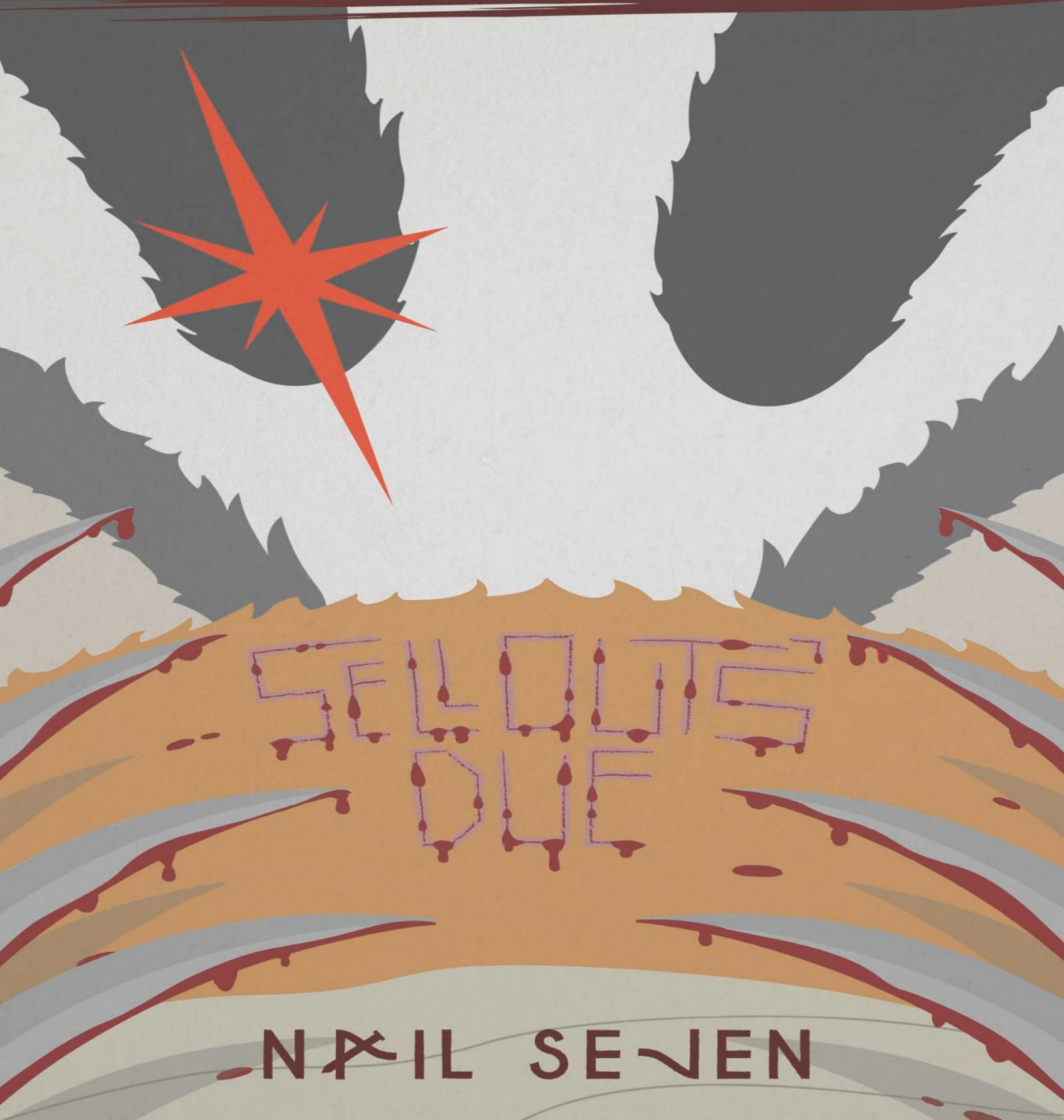


ZOKOSIC



NÆIL SE~JEN

# **ZOOKOSMIC**

*Sellout's Due (Sample Edition)*

A Novel By Nail Seven

This book contains scenes and situations that some may find distressing or upsetting, including extreme violence, copious swearing, and acts of war.

Recommended for readers ages 16 or older.

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents either are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, events, or locales, is entirely coincidental.

Copyright © 2025 Nail Seven

First Edition

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced or used in any manner without written permission of the copyright owner except for the use of quotations in a book review or as an image taken from at least twenty feet away at night.

Contact the author at: [nailseven1993@gmail](mailto:nailseven1993@gmail.com)

# 1: Right Side Of The Wrong Bed

The old leather seat groaned in protest as several Gs of force pushed its occupant against the hard cushions, the faint rip of some seam giving way, lost amid the other noises of protest the ship was currently making. Fennick let out a little groan himself as his patchwork Z-09 fighter hit the apex of its sharp banking turn and the pressure on him lessened. Or it should have.

Instead, it only got more intense as the hasty welds on the wings failed with an audible series of metallic snaps and he was sent careening downward, gravity and centrifugal force pushing him back into the seat until he felt unable to breathe as the whole frame of the craft started to come apart at the hastily mended seams. Outside the windshield, the snowy ground of Corsic was rapidly approaching with every spin and the controls were dead in his hands despite his fevered thrashing at them. Piece by piece was torn away until the whole craft disintegrated around him and the fox was left to meet planet alone.

Fennick hit the ground and felt the world spinning around him as he rolled out of his bunk and onto the floor of the motel dormitory, gasping for air and looking around to see if he had landed in heaven or hell. A few of the other occupants gave him quizzical looks and one even snickered, which prompted him to quickly scurry back inside the tiny sleeping area and shut the door. Heart racing a mile a minute, Fennick took a moment to clear his head of the screaming engines and phantom gravitational forces that he could still feel hanging off him.

“And I was doing so good...” he complained as he rubbed his eyes.

There was a knock on the hatch and a deadpan synthetic voice addressed him. “Occupant... Fennick Stratus, your reservation of this bunk has one hour remaining. If you would like to extend your reservation of the this bunk by another twenty four hours, please make a payment at the front desk. Otherwise, you are asked to free the space for the next occupant. Please confirm you have received this warning.”

“Yeah I got it.” he yelled back and was met with the fading sound of motorized footsteps followed by a similar message directed at someone else.

He pulled his palm computer out of his jacket pocket and flicked the screen over to his banking application with the vain hope in his heart that he would be surprised. He wasn't. His housing budget was currently depleted. Flat zero. He mulled over dipping into his maintenance funds but he would rather have to sleep in his ship and be sore than be caught broke when something important finally failed. He rolled out of his bunk again and this time stood up to stretch, feeling his whole back throb from the impact with the cold tile floor, rubbing it gingerly as he headed to bathroom.

After a lukewarm shower and a pricey pain reliever, he grabbed a complimentary coffee off the table by the door and pressed the activation button on the chemical heater in the bottom of the cup as he strolled towards the main lobby. The sizzle of the device was lost in the din of the lobby where all manner of mercenaries, prostitutes, and unfortunate travelers through Coldtower station mingled among the worn out plastic furniture and half empty vendor machines.

The far wall had an array of tiny glass windows nearly a foot thick that looked out onto a starry black void with the bleak, snowy surface of Corsic rising into frame from one side. The whole station slightly shook at regular intervals as the bulky and angular Veon Federation cruisers and supply haulers passed by, seemingly unaware of the tiny maintenance port turned colony orbiting their latest planetary addition. Fennick plopped down near the chilly view and got to work.

His PC connected to the motel's network router and at a tap of his finger his job browser addon started to automatically collect and sort the available postings on a few sites according to his filters. Unsurprisingly, most of the work was for manual labor or production line spots with a few wartime employers looking for cheap, or desperate, pilots, guards, and haulers. That was mostly local stuff, though. Fennick briefly considered skimming over the government and corporate listings but those were bogged down in a sea of VFed recruitment spam and propaganda, especially lately.

A shadow fell on the fox as a wolf in Coalition colors loomed overhead to access the public router on the wall behind him. She held her PC close to the access node and there was a ping as it registered her authority and added a new article to the local public information site. A scattering of digital alert noises then rang out across the lobby as the

various devices in range updated their lists, Fennick's included. He tapped the popup and saw the flag of the Coalition next to the line "A Great Freelancer Opportunity!". Usually there would follow some fluff about joining a planetary military, buying bonds, or some other form of nationalistic scam but this was more official and came with the seal of the Yggweh Forum. There was a lot of bloated paragraphs extolling the virtues of service to the common good and the like but the actual content was very interesting, bringing to attention the creation of the Coalition's new Mercenary Combat Wing and PMC contractor program, inviting applicants to sign up on Hedirun.

"Military wage..." Fennick mumbled as he skimmed, "negotiable contracted employment... room and board... hiring all positions but space combat preferred..."

"They're desperate," someone said nearby and the fox's ears pricked up, "either the war's almost over and they know it or they want to fight Veon *and* the cartels."

The babble of background discussion was lost to Fennick as he weighed just how desperate for work he was at the moment. He had been living fine enough off of local escort and fire support gigs and had even fostered his own little network of clients, though the landslide victory of the new, very pro-Federation planetary Congress had sent most of them packing for safer places to do their non-regulated business. Sure, there were always corporate security or transport gigs but there was a high chance that his only payment at the end of those would be doled out in the form a few laser pulses to his engines or a plasma bolt to the cockpit. He hadn't quite hit a deep enough level of desperation to roll the dice on that as you needed a decent reputation to make it easier to just pay you over wiping you out and saving the money. He turned his attention back to reality as someone started shouting.

"Corsic won't die! Corsic won't die!" a sparrow squawked loudly as he tried to hand out pamphlets to the people assembled. "It is not too late! If we all make our voices heard we can get Tenner and his goons impeached, hold a fair election, and show them we don't want 'em! If we unite once again, we turn towards our common enemy!"

"Go try the lockup, you asshole!" someone jeered.

Other people started throwing insults as well and the patriot decided it was time to split. “Remember people, *WE* can do this! *WE* have the power!” he called back as he exited.

A beer bottle grazed his head and he vanished around the corner with a squawk. Excitement over, Fennick turned back to the advert. This Merc Wing was almost certainly going to be the Coalition’s way to save their actual soldiers by throwing up a wall of greedy freelancers to soak up those artillery and armor salvos. However, it did pay *very* well for contracted service and included room and board, very attractive things to someone without much money or current sleeping options. That also meant that there would most likely be an interview to weed out the wanted men and con artists and that certainly came loaded with a background check and regular close observation, two things that historically seemed to hurt Fennick’s chances of receiving a paycheck.

His head started to hurt from the extra calculation it was being forced to do so he typed up a note to remind himself to look into it later. Maybe he’d ask a seasoned merc about it if he could find one willing to chat. Downing the rest of his coffee, he threw the empty container at the trash can, missed, and left it to roll amongst the rest of the refuse on the floor around it. Accepting that he was losing his bunk, Fennick headed back and packed up his things before taking them to his dock. At least that reservation was cheap. Go figure.

The mall-sized station was the same as ever as he passed through, its outdated utilitarian design overwritten by an attempt at modernization that was not quite comforting but at least familiar. Most of the population on any given day were on their way somewhere else with few permanent residents, though the colony also housed a “diplomatic” Coalition squadron as per the Peace Court’s mandates, making the blue, green, and yellow seal commonplace as they ensured they were seen.

As expected, the group of pilots and their support team were in the cafeteria, sitting at their usual table as they ate their heavily processed lunch and warily watched the people moving around them. Many local businesses thought that hosting Coalition forces was just asking for trouble and there had been a few scuffles and quite a lot of yelling about it since about a month ago when they had arrived. It hadn’t come to blows just yet but with

the way things were heating up planetside, it would come to open hostility soon enough.

The fox bought a cheap breakfast bar from a vending machine and ate it on the way to the docks that hung below the station like a metal honeycomb. As he entered the code to his space he saw fresh scratch marks on the panel where someone had tried to pry it open to no doubt bypass the computer, with little success.

Once inside, the lights automatically flickered on to reveal his Lexxon Rough-Rider, a light combat craft that was basically a sealed, souped up civilian atmo-pounder with some guns, light shields, and armor plates attached. It was the kind of affordable, upper-mid range vehicle that important officials and criminals drove, a ship that could take a few hits and dole out a few in turn but relied on better warriors to win its battles. She was bulky, rickety, and liable to throw fits but she was his moneymaker and so he was forced to love her.

Fennick hit his keypad and the hatch opened outward to reveal a worn interior full of his worldly possessions. Crates of cheap food supplies, bags of clothes, and even a big beanbag chair took up the vast majority of the passenger and storage space, leaving only a tight passage through for him to access the cockpit. He jammed his overnight bag into the pile and started up the aging vehicle for a systems check. He held his hands together and prayed for green lights only as the systems panel slowly lit up with the energy of an old woman getting out of bed. There was a single red light denoting a leak in one of the reactor coolant tanks but that had been around for a while now and he pretty much ignored it. It was cheaper to just buy coolant more often and clean up the mess than pay the high cost of getting the tank replaced. Speaking of which...

He unlocked the access panels and grabbed a blue plastic jug and a funnel, using them to refill the appropriate tank. Once that was done he grabbed some duct tape and wrapped another piece over the crack in the side, also covering up the last few pieces which had been steadily eaten away by the caustic chemicals. When that task was done he locked the panels back up and headed out to wash his hands before his fur fell out.

On the way back from the bathroom down the hall, he passed an open dock and saw the back end and tail of a gecko bent over the internals of a ship somehow worse off than his. He was muttering to himself and Fennick



stopped to watch as his whole body stiffened and there came the clang of some tool hitting metal as he dropped it.

“Shit! No! Come on... So close!” he groaned as he practically forced himself into the compartment trying to reach it, legs flailing in the air.

He eventually gave up and pulled his torso out, noticing Fennick at the entrance as he wiped the grime off of his face. The fox tried to make it look like he had been walking by but was too late as the squeaky voice of the reptile rang out.

“Hey you, can you help me out?”

Fennick winced but headed back to lean against the doorway. “What?”

“You’ve got long arms, can you get my spanner for me? I can’t reach...”

He sounded so defeated that Fennick actually felt bad for him and he didn’t look too threatening so he easily retrieved the tool.

“Maybe try tying a cord around it and your wrist next time.” he offered as he handed it back.

“Oh! That’s a good idea!”

“Yeah, sure. Bye.” Fennick started to leave but suddenly turned on his heel as a thought struck him. “Hey, you know anything about that Merc Wing the Coalition has going on? Just heard about it today.”

“Yep! I’m heading to Hedirun to sign up after I get my ship ready. I was headed to Aygon originally but this sounds too good to pass up. I guess news takes a while to reach out here, huh?”

“So you aren’t afraid you’ll be the meat shield for their real soldiers?”

“Oh, I’m not applying for a combat position, I’m a certified mechanical technician, so I’ll be away from the front line.”

“Ah. Nevermind then.” Fennick turned to go again.

“Wait!” the gecko yelped suddenly. “Would you be willing to help me finish readying her up? I’ll pay you for your time.”

“No friends to call?”

“You can just say no, dude...”

Fennick wanted to get back to his own business but this guy seemed desperate and even if it was a just few bucks, it was easy money for

relatively little work. He'd probably just be lifting and holding things, plus, a grateful technician might be willing to tidy up his own ship issues for free.

"Alright, alright, sure. I'm Fennick" The fox held out his hand.

"Leslie Gambol, but I usually go by Spud." the lizard said with relief as he shook it vigorously.

"Spud? Like potatoes?"

"Cause that's how I'm shaped!"

"Did that name chase you from school? Because I was Fa-" Fennick stopped himself mid sentence as memories of high school flooded his brain. "Well I won't say it but I had a *really* bad nickname."

"No, *I* chose it, because potatoes are delicious and everyone likes them!"

"Okay..." Fennick said as he moved over to look at Spud's ship and shift the conversation. "So, what needs doing here?"

A cursory examination of the ship made Fennick realize that no matter what, he was not going to be paid enough. It was an Intia Umbra, a notoriously trouble prone model to start with, and one that appeared to have been rescued from a scrap yard. Entire systems had been pulled out and wires and components were laying scattered about compartments alongside manuals and printed out instructions. Once he saw that the life support system was sitting on the floor by a shelf with the foam buffers still around it, he stopped the assessment and headed back to Spud.

"Look man, I know you probably know machine stuff better than I do but unless you get a professional team to rebuild this thing you'll be taking off by the end of the year, and that's a conservative estimate. I don't like saying no to easy cash but you're delusional if you think two people can fix this thing in the next few months. How the hell did it even end up in this state?"

"Well, I bought the frame as salvage, ordered the stuff I needed off of the secondary market, then had them all shipped here after I was dropped off. I figured it would take me a few weeks but then I kept finding problems and then some of the parts weren't in the best condition..." Leslie trailed off.

Fennick felt really bad for him. Getting scammed by trying to save a few bucks was the bad memory of his first vehicle. Two years of savings

spent on a crapbox missing most of its internal systems had taught him a hard life lesson about why certification was important and the fees were worth it.

“Well, uh, you said you’re not planning to fly for the Coalition, right? So as long as you get there you’ll be fine?”

Spud took a seat on a removed module frame and moped. “I guess, but I used most of my savings getting all the parts and transporting them here. And I have loans to pay off so system transit is a little out of my price range right now. I’ve been surviving on nutrient bars for weeks now.”

Fennick patted him on the shoulder. “I like you, so tell you what: I can make room in *my* ship since I was going to check out this Merc Wing business anyway. You can hitch a ride with me since you don’t seem liable to be a killer or a thief. I even know a guy here you can sell this lost cause to, that way you can make some of your money back as well. In return, you can help me patch up my ride. Best deal you’re gonna get on this station.”

Spud looked at the disassembled wreck of the ship he had been laboring over with a face full of regret before he sighed and stood up, walking over give the side a hug and a kiss. “You were going to be so beautiful... I’m sorry.”

Fennick politely looked away from the emotional moment and called his scrapper.

...

Spud clutched the wad of cash in his hands as he and Fennick left the dock where a crew were preparing their tools to cut up the Umbra for easier transport. The man in charge had gone into almost graphic detail about how they were going to tear the Umbra apart, melt it down, and sell the metal to a gunsmith he knew, walking Fennick and Spud through the process while he counted out the money. The gecko had a haunted look, like he’d just sold his own child to an exotic meat kitchen. His mood immediately changed, however, when he saw Fennick’s Rough-Rider.

“Ooh, A classic RR! In decent shape, too!” He circled the ship and opened the door. “I hope the interior is still orig-” He stopped dead as he met the wall of stuff that occupied most of the interior space. “Oh.”

“Don’t worry, there’s room behind the pilot seat. You’ll have to stand but it’ll work.”

Spud pulled a cracked plastic bin off of the pile and peeked inside. “These are empty coolant bottles...”

“And they’re worth money when you recycle them.” Fennick chided him.

“Yeah, a whole two bucks. Fennick, I think you might be a hoarder.”

The fox made a noise of derision and pulled out a bag to show his detractor. “So *these* aren’t worth anything by your estimate?” he asked smugly.

Spud picked up one of the depleted battery mags and shook it. “These are at least a decade old and aren’t even charged. Do you have a gun that takes them, at least?”

“I did, but I had to scrap it after it broke so now I’m going to sell them. There’s a lot of people out there who still use older models!” he added defensively. “Just got to find the right guy.”

The gecko took a seat on the workbench seat and clasped his hands as he spoke in a quiet, tortured tone. “My gran was a hoarder. Liked a deal at the market, liked a deal more than anything else. After gramps died it was all she had, spent four days a week shopping. She lived in a maze of canned food and random garbage until she nearly died and we had to step in. We got her help and her place cleaned up before it did kill her, but it was close. Trust me when I say I know the signs. I’ll even give you some leeway due to circumstances but this is not good, Fennick. You can toss at least three quarters of this junk, probably more.”

“Hey now, I don’t remember you being all judgmental as part of the favor, pal!” Fennick shot back, annoyed that he was being talked down to by someone around chin height. “You’re not sleeping in there!”

“Neither are you! Lexxons have more than enough space to stick a cot when you fold the seats! You could be saving money on bunks and motel fees, and we just met, but I know you aren’t rich.”

Fennick couldn’t really think of a way to refute that argument and being talked down to always pissed him off, but he wanted the help so he threw his hands up in defeat and walked around in a small circle to vent his frustration.

“Fine! Sort, fix, and chuck to your scaly little heart’s content! Just give her a look-see and tell me if there’s anything you need to fix stuff. I’m going to get lunch.”

With that, he stormed out of the dock and grumbled all the way back to the cafeteria where he splurged and got a combo meal from a fast food joint. It was as likely to hurt his wallet as much as his digestive tract but he needed a treat to smooth over his current anxieties. When he returned in a better mood and with a slight stomachache from all the grease, he found the ship cleaned out and its contents neatly sorted into piles. Spud had his head in a compartment and popped out when he heard the door open, immediately berating Fennick.

“Why is there a massive, melting tumor of duct tape on the coolant tank?”

“Leak,” Fennick said around a burp, “replacement parts are too expensive.”

“Then why aren’t you using coated tape? The coolant is eating through this stuff and leaving the hardware equivalent of a festering wound!”

“Then fix it if it bothers you. Regular tape has worked just fine for me so far.”

“I’m not flying in this thing unless that crack is patched with the right materials. Other than that the ship looks good but I can’t be on it in good conscience while this problem persists.”

Fennick shrugged. “Like I said, do whatever you feel is right. You’re the expert.”

Spud looked ready to argue but just shook his head and gestured to the piles nearby. “So I put all the food and water and important stuff over *there*, the things you should sell over *there*, and the last pile *there* should just be tossed. I ordered a sanitation assistant so pick out anything you can’t live without while we wait for it.”

Fennick was ready to just shovel it all back into the ship but as he took the opportunity to look over the contents he was having a hard time finding a single non-essential item he really felt he needed or was particularly attached to. Most of it was stuff he’d happened to come by and held onto through force of habit. Hard times had beaten into his head that nothing was to go to waste, even if that stuff was pretty much garbage.

By the time he had looked over everything twice it was like a spell had been broken and all that lay on the floor of the dock was a jumble of worthless junk. When the large autonomous dumpster arrived he had no problems dumping his former things into it. After that, a quick jaunt to the local pawnbroker to sell the items with some value left him with enough extra money to strengthen his financial safety net a good bit. He took a seat in the newly cleaned interior, in awe of the space that was open to him now.

Spud had scrambled over every inch of the ship and fixed many of the innumerable smaller issues in addition to the offending coolant leak with the roll of specially coated tape that Fennick had bought for him. The gecko was sitting in the cockpit running systems tests and updating the ship OS over the station's public access, a slow process to be sure.

"So how's she looking, Spud?"

"You really need to update your OS more often, Fennick. This thing was over twelve versions behind. It's amazing any of the newer parts worked with it."

"Besides that, please..."

"As good as anyone can hope. I'm willing to fly in it at least so the chance of catastrophic failure is low." He muttered something else that Fennick couldn't fully hear but he picked up the words "pilots" and "abuse".

"So we can get going?" Fennick called out loudly but was met with silence.

After about twenty minutes Spud emerged from the cockpit and gestured towards the front of the ship. "Let me go get my things while the system reboots and you get used to the updates."

Hoping he wouldn't take too long, Fennick got in the pilot's seat and played around with the updated interfaces and features, finding out very quickly that a lot of stuff had changed and many of his old addons weren't compatible anymore. He had just given up trying to find the music player when Spud returned and threw a modest travel bag onto one of the back seats with a muffled clang of various tools.

"Ready when you are."

"All right, let me just give control notice and we're off."

The lady who answered his call noted his departure with an unpleasant “Of course, sir...” and promptly hung up in a textbook case of orbital station customer service.

## **2: The Man From The Past With The Plan For The Future**

Hedirun was a chilly but habitable moon orbiting the gas giant Kappis. It wasn't as bone chilling as Corsic, it was practically tropical by outer ring standards, but the lower gravity and artificially bolstered atmosphere could really disorient those who weren't used to it.

Fennick landed them on the outskirts of Pale Desni, a major regional hub city only a few miles from one of the moon's resident Coalition military bases. Both Spud and the control tower chewed him out for coming in so hot and slamming on the brakes but he wasn't fined so he ignored them. Unlike Coldtower, ships were parked on the miles of expansive concrete lots outside the city and the lack of hardened security made Fennick nervous. He even set the anti-theft lockdown despite it having worked against him on a number of occasions in the past.

Spud seemed to know where they were going so the merc spent their journey ogling the sights as he tried not to overtake his companion with his longer stride. There was a long walk from the lot to the city proper but even from the outside, the looming concrete buildings reminded him of headstones all piled on top of each other and the closer he got the more he missed the cramped confines of the colony. They flashed their IDs to the cops at the entrance and were let in without hassle, in part thanks to the influx of visitors from the outlying communities.

The first thing apparent once they were under the megastructures was that the Coalition was in charge here. Banners and flags hung and flapped on nearly every surface and half the people walking by were wearing their garish colors. They waited at a crosswalk as a transport full of planetary militia members rumbled by with a heavy weapons platform behind it. A nice show of force for all the people who may not appreciate their presence. Their final destination was thankfully near the outskirts of the city but the banner draped over the front of the recruitment center almost made Fennick turn around and fly back to Corsic.



“Wow. That’s really tacky...” Spud voiced what they were both thinking.

A line of soldiers of various species were standing at attention behind a gathering of the various worlds of the Coalition while the line “Fighting For Freedom!” practically screamed at them in neon yellow underneath. A tiger in the uniform of a high rank stood to the side of the door and tried to cheerfully usher passerby in without much success. Fennick wasn’t that knowledgeable on Coalition hierarchy but he knew she was way too young to be wearing that many insignias.

“Hey there!” the feline said cheerfully to them as they approached. “You guys looking to make a difference?”

“Just... Can we please not do the bit?” Fennick asked as he and Spud ducked past her.

The inside of the building looked part prison, part waiting room. All manner of low-grade mercs, freelancers, workers, criminals, destitutes, and related lower society peoples mingled and waited in small groups while a dozen or so Coalition representatives sat at desks in the back section and gave interviews. The walls were papered in Coalition propaganda and innumerable informational packets littered the floor with the rest of the usual garbage that followed metropolitan life. It was clear from a glance that there were no proud would-be soldiers ready to serve the nation they loved, only the sad march of those with no better option and a military happy to abuse that desperation.

Fennick and Spud each took a ticket and went to wait on the cheap plastic chairs. After two hours Fennick was going insane. The free coffee he kept drinking was probably a significant factor but the more he studied the people around him the more he wanted to get away from them. This was the real bottom of the barrel as far society was concerned.

Even as he watched, a strung out monitor lizard started getting handsy with a weasel who didn’t want any of her business while her emaciated blue jay friend inched her hand towards his wallet. On the other side of the room, a squirrel with bald patches all over his face and arms stepped out of the bathroom, exhaling a cloud of smoke as he returned to his seat and slumped down in it.

“This is like trying to register a vehicle in hell.” Fennick grouched as he thumbed through a frayed magazine without looking at it. “What numbers

were we?”

“606 and 607.” Spud answered from behind his PC where he was scrolling through his social media.

Fennick looked at the screen on the wall and saw it change to 600. By the time it had reached 605 the fox was pacing endless circles around the area and people had started to avoid him when he got near, fearing madness or sickness. Finally, it changed and he looked at his ticket in disbelief to see he was 607, not 606. He wanted scream and instead bit the sleeve of his jacket while Spud greeted a representative with a polite handshake and they sat down. Mercifully, a rep waved Fennick over not a minute later and he gratefully plopped down in the seat.

“Good day.” the rabbit behind the desk said listlessly as he tapped on his PC and pulled out some papers from his desk drawer. “So, you’re interested in the Mercenary Wing, I presume?”

“Yep. Was it that obvious?”

The rep ignored the question. “Alright... I’ll need your name and ID then.”

“Fennick Stratus.” the fox said as he handed over his identification.

The interviewer’s ears twitched and he immediately typed something into his device, spending the better part of a minute furrowing his brow as he searched through some database. Eventually he squinted at something and looked up.

“I’m sorry sir, but I have to ask... There’s a flag on your name for terrorist acts. Can you explain?”

Fennick sighed and got it over with. “That’s because of my dad. He, uh, got on the bad side of the system powers. They flagged the whole family, it’s why we don’t go on vacation often.” he joked with limp chuckle.

“Sir,” the Coalition rep said as he leaned over the desk and clasped his hands, “are you trying to tell me that you’re the son of Dash Stratus? Do you know how many folks we see who claim to be related to someone famous? I’ve already met at least a dozen of your brothers and sisters this year alone if true.”

“It is true!” Fennick protested. “Have your people look it up through the genealogy registry in the Archive. My mom’s name is Vera Banchek and

my grandfather was Sal Strachall, if that helps. My dad, uh, changed his name. I did the paperwork myself, it's all verified, pictures and everything."

The rep gave him a hard look but got on his PC and conversed quietly to someone for a few minutes before listening intently then suddenly hanging up. His mood had changed and he was much friendlier.

"I apologize for my skepticism earlier, Mr. Stratus. I'm just surprised *you* would be *here* looking for work. There are much better ways to help the cause. For instance, the Coalition is always looking for investors-"

"I don't have any money," Fennick interrupted angrily, "the banks and governments divvied up my dad's estate after he died and left nothing. You're way too late to pick the bones, pal."

"All right then sir," the rep said, taken aback by the merc's venom, "let's talk work then. In what capacity were you hoping to operate?"

"Pilot."

"Do you have your own ship?"

"Of course."

"Experience? In combat and flying in general?"

"Former Corsic militia, over two hundred active flight hours there. Near twice that as a freelancer."

The rabbit started typing things out. "Criminal record? Any warrants we should know about?"

"A couple of minor thefts, a fight here and there, speeding fines. No active Coalition warrants that I'm aware of."

"And the VFed?"

"They labeled my family as terrorists, what do you think?"

More typing and then another call. Fennick looked over to Spud where his harrowed representative was reading through a long resume while the reptile patiently waited. The call ended after a minute.

"Good news, Mr. Stratus, you cleared our preliminary background check. There will be a more in depth interview later but for now I'm going to explain the benefits and payment so we can get you sent on your way. So, as a pilot you'd get full room and board at Ketterall as well as access to a closed personal dock for your craft and round-the-clock access to technician services. Of course, you will have to sign a number of waivers that-"

Fennick tuned out the droning explanations as his mind turned to the choice at hand. This was the point of no return, the moment he went from independent freelancer to mercenary sellout. The job seemed to be all it was promising to be and there was definitely safety nestled against the bosom of a large faction like the Coalition, but the problem was that he just couldn't shake the feeling that something was off with the whole premise. Either the Coalition was on its last gasps and this was a desperate last bid to cling to life or there were going to be some real tough orders to follow later on down the line, if he wasn't just dragged off somewhere and never seen again. He'd learned quickly that the employer who met all of your demands up front was the one most likely to stab you in the back to avoid having to fulfill them later.

But, the alternative was to continue living job to job, scraping enough together to keep the ship running until it finally died and he was left stranded in some remote asshole of a station with no way off. With two relatively unpleasant options and not enough luck to try the lottery, he found himself deadlocked with no real answer.

“-you hear me? Mr. Stratus? Hello?”

“Yeah what?” Fennick barked as he returned to reality.

“I lost you for a moment there. If you need time to decide you can read and sign *this*-” The rep plopped a thick envelope onto the table. “-at your leisure. You're already in the system so all we need is your signature whenever you feel the time is right.”

“Oh, uh, yeah, thanks. I'll do that.” Fennick mumbled as took the item and left the desk.

He waited for Spud and noticed that a few people were shooting him looks, most likely due to overhearing his name and the response it got. It was always the same: They didn't believe him until they verified his identity and then it was all about money, that big pool of wealth from lucrative mercenary work and fame that surely must exist. You would think someone at the registry would add a note that there was no Stratus fortune and never had been. He'd certainly tried to get it done, though the amount of legal hoops to jump through had been many and situated very high.

Finally, Spud headed over to Fennick with his resume and an envelope under his arm. “How'd it go?”

“I didn't sign anything, felt too weird about it.”

“Oh, I was hoping we could head to Ketterall together... In that case, I guess see you later, maybe. Thanks for the lift and stuff.”

“Yeah, don’t get kicked around by some chromesnout pilot.”

Spud gave him a quick a hug and disappeared out the door. Fennick felt he should also leave before anybody in the waiting area decided his alleged fortune was a better opportunity than military service.

...

That evening found Fennick sitting in the doorway of his Rough-Rider on his lot, cooking some pizza pockets on his portable stove while he enjoyed the night. Kappis was high in the sky and the swirling reds, browns, and yellows filled most of the celestial dome above. It was relaxing being out under the stars, even if it was on the chilly side. The fox shivered under his insulating blanket and eagerly watched his meal cook.

Suddenly, an alarm sounded from the cockpit and the exterior lights kicked on in emergency mode, illuminating the surrounding empty lots and throwing a blinding red glare over a figure standing a bit away and approaching. Fennick threw off the blanket and unholstered his pistol, hitting the safety and producing an intensifying hum.

“Back off, man!” he warned. “I *will* shoot. I’m not in the mood for a hold up tonight!”

The visitor put up his hands and called out in a hoarse voice. “I don’t want any trouble, just looking for a guy named Stratus, supposed to be in a Lexxon out here. Sorry to bother you if you aren’t him but I have a great need to reach him.”

Fennick sighed and killed the alarm with his keypad but kept the lights on in normal mode. “There’s no money.” he called out.

“I know that.” the visitor replied, hands still in the air. “Dash stuck to a budget like water to a fish’s back. Can I assume you’re Fennick?”

The stranger put his hands down and one of them casually fell onto his gun. Fennick’s instincts kicked in immediately and he fired a shot off to the side as a warning, the area briefly lighting up red as the beam of focused radiation cut the air.

“Whoa, whoa, hey whoa! I just want to talk with you!”

“Go ahead, but those hands get near that gun again the next shot won’t be a warning! You can start with telling me how you found me.”

“My nephew. I guess you really gave the Coalition a shock when you turned up at a recruitment center looking for grunt work. He knew my history with your dad and contacted me.”

“What history?”

“I was the navcomm for Fox Fleet and manager of business operations or whatever you want to call it. I was there on the ground floor and I worked for them until the group fell apart. I even saw you as a little kid once or twice when Dash wanted to look like an actual father.”

“Bullshit! Anyone can say anything! You spent ten minutes skimming his biography and then thought you could just saunter up and be buddy-buddy. You’re not the first one to try this bit, so shove off and let me eat my dinner!”

“I thought you might be skeptical so I brought proof. A picture we all took that includes you and your mom. Can’t find it anywhere on the network or Archive, pure original.”

“So I go over to see it and your man out there takes the shot when I get out in the open, is that the plan? Do you think I’m stupid?”

“Boy, I am trying to be civil here! Did you spend the last twenty odd years fighting vermin in a dumpster for scraps? I’m old! I’m here alone! If you wanted to you could blow me away and I’d have no chance! Just put the damn gun down and be reasonable for a minute!”

“Take yours off and throw it over here. Then approach, slowly.”

The stranger did as he was bade and Fennick was able to get a good look as he approached.

He was a rabbit, seemed to be older, with a slight limp in one leg. His scraggly gray fur was once well groomed and he was wearing an ancient insulated flight suit under a longcoat so it meant he had possessed some money at some point. To top it off, he had twirled his greased whiskers into a mustache and a pair of dirty reading glasses sat perched on his snout. He stopped a couple feet away and offered a picture in a frame. Fennick approached to take it and kept this gun trained on the intruder.

Sure enough, the whole Fox Fleet crew were present in the photo at a celebration of some sort, including his mother and a bundle in her arms that

was him as a baby. His father was front and center, standing with his arms crossed and smiling like an idiot for the camera. The rabbit was there in the back, younger of course, alongside a few other pilots and crew Fennick recognized as his dad's close friends. In the background were the four Pinion R5 ultra light skirmishers that had won Dash Stratus and his mercenaries so much fame and notoriety. The photo was signed by Dash himself, which seemed sort of tacky if this guy had worked with him but also incredibly on brand.

"What do you want? His stuff? Some memorabilia? The family secrets?"

"Are you this much of an asshole to everyone?"

"Answer the question, longears!" Fennick commanded as he waved his gun and his patience ran out.

"That answer is gonna take more than a few sentences and that gun is making me mighty nervous..."

Fennick returned to his ship and put his gun down next to him, motioning for the rabbit to sit opposite the stove. His visitor took the proffered spot with a groan and wrapped his coat around himself in the cool night air before jumping right in.

"So you couldn't pull the trigger on the Coalition gig, huh? I don't blame you, too good to be true, right?" Fennick grunted an affirmation and bit into a pizza pocket while his guest eyed them hungrily. "There's been a lot of talk about the Merc Wing on all the channels and forums since the news dropped. People are trying to figure out if it's a scam or a honeypot or the real-deal limited time opportunity, but it doesn't matter. Folks are gonna bite that hook regardless, that's the point of it. Thought about it myself even."

"Aren't you retired? I thought Fox Fleet doled out dues before the banks and bureaucrats ripped them apart."

"Yeah but it wasn't a whole lot to begin with, and divided up among the remaining members we each only got a few hundred thousand in parts and supplies, worth a lot less than that on the secondary market. From what I heard, those banks walked away disappointed as well. I guess they were expecting a vault full of gold and jewels." he chuckled. "They even went to court over the ships but they were never going to win that one."

There was a long silence as Fennick continued to eat while he watched the man carefully. The sound of a distant gunshot ran out and there was a flash of red out in the wilderness beyond the lots, followed by a yell.

“Bad night for someone.” the stranger commented.

“What’s your name?” Fennick asked, still trying to figure out the scam.

“Harold Oppella.”

“Harry the hare!” Fennick said with a grin. “I think I remember mom calling you that once!”

Harry frowned. “I’m a rabbit, asshole.”

“Come on, close enough! Could be worse, I know guy who goes by Spud.”

“Spud? Like a potato?”

“‘Cause everyone likes potatoes!’ he says. You’re hairy. You’re kind of a hare. Lighten up, dude.”

Harry scoffed and waved his hand dismissively. “Can we get off my name, please? Look, I get that you’re... busy and not prone to visitors, so let me make my pitch. Now this Merc Wing, freelancers are flooding towards it from the Corsic theater in droves, the wartime market is shifting, enough that I think it might actually mean something against the VFed if they do it right. The more I’ve thought about it, the more I’ve realized it’s not just a pool of bodies to serve as a meat shield, there’s bound to be people with all sorts of skills and knowledge, hell, even equipment, that the Coalition wouldn’t normally get through a recruitment center.”

Harry sniffled and wiped his nose on his sleeve. Fennick took note of the many stains from previous wipes and what looked like a few blood splatters as well. This guy was bad news in more ways than one.

“They’re not just picking whoever they see, they’re taking a slight risk to set up a curated pool of people who have a higher chance of being useful than the dregs they shuffle through the doors with empty promises. The ones that don’t pass inspection can just be dismissed and all the Coalition loses is whatever they spend putting them up and feeding them. Can you even imagine the tech alone just sitting out there in the hands of some ice miners on the edge of the system? Or in an isolated pirate nest? The Merc Wing is bait meant to draw in all the unused, inaccessible surplus they couldn’t normally reach, at least that’s my theory on it. I want into that.



With the right connections someone could hop in early and skim alongside the Coalition then hop right out before it goes to pot.”

“Then join. You don’t need my permission.”

“Well, I treat joining any group with such lax quality control the same way I treat going to prison. That is to say I want people I can trust in there with me. I’m no fool, I know I’m an easy target. It’ll be opportunists across the board so I want to get a little group together for safety in numbers, you know? Now the problem is that most of the people I know nowadays either have no business being near a battlefield or won’t return to one. So when Benet called me up talking about Dash’s kid just appearing out of thin air and his manager freaking out, now I don’t believe in fate but I do believe in ripe opportunities. Even better, you seem to have inherited some of your dad’s piloting proficiency based on your service record. You could be something great, hell, you could lead a whole ass squadron if you play your cards right! Bet that sounds great, right? Big shot ace just like your dad?” Harry finished his pitch with a big smile that only showed he hadn’t been brushing.

“So what use are *you* to me then?” Fennick retorted. “Seems like you’re a greedy old man who misses his glory days and wants to relive them and make a profit without having to do any of the work. I’m no fool, Harry, I wouldn’t be here if I listened to people like you.”

The rabbit leaned over the stove and got serious. “Let me tell you, asshole, that without me Fox Fleet wouldn’t have been *shit*. *I* found the jobs, *I* negotiated with clients, and *I* ensured that we got paid at the end, in addition to navigating an entire damn cruiser! Dash and them did the fighting and the boasting but that was all they were good for! I did the thankless organization and coordination that those space jocks didn’t even know existed and couldn’t appreciate with their tiny pea brains! I understand that credit falls on the figurehead but I will *not* be called useless!”

“Ah, so you’re bitter but desperate, not hunting for glory! Well too bad for you this little baby right here lets me find work and talk to employers already.” Fennick said with a smirk as he waved his PC around. “It’s a whole crew in my hand. Isn’t technology amazing?”

“But it can’t negotiate. It doesn’t have the experience to know when someone doesn’t plan on paying for the work you’ve done, and it certainly

can't talk down a whole group of thugs who want to kill you and take your stuff."

"Those sure are some boasts there, Harry. Color me intrigued." Fennick said as he turned off the stove and pushed it to the side. "I'll make you a deal: You get an official addendum added to my family's genealogy record and my dad's Archive article that says the fortune isn't real and it's all rumors and we can run off to the Coalition hand in hand. That should be impressive enough to earn my trust and respect."

"Are you fucking kidding me?! Do you know how much work that is, the people I'd have to talk to, the fees I'd have to pay?! That could take months and there's almost no chance the appeal would be accepted!"

"That's the idea. It's a trial to prove your worth." Fennick explained as he re-holstered his gun, got up, and put the stove away in a storage compartment. "Good luck, Harry."

"Well there's no doubt you're a Stratus, you dick." Harry replied sourly as he also stood up with a groan.

"Have a nice night." Fennick told him sarcastically as he closed the Rough-Rider's door in the rabbit's face.

When he was sure that Harry was gone, Fennick locked the ship down for the night and unrolled a sleeping mat on the floor of the passenger section. The thin layer of rubber wasn't nearly enough to count as a bed nor would it do anything to keep the cold at bay but at least it wasn't costing him anything. He wrapped his insulated blanket around himself and lay down, hearing the muffled sounds of more gunshots off in the distance.

### **3: The First Step Of A 1,000 Mile Journey Begins With A Week Of Paperwork**

The first thing that Fennick awoke to was pain. His whole back was sore from sleeping on the hard metal floor of the ship and his sleeping mat might as well have been made of paper for all the padding it offered. He gasped as a wave of agony swept over him when he attempted to stand and fell back into a passenger seat. He frantically searched the ship's storage spaces for his pain relievers and downed two with a shot of cold minifridge coffee just to be safe. He waited for about five minutes until the aches started to fade before he laboriously changed into some clean clothes and groaned over a breakfast of crumbly dehydrated food bars. He had bought those in bulk a while back and though they kept him alive, it was barely so.

He had just gathered up his dedicated pee container to dump it when the proximity alarm sounded from the cockpit and someone knocked on the door, nearly causing him to drop the sloshing plastic jug. He opened the hatch, container still in hand, and squinted out into the dim morning light at the five Coalition officials standing at attention.

"Mr. Stratus?" a blue jay asked.

"Yeah?" Fennick answered around a half-chewed mouthful of food bar, spitting crumbs everywhere.

A cheetah wearing a smile stepped forward and offered his hand. "I'm Lieutenant Tasler of the Coalition forces stationed at Ketterall base and the main liaison to the public of the region. Nice to meet you, Mr. Stratus."

Fennick shook the proffered hand with his free one and quickly chewed the rest of the bar while he set the jug down. "Uh, yeah, sure. What's, uh... what is all this?"

"It was quite a surprise to us when you interviewed for a freelancer job. The Coalition feels that the son of such a... noted cultural icon shouldn't be left in such-" Tasler's eyes flicked to the crumpled bedding, then to the disheveled fox, and finally to the pee container. "-unfortunate circumstances. All he did for Dyshla and the outer rim and nobody left his family anything."

“There’s no money.” Fennick said automatically before he processed Tasler’s last sentence.

“We know that, sir. We are here to make you an updated offer in regards to employment. You were unsure yesterday and we feel that someone of your abilities and with your history can be trusted with more opportunity than the regular applicants.” His smile got slightly larger but his eyes betrayed his distaste for his current task.

“So you found out I’m related to someone important and now it’s all red carpets and roses? At least the cartels are up front about their plans to use you.”

“Mr. Stratus,” a wolf interjected, pushing the cheetah back and assuming control, “we are not interested in you just so we can parade you around. We have your records and your time in the Corsic militia is more than enough to meet our standards. In addition to that, you’ve done extensive freelance work and survived it all. We want you in a pilot’s seat because you are capable and experienced, your heritage is merely ancillary.”

Fennick looked them over and shrugged. “Let’s hear what you’ve got.” The blue jay produced a packet of papers from her satchel bag and handed them to the fox along with a pen. “Now hold on, I’m not just gonna sign anything you guys hand me, I’m not that stupid!”

The wolf motioned to the documents. “That is a consent form for the audit and addendum of your father’s Archive article and biography as well as one for your family’s genealogy record. These will note that Dash Stratus left no fortune and officially dismisses such as rumor and myth. It also contains a request to hide you and your mother’s information from civilian viewing under the Archive’s witness protection laws. It should help alleviate the unwanted attention you infrequently receive.”

“That’s pretty damn good.” Fennick admitted as he ran a finger along the edge of the paper stack. “What else ya got? Don’t get me wrong, the requests are nice. but they’re hardly that much to the Coalition, just using connections you already have and all that. I’ll need a little bit more before I’m convinced to throw in my lot with you guys, you understand. It’s a big decision.”

It might be a dangerous proposition to poke the tiger in the eye but he was never going to get an opportunity like this again. They had come

willing to negotiate so that meant they would be trying to save as much money as possible and, as expected, had undervalued him. Poking was in order but the key was not to poke *too* hard.

Lieutenant Tasler leaned in and whispered something to the wolf. He said something back and both of them looked upset.

“How does a ship sound? Your choice from our reserves. On top of that, you’ll be getting military-grade pay, room and board, all the maintenance and supply support we can offer, and maybe even dental if you stick around long enough.”

“Hey, now we’re talking! But, just one more little thing.” Fennick said, noting the rapidly souring faces of the officials as they realized they were being wrung out like a wet towel. “I want my own little squadron or service group or whatever it is for you. There’s two guys I got already, a fellow named Spud who just joined up and one Harry Oppella.”

The Coalition officials all looked surprised at that. “We can allow you a squadron and your friend but Mr. Oppella won’t be possible.” the wolf explained

“Why not?” Fennick asked, genuinely confused.

“Let me explain, since you’ve clearly come from elsewhere. Mr. Oppella is a known variable here on Hedirun, spent a long time on the wrong side of the law after Fox Fleet ended, long enough to get his name on many Coalition wanted lists. We have reason to believe that he will steal both resources and information for his own profit should he be allowed to join. If you are associating with him we strongly urge that you stop, though I am unfortunately not surprised that he sought you out. In fact, I’d bet he is more eager to join the Mercenary Wing than you are. It is quite the tantalizing target for a man like him.”

Fennick was ready to just forget about the geezer but his words about safety in numbers rang through the merc’s ears. He was also taking note of the change in conversational mood. Before, it was all handshakes and smiles but now each of the officials was stone-faced and distant while they tried to read his thoughts. There was a bad feeling brewing in his gut that wasn’t coffee or food bar related but he didn’t want to capitulate to their terms too completely. He wanted to take them for as much as he could while not getting in too deep.

No, he needed something that kept them wary and Harry was savvy enough to know that playing the part of chaos agent would be the best option for him, enough to keep him reliably under Fennick's control and ward off the higher ups from clamping down on them too hard. That, and Harry was clearly desperate.

"Harry comes with or no deal."

Lieutenant Tasler's eye twitched while the other officials' faces morphed into various levels of disgust and disapproval. Fennick caught the name "Fairdown" on the wolf's chest as he stepped closer.

"I'm going to tell you what will happen if we forgive Harold for his crimes and let him ride your tail in through our doors. At first he'll be on his best behavior, the model mercenary. Then things will start going missing, small things like jewelry or loose cash. Then larger things. Weapons. Supplies. Ships even. Then he'll just disappear while his network of thieves takes the fall and he gets away with all the profit. Finally, he'll pop up somewhere else and do it all again, as he has done many times before. He is a creature of habit and a thief to his very core. He doesn't care about you, or your father's legacy, or the Coalition, only how much money he can make off of you. You're better than that sniveling pile of scum."

"I could have told you that! The man *exudes* sleaze. He's greasier than a bag of fast food in a mechanic pit. But, he's getting old. His best years are behind him and he fears winding up in some government home and dying in a piss-stained chair with everyone cursing his name." Fennick ad-libbed as he went, a plan forming in his mind.

"Are you really gullible enough to believe that lie?" Fairdown asked, crossing his arms.

"We could ask him? You can interview him, let him speak for himself and if you find him unsatisfactory after that, then fuck him, he's out."

"That would be agreeable if Mr. Oppella would get within fifty feet of any Coalition member. He's got many warrants both here and abroad dating back decades."

"No, we can do it right now. He's hiding under that Yesprovo over there with the tarp." Fennick motioned back towards the ship in question. "Kept setting off my proximity alarm last night when he got up to pee." he turned towards the vehicle and yelled. "Come on out, Harry! This is your chance!"

Everyone standing at the Rough-Rider waited and watched but no one appeared from under the tarp. Fennick held up a hand as Tasler opened his mouth to protest and a few seconds later a disheveled Harry crawled out onto the concrete lot, covered in dirt and grime. He stood up with a gasp and held his back as he dusted himself off. He stumbled over and stopped about twenty feet away.

“This is as close as I’m getting, no offense.” He panted.

Fairdown turned to Fennick, incredulous. “You’re a damn magician, Stratus! We should throw him in a dark cell in a pit but I’ll let him speak for himself, I guess.” He turned to address Harry. “Mr. Stratus is vouching for your addition to the Mercenary Wing, Mr. Oppella. So tell us, why should we let you serve instead of locking you up? Please, the floor is yours.”

“You might find it hard to believe,” Harry began, starting to pace and gesture like he was giving a lecture, “but I’ve spent the last two decades living a quiet life with my sister and nephew. I took my payout from Fox Fleet and carved out a place in a lovely little community where I could be close to my family and friends. But times are tough, the money dried up, and my presence became a burden. So I left and upon hearing about the Merc Wing, I thought that maybe these old bones could do what I love to do one more time before I am incapable of doing it anymore. I have washed my hands of the foibles of my past and confronted my habits so as not to fall prey to temptation again. I certainly don’t want to see VFed colors blanket the system and I fear being powerless to stop it. Please, don’t let me die a sad wretch with innumerable regrets. Let me put my skills to use helping you in this dire fight.” he ended the monologue with slight bow then took a seat on the edge of a lot to catch his breathe.

Lieutenant Fairdown clapped while the other officials whispered and one giggled. “Bravo, Harold, bravo! That was one hell of an impromptu speech, real top shelf chicanery and presentation! It almost felt like it came from the heart! There’s going to be some highly entertained prison behavioral psychologist with a lot to chew on.”

The rabbit stood up and the officials all put their hands on their weapons as they anticipated him making a run for it. He instead surprised everyone by walking up to them and turning around with his hands behind his back.

“That was the honest truth and this is me backing up that claim. If you don’t believe me, arrest me or kill me or whatever because it’s either Merc Wing or bust at this point. I don’t have anywhere to go. My sister hates me, my bank account is empty, and I had to sleep on hard concrete in the cold under a fucking mom-mobile last night! I’m bloody sick of it! So you can either lock me up and miss out on my decades of expertise and guidance or you can pay me what you’re paying the other lowlife scum and benefit from my vast store of talents and experience.”

All five officials immediately grabbed and disarmed Harry and four patted him down while one called for backup. Fairdown pulled a palm pistol from the rabbit’s boot and held it between his fingers, shaking it in his face before pocketing it.

“They say you are one smooth talking, crazy gambling son of a bitch, Oppella. I’ve seen your record and there’s not a casino or betting office in the outer ring you can return to. Too bad all that skill only works *at* the casinos.” Fairdown turned to Fennick. “Come on down to a recruitment center at your earliest convenience, Mr. Stratus and we can get some terms ironed out, probably better ones now that you’ve helped us today. We have to get this guy somewhere secure before he hops off on us. See you later.”

They started to lead Harry away but he resisted. “Let me at least say goodbye to Fennick. I’m owed that, I’m like an uncle!” he lied.

The con man was already cuffed but one of the officials still drew his gun and kept it pointed at the rabbit as he hobbled over and leaned in. “Hey, thanks for the help, even if you didn’t mean it.”

“You *want* to go to prison? Are you crazy?”

“No, thanks for setting me up with a way in. These guys will let me talk their damn ears off and by the end of it they’ll see that they can’t afford to not let me help. Hell,” he snorted, “I’ll even work for just a closet to sleep in and plain bread to eat. Not an ideal situation but better than getting busted by some clueless beat cop and thrown in the clink to rot. I won’t forget this.” he ended the conversation with a surprise sour note.

Fennick was left puzzled at the rabbit’s cavalier attitude in the face of incarceration and that last bit which had come off as more of a threat than actual gratitude. He also might have just been delusional this whole time. It was impossible to tell.



The exchange had solidified Fennick's gut feeling that he couldn't trust the Coalition, at least not at face value and without some sort of safety net. The only reason he wasn't being carted off too was because they still believed he would take their terms, that he was already too far in to back out. There was no way they would risk him running to the VFed, no matter how crazy a notion it seemed, and they wouldn't wait too long for him to commit.

He returned to his ship and found out he was still holding the legal forms for the editing of the Archive records. There was no way for him to sign and submit them without the Coalition's approval but they might come in handy in measuring their honesty with him or offering the guidelines to do it himself.

...

The sound of a page being flipped echoed around the small office in the undercity sector of Pale Desni as the seedy lawyer looked over the pile of forms. Fennick was admiring the "tasteful" painting on the wall of a rodent bending over in a short dress when the squirrel behind the desk put down the packet and addressed him with an energetic and almost mocking tone.

"As far as I can tell there is no legal misconduct or attempts at trickery in this document, Mr. Status. It seems to me that everything is legally airtight and properly organized. If the Coalition loves one thing, it's their paperwork."

"So you'd sign it in my position?"

"Let's not talk about me, let's discuss what you *really* want."

"And what's that?"

"You want me to write up your own version of this, allowing you the benefits it offers without the commitment to a higher power. While this is possible, I would need to submit numerous requests and verify multiple facts, a process that could take years and would cost, well-" He looked over the fox. "-too much for you. No offense. The Coalition has the luxury of being able expedite such bureaucracy as well as national level access to the Archive, two things I don't and won't have. I would be stuck navigating through civilian channels and those are where requests go to die."

“So it’s their way or the highway, then?”

The lawyer nodded. “Pretty much. However, if the situation allows, I could help you get your *specific* terms in writing and, with the consent of Coalition legal, add them to the contract as a safety net in case they happen forget something they promised. Not really what you want, but more of a possibility of happening.”

“Nah, they’ll find some way to invalidate what they don’t like. No government just rolls over because they made a promise on paper.”

“An unfortunately possible outcome.”

“All right then, what do I owe you?” Fennick said, pulling out his wallet.

“Before you leave...” The lawyer stood up and closed the blinds before pulling out a bottle of whiskey and two glasses. “Perhaps you could entertain my curiosity and let me give you some advice. I won’t charge you for the time in return.”

Fennick sighed. “Fine...”

“Excellent!” The squirrel poured a glass and handed it to his visitor before pouring another for himself. “So what happened there with Fox Fleet and how did you wind up with nothing from it? What did it look like from your end? Tell me!”

“I don’t really know. My dad mostly kept mom and me away from everything but photo ops and the hangar on occasion. It was smart I guess, kept us from getting scooped up with the rest of the wayward members when it all came crashing down. Plausible deniability and all that.”

“I was still in school when it happened. My professor at the time spent a whole week following that gonzo legal battle over who got what. I remember thinking how insane it was watching the VFed and Coalition chewing this small mercenary group apart and fighting over the scraps like it was an enemy nation. You’d think they were threatening to drop nukes on cities but all they really did was humiliate them on the battlefield with their own tech and steal some stuff. Famously stuck to their ‘no kill’ policy pretty tight, too. Warmongers hate a pacifist.”

“I do remember we had one visit, actually,” Fennick reminisced, “all these guys with guns and armored gear showed up. They left when they saw a poor widow with her crying son beyond the door they’d just knocked

down and that they weren't, in fact, living in a golden palace. Got out of there fast when the neighbors started recording."

"Sometimes inherited fame is a rough thing. So, story time! Back when I was working the corpo legal circuit in my glory days I represented the heiress to this big time company that worked in the Belt. Ran few stations, did a little refining, had a nice little local market niche carved out. This girl didn't even know who her father was until he croaked and his company lawyers found out she was his through uncovered alimony records and such. They were all ready to prop her up as CEO while they ran the company, the usual puppet master gambit. Then a competitor got wind and sent an army of lawyers with endless litigation, most of which was manufactured but laborious to disprove, and they went after her like she had stolen their children and rode off cackling into the night, waiting to for her to crack. Now, I like to think I'm pretty good in a courtroom but my little firm, great as we all were, couldn't fight an endless stream of the best legal minds a multi-billion dollar corporation could throw at us. So you know what I did?"

"Settled?"

"Precisely. I'd bit off more than I could chew, I'd let my greed and ego make me think I was going to change the world and I looked like a loser for it, slogging away under a deluge of bullshit. So, I convinced the poor girl to take what little the company was offering and go leave it all behind her. The deal was made, she walked away with enough to live comfortably, and then she was lynched by an angry mob who had just lost their jobs from the buyout and blamed her. Even worse, it came to light not too soon after that the rival company had been lying about their profits for years and were actually about to go under. The reason they had fought so hard and ultimately killed this young woman was because the executives wanted to feed off her company's corpse to keep theirs alive long enough to empty the coffers and escape on their golden parachutes. Naturally, we took those executives to court after an in-depth investigation and put proof after proof before a jury, showing without a doubt the conspiracy to gut the companies and run away with their arms loaded with tax-free wealth."

"Let me, guess, nothing happened, right?" Fennick commented, getting tired of the long winded story.

“Well there’s the surprise! A few got away but the majority of them were fined and blacklisted and a discretely directed mob of irate ex-workers drowned them in a sea of lawsuits that still persists to this day. As we were now known to act against corporate interests, the firm was caught in scandal after scandal until it all fell apart and I was forced to my current position, making chump change off of the ‘unfortunates’ down here. Forever locked out of the grand arena of corporate court, brought low by my own ambition.” the squirrel sighed heavily and took a drink. “The moral of the story is that a big enough legacy is destructive when misused or unappreciated, which it almost always is. It killed my client, put thousands of people out of work, ruined numerous executive careers, and bogged down the legal system on Hedirun for decades. All because some corpo pen pushers saw an opportunity and got greedy. They knocked over a chair while reaching for a second cookie and cause and effect destroyed the building it was in.”

“Nice story, but how does that have anything to do with me? Where’s the advice buried in all that?” Fennick asked.

“Don’t you see the similarities? You’ve kept low for these last couple of decades, right? You don’t run around screaming about being ‘the son of Dash Stratus’ do you?”

“No, but I don’t hide it either when people ask. He wasn’t a president or anything. Most people only really know the name anyway.”

“Well imagine you did go around shouting about that, you made it your whole personality. You were daddy’s biggest fan! What do you think would have happened to you?”

“I would have been killed or kidnapped by people looking for the money. Or taken out by a major system power.”

“Precisely. Now multiply that by a thousand and that’s your current situation with the Coalition. You all but disappeared from the public eye. Most people probably don’t even remember that Dash had a family, he certainly didn’t parade you around when the cameras weren’t turned on him. But now the Coalition knows about you, and you’ve not only suddenly appeared on their sensors, but wandered right into their hands, on a premiere operating moon no less. You aren’t going to be able take a piss unless you do it with their consent and if you don’t hop on their cause quick enough then you’re an enemy. You fell tail over titties down between the

grinding gears of planetary and system politics, and don't take this the wrong way, but you are *screwed* no matter which way you turn." He chuckled and clapped his hands. "What you thought was a prime opportunity could just about kill you."

"So what would you do in my situation, as an experienced lawyer?" Fennick asked as he downed his whiskey.

"Can't really say what I'd do in the moment but let me tell you about a term for situations like yours among the legally inclined, when greed over inheritance and fame causes lots of undue death and misery. We call it the golden grenade, and in your case, Mr. Stratus, the pin has been already been pulled and its cooking in your hand. Here's my card. Whenever you figure out your whole... situation and you need legal help, call me. I'll give you the 'victim of fame' discount." he finished with a smile as he shoved a crumpled business card into Fennick's hand.

Fennick left and on the way back to his ship he noticed two people were following him, a possum and another fox. He took a few detours and even rode a few elevators around randomly but they always found him and only disappeared when he got to his lot. Standing by his Rough-Rider were the same five officials along with Spud and Harry. The ship's door was open and someone, most likely Spud, had turned off the proximity alarms so it was dead quiet as the owner approached. Lieutenant Fairdown spoke as he got closer.

"Why the trip to a legal representative? Did your will need an update?" The question was made in jest but it was really just a subtle warning that they were watching him.

"Yeah, actually. If I'm going to be flying for the Coalition I think it's better to make sure the old girl doesn't end up in a junkyard after all her service." Fennick walked up and gave the ship a pat on the hull for effect. "She deserves to retire to a nice dusty garage."

That seemed to satisfy the wolf who motioned Spud and Harry over. The reptile's tail was twitching in excitement and the rabbit was a dour sight in a prison jumpsuit and remote activated stun handcuffs. He also had a black eye and was standing with a lean to one side.

"Harry, I never expected to see you alive again!" Fennick said as he looked him over.

“After a lengthy discussion Mr. Oppella has convinced us of his dedication to the cause and we were kind enough to get his various sentences commuted to service in the Mercenary Wing alongside a strict supervised parole. This rare act of mercy is exclusive to you, so don’t abuse it. He’s in your squadron or he’s going away forever. Right, Harold?”

“Yessir.” was the quiet reply.

“Hey Fennick!” Spud interjected excitedly. “Thanks for remembering me! This is gonna be so sick! A squadron!”

Fennick gave him a nod and pulled out the forms from earlier that day, signed during the long wait at the lawyer’s office. “Here, if there’s anything else I need to sign, point me at it.”

The blue jay officer snapped the documents up and stashed them in her bag. Fairdown pulled out his PC and a stylus and handed them to Fennick.

“We just need your digital signature then, Mr. Stratus.”

Fennick took the device and hesitated only for a second before scribbling his name and handing it back. His hand felt weird as it fell back to his side, like it had been used to perform some great act of evil and the smile that Fairdown gave him was the kind that gang leaders gave to their new members or unaware victims.

“Leslie will take you and your ship to Ketterall Base to get acclimated while we go set up things for Mr. Oppella. Glad to have you on board and I’ll be watching your career with interest. Who knows? You might even sign up officially some day.”

Spud was already in the cockpit and booting up the flight systems as the officials led Harry away, pushing and tripping him as they laughed. Fennick closed the door and sat in a passenger seat to think about his life choices.