

Onyx booted to the sound of a net-call coming through his HUD. A dull, gurgling beep. He felt blank, without a self. The indexer had frozen on his lateral drives, bottlenecking his OS launch down to a glorified crawl. All he could do was sit there like a jackass and wait for his brain to finish loading.

His Dom was an economy model; a no-frills shell designated for service units on rotation. He took it nearly 500 cycles ago on a short-term whim and just never got around to finding something better. , but not if it was late or early. He'd have to find that out the hard way.

Onyx stood and removed the charging coupler in his back. He crossed the room and drank in the one singular up-side of living 80 floors up in a tower packed with gear-heads and pre-Prime creationists: the view.

Outside, Cygnus ebbed and flowed with a hurried pace in all directions. Sunlight threatened to pierce a slate-gray sky while carriers, shuttles and drop-ships sashayed through the districts and boroughs below in an ever-shifting rhythm. It was beautiful in its own messed-up way, but something about Cygnus felt different to Onyx now; it looked smaller, losing face. It was almost as if every time he came back another little piece of it had gone missing.

Chipped away in absentia.

When he finally noticed the comm-note sitting in his corner-display, he knew it wasn't a debrief or a commendation for outstanding service. The red chevron tagged in the headline meant that crap was coming down the pipe in his general direction. He took one last look out onto the scape, then pulled the comm into full view:

*Cygnus Defense Systems*

*On Behalf of Cygnus Prime*

*Directive 628-B*

*“Mandatory Diagnostics Procedure”*

*Directive dictates that all actionable units dated 5000cy and over*

*submit a full hardware/software readout to:*

**prime//usenet//asset administration//MDP**

*accompanied by all logs and an itemisation*

*of all actuated services and repairs.*

Onyx burst through the main doors of the tower and moved as quickly as his hip would allow. The streets were littered with units and service modules, making him dodge and weave toward the district perimeter.

The botched boot-up in the Dom was a happy accident; a life-line tossed his way via laziness and stupid luck. Had Onyx been sentient and taken that net-call whilst still docked-in, the operator on the far end could have jacked right in and pulled his readouts remotely with ease. Every cracked bearing, corrupted driver, and spent ligament exposed for scrutiny, spelling nothing short of game over.

Onyx had bought himself a stay of execution and was only now realising it. He needed a quick-fix and time was an enemy. He thought of the last place where he still had a little pull; someone who could cut him an inch under the table and give him some semblance of a head-start.

The closest thing he had to a friend.

“You're out of your fucking board!” Kamm 039 06 boomed at Onyx from across the floor. “I couldn't patch you up for an MDP even if I wanted to.” He whirred along the ceiling track toward him. “And I don't want to. You're a shit-box!”

“Don't hold back Kamm,” Onyx blurted “Tell me how you really feel”. He eyed the shop. Parts and bric-a-brac all lying idle. “You have to have a core-casing here somewhere for Prime's sake! I've got the credits!”

“It's not the credits!” Kamm fired back. “You're incompatible! Nothing fits, you're basically bespoke at this stage. Best I can do is weld the housing, but that comes with its own set of problems. They made you as good as they could.”

Onyx said nothing.

Kamm inched himself to a fresh part of track. “Look at me,” he muttered “All I know is this shop. This track. Units like you coming in, trying to live forever. This life? It's a test of substance, not mass.”

“You could just put one through my chipset, instead of making me listen to something you clearly rehearsed”.

“You've done your bit, Onyx. Let it fall where it may.”

He threw Kamm a look. “ Well, I think I'll push my luck a little further.” He turned and made for the exit.

“Well consider me a last resort,” Kamm shouted at his silhouette. “But you're an idiot!”

Onyx stood in the doorway. “I love you too,” he said, disappearing back into the Central sprawl.