



PROLOGUE

Ion stared at the email displayed on his tablet, holding it over his head as he lay back on his cot in his tiny bare-walled room on Moon Base One. Through the curtain he could just glimpse the Earth through the dome that encompassed the entire city.

He read the words of the email over one more time. He wasn't sure why he bothered; he'd memorized every sentence by now. Perhaps he was hoping the message would magically change.

He jumped as a transmission came through on his tablet. Ion took a steadying breath; this wasn't going to be a fun conversation.

He swiped to answer the call to find a girl around twelve with curly brown hair and gray eyes pop up on his screen.

"Did you get your assignment yet?" Livia said, by way of greeting.

"I did." Ion's voice felt raw in his throat. "I didn't get Project Olympus." His voice drifted off. He was trying his best to hide the disappointment there, but it didn't matter; Livia had already caught it.

Her face fell. "I'm sorry," she said. "Did they say why?"

"No," Ion shrugged. "I guess I'm just not good enough."

"You are; this is your dream," Livia assured him. She paused for a moment. "What did you get?" she asked, clearly still hoping for some good news.

"I report to Fuel Port Friday," Ion said with a sigh. "I'll be flying the transports to The Belt."

"They have you shuttling criminals?" The indignation in her voice was the same Ion had felt upon reading the words. All the interesting jobs

for him to be assigned to, that he had dreamed and worked so hard for, and he got mindlessly shuttling people to carry out their sentences.

"Looks like it," Ion said quietly. He decided to change the topic. "How's Pleasant Hill?" Ion hadn't been back to the orphanage in months. He felt guilty at being away for so long.

Livia rolled her eyes. "Just as stupid as ever since you left, nothing new," she said. She then flashed an excited grin as she changed topics to something much lighter. "Are we still having lunch on Wednesday?"

Ion couldn't help but smile. "Anything for my little sister."

Livia twisted her face. "You're always so mushy, I-" She stopped talking mid-sentence to twist and look behind her.

"I think Mrs. Pierce might be-"

The door to her room in the orphanage burst open and three people, dressed in all black, piled into the room. Their faces were covered, but their movement and stature showed that they could only be men.

Livia let out a surprised yelp, her back turned entirely to where her tablet was propped up on her bed, blocking Ion from view of the men.

"Who are you?" she demanded, her voice quivering.

Ion watched, powerless to help, as one of the three men grabbed Livia. She kicked at another, landing a hit in the stomach, but she might as well have thrown water on him for all the good it did. He pulled out a silver-barreled weapon. Ion's eyes went wide as he recognized a stunner. The man aimed it at Livia's head.

"A blast this close could kill you little girl," he said, his tone so lethal that Ion didn't doubt for a second his willingness to pull the trigger.

"Don't," the man holding Livia said. He pulled down the other man's arm, adding coldly, "She gets to Outer Port alive."

His words relocated Ion's pulse to somewhere in his throat. Outer Port, he'd only ever heard of it. It was far past The Belt - a city in the outer limits of the solar system. It was the capital of The Fringe, one of the two governing bodies in the solar system, if you could call it that. Its main selling point was that it was a place far from the other capital, Moon Base

One, where Ion was now, and free from the laws of The United Space Coalition, the other government in the solar system.

The two governments had an uneasy relationship, neither fully trusting the other, but The Belt had held as a border between the two for decades. Everything inside The Belt was The Coalition's. Everything outside of that belonged to The Fringe.

Livia's gaze flickered to her bed where Ion was sure his face was displayed, looking horrified. Because of the way she was sitting, the three men hadn't yet noticed she'd been in the middle of a transmission.

A second later, she bit down on the arm of the man holding her. His grip loosened just enough for her to be able to break free and she dove for the bed. The three men scrambled to grab her, but she reached the tablet before the men could grab her again. The next second the transmission cut off, leaving Ion to stare at his own alarmed expression reflected on the screen.



Ion grinned into the cup of cheap booze he held in his hand as two men entered the bar.

He'd been sitting in this little corner of a shitty dive bar for the better part of four hours, watching and waiting. All around him, the dimly lit room was teeming with life. Men and women were yelling, fighting, and laughing over the electronic music that played over invisible speakers. The newcomers seemed to embrace the chaos fully.

Ion had chosen the bar for its clientele. It had a reputation of being a place where Fringers and people involved with less than legal activities would frequent. That's what Ion had come for, but he had fully expected to be stuck waiting there longer.

But, it looked like today was going to be his lucky day.

Everything that the men were wearing, from the genetically-engineered leather jackets to the scruffy boots, screamed that they were traders comfortable with the rougher parts of the System. But Ion didn't need to look any further than the tattoos of two serpents wrapping around a winged staff behind each man's right ear to know they possessed the information that he needed.

The tattoos were the Caduceus, the symbol of The Fringe.

He watched as the two men sat down at the opposite end of the bar. He needed to wait for them to get a few drinks in them before he made his move. Fringers - people who had dealings past The Belt had a tendency, and every right, to be wary of strangers with questions about Outer Port around here. The United Space Coalition didn't officially have prob-

lems with Fringers, but everyone knew the truth. The Coalition wasn't a fan of interlopers.

He settled in and ordered another drink from the bartender, playing on the projected com device screen on his wrist to avoid suspicion.

For almost an hour, Ion never let his eyes wander from the men for too long. Fortunately for him, they weren't holding back on drinks tonight. As Ion watched the men, they both fell six shots in. Soon one of them stepped away from bar to stumble off to the bathroom.

Ion seized his chance, approaching the man at the bar, trying his best to exude confidence, and sliding into the seat next to him.

"Nice tattoo," Ion said over the music, carelessly playing with the glass in his hand that was more ice water than anything at this point.

The man gave Ion a sidelong look. "Thanks," he muttered. He looked uncomfortable, not sure how to take Ion.

"I was looking for a ride," Ion said, watching as a drop of condensation made its way down his glass.

"I don't pilot a transporter," the man said, taking a long draw from his glass.

"I'm not looking to go anywhere a Coalition transporter can take me," Ion added. "They stop at Belt Port." He gave the man a pointed look.

The man returned Ion's stare with a long, hard one of his own. "You Guard?" There was a sharpness to the man's voice that hadn't been there before. A warning. Ion felt a jolt of adrenaline as he realized the situation he'd potentially put himself in. Of course that'd be the man's first guess.

"Do I look like I'm a Coalition Guard?" he asked, trying to keep his voice calm and praying that the man would decide he didn't look like a threat. The ironic part was, The Guard was more likely to arrest Ion than the man he spoke to, but Ion decided it was best not to mention that.

The man shrugged and went back to his drink. "It'll cost you two hundred credits," he said after a pause.

Ion's eyes went wide. "That's outrageous! I could fly myself halfway across the System for that."

"Then float yourself to Outer Port," the man said, unconcerned by Ion's protests. He finished his drink, slamming the glass down, and stood up. "Like I said, I don't fly a transporter."

"Wait," Ion said, letting out a sigh. He didn't have five credits to his name, forget two hundred. "Can you tell me how to get to Outer Port at least?"

The man curled his upper lip at Ion. His friend joined them. He looked like he was about to tell Ion to screw off when there was a ding and the tavern door slid open.

Ion's eyes flitted to the front as he swore, turning his face away. Five Coalition Guard members were standing in the doorway, each wearing full black protective gear with the white stars of The Coalition emblazoned on the chest. All were equipped with face shields and stunners.

They'd come for him. He could feel it in his gut. He kicked himself for stealing that ship.

There was a moment of tension before the bar erupted into chaos, the bar patrons - including the men Ion had been talking to - ran past Ion to the back door. Others ran for The Guard members themselves. A few flipped over tables and pulled out stunners of their own.

He should have expected this reaction to The Guard showing up after the reputation this place had.

The Guard started firing the stunners at the people rushing them. Every patron shot seized up as electricity coursed through their veins, and they toppled to the ground. As people began piling up around him, Ion decided it was high time for him to get out of there. He hoped this was a routine raid and The Guard wasn't there for him, but he wasn't going to chance it.

He turned to run out the back, but as he got there, another wall of guards appeared and began shooting people down as they ran that way. Noticing a staircase nearby, Ion bolted for it. He knew it would only put minutes between him and The Guard, but, at this point, he'd take what he could get.

He ran full speed, three steps at a time, nearly tripping towards the top.

The stairs led to a hallway with doors down each side, much like an apartment building, all matching with fresh paint.

Hearing the yells echoing up from below, Ion didn't have time to be choosy. He picked the closest door to him and opened what was probably one of the only non-automatic doors he'd ever gone through. He shut it quickly behind him, locking it as well. The footsteps of The Guard marched past the door. He felt the tension inside of him ease as he turned around.

Inside the room, something became immediately apparent.

The guy and girl fucking on the bed were *not* expecting company.

The girl let out a surprised squeal and pulled the sheets to cover herself.

"I am so sorry," Ion said. He felt his cheeks grow red from embarrassment as he held out a hand between him and the girl and tried his best to look anywhere but at the naked people in the bed.

"What the actual fuck?" the guy yelled standing up, a look of pure, unadulterated anger on his face. "What are you doing in here?"

The guy had light brown skin covering his muscular body. Wavy dark hair hung over an attractive face, even as it was twisted in rage, framed with a strong jawline covered in stubble. He had a piercing in his left ear. His deep brown eyes bored into Ion, sending his chest into a flurry and making him wish he could shrink and disappear.

"I didn't know anyone was in here," Ion stuttered, leaning against the door, looking up at the ceiling so he didn't have to see the look on the guy's face, and also so his eyes weren't tempted to stray.

"I fucking hope not," the guy retorted. He pointed out the door. "Leave, we're pretty busy."

"I can't leave; The Guard's downstairs." Ion's breath was slowly returning to him, although the nakedness of the guy in front of him was distracting. "Could you please put some shorts on?"

"The Guard?" The girl looked worried, picking up her clothes from the ground.

The guy, however, didn't seem too concerned. He looked down, following Ion's straying gaze, and laughed. "Yeah, I know it's a lot to take in."

Ion looked to the ceiling instead of responding. Luckily, the guy reached down where his clothes had been flung and pulled on his under-shorts.

Thank God.

The guy snapped the elastic strap into place around his waist. "Happy?" he asked. Ion finally was able to look at him in the face now. "Now about the-"

A loud banging came from the door, interrupting the guy mid-sentence.

Ion backed away from the banging.

"This is stupid," the girl complained as she pulled on her clothes. "I haven't done anything wrong. I'm out of here." She made a move to walk past the guy, who was still mostly naked, but he stopped her with an arm around the waist.

The banging intensified. "Coalition Guard!" someone shouted through the door. "Open up!"

"What did you do to piss off The Guard?" the girl asked, giving Ion a wary expression from her place in the guy's arms.

"Actually they might be here for me," the guy said casually.

"What the hell?" the girl exclaimed, trying to pull away from him.

"Stay put," he said to the girl, pulling on the rest of his clothes - black, tight fitting pants, a simple brown V-neck, and a dingy red jacket - slowly, as if they didn't have to worry about the people on the other side of the door.

He finally shrugged into the jacket. "It's a possibility. No way of being certain."

"I'll know for certain once I open the goddamn door," she said as she snatched her shoes from the floor and moved again to walk past the guy toward the entrance of the room.

Once again, the guy stopped her, grabbing her around the waist with one arm, and holding her close to him. "I'm sorry, I can't let you do that, Bailey."

The girl revealed something slim and silver-barreled that Ion immediately recognized as a stunner. She dug it into the guy's stomach, finger on the trigger. Her face got really close to his. "It's Brie, you asshole. And I don't think you're in the position to be making any demands."

The guy grabbed the stunner from the girl. A shot flew past Ion, hitting the wall harmlessly. The guy shoved the girl onto the bed. "Stay still," he commanded again, and Brie looked like she was willing to obey this time.

The sound of the knocking at the door changed. The pounding got heavier like someone was hitting it with a large object. Ion realized with mild horror that they were trying to override the electric lock.

Brie let out a scream. "Guards, help! They're in here!"

The guy sighed. "Alright, I'm done." He fired the stunner at her, and she went rigid as the electric wave tore through her body, sending her crumpled to the floor.

Ion let out a surprised yell, right as the door behind him flew open and guards filed into the room. He and the other guy managed to dive behind the bed right as the first shots of the guards' stunners were fired.

"They really are the 'shoot first, ask questions later' types, aren't they?" the guy said, somehow remaining calm. He lifted the mattress on its side so it gave them more cover.

Ion tried to ignore the way the guy's muscles flexed as he heaved the mattress over. This was not the time to be distracted. "Something tells me this isn't your first time being in this position," Ion said.

"Hardly." The guy fired blindly over the mattress.

Ion fought down the questions that statement caused to rise in his mind. Instead, he glanced down at Brie where she lay on the floor. "Do you think she's okay?" In spite of himself, he was worrying about her. She'd been shot from an awfully close range.

The guy shrugged. "I'd worry a little less about her and a little more about The Guard." He fired a couple more shots, then glared at Ion. "Don't you have a stunner?"

Ion shook his head. The other guy let out an annoyed sigh as he pulled another stunner out from his boot.

"Don't lose this," he said.

Ion snapped out of whatever trance he had been in and followed the other guy's example, firing blind shots over the top of the mattress. He heard a thud shortly after as one of their shots hit its target.

"I'm Ion, by the way," he said.

The guy glared at him in exasperation. "Arsen."

Ion nodded. "Arsen, do you have a plan on how to get out of here that doesn't involve cuffs?" Ion asked, firing a couple more shots.

"Way ahead of you." Arsen grabbed the bedside table and swung it with all his strength at the only window in the room. The panes shattered on impact into a million tiny pieces, showering the street below with shards of glass.

He held out his hand to Ion. "Give me the stunner; while I've got them distracted, jump out of that window. Try to grab hold of the tree on your way down; otherwise, you aren't going to have a good time when you hit the ground."

Ion shot Arsen an alarmed look; he'd never been particularly fond of heights and now he was being asked to jump out a window. But he didn't have time to question the orders before Arsen stood up, firing both stunners simultaneously at targets unseen to Ion.

Ion darted for the window but made the mistake of looking at the pavement below. A wave of nausea hit him, and he found himself frozen in place.

"Go, goddamn it!" Arsen yelled, still firing shots.

There was a decorative tree a few feet away, its closest branches pretty close to the window. He guessed it was going to have to be enough. He took a deep breath and jumped out of the window, tearing his pant leg on the shattered glass of the window as he did so.

Ion grabbed at the branches, friction burning his hands as he desperately tried to slow his descent. Somehow he managed to land on his feet. He took quick stock of his body; it seemed he had managed not to break anything, just a small cut in his leg where the glass had got him.

He heard yelling through the opening above and saw Arsen jumping out of the window, waves of electricity from stunners following after him, rippling the air with currents. Ion looked on nervously, but none of them touched Arsen as he slid down the tree with apparent ease to land beside Ion.

More stunner shots rippled through the branches of the tree. "Run!" Arsen screamed as he sprinted away.

There was nothing for Ion to do but follow after Arsen. As he ran, he thought about the two guys he had hoped would get him to Outer Port. So much for that, he thought dejectedly.



OFFICER ILARIA FAWCETT of The United Coalition Guard climbed the stairs of the little dive bar. The raid had proved itself to be a failure, as her prey had somehow managed to escape. She huffed in frustration as she stepped foot on the top step.

She entered the room where other members of The Guard, their uniforms emblazoned with the stars of The Coalition, were busy interrogating a traumatized-looking girl who was clearly in shock. Ilaria spotted Jerson Greer, a slender, tan-skinned man, standing with crossed arms, watching as other people took pictures of the scene.

"How bad was it?" Ilaria asked Jerson as she came to stand next to him.

Jerson shook his head. "Eyer, Hagan, and Breech were all hurt pretty badly downstairs," he said. "We got Fringers with warrants on them for the usual – drugs, illegal body mods, contraband. They'll just be sent back to The Fringe, free."

"And Ion Kinsley?"

"He took off through the window with someone's help," Jerson said.

Ilaria scratched her head. For Ion to have come here, he *had* to have been desperate. "Any clue who it was?"

"None," Jerson said. "The girl with him never got a name. We're taking semen samples that belong to him to see if they match our database."

"Semen samples?"

Jerson gave Ilaria a wry smirk. "Turns out Kinsley interrupted the girl and the accomplice in a pretty precarious position."

Ilaria pinched the bridge of her nose as she let out a sigh.

"We'll find Kinsley," Jerson said, touching Ilaria's shoulder.

"My mother gave me one assignment," Ilaria said in a low voice. "*Bring in the thief*; when she finds out I couldn't even do that-"

"Hey," Jerson said, giving Ilaria's shoulder a squeeze, "there's only so much we can do, surely the Commander-"

"She doesn't care," Ilaria said, hating the bitterness she could hear creeping into her voice.

"Then I guess we have some work to do," Jerson said, straightening up.

Ilaria nodded, then raised her voice so everyone could hear her orders. "Shut down this sector, and get some CCV's on the ground. We need to find Kinsley before he has a chance to make it to a hangar!"

Men hustled around Ilaria, all moving to carry out her commands.

"Shutting down the whole Lower End?" Jerson asked as they started walking towards the door. "Isn't that a little overboard for a common thief?"

Ilaria shook her head as they descended the stairs. "Ion stole a Coalition ship, and the same night, classified information went missing."

"And we're assuming he's the one who took it," Jerson said.

"It stands to reason," Ilaria replied. "He went crazy when some kid he knew went missing. He accused The Guard of not doing enough and demanded that we needed to look at The Fringe."

"What would he want with classified information then?" Jerson asked.

Ilaria stopped at the foot of the stairs and met Jerson's eyes. "If he's trying to get to Outer Port, he's going to need something of value once he gets there. Hermes doesn't do anything for free."



TWO

Arsen played with a small data drive on his necklace absentmindedly as they hurried through the crowd. The towers of Fuel Port rose around them in the bustling streets of city. Even though it was beginning to get late, there were still plenty of people around. High above even the tallest of towers, there was the dome that encased the entire station, already dimmed to simulate nighttime as it would be on Earth.

"What's on the drive?" Ion asked as he nodded at it.

Arsen stuffed it into his shirt. "Just something sentimental," he said. Ion wasn't sure he believed him, but he let it alone.

"We need to lay low for a while," Arsen added. "At least until The Guard stops sniffing around this part of the city. It's going to get much worse before it gets better."

"How long will that be?" Ion checked the time and thought about the ship he'd stolen, still sitting in Hangar 47.

Initially, he'd only planned on getting the ship to here. The Guard could track him as long as he was in it, so he wanted to ditch it as soon as possible, but with things as they were, he'd have to use it for just a bit longer. If he acted quickly he might yet be able to make it back there and move on to Belt Port before The Guard reclaimed possession of the vessel.

Arsen shrugged. "That depends on how bad your crime was," he said, bringing Ion back to the situation at hand.

"I thought you said they were after you."

"I said they *could* be; that doesn't mean they are," Arsen replied. He turned into a narrow alleyway and Ion followed, gagging at the smell of piss and decay that filled his nostrils.

"Don't spend much time in Lower End, do you?" Arsen smirked.

"I hadn't been to Fuel Port before yesterday," Ion admitted, pinching his nose closed with his fingers. His eyes watered from the smell.

"I thought you sounded a little proper," Arsen teased. He approached a steel door with no handle and gave it a knock. "Bet you're from one of the Moon Bases."

Ion's look must've given him away because Arsen let out a laugh.

"What's a boy from the hub of The Coalition doing out here?" Arsen mused.

"Is something supposed to be happening?" Ion asked, ignoring Arsen, as he gestured at the door.

As if in response to his question, the door opened and a short bald man looking around forty peered out.

Arsen plastered the widest grin Ion had seen up to this point on his face. "Chao, it's been too long."

Chao frowned with a grunt. "Not long enough." He moved to close the door, but Arsen stuck his boot in the way.

"We need a place to stay while the guards are around," he said. "You owe me for last time."

Chao narrowed his eyes at Arsen. "Last time was your fault, if I recall."

Rather than respond, Arsen stared at Chao with a level gaze.

Something in the look must've worked because Chao threw the door open. "Who's the boy?" he asked over his shoulder.

Arsen gestured for Ion to go ahead of him, and they followed after Chao.

"He's just a friend," Arsen replied as they walked down a dark, wet hallway only lit by tiny red lamps every six feet or so. Ion had no idea

what this place could be a part of, but judging from the smell, he wasn't sure he wanted to know.

"Friend, or a *friend*?" Chao asked.

Ion felt his face get red at the implications. Luckily for him, it was dark.

"I thought we had a rule about questions," Arsen said, his tone a warning.

"Pardon me for wanting to make conversation." Chao opened a door, revealing a smoke shop with lighting only a fraction better than the hallway had. Once again Ion had to catch himself from coughing; only this time it was from the smoke vapor that filled his lungs.

On some nearby shelves, Ion spotted bags of plants that he knew were illegal, at least in The Coalition. All of them were stamped with the Caduceus symbol of The Fringe. Ion felt a strange mixture of excitement and disgust the further he walked into the room.

"Can I talk to you for a minute?" Arsen said in a low voice. Ion was confused until he realized Arsen was talking to Chao who grunted in response.

They stepped outside the room, leaving Ion alone to look around.

There was an old woman sitting on a pillow in the corner who caught his attention. She was reclined back, taking long draws from a pipe that seemed to be responsible for the majority of the smoke in the room.

Ion wasn't sure if he should say something to her, but she appeared to be on another plane of existence, so he didn't bother. He was just beginning to wonder if he'd been abandoned when Arsen and Chao returned.

"You two sit tight," Chao said and he turned away and left the room again.

Arsen walked over and plopped down on an overstuffed cushion and patted next to him, signaling Ion to join him. Ion sighed and sat down, although a bit timidly, next to Arsen.

"Where'd Chao go?"

"He's going to see what The Guard's up to; he'll let us know when the coast is clear." Arsen put his hands behind his head and leaned back as if he didn't have a care in the whole solar system.

Ion fiddled with the frayed edge of the cushion and checked the time again.

"Got somewhere to be, Moon Base?" Arsen asked, peering at him through one squinted eye. "I'm sure the streets are packed with Guard members at this point."

Ion shook his head and tried to relax himself. He couldn't go anywhere until The Guard had given up searching the area, so since he had a few hours, he might as well try and get some rest.

However, before he'd even closed his eyes, he knew he was too wired to get anywhere near sleep. After giving Arsen a quick glance to see if he was paying attention, Ion swiped open his com device on his wrist, opening up a picture of Livia taken just a few days before she'd been taken, when they'd last seen each other. Closing his eyes, his heart ached, remembering the men breaking into her room. He hoped she was okay.

"Who's that?" Arsen asked. Ion quickly shut off his device, but it was too late; Arsen had already seen the picture.

"My sister," he said.

"Doesn't look like you."

"She's...well, we were in the same orphanage," Ion said, his face flushing in embarrassment from admitting where he'd been raised. "Families don't like adopting kids older than five usually... She was six when she was dropped off. Right on the line. But she might as well have been invisible to the people who came looking to adopt. I was fourteen at the time, but she latched on to me anyway. I think it's because I definitely wasn't going anywhere."

Ion shrugged; he could feel his emotions rising as he spoke. "I think I needed someone consistent too, so I became like a big brother to her. Since then, I've been the only one she's had."

Arsen was quiet for a while. Long enough for Ion to regret saying all he had, but it was the first time he'd had someone to really talk to since she was taken.

It turned out he didn't have anything to worry about. "I didn't know they had orphanages on the Moon Bases," was all Arsen said, and he turned over. "You should get some sleep. The Guard will be around for hours. Once they get going with a raid 'round these parts, they don't stop until they run out of room in the Mining Transports."

Ion lay back, staring at the ceiling through the smoke. SnORES from across the room told him that the old lady had fallen asleep. He wondered for a moment if she'd put out her pipe before passing out, but since he couldn't see any hint of burning from her direction, he decided not to worry about it.

He *did* worry about what Arsen had said about the raids lasting until the Mining Transports were full. Like most things in The Coalition, mining in The Asteroid Belt had been largely mechanized. But there would always be need for human labor, preferably the cheap, expendable kind.

This is where places like the Lower End of Fuel Port fit in nicely. The Lower End was a den of all sorts of illegal activities that called for quick trials and shipment off to The Belt.

And to think, Ion had almost been the pilot for one of those transports.

He wasn't sure when it happened, but at some point his body relaxed and he drifted off into a dreamless sleep.



THE SOUND OF A MACHINE passing by woke Ion up. The noise was so out of place to him outside of a hangar. The only vehicles in places like Fuel Port were the farming equipment and...

The Guard vehicles.

Ion checked the time and swore. It was five twenty in the morning. He had let himself sleep for too long; chances he'd had at The Guard not retrieving their ship were even slimmer now. He decided if he was going to have any hope of getting back to the ship, he needed to leave. He grabbed his stunner, got up, and moved towards the door, tripping over something in the process.

Arsen bolted up, eyes wide, reaching to his side to grab his stunner.

"Oh, it's just you," he said lying back down.

Ion relaxed a bit once he saw Arsen's eyes close and he kept moving, as quietly as possible, towards the door.

"Where are you going?" Arsen's voice came from behind him.

Ion looked over his shoulder at Arsen. "I-I have to go," he stammered.

"Are you crazy? Don't you hear The Guard vehicles?"

"I've wasted too much time already," Ion said.

"You'll be wasting even more when you're caught and sent to The Belt."

Ion turned around. "Why do you care?"

Arsen rolled his eyes. "I don't," he said stiffly, and lay back down again.

Ion opened the door to the hallway.

"Have fun working on The Belt," Arsen called after him.

Ion let out a sigh and walked out of the smoke shop, down the dingy hallway, and out into the artificially-darkened city.

All around him rose towers with thousands of signs advertising products that made it look like almost any other street he'd seen in Fuel Port. He was finding it next to impossible for him to orient himself.

Not that he would have particularly known where he was if he hadn't been surrounded by towers. He'd been in Fuel Port for less than a day. The only thing he knew for sure was that the hangars where the ships docked were at the edge of Fuel Port in any direction; that was about it.

His only hope was that maybe The Guard wasn't looking for him and he'd actually have a chance to make it back to Hangar 47.

As he continued onto the street, his hopes died fairly quickly. He was just in time to see a Guard vehicle round the corner and flash a high beam on him.

Ion swore and darted down the street, trying to get as far away from the major roadway as quickly as he could. He heard the roar of the long six-wheeled pseudo tanks with turrets capable of firing crowd-leveling stunner blasts. If they fired at him, it would all be over.

He ran to the nearest building he could, not that it would help much, and tried to get the door to open for him. Of course it wouldn't open; they must have locked down this entire sector of the city. Arsen had been right. He should have stayed.

Ion let out a yell in aggravation as sounds of the vehicles got closer and closer to where he was. With it being so early, there weren't exactly many crowds on this street to hide in either.

He sent a silent apology to his sister, wherever she was.

And then shots started coming. He could see the giant ripples in the air as the electric currents flew by. Ion was cornered in the dingy gray entranceway to the building. He couldn't even get his hand around the wall to shoot back, as many blasts were being fired at him. He knew that this rate of fire couldn't last forever; stunners only held enough charge for a few dozen blasts. The Guard would have to recharge them soon if they kept this up.

But The Guard was also the only trained military force The Coalition had, and they were in the middle of a raid. They would be carrying several stunners each.

Ion found himself wondering for a moment how many stunner blasts he could take before his head tore itself apart.

Guess he was about to find out.

Suddenly, there was the sound of shouting, and the guards started firing in a different direction. At least they weren't hitting anywhere near Ion's hiding place anymore. He chanced a look around the corner from where he stood and he couldn't believe his eyes. Arsen was there, stand-

ing on top of one of the two Guard vehicles, firing his stunner into the turret.

He'd come after him?

Arsen hopped into the vehicle, and before the other vehicle could target him, he rammed his stolen vehicle into it. There was a loud shriek of metal on metal as they impacted one of the buildings on the side of the street, bursting through the bottom windows.

Smoke poured out from the hole punched in the building. It must have been coming from the other vehicle because the one Arsen commandeered backed up out of the hole and faced the other guards.

Holy shit, was all Ion could think as he watched in awe as the rest of the guards fired shots at Arsen's vehicle. Ion didn't really think before he acted; otherwise, he wouldn't have stepped out from his hiding place to fire shots into the backs of the guards. A couple of them turned around, distracted from Arsen. Ion ducked back around his hiding corner, before the shots could hit him. He tried to fire back, but he was pinned down again.

On the other side of the guards, Arsen climbed into the turret of the Guard vehicle and shot a giant stun blast at the guards that had pinned Ion down. Ion barely had time to take cover as every guard crumpled to the ground under the effects of the turret fire. When he peered back around the corner, only himself and Arsen remained conscious.

Ion ran over to the vehicle, banging on the window.

The door opened and Arsen met Ion's eyes with grudging approval.

"I told you so," Arsen said.

"I know, I'm an idiot," Ion said. He clambered into the vehicle and strapped in. Arsen pulled a few switches, setting off towards the outskirts of Fuel Port.

Arsen drove with a lead foot. It was a good thing it was so early and most people had been moved indoors because Ion had serious doubts as to whether or not this guy would let a few innocent bystanders slow him down.

"Where are we headed?" Arsen asked.

"Hangar 47."

"What's there?"

"A technically stolen Coalition ship."

Arsen gave Ion a long look. "What have you gotten yourself into?"

Ion didn't respond, and silence fell between them. Ion's eyes kept wandering back to Arsen, but if the other man noticed, he didn't show any indication.

They were nearing the edge of the city where the buildings were far less dense. Soon, they were closing in on where the hydroponic farms began. This part of the city was beginning to look familiar from when Ion had arrived a day ago, but it already felt like ages ago. Arsen seemed to know where he was going without Ion's direction, and Ion found himself wondering where this guy was from.

"Well that might be problematic," Arsen said, looking in the rearview mirror of the vehicle.

Ion turned his gaze behind them. No less than twelve Guard vehicles were following behind them; all were at least matching the speed Arsen was driving.

Ion turned to face forward, his pulse redoubling yet again. His mind flitted back to the past couple of days. He had done what he'd needed to do, hadn't he?

"Alright, we're going to have to try and block as much of the hangar entrance as possible," Arsen said, pulling Ion back to the present. The entrance was almost upon them, and they were going way too fast to stop before they crashed into it. Arsen started flipping switches. Ion was just opening his mouth to ask what he was doing, but before he could get the words out, Arsen turned the steering wheel sharply to the left.

The vehicle spiraled out of control. Ion seized up as Fuel Port became one giant blur; he relaxed only when they came to a halt a whole six inches from the door to the hangar. The automatic doors of the hangar slid open as they sensed the vehicle's presence.

Ion pushed the vehicle's door open. He got out and Arsen followed, climbing over the passenger seat. He looked around the hangar; most of the ships here were class three - large machines around eighty feet in length. All of them looked like newer models except one rather old looking class-two freighter in the back of the hangar.

Ion came up short.

"What's wrong?" Arsen asked, stopping and looking back at Ion.

"I don't see it."

"Your ship?"

"Those assholes must've stolen my ship!"

"You mean the ship you stole first?"

A wave of horror rushed over Ion as the truth set in. He'd never considered the possibility that The Guard would be able to find and take back their ship so quickly. But they had and the said Guard were on their way and he was out of places to run.

Ion realized Arsen was right; he should've stayed put and waited it out.

"It's okay," Arsen said, looking over Ion's shoulders.

"No, it's not, I need to get-

"It's fine," Arsen assured with such force that Ion had to look up at him. "The class-two freighter in the back is mine."

"The what?"

"Come on." Arsen tugged at Ion's arm, forcing him to move. Ion finally registered an old freighter sitting in the back, looking very much like it was barely holding itself together.

They were almost to the freighter when Ion heard someone yell, "Ion!" His name reverberated angrily off every ship in the hangar. He spun around, recognizing the dark skin and curly black hair that belonged to someone he hadn't seen in what felt like a lifetime.

Ilaria was running after him with her partner - and close friend, if memory served - Jerson close behind her.

Ion realized it at that moment; the whole raid had been for him. Without a word, he turned back around and kept running towards the freighter with Arsen.

"Shoot him, Jerson!" he heard Ilaria yell, and he felt the increasingly familiar current of electricity zip past his shoulder.

Ion heard a loud crash from the entrance to the hangar as one of the Guard vehicles plowed through the one that Arsen and Ion had hijacked, sending it rolling end over end, small metal pieces flying off of it, before coming to stop by crashing into a class-three transport ship. The Guard vehicle that had crashed into theirs looked rough, its front end crumpled back and smoke pouring from under the hood, but it had cleared the way for the other vehicles to swarm into the hangar after them.

Another shot whizzed past Ion, drawing his attention away from the wreckage.

The Guard vehicles closed in on them, but not before Arsen had reached the freighter and hit the button to open up the loading ramp. The ramp opened downward so slowly, or at least it felt that way, and there was nothing they could do but wait as it opened.

Stun blasts hit all around them. They moved around to the side of the ship for cover, putting it in between them and Ilaria, and Jerson, and The Guard.

"Your ship is a piece of shit," Ion pointed out.

It really was. It looked at least fifteen years old. It was shaped more or less like a giant rectangle with thrusters on the side and triangular protrusions in the front and back for the cockpit and the loading ramp.

"Do you have a better option?"

Ion snapped his mouth shut at that comment. They weren't out of Fuel Port yet, and the last thing he needed was for Arsen to change his mind about him when they were so close.

A stunner shot hit the ship two inches from Ion's head. He swore and shrank back further from view of the people approaching.

Ilaria and Jerson reached them before the rest of The Guard did.

"Ion come out from behind there," Ilaria called. "Give it up. You're already in enough trouble."

He chanced a look around the corner; the back hatch of the ship was opened, but Ilaria and Jerson were standing on the ramp, and Jerson had his stunner pointed at the side of the ship where Ion and Arsen were. He fired as soon as he saw Ion's head, but Ion moved back to the safety behind the ship.

"I don't think we are getting out of this." Ion tried to steady his breathing.

Arsen shook his head. "Such a malfunction." He jumped out around the corner and fired his stunner. Ion brushed off the insult and looked around the corner and saw that he had hit Jerson, who lay in a disjointed pile on the loading ramp, his dark hair falling over his closed eyes.

But it was too little too late, The guards arrived and made a half circle around the back end of the ship.

Well that was that, Ion thought. It was time to start preparing himself for life at The Belt.



THREE

As he stood surrounded by The Guards, Ion felt numb. This wasn't how everything was supposed to happen. He knew he'd taken a risk when he'd stolen the ship, but somehow he'd imagined that if he moved quickly enough, he would be able to make it to Fuel Port and get onto a ship that The Guard couldn't track, and that it would all be fine.

His mind flitted back to a week ago, when he was still home in Moon Base One, right after his sister had been taken. At first, he'd trusted in the System like all good citizens of The Coalition. He'd gone to The Guard, confident in their ability and willingness to track his sister and bring her home. He'd spoken to Ilaria when he went to them then, and she'd put his mind at ease.

But he'd been let down. The Guard had gone through the motions in the beginning: sweeping Livia's room, playing back surveillance footage of the surrounding streets; but the men had disappeared. And even though Ion had reported that he'd heard the men who'd abducted Livia mention Outer Port, there wasn't enough evidence, they said, to warrant an investigation into The Fringe.

Bitterly, he thought of the look on Ilaria's face when she'd told him that they weren't going to do anything else other than wait. Be patient, she'd said.

He remembered the sleepless night that turned into firm resolve in his mind. He'd walked the streets of Moon Base One, staring up at the Earth that had been ruined by plague, and he knew what he had to do. He was going to steal a ship. It had been easy considering he had access to

the hangar since graduating the Academy, but he'd known that he needed to lose the traceable vessel at the first opportunity or he'd be in deep trouble.

It hadn't taken him long to find the bar after he'd arrived in Fuel Port. People had been more than willing to gossip about the place where Fringers would frequent. He'd thought he'd had enough of a head start that he wouldn't have to worry about getting caught this soon.

But he'd been wrong. Here he was, surrounded by The Guard with nothing to show for his efforts except a longer list of offenses.

However, it seemed Arsen wasn't prepared to give up. He sprang at Ilaria, drawing Ion out of his head.

Ilaria struggled, pulling away from Arsen until he pressed his stunner to the small of her back. She froze mid-swing, a look of humiliation and fury across her face. The rest of The Guard hesitated, not wanting to shoot Arsen and have him fire at Ilaria in the process.

"I'd be careful," Ion heard him say to her in a low voice. "A shot this close would stop your heart."

"I think I know that," Ilaria said, somehow managing to keep her voice calm.

"You coming, Ion?"

Ion's eyes were wide in shock. He'd never exactly had any love for the girl being held at stunner point, but that was a far cry different than wishing her dead or threatened. None of that stopped Ion from scrambling on the ship as quick as humanly possible.

"You're making a big mistake," Ilaria said. "I'm Officer Ilaria Fawcett."

"She's Commander Fawcett's daughter," Ion said from aboard the ship.

"Interesting," Arsen muttered thoughtfully. He raised his voice so that The guards could hear him. "You probably shouldn't try to stun us," his voice echoed throughout the hangar. "Commander Fawcett won't be too thrilled if I have to kill her daughter because you lot decided to get trigger happy."

Ilaria began, "Don't listen to-" Arsen covered her mouth with his hand before she could finish the sentence. He walked with her, backing up the ramp into the ship.

"What is going on here?" came a voice. Ion's shoulders slumped as he recognized it as the last voice he wanted to hear.

The speaker stepped into view, in between two of the guards, her eyes taking in everything from Arsen, with his hand clasped over Ilaria's mouth with a stunner shoved into her back; to Jerson, lying in crumbled heap at the bottom of the loading ramp; to Ion, standing slightly behind Arsen and Ilaria. She met Ion's eyes and he could see the unfettered rage burning behind hers.

Ilaria tensed up and Ion could tell from the shock on her face that she hadn't expected her mother to be there at that moment.

"What are you waiting for?" Commander Fawcett said to the guards. "Shoot them."

"Ma'am," one of the guards said, "if the boy shoots her from that close of a range-

"It'll most likely kill my daughter," Commander Fawcett finished for the guard. "She made her own mess of this situation; let her pay the consequence of it."

Ion looked over to Ilaria and could see the hurt and betrayal written all over her face. It looked like tears were welling up in her eyes.

It was strange. Ion didn't really know her; they'd gone to school together years ago, but other than her taking his statement when he'd gone to The Guard about Livia, they hadn't had much contact. Seeing this brief exchange brought out a foreign emotion towards Ilaria. For the first time, he actually felt pity for her.

"Looks like this has worked about as long as it's going to," Arsen said. He elbowed a button and the ramp started closing.

And right then The Guards finally decided whether or not they wanted to fire at them, choosing to obey the commander rather than their officer. Ion dropped to the floor as fast as he could, trying to curl

himself into as small a target as possible. Looking to his left, he saw that Arsen had shoved Ilaria to the ground as well.

Before the ramp door was shut fully, a guard tried to climb in.

"Really?" Arsen yelled. He shot the guard, who fell out of sight.

The door, apparently much better at closing than at opening, managed to shut before anyone else tried a similar stunt, sealing the three all inside the ship's metal hull.

Arsen went to the front of the ship toward the cockpit, ignoring Ion and Ilaria. Ion could hear clicking coming from the controls as Arsen flipped switches and the thrusters roared to life on either side of him, albeit a muffled roar since the hull of the ship was somewhat sound proof from the insulation.

"You can't seriously be this stupid," Ilaria said, storming into the cockpit and throwing herself into the passenger seat beside Arsen. Ion followed close behind, still holding on to his stunner.

When Arsen failed to give her a response, she continued, "They'll close the hangar doors," she said, "and you can't sit in here forever. They'll cut open this piece of shit in less than an hour."

"She does have a point," Ion said, watching through the viewport as the guards swarmed around the ship. So far there wasn't much to see, but if Ion knew Commander Fawcett's reputation at all, she'd already given the order to have the place shut down.

"They might close the hangar doors," Arsen said, pulling up on the controls of the ship. Ion continued to watch through the front view port as the ship lifted up far above the heads of the guards surrounding the ship. "Unless someone disabled them."

"You didn't," Ion said, impressed as the ship spun around to face their exit.

"I didn't," Arsen said, "but that would've been a great idea in hindsight." As if to prove the point, the giant pieces of metal gate to the hangar started closing.

"Great," Ilaria said, folding her arms and sitting back in the passenger seat. "I can't wait to watch The Guard stun you both until you shit yourselves."

"Going to be a long wait," Arsen grunted. He slammed the controls forward and they zipped through the closing hangar doors faster than an old ship such as his should be able to go. They barely made it out of the hangar. Ion could've sworn he heard the doors scrape on part of the ship as they went through, but it passed and they were in the clear.

Arsen let out a whoop of glee as they were enveloped by the blackness of space, and Ion relaxed muscles he hadn't realized he'd been clenching until now.

"Congratulations," Ilaria said flatly, refusing to be impressed. "You've made it into space. Where are you going to go now? The Coalition isn't that big; they'll send messages ahead to every city to watch for this hunk of junk at their hangars."

Ion couldn't help but dejectedly think that she had a point. He stared out the view port, sensing more than seeing that the ship was accelerating. All around them was a dark canvas with nothing but the stars for light.

"Let me guess, you're from a Moon Base," said Arsen. Ilaria rolled her eyes at him. He continued, "You're just showing the classic privileged Moon Base naivety of the solar system. There's a lot more out there outside The Coalition's reach."

"We're going to The Fringe?" Ion asked, sitting up a bit straighter.

Arsen shot Ion a little smirk. "Straight to Outer Port."

Ion's jaw dropped. He couldn't believe it. Even with all the craziness that had happened since the bar, he'd still managed to achieve what he'd set out to do in the first place: find someone to get him to Outer Port.

Maybe his luck was finally turning around.

Ion felt himself fully relax and he looked around him, finally taking in his surroundings. The ship had a relatively simple design. Right on the other side of the cockpit door, there was a small hallway that went to ei-

ther side. On the right there was a closed door, probably enclosing the engine room. And on the left, Ion could see the foot of stairs which he was sure went up to the living quarters of the freighter. A lot of ships had those for exceptionally long missions and general morale of the passengers while aboard the ship.

He glanced over at Arsen, who had rolled up the sleeves to his jacket and was busy swiping at a screen on the control panel, and noticed for the first time that he had a tattoo on his left forearm. Ion could just make out the design of an arrow there and he was tempted to ask Arsen about it.

Before he could, however, Ilaria sensed their distraction and sprang. She punched Arsen in his perfect jaw, his head snapping to the side. While he was still off guard, she grabbed the controls of the ship, jerking them to the side so that Fuel Port swung back in view, looking like little more than a tiny glass marble from this distance.

Arsen back-handed Ilaria and she fell into the passenger seat, stunned by the blow. He grabbed her and threw her into the seat right next to Ion.

"Don't move," he ordered. Arsen looked at Ion. "If she moves an inch, shoot her. I don't give a fuck if it kills her or not."

Ion's blood went cold, but he nodded his understanding, aiming his stunner at her.

Ilaria slumped in the chair, crossing her arms and huffing, looking more like a pouting toddler than anything else. She was bleeding from a split lip but didn't make any effort to stop it.

"You're not going to get far, you know," she called to Arsen in the cockpit. "They'll follow you."

"Let them follow," Arsen called back from the cockpit. "They don't stand a chance in hell of catching us. I've built up the engines and turbines in this thing myself. It's faster than any Coalition-built ship."

Ion could tell from the expression on Ilaria's face that she didn't believe him. Not that he blamed her; he wasn't all that sure he believed him either. The ship looked anything but impressive.

"The Coalition has dealt with Fringers before," Ilaria said. "You're nothing special."

"Perhaps," Arsen said with a shrug. "But I've dealt with them before as well. I have no plans of being captured by anyone anytime soon."



THE DOOR TO JERSON's hospital room slid open to reveal the last person he expected to see. Commander Fawcett stepped into his room, hands clasped behind her back, wearing a stern look across her face - not that Jerson had seen her look anything *but* stern.

"The doctors tell me you're good to go," she said.

Jerson, who had been in the middle of getting dressed, pulled his shirt over his head and nodded. "They just cleared me. They were concerned because of how close the shot was."

They looked at each other for a long moment. The Commander seemed to be struggling with her words, a first for her, but eventually she spoke.

"You trained at the Space Academy," she asserted. It wasn't a question.

Jerson nodded, hoping his confusion wasn't plastered across his face.

A muscle in Commander Fawcett's jaw worked. "We need you to report to Hangar 17. We need extra security for Project Olympus."

Jerson couldn't hide his surprise. His mouth was hanging open, gaping dumbly at the commander.

"The Mars settlement," he said. "I thought since Ilaria-

"My daughter has been taken and there's nothing you can do," the commander said. "And I'd rather not have you around here, if I'm being completely honest."

"With all due respect," Jerson said. "There's no way I am just going to let my friend be taken by criminals."

"President Martinez has decided to play it safe on this one," Commander Fawcett said as she wrinkled her nose in disgust. It was no secret she butted heads with the president on pretty much every issue. "We are to leave The Fringers alone."

"So you're going to blindly follow orders and risk never seeing Ilaria again," Jerson responded, heat rising to his face.

If he thought he could antagonize her into disobeying the president, Jerson was mistaken. The commander nodded. "Hangar 17," she repeated, and she left the room.

Jerson finished dressing in a fury. He shouldn't have been surprised; the woman cared more about her job than anything else in her life.

He stormed out of the room, down a flight of stairs, and out the front doors of the hospital. As he walked down the streets, his mind was on fire with anger. It wasn't until he noticed several people shooting him concerned looks and pulling their children across the street that he realized how pissed he must have looked.

After that, he tried to keep his expression as neutral as possible the rest of his way to Hangar 17. It wasn't that long of a walk, about twenty minutes or so, but when he got there he found himself coming to an abrupt halt.

There was only a single ship in the hangar with its access ramp down and no one else in sight. He'd never seen a hangar this empty in his life.

Curious, he boarded the ship, entering the cockpit.

There was a tablet sitting in the pilot's chair. Still standing, Jerson picked it up almost without thinking, opening it up to reveal various files; they were all briefing him for Project Olympus. As he read through them, he felt himself grow angrier and angrier. He could not believe he was supposed to pretend Ilaria hadn't just been abducted.

It was then that he noticed something else in the copilot seat, a tiny com device with a note stuck to it.

“Just in case,” the note read.

Jerson sighed. He tossed the tablet to the side, sat down, and fired up the ship's engines. He then set course for Mars Port.

