

The station didn't have a name. The actual living space inside was relatively small and could fit two dozen people at most, comfortably. Its docking bays were big enough to handle space-faring ships. Its obsidian exterior bristled with top of the line, military-grade stealth technology from Terra.

At the top level of the station a man sat behind a desk. He had his feet up on the desk, wearing stylish if informal shoes, jeans, a plain blue t-shirt and a sport jacket. He had many names, but his current employers knew him only as Mr. Hastings.

A large bank of windows dominated the westward facing wall of the room. The northern and southern walls were lined with bookshelves that groaned with books. Bibliophilia was one of the few vices he allowed himself and the delight he felt at finding what appeared to be a first edition of one of Nietzsche's works still filled him.

He turned the book over in his hands, admiring its cover and feeling the weight and heft of it- and trying to fight down the mounting annoyance he felt at being kept waiting.

If you knew the right people- and his employers fell into the category- you could hitch a ride to Venus and transit through this station- far from the eyes of the Venusian Transit Authority and the other squabbling city states and micronations, this was the most secret point of entry on the entire planet.

Mr. Hastings couldn't wait to leave. Despite the obscene amounts of money he was being paid to arrange certain events for his employers, he despised this miserable bile-colored planet. A soft chime from across the room made him glance up and he let out an audible sigh of relief.

"Finally!" He tossed the book onto the desk and swung his feet down and stood, walking around the edge of the desk to lean on the front of it. The doors opened, he smiled at the sight of a nervous looking man being escorted into the room.

"Angus! Did you get the girl?"

The two guards flanking Angus halted a few feet in front of the desk and Angus halted with them, shifting uncomfortably. "We ran into a complication."

Mr. Hastings frowned. "What kind?"

Angus looked down. "She got away."

"That *is* a complication. What happened?"

"They... intercepted her."

"Abernathy's little cultists?"

"Yes."

Mr. Hastings began drumming his fingers on the desk. He had been impatient. Now he was angry.

"So, where is she, Angus?"

"We're not sure."

"You're not making me happy, Angus," Mr. Hastings said. "You lost the executioner's daughter in Lo Shen City and then the Assistant Director of the Malagasy Venusian Authority slipped through your fingers."

"She had help. We didn't anticipate it."

Mr. Hastings stood up and gestured to the guards, who grabbed Angus and dragged him to the center of the room. Mr. Hastings pressed a button on his wrist pad and two railings shot

up. Angus began to twist and writhe in the grip of the guards, fighting for every inch as they inexorably forced him between the railings and secured his wrists to each one.

"I'm paying you and your crew extremely well, Angus." Mr. Hastings walked up to him. "I expect better results than this."

"We can find her."

"Can you?"

"We will find her." Angus' face was pale. "We know where she was—"

Hastings pressed another button on his wrist pad and the panel of flooring Angus was standing on dropped open. He fell into the void with a scream of pain as the handcuffs began to cut into his wrists.

"You know what I love about this place?" Mr. Hastings smiled. "Those delightful crackles of electricity far, far below you, Angus? They weren't sure those were real. They called them the ashen light. Then for a while they thought they were just a trick."

"Please," Angus begged. "We know where she's going, she's going to Samundra City! We can—"

"Look down for me, Angus," Mr. Hastings ordered. "*Look.*"

Angus, his legs pinwheeling in the empty air lowered his gaze and both men stared down into the hellish void below. Electrical discharges crackled across the sky. The clouds swirled greyish-yellow bile. Death was below.

"If you fail me again, that is your fate," Mr. Hastings added. "So you're not going to fail me again, are you?"

Angus somehow shook his head, despite the pain in his wrists and the paralyzing fear of what was below him. Mr. Hastings gestured to the guards who stepped up the rails and lifted Angus as Mr. Hastings closed the panel on the floor again. He smiled thinly at Angus, sobbing with relief and pain. "I'm glad we understand each other."