

[A]cracking fusion of cyberpunk and space opera...
—David Annandale, *Warlord* (Warhammer 40,000)



PALE GREY
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DON MIASEK

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*To my parents and siblings,
who gave me everything I needed to succeed.*

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PALE GREY DOT

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1

Jenna woke to the sound of arguing, audible even over the rain. Up above, water poured out of the gutters that ran down the sides of the housing complexes. Her internal chronometer showed 5:08 a.m., and the lights in the nearby buildings were still dimmed. Jenna's eyes settled on the man and woman.

They were now screaming at each other. She stole his ration chip, he said. He was a stain who couldn't tell a chip from his ass, she said. The man wore a tattered grey long-coat that blended in with the walls of the surrounding buildings. His breather was little more than scratched glass and cracked rubber. The woman had no breather at all, and her strained screeching was interrupted by a fit of hacking coughs. Her sagging skin and sunken eyes spoke of bad anti-ageing procedures long since abandoned. Her mouth had more gaps than teeth.

There were at least fifteen others huddled together in the laneway. Most were sprawled across the ground, sleeping under makeshift blankets, or propped up against one of the old shipping crates used for food distribution. Neither the screaming nor the rain woke them. Jenna had already marked and identified each one the night before. Even those with some fight in them knew better than to get in her way.

Jenna's joints ached as she climbed to her feet, turning away from the fight. Her fellow displaced were unstable after so many years of scavenging for survival, but at least they were predictable. Her drenched black hair obscured her vision as she stumbled out of the alley towards the street. Traffic was quiet, the curbs lined with auto-taxis waiting patiently for commuters.

The signs over each cab existed in the physical world as well as virtually for those with cybernetically enhanced eyes. *Thirteen minutes from downtown to the Bronx Port! Only twenty dollars!*

The sound of the argument faded as Jenna walked. *The homeless fight for petty reasons*, she thought. Every alley on the street was filled with this sort of nonsense. She took stock of her surroundings. Despite the hour and the down-pour, a few brave, umbrella-wielding pedestrians strode past her. The rain had chased away most of the smog this morning, allowing citizens a chance to go without their breather masks. One man in a business suit and jacket took several steps to avoid being too close to her, wrinkling his nose in the process.

Time to see about stealing a fresh set of clothes, apparently. When the dredges started actively avoiding her, it meant they noticed her. Her stomach growled, but food was also something to worry about later—for now, she had to focus on her mission.

Up above, the glowing red light of a security checkpoint cut through the brown fog. The metal arch stretched from one side of the street, up and over to the other. It flashed its acknowledgement as each citizen passed underneath. Drones, no doubt managed by some cyborg in a darkened control room a continent away, watched her every move. A few hovered, fans beating against the rain, while others used their spidery legs to cling to the side of the arch. Old training helped Jenna keep her breathing and heart rate steady while her proxy identification program supplied a false name as she strode underneath. The arch flashed green, placated.

On the other side, Jenna backed into the nearest alley and rolled up her left sleeve, revealing ports and circuitry along a tarnished metal arm. She remembered how happy she'd been when she first received the cybernetic limb. *Such idiocy.* Digging into a soaked pocket, she drew out a small, gleaming data decrypter. Twisting it around, she braced herself before inserting it into one of her ports.

The instant she connected with SecLink, mixed in with the flood of information, came the Pull. For a moment, she wanted nothing more than to call the Earth Security Service and surrender. *You blame Her, but you know it was your fault. Make Her happy. Make yourself happy. ESS is your*

friend. They will help you. You know She only wants what's best for you.

“Piss off,” she hissed out loud, though no one else heard her. Searing jolts of pain shot through her head the longer she resisted.

Fighting the desire to give up, she found what she was looking for. A map of Toronto filled her vision. A bright red mark appeared several streets over. Jenna pulled in every detail of the area. Every building, every car, every check-point, and every person was processed.

Disconnecting as fast as she could, Jenna breathed a sigh of relief. Any longer and her intrusion might have been detected. Worse, she might have fallen sway to the need to return to ESS's loving embrace. It'd taken years to design and build the decrypter. She almost thought it wasn't going to work. *Might never work again if they guess you have access.*

Shoving it back into her pocket, Jenna crossed the street, looking for her target. She hadn't been able to grab his full dossier, but what she had should be enough. Marcus Secor. ESS agent for one hundred and three years. Raised to operative status fifty-four years ago. Known to be stable and reliable. Expert in electronic interference, hijacking, and seduction. Combat training wasn't listed, but that always went without saying. Assigned to support the GreyCorp infiltration effort at the Jupiter locale. Though he'd become an operative during the end of the Athena Program years, Jenna didn't know him personally. As she passed by the slowly opening stores, she wondered if he would know anything

about the program. *Just what are they telling them about the Athena Six these days?*

The streets were slick, and the puddles cast reflections of the stratoscrapers above. None were taller than the Tower. The Earth Security Service's headquarters was as ugly as it was threatening. Asymmetrical and covered in black armoured plating, it was the centre of the web ESS cast across the entire solar system.

Though the sun wasn't strong enough to pierce the thick brown clouds, the city brightened as natural light usurped the artificial. More cars pulled away from the curb. There would be witnesses. Across the street, Jenna saw her target.

To anyone else, Marcus looked like a random pedestrian going about his business. He wore a black raincoat over a suit and carried a briefcase in his hand—real or a prop, Jenna couldn't tell. Even from here, she could make out his youthful features. She knew from his dossier that Marcus was well over a hundred, but he didn't look a day older than forty. *He isn't innocent*, Jenna reminded herself. *He's the enemy.*

Though Marcus looked as distracted as anyone else, Jenna knew better. Awareness training was the first thing every agent learned. Register every living being in sight, within earshot, and local electronic assets. Catalogue each for potential threats. Look for incongruences. Register any potential weapon, engineered or makeshift. Keep at least three escape routes available at all times. Assess the viability of any potential sources of cover.

Dressed in her ragged coat that was ill-equipped to deal

with the rain, Jenna played the part of a shuffling displaced woman while watching Marcus from the corner of her eye. She had no idea what his cybernetic enhancements consisted of, how diligent he was in his training, or where he was heading.

Jenna stopped at the corner opposite Marcus, pretending to wait for the light. She knew this would require perfect timing. Slowly putting her hands into her pockets, she gripped the signal disruptor tightly with one and her pistol with the other. Taking a deep breath, she squeezed the disruptor, and all hell broke loose.

Every wireless device was struck by static. Every eye ESS had in the area was blinded. Marcus and Jenna both reacted instantly. Pulling her energy projector pistol, she squeezed the trigger as Marcus hit the ground. Deep scorch marks spread across the corner of the building behind him.

There was chaos as pedestrians fled from the gunshots. Displaced, in the hidden safety of their alleys, huddled together in an attempt to go unnoticed. Transports, from the small auto-taxis to the larger commuter buses, slowed to a halt as their connection to the traffic controller was severed.

Jenna fired another shot as the enemy operative dove to the side. She cursed herself—had her internal cybernetics not degraded so much during the past fifty-odd years, this would have already been over. Her only hope was that Marcus was thrown off balance by the sudden disruption to SecLink.

He tossed his briefcase away as he rolled to a kneeling position. Jenna could see his face clearly now. He had the

stoic expression of a man who wasn't surprised at being ambushed. Raising his hand towards Jenna, his palm glowed as he charged an energy blast before her third shot struck him square in the torso. Falling backwards, Marcus hit the wet pavement, convulsing.

People were emerging from their vehicles. Someone in the crowd shouted at her, barely audible over the rain. Jenna raced across the street, kneeling before the downed operative. He was still alive. Good—his systems would start shutting down the instant he died.

Working fast, she pulled up Marcus's sleeve and began removing the data drives from his arm. Where her cybernetics had the roughness of tactical-grade equipment marred by decades of neglect, his were subtle, designed with a smooth sleekness to simulate civilian implants.

“... Jenna.”

She froze.

Marcus twitched as he reached up with his free hand, feebly grasping at her shoulder. His eyes were unfocused, and his breathing had turned ragged. “You don't need to keep running. You can always go back.”

Jenna removed the next drive and shoved it into her pocket. She met Marcus's eyes, cursing herself for lingering. Her disruptor wouldn't last much longer, and the instant ESS had access to their network of cameras and sensors again, she'd be lost.

“You know She will forgive you ... She loves you ...”
Marcus murmured.

“Shut up,” she whispered. Jenna drew out a med-stim syringe and rested the tip against his chest. To save him, she knew she’d have to press down hard to break through the thin-weave armour beneath his suit. *No! Don’t be stupid. If he lives, She will find you.*

Jenna swallowed hard. *You’re wasting time*, she thought. *It’s you or him.* “I’m doing you a favour,” she muttered. Jenna withdrew the syringe and shoved it into her pocket, unused. Marcus’s grip loosened and his breathing faded.

She wrenched out his last data drive. There would be witnesses. All the technological gadgetry in the solar system couldn’t stand up against human eyes. Helicopter sirens sounded in the distance. A full lockdown of the sector would soon follow.

With no way to tell how long it would be before ESS’s electronic eyes and ears returned, Jenna fled.



DC FORTRESS

WASHINGTON, EARTH

January 31, 2510

Re: Congratulations and concerns

Dear Premier Fairchild,

First, I would like to congratulate you on your re-election into high office. Earth and her territories, from Mercury to the extrasolar-system colonies, continue to prosper under your just leadership.

With your renewed mandate, I'd like to reiterate that we have the opportunity to eliminate a wasteful and dangerous section of our government. It is time that ESS is dismantled.

I won't mince words: ESS has a proven track record of failure. The Ganymede Blitz was a monumental disaster only rivalled by the bloodbath that was the Martian Insurrection fifty-one years ago. Allowing Her free rein has proven disastrous and may well jeopardize your administration's efforts to maintain unity and stability within the solar system.

With your approval, the United Fleet and the Ministry of Defence can be fully capable of handling all intelligence-related matters within three years. Let's use this opportunity to make Earth safe again.

Sincerely,

Sebastian Havoic, Minister of Defence

2

It was as if a switch went off in the back of his brain, and for the first time in fifty-one years, Cherny felt the Pull. He had a moment of near panic before his old training kicked in. Cherny gripped the refuelling hose tightly as he regained his bearings. Glancing over his shoulder, the bustling Hawaii Tsiolkovsky Spaceport filled his view. Jets fired under an orbital hopper, lifting the craft off the tarmac, while one of the big 4200 Series haulers, covered in maintenance personnel, rested behind it.

Cherny's gaze followed the hopper as it forced itself into the brown sky before vanishing into the darkened clouds. The Pull wasn't going away, he realized. This was it. This was finally it. A bewildered smile crept across his face behind his breather as the implications dawned on him. It took the shrill beeping of the refueller hose to snap him back to reality. Pulling the safety lock back onto the nozzle, Cherny

unhooked the connector from the engine and closed the hatch. As he dragged the hose away from the starliner, another man stood in his way.

“Christ! Thirty-six minutes for one goddamn MO-8 engine!” While he was only a little taller than Cherny, Minsk was a hell of a lot wider. He wore the same ugly safety-orange coverall and mask as everyone else. Only the blue card over his left breast pocket marked him as a supervisor. The man trudged up closer, and Cherny swore he could smell his boss’s breath through the filtered air. “Alain had his done ten minutes ago! And his cybernetics are trash compared to yours.”

After five decades of putting up with this lumbering sack of ego and abuse, Cherny’s metallic hand twitched. It took everything Cherny had not to deck him. *The Pull doesn’t mean you can unleash your frustration on this prick*, Cherny reminded himself. “I-I’m,” he stammered, “I’m doing the best I can, Minsk.” Cherny knew what a sad spectacle he must be right now. On any other day, this wouldn’t have been an act. A few of his colleagues shot quick, nervous glances in their direction. He tried to ignore them as well.

“My great-grandma has a faster response time than you, and she’s four hundred and fifty!” The supervisor grabbed Cherny’s shoulder and turned him around to face the sprawling spaceport. The port was a small pond, but Minsk was the biggest fish in it. “Take a good, long look. There’re plenty of people out there who would *love* your job.” He drew out the word “love” mockingly. “One call is all it’d take. You’d be back on the street on your ass.”

Cherny shivered. Before the Pull, Minsk's threat would have genuinely terrified him. He had fallen so far over the past five decades. *Please let this be the last time I have to go through this*, he thought. "I'll do better," he promised.

Minsk grunted with obvious disbelief and looked out at the thriving port. It was his kingdom. "Or hell, maybe I'll get a drone to do your job. Cost me about ten bucks extra in taxes a day. What do ya think about that? Replace you with a goddamn calculator."

Cherny didn't say anything. It wouldn't take much for his sad excuse of a life to be destroyed.

"All right," Minsk finally said, letting go of Cherny's shoulder. "Get out of here. You're done for the day."

With a sigh of relief that was only partly acted, Cherny bolted, eager to get out of Minsk's sight. *That was the last time*, he repeated to himself. The doors to the terminal building slid open as Cherny approached, and as soon as he was through, he reached up and undid his breather's clasps. Even indoors, the air was putrid, but it was still good to be free of the mask.

The changing room was crowded with dock workers either preparing for a shift or just finishing. Cherny's cover-all was filthy, stained with grease, dirt, and sweat. Undoing the zipper, he shed the garment and tossed it into the overflowing hamper before reaching for the towel in his locker. The circuitry and ports of his metallic left arm also covered half his chest, snaking about his flesh like veins.

"You're in a hurry, man."

Cherny looked up in surprise. A tall man with a wispy white beard was gearing up next to him. “I guess I am, José,” Cherny replied with a chuckle. In the old days, he never would have been caught unawares. Being distracted by the long-lost Pull in his mind was no excuse, no matter how intoxicating it was.

“Got someplace to go?” José asked as he brought his tool belt up around his hips. The man was well over three hundred years old, and Cherny knew from his records that he had served at this post for nearly two hundred of them. If there was ever a poster boy of a dredge—stuck in the same job forever—José was it.

“Yeah, I might see about a trip to the mainland. I have a bit of cash saved up,” Cherny lied.

“Mmm.” José fumbled with his belt buckle for a few moments before the latch caught. “I’ve been thinking about that too. Me and Paul are going to see about getting our VR flick together. Paul’s writing the script and I’m planning to direct and star. Just need an investor and we’re ready to go. This is it. This is going to be my ticket out of here.”

“Can’t wait to see it.” Cherny wrapped the towel around his waist. The Pull was growing stronger, going from a comforting sensation to one that made his head sore. Nevertheless, he stopped himself before stepping away. “Hey, you stay safe, José. You’ll make it.” *Lying is a skill you never quite forget*, Cherny mused.

“Thanks, man,” José replied. Picking up his orange gloves, he headed for the exit.

Cherny watched him go. He wasn't proud of it, but it was comforting to see someone even more pathetic than he was. José was a cautionary tale, but now Cherny was on another path. A path back to greatness, luxury, and superiority over the dredges. A path back to Her. That last one terrified him, but it would be worth it. Setting the towel aside, Cherny stepped into the shower to get clean.



UFS *Starknight* shuddered as her boarding line contacted the broken primary hull of the freighter. Powerful shocks in the line compressed to distribute the impact evenly, but the vibrations were still felt up in the cruiser's command centre. Walls of monitors showed every inch of the captured transport. Someone had crudely painted *Sic Semper Tyrannis* across its hull. The demolished engine, sporting a gaping puncture wound, was surrounded by floating debris.

The command centre was cramped and sparse, like everything else on a military vessel, and supported only three crew members at a time. Wasting mass on creature comforts was unthinkable when that same space could be better utilized to improve ship performance. It could take months of living aboard a spaceship, surrounded by endless vacuum, to get used to it, and some never did. But Captain Ezza Jayens was born in space and spent the first six years of her life there. It was home.

Clipped into her zero-g harness at the command station,

she listened as her crew methodically and efficiently worked to take the freighter.

“All grapplers are green,” Rachelle reported from the ops station. The woman carried a full suite of cybernetics. A dozen steel-grey cables ran from her station into ports along her body, granting her instant access to every scrap of data *Starknight* was receiving. When she turned to face Ezza, the hair-like wires running from the back of her head into the computer systems shimmered in the light.

“*Tyrannis* is stationary relative to our trajectory,” Adams added, not looking up from his console. “All manoeuvring thrusters are disabled.”

Ezza disapproved of the nickname the crew had given the other ship. The last thing she wanted was to make the Syndicate sound any tougher than they were. Compared to the true political powers in the solar system, Ezza considered them petty thugs with a sledgehammer, when a scalpel was needed to affect any kind of real change. Mentally flicking a switch, she accessed the ship’s intercom and spoke in a commanding tone. “This is Captain Jayens to all hands. The Syndicate vessel has been disabled and grappling manoeuvres have been successful. Boarding operations will begin momentarily. Captain Jayens, out.”

Severing the connection, Ezza looked in Adams’s direction. “Tell Commander Gole his team can go in. Remember—no fatalities. Stunners and flashbangs only.”

Heavily armed marines with power armour were overkill against whatever the Syndicate crew could scavenge

together. Ezza watched the progress from the command centre's holographic viewer. Twenty green dots denoting *Starknight* marines moved swiftly through the wireframe image of the freighter. Like any ship that wanted to simulate gravity when not accelerating, it was built with an even number of hulls rotating around a single fulcrum. It was big, bulky, and slow—a pack mule compared to *Starknight's* cheetah.

“Is something wrong, Captain?” Rachele asked. She was still plugged into *Starknight*, and Ezza knew from experience how distracting that could be.

“I'm trying to view this scenario from the perspective of the people on board that ship,” she responded, tapping a gloved hand against the holographic display. “It doesn't add up.”

“Oh?”

“The instant they spotted us, they tried to run. Fine. But then we locked on and managed to match their trajectory. From that point on, everyone knew how this was going to end. They couldn't outrun us, they couldn't outgun us, and they sure as hell can't outfight us.” The way the green dots on the holographic freighter washed through the ship was proof of that. “Yet they made us chase them for two weeks. They didn't scuttle the ship, so it's clear they aren't suicidal. You'd think that surrender would have crossed their minds.”

“Can't underestimate human stubbornness, Captain,” Adams said. He still had a boyish smile at only fifty. “Maybe they were hoping we'd lose interest and leave 'em alone.”

“Maybe,” Ezza considered, unconvinced. Any other ship

suspected of carrying contraband would have either detonated their cargo or stashed their goods and prayed they'd survive the inspection. Illegal technology was always a possibility, though Ezza found it unlikely the Ministry of Science wouldn't have already detected and reported it.

Within twenty-five minutes, the fighting was over. *Starknight's* marines had invaded with the efficiency and precision Gole had hammered into them drill after drill. Within two hours, Ezza's technicians had the freighter rigged up to operate under its own power again, and she made the trip over.

Ezza reached out, grabbing the handhold to pull herself through the freighter's wrecked halls. They brought back distant memories of her childhood on the Vesta Archipelago before she was transferred to a learning institute on Earth. The yellow lighting flickered, trash floated around her, and the distant sound of damaged machinery filled the halls. "Can't blame the battle for any of this," she muttered.

"Sorry, Captain?" Adams asked, too cautious to move quickly in zero-g. The man was still a few rungs behind her, face red from frustration.

"Never mind," Ezza said. "Don't worry about it, Lieutenant." She grabbed the nearest handhold and gently flipped around to face backwards, waiting for him to catch up.

Adams drifted to a halt, grateful for the break. "If you don't mind me saying, ma'am, you look pretty disappointed for someone who pulled off a terrific victory."

"Terrific victory, eh?"

Adams wedged his leg behind one of the rungs to steady himself. “A full forty-five-degree telemetry shift at the velocity we were going, while simultaneously throwing up a mine cloud and deploying a full complement of missiles over the course of two days?” Adams illustrated the manoeuvres with his hands. “I’d have paid good money to have seen the look on the captain of this rust bucket’s face when we pulled that off. Yes, ma’am, I’d call that a terrific victory.”

“This was your first actual combat action, yes?”

“Yes, ma’am,” Adams replied proudly. “Stunts like that are why I couldn’t believe my luck when I got assigned to *Starknight*.”

Was I ever that green? Ezza wondered. The Siege of Valles Marineris, the Lunar Blockade, and the Martian Insurrection seemed so long ago, but then, her participation in those assignments hadn’t been while serving on a spaceship. “Overconfidence breeds complacency. This?” Ezza spread her arms and glanced around the dirty corridor. “This wasn’t anything glorious. Just a broken-down freighter.”

Adams shrugged but kept grinning. “Well, sure, but the Syndicate’s got bigger ships out there. It’s only a matter of time before we run into a real challenge.”

Ezza smiled and shook her head at the young man’s bravado. Before she could comment further, she was interrupted by the sound of muffled shouting.

“We’ve never carried anything illegal on this ship, technological or otherwise!”

The pair immediately pressed themselves against the wall

defensively. The shouts were joined by banging and crashing ahead of them. Ezza mentally pulled up the file on the freighter's layout. The grungy corridor led to the main common area, which then split off to the cargo hold, the command centre, and crew quarters.

"Our lawyers will have you crying like pigs when they're done with you!"

Soon a second voice joined the first. Though electronically modified by a marine's helmet and mask, it was still strong and commanding. "I need you to cooperate or I will take further action against you!"

From the hatch leading to the cargo hold, a marine shoved a struggling man into the corridor. The marine was decked out in grey power armour with the United Fleet insignia above her left breast. A helm and visor hid her features behind dark glass. The man wore beige civilian clothes, and despite having his hands bound behind his back, he was trying desperately to wrench them free from the marine's grasp.

"You bitch! There's nothing illegal about transporting hydroponics and cloning facilities!" the man yelled. He twisted around as far as he could and spat at the marine. Flecks of spittle landed harmlessly against her armour, while tiny globules drifted in the zero gravity.

"Do you have this under control, soldier?" Ezza asked as she sized the prisoner up.

Before the marine could reply, the man whirled around and glared at Ezza. Spotting the captain's bars on her shoulders, he hissed, "You! There won't be enough of you left to fill

a piss pot by the time our lawyers are done with you!” With one final yank, the man broke free from the marine. Pushing off the wall with his legs, he charged headfirst at Ezza.

The captain pulled herself to the side with the help of a nearby railing and reached out to grab him with her other hand. Using his own momentum, she drove the man into the wall, hard.

He hit the metal bulkhead with a groan and turned awkwardly, but with his hands tied behind him, there was little he could do. Blood floated away from a gash on his forehead.

The marine had her stunner drawn, but before she could fire, Ezza held out a hand. “Wait!” Keeping a hold on the man’s collar with a gloved hand, she forced him to look at her. “What’s your name?”

“What?” He squinted at her, trying not to get any of the floating blood in his eyes.

“Your name.”

“Bruce Arun.”

“Well, Mr. Arun, let me explain something to you. Combining legal threats with an assault against a United Fleet captain doesn’t tend to work. Next time, pick one and stick with it. Now, what do you mean by ‘hydroponics and cloning facilities?’”

The marine answered for him. “The cargo holds in the secondary hull have been completely retrofitted. The entire place is jam-packed with farming and cloning tanks.” After a beat, she hastily added, “Food-grade cloning.

Meat-processing facilities. Commander Gole said it was crammed so tight that his team could barely manoeuvre.”

Adams glanced in the direction of the cargo hold. A look of confusion crossed his face. “Why so much food?”

“Neither are illegal! It’s standard equipment!” Arun protested.

Ezza positioned the man so he’d have no choice but to look her in the eye. The realization dawned on her. “You were making a run, weren’t you? All that food-production material was for the trip to Epsilon Eridani, wasn’t it?”

Arun shook his head vigorously.

“Now why would a ship tagged to the Syndicate be trying to escape the solar system?”

Arun stayed silent, but Ezza pressed on. “Getting ‘refugees’ to Eridani is more along the Sympathizers’ modus operandi. You’re not secretly with them, are you?” At Arun’s stony-faced glare, she added, “You can tell me now, or you can tell an interrogator later. I’d just as soon spare you the stress and myself the paperwork, but I suppose it’s up to you.” Ezza could see the resolve drain from Arun’s face.

“We aren’t delusional like them,” he said. “The Syndicate isn’t what it used to be. Alexander Reuben’s control has slipped.”

His mention of the disfigured leader of the Syndicate piqued Ezza’s interest. “Really. What, did his people finally get sick of his anarchist rhetoric and decide to go back to being common criminals?”

Arun shook his head. “Don’t laugh. Reuben kept everyone

under control. You'd miss him if he falls. I know I don't want to be here when it happens."

Ezza reached into the pocket of her uniform and drew out a white handkerchief. She dabbed at the cut on his forehead, wiping away the blood. "Thank you for your time, Mr. Arun."

The marine took hold of the man again, leading him back through the garbage-strewn corridor towards the airlock.

Adams watched them go as Ezza straightened her gloves.

"A Syndicate ship trying to escape the solar system," Adams whistled, amazed. "Damn, I never thought I'd see it. Think there's anything to this?"

"I don't know." Any trip out of the solar system, Ezza knew, was one-way. Epsilon Eridani didn't have the infrastructure to support repairing and refuelling a spaceship. Neither of the colonies did. "Come on, I'd like to see these food-production facilities. I'm curious whether they ever stood a chance of making it."

Before the pair could push off towards the cargo hold, Ezza felt a subtle vibration in her subdermal implants. Concentrating, she activated the incoming call and set it to full audio. "Captain Jayens here," she said aloud.

"Captain, this is Rachele." There was an edge of worry in the cyborg's voice. Even Adams picked up on it, casting his gaze downwards.

"What's wrong, Rachele?"

"One of the prisoners has asked to meet with you ASAP?"

"So? Tell them no." Ezza prepared to push off in the direction of the cargo hold.

“He says he’s an Earth Security Service operative.”

Adams’s face went pale, and he gripped the ladder as if he could fall off despite the zero-g.

Ezza took a deep breath. “I see. Credentials?”

“They all check out, Captain,” Rachelle confirmed.

“Oh God,” Adams said. His knuckles had turned white from holding onto the railing so tightly. “If we’ve stumbled onto some ESS operation ...”

Ezza waved at him to shut up. “Fine. I’ll meet him in my office. What’s his name?”

“Brylan Ncube.”

Ezza didn’t recognize it. Whether that was a good thing or not remained to be seen. “We’re heading back to *Starknight* now.”

“Captain, do you need me to be ...?” It wasn’t like Rachelle to falter.

“No. I’ll deal with this *alone*.”

They made the trip back to *Starknight* in complete silence. Adams suddenly had nothing else to say, and Ezza was pre-occupied with how to contain the situation. The last thing she needed was ESS’s attention right now.

Her office was, like everything else on *Starknight*, small and functional. A metal desk pulled out from the wall, as did the visitor’s chair just an arm’s length away. With the ship still operating under zero-g conditions, harnesses hung from all surfaces to keep occupants from floating off. While other officers might have kept small mementoes or images of family vel-tacked to the walls for comfort, Ezza had nothing.

She busied herself with reviewing Gole's combat report until there was a muffled knock from the corridor, and after a moment, the heavy door folded open. Brylan Ncube was tall, fit, and relatively young, with a full head of smooth black curls. In his dusty beige jumpsuit, Brylan would have fit right in with the Syndicate crew were it not for his swaggering movements that oozed confidence and power. Zero-g did not slow him in the least.

Without waiting to be asked, Brylan pulled the visitor's chair down from the wall and buckled in. "Ezza Jayens. My word. You, mademoiselle, are still a legend." His tone and grin matched his swagger.

Ezza set down her padd, fastening it to the magnets in the tabletop. "I'm afraid I've never heard of you, Mr. Ncube. Please close the door behind you." She rested her hands on the desk.

"Ah, yes, well, I joined after you left. And please, Brylan will do." He reached out with a foot and nudged the door. It clanged loudly as it folded shut.

"What can I do for you, Brylan?" Ezza asked, determined to keep this professional.

Ignoring the question, Brylan gestured around him with his hands. "Your ship is quite nice. Sometimes I wish ESS had some actual military assets. Your people were very effective in taking down the Syndicate crew. I was impressed." His tone suddenly turned dark. "It was inconvenient for ESS, though."

"If ESS had informed the United Fleet about your operation, then *maybe* I could have accommodated you."

Still grinning, Brylan pointed at her hands. “Your gloves. Are you cold, mademoiselle?”

Ezza said nothing.

His grin vanished. “Or is it to hide the cybernetics? I’m sure your crew already knows you have an advanced suite, but perhaps someone might notice just *how* advanced.”

Ezza took a deep breath. “ESS never changes, does it? From the moment you floated in here, you were looking for weaknesses. You’ve sized up both me and my office. You’re looking for any psychological defects I may have. No pictures of friends or family? Ah, I must be lonely and desperate.” Ezza gave a thin smile. “My office door was closed when you arrived, therefore I’m cold and distant to my crew. I’m wearing gloves, thus I’m ashamed of my past. Allow me to give you some advice: Don’t rely too much on character profiling. It is not as accurate as one might hope.”

Brylan’s smile was back, but this time it was sheepish. Ezza didn’t buy it for a second. “I see you still remember your training,” he said.

“Believe me,” Ezza said, “you never forget it.”

Giving an exaggerated sigh, Brylan shrugged. “Okay, I’ll drop the act. It’s so much more difficult when the subject doesn’t instantly fear the Earth Security Service.”

The act, Ezza knew, never drops either. “The fear is something you’ve cultivated well.”

Brylan pointed at himself, and then at Ezza. “*We*,” he corrected. “Something *we* have cultivated well, mademoiselle.”

Esza wished he would stop calling her that but knew better than to show weakness by asking him to stop.

“You know,” Brylan continued, “I was serious when I said you are a legend. New recruits aspire to be as good as you. The United Fleet does not normally take kindly to people with nothing but state education and nearly a century and a half of classified nothingness on their record, yet here you are, a captain. I do not mind telling you that not everyone from the Athena Program has done so well.”

“Really,” Esza replied, feigning disinterest. She would have loved to hear how the others were doing but refused to be baited into asking. “You still haven’t gotten to the point, Brylan. What do you want?”

“You’ve seen the Syndicate ship.”

“Yes.”

“The focus on food production. I can tell you the engines and life-support systems are similarly prepped. You know what that means.”

“Yes.”

After a pause, he asked, “Well? Don’t you want to know why a Syndicate ship would be making a run for Epsilon Eridani?”

“What makes you think I don’t already know?” More than that, Esza wanted to ask what Arun meant when he said Alexander Reuben’s grip on the Syndicate was failing. ESS would surely know more than her about the organization’s inner workings.

Brylan studied her face. “Nah,” he said finally. “No,

mademoiselle, you don't know. Damn, though, you are good at the game. I can't tell you what a pleasure it is to go up against you."

"Against'? Why Operative, I thought the United Fleet and ESS were on the same side."

Brylan waved his hand dismissively. "Don't insult either of our intellects."

"Then what, exactly, can I do to help you, Brylan Ncube? You will note this is the third time I've had to ask."

"I need a lift back to Jupiter Station."

"*Starknight* is needed elsewhere."

Brylan tsked. "You'll be getting orders from the Ministry of Defence in a few hours to head to Jupiter Station. You might as well prep to change course now. Save some time."

Ezza leaned back in her chair. She didn't doubt the truth of his words. "All right."

"After that, well, we'll see what you can do for ESS again."

"After that, Brylan, *Starknight* and I will be back on patrol. As you've enjoyed reminding me, I left the service." Ezza almost said "the service didn't need me anymore," but she caught herself in time.

"Oh, mademoiselle. You and I both know nobody ever really leaves ESS."



The door to Cherny's apartment banged shut. The automatic lights snapped on to reveal the overflowing trash can,

crumpled clothes on the floor, and a stack of dishes on the counter. The Pull always started wonderfully, but the longer he delayed in his duty, the more it inched towards pain. Shoving aside last night's leftovers and empties from the comm unit—which he'd used as a placemat—he pressed his finger against its input pad and sat on the bed. Immediately, the unit lit up. Wiping the crumbs from the display, the call went out.

Transmission Open

Encrypting

Establishing Line to ESS—Earth Security Service HQ

Connecting

Connecting

Connecting

“Come on,” Cherny urged. His leg shook and he tapped his finger against the comm unit, as if that would make it work faster. The display flashed its repeating message again, and for a second, Cherny feared the worst—that there had been some sort of mistake and his loyalty chip had been reactivated by accident. His fears were quickly allayed as the unit flashed again.

Connection Established

Line Open

Silence. After a brief hesitation, Cherny opened his mouth. “H-hello?”

“Operative,” Her voice replied.

Cherny breathed a sigh of relief. It was rare for Her to speak aloud, but there was nothing more soothing. Or terrifying.

“I see you are still prospering,” She continued.

Cherny glanced around his apartment with the bad lighting, the dirty clothes, the peeling wallpaper, and the broken electronics. If he stretched out, he could touch opposite walls at the same time. He wondered if She was being literal. It would have been trivial for Her to spy on him here.

“I took a moment to process your file since you left the service,” She said, “though I have to admit, it did not take very long. Hired by the Hawaii Orbital Port Authority forty-nine years ago as a ship maintenance technician, and ... well, that’s about all there is, Cherny. Forty-nine years of nothing. Your social life is no better. I wonder if you still hold reservations about Sal.”

Cherny rested his head against the wall of his apartment. *Please don’t talk about her.* “I didn’t leave. You threw me away. Me and everyone else in the Athena Program,” he mumbled.

“An unfortunate situation,” She replied, sounding indifferent to his plight. “But that’s over now. You’re reinstated to the rank of operative.”

Cherny closed his eyes. It was like waking up from a nightmare. He tried to remember the mentality he used to have as an operative. The confidence, strength of will, and exactness would not come back easily to him. “Are you bringing the others back? Did you find Jenna?”

“Do not worry about that yet, dear Cherny. We need to get

you fixed up. Another operative is on her way for extraction. In one hour, there will be a car accident a few blocks north of your apartment complex. A glitch in the traffic controller will be responsible. The old you will be dead, and the new you will be on a flight to New York. The Tower awaits you. We will discuss matters during your trip.”

“Does that mean ...?” Cherny started to ask.

“Of course, Cherny. SecLink is ready when you are.”

Cherny licked his lips and pulled a cord out from the comm unit. Rolling up his left sleeve, he inserted the tip into a port on his inner arm. Immediately, the whole world opened up to him. Cybernetics that hadn't seen use in the past five decades had new life breathed into them. He immediately felt stronger and faster, and he heard whispers from across the globe.

An operative was filing a report on ship taggings in the spaceport.

Bugs placed within the capital building in nearby Honolulu were recording a private conversation between a GreyCorp executive and the regional governor.

Agents in the Southern Manitoba Regional Governorship discussed the latest laws banning emigration to the two extrasolar-system colonies.

The movements of tens of thousands of Suspicious Persons were open to him.

All of Earth Security Service's information was at his fingertips.

//It feels good, doesn't it?// Her voice was now directly in his mind. It was Her preferred method of communication.

Cherny wondered if feeling was something She could do anymore. //Yes,// he admitted.

Cherny stood up from his bed. His dingy apartment now seemed smaller than before. It also now seemed utterly irrelevant. There were billions of crappy, run-down apartments across Earth, and Cherny would never have to live in one again. //Promise me You won't let me go again.//

//I promise I will always do what's best for you,// She sent.
//You know you were always My favourite.//

WHAT WE AS A SOCIETY CAN LEARN FROM EPSILON ERIDANI

BY NIRALI KASHEM, IDEA

The latest transmission from Epsilon Eridani arrived yesterday, detailing all the challenges, dreams, and triumphs of our second extra-solar-system colony, and we wonder what we should be taking from this. For those who haven't had a chance to review the transmission, it is glowing—our colony is kicking ass!

Now, Governor Selezneva would have you believe that this is due to Earth's strong leadership, but longtime IDEA readers will know what silliness that is. The woman lives in the DC Fortress. She has about as much impact on Eridani as a butterfly flapping its wings.

No, Eridani is prospering for a very different reason: Earth *can't* control Eridani—the laws of physics are tougher than Earth's laws! It's a twenty-one-year round-trip delay before we hear the results of the Governor's proclamations. No wonder they aren't bothering to listen anymore!

That means they aren't bound by the same anti-technological bent of our illustrious government. Venus, Mars, Jupiter Station, Alpha Centauri, and Epsilon Eridani. We settled amazing places purely out of a sense of adventure and discovery. Now? Now we cower in fear of what technology can do to hurt us. Eridani won't be hampered by that.

Read on through this week's issue, true believers, and we'll explore how distance equates to unparalleled freedom, and how the Eridani Sympathizers may be doing more harm than good for our long-distance friends. Also, don't forget to donate for more articles like this!

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*I*t's amazing how quickly the old instincts come back, Cherny thought. Three hours ago, he was working as a labourer, and now he was on a first-class flight to Toronto. Gone was his sweaty, stained jumpsuit and the dirt beneath his fingernails. Now he wore an elegant dark grey suit, and for the first time in ages, he felt truly clean. He eased back into the synth-leather chair, a glass of red wine in his hand, as a thousand data threads passed through his mind. There was so much to catch up on.

A woman slept in the seat next to him, oblivious to his SecLink connection. Two virtual reality cables—power and data—ran between her arm and the armrest of her chair. Socialite? Business exec? Some high-ranking government bureaucrat? It took Cherny a moment to remember that he no longer had to guess such things. He glanced at her face, and SecLink had the answers within moments. Her

name was Kavitha Marcoccia, she lived in Toronto, and her schooling was online with GreyCorp, where she now worked. He knew with whom she last spoke, her favourite foods, her lovers, every VR experience she ever had, and more. He could know her entire life, if he desired it.

Cherny sipped his wine in satisfaction.

It felt good to be serving again. He wasn't sure if it was the loyalty chip or a natural reaction to missing his work. There was still something not quite right, though. He remembered SecLink perfectly. He often dreamt about it. But something was different. //Are You there?// he transmitted.

//Of course, Operative.// Her voice was in his head again.
//I always have time for you.//

//You're keeping something from me. I can't find any of the others from the Athena Program. Where's Jenna? Ezza? Siemar? There's no information on them anywhere.//

//In due time, Cherny.//

Cherny frowned, setting down his glass. //I'm no good to You without all the information. Please don't keep me in the dark.//

She didn't reply. Silence was always a bad sign from Her, and Cherny worried he'd pushed Her too far. With one snap of Her fingers, he'd be back at Tsiolkovsky Spaceport, suffering whatever abuse Minsk saw fit to dole out.

//The Ganymede Blitz, Cherny. Tell me, did you hear of it?// She finally asked.

From anyone else, it would have been a simple question, but Cherny knew nothing was ever simple with Her. Woven

into the fabric of the question was a second one: did you manage to stay well informed throughout your exile, or were you helpless without Me? //No,// he reluctantly admitted. He didn't need another reminder of how much he'd always needed Her.

//Then allow me to educate you with the short version. It took nearly forty years of concentrated investigation for us to insert three of our operatives within the top ranks of the Syndicate. It took another four to carefully manoeuvre ships and personnel into the Ganymede region without arousing suspicion.//

//Sounds like You could have used us.// Cherny regretted sending it the second he did, but luckily She ignored the comment. Gazing out the window, Cherny could see the western coast of North America passing beneath them. To anyone else on the craft, Cherny appeared calm and serene, but he felt neither of those things.

//It was going to be magnificent. The culmination of the largest project in the past century. We lured all the top names. Ellaria and the Analyst. Members from the Comptroller's Guild. We even managed to draw Alexander Reuben himself out. Daniel, Siemar, and Ghanshyam had played their parts perfectly.//

Cherny couldn't help but feel disappointed by all the excitement he'd missed out on. Hearing these names brought back memories of the best times of his life.

//But when it came time to close the trap, it all went wrong. I will leave you to review the details at your leisure,

but needless to say, every Syndicate leader assembled escaped unscathed, and Daniel and Ghanshyam are dead.//

Cherny jolted in his seat. The woman next to him snorted and glared at him through her VR haze. “Sorry,” he muttered.

//It gets worse, Operative,// She continued. //Sienar has defected to the Syndicate.//

Impossible, he thought instantly.

Though it was so long ago, Cherny remembered when he’d first met Sienar. He remembered the long helicopter ride and being packed in with twenty-nine other kids ranging from four to seven. Cherny had pressed his nose up against the frosted window to catch a glimpse of the snowed-out landing pad. He had been excited and scared as the educators led them through the underground facility to their dormitories. But then they’d separated him from the others. His room wasn’t with the others, they had said. Instead, they marched him to a special classroom. At first, Sienar was the only one there. He’d looked up from the toy plane he’d been playing with and handed Cherny the controller with a big smile. Sal had been added within the hour, and the three became instant friends. Over the following months and years, the remaining three had been added, and they were never separated again. Not until the Martian Insurrection, at least. There was no way that Sienar, of all people, would betray ESS. The man lived, breathed, and bled Earth Security Service.

Though She could not read his mind through SecLink, She must have sensed his doubt. //I am aware you and Sienar

were close. Closer than you were with Sal, perhaps.// The tone of Her transmission was cold and sterile, as if She only knew the concept of closeness in clinical terms.

//No. No, that's not a problem,// Cherny insisted. He knew what She was really asking. //My loyalty is to You, not them.//

//I never doubted you for an instant,// She replied.

Cherny let go of a breath he hadn't realized he'd been holding. //How do You know he turned?//

//The Syndicate was tipped off to our trap. Every soldier and ESS agent sent in was slaughtered. All assets were accounted for ... except for Sienar.//

//But, I ... That's not ...// Cherny stopped to collect himself. //Maybe he was killed. If he went rogue, you'd have reactivated his loyalty chip. The Athena Protocols would—//

//Oh my dear, sweet Cherny,// She transmitted with a sigh, //you always did see only the best in people—especially those you care about—but you should know better than to think I could ever be wrong about something like this. Stand by, Operative.//

Cherny raised his glass and caught the attendant's eye.

“One in the air is two on the ground, sir,” the attendant warned.

Cherny offered a weak smile. “I'll be fine.”

The attendant nodded slowly and obligingly refilled his glass before moving onward, leaving Cherny alone with Her.

A file passed through his mind. //When Sienar went missing, we investigated. There were concerns of capture, of

course, which I could not allow. You know I would do anything for My agents.//

What She meant was that She did not easily give up what was Hers, Cherny knew.

//We scoured his history. We found uncertainty in his past behaviour. Conversations with fellow operatives—seemingly innocuous, but now we understand he was seeking friends he could trust. Had he found any, I am sure he would have coerced them into defection as well. Data forensics from the over-watches revealed secret transmissions to unknown locations, logs rewritten to cover his tracks. In the wake of the failed blitz, the Syndicate became emboldened. My agents began hearing rumours of new sources of information within their ranks.//

It pained Cherny to think that his friend could ever do something like this. //Why? I mean, there must be theories on why he'd do this.//

//Perhaps he felt disenchanted with our methods,// She replied. //As threats to the government's stability grow, our escalation must always be proportional. Or perhaps he was never the man we thought he was.//

Or maybe ESS wasn't the same without us, Cherny mused. The six of them had played, lived, and worked together since they were children. The Martian Insurrection had shattered those who'd survived. He hadn't spoken to them since. Cherny doubted it would have taken Sienar forty-nine years to defect if he'd simply missed them, though.

//There is more,// She continued. //Jenna has murdered one of my operatives.//

The name made Cherny shift uncomfortably in his seat. // This is why You brought me back, // he realized. Sal was long dead. Taylor too, though he at least deserved it. Sienar and Jenna had betrayed the agency. That left only him and Ezza.

//In part, Operative. The failure of the Athena Six during the Martian Insurrection was a disaster, but a disaster I could deal with. Now another one of you is responsible for the greatest catastrophe in the history of the Earth Security Service, // She replied. //Letting the rest of you go free was too merciful of Me. I am recalling you and Ezza back to service. One way or another, Cherny, we are going to wipe clean all the mistakes of the Athena Program. //