

SESSION 1-1

June, 24th, 2014

“Riff-Raff”

a low-tech scifi about low-life bounty hunters and thieves

I frowned, the bounty in my crosshairs. This was wrong, somehow. Not the act of knocking out the target with a stun slug, and not even the very real and cocked thunder-slug repeater against the back of my head. Just the situation in general. But the gun, I suppose, said all that needed to be said for the moment. No room to miss there. No room for debate No air or space or time. No way out.

Trick was, Allister, the spry and confident reminiscence of my own young, arrogant ass, had been the one watching my twelve. It sounded like he was now holding the barrel to my head. And it was funny, how the word didn't cross my mind for a few blank, wandering seconds. I watched my target, a four eared, metallic-mud colored, doggish biped with a 98,000 dollar bounty for freight thieving, sniffing around an herbal stand four stands down in Mars's middle-ring black market. He was snout deep in a leafy, crystal-blue and green flowered plant, a twitch forming in the mangy, pieced together tail behind him, rife with scars where'd it'd been once, twice and so-on removed.

Then it hit me.

Double-cross.

Then,

Set-up?

But that didn't make any sense. I frowned and looked off to the side of the scope. The heat of the closed up, rented shanty-stand had sweat trickling down the edge of my nose onto the ground.

“No moving, Jay. None at all. Set the stunner down,” he said.

“This doesn't make any sense,” I said, not moving.

“What doesn't? We're all bounty hunters. So you know what this means. Our good times were nothing but shared space on a single ship.”

“Yes, I know. I know. That's not what I mean. What I mean is, this isn't a set up.”

That made him pause.

“Elaborate.”

I stared at the alien bounty a hundred feet away. He was chatting like it was no effort to the stand dealer, and he looked like he was buying, not a cut, but a full plant of whatever herbal he'd been

inhaling. It rested by his boots, which looked heavy. I guessed that they had mag-assist in them, or something or another. And he was well known. Liked. People, humans and other-life alike, seemed to have a passing work to him.

One nervous, elderly woman in a styled-kimono hurried up to him, desperately urging his attention. He looked down at her, smile fading into concern. She showed him the paper and he read over it. He had a red bandanna tied over his forehead, which was slightly elongated. I couldn't place his species. Must have been an outer-quad race. His face turned to disbelief, concern, and then nervousness. He began to glance around.

An idea formed in my head. I needed to wrap up this conversation quick.

"Something must have convinced you all to jump the gun. A high price on my head—a stupidly high one. One that made you make stupid decisions. Dangerous ones. Like not looking into why that price on my head is so high, waiting until we got back to the ship. Blocking my bounty from view on the screen. Setting a proper trap. Capturing me in a way that would secure your safety. But no, you've jumped the gun in the middle of a mission and there's no turning back, and I guess it's not so much the why, anymore, but the conclusion."

Another pause. He was thinking. Thinking maybe—thinking he was tired of my windy old ass. I rolled the air-stun grenade, sans pin, back onto the ground.

"You have no idea who you've fucked with.

I held my breath, and the world around me exploded.

Eru Sawthsayer was staring at his own bounty on the printout from Miss Suri, a friend of his who ran a curios shop, when the vacant shanty-store three buildings down exploded, leveling the two next to it in a clattering and screaming domino crash of Mars rust-iron and sheet-metal. Cheap, un-coded housing cracked and shattered under their own weight. Curses from a hundred different language and growls, shrieks, and hisses of surprise filled the air—one of the few things a translator couldn't properly translate. For a few seconds, Eru felt as if he was in a jungle, surrounded by the cries of unseen species. Predators too, if the bounty had anything to say.

Miss Suri was hurrying back to her stand.

"Dust everywhere. Dust and rust! There'll be regs here soon. Regs! Just what I need! Jer-tom and his well-to-do guns and..."

She kept up the tirade all the way across the cheap backalley. Other black market setups were disappearing with alarming speeds. Folded up and rolled away on mag-carts. Some flown away via claw-drones. Others packed into single, space-warping bags. Miss Suri, whose real trade consisted of stolen antiques and relics, simply pressed a button on the inside of the entrance to the shanty-stand, which started to creep into the ground, leveling out with the empty floor above. Instead of a two story stand it was now a single. Miss Suri smiled. It was good business, dealing old relics. People had a fondness for the past in these times. It allowed her such precautions.

When she turned back, the funny-alien freighter thief was sprinting around a corner, flyer fluttering in the air behind him. He was followed shortly by a military armored looking man carrying a

rifle, who *appeared* to be running from the younger blond haired kid that was coughing and limping along, screaming into a radio. He passed by, brushing, but not knocking down the plant Eru had purchased.

Miss Suri frowned, walked across the street, and picked it up.

She reached into her pocket and pressed a drone-caller. As she fiddled with the settings, she opened a panel on the ground to a nice little tunnel she'd decorated with gold and green foo-dog statuettes. It was dry, well bricked, and muffled the sound of Regiments above ground, ordering any straggling bystanders to the ground in the name of the Justice Federation. She talked to herself as she shuffled towards the entrance of her incognito-curios shop.

"I wonder... where is that old cage," she said, in a way that was more tired than it was a true question. She knew where it was. It was in her shanty-stand, lost.

Eru's padded feet hit the ground rapid fire as he ran. Ninety-eight thousand. *Ninety-eight thousand!* What in eternities had he stolen to catch a price like that? As he slid into the main avenue of the Mars City, staring up at the oblong towers of parliament buildings of downtown, he figured to hell with his usual rules. He would look at the cargo and consider ditching the load, whatever it may be. In the depths of the situation, it was the only thing he could think of.

A quick movement to the left.

Eru's last thought as Jay plowed into him full tackle was, *Real fast for a human.*

It was a tackle that knocked the wind out of them both is a quick, deep exhale that had both of them writhing as they got up amidst the remains of a freeze-dried food stand. Eru darted forward in a weak gait, staring straight ahead towards the scrap yard. For two hundred dollars, you could park any ship without question for a night. Maybe two if you drink with the owner.

Jay picked up his rifle when a shot kicked up concrete and shattered rust-iron next to him. He cocked the gun and let loose a single slug. The rifle barrel kicked up with a firecracker-bang, and Allister dropped, trembling as he went from full sprint to comatose on the concrete market ground. He slid to Jay's feet, teeth clenching. Jay reached out and snatched his gun.

"Cool."

Another rapport. A shot disintegrated next to his foot, throwing up shards of concrete that sliced his cheek.

"Fuck."

He was up and running, this time in a distinct zigzag pattern that was the only defense from the triple-A certified mercenary sniper kneeled at the end of the main drag, firing without discretion in Jay's direction.

About the same time Eru had caught his full breath and speed, the 20.20 long persuader slug hit him the shoulder. It felt like a hard punch to the back. He yelped once as the heat began to seep in, and then gritted his fangs and lowered his head. People around him were screaming. Running. Some falling. Mostly humans. Some were quiet, scaled Jivva race. Most he'd never seen before. He saw no Ka'thar—none of his own.

At the Main Lane drag, Eru came to another skidding pause, but immediately took off to West,

the arbitrary direction set by the atmosphere field. As he ran, something wizzed by his head—a familiar smell. The citric, herbal smell of a Ka'thar favorite—*hallar*. The scent was pouring from between the canvas wrap of a waist high bird cage, which was dragging through the air behind the grey boxed, personal delivery drone. Its polymer turbines droned in the air with a furious humming sound. Eru let out a haggard, barking laugh. He had a feeling it was going to Yellow Toad's scrap yard. It had yet to ascend the buildings due to crisscrossed and humming wires strung between buildings overhead, and it gave Eru an idea.

A goal in mind, vigor renewed despite the bluish blood trickling across oiled fur, he leaned forward into a sprint, panting as he neared. He could hear boots slamming on the ground behind him just as quickly as his own padded feet. With a snarl, he leapt forward and jammed his good hand through the drone's carrier claws, and wrapped his injured arm and body around the cage. It looked like genuine brass—a sure marker of Miss Suri's wares.

As the drone began to ascend, Eru felt something latch onto his leg. The entire flight dropped three feet, nearly back into the ground, before the drone compensated and shot back up. The momentum made Eru's hand wrench painfully in its grip, and he slipped down a bit on the bird cage. He swore and looked down.

Attached to his leg was that same human who tackled him. Except this time he seemed to be screaming something as he clawed a grip on the bottom of the cage, the buildings growing smaller beneath him. The crosswinds began buffeting them, filling Eru's ears with a white-water roar. Eru ignored the pain, the yelling, the wind, and began shaking his leg, awkwardly kicking him with his free leg.

With little effort, the human caught his leg in an iron grip. Eru made a gasping sound. *Pain. Dear Eternities, pain.* The human had homed in on a tendon on the leg, and was threatening to tear it by hand alone. Another attempt at shaking him was met with another pang of suffering. Eru yelped and looked down, grinding his teeth. The human looked up at him grimly. Eru wanted to insult that determined expression, but he knew the translator wouldn't decipher most of it. He thought of all the Earth Standard he knew.

"Hunter!"

The human nodded.

"You insufferable low-life waste-matter!"

He raised an eyebrow. He seemed to be silently laughing. Eru furrowed his eyebrows and began collecting saliva in the back of his throat. His throat made a rattle-coughing sound deep down. Ka'thar spit mixed with their own stomach acid was notoriously corrosive to anything that wasn't Ka'thar stomach, which had a fondness especially for copper.

It was Jay who heard the sound first, over the shouts, shots whizzing by, and the hum of the delivery drone. He looked back, keeping his grip on Eru's legs as he looked back. A flash of red in the distance, growing. He swore and looked up at the alien, who sounded like he was choking on his own tongue.

"Hey! We're in trouble!" he yelled. All four of the alien's ears were tilted up, trained on him.

Eru paused, holding the bubbling mass in the back of his throat. His *den-dam* had told him as a pup it wasn't healthy to do it for anymore than a minute.

"It's Harrier Harry. *He'll kill us both for our half bounties if you don't—*"

“HELLOOOO BOYYYYS!”

Jay groaned. Eru looked over in dead confusion at the candy apple red Harrier-2 that was hovering next to them, polished sheen blazing, bird like nose pointed directly at them. Inside the cockpit, strapped behind the controls, was tremendously narrow man decorated with shamelessly fake silver and gold ornates over a black jumpsuit.

He waved.

“Talk to me, Honeys. I’ve got the mic on.”

“What do you *want*, Kame?” Jay said. A vein in his neck bulged.

“Oh, simply to clear up a misunderstanding. I’m going to shoot you down, so sorry, and I don’t want you off and dead thinking it was because I’m here for your measly freighter thief.”

Eru’s expression went suddenly blank. Expressionless. Almost dead, but with boiling eyes that burned with something animal and indiscernible. The face of Ka’tar rage. He judged air speed.

“I already know, Harriet.”

The pilot grimaced.

“It’s Harry.”

“Yeah, I’ve read your bio.”

Harry leaned forward on the controls. Grim expression.

“And I’ve read yours. Normally I’d feel guilty about killing another bounty hunter. I say that, and this honestly: not today. I’m taking no chances. No remorse. And since you make common goddamned conversation so difficult, I’ll get along with the machine cannon.”

Two barrels on the underbelly of the clicked on and began rotating.

Eru leaned back and hacked, jerked forward, and spat. A sizzling, green black glob of bubbling bile stuck dead center of the cockpit glass and began to sizzle, a depression with goopy edges forming.

Harrier Harry balked.

“What?”

Without a second thought, Jay whipped out the thunder-slug repeater-aimed-and-fired.

The slug punched right through the bubbling pool of once bullet proof glass and shattered, igniting a contained charge. A rapport boomed, muffled by the confines of the cockpit. Its effect was apparent. Harriet Harry jerked in his seat, shrapnel thumping through his neck, but already dead from the compressive bullet blast that’d already shattered his head and brain. A red arc of blood flipped against the glass of the cockpit.

The gun turrets loosed a set of rounds that churned and coughed through the air past the drone as it pitched straight towards the ground, hardly straying course as barreled through the roof of an abandoned federal health structure, engines screaming, fireballing as it became one with the building. Jay and Eru watched the red cross and circle disintegrate as older parts of the roof gave way.

Jay did some rearranging and managed to crawl up, hooking a boot through the open bird cage door. He looked over to Eru, who stared at him curiously. He didn’t understand, not yet anyhow. Jay saw a furiously intelligent mind humming behind muted grey eyes, tinged with blue underneath that bandanna wrap. Jay couldn’t place the species, but sensed there wouldn’t be an IQ gap.

They didn’t say anything for the rest of the trip

SESSION 1-2

“A Devil”

a man find himself at play with an ancient, albeit bored evil

Could you fall to the temptation of an illusion?

It was a question that had recently overcome Ian's mind. As fried and hot as it was from the heat and dryness, at least the discretion between real and not was there. For now. Before then, though, the loudest question was how *sad* was it that he had no one he was truly fighting on for, across dune after dune? No lover. No family. No fair acquaintances. It was a question the dark phantom man shape had posed to him, among other darker propositions. Though before, it was only Ian himself who asked, just as the last of the water had poured down a wanting throat, how long would he last? How long before the hallucinations? He'd answered the previous query—how long was the water going to last? Four days. A single canteen. Before that how had he survived the smoldering wreck that'd flattened and charred every one of the internationally mixed crew?

“Guess it really don't matter,” he said, cringing at the dead, hoarse way half of his words crawled out. He was *dead* anyway. After it all. When it was said and done. The bottom line. Only difference was, they wouldn't find his body with the rest. He would be mysteriously absent, one body. Would he become a myth or just listed as “missing”?

Next to him, a man in a black coat and square sunshades pranced. His left leg kicked up, swinging up and down in his step as he hopped next to Ian, kicking and shuffling the sand forward in the way a bored person might try to annoy someone with no sense of humor. The edges of his long jacket trailed behind him, seemingly with the slightest breeze, and even when there seemed none at all. The sun shades looked old fashioned, oriental. Either from Imperial China or a K-pop video. Ornate, no doubt gold, trim danced around the blue tinted lenses. The leaf-press patterns of the frame seemed to shift constantly, but the heat might have had something to do with it, Ian figured. Underneath the heavy black duster was a red vest with nearly feminine red ruby buttons. Black, clean pressed dress pants.

Ian had often wondered not what the Devil *looked* like, but rather what he *acted* like. Truth was, he was a grinning bastard. That's what he was.

“Oh, I'm not *the* Devil,” he said, changing gaits. He jammed his gloved hands into his pockets and began a waltzing pattern alongside Ian's shuffled walk. He whispered under his breath, “*ONE two three HAW! One two three HAW!*”

Ian though, had he been talking himself again? Oh well. Ian had guessed the Devil because of how heavily dressed up and layered he was, on top of being extravagantly ornate in the classical, vain

sense of the fallen angel, Lucifer himself. But he was right. He had the wrong air to him. Not satanical... No. The man with the specs was, quite simply, *antique*. An archaic evil so old fashioned that it was a breed all its own. In fact, he seemed so antique that it crossed Ian's mind that he was probably older than the Devil himself, and that—

And that he was now thinking of the hallucination as real. Ian stopped in the sand, looked up with bloodshot eyes through a heavy, matted head of long hair, with was the only thing keeping him from frying the skin on his face, and collapsed on his hands and knees in the sand. Every particle of sand felt like hot sparks digging into his knees.

"No, get back up! You've got to kneel *to me*, not just kneel on the ground in general," the devil said, frowning, eyes furrowing. His given name was Jacker, though four times translated from unspeakable languages, it'd lost a lot of meaning. He jumped in front of the wretched man, hands on his knees, scaled-skin boots spread and set in the sand as he leaned forward. He stared at that tattered, long mane of matted gold-blond hair. He stared hard and waited for him to look up.

Ian made no move, and that aggravated the devil a great deal because if he couldn't get him to at least see him as something real, then he'd never, well, he'd never strike a *deal*. That Satan fellow might be a sucker for blasphemy against the Big Man Almighty, but ohhhh let Jacker tell *you* what kind of deals he'd managed to strike behind the backs of the Big Guy (as well as a few other, mid-level gods). Nothing was better than the fine print. The between the lines. The half-truths and double-meanings. Fortunes and kingdoms, Jacker had given them all too many, as well as the secret planted tools to their own destruction.

But it meant *nothing* if the fool were to die here. He was simply too stubborn. Or was it something else? Jacker had to know. He'd hardly met this resistance unless there was something moralistic or religious behind it.

"Whose god is it that you are afraid of offending, Ian of Austin?"

Ian said nothing, and that was when Jacker growled and grabbed the man by the hair and jerked his head up. He looked like a hippy, a long hair. Reddish beard and dark long blonde hair. He'd seen his type from behind the shade of a riot mask back in the sixties, with a strong arm and a stout billyclub. That disappointing flop that had been the 1969 Democratic Convention. Sure, riots were nice. But he'd wanted *fire* and the fella with the molotovs had gotten too lost on the LSD and had ended up drinking half of them before shooting himself in the head.

But sometimes, you just couldn't trust someone with long hair to be a hippy, though. And this one in particular seemed to be staring at him with a certain kind of distaste that Jacker found deliciously *foreign*. It wasn't the normal revulsion of the unnatural and dark. And the eyes that started back weren't stoned nor drugged in the slightest. Jacker closed his eyes, swam inside the man's head. Ian shivered as if something slick and perverse had slid into him.

"What is it? What is it that makes you tick, Ian Linkwater of Austin? Is it the thirst? Are you so far gone that you can't even believe in me?"

Ian stared up at that cool, sweatless face and figured that if he didn't have much time left, seeing as he was this far gone in the visuals (the specter's hands *really was* yanking at his hair), then he could have some decent conversation, at least. He pulled his head away, shoving the hands aside.

"I don't tick. I ain't worried 'bout no one's gods. I ain't got no reason to be bowing to nobody."

"I could refute you on that last point," the devil smiled, placed his hands on his hips.

"You ain't given me no good reasons."

Jacker frowned. "No reason? You're going to die here."

"Yeah. That's a bitch. Figured survivin' the plane meant something."

"Exactly! What of your own god, Ian?"

"Yeah, well, what of him?"

"Does it not anger you? Of all the people on the plane, he denied you a quick death," Jacker said, smirking. He loved playing on doubts. And if he could get him to doubt that his survival was anything beyond chance, he could—

"No."

Jacker smiled even harder.

"What?"

"No."

"Why?"

"Ain't his fault. Ain't nobody's fault. Everybody's fault. I ain't mad. God ain't mad at me. He ain't testin' me. Me and Him. God and I. We have an understanding."

"Oh?"

"I don't ask much of him and he does likewise."

Jacker said nothing. Only stared from behind tinted shades. An eyebrow raised. A single chuckle trickled up through his throat, falling out of his mouth. Then another. Then a laugh. Then laughter and full on hysterics. He stood up and continued laughing, and pranced in a circle, picking up his feet and stomping them down, in unadulterated hysterics. Oh man, oh MAN oh man! He had something new! Something *fresh*! And it was more unmovable than the thousands of walls he'd torn down before.

He froze. Oh, he *couldn't* just leave him here. No, not anymore.

Ian started back down at the ground, sighing. They were short lived, hallucinogenic conversations. He wondered what his last thoughts would be. Or when the body might be found. He might end up as a preserved body, to be studied in the far future. *And here is the early-21st century HOMO SAPIEN. This particular male specimen was recovered from an arid, desert region, and shows remarkable, natural preservation! Look now, as the magnifying camera pans over the hollow holes that once held his eyes.*

"Ian of Austin!"

He looked up. Satan was there, and he was holding a wooden bucket stained dark with sopping water. See, now he *knew* he was hallucinating, because there was no devil Ian knew of that would simply give up and—

The torrent of cold water hit him like a shotgun blast, and suddenly Ian realized it was all very, very real.

SESSION 1-3

"Punk Cliché: Dust Ridden Blues"

a neo-noir dystopic, low tech scifi centered vaguely around the profile character, Red Savage

She awoke with her heart pounding damn near out of her chest. Claws gripped the sheets. Sweat smeared from fur onto the sheets. It wasn't from fear, though, which scared her in a wry, humorless way that defeated her in the hot darkness. Her flat grin went unseen in the confines of her home. Good living by world standards, yes, but, even then, Red Savage figured she could hear her breath hitting the other end of the room.

Red checked the clock. Pale-green radium dials pointed to about five forty-five am. Maybe six. The second hand ticked in stealth, unpainted as it was.

Red groaned and laid back in her bed. Sheets twisted up. Pillow jammed into the crevice between bed and frame. Black shirt sweated tight to the rise and fall of a tuft of fur matted on her chest. Not

that it mattered, damn, she figured. Six. Five. Four. Three... She was up and awake, even if it wasn't the same thing as being well rested. It had something to do with her split lineage, Red figured. Coyotes weren't fair matches for the Barbados strain of sheep, but here she was. What do you get when you cross nocturnal habits with daytime types? Not a single night's worth of decent sleep. That's what. And that turned into a decent benzo habit, which seemed to be the only thing close enough to a sleep aid affordable to the Underclass.

And let it never be said that Red had ever been anything more than Underclass.

"Well maybe that will all change today," she said, a little shocked at the raspy and hollow thrum of her voice. She leaned back up and coughed, brought something nasty up, and swung her hand around the darkness, fishing for a waste bin. After not finding one, Red pulled herself up out of bed and into the bathroom where she spat in the sink, feeling nine shades of disgusting.

Red followed it up with another bout of hacking and an equally large glob of smoke, industrial fumes, smog and what-have-you fell into the sink. She turned on the light and examined the mess. *Good*, she thought, *No red*.

She turned on the facet, a rusted center piece amongst lime-stained ceramic, and washed it down. Up in the mirror, she glanced at her reflection for only a moment before swinging it open, revealing a medicine shelf with nothing but a pack of Grey Cloud cigarettes and a lighter. A frown crossed her face. Both the pack and the light were snatched up in a single grab, and the mirror resumed its original location.

Red Savage regarded herself.

She was a creature alright. But even a creature among creatures. She stared in her own eyes. Something of a coyote-faced muttdog. The smiling, untrustworthy slant of a muzzle too thick to be a fox's--but too mangy and narrow to be a wolf's. Too much scruff on the back of the neck too. Ears erect, but a jagged bite removed from the outside edge. (There was a decent story behind that).

In general, too much scruff everywhere. A large clump (unbrushed, that's what it was, a clump) rested right over her sternum, between her breasts. Currently, trapped beneath the thin black sleep shirt, it had her sweltering, and in that moment she hated it for the annoyance it caused. More fur hung off her shoulders, elbows, knees. Black swathes of thick and fine fur patch worked with dull brown, all laid

over a wiry undercoat of brown and reddish fur.

Red smirked. Not that *anybody* noticed these things first.
It was always the horns.

But they were a mighty set, and they burst forth from hard spots nestled behind her ears, cork screwing back from her head, down and back forward in broad, angled points that eventually curled back, framing her houndish visage. A thick, hard set of tar colored ram's horns. And they were ram's horns, that was no trick, but Red thought they looked very graceful and strong on her even as a woman, so on her head they stayed. And besides, there was enough woman in the curve of her hips and legs to make up any doubt on the subject.

And, they scared people. Red's smile widened, paused at the accepted standard for a creature. Humans and leaf-chompers could get away with showing white in their smile now and then. Strict predators could not. The gentle curve of the lipline tracing up the edge of her muzzle would have to suffice. In the dull yellow light of the closet-like bathroom, Red went further than that, and flashed the fine white line of white of her teeth. Then the jagged cut of her rear canines. Giggling, she drew her lips back more, revealing a prominent front fang on the left of her mouth, the right distinctly missing. Red tightened her face up, widening her eyes, arching the fur of her brow. Her teeth jutted forward. An evil imitation of a smile, more snarl than anything. The whites of her eyes made a clear ring around her nearly black-with-brown eyes. The corners of her mouth jutted upwards. It was an expression very much like madness.

Hellhound. There was no such creature, in the same mythical vein of 'ol Black Shuck and Church Grims, but it wouldn't stop people from calling her one behind her back. It was okay. Red Savage had her own superstitions, and she liked that she could be part of someone else's. And besides--

She dropped the grin. Normal, hybrid riffraff smile.
Red blink and twitched. Otherworldly madness returned to her face.

--It *scared* people.

Red kept at it before pausing, her face dropping into a humorless daze. She felt her body remembering the lack of sleep. Red's mind raced away nonetheless. She looked at the cigarettes in her hand. She wanted to smoke. But maybe not this early. Not this early. Instead she peeled off her shirt and underwear and took a cold shower in the cramped heat of the hovel apartment, which rested on the corner of the sixty-sixth floor of a grey highrise living bloc in the lower east end

of Carrizo City, whose population in the year triple-five-seven had swelled past a bursting, 1.1 billion. Seventy percent of that, within the past twenty years, resulting from refugees from war on the UnUnited Continents.

Red finished her shower and air dried herself on her bed, dark stains of water spreading beneath her as she lay back, staring up. She'd hang out the sheets to dry later. In the meantime, she was remembering the feeling that woke her. She couldn't remember the dream, though. Just the feeling. Not the typical terrified feeling of having fallen and snapped awake in the infinitesimal space between touching the ground and impact.

It'd been regret. The reeling, panic inducing feeling of heart breaking, scrambling, and irrevocable regret. Like loosing a bullet from a persuader, drunk, at a half assed target, only to see from the corner of your eye your best friend jerk and fall, brains poured out on the asphalt by your feet. Ricochet. And the heart stopping, soul wrenching moment where you wish you could take every moment leading up to that point back, and knowing with full horror that you *cannot* no matter how badly you wished.

Red Savage spent the rest of the morning air drying, trying to remember what it was that had ricocheted in her head, humming off into the night. A lost bullet of a dream. Misshapen. Spinning away. Gone. When the dull morning glow of a haze hidden sun peering over the city failed to bring it to mind, she dressed and walked out to the hall, to the stained, musty stairwell leading down, and into the half hour trek leading down the winding darkness.

"Maybe it will all change today," she said, smiling, adjusting the persuader strapped behind her back, covering it with the black flak jacket draped over her shoulders. She put the blue penny lensed shades on her face. In her view, numbers and letters began to swim as the minute computer in the

"Maybe."

"Holy shit, Carr. We've got a fucking mess in lower-east end. Big Underclass area." Janet's voice crackled over the lesser used comm on Carr's desk. He looked up in vague surprise, distracted by an information packet about the latest narcotics found on the streets.

"We need you to head the mess and make sense of the statements. It's chaos out there."

Carr stared at the comm with a vague sense of menace, as if it was the little box's fault that he was being drug out like a spare ladder. His broad, square face looked nearly like a granite block attempting emotion. Thick black brow. Thick, fast growing hair and an eternal five-o'clock no matter how much he shaved. Thick jaw. Carr knew somewhere up the family tree Slavic roots had made their mark, and they weren't pretty. They'd made him strong, though. He hadn't gotten to where he was through charm. That was for sure.

Though, at times he wished it was a skill he possessed, and he wished it then as he stood and stretched, popping his back. His desk was one of fifty on the fourth floor of the Carrizo Justice Unit, each of them identical in that they contained two monitors, one comm, one desk officer, and an endless line of reports to examine and file. When he looked around, he saw lots of bored expressions shared across all species. Glazed looks. Tired eyes. To Carr, though, the desk wasn't a bad rap. Yes, the list of paper work was endless, but so were the troubles on the streets. But a vehicle theft report would not shoot you in the back.

Carr rubbed a sore spot above his hip, and pulled the bullet proof vest from the back of the chair. Yes, he wished then he had a bit of charm, because then maybe he could call dispatch back and say some cool, convincing words to give the job to someone else. Let them have the 'fun'. Maybe he could pull seniority, (which he certainly had done to get to the desk, to the surprise of few), but he had a feeling that it was seniority that got him the assignment. He had experience with chaos, or "big fucking messes", as dispatch had eloquently put it.

In the top drawer of the desk, a Justice Unit .38 persuader lay waiting, and Carr's hand wrapped around it with the same feel of a familiar handshake. It was older, and less accurate, but was loud, which no one but Carr seemed to understand as an advantage. He checked the clip and chamber, chambered a bullet when he saw the first full and the latter empty, and snatched three more clips from his desk. Two held standard issue *Defenders*, non-shattering rounds that could both incapacitate and put-down with brutal force.

The last clip were street bought. *Snitch Hunters*, they called them. They were illegal on several grounds, but Carr had experience with Underclass types. He'd been one, and he knew they didn't play fair. With this simple logic he had explained the bullet's existence

to the Unit Admin, who'd said simply over the phone, "I suggest you reread the list of acceptable ammunition, Mister Carr Reznor, and make your choice as such. I *trust completely* that you'll be in control of the matter without prying from us or the unit."

And that was that, Carr thought, strapping on the last of his gear. Badge. PDA, which he glanced at briefly. A utility belt with a few more things to level said playing field. The officer behind him, a gawky necked brown and white splotched mink who didn't know how young and clueless he looked in a tie and button down, stared at him intently.

"Carr? You finally headed out on a job?" he asked, leaned forward. Carr nodded at the creature. His name was Trent Homm, a long descendent of the hybrid experiments that'd crashed the world so long ago. (But it wasn't *their* fault, Carr knew, though the '*Evolved Race*' groups violently disagreed, mostly oblivious to their atavistic irony.) Trent was everything Carr had come to think of the newer Justice crowd. Smart. Intelligent. And full of misguided energy that *didn't* quite get it just yet. Yet. The human had faith in people, though. They would learn in time. Just like him.

"Need anyone to go with you? Ride along? Did your PDA get updated with the assignment details?"

It had, and Carr wished it hadn't, because he couldn't lie to just anyone. Even the annoying mustelidae with the eager smile. He nodded and the expected chain of questions commenced.

"Awesome! Did the details let you get by with a partner or two? What kind of an ordeal is it?"

Carr sighed. It had. He nodded.

"How many?"

Carr held up two fingers. Trent just grinned, lacing his fingers up underneath his muzzle. Neither of them said a thing, and Carr caught on after a few moments. Trent was giving him the same silent conversation Carr had gotten many a jab about. The human sighed, went back to his PDA.

"Let me see, first," he said, bringing up the details he'd planned on reading while en route.

Trent watched the expression on Carr's face shift as he read:

"5 Fataals Confirmed, 77 reports of injury, 12 unknown status. Incident occurred at East-end at approximately 0900 hours. Numerous witness report of explosion at *Jekku's Market*, escalating into firefight between two parties. Clan Activity suspected/probable. Situation further escalated into vehicular chase EASTWARD through pedestrian walkways past more market stalls. Security footage as of yet unobtained. Area is Clan friendly."

Maybe not today, Carr thought. He down at at the mink, who'd been shamelessly trying to read the expression on his face. He also looked overtly worried about—*rejection*? Carr stared at him for a moment before chuckling. Trent leaned back in his seat, ever so slightly, as Carr smiled.

"Meet me by the curb here in a half hour," Carr said, tapping into the palm PDA his intent to bring a partner. He selected Trent from the list, and after a pause from the confirmation system, it was approved.

Carr began walking away.

"Don't forget your gun," he added.

Trent Homm didn't turn as Carr left, though his ears followed the words of the strange man. He frowned, looking nearly a growl, the PDA on his wrist buzzing. (Why Carr liked that massive palm-brick he'd never know.) He brought up the request to assist, agreed, and skipped past the pay hazard pay specifics to the summary that Carr had read. He jerked as the PDA buzzed, and the text rearranged itself to accept the newest detail.

He'd seen humans go *pale*, as they put it. It was never obvious for a creature, but Trent had to guess that anyone looking close enough at him would see that the insides of his ears had gone stark white.

"UPDATE: Crime scene extends 10 blocks EAST to WEST. 11 fataals now confirmed."

The human boy swept the floor under the watchful eye of the station owner, Markov, a grizzled and tired bearcat male with thick, wide hands crisscrossed with white stripes through the black fur. The boy knew it was because of scars, but he'd never asked. Just as the bearcat had never asked the boy what happened to his left eye, which was blind with stark white scarring. The boy's broom tapped a row of yellow boxes labelled **V-75**, pushing a stack ever so closer to the edge of the metal, grate shelves. The small store room smelled of dust and electricity.

"Watch that row of seventy-fives, Eli," Markov murmured, his voice barely escaping the thick fur of his lips and whiskers, which hung down in a way that seemed very, very tired.

"Yessir," Eli said. He set the broom against the opposite shelf, which held nearly identical boxes. Each of them were separately colored and coded.

"V-seventy-fives will pop on you if you're not too careful," Markov added.

"Yessir." Eli nodded. So would V-sixty-fives. And even *ninety-fives*. Charge-pods were usually stable, sturdy battery pieces. Previously unbreakable by anything less than a precise saw and a disregard for personal safety. Demand had shot through the roof since the population burst, though, and said demand was met with cut corners and rushed production.

Now days you could crack a V-ninety-five with a hard boot stomp. Eli subconsciously swept further away from *that* particular row, remembering the one crate he himself had dropped. It'd been a single ninety-five on the corner of the box. On top of the electrocuting, static blast that had thrown Eli to the ground in an ionized daze, the fist-sized energy cell had fried power to the entire block.

Only a set of electronically grounded boots had saved Eli's life. They were identical, except in size, to Markov's own. Thick black rubber bricks on his feet with lightening holders inside. That's what Eli figured them to be. He hadn't been able to afford a newer pair. Had he done so, Eli would have already dismantled and deciphered the older pair before the newer set could even be worn. As it was, Eli contented himself with musing wildly.

Markov had gone back to the numbers book, and Eli to the far end of the room where a long handled dustpan leaned against the storage room door, when the ground rumbled. The old binturong

froze, listening to remnants of an explosion trembling through the walls. Eli hadn't noticed, but the young worker could sense his boss's unease. Before he could ask the question, reports and muffled cracks meandered through the thick walls. First slow, then quick. *Pop. Pop. Pop-pop---Pop-pop-pppp-p-p-p-poppoppoppoppoppoppop*. Shattered glass. Screeching turbine engines. Shrieks and howls of pain.

Markov caught Eli's worried gaze, and he himself felt an old, familiar tension rise up in him. *War*, he thought, *It sounds like war out there*.

"Eli, I think we'll close now."

"Want me to set the locks, Sir?"

"Please. I'll shut off the lights. You may spend the night here."

Eli turned right around the back shelves, tall and skeletal black constructs, past the storage door to the hall, which led to the control panel in Markov's dwelling upstairs. It had a small security circuit, as well as switches to all the steel bolt locks on all the doors. Power cells were valuable, as well as dangerous. No one could afford to have one of the seemingly semi-annual riots sweeping through the store front to shelves lined with what were essentially small, electrocuting bombs.

Maybe it's a riot, he thought to himself. But he'd never heard a riot with such a range of artillery. He could now hear a scatter gun booming out, and the distinct sound of shot pinging off

The big bearcat himself pulled himself out of his chair, back sore. He stretched up and out, a towering seven feet, and hunched back over into his bent posture, losing a foot and a half. It was an innate issue he'd carried since youth, and was the reason why he woke up sore in the night.