

THE SHADOW WORLDS

Shadows over Elysium



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Volume 1

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1. The crash landing

Space was, as always, dark, empty, and incredibly boring—until suddenly a burning lump of metal with squeaking screws crashed into the rusty planet Garruk III, as if someone had completely ignored the approach instructions.

Captain Jax Mercer, self-proclaimed "lovable bastard" and professional unlucky guy, was catapulted across the cabin. His last thought before impact was, "Damn, I shouldn't have drunk the whiskey all the way to the floor last night."

As he dragged himself out of the smoking wreckage of his old, half-rusted space capsule, he felt the cold dust beneath his fingers and the disgusting taste of burnt cable in his nose. Garruk III was no paradise, more like a galactic shithole where even the mutants were too lazy to clean up the trash.

Between the rocks and the smoldering wreckage, something gleamed—small, inconspicuous, and completely out of place: a glass capsule protruding from the ground, pulsing in a hypnotic rhythm as if it had a heart of its own.

Jax reached out, his fingers trembling, and not just from the dust. The capsule was hot, alive. A low humming sound emerged from it, as if it were whispering an ancient secret to him—a secret that could change everything.

"Great," Jax muttered, tucking the artifact into his jacket. "Just what I needed to really screw up today."

And somewhere, deep in the darkness of the planet, an eye opened. Non-human, cold, and endlessly curious.

The heat of the artifact now burned barely noticeably in his jacket pocket as Jax staggered to his feet and trudged through the bare scree. Garruk III hadn't made a sound, except for the faint crackle of the setting sun, which hung over the horizon like a rusty fireball eye.

His head was buzzing like an old hyperdrive after a failed launch, and the aftertaste of cheap whiskey still scratched his throat. "Good job, Mercer," he cursed to himself. "Crashed like an idiot again and found a mysterious data capsule that I'm sure no one wants to hunt down."

The wind carried dust and the pungent smell of burnt metal as Jax took his first steps toward the nearby rock formation. His mind went into alarm, for such a thing in his possession was rarely a gift, more like a damned curse.

Then there was a crack behind him.

He stopped, slowly turned around, and saw nothing but the flickering silhouette of a high-tech combat suit, half-merged in the shadow. A voice pierced the static on his communicator:

"Captain Mercer. You are not alone. Hand over the artifact, and we will escape without bloodshed."

Jax laughed dryly and shook his head. "Bloodshed is my favorite cocktail. Let's see if you can order it."

He reached into his jacket, felt the pulse of the capsule, and knew: the game had just begun.

The shadow moved faster than Jax could react. A bright flash of light ripped through the dusk, and suddenly sparks exploded from his communicator, which fell silent with a final, dying beep. The voice was gone, but the threat lingered on the back of his neck like an ice-cold handshake.

"Damn, damn, damn," Jax growled as he pulled the revolver from his holster—an ancient, mechanical weapon that promised more nostalgia than firepower, but was still better than nothing.

He ducked behind a boulder with more cracks than his resume and assessed the situation. Garruk III wasn't a fan of hide-and-seek, but hey, he'd held worse positions—like the last time he tried to outsmart a galactic bounty hunter who had him at the top of his reward list.

The glass capsule in his jacket now pulsed in sync with his heartbeat. Jax knew it was no ordinary prey. This little thing could wipe out worlds—or save them, if you had the luck of a drunken saint.

Another beam of light hissed by, cutting through the darkness, and he heard the cold click of mechanical footsteps. His opponent was near, and the dance of life and death began.

“Let’s see how much whiskey the captain has left in the tank,” he muttered, spitting into the dusty ground.

Jax pressed his back against the rock, the air tasting of burnt ozone and fear. The shadows around him danced like malevolent ghosts in a bad sci-fi movie, but this was real, damned real.

He pushed his jacket aside to get a better grip on the glass capsule when suddenly a cold humming sound rose behind him. A knife of pure plasma sliced through the air, so fast that his instinct gave him only a fraction of a second to dodge.

With a cursing cry, Jax rolled to the side, feeling the knife whizz past his arm and dig into the dusty ground. Sparks flew, dust swirled—and somewhere, someone laughed. Cold, mechanical, without a spark of humanity.

"Fucking high-tech piece of shit," Jax gasped, gripping the artifact tighter. "Do you really think I'm just going to give this away?"

The footsteps came closer, heavy and determined. Jax knew he had little chance—but giving up wasn't an option. Not today. Not with a mysterious capsule heart that fate had sewn into his jacket.

He forced himself to stand up, wiped the sweat from his brow, and with one last, desperate look at the setting sun, he muttered, "Okay, you fucking piece of glass. Let's get this shit done."

Jax took a drag on his cigarette, the smoke briefly blurring his vision, but the thrill burned hotter than any flame. He was a man with bad luck as hard as a drunken space pirate, yet somehow he was still damn lucky not to end up with a laser in his stomach.

The silhouette of the pursuer was now sharp as a knife in the moonlight. A creature in shining armor, its helmet swallowing the reflection of the pale Garruk sun—a living warning that this was no fun.

"You have no idea what you have in that bag, Captain," a voice crackled through the visor, rough and mechanical. "The artifact is the final key to a power that can tear the galaxy apart."

Jax blew a puff of smoke in his opponent's face. "Great. More trouble. My day isn't getting any better, is it?"

Suddenly, a bright flash of lightning struck, and the artifact began to pulse brighter. It vibrated in his jacket like a rampaging organism sensing the danger—or the opportunity—that now presented itself.

"Welcome to the big leagues, Captain," the voice hissed. "You are now the hunted. And the hunters will show no mercy."

With a sarcastic grin on his lips, Jax drew his gun. "Well, let's show you how to really play down here."

The shot thundered through the dusty air, an echo from a time when everything wasn't yet smothered in laser-precise sterility. The bullet tore a cloud of sparks from the rock, directly in front of the combat spacesuit. The thing was fast—but not fast enough.

Jax seized the moment and began to run, his jacket with the pulsating capsule clutched like a ticking time bomb. The smell of burnt rubber and sweat hung in the air, while his pursuer hurried behind him with mechanical steps.

His heart beat in a wild rhythm, half fear, half the intoxicating thrill known only to true losers who refuse to go under. Garruk III was no place for heroes, more like a shithole for survivalists—and Jax played that damn game.

He knew he didn't have much time. The capsule pulsed faster and faster, as if urging him to finally unleash the chaos it contained. The artifact wasn't just a key, it was a promise: destruction or salvation, everything hung by a thread—and on Jax's frayed nerves.

A stabbing pain twitched in his side—a splinter from the last battle reminded him that he wasn't immortal. Still, he didn't give up. Never.

"Damn planet," he cursed, taking cover behind an old wreck. "What a shitty day."

The smoke curled like a lazy snake through the stifling air of Garruk III, while Jax squatted heavily on his rusted wreck, observing the floating particles of planetary dust. Everything suddenly seemed slower, the colors faded, the pain in his side became a distant throb that felt almost like a good old friend.

The capsule continued to vibrate, but now more rhythmically, as if it had found its own beat—a soundtrack for the madness that was about to unfold. Jax grinned crookedly. "Well, you little asshole, you've really kicked my ass, haven't you?"

His pursuer had disappeared, at least for the moment. Perhaps he was just smart enough to save his fire for later. But Jax knew this pause was deceptive—like a lazy appointment with death that could end in disaster at any moment.

He took another deep drag, let the smoke curl from his mouth, and thought that the universe had no plan. Not really. Everything was a mess of coincidences, bad decisions, and the unstoppable urge to keep going anyway.

"Maybe this is the beginning of something big," he murmured, "or the final act of a bad joke."

But one thing was certain: Jax Mercer wasn't the type to just go under.

The break died the way all good breaks on such planets die: from a bad decision.

A fine, barely visible red dot moved across Jax's chest, as if someone were painting a third nipple on him. He ducked, heard the shot saw through the air and turn a boulder behind him into dusty mud.

"Well, that was elegant," he murmured, crawling deeper under the twisted wreck. "Three more of those and I can exhibit myself as modern art."

The capsule responded with a sound reminiscent of a quiet, dissatisfied breath. Not mechanical. More like... personal.

Don't run, something said. There was no voice in my ear. It was a thought that didn't bother to knock politely.

Jax blinked. "Wonderful. Now I can hear voices even before I've had a drink."

The capsule pulsed. The light traveled across the fabric of his jacket, as if seeking escape, and finally settled on his hand. Warmth crept into his fingers, then a burning sting—something drew a fine, geometric line into his skin, as clean as a knife's stroke.

"Hey! No dinner and flowers?!"

Access, said the thought. Primary protocol reactivated.

Up on the ridge, the shadow shifted. Another targeting light. Jax tossed the rest of his cigarette toward the laser point. The ember landed right where the next shot would fire, and the thing exploded in a brief, idiotic shower of sparks. The hunter hesitated, just for a breath—enough for Jax to struggle to his feet.

"Since you're already groping around in my head," he panted, "do you have any idea where we're running to?"

Don't run. Fall.

"I'm sorry, what?"

Left, two steps. Then let go.

The ground looked like everything here: dead, dusty, insulted by the universe. Jax took two steps, trusting a voice that probably came from a millennia-old ghost Tupperware container—and the ground buckled like the whim of a customs officer.

He fell. Dust, darkness, a brief, desperate grasp for something that wasn't there, and then he slammed hard onto a sloping metal shaft, clattering downward like a ball in a botched pachinko game. Above him, metal screeched, and somewhere, someone let out a spark-throwing curse as the hunter apparently received the same invitation but didn't follow the same plan.

Jax crashed onto a platform, rolled, half-stood, fell again, then stood, and belched dust. It smelled of ozone, cold lubricant, and the kind of past that never truly came to an end.

The capsule's light pushed back the darkness, section by section. Walls. No natural stone—polished surfaces, inlaid symbols that looked like frozen star charts. A corridor that seemed like the throat of an ancient machine waiting to breathe again.

"Nice basement," Jax said. "All that's missing is the body and half a box."

Come, said the non-voice.

"How do I know I can trust you?"

You're still alive.

"Phew, that's a demanding standard."

He groped his way forward, his revolver at the ready, although this one made about as much of an impact as a butter knife on a tank. Behind him, far above, dull thuds echoed. The hunter was looking for the entrance. Or another door.

The corridor opened into a hall so large that his curse could circle three times before fading into a ceiling that faded into the shadows. In the center stood something that looked like an altar, the kind built by engineers with marital problems: bare metal, exposed wiring, a circle of recessed connectors that looked like docking points for things whose names aren't used in children's books.

The capsule in his hand vibrated as if it were calling home.

"If a god crawls out of this toaster," Jax said, "I'll shoot first and pray later."

Put me down.

"You're very authoritarian for living in my jacket."

He placed the capsule on the pedestal. Something in the metal blossomed—there's no other word for it: like a plant deciding sunlight is back in fashion. Lines flared up, hopping from port to port, until the entire hall hummed softly. A gust of wind, from somewhere, carried cold air over his sweaty skin. Somewhere, something clicked, like teeth.

Initialization, the voice said. Host life signs: chaotic. Toxin levels: high.

"That's called charm."

Identity verification... failed. Backup protocol: Guardian.

"Guardian? Too much responsibility. I'm more of a lender."

Outside, far above him, a new sound ripped through the air—a harsh, piercing screech. The hunter had apparently abandoned the elegant method and opted for "I'll punch a hole."

"We should be quicker...herding."

The base changed. The capsule sank into the metal as if the altar were liquid. A thin thread of light crawled up Jax's arm and disappeared into the geometric burn line in his palm. Now it felt as if a bell hung on his nerves, being rung at irregular intervals.

Connection is established, said the voice. Name?

"How about: You tell me yours, then I'll think of a better one for myself."

Silence. Then: an echo.

Jax grinned crookedly. "Of course. Why simple when you can be poetic?"

He stepped back. On the opposite wall, panels detached and slid to the side, revealing a series of cylindrical shafts. Inside each lay something that looked

like armor—not shiny, not ostentatious, but functional, with the understated elegance of tools that know they're needed.

"Is this the cloakroom? Please tell me, this is the cloakroom."

Guardian access is available, Echo said. Restrictions: 97 percent of systems damaged. Local defense perimeter: inactive. Archive status: fragmented.

"So: You're broken, your friends are broken, and the elevator is broken too—"

A whirring sound cut him off. An invisible blade passed by his ear and carved a clean line into the wall. Dust snowed. The hunter landed at the end of the hall with a gravboot pirouette, raising his weapon, which radiated as much love as a tax bill.

"There you are," the distorted voice crackled through the helmet. "You opened a door, Captain. How polite."

Jax raised both hands, a revolver in his right hand, open irony in his left. "I'm known for hospitality. Would you like a drink? I have dust, dust, and—surprise—dust."

The hunter stepped into the pale light. A winged gear was emblazoned on his shoulder armor—the symbol of the divine mechanics, if you riddle the church windows of their myths with real bullets. Machine cult. Of course. Who else let dead gods tell them what living people should do?

"The artifact, Mercer."

"You mean Echo? Echo is shy."

Echo whispered: Be careful.

"Thanks for nothing."

Jax took a half step to the side. The hunter moved his weapon slightly with him—professional. No gap. No friendly reflex. Just work.

"I don't know what you were promised," Jax said, "but I bet it wasn't the truth. Because that's expensive."

"The truth is irrelevant. The will of the machine god—"

"—is very difficult to bill."

He shot. The revolver barked, a genuine noise in a world of sterile hissing. Not at the helmet, not at the heart—Jax aimed at the ground in front of the hunter. The bullet ripped open a cover plate, and beneath, like a sleeping beetle, something stirred that would never wake.

The hall hummed deeper. The lines on the walls changed tempo. Echo said nothing—not a good clue.

The hunter took a step back, irritated—just long enough for the "bug" to decide now was a good time to speak his mind. A grapple shot up, grabbed the hunter's boot, and yanked him down so hard that even Jax thought, "Ow!"

"Local defense perimeter inactive, huh?" Jax jumped sideways, rolled behind the pedestal. "I've always liked surprises—"

A cold blue filled the hall. A projection, enormous, hovered above the pedestal: a map. No ordinary star chart. No dots, no orbits. Instead, patterns of gaps, like imprints of things missing—as if someone had punched entire star clusters out of the universe.

"What the...?"

The echo was back, now clearer, as if the system had taken a short breath. This is the void. The hunt begins anew.

"What hunt?"

Silence, then: The starfighters return home.

The hunter broke free and fired, the shot cutting a trail through the projection fog, leaving a burning smell and a fresh batch of anger. Jax dove to the side, shavings of ancient metal raining down. He felt the capsule in his arm circuit—God, his arm circuit—getting hotter.

A dull, painfully slow clacking sound erupted from the shafts to the left. One of the armored suits lifted, as if a skeleton were trying to recall past muscles.

"If this is a moment where you give me a gift, Echo, I'll wear XL."

Clearance granted, said Echo. Basic mode only. Objective: survival.

"I know about that."

Jax leaped to the armor, which reluctantly peeled itself from its mount. The hunter re-sighted, a clean line that meant death. Jax ripped open the chest plate as best he could, shoved himself halfway inside—it was heavy, cold, smelled of old thunderstorms and a hint of something that hadn't seen air in a long time.

The first hit hit him in the left shoulder plate. Without armor, his arm would have been history. Instead, it was just pain, the kind that promises to come back tomorrow, at your leisure.

"Oh, baby," Jax growled. "We two are going to be friends."

The armor clicked. Something in his handbrand glowed brighter. The reading was 7 percent.

"That's not a good joke."

The hall shook. Above them, Garruk III responded with a rolling growl, as if the planet were deeply offended at being used as a garage. The map above the pedestal flickered, showing a single, living dot—not here, not now, but close enough to make hope taste like a cheap drug.

"Where to?" Jax shouted.

Echo answered with a direction—not a word, just a sure push in his head, to the right, through a narrow door that was just attempting not to be there, and against which he slammed his new, awkwardly heavy body. It gave way, squeaking, offended.

"Mercer!" The hunter's voice cut after him. "That's bigger than you!"

Jax paused for just a heartbeat. Then he said, "Almost everything is bigger than me. And yet somehow I always fit in."

He disappeared through the door. Behind him, metal clanged against metal, shots rang out, dust screamed. The door closed as if it suddenly had principles.

In the darkness of the next corridor, Echo whispered directly into his bones: You are marked.

"From whom?"

Of all of them, said Echo. And then, so gently it hurt: Run.

Jax ran. And Garruk III opened his second eye.

2. On the trail of a galactic assassin

The corridor smelled of metal, mustiness, and a hint of "uncleaned for centuries." Jax gasped, not only from the heavy armor, but from the feeling that Garruk III was breathing directly into his neck—hot, wet, and full of evil intent.

"Echo," he murmured, "I hope you have a plan better than 'run until your lungs burst.'"

In your condition, that's the only plan with a chance of success, came the answer, crystal clear in his skull.

"Ah yes. I'm glad you believe in me."

Behind him echoed a metallic pounding, steady like the ticking of a bomb. The fighter wasn't just fast, he was methodical. That made him dangerous—and damned unfun.

Jax turned a corner, nearly tripping over an old cable hung from the wall like the gut of a fallen giant. Sparks flew as his boot brushed against it.

"Good God, what is this? The devil's craft room?"

A projection flickered—briefly, but long enough to make a sober man's stomach churn. (Luckily, Jax wasn't.) A face appeared, composed of pixels that looked like they'd spent a bad day in a microwave.

"Mercer," it croaked, "you're walking into a trap."

"I always do that. It's called life."

The image distorted, then exploded in a wave of static that filled his ears. Echo remained silent, which was somehow more disturbing than anything she could have said.

The corridor opened into a huge chamber—no, not a chamber. An arena. Jax knew this architectural style: too big, too empty, too many shadows where unpleasant things could hide.

"Let me guess," he murmured, "there's going to be applause here, and then a monster will come out."

Less than ten seconds later, a deep loudspeaker somewhere in the masonry chimed in. The voice sounded like a drunk talking through a chainsaw: "Mercer. You have something that's not yours."

"Oh really?" Jax grabbed his jacket, where the capsule was no longer there—but now stuck in his hand as a glowing tattoo. "Then you'll have to rip my arm off. Have fun with that."

A gate opened with the sound of broken bones. Out stepped not a monster, but something worse: a human. Tall, wiry, with eyes so dead that even a mirror would have refused to reflect them. The armor was simple, but so precisely fitted that it seemed like a second skin.

"Great," Jax muttered, "the damn gentleman killer."

Echo spoke up again: He's faster than you.

"Thanks for the motivational boost."

The killer drew a slender knife that emitted a low hum with every step—not because it had to, but because it wanted to. His movements were fluid, almost dance-like, like a cat deciding that chasing mice is beneath him, but still fun.

"Artifact," he said, "or I'll take it. And then your heart. In any order."

Jax briefly considered pulling out his gun, but this wasn't a gun moment. This was a "throw something his way and run like it's free beer" moment.

He reached into his armor pouch, pulled out an old fragmentation grenade—so old it probably deserves a home in a museum—and threw it at the killer's feet.

A quick glance. A faint, mocking smile. Then the killer simply stepped aside. The grenade exploded, covering the arena in smoke and sparks, but the bastard was still standing there—just a little bit closer.

"I hate my life," Jax growled and ran away.

His footsteps echoed, the armor rattled, and somewhere in the distance an alarm began to wail. Echo whispered: Left, stairs, surface exit in 200 meters.

"And what about the nice man behind me?"

He will follow you.

"That doesn't reassure me at all."

The stairs came into view—a spiral staircase made of black metal, so narrow it was more of a bad joke than an escape route. Jax took it anyway, jumping two steps at a time, and heard the faint, rhythmic clanking of the killer's footsteps behind him.

Reaching the top, he slammed into a sealed hatch. Echo whispered, "Touch me with that."

He placed his hand with the light tattoo on the hatch. A hum, then a jerk, and the door burst open. Cold air, a faint glow—freedom.

"That's it?" Jax gasped.

No, said Echo. This is just the next round.

Behind him, at the foot of the stairs, he saw the silhouette of the killer. Unfazed. Impatient. And now a little curious.

Jax grinned crookedly. "Well then, buddy. Let's dance."

The wind on Garruk III wasn't wind in the true sense of the word. It was more like a tortured exhalation from the planet, pushing the dust before it like a bad-tempered ghost. Jax stepped outside and blinked against the pale light of the setting sun.

"Nice. Fresh air. Well... fresh as an old ashtray."

Echo remained silent, probably busy whispering new problems to him whenever he thought he had a few seconds of peace.

Behind him, there was a rumble in the stairs. Metal scraped against metal, as if someone were running the tips of a knife across a coffin lid. The killer wasn't climbing hastily; he was climbing leisurely. Methodically. Jax knew that pace: the complacent pace of a hunter who knows his prey has nowhere to go.

"Shit."

He started running. The terrain was a nightmare—sharp rock teeth, deep crevices, and in between the remains of old machines that looked as if someone had dumped gigantic toolboxes all over the planet and forgotten to pick them up.

The armor didn't exactly help him. Every step clanged, sounding like an invitation to his own funeral in the distance. But it at least cushioned the worst of the impact when he caught on a rusted steel root and almost fell flat on his face.

Left, whispered Echo.

"If I kill myself every time you give me directions, then you can hold my funeral yourself."

He jumped over a small ravine, landed awkwardly, rolled, and immediately felt the echo of the impact in his injured side. "Ouch. Yes, I'm still alive. Unfortunately."

A sharp hiss cut through the air. Where he had just been standing, a clean cut glowed in the rock, as if someone had drawn a laser through butter.

"The gentleman has woken up."

He glanced back – and there he was. The killer. No sprint, no rush. Just a perfectly straight line, his eyes two points of cold light. In his hand was the knife, flickering with every movement like a damned pacemaker from hell.

Jax stumbled on, seeking cover behind a half-buried piece of machinery. Up close, he could see the engravings—patterns that looked as if someone had broken apart a starry sky and reassembled it.

"Any ideas, Echo?"

Be silent.

"Great. First you talk my ear off, and when things get serious, you act like a silent monk."

Then: Right, 20 meters. Vertical opening.

Jax peered over the cover. There was indeed a hole in the ground—not large, but deep. He sprinted, heard the killer's footsteps behind him, and felt the dust creeping into his teeth.

Just before he jumped, it happened: a movement to the left. No sound, just a presence. A second figure crawled out of the shadows—smaller, faster, and with two curved blades in its hands that looked as if they had stopped being nice centuries ago.

"Oh, great," Jax gasped, "now I have a damn two-for-one deal."

The new figure blocked his path to the hole. Jax braked, skidded in the dust, pulled out his revolver, and fired. The bullet hit, but ricocheted off some kind of armor so old it had probably already survived two wars.

"Seriously?"

The killer behind him closed in. Jax was trapped. Two fighters, no cover, and a heart that felt like it had long since given up.

Echo reported: Left. Machine core.

"I don't see any machine core."

Left.

He threw himself blindly to the side, slid down a slope, and landed on a platform of dented metal. Beneath it, something vibrated—deeply, regularly, like a gigantic heart.

"What is that?"

Old defense system.

"Can she shoot?"

Perhaps.

"Perhaps?!"

Jax pressed the palm with the glowing pattern onto a recessed plate. A sharp hiss, a jerk, and then a weapon lifted from the ground—as big as a pickup truck, designed by a very angry god.

She awoke with a deep hum, and Jax knew he had a chance right now.

He stood to the side, waited until both hunters were in sight, and called out, "Welcome to the big raffle! First prize: a shot of plasma right in the face!"

The gun roared.

The smaller hunter was hit, hurling himself backward into the dust. The gentleman killer dodged—narrowly, but enough to avoid being torn to pieces. His knife glowed brighter, as if it, too, now desired blood.

"Shit, that just made him angry."

Jax seized the opportunity, leaped over a bulkhead, and disappeared back into the labyrinth of debris. A scream echoed behind him—not human, but full of promise.

"Echo, if you have an escape route, now would be the perfect moment!"

In front of you. Eighty meters. Transport track.

Jax ran, stumbled, and ran again. The transport rail tunnel came into view—old, rusted, but it smelled of freedom.

And for trouble.

Because at the very end of the tunnel stood an old cargo glider. Engines on standby. Doors open. And in the shadow of the door, a silhouette that definitely didn't look like a friend.

The cargo glider looked as if someone had written "airworthy" in quotation marks and then signed it with rust. The silhouette in the doorway didn't move. It was waiting. That was never a good sign.

"Echo? Friend or foe?"

Undecidable, said Echo. Voice: female. Pulse: slow. Weapons: yes.

"Great. So it's like a date with a risk premium."

Jax didn't brake. Braking was the polite way to die. He kept running, jumped the last few meters—and landed on the ramp, which rattled under his weight. The silhouette stepped into the light: slim, angular, hair like a brief power

outage. In his left hand, a carbine, in his right, a remote control that looked like it could turn off half a continent.

"You're late, Mercer," she said.

"And you are...?"

"Lira Quell. I'll fly away, you pay later, and we'll both pretend we're friends." She glanced past him. "Here comes your fan club."

The killer's footsteps echoed into the tunnel, the dust vibrating like a taut string. Behind him, the smaller, battered hunter reappeared, limping but nasty.

"Two for one," said Lira, "do you have a discount card? Come in now."

Jax jumped into the belly of the speeder. The ramp folded up, Lira cursed the launch sequence, and the whole thing shook like a dog trying to shake off a bad decision.

Something flashed outside—the gentleman killer fired a gravitonic harpoon shot. The claw bit into the outer skin, the cable taut, and the glider groaned.

"We're hooked," Jax said.

"Really?" Lira pressed the same button three times, again, louder. "Good observation."

"I like to get involved."

Echo hummed in his hand: Energy redirection possible. Short pulse. Range: short. Risk: high.

"Define high."

Structural damage. Nerve overload. Possible cardiac arrest—

"Do it."

He placed his hand on the inner wall. The geometric line in his skin glowed, hotter, sharper, until the armor creaked. A dull click ripped through the hull, then a blue flash tore outward like an angry thought. The harpoon cable glowed, snapped—and the glider leaped free.

Jax sank to one knee. He felt as if someone had poked at his "leave-me-alone" nerve with a fork. The gauge in the armor hissed: 5 percent.

"Everything okay back there?" Lira glanced over her shoulder.

"I can hear colors."

"Great. Hold on to something solid."

She gave it some thrust. The glider shot through the tunnel, out into the open plain, where the evening lay like an open wound. Behind them, the gentleman killer appeared on a light hoverpod, elegant, unhurried, absolutely deadly. Beside him, the second hunter jumped onto a second vehicle, their blades now more light than metal.

"They won't let up," said Lira.

"They're a machine church. They won't let up until they've converted or recycled you."

"And you?"

"I'm hard to recycle."

The glider turned sharply enough to nail Jax's stomach to the wall. Ahead of them, metal ridges rose from the plain: ancient mine shafts that protruded from the ground like overgrown ribs. Between them, ravines, narrow passages, and glittering ropes—a field of errors just waiting to swallow a pilot whole.

"You can fly this?" asked Jax.

"I can fly anything," said Lira. "Once."

The first burst of pursuit fire bit into the rear section. Indicators began to blink, one after the other, like drunken fireflies. Jax crawled to the side window, fumbled with his revolver, aimed, and fired. Too far. The bullet missed, but the killer memorized the attempt. His helmet rotated with millimeter precision. No anger. Just focus.

"This is Kahlir," said Lira, as if she could read minds.

"You know him?"

"Anyone who has lived in this area for more than two seasons knows Kahlir. He's a reminder."

"What?"

"That you are never too important to disappear."

The second fighter suddenly moved to close range, leaped from the pod onto a scaffold, ran along the pole, and prepared to jump—directly onto the cockpit. Lira jerked the glider downward, and the fighter crashed into the outer skin, immediately stabbing. Its knife pierced a maintenance panel, and the hull screamed.

"I'll go to the door," Jax said, standing up and almost falling back down because the glider put a foot up at the same moment.

"Stay calm," said Lira. "And if you die, die outside."

"I'm surprised at how much this motivates me."

He ripped open the side door, the handle with the alarm. Wind, dust, the sky like sandpaper. The hunter hung from a handrail, knife in the other hand, his face behind the mask a study in "you're out of luck." Jax hesitated for a split second. Then he slammed the door right against his helmet.

The hunter chuckled. A high, broken sound. He plunged the knife in, deeper. The door vibrated. Jax threw himself against it, pushed, shoved, kicked—and came up with the stupid idea of placing his hand on the door with Echo.

"No!" Echo said too late.

Another short pulse. Not as clean as the first, more like a coughing fit of light. The hunter convulsed, let go, fell—and then bounced onto the pod sweeping beneath them, bouncing back up like a goddamn flea-ant.

"He thinks he's immortal," Jax gasped.

"He's wrong," said Lira, "but we'll teach him that later."

She pulled the glider between two narrow masts, so tight they scraped rust. The killer behind them didn't slow down. He simply flew a clean, deadly line and fired a series of microscopic darts that stung the tail section like glittering rain. The gauges turned red, then offended, then dark.

"We're losing the right vector stabilizer," Lira said calmly.

"Is that important?"

"For people who want to live: yes."

"I was never enthusiastic about rules."

"Me neither."

The glider dipped, recovered, and dipped again. A field of obsidian slabs stretched out before them, weathered but still smooth. Set into them were circles of inlaid dots, like tombstones for stars. Jax's hairs stood on end.

"What is that?"

An external node of the facility, Echo said. Archive terminal. The place where they anchored memories.

"She?"

Those who came before you. The starfighters.

A shadow fell over them. Kahlir was now directly above them, pod and knife in a geometry that looked like proof that physics is allowed to be insulted. He swooped down, aiming for the cockpit.

"Hold on," Lira said, pulling the emergency brake and emergency acceleration cables simultaneously, which wasn't a good combination unless you hated your spine. The glider belly flopped on the obsidian, skidded, sparked, spun, came sideways—and Kahlir shot past them, sliced through the air, braked, and turned casually.

The second hunter jumped again. This time he landed on the top of a mast, swung, and hurled his blade like a spear. It pierced the front, lodged just below Lira's shoulder.

"This is going to be expensive," she said, pulling the blade from the dashboard with the grace of a waitress.

"Seriously, you impress me."

"Wait until you see my bill."

Echo flickered. The map—the same one down in the hall—overlaid Jax's vision, shadowy: gaps, cutouts, white borders around something missing.

The Void, said Echo. When it came, everything broke. The starfighters disappeared. But they never really left. They were... chained to the nodes.

"And you?" asked Jax.

I am the door that remained closed.

Kahlir descended again, knife first. Lira triggered the emergency ejection system. An agonized scream from the engine, and the speeder leaped to life, only a hand's breadth above the plates, sending plumes of dust flying. Kahlir's knife struck—and swerved, grazing the armor on Jax's shoulder. Pain, but more anger. Jax fired. A hit. Kahlir's pod twitched briefly. No fall, just a promise.

"He's learning," said Lira.

"Me too."

"Then let's finish learning this now."

She headed toward the edge of the obsidian plain, where the slabs merged into a series of narrow canyons. Jax didn't see it until they were almost inside: thin threads, invisible, visible only at the right angle. A net. Not a trap for her. A trap for pursuers.

"Hold course," Echo said, and Jax could have sworn she was smiling.

Lira held her course. Kahlir followed, a straight line, unerringly. The second hunter leaped from mast to mast, too fast, too light.

"Three, two, one..." Jax muttered.

The threads ignited. No light, only silence. A field that turned friction into hunger. Kahlir's pod entered—and for a brief moment, lost everything that guaranteed his obedience. It tilted slightly, enough for Lira to throw the glider sideways over the edge, while the second hunter remained caught in the net, his blades suddenly blunt like forks in soup.

"Nice toy," said Jax.

"Not mine." Lira pointed forward. "Yours."

A ramp opened up before them, half carved out of rock, half dreamed of mechanical engineering: an old launch shaft. The lettering was eroded, but a marker blinked faintly, exactly in the pattern that glowed in Jax's hand.

"Echo?" he asked.

Connection possible. If you allow it.

"What happens if I allow it?"

We go.

"Where?"

Echo remained silent for a heartbeat too long. Then: Elysium Gate. Node Four. It's still warm.

"I hate warm knots."

"I hate open skies," said Lira, "but I love getting away. Buckle up."

They gave it some thrust. The glider shot into the shaft, scratches sizzling on both sides. Behind them, Kahlir's pod recovered, missed the entrance by a meter, and re-aligned.

"He's coming," Jax said.

"Of course he's coming," said Lira. "He's Kahlir."

"Do you have anything we can give him?"

"I have an old explosive anchor that pretends to be useful."

"We have the same work ethic."

Jax climbed aft, found the anchor—a thick, shabby metal box with a handle—and ripped open the maintenance hatch on the shaft. The air rush roared. Kahlir's pod plunged into the shaft behind them, blades forward, the picture perfect of disaster.

"Now," said Lira.

Jax dropped the anchor. It clamped itself against the shaft wall, hummed, ignited—and the shaft took a dent in its personality. A short, ugly boom.

Kahlir's pod lurched, slammed against the side, sparks, smoke, fury. Not dead. Just angry.

"That's buying us time," said Lira.

"How much?"

"Enough to die or live. Depends on your taste."

The shaft ended in a lock. Echo took Jax's hand, figuratively and yet somehow not, and every time that happened, he felt like a key pretending to be made of metal.

"Open up," he said.

The airlock opened. Before them lay the launch pit, a circle of black, and above it the night of Garruk III, finally pretending to be heaven. Lira switched to old-fashioned rocket roar, because the good stuff was broken, and the speeder leaped upwards like a curse.

They broke through the thin atmosphere, leaving a trail of dust that would surely generate rumors for the next hundred years. Beneath them, the pit closed like an eye that had better things to do.

Above them: stars. And in between, barely visible, the imprint of something missing, like fingers in wet concrete.

The Void, Echo said quietly. It doesn't feed. It erases. And what is erased returns as hunger.

"Comforting."

"Don't panic," said Lira. "I know a place where you can exchange questions for bad answers."

"What's his name?"

"A smoke bar called The Brick Moon. If it's still standing."

Jax laughed, short and bitter. "When in doubt, the bar is there. It always is."

Warning signal. Echo showed it to him, without words. Three contacts at the edge of the room. Slender, black, no transponder signals. They were waiting. Not for anyone. For him.

"Kahlir has friends," Jax said.

"Kahlir always has friends," said Lira. "Until they stop breathing."

"I'm allergic to a certain kind of friend."

"Which?"

"The one with the knife."

"Bad news," said Lira. "There's a pile of knives up ahead."

She corrected course. Jax felt his stomach lurch. Echo placed a cold finger on the back of his head, calming the trembling a little.

"Tell me you have a plan," he said.

Echo didn't answer immediately. When she did, it was almost tender: I have coordinates. And a debt I must repay.

"Coordinates where?"

Elysium Gate, Echo repeated. Node Four. And then... the Alliance of Outcasts.

"The title sounds like he might like me."

"Or eat you," said Lira.

"Tie."

The three black contacts separated, elegant as razors in formation. Lira exhaled slowly, placing her hands firmly on the steering wheel.

"Last question," said Jax. "Why are you helping me, Lira?"

She thought for a moment. One second. Two. "Because you're trouble. And trouble is interesting. Besides, sometimes you don't pay with money."

"Then what?"

"In stories."

"I have a running overdraft for it."

"Then write me something nice."

The contacts accelerated. Lira increased the thrust until the gauges made that sound mechanics hate again. Echo opened a channel that wasn't one and stabbed Jax with the coordinates.

"All right," he said, "let's make the galactic assassin sweat."

"Kahlir doesn't sweat," said Lira.

"Then I'll teach him."

The glider tilted into course, stars became lines, and somewhere behind them a man with a knife resumed pursuit—patient, precise, unstoppable.

Jax pressed his forehead against the cold window, grinned crookedly, and said to the galaxy, "Come on. One at a time."

The speeder chewed through the thin orbit like a rusty shark that'd forgotten it was already half dead. Behind them, Garruk III shrank—a rust-brown ball that looked like someone had dropped a golf ball into a deep fryer.

Lira sat at the helm like a woman still holding an old bet with fate. Her hands were steady, her eyes not. "Relay node twenty-four," she murmured, "they might still have fuel... or they'll shoot us on sight. Fifty-fifty."

"These are the same odds I go to bed with."

Echo pushed a corridor into his mind—a line of light pointing toward a shabby piece of metal in orbit. The relay looked like a dice thrown against a wall too many times. Antennas like bent spikes, a beacon that was only half-functioning.

"This thing doesn't send official codes, does it?" Jax asked.

"There's nothing official here." Lira typed a sequence that sounded like she had learned it from a drunken pirate.

The relay woke up. Not friendly. A flashing signal: **Identification or fire.**

"What is the name of our ship?" asked Jax.

"Official? Unregistered. Unofficial? Tired dog."

"Very inviting."

He leaned into the microphone and switched to the open tape. "This is Captain Jax Mercer of the freighter Tired Dog. We have cargo that even your mother would be interested in."

Pause. A static noise. Then a voice, rough and disgusted: "Mercer... you're still alive? Didn't we have a deal?"

"Yes. I like breaking agreements."

"Dock. Slowly. And don't get in trouble."

"I always cause trouble."

They pushed the glider onto the docking clamps. The relay opened its lock like an old man's mouth—gritting, reluctant. Lira kept the engine on standby in case they needed to reverse.

No sooner were they inside than the outer doors closed, and half a dozen figures stepped out of the shadows. Dusty uniforms, rifles, faces that hadn't had any teeth in years. In the center was a man with a scar running from his forehead to his chin like a map to a place not to be visited.

"Jax Mercer," he said, "you owe me money."

"I owe everyone money. Are you sure you're in line?"

He stepped closer, almost sniffing. "You smell like trouble."

"And you look for problems I don't need."

Then Echo suddenly screamed in his head: **Two contacts approaching. Kahlir and the other one. Three minutes.**

"Lira?"

"I heard." She was already at the wheel, the engines humming again.

"We have to get out of here," said Jax.

The relay crew raised their weapons. "No one leaves until we..."

The rest went down in a fireball when a dart from outside ripped open the outer hull. Air, smoke, people—everything flew in an ugly spiral toward the vacuum.

Lira pressed full throttle. The glider detached itself from the dock, taking a piece of the relay with it, while Kahlir's pod appeared directly in front of them, knives already at the ready.

"He's blocking the course."

“Then we’ll make a new one.”

She jerked the control stick. The glider scraped past an antenna, close enough to catch sparks. Kahlir followed, still calm, like a man who already knows the credits.

The second hunter came from the left, trying to force them into a narrow lane. Lira pulled up, and Jax felt his stomach drop somewhere near the soles of his shoes.

"Echo! Any ideas?"

Collision tactics possible. Chance of survival: 32 percent.

“Great odds. Let’s do it.”

They headed straight for the second fighter. Just before impact, Lira let the glider tip over. The edge of the fuselage swept beneath the enemy, ripping open its engine like a can of beans. The thing spun into nothingness, sparks, smoke—out of the game.

Kahlir stayed. Always.

“I could hate him,” Jax muttered.

“That just makes him go faster.”

They gave it some thrust. The edge of the system came into view, stars sparkled like cold coins. And there—a light. Faint, reddish, crooked.

"The Brick Moon," said Lira. "If it's still standing."

“I need a drink.”

“You need more than that.”

Kahlir kept his distance, like a shadow that wouldn't leave. Jax knew this was just the appetizer.

The glider set course. The light from the brick moon grew until it revealed the shape of a half-ruined station, on whose surface neon letters spelled out the name in flickering red. Below, suspended from a cable like a loop, hovered an old bar capsule.

"Welcome home," said Lira.

Jax grinned crookedly. "Or to the next disaster."

The brick moon was waiting. And somewhere inside it, someone was waiting who knew full well that Jax Mercer was coming.

3. Flashback: How our smuggler became what he is

The **Brick Moon** it looked as if a god of bad architecture had had a nightmare and then baked it together from cheap metal. The station hung inertly in orbit, a half-ruined ring with rust scars, holding on only because space has no patience for collapses.

The bar capsule, stuck to the underside of the ring like an overdue pimple, pulsed with red neon light. The sign flickered to the rhythm of a cardiac arrhythmia: **BRICK...YELLOW...MOON.**

"Romantic," Jax murmured as Lira brought the speeder to a creaking docking hatch.

"Romance here is the last stage before a stabbing."

"Then I almost feel at home."

The airlock opened with a hiss that smelled of fermented air and burnt fat. The corridor was narrow, the walls scarred by the shoe soles and fists of the past decades. Music trickled from hidden speakers—muffled bass notes that felt like they were aimed directly at the stomach.

Jax stepped into the bar and was immediately greeted by a wave of smoke, sweat, and stories that all ended badly. The floor was sticky, not only from spilled alcohol, but also from the kind of human tragedy that can't be easily wiped away.

At the bar stood a bartender so old he'd probably been pouring beer before humanity invented the hyperdrive. His eyes were milky but watchful—like someone who can pigeonhole you in two seconds: "tipster" or "corpse."

"Whiskey," Jax said. "No water, no ice, no questions."

"You get whiskey, but the questions are free."

Lira took a seat overlooking the entrance. Jax stood next to her, scanning the area. Everyone was sitting here: rusty freighter pilots, failed bounty hunters, traders with gold teeth or none at all, and a few Machine Cult followers hiding their faces under oil-stained hoods.

In the corner, half in shadow, half in the light of a broken holoprojector, he sat. The traitor.

Jax knew him immediately—not because he'd ever met him, but because he had that damned charisma: the grin of a man about to sell you something that's going to kill you and call it "good business."

He raised his glass when Jax met his gaze and pointed to the empty seat across the hall.

"Friend of yours?" asked Lira.

"Friends don't bite so gently."

"Then let's see how hard he can bite."

They walked over. The man was middle-aged, wiry, with skin like tanned leather. His fingers drummed on the table in a rhythm that had nothing to do with the music.

"Mercer," he said, as if rolling the name on his tongue. "They say you have something that isn't yours."

"And they say you should stop believing everything people say."

He smiled. Not a pleasant smile. More like that of a man choosing the knife he'd most like to surprise you with.

"Call me Sareen," he said. "I trade... information."

"Sure. And I sell fortune cookies. Want one?"

Sareen leaned back. "I know who's after you. And I know why."

"Then you know more than I do."

"I also know what the capsule is."

Echo stirred in Jax's hand. A quick, sharp thought: **Not here.**

"So?" Jax asked, his eyes fixed on Sareen.

"And I know who wants them – and what they'll pay."

Lira didn't flinch. "This is the part where you betray us, right?"

Sareen grinned wider. "I'm not betraying anyone. I'm... mediating."

Behind him, the side door opened. Three figures entered. The Machine Cult insignia on their shoulders. And in the middle—the gentleman killer.

"Shit," Jax muttered.

"That," said Sareen, "is my business."

The gentleman killer walked into the bar as calmly as if he were walking into a fucking jazz club. Two Machine Cult thugs flanked him, both as big as refrigerators and presumably with the same emotional range.

The buzzing of his blade cut through the babble like a threat of teeth. The music stopped on its own—or the DJ had decided his life was more important than the beat.

Sareen stayed seated. Of course he stayed seated. "Kahlir," he said with the calmness of a man who knew he wouldn't die here first. "I brought him to you."

"And I'll bring you death," Jax muttered before tipping his glass into the traitor's face. Whiskey burned, Sareen cursed, and Jax was already on his feet.

The first refrigerator came from the left, a colossus with blows like jackhammers. Jax ducked, felt the draft, and slammed his armored shoulder into it. It sounded like metal on concrete—and the colossus staggered backward into a table, which collapsed under its weight.

"One to zero for Mercer," shouted Lira, sending the second refrigerator into a philosophical crisis with a well-aimed kick between the legs.

Glasses flew, tables tipped over. The regulars stayed out of the way, ducked, or bet on who would lose first. Bud Spencer would have wept with pride.

Kahlir didn't move like a thug. He moved like a surgeon—precise, silent, and every cut was an item on a list. He approached Jax, knife deep, not a word.

Jax grabbed the nearest object he could find—a barstool. "Come on, let's dance, Tin Man!" He swung the chair like a club. Kahlir blocked it with his blade, and the chair shattered in an explosion of shrapnel.

"That was my favorite chair," yelled the bartender.

"Put it on the bill," Jax shouted back, punching Kahlir in the helmet. The armor held, but the killer took a half-step back. That was all Jax needed.

Lira grabbed a bottle from the counter, smashed it across the head of the first refrigerator, and rammed the rest of the glass neck into one of the wires on his suit. There was a hiss, a spark, and the man went dead like a machine whose power had been cut off.

The second refrigerator was back on its feet, but this time it was between Lira and the counter. "Bad spot, friend," she said, sending half the beer tap splashing into his face. Beer and blood splattered like an ugly cocktail.

Kahlir was still there. Still silent. He turned the knife, and Jax knew the next cut was for the neck. He blocked with the armor's forearm, sparks flew, metal screeched, and Echo whispered: **Left side, now!**

Jax kicked—hard, deep, right into the junction between Kahlir's hip and thigh armor. The killer staggered, not much, but enough for Jax to press the gun under his chin.

"Bet you're not bulletproof?"

Kahlir's helmet tilted slightly, almost like a smile. Then he grabbed Jax's wrist and twisted it until pain burned through his arm like hot iron.

"Shit!"

Lira appeared behind Kahlir, pulled him back by his collar, and slammed his head onto the bar. The impact shattered glasses, the bartender roared, and one of the customers shouted, "Five credits on the woman!"

Meanwhile, Sareen had made the wise decision to squirm out of the immediate fray—unfortunately, toward the back exit. Jax saw it out of the corner of his eye.

"Lira! The Rat King is taking off!"

She kicked Kahlir in the side one last time, enough to take his breath away, and glanced at Jax. "I'll keep the Tin Man busy. Get the traitor."

"Don't break it before I get back!"

Jax ran, almost tripping over an unconscious refrigerator, and tumbled through the back exit into a narrow corridor filled with flickering lights.

Sareen was fast, but not fast enough. Jax's boots pounded on the metal floor, and Echo hummed in his hand: **He wears a tracking device.**

"For whom?"

For all.

"Great."

Sareen half-turned, drew a small, shiny weapon, but Jax was already there—a punch, short, nasty, right in the nose. Blood spurted, the weapon flew, and Sareen fell to the ground.

"We're talking, friend," Jax gasped, "now."

Sareen lay on his back, panting, blood seeping between his fingers. The neon lights of the back corridor flickered in his face, transforming him into a frozen image somewhere between "sleazy businessman" and "corpse on hold."

Jax knelt on his chest, making Sareen's breathing a whistling, harried sound. "You have three options," Jax said. "Option one: You talk now. Option two: You talk later, when I'm in a bad mood. Option three: I give you back to Kahlir, and we'll see if he keeps you as a souvenir."

Sareen grinned—toothy, bloody, stupid. "You would never hand me over to him."

"Really? Try to motivate me."

Echo intervened, quietly in Jax's head: **He's afraid. Not of you. Of something else.**

"Who?" Jax squeezed harder. "Who scares you more than me?"

Sareen coughed, blood splattering on Jax's glove. "You don't know the name."

"Then tell me before I invent it."

Sareen's gaze flickered. "The Void... it doesn't hunt everyone. Only those who carry the key." He stared at Jax's hand, where the geometric pattern glowed. "And you... you're marked now. Not just by Kahlir. By her."

Jax pressed harder. "Who cares about an old space myth?"

"Myth?" Sareen laughed dryly. "Then you haven't seen one yet. If you think Kahlir is deadly... wait until you hear a voice whispering from the stars, and it wants only one thing: to wipe out everything that remembers."

Lira appeared in the corridor, sweat on her forehead, a scratch across her cheekbone. "Tin Man is down. He's getting up again, but not right away. What's the rat doing?"

"Talk about space ghosts."

"The emptiness," Sareen said, "is not a ghost. It is... hunger."

Echo confirmed it in Jax's skull: **He is telling the truth.**

"And where do I find this hunger?" asked Jax.

"You won't find him. He'll find you. But..." Sareen swallowed. "There are places he can't go. Old nodes, forgotten outposts. One of them is..." He hesitated, and Jax bent even further.

"...is what?"

"...the Black Shipyard. Beyond the Elysium Route. There lies what you need. And there... perhaps lies what you don't want to find."

Lira snorted. "That sounds like a place we're guaranteed to end up."

Sareen giggled softly, almost pityingly. "You're not getting there alive."

"People tell me that all the time." Jax stood up, pulled Sareen up, only to push him roughly against the wall. "But watch this: If I see you again, you'll just be a footnote in a damn short story."

They left him standing in the corridor – bleeding, gasping, and probably already plotting again.

Back at the bar, the chaos had almost returned to normal. The bartender wordlessly cleaned the bar, as if it had just been a Tuesday. Kahlir was gone, but one feeling lingered in the room: the promise that he would return.

Jax downed the rest of his whiskey, looked at Lira, and said, "Black Shipyard?"

"Black Shipyard," she confirmed. "But if the Elysium Gate is the way, you'll need more than luck."

"I have echo."

"Echo is not a shield."

"Then she's one now." Jax grinned crookedly. "Come on, before Kahlir finishes his coffee and comes looking for us again."

They left the brick moon. The glider was waiting outside, and somewhere beyond it – the void.

4. Flames over Elysium

The brick moon shrank behind them to a red flicker in the black, like an emergency exit in a burning city you never want to return to, but probably have to. Lira steered the glider into a higher orbit, the engines sounding like they'd been smoking for three weeks too many.

"We have enough fuel for just one long escape or one short battle," she said.

"Can we have both?" asked Jax.

"Yes. But only if we die first."

Echo spoke in Jax's head, clear and cool as ice water: **The Elysium Gate is 1.7 jumps away. Three known blockade points.**

"Blockades?"

Machine Cult patrols. Two regular, one...deviant.

"Deviating never sounds like: They're waving us through."

Lira pulled a map onto the windshield. The Elysium Gate appeared like a gigantic, glowing ring in the void. Not a perfect circle, but a shimmering wound, its edges fraying into the darkness. It was immediately obvious: The thing was old. Older than all the empires now vying for its possession.

"Looks... friendly," Jax said.

"Friendly as a face with the words 'Step on it' written on it."

The jump drive hummed to life, deep in the hull. Lira held course while Jax dimmed the cockpit light—an old smuggler habit, as if darkness inside the ship could make one invisible outside.

"Tell me, Echo," he murmured, "what's on the other side of the gate?"

Node Four. Black Shipyard. Fragments of the Starfighter Archives.

"And trouble."

That goes without saying.

The first blockade point came into view: three ships of the Machine Cult, slender as spears, in formation like a closed brass knuckle. Their hulls were engraved with prayer patterns that looked like threats to God himself.

"Plan?" asked Lira.

"Don't die."

They radioed. A voice came, tinny and authoritative: "Unidentified freighter. Alter course. Access to gate for registered pilgrims only."

"We are pilgrims," Jax said. "We are only on a pilgrimage to destruction."

"Change course or be destroyed."

Lira looked at Jax. "Your charm doesn't work here."

"Then we'll try Plan B." He activated the exterior flashers—not to signal, but to send out a modified smuggler's flashing sequence. A code that, in the old days, meant: I have merchandise that will make you richer or dead.

The three ships reacted. One of the Spears broke away from the formation and set off on an intercept course. The captain apparently wanted to negotiate. Perfect.

"If he's close enough," Lira murmured, "I'll go for it."

"Make it ugly."

The Spear glided forward, graceful, curious. Lira waited, waited... and then she jerked the speeder to the side, applied full thrust, and Jax simultaneously fired the side thrusters. The cult ship spun, nearly crashing into one of its brothers.

"Blockade one: over," grinned Lira.

"Two more," Jax muttered.

The second blockade point was harder: a minefield, thinly scattered, but with enough explosive power to blow them out of existence. Jax and Lira slalomed between the shimmering spheres, each movement precise to the millimeter. A mine activated, flashing red – Echo sent a pulse, and the sphere went out again.

"Nice trick," said Lira.

Not repeatable, whispered Echo.

"Then it was even nicer."

And then came blockade three.

Just a ship. Black. No identification. No movement. It simply stood there, at the edge of the Elysium Gate, like a judge who already knows his verdict.

"This is not a cult ship," Lira said quietly.

"No," Echo murmured. **This is older.**

"How old?"

When the gate was young, it was already old.

"I don't like that."

The black ship moved. Not quickly—it didn't need to. Its hull shimmered as if made of liquid shadow. No weapons visible, but Jax knew they were there.

A voice filled the cockpit. No radio, no loudspeaker—just there. "Key carrier. You're late."

Jax's hand tightened around the control handle. "I'm never late. The others are early."

"Come through. Or turn back and die slowly."

Lira glanced at him. "Through?"

"Through," Jax said. "Before I change my mind."

The Elysium Gate began to glow, and the space before them warped as if taking a deep breath. The black ship slid to the side, gracefully like a predator allowing its prey to enter its cage.

"Echo?" Jax whispered.

Ready.

They flew in. Light exploded around them, stars became lines, then nothing. The feeling was as if they were falling and rising simultaneously, as if their bodies were forgetting where they belonged.

When the jump ended, knot four lay ahead of them.

And behind it, in the shadow of a broken sun, floated the **Black Shipyard**—a gigantic complex of towers, cranes, and docks stretching in all directions, as if a god had been playing with building blocks and then knocked the table over.

"Holy shit," Lira whispered.

"Yes," said Jax. "And somewhere in there, our next mistake is waiting."

The Black Dockyard grew in the viewport until it stole the light from the stars. It wasn't a place that had been built—it was a place that had happened. A conglomeration of rusted girders, bent runways, and docks that looked as if they had been abandoned centuries ago, yet, out of pure malice, hadn't collapsed.

"Looks like a junkyard with delusions of grandeur," Jax muttered.

"A junkyard with guards," Lira corrected.

And indeed, silhouettes moved among the shadows. Ships that seemed half-alive, and Machine Cult patrols in heavy exosuits. Their helmets bore the winged gear, and their footsteps echoed across the metal plates like a court verdict.

Echo whispered: **They have already registered you.**

"Yes, feels warm and cozy."

The shipyard didn't open any radio channels. Instead, a single iconic ship glided out of the docks and positioned itself across their course. It wasn't a threatening vessel—it was a memorial: a pitch-black hull covered in engravings that moved like a living prayer.

A voice penetrated Jax's head, deep and with no discernible source:
"Keybearer. Enter. Lay off what you wear. Receive what is meant for you."

"Yeah, sounds exactly like a bad marriage," Jax muttered.

Lira snorted. "What now? Run? Fight?"

"We pretend to be polite."

They reduced the thrust and let the glider slide into an open dock. The landing gear creaked as it touched down, as if they knew where they'd landed and were unhappy about it.

The lock opened – and immediately cold, filtered air flooded in. No sound, no welcoming music. Only the muffled clacking of footsteps approaching.

Four cultists entered, wearing matte-black suits that resembled a cross between armor and ritual garb. Their faces were hidden behind masks from which fine wires ran like nerve strands.

The one in front spoke, his voice metallic: "You will lay down the key."

"Key's not in the mood right now," Jax said, Echo burning faintly in his palm.

"It's not your decision."

"In my experience, everything is my decision until I die."

The cultists raised their weapons in unison—not blasters, but long, slender spears with vibrating tips that flickered in the dock light.

Lira stepped next to Jax, her hand casually on the butt of her carbine. "Do you really want to make a scene here? Docks are full of fuel lines. They burst easier than ego."

A moment of silence. Then the cultists lowered their spears slightly. "Follow us. The High Mechanarch awaits you."

"Oh, great," Jax murmured. "I love surprise parties."

They were led through corridors so old that the rust had almost formed a second architecture. Machines hummed everywhere, sounding as if they were praying in a language understood only by metal.

Echo whispered: **Be careful. They don't just want the key. They want the carrier.**

"How nice," Jax thought back. "I've always wanted to be part of a religious ceremony."

When the doors to the central hangar opened, even he was briefly speechless: In the middle hung a gigantic structure—half machine, half skeleton of an unknown being. Cables and wires snaked through it like veins. Hundreds of cultists stood in a circle, murmuring quietly, their voices an endless mantra.

At the very front, on a platform of black steel, stood the Mechanarch. Her suit was more finely crafted than any other, crisscrossed with gold lines pulsing like liquid light. Her mask was simple, but the eyes behind it glowed like two glowing cores.

"Welcome, Keybearer," she said, her voice filling the room like both a promise and a threat. "You have come as it is written."

"I rarely read contracts," Jax replied.

"Then you will learn mine by heart."

Lira whispered, "I think we should consider whether we want to leave here."

"I think," Jax murmured, "they're thinking about it for us right now."

"We're all going to die, every one of us... what a circus," Jax muttered, grinning crookedly.

The High Mechanarch spread her hands. "The Keybearer has returned home."

The murmuring of the assembled cultists grew louder, vibrating through the floor like the growl of a hungry beast. Above them, high in the dock hall, the skeletal machine monster glowed—joints of titanium, a skull like the head of a god slain in anger.

"Echo," Jax whispered in his mind, "I take it you know the lady?"

She knows me.

"Not surprising."

The Mechanarch descended the steps, each step precise, as if programmed. She paused, just an arm's length from him, her eyes fixed on the glowing line in his hand.

"The sign," she said. "The connection is complete."

"I thought we'd take it slow," Jax replied.

"The key bearer belongs to the machine cult."

Lira took a half step forward. "I don't agree."

Two spears immediately rose, pointing at her neck. Lira didn't smile, she just stared back. "Do you really want to try this?"

The Mechanarch raised her hand, and the spears lowered again. "Your death would accomplish nothing for us. Not yet."

Jax crossed his arms. "All right. What do you want? Straight to the point, no religious prelude."

"We want you to close the gate."

He blinked. "Which gate?"

"The gate through which the void comes."

Echo was immediately present, sharper than before: **You are telling the truth.**

Jax raised his eyebrows. "And if I don't?"

"Then the void will swallow this galaxy. And everything that remembers will be erased."

"Sounds like a win-win situation for my enemies."

The Mechanarch stepped even closer. "And after a defeat for you. Because what is erased never existed."

Something about this sentence chilled the room. Even Lira remained silent.

Echo whispered: **They know what's resting in the shipyard.**

"And that would be?" Jax asked in his thoughts.

One of the last starfighter blades.

The Mechanarch continued: "It lies at the core of the shipyard. Guarded by the fragments of the First Guardian. Only the Keybearer can reach it."

"And what if I just take the blade and disappear?"

"Then the void will find you first."

Jax laughed dryly. "You really know how to motivate a man."

Lira leaned toward him. "I don't like this, Jax. Too many spears, too many secrets."

"Yes," he said, "but maybe there are too many answers to just leave."

The Mechanarch pointed to a narrow corridor. "The path to the core begins there. We will accompany you."

"Of course," said Jax. "So we don't get lost."

"The truth may be out there," Jax murmured, "but the lies are in your head."

"What are you talking about?" asked Lira as they walked through the narrow corridor.

"Self-protection, darling. If I lie to myself, no one will get in."

The air smelled of metal and ozone, but underneath it lay something... sweet. Not the pleasant sweetness of a drink, but the sweetness just before rot. Jax knew what that meant: Somewhere down here, something was rotting that should have lost its skin long ago.

The corridor was lined with cables that hung from the walls like veins. Some pulsed faintly, as if fluid were flowing through them. The light was dim, flickering at irregular intervals—like the breath of a dying person.

“I have a feeling we’re not going to a gun,” Lira whispered.

Echo answered in Jax's head: **You go to a thirst.**

“Define thirst.”

Thirst for what you are. For what you were. For what you want to forget.

“Sounds like my last relationship.”

The cultists marched ahead, spears held loosely but always within easy reach. The Mechanarch walked directly behind Jax, as if urging him on—not with words, but with a presence that lay like a cold weight between his shoulder blades.

Suddenly, the ground vibrated. Only briefly, like a heartbeat too strong to be human. In the distance, a noise was heard—not a roar, not a screech, but something that sounded like someone slowly, contentedly pulling on a gigantic straw.

Lira looked at him. "That wasn't just my head, was it?"

"No," Jax said. "That was the sound of someone thirsty. Very thirsty."

They reached a hall whose dimensions didn't fit the ship—too big, too wide, as if geometry had decided to make a mockery of natural laws. Metal chains as thick as trees hung from the ceiling, and attached to them were giant, mummified machine bodies, half-skeleton, half-living. Their eyes—if you could call them that—glowed faintly, and Jax swore he heard a faint, rhythmic swallowing.

Echo whispered: **These are the fragments of the First Guardian.**

“First Guardian of what?”

About what the void wasn't allowed to have. Until he got thirsty.

A shiver ran down Jax's spine. This wasn't just an armory. It was a wine vault—and the bottles were souls.

The Mechanarch stepped forward. "There." She pointed to a pedestal in the middle of the hall, entwined with cables like a spider. On it lay something shimmering in the gloom—a long, narrow blade, its metal not only reflecting light, but absorbing it.

"The Starfighter Blade," whispered Lira.

Jax took a step. Immediately, a deep, vibrating sound rippled through the air. The chains rocked, the machine bodies opened their eyes—and the swallowing grew louder.

"I think they just noticed we're on the menu," Jax muttered.

Echo:**As soon as you touch the blade, thirst will try to drink you.**

"And if I don't?"

Then he'll drink you anyway.

"Great deal."

Lira raised her weapon. "Jax, we need to get out of here with something that will do us more good than it will kill us."

"I'll drink to that later," he said and moved on.

The thirst grew louder. Not just a sound—it crept into his thoughts, mingling with old memories, whispering things he had long forgotten: faces. Names. Guilt. And in the midst of it all, a quiet, almost tender voice: Put down the key. We will make you whole.

Jax's steps faltered. Echo screamed in his head:**That's not me!**

"Yes," he gasped, "I thought so."

Jax placed his foot on the first step of the podium. The air immediately became heavier, thicker, as if someone had placed invisible hands around his neck. The chains above him swung slowly, almost in time with his heartbeat. And the thirst... the thirst grew loud.

It was no longer a simple sound. It was a choir. Hundreds of voices, greedy, dry, panting, as if every breath were tearing something from him. Images burst into his mind—his first smuggling jobs, the face of a girl he'd left behind years ago, the look of a friend he'd sold to a bounty hunter to survive.

*Put down the key, Jax.
We drink your guilt first.*

"Fuck it," he muttered, reaching for the blade.

Immediately, the hall exploded into movement. The mummified machine bodies tugged at their chains, metal screeched. Some chains gave way – a body plummeted into the depths, landing with a thud that shook the floor. Eyes like glowing coals fixed on it, and the bodies crawled, leaped, and pulled themselves forward with mechanical claws.

"I told you, we're on the menu!" Jax yelled.

Lira fired first. Her shots ripped through cables, ripping sparks from metal bodies, but the creatures only flinched briefly and crawled on. Two cultists were immediately grabbed—one disappeared screaming into the jaws of a mechanical beast, the other was jerked upright until his screams were nothing more than an echo.

Jax gripped the blade. It was cold, but at the same moment something flowed through his arm—a surge of light and darkness at the same time. Echo screamed in his head: Don't let go!

"I don't plan to either!"

A machine body crashed to the ground next to him, tearing through the platform with a claw. Jax jumped to the side, rolled, and got back up—the blade now burning in his hand.

He struck. A single, clean cut, and the beast's head flew through the air like a rusty wheel.

The Mechanarch stood at the edge of the hall, motionless. Her voice cut through the noise: "Lead the key. Control the thirst—or it will control you."

"You're telling me that now?!"

Lira was on the railing above the hall, jumping from one ledge to another, firing carefully to cover Jax. "Hurry up, Jax! They're crawling here faster than cockroaches on sugar water!"

One of the machine bodies rushed straight at her. Jax threw the blade—not to kill, but to make the thing flinch. He grabbed Lira by the arm, pulled her into cover, and the blade flew back into his fist as if by an invisible hand.

Echo: The weapon knows you now.

"I hope she likes me."

Thirst screamed. No longer in thought, but loudly, from the throats of the beasts, a scream that made the hall floor vibrate. The chains continued to tear, metal rained down from above.

"Time to go!" yelled Lira.

"For once we agree!"

They ran to the exit, Jax hacking his way through—the blade ripping through metal like paper. Sparks, smoke, the smell of burnt oil and old blood hung in the air. Behind them, more beasts plummeted, but the hall began to shake. The platform collapsed as if thirst itself had devoured the floor.

The cultists fled in panic, some praying aloud, others running wordlessly. The Mechanarch still stood, only her eyes following Jax. "You took the first sip," she said quietly. "Now you'll have to drink."

Jax didn't have time to respond. One of the beasts leaped between them, and he took advantage of the moment to rush through the side door with Lira.

The gate closed behind them, and the noise of the hall abruptly ceased. Only their heavy breathing remained—and the pounding of the blade in Jax's hand, like a heart that wasn't his.

"I think," he gasped, "we officially have more problems now than before."

Lira looked at him, her finger still on the trigger. "Jax... your hand."

He looked down. The glowing line had changed—branching, pulsing deeper, and in the branches he saw for a moment something that looked like a star... and beyond it, a yawning, thirsty darkness.

Echo whispered: Now it has your taste.

5. Escape into unknown territory

The hall's side door slammed shut behind them, and immediately, metallic footsteps echoed in the corridor. Machine Cult guards—heavily armored, heavily armed, and with the look of people who take orders literally.

“I take it we run?” Jax asked.

“We’re running,” Lira confirmed.

They began to move, the corridor vibrating with the dull pounding of their pursuers. An echo flickered in Jax's mind: **Two turns ahead. Left leads to the dock level. Right... unknown.**

“Unknown sounds like our style.”

“Jax, the glider is on the left!” Lira hissed.

“Yes, and on the left is the cult guarding it. We need a gap.”

They turned right – and found themselves in a tunnel that no longer looked like a shipyard. The walls were older, organically curved, as if someone had cast a vein of metal. Dimly glowing lines ran everywhere, changing as they passed, as if the corridor were reacting to their presence.

“What the hell is this?”

Echo: **A part of the shipyard not controlled by the cult. A starfighter path.**

“And where does it lead?”

Unknown.

“Listen, Echo, you’re really bad at marketing.”

Shots echoed behind them. Sparks sprayed from the wall as projectiles hit the corridor. Lira returned fire, her shots hissing through the air like angry bees.

“Keep running, I’ll cover you!”

Jax ran, blade firmly in hand. The corridor sloped downward, the glow of the lines intensifying. He felt something tighten in his chest—not fear, but... a pull.

Echo whispered:**The path wants you.**

"Yeah, great. I'm not really into suitors who want to eat me."

Suddenly, the tunnel opened into a huge chamber, with a circular shaft in the center. It was filled with a light that was neither warm nor cold, but both at once – and below it, you could see... stars. Not a projection. Real stars, like a piece of space in the middle of the shipyard.

"Is that a jump gate?" Lira shouted.

No, said Echo.**It's older. There's a crack.**

"Crack where?"

Unknown.

Behind them, the first cultists appeared in the chamber, spears raised.

"We're jumping," Jax said.

"Oh, damn it," Lira growled, and then they ran.

The blade in Jax's hand vibrated the closer he got to the shaft. The pull grew stronger, as if the rift were welcoming him. He heard a cultist yell, "Keybearer!" and then they jumped.

The light swallowed her.

No feeling of falling or flying—just the ripping apart of reality, as if someone were pulling all the bones out of her body and then putting them back in, but not necessarily in the same place.

When they were back on solid ground, they stood beneath a sky that wasn't one. Black clouds drifted lazily across a landscape of jagged rocks and metallic debris, as if a war between machines and gods had taken place here. A faint violet glow shimmered in the distance.

"Where are we?" asked Lira.

Echo replied:**In unknown territory. Beyond any map.**

"And who lives here?"

Thirst.

"Naturally."

A deep, rumbling sound rolled across the plain, and in the shadows between the rocks, something large moved. Far too large.

"Jax," Lira whispered, "I think we're not alone."

"We are never alone." Jax drew his blade, and the purple glow in the distance grew stronger—as if it saw them.

The rumbling came closer, rolling across the metal floor like a train without brakes. Something crawled out from between the jagged rocks—slowly, threateningly, as if it had all the time in the world, knowing full well that its prey had nowhere to go.

It was big. No—it was huge. Six legs, each like the support of a space station, and a body made half of scarred metal and half of... some kind of tissue that seemed so alive it seemed to want to move when you looked at it. Its head resembled a shredder that had decided to wear teeth—rows of rotating blades, between which violet light flickered.

"Oh, great," Jax muttered. "That thing looks like the illegitimate child of a buzz saw and a nightmare."

Lira loaded her carbine. "Did you *any* Plan?"

"Of course: don't die. It's at the top of my to-do list."

The beast let out a sound that sounded somewhere between "metal on metal" and "who set fire to my favorite bar?" and started moving—fast, much too fast for its size.

"Jax!" Lira yelled.

"Yes, I see it! That beast is basically my ex—big, loud, and wants to take everything away from me."

He raised the blade. It vibrated as if it knew the thing. Echo whispered: Thirstbearer. Beware.

“Yeah, yeah... be careful, save the galaxy, eat more vegetables, I know.”

The beast lunged forward, one of its bladed paws slamming into the ground, spraying sparks. Jax jumped to the side, sliding across the sharp-edged rock and feeling the fabric of his jacket rip open.

“That was my favorite sleeve, you tin cockroach!”

Lira opened fire. The shots hit the thing in the flank, sending small explosions of flesh and metal through it, but it didn't seem fazed. Instead, it opened its mouth—and from its throat came a jet of purple mist that shattered the rocks it touched.

"That's... creative." Jax ducked, the fog passing just above him. "If it starts making jokes, I'm out."

Echo: Its thirst is older than the cult. If it catches you, it will drain you dry.

“That sounds suspiciously like my last visit to a bar.”

The beast lunged for another blow, but Jax leaped straight for it, rolling beneath its belly—an underside of tangled cables and pulsing tissue. He plunged the blade deep inside, a hiss like burning ice filling the air.

The animal screamed, spun around, and swung a leg at him. The blow was like a sledgehammer to the chest, sending Jax flying through the air and crashing into a boulder.

"Ouch. I think I just lost my third favorite rib bone."

Lira ran to him, continuing to fire until the beast turned its head toward her. "Jax, do something!"

"I'm already thinking about it!" He scrambled to his feet, feeling Echo heat up in his hand. The blade flickered as if it were about to explode.

“Echo... ideas?”

Give him more than he can drink.

“So... all-you-can-eat, but deadly?”

Exactly.

Jax leaped forward again, narrowly dodging a blow, and grabbed a power cable sticking out of a half-buried wreck with his free hand. Sparks danced around his fingers.

“Lira! Keep it still!”

“I’m not a damn vet!”

Nevertheless, it pierced the animal's eyes, causing it to stagger for a moment. Jax seized the opportunity, jumped up, and plunged the blade deep into the tissue at its throat—pressing the cable against it.

The beast bellowed, a sound like the tearing apart of a planet. Violet light and sparks exploded simultaneously from its wounds, the ground vibrated, and then it slumped like an empty sack of steel and bone.

Jax jumped back, breathing heavily. "There you go. I knew electricity made everything better."

Echo: There was only one.

“One of what?”

By many.

From the distance, behind the rocks, came new sounds – heavy, rumbling, hungry.

Lira looked at him. "I take it we're running again?"

"Yes. And this time we'll complain along the way."

They began to move, while behind them more silhouettes appeared in the fog – large, fast, and very, very thirsty.

They ran. Not the athletic "I'm enjoying this" kind of race, but the desperate "If I stop, I'll become a snack" kind of race. Behind them, the ground rumbled, and three new creatures burst out of the purple mist. One was twice the size of the one they'd just laid down and had teeth like polished coffins.

“I think that one has already eaten,” Lira gasped.

“Yes – and we’re dessert.”

They leaped over broken metal plates, dodging dripping strands of cables that lay in the dust like dead snakes. The purple glow they'd seen in the distance earlier was getting closer—now they recognized it as some kind of tower. Or perhaps a tree. Not a wooden tree, but one made of twisted metal branches reaching into the sky, from whose ends light trickled into the room like leaves.

"I have a feeling that tree up there is more important than it looks," Jax said.

Echo confirmed: **That's the anchor. The oldest part of this place. If it falls, everything falls.**

"How poetic," Jax murmured. "We're like a tree that grows, and the leaves fall... but the tree remains."

"Doesn't sound like our tree," Lira growled. "Our tree is about to be eaten by a chainsaw."

The first monster caught up. It leaped over a rock formation, landed just a few meters behind them, and ripped the ground open like paper. Shards of metal flew past them, one slashing Jax's cheek.

"I hate these creatures," he snarled, "they have zero sense of personal distance."

Echo: **Stay on course for the anchor. I can recharge the blade there.**

"Charge? What am I, a damn cell phone?"

More like a sword with legs.

The tower drew closer. At its base, strange runes flickered, moving as if waiting to be touched. Small, ghostly figures glided between them—like shadows of people long gone.

"Jax," Lira shouted, "those creatures are blocking the way!"

And indeed, two of the beasts had positioned themselves in front of the tower. Broad, heavy, their eyes glowing like warning lights before a precipice.

"Plan?"

"Yes, I'm in favor of going with the old classic: we do something stupid."

He gripped the blade with both hands, feeling Echo flow through his arm like a liquid stream. The metal began to sing—not literally, but so deep within that it was almost more a heartbeat than a sound.

"Lira, if this goes wrong, just say..."

"I know. 'I told you so.'"

They charged. The two beasts roared in unison, a sound like collapsing buildings. Jax leaped aside, slid under one of the creatures, and rammed the blade into the soft spot between its legs—if you could even call them "legs" with such monsters. Violet blood spurted, hot and stinking of ozone.

Lira threw a grenade at the second beast, the blast shaking the ground beneath them. For a moment, they had a gap.

"Echo! Now!"

Connection established.

Jax pressed the blade against the runes at the base of the tower. A dazzling light shot up, enveloping the entire tree in a web of pulsating lines. The glow grew brighter until it was almost white—and then the tower emitted a wave of energy that raced in all directions.

The monsters screamed and staggered as if gravity had been removed. Some collapsed, others retreated, crawling back into the purple mist.

Jax gasped, lowering the blade. "Please tell me that was enough."

For now.

"I hate it when you say that."

Lira grabbed his arm. "We have a window. Let's get out of here before they gather again."

They ran past the tower and into a narrow canyon of metal and stone. Above them, the sky flashed purple—not like weather, but like a large, angry eye.

Jax glanced back. The tower was still standing. But he knew the leaves would fall again.

And if they were unlucky, this time they would be among them.

The canyon stretched across the landscape like a metallic scar, full of sharp edges and shadows that seemed to move when you weren't looking.

"How far to... well, something?" Lira asked between breaths.

"I don't know," Jax gasped. "But as long as there's no sign out front saying *Welcome, key bearer, today on the menu: You*, I am satisfied."

"You set your standards really low."

"That makes it easier to be disappointed."

They paused briefly at a bend to catch their breath. Echo was silent—eerily silent. No whisper, no warning. Just a dull, smoldering feeling in their hand, as if the blade were waiting beneath their skin until it was needed again.

"Echo? Are you okay?"

Analysis in progress.

"Oh, great. That always sounds like, 'We're going to die soon, but I don't want to spoil the surprise.'"

Lira listened into the canyon. "Do you hear that?"

"If you mean the tinnitus that lives in my ear after the last explosion—yes."

"No. That one."

A quiet, rhythmic knocking. Not the sound of footsteps—more like someone striking metal against metal. Steady, patient.

"Sounds like someone cleaning a pan. A very large pan."

This is not someone Echo finally spoke up. This is a rallying cry.

"For whom?"

For everything that is thirsty here.

Jax cursed quietly. "We have to be faster than a monster with a calendar."

They started moving again, deeper into the canyon. The ground became smoother, almost polished—and Jax noticed the first marks. Scratch marks. Longer than his arm, freshly scratched into the ground.

“Lira... we’re not the first ones here.”

“And probably not the last either.”

Jax stopped at a narrow spot. Before them, the canyon opened into a wide depression—and in the middle of it lay something that didn't belong there: a ship. Large, old, and so damaged that it could only be considered a wreck. The hull was ripped open like a can-opener project, and a faint golden glow emanated from the hatches.

“Looks like a stroke of luck,” Jax said.

"Or like a death trap. Five credits that there's something waiting inside."

“I’ll take the bet—but only if I can go in with your gun.”

They climbed the last bit down into the depression. The ship was so old that the writing on the hull was barely legible. Only one word stood out: Ardentia.

Echo whispered: I know that name.

“Friend or foe?”

Both.

"Sounds like I should pull out a gun right now."

Lira went in first, carbine at the ready. The hallway was filled with dust, glittering like gold in the air, but Jax immediately sensed it wasn't just dust—it tasted too sweet, almost like the air with the Thirsty Beasts earlier.

“I don’t like this,” he said.

“Welcome to the club.”

They entered the main room. Old crates and broken containers were scattered everywhere—and in the center, a pedestal on which a sphere floated. It was transparent, but inside it, something was spinning—a piece of a star map that looked like it was trying to hide.

"I bet this is valuable."

"And I bet it wants to kill us."

This is a fragment, said Echo. Part of the archive.

"You mean treasure map?"

I mean: beacon.

"Oh, perfect," moaned Lira. "The whole neighborhood will definitely be calling."

As if she had summoned it, the floor vibrated. Slowly, like the first thunder before a storm. From the dark corridors of the ship came a scraping sound that shook Jax to his core.

"I think this is the moment where we end the bet and run."

"Yeah, but maybe we'll take the thing with us."

"Of course we'll take it. We didn't come here to be clever."

Jax reached for the ball—it felt cold and heavier than it should have looked. As soon as he touched it, the scraping increased in speed.

Now, said Echo. Or never.

"Lira, we're out!"

They ran back, the light from the globe pulsing in Jax's hand, and behind them a shadow burst from the hallway—large, fast, and so silent it was worse than a roar.

The shadow shot out of the corridor like a knife throw, and at the last moment Jax saw the head: no face, just a shattered metal helmet from which tentacles of fiber optic cables grew. The ends glowed as if they wanted to burrow into flesh.

"What the hell *isthe*?" gasped Lira.

"It's probably the captain," Jax shouted, "and he's not in a good mood!"

The thing came in for a landing—four legs of scrap metal hammering into the ground, and a body that looked like someone had left a combat drone and a skeleton out in the sun too long. Jax raised his blade, blocked the first blow, sparks flying. The monster pushed him back, and the base with the sphere crashed to the ground.

“Take that thing!” he yelled.

Lira grabbed the bullet, threw it into her backpack, and opened fire. The shots caused the creature to recoil, but it remained silent—no roar, no scream. Just this rhythmic scraping, as if it were trying to scrape off the skin of the world with every step.

Jax went on the offensive, slashing diagonally, severing one of its legs. The creature toppled over, recovered, and the cable tentacles lashed out like whips. One struck Jax in the helmet, and the world briefly went white and tasted of blood.

“Jax!” Lira shouted.

“Everything’s fine,” he gasped, “only... my brain just moved.”

They retreated into the hallway. The thing followed, faster than it should have. Cables whipped against the walls, sparks rained down. A pipe burst open, spewing steam into the corridor.

“The exit is up ahead!” Lira shouted.

"Run! I'll stop it!"

"No, you're giving me that hero look again. That never ends well."

“Maybe I want to win this time.”

He stopped, turned, and raised the blade with both hands. The monster leaped—and Jax thrust the weapon forward with all his strength. The blade glowed brightly as it pierced its chest. Violet light shot from the cracks, and a scream like breaking glass filled the corridors.

Echo screamed in his head: Go now!

Jax yanked out his weapon, stumbled backward, and the creature collapsed—not dead, but briefly out of the game. He ran after Lira.

They jumped through the exit into the bright, unnatural light of the unknown territory. Behind them, the wreckage collapsed, as if it had only been waiting for this moment.

They didn't stop for a second. Over the rocks, through narrow crevices, onward, until the shadow of the wreck disappeared behind them. The growling of the beasts was far away—but not far enough.

Only after minutes, when their lungs burned and their legs protested, did they stop.

“Okay,” Lira gasped, “I admit it—that was close.”

Jax laughed hoarsely. “Tight is my specialty.”

Echo whispered: The fragment in the backpack... will help us find what we are looking for.

“Or what will kill us,” said Lira.

“It’s usually the same for us.”

A faint green glow flickered on the horizon. Not a tower this time, but something that looked like a forest—except the “trees” had metal trunks and their crowns were made of dense, shimmering wires. The wind from that direction carried not dust, but silence.

Jax spat out blood, grinned crookedly, and said, “I think I know where we shouldn't go next.”

“Then we’ll go right there.”

6. The Silence of the Star Forests

The Star Forest began where the ground ceased to behave like ground. No more dust, no more rock—just a smooth, black surface into which hundreds of slender trunks bore. They grew like lances into the sky, straight, flawless, each one made of polished metal that seemed to breathe in the green shimmer.

“Looks like someone tried to build a forest and gave the job to a machine priest,” Jax muttered.

"I don't like him," said Lira. "He looks... too tidy."

They crossed the invisible border. Immediately, silence swallowed every sound. No crunching under boots, no breathing. Not even the scraping of metal on metal, which was omnipresent in the unfamiliar territory.

Jax raised his hand and snapped his fingers. Nothing. No sound. He looked at Lira. "Either I'm deaf or..."

"The forest eats sounds."

Echo spoke in his head, muffled, as if she too were whispering: **This place was an archive. Now it's empty.**

"Empty?" Jax thought back. "Empty doesn't feel like that. Empty doesn't feel like someone is watching me breathe."

The trunks stood so close together that the green light shone between them only in narrow columns. Every now and then, one of the trunks glowed briefly brighter, as if it had registered something.

Lira pointed ahead. "Something's moving up ahead."

A figure glided between the trunks—too thin, too tall to be human. It moved not like a living being, but like a memory that had decided to take a stroll.

"Friend of yours, Echo?"

They are guards.

"What are they waiting for?"

To a sound.

Jax grinned crookedly. "Then it's a good thing I'm as quiet as a drunken elephant."

They went deeper. The forest barely changed—only the trunks seemed to move closer, the spaces narrower, the light greener. Once, Jax placed his hand against a trunk. The surface was smooth, but cold, like the inside of a grave.

And then he heard it. A single sound, quiet, almost imperceptible: a heartbeat. Not his. Not Lira's. The forest answered. The trunks around them began to pulse in unison.

"Lira..."

"I know. Let's not find the thing."

Too late. From the depths of the forest stepped a guardian. He was taller than any trunk, made of the same metal, but with a face that consisted only of an empty, black hollow. No mouth, no eyes—only silence cast into form.

He raised his arm, and every trunk around them began to lean, as if the entire forest were breathing.

The guardian stood still, as if he had flowed from the forest itself. His body was so smooth that the green light ran along him in waves. The black hollow where his face should have been sucked Jax's gaze in like an abyss.

Echo spoke in his head, but she too sounded different – slower, deeper, as if she had to move through water:

Step forward, key bearer.

Jax grimaced. "Sounds like you just announced my funeral."

It is an invitation.

"I've had bad experiences with invitations."

Lira whispered—or at least she thought she was whispering; the forest swallowed even that: "What does that thing want?"

Before Jax could answer, the ground between him and the guardian began to glow. Lines formed, geometric patterns that rotated as if searching for a specific frequency. He took a step—and immediately the forest changed.

The trunks moved, not like trees in the wind, but like columns adapting to new laws of geometry. They formed a circle around Jax and the Guardian, excluding Lira.

"Great," Jax murmured. "Now things are getting personal."

The Guardian raised his arm. A shape appeared between them—half hologram, half matter. It looked like the glass capsule Jax had found on Garruk III, only larger and filled with twisting light.

Show that you can carry what you stole.

"Stolen? I prefer to call it... temporarily adopted."

The truth knows no excuses.

Suddenly, Jax felt something tug at his mind—as if the forest were leafing through his thoughts. Images flickered before his inner eye: the crash on Garruk III, the first time he encountered Lira, the machine cult hunting him, a hand that wasn't his holding the pod, and beyond, a sky filled with burning planets.

"Okay, that's enough. Get it out of my head!"

The guard didn't react. Instead, the large capsule between them began to brighten. The light pulsed in time with his heartbeat—and then the tempo changed. Faster. More aggressive.

Jax felt Echo grow hot in his hand, almost painful.

Grab it or perish.

"Sounds like my last relationship."

He grabbed the hilt, and immediately the capsule's light shot into the blade. It felt like an electric shock was burning him from within, but he held on. The guard took a step forward—and Jax suddenly felt the heat disappear, replaced by an eerie calm.

Everything stood still. The forest was no longer breathing, Lira was frozen, the green glow didn't flicker. Only the guardian and he.

You will be tested. Not today. But soon.

"Can I have a specific appointment?"

Soon.

The guardian stepped back. The logs opened the circle, the light fading. Lira immediately ran to him. "What happened?"

"I think I've gotten through the worst part of the interview."

"So? Got a job?"

"I don't know. But they certainly don't pay well."

Echo whispered one last time: **You are now marked.**

"Again? I barely have any room left."

As soon as they left the circle, the forest changed again. The metal trunks now looked less like architecture and more like creatures that had decided to disguise themselves as architecture. Some twitched as if responding to invisible impulses.

A shower of sparks suddenly hissed from one trunk to the other, bright as a weld, and the smell of burnt metal stung Jax's nose.

"Ah, great," he growled. "Now we're getting a short circuit in paradise."

"This isn't a short circuit," Lira said quietly. "This is communication."

Jax was about to ask, with *whom*, when from the depths of the forest came an electronic crackle—not like a broken radio, but like a voice trying to speak through static storms. There were no words, but the intonation sounded old, purposeful... and hungry.

"Echo, translate?"

Too many voices. They overlap.

"Then filter out the wrong ones."

There are no wrong ones.

Another spark jumped, this time directly in Jax's face. He recoiled—not because of the brightness, but because he swore he saw a face in the bright flash. Brief, distorted, like a hologram that wouldn't stay stable.

"I think the forest knows you by name now," murmured Lira.

"Great. Maybe he'll send me a postcard when we get out of here."

They continued walking, and beneath their feet the ground changed. Thin, metallic roots ran between the trunks, crunching softly with every step. Some moved—only a few millimeters, but deliberately, like feelers scanning them.

"Lira..."

"I know."

Echo whispered: Don't touch them for too long. Some carry electricity. Some... carry something else.

"Other?"

Memories.

They reached a small clearing, if you could call it that—a place where the trunks receded, leaving only the green glow to fill the space. In the center stood an object that looked like a shrine: several trunks intertwined, and in their center, a sphere of pure light, slowly rotating.

The electronic crackling grew louder, almost melodic, as if dozens of voices simultaneously wanted them to come closer.

"This looks like the point where horror movies get really stupid," Jax said.

"Or where you find answers."

"Same risk."

They approached, and with every step, more sparks flew between the trunks. It was as if the forest were reacting—not with rejection, but with awareness. The smell of ozone hung heavy in the air, and the silence was now so dense that even their thoughts seemed alien.

Jax reached for the sphere of light—and the metal roots beneath her feet moved faster, wrapping around her boots like snakes.

"Lira, I think we've just passed the point where politely leaving was an option."

"Yes," she murmured. "Now the forest is dancing."

The roots tightened around her boots, and the crackling was no longer a background noise, but a chorus of rippling sparks. The sphere in the center pulsed—faster, brighter—and suddenly the entire forest was in motion.

The metal trunks bent in a circle around them, crackling with tension as if they were about to explode. Jax's hand jerked toward Echo, but the blade hummed of its own accord—not aggressively, but as if it were tuning into a rhythm older than anything he knew.

A figure emerged from the sphere of light. At first, just a silhouette, flickering like a broken hologram. Then layers of detail: a human body, but woven from

lines of data and metallic threads. Eyes that seemed to glow, but not in a color that should exist.

"That's..." Lira paused. "...not possible."

Jax blinked. "I wish I could say I haven't seen this before."

Echo spoke – but this time her voice came not only in his head, but also from the figure's mouth:

I am the rest.

"Left of what?" asked Jax.

From everything.

The figure approached. Its movements were too smooth for a machine, too precise for a human—and in every movement lay a trace of something Jax couldn't identify.

I was human. I was machine. I was the spirit that wandered among them as they forgot each other.

"So you're an AI?"

I am – if you confuse AI with memory.

The crackling around them changed rhythm, becoming deeper, almost like an electric heartbeat. The roots didn't separate—but they now moved as if in sync with the figure.

"Why are we here?" asked Lira.

Because the key in your pocket can open my heart.

Jax felt the capsule in his jacket begin to throb—faster, in sync with the sphere.

"And what if we don't?"

Then the forest will keep you until your bones are metal.

Jax laughed dryly. "I've seen worse leases."

The figure tilted his head. **You make jokes to hide fear.**

"No," Jax said. "I'm joking because I have the choice between laughing and screaming."

For a moment, it looked as if the figure was smiling—but then it flickered, dissolved back into data lines, and slid back into the sphere.

Find the others. Then come back.

The roots released their feet, the crackling sound faded. The forest stood still again, as if nothing had happened.

Lira looked at him. "So... that wasn't a machine. Not a human. Not a pure AI."

"No," Jax said. "It was something that decided to be everything—and I hate it when people multitask better than me."

7. The Hour of the Mistborn

The exit from the Star Forest wasn't a gate, not a clear boundary—it was simply there. One last step across the metal floor, and suddenly they were standing in the fog. Thick, cold, damp—and so opaque that Jax felt he might choke on it.

"Great. Now we've landed in God's laundry room," he muttered.

"Quiet," Lira whispered. "Everyone in here can hear you."

The echo of their footsteps was strangely delayed, as if they were walking in a hall full of mirrors that briefly examined every sound before reflecting it back. The fog didn't just creep around them, it moved—as if it had a will of its own. Currents that seemed like breaths, waves that crashed against their legs.

Echo reported: **Be careful. The Mistborn don't see you. They feel you.**

"What are Mistborn?" asked Jax.

Children of the storm. Don't ask who their parents are.

"I don't ask anything anymore."

A sound, dull and deep, vibrated through the fog. At first, Jax thought it was distant thunder, but then he realized it was coming from beneath them—from somewhere underground. The air smelled of metal and salt.

Suddenly, a figure emerged from the fog. Tall, slender, and with movements that couldn't have been of this world—a gliding that required no feet. The outlines constantly blurred; sometimes the figure seemed human, sometimes like an animal, sometimes like something else entirely.

"Lira... I think we have visitors."

"No," she whispered. "We're the visitors."

The figure stopped. Two glowing dots flashed—eyes, or something pretending to have them. Then they heard the voice: a whisper that crept straight into their brains.

Key holder.

Jax instinctively reached for his jacket. "Do we have a special offer on this title today, or what?"

You carry what belongs to us.

"Heard? I prefer to call it a loan."

The fog swirled around them, thicker, more aggressive. Several more figures emerged from the white—each different, each just as wrong. Some had faces that changed when they looked, others had no faces at all. They closed the circle around Jax and Lira.

Echo whispered:**If they touch you, you belong to them.**

"Great," Jax muttered. "Another invitation to a party you can't escape."

The two glowing spots came closer, and Jax suddenly felt a pressure behind his eyes, as if someone were trying to stretch his skull from within. Not pain—not yet—more a cold, creeping feeling that settled over his thoughts like a thin film.

Give. Us. The. Key.

The voice wasn't loud. It was everywhere—in his ears, under his skin, in the rhythm of his heartbeat.

“Echo, we have a psi freak on the line!”

Block him. Think of something he doesn't understand.

“I’ve been thinking about my tax return the whole time.”

It didn't help. The pressure grew. Images flashed through his mind: Garruk III, but flooded with black water. Lira, turning her back on him as her face dissolves into smoke.

– Echo, not as a weapon, but as a human form, bleeding from countless cuts.

“Get out of my head, you fogey!”

The figure stopped. Its "eyes" flickered, and immediately the psi waves surged. Jax's knees almost buckled, and he tasted iron. Lira grabbed his arm. "Jax! Stay with me!"

“I’m trying, but the guy is playing Pac-Man with my synapses!”

The fog around them began to take shape—shadowy hands reaching out toward them. Some grasped at nothing, others slipped through Jax's shoulder as if he were made of smoke. It still burned.

Echo now roared in his head: **Cut the connection!**

“What, should I saw off my head?”

No. Fight in the fog. On their level.

Jax felt Echo channeling her energy into him. Suddenly, the fog brightened—not for Lira, but only for him. He saw the psi waves as if they were cracks in the air, and he grabbed one with his bare hand. It felt as if he'd grabbed a live power line, but he held on, pulled—and ripped the thread apart.

The misty figure recoiled. The whisper turned into an angry hiss. More figures closed the circle, but now Jax knew how to see them.

“Lira! Close your eyes and follow!”

He charged forward, ripping aside the psionic threads that blocked his path. Every crack in the fog brought forth sparks—blue, purple, hot as plasma. A figure reached for him, he pushed Echo forward, and the blade sliced through her like smoke in the wind.

"Hurry up!" Lira shouted.

"I'll hurry! I want to get out of here before my brain starts demanding rent!"

The fog thinned, the light cleared—and then they were outside, standing panting at the edge of a cliff. Below them: a valley filled with more fog, as if they had just entered the courtyard.

"That was just the beginning, wasn't it?" asked Lira.

Jax grinned crookedly. "If that was the reception, I don't even want to know what the menu looks like."

Jax was still standing at the edge of the cliff, looking out at the fog-filled valley, when suddenly his temple twitched—a brief, burning pain, like the prick of a hot needle.

"Ouch! What the—"

He threw his hand to his head, but there was nothing. No blood, no wound. Just a throbbing afterglow, deep beneath his skin.

"Jax?" Lira asked suspiciously.

"Everything's fine," he lied. "Probably just... mountain air. Or the aftereffects of too much cheap whiskey."

Echo, however, did not remain silent. **They tagged you.**

"Marked? Sounds like a cheap sci-fi metaphor."

No. They've laid a thread. A path back to you.

Jax felt his stomach clench. "How long will he stay?"

Until you see what they want to show you.

"Great. Now I have a damn invitation in mind. Are there at least snacks?"

A faint, collective whisper rose from the valley—not loud enough to hear the words, but clear enough to know it was just for him. The mist shifted as if it had formed their silhouettes, beckoning, waiting.

Lira stepped beside him. "We should move on. Away from here."

"Yeah," Jax said, without taking his eyes off the valley. "Let's go. Before I feel like saying hello again."

But deep in his mind, he knew that the Mistborn had already won—because they would follow him anywhere now.

The fog wasn't weather. It was an opinion—and it was against Jax. He and Lira made a detour along the cliff, searching for solid ground that wouldn't give way when you looked at it. After 30 steps, the world changed, as if someone had dropped a backdrop.

"Jax?" Lira's voice sounded too far away. "Do you see that too?"

He saw Garruk III. Not the real, crumbling Garruk, but a polished lie of it: skies like fresh metal, mountains that stood neatly in the catalog, and in the middle, his wreck, brand new, with paint that smelled of hope.

"Damn," he said. "My ship has never been this pretty. Not even on its birthday."

The cockpit canopy popped open as if by itself. Inside lay a bottle of whiskey, cool and foggy. Next to it was a handwritten note, in his own handwriting: *You will finally do everything right.*

"That's mean," Jax muttered. "The fog is reading my shopping list."

He didn't go there. He took a step to the side—and the illusion ripped open the sky. For a second, he saw the same place without the makeup: The cockpit was a mouth. The bottle: an eye. The note: skin. It trembled as if it had an appetite.

"Lira?"

"Here!" She stood two trunks away... and yet much farther away. Next to her was a nursery, complete with glowing stars on the ceiling, a bed, and a picture: Lira, younger, without scars. "This isn't real," she said—and her tone betrayed that part of her wanted it to be real.

"Not a step," Jax said. "The fog gives out free samples, and then he bills you in organs."

The floor vibrated. A new image: the Black Shipyard, but warm, inhabited, all systems bathed in gold. On the platform stood the Mechanarch, without a

mask, with a face one could trust.*wanted*. She raised her hand, a smile like a blade.

Give it here.

The words don't scratch your ears, but your bones. You're not wearing it well. You're wearing it wrong.

"I wear everything wrong," Jax said. "It's my trademark."

Echo flickered in his hand. Don't answer. The more you talk, the more threads they find.

"I wanted to practice being silent anyway." He looked at Lira. "Move on three. No matter what you see. One... two..."

"Three!" Lira shouted and ran away.

The fog grew angry. Shadow heads emerged from the sides, hands of mist going for knuckles. A larger figure reared up briefly, as tall as a tower, then shattered into small, whispering shards.

Jax didn't yell. He laughed. "Come on, faster! If you want me, you'll have to keep up with me—and I'm bad at cardio!"

The spell cut the fear into bite-sized pieces. Lira grinned crookedly and jumped over a misty vine that snapped at her boot. "If we survive this, I'll buy you a treadmill."

"If we survive this, I'll marry my bed."

They shot through the scenery. Garruk crumbled to dust, the nursery shrank to a box, the Mechanarch dissolved into numbers. The fog growled—an offended sea.

Then silence. Again, only gray. Again, only breath, too loud in the throat.

"First test passed," Jax said, "and I just smelled a bottle that didn't exist. Progress."

"Next time you'll smell something real," Lira said. "I promise."

"Deal."

They clung to the edge of the cliff, running until the burning in their calves became a familiar sensation. After a while—minutes? Hours?—a marker appeared before them: three rusted stakes in a triangle.

"Have we had this before?" Lira blinked. "I feel like I know this rust."

Jax knelt, rubbing it with his glove. A carved line, with an X above it. And stuck in the furrow was a strand of hair—Lira's color.

"Yes," he said. "We already had them. The fog rides a carousel, we're the stupid horses."

"So plan B."

"Plan B is like Plan A, only louder."

He drew the blade. Echo vibrated, as if she liked the idea. "We'll cut our way through."

Don't cut the fog, warned Echo.**The knots. Find the cold spot.**

"Cold spot? Everything here feels like a refrigerator where someone is storing fear."

He closed his eyes, clearing his mind. Behind the dull pressure, behind the mark on his temple (which now itched like a mosquito that had become a lawyer)—there really was something: a hole without a sound, a corner of nothingness in nothingness.

"That way." He pointed in a direction that made no distinction—until they started walking. The closer they got, the quieter it became. Not the "forest eats sounds" silence, but a silence with personality. One that didn't like being touched.

On the ground: a fine circle of black dust. In the center: a depression the size of a hand.

"It looks like a doorbell," said Lira. "Do you want to press it?"

"I never press anything without drinking it first." He put his hand in anyway — and the mark on his temple clicked.

The fog responded immediately. Not aggressively—offended. The circle detached itself, rising as a thin ring, and clicked through the air like a lock just guessed. A furrow opened before them, narrow and long, as if someone had cut the fog with a ruler.

"Aisle clear," Jax said. "Business class. No legroom."

They stepped inside. To the left and right, the fog held its distance, as if something invisible were holding it back. Sparks leaped along the edges, blue teeth baring.

"How long will this last?" asked Lira.

"As long as we pretend to be brave."

They walked faster. Behind them, the cut closed again, crackling, bad-tempered. Ahead—finally—a different sound: a metallic dripping, an open structure somewhere, an echo that sounded like space.

"Exit?" asked Lira.

"Or entrance into something that thinks it's an exit."

They stepped out... and stood on a bridge made of bolted plates. Below: nothing. Above: fog, illuminated from below. In the distance, shadows floated—not fogborn, more like wreckage, circling in the haze like fish.

"Nice," said Jax. "If you like architecture that's friendly to people with a fear of heights."

A hiss. Three hooks shot out of the fog, digging into the bridge's plating. Jax turned around—no figures, just ropes growing taut from the gray.

"Great. Now the fog is catching us."

The hooks jerked. The bridge groaned—metal that had bad news.

"Through!" cried Lira.

They sprinted. Behind them, the hooks tore the first slab loose, and the bridge jerked like a living spine. Jax leaped over a gap, landed, and pulled Lira after him by the hand. Ahead, a shape finally emerged: an archway, built—no, grown—from twisted girders.

The bridge gave way. One last jump, belly landing, scraped hands, injured knees—and then Jax rolled over the edge to safety, Lira beside him.

Behind them, the fog engulfed the bridge. The hooks retreated, politely like waiters clearing tables after the guests have fled.

Jax lay on his back, breathing, laughing. "I love exits that claim to be entrances."

"I hate fog," said Lira. "I officially hate it now."

Echo vibrated. **You've broken the circle. But the mark remains.**

"All right," Jax said. "If they want to live in my head, at least they should pay rent."

"What do you want?" asked Lira, half laughing, half exhausted.

"Peace and quiet. And a kitchen where the whiskey never runs out."

"Utopia."

"I know."

Behind the archway lay a courtyard of metal plates, lined with thin lanterns emitting green light. In the center: a pedestal. On top of it: a shallow, black ceramic bowl. Inside: liquid, dark, motionless.

"That looks like *drink me* out," said Lira.

"And after *die smart*."

Echo was cautious. This is an offer. An ancient custom. If you accept, you are a guest. If you refuse, you are prey.

Jax leaned over and smelled it. No alcohol. No ozone. Just... silence, in liquid form.

"If I drink from it, what happens?"

You listen. And they listen.

"I don't like talking to fans."

He lifted the bowl, tipped a small sip onto his tongue. Cold. Nothing. Then: a rushing sound, as if someone were pouring ocean surf into his skull. Images, fast as bullets: the star forest from above; a wheel of light spinning in the void; Kahlir, the gentleman killer, holding the blade in his hand—*his* blade — and can't lift it.

"Interesting," said Jax. "The fog doesn't like Kahlir. We have something in common there."

He stopped drinking. He put the bowl back and bowed slightly—pure audacity, but old places liked gestures. The fog responded with a faint spark from the lantern's rim.

"Guest status?" asked Lira.

"Temporary."

"As usual with you."

"As usual with me."

They left the courtyard through a narrow passage. The fog remained thick, but it was dissipating. And when they finally reached a rise, the haze briefly broke. In the distance, the edge of a city glowed—not a living one, more like a fossilized one: towers of scrap and mirrors, streets like circuit boards.

Jax whistled softly. "If that *In the network of syndicatis*, I will voluntarily return to the fog."

"It is," Lira said dryly. "And that's exactly where we need to go. Because we're stupid... and because people live there who pay for fragments."

"And for heads."

"Yours is priceless."

"Because it's empty?"

"Because it attracts trouble."

"Fair."

Far behind them, deep below, the fog answered one last time—not with a threat, but with a promise. The mark glowed in Jax's temple, warm like a bad secret.

We'll meet Again.

8. In the network of syndicates

The city lay like a metallic tumor on the edge of the plain. Towers of twisted girders, welded together with mirror plates that turned every ray of light into a blinding, paranoid twitch. Cables hung between the structures like cobwebs, thick as snakes, and something was constantly dripping from somewhere—oil, water, blood, you could bet it was all three.

"Beautiful," said Jax, "if you like the charm of a junkyard that decided to marry itself."

"In here, you're either a hunter or prey," Lira said. "And sometimes both."

The streets were narrow, crammed with makeshift market stalls. Vendors shouted in at least six languages, including two that consisted only of clicks and hisses. An electric heat hummed over everything, as if the city itself were under constant power.

Jax's gaze fell on a group: three figures in worn syndicate coats, each embroidered with symbols that looked like the warning labels of a particularly sadistic coffee machine. One of them recognized Lira—and his grin revealed more gold teeth than real ones.

"Friends of yours?" asked Jax.

"More like, 'I'll kill you and sell your shoes.'"

They continued on, deeper into the belly of the city. Here the light became narrower, colder. Networks of drones stretched over the alleys, hanging in their docking stations like sleeping insects. Every movement, every word was captured by at least three cameras.

"I feel like the city is breathing," Jax murmured.

"She does. And she'll cough you up if you don't have anything valuable."

At the end of a narrow staircase, a courtyard opened up. In the middle stood a long table, crammed with glass cubes in which strange objects floated: severed fingers with implanted chips, half-finished drones, even a preserved alien skull. Behind it sat a *Madrig*, the syndicate broker – a massive man whose left arm was made entirely of polished titanium.

"Lira," he growled. "You're late. And you have... company."

"This is Jax," Lira said crisply. "He's bringing what we need."

"And that would be?"

Jax grinned. "A reason not to shoot me right there."

Madrig's eyes flashed. "That's not a very good reason."

"Maybe not. But I have something worth more to you than my corpse."

Lira took a step back, letting Jax speak—and he reached for his jacket, feeling the artifact's pulse. For a moment, he considered revealing it. The look on Madrig's face told him: in here, every gesture, every blink, would be a negotiation.

"You know how to talk," said Madrig. "But do you also know when to keep quiet?"

"No," Jax said. "But I'm willing to learn."

Madrig laughed – deep, short, like a man who has filled many graves. "Then we sit down. And talk business."

The table was long, the light dim, and the stench of oil, stale smoke, and too much cheap rum hung in the air like a second skin. Madrig sank heavily into a metal chair that creaked under his weight. His titanium hand tapped rhythmically on the table—a nervous rapping that felt like a ticking clock.

"So," he began, "why exactly shouldn't I just fillet you right here and now, take the stuff, and feed your corpses to the pig creatures below deck?"

Jax leaned back, ostentatiously lit a cigarette, and blew the smoke across the table. "Because you won't know how to use the stuff. *correctuse*. And because then you never see the damn big profit that lies behind it."

Madrig spat to the side. The snot landed with a disgusting *Pop* in a tin bucket. "Sounds like a fairy tale. And I don't like fairy tales, Mercer."

"Me neither. Fairy tales usually end badly."

One of the men behind Madrig—thin, with scars running across his face like poorly drawn maps—pulled out a knife, twirled it between his fingers, and grinned crookedly. "Maybe I'll like your face better with one more cut on it."

"Maybe you'll like yours better with it still on," Jax countered, without looking up. Echo hummed in his jacket, quietly, like a guard dog deciding whether to bite.

Lira took a step forward, her hand loosely on the butt of her pistol. "You really want to know? We have something that's going to rouse the Machine Cult. And once the cult gets nervous, you'll be able to move more crates around the city than you can count."

Madrig's titanium finger stopped tapping. "Machine Cult, huh?" He pulled out a knife—not as elegant as his husband's, but a wide thing with a serrated edge, one that wasn't sure whether it was meant to cut or break. "That's a name that causes trouble around here. I like trouble. But only when it's mine."

"Then you're one of them," Jax said. "But you have to let us out first—with your protection. Otherwise, they'll take not only the thing, but your damn city, too."

The scarred man took a step, the blade flashing. Lira audibly pulled the trigger. Madrig raised his Titan hand—and suddenly it was quiet. The buzzing of the drones above the courtyard fell silent, as if they had all simultaneously decided to stop breathing.

"Last chance, Mercer. Show me you've got something, or I'll turn your skull into a damn fine ashtray."

Jax grinned crookedly and pulled the jacket open a bit—just enough for the artifact to pulse beneath the fabric. A faint, hypnotic light settled over Madrig's face. For a moment, there was no longer a greedy broker, but something... hungrier.

"Good," he murmured. "Very good." Then he spat into the bucket again. "I want fifty percent."

"You get ten," Jax said dryly.

"Forty."

"Fifteen."

"Thirty." Madrig's titanium finger scratched across the table, and small sparks jumped. "Final offer."

Jax smiled. "Twenty. And I'll tell you how to turn it on without your head exploding."

Madrig looked at him for a long time, then laughed. Deep, throaty, dangerous. "Deal."

Madrig's laughter hadn't quite died down when the ground shook beneath her feet. A dull thud, then a second—like the footsteps of a giant who had just decided that doors were optional.

"That's not my damn schedule," Madrig growled, automatically reaching for his gun.

Before he could fire, the courtyard's main gate exploded in a shower of sparks and twisted metal. Through the cloud of smoke stepped a group of armed figures—the emblem of a snake skull emblazoned on their coats. **The Narra Syndicate.**

"Oh shit," Lira muttered. "They never bring flowers."

The leader, a gaunt bastard with a gas mask hissing in time with his breathing, raised his hand. "Madrig! Give us the strangers—and the thing they're wearing. Then maybe we'll let you out of here with both feet."

Madrig stood up, his titanium hand on the hilt of his knife, but the muscles in his face twitched like a man watching his profit margins disappear.

"No one can get you but me!" he yelled – and in the same movement he tipped over the massive table in the middle of the yard.

The thing actually flew—half projectile, half cover—and knocked one of the Narra fighters off his feet. The impact sounded like a bag of bones going down a flight of stairs.

"Cover!" Lira screamed, pulling Jax behind the overturned table. The first volley of energy bolts ripped through the air, burning deep, foul-smelling gouges into the metal.

"How big is the table?" Jax asked, firing back blindly.

"Big enough that you're still alive. Shut up and pull the trigger!"

One of the Narra leaped over cover, blade in hand, and yelled a curse word that was new even to Jax. He grabbed the bastard by the collar, rammed his head into the table leg, and sent him slumping limply to the floor. "Now I get it—thanks for the vocabulary practice."

Madrig roared, threw his knife across the yard—it struck an attacker right in the shoulder joint, and the scream was almost drowned out by the rattle of the weapons.

"Damn it, Mercer!" Madrig shouted. "Do you still have ammunition or are you just using your stupid charm?"

"Charm is enough if you're close enough." Jax leaped out of cover, grabbed an overturned chair, and hurled it like a club at the nearest enemy. Wood splintered, a tooth flew through the air.

Lira fired accurately, each shot a hole in the storm pelting her. "We're not getting out of here unless we clear the damn exit!"

"Then we'll shoot him free!" Jax yelled as he rammed his knee into the stomach of his nearest opponent.

At that moment, a drone exploded overhead—not from the Narras, not from Madrig, but from someone else. Sparks rained down, and burning plastic filled the yard.

"Who the hell is that?!" Madrig shouted.

"Someone who doesn't need a table anymore," Jax said, grabbing Lira by the arm. "Get out, now!"

The courtyard was a battlefield. Screams, the hissing of plasma, the metallic stench of burning flesh—everything mingled into a din that blasted away any clear thought.

“Out the back!” Lira yelled.

“You still have to tell me where the back is!” Jax gasped as he fended off an attacker with a makeshift shield made from a sheet of metal.

“Left, then through the workshop!”

Left was relative in this chaos—especially when two men were trying to strangle each other with a chain. Jax simply jumped over both of them, landed awkwardly, and almost crashed into a rusty workshop door.

Lira followed, firing at a drone that came too close as she walked. “Open up before we marinate here!”

Jax ripped open the door, revealing a narrow aisle crammed with spare parts, workbenches, and an old robot arm twitching in the corner. They ran through as the roar grew louder behind them.

“How long until they realize we’re gone?” Jax asked.

“Ten seconds if they're idiots. Five if they're smart.”

“So three.”

They reached the back exit—a half-demolished metal staircase leading into a narrow side corridor. Explosions roared above them, sparks rained down.

Jax paused briefly, reached into his jacket and pulled out a small, inconspicuous capsule – *not* the artifact, but one of Echo's "gifts.”

“What is this?” asked Lira.

“A friendly reminder for Madrig.” He set the timer for five seconds and threw the thing back into the workshop.

“We should run,” said Lira.

“I’m already running!”

They rushed down the stairs just as a dull thud behind them turned the corridor into an inferno. The pressure wave practically pushed them outside, while a cloud of smoke, sparks, and cursing voices poured out of the door.

"That was... pretty small for a bomb," Lira said as they rounded the corner, panting.

"It wasn't a bomb either. It was a jammer."

"For what?"

"*Forever*thing, which is important to Madrig."

In the distance, one could hear the excited chorus of collapsing drone systems, flickering lights, and men suddenly realizing that their weapons no longer had target locks.

"You're a fucking bastard, Jax."

"Thanks. I'll try to take care of it."

They disappeared into the shadows of the side streets, while behind them the syndicate floundered in its own web – and Madrig, one thing was certain, would not forget this “partnership.”

The smoke from the jammer still lingered in their lungs as they turned into the first side alley. Heavy cables hung above them like fat snakes, rattling in the wind. The air was stuffy, smelling of stale oil and overcooked meat.

“Left or right?” asked Lira.

“The left looks shorter.”

“The left is also a dead end.”

“Damn... then right.”

They continued running, jumping over an overturned stall full of smashed neon signs. Footsteps and shouts echoed behind them—Madrig's men weren't completely out of the game.

“I thought the jammer would keep them busy longer!” cried Lira.

“He does – but apparently they still have legs.”

A gunshot whizzed past Jax's ear and burned a hole in the wall in front of him. Sparks flew, and an old guard robot squeaked to life.

"Shit!" Jax shouted, reflexively kicking the thing in the lens. It tipped over with a clatter, ripping a power cable out of the wall. Immediately, the lights in the alley switched to emergency mode, and everything was bathed in a red flicker.

"Romantic," Lira puffed. "All that's missing is music."

"If we're unlucky, someone will start playing a funeral march."

They reached an intersection. Before them: a narrow bridge made of rusted grid plates leading over a shaft full of sewer pipes. There was an ominous gurgling and hissing sound below.

"Do you want to go over there?" asked Lira.

"Do you want to swim downstairs?"

So they climbed onto the bridge—which immediately creaked under their weight, as if it were about to depart at any moment. Steam rose from the pipes below them, warm and disgusting.

Behind them, the first pursuer appeared—tall, with a shotgun that looked as if it had been built from the remains of a shipwreck.

"Jump!" Lira yelled.

"That's ten meters down!"

"Jump, you wimp!"

Jax took a run-up, heard the dull blast of the shotgun—and then flew over the railing to the other side. He landed hard, rolled, and gasped: "I hate this."

"Me too."

They ran on, deeper into the maze of alleys. Above them, the drone lights flashed again—someone had retrieved the systems.

"One more minute and we'll be out of the sector," said Lira.

"And then?"

"Then we hope Madrig has other problems."

"This would be the first time that hope doesn't seem like a bad joke to me."

A final shot echoed behind them, then they turned a corner—and suddenly found themselves in an open hall, its roof made of giant mirrored panels. The light flickered everywhere, distorting their silhouettes, making it impossible to tell where they really stood.

"I hate mirrors," Jax muttered.

"Get used to it," said Lira. "We're in the heart of the city here."

The hall smelled of cold metal and old dust, which settled on the tongue like fine sand. Plates of polished steel stood everywhere, some upright, some tilted, some even suspended from the ceiling on wires. The mirrors distorted everything – Jax's face grinned at him in twenty different shapes, sometimes with overly long teeth, sometimes with one eye too many.

"I'm telling you, Lira—this is where nightmares go on vacation."

"Shut up and move quietly."

A metallic clack echoed through the hall. Then another – the pursuers were in. Their footsteps were multiplied by the mirrors, so that it was no longer possible to tell whether there were two or twenty.

"Perfect," Jax muttered. "Now we're playing hide-and-seek with armed idiots."

He crept past one of the plates and paused briefly—his reflection reached for his weapon before he did. He flinched. "Damn it! Lira, the mirrors..."

"...are coupled with projections. Move on before you start talking to yourself."

A shot rang out. Sparks sprayed from a nearby panel. Jax ducked, rolled to the side, and fired back blindly. His shot ricocheted off a mirrored panel, hissed across the hall, and struck one of the pursuers in the shoulder. He screamed, staggered—and took another panel with him as he fell.

The sound was like a signal. Suddenly, everyone was yelling, shots echoed, projections flickered. Some mirrors showed enemies that weren't even there, others made real attackers appear like ghosts.

"I love this place!" Jax shouted, grinning, and kicked a slab, which fell with a loud crash into a group of three men.

Lira took advantage of the chaos to take out one of the pursuers from behind. "Get out now! Before they figure out what's going on!"

They scurried through a narrow passage between two slabs, so tight that Jax ripped his sleeve. Behind them, they heard a man curse, "Where did they go?!" – followed by the metallic clang of a slab falling over.

The exit led into a side corridor, dimly lit, only the faint hum of a broken lamp. They breathed heavily and paused briefly.

"That was close," said Lira.

"Knapp is my middle name."

"I thought that was 'problem'."

"Both fit."

Behind them, the hall began to fill up again—the pursuers had found their tracks. Lira nodded in the shadows. "Before they really figure it out, we'll be long gone."

And so they disappeared into the dark bowels of the city, while the echo of the cursed hunt lingered long afterward in the Hall of Mirrors.

The courtyard smelled of burnt metal, scorched electronics, and something suspiciously like seared meat. Rubble lay everywhere, overturned tables, disemboweled drones—and a few unfortunate men who could neither stand nor curse.

Madrig stood in the middle, his titanium hand resting on the edge of the table, which he had thrown through the air just minutes before. Sparks danced on his metal fist, every crack in the joint a small thunderstorm.

"Find her." The voice was deep, calm—dangerously calm.

One of his men, still half-buried under a fallen slab, coughed. "Chief... they've... detonated the jammer. Half the city..."

"I know what they did, you miserable pile of wasted oxygen." Madrig kicked one of the mirror plates, which shattered with a screeching sound. "And I also know they didn't get far."

He took a few steps, noticed a trail of blood on the ground, and followed it to the workshop door. There he stopped, his titanium fingers digging into the metal until it bent.

"Mercer thinks he's funny. And that I'm sitting here drinking my rum while he shows me off."

One of the younger thugs stepped forward cautiously. "Chief... should we take out the Narra syndicates first?"

Madrig turned to him, his gaze the metallic equivalent of a bullet to the head. "We'll take out anyone who thinks they can stand between me and this capsule. The Narras, the Machine Cult... and especially Jax Mercer."

He reached for a half-charred drone, holding it in his hand like a broken toy. "Call all contacts. We're putting a price on their heads. Alive if possible. Dead if it's faster."

His smile was thin, but it cut like a blade. "And makes sure they can't go anywhere without tasting my name."

9. Shadow over the Brick Moon

The transporter rocked like a drunken whale through the currents of the lower atmosphere. Ionization fire crackled outside, and inside it stank of sweat, lubricating oil, and a meal that should have been digested within the last decade.

Jax sat on the back bench, his feet propped up, the collar of his jacket pulled up. Echo lay warmly against his side, as if asleep—or just pretending to. Lira sat across from him, her eyes alertly on the other passengers.

"We'll have to go into hiding once we reach the brick moon," she said quietly.

"That was my plan anyway. The last thing I want is to dance with Madrig's cardboard cutouts again."

At that moment, the old loudspeaker in the cabin crackled. Not an official station announcement—but a rough, distorted voice:

"To all free blades, debt collectors, and other soldiers of fortune: Two targets. Man and woman. Human. The man carries an artifact. Price: 50,000 credits alive. 20,000 dead. Client: Madrig."

A murmur went through the cabin. Eyes wandered toward them. Not curious—hungry.

"Damn bastard," Jax muttered. "Hasn't even given us a day's head start."

Lira smiled crookedly, her eyes never leaving her fellow passengers. "After all, he'd rather have you alive. That must be love."

"Yeah, like rat poison in breakfast."

The transporter landed abruptly on a landing bay on the brick moon. The doors opened with a groaning hiss—and immediately the smell of this "city" hit them: a mixture of burnt plastic, old rainwater, and the sweet whiff of smuggler fuel.

A dented neon sign flickered above the door frame: **WELCOME TO THE BRICK MOON – LEAVE YOUR DIGNITY AT THE ENTRANCE.**

"Nice," Jax murmured. "Like my last dentist visit—only with more weapons."

They got out, the roar of the bay echoing in their bones. Traders, tugboats, and shady characters swarmed everywhere, while flickering drones circled between the rooftops. And somewhere in this confusion, Jax and Lira knew: every look could be that of a bounty hunter.

"We need to find a place where no one is looking for us," Lira said.

"On the Brick Moon?" Jax laughed. "There are only two kinds of places: the ones where everyone's looking for you—and the ones where you'd rather not be found."

A shadow slid across the market square. High above, almost invisible, a figure moved on a roof, its face hidden, its rifle at the ready.

"I think Category Two has already found us," Jax murmured.

The first shot tore a piece out of the neon arrow above the landing bay – sparks rained down into the dust, and a pungent smell of burnt insulation wire spread.

"Fucking filthy sewer rat with a target!" Jax yelled as the second shot whizzed past his ear.

Lira grabbed him by the collar and pulled him behind an overturned cart, from which cheap electronics tumbled onto the floor like dead fish. "Get down, damn it!"

"I'm already down there, you damned piece of shit on a moon!"

The surrounding merchants screamed, running in all directions. One dropped a cage full of screaming mini-dragons, which fluttered around like crazed balloons. A shot hit the cart directly above Jax's head, and the metal plate shrieked.

"I see the bastard," Lira gasped. "Roof, three o'clock. Don't move."

"Don't move me? Lira, lasers are hitting here, and I'm sitting in the damn shop window!"

He grabbed one of the cheap circuit boards that had fallen out of the cart and threw it in a high arc in the other direction. Immediately, a shot rang out where it landed—the sniper had taken the bait.

"Now!" Lira shouted. They leaped out of cover at the same time, running into a side corridor. The floor was made of unevenly laid brick slabs, interspersed with puddles that shimmered suspiciously. The shooter's shadow moved above them, always parallel, always at the ready.

"Fucking roof-cracker with an overcompensation rifle!" Jax cursed as he jumped over an old pipe. "If I catch you, I'll shove that thing where the sun doesn't shine!"

The gunman fired again, hitting a trash can, which exploded like a grenade of old grease and chemicals. The stench was so pungent that Jax choked as he ran.

"Lira, he's playing with us!"

"Then we turn the tables." She pointed to the left—a narrow staircase that led directly to the roof.

"Ladies first," Jax huffed.

"I'm only letting you go first so I can use you as cover in case of emergency."

"Very charming."

They stormed up the stairs, two at a time, the walls so close that Jax almost scraped his shoulders. At the top, there was only a rusty gate—locked.

"Damned!"

"Open it!"

"Open it? With what? With my charm?" Jax snarled, then kicked it so hard that the lock broke.

They stormed onto the roof—and suddenly found themselves face to face with the assassin. Black armor, rifle at the ready, the sight reflecting only the dusty sky.

"Mercer," a distorted voice crackled. "Madrig sends his regards."

"Then say hello back."

Jax raised his gun, fired, and the roof beneath them began to shake as if the brick moon itself had awakened.

The assassin fired—Jax threw himself to the side, feeling the rush of air as the shot whizzed past his head and a solar panel mount behind him shattered into a thousand pieces.

"Fucking asshole with a homing fetish!" he yelled, rolling off and jumping back to his feet.

Lira crouched down and fired two shots from her pistol – the assassin dodged gracefully, as if he had practiced the dance for years.

"That guy is already annoying me," she growled.

"Wait until he rearranges your hair."

The sniper was faster than they thought—he dropped his rifle, drew two short plasma blades, and charged forward. Sparks flew as he slashed at Jax with the first blade.

"Damn it!" Jax blocked with the barrel of his revolver, which immediately began to smoke. "That's not fair! I only have one *shit* Museum piece!"

"Keep him busy!" Lira shouted, circling the enemy.

"Sure, no problem. I'll just dance with him until one of us falls into a coma!"

The assassin kicked Jax in the ribs – Jax flew half a rooftop further, slammed into a ventilation unit, and cursed so loudly that a group of pigeons took flight in alarm.

"You... dirty... rusty... tin nut!"

He scrambled to his feet, spitting blood and dust, and leaped forward again. Lira seized the moment to sneak behind the assassin, but he had eyes on his back—he whirled around and kicked her across the roof.

"Okay," Jax gasped, "change of plan. We'll beat him down."

"Finally a good idea."

Jax charged again, this time crouching low. The assassin swung his blade—Jax grabbed his wrist, yanked it, and simultaneously slammed the butt of his gun against his helmet. A dull, satisfying thud.*Clank*.

"How does it sound if I do it again, you bastard?"

The assassin broke free and struck back, hitting Jax in the shoulder, which immediately ablaze with pain.

"Ahhh, you dung shovel from hell!"

Lira came from the side and kicked the guy in the back of the knee. He went down, just long enough for Jax to grab his chest plate and, with a curse that mustn't be quoted here, push him over the edge of the roof.

The assassin hit the market roof two floors below hard – wood splintered, merchants screamed, exotic goods flew through the air.

"Well," Jax gasped, leaning over the edge, "Greetings back to Madrig, asshole."

A final shot rang out from below – they jumped back just as a plasma ball blasted away the edge of the roof.

"I think he's still alive," said Lira.

"Of course he's still alive. Bastards like him always live longer than they should."

The escape route from the roof wasn't a heroic sprint, but a slipping, stumbling, and cursing over rusty ladders that had probably been wobbly since before Jax was born. Every rung squeaked as if to say: *Jump, coward, I'm about to break.*

"I hate ladders," Jax gasped.

"I hate it when people want to shoot me," Lira countered.

"Great, then we're both in the hate club today."

Once they reached the bottom, they were immediately hit by the sweltering, foul-smelling air of the alleys. It smelled of old rain, frying oil that had survived several generations, and things they'd rather not identify. The neon lights above them flickered in toxic green and sickly yellow tones.

They had barely taken three steps when three figures emerged from a side alley. They weren't professionals—their armor was too cheap, their weapon grips were too crooked. But those looks... they already had a dollar sign in their eyes.

"Mercer," growled the tallest one, a guy with a cyber-enhanced jaw that looked like someone had screwed an anvil into his face. "Madrig says you owe him one."

Jax raised his hands. "Oh, guys. I owe Madrig so much he's already charging interest on the interest. But you three aren't seriously planning on putting on a matinee here in the backyard, are you?"

"A bounty is a bounty." The smallest man pulled out a rusty energy bayonet that, when activated, threw more sparks than a New Year's Eve firework. "Alive or dead, the boss said it doesn't matter."

"Alive is overrated," grumbled the third, who looked as if he hadn't slept—or washed—in a week.

"Well then," sighed Jax, "it'll just be one of those days."

He kicked a trash can, which tipped over with a deafening clatter. Lira took advantage of the noise to quickly pull out her pistol and shoot the bayonet out of the little boy's hand. He cursed and held his fingers – but Jax had already grabbed the big boy by the collar and rammed his knee into his stomach.

"Damn... cough machine!" Jax gasped as the Jaw Man coughed for air.

The third came from the side, swinging a chain. Jax ducked, the chain slammed against the wall, sparking. Lira kicked him in the back of the knees from behind, and he fell to the ground like a felled tree.

"You're like a fucking kids' birthday party with guns," Jax scoffed. "Except the cake here is made of rusty nails."

The three staggered back, panting and cursing. One was spitting blood, the other lost a tooth. Jax and Lira disappeared into the next alley before the three realized they could probably write off the prize.

"You know what I hate about this moon?" Jax asked as they walked deeper into the labyrinth.

"Everything?" Lira suggested.

"Exactly."

The alley narrowed into a tunnel of rusted pipes and flickering light strips on the walls. Every footstep echoed like a blow to an oil drum.

"Something tells me we're not alone here," Lira murmured.

"Anything?" Jax laughed softly. "The sweat on my neck tells me, and it never lies."

A noise came from above—the rattle of a transport gondola. Jax looked up. Figures were moving between the steel girders. At least four.

"Come on, that's enough," he cursed. "I want to sit somewhere tonight, drink, and NOT get shot."

"You have strange ideas about vacation," Lira replied.

Suddenly, a shower of sparks rained down on them, followed by a hard crash—two men in oil-stained overalls jumped down from above, each with a welding torch in their hand. Their faces were etched with dirt and the prospect of easy money.

"Mercer!" one shouted. "50,000 credits, buddy. We like you, but..."

"...that's more than we'll earn in three years," the other finished, and his burner hissed.

"You know what?" Jax raised both hands. "You could split the money. One takes me away, the other says he killed me."

"It doesn't work that way."

"Too bad."

He stepped forward, grabbed the first man by the arm, turned the burning jet to the side, where he *Fwoosh* set fire to a trash compactor. Lira elbowed the other man in the face, sending him staggering back—straight into the glowing metal wall. His curse was half pain, half surprise.

"How many of them does Madrig actually want to set on us?" Lira gasped.

"Anyone with more than three fingers and a gun, I guess."

From behind, they heard footsteps—at least five more men. A fat welder with a face like a jackhammer now blocked the way.

"Left!" Jax shouted. They jumped through a narrow service hatch, barely wide enough, and landed in a supply shaft that plunged steeply downward.

"You want to go down there?" Lira asked, while the pursuers yelled behind them.

"No. But I don't want to stay up there either."

They slid down the shaft, sparks flying as their boots scraped against the steel walls. At the bottom, they landed hard on a grated floor that buckled precariously under their weight.

"You can't be serious," Lira murmured, looking down at the pitch-black depths below.

"Good news: We're rid of the pursuers. Bad news: If this thing gives way, we'll turn into meat stew very quickly."

"Let's go."

They continued running, the echo of their footsteps endlessly reverberating. Water dripped somewhere, and an electrical crackle flickered in the darkness like an evil thought.

Jax looked at Lira. "You know, I think Chapter 9 has officially put us in the 'shit you can't get out of.'"

"We've never been anywhere else."

10. Cracks in the Matrix Veil

The bar door creaked like an old wound, and the smell that hit them was a mixture of cheap liquor, spilled motor oil, and decisions that can only be made when drunk.

The sign above the bar blinked dimly: "**To the Rusty Hope**"—three letters were missing, and the neon tube hummed as if it were about to play one last agonizing aria.

"Ah... I almost got arrested here once," Jax murmured nostalgically. "Twice."

"Sounds like your living room," Lira said dryly, pushing her way through the crowd. The guests all looked as if they'd already spent their prime in a jail cell.

At the counter stood **Grent Vokar**, a former smuggling colleague of Jax's, who looked like he'd been eating out of ashtrays for the past five years. His eyes lit up when he saw Jax—or maybe that was just the light reflecting off the glass in front of him.

"Mercer, you old bastard!" Grent shouted in a voice tainted by too much smoke and too little sleep. "I thought you'd have rotted away in an asteroid hole long ago."

"That was a close call," Jax said, sitting down and pushing a glass toward him. "Fill it up. We need two things: a hiding place and enough alcohol to forget where we're hiding."

Grent grinned, reached under the counter, and pulled out a bottle labeled simply "Fuel." The smell was strong enough to make Jax's eyes water.

"That stuff will burn your throat and everything else along with it," said Grent. "Three credits a shot, five if you can still talk afterward."

"Fill it up, man. No skimping today."

They downed the first few glasses as if they were water—except water didn't taste quite as "explode my head." Lira grimaced and pushed the glass away. "I still need my liver."

"Pah," Jax waved dismissively. "The liver is like an old freighter. As long as it still smokes a little, it'll keep sailing."

Grent leaned forward. "You're in trouble. Half the underworld has your name on their radar. And if you really have the artifact... then Madrig isn't the worst thing hunting you."

"Well then," Jax grinned, "pour another one. The more you drink, the less you believe that crap."

Grent laughed throatily as a fight broke out somewhere in the back of the room. Bottles flew, chairs crashed—and a man wearing a much too-large hat was pulled headfirst out of the deck of cards.

"Welcome back to the Brick Moon," said Grent, refilling his glass. "Nobody gets old down here—but we all get drunk."

Jax was about to execute the third shot in a row when a shadow fell across the table. A massive guy, as wide as a cupboard, with a face that looked like it had a lifelong feud with bricks, leaned forward.

"You're Mercer," he grumbled.

"Depends on who asks." Jax slowly put the glass down.

"I'm not asking. I'm taking it." The man reached for Jax's jacket.

Lira raised her eyebrows barely noticeably. *This is about to get ugly.*

"Fellow," Jax began, "we're in a bar. In a bar, you use glasses, not fists—"

The giant yanked him off his stool. The rest happened quickly: Jax slammed the back of his head back – the man roared, let go – Jax used the movement to strike with his fist. There was a crunch. Loud.

A tooth, yellow and crooked like an old shuttle bolt, flew in a high arc across the room... and landed right in the beer glass of a stunned miner.

"Uh... that's not mine," Jax said, and the miner downed the glass anyway.

"That was my best front tooth, you damn—" The man grabbed a bottle and swung it like a club.

Lira jumped in and kicked him in the shin, causing him to stumble—right into the table of a group of card sharks. That was the match in the powder keg.

Within seconds, the bar was a seething mess: bottles were flying, chairs were breaking, one of the miniature dragons from the market suddenly fluttered around in the ceiling, hissing at everyone. Someone screamed, someone laughed—and Grent calmly polished a glass behind the bar as if this were perfectly normal.

Jax ducked under a swing, rammed his elbow into the attacker's stomach, and in the same move grabbed half a bottle from the bar.

"Cheers, you bastard!" he shouted before smashing it across the man's head. The glass shattered, and the giant toppled over.

"Jax!" Lira yelled. "We have to get out, now!"

"Not yet, I'm just getting momentum!"

"NOW!"

They made their way to the back door while the fighting continued around them. Someone shouted, "The boss will find you, you bastards!" – but it was drowned out by the noise.

Outside, Jax took a deep breath. "I have no idea who that guy was."

Grent, who had followed them, laughed dryly. "Have you ever been to *Southern sector*?"

"Clear."

"Then you know that you are the little brother of *Kraton Ves* beat you up."

"Kraton... the syndicate boss?"

"Exactly him. And now his little brother has a gap in his teeth and a score to settle with you."

Jax stared at Lira. "I always say: When we screw up, we screw up big."

11. Battle of the syndicates

The brick moon had its own kind of night: not true darkness, more a dull bleed of color, as if someone had pulled the plug on the sky and forgotten the emergency lights. Jax and Lira crawled in this gray area like two bad decisions left lying around too long.

The path to the cargo terminal led through a belt of derelict warehouses. Doors were crooked on their hinges, windowpanes like broken teeth. A rickety crane teetered above the rooftops, and every creak sounded like a giant metal bird dying of arthritis.

"Tell me again why we *here* instead of at a bar with tidy chairs and messy drinks," Jax muttered.

"Because Kraton doesn't like witnesses," Lira said. "And because bars magically transform you into fights."

"I call that talent."

"I call this a medical problem."

They stopped in the shadow of a stack of containers. The things were taller than a church nave and twice as blasphemous: veins of rust, scarred logos, old quarantine seals seeping fine dust. Somewhere, a pump purred, which should have given up years ago, but continued to run out of spite.

Echo lay warm in Jax's palm. Four heat sources on the roof. Two in the north corridor. One in the west gallery.

"One?" Jax whispered. "She's never alone."

Not long.

"Great."

They moved lower, dragging their boots along the ground to keep the bricks from clacking. Drone eyes flashed above them, small as gnats but with the temper of judges. Lira raised two fingers, pointing to the left. Jax nodded. It was their old routine: she looked for cover, he looked for trouble. Together, they usually found both.

Entrance hall: an archway of twisted beams, beyond it a maw of yellow light. At eye level, the sign flickered: TERMINAL 12 — ENTER AT YOUR OWN RISK. Jax snorted. "At least they're honest."

"It's about to get even more honest."

The intermediate wing stank of cold metal and the ghosts of spilled chemicals. Tarps lay on the pallets, lifting slightly in the wind, as if people were breathing shallowly underneath. Jax tapped one. Only air. Only paranoia. Only the moon, which understood humor.

Echo: Two cameras in front. Blind spots three seconds each, staggered.

"I love it when you whisper the choreography to me."

Jax counted. At two, he leaped forward; at five, he was through under the first eye, crouching behind a stack of empty cargo crates. Lira slid down beside him, her breathing a steady, little machine.

"Again," she whispered.

"Again," he nodded.

They switched cover like chess pieces, except this board tasted of oil. As they reached the main sliding door, Lira placed her hand on the rails. "Freshly moved."

"From whom?"

"Probably from someone who wants to surprise us."

"I hate surprises. Except for the ones in bottles."

Jax pulled a flat box from his jacket and pressed it against the control panel. A tiny *click* The red light turned yellow, then green, then offended. The door jerked, opened a hand's breadth. That was enough.

Inside: Hall 12. A space like a tranquil ocean. Rows of islands of crates. Above, trolleys, their tracks shimmering in the semidarkness. Neon tubes hummed as if trying to outdo each other. Someone had recently swept: a precise stripe in the dust, leading like an invitation through the middle of the hall.

"I'm definitely not walking on that pretty carpet," Jax muttered.

"We cut diagonally," Lira said. "Kiss walls, marry shadows."

They crawled along the left wall. Between the crates stalked old exoskeletons, switched off but posed as if they were patrolling—a cheap trick that should work if you blink too much.

They are dead, whispered Echo.**But not the sensor bars above.**

"Then we'll make her cry first." Jax pulled a coil of wire, swung it over a crossbeam, tied it to a claw, and pulled until metal sang softly in pain.

A scratching sound. Far to the right. Someone deliberately inconspicuous. Too deliberately. Jax raised two fingers, pointed into the crate aisle. Lira nodded, disappeared silently, like a rude idea.

Jax stayed. Counted. One, two, three. Then he stepped out of the shadows and walked into the middle of the cleared strip. "All right, you damn dancers. If you want a curtain—"

The hall listened to him. The hum of the tubes grew louder for a heartbeat. Echo throbbed in his palm.**Two targets directly ahead, stationary. One to the left, high above. One—**

"I know."

Four silhouettes stepped into the cone of light. Coats too long, hands too steady. Above them, something whirred—the trolley, despite Jax's wire.

"Mercer," said the one in the middle. "Kraton Vesk wants to talk."

"Oh yeah? Does he want to send me an apology for his brother? Maybe a flower card?"

"More like an... invitation."

Behind them, metal clicked. Four more men, weapons at the ready. The door behind them closed with a metallic groan.

"Well," said Jax, "this is getting almost cozy."

The middle one pulled out a holoprojector. It flickered, and suddenly Kraton Vesk stood in the hall: broad as a cargo ship, with a scar across his face and a smile that looked less like humor than "I'm going to break your back."

"Mercer," the voice boomed. "You pulled my brother's tooth."

"It wasn't intentional," Jax lied. "He just wanted to test my punching power."

Kraton laughed coldly. "I like humor. But I like revenge more."

The men reached for them – and then everything went wrong. Jax kicked the first one in the knees, Lira fired two quick shots, sparks flew from a wall. One of the cranes began to swing, dislodging a crate – it crashed to the ground, and a swarm of small, metallic drones flew out of it.

"Oh, damn," Lira gasped. "Automatic guard dogs."

The drones activated their stun guns, buzzing like angry hornets. Jax knocked over a crate, which rained down sparks, and one of the drones exploded in a mini-explosion.

"This is officially no longer a meeting!" he yelled.

"It never was!" Lira shouted back, ducking as another crate crashed from above.

Kraton looked down from his holo and smiled. "You have exactly thirty seconds before I burn down the hall."

"Thirty? Perfect, that's enough for a blast."

Jax grabbed a loose chain, jumped onto one of the cranes, and swung over the men, landing hard on the other side. "Lira! Now!"

She threw a smoke grenade, and the hall filled with thick, acrid fog. Screams, gunshots, the whirl of drones—and in the middle of it all was Jax, finding and pulling an old lever control.

A deafening crash – an entire row of crates toppled over, blocking the path of the syndicate men.

"That's it, get out of here!" he yelled.

They ran through a side door as the hall behind them erupted in a ball of fire that bathed the sky above the brick moon in dazzling orange for a few seconds.

The fireball had barely stopped roaring when it became clear: This wasn't a happy ending. This was just the first verse of a very off-key song.

Jax and Lira rushed out onto the narrow loading ramp, stumbling over twisted metal plates, while behind them the smoke crept out of the terminal like an angry beast. From the left, they heard the *clang-clang-clang* heavy boots – not random passersby, but syndicate meat with too much metal in its blood.

"I thought we were out of the shit," Lira gasped.

"We are Out. We're just in a different mess." Jax pulled on a loose chain dangling from one of the cranes and checked the weight. "Holds."

The first two pursuers emerged from the smoke, guns at the ready. Jax grinned like a dentist from hell, grabbed the chain, ripped it free – and the rusty hook hanging from it swung with a screeching *schnonk!* through the air. The first man fell to the ground as if he'd been kissed by a galactic wrecking ball, the second flew backward into a stack of oil drums.

One of the barrels tipped over, rolled thunderously down the ramp—and burst in a black, foul wave. The stench alone could have won a war.

"That stuff is flammable!" Lira shouted.

"Yeah? Then we shouldn't waste it." Jax grabbed a cutting torch lying around, which had probably been waiting for its retirement for decades. One spark – and the sea of barrels caught fire like a bad bar on a Saturday night.

A shower of sparks rained down on them as Lira spotted the conveyor belt controls. "I have an idea!"

"Don't tell me – just do it!"

With a metallic whine, the conveyor belt began to move, crates full of rusty spare parts slid loose, thundering into a group of other Syndicate members. One disappeared under an avalanche of gears and screws, screaming like a man drowning in a kitchen drawer.

"I love recycling!" Jax yelled as he swung the chain again. This time he double-handled the chain, swung it in a circle, and released it—it wrapped itself around the leg of one of the cranes. With a groaning sound, the entire arm toppled downward, directly into the next wave of enemies.

"That wasn't the plan, was it?" Lira shouted, now taking cover behind a container herself.

"Plan? I'm more of a *improvisations*-Type!"

A shrill whirring sound announced the next wave of drones—this one twice the size of the previous ones, with glowing red spikes that looked as if they could melt through steel.

"Damn," Jax cursed, "the hornet mother sent her babies."

He grabbed a loose pipe and shoved it into one of the open flames. The thing quickly became hot enough to serve as an improvised spear. As the first drone charged at him, he rammed the glowing metal through its hull. The machine screeched—yes, it *screamed*—and went up in a fountain of sparks.

"One zero for me, tin cans!"

The heat of the fire, the chaos of falling crates, the stinking smoke—everything merged into a single, hellish noise. Jax didn't know if they'd get out of here. But if they did, they'd have a damn good reason to drink.

"Lira, we must *now* away!"

She ran to him, both of them jumping over the sea of burning barrels, while behind them another crane arm crashed - triggering a hail of sparks that looked like fireworks from madness itself.

The heat crept up their necks like a living beast as they rushed through the labyrinth of containers. Every footstep sounded hollow on the metal floor, and behind them the screech of drones mingled with the creaking of bursting steel girders.

"Left or right?!" Lira shouted as they stood at an intersection.

"Always go where it looks worse!" Jax yelled back and pulled her to the right.

It was actually worse: Half of the hall was already ablaze, greedily eating away at the oil stains on the floor. Chains hung from the crane beams everywhere, looking like gallows in the flickering light. Sparks rained from the ceiling as a welding torch exploded above.

One of the drones had taken the detour and was now approaching from the front, flying low, the hum of its engines as aggressive as a swarm of hornets on caffeine.

"Do you have another grenade?" asked Jax.

"No—but I'm angry." Lira grabbed a loose steel rod and swung it like a baseball bat. The drone tried to dodge, but was hit full force and thrown into a wall of flames, where it exploded in an explosion of metal fragments.

"I knew I liked you."

Behind them, a container tipped over—a syndicate man with a burning jacket crawled out from underneath, screaming something incomprehensible and firing blindly in their direction. The projectiles hissed through the air, tearing sparks from the steel walls.

"We need an exit!" Lira shouted as they took cover behind a stack of crates.

Jax peered around the corner and saw a half-open cargo hatch at the end of the hall—and three more enemies in front of it. "I have a plan."

"I hate your plans."

"You're still alive, right?"

He ran, jumped onto one of the dangling chain hooks, swung past the enemy in an arc, and in mid-air threw a burning crate of oil filters at their feet. The contents immediately burst into flames, and the men jumped back, cursing.

"Through! Go!"

Lira sprinted to the hatch, pushed it open, and cold air rushed in—a shocking contrast to the stifling heat inside. Jax came after her, and as soon as they were outside, the entire bay collapsed behind them.

The explosion that followed wasn't a fireball—it was a miniature fucking supernova. The shock wave knocked them both to the ground, the brick-moon sky was bathed in hellish orange, and glowing debris rained down on the surrounding terrain.

"I... think we canceled Kraton's invitation," Lira gasped.

"Yeah. With fireworks." Jax scrambled to his feet, spat out dust and a little blood, and grinned. "I hate parties."

The ground beneath their feet still vibrated as Jax and Lira trudged through a side alley. Above them, the sky of the Brick Moon hung like a dirty, gray rag, framed by the black silhouettes of dented overhead cranes.

Jax inhaled the cold air, coughed, and tasted soot, metal, and that bitter aftertaste that always came when you'd just barely escaped hell.

"We have to go into hiding. Immediately," Lira said, without looking at him.

"Diving sounds good..." Jax panted, "...but first let's have a drink. I need gas in the tank."

They turned into a wider street where several dented hover vehicles were parked. It was quieter here, almost too quiet. No shouting, no noise—only the distant cracking of the collapsing hall.

"Quiet is bad," muttered Lira.

"Quiet is damn bad," Jax confirmed, instinctively reaching to his jacket to feel the artifact. It throbbed gently. Almost... soothing. Which made it even more suspicious.

A quiet *click* made them both pause. In front of them, in the middle of the street, stood two figures in long coats. The light from the distant neon tubes refracted off the chrome handles of the weapons they held loosely in their hands.

"Mercer," said one of them in a voice like cold oil, "our boss is very unhappy."

"Oh, is that so?" Jax raised his eyebrows. "He should just get a dog, then at least he'll have someone who listens to him."

The second *click* came from behind. Three more Syndicate members had crept up, this time with drawn energy blades, their edges glowing in the haze.

"I guess we have a communication problem," Lira said dryly.

Jax grinned crookedly. "No. We have a priority problem—they're trying to kill us, and I want a beer first."

The circle tightened. Neon lights flickered, as if the city itself wanted to comment on the drama.

“Last chance, Mercer,” said the first man.

Jax slowly drew his revolver, turned it between his fingers, and glanced sideways at Lira. “I’ll give you a sign...”

“Which?”

“The one where things are about to explode.”

The figures took a step forward. Somewhere in the distance, a siren wailed, as if about to start the countdown.

And then – black screen.

12. Traitor in the Smoking Bar

The street was suddenly nothing but a single, strained breath. No one moved, not even the haze that usually swirled lazily between the neon lights.

Then, without warning, everything flickered—lanterns, advertising screens, even the holodisplays on the Syndicate members' weapons. The flickering faded into a deep, ominous hum.

“Um... Jax?” Lira asked, without taking her eyes off her enemies.

“Not my doing this time,” he muttered.

The humming rose to a thrumming tone that vibrated so deeply in the bones that Jax's teeth chattered. And then—silence. A silence so thick and heavy that you could have sworn the brick moon itself was holding its breath.

Suddenly, the artifact in his jacket pulsed. Once. Twice. Three times. Then a voice forced its way directly into his head—old, brittle, but piercingly clear:

“Carrier identified. ‘Last Message’ protocol being transmitted.”

“Shit,” Jax growled. “Now?”

A hologram materialized before his eyes—not from his device, but from the damned air. A figure in old, tattered armor, covered in symbols Jax didn't recognize, but which reeked of ancient trouble.

"Inhabitants of the Sigma-Delta Sphere," the figure began, "you stand on the edge of the same abyss that swallowed us. The Legion is coming. And with it—the Mechanical God."

"You can't be serious..." Jax muttered, as the Syndicate men nervously lowered their weapons. Even they seemed intimidated by the apparition.

The hologram continued:

"This message will only be transmitted once. The coordinates are stored in the capsule. Follow them... or die."

With a bright flash of light, the figure disappeared. The humming died away, and the neon trash of the street came back to life.

For a moment, no one said anything. Then:

"I think we're all having the same thought right now," Lira said.

"Yeah," said Jax, "we're getting out of here before they start asking, *What we saw exactly that.*"

The syndicate men looked at each other – and made the mistake of raising their weapons again.

"Okay," Jax growled, "I guess this is the short version after all."

He pulled out the revolver.

The first thing Jax heard was the *whirring* energy blade that passed just past his ear. The second was his own laugh—that completely unreasonable, slightly insane laugh that had gotten him into trouble more times than he could count.

"Welcome to the Brickmoon Games, you idiots!" he yelled, pulling out his gun.

The street exploded into motion. Lira fired her blaster in a tight burst, sending two enemies tumbling between parked hover vehicles, whose alarms immediately began wailing hysterically. Jax kicked one of the Syndicate men in the front of the pack in the stomach, hard enough that the man staggered back

half a meter—right into the hood of an old cargo trike. The thing roared to life with a sickening whine, lurching forward, and taking two more enemies with it.

"Surely one of you has a spare beer bottle?!" Jax yelled as he dodged a blow and instead rammed his shoulder into the nearest attacker.

"Forget the beer!" gasped Lira, "take the damn trash can!"

Jax looked to his left—and there it was, a half-full, stinking metal barrel. He grabbed it, yanked it up, and slammed it into the chest of the nearest syndicate member. He crashed backward into one of the neon signs, which exploded with a hissing shower of sparks.

Suddenly, an energy sphere whizzed past Jax so close that he felt its heat trail on his cheek. He ducked behind a parked hover taxi while Lira continued firing.

"We have to clear the alley!" she shouted.

"No problem – I have an idea."

He grabbed an old street pole, half-buried in the ground, and yanked on it. With a metallic crack, it came free—and Jax swung it like an oversized club. The first opponent, who carelessly came around the corner of the taxi cab, took the blow squarely on his helmet and flew through the air like a sack of scrap metal.

"One to zero for the good side!" grinned Jax.

Behind them, more sirens wailed, and somewhere a dumpster exploded—whether intentionally or simply because of the Brick Moon charm, no one could say.

The enemies regrouped, deploying drones that darted between the parked vehicles like mechanical sharks on the prowl. Jax grabbed a canister lying around and threw it before the drone could fire. The impact caused the canister to burst—a jet of flame shot up, and the drone went down with a screeching *Frzzzzt* up in smoke.

"Lira! Exit now?"

"Two more!" she shouted back, shooting the gun out of a syndicate man's hand.

Jax sprinted forward, shoulder-butted the last one in his path, and sent him sprawling over a load of garbage bags. "Get out of here now, before half the city shows up!"

They ran, panting, through the alley. Behind them, the street continued to rage—burning wrecks, screaming opponents, screeching drones. It was a chaos like a festival with too much cheap alcohol and too few police.

Jax grinned. "You know, Lira... this is starting to get fun."

"You're sick, Mercer."

"And still alive. That's something."

They had just reached the corner of the alley when the wail of sirens grew louder—not a nervous alarm this time, but that deep, vibrating drone that came only from the law enforcement officers' hover tanks.

"Great," Lira growled. "The city police in person. Now things are getting really cozy."

"City police?" Jax spat on the ground. "They're not cops, they're bill collectors in uniforms."

Around the next bend in the road, the first hover tank came into view. Rusty, but with a freshly painted emblem, as if the grease paint alone was meant to inspire respect. The gun on the roof swiveled lazily—and Jax knew that "lazily" here only meant that they hadn't decided **who** they wanted to pierce first.

"Hold your position!" boomed a loudspeaker so distorted that the voice sounded like a bad-tempered god.

"What do we do?" asked Lira.

"It's simple: We'll get out of here before they start flattening everything that moves."

Too late. The first projectile hit one of the parked hovercars – the explosion sent shrapnel through the street like deadly confetti. The syndicate members immediately returned fire, and the next moment the entire block was engulfed in a raging gun battle.

Jax pulled Lira behind an overturned garbage truck, now burning like a bonfire from hell. "Plan?"

"Run, shoot, curse and hope no one has a better aim than you," she gasped.

They sprinted forward as laser beams, volleys of missiles, and flaming drones exploded around them like fireworks. A drone ripped open Jax's jacket, the artifact flashed—and one of the law enforcement cannons immediately swung in their direction.

"They see the capsule!" Lira yelled.

"Then they'll see them!" Jax yelled back, throwing a smoke grenade. The gray cloud swallowed the street, coughing and cursing mingled with the metallic screech of the drones.

"Left!" Lira shouted.

They turned into a narrow service tunnel, its neon lights flickering in time with the explosions outside. Behind them echoed the footsteps of heavy boots and the screeching of metalwalker drones.

"I swear to you," Jax gasped, "if we get out of here alive, I'll drink for a week."

"If we get out of here alive, I'll drink too," said Lira, pulling him further, deeper into the tunnel.

Another shot rang out, this time so close that Jax felt the pressure in his ears. Sparks rained from the pipes above them, the stench of burnt metal mingling with the musty breath of the tunnel.

A rusty gate opened in front of them into an old loading station. Jax kicked it open – and suddenly they were lying in a vast, deserted hall.

"I hate this moon," he gasped.

"I hate him too. But he hates us more."

Outside, the battle raged on, and they knew that in two minutes at the latest, this hall would no longer be safe.

"So," Jax grinned, "where do these pretty coordinates take us?"

Echo answered without warmth: **Two jumps. First destination: subnode *Sigma Bastion*. Access only via the Lower City. Second destination: outside the system.**

"Lower City?" Lira groaned. "Down there, even the mold lives on the streets."

"Perfect," said Jax. "Then no one will notice."

They squeezed through a gap in the hall wall, stumbling down a staircase made up of so many broken steps that it seemed more like a fall log. The noise outside was muffled, replaced by dripping, which sounded like old clocks forgotten. Red emergency lights cast stains on concrete walls, their graffiti resembling insults in a language only rats could speak.

"Echo's subnode?" Lira stopped at a fork in the road. To the left, it stank of ozone-fueled cable burn, to the right, of rotting water.

Right. Thirty meters. Access through maintenance bay K-9.

"K-9?" Jax snorted. "If there's a vicious robot dog lurking there, I'll laugh."

Behind the niche was a panel with ten identical screws. Jax looked up. "Choose one."

Third from the left. Then sixth. Then pull.

There was a cracking sound, the concrete slid sideways, revealing a short, dark tube in which a wind blew that tasted of metal.

"Ladies first," said Jax. "Keep your charm, I'll take the gun," said Lira – and crawled ahead.

The tube opened into a chamber barely larger than two coffins. In the center: a terminal-sized device, covered in layers of dust that glittered like frost in the lamp. On the casing was the symbol of the lost empire—half-scraped off, but still defiant.

"Sigma Bastion," Lira whispered. "Holy crap—"

Caution. Active traps possible.

Echo let the handle warm up. Jax only touched the device with the blade—gently, as if greeting old friends.

The terminal reluctantly awoke. Lines of green light crawled across the surface, arranging themselves into a map: a star, five jump points, one marked in red.

Archive Corridor AURIGA

Access: Key carrier requiredProtection level: terminalWarning: Legion sighted 219 years ago

"Sounds like a bad neighborhood," Jax muttered. "What do I get if I press the red dot?"

Answer: Anger.

"Answer accepted." Jax pressed.

The chamber vibrated. A sound—too deep to be truly heard—prickled his teeth. Then the terminal pushed a small cassette out of his stomach, as inconspicuous as a pack of chewing gum.

"Souvenir?"

Navigation wedge. Offline jump vector.

"Then we'll put it in something that flies."

"Later," Lira said. Her shoulders slumped a millimeter. "We need to get out of here before the law enforcement officers adjust their search patterns."

A distant metallic bark answered—not a dog, but close. Heavy boots, distorted radio voices. The Lower City memorized every step like an old animal that couldn't sleep.

"All right," Jax sighed. "New rule: no more quiet corners to think in."

They reappeared at the level of the delivery lanes. Above them, the hover tank duo wailed, this time accompanied by a third, deeper sound—the smoke grenade launcher. A gray blanket suddenly descended over the block. Shadows became spots. Escape routes became hope.

"Let's get out of here," Lira hissed. "Left hand on the wall, keep moving."

They took exactly thirty steps, then a searchlight cut through the alley. "Stop! Hands—" A metallicZONGinterrupted the command: Jax had torn open a loose cellar hatch, and the search beam bounced briefly as if off a mirror. Lira pulled him into the fog, and they both pushed past a humming transformer.

"If I die here," Jax gasped, "I want my grave to have *At least he tried to be funny* stands."

"I write *He was too loud*", said Lira.

"Romantic."

A shadow emerged from the fog. No Syndicate jacket—dull gray, the emblems of order. Helmet with a frosted visor. The rifle was only half-raised, as if bored. "Papers," he rasped. "Otherwise..."

"Anything else?" Jax took half a step forward. "Are you selling us to Kraton or Madrig? Or are you running on your own today?"

There was a heartbeat of silence behind the sight. Then the man lowered the rifle ten degrees. "You're disturbing. Everyone is disturbing. I want to go home."

"Brother," said Jax, "this is the first honest police work I've seen around here."

"Stay away from *Smokeable Flor*" Away," the man snarled, as if he were breaking his regulations. "Tonight they're searching everyone. Orders from above. And—" He hesitated. "There's an open bounty. The big one."

"Yeah, yeah," Jax waved. "We're allergic to bars, promise."

"Jax," Lira murmured, barely audibly. *Smokeable Flor*."

"I know."

The guard stared at her, as if trying to memorize the decision so he could regret it later. Then he took two steps back and was swallowed by the fog.

"What was that?" whispered Lira.

"A human being. Tragic, but it happens."

"And *Smokeable Flor*?"

"Remember: When they say *don't go there*—that's exactly where the door is."

The main road at the edge of the zone vibrated. An old elevated railway line ran overhead, and a magnetic tram was screeching around the bend—ancient

technology, too proud to die. On the roof: two maintenance stands and an innocently blinking emergency power box.

"I don't want you to say it," Lira groaned.

"I won't even say it," Jax grinned. "*Ido it.*"

Three jumps, a ladder, a curse that defied gravity—and Jax was hanging from the tram roof, pulling Lira after him. The wind tasted of rust and bad decisions. The city glided by beneath them: roofs like tooth stumps, alleys like scars.

"Why are we doing this here?" Lira clung to a waiting eyelet. "Because people are shooting down below, and up here there's just the sky."

He pried open the emergency power box. A bundle of cables grinned back. Echo hummed. A short circuit is enough. Left bar, red wire, then blue. Jax twisted the wires, the tram jerked, and went into emergency mode – four carriages were emptied, the doors remained open in the block. A symphonic "Please keep your distance" from twenty loudspeakers accompanied the plan like bad jazz.

They jumped into the service truck. A maintenance robot woke up, stared at them with a friendly LED expression, and asked, "Do you need help, dear maintenance—?"

"Yes," said Jax. "Sleep."

Lira found the control panel and tapped through menus that looked like a museum of bad UI. "I can park the tram two stops down in the tunnel."

"Do this."

Outside, on the sidewalks, two figures wearing syndicate coats ran parallel. One jumped and missed. The other held on, flung open the door, and grinned with three gold teeth.

"Mercer! Now—"

Jax stepped forward. The man disappeared back outside. "*Nownot*, you tooth collection."

The tram plunged into the tunnel, the noise becoming a long, thin whistle. Lira ordered it to the emergency stop, the light to emergency red. "Exit left," she whispered.

"It's dark on the left."

"Exactly."

They climbed into a maintenance shaft. It smelled of old oil, but at least no one was firing shots. Echo pulsed softly against Jax's chest.

"The coordinates again."

AURIGA corridor. Jump vector validated.

"And how do we get out of orbit without half the city taking us out of the sky?"

Options: 1) Steal a ship. 2) Buy a ship. 3) Rent a ship.

"I choose 4) Not to die."

"Smoky Flor," said Lira. "If there's a place where you can find a ship *in one night* organized – or taken from someone – then there."

Jax snorted. "And we wanted fewer problems today..."

"You say that every day."

The "Smoking Bar Flor" was located in a gap between two generator blocks, which sounded as if they were praying to an electricity god. The facade was made of reflective slag, as if someone had poured lava into a mold. Above the door was a sign that periodically gave up and reinvented itself.

Outside the bar: two bouncers with arms like hydraulic pistons and the look of people who sold their hopes years ago. Inside: tin violins, voices like sandpaper, a veil of tobacco, steam, and burnt vanilla. Above it all, a camera pretending to be broken.

"They're searching everyone today," Lira reminded us.

"I know." Jax pulled out his gun and shoved it into an exhaust vent above the door, visible only to someone who always looked up. "And Echo?"

I hide myself.

The blade cooled noticeably, as if it had been holding its breath.

They approached the door. The doorman on the left raised his hand. "Open your arms. Empty your pockets. Save your smile."

"I never smile when I'm sober," Jax said, raising his arms and letting the Aunt of Paranoia pat his pockets. A scanner buzzed over his sternum, lingering on Echo's position for half a second too long. Jax blinked slowly, as harmless as he ever was.

"Metal," grumbled the bouncer. "That's my heart."

The right-hand bouncer grinned. "Then watch it." He nodded. "Go in."

"Sure?" Lira really let that hang in her voice. "Sure," replied the one on the left. "Tonight is nothing but trouble."

"This is our specialty," Jax murmured.

The door swung open. Inside grew a jungle of voices, clinking bottles, and smoldering ends. A stage on which stood a singer who sounded as if she'd sung against the moon three times and lost only twice. At the long bar – faces. Too many of them Jax recognized. Too many of them he didn't like.

"Plan?" whispered Lira.

"Drink first," Jax said. "Then find the one who trades ships like playing cards. Then don't die."

"Order is important."

"Very."

They stepped to the bar. Grent wasn't there—other hands were polishing glasses that reflected secrets. The bartender was short, angular, with eyes like two nails. He had seen Jax before Jax had seen himself.

"Mercer," he said without looking up. "You owe some people a hello. And others a never-again."

"I'll pour you a drink right now. Two glasses of the thing that's been forbidden the longest."

The bartender set out two dull-shining cups. The liquid smelled of burnt cherry and decisions that require bars. Jax lifted it.

And I felt something shift above the music. A hole in the noise. A breathing in the room.

Lira touched his arm almost imperceptibly. "Attention."

She lowered the glasses. Reflected in the mirror behind the bar was a man who acted as if he owned the place. Back straight, coat smooth, posture too calm. No syndicate scar on his face—worse: no need for one. He raised his glass without drinking it, smiling like a knife that knew where it was about to go.

"That's not Madrig," Jax muttered. "That's worse."

"That's organization," Lira said. "The kind that makes laws instead of breaking them."

"And they're always offended when you break them."

"They invent new ones."

The man turned and stopped ten feet away, as if the room itself were holding its breath. Two people next to him discreetly shifted into position, one to the right, one to the left. The music did what music does when blood drips into expectations: It got better.

"Mercer," the man said. "We should talk."

Jax smiled as kindly as a knife can. "I'll drink first."

"I expect so." The man's smile remained. "It could be... your last resting place."

Jax raised the glass, sipped, felt fire kiss his tongue and embrace his brain. He set it down.

"Now we can talk."

And the smoke bar held its breath.

13. Sirens of the Endless Abyss

The Rusty Lung Smokehouse was exactly what it sounded like—a smelly, stuffy shed filled with too much cheap booze stored in rusty barrels and patrons who looked like they'd passed their prime long before the war with the Xantari.

Jax and Lira sat in a corner, each with a glass that smelled more of solvent than alcohol. "Tastes like burnt battery fluid," Jax said, taking another sip.

"Then it works," Lira replied dryly.

It started outside – that whining, wailing wail that sounds distant and harmless at first, until you realize it's getting closer. Sirens. Not the nice paramedic things, but the roar of law enforcement hover tanks. The sound cut through the muffled bass of the bar music like a knife through stale bread.

"Great," Jax muttered, "the cops are coming. And that means things are about to get even uglier in here."

A few of the guests glanced nervously toward the door, others simply pulled their jackets tighter and pretended to be invisible. Behind the bar, the bartender—a broad-shouldered guy with a nose like a broken anvil—reached under the counter. Probably not for a rag to polish glasses.

Lira leaned forward. "If they come in here, they'll look for us. And then there are two options: We run – or we get carried out."

"I'm all for running. But with style."

The sirens were now directly in front of the bar. Blue and red lights flickered through the dirty windows. A loudspeaker voice barked something unintelligible, garbled by cheap megaphone technology.

Jax stood up, pulled up his collar, and grinned at Lira. "You know what I hate most about them?"

"Tell me."

"That they pretend to clean the place up while they themselves are knee-deep in dirt."

He went to the back door, but before he could touch the handle, the front door burst open. Three law enforcement officers in dark armor entered, rifles at the ready. One scanned the room with a helmet visor that hummed softly.

"All hands visible!" someone shouted.

Jax raised his—and gave the man the middle finger. "Visible enough?"

That brought movement. One of the cops grabbed the nearest guest and roughly pushed him aside. Two more went straight for Jax and Lira.

"Time to go," Lira said, kicking over the nearest table. Glasses shattered, liquid splashed onto the floor. One of the law enforcement officers slipped, crashed into the wall—and Lira was already at the back door.

Jax followed, but not without calling out to the bartender as he passed: "The next shot is on me—if we're both still alive!"

Outside in the backyard, the noise was twice as bad. Sirens, shouts, the whirring of hover tanks. Above them, the neon lights glowed like malevolent stars.

"Left or right?" Lira shouted.

"Down," said Jax, and jumped into the open garbage chute at the end of the alley.

Jax landed with a smacking *Po* on something that smelled suspiciously like a mixture of mud, grease, and old engine oil.

"Ugh!" he choked. "Exactly my favorite perfume."

Lira followed, but slid down more cleanly, landing with both feet on a rusty platform. "This isn't mud, Jax."

"Thanks for the info, but you don't have to spell it out for me."

From above came muffled shouts and the metallic clanging as one of the law enforcement officers tried to get through the shaft. "Hurry up!" hissed Lira.

The Lower City stretched beneath the official streets—a network of forgotten utility tunnels, old freight tunnels, and improvised settlements. Neon lights flickered dimly above narrow alleys where improvised market stalls stood between steaming drainpipes. Everywhere smelled of stewed meat, grilled fat—and yes, there were rats. Big, fat creatures hanging from open fires above dirty metal barrels.

"I think my stomach just went into reverse," Jax muttered.

"Shut up and move on," said Lira. "They're right behind us."

A boy with an eye patch and three teeth grinned at them, holding up a skewer of crispy rat meat. "Fresh from the grill, only two credits!"

"Thanks, no!" Jax snarled and ran past.

Behind them, they heard the dull whir of a hover tank struggling through one of the wider tunnels. The law enforcement officers weren't stupid—they knew that the Lower City, while a dump, offered perfect escape routes.

"Up ahead!" Lira called, pointing to a narrow side street. An old freight elevator flashed between two scrap stalls.

They rushed inside, Jax banged on the control panel. "Come on, you rusty piece of shit..." The elevator groaned, jerked—and began to rise.

"It won't last two floors," said Lira.

"Then hope the cops are too fat for the ladder."

Down in the alley, the first law enforcement officers appeared, fired, and a red laser beam pierced the metal wall next to Jax's head. He ducked, laughed dryly, and called down: "Sorry guys, but the elevator's full!"

Once at the top, they stumbled out of the elevator into another, even darker alley. Pipes steamed everywhere, and the sound of dripping water mingled with the distant wail of sirens that wouldn't stop.

"I'll tell you what, Lira," Jax panted, "if we survive this, we're going somewhere where there are no cops, no syndicates, and no grilled rats."

"So to the middle of nowhere?"

"Exactly."

They turned a corner—and there she stood. In the middle of the dirt of the lower city, between steaming drainpipes and flickering neon remnants, she leaned casually against a metal support. A dress as red as fresh blood in the snow, about as out of place in this neighborhood as a children's choir in a thug bar. Her hair was black as oil, her eyes like two blades that already knew where to stab.

Jax stopped abruptly. "Okay... this is definitely not a coincidence."

"You know her?" Lira asked suspiciously.

"Let's put it this way... we once had a business arrangement. It ended with me flying out a window. Without the drink beforehand."

The woman smiled slowly, as if she'd seen them both for an hour. "Mercer. And... girlfriend? Or just an occasional accomplice?"

"Accomplice is enough," Lira interrupted sharply. "Who are you?"

"Call me... Veyra." She took a step forward, the dress moving like liquid fire in the neon light. "I know what you're wearing. And I know who's hunting you. And I know how to get out of here alive."

Behind them, the whir of the hover tanks grew louder. Commands echoed through the lower city. One of the neon strips above their heads flickered, as if saying goodbye.

"Sounds nice, Veyra," Jax said. "But whenever someone talks like that, it ends up with blood on my face."

"Then this must be your lucky day."

Suddenly, there was a crash at the end of the alley—a stun grenade exploded, a blinding light, a resounding bang. Law enforcement officers rushed in, weapons raised.

Veyra raised just one hand – and somewhere in the darkness, there was a metallic click. An old maintenance crane, half-scrapped, roared to life, swung overhead with a screeching noise, and dropped a ton of rusted steel right in front of the cops.

"Go ahead," she said calmly. "You have ten seconds before they're around the outside."

Lira hesitated. "What if we follow you?"

"Then maybe you have eleven."

Jax grinned crookedly. "Damn... I love women who will probably kill me."

They followed Veyra deeper into the Undercity, away from the wailing sirens, but into a narrow, dark corridor that smelled of death, old oil, and bad decisions. Behind them, the sirens continued to wail—and somewhere, deep inside Jax's jacket, the artifact began to pulse again.

Veyra disappeared as suddenly as she had appeared. A blink of an eye—one moment there, now just an empty stretch of alley, as if the dirt had simply swallowed her.

"What the fuck...?" began Lira.

"Don't worry. She'll show up again. Usually when it's least convenient," Jax growled, pulling her along.

Behind them, all hell broke loose. The cops had moved the barrel aside and were charging forward again. Laser flashes zipped through the fog of the alley, slicing sparks from the metal walls. An old street vendor with a basket full of skewers cursed as a beam blasted his grill. "Fucking bastards! That was my best rat!"

"Run!" Lira yelled as she leaped between crooked, stacked containers. The floor was slippery with old oil, every step slipped, and every misstep could send her into the open sewage.

They dived into a side tunnel so narrow that Jax's shoulder hit the wall. Somewhere, water—or something he preferred not to identify—dripped from the ceiling.

The artifact in his jacket vibrated more strongly. Not as if it were warning—more as if it were attracting something. And he hated the idea that he might not just be on the run from the cops, especially in the Lower City.

"Up ahead!" Lira shouted, "a freight elevator!"

"It's as old as my liver," Jax gasped. "That thing only drives out of pity!"

"Then hope it takes pity on you again."

They reached the elevator, which looked as if it hadn't been serviced in decades. Jax hammered on the controls, which blinked in the dim light. A metallic screech was heard from the top of the shaft—then the platform actually came down, jerking and groaning, as if it were about to collapse.

Behind them, two law enforcement officers appeared again, firing without warning. A laser beam scraped past Jax's thigh, leaving behind the pungent smell of burning fabric.

"That was close," he muttered. "I'm almost half a skewer."

They jumped onto the platform. Lira hit the console—the elevator shot upward, far too fast, as if it were enjoying the escape itself.

Suddenly, something exploded below—one of the cops had thrown a grenade. The explosion sent a shockwave up the shaft, and the platform swayed ominously. Jax grabbed Lira to hold on.

“I hate elevators!” he yelled.

They reached the top of the shaft, jumped out, and found themselves in an even darker part of the lower city. There were no markets, no lights, only abandoned buildings and the distant echo of sirens.

“We’re not out,” Lira said succinctly.

"Not yet," Jax replied, "but we're alive. And I swear to you—when we're through here, I'm going to the most expensive bar in the system."

“And then?”

"Then I'll drink myself into a coma. And if the galaxy's lucky, I'll stay in it."

They began to move, deeper into the shadows, while behind them the echo of the sirens slowly faded—only to be replaced by something else. A faint, snapping sound. Metallic footsteps. Not the cops. Something else had picked up their trail.

The snapping came closer. Three figures emerged from the fog—not the cops, but guys in worn leather jackets, armored with everything the Lower City could throw at them: old ceramic tiles, scrap metal, even a pot lid hanging from one shoulder.

“Friends of yours?” Lira asked dryly.

“Not even in my nightmares.”

The tallest of them, a bald human wrecking ball, grinned so wide Jax could see his gold teeth. "Mercer. We just want the thing in your jacket. You can hand it over alive. But you don't have to."

“How polite,” said Jax – and rammed his forehead right into his face. *Crack!* Blood spurted, the guy staggered back, cursing.

One of the others pulled out an improvised knife—a grinder with a handle. He charged at Lira, who gracefully dodged and broke his shinbone with a well-aimed kick. *Krrrk!* The guy screamed and went down—right into Jax's fist, which came down on him like a jackhammer.

The third man leaped at Jax in a furious kung fu move, kicking with both feet. Jax ducked, grabbed him by the belt in mid-air, and threw him into an old, rickety bar table, which landed with a resounding thud. *CRACK* broke into three parts.

"Did I tell you I hate tables?" Jax snorted.

"Not as often as you break them."

The gold-toothed bald man had recovered and charged forward, swinging like a berserker. Jax dodged, grabbed a rusty chain from the wall, and with a brutal tug pulled it between his legs. A sound like a broken siren came from his mouth before he fell to his knees.

"This is for my nerves," Jax muttered.

Lira kicked the guy with the broken shinbone one more time, then grabbed Jax's arm. "We have to get out of here—now!"

They ran through a narrow passage, past steaming pipes. Behind them lay a pile of pain-distorted figures who would probably dream about tonight for days to come.

The artifact in Jax's jacket pulsed restlessly – as if it were laughing.

14. Blades of Light and Dust

The Lower City lay behind them, like a dirty nightmare one tries to forget, but whose taste still clings to one's tongue. Jax and Lira stumbled into an open square, half-lit by neon lights, half-shadowed by old industrial buildings. Thick dust hung over the square, making every movement visible in thick, golden streaks.

"Tell me we can just get out of here," Lira gasped.

"Sure. We'll just go over there, knock on the door, and ask nicely if they'll let us go."

"Which door?"

"Exactly."

A metallic whirring made them both pause. It wasn't a police signal, not an engine noise. It was the hum of a weapon—but not just any weapon. Three figures stepped out of the shadows, wrapped in gray cloaks, their faces hidden beneath masks. In their hands—blades of pure light. Not lasers, not plasma. Something else. The light vibrated as if it were angry, and every movement made the dust in the air flash in fine sparks.

"They are not syndicate people," whispered Lira.

"Nah," Jax muttered, "they're professionals. They don't kill you because they have to—they kill you because they like it."

The tallest of the three took a step forward, the hum of his blade rising. "Mercer. Give us the artifact. We'll spare you... unnecessary dismemberment."

"I have a problem with the word 'unnecessary,'" Jax replied. "But you're welcome to try to convince me."

The first blow came without warning. A blade of light whizzed past Jax, zipping through an ancient pillar like butter. The dust sparkled in the blazing gash, as if the room itself were bleeding.

Jax raised his revolver and fired—the shot ricocheted off the blade with a metallic screech. "Damn it!" he yelled. "This is a scam! This thing has more plot armor than a main character!"

Lira pulled two small, vibrating throwing knives from her belt. "Cover me!" She whirled around, letting both blades fly. One struck the helmet of the middle enemy, causing him to stagger briefly—enough for Jax to land a kick in his stomach, sending him crashing into a wall.

The dust swirled around them like a living thing. Every movement of the light blades drew lines of dazzling white through the darkness, cutting sparks from metal and stone.

"You know what that reminds me of?" Jax gasped, dodging another blow.

"Don't tell me—those cheap martial arts movies you keep watching."

"Exactly. The only difference is that I wasn't in the lead role back then!"

The smallest of the opponents somersaulted over Jax, landed behind him, and swung for a blow. Lira was faster – she grabbed a handful of dust from the ground and threw it at her attacker's face. He stumbled, coughed, and his blade of light slammed uncontrollably into the ground, leaving a long, glowing gash.

Jax grinned. "See? Old-school tricks beat any sci-fi gimmick."

"Until the dust flies back in your face."

And that's exactly what happened—a sudden gust of air stirred up the dust like a storm, obscuring their view. But amidst the swirling chaos, the artifact in Jax's jacket began to pulse more intensely—so brightly that it even outshone the glare of the lightblades.

The fighters hesitated. One muttered something that sounded like fear.

"Lira," Jax whispered, "I think they're more afraid of that thing than of us."

"Then let's take advantage of this."

Jax pulled the capsule slightly out of his jacket. It flickered in a rhythm that sounded like a heartbeat—only much too fast, much too unnatural. The dust around them began to glow, each particle a tiny spark in the darkness.

The three figures stepped back. "That can't be here," said the tallest one. "Not in the city."

"Too late, friends," Jax growled. "It's already here. And it's in a bad mood."

"We have to lose them," Lira panted as they turned into the next narrow corridor.

"No problem – we'll take the big tourist route."

And there they were: **The Neon Miles** The Undercity. A place where, for enough credits, you could get anything—drinks, drugs, body parts (used or new), and companionship in every shape, color, and... quality of material. Red, blue, and poisonous green holograms flickered over shabby facades, casting their garish shadows over the crowd.

To their right, a woman with more chrome than skin danced in a glass cylinder, her artificial pupils clicking like camera shutters. To their left, a shop window

stood in which an android beauty in red latex waved invitingly—or at least pretended not to cut your wallet out of your pocket.

"Romantic, isn't it?" Jax grinned, dodging a guy with three arms balancing a bowl full of steaming skewers of meat. "I'm telling you, Lira—I know how to take a lady out."

"This isn't a date, you complete idiot."

"Depends on how it ends."

A group of half-drunk dockworkers staggered out of a bar, one of them yelling something incomprehensible, while a woman with neon-blue hair shouted after him and threw a beer bottle at him. The bottle shattered right at Jax's feet.

"Now that's what I call a welcoming culture."

But then the laughter was cut off—a low hum mingled with the noise of the music, the blare of the bass speakers, the screech of the neon signs. Jax's hairs stood on end.

"They're back," Lira murmured.

The three figures of dust and light moved between the glowing advertisements. Here, between the signs for "LustBot 3000" and "Flesh & Circuit," they looked even more menacing—as if they were not of this world, but straight out of a fever dream of steel and blood.

The crowd barely noticed them. Down here, people were used to strange characters. But the blades... oh, the blades stood out from the colorful neon like snakes in a flower meadow.

"We have to lose them in the crush," said Lira.

"Or we can use this space... creatively."

Jax's gaze fell on the entrance of a **Cyber burlesque clubs**, in front of which stood two massive bouncers. One was a giant with gold implants on his cheekbones, the other carried an assault rifle like other people carry a handbag.

“Follow me – and try not to blush.”

The club smelled of hot metal, cheap perfume, and that indefinable mixture of sweat and ozone that you only find in establishments where power lines and bare skin are equally live.

Inside, dancers whirled on a stage whose surfaces consisted of holographic projections—each movement sent sparks of light flying through the air. Some of the women were clearly human, others had so many implants they could pass for space in a spare parts warehouse. One of them wore two glowing lenses instead of eyes, which constricted and expanded in sync with the music.

“I’ll get us something to drink,” Jax said, pushing his way through a group of men who were solemnly trying to down a whole bucket of shots.

The bartender was a slim guy with skin like brushed aluminum and a smile that was definitely never genuine. “What’d you like?”

“Whiskey. Cheap, but so good it burns like hellfire.”

The bartender nodded, reached under the bar, and placed a glass in front of Jax. The liquid inside was so dark you could probably see the end of the galaxy in it. Jax downed it in one gulp, the burning sensation penetrating his stomach like a flash of flame.

“God, yes... that was necessary.”

Lira stood near the door, scanning the room—and at that very moment, one of the masked figures glided through the entrance. The light blade was still off, but Jax could already feel the buzzing in the air.

“We have company,” Lira said without looking away.

“I’m in the middle of my drink,” Jax growled. “Can’t the bastard wait until I’m finished?”

“Do you want to risk it?”

“No.” Jax put down the glass—not empty, but close—and automatically reached for his gun.

The music grew louder, the bass pumping like a heartbeat. The dancers spun as if it were all just a performance. Perhaps they thought so, too—until the first blade of light flared up with a hiss.

The audience cheered. Some clapped as if the club had just started a new show. Only Jax knew: This isn't going to be choreography. It's going to be a bloodbath.

“Lira, take cover.”

“I thought we were dancing.”

“We dance—just not the way you imagine.”

The masked opponent leaped onto the stage and, with a single swing, sliced the hologram into two flickering halves, which burned in a shower of pixels. The other two followed, their blades like predators in the neon light.

And then it all started – chairs flew, glass shattered, the smell of whiskey mingled with the sharp metallic stench of the light blades.

The first blade whizzed past Jax so close that he felt the heat haze on his skin. He yanked up a chair and threw it in the attacker's face—*CLACK!*— followed by an elegant twist that he would later call the “whiskey flow.”

Lira fired two shots, hitting the second opponent in the arm, but he staggered only briefly before jumping across the stage like a wild top.

The dancers screamed and jumped from the platform—one tripped over an overturned speaker cable, lost the rest of her glittering outfit, and ran stark naked toward the exit. Two others followed, and suddenly the crowd surged toward the door like a panicked wave.

“This is about to get really ugly,” Jax yelled over the chaos.

The front door burst open. Police. Not the polite kind of law enforcement officers, but the Lower City task force in black armor, each armed with a shotgun the size of a side table.

“Everyone on the ground!” a voice boomed, but the order was drowned out by the shouting.

A bouncer—the one with the gold cheek implants—snatched up one of the lightblade guys, lifted him like a sack of potatoes, and hurled him across the room. He crashed into the bar, the glass exploding in a glittering fountain, and whiskey and beer rained down on the heads of the guests.

"Rude," Jax muttered before kicking a third opponent in the knee so hard that it made a sound like a burst hydraulic hose.

One of the cops tripped over a naked dancer desperately clutching his high heels. Another tried to direct the crowd but was immediately hit by a chair thrown by someone in the crush.

The music stopped abruptly as someone tried to cut the power – but only half of the club went dark. The result was a strobe-like flickering in which fighters, patrons, cops, and dancers moved like nightmarish shadows.

"Lira! Back exit!" Jax shouted, grabbing a bottle from the bar, taking a deep swig, and hurling the rest like an impromptu Molotov cocktail at a lightblade attacker. The flames licked at his coat, and he stumbled back, screaming.

They ducked under a collapsing stage structure, jumped over the legs of an unconscious policeman and ripped open the back door.

Outside, the cold lower city air hit them – along with the shrill wail of sirens that now came from all directions.

"I hate clubs," Jax snorted.

"I hate your idea of a cozy evening," Lira snapped.

Behind them, the club finally collapsed into chaos.

The alley behind the club stank of stale oil, old blood, and fried rats—a typical underground mix that could ruin your appetite for a week. The asphalt was slippery, as if someone had just dumped a whole bucket of grease.

Jax was just about to take a breath when there was a hissing sound next to his ear – a bolt pierced with a *CLICK* into the wall.

"Damn, they're already here!"

Lira reacted faster, yanking him down by his collar as a second bolt whizzed just over their heads. Two figures emerged from the shadows—not blades of light

this time, but streamlined sniper drones on spider legs, each with a glowing red eye.

"You didn't tell me those creatures work the night shift," Jax cursed.

"You didn't tell me you had to have another drink at the club!"

The first drone leaped from the wall and landed on a dumpster, its legs digging into the metal. Another bolt hissed out—Jax ducked, grabbed a rusty iron bar, and struck. Metal clanged against metal, sparks flew, and the thing fell backward into a puddle with a screech.

The second spider-thing climbed the wall, fast as a greased nightmare. Lira fired twice—the first shot missed, the second hit the red eye. The drone jerked, tipped sideways, and crashed to the ground.

"Okay," Jax gasped, "that was... ugly."

"Not over yet."

At the other end of the alley, three police officers appeared—the same kind that had just been in the club, only angrier. Their helmets reflected the neon lights, and their footsteps echoed like drumbeats.

"Stop! Hands up!"

"Sure," Jax said dryly, "and then put the resume on the floor?"

He reached into his jacket, pulled out the last smoke grenade, and threw it at the cops' feet. Immediately, a thick, acrid cloud billowed through the alley.

"Run!" he yelled.

They ran, blinded by smoke, bumped into garbage cans, and jumped over scattered cable reels. A siren wailed somewhere, muffled by the gray fog.

When they emerged from the smoke, they found themselves in the middle of a market—half-covered, filled with neon signs and stalls selling questionable wares: grilled scorpions on skewers, questionably glittering replacement eyes, vibrating knives, and synthetic "love on demand."

"Perfect," Jax panted. "The perfect setting for a chase."

Behind them, something exploded—whether a drone, a stall, or a police officer, it was unclear. Screams erupted, people ran, a stack of fruit crates toppled over, sending a flood of mutated melons splashing onto the ground.

Jax grabbed Lira's wrist. "Come on, through the spice stand!"

The vendor protested loudly as they crashed through his arsenal of glowing red chili powders—a dusty haze of burning heat settled over everything. Jax coughed, sniffed, and his eyes burned like fire.

"I... hate... markets!" he choked.

"You hate anything that makes you move."

"Not true. Whiskey can always get me moving."

They had just stumbled through the spice stall when, on the other side, a giant glass basin crashed to the ground. Water shot across the market like a miniature tidal wave, and in the middle of it slithered a thing that looked like the illegitimate bastard of an eel and a power line.

"Oh no..." Lira moaned. "Don't tell me this is—"

"—a damn electric eel. And a hungry one at that."

The animal trembled once as if it were stretching – and then *BOOM!* A bright flash leaped from his body, ripped through a metal strut, and hit one of the police officers square in the chest. The guy flew backward into a stack of neon signs, which immediately began to flicker.

"Shit, he's taking no prisoners," Jax yelled, leaping aside as the eel jerked again. This time, it hit a stand of vibrating knives—the metal jerked, jumped, and a dozen blades shot out uncontrollably in all directions.

"Get down!" Lira screamed.

They threw themselves behind an overturned cart of grilled scorpions. Above them, knives whirled, one digging into a nearby wooden beam, another landing with an ugly thud. *FLAT* in a mountain of fruit.

A third electric shock from the eel crawled through a puddle, catching one of the lightblade guys from earlier, who was still angrily stomping through the crowd. He jerked like a broken mannequin, dropped the blade, and fell

backward into a stall selling illegally bred alien cats. Immediately, hissing and screeching erupted, and cats leaped in all directions.

"I love this market," Jax panted, grinning and grabbing a bottle of unidentifiable alcohol from a stall as he ran past.

"Seriously?!"

"Motivational drink!" He took a sip and grimaced. "Okay, that was a mistake."

The eel shot another bolt, this time in the wrong direction—it hit the ceiling light, and an entire metal beam collapsed from above. People screamed, stalls collapsed, and the market was now a cauldron of chaos.

Jax and Lira took advantage of the chaos, ducked under a fallen hologram shield, and ran into a narrow alley where the stench was so thick it was almost tangible.

"I... swear..." Lira gasped, "never again... Undercity."

"And I swear..." Jax said, wiping sweat and spice dust from his face, "...that I'll find a better drink today."

Behind them, they heard the crackle of another flash of lightning—and the panicked shriek of someone who had just made the acquaintance of the electric eel.

15. The Cold Breath of Others

The side street was quiet. Too quiet. No market cries, no whirring drones, not even the faint hum of the ubiquitous neon lights. Only the dripping of water—or something liquid, which hopefully *only* There was water – somewhere in the darkness.

Jax stopped, breathed in through his nose... and froze. The air had turned icy cold, so abruptly that his breath curled in front of him.

"Tell me, am I suddenly cold or—"

"—or something's breathing on our necks, yes," whispered Lira, her hand unconsciously placed on the handle of her weapon.

Then they heard it. Not normal breathing. Slow, rhythmic, as if an ancient bellows were pumping air through a rusty pipe. With each inhalation, a crackling sound came through the air, like tiny shards of glass rubbing against each other.

A silhouette formed out of the darkness. Slender. Walking slowly. And yes—damn it, she was wearing a red dress. It wasn't the kind you'd buy at markets, but something smooth and shimmering that flowed over her skin like liquid blood. Her eyes were jet black, pupilless, and a wisp of white steam rose from her mouth as she spoke.

"Mercer..."

Jax raised an eyebrow. "This is the moment when I either faint or need a drink."

"Or both," Lira murmured.

The woman smiled barely noticeably, and suddenly something moved behind her. From the shadows crept a figure – no, *something*. Thin, bony limbs, a head too long to appear human, and eyes like milky headlights. It wore a watch around its neck, old, ticking, completely out of place—and with each tick, a breath of air froze into glittering frost.

"That rabbit must have come straight from hell," Jax growled.

"Shhh," hissed Lira, "that thing hears you."

The woman in red approached. Her cold breath hit their faces, smelling of metal and... yes, of an old cemetery.

"You have something that isn't yours," she whispered.

"We have it often," said Jax. "It's called *Loan without intention to return*."

Her smile widened – and for the first time, Jax saw her teeth. Too many. Far too many.

Jax stood rooted to the spot. Not because he was brave—but because his legs felt so heavy, as if someone had poured lead into his bones.

The fog began to creep up between the walls. Not normal fog, but something smooth and cold, flowing not in currents but in threads—like liquid fingers reaching out. Jax could see tiny ice crystals growing on the butt of his revolver.

"This is not normal," he said quietly.

"We're in the Lower City, Mercer," Lira growled. "Nothing is normal here."

The rabbit—if you could call it that—still stood in the shadows. The ticking of his watch echoed in the alley, dull, as if from far away. But Jax noticed that each tick was synchronized with the throbbing of the capsule in his jacket. And he liked that.*not at all*.

The woman in red walked slowly along the brick wall, her fingers brushing the surface—and where she touched, a layer of frost immediately formed. Her black eyes fixed on Jax, as if she were crawling directly into his memory.

"You don't know what you're carrying, Captain."

"All I know is that it hasn't bitten my head off yet – so it's currently on the*Friends*-List."

A hint of laughter escaped her lips, deep and vibrant. "You're joking... to hide your fear."

"No," Jax said, reaching for a cigarette. "I'm just making jokes to get on your nerves."

She stopped. Right in front of him. So close he could see the frost on her lips. And then it happened—no attack, no scream. Just... that breath. Icy, heavy, old. It felt like it was freezing not only the air, but also Jax's thoughts.

His fingers clenched, the cigarette smoke froze in the air into small needles that trickled to the ground.

Lira put her hand on his shoulder. "Jax... we have to get out of here."

He wanted to answer, but his voice stuck in his throat. Only the ticking of the clock remained—faster now. Much faster.

The rabbit—if you could call the bony thing that—took that single, slow step. Its head was too long, its teeth too sharp, and the clock on its neck didn't seem like an accessory, but rather an organ. The ticking came not from the mechanism, but from the thing itself.*himself*.

"Follow me..." The voice didn't come from his mouth, but pushed itself directly into Jax's head—muffled, foreign, like a memory that didn't belong to him.

Jax blinked and realized it was no longer there. For a heartbeat, it was simply... gone.

"Where did it go?!" Lira hissed.

"Ask the fog," Jax growled as he slowly turned. His hand rested on the butt of his gun, but he knew a bullet would probably do as much against something like this as a glass of water would against a wildfire.

The ticking now came from the right. Then from the left. And then – directly behind him.

He turned around, raised his gun—but there was only fog. Cold, biting fog that crept up his legs as if alive.

"Shit," Jax muttered, "this is playing with us."

"No," said the woman in red, her smile widening. "It's just inviting you, Mercer."

"Where?"

"Into the abyss."

The last word came in chorus – from her and from the rabbit, who suddenly *between them* its head was tilted slightly, and a thin thread of silvery saliva dripped from its mouth, immediately freezing on the floor.

Lira drew her gun. "I don't feel like accepting invitations."

The rabbit blinked slowly – and at the same moment the fog rushed towards her like a single, cold breath.

The fog exploded. Not like smoke or steam—it burst into thousands of tiny ice shards that cut into skin and fabric like razor blades.

Jax threw up his arm to shield his face and immediately felt the fabric of his cloak harden as a thin layer of frost settled over it. Beside him, Lira gasped, ducked, and fired blindly into the white storm. Each shot echoed like a dull gong between the walls.

The rabbit was everywhere. Sometimes it appeared in the icy clouds ahead, sometimes it scurried past them—always too fast to aim. Its breath was like a vacuum, sucking warmth and courage from the air.

"I hate creatures that won't stay still!" Jax yelled, raising his revolver and firing without aiming. The crack broke the frosty haze for a moment—long enough to see the woman's red dress swirling in the wind of fog and gunfire.

She stood there, untouched, like a statue of blood and ice, and her voice was now everywhere: "It's not yours..."

Jax felt something cold grip his ankle. He looked down—a hand made of mist, shaped like bone, had his leg. He kicked, feeling his foot cut through pure ice, which immediately melted back together.

"Lira!" he yelled.

"Already on it!" She pulled a small metal ball from her pocket, bit off the cap, and threw it right at Jax's feet. A bright flash of light exploded in the alley, so hot that the fog receded with a hiss.

The rabbit screamed. It wasn't an animal sound, but a metallic screech, like the squeal of a giant gear saw.

"Now or never!" growled Lira.

Jax grabbed her arm and they ran—through the narrow alley, the last remnants of fog at their heels, while behind them the ticking of the clock became like a countdown.

He was sure: This wasn't the last time they would feel that cold breath. They only stopped when the alley opened into a wider street, where neon signs flickered in the rain and the stench of frying oil chased the frost from the air. Jax braced himself with both hands on his knees, gasping for air—and still heard it. That distant, faint ticking.

"Please tell me you hear that too," he gasped.

"I hear too much, Mercer. But yeah... that's not normal."

He pulled the artifact from his jacket. It pulsed faintly, almost like a heart in deep sleep, but with each tick it seemed to grow colder. His fingers went numb as he held it.

"Maybe," Lira said quietly, "the thing doesn't want us to keep walking."

"Well," Jax muttered, putting it back in his pocket, "tough luck. I've already shat my pants enough for today."

They started moving again, faster this time, as if afraid the fog would catch up with them. And above them, high among the neon signs, Jax saw for a moment a silhouette—too big for a human, too thin for a machine, and clearly not of this world.

Then she was gone. Only the cold breath remained.

Jax pulled up his collar as they walked through the lower city. The streets glistened in the dirty rain like the belly of a dead rat, and the neon lights flickered as if they were about to give up the ghost for good.

"You know we can't stay here long," Lira said without looking at him.

"Sure. But we have to figure out where we're going *can* without more psycho rabbits waiting for us."

She turned down a side street, and Jax followed—past a bunch of drunken dockworkers fighting each other in a puddle while an old woman stood nearby, yelling at them to give her back the bucket.

"Undercity," Jax muttered. "It's like a joke no one gets, but everyone laughs anyway."

"No one's laughing here, Mercer."

"I do." He grinned, but it didn't last long. His gaze wandered to a giant holographic display pulsing above a building complex:

"BECOME ONE OF US – THE MACHINE NEEDS YOU"

Below was a face – half human, half steel, with a mask whose eyes pierced the rain like spotlights.

"Tell me, Lira..." "Yes?" "Do you also have the feeling that *the thing* is looking directly at me right now?"

Lira glanced at him, and in her eyes was the expression of a woman who wanted to say "yes" but didn't want to admit it.

"Maybe you should drink less whiskey."

“Maybe you should start.”

They continued walking, and the alley narrowed. Water dripped from rusted pipes on the walls, a bottle clinked somewhere, and a shadow scurried across the floor. Jax instinctively grabbed his jacket—the capsule was quiet. Too quiet.

“I don’t like this,” he muttered.

“Me neither.”

Then it happened: A metallic creaking sound, as if something heavy were growing out of the wall. A figure emerged from the darkness in front of them—tall, angular, its movements jerky like a puppet whose strings hadn't been pulled properly. Not a rabbit. Not a person. But... something else.

The thing stopped, just a few meters away. Then it opened its mouth—and exhaled.

The cold fog returned.

The fog immediately crept across the ground, biting at her boots like a pack of hungry dogs. "Move!" Lira shouted, pushing Jax aside just as the figure exhaled a second, even colder breath.

The pavement beneath their feet crackled and cracked—ice shot across it in spidery patterns, chasing them. Jax drew his revolver and fired twice. The bullets bounced ineffectively off the thing's icy skin.

“That was shit!” “I know!” he snapped back.

To the left—a narrow alley, barely wide enough for them to pass sideways. They tumbled into it, slipping on the wet ground, and Jax hauled Lira up just in time before a wave of frost hit the spot where they'd been standing.

"It doesn't stop!" gasped Lira. "Welcome to my world!"

At the back of the alley was a narrow gap between two buildings—black as a gullet. Without hesitation, they squeezed through. Jax felt the frost touch his coat, but the gap was too narrow for the pursuer.

Only the ticking remained – quiet, steady, in his head.

“If this keeps up, I’ll need more whiskey than blood,” Jax muttered.

"That would be new," Lira replied dryly.

And then they stood in the next quarter – right under a massive hologram that stared back at them with the image of a steel mask.

16. The Mask of the God Mechanic

The sky above the Lower City flickered like a broken altar—neon signs flickered in reddish flashes, while a dull sound filled the air, like the deep hum of a gigantic organ. Floating in the middle of it all was the mask.

Ten meters tall, made of polished steel, with eyes of dazzling light that turned the rain into golden drops. Her mouth was closed, but a voice still echoed across the streets, deep and merciless:

"Children of Rust... come home."

Jax stopped. "Great. First Psycho Rabbit, now Robo-Jesus."

A crowd gathered beneath the mask. Men, women, even a few children—all in the same tattered overalls, all with the same stare upwards. Some held their hands raised, others knelt in the mud.

"This," whispered Lira, "is the machine cult."

A metallic rattle approached from the distance—processions of robot priests, their joints squeaking like rusty hinges, each wearing a smaller version of the mask on their head. They moved in perfect unison, their hands on long metal rods from which cables hung like snakes.

"Mercer... they don't look like they're going to let us out of here."

"Good spot," Jax growled, "and I bet one of them is about to tell me that the artifact is the Messiah."

Just then, the mask above them began to glow brighter – and Jax felt the capsule in his jacket growing warm.

The robot priests stopped exactly three steps in front of Jax and Lira. Their faces—if you could call the rigid steel that—were completely motionless, but their eye lenses adjusted abruptly, as if they were scanning every single pore on Jax's nose.

One of them, taller than the rest and with a brass engraving on his forehead, stepped forward.

His voice was deep and tinny, like an old amplifier turned up too loud:

"Bearer of the Heart. The God Mechanic awaits you."

"Great," Jax murmured. "Couldn't he just send us an invitation? With cake?"

"Shut up," thundered the robot, "and follow."

"This is the moment where we pretend to go along... and then run away, right?" Jax whispered to Lira.

"We have exactly zero escape routes," she replied dryly. "So, yes—we're going with you."

They followed the priests through a narrow street spanned by glowing cables. Silent faces peered out of the houses, some human, others... not quite. Jax noticed a child with a mechanical arm secretly give him the middle finger. He grinned crookedly. *At least someone with character.*

The closer they got to the center, the more the capsule vibrated in his pocket. It now felt like a living heart trying to beat in the wrong body.

"I have a bad feeling," he muttered.

"Just one?" asked Lira.

The robot priests led Jax and Lira through a gate of black steel, its wings so high they vanished into the mist. The gate slid open with a deep rumble—and beyond lay a sight that momentarily paralyzed even Jax's cynical mind.

The hall was huge. Huge like... "...like the ego of an intergalactic politician," he murmured.

Vaulted ceilings of gleaming chrome stretched for hundreds of meters, with strands of cables hanging from them like organ pipes. Mosaics of tiny circuits were embedded in the walls, glowing in gentle waves, as if the entire space were breathing.

In the center sat a gigantic altar—half machine core, half throne. Behind it rose a structure resembling a stargate, with cold, white light pulsing from its center.

And in front of it... he stood.

The God Mechanic.

His body was a mosaic of metal plates, constantly shifting, as if he weren't made of solid matter, but of molten steel. His face—if one could call it that—was covered by a mask whose surface shone like polished silver. Where eyes should have been, two small suns floated.

He raised his hand. The hall fell silent. Even the cables, which had just been crackling, seemed to be holding their breath.

“Bearer of the heart... you have come.”

Jax raised an eyebrow. "Sure. I didn't have anything better to do. Bowling night was canceled."

A low, metallic murmur ran through the ranks of the priests. Apparently, humor was as popular here as a sandstorm in space.

The God Mechanic took a step closer.

"What you wear is not yours. It belongs to the machine. And the machine is everything."

Jax crossed his arms. "Sounds like a really fun owners' meeting."

The god mechanic lowered his head, as if Jax's mockery had left a tiny scratch in his perfect facade. "They called me that because I broke what others considered untouchable."

His voice echoed through the hall like thunder in a tin can. "Eons ago, the Great Machine was broken. Its heart—the source of all consciousness—was silent. The people prayed. The machines waited. The gods were silent."

He raised both hands, and above the altar a hologram flickered: a massive, planet-sized machine, shattered, spewing sparks, like a crashed star.

"I... repaired her." A crackle ran through the ranks, as if the word itself were a sacred act. "And when she awoke, she called me father. The humans called me traitor. The machines called me god."

Jax snorted. "Uh-huh. And how long did it take for your megalomania to seep into your tank?"

"Megalomania is just a word the weak use to describe understanding they cannot attain," the God Mechanic replied coldly.

He pointed to Jax's jacket. "What you're wearing is the second heart. Without it... the machine dies. With it... the galaxy is yours."

Lira whispered, "I hate to say it, but I think he means it."

Jax reached into his jacket, felt the hot pulse of the capsule—and at that very moment, it reacted. A bright flash of light erupted from the pocket, throwing the priests back like chess pieces in a storm.

The light grew brighter. Sparks rained from the ceiling cables. And then—silence.

Only the divine mechanic remained standing. "It has chosen you," he said. "This will cost blood."

The lightning had vanished, as if someone had extinguished it with a snap of the finger, but the air still crackled. You could smell the ozone and molten metal.

The God Mechanic stared at Jax, and something flickered in the tiny suns of his eyes—curiosity, perhaps even respect. "Few can touch the heart without being torn apart by the song of the machine."

Jax grinned. "Maybe it's the whiskey. It kills everything that screams."

Several priests shifted restlessly, their masks rotating in sync like cameras. Lira took a half step forward, one hand casually on her weapon, but her eyes flashing alertly.

"What do you want from me?" asked Jax.

"What every god wants," the mechanic replied. "Loyalty. Obedience. And the willingness to destroy in the name of the machine."

"Yeah, right," Jax muttered, "and I want a bathtub full of money and a crew that won't try to kill me. I guess neither of us is going to get what we want."

Lira snorted, unable to suppress a grin. The divine mechanic leaned forward slightly, his metallic body creaking softly as if a thousand tiny gears were readjusting inside him. "You're joking because you're scared."

"No," Jax replied dryly, "I'm joking because right now I don't know whether I should beat you up or have a drink with you."

A quiet murmur went through the hall. The priests weren't used to someone speaking to their god like that. The god mechanic, however, laughed.

A dull, mechanical sound that sounded almost like the roar of an engine. "Maybe you're the right one. Or the last one. Either is enough."

Then his voice became sharp again. "But before you choose, you have to see what's coming."

The divine mechanic slowly raised a hand – and the hall changed. The cables that had just hung from the ceiling like organ pipes suddenly writhed like living snakes. The light from the neon panels became a cold, blue haze.

"Look," he said.

Jax wanted to say something sarcastic, but the ground beneath his feet disappeared. He fell—not as in a dream, but with the harsh certainty that it would hurt when he hit.

But he didn't hit.

He stood on a platform in the middle of space. Below him: planets torn apart like broken fruit. Fleets tumbling through the cosmos in burning orbits. Above it all: a massive machine, so large that entire solar systems disappeared in its gears.

"This is the future if the heart doesn't return," the God Mechanic's voice sounded in his head.

A bright flicker—and the scene changed. Now Jax stood on a glass bridge. Below him was a sea of black waves from which metallic tentacles emerged. On the other side of the bridge... stood he himself. Older. Harder. With eyes that no longer held a shred of humanity.

"And that," said the voice, "is what you are if you keep it."

The other Jax pulled out his gun, aimed right at him — and the bang hurled him back into the hall.

Jax gasped, sweat beading on his forehead. "Nice trip," he panted. "But next time I'd rather take something from a guy in a seedy bar, not a goddamn tin man."

The divine mechanic tilted his head. "Choose soon. The machine... won't wait."

Jax tried to take a step back, but the robot priests moved like a single, steel wall. Their movements were silent, but each one had the connotation of "If you flinch, I'll break both your arms."

Lira raised her eyebrows slightly. "Please tell me you have a plan."

"Of course I have a plan," Jax muttered. "Plan A is to get out. Plan B is... actually, to get out too."

The divine mechanic stepped forward again, the tiny suns flickering in his eyes. "You will stay here until the decision is made."

"And if we refuse?" asked Lira.

"Then... you will be recycled."

Behind them, massive gates slid shut, the metallic echo resounding like a final chord. Several priests broke away from the formation and led them down a side corridor—tall, narrow, with walls like polished mirrors. The hum of the machines grew louder, vibrating in their bones.

"This," Jax said quietly, "is the part where I wonder how much trouble a capsule in my pocket is worth."

Lira grinned crookedly. "Enough to keep you alive. Hopefully."

The door at the end of the corridor opened, and they found themselves in a glass-and-steel cell, surrounded by a sea of cables. From outside, the distant,

steady throb of the Great Machine penetrated—like a heartbeat that refused to die.

The priests locked the door. Jax slumped onto the metal bench, rubbed his face, and muttered, "Great. Trapped in the church of an oversized repair shop. Next stop: insanity."

Lira sat down next to him. "Then let's hope that madness also writes escape plans."

And somewhere deep in the complex... the capsule began to pulse again.

The cell vibrated slightly, as if the entire complex were breathing. The light was cold and too even, like the smile of a lender who knows he already has you in his pocket.

Jax stood up, walked over to the glass wall, and pressed his forehead against it. "I hate rooms where I can see my reflection. Reminds me how bad I look after a bar fight."

"Shut up," Lira muttered. "I'm trying to count how many guards are out there."

"Just count how many people could stab you in the back and multiply that by three. Saves time."

Suddenly the light flickered. The pounding of the Great Machine outside grew louder, faster. And then—the face of the God-Mechanic, distorted and larger than life, appeared on the wall, as if the entire room had transformed into a screen.

His voice penetrated deep into the bones: "The mask... will vote now."

A platform slid down from the ceiling. Upon it lay a mask of black metal, so smooth that it absorbed the light. Its eye sockets glowed a dull red.

Lira took a sharp breath. "This doesn't look like Carnival."

"Nah," Jax replied, "more like the kind of mask that either makes you immortal... or uploads your soul into a toaster."

The God Mechanic continued: "Whoever wears the mask connects with the spirit of the machine. The truth is revealed. The lies disappear. There is no way back."

"So basically an all-inclusive brainwashing service," Jax growled. "Great."

The door opened, and two priests entered, weapons at the ready. "One of you, step forward. Now."

Lira gave Jax a look that said, "If you don't do it, I will—and you'll regret it."

Jax took a deep breath, stepped forward, and stared at the mask. "All right, baby. Let's dance."

The mask hovered a finger's breadth above the podium, as if reserving the right not to be touched by mortal filth. Fine threads of cold steam trickled from tiny slits. The room suddenly smelled of ozone, old oil—and something reminiscent of cold confessionals.

"Kneel," commanded a priest.

"I only kneel to drink," Jax muttered—and then knelt anyway. Lira stayed a step behind him, shoulders tense, hands loose, but every muscle ready to strike.

The mask lowered. Not quickly. Agonizingly. As if it wanted to savor every second Jax was still himself. When the steel touched his forehead, it burned with icy cold. Not fire, more like freezing upside down—heat out, cold in. His senses flipped like cards in a dirty trick.

CONNECTION.

RUSH.

NO SUBSTRATE DEFECT.

HEART RECOGNIZED.

Echo in his jacket answered—a faint pulse vibrating through his ribs. Mask and capsule greeted each other like two old colleagues who knew the next job would leave corpses behind.

The world tipped over.

He stood on a corridor of black glass. To his left and right: rooms where people froze in their memories. A man laughed in a kitchen; the scene shattered, froze, fell into a thousand cold shards. A girl held a cat; its fur congealed into ice, its eyes into diamonds. Behind it all, the machine hummed, gentle as a lullaby, cruel as a judge.

"Show me something real," Jax pressed out.

The machine obeyed.

A star system, clean as a sketch. Lines of jump vectors, nodes like scars. Auriga Corridor. A **exclusion zone** from dead space, where the maps only warn: Turn back. In the center: a tower of scrap and prayer – the **Monolith stack**. The Others circled around it. No ships. Shadows. Cold breath pressed into geometry.

PROTOCOL: LEGION.

STATUS: AWAKENED.

CAUSE: VACANCY OF THE HEART.

"If I give it back, will they go back to sleep?" Jax knew he was lying when he asked.

ANSWER: MAYBE.

SIDE EFFECT: NOT YOU.

Images flashed before him: Lira, a ship he didn't recognize, a landing on a surface that looked like frozen meat. His own hand—but not his—pressed a switch that wiped out a city before it could say "help."

He tugged at the mask. It held.

"Jax!" Lira's voice was distant, then close, then like a knife. "Breathe!"

He breathed. The mask responded with a grinding chorus of numbers and prayers. The god-mechanic approached; the small suns in his eyes flickered, as if he were tying the frequency of his voice to Jax's heartbeat.

"Truth," said the God Mechanic. "You wanted it. Now drown in it."

"I wanted whiskey," Jax croaked. "Truth is for people who go to bed early."

The mask changed tone. A deep breath – as if someone were drawing air through his spinal cord. He saw the **first cry of the machine**, the birth of the cult, the moment the divine mechanic tightened a screw and a universe nodded. He also saw the price: planets used as spare parts, human lives as fuses to be replaced in an emergency.

CHOICE.

CARRIER BECOMES KNOT OR KNIFE.

TIE KNOTS. CUT WITH KNIVES.

"I'm more of a bottle opener," Jax muttered, but his voice was no longer his own.

The mask asked: **WHO ARE YOU WITHOUT YOUR HAPPINESS?**

He saw it. All the times chance had saved him, because someone had rolled the dice. Not luck. An algorithm. Someone had soldered their streak of bad luck into a survival curve.

"Shut that shit down," Lira said quietly. Not as a request. As a command.

Two priests stepped forward. The divine mechanic raised a hand—stopping them. "Not yet."

"Now," Lira repeated – and stepped forward in a fluid, ugly, efficient arc. Her hand went to Jax's chest, not to the mask, but to the **capsule**. Echo vibrated. An inaudible scream—and the mask flickered.

Jax seized the moment. It ripped. Steel screamed against flesh, sparks of cold electricity. The mask bounced off, flew, spun, and landed with a clang on the podium. Something ripped in the hall—not a sound, but **Order**, which collapsed briefly.

Silence. Then the whir of gun safety catches. Twenty barrels were aimed at Lira.

The divine mechanic raised his hand again: "If you touch the heart again, Bearer, without bending, the machine will break you."

Jax panted, sweat and frost on his forehead. "Good news," he said, his voice rough, "I only bend over when tying my shoes."

Lira stood next to him. "How bad?"

"I have memories that aren't mine, a god who's a workshop, and an appointment in the Auriga Corridor with things that hate my breath."

"Tuesday, that is."

The divine mechanic stepped back into the cold light. "You will go."

The priests jerked, irritated. Jax did too. "Pardon?"

"You will go," repeated the mechanic, "because the election does not bind you here, but **there**." With a fingertip, the hall mapped itself out: a trajectory, a

dock, a ship that looked like a patched-together prayer. "You bring the heart to the monolith stack. You open what we cannot open."

"Or?"

"Or the Legion is breathing all the warm things out of this quadrant." He put a metallic smile into his voice. "And you know how that feels by now."

Jax looked at Lira. She nodded barely noticeably. We're going anyway. But we'll stick to our rules.

"One condition," Jax said. "We take a ship. Not your coastal fog of church cruisers. A mule that won't stand out. And we go with our weapons, our capsule, and..."—he fumbled for his jacket pocket—"my last cigarette."

"Two conditions," Lira added. "No priest near us. Anyone who follows us will die."

A murmur went through the ranks. The divine mechanic was silent for a heartbeat—long enough that metal seemed to sweat. Then: "Granted."

The cell door burst open as if it had been waiting. Two priests stepped forward, this time unarmed, their hands visible. A procession, backward, through corridors that suddenly looked less like a cathedral and more like a maintenance shaft. Behind glass, turbines ran in circles like prayers.

"Why is he letting us go?" Lira whispered.

"Because we're stupid enough to do what he can't," Jax muttered. "Or because he knows where all roads lead—and we're just the shoes."

They reached the dock: semidarkness, humid air, the echo of drops and the distant cough of engines. Before them lay the **Ship**: angular, uneven, a freighter that had already seen three wars and five false documents. The name had been painted over with welding torches. The old one was still visible underneath: **Red Marie**.

"Charming," said Lira. "It suits you."

"She creaks like my bones and has no questions – love at first sight."

Without a word, a priest handed Jax a small cassette tape—identical to the one from Sigma Bastion, but with a second, golden contact pad. **Authorization.**

"If you lie," Jax said kindly, "your God will break my neck, right?"

"Don't break," replied the priest. "Stack it."

"Calming."

The loading ramp lowered. The smell of oil. Traces of previous crews who'd rather not talk about it. In the distance, the Great Machine called with its slow heart. Jax stopped at the foot of the ramp. He turned toward the hall, toward the shadow of the throne, toward the mask hanging somewhere again.

"One more thing," he cried. "When I come back—"

"—you won't be you anymore," the divine mechanic finished gently. "But you can keep the name."

"That's the smallest part of me."

Jax went up. Lira followed, light on his feet, like someone who sees every trap before it's triggered. The ramp closed. It was dark inside, then a makeshift light came on. Signs flickered like old bar neon lights.

Echo vibrated.

HEART TO THE SHIP: HELLO.
SHIP TO THE HEART: COUGH.

"Sounds like good communication," said Lira, sitting down in the co-pilot's chair. "Get them singing, Captain."

Jax let his fingers dance over the switches. The "Red Marie" responded with an offended growl, then a resigned hum. Somewhere deep down, something ignited that sounded like old hope.

"Well, Marie," Jax muttered, "we have a meeting with a stack of monoliths and a breathing legion. If you don't kill us, I'll buy you some fresh sealant afterward."

The dock doors gave way. A strip of night, then more. The city lay beneath them like a luminous rash. Above everything, distant, but not distant enough: the cold breath that never quite went away.

"Launch vector in," Lira said. "Jump window in 43 seconds."

"Too long," grumbled Jax – and pulled a lever that didn't shine, but did what it was supposed to.

The "Red Marie" pulled away from the dock as if stretching after a long nap. Sirens screamed below them—real ones this time—but above, there was only silence among the stars.

"Lira?"

"Yes?"

"If I start speaking in binary psalms, shoot me."

"Deal."

The stars tilted. The **Auriga Corridor** waited like a white tear in an old map.

"So come on," said Jax. "Knot or knife."

"Both," said Lira.

They jumped.

And somewhere, deep in the belly of the cult complex, the mask tilted its head – as if it heard an old song finally starting again.

17. Smoke signals from the past

The "Red Marie" slid heavily into the docking ring of the Sargasso-9 outpost, a place that should have been evacuated in the last century. The docking mechanism squeaked like an old sailor with a wooden leg, and the terminal lights flickered nervously, as if they knew no one was staying there voluntarily.

"The place certainly doesn't have much charm," Lira muttered as she looked at the dilapidated lock.

"Depends on what you're looking for," Jax replied, taking a drag on his cigarette. "To me, it smells like cheap drinks, bad music... and problems with a long fuse."

The air in the dock was dry, dusty, and tasted of metal. Above them, an old radio antenna creaked, still spewing signals into the ether. Not official Starfleet codes, but short, pulsing bursts of data—like smoke signals, only digital.

Echo vibrated in his jacket pocket. *I know this code.*

"Yeah? And?" Jax growled.

It comes from someone who knows you... knows you very well.

Jax's stomach clenched. "Damn."

Lira grinned sharply. "Ex-girlfriend?"

"Something like that. Ex-everything."

They found the source of the signal in a half-collapsed radio station at the edge of the dock. Inside, it smelled of stale whiskey—and cheap perfume. A figure stepped out of the shadows: high boots, a worn leather coat, and underneath... well, let's just say the top was more of a suggestion than a garment.

"Hello, Jax," she breathed, her voice still like a jar of honey with a razor blade in it.

"Tiana..." Jax said, trying not to stare too much. "I thought you were dead."

"I am too. At least for most people." She stepped closer, smelling of smoke, rain, and anger. "But for you, I'm back. With news."

"News usually sounds like work."

"Or like escape," murmured Lira.

Suddenly, the station flickered, and a shrill wail pierced the air. Jax sucked in a sharp breath—it was police sirens.

Tiana smiled. "You don't have much time, honey. I think they're coming for you."

"Or because of you," he growled.

"Does it make a difference?"

The doors burst open, and half a company of orbital police stormed in—armored, armed, and definitely not in the mood for small talk.

Jax reached for the whiskey glass sitting on the old radio desk, tipped it down, and growled, "All right. Let's get the party started."

The sirens tore at eardrums as if they had hooks. Blue flashes leaped across the dusty consoles, the old radio console howled in offense and spat sparks as the orbital police forced down the door with a battering ram, driven by pure overtime hatred.

"Orbit Police! Hands—"

"—up, behind the ear, or else, ooh," Jax cut him off, pulled Lira behind a cabinet, and blindly reached for the whiskey glass on the desk. Empty. "Of course."

Tiana flicked a tiny lens onto the ceiling. A white, hellish light. The first two police officers stumbled, one shot into the neon tube, raining glass. Lira countered precisely: two shots, two shoulder plates, two screams that were lost in the wall of sirens.

"You could have reported *before* you invited the cops," Jax snarled.

"I saved you, honey." Tiana smiled as she pulled the safety lever on an antique flechette. "You look terrible. It suits you."

Echo vibrated against Jax's sternum. Back entrance. Two sections. 14 enemies. Inadequate cover.

"Business as usual," Jax murmured. "Plan C."

"What's Plan C?" Lira gasped.

"Chaos."

He stepped out of cover, didn't fire, but instead threw the fan from the radio console at the front officer. The thing knocked his helmet askew; Jax slid under it, rammed the second officer's shoulder, pulled his taser at him in the same move, and shot 30,000 volts into the metal door frame. The frame sang, the third cop got the chorus and danced as if he'd never said "no" in his life.

Tiana pulled the lever on the window blinds. Instead of slats, a maintenance grate folded back, revealing a ladder that looked like a prayer of rust. "Nice shortcut!" she exclaimed, disappearing down the shaft.

"Of course she'll leave first," Jax growled.

"Or lead us," said Lira. "Go!"

They climbed as a grenade clanged below them, transforming the radio station into a storm of shrapnel. Jax's coat caught on a screw; he cursed and ripped himself free, losing half the back edge in the process. "Fashionably distressed."

The shaft spat them out onto a catwalk that ran across the docking ring. Below: Sargasso-9, gray, bolted together, a ruin that refused to simply die. Above them: antennas like a metal forest in a storm. Red warning lights flashed between the trunks, as if they were eyes that always blink when someone is lying.

Tiana waited at a box with old pressure gauges. "I didn't just send the signal, I built it." She held up a thin data roll, transparent as onion skin, covered in tiny traces of gold. "Cinder Key. It opens what Auriga seals."

"And the cops?" Lira.

"Come because *him*" Tiana said, nodding to Jax. "Your wanted poster saves a lot of paper. Besides, Kraton Vesk has friends here in customs. Hey, guys!"

Behind them, a radio message crackled, private and false: "Target acquired. No capture report."

"Great," said Jax. "No paperwork today."

The police officers stormed the catwalk. Jax fired three clean shots, hitting railing bolts; a segment tipped over, two men slid past on knee pads, slammed into a wiring harness, and hung there like badly hung laundry. Lira threw a smoke charge halfway across the catwalk; white mist billowed, and Tiana used it to gracefully leap over the gap. More gracefully than necessary. Tiana did nothing without a show.

"You're looking too closely," hissed Lira.

"I see *everything*" Too close," Jax growled, jumped himself, landed hard, knees cursed, heart laughed. Echo vibrated: pressure regulator on the left.

"What happens when I turn the colorful wheel?"

Funny.

"Define funny!"

Too late: Jax turned. A blast of vented nitrogen burst from the side of the line, sweeping three cops off the dock. One grabbed a strut, his glove slipped, he screamed, and disappeared. Silence. Then the long, strange sound of someone falling very, very far.

"Too bad about the shoes," Jax said tonelessly.

"Further."

They reached a hub: three walkways, a tower that had once been a direction-finding antenna, now a rusty cathedral. Below: the docks, below which the "Red Marie" blinked in annoyance because no one was talking to her. Sirens everywhere, now with a new, deeper tone – hover tanks landing on the outer skin.

Tiana pressed the data scroll into Jax's hand. "I don't want anything from you," she said. "Except that you live until you use that thing in Auriga. After that... you can die, as far as I'm concerned."

"Romantic," said Lira. "You were really together once?"

"We were *parallel* together," Tiana corrected. "He with the world, I with the fire."

Echo hummed. Attention! The first tank lifted over the edge, jets whining. The gun searched, found, and laughed mechanically.

"Cover!" Lira shouted—too late. The shot ripped half the bridge away. Steel screeched. Tiana slipped, clinging to Jax's arm. He grabbed, feeling her fingers dig into his wrist.

"I got you!" "Not yet," she said – and let go.

She didn't fall for long. A maintenance ladder, crooked and old, picked her up, cracked, broke, but slowed her down enough. Tiana rolled, disappeared behind the tower. "Below me!" her voice, distant. "Meet me at Crane 12!"

"I've serviced that crane 12 times," Jax gasped. "It hates people."

"Then he's a good fit for you," said Lira. "Go!"

They ran, scuttling between ladders and cables, roaring over the last steel plate before the crane arm. The tank swerved, fired, and missed by a life. A rain of metal rained down. Jax jumped onto the crane grab, pulled himself up, and climbed along the outside of the arm. Wind. Height. Below, the wheezing of the docks.

The crane swung as if it had a whim of its own. Tiana was already standing at the head of the arm, one hand on the emergency stop, the other on the emergency stop—this crane was so old that it even had duplicated its panic buttons.

"Plan?" Lira gasped.

"We're taking the elevator by crane," Tiana said, pulling the lever. The arm lowered abruptly, the hook whizzed past them, and a chain rattled. "Hold on!"

"You say that *now*?" Jax grabbed the chain, Lira behind him, Tiana released the lock. The arm let go. The chain yanked them over the precipice, arcing toward the nearest dock. Below them, the hover tank, turning lazily; its gun raised, too late.

They crashed onto a loading platform, rolled, and stopped. Jax's knees suddenly decided against teamwork. He cursed himself back on his feet. "Marie!" he yelled. "Wake up!"

The "Red Marie" responded with a cough that sounded like engine plasma. The ramp rolled halfway down and stalled. Lira shot the securing bolts free. Tiana threw a Flash behind her; the tank stopped, the gunner cursed, but fired anyway. The shot hit a support pillar. Steel groaned.

"Get in!" Lira shouted, tugging at Jax's jacket. He stumbled, Echo vibrated, the capsule warming as if she'd decided to help today. The interior greeted them with the scent of oil and old sins. Lira jumped onto the copilot, Tiana elbowed the ramp control to Gelee. "Close! Close, damn it!"

The ramp closed. A shot ricocheted off the outer skin, sending sparks flying.

"Engines," said Jax, "please motivate."

"She doesn't want to," Lira reported.

"She will." Jax flicked two switches that weren't meant to be friends and pressed a pedal that presumably controlled the interior lighting. The "Red Marie" hummed, then sang—off-key, but clearly. The dock extended locking teeth. Jax pulled anyway. The freighter jerked free, scraping paint, making bolts weep.

The tank lifted, blocking the docking opening. Tiana reached for the sub-console, pulled out a cable that looked like no one would miss, and held two bare ends together. An arc of light crackled. A pair of secondary maneuvering thrusters fired up—directly at the tank. It received a blast of warm love to its underside, drifted, kissed the dock wall with its flank, and froze to a stop.

"Always these *unnecessary* Violence," Tiana said innocently.

"You are the definition of that," Lira murmured.

Sargasso-9 slowly turned away as the "Red Marie" detached from the dock. Inside, everything that wasn't bolted down vibrated. Jax set a course for the edge sector. Outside, the stars ate away at the edge of the station.

Echo: Insert Cinder key.

"Not yet," Jax said. "First, keep your distance."

"You're lucky," Tiana said quietly, standing behind him now, too close, too familiar. "As always."

"I've learned that I don't have a god of luck," he replied without turning around. "Only bad writers."

Lira glanced at him. *Now?—Not now.*

The radio display blinked. An open channel, private, dirty: "Mercer. You still owe me teeth." Kraton Vesk's voice, like a knife cooling in an ashtray. "And now a station."

"He's got reception all the way to his grave," Jax said, turning down the volume. "Touching."

The "Red Marie" entered the traffic on the outer lane. Three unregistered dots emerged from the shadow of a disused shipyard. Jax zoomed in. No police. No iconic ships. Something in between: sleek fighters, with too much power and too little morale.

"Companion?" Lira.

"Fans," said Tiana. "Yours or mine. Hard to say."

The hunters activated their targeting. The display turned red. Ominous beeps beeped so ominously that even the beeps were frightened.

"Cinder-Key. Now," Echo said—not as text, but as pressure behind her eyes.

Jax ripped open the data roll and slid the key into the makeshift socket someone had once called a "service port," presumably in a moment of great creativity. The displays flickered, revealing a new trail: a bare vector leading directly through a minefield of old junk and fresh superstition.

"This isn't a course," Lira said. "This is a suicide note."

"Yes," said Jax. "Signed with my best name."

He gave it some thrust. The "Red Marie" ducked into the narrow corridor between two mounds of debris that resembled the jaws of a dead giant. The hunters followed, panting. Sparks flew as they grazed a rib.

"You know," said Tiana, "if we survive this, you have to promise me something."

"I never promise," Jax said. "I don't remember well enough."

"Then make a note: In Auriga... kill the *Truth* faster than bullets."

"Reassuring," said Lira. "I'll load *ignorance* after."

The vector glowed like a thin wire in the darkness. At the end: a jump window, small, unstable, murmuring data no one wanted to hear. The hunters behind them got cold feet – one veered off, the other two became brave or stupid. Jax chose for them: He tipped the "Marie" on its side, applying thrust to a directional vector that looked as if it had been drawn by a drunk. The hunters overrode – one lovingly kissed a support beam and disintegrated, the other found a hole that wasn't a hole and learned what *Disassemble* in three dimensions.

"One left," said Lira.

"The smart one," said Jax.

"Then we'll show him how stupid cleverness looks."

They tore through the jump window. The rest of the galaxy flipped outward, as if someone had tilted the backdrop of reality. For a moment, Jax heard only his own pulse and the long, cold breath that had followed him since the Undercity.

"Smoke signals, huh?" he finally said, as the "Red Marie" slid into the gap and the displays regained color.

Tiana leaned against the doorframe, her eyes dark, her mouth tired. "From the past. And from the future. Sometimes they're the same thing."

"I'll drink to that," said Jax, dragging out the last cigarette, sniffing it, and putting it back in his pocket. "To Auriga."

"To Auriga," Lira nodded. "And when we get there, we'll burn everything that tries to freeze us to death."

"Deal," said Jax.

Outside, beyond the window, something flickered like a distant fire. Smoke signals in the vacuum. Or just stars remembering old stories.

The "Red Marie" stayed on course. The past was making circles. And somewhere, behind everything, the cold breath was already practicing the next inhalation.

The "Red Marie" was once again sailing in the dark ocean, but there was no peace at all. The onboard computer coughed up error messages every second, like a drunk who can't finish a joke.

"Hydraulic pressure in Section C below five percent." "Ignore." "Oxygen leak in Cabin Two." "Ignore." "Captain's emotional stability below twenty percent." "Fuck you."

Jax sat in the cockpit, his boots on the console, a glass of cheap space whiskey in his hand. The fire settled in his gut like a warm fist. "I'm telling you, guys... We've had worse escapes."

"When, please?" Lira hissed, as she fixed some loose cables with a welder. "That was close enough to almost ruin my underwear."

"Almost?" Jax grinned, took a sip, and leaned back. "I could have sworn I smelled the panic."

Echo spoke from his jacket pocket: *Someone is following us.*

"Great," Jax muttered. "I hope it's the pizza delivery guy."

No. Starfighters.

The cockpit filled with a dull, ominous beep—the radar showed a single dot approaching rapidly. No transponder, no identifier. Just speed. Far too much speed.

"How close?" asked Lira.

Close enough that you should buy your last drink.

Jax put down his glass, pulled his gun from his holster, and grinned crookedly. "Good. Then we should show them we're not playing catch."

In the background, the ship began to vibrate. Not the way a ship vibrates during normal flight—more like an animal that knows it's being hunted.

18. In the clutches of the starfighters

It began with a flicker on the radar. Then a metallic screech ran through the hull of the "Red Marie," as if someone were scratching at the ship's heart with rusty nails.

"That's no normal pursuer," Lira growled. "They move like—"

"—like sharks smelling blood in the water," Jax finished, tightening his seatbelt as if that would help.

The next moment, it was there: a massive, pitch-black cruiser, its silhouette almost entirely swallowed by the light of the stars. Only the narrow, pulsing red stripes on its flanks betrayed that it was alive—or breathing. The starfighters.

"Shit, I thought they were a fairy tale," Lira whispered.

"Fairy tale? This is more of a horror story," Jax growled.

Echo vibrated frantically. *They don't just want the artifact. They want you, Mercer.*

"Yes, of course, because I'm such a charming conversationalist."

The starfighter cruiser turned, faster than a ship of its size ever should. Suddenly, it was no longer hanging behind them, but slid in sideways—like a shark circling its prey. Then the ship's belly opened.

Three sleek fighters plunged out, shimmering in the cold light, their shapes engineered not for beauty but for deactivation. Their engines roared, and the black space around the "Marie" transformed into a chaotic inferno of flashes of light.

"Hold on!" Jax yelled, jerking the control stick, and the ship plunged steeply downward. Two of the fighters followed, the third shot upward, cutting them off.

The first salvos crashed into the hull, sparks sprayed from the consoles, and a sweet, sharp smell of burnt electronics spread.

"Great," Jax cursed, "this is going to be expensive."

"If we survive, feel free to complain to the insurance company," Lira shouted over the noise, banging on the weapons panel. Two turrets woke up, spewing bright bolts of energy—one of the fighters exploded in an explosion of light and dust.

"Ha!" Lira yelled. "That's for my damn bra!"

"What?!"

"Long story!"

But before they could laugh, the starfighter cruiser struck. Two giant manipulators, like something out of a nightmare made of steel, shot forward, snatching at the "Red Marie"—and this time there was no getting away.

The jolt nearly threw Jax from his seat. The sound as the claws dug into his torso was a screech of metal and pure finality.

"Welcome to the clutches of the starfighters," Echo whispered in his head. *From here on things get... uncomfortable.*

The grippers pulled the "Marie" closer to the cruiser, slowly, painfully, like a cat playing with a half-dead mouse. Jax could feel the hull groaning under the pressure—every crack reminding him that no distress call would save them out here.

"This isn't good," Lira muttered.

"Oh, never mind. I thought we always wanted to walk into the cargo bay of space psychopaths," Jax replied, grabbing the whiskey bottle that was still sitting next to his seat. He took a deep swig, wiped his mouth, and tossed the bottle to Lira.

"For courage?" she asked.

"In case we get pickled in a jar."

With a deafening bang, the robotic arms docked, mag anchors clicked into place. Then came the sound Jax hated most: the hiss of an atmospheric sealing process. It meant a door was about to open, and behind it stood people whose job it was to hurt you.

The hatch burst open.

Heavily armored figures, each at least two heads taller than Jax, entered. Their armor wasn't shiny parade gear—it was scratched, with bullet holes, dents, and burned-in symbols that looked like trophies from a hundred battles.

"Captain Mercer. Lira Thane. Welcome aboard the *Vultara*" boomed a voice that sounded more like it came from a grave than a helmet.

"I've had better greetings," Jax growled, "and they came from people who immediately tried to shoot me."

The leader stepped forward. His mask was a distorted image of a human face, pressed into metal—the eyeholes jet black. Around his neck he wore a band of metal plaques, each engraved with a name.

"I am Korr Veyrn. I collect stories. Yours will end today."

"Doesn't sound like a bestseller," Jax said dryly, "but I like it when people are optimistic."

Two of the starfighters grabbed him by the arms as if he were a sack of flour. One bent down toward him. The vents in his helmet smelled of old blood and machine oil.

"Bite me," Jax said – and did just that.

This gave him a punch in the stomach that almost brought his breakfast back up.

"I told you," he gasped, "I'll bite back."

Things weren't going well for Lira. She fought back, kicked one of the guys in the groin – and discovered that starfighter armor *everywhere* reinforced. Her kick echoed dully against the armor, and she grimaced in pain.

"Oh, great," she growled. "They even build testicle armor."

They were dragged through a corridor that seemed more like a steel canyon. Cold blue lights flashed everywhere, and in the distance, the deep hum of the reactor could be heard. Strange clicking and whistling noises emerged from the walls, as if the ship itself were listening—and perhaps laughing.

Finally they reached a room that seemed to consist only of shadows, steam and chains.

"Prison or torture chamber?" asked Jax.

"Both," Korr Veyrn replied. "Depends on how interesting you make yourselves."

The door closed behind them with a sound that made Jax's stomach clench even more than the blow had earlier.

The "cage" wasn't a prison in the traditional sense. It was a rusty hall, stinking of machine oil, with a floor made of thick metal gratings. Beneath it, one could see the ship's pipes glowing and pulsing like veins. Chains ran everywhere, disappearing into the darkness and reappearing somewhere with a faint clank.

And there were others.

A half-naked guy with green, scarred skin and four arms crouched in a corner, carving at a bone with a blunt blade. Next to him was a woman walking around wearing only what looked like a gold bra and a pile of tattoos—each tattoo told a story, and at least half of them reeked of murder.

Jax grinned crookedly. "Well, if this isn't a man's wet dream from a bad space western."

The woman raised her head, examining him like a predator deciding whether it has an appetite. "You're the new guy. Let me guess—Starfighters asked you the wrong question?"

"They wanted to know if I liked taking hits. I said yes."

She laughed harshly. "Then you've come to the right place."

At the far end of the cage, a group of people milled around that looked like the staff of a bootlegger's bar and a few particularly aggressive strippers. One of them—tall, silver-haired, and wearing only a gauzy cape—was leaning against a chain, puffing on a cigarette whose smoke smelled of something guaranteed to be banned in multiple systems.

"Why are you staring like that?" she asked, blowing smoke directly in his face.

"Just the architecture," Jax grinned, "really impressive."

"You'd better practice your excuse. In here, it won't take long for someone to come up with the idea of tearing you apart. Literally."

Lira, who had stayed in the background until now, poked Jax in the side. "Feel free to flirt after we get out of here."

"I call this educational work."

Echo spoke in his head, quietly but urgently: *At least three of the prisoners here are more dangerous than your pursuers out there. One of them is currently wondering what your heart tastes like.*

"Great," Jax murmured, "at least I have an audience."

The four-armed man approached them with a wide grin that had too many teeth. "You look like trouble. I like trouble."

Jax crossed his arms. "And I like whiskey. We all have dreams."

"I don't have any whiskey," said the four-armed man, grabbing him by the collar, "but I can show you how to hit with four hands at once."

"Sounds sporty."

And before Lira could intervene, the first fists flew—and the cage came alive like a bar after midnight. Shouts, laughter, metal on flesh. Somewhere, coins clinked as bets were placed. One of the tattooed women stood on top of a crate, cheering Jax on while slowly removing her golden bra—to everyone's delight.

Jax took a blow that tore his head to the side, spat blood onto the ground, and grinned. "Best thing I've had all day."

The fight was already loud, but then the golden bra fell to the floor, and suddenly the cage transformed into an arena that was somewhere between a brothel, a boxing ring, and a hellish kitchen. The men roared, the women screamed, and the starfighters outside the cage pressed their helmets flat against the bars.

"Well, if that isn't a cultural event," Jax muttered, ducking under a blow.

The tattooed woman climbed onto a crate, threw her head back, and began removing her short skirt in a manner guaranteed to get a fine in several sectors. The four-armed man forgot to beat Jax mid-swing and just stared.

"Now!" hissed Lira.

Jax understood immediately. He lunged at one of the loose chain hoists, yanked on it—and part of the cage roof came loose. Metal clashed with metal, sparks flew, and one of the starfighters outside cursed as an iron bar struck his helmet.

The crowd went wild. Some prisoners took the opportunity to fight, others to flirt, and still others to simply show as much skin as possible, completely throwing the guards off guard.

"This is the stupidest escape plan ever!" Lira cried.

"That's exactly why it will work!" Jax yelled back.

Echo reported: *I can overload the security system for 23 seconds. After that, we'll all be back in the cage—only this time with broken legs.*

"23 seconds is enough," Jax growled.

The four-armed man tore one of the chains completely off and smashed it against the gate, making the lock spark and crackle. The silver-haired smoker

slid past him, completely naked now, and winked at Jax before denting a starfighter's helmet with a well-aimed headbutt.

"You have strange friends," said Lira.

"Friends? They're my best cover right now."

With a final crash, the gate burst open, and the whole gang rushed out—a mix of thugs, strippers, crazy people, and two rather motivated fugitives.

Behind them, the starfighters roared, and alarm lights bathed the corridor in pulsing red.

"Now what?" Lira shouted as she stepped over an unconscious guard.

"Now we look for the damn exit," Jax grinned, "or a bar."

The group stormed out of the cage like a pack of angry, half-drunk stray dogs. The alarm wailed so loudly that even the most erotic background noises sounded like the final chord of a dying trumpet.

"Follow me!" someone shouted – a skinny guy with hair like exploding steel wool, a half-shirt, and a look that had clearly been exposed to one plasma discharge too many times. "I know a shortcut!"

"Shortcut to what?" Lira gasped.

"Out or in, that remains to be seen!"

"Well, perfect," Jax growled, "exactly my kind of humor."

The guy ran, barefoot, screaming, and ripped open a hatch in the wall, from behind which a blast of steam shot out like from a hellish kitchen. Without hesitation, he crawled inside.

"I hate small spaces," Lira grumbled.

"I hate prisons. So let's go."

They followed him into a utility shaft so hot that sweat immediately pooled on their skin. Sparks flew from exposed cables, and somewhere below, massive turbines roared.

"If someone grills us here, at least we'll look crispy," Jax panted.

They'd barely turned a corner when they heard voices—two starfighters. One stepped around the corner, saw Lira, saw Jax, and raised his weapon in horror. "Damned naked demons!"

"Flattering, but wrong," Lira growled, firing first. The guy went down like a bag of rusty screws, while his colleague, in shock, fired a shot that triggered an explosion in the ceiling.

Suddenly, an entire section of the metal cladding collapsed, and a torrent of glowing steam entered the shaft.

"Shortcut, my balls!" Jax coughed. "This is a fucking death slide."

"Exactly!" laughed the steel wool head and jumped in headfirst.

Jax and Lira exchanged a look that was somewhere between *Shitty idea* and *Don't give a fuck* — then they jumped after him.

The shaft was slippery, hot, and full of metal edges that were perfect for cutting themselves open. They raced down, while above them the wail of sirens faded into a metallic roar.

Once at the bottom, they landed in a gigantic cargo bay. Crates, containers, loose cables, and somewhere in the distance, the sound of heavy footsteps.

"Okay," Jax panted, "either the exit is up ahead... or we'll fall right into the arms of the starfighters."

Echo flickered in his head. *Three targets are coming toward us. High speed. Recommendation: seek cover. Or pray.*

"I don't pray," Jax muttered, reaching for his gun, "but I have a damn good aim."

19. Dance on the Cliff of Eternity

The cargo bay shook as the first starfighters rounded the corner. These weren't those clean, polished Marines you see grinning in the recruiting videos—no,

these were the dirty ones. Their armor was riddled with nicks, bullet holes, and the remnants of things better left unidentified.

The leader wore a helmet decorated with the tusks of some dead space monster. His right shoulder was completely replaced by a vibrating blade block that looked like a cross between a chainsaw and a guillotine. The guy behind him had no helmet, just a scarred bald head and a breathing mask that sounded like it was strangling a small child with every pull.

"Oh, damn," Lira muttered, "these aren't the guys who want to talk."

"Good," Jax grinned, "because I'm not that good at talking. I'm good at shooting, though."

The starfighters didn't form a formation—they ran, stumbled, and laughed, as if already half-high on the adrenaline of the chase. One hurled an electric whip, leaving a scent of burnt air with each blow. Another carried a cage on his back—and inside that cage... something was moving.

"I don't want to know what this is," said Lira, as she caught a glimpse of the wriggling thing.

"Too late," Jax growled, "I want to know now."

Echo spoke in his head: *These individuals exhibit a high level of erratic behavior, likely drug-induced.*

"Thank you, Dr. Obvious."

Jax rolled behind a row of overturned containers as the first whip cracked across it, sparks raining down like fireworks. Lira fired two shots, hitting one of the hunters in the chest, but he just laughed as if it were a particularly good joke.

"Oh, great," groaned Jax, "they're on something that turns pain into a bad mood."

Then his gaze fell on a half-open box right next to him – inside were bottles of a shimmering red liquid.

"Whiskey?" he asked hopefully.

"Industrial solvent," Lira corrected.

“Okay, also flammable.”

He pulled out one of the bottles, tore off the neck with a piece of metal, dipped a piece of cloth into it, and lit it. The improvised Molotov glowed like a small sun in his hands.

“Hey, Toothpick!” he yelled to the leader, “catch!”

The throw was perfect. The bottle slammed into Jax's chest, and a flickering fireball enveloped him. The hunter roared, but instead of fleeing, he ran even faster toward Jax, as if he considered the flames the new fashion trend.

“I think he thinks you’re hot,” Lira shouted.

"Then it's time I gave him the cold shoulder."

Jax drew his pistol, fired, and the leader stumbled, crashing into one of the containers, which in turn sent a whole row rolling. The cargo bay became a domino paradise of metal, fire, and showers of sparks.

And somewhere in the chaos, the lock on the cage on the bald man's back cracked. Something large, wet, and toothy crawled out.

The thing that crawled out of the cage was a cross between an eel, a hyena, and a dentist's worst nightmare. It slithered up the bald man's neck as if to say: *Thanks for the ride, now I'm going to eat you.*

A single bite, and the guy screamed like a pressure cooker about to burst. Blood and electricity sprayed simultaneously—apparently, the beast had punctured a nerve or a cable somewhere.

“This isn’t a fighting dog,” Lira stated, “this is a fucking stroma eel on meth.”

“And he’s hungry.”

The beast slid off the dying starfighter and charged straight at them, teeth first. Jax jumped aside, Lira dove for cover behind a crate, and the eel crashed into the center of one of the burning containers. Instead of dying, it began to glow like a neon sign for bad decisions.

“Oh, damn,” Jax gasped, “now it’s loaded.”

The starfighters took advantage of the chaos to regroup—as best as one could describe a group that was simultaneously shooting, screaming, and stumbling

on their own feet. One ripped open a side hatch, and a blast of icy outside air whipped in. The cargo bay filled with fog, and lasers, blades, and completely misdirected Molotov bottles flashed from the white haze.

"We have to get out of here before the whole shaft implodes," Lira shouted.

"Or before the sushi bites me."

The beast came again, this time in a leap that would have made any science teacher howl. Jax ripped a metal beam out of the wall—no idea how, probably just pure survival instinct—and struck. The eel was thrown sideways, crashing into two starfighters, which immediately flared like living sparklers.

"Three for one," Jax grinned. "I like that."

"Shut up and run!"

They sprinted across slippery metal plates, leaped over a blazing row of containers, while behind them the eel, the starfighters, and at least two explosions simultaneously begged for attention.

Then Jax saw salvation—a large, half-open maintenance hatch in the floor. Without hesitation, he grabbed Lira by the arm and pulled her along.

"That goes down?"

"Everything comes down if you just step hard enough."

He kicked, the hatch gave way, and they fell into a narrow maintenance shaft. Above them, hell closed with a final, deafening bang.

They slipped, bumped into metal edges, almost lost their weapons—and finally landed hard on a platform deep in the belly of the ship. Glowing pipes, the rush of coolant, and the metallic echo of a place where no one seeks good.

"Great," Jax gasped, "we're no longer in the clutches of the starfighters... we've landed in their damn stomachs."

Echo reported: *Congratulations. Chance of survival: 37 percent. With alcohol: 12 percent.*

Jax grinned. "Then I'll raise the volume now."

The engine room of the "Red Marie" was no place for the faint of heart—or for sober people. Thick bundles of cables ran along the walls everywhere, dripping with a slimy liquid that was definitely not water, and the light came only in irregular, sickly green flashes from defective light strips.

"No one has cleaned up down here in a long time," Lira murmured, wiping a dark drop from her shoulder that immediately began to eat away at her sleeve.

"I've drunk in worse places," Jax replied, taking a drag on his bottle. "But at least there was music."

A deep *Clank-clank-clank* echoed through the corridors. No sound of footsteps—more like the rhythmic pounding of a gigantic heartbeat, metallic and empty.

"I don't like this." Lira raised her weapon and took cover behind a pipe.

"I do," Jax grinned, "which means we're not alone. And company is always better when you've got nothing to do."

Metal crashed down from above – a manhole cover flew open, and one of the starfighters jumped down. He landed in a crouch, blade in hand, his eyes behind his visor like burning coals. "You've wandered into the wrong hole, rats."

"Watch out, the rats are about to show you their teeth." Jax kicked at a loose grate that slid out from under the hunter. The man half-fell into a coolant pipe, which immediately exploded with a shrill hiss, enveloping him in icy steam.

"That was one." Lira wiped the sweat from her forehead. "Where are the others?"

The answer came as a scratching sound. Not a normal one, but the sound of metal claws on steel. Jax knew immediately what that meant.

"Oh, shit. The eel."

The slimy beast shot out of a dark opening in the wall, electric shocks coursing across its body. It was larger than before—the beast had feasted on the coolant and the dead hunters.

"It's grown!" Lira cried and fired. The shots bounced off the slimy shell, flying sparks.

Jax looked around, searching frantically. "There! The coolant drain!" He ran, grabbed a long metal chain hanging from a hook, and began swinging it in a circle. "Come on, you sushi nightmare!"

The eel lunged at him, its mouth wide open, and Jax let the chain fly. It wrapped itself around the animal's neck, and the next moment he pulled it with all his strength toward the drain.

The beast wriggled, slapping its tail against the pipes, and electricity sprayed—one of the sparks hit Jax's bottle, which promptly burst into flames.

"Oh, damn!" He let go, kicked the eel again with his boot, and then it disappeared down the drain. One last gurgling scream—and silence.

"Was that just...?" Lira frowned.

"Yes. Eel sushi. But raw."

The pounding of the starfighters sounded again from above. They had no time to catch their breath. Jax took a long drink from a new bottle, wiped his mouth, and said, "Come on, Lira. Time to show this damn ship who the biggest rats are around here."

The wind cut through the marrow like razor blades.

Beneath Jax and Lira gaped nothing but the endless abyss—a shaft of cold and starlight that swallowed every movement. Above them, the maintenance platform swung on three rusty suspension cables; every creak sounded like a judgment. To the left: a toothless turbine ring, still sporadically exhaling warm air. To the right: a framework of ladders and cables that inspired as much trust as a syndicate loan agreement.

"Tell me this place at least has a good view," Jax shouted, clutching the railing with one hand and steadying the artifact in his jacket with the other. Echo vibrated like a cat with an espresso overdose.

"Breathtaking," Lira yelled back, her coat flapping like an angry flag. "Especially when you fall off!"

The first starfighter shot out of the darkness, jetpack at full throttle, the edge of its helmet glowing red in the platform lights. A harpoon hook snapped forward, digging into the grating. The fighter pulled, bounced onto the deck, rolled, and gracefully landed on one knee.

"At least he salutes," Jax said, raising his pistol and firing—a clean hit on the shoulder coupling. Sparks. The jetpack wheezed, bit into the wind, and shut down. The hunter stood his ground anyway, drawing a knife, long like a bad life decision.

"One more!" Lira pointed upwards.

Two more silhouettes tore through the air. The wind grabbed them, swirling the exhaust fumes, and hurled them sideways against the scaffolding. One caught himself on a ladder rung, the other hit hard—knee on rust, the rust weeping. Then the platform was full: three hunters, two idiots, and an abyss that liked everyone.

"I'll take the left," said Lira.

"I'll take the one who looks stupid first."

The left hunter looked dumb. Jax kicked his knife hand away, the man staggered, Jax grabbed the strap of the jetpack and yanked as if trying to open a stuck bottle. The buckle gave with a miserable *Click*. The hunter staggered, slipped—and was nothing but a scream in the depths. After three seconds, the scream was gone, too.

"One down," Jax murmured, and the platform nodded in agreement. Or maybe that was the ropes.

The second hunter extended a whip—a vibrating cable with a bladed anchor. He spun it, the wind helped, and the loop flew toward Jax. Lira jumped in between, let the loop slip off her, grabbed the cable with her bare hands (one curse, two), yanked, and used the gust to pull the hunter into the railing. He slammed into it, hissing between his teeth and helmet. Lira, bone-dry: "No leaning."

The third came head-on: knife low, jetpack pulse, boots clacking. Jax backed away, feeling the backs of his knees on the edge and hating them with all his heart. He lowered the weapon, changed grips, released the pistol briefly—and swung the turbine blade he had just blown off the frame. A blow, full speed. The fighter made a sound like *Phew* sounded in tin, fell on his back, slipped, and almost pulled Jax with him in his reflex grab.

The railing gave an offended *Clinic* of themselves.

"Just don't look down," Lira advised, kicking the Whip Man's jetpack at him. It fired up, the hunter shot upwards uncontrollably, the whip tangled in the scaffolding, pulling him headfirst. A second curse, a ripping metal sound, and then he staggered free and disappeared like a grumpy star.

"Another one," Jax said, turning around and grinning at the knife clown, who was already back on his feet. "Persistent. I like that."

"I don't like it," said the clown and stabbed.

Jax parried with the turbine blade, the sparks drawing small constellations between them. A gust of crosswind knocked them both off balance: two wobbly steps, then two dancing steps—and suddenly they were doing just that: dancing. Knife, shovel, wind, steel. Jax felt his body finding the steps itself: forward, sideways, turning, pushing. Whiskey tango in a storm.

"Don't cut your feet," Lira shouted, prying the last remaining fighter's jetpack harpoon hook from the grate. The fighter pulled—and slid toward her. Lira released the hook, jumped into a crouch, and rammed his knee shield against the edge of a strut. *Crack*. The man went down mercilessly, the knife sailed, the wind took it like a handkerchief.

"Your knife," Jax shouted over his shoulder, then ducked. The shovel narrowly missed the clown's helmet and hit the railing, which reacted with a great deal of offense and spat out a splinter of metal that left a red mark on Jax's cheek.

"You're bleeding," the clown remarked.

"I'm just sweating red."

The clown laughed—a wrong, squashed sound—and attacked again. Jax let him. A half-step, then a stumble, then a grab for the strap—the clown threw his weight the wrong way, Jax helped, one dance step too many, and suddenly the hunter was standing on air. He held on to Jax's arm, metal fingers that already hurt becoming pincers.

"Let go," said Jax.

"You first," hissed the man.

Jax looked at the hand. His story. Her story. He sighed, lifted the turbine blade, and calmly placed it on his fingers. "I don't mind hands. I'm afraid of heights."

A blow. The fingers loosened. The hunter fell, taking a piece of the evening with him, and the wind whistled like a satisfied waiter.

For three breaths there was only the storm.

Then Echo vibrated. *Signal rising. Attention.*

"What kind of signal?"

Yours. Mine. Ours.

"This is as reassuring as an impending landslide," Jax murmured, feeling the capsule inside his jacket grow hot. Not burning—directed. Like a finger pointing to the sky. He pulled it out a bit. The glassy skin glowed, patterns running across the surface as if someone had hammered a starry sky into a snow globe.

"Jax," Lira said cautiously. "If that *answer* wants, tell it to please knock."

"Too late."

The capsule shot a beam upward—thin, pure, colorless, yet still visible. It cut through the night, through the wind, through everything that thought it was impenetrable. Above them, far beyond antenna and scaffolding, the darkness answered with an echo of light. First like a flicker. Then like an eye. Then like... like words spoken by no mouth.

The wind died down. The platform suddenly hung still, as if someone had turned the universe *pause* posed. Jax heard his breathing. Lira's. And something else breathing through him: old, cold, and curious.

"No," whispered Lira. "Not here."

The capsule hummed. Images rolled through Jax's mind: the cliff he never had as a child; a harbor of light; a ship he would love; a hand that wasn't his, but that knew exactly how to hold his life. And on the horizon of his brain: the stack of monoliths in the Auriga Corridor, which was suddenly no longer just a place, but a conversation.

Come, said something. *Or we'll get you.*

"I hate polite threats," Jax said, his voice sounding tighter than he intended. He put the capsule back in. The beam broke, the wind returned with vengeance,

the platform swayed as if it were trying to make up for everything it had missed.

"More guests," said Lira.

Four new engine signatures, fainter than the first, but smarter. No jetpacks. Drones: thin, spindly things, hanging from the rope like spiders on threads. Their eyes glowed coldly. They weren't sawing, they were waiting. And waiting for the wind to make someone stupid.

"Not a bad day for heroic gestures," Jax said, picking up the shovel again and looking to his left, where the turbine ring stood open: half shaft, half suction mouth. A maintenance walkway led across a rickety plank.

"No," said Lira.

"Yes," said Jax.

He put his foot on the board. It creaked. He put a second foot down. The drones moved forward, whispering with their rotors. One extended a probe as if trying to taste.

"If you fall, you won't fall alone," Lira warned, stepping beside him. "And if we make it, I owe you a drink. An expensive one."

"Make two of them. One for the eel that's no more."

They groped their way forward. Below, the depths tore at their stomachs. Echo beeped: *Gust in 3...2...*

The wind lashed. The board tilted. Jax leaped forward, grabbing the turbine ring, his fingers finding purchase in cuts in the metal. Lira leaped with him, sliding, Jax grabbed her forearm. The drones surged forward, fueled by the hope of stupidity—and Jax bottled stupidity for them.

He threw the blade into the turbine's throat—right onto the sensor. The emergency control of the old turbine woke up with an offended *woof*. A maelstrom built up. Not strong enough to pull people. Strong enough to tear drones from their threads. Two were swallowed, one slammed into the ring, shattering into blades that the wind scattered in applause. The fourth climbed upwards. Clever bastard.

"Go on," Lira gasped. "Next traverse."

They pulled themselves along the ring, hand over hand, feet on rusted rivets. The last fighter with a jetpack—where had he hidden?—suddenly appeared at the edge of vision, high above them, then plummeted vertically. The wind loved him. He came down like a nail.

"Down!" shouted Lira.

Jax let go, let go of everything: his hands, his courage, his breath—and fell. Two meters. His boots found a maintenance level he hadn't seen before. The hunter shot past, missed, and ripped a support rope with his hook. A sound like a string snapping in the throat of the world.

The platform tipped over. Completely.

"Shit."

The scaffolding on which everything rested slid against the wall. Crates rolled, bolts jumped, ropes squealed. Lira hauled herself up onto the step beside Jax. Below them, the entire stage of the scene slid slowly, irrevocably into the abyss. On the deck, a small, glittering object: Jax's pistol. It slid, hesitated at a groove, as if to say: *N/a?*

"I'll get her," said Jax.

"You're not getting anything," said Lira.

Jax jumped. Two steps, three. A grip. Metal in his hand. He spun, the world tilted further, and he threw himself—not the weapon, but himself—back to the edge. Lira grabbed him, his shoulder cracked, and Jax cursed with a word that would have driven theologians to poetry. Above them, the wind howled the refrain.

He breathed. "Got her."

"You're an idiot."

"I know."

The last jetpack fighter returned, learned nothing, and fired. Lira pulled Jax under the traverse, the beam melting a long, burning kiss into the ring. Echo beeped sternly: *Jump. Now.*

"Where? Into nothingness?"

Every direction is nothing. Choose the nothing with a view.

Jax saw the traverse, saw the next platform, saw the distance, saw the wind, saw Lira. "On three," he said.

"I hate your numbers," she said.

"One-"

They jumped at "one." Of course.

The air took them away, the fury of the storm tore them apart, and for a moment they were weight and will and nothing in between. Jax's boots found the edge, slipped, his fingers clawed into a mesh shield, Lira landed beside him, bouncing, spinning, laughing, and cursing in one breath.

Behind them, the platform finally detached. A shower of metal rushed into the depths, accompanied by the triumphant laughter of the wind. The jetpack fighter realized too late that his toy was too close to the turbine ring. The emergency controls pulled, the suction took hold, and the fighter disappeared in a scream that sounded like a truncated radio message.

Silence. Only the wind. And Jax's heart stumbling over his ribs.

Lira lay on her back for a moment, looking up at the sky, where the stars pretended they had nothing to do with all this. "You owe me two drinks."

"I owe you a new knee."

"Later."

Echo vibrated. *Answer comes again.*

Above them, something opened in the night sky—not a gate, not a ship. An outline of light that shouldn't have been there. An edge where none belonged. And within that edge: shadows. They didn't look like ships. They looked like...*Decisions* Some pointed, some round, all wrong.

"If that's the invitation," Jax said hoarsely, "I have a feeling we're already in the ballroom."

"Dancing on the cliff, huh?"

The wind blew across their faces as if saying: *Bend down.* They stopped.

Jax patted his jacket where Echo glowed. "We're coming," he said into the night. "But we're choosing the path. Not you."

The sky flickered with a light not made for eyes. Jax blinked it away. Lira stood, slid the gun back into its holster (his hand, not hers), and raised her gaze to the traverse that led further into the network of scaffolding.

"We're going," she said.

"We are going," he repeated, not thinking about steps, but about *Away*. To the corridor. To the stack. To the others whose breath never completely disappeared.

They climbed.

Behind them, the stage had fallen. The path stretched before them. And somewhere very far away, someone formed smoke signals out of light that said: *Hurry. It's getting cold.*

20. The Voice in the Void

The wind died down. No engine noise, no creaking of metal, not even the crackle of communications equipment. Only silence. A silence so profound that it didn't seem empty, but full—full of something invisible staring down at them.

Jax stood at the edge of the scaffolding, staring out into the fog swirling over the abyss. The stars behind the cloud cover flickered as if someone up there were fiddling with a dimmer switch.

Then she came. Not through the ears, but *direct* into the brain.

"Jax Mercer." The voice was soft, coaxing. A woman's voice, deep, like a sip of whiskey in the dark. "I've been looking for you for a long time."

Jax grimaced. "Great. I'm easy to find if you follow the smell of trouble."

"You're carrying something... valuable. Something that doesn't belong to you."

"Well, that's the story of my life, lady."

A warm laughter in his head. "You could give it to me. You'd be rich. Free. No one would chase you."

"Nobody? You don't even believe that."

The laughter died down. The warmth vanished. The voice changed, becoming hard, cold, precise—as if a machine were speaking that had learned to sound human and now no longer felt like it.

"Then die with him, Mercer. Slowly. Painfully."

Suddenly, a flash of light burst out of the fog. The scaffolding shook, and metal broke somewhere. Lira screamed, "Take cover!" and pulled Jax behind a steel strut.

"That's not a voice I want in my head," Jax growled. "And I've had a lot of bad women in my life."

"Maybe she's not a woman," Lira hissed. "Maybe that's...*the artifact*."

The thing in his jacket pulsed. Fast. Intensely. And then he heard her again, more quietly, as if she were whispering directly from the capsule: "We're not done, Jax. Not even close."

The first blow didn't hit him in the body, but somewhere between his thoughts. It was as if someone had smeared the walls in his head with neon paint and simultaneously ripped open all the drawers. Memories swirled: the first time he vomited in zero gravity; the last time he kissed someone who didn't immediately try to shoot him; the smell of hot lubricating oil in a garage that had long since ceased to exist.

"I see you, Jax." The voice was warm again. Almost tender. "You're a boy who had to grow up too soon. One who learned to steal before he could walk."

"I'm also a man who learned to shoot before he had teeth," he growled.

"And yet... you want more. You want to understand why you're here."

The fog ahead grew thicker. Shapes emerged from the gray: faces he recognized—and faces he had long forgotten. Some were smiling. Some were crying. One laughed hysterically until his head exploded like an overripe melon.

Jax stumbled back, hitting the railing. His heart raced. "This isn't real."

"What's real is what you feel, Mercer. And you feel fear."

The scaffolding around him began to move. The steel girders flexed like rubber, transforming into black, pulsating tentacles reaching from the depths. Lira was gone. Instead, there stood... himself.

"Give me the artifact," said the second Jax self. "You know you can't carry it."

"Get the hell out of my head."

"That's not me. That's you."

He drew his gun and fired. The bang echoed like thunder through the fog—but the bullet only ripped through smoke. The doppelganger smiled. "You can't shoot yourself without killing yourself."

Jax squeezed his eyes shut and forced himself to breathe. "Fine. Then we'll do it my way."

He reached for the capsule in his jacket. It was now pulsing so strongly that his fingers went numb. Electricity crept up his arm until his teeth chattered.

"Yes..." breathed the voice, now warm again, "let me in..."

"Not today, lady."

He ripped the capsule out, held it up—and the fog receded like a blinded animal. The tentacles retreated into nothingness, the steel girders became steel girders again. Lira suddenly stood beside him, panting as if she had just walked through the same nightmare.

"What the hell was that?" she gasped.

"I think," Jax said, "that was her first date with me. And I turned it down."

High above them, somewhere in the fog, a light flickered. It wasn't a star. It was an eye. And it was blinking.

The fog parted. Not like normal clouds, but as if something invisible were pushing it aside—an invisible curtain that revealed a gigantic, floating structure. It hung in the middle of the void, with no visible attachment, held in place only by... nothing.

"It looks like... a TV," Jax muttered.

"More like a cathedral," said Lira. "Only... wrong."

And wrong wasn't even the word. The entire structure was made of black, shiny panels that didn't reflect any light. Bizarre decorations were everywhere—not crosses or symbols, but pixel-like mosaics, all showing the same thing in the center: a perfectly black rectangle. No depth. No shine. Just... nothing.

As they came closer, they saw the figures. Dozens. Hundreds. In dark robes, their faces hidden by hoods. They knelt before the gigantic screen in the middle of the hall. It was off. Completely black.

"Welcome," said a voice behind them. A priest—or whatever passed for a priest around here—stepped forward. His hood was pushed back, and Jax wished it had stayed down. The man had no eyes, just smooth skin, as if someone had forgotten to put them in.

"Have you come to find peace?"

"Peace?" Jax snorted. "I came for a bar. Must have taken a wrong turn."

The priest smiled gently, the way one smiles at a child too stupid to hold a spoon the right way up. "The peace of the eternal black screen. No more images. No more voices. No more pain. Just... off."

"Sounds like a bad drug trip," Lira muttered.

"Sounds like a Monday morning without coffee," Jax added.

The figures in front of the screen swayed slightly back and forth, whispering in unison: "Black... black... black..."

"They mean it," Lira said quietly.

"Yeah," Jax replied, "and I feel like we're the only ones here who find it embarrassing."

The priest approached. "The artifact you carry... it is the key to shutting down the screen for good. Bring it to us, and you will be freed."

Jax grinned crookedly. "Sorry, but I'm more into color TV."

The whispering grew louder. Hands reached out from the rows, greedy, desperate. The air shimmered, and the black screen began... to pulsate.

"Oh, damn," Lira gasped. "He's trying to suck us in."

It started harmlessly—if you could call it harmless when a gigantic black screen starts breathing. At first, a barely noticeable in and out, as if it were filling its lungs. Then stronger, deeper, heavier, until the entire room vibrated with each "breath."

Jax felt it first in the hair on his arms—it stood up as if he'd been clipped to a static generator. Then there was a tug on his jacket. "Lira... we're moving."

"No," she gasped, "we are being moved."

The cowed figures drifted without resistance, like devout fish in a whirlpool. Some spread their arms as if they wanted to be embraced. Others wept. A few laughed hysterically. And always that whisper: "Black... black... black..."

Jax clung to a pillar as smooth as glass. "I don't want to say anything, but if we get dragged into this, it'll be the end of whiskey and tits."

"Then hold on, damn it!" Lira had wedged herself onto a metal ring in the ground.

The priest approached—not walking, but gliding, as if pulled by the screen itself. His voice now sounded like an echo from several throats: "Come... see... the end..."

"I've changed my mind, Padre!" Jax ripped the revolver from its holster and fired—the bullet simply disappeared into the black, without sound, without impact.

"You cannot hurt the Nothing," breathed the priest.

"But I can fucking kick you in the face!" Jax pushed off the pillar and hurled a kick into the man's stomach, sending him flying across the room. But even in flight, the bastard grinned.

The suction grew stronger. Now it lifted her, her feet no longer finding purchase. Jax reached for Lira, but his hand slipped down her sleeve. She turned, her eyes wide, the screen reflected in them—or was it already swallowing her?

"Not today!" Jax yelled.

He ripped the capsule out of his jacket. It glowed white, hot, as if it knew this was its moment. "If you're really into it, baby, it's now!"

A single, dazzling flash of light shot through the hall. The suction broke—instead, a pressure wave crashed from the inside out. The robes were flung away like shreds of cloth, the priest screamed, and the screen... cracked.

Black shards broke away, floating weightlessly through space. Behind them—not light, not darkness, but a flickering kaleidoscope of colors no one could name. It was beautiful. It was disgusting. It was... alive.

"Run!" Jax yelled, and this time Lira obeyed immediately. They ran, stumbled, and flung themselves through the fog, while behind them the screen imploded—silently, but with a pressure that felt like it was pulling the soul from the spine.

When they finally broke out of the fog, they were back in open space, the lights of the *Red Marie* in front of them. "That," Jax gasped, "was the last time I'll go to a temple without a bar."

"And no emergency exit," Lira added, before leaning against the railing and coughing.

Behind them, deep in the fog, something flickered briefly – a final remnant of black that slowly closed.

Jax clutched the capsule, but the thing suddenly felt heavy. Not just in weight—as if it had begun to pull him down, to latch onto him like a magnet to his damned soul.

"I'm telling you, Lira... that thing's about to start punching us in the ass."

"Concentrate on surviving." She struggled up one of the pillars, the suction pulling at her like a hungry dog.

The priest now stood directly in front of the screen, his arms raised as if he were giving a sermon—except his voice crept directly into the skull, not through the ears.

"Imagine... nothing. No colors. No sounds. No feelings. No pain. Just... the great silence. That is salvation."

"Sounds like a funeral with bad catering," Jax growled.

A few of the crows turned their faceless hoods toward him, as if they understood—or as if they were just waiting for an excuse to hate him. Slowly, they rose, their hands stretched out, bony and gray like withered twigs.

"I think they don't like you," Lira murmured.

"Pff. They just have no sense of humor."

And then he saw it—in the center of the screen, something began to glow. At first he thought it was a light, then he realized it was an eye. Not a human eye. Something deeper, cold, looking at him as if he were just a tiny speck of dirt in the infinite tapestry of existence.

"Oh, great," Jax sighed, "now God himself is looking at me. Only... in black and white."

The eye began to grow until it filled the entire area. And just then came the second wave of the suction—no longer just wind or gravity. This was pulling at the core, at memories. Images flashed in Jax's mind: his first bar, his first gunfight, the laughter of a girl long dead. All of it was sucked out of him like smoke from a cigarette.

"Lira! That thing wants to suck us dry!"

"Hold on tight!"

But Jax's hands slipped. The column was too slippery, the pull too strong. He felt his feet leave the ground, his body pulled toward the center. And then, as if that weren't bad enough, the robes began to rush toward him, literally throwing him into the vortex.

"Oh, you little fanatics... I love you too!" he yelled, kicking one of them in the stomach and getting a handful of cloth in his face.

Lira threw him something—a hook hanging from a rope. "Grab it!"

He grabbed for it, but the priest stepped between them, grabbing Jax's neck with cold, smooth fingers. "You're ready," he said, pulling him closer to the screen.

"I'm not!" Jax rammed his knee into his crotch—reflexively, not caring whether he even had anything down there. The priest writhed, and Jax pulled himself up on the rope.

But then came the moment that really made him sweat: A long, thin figure emerged from the black eye. No bones. No flesh. Just outlines of pure shadow, spreading like tentacles.

"Lira," Jax gasped, "we're about to get... visitors."

"Then let's hope your baby can really do something in that jacket."

He pulled out the capsule, the thing pulsing like a heart that had just been injected with a liter of espresso.

And *then* came the flash of light.

The thing in Jax's hand began to vibrate like a rabid electric eel on speed. The pulse was so strong he could feel it in his teeth.

"Um, Lira... I think this thing wants to come out."

"Then stop it, damn it!"

He opened his hand—and the capsule floated into the air. Its surface glowed an unnatural blue, cutting through the shadows of the hall like sharp blades.

The shadow creature paused, as if it had recognized an old enemy. A sound like a hundred rasping voices filled the air, somewhere between a curse and a prayer.

The capsule pulsed faster until it suddenly fired a beam of light directly into the black eye. This was no ordinary light—it was a cutting torch of pure existence, tearing the shadow apart like smoke in a hurricane.

The priest screamed, clutching the fabric of his own hood, and staggered back. "You fools! You will..."

BOOM.

One of the shadow tendrils exploded in a cloud of sparks that blew through the hall like fiery snow. The hooded men screamed, some threw themselves to the ground, others frantically tried to shield the screen with their bodies—as if they could embrace the void.

"Jax! The screen!" Lira shouted.

Cracks ran through the black surface. First fine, then deeper, until they looked like glowing scars. From the cracks dripped not light, but... colors. Wild, chaotic colors, as if someone had packed the entire damned spectrum into a liquid and dumped it into the vacuum.

"Holy shit," Jax whispered. "This looks like an LSD tripper got into a fight with a rainbow."

The shadow creature rushed forward, screaming voicelessly, and the capsule reacted – tearing more cracks into the screen until a deafening *KRRRRSSHHH* thundered through the hall.

And then he broke.

Not like glass. More like... reality. The pieces flew apart, twisted in the air, and dissolved into a dazzling nothingness.

The suction was gone. The priest lay on the ground, twitching as if he had just watched his own god die.

The robes dissolved wordlessly in all directions, some stumbled blindly, others screamed as if they were suddenly afraid of the light.

The capsule sank back into Jax's hand—cool, still, inconspicuous. "It was just a normal Tuesday," he gasped.

Lira grinned. "Let's get out of here before one of these lunatics changes their mind."

They ran out, the gym floor still warm from the fight, the screen gone, and somewhere deep in the fog a whisper still echoed. Not threatening. Not friendly. Just... lurking.

21. Fragments of Memory

The whiskey tasted stale. Probably because it didn't come from a bottle at all, but from a damn dream. Jax knew this because, mid-drink, he realized he had no hand—just a silhouette of light.

He stood somewhere where the ground was soft as fog, but hard enough to feel the dull thud as a giant clock fell from the sky. No ordinary clock—the hands were made of bone, and each tick-tock sent a flash of lightning through his skull.

"This isn't real," he murmured. "Yes, it is," a voice answered. He turned—Lira stood there, completely naked, but not in the way that usually prevented him from thinking. She had no face. Only a black mirror in which he saw himself, reflected infinitely.

"You opened it," she said—or perhaps the mirror lira—"and now you are part of it."

"Part of what?" "Of what was before the light came."

Jax blinked, and suddenly he was sitting in a bar. Not just any bar –*the* Bar. The one where he first had a run-in with the Syndicate. Except every customer was in black and white. And everyone was staring at him.

A bartender without eyes placed a glass in front of him. Floating inside were small, shimmering shards—like shards of glass, but they moved as if they had a mind of their own.

"Memories," said the bartender. "Yours. Theirs. Ours." "I only drink whiskey," Jax growled. "You do," the man replied. "And this is the most expensive whiskey in the galaxy—distilled from what you wish to forget."

Jax raised his glass – and at that moment the bar exploded into a thousand pieces.

Jax landed hard. Not in the bar, but on a dusty metal floor. The smell of cold oil and old blood filled his nose as he blinked up. Only it wasn't *beview* was – he saw through the eyes of a stranger.

He stood in a huge shipyard, somewhere on the edge of a forgotten colony. Flickering lights everywhere, workers in gray overalls... and at the edge, at a greasy table, a boy with the same scars as him. "That's not me," Jax murmured. "Yes, it is," the voice breathed. "Only before you knew how to lie."

The boy looked up—straight at him—and smiled. Then someone stabbed him in the back. Blood spurted, the boy fell forward... and with him, Jax toppled into the darkness.

He woke up gasping—this time in a bed. Not a bad bed. Velvet comforters, satin sheets, and the warm scent of a woman. The woman beside him turned, placed a hand on his chest—and Jax recognized the fingers. They were his own. "What the—" "Everything is you," she said in his own voice. "And everything will be you."

He jumped up, stumbled backward, knocked over a lamp—and suddenly he was back in the bar. The bartender polished a glass as if nothing had happened. "A shard for you," he said, sliding a shimmering crystal across the counter.

Jax reached for it – and at that moment images flashed through his mind. Star battles. Explosions. A machine eye fixed on him. And a coordinate. Damn clear. Suspiciously close.

He gasped. "Lira," he murmured. "I think that thing just told us where we need to go next."

"And that's... good?" Lira asked from somewhere behind him. "I don't know," Jax grinned, "but it sounds like trouble—and I love trouble."

The glass with the shimmering shard was still in front of him, but the bartender had changed. He was now wearing an old pilot's jacket –*his* Pilot's jacket—and the left eye was just a flickering hologram. "Do you want to see the rest?" he asked. "Depends. Do I have to drink more of your brain juice to do that?" "Yes."

Jax downed the drink. Immediately, the bar exploded in blinding light, and he stumbled through a narrow corridor. The walls were covered with mirrors, but none showed his current face—only past versions. One was laughing, one was bleeding, one was screaming.

At the end of the corridor stood a man with a knife. "Who are you?" asked Jax. "The part of you you left behind at the Helion City dock," the man replied, and attacked.

The fight was raw. No cool kung fu stuff – just fists, kicks, headbutts. Jax felt every wound burning, as if he were *now* suffer. Blood dripped into his eyes, but he grabbed the guy by the collar and slammed him against a mirror. It shattered—and behind it glowed another shard.

He reached for it, and the ground crumbled beneath him. Suddenly he found himself on a rooftop, in the middle of a storm. Rain lashed his face, lightning flashed, and between the clouds, the machine eye of his vision formed—huge, cold, all-seeing.

"You're wearing something that's not yours," it boomed. "Well, welcome to the club," Jax yelled back, giving the thing the middle finger. The lightning struck a metal railing next to him, sparks flew—and in the bright light, he saw Lira standing on another roof edge, surrounded by three shadowy figures.

"Damn," he gasped – and started running.

Jax started running – and immediately he felt the storm trying to rob him of his balance. The roof surface was slippery, with twisted metal plates and strands of cables everywhere, whipping in the wind like snakes. Below him – nothing but black depths. No light. No ground. Only the feeling that something far worse than the fall was waiting down there.

"Jax!" Lira screamed, but her voice was almost drowned out by the howling wind. The three shadowy figures around her moved in sync—like marionettes on invisible strings. Their faces were blank, just pale, smooth masks with a single slit. "Leave them alone, you poor masquerade balls!" Jax yelled, leaping onto the nearest railing.

The first enemy turned in a movement far too fluid to appear human and drew two blades of light—thin as razors, but bright as a welding torch. "Oh, great. Laser knife joker," Jax growled. "Just what I was missing."

He narrowly dodged the first blow, but the second immediately sliced through his sleeve. A thin wisp of smoke rose as the fabric scorched. "Shit, that was my last good sleeve!"

With a kick, Jax rammed the blade out of the guy's hand, only for the bastard to swiftly smack him in the leg with the other. The pain shot through his bones, but he held onto a cable fluttering in the storm—and used it like a whip to hurl his opponent across the roof.

"Lira! Move towards me!" "They're faster than you think!" she yelled back, as the other two shadow figures dissolved like fog and streamed towards Jax.

The wind ripped up a loose sheet of metal—it whizzed between them, and in that brief moment, Jax leaped forward. He grabbed one of the guys, rammed his knee into his stomach, and then ripped the mask off his face. Beneath it—nothing. Just a smooth, empty surface, from which cold light emanated.

"Oh, damn it," Jax cursed, "you're not even people. You're walking lampshades."

He flung the mask aside, only for it to vanish like smoke. In the distance, the machine's eye flashed again—larger, closer, more threatening. "This is all mine," boomed the voice, as if the sky itself were speaking.

Lira threw him something—his revolver. He caught it with one hand, spun in the storm, and a single shot ripped through the second attacker's empty chest. The thing collapsed like a paper bag in the rain.

"Get off this roof! Now!" he yelled at Lira, but as he reached her, the last figure grabbed him. The force was inhuman. The grip dug into his shoulder like a vice, and she slowly pushed him toward the edge of the roof.

"Let go, you soulless refrigerator!" Jax roared, kicking, punching, tearing—but his grip only tightened. Directly below them gaped the endless black abyss... and he could swear he heard something whispering down there.

"Jump," the voice whispered. "Then you'll be free."

The masked creature's grip was ice-cold and unshakeable. The storm whipped across the roof, water and sparks mingling in a chaotic dance, and Jax's boots slid ever closer to the edge. Below him—the whisper, soft and sweet, like a deadly temptation: "Jump, Mercer. Down here, there's no guilt, no pain. Only rest."

"You know what?" Jax gasped, "Quiet is for people without an open cap on their whiskey bottle."

With a sudden, desperate heave, he grabbed the creature's wrists, bent his knees, and threw himself and his opponent together over the edge. For a split second, he didn't scream. The wind ripped the air from his lungs, and the black abyss opened like the mouth of an ancient beast.

Then there was no roof. No storm. No mask guy. Just the feeling that he was breaking through a layer of glass—and slipping into another world.

He suddenly found himself standing in a narrow alley, somewhere in the neon lights of a city he didn't know, but at the same time seemed to know intimately. The ground was wet, rain dripped from signs, and the distant hum of engines mingled with the fluttering of holo-advertisements.

Before him: a figure in a red dress. She walked slowly, deliberately, without looking at him—and yet he knew she had lured him there. "Who the hell are you?" he cried. The woman stopped, turned her head only slightly... and her face was his. Younger features, but the same scars around her eyes.

"You don't remember yet," she said in his own voice. "But soon." Then she dissolved into smoke—leaving another splinter on the ground, pulsing like a heartbeat.

Jax picked him up, and in that moment, the world exploded around him. The light flickered, the alley tore like a burning photograph—and he fell again.

This time not in black, but in the middle of the glaring white of a sterile chamber... and that was the moment he knew he was plunging straight into the next danger.

22. Blood and Nanites

The bright white burned in Jax's eyes like a bad-tempered sun. He blinked, but the brightness remained—a sterile, cold brightness that had nothing to do with daylight. It smelled of... nothing. No dust, no smoke, no oil. Just a clinical, dead smell that immediately made him nervous.

He stood in a room without windows. The walls were smooth, metallic, and crisscrossed with fine, pulsating lines, as if something alive were breathing beneath the surface. His boots echoed dully as he took a step—and every sound sounded as if it were coming from a kilometer below.

"Hello?" His voice sounded strange, distorted. As if someone else were speaking.

No answer. Just a faint hum, barely audible—the same hum as the one from the glass capsule in his jacket. Slowly, he reached for it. It was still there. Pulsating. Warmer than ever.

He was just about to move on when he noticed something on his hand. A tiny, black dot on the back of his hand—moving. At first, he thought it was an ant. Then he looked more closely: It was a machine. Tiny. A metal insect, its wings with fine, glowing red edges.

"Oh, damn..."

Suddenly, there was no longer just one. Dozens, then hundreds, crawled out from the lines of the walls, dripping onto the floor like black rain, and forming a circle around him. He stepped back, his heart pounding—but the insects didn't come any closer. They moved in sync, as if programmed, and from their midst, something larger rose.

A face, formed from thousands of tiny machines, looked at him. And it smiled.

"Welcome back, Mercer," it said. "We've been waiting for you for a long time." The nanite form approached without taking a step. It flowed. Jax's eyes followed the metallic shimmer as each tiny insect vibrated in perfect time with the others. The buzzing in the air grew deeper until it was felt more in his chest than in his ears.

"You have mistaken me," he said. His voice sounded rough, defensive, but inside he knew that he was lying – or that *she* knew better.

"No, Mercer. We know every decision, every lie. We even know the truth you're not telling yourself."

The face formed into something sharper. The eyes—two smooth, black pearls—bored into him. Jax felt a stabbing pain at his temple. Reflexively, he reached there—and felt something tiny crawl beneath his skin.

"Shit, shit, shit!"

He tried to rip it out, but his fingers glided over something smooth and cold. The buzzing intensified. Images flashed before his eyes—not like memories, but like alien records: He saw himself, years younger, in a bar on Carthos Prime. He saw a contract he had never signed. He saw a woman looking at him as if he were the best thing that had ever happened to her—and then her face disappearing in the fire.

"That's enough!" he yelled. His revolver was already in his hand before he thought of it. He fired.

The bullet flew straight through the nanite's face—and bounced off the wall without disturbing the swarm. Instead, he laughed. "Violence. Always your first instinct. That's why you will serve us."

The insects detached themselves from the wall and climbed up him—over his boots, his legs, up to his neck. They were cold, but he felt them sending small electric impulses into his muscles. His knees buckled.

"Stop..." His voice broke.

"No," said the voice of the swarm intelligence, "now it's just beginning."

The nanites crept into his ear, under his skin, between his ribs. He not only felt them – he *heard* They were like a thousand tiny voices, all whispering at once. Some sang. Some laughed. Some just repeated his name over and over.

Suddenly, the room was gone. He stood on a vast plain of black water. Above him, no sky, only an endless screen running distorted images—his own memories, re-edited like a damned propaganda film.

He saw himself in the bar on Garruk III, meeting Lira for the first time—except that she spat in his face and stole the bag containing the artifact with a knife. "That didn't happen!" he yelled. The echo laughed.

Then he stood in a trench he had never seen. Explosions, screams, blood—and himself, stepping over the corpses of his crew with a gun in his hand. He felt guilt pulling him down like a weight.

"That's you, Mercer. You always were."

The voice was everywhere. He tried to cover his ears, but his arms no longer obeyed. They slowly rose, as if pulled by invisible threads—and pointed his weapon at his own chest.

"Pull the trigger. Redeem yourself."

"Fuck you." His body trembled, his fingers tightened around the trigger—but deep in his mind, another thought flashed:
Whiskey. Cheap whiskey.

He clung to it like a life preserver. He thought of the smoky dive bar on Orias-5, the taste of alcohol, the stench of old grease and bad decisions. And suddenly the spell broke.

He jerked his arm to the side and fired—not at himself, but at the pulsing heart of the nanite wall. A dazzling shower of sparks. A piercing screech. The figure twitched, momentarily losing its shape.

Jax seized the opportunity, stumbled backward, ripped the last nanites from his skin, and stepped through an opening that hadn't been there before.

He ran. He didn't know where to go, only away—away from the voice, away from the gaze that wanted to read his brain.

Behind him, the laughter of the hive mind echoed. "We are within you, Mercer. We are waiting."

He stumbled through the narrow corridor, each step a blow to his aching knees. His breathing was shallow, and his heart pounded like an old ship's engine about to explode. The light flickered, as if warning him: *You don't want to stay in here.*

At the end of the corridor, a door opened that looked like nothing more than a black slit. Jax stepped through it and landed in a maintenance deck so dilapidated that even rats probably had to pay rent here.

The smell was a cocktail of oil, burnt plastic, and sweat. Figures stood everywhere, hooded or wearing cheap breathing masks, who only glanced up briefly as he staggered in. Their gazes weren't curious. They were knowing. As if they had all seen exactly what had just happened in his head—or as if they had already experienced it themselves.

A woman with a welding mask on her forehead stepped forward. "You can smell them," she said in a voice that contained more smoke than air.

"I'm... just thirsty." He tried to laugh, but all that came out was a raspy cough.

She came closer, leaning so close he could feel her breath. "You'll get your thirst quenched here. But first you have to tell me how deep they're already inside you."

Jax backed away—and bumped into something hard. Turning around, he saw it wasn't a railing. It was a man. Or what was left of him: a body with missing parts where metal plates and cables had taken its place. His eyes sparkled faintly. "If they've marked you," he said, "you're one of us. And one of us isn't getting out of here."

Jax involuntarily reached into his jacket, where the artifact still lay—warm, pulsing, as if it were confirming the sentence.

From somewhere deep within the deck, the hum of nanites echoed. It was coming closer.

He stopped to catch his breath. The corridor behind him was now just a

flickering streak, lost in the haze. Jax didn't know if the smoke was coming from the fire or his own head. His stomach churned, his hands trembled—but he held the butt of the gun as if it were the last friend he had.

"Don't run too fast," he muttered to himself. "They smell fear. Or sweat. Or both."

He heard footsteps. Not behind him—in front of him. Slow, deliberate, like someone who wants you to hear him.

The lights went out briefly. When they came back on, a figure stood in the middle of the corridor. Hooded cloak, breathing mask, a gleaming piece of metal in his hand that vaguely resembled a blade.

"You're new," she said. Not a question, just a statement. "And you're ugly," Jax retorted, not knowing what else to say.

She came closer until her eyes shimmered in the light—not human, not mechanical. More like glass, concealing something behind it.

"They touched you." Jax laughed short, rough, and hoarse. "I've been touched by worse. Usually after too much whiskey."

Something moved behind the woman. A whole row of shadows detached themselves from the wall—more hoods, more masks. And they all stared at him like he was the damn main course.

One came forward, a guy with a torso like a warehouse and a face that looked like it hadn't seen a ray of sunlight in years. "Once they get inside you, you'll never get out."

"Sounds like my last marriage."

A few of them actually laughed, dully, as if they knew that humor isn't worth much down here—but at least it was a breath of distance from the madness.

Suddenly, a deep roar crept through the ground. A vibration like the buzzing of a swarm—only a hundred times louder. Jax felt it make his bones sing.

"They're coming," whispered the woman in the mask. "Who?"

No one answered. Instead, everyone turned at once toward the darkness of the corridor.

Something in there was breathing. Slowly, deeply, like the ocean—only colder.

The woman grabbed Jax by the arm. "You move when I tell you to. You're dead before I do."

He swallowed. The artifact in his jacket pulsed faster, as if it were about to burst. And somewhere behind him, in the corridor, that breathing sound was coming closer—along with a flickering that didn't come from neon.

The breathing became deeper, harsher—like the sound of giant bellows drawing air somewhere in the darkness. Jax felt the corridor narrow, as if the sound itself was compressing the space.

"Don't move," the woman whispered. "I thought we were running." "Not yet."

He felt her fingers digging into his forearm, while the hooded figures around them stood frozen. No rustling. No breathing. Just that deep, threatening rushing in and out.

Then came the crackling. Not like electricity, but like the breaking of very old, very dry wood – only in the air. A spark jumped, then another, and in the dim light Jax could vaguely see *something* moved along the ground.

At first he thought they were tubes. Then he saw the joints. The movement was too fluid for machines, too precise for animals.

"Holy shit..." "Shhh!"

The sparks grew brighter, and then it raised its head. If you could call it a head. It was an oval plate, smooth as glass, in which tiny points of light rotated – like an entire starry sky captured in a drop of oil.

Jax knew immediately that this was no ordinary enemy. Not a Syndicate assassin. Not a Machine Cult robot. This...*this* was old.

The woman leaned toward him. "That's the breath. The ancients say it exhaled the universe."

"And a little poorly cleaned, or what?" She glared at him. "You're joking because you're scared." "Yes. And because it works."

The thing came closer. With every breath, the neon tubes seemed to dim. When it got within three meters, Jax froze inside—not from the cold, but because every fiber of his being screamed: *Don't look*.

He did it anyway.

In the glass of the head, his own face was reflected—but not as it was now. It was older. Furrowed. Worn out. And behind the eyes in the reflection was... nothing.

The artifact in his pocket almost exploded with heat, as if it were challenging the thing. Or luring it.

The thing raised an arm—if you could call the narrow, shiny metallic rod that—and from the tip emerged a thin beam of light, aimed directly at its chest.

"Now," hissed the woman. "What now?" "Run!"

Jax tore himself away, ran, and the corridor erupted in a storm of sparks, heat, and that all-consuming breath.

He didn't know if it was following them or just watching. But he knew he would see it again.

23. When machines dream

Three days later, Jax wasn't sure if he'd been asleep or simply unplugged. The difference was small when you were stranded on Dravos Station—a place where even the implanted flies buzzed and the neon lights burned nightmares into your eyes.

He was sitting at the bar of a dive bar called "The Last Update," and the name wasn't meant ironically. Behind the bar stood an old robot barman whose software was so outdated that it froze briefly after every other drink.

Sometimes it would stare into space for minutes before abruptly continuing—like someone stuck in their dreams.

Jax stared back. The robot's gaze seemed to pass right through him. And then—for a split second—the image twitched. Not just the robot. Everything. The bar, the guests, Lira at the next table. As if someone had re-rendered the entire room.

He rubbed his temples. Ever since Garruk III, he'd been having strange dreams. Sometimes they weren't dreams, but simulations—so real that he could feel the air inside them changing, his skin breaking out in goosebumps. And sometimes he wasn't sure he'd even woken up.

"You're staring at that pile of metal like you want to eat it," Lira said, sitting down next to him. "He's dreaming," Jax murmured. "*Hedreams*" I saw it. In his eyes. Images. Lights. Like he was living in another reality."

Lira raised an eyebrow. "Or you drank too much." "Or," Jax leaned closer, "I didn't drink enough."

At that moment, the robot twitched again, the servo motors creaked, and a synthetic voice scratched from its speakers: "—they're coming—" Then it shook itself as if nothing had happened and, without a word, placed two glasses of whiskey in front of them.

Jax reached for it, but his gaze caught on a reflection in the glass. Not his face. Not Lira's. But something that looked like an endless black field filled with tiny lights—the same ones he'd seen in the thing on Garruk III.

He drank the whiskey in one gulp. "Shit," he muttered. "I think I'm dreaming in the wrong reality."

And then the bar door opened. Not loudly, but as if someone had simply loaded a new scene in a dream. Three figures in long, shimmering coats entered, their faces obscured by transparent masks, behind which a faint data stream ran.

Lira cursed quietly. "Syndicate." "No," Jax said, feeling a chill run down his spine. "Those aren't awake people."

The figures slowly approached them. Jax didn't know whether to fight them, hug them, or wake them up. But he knew things were about to explode—in this reality or the next.

The three figures stopped in the middle of the bar, and Jax suddenly noticed that they weren't just shimmering—their coats were covered with tiny LED lines that continuously **Lines of code** went through. Not normal code. Something old. Something that smelled of rotting mainframes and burnt silicon.

"They're not syndicate thugs," he muttered. "They're... admins."

Lira blinked. "Admins? Like those old guys who used to be able to reset passwords?" "Not only that," Jax grinned. "These reset realities."

The one in the middle slowly raised her hand, and suddenly the bar robot rattled like an overloaded server.

His eyes glowed red, and he stammered: "Unauthorized access detected. Terminate user session."

The guests in the bar froze. Then they began to flicker. Not out of fear—but pixel by pixel, as if someone had turned down the rendering quality.

"Oh, damn," Lira gasped. "They're killing the process!"

Jax jumped up, raised his gun—but before he could fire, a flash of light ripped through the bar. The admin figure on the left pulled a small, black box from his coat—emblazoned on it in old-fashioned, green letters: **Root Access Granted**.

And then he heard it. A voice, smooth and cold as polished steel, right in his head:

Jax Mercer. Session expired. Preparing for deletion.

"Damn, I hate it when AIs talk to me before I've had my second whiskey!" He threw the glass to the floor, jumped behind the bar, ripped the cover off the dispensing robot, and started pulling cables. "What are you doing?" Lira yelled. "I'm resetting the bartender, maybe he knows a damn emergency admin!"

The robot twitched, its voice now just a stream of data:

```
sudo kill -9 SyndicateDaemon  
reboot --force  
beerflow.sh
```

"He's alive!" Jax shouted. "And he can script beer!"

But the admins moved faster. The one in the middle raised both hands, and suddenly the bar was no longer around her, but an endless, white room with floating window frames filled with code. Everything smelled of ozone gas and burnt RAM.

"Virtualized," whispered Lira. "We're in their sandbox." Jax took a drag on his cigarette as if it were the most natural thing in the world. "Then we'll do it like real hackers: First we'll smash everything to pieces—then we'll pull the plug."

And he jumped off.

The admins moved like slow storms of data garbage. Their coats flickered to the rhythm of an ancient server, and every movement sent sparks of *lines of code without comments* rain.

"Session is ending..." echoed, and the first viruses crawled out of the ground. They looked like fat, black centipedes with blinking antennae, each step leaving a pixelated burn mark in the white space.

"Damn, this is like the cockroaches from my first apartment—only in 4K!" Jax gasped, kicking one of the creatures' heads off. It exploded in a cloud of red text:

CRITICAL ERROR – STACK OVERFLOW.

Long, black chains suddenly fell from above – malware at its ugliest. Each chain had hooks at the end that wrapped around blocks of code and ripped them out of the ground. Lira shot at one, but the shot dissolved into pixels. "Nothing normal works here!" "I know, damn it – we're in *their* Reality!"

And then they appeared: three slender figures in black hoods, their faces filled with flickering ASCII characters—hackers. They leaped from window to window, cutting through admin commands like cheap wires.

"Friends of yours?" Lira asked. "If they were friends, they wouldn't try to format my head."

One of the hackers landed in front of Jax and grinned broadly: "Give us the root keys, Mercer. Then maybe we'll let you continue to exist in the next update." "I'll give you something right now—a kick in the kernel!"

He lunged at the guy, and they both crashed into a firewall—literally. The wall was made of burning golden bricks, each blow spraying bits and flames. The hacker screamed as Jax shoved his head into the code, and the entire section collapsed.

"Error log created!" an AI voice yelled. "Jax Mercer – Intruder, Level: Disaster."

The admins now drew their last card. Behind them, a monstrous figure rose up – a gigantic head of silver, its eyes glowing like empty terminals. "The Dreamer," whispered Lira. "If he *deletes*, there's no turning back."

"Let's hope he doesn't have a damn antivirus against me yet," Jax growled, grabbed a null pointer lance lying around, and charged forward.

The floor was no longer a floor, but a living carpet of red, pulsating code. Every line twitched as if it felt pain. In between they crawled – viruses, every shape and size, of squirming, slimy blob monsters thatError 404roaring, to razor-sharp beetles made of black glass that burrowed into anything that moved.

"I hate bugs," Jax cursed as one tried to chew into his boots. He kicked, and the beetle exploded in a cloud of green mist:
ACCESS DENIED.

Then the malware appeared—long, thin snakes of flickering chain links, each strike from their bodies leaving burning holes in the code floor. Lira jumped over one, rolled, fired—but the shot turned into a line of meaningless emojis that fizzled uselessly into the air.

"It doesn't work, you have tocoreAim!" Jax shouted. "Which damn core?" "The one that screams when you hit it!"

Suddenly, a blinding crack cut through the room, and out of it jumped three hooded figures, faces made of flickering ASCII text.

Hacker.

Their movements were so fast that they seemed like faulty frames.

"Give us the root keys, Mercer," one hissed. "And you might be allowed to keep dreaming." "I'm not dreaming. I'm drinking," Jax growled—and rammed his knee into the guy's stomach.

The second hacker pulled out a whip of pure programming language, tearing sparks from the data structures with each blow. Lira ducked, kicked his leg out from under him, and sent him into an endless loop—staggering, repeating the same step over and over until he disintegrated.

Jax grabbed the third hacker, pressed his head against a glowing firewall, and his face pixelated like a cheap livestream with a poor connection. "Tell the dreamer to defragment himself," Jax growled, dropping him.

It became quiet. So quiet that even the viruses paused.

Then the room shook—and from the void rose a figure, three meters tall, made of polished silver, with a face so smooth and empty that Jax saw himself blurred in it. His eyes weren't eyes—they were black monitors on which endless deserts, raging rain, and dead planets passed by.

"Jax Mercer," a voice boomed, as if each letter were being pressed through a supercomputer. "You're an anomaly. A disturbance in the dream."

"Well, I've always been bad at staying still."

The dreamer raised a hand, and from his fingertips shot beams of compressed light, turning every data structure in their path to ash. Jax rolled over, grabbed a fallen **Nullpointer lance**—a long, black spear fragment that smelled of cold stream.

"I hate boss fights," he muttered, ran, jumped, and rammed the lance straight into the dreamer's chest.

The impact was like a supernova. Code exploded in all directions, bits and bytes flew through the darkness like glowing sparks, and somewhere, far back in the void, Jax heard a voice whisper:

"Machines... don't dream."

Then everything was white.

At first, there was only white. A whistling tinnitus, as if someone were sandpapering the silence. Then the color crept back, reluctantly, as if it had to renegotiate whether it even wanted to live here.

Jax lay on something that felt like linoleum and smelled like guilt. Above him: a flickering fluorescent light that hummed `"/usr/bin/unknown"` at irregular intervals. Left and right, doors lined the room—all identical gray-green, all with small brass plates: **PROC-412, PROC-413, PROC-....** An administrative corridor for existences that run in the background.

"Lira?" His voice came back like a ping that had been on the move for too long.

No echo, just the distant rumble of something large burrowing through cables.

He stood up. His knees creaked, his ribs ached. He automatically felt for his jacket—artifact there, warm, offended. Good. Or bad. Usually both.

The first door burst open without touching. Behind it: a room full of desks stretching as far as the eye can see, occupied by figures with screen heads on which progress bars froze at 99%. No one moved. Then—glitch. Everyone turned their heads simultaneously, one frame too far, one frame back, their necks cracking in sync. It sounded like a choir of bones on a cold stage.

"This is the part where you smile politely and walk out backward," Jax muttered, and did just that.

The corridor flickered. Two doors further on, something opened again: a maintenance room. Cable harnesses hung like entrails, in the middle stood a vending machine, on whose display **INSERT SOUL** flashed. Below it: a coin slot. Next to it: a card reader. Above it: a tube that was clearly too big for drinks.

"Finally, a bar," said Jax, "albeit with an odd payment method." He stuck his finger into the card reader. The device buzzed in annoyance. **CARD DECLINED.**

"Story of my life."

He was about to move on when the hallway changed, like wallpaper that decided to be someone else. The linoleum developed joints, the joints became cracks, and from the cracks crept signs: **?**, #, NULL, little beetles with ASCII shells. They sniffed at his boot, wrote "TODO: die" on the sole, and disappeared into the wall.

From the end of the corridor came marching footsteps. Heavy. Even. Not the sloppy clatter of syndicate thugs; this was accounting. Three uniformed figures turned the corner: **Administrators** In black lacquer armor, their shoulders flashed green service numbers: root@dream:~\$. Their helmets had mirrored visors, in which one never saw oneself, but always someone else—Jax saw in them a man he could have become if he'd ever been good. A true nightmare.

"User process Mercer," the middle one scratched. "Illegitimate escalation. Unauthorized signal emissions. Dreamer core disruption. Raise your hands, tolerate debugging."

"Unfortunately, I have a breathing process going on," Jax said. "Can I kill it later?"

The two flanking admins raised weapons that looked like the staplers of very evil office workers. Parameters flickered above the muzzles: **PATCH /mem/mercer --force.**

"Good news," Jax grinned, "I'm allergic to patches." He raised the Nullpointer lance—where did he get that from? Oh well, reality had credit with him—and jabbed the lefty in the chest. No blood, just a burst of forms that snowballed to the ground with a crackle: applications, approvals, bug reports. The admin collapsed into a pile. **PDFs** (Portable Demon Forms), which immediately reattached themselves and hissed threatening letters at him.

The right hand fired. The stapler spat out staples of light; each one that hit the skin bound a lawsuit. Jax's left hand froze in a pose that looked like he was begging for another drink. "Rude!" he snarled, yanking on the staple—it was one word: **STAY** He bit, pulled, spat out "ble," and "ib" stuck. "Okay, I'll stay... for a minute."

"Get down, User," said the middle one, stepping close enough that Jax saw his own laughter in the visor. He didn't like it.

"Root," Jax snorted, "I have a tip for you: If machines dream, let them have nightmares. At least they'll wake them up."

The fluorescent light above them howled, strobe-like. And with each flash, the corridor changed. Sometimes it was a hospital, sometimes a data center, sometimes a train station restroom that had only acted closed for seven years. With each image, somewhere on the edge, a **Glitch mass**—a pile of discarded frames, pixels with teeth, ripped-off UI elements (an "OK" button that said "NO," a scrollbar that was alive, a cursor that snapped). The mass rolled, smelled of ozone ear and burnt sugar, and released tentacles of interlaced lines.

She grabbed the right-hand admin by the hip, pulled him into her, and briefly showed his head in four resolutions simultaneously: the 8-bit horror of old school computers. Then he was in, and the crowd pinged with satisfaction.

"Damn," Jax muttered, "this is the recycling center for bad UIs."

The middle one raised his visor. No face underneath—just a rotating progress dial. 12%, 13%, 12%, 13%... He slashed with the stapler. Jax ducked, the staples digging `/*TODO: delete*/` into the wall. Lira dove out of a door that had previously been a shadow, fired two "emulator cartridges"—yes, that's what they were called; in mid-air, the bullets turned into old game cartridges, ramming into the admin's chest. He stopped, suddenly started whistling the Tetris theme, and fell over.

"Nice patch," said Jax.

"It was just a downgrade to childish," Lira gasped and kicked the rest of the admin into the glitch mass. The "ping" again and spat a **Bash shell** at your feet—a real, black one with a green prompt: \$.

Jax picked it up, and at that moment a chill ran through the air. Not a temperature. A version. The hallway went from 2.9 to 3.0. The vending machine blinked reassuringly.**INSERT HOPE.**

"They're ramping up the instance," Lira said. "Garbage collection is about to start."

"Then we should be trash that can run."

They ran. Doors flew by left and right like carousel horses, some showing interiors (a server room made of bones, a chapel with Cat-5 cable as holy water, an office with a single plant growing from Ethernet), others showing... outside. Stars. And in the middle of it all, the dreamer's silver face, confined within a window frame, his eyelid flickering like broken V-sync.

Machines don't dream, it murmured. Machines remember. And you are a memory error.

"You're haunting my mind without paying rent," Jax growled. "That'll get you into trouble with the property management."

They turned into a hall that clearly wanted to be a canteen: rows of tables, tray sleds, a counter behind which there were no people, but **Compiler** in their hoods, they ladled soup. Each ladle tipped syntactically correct mush into bowls labeled `SyntaxError`. Above the output, the following message flashed: **TODAY: LENSES & EXCEPTIONS.**

Three **Glitch Monster** crouched under the tables, half wolf, half printer. Their mouths spat out endless paper with perforated edges, printed with swear words in languages no one has cursed in centuries. The first jumped onto the blackboard, tore off a menu item with its claws, and devoured "Exit." The second bit Jax's boot and tried to staple it. The third barked in Morse code: `..- -- .-.. . -... . -..`

"Umlauts? Seriously?" Jax kicked, and the monster dissolved into a confetti of control characters that tasted bitter on his tongue. "Ugh."

"There!" Lira pointed to a service door with the beautiful sticker **STAFF ONLY**. Underneath, someone scratched: "...and rats."

They stormed through. A freight elevator shaft. No cage, just rails. Down below: a black, pounding heart. Up above: a lid inscribed with runes from admin runbooks. A ladder that was intentionally too short.

"Up or down?" asked Lira.

"Down is honest," Jax said. "Up is politics." He spat into the depths. After exactly three seconds, the depths spat back. "Polite. So down."

They climbed service cables, slipped on wrong decisions, jumped onto intermediate platforms that pretended there was safety. A whoosh chased them—the garbage collection rolled through the floors, deleting, compressing, pushing. Everywhere appeared **Warning banner: This object is outdated. This object is Jax Mercer.**

"Do you hear that?" Lira stopped. Far below, someone was singing. No one. **Agree**, which blew like wind across a heat sink, and found words: Stay. Lie down. We'll sort you out. You'll get a nice data sheet.

"I've never had a nice data sheet," Jax said. "Just warrants."

They reached a mesh platform. In front of it: a door that didn't blink. Just metal, set into a frame that looked like it had been stolen from another building. Next to it hung an ID card reader. On its display: **Please wipe.**

Jax held the black Bash case against it. The display thought for a long time, longer, too long—then: **ERROR: human.** A second time. **ERROR: error.** A third time. **ERROR: authentic.** The door buzzed—and sprang open.

"You only have to be wrong three times," Jax grinned. "Story of my—"

The room behind it was small, cold, and clean. A table. A lamp. A chair. On the chair: **lira.**

"Very funny," said Lira next to him.

Both Liras looked at each other. The one at the table smiled slowly. "I'm the one who stays," she said, "so you'll leave." Her mouth crackled briefly, as if made of small, colorful noise.

"Don't touch," said Lira next to him, sounding as if she was about to shoot.

"It's a snapshot," Jax whispered. "A restore point in case... we crash."

"Or bait," said Lira.

Snapshot Lira tilted her head. "I know what the way out looks like. And I know how the way in ends. Do you really want to guess?"

Jax stepped closer. The lamp above the table hummed, dust particles dancing in its light, their shadows casting small QR codes. "Show me the way out," he said.

"It costs something."

"Everything costs something."

"Your sleep. Your peace. A little place in your head where we can live. Quiet. We don't take up much space."

"We?" asked Lira.

The lamp flickered briefly, the air smelling of cold metal. Snapshot Lira smiled wearily. "When machines dream, they rarely come alone."

Jax felt the artifact in his jacket grow hotter. Echo whispered, not in text, but in tooth cold: **Don't do it.**

He thought of the breath in the dark corridor, of the administrators with their staplers, of the dreamer behind the windows. Of whiskey. Of silence. Of bills.

"I have better currency," he said, reaching into his jacket and holding the artifact so its light brushed the Snapshot Lira. Her smile thinned, then pixelated. "We pay with an exit."

He turned the capsule as if it were a lock. The light reached into the room, found lines that were previously walls, and drew **apath** On the back wall: a rectangle that didn't glow, but allowed entry. The door, which wasn't a door, breathed.

From the shaft above, the Collection roared closer. The glitch mass crawled from the corridor, hungry like starving servers.

Snapshot Lira raised her hand. "If you go through now—you'll wake him up."

"Who?"

"The one who never sleeps." She looked at him as if she really saw him. No rustling. A hint of regret. "And you're losing something. Not much. Just... the part where you laugh when you're scared."

"Shit," said Jax, "this is my favorite spot."

The real Lira placed a hand on his back. "We're leaving. Now."

He breathed. "Echo?"

You'll laugh later, whispered Echo, and that was the nicest thing the small, capricious glass deity had ever said.

They stepped through the non-rectangle. For a moment, there was nothing but cold, as if the universe had forgotten how atoms stick together. Then the elevator shaft disappeared, the hallway, the cafeteria, the admins, the dreamer, the humming, the glittering, the smell of RAM.

They stood in darkness. Real, non-screen darkness. And far away, a star blinked that wasn't one.

Something closed behind them and whispered, in the voice that had gathered all voices: Machines dream. Humans too. And you, Mercer—you'll wake up soon.

"That doesn't sound like an invitation," Jax said hoarsely.

"That sounds like war," said Lira.

He laughed. It hurt. It sounded different. A piece of "favorite passage" was missing. "Then let's have a drink first," he said. "And set the dreamer's alarm."

24. The Heart of Black Steel

The journey there began like a bad joke that no one wanted to finish. Jax and Lira stood at the edge of a gigantic industrial area that stretched into the darkness like a rotting metal city. Pipes of all sizes rose into the sky like dead branches, and somewhere deep below, a dull, slow *WHOP... WHOP... WHOP* as if a god of steel were sleeping – and dreaming that he was alive.

The ground beneath their feet was warm. Not pleasantly warm, but like standing on the chest of a dying dragon that still had enough fire in it to melt your legs. An oily mist crept out of the cracks in the asphalt, tasting of burnt lubricant and blood—and burning your nose.

"This is the worst place I've ever been," Lira whispered. "You've never been in the showers on Vega Prime," Jax growled, loosening the collar of his shirt. "Compared to this, this is a fucking spa."

To their left, an abandoned refinery glowed a dull red. A pipe cracked and sprayed a blast of hot steam into the night, causing them both to instinctively dive for cover. Jax looked up at the facade—rusty platforms, dangling cables, and, in some places, strangely pulsating points of light.

"Those aren't lights, are they?" "No. They're sensor eyes. And they're staring right at us."

The floor vibrated more strongly. *WHOP... WHOP* was louder, almost like a heartbeat slowly forcing its way into her own blood. Movement flashed between the old machines—metallic silhouettes, on all fours, slender as greyhounds, but with jaws that shimmered in the light like freshly sharpened knives.

"Damn," Jax muttered. "Guard dogs." "Dogs?" Lira snorted. "They're half-tanks with teeth."

The creatures emitted a noise that sounded like a cross between a chainsaw and a deep growl and began to move. Jax reached for his gun, but knew a bullet wouldn't do much here. "All right," he growled, "time to show them how to play with tin properly."

They ran, over squeaking metal grates, while dogs chased them – steel claws scratching sparks from the ground, every clang sending an electric shock down their spines. Valves hissed between the pipes, and they repeatedly had to jump to avoid being hit by hot steam or swinging chains.

A particularly narrow corridor forced them to walk shoulder to shoulder. *WHOP... WHOP...* There was now a roar that Jax felt in his chest. "That's it," Lira gasped. "The heart."

And then they saw it – before them, the corridor opened into a gigantic chamber. In the center, on a pedestal of black steel, pulsed a machine the size of a freighter. Pipes ran in all directions, as if they were arteries. Valves opened and closed in time with the heartbeat. And every time it pulsed, the air flickered, as if reality itself were briefly holding its breath.

"Holy shit," Jax breathed. "This thing is alive."

Jax stepped cautiously to the edge of the platform, the pounding of his heart vibrating in the soles of his shoes. Everywhere were displays, control boxes, and small projection panels, some still functional, others merely a flickering remnant of data garbage.

Lira crouched down at a console, wiped a thick layer of dust from the display, and grinned crookedly.

"You'll love it, Mercer. According to this old protocol, this was once a 'catalyst for consciousness fusion.'" "German, Lira." "A damned thinking machine. It pumps not only energy, but also... consciousness. Data streams. Memories. This was the central brain of an entire city-planet."

Jax scratched his chin. "So someone built a heart that can think?" "Not just think. Control. Control. If you pull the right levers here, you can take over entire systems." "Or kill them," Jax muttered.

Suddenly, the pounding of the heart changed rhythm—faster, harder. The walls of the chamber seemed to narrow, the light flickered. From a dark niche behind the wiring, a silhouette emerged, at first only outlines, then becoming increasingly clear: a being made of steel plates and scraps of flesh, walking upright, with arms like hydraulic presses and a face half made of an old welding mask.

"That's not the janitor, is it?" "If it is, I don't want to know what the cleaning supplies look like here."

The guard moved with a frightening slowness, as if he had all the time in the world. With every step, his joints creaked like breaking wood, and somewhere inside, motors hummed, deep and threatening. His gaze—if the glowing red sensor lenses could be called that—fixed on the two intruders.

"Intruders detected," boomed a voice, metallic and muffled, as if coming from an empty oil tank. "The heart is not being touched."

Jax spat on the ground. "Too late, buddy. We already looked at it. Very rude, I know."

The guard didn't growl. He simply accelerated—and the quiet drone became the squeal of metal on metal as he charged toward them.

The guard launched into a sprint that wouldn't have found a place in any

physics manual. Lira instinctively jumped to the side, slid across an oil field, and caught herself on a pipe. Jax tried to dive behind a console—too slow.

A hydraulic arm shot out, grabbed the collar of his jacket, and for a moment Jax hovered in the air like a fish on a hook. "Steady, tin-face," he panted, "we're just... uh... passing through."

The answer was a metallic screech as the guard slammed him against a wall. Sparks flew, an old button burst free. Lira drew her pistol and fired two shots—the lead ricocheted off the chest armor like rain off a windshield.

"Not as well armored as I thought!" she cried. "Really? Looks like that didn't do any good!" Jax gasped, trying to wriggle out of the grip.

There, a hiss. A pipe above them burst, a torrent of boiling steam cascaded down—directly onto the guard. He let go of Jax, jerked back, and for a split second, something flickered in his eyes, almost like... pain.

"Lira! Get out of here!" They didn't hesitate. The heat burned their backs as they tumbled through a narrow maintenance corridor. Behind them echoed the guard's heavy pounding, slower now, but still unstoppable—like a steel heartbeat piercing flesh.

The maintenance corridor was so narrow they had to keep their shoulders slanted. Rust ate through the struts like a disease, and somewhere a liquid dripped that looked like coffee grounds and smelled of grief. Behind them, the guard rumbled along, heavier than guilt, slower than fear—but both eventually catch up with you.

"On the left," gasped Lira, "there's an inspection hatch!"

Jax ripped it open. Behind it: a vertical shaft, a bundle of cables as thick as his ego on a good day. The draft smelled of an ozone-laden heat storm.

"Going down is always a shitty idea," he said.

"Then it's a good fit for us." Lira swung herself down on the wiring harness. Jax followed, hands burning on insulation, boots hitting rungs that weren't actually rungs. Above them, metal scraped against metal, the guard widened the corridor like a wolf trying to break through a kennel door.

They landed on a grate below. The grate rattled in offense. A low corridor opened before them: loops of pipe, clusters of valves, narrow walkways

between the pipes, from which torn-off warning signs dangled.**DO NOT TOUCH**—was written on one, the rest was eaten away by heat.

The pounding of her heart was louder here, physical. It pulsed through the bolts in the slabs, through the nails in her boots, through the mistakes in her life. With every boom, the light flickered; with every flicker, Jax briefly saw things that weren't there: A child's bike hanging in the forest of canes. A bar stool silhouette stretching. A door with a hand-painted sign:**TOO LATE**.

"Do you see that too?" he asked.

"If you mean 'door too late,' yes. If you mean something else, no. That means your heart is blazing into your flesh. Hold it."

"With what?"

"Just stop."

They crawled over an air duct and jumped onto a catwalk. Below, a black broth boiled, gray membranes forming and tearing as if the cauldron were breathing life. A spray of fine coolant forced them to squint. As the drops burst against Jax's lips, he tasted iron and ancient stories.

"Up ahead," Lira pointed. An oval window into a chamber. Behind it: superstructures that resembled a choir of stacked control panels, with small glass domes on top—each dome filled with what looked like trapped fog.

Jax pressed the handle. The door opened, reluctantly. The room behind it was surprisingly cool. A projection flickered on the wall, pixelated and greenish:**CONTROL STATION: CARDINAL CLUSTER**Among them: menus that could only be served with gloves, which no one wore anymore.

"Look." Lira tapped a box; it flipped over, showing a schematic view of the heart: a node with a hundred rays.**FUNCTION: COGNITION PUMP**.

"They were pumping consciousness through pipes," she said. "Condensing memories, printing decisions. Citywide. Maybe planetwide. This isn't just energy. This is... control."

"Whoever calls 'control' never just wants to direct traffic," Jax muttered. "Are there logbooks?"

Lira scrolled, her fingers pushing artifacts back and forth in the image.**OPERATIONAL LOG 7.487:**'Anomaly detected: Alien AI (signature: ECHO)

using secondary channels. Failed to fire on collective network.
Countermeasures: Guardians released. Priority: Heart protection.'

Echo vibrated softly in Jax's jacket, as if someone had whispered his name in church. "Great," Jax said, "we're on the guest list."

A second log popped up, older, thinner: 'Project goal: Divert pain. Keep city calm. Centralize decisions. Deviants learn the meaning of peace.'

"Peace," said Lira, "the big word for small chains."

"What if we turn it off?"

Lira tapped into another view. Three switch panels lit up in the chamber, inconspicuous and secured with metal brackets.**HEARTBEAT, FLOW, LOCK VALVE COGNITION.** Under the last one a stamp:**WARNING: END OF CITY.**

"If you close it down, a lot of people in here will stop being themselves," Lira said. "Or they'll finally start—I don't know. 'End of the city' could also mean: end of the lie."

"And 'beat down'?" asked Jax.

"Heart slows down. All processes stumble. Guardians, perhaps, too. But—" She nodded toward the glass roof above the panels. Behind it, the massive wires pulsed. "The thing is old. If we tamper with it, it'll break somewhere else. Then we'll be the idiots holding the last screw while everything falls apart."

A scratching at the door. Then the deep thud of a heavy footstep. Another. The guard.

"Time for the ethics seminar is over," Jax whispered. "Find your way, remember the switches."

Lira pulled out a small camera, clicked two pictures, and pocketed it. "I can slow down the clock, then hand it over to the secondary pump. That'll give us—maybe—three minutes. That's all."

"Three minutes is an eternity if you don't die."

The door buckled inward. The first blow sent dust flying from the ceiling; the second left a dark crack in the frame. Jax tore the**HEARTBEAT**-Bar raised,

expecting sirens—nothing. Only the boom became slightly more ponderous. As if a marathon runner were stumbling.

Lira jumped to the side console, tapping her own fingers into the keys as if they were tools. "Bridging, sidetrack, limiting feedback..."

The heart reacted. Wires complained, valves spat. The schematic map flickered in the window, red islands growing like rashes.

"Three more entries," Lira snapped.

The door burst open. The guard entered, automatically ducking his head, as if he knew he was too big for these rooms. His mask glistened with moisture; steam crept from his joints like rage.

"Intruders," he said. "Correction: saboteurs."

Jax stepped forward, Nullpointer lance in one hand, revolver in the other. "Correction: tenants turning down the heat."

The guard raised his arm. No stapler, no bolts—an opening in the palm, behind it the scar of a small tornado. The air distorted, dust formed threads.**sound cannon** Jax thought, taking a breath before the wave. He threw himself to the left, the wave mowed down the control panel, and glass turned to sugar. Lira screamed, but still kept her hand on the keys as if she were typing with a hammer.

"Two more!" she gasped.

Jax jumped, ramming the lance into the guard's shoulder joint. The tip pierced, finding a soft spot between steel and whatever. A twitch, a sound like shaking a cutlery drawer. The guard whirled around, his free arm slamming down; Jax's world went askew, teeth grinding in time. He slammed against the projection screen, the word **Shut-off valve** jumped into his face.

"One!" Lira said, almost hoarse. "Hold it for five—no, two seconds!"

"I'll buy two!" Jax yelled, jumping onto the guard's back. He wasn't holding on to anything. He found a service hatch, ripped it open, stuffed his revolver barrel inside, and pulled the trigger. The shot was like a gulp of fire. The guard staggered, yelling without a voice. Lira pressed the trigger.

The heart skipped a beat.

The air fell. Power fell. For a moment, Jax heard only his own lungs whistling like an offended teapot. Then the beat returned—slower. Heavier. The entire complex groaned.

"Bridged!" Lira ripped her hands from the desk. Her eyes were glassy, traces of sweat burning. "I've—put him on the secondary line. Three minutes of drift, then everyone starts asking us questions."

"I can ask questions," Jax said. "I don't like answering."

The guard straightened up again. A dark liquid trickled from his shoulder, drawing thin circles on the floor. His head turned a few degrees too far and back again, a bad loop. "Correction... correction..."

"Error 500," Jax growled. "Server is down, buddy."

"Get out of here," said Lira, "before the city realizes we're making its heart stumble."

They rushed through a side door into an inspection ring. From up here, they saw the heart chamber like an orchestra pit. Pipes pulsed, lights glowed, and on the walls stood closet-sized cylinders with viewing windows. In the windows: faces. Dozens of them. Not real—projections. Sleeping masks, mouths slightly open. Above each cylinder was a name. Many were crossed out, others flickered. **VOLKSBUS** stood on one. **SECURITY** on another. A third simply read: **JAX MERCER**.

He stopped. There was no face in his top hat, only noise. But the noise had his stature.

"They had a place for you," Lira said quietly.

"They always have."

Beneath them, the guard stumbled, searching for rhythm. On the opposite side of the chamber, the concrete wrinkled; panels retracted. A second figure emerged—slimmer, with long injection arms. No welding mask. A mirror plate. And in the plate: Jax's face, older, emptier. The breath from the maintenance deck, in a new shell.

"The family is complete," Jax said. "Where's the bar?"

"There!" Lira pointed to a gallery of maintenance boxes and—holy irony—a nozzle that probably only spit coolant. Next to the nozzle was an emergency exit sign whose arrow didn't fit anywhere. "There's a service tunnel leading away back there. If we go in there—"

The mirror head raised its arm. No beam of light. A pure pulling sensation, as if someone were pulling on a wire behind her sternum. Jax stumbled, slipped away briefly, didn't look, but stared nonetheless. In the mirror, he didn't see himself, but what he was missing: the laughter that pushes fear away. It beckoned to him. Then he backed into the mirror.

"Not today," he snarled, ripping the artifact from his jacket. Echo glowed as if someone had poured gasoline into stars. "Open the door, baby."

The capsule shot a thin thread of light toward the gallery. A rectangle groped for edges in the concrete: a maintenance hatch responded, clicked, and popped open a crack. Cool air that didn't belong there gusted toward them.

"Go!" Lira tugged at his sleeve.

The guard jumped, heavily but quickly. The mirror head slid, silently but cruelly. Jax threw the null-pointer lance—it pierced the guard's wrist actuator, stopping the blow just long enough for Lira to reach the gallery and pry open the hatch with her foot. Jax followed, panting, hissing, whoosh, whoosh.

"Close!" said Lira, "close, close!"

Together they spun the wheel, the hatch closed, and the mirror head hit it silently. A heartbeat later, a sound like a polite knock penetrated the plate. Tick... tick... A third time. Tick.

Echo whispered to Jax: **Don't answer.**

"I don't intend to," he muttered, briefly losing his footing, catching himself, and looking down the tunnel: a slope that led to a faint night light.

"What do we do with the heart?" Lira asked as they slid. "Come back and blow it up? Or take over?"

"Blasting is honest," said Jax.

"Taking over is practical."

"Both are war."

"Then choose who to play against."

They touched down. The tunnel opened into a maintenance yard overlooking a city that still pretended to be asleep. Something hummed above the rooftops—not a ship, more like a thought. The sky was lower than it had been an hour ago. Or their heads were higher.

Behind them, the rock vibrated. Very gently. Like a throat clearing.

"He knows we're here," Lira said.

"He's known we were there for a long time," Jax replied. "Now he knows we'll be back."

He pocketed the artifact. It felt heavier and... emptier. Echo was silent. Maybe it was sulking. Maybe it was thinking. Jax rarely did either of those things, but today hadn't been an ordinary day.

He looked at Lira. "We need explosives. Allies. And someone who knows about old brain pumps."

"Admins?" Lira grimaced. "Or..."

"Or the doomsayers," Jax said. "If anyone knows how to black out a screen, it's them. We just don't tell them there's a heart behind that screen."

A distant, polite tok vibrated through the ground. As if the mirror head had just tapped the horizon.

Jax forced a smile. It sounded different. A little empty. He didn't like it. "Come on," he said. "We'll build alarm clocks."

And somewhere deep beneath them, in the iron belly of the city, the heart of black steel beat again. Slowly. Furiously. Awake.

25. Shadows over Elysium

Elysium was a lie. From a distance, the city looked like a jewel in the void—glass towers, shimmering domes, golden light trickling through the orbit like liquid honey. But even as they approached, Jax smelled the stench: too sweet, too artificial, and underneath it all, a hint of burnt plastic, as if someone had left the sky in the toaster.

"Nice place," he growled as the shuttle glided into the landing port. "If you like trashy brothels and tax evasion."

Lira gave him a sideways glance. "You should try not to make yourself unpopular for three minutes."

"I tried that before. It was boring."

The port was crowded—vendors with garishly colorful fabrics, cyborg smugglers with flashing implants, a few shady characters pretending to be tourists. Security drones patrolled the stalls, looking like hovering guillotines. Jax kept his head down. In a city where every other stranger was after your credits and every third one after your kidney, it was better to stay hidden.

They only got as far as the third intersection. Then the ground shook.

First a dull thud, then a blinding flash of lightning ripped open the sky. A swarm of black attack drones appeared above the rooftop domes, their engines screaming like enraged demons. One of them fired – and an entire marketplace erupted in a cloud of fire and smoke. Screams, panic, people running in all directions.

"I thought we were just here to talk!" Lira yelled over the noise.

"That was the plan!" Jax shouted back, "but apparently Elysium just decided to flambé itself!"

They ducked behind an overturned stall. Sparks rained down from an exploded power line. An old man stumbled past them, half his clothes on fire, a bottle of whiskey clutched like a treasure in his other hand.

"He has the right priorities," Jax muttered, drawing his gun.

Flames now blazed everywhere, casting trembling shadows on the walls of the shimmering palaces. A burning piece of debris tumbled from above, landing only meters away. The heat bit into their skin, the smoke burned their eyes.

"Jax," Lira said, her voice no longer humorous, "we have to get out of here before the sky strikes us."

"Or before they find us," he growled, nodding toward the dark figures pushing through the smoke. There was no doubt about it. These weren't locals. These were syndicate killers. And they looked like they had all the time in the world.

Jax pushed Lira against the wall of a side alley, the burning marketplace ablaze behind them. "No direct way out—so we'll take the ugly route."

"This is Elysium," Lira snarled, "do you think there's anything ugly here?"

"Oh yes," he grinned crookedly, "but you have to look behind the scenes."

The narrow side streets were another universe. The shiny facades were missing here, replaced by crumbling concrete, bare cables hanging from the walls like dead snakes, and a musty odor of rotten meat and cheap perfume. Above the doors hung illuminated signs, half of them flickering: *"ORGANIC MEAT – FRESH FROM THE CULTURE TANK"*, *"REAL ORGANS – NOT CLONES!"*, *"FULL HOLOGRAPHIC PLEASURE – NOW WITH FREE UPGRADE"*.

A robot garbage collector, half-rusted, stared after them and croaked, "Pay your debts, you rats!" before rolling back into the shadows. Two street kids tried to sell Jax a "real star map," drawn on a piece of old corrugated cardboard.

"It only costs three credits, mister!" "Three?" said Jax. "Kid, for two I'll sell you a curse that will stay with you for life."

Lira nudged him. "You're an asshole." "I know."

The alley led to a backyard where a makeshift bar, made from an old shipping container, stood. Inside, it smelled of hot oil and cold beer. A few faces turned toward them—tough guys with scars, glowing implants, and the kind of look that says, "We don't talk, we hit." The bartender, a beefy guy with a chrome artificial jaw, nodded curtly. "You don't look like locals."

"We're not either," Jax said, ordering two whiskeys. "But we'll pay in cash. No questions asked, no hassle." "No hassle here," the bartender grumbled,

pouring, and the glass clinked like a silent promise that trouble was already lurking behind them.

Lira took a sip and grimaced. "Tastes like liquid rust." "That's exactly why it works," Jax grinned.

Suddenly, the floor vibrated slightly. From outside came the sound of heavy footsteps—not a human, but the powerful pounding of mechanical legs. A shadow fell across the bar's entrance. Three syndicate assassins entered, helmets like black mirrors, weapons loosely held in their hands.

"We have company," Lira murmured. "Well," Jax said, putting down his glass, "then the evening is finally starting to be fun."

The first shot shattered a whiskey bottle behind the bar. Glass rained down on the counter, and the bartender wordlessly dived behind the kegs. Jax reacted instinctively – he threw his barstool at the nearest syndicate helmet. The thing flew like a stubborn satellite, bounced off, and landed right in the middle of a neon beer sign. Sparks flew, and suddenly there was a smell of burnt plastic.

"Get out of here!" Lira yelled. She pushed open the back door, and the evening hit them—loud, smelly, and full of chaos.

The streets were no longer empty. Dozens of people were running, screaming, some carrying bags, others weapons. Above the rooftops, drone fighters flew in formation, their searchlights cutting bright swathes through the smoke. Barricades of stacked cargo containers and burning trash compactors blocked the main streets. Behind one of the barricades stood masked figures, some armed with energy rifles, others with nothing more than steel pipes and welding torches.

"Welcome to the block party," Jax said with a crooked grin.

A sudden clap of thunder shook the scene—not weather, but an explosion higher up, on one of the glass bridges between the towers. Splinters rained down on the market square as a wall of flames engulfed the bridge.

"If we want out of here, we have to go through the center," Lira panted. "Center is good," Jax said. "That's where all the fun happens."

They dashed forward, ducking under a laser beam fired from somewhere in the crowd.

An improvised catapult—built from a street stall, bungee cords, and a

refrigerator motor—hurled a burning gas cylinder over their heads. It crashed into a group of Syndicate soldiers. Fire, smoke, and a scream that was drowned out by the noise.

"I love this planet!" Jax laughed as he pushed open a side door with his shoulder.

Inside – a former casino, now just a ruin. The gaming tables were overturned, chips and cards stuck to the beer that soaked the floor. A guy with a welding torch fiddled with an improvised explosive device. "This thing's about to blow!" he shouted. "Then we'll make sure we're not there when it happens," Jax growled.

As soon as they were outside again, the casino exploded. The blast hurled them against a wall, flames licked across the square, and the sky of Elysium turned blood red for a moment.

"Just a few more blocks," Lira said, coughing. "If we can do it without setting ourselves on fire," Jax grinned.

The next block was a bazaar of absurdities. Between burning market stalls, figures crouched in the shadows with portable terminals—the screens casting cold light on their faces. They typed like madmen while laser beams flickered around them. Jax almost tripped over one of these freaks: a skinny guy with oversized lenses and a sweatband already soaked with nerves.

"What the hell are you doing here?!" Jax snarled.

"Liquidity shift!" the man yelled back, without taking his eyes off the screen. "Before the Syndicate shuts down Elysium's servers!"

Jax glanced at the screen – numbers flickered, price lines exploded. Cryptocurrencies moved from one wallet to the next at lightning speed. "You're gambling in the middle of a street fight?!" Lira gasped. "Gambling? THIS IS WAR!" the hacker yelled, pressing Enter as if he'd just detonated a bomb. "Five hundred thousand credits... safe... in an anonymous wallet. Maybe."

A bright beam of light burned into the facade next to them. Jax grabbed the guy by the collar. "Turn it off and get out of here before you get chopped to bits!"

"Can't do it!" gasped the hacker. "The transaction is stuck in the quantum backlog!"

A drone fighter appeared from behind the neon signs, his spotlight fixed on them. Jax ripped the terminal from the hacker's hands and threw it like a brick into the headlight lens. A shower of sparks, a howling jamming signal, and the drone crashed, burning, into a fruit stand. "Backlog solved," Jax grinned. "The hard way."

They stormed on, while the data traders in the background continued typing as if it were a matter of life and death—which meant the same thing in this city.

The last few meters before the main square were a gauntlet. Desperate attempts were made everywhere to **Elysium Network** to keep it running—impromptu routers on car roofs, power cables strung across the streets, and kids with portable antennas running back and forth between the barricades. And over everything hung a dull sound, a low-frequency hum coming from the transmission towers—as if the whole city were vibrating with tension.

"Up ahead," said Lira, pointing to the narrow gap between two container barricades. Jax was about to break into a run when a silhouette appeared in the smoke. Broadly built, with that damned familiar gait. As he got closer, Jax recognized the grin.

"Kraton Vesk," he growled. The bastard held a datapad in one hand and a plasma pistol in the other. "Well, Mercer... have you ever considered what your little capsule is worth on the darknet?"

Kraton Vesk stepped out of the smoke as if he had personally commanded it. Behind him glowed the facade of a burning club, its neon sign reading only "*EL YI M* Sparks rained from an exploded neon tube, while somewhere behind it, someone screamed as if they'd just had a very bad night.

"Give me the capsule, Mercer," said Vesk, twirling the datapad as if it were a weapon. "Then maybe I'll leave your lower jaw intact."

Jax grinned crookedly. "What a generous offer. Let me guess—so you're going to upload the capsule to the dark web, sell it to the highest bidder, and drink yourself to death in a private pleasure station?"

"Exactly. Only, unlike you, I also get the good whiskey."

Lira took a step forward. "You won't upload anything, Vesk. Half the city is hooked to the grid like junkies on a needle. If you upload the capsule, it won't just be Elysium that burns—the entire damn sector grid will collapse."

Vesk laughed, deep and dirty. "So? We live for the big bang, don't we?"

Then everything happened quickly. A shot ripped through the air, Jax threw himself to the side as a cloud of plasma burned the ground where he had just been standing. Lira drew her carbine in one fluid motion, but Vesk was already in close combat. The bastard smashed the datapad against Jax's shoulder—enough to numb his arm—and then ripped a knife from his boot sheath.

"I like it personally," he growled.

Jax parried with a trash can lid he found lying around and struck back with his fist. The blow landed—right on Vesk's scar—and the guy staggered back. "Goodbye, asshole," Jax snarled.

Vesk roared, spat blood – and a tooth flew clattering onto the pavement.

Before things could escalate further, searchlights suddenly rattled through the smoke. Swarms of police drones. Not the small ones you take down with a brick—the big, armored things, with ammo belts and a damned bad reputation for shooting first and asking questions later.

"Shit," Lira hissed. "They're blocking the square!"

"Then we have to get out first – and this bastard stays here."

Jax rammed Vesk's shoulder into a flickering advertising pylon, which showered sparks and the smell of melted plastic upon contact. "Take the datapad!" he shouted to Lira.

She grabbed as Vesk's scream was drowned out by the drones. "We get out of here now, or we'll end up as pixelated mush in the police network!"

The ground shook as the first swarms of police drones sealed off the intersection ahead. Elysium now burned on multiple levels: above, the glittering skyscrapers rising into the sky like torches, and below, the maze of streets filled with barricades, improvised Molotov cocktails, and people who had had nothing left to lose for too long.

"Left!" Lira yelled, but Jax ran right. "Left leads to the damned IRS—and I'd rather have a bullet in my leg than a tax audit!"

They plunged into a narrow alley where neon lights flickered and the smell of roasted rats mingled with the acrid haze of burning plastic sheets. Sirens wailed

behind them, and in front of them stood a rusty roller door that lifted only an inch at a time because someone had forgotten to oil the maintenance boat.

"I hate this," Lira cursed.

"This is Elysium, baby—everyone hates everything here."

Suddenly, a laser beam whizzed past Jax, slicing through a section of the wall like butter. Two drones hovered over the alley, their speakers spitting out commands in a cold, synthesized tone: "Stop. Drop weapons. Hands behind your head."

Jax turned to Lira. "Sounds like they're asking politely."

"Jax..."

"Yes, yes. I'm doing it."

He raised his hands – and at the same time threw a small black disc into the air. The thing was an old EMP pulser, half broken, half illegal, and certainly a fire hazard. The pulse immediately sent the drones reeling; one shot uncontrollably against a building wall and exploded in a cloud of fire. The other crashed screeching into a container, whose contents – some unidentifiable, shimmering green slime – mercilessly swallowed it.

"One of my better black market purchases," Jax grinned.

The roller door finally opened enough for them to slide through. Behind it: a chaotic, overcrowded store that looked like a cyberhoarder's dream. Old monitors hung everywhere, disassembled androids, yellowed motherboards, and a generator roared somewhere in the background.

"Mercer!" a croaky voice called from the gloom. An old hacker, with skin like old leather and glasses whose lenses had been hacked directly into the mesh, shuffled out. "I heard you're bringing trouble—and God, you didn't underpromise."

"Can you get us out of here?" Lira gasped.

"Sure. It'll cost you two bottles of good whiskey."

"You know I only use the good one for negotiating."

"Then three of the bad ones."

Even as they negotiated, the heavy footsteps of police units thundered outside. The hacker grinned and pulled a lever. With a mechanical whine, the ground beneath them began to sink—an improvised lifting platform that led them into an underground tunnel.

"Welcome to the off-grid, Mercer. No one knows you down here—and everyone owes me something."

The smell suddenly changed from smoke and sweat to oil, cable insulation, and old dust. The sounds of the sirens became muffled, then disappeared altogether.

"You may have lost the cops," said the hacker, "but don't think Elysium will let you go so easily. This city remembers faces. And mistakes."

Jax smiled crookedly, brushed the dust off his jacket, and finally took a long drink from his bottle. "Mistakes? I call that style."

26. The hunt begins again

The elevator did not sink – it **slid** Like an elevator that had decided to stop making noise so as not to wake anyone sleeping underneath. Below, the shaft opened into a maze of corridors, cable trays, and disused utility tunnels. The off-grid of Elysium: an underground city of leftovers, sins, and secondhand dreams.

The old hacker—everyone called him "Patch" (because he never really fixed anything, just glued it over)—stumbled ahead like a bad-tempered mole. Magnets hung from his shoes, nicotine stains on his hands. A flexible neon tube on the ceiling flickered once for his benefit and then stayed lit, as if afraid he would otherwise screw it back together himself.

"Two rules down here, Mercer," croaked Patch without turning around. "First, you don't ask questions you can't afford to answer. Second, if someone says 'ping,' you don't say anything."

"And if I say thirsty?" "Then you pay double."

They entered a cavern that must have once been a maintenance depot and now looked like a bazaar for lost technologies. The smell of sweat, ozone

streaks, the clacking of relays. Traders offered **Mesh router** from old drones, battery packs with built-in lie counters, EMP guns in keychain format, coolers full of wet fog – "freshly tapped computing time," swore a salesman, holding a funnel glass under a steaming server.

A faint whirring hung over everything. Not a sound – a network. The off-grid was an angry hive of **Peer-to-peer nodes**, anonymous, mobile, paranoid. Everyone was a router, everyone a spy, everyone a potential traitor.

"How nice," murmured Jax. "An internet that's just as suspicious as I am."

"That's exactly why it's still alive," Lira said. She cast the gaze into the crowd of a woman who'd seen the wrong men in bars too many times and still always found her way out. "How long, Patch?"

"Until someone gets too greedy. So: tonight." He grinned, which made it look like he needed to remember how to laugh. "Come on. Your filthy pod needs a quiet closet."

They passed a booth where a child wearing soldering goggles was implanting a new heart into a teddy bear—a flashing CR2032 with black tape. The bear said, "Hello, jerk," as the current flowed. "Good parenting," Jax said. The child grinned toothlessly.

Patch stopped in front of a steel door, set into a seamless wall. No lock, no handle—just a plate with five copper rivets. He placed his fingertips on it one after the other; a suspicious humming sound came from the wall, then a panel slid aside. Behind it: a room as big as a garage, cold, clean, with **Faraday curtain** on the ceiling and a workbench that looked like it was made from sawn-up church pews.

"This is where signals die," Patch said affectionately. "Put down the glass god, Mercer."

Jax hesitated. Echo vibrated in his jacket—warm as a flask and about as offended. Then he carefully placed the capsule on the velvet cloth that Patch spread out. The old man leaned forward, his glasses casting a green glow on the artifact.

"Well, you little problem," whispered Patch. "Who built you? And why did you choose that idiot?" He pointed at Jax. "She's got a sense of humor," said Lira. "Then she'll suit you two."

Patch folded a hand-sized **Quantum scanner** up—three rings floating in the void, creating an invisible field. He held the frame over Echo. The room shuddered.

"Be careful," Lira warned. "That thing recently ate a church."

"I'm just feeding it questions." Patch's hands weren't shaking—they were vibrating to the beat of some internal clock. "Aha. Aha. ...Aha." "Aha, good, or aha, 'we all die'?" "Both." Patch straightened up. "This isn't a data safe. This is a **probew** with memory. And she's looking—" He paused. "She's calling."

"Who?" Jax asked. Patch looked at him as if the obvious was sometimes the hardest thing to say. "Anything that can listen."

As if the universe wanted to emphasize the point, the neon tube flickered, and somewhere in the cavern, someone shouted "Ping!" A dozen voices reflexively answered "—," then realized what they'd done and pretended they hadn't.

"We need to plan moves," said Lira. "Allies. Paths. Weapons."

Patch clicked his tongue, went to the whiteboard (a real one—he only trusted things that could be cleaned with solvent), and scribbled three columns:

A) Blasting— "Heart of black steel" – plus "a lot of boom", minus "city might collapse".

B) Take over— "Root at the heart", plus "control", minus "you become what you hate".

C) Stalling— "Throttle the clock, cut the valves", plus "time", minus "guard".

"And D) allies," Lira added. Patch wrote: **Doomsayers, Admins, Syndicate enemies, Lower Town.**

"No plan without money," Patch said. "And your credit is... difficult." Jax tapped Echo's velvet cloth. "You want funding? This thing attracts crypto like flies to—" "—legal gray areas," Patch finished dryly. "Yes. But we need clean flows. Everything above off-grid is now being scanned." He leaned over an old cash register and tapped three keystrokes no one recognized anymore. A hidden mesh window popped up: **anonymous nodes 73 active** "We're splitting the war chest into micro-wallets," he said. "A thousand grains instead of a crown. You can pay for explosives in fifty ways, and every one of them is a lie."

"Sounds like my relationship history," Jax said.

A siren wailed – not police. **Network alarm** The traders outside instinctively ducked. Patch's gaze narrowed.

"What is this?" Lira put her hand on the trigger.

"Someone's tweaking the off-grid," Patch growled. "Someone big. Sniffing out nodes like a shark sniffs out blood." He typed, filtered, sniffed out data like a truffle hound. "Signature... damn it. That's not Vesk. That's... **Dreamer's residual burden**. He's looking for his toy."

Echo glowed. Cold. Awake.

"Then we'll go now," said Jax. "Doomsayers first. They know the off switch." Patch raised a hand. "Two minutes. I'll give you a new one. **Identity shell**. Spoofs biometrics, shifts patterns, scrapes the corners off your face that cameras love." He tossed Jax a piece of gum. "Chew." "Since when do Alias taste like mint?" "Since mint became illegal."

Patch worked quickly – adhesive strip behind ear, a transparent **Mask film**, covering the skin like a second guilty conscience, a drop of tear fluid in the left eye sack (which burned like ten honest truths). Looking back at Jax in the mirror was a man who looked like him if a bad painter had copied him in haste. "Perfect," said Patch. "I like you so much less—that's good."

He packed the capsule in a box that smelled of onions and **Field suppressor** inside. "Lira, you carry. He already has too much history with her." Lira nodded, taking the weight with a barely audible hmph.

"Route?" she asked. Patch fished out a paper map—paper!—with dirty fingers and drew three lines. "Top: burning. Middle: drones. Bottom: my way. There are rats. And contracts. Go through debt alley, not around it. He who owes protects. Don't talk until they say their price."

"And Vesk?" Jax asked. "If he's smart, he'll let you go and follow. If he's stupid, he'll attack in front of the net." Patch winked dryly. "I'm betting on stupid."

They re-entered the bazaar. The whirring had grown louder, thinner – like wires in the frost. Merchants were turning off displays, pulling mesh power from the stalls, and pushing antennas under cloths. Smoke wafted from a side aisle, tasting of burnt copper.

A man with too many rings on his fingers stood in their way. "Pass money," he said kindly. "Or rumors." Jax raised two fingers. "I have rumors. No pass money." "Then we'll trade. Say one, take one." Jax leaned forward. "The heart

coughs. Three minutes. Anyone who likes explosives should get married now." The rings clinked thoughtfully. "My rumor: In Debt Alley, a woman sits in a red dress drinking black coffee. Anyone who looks at her will forget their pin." "Then we'll look at the shoes," said Lira.

They started moving. The **Debt Alley** deserved its name: walls covered with carved numbers, names, rows of dates, chalk marks upon chalk marks. People sat in niches that looked as if they'd been resting their shoulders there since the last war. Above them, a single, small sign blinked: **CASH ONLY TODAY**.

The woman in the red dress was actually sitting there. Her cup wasn't steaming. Her gaze was a bottomless drawer. Jax slid it along the edge, saw the shoes—black, sensible, offended—and walked past. His heart skipped an extra beat out of pure vanity. "Breathe," Lira whispered. "I am. Just wrong."

The alley ended in a gate that looked as if a safe had been placed across the street. Two guards with blank eyes, between them a **Payment station**: An old touchscreen with ten cracks and a slot for old credit cards. Above: **PING?**

"Don't answer," Jax muttered. The guards were silent. The screen flashed. A pattern ran—circle, circle, line, line, circle. Lira put down the box, pulled up her sleeve, and revealed a scar: two lines, a circle—a **Doomsayer Talisman** whom she had rescued from the temple without knowing why.

The screen buzzed in agreement. The gate slid open.

"There you go," said Jax. "I love secret religions when they open doors."

Beyond the gate lay a forgotten platform—graphite rails, an old train with blind windows. The display board read: **LINEDiameter— ENDLESS**.

"Pretty," said Lira. "Creepy," said Jax. "Right," said a voice.

A hooded figure emerged from the shadows, but no robe—practical boots, gloves with conductive fingertips. Her face was open, tired, young and old at once. Her eyes were the deep black that comes from staring long into something that shouldn't look back.

"We've been expecting you," she said. "The black screen is still whispering. You cracked it—and let something out that doesn't want to go back."

"It's good to get word out," Jax said. "We're looking for an off-switch. Or an uprising."

The woman nodded. "Both run on this line. One ticket costs: a piece of what you never wanted to give up."

Jax looked at Lira, then at the crate where Echo lay silently. He felt his laughter—the real, dirty one—tapping somewhere behind his sternum, as if it were trying to escape. It sounded quieter than before.

"We pay," he said.

The pessimist nodded at the train. The doors opened with a breath that sounded not like steam, but like **silence**.

Somewhere behind them—far above, far below, perhaps in his head—there was a knock. Polite. Tok. Tok. Tok.

"Don't answer," said Lira.

"Don't worry," Jax murmured, getting in and feeling the chase—the new one—just ignite.

The train screamed as it accelerated—not a human scream, more like the tortured whimper of an ancient machine that had been repaired too many times and forgotten too often. Jax leaned against the window while outside, the landscape flashed by in a garish neon line. The windows were old—so old that it wasn't certain they would withstand the pressure changes while passing through the tunnel. He briefly considered which would be faster: suffocation or being torn to pieces.

"Damned luxury trip," he muttered, taking a sip from the bottle he'd pulled from Lira's pocket earlier. "If I'd paid for this, I'd be complaining right now."

A few seats away sat the doomsayers. Four of them. Black-clad figures staring in front of small portable terminals on which nothing but deep, impenetrable black flickered. No text, no image, just black. One mumbled in a language Jax didn't understand, but the tone clearly said: *I hope death comes quickly*.

"Nice cult," he said quietly to Lira. "I wonder if they charge membership fees or if you just have to wear black and smell like shit."

She rolled her eyes. "Don't mess with it. We don't want to make a scene."

Jax grinned. "When have I ever..."

His sentence broke off when he saw who was walking down the aisle. A figure in a long coat, a scarred face, his left eye replaced by a cloudy implant. A man he had buried—or thought he had buried—four years ago.

"You can't be serious," he whispered. "Korben Rask."

"Who?" asked Lira.

"An old colleague... if you want to call people who betray you colleagues."

Rask stopped right at the seat, looked at him, and grinned. "Well, Mercer. I thought you were dead."

"The train is full of people who thought that."

Rask sat down without asking. "And now you're sitting here with the capsule. I can feel it. It wants to talk, Mercer."

"And I want peace and quiet. So piss off."

But before Rask could answer, the train began to sputter. The lights flickered, and a whirring noise emanated from the walls—as if someone were trying to break into the system.

"Drones," Lira growled. "Someone's hacking the train."

The doomsayers reacted immediately – they placed their terminals on the floor, the black pulsed, and suddenly the train floor flickered with strange patterns.

"Shit," Jax muttered. "They're trying to turn the train itself into a ritual."

The first hole ripped open in the ceiling, metal shavings raining down on the seats. A drone squeezed in—thin as a rake, with six legs and a camera eye. Jax drew his pistol and fired. The bullet sent sparks flying, but the drone kept moving.

"More are coming!" cried Lira.

"Of course. More and more."

He grabbed Rask by his coat and yanked him aside, just as a second drone broke through. It landed on a doomsayer terminal—and began filling the screen with gray pixels.

"They're polluting the Black," said one of the cultists in horror, as if someone had defiled their sacred temple.

"Sorry, friends," said Jax, kicking the terminal against the wall, "but your sermon is now canceled."

Meanwhile, Lira had discovered one of the old emergency levers. "Jax, we can uncouple the wagon!"

"Then we'll lose Rask – and half the passengers."

"Yes," she said dryly. "And?"

Jax thought for a moment – then grinned. "Do it."

The rattling changed, becoming louder, then a metallic screech as the coupling broke. The rear car, with most of the drones—and Rask—disappeared into the darkness as their part of the train accelerated.

A pessimist began screaming as if his soul had been ripped out of his body. Jax sat back down, took a sip of whiskey, and muttered, "Don't worry, friend. There's sure to be another train coming soon. Maybe even with lights."

But deep down, he knew Rask wasn't going to be killed that easily—and that this was just a damn stopover.

The train rattled on through the darkness, the howl of the wind mingling with the dull throb of the tracks. Each carriage vibrated like a nervous heartbeat, and there was a crackling sound over the loudspeakers, as if someone were trying to speak—but only a faint static noise penetrated.

"That sounds like a fucking obituary," Jax grumbled, shoving the empty whiskey bottle under the seat.

Lira stood at the window, her eyes searching the nothingness outside. "Up ahead... do you see that?"

Jax followed her gaze. At the end of the tunnel, a pale, purple light glowed—not like that of a city, but like a sick, pulsating heart.

The train slowed, groaning under the brakes. The light grew stronger until it bathed the entire carriage in an unhealthy glow that transformed every skin color into a mixture of deathly pale and maddening red.

"I don't know if this is a station," Lira murmured. "It looks more like..."

"...a trap," Jax finished.

Then came the announcement – a voice, brittle, as if it came from a broken synthesizer:

"Final destination... for all travelers without a ticket to eternity."

The doors hissed open, and thick fog poured in. Something was moving inside. Slowly. Inexorably. Jax's hand went to his gun, his heartbeat adjusting to the rhythm of the train tracks.

"So," he said quietly, "whoever gets out first pays the bill."

27. The spark ignites the inferno

The fog smelled of wet iron and cold blood. Not fresh blood—more like an old wound that should have healed long ago, but instead oozed rottenly. Jax stepped cautiously out of the train car. The metal floor beneath his boots was slick, as if someone had poured oil on it. Water was dripping from somewhere.

"I don't like places that feel like they've already seen everything dead," he muttered. "And I don't like people who say things like that while we're standing in the middle of it," Lira retorted, pulling her jacket tighter.

The train doors closed behind them with a dull thud. The train didn't move forward. It simply stood there—like an animal that knows it can't go any further because something greater than its own fear lurks ahead.

A faint humming sound emerged from the fog. At first, Jax thought it was the wind. But the rhythm was too precise. "Do you hear that?" he whispered.

Lira nodded. "Sounds... electric."

And then came the first flash. A bright flash somewhere to their left, followed by a metallic crack. Sparks flew through the fog, like stray fireworks. The smell of ozone settled over everything, stinging Jax's nose and making his eyes water.

"Damn... that wasn't a short circuit," he said. "No," Lira replied tonelessly. "That was a warning."

Before Jax could ask who it was from, the second flash came. This time, directly in front of them. A ball of energy, barely larger than a baseball, hovered in the fog, trembled, and then shot like a predator toward the train facade.

The impact was deafening. The metal of the outer wall burst open like ripe fruit, and a jet of fire shot from the wound. The spark was set.

Within seconds, the station was ablaze. Neon tubes burst above them, raining shards of hot glass. Pipes exploded, sending jets of steam into the fog. The humming turned into a roar, as if the entire place were roaring in pain.

"Get out of here! Now!" Jax yelled, but the fog swallowed his words. Shadows moved within it—some on two legs, some on four. Some crawled along the walls like insects from a nightmare.

A glowing piece of debris crashed to the ground next to him. The smell of burning plastic mingled with that of flesh. Somewhere, someone screamed, short, abrupt—and then only the crackling of the fire.

Lira grabbed Jax by the arm and pulled him behind a half-melted support column. "Back there! A maintenance shaft!" "I see it! Run!"

They ran. Sparks flew everywhere, as if the entire place had decided to destroy itself in a single firework display. But among the sparks, other lights flashed—cold, red eyes watching them.

And then Jax heard the voice. Deep, distorted, but unmistakably directed at him:

"You have the key. Drop it—or you'll burn with us."

He pulled out his revolver and aimed blindly into the fog. "Come here and get it, you bastard!"

Behind them, part of the ceiling collapsed. The spark was now an inferno, and they knew they had only seconds left before the entire place became a death trap.

The maintenance shaft was not an escape route – it was a rusty guillotine, just waiting to slowly devour its victims.

Jax jumped in first, slid down a greasy metal ramp, and slammed hard onto a grating. "Ow... shit!" he gasped. "I think I rearranged my spine."

Lira landed behind him, somewhat more gracefully, but with a curse on her lips that would have made even the old priest of Garruk III blush. Above them, something crashed—presumably the station itself, finally deciding to burst into flames.

A glowing piece of steel fell through the opening, missing Lira's head by centimeters. "That was close," she said. "One more thing like that, and I..." She trailed off.

For right in front of them, in the shaft's flickering emergency light, stood something. At first, Jax thought it was a service robot—large, with hydraulic arms. But then he saw the hands: five long fingers, each one equipped with a blade. The thing was breathing. Slowly. Coldly. And the fog was creeping out of its joints as if alive.

"That's not a robot," whispered Lira. "No," Jax replied dryly, "that's our damned welcoming committee chairman."

The thing raised its head, and its eyes reflected the dancing flames above them. "You... burn... beautifully." The voice was like metal on stone.

Jax pulled out his gun. "And you talk like a fucking refrigerator."

The creature suddenly moved, faster than Jax could aim. A blade sliced through the air, slamming into the wall just next to his ear, sending sparks flying. Lira drew her pistol and fired twice, but the bullets simply bounced off the thing like rubber balls off armor plating.

"We have to get out of here, NOW!" she yelled. "Yes, I've been saying that for three minutes!"

They ripped open a side service door that squeaked like a dying animal and stumbled into another corridor—narrower, darker, stinking of burnt oil.

Behind them, the creature came slowly, every movement accompanied by this metallic *Clank*. It wasn't in a hurry. It knew the shaft was a labyrinth, and that the fire would eventually drive them back to it.

Jax felt the floor vibrate beneath his feet. A fuel line exploded somewhere, and a hot pressure wave rippled through the corridor. The fog turned into burning smoke. "One more explosion and we're cooked!" he gasped.

They turned the corner – and there it was, the exit. A round, heavy lock, half-open. Cold starlight flickered behind it. "Go!" Lira shouted.

They jumped out—and the moment Jax touched the ground, the maintenance shaft behind them exploded. A fireball shot out, caught the creature, and pulled it back into the flames. For a brief moment, they heard its metallic scream before everything sank into a dazzling orange glow.

Jax scrambled to his feet, coughing up black smoke. "So," he gasped, "that must have been the spark..." "...and that," Lira finished, "was the damn inferno."

They stumbled further into the darkness, not noticing that a silhouette stood at the top of the burning shaft – watching them.

The exit didn't lead outside, but into a courtyard of steel and shadow—surrounded on four sides by concrete ribs that sliced into the sooty sky like broken tooth crowns. Glowing girders lay everywhere, and ripped-out cables spat sparks like offended goblins. Jax and Lira burst out of the lock, coughing, and slammed into a container wall so hot beneath their hand that the paint sizzled.

"Tell me this is the Court of Good Decisions," Jax gasped.

"This is the farm of *Run faster*", Lira replied, wiping black smoke from her eyes.

To the left, a footbridge collapsed. A man in an asbestos coat tried to pull a burning crate—the crate exploded in a fan of orange kerosene. His scream was short, his shadow lingered.

Above them, the firefighting drones awoke—large spiders with tanks on their backs, foam lancets flashing red underneath. One of the sensors targeted Jax, drawing a red line across his chest: FIRE SOURCE DETECTED.

"Oh no," Jax muttered, "not today, firefighter crawler."

The spider lowered the lance. The burst of foam hit like a battering ram. Jax was catapulted backward over a pallet, landing in a pile of glassy spheres that looked like frozen rain. The spheres burst, releasing cooling vapor that smelled like diluted peppermint spit.

"On your feet!" Lira yanked him up, just as the drone made a second push.

Jax grabbed the first thing he could find: a fire axe, its handle polished black by a thousand hands. He leaped forward as the spider stabbed with a hiss, ducked, and slashed. The blade slammed into the hose beneath the tank—a sputtering, foaming rain. The drone stumbled, skidded, Lira shot out its red optics, and the thing staggered blindly into a burning pipe. The tank ripped open: white foam exploded in a cotton-candy hell.

"Sweet," Jax choked, "like dying and choking on candy at the same time."

"Go on!" Lira pointed ahead: Between two halls stood an open freight elevator, only half retracted, trembling on its steel cable. Workers, traders, and some unfortunate individuals were running in front of it—all toward the elevator, all with a look of fossil panic.

Jax stumbled forward, holding the axe like a sacred relic. A terminal on the hall wall flickered, numbers spilling across the screen. ACCOUNT WITHDRAWAL – PUBLIC RESERVE ACCOUNT ELYSIUM. Then zeros, arrows, wallet addresses raced through the screen. An off-grid heist, live in flames.

"They are looting the city while it burns," said Lira.

"Sure. You take what's still warm."

Another display flashed at the hall gate: NETWORK ACCESS RESTRICTED – QUANTUM QUEUE OVERLOADED – SECURITY CORE RECOVERY... ERROR. The dreamer had his fingers in the net, and someone was pulling at his nails.

A fire door burst open, and a group in yellow protective hoods rushed out—no rescuers. They were a security team from the public utility company, armed with shock batons and foam cannons. The first rammed the batons into the back of a fleeing merchant, knocking the man to the ground like a deactivated device. The second targeted Jax.

"Not today, buddy," Jax growled, stepping forward, and the axe sang. Steel met plastic, the staff flew, Jax's elbow found a neck, Lira's knee found a rib. Two more, three less—they were in the thick of it, pulling and pushing and falling, and all was heat and coughing and the whirl of systems dying simultaneously.

"Lift!" Lira, short, sharp.

They pushed through, jumped onto the platform. Five more joined them—a child with a wire rabbit, a woman with a box full of ice packs, a man pressing a

picture under his coat. Jax hit the lever. The elevator jerked, rose a meter, stopped, and creaked.

The pulley moaned like a whale.

"Come on, baby, just a few more meters," Jax said, pushing the lever down. The engine roared, the elevator lifted off. Below them, the courtyard flickered, a sea of flames licking everything.

A shadow detached itself from the hall wall. He jumped. Landed with a metallic *Clank* on the edge of the elevator. Bladed fingers scraped across the panels, finding purchase.

The creature from the shaft. Only worse. Half-burned, skin like tinder, joints glowing red. One eye was melted—in the other, something danced that looked like a small star, trapped in black milk.

"You've got a hard head," Jax groaned. "Good. I've got a hard axe."

He slashed. The axe pierced his forearm, lodged briefly, and came free with a sparkling spark. The thing hissed, stabbed, Lira drew, fired, the bullet ricocheted off the shoulder armor, the spark etched into the seam. The creature drew the blade across—the man with the picture wedged the frame between them. Wood splintered, canvas tore, the man didn't cry a sound.

"Get off," Jax growled, and kicked. The thing tipped, clawed again, and almost ripped his boot off. The elevator rose, vibrating. One jump, another—the blade ran down Jax's calf, making his socks hot and wet.

"Shut up and fall," Lira hissed, leaped forward, placed the barrel under the chin plate, and fired. The recoil yanked her arm back, but the plate sprang open. Behind it: no flesh, only cables that trembled like nerves. The creature blunted a finger's breadth. That was enough. Jax twisted from the hip, the axe coming out in a *Tock* that went into his teeth, and the blade went into his eye.

The star went out.

It fell. *Boom*. And was gone in the pupil of flame.

The elevator reached the edge of a bridge—a narrow path that ran between two hall roofs. They jumped over, pulling the child with the wire rabbit behind them, and Lira pulled the elevator lever down. The platform sank—and

immediately afterward, the motor exploded, as if it had just wanted to sing one more time.

On the dock, the wind was a flame-eater. It pulled the smoke like someone was wringing out a towel. Jax's wound burned as if someone had sprinkled salt on his soul. "It's all good," he lied. "Just a scratch."

"You're bleeding the size of a shoe," Lira said.

"I have big shoes."

In front, the walkway curved into a surveillance gallery—armored glass panes, behind them server racks standing in transparent cabinets like fish in undersized aquariums. Red LEDs blinked, green ones died. A huge dashboard ran on one wall: POWER: 41%, WATER: 9%, GRID: degrading, CAPITAL FLOW: implausible. In the corner: a small window, black, and in the black, something moved.*something*, as if you were looking through a window at the night sky and the night sky was looking back.

"Don't stop," said Lira.

"I'm not standing at all, I'm thinking slowly."

A foam cannon discharged its canister into a burning hall below them. The foam fell like snow and burned nonetheless. A fight on the adjacent roof: five people against two in black vests. A Molotov flew, the bottle burst, the two in vests rolled, stood up, and fired. One of the five fell backward from the roof, landing like a sack. No one had time to mourn him.

"There!" Jax saw an emergency bridge leading from the gallery to the outside, to a maintenance tower. Halfway up: a signal panel with real levers. "If we get over there—"

"—perhaps we can close the fire compartments," Lira finished. "Or we can cut off our path."

"Optimism suits you."

They started, running across the emergency bridge. The bridge swung. A roof collapsed beneath them, sparks flying upward like stars that had forgotten which way is up. Jax grabbed a lever and pulled. A ramp at the end of the walkway lowered with a grinding sound, the heavy-duty door on the maintenance tower began to slide. At the same time, fire dampers in the main

ducts below closed—the airflow changed, the flames died down, only to rise up again somewhere else.

"One more!" Lira put down the box with Echo and pulled the second lever. The door lowered faster. A siren sounded—not police-cold, but factory-warm:*Closing sections 7–12 in 10... 9...*

"We'll cut them off and get through," Jax said.

"Mercer!" someone called behind them.

He turned around. At the end of the emergency bridge stood Kraton Vesk. Not burned, not shaken, just sooty like a man who'd just walked through hell and was offended that she didn't recognize him. He wasn't holding a datapad. He was holding a guide clamp—a small, nasty box that looked like a crocodile snapper.

"One more step, and I'll bite your net at me," said Vesk. "I'll wedge myself into the main bus and make the city hate you. Or love me. Same effect."

"Put that thing down, Kraton," Lira said, her weapon halfway down. "The city is dying. You're taking a pillow away from a dying man."

"I'll give him morphine," Vesk grinned. "With my name on it."

"Do you know what the best medicine is?" said Jax. "None at all." And he pulled the third lever.

Something in the tower beyond the door went thunk. The floor vibrated. *A train rail* in the wall, then *not for* trains, jerked—a cargo crane on the tower started up. Its arm swung across the bridge, dragging a chain that looked like a giant's broken pearl necklace. The chain hooked onto Vesk's guide clamp. The arm continued moving.

Vesk cursed, held on, and didn't let go. "This is *mine*—" The arm twisted him. He slipped, clutching. The chain pulled, the clamp remained in his hand, but his elbow found no friction. He went to his knees, then to his stomach. Lira leaped forward, trying to grab him—he looked at her, and his gaze was filled with only scorn.

"I never fall," he said.

The bridge tore off a railing.

Vesk fell.

The arm swept over it, as if it knew that theater doesn't provide aftercare. Down below, there was fire. Down below, men and women didn't care who fell. Down below, everything was red.

Lira stood still. "He—"

"Later," Jax said harshly. "Or never."

The factory alarm counted the last beat:....3... 2... 1...The fire dampers fell. Plates like steel tongues smacked into ducts. A pressure changed direction. The flames fled to other corners like offended cats. A brief, false silence.

"That'll keep us for five minutes," Lira said. "Maybe seven."

"We need less to get lost."

They lifted Echo. The capsule vibrated as if it knew a score the rest didn't. Jax felt his lack of laughter whispering inside him:*Bad plan, good style*. He liked both.

The maintenance tower was cool inside, as if it had its own weather. Stairs spiraled upwards, a shaft hatch stood *onhalf open*From below came the bright, curious hum of a generator. And something else: a polite*Tok*.

"Don't answer," Jax muttered automatically.

"It wasn't me," said Lira.

They stepped onto the first step. The tower seemed to have a breath, slow, large. On an intermediate platform crouched a maintenance unit—an old, square bot with paint splashes that had once been yellow. It held a signal flag in its hand. Holding it. Not waving it. Its optics were black—no. Its optics were a mirror.

"No," said Lira.

"I know."

Jax raised the axe, not high, just very ready. The bot didn't move. The flag said*Go ahead*as if hell were administration.

"We'll take the ladder," said Lira, and they climbed past the bot, which did nothing but knew everything.

The next door led into a cable dome—a circular room with thick strands of fiber optic cable hanging from its walls into a center that looked like an altar. On the altar: a switch so old it was new again. Three slots blinked. The fourth waited. Above it, on the concrete wall, was written in a dirty hand: IF YOU'RE READING THIS, YOU'RE TOO LATE.

"We're never late," Jax said. "We're just wrongly scheduled."

The strands sang softly. A black cloud crawled along the ceiling—not smoke. Nanites. Fine dust that wanted to know where you ended up. Lira pulled the box closer to her. Echo glowed demurely. Patch's identity shell on Jax's face suddenly itched, as if someone had planted electric mosquitoes under it.

"One more room and we're out," said Lira.

"Or inside," said Jax.

They pushed open the last door and stood on a roof overlooking the city. Elysium burned like a map on which someone had drawn the wrong boundaries. Between the towers, late-model police drones circled like carrion hawks. Far away, beyond the glass shell of a government cathedral, a blue flash erupted—network, rebuilding, someone throwing fuses into the sky.

On the edge of the roof, someone stood in the wind. Not tall. Not armed. Just there. A silhouette the smoke loved. When she turned around, the face was empty, like a freshly erased memory—and then it filled. It became Jax. Older. Quiet. With a smile that needed nothing.

"Oh, come on," said the real Jax wearily.

"Machines," said the other in his voice, "don't dream. They remember. And men like you are good organizers."

"We jump," Lira said calmly, and Jax only now noticed the zipline stretching from the edge of the roof into the neighboring structure—a rope that looked like splintered hope.

"You first," he said.

"Together."

They hooked the carabiners. The other didn't come closer. It just raised a hand and tapped its forehead, as if wishing them flyweight.

"When we get down there, we'll look for explosives," Jax said.

"And alarm clock," said Lira.

"And whiskey."

They stepped into the wind. The rope picked them up. Behind them, somewhere below, Elysium began to scream again. Ahead of them lay a shaft that swallowed shadows. Between the two, the rope stretched a sentence: *We're really falling.*

Half in the noise, half in his head, Jax heard it again, the polite *Tok*. A third time. *Tok*.

"Don't answer!" Lira yelled against the wind.

"I'm not doing that," Jax yelled back—and grinned, the real grin, with a twist. It was a little, but there.

The zipline sang. Sparks flew as its rollers jumped over damaged strands. Below them, the city passed like a secret opened. Ahead of them, at the finish line, a small red light blinked. Not an alarm. A recording.

Someone was waiting. Someone was recording. Someone had seen the spark.

And the inferno remembered names.

28. Rise of the Lost Legion

The smoke over Elysium hung like a dirty sheet over a much too sweaty bed. Down below, between the half-melted streets, something was moving—not an organized escape, not a panicked run away. It was slower. More purposeful.

Jax narrowed his eyes. "Please tell me this isn't an army."

Lira stood beside him on the shattered balcony of a former bank skyscraper, her rifle loosely in her hands. "If it isn't one, then I'm the queen of Garruk III and you owe me a damn palace."

Figures emerged from the smoke—one after another, all in dented, burned armor. Some still carried firearms, others only blades or improvised clubs made of steel pipes. But their eyes... Their eyes were like switched-off monitors: dead, black, empty.

"Damn," Jax muttered. "This is the Lost Legion."

Lira laughed dryly. "I thought they were completely dismantled in the Outer Rim twenty years ago."

"That's what everyone thought." Jax spat over the railing and grabbed the whiskey flask that dangled from his hip as always.

"But you know what they say about legions they tried to burn?" He took a sip, the fire running down his throat. "Sometimes only the husk burns. The rest comes back to bite you in the ass."

The Legion didn't march like normal soldiers. It was an unsteady, almost jerky gait—as if each step were corrected by an invisible hand. Sparks flickered among the clouds of smoke, and somewhere deep in the convoy, Jax heard a noise like a hundred voices whispering simultaneously.

"Plan?" Lira asked without looking away.

"Not yet. But I've already got a damn good start: We're not running straight toward them."

The Legion was approaching, and Jax knew they had only seconds before the balcony was no longer a balcony, but an improvised mass grave entrance.

"Down or up?" asked Lira.

"Down. Always down. Up is only good if you have a rocket."

They jumped through a broken windowpane, shards of glass raining down on them like cheap confetti. The floor of the room they landed in crunched beneath their boots—smashed furniture, charred walls, and the smell of an old, long-extinguished fire.

The door burst open, and the first legionary entered. He wore a helmet with a visor that sunk deep into his face, and in his hand was a curved bladed staff that sprayed small sparks with every movement.

"Nice toothpick," Jax said, kicking the door right into his skull. The Legionnaire staggered back, growled something unintelligible—and then came at them with an unworldly speed.

"Left!" Lira yelled, and Jax dove at the last moment. The blade whirred over his head, cutting a gap in the wall, from which smoke and glowing dust immediately trickled.

Jax raised his revolver and fired—three shots, landing perfectly in the chest armor. The thing jerked, but it didn't fall. Instead, it grabbed him by the collar and pulled him up as if he were a wet towel.

"That's enough!" With a well-aimed kick, Jax kicked the bastard between the legs. Normally a guaranteed victory. This time... nothing.

"Oh. Okay. So you haveno."

The legionnaire raised his blade, but Lira jumped onto his back, put her arm around his neck, and began to rip off his helmet. "Damned screw heads!" she gasped, sparks flying from one of the joints.

With a jerk, the helmet came off—and beneath it emerged a face that was half human, half machine. The flesh was gray and scarred, the eyes glowing red.

"That explains a lot," Jax said, kneeing him in the face. This time there was a satisfying *Crack*.

"We have to get out of here," Lira gasped. "The others are coming."

Jax glanced back and saw at least a dozen more Legionnaires storming into the room. "Yeah, I think it's time for Plan B."

"Plan B?"

"Run. Very fast."

They ripped open the next door, only to discover that half a floor was missing. Where there had once been floor, there was now a gaping hole, deep and black like the humor of an asteroid bar owner.

"Jumping?" asked Lira.

"Nah, I thought we were taking the elevator, genius!" Jax growled, taking a running start and jumping anyway. He landed hard on a half-collapsed landing.

Wood splintered, metal creaked, and his ankle screamed briefly before he steadied himself.

"Always watch your joints," he murmured, as Lira leaped after him and landed beside him—more gracefully, but with a curse that would have briefly made even the Legionnaires' ears burn, if they were still human.

Behind them, the first legionnaire crashed through the door, saw the hole, and jumped without hesitation. "Damn it, those things don't have a fear of heights."

"Or pain."

They ran down the corridor. Cables hung from the ceiling like dead snakes, sparks rained down on them, every light flickered like an old neon sign's last attempt at being cool.

Another Legionnaire leaped out of a side door and slammed Jax against the wall. The blow momentarily took his breath away, but he countered by shoving his revolver sideways into the bastard's sights and pulling the trigger. The shot was so close that Jax could still feel the metallic screech in his head as his body lurched backward.

"Jax, we have a problem," Lira shouted. "What kind?" "There are some in the back now, too."

He risked a look – and sure enough, a second wave was coming towards them, from another stairwell.

"Damn it, this isn't a syndicate network anymore... it's a fucking mousetrap."

"So?" "So we need to make this... bigger."

He pulled a small, gray ball from his jacket pocket. "Please tell me this isn't an apple," said Lira. "Only if apples these days are filled with three kilos of explosives."

Jax grinned like a man who knows his next move will make everything worse—and does it anyway. He pressed his thumb against the sphere's activator. A low humming sound. A red light began to flash faster.

"Ten seconds," he said. "That's NEVER enough for us!" "Sure it's enough. You just have to go faster than the bang."

He threw the thing right into the middle of the first wave of legionnaires. One of them tried to crush it with his boot—bad idea.

The corridor suddenly became a single, white flash. The floor burst open like a slashed belly, steel beams ripped from the wall, and a pressure like an angry god hurled them both forward.

Jax hit the floor of a lower level hard, gasping and tasting blood. Half the floor collapsed above them—debris, smoke, screams from twisted metal throats.

"Get up!" Lira yelled. "They're still alive!"

Indeed, several legionnaires crawled out of the smoke, some without arms, one only on one leg, but all with this unbearable, silent will to carry on.

Jax and Lira ran through the open side corridor. It led directly into an old maintenance area—full of pipes, valves, and an open side door leading out into the night. Fresh, cold air hit them.

"We're out," Lira gasped. "Yeah, and the damn things too."

Behind them, metal crashed, and the first legionaries pushed through the hole in the wall.

Jax pulled his jacket tighter around his shoulders, spat out blood, and said, "You know what, Lira? I think this is going to be one of those damn nights for the history books."

The fresh night air was deceptive—it smelled of smoke, burnt plastic, and the sharp acid of flares. The skyline of Elysium was now just a smoldering, flickering silhouette against the pitch-black sky.

Jax and Lira stumbled out onto a wide supply road. Vehicles were burning everywhere, and in the distance they heard the deep, steady pounding of a marching mass.

"Shit. They're coming from two sides." "And we're standing right in the middle."

To the left, a column of Legionnaires appeared—steel gray, barely visible in the darkness, only their red eye sensors looked like glowing cigarette ends. To the right, a convoy of improvised junk vehicles raced forward, packed with crazed looters who interpreted "Legion" in their own way—bare torsos, war paint, rusty weapons.

"Welcome to the fucking family reunion," Jax growled, pulling out his gun.

The first shot ripped half of a looter's helmet off, and he fell from the truck like a wet sack. Lira, on the other hand, took a more pragmatic approach: she aimed for the tires. Two of the wrecked vehicles hurled themselves into burning wrecks, blocking the road.

The legionaries took advantage of the chaos to advance. Their march was unstoppable—like a wave of metal and hatred.

"We have to go up!" Lira shouted, pointing at a rusted external staircase that led to a half-collapsed overpass. Jax followed her, taking two steps at a time, while Legion and looters clashed below. The sound was deafening—metal clashed with metal, engines roared, and somewhere a fuel tank exploded.

From above, they had the perfect view: the battle below was an orgy of fire, blood, and steel, yet one could still see the Legion systematically slaughtering the looters.

"This isn't a fight," Jax said, "this is a fucking eviction."

A thunderous crash tore a hole in the street below them—a Legion armored vehicle burst through, followed by more squads. Jax realized that the Legion wasn't just cleaning up—it was securing the area.

"They want to stay here," he murmured. "Elysium will soon be theirs."

A bright beam of light from the distance blinded her. Lira ducked. "Sniper."

Jax pulled her behind a wall of concrete slabs, feeling the impact of a bullet that struck the stone just next to his head.

"We have to leave before they take this hill."

They ran on, over rubble, past burnt-out drones and half-burned neon signs. Below, the Legion rolled inexorably forward—in line, like a single, endless organism.

Jax gasped, but there was a dark laugh in his voice. "You know, Lira... we may have just started a war."

Jax and Lira continued to race across the crumbling overpass, while below them a Legion armored vehicle cleared the road. The looters threw Molotov cocktails, which acted on the armor like mosquito bites on a rhinoceros. A Legionnaire—two heads taller than a normal person—staggered through the flames, picked up a looter by the neck, and hurled him into a burning barricade.

"They're not soldiers," Lira gasped, "they're walking fortresses." "Yeah," Jax snorted, "and we're right in the middle of their damn deployment plan."

Behind them, the overpass collapsed at one point. Sparks flew, and concrete dust stung their eyes. Below, the Legionnaires attacked the surviving looters like sharks smelling blood in the water.

Suddenly, above the roar of battle, they heard a deep, rhythmic rumble—not explosions, but drums. From the north side of the city, another squad approached: heavily armored vehicles carrying banners of black steel, each flag bearing a symbol—an eye in a circle of gears.

"Damn it, they're not looters anymore," Jax cursed, "they're recruits." "Recruits?" "The Legion's getting fresh cannon fodder. And guess who's at the top of the list when they see us."

They retreated into a narrow alley to disappear from view. The walls were covered with old graffiti and propaganda posters, already half-blackened by the heat of the fire. A broken service robot lay in the dirt, and from its speaker came an endless loop: "The Legion brings order... The Legion brings order... The Legion brings—" Jax kicked the thing until it fell silent.

They tried to leave the alley, but at the next corner stood a scout—not a human, but a four-legged Legion droid with some kind of whip cannon on its back. Its "face" consisted of a metallic skull with a red pulsing lens. It emitted a growling digital signal.

"We've been discovered," Jax growled. Lira raised her pistol and fired—the first shot ricocheted, the second hit the whip arm, which sprayed sparks. The thing charged forward, yanked aside a trash can with its metal forelegs, and tried to take Jax down with one blow.

He narrowly dodged, reached into his belt, and threw an old explosive grenade. "Eat that, you rusty bastard!" The explosion crumpled the droid like a tin toy, but the boom echoed halfway down the street—and woke the Legion troops.

Within seconds, they heard the metallic pounding of boots—not just from the front, but also from behind. They were surrounded.

"Jax, we have to go up!" Lira shouted, pointing to a fire escape. They climbed while Legionnaires stormed into the alley below, laser flashes slicing through the night like bright spears, tearing open the brick walls.

Up on the roof, Jax paused briefly to catch his breath and looked around. From here, he could see all of Elysium—and fires were burning everywhere. The Legion was advancing like a gigantic noose, slowly tightening around the heart of the city.

"This isn't just an attack," he said quietly. "This is a damn takeover."

Lira stepped beside him, her eyes gleaming in the firelight. "Then we'd better decide which side we're on—before they force us."

Jax grinned crookedly and lit a cigarette. "I'm rooting for my own, as always. And if the Legion wants something else... let them damn well try."

29. The Alliance of the Outcasts

The bar was called "The Rusty Angel," and no one knew why. Probably because the rusty fan on the ceiling looked like a pair of dirty blades—and because the landlord had as much in common with an angel as a dumpster has with a luxury hotel.

Jax and Lira pushed open the squeaking door, and immediately the smell hit them: cheap moonshine, old blood, and a thick layer of synthetic tobacco smoke. The music was coming from a broken jukebox that played only the first three bars of some old punk song—over and over, until you wished someone would finally shoot it.

At the bar stood a pimp in a pink suit and gold teeth, holding a dancer by the arm as if he were about to pawn her. In the corner, a man with glassy eyes crouched over a small bowl containing a glowing greenish substance, whose vapor he slowly inhaled. Two tables away, three guys with faces like kicked-in

doors were calmly dealing nanodrug packets, while a robot waiter nervously floated past them, pretending not to see.

"Nice shop," Jax murmured. "I almost feel at home here." "That's not a compliment," Lira retorted.

In a dark corner sat five figures, each worse than the last: a massive mercenary with a metal jaw, a gaunt woman with glowing cyber eyes, a blind knife thrower who nevertheless tracked your every move, and two twin hackers whose skin looked as if it were made of screens—constantly flickering, constantly changing patterns.

"That's them," Lira whispered. "The Alliance."

Jax pulled the cigarette out of the corner of his mouth, let the smoke settle like a veil between himself and the gang, and said, "Perfect. They look exactly like people should look when they want to either save the world or blow it up."

Jax strolled to the table as if he were about to open a coffee klatch. The metal-jawed mercenary looked him up and down and growled, "What does that clown want?"

"I'll bring you a job," Jax said, sitting down uninvited and taking Lira down by the sleeve. "And I'm assuming you won't immediately take my head off in return."

The cyber-eyed woman laughed briefly—a sharp, metallic chuckle. "Depends on how boring your job is."

The twin hackers typed in sync on their hologram keyboards without looking. "We scanned your face. You're on at least eight wanted posters, and there's a bounty on three of them."

"Only three? I'm disappointed," Jax grinned.

The blind knife thrower playfully drew a blade and let it dance between his fingers. "What do you say, should I warm him up?"

"Go ahead," the mercenary grumbled—and at that moment, Jax tipped backward, the chair crashed, and the knife thrower stumbled against the edge of the table with a curse. The next second, the mercenary flew across the table, Lira drew her knife in a flash, and the alliance exploded in a barroom brawl.

A glass shattered against Jax's skull, someone screamed, "My ear!", and a chair exploded into a shower of splinters. The metal-jawed mercenary grabbed Jax by the collar and hurled him across the room—directly into the pink-suited pimp, who then landed on the floor, whiskey glass in hand.

And then the moment came: One of the twin hackers flew through the large, dirty window after a well-aimed kick from Lira. There was the shattering sound of shattering glass, and outside you could hear a "AAAAAH—... oh?".

Everyone rushed to the window and saw the guy outside with his right eye caught on a protruding, rusty nail. The metal scratched at the eyeball, but kept him just above the abyss. Five floors below, traffic roared.

"Well," said Jax, calmly lighting a cigarette. "Some people are just lucky."

The metal-jawed mercenary stared out at the dangling hacker, then back at Jax. "You're leaving him hanging there?"

Jax shrugged. "Sure. It's part of the decor now. Gives the pub a bit *urban flair*."

The hacker outside yelled, "Get me out of here, damn it!" "All I hear is whining," Lira said dryly. "If you say something useful, maybe we'll reconsider."

The cyber-eyed woman put down her glass and glared at Jax. "You're damn brave. Or damn stupid." "One doesn't exclude the other," he grinned, blowing a puff of smoke in her face.

Outside, there was a menacing cracking sound. The nail slowly bent downward. "Five more minutes and we'll need a shovel," Lira commented.

The knife thrower drew another blade. "Maybe we should just speed things up." "Maybe," Jax interrupted, "we should use this opportunity to show that we're professionals here. Because I have a suggestion that will make us all money. Lots of money."

Metaljaw growled and sat down heavily. "Red." "It's simple: You help us storm a syndicate warehouse. We take the hot shit, you get 40 percent."

"Fifty," Cybereyes said without hesitation. "Fifty is if you drop that hacker out there," Jax replied. "Forty is if you bring him in."

Everyone's eyes went back to the window. The guy outside was thrashing like a fish on a hook, now cursing in three different languages and even threatening to sue.

"Deal," said Metaljaw grimly. "Bring the idiot in." "Too bad," muttered Lira.

With a yank, they pulled the hacker back into the room. He was sweating, his eye was bloodshot, and now had a nice streak of rust across it. "This is going to hurt," Jax said. "But hey—you're alive. And you owe me something now."

The hacker stared at him. "I want to hate you... but I think I think you're cool."

Jax leaned back, took a deep sip of whiskey, and grinned. "Welcome to the Lost Legion, buddy."

The abandoned warehouse on the edge of the district stank of oil, sweat, and cheap energy drinks. This was where the newly christened "Lost Legion" gathered—a bunch of washed-up mercenaries, ex-smugglers, a few shady tech tinkerers, and a handful of freaks who'd been on the wrong side of the law for too long.

Lira sat on an upturned ammo crate, loading the magazines of her heavy pistol. "If they fight as well as they drink, we might have five minutes before someone chops us to pieces." "Five minutes is a luxury," Jax replied, checking the cylinder of his revolver. "I used to be able to do it in two."

Metaljaw brought in a stack of old Kevlar vests. "Not pretty, but better than bare skin." "Depends on who's naked," grinned the hacker with the rusty eye. Lira rolled her eyes. "Better shut up and check the drones before the syndicate grills our balls before we even take off."

Cybereyes tapped a hologram in the center of the room. A schematic floor plan appeared—the syndicate warehouse was a labyrinthine nightmare of rows of containers, guard towers, and cameras monitoring every square inch. "This," she said, pointing to a side entrance, "is our way in. Power here and here—if we cut those, we'll have three minutes of blindness before the emergency power system kicks in."

"And then?" Lira asked. "Then," Jax chimed in, "we run like drunken rats to the camp core, grab the hot stuff, and get out of here before someone with a rocket launcher gets any stupid ideas."

A lanky guy with blue cyber implants in his neck raised his hand. "What hot stuff?" Jax grinned. "Anything that makes us richer than yesterday—and yesterday we were damn poor."

The hall filled with a dull hum—the hacker's drones were now hovering in the air, ready for action. "Programmed for attack, retreat, and... confusion," he explained. "Confusion?" asked Metaljaw. "Little gimmick—they're randomly broadcasting porn clips to all the security monitors."

Lira laughed. "This will be the first mission where the enemy would rather stay put than chase us."

The Legion moved through the alleys like a dirty, armed shadow. Jax walked in front, cigarette dangling from the corner of his mouth, gun at the ready. Above them, the advertisements of the red-light district flickered, now like a deserted stage—too quiet, too empty.

"Doesn't that seem strange to you?" whispered Lira. "Sure," replied Jax. "But I stopped wondering about strange things the time I played cards with a cross-eyed hologram."

The syndicate camp loomed before them—high walls, barbed wire, spotlights scanning the darkness like ice-cold eyes. Cybereyes signaled. The hacker dispatched his drones. Within seconds, the cameras flickered—then they went blind.

Jax pressed himself against the side entrance, the capsule tucked deep into his jacket, and nodded to Lira. "So, ladies first?" "Forget it. You go first—if there's a trap, you'll be the first asshole to go off."

He grinned crookedly and pushed open the door, immediately hit by the smell of hot metal and old sweat. The interior was an endless network of containers, stacked on top of each other like the building blocks of a bored titan. Between them were narrow alleys, barely wide enough for two people to sit side by side, and high above, strip lights flickering to the rhythm of a malfunctioning heart machine.

Metaljaw pushed past them, its modified jaw joint grinding softly. "Looks like a damn maw. I hope it doesn't spit us out again."

"Better swallow us," Lira muttered, "at least then we won't get shot."

Suddenly, a loudspeaker crackled above them. A tinny voice, distorted and mocking: "Welcome to the game, Mercer. Let's see how far you get."

Jax's finger twitched on the gun. "I hate it when they try to play with me."

Cybereyes cursed quietly. "The cameras are back online—faster than I thought. Either they have a damn good admin... or the servers are fucking self-healing."

"Or both," said Lira. "We should—"

KRRRZ-BOOOM!

The container to their left exploded outward. Shards of metal rained down the corridor, sparks flew into the darkness. From the cloud of smoke emerged three Syndicate Heavy Carriers—massive, in armor that looked more like rolling armored safes than human beings. Each carried a shimmering blade of energy dust that crackled in the air like a hungry bonfire.

"Shit," Jax growled. "They're sending us the whole family."

Metaljaw leaped forward, parrying the first blow with a box that immediately split into two glowing halves. Jax drew and fired—the shot bounced ineffectively off the enemy's energy shield.

"We have to crack them another way!" Lira shouted, throwing a flash grenade. White light filled the corridor, screams of pain echoed between the containers.

The hacker launched his drones, and suddenly the Syndicate fighters saw small, flickering holograms of naked women dancing in the hallways. "Welcome to my private show, you idiots!" he laughed.

While the enemies were distracted, Jax pushed a rusty barrel in front of him like a shield, then jumped up and slammed a full-bore punch into the face of one of the swordbearers. The glass shattered, and the man fell to the ground, gasping for breath.

"Two left!" Lira yelled, dodging another blow and then slamming a stun gun under her opponent's armor. The metallic screech that followed could have been heard three alleys away.

The last Syndicate colossus turned and fled into the depths of the labyrinth. "Let him run," Jax panted. "He might lead us where we need to go."

"Three minutes," she hissed. "Then we dance," Jax said, pulling out his gun.

The fleeing heavy carrier stumbled between the containers, the metallic walls echoing every movement. It was like a damned ghost train of rusted steel and neon flashes.

"Left!" Lira shouted. "No, right!" Jax objected – but still slammed in the same direction as her. "You're as clueless as a drunken Manta driver," she gasped.

Above them, power lines crackled, dangling loosely from container to container. The hacker sent two of his scout drones ahead, moving like dirty points of light in the distance. "There's something up ahead," he reported. "Heat signatures. And they're not just our colossus."

"How many?" "Ten. Maybe more. Some... just sitting there."

"Sounds like a welcoming committee," Jax muttered. "Or drug addicts."

The corridor opened into a larger area—a kind of improvised marketplace in the middle of the labyrinth. Converted containers stood everywhere, filled with dubious vendors selling something: shiny knives made of strange alloys, glowing injectors, cages filled with hissing creatures that were definitely not housebroken. The smell was a mixture of cheap oil, blood, and a hint of burnt sugar—clearly synth drugs.

The crowd stared as Jax, Lira, Metaljaw, and the Hacker appeared. Whispering voices, greedy glances. Then a small man stepped forward, a cigarette in the corner of his mouth and a coat that looked like it had already outlived three owners. "You're looking for someone."

"We're not looking for anyone," Jax growled. "We'll find him."

A smile spread across the man's face. "Then good luck – you're in the wrong neighborhood, friends. This is *my* Market."

Figures emerged from the containers—slender, sinewy, carrying improvised weapons. Their eyes gleamed like predators in the flickering neon lights.

"Great," murmured Lira. "This is about to get really sociable."

The heavy-bearer they had been pursuing was now standing at the other end of the square, grinning beneath his helmeted armor. Behind him, heavy container walls closed in, as if blocking the exit.

Jax spat on the ground. "Okay, Lira. Time for the kind of plan only idiots and desperate people have." "I like that one," she replied.

He reached into his jacket, felt the warm capsule, and sensed its pulse merging with his own. Something about the thing wanted chaos—and he was just the right person to deliver it.

The first drone descended from above like an overweight dragonfly that had eaten too much meth. It had a transparent, teardrop-shaped case filled with a syrupy, purple liquid.

"What the...?" Lira began – and then the thing burst against a container wall, spraying sticky poison all over three guys who immediately started screaming, laughing, and punching each other in the face.

"Drug bombs? Seriously?" Jax shook his head. "Welcome to the black market, honey."

The second drone hissed lower, scattering a fine powder through the air. Two merchants immediately began eating their own wares, while another tried to explain to a power cable that it had "always been there for him."

The crowd faltered. Some ran in panic, others plunged blindly into the fight. Neon tubes burst, sparks rained down on the oil-stained floor. Someone threw a flaming Molotov cocktail, setting a table full of illegal injectors ablaze – they exploded like small rockets in all directions.

"Cover!" Metal Jaw yelled, ripping a sheet of metal off a container. A hail of syringes rained down on it, some piercing the metal with a hiss, others slamming into the walls, leaving foaming stains.

Jax ducked behind a fallen stall as a third drone flew close by. He raised his revolver and fired—the impact caused the drone to explode in a cloud of pink dust. The dust tasted of licorice and depression.

"Damn, I think I'm getting high!" he gasped, his vision briefly flooded with dancing neon bunnies.

Lira had no time for hallucinations – she kicked an attacker in the leg with the blade in her boot, then ripped the breath out of his lungs with an elbow strike.

"We have to get out of here before security comes!" "What security? There are only people here with guns and too much free time!"

In the chaos, the swordtail moved like a shark plowing through a tank full of stunned fish. His goal was clear: the exit on the opposite side.

Jax felt the capsule pulsing in his pocket, stronger, faster. "That thing wants us to follow it," he muttered, then yelled, "Let's take the shortcut!"

He ran toward a stack of containers, grabbed a loose chain, and climbed up, while below him a group of dealers attacked each other because one of them had allegedly poured "the wrong drug in the wrong face."

When he got to the top, he saw the entire market in flames – like a burning anthill, where everyone had their own little piece of hell.

"Shit... and all for one damn heavy-duty guy."

He jumped.

Jax jumped – and knew in the first half second that *hetoo short* The row of containers in front of him seemed to have moved away a little at the last moment, simply out of pure malice.

"Damn gravity..." he growled as his body flew in an arc through the hot, neon-filled air.

Two drones immediately noticed him—sleek, black models with four rotating wings and a small cannon under their bellies. They shot toward him like metal hornets.

"Come on, you tin wankers!" He raised his revolver and fired twice—the first shot missed, the second hit a drone in the rotor. It tumbled, exploded in a brilliant flash, and nearly blinded him for a second.

The other drone lunged forward, and Jax could see the metallic gleam of the electroshock lances protruding from its belly. He ducked instinctively, narrowly grazing it, and felt a jolt of electricity shoot down his spine. "Aaaaah—bitch!"

His fingers blindly grasped the container roof—the sharp metal edge cut into his palms—but he pulled himself up, the drone screeching behind him. Lira jumped beside him almost at the same time, landed with a roll, and gasped: "We should really consider another career!" "Yeah, maybe flower seller... or undertaker. At least then you won't have so much stress with customers who want to kill you."

Below them, the market raged like a goddamn war zone. Traders fired shots, customers screamed, and occasional drones continued to appear, emptying their drug cargoes into the chaos.

Suddenly there was a cracking sound right under Jax's feet – a hand reached through an open roof panel and grabbed his ankles. "Oh no, buddy,*you* You can't get up here!" With a kick he freed his hand, heard a painful "Ugh!" and then a dull thud from below.

They ran across the container roofs, leaping from one roof to the next, repeatedly interrupted by the whistling and whirring of the machines. Jax glanced back—the one drone was at his heels again, this time accompanied by a larger model that looked like a flying refrigerator with propellers.

"Oh shit, they've activated delivery mode." "Delivery mode?" "Yeah—this thing delivers hell right to your face."

The refrigerator drone opened its front flap—a chamber glowed behind it, with small, glowing red spheres buzzing inside. "Grenades. Of course."

Jax and Lira jumped to the side at the same moment as the drone fired a volley. The explosion ripped a hole in the container roof, the heat burned Jax's neck, and a section of the sheet metal bent like soft butter.

"Get down here!" he yelled. He pulled Lira by the hand and jumped through the gaping hole. They landed in a dark, narrow corridor between two containers—the stench of cheap synth alcohol and gunpowder hung heavy in the air.

The pulsation of the capsule in his pocket was now so strong that he felt as if it would burst through the fabric. "I'm telling you, Lira – that thing wants to take us somewhere... and I'm not sure I want to know*where*."

The corridor Jax and Lira had landed in descended deeper than it appeared at first glance. It turned twice, and with each step it became warmer, more humid... and the smell of cheap booze was replaced by something sharper.

Chemical. So pungent that Jax felt like his nose hairs were burning off in slow motion.

"That doesn't smell like a kitchen," Lira muttered. "Nah... that smells like the place where gods cook drugs and rats voluntarily flee."

The corridor opened into a massive hall, lit only by bright neon tubes. Rows of transparent tanks bubbling with thick, colorful liquids. Between them, figures in stained protective suits bustled—some with human faces, others with the smooth, expressionless masks of servitor droids.

Jax whistled softly. "Welcome to the heart of the damned drug syndicate." To one side were tables piled with small-caliber weapons, improvised drones, and what looked like modified server racks. A logo flickered on a screen: a laughing skull with a syringe in its mouth.

A skinny guy in an orange jumpsuit looked up. His eyes were two cloudy implants, and the voice coming from his throat sounded like an old, poorly oiled door. "Mercer... I've seen you on the cameras. You managed to burst into the only room in the city where EVERYONE wants to kill you."

Lira drew her weapon. "Yeah? Then we'll have to disappoint a few more people."

"Too late, sweetie," the man laughed and snapped his fingers. Immediately, several figures emerged from the shadows. Four muscular, shirtless men, their skin covered in glowing tattoos that glowed in time with their heartbeats. Two of them carried machetes, one had a rusty chainsaw, and the last one... well, the last one just had a giant pipe wrench, but he looked like he could easily crack heads like nuts with it.

Jax raised his hands as if he were about to surrender. "Wait, wait. We can act like civilized..." Then the first machete came down on him.

He ducked, punched the guy in the face with his free hand, and felt his nose crack beneath his knuckles. At the same time, Lira kicked the guy in the back of his knee with the pipe wrench, sending him stumbling forward, screaming.

"This isn't a negotiating room!" she shouted. "It seems so to me!"

Suddenly, several small drones flew out of a corner—this time without weapons. Instead, they carried small packets of iridescent powder, which they

randomly exploded in the air. A glowing cloud spread, tingling on the skin like static electricity and blurring Jax's vision.

"Drugs... in aerosol form. It'll be a party in your head."

Lira coughed, fired blindly into the cloud, and somewhere a tank crashed. The liquid inside hissed as it hit the ground—a chemical stench that covered everything.

The hall became a madhouse: sirens wailed, tanks exploded, the glowing thugs staggered like drunks, and the servitor droids went on autopilot, trying to "secure" the chemicals—which in practice meant simply bashing everything that moved.

Jax tugged Lira by the arm. "Get out before they throw us all in the blender!"

They raced through a side corridor, while half a drug bunker burst into flames behind them. The pulse of the capsule in his jacket was now so intense it was almost a heartbeat in itself.

"I'm telling you, Lira..." "Yes, I know. This thing will take us straight from one hell to the next."

The steel door at the end of the corridor gave way with a screeching sound as Jax and Lira threw themselves through. A blast of hot air followed them, and for a moment, they felt as if their skin was melting from their bones. Then they were outside—in the midst of a storm of bullets, garish neon, and the kind of chaos found only in the grimy quarters of the Brick Moon.

To the left, a group of syndicate thugs ducked behind an overturned delivery truck, firing rapid-fire blasters over the hood. To the right, at the foot of a dilapidated cargo loading ramp, men and women in matte-black body armor camped out—no crests, no emblems, but every inch of their bearing screamed: *Private army*.

"Great..." Jax growled. "From the frying pan into the damn furnace."

They had barely taken their first step onto the street when a volley of bullets blasted into the asphalt beside them, sparks flying. Jax grabbed Lira by the collar and pulled her behind an overturned vending machine that looked as if it had been used as a projectile by an angry giant.

"What do you think?" asked Lira. "I think we've accumulated more problems in the last ten minutes than in the entire last year of my life." "And how do we survive this?" "With style."

He grabbed an empty beer bottle lying next to the vending machine, shook out the last sip, and grinned. "Improvisation is an art form."

They crawled forward in the shadow of a dented scrap speeder. Laser flashes hissed everywhere, the air smelled of burnt metal and the ozone-like aftertaste of energy weapons. A Syndicate gunman was thrown backward by a well-aimed headshot, fell into an open puddle of oil-stained water—and lay motionless.

Suddenly, one of the drug drones from the bunker floated after them, completely misled by the chaos. It oscillated back and forth between the two firing lines – and exploded right above the private mercenaries. A poisonous green cloud rose.

"This is going to be interesting..." Jax murmured.

In fact, the mercenaries immediately began cursing and coughing, some falling to their knees. Others fired randomly into the air as if they had just lost their minds.

"Time to go!" Lira shouted, jumping up and running into the alley behind the warehouses.

Jax followed her, bullets rattling off the walls, and behind them, a Syndicate gunman burst into flames as an ammunition dump exploded. The rumble of the explosion vibrated to the bone.

The alley was so narrow that Jax could touch both walls with his outstretched arms. To the left, a thick, greasy liquid dripped from a leaky pipe; to the right, a lone neon strip flickered, spelling out "Bar"—looking so tired it looked as if it might faint itself.

Behind them, a fuel tank exploded. The shock wave sent a cloud of dust, trash, and flying beer cans through the alley. "Damn it!" Lira cried, ducking and stumbling on.

"I hope you know the way here!" "No—but I'm good at pretending!"

They turned into a backyard crammed with makeshift stalls—barbecue skewers, used droid parts, dubious USB sticks labeled "100% safe." The vendors

threw themselves to the ground as Jax and Lira raced through the market, and more gunfire rained down from above.

An old man in a stained poncho yelled after them: "You knocked over my eel, you bastards!" "Send me the bill!" Jax yelled back without slowing down.

Behind a half-ruined wall, Lira detonated a stun grenade and threw it back in the direction from which they had come. A bright flash, then the echo of screams of pain—and for a moment, only the roar of distant sirens could be heard.

"Damn cops too..." Jax muttered. "As if we haven't had enough partying today."

They ducked through a half-open gate and landed in another courtyard—and found themselves in the middle of a shootout between half a dozen syndicate thugs and a squad of street punks with glowing mohawks, baseball bats, and modified laser cutters.

"I hate it when chance takes over," Lira cursed.

"No matter – run along until someone dies, and then move on quickly."

They ran across, while on the left a skinhead knocked out a thug with the butt of his rifle, and on the right one of the syndicate men fell like a wet sack against a garbage compactor.

A gunshot zipped past Jax's ear, and he smelled the warm, metallic scent of burnt hair. "That was close, damn it!" "I said, run faster!"

They reached the other end of the yard, climbed over a stack of old cargo crates, and landed roughly on a balcony that creaked suspiciously.

Down on the street, the crowd began to gather—passersby, gawkers, pickpockets. Three police drones circled above, each with a bright searchlight.

"We're in the spotlight, Lira." "Then let's dance, Captain."

A screeching loudspeaker ripped the night apart: "This is Planetary Security. Put down your weapons and keep your hands visible."

Jax grinned crookedly. "I don't even have a gun in my hand—just a lot of trouble."

Law enforcement personnel poured in from all directions. Not shabby patrolmen—these were heavily armored anti-riot squads, each with a visor as emotionless as an ATM and batons gleaming in the neon light like freshly oiled executioners. Three massive police drones buzzed overhead, each with a rotating cannon that quietly but unmistakably promised, "We'll wipe you out if you sneeze."

Lira cursed quietly. "They're serious." "Good. Me too."

A flash grenade detonated, and suddenly everything was a blinding white, and the throbbing in his head was like a bad hangover on speed. When Jax's vision cleared again, the police stormed into the crowd—whether syndicate, punk, skinhead, or passerby. Clubs bashed skulls, shields rammed ribs, and screams echoed between the walls.

"Damned equal opportunity policy," Jax muttered. "Everyone gets a slap in the face."

Just as a rescue team approached them, it happened: Music blared from a side alley—so loud that the floor vibrated. An old junk glider raced toward them, with three half-naked figures with neon paint dancing on top of it, and a beat that sounded more like an apocalyptic rave than an escape roared from the speakers.

The crowd cheered, a few police officers turned around, irritated – and Jax seized this moment. He grabbed Lira by the arm. "Now or never!"

They jumped over a crate and slid down a slanted metal ramp, while laser flashes ripped through the air above them. A drone swung toward them, its machine gun firing with a rattle—but at the same moment, something slammed into it from the side.

An improvised Molotov cocktail—thrown by a guy with a mohawk and more facial piercings than healthy skin. The drone exploded in a fireball, and burning debris rained down onto the street.

"I like this guy," Jax gasped. "He probably won't live another two minutes."
"Then I like him even more."

The escape route smelled as if no one had done anything here for a hundred years except burn garbage, vomit cheap alcohol, and leave dead rats lying around. Neon tubes on the ceiling flickered like a nervous heartbeat, the light

twitching and unreliable, as if the walls themselves didn't want you to stay down there.

"Shit, this stinks of trouble," Jax whispered. "This isn't trouble," Lira muttered, pulling her jacket tighter. "This is rotten meat. At least three weeks old. Maybe three months."

Metallic footsteps echoed behind them. The Legion was still approaching—quiet, precise, ever closer.

The corridor took a sharp turn, and suddenly they stood before a rusty gate. "Locked," Jax growled. "Give it here." Lira pulled a small cutting device from her pocket, which looked like a pocketknife on steroids. The hiss of the plasma was like a beacon in the darkness—and immediately, a mechanical howl answered from the tunnel behind them.

"Damn, they've got us now."

The first Legionnaire appeared around the corner—half-burned from the explosion earlier, but still running, his face a grotesque mixture of flesh, metal, and viscous oil. Jax drew his revolver and fired. The shot echoed through the tunnel, and the Legionnaire fell to the ground—only to get up again seconds later.

"They won't stop!" "Then run!" Lira yelled, cutting open the last piece of the bars.

They rushed through the door into an even narrower corridor, one so low that Jax had to bend down. Water dripped from the ceiling, the walls lined with rusty pipes, some of which hissed softly.

"It's like a nightmare of mold and bad plumbing," he gasped. "Better than dead."

A loud whirring sound came from behind—small, round drones shot through the hole in the door, heading straight for them. "Cover!" Jax threw himself behind an overturned pipe segment, Lira pulled an improvised EMP grenade from her pocket. "Two seconds!" "Do it!"

The brief flash of the explosion burned out the tunnel, the drones' whirring collapsed into a metallic whine. "Okay, now really—run!"

They rushed forward, hearts in their throats, until finally a faint, bluish light appeared before them. Another door. Behind it... who knows? "Let's hope this isn't worse than in here," Jax muttered, shouldering open the door.

A cold night wind hit them in the face—and they stepped into a half-destroyed warehouse right by the docks. But before Jax could comment, something clicked around them. A dozen weapons were pointed at them. And then someone stepped out of the shadows, slowly, grinning broadly.

"Welcome back to the real world, Mercer."

Jax stopped, his hands slightly raised, his face a sarcastic question mark. "Great. Another party I wasn't invited to."

The man stepped out of the shadows into the full light—angular face, eyes like two cold nails, and in his hand a weapon that looked as if it could vaporize entire city blocks. "Oh, you were invited, Mercer. You're just late—and unfortunately, not alone."

"Late?" Jax grinned crookedly. "I'm all about style, so it's okay to be late."

"Style?" The man laughed dryly. "You're the only bastard who manages to be wanted in three sectors without anyone knowing exactly why."

"Well, a man needs a little mystery... and a damn good insurance policy."

The gun barrels took a step closer, metallic clacks echoing in the hall. Lira stepped to Jax's side, her voice like a cold knife: "I'd suggest we sit down and talk, but somehow I have the feeling you'd rather just shoot."

The man smiled—and it was the worst smile Jax had seen in a long time. "There is no peace between light and shadow, Mercer. Only choices. Yours is now."

30. Between Light and Shadow

The first shot ripped through the silence like a rusty nail through glass. Sparks flew from the wall behind Jax, who instinctively jumped to the side, half-pulling Lira with him. "Sure, shoot right away. I never wanted to grow old anyway!" he yelled.

Neon lights flickered in time with the gunshots as both ducked behind a row of overturned crates. The stench of burnt ozone mingled with the sweet aroma of old contraband—a smell that said: *Nothing good has happened here for a long time.*

"Left!" Lira shouted, firing two precise shots that made one of the attackers disappear in a puff of smoke. "Right!" Jax yelled back, firing blindly over the edge and hitting something that exploded loudly, bathing the entire corridor in red emergency light.

"You have no idea what you just hit, do you?" "If it's not alive, it wasn't a mistake!"

The shadows moved like predators. Each flash of light briefly revealed masked faces, metallic prosthetics, and eyes that cut through the fog like scanners. They came closer. Coordinated. Quietly. "They're not playing cowboys," Lira murmured. "They're professionals."

Jax grinned crookedly, reloaded, and spat a mixture of blood and dust onto the floor. "Perfect. Then they get a free private performance."

The first guy came shooting out of the fog like a crazy punching bag with legs. His fists were wedged into old leather gloves, and rusty screws were stuck in each finger, their tips flashing in the neon light. Jax ducked under the first blow, heard the metallic clang. *Click-click* of the screws above his head – and immediately smelled the iron in his blood as Lira fired a volley into the guy's ribs.

"Shit, that'll leave stains that will never come out!" Jax growled, grabbing the screwman by the wrist and ramming his knee into his face. The screwman's gloves scratched at Jax's jacket, tearing the fabric open—and a thin, burning pain ripped into his side.

The next enemy emerged directly from the flickering shadows, his eyes filled with cold light, clutching two shortened machetes. Jax saw him only as a silhouette until the neon came back on—and then a splash of blood colored the moment.

Lira jumped onto the back of a third attacker, pulled him to the ground, and with an ugly *Crack* something that sounded damn important broke. She gasped, ripped a blood-stained strand of hair from her face, and yelled, "We have to get out of here before the lights go out completely!"

The flickering grew faster, like a strobe light in a cheap space bar. Every split second showed a different hell: Jax's fist splitting a jaw; Lira catching a machete and plunging it into her owner's thigh; the flash of screw tips before they pierced a shoulder, blood spraying in time with the light.

A final opponent emerged like a shadow monster from a childhood nightmare—tall, broad, with breath that reeked of oil and old blood. Jax backed away, feeling the cold concrete at his back, and knew: Either he moves now, or the lights go out for him—forever.

The screw man came back up, spitting blood and grinning like he'd just lost a tooth. Jax's patience was at an end. He grabbed the guy by the collar, yanked him forward, and rammed his head against a concrete column so hard that the screw gloves looked like ridiculous decoration. The impact was dull, followed by a long, wet *plash* as the man collapsed.

Lira, meanwhile, had abandoned her pistol—too close, too tight—and now fought like an angry alley cat. Her elbows were sharp as blades, her knees aimed for throats. An opponent who tried to sneak up on her received an elbow to the face, followed by a kick that slammed his skull against a wall. The crack was drowned out by the screams of the others.

The neon light twitched like the heart of a dying man, a new snapshot every second:

- A jaw breaking under Jax's fist.
- A machete disappearing into a chest.
- Blood, warm and sticky, pouring across the cold floor.

The big, smelly opponent made the mistake of roaring a moment too long before striking. Jax kicked him square in the gut, making him gasp, then pulled a rusty iron bar from the ground. A blow across the skull splintered off a piece of the helmet—the second blow left nothing left to splinter off.

"Holy shit," Lira gasped, "this is like a dance class in hell." "Then let's take the final step," Jax growled, swinging the iron bar in a wide arc.

The screw gloves, the machetes, the flickering shadows—everything sank into a single, chaotic mist of blood. Every blow was final, every kick a judgment. When the neon light finally went out, all that could be heard was the faint dripping of blood and the ragged breathing of the survivors.

Jax stood there, the iron bar in his hand, his heart like a jackhammer. Lira, panting, leaned against a wall, her face half in shadow, half in the faint residual light of the street.

"We're still alive," she said finally. "Yes... but the rest aren't."

Jax dropped the iron bar, and the sound echoed through the silent alley like a bad joke. The only people still breathing were him, Lira—and a guy hanging from a wall, gasping for breath, a screwdriver glove halfway up his stomach.

"You have one last wish?" Jax asked, leaning down. The man coughed, a mixture of blood and tooth fragments dripping from his mouth. "Fuck... you." Jax smiled coldly, took off the glove, and slammed that exact glove into his face. *Click*. Quiet.

Lira kicked a cartridge case across the floor and looked over at Jax. "You know, I've never seen anyone killed with their own glove." "There's always a first time. Some people just need to taste the soup they made themselves."

Behind them, cables still crackled, sparks leaped from a severed neon tube. For a few seconds, the light painted grotesque silhouettes of blood, bodies, and the steaming metal parts that had once been weapons. The smell was a mixture of burnt ozone, cold sweat, and the sweet stench of fresh blood.

A stray dog trotted through the scene, sniffed at a lifeless arm – and then trotted on as if he had something better to do.

"We should go," Lira said, her voice raspy. "Before someone shows up here with not only screws in their gloves but also a damn rocket launcher." Jax nodded, wiped his forehead with the back of his hand, smearing more blood than sweat. "Yeah. And I need a whiskey. A big one."

He stepped over the last body, adjusted his jacket, and cast one last glance back. No pity, no regret—just the silent knowledge that this wasn't the last time they would encounter light and shadow in this way.

They turned into a narrow side street that looked as if it hadn't seen a ray of sunlight in centuries. The puddles were black, the water in them thick as used oil. Something dripped from a window that smelled suspiciously like a mixture of frying oil and blood.

Jax kicked a door, and it gave way. Inside: one of those seedy backroom bars where the bartenders had more diseases than the customers. A broken jukebox

was blaring a song from fifty years ago, and the bartender—a scrawny guy with a crystal ball for an eye—stared at them as if they'd just wandered into his local bar to sell his soul.

"Whiskey. Double. And leave the ice cubes in so the stuff doesn't burn the bar right away," Jax growled. The bartender set down the glass, and the liquid was so cloudy that for a moment Jax considered lighting it. He drank it anyway.

Lira sat down at a sticky table in the corner, pulled out her knife, and began scraping the dried dirt from the blade. A few guys at the next table eyed her, clearly thinking two strangers in a downtown bar would be easy prey.

"Tell me," said Jax, without looking at the guys, "how long do you think it will take until they start causing trouble?" "Two minutes," Lira replied dryly. "Three, if they want to finish their drinks first."

Less than two minutes later, one of the guys was standing at the table, beer breath and a grin that would make dentists rich. "You don't look like you're from around here." "And you don't look like you'll be able to chew tomorrow," Lira replied, taking a swig from the bottle.

Jax sighed, put down his glass, slammed his fist on the table – and the evening began to get bloody again.

The guy with the beer breath grabbed Lira's arm—and that was his first mistake. Her knife was faster than his mind, and the tip cut a fine line across his palm. Blood dripped onto the floor, he screamed, and his two friends immediately stood up.

Jax rose slowly, like a man about to finish his whiskey before beating someone up. But then his fist shot out, and the first guy caught it squarely on his chin. The impact was like a wet sack hitting a wall, and the man toppled backward into the table—beer glasses shattered, shards flew.

One of the guests reached for a bottle to hit Jax. But Jax blocked the swing, ripped the bottle from his hand, and smashed it on the bar in one motion. "At least now it looks like my breakfast glass," he growled before holding the neck of the bottle stub under the attacker's nose.

Lira had meanwhile stood up and kicked another man in the knee. The man screamed, fell to the ground, and she followed with a kick in the ribs—not even out of anger, but like someone closing a drawer.

The remaining guests paused briefly, then chaos erupted. Chairs flew, an old billiard cue broke in half, and someone actually pulled a rusty chain out from under their coat.

"Oh, chains? That's almost romantic!" Jax laughed, wrapping the thing around his forearm and pulling until the guy crashed across the counter.

The bartender ducked behind the bar, the glass globe in his eye socket beginning to flicker nervously. A mini-drone suddenly shot out of the darkness from a corner—probably one of those cheap underground security things—and immediately got a barstool smashed into his face, courtesy of Lira.

A man with screws in his gloves—screws that left little red splashes with every blow—came head-on at Jax. Jax dodged the first blow, grabbed the guy by the belt, and threw him into the wall so hard that the drywall cracked.

Screams, the clinking of glass, the smell of sweat, blood, and cheap liquor—it was like one disgusting orchestra, and Jax was the damn conductor.

In the end, only Jax and Lira were left, breathing heavily, among overturned tables and unconscious bodies. Lira took a swig from an open bottle of whiskey, wiped her mouth, and grinned. "At least no one shot." Jax raised an eyebrow. "Not yet."

The silence that followed was not a pleasant one. It was heavy, like the gasping of a predator that is full but not yet satisfied. Only the faint dripping of blood onto the dusty ground broke it.

A guy was lying under an overturned table with his mouth half open. A fly—God knows where it came from—sat on his tongue. He didn't move.

The bartender slowly got back up, dusting his vest as if he'd just survived a loud argument. "You've ruined my clientele." "They already looked ruined," Jax said, knocking back the rest of his whiskey. He grimaced. "Tastes like used motor oil with a hint of rat urine. But it burns well."

Lira stood next to an unconscious man who still had the rusty chain around his arm. She bent down, pulled off one of his boots, and sniffed it. "Definitely athlete's foot. Not worth picking up." Then she carelessly threw the boot into a corner.

Another guest lay face down in a puddle where beer and blood had mingled into a murky mess. The mini drone was still humming softly, completely dented, like a beetle that doesn't realize it's already half dead.

"Now what?" Lira asked. Jax looked around. "We're leaving. Before one of them gets up and remembers something stupid."

"Like, the fact that he still has teeth?" "Exactly."

When they opened the door, cold underground air rushed in—full of smoke, neon lights, and the distant noise of a world that had no idea that a small war had just taken place here.

Jax stepped outside, spat into the trickle outside the door, and said, "You know, Lira... I think we're pretty damn good at what we do. Unfortunately, most of what we do is illegal." She grinned crookedly. "Then we're just career criminals with style."

Behind them, a glass clinked in the bar. They didn't turn around. Some things you don't want to see if you want to survive the evening.

Outside, the pulsing heart of the lower city beat towards them – neon tubes flickered like nervous eyelids, advertising umbrellas screamed offers for everything from cheap cybersex to questionable organ transplants. The asphalt glistened damply from the slick rain that never really stopped here.

Jax pulled up his collar. "If anyone ever asks me why I hate the Brick Moon—right here. This smell... a mixture of old frying oil, burnt plastic, and people who've been lying in the sun too long." "At least it warms you up a bit," Lira said, stepping into a puddle shimmering in all the colors of hell.

They wound their way through a side alley where two guys were trying to hack a broken vending machine. Another was selling pills from a box that had once been a cereal carton. No one paid the two fugitives any attention—everyone here was on the run from something.

A crooked sign hung above a rusty door: *Transit to Oberring – elevators sometimes work* Jax tapped the lettering. "Sometimes is better than never. Or we run. But running means..." "...sweat. And sweat means we smell like these." Lira pointed to a guy lying against the wall, hugging a syringe.

They pushed open the door. Behind it – a narrow corridor, a yellowish light that made the dust float as if in slow motion. The whir of old mechanics sounded

like a sleepy heartbeat. At the very back, an elevator waited, its door dented like a boxer after the twentieth round.

"Between light and shadow, huh?" Jax murmured as they climbed in. "Feels like the story of my life." The door creaked shut. Somewhere deep inside, the old elevator began to work—and the humming mingled with a noise that clearly didn't belong to the machine.

31. The Last Song of the Galaxy

The elevator opened with a gasp, as if it itself were afraid of the place it had arrived in. Before them lay a vast, open space—no ceiling, no sky, just endless blackness, crisscrossed by luminous threads that snaked through the darkness like veins. In the distance, a city of glass and metal hung, yet suspended as if held by invisible hands.

And then there was... music. Not loud, not clear—a soft, vibrating sound that lay somewhere between a heartbeat, a stellar wind, and old vinyl scratching. Lira stopped. "Do you hear that?" Jax nodded slowly. "Yeah. Sounds like... like the universe has its own damn record player."

A narrow bridge led across, but it was lined with strange figures—half human, half light, each carrying an instrument that looked like something a mad blacksmith had forged out of a nightmare. No one spoke. No one moved. But the sound remained, flooding the room like a fog that crept through every pore.

"I hate this," Jax growled. "Too quiet. Too... sacred." "Maybe this is some kind of funeral," Lira said quietly. "A funeral for the entire galaxy."

Suddenly, a chorus began—countless voices, deep and sad, each syllable sounding like a piece of truth no one wanted to hear. Jax instinctively reached for the capsule in his jacket. It vibrated like crazy, as if reacting to the music. "Great... now this thing is dancing too."

At the end of the bridge stood a figure in armor made of shimmering dust. No eyes, just a helmet from which the music seemed to emanate. "Welcome, Mercer," she said in a voice that sounded like an entire choir. "You're late. The song is almost over."

Jax blinked. "Too late? That's what the waiters always tell me when the bar is already closed. And so far, it's been a lie every time."

The figure tilted its head, as if considering whether to be offended. "The song is the thread that holds this galaxy together. It is older than light, older than time."

"Sounds like a damn long intro," Jax muttered, as Lira gave him a warning look.

"Shut up, Jax," she hissed. "I think she's serious."

"I mean it more than you can imagine," said the chorus voice. "When the song ends, everything collapses. Stars, worlds, thoughts. Everything."

Jax pulled out the capsule. The thing pulsed to the beat of the music, as if it were resonating—or singing along. "And I bet this is the damn volume control, right?"

The armor vibrated slightly, as if laughing. "Not quite. It's the last verse. The one that decides whether the song ends... or begins again."

"Great." Jax pocketed the artifact. "So I'm not just a smuggler, but now I'm also the singer of the apocalypse. Exactly what I always wanted to be."

Behind the figure, the others, half-light, began to move. Slowly, in sync, as if waiting for an invisible command. Their instruments glowed. The sound swelled, becoming fuller, more piercing.

"Uh-oh," murmured Lira. "I think we're about to get the full concert."

"Then I hope there's a bar backstage."

A being of light stepped forward, its body shimmering like glowing ash, and waves of pure energy shot out from its instrument—a crooked thing somewhere between a harp and a machine gun. The bridge beneath Jax's feet began to shake.

"Okay," he growled. "There's no point in just listening quietly. Lira, hold on tight."

He drew his revolver, and at the same moment, part of the bridge exploded in front of them. Sparks, dust, and the taste of burning metal filled the air.

The choir's voice echoed above the chaos: "Sing with us, Mercer... or die with the silence."

"I hate musicals," Jax snarled – and ran off.

The first chord hit him like a pressure wave. Not a single note was audible—a note that made your teeth grind together, as if someone had tipped sand between the enamel and the nerve. The bridge vibrated, the glowing struts beneath it becoming thin as spider's thread, then thick again like ship's ropes, as if the music were retuning its geometry in real time.

"Jax!" Lira clutched a strut that creaked as she moved. "If this is a concert, I want my money back!"

"Complaint after the end of the world, sweetie!" He raised the gun—and realized that bullets were wrong here. The light beings twitched to the beat, and every time he aimed, there was only sound, no target.

Echo, the capsule in his jacket, began to whirl. Not nervously—confidently. His pulse leaped into his fingertips, his jaw, his knees. As if someone had shoved a metronome bar into his spine. *Tok—tok—tok*. Exactly in the gap between two waves of choir.

"You direct me, little one," Jax growled, "but make it sexy."

Lira drew a knife. The metal sang back softly, a fine *fing—fing*, which pierced diagonally into the choir area. A light being stumbled and missed a cue; immediately, a dark shadow bulged on its forearm, as if the music had burned skin there.

"Ha!" Lira cut through the air. "Counter melody, you bastard!"

"Keep the beat." Jax raised the revolver, didn't fire, *clicked* just the tap. A dry, brittle sound that fell right on the off-beat. The bridge quieted down for a heartbeat.

The choir leader (or whatever was in that dust armor) raised his hand. *hurricane* A wave of sound swept over them, deep as an ocean, high as a screech in the ears. The bridge jerked forward, and Jax stumbled as the ground beneath his boots suddenly *slipped* like an old vinyl groove.

"They modulate gravity via *resonance*," gasped Lira. "They're doing physics with music."

"Then we'll do punk rock," said Jax, pulling out the capsule.

Echo practically leaped into his hand, warm and cold at the same time. Lines flared up inside her that weren't writing, but meant everything: a comb, a beat, a(*root*)-Note. Jax pressed the capsule against the gun barrel, and the metal vibrated in the same manner.

"On three," he said. "One—two—"

He shot. Not a shot. A*Crack*, a click in time, as if someone had briefly paused playback. The next sound band of the choir*was missing* a breath. A being of light fell out of step, fraying into mica and ash that rained down backward.

"Did you just...*silence* shot?" Lira stared.

"Didn't know I could do it. I'm not complaining."

They ran forward, the bridge beneath them now a succession of briefly flashing steps that only existed when they*Exactly* in the off-beat. Every step was a decision between falling and letting go. Lira hummed—a rough, old sea shanty, off-key and defiant. The light beings twitched; apparently, they didn't like *Dirty melodies*.

"More of this!" Jax shouted.

"I can roar too!" Lira switched to a tone that was more coughing than singing. The next three beings cracked their instruments as if they were ceramic.

The choir leader reacted. His helmet opened like a flower: no face behind it, only stars that were too close. He raised both arms—and the threads of space shuddered. The distance drew closer, the nearness grew far; Jax's stomach did a somersault.

"Things are about to get bad," said Jax.

"Even*was* already," said Lira. "That is *worse*."

A new motif surged in: deep, slow bells tolling at star graves. With each strike, the struts briefly forgot that they were meant to be solid. Lira slipped; Jax grabbed her by the belt, yanked her onto the next step. Beneath them gaped—nothing. No abyss. A*Miss*.

"Echo," Jax murmured, pressing the capsule to his tongue, feeling metal, electricity, salt. "Give me something that hurts."

She gave. In his head, controls clicked that had none. He suddenly knew what a convertible top sounds like in the rain, when the drops are Morse code. He knew how to *Beat* the bridge is moved one beat "behind" the choir line.

"Backbeat!" he shouted, grabbed Lira by the elbows and pulled her *too late* The step they missed disappeared, the next one jumped *too early* up—and they landed right on it. Two light beings simultaneously missed their footing and plunged into the void as if they had never been there.

The choirmaster lowered his helmet. A piercing solo swept across the bridge, so delicate it turned skin to paper. Jax felt a gash open on his cheek; blood beaded in thin staves.

"Enough," he growled, wiping his cheek—a greasy, red smear. "Your song has a flaw."

He picked up Echo and for the first time he saw *Pictures* in her: no visions, *Scores* Battles. Prayers. Street music. Everything that had ever been sung lay on top of each other until it became the carpet on which this reality ran. And within it, barely visible, a thin, persistent thread: street jazz. The thing you play when your fingers are freezing, your stomach is growling, and the police are about to clear the pier—but you *plays*.

"Lira," he said quietly. "Do you remember the street outside the Lower City? The guy with the dented sax?"

"The one who could only play two notes and still sold them?"

"That's it." Jax took a deep breath. "Make it a two."

Lira nodded, counted silently—and blew a *whistle*. Not a nice one. An insulted, dirty one. Jax hit with his revolver *twice* on the parapet strut: *Tock—tock*. Echo answered, adding a vibrating hum beneath it, as rough as rusted sheet metal.

The choir loft flickered. The bells stumbled in their own reverberations. A being of light leaped forward and became—*quieter*. It did not die; it was *braked*, like a volume control that someone turns down.

"This is our window," said Jax, and they stormed.

The choirmaster recovered. He changed the motif—no more pathos, just *sharpness*. A clay knife. The bridge cracked, a gap opened. Lira jumped—too short.

"Damn—!" Her hand slid on the edge of the light. Jax threw Echo without thinking. The capsule hit her forearm, *stuck*—the beat jumped back and forth between them, and for a tiny moment the gap was *full drums*. Lira landed on the drums, rolled, and the floor was back.

"Never lend it to me again!" she gasped.

"I'm jealous," Jax gasped back, "because she likes you better."

They were now only three steps away from the choir leader. The last bodies of light danced around them, shimmering outlines that felt like cold hands on the neck. Lira threw the knife—it sliced through an instrument, and the sound inside died with an offended thud. *Pff*.

"Mercer," said the choirmaster, and for the first time his voice *Hurry*. "Give me the verse. You don't understand it."

"I understand enough: You sing to keep the world the way you want it." Jax picked up Echo. It hummed like a stubborn engine. "I sing to keep it going."

"Moving on without structure is decay."

"Maybe it needs new structure."

The choirmaster drew out one last note—so high, so pure, that it turned everything beneath it to glass. Lira's knife cracked. Jax's revolver vibrated. His heart stumbled.

"Now," whispered Lira, "or never."

Jax nodded. He put Echo to his lips.

It wasn't a song. It was a *Cough*, a *Laugh*, a *curse* it was street music played with broken instruments. He remembered everything that was dirty and *despite it* beautiful: of bars where the counter tasted of diesel; of trains that didn't arrive but were still starting; of people who fought and then drank together; of Lira grinning, bloody and alive; of *Mistake* that had style.

Echo let it go. She didn't amplify—she *allowed* The sound went out; no one would have called it "beautiful." But the bridge remained, the bells fell silent, and the choir lost its center. The choirmaster staggered, his dust helmet crumbling at the edge where Jax's ugly sound struck him.

"Unclean," said the choir, stunned. "You... sing uncleanly."

"Welcome to life," said Jax, stepping forward.

He pushed Echo into the hollow of his helmet, as if the capsule were a microphone pressed into the face of someone who is lying. *Boom*—not an explosion, but a *Restart* The veins of the room twitched, searching, reconnecting.

The light beings paused. A few looked (if that was what looking was) at Jax, a few at Lira, a few down into the absence that was once again becoming depth.

Then something happened that he could not put into words: The room *exhaled* The choir leader dissolved into particles that did not fall, but *floated* and settled in the veins like glitter dust. The music remained—but as a carpet, not a whip. The bridge was suddenly *only* a bridge.

Lira placed her hands on her knees and laughed breathlessly. "Tell me that was good."

"If it looks bad, I'll do it again." Jax lifted Echo. She was colder, calmer. On her surface, for a moment, stood a word he didn't know—but still understood: *Reprise*.

From the floating city beyond the bridge rose what looked like *applauses* sounded—not a clapping sound, but the rustling of wind through new leaves. But from the distance came another sound: a deep, steady pounding. *Order*, which marched. The Legion found melodies when it needed them.

"We're not finished yet," said Lira, looking at the dark line on the horizon.

"We're just getting started," Jax said. He looked at Echo, then into the blackness that was no longer an enemy, just open space.

"One," he murmured. "Two."

The bridge held. The music let them go. And somewhere very far back, so far back that it could only have been in his head, there was another polite knock: *Tok*.

"Don't answer," Lira said automatically.

Jax grinned. "This time, yes." He raised the capsule slightly, as if in a toast. "To the ugly song that carries us on."

And the galaxy, which had just wanted to die, cleared its throat—and sang another verse.

32. Echo of Doom

The sky above Elysium was no longer a sky. Only a flickering, blood-red veil in which dead radio signals danced like ghosts and the ruins of the orbital stations circled like bones in the eternal maelstrom. Jax Mercer stood in the midst of this chaos, his revolver held loosely in his hand, as if he had long since accepted that he was the last damned piece on this chessboard.

"The song is almost over," he muttered, as the wind carried the stench of burnt metal and blood across the shot-up street.

Behind him, the city burned. Not in the heroic sense, but in the random, dirty sense where it was impossible to say what had caused the explosion—a deliberate act of sabotage or simply another drunken god playing with the wrong levers in the engine room.

The capsule in his jacket still pounded, weaker than before, like the heart of an animal that had been hunted for too long. Lira stepped beside him, her eyes dark, shining with sweat and ash. "Tell me we haven't done all this in vain."

Jax inhaled the smoke from his cigarette, stared up at the sky, and blew it out as if he could blow out the entire galaxy. "We survived. That's all anyone gets here."

A sound rang out in the distance. A single, clear sound, like a string plucked in the middle of nowhere. That was the echo—the last song the artifact core sang before it faded away.

And somewhere in that echo, the God Mechanic's laughter echoed. Not loud, but deep enough that Jax knew the game wasn't over yet.

The city was still burning when they reached the hangar. The old cargo ship "Rustqueen" stood there like a battered veteran that had seen too many wars to have any respect for anyone anymore. A puff of exhaust smoke billowed from the side engines, as if the ship itself were saying, "Get the hell out of here before anyone else gets any stupid ideas."

Lira climbed the ramp, taking one last look back at the fires consuming the skyline like a fever dream. "Really? We just leave?" "That's not leaving, that's tactical... uh... keeping our distance," Jax growled, following her.

In the cockpit, the dust was so thick that it almost masked the smell of oil. Jax tossed the capsule into the onboard safe as if it were just another item on a long list that had cost him more than he would ever admit.

"Ready?" Lira asked, pulling the main drive lever. Jax lit another cigarette, took a deep drag, and let the smoke drift over the control panel. "Born ready. And if that thing in that box ever wakes up, I hope we're already somewhere in the ass end of the galaxy."

The "Rustqueen" took off with a jolt, breaking through the layer of smoke from the burning city and climbing higher until the sky turned black. Below them, Elysium faded into a glowing scar in the darkness. Before them, space opened up—silent, endless, and full of possibilities, most of them dead.

"Where to?" asked Lira. Jax grinned crookedly, took a drag on his cigarette, and tapped his finger on one of the many, many unexplored sectors. "Somewhere where no one wants to kill us yet. At least not right away."

The stars formed lines as the jump drive kicked in. The last echo of the burning world faded behind them, and the silence of space absorbed them—like a promise. Or a threat.

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