

# SPACEBREAK

By WHITSTEEN



## CHAPTER 1 – PIZZA PALACE

It was pouring rain on an autumn Saturday evening in the downtown core of Neo-Vancouver.

Pizza Palace was a multi-leveled building constructed from brick walls and tall glass windows. Light exuded from within, creating a glowing visage of the whole. A red carpet led down a wide, torch-lined alley from Liberty Street, up a short flight of steps to the golden doors of the entrance. Inside was a network of tables ranging from booths hugging the walls to a series of wooden islands between them. A spiral staircase led to the second floor, where there was a Happicade arcade room and separate lounge and bar decorated with mirrors and paintings of mountains. It was a fantastic looking restaurant, inside and out. Unique; it wasn't a chain. Clean, cozy and well lit, surpassing the reputation of any normal Italian restaurant. The place was at peak business hours, packed with happy patrons. Soft jazz was playing. The servers were all beautiful women who were dressed very nicely. Dresses, jewelry, tactfully applied make-up, nylons and heels were rampant. The dress code was fancy, setting a high standard for the eclectic clientele populating the place. The weather accentuated the huddled camaraderie between the customers and staff.

He was sitting in a booth with a gorgeous lady, her generous bosom floating on the rim of a blue dress top. He had short, slicked black hair with a highlighting white tuft, a white tuxedo jacket and neat mustache. He was sipping a glass of champagne.

A pizza arrived with the server on a circular wooden plank. It was a margherita drizzled with balsamic glaze over pesto-coated prawns and leaves of basil. The pretty server said "enjoy," and glided away.

"This looks marvelous, Voltaz," the woman in blue said.

"Sapphire darling, that's why I wanted to bring you here. Pizza Palace never fails to deliver the highest quality," Voltaz said.

As he reached for a slice, an oval sapphire ring on his index finger caught the light and shone, iridescent. Sapphire's attention couldn't help but be drawn to its mesmerizing effect. He claimed the item was a display of devotion to her beauty, flattering her. However, there was something mysterious about it. She had never seen it before. The origins of where it came from were unknown to her. Politely, she left the topic untouched further than the slight information Voltaz had chosen to divulge. The conversational pleasantries took a hiatus there as they both ate, reveling in the glory of their meal and comfort of each other's company. It was a nice moment; safe, warm, and shielded from the torrential downpour outside.

A man walked in from the front door, dark and wet, wearing a black trench coat. His chiseled, ghoulish face turned. Darkened, soulless eyes scanned the room seriously. He didn't look like he was there for pizza and a pint.

Voltaz noticed this briefly and turned his attention back to his date. A glob of bocconcini fell off Sapphire's food and into her cleavage as she was aiming for her mouth. She giggled.

“Oh my lord!” She said. She put down the half-eaten slice and began dabbing at herself with a napkin and fiddling with her breasts, trying to fish the piece of cheese out from its spelunking, “And here you thought you had a classy date on your hands!”

“Sapphire, it would take much more than a rogue piece of cheese to spoil your class,” Voltaz said. The ring shone again and the bocconcini rolled between her breasts out of the dress, easily popping onto the table with little help from her fingers.

Voltaz looked over at the entranceway again. The man in the trench coat was gone.

“Excuse me, I’m going to wash up,” Sapphire said. She stood and began walking towards the washroom, shifting through the formidable crowd. Her hips gyrated hypnotically as she moved on heels that flexed her legs and buttocks. Voltaz saw the awe she inspired in other people as she gracefully moved past.

The man in the trench coat was sitting at the bar now, nursing a pint, a pickleback present in shotglasses. He draped his coat over the back of the seat, wearing a red plaid flannel underneath. His head turned, glancing over at Voltaz, who looked away before their eyes could meet.

Voltaz looked down at his ring. He put down the piece of pizza, appetite suddenly diminished, and took a gulp of champagne.

Sapphire returned, looking more glamorous than ever.

“Sorry about that. How rude of me!” She said.

“Quite forgiven, my dear,” Voltaz said.

“Now then. Where was I?”

She resumed her meal.

An ambulance approached with a droning siren and drove by, causing the cars on the street to struggle out of the way outside the window. The loudness rendered speech inaudible for the time it took to pass. As Voltaz turned back from looking out the window, his sweeping line of sight caught eye contact with the man at the bar for a long second. Then he faced Sapphire.

“Is something the matter?” She said. “You look a bit frazzled all of the sudden.”

“Judging by that ambulance, something *is* the matter, for someone,” Voltaz said, “everything is perfectly satisfactory with me.”

“Good. I wouldn’t want anything to spoil our lovely evening together,” Sapphire said.

“I’ll see to it that nothing does,” Voltaz said. He smiled.

Voltaz looked over at the bar again. The man had disappeared, but his coat was still there.

Sapphire looked suspicious now.

“Is something over there bothering you?” She said.

“Not at all. I’m simply perusing the interesting clientele of the establishment. It’s such an exciting environment,” Voltaz said.

“It is very amusing.” Sapphire seemed placated. She started eating again. Their pizza was half devoured now. Her perfume was invigorating. The aroma was intensifying the overall impact of her presence. Even her eyes appeared to be sapphire colored.

The sapphire ring was cycling through rainbow shades.

“What an exorbitant jewel that is,” Sapphire said, noticing, “I’ve never seen anything like it. The way it plays with the light like that.”

“It’s a very rare sapphire. I had to go to great lengths to get it.”

“Are you going to tell me what those great lengths were?”

“No.”

Sapphire grunted, cutely.

A low rumbling sound enveloped the room and the table began to shake. The cacophony of glasses clamoring and plates and silverware clinking together in unison spawned in a slow auditory

ascent. Then it faded away.

“What was that?” Sapphire said.

“That was an earthquake, I believe,” Voltaz said.

There was a shocked hush in the room as everyone realized what had happened.

“Just a minor tremor, nothing to worry about,” Voltaz said.

“That scared me,” Sapphire said.

The server came over. Their glasses were nearly empty.

“Whoa! That was a little scary!” She said. “No harm done though, it looks like. Can I get you two some more champagne?”

Voltaz gazed at Sapphire, gauging what she wanted. He decided.

“Yes, please. That would be lovely,” Voltaz said. They weren’t finished their pizza yet and he had promised nothing was going to ruin the evening. He made certain to deliver.

“Sounds good,” the server said and walked away.

Voltaz’s hands were on the table. Sapphire could see that his ring had lost some of its blue color. It was clearer now. She thought she could see something embedded inside the jewel. Voltaz moved his hands off the table.

The rumbling began again. Voltaz saw the look of sinking desperation in Sapphire’s eyes. This time the quake didn’t fade away. It got worse. Within seconds the entire room was shaking violently. People were screaming. The tables were rattling. Glasses were smashing. Bottles were falling off the bar shelves, burying the bartender in an onslaught of blunt hits and shattering glass. An extravagant chandelier high above was swinging wildly. The chain holding it snapped off. It plummeted, landing on the server who was frozen standing on the way to bring the champagne, squashing the poor girl in a kaleidoscopic spectacle of glimmering glass and blood. The thunderous sound of the earthquake had drowned out all else. TVs were falling from their perches. People were diving for cover and hiding underneath the tables, grasping on and trying to hold them steady for protection, praying for it to end.

It didn’t end. It intensified. The roof imploded. An avalanche of broken wood, asbestos, concrete and metal fell to the bottom floor, crushing many of the horrified patrons scrambling for protection. A bolt of lightning struck across the newly opened sky.

Sapphire was alive. She was protected beneath the debris covered table, a look of distraught confusion on her face. Voltaz was under there too. He looked up.

The man in plaid was standing in a dust cloud rising from the rubble as thunder erupted. Everyone else in the place was hurt, dead or hiding. The landscape had become a jagged rock precipice strewn with destruction. The quake had stopped. The music was over. A chorus of aghast sobbing and rain were the only sounds.

Voltaz got out from under the table. The plaid shirt man unbuttoned his flannel and tossed it down a chasm. He faced Voltaz across the decorated distance of bodies and wreckage.

“You know what I’m here for,” the man said.

“You didn’t have to do this,” Voltaz said.

“You wouldn’t have given it to me if I asked nicely.”

“I’m still not going to give it to you, Chronus.”

“I expect to take it.”

Chronus had a machete in a sheath strapped to his chest. His skin was deathly pale, dark eyes flaming, a flicker of evil from inside. The costly use of his incantation had visibly drained him. Voltaz was still fresh.

“That microchip you’re carrying is the property of the Ochot Spacecruiser Rhinoceros!”

Chronus snarled, “my Ochot employers are *pissed*, Voltaz! They need those launch codes for the Axial Ordinance!”

Ambulance sirens whined out in the distance.

Chronus leapt over the chasm and unleashed a flurry of flying punches on Voltaz, but the blows were deflected with a mystic pulse shield, blasting Chronus off the attack in an expulsion of wild blue energy, sending him flailing down the chasm. He landed far beneath on a plateau of protruding earth suspended above a dark abyss.

“You *stole* that chip! You have no right to it!” Chronus yelled upwards, voice reverberating in the echo chamber.

Chronus’s eyes gleamed red, expending his final flair. His feet were smoking as he pounced an uncanny distance upwards towards the opening of the pit, intent on escape. Voltaz couldn’t let him do that. He countered with a descending dropkick to the face, colliding in midair, dropping them both down on the plateau.

The rumble returned. The chasm walls began closing.

Chronus pulled the machete out from the sheath. Voltaz lunged to grab it, but Chronus savagely swiped. Voltaz screamed.

His hand was slashed off at the wrist and fell to the dirt. The hand with the sapphire. Blood leaked copiously from the open-veined stump.

The walls stopped moving.

Chronus bent to snatch the sapphire. Before he could, Voltaz kicked his own hand aside and uppercut Chronus in the face, crunching his nose cartilage, knocking him to his knees. Crackling blue electricity spiraled around Voltaz’s leg as he followed with a superkick to Chronus’s temple, decapitating him. A geyser of blood squirted from between the shoulders as the body flew over the edge and disappeared into the blackness. So did the head.

Voltaz picked up his hand, put it in his pocket and began climbing out. When he reached the top, Sapphire helped him over the ledge, distraught and tearful.

“Voltaz! Your *hand!*” Sapphire said, queasy.

He took off his tuxedo jacket and tightly bandaged his wound with it, wincing.

“It’s not as bad as it looks,” Voltaz said.

## CHAPTER II – SPACECRUISER RHINOCEROS



Xalluna was a cold planet. The geography was nearly all tundras and mountains. There was a frozen ocean, amounting for a small fraction of the entire surface area of the world. The weather was harsh everywhere, except within the city. There was nothing out there in the wasteland except for some tough animals, able to exist with sparse vegetation. Species that adapted to the crushing hostility of the environment; thick-coated birds and beasts.

Ockgate was the lone capital epicenter of the entire planet, simultaneously ancient and technologically advanced. The old quarter had temples that were built centuries before to worship the original gods. A mysterious apocalypse must have happened along the way. The epoch ended, catapulting the evolution of the species on a path of long-winding reset into the future. Ruins of an advanced civilization with archaic technology were preserved. There were new gods now.

The planet had a relatively small temperate zone. Scientists couldn’t explain why. The reality of its existence was more important than the reason. A foundation had been set up there long ago and grown into a metropolis over centuries. In present time, skyscrapers and fortresses were rife and

spreading, making up the majority of the city.

Xalluna was located at a crossroads between larger planets with more desirable ecosystems, attractive to travelers and good for commerce. Ockgate served as a convenient spaceport for outsiders, enabling it to slowly grow into a wealthy, state-of-the-art urban triumph.

In their long seclusion on the home planet, before space travel could reach Xalluna, or anyone could leave, the Ochot had diligently advanced in the realm of transportation, primarily a network of hyperlink tubes that ran a vein-like structure through every section of the city. A passport supplied by the government was needed in order to use it, which many civilians subscribed to. Once inside, the passenger would be swept away, riding a platform along the route at a comfortable speed, able to step out into a new sector at any exit point.

The Ochot had been under threat of attack for a long time, thus becoming resilient and vicious against overwhelming opposition. The barrier ring of defense ships above Ockgate was doing an exemplary job since its implementation. A strict filtration of visitors by the guard ships rejected or captured any with illegal or ill-intentions, keeping the city in order and generally unthreatened by serious outside mischief.

Despite being native to a winter planet, the Ochot rarely wore much clothing. Within the city or the ships, the temperature was carefully moderated. It was a show of pride and strength against nature to bear skin against the elements. Traditionally, they wore only enough clothing to cover the sex organs. That was socially acceptable.

The Spacecruiser Rhinoceros hovered in orbit outside the planet. Inside the ship, Delt Kangis was in his seat, gazing at the expanse of space outside the window of his chambers. He was a lanky creature, wearing a black speedo, leather gauntlets and boots. His face was plain, nose and mouth hidden beneath a layer of wrinkled skin, with gaping red eyes.

The ship was sleek built and relatively compact, with a skeleton crew of ten. Its main purpose was facilitating an interstellar superweapon, the Axial Ordinance. The nuclear laser could wreak incredible carnage, but the microchip with the codes needed to launch it had been stolen by the rogue known as Voltaz.

Attempts had been made by bounty hunters to kill him and recover the chip, but Voltaz had thwarted them all.

The Rhinoceros was the only Ochot vessel to be equipped with a weapon as potentially devastating as the Axial Ordinance. The government had spent considerable sums on its development and subsequent implementation into a spacecruiser. It had been tested in the past on derelict planets, wreaking nuclear havoc. There was a sole key, the microchip which contained the codes to engage the weapon. Without the chip the Axial Ordinance was useless. It couldn't be remade, on purpose. The original creator stressed the importance of extremely restricted access, so it couldn't be misused. No one else knew the secrets to how it worked. Now, no one did at all. The famed scientist, Dr. Klebold Kundruum, who had spent a period of his life's work building it, passed away suddenly under dubious circumstances. Some surmised he was murdered with poison, but the official cause of death was unknown and never investigated.

Delt Kangis had risen far in the ranks of favored government agents and space captains. It had come with a good amount of hate and jealousy from his peers, who became rivals. Now he was assigned to the position of being the guardian of the most powerful weapon which couldn't be used.

That made Voltaz one of the most sought after fugitives in the universe. Informers had reported he managed to escape to earth.

Delt Kangis wasn't a bounty hunter. He didn't have arcane knowledge. He was a spacecruiser captain. His place was on the ship. There were other responsibilities. So he delegated.

"Halfbag" Silvertooth was on the vidscreen. Delt Kangis paced up to meet him.

“Captain Kangis, I heard you were interested in my services,” Halfbag said. He was pale. Thin, long hair like a recently deceased corpse. His eyes shone like a demon was behind them.

“Mr. Silvertooth, greetings. Your reputation precedes you. I’m told you’re skilled in the arts of reconnaissance, and a warrior of great courage and ability,” Kangis said.

Silvertooth said, “I take it there’s a job you’re interested in my services for?”

“A man by the name of Voltaz has stolen an item very precious to the Ochot government. Multiple attempts have been made to recover it. All have failed. We are prepared to pay you handsomely for the safe return of the Axial Microchip to the Rhinoceros.”

“A tempting undertaking. Who is Voltaz?” Silvertooth said.

“I won’t lie to you, Halfbag. He’s somewhat of a little weasel. Conniving, slippery, and most of all dangerous. To a frustrating degree. Not to be underestimated. He’s shown significant prowess in the arcane and he knows martial arts,” Kangis said.

“That doesn’t intimidate me,” Silvertooth said.

“You are saying what I like to hear. Superb. The target has fled to Earth. We can provide you with the necessary information to get started, that is, all we know about the situation. Upon safe return of the microchip, you will be paid. Eliminating Voltaz is not required, but recommended. The universe would be a better place without him.”

“Sounds like a worthy challenge. Send me the info and I’ll start as soon as I finish up what I’m doing, which will be soon. One last thing. I’ll need to receive half the payment now.”

“What if you fail? Then we will have wasted the money.”

“I never have before. Half now, half when I bring back the microchip. I’m not stupid enough to abandon the mission and try to disappear with the cash. I know what would happen.”

“There’s a first time for everything, Halfbag. You drive a hard bargain. I’ll have to discuss it with my superiors in Ockgate, but that can most likely be arranged.”

“Good. Then you’ve got yourself a deal. When I receive the first payment, I’ll start.”

## CHAPTER III – HALFBAG SILVERTOOTH



The desert was cracked and uneven, sun blaring down with ballistic heat. A tall wooden post was embedded in the ground. Someone’s bone-thin, sun-peeling body was tied to it with their arms wrapped behind, wrists bound with rope.

Halfbag Silvertooth was standing there, wielding a curved dagger.

His spaceship was parked beside them. It was an LWS (Light Weight Spaceship) named “Falling Star”, electric razor-shaped with no wings spread out the sides. Simple and compact cockpit, with plenty of cargo space in the back.

The prisoner was slowly regaining consciousness as Halfbag smoked a cigarette, patiently waiting. When the young man looked up at him with confused, bleary eyes, Halfbag threw the finished butt on the ground and squashed it into the dust with the toe of his boot.

“Good morning,” Halfbag said.

The prisoner glanced horror-stricken at the dagger and turned his eyes back to Halfbag, struggling pathetically in his bondage before he gave up. He started gagging and retched a little bit of bile.

“W-what are you going to do?” He said.

“Well, that depends,” Halfbag said, tossing the dagger in spirals, catching it by the hilt

repetatively.

“Oh god, please don’t kill me. *Please*, I don’t know anything,” the prisoner said.

“I’m not so sure of that,”

“Who are you?”

“That’s cute. I thought I was the one asking the questions here.”

Halfbag took the man by the pinky finger and casually sawed it off. The young man screamed in agony. Halfbag held up the finger in front of his turned-away face, keeping it there until he looked at his dismembered body part.

“Nine more to go,” Halfbag said. The young man was in shock, squealing and whimpering, fighting the pain.

“*How could you do that?*” he said, “*I didn’t mean any harm.*”

“What you mean and what you do aren’t always the same.”

“But, but, *I’m* innocent. You can’t hold me responsible for other people’s actions.”

“I can do whatever I want,” Halfbag said and cut off the next finger. After the screams, which lasted awhile, the man regained a semblance of composure and could face Halfbag again. There was nowhere else to go. The only possible way out was through the conversation. Halfbag waited patiently until the man was finished with the brunt of his agony, absorbing the suffering.

“Please, my father is very rich. You know what my father does? Let me live and he can pay you. I won’t hold it against you. Just let me go. Whatever you’re being paid now, my father can do better than that!”

Halfbag twisted the dagger, staring at himself in the reflection of the steel, mock-contemplatively.

“That’s a very enticing offer. But money isn’t really the full issue here. I’ve got some degree of ethics and honor, I like to think. To accept an offer like that from you, after I already agreed to a contract with someone else about this. That just doesn’t bode well for my self-esteem.”

“*Contract?* I didn’t do anything to you! This isn’t *fair*...”

“That’s the really troublesome thing about life, isn’t it?”

“What is?”

“It’s not very fair sometimes.”

“*Ahhhh*... What do you want to know?”

“*Now* we’re getting somewhere,” Halfbag smiled with a twinkle, “cooperate and you may come out of this alive. Maimed, of course, there’s no going back on that. But alive.”

The man held his head. “You want to know where... Where the... *Sceptre... Is...*”

“That would be a good start.” Halfbag held the tip of the dagger up beneath the man’s chin, “let’s skip right to it, then.”

The wounds had created an incessant dribbling of blood, pooling behind the stake the man was tied to and surrounding his bare feet.

“My father, he’s... *Oh god*... He’s keeping it...”

“*Yes?* Go on. You’re so *close*. You can do it. I *believe* in you.”

The sarcastic derision stung differently than the blade.

“He’s keeping it in the... The...”

Halfbag sliced off the index finger. A vulture was scavenging above, circling in anticipation. Halfbag threw the severed digit to the bird, who caught it in midair and began eating it on the ground in front of the young man.

“*The... The... The... The what?*” Halfbag smacked the man in the face with his open palm, forcing him to stay in reality a little bit longer.

“Tell me now.”

The man was waving his low head back and forth, sobbing.

“It’s in the Sunken Temple,” he said.

“What Sunken Temple?” Halfbag lifted the man’s head with his free hand, but the man couldn’t look him in the eyes. He squinted away, mouth twitching with chapped lips.

Halfbag smiled. His silver front tooth gleamed in the sunlight.

“The Sunken Temple... In the Stormspike Valley... on Asheron.”

The vulture had finished pecking the flesh off the morsel it had been offered. Now it was hungry for more, with a potential feast in front of its avian eyes. Halfbag stood with the vulture as his newfound accomplice, the victim hopeless and depleted.

“The planet Asheron?”

“Y-Yes...”

“You wouldn’t *lie* to me?” Halfbag said.

“N... No! It’s in the... The... Sunken Temple.”

Halfbag believed him. He thought the young man was so weak and cowardly in character he wouldn’t have the guts to boldly lie in the face of death. No, this one would use any last fleeting chance to save his sun-fried skin.

“You’ve won your life but not your freedom. For now. Let’s see how you serve me and we’ll reassess the situation later.” Halfbag cut the ropes binding the man’s hands and released him. He was so exhausted and near-death he fell face first to the ground and passed out.

The vulture attempted to begin nipping at his back-flesh, but Halfbag kicked the bird away. It squawked and settled for the other two severed fingers laying there, then watched disappointedly as Halfbag hauled the abused man back to the Fallen Star. He placed him in the back cargo area and nurtured him with water from a bottle out of the mini-fridge, pouring it into his mouth. By some reflex of dehydration he swallowed it, even though he wasn’t conscious. Then Halfbag bandaged his mutilated hand.

## CHAPTER IV – ORFAN STORAGE



Halfbag took a syringe out of a bag on a counter top in the cargo room, filled it with liquid from a vial and walked over to the man’s body, inserted the needle into his arm, pushing the fluid into the blood stream. That should keep him incapacitated for a while. In the cockpit, he got in the pilot’s chair and engaged the turbo thrusters. The Fallen Star took off from the desert, leaving a cloud of blown-up dust in its wake. The ship ascended, soon passing the ozone layer into space.

Now Halfbag had a dilemma. He had agreed to undertake the job for the Ochot government, but he still had this prisoner, who just divulged the information about the Owl Eye. He spared the man’s life, now he was his responsibility, and he might need him later. Right now, he was going to get in the way. A place to drop him would be ideal. Then he could come back later to finish the mission.

Halfbag had never been to Asheron. A guide would be optimal, but he would have to break the man’s spirit first, if there still was one. If he died in the desert, and lied about the location of the sceptre, there would be no reconciliation. This way Halfbag could still squeeze the truth out of him.

The Owl Eye sceptre originally had belonged to the kingdom of Barbador, located on planet Thora. The King of Barbador, Ernest Tedbaldust, commanded real respect from his people, as the sceptre was imbued with charisma-enhancing witchcraft that made whoever held it beloved by anyone who encountered them. Halfbag’s prisoner was from the kingdom of Gann, also on Thora. His father



was King Isemburd Guilhelm, who commanded a savage army amassed of knights and barbarians.

Gann and Barbador were the two main kingdoms on Thora. Naturally, they fought for supremacy. The conquest campaign wrought by the Gann army was able to eventually overpower and invade the Barbador empire. Legend has it, King Tedbaldust was killed by King Guilhelm himself in The Battle of Barbador. When Gann usurped the castle, they found the sceptre prominently displayed in an alter in the court.

Many Barbador knights had retreated before the battle, citing impossible odds, but King Tedbaldust was too proud and stubborn to forfeit his kingdom. Over the coming months, the knights, led by a brave up-start, Ralf “the Shepherd”, began amassing a new army, adding components of revenge-thirsty savages that had been violated by Gann in the past and lived in the woods.

Gann occupied Barbador, and was busily making reparations to the damage they had done, building the ruins back into a city, this time in King Guilhelm’s vision. The Barbador survivors, peasants and noblemen, were enslaved or executed in mass public burnings. This brash brutality infuriated the outsiders on Thora. The balance of power had fallen completely into the hands of Gann, who dominated the planet except for the hidden patches of rebels amassing a retaliating force in the forests to the west. When word of these enemies reached King Guilhelm, he had the treasures of Barbador extradited in a space freighter and hidden on Asheron, which was a small, desolate planet beside Thora.

Asheron had fledgling Gann colonies, and the addition of valuable items such as the Owl Eye was an attempt at quickening the expansion of the off-world empire. The Shepherd’s guerillas soon began winning some battles of their own, ambushing Gann outposts, solidifying themselves as a real threat to be taken seriously. They started to gain traction in the west, enough to get King Guilhelm’s attention and weaken his confidence. Gann was spending heavy resources on rebuilding Barbador, struggling to manage the territory that was full of new slaves and civil unrest from the conquered. Barbador became “Gannador”.

This prisoner of Halfbag’s was the son of King Guilhelm, though he didn’t share the fortitude of his father, making an easy hostage for him. He stumbled on the chance to kidnap him out of the streets of Gann, and he took it, intercepting the prince on an unfortunately drunken, wandering night for the young man.

Halfbag wasn’t sure how powerful of a hand he held with the prince. He didn’t know what his relationship was with the court and the people, or his father. They could very well not care at all if the prince were to be fed to the vultures. The court could wish him dead. He didn’t have any redeeming qualities, not that Halfbag had witnessed so far, but he was too valuable of a hostage to waste.

These details would have to be worked out at a later time. For now, that mission was going on hiatus. Halfbag had to find the Axial Microchip now. The Ochot weren’t the sort of people to be taken lightly, or betrayed. This was a crucial gig for his finances. After this one, he was sitting pretty for awhile. Maybe he could buy that ranch he had been dreaming of, and take a vacation from the merc life, reflect, relax and enjoy himself.

He had given his word to Delt Kangis. He said he was going to do something, now he had to do it. As long as the Ochot came through with that half payment upfront.

He lit up a cigarette as he steered the Fallen Star through space, strategically thinking of his next move. Hours passed. The radio was on, playing sporadic songs interspersed with talk show chatter. An asteroid belt was near, he could see it in the distance, and on the radar, which was more useful for navigation than looking out the windshield. It displayed all space debris, substantial obstacles and places, including his current destination.

The Fallen Star approached a huge rectangular station suspended in space. It docked in the landing bay, where there was one other ship. Halfbag brought the prisoner to the main office. The place

was a space-chain storage facility called “Orfan Storage”. It was fitting because Halfbag intended to use it for a person.

“This ain’t really a jail,” the employee said. He was a short fellow with a ballcap, chewing gum, bushy auburn eyebrows.

“I need to store my property, that’s what this place is for isn’t it?” Halfbag said.

“Yeah, but it’s for items and stuff, you know, furniture and that kind of thing.”

Halfbag held up a hundred dollar bill.

“There’s more where that came from, if you just go along with it for a little while, feed him, keep him alive until I get back.”

“Who is he? I don’t want no excess trouble here. What if people come looking for him?”

“Nevermind that. No one knows he’s here.”

“How do I know that for sure?”

“Trust me.”

“Well, I don’t know, I ain’t no prison warden or slave keeper or whatever.”

The man had a spine. He wasn’t afraid of Halfbag’s presence. Maybe after enough time of working alone in this storage facility, death didn’t scare him.

“What’s your name?” Halfbag said.

“Jethro.”

“I’ll make it worth it, Jethro. I won’t be too long, I’ve just got a pressing engagement I need to take care of. Then I’ll come right back for him. Shouldn’t take me more than a week. You’ll be amply compensated, just keep your lips closed about it and there’ll be no trouble.”

A bribe and a threat had something in common.

“Well, OK, I guess. Sounds like you’re leaving me no choice.” He reached out and took the money.

“I’m imploring you to take the path of least resistance. Then we both win.”

“Alright, let’s see here,” Jethro looked at the grid on his console, “Lot 32 is open.”

Halfbag paid the fee and hauled the prince’s body over his shoulder to Lot 32, led by the employee, who glanced warily at the bandaged hand. They took a freight elevator to the third floor, walked down the hall and opened the garage. It was a dark empty room. There was a mouse inside that scurried into a hole when the outside light flooded in. Halfbag slumped the body in and shut the door, locking it.

He got back in the Fallen Star and exited the landing bay, blasting off into space. A beep sounded on his command console. He checked it. It was a file on Voltaz from Delt Kangis, and a payment. Now that that was taken care of, his next destination was Earth.

He put the steering on autopilot and read the file. There was a picture of Voltaz, and the microchip. Somehow the Ochot knew it had been placed inside a sapphire ring. Voltaz had no official criminal record, but there was a list of deeds deemed guilty of. In the photo, his eyes had cunning to them. It looked like his drivers license picture. No smile.

Halfbag flipped open a compartment with a lone button inside that read **WARP** underneath. He pressed it. A beam fired out of the bottom of the Fallen Star and a swirling purple warp portal opened in front of the LWS.

He flew in and the ship was swallowed by the vortex and transported through a tunnel of revolving plasma and light, traveling speedily towards the Milky Way Galaxy. It emerged out the other end of the portal several minutes later.

Halfbag could see the moon. Dwarfing it from behind was planet Earth.

He was becoming a professional treasure hunter fast.

## CHAPTER V – NEO-VANCOUVER SPACEPORT



The Fallen Star entered Earth's atmosphere and descended on autopilot. Halfbag was busy reading the information in the file on the way. It said Voltaz was last seen specifically in the city of Neo-Vancouver. Halfbag was from Earth, but he hadn't returned in decades. Not since Mother disappeared. It seemed like ancient history. He was a far different person now. Chiseled, hardened by many adventures and misfortunes. He didn't envy the young version of himself. Lost and chaotic, ignorant of many things that only hard, painful lessons could teach. There was no easy way, not for him. Those that took the easy route, for whatever reason, were at a massive disadvantage versus the real warriors and mettle that existed out there.

He steered the ship towards North America, getting closer rapidly. The vague landmass in the distance rendered with increasingly discernible details as he approached. Through a clearing in the clouds the city appeared. He went straight into downtown, docking in the spaceport. It looked like a smaller version of a football stadium, walls curved, reaching for the heavens. There were many different types of spaceships, most Earth-built, but some were intergalactical.

He took the Legionnaire's Flux Equalizer pistol from the cargo area in his ship, loaded it with a full clip of twenty APJ rounds, stuffed it in a chest-holster and strapped it on, concealing it with a long jacket overtop.

The side hatch on the Fallen Star opened with a gushing suction sound from the airflow. Halfbag walked out, down the ramp, through the spaceship-filled parking lot and down a short corridor into the main ring of the building.

At customs, the pencil-necked official found the pistol immediately, of course, but Halfbag had a license for it. The man inspected it, side-eying suspiciously, probably not having seen many Flux Equalizers in his time. Halfbag could see the slight gleam of intimidation in his eyes, a realization of power beyond his knowledge or ability to match. Despite the obvious personal distaste, there was nothing the official could do to stop him. It was a law and Halfbag had his permit. He was allowed through.

He took the escalator down to street level and walked through the crowd onto Liberty Street, scanning the area. It was mildly sunny now, and dry. That was unexpected. The weather icon on the command console in the Fallen Star read it was going to continue raining. Computers weren't always right.

The space station was located in a prime downtown area, flowing with a wide spectrum of interspersed pedestrians. A deluge of homeless people littered the streets, something that wasn't as prevalent on other planets Halfbag visited recently. He had forgotten about that aspect of Earth. They had been forgotten here too.

He couldn't deny it, Neo-Vancouver had a distressing aura emanating from the cumulative response of the souls. In many societies on other planets, as he learned in his travels, there was often some kind of unity there, a joint goal or resonance of intention.

Here it was disparate, hopeless. The leaders had failed at rallying a common effort. Things had collapsed into self-serving interests in a cauldron of anguish no one understood and was impossible to fully control.

Many had been rejected from life, washed-out in the streets in a bleak sea of addiction and loss.

The rest weren't giving off that much positive energy either. The satisfied ones were also the most oblivious. Halfbag could absorb this psychic info by being present among the minds. *Why would Voltaz choose Earth of all places?*

He knew by intuition now Voltaz was still in Neo-Vancouver. Having never met the man, he could feel his presence in an array of souls swarming the overall area of the city. He sensed that just by looking at Voltaz's picture and focusing his intention, getting to know him already. He wondered, *what was Voltaz's reasoning for stealing the microchip?*

Halfbag wasn't aware of the extent of the damage the Axial Ordinance could cause. It wasn't his problem, and he didn't much care. It wasn't his job to differentiate right from wrong, or whose plight was just in this situation. His job was simply to recover the chip, and probably kill Voltaz in the process. Obviously, Voltaz wasn't going to give it up without a fight. He was a formidable opponent by the sounds of it. That's where things would get tricky.

Halfbag knew the extent of his own ability, but it would be folly to be over-confident in this situation. Judging by the file, Voltaz really did have supernatural powers. Halfbag had dealt with that kind of thing before, victoriously, but it would only take one mistake to be fatal.

The deadline he was under was the one he had set for himself, the consequence of being in the middle of his own mission before this one befell him. He hoped his ego hadn't gotten the better of him, that he had not taken on more than he was capable of. He was confident he could handle it, but life always had its unpleasant surprises.

If Voltaz went to all the trouble of stealing the microchip and defending it against the hunters who came after him, why would he not simply destroy it and be rid of the consequences? He must have some intention for keeping it. That was something that would likely be discovered soon. There was about a week, like he told the Orfan Storage employee, Jethro, to get the job done and return to pick up the prince. If he couldn't do that, then he was screwed. *Don't get too far ahead of yourself*, he thought. *That's a long ways away from now. Get distracted with that, and you could mess this up.*

His second sight was going to be key here in tracking the target. It's what made him such an effective bounty hunter. He could tune into the frequency of other people, even ones he had never met before, picking up on their brainwaves, beyond the capacity of a normal person's intuition. It wasn't magic, it was a natural talent strengthened by knowledge and training. Most people had the latent ability to some degree but never worked to evolve it. Halfbag was fortunate enough to have his spark noticed and developed by his mentors in early life. Now he was good at it, the sum of much experience.

There was a subtle manifestation of Voltaz's spirit in Halfbag's mind now, alert to his presence. He couldn't pinpoint where, not yet anyways, but soon, as he got more accustomed to the environment. Things would start to organize themselves, filter out the useless parts, leaving the gold like a sifter.

He found the onslaught of signs and advertisements in the environment invasive to his psyche. The overload of pandering on the streets and in the businesses was all so aggressively fake and patronizing. There were juxtaposing blatant, low-level attempts at coercion everywhere he looked. They called that democracy here, if he remembered correctly. It gave Halfbag more respect for subtle systems. At least those ones instilled some kind of mutual drive to contribute. People knew they were running on a hamster wheel here, fed on by vampires.

After the initial disease normalized, he coaxed himself to get to work. It wasn't his personal horror he was feeling, it was the vicarious horror he was soaking up from the mob he was surrounded by. Maybe Voltaz felt the same way. Some were natural outliers, born special. Separated from the mainstream and gifted or cursed by some cosmic twist. A lucky hand came with the responsibility of following through with what's been dealt.

## CHAPTER VI – SKYCRAWL COVERT



Voltaz was outside Echowood Gardens, smoking a cigarette, walking into downtown. Weird bird sounds were emanating from inside the forest. The weather had been hostile, raining for days in varying intensity and violently windy. Now the afternoon sun was peeking through a gap in the clouds. A momentary slice of glory.

The sapphire ring on his hand was an intergalactic bullseye for bounty hunters. Something needed to be done about that. So far he had been getting away with it. Fate had been fortunate. He didn't take it for granted, knowing his luck wouldn't last forever, or possibly even much longer. The microchip had to be dumped somewhere, preferably in a prosperous way for him. There was no use running away further than this. No matter what city, what planet, his pursuers would find him anywhere, eventually. He was living in a state of fugitive strife and constant anxiety, but he was good at covering. He reminded himself this was all necessary, and it would be worth it in the end.

The Ochot could obliterate cities with the press of a button if they were in possession of the Axial Microchip. Voltaz had seen the footage of the test blasts. It was practically his responsibility to keep that from happening, which was now causing immense danger to himself.

Chronus had been the toughest of his opposition so far. The bastard had cut his hand off, which he was currently keeping in a formaldehyde-filled jar in his motel room. The ring was on the other hand now. He needed a substitute.

Thankfully, the business advances of cybernetic enhancement had boomed in recent years, and replacing his severed hand wasn't impossible any longer. His bank account was looking good, mostly from the skillful thievery he'd been practicing in adulthood. A regular, honest job was something he hadn't had since he was a teenager. Now he was thirty-seven, been all over the galaxy and all kinds of adventures. He was prepared to spend on a new hand now. A right hand was worth it. He wasn't that cheap. He thought about the mysterious bias of nature to lean towards the competence of the right hand over the left in the majority of human beings, including himself.

Daedalus Gulf was a genetic engineering industry founded by the old, now defunct company Dynosoft. The Peripheral Spire, the original headquarters of Dynosoft, was located conveniently here in Neo-Vancouver. Daedalus Gulf had eventually eclipsed Dynosoft through the sheer magnitude of importance and attention their projects were receiving, buying out the mother company. Space travel became a regular thing for civilians, and a travel network in the galaxy had been established. Daedalus Gulf had become famous long ago for miracle-working procedures in the realm of genetic engineering and cyber-enhancement. That's what Voltaz needed now, expert integration.

He was going to be more easily identifiable to his enemies. Surely word must have spread through the galaxy. There was probably another assassin sent after him already. That's how the Ochot operated.

He probably should have sought emergency medical attention at the time of the disaster, but that would have garnered way too much attention. He was still on a date with the lovely Sapphire then, so he played it cool.

Disguised on the street in a trench coat and fedora, he approached the seedier neighborhood of Slagwood Avenue, outside Chinatown. His Enhanced Pulse Zapper was strapped to his chest, always a good thing to have handy these days. Ever since his traumatic encounter with Chronus, he'd been

carrying it everywhere.

There was a certain building he had heard of through the grapevine. A hidden place that did cybernetic enhancements and cyber-surgery, called “Skycrawl Covert”. The owner was ex-Daedalus Gulf, a man named Dr. Agnew Rosa. Rumor had it Rosa had gone rogue in the world, outside the safety net of the empire. Voltaz didn’t really care what his reasons were.

Requiem Street was packed with strange, small businesses side-by-side lining the off-kilter Slagwood Avenue. There were antique shops, a laser tag, gun stores, corner stores, computer repair shops, military surplus, tattoo parlors, a pharmacy, restaurants including a Jumbo Doggo and a Burgers Queen, an Animal Depot pet store, which in the window had snakes, puppies, parrots, hamsters and bunnies. At the end of the row was Skycrawl Covert, under a red awning with a cybernetic hand graphic screen printed in yellow, wooden barrels on either side and strings of red Christmas lights decorating outside the door.

Voltaz lit another cigarette in preparation. It was frustrating that he had to alter his method for simple reflex actions like that. He stood there smoking, witnessing the expanse of the courtyard at the end of the street in the neighborhood. The passing silhouettes of strangers, their body language telling much of the story about the kind of people that they were. He didn’t have to know the details to get a glimpse of the bigger picture. There were police cars staking out something, not very inconspicuously, an apartment complex perhaps. Spaceships moved in the far-off sky like slow-moving shooting stars. He took one last drag of the cigarette and dropped the butt to the ground, ready to meet the doctor.

Inside the building, there was a reception desk with a computer, with a wall behind it and an open door. Through the door an operating table was visible with surrounding shelves populated with a plethora of medical items; surgical equipment and spare parts. In the lobby, there were framed diagrams on the wall of many of the restorative services offered. Cybernetics was somewhere outside the official medical community, but clearly had its foundation there. Skycrawl Covert was operating in its own derelict league. If this wasn’t legal, Dr. Rosa was getting away with it, which Voltaz appreciated.

There were some sawing sounds from the back that came to a halt when the front door closed. Soon a man appeared through the doorway, bushy white hair and a thin face with glasses. His nose seemed chipped, which struck Voltaz as odd, for someone who was purportedly a master in cosmetic surgery. Why would you let something like that slide on yourself? He didn’t presume to understand how everyone’s brain worked. It could be a red flag. Voltaz was about to find out.

“What can I do for you?” Dr. Rosa said.

Voltaz took his arm out of his pocket, revealing his missing hand, holding up the stump.

“Is there anything you can do about this?” Voltaz said.

“You want a new hand?”

“That would be nice.”

“Let’s have a look, come in, lay down.”

Voltaz followed the doctor into the backroom. The doctor flicked on a light overhanging the reclining chair. Voltaz got in the chair and presented his arm. Dr. Rosa began unwrapping the bandage. When it was off, he glanced at the wound, turned to the table beside them and lay the bandage there. He picked up some oversized goggles and put them on coming back to address the damage closer. Peering into the wound, Dr. Rosa said, “it’s not infected.”

“Can you replace it?” Voltaz said.

“What happened to your hand?”

“Someone cut it off with a machete.”

“I mean where is it?”

“Sitting in my motel room in a jar of formaldehyde. Can you reattach it?”

“I never have before.”

“Is there anything you can do?”

“I can attach one of these,” Dr. Rosa turned to the wall display of metal and plastic cybernetic hands. They were ugly and janky. “That’s going to cost a bit.”

“What if I brought my hand in, could you make something work with the materials you have here and the organic flesh?”

Rosa shrugged. “Possibly. I might be able to cerebral-shock the connection back into the ligaments. It’s worth a shot, I suppose.”

“I’ll go get it right now. What time do you close?”

“Five. Time is of the essence here, but you’ve still got some. Judging by the looks of that wound, it’s a recent injury,”

“It is. I had to lay low for a while, but now it’s on my priority list to get a hand again. If that’s something you could do, if you could somehow do some overtime today, I’d appreciate it.”

“Well, I’ve got plans with my wife...”

Voltaz held up a wad of cash, not unpolitely. “Can you reschedule?”

Dr. Rosa watched the cash-wad, thinking, measuring the ethics, then took it gently from Voltaz’s outstretched fingers and stuffed it in his pocket.

“Alright, you’ve got yourself a deal. No promises though, I can’t guarantee the outcome, and no refunds, sorry. My time is valuable, even if the operation fails. Like I said, I’ve never done this procedure with someone’s real hand before. Only what you see around you, cybernetics.”

“I’m willing to take that chance. I’ll just have to hope it doesn’t fail.”

“Okay, come back at five with the hand. That way there will be no interruptions.”

Voltaz returned at five with the hand jar. Dr. Rosa locked the door behind him and inspected it. “Looks in good enough shape. Well preserved, a few little spots of decomposition. We can deal with that. You must have gotten it preserved fast. That was smart.”

Dr. Rosa intuitively knew not to ask too many questions. He was a renegade operating on his own, relying on his knowledge and talent. He needed clients like Voltaz to sustain himself. He learned not to judge his patients. If he had some ethical quarrel with every mysterious request he received, he’d go out of business pretty fast. As it was, he was doing alright for himself. Turns out the market for cybernetic augmentation was decently busy. Especially the way he was doing it, so the customer didn’t have to go through the official rigmarole of the real offices of Daedalus Gulf.

Voltaz laid down on the reclined chair.

“I’m going to need to put you out for awhile, won’t be longer than an hour,” Rosa said. He had an IV needle hooked up to a certain clear liquid.

“Do what you need to do,” Voltaz said.

Rosa slipped the needle into the top of Voltaz’s left hand and strapped it on with medical tape. It was uncomfortable. Voltaz could feel the chill as the cold liquid entered his bloodstream. He rapidly began to feel very sleepy, then he was out.

He woke up drowsy, no longer on the operating chair. He was laid out on the leather couch in an adjacent room. He looked down. There was his hand grafted to the end of his arm again, stitches lining the connection point. There was a marked color difference between the healthy skin of his forearm and the cold, dead hand. He lifted his arm, but he couldn’t move his fingers. Dr. Rosa entered the room. He had a glass of wine.

“Wine?” Dr. Rosa said, offering.

“That would be nice,” Voltaz said. Dr. Rosa poured him a glass of Shiraz and brought it over to him on the couch. Voltaz sat up and took it, sipped it. Exquisite.

“The operation was a success, so far, but it’s only part done,” Dr. Rosa said.

“That would explain why I can’t move my hand.”

“Correct. I had to remove the bones and replace it with one of these,” Rosa said. He held up a diagram of the exoskeletal framework he was referring to, “It’s an exoskeleton. These are called skeletal clones. They’re actually stronger than bones, but it’s not organic. It’s made of metal. Ozmium, to be exact. Very strong. This was the best I had.”

It was embedded within the glove of Voltaz’s own reattached skin, brought back to life and reconnected to the matrix of blood vessels and veins within his body, slowly regenerating.

“There will have to be another operation. I hope you don’t have anything better to do this evening. I’ll need to go in and do some fine detailing with the receptors,” he was fiddling with a tool that looked like a pen with a blue laser tip. “This is the essence of all cybernetics, the marriage of robotics and organic structures. Fascinating, isn’t it?”

“Oh yes, quite,” Voltaz said. He sipped his wine. Something about the doctor drinking in the middle of his procedure was unsettling, but he had committed now so he didn’t say anything about it, and Rosa was sharing. Dr. Rosa was an expert, allegedly, so Voltaz was going to let him do his thing his way. Voltaz was staring at his hand. There was something zombie-like about it now. He thought he looked like Frankenstein from the wrist down. It wasn’t that far from the truth. Dr. Rosa went to the operating room and Voltaz could hear various sounds of movement, organizational metal clanking. Voltaz was still quite drowsy. The wine was helping his mood, and the friendliness of Dr. Rosa meshed with the exciting hopefulness that his issue was receiving proper attention. Dr. Rosa came back in the room.

“When you’re ready, everything is set up, you can come back in,” Rosa said. Voltaz finished the wine eagerly and got up. He had a head rush, the cumulative effect of the wine and the sedating drugs. He walked carefully back into the room. It was time for round two. When he got in there, it was different. There was an elaborate helmet set up at the head of the chair, with a pilot’s visor, wires and tubes protruding from the back of it, pooling on the floor in a rat-king formation and rising again, inserted into a rectangular generator glowing green from the power source. Dr. Rosa welcomed him to lay back down with an extended arm towards the chair. Voltaz resumed the position, mildly nervous. This had better work the way it was supposed to. He didn’t want to leave here having done more damage to himself with some weird side-effects he hadn’t counted on.

“Don’t worry,” Dr. Rosa said, seemingly having read the trepidation in his mind, “This is called a Cerebral Configurator. This is to calibrate the exoskeleton with your mind, so you’ll be able to control it, like you would with your natural hand.

“Ok,” Voltaz said, not fully convinced.

“You’ll find this intriguing,” Rosa said as he was fastening the Cerebral Configurator onto Voltaz’s head. The inside of the visor was not really a visor at all. Voltaz couldn’t see out of it.

“I’m going to go ahead with the remainder of the procedure now, if that’s ok,” Rosa said.

“I’m ready.”

“Good,” Rosa said, and slipped the needle into Voltaz’s left hand again with no further warning. The prick made him shudder. Then the cold liquid started to flow into his arm, rising up to his shoulder and into his chest. He never felt the rest. He was out.

When he came to, he was back on the sofa, feeling like he had just suffered an epic nightmare filled with electric shocks and demons springing forth from a shadowy world, lost in some freezing, dim-lit stone labyrinth.



As reality seeped in, he lifted his arm and turned his hand around, flexing his fingers. He had control. Even the color of his hand had improved since... *How long had it been?* He looked at his watch. It was nine-thirty. Four and a half hours was a disturbing amount of time to be unconscious and completely at the mercy of a stranger, but Dr. Rosa was a doctor and Voltaz didn't get an untrustworthy feeling from him, so he went through with it. That doesn't mean he fully trusted him, as he wouldn't with anyone. In a desperate circumstance some risk taking was inevitable if progress was to be made. Dr. Rosa entered the room again, with a fresh glass of wine for Voltaz, and one for himself.

"Parts of you are a new man," Rosa said, pleased with himself. Voltaz took it the operation was a success, taking the wine glass with his re-established hand. The feeling was numb but his fingers were working. Trembling, he took the glass to his lips and sipped the wine.

"How did it go? Any complications? Anything I should know about?" Voltaz said.

"I think it's going to work. I did have some obstacles that presented themselves, but I've been doing this sort of thing for a long time and it became an interesting challenge for me. That's part of the fun of being a scientist. The human body is a marvelous thing."

"What kind of obstacles?" Voltaz said.

"Oh, I had to do some untangling and such, to get the synapses firing. This pen here, it's called an elliptical spark." Rosa demonstrated with some drawing motions in the air. The living veins and the cybernetic ones need to be melded. A little poking and prodding with this guy usually does the trick, but it took some experimenting."

"I see," Voltaz said, slightly confused. The feeling of being molested while he was asleep was not pleasant, but that's what it took. He was satisfied with having a right hand again.

"Now, if you're happy, I'll give you a moment to gather yourself and enjoy the wine. Then I'll be ready with your bill."

"Yeah, of course, the bill."

Dr. Rosa left the room. Voltaz sat alone, drinking. The back room he was in was sparse, one window with drawn blinds and a ceiling fan, which was rotating hypnotically slowly. His head felt muddy, and prickly. The drugs were still in his system. He downed the rest of the wine and stood up, feeling dizzy and high. He left the glass on the table next to an issue of *Modern Cybernetics Magazine* and walked through the operating room to the front desk, where Dr. Rosa was patiently waiting in the chair behind the counter. He was typing into the computer keyboard, clicking the mouse.

"Alright, that will come to \$1999. For the labor and the exoskeleton. Those aren't cheap, I know. I discounted the skin because you brought your own, so I was able to use a basic model exoskeleton. I had already stripped the latex. Hopefully it shouldn't cause you any trouble."

"I hope so too," Voltaz said. The charge was on the screen and he used his credit card to pay the amount.

"Receipt?"

"Yes, please."

Rosa tore off the piece of paper that spouted from the terminal and handed it to Voltaz. Voltaz folded it twice and tucked it into his wallet.

"Thank you," Voltaz said.

"Let me know if you have any troubles."

"Sure. Hopefully I won't."

"I hope so too! Like I said, it was my first attempt at an exohybrid. Good practice for me."

"Alright. Have a wonderful evening, and thank you again for the wine and the hospitality, very polite of you."

"My pleasure."

Voltaz walked out the front door and into the night.

## CHAPTER VII – BAYSIDE AUCTION HOUSE



Voltaz took a cigarette out of the pack, placed it in his mouth, lit it. He stood there smoking, using his new hand. What he just went through was a disturbing experience, but necessary. Going to Skycrawl Covert would keep him off the radar, and he supported Rosa in spirit, relating to a man who had clearly defected in some way and still chose to operate on his own accord.

The blood flow in his hand was working now. The sensations were starting to return at the surgical site. A nagging itch faded into relevancy around the stitches. Whatever Rosa did was miracle work. Technology had advanced to god-level.

Voltaz had to profusely scrub in a public washroom to get the stench of the formaldehyde off. It was still lingering. He hoped that would go away.

The assassins the Ochot were sending after him were getting more competent. That last fight with Chronus was way too close. Not only did he take serious damage, but innocent people were killed in the process. That was inadvertently his responsibility, but how many innocent people would be killed if he *didn't* take the microchip? He had a very hot potato and it wasn't a comfortable thing.

His next course of action was to unload the chip. It had to go to a suitable home. It could find its way back to the Axial Ordinance eventually, unless it was destroyed, but it was too valuable an item not to sell. He had to be careful about how he did this, and swift. He was in new territory now, where other people were suffering the consequences of his actions. That was unacceptable.

Earth was a familiar place to get lost amongst the fray. On other planets, he would stick out too much. He stood out here too, but with such a mass of everyday chaos, his identity tended to get swept up in distraction. The overpopulation masked him, but he knew a seer would be able to hone in. That could be happening at this moment. He didn't have time to dawdle.

Taking Sapphire on a date to Pizza Palace was a great idea in theory, and everything was going perfectly smoothly until Chronus showed up. Voltaz knew the coming catastrophe as soon as he saw him. Next time, a complete stranger could attack and he wouldn't even know he was in immediate danger. He was living in an underlying state of constant threat, but he was good at acting.

He got in his car. It was a navy blue '77 Oracle with tinted windows. He turned the key. The engine roared into activation and he drove calmly out into the night street grid. It wasn't raining. That was a nice change. He wasn't one to be so profoundly affected by the weather, but it seemed like ever since he had been back in Neo-Vancouver it was windy or raining or both. A dire omen.

He had really gotten himself into a mess here.

Things got more complicated. He actually cared about Sapphire now. It was in his best interest to keep her happy. Getting himself killed over an intergalactic dispute for an item as big as a dice wasn't going to do that. He had to force himself not to show weakness when his hand was chopped off in front of her, so she wouldn't think him less of a man. He knew at heart she wasn't an extremely uncaring type, and seeing that must have instilled some kind of sympathy in her, but he didn't want sympathy, he wanted to be strong. No matter how empathetic she was, she was still a very beautiful woman, and at that point he was akin to the winning animal wounded in a mating duel, rectified now as best as possible.

It didn't sit right to use a completely prosthetic hand when the one he was born with was still an

option. It would have cost a lot more for one of those Daedalus Gulf pro-model hands than the Frankenstein job Dr. Rosa whipped together. Damaged goods were cheaper. Maybe Sapphire would think having a zombie-hand was rugged and cool, best case scenario. One thing he had going for him in that embarrassing situation is he didn't complain. He took it like a man.

Driving along the harbor, he turned onto Luxembourg Street, heading north. He was living in a motel on the main stretch of downtown. It was a decent place, but not far away there were other places that weren't so decent, plagued by derelicts and crime. That was pretty regular in downtown Neo-Vancouver. It was infested, big time, but Voltaz didn't blame the individuals. Their support systems were hopelessly lackluster for that kind of thing here, and there were many contributing factors that influenced the ejection of people from society, most never to return. It seemed cryptic, the disparity between the rich and self-satisfied and the completely destitute inhabiting the same areas together. Each seemed to have disdain for the other's way of life. Classic human nature.

Voltaz didn't know what he was doing. He could go home, that was the direction he was loosely driving in, but it wasn't really his home, and that wasn't really the direction he needed. He had no home, like these people on the streets. He was just better dressed. He wasn't even sober, thanks to Dr. Rosa.

There wasn't really time for rest and relaxation now. It was later in the game. He needed a solution and fast. His mind was swamp-diving, unpleasant thoughts swimming around in the murk. He had gotten away with being a professional thief for a long time now, learned to ignore the guilt, tucking it away in a little compartment in his mind and dismissing the dark thoughts. It wouldn't do anything positive to perseverate. So he had to make a concerted effort to not get sucked down that rabbit hole. *Reality was just an idea projected from our brains in the first place. Was it working to build? Or simply digging a deeper grave?* He was wary of the pitfalls. Sobering how one event, one catastrophe, one second, could shape an entire life for a person, or end it.

Up the hill, the Oracle drifted with a soothing purr. The Auction House came to mind. That was a desperation idea, but it could work. It was located downtown, in West Bayside, not too far from where Voltaz was driving right now. He didn't have the time or the connections to make the perfect deal anymore. It wasn't realistic. He wanted to just dump the chip and run. Make it someone else's problem. It may have been a huge mistake to take it in the first place. Maybe there was still a chance to redeem himself.

He swerved left through a green light intersection between a military base, a cemetery, a plaza, a used car lot, careening down Bayside. The Auction House was located right before the bridge crossed the inner harbor. It was beside an abandoned factory with brick smokestacks, a building like a small warehouse with a parking lot beside, fenced in on a cliffside above the water, rows of boats strung up on docks beneath.

Voltaz parked the car, got out, locked the doors automatically with the keychain button. He walked across the lot, up the steps and entered the glass double doors. It was moderately populated inside with all sorts of people. Some were obviously travelers from the far expanses of space, some probably rarely left this neighborhood. Common degenerate types, that was to be expected pretty much anywhere in this town, but especially in a place where items could be put up and sold right away.

There was a little cafe off to the side called Brew & Chew, with metal gates that slid surrounding it, emphasizing its separation from the main activity here, and a bar with a long row of tables populated with drinkers.

Voltaz eyed the ring on his hand. These people wouldn't even understand what it was. No one was even going to realize the power that lurked inside. Its value was going to lie in the gemstone alone. If he were to get an anonymous buyer now, the burden could be whisked away, no longer his problem.

Or, he could spend some more time and effort and get someone who understood what the chip

was. It was so rare and sought after Voltaz couldn't rationalize destroying it, or selling it for cheap, disguised as something else. Especially after pulling the death-defying ordeal of stealing it and escaping from the Spacecruiser Rhinoceros.

He went to the bar. Maybe an altered frame of mind would help influence his choice in the right direction. He got a Monkey Back on tap and went and sat down at the end seat of the long table. The way the place was set up, there was a row of computer terminals with a video display of all the items for sale. People could scroll through the program and bid on them. There was a picture and a description written by the seller. Voltaz considered what he was supposed to write about the Axial Microchip. *Rare sapphire ring with microchip containing crucial keycodes to alien interstellar weapon of mass destruction.* He couldn't tell the truth, but the truth was where the value was.

The auction items themselves were kept behind a gate with staff who guarded and tended to them, granting buyer access to a locked room behind a large wooden door barred with a golden plate. Voltaz could see someone being let into the room, glimpsing the red walls inside.

The building looked spacious from the outside, but inside there was only the cafe, the bar, the lounging area and the terminals. Most of the space was for keeping the merchandise in the storage area behind the gate. There were three arch-shaped windows with a staff member in each one, waiting for something to sell. Some of the more aggressively talkative patrons would go over and converse with them, being a captive audience.

Voltaz finished his beer and went to use one of the terminals. Before he put the ring up for auction, he wanted to peruse what was already there. Furniture, jewelry, guns and ammo, swords and knives, video games, musical instruments, medicinal vials and elixirs. He explored the list and descriptions, getting mildly tempted to buy something. The notion of coming away with something new was a friendlier thought than the gnawing doom growing inside about the sapphire.

He turned his head and saw one of the clerks, a troglodyte-looking man of tall-dwarf height staring at him from within his arched window in the gate, unsmiling with bulbous eyes. A bolt of paranoia struck into the chest of Voltaz. He'd left the trench coat in the car. Wearing his white tuxedo jacket now, he may seem exorbitantly overdressed for this establishment. If people were looking closely enough they could see the undead color of his hand. *Anyone could be a spy or an assassin.* The odds of this ghastly creature watching him being either of those was slim, but the possibility was worth acknowledging. He could be about to call his masters and report Voltaz.

This was getting ridiculous. Voltaz couldn't make up his mind. His moment of weakness - the deliberation with the sapphire, was embarrassing for himself. How could he think of pawning it off for peanuts here after all he went through to get it? It wasn't a good idea. Realistically, the Ochot knew who Voltaz was, whether he had the chip or not when they found him was irrelevant to the fact they would aim to punish him for his crimes.

He snapped back into it then and reminded himself what he had to do this for in the first place. There was a good reason, it wasn't pure greed. He was saving countless lives. This was important. He had fled across the galaxy with this thing. Now he found himself in some waterfront dive trying to decide if he should bail out, but it was too late for that.

He wasn't thinking rationally. Maybe he was traumatized. It wasn't just his life he was worried about, it was Sapphire's too, and everyone in the galaxy who the Ochot might deem a suitable target for the holocaust blast of the Axial Ordinance.

So, he turned to leave, abandoning the idea, having zoned out into some spiral of imagination, weighing the options, forgiving himself for the misgivings he was having. This was real life, not some old spy movie with a cool, infallible hero. In real life people weren't perfect, they had feelings and doubts.

Voltaz turned around and the short man was standing there in front of him.

“Can I help you?” The man said.

“I’m just browsing, thanks,” Voltaz said. The man looked at Voltaz’s ring. It shone with iridescence at the flash of attention.

“That’s a very nice ring.”

An unsettling pang affected Voltaz.

“It is. I was thinking of selling it.”

“Well, you’ve come to the right place,” the man said, “I’m Weznil. Pleased to meet you, mister?”

“Sampson. Bill Sampson.”

“Mr. Sampson. Let me know if there’s anything I can assist you with.”

“Weznil, this ring is worth much more than it looks like.”

“Really? Why is that?”

“It’s very special. See this inside?” Voltaz held up the sapphire towards Weznil’s face so he could inspect it. Weznil took a monocle out of his plaid vest pocket and peered at the jewel, squinting the other eye. He scratched his bald head between the tufts of white hair puffing out from either side. There was no way Weznil could not notice the grim color of Voltaz’s hand, and the stitches around his wrist.

“There’s a computer chip inside.”

“There is. The chip is far more important than the sapphire, so I can’t sell it as just a plain sapphire ring.”

“Indubitably. May I ask what it does?” Weznil said, “perhaps I could advise you on the best course with which to sell it, if I knew.”

Voltaz’s intuition told him Weznil really was just an auction house employee, that his offer was out of genuine desire to be of assistance.

“It’s a very important component of a powerful machine in space.”

“I see. I happen to know of some eclectic collectors of such items,” Weznil said.

“Do you now? That’s exactly what I’m looking for. I went to a great deal of trouble to acquire this piece. It would be a shame to let it go to an undeserving buyer.”

“A shame indeed. I understand completely, Mr. Sampson.”

“Can you contact him now?” Voltaz said.

“Now, sir? Certainly not. But I could leave him a message for later, if it pleases you.”

Voltaz was thinking this over, stroking his shaven chin with his thumb and forefinger, looking off to the side. Focus was necessary.

“Alright. I’d appreciate it if you’d let him know. Tell him there’s a potential to own a rare treasure from the far reaches of the galaxy.” Voltaz said.

“An enticing offer for such a man as this! Hold on just one moment and I’ll get a form for you to fill out.”

“A form? I think I should be going.”

“Well, how am I supposed to contact you with the response? It’s a simple form, sir. It will only take a minute.”

“Alright then, that sounds fine.”

Weznil hobbled off back to his station in the archway window, entering by side door and appearing there, then ducked beneath, presumably to fetch the form. Voltaz stood waiting, a voyeur watching the other people. Weznil returned with a sheet of paper and a sharpie. He handed them both to Voltaz. The sapphire shimmered with a rainbow shine when he took the pen. Weznil noticed this and gave Voltaz an eye-contact look of understanding. The sapphire really was special. Voltaz filled out his name as *Bill Sampson*, and his phone number, skipping the e-mail address and just writing a quick X

there instead. He handed the paper and pen back.

“Thank you,” Weznil said.

“Thanks. I have to be on my way now. I’ll look forward to hearing from this eclectic collector. Who is he?”

“His name’s William Knight. He’s a wealthy entrepreneur. He doesn’t come down here himself very often, but he has personally asked me to inform him of any interesting treasures that appear.” Weznil thought for a moment, “would it be more appropriate to keep the sapphire here? In the vault? It would be quite safe. You can trust me. It’s an official auction house and no one with access here would dare touch the thing, I assure you. That way if Mr. Knight or anyone else should show interest, a purchase could be made without troubling you to return or have any further meeting arrangements, Mr. Sampson. Direct deposit will be sent to you, minus my percentage.”

“How much would that be?”

“We can discuss that when necessary. It would be quite fair, of course.”

Voltaz’s immediate reaction was that of total rejection. Then he paused his thought pattern from the automatic revulsion at the notion and chose to consider the idea. Something about Weznil, upon meeting him, seemed trustworthy. Despite his unwieldy appearance, he likely wasn’t lying. Voltaz would be able to tell. If he dropped the burden here, he could make a new plan, escape this town, this planet. Maybe he could convince Sapphire to come. She wasn’t akin to space travel, and she had her job. That could be a fantasy too far fetched to realize. What did he have to offer Sapphire that was surely better than the life she had made for herself here? She didn’t even know fully who he was, or what he was guilty of. However, since the Pizza Palace disaster, she had her definite suspicions. How could she ignore something like that? Even a simpleton wasn’t that dense. His deceit was barely lurking under the surface now, and it would be putting her in danger to bring her with him. But he couldn’t bear to leave her. Hypothetically, if Mr. Knight did buy the sapphire, Voltaz would get a major boost in funds. He could disappear into space and make a new life for himself. This time he would take extreme precautions and put in the necessary effort to make sure no one would find him. The Ochot would have more trouble with the trail on the chip than too, lost in the flux of the auction house business, hiding in the crypts of this building and eventually whisked off to an anonymous safehouse elsewhere. That would solve his problem.

Voltaz slipped the ring off his finger, catching Weznil’s attention before they parted ways.

“I’m inclined to trust you,” Voltaz said and held out the ring. This seemed like a viable place to store it for now. He could always come back and retrieve it later if he changed his mind. Not having it on him would be beneficial if he was killed by an assassin. At least this way it wouldn’t fall back into the hands of the Ochot, and it would be available for someone to buy in the meantime. Mostly he was just sick of the thing. It felt like wearing a heavy nugget of evil.

“Splendid! I’m flattered my personality is a trusted one. But as I say, I am a professional man, Mr. Sampson, and your treasure will be kept quite safe with me in the vault,” Weznil said.

“Perfect.”

They exchanged farewells and Voltaz left, back to the Oracle. He got in, engaged and drove out of the parking lot, turned onto West Bayside and drove across the bridge, in the opposite direction of his room. He felt flushed with an exhilarated feeling, like he had narrowly escaped a close call, again. Now there was more thinking to be done. Thinking that required decisive action within a short time frame. It was a relief to be not completely rid of the thing, but separated physically from it. That was a step in the right direction at least. Idleness was dangerous, and he had been conflicted with the decision for awhile now. The issue was being addressed.

Voltaz felt Weznil was exactly what he said he was. He couldn’t detect any hint of deception in his body language or eyes. Weznil was a man simply doing his job. One he actually cared about. Of

course the percentage he would earn was a reasonable incentive. That was his current judgement of the situation. Whether it was correct or not would remain to be seen.