

The dim light filtered through the window bringing with it the colors of the swirling gases of the giant planet dominating the view. I took another long drag off of my vaporstick. The light on the end of it brightened and reflected in the window as I felt the mist travel through my throat into my lungs while warming my chest. I held my breath for a second, allowing the various chemicals and medicines in the vapor to absorb in my body, then slowly exhaled.

*Galileo Station.* I thought staring out the window. *At one time there were barely enough people here to support the mining operations and now look at it. People are able to raise families and trade has flourished.* The station was located on the moon Callisto and acted as a nice waypoint for the trade and mining traffic with the inner moons and Jupiter itself.

*The problem with a population boom is that problems tend to arise all over the place. That's why I'm here. A private detective can make a lot of money on the frontier if they know what to do and I apparently do well enough. People bring me problems that the company security force won't or can't deal with. It's usually menial work, a dispute with a neighbor, cheating spouse, contracts gone bad and the like, but the people have come to depend on me like a sheriff. I liked that, it felt like I had a purpose again and sometimes is all that keeps me going. I'll admit there are still some days that I hate being in a behemoth of metal and glass on an ancient moon.* I inhaled deeply fixing my gaze on Jupiter. *But you sure can't beat the view.*

*The constant shifting and swirling of the gasses always mesmerized me. The undulations of oranges, reds and whites seemed to twirl and dance like a pair of lovers caught in an eternal ballet. The storms were a constant feature as the station was on the side of Callisto that always faced Jupiter, so they were always in sight, but yet always different. For some reason I found that comforting.*

"Incoming message," the computer intoned as the desk next to me suddenly lit up. I clicked a button on the side of my vaporstick, extinguishing the light on the end as I turned toward the desk. I walked over and placed my hand on the desk.

"Graydon speaking," I acknowledged the computer to answer the call. A holographic screen appeared above the glass surface of the desk revealing the face of an auburn-haired woman in a grey business jumpsuit. Her wrinkles of her forehead stood out in contrast to the deep set light-blue eyes that defied her age. I couldn't help but feel like she was staring through me and not at me.

"I thought you quit that years ago," she began motioning to the vaporstick in my left hand. "It's bad for your health you know."

"Old habits are hard to break," I responded slyly with a slight wink that caused her to shift uncomfortably in her seat and adjust her clothes. "Isn't that right Janice?"

"That was a long time ago Thaddeus, on a whole different world. Some things do change you know," she huffed trying to hide the fact she was blushing. I loved seeing her blush.

"And some things always stay the same. What is it you wanted?"

"Someone has been stealing supplies from one of the storage facilities. The security force is looking into it but..."

“The security force is a group of brain-dead ex-military mercenaries that couldn’t catch a cold if they fell out an airlock and you needed someone with real brains to look into it?”

“That’s one way to put it, but you are the closest thing we have to a sheriff on this outpost and in addition to your usual fee, I would consider it a personal favor,” she answered letting a slight smirk slip out.

“I’m a bit busy dealing with the other things the security force won’t deal with out here.” I took a seat at my desk, the holoscreen following me the whole way and sat the vaporstick down. “Couldn’t you just change the locks?”

“We have. Several times in fact,” she added tersely. “The current locks are state-of-the-art, with the best encryption the company can buy. They still keep getting in somehow. We have had at least nine separate break-ins and no camera or person has ever seen a thing.”

“Which storage facility was it?”

“No longer playing hard to get?” Her voice seemed slight disheartened by my acceptance. “We are growing old Thad.”

“Some things change,” I remarked. “Time is no longer an ally.”

“Indeed. It was the Jones Street facility sublevel 2, I’ll send you all the information we have so far, but I warn you it isn’t much. I’ve informed security that you’d be looking into it so they won’t shoot you on sight.”

“That was nice of you but how’d you know I’d accept the job?”

“Because you’re right, some things never change,” she smiled ending the conversation which caused my desk to turn off, leaving the room bathed in the light of Jupiter again. I turned my chair to face the window.

“She always did have to have the last word,” I thought aloud as I grabbed the vaporstick and reignited it.

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It was midday by the time I walked out of my office and onto the busy concourse of Main Street. It was filled with people going about their daily business, and while it was a little crowded, it wasn’t as crowded as it would be when the miners returned later in the day. All around me I could hear children playing and people making idle chatter as they walked to and from the marketplace across the street. I started walking towards Jones Street.

*I’m still amazed by the progress of this place. Five years ago it seemed like a ghost town under the dome. I thought dodging out the way of an errant ball. Now look at all the people. And it’s all thanks to the artificial weather controller on top of the JMC tower. I looked up at the building in the center of the small domed city that rose higher than any other building. If it wasn’t for that tower we’d never see rain, or have more than the dim light that made it through the tinted dome. Frankly, it worries me that this is basically a city run by a single company that can control the weather. Anything could happen based on the whims of fortune*

*and if someone presses the wrong switch we could all die.* I tried to put that thought out of my mind.

“Fancy a walk did ya Graydon?” a young man asked playfully as I passed by the corner of a building.

“It never hurts to walk instead of hitching a ride on the pneumo-tube,” I answered recognizing the voice as that of Jase, a young, but resourceful, man that I had used on more than one occasion to do jobs I didn’t feel right doing myself. It never hurts to know a few people willing to pull the wool over the eyes of security. The lanky young man, with dirty clothes and unkempt brown hair under a filthy baseball cap fell into step with me. “It’s funny I should run into you on the way to investigate a theft.”

“I didn’t do nothing. I’ve been out on the big moon drilling for minerals for three weeks. Just got back in and thought I’d see what my old pal Graydon was up to.” He was right, I knew he was gone and couldn’t have been the one stealing supplies. I always made sure I knew where he was.

“I can tell. You’re filthy and you stink. Why didn’t you shower when you got back?”

“And miss time spending my well earned money? Don’t you know me better than that?” He flashed a wad of cash at me then quickly put it back in his pocket. “So you got any work for me?”

“You could see what you can find out about missing supplies from Jones Street. I’ve got the official report, but it’s about as useless as a flashlight to a blind man. The stuff just seemed to disappear. I’m heading there now to see what I can find, but maybe you can dig something up?”

“Maybe I can, who’s to say? What was taken?”

“Bunch of random stuff from sublevel 2, I’m not really sure what any of it does.” I stopped and tapped my wristwatch, bringing up a holodisplay with the list.

“I ‘eard that sublevel 2 was mostly just old stuff stored for parts or waiting for the trash,” he started scrolling through the list. “That’s what this looks like to me. I’ll see what I can dig up. You paying the usual?”

“Don’t you think you have plenty of ‘well-earned money’ right now?”

“You can’t have enough,” he said with a chuckle and a dumb grin on his face.

“You know I’ll pay you if you find something. I’m not the criminal here.”

“Hey, hey, easy with the ‘c’ word there G-man, don’t want you to ruin my flawless reputation around here.”

“Flawless?” I couldn’t help but laugh and he joined in after he failed to maintain a straight face. “Just do what you can.”

“Sure thing, I’ll catch ya later,” he patted me on the back before he turned and walked away. I continued down the sidewalk.

*I really don’t think he’ll find anything, I thought approaching a crosswalk and thinking back to the files I had received earlier in the day. There doesn’t seem to be anything to find. The whole mess seems to be too perfect. There were no fingerprints found, no tool marks on any of the crates. No damage to anywhere on the walls, floors or ceiling. I honestly feel like I’m being lead on more than anything. The only way to pull a crime this perfect is to have the access code. But to do it nine times, and not be seen, that’s a trick I hadn’t seen before.*

I rounded the final corner and found myself at a large door with a sign over it that read ‘JMC Jones Street Storage.’ I pushed the door open and found myself confronted by nothingness.

*Well, this isn’t right. I walked into the building and took a look around. Where is everyone? I drew my gun while walking toward the elevator. It beeped and opened after confirming my identity as I approached. If there were this many thefts why are there no guards of any kind here? A dark room stretched out before me as soon as the doors opened.*

*Nothing in here but crates of junk, I thought stepping out of the elevator and glancing around the large room. And it stinks in here in more ways than one. I need a second set of eyes. I reached into my pocket and pulled out a small cone shaped device and activated it. It hovered in the air in front of me bringing up a holodisplay and I set it off to search for any organic material in the room. I know that smell, it smells like death in here. Somehow I don’t think Janice was giving me the whole truth. It smells like it’s coming from this direction. I walked toward where the smell seemed to be originating. I found myself near the wall. Nothing over here but more junk and a vent.*

The holodisplay on watch illuminated suddenly and I pressed a button displaying the sensor from the probe. *At least it’s had better luck than me. Looks like it found organic material, and lots of it. I can’t make out what it is though, the camera is too dark.* I made my way to the probes location after a few minutes and turned on the light on the barrel of my pistol.

“Well that would seem to be the reason why no one was there to meet me,” I spoke to the room as my flashlight illuminated the grizzly scene in front of me: the bodies of four guards arranged around an open container. *I don’t know what could a caused a scene like this but those bodies look like they have been ripped apart.* I walked over to one of the bodies and picked up a discarded pistol. *This has been fired recently, so that might explain the lights being out over here but maybe they hit whoever attacked them.* I retrieved the probe and looked around the scene once more. It wasn’t long before I found what I was looking for, a blood trail. *It must have been pretty wounded; it looks like it was dragging itself along.* I followed the trail as it wound around several crates like a creek of crimson and filth. *The smell is getting stronger, I must be getting close.*

"H...elp me," a raspy voice broke the silence ahead of me and I leveled my gun in its direction.

"Who's there?" I demanded, sweeping my light back and forth along the trail, trying to find the owner.

"I am," it responded raising a hand in the air such that I could see it above a crate to my left. The blood trail was leading me there. "Help me." I rounded the corner and had to stifle a gag as I saw the figure. It was man, or at least used to be a man, and was riddled with bullets, one of which had gone into his left eye socket. His right arm hung loosely from the shoulder and looked more like ground meat than human flesh. He was completely covered in blood, and I assumed not all of it was his.

"Who are you?" I prodded, pointing my gun squarely at the center of his head. I wasn't going to let him do to me what he did to the guards.

"Sands," he rasped, pausing for a moment before managing to struggle the word out. I couldn't tell if it was confusion or his impending demise that caused him to pause. "I'm a gas miner. I was at work. How did I get here?"

"I don't know. What is the last thing you remember?"

"The rain," he answered hoarsely. "I remember being in the rain."

"What rain?" I asked but no response ever came since the man slumped forward and stopped breathing. I looked around where he had been sitting and noticed an open storage container nearby and made my way too it.

*If I was a man that believed in coincidence, this would be a hell of one, I mused peering into the container with my light. It looks like the missing items were just garbage. Are those teeth marks? This guy was gnawing on metal? I released another probe to take pictures of the container and the two bloody messes. I should probably contact security to clean the mess. They should at least be able to handle that. I need to go speak with Janice, she's got some explaining to do.*

I made sure I was gone before security arrived. They don't like me on good days would have a field day finding me the only living person in a room full of death. I didn't have time to deal with them today. I watched from an alley across the street as 4 young men jumped out of a security transport and ran into the facility, followed by their middle-aged, barrel-chested sergeant moving at a far slower pace, slightly stumbling after missing a couple of stair.

*Richard is drunk as usual I see. I mused before turning and walking down the alley. I'll just have to assume they can handle clean up. Hopefully I'll be long gone before they find my ID in the elevator log. Central is only a couple of blocks, I should be there before they have any idea I was taking pictures in there. The alleyway was empty except for a few garbage bins I had*

to dodge as I made my way towards Adams Street. My watch beeped indicating a message before I had made out of the alley. It was Janice.

“Thaddeus, I just heard the call come out for security to report to Jones Street. I assume that was you,” the recorded message began, Janice’s normally angelic voice sounded desperate. “I’m sure that you have plenty of questions, and if I know you, you’re on your way to Central now to come barging into my office for answers. Don’t. If you go there you may end up in more trouble than I am for involving you to begin with. Meet me at Spark’s Diner at 5, I’ll explain everything. Just please don’t come to Central.” There was some commotion over the record before it cut off.

*Good idea or not, I’m definitely still going to Central. Something doesn’t sit right with me.* I thought making my way toward the big building.

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The shining reflective steel and white accents of Central stood out among the dull grey facades of the surrounding buildings as I approached. *They sure did want to make it stand out, I guess so that we know they control the whole area, regardless of what any government agency might say.* I thought observing the front of the large building from across the street. *There are an awful lot of security guards around that entrance today. Usually there is only one or two, I’m seeing at least 4, and they don’t look like fresh recruits. I know they aren’t looking to question me yet, I would have seen the security bulletin.*

I walked up to the building expecting the two guards flanking the door to stop me, but they allowed me to enter unabated. The doors opened to a large two story foyer, lined with two rows of large marble columns leading to the secretary’s desk set in front of a larger silver-painted column adorned with the Jovian Mining Company logo. Spiral staircases wound down from the second floor to either side of the desk. The young blond woman looked up at me as I approached.

“Haley, I need to see Janice,” I stated bluntly. I didn’t have the luxury of time. She pressed a series of keys on her desk. *This is all too convenient; maybe I should have listened to Janice.*

“She isn’t in,” she replied looking up from her holodisplay and giving me a look that sent daggers down my spine as if to tell me I shouldn’t be here either. “Can I take a message?”

“That won’t be necessary my dear. I believe I can provide all the answers the good detective needs,” a voice I didn’t recognize answered from atop the left most staircase. The man looked to be in his thirties and was wearing a standard issue business suit across his shoulders that seemed a little too tight. “If you’ll accompany me I’m sure you’ll get all the information you need.” Two security guards had joined him on the stairs, and the two from the front door had walked up behind me.

"It doesn't appear that you are going to give me a choice," I responded making my way to the staircase. I ascended slowly, never taking my eyes off of the man. I didn't like him. The walk "And who might you be?"

"Stephen Torian."

"Torian? As in Horatio Torian, the guy who owns the JMC?"

"That would be my father." His words hung in the air like an icicle after a winter storm as we made our way through the corridor to a meeting room. I took a seat directly across from Torian, made it feel more like I was the one doing the interrogation.

"Where is Janice?" I wasn't playing, and the tone of my voice indicated so.

"Direct. I like that. What I've heard about you, Mr. Grayson, is definitely true. Ms. Roberts is no longer in charge of Galileo Station."

"It's Graydon. Thaddeus Graydon. And I'm guessing you are in charge now?"

"Indeed."

"And she was removed because of nepotism or just because she contacted me?"

"Hardly, involving you in this current matter was but one of her many flaws that caused her demotion," Torian leaned back into his chair. "I'm sure you are well versed in her many indiscretions."

*I was one of them.* I thought before speaking. "Of course, but that's hardly unexpected on a cold lifeless rock. People seek to fill the boredom and we tend to overlook the little indiscretions. Now, what was going on in the storage facility?"

"That is nothing you need to concern yourself about. I really must apologize that you were even dragged into it."

"I don't need to concern myself that there was someone capable of ripping four guards to pieces hiding in a storage facility, and he was eating metal?" I interrogated, laying all of my cards down to see if Torian would bite.

"We have the matter under control I assure you." He leaned forward in his chair. "You needn't concern yourself with the actions of a gas miner. The JMC is investigating the cause of his madness fully. We do understand that you have been inconvenienced by the actions of our former head, so I'm willing to offer you a substantial payment just drop the matter." He pulled a folded piece of paper out of his pocket and handed it to me.

*That is a lot of zeroes, but does he really think he can bribe me?* I pondered peering at the paper after I opened it. *I wonder how far down the rabbit hole this goes. Janice knew this would happen if I took the job I bet.*

“Will you accept my offer?” He inquired, his face making the expression of a young boy trying to get out of trouble.

*It's now or never old man.* I thought standing up and making for the door. “If you know anything about me, it's that once I start something I finish it.” I ripped the paper in half and dropped it on the floor. Two of the guards moved to block my exit.

“I had hoped it wouldn't come to this,” Torian stated regretfully.

“Me too” I sighed as I pulled a long cylinder from my pocket. The guard directly to my left made for my hand, but was too late as I had all ready activated the sonic stun baton. Both of the guards in front of me fell to the ground screaming, and the glass table behind me shattered from the piercing noise. I looked back and saw Torian and the other two guards were holding their heads. I threw the baton on the floor and ran out the door; the alarm had begun to sound outside the room.

I hastily made my way toward the front of the building, pulling out my pistol and making sure it was set to fire stunning rounds only. I just wanted to get out, not kill anyone. I heard footsteps coming and flattened myself against the wall, taking aim down the hall. When the first guard was in my sight I fired, and the nonlethal round bounced off his chest momentarily before unwinding rapidly and electrifying the man, sending him to the ground. The next guard managed to fire of a shot that hit the wall beside me before suffering the same fate.

*That was close,* I thought looking at the bullet impact in the wall next to me before I made my way towards the two guards lying on the floor unconscious. *I'm guessing those were the other two guards from outside.* I rounded the corner weapon drawn and barely dodged a bullet that came from the top of the stairs. Two more followed rapidly as I dove to the wall, the second shot grazing my left arm. I leveled my weapon and fired hitting the man in the left shoulder and dropping him in spasms to the floor. *And that was a third. Too close old man.*

The alarm was nearly deafening as I reached the top of the stairs. Seeing no other guards in the lobby, descended the stairs as fast as I could and jumped behind the secretary's desk finding Haley hiding underneath it.

“Making quite a first impression for the new boss today Mr. Graydon?” Haley joked with a serious look on her face. “Didn't Janice tell you not to come here?”

“You know me; I never did take orders well. Can I use the back exit? I have a feeling the front is going to be a bit crowded soon,” I responded keeping an eye on the front door and seeing a transport screech to a stop on the street. Haley pressed a button under her desk opening a panel on the floor. “You're a doll.”



“Now just get out of here they’re coming up the stairs,” she scowled keeping an eye on the front door as I entered the tunnel. She closed it just as soon as I was on the other side. The tunnel was poorly lit and in a state of disrepair, but still provided me with a convenient exit.

*At least I got what I came for. I wonder what the miner would have encountered that would cause him to go mad or eat metal for that matter.* I pondered making my way down the long escape tunnel. *It seems like every time I find an answer it just brings up more questions.* I checked the time on my watch, it was nearly 5. *I should make my way to the diner, hopefully answers are waiting for me there.*

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*Busy as usual,* I thought approaching Spark’s Diner, its neon store front lighting up the street from over a block away. *Even during off hours it’s usually packed. I’d imagine that’s because it allows you to take your mind off of your cares. There’s something comforting about an old world diner on a space station millions of miles from home. The neon lights and savory smells conjure up images of family meals and good times and the music lets your mind drift away for a while. The foods pretty good too.*

I made my way to the door of the diner, scanning the people eating at the tables by the windows to see if Janice was among them. I opened the door allowing a family of four out before I entered. It was laid out in a typical diner fashion, a central bar with stools around it and the waitress’s area behind it with the cooking area beyond them, separated by a wall. The outer wall was lined with booths sat up against the windows, with a few in the back of the restaurant after the windows stopped. I noticed Janice immediately at one of the farther booths and made my way toward her.

“You went to Central didn’t you?” Janice asked rhetorically as I sat down.

“You knew I would, especially after you told me not to,” I responded, looking her over. She looked upset and frazzled. Her hair was usually kept in a tight bun, but now hung loosely on her shoulders. “You look like you’ve had a bad day.”

“You could say that, but it’s nothing that I didn’t expect.”

“You knew Torian was coming?”

“He’s been here for a while. They were just trying to find a good enough excuse to put him in charge. I knew getting you involved in this matter would probably be enough for them,” she remarked sorrowfully as a waitress came to our table leaving a pot of coffee and two cups. I nodded my thanks. “Did you find out anything interesting while you were there?”

“Just that the gas miner I saw in the storage facility contracted something while working on one of the atmospheric mining platforms. That and the fact that the guy was able to tear

apart four guards all the while eating metal are all I have to go on. Also that Torian has a bad poker face and was willing to bribe me to keep me from looking into it.”

“Which just made you more curious of course, did you accept the bribe?”

“You know I didn’t.”

“Of course not. I bet he didn’t take that too well.”

“You tell me,” I responded, showing her my shoulder where the bullet grazed me. I removed the makeshift bandage I had made from a handkerchief and revealed the still fresh wound.

“Oh my,” she gasped, covering her mouth and nearly knocking over her coffee. She examined the wound for a moment before she spoke again. “I take it you had to fight your way out of Central?”

“Used a sonic baton on Torian and his guards, and then stunned three more guards before heading out the passage.” I put the bandage back on it and then took a sip of my coffee. We sat there silent for a moment just staring at each other. “What is really going on? Why did you need my help?”

“I would think it is obvious by now that we needed help trying to figure out what is causing this madness. The guy in the storage facility isn’t the first he’s just the first they managed to bring back. They were trying to remove him from the storage container before you got there.”

“Well that would explain they why the guards were there, but what about the thefts?”

“I knew they were going to move him, and contents of the crate. I figured it was a good excuse to get you involved and that I could frame it in such a way that an old hound dog like you couldn’t resist,” Janice flashed a smile when she said that last part.

“When it comes to you there isn’t much I can resist,” I smiled back at her. “But if you had told me the truth I would have still helped.”

“I know, but I was afraid that security or Torian might get wind sooner if I was straight forward and attempt to stop you sooner. It was the only way I thought I could keep them guessing for a while. They are blissfully clueless most of the time.”

“Apparently so much so that they it got four of them killed.”

“They probably didn’t know he was that dangerous, most of this has been kept very secret. Torian came as soon as I mentioned it to the home office and started covering it up. Unsurprisingly the families of the miners that were put down because of the madness were paid to keep quiet and threatened with various hardships should they speak out.”

“Just how many miners have experienced this?”

“I don’t know the exact number, but it’s got to be approaching twenty at this point. All of them worked on the *Aphelion* deep atmospheric mining ship, based off of platform 4. I assume they contracted it while working, but have no proof. Torian tried to keep me from investigating it myself which is why I had to find a way to get you to help.” *Only one ship has ever had an incident, that seems a bit strange.*

“It looks like we need to head to the *Aphelion* then,” I concluded before taking a drink of my coffee.

“How? I doubt either of us could rent or hire a transport now,” she questioned after taking a drink of her own coffee.

“I’m sure I can find a way,” I told her, pulling up the messaging system on my watch and sent a message to Jase. I caught a flicker of movement out of the corner of my eye and locked my gaze toward the outside of the diner.

“What’s going on?” she asked, concern growing in her voice as my expression changed.

“Trouble, just keep your head down,” I answered motioning with my hands for her to duck down. I returned my gaze outside and watched as a security patrol vehicle pulled up and dropped off the barrel chested sergeant from before. “Oh great, it’s Kerns.”

“I doubt he’s forgiven you for the ass kicking you gave him last time you saw him,” Janice commented ducking in the booth. The brutish sergeant made his way to the door and opened it with some force before walking through.

“Graydon! I know you’re in here!” he yelled from the front of the restaurant. “Why do you keep sticking your nose in my business? I know you were at Jones Street before I was and I know you’re here, I tracked your ID.”

“I thought you’d be busy examining the bottom of a bottle Richard. I figured I would save you the trip,” I dryly responded standing up from the booth and walking toward the front. All eyes in the diner were looking at the scene unfolding and several parents were trying to hide their children’s faces. *Looks like he might not know about Central yet. Probably a good thing otherwise he’d have brought the rest of his goons.*

“And you still found a way to ruin my day.” He continued walking toward me, doing his best to intimidate me but still staggering a bit from drinking early in the day. He still smelled like he was drunk too. “Are we going to do this the easy way or the hard way?” We met just around the corner of the central bar, neither of us taking our eyes off the other. Time seemed to stand still while both of us stood there sizing the other up. Suddenly his communicator beeped and a holographic screen appeared in front of his face, distracting him momentarily. I could see

what was on the screen before he even spoke: A detailed report of my actions at Central. “Well what do we have...”

I didn't give him time to finish his statement before doubling him over with a quick kick to the gut and grabbing a nearby coffee pot and slamming it into the back of his head when he bent over. He staggered back a step and I connected with a stiff left uppercut to his jaw. He fell to the floor with a thud. There were several gasps from the patrons of the diner.

“Was that really necessary?” Janice asked standing up and walking to where I was standing.

“I wish it wasn't, his jaw is like hitting a brick wall,” I commented opening and closing my hand to try and relieve some of the pain. “We need to get out of here, he had just gotten the report about what I did in Central, and I'd imagine that the rest of security is probably on their way here now.”

“He's going to want to kill you when he wakes up.”

“I'm pretty sure he already did anyway. I know a place we can go and sort this out.” I grabbed her hand and we both ran out the door. *I just hope he's home.*

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The street lamps around us ignited as intense light of the artificial sun at the top of Central dimmed while Janice and I made our way through the streets. Their dim illumination casted shadows all around but was often overtaken by the light escaping Jupiter which dominated the now visible starscape even more than it did during the day. We rounded a corner and Janice stopped dead in her tracks, nearly pulling me down as I had kept walking.

“We're going to the slums?” She asked hesitantly looking down the darkened nearly deserted façade in front of us.

“We'll be safer here than we will be anywhere else on the station,” I assured her pointing down the street. “You're with me and you know I won't let anything happen to you.” She faked a smile and gripped my hand tighter as we continued walking down the street.

*Every city has its slums and Galileo Station was no exception.* I thought while Janice followed close behind me as we made our way down the shadowy street. *I'm sure most on Earth would consider many of the habitation buildings on the station slums, but those on Clark Avenue are the worst. It was here that anyone would come to visit with prostitutes or purchase various mind-altering drugs to make the time pass faster. It was a despicable place with a dingy grey front that looked even more run down than most of the buildings around it. It was also where Jase choose to live.* We arrived at the building at the end of the street and I pressed the buzzer to Jase's apartment.

“Who do you know that lives here?” Janice asked as she sat down on a bench by the buzzer wall. “Seems kind of seedy for the type of people you usually associate with.”

“It’s good to have a few sources in the seedier element you’ll find,” I answered pressing the buzzer again. “His name is Jase Chapman. He lives a bit on the wild side, but he’s never let me down. Hopefully he’ll be able to find us a transport to the *Aphelion* too.”

“It doesn’t seem like he’s at home.”

“He’s probably up there, just doesn’t want to answer the buzzer. We’ll just go wait for him in his place, I have a key,” I replied and motioned for her to follow me and opened the door to the inside of the block.

“You’d think they could clean up a little bit, this place is disgusting,” she commented as we made our way through the dirty hallway to the stairs. “Why isn’t this place kept up? Doesn’t the JMC pay for the maintenance on all the habitation blocks?”

“I suspect the crews don’t want to be associated with this place considering the amount of crime that goes on here. There is more here than what you see I think. This dilapidation is deliberate.”

“You mean these people choose to live like this?”

“It keeps away the unwanted people and lets them do basically whatever they want.” We ascended the stairs and finally reached the door to the apartment. I pulled out a small cylinder from the inside of my jacket and placed it on the door lock pressing the button on the end of it to activate it. After a few seconds of beeping and whirring the door locked clicked open and I opened the door after putting the device back in my pocket.

“I thought you said you had the key,” Janice joked walking passed me and into the apartment. The expression on her faced changed almost instantly to one of confusion once she was through the door. I smiled as she looked back at me from the center of an immaculately clean room with what looked to be very taken care of furniture. “What the hell?”

“I told you they mostly just want the place to look like a dump on the outside. In here they do whatever they want,” I explained walking in behind her and locking the door again. “Jase may be a dirty miner with a penchant for breaking the rules, but he also enjoys a clean house as much as the next man.”

“Ain’t that the truth,” Jase agreed walking from the hallway that lead to the bedroom wearing nothing but a pair of shorts and toweling his hair dry. “I see you let yourself in and who is this lovely woman with you?”

“Jase, meet Janice Roberts.”

“As in head of the station Janice Roberts?” He asked with sly look in his eyes right as he pulled a shirt over his head.

“Former head of the station,” she corrected matter-of-factly as she walked over and shook his hand. “Nice to meet you.”

“You ‘iding her from someone? That why you need to get off the station?” He pointed at her as he talked.

“Not exactly, it’s more about what happened at Jones Street.”

“Yeah, about that, I didn’t find anything about any thefts, but apparently they just dropped off a new crate from platform 4. The rumor what is had a miner that died in an accident in it. I’ve been hearing all about things going on at P4 but no one seems willing to talk about it.”

“The miner was alive when he was put in the crate,” Janice added. “He was stark raving mad but alive.”

“Wait just a minute here, what the hell is goin’ on?” Jase sounded exasperated.

I walked over to his table and touched it with my left hand, allowing the images from my watch computer to download to his table unit. With a couple of presses several small holoscreens appeared above the table, each with a different image I had taken at the storage facility. Jase examined each closely.

“I know that guy,” he said pointing to the picture of the mad man’s body.

“He said his name was Sands,” I added trying to jog his memory.

“Yeah, Mike Sands, that’s it. He was a regular over at *Shiners*. Looks like they shot him up pretty good, and you say he did this to the guards?”

“It appears that way. From what I can tell they were going to try and figure out what was causing his madness, but he attacked them when they opened the crate he was in and he killed all the guards, but they managed to kill him,” I explained as Janice had walked over to examine the images as well.

“Are those teeth marks on those pieces of scrap metal?” she asked enlarging one of the photos. “I don’t think human jaws are capable of taking bites out of steel.”

“He didn’t,” Jase responded looking closely at the picture. He pointed at the rim of the bite mark. “That looks like the corrosion you’d see when you don’ clean your tools after you have been mining. It happened to me before, when I didn’t clean the icemelt off my drill head. My foreman was pissed.”

“So the metal was dissolved? Was anything like that found any other time this happened?” I asked looking toward Janice.

“I don’t remember seeing anything about it,” she shrugged. “Come to think of it I don’t remember any mention of increased strength or anything with the other cases. Usually they just ended up restrained on a medbed eventually died. They would flail around a lot but I don’t think the restraints would have lasted long if they were able to do that.” She pointed to one of the guard who looked to have had both of his arms ripped off.

“He looks like he was exposed to the atmosphere too. That’s a nasty thing to have happen to someone,” Jase, who had been examining the picture of Sands. “He doesn’t look as bad, some of them end up getting most of their skin eaten off. Really disgusting way to go.”

*I hadn’t considered that option maybe it was something in the atmosphere that was causing it. They were gas miners after all and chemicals can do all kinds of things to your body. There are even drugs that can increase your strength. I realized after thinking about it momentarily. The answers probably died with the body unless....* “Did anyone ever autopsy the miners after they died?” I inquired breaking my thought.

“I would imagine so, but if so, the records are on the ship or the mining platform. They were never sent back to Central, at least to my knowledge. I don’t know what all Torian suppressed or didn’t after he got here,” Janice answered dejectedly.

“Any luck with that Jase?” I looked at Jase, who was smiling his devious smile. I wasn’t sure if I should be impressed or frightened.

“I found a way, but I’m not sure how well you are going to like it.”

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*Darkness has a way of playing with your mind. Making you feel as if nothing else exists around you, that you are alone in the universe with no friends, no enemies. It also brings with it a feeling of foreboding that the darkness will never end causing time to crawl as you lay hoping for a glimmer of light. This must be what it feels like to be dead, a sense of nothingness. I thought reaching out into the darkness of my surroundings and my hand brushed across and soft and warm object that seemed to jump at my touch.*

“I really don’t think this is the time or place for that,” Janice whispered pulling my hand off of her thigh. “I hope your man does know what he’s doing. You trust him right?”

“No, but I know he’ll get the job done for money and won’t give us to security,” I responded shifting my position slightly to try and get more comfortable in the small shipping container. “I just wish he would hurry up. I think I’m starting to go crazy in here.”

“If someone had told me a month ago that I would end up stuck in a shipping crate with you while running from security after losing my job while trusting my life to a lowlife con artist

miner as he wheels us to a cargo barge heading to a mining platform so we can investigate a mysterious illness I would have thought they were crazy.” She spoke without taking a breath and at a volume louder than a whisper, but not nearly her normal voice.

“Still glad you contacted me this morning?”

“Of course I am. Current surrounding aside, we are at least closer to finding an answer than I have been since this whole mess started a month ago.” We left it at that for a while, sitting in the dark crate waiting for light. After a few minutes we heard some noise from the outside and felt the container move and stop suddenly a few minutes later followed by an extremely bright light as the lid was opened.

“Ready to come of your box, or do you want to ride in there all the way to the platform?” Jase asked playfully reaching into the crate and pulling Janice to her feet and helping her out of the crate. I stood up on my own and climbed out

“Welcome to the *Pack Mule*,” a fatter older man welcomed Janice and I as we made our way out of the cargo area and into the cab of the ship. “I’m the captain, Santiago Vega is the name.”

“Really, a cargo barge named the *Pack Mule*?” I inquired incredulously.

“Yes, I named her myself. What of it?” the captain answered. I looked to Janice for an answer.

“We told the captains they could name their ships whatever they wanted since we have the registration number on file anyway,” she explained as the captain gestured for us to take seats near where his pilot seat was.

“Some were more creative than others I’d imagine.” I commented taking the indicated seat. The cab of the barge was a fairly small box shape with four huge engines around it, with several large cargo compartments attached to the back. The inside of the cab had seats for four people behind that of the pilot all with a decent view outside. Vega took his seat after the three of us were settled and began starting the launch sequence.

“We just got launch clearance, so hold on. She’s not a spry as she used to be,” he stated gleefully starting the engines which started despite the sounds of hissing and a couple loud thuds in protest. I felt the ship lurch upward and forward as it lifted off and made its way gracefully, if loudly, toward the opening airlock doors. Once the last of the cargo containers were safely out of the station, Vega pushed the engines to full power and we shot off for a slingshot orbit around the moon. “Hold on, we’re running a bit heavy today, going to have to do a couple of orbits to pick up speed.”

*The station looks so small from out here, I thought looking at it slowly fade from my sight as we orbited Callisto. It’s like a shiny metallic pebble in a sea of regolith and craters, and obvious blemish, even against the pockmarked landscape. Sometimes I think we forget the*



*beauty of space now that we travel it so frequently.* We rocketed around the moon a couple of times before Vega pulled up and sent us off toward Jupiter and Platform 4.

“How long does it take to get to P4?” I asked watching Callisto shrink behind us.

“In a normal transport it takes about an hour,” Jase answered having made the trip several times. “In this thing it’ll probably be closer to 2 or 3. These things are snails in space.”

“Aye,” agreed Vega with a tone of pride. “But she’ll get you where you’re going just fine.” The trip went smoothly as we all sat and watched as the giant in front of us slowly grew even bigger. It didn’t take long before we could only see a couple of bands of warring storms of the giant and even that gave way to a single color within a few minutes.

“There’s the platform,” Jase pointed out as the reflection of light glinting off the surface of the platform were just coming into view.

*I wonder how much gas these platforms collect. Each one is shaped like a top, and stuck in an endless loop around the planet slowly siphoning in what gas it can from a long funnel that disappears into the atmosphere. I’d heard rumors about some of the illegal activities that happened out here so far away from the station, but as long as they didn’t bring them back home with them, they were usually ignored.*

“It looks like there is a ship docked dropping off a load of materials,” Janice remarked as the vague outline grew in size. “I wonder if that is the *Aphelion*.”

“I don’t think so it’s not due to make a drop off for a few hours. What do you need on there if I may ask?” Vega inquired pushing in a sequence of commands that started the docking process for the barge.

“Investigating some thefts,” I answered quickly, but not quickly enough to seem suspicious. “I figure the thief is out here and was going to look for him.”

“And that’s why my buddy and I had to smuggle you to the landing area? I don’t buy...” Vega never got to finish as Jase reached over and hit him with a stun baton, knocking him unconscious.

“Was that really necessary?” Janine yelled as I jumped up and helped Jase move Vega to another chair so Jase could take over the piloting seat.

“If he found out who we were, he’d probably call security to come meet us. I’d like a few minutes to investigate before we have to run from them again. I don’t know how far we could run out here anyway. He’ll be fine in a few hours,” I reassured her after seeing the look of concern on her face deepen. “I don’t like it any more than you do.” The barge had slowed and Jase began the docking procedure and after a few minutes the ship stopped moving with a hiss as the docking ring a voice came over the communicator.

"*Pack Mule*, we'll send out drones to get the cargo and you're welcome to come aboard while we unload. Welcome to Platform 4," the voice welcomed us. I motioned for the others to follow me and we made our way out of the cab and down the corridor of the docking arm and into the open common area of Platform 4.

*It certainly is a bustling little place all its own.* I thought looking around the interior of the platform. *A few shops, a couple restaurant, it looked almost like a mall that only exists for the purposes of the miners that work here. I guess that makes sense as some of these guys stay out here for months at a time. People were laughing and carrying on like we weren't in the middle of space far away from the closest civilization.*

"It's not quite what I expected," started Janice as we made our way farther in to the center of the platform. "I expected it'd be all serious like a worksite. This seems almost homely."

"You keep these people out here, some for months at a time, and don't expect them to form small communities?" I asked rhetorically taking in the sights around me. *It is amazing that people choose to live like this even when fairly close to Galileo Station.*

"So where do we go first?" Jase inquired walking up to a directory on the wall. "The infirmary?"

"Probably the best place to start," Janice agreed, still taking in the surroundings.

"One of us should stay out here and keep an eye out for the *Aphelion* or any security guards," I mentioned looking at Jase who nodded.

"Yeah, I'll do it. There's plenty to do around here and I'm probably better at spotting trouble anyway," he responded rubbing his hands together excitedly. "You go do your investigation and I'll let you know when our ship comes in." He pointed us towards the infirmary and walked off the other way. We made our way to the infirmary fairly quickly as it was just around the next corner.

"Let me do the talking," Janice told me as we were about to walk into the infirmary. "I'd imagine they will be more likely to give the records to me since I'm still technically employed by the JMC."

"As opposed to a grizzled old detective like me? I get it," I responded trying to lighten the mood. We continued into the waiting room of the infirmary and up to the dark-haired nurse setting at the desk.

"Lucy? When did they move you out here?" Janice asked the nurse who looked up in surprise.

“Janice? What are you doing out here? It’s been forever since I last saw you,” she exclaimed jumping up and giving Janice a hug with a smile on her face. “I’ve been out here about a month, ever since the last nurse was let go.”

“I bet that’s been a fun time, treating miners on a tiny bit of metal,” Janice smiled back.

“Fun isn’t exactly the why I would put it, but it does get quite interesting,” she joked pulling away from the hug. “What are you doing out here? I never pictured you the type to come visit the platforms.”

“Just dropping by to look at some of your medical records,” Janice answered still smiling. “Some of the ones we have a central are incomplete, and I decided I’d just come out and fix the problem myself. Felt like I needed a bit of a break from the station.”

“I can understand that, the records room is right over there.” She pointed to a small side room with a large table and rows of shelves lined with storage drives. “Should you need any help just let me know.”

“I will thanks,” Janice responded and we made our way into the records room. Once we were in she shut the door and sighed leaning up against it. “If we get found out she’s probably going to lose her job.”

“That’s one of the dangers of having to sneak around to find answers. Sometimes you end hurting people trying to find the truth, but in the end it’s worth it,” I assured her. “You did well and hopefully we can find something in here.” She simply nodded and walked toward the table and took a seat while pressing a sequence on the surface to bring it to life. I watched as her fingers glided over the surface of the desk and bring up record after record.

“Well, this is interesting,” she started closely examining a record. I walked over to her and pulled up a second copy of the holoscreen she was looking at. “It looks like there were no autopsy records for those any of the miners. They were all cremated upon their return to the platform.”

“Maybe not all of them were what if there was a patient zero, someone who contracted it before they knew what it was?” I asked skimming through the records with her.

“What about this guy? The record says he died while working on the Aphelion while it was mining deep in the atmosphere from exposure. The autopsy revealed his teeth had been worn down and his mouth was full of partially dissolved steel.”

“Well that certainly sounds like it’s related,” I commented scanning the files myself.

“It doesn’t seem like we will find anything...” Janice started but trailed off as she opened another file. “Why would they need this much medical equipment on a mining ship?” I walked over and looked at the list she was examining.

“With this many medical supplies they could run a hospital on that ship, but I don’t know how that would be possible,” I commented when suddenly my watch beeped with a message from Jase. “Jase says the ship just docked, I think it’s time we find out what is on that ship.” With a press on the table all the holoscreens disappeared and we made for the door and left the now empty infirmary.

*Where did the nurse go?* I thought as we walked toward main area of the platform. I heard a scream from outside and drew my gun, making sure it was set to fire regular rounds.

“Graydon!” Jase yelled running down the corridor toward us. “They have another one they just dropped off from the *Aphelion*.”

“What do you mean?” I asked but my question was answered as I stepped from around the corner and saw what Jase was running from. Behind him was what I could only assume was once a miner, but now looked like a crazed brawler. Its eyes were wide open and its’ teeth were bared in an ungodly scream as it ran toward after him. It moved with an unnatural gait and superhuman speed and before I was able to level my gun to fire it had already caught up with Jase.

“Get down!” I yelled before firing several shots, narrowly missing Jase as he fell to the ground, but hitting the crazed creature in the chest. It didn’t stop charging and stepped on Jase’s back as it ran toward me, colliding using its full force and knocking me back into Janice. The momentum sent us both flying into the wall behind us as if we had been hit by a truck.

“Over here ugly!” I heard Jase yell from behind the creature as a chair slammed into its back. It turned and started toward the now limping Jase. I barely had time to think as I struggled into a sitting position and pressed the button on the side of my gun and fired a stun round into its back. The bullet transformed after hitting the creature and the electric tendrils wrapped around it causing the former miner to howl in pain as the electricity coursed through its body. It turned after a moment and started for me again.

“I had hoped to never need to use one of these,” I muttered pressing the button on my gun again and changing the bullet type from stun to explosive. I fired the shot into the creature’s right eye, causing it to stagger momentarily trying to dislodge the bullet. Seemingly an eternity later it exploded, sending the destroyed flesh of the top of the creature’s head flying all over the corridor, covering myself and Janice, who lay unconscious on the floor behind me. A wisp of multicolored gas escaped from the open wound and was quickly sucked into the vent. I stood up and looked down the hallway at Jase, who was limping but seemed fine despite the mess around him. It was just then a gunshot rang out and he started flailing around as electricity from a stun round shocked him.

“Very impressive Mr. Graydon,” began Stephen Torian as he walked from the airlock. “But I’m afraid your investigation ends here.”

“What makes you so sure?” I asked leveling my gun at him.

“Her,” he pointed behind me and I turned, but immediately found myself being injected with something by the nurse from the infirmary that Janice had called Lucy. Then all I remembered was blackness.

*Where am I?* I thought slowly coming back to my senses. When my eyes managed to focus again I could see it was in some kind of large metal room and I was handcuffed to a chair. There was a metal table in front of me and a large window behind it.

“Ah, Mr. Graydon, I’m glad to see you are awake,” Torian said as he walked into the room.

“Where the hell am I?” I asked sluggishly. Whatever they had drugged me was strong.

“On the *Aphelion*, just like you wanted to be,” he answered like he was doing me a favor. “You’re about to see a wonderful show.”

“Where is Janice?”

“Both of your companions are safe, at least for the moment, though I don’t know about how long,” he responded pointing to the window. I sat up and looked out the window on to a large storage tank that looked like it had been converted to a hospital. Two rows of nearly side by side beds running all the way through the room beyond. Janice was in the closest bed, struggling against restraints as someone in a protective suit stood near her tightened them. Jase was in the bed across the room from her. The metal walls near both began to rise. “Here we go!”

“What are you doing? You’ll kill them!”

“I’m showing you what you were so desperate to uncover. Look! Look at the neon rain of Jupiter!” I saw what he was pointing too. Through the raising wall I could see winds raging against the protective field and along it what looked like bright red rain.

“The rain? The man in the storage facility said something about rain.”

“That was probably the last thing he saw before it infected his mind.”

“Before what infected his mind?”

“It’s some kind of microbe or something. I don’t know the specifics, but it lives in the rain and when it gets in any creature it drives them completely mad. First we thought it was just some weird thing and wrote it off, but then one day, one of the infected men began gnawing on a piece of steel and the microbe was causing his saliva to dissolve it. It was a beautiful thing to behold! It increased the man’s strength ten-fold. We nearly had to destroy the ship before we managed to sedate and lock him in a shipping container. It was then we realized that if we could control it, we could sell it as a potent drug. We’d found Dr. Jekyll’s potion..” The wall was

almost completely open now and the forcefield was struggling to keep the gasses of the atmosphere out.

“And all it cost you was the lives of some gas miners and some hush money.”

“Exactly. Think of it, we could sell it all over the place. The military will want it, criminals will want it. We’ll make billions. You could have seen a nice profit for looking the other way you know.”

“You’re despicable. You don’t care about the lives you’ve ruined or the consequences of your actions. All you care about is making a profit. You’re even willing to sacrifice one of your most loyal employees.”

“She could never see passed the people so now all I need to worry about is the profits.”

“That makes her a better person that you’ll ever be.”

“Perhaps, but soon she’ll be infected and I can shoot you both into space together,” he responded and I started laughing as I was finally able to feel my hands again and realized he had handcuffed me with my own handcuffs. I pressed the release button that was coded to my dna and they opened without an issue. “What’s so funny?”

“You used my own handcuffs?” I laughed coming to my feet and showing him the now open handcuffs. He made a movement toward me but I had grabbed the chair and threw it at him, catching him in the side of the head before it slammed into the window behind him, causing the window to crack. He fell to the floor but by the time I got around the table lunged for me from the floor. He dug his shoulder into my stomach and drove me into the back wall of the little observation room. I put both of my hands together and slammed them as hard as I could into the middle of his back causing him to stagger for a moment, allowing me to knee him in the face.

“You will not ruin this for me old man!” He yelled as he backed off for a moment to gather himself. I pressed the attack and took a swing at his head, but found nothing but air as he dodged to the side and swung wildly for my head. His blow connected with my left shoulder but allowed me some momentum with an uppercut from my left arm that knocked him against the window. I charged for him and grabbed him as we both went sailing through the window and fell to the floor of the chamber beyond. I rolled off of him onto the broken glass of the window before starting to stand again.

“Thaddeus! The fields are about to collapse!” Janice yelled from the closest bed to me causing me to look toward the sides of the chamber. Torain took this moment to try and lunge for me again with a broken piece of glass and managed to cut into my right shoulder as I attempted to get out of the way.

“Torian, you might want to close the doors, or we’re all going to end up infected!” I yelled at him as he staggered passed me.

“I’d rather die with you than let you have a chance to ruin all of this!” He ran at me with the glass shard again in a rage, but I was easily able to dodge his attack and kicked him in the back after he passed me sending him flying headfirst into the corner of the bed Janice was restrained in, knocking him out cold.

“You might want to do something about these doors Graydon!” I heard Jase yell from his bed. “I don’t think these fields are going to last much longer, and I don’t want to be here when the atmosphere comes in.”

“I’m not sure how to close them!” I yelled as I surveyed the room and saw the person in the protective suit at the other end of the chamber heading toward a console built into the wall.

“I’ve got it!” Lucy yelled pulling the top of her protective suit off and revealing her face. She reached the console at the end and pressed a sequence of keys causing the doors to slam shut one at a time. Unfortunately for her, the forcefield on the nearest door gave way a moment before the door shut and the suction pulled her full force into the wall. She collapsed at the bottom of the door with a thud.

“Thad!” Janice screamed, panic rising in her voice as the field in front of her bed gave way and the suction of the atmosphere escaping the room started pulling me toward the opening. I reached out with my left arm and managed to grab a hold of her bed and with my right was able to catch Torian as he flew passed.

“No!” he screamed brought back by the sounds of the rushing wind and he started struggling to climb up my arm. My injured shoulder couldn’t take it any longer and I lost my grip. Torian screamed all the way out of the opening as the door slammed shut. I got on my feet next to Janice’s bed and began to loosen her restraints. “It’s over.”

“I know thank you,” she responded softly as she sat up. I walked over and removed Jase’s restraints and motioned for him to come help me carry Lucy into the main body of the *Aphelion*. After we were all out of the converted storage tank Jase jettisoned the tank and allowed it to be destroyed in the atmosphere.

“Good riddance,” I commented taking my seat. I was very tired, it had been a long day. “Can you fly us home?”

“Sure thing boss,” he responded taking the piloting controls.

“What’s going to happen now?” I asked looking a Janice, who had collapsed into one of the seats next to me.

“I’d imagine another cover up, but I’ll probably be reinstated,” she answered. “I was never actually fired, so I doubt they will want to send someone new after what happened to

Torian. Lucy here will probably take most of the fall. I'll make sure you're name is cleared, but I'd imagine Richard is still going to want to kill you."

"I doubt he'll be the last person that wants to," I responded as I stretched my legs out. Jase reached over and handed me a vaporstick. "Now where did you find that?"

"I always carry a spare." I laughed turning the vaporstick on and took a long drag.

*Something tells me this isn't the end of this,* I thought as exhaling. *But I'll take the victory for today.* It was a long, uneventful ride back to the station.