun gives his customary grunt.

The remaining moments pass quickly and in silence. Brun exits the vehicle first, followed quickly by Sky. The duo walked into the garage with Brun in the lead and his revolver in hand.

"Sky, Sky, oh my god, they took her," Suphen says in tears, limping more than usual, and rubbing the back of his head. Sky walks over to the man, putting her hand on his shoulder to comfort him.

"Who has Hex?" She asks calmly.

"It was the Re.. Rene... the Renegades, same ones who took your boy," he stammers between sobs. Sky punches him hard enough in the stomach to knock all air out of him.

"Him, I shoot?" Brun gets out as a growl.

"I'll deal with him later," Sky says as she walks back to the vehicle outside. Before she reaches it, the door is opened for her by Milo from the inside.

"I take it things are not well?" He asks her as soon as she is seated.

"Those fuckers have my girl now, can you take me to the Trentik Inn. I need to hire a crew," she says through gritted teeth.

"No. If you need a crew, you want the Acolytes. I've used them a couple times," he insists while he puts his hands on hers reassuringly. "Brun to the Asteroid."

Within a matter of minutes, the large vehicle arrives at its destination, a large five story clay building, reinforced with patchwork pieces of metal where windows once had been. Two men, both larger than Brun and each armed with large assault rifles, guard the entrance.

Both Milo and Brun exit the ride, Brun quickly moving to assist Sky out while Milo speaks to the bouncers, "Is Hektik in tonight boys?"

"No sir, but Reaper is," the one on the left says without even looking at the man.

"Take the lady to speak to Reaper, let him know that if the Acolytes help her, their debt is square," Milo says while slipping a few credits into the bouncer's gloved hands.

With that taken care of, Milo returns to his ride. "The boys at the door will take care of you. I hope you find those bastards. Brun, let's get back," he says climbing into the vehicle, not once taking his eyes off of Sky. As soon as he sits in his padded seat, the car speeds off leaving Sky coughing at the kicked up dust.

The large man turns and opens the door to enter. The moment the door is ajar, a wall of noise pours out into the rapidly cooling evening air. Sky cringes from the sound briefly as it hits her ears full force, momentarily making her dizzy. Quickly shaking off the effects of the noise, Sky follows behind the man.

Nearly every chair is filled, save for a torn bench where one man sits holding a glass of what's on tap. The man is much smaller than the bouncers, but well-built when next to nearly anyone else. Wearing an open black leather jacket, with two inch jagged spikes rising from his shoulders, exposing a nearly clean white shirt underneath and an ammo belt around his waist. A large assault rifle lay on the table, barrel pointing towards the main door. He pulls out a long, six inch blade and scrapes the foam from the top of his glass. As the brute and shorter woman approach, the man slides his glasses down along the bridge of his nose to see over them, still unsure he was seeing this correctly.

After a brief moment of staring at her breasts, he takes in the whole picture of the average height woman. The muscles of her stomach are easily seen through the slightly torn sleeveless gray tank top. The biceps well defined but not overly large, leading to average looking hands covered in matching racing gloves that were covered in as much dust as the rest of her clothing. Her near black hair hung only to the length of her jaw, with a few strands obscuring the view of her large brown eyes. His eyes move downward, taking in the view of her dirty brown pants, immediately noticing dried blood on her calf and the slight limp as well as the torn black boots. This woman obviously could not afford his services.

Looking back at her face, he sees the nose that obviously had been broken a few times and the dried lips that would look full had they not cracked and bled from the heat of the day. The exposed skin tanned from spending most of her days outside, but with a hint of red from too much exposure during her long walk.

She finally stops at the table and the man looks over to the bouncer. "Who's this?" he asks, not addressing Sky directly. She leans forward, placing both palms on the table. The man can't help himself and stares directly at the now exposed cleavage. "What are you in need of?" he says, finally addressing her directly, still not taking his eyes off of her breasts.

"Milo says debt paid if help," the bouncer says before turning away and walking over to resume his post at the door.

"This must be a big deal if Milo is willing to give up that much bread for one job. I can't say we'll take it until we speak with the rest of the boys. Have a seat," he gestures to the booth he's sitting in, "I'm Reaper, and you are?"

"The name is Sky," she begins as she sits across from the man, "two days ago the Renegades kidnapped my son. I brought the money they asked for and after taking my money and blowin' up my race buggy, I found my son tied to a chair and mutilated. These fuckers then took my daughter while I was making my way back. They-" he put up his hand to cut her off.

"I've heard enough. Wait here and have a drink. I'll be back with the boys," Reaper says as he rises from the seat. The man quickly walks over to the bar and hands a few credits to the very tall man behind the counter. He immediately exited the building through a rear entrance.

The tall man brings a large drink, barely small enough to put both hands all the around, sloshing some of the golden liquid with each

step. Setting the drink down, he then returns to his place at the bar. Sky looks at the liquid and noticed that almost half her drink was gone in the walk over. She begins taking small sips while looking around.

Within moments Reaper returns to her with three more men behind him. She notices that he is now wearing a mostly black bandanna around his neck. Sitting at the table he points to the man directly to Sky's right, "This is Hektik."

She looks at the man who is a foot taller than her. He wears an open, full length black leather coat, revealing multiple holsters, each loaded with various pistols and a black shirt. Around his waist are multiple ammo clips for each pistol as well as a couple of custom grenades. Below the belt is a pair of cybernetic legs, covered by loose fitting black tinted camo-pants and multiple knife holsters. His brown hair was shoulder length and tied behind his back and his blue eyes were concealed by dark tint mining goggles.

As she turns to look at the next man, who was similarly built as Hektik, Reaper tells her, "This is Snake, our long range specialist." The man wore black sunglasses over his brown eyes. His short hair was spiked up and multiple piercings adorned his face. He wore loose black pants and a loose black shirt. Across his back was his trusted long-las sniper rifle as well as a small black pack. Multiple clips for the long-las were strapped around his waist and to the straps of the pack. He too had numerous knives strapped to his legs.

Reaper points to the final member of the group, "This is my brother Bizarro." The larger of the men wore a metal helm that was covered in spikes, many of which had dried blood on them. He was eight feet tall and had enough muscle to rival any bouncer she had seen that night. He carried an auto-cannon that was large enough to be used as a fortification turret with a belt of ammo connecting it to a large bag on his back. Both of his over-sized fists had metal plates on the outer sides with more blood dried spikes. Both his shirt and pants were

once the color of brown, but were almost completely stained by dried or drying blood.

Each member gave a nod to Reaper who in turn looked at Sky. "If it wasn't for our debt we would have taken those bastards out a while ago. The only matter remains is if you are going with us," he said raising an eyebrow.

"You can bet your ass I'm going. They have my daughter and I will see them pay for what they have done to my family. Question is, first will you try to stop me from going, and where can I get a gun?"

"This is personal for all of us. I can respect that you want to go, understand that we are not your baby sitters. If it becomes too much for you, retreat and we'll collect you when it's over. Biz, give her the spare. We roll out in five." Bizarro reached into his bag and removed an auto-rifle and two spare clips and placed them on the table. She picked up each item and removed herself from the booth.

Part 3 - Hell hath no fury

The group proceeded out of the establishment through the very same entrance she had used an hour before. Reaper led the group around to the side of the building where a large vehicle sat. "You ride in the cab with me," Hektik told her. "Biz, get your canon on top, Snake, I want that scope of yours with him. Reaper, you got the auto on the door," he said to the group as he climbed into the driving position. The vehicle could not be classified in any less broad terms. It rested on six tires, each as tall as Sky, and the entire vehicle was covered in armored plates. It was shaped like the head of a jackal. Where the eyes would be were two large armor plated windows and for ears were two pieces of plating that went straight up for the gunners to shoot from behind. On each side was only one door, placed about half the length of the vehicle and each with a large automatic machine gun attached to the firing slits.

Once each person was seated, Hektik shifted into gear and the engine roared as it sped off towards the dusty road. Both Bizarro and Snake scanned the horizon, looking for firing solutions but none presented themselves. For miles around them was nothing but bare, dusty plains.

"So how much did you guys owe Milo that you were willing to take the job before finding out what I needed?" Sky asked, unsure if she was crossing any boundaries.

"Reaper told us all we needed to know- debt paid and a chance to take out the Renegades." Hektik told her, not taking his eyes off of the road.

"They are the ones that took his legs. The debt for buying him replacements has been the only thing keeping us from coming back at them." Reaper chimed in.

A speaker in the dashboard turned on, "You blow jobs ready? We got two bugs inbound. North side." Snake informed them.

"Bugs?" Sky asked, looking very confused.

"Armed buggies. With any luck they're not after us and we can keep going," Reaper answered while checking the belt feed to the auto in his door.

"And if they are..." she trailed off, noticing them for the first time through the windshield.

"Then we'll kick some tires and light some fires," Hektik said with a smile. Her hands tightened around the handle of the rifle, knuckles going white.

"Bugs are shooting at each other and heading west and away. In the clear for now," Snake said through the speaker.

Several uneventful hours of driving brought them to the edge of a canyon. The sun's rays coming over the horizon before them as it slowly descended into night. Nearby, the remnants of the bridge that had once crossed the gap, sat in a heap beside them. Broken concrete lay everywhere. Each member of the team exited the vehicle, followed by the woman. Reaper's bandanna now pulled up over his nose, displaying a contrasting image of a white skeletal smile on the black fabric.

Snake immediately walked to the edge and peered down through his scope, constantly scanning. The group waits silently behind him. Half an hour passes before he stands upright and walks back to the group. The sniper pulls a small box, with a long plug attached, out of his pocket and connects it to a port in the side of his rifle.

Snake crouches down and places the box on the ground. The remaining men do the same, with Sky following suit shortly after. A blue light begins to be emitted from the box, growing in size and intensity until a blue-tinted holographic copy of a small town appears. Two large towers are placed at each end of the town.

He points to a tower roof near where Sky is squatting, "We'll repel down by rope onto this tower, then through the hatch. Clear out every room along the way to the central building."

"How do we know the head will be in there?" Sky asks.

"It's the only one with an AC unit. He'll be there," Snake continued, "we go in quiet and we go in hard. Remember, whoever has the fewest kills by the end, buys the first round, and if the girl beats you, then that's two rounds. Whoever gets the leader gets free drinks all night." They all smile and nod to each other. "Let's do this." They all stand up and return to the vehicle, each member grabbing any last minute items they may need- Snake, a sword now attached to his hip, Reaper, a couple bombs of different makes, Hektik, a scope now attached to his rifle and Bizarro, several bottles of liquor, each with a

rag tied around them and a lighter now in his pocket. Reaper quickly grabs a knife and hands it to Sky.

Each member attaches a rope around their belts and then to the side of the vehicle itself. Holding onto the ropes to control their descent, the group makes its way onto the roof. "Everybody inside, three clicks on the earpiece when the immediate area is secure. I'll take out any sentry sorry enough to be on shift tonight," Snake said quietly.

Everyone complies and enters through the hatch. Once alone Snake begins tracking any movement through his scope. Watching three pacing men closely, each in a different tower, he takes aim at one looking his direction, but not yet seeing his soon to be killer. He pulls the slide on the rifle, charging it for the first shot, taking aim, he fires. The discharge of the rifle only a near silent hiss, while the last bullet pierces the man's forehead and paints the wall behind him with grey brain matter. Taking aim quickly, he readies his shot again and removes another sentry in the same fashion.

The remaining tower sentry looks over in time to see his friend die in the next tower. Quickly looking for the shooter, he sees the marksman looking right at him. Instantly recognizing the man, he barely has time to mutter to himself, "Snake, why'd it have to be Snake?" His brain remains in his head however, due to the shooter hitting him in the neck, virtually removing the head cleanly from his body.

Checking all of the exposed paths to each tower, the sniper climbs into the room his friends had entered only moments before. Two bodies lay face down on the ground, both with throats slit and streaks of blood on the walls and ceiling from the arterial spray.

He reaches the door leading to the rest of the complex in time to hear gun fire close by. No longer caring to be quiet, he moves faster catching up with his team, all of whom are in defensive positions at the end of the hallway behind an overturned vending machine. "What's the score? I'm at three," Snake asks.

"I'm at two, Reap is at one, Biz has three and the chick has two," Hektik tells him.

"I'll be at five after this shot, count 'em," Reaper says as he quickly aims above the defender's position at a metal pipe. He pulls the trigger and releases a stream of full auto, hitting the pipe first and then the head of one man. The ruptured pipe leaks gas into the chamber and in the same instant ignites and explodes a tank on the wall, killing the three remaining shooters.

"That's right bitches, I kill with skill," Reaper exclaims. "Okay, time to separate, half goes left, half right and Biz down the middle," He said as they reach a t-shaped junction in the hallway with a door in the center.

Every room they encounter on their path is made of old rusting metal, some with old beds, sheets stained by various bodily fluids, others with recently and some not so recently dead bodies. Reaper and Snake slowly stalk their path, checking every door and alcove for a waiting enemy. With the exception of the few dead bodies they found in some of the rooms, their path was deserted. Reaching the end of a long hallway, there is but one door before them and a hole where a large window had once been. Peering through, they see another such hallway which also curves towards where they are waiting and meets at the door they stand behind. Snake catches a glimpse of multiple shooters, many using full auto, and a blur of movement from Bizarro as he charges, head down towards them and gun only resting in his hands.

Reaper reaches up to his left ear and presses the button on an ear piece, "Dammit Biz! Just shoot the bastards." As soon as he gets the final word out, a loud crash is heard from Bizarro's hallway, immediately followed by silence from all shooters and deep laughter coming over the ear piece.

"I now have eleven brotha," Bizarro brags over the comm, "you do realize I never buy the drinks. I found a stairwell; get your asses over here so we can kill the rest of these fucks." Reaper and Snake begin heading in his direction.

Sky and Hektik, however ran into quite a bit of opposition. Shortly after starting their path, a large man with a flamer bathed the rooms and hallway in pure fire. Hidden from view by the rising flames, the man continued to add more fire to the already burning hall.

"Need an assist fellas," Hektik said into his comm unit. Sky begins blind firing, hoping to stop, if not kill the man.

Now united, Reaper, Snake and Bizarro move quickly to a door leading to the engulfed hallway. Snake raises his rifle and flicks a switch near the scope with his thumb. A soft humming is being emitted from the rifle, indicating that the scope's settings have changed. Putting his eye to the scope, he can see the images of heat beyond the door with an image in the shape of a man colored to show that he was cooler than the flames around him.

"He is holding still, I've got a hotshot round primed and ready," Snake says quietly. "Hek, find some cover, this is going to be messy," Snake added, this time into his comm unit. Reaper crouched near the door, hand ready to push it open. "On my mark open it up and no stray shots. Three. Two. One. Mark!" he yells out the last word and the door is quickly pushed open and in the same instant he pulls the trigger. The red hot round burst from the gun and enters the back of the man's head and exiting out through the bridge of his nose, propelling pieces of the man's face and brain forward. The shot and flesh of the man collide with the wall Hektik and Sky were hiding behind moments before.

The team watches as the corpse topples over, nozzle of the flamer clattering on the ground. "It's clear. Run up the middle, you guys will be okay. The fire is burning along the walls," Snake says into the

comm in his ear. Shortly after, the echoes of footsteps precede the two people running through the burning hallway.

"Enough, of this waiting shit," Bizarro says through gritted teeth.

Sky is panting after the exertion of running through the flames. "He's right. We know at the end of this path are two doors. One door led to a tower that overlooks the central building and the other outside where we can run to the main entrance. Snake, load up on hotshots, we'll need to make sure they stay down. Biz, see if there is an entrance around back, take Reaper with you. The girl follows behind me," Hektik tells the gathered group.

The group reaches the doors that they knew would be there and all go their separate directions. Snake moves quickly towards the tower while the rest walk quietly into the open space. Only twenty feet of open ground lay between them and the doors. The two large wooden doors were covered in wire mesh and jagged pieces of metal and were void of any windows or viewing ports.

The two brothers move around the side of the building, Reaper taking point and Bizarro at his heels with his cannon tracking every shadow they pass.

As Hektik reaches to open the doors, his comm turns on in his ear. "I'm in position. No surprises on the other side of the door. Happy hunting," Snake says before cutting the connection.

Hektik removes two large pistols from holsters at his waist and pulls the door open slowly using the barrel of the gun in his left hand. The door makes a loud screech as it moves on hinges in desperate need of oiling. Moving through the doorway as silently as possible, his comm turns on again, "You have incoming. A shit load of guns your way. I count at least three bodies armed to bear. Keep the girl outside."

"Stay out there, we have incoming," he says to Sky, who complies and closes the door behind him. His moment's distraction was all the incoming shooters needed as they turned the corner. Two shots are fired quickly, each hitting the barrel of one of the guns in his hands, knocking them to the floor in a loud clatter.

Three men enter the room, each with weapons pointed at Hektik. Two carried small automatic rifles and the third held two pistols, one of which had a faint trace of smoke rising from the end of the barrel. Looking in the direction of the three shooters, Hektik takes a different approach than they would have expected. "I wouldn't do that if I were you," he tells them with a smile.

"And why is that? You're no longer armed," the one with the pistols says.

"I'm always armed," he says, pointing a hand at each rifle wielding man. With thumbs pointed at the ceiling and first two fingers pointed at each man, he continues, "The Federation did some things to my body, freaky things. They turned me into a telekinetic." The smile never leaving his face, he raises the left hand as if he had shot a gun and moments later the man he was pointing it at dropped to the ground. He quickly does the same with his right hand and the right shooter drops as well. The remaining shooter looks around and notices his dead companions. "Go ahead punk, make my day," Hektik says aiming both hands at the final man. The would-be shooter places his guns on the ground and turns to leave quickly. Hektik makes the motion of firing again and the man's right knee explodes.

He quickly picks up the guns that were knocked out of his hands and walks over to the man on the ground. "You really are an idiot. Think I'd let you live after you took a shot at me?" He raises his pistols and fires them both, each bullet hitting the man's skull and turning his head to not much more than a red smear.

He turns around to look in the direction of the tower. "Thank you, Snake," he says through his comm.

A clicking is heard over the comm in acknowledgment. Hektik turns and opens the door, beckoning to Sky to enter. She moves in quickly with rifle aimed at the doorway the shooters had entered before. Hektik walks into the next room, pistols pointing into the open room. Gunfire can be heard at the far end of the building, presumably Reaper and Bizarro had run into trouble. Continuing into the room, the pair notices a large man on the ground, most of his head removed. A flame thrower that had yet to be turned on strapped to his back.

"Thanks again Snake, could you try and leave some for us?"

"Maybe, you could move faster. Tell the chick I've spotted the kid. One or two shooters in with her and I can't get a clear shot on either. They're on the second floor, at least ten in the stairwell. Too many pipes in the way, couple are gas. Count your shots. Moving to another tower," then the link turned off.

Quickly relaying the message, they continue forward. The only other door in the room leading to a long hall that was wide enough for three men Bizarro's size to stand shoulder to shoulder. Stepping into the corridor, weapons ready, they take in the lack of doors except for three at the end. The lights turn out, putting the hall and adjoining rooms into pure darkness. Hektik kicks backwards, tripping Sky, making her land on her stomach. "Stay down, stay quiet," he whispers to her. Several men walk quietly into the room, guns at the ready. Hektik's foot brushes her arm as he moves silently away from her.

Three guns fire in the direction of where he was. He quickly fires both of his pistols once, aiming above the muzzle flash and dropping two men. Moving quickly to another location, he waits ready to fire again. Four muzzles flash as they're fired while two of which have a

much lower intensity. He fires again, this time aiming in between the lighter flashes and the other shot going above a third flash. He moves, again waiting for telltale flashes. Only two flashes this time, he throws two knives, each one entering the body of the remaining shooters after a brief whistle through the air. With no more shots fired, he moves forward quickly and finds a large metal switch on the wall. Raising the lever, the lights quickly return, displaying the grisly scene that Hektik created.

Six bodies lay on the floor, one still twitching quietly as the last of his blood runs out of the wound the eight inch blade had created in his neck. Blood splatters and arterial spray covering the walls. "Let's move, and watch your step," he tells her, moving to check the doors.

Listening through the door on the left, he hears nothing, so quickly opens the door to find the body of a large man, naked, face down and covered in knife wounds. Shaking his head, he moves to check the door on the right. Once again putting his ear to the door, this time he backs away and fires two rounds into the door. Pushing the door open, he sees a man on the ground, one wound in his stomach another in his calf. A knife lies on the ground, just out of reach. Several hooks hang from the ceiling, one of which held the bloody corpse of a young girl.

The man, incoherent from the pain, doesn't notice Hektik walking towards him. He raises the man and clamps him under both of his arms with two hooks and leaves him suspended. "I'll be back for you later," he tells the man through gritted teeth.

Returning to the hallway, Sky waits for him, ready to go through the final door. Listening but hearing no signs of movement beyond, they push it open slowly to reveal a smaller hallway that ended in a t-shaped junction.

Carefully walking to the end of the corridor, they reach the junction. The path to the left revealed a long staircase descending into a dark

basement. Each metal step covered in rust and holes, and many empty spaces where steps should have been. The remaining choices were both large metal doors, both with no way to view beyond them.

The opening of the door directly ahead of them instantly caused them to gag on the smell. Despite the lack of plumbing, the room had become a makeshift toilet, as was evident from the large, overflowing bucket in the center of the room. Quickly shutting the door, they made to open the remaining path. The door squealed on the rusted hinges as it opened, red flakes falling to the floor.

The door revealed a set of stairs on the left, rising to the higher floors, and an equally rusted door ahead of them. Movement is heard on the other side, quickly raising their weapons in anticipation, the duo back up against the door they had entered from. The opposite door inches slowly open and a tall, lanky man with a shaved head backs into the room. As he starts to turn his head, the presence of others finally dawning on him, his head bursts like a ripe melon. A red mist blooms outward, covering the duo's faces in droplets of blood. The slackening body pushes the door the remainder of the way, revealing another hall, with Bizarro and Reaper walking towards them, a hint of smoke rising from the barrel of Reaper's rifle.

"Snake is on the way, we move as soon as he gets here," Reaper said quietly as he entered the room. The remainder of the group simply nodded and went about checking their ammo supplies. Within moments he arrives, rifle strapped to his back and checking over his shoulder just before closing the large door behind him.

"What's got you spooked?" Hektik asks with a raised eyebrow.

"There's another hunter, possibly two. Can't find any heat sigs, just thirty some-odd corpses, all with tech injuries, most with the same cauterizing knife wounds," he replies, listening at the door. Content that he wasn't followed, he removes two auto-pistols from holsters at his lower back.

"Goggles on, popping smoke," Hektik says, handing Sky a pair of mining goggles, similar to the ones he had on. Each person puts on their various goggles, Snake a pair of black sun glasses, and both Bizarro and Reaper matching pairs of black mining goggles.

Pulling one of his custom bombs from his waist, he depresses a thumb shaped indicator and throws it up and around the bend of the stairs he began climbing. With a soft hiss, dark smoke is released. Coughing is heard from the shooters in the stairwell as the smoke fills the space completely and suddenly electrical flashes ignite, further blinding those not wearing any sort of eye protection.

Feeling safe, and surprised how well she can see the heat from the enemies in front of her, Sky rushes forward and opens up with her rifle, killing every man ahead. The group follows behind quickly, and all five reach the top of the stairs with no other altercations. The door before them was the only in the entire complex that was void of any rust or damage. The thickness however, prevented the group from seeing through it.

"We go in hard, fast and no stray shots. We move in three, two..." Hektik began before stopping abruptly, due to the loud gunshot heard on the other side.

Tears begin pouring from Sky. "No, not both of my babies," she gets out between sobs. Steeling herself, she pushes through the door, to see her little girl standing over the body of the group's leader, now headless, and with a smoking shotgun in her hands. Sky's mouth drops at the sight.

"What happened?" she asks between breaths, still crying, but from joy rather than sorrow.

"You told me if a grow' up ever shows me his peanut to shoot him. Was I bad mommy?" the little girl asks, setting the gun on the ground.

"No baby, you did great," she says with a smile.

"You short shit's a killa," Bizarro says laughing.

She walks over and picks up her daughter and moves towards the door. Hektik puts out his arm to stop her.

"Biz, you carry the girl. We need to move quick if there are other hunters." Bizarro takes the girl from her mother, holding her to his large chest with one arm, the other holding the shotgun from the floor like it was a pistol.

The group proceeds along the paths that Hektik and Sky had traversed less than an hour previously, only stopping once to pick up the unconscious prisoner they had left behind.

"He may have some information, leave the shot and carry him as well Biz," Hektik says. Bizarro complies, but only after impaling the man's hands with the spikes on his shoulder. The man let out a low whimper, but stayed completely motionless.

"We need to make place burn," Bizarro says, not showing even a little strain from carrying the two people.

Snake puts up a hand to stop him. "You know the mission, all structures intact, but leave no personnel." He merely grunted in reply and walks past the group towards the exit. The remaining members follow behind. Moving quickly and checking every corner, hall and door, preparing for any sign of ambush, but none are found. Making their way back to the tower they entered, no other signs of life are found.

Climbing out and onto the roof, Bizarro quickly attaches a device to both his belt and to the line he had descended. A motor begins to pull him and his charges to the top of the cliff face. The group follows suit and all members return to the vehicle. Quietly, they each unload

the items they no longer need to carry; the girl placed in the passenger seat and the prisoner is then bound and tossed unceremoniously onto a rear seat.

The instant the door is closed on the detainee, the ground begins to shake as small explosions are set off, preceded by an enormous fireball lighting up the night sky. More detonations resume as each structure collapses. Four heads all turn in Bizarro's direction.

"Wa'n't me," he says with a shrug.

"We need to roll before whoever did that comes to us," Snake says climbing into the vehicle quickly. With a bit of haste they all clamber in. The instant all of the doors are closed, the engine roars to life, quickly speeding into a sharp turn and running at top speed, throttle wide open.

With the sniper and heavy gunner up in the turrets, they moved along the same path they had driven only hours before. Two miles covered and no sign of followers, Reaper pulls out a long knife and moves to the prisoner. Slapping the man in face, he finally stirs.

Slipping the point of the blade up under the man's right eye, a small drop of blood begins to well up as Reaper stares intensely at him. Fear fills the man's eyes as his bladder begins to unload. "Who else is after you?"

"No one, we didn't even think you guys would come back," the man cries, tears mixing and causing the blood to run a little more freely.

The mother moves closer to the scene and holds out her hand to Reaper. "May I have a go?" she asks calmly, a glint in her eye. He hands her the knife and moves over to give her enough room. Without pausing to even look at the man, she rams the blade through the top of his thigh, blood beginning to pour freely. The man lets out a high pitched scream.

"Mom, what's going on back there?" Hex says from the front.

"Momma's working baby, don't look back here." Now looking at the man and through gritted teeth, "Who hired you?"

"Some racing manager, Stupid I think his name was," the man said tears running down his face.

"Do you mean Suphen?" she asked, knowing full well the names of all of the local racing managers and that his was the closest.

"That's him." Signs of hope light up his eyes. She slowly removes the knife from his thigh, and immediately stabs the other. He held his breath this time, refusing to cry out. His eyes bulged from the self-contained pressure.

"Who paid him off?" she asked, twisting the knife a quarter turn.

"I...I...I...I don't know; only the boss knew. All he told us was that we were to keep you from racing anymore. That's....that's all I know. I swear," he finally got out, still sobbing, but empty of tears.

She looks over at Reaper, "I think he's telling the truth. You can let him out." Overhearing, Hektik pulls to a stop and Reaper removes the knife from the man's leg and unbinds his wrists. He immediately tosses the man to the sand covered ground. As soon as he closes the door, they continue the drive.

Within minutes the man is but a silhouette on the horizon behind them. "Light him up," Reaper says over his comm. instantly, the man's upper half of his body explodes into a dozen ragged pieces. "What's the score? I had twenty one."

"Nineteen," Hektik says from the front.

"Thirty," Bizarro bellows loud enough to be heard outside of the moving vehicle.

"Twelve," Sky says from her seat.

"Fifteen," Snake says over the speaker in the dashboard. "Looks like I got first round."

They drive for an hour with each person relating parts of their story during the fight. Sky merely sits and listens, desperately trying to stay awake.

The following hour of driving is filled with silence as Sky lowers her head to her chest in exhaustion.

Another hour passes by the time the tires take a hard dip on the left side, jarring the vehicle and Sky, waking her from the brief slumber. She looks out of the front view ports to notice that the town they were approaching was not the same they had left from.

"Where are we?" she asks yawning.

"Welcome to Gaberd. This town is not only under the Acolyte's protection, we own most of it," Reaper said. Looking at him again she realized that his skull face bandana had been pulled down around his neck. "We were only working out of the Asteroid until Milo was paid off."

The vehicle reached the outskirts of the larger city. The city of Gaberd was home to nearly sixty dwellings, three taverns, one of very ill-repute, four parking structures, three to the rear of the buildings and the fourth adjacent to the larger of the taverns, a water processing plant and an extremely well stocked armory. The water processing plant and armory were both made of refined steel and recently reinforced concrete. The remainder of the buildings were built of the same concrete and each housed personal air conditioning

units. The taverns however were the only exception; one was more rusted metal than anything while the remainders were concrete with a mud like paste on the exterior.

The vehicle pulled into the structure next to the tavern. Several large vehicles of a similar make were housed here along with a dozen or so motorbikes of various builds. Once the vehicle was parked, the group vacated with Bizarro once again carrying the little girl who now slept in his arms.

"You can hole up here for a couple nights. There are rooms on the second floor that you and the kid can use. Nothing will happen to you within the walls of Desolation Row," Hektik tells her, placing his hand on her shoulder. She smiles at him, still unsure after everything that had happened.

They walked at a steady pace, not slowing until they crossed the opening to the garage. Two armed men guarded the entrance, both looking more like trained soldiers than hired thugs. A very large reinforced shutter closed behind them. One of the men made to salute, but a hard look from Snake stopped him, he instead made to scratch at his afternoon stubble. Hektik approached the two men.

"Take the mother and her child up to one of the spare rooms in the D.R. Get them fresh clothes and have Spinner check out her wound. She's my personal guest for the show tonight. Make sure she finds my table." Both men nodded. "And tell Shemp to have the kitchens going, we're gonna be hungry and word is it's going to be a packed house."

"I took the liberty of contacting Shemp as soon as the transponder alerted us to your approach. As for the fullness of the house, you are right sir; all will be attending save those of us on detail. Master Snake only needs to inform the rest of X when he is ready. They are currently staging in preparation," the man said in a matter of fact tone, showing pride in his job well done.

"I want the guards doubled tonight. Other hunters may have followed us."

The man immediately switches on a comm system that is attached to his left shoulder. "H says to double up, expect incoming," he begins, just noticing that the mother is watching him. The remainders of his orders are quiet enough to only be heard by those on the same frequency and his mouth would twitch often as he spoke to make lip reading impossible. The moment he was done relaying his orders, he approached the woman, offering his elbow. The other man walked to Bizarro to take the girl but he continued to hold her and shook his head.

"Watch here," he grumbled quietly, trying not to wake the girl.

The man nodded and resumed his post. The three other members of the squad walked around the corner of the building to go into the main entrance of the tavern. Bizarro and the guard escorted the ladies to a closer entrance, this opening to a set of stairs. The climbing of three flights were made quick and all the easier thanks to the arm of the guard, Bizarro still not showing any signs of hindrance. The third floor opened to a long hall filled with doors on either side, all of them appearing to have been recently painted and unlike almost any location on all of Razzen. The group walked to the third door on their right and entered.

The room was of decent size, large enough to have both the bed already in the room and parked her former buggy with walking space in between. The large bed sat at the rear of the room and was nearly as large as the same buggy. A small refrigeration unit sat against the wall across from the bed and upon immediate inspection was stocked with many bottled drinks and various food stuffs. Closer to the door sat a couch large enough for all four to sit comfortably and in front of that was a large electronic viewing unit. The contents of the room were more lavish than anything she had lived in prior. Bizarro walked over and gently laid the girl on the bed, taking care to cover

her to help keep her warm. He quickly left the room, leaving the guard behind.

“You are welcome to anything in the closet that fits,” he began, pulling an electronic card out of his pocket, “this card will get you into the room. I’ve activated it for you already. There is no one else who can enter your room with the exception of the four. There will be an armed guard in front of your door while you enjoy the festivities. Spinner will be here shortly to address your wounds and in thirty minutes one of my men will arrive to take you down to the private table.” He handed her the card and then left the room so she could change clothes.

Opening the closet, to her surprise, she found many items of clothing. She settled for a pair of black combat pants and a matching tank top. Taking the time to clean herself in the shower she noticed that the stitching Milo had done had torn and her leg had bled for a while, staining the bottom of her pants the rust color of dried blood and covering her leg in the same. There was a sharp knock on the door and she walked over, quickly wrapping herself in a towel of some of the softest fabric she had ever put against her skin.

“Who’s there?” she called through the door.

“My name is Spinner, I’ve been asked to clean and stitch your wounds,” the man said from the other side. Recognizing the name she opened the door and allowed the man to enter. He was dressed in a long white coat with a matching shirt underneath and perfectly pressed black pants. He motioned for her to sit on the couch and she complied. He reached into the large black bag he carried and removed some thread and a long needle that was in a fresh package. He then removed some cleaning cloths and some antiseptic spray and began cleaning the gunshot wound in her leg. After several minutes of cleaning and her resisting the urge to pull away from the intense pain, he began sewing the wound closed, much neater than it had been before. Immediately upon finishing, he offered her a bottle with

a clear liquid inside. "This will kill the infection. Try to take it easy for a few days and you'll be back to business in no time." She took the bottle and drank it at once, wincing at the flavor.

The man left and within minutes there was another knock on the door. "Ma'am, I'm here to take you to your table," the man said not waiting for an answer. Feeling safe for the first time in days, she left the room, hearing the click as the room automatically locked itself. In the hall were two men, one holding an assault rifle while the other was offering his arm as the guard had an hour before.

He led her to the end of the hall and down another flight of stairs, these emptying into the tavern proper. The tavern itself was enormous, nearly thirty tables, all seats filled, ringed a large open floor with a stage at the end of the open area. On the stage were three men setting up instruments, the likes of which she had never seen. The area in front of the stage was filled with people, many dressed like the guards that had been leading her around. The guard whose arm she held walked her to the largest table at the rear of the room. This table sat on a raised dais, allowing the seated occupants to have a perfect view of the stage. A large cushion curved around this table and Hektik and Snake both sat with drinks in hand. Snake rose to allow her to sit at the table. Instead of sitting, Snake drained his glass.

"I need to finish getting ready." He then turned and walked away. She followed him with her eyes and saw him begin to help the men on the stage. Glancing around, she spotted Reaper at one table with several others, all in the middle of a card game with hundreds of creds sitting in the center of the table. At the near opposite end of the room was the large man, Bizarro, taking on any who would try in a contest of strength, each man holding the others hand in a tight grip and attempting to slam it into the table. As of yet, no man had been able to budge his giant arm.

She then looked to the man she sat next to, noticing how clean he looked. His dirt and blood caked hair, now clean and smooth, tied in the same fashion as before. He had a large plate in front of him, loaded with many different cuts of meat and many fruits she had never seen before. Noticing the way she was eyeballing his plate he raised a hand and almost immediately a tall man appeared holding a tray of drinks. "Get her a plate; tell Shemp that we should stick to local meats and breads." The man nodded and placed the drinks on the table before walking to a door near the stage.

Everything seemed very surreal to her, nothing seemed to make sense anymore. How did she go from having two children kidnapped, to losing one, finding out the one person you've trusted your entire life is a backstabbing worm and now ending up at what appears to be a party the likes of nothing she's ever seen before. The lack of sleep, food and drink had hit her hard; she could feel herself starting to teeter where she sat.

"You need to cry for a minute?" Hektik asked her, genuine concern in his eyes.

"There'll be time to cry later," she said looking down at the table.

He shrugged his shoulders, not sure where to proceed with her sitting at the table. "Here, drink this," Hektik said as he passed a tall glass of something that resembled freshly spilt blood. Without hesitation she complied. The bitter drink shocked her system and she felt more alert than she had in the fire fight.

She gagged on it as it fought to escape the way it had entered. "It tastes like coconut and metal," she said as she gave an involuntary shiver. He smiled at the response. "What is this?"

"A concoction that Snake's wife created. Won't go into the how it was made, but just know that the stimms will keep you awake for about five hours and still aid in recovery from your wounds," he told

her, taking the time to slice pieces of the meat on his plate and continuing to speak after each bite.

"What is this place? I've never seen a town like this one before."

"To begin with, the run down looking tavern at the other end belonged to the Chaos Runners. We eliminated the threat and helped build this place to what it is," he said as he pointed the utensil in the direction he was referring to.

"Who are you people? Really?"

"We are the Acolytes. Always have been," he said as he finished the last of the meat on his plate. Just as she was about to speak again, the man returned with a tray of meats that had been fire roasted and small plate of a brown bread.

She didn't know where to begin with the food, so instead continued with her line of questioning, "You guys aren't from around here; I doubt you're even from Razzen. You've had some training in things I've never seen and weapons from a scraper's wet dream." Satisfied with getting it out in the open she began to eat, starting with the meat.

The man only watched as she took the first bite. Her eyes lit up the instant she tasted it. "This tastes like the grilled rondo my ma used to make before she was killed." He smiled at this.

"You keep eating, I'll tell you." She nodded in acceptance, taking another bite. "You're right; we aren't from Razzen, not even this system. Not one of us shares the same home world except Reap and Biz."

She nodded in satisfaction. "How did you guys come together and why are you here?"

He smiled, knowing the response he would receive. "We are soldiers for the Federation of Planets." She gasped in surprise. "The how and why we are here is a much longer story."

Chapter 2

Part 1 - A player in the game

“First I’ll tell you how we became members. We’ll begin with that man,” he says pointing to Snake who is standing at the bar waiting for a drink. A woman approaches him as Sky looks over.

“Who’s she? Is that his wife?” she asks. Hektik looks over in time to see the woman doing her best to flirt with Snake, who notices only the drink in his hand. “She’s beautiful.” Hektik smiles and shakes his head.

“No, his wife is off planet. That woman has been trying for years to get him into her bed. Along with many other girls here, he doesn’t notice them. For him, this is mission first. He’s waiting for the cure for the disease that his wife and kids contracted.”

“My god. What happened?”

As he was about to begin the story a very tall man, covered in a bright orange robe and dark glasses approached the microphone on the stage. “It’s time to do it loud and do it proud! Everybody make some noise!” the man in orange yelled out as he stepped aside for the band to start their instruments.

The band consisted of four men, all dressed in a similar fashion as Snake. One sat behind a set of drums, a percussion instrument that resembled several buckets with a tanned hide stretched across the top. The remaining three all held similar looking instruments that had several strings from one end to the other. Snake, standing closer than the rest of the band members approached the microphone. He nodded to the man in orange as the band began playing their instruments.

Sky couldn't help but watch what was happening on the stage, until Hektik interrupted her distraction, "You'll have to listen close if you want to hear the story; it's going to get loud in here." She nodded, leaning in closer to hear him better. As the music plays, he begins the story.

Eighty years ago the man known as Snake answered to another name, that of Syn when he joined the Federation Armies. Nearly thirty years before that he was born on the station Crysint, home to the famous Asbythe School. This school had trained every general or private scientist that was worth mentioning for the last four hundred years. Like many of the other students, Syn had attended since the age of three and unlike most was primed to graduate at the age of nineteen with a doctorate in multiple facets of technology. As required by Federation edict, all students went through rigorous skills training to determine how they could better assist the Federation of Planets in their goals. Syn ranked top in his class every year in shooting, hand to hand, weapon design and construction as well as many other areas.

During the final two years of his schooling, Syn had met his wife to be, another soon to graduate doctor by the name of Michone. They pushed each to great lengths to ensure they reached the levels of schooling and jobs that they wanted most. The couple had both found jobs at the station where they were raised, she as a doctor of medicine as well in research of biologics, he as a weapons designer of some renown. The breakthroughs the two had made in their fields were so beneficial that the Federation had no desire to split up the duo. His skills with using weapons only surpassed by his skills at designing, he was one of the few males to never be tasked with joining the ranks of soldiers.

Ten years had passed since their graduation, and the Federation had requested Syn join some representatives at a second station, to discuss some special projects they would like him to focus on. He had arrived at the station during the evening cycle, an artificially

simulated night time to better allow its denizens to sleep more soundly, and under heavy escort was ushered to the designated meeting room. The room was long, with barren gun-metal colored walls and a long matching table in the center, surrounded by twenty chairs. Nineteen of the chairs were occupied by members of the war council, leaving a padded chair at the end of the table for the guest of honor. A tray with his favorite foods and beverages sat on the table near his seat.

The moment he sat, the chairman sitting opposite him began to speak, "Thank you for joining us. Your work on the 'hot-shot' rounds was pure genius. Could you explain for the council how they work?"

"It's quite simple, really. We learned that ficen powder had a high burn rate and that when mixed with a simple accelerant burned even higher. I was able to forge the compound into a hard round that ignited when fired. The results were impressive to say the least," Syn informed the council. One of the members pressed a button on the table and set of viewing screens emerged from the table itself for all members to watch.

The video being displayed showed Syn wielding a long barreled rifle and aiming at a practice bot. He fired the rifle and the superheated round emerged burning white, hitting the bot in the center of its mass. The collision of the round caused a chain reaction, heating the wound to the point that the bot began to melt. In less than a second the bot melted entirely, leaving a grey paste on the floor that was beginning to cool. Upon completion of the video, the council began to applaud the work.

The chairman raised his hand for silence. Immediately the sound ended and he began to speak once more, "To show our appreciation, we would like to bestow this gift upon you." A man entered the room carrying a long box. Placing the box on the table in front of Syn, the man turned and left. Knowing protocol, he slid the box to the side, awaiting the request he knew was sure to follow. "We need you to

begin work on some stealth suit designs as well as making the plasma knives designed by your mentor work. Can we count on you for this?"

Syn replied only with a simple nod. The war council smiled at this. "Concerning your request for an increase in funding and another shipment of our ficen stock, your request is approved." Knowing that the council only brought up monetary concerns when they were finished, Syn rose from his seat, collected his box and left the room.

With no altercations along the way, Syn boarded his shuttle and began the two day flight to his home aboard Crysint. Aboard the shuttle he finally opened the package he received. Inside the long box sat a freshly minted sniper rifle, the very design he had perfected over the last three years.

While her husband was at his meeting and their two children asleep at home with their live in nanny, Michone worked tirelessly on her research. During the last two years she had perfected the cryo-stasis system and had been instrumental in helping to clone the ficen crystals. These copies were less potent than their pure cousins and were too delicate to be used in weapons.

Recently she had begun her research into the disease Hurstruger's Syndrome, a disease caused by the mishandling of ficen residue that could be transferred by bite or blood. The ficen residue was the by-product of melting pure crystal or by administering too much of the cloned product. HS, as it was referred to, had destroyed three Federation planets. These planets placed under the strictest of quarantines, and any vessel seen to enter or exit the atmosphere was eliminated. The only way known to stop the spread was to eliminate the threat, but with so many known cases, a cure was needed.

The victims of HS would descend into madness, the only remaining thought would be to eat anything warm blooded they came into contact with, thus spreading the infection. Fresh patients would be brought in for her to experiment on frequently. Tonight's patient used

to be a girl, no older than thirteen. Her father, looking to get high, decided to snort imitation ficen powder and went into an immediate rage that caused her to get bit and the rest of the family to be eaten in front of her while she watched, slowly descending into the rage-madness herself.

Michone was attempting to eliminate the disease by using an elixir she had designed that was refined in pure ficen extract. This elixir was placed into a large syringe and then injected into the girl's left arm. The girl who had been thrashing under her restraints began to calm, although the blue tint that filled her eyes did not fade.

She spent another five hours with her calm patient, drawing blood, scraping skin cells and performing ultrasounds, trying to learn as much as she could about the disease.

The sixth hour marked a sudden change in the girl, every muscle on her body began to clench as they did they suddenly increased in size, the thrashing returned, more violent than before. The nails of her fingers became more elongated and the blue in her eyes turned to a dark red. The two armed guards at the doorway were becoming increasingly restless, weapons at the ready.

The doctor approached the girl cautiously, looking her in the eyes; no one could anticipate what would happen next. With new, stronger muscles, the girl broke free of her restraints, slashing her left hand towards the doctor, fingernails cutting a long incision in her right arm. The two guards opened fire, turning the girl's head into a dark red cloud and riddling her body full of holes. The doctor went to the wash station and cleaned the wound, taking care not to mix the blood from the girl with hers.

Once she was satisfied, she looked to the guards. "Dispose of the body, no subjects for tomorrow. We're going back to formula. See you boys tomorrow," she said as she walked out.

Two day cycles had passed by the time his shuttle landed at the station. During the flight, his designs were complete for the plasma knives and were ready for construction. As with every trip off station, he expected his family to greet him on his return, but this time they were not around. Syn pulled a small communication device from his pocket and placed a call. His call ended abruptly due to a connection failure, for some reason his wife's comm was malfunctioning. He began the long walk to the hab that was his family's residence.

Upon first inspection, he thought he had made a wrong turn because he knew there was no reason for a security patrol to be surrounding his unit, but they were. He approached the man that appeared to be the senior officer.

"What the hell are you doing in front of my home?" he demanded, pushing the man with his finger forcefully. The man raised his hands in an attempt to placate the father.

"She failed to return to work yesterday, this morning one of her assigned guards entered but never left. His comm system was on while his partner listened to guy's screams as he died. We don't know who's in there or what they want; only that no one has seen your family. I'm sorry." Syn nodded and held out his hand.

"Your sidearm," was all he said. The officer complied, relinquishing the automatic hard round pistol. Syn thanked the man and walked past the other officers.

As Syn entered the house, there were many things he noticed right away; the most obvious was the smell of meat left to rot, followed by the sight of arterial blood spray on the walls and ceiling. Not realizing he was holding his breath, the only sound he could hear was his own heart pounding in his ears. Releasing the trapped air, the sound abated, leaving the soft sounds from the next room, sounds that reminded him of a carnivore devouring its kill. Slowly inching forward, gun at the ready, he approached the doorway that the

sounds were emanating from. Each step brought the sounds of flesh ripping and bones crunching louder than before. He leaned his head into the doorway, the sight before him stealing his breath away.

On the ground lay the corpse of the man who was in charge of protecting his wife, clothes shredded, ribcage pried open and many organs removed and devoured. His three year old son and seven year old daughter were covered in the man's blood, as was his wife, all of whom were taking time to enjoy the meat before them, not noticing the watcher in the hall. He quickly exited the home, making sure to close the door behind him.

The officer approached him quickly. "Sir, what happened in there?"

"It's HS. How did this happen?" The officer's jaw dropped.

"Men move in! Drop anything that moves!"

Something snapped inside. "Your men so much as take one step towards that house, I. Will. Put. Them. Down," he informed the officer in no uncertain terms, hand clenching around the handle of the gun.

"I'm sorry, Sir," he told him, and then to his men, "We move!" Syn, quickly opened fire, each shot hitting a man in the head and killing the same out right. All twenty rounds used, accounting for twenty dead, and another wounded due to a round hitting him after it had passed through the skull of his friend. Four uninjured men remained. Three quickly took cover while the fourth made it to the house. Unslinging the rifle that he had across his back, Syn shot the man closest to the home, then turned and killed the three remaining men, the bullets passing through their cover and then their heads. He walked over to the final man and stomped down with the heel of his right boot, caving the soldier's skull in.

He removed the comm from his pocket and made a very different call, "Gren, I need a cleanup crew and three stasis units brought to my home."

Thanks to the work of the cleanup crew, under the direction of Gren, there was no evidence that anything had happened in the street. His family safely moved in the stasis tubes, he was able to cover up everything that had happened. The three people were in a stasis sleep that kept them from aging and allowed them to sleep as if nothing happened.

Syn then retired to his office and began to view the tapes from his hab and from his wife's laboratory. The lab tape showed that the only possible explanation for infection was the single scratch she received, but never had a person been infected by a scratch before this day. The virus had been mutated by the elixir she had used. Viewing the tape from his home, he learned that the children had been infected by a simple goodnight kiss from their mother.

He should have known not to view the tapes from a place he knew was heavily monitored by the Federation. Due to his lack of foresight, heavily armed troops arrived to take him to the council for questioning.

Sitting before the council was very different this time, manacles bound him to his chair as armed guards stood behind their prisoner. He sat, head low, avoiding eye contact with the men before him.

"Remove his chains and leave us," the chairman said receiving stares from the other men at the table. The guards complied and left the room. "We have a proposition for you," he began. "We will have teams dedicated to finding the cure for both HS and the mutated strain." Syn raised his head, keen to hear what was required of him. "In return, you will continue to design for us, but your time will be more occupied than ever before."

"What will I be doing?"

"You have shown skills beyond anything we ever expected. You have a talent with a gun that is nearly unrivaled. We want you to head a team of hunters."

The man paused, waiting for Syn to decide, knowing what his answer would be because the other would mean his death and the death of his family. "Fine, but I want to participate in the rejuvenation procedures. I don't want to be any older when I see my family again."

The head of council smiled. "Done. You have two years to select your team. No more than five soldiers, all requests for personnel must be approved."

"Let's get started then."

The story concluded with the end of the song, the latter to a great deal of applause. Hektik signaled for more drinks and a man came bringing a tray with several choices, with Hektik selecting them all, placing several in front of Sky.

"How can he be so old?"

"The rejuvenation baths only turn time back so far each time they are used, but the alternative is a CT," he told her after finishing the first drink.

"What's a CT?"

"A consciousness transfer. The consciousness of an individual is transferred into a freshly grown body that is made from your DNA. The process is quite painful, but guarantees that you won't age more than you intend. The war council has held the same members for two thousand years this way."

Part 2 - Thicker than water

"I thought Reaper was in charge, what's his story?" she asked as the next song was beginning.

"Whoever lands the job calls the shots. As far as his story, you'll hear his brother Bizarro's as well. Have you ever heard of the Hunter Arenas?"

The brothers known as Reaper and Bizarro were orphans, known by the names of Cryz and Miken, living on the streets of the planet Indomi. Nearly every inch of Indomi had been colonized and is now covered in either machine fabricators or living structure. Metallic and glittering buildings were everywhere. Not every location was nearly so glamorous though. Some sectors had fallen to neglect and disrepair, structures crumbling, alleyways filled with trash and human refuse. The two boys had lived in these same alleyways since they were both old enough to walk, their mother having died of an addiction to various chemical inhalants. Cryz being two years older had to look out for his four year old brother, but during frequent scavenging trips for food, could not always watch Miken.

After one such trip, Cryz arrived to find his now five year old brother being beaten and raped by two grown men who dressed like they were from the upper sectors. Scrounging for anything to defend his brother with, came upon a jagged piece of metal and jumped behind the man closest to him and stabbed him in the neck, blood spraying outward, covering the face of the man's friend. Stunned, the man stepped backward pulling his pants back on, as the boy pounced again, this time cutting the man's stomach open, spilling his steaming intestines to his feet. With both men on the ground, Cryz helped his brother to his feet, vowing that this would never happen again.

In these areas, in order to survive, many turn to gang life. Several members of the Reapers, one such gang, had happened to be nearby

when the killing started and arrived in time to see both deaths. Impressed with the youngster, they had invited the two into the fold, Cryz accepting, knowing that this would be his best chance to protect and keep the promise he had made to his brother. Ten years of drug and gun running, extortion and many other dubious acts, Cryz had found himself in the position of gang leader. The moment he took power, he became known as "The Reaper", the previous having been gutted and had his organs removed in a savage fight over a job assigned to Miken.

Miken no longer needed his brother's protection, seeing that he was the largest member of the group. The job he had been tasked with was to mine an overpass that some rivals were squatting beneath. Despite how eager he was to kill someone, he lacked any training with explosives, both planting and arming. He had been given the job in an attempt to eliminate him since the two brothers were the greatest threat to the leader's position. There had been a steady rift growing between members of the gang. More and more members began looking to the brothers for guidance, which did not sit well with the original Reaper.

Under new leadership, the group became closer to a dominant predator with no natural enemies. Despite the power they had found themselves in, Reaper was not satisfied.

Word slowly spread regarding a new stadium being constructed in a nearby slum, "upper class" citizens from the upper sectors would pay to watch men forced to live in their gutters fight for their lives. Years were spent, slowly having his men infiltrate the construction crews, knowing that the big payoff would be on opening night. The rumors told that the winner or winning group would receive a large sum of credits, an as yet undefined amount.

The stadium was finished on the anniversary of the sixth year. An enormous metal building designed to absorb weapon damage and featured an energy field that covered every inch of the fighting

arenas, protecting the patrons from stray gunfire. The following night, groups of thugs from the surrounding hundreds of miles arrived, all in hopes of the big prize. The stadium and the games themselves had been dubbed the Hunter Arenas and were designed to mimic the gutters that most of the combatants had lived in most of their lives. The last team to have the only surviving members would win.

The games started with a bang, each team would face off against a group of a similar size, the winners moving on to the second wave and so on. Some men, specializing in stealth, could navigate the course with little more than a knife and get the drop on the more trained fighters. The Reapers would use this tactic to full use. Reaper and his brother would distract their opponents by peppering them with fire as scouts would slit throats from behind. The twenty member group made it to the final round this way, knowing that the final fight would call for something different.

The opposition was the only group to be considered dangerous enough to be rivals, The Chaogs. The Chaogs had thirty members, most as large as Miken, and all armed with large assault rifles. The announcers played on the tension to energize the crowd. Just before the buzzer rang to start the killing, Miken walked over to a nearby wall and began to relieve his bladder.

"That man is plain bizarre folks," the announcer chimed in, much to the pleasure of the crowd.

The leader of the Chaogs took the opportunity to goad his enemies, hoping to slip them up. "Hey Bizarro, when this is done I'm gonna fuck your momma." His men laughed at their benevolent leader.

Miken approached his brother, "I likes that, I'm Bizarro when this is done."

His brother smiled, "It suits you."

A loud klaxon sounded, starting the match. Both teams hid behind their respective cover. No one had noticed that the Reapers were missing two men. Two matches prior they had entered structures that were behind where their enemies would be starting. Two silenced rifles emerged from cover that was several floors above the Chaogs. They began to pick their targets, quickly eliminating foes before anyone saw where they were hiding. Half of the Chaogs fell to their rifles before the remainder of the team hid themselves out of sight.

This was the moment the Reapers were waiting for. The Reaper himself stalked into each hiding spot, killing each hidden man, leaving only the leader alive. In fear the man ran out of cover, colliding into the chest of the newly named Bizarro, who in turn snapped the man's neck.

The crowd roared its approval, as a man stepped into the arena, carrying a small metal box the size of large boot. The man handed the box to Reaper, who opened it eagerly. The contents inside were only a small handful of credits, the bounty being considerably less than expected. Bizarro shot the man as Reaper removed a small device from his pocket, a simple box with one large button on it. Pressing the button, the entire outer arena where all of the spectators sat began to detonate and ignite. The shield that was designed to keep arena combatants from harming citizens was now protecting the gang from the blast.

In the aftermath of the blast, the group and many of the local denizens looted the charred bodies, or what was left of them. Now inspired by the actions of the gang, those same looters joined and assisted in the expansion of the Reapers territory, now encompassing the greater portion of three sectors.

Local planetary forces attempted for years to eliminate the threat posed by the now five hundred member nation. After the events of the Hunter Arenas, no person outside of that nation had seen either Reaper or his brother. Despite numerous attempts, the Reapers

continued to grow, and many members of the ruling elite had been eliminated. A distress call to the federation was finally placed.

Federation troops descended like a plague on the planet. Gunships, black as a starless night, vomited troops onto the runways before returning to orbit. These troops then moved outwards towards to Reaper zones, killing any person that fell within their path. Shortly after the initial purge, orders came, demanding that all members be obtained for questioning, since there had been a severe lack of information on the two brothers. There had yet to be any visual evidence as well.

Twenty days later, over two hundred individuals had been apprehended, but none had yet to name either brother or their locations.

At day forty six, the last Reaper stronghold was brought down, increasing the prisoner count to eight hundred, with three hundred dead, only fifty of which were Federation soldiers. No signs of the brothers could be found.

Groups of prisoners would be ferried to the flagship of the fleet, The Juggernaut. They would then be interrogated in groups of ten by the fleet master himself. The tall man would pace in front of each group, sizing them up and occasionally stop before one prisoner, each time saying the same thing, "Not the one," before impaling them on his sword. This would continue until each member of the ten was dead, never asking any questions.

Three days passed in this manner. There was no change until morning of the fourth day. The final ten men from one of the smaller ships in the fleet had been moved, consisting of the largest man the fleet master had seen yet. He proceeded with the usual routine, eliminating every man but the brute and the much smaller man to his left.

"Take them to my chambers, eliminate the rest. We're done here," he said to the adjutant standing behind him. The men were escorted to the large chamber, chaining them to the only wall that was vacant. The room had a large desk with a large leather chair behind, a much larger bed, and the walls were covered in both pictures of a family and schematics for different tech pieces in addition to the nicest rifle either man had ever seen. Within minutes, the fleet master entered the room.

"Reaper and Bizarro. We've been trying to find you for some time. Interesting that you were among the first to be captured since those around you didn't even know who you were. I like that." The two men simply stared forward. "You won't die today; I'm here with an offer."

The smaller of the two men looked over to the fleet master, making eye contact, knowing that this was not a man to fuck with, even when unarmed. "I want you to be soldiers for the Federation." The larger man began laughing despite himself. "You will answer only to me. What will it take for you to fall in line?"

"Burn the upper sectors and we're in," Reaper said smiling. Knowing that his wish would not be fulfilled, the man returned the smile.

"Burn the planet as a reminder that the population of any federation planet should handle its own problems," he said into a comm unit attached to his shoulder. He then reached over and released the two men. "Welcome to the Federation," Syn said with a smile like that of a demon from a child's nightmare.

"He burned the entire planet?" Sky asked in shock.

"Like I said he's mission first. He's chilled a bit since then. That was during the second year of assembling his team. He still had a lot of anger."

"Didn't the Federation care that he killed the population?"

"They had decided to wait to see how it played out. If the provisional rulers couldn't keep their subjects in line then it was time for change anyway," Hektik told her.

"Did anyone survive?"

Hektik shook his head. "He used some heavy duty atomics. Even the minerals burned. All that was left was a giant rock that the fleet then detonated, creating the Indomi asteroid belt."

Part 3 - A hero to none

"How were you recruited?" she asked. Hektik smiled, lighting the end of a smoke, and inhaling deeply, a blue tinted cloud escaping his lips as he began the story.

The wealthy son of General Shix, Ajin was raised in the ideals of the Federation. By the age of ten, he was an accomplished soldier in the planetary force of Geona. At the age of fifteen, his father had died in a space battle against the pirate Thorin.

Thorin had plagued the sector for years, his own fleet growing large enough that an Indomitable class frigate could be destroyed with little to no effort. Now full of revenge, hate, and impatience, Ajin left the forested planet and set sail for the last known location of Thorin.

Accompanied by a crew of elite troopers, the chase was on.

The crew arrived at the planet, Trion, chasing a lead. Rumor had it that the lover of Thorin lived in a small villa in the northern mountains, and Ajin knew he would find a way to get Thorin to come to him.

Hours of trekking through the mountains led them to the home, instantly Ajin knew something was amiss. The home was without

lights and the door was left ajar. The sound of buzzing insects could be heard from outside. Slowly, the group entered, noticing immediately that nearly every item was on its side, clearly showing signs that someone was searching for something. The insects were swarming around a couple plates of food that had sat long enough to no longer be identifiable. In one of the rooms lay a body with several knife wounds, upon closer inspection, found that he wore the insignia of the Gutter-Rats, a local gang that were trying to make it into space pirating.

Finding the location of the hideout was the easy part, many locals already knew to stay away. The hideout was hidden deep within the mines of Ihron, long emptied of anything of value. The mine had only one entrance and luck would have it that said entrance would be unguarded.

The group quickly stalked the tunnels, silently killing any sentry they found. Eventually, all tunnels emptied into one chamber, large enough for the shuttle they had flown in to sit with room to spare. Four armed men stood in the room, with a woman tied to a chair in the center.

"Okay boys, he's on the way. This is our chance for the big time," said a fifth man who entered from one of the connecting tunnels.

Ajin sent a nearly inaudible click over his comm system, signaling to his men to move forward and eliminate the targets. Seven men emerged, each from a different tunnel exit and Ajin among them. Each man instantly took aim and fired, killing all five men in a hail of well-placed shots. He approached the bound woman.

"You saved me, you're my hero," she said behind tear filled eyes.

"I'm no one's hero lady," Ajin said with a grin that scared her worse than the kidnappers had previously. "Take the tunnels, come from behind and take out all of that bastard's men before they reach this

chamber," he said addressing his men. They slowly left the chamber, weapons at the ready.

The group lay in wait for two hours before the pirates arrived. As ordered, Ajin's team began removing members, thinning the herd with none the wiser. The moment Thorin arrived in the chamber; he was the only person alive from his group. Thorin approached the man who held a knife to the throat of the woman he loved.

"Oy! Let her go, mate," Thorin said in a thick accent.

"Drop your guns, you are grossly outnumbered," Ajin said. Thorin began laughing.

"You think I came here alone? Boys!" he called, but no answer came, but that of six armed men approaching from the shadows. Realization began to dawn as he turned to see the smile on Ajin's face. Thorin pulled his sidearm from its holster and threw the pistol on the ground at Ajin's feet, with Ajin immediately kicking it behind him.

"You want money? I have tons, just let her go," he pleaded. Ajin responded with throwing a knife at Thorin, blade hitting the ground and remaining with the handle upwards.

"We settle this like men," Ajin said walking forward, knives at the ready.

"Who are you, mate?"

"My name is Ajin, son of General Shix. You killed my father, prepare to die." Thorin began backing away from the armed man.

"Can't we make a deal?"

"MY NAME IS AJIN, SON OF GENERAL SHIX. YOU KILLED MY FATHER PREPARE TO DIE!" he roared as he charged forward.

Thorin stumbled as he grabbed the knife that had been thrown at him, barely raising it in time to block the slash at his throat. He held the knife downward, making it easier for him to block. Remaining on the offensive, Ajin charged in again with his blade stabbing and slashing faster than most men could see. Thorin was skilled enough to block each attempt but one, the knife scoring a straight cut on his cheek.

The pirate returned the charge this time, going for the exposed throat. Ajin dodged the telegraphed attack and brought his own blade up under the guard and stabbed the man to the hilt under his jaw, the blade piercing the brain. His body fell like a puppet's strings being cut. The instant the knife pierced, the woman began to sob. Ajin retrieved the knife he had thrown to his adversary and hurled it through the air, the blade spinning until the knife struck the woman's forehead.

With his business concluded, Ajin and his team left the mines and returned to their shuttle at the base of the mountain. Approaching the shuttle wearily, they found a single man waiting them, wearing the uniform of a fleet master with the federation and armed only with a sword.

"I trust things went well Ajin?" the man asked.

"Do I even know you?" he replied.

"No, but I was a frequent acquaintance of your father's. He would have been pleased with this show of loyalty. Family first, I can respect that. Your father was one of the few who truly understood that within the higher echelons," the man informed.

"What do you want?" Ajin asked, getting right to the point.

"To invite you into a new family."

"You didn't ask any questions, you just joined?" Sky asked him.

"The federation was already my family. Hard not to be when raised with it."

Part 4 - Brothers in arms

"What is the show all about?"

"It's how he winds down after a mission. We all have our methods. I enjoy a smoke and a drink, Reaper plays cards, Biz will start a fight before the night's over, and Snake plays music," Hektik says, indicating each man in turn.

"How did you and Snake get your names?"

"They both came about during the first mission."

The Federation fleet assigned to accompany The Juggernaut was placed at high anchor around the forest planet of Xanthic. The view ports on the bridge of the Juggernaut showed the planet in all its beauty. Xanthic was predominantly covered by forested land mass, with nearly all sources of water found in the ground or in the numerous rivers.

Five men stood on the bridge, each armed for the mission ahead. Syn stood next to a large view screen, looking directly at the remaining four men. On the screen, there was an image of a man. The man had a weathered face, like that of tanned leather, with a long nearly white beard. One eye was blue and the other had been replaced with some cheap cybernetic augmentations. What remained of his hair was hidden beneath a white bandana with a blood red hand print over the top of his head.

"This is the target. His name is Drynn. He is responsible for the spread of HS on nine federation worlds. He went mad when his wife became infected and began to use her to infect the first planet. He-"

"Who cares, let's just shoot the fucker and be done?" Bizarro interrupted.

"Let the boss finish, and then you can shoot the fucker," the fifth man said.

"Thank you, Tempest." Bizarro did not speak up a second time, "He is to be brought in alive. The council believes he may have the cure, either in his system or at least know how to manufacture it."

Knowing that he can no longer 'shoot the fucker' Bizarro looked a little more than irritated. "It's tranqs only once we find him, live ammo for everything else."

"Do we know if there are any infected?" Ajin asked.

"No. However, since its Drynn, it is more than likely. That said if you become infected you will be put down with the rest. Once we extract the target, the Juggernaut will send a payload to handle any remaining infected. Questions?" Syn paused, but none were forthcoming. "No? Then let's board the shuttle."

The large, hunter class shuttle broke through the cloud cover and landed in a large clearing. With a hiss from the hydraulics, the ramp lowered and the men descended single file, each with their various weapons ready. Syn took the lead with his long-las on his back and his curved sword in hand, butt resting on his right shoulder. Ajin followed, sporting an auto rifle, with two others strapped to his back. Reaper came next armed with a combat rifle. Next was Tempest, who had two pistols in holsters at his hips and wearing two large tech-gloves. Bizarro brought up the rear armed with his auto cannon.

Syn raised his right fist, telling the men behind to stop. "Hand signals from here on out. If you need to say it out loud, use the comms."

The squad entered the trees, each man scanning every shadow. The sounds of the forest were strangely quiet.

Two hours of walking through the wooded area, led to a small village. Nearly every structure was a residential building, save two, a tower at the northern end and a building that appeared to be a place of worship. Each building was made of a combination of clay and wood. Several doorways had been broken open at some point and several walls had dried blood on them. The village was just as silent as the forest.

"Where is everybody? This place is dead," Reaper asked over the comms.

"They're still here, but yes, this place is dead," Syn answered.

As the group moved forward, a loud squeak was heard as Ajin stepped on what appeared to be a child's doll. Just as soon as he moved his foot off of the toy, movement was detected in one of the many doorways.

"Contact. I count seven bodies in the first two buildings," Tempest announced to the group.

Two infected emerged from the first building, one formerly a little boy with a mangled face and the other an adult female. Using their ravage throats, the duo roared and began to charge towards the group.

"Hold your fire. Melee only unless you get overrun. We don't want to attract more," Syn said. Each member of the team quickly holstered their weapons and withdrew their various hand weapons. Tempest was the only exception; he merely turned a dial on his gloves which

began a quiet crackle of electricity as they became electrified. "Circle up, do not expose your back to these things. Move as a group towards the edge of the village, I'll meet you there."

Syn stepped in the direction of the charging infected. He thumbed a button on the sword and the blade separated into linked segments. Now armed with a blade whip he made a quick movement, lashing it at the two chargers, the blade decapitating both instantly. A quick look behind him showed that others had joined the charge and went after the four men who stood back to back.

Tempest's gloves fried any infected that came within several feet of him. Reaper and Ajin were both armed with clubs that were not only very light but very effective at splitting open skulls. Bizarro stood his ground wielding two knives that were long enough to be considered short swords by smaller men and wide enough to be a butcher knife by the same.

Syn made his way towards the tower, leaving a trail of infected bodies behind him. As he came closer to the tower, he heard a woman crying loudly. Walking towards the sound, he encountered no more infected. Turning a corner, he found her. The woman was sitting on her knees, head in her hands crying loudly.

"Ma'am. I need you to be quiet," Syn told her, retracting the blade whip until it became a sword once again. The woman went silent, raising her bloody face in his direction. Syn noticing instantly that her finger nails had grown into talons. He reflexively pulled the rifle from his back and fired one time, splitting her head open like a rotten melon that had been dropped from a roof. With her dead, there was a clear path to the tower, which he ran for immediately.

The four men moved slowly towards the edge of the village, leaving dozens of dead behind them. The swarms of infected seemed to die out and the village knew peace once again.

"That was crazy hectic. Any bites? I'm clean," Ajin asked the three.

"Clear," both Reaper and Tempest responded.

Bizarro clapped him on the shoulder, "No bites. Your name Hectic now. I like that word."

Using the scope of his rifle, Syn began tracking for movement. "Work your way to the tower, I've got zero movement," he said over the comm.

Twenty long minutes passed as the group reached the bottom of the tower without any further encounters with the infected. Syn continued to track with his rifle.

"I've got movement. Lone cabin, about a thousand feet into the trees," Syn announced to the team.

"Is it him?" Reaper asked over the comm.

"Looks like it. If not, this one has the same bandanna."

Syn descended the tower and rejoined his team below. Walking into the trees was one thing the group did not want to do, regardless, they moved forward. The sounds of the forest were still missing. No matter how quiet the group was, every step sounded like a gunshot in their ears in the comparative silence.

Within many stressful minutes, they stood at the steps of a wooden porch and the cabin it was attached to. Using hand signals only, Syn gestured to the brothers, indicating that they should circle around the back and be ready for the target to attempt an escape. They left the rest of the group behind, heading towards the rear of the cabin. Another hand gesture from Syn ordered Tempest to blast the door off its hinges.

Tempest silently climbed the steps. Upon reaching the door, he placed both palms on the surface. The door shook in its place, as if a major earthquake shook below it. Within seconds, the door flew off of the hinges and collided with the wall behind.

Syn, Ajin and Tempest stormed into the empty hall. A crash could be heard from the back of the cabin as the door is slammed open. "Fuck m..." Is heard, followed by the dull thump of a rifle butt smacking into the head of the man.

"I need confirmation. Is it him?" Syn asks over the comm.

"We have him," Reaper replied.

The three left the cabin through the rear door, seeing the disheveled man draped over Bizarro's shoulder. "Let's move, double time." The group nodded and began jogging towards their shuttle. The moment they emerged from the tree line, howls from numerous infected came from behind them.

Picking up speed, they ran until they began to feel their muscles begin to ache and continued to run. "Drop them before they can get close!" Syn yelled out, sheathing his sword and removing two pistols from his belt.

A loud thump is heard as Tempest falls to the ground, with Syn the only one to look back. Tempest had tripped on an old root that was sticking up out of the ground. Looking behind himself, Tempest quickly rose and resumed his run, noticing that the infected were quickly closing the distance. He began to send waves of electricity at them with one glove and creating an earthquake to make them stumble with the other.

At the current pace, the other four reached the shuttle in twenty minutes. They quickly climbed aboard and ignited the engines, white flames spewing behind the shuttle. There was no sign of Tempest. Syn

remained at the ramp while the final flight checks were made. Raising his rifle to peer through the scope he saw Tempest begin to emerge from the tree line, dozens of infected behind him.

Suddenly, an infected male pulled him down. As he fell, he spun around quickly to better grapple with the man. Unable to discharge his gloves, he knew he was going to die. The man on top of him was nearly twice his size.

Taking his time, Syn aimed the rifle and fired. The round tore into the infected's shoulder with such force that it threw him off of Tempest and spun him around before the infected man fell face first into the leaf strewn ground.

Tempest picked himself up and boarded the shuttle before any other infected could reach him. The ramp began closing the instant he had begun boarding and was closed just after he reached the safety of the inside of the shuttle.

"You snake. You don't need to make the shot perfect every time," Tempest confronted Syn.

"If the shot wasn't perfect you'd be infected," Syn responded.

"Ever since that day he's gone by Snake," Hektik told her.

"What happened to Tempest?" Sky asked.

"That's a story for a different day."

Part 5 - The Arrival

"So, why did the Federation send your team here?" she asked, gently placing her hands on his and looked into his eyes.

Hektik removed his hands from the touch. "I'm taken. As for the mission, I can't tell you that part without Snake's approval. It's your turn. Tell me one of your stories."

"I'm not sure where to start," she said confused, and blushing from the failed interaction.

"Try the beginning."

Born to the name of Krysh, she was raised in a small hab on the outskirts of the largest city on the planet, the city Greedo. The city was known for being the only location to have contracts with the Trading Guild. If something comes from off-world, it passes through Greedo first. This is the only city on the planet to have its own police force.

Krysh never knew her father, or what became of him. All she knew was that she had her mother and that was enough. She was taught from the beginning to always reach for the stars, and never settle. This outlook on life earned her the name Sky by the age of twelve.

Her mother became ill and could no longer provide for the two of them at the age of fourteen. Within six months of her mother becoming ill, she passed away and Sky was left with her uncle Ryll.

Ryll was a buggy racer with little ability on the track but an unrivaled amount of knowledge. He spent years teaching her everything he knew, along with putting her to work on maintaining his buggies. The years of tutelage conditioned her mind to be ready to race and the labor kept her lean and fit.

Her eighteenth birthday was one she had been looking forward to. She was finally old enough to enter the races. The only problem she faced was that she needed to procure her own buggy.

Knowing that her uncle made very little when he raced, she understood that she wouldn't be paid for her work on his buggy. She

decided that she would offer her services as a mechanic to earn the money herself.

Not thrilled with the idea of his niece helping the competition, he allowed her to leave and search for her own opportunities. Sky was hired on by well-known racer, Deuce. He owned four buggies, each one custom built for each of the main tracks, and none of them left a race without taking some major damage along the way.

Deuce paid her well and treated her even better. He may have been ten years older than her, but she began to fall for him. Silently she waited for her chance to be with him, all the while watching numerous women come in and out of his life.

Sky worked for him for two years before finally having enough saved to buy her own buggy. She informed Deuce that her time was at an end and come tomorrow she would be leaving to purchase her own buggy. He was sad that she might be leaving his garage, because little did she know, he had grown quite fond of her and the kindred spirit she was.

The man offered her the deal of a lifetime, they would become partners. He would help purchase her buggy, share a small portion of his winnings. All that was expected in return was her continued work on the buggies and a small portion of her own winnings. Ecstatic, she agreed to the terms and the following morning the duo went to the seller Deuce had used in the past to procure his own buggies.

Since Deuce knew the man for many years, Sky had the total price slashed to a fraction of what it was, leaving her with enough money to buy the parts needed for all of the modifications she had planned.

Returning to the garage, she got to work immediately. Two weeks of near constant work, it was finally finished. Deuce loved to watch her work, the energy and excitement was infectious. As she stood

admiring the completed buggy, he approached from behind and began kissing her neck. In surprise she dropped the wrench she was holding. She turned and kissed him back, both realizing that the feelings they had for each other were shared. He stopped himself before things went too far, and reminded her they needed their rest if they were to both race in the morning.

"Good morning race fans!" the announcer began, "We have what promises to be a most excellent time for you!" The buggies began pulling into position. There were twelve buggies in total, all with different builds and colors. No two were the same, and many had at least one large gun or cannon equipped.

"We have fanned favorite Deuce defending his title against the rest. Longtime rivals the Scolari brothers in position with Ryll directly behind." A second announcer proclaimed, resulting in a cheer from the fans. Thousands of people gathered around the track every week to see the races.

"Of course he's behind, he's always behind," the first chimed in.

"He's still the only racer to place behind the brothers that hasn't died or lost a limb."

"Don't die today Ryll!" they both said over the speakers. The crowd's laughter became a roar that could be heard by the drivers above their engines.

"The lights are on. Here we go folks! 3! 2! 1!" the first yells out and a trio of lights change from red to yellow and then to green. With a roar of the engines the drivers quickly left the starting line.

The track was shaped with many turns, one stretch going through a long cave, and consisted of three laps. As usual Deuce was in the lead out of the gate, followed by one of the brothers, then Sky, the remaining brother, Ryll and then the rest.

At the first turn, the second brother pulled a lever, opening a rear hatch and dropping many items on the ground behind. The items were mostly glass to shred tires with many drivers able to avoid it, but two were not so lucky. The eleventh car ruptured a tire and flipped, jumping the guard rails and crashing into the walls of the enormous arena. The final car avoided the glass, but swerved too late to avoid a small black dome that exploded on impact, incinerating both the driver and the buggy instantly.

The first lap concluded without any other tricks being pulled by the brothers or any racers pulling ahead of the others. As the group finished the second turn things began to change.

The upper half of the second brother's buggy rotated allowing him and his large cannon to face behind as the buggy continued forward. He began firing his cannon, destroying three of the rear racers. The other drivers swerved frantically to avoid the shells and in turn the brother began shooting large holes in the ground. Just before he reached the next turn he swiveled forward again. Ryll was unable to avoid one of the large holes and crashed bumper first. His buggy flipped over and now rested upside down. Ryll tried continuously to pull himself from the wreckage.

Once again the lap concluded with no other problems. The buggies sped around the second turn, the final one crashing into one of the holes. Ryll finally pulled himself out as Deuce passed him. He turned in time to see the first brother just before he was run over, blood splattering the windshield and the body getting stuck in the gears connected to the wheels. Jammed as they were, the wheels refused to turn anymore and the brother was out of the race, leaving Deuce in first, Sky second and his brother in third.

The remaining brother began to pull ahead of the other two drivers. A flick of a switch and he accelerated forward much faster than he had all race and pulled ahead of the leader. Sky gave her engine another pump of gas as she revved it harder than she had yet and

began to pull alongside the brother. Coming out of one of the final turns, the racers approached the tunnel.

The tunnel was only wide enough for one buggy and was solid rock on all sides. With only six feet before the brother entered the tunnel Sky swerved into him, forcing his buggy into the side wall. The collision was hard enough to ignite the fuel tank. The inferno killed him before the metal compressed him tight enough to be half as deep. Sky made it through the tunnel and became the first person to best Deuce in ten years.

"Did he let you win?" Hektik asked her.

"I kept asking him that for years. He always denied it," she told him, "we got married shortly after that race."

"What happened to him?"

"Scolari killed him in a race last year."

The band began to lead into the next song but was stopped abruptly by the sound of gunfire from the entrance of the club. Many of the patrons ran out a rear door since they were unarmed per the rules of the club. The bartender removed a shotgun from behind the counter and the four members of the Acolytes equipped various side arms, all awaiting the foe that fired shots in their bar.

"Get your ass in here! Who do you think you are to come into my den?" Snake yelled towards the doorway.

A tall, slender figure enters dressed in a full, skin tight suit. The only identifying characteristics were two knives with blue blades strapped to her waist, a completely black mask that hid her face entirely, and the shape of her breasts beneath the material. Looking at the knives, realization began to dawn on Snake who slowly lowered his guns.

"Give me one reason not to put you down!" Hektik yelled as he walked further from the table.

"Is that any way to greet an old friend?" the voice came from the mask and sounded very machine like. Both Hektik and Snake glanced at each other and with a nod both men holstered their weapons.

"Snow? Is that you?" Hektik asked with one eyebrow raised.

The woman removed the helmet to reveal a young and beautiful face with long flowing golden hair. At first sight of the woman under the mask, both Reaper and his brother lowered their weapons. The bartender only follows suit after a nod from Snake.

"What was with the shooting?" Hektik asks her. She closes the distance to him, wraps both arms around him and kisses him passionately.

Once stopped, she looks him in the eye and smiles. "I told Filp that if he touched my ass again i was going to kill him." He gave her a knowing nod, remembering the conversation the last time he saw her. "I only used the gun so I could make our reunion more private."

Hektik led her to the table he had been sitting in all night. He waited for her to sit, but when she didn't move, he took the seat instead. She then sat on his lap, her fingers running through his ponytail. Reaper and Bizarro both joined them at the table.

Snake approached the bartender. "Get my good bottles and bring us enough glasses." The bartender nodded. "Then I want you to close up and let everyone outside know that it's a private party now and to vacate." He then joined the group at the table.

"How did your last mission finish out?" Snake asked her as he sat in the remaining seat.

"Complete success. We retrieved the sample with zero casualties," she answered.

"Did the fleet pick up the item?" he asked. A smile told him that the item was indeed retrieved. "Excellent." He returned the smile.

Letting the smile fade he began his questions again, "Why did high command send you and who else did you bring?"

"I came with Tempest. We're the new recruits for the Acolytes. High command wanted to make sure you had enough hands for both missions."

"What other mission, and what the fuck item are you guys talking about?" Reaper asked.

Chapter 3

Part 1 - The other mission

"I'll tell you all about it, but after one of you takes the girl back to her room," Snake said looking over at Sky.

"She's to receive full protection and full disclosure. General Xan's orders," the new woman said still looking only at Hektik.

"Why her?" Bizarro asks.

"He didn't say. However he did mention that when we leave this rock we are to bring her and the kid with us." Everyone nodded at this, but none understood the reasoning.

"For her benefit, I'll cover the outlines for both missions," Snake began, "the secondary mission is to eliminate all groups in power that aren't already tied to the federation."

"I thought that was our primary?" Reaper asks confused.

"The real reason we're here is to find the crystals. The item that was picked up was a container of raw ficen. I found the largest cache in hundreds of years." Everyone but the newcomer looked shocked.

"Why didn't you tell us?" Hektik asked.

"It was need to know, which reminds me," Snake looks over at Snowflake, "was that you that took out the Renegade base?"

"General Xan said that there was too much ordinance there to leave sitting around. So, yes that was me."

The bartender returned with three clear bottles, each filled with an amber liquid. "Sir. A couple of the locals are unhappy regarding the private party. What do you wish I do with them?" he asked as he placed the bottles and several glasses on the table.

"Remind them that as long as they live in Gaberd they will obey. There are two other taverns that they can visit," Snake looks back to the table and adds, "Biz, go with him."

The large man rises from the table and walks behind the bartender as they leave the establishment.

"How long until Tempest arrives?" Snake asked, looking at the woman.

"By morning. He's doing reconnaissance for the next target. The Blackouts are too close to the mines. Xan wants them removed by nightfall."

Some dull thuds are heard from just outside the main doors. When the sound ended both Bizarro and the bartender entered the establishment. Bizarro cracked his knuckles as he walks and returns to the table.

Reaper looks at his shirt, which now has several fresh splatters of blood. "Did you know you have some red on your shirt?"

He looks at his shirt and only shrugs. Grabbing one of the bottles, he begins to drink without the need to fill his glass.

"Once the drinks are done, call it. We're hitting the Blackouts tomorrow. Rest up," Snake says, rising from the table.

Snowflake quickly jumps to her feet, and approaches him. Placing one hand on his shoulder, she whispers, "Xan had a package for you."

Your eyes only." She pulled a small black box from a pouch on her belt and placed it in his open palm.

He nodded and began to open the box. With the opening, she immediately returned to her seat at the table, but not before placing a similar box in front of Sky. "Wait until you are back in your room."

Snake reads over a small paper he had removed from the box, eyes going wide. Looking back at Snowflake he begins to yell. "WHAT THE FUCK IS THIS? DOES HE THINK THIS IS FUNNY? I WILL. FUCKING. MURDER. HIM!"

She raises two open palms, "He said you'd react like this. He wanted me to assure you, it is on the level. They finally did it." Snake quickly sits down, attempting to regain his composure.

"What did it say?" Hektik asked him. Snake handed the letter to him in response.

Part 2 - The contents

'Snake-

It's been a long time, I know, but trust me when I say this- Drynn synthesized a working cure, to BOTH strains. Your family has already been administered the vaccine a year ago, but it takes three years of them in stasis with the formula in their veins to be cured. We didn't want to tell you before, but their vitals are improving.

They will be with you when your mission is completed.

-Xan'

"That is some heavy shit," Hektik says, placing the message on the table. Snake grabs it and returns it to the box.

"Be ready to roll at 0600. The girl stays here," Snake says just before turning and walking out of the room.

"I need to get some sleep. Thank you for your help," Sky says, rising from the table. The same guard rushes over from an adjoining room and follows her as she exits.

"So what was that about?" Reaper asks, looking to Hektik for an answer.

"The cure. It's finally finished. He can finally go home."

"What will that mean for the Acolytes?"

"If he's done, he's done. That just means Hek can take over," she says with a smile, her voice like silk.

"When it's time to leave this rock, we need to have a plan," Reaper says rising from the table. The rest of the group responded only with an assortment of shrugs and nods. Finishing the drink in his hand, Reaper leaves the room as well.

The three remaining people finish their drinks and do as Reaper had before and returned to their rooms.

The escort walked with Sky until she reached her door, not turning away until it was closed and secured. Sky walked to her bed and promptly sat down, quickly noticing how soft the mattress was.

Immediately falling into the mattress, her eyelids grew heavy. As she was nearly asleep, a thought began to gnaw at her consciousness, she had to know what was in the box. Sitting up, she opened the box to reveal two items. The item she removed first was a picture of her mother sitting with a man she had never seen before. The image faded from years of exposure to harsh lights. On the back was a date, nearly one year before she was born. Looking again at the picture,

she noticed that her mother was smiling, something she almost never saw while Sky was growing up. Oddly enough, the man had a smile that she had seen before but couldn't place.

Setting the picture aside, she removed a letter that was similar in the style that Snake had received.

'Krysh,

You don't know me yet, but I am the man in the image of your mother. I promised her I would return, but failed to arrive in time. I have seen you on three occasions since your birth. I'm sorry I never rescued you from this damned planet. You are my daughter and I should have done more for you.

Every time I saw you, you seemed happy and I was afraid that my taking you away would change that. I was there for the birth of both of your children. Your husband seemed like a great man and he was good to you, much better than I had been to your mother.

If I would have acted, your son would still be with us. For that I am sorrier than you could ever know.

The destruction of the Renegades was for the death of your son. Now no one can benefit from those monsters.

For the time being, stay with the Acolytes. They will take care of you in every way you need. They have never lost a member of their team, or failed to protect anyone in their care.

Once the team returns from removing the Blackouts, they are to find who hired those pricks that interfered with our family. No stone is to be left unturned. Destroy everything these people hold dear.

The team will do this, merely show Snake this letter. The code is Zeta Invictus Alpha.

Xan'

Tears began to fall freely as she placed the items back in the box they had come from. When the tears finally stopped flowing, she heard a near constant pounding from another room. Muffled moans can be heard as she lays her head on the bed and she is thankful that she's asleep within seconds and not being kept awake by the guests in the other room.

Part 3 - Blackout

Morning arrived about two hours before they needed to be ready, but with the rising of the first sun each member arose and began readying for the fight.

Snake was the first to enter and find the seat where he had been sitting only hours before. His customary pair of shades blocked most of the light from his eyes. Removing a small metal case from one of the pouches on his hip, he opens to reveal a row of perfectly rolled cigarettes. Quickly lighting one, he relishes the calming effect they have on him. By the time he finishes and begins to put the stub out in the ashtray in the center of the table, the brothers arrive, followed shortly by Hektik and Snowflake.

As the final two walked towards the table they each did their last minute checks. Snow looked at the condition of her plasma knives, and Hektik slid the final clip into place on his belt, blue smoke drifting upwards from the smoke that sat between his lips.

Snake rises and promptly walks towards the exit, all four members following close behind.

With no interruptions, the group enters the large vehicle they had used the night before and proceed to their destination.

This early in the day, when the three suns are all at their peak, most people remain indoors, odd then, that Snake would see a glint of metal on the horizon.

"Multiple bugs incoming," he announced over the speakers in the dash. This is punctuated by an explosion about fifty feet in front of the speeding vehicle.

Hektik begins driving erratically, swerving left and right in order to make them much harder to hit. The large turret begins to open fire, spraying bullets faster than most could see.

Most of the shots went wide or fell short due to the range of the approaching buggy. Snake takes aim with his rifle, taking time to exhale to steady himself before pulling the trigger. The hot-shot round tore through the sky, leaving a straight lined after image obscuring everyone's vision briefly. The nearest buggy erupts into an inferno as the round hits the gas tank, igniting the fuel instantly.

"That's one down, two more incoming. The rifle jammed on that last shot. We need to be closer if we're going to take them out," he informs the rest of the team.

Accelerating even faster, the distance decreased to the point that he needed to slow down. At that same moment, the cannon began firing a stream of shells, quickly hitting and destroying a second buggy.

The final 'bug' made a quick turn and attempted to flee. Hektik knew he could catch him and began to push the engine again. Within moments the two vehicles were a mere two feet from touching.

"Snake, you make this shot, I'm buying," Hektik called out, accelerating as he made a quick turn to the left and an, even sharper turn to the right. The vehicle hit a small dune and went airborne. The entire vehicle proceeded to do a barrel roll to the right, passing over the buggy.

Snake aimed a pistol as the man driving looked up in shock. Pulling the trigger, the man's head was turned into a wet crater above his jaw line. Brain matter covered the interior of the 'bug'.

Coming out of the roll, the vehicle landed with a bump that made everyone rise slightly out of their seats. Checking various gauges and meters on the dash, Hektik returns the vehicle to its previous heading.

"You catch the markings on those bugs?" Snowflake asks to no one in particular.

"Two were Blackouts, the third was a Dementor," Snake informs the team, "when did they start working together, and were they gunning for us already."

The entire team merely looked at one another, not a one with any clues to answering the question.

The open plain they had been driving on led to enormous rock outcroppings. The rocks formed a near perfect wall that ran for two miles. As they approached the base of these rocks, the outline of a man can be seen. The man stood perfectly still with his head bowed. Only a dozen or so feet away the rope tied around the neck of the man is noticed, followed by a small, portable, short range radio strapped to the left hand.

Stopping the vehicle, Hektik quickly exits. "Wait here, I'll check this out," he says looking back.

Walking towards the hanging man, Hektik realizes that the corpse is dressed in the all black livery of the Blackouts, including the customary tattoo work of every visible inch covered in black ink. He reaches for the radio, removing it from the bindings just before it begins to emit the customary squawk of an incoming transmission.

"Been a long time Hek. I'm on my way down," the voice says from the radio.

Within moments a silhouette of man can be seen at the top of the forty foot high rocks, jumping over every gap. Upon reaching the final rock, without pause, the man jumped towards the ground. His arms outstretched, metal hands glinting in the sun. A short gust of wind escaped from the hands to slow his fall. Landing without a sound, he approached Hektik, a black hood covering his torso and face.

With a smile, Hektik walked to the man, instantly grabbing the offered hand and with each man shaking the other with a hand around the other's wrist.

"Haven't seen you since the Sunty incident," Hektik says, as the other uncovers his head, revealing a fair skinned man underneath.

With the man revealed, all occupants vacate the vehicle. Snake walks over quickly, nodding as the other man made to salute.

"What's the word Tempest?" Snake asks, looking at the hanging corpse.

"Most of the Blackouts are gone. The scout didn't know anything about where they were headed; only that someone is uniting the gangs."

"This could be problematic," Snake began. Looking back at Tempest he added, "How many are left?"

"No more than ten. Zero civilians. Orders?"

By then, the rest of the team was standing around the three men. "You've had the lay of the land. Guide us in and no casualties. I want

them breathing until we get every answer from them. Then we'll leave a calling card." Bizarro smiled at this, cracking his knuckles.

"They have two guards manning the main gate; the rear has four auto-launchers. To the west, they have a power substation. There is a tunnel connecting the primary structure to the station."

"How many guards at the station?" Reaper asks.

"None. Every major path can be seen from the main gate. We avoid sight by passing through the holes in the rocks and cutting our way in from there."

The group looked over at Snake, who simply nodded. Hektik immediately jumped in the vehicle and moved it out of sight behind some large rocks. As he walked back, the remainder of the team was finishing final weapon checks while Reaper fixed the leering skull bandanna over his face and Snowflake had secured her helmet on her head.

Tempest began climbing the rocks quickly, the rest of the team following behind. Within moments the group had collectively reached a ledge that opened to a dark tunnel. Each of the men put on their various eye-wear, the lenses instantly illuminated the passage.

Single file, with Tempest at the fore, the group followed the winding path. An hour of trekking through the tunnel, led to an opening wide enough for only one man to walk through. The light of the suns blared down, trying to overtake the shadow, and blinding the night vision of the lenses. Snowflake and Snake both adjusted small dials to turn the vision mode off, while the others simply removed their goggles.

"Snow, you're up," Snake said looking to the woman. Without even nodding, she moved forward, touching her left wrist as she entered the sunlight. The instant the light touched her suit, she shimmered

and could no longer be seen. The crunch of gravel under her feet became softer as she walked further away. Eventually the only telltale sign of her passing was the occasional pieces of gravel rolling away as her foot brushes it. Within a few moments she had reached the fence. A flash of blue appears as if from nowhere as she turned on the power to her plasma knives. The blue flash quickly moved through the links of the fence, parting the metal like blade through empty air. As the circle of fence began to fall, she quickly took hold and gently placed it on the ground so virtually no sound could be heard. With the opening revealed, the group moved forward quickly to put the substation between them and any prying eyes.

Each person walking as low as they could, some practically sitting on the ground, Tempest led them to a large wooden hatch. Reaper quickly opened the hatch as each member dropped into the vertical shaft. The tunnel was dug directly out of the dirt, wooden beams supporting the structure above, and dull yellow lights strung every eight feet. The end of the tunnel was a metal staircase that had been painted to resemble the dirt walls, with a line of missing paint running down the steps from the many steps that had been taken to the substation and back throughout the years. Voices could be heard at the top of the stairs from the other side of a large metal door.

Snowflake removed and handed the helmet to Hektik. “Hold this for me, baby.” She slowly walked up the stairs, unzipping part of her suit to expose the cleavage of her breasts. At the door, she slowly pushed it open.

“What the hell is she doing?” Bizarro whispers to Hektik. Ignoring him, Hektik continued to watch as she exposed only her head into the hallway beyond. Behind her back, she waved the group further back into the tunnel and out of sight. Without confirming that the group followed her instruction, she stepped into the hallway further.

Just as she entered the hallway fully, one member of the Blackouts turned a corner and spotted her right away. “Your boss sent me to

keep you boys company, and I've been really lonely," she said to him, just before disappearing into the stairwell again, the man walking quickly behind her. Continuing down the stairs, she would occasionally look behind her, giving him a smile that made his heart skip in anticipation. Looking behind her one last time she turned the corner and quickly moved past the rest of the team. The man soon turned the same corner, nearly crashing into Bizarro, whose huge fist came crashing down on the man's head, instantly knocking him out, but not before his eyes going wide as realization dawned on him. Reaper moved forward and bound his hands and feet together and using a small roll of industrial tape covered the mouth to keep him silent while they stalked his friends.

Together the group ascended the stairs, this time to no sounds on the other side. The walls of the hallway matched the paint of the stairs but with twice as many lights. "Where you at Plim?" a voice called from behind a door at the end of the hallway.

The door began to open quickly, but before it could reveal anyone in the hallway, Snake kicked the door with enough force to send it back, smashing into the voice's nose with a sharp crack. As the man stumbled backwards, he began muttering, "Wha' hell man. Why you do tha'?" The door opened revealing the team behind. Reaper getting to him first hits the man hard enough to knock him out in a single strike of the butt of his rifle. Reaper proceeded to bind and gag him as he had the first.

Entering the hall, they found it to be empty of anything but a second staircase, this one rising to the surface. "When we exit here, we'll be completely exposed. The path breaks off and circles both sides of the primary structure. They have one man at the gate and the rest will be in that building." Tempest informed them.

"You heard him. Stay low and Snow, you have the gate," Snake ordered.

The woman initiated the stealth mode and began running towards the gate, her moving laughter resounding in their ear-pieces. "If all of you beat me, I'll buy every round."

"Does she even know how much he drinks?" Reaper asked no one in particular as his brother began running as well. The rest of the group began to pick up the pace.

"Fuck me!" Snowflake cried as the reserve energy of her suit was depleted, making her visible to the world. As fast as her long legs would carry her, she made for the rocks to find cover as the large cannon opened fire. Clouds of sand erupted in the air as the cannon's shells landed, the gap a mere three feet from her and closing. Approaching the large rocks she was seeking, she performed a running leap to find cover. She was almost behind the rock as a single round found her left shoulder, exiting cleanly out of her back with a spray of blood. The pain of the wound distracting her from landing, causing her to crash to her side, bruising a couple ribs and making her cry out involuntarily.

While she was running, and before the canon had fired its first shot, the men had entered the building. The iron pipes blocked all thermal imaging and distorted all incoming radio transmissions, causing her cries to go unheard.

The pipes ran in every conceivable direction, taking freshly pumped crude oil to the many reservoirs. The rushing liquid in the pipes created a dull roar that made communication difficult without using the hand signals that formed the federation battle language. The group continued forward until they reached the only door in the building with no incidents on their path, the door made of a similar material as the pipes.

Receiving the signal, Bizarro rammed the door with his large shoulder. Five men had been sitting around a single table playing cards, a small pile of credits lying in the center. One of the men fell

out of his chair in surprise. The Acolytes quickly stepped in with guns raised. Each of the men around the table quickly raised their arms.

"My associate," Snake began, nodding at Reaper, "is going to bind each of you. One wrong move and his brother will begin breaking bones."

Reaper began his work. Upon completing the bindings of the first man he leaned in close to his ear. Through gritted teeth he demanded, "How many of you are here?" Before giving the man a chance to answer, he shoved him into the table face first. The impact broke his nose and dented the metal table.

Moving to the second man, he finished binding and asked again. "How many-" he began but was interrupted by the man he held.

"There're only eight of us," he blurted as tears began to fall. The remaining men were bound in silence and were left with Bizarro watching over them as the team exited the building.

Leaving the noise of the machinery, they were greeted to two new sounds, that of the turret peppering the rocks with shells and of Snowflake cursing them over their headsets. Snake quickly took aim with his rifle, putting his sights on the man behind the turret, cross-hairs falling on his right shoulder. Depressing the trigger, a single round escaped from the chamber. The round hit him with enough force to not only knock the man on his back, but to separate his arm from his body. His cries resembled that of a baby wolf-cat being drowned in boiling fluids.

With the rain of shells at an end, Hektik rushed forward to assist his girl, while Reaper secured the final prisoner. "You gonna be ok babe?" Hektik asked her as he helped her to her feet, taking special care to support her shoulder.

"You think I'm ok? I was fucking shot!" Holding her ribs with her good arm, she walked slowly towards the structure.

Reaper dragged the bleeding man by the back of his shirt, the man's face beginning to pale. "We need to stop the bleeding if you want him to answer any questions. Snowflake immediately walked over, plasma knife in hand. Depressing a small button, the blade became energized instantly. Using the flat edge of the blade, she quickly cauterized the wound, the man screaming even louder. Slapping him with the back of her hand, he quickly went silent. Tears ran down his cheeks in thin streams, while he refused to allow any more sounds to escape his lips.

Reaper looks at the wound on her shoulder. "You alright?" He asked.

"Is this stupid question day? Of course I'm not alright. I had a bullet go through my shoulder." She explained sarcastically.

"Reaper. Bring the other two up, Tempest and I'll help your brother bring the others out here. Hektik, bandage her up." He said tossing the pack he always carried to Hektik, who caught it neatly.

With the others away, Hektik removed the top portion of her suit, exposing her flesh to the world. Working quickly, he firmly placed a compress on each side of her shoulder and wrapped her several times with white medical fabric that would support her bruised ribs. He then helped her cover herself with the top of her suit to conceal her breasts from potentially prying eyes.

One by one, the eight members were thrown to the plating underfoot, each body stirring up a small cloud of dust.

"Biz, you know what to do," Snake said as he paced in front of the prone men. Bizarro entered the building again, this time carrying the sack that Hektik had used moments before. "Where is the rest of your

gang?" he said this time addressing the men, "First to tell me everything I want will outlive the others."

No answers were immediately forthcoming. Each of the men looked at the others dumbfounded. The only one who didn't take his eyes off of their captors was the one missing an arm. His determination to keep his eyes on them at all times was the only thing keeping him conscious.

The woman walked over to the one armed man, her good arm wielding the electrified blade. Her other hand gently stroked his cheek as she leaned close, noses nearly touching. "You have this sharp, useless look about you. Are you going to answer him?" The man stayed silent. "Pity," she said sounding bored, her knife stabbing outward and killing the man that sat next to him by piercing the brain through the ear canal.

The prisoners began to speak rapidly, each voice drowned out by the volume of the group. Hektik unholstered one of his many handguns. "Hey! One at a time!" he yelled at them as he fired a round into the upper thigh of one of the men, blood pooling quickly around the pucker of a bullet wound. Each of the men was quiet again.

Tempest leaned in towards Reaper's ear, "This is just like that time on Jaspim." This brought an unseen smile to Reaper's face as he nodded in agreement.

Hektik aimed his pistol at the lower extremities of one man as Snake began to ask him questions, "Where did the rest of you go and why are some of you running with Dementors?"

Staring down the sights of the gun, the man answered shaking, "Th. Th. Th. They went to a meet. Th. Th. Th. The boss says we gots to roll with them Dementors. Di. Di. Didn't says why."

One of the other men glared at him. "Shut the fuck up man, what's wrong with you?"

"He's got a gun pointed at my dick."

"Here, is this better?" Hektik asked as he raised the sight of the gun to point at the man's forehead.

"No, it's not." He was able to get out.

Snapping his fingers, Snake spoke again when heads had turned his direction again, "Who's the meet with and why are they meeting?"

A different man responded this time, "He never said. That's all we know man."

With a loud crack, the pistol was fired, killing the stammering man. The other men stared at the rising smoke, either from the gun or the entry wound. "Is this the truth?" Snake asked.

The maimed man began to sob as he confirmed this information. Hektik fired and killed another of the men.

"Again I ask, is this the truth?" He asked louder this time.

One of the remaining men began to soil himself as he cried, answering the question, "Yes. It's true. He keeps information to himself."

Snowflake stepped forward glaring at the man whom had spoken, knife in hand as she spoke to Snake, "Do we believe him?"

Bizarro rejoined the group, listening to what he'd consider fun. "Yeah, boss man. We believe?"

All eyes were on Snake as he paced for a moment. After several long minutes he responded, "Let's leave a message for the king. Time to roll." Nodding, the entire group returned to the vehicle.

As they entered the vehicle, Snake gave his directions to Hektik, "Take us out one mile and then we'll watch the fireworks." They quickly drove off, accelerating as fast as the vehicle would allow. Seconds later Hektik slammed on the brakes, causing the entire vehicle to fish-tail around in a full one hundred and eighty degrees.

"How much time left Biz?" Snake asks as he exits the vehicle again, ensuring that his shades are back on.

The others follow suit as he answers, "Five.....four.....Three...." As he was about to say the next number, a large explosion ripped through the installation. The vibrations could be felt by the team as they witnessed a jet of fire rising into the clouds. Black smoke billowed outwards, blanketing the horizon as the oil wells were being burned, further fueling the stream of fire. The flames reached such heights that clouds in the sky evaporated into near nothingness.

"Let's get back to Gaberd, see if we can't get more information about the other gangs." The Acolytes returned to the drive, but used a different route to their home.

The drive was uneventful until they were nearly two miles away and the first traces of smoke could be seen rising above the town. Snake began sighting with his scope, searching for the source of the fire. Two destroyed 'bugs' could be seen. Both were on fire, but still were not the source of the smoke. The vehicle slowed to what felt like a crawl as they approached the outskirts of the town. Reaching the single entrance, the fire could be seen from the first three buildings, each burning with an intense heat. Dozens of people could be seen dumping buckets of water and making use of fire-retardant foam. Several others could be seen near the entrance and beyond, each dead, having bled out from numerous bullet wounds. One such

corpse lay with its head having been vaporized by an explosive shell with the uniform of the lead guard that was watching the gate the night before. The vehicle quickly drove in with the group vacating as soon as the wheels had stopped moving.

Running over to the scene of the fire, each member of the team took a place to assist with the water line, successfully quelling the flames within forty long and hot minutes. With the flames extinguished a higher ranked guard approached the team, thanking them all for their help with the water.

“Qero! What the fuck happened here?” Reaper demanded of the man.

The man was shaking as he began to answer, all color drained in his face. “I don’t know where they came from. There was so much blood,” the pitch of his voice rising as he became more hysterical.

“Start from the beginning,” Snake said placing his hands on the man’s shoulders to try to calm him down.

He took a deep breath and began again, “Dozens of ‘bugs’ opened fire before we even knew they were there. Halleck was the first down. We brought out the missile tubes and returned fire. Once the first two were taken out, they scattered and ran away. The last couple rockets that they fired hit the buildings.”

“How many of our men died today and who ordered the tubes?” Snake asked.

“Nine men total, eight wounded. I was the one that ordered the tubes, sir.” A new look of worry crossed his face as he admitted his assertion of command.

“You did well.” Snake said showing a rare smile. The man’s shoulders finally relaxed as Snake began again. “You will take Halleck’s place. I could use more men that take initiative like that.

Jake Combs

Take the rest of the night off. After the cleanup is finished, meet me at the D.R.”

Chapter 4

Part 1 - Five hours earlier

Five vehicles, all painted the color black, speed along a sand covered road. The group travels in a 'v' formation with the two largest vehicles taking up the rear. These two were large trucks. Where the flatbed would typically be open, both were covered by the same black fabric concealing the men inside. The remaining three were single-man buggies, only one of which were not exposed to the elements and rode in the center of the formation. The previous two hours of driving led them here, to a large estate that was surrounded by a three story high wall.

Two similar caravans followed a mile behind. Each group marked in a different scheme than the next, and each completely distinctive.

Two large metal gates slowly swung open to make room for the vehicles. Large men carrying oversized auto-cannons directed them to their parking. As each wave of vehicles entered the compound, the tension would continue to build, each group having had problems at one point with the others. The only thing keeping these volatile individuals from fighting amongst each other was the agreement they made in order to be allowed entrance to this meeting. These three caravans marked the end of waiting.

Each group was led separately through reinforced doors that could withstand a direct rocket blast with only minimal paint damage. Beyond the doors were several lavish hallways, each with rooms that could rival almost any residence on the entire planet.

The final hallway they had walked down led to an exceptionally large dining area. At the end of the room sat a large ornate chair which was occupied by a man who kept his body in the shadows. Standing before him were over a hundred men and women,

consisting of members from eleven different gangs. The final members of this cabal entered at the rear as the man in shadow began to speak.

"I know there are blood feuds between a few of you, so I thank you for meeting here peacefully," he began as he placed his right hand on the arm of the chair. Many glared at each other.

"You've all been at each other's throats for years, like some wild dog trying to mark its territory." This got the attention of everyone. Nobody has dared to disrespect some of these men and live. "I am offering you all a chance to be part of something bigger, a chance to rule not just your territory, but others as well."

Those that came from some of the smaller territories got very excited by this news, each quietly discussing what this would mean for them.

The man raised his hand, demanding silence as he continued, "There will be no more fighting between your groups; instead resources will be shared more freely. The Blackouts for instance have already agreed to decrease the cost of crude oil only to the men in this room." The leader of the Blackouts nodded as those around them turned, trying to confirm what was just announced.

"We've had some setbacks as of late. I've learned that one gang has been systematically removing some of their competition entirely." People began to murmur as they looked around to see if any groups were missing. "The Renegades were eliminated as of yesterday."

Cries of shock could be heard as one man stepped forward. The lone man, wearing the colors of the Renegades turned to face the multitude.

"I am all that survived the attack on our base. Hundred thirty of my family were butchered. If they could take us out, who's next?"

The group began to discuss this news loudly.

"Who's next?"

"Who could take them?"

"Fuck. They're the largest..."

"No one's safe."

"Let's get the bastards."

The noise had become a roar as the group began to panic. Knowing that there was no other way to regain control of the room, the shadow unholstered a revolver, and aiming at the floor, fired without hitting anyone. The report of the firearm brought the group up short as everyone turned to view the man with the smoking revolver.

"If I may continue?" he paused, waiting to see if anyone continued to interrupt him, "The items I have promised you will be found with your vehicles. By accepting these gifts you have pledged yourselves to this group and our cause." The group leaders all nodded in agreement.

"Expect a blood red buggy to greet each of you in the coming week. I wish the Blackouts, Dementors and Fiends to stay. The remainders of you are free until you are called upon again."

The three groups stepped forward as the remainder left out the doors they had entered.

Part 2 - Four hours earlier

The room sat nearly empty, even though close to fifty men stood waiting to hear what their great leader needed from them.

"Nearly twelve hours ago, the Acolytes attacked the Renegades. In less than two hours they were finished," the man in the shadow began as the remaining men stood listening closely.

"I've learned that their home is in Gaberd. If they think they can attack one of us in their home, they will regret it." Knowing where this was going, they all began smiling.

"I have a man within their city. He's informed me that there is only one entrance and only four men stand guard. They don't even use a gate." The men started laughing at the notion of a stronghold without a gate.

"It's early still in the day; let's take them out of the picture before they can eliminate any more of our group." The group became energized, each person as eager as the next to leave.

"Kill every fucker in their town and you will be rewarded immensely." This was enough for the men to hear since they all immediately turned and ran towards their vehicles.

With a chorus of hooting, yelling, growling and fists pumping the air, the remaining twenty vehicles left together, quickly putting distance between them and their benefactor.

Part 3 - Three hours seven minutes before

The line of spread out buggies ran at full speed, churning up enough dust to make visibility zero behind them. As each second passed, it brought them closer to their objective. Twenty buggies and two trucks moved as one mass.

The other two gangs deferred to the instructions of the Blackout leader, who was simply known as Rax. The Planetary Security Force, or PSF, had placed a bounty on his head years ago, but through his

contacts and stranglehold on oil in the region, no one was able to successfully collect. His greatest protection came from the Renegades, who were run by his older brother.

A voice began emitting from behind a speaker in his dashboard, "My contact has informed me that the Acolytes are on the move. The city is your prime target. Still, it would be good for us if they died right away."

"I'll have a couple of the guys break off and go after them. The rest will follow me," Rax responded. Pleased with the response, the line went dead.

Using the handheld radio that linked all of the vehicles, he gave his command. Immediately three buggies, consisting of two Blackouts and a Dementor, broke off from the formation and veered to the north in order to run headlong into the Acolytes path.

Part 4 - Two hours and twenty minutes before

The three vehicles ran full throttle towards their objective, each buggy beside the other without any pulling ahead. Hearts pound as they continue to inch closer to the fight at hand.

Suddenly, the three suns reflect off of the hull of their enemy and before anyone had time to comment, the Dementor launched a rocket that fell directly in the path of the Acolytes.

"Did you get 'em?" the driver to his right asked.

Before he could answer, the glint of metal begins drifting across the horizon from side to side while spraying a hail of large explosive rounds in their direction. The rounds falling short, causing large divots in the arid landscape, throwing up dust and small rocks in the air and causing the drive to become rough. The shocks of the

vehicles failing to absorb each rise and fall the vehicles made as they proceeded forward. Some drops caused two of the drivers to slow their pace to avoid crashing, allowing for one to pull ahead of the others.

The rain of shells lessens as an intensely bright red light comes forward, leaving an after image that they could not shake. Before they realized what the light was, the Blackout to the fore went up in a fiery inferno that was caused by the round tearing into the gas tank, instantly igniting all of the fuel.

The speed of the oncoming vehicle increases drastically as the large turret opens fire again, the shells finally able to find their mark, that of the driver and engine of the Dementor and his buggy. The explosive rounds sending chunks of meat and burning metal into the air as the buggy hits another divot in the ground, causing it flip end over end.

The remaining driver immediately turns completely around; realizing that to stay in the fight would mean his certain death. The man begins to chant a mantra to himself in panic, "Oh shit, shit, shit, shit, shit...." and on as he realized that the larger vehicle was gaining on him.

The Acolyte's vehicle was a mere two feet away as it quickly swerves to his left and accelerates further. Knuckles going white, he braces for a collision that isn't coming. Looking behind him, he sees that the vehicle is gone, but as he turns forward, he realizes that it is flying upside down above him, a single man standing in an open port, one revolver extended. A shit eating grin if he ever saw one splits the man's face as he fired. The man barely had time to evacuate his bladder as the round entered his skull and burst his head like a rotten melon.

Part 5 - One hour forty three minutes before

The first building can be seen cresting the horizon line, large rocks protecting the perimeter of the small city, leaving only one entrance into the city proper, just as the Shadow had informed them.

"As soon as you are in range, open fire. Watch for the other drivers. No collisions," Rax's voice filled the speakers of the vehicles in the line.

Another thousand feet brought the first of the guns within range, auto fire spewing from mounted cannons, rockets being saved for a larger target.

The first of the defenders holds their line amidst the storm of shells, barking orders while he takes aim. Before he could fire his first shot, his head is removed from his shoulders by an explosive round. No one had seen where the shot had come from in the bedlam. Eight buildings toward the center of the city, a lone sniper conceals his long-barreled weapon.

More buildings could be seen as several rockets emerge from the speeding line. Two rockets fall short, sending debris into the air, rocks and dirt raining down on both the defenders and attackers. The remaining rockets collide with the largest building they could see, a large housing structure, and most likely homes to a dozen families.

Chaos was running rampant among the defenders as lines broke in fear, and those that didn't run failed to do any significant damage. Stray rounds found their homes in the backs of panicked men running for safety.

Seeing one of his superiors die and the others running like dogs with their tails between their legs, a man, no older than twenty, begins to bark orders. Several of the cowards began to return as instructions were given.

"Get the rockets up here!" the man yelled.

Several soldiers responded by grabbing the bulky weapons and returning to the firing line. Each rocket was used as a two man team, one marking targets with a pair of goggles and the other to fire. This left for only three launchers, each immediately tracking their targets.

"Paint the targets and let 'em fly!" he called.

The first pair had a target lock, but before the rocket could be fired, a single auto round tore out the throat of the target-finder and a second round ripping open the shooters stomach, spilling his intestines on the ground.

In near unison, the remaining two rockets fired their payload as the swarm of buggies released one as well. The wave of rockets whistled as they split the air, narrowly missing the defenders themselves but colliding with multiple structures behind them, raining large slabs of concrete and starting an inferno within the rooms.

Upon the release of the rockets, the line of attackers quickly retreated to regroup to make a clean pass at the enemy. As the group was finishing their turn around, the earth began to shake. The vehicles began to scatter, unsure if this was the weapon of the enemy.

"Back off! Get out of range!" Rax demanded of the surviving drivers. A couple buggies ran into each other as the drivers tried to quickly turn away. Breaking only a headlight and scratching off some large streaks of paint, the two drivers recovered and drove further from the enemy's range.

The vehicles pulled to a stop as they passed the point that they knew the enemy could not damage them. Climbing out of his bug, Rax began using his pair of binoculars to scan the city for a sign of the source of the shaking earth.

"Uh, boss?" one of his men said drawing his attention.

"What is it?" he asked, clearly frustrated with the interruption.

"What is that?" the man asked, pointing to what appeared to be a portion of the sky now ablaze as the rumbling began to ease.

"Oh fuck." Rax said jaw dropping in shock.

Rax quickly ran to his vehicle, with the remaining men following suit. Without waiting for the rest of his men, he sped off towards to towering inferno.

Part 6 - Twelve minutes before

Rax exited his vehicle a mile away from his former base. The heat already becoming intense as the sky continued to burn.

Every surviving vehicle that had followed him into battle arrived in time to see their leader in a complete rant.

"Mother fucker! The leader is not going to be happy! What am I...?" he trails off, realizing he's no longer alone.

Regaining his composure, he began again. "We need to return to the leader. He'll know what to do."

Part 7 - One hour before but elsewhere

Sky awoke in an area she had never seen before. Her body stiff as she rises from a cold metallic surface that looked like it had been painted purple recently. Looking around her, she noticed that the metal walls and ceiling matched in color, but with large painted eyes periodically.

Using her peripheral vision, she spies movement on her left side, but turning quickly sees only another painted eye.

"Wasn't the eye looking a different direction?" she asks herself aloud. Her voice sounds strange to, almost like the voice of someone she had never met before.

On her feet, she begins walking towards a lone door. In a panic, she realizes that Hex is missing. As loud as she can manage, she calls out the name of her child. Inching closer to the door, small footsteps can be heard running away.

The door is made of bleached wood, with a small block that can be moved to reveal a window. Sliding the block aside, she notices a man dressed in white marching in the direction the steps had gone.

"Where am I?" she calls to the man who doesn't seem to hear her and continues walking. Turning the handle, she's surprised to find it unlocked.

The hallway she entered was a stark white that almost hurt her eyes to look at. The harsh lights above warmed her skin as they hummed. Looking to the left, she sees the tail of the man's white coat turn behind a corner.

Running forward, she moves faster than she's ever run before, and yet the hall felt like she would never reach the corner. An hour of running left her out of breath. Pausing long enough to breathe, she realized she finally reached the end of the hall, and before her stood another bleached wood door.

This time, the door before her was locked. Panicking she began to hit the door with her shoulder repeatedly. Several hard hits had left her arm growing numb and bruising quickly. Tears began to run down her face as she sat on the clean floor with her back to the door.

Looking back from the direction she had run from, she saw that a black wall had sprung up only feet from her. Her head droops as her stomach threatens to evacuate its contents.

A sharp click resounds from behind her and she nearly falls over and the door opens inward. Springing to her feet, she turns as she readies herself for an attack.

There was no one immediately behind her. The door revealed a soft brown room with a small bed with several children's toys on the floor beside it. A familiar man and a small child sat around a toy version of her now destroyed buggy.

The small child looks over at her with a huge smile. "Mommy!" the small boy exclaims getting up and running towards her.

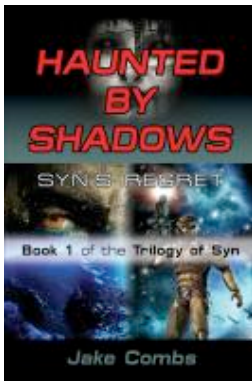
Her jaw drops as she recognizes the boy now hugging her leg was her son. Instantly she wonders who it was she had buried almost two days before. Looking to the man, he stands, showing her a loving smile.

"Deuce?" she exclaimed, unsure of what was going on.

"Hey baby," he began, placing his hands on her shoulders to calm her, "it's me. Tryz is here with me. He's safe here."

"How are you alive?" she asks, realizing that she doesn't want to hear the answer.

"We need you to be strong. Listen." he tells her, head turned to the side as if he could hear something she couldn't. "Hex is calling you. Go to her."



What happens when those in a position to lead do so only for their own gain? Syn must follow every instruction from his superiors, and hopefully find the cure to save his family from a man-made disease. The disease that afflicts them is so heinous that it not only kills the infected, but brings their corpses back to life. In a world without law, if the gangs don't kill him, the environment surely will...

Haunted by Shadows

Syn's Regret

The Trilogy of Syn Book 1

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