

THE HALFERNE DECEPTION

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THE HALFERNE CONSPIRACY

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BY

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Table of Contents	3
Revision History.....	5
Chapter 1. (Rik)	7
Chapter 2. (Tiron)	21
Chapter 3. (Krisp)	33
Appendix	43
About the Author	43
Afterword.....	43
Links	44
Bibliography of current and in-progress works by the author.....	44



REVISION HISTORY

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*"I have no spur to prick the sides of my intent but only vaulting ambition which
o'erleaps itself and falls on th'other."*

-- William Shakespeare (Macbeth)

CHAPTER 1. (RIK)

The café did a modest breakfast trade, and its patrons behaved as if the commotion were beneath them. “Boy, am I glad I’m not trying to navigate through that mess,” Rik Baddon said as he watched the wave of rush-hour pedestrians crowding the walkway and the swarm of hover transports buzzing up and down the vertical transit shaft. He sat, took a sip of coffee, made sure the team was in place on the street four floors below, and finally leaned into a pose meant to read as relaxed but failed miserably.

“Okay, he’s going to be out here any minute, so I’m gonna need you to unclench, Rik.”
Stev Bix laughed and refilled his cup.

Rik’s heart sank. “Sorry, I can’t help it. I should be down there with the team working this job, not up here with you guys talking about it.”

“Seriously, and when I said I wanted you at the grown-ups’ table today, I assumed you’d dress better. What the hell is this? We’re having breakfast with Mr. Madhavi, and you came looking like you just walked off the night shift on a factory floor somewhere.”

Rik scowled. “Come on, Bix, I was up all night putting this thing into motion! Not to mention, until I get paid for this, I can’t afford a \$2,000 cred suit like yours. As it was, I at least ran home and put on the nicest shirt I own.”

Bix raised an eyebrow. “That’s your nicest shirt? We’ll be lucky he doesn’t frag you on the spot for the insult.”

“Oh my God, you’re kidding, right?”

Bix paused ten seconds for effect and then flashed a wide grin. “Of course, I’m kidding. Relax, will ya?” He slapped Rik on the arm.

“You sonofa—”

“Don’t overthink this. The fewer people down there, the better, and I need you up here to explain the tech and take full credit when it goes to plan.” He placed both hands on the table and looked Rik in the eyes. “You can do this. Whatever you do, impress upon him how difficult and intricate this plan is, and don’t let him think we’re taking a chance and hoping we get lucky.”

“The plan was difficult and intricate,” Rik protested, “and we do still need a couple of lucky breaks to pull this off without a hitch. There’s a good chance we’ll be improvising at least some of it, which is why I wanted to be down there. Krisp and I know the drill—”

“Definitely don’t tell Madhavi if we go off-script,” Bix interrupted in a low, conspiratorial tone. “This is still a fourth-floor terrace. You probably won’t die if you roll when you hit, but it will hurt—a lot.”

“Why do you do this to me?” Rik pleaded, rolling his eyes.

“Because you’re better than you give yourself credit for. We’re aiming for the big time with this one, so I need everyone to step up their game.”

A thin, middle-aged man walked onto the terrace. He wore an immaculate cream suit with loafers. His assistant, dressed in a black tunic, pulled out a chair for him and poured a cup of coffee. “Good morning, Mr. Bix,” the man said coldly, barely looking at the two of them. “Thank you for waiting.”

Bix smiled. “Not at all, Mr. Madhavi.” He gestured to Rik. “This is Rik Baddon. He’s new to the team, but an expert in lockpicking, alarm cracking, and surveillance countermeasures.”

“I see,” Madhavi said. “What I do not see is the weapon prototype I hired your team to secure. You assured me that you would complete the job by this morning.”

“And so, they will, shortly, sir.”

“I don’t appreciate my employees wasting my time like this, and I don’t usually expect to be called to a meeting unless the job is complete and you are preparing to hand over the merchandise.”

“I understand your concern, Mr. Madhavi,” Bix said, smiling disarmingly. He had a swagger and charm that somehow let him get away with mild insubordination, which made him the one who did most of the talking for the crew. “We had to make a few last-minute adjustments to the operation. If all goes to plan, we’ll be completing your job shortly.”

Pranav Shah, Madhavi’s majordomo, looked up from his breakfast for the first time with a hurt look on his face. “And if it isn’t? Then you most certainly will have wasted Mr. Madhavi’s time.”

Bix waved his hand. “I wouldn’t worry about that. I have complete confidence in my team, and in the plan that Rik here has put together.”

Shah leaned forward and eyed Bix. “Yes. I’m still curious about that. We gave you complete schematics and intel on your target. The job should have been a no-brainer for a team like yours to pull off last night, or the night before, yet you apparently didn’t use any of what we gave you and are waiting until the final moments before the deadline,” he said in a low, menacing voice.

“We appreciate that your team no doubt went through a lot of trouble, believing they would save us time and effort. However, we still prefer to get our intel firsthand and make all preparations in-house. No slight on your abilities, you understand. It does not affect our fee for successful completion of the job.”

Shah appeared more hurt than angry. “There was nothing wrong with that report. I was very thorough.”

“So you were, Mr. Shah.” Bix smiled disarmingly. “Even you’d admit, however, that you’re not a pro. Your information was good enough to possibly pull off a break-in and grab, but fortunately, we saw a less-risky approach.”

Shah snorted in contempt and disbelief.

“Not a lot of people can disable a Higgins 2600 sensor net,” Bix continued. “Rik is one of seven people in the metroplex who know how, and even he sets the damn thing off one out of every five attempts.” Rik was grateful for the acknowledgment but avoided smiling so as not to appear cocky. “And my apologies, but the pay isn’t worth a 20% chance of someone from my team getting pinched by security.”

Shah leaned forward to appear menacing. “So, you should have said something. I know the other six guys. They would have happily done the job for half what we’re paying you.”

“Yes, but the Higgins was the least of our concerns. We’re not just robbing a design engineer’s home. In effect, we’re robbing Tesnica Enterprises, a major manufacturing and design conglomerate with deep pockets and ample resources assigned to protect its interests. Even if we managed to get away with the prototype, it would take Tesnica’s investigation team five minutes to determine exactly how and when the job was done, and then another five to identify whose team had the capability to pull it off. We’d all be stains on the street by dinnertime, and by breakfast, they’d be paying a visit to you and Mr. Madhavi here.”

Cid Madhavi, who had stayed out of the conversation to this point, raised a hand and motioned for Shah to stand down. He smiled at Bix and Rik. “I’m prepared to give you the leeway. Your success now will determine whether there will be a next time. I will say, Mr. Bix, this is a bold gamble. Your reputation for smoothness and dussahas is not unwarranted, I see.”

Bix tapped the commlink on his wrist and signaled to the three-man team standing on the street corner four stories below them. “Krisp? It’s almost time. Is everyone in place? Does everyone know what they’re supposed to be doing?”

“That’s affirmative,” came the reply. “We’re just waiting for the show to start.”

Bix grinned widely and gestured to Rik with a flourish. “As this is his idea and his plan to execute, I will let my associate here explain the details.”

Rik sat up instantly and cleared his throat. “Gentlemen, as you know...” His voice cracked with nervousness, and he grabbed a napkin, pretending he’d swallowed wrong, then continued. “As you know, our mark is Mr. Marten Clerc, a wealthy industrialist on Level 19 who happens to be a well-respected personal weapons designer for Tesnica Enterprises. As we have

just discussed, Tesnica's security team is focused on protecting his residence, where they have installed a notoriously uncrackable security network, which your intelligence discovered. It did not, however, confirm or rule out the presence of a silent backup, real-time monitoring by Tesnica's security operations center, or any additional, possibly independent security around Clerc's home workshop. This made stealth entry and theft impractical, as the timeframe given to complete the job did not permit further surveillance of the target."

Shah continued to look irritated, but Madhavi, amused by Rik's nervousness, nodded for Rik to continue.

Rik swallowed hard and took a deep breath. "In looking for an alternate approach, we observed that over the past week, our man Clerc leaves his home on Level 19 and drives the same route to the ground level of the arco and out to his lab in the open-air levels each morning at 0630. Coincidentally, this route takes him right past this block, where Krisp and I work. So any casual scan by vidcams or enforcer drones wouldn't flag our presence here as unusual, and thus we wouldn't tip off analysis software looking for out-of-place pedestrians."

While Madhavi appeared impressed by Bix's suave coolness earlier, his subtle yawn alerted Rik that he was still failing to make an impression. He pressed on, speaking faster now. "Further, I noted that our Mr. Clerc drives a '74 Quinn Starlight that he keeps on a clockwork maintenance schedule and stores in his unit's autopark. The '74 Starlight was the first model to use a single power regulator valve rather than the usual practice of having one for each repulsor. This provides fewer points of failure and maintenance, along with much more efficient control over fuel consumption that is practically foolproof, assuming your regulator is properly tuned. If one were to, say, boost the power input and miscalibrate the regulator so that it doesn't register the additional power, it's only a matter of time before the valve overheats and shuts the vehicle

down. With precise enough tweaking and a bit of math, you can calculate time-to-failure to the second.”

Much to even Rik’s surprise, at that instant a sputtering transport pulled away from the traffic descending the transit shaft, passing mere meters from the terrace where they were sitting. In the main pilot’s seat, an angry Marten Clerc could be seen pounding on the controls as he passed them. Seconds later, the craft’s emergency landing system parked it on a street corner directly across from Krisp. While Rik was reasonably sure when, and consequently where, the transport would break down, he could not possibly have timed its arrival to coincide so perfectly with his speech.

Bix grinned and locked eyes with Shah, not betraying the coincidence. “Turns out my man here is an even better full-time repulsor mechanic than he is a part-time alarm cracker.”

“I will join your revels when your team has finished the job, and I have the item in my possession,” Madhavi snarled, then allowed the slightest smile of approval to show on his face. “However, I appreciate your chutzpah.” He held up his glass in a mock toast.

“Thank you, Mr. Madhavi.” Rik nodded in appreciation. The cut for this one job, which took him a total of three days to plan and execute, was equivalent to nearly two weeks’ work as a transport technician, depending on business during those weeks. Now, however, came the human factor, which he trusted slightly less than the immutable laws of mechanics. The con had four simple beats, ones Rik and Krisp had run since their teens. Unfortunately, the other two who were part of the plan were working outside their normal areas of expertise.

First up was Krisp, the most charming of the group. The 70-meter-diameter transit shaft and ringed walkway meant nearly 300 meters of possible touchdown points for the failing craft. Rik estimated slightly better than two-to-one odds that it would come down right where it did.

He set the team up there in advance, putting Krisp in the fortuitous position to approach Clerc from across the street. As he called out, offering assistance, he naturally kept all of Clerc's attention forward, keeping the man's back to the storage locker containing the target weapon prototype.

Next was Daria, who was small, stealthy, and fast with her fingers, though she was better served running a computer console than doing a snatch-and-grab over the side of a transport. Rik watched her nonchalantly walk straight up to the transport, lean in on the outer railing, and, with a handheld sonitron, disable the electronic seal in just under five seconds. She then snatched the case containing the prototype and tossed it behind her back to Luuk.

While Daria was fast and nimble, she would not do well in a fight should Clerc spot the ruse and attempt to do something brave on behalf of his employers. That's where Luuk came in. Very few people who saw Luuk would find the bravery to stop him. Beyond intimidation, Luuk's only job in this caper was simply to remove the prototype from the case, place it in his pocket, and—assuming he had time and remembered—replace it with one of three worthless hunks of metal fastened inside his coat. This required him to determine which one was the closest in size and weight, which is where Rik feared the instructions might have gone over his head. In any event, when he completed his job, he was to hand the case back to Daria to slip back onto the transport.

The decoy metal was not essential, but it could potentially be the difference between Clerc noticing he'd been robbed here and now when he grabbed the case and switched to an alternate mode of transportation, or several hours from now after he arrived at Tesnica's complex, and presumably had been around several hundred more potential suspects.

As luck would have it, Luuk did remember, and Rik saw him place the medium-sized decoy in the case before handing it back to Daria, who quickly returned it to the locker and was away before Krisp had even finished introducing himself. She and Luuk split off in two predetermined directions and were halfway to their rendezvous point before Clerc turned around and glanced at the storage locker for the first time to ensure he wasn't being set up.



Safely back at their transport repair shop an hour later, Krisp was beside himself. "That went so smoothly. I can't believe how easy that was."

Rik shook his head. "A lot could've gone wrong with that job, just like the break-in concept I told you guys to avoid. I'm still not convinced it would have worked if he'd landed on the other side of the street, and it definitely wouldn't have worked if I'd messed up the miscalibration on his transport."

"Either way," Krisp was pacing in excitement, "I would have loved to see the look on Madhavi's face when that Starlight came barreling down right past him. I'll bet you anything we get the next big job, and Bix makes you a permanent addition to the crew. We're really moving up to the big time now."

Rik sat up, alarmed. "Okay, first off. I was happy to help, but I'm not so sure I want to be a permanent member of the crew. Second, don't you think he's forcing the team into areas none of us know anything about? Personally, I think you and I should be keeping Bix at arm's length and just helping him out with the jobs we're best at. I mean, who is Madhavi anyway? What's his game? Why is he relying on morons like Shah, who couldn't plan a trip down a flight of stairs? Not to mention that 'smooth' job was way out of most of the crew's comfort zone. I was almost positive I could bring down the Starlight, but I was half terrified Luuk would put the

prototype back in the case instead of the decoy. Maybe we should go talk to Bix first, before he signs us up for something we can't handle."

"Oh, but the money, Rik," Krisp protested. "You know what he paid us for that. I didn't do anything but distract Clerc, and that was one of the top five best-paying jobs I've ever done."

"Yeah, but there's still a chance he'll remember you under hypno-interrogation, or piece together when and where we snatched the goods. Come on, Krisp. Do you really want to be a career criminal and spend the rest of your life looking over your shoulder?" Rik studied his friend, who didn't seem to be getting the message. "If we take this next big job and get on Madhavi's payroll, do you really think he'd ever be okay with any of us leaving, knowing all about his organization, his contacts, his operational fronts, his people, his methods, and such? He may not be Black Scorpion Syndicate or Celestial Veil, but he has a lot to protect, and I'm willing to bet he'd go to some extreme lengths to keep it that way."

Krisp nodded impatiently. "Well, you can play it your way and leave all that money on the table, but it's not like either of us is going to be getting rich off the transport maintenance business."

Rik shrugged, forced to agree on that point. "Speaking of which, did you get Mr. Simuns' repair done? I see it's still sitting in bay 4."

"I put Raj on it yesterday. Come to think of it, where's Lora?"

Lora Dobs was the third co-owner of the shop. Although not a technician, like Krisp and Rik, she did come from a slightly higher social background, which meant she brought financial means and a formal business education to the group. While Rik trusted her without question, there were clear boundaries that needed to be kept. Lora was very pragmatic and didn't agree with Krisp's extracurricular activities at all. In fact, Rik was convinced she would dissolve the

company and leave them on the street if she knew Rik had joined Krisp on his latest job and was now starting to dabble in thievery.

Rik shook his head. "I persuaded her to take the day off so we'd have a little room to move around this morning, if you know what I mean."

Krisp nodded. "Smart thinking."

The door chime sounded, and Rik checked the lobby feed on the monitor. "No way," he blurted, jumping to his feet. "Krisp, go back and verify Simuns' transport has been fixed. Now."

Krisp squinted at Rik. "Why, what's going on?"

"Marten Clerc just walked into the shop, you idiot. Go hide your face before he sees you!"

Without a word, Krisp ducked low, scurried to bay 4, and slid under the transport with his legs and feet pointed toward the lobby. Meanwhile, Rik adjusted his work tunic and rushed to the front door to meet Clerc.

"Good morning, sir. Can I help you with something?" He smiled cordially.

"Hello, yes, someone told me they thought this was a transport maintenance shop."

Rik's jaw started to drop. While it was true that he managed to bring the transport down only a few blocks from his shop, that was simply because he regularly ate at that restaurant and thought it would make a great meeting point along Clerc's commute. He never dreamed the mark would bring his ailing transport here, to their shop, for service right after the heist. Now, however, Rik was starting to consider the idea of a whole new side business. "It is, sir. I'll admit it's poorly named and tends to confuse everyone."

"Yes, B.D.D. Repairs could be just about anything. What's B.D.D., by the way?"

“Well, I’m Rikkard Baddon. My partners, Lora Dobs and Krispin Dijek, aren’t in, but they would be the two ‘D’s.”

“You’re the owner then?” Clerc asked.

“One of them, yes, sir.” Rik smiled and pulled up a work order on his holodisplay. “What kind of transport is it, and what seems to be the problem?”

“Oh, it’s a ’74 Quinn Starlight. I don’t know what the deal is. I regularly have all the routine maintenance and inspections done, but this morning it started sputtering and overheating in the vertical shaft, then auto-landed a few blocks away. It’s so strange. I’ve never had a single issue with it until now.”

“Well, I’m sure we can get you fixed up in no time. Where’s the transport now?”

“Underneath a maintenance hauler right outside,” Clerc said, gesturing to the door.

Rik leaned forward and spotted the large, automated drone with the Starlight anchored to its underbelly in a gravbeam. He pulled up a second holo, made three quick gestures, and directed the hauler to drop the transport into bay 2. “Let’s see what we’re dealing with.”

“Just like that?” Clerc asked. “Usually, people tell me they’re far too busy to get to me immediately and either expect me to make an appointment for later in the week or bribe me to move up a waiting list.”

Rik motioned Clerc onto the maintenance floor, where eight of the twelve repair bays were currently empty. “As you can see, we don’t exactly have a waiting list, so it would be really bad form for me to ask you for a bribe when I desperately need your business.”

Clerc nodded, numb with surprise. “I see, yes.” As soon as the hauler had released his transport, he climbed aboard and went to the storage locker in the back. Rik’s heart sank, but he dared not say anything. Perhaps letting Clerc into the shop instead of immediately turning him

away was not the smartest thing he'd done that morning after all. Still, if Krisp kept his head down on the other side of the bay, Clerc could not have seen Rik four stories above and behind him. It also made an interesting, if tense, way to confirm Luuk's choice of decoy had worked, as Clerc retrieved the weapon case and placed it under his arm without a second thought. "I don't suppose you have a loaner transport you could rent me, or direct me to the nearest taxi station? I really do need to get to work. I have a presentation this afternoon."

Rik motioned for him to slow down with his right hand and pulled up a diagnostic holo with his left. "If you can spare a moment, I can at least give you a diagnosis and estimate on the repair."

Clerc smiled, obviously amazed. "Oh, really? That's very kind of you."

The diagnostic monitor instantly identified the misconfigured power regulator. Rik wasn't sure if Clerc knew anything about transports or could read the diagnostic display, but he supposed it really didn't matter at this point. "Actually, Mr. Clerc, it looks like I can have you fixed up and back in the air in about ten minutes."

"What? How?"

Rik provided a basic explanation of repulsor technology, detailing exactly what was happening to the transport's overheating regulator valve, while omitting his actions the previous night from the explanation. Then, after a couple of adjustments and a full diagnostic to ensure nothing else was wrong, he pronounced Clerc ready to travel.

"Amazing. What do I owe you?" Clerc asked, suddenly realizing he was still clutching the weapon case under his arm. He tossed it onto the rear seat of the transport.

"Well, frankly, you saw that I really didn't do any actual work there. Let's just shake on it and call us even. Otherwise, I'll be forced to round up to my hourly rate for those five minutes

of work, and that would make me look like a Grade 9 asshole, if you'll forgive the expression." Rik extended a hand, which Clerc took, still dumbfounded by the entire experience. He had not even questioned how such a key component of his transport engine could have gotten so badly misaligned and unnoticed by the onboard safety systems.

"I may start coming down here for my routine maintenance. I am thoroughly impressed, Mr. Baddon. Thank you so much for everything you've done."

"My pleasure, sir. We hope to see you again, though not too soon." The line was corny, but if anything, it made him seem endearing and harmless.

As soon as Clerc was gone, Krisp cautiously slid out from under Simuns' transport and walked back to the office, where he found Rik deleting any trace of Clerc's transport from their logs.

"Well, Simuns' is done now. I'll get the invoice together. Why the hell did you let Clerc off like that? You know he's a suneater and ten levels from home. You could have run him around and made a small fortune off of him. He wouldn't have been any the wiser."

Rik frowned and shook his head. "I may be many things in my off-hours, but when I'm here, in my shop, representing you and Lora, I'm 100% honest and upfront with my customers. Besides, he's apparently presenting that weapon to his boss this afternoon. He's already about to have a very bad day. Might as well give him one win to balance the scales."

CHAPTER 2. (TIRON)

“Rube’s” was, by appearances at least, a reputable entertainment establishment that catered to the upper-middle-class denizens on Arco Korab, Level 16. The drinks were a bit pricey, though not watered down. The holoivid sports tables offered nearly every game and match in the metroplex, along with the usual legal wagering options. On weekends, there was often live entertainment in the form of a staged drama, comedy, or musical acts. It even offered a family-friendly brunch five days a week.

For those in the know, Rube’s was neutral ground where the seedier side of arco life could conduct business with no questions asked, provided they followed a handful of simple, irrefutable rules, chief among them: do nothing to irritate, offend, or frighten the establishment’s legitimate customers.

Tiron Essien sat at the side of the bar with his back to the corner and studied the room. Most of the patrons were civilians, and he recognized most of the others either personally or by reputation. One couple, however, seated at a high-top by the main entrance, stood out. They were fit, young, and dressed in loose-fitting casual clothes that suggested they were looking for

trouble. They kept their eyes on the room, barely speaking or touching their drinks. They weren't local security—who wouldn't bother concealing their identities in a place like this—nor did they read as freelancers; they were far too subtle for that.

"They're Tesnica," a voice beside him said in a matter-of-fact tone.

Tiron looked up and saw a ludicrously handsome man in a gray silk suit holding a small tumbler of clear liquid. "I know you're not going to say they're here for me."

The handsome man shrugged and took the seat on the front side of the bar, next to Tiron, subtly keeping his back to the two at all times. "Not yet, anyway. They're waiting to see who Marten Clerc is coming to visit in fifteen minutes."

Tiron emptied his drink, setting the glass down with a thump that Rube heard at the other end of the bar; the barkeep instantly began pouring another. "Well then, thanks for the professional courtesy. I suppose I owe you one."

The man smirked apologetically. "Technically, no."

Tiron studied him. "You're Stev Bix. Your crew did the Celestek Ventures job last year." He put it together and winced. "How the hell did you beat me to Clerc?" he whispered. "And when did you pull it off?!"

"This morning, during his commute to work."

"Sonofabitch! In three hours, I would have had him right where I wanted him—"

"I know. Your boss talks a lot. That's why we moved our timing up to this morning."

"Ghaffari?! That idiot. It's a wonder he's still walking the streets."

"You were brilliant, though. You even have the mark running straight to you to confide in after he's just been robbed. That takes serious manipulation and trust-building, and from what I've heard, you're the best confidence man in Arco Korab."

Tiron rolled his eyes. “Yeah, but four weeks of strategic charm and flattery don’t do any good when someone else beats you to the prize a few hours before your big move.”

“That’s not your fault. Why don’t you throw in with a smarter crew?”

“Why? Are you hiring?”

“As a matter of fact, that’s why I came. It’s not professional courtesy. This morning’s job was a test for my crew. Now we’re about to land something big and expand the team. The job’s tailor-made for someone with your skill set. I figure after expenses, the payout is north of two hundred fifty thousand.”

Tiron tried not to look impressed. “I gather there’s a catch.”

Bix bobbed his head noncommittally. “Well, it would be nice if Tesnica’s security operations center had a bit of focus in their investigations, so I don’t have to wear a hat and avert my face constantly in public.”

“Yeah,” Tiron laughed, “that’s damned inconvenient, I’m sure. I’ll need twenty thousand for that.” He set a datapad on the bar between them. “A thousand in hard cred.”

Bix smiled, keyed numbers on the pad, and acknowledged the sum with his thumb. Then he discreetly reached into his pocket, pulled out a wad of cred notes, and set one on top of the pad, which Tiron scooped up and made vanish.

Rube arrived seconds later with a fresh drink, taking Tiron’s old glass and noting the thousand-cred note underneath. He paused, not looking at Tiron but at the note, which he pressed between his index and middle fingers.

“When the two newbies at the high-top by the door ask in about thirty minutes, I’m just a lonely freelance card sharp. I work with anybody, and I just picked up a last-minute job fixing a game for some big-time tech runner who just scored a deal this morning. I have no idea what it

is, I was just paid to deal a few hands and disappear right afterward without asking questions.”

Rube nodded, pocketed the note, and walked back to the other end of the bar.

Bix nodded at the speed with which Tiron had covered himself. “Did you think up an exit strategy on the spot, or have you been playing this out for a while?”

“You think I should give him advance notice? A smooth transition period? A warning shot?” Tiron raised the glass in mock salute. “I don’t owe him favors. If I did, things would be different. Considering he cost me a lot of money today, I have no qualms about selling him, or anybody else, out as payback.”

“As your new boss, I’ll keep that in mind.”

“Prepare to be impressed, Mr. Bix.”

Fifteen minutes later, Tiron was at the bar outwardly consoling his friend while inwardly working out the details of an improvised plan. He hated improvising.

“Oh, come on, Marty, it can’t be that bad,” he lied. “It’s not like you’re dealing under-the-table with the competition. I’m sure Tesnica will run an investigation, figure out you were the victim of a random robbery, and clear you of the whole thing. The guys that nicked it probably won’t even realize what they have and will sell it for worthless junk.”

Clerc took a nervous sip and shook his head. “That would be even worse. A prototype military smart-plaser sold to a common street thug by a second-hand consignment shop? At least if some big-time tech-running gang had snatched it, then it would be no fault of mine. If it were a bunch of street thugs, they’ll frag me for being careless.”

“Okay, maybe you have a point there. I’m no expert, but that sounds sensible. Gun-wielding street thugs aren’t the type to rob transports. So drink up and relax.” Tiron almost felt sympathy for Clerc, who had been—and still was—the target of no less than a half-dozen

independent operations by various crews, tech runners, and criminal syndicates. Of all the scams, burglaries, robberies, and extortion plans in motion, the confidence game was the slowest. He had already lost four months of his best work today. Now it was time to get compensated for at least part of it. Bix was right: it was a testament to Tiron's skill as a confidence man that Clerc ran straight to him after losing the prototype and getting grilled by his employer. Tiron couldn't calculate how much karma he'd burned for Bix to find and recruit him immediately afterward, though he still suspected he had a good amount banked with the universe.

"Honestly, I don't know what to do," Clerc was almost hysterical. "I'm certain they'll fire me for disregarding security procedures, and Tesnica isn't about to let me sign on with the competition. I'll be lucky if they just let me go bankrupt and don't outright disappear me."

"I'd be more worried if I were the low-life thug who robbed you," Tiron assured him. "You've got a decade of good service with your bosses. You didn't do anything wrong, and their investigation will show that. So relax. We'll have a few drinks, talk to a few ladies, and a week from now we'll look back on tonight and laugh." He handed Clerc a tall glass of his favorite ale and studied him to gauge his state of mind. He caught Clerc's slight smile and knew he was almost ready.

"Tiron, old son!" A boisterous voice boomed over the thrum of the establishment about fifteen minutes early. Tiron decided he could still salvage the situation and compensate. "We need two more for a friendly game of Procyon Shuffle, old son. Can we persuade you and your friend to join us?" An obese man in a stylish white suit walked over and put an arm around him. A few seconds later, a taller, muscular man in a green suit walked up. The fat man introduced him as "Arash," without specifying whether it was a first or last name.

“Hey, Mr. Ghaffari!” Tiron smiled and turned to Clerc. “Marty, this is one of my old teachers, Amil Ghaffari. Mr. Ghaffari, this is my friend Marty. He’s a... fancy engineer... of some sort. I’m not sure exactly what he does.” Ghaffari wasn’t paying attention, busy arguing with a waiter about the non-suitability of the table set for him. As soon as his back was turned, Tiron leaned in so only Clerc could hear. “This guy is a horrible card player. I’m betting we can clean him out of a few grand if we’re smart.”

Clerc scowled. “I don’t know, Tiron. I think I’ve pressed my luck as far as I should today.”

“And that’s why it’s about to turn around for you. The universe owes you payback, and your old buddy Tiron is here to see you get it.”

Clerc considered it for about forty-five seconds less than Tiron expected, then nodded. “Okay, let’s do it. I have nothing left to lose today, and like you said, the universe owes me a win.”

Tiron smiled. The hook was set.

An hour later, after three more drinks, they were seated at a secluded table at the back of the establishment. Everything was going exactly to Tiron’s new, improvised plan. He wasn’t as fast as Clerc at calculating odds, but he was nimble enough with a deck that no one at the table would catch him manipulating it—not that Ghaffari and Arash would complain; it was what they paid him for, though not in the manner he intended tonight. He had already dealt Clerc several winning hands, though the dumbfounded engineer was slow to test the limits of his luck and folded about a third of them. After an hour, Clerc was up substantially but visibly nervous.

“Tiron,” Clerc whispered when Ghaffari and his companion had excused themselves during a break between hands. “What have you gotten me into? These are really high stakes for a friendly game.”

“What are you complaining about?” Tiron arched an eyebrow. “I told you, these guys have more money than brains. They play hunches. You’re doing advanced probability in your head. You’ve won most of the hands and you’re holding most of the chips.”

“Yeah, but this is almost two thousand credits. I’ve never gambled this much in my life.”

“You’ve been missing out, then,” Tiron teased. “Don’t worry, Ghaffari is impressed with your prowess, and he’s on the board of WBS Engineering. Keep him in your debt, and you could land a sweet directorate position. Just be cool.”

“WBS? Really?!”

“Yeah, really. I’ll bet he put this whole game together as a chance to meet you.”

When Ghaffari and Arash returned, they eyed Tiron suspiciously. He met them with an assured smile and an arched eyebrow that signaled everything was under control. He’d never seen Arash before and assumed him to be muscle. The oversized coat could conceal any number of weapons, and if his intense gaze had caught any of Tiron’s sleight-of-hand, he kept it to himself. Tiron also noted the man was the only one of the four not drinking. Still, Ghaffari had put him in the target seat to Tiron’s left, and Tiron stuck to their pre-arranged plan for the moment.

After nearly three hours, Clerc controlled just over ten thousand credits, while the others were down to meager stacks. As the deal came back to Tiron, he cheerfully picked up the deck and did a quick waterfall and one-handed cut. That was the signal to spring the trap. The big man smiled and nodded at the flourish.

Tiron focused hard, willing his fingers to move faster and more subtly than they had all evening. He shuffled a beat longer than usual and offered Ghaffari a cut. Ghaffari declined. Clerc continued to stare at his pile of credits, oblivious.

Tiron couldn't see the cards he was dealing, but when Ghaffari's man sat back, stone-faced, and Clerc set his cards down without reordering them and frowned, he knew he'd nailed the intended sequence. The next five minutes had been meticulously planned. Clerc slow-played his hand, betting small at first, thinking he was stringing the others along. After four rounds of betting, he pushed his entire pile into the middle. "I'm all in," he said, barely containing his excitement.

"Well, Mr. Clerc, either luck or skill shines on you tonight," Arash said. "You've played masterfully and just about cleaned me out. I wonder if you might give me a chance to redeem myself." He pulled his pad from his jacket, typed **30,000**, and set it in the middle of the table. "If you really had such a strong hand, you wouldn't have taken so long to commit. No, sir. I think you're attempting to buy a victory, and I'll wager the pot you pushed in plus an additional twenty thousand to prove it."

Ghaffari and Tiron sat up. Tiron whistled and looked at Clerc, who was apparently considering it, though Tiron knew exactly what cards he held. This shouldn't have warranted any thinking at all. "That's a lot of money," Tiron said. "Heck, that's kiss-your-troubles-goodbye, quit-your-job, and move-to-a-beach-on-Poseidus money." He watched Clerc for a reaction, knowing the man had an unfoldable hand and the hook was still set.

Clerc frowned. "I'm afraid I don't have that kind of money. I'm sorry." He prepared to throw his hand onto the table.

“I know Arash’s face, sir,” Ghaffari interjected. “He’s desperate and knows you can’t cover the bet. However, seeing as you’re a friend of Tiron’s, I’d be willing to stake you for the twenty thousand just to see the look on his face when he loses.” Without waiting for approval, Ghaffari retrieved his datapad, keyed a transfer sufficient to cover the bet, and set it next to Arash’s. “So, what do you say, my friend? It’s my money you’re risking now. Show me what you’re made of.”

Clerc was visibly sweating. Tiron feared he might realize he had no obligation to allow what amounted to Arash’s rebuy in the middle of a hand, but he’d also made sure his friend was nervous enough not to challenge anyone. Ten seconds later, Clerc nodded reluctantly, wiped his forehead, and leaned forward over his cards.

“Well, it’s settled then—may the best man win.” Ghaffari chuckled.

“Hang on a minute,” Tiron interjected, pulling out his datapad and putting it on the table. “As long as we’re ditching the buy-in rules, I want in on this action, too.” All three men regarded him with curious expressions. This was his first deviation from the plan—the point where everything could go wrong. Tiron pointed to his display, which showed his bank had already approved the credit transfer and was waiting for the winner to claim it. “I’m good for it, don’t worry.”

Arash snarled for a few seconds, then turned over his cards, revealing double trips—three alphas and three omicrons. It was a solid hand, worth the thirty thousand he’d wagered. Clerc smiled nervously and flipped over a flush of seven staves, which beat Arash. Arash scowled at Tiron as everyone waited to see what Tiron had.

Tiron sat stone-faced, then laid down five different-colored Kappas—the odds nearly impossible. Smiling only slightly, he pressed his thumbs to the other two men’s pads before they could object. His own lit up a second later as it accepted the sixty-thousand-credit transfer.

“Well, that was fun, gentlemen. We simply must do it again sometime,” he said, keeping his voice mild, not wanting to enrage them further. Ghaffari had already signaled to a man in a worker’s tunic by the bar, who walked toward their table, his hand entering his side pocket three steps away.

“Oh, no, no,” Tiron tsked, opening his coat just enough to show the sleeve-loader’s gun aimed at Ghaffari under the table. “You know who owns this establishment, and you know the rules about gambling disputes on premises.”

The man stopped, hands at his sides, eyes locked on Tiron.

Clerc buried his face in his hands. “I don’t believe it. This was a setup. You’ve been playing me all this time? Now you’ve ruined me.”

“Marty, I know you don’t believe this right now, but I did you a favor. You were almost twenty thousand in debt to a major crime boss.” He jerked a thumb at Ghaffari, who regarded him with fresh rage. “I just saved you a world of trouble you didn’t need on top of everything else that happened today.”

“A very bold move, Mr. Essien,” Ghaffari growled, “but I don’t suppose you’ll explain why you chose this moment to grow a spine?” He motioned for the man in the tunic to return to his seat at the bar.

Tiron pocketed his pad and slowly stood. “Well, Mr. Ghaffari, once you learned Marty no longer has that weapon prototype you were going to look at in exchange for clearing his debt, I knew I wouldn’t be getting my cut.” He watched Clerc, who now gaped at both of them.

“That may or may not be so, but the way I see it, you are now in debt to me for much more than your cut would have been, which I plan to collect, with interest, before putting you out of my misery.”

“Tesnica isn’t going to let you do that.” Tiron looked almost disappointed at the threat.

Ghaffari’s eyes narrowed. “What does Tesnica have to do with our business?”

“They lost a very valuable weapon prototype this morning and are anxious for leads. That begins with putting a tail on Marty to make sure he isn’t part of an inside job.” He subtly nodded in the direction of the man and woman sitting in the corner. “That’s them, the underdressed couple nursing their drinks.”

Both Ghaffari and Clerc turned, and the couple sat bolt upright.

“After they saw me getting chummy with Marty and asking around about me, I had my boy Ruben at the bar explain I was just a freelance card hustler paid to fix a game and disappear.” He sighed as he backed away from the table. “I’m about as boring as they come, but I’m pretty sure they’ll be fascinated by you two and your friend at the bar.” He placed a hand on his chest and smiled. “You could make a run for it. If you’re lucky, you might make it to a security station and turn yourselves in before they catch up.”

Clerc was near tears. “I can’t believe this is happening. The company will kill us. We’re all dead men, and you don’t even have the slightest bit of guilt about that, do you, Tiron?”

“I think of it as improving the breed, Marty. Weeding out the weak ones,” he said. “Look, you’re innocent. You’re a sucker, but you’re clean in all this. Stick to my story and you’re off the hook. They can’t blame you. It’s him they want.”

“A bit of advice, Mr. Essien,” Ghaffari said in a low, conspiratorial tone, “keep running, find a very low level that never sees sunlight, and pray I don’t catch up to you in the future.”

“Mr. Ghaffari, I’m pretty sure you don’t have a future,” he said as he slipped out the door into the night.

CHAPTER 3. (KRISP)

Rik walked up the featureless, narrow corridor to his apartment entrance, placed his palm on the biosensor, and waited for the door to slide open. The sudden odor of unwashed laundry, tainted with mechanical fluids and lubricants, hit him like a wave. He didn't mind. He secretly enjoyed the scent, but he knew that if he ever had visitors, they'd instantly think his home smelled exactly like the garage where he spent his days. He spotted the offending tunic and undershirt on the back of a dining chair and flung them into the cleaning unit. Satisfied he'd eliminated the culprits, he slid another panel aside, grabbed a beer from his modest refrigeration unit, and made his way to the balcony at the opposite end of the apartment, five meters away.

The balcony was equally modest—about one meter by two—with a view of nearly identical balconies in the housing unit across the alley. Those residents seemed to have more time to personalize theirs, some adding lighting or plants. He wasn't sure whether there was a camaraderie their building lacked or if those neighbors simply had less-intensive careers that afforded them time to decorate.

The outer windows of the arcology tower where he lived, a kilometer down the alley, glowed with dim salmon light. The sun was setting, though from his vantage point it rose and set on the opposite side of the arco, so he rarely saw the spectacle—certainly never from home. The “street,” eight stories below, was a bustle of activity at shift change, and he scanned the traffic for any particularly fascinating transport models. The units, with their rows of identical windows and balconies, continued another eleven stories upward to the “ceiling,” and beyond. He knew there were eighteen more multi-storied levels, similar to his, stretching nearly two kilometers into the sky like small cities stacked on top of each other. The levels grew more lavish and expensive as one ascended, ending at the top of the arco, where parks, mansions, and resorts catering to the ultra-wealthy suneaters rested like vultures atop artificial bluffs, looking down on their prey.

“Oh no, you already grabbed a beer. I was hoping to get to you first,” Krisp said, poking his head out the door of the unit next to Rik’s. The rest of him emerged a few seconds later, holding a tapered bottle of amber liquid and two glass tumblers with ice. He scaled the waist-high railing between their balconies and set the bottle on the table next to Rik before taking the opposite seat. “After the great work we did this morning, I thought a celebration was in order.”

Rik eyed the bottle. Azure Bay Forge was Arco Korab’s most famous export. Brewed down on Level Three, it touted itself as a personal favorite of the King himself. Rik had never developed a taste for hard liquor but could drink anything with a smile, and he wouldn’t offend his friend by turning down an offer this generous. “You didn’t spend your entire share on that, did you?”

“No,” Krisp protested, “I bought some new clothes, too. I hoped we might take the party up to the casino on Level Nine.”

“Oh, I don’t know. I thought maybe I’d hold on to my share and put it into the Manta,” Rik said, taking a healthy swig of his beer. “If we at least replace the dampers, we could get it fired up and take it for a ride.”

Krisp scoffed. “You really think you’re ever going to get that piece of junk working? Every time you replace a part, something else goes bad. Face it, it’s cursed.”

“It just needs a bit of love.”

“Well, regardless, save your money. I already looked at the dampers, and I think I can bend two of them back into shape and fabricate a third out of bits from the old recycler.”

“The recycler?” Rik eyed him, confused. “We junked that last month.”

“You tried to junk it. I hauled it around back. Do you know how many useful parts are in that thing? You can’t just throw away valuable equipment like that.”

“Well, I don’t have your skill for turning food processors into racers.”

“All the more reason you should leave scrapping to me.”

“I also don’t want our customers’ transports falling out of the sky because their repulsor was held on by opti-cable from a holoprojector and an optimistic knot.” Rik exaggerated, thinking that most of Krisp’s makeshift designs exceeded their purpose and lifespan, often outlasting the component they were substituting for.

“Suit yourself, but I have a feeling we’re going to get that next job from Madhavi, which will pay way more than today did. Four or five like that, and you can buy a new Manta instead of fixing up that hunk of junk you’ve got now.”

Rik put his beer down and sat back, watching the balconies across the alley. “Look, I get you’re enjoying that lifestyle, and they’re your friends and all, but I don’t think it’s for me. I’m not sure I should rush into business with Madhavi.”

“What’s wrong? This isn’t like you at all.”

Rik couldn’t meet his friend’s gaze. “I don’t know. I’ve been thinking: maybe I’m not suited for this. I almost panicked when Clerc showed up at the shop today. I was horrified he was going to spot you. I’m still terrified something came up on the security cams and the police will show up any minute to arrest us. It’s not worth it to me for a couple thousand extra cred, man.”

“What about a couple hundred thousand?”

“You know what I mean, Krisp.”

“I know what you mean, but I don’t get it. Do you really want to be a Grade 9 repulsor mechanic all your life? Live here on Level Seven?”

“What’s wrong with being a repulsor mechanic? I like being a repulsor mechanic. I’m good at being a repulsor mechanic.”

“Yeah, but I don’t, and I’m not.”

Rik shook his head. “What do you mean? You’re one of the most brilliant tech guys I know. You can build anything out of stuff you find on a disposal barge.”

Krisp frowned. “Yeah, but that’s not being a repulsor mechanic.”

“Okay, so why don’t you take the money, apply for an engineering certification, and go be an engineer?”

“You really don’t know?” Krisp eyed Rik with surprise.

“I really don’t.”

Krisp waved his hand between them, then toward their adjacent units. “I don’t want to split us up.”

Rik was speechless. “What? That’s stupid. You’ll always be my friend, even if you’ve got a better job than I do. We’ll just be hanging out on your level instead of living next door to each other. You never know if you’ll make it until you try.”

“No, I already know.”

“How?”

“We’ve been friends all our lives, ever since the social service tenement,” Krisp said. “When we took the aptitude exams, I qualified for a bunch of stuff, including the Royal Marine Corps of Engineers.”

Rik was shocked but understood the implication. “But I only qualified for manual labor and Grade 7 Mechanic. I can’t believe you gave up a Grade 14 engineering position—for what? Just so we could be neighbors? Out of loyalty to me?”

“It wasn’t just that.” Krisp shook his head. “Well, it was part of it.” He leaned forward. “Look, this is great. I love running the shop with you and Lora. I don’t really mind the work. It’s just not fulfilling. Don’t you want to live someplace bigger, less generic, higher up?”

Rik thought for a moment. “Yeah, sure I do. I just don’t want to spend my time looking over my shoulder when I get there.”

“You’ve got to take a risk if you want the reward. You’ve got to make things happen. Don’t waste your life waiting for things to happen to you.”

Rik sighed and grabbed his beer. “You may be right, but I still don’t think life in a thieves’ den is for me. There must be less risky options out there.”

“Do you even remember when you loved taking risks?”

“I don’t think I ever ‘loved’ taking risks.”

Krisp eyed the refuse barge making its way along the row of balconies, stopping at each one and collecting trash from the port that ran beneath each apartment. It was six doors away and moving toward them. “I think you did once.” He gave Rik a mischievous grin and nodded toward the barge.

Rik knew instantly what he was proposing. “Lane skipping?! You’re insane. We’re too old for that, and you’re not nearly in as good a shape as you think.”

“Oh, I’ll bet it all comes back to me. Come on. Last one to the Level Nine commissary buys the winner a 20-cred dinner... plus dessert.” He swung one leg over the railing, preparing to leap down onto the barge as it passed below.

“This is insane. We’re going to injure ourselves.” Rik was smiling now as he joined his friend on the balcony’s edge.



Rik had no idea who invented lane skipping, but almost every vagrant kid in every arco, and probably in the seedier open-air levels as well, had done it at least once. There was risk in jumping from transport barges to hovertrains to disc-shaped personal transports to reach a destination without walking or piloting a vehicle, but it was still less dangerous than the average contact sport. The worst injuries came from low falls, ranging from broken bones to concussions, easily repaired by a few hours on an autodoc in the nearest free clinic. Higher falls meant safety systems could spot, track, and identify you in time to slow you and catch you in a gravnet. While this wasn’t pleasant—usually knocking the wind out of you and leaving aching muscles from the sudden deceleration—it made for better stories, up to “that one kid everyone knew who once made the famed Icarus fall,” all the way from Level 24, two kilometers down, safely stopping in

the gravnet three meters above street level. Variants differed only in whether he was immediately arrested or managed to escape the authorities.

Rik and Krisp had already leaped from the refuse barge to a large cargo hauler, then to the back of the hovertrain, which carried them from the residential sector to the transit shafts that ran from ground level up to the top of the arco. From there, Rik spotted another transport barge and jumped onto it for the short ride up from Level Seven to Level Nine. Krisp, however, was late finding his position and had to leap down onto an unsuspecting elderly man's transport disc. Startled and more annoyed than angry, the man shook his fist as Krisp laughed and jumped off the side, grabbing a courier drone.

He had almost caught up when Rik's transport slowed and turned laterally onto Level Nine while the drone continued ascending. Cursing and whooping, Krisp swung off the drone, tucked, and rolled onto the street, stopping a few meters from Rik, who was already waiting at the commissary entrance.

"You're right," Krisp said, laughing as he limped to his feet. "I'm not in as good a shape as I used to be. That's gonna leave a bruise."

They entered the commissary. Rik immediately spotted their partner, Lora, sitting alone at one of the long communal tables. "Remember: a 20-cred upgrade plus dessert, and it had better be a baked good, not fruit," he reminded Krisp, and went to join Lora, who did not appear pleased to see him.

"Lane skipping?!" she admonished. "What are you, a teenager? Whose idea was that?"

Rik waved her off. "I think he's having a quarter-life crisis or something. How was your day off?"

“Actually, I got a lot of work done, and don’t change the subject. I’m worried about him.”

“Krisp? He’s fine,” Rik said, wondering if Lora suspected the side hustle they’d both been part of that morning.

“The hell he is, Rik. His mind hasn’t been on the job lately, and I don’t like some of the people I’ve seen him associating with. I think he may be in trouble—or about to be.”

“I think you’re being overprotective.”

“Look, we made a deal. I finance this company and handle the business end; you guys fix the transports. This is just as much my company as yours, and I’ve put a lot of time and money into it. The difference is that while you two can probably figure out how to balance the account and order spare parts without me, I can’t become an expert in repulsor maintenance overnight. I need you both at peak performance so we can grow and expand. I’ve got a lot on the line, and if you two aren’t up to the task, or if it looks like you’re going to drag me into something I don’t want to be involved with, then I swear I will pull my shares and leave you both to figure it out on your own.”

It wasn’t an idle threat she’d made before. She was serious, Rik thought. “I get it. What do you want me to do, though? I’m not his mother.”

Lora shook her head and glared. “Don’t you get it? You actually are his mother—or at least the closest thing he has.”

“You know neither of us ever had a mother,” Rik said. He wasn’t trying to argue but genuinely wanted to know what she was getting at. He respected but wasn’t overly fond of Lora; he saw her as casually confrontational at best and despotic at worst.

“Yeah, I know. Don’t play ‘little lost orphan’ with me.” She thought for a moment, then corrected herself. “Or do, actually. It makes my point. He looks up to you. He wants to impress you. He’s terrified of losing your approval and will do anything to make you think he’s a success.” She sat back and folded her arms. “I think it’s going to get him into trouble, and I think you do, too. So whether or not you’re his mother, you’re the one person who can steer him straight, so it’s your responsibility—as surely as if you really were his mother.”

“So, should I spank him or something?”

Lora rolled her eyes, then hurriedly went back to her dinner just as Krisp approached, carrying two large plates of food.

“You can go pick your own dessert. The line was too long,” he said, setting one of the plates in front of Rik.

“Gods, did you hit the Royal Lottery? What did you spend?” Lora asked.

“Just a gentleman’s wager on the lane-skipping contest. But there’s no way I was going to sit here and eat the free stuff while he loudly slurped and chewed in luxury.” Krisp nodded disapprovingly at Lora’s basic vitamin-infused fish stew with bread.

“I happen to like it,” she said.

“Because you’ve probably never purchased an upgrade.”

“It’s just food. This tastes fine to me.”

Krisp waved a fork. “Do you realize that a few levels above here, they have entire dishes people eat for love of flavor? Stuff with no nutritional value and, in fact, really bad for you—yet people pay hundreds of credits to have it prepared properly.”

“There’s nothing practical about that,” Lora snarled. “It’s why they’re all lazy. Think how much more productive they could be during that time. How many better uses can you think of for the money they waste on the sensation of taste?”

“Don’t forget smell,” Krisp added.

“You get my point,” Lora scolded.

“We get your point,” Rik said, trying to defuse the situation. “Krisp here should save his money and enroll in cooking school instead of blowing it on processed cuts of meat.”

Lora groaned and stabbed her fork into her stew. “I should have known I couldn’t win the argument. You two would stick up for each other to the end even if I were spouting universal truth and you didn’t have the slightest clue what I was talking about.”

“Sorry, Lora,” Krisp said, half-serious. “It’s history.”

She scowled and finished the last of her meal. “It’s dangerous.”

APPENDIX

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Darrin Snider is an award-winning Internet radio and podcast host, cloud engineer, analytics wizard, mannequin wrangler, recovering software developer, and resident expert on the Indianapolis local music scene. His hobbies include baseball, strategy gaming, the occasional RPG, voraciously reading everything in sight, DX-ing exotic radio streams around the world, quantum physics, day trading, comic books, old-time radio, the technological singularity, biking, cooking/baking, wuxia/chop-socky flicks, cyber/technoculture, imported teas, transhumanism, dead programming languages, and speed-writing first drafts of novels (mostly to get the NaNoWriMo certificates) which he locks away as part of some grand retirement scheme should he live that long.



AFTERWORD

This promotional edition of the "latest (not final) draft" is free of charge to anyone interested. If you enjoyed it, drop me a line, and I'll add you to a list to receive a copy of the final book and possibly some other goodies along the way. If you're a publisher, potential alpha reader, or bookworm like me who doesn't care if it's a bad draft, and you would like to see the full outline or other existing parts of this novel as a prelude to helping edit or publish it, I can probably make that happen, too.

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