

Chapter 1

I'd been reduced to rolling my own cigarettes. There were people who thought hand-rolled meant luxury. Such people had money and time to spare, and they'd never choked on the smoke of grade A Ganymede algae. The kids called it trickotene. Old ladies called it pond scum. To me it was just the closest thing to a cigarette left on the whole icy rock. They had half the effect of the genuine article, but I could roll and smoke twenty in an hour. That's what I'd been doing all morning while I waited. I rolled and I smoked. When it was getting close to noon my canary came from the office of Guerrero Investigations across the street. He walked like he had a song for me.

"Fish on the line, Ben." the man said.

I put my Cigarette out and stood. "Where?"

"121 West Lumha Hill. Old Mary Edelbrock paid some grays to get her family onto the bus over from Earth. Now they want double to stay quiet. There's money in it, but you best hurry."

I paid him my last forty francs then hailed a dog cart. It was a reasonable expense. The kind of people that lived on Lumha Hill would pay well to stay on the right side of the moderators.

The young driver picked up his nimble tricycle and flipped it around then pedaled toward me. He bounced over the cracked ice and I climbed into the bench seat.

"Lumha hill," I said. "Get me there quick and there's a nickel in it for you."

The boy kicked on the electric motor and the tires skidded. "Wet today," he said.

I sat back and buttoned my coat. The wind bit my face and made me wince. Something caught my eye and I perked up. "Faster," I said.

"Que?" he said.

Another dogcart was weaving through pedestrians at full speed next to us and the passenger was staring me down. He was a fat man in a gray suit and hat that were left over from when he hadn't been so fat. Even from thirty yards at high speed I recognized his pelican throat and his sorry eyes that butted up too close to his nose. It was Marv Berman. He was another independent investigator and must have had a kept man in Guerrero's office—maybe even the same one I was using. I knew Marv was desperate, but I was surprised he was desperate as I was.

I slapped the kid on the back. "Vamanos!"

"There is people," he said.

I slapped him twice more. My driver started to pedal along with the motor and we surged forward. The speed made me aware of the lack of restraint in the rusted out bench. I wrapped my fingers around the sharp, steel edge beneath me. Marv's driver came closer to us, cutting a direct line to the manor district. My driver and the other were in a full sprint race through Galileo Boulevard. At first they yelled for people to get out of the way, but then their breath went. Our left wheel caught a pedestrian and I heard tearing fabric. The man yelped but we didn't look back. As we neared to Lumha hill Marv's kid started to fall behind and I cheered mine on. The gap got wider. Then there was the sound of collapsing aluminum and scraping pavement and screaming pain behind. My driver collapsed across the handlebars as we rolled up to the gate. I dropped my change on his heaving back and ran to the keypad. The entrance was a locked pedestrian gate whose entry code was an open secret. As the bolt came open a hand dropped on my shoulder.

"Hey Ben," Marv said with a breathy, nagging husk.

I flung my elbow back and connected hard with what felt like a jaw, then went through the gate and sure the bars locked behind me.

There was no pavement on Lumha Hill, just slim lines of perfect green grass in between the tall houses. The lawns were too small for a charcoal barbecue, but each one was proudly manicured. The identical three story homes were the only single family towers in town and were arranged in a grid so I knew where I was going. I jogged in and out of the long, overlapping shadows and up to 121 then rang the bell. The door opened.

"Mrs. Edelbrock?" I said. "I'm Buddy Guerrero."

The woman's features were connected by thousands of little lines in her onion paper skin. Her face might have been something once. She peered at me through fragile bifocal glasses with a gaping mouth and drooping, pleading eyes.

"I don't understand." She started to say something else then turned around clasping her shaking hands together in front of her chest. It looked like she would cry, but a stern voice came from behind her and she was soothed by it.

"Let me handle this, Mary," the voice said. The real Buddy Guerrero stood behind the woman and took her hand. He reassured the silver-haired crone with a sincere glance. If you judged by his eyes you'd think that Buddy Guerrero didn't know what a lie was. "I'd like you to meet Benjamin Alder," he said to Misses Edelbrock.

"Pleased to meet you," said the confused woman. I didn't say anything, just turned around and started to walk back down the hill.

“Now go sit down. I’ll be right back,” I heard Buddy saying. He came after me.

“You forget your own name again, Ben?” He asked.

“I just get mixed up,” I said, lighting a cigarette. “You know how it is.”

He smiled. “Right. The years do me wrong too. What have you got, fifteen on me?”

I turned toward him.

He kept talking. “You out here on a job?”

“I was thinking about moving in, actually.”

“Misses Edelbrock isn’t renting,” he said and gestured to something behind me.

I turned around and saw Marv ambling up the lawn cradling his jaw in his hand.

“Hi Marv,” Buddy said.

“Buddy.” Marv nodded. “You got here quick.”

Buddy took a small radio out of his pocket and shook it at us.

“Ah,” Marv said. “Excuse me a sec.” He grabbed my collar and poked at my chin. The punch was clumsy so I got out of the way of it and kned him in the gut. It was a big target. Marv backed off and made a choked gasp. Buddy got between us.

“What is this,” Buddy said, “You boys fighting over me? Isn’t there an easier way to get a job?”

Marv spoke between labored breaths, “You don’t gotta take up... all the damn work, Buddy. These mods leave enough scraps for everybody.”

Buddy said, “Just because I run my business like an actual business doesn’t mean I’m kicking you guys around.”

“I’d think a man with as much business savvy as yourself would invest in more reliable people,” I told him.

“Marv I understand,” Buddy said then put his finger against my chest, “But you got a brain on you. I can’t believe your business is so bad that you have to pay my employees off just so you can steal my customers.”

“Come on,” I said. “You can believe it. You love to believe it.”

“That’s not right,” Buddy said. “As far as I can remember I didn’t give you any reason to think that. I never had anything personal against you—either of you. We have enough to worry about without independents stabbing each other in the back.”

“Maybe it’s not personal for you,” I said. “But for me it’s worth it just to see the look on your face.”

Guerrero threw his hands up and went back to Mary Edelbrock's door. I dropped my cigarette in the grass and started back down the hill past Marv. He glared at me but didn't make a move. He was still catching his breath.

It was a nice view of the city from the hill. Beyond the stretch of shops on Galileo the gray tenement towers broke Jupiter's blazing orange arch into a series of diminishing rectangles of light. Past the edge of town I could see the emerald algae fields that stretched for miles. They caught the morning sun and the reflection was so bright that I had to look away. I gazed up instead as I walked the rest of the path down the hill to the gate. The stars were out. The stars are always out on Ganymede.