

Chapter One

Rumil's eyes scanned across her surroundings once again. A wall of grid panels stood vertically on each side of her, extending about three Tacks above her head, and like the identical floor beneath her, their lines slowly came together against a horizon that seemed to go off into nowhere. The lines dignifying the grid frame shone with a pale yellow light against the uniform purple of the panels. Digital characters on each vertical panel around her bore the name "Archives: 3300-3310."

Rumil frowned disdainfully. "Wrong century," she muttered, and reached down into her waist pack. She pulled out a small device about the size of her fist and held it in front of her face. The device barely fit into her palm, and it was mostly of a black analog display with small white crosshairs marked in the center, signifying her location. The screen was then rimmed with a light gray plastic border, the top left corner being where the model code *would* have been... had it not been rubbed off with a file. The internal programming of the device had also been wiped, to prevent anyone from locating its source of manufacture or buyer.

So far, the screen remained completely black, meaning that the security programs had not detected her yet. "Well, that will probably change rather quickly," Rumil noted, and then turned towards another grid corridor that led to earlier dates in the archive.

Once she found the decade she desired, she encountered a heavy security lock that resembled a large green metal door with a keypad on the left side. Dutifully tapping in the pass code she had acquired, she awaited clearance or rejection. From an immaterial speaker system, she heard a computer-generated female voice declare, "The data contained in this module is restricted to Level Ten clearance. Your current clearance is Eight. Access to this module is denied."

"So... my little friend wasn't as high up the chain of command as he claimed." Rumil sighed softly to herself. She had guessed that any man who so willingly gave up his clearance codes after a few drinks wasn't terribly high up the ranks, but she had taken the chance anyway.

Rumil frowned angrily in spite of her own reasoning and began to think about ways to work around the firewall, when her waist pack suddenly vibrated. She didn't need to examine the detector to know what was happening; she already knew, but she pulled the analog screen out of the pack just to confirm her fears.

Four white lights were beeping on the edge of the display, but she knew that the security sentries would close the distance rapidly. With a dejected sigh, Rumil reached up to her right ear, and tapped on the space above it with her index finger twice.

The lighted grid frame disappeared abruptly, and was quickly replaced with a more detailed scene, although in some ways it was just as barren. The small tavern had likely been abandoned for years, for now only cobwebs and dust were its regular patrons. Sliding the red-tinted visor of her virtual display helmet into the slot on the temple, she examined her surroundings a little more closely.

The small bar counter ran from the middle of the west wall about two Tacks and a half to the north, then ran to the east, stopping just shy of the far wall to allow a vertical flap that opened for entry behind the bar. Even through the dust, the counter was a shade of red that would have looked absolutely gorgeous if given a tenth-cycle's cleaning and polishing. Behind her, a large shelving unit, stripped bare of any contents, filled almost the entire space behind the counter.

The rest of the room was occupied with twelve equally elaborate oak tables, spaced evenly throughout, carved and polished in the same beautiful red hue. On each table were four

wooden chairs placed upside down on the tabletops, their backs hanging down over the edge. Five of the chairs had fallen from their perches: two from the northwest corner table, one from the southeast, and two from the center table that had been smashed in the fall.

The walls were made of a normally drab fiberwall that was being used in all buildings for the last century, but in this establishment, it had been molded and decorated to resemble white granite, and Rumil had to admit it did the job impressively. The door, made of a harder fiberwall composite, had been formed and painted to mimic a thick wooden door, but without the weight and bulk. The door had separated from its lower hinges, but still was able to close, allowing Rumil some desperately needed solitude. Hacking was a delicate and largely illegal business, best not done in a public place with many eyes about.

All in all, the bar looked like it should have been in an antique store, rather than wasting away, abandoned to be claimed by inactivity. Such robust pieces of woodwork and skill didn't deserve such a lackluster fate.

Nonetheless, said fate was precisely the reason she chose it for her hiding place. The only people who came around here were historical renovators, or something of the sort, and they had absolutely no reason to come around in the depth of night.

Rumil tugged the light helmet off her sandy blonde hair, quickly swishing her short shoulder-length mane a few times to free the follicles from where they had plastered to her cranium. After plucking her interface gloves off, finger by finger, she disassembled the four interconnecting plates of the helmet, and put all the items into the satchel hanging off her right shoulder. Once more, she appraised the abandoned bar, and a slight smile worked on her face.

"Maybe after I get my last little paycheck... I might just buy a place just like this. Settle down, run a quaint little bar, hire some nice dancers..." Rumil mused, then chuckled in spite of herself. The concept of staying in one place wasn't one that Rumil felt she could ever enjoy. Even after the conclusion of her hacking career, she'd have to stay quiet for twenty staryears or so, while the statute of limitations on her crimes had expired.

She slid off the small, red leather barstool she had been sitting on, and extended her two-Tack frame to her toes, working the kinks out of her spine, and rolled her head from one side to the other three times. She always got unusually tense when she was hacking, and she doubted it was any good for her posture. Striding to the door on her thin frame, she grabbed the handle, and started to pull the wounded doorway open. Stopping, she fondly regarded the lonely bar one last time, then slipped out the entry silently and gently closed the door.

Looking up at the blackened alleyway she now found herself in, it was like stepping through a portal three hundred staryears into the future, in which she came from the full, colorful tavern of yesteryear into the monotonous deep gray present. The buildings across the alley loomed upward several stories, tall banal blocks shrouded in the darkness of the alley, the occasional speck of lighted windows breaking their cold exteriors.

Despite the futuristic design, the only light being provided was from the moon of Talos, hanging in orbit, and even that light was a dim one indeed thanks to heavy cloud cover. As it was, Rumil couldn't see the tops of the drab buildings flanking the alley, and didn't even realize that she was not alone in the alley until she turned right into him.

The stranger seemed to be clad in something hard, but he was not heavy, as she could feel him stagger backward with the collision. He didn't fall on his bottom like she did, however. She landed hard next to a trash canister that – judging from the smell – had not been left alone quite as long as the bar next to it. The sudden movement set off the motion lights across the alleyway, and it cast the narrow passage in a soft white luminescence, giving Rumil a better view of her

new companion in the alley.

The first thing she noticed was that he wouldn't be much taller than herself, if even that, and his frame had the appearance of a young boy.

Her eyes came to rest on the hard carbide breastplate, molded to fit the exact shape of its wielder, and colored a deep brown. Abdomen and chest muscles were clearly defined in the alloyed material thanks to the newfound light. The shoulder plates were hinged to the breastplate, allowing free movement of the man's shoulders. Cylindrical carbide wrapped around his toned upper arms. Below the elbows, his forearms were covered by gauntlets noticeably bulkier than the rest of his armor, with gloves of metallic mesh over his hands and a flattened plate attached to his right gauntlet as a small shield.

His legs were like the rest of his body – thin but well toned, covered in shells of carbide, down to the mesh boots that gave way to black soles at the bottom of his feet. Where she could see underneath the brown alloy plating, a lighter brown tight-fitting bodysuit clung to the man's frame.

Hoping to get a look at the stranger's face, she was foiled by the tinted visor that extended from the temple of his brown helmet to his chin piece. However, she didn't need a face to identify him. Blazoned in small gold letters upon a black bar on left side of his breastplate were the words, "Honore, Timothy." Seeing that name, she glanced back down to the belt around his waist, and confirmed her worst fears when she took note of the startling lack of equipment. Where a common soldier would normally hang a bevy of weapons and field equipment, only a small plasma pistol and sword took residence among some small belt pouches, and she was pretty certain why.

Only the ignorant didn't know the Honore family and the history it had. The man in front of her was an Erani. More importantly, he was a member of the Solarian army. And *most* importantly, he was a Solarian Knight.

Despite their smallish stature, the Erani were not a people to take lightly. They were swift of foot and light in their movements, and the military training their soldiers took honed those natural gifts to a keen skill. It was very likely that the Knight in question had been following her since she left her hotel room, and she had never noticed, despite his armor.

Of their kind, of whom none were to be trifled with, the Solarian Knights were indeed the utmost of the lot. They were the ones in which the blood of the Se-Lan race ran the strongest, and it manifested itself in the ability to manipulate the universe around them with but a thought. A Solarian Knight could ignite a bonfire with no kindling or devices, heal in mere seconds wounds that would have bled for hours, and even warp the boundaries of space and time, moving the span of TackMets in the blink of an eye.

Rumil did not consider this good news. She must have *considerably* upset someone on the Solarian capital of Centris with her hacking, and that the Solarians were now starting to get serious. Judging from the aggressive posture of the Knight standing in front of her, it appeared that his orders did *not* necessarily include taking her alive...

In her panic, she almost didn't hear the Knight speak. His voice was soft, but firm, and betrayed no emotion. "Rumil Bonamede, I suggest you come with me. Let's not make this any more irritating than it's already been."

"How..." she began, unable to finish her thought.

Timothy finished it for her. "Did I find you? We've been watching your transactions since you logged into our database. Do you *honestly* think that someone would divulge their security clearance after a couple gicanos?"

Rumil was somewhat disappointed that she hadn't anticipated the ploy her adversary had used. She had been under the impression that she had ordered something stronger. Gathering her wits, she realized the sort of planning such a deception would take. They must have been following her since her last hacking raid... plotted out where she'd go next, set up the scene in the bar she went to, paid off the bartender... and she eventually reached one conclusion. "Sounds like you've been planning this sting for some time."

"Since I was assigned to lead the case," Timothy admitted.

"How long has *that* been I wonder...?" she said, letting her voice drop off, trying to buy some time to think up a plan.

It appeared that the Knight saw the ruse for just what it was. "I do not need to answer *any* question of yours." Reaching down, he grabbed her shoulder, and pulled her to her feet. His grasp was firm, but not painful, until he took her by the wrist. Even then, Rumil admitted that her pain had nothing to do with the Knight. She bit down a yelp, then had to sink her teeth into her lower lip when her arms were pulled behind her back and cold restraints clapped over her wrists.

He leaned in next to her ear, and whispered softly, "I don't *want* to get rough with you, but if you give me a hard time, I *will* make your life *very* uncomfortable. Now move."

She dragged her feet initially, but the uninviting feel of a hypersteel blade against her back convinced her to pick up her pace. Even now her eyes scanned about, looking for any possible avenue to escape her current predicament.

To her immense luck, it appeared that such an avenue came to *her*. As they were about to enter the main road, another voice from the alley playfully called to them, "Pardon me, dear sir, but just where do you think you are going with yon hacker?"

Timothy whirled about, and Rumil had no choice but to follow. Her eyes then caught sight of the speaker as he emerged into the lighted part of the alley, and then she couldn't help but smile.

The second man was clad in a similar fashion as her current holder, but his armoring was colored a royal blue. His attire and lack of equipment suggested that he too was a Knight of his respective faction. Gold letters similar to the ones on Timothy's breastplate read, "Feroz, Justin." While she couldn't see Timothy's face through his visor, she didn't doubt for one second that he was absolutely glaring.

If he was, his voice didn't show it, as he spoke as plainly as before. "Where I am going should be obvious even to your ignorant kind," Timothy retorted. "Now I suggest that you return to wherever you came from. This is no concern of the Kiros."

"I beg to differ," the blue-armored warrior said somewhat threateningly, and he stepped even closer, his right hand crossing his body, starting to linger over his sword hilt. "The Kiros have quite a stake in delivering this hacker to justice, and I was ordered to bring her in at all costs."

"Your orders are of little concern to me, Kiros," Timothy shot back coldly. "Now I suggest you crawl back into whatever hole you slithered from, unless you wish to be severely hurt."

"I think I'll take my chances. I've wanted to test my skill on someone deserving of it," Justin replied. As with Timothy, Rumil couldn't see through the blue-clad warrior's tinted visor to see if his face revealed confident swagger, or insecure posturing.

With a shrug, Timothy pushed Rumil back against the trash container that she had fallen into when they had first run into each other. "Stay right where you are while I deal with our new

friend. Do *not* move as much as an eyelash, because I'll be watching you."

Timothy then once again turned to face his foe, and Rumil thought that now was a good chance to possibly slink away. However, the moment she moved her left foot, a plasma round ripped through the air with a burning crackle, and sizzled through the fiberwall inches ahead of her nose. Turning back to the fight scene, she saw Timothy's pistol trained on her. Guessing from the angle of the weapon, she decided he wasn't going to fire a second warning shot.

"What did I just say?" Timothy reminded sternly.

Rumil grinned in reply, and said coyly, "I don't think you should be wasting so much attention on me."

In response to that statement, Timothy whirled back to face his opponent, sword swinging upward to deflect the blow from Justin, who slid with the strike, and nimbly rolled back to his feet, his sword again at the ready.

"Attacking a man from behind. That was quite dishonorable of you," Timothy chided. "Not surprising considering the source of the attack though."

Justin huffed, and answered casually, "I knew you would react in time to stop me. If you hadn't, then you wouldn't have been worth the energy I'm about to spend." Then with a slower drawl, he added, "Besides, *someone* had to start us off."

"Right..." Timothy retorted, clearly unconvinced, before closing the gap with a strike of his own. Justin turned aside the blow with a quick swipe, and countered with a low sweep, hoping to get Timothy to jump over the blade. Instead, Timothy stopped the blow with his own weapon, forcing Justin's sword downward, and swung his right arm in a vicious uppercut that probably would have dealt some serious harm to his Kiros counterpart, had Justin not leaned back away from the blow. The Kiros Knight, rolling backward and to his feet, lunged forward as soon as he had regained his balance.

Timothy responded by spinning to his left, and the ensuing thrust caught empty air as Justin flew completely by. Timothy then brought his sword around with a low sweep of his own, and Justin responded by pushing his entire body into the air off his left hand, flipping in a graceful somersault, and landing a Tack away squarely on his feet. The two combatants once again faced each other, taking a couple sidesteps, swords at the ready for the next exchange.

Rumil almost forgot she was trying to get away; the fluidity of the two Erani's combat had nearly lulled her into an awed trance. Shaking herself out of her astonished stupor, she once again started looking about, waiting for her opportunity to make a break.

"I said do not move," Timothy reminded her again, although it did not appear he had taken his eyes off his opponent. "How many times must I remind you?" Finally, he appeared to address Justin, adding, "You *could* keep an eye on her too, since you seem to be so intent on bringing her in yourself."

Justin jerked slightly as if slapped, then shot back casually, "Who says I'm not?" Then, as if to take the attention off the topic, he attacked again. This time his attack was in the mold of a standard fencing strike, thrusting the point directly forward in an attempt to pierce the carbide of his opponent. When Timothy deflected the blow aside, Justin's right hand followed, his palm filling with a glowing orange ball of energy moving towards his opponent's face.

But Timothy had a response even to that, and when Justin released the small ball of psionic flame, it bounced off an invisible barrier that had suddenly popped up between them. The sphere of energy ricocheted upward into the black sky, lighting up the darkness above them as it traveled, and no doubt drawing the attention of the people inside the small lighted windows of the buildings around them.

“Impressive,” Justin said, his voice tinted with a begrudging appreciation. “Not many can construct a psychic mirror that quickly.”

Timothy grunted in response. The unwritten rule between warriors that had kept this solely a martial affair had been violated with Justin’s fireball. Now Timothy figured that every tool in his repertoire was at his disposal. Focusing his energies for less than a demitick, the Solarian then used a quick burst of power to leap several Tacks above Justin, and while airborne, sent a cascade of small blue-white electric bursts down into the narrow alley. However, Justin was not without a defense either, as the bolts struck a similar barrier as the one Timothy constructed, sending the shards of energy screaming in various directions.

Rumil yelped in surprise as one of the whistling white-hot bolts struck the ground a mere Tackem from her left foot, the residual electricity shooting painfully through her foot and ankle. A sudden crack from above drew her attention, and it became apparent that one of the bolts had struck the heavy fiberwall above her, sending large chunks on top of her seated form.

After an agonizing pause, Rumil realized that the falling debris hadn’t killed her. Dropping her hands from her head, she allowed her eyes to adjust to the sudden darkness and appraise her position.

A large slab of the fiberwall rested above her head, one end leaning on the edge of the trash container next to her, the other slanted down to the alley road, and effectively supporting the rest of the collapsed wall from crushing her.

Breathing a sigh of relief, her attention was then drawn to her right, where she saw the lower half of the doorway to the bar. In the sudden collapse of the wall above it, the door had fallen inward, leaving a small crawlspace back into the bar.

Rumil smirked at the sudden change of her fortune. There was a stairway behind the bar counter that led to the next higher floor, and quite likely, another exit. Sliding on her stomach – her arms still bound behind her – she slipped back into the bar. Crawling to her feet as quickly as she could, she crouched underneath the flap leading behind the counter, and rushed for the stairs.

Meanwhile, two Erani Knights dug through the rubble, one quite vocal in his displeasure.

“You are an idiot!” Justin shouted as he frantically pushed chunks of fiberwall and fragmented hypersteel supports aside. “If you’ve killed that hacker...”

“We’d both be off the hook,” Timothy replied flatly, although he was just as frenzied in removing the rubble.

Justin paused to ponder this for a moment, and was jolted when Timothy said with a hint of disgust, “Do you think you could help me move this anytime this staryear?”

A large slab of fiberwall was resting against the trash canister that Rumil had been sitting next to. Justin knelt down, and dug his fingers in between the slab and the ground, but then Timothy paused. He put his left hand under his chin, and said, “Don’t mind that. There’s no point after all... she’s escaped.”

“Just because you can’t feel her life aura, doesn’t mean her body isn’t under here, buffoon,” Justin snorted. In response, Timothy just pointed above Justin’s head, and let the Kiro’s eyes take him to what he was referring to. Above the slab, the top of the doorway behind it was visible. The door obviously had fallen inward in the mayhem, giving a wide-open passage for anyone under the rubble to slide back into the building.

“You have *got* to be kidding me...” Justin sighed. “Well, way to go. You’ve just let our target get away.” He stood up, got face to face with his counterpart, and replied with a menacing hiss, “I’m of half a mind to send you back to Solaria in a casket...”

Justin's rant was interrupted by the sound of approaching sirens, no doubt the peacekeeping force of the city arriving at reports of the mysterious destruction. Justin looked around the alley into the main street, and groaned, "Are you in any particular mood to explain this to the Talos Peacekeepers?" When Timothy didn't reply, Justin turned back to where the Solarian had been standing... to find nothing.

"Sly Solarian bastard..." Justin mused with a sour chuckle. Then gathering his sword, Justin quickly teleported away from the scene, leaving the alleyway empty once again.