

Mother Is the Name for God

By

Jonathan E. Hernandez

It was quiet down below on the lower decks of New Karvina. Quiet, and dark. Mom always told Marcel not to play down below as a kid. But, mom hadn't been around in ages.

A lot of the space habitat's junk ended up there. Garbage that even the recycling drones wouldn't touch. Social rejects too: runaways, homeless, escaped convicts, opportunistic hustlers. In some grand cosmic scheme, it seemed like they were meant to congregate there.

Marcel could tell that he wasn't alone as he navigated down a series of dimly-lit corridors. He heard people chattering and felt bodies moving around him. He smelled processed foods boiling over flames and the stench of filth. Residual heat radiated from the center of the thirty kilometer cylinder that the space city was built into. Between the habitat's centrifugal force and thermal induction, it was always hot down below.

Marcel constantly wiped his greasy face, brushing his long, straw-colored hair away from his eyes. And, as he reached his destination, he felt others silently sizing him up.

Show no fear, he thought instinctively. He had always been small, especially as a child, and developed a heightened sense for danger. Also a heightened will to survive.

"Come out where I can see you," Marcel barked, his voice almost cracking.

He heard a shuffling sound and a clang as a foot disturbed a piece of metal.

His clients picked a curious place for the meeting; an old industrial sub-station. They insisted on being alone, and that small quarter was the closest that they could manage on such short

notice. They must have been desperate to arrange such hasty transportation. Good. Desperate people paid.

“Well?” he asked the shadows. “Are we gonna do this or what?”

A tall, lithe woman came out of the shadows—bald-headed and draped in a hooded robe. She was trailed by two tough-looking men wearing shiny armor like the exoskeleton of an insect. There were curiously-shaped weapons hanging off of their belts. The way that they moved suggested training, experience, and confidence. Four smaller people followed them last: a young, thickset woman wearing a white robe that seemed to glow trailed by three attentive females waiting nearby like servants. They were covered in hooded shawls that seemed to breathe as they did.

Marcel tensed and instinctively reached for his belt as the men took their places on either side of the tall woman. The antique Remy pistol that Marcel brought fired big slow slugs with horrible precision and penetration. It was mostly for intimidation, but the men didn’t look easily intimidated.

The tall woman stepped ahead of her peers and stopped underneath one of the few functioning overhead lights, bathing her fleshy robe in a beam that turned it translucent. She slowly pulled back her hood. Marcel thought he saw it slither away like a skittish pet. Her skin was pale—pinkish gray with purple tones. She had a pair of blue lines underneath her mouth like racing stripes. The overhead lights cast a shadow over her eyes, turning them into deep black voids.

Marcel wondered if she was a spacer. Her height and build suggested a life in low gravity. The toughs flanking her looked athletic and the smaller women were stocky. Maybe they were

pilgrims on their way to some paradise planet beyond the core systems. Lots of travelers coming through were looking for some platonic space Eden. Not another Earth, but a better rock. More likely, they were one of those cult enclaves bouncing from one settlement to another. Whoever they were didn't matter. All that mattered was that they paid.

The tall woman raised her hands and steepled her fingers, making a triangular shape. A greeting, Marcel realized.

"Nice to meet you," he muttered noncommittally. "So...you need a transport."

"Yes," the tall woman said and pressed her fingertips together. The black pits of her eyes stared unsettlingly. Her lisping accent was hard to place. Her voice was deep and silky. She sounded cultured, high-class. The kind of person that wouldn't bother looking his way growing up.

Marcel was almost caught off guard by her straightforwardness. No special requests or conditions. At least not yet. "How many?" he asked. "You all?"

"Yes," the tall woman pivoted at the hip to regard and include the others. "All of us."

Marcel eyed the girl in white again. Her face was round and smooth, like a child's. Her large, wet eyes flashed at him in the dark as if she wanted to tell him a secret. He could tell by the way that the others formed around her that she was important.

Marcel pointed at her with his chin. "Does she speak?"

The tall woman stepped across and eclipsed his view. "She doesn't speak your language," she said matter-of-factly.

Marcel nodded. "Any cargo?"

She frowned as if the concept was foreign to her.

“Are you bringing anything with you?” Marcel asked.

“Just what we carry,” the woman affirmed. She was starting to sound impatient.

“Alright,” Marcel said and made some quick calculations in his head. Seven bodies, no additional loads. Over four hundred kilos. Just a straight drop off, for a change. What would Zhao think? He should have been happy, as long as they paid.

“How will you pay?” he asked.

The tall woman looked at him with her head turned to the side like a reptile. “We agreed to pay... when we embark.”

Marcel chuckled. “I told you—half up front. Non-negotiable. Call it insurance. Then the other half when you *embark*.”

Her jaw hardened as she muddled it over. She turned and looked at one of the burly men beside her. He reached by his neck and yanked, pulling free something that made a clinking like a link in a chain breaking. He tossed an object at Marcel that glinted as errant beams of light struck its silvery surface. It landed in Marcel’s hand with a clammy *whump*.

Marcel took a quick glance. It was a trapezoid-shaped piece of metal that sprawled across his palm, as thick as a wedge of cheese. Was it platinum? It was platinum.

“Is that agreeable?” the woman asked with her hands resting on her serpentine hips.

“Agreeable?” Marcel repeated dumbly. *Shit yes*, he thought.

“How long will it take to make the arrangements?” she asked.

Marcel was still looking at his prize. “Not long. I need to talk to my people,” he said and transferred the piece of metal to a secured pocket. He had to message their contact at the

destination again and make sure that their documents looked legit or else they would get pinched by immigration. “I’ll let you know when the arrangements are done.”

He casually glanced down at the rectangular panels of the PDD strapped to his forearm, his only way of staying in touch with them. A commercially-available model, but with considerable mods. All illegal, naturally.

The woman slowly closed and reopened her eyes. “Do not make us wait.”

“Oh no,” Marcel said and rubbed the piece of metal in his pocket. “I won’t.”

On the surface level, it was cool. The climate was controlled to give the hundred thousand inhabitants along the inside of the rotating cylinder a perpetually balmy season.

Marcel darted around the downtown emporium’s food plaza as server drones wheeled back and forth, occasionally bumping into patrons and beeping in apology. Marcel kept himself from staring across the wide central valley of the space habitat. The curvature of the tube-like landscape could drive outsiders mad, and was difficult at times even for locals to take in. The ‘sun’ was a strip of plasma channeled from the reactors at the ‘poles’ through optical filaments and cables running down the central axis to supply heat and light throughout the artificial world. Surrounding the fixed sun beam in a perpetual high noon were massive gantries, beams, and platforms like a giant hollow metal tree with countless limbs. Massive industrial-grade 3D printer stations grew out of the beams like geometrically-shaped melons, taking advantage of the null G to save energy and fuel while a massive fleet of shipping and transport VSTOLs

constantly ferried in every direction. The Night Watch was also headquartered up there in stations with surveillance equipment and a never-ending swarm of buzzing scout drones to keep an eye over the citizenry.

Zhao was sitting alone on a long bench overlooking the valley. A modest Indonesian takeaway place with flashing holographic advert sprites danced behind him. Drones serving samples rolled back and forth as he slurped up a carton of mie goreng.

“You’re late,” he grumbled and wiped his chin with a napkin. He was a flatlander; born and raised on a forested rock called Silvanus in 70 Ophiuchi. As he explained, there wouldn’t be much of a forest left at the rate the settlers were logging.

He always seemed too short to Marcel. That natural planetside gravity had crushed him down over the years, making him look wider than he was tall.

Marcel hopped onto a seat across from him. “All of a sudden we’re punctual.”

Zhao pulled his face away from his food long enough to shoot Marcel an annoyed look. “I’m busy.”

“Too busy to make money?”

Everyone on New Karvina needed a side hustle, and Zhao had a rare skill. And a type III commercial pilot’s license and a working ship.

“You said it’s a transport job?” Zhao asked and wiped his shiny, balding head with the back of his hand.

Marcel nodded. “Seven people. No cargo.”

“Outsiders?”

“Yeah. Funny-looking, too.”

“Who the fuck are they? Chachis?”

Chachis were rich kids who grew on wealthier worlds with healthy gravity and more time and money than sense.

Marcel shook his head. “Definitely not chachis.”

“How can you be so sure?”

A chachi wouldn't be caught dead on Zhao's ship, not even if they were trying to slum it. They had too much class consciousness for that. “You'll see what I mean. They look like spacers. Probably an enclave.”

“Where're they going?” Zhao asked.

“Beta Comae Berenices.”

A modest hop away from New Karvina's location in Groombridge 1830. Ten light years tops. There was nothing there as far as Marcel knew. Capital world was Lakapati, which wasn't on anyone's list as a major destination. Maybe that was the point. And besides, Marcel had the feeling that it was just another pit stop like New Karvina must have been. A layover to wherever they were ultimately going. Or getting away from. Running?

Zhao burped and let out a long disgruntled rumble.

“Are you interested or no?” Marcel tossed him the platinum link. “*That* was their down payment.”

“This is...”

Marcel grinned. “Solid. Almost a kilo. I know someone in Sleepy Hills that can get us a good price for it. We get the other half when they leave. I'll take my usual commission and pay my people and you pocket the rest. Pretty decent for a straight drop off. *If* you're interested.”

Zhao licked his lips. Shiny shit had that effect on people.

Marcel curled his fingers. “Give it back.”

“Give what back?”

“That’s hilarious. You get that whistling shit can of yours ready to lift off.”

The dream was different for everyone. Some wanted to live large like the high rollers in one of the luxury homes across the valley. Up in Haven Hills with higher elevation where the air seemed cleaner and the weather seemed sunnier. Marcel only ever wanted to leave New Karvina. And not because he knew that something better waited for him. He wanted to do it almost for the sake of doing it. To not look for the asshole father that left him before he was born and prove to his mom that it could be done.

“Where’d you get this?” Zenda asked at her work bench and rolled the link of platinum over and over in her slender, callused hand. She had a belter’s body: long limbs, slender build. She spent most of her life in some rock out in old Sol with only two working ports. She never said exactly what it was that forced her to leave home, but Marcel had a feeling based on the way she talked about her mother’s then-boyfriend.

“New clients,” she suggested and looked up. Her dark cow eyes with long lashes looked through him. In the intense light of her shop, her olive skin was almost incandescent. Behind her, a small army of shop drones rolled back and forth, welding and drilling pieces of metal together. Occasionally a shower of sparks fell over the greasy deck. At the far end of the shop, her

slapped-together racing yacht, the *Esfir*, sat under a stained beige tarp. Marcel once foolishly asked Zenda if she would ever race again. It rekindled false hope in her often sullen eyes. New Karvina wasn't a place for hope. Not for broken racing yachts and not for broken people.

"Yeah," he muttered back. "That's from my new clients."

She raised her eyebrows. "They must be wealthy."

"Can you melt it down?"

That was usually how it went. They would talk past each other, careful not to bring up their pasts. The naivety of their youth when they didn't even realize how little they had. When they had no idea how dark adulthood would become. What they lost and could have had. On a good night they'd share a bowl of paella and dance to old acid tunes. Lick a bottle of sake dry and help each other out of their torn-up clothes, then stumble into the back of the shop and whisper things to each other that they'd regret the next day. She was good with her hands, though. Better than any of the greasy, frankfurter-necked slobs that ran the seedier chop shops.

She pointed at the side of the link and tapped on it with a nail that she hadn't yet chewed down to the quick. "There's a mark—here."

Marcel leaned in and squinted. There was a mark. Not etched, but raised. He didn't even notice it until Zenda's talented hands pointed it out. It was weird. A symbol like crossing slash marks. A letter from some alphabet he'd never seen before.

"What is it?" Zenda asked.

"I have no idea." He ended up sounding more impatient than he meant to. But, time was something he never had enough of. "Can you..." he began to ask again.

“Yes, Marcel,” she said and slammed the link onto her work bench. “I can melt it. Mold it. Turn it into a ball that you can shove up your ass. You’re leaving, aren’t you?” Zenda asked.

New Karvina? Eventually. If such a thing was possible. “No.”

She snorted. “Fucking liar.” She picked the piece of platinum back up and narrowed her eyes over it. “It could be worth more like this. Where’d you get it?”

“I already told you; a client.”

“Do your clients always pay in pure platinum?”

The more he thought about it, the more he was convinced that they needed to melt it down. If someone was looking for his clients, large pieces of rare metal with exotic symbols were much more traceable than old-fashioned hard currency.

“What do they want?” Zenda asked.

“Jesus Zenda. It’s a clean job. We’re not moving weapons or drugs. Not even level one contraband or HAZMAT. They’re just people who want to leave New Karvina. Can you blame them? Making money is *my* motivation. What’s yours?”

She formed a fist around the link and her upper lip went thin the way it always did when she was angry, or serious. “Safety. You know nothing about these people, do you? That’s how you always get into trouble. I worry about you sometimes.”

He sighed. “Are you gonna help me or not?”

“What’s my cut?”

“The usual.”

“I want something else. Let me clarify; I want something else *additionally*.”

Marcel thought. His eyes went to the back of her shop out of habit.

Zenda shook her head. “Don’t flatter yourself, Casanova. Promise me that this is the last time.”

“Fine.”

Her fist shook with the large heavy link in her palm, the knuckles turning white. “Promise me, or I’ll throw this fucking thing into the Cylindrical Sea and some junk diver or service drone will find it in twenty years.”

“I promise,” he bayed over and over again, and she slowly lowered her fist.

And that was a lie too, and she knew it. But they had to try and act it out and pretend to be normal once in a while. Not the perpetual fuck-ups and failed adults that they were, still holding onto the hope that one last try could finally get them out of the hustle.

Marcel was still coasting off his endorphin rush, feeling punch-drunk and goofy. The business hour “Dolly Trolley” was slowly working down the gastro district of Babayan Plaza and making every stop on the way. The offworlders were gawking at the local upscale shops like Bakala’s Colonial-Bohemian Bistro. One of the old legacy stores that was almost always empty but pristinely kept by the wealthy line of inheritors. More of a museum than a legit shop that kept rival land developers out and rent high. If it was one thing that the bourgeois loved to do it was sniff up the smell of their own farts.

Marcel occasionally bumped into spruced-up tourists as the smart tram made jerky stops. It passed the clean, up kept main streets, then reached the slums. The tram seemed to speed up, and

the passengers made fewer stop requests. Marcel kept grinning to himself, fantasizing about the ways that he would spend his money.

He was so lost in his thoughts that he almost missed his stop. He squeezed through the buzzing tourists and hopped off the tram, passing the darkened alley between a pawn and a porn shop where three toughs waited by the corner. The stocky bald guy in the middle was “Slobo” Slobodan. His two beefy cohorts must have been new Syndicate bagmen that he was breaking in.

“Shit.” Marcel yelped and rabbited down the street. He heard Slobo and his guys screaming and grunting behind him, and the slap of soles on the grid walk.

They caught him by the scruff of his neck like a runaway kitten and dragged him into the alley. Marcel tried to make himself heavy, but Syndicate toughs were chosen for their size more than their smarts.

“You’re making me sweat,” Slobo panted as his goons groped Marcel for loose scratch like muggers. “I don’t like it when people make me sweat.” Slobo wheezed. He lifted Marcel by his collar and pressed him against the wall. Slobodan was a real blue-water *Urta* from old Earth. Nice healthy gravity; shitty air quality. Strong bones. On New Karvina, his strength was superhuman.

Slobo pointed threateningly with his free hand. His pinky ring gleamed in the hypnotic neon lights of the storefronts. “I don’t like bein’ sandbagged for twenty large, *malaka*.”

“I got the money.”

“Where?”

“I don’t have it *on me*. You think I just walk around with twenty large hanging out of my pockets? I could get jumped by a couple o’ tweaked-out skees.”

Slobo pelted him in the stomach. It felt like being gored by a giant tusk. He grabbed Marcel's scalp and wrenched his head up. "You've been bullshitting me for how many rotations now? I've lost my fuckin' patience. I want my fuckin' money!"

"I can get it to you; I can. I just need to see Bela Hargitay up in Little Debrecen."

Slobo used his tongue to clear a nonexistent morsel from his teeth. "Grab his ankles."

Marcel thrashed as Slobo's men lifted him like a rolled-up piece of canvas and took him deeper into the alley. Marcel tried to yell but they muffled his cries. His heart was thumping.

Slobo used his hands like meat mallets. His blows looked like wild haymakers, but his strikes had laser precision. He used to be a trained fighter on Earth before he bounced around the core systems and ended up on New Karvina doing dirty work for the Syndicate. He popped Marcel in the liver and made him yell out a primitive cry for mercy.

"Twenty large," Marcel managed between gasps. "I'll get it to you tomorrow. I swear."

"Twenty was the principal, you greasy little fuck. I might have been willing to forgive some of the interest if you were up front, but since you've let this shit drag on, that ship has left the station. You owe us another ten on top."

Marcel sighed and closed his eyes. He would have been short even before he gave everyone their cut. "Alright."

"That's not all. I'm adding a five point vig so I can kick a little extra upstairs."

"What?"

"Keeps the bosses happy, makes me happy. We can stop meeting like this. Call it a penalty for my efforts and mental distress."

His bagmen chuckled.

“You can’t do that!”

“I just did, you degenerate little fuck,” Slobo said and gave Marcel a shot to his right kidney to shut him up. Marcel almost blacked out and collapsed to his knees. He was seeing flashes of light and gagging like he needed to vomit.

Slobo stepped on his hand. “From now I own you. If you pawn something off, win a game, I will be there like stink on shit to collect. If you earn, get a piece of ass, buy yourself a fuckin’ shawarma sandwich—I get a taste. Understand?”

Marcel dropped his head in assent.

“And don’t even think about trying to jump station, cos’ I’ll know.”

There was no getting off New ‘Vina. Mom was right.

Slobo took his foot off Marcel’s hand. “Let’s get the fuck outta here,” he said to his guys and tiptoed back out the alley.

It took Marcel some time to collect himself. He forced his legs to move, making his knees pop. His body felt raw, and he still felt dizzy.

Get it together, he thought. Get to your feet. You have a day. A day.

He forced himself to his feet, and thought. He had clients to meet. And they had platinum practically falling out of their asses.

Marcel went down to the lower decks, but not too fast. Life moved slowly on New Karvina, at least in that part of town. Looking too eager could arouse suspicion.

Something was wrong. Foot traffic seemed lighter, but concentrated around the low-income residential flats by Barrow Greens; an absurdly named area with neither barrows nor greens. The narrow gray tunnel-like streets were full of Night Watch security teams performing sweeps like they were looking for something. Someone? Marcel couldn't remember the last time the Night Watch actually came down from up top and did their jobs.

He avoided making eye contact with anyone as he shuffled across the streets to the open service grates. Down below might have been the only place on the habitat safe from eyes. The Night Watch weren't meticulous, but even they didn't like going below if it could be avoided. Would they go down there eventually? Most assuredly. Marcel would just need to move fast before the guards or Slobo's people found him.

"Is she here?" Marcel asked one of the tall woman's brutish, square-jawed bodyguards.

Marcel didn't clarify who he meant, and suspected that he didn't need to. The tall lady was the one giving the orders, and the only one in the group who spoke his language. Luckily, she was nearby, and heard him.

He heard her muttering something to the big men in an exotic yet oddly familiar-sounding language, and they stepped aside. As he passed them, he scoped out their loaded belts and the weapons on them. Swords and daggers with corrugated handles like the body of a seahorse. Organic, but lethal-looking still.

He reached a long service corridor with a number of adjacent rooms off to the sides. The kind that used to serve as offices and storage rooms for the maintenance crews, before management laid most of them off in favor of drones.

He looked for the woman in the dim lights of the hall, following a sweet scent like a freshly-plucked flower. The kind of smell that contrasted with the ubiquitous stench of down below.

She stood alone under a dim circle of light that cast a soft glow over her tall, thin frame. Her hood was pulled back, revealing her bald head and pale pink-purple skin. “You’re late,” she said in her lisping voice and strange accent.

“I’m sorry,” he opened weakly.

She suddenly turned her head and stared at him like a condor sizing up carrion. Her eyes were thin crescents of white – the pupils gone at first and then swiveling forward as if she were coming out of a trance. Her gaze began to go through him like she were re-evaluating him, reconsidering her decision to work with him.

“The streets are full of...” he trailed off. “It doesn’t matter.”

It would take more than a few security teams to keep them away from Zhao’s ship. Marcel still knew plenty of ways to get around up top. How to get past security checkpoints. It was easy when you were a nobody. He was a lot bigger and older than he was when he was an adolescent runner. When he learned the ins and outs and found out just how porous the large habitat could be.

“I’ve got your ride,” he promised her.

“A ship.”

Marcel slowly blinked in affirmation. “I got the details; a time and place. A terminal where you can meet your pilot. One of my people.”

He thought of Sloba and rubbed his stomach, wincing at the memory of the beating that he took in the alley.

The tall woman looked away for a moment. Marcel heard murmuring sounds. The young woman that they were escorting and her three servants were whispering to each other in an adjacent tunnel. Marcel peered around the corner. One of the large bodyguards stepped in front of him to block his view. He had one of his hands over the bony hilt of his strange sword.

The other bodyguard said something to the tall woman in a deep, muttering voice that sounded like a question. She closed her eyes as she knitted her brow, waving them away with a dismissive hand gesture.

“Come with me,” she lisped to Marcel. “I want to show you something.”

He detected urgency in her voice, and had already kept her and her entourage waiting long enough. He followed as she stepped into a tunnel bathed in a glowing light.

Bioluminescent tendrils were snaking up the walls and ceiling, so hypnotic that Marcel almost didn't see the dead body until he nearly tripped over it.

“Jesus!” he snapped and jumped back covering his mouth.

She blinked at him. “You're a stranger to death.” She sounded charmed, as if his show of innocence were a novelty where she came from.

Marcel looked down to confirm what he saw. Not a dead body, but *bodies*—a team of four. They were dressed in the same weird armor as the tall lady's bodyguards. Segmented sections—more like the chitinous shell of a beetle than the ballistic armor that heavy riot teams and offworld troopers wore. Green. Spiked. They glistened in the dim lights like they were wet.

“So,” Marcel began. “They're...”

“Dead,” she said and bobbed her head.

“Who are they?” he asked and continued scanning their bodies. They still had their weapons in hand. Bladed weapons in curving sickle and hooked shapes. Jaundiced-colored blades with bands like the teeth of some exotic beast. Marcel wondered how they got on the habitat, and all of a sudden the Night Watch security sweeps made more sense.

“Your people?” Marcel guessed.

“In a manner of speaking.”

“What the hell does that mean?”

She blinked. “My name is Ravasz. *Zonya Ravasz*. That is how you will address me from now on.”

“What the hell happened here, Zonya Ravasz?”

She lowered her head and lapped one of her long forearms over the other like she was forming a shelf in front of her chest. “These warriors made an attempt on the girl’s life. My warriors pledged themselves to me and took a solemn oath to see to her safety. Thank the Goddess, they are good at what they do.”

“Assassins?”

“You see now why we need to leave.”

“More are coming?”

She closed and opened her eyes. That meant yes.

“Shit.”

Ravasz slinked closer to him. Her height was intimidating up close. “You gave us your word, and we gave you your payment.”

Marcel swallowed. "I can still get you out," he promised. The way he said it made it sound more like a question.

He strutted like a cock as he thought and combed his thick hair with his hand. "I *can* still get you out, but it won't be easy."

She craned her long neck in his direction. "Explain."

"I don't know what the hell you people did, but someone on New Karvina knows you're here. There are guards all over the damn place. My guess is they're looking for the young maiden back there. Am I right?"

Ravasz blinked. "You said that you could help us."

"That was before you had half of New Karvina looking for you. My price has just gone up. Double."

Ravasz reeled away from him like she smelled something odious. "You are accustomed to danger, no? Are you not a purveyor of unsavory trades?"

It would have been a bad time to tell her that he and everyone he knew were just bottom feeders. "You knew that these guys were coming for you."

Ravasz bobbed her head. "They have been hunting us ever since we arrived."

"You should have warned me."

"Would it have made a difference?"

Maybe not, but it would have been good to know. "What the fuck did the girl do? Kill someone?"

Ravasz circled him with her forearms still stacked. "She represents a threat to my Queen. That is all that you need to know."

Queen, Marcel thought. What the fuck kind of spacers were they? It was all so damn weird. Weird was fine as long as they paid, but not when they brought the Night Watch on his head and dropped bodies down below.

“How?” Marcel asked. “How the hell can one girl be a threat to anyone?”

“Not her. The unborn child that she carries.”

Who the hell was she to them? Some kind of space Madonna?

What the fuck are you doing? Marcel thought. The trade he was in didn't have many scruples, but he was breaking unspoken rules and norms: don't ask questions, don't make it personal.

He looked up at the tall woman, wondering what her role was and how she got involved.

“You come from someplace far away, don't you?”

“As you say.”

“You speak English very well.”

She thought. “I've been watching your people for some time. I used to work for a group that was tasked with studying your kind. To understand you, in the hopes of...”

She was a spy. And he had the feeling that whoever she used to work for were the same ones now hunting her Madonna.

“The people coming after us,” she began, regaining his attention “will not care if you're only helping us for money. The people hunting us do not care about money. They will not think twice about killing anyone who gets in their way. They would kill you just for having seen the girl. Do you understand?”

He swallowed and closed his eyes. Zenda was right. He was in way deeper than he realized.

“Yes.”

She dipped her head slightly. Her mouth was rigid when she stepped past him. “It is in your interest to ensure that we leave this place as soon as possible. Yes?”

Marcel nodded numbly.

“Goddess be praised,” she lisped in his ear.

Marcel led the troupe through the dark, labyrinthine tunnels of the plumbing substation, ignoring the chatter and squeal of rats and constantly wiping the sweat from his face. The humidity was so thick that he could practically chew the air, and the constant drip of water echoing around them sounded like an antique ticking clock.

They were below one of the main service tunnels. And the service tunnels were in turn a few levels below the main thoroughfare heading to the habitat’s North Pole, and Zhao’s tiny commercial cutter.

Marcel let out a grunt and leaned against the tunnel wall.

“Are you alright?” Ravasz asked in surprise as their train came to a halt. She sounded less concerned than inconvenienced.

“I’m fine,” he panted in pain. Slobo’s beating might have hurt him worse than he realized.

“What is it?” Ravasz asked and looked back and forth as her beefy bodyguards muttered to each other. “Are we lost?”

“What? No.”

“Why did we stop?”

Quiet, Marcel thought. *Let me think.*

It would have been a lot easier without all the God-damned patrol sweeps. It was bad enough when the Night Watch were just shaking up indigens for a bribe. Now they had to actually work, so they would all be pissed off.

“Tell me about her,” he suddenly said and rubbed his sore torso as he caught his breath. “The girl,” Marcel peered back into the darkened tunnel. He could hardly see the others through the protruding pipes and burly guards. Their heads bobbed as they navigated around the cluttered litter and trail of vermin. “The *mother*.”

“What do you want to know?”

“I just want to know what her story is.”

“Does it matter?”

“I just need to know. Maybe I care.”

She raised an eyebrow skeptically.

“Because...I’ve never left this place before. Is that sad? And I probably never will, and I need to know what it’s like outside. And if she can escape New ‘Vina it’s... in some weird way maybe I can just get a little taste of freedom.”

Ravasz looked down. Her steely eyes softened in the weak lights of the substation. “Perhaps, if we have time, she can tell you her story herself.”

Marcel frowned. “You said she doesn’t speak my language.”

She cocker her head. “I lied. We need to keep going.”

Marcel blinked like he came out of a spell and stood straight. “You’re right. Let’s keep quiet. There might be an entire crew of Night Watch right above us, and I’m not looking to get pinched.”

The artificiality of New Karvina became more apparent from the vantage point of the North Pole.

Further inland, the effect was more convincing. Even though the horizon unnaturally curled up and in, the city’s architecture was usually enough to create the illusion of a flat plain. Looking at the land from the poles was like staring into an insanely large bucket. The geometry gave itself away, showing curving, tube-like walls and a cap at the opposite end. The synthetic atmosphere of the habitat gave the landscape: the bright greens of the parks and colorful mega-homes of the elites in the highlands, a desaturated and fuzzy look.

Marcel came out of his daydream as a VSTOL taxi screamed over his head, blasting him with a hot swirl of engine wash and blowing him further into the crowded bay.

Ships docked at the pole and then the passengers rode one of twelve lifts down to stations rimming the cylinder’s inner surface. The nearest lift station looked like a gray tower with a wide base and cables coming out of the top. Following it with his eyes, Marcel saw it joining the other shafts at the main egress station in the hub like the spokes of a wheel.

The terminal gates around the station were chaos with travelers, merchants, and pilots constantly shuffling back and forth. Squads of well-armed Night Watch in black tactical armor were setting up security checkpoints to scan the IDs of outsiders and indigens alike. Small, disc-

shaped drones hovered over their heads like birds, scanning the crowd and flashing beams into their retinas to verify their identities.

Marcel practically skipped around support beams and struts at a currency exchange shop by terminal D and saw Zhao waiting for him by one of the public recharge stations used for commercial drones and synths.

“Where the fuck were you?” Zhao asked as Marcel rushed up to him. His face immediately screwed up as Marcel got close. “*Fuck*. You smell.”

“Is your ship ready to go?”

“Good to see you again too.”

“Zhao... we need to move these people fast.”

The pilot’s eyes cannily scanned the crowds as the Nigh Watch methodically checked each terminal. “Did they do something? Illegal?”

“Fuck Zhao; *we’re* doing something illegal. Can you move them or no?”

“Have you been checking the news casts? The local channels put out a warning bulletin about outsiders on the habitat wanted for questioning related to some murders down below. They’re supposedly armed and dangerous. I don’t know if you heard, but the habitat’s going on lockdown.”

That was bad. The only time a habitat the size of an O’Neill Cylinder went on lockdown was during a crisis like an epidemic or a Marauder assault. But, buttoning down a habitat the size of New Karvina also took time. And Marcel still knew the ins and outs good enough to get a ship as small as a cutter out. And, a place as big as New Karvina also took time to properly search.

“Is your ship ready or what?” Marcel asked again.

“Sure. Where’s the payload?”

Marcel frowned. “You mean the passengers.”

“Passengers, right. Where are they?”

Marcel doubled over. A sudden spike of pain went through his body. He felt nauseous.

“Hey,” Zhao patted his back. “You alright?”

“I’m fine.”

“You sure? You look like shit.”

Marcel clawed at his torso to open his jacket and lift his shirt. His belly was three different shades of blue.

“Did you get run over by a tram?”

“We need to get these people...”

“Yeah yeah,” Zhao said and helped him stand up. “I gotchu bro; be a soldier. We’ll get this done and the best doctor on New Karvina will look you over. You’ll be able to afford *ten* doctors after this.”

Marcel frowned, realizing that Zhao had been speaking all this time with renewed jubilee; like he had just won a lottery. Or, made a new deal? A better deal. He stood straight. “Zhao. What did you do?”

The pilot licked his lips. “I figured that something was up when the Night Watch started mobilizing,” he said, eagerly looking back and forth like he was waiting for someone. “Your clients showing up when they did—desperate to leave New Karvina. Mysterious outsiders paying in pure platinum. The Night Watch has channels just for info like that. If you see something suspicious, say something, right?”

Marcel grabbed Zhao. “You tipped off the *fucking Night Watch*?”

“I figured there might be some kind of reward money. I asked around if anyone was looking for suspicious outsiders and they put me in touch with someone. Look man, they offered me money. More money than we could ever make on one of these shitty jobs. What the fuck was I supposed to do? Say no?”

“I’m just tryin’ to earn a little extra. I was gonna cut you in too, I swear. This is a good thing for us, man. This is like our lucky break, you know? No risk to us. We don’t even have to lift a finger. It’s clean, man. All we gotta do is turn them over and let the Night Watch...”

Zhao actually looked embarrassed as Marcel paced back and forth and ran his hands through his long, plume-like hair.

There were excited squawks in the crowd. Groups were splitting up as teams of Night Watch guards stomped through them. Service drones carrying heavy cargo and luggage were dropping pallets on the floor, creating a fuck-ton of noise, and a decent distraction.

Marcel backed away from Zhao, suddenly feeling surrounded. As he slinked away from the terminal, Zhao followed him.

“Marcel,” the pilot began.

“You broke one of the oldest rules in the game. You talked to the *fucking Night Watch*.”

He had to warn the others, and he needed a plan B. It was supposed to be an easy job.

“Hey, Marcel. *Marcel*.”

Marcel avoided the main streets as he led them through the commons. He couldn't risk putting them on the tram, even though it would have saved precious travel time. Too many people and too many eyes.

He had to get them away from the poles. The security teams would start there and sweep in neighborhood by neighborhood. There might have been dozens of checkpoints between the docks and downtown by then, and hundreds of security drones swarming the air. Luckily, the administrators on New Karvina were as slow and incompetent as they were corrupt.

Marcel stopped walking as he came around a corner and frowned at a wall that he wasn't expecting. A dead end? Not a wall, he realized as he backed away and looked up; a barricade. A giant slab that the Night Watch could drop onto streets from the axis of rotation to block off entire neighborhoods. Standard lockdown procedures. The administrators were going through the book, but faster than he expected. It would be hard to go from one district to another without hitting more roadblocks, and then sweeper teams.

He swore and kicked the thick metal door with a heavy DONG.

The warriors traded puzzled faces with each other. Ravasz made an inquisitive sound as she sidled up to Marcel and studied the giant hatch.

He sniffed. "We'll have to go around." The nearest service tunnels. They had loads of squatters on most days, and during a lockdown would be full of hideaways.

He led them without explaining, drawing looks of scorn from the warriors. One of the bodyguards snorted and muttered something to his companion that made him guffaw.

"What did he say?" Marcel asked as he walked.

Ravasz shook her head. "You don't want to know."

“He’s upset.”

She raised an eyebrow. “You took his metal and make me look bad.”

“I made a mistake; I admit it. *I fucked up*. You’re upset, I get it. I’m upset too. Does that make you feel any better?”

“No.”

“Zhao was my friend. I trusted him.”

Zhao was dumb, but not malicious. But that was bad enough. Dumb still got people caught, and killed.

Ravasz exhaled through her nostrils. “You should know that the warriors have asked me for permission to punish you. In their own way. I’m the only reason they won’t lay a hand on you.”

“I can pay you back.”

“It’s not about the money.”

Marcel cheated a peek back at the maiden. “What’s your angle in all this? Why do you care?”

“My angle?”

“How did you get involved?”

Ravasz paused. “In a way, I am responsible for this.”

“When you were working for the other side?”

Ravasz pressed her palms together. “There is an organization among my kind called the Black Fleet. I worked for a unit tasked by the Queen with finding her. I succeeded, and gave her location away to my siblings before I chose to betray them.”

“Why her? She’s just a kid.”

“Indeed. All maidens are young. When it happened...”

“I know how girls get pregnant.”

“Ah; but our ways are not your ways. In our society, only a select group can breed. It has to be planned and sanctioned, and controlled. So, when she became pregnant...”

“How did it happen? Immaculate conception?”

Ravasz blinked. “I thought that you knew how women get pregnant.”

“In *your* society.”

Ravasz exhaled through her nose. “It’s a fluke, perhaps. Or a miracle. I don’t know why the Goddess chose this child to bear a new Queen. It doesn’t matter. Now, the dreams of our people, of all three castes, go with her. And the dawn of a glorious third age.

“If her baby is born and lives to be ten and three seasons, she may challenge the queen for the right to rule the Regime. The now-Queen cannot tolerate that.”

Marcel felt like a small person mixed up in something that he would never understand.

“How powerful is this queen?” he asked Ravasz.

She sniffed a laugh as if she found Marcel’s sudden sobriety amusing. “Her power is absolute, and she can reach us even here.”

The air felt different. Marcel smelled flowers.

The warriors barked alarms at one another and flanked Ravasz. “Get behind us,” she lisped, then muttered instructions to her bodyguards in a deepening voice. Their hoods and capes slithered into their armor. Their collars flew apart and formed helmets as they drew their swords and struck poses.

“What’s going on?” Marcel asked, still backing away. Ravasz grabbed his hand and squeezed, giving him a serious look. “Watch Hyjnia.”

Hyjnia. The girl.

He pulled out his antique Remy pistol as Ravasz let him go. He backed up, but didn't look away. He couldn't hear what was hiding in the dark recesses of the commons, but could feel it. And as he looked, he saw shapes and colors forming out of the shadows.

A tall woman walked out first; tall and thin and elegant. A ruler, like Ravasz. She wore black pants and a spiky vest that reflected light like leather, but it rather resembled a shiny exoskeleton. Her pale pink skin was marked with curvilinear tattoos, and her dark lips looked like they were stained with ink.

She greeted Ravasz in her language and spoke casually. She seemed so pleasant that Marcel almost missed the four warriors who came out of the shadows with her, also in spiked black armor with blades coming out of the forearms and shins. They also retracted their cloaks into their armor and extended horned helmets with bug eyes.

Marcel tried to read their tone and body language, but the other ruler looked skilled at deception. She walked as she talked, not forward but side to side. She talked with her hands like she was trying to convince Ravasz.

Marcel looked back. Hyjnia looked like some fey creature with her dimly glowing veil and white robe. "Hey. Can you... do you understand me?"

"Yes," she quickly answered in a low pleasant voice. She sounded like a child. Marcel sucked in a surprised breath at how well she spoke English. He turned sideways and looked at the ruler in black and her intimidating warriors as she continued strutting. "What are they saying?"

Hyjnia listened. “Zonya Ravasz is being asked to surrender me to her siblings in the Black Fleet. She is being offered amnesty, a sizeable bounty, and a fief by the Queen herself.” She listened some more to the lisping, rasping chatter, and smiled. “She is refusing.”

Just then, Ravasz shouted a warning as her bodyguards yelled out their war cries.

A spear with a thin shaft whistled through the air, barely missing Marcel and the girl, the intended target. He stood in front of her and spun around as Ravasz’s warriors swung their swords at their attackers.

Ravasz squared up with her rival too, retrieving a dagger from her dress and wrestling with the woman in black, who snapped insults and clawed with her free hand like a trapped animal.

Marcel watched the two bodyguards as they stood back to back, striking and parrying against their opponents with graceful, studied sword strokes. One of the warriors in black fired a series of spade-shaped darts out of his forearm, forcing one of the bodyguards to his knees. Shoring himself up, he fought back up to a standing position and continued the fight to protect his mistress and his charge.

One of the assassin peeled away from the action and charged at Hyjnia. His bug-eyed helmet snapped into separate pieces and pulled away, revealing a grinning tattooed face.

Marcel instinctively raised his pistol, and fired. The crack of the round made Hyjnia jump behind him, and sparks flew off the attacker’s armor, but he looked only slightly angered. He raised his free arm and a thin fleshy tendril shot out like a grappling hook. It wrapped around Hyjnia’s arm.

Marcel swore and grabbed onto the line. It felt slick but strong. It flexed underneath his fingers like a tendon. He fired a few more rounds at the attacker, aiming for his head but missing terribly. An errant round struck the enemy warrior's collar and he screamed.

The line went slack. Marcel placed the barrel of his Remy against the tendril and fired. The warrior roared and backed up, extending his helmet from his collar again and angling his sword. The tip wasn't aimed at Hyjnia anymore, but at Marcel.

Before he could attack, a curved yellow-brown blade popped out of his rib cage, spearing his heart in one clean thrust. The slain warrior collapsed without making a murmur. Ravasz's remaining bodyguard walked up to them with a slight limp and covered in blood that wasn't his. Ravasz was kneeling between her slain rival and the fallen bodyguard. She had her head lowered and her lips were moving in prayer.

"You're injured," Ravasz observed coldly when she returned to Hyjnia, craning her long, serpentine neck down at him. As cold as Ravasz came across, he detected a hint of concern in her voice.

"I'm fine," he wheezed and put the Remy away to massage his torso with both hands. He wasn't struck, but the pain was getting worse.

They needed to get off the streets. "There's one more place we can go. There's someone I trust."

"Like the pilot," Ravasz said somewhat sardonically.

"No. She's different. She's the only person I trust," Marcel panted.

And, she had the fastest ship on New Karvina.

“Zenda,” Marcel grunted as he reached her shop and shoved her greeting drone out of the way. He told the others that he needed to go in first, that she might get spooked if she saw a bunch strange outsiders storming in at once. He was barely able to stand after shambling in. He accidentally knocked a tray pan off a work bench, sending tools clattering to the deck.

Zenda looked disappointed as she walked into her work area, wiping her hands with a rag and rolling her eyes. “I wasn’t expecting you back so soon. Did you spend your cut already? Hey!”

He reached out and grabbed her arm as he collapsed.

“What the fuck... are you high?”

“The *Esfir*,” he managed.

“Huh?”

“What would it take to get her space-worthy?”

“This is how you say hi?”

Her large dark eyes went to the back of the shop. With the tarp covering her, he couldn’t see what condition she was in. Zenda wouldn’t let the old girl fall apart. She loved her, or at least used to. She would need to be fueled and serviced at the very least. No time for a test run; barely time for a proper preflight inspection. She needed to survive the rigors of space, get under way on her own power, and outrun any pursuer. She used to be fast. *So fast.*

“What the fuck is wrong with you?” Zenda yelled, shaking him to keep him from passing out.

He tried to lift his shirt. Zenda helped him and cursed. He heard her sharp rebuke right before he passed out.

When he woke, an emergency aid drone was looming over him and laying a medical smart gel bandage over his stomach. Most of the discoloration was gone, as well as the pain. Likely he had an injection of smart drugs cleaning and repairing his body from the cellular level.

“You’re up,” Zenda said across the shop. Marcel was lying on a couch that Zenda meant for visitors and customers, but ended up using as her bed.

“Zenda,” he began and tried to sit up.

She hushed him and went to his side, eyeing him up and down. She knew his body intimately, and as her eyes regarded his exposed flesh, he wondered if anyone would ever know him as well as she did.

“It didn’t take you long to get in trouble,” she sighed. “You always get into...”

He grunted and checked the time on his PDD as Zenda talked. The others.

“Who was it this time?” she snapped like an angry aunt and lifted the smart gel bandage for a moment to peek at the bruised skin underneath.

“It’s not what you think.”

“Yeah; heard that before. The Syndicate again?”

Marcel closed his eyes. “Slobodan.”

“Slobodan! You jackass. Do you have any idea how lucky you are? You’ve been walking around with a perforated organ. You had internal bleeding and sepsis. You could have died if you didn’t come to me.”

“Then I’m happy that I did.”

Zenda looked oddly vindicated, like she always knew he'd go back to her. This time, almost literally crawling.

"Zenda..."

"Save it, malaka."

"Zenda! I need you to listen. The clients that I've been working with... there are people after them."

"I know."

He heard footsteps and tensed up, reaching for his old Remy and praying that he still had a few rounds left. He relaxed when he saw Ravasz with Hyjnia closely trailing.

He sighed and leaned back down on the couch. "You've met the others."

Zenda's angry aunt routine broke for an instant and she smiled wryly. "The boss lady has been telling me one hell of a story."

He swallowed. "Zenda. I'm sorry that I came here, but..."

"Quiet." She looked back and forth between Marcel and the visitors. "Is there any place that they can hide?"

"Like where, Zenda? Down below?"

"There are lots of places to hide on New Karvina."

"They'd find us eventually. Either more of the assassins or the Night Watch. Even if we got them to Beta Comae Berenices, they'd follow."

He looked at Ravasz for confirmation.

The ruler bowed her head. "The Black Fleet have very specific orders," She trailed off to save everyone the gory details, but didn't need to explain that much for them to get the idea. The

Queen couldn't risk either the mother or her unborn child surviving. And, Ravasz couldn't go home either after betraying her former employers and pissing off the Queen. It was ironic; she couldn't go back home and Marcel couldn't escape his.

Marcel looked at Ravasz. "Something terrible is coming, isn't there?" Not just New Karvina. The Queen's power was absolute, Ravasz said, and her reach was great. It wouldn't just be more assassins that came. They had sent scouts for a reason.

"Why us?" Zenda asked. "We didn't do anything to them."

"I don't think it matters," Marcel shook his head.

Ravasz nodded. "Our Queen has plans for both of our peoples, and many brave warriors eager to die in combat for the glory of their Queen and the Regime."

Zenda swore and tossed one of her spare tools across the shop. She spent years building up the business and was about to become another one of the galaxy's many displaced refugees. The galaxy would have a lot more when the Regime finally came.

"I put you in danger by coming here," Marcel said to Zenda as he sat up and looked around the shop for the rest of his clothes. "I had nowhere else to go."

His eyes went to Hyjnia and the bulging belly that he could detect just underneath her glowing robe. He didn't know why, but in that instant he was willing to die for the maiden and her unborn child. What Ravasz called the hopes and dreams of their entire people, and an innocent being. An innocent being on New Karvina of all places. That was a sacred thing, and worth fighting for.

"Please Zenda. When was the last time I asked you for a favor?"

She raised an eyebrow.

“Okay. When was the last time that I ever begged you for anything?”

She sighed and looked down. “I should kick you all out, but then where would you go?

Where would she go?”

“Does that mean...?”

“Now you really owe me.”

Carrack Point, home to New Karvina’s main waste and sewage treatment facility, almost looked pleasant from a distance. It was less busy the farther away they got from the more crowded downtown area. There were fewer VSTOL taxis and drones in the air, certainly no gawking tourists and uppity busybodies hanging around. The smell didn’t start to hit until they got much closer to the landfill.

Marcel occasionally peeked his head out of the tarp covering the *Esfir*, concealing them from surveillance craft and the eye in the sky.

The rising brown hills in the distance were actually dump sites where hovering trash transports were constantly dropping waves of garbage. The “Roach Coach” sanitation guild barge that they were riding on was one of the few still in operation on New Karvina.

Autonomous and easy to hide in, especially if you knew how to blend in.

Marcel withdrew back under the tarp and scoped out the *Esfir*. Just enough light filtered in through the tarp to make out her glossy outline and elliptical shape, like a sleek metallic seed. She had pits for the reaction control thrusters and twin plasma drive torches in her rear. Her

comm antennas and radiator fins were retracted or collapsed, keeping her skin curving and sexy even though her panels looked mismatched when you got a closer look. She was small even for a racing yacht, but even though she looked like a tight fit for even a crew of two, she felt much roomier on the inside.

The others waited inside for the Roach Coach to reach its destination. Even Marcel, not a tall man on any planet, had to duck to squeeze through the main hatch and keep from hitting his head on the low ceiling. There was enough room for a few cots and hammocks, a combined shower/sink/bath unit, and an engine room. The cabin blended right into the control room, where Zenda and Marcel used to cuddle, fight for elbow room, and make love. As small as she felt, she could be so cozy. The times that they used to have.

Zenda slammed a crescent wrench down in frustration and pulled her oval face away from the main control panel. “The *Esfir* has enough power for basic life support and I can get her under way, but I need to fix the main plasma manifold chamber in order to fly her to the nearest gateway station. If we get that far it’d be a miracle.

“You’ll get her fixed,” Marcel said admiringly. “You always do.”

She looked less convinced. “How is this supposed to work?”

“New Karvina recycles everything that it can,” Marcel explained, thankfully not going into too many details. It wasn’t a big secret that a good share of the drinking water came from filtered piss, but that was only part of what happened at the facilities. “They fudge the numbers to make it look like they’re in accordance with system ordinances. What they don’t reuse, they burn,” he said and pointed outside the tarp over a nearby hill of garbage. Just behind it rose a smoking funnel-shaped stack. An antique reactor turned giant incinerator.

Zenda shook her head. "I don't see how that helps us."

"New Karvina has hatches and lifts that they're supposed to use for emergency transit outside the habitat, and one of them is right by the facility. What doesn't get reused or burned gets dumped. Whenever too much trash accumulates they slow down the dumping and blame the spacer caravans." Funny enough, the spacer caravans collected their fair share of space junk in an odd symbiotic relationship.

Zenda mouth formed an O of realization. The hard part had always been getting off New Karvina. *Esfir* could drop into a bay, pop through the chute, and get blasted into the black where she could float away until Zenda could fix the plasma drive.

"How do you know about this place?"

"I used to scout dump sites for scrap when I was a kid. You'd be amazed the kind of shit that rich people throw away."

Zenda smirked. "I should have known you were a dumpster diver."

He gave the cabin one last look, taking everything in and trying to form a memory. He was an idiot. All this time, he should have enjoyed what he had. All this time he had been trying to get away from New Karvina, and her. And now, he wouldn't have anything.

"Whatever happened to us?" he asked.

She exhaled through her nose. "You pushed me away."

Did he? He did. "We had some good times, right?" He would have to hold onto those as long as he could.

"You were far away from me even then."

“I don’t know how to do it. How to get close to people. The only other person I was ever close to...”

“You don’t like to talk about your mother.”

Marcel looked away, looked for Hyjnia. Her servants were still surrounding her, getting her ready for the next leg of her journey. Where the hell would it end? Where was anyone ever headed?

“Someone is your entire world, and then they’re gone. And then the world swallows you up, and you try to use every trick that they taught you, but they can only teach you so much.”

He reached out and squeezed her hand. “Can you watch her for me?”

Zenda’s stern face softened. “Of course.”

“Make sure that she doesn’t get swallowed up. Make sure that she finds someplace safe. Make sure that she spoils the fuck out of her kid.”

“I will.”

His PDD chimed. “We’re here.”

The remaining warrior helped Marcel and Zenda wrestle the tarp off the *Esfir* as the Roach Coach came to a halt and hovered over a massive, motley-colored mountain of garbage. Yellow tracked mechs with scooper arms shoveled tower-sized mounds of filth into a giant maw that formed as a massive double hatch yawned open. From their height, it looked fuzzy and pale with flat earthen tones. Occasionally, Marcel could make out an object: the husk of a wrecked vehicle or the skeletal remains of a junked service drones. Giant beams and ribbons of metal fused together with shreds of composite material sandwiched between them.

The others jumped as a black Night Watch patrol VSTOL car rocketed past them, firing dozens of small scout drones into the air.

Marcel looked back and forth. A squad of humanoid drones in tactical gear were storming up the barge.

“Use the service cranes to lower you in and conceal the *Esfir*,” Marcel said and drew his Remy one last time.

“What the hell are you doing?” Zenda asked.

“Firing on a Night Watch drone is a serious charge. The other units will be forced to pursue me.”

“You can’t let them catch you, Marcel. You already have three strikes and you’re in the system.”

“I’ve always been in the system,” he said and stroked her cheek. “I won’t let them catch me. At least, I’ll make them work for it. Make the Night Watch sweat and do their jobs for once. I’ll make a nice distraction.”

“Come with us, Marcel. There’s room.”

He looked over her head at Ravasz. In the dim red lights of the *Esfir*’s cabin, she looked almost like a dream sprite. “Take her someplace safe.”

The ruler bowed. “I will.”

“Marcel,” Zenda said. Her face looked pained. “Those things that I said to you, the last time we... they weren’t fair. I was angry. I used to think that you didn’t care about anyone except yourself.”

He smiled. “Did it hurt saying something nice about me?”

“You can come with us.”

“No. I can’t.” Maybe he wouldn’t even know what to do with his freedom if he had it. Maybe one day even Zenda would learn to resent him, or he would overstay his welcome. And, he hadn’t earned it. Not yet.

“I’ll come back for you,” Zenda said.

No you won’t, Marcel thought, but it was a nice idea.

He turned away from her and ran down the barge, wildly firing his Remy like a cowboy and hooting like a madman. The drones fixed his location and ran after him. In the air above him, the patrol car turned and committed to a pursuit. The plan was working.

Augmented Reality, one of Marcel’s favorite joints, must have cleared out right after the first Black Fleet ships started arriving. The looters smashed the windows outside, some of the service drones, and took most of the good stuff from the top shelf. Luckily, they missed the hidden treasures underneath the counters.

Marcel found a bottle of Blue Hades and poured himself shot after shot as he watched the intra-system news updates on a flashing holographic chyron above the bar. The administrators sent friendly comm signals to greet their mysterious visitors at first, then peace delegations on diplomatic barges, but the Black Fleet was swallowing up any craft that got too close or tried to get away. Jammed the external comms to keep them from getting out a warning or call for help. Even jump drives stopped working, keeping anyone from escaping the system. Marcel wondered

how long it would be before they sent their first boarding teams. The waiting was unbearable. The not-knowing. The Night Watch took him out of holding soon after and supposedly started mobilizing for defense, but he hadn't seen a single guard in rotations.

Behind him, he heard the swoosh of the establishment's doors shuttering open and the beep of a bouncer drone as it regarded a host of new patrons.

Marcel listened, then snorted at the irony of the situation. "What took you guys so long?" he cawed.

"What took us so long?" One of Slobo's goons repeated incredulously and made a stomping sound forward. Slobo muttered a command to keep him back.

"That's all that you have to say?" the Syndicate soldier asked, sounding wryly amused.

Marcel shrugged. "What else is there to say?" He kept his back to them but looked at the counter top in invitation.

Slobo and his people took the offer and sat beside him, their large wet eyes scanning the chyron and reflecting laser neon light. He had never seen Syndicate toughs so scared before.

"Fuck me," Slobo began. "Those things are real."

"Yes they are," Marcel said cryptically and poured another shot. He could feel the goons staring at him like the answers to all of their questions. Even a couple of meatheads like them could probably put the clues together like Zhao did. They might have heard that Marcel had new clients right before everything went tits up.

"There are some people who might blame you for all this. That say maybe you brought them here," Slobo said and reached for the bottle.

Up close, Marcel saw that his eyes were blue. “They’d be wrong. This shit is more complicated than any of them could realize. We’re just little people caught up in this. In another peoples’ war. We’d be lucky just to survive it.”

Slobo looked down. “Then...we *can* survive it.”

“They’re not going to blast the habitat. If they were, they would have done it already. They have other plans for us, I guess.”

The Syndicate soldier chuckled and made a congratulatory face. “You’re a lucky son of a bitch, you know that?”

Not the word that Marcel would have used. He liked the new Slobo. Charming, patient. Not well-spoken, but almost pleasant to talk to. It would almost make the thrashing less painful when it came.

Whatever came, he had no regrets. A young woman, a mother, came to New Karvina looking for help, and he helped her.

Marcel finished off his last shot to steel himself. “Are we square?”

Slobo snickered. “Fuck no. If the universe went cold and you owed half a quid, the Syndicate would hunt you down for it. But...” As he talked, his eyes were called away, back to the flashing chyron and the alien ships surrounding New Karvina. “Let’s just say that the bosses have other things on their minds right now.”

“Now what?” Marcel asked. Maybe someone like him could lay low and weather the storm. Their occupiers might have uprooted every final hiding spot eventually, but his entire life might have been preparing him for what came. He was always in a hustle because it was always a part of surviving.

“Maybe none of us know what’s gonna happen next,” Sobo shrugged. “But...”

Marcel thought. “Maybe you can use someone who’s dealt with their kind before.”

Sobo suddenly slapped Marcel’s shoulder. “I don’t know if you’ve ever been through a colonial siege before. And these... whatever-they-ares might not be anything like your typical Marauder chapter. Sieges are hard. *Hard*. They can last for years, drive people mad. People starve, get stupid, do desperate things. And that’s not even including what their people do to you. When things get bad, you wouldn’t believe the kinds of things that people will do to one another. To neighbors. To family. The social order will collapse, but new leaders will emerge, and create order again. It’s inevitable. It’s like water going downstream. There will always be certain *needs*, and ways of acquiring and distributing things. A crew that knows their way around and how to play the game can earn. Crews that know shit about those people,” Sobo threw one of his meaty arms over Marcel’s back and pointed at the chyron with his free hand. “If we can figure out what *they* want and how to make *them* happy. *Eyyy*. We could live like kings.”

He nodded, admiring Sobo’s vision. “All this time, I had myself convinced that I couldn’t leave. That even if I could, a part of me would somehow still be stuck in this place. Maybe a part of me always wanted to stay. Maybe I was just afraid. This place is all I’d ever known, and I was afraid to leave it. And now I’ll never get another chance.”

In a way, perhaps his mother had been right. It wasn’t like leaving New Karvina was impossible—other people had done it before. His father left before he was born. His mother left in her own way. Hyjnia and Ravasz left along with their troupe, thanks to Zenda and the *Esfir*.

So it was possible, just, not for him. His mother's warning was almost like a prophecy, and something that he internalized and took as gospel. And with the Black Fleet arriving, he would never know how close he came.

New Karvina's black market was a cesspool of illicit trade and trafficking on a normal day. Marcel could only imagine what it would be like under an alien occupation. But, there were glimmers of hope, too. Instead of smuggling drugs and slaves he could smuggle food and refugees. Show them how to hide, and where. Instead of just weathering the storm and surviving, he could help others as well. Maybe that's why he was fated to remain on New Karvina.

As he shared another shot with the Syndicate toughs and planned out in his head the next chapter of his life, he accepted his destiny.

“So,” Marcel began, sneaking in a glance first at Sobo and then the news chyron. “Where do we start?”

About the author

Jonathan E. Hernandez is an author, visual artist, and organizer with the Brooklyn Speculative Fiction Writers. After an honorable discharge from the military, he went back to school to study creative writing and pursue a career better suited to his muse. His debut Gordian Knot trilogy is out now with Aethon Books. A Nuyorican originally from the Bronx, he now lives in Astoria, New York with his partner Anita and a cat named Jonesy.

Contact

Twitter: @jhernandez13
Instagram: jonathan.e.hernandez13
jehernandezauthor@gmail.com
Jonathanehernandez.com