



Two Shadows
by
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Astunash had two moons. One of them was a shining, overpopulated kosmoplex where outsystem transports arrived every day, clogging space with traffic. Ships came from all over the Hegemon, using the moon as a stopover point between two leylines a span's burn in-system. They bring with them refined resources, machinery and luxury products. They leave with one of the universe's most valuable resources: drinkable water.

The other moon was little more than a mined-out husk, chewed away by a generation of mass that had left the surface cracked open to space. The southern hemisphere now bore a vast chasm exposing the moon core that produced a comet trail of scattered molten globules the size of mountains. These were greedily consumed by modified freightliners that were owned by a smaller corpo that had paid the Astunash government for the rights to do so. They paid more for the resulting seasonal meteorites that now fell on the planet's surface that would, in a few thousand years, render the planet uninhabitable if something wasn't done.

But that was the concern of future generations, and profit was being made now.

As a result, both moons were such bright sources of light in the Astunash sky that night had become a foreign concept. Those local flora and fauna that had not adapted had long ago been driven insane or slowly died off. But once every few orbits, the moons disappeared over the sky of the Sphera, the planet's largest city, resulting in a night of unbound frivolity and merrymaking.

Sphera's streets became packed with parades and local fairs as tourists from other cities, towns and offworld arrived in the millions to enjoy the rare night celebrations. No one wanted to stay indoors and the manufactories and habplexes shut down their main lights, reducing the light pollution to the glow of candles and dim lanterns.

The local government, long turned into mere puppets to Source Unlimited MacroCorp, officially declared that such nights be a time for Consumers to connect with one another and, specifically, spend as much credit as fiscally possible. Source had monopolized the suppliers to the bazaars and malls, earning a hefty percentage in the last decade when their lease of Astunash's water supply had been approved by the Commission that would last the next three hundred fiscal cycles.

It was the perfect night to blow something up.

The three guerrilla fighters moved quickly over the rooftops of the slurbs. Unlike the towering habplexes at the heart of Sphera, the slurbs were made up of whatever the lower-credit citizens could find, which they then stacked into barely stable stacks. Few of the millions that lived here had autocars and so, simple footpaths were the dividing lines between the masses of domiciles, which made crossing the rooftops almost easy.

If you kept your footing.

Pavan slipped, his grip-boot dislodging the anchoring bolts of some metal siding that sent him backwards. For a moment he was falling, hands stretched out, but not long enough to grab the ledge that he was now falling away from.

Pavan never thought of death when it threatened him. He never thought of a grand power in the universe that might welcome him home, nor did he plead with dead prophets for a second chance. The only thing that Pavan ever thought about as the chemicals in his brain swirled and rushed, was how tired he was. How it would be so wonderful to finally close his eyes and let oblivion remove him from the struggle.

No more avoiding government patrols. No more starving. No more having to stay away from his people for fear that he might hurt them despite his love. To sleep and, if he was lucky, perhaps dream and never waken.

But then Lucci caught him by his ankle and hauled him back into life.

Lucci was always there to save him.

Pavan hated him for it.

He was tossed unceremoniously back onto the hexagonal flooring of the roof, cracking a few of the solar-sensitive panels that made the floor. Pavan rolled, coming back up in a half-crouched landing and took a moment to breathe as his heart only sped up in tempo.

"Don't get sloppy." Lucci chastised him. "You die without switching and you're dead for good." Lucci rarely made mistakes and was always first or strongest or fastest. They were opposites, always had been despite looking similar as their mothers had been sisters. The same height, the same dark skin covered in even darker lesions that bloomed across their bodies in spirals and patterns.

"We should have left you behind." Lucci said. "You weren't ready for this."

"Then you should have let-me-fall!" Pavan slammed a fist into a panel, shattering it and slicing open his knuckles. He wanted to break Lucci's face, starting with his teeth.

"Breathe," Lucci ordered, stepping back into a fighter's stance.

"I-am-breathing!" Pavan bit back and realized he wasn't.

He was choking.

"You need to breathe, little brother," Raka, their third companion, whispered as he walked back to rejoin them. "Remember the sea and the stone."

Pavan could feel his heart throbbing against his ribs. He was seeing spots, swirling angry black blobs that threatened to blind him. His teeth were clenched, biting through his tongue, now bleeding. He could feel his lungs beginning to collapse from trying to suck air down his throat.

"He's going to lose it—" Lucci said, but stopped when Raka put his hand up. Raka was in charge. He wasn't as big as Lucci or Pavan but he was the cleverest. Raka was the only one of the three who had actually fought for the resistance, hunting down the skiptracers Source Unlimited sent into the jungles.

"He's going to be fine," Raka took a step forward, not too close, but just enough so that Pavan's eyes, which were bulging out of his skull, could see. Raka was also kind, almost always smiling with deep dimples. His voice and his presence always helped, "He's going to remember the sea and how it crashed against the rocks of the shore. He's going to understand that he is in charge of what his mind resides in. He will remember."

And Pavan did, even as his skin began to burn.

He remembered the sea, with its twin tides from the moons, creating crisscrossing currents that made shapes across an ocean. An ocean filled with life where they would fish and play in the waters and forget, just for a moment, that their world was being murdered.

He breathed and his heart grew timid, the rage ebbing.

He remembered the stones of the coastline. Red and orange and bright with the water that had smashed against them. If you looked closely you could make out the black fossils of creatures that had lived long ago before the first humans set down their colony ships.

Pavan stood, dripping with sweat, but he was fine. He was him. Raka smiled and embraced him, "You're going to be fine, kid."

"We're the same age!" Pavan said but hugged him back.

"Don't mention it." He broke the hug and beckoned Lucci closer who obeyed. Raka was their leader by temperance and ability.

"Now that you've had some rest, can we get on with it?" Lucci said with distaste. Raka slapped him on the shoulder and some of the venom in Lucci's demeanor trickled out.

"We're almost there." He pointed to a sprayed-on marker on a nearby wall. "She's left us a path!"

Pavan nodded and leapt to the fore, running along a dividing wall and throwing himself across the space between two structures. Raka laughed and followed while Lucci rolled his eyes but gave chase.

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They had been sired in the prototaxite wilds of the equatorial jungles. Here the resistance against the Hegemon was still strong after being pushed out of the cities a generation ago. They subsisted here in mobile caravans, raiding company towns or striking against water prospectors. It had been in the last twenty fiscal cycles, fifteen local years, that the resistance had joined by outsystem agents who spoke of a greater resistance being fought throughout the universe against the MacroCorps. The Astunashi had said yes in exchange for intelligence, greater understanding of the enemy destroying their world and, most importantly; weapons.

Pavan, Lucci and Raka were the product of that barter.

They had been trained from birth to fight. Every day and night they were taught new lessons and methods to survive but this was done not with the old methods but with a single mission in mind; *kill the Water Baron*.

As Pavan leapt and picked up greater speed with Lucci and Raka, he let his mind wander. They had reached a section of buildings that started to become uniform, getting closer to the tram station they needed to get to the city proper.

The Water Baron was a creature of the Hogs and the leading representative of Source Unlimited in the system where he had laid waste to ice laden asteroids, reservoir moons and two other worlds where water could be found. Astunash was the most plentiful and water abundant world in a sector of space, something Pavan didn't really understand except that the Hogs divided up the Galaxy as they saw fit.

For sixty fiscal cycles he had wooed the Astunashi, pretending to treat them better than his predecessors that had used the lash and violence. He used the Lex and convinced the local governments to relinquish more and more of itself as he paid his way through red tape.

Now, the Astunashi people weren't even allowed to live in the cities they had built. Outsystem colonists had arrived from the ExeCor, flocking to take jobs and develop what the Astunashi had started and pushing them out into the slurbs Pavan now ran through. Pavan knew that their kinsmen had become weak, addicted to the luxuries their world could not make and drunk of intoxicants that were supposed to be illegal.

Pavan's grandfather had tried to protest the takeover and had been shot by government security forces. When his father had tried to lead a delegation to speak to the Water Baron, they had been ambushed by hired thugs and badly beaten on their way to the offices. The Baron used their absence as an insult and sent more security teams in a violent crackdown. When Pavan's father had returned home he took his newly wed wife and anyone who would listen to flee north and into the equatorial jungles.

You could not reason with the Hogs.

Which is why Pavan, Raka, and Lucci's mothers had each accepted the Traveller's gift and borne children who could finally strike back at the black hearts of the MacroCorp. They would begin on this night of nights and behead Source Unlimited's leadership at any cost.

They reached a trolley car suspended by pulleys and fell onto the rooftop as the passengers cheered at the people below and drank from bottles of multi-colored spirits. The trolley picked up speed, rising toward the city's inner-plex forcing the three men to hold on for dear life, using climbing hooks to tether themselves to crenellations and seams in the roof.

Gradually, the trolley car levelled out, the load wires reverberating loudly, and they passed between two massive habplex towers that were the border of the city-center. Pavan had never been to Sphera, or any city for that matter, and felt his mouth go dry in awe.

"How many people live here? You think?" Pavan turned, ignoring the wind blasting his face and shouting not worried about the raucous party in the tram's cabin. The merry-makers were obviously drunk, throwing empty bottles and refuse out the windows without a care.

"Too many!" Raka yelled back, "People were never meant to live like that! Like bugs!"

That was obvious, Pavan thought. Millions of windows dotted the face of the curving faces of the buildings reflecting the lights below. It was daunting to even contemplate challenging such numbers. More people lived in just one of these towers than the whole of the Astunashi that survived in the jungles and he could see two more being built in the distance.

"There must be millions of them!"

"And we'll kill them all," Lucci yelled, grim as ever, his dark eyes narrow as he glared at the buildings. Pavan turned away, placing his head against the trolley's roof and enjoyed the cold on his skin which was still hot from his episode.

Yes, of course they would. The three of them would start it all tonight, but that didn't mean he wasn't crippled with doubt. It was easy to agree with the idea that the Hogs were evil and he had seen the slow death that was creeping across the face of the planet as Source Unlimited drank the seas and the rivers and the lakes dry. For a hundred years the MacroCorp's goons had beaten or killed any opposition with the blessing of the government that was supposed to protect the people. Instead they took payment as water siphons forced desertification, the water going offworld and beyond the system.

But they had been running all day and into night, running through the depot towns and the corpo-burbs that lead to the slums and grew into this city. They had avoided detection easily enough with the bustle of tourists coming in but that meant he had seen the men women and children that he was being told to kill and had never killed another human being that wasn't fighting back or knew they were being hunted. It felt wrong and there was nothing Lucci could say that would make him feel like this was right.

Raka crawled next to him, getting close, "I know what you're going through, but we've got to do this, brother." Raka's voice, firm and confident, the bedrock of their unit. Lucci was the knife edge but Raka was the guiding hand.

"It just seems wrong. Look at them—"

"They're a sickness, Pavan, a gods-damned plague. Think about how much they eat and drink or shit! Our world was never meant for what they've done to it. We have to do this." Pavan nodded. He would do it, starting tonight, when they ripped the Water Baron limb from limb.



They blended in with the populace after leaving the trolley station. Raids into the work towns weren't just for guns, food, or tech but for information, ident passes, and usable money chits. The trio might look a little odd in their mismatched clothing, but on a night like this no one would notice and they advanced through the various tolls without suspicion.

They reached a walkway that connected to a major cantilever bridge packed with stalls and tents, each one steaming with food or produce. Pavan slowed, his stomach twisting with a hunger he never knew he could feel as he smelled strange and incredible dishes. Racks of meat, choked in glaze, birds and animals all cooked in concoctions that made it hard for him to concentrate. His mouth watered, almost spilling out of his mouth.

"Focus," Lucci snarled under his breath and shoved him forward.

"We have money," Raka said, passing some of the stolen chits, blue and red, into Pavan's hand. "It will help us blend in." He said with a wink.

Pavan bought strips of deeply fried meat that the vendor called "cheken" with a plasta cup he poured a dollop of a gel that, despite its lack of color, exploded with flavor in Pavan's mouth. In the jungles they ate what they could catch and lived off of foraged roots and plants or stolen rations. They never farmed the way that they were told their grandparents once did, for if they stayed too long in any place they ran the risk of Corpo mercenaries who were always hunting them.

What Pavan bit into made him audible gasp, "You need to have some of this, Raka," Pavan said, the crumbs of fried kernels falling from his mouth.

"You're making a damn fool of yourself, Pavan." Lucci said as he took an enormous bite out of his own cheken strip.

Raka was the oldest, with Lucci right behind him and Pavan the youngest. They were all within a year of one another as their mothers had each been seeded by the Traveller at roughly the same time. Trained by the Resistance's best fighters until they surpassed them as intended, they were brothers in every sense of the word, even in blood from their unknown third parent's contribution. But like brothers, Lucci treated him like the runt as he was the smallest and the youngest.

Raka shook his head then his eyes went large. He grabbed Pavan and pulled him into the darkness between two stalls. Lucci was with them, his fist already wrapped around a shard of prototaxite wood. The plants of the jungles produced fibers that were stronger than steel and twice as sharp. A moment later a platoon of beetle-armored constables marched through the crowd, which moved to either side to give them room.

Pavan recognized these men and women by their uniform. Once they had been governmental soldiers, Astunashi who were drafted into two or four long stints to keep the peace or hunt down bandits. He'd fought them, in the jungles, opening their throats or blasting them to pieces with their own weapons they had stolen. They looked like him, they spoke the same language, they knew the same gods.

But these constables that marched through now were off-worlders. They had strange hair, sometimes all over their faces, eyes that hadn't been changed by the star. They didn't care about Astunash, Pavan could see it in their faces. They were paid to enforce Hegemon law and nothing else.

A pair of Astunashi in traditional garb offering handmade spinning windmills made from dried tall-grass to people walking by. They were clapping and cheering on a street performer when one of them stepped back into a constable. Instantly the armored man took a studded club from his belt and battered one of the Astunashi. The other constables rushed forward, instantly grabbing the other man and forcing him down to be restrained and kicked again and again.

"Hold," Raka whispered and Pavan realized his hands had become fists, crushing the chicken strips and spilling the sauce. The constables passed and Raka let him go. The wooden shiv disappeared back into Lucci's sleeve.

"You see them for what they are, don't you."

"I see them, brother." Pavan let the food of these invaders fall to the ground and stepped on it. All the tastes and "advancements," were all lies. Lies spoken from the mouth of the Water Baron. A mouth Pavan promised they'd finally silence tonight.

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The weapons stash had been left in a false power box bolted to the side of a building in an alleyway. Raka knew how to read the graffiti left by fellow resistance fighters in Sphera which had been their path to this point.

"What do you think they're like?" Asked Pavan.

"Who, the other resistance groups in the city? Probably serviles working in the lower levels." Raka said, withdrawing two automat Tamais 'drummer' guns. Pavan took one, checking it methodically and noted the excellent shape of the weapon.

"Fat and lazy, living in the conqueror's house and feeding off the same—" Lucci started.

"Enough, Lucci, they struggle as we all do. And think of the risks they take everyday, always being watched. Here." Raka took a compact scattergun, the barrel sawed off. Lucci took it and gave an approving nod.

They didn't take the knives, they'd keep their own prototaxite knives, weapons they'd made themselves as children. They did take the pipe bombs, handheld prism cutter for locks and doors, and a jerry-rigged satchel bomb that Pavan knew would only be used if things went very wrong. The last item was a small dataplayer, preloaded with a cassette-cartridge, with a small square screen and simple STOP/PLAY/REVERSE plasta buttons.

When it played, it took a moment for the ribbon to find the magnetic reader, crackling to life to announce the familiar voice of the Traveller: "My sons, you do me proud for getting this far—"

"She's not our mother," Lucci growled, pushing a shell into the receiver. Pavan agreed, of course; they had only ever heard the Traveller's voice in similar recordings throughout their lives. Lives made hard by this woman's teachings and instructions to their living parents and teachers.

“By now you have seen the riches pilfered from this world, your world. This city paved over the lands of your ancestors who were driven off and killed in the name of the Hegemon’s profit. We have an opportunity now. A chance to strike down an enemy that is the architect of these atrocities.”

The screen winked on in a wash of contorting static that swirled into the recording of a grand entrance that glowed and twinkled. A red carpet had been rolled out over a blue marble balcony that bordered the building’s face, which was made up of looming statues that looked down upon a crowd that had formed, held back by masked soldiers.

Elegant chrome and gold luxury autocars slowly made their way to the carpet, depositing couples that must have been some kind of celebrities who waved and smiled as they walked into the building. People crowded around one in particular, many holding photograms that flashed as they took pictures.

Emerging was their target: the Water Baron, Omö-Hvit, a massive male who wore a suit of purest white. He looked human but like nothing that had been born on Astunash. This fact became apparent when he stood and turned, taking the hand of a much younger, elegant woman who barely came up to his waistline while her entire hand was the size of one of Hvit’s fingers. He turned and smiled, revealing a modified face that made him appear more like one of the statues in the background.

Even Raka’s typical composure broke as all three rebels grimaced and empathetically yearned to kill this tyrant. The recording stopped and the Traveller’s voice continued, “You know the face of Baron Omö-Hvit of Source Unlimited MacroCorporation because it is his face that murdered your grandfathers and drove your fathers into the wilderness. He is the face of oppression. What you do not know is that Source Unlimited is one of the largest and most influential entities in the Hegemon. What they have done to your world they have done to hundreds of others. Hvit’s master, and his parent, is Archonist Magnate Omö-Torsteändelse who sits upon the Summit Council. When he is dead it will destabilize not only market shares but the management and leadership of Source Unlimited all the way to Protea itself.”

“What is Pro-tee-ah?” Pavan said, confused.

“Just listen,” Raka nodded.

The Traveller's voice took on a different tone, the strength and confidence that had been a constant throughout Pavan's life broke and now he could hear an infinite weariness.

"Everything I have done. Everything that it took to create the three of you and the pain that life has meant for you is compensated with this night. You will kill the Water Baron. You will do whatever it takes to do so and you will accomplish this with the lessons you have been taught..."

She cleared her voice, the steel returning, "The entire revolutionary movement on Astunash waits for the conclusion of your mission, one way or another, and are united tonight throughout this city and in the surrounding territories. We're counting on you... Remember the strength of the tide and the rock of the shore..." Her tone changed, hardening,

"Seven-Red-Overt-Thirty-Two-Negligence-Sanguine... Execute."

Pavan felt his skin crawl as his head snapped to the side. A rush of pressure built up in his eardrums and memories burst from somewhere in his mind. Images of his parents waving to him, his mother's beautiful voice that sang to him, always so sad because he could live near her lest he hurt her. A boot crashed into the image and became a titan, lording over the world as fire erupted in twin geysers and waterfalls falling into the sky. Pavan would have screamed if he wasn't swallowed by black desert sands as the titan reached down to laugh at him revealing the face of the Water Baron.

The tape wound down and stopped with a click.

Pavan shook himself off. He felt incredible, strong, he could feel every part of his absolutely lethal body. He looked at Raka and Lucci who seemed to also be recovering. Had they seen the same thing?

It didn't matter, he had to save his mother. Save the world!

"Let's do it. Are you ready, brothers?" Pavan slammed the drum clip home. Raka grinned and Pavan turned to Lucci who, perhaps for the first time, looked back at him with pride.

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Do'Bai hotel took up the entire upper superstructure of Sphera city's largest skyscraper that stretched a thousand meters upward. Dozens of major bridges corkscrewed up with it, wrapping around the building like a vast spiral net before spreading out to other buildings and back down into the various districts of the megalopolis.

Security measures included roadblocks with heavy vehicles that scanned and searched any autocars that might be heading toward the Do'Bai due to the mass gathering of the system's leadership and many Patrons who had spent spans getting planetside to experience the night's beauty and revel in communal decadence.

Rotar gunships patrolled constantly, overlapping each other's flight paths and ready to respond at a moment's radio signal from corresponding units on the ground. The rooftops of dozens of buildings housed sniper nests, their spotters seeking potential threats to their employers in the upper levels. Astunash was known for its rebel activities which disrupted convoys and pipe construction. Every now and again they even assassinated Source Unlimited staff in the field or engaged against government forces even after they were bolstered by Source Unlimited mercenaries and there was talk about classifying them as a full on Unionist threat which would sanction the use of the Directorate's Army to finally burn them out of the jungles.

Yet, the rebels had never attacked Sphera city. It was believed that the Astunashi that had been 'civilized' in the slurbs served as a natural buffer to their wild kin as they were properly incentivized to report on another. Despite that, the security forces were at high alert, not wanting to risk being responsible for anything going wrong which, as was protocol, would come out of their own pay and credit.

Despite their vigilance, it meant they had no idea where to expect an attack.

Sphera city had grown from three smaller cities when Source Unlimited had sent their first acquisitionists and prospectors. After the contractual acquisition of the region sighted for development, these cities were united by roads, manufactories, and a new kosmodrome for interplanetary travel but much of the foundations remained the same. The contractors saved a fortune on intertwining the existing infrastructure with newer, Heg style, buildings like habplexes and especially a large hydroelectric plant until newer velanite plants could be built. That plant was left, now inert, but its service corridors and access ways still led into many buildings' sub-levels.

One of those was the skypiercer the Do'Bai hotel was built upon.

Pavan, Raka and Lucci went down into the sewers and through marked transit tunnels that hadn't been used in generations. Most of them were dry but others overflowed with filth and waste runoff. The three men moved through each of these with quiet efficiency, never

complaining and assisting one another in the seamless fashion they had trained all their lives to do.

They reached the abandoned hydro-plant, mold filled and forgotten. As a break they ate wax textured replenishment sticks to recover and wandered the offices and control rooms. Pavan idly touched the scattered papers and printouts where people of his great-grandfather's generation had left behind. He could not read the strange script of Astunash's past as he had only been taught the sigils and alphabet of the Hegemon's Interlex-lang.

"It's a shame," Raka said, putting down a book in the rectangular space of dust he had removed it from. "I think too much has been forgotten, sometimes."

"We'll take it back, one day," Lucci said, twisting a wheel to the next hatchway they had to ascend. "We'll knock down all their buildings and bring this one back. You wait and see." The door gave way and they were through.

They climbed ladders and pushed through barely wide enough pipes for an hour before reaching the bottom levels of the hotel. Here the building came to life with service lifts and cargo platforms taking in produce or laborers to and from their duties high above. They easily hooked onto the bottoms of an elevator and shot up a hundred levels before slipping off again and infiltrating the air exchange ducts.

Here, they made excellent time, only slowing down when they came across a nest of rats that squeaked in surprise before Lucci slaughtered them with his knife.

"Did you have to do that?" Pavan said as he pushed through puddles of viscera and blood.

"Call it loyalism to the Astunash," Lucci growled. The rat had become synonymous with the Hegemon. The invasive species had shipped in on grain shipments, quickly spreading throughout the continent and beyond. They were a plague, eating and overwhelming the local wildlife and breeding faster than anyone could kill them. What was worse is that the Heds did nothing to stop them.

They pulled themselves through the last drainage grating into a dimly lit storage room filled with more food than Pavan had ever seen in one place. Pavan found fresh markings made by their allies, likely cook or wait staff. Simple arrows pointing to a can of produce which he tossed to Lucci who quickly pried it open revealing thick red sauce and withdrawing a final

cassette and a flat reader wrapped in plasta.

“You are currently a thousand feet from the banquet chamber.” The Traveller’s voice was haggard, like she herself had been climbing. “Within, there will be close to a hundred members of the Patron class and their attendants. These are men and women from other planets who have come far and wide to drink from your world. They are the worst possible beings you can possibly imagine—”

Lucci took his knife and slit his wrist.

“-The people who defend them will be offworlders as well. Soldiers of the Directorate and mercenaries who care nothing for Astunash. Kill them before they can do their jobs which is to kill you. They are guilty of accepting profit and care nothing for your people—”

Raka stuck his thumb in his mouth and bit deeply, spurting blood.

“-You will see some Astunashi. Ignore the weakness of empathy, for they are the worst scum of all. Traitors, each of them, who have sold themselves into slavery. They cannot be allowed to infect your world when it comes time to rebuild.”

Pavan closed his eyes... And swallowed his own tongue.

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Omö-Hvit required a small couch to sit on and even then he almost completely took up both cushions with his massive bulk. He wasn’t fat, instead his body had been modified long ago to grow more mass in layers and layers. His face was modified as well, sculpted to take on the visage of the Founder, Dumno-Ualos, but he had filled the surgical lines with moving quicksilver so that it looked like he had channels of water that shifted and moved with him.

He was laughing and clapping and sharing jokes with the Patrons around him, all lit by candlelight so that, out the window behind him, the full view of stars could be enjoyed. Clusters of people shuffled about those he had chosen to be his private circle at the head of the banquet table, paying him homage and accolades as the host of this party.

It made protecting him almost impossible for Fee-Captain Harkwald.

"Are scans clean?" Harkwald asked into his wrist communicator, his other hand resting on the hidden holster beneath his dress coat. He was the closest to the ten-strong close-support team of Hvit's detail but he wished he could have had twice more. Hvit could afford it, this wasn't the only planet within his jurisdiction, but the man didn't like seeing staff of any kind if it could be helped.

"Sure, boss, as far as we can tell," one of his people looking down from the balcony above confirmed.

"As far as we can tell' is going to be one gutter of an excuse if one of these fops is carrying something. Scan it again, broaden the spectrum, anything metal."

"Metal? Boss, most of these Patrons are wearing enough gold to—"

Harkwald found the speaker and shot her a look that made the younger woman flinch. She was new, pouched out of the Tributaries and had a solid record but hadn't gotten used to personal security details, "Do your job or I'll cancel your contract and leave you on this backwater, get me?"

"Copy, boss."

He straightened his jacket and went back to staring at the man he was paid to keep alive. The Rigil Order, the MiliCorp that Harkwald worked for, was one of the best in the ExeCor and that was no small feat. Harkwald himself had been in the Armada Special Operations, the elite Tributaries of the Hegemon's military. The Omö Clan had sponsored him personally, eventually bringing him on board for personal security in the Protea system before pairing him with Hvit.

Hvit was a hard man to please but when he was he showered you with everything you might want or need. He also integrated his staff with interdependency, usually offering shares in addition to positive credit recommendations to his own banking guild. It was the best job Harkwald could ever hope for and after another few fiscal-cycles, he'd likely be moved to Lhunarka in one of the Clan mansions.

"Coming back with the Consort, Sir." Harkwald nodded, glancing as the woman Hvit had brought with him from off-world glided across the floor and returned to Hvit's side, immediately smiling and modestly laughing at the Baron's every word.

He hadn't liked it either but he could hardly blame the Baron. The Consort, who called herself Lady Eryn, was a trained professional companion from the paradise world of Cicatrix. They'd found her on the Astunash system's only orbiter station near the leyline exit point that catered to the tradelanes. Harkwald had assumed that the Baron had been initially charmed by the femme because she was from Protea but after three nights of dining and taking in the limited sights of the lonely station, the Baron had penned a quat long contract with Eryn to engage with her exclusively on his tour of the system and his return to Astunash for the nightly festivals.

A voice yelled out from his wrist receiver and Harkwald realized she'd entranced him even from here, "Boss, I've got something, Founder's balls he's got a gun—"

A heavy blast, the roar of a scattergun, exploded on the far side of the banquet room to screams of terror from the guests. Hvit turned his enormous reshaped face unable to convey shock or worry, but it was unlikely he could even feel such debilitating emotions without expressly wanting to anymore. He locked eyes with Harkwald, a hairless eyebrow arcing upward like this was somehow his own chief of security's fault.

Harkwald went for his gun and moved, putting himself in between Hvit and whatever was coming, "Element One, pull in, cover Primary, Element Two with me and secure exit protocols."

He didn't wait to hear the acknowledgements as he went low, moving between the rush of bodies and searching for a target. Hvit wasn't the only Patron with bodyguards and they fell into a natural gunline with him, advancing toward the gunfire or grabbing their own employers, dragging them to safety conduits Harkwald had assigned before the festival. What the other bodyguards didn't know was that these exits were deliberately designed to tangle as many bodies, armed bodies, between Hvit and danger.

The fire continued ahead of them, random and indiscriminate. It wasn't a spree-killer or a disgruntled laborer gone maniac, the scattergun was firing in controlled blasts, clearly a trained shooter.

"Treat grade-two." Harkwald muttered into his wrist to his people. "Priority is securing and extracting, all other parties: treat to sacrifice."

“Contact! CONTACT!”

In the running crowd of bodies he finally made out the shooter.

It was hard not to; he was a kid, just a kid. A kid whose skin was steaming red and boiling under the rags of old cloths and construction overalls. Despite his age he was clearly trained to a professional degree. Methodical, moving constantly, popping up in between furniture to fire then back down again behind a knot of people trying to get clear, using them as cover.

Harkwald hadn't been paid to keep the guests alive.

He fired through the crowd with his ATA-Mk9 Silex autosub, slicing through their bodies and demolishing the table where the shooter was hiding with armor piercing caseless rounds. The terrorist fired back, almost cutting one of the bodyguards next to Harkwald in half but that gave him the two seconds to leap over the wreckage of the cover and fire a three-round burst at point blank range.

He might have been seventeen? Possible twenty. Harkwald had two sons around the same age that he'd left across Known Space. He suppressed any emotion, thinking about how he had done his job and this idiot had thrown what little life they had away.

“Target down, there could be others.”

The kid was bleeding from his chest where Harkwald had hit him, somehow still alive and coughing up blood. Harkwald kicked the scattergun and knelt, keeping his automat up and ready. Strangely, the kid was bleeding from a deep cut on his left arm where spiderwebs of pulsating veins bulged.

“You speak Interlex, kid?” He prodded, “Are there anymore?”

The shooter looked up at Harkwald, blood welling up through clenched teeth that looked like they were becoming loose. “See you... soon, Heg...” The kid started convulsing, he'd be dead soon.

Other guards and one or two government officers that had been invited to the party stepped forward. By now the Patrons and wait staff both were gone, except for Hvit who still sat on his couch, waiting with five Rigil guards forming a human shield around him. The consort was also protecting him in what was a subtle fighting stance, a small two-shot pistol in her hands.

She's smart, Harkwald admired. They'd checked her for weapons but must have missed this one. Now, this display was likely going to get her in a negotiated marriage proposal for a decade or two with the Baron.

"Is it over?" Hvit said, his silken voice slithering out into the room. "Who was it?"

Harkwald looked at the boy. "Looks like an indigent based on planetary phenotypes. Eighteen, maybe twenty, male presenting. I'd say he's some kind of local that came from the slurbs."

"Not enough ink," one of the soldiers, an indigent himself, in the uniform of the local government military said. "He's from the equatorial zones, the jungles. Slurb folk always get inked when they join protest groups or gangs."

"How could someone get from the equator all the way here?" Harkwald said, ejecting the cylinder clip from his silex and slamming in a new one he took from his suit pocket.

"Still has a pulse, boss," one of his people said, confused.

"He's rattling out, most of his insides are outside. Do we have an 'all clear' for the rest of the hall?"

"You can feel the heat coming off of him, boss?" She bent down, looking into eyes that were still, impossibly, moving. His skin was slick with sweat but, Harkwald could feel it now, the temperature was somehow rising.

"Back up!" Could it be a bomb? He'd heard of such things, pumping some poor bastard with chemicals and organoids that could convert into a blast. As he was backing up there were second and third reports of gunfire, now the lighter rattle of automats.

"Return to Primary, we're getting out of here!"

The first shooter's body convulsed violently. Harkwald realized the new threat a full second too late as the kid's skin peeled back, like book pages burning all at once. Steam rushed from his body which, somehow, began to grow. Ropes of muscle twisted out, forming new bonds and bulging. The boy was screaming now but with two sets of vocal cords that tore into a wet explosion as his face split revealing another face beneath.

"What the—" the assembled soldiers and bodyguards turned their weapons, too slowly, at the creature as it erupted into action.

The femme agent that had been checking the boy's vitals was grabbed by her neck and yanked toward him with such force her neck was completely pulverized. If she wasn't dead by then, she was when the boy, the thing, bit her with a mouth that had doubled in size, chomping into her cheekbone and tossing her aside.

Harkwald opened fire but the thing was already moving. It lunged for the uniformed soldier, lifted him off the ground, and tore him in half in a geyser of blood and scattering organs.

"Fall back now!" He opened up, full auto, but the monster was already moving in a blur, smashing into another guard in a hurricane of blows, bones obliterated and leaving behind a sack of flesh, already moving onto the next.

Harkwald did the math and ran.

Harkwald had fought his share of altered humans but nothing like this. Most assassins or advanced operatives had at least one organoid like the adrenal reservoir he had just activated next to his thyroid as he leapt over a chair and toward his employer. Full body modification and amplification was usually in the purview of the only people who could afford it; the MacroCorps.

Rebels on a backwater planet in the process of getting a pump-and-dump shouldn't have this kind of technology. This was different and getting worse. Something, deep down in his Self, was telling him that whatever was being unleashed against the Water Baron tonight was far beyond what he or his people could handle which meant they needed to get their employer out.

He ignored the screams as they intensified, the wet sounds of flesh being torn and pulled apart. Time seemed to slow as controlled, premium adrenaline shot through his system. He saw in beautiful clarity a bodyguard from another outfit, mouth open in a scream, shells spilling from a compact automat, suddenly jerk back as a wooden knife replaced his eye, killing them instantly.

He leapt over a sprawled body, his whole world narrowing to Hvit who was slowly standing, face implacable, standing up to his full two and a half meters behind the banquet table, calmly buttoning his suit's painite buttons as if he was about to use the fresher. It was the eyes of the rest of his bodyguard detail, their slow-motion aiming at the thing behind Harkwald that told him all he needed to know was that he needed to move faster.

If a client, especially a Clan member and relative to an Archonist, died they didn't just come after your credit rating. Your entire genetic lineage took on the debt and you'd be blacklisted. Liability for such a failure had extreme consequences, and Harkwald wasn't about to lose everything he'd done to get here just to end up being indentured in some Protean corpo town.

A body sailed past Harkwald's field of vision, every limb broken, all but exploding as it hit a marble column. He could make out teeth erupting in a spray, his heightened state letting him see it all in intricate, horrible, detail.

"Kill it!" Harkwald yelled as he dove past their angle of fire. The five Rigil operatives of Element One sprayed, full rapid fire from their silex automats.

Harkwald landed on his back and saw how close he'd come to joining the victims of this massacre. The creature had been inches away from him, long distended arms that ended in talons of ten digits. Hundreds of bullets riddled its body, slicing through the ribbons of muscle in a storm of firepower. The thing that had once been a kid roared but was driven back.

His people kept the fire up, advancing, as Harkwald got up and reached Hvit's side, "We have to get you out of here, Sir." He even dared to touch him, his hand feeling the strangely thick body of the Water Baron who looked down at him with amusement.

"Alright, Free-Captain, she comes with us."

Harkwald glanced at Lady Eryn who looked frightened but was still holding the knife defensively, "Yes, Sir."

Weapons fire was rattling off from above which meant the only exit was a servile passageway, but they had to get there first.

A second attacker landed from above, right into Element One's firing line. They reacted as best they could, as best as Harkwald had trained them, firing on instinct rather than aiming. The creature moved fast, a skinless blur, moving between the strobing gouts of flame and into the bodyguards. It lashed out, chopping through men and women and leaving only pieces and blood.

Harkwald opened up with his own weapon and bit back the guilt of shooting through his own people.

They're dead anyway.

This is my job.

I need to live.

It's not my fault.

Harkwald saw bullets hit but only pass through cords of muscle that vibrated with impact but weren't pierced or cut. Overgrowths of bone from twin human physiologies chipped but did not shatter. None of it slowed the attacker down as he lifted up the last Rigil bodyguard and hurled him into the ceiling before turning on Harkwald.

A full tube spent, his fingers burning from the metal, he pushed away the growing terror and instead of going for more useless bullets he went for his final option. The creature seemed to consider Harkwald but then focused on Hvit, just behind him.

"For Astunash!" The thing that was once a person howled through rows of overgrown teeth and kicked forward, arms and claws extended.

The theatrics gave Harkwald the time he needed to reach, prime, and toss the concussion grenade. It was a contact device, high grade, and it cracked open to unleash a maelstrom of light, sound and enough electricity to stop an Andosian bull. The shockwave knocked the creature off its trajectory, making it clutch at its eyes and the holes of its ears in pain.

Rigil staff all wore lenses grafted to their eyes that provided a variety of perks that included flash-shielding. Harkwald felt little more than a pinch as the device in his eyes flexed a nictitating membrane over his pupils that darkened the flash to a fraction of its actual value.

It meant he could see Hvit step forward, pulling Lady Eryn back protectively with one arm and, with the other, strike his would-be attacker with a skull sized fist directly in the center of his chest. Bullets hadn't broken the creature's bones but whatever the Water Baron had done as part of his enhancements did.

The creature's chest burst apart, he flew back, head over heels and skipping across the banquet table which collapsed under the impact. It groaned, twitching, then stopped moving.

Hvit recovered and brushed off his suit before straightening and turning to Lady Eryn who had stumbled and was now fixing her dress, "Are you alright, my dear?"

"Yes, thank you—" She was out of breath, touching her hair and face in shock.

Harkwald joined Hvit, "We need to go now, sir!"

Hvit nodded, amused, "They're using Switchskins."

∞

Pavan's sense of Self had been shoved back into the deep folds of his mind, barely conscious, like someone in a tree observing people moving in the distance. Except that one of those people was him, his body, darting and leaping and killing the way he'd been trained. It came to him in moments, flashes, like he was dreaming which, of course in a way, he was.

The Traveller had called them Biphasic Homo-Allomorphic Chimeras with numbers and letters before and after or, simply, *Switchskins*. Pavan, Raka and Lucci were the result of the Traveller implanting their mother's wombs with ovum and seed harvested from others like them. In a way, two babies formed in one body. Pavan was the surface and... the thing killing dozens of people like a manifested nightmare was what they collectively called their "Switch."

Induced by high stress or pain, the chemical process caused a violent growth of altered muscle and bone. Pavan's skin would be absorbed or slough off while the Switch would emerge to create an amalgamated crimson devil, a muscle-pink and tendon-white horror that could move faster, take more damage and unleash attacks that could put a dent in nusteel nevermind pulverize the biological constitution of a human being.

Lucci had been the distraction, taking longer to turn due to his incredible level of control and drawing the Hogs to his position while Raka and Pavan had infiltrated the upper levels. They had used suppressors to quickly dispatch staff and guests alike with an indiscriminate efficiency before the change took them at the balcony's edge.

Raka had seen the Water Baron and made the first attempt, as they had planned. Eradicating the remaining bodyguards, Pavan had watched him get within a hand's breadth before the concussion grenade had taken him and the Water Baron struck him.

The Traveller had said to expect the unexpected. Patrons changed their bodies in ways like the switchskins had been made. Toughened and strengthened bodies or faster healing and organs that could make them immune to poison or fire. Infused with the wonders of the Hegemon's

star spanning influence, they sought to become impervious to the universe that largely hated them. That's why Pavan had hung back: he was the contingency. The resistance couldn't afford a single plan but layers of responses to any number of capabilities the Hogs could pull out of the bottomless well of the military industrial triplex.

They were moving now. The pretty woman, the bodyguard, and the Water Baron. He could see them, distant, like looking down a reversed monoscope from his vantage point at the ends of his existence.

Lucci was still fighting, his Switch having fully taken over and would rage against the Hogs until he collapsed from wounds or exhaustion. When he turned back into his Self they would either kill him or capture him. Pavan could sense Raka's broken body, hear his unique heartbeat struggling to try and repair his exposed chest cavity.

Pavan and his brethren had never died, at least not for long. Merciless life always returned to their bodies no matter how beaten, shot, set on fire or stabbed, they always recovered eventually as their cells stitched back together. But then, they had never fought against a creature enhanced like themselves.

Which was why he was priming the satchel bomb.

Lucci was able to hold back on his change, Raka the most willed and able to slow his metamorphosis and control his bloodlust. Pavan was the most abstract, the most human. His sense of Self did not dissolve entirely in rage and the thrilling animalistic psychology of his Switch. Despite being far from full governance of his body, he still could retain the means to use tools and weapons in his altered state.

He fastened it to his body and flung himself from the balcony to give chase.

Fear had been something managed and controlled in the first century of his life. Hvit's mother had taught him as a child that the meanderings of the Self must be controlled in reaction to the many failures of human biology and reactionary emotions. She had given him a single decade to learn as much as possible at her side as an Archonist of the Summit Council. That time had been worth an incalculable fortune of her care and attention as she nurtured his understanding of trade and business. He now used this wisdom to manage a fraction of her MacroCorporation.

He had layered this not only with his primed psychology but with modifications of the finest organoids. Afterward he had grown himself a new body, sacrificing fiscal-cycles of immobility to be reborn into the titan he now was. He would destroy these flawed, overly expensive, products of a human provolvment program from a bygone era whose science had somehow survived to this day to be used by a bunch of terrorists.

How proud she would one day be of him and the worlds he had syphoned, feeding the brightest points of civilization like Kandia and Protea itself. One day she would call him back to her side, to learn again the intricacies of galactic mercantilism and the inner mysteries of—

“Where are we going?” Lady Eryn, he’d almost forgotten her, thinking of his mother. His mother. Lady Eryn looked like his mother, maybe that’s why he had been so taken by her?

“To my personal rotar, have no fear!” He twittered, his voice a subtle soprano he had altered for he loved the dichotomy of his massive size to the evirato delicacy that formed his words. “It is housed on a private landing pad nearby, Harkwald?”

“Yes, Sir, just through the kitchens.” Harkwald was sweating, the peak rush of his additional adrenal gland already starting to expire. Hvit didn’t like his staff relying on such things, they should be the very best that New Mankind can produce. He’d consider this for later.

Harkwald kicked the door open, staff screaming and cowering in the kitchens that were supposed to be feeding the hundred course dinner Hvit had planned. There were rare breeds of animals from across the Thousand Empires ready for preparation by a band of chefs from Cicatrix personally sponsored by Berserang Multi-Stellar.

All wasted now.

They moved past rows of burners with stinking blackened meat and vegetation in pots and pans. Hvit considered the cost, abstractly, looking at a fragment of ice weeping in a puddle on the floor. It had been stolen from the Servadak comet by his personal water seekers, requiring a full fiscal-cycle to chase down and intercept as it made its way between star systems.

Fifty staff, trained and with fully paid life-assurances, had perished bringing it here to be served as refreshment between courses.

Hvit felt anger rise up through the many borders of his psyche. The wonders of the universe, brought here to be cherished, so blatantly disregarded and ruined by what? Freaks that had

been twisted by poor science and a false dream and stuck into children.

Such a waste!

The doors behind them exploded, the heavy wood doors reduced to splinters in a hurricane of motion. Two waitstaff were eviscerated by proximity alone while kitchenware was tossed as a third Switchskin barrelled through the kitchen directly at Hvit.

Harkwald was there, blasting with his automat that did nothing to slow the creature down. He died, the gun yanked out of his hands so fast his fingers were ripped from their sockets. The Switch backhanded him, decapitating him entirely and sending his body spinning into the stove where his body erupted in fire and grease.

Hvit calculated all of this with the same measure that he could subdivide how many drops of water were in a glass or how he could infer the origin of a spring. He moved forward as the Switch's body, a twisted mass of two men trapped in a single body, was contracting into a new stance after killing Harkwald.

He struck the Switch, cracking its skull in a spurt of blood followed by a massive uppercut that missed, caving the ceiling above. Another sweep dislodged a bolted table, the Switch a red blur as it danced back. Hvit struck out blindly, anticipating the next dash and connected with his assassin's elbow, sending him sprawling over another table.

The kitchen's flame retardant system initiated, spitting ammonium and retardant gel in a steady rain. The room filled, making it hard to see, giving the Switch some reprieve where it scurried somewhere. He would crush it.

"You can't win." Hvit called out, cracking his knuckles. He looked over at Harkwald's cooling body and searched for Lady Eryn who must be hiding somewhere. Poor woman. But he'd make her safe.

Hvit smiled. Physical prowess had been a fleeting enjoyment and one he hadn't focused on. He preferred the weight and journey of water, the management of its complicated transport and the universal need every living thing had for it. But this felt good, crushing an opponent with simple strength and brute thinking.

A blur of motion meant the Switch had recovered. Hvit raised his arm just as a carving knife, pilfered from the chef's belongings, plunged at him in all four hands of his assailant.

This was curious. Hvit had studied the Education Module regarding new Unionist rumors and capabilities. Nevermind the proliferation of atomika weapons, these Switchskins had been appearing on the Fringe and in the Bhosnaya conflict zones. Now they were in the Midworlds on Astunash which wasn't in itself surprising, but the module had said that once changed, a Switch could not use tools.

It attacked now in a flurry of stabs and slashes into Hvit's ivory white suit, its arakine-silk fraying and tearing in bursts of blue sparks. He'd spent a tael's worth of Astunash water to have his clothing incorporate a Grade-1 series of nexlock nodes to protect him, but the Switch changed his attacks, aiming for Hvit's hands, face, and anywhere the field didn't cover.

Hvit swatted back and forth, trying to grab the smaller creature who seemed to always be one step ahead. Perhaps after he was done killing this thing, he'd bring its remains to contacts he had with some greymarket gene-shapers who might be able to backward engineer the bastard.

The knife was suddenly in his face, carving into his left eye socket.

Hvit grunted, jerking his head to the right and yanking the blade from the Switch's hand with the bone of his eye socket. It left the Switch open and off balance so that Hvit could finally land a blow in a cacopheny of snapping ribs. The Switch fell back, moaning.

Hvit wasn't worried about the cuts, he was already focusing on his skin to close the wounds. He'd have to replace his eye but that would be no issue. The real issue was his suit, dirtied and cut to pieces, how would he look when he was received, looking like a common thug? How would opinions change?

He would need to become the victim, abused by these anarchists. The shareholders would want to know what happened. He'd need to make sure the right people survived this, people that could confirm that no fault came onto Source Unlimited.

"We fought for our lives! Yes, just look upon my face and see!" That's it, yes, he'd need to show how no one could have done any better. A Baron almost murdered, he'd be hailed a hero!

The extinguishers shut off, leaving silence and flickering lights. Hvit could still hear gunfire outside in the banquet hall. There was no way he could fight more than one of these, as much as he hated to admit it.

He needed to move, *run*! Get to the rotar!

"They'll laugh at me. Say I skimmed on security!" He shouted at himself when two knives came at him in quick succession but the nexlok fields sent them skittering away. "I'll blame the Directorate. They should have been here! The rebels— no! The Unionists are now armed with weapons of terror! Why wasn't a Regiment here? Yes, that's good." He considered which info-channels he had good connections to in-system and how to spin the story.

The Switch was behind him, grabbed him by the leg and sent him toppling, face first into the ground. Hvit's nose broke, flattened by his own weight. He rolled and kicked but the Switch was gone.

"No... The Directorate is blameless, it's the local government that failed!" Hvit's voice was a squeak. Why couldn't he control his voice anymore? He turned over, struggling to his feet and slipping on his own blood. "Why is Source Unlimited subject to so many local taxes? Where were our defenders that we paid for? Yes, that works. The Astunashi indigens are ungrateful, they hate us for how we have civilized their world!" A chair smashed into his head, pulverizing his left ear and leaving a ringing on one side.

He'd write a datagram to the Summit Council! Decry this wanton violence— "And just look at what they did to my face!" Disfigurement would go well in the opinion polling. He stumbled and realized abstractly that his ankle was broken. Was he breathing heavily?

"I see what I did to your face," the voice was layered, both calm and enraged at the same time. "It's not nearly good enough, Baron."

The Switch was standing in front of him, blocking the doorway that would lead to the stairway to his rotar. How dare he deny anyone's mobility and right of choice!

Hvit pulled himself up and, for the first time, really looked at the Switchskin. It was taller than a normal sized man, all exposed muscle and overgrown tendons. Bone ridges formed into blocky growths over kneecaps, knuckles, but most threatening was the split skull that reformed like a helmet around an inner noseless face.

The lipless mouth, stretched obscenely, opened and words rumbled out as four eyes regarded Hvit with such hate that, for the first time in a long, long time, Hvit finally realized he was terrified.

"I can pay." Was all he could squeak out.

"Nowhere near enough." The two hands on his right arm closed into a single interlaced fist.

Hvit hadn't felt afraid since his adolescence, when the universe had become indifferent to his loneliness and fear. When he had longed for his mother to return from Protea she never would and the Clan caregivers would raise him with prods and punishment.

He loved his mother, where was she now? He wanted her here.

Where was Lady Eryn?

He was bleeding, more than he had noticed and he could feel pain creeping from them as he lost his ability to focus. They were deep, through the first and second layers of additional dermis and muscle and protective fat. How had he not noticed?

He needed to get out of this. Time to reason.

"I can pay, my friend." He opened his hands, "You wouldn't believe how much. I can make you the sole owner of everything you've ever wanted."

"Pay." It wasn't a question but Hvit pushed on it. Sometimes you had to lead the momentum of a negotiation whether someone wanted to or not.

"I'll be entirely honest with you, I'm impressed!" Hvit gestured at the destroyed kitchen. "You know who I am?" He smiled at his assassin, "Clearly! I doubt you and your compatriots could have imagined it would be this costly. But it's not too late!" He hunched slightly, showing that his wounds should be enough. They did a good job, but there wasn't a need to keep going.

"What is it that Source Unlimited can give you? The jungles? Have them! Reduce syphoning? Consider it done! We can be reasonable in the spirit of New Mankind!"

The Switch's head tilted, like a canid expecting a treat. Then it bit the air in what was the strangest, inhuman thing the skinless monster had done yet.

He pounced, a single bounding leap up into Hvit's face. Hvit willed his body to do something, anything, but the fear coursing through him seemed to slow everything. He was lethargic, raising his hands up in a pathetic block as the Switch landed on him, disgusting arms and legs leveraging purchase and starting to headbutt him again and again.

Hvit took a step back, fingers slipping on the thin strands of muscle, failing to gain purchase.

The Switch shoved a hand into his mouth and used it as a handle while the other smashed into his missing eye, caving the orbital bone. He felt all of it now, more pain than he could possibly have imagined. His enhanced nervous system pumped a cocktail into him to counteract his spiking heart rate, to rejuvenate the failing organs and organoids, to quench the insanity of pain rising up to swamp his consciousness!

He screamed, a high pitched preening, and ran straight into the door, caving it and the frame in. It saved him, knocking off the Switch as it was driven through the formacrete. Only after, rushing down the stairs, did Hvit distantly realize the Switch had yanked his jaw out of his face.

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Pavan looked at the Baron's jaw in his hands, momentarily confused as to how the man could possibly still be alive as he continued screaming and gurgling down the staircase. He could feel his Self returning which meant that he had run out of time and this, all this, was about to fail.

His empty hand touched the satchel-bomb on his chest. If he detonated it now he might still kill the target. Not for sure, but he wouldn't be able to slow the madmen down now and guns or knives wouldn't do the kind of damage clearly needed. They had failed.

He had failed. His Switch howled in empathic pain.

His fingers touched detonator pin when—

The woman, the courtesan, appeared, her hand gently touching his.

"Remember the tides. The shore. The water." She said the null-phrase, cutting through his Switch's comprehension and pulled his Self to the fore. For a brief moment in his mind's eye he passed the Switch, a creature of tortured meat, teeth and black eyes that looked pleadingly at him before being shoved by an invisible force in the place where Pavan had been watching from.

Pavan's strength ebbed, body parts beginning to force themselves back together and a layer of pathetic skin started to grow back like a quickly forming rash. He groaned and collapsed, his insides twisting with a life of their own into place, bones dislocating and flexing back to their original shapes.

"It's okay, Pavan." That voice, the voice of the Traveller? How was that possible? "I'll finish the mission. Try and survive. You did well, you did everything right." He felt a kiss on his forehead and she was gone.

∞

She had gone by many names, too many, on as many worlds throughout Known Space. Here she was Lady Eryn, to the Switchskin boys she'd made almost two decades ago she was the Traveller. To the Baron she would be Death.

She flitted down the stairway, seeing where the Baron had leaned into the wall tiling and left broken holes. He was going insane, feeling far too much then he had ever expected to. Pain and hurt, uncontrolled and unasked for, inflicted by a young man that belonged to a world he was killing. She knew the layers of physical pain and psychological uncertainty was something few Patrons of his stature could comprehend anymore. With their wealth, they grew too far from 'basic' levels of comprehension. To be so rudely reminded of their frailty was often enough to require years of recovery.

The bridge leading to the rotar extended out like a petal from a flower, a sloping extension of the Do'Bai hotel. Two guards had died, crushed underfoot and reduced to splashes of human corpses where the Baron had run over them. She ignored them and put all speed into getting to the rotar which was spinning up.

She could see him, sitting on the rear passenger couch having left the hatch open. His eyes were wide, the ruin of his mouth bleeding and his tongue loose, barely hanging onto its roots. She yelled his name! Pleading, panicked, begging him to save her.

She had sculpted her face to match his mother's, ever so slightly. She'd spent a fiscal-cycle learning Archonist Magnate Omö-Torsteändelse's every mannerism and subtly she could from visutel captures before deploying them against her son who she had seduced.

He looked at her, eyes filled with tears and terror. His tongue flapped beneath his upper mandible, slick with arterial blood. He leaned toward her, unable to stand in the rotar, his arms out like a baby.

She made her face smile as she ran, the silks of her dress flapping in the rotar blade's propellers. She forced tears to well up into her eyes, made herself feel emotion as she had

been trained centuries ago to do.

She'd lived too long. Seen too much of what the Hegemon of a Thousand Empires did to people and entire ecosystems. Some part of her had hoped that her Switchskins could have killed this abomination of a human being she now ran toward but a part of her had known that it would always end this way.

Plans within plans within plans.

Her heeled foot touched the landing skid and she took his hand in hers, fastening it as the craft began to rise.

She had served her part.

The Union would rise on Astunash.

The true fight to save this world would begin.

And not just here. One day all of Known Space would rise up.

He was gurgling something, his eyes soft, comforted by her. She smiled, letting his provolved strength lift her up next to him, close, in a lover's embrace as her other hand pulled the pin, closing her eyes so that the last thing in this existence wouldn't be the face of the Water Baron.

∞

The side of Do'Bai tower was engulfed in a sheet of superheated violet plasma. The satchel had been specially designed by Unionist bomb makers out-system. Instead of conventional explosives they had designed a weapon that used velanite.

The Water Baron's escape ship was instantly reduced to its base atoms, utterly annihilated along with the landing platform. A sphere for forty stories of the tower cut into the superstructure that caused thousands of tonnes of fused glass and formacrete to avalanche down onto the city below. Secondary explosions within the sky piercer took down more of the building, forcing the tower to sway and almost snap before the nusteel moorings groaned back into place.

The explosion could be seen for hundreds of kilometers, festivities halting and confused Consumers looking up to see the jewel of Sphere city begin to burn. In the dark of the night, the blaze lit the mercantile district, visible even from space with the unaided eye.

Every law enforcement contractor, governmental soldier and corpo mercenary turned their vehicles or started running toward the fire. The collateral fiscal damage of such an event would affect all their contracts and if the Water Baron was hurt, each of them would be considered responsible as per their operating agreements with Source Unlimited. This combined terror caused even more havoc as autocars rammed through shocked pedestrians or panicked officers started shooting randomly at anyone they thought was aiding the attack.

They left their posts empty. Checkpoints open and unguarded. Everything was focused on getting as many first-responders to the site as fast as possible.

Which meant no one was looking as the northern boundaries of Sphera city lit up with vehicle activation as the Astunashi guerilla army, waiting for just this signal, roared to life and crossed the border. Armed with pilfered weapons and more powerful technology given by their offworld Unionist allies, they were finally ready to take their world back from Source Unlimited.