

Prologue  
Wayfaring Stranger

She stands alone in the road. A dark silhouette on the dark asphalt in the bluish haze of the dawn. All around her the bleached salt flats go on to forever, and above her the last of the stars fade in the coming daylight. Out here there is nothing but the road and the vastness of the desert and the song the wind makes when it has grown tired from its journey.

For hours she waits. She knows the plan and she will wait as long as she must. Over and over she hums to herself an old folk song, and the wind seems to sing it with her.

*I'm only going over Jordan I'm only going over home*

Peace is broken. Sudden and vicious. A starliner breaks the atmosphere above and the roar of the engines is beautiful, monstrous. Brutal and divine. It commands the wind. Controls and consumes. The ship passes over her and it leaves behind a fading trail of fire, bisecting the sky. Then it is gone from her sight. Bound for some other place on this foreign world.

*I know dark clouds gon' gather 'round me I know my way is rough and steep*

Silence, and then a different roar. Now the truck is coming. She hears it a long time before she sees it, the growing spot of grey on the horizon.

*I'm going there to meet my savior to sing his praise forever more*

As the armored truck approaches she raises her hands and waves them in distress. It slows down in front of her and rolls to a stop. The truck is unmarked white. Bellerophon license plates.

The wind blows between them and for several moments they are a tableau. Then, her partners stand up in the salt flats. Seconds earlier they had been invisible in white desert sniper suits. Each of them holds an RPG loaded with a concussion round. The woman in the road smiles. The men in the truck don't know it yet but they have already lost. They lost the moment they hit the brakes. She reaches into her pocket and retrieves a pair of earmuffs and puts them on. And her companions fire.

1.

Until you're Not

Left foot right foot one and then the other. Crazy-Eyes limped through the dampness and the dirty yellow light of the service tunnel under the central Bellerophon municipal train station. The blood trail from her leg was a surrealist painting across the white tiles of the floor. Out the windows Bellerophon's dusky cityscape was hazy gray and cold. She hadn't seen whose bullet clipped her but it didn't much matter. She was going to make them all pay once she got right. If she got right.

She was dying and she knew it. Just walk and breathe and concentrate on that. Reach the port. The Koestler-9 combat shotgun was empty but for some reason she'd kept it. Use the barrel as a walking stick. Keep going. Stop shaking. Take stock. Broken bone in her hand though she couldn't remember why. At least two cracked ribs but that wasn't what would do her. Her left pant leg was a darker color from just below the bullet wound and her boot made a wet squelch noise with every step.

Cardenas and Marquette were dead but Crazy-Eyes had no time to feel anything about that unless she wanted to join them. She thought: it was greed got us here and nothing else. This was always the way it went and she knew it but she let it happen. She knew what Saul would say: not many crooks got hair white as mine girl. At some point we get stupid and risk it all for the jackpot. We forget that pennies add up to dollars. Stay small and stay alive. You're always bulletproof until you're not. For the love of all things good she wished she could stop shaking. She wanted to stop moving but if she did she'd be room temperature before long. Reach the metro port. One foot and then the other. Murchison must know she had gone down into the tunnels. He would send someone and they would find her soon and then she'd be finished.

But no one found her and she made it to the service tunnel's street access. She slung the shotgun back over her shoulder and turned the large wheel on the bulkhead and slowly pulled the door open. She stepped out into an alley between two skyscrapers and the cold air hit her in a wave. Everywhere trash and graffiti. She shut the door behind her and slumped against it. It was the mid-evening rush hour and the streets on either side of the alley were bustling with cars and pedestrians and street vendors.

Crazy-Eyes tossed the shotgun into a dumpster and staggered out into the night. *Get off the streets.* The sky above the city was choked with personal vehicles and meka drones. The cars followed the invisible light-road paths through the air but the mekas soared like birds wherever they pleased. In flight they looked like giant mechanical five-pointed starfish gliding on air currents but on the ground they moved like a three-legged spider with two heads, about the size of a small car. It was possible that some of them had been sent for her but she doubted it. Still too soon.

Traffic was moving at a decent clip. She stepped out in front of a luxury sports car and the driver smashed the brakes. She drew her stub-nose tranquilizer from her boot as she stepped around to the window. The driver was a businessman. Overweight middle-aged taxpayer. Concern for the blood- and mud-spattered young woman who stepped in front of his car. "Do you need-" was all he got out. Crazy-Eyes leaned on his horn to cover the sound of the shot. She fired the dart into his chest and he was asleep in two breaths.

She shoved him over to the passenger seat and forced herself not to yell from the pain of it. Then she picked up his hand and placed it on the fingerprint identifier for the ignition and the car roared back to life. She set out across Bellerophon's highways as the red Eridani sun was falling behind the too-near horizon. She was still bleeding too much but she thought she might make it now that she was sitting down. The engine was quiet as engines went, but it screamed as Crazy-Eyes pushed the accelerator to the floor and wove through the traffic before her. She was risking catching meka attention but if she bled out it wouldn't matter.

The eastern edge of the city came quickly into view and the car streaked out across the Xanthos Bridge. She passed the great statue of the Greek hero Bellerophon standing sentry on the shore between the Knightsbridge and the Xanthos, which ran parallel for a while on their route to the nearby islands. Eridan was a relatively small planet, so she'd caught back up with the sun and in the distance she saw the energy nets shining red-silver in the dusk. The ocean waves shimmered with light from the city domes on the sea floor and the flying sky-cities blocked out most of the stars.

Out among the domes and the sky-cities the mekas probably couldn't find her in the background radio noise, even if they were looking. So she punched a number into the car's dash-com and waited. She had made sure to steal an expensive car for two reasons - it was fast and would get her to the metro port before she became the object of a manhunt, and such vehicles were likely to have access to an encrypted channel, which turned out to be correct.

"Parker, Christmas," the car's onboard computer spoke in a neutral voice.

Atusa Navarro picked up seconds later. "Navarro."

"Tusa."

"Eyes?" Navarro never sounded worried but she did now. "Where are you?"

"Cardenas and Marquette are—" Crazy-Eyes' voice caught and she couldn't finish. "We were set up."

"What? What happened?"

"We showed up to make the trade and they laid into us," Crazy-Eyes said. "Murchison's people. That son of a—"

"You still got our package?"

Crazy-Eyes shook her head but then remembered Navarro couldn't see her. "Cardenas had it," she said. "But I'll get it back."

"Did Lupe have time to plant the tracker?"

"I think so." Crazy-Eyes swore loudly as a yellow sports car changed lanes in front of her. She shifted to the lane it had just vacated and sped around it.

"Eyes, calm down. Tell me where to pick you up."

"Find me a doctor."

Silence for about a minute. "Hassan Chenjeri," Navarro said. "He's in the Bellerophon metro. We've used him. Sending you his location."

"I want all the contacts for the Bellerophon job," said Crazy-Eyes. "I know it's an on-planet corporation owned that armored truck. They bought Murchison and flipped him. He went double-agent; that's the only way this makes sense. I want the CFO, the stockholders. I want the janitors, Tusa. Every last one, you understand me?"

"Eyes, these aren't small-timers," Navarro said. "Just get off planet and we'll deal with this."

"Tusa."

Navarro sighed. "I'll try," she said.

“Can you get ahold of Eddie?”

“I’ll try. Be in touch.”

Crazy-Eyes exited the freeway and pulled into the parking garage of the Bellerophon metro station, the convergence point for all public transit from elsewhere on the planet Eridan. She found a space inside and parked, and then she positioned the unconscious man back in the driver’s seat. She dropped a small gas canister in the backseat and turned her face away and drew her sidearm pistol and put one bullet in the car’s onboard computer. Then she holstered her sidearm and locked the doors and limped off into the bustling steel labyrinth of the port.

Family Business

*The girl was born on one of the frontier mining planets where unwanted infants found their way most often into mass graves. Her mother was a prostitute and her father an alcoholic miner who came to occupy his own grave not much later. This was a common enough occurrence but the uncommon part was that the girl lived. A small-time crook called Saul Parker purchased her from the mother for reasons even he couldn't explain at the time. He named the girl Christmas because that was the day on which they met.*

*Christmas Parker acquired the nickname Crazy-Eyes when she was twelve and already three years into learning her father's business. She began seeing hallucinations and it turned out she had an incurable eye condition, one of those with five syllables of Latin that add up to you're fucked. Her eyes couldn't sort light properly and her brain turned the jumble into things other than what they were. Shadows and demons. Thankfully for her she had been adopted by the right crook for Saul Parker was one of those men who collected favors and knew a guy for almost anything. The goggles that Parker's man made for her were of a brass color and made her look like a grounded pilot. But they let her eyes make sense of things so she never took them off. Saul said most of the best crooks had nicknames: Pretty Boy Floyd and Baby Face Nelson. Crazy-Eyes Parker. The goggles became her uniform. Her calling card in the underworld.*

*Together they took scores and ran jobs in the outskirts of the coalition systems at the edge of things where it was still possible to make a living. The coalition planets became heavily fortified and gated such that it was hard to sneeze without agents wiping your nose for you. They kept to the frontier planets where security was shakier. They stayed out of cybercrime and they kept ahead of the law right up until Saul Parker took ill and passed.*

*It might have been a blessing that he died when he did. Saul Parker wasn't changing his ways but the underworld was changing around him. She could see it but he couldn't or wouldn't. In a strange way she was glad he didn't live to see the job leave him behind. It was the close of his generation and it was a more proper ending than a shootout or mind-prison. Saul was right to avoid cybertheft and he was right to keep his scores small but he was indiscriminate – he'd steal from the coalition or individuals or corporations or local governments, whatever presented itself.*

*But the political leadership in the coalition was dedicating more and more resources to the war on crime. As thieving proliferated the blowback grew in parallel, culminating in the*

*election of Chancellor Peter Bramhall, who ran on a platform of destroying people like Saul Parker.*

*Crazy-Eyes guessed that Bramhall didn't really care that much about stopping crime, but rather about appearing to the citizenry as if they cared. So she began targeting only the coalition's enemies – independence movements on planets where the coalition presence was relatively weak. Her crew would steal political secrets and plans and weapons and funnel them to coalition anti-terror agents in exchange for cash through a dummy front corporation set up by Atusa Navarro. Under the name Operation Peacemaker, the Galactic Coalition set up a secret fund to pay off people like her, agents-in-all-but-name whose work weakened terrorist groups. They weren't legal but they were tolerated. If Saul Parker was a blood-sucking tick on the coalition's back, Christmas Parker was a blood donor.*

*And for a long time it worked. The problem was that certain enemies had long memories and word got around. The scores necessarily grew in scope if all you were targeting was planetary independence movements. That they were often stunningly well-funded was a double-edged sword: you could steal a lot before they really felt the pain of it but eventually one of them would have the wherewithal to catch up to you. That was all Crazy-Eyes could figure about the events in the Bellerophon train station that night. Snatching the package off that armored car had been nothing at all. Marquette had even remarked "that was too goddamned easy" but she didn't think anything of it. That was the first thing that had made her suspicious. The second was that Navarro's coalition contact had refused to make the trade the usual way and insisted they do it that night, face to face. She guessed the funders of some Eridani independence movement had somehow gotten wind that they were coming and bought off Murchison. Murchison would get his; that was priority number one. The son of a bitch had taken out Marquette and Cardenas. Good help wasn't easy to find in this job, and she'd liked them both besides.*

*At least her next moves were clear. Find out who she'd stolen that package from and take care of him. Find this Murchison and take care of him, if he was involved. Maybe along the way figure out what was in that goddamned package.*

### 3.

## Pyrene

Horace Murchison awoke as the transport ship carrying him to Pyrene touched down on the moon's ice-covered surface. It was silent but the sudden change in velocity was noticeable and nauseating. Murchison had never been this far out in the Eridani system and he didn't want to be there now, but he still had bosses and when they broke their silence it was never done frivolously. When the founders of your feast tell you to meet them, well then that was what you did, regardless of your annoyance with the locale.

Out the windows the view was at once majestic and depressing. From space Pyrene was a smudgy iceball against the darkness but at the surface it had a desolate beauty. Canyons snaked away across the moonscape in every direction, miles deep and coated in frozen methane and rock the color of steel. Pyrene's parent planet, the blue gas giant Asopus, was colossal in the starry darkness, its planetary rings sweeping magnificently through the Pyreni sky. Murchison struggled against the visual impression that they were falling into it and its massive gravity well. Without the protection of the ship or the port they'd have been dead in minutes from the planet's intense radiation, by far the most powerful energy source this distant from the Eridani sun. Signs of civilization were few and scattered, just a smattering of dome-shaped reflectors collecting Asopus' radiation and powering the underground city. It was almost difficult for Murchison to believe that the far side of Pyrene housed the Eridani system's superluminal port. But the Klein-Gordon ships of the superluminal network required an extraordinary amount of energy, and Pyrene was tidally locked with Asopus, so the energy panels never turned from their source. They would power the superluminal port for millions of years - at a rate of one faster-than-light trip every four days - if left undisturbed.

The great dome that had opened on their approach now closed silently, slowly over them, and immediately afterward the ship lights flared to life. All around him fellow travellers stood and retrieved their belongings and shuffled out of the ship. Murchison retrieved his briefcase from the overhead compartment and put on his grey bowler hat and spectacles. He then joined the throng exiting the transport ship and moved into the flow of foot traffic in Pyrene City's spaceport, a vast interconnected network of brightly-lit spacious underground tunnels. It was part transportation hub, part giant shopping mall - hotels and restaurants and shops selling any conceivable

product useful to a traveler lined the sides of every tunnel. In spite of the elbow-to-elbow crush of humanity and the din of voices all around him Murchison was unconcerned about pickpockets reaching for his wallet or his sidearm, a stub-nose holstered at his shoulder. The port and the city were clean and well-maintained and crime was rare, unsurprising in a system that had been designated *alpha* for centuries. Those systems the Coalition designated as 'frontier' typically held the most active populations of gangsters and petty malcontents vying for control. Planets like Eridan had their share, but not enough to warrant the presence of Horace Murchison.

Or so the official reports had claimed at least. Murchison had only been here for a few weeks himself, waiting on the arrival his orders from the central office. That was entirely normal - the vagaries of *secretive* superluminal communication occasionally entailed a substantial lag between learning the location of a job and receiving the job's details. It was not at all unheard of for a Governor's office to under-report crime and violence statistics, as the incentives of consistently maintaining a stable colony were many. Upgrading a planetary system from frontier/*gamma* to TFCA (Targeted For Coalition Assimilation, or *Beta*) was an easy way for a Governor to catch the Coalition's attention. Upgrading a system from frontier to UCC (Under Coalition Control, or *Alpha*) would make a Governor's career.

Murchison had visited dozens of systems where the disparity between officially reported stability benchmarks and on-the-ground reality was obvious and apparent from the moment he stepped out of the port. In fact that was most often the case, given Murchison's profession. Independence movements didn't generally gain traction on peaceful safe worlds.

It was somebody else's job to ascertain their validity beyond doubt, but near as Murchison could tell the reports about Eridan's stability were absolutely accurate. It didn't make sense, then, why he'd be sent here. Freedom fighters did not tend to be secretive people. If there was an independence movement in Eridan he'd almost certainly have heard of it. The pattern was as ancient as it was effective - make a splashy show of violence against a symbolically relevant target to catch the attention of your 'oppressor,' publicly take credit on the people's behalf, and then proceed to make it prohibitively expensive for the coalition to maintain its control. That the strategy had never worked in the Galactic Coalition's five-century existence did not dissuade the occasional political or business faction from trying.

He found the Halifax Pub at the corner of a four-way tunnel intersection situated between a movie theatre and a coffee shop. In contrast to the cold metal sterility of the

port the Halifax was built for nostalgia – everything dark wood, candles on the tables and dark green carpets like an old casino. One entire wall was devoted to television screens, which showed sports and stock market and weather reports. Though by Pyrene’s clock it was technically morning the Pub was near capacity. His meeting would demand privacy but that wouldn’t be an issue. The tables were spaced far enough apart that every conversation was part of everyone else’s background and jazz played over the dining room, further reducing the odds anyone could listen.

Murchison removed his bowler hat as he sat and ordered a martini. He was prepared to wait a while but he didn’t wait long. “Mr. Murchison?” He turned to find a young woman in a green business suit carrying a briefcase. Everything about her was perfectly in place, from tight black braid to shined black heels. Her earrings were striking, eye-catching: pearls with sunbursts painted over them. She looked vaguely middle-eastern to him, appealing in a naïve way. “Thank you for coming,” she said as she shook his hand and sat.

“The pleasure’s mine,” said Murchison. She smiled and retrieved a cigarette case from her pocket and offered him one. He declined and she lit one for herself. “I’d never seen the Eridan system before now,” he said. “I’ll confess I’m hard-pressed to see why my services would be necessary here.”

She took a long drag off the cigarette and exhaled slowly before replying. “And why would that be?”

Murchison felt a sudden pang of disquiet. He couldn’t put his finger on what it was precisely. In spite of the feeling he smiled. He wouldn’t be pushed off his game by this pretty little thing. “Well,” he said. “We’d best dispense first with the bureaucratic necessities. I assume you’ve your credentials on your person.” She only looked at him impassively. “Tell me,” he continued. “Which bureau are you with?”

“Mr. Murchison, I’m not with the Galactic Coalition.”

Murchison laughed silently. He hadn’t expected her to come out and say it so easily. “Yet you knew the authorization codes necessary to bring me here,” he said. “That must have been expensive.”

“I wouldn’t know,” she said. “Not my department.”

“Well whatever you people spent, it was wasted,” said Murchison. He picked up his bowler hat and stood and nodded to her. “Good day, miss.”

He took one step and she said: "Sit down, Horace." The immediate change of quality in her voice - from deferential and polite to commanding and authoritarian - surprised him such that he stopped and looked at her indignantly. She looked up at him and smiled and the veneer of courteous naivety had returned. "Please," she said and she gestured to his chair. "If you'll only hear me out."

Murchison sat, mostly out of curiosity. "What is it you do precisely, Mr. Murchison?"

"I think you already know."

She stubbed out her cigarette and lit another. "You... are an agent of the Coalition's anti-terrorism office," she said. "Charged with seeing through the protocols of 'Operation Peacemaker.' Specifically you contract criminals on the government's behalf, to disrupt the efforts of those who might dispute Coalition authority."

"That's right."

"On behalf of my employer... I would like to retain your services."

Murchison sipped his martini. He shook his head. "I don't freelance."

"After this job, you won't be needing the Coalition anymore."

"Perhaps I was unclear," he said. "Having this conversation could earn me time in mind-prison. My employers do not treat disloyalty with high regard."

She scowled and stared thoughtfully at the televisions a moment before looking back into his eyes. "Mr. Murchison, do you feel you're compensated adequately for your talents? That you're... paid your due, given your considerable efforts? Given the personal risk involved? If it ever became generally known that the Coalition was hiring criminals to steal from and in some instances assassinate its own citizens, who do you think would fall? The Chancellor? Anyone in the cabinet? Or would it be the foot soldiers, men like yourself? The pigs in the government are getting you at a slave's bargain, aren't they? Everyone is making out in this arrangement, except you. Your network of criminals will have cover: they'll vanish into the underbelly if your scheme is ever found out. The pig politicians have cover: they'll deny everything and pin it on you and the other agents. Where's your cover? What's your plan, if your existence ever becomes public?"