

## Chapter Two

His eyes flashed open, and his left hand instinctively shot over to the alarm at the side of his bed, mere demiticks before it began blaring. Sitting up swiftly, Timothy Honore folded back the covers neatly, and turned out of the bed as if he hadn't been in deep REM sleep just moments ago. Pausing for a moment on the bed's edge, he moved his hand rapidly in front of the motion sensor just beside the headboard. The fluorescent lighting module on the center of the ceiling flickered slightly, as if it was somewhat unwilling to rise at the hour Timothy had designated, then fully activated to cast the small suite into light.

The white rough-textured ceiling gave way to fiberwall supports, molded and painted to resemble plywood planks. The carpet was of a cheap sort, woven in a rather gaudy red and gray fiber pattern. Judging from the feel under Timothy's feet, the proprietors of the hotel had not even spared the expense to place a padded layer underneath.

Timothy didn't give much further attention to his surroundings, instead bending over a large luggage pack that was almost a Tack square, and a half-Tack deep. His fingers nimbly plucked the clasps, and the top of the pack jumped open with such force that it nearly sent the whole pack tumbling backward, despite the weight inside. Timothy righted the case quickly, averting said disaster, and began looking for his day's attire.

He first pulled another form-fitting brown body suit from the interior, and slid it over his lean frame. From there, he pulled out three different shades of white shirts, the first long-sleeved and the next two short, before settling on a sleeveless russet leather vest. The Solarian slipped his arms through the armholes, and tugged the fabric over each shoulder, leaving the clasps unhooked, the opening flapping loosely across his taut abdomen. Reaching into the pack again, his eyes appraised four different pant options, finally deciding on long-legged, light brown casual pants. He regarded his mesh armor boots for a brief second then passed them over for black slip-on low heels.

Methodically, he folded each item he passed over and placed them, heaviest items first, into the pack, save for his mesh boots which he slid to the far right corner of the bed. Satisfied that everything was back in its proper place, he moved the three Tacks to the small desk of his one-room inn suite, where his personalized computing unit awaited use. Other suites, much more spacious, had been available, but for costs that Timothy was not comfortable with renting. Besides, he rationalized that this was all he really needed, and that to get anything larger would have been a waste of his funds.

And yet, he reluctantly admitted that he would have liked just a little more room to operate in. As it was, he could barely fit a chair in between the bed and his desk, and as he pulled the folding chair out, he felt the thud of its small aluminum back against the frame of the bed. Sighing, he sat down, leaning his back against the padding, and scooted forward until he was in a proper operating position. He passed his thumb over the lip of his book-sized PCU, flipping the catch that released its three sections and unfolding them to form a single touch-sensitive keypad, with an opaque holographic display appearing just above and behind it.

With a pained groan, the first thing he saw was a daily news headline and a picture of the alley that he and that Kiros, Justin Feroz, had scuffled in the night before. There was no report of any bodies being found, confirming his hypothesis that the hacker Rumil had escaped. His eyes continued to peruse the article before stopping to read one section more closely:

*It is still to be determined what caused the abandoned bar house to partially*

*collapse, but witnesses to the scene reported several flashes of light from the alleyway adjacent to the prospective landmark, as well as sounds of fighting. Peacekeepers have no leads to connect the events prior to the collapse to any person or group, and none have claimed responsibility.*

*Hoef's Grand Tavern had been out of operation for 4 staryears, but the Talos Historical Committee had been in the process of purchasing the lot, and restoring it as a planetary landmark. The Historical Committee has not given any indication that they will proceed with plans to purchase the building.*

Timothy shook his head. The last thing he needed was for the fault of damaging a potential historical landmark to be placed on him. All thanks to that obnoxious Kiros, he had lost his target, and would likely get hit with a nice, big damage assessment. All Timothy could hope for was to find Rumil quickly, and get off the planet without further incident.

Thoughts of the hacker triggered something in the Solarian's memory. In that brief moment that he had been touching her, he had felt a tingle in the back of his head, similar to a slight psionic shock. It baffled him, and allured him at the same time. When he'd been given the case to pursue, he had not thought much of the shapely blonde who looked like she probably would have fit in better at a gentlemen's club than the seedy underworld...

All of a sudden, it struck him. He knew where he had seen the hacker before.

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Through the dimly lit surroundings, Timothy looked down at the small mono-mobile PCU in his hand, but it only confirmed that of which he was already certain. From his position, near the rear of the Sultry Siren Gentlemen's Club, he saw Regis Gallan, with some cosmetic alterations, living the "good life" at the front row of the catwalk. Gallan was cheering heartily at the erotic dancer taking swaying strides off the raised stage, which the Demodian pirate leader turned to jeers as the woman was about to disappear. Recognizing this, she turned around and gave him a suggestive wink, pointing to the back rooms.

Gallan stood with a smug grin and began to work his way to the exit leading to the dancers' private quarters, while the two hulking Ubeks guarding the passage stepped aside in anticipation of Gallan's passing. Timothy started to stand, preparing to follow the pirate leader, when motion on the stage broke his attention.

The club owner, a bulbous, short, balding excuse for an Arcadian, hastily shuffled his portly body as fast as he could, slipping his broadcast comm into his mouth as he did so. By the time Timothy had turned his attention back to the pirate, he had already disappeared through the exit, the bouncers again flanking the exit. Nearly cursing, he sat back down, hoping to get another chance at the pirate when the man had concluded his... business.

The club owner giggled obnoxiously, then said, "Don't worry, gentlemen, Sasha's ridden harder and longer men than *that* sir, and she'll be back at the top of the hour as scheduled. Let's hear it for Sasha once again!"

A round of raucous applause followed, complete with whistles and yells, and the horizontally gifted, vertically challenged Arcadian soaked it up. Timothy grudgingly joined in with his own nonchalant clapping, trying to blend in with the crowd as much as possible, but he was simply unable to immerse himself in the moment like everyone else.

When the din died down sufficiently, the club owner giggled again, and said, “Well, dear sirs, do I have a special treat for you. No one knows her name, and she will only give it to the one man who captures her heart.” He paused in an attempt at suspense, before adding, “Perhaps it will be one of you fine gentlemen out there?”

Timothy scoffed. The upcoming dancer likely had given more than just her name to a great number of patrons of this particular bar, and possibly several others. Predictably, there were some confident affirmatives from the audience, and ignoring them, the owner announced with a hushed voice that rose into a declarative yell, “Here she is... the beautiful... the mysterious... the Beauty of Baramak!”

The long-legged blonde that emerged, clad in navy lingerie and a transparent slip of matching hue, quickly caught Timothy’s eye, but for more than the obvious reasons. He admitted that he was drawn to her ample chest, flaring hips, and smooth curves, but there was something else... something that tingled in the back of his head, a sensation that he should not have felt upon the woman’s entry, due to her obviously Arcadian descent.

The woman’s green eyes scanned the crowd with a playful gleam, and she moved with such perfect balance out on the catwalk that it seemed like she floated out to the front. She slid down smoothly until she was sitting across the edge, and lifted her right leg towards a man in the front row. She said something that Timothy couldn’t hear clearly, even with his naturally superior hearing, and the man leaned forward to remove her high-heeled shoe. She quickly shook her head, and made a quick, sensual biting motion with her teeth.

Catching onto the hint, the club patron leaned forward, took the pointed tip between his front teeth, and slowly slid the heeled shoe off the dancer’s foot. Once removed, she pulled her leg away then lifted her left foot to yet another front row patron. After her left shoe was removed in the same manner, she stood up again, swaying her hips as she approached a thin pole that extended from the middle of the catwalk to the ceiling.

She planted her right foot between the floor and the pole, then spun twice around it, her long gathered tail of hair following in long arcs. She strode to the edge of the catwalk again, knelt down, then began to flirt with a trio of men in the front. As she did so, Timothy’s eyes narrowed, still trying to work out the perplexing sensations he was experiencing.

Somehow, the alluring dancer sensed his eyes on her, for she lifted her head and looked up, her eyes focusing on the determined glare he was casting her way. She smiled toward him seductively, mistaking his gaze for something else, and her eyebrows rose in a playful manner.

The three closest to her obviously objected to her suddenly turning her attention away from them. One, a red-haired humanoid that Timothy recognized as Demodian from his four-fingered hand, suddenly shouted over the crowd, “You were talking to us, you filthy whore!”

Timothy was jolted out of his scrutiny as two of the men flanking the Demodian jumped up onto the catwalk, grabbed the stunned dancer by her elbows, and pushed her down so that she was leaning over her knees. The Demodian then jumped up beside her to the cheers of his fellow patrons. With a sneer, the red-haired humanoid ripped the navy slip clean off the dancer’s body, and shouted, “Did you forget that you were here to entertain *us*? I think you owe us an apology.”

She muttered a quick, timid, apology, but that proved not to be enough for the Demodian. He turned to the patrons on the floor proper, and said, “Maybe this little slut should kiss my feet? Better yet... she should *lick* my boots clean. Any of you out there favor that idea?”

The cheer was enthusiastically in the affirmative, and Timothy’s eyes narrowed again, this time in concern. The situation was increasingly turning into one that crossed tolerable bounds even for this manner of establishment, and with a quick glance to stage left, he noted the

club owner once again giggling uncontrollably, suggesting that the dancer would find no aid there.

On the other hand, making a move to stop the assault would certainly require him to reveal more than he had wanted until *after* he had Gallan in custody, and to do so now would likely tip off the pirate leader and allow him to escape.

Onstage, the humiliating display began, the dancer's small pink tongue touching the leather boot, running along the surely filthy sole. Two tears escaped the young woman's lashes, falling unheeded – save by one person – to the catwalk below.

Despite every thread of his common sense almost screaming not to interfere, it was as if another part of him would have none of it. Something had been compelling him to come to her aid, and the sight of her tears set him into motion. Slipping through the mob that was quickly massing as close as they could to the catwalk, he used his smaller stature to wedge his way to the front of the crowd. He effortlessly leaped to the catwalk, and tapped the Demodian on the shoulder.

“Don't rush me... you'll get your turn,” the red-haired humanoid said, not even looking back.

Timothy snorted, and replied, “I'm not here for my *turn*. I'm here to tell you to stop... right *now*.”

The Demodian turned around slowly, and Timothy found that he had to tilt his head up to look the man in the eye. The four-fingered humanoid hissed, “Could you care to repeat that, little man?”

Normally, being stared down upon led to a small degree of intimidation, but Timothy, like most Erani, had become used to the fact that they simply did not possess the same physical stature as other sentient races. Unperturbed, the Solarian Knight said, “Let me put it into words your drunken, narcotic-addled brain can comprehend. Cease and desist, before I rip that foot of yours *off*, and give you the opportunity to lick it clean on your own.”

In response to that unsociable threat, the Demodian reached out with his right hand to shove Timothy aside. Timothy grabbed the intruding limb and dug his fingers into the thug's knuckles, pinching the nerve endings in a way that he knew would be excruciatingly painful from his study of Demodian anatomy.

The red-haired man squealed as pain shot up the entire length of his arm, and he dropped to his knee. His companions regarded the development cautiously, unsure what to make of this stranger. Slowly, they stood, observing the scene warily, dragging the dancer up with them.

The Demodian finally wailed, “All right! All right! I'll stop!” prompting Timothy to release his victim. The red-haired man stood once again and staggering back to his two friends, whose gaze kept switching between their leader and the waif-like stranger glaring at them. “What are you dolts waiting for?” the Demodian said to his companions, “Take care of that punk.”

After a moment's hesitation, the two complied, but fared even worse than their leader. One found himself the recipient of a vicious kick to the gut, and the second charged at Timothy, only to be cut at the legs when the Solarian crouched, sending the thug into the crowd. Timothy turned his attention back to the first assailant and threw another kick, connecting against his jaw. The thug crumpled, and tumbled off the catwalk. In his attempt to climb back on, he treated one of his fellow patrons a little too roughly, and the patron pushed back. From there, the violence spread like a ripple of water in a pond, until the entire club had burst into fighting.

Dashing past the Demodian, who was still nursing his hand, and ducking a suddenly

airborne barstool, Timothy quickly circled his arm around the dancer's waist. She yelped in surprise as he then lifted her off her feet, and with one graceful leap, jumped off the catwalk to land behind the bar several Tacks away.

He set the startled dancer down gently, and said, "Stay behind here, and *don't* move until I tell you it's clear." Without waiting for her confirmation, he then addressed the barkeeper, who was crouched behind the bar in cover. "You keep an eye on her for me, okay?"

After receiving the barkeeper's hurried nod, Timothy then jumped on top of the bar, pulling out his pistol in one smooth motion with his left hand, his right going to his creditfold where he kept his identification. He raised his pistol to the ceiling, and fired three rounds upward. The crackle of plasma fire quickly settled the small riot, while inciting a bevy of screams from in back of the club. Once Timothy had the patrons' attention, he let the bottom third of his fold slip out, revealing his Rank Shield.

"I am a Solarian Knight, and while I may not have any real jurisdiction here, I am not averse to applying due force to get what I want," Timothy stated calmly. He lowered the aim of his pistol, hovering it around the patrons beneath him. "If any of you do not wish to make an overnight visit to confinement or the recovery ward, I would suggest that you all leave immediately."

It became apparent that the vast majority of the patrons did not wish to do either, and slowly began to filter to the nearest exit. Even the trio of troublemakers had fled, leaving the club as empty as if it had just closed.

The club owner, seeing a good nighttime's revenue slipping out the doors, rushed to Timothy, and angrily ordered, "You have *no* right to bust in here and run out my business! I want your Rank Shield Identification and the contact protocol for your highest superior. I will *not* tolerate your..."

The stout Arcadian's monologue died off when Timothy trained the pistol on him. The Solarian said simply, "You are free to have it, but would you like me to inform the enforcement office here as to exactly what goes on behind that guarded doorway?" he said, motioning with his free hand to the doorway leading to the back rooms, where even the Ubek bouncers had fled the scene.

Licking his lips nervously, the club owner finally stated, "Okay... but don't expect me to be so kind *next* time. Now if you pardon me, you've given my girls an awful fright. I should calm them down now." Bolting away, the owner disappeared into the back.

Timothy still could not hear any enforcement agents approaching, and he did not feel particularly inclined to wait for them. He looked back down behind the bar, and said, "It's clear. You can come out."

Two heads emerged, but the only one that held any interest to him belonged to the dancer, whom he assisted in climbing over the bar. Realizing that he was about the same height as her, he pulled off the light jacket he wore, and put it over her shoulders. She gratefully accepted it with a voiceless "thank you", and pulled it around her scantily clad body.

Timothy then remembered why he was in the club in the first place. For a second, he thought about investigating in back, but decided that Gallan had most definitely fled the scene when all the commotion had began. Deciding that he would have another chance to bring down the pirate leader, he waited in silence with the dancing girl until he heard the approaching sirens that indicated that enforcement officers were approaching.

As he made to leave, he offered the dancer a small piece of advice. "I would strongly suggest, madam, that you *quickly* find a new line of work." With that, he rushed out the north

exit, farthest from the approaching sirens, and turned left onto the street.

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With a sigh, Timothy folded his PCU closed again and slid out of the chair. Once he was standing, he folded the chair up, and leaned it against the wall between the bed and the desk. Checking to make sure that he had everything he needed, he prepared to leave the room.

Just as he was about to grab the door handle, three swift knocks sounded from the other side. He didn't need any psionic ability to have a pretty good guess as to who had come calling. There was only one person who had any business rapping on Timothy's suite.

Timothy immediately opened the door, to reveal the tall Arcadian hotel manager. The gaze that fell on Timothy was one of barely tolerated disdain, but the Solarian acted as if nothing was the least bit amiss.

"Hoef's Grand Tavern was nearly demolished last night. Witnesses say there were odd lights and fireballs, and the sounds of fighting," the manager said, in a failed attempt to talk casually. "I wonder if you had anything to do with it, hmm?"

"If any damage was done to any part of this planet, it was not by my hand," Timothy replied coldly, which he honestly felt was the truth. He had very carefully deflected Justin's fireball so that it could do no harm. However, the Kiros's haphazard shielding was not nearly so precise. *That* was what had caused any undue destruction of person or property.

"Well... even if you *are* telling the truth, which I highly doubt, it always seems that where you religious fanatics go, a nice little swath of destruction follows, usually of things *normal* people hold dear." The manager stressed the word "normal," an obvious jab at Timothy's Erani lineage.

However, Timothy found it to be pretty pathetic attempt at an insult. "If Hoef's Tavern was held so dear, why did it have so little business that it had to shut down?"

Timothy took the half-tick the manager took to react to the question to slip aside, and strode purposefully down the hall. From behind him, the manager called out, "If you want to rent this suite for another three days, payment must be made before 5 LT!"

"Hopefully, I won't have to book a further stay," Timothy called back as he stepped into the lift at the end of the hall. "I would say it's been a pleasure, but then I *would* be lying." The lift doors closed, and he rode the mechanism to the ground floor.

Once out onto the ground floor, he stepped into the main lobby. Five expensive-looking gold and crystal chandeliers hung in a neat line leading from the lift to the main exit. Carved columns were spaced about the lobby, two of them forming the corners of the main desk. Passing by the desk, he gave a passive wave to the early shift receptionist, but didn't bother to note her response. Timothy purposefully strode through the glass double doors, and outside, where the system's primary was beginning to creep over the slope of the planet.

He paused underneath the covered walkway leading to the sidewalk, his eyes darting back and forth. His mental sense caught a slight tingle of another gifted psionic nearby, vainly trying to keep his aura hidden. Timothy correctly reached the most logical conclusion, but refused to let it bother him. If that inept Kiros wished to tag along on the hunt, then so be it.

Meanwhile, Justin Feroz exhaled in relief as Timothy finally left the walkway, and began to take a leisurely pace down the side of the relatively vacant street. For a brief second, Justin had thought that his Solarian counterpart had detected him, but that didn't appear to be the case.

Keeping a safe distance away, Justin slinked after his target. The Kiros Knight had no

idea where Rumil might be hiding, but was taking a gamble that Timothy Honore did. If the Solarian did have a lead, Justin wanted to be present when it panned out.

Suddenly, Timothy turned right at an intersection of two streets, and the Solarian's psionic aura disappeared soon after. Thinking that Timothy had teleported away to escape pursuit, Justin rushed around the corner, hoping to pick up a hint of the warp trail. Instead, he walked right into a lightning-fast jab to the throat.

Justin collapsed to the ground, and Timothy stood over him while the Kiros Knight fought a losing battle to remain conscious. As blackness filled Justin's vision, Timothy muttered, "*That* is how you dampen a psionic aura. Consider it my first and last lesson to you."