

CONNECTED: BOOK ONE

**THE POWER OF A
CONNECTED**

ANDREW SHARP

Copyright © Andrew Sharp 2021

All rights reserved.

No part of this publication may be altered, reproduced, distributed, or transmitted in any form, by any means, including, but not limited to, scanning, duplicating, uploading, hosting, distributing, or reselling, without the express prior written permission of the publisher, except in the case of reasonable quotations in features such as reviews, interviews, and certain other non-commercial uses currently permitted by copyright law.

Disclaimer:

This is a work of fiction. All characters, locations, and businesses are purely products of the author's imagination and are entirely fictitious. Any resemblance to actual people, living or dead, or to businesses, places, or events is completely coincidental.

Prologue

□
Taken

Sara screamed, a high-pitched frightened scream. They had finally come for her, the day she had always feared was today.

Jeb, her younger brother by a couple of years, had opened the door without asking over the door communicator who was outside; at nearly sixteen he should have known better. Then he had stepped back and let the six men and women into their home without challenging them. They all wore smart dark uniforms, not the grubby type worn by grounders, on their left breast each had an embroidered symbol of a golden bird; these were people from the privileged lofts.

Sara looked for somewhere to run. Their home was made from two metal containers, one stacked on top of the other. There were no windows and only one door in and out and that had one of the intruders guarding it. The other five fanned out as they approached her.

She looked for something to throw or use as a weapon but the sparsely furnished front living space had little to

The Power of a Connected

offer. The main furniture was fixed to the shell of the room and the few items that weren't were of no use to her situation.

Feet hammered down the stairs behind her. Sara felt a moment of hope, her mother was coming to save her. Then she panicked again, her mother couldn't fight these people alone, if she did she might get hurt or worse. They more than likely wanted her alive but her mother and brother probably had no value to them.

Sky, Sara's mother, charged into the living space dressed only in a knee-length nightdress and without pause rushed past her daughter and leapt on top of the nearest intruder with her fists flying.

Sara looked to Jeb for help. He was tall, close to six feet, strong and his dark skin was contoured with toned young muscle, but he was just standing there watching his mother fighting. Sky was thrown to the floor but she was instantly up on her feet again attacking.

A punch smashed into the side of Sky's head and she dropped limply to the floor. Sara screamed again as she turned and ran upstairs. Hands snatched at her, narrowly missing as she escaped. She went up the stairs and into the bedroom she shared with her brother but before she could close the door a man and woman raced in behind her. Following her mother's example, Sara leapt at the nearest, swinging punches wildly. They all wrestled around the room for a moment before Sara landed hard on her back as the man slammed her to the floor. The air in her lungs expelled in a violent rush leaving her breathless. Before she could recover the woman had shackled her wrists together. They had her.

Lying still for a moment, as her breathing came back

to normal she noticed her cat peeping out from under a pile of dirty clothes. She willed it to stay still, not knowing what the uniformed men and women would do with it if they caught the cat; she didn't want them to find it.

The woman yanked Sara to her feet, pulling her up by the shackles that bound her wrists in front of her. The man clamped a strong hand on the back of her neck and they led her from the room.

Downstairs Jeb had remained standing by the door. Sky was prone on the floor and not moving. Two of the downstairs assailants grabbed Sara by an arm each and the woman holding the shackles let go, as did the man whose hand was clamped to her neck. Then she was pushed and dragged outside through the doorway.

They all marched a short distance down the main route before entering one of the side alleys. They snaked through a few more alleys, dragging Sara who was still resisting being taken. She had seen Jeb behind her a couple of times but he was tagging along freely.

"The mother is following us," said one of the men behind Sara.

"Take care of it," ordered one of the women.

Chapter One



Teaming Up

Scallion looked at the clock: 20:00, Friday 03 03 2923. The shift was changing on the flight dock. They would find the bodies soon, if not already. He had perhaps a four-hour head start on the authorities, but much less on the bounty Ninety-Six would place on his head. If he were lucky, the contract would be for alive, but he was never that fortunate. He looked around his miserable small dwelling pod, which was littered with old food packaging, empty alcohol bottles, and the remnants of used drugs, one last time to make sure that he had everything. The scarred holdall in his left hand held his entire life's worth and fortune. Inside, the ballistic handgun and a small amount of ammunition were illegal but necessary in his line of work. The drugs were recreational, and he needed them, as he did the half-bottle of cheap whiskey, if he were to get through any given day. The few credits were all he had now; the last guaranteed winning bet he had placed had just about cleaned him out. He had managed to stuff a single change of clothing in the bag, but that was all he could fit in alongside the package.

He scanned the frayed, stained and worn cot that doubled as a sofa, opened the three empty tiny cupboards on the opposite wall checking for anything he needed, but knowing he wouldn't find anything. The cracked wall screen, hit by a liquor bottle recently and pretending it was a window, caught his eye. The displayed mountain scene with clear blue skies was his favourite.

“Mirror.”

The screen switched to show his reflection. He was three days unshaven, his shoulder-length brown hair almost black with grease. The left eye was dark, puffy and partially closed, and across his top lip was a smear of dry blood. He spat on his hand and rubbed the stain away. He still wore the badged, dark blue flight dock overalls of a loader, but he couldn't afford the time to change. His face looked haggard. Drugs, alcohol and bad women had added ten years to his existing forty. He was fit and healthy, though; he needed to be in the violent grimy underworld of crime and deception he passed through.

“Get a grip. You've no time for nostalgia, you prick. They're coming for you. Door open.” He stepped outside to the filthy walkway beyond the room he had called home for six months.

He needed to disappear, and quickly. Getting to another station was his best hope for now, and that in itself would be difficult, if not impossible. He didn't know anyone that had tried to do that successfully. For starters, he would need more credits. The town was his only option for that. There, he could either steal the credits or find them in other nefarious ways. He looked up to the star-veiled hangar ceiling far above, mimicking a sky. The lights had dimmed to bring on the false concept of nightfall. The

domicile pod he occupied was on the southern edge of Station Six's town. He could reach the dense population and be hidden in the narrow, gloomy routes and the maze of filthy alleys in minutes, but did he still have that long?

Scallion bounded down the rickety stairs two steps at a time, from the fifth floor to ground level, rapidly growing more aware that his capture, or worse, might be imminent. He looked back and upward for any sign of pursuit, checking the impoverished twenty floors, each lined with twenty-eight identical pods. He was lucky in that he hadn't needed to share. Others had to cram two adults and kids into a space only large enough for one. Why people still had kids and coupled up together with someone he couldn't fathom. That was a lose-lose situation. Less space, fewer credits to go around more mouths, and the kids could turn blood-sick anytime in their first year and cramped up like that their parents could only be food. Happy that no one was following or watching him, he moved on.

At the base of the stairs, he found a couple of run-down and battered shuttles. He mounted the nearest, taking the torn double bench seat facing forward.

"Town, Arent Square."

The vehicle lurched into motion, the engine complaining as it turned the shuttle around, with wheels squealing on the black pitch-coated metal surface.

"Piece of shit. Can't you go any faster?"

The small, open-top, four-seater carriage had no vocal responses, but he needed to vent his frustration. Running would be quicker, but he immediately discounted it. A man fleeing the tower pods at speed would be memorable to witnesses, and he couldn't afford to give his inevitable hunters any help.

Ten painfully long and desperate minutes later, he crossed the town's perimeter. An old, faded and tarnished sign stated: Welcome to Station Six, Population 109,674. The white numerals were freshly updated. *Who the fuck has that cushy job*, wondered Scallion for a moment, angry at the prospect that someone had it more comfortable and better than he did. *Does that include the tower pods and the lofts too? I doubt it. One lot's too poor to be counted, and the others are too rich to be simple numbers.*

The centuries-old, block-on-block prefabricated structures of the town were in no better condition than the ageing tower pods on the outskirts. Metal, mainly windowless, containers, every one the same dull grey colour, were attached together to create buildings. At least they were better homes, with several rooms, than the single box of the pods. Here there were also stores, bars, the brothel, the gambling house and the service buildings too. None were taller than six storeys; this was why they could be more spacious, as they supposedly had less weight on top. He didn't believe that, however. He believed it was just something people above in the lofts said so they could avoid spending credits to extend them upwards.

The shuttle stayed to the main routes as it passed buildings, mainly homes, but with stores and bars peppered in among them, all stacked one on top of the other and side by side. People were outside in low numbers, the darkness of night keeping most decent folk inside. Some of the bar doors slid open as he passed, revealing gloomy interiors. Some played music, others were virtually empty, while the more popular ones erupted in raucous noise until the door slid closed again. Stray dogs were a common sight, wandering where they liked, ignored

The Power of a Connected

but accepted. The numerous alleys were too narrow for shuttle passage, as although they were just wide enough for one vehicle, the stairs up to the higher levels and trash bins and junk littering them made it impossible for travel. On the main routes, two could narrowly pass each other while still allowing some room for pedestrians.

The motion stopped, and he faced the centrepiece of the circular square. Another decomposed old relic, once a tall fountain depicting fish and women pouring jugs, but no water had flowed from it in centuries.

Now where? Old Bob's? No, those cutthroats would try and take me themselves once they heard of the bounty. Valerie's? She had no love of Ninety-Six, but she needed the brothel to survive, and I wouldn't be worth any sacrifice on her part.

“Get out of the open, stupid.” He knew he didn't have time to sit where he could be seen and remembered.

Going left, for no particular reason, he entered the darkest alley. The smell of trash and general waste was stronger here than on the routes. *Getting out of sight has to be my first objective, but after that?* He stepped in something slick and slippery but caught himself before he fell. *Probably someone's shit, literally.* Then he heard a soft moan, and for no specific reason, he decided to look closer.

It was a body, discarded between two large trash bins. The shit he had slipped on was blood. Stooping closer for a better look in the murky darkness, he saw it was a woman, savagely beaten, maybe stabbed, or shot. He didn't have time for this, and so he moved on.

Agitated, muffled and raised voices ahead caught his attention. *Are they looking here already?* The paranoia was now messing with his mind. He needed a drink, a fix, sleep,

any escape. Trying to flee the unavoidable was screwing up his head. *The woman! She must live somewhere. If I save her, take her home, I'd be off the routes and alleys in a random location and out of sight.*

“Hey, you all right?” It was a stupid question and he knew it.

“Do you need help?” Another fucking stupid question.

“I’m going to pick you up.” He grabbed her and started to lift her. “Look, if you need me to help you, you have to help me. Try and stand. I need you to tell me where to take you.”

“Corgon Route, eighty-nine.” Her voice was weak, but he had heard her.

He cradled her in his arms. She wasn’t walking anywhere. Her last effort had been to give the address, and now she was gone, but he could feel her breathing; not dead yet then.

Corgon Route was close. It would be quicker on the main routes, but there he was more likely to be seen, and so he took the alleyways, hoping she’d still be alive when he got there.

The last alley exited close to his destination, but not so close that he could remain out of sight. He was more exposed moving down the route, and not inconspicuous with a blood-soaked woman in his arms. He also appreciated that it was that time when most people were either at home or in the bars, brothel or gambling house, so the way was relatively quiet.

“Hey, what are you doing to that woman?”

Scallion was paces from his goal: number eighty-nine on the ground floor of the blocks. The short, scrawny young man in front of him was the last thing he needed.

The Power of a Connected

With the woman in his arms, he had no other option but to kick. The ball of his right foot hit the interfering man hard on the upper lip and under the nose. He dropped instantly beneath an erupting shower of blood.

“Fuck, fuck, fuck,” cursed Scallion as he took the last steps to reach number eighty-nine.

“Woman, wake up.” He shook her, rattling her as best he could without putting her down. “Wake up. I need you to open your fucking door if you want me to help you.”

“Door open.” She didn’t seem conscious, barely alive, but she had spoken loud enough that the door slid open.

Scallion stepped inside immediately but then halted at the entrance. The man left out in the open was a risk, a marker for the hunters. Now he had access, he dumped the woman uncaringly across the threshold to hold the door open should it close. Then he went to retrieve the fallen man, scanning furtively for any witnesses, but he saw no one.

Finally, the door closed and he was inside, but with the added complication of two unconscious bodies. The man would recover, a little battered and bruised, but other than that fine. The blood-soaked woman was another matter.

The sound of a metal-framed chair scrapping across the floor woke Scallion. His mind was foggy, but as the realisation of his current predicament returned, he fully woke with a start. He was sitting on the floor and waved his gun indiscriminately around the room. An empty whiskey bottle rolled off his lap and clunked to the floor before rolling a short distance.

The man was conscious, tied and gagged to one of the

table chairs. He was trying to escape but was only succeeding in moving the chair across the floor. They were in the kitchen. The woman was laid out on the small dining table, not moving, her legs dangling over the edge. The man's eyes were wide with fear and panic. He was trying to scream but then started to choke as the gag in his mouth, overlapped by another tied around his lower face, began to restrict his throat.

Scallion watched initially, wondering whether to save the man or not. His prisoner started to turn blue; he couldn't breathe. Deciding it wasn't worth letting the man die until he knew if he had any worth, Scallion stood slowly and walked over to him. Waving his gun in the prisoner's face, he clumsily untied the top gag with his free hand before pulling the second from the bloated face.

The coughing stopped, only to be followed by floods of tears and begging. "Don't kill me. Please don't kill me."

"Shut the fuck up."

"Please don't kill me."

"Fuck this." Scallion struck the bound man across his temple with the butt of his gun. The silence that followed was calming. Now he had time to think.

He glanced at the beaten and wounded woman, a knife slash across her gut. She was lucky. The blade hadn't gone deep, but it had sliced a long wound across her abdomen. She would more than likely live, provided she hadn't lost too much blood. He had found a medi-kit in one of the cupboards. Inside had been a laserseal-pen, and so he'd been able to close the wound. There had also been several anti-infection-healing cartridges and a delivery-needle pump, and he had administered two of those as well. A third he had used on himself to resolve his swollen eye and other bruises.

The Power of a Connected

With both his captives once again silent and him up on his feet, he needed to plan his next move. First, he replaced the gags on the man, but this time with less stuffed inside his mouth. Next, he searched the dwelling. He didn't need to be discreet or hide from outside observers, as the two blocks that made up the home had no windows. Very few did; it was a luxury and risk that few could afford. The front living space had been the scene of a struggle and a fight. The few items of cheap furniture not fixed to the shell of the room had been upturned and scattered. A quick rummage found there was nothing of value worth stealing. The same disarray existed in the kids' sparsely furnished bedroom upstairs. The woman's bedroom hadn't been the scene of a disturbance. However, the bed cover was on the floor, as though she had exited in a hurry. Again, nothing worth stealing.

Where are the kids? Is she a good worker? Good enough that someone would come looking for her? Looking at the clothing scattered about and the filter masks, it looked like she worked in the ore mine. From the evidence, the kids, a boy and a girl, worked in the factories, older teenagers too. The man, he guessed, worked on the farms. *Too soft for the mine. Would anyone be looking for him?* Time to wake them up and see if they have any value.

Lifting the well-wrapped sealed package from his holdall, he placed it to one side. It was a foot and a half long and ten inches wide all around. He had no idea what it was inside but figured it had to be valuable given the trouble it had caused. Under the package, lying loose in the bottom of the bag, was his drug stash. He selected a strip of shrink-wrapped pink smilers and popped one. It wasn't for him. It was a stimulant, and he needed to force it down

the woman's throat. The sink was behind a panel on the wall. "Sink." The unit slid out, exposing a tiny basin with no drainer and a water tap. He opened a cupboard to find dry ration packs, and the next had some tinned goods. The third had some metal plates, bowls and cups. Taking a cup and filling it with water, he poured some down her throat as he massaged the smiler down. The rest of the water he threw in the man's face.

The woman suddenly sat bolt upright after only a few seconds but then collapsed back to the table, groaning. Good, she hadn't screamed. The stomach wound must have healed well, and her facial bruising had disappeared too. He would need to watch her though as he hadn't bound or restrained her, but he doubted she would have the strength to stand or fight. The scrawny man, young, maybe only nineteen or twenty, was staring wide-eyed at the gun and Scallion.

"No sudden movement from either of you or I will shoot you." He had no desire to fire. Not because he cared about their lives, but the noise of the ballistic weapon would be audible outside the building. "No shouting or screaming either and I won't hurt you. I'm going to remove your gag. Don't be stupid."

The woman had rolled over to face Scallion. She was conscious enough to talk. "My kids?"

"They're not here, but that's nothing to do with me." Scallion flitted his gaze between the two watching for signs of a threat.

"Who's he?"

"He saw me carrying you home. So now he's here."

"You didn't take me to the authorities, and you've kidnapped him. You're on the run."

Clever bitch. Not stupid this one.

“Yes. So that means I’m desperate, and if I have to, I will kill you both,” he countered quickly.

“But first you want to know if…” She coughed, then took a moment to compose herself. There was no blood in the saliva running from her mouth. Another good sign that her abdomen wound wasn’t severe.

“What the fuck have you given me?”

“A smiler. I needed you awake.”

“Wow, I’m definitely awake.” She forced herself up into a sitting position with her legs now dangling comfortably over the edge of the table towards Scallion.

“Don’t do anything stupid. The smiler might let you think you’re invincible, but you’ve lost a lot of blood and you were slashed in the gut when you were beaten.”

She examined the wound through the tear in her knee-length nightdress. It had been sealed. There might be a slight scar, but it would be faint. “Good work.”

“I’ve had lots of practice.”

She checked that her knickers were still on through the rip of the gown.

“I didn’t look or touch down there.”

Scallion had thought about it. She was pretty. Nice tits: he had looked at them. She was maybe thirty, ebony skin. A brunette too, his preference. She had beautiful legs. Shorter than him, maybe five foot eight. He liked them shorter and smaller. He was six foot two, but there were still many women taller and bulkier than him.

“What do you need from us?” asked the woman.

“First tell me what the fuck happened here? Are the kids coming back? Will anyone come looking for you when you miss your shift?”

Andrew Sharp

“Someone took my kids. I tried to stop them.”

“Why would anyone take your kids?”

“Sara is a connected.”

“Fuck, how’ve you kept that a secret so long?”

“We hide it. For nearly eighteen years we kept it a secret. We didn’t want to be separated.”

“The boy?”

“Jeb. No, he’s not connected.”

“So why did they take him?”

“No idea. Leverage against Sara? Maybe they think he is too?”

She slid off the table to stand. Scallion stepped back and raised the gun to her.

“Don’t do anything foolish.”

The man tied to the chair was sobbing now.

“And you shut the fuck up. Grow a pair. I’ll be asking who you are next.”

“I need to get my kids back.”

“That’s not going to happen. They’ll already be up in the lofts. They’re gone.”

“Then I’m going to the lofts too.”

“You won’t get up there. They’ll kill you before you even get close. No doubt they think they left you for dead already.”

“Rich, pampered bastards took my kids, and I’m going for them.”

“Look, lady, I’ve been a career criminal all my life and even I wouldn’t risk the lofts.”

“You need to get out of the station, don’t you? What are you going to do, walk across the Scorched Land? You need a means of transport. The lofts might be an option for you too.”

The Power of a Connected

“You trying to recruit me to your cause?”

“As you said, I’ve no chance alone.”

“Fuck that, you’ve got a death wish. Anyway, answer my fucking question. Will anyone be looking for you? Partner, boss, anybody?”

“No, no partner. He died years ago in service. Work won’t come looking for a day or two. I’m not that important.”

She stepped forward, straightening fully upright as she moved.

The gun snapped to her. “Nothing stupid.”

“I need a drink.” Then she shuffled towards the sink.

“So who the fuck are you?” said Scallion to the young man.

The young man had stopped crying but was too frightened to speak. He was still wide-eyed with fear.

“You’d better start talking, or you’re no good to me.”

“I’m Poppy. I work on the farms. I look after the groff plants. You know, the ones they can use the seeds from to make smilers.”

“Will anyone be looking for you?”

“My husband might. But he’s home with our son. We argued yesterday, and I stormed out, so he might not bother looking for me for a day or two.”

A repeating tone came from the living space. Someone was calling on the wall screen.

“Ignore it.”

“If I do that they might come knocking,” said the woman.

“Who the fuck is it?”

“How should I know unless I answer it.”

“Ignore it.”

“You’re the boss.”

The call tone stopped.

“Husband? So you’re one of those religious freaks.”

“Matrimony is the only way two people should be together.”

“Fuck that. There’s no fucking gods, and if there were they wouldn’t be here in this shithole.”

“Mother sees all and is everywhere.”

“Well she ain’t with you now, is she?”

“She’s always with me.”

“What about the farm, will they look for you?”

“They might. I’m a head grower. If the crop has a problem, they’ll need me.”

“Head grower, eh. So you’ve got credits?”

The slight-built man was short, maybe five foot tall when standing up, skin colour light yellowish-brown and almond-shaped eyes, maybe of drich origin mix. His clothes were brighter than the average person would wear. A yellow jacket, trousers and similar matching shoes and shirt, all spoiled now with flecks of his blood. He didn’t look important.

“Not with me. But yes, at home. If you take me there, you can have what you need to run.”

The woman started walking towards the living space.

“Where the fuck are you going?”

“To get dressed. If we’re going to the farms, I need to put some clothes on.”

“Who says we’re going to the farms?”

“You need credits. He has them. As a head grower, his domicile will be on the farm. They keep his kind close to the crops. I need someone like you to figure out how I get into the lofts.”

“Look, lady, I’m not helping you find your kids.

They're probably already halfway to the Device already."

"Then that's where we're going."

"Fuck you, lady." But he didn't stop her from leaving, and once she was out of sight, he turned back to the bound man on the chair.

"I won't do anything stupid. I swear on all that is holy. I just want to be back with my husband and son."

"Fuck, fuck, fuck!" What choice did he have? There was no doubt that by now there was a bounty on his head. As soon as he stepped outside, the authorities, bounty hunters and every other lowlife would be looking for him. He needed to get out of this station fast.

Leaving Poppy tied to the chair but without the gags, Scallion went to look for the woman. He found her in her bedroom pulling on a short black leather jacket over a tight blue vest top. She was already wearing a pair of figure-hugging trousers with knee-high laced boots.

"What the fuck is that?" He pointed his gun straight at the animal on the bed. "Where did that come from?"

"It's a cat."

"Fuck off, there are no cats. Not for a hundred years or more since the last great food shortage. And if any survived that, the grumbles wiped them out when they breached the perimeter fences a few decades back."

"It's an OD, an ore-drone."

"Fuck off, now you're taking the piss. How the fuck do you afford an OD?"

"Do you have to swear in every sentence?"

"What if I... do?" He stuttered past the swearing that was on the tip of his tongue.

"Sara made it."

"Fu... really! That's one gifted kid." He would try and

watch his swearing for a while because she was pretty, and he fancied his chances later.

“Where’d she get the parts?”

“I stole them bit by bit from the ore mine, and anywhere else I could scavenge them. It took her two years to build it, and she finished it only last week. It’s still young, still developing and learning.”

“She couldn’t make a dog. Something less conspicuous?”

“Too big, more parts. And she liked the thought of a cat.”

Scallion assessed the OD. Black fur, sleek body, long tail, bright green eyes with dark slit pupils; it looked real, alive. It was lying on the bed, making a soft rumbling noise.

“Why’s it making that noise. Is it broken?”

“That’s a purr. It means it’s happy.”

“Where’d you get the ore to power it?”

“Again, stolen like the parts. I’m not a thief, but she was so clever, talented, gifted that I had to find something to keep her occupied and challenge her. I stole ore dust, chip fragments and small components a little at a time. Nothing so large that it would get noticed by the scans. And if I was caught, it was just like dust or a part that might have accidentally drifted into a pocket.”

“What can it do?”

“I don’t know. So far, it’s just been a cat. We’ve kept it hidden most of the time.”

“So it has power ore, intelligence ore. Does it have comms ore?”

“I suppose so. I managed to get hold of all three. Sara said that’s what she needed.”

“We’re taking it. It’s probably worth a good few credits.”

“You’re not selling my cat. And yes we’re taking it.”

At that, the woman slung a slouch bag over her shoulder and picked up the cat. “Stay inside and be quiet,” she said as she placed the animal inside the bag. Then she reached under her pillow and pulled a blaster pistol.

Scallion levelled the ballistic in his right hand, but the woman didn’t turn around and instead dropped the pistol into her slouch bag beside the cat.

“Where the fuck did you get a blaster?”

“My partner was a security operative on the dock. When he died, they gave me his stuff. The pistol came with that.”

“Don’t think that should have happened.”

“Neither do I, but I didn’t give it back.”

“Why didn’t you use it when they took your kids?”

“It was hidden then, and I didn’t get a chance. I’m ready now,” she said as she turned. “My name is Sky, and you are?”

“Scallion.”

“Well, Scallion, let’s get you ready too, shall we?”

Poppy hadn’t even tried to escape. Thirty minutes he had waited alone before the woman showed up again. They were probably shagging. More than likely at gunpoint too, as he doubted the woman would be willing, but he had seen the lust in the ruffian’s eyes.

The woman entered the kitchen, strode over to the holdall, and took the man’s clothing. She didn’t even acknowledge Poppy before she left. Ten minutes later, the thug and the woman came back. The man had changed into a dark knee-length jacket over a black shirt and trousers with matching dark ankle boots. The change of

clothing wasn't why Poppy's mouth hung open though. The man was clean-shaven, and his long dark greasy hair was now washed, cut noticeably short in length and blond; he barely recognised him as the same man that had kidnapped him.

"So, we're leaving now, Poppy. This is Sky, and I'm Karl," lied Scallion. "Are you going to give us any trouble?"

The bound man shook his head.

"Right, I'm going to let you loose and then we're going straight to your home."

"You won't get past security. You don't have the right clearance," Poppy challenged.

"We won't be using the security point," replied Scallion.

"There's no other way in?" questioned Poppy

"The maintenance conduits."

"But they have botdrones and defences."

"Leave them to me."

Outside, the ceiling was daylight bright. Holographic clouds drifted over the lighting cells to cast soft shadows on the ground and surfaces below. In the stark light of day, the slum they called town was even more squalid. Litter drifted down the main routes. Botdrones were supposed to collect such waste, but they were few in number and the waste relentless. People of all types and colours were out and about now. Most would be going to or from a shift at the ore mine, the factories or the farms. Others worked in stores, the bars or on the service provisions. All children attended school from the age of three and then everyone over the age of seven had a job allocated to them.

"Hold my hand," said Scallion, throwing the straps of

his bag over one shoulder before grabbing Poppy in a firm grip. “Don’t try anything.” He pulled back his coat just enough to show the handgun tucked into his belt and trousers.

The three of them strolled casually down the route and were initially ignored. Most people kept their heads down; no one wanted to stand out, to attract any attention from the patrolling authorities or the criminal elements lurking in many of the shadows. The gangs and lawbreakers were left alone unless they made themselves a particular nuisance. The station’s security forces focused on protecting and policing the flight dock, ore mine, factories and farms. These revenue streams, much of which went off Devil’s Rock to Eden, were all critical to the wealthy, up high in their lofts. The grounders were just commodities to labour for them, a population they needed to keep alive and relatively healthy but not at any great expense.

A dog barked and Scallion looked in its direction.

“Relax,” said Sky. “You’ll attract attention.”

He was sweating, even though the controlled temperature was moderate. He was nervous, and he hadn’t had a drink or any drugs since he’d finished the whiskey. However, Sky was right, and he had to keep calm. *How is she so calm?* They had a forty-minute walk to the right conduit access point, and they were going to pass many people along the way.

Scallion knew the town like the back of his hand. After all, he had lived there all his life, like everyone else. Anyone hunting him would assume he was looking for a way out of the station. They would be monitoring all the possible exits. He wondered for a moment how much his bounty

might be. No one would be expecting him to be going to the farms, surely? He was confident this detour would buy him some time to think about how he was going to get out of the station.

The robust service shed was cordoned off by sturdy, thick meshed fencing on all four sides and above. It was located midway down an alley, with only domicile blocks on each side. The place was quiet, with only a solitary dog rummaging through the trash. A combined numeric keypad and a card swipe secured the gate. Scallion produced a palm-sized transparent tablet from his pocket. Lights danced across the clear surface of the utility device and seconds later the lock popped.

“Neat,” commented Sky. “Bet that wasn’t cheap to come by.”

“I got it for free. The last owner didn’t need it anymore.”

The same type of lock barred the shed door.

After closing and locking both the gate and the door behind them, they were inside the shed. Space was a little cramped for the three of them, especially as they were avoiding the floor hatch should it suddenly open. Dark panels lined one wall from top to bottom. Scallion touched all four surfaces and they blinked into life, each displaying a holographic keyboard and requesting an access command.

Scallion typed a command into the first and the screen turned amber. “Shit, wrong code.”

“Won’t the utility device help?” asked Poppy.

“Not on these. They change the code every couple of weeks. But in truth, there are only four command codes they use. I just have to put the right one in next, or the

panels will lock out for an hour and alert one of the control rooms.”

“And you know all four codes?” asked Sky.

“Yes, everything has a price, and everyone is corrupt. So that makes everything available if you can pay the asking.”

“So which of the three remaining are you trying next?”

“Sssh! I’m thinking. They’re always used in order, and I last used one three weeks ago... so... got it.”

He typed in another code and the panel came to life displaying readings of the services flowing through the conduit tunnel. With one panel accessed, he entered the same code at the other three and all became active with illuminated holographic dials, graphs and wave-bars.

“I can disable the lasermesh and the filters. They might send an engineer or reset them from a control room, but I doubt that will be quick,” said Scallion.

“No, not filters.” Poppy almost screamed.

“They won’t think anything is down there, any person at least if the filters are off. They might also think the tainted air has tripped the lasermesh in some way.”

“That tainted air will kill you in less than an hour, and after thirty minutes your lungs won’t be able to recover, and you’ll have weezies for the rest of your life.” Poppy showed real fear on his face.

“Look, there are filter masks over there. We each take one and move through the conduit as quickly as possible before they reset everything. The control rooms are lazy, and this shit is all old and fails regularly. No one will be bothered. They can ignore minor glitches like this for days. Trust me. You work outside every day on a farm, so why are you so worried.”

Scallion touched a screen one more time, and the floor hatch unlocked and slid open, revealing a ladder descending thirty feet. Sky collected three filter masks, complete with eye visors, and they each put one on.

The illuminated conduit was wide enough that they could walk abreast if they chose to, but they formed a line with Scallion at the front and Sky at the rear. There was plenty of headroom and running miles in both directions were a multitude of different coloured and sized cables, pipes, valves and small dark service panels. Ladders descended randomly, well distanced from each other and centrally onto the deckplate. Other conduits crossed at an irregular frequency. Scallion drew his handgun and they set off towards the farms.

“Karl, look.”

“I see it, Poppy. It won’t bother us. It’s here for the grumbles.”

Ahead was a botdrone hovering three feet above the deckplate. A two-foot diameter globe armed with four small laser-bolt turrets giving it the ability to fire in a three-hundred-and-sixty-degree arc on every axis.

“How do we get past it?” said Poppy.

“We walk. It’s used to ignoring engineers,” replied Scallion. “We’re too big to register on its targeting sensors. Don’t you know anything?”

“Farming, that’s all I know. I rarely leave the farm.”

“So what were you doing in town last night?” asked Sky.

Poppy ignored the question. “Look, it’s moving.”

A fat grumble dropped suddenly from the ceiling just feet ahead of them and Poppy screamed the high-pitched scream of a young girl. The botdrone targeted instantly and fired. The six-inch bolt of blue light splattered the

creature in a wide radius of showering blood, bone fragments and flesh.

“Gross,” said Sky.

Scallion looked at his feet and trousers where the fragments had reached him. “That stinks.”

They moved past the botdrone, which was moving in the opposite direction.

“How much further?”

“Nearly there, Poppy. Keep your shit together.”

They had seen several other grumbles scampering across cables, pipes and the deckplate, and it was quite apparent that Poppy was phobic about the creatures. The vermin kept away from people. They feared dogs, and that was why so many strays were allowed to roam freely. They had invaded every station over fifty years ago. Suddenly they had found a way out of the Scorched Land, under the perimeter walls and into the towns. No one had been concerned at the invasion, even though the grumbles were larger animals than the rats and mice, and remarkably similar in appearance. They differed not only in size but their fur was bright blue and they were fanged; they were bloodsuckers first and foremost, but they devoured every mouse and rat in every town. They were so successful that both rats and mice had become extinct. Now they fed on each other, forming gangs, and controlling territories. Their numbers were few, compared to what the extinct prolific breeding rats had been, and most people considered them a better swap over the lost rodents.

“Shit! Run.” Scallion set off at pace as the dark-screened dormant service panels were lighting up. Someone was resetting the systems.

Sky overtook Poppy, who fell behind, breathing heavily.

Scallion reached the ladder first, a much longer ladder than the one they had climbed down. At the top, he opened the hatch and entered another service shed identical internally to the previous. Sky was only seconds behind him, but they had to wait for Poppy. A bloodcurdling scream came from below just before they saw Poppy grabbing the ladder's frame. The skinny young man climbed slowly, making hard work of his progress, showing no signs of any urgency.

"Aaahh!" Sky gasped as Poppy crawled off the ladder onto the floor, where he collapsed whimpering.

Scallion sniggered, and finally not able to hold it, he laughed aloud as he closed the hatch. A crisscross of welted burns covered the frail young man's back. His shirt and pants were shredded where each line ran. The scorch lines across his arse looked particularly sore and still smoked slightly. The smell was like cooked chicken. A lasermesh had caught Poppy. He must have almost passed through it as it came back online. The burns were painful, but a person could jump through lasermesh and only take minor burns, as they were designed originally to only kill rats. The laser beams were visible, interwoven across the width of the conduit, avoiding the pipes and cables but covering any space in a close-knit mesh. The wounds were nothing that a laserseal-pen couldn't knit back together and heal, but they would sting until treated.

Sky removed her facemask and took Scallion's before hanging them on the shed wall with a collection of others.

"It's not funny," whimpered Poppy, head buried in his arms, face down on the floor.

Scallion tried to stop laughing and slowly regained his composure. "It could have been worse."

“How?”

“Lucky it’s your back and arse and not your dick and balls.”

“Oooh.” Sky winced at the thought.

“Outside, we’ll be in the plant farm’s control zone. I’m fairly sure we’ll be close to the groff fields because of the seed smuggling that goes on, but Poppy you’ll need to guide us to your home quickly. The quicker the better if you want your wounds healed.”

Leaving the service shed, they entered a different world. Gone were the filthy alleys and littered routes, replaced by clean white corridors. A hovering botdrone passed them as they exited the shed door. It moved along the wall slowly, shining a beam on the nearby surface that both removed dirt and any possible bacteria. B23, in large red print, was marked on the wall opposite the shed.

“We’re close,” said Poppy. “This way. We need to be in B twenty-six.”

Along the corridor, there were occasional doors in both directions, but other than botdrones, they met no one. They passed a viewing window, and Sky and Scallion couldn’t resist looking outside. Below them was a large groff field. The dense red bulbous fruits, lying on the ground, looked ripe and ready for picking. Each groff was surrounded in a swathe of broad purple leaves. Ahead of them, high above the crop, was another service corridor like the one they were on. Pipes were attached beneath the corridors, running both ahead of and behind theirs, linking the corridors together and on occasion giving controlled bursts of water spray, cleansers, germicides or growth agents as required. Intersecting service runs also connected one corridor to another.

“I’ve never seen the real sky.”

Scallion looked up, following Sky’s gaze. The groff was an outside crop as they needed the tainted air for growth. The world outside had a permanent orange tint, almost imperceptible, but it was there, and it became more crimson as night fell. The sun was high in the dull beige-orange sky behind pale grey broken clouds. The old stories said that the sky had once been blue before the Destruction, but no one knew for sure.

“Come on, my back’s sore,” said Poppy. “We need to move.”

Reaching B26, Poppy touched the small panel beside a door, and they waited until the lift arrived. Inside the tube was a circular platform, and when the door closed, they went downwards.

“Let me do the talking, and no guns, please. I don’t want to frighten Carlu or Sunshine.”

The door slid open, and Scallion drew his handgun immediately. Sky produced her blaster a moment after.

“How old’s your son?” asked Scallion.

Poppy couldn’t speak. The nicely furnished white living space ahead of them was in disarray and blood was splattered everywhere, including a handprint in blood slapped in the middle of the window looking out towards a crop field.

“Less than twelve months I’d guess,” stated Sky. “We need to go back up.”

“We can’t. We need his credits, and he needs a medikit. Stay close.”

Stepping cautiously out of the lift, they swept the room with their weapons.

“These things are fast. Shoot first, don’t wait until you see it.”

Something toppled over on the far right of the room. Scallion fired two rapid shots into the vicinity.

“Shoot first,” he reminded Sky, who nodded nervously. She had turned pale, and this was the first time that Scallion had seen her not looking confident.

Something was disturbed in another area of the room. Two more shots and this time Sky fired too. The red six-inch rod of light burned a hole through the back of an upholstered chair. This time they heard the soft snarl of something wild and threatening.

“It’s definitely in here. You only had one kid, right?”

Poppy nodded.

The scream was unholy, frenzied and primal, as the small child leapt from behind the nearby overturned sofa with his mouth open wide and two large fangs protruding from his upper gums. The blood-smearred infant had eyes like hot burning coals as he flew through the air towards Scallion. He fired, and the baby exploded like a ruptured bag of meat: blood and flesh splattering across the room.

Poppy fainted.

“Look for survivors,” ordered Scallion, moving across the room with his gun before him. Sky followed, and they crept slowly to the far door, which slid open as they approached. Beyond was a glass dining table and six matching chairs. Two of the walls were entirely glazed, looking out across crops of groff, and all the surfaces were smeared with bloody handprints.

“Watch the stairs. I’ll check the kitchen.”

The door slid open, revealing a large, well-equipped kitchen complete with a circular food preparation island.

“It’s clean here,” he called, as he swept around the stand and returned to the dining room.

He took the lead, and they climbed the blood-stained stairs. There was a short landing at the top with three doors, each smeared with blood.

“Bedroom open.”

The first room was for the kid, with a cot against one wall and a small bed on the far side. A holographic mobile danced about the ceiling displaying cute dancing animals, and a soft lullaby was playing; the room was clean. The next room had a large circular bed that was rotating slowly at its centre, but that too was clean. The final room was a luxurious bathroom, complete with a deep tub, a walk-in shower cubical, bidet and sink. This room wasn't clean.

The half-devoured body lay on the floor with the belly and chest ripped wide open, and all the vital organs were missing. “Ravenous little bastard.” Scallion relaxed and lowered his handgun. “An open cot. Idiots. They should have had the runt caged, and the door locked when it slept.”

“First-time parents. Probably couldn't believe their child would get blood-sick.”

“Well, Poppy's life's about to change. No more fucking luxury domicile for him.”

“We'd better go see if he's okay.”

They woke him in the kitchen, one of the clean rooms and where they had found the medi-kit. Sky had treated his wounds, and he hadn't flinched during the process, so far had he retreated into his mind. It had taken some effort to rouse him. Having not wanted to waste a smiler on him, Scallion had slapped his face red-raw before Poppy's eyes opened.

Conscious now, he was sitting in a corner, head down,

not making a sound.

Scallion had ordered a meal from the preparation stand where he was sitting, and the serving area in front of him showed a countdown for the two minutes it took to prepare. The unit pinged. The meal was ready, the cover slid back, and a plate rose to the surface with roast bovine, vegetables, tuber-fries, and gravy. His stomach grumbled at the sight of the food. He couldn't remember the last time he hadn't eaten from a tin, a ration pack or another package of long-life processed food.

"A real fucking meal. Fuck, you had it good, Poppy."

"Do we have time for this?"

"Relax, Sky. He needs to get his sense back, and I'm hungry. I couldn't find any alcohol and this unit won't produce any, so I'm eating. When I've finished the meal, he'll give me the credits one way or another and then we can leave."

Sky went over and sat on the floor in the corner with Poppy.

"I can't imagine how you're feeling. I lost my partner, but I still had my kids. You've lost both."

There was no indication that Poppy was listening.

"Look, I'm guessing you served the seed that fertilised the egg and your husband carried the baby for the full term. If that's how it was, then you'll be classed as a carrier. The only way you'll be able to resume your life here is if you had nothing physically to do with the kid's creation, but I doubt that. They'll not only sterilise you, but they'll drop your classification, and you won't be head of anything ever again. You'll have to go live in the town with the rest of the farm workers and the rest of us lower classifications."

There was no movement or sound from the curled-up

man pressed into the corner of the walls.

“Look, if you’re listening, Scallion will want the credits you promised him. He won’t ask nicely. Your best chance is to come with us.”

“Recruiting for your cause again,” called Scallion with a mouthful of meat. “He won’t come with us. He won’t last two minutes away from this life.”

“You probably don’t care if you live or die at the moment, but my kids are still out there, and the longer it takes to catch up with them, the less likely that I’ll find them. Please, I need your help.”

Poppy stayed frozen in place. The soft sound of his breathing was the only indication that he was still living.

“It wasn’t your fault. There are no signs before they turn blood-sick. It just happens. There was nothing you could do.”

“I wanted to cage Sunshine, but Carlu said no. He could always get his way with me. That’s why we argued and I left. It sucks that I was right and he was wrong and I can’t tell him to his face.”

“Come with us unless you want to be sterilised or, worse, thrown into a grubby town domicile. That’s assuming they don’t just stick you in a pod on the outskirts.”

“He’s right. I won’t last two minutes on the run.”

“You’re smart. You have to be to become head of anything. Smarter than either of us. He’s the thug, I’m the diplomat, and you can be the brains.”

“Who are you calling a thug. I’m more than just muscle, lady... diplomat indeed.”

“I don’t know where to start looking. The lofts, the Device. I’ve no idea what we’re going to do next.”

“The people that took your kids. How were they dressed?”

“Smart. Uniforms.”

“Not grounder uniforms?”

“None like I’ve ever seen before.”

“Probably elite from the lofts. Did you notice any insignia on their left breast area?” Poppy tapped the area on his chest to indicate where he meant, and he lifted his head now as he spoke directly to Sky.

“Yes. Now that you say it, yes. They all had a bird or something with wings. Gold-coloured,” replied Sky.

“An eagle. They belong to the governor of bovine, Governor Frisk. He doesn’t reside here in Station Six. Only his envoy will be here, and a small number of his elite. He’s from Station Eight. If he took your kids, they would be on their way to Station Eight. Assuming no one has hijacked them along the way. Connected are valuable, and other governors might look to acquire them for themselves.”

“How the fuck do you know that?” interjected Scallion.

“Do you know anything about who lives in the lofts, Karl?”

“Rich fucks.”

“You have no idea, do you. There’s a hierarchy, a structure. The groff I grow here doesn’t belong to Governor Jerim up in the lofts here. He’s governor of poultry. There are only so many stations, and the governors have to share the resources. The governors report to head office. That’s how they refer to their seniors. It’s all a class system. You’re at the bottom, Karl.”

“Fuck you, Poppy.”

“See, you’re smart. We need you. I need you. Please?” said Sky.

“I might not last two minutes on the run, but I’ll last a lot less if they put me in a tower pod. I might want to die just now, but I’ve not got the strength to do anything about that. I think I need you now, just as much as you might want me.”

“About fucking time. So where are the credits,” said Scallion.

“I’ll get changed, get the credits and I’ll be back in a few minutes.”

“I’d stay out of the bathroom if I were you,” called out Scallion as the door started to close behind him.

“One of us should maybe go with him.”

“Good idea. I’m finishing my food, so not me.”

“We’ll wait then.”

Ten minutes passed, and Scallion was visibly nervous that Poppy might have done a runner, or called the authorities, but he was trying not to show it. Sky could read him though and knew that he was worried, and he knew that she knew. *Too fucking clever, she is. She’s going to be a real pain in the arse.*

The kitchen door slid open and Poppy returned. He wore an expensive pink jacket with matching trousers, shoes, and a colour-coordinated top.

“Fuck me. Not exactly inconspicuous are you.”

“I’ll wear what I like. This is my favourite suit, and I’m not changing.”

“Fuck, all right. Where are the credits?”

Poppy slid two transfer cards across the top of the surface of the food-prep island to Scallion.

“How much?”

“Enough.”

Scallion put his thumb on each of the cards to see the

totals they held, but nothing happened. “They’re empty!”

“No, just locked.” As he passed the preparation station, he picked them both up again. Reaching Sky, he handed her one of the cards after he had unlocked it with his print. He indicated that she should imprint her thumb on the card, and she did.

“Now one card is locked to me and the other to Sky.”

“Fuck it. I’ll just cut your thumbs off.”

“They are biometric and not the simple cards you’re used to. Our thumbs will need to stay attached; we’ll need to stay alive and our vitals remain normal, as any stress, such as if you tried to force us to use them, and they won’t work. If we die, they won’t work. Now, if you want credits, you work for us.”

“What the—?”

“Looks like you’re on Team Sky and Poppy now and coming to find my kids.”

“No way. I’ll find another way out of this station.”

“Go ahead.”

Scallion paused, unsure what to say or do. “How much is on your card?”

“Wow! Enough,” Sky said after looking.

“We were savers. Wanted to ensure Sunshine had a good place in society. I’ve emptied our accounts though. Everything is on these two cards. A withdrawal like that will get someone’s attention, so we’d better get moving.”

“Where are we going then, brains and diplomat?”

“I know someone who will help us,” replied Poppy. “You need to get us back into town, and I’ll get us somewhere safe.”

“Fuck it.” Scallion pushed his empty plate away. “So where’s your bags?”

“I’m not taking anything. I don’t want any memories to haunt me. I’m barely holding it together now.” His last words quivered as he spoke and a single tear rolled down his left cheek.

“Great, a pink softy, and a pain in the arse bitch in charge. What the fuck could go wrong.”

The three of them returned to the living space, heading for the lift, ignoring the mess and the blood that coated everywhere, especially the area splattered with the baby. They were halfway across the room when the lift door slid open.

They froze.

A humanoid OD exited the lift. It looked like a humanoid botdrone, but the seamless shell, entirely matt-grey, and fluid movement declared that it wasn’t. The right thigh opened, and a heavy blaster pistol slid out and was taken by the OD.

“Stay where you are,” a strong, confident male voice said.

Scallion dropped his bag, pulled his weapon, and fired. The bullets hit the ore-drone, two in the chest and one in the head, but they were deflected and ricocheted off its armour plate.

Two blaster bolts scorched the OD’s shell, but other than leaving dark splayed ring patterns, they had no detrimental effect.

The OD pointed its blaster to the window and blew it out. Tainted air rushed in, and the three humans felt their throats become dry and coarse almost immediately. The ore-drone was unaffected.

A dozen strategically located facemasks, mouth-covering only, dropped on tethers from the ceiling. The

humans each grabbed their nearest masks and dived for protection behind furniture. Both Scallion and Sky fired rapidly at the OD to provide them cover as they hid. The ore-drone remained stationary, blocking the path to the lift, allowing the bullets and bolts to bounce off its shell.

“Scallion. Where is the package, and you will be allowed to live,” said the OD.

Three blast shots ripped through the furniture extremely close to each of them. The OD was demonstrating that their barriers were ineffective.

“My sensors have the tracker located in this room, but I need to know that you still have the curio too,” continued the OD.

Another blaster shot, and Poppy screamed. A thud followed as he fell to the floor. One of Poppy’s pink legs was sticking out from behind the overturned chair, and Sky could see one of his arms lying motionless.

“I will kill the woman too. Unless you reveal yourself and the curio.”

The dining room door slid open, and Sky watched Scallion flee, leaving her behind.

She waited for the blaster shot. She had no value to the OD, so she was expendable, but the shot never came. She heard gunshots from the dining room. *What the hell is he shooting at in there?*

There was a loud crash in the living area as something substantial fell to the floor. Silence. Then more shots from the dining area.

Sky very cautiously stood up and looked around. The OD was face down on the floor, motionless, and sitting on its back, licking its front paws, was the cat.

“Now that I wasn’t expecting.”

Sky crossed the room, picking up her slouch bag from where she'd dropped it, and continued to the dining room. The door slid open. Scallion aimed his gun at her but didn't pull the trigger. She surveyed the room. The glass in the two window walls was damaged where he had been firing bullets at them in an attempt to shatter them. His escape plan hadn't worked.

The confusion and questions on Scallion's face were a picture, and she took great pleasure in not answering his unasked queries.

"I've taken care of the OD. Now we need to get out of here quickly, but you need to lose that package, whatever it is. I'll see if Poppy is still alive."

Scallion put his holdall on the dining table and pulled out the package. It was wrapped and sealed tight, but he had a pocketknife in the bag and started stripping away the layers of wrapping. Uncovering a tin box, not locked, and he flipped the lid. Inside, the tracking disc was obvious, but he had no idea what the curio was. Picking it up he examined it. A shiny cylinder, not metal but something remarkably similar, capped at both ends and full of different-sized holes. Inside the outer cylinder were other cylinders also covered in holes. It was more substantial than it looked, eight pounds he guessed, twelve inches tall and six inches in diameter. He put the cylinder back in his holdall, deciding to work out what it was later. It was a curio, and he had handled one before so had no fear of the superstitions surrounding them. If he could find a buyer for it, he wouldn't need Sky or Poppy anymore.

"A little help." Sky was half carrying, half dragging Poppy

into the room. “Get him on the table and I’ll fix him up.”

The blaster bolt had narrowly missed his head, scorching across the top of his right shoulder and the right side of his face. He was conscious but partially stunned as they stretched him out on the glass table.

“You smell like cooked chicken again,” said Scallion as he let go.

Sky took the medi-kit from her bag. She had acquired the one they had used earlier in the kitchen, thinking that it might be something useful to have.

She got to work with the laserseal-pen. “Give him a couple of healing cartridges,” she ordered Scallion, who picked up the delivery-needle without question.

While Sky worked on the wounds, the air purified around them and they were able to remove their masks. The automatic systems had kicked in, filling the breached window with a bonding foam as the extractor fans purged the taint.

“Finished.”

“How does it look?” asked Poppy, now recovered from the shock and the ringing in his ear.

“The shoulder’s good. The face too...” Sky hesitated.

“What?”

“You’ve lost half your ear. The bottom half. The lobe and a bit more. Looks good I think,” said Scallion, grinning. “You don’t look such a softy now.”

“No, no.”

Poppy pushed himself off the table and raced to the screen in the living space. “Mirror,” he shouted. “No, no. Fuck, I liked this suit.”

Chapter Two



No Escape

“Okay, so we’re back in town. Where next?” Scallion didn’t like it that he now answered to both Poppy and Sky. He had thought about cutting them both loose and going it alone on the whole journey back to the service shed, but they held the credits. He also had no idea what he was going to do next, and both of them seemed to have a plan. These two were usually the types of people that he would have robbed, beaten up and generally intimidated. They considered him a lowlife and a petty criminal, which he was, but he didn’t need them reminding him of the fact. Poppy had acquired the OD’s heavy blaster pistol, and that should have been his. The softy had claimed it and now carried it in a pale blue purse slung over his shoulder. The little drich had changed from his pink suit to a blue one before they had left, and that matched the purse.

“Valerie’s,” said Poppy.

“No way. The brothel? She’ll turn me in without a second thought. Probably not even a first.”

“Valerie’s,” repeated Poppy.

Scallion sighed, *the brothel then*. He just hoped this plan, whatever it was, would work. If not, he would dump them both and go it alone.

“Keep the curio out of sight,” added Sky.

He wasn’t stupid. He knew that having it with them made both Sky and Poppy nervous. Not because they had any superstitions, as many did about such devices, but because it was valuable enough for someone to send an OD to retrieve it.

They left the service shed and entered the dark alley as nightfall began; the lighting was slowly dimming as the stars were coming out. Poppy took the lead now, and Scallion found himself wondering once again how things had changed so quickly.

“Not that way,” said Scallion abruptly, spotting some people up ahead, and he turned sharply into the alley on his right.

His companions stopped on the route, hesitant about following him.

“Get off the route now.” Scallion’s request sounded urgent, so they complied.

“What are you doing?” asked Sky.

“That’s Demic ahead. The loud one with the others. She’s a bounty hunter, a killer for hire and generally not a nice person.”

“You think she’s looking for you?” asked Poppy.

“I don’t want to find out.”

“Okay. We’ll cut past them through the alleys.” Poppy again took the lead.

Once they had passed the threat, they came back to the route and continued walking.

“Where are you going? The brothel’s that way.” Scallion pointed to their left.

“I know,” replied Poppy, without answering Scallion’s question, as he headed in the other direction.

“Door open,” commanded Poppy as they reached what was his destination.

The ground-level domicile wasn’t near the brothel. It was a couple of routes behind it.

“Why are we here? Who lives here?” Scallion’s questions were once again ignored. He didn’t like it that neither of his companions was telling him anything about what was going on.

“Who does live here?” asked Sky.

“No one lives here, but it’s registered to someone, so it’s not a vacant block,” answered Poppy.

The living space was sparsely furnished. The layout matched that of Sky’s domicile, but the dust covering everything indicated that no one had been there for some considerable time.

In the kitchen, Poppy knelt and put his face to the floor. They heard him mutter something, but they couldn’t catch the words. A hidden hatch slid open, and there was a dark hole in the floor of the room.

“What the fuck. Who are you, Poppy? This shit isn’t something a dumb farmer knows.”

Again his question was ignored.

“It’s dark down there. There’s no lighting. But the passage is clear, and we just need to follow the walls to the other end,” said Poppy.

They climbed down the ladder together, one after the other, and before they reached the bottom the hatch above them shut, enveloping them in complete darkness.

“Put your hand on the wall and keep walking until we reach the other end,” instructed Poppy

Scallion had been last off the ladder. He held his hand up, and soft light emanating from the small utility device revealed a little about where they were. All the surfaces were smooth. There was a little spare headroom, and if he reached out with both arms, he could stretch across the entire width of the passage. Behind them was a wall, and so there was only one direction to go.

“There are no secret tunnels in town. It’s impossible. The network of maintenance conduits and the station’s foundations make digging impossible,” said Scallion.

“Yet, we are here,” answered Sky.

Keeping the soft light on for the entire walk revealed nothing new until they finally reached a ladder at the other end of the passage.

“Where are we?” said Scallion.

This time he got an answer. “Valerie’s,” said Poppy.

At the top of the ladder, a hatch opened, and they climbed out.

“Light,” commanded Poppy, as the hole in the floor shut and their small cell became illuminated. The confined box where they now stood had no visible exits and no control panels. The light source was all about them, but with no visible lighting cells to provide it.

“Where are we now?”

Once again, he was ignored.

“We can’t get out now from inside. So we need to wait for someone to let us out,” said Poppy.

“So we’re trapped.”

Again he was ignored.

The three of them managed to sit down, but in such

a small space, their legs often became intertwined, and Scallion was getting short-tempered and cramped. The other two hadn't answered any of his questions. How long would they have to wait? Who were they meeting? Why were they here? And many other similar queries had fallen on deaf ears. He rummaged in his bag, and his hand came out holding a strip of green screamers.

"You're not taking that in here," stated Sky, grabbing the drugs.

Scallion managed to keep them from her.

"What are they?" asked Poppy.

"Screamers," replied Sky. "They're hallucinogenic. Some people call them Nightmares, as not everyone has a good trip with them."

"I don't get nightmares, and I could do with a distraction," said Scallion.

"Give me them." A scuffle began in the small space as Sky attempted to wrestle the drugs from Scallion, and Poppy tried to keep out of the way.

Suddenly the door opened.

Everyone froze in the new intrusion of fresh light, and they each looked up from their entanglement.

Valerie stood outside, framed in the doorway. She ran the brothel, and every other flesh-peddling woman, man and child in the station worked for her. She took no shit from anyone. Her small army of protectors ensured that her house was always under her authority. For such a powerful woman she was small, just under five foot tall. A drich with a very slim figure and small breasts. The tight slinky, shiny dresses that she wore exaggerated her flat outline. If her face hadn't been so very feminine, set against flowing blonde hair, she might have passed for a young

boy. For although she must have been in her fifties, no one knew her real age, and she looked no older than twenty. Natural looks or cosmetic enhancement? Again no one knew.

“Get straight to it, or you’ll stay in there until you die.”

She was unarmed, with no visible weapons showing, and alone. Her outstretched arm was held over a control mechanism.

“Carlu and Sunshine are dead. Blood-sickness,” stated Poppy. His statement was enough, and Valerie moved aside to let them clamber and crawl out into the room beyond.

They were in a storeroom, with all types of liquor bottles and canisters stacked in a multitude of shelf baskets and racks.

“Who’s she, and why are you with a scumbag like Scallion?” Valerie asked Poppy.

“Who’s Scallion?”

Valerie indicated.

“That’s Karl.”

“No, that’s Scallion.”

“We’re on the run. She, Sky, is trying to find her kids. At least one of them is a connected, and Governor Frisk has taken them. He’s got a bounty on his head... Karl, or whatever his name is. I did wonder why that OD said Scallion. We need to get out of this station.”

“I’ve not heard of any bounty on him, and I’d know. A connected kid? Not heard anything about that either. The last one of them found here, in this station, was a few years back, and it’s longer still since the one before that. Don’t put your hand in that bag.”

Scallion froze. The tone of Valerie's last words wasn't a polite request. A blaster had appeared in her hand, and it was pointed straight at him. Where she had hidden the weapon in such a tight blue dress was a mystery, but he was in no doubt that she would kill him if he so much as twitched.

"I was just putting these away," he pleaded meekly.

"Just drop them. I won't have that kind of shitty drug in my house."

Scallion let them fall to the floor as he stood up. Poppy and Sky were already standing.

"You two put your bags on the floor and move away from them." As she spoke, she stepped back and moved Poppy behind her, waving her blaster between Sky and Scallion until they complied.

"Now, from the top. Tell me your stories, or you won't leave this room. What—?"

"It's an OD. A cat," explained Poppy, as the black animal appeared over the rim of the slouch bag.

"Dangerous?"

"No, I don't think so." Poppy moved forward and picked the animal up, cradling it in his arms before he once again went behind Valerie.

"You first." She trained the blaster on Scallion.

"I was in the dock. I was going to steal a valuable commodity that was being stowed away in a container. I was early. I meant to turn up after it had been stashed and simply walk away with it. Then these security guards turned up to hide a package in the container. Finding me surprised them. I took advantage and shot two of them immediately. Then I fought with the other two. I recognised one of them as being on Ninety-Six's payroll,

so I couldn't leave any of them alive. Then more guards showed up, and I ran. I figured because I'd fucked up one of Ninety-Six's smuggling operations that he'd have a bounty on me, and once the bodies were found the authorities would be after me too. So Iran."

"How did you end up with Poppy?"

"He kidnapped me," said Poppy, interrupting. "And he has a curio with him. Must be important too, as someone sent an OD to collect it."

"Where's the OD?" Valerie glanced over her shoulder to the storeroom door, as if expecting it to suddenly show up.

"The cat incapacitated it," Sky said.

"What?" Valerie moved further back, now almost at the doorway, to bring the small black animal into her vision.

"My daughter made it. It's just been a cat so far, but somehow it took out a biped OD."

"Why did you kidnap Poppy?" said Valerie, her attention returning to Scallion.

"He saw me in the route carrying her. She was covered in blood, and I couldn't leave him to alert anyone where I was."

"Why was she covered in blood?"

"They took my kids, Sara and Jeb, teenagers. I tried to stop them and failed. They left me for dead, and he saved me."

"He doesn't save anybody. So why?"

"I needed to get off the routes, and her place seemed a good place to hide."

"Show me this curio. Carefully."

Scallion took it from his bag.

“Any idea what it does?”

“Not got a fucking clue.”

“Right, put it away. So, how’s Poppy caught up in all this.”

“He wanted my credits, so we went home to get them,” said Poppy. “When we got there, it was already too late for Carlu. Sunshine attacked us. He was blood-sick, but he shot him. If I’d gone home alone, I doubt I’d be here now.”

“Wow, you’ve changed, Scallion. You’re saving lives now instead of taking them. This something new you’re trying? Stay here. Don’t come out and stay quiet. I’ll send someone for you shortly. And Scallion, take any of your shitty drugs or touch any of my merchandise” – she waved the blaster at the liquor – “and you won’t see another day. If they do anything stupid, Poppy, shoot them,” continued Valerie, and she made to hand over her blaster.

“I’ve got my own.” He took the heavy blaster pistol from his purse.

“You do keep surprising me.” Valerie smiled as she left.

“You going to shoot us?” said Scallion.

“You maybe. Sky no,” Poppy replied as he handed her the cat.

“How the fuck are you in so tight with Valerie? She doesn’t like anyone. Everything is just business with her,” said Scallion.

Poppy ignored the question.

“Are you both always just going to fucking ignore me?”

“Yes,” came the synchronised reply.

Several minutes later the door opened and in stepped Tianee, Valerie’s second. Not a working girl, not muscle either. She was a curvy redhead in her late thirties, pretty,

and she managed the floors and bar in the brothel. Scallion had once seen her cut a man's throat at the bar without flinching, and without fear of repercussion.

"Put these on," she said, and she threw each of them a bundle. "I'll take your bags and weapons too, and the cat."

Poppy and Sky received client's robes, long hooded gowns that hid a person's identity if that was preferred, or what they were wearing, or not wearing, as they moved through the brothel.

Scallion held a red leather studded thong and a matching full-face mask. "I'm not wearing these!"

"Strip. Put them on. It's not a request."

The others gave him no privacy as they all watched him strip naked. He struggled to get the thong comfortably up the crack of his arse and around his balls but managed, and then finally he put on the facemask. There were two peepholes for him to see through and a large circular opening at the mouth.

"Not too shabby," said Poppy, grinning. "For an older man, you're in good shape. "Maybe a little more length is needed, though."

"Fuck off," came the muffled response.

"Poppy, take them to Valerie's office," ordered Tianee.

The brothel comprised four levels of block modules, all stacked and laid out together to make one large complex. The ground floor had no interior doors in the public area, and the four massive industrial blocks created a square formation that allowed anyone to walk freely around the inner walls where the blocks met. Each of the four spaces had a different theme. The entrance area was

the bar, with a long counter serving a large variety of drinks; drugs were also available, but only the type Valerie would permit on her premises. Another area was always in shadow, with soft red light cast over private booths, where lap dancing and the odd blowjob took place. The other two, each decorated differently with erotic art or paraphernalia, were a mix of low booths and different-sized tables where anyone could mingle. It was late at night, and the place was busy. No one paid them any particular attention as the three of them came out from behind the bar and moved on towards the stairs. The hired muscle at the foot of the stairs let them pass without question.

The next two floors were domicile-sized blocks for private room hire. The top floor had restricted access to Valerie's apartment, office and her other private areas. More muscle, two men and two women, all visibly armed, guarded that entrance, but they let the three pass without question.

The office was luxurious and fully carpeted. Carpets were a rare commodity in the town. The antique wooden furniture was comfortable, elaborate, and framed with beautiful upholstery.

Valerie sat on the edge of a dark wooden desk by the far wall. She indicated a sofa in front of her. "Take a seat."

"Did I say you could take that off," she said, chastising Scallion as he began to remove his mask. He stopped what he was doing, not sure if she meant that or not, but taking the safe option.

"Take it off and cover-up." She tossed him a client's gown.

"What'd you put me in this outfit for?" he asked sheepishly.

“You forget, I know you, Scallion. The only way to make sure you’re not armed or carrying any contraband is to have you butt-naked. Plus it amused me, and I don’t have reason to be amused very often.”

He muttered something under his breath, glad to be ignored this time.

The door opened behind them, and Ninety-Six entered. Scallion went pale quickly. Sweat suddenly ran down his spine, and there was no hiding the fear he showed.

Ninety-Six was so named because that was how many people he had needed to kill personally, and with his bare hands, to climb to the highest rank in the station’s criminal fraternity. Nothing illegal had happened over the last twenty years in Station Six without his express authority.

He was a brute of a man. Seven-foot tall, exceptionally wide at the shoulder, and always wearing a tight vest and shorts to show off his extreme muscular definition. He was scarred across his bald head and over his right cheek. Both of the scars could easily be removed, but he wore them proudly.

Valerie made the introductions. “You know Poppy and Scallion, and this is Sky. Sky, this is Ninety-Six, and in case you don’t know who that is, he’s basically in charge of all crime in the station.”

“Scallion...” Ninety-Six said the name so sinisterly that Scallion felt himself squirm. The big man perched on the opposite corner of the desk to Valerie. “I’m told you think you’ve upset me. Is that true?”

“No. I don’t know. I didn’t mean to if I have.”

“So you were trying to steal from me? You think that was going to work?”

Scallion didn’t reply.

“Well? I asked a question.”

“I didn’t know it was yours. It was supposed to be a simple pickup. They hid it, and I took it. Easy job. In and out without any trouble.”

“They weren’t smuggling anything for me, and I have no idea why they were there or who was trying to get that curio out of the station and to Eden. And I have no idea where it came from. Someone cleaned up your mess before the authorities got involved, and that wasn’t me either. That’s a lot I don’t know, and I’m not happy about that. Can you remember anything else about the security guards that you killed or those you ran away from?”

“Like what?” Scallion looked directly at Ninety-Six for the first time.

“Think, stupid. Anything at all?”

“They were just regular dumb guards.”

Sky shot him a scathing look. *Shit*. He remembered that her partner had been a flight dock security guard killed in service. *Fuck. Is there any chance I’ve killed her partner?* The recent ones weren’t the first he had needed to take care of.

“So you have nothing that helps me! However, it does seem that your stupidity resulted in you saving Poppy. All be that unintentional.”

Scallion glanced over at the softy, dressed in his pale blue suit under a client’s gown. *Who the fuck is this guy? Why are both Ninety-Six and Valerie so concerned about his welfare when they supposedly hate each other?*

“Grig,” said Scallion sharply as he suddenly remembered that detail.

“What?”

“I heard one of them say the name Grig. Grig

wouldn't be happy about this, one of them said. I was on top of some containers, hiding when they went past me.”

Ninety-Six looked to Valerie, who shook her head.

“Are you sure they said Grig?” said Ninety-Six.

“Yeah. It stuck now that I remember it because I wondered who the fuck Grig was.”

“Grig's a pretty common name, Scallion. How did you find out about the package?”

“I overheard Torgon discussing it in a bar.”

Valerie slid off the edge of the desk and indicated that Ninety-Six should follow her. They left the office together. It was a bizarre sight: the giant of a man being escorted out by the comparably diminutive woman. Two beefy guards stepped inside to watch over the three of them in their absence. Ten minutes later, Valerie and Ninety-Six returned, and the guards went back outside the door.

“Okay, you can both go. We will look after Poppy from now.”

Poppy made to object, but a stern glance from Valerie silenced him.

Tianee entered the office carrying Scallion's and Sky's bags, which she dropped in front of them.

“Everything's there. Now go. Get out of here. Tianee, show them both off the premises,” ordered Valerie.

That was the end of any discussion. Scallion removed the thong and got dressed as they moved through the floors; his clothes were in his holdall. Then they were outside in the darkness of night.

He could feel her penetrating judgemental gaze boring through him, even though he was avoiding looking at her.

“How many security guards have you killed over the years then?”

Andrew Sharp

There it was, the question that he knew had to come eventually.

“I only killed corrupt ones.” “How can you be so sure?”

“Look, can we get off the routes. I’ve still got the curio, and someone wants this badly.”

“They let you keep it?”

“You’ve still got your cat. Your OD. I can hear it purring.”

“Why’d they let us go?”

“We aren’t a problem. Someone else is. This Grig guy, he’s their problem. I wouldn’t want to be in his boots when they catch him. Look, your domicile is probably still a safe place. Let’s go there and work out what we do next.”

“I’m not going anywhere with you.” “Don’t you still need to find your kids?”

“Yes. Of course.”

“I’ll help.”