

Return to Juno Station  
By Mark Tuttle

Chapter One

He's yelling again.

Even though there are ten of us piled into the cramped cargo hold of a captured Gongen transport, barely centimeters from each other, he feels the need to yell. God, I hate the military mentality. Unfortunately, it's tough to tell where the military ends and the corporation begin these days. I've been in enough board meetings, allocation proposal reviews and research justifications that I feel like I went into the service instead of the tech corps.

Three days ago, a courier entered my lab with a data pad flashing "Jarek Mindon, Eyes Only" and a glowing thumb contact press. After dismissing the courier and placing my right thumb on the pad, I read a three-page report of my duty reassignment. I almost dropped the pad in disbelief. I was to drop all current projects and begin immediate study on the security, surveillance and weapon systems of the B-63 Redman class orbital station. After that, I was to relocate to the Luna Military Staging Platform and report to the man who's currently bellowing at the soldiers around me. I had been reassigned from my lab to a field position with a military ops unit.

I leaned toward the forward hold and strained to look out the small port. Of course, the glow is there. It's always there in this part of space... a ghostly, bluish hue that redefines the darkness of the universe. The rift hangs in space like a lamp cord blowing in a breezy window. It's an awesome sight the first couple of times you see it. Then, when you find out about the steady stream of particles that are bathing our system, you subconsciously turn your eyes away from it, as if that will somehow protect you. Anxiety, desolation, even fear has always been represented by blackness. Now, it's blue.

I couldn't see the station yet. I supposed we had a ways to go yet since we hadn't strapped into the gear packs. I turned back to the noise that was threatening to drown out the rattling grav drive. Lieutenant Milt Rundy was the commanding officer of the CGC's 86th Orbitborne Division, otherwise known as "vac jumpers."

Vac jumpers were probably the most insane members of the CGC military machine. These men and women literally leap from moving transports to either ground targets or any other solid purchase, orbital or otherwise. I remember reading about a previous mission where a full team made a suborbital jump on Gongen and landed on their feet. The Navy rats will tell you it's all the equipment and that anyone with a death wish could

do it. Gravdisks, grapplers, tether cannons, and friction generators are the stock-in-trade, but the dirty little secret is the jet pack technology. They might save your life if you're a vac jumper, but the corresponding hazing from your teammates makes 4G ground splat look appealing.

Vac jumpers are also the masters of the angles. Their knowledge of the physics of motion is astounding. They can figure out, quite literally on the fly, the angle, amount of thrust required, the amount of opposite reaction expected and the timing for the landing in amazing time. The other branches of service generally believe them to lucky, stupid, or maybe both... but it's interesting to note that almost no one will play billiards with a vac jumper.

I looked back to see what the commotion was all about. Rundy jammed a squat, gloved finger in the face of a handsome young woman checking the fuel gauge on her single thruster jet pack.

"You thinking about using that, sweetie?" Rundy mocked.

"Only to catch your fat ass when you miss the station," she replied crisply. Laughter erupted from the other men. I afforded a quick smile. Corporal Carenn Micaro was your typical SeeGeek. Fit, beautiful, smart, confident. All of the things we didn't see locked away in the core tech labs of CISNET. As my mind wandered through her shining white hair, she looked up from the pack's valve fitting and locked onto my gaze.

"I hope you're paying attention, Techie. If anyone needs to use this today, it's going to be you," she said. I caught only the briefest smile as I jerked my stare away. When I swung my eyes back up, it was right into the bulging grey eyes of Rundy.

"See something you like there, Mindon? You think you're man enough for a woman like Micaro?" More laughter filled the hold and Rundy leaned in close to my face. "You don't screw up and get us killed today and just maybe I'll let you have her," he said with a wide toothy smile.

I felt the need to change the subject and saw this as a good of a chance as any. I was feeling outnumbered and outgunned and I decided to even up the odds.

"I'm not CGC, Rundy, but I still outrank... and out-earn you."

The jovial atmosphere of the cabin came to a halt as eight men blinked in disbelief at the dressing down their commanding officer just got at the hands of a techie. Micaro turned away, preoccupied with something else in her gear pack. I really wished I knew if she was smiling.

Rundy leaned back against the bulkhead wall, studying me closely. If he was annoyed, he didn't show it. That was a credit to the CGC training. Loose cannons were quickly removed

from command, discredited, and many of them ended up in the Maverick camps on the outer rim. The ones that could be re-educated were often done so through some... biological persuasion. The smart ones knew when to not show their penchant for going off-script. Rundy drew in a long breath and leaned forward, resting his arms on his knees.

"You ever seen a Quay, Mindon? I don't mean trussed up in your microbe-scrubbed labs splayed open and gutted. I mean have you even seen one in a full-blown death charge?" Rundy's voice lowered and the phlegm in his throat began to rattle. "They have four legs, you know. Imagine a bull that gallops on spearheads. Eyes and throat glowing red from some damn internal furnace that fuels their hatred and rage. Two pairs of horns on its head; one pair pointing up and the other pointing down. If he head butts you in the gut, it doesn't matter which way he goes first. He'll rip your torso clean in half with 'em."

I was aware of nods and mutters of confirmation from the men around me. I had seen a Quay once, but I was reluctant to admit it was not exactly in the conditions that Rundy described.

"Your point? I'm not here to fight Quay," I said, trying to maintain an air of authority that I probably didn't possess here.

"That's right," said Rundy. "You're here to get us into the station. Once we sweep out the trash, you're supposed to get the systems back online. Lord only knows what the monsters have done to the place."

"I'm sure the Quay have done little to actual operating systems. It could be... "

"I wasn't talking about the Quay. I'm talking about the Gongen." Rundy spat. His feelings toward mankind's first off-shoot society was well known in the infantry circles.

He was, of course, referring to the fact that the Juno iCom station was built by the CGC in 2179 as a remote staging base for outer system defense. The Mavericks began causing trouble before the Battle of Phobos, and a few stations had been quietly slipped into the orbits of various moons and asteroids. It was assumed that there would one day be a perimeter established, well outside of the normal supply routes, and Earth would starve out the Mavericks, forcing their capitulation back into civilized society. That was before the Gongen situation pushed that priority back.

The problem was that the Gongen were aware of these stations and their tactical advantage. In 2387, with Earther resources split on two fronts, it was easy for the Gongen and that spooky AI of theirs to catch the station off guard and understaffed. What infuriated the CGC commanders at the time is that they did it firing only a few shots and they took the

entire station without any loss of life. Juno Alpha's small Earther crew that remained were put into environmental suits and dumped into space, clinging to a locator beacon. Despite this act, the CGC media broadcasts depicted the Gongen attackers as butchers who left those men to die slowly in the vacuum of space. None of them did, by the way.

I suddenly realized that Rundy was still speaking to me while my thoughts had drifted away.

"...numerous occasions to retake the Juno Station, both from the Gongen, and then from the Quay. Can't get near it. The proximity to the asteroid field makes it too easy for the occupier of the day to hide support fighters. Why the hell do you think we picked this spot in the first place?" Rundy grunted.

"So what makes you think we'll have any more luck?" I asked.

Rundy drew back up and reached back until his hand touched the Gongen bulkhead behind him. He gave it two solid raps with his knuckles that must have bloodied them.

"Because the Quay are working with the Gongen. And they're going to think we're all playing on the same team." Rundy smiled.

It took a moment for me to process this. The Gongen who took Juno Station were brutally slain by the Quay. Long range surveillance spotted bodies ejected from airlocks. Intercepted transmissions from Gongen were not much better, as vids of the battle were downloaded from the station before the Quay managed to stop it. I had to watch all of it to figure out what type of reprogramming the Gongen techs might have done to Juno. My job at the time was to analyze the data and work up a plan for reclamation of compromised CGC systems in the event we could retake the station, which had been impossible up to this point. When the Gongen took Juno, it was embarrassing but not overly important in the scope of the war. However, when the Quay took up residence, it became a top priority as they were the new hostiles and this was one of the few footholds they had in our system.

"But why would they... ", I began.

"We don't know for sure," Micaro interrupted, looking at Rundy before turning her attention to me. "It's a theory, and the basis for this suicide run we're on."

Several of the other jumpers smiled and pretended to be polishing one piece of equipment or another. "Be careful, Hendy," a young, square-jawed man said. "Lieutenant will make you watch the briefing for what, the fourth time now?"

"I've seen it a dozen times already and a dozen more won't change my mind about this mission. We're proceeding under a dangerous assumption and the Lieutenant knows my thoughts. Does

our CGC tech know the plan? Does he know what this is based on?" She was clearly disgusted as she pushed a clip of ammunition into her combat pack. Was she concerned for me?

I spoke up after a bit of a silence. "I guess I don't know why we're in a Gongen transport. Or what evidence you have of cooperation between the Quay and the Gongen. What proof do you have?"

"We've been watching Juno Station closely since the rift opened and the zoo animals came through." Rundy snorted. Anything alien was also on his short list of beings beneath his approval. "We've made several attempts to assault the station outright with little success. As soon as we enter the sector, Quay fighters appear out of the asteroid field. Personally, I'm for standing and fighting to the last, but the Corpheads back on Earth are worried about the effects of a protracted battle on their balance sheets.

"So after seven aborted assaults, we started doing single fighter strafing runs with the same results. And then two months ago, Hubble-12 picks up a Gongen fighter who apparently has the same idea. He makes a ten kilometer pass, roughly the same distance we did, and nothing happens."

I stared at Rundy for a moment, waiting for him to follow up on this point. He stared at me like a teacher waiting for a student to answer an obvious question. "And?" I asked.

"Nothing...happened. Not that time, and not when it happened again, two weeks ago. At one klick, the Gongen got close enough to scrape their windows, and there wasn't a single reaction from the Quay. Now why do you suppose that is?"

"It doesn't mean collaboration, necessarily. There could be other reasons." Micaro protested. "Maybe the Gongen have perfected light bending or some other stealth technology we haven't figured out yet. Or maybe our resident tech, Mister Mindon, has an idea."

I suddenly felt the spotlight on me. "You realize that I cannot comment on any ongoing research. No one here has the security clearance to..."

"So, then we're left with collaboration." Rundy said rising to his feet. "All the more reasons to knock, introduce ourselves, and show our Gongen-loving Quay friends to the airlock."

Rundy stepped over some equipment to look out the port, blocking my view. "It's time. Suit up, jumpers." He looked right down at me, now towering over me.

"There's no mystery here, Mindon. The Quay will die as will any Gongen collaborators we find on board. You're going to refit the station systems and we're going to bring Juno Station back online. Do you understand?"

I nodded without meeting his gaze. I looked over to Micaro who had been staring at me. She held that lock longer than I would have thought, before turning to her gear. I had the impression that she wondered the same things I did.

Why would the Gongen be helping the Quay? Why could they get so close when we couldn't?

## Chapter Two

The jumpers assured me that this was an easy one. We'd fly in close to the broad side of the Juno Station hull. The pilot would slow down considerably to allow us the least amount of forward momentum when we kicked free. The momentum would then carry us the rest of the distance to the station. Once we reached braking distance, we'd fire a burst of reverse thrust from the chest pack. This would slow our descent to a mere drift, allowing us to touch down on the hull with minimum velocity. At that point, the soft mags in the boots would grip us to the station without any noise.

My normally analytical mind had a tough time dealing with the calculations that the jumpers took for granted. It was a running competition with them to see who would go the longest before firing the braking burst. The outcome usually resulted in a large bar tab upon the mission completion. Hibbs, a 24-year veteran of the vac jumpers, usually won and was thusly the biggest consumer of free alcohol in the group.

We double checked our environmental suits and depressurized the cabin. The ship slowed down for the jump point. "Lock down your valuables because we're about to open the hatch!" Rundy hollered, completely unnecessarily as we were all linked with helmet coms. As I fumbled for a volume control, I heard the clunk and hiss that followed a hatch opening. The ship slowed to an almost imperceptible speed. Still fast for movement in a vacuum, however.

Hibbs was already in position on the kick pad with knees bent. He looked like sprinter waiting for the gun. Brelson, my jump assister, tapped me on the shoulder and motioned to the pad. "C'mon. We're going out second. That way if I lose you, one of the others has a chance at grabbing you."

I didn't much like the matter of fact way he worded that. "How many times have you done that?" I asked, trying not to show the panic I felt spreading up my legs.

"Lost someone? Only once out of twenty-five assisted. His body passes over Miami around 8:30 every night." Brelson said confidently.

If I hadn't paused for a second before responding, I could have avoided the laughter in the cargo hold. Only Micaro didn't

laugh, but I couldn't see her face. Brelson pushed me up to the kick pad next to Hibbs, who smiled broadly. He winked at me as I moved into position.

"Alright now, listen to me," Brelson said. "I've preset your chest thruster to point zero three. When I tell you, point your chest right at the station's broadest point, and hit the red button on your left hand unit. Make sure your arms at your side and your gear is clear. When the burst ends, you'll feel the deceleration. Stick your arms and legs out and activate the soft mags on your right hand unit. That should pull you the rest of the way in. Try to land feet first, as that will absorb some of the shock. I'll be tethered onto you and I'll get us in but we can only use your chest unit, do you understand?"

I nodded and looked down at my hands to confirm the placement of the buttons. "Yeah, I got it."

"If you screw up, panic, and sever the connection, you're on your own. Understand?"

I nodded again. Jump into the vacuum of space, fire a chest burst at the exact right moment and don't become a greasy smear on a hundred-year-old space station. Right. Don't panic.

Brelson slapped the back of my suit, I assumed in a gesture of camaraderie. Then I realized he was just attaching the tether. "We jump together. When I say push, you jump with all of your strength."

"C'mon ladies, it's almost time!" Rundy barked. "First jumpers to mark. Second and third squad to standby."

In the mission briefing, they explained to me how this was going to work. The ship would come in on Sol's side of the Juno asteroid, taking advantage of the blind spot. We would then swing over the top, cut the engines and swing the ship to port so our forward momentum pushed the open cargo bay door on a straight line to the station. We'd jump at that point in five tight jumps. Once we were clear, the ship would then make a five-kilometer swing past the sensory array on the station as a diversion. The point of the vac jumpers was to come in quiet and dark.

"Sir... " Hibbs clipped over the com.

"No, wait for it. Wait." Rundy studied the station carefully. It now seemed closer, but still far considering the lack of anything solid between us.

"Sir?" Hibbs was rocking back and forth on the kick pad.

"Now!" Rundy shouted. "Go, first jump!"

I shut my eyes tight as I felt Brelson grab the arm of my suit. I kicked as hard as I could and felt surprisingly little except the pounding of my heart in my chest. I was embarrassed to hear myself screaming until I realized it wasn't me!

"Whoo hoo!" Hibbs screamed. In the background, I could barely hear a static-filled Rundy shouting jump orders to the next team.

I looked at Hibbs, slightly ahead of Brelson and me. His arms stretched ahead of him as far as the suit would allow. Same with his legs. I tried not focus on anything but Hibbs at the moment, as looking in any other direction would probably make me sick. Hibbs still shouted and Rundy screamed for him to shut up. Just when I thought I was not going to throw up, Hibbs somehow spun like a log rolling in water. As he turned his face toward me, I could see his teeth reflect the sunlight meaning he was smiling like an idiot.

"God damned showoff," Brelson hissed. "Going to get killed one day screwing around, Hibbs."

"Both of you shut up now!" Rundy barked. "Radio silence until contact. Emergency only."

Several audible clicks meant that the suit comm system was being shut down for each man. It was impossible to look behind, as I was afraid to move in any direction. I rolled my eyes up to the direction of the station. It was looming large at this point and I felt that rise of panic again. Brelson still had a firm grasp on my suit.

A few long minutes passed as we moved closer to the station. Rundy said at the briefing that this would be a distance jump. Kinetic energy was doing all of the work and all we had to do was keep quiet, don't panic and fire at the right moment. I began to calm somewhat. Weightlessness always had that effect on me. Some of the best nights sleeping I've ever had were in zero gravity. These were not ideal conditions but looking at the stars behind Hibbs' floorshow had a tranquilizing effect. All at once, that feeling ended when Brelson grabbed me hard and said "This is it. Pull your feet up and drop your arms."

I slowly brought my feet up to angle my body perpendicular to the station. It seemed close now, and I started to feel the hairs on the back of my neck stand on end. Brelson pulled my arms back and down so the chest thruster was free. I felt like I was falling off a building and the station hull was the pavement rising quickly to greet me. I suddenly worried about my visor hitting first and shattering, exposing my face to the cold metal of the station. I pulled my hand up and went for the thumb button.

"Wait! Not yet!" Brelson yelled.

I shut my eyes and held perfectly still. My breath fogged my visor. My heart beat like a hammer. I considered the task ahead and the probability of hiding in a corner while the vac jumpers fought the Quay that more than likely occupied the station. Right now, a two-meter tall monster running toward me



in a death charge didn't seem like the worst thing that could happen to me today.

"Now," Brelson said, far calmer than I would have.

I pressed the thumb button and felt a push on my chest. It was like being in a pool when a friend pushed you back in the water. I opened my eyes and looked down over the lower lip of my helmet. The exhaust drifted slowly past my field of vision and my descent slowed noticeably. In fact, we almost stopped. The station was now very close. The reverse thrust reduced our forward motion to a crawl. Eventually we would have drifted to the station, but we needed to take advantage of the tiny forward velocity to touch down.

"Mags on," Hibbs said over his comm. I hadn't even realized that he executed his stop after us and was slightly ahead. With his arms and feet spread before him, he activated the soft mags in his gloves and boots. Soft mags were powerful magnetic grapplers that could be used to generate focused magnetic fields. They would pull us onto the station and keep us in place. I made a mental note to thank someone for the creation of this wonderful device.

Hibbs touched down onto Juno Station with nothing more than a soft shuffle. Obviously there was no sound in space, but the purpose of the soft mag was to deaden any sound inside the station. It has been said that someone leaning on the wall directly inside of a soft mag landing is likely to be unaware of what's just a few centimeters behind him. I felt the pull on my arms and legs and rode in the pull in to the station.

"Pull your head back. Let your arms and legs cushion the landing," Brelson said as he unhitched the tether and pushed away slightly, leaving me to land on my own. We both hit at roughly the same time. His landing was completely quiet. Mine dropped me to one knee and was accompanied by a loud "Hrrfff!" when I hit. Hibbs reached out and punched me in the arm.

"Nice landing, rookie. Might want to get that tear in your kneecap fixed, though."

I reached down in terror, expecting to see venting oxygen but found nothing. My suit was whole, and again, I looked stupid. At least I was alive. There was a host of things I could have said to Hibbs, but anyone who can do this for a living won't be fazed by clever words coming out of my mouth.

I shut my eyes and pulled myself in close to the station. I drew a deep breath and opened my eyes again to get my bearings. The station was a rusty, iron color. Oxidation was supposedly solved years ago for orbital stations but when it came to actually building the things, the low bidder always won. That didn't make for the highest quality products. What was peculiar though, were the pockmarks all over the station. They didn't look like asteroid damage. The station defenses

would have dealt with larger dangers. They could be fragments from the blasting of larger debris. It didn't look right. There was almost a pattern.

I looked along the length of the station and saw the other teams had landed and only two jumpers were left. It was almost more frightening seeing the jump from this side, with nothing but the vacuum of space behind them. Our Gongen cargo ship had already gone with apparently no notice by the Quay. That makes three times now that the Gongen have gotten close with no retaliation.

"Aaaahhhh!" came a scream over my helmet comm.

Everyone else looked up at the last two jumpers in time to see a massive burst erupt from the chest plate of one of them. Debris from his suit blew in several directions as his forward momentum was halted and reversed. The motion jerked him so hard backward that he doubled over and shot outward from the station.

"Kreet! Kreet, report!" Rundy yelled.

"...malfunction... koff koff... reverse velocity..." came Kreet's static-filled reply. The explosion obviously affected his comm system.

"Do you have suit integrity? Kreet! What's your suit status?" Rundy continued.

"...environ...tal...skrshhhhhhhh...five percent. Reserves full. Tether sys...skskkshhhhhhhh."

"Can he jet pack back to us?" I shouted.

"Shut up, Tech! Kreet, listen to me. You're moving too fast to burn back to the station. Can you reach the Juno asteroid?" Rundy slowed down, delivering instructions as if reading an assignment to a pupil. "Tether to Juno. Do you read?"

Several moments of silence passed as Kreet moved away from us. Juno was off to our right, behind him. A quick flare burned, and then darkness swallowed him. Minutes of silence passed, and I waited for someone to say something. In the confusion, no one took any notice of Micaro touching down, the last to do so.

"When is the pickup?" I asked, realizing that I wasn't in on this part of the briefing. "Can he make it to Juno? What the hell happened?"

Rundy turned in my direction, which was pointless since I couldn't see him from my angle anyway. "Pickup is when we clear this station. As for Kreet, he's a good jumper. A good soldier."

"He'll die out here, won't he?" I said. A pit was growing in my stomach. Fear for Kreet's fate replaced the terror I felt on the jump.

Rundy took a deep breath and blew it out directly into the helmet mike so we all heard it. "We'll all die out here, if you don't get that door open."

### Chapter Three

We touched down a few levels below the hatch identified by the CGC tech division as the best possible entry point. It was a low-level, dual-airlock system that could be used in the event of a catastrophic disaster. The dual airlock would allow our team to enter and secure each set of doors before venturing into the station cabin. This meant we didn't risk opening a door into a firefight with an open hatch to space behind us.

The mechanism was fairly standard, but both the Gongen and the Quay had opportunity to alter it and prevent an assault of this type. I pulled my equipment from my backpack and began integrating the command module we'd cooked up. The XeLab techs devised kind of an "all purpose" module that could learn the system it plugged into and backward engineer the most likely combination or unlocking sequence. They called it the "skeleton key," an ancient reference that was lost on me.

My skeleton key was not standard XeLabs issue. I spent a few weeks integrating a few ideas of my own. Being tied to the corporate mentality, any XeLabs tool was built to do exactly what it was designed for and nothing more. I prefer my toys to have a more functionality so I threw in a couple million terabytes of storage, improved the diagnostic routines, and even installed a rudimentary comm system that allowed the unit to "speak" to me. Modifying your equipment was not always well received, and I had to be sure to hide these changes. The last thing you wanted to do was make yourself look like a Maverick.

While I worked on the door, I was anxious to turn my thoughts away from Kreet and the accident. I thought about the Gongen and what connection they might have with the Quay. When the rift opened and the Shi planet ripped through, the Quay jumped into our space before anyone of us grasped what happened. Seyal, the Shi planet, wasn't the only thing that was in bad shape. The Quay ships, part-organic in nature, were devastated by the trip through. Many of them crashed into asteroids, some into Seyal and others buzzed around looking for a place to land. The Juno station was in the wrong place at the wrong time.

The Gongen could have beaten back the Quay attack on Juno Station had it not been for the fact that when the rift opened, Mars had just entered its far orbit around Sol. Distress calls from Juno didn't reach the Gongen homeworld in time, and that small crew was left to fight by themselves. The vids were gruesome, but you have to admire the Gongen courage. They never

backed down, never begged for mercy and, as I suppose they would say, they never lost their honor. They fought the Quay to the last, but never had any hope of survival.

I tried to wipe a bead of sweat from my forehead and smacked myself in the visor. No one noticed. The others were quiet. They checked weapons, shifted gear and acted generally impatient. No one looked back toward the Juno.

My mind drifted back to the vid of the massacre of the Gongen crew. It was dark, so much of it was obscured. There was a great deal of weapons fire. My God, I thought; there is nothing more dangerous than firing a weapon inside a station this old. It's a wonder it didn't explode. That might have taken out the Quay, but that's no guarantee. It also explains why many of the Gongen warriors on the station brandished swords. I could never decide if it was foolish honor or lack of judgment brought on by fear. After seeing a Quay dissection back at XeLabs, the prospect of facing one with anything short of a long-range grenade made me shiver.

To my dying day, I will never forget the final scene of the vid log. The camera position was standard procedure; overhead shot of the corridor outside the station command center. This keeps a record of who comes and goes there. The Quay hacked through most everyone else and attempted to enter the CC. Then, one Gongen walks into frame, holding nothing but a damned sword. You could see other Quay circled around but that seemed to be the only Gongen left. One large Quay faced him. It was black and horrible, with a red glow seeping out from under the hard carapace. It's legs punched up and down in a frantic motion.

I wonder if the warrior knew he was being recorded, because he squared his shoulders and pointed his sword directly in the face of this Quay. I would assume this is an insult or a challenge, because the Quay reared up on its hind legs and leaped forward to spear the Gongen. In a move that we couldn't even see on frame-by-frame analysis, the Gongen pulled back his sword and even as the Quay leader impaled him, he drove his sword through the neck of the Quay. On a human, it would have severed the jugular so we assumed that's what he intended. We found out later that's not how the Quay work, but nevertheless the Gongen hit something vital and they both hit the floor, wrapped in a grotesque embrace. The Gongen never moved but the Quay was pulled away by a host of four-legged shadows that rushed in from the darkened corners. After several others stormed into the CC, the vid stopped. The takeover of the Juno iCom station or "Mijikayo," as the Gongen called it, was complete.

"Is that green light supposed to mean something?" Hibbs tapped on the command console. I shook off my daydreaming and hoped that it hadn't been lit long.

"Yeah. We're good to go. If you folks are ready, we can enter the station anytime."

Rundy crawled over, looking like some bloated spider. "Alright Mindon, here's the drill, you get us in. Once we establish a front, you find a place to hide and stay put. Got it?"

I nodded and wondered how you were supposed to hide from a Quay. We didn't know enough about them to know what they were or were not capable of. I keep thinking of the Gongen getting impaled.

"Opening the outer airlock," I said. I turned to look for Micaro thinking that I might not see her again once she entered the station. She stood to the left side of the airlock, a couple of meters down. She was quiet since the accident, but it didn't seem appropriate to talk to her. I wished I could have said something right then, but I was suddenly distracted. Above her, and to the right, was a darkened portal. Inside the portal, I saw two, glowing red slits.

"Ahh!" I fell back and let the skeleton key slip from my hand. Ignoring it, I pointed up at the portal. "There!"

The whole squad wheeled to where I pointed and looked at the portal. It was black and uneventful.

"What?" Rundy demanded? "What are you looking at?"

"I thought I saw... something," I said, feeling foolish. Again.

"I don't see anything," said a jumper I didn't know. He sighted up his riflescope on the window. "Want I should take a closer look?"

"No," Rundy snorted. "Red eyes eh?" he said, glaring at me. "You see that red antennae beacon up there?" He pointed at the beacon, which, arguably, was farther away, but in a direct line to the port. "You saw that reflected in your helmet visor. Two. Red. Eyes." He made his point by sticking two fingers out and pointing them back toward his own eyes.

"You're giving me the creeps, Tech," Hibbs said. Just open the damned door already.

I regained control of the module that drifted near me on a short tether. The light was still green. I punch a command code and with a hiss, the door slid open.

"The Quay don't know we're here. They won't until they're dead." Rundy said in a low, demeaning tone.

I lowered my head as the troops began to file in. Rundy flashed hand signals that I couldn't comprehend. When the last jumper was in, I turned back to the portal, and put my hand up

to block the antennae beacon from my view. Two eyes of fire stared at me, then vanished.

Without looking away, I stepped through the hatch, and closed it behind me.

## Chapter Four

As the door slid closed behind me, I looked around to get my bearings. The outer airlock was roughly two meters wide by about fifteen meters deep. Although the space was cramped, there was an open path to the inner airlock door as the squad pressed themselves tight against the wall with weapons drawn. Micaro checked the wall panel that housed the pressurization and door controls. There was surprise in her voice as she spoke.

"We have minimal power. Both life support, door control and probably even remote access to the station systems," she said, looking directly at me.

"Can you do your thing from here?" Rundy asked, waving an ominously large gun at the panel.

"No. Critical systems can't be accessed from anywhere other than the command center and the power junction points."

"Well what can you do from this point? Anything useful?" Rundy said in an accusatory tone. "Can you get us a vid of any other rooms? Can you cut life support? Can you flush a damn toilet, maybe?"

"My job requires me to be in CC. If you can get me there, I can flush every toilet in the station if you'd like. I didn't realize you needed help with that," I said defiantly, figuring I'd regret it later.

Several members of the squad snickered. I looked over to Micaro, hoping to see her smile, when I heard a click and silence. Rundy, as squad leader, could comm to individual members. It was a safety measure in case of capture. Covert instructions could be delivered securely. Of course, it could also be used to intimidate, as Rundy drew close to me to do.

"Get this straight, Techie. My job is clear the filth out of this station. Between you and me, I don't give a Gongen's ass about the CGC's profit margins. I don't need you to kill a Quay."

He tapped his gun on the visor of my helmet. "See this? This is a Colt-Burton Special Cup Trophy Sidearm, Mark 500. Special made, just for me. I wanted something to get through that thick Quay hide. I tested it on a captured Quay at XeLabs. While he was strapped to the table screaming and kicking, I blew a hole right through him. One shot. Nice and clean." Rundy smiled a toothy grin. "You know the lesson of this story?"

I paused, letting him make his dramatic overture.

"I don't need you. In fact, it'd be a damn shame if one of those Quay got his claws on you."

Rundy leaned back and lowered his weapon. The exchange took longer than he'd thought, and he glanced around. The squad shuffled nervously, knowing something was just said that they'd probably get a court martial for hearing. Rundy reset the comm system so the entire squad could hear him.

"Glad we had a chance to chat, Jarek," Rundy said. This was the first time he used my first name. "Points one and two, ready."

Hibbs, at the door, looked into the hallway. "Clear, far as I can tell. We've got ten meters of hall before a slight right turn. No side or rear entrance. Ceiling shaft at four meters."

"Assume the only thing moving is Quay. Shoot it until you see the pieces. And then fire off a couple more," Rundy paused to take a long look at me. "Move out," he commanded.

Micaro opened the door and the first four members of the squad ducked through. They walked fast in a crouched position, sweeping right and left with their weapons. Micaro was in the next set to move through. The rest of us followed.

The corridor was lit, but poorly. Strip lighting ran along the top of the walls, encased in upward sloping trays. According the CGC psychs, this created softer lighting and made stations less artificial. It was supposed to help station crews adapt better to long terms of duty. I considered a letter to that department telling them to include the random element of charging death to see if the effect still worked within their parameters. At this moment, it was nowhere near enough light for my liking. It was creepy, dark, and enclosed. We were completely boxed in. The exit behind us led to the vacuum of space and whatever befell Kreet. Ahead of us was a bend in the corridor that could be full of black carapaced death.

We focused on the end of the hallway, so the swooshing noise of the inner airlock door closing as I reached triggering distance came like a cannon blast. Most of us jumped, and before anyone could draw a breath, a clang indicated the door was sealed.

"Jesus!" Brelson exclaimed. "Let us know when you're going to do that again!"

I started to say something in my defense when Micaro, a few steps ahead of me, broke in. "It's an automatic system. When you're a meter from the inner door, it closes. You'd know this if you paid attention during the briefing," she said pointedly.

"All I know is that it made a hell of a lot of noise," Brelson said. "Wouldn't be surprised if half the station heard that."

"We don't know that they actually hear at all," Micaro replied. "Stop looking at everything from such a human point of view."

"Well, do they see? Do they have eyes?" Hibbs said. "If so, here's a message for them." Hibbs extended his middle finger toward Micaro.

"Shut up, all of you," Rundy broke in. "Look at this."

Rundy got down on one knee and looked at the floor. The plating had pockmarks up and down in chaotic lines. Some even ran up the sides of the walls about a meter and a half up. I didn't need to move toward Rundy to see what he meant. It looked like someone took a hammer and banged up and down the corridor at random. There were thousands of these marks. Not only that, but deep scratches were etched in the walls at a meter and a half above the floor. As I followed the scratches and floor markings, Micaro stepped past me, back toward the airlock.

"That's not all," she said slowly. Our helmet lights turned back toward the airlock. The seals around the door appeared intact, but there furious markings ran from the corridor we stood in to the outer airlock. Like something was being pushed or blown out and fought to stay in.

"Enjoy the scenery later, you two," Rundy barked. "We're moving. Now."

The squad formed into two columns with Rundy toward the back. Micaro and I were now dead last, a couple meters behind the rest. As the squad approached the overhead vent, they parted like water flowing around a branch in a stream. As each one passed, they took their eyes from the end of the corridor and looked up to the vent. The grate was in place, but had more of the scratching around it.

"Hibbs," Rundy said in a whisper. "Stay on the vent until we reach the... "

Rundy never finished that sentence. A sound started, first like a lid rattling on a boiling pot. Then it grew to ten and then a hundred pots. The sound grew louder and stronger. It was a chorus of thunder, galloping above and below us. The walls vibrated and the station, despite its modern horizontal stabilizers, shook. The squad looked at each other, and everyone came to the same realization.

They were running.

Even through the enviro suits, you could hear the clacks of ammunition packs slammed into place. My heart pounded in my chest again, and sweat poured into my eyes. It was difficult to see.

Rundy yelled again. This time, I couldn't fault him. "... almost three meters tall. I want full horizontal fire at no



higher than two meters. We cut off their mobility first and kill the head when you've got it clean. Understand?"

The thundering grew so loud I put my hands up to my ears. A useless move in a helmet, but it made me feel like I was doing something. I looked beyond the crouching line of soldiers. The din was unbearable. I started to see shadows moving on the wall through my blurred vision. Micaro grabbed my arm and pulled me back, away from the fire line.

Black shapes poured around the bend at the end of the hallway. Like a wave on a shore, the darkness swept onto the vac jumpers. The terror in my mind, the pounding in my chest, and the vise-like grip on my arm blocked out a sound that no one noticed. The inner and outer airlock doors behind us opened simultaneously. I was vaguely aware of the firefight that was underway when I was jerked backward by the force of the atmosphere rushing out of the station. I was going to die in space. Just like Kreet. I barely began a new thought when I smashed hard against something solid. Micaro, or something, still held my arm. I heard shouting on the comm. Gunfire slowed and far away, something went swoosh-clang.

I slumped to the floor and lost consciousness on top of something soft and equally immobile.

## Chapter Five

Bells. I heard bells ringing, and I suddenly realized that I was late for class again. Was today the psionic interface technology exam? Why couldn't I remember?

I sprinted across the courtyard to the Advanced Technologies Building. I've spent a lot of my time here lately. The CGC fast-tracked a couple of different courses dealing with advanced computer systems after the Martians declared independence. No one was sure why at the time, but the CGC needed binary techs in the worst way, and I happened to be good at it. The CGC administered aptitude tests every year in primary education, but the tests had become more frequent and more specialized. Questions probed deeper, requiring thought that is more critical. Earth history almost disappeared from the curriculum and the attention turned toward development of technology. They were looking for something specific.

My parents never understood my fascination with technology and only barely tolerated me as I took apart everything in the house. Dad wanted me to be a soldier, rising in the ranks in the CGC infantry to the command level. There, I would offer him bragging rights and status, which is what he was about anyway. Don't get me wrong, I wasn't abused or anything and my father didn't deride me daily with disappointment. I just kind of flew in and out of my parent's radar. When I didn't meet their

expectations, I sort of vanished from their world. Which happened a lot, come to think of it.

The doors slid open and I was in a full run by the time they closed behind me. My heart beat hard in my chest, because I was running I suppose. Still, something felt wrong. I shook that thought off as I peeked into the classroom. There were 317 students in attendance plus another 500 or so watching through vid at various campuses both on- and off-world. The only eyes I care about were those of Mr. Draylen. If I could sneak past him, I could...

"Mr. Mindon. I'm so pleased you could make time for us," Draylen said, rising from behind his desk.

Draylen stood roughly three meters tall, on four monstrous, sharp legs. His upper torso was ripped, black carapace. This hard shell overlapped at various points, but a consistent, burning glow could be seen underneath. He wore a white lab coat that made him look almost humanoid from the waist to the neck, except for the two giant claws that poked from the sleeves. His head was large and reptilian, with two sets of horns jutting upward from his forehead and downward from his cheekbones. His eyes glowed red behind a pair of thick-rimmed glasses. This seemed strange to me, but I couldn't place what was wrong.

"I'm sorry Mr. Draylen," I cowered. "I was... well, I don't really know where I was."

"Inexcusable. Worthless. While you were out dancing around in your spacesuit, your friends were able to make it to class on time," Draylen said, gesturing toward the other students.

I had only just noticed that I wore an enviro suit. Where did I get this? I looked up at Draylen as if he had answers to the questions that began to pull at my consciousness. His giant black claw pointed, so I followed it to where he directed my attention. The class was full of students. All were wearing various outfits ranging from enviro suits to Gongen armor, the white and green Earther infantry uniforms, and other items of apparel that seemed familiar.

I started to realize that they were all dead. Heads slumped over on desks. Arms hung limply at their sides. Blood ran in a steady trickle over my feet down the angled amphitheater. Many of the dead were impaled on large black spear-looking devices. Their faces twisted in an expression of pain and surprise. A body in an e-suit drifted past my head, inexplicably.

I stared in disbelief, realizing I should be sitting in my seat. Mr. Draylen hated it when you were late. The tugging on my brain grew stronger. Get out. Get out. Get out!

"The class is waiting on YOU Mindon!" Draylen roared, his lab coat falling away. "Pull up a stake and impale yourself to a chair!"

No. Get out. This... something is... what? Get out.

"Move it tech! You're holding us up!"

I whirled back to the class to see Rundy sitting at a desk. A large black claw protruded from his chest. Pieces of his innards stuck to it, and blood poured from the wound. He stared at me with gray, dead eyes, still flashing his toothy grin.

Get out. I stepped back from Rundy and suddenly was gripped by Draylen. No, not Draylen. He was an older man. A man. Human. This was not human. This was NOT HUMAN!

Get out!!!

I screamed and pushed back from the horror that held me. I jolted awake and looked around. I sat on the floor of the airlock. Both the outer and inner doors were closed. I was panting and sweating, my heart threatening to explode. It was only then did I taste blood in my mouth and see the shattered visor I stared through. I was breathing, so the atmosphere was good, except for the smell. I felt around for anyone or anything else in the room. It appeared to be empty.

The shattered plastic did nothing to help my vision so I clicked the latch and removed my helmet, slowly lowering it to the floor. I was unwilling to approach either portal quickly so I moved myself along the floor to the inner airlock door. I was in pain but nothing appeared to be broken. What had happened? I remembered the shadows, the gunfire, and then a sudden rush. Did the airlock blow? What happened to...?

I remembered that Micaro had been grasping my arm. I looked back toward the outer airlock door. Jumping up, I looked out the portal and saw only the blackness of space and the blue glow of the rift. Suddenly aware that I was exposed, I dropped back down and made my way to the inner airlock door. I slowly slid up the wall with my face pressed against the side of it. I glanced at the panel and noticed the green light, indicating it was powered. It could be open, I thought. I'm just not sure that's a good idea at the moment.

I took a deep breath and looked out of the portal. The sight was horrible. Several bodies were strewn about the corridor. Parts of bodies, uniforms, and equipment lay from the far end of the corridor almost to the inner airlock door. It was impossible to tell how many bodies were there. I assumed no one else was left alive. The ceiling vent screen was hanging and bent, dripping with blood. Looking farther down the hall, I saw what I guessed were bodies of Quay occupiers. They also seemed lifeless, but more intact. Death filled the hallway.

I dropped to my knees and put my back to the door, sliding down it. My mind raced as I addressed the problem. What do I do now? If the squad is dead, there's no way to clear out the Quay. Thus, there's no way to get to the CC. There was no pickup without the command functions being restored. If there was just one Quay between CC and me... well, I didn't want to think about that.

I looked toward the outer port. I could just find an intact helmet from a dead man in the hallway and take my chances in space. Kreet probably activated his beacon, and mine still appeared to be functioning. And it's not like the CGC didn't know we were here. This plan still required going into the hallway. I looked at the panel to my right. My skeleton key still functioned, so I could get back out. Why did the airlock open? Malfunction? Not a pleasant thought when I wasn't wearing a helmet.

So that was the plan. Go out, find a helmet, and take my chances in space. It looked like a better way to die than what I saw inside. I pushed the button to open the door. It swished open and I turned toward the hall. Instead of seeing the carnage I witnessed moments ago, I was confronted by a sneering Quay warrior.

I stumbled backward as if I could get away. The Quay grabbed me by the neck, jerking me up so high that my head hit the ceiling, hard. I thought he was trying to kill me, but I realized he was looking at my belt and equipment pack.

"Tools," the Quay said in a voice that sounded like glass being ground under a thick boot. "Tools. Not weapons."

I grabbed the Quay's hands as if I could stop him. I felt even more helpless as he turned and swept me down the corridor, grasping my neck. So much for dying in space, I thought.

## Chapter Six

I struggled to remain awake. Between my rising fear and shortness of air, both due to the choke hold my Quay captor had on me, I barely stayed conscious. When I squirmed, he squeezed more tightly.

He strode down the hall quickly. His four legs hit the floor hard and swept anything and everything out of its way. He was taking me somewhere for a reason. I was several dozen meters farther into the station than my unfortunate squad mates had made it. That calmed my nerves, but only slightly. I had regained enough composure to take in my surroundings.

The station seemed intact, although it looked awful. Panels were ripped from the walls and floors. Circuitry was pulled out and everywhere wires hung loosely. My technical side took over long enough to deduce that this wasn't damage for

damage's sake. It wasn't repair, either. Someone was looking for something. I tried to orient myself in the station to figure out what panels had been removed. It was tough to get a frame of reference, because my Quay escort made several turns through dark corridors. I started to notice I hadn't seen any other Quay until we stopped in front of an open door. I looked ahead to see where we were and recognized an open elevator shaft and I suddenly realized the Quay's intent.

"Oh crap," I said, to no one in particular.

I shut my eyes tightly as the Quay stepped into the shaft, pulling me with him. The lift car was nowhere in sight so I expected us to fall to the bottom of the shaft. Instead, I heard the loud thumps of the Quay's four legs jamming into the shaft walls as he pulled us upwards. It reminded me of vids of rock climbers, scaling a gap between two sheets of vertical rock. The Quay accomplished this easily, and we climbed at a rapid rate. I opened my eyes, despite expecting vertigo, but it was too dark to see how many levels we'd climbed. With a jerk, we came out of the shaft and into a dim corridor.

The Quay threw me to the floor and looked down the shaft, staring intently. A low, growling sound traveled up his throat. I moved slightly to stretch a cramp in my leg. The Quay's attention whirled back to me as he spun his head around. His right claw darted out and grabbed my foot. He threw me behind him and proceeded to drag me down the corridor. Being helpless is one thing, but being dragged helplessly while dodging four Quay legs slamming into the floor near your head was another thing entirely. I shut my eyes and went limp, hoping this would be over soon.

After a moment or two, we stopped again. I heard a door slide open and the Quay threw me forward using a right arm toss. I slammed the floor and slid about a meter on the polished floor. I lay still for a moment before cautiously opening my eyes. Without moving anything except my eyes, I looked at the station's command center. Massive screens lit up the center of the room, and humming consoles were grouped in stations here and there.

Curiosity overcame fear and I turned my head to look behind me, getting the full panoramic view of the room. Several Quay in the room stood over consoles and worked controls. They took little notice of me. I had trouble processing this sight. I assumed the Quay were just beasts. We knew they had some intelligence but this was way beyond our expectations. They were operating the station's systems. Toward the front of the room, several Quay bent down in front of an exposed console, turning components over in their hands, and studying them carefully. They handled the electronics as if they realized

they were sensitive instruments. How could this be? What were they doing?

I became aware that a large Quay was walking toward me purposefully. My captor stepped away to my left side in deference. I looked up just in time to see a large claw slam my head down to the deck. I heard a tooth crack in the side of my mouth and for the second time that day, tasted blood.

"You approached. You trespassed. You attacked."

The Quay leaned in to speak slowly and deliberately. I couldn't tell if that was for emphasis or whether he chose his words carefully, as a foreigner in a strange country might do. Regardless, his low, granite-like vocal chords dripped with hate and venom.

"But you carry no weapons. Those with weapons are gone. You use tools. Are they weapons?" the Quay asked.

"No," my voice trembled, more than I'd hoped. "I don't plan to kill anyone."

The Quay hissed lightly and straightened. He looked toward the Quay who was working on a console. What came out of his mouth was a mix of growls, clicks and grunts. I assumed that's what the Quay use as a native tongue. The other Quay in the room and responded with more of the same sounds. The Quay turned back to me and reached down to my suit kit, tapping it with his claw.

"I observed you out there. You spoke with the system. Opened the door. With this." The Quay held up my skeleton key. The Quay that grabbed me in the airlock must have brought it. "You can speak with the system. You can make it Quay."

Although I had trouble with the idea that the Quay understood technology, it became clear they had adaptive skills beyond what we believed. This would explain his speaking English, and how the station's power continued to operate. If they accessed the computers, then they had access to the entire Earther library buried in that system.

"I'm... not sure what you're asking," I said, wanting to buy some time. "Who are you?"

The Quay's eyes narrowed and the orange light behind them burned brighter. He cocked his head slightly and then stood up straight.

"I am Rhetekk. I am the lore-teller of my tribe. Alnak, the great Quay warrior who took this station, initiated me. She was crippled by the Wearers of Red, Bearers of Metal Teeth. They are the Hated and have now become as the Shi, the Most Hated."

I slowly raised myself up to get to my knees. It wasn't much more comfortable, but I certainly felt less vulnerable. I took a chance that I could enter the conversation.

"The wearers of red... you mean the Gongen."

Rhetekk hissed and considered the word. "Gongen. Yes. But they are still you and you are they for you both are the same."

"Not exactly," I said. "The Gongen are human, yes, but they left Earth to form their own society. We war with the Gongen for... political reasons." I realized at that moment how stupid our differences seemed.

Rhetekk stared at me silently. "So you are broken tribes? As are the Quay?" He turned his head to look across the room. "The Quay are also broken. Our tribes are as many as disagreements. We will reunite when we have ripped the hearts from our enemies and found our world."

"The Gongen?"

"The Shi!" Rhetekk roared and leaned in close to my face. His breath singed my eyebrows. "For the length of thousands of offspring, the Shi enslaved us, worked us, and killed us. Then we grew strong and fought. Our numbers were millions strong and we forced them to flee... to here." Rhetekk looked around the room as if looking through the bulkhead. "This place... these stars are strange to us. Something is... happening... to us here." Rhetekk drifted off.

"Rhetekk," I decided to go on the offensive. "If the Gongen are so hated... why are you working with them?"

Rhetekk stood still for a moment, eyeing me up and down. He turned to the other Quay in the room and said something I couldn't begin to understand... until I saw the command center empty of all Quay, except the one who had captured Rhetekk and me.

"Why do you say we work with hated Gongen?" Rhetekk questioned in what could only be described as a whisper.

"We, the Earthers, are aware that... you have allowed Gongen ships to pass through space, near to this station. You fire at everything else but Gongen. We assumed that there was some sort of cooperation."

Rhetekk again stared at me. If he was breathing, I couldn't tell. The pause gave me a chance to study his face. It was long and cracked, with frighteningly sharp horns jutting up and down. But somehow, I was drawn to red, cragged lines that seemed to be painted on. There was a pattern there, and I didn't remember seeing it on the others.

Rhetekk leaned back. Watching the movements of a quadruped was disconcerting, because you never knew which direction a small movement would take him. He lowered his shoulders and his head and glanced around as if suspicious of eavesdroppers. After sweeping the room once, he leaned back in close.

"We are not allowing the Gongen to come. *They* don't see them... " he said, pointing at the computers. " Or they don't tell. We see them with our eyes, but the alarms don't sound. They come and leave and we feel as fools."

He held up the skeleton key and placed it between himself and me. He then whispered with a sound of steam releasing from a pool of lava.

"Something else allows them. Something is here. It crawls through the walls and attacks unseen. Many died when doors opened and they were blown into space. We no longer trust the mechanical boxes and climb up and down the levels. Something listens to us and mocks us. Something watches and learns."

He pushed the skeleton key hard into my chest, knocking me back to the floor. His front legs bent hard and he towered over me. "You will kill it. You will make it Quay."

## Chapter Seven

I spent two hours trying to clean up the mess of the main sensor grid consoles. I was surprised to find them relatively undamaged. I wasn't sure if the Quay or the Gongen had taken them apart, but it was done with care and skill. Most of the consoles were still functioning, but the guts had been pulled out as if someone thought they could "watch" the circuitry work.

I didn't have much of a choice when Rhetekk told me to fix the computers. I couldn't run, and following this course of action would keep me alive longer. If nothing else, working on the problem gave me time to calm my nerves and think through my dilemma. Hopefully, I would find an opening and make a break for it. Or perhaps Earth would send a squad to find out what happened to Rundy and his men.

And woman.

With everything that happened since we were attacked, I hadn't thought of Micaro. The bodies in the corridor were so mutilated that I couldn't recognize any of them. She was grabbing my arm when the attack happened. But wasn't there someone or something in the airlock with me when I blacked out? I woke up alone, but what happened there? How did two doors open and then close again?

Rhetekk sat near me and watched my every move. He would cock his head, as if curious. That was the first Quay body language I could read besides "menacing." Occasionally he reached over to poke an equipment board for reasons that, at first, escaped me. Finally, I got the courage to ask about the dismantling of the bridge.

"Rhetekk," I said, sitting up from under the console I was working on. "Did you do this?"

For the first time, Rhetekk looked away from me when he spoke. I couldn't be sure, but it sounded like he sighed. *We're up to three on body language now*, I mused.



"No. I do not understand the technology. I am a storyteller. I have studied the language of your race so we may better understand these new stars. I then pass this knowledge to the others. They serve the other tasks, including this. I am the bridge."

"You mentioned someone named Alnak. That is someone of great importance to you," I said. I was gathering information to build a relationship with my captors. I don't have experience in hostage negotiations, but it seemed like a good idea. At any rate, I was interested. Rhetekk surprised me more and more with each passing minute.

"Alnak lead us through from the other stars. A thousand hekatons strong we were, when the battle began with the Shi," Rhetekk said with pride. "When we emerged here, we were broken and spent. Alnak knew we would die without a foothold. She found this home and through her will, we took it."

"And she was injured?"

"Gravely." Rhetekk paused. "We had never seen the metal teeth and it took many to bring her down. But she fought, and she triumphed, until she finally collapsed."

A silence stretched between us. In pleasant company, it would have been uncomfortable. At this moment, it made the air thick and hot.

"I... uh... have confirmed that the main sensors are online but there seem to be dropouts... or holes in the grid," I reported, looking back to my diagnostics. "This might explain how the Gongen ships have been able to approach. They knew about these anomalies or programmed them intentionally. If you know the coordinates, it would be easy to navigate them."

"Can you remove these... anomalies?" Rhetekk asked.

"Yes, I can," I said, looking back at Rhetekk, formulating my next move. "I can realign the sensor and defense grid to cover over 95% of surrounding space. Without a complete overhaul, that's the best I can do with the tools I have. But, what happens when the work is complete?"

Rhetekk stared at me, unmoving. Another silence. I took a chance, even though it could be too early to ask for favors from a three meter tall Quay.

"You will... realign the... sensor and defense grid," Rhetekk said, mirroring my words back to me. He was adept at picking up new languages so he considered any new words he used. "You will do this."

I was almost waiting for a "please" but figured I wouldn't press my luck. "Yeah, I can do this. All I need to do is... "

The sound of a stampede of Quay running down the hall distracted both of us. Rhetekk stood to about half his height and craned his neck toward the open door. A Quay warrior stepped inside and looked around. A brief conversation ensued

between Rhetekk, the Quay that captured me originally, and this new arrival.

"What's happening?" I asked Rhetekk, who ignored me.

I turned back to the console I was working on and started wiping the settings the on the sensor grid. With a memory wipe and a reset of the imaging matrix, all of the holes in the sweep arc should be removed. After entering a few commands into the panel, the screen went black, indicating the wipe had begun.

And then it promptly re-initialized, far faster than it should have.

"What the hell?" I said to myself. The commotion in the hallway died down, but Rhetekk moved toward the door. My attention was on what was happening in front of me.

I double-checked the sensor array. The wipe had been successful and the initialization of the matrix was working. The anomalies were eliminated and the sensor field was now covering local space.

At one hundred percent.

I shot a sideways glance at Rhetekk to see if he noticed. He was discussing Lord only knows what with the two other Quay and was not concerned with me. I turned back to the console. The sensor grid hummed perfectly, showing a large, umbrella-shaped glow around the computer's representation of the station. I touched a few sectors, running the diagnostics as I did.

One hundred percent.

I'm good, but I'm not that good. I sat back for a moment and ran the timeline through my head. This was an Earther station. Most of the equipment around me is Earther. Then the Gongen took it. There were a few pieces of Gongen tech, but not much. It didn't seem to be connected to any key systems, so I assume that it's comm equipment or... hell, maybe something to sharpen their blades. Then the Quay took it from the Gongen. There's nothing Quay here at all. But the Gongen ships were always allowed to enter the space surrounding the station, even after the Quay...

And then it hit me. The Gongen ships had pilots, human pilots, but they were assisted by onboard artificial intelligence. Each ship was basically fitted with an AI co-pilot. So the AI navigated the holes in the pattern. But our stolen fighter had switched that off and still got through. So if the AI wasn't in the fighter...

Oh my God.

It's in the station.

"Rhetekk!" I shouted, jumping to my feet. "We have to get out of... "

Before I finished my sentence, a light flashed and something exploded by the doorway. The Quay who just entered fell to the deck with a smoking wound in his back. The blast threw me back into the console and I opened my eyes in time to see the head of my Quay captor roll onto the deck after being neatly severed from his shoulders. Rhetekk was on the floor, stunned as much as I. He roared, and started to stand when a figure stepped forward through the smoke. Rhetekk stepped back as one hand holding a gun and another hand holding a long sword became visible. The figure was dressed in pieces of blood red armor that curved gracefully around the grayish black under-mesh. I pulled myself up and stared in disbelief.

Micaro stepped forward through the smoke. With the tip of her sword, she reached back and hit the switch to close the door. Then, with a flash, she buried the sword eight centimeters in the sparking panel and withdrew it. The door was sealed shut. She never lowered the gun from the direct line between her eyes and the middle of Rhetekk's forehead.

"Micaro," I said. "What the hell is going on?" although I thought I had already figured it out.

"In the name of Gongen, I will remove the Quay filth from Mijikayo. And if you care for the future of all humanity, you'll help me do it."

## Chapter Eight

Micaro stepped slowly to the right, keeping her firearm tight on Rhetekk. She never wavered, her hand never shook. She was simply amazing. Rhetekk, for his part, never took his eyes off of her.

"You're an infiltrator. This whole time, you've been waiting for an opportunity to do... what?" I asked.

"To save humanity from the ignorant mistake you Earthers were about to make. Your quest for profit and worship of possession is what drove the Gongen people to leave Earth behind in the first place. Now, for the love of metal and wires, you would risk the sacrifice of us all."

"What are you talking about, Micaro?"

Rhetekk looked back at me and then back to Micaro slowly.

"I was stationed here on Mijikayo shortly before the Quay invaded and brutally murdered my kin and company."

"So you have come for revenge?" Rhetekk said, snarling as the words left his mouth.

Micaro ignored this and glanced back to me. It took a lot of guts to turn your full attention from a snarling Quay, I thought.

"I was called back to Gongen once the rift appeared. Before I could return, the Quay launched their attack and there was nothing I could do to assist my brethren."

"So you infiltrated a CGC Vac Jumper squad in order to come back here and kill everyone? That makes no sense."

Micaro's expression never changed. "I didn't expect to come back here. It became necessary when I discovered that Earth was going to attempt to take back the station. I had no choice but to work myself into the mission to sabotage it."

I scratched my head trying to understand what she said. Only then did I become aware of a pounding on the door. The other Quay in the station were trying to get in. With only Rhetekk, Micaro and I in the command center, it wasn't hard to figure that two of the three of us were likely to be killed when they got through the door.

"This doesn't make sense," I said. "I couldn't understand why this station was so important to Earth in the first place. Why is it worth so much effort for the Gongen to keep it?"

Micaro looked directly at Rhetekk and seemed reluctant to answer. Finally, she drew breath ever so slightly. "We will all be dead shortly, so you might as well know. When the Gongen took Mijikayo, we allowed Eichi, our artificial intelligence, to run the systems. When the Quay attacked, we hid this fact and instructed Eichi to remain hidden and observe the Quay. We have gathered data on them for months. Their numbers, their capabilities, offensive strategies. All of this was known to us. Eichi acted only when it was threatened with discovery."

"So the whole time, you've been spying on the Quay. That's why Gongen never attempted to retake the station."

"And now in your stupid attempt, you have cost all of humanity the ability to find critical flaws in a deadly opponent."

"Micaro," I said, taking a cautious step forward. "They're not the animals you think they are. It's possible," I continued, looking toward Rhetekk. "It's possible that they can be reasoned with. We all have a common enemy here in the Shi."

"Spoken like a true traitor. I wonder if your superiors will ever forgive your betrayal."

"My betrayal? You were the spy!"

"The station vids have recorded and transmitted everything that has happened here today. You have been repairing the sensors, have you not? If the Quay control the station, you have been working with the enemy."

That made my head spin but she was right. I didn't even consider that anyone could have seen my conversation with Rhetekk. But when we entered the station, the antenna beacon was active. Both red lights were blinking.

"The antenna. Active and transmitting back to Gongen. It's how you communicate, and to some extent, control 'Eichi,' isn't it?"

"Correct. And it will soon transmit the destruction of this entire station. Now that the Quay are aware and you have interfered, there is no reason to continue this."

Rhetekk roared and jumped forward at Micaro, but she dropped low and spun like lightning wrapped in red armor. Her blade cleanly severed one of Rhetekk's legs, near to the floor. His forward momentum sent him crashing to where she should have been standing had she not continued her motion by launching herself toward me. I tried to dodge her blow, but I'm no fighter, and no match for a trained Gongen warrior. Her elbow caught me in my lower rib cage. I heard, and felt, a few sickening snaps and dropped to the floor as well. I looked at Rhetekk's eyes when I hit the metal deck. I could see the rage behind them and realized that I was going to die, no matter whose side I chose.

Micaro so perfectly executed her move that she stopped right in front of the main control board on the command console. Her fingers danced over the controls and she spoke some Gongen dialect in low tones. She was giving instructions to the AI. I had a good idea what she told it to do.

"Micaro, don't do this," I choked through the blood that I coughed up. I realized that the pounding in my head actually came from the command center door. It got louder and more frantic.

"In two minutes time, Eichi will receive the command instructions from Gongen, and this station will self-destruct, killing everyone onboard. All exits are sealed, and there is nothing anyone can do to stop it."

She strode over to me and looked down at me. She almost softened momentarily.

"I'm sorry, Jarek. I wish it didn't have to be this way. I know you aren't like Rundy and his men." She looked up at the door. It began to flex and bend inward. It would be only moments now before the entire complement of Quay burst through. "I can kill you so swiftly you won't feel it. It is an honorable and painless way to die. I would do this for you."

I looked up at her face. She was beautiful and frightening all at once. But I knew she was being sincere and almost...tender. There was a certain appeal to her words. I had resigned myself to death as soon as the Quay grabbed me at the airlock. Her suggestion sounded better than being ripped apart by clawed hands.

"I...," was all I got out of my mouth before chaos erupted again.

A ceiling ventilation screen caved in and crashed down to the floor. A large figure dropped through the shaft into the room. Micaro spun around with her gun ready. She must have been as shocked as I to see Milt Rundy hit the floor, his gun drawn and pointed at Micaro.

"Don't let her do you any favors, Tech," Rundy said. "I still might need you."

Rhetekk hissed at Rundy and pulled himself up uneasily. The Earther pointed a finger from his free hand toward the injured Quay. "Stay put." He never took his eyes, or his gun, off of Micaro.

Between my broken ribs, the shock of seeing Rundy alive and the fact that we were standing in a station with a self-destruct ticking away, I was at a total loss for words. Rundy didn't look much better. His enviro suit was mostly torn away, revealing the combat mesh underneath. Spots of dark liquid covered him, some in large round circles. Others appeared to be splattered across him. There was no telling how much of the blood was his.

"If it's any consolation, I knew you were an infiltrator, Micaro. I just didn't know what you were up to. Until now. And you, Tech," he said, sneering at me, "You're in just a little bit of trouble now yourself."

"You are in no position to dictate your military agenda to anyone, Earther. This station will be destroyed and your arrogance will pass from this universe unnoticed," she said, never lowering her gun from his direction. Rhetekk and I were both ignored by Rundy and Micaro.

Rhetekk began to slowly rise on his three remaining legs. "You claim to be different. You brand yourselves with different garb but all we see is weak flesh hiding behind guns and metal. Hatred, greed, and prejudice drive you all. You are like the Hated. Like the Shi."

Ignoring Rhetekk and the pounding at the door, Rundy continued. "When the Gongen took this station, they immediately set up a link to the AI, didn't they?" Rundy said to everyone in the room at once. "Spying on the Quay isn't the only thing your people are up to here. This station works as a listening post for the Gongen, intercepting comm between Earth and the Outer Rim. The AI runs the show and communicates with your buddies on Gongen. Being an AI, it can mask the transmissions any number of ways that only another AI could translate. In fact, the AI scrambling was so good, we thought it was just background noise from Jupiter until only recently."

Micaro didn't say a word. Her gun arm was straight and never wavered. Rundy, on the other hand, was having trouble keeping his firearm lined up.

"And the AI is your command interface to Gongen, isn't it honey?" he sneered at her. "And when the AI receives the destruct command code, we're all dust."

"Correct," Micaro answered. "I only hope that the data on the Quay that we've collected is enough to save all of our worlds after our deaths."

"Oh, we aren't done collecting data on the Quay. But you Gongen are." Rundy clicked a comm unit on his belt. "Kreet, you in position?"

There was a momentary crackle of electronic noise and then another voice from the dead was heard. It was Kreet.

"God dammit, I've been ready for three hours! What happened... "

"Save it," Rundy interrupted. "Blow it. Now!"

There was a pause before we heard a muffled explosion and the station shook. We all shifted our balance, as the floor seemed to pitch before righting itself again. Micaro stared at Rundy and for the first time, seemed confused.

"What have you done?" she said in a low voice.

"We've known the antenna was active since the Quay took over. Who would the Quay talk to, eh?" Rundy said, moving slowly along the wall toward the command console, putting Micaro and myself between him and the door. The commotion outside had stopped. Apparently, the Quay had gone to investigate the explosion.

Micaro glanced down at the command console. Rundy took another step to his right. "Don't bother waiting for the command code. It's not coming. The plan all along was to make you think Kreet was lost. He's a jumper, for God's sake! You think he's going to make a stupid mistake like that?"

"You destroyed the antenna," I said, deciding it was time to enter the fray. "You took out the antenna so the command codes won't be received. That was the point of the whole mission? Why not just destroy them from the Gongen freighter we flew here in?"

"Because that wouldn't have given us the answers to what was going on, or help us sniff out this infiltrator." He pointed his gun carefully now, right at Micaro's face. "We knew the antenna was active, but we didn't know what was coming or going through it. If the Quay and Gongen worked together, that's how they communicated. So, we weren't exactly right but close enough. We figured that if we didn't gain control of the station, we'd need to at least sever that link so nobody could signal for help. Turns out that our plan to get Kreet into position served a different purpose than we'd thought."

Rundy smiled, although he was obviously in pain. "Been watching you for a while, sweetheart. I knew you were up to

something. Figured you for a traitor, but I just didn't know whose side you were on. Doesn't really matter now."

"So this became a big Petri dish," I said in disgust. Rhetekk took this all in, cocking his head from side to side. "All this time, you've been watching the Quay do... what?"

"We've been watching what they are, and what they can be," she said, glancing briefly toward Rhetekk. "They are foul and disharmonious. They thrive on vengeance and hatred. Left unchecked, they would certainly destroy all of us. Only by studying the enemy can you understand how to kill them."

"This... Eichi... you call it. This is what stalks us?" Rhetekk said, studying Micaro, his eyes growing redder.

"Eichi was instructed to stay hidden, but protect itself if threatened. When one of your kind got close, it would defend itself."

"Or protect you," I said. "That's how we got blown into the airlock. The AI knew you and opened the two airlock doors to pull us out of the hallway before the attack, but closed the doors to keep us in the station and protect us from the Quay."

"And here I figured you two just ran while we stood and fought," Rundy choked, coughing up some blood. His gun lowered slightly, a motion not unnoticed by the others in the room. "So now what? We've got a Gongen spy, a tech traitor, and a Quay that's as good as dead. I think I may have just enough rounds left."

Rhetekk rose to his feet awkwardly, balancing on his three good legs. Blood seeped from the wound that Micaro had made. He moved toward the wall that Rundy had his back to. Micaro moved to her left, creating a triangle of the three of us, pointing right at Rundy.

"You can't shoot us all at once," Micaro said coolly. "If this Quay lunges, as they're apt to do, I'll kill you in the distraction. If you shoot me, the Quay will be on you in a moment."

Rundy didn't reply. His gun aimed at Micaro but he eyed Rhetekk out of the corner of his left eye. Rhetekk slowly moved toward him along the wall.

"Okay, wait. Slow down," I said, expecting gunfire to begin again. "Rundy, how do you plan to get out of here? If you kill Micaro and Rhetekk, there's still a station full of Quay between you and any hope of extraction."

"Kreet is on his way to a XeRacer stashed in the Belt. There's a squadron waiting on the other side. If the station couldn't be taken, I was to gather recon, transmit it to Kreet and hold out for as long as possible. If I can't be extracted, they'll wipe the place out."

I suddenly felt like the only person not invited to a party. "Umm... and what about me?"



Rundy laughed. "You think you're clean? That you can just walk out of here? I recorded two hours of your working with the Quay to rebuild the defense grid. You're as bad as your girlfriend over here. Don't think you're ever going back to Earth. Hell, I just planned on killing you with these two."

He was right. Deep down, I knew that if I ever did make it off this station, I was a dead man. I could try to explain the situation, but if Kreet made it back with those recordings, the charge would be treason. I doubted the Gongen would be any more lenient. It definitely decreased my options. I looked over to Rhetekk, who crept along the wall. Rundy backed away along the wall to his right, as Micaro slid slowly to the left. Whatever was going to happen would happen soon. And in a thundering of clicks above our heads, it did.

Several airshafts on the ceiling of the command center exploded inward, with Quay warriors riding the metal grates like gravboards. There must have been four Quay that hit the floor running full speed. Two bore down on Rundy, one threw himself in front of Rhetekk, and the last charged, head down and horns pointed forward, toward me. In a panic, I fell back away from the Quay warrior toward Micaro. I heard gunfire behind me and to my left as I felt a burning tear through my left arm. The impact of the shrapnel spun me onto my left side in time to see Rundy go down in a shower of blood as two Quay ripped him to shreds.

In my fall, I hadn't realized the Quay that charged at me stepped over me. Despite the pain in my now useless left arm, I rolled over to see Micaro, who had been behind me. I saw her just as she slumped to the floor, a gaping hole in her midsection from by a Quay claw swipe. The Quay fell at the same time, a sword buried to the hilt in his forehead. Finished with their task on Rundy, the remaining two Quay moved toward me. I put my head down, waiting for a welcome end to the agony I felt. Click-click, click-click thundered as they strode toward me. "God," I thought. "This is going to hurt."

Rhetekk shouted and the Quay stopped. I peeked over my right arm and looked up. Rhetekk spoke with the two Quay and gestured at the ceiling of the command center. They looked down and me and sneered as they moved to pry open the battered main doors. I realized that if I understood Rhetekk's intention, Kreet was not going to make it to his ship.

I pulled myself up on my right arm and surveyed the damage to my other. It was burned, broken and torn. It looked as if Rundy squeezed off a shot at me as the Quay took him down. I wondered if it was accidental.

"Are you well?" Rhetekk asked as he looked down at me.

"I guess I'm about as well as you," I said, bowing my head toward his severed leg. "Why didn't you just let them kill me?"

"You are strange to us. Soft and weak. You prey upon each other and claim the possessions of your dead." Rhetekk looked down at Micaro's body. He made a scraping noise deep in his throat that might have been a sigh. "But we are not the savages you believe. The Quay have made allies before."

Rhetekk reached down with one clawed hand and took me by the shoulder. He pulled me to my feet while I did my best to hide the scream of pain I wanted so desperately to let out.

"We have made one today," he said.

I gasped short breaths and squeezed my upper left arm. I winced at the pressure. "Don't go sewing up our flag yet, we still have problems. The Earther squadron will be here soon. If they don't hear from Rundy, they'll blow us to pieces."

"They will be met by our hekatons. That one," he sneered, pointing to the pile of remains that was once Rundy, "he does not study our ways as the red ones do. There are always ships near. Alnak is protected."

Rhetekk looked over at the command center main console and then back to me. "That which shadows us is still here, watching. Waiting to kill. We have gained nothing this day."

I looked down at my damaged arm and back at the console. My eyes then fell upon my skeleton key, lying in a small, wet puddle on the floor.

"I assume that I'm stuck here, right?" I said looking up at Rhetekk. "There's a lot more to be fixed than just the defense grid and you kept me alive this long."

Rhetekk studied me for a moment before looking over to Micaro and then looking at Rundy's torn remains. "Quay ravage. Quay rage and scream. We fight. We kill. But... " he said, drawing close to me in quite a discerning way. " Quay do not enslave."

Rhetekk straightened up in a prideful way, spine straight, legs lifting him up. An obvious jolt of pain rattled him and he settled down, leaning toward his missing leg.

"I can't stay here, Rhetekk. But I can help you. I have an idea to rid your systems of the Gongen AI and get the rest of the operation back online," I said, glancing at my skeleton key. "But I will need a favor in return."

Rhetekk cocked his head again but said nothing.

"I need a ride."

## Chapter Nine

He's yelling again.

It's bad enough that the noise in the Rats' Nest is enough to drown out an Earther shipyard without Dooley, the owner and bartender, shouting about every little thing. For a moment, I remembered Rundy. I'd take Dooley any day.

I sipped the powerful concoction they call "max retros" and leaned my head against the synthleather of my booth's headrest. The last three months swirled around in my head like a flock of birds looking for refuge from the wind. The Earther squadron showed up, intending to atomize the station. They were surprised when the huge Quay life ships appeared on their screens. I asked Rhetekk not to slaughter them and, except for a few overzealous pilots, most of the squadron returned to Earth only in need of a change of their undergarments.

Kreet did indeed make it back to the Belt, but the Quay had destroyed his XeRacer. Rhetekk refused to tell me what happened to him. I decided not to press the issue.

After my encounter with Rundy, I was taken to the station medcenter, which was mostly intact. I patched myself up just enough to keep from bleeding to death. It was the Quay who saved my life with their own type of medicine. It was roughly a cross between voodoo and a college hazing.

Our arrival here on Ceres must've been a real sight. It's not often a Quay hekaton lands here, and even less often when a three-legged Quay storyteller limps out carrying a battered Earther. Fortunately, I found a less than reputable limb tech that fixed me up. It was easy to negotiate a fair price with three Quay standing behind me. Rhetekk refused to take tech graft, saying his injury would "be told of in tales to come. Pain strengthens us," he said. I felt somewhat weak in comparison as Rhetekk and his warriors left under the watchful eyes of a great many surly Mavericks.

I was still getting used to the arm. It was a nice piece of work, as most of the expensive enhancements on the Rim are. My entire left arm was replaced up to my shoulder with muscular tendrils implanted across my chest for stability. The four fingers all worked as docks for precise tool attachments or jack-ins for computer node access. Between the wrist and the elbow, I worked with the tech to incorporate my skeleton key circuitry directly into the appendage. Sensor implants at the base of my cerebellum allowed me to comm with the onboard computer, and that allowed me to remove the keypad for the unit altogether. Two red and one blue light adorned my exposed forearm. No one, not the tech, or Rhetekk, or anyone in the bar, could have guessed what was inside.

I drummed the metal fingers on the table. Without realizing it, I mimicked the pattern of the Quay as they ran through the metal-floored hallways of the station. The red lights began blinking furiously.

"Oh, sorry. I forgot that upsets you," I said, looking down at my arm.

The lights slowed and an occasional blue blink joined the dancing lights.

"No. We're staying here, Eichi. And no, you're not getting near an uplink. Not yet anyway. The last thing I need is you trying to contact your big brother. Chasing you into this," I said, knocking my arm on the table edge. "... was the best way to get you off of the station and out of Rhetekk's hair. Not that the Quay have hair, of course."

I took another sip of the awful smelling drink and set the glass down. With any luck, Earth thinks I'm dead and the Gongen won't bother coming to look for me. Any mention of Gongen takes me back to thoughts of Micaro and my last memory of her hitting the floor in a splatter of red. I admired her for standing up to Rundy. Hell, for all I know, she was the one that killed him. But she was dead too, a victim of some Gongen code of honor through revenge. She knew we were all going to die and offered to keep me from suffering. I guess I should take that as a compliment.

I emptied the glass and with my metal arm, flicked it toward the bar. It hit with a loud clink as it broke in about four pieces.

"I'll uh, take another," I said sheepishly, making a mental note to remember my new arm was a tad stronger.

Dooley stared at me for a moment. He'd seen patrons with new arms before. I could tell he was annoyed at the broken glass but he recognized me with the new arm and Earther-issue armor piercing hand cannon holstered on my hip. But the most distinguishing characteristic was the "paint" that Rhetekk scraped across my face in an odd, V-shaped pattern. He told me it was a means of accepting me to his tribe, and that few non-Quay have ever received the honor. I don't know what the hell he used, but it still burned. The locals seem to read it as, "Back off, I have friends." And that was just fine with me. I had no desire to fight, but the Outer Rim is a dangerous place, and any kind of an edge is welcome.

A server robot brought my drink and set it on the table. I choked it down in one swallow and bit down hard on my lip as it burned down my throat. In a few minutes, it would help dull the ache in my arm and the burning on my face. I stood up and walked toward the bar, dropping a few creds in front of Dooley. He looked down at them suspiciously, but then snatched them up. "Something else?" he said.

"Yeah," I replied, as I leaned in to the bar in a gesture much more dramatic than necessary. "Know anyone that's hiring a CISNET-trained master system hacker?"

End