

A man in gray work clothes hurried down the street, the sun was shining brilliantly giving the white smooth cut stones an iridescent hue. The street was busy with people but his boot steps still seemed to echo as he walked. A breeze blew up, threatening to carry away his hat so he grabbed it firmly by the bill and pulled it down. The action made him look down and he cursed at the grease spot on his normally pristine work uniform. He wiped at it in annoyance with his free hand but did not allow it to slow his pace. His bag swung at his side to the tempo of his stride. "Lunch time at last," he thought to himself, "Maybe if I hurry I can enjoy it." The smell of the distant deli already filled his nostrils and made his mouth water with anticipation, but even from here he could see it filling quickly with people. At least he was away from those damned fools at the yard. Ignorant bastards with archaic misguided philosophies. He approached the familiar pump station, its dark shape cutting a stark contrast to the street stone as it stood on the edge of the drop to the city bellow. He must have passed it countless times, it almost seemed lonely there alone on its perch. Like a good push would send it over the brink to the under city bellow. He put his head down into the wind and hurried past it, lunch was all he really cared about right now. Then suddenly something flashed in front of his face, a sudden jolt of pain in his back, and then darkness....

Thomas quickly carried the man in the grey uniform backwards through the door to the pump house and closed it slowly, his long, pointed, furred ears twitching nervously listening for any sound that would give an indication that someone had seen him. He cocked one ear and laid it flat against the door for a moment before turning around. The inside of the pump house was relatively dark, lacking windows and he being too uneasy to turn on a light, but his augmented eyes quickly adjusted and he could make out the room's features. It was a small cramped place, most of the area being taken up by large pipe work that ran up through an open space on one side. The tangled looking mess of pipes had been there for longer than any memory and was indicated by a few needled gauges sitting clustered together at an inspection point.

Thomas walked out onto the cat walk that extended over the open space and looked down at the pipes which vanished into the infinite darkness bellow. Crawling through the dark, damp, and cramped spaces with now ancient pipe work had been more than he had bargained for. His white and golden fur, normally kept clean and neat, was wet and matted with the grime and moisture. He looked down at himself and cursed trying for the umpteenth time to get the mess off him. He may be a social outcast but at least he did not have to look like one....who was he kidding he would always look like one but at least he could take care of what he did have.

Giving up, Thomas, shook his head and retrieved his bag. He dropped the small twin pronged stunner he had in his hand into it and then wondered over to where the other man lay unconscious on the floor. He drew a deep breath and looked down at the man laying in front of him. Like Thomas the man had undergone a fair amount of augmentation. It was not the augmentations per say that had been the reason why Thomas had targeted the man. Augmentations, after all, were fairly common. Mechanical augmentations such as prosthetics had been helping and assisting people for years, decades even, maybe even centuries. Genetic augmentation on the other hand

was a bit harder. Genetically augmented people tended to fall into two groups, enhanced and mutated. Enhanced was perfectly acceptable, change your hair color or maybe just add a bit more immunity for that special off world trip or maybe something to help you focus a little better. Those kind of augmentations were perfectly fine in society, but this man and Thomas were different. The mutation augmentations were generally frowned upon by the society at large. Most mutation augmentations tended to be human and animal hybrids. And as far as the classifications go Thomas would rate as heavy to severe.

Thomas had never known his humanity though. Whether he was a primary augmentation, pre-birth, or a supplementary done shortly after birth, he did not know. He had grown up as the little fox like boy in the orphanage years ago, not that he was little anymore. He was of average height and athletic build, all relatively normal for a human other than his animal qualities. Well maybe human was not the word to use, society would never accept him as such, so he was resigned to their artificial race title of modified. A title that had been stuck to him from the start of his memory and he despised it.

The man that lay face first down on the floor in front of him was also a modified, and it was for this reason he had become Thomas' target. Thomas stripped out of his wet casual clothes and, despite being caked with grime from his crawl, stuffed them in his bag with the stunner. He then turned to the unconscious man, the grey of the man's fur nearly matched his work uniform. Thomas rolled him over carefully and propped his back against the pipe work. Two small triangular ears kept the man's hat on as his long canine muzzle came to rest on his chest with his limp hanging head. Thomas took off a small display that he was wearing and set it gently on a barrel that looked like it had not moved since the place was built.

Thomas knelt down in front of the other modified and slowly removed his hat, apologizing to him quietly even though he knew the man could not hear him. He undid the buttons down the front of the man's shirt and slowly rolled him back over on his front removing the shirt. He folded it and set it aside on the drum with the hat and his display. Repositioning himself, he went to remove the man's boots.

Plantigrade, he spat at his bad luck. Why did no one ever put things like this in dossiers? His own boots would have to do then. Thomas removed the boots and set them aside. He then reached up and grabbed the other modified's pants by the waist and carefully slid them down. Thankfully the other did not have a tail sleeve sewed into his pants because Thomas was certain his long bushy tail would not have fit in one for the other's short course one.

Having now reduced the other man to nothing but his boots and a pair of underwear, Thomas pulled a small sleeve of fabric out of his bag. He held it up to the clothes he had removed, the color was not an exact match but it was close enough. He slid the sleeve over his tail, compacting it to the thin tube of grey fabric that bulged a bit from what it contained. Tying the sleeve off he then picked up the pants and slid them on as well. The pants were a bit on the big side but not unmanageable with the belt. He pulled the shirt on quickly, fastened it, and tucked it in. He picked up the hat and inspected it. It was fairly simple construction, a round bit of fabric with a bill and two holes for ears cut

in it near the edges. He slid the hat on, poking his ears through the cuts and pulled it low over his face. Not that the bill would hide much with his long whiskered muzzle but the more he could cover the better.

Lastly he picked up his display and hung it on the side of his head so the small projector sat in front of his eye. It was old technology, but he could not find something better for rugged durability and it got the job done.

Thomas pressed a small button on the side of it, "Dex," he spoke to the space around him, "I'm going to be going dark for a bit. I'll call you if I need anything, otherwise see you in a moment."

The deceived beeped softly in his ear and text read across the projection. "Ok, stay out of trouble." it said.

The other man groaned a bit on the floor, he would be coming around in a few minutes. Thomas rolled him under a space in the pipe work and then rolled the drum and a twin sitting next to it in front of the gap. That should keep him long enough for Thomas to do what he needed. Thomas then adjusted the cap again before leaving the musty smell of the pump house behind.

Thomas stepped out into the light and blinked a few times blindly. His eyes adjusted quickly to the sudden glare and he set off down the white stone walkway. His boots made a soft patter as he walked that made him uneasy and the evening breeze blew under the hat, threatening to carry it away. These upper city plazas always seemed to have too much wind. He huffed, flicked his whiskers in annoyance and pulled the brim down with a somewhat paw like hand. He hurried down the path keeping his head low with nothing more than his bag slung over his shoulder.

In the distance he saw a group of men approaching, going the opposite direction. They wore the same grey pants and shirts he did and wore their hats high on their heads. Thomas practically skid to a halt, being caught off guard and turned quickly to lean on the rail. He stared at the undercity far below him and his tails swished in its sleeve gently behind him, showing his frustration. The group of men were talking loudly among themselves as they walked together. As they approached some of them thumbed at him and a few jeered. Then one near the middle of the group said something and the whole group roared with laughter. Thomas tried to ignore their taunts and silently grit his sharp teeth in a snarl he kept to himself. At last the group moved on and he could continue along. He took a deep breath and stood up straight. With great practice he recomposed himself and set off again.

It was not long before he reached where he was going. The large building loomed above the concourse, its front facade supported by exquisite carved and polished pillars. A broad stairway led up to the front of it made of the same bright white stones as the walkway that Thomas stood on. Flanking the stairs were two large walls that rose to meet the highest tier at the entrance of the building. Atop the walls stood two statues, one on either side. The statues were mirror images of each other, a man with a shield in front of a sword held upright kneeling with a bent head. Thomas couldn't tell if the faces had been made smooth and virtually non-existent or if time had simply eroded them away. Atop the building beyond the statues the letters read "Galileo Shipyard

Department of the Navy". Thomas looked to the sky above the building. In the rapidly shrinking bit of blue in the sky he could see the gleam of the massive station at the end of its skylift. Somewhere up there was his prize, catching the rays of the sun.

He did not have much time to admire it though, he turned and hurried down a side passage that led around the building. He stopped, searching the walls and floor. It had to be here somewhere...ah ha! A small pannel lay set into the walkway. The markings denoted it as one of the new communication lines that had been retrofitted to the old district. Thomas knelt next to it and pulled a couple of tools from his bag. Hunching over he worked quickly to pry open the cover to the data link bellow it. Next to the data link was a small bundle of cables that tied into it for diagnostic. Connecting a small device to it, Thomas, entered a code he had stolen weeks ago. The device beeped an affirmative and he removed the small identification bar from his stolen shirt and connected it to the device. He then lifted his hands to the invisible interface of his display.

"Ok, Dex," he typed out, "I'm connected. Your turn."

"One moment please...." came the response with a beep.

The bar opened suddenly with a holographic display. Sheets of information began to role by on the card followed by a picture. Then the pictured changed to Thomas' and the text began to role back and forth quickly rewriting itself. Thomas tried to read it but it kept scrolling too fast for him catch it. Right about the time he gave up trying the display closed and his headset beeped at him with new text.

"All set, I will monitor from here. You should be able to get access no problem now."

"Thanks, Dex," Thomas typed back.

A small pathway led down the side of building from the main concourse. The area was lined with the same white stone but as Thomas traveled further and further down the path they seemed to loose their polished sheen. By the time he neared the door he was looking for the area around him was a dulled off white color. Thomas rushed up to a turn in the path but skidded to a halt as his headset beeped.

"Wait!" read the text on his display.

Thomas skidded to a halt, his boots making a squeak that was uncomfortably loud to his sensitive ears. He waited for his breathing to settle, had he really been running that hard? He drew a deep breath and held it till his heart rate slowed then let it out slowly. Now that his own breathing wasn't thundering in his ears he could hear the faint whirl of an actuator around the corner. His ear twitched and he leaned back against the wall and siddled to the corner. He listened with one ear cocked for a while. A single motor whirled, stopped, changed pitch and whirled again.

Thomas leaned around the corner to take a peek. The white stone continued around the corner. A dark metallic door was laid into it in striking contrast to the rest of the stone structure. Opposite the door sat a single actuated camera swinging gently back and forth. He mused at the piece of old technology whirling away just ahead of him.

"Did you find a museum?" came the message on his display, Dexter must be watching through the optical sensors on his headset. "This will be easy, one moment."

Dexter was right, it should be easy but on a high security operation like this? Thomas sniffed at the air and the distinct twang of ozone hit his nostrils as they flared. Trying to ignore the whirling motor of the camera he could hear a faint buzzing of

charged particles now.

He began to type on his interface, "Dex, there is a charged barrier on the door as well."

A set of dots went across the display for a moment then a reply, "Hmmm," Thomas thought he could almost hear his friend, "that does make things more interesting, one moment."

Thomas did the best impression he could of tapping a foot as he could without a heel to stand on. The delays, how ever small, were beginning to bother him. His plan was only just falling into place but the window of opportunity was slim and with each second it got narrower.

Finally, after what felt like an eternity his headset beeped at him, "And I'm through, only took me 15.6 seconds." There was a moment's pause, "And security measures deactivated, better move quick."

Thomas did not bother to type a thank you and just hurried to the door. He stopped for a moment to present the hacked credentials to the integrator and then slipped inside as soon as the heavy metal piece slid aside. Using his interface he opened up a map of the building.

He studied it for a brief moment, before turning his attention to the corridor itself. The maintenance entrance was as stark a contrast to the exterior facade of the building as the door he had just entered. Metal beams ribbed the hallway with exposed cables running along the walls. The duct work snaked its way down the ceiling along with a mix of various pipes and the occasional dim light. The dark greyish color covered not only the walls and ceiling but floor as well. Thomas listened for any signs of life in the corridor but the sounds of hissing pipe work and a deep pervading thrum that he could feel in his feet drowned most sounds out. He began to walk cautiously towards the first bend, the air was heavy and damp and smelled like the pump house earlier.

Coming to the turn, Thomas stopped and snuck a peek around it. The maintenance way was empty right up to where it joined a larger corridor ahead. He checked his map and qud another message, "I'm inside, have you gotten into their security yet?"

The response came quickly "Yes, though only the lower level ones. I will need an uplink further along."

"I'll keep that in mind as I go, but how am I looking up ahead."

"Clear if you go to your right and take the break room to your left about 60.3 meters down the hall."

Thomas grinned at the distance mark in the text, even point three was rounding for Dexter. He wasted no time though and quickly ran to the larger corridor and turned. Sure enough a little ways down was a small doorway. He swung a turn in stride and pushed the door open closing it quickly behind him. He leaned against the door for a moment listening as was his habit but other than the ambient ruckus there was nothing to be heard.

The room Thomas now found himself in was lined with lockers. Two long benches ran the length of the room's old grey tiled floor. At the far end of the room was another small door much like the one he had just entered through. Trash and various items lay around the room where they had been dropped or left during the break. The smell of

sweat and grease hung in the room so heavy it was palpable. Thomas moved down one of the rows of lockers and tried a couple. A few were open but there was nothing of value in them.

A small toolbox sat on one of the benches. Thomas quickly moved across to it and threw it open. Perfect it was full of tools for the station. He riffled through and removed a few of the tools he would not need, setting them aside. Then he stuffed his bag inside and closed the box. But as Thomas picked up the box and turned to leave he heard voices approached from outside. Thinking fast he turned and dashed through the opposite door just in time. He cursed silently to himself, nothing more than a closet with no way out other than the way he had come in. He was trapped till the two men who had just entered the break room left. The two men were speaking rather loudly to one another in the next room.

"Well, George, I don't know what to tell ya," the first one said continuing what ever conversation they had been having in the hall, "if she's gonna take the kids what can you really do?"

"That's just it, James," the second started, "I work, I feed her and the kids, give her everything I've got and it just isn't enou...." The second stopped mid word and there was a moment of awkward silence. "Hey, have you seen my tool box? I could have sworn I left it right over here."

"Nope, can't say I have."

"Wait a minute....Someone has been going through my tools! Look some of 'em sitting on the floor over here!"

"I'll bet you anything it's that damned mutt blooded wolf."

"I ain't going to argue that, but going to check one last place."

As the man spoke Thomas heard him step up to the door he was standing behind. Thomas slowly backed away from the door and his hand found a screwdriver in the dark. He clutched it in front of him ready to lash out with it if he had to as the door clicked and began to open. There was a beep from somewhere in the room and the door suddenly stopped.

"George, we ain't got time, lets get going before we're late."

The two rushed out of the break room and Thomas let out a breath he had not realized he had been holding. He walked back out into the break room and listened at the door to be sure the two had gone. Not wanting to be caught like that again he hurried out the door and down the corridor. At the end of the corridor it opened up to meet the grand hallway, just inside the entrance. Most would have been awestruck by the polished white stone, towering pillars, and fountains, but Thomas had no time to site see and hurried across it.

Taking a turn around a secluded corner along the side of the grand hallway he found a small service lift and he took it. There was a muffled ding as he reached the top and stepped out onto a platform at the top of the stair case that ran from outside the building right up through the middle of the grand hall and to the base of the skylift. At this level several ornate doors opened and closed as people boarded and disembarked from the lift. It was a busy day and the crowds were pressing to get aboard. Thomas was here to ride the lift just as they were, but he was not about to join them. Instead he

walked around the side of it to a large set of doors. He waited as patiently as he could till they slid open. The large cavernous space inside was dimly lit by red lights that lined the walls. He did not get much of a chance to look though as a droid in the corner whirled to life and began loading freight aboard the lift. The large robot was absorbed in its task and ignored Thomas mostly as it went about its duty. All Thomas had to do was simply step inside and keep out of the way.

It did not take long for the robot to finish loading the cargo and the doors shut, sealing Thomas in the eerie red glow of the lights. A moment later he could feel a slight acceleration in the pit of his stomach and he sent a message, "On my way to the station, we're nearly there."

The lift moved slowly with a soft thrum and though Thomas knew it must be moving quickly the on board inertial dampeners gave it the feeling of a crawl. Large crates stood stacked to the ceiling most of the way around him but he managed to find one by itself that he could sit on. The dim red light was beginning to wear on him and his tail flicked with annoyance. He looked around like it might help him find a distraction, his ears twitching straining to hear every sound.

In truth Thomas had only been on the lift for a few minutes when a loud clang announced his arrival at the station. There was a clacking somewhere in the doors and a crack of light appeared between the seam as they slowly began to open. He blinked in the light as it spread over him. With a clatter the doors opened fully and Thomas could make out a silhouette of a man as he blinked against the bright lights for a moment.

"Hey," The man called waving Thomas over as his vision cleared, "what are you doing on the freight lift?"

Thomas jumped down and made a show of fumbling for his credentials, "First day on the job...I'm...uhh," he produced the credentials and handed them to the man, "running late." Thomas gave the man a toothy smile with his large sharp canines which seemed to make the man uneasy as he took the hacked clearance chit.

The man, who also wore a grey uniform like the one Thomas was in, skimmed through the information on the chit and then handed it back to Thomas with a nod, trying not to look at the teeth, "Well at least you were smart enough not to get caught today. Better hurry though, or there will be hell to pay for all of us."

Thomas thanked the man profusely and hurried past him and around the corner. That call was closer than he would have liked. Making sure he was well clear of the other he opened a new map and studied it quickly. The station was far larger than the building below on the surface, he would need to move fast to get to his prize which currently sat in one of the many dry docks.

"Dex," Thomas typed on his interface, "where's the conduit I'm supposed to be heading to?"

"One moment please," came Dexter's usual response and then a red line drew across the map and terminated at a small blinking red dot.

"That's too far," Thomas frowned, "we only have twenty more minutes."

"Then we better improvise...."

Thomas thought for a moment, "How far to the next security uplink?"

"One moment...." The red line redrew itself a much smaller distance.

"And where is the next maintenance traverse?"

"One level above," came the quick response, "but still four levels bellow where we need to be."

Thomas smiled, "I'll worry about that one, are you on the station yet?"

"I am approaching it now....and so are our performers."

Thomas nodded to himself, a little early but perhaps that would buy him more time. With that he strolled out into the main entryway to the shipyard. The main entrance was like an ever brighter and extravagant version of the grand hallway he had left bellow. The towering white gleaming stone rose high above the dark red carpet of the floor. Brightly polished silver monuments and murals adorned the walls which were draped in places with dark green curtains, commemorating times passed. Shortly before the stair case that climbed to the central hub ahead was a small unassuming metal plate attached to the wall.

Thomas crossed the hall, weaving between the crowds of people who hurried excitedly to and from the lifts, to the plate and knelt before it. The plate was made of a brushed metal that gave it a slightly reflective sheen. It was a little wider than Thomas's shoulders and fastened to the wall by a rounded screw set into each corner. Thomas couldn't help but chuckle inwardly as he set the toolbox down next to him, thousands of years and the simple fastener has yet to be truly improved upon.

The process of removing the plate was simple enough and Thomas was just poking through the cables on the other side and looking at the space behind them when a quiet, "ahem" came from behind him. He stopped for a moment before continuing to part the cables that hung in front of him.

"Ahem," came the sound again a little louder and Thomas stopped and looked behind him. The sound was coming from a squat little man, he had a round face and wore what one might have mistaken for old spectacles on his fat nose. His white shirt rolled outwards with his belly and then back to his tight dress pants. His bald forehead seemed to press forward over his brow making him look as if he were squinting against the sun.

Thomas stood and turned to face him, "Can I help you?" he said with annoyance.

"Oh, well yes," said the man indignantly, "well it certainly took you long enough, I've been standing here for five minutes. Aren't those satellite dishes on your head supposed to help you hear? I swear what use is doing these things to oneself if...."

Thomas put a little more force into his question, "Can I help you?"

"Oh! Quite!," the man cleared his throat and continued, obviously quite full of himself, "I have a matter of the utmost importance."

"More important than the main security uplink?" Thomas gestured to the removed panel.

"Yes, yes, much more." The man was nodding so hard Thomas thought his glasses might come off, "This is the greatest priority, I wouldn't expect you to understand."

"And what, prey tell," Thomas was doing his best not to show his irritation, "is so much more important that I have yet to be informed of it?"

"Well, we are having an issue with the camode, it's just not working you see. We keep-"

Thomas cut the man off practically throwing his hands in the air, "You are stopping me from working on the security main frame to fix a fucking toilet for you!? I'm a technician not a janitor!"

The man stood there staring at the wild fanged creature in front of him with his jaw hanging open for a moment in shock at the sudden out burst. It took him a moment but he finally found his voice, "Why...I...never," he stammered, "I'll have you know that I," he puffed out his chest, "am the personal scribe to representative Haishaw of the Orion system, representing three billion people! Just you wait," he was shaking his fat little finger now at Thomas, "till he hears how disrespectful you have been to one of his most trusted people! In fact I believe I will go tell your supervisor right now. Oh I'm sure he'll be livid enough with you!"

Thomas sighed, as frustrating as the man was he could not afford a run in with the supervisor, "As you wish, sir," he relented, "lead the way."

The squat man nodded approvingly and apparently feeling full of himself for having faced down the toothy monster in front of him, "That's the ticket there, we'll have you right and civilized in no time. And you know what I'm even feeling generous, I'll forget you ever said anything to the contrary." The man smiled as if he were extending a huge favor, "Now, no more of this aggressive behaviour, you take orders, and you follow them. Though I guess I should expect no less from a genie..."

That word, Thomas hated that word. It had haunted him for as long as he could remember. The derogatory slang for people who were modified as he was. His hands clinched around the wrench in his hand, had he human hands his knuckles would have been as white as death. Oh how easy it would be, all it would take would be a swing. He could see it now, the wrench connecting with the man's skull as his eyes rolled into the back of his head. The sickening crunch as bone gave way and he fell limply to the floor.

Thomas took another deep breath and stayed the urges and simply said between clinched teeth, "Lead the way."

The man nodded and spun around leaving Thomas to quickly gather his tools and chase after. They began to climb the stairs leading towards the main hub. Thomas tried to ignore the scribe as he yammered about politics and the happenings of the man he worked for, always painting himself as if he were some important and involved figure. By the time they reached the small doorway that led to the restrooms one might have thought the squat little man expected to receive his metals that evening.

The two entered the restroom and the man gestured Thomas over to the offending toilet. Thomas laid down and slid himself over to the toilet on immaculate floor and pried open an access port on the side of it. The toilet was simply clogged and could have cleared itself if told so but Thomas noticed the man seemed to be getting antsey so he began to pull and work on some of the other components. It did not take long though and he soon had the panel and all its contents back in place.

The scribe was practically dancing as Thomas stood and nodded the all clear to him. Leaving the irritating little man Thomas hurried back out and began to work his way down the stairs. He was half way down the last tier of steps when there came a deep thud, like an explosion. People were running some where a tier or two above him and shortly there after a thin sheet of water ran down the stairs around his feet. Thomas

could only smile to himself as he reached the bottom and returned to the panel he had removed.

Thomas pushed the wires aside enough to let him squeeze through to the space behind it. He stood up and looked down realizing he had forgotten something. He knelt down and retrieved the toolbox from outside. The place he now stood in was a narrow corridor lit dimly by the open panel behind him and distantly glowing red lights. It was a narrow space but it stretched far above him into the darkness. Just ahead it widened on one side to allow the cable bundles that ran through the space to rise vertically up a set of bars. Thomas turned to face the rising column of cables and looked into the distant darkness into which they disappeared. He shook his head a moment then knelt and removed his bag from the inside of the tool box. Digging quickly through it he pulled out a cylinder about as wide around as his thumb and half the length of his forearm. He had an old knife tucked in his boot and he removed it from its hiding place. Thomas ran his fingers up and down the bundles of cable mumbling to himself softly before seizing one and pulling it out. It was a quick operation to sever it with the knife, and only a moment later he had the two ends of the uplink stuffed into slots on the cylinder.

"I've got a new patch point for the security network," he typed.

"What took you so long?"

"I got held up...."

"That was you? What the hell did you do? The station went nuts there for a moment.

"

"Tell you later, Dex. Right now I'm going to head up."

Thomas seized a thick bundle and pulled on it experimentally as the reply came, "Fine, and speaking of going crazy, our friends are about to start shooting."

Thomas made note of it and heaved himself up the wire harness with his tail and bag hanging behind him. Hand over hand he went, slowly higher and higher. He took a moment to take a glance over his shoulder at the now small speck of red light that lit the floor far bellow. Thomas had never been really bothered by heights but the tall dark walls of the narrow corridor made him feel as if he were looking down from the top of the world. Not much further, he hoped.

Thomas reached up one more hand and felt a solid ledge where the cables branched out to run along another narrow corridor. He breathed a sigh of relief and hefted himself up on to it. He sat with his legs hanging over the edge, the climb had taken more out of him than he had expected. It was very dark up here and even with his augmented eyes he had to squint to see. This corridor was different than the one he had left bellow. While the other could be considered a very narrow hallway this one was more akin to a tunnel. It's rounded sides were ribbed and cables ran every which way around them. He strained and looked at the flattened part of the wall where the cables he had just climbed up rose.

There it was, a small bit of markings scrawled on the wall where no one had likely seen it since it was first written there. A pointless marker put there should an unfortunate repairman have to make the same climb as Thomas. The fourth level maintenance chute, a sort of highway for data uplinks and maintenance droids. The main hub was a few levels up, much closer to where he wanted to be. He needed the

ride and there was only one simple way to make a maintenance droid come by. He reached up and grabbed a bundle of cables, he folded them over the blade and pressed till the bundle parted neatly. He then dropped the severed ends and listened.

Thomas did not have to wait long, a faint noise struck his ear but it quickly got louder. He nearly jumped aside as the rounded end of a maintenance droid flew from the chute. Its long segmented tubular body reminded him of a centipede as it lurched to a stop. The droid grunted like a mechanical pig and extended a small probe to the damaged wires. It probed the two ends and then extended a second small arm and began quickly patching the cables back together.

Thomas did not wait to watch the droid go about its work. He just simply grabbed ahold of the sides and pulled himself as tight against it as possible. The segmented portions made for good hand holds but he was careful not to stick his fingers too far inside. He tensed and waited for the moment when the droid would set off again.

He did not have to wait long as the droid finished just as he was thinking he might be able to relax a bit and with another mechanical grunt rocketed forward. The sudden blast of air as they accelerated carried his hat away and threatened to take his bag too. Thomas clung for dear life as the ribs of the chute whizzed by. He tried to keep track of the droid's movements as best he could. Left, up, right, right, down, left, or was that another up? Out of the darkness another shape suddenly loomed towards him. Thomas just managed to clutch his bag to himself and hug the droid before another thundered past like a freight train. His tailsleave caught on the other droid and tore off with an unsettling sound that made him cringe.

This thing is going to kill me, he thought, I've got to find a way to stop it. Shifting, his hold to one hand, Thomas reached for his knife again. He held it out, something, anything, it just need to catch one thing. Slowly, inch by inch, he stretched his arm further till the blade caught something. The force of the strike wrenched the blade from his hand and sent it skittering away, but it seemed to have the desired effect. The maintenance droid came to a sudden halt then backed up. Thomas peeled himself away from its side as the droid went to inspect the gash caused by the knife. All he could do was crawl till he found a small square hole and drag himself inside it, safe away from the blind rush of the maintenance droids.

A little way down the small crawl space it opened up into a small room with cables running the walls and a dim red light that illuminated it from one of the walls. It was much like the corridor he had entered through the panel earlier but with a visible metal ceiling above. Thomas tried to stand but the shaking of his legs was so sevier he had to brace himself on the wall till they stopped. Opposite of where he had come in was another access panel, he wanted out of the cramped dark space on the station so he undid the fasteners without hesitation and pushed it out. He caught the panel before it could fall and set it down gently before exiting himself.

The new corridor was dimly lit by a white light here and there along its length. Its sloped metal walls and ceiling felt minuscule next to the grandiose ones of the grand halls. Thomas could make out more lights but they had probably been shut off to conserve energy in the apparently empty hallway. Ribbed supports at regular intervals along the corridor was Thomas's first hint he was somewhere near the station's exterior.

Then he caught sight of a viewport. Thomas rushed over to it and peered outside into the vacuum of space and that is when he first saw it.

Nestled in the dry dock outside the window was what he was here for, a frigate sat silently in her berth. Her rounded bow smoothly flowed into a high arched back that widened about two thirds of the way back then tapered to a horizontally flattened end flanked by two large banks of main drive engines. The top and bottom halves curved to meet one another at a sharp angle making the ship look as if she had been squashed slightly. Two rows of turrets adorned the top and bottom of each flank and a pair of large cannons protruded from where the ship widened. She was sleek and shone with a brilliance befitting of her fresh construction.

Thomas caught himself staring, awe struck at his prize. He had not expected anything like this, even after looking at the lines and schematics. He shook his head a moment to clear his thoughts and bring him back to focus. As luck would have it he was only a couple of levels below where he wanted to be. He contemplated trying his luck in the maintenance chute again but decided against it and set off down the hallway. He ran down past more windows and the sun gleaming off the frigate's metallic hull kept threatening to mesmerize him and he found himself staring at the floor in front of him as he ran. He was trying so hard to distract himself that he almost did not see the access ladder as he ran past it. Skidding to a stop he ran back to it and leapt across the open space to the closest rung. He glanced up and down, it must be for the yard workers to get around. Thomas climbed like a man possessed, he was close now, he could taste it.

Two levels later he grabbed the edge of the floor and hefted himself onto it. The corridor was much like the one he had just left below. Engaging his interface he checked where he was on his map. Just ahead, around the next corner even, was his destination. Thomas had to force himself to take it slowly as he edged along the wall to the turn. His heart raced and his tail twitched anxiously behind him. A large support ran up the wall at the corner of the turn and he pressed himself against it. From his bag he produced a small mirror that he edged around the corner slowly.

The corridor ran for a short distance before it crossed a security barrier, Thomas could smell the ionized gasses from it, and beyond that stood a single set of doors with two guards. The guards wore a black armor covered them from the top of their heads to their boots. Heavy shoulder pads overlapped an angular molded breast plate that was joined to the hip by a scale like portion. Bulky pads wrapped around the thighs were overlapped at the knee by a kneecap like plate that joined a shinguard forming the top of the boot. Both men carried a rifle clutched to their chest and the darkened blast shields of their rounded helmet made reading the expression on their faces impossible.

Thomas pulled the mirror back and heard a very soft and barely audible thrum approach from behind him. He smiled and turned to face Dexter, the droid floated so that the soft blue of its optical sensor was at eye level. The egg shaped ball rounded back and was joined at the back by two vertically curved foils. The droid's body was covered in nicks, scrapes, dents, and chips. Many might have mistaken Dexter for scrap.

"Hello," the text from Dexter read.

"Have trouble getting in?"

"No, what about you?"

Thomas wanted to grumble, "How did you manage your way in?"

"Oh I told the arrivals computer that I was a garbage barge carrying a delegation of monks from the Pegasus sector to make peace offerings to the new warship."

Thomas tilted his head at the droid, "How does that work? It doesn't even make sense."

"Well, it could not find a reason for me not to be there." Thomas could almost swear he could hear laughing. "So what have we got here?"

"Two guards and a barrier," Thomas typed to Dexter.

"I guess expecting our friends to distract all of them was too much to ask for."

"There must be a way past them."

Thomas stood in deep thought in the shadows studying the map on his display. Something, there had to be something he could use. His thoughts were violently interrupted by what he could only describe as an electronic scream somewhere down the corridor opposite the off shoot he now stood at the corner of. He covered his ears at the shrill noise that ended with a sudden explosion and what lights there were went out. Suddenly the sounds of rushing boots and Thomas snapped himself to the wall just in time for the two guards to run around the corner opposite him towards the sound. He was not going to waste any time and charged around the corner. He charged through the dead barrier and skidded to a halt in front of the two doors.

Dexter floated up next to him, "two point four seconds," he texted.

Thomas bit his lower lip and the two doors slid open. The two entered the lift and Thomas hammered the button to get it moving. The doors slid non-chilantly closed again and Thomas felt the acceleration in the pit of his stomach.

"I rerouted a small amount of power from a secondary source," came Dexter's words in Thomas' display, answering an unasked question.

Thomas gave a sigh of relief, almost there. He looked at his droid companion and if he did not know any better could have sworn the droid was smiling smugly, "What'd you do?" Thomas asked aloud, no longer afraid of being overheard.

"Oh, I convinced the cleaning droid that the main power conduit was extremely dirty and needed extensive scrubbing," the words flashed on the display.

Thomas just put his long face in his hand and shook his head laughing, "Dex, what are we going to do with you?"

The lift smoothly slowed to a halt. The two doors slid open and Thomas' ears popped as the crack appeared between them. He stepped out onto the gangway into the silent still air. His footsteps fell almost without sound as he stepped onto the smooth sterile passage way. Dimmed white lights ran the length of the ceiling but most of the light shown in through the length of windows that ran the total length of the gangway. For the first time since arriving on the station, Thomas was aware of the vacuum outside. The only sounds around him were the soft thrum of Dexter's repulsers and his own breathing. At the far side the silver sides of the ship stretched out in both directions, its hull reflecting the light around it. The view was breath taking and the chill of the thinly insulated gangway felt as if he had stepped into the middle of winter. Thomas walked down the gangway a bit and turned to look out the windows. He watched as the light of the distant star began to crest the bow where it crossed the blue horizon of the planet

bellow. He had been in space many times before but nothing had ever prepared him for what he saw now. He was filled with a sense of awe and wonder like a small child taking their first steps into the light of the world.

A soft beep in his ear called him back from his wondering thoughts and he shot a glance at Dexter, "Right....sorry."

Thomas wasted no time hurrying the rest of the distance to the identical pair of doors across from where he had come in. He pressed the control panel and stepped through the doors before they could even finish opening. On the other side lay a gleaming white heavy set door with a series of lights inset around it to illuminate the small space between the gangway doors and the ship's airlock. A black stripe of paneling angled its way down the door giving a stark contrast to the white and polished silvery sides around him. The distinct smell of mechanical workings played across Thomas' nose. He stopped before the large doors and lifted a hand.

"This is it, Dex," he said exhaling a deep breath, "the point of no return."

Dexter made a whirling sound that could almost be mistaken for a "coo" and Thomas pressed his hand on a flat surface in the center. Mechanical linkages ground to life all around them and the black portion of the door slip forward a bit and slid back, revealing a set of turning lock mechanisms shortly before a crack appeared in the door and the two portions slid apart. A blast of warm air hit him along with the smell of fresh sealant. Thomas wrinkled his nose at it and wondered how unmodifieds could ever find the smell attractive. He noted a slight ripple across his body as he stepped through the airlock door, marking his crossing into the new gravitation field of the ship's artificial gravity. The airlock's walls were rounded and smooth right down to a sharp line where they met the floor which was perforated with ventilation. The ceiling was similarly constructed to the floor and if gravity had not been pulling him away from it may have been mistaken for the floor even. At the far side of the airlock, only a few steps away, was a door identical to the one behind him.

Thomas stood in front of the door as before and checked over his shoulder to be sure Dexter was right behind him. He pressed his open palm to the center of the door again and stepped back. The whirling of mechanical linkages began from behind him and he turned to see the outer doors close and lock tight. A light hissing sound began to fill the space around him and his ears popped for a second time as the airlock began to equalize. Thomas paced back and forth a couple of times while the process completed. No sooner had the hissing stopped the inner door slid open to reveal the clean sterile lines of the new ship corridor.

Thomas stepped through the threshold and scanned for anything to indicate where on the ship he now was. The corridors were straight walled and practically shown with fresh polish. The corners where the walls met the ceilings and floor was smoothly rounded with inset lights that gave off a bright yet soft glow. Every so often a set of what looked like supports extended from the walls at even intervals. The site was beautiful, almost homely, but Thomas had to remind himself that this was a warship. The supports were probably no more than convenient cover and choke points should she be boarded. To satisfy his curiosity though he walked down to the first break. A small panel was inset on either side and he reached around it till he found a catch and pulled it open.

Sure enough two rifles sat with a few extra magazines in their racks, their dark form seeming almost out of place in the corridor.

Thomas closed the panel and turned to Dexter, "How much longer do we have?"

His interface beeped, "Five, maybe ten minutes."

"Then we better hurry," Thomas said and turned and ran down the corridor past the airlock.

Thomas's eyes scanned, looking for the maintenance cover that would lead him deep into the bowels of the ship. He skidded and backed up, almost having missed it among the other white panels of the wall. He knelt and wasted no time in prying it off. The space behind it was dimly lit by red lights that came on as the panel was removed. Dark bare metal formed all the surfaces of the crawl space. It was shaped much like the corridor but with hand holds periodically in place of the breaks.

Thomas looked at the space and then at Dexter and frowned, "I don't think you're going to fit in there, Dex."

Dexter shook as if to shake his non-existent head in a negative.

"Well, then wait for me on the bridge," Thomas said and crawled into the maintenance way without waiting for an answer.

The space was cramped and hardly even big enough for Thomas to crawl through. He had to take it painfully slow, practically pulling himself forward by his hands from one hold to the next. When he thought he was never going to reach what he wanted before the other side of the ship his hand reached for the next hand hold and grabbed into open air. He felt around and found the lip of the maintenance access and began to pull himself through. As he emerged into the space he could feel the ripple of a gravitation field change and his fur began to free float around him. Then suddenly bright white lights glowed into existence around him.

The room was spherical in shape and covered in white clean panels. Pulling himself the rest of the way into the space Thomas confirmed his earlier suspicion, the room was artificially maintained neutral gravity. Floating in the center of this space was a ball covered in dark panels with a series of blinking red, green, and yellow lights at various places around it. This was the primary computer core, exactly what Thomas had been looking for.

"Dex," said Thomas, seemingly to thin air, "I'm in the core. Can you start calculating our jump?"

His headset beeped, "I'll do what I can, but I will need the latest drift charts."

"Well get on that, I'm going to start slicing into this thing, sure the charts are on here somewhere."

With that Thomas kicked off from the maintenance access to the core. The panels made for good purchase and the inertial dampeners kept it locked in place as if it had been welded there. Thomas admired the design, the spherical shape meant that all peripheral processes were equidistant from the core processes in the center, ensuring the fastest possible relay between all systems. And the dampeners would likely fail in a crash, guaranteeing destruction of the system should the ship be lost. He did not have time to admire it long though. Finding a panel he pulled it open to reveal the circuitry beneath. He pulled out a pair of cables and stripped them. Reaching into his bag he

pulled out one of the small cylinder like before and wired it into the system before pushing the whole mess back into place.

"Ok, Dex, I need a picture of what I'm looking at."

There was a moment's pause then a schematic ran across his display. Thomas studied it quickly then flipped himself around and hand walked himself around to the next panel he needed. He pulled it open, stripped the wires as before, and set a third cylinder inside. He continued like this as fast as he could, moving around the sphere with his legs dangling behind him. Then suddenly a broadcast started through the ship.

"Welcome! Welcome!" the voice began, Dexter must have hacked into the ship's intercom and was broadcasting the ceremony for him, "We stand here today at Galaleo shipyard to commemorate the launch of our newest warship."

There was a pause and Thomas took the opportunity to shout over the applause, "Dex, better start warming it up. Do it quietly and shut all external vents and sinks."

The broadcast began again continuing to welcome people to the event as Thomas' interface beeped a response from Dexter, "That will raise the temperate dramatically."

"I don't care Dex, do it anyways!"

The broadcast had moved on to new subjects, "How appropriate it is we stand here today on this station. So aptly named for such noble work. After all Galaleo was the first man to dream of concurring the stars...."

Thomas scoffed and pulled open another panel peering inside and shook his head listening with a sigh, they needed more time.

"Dex," Thomas yelled again, "I need a distraction, slow them up as best you can."

"Affirmative," came the simple reply.

Moments later the announcer was cut off by a sudden fan fair of horns. Thomas mused at the thought of the fat speaker's face caught suddenly by the ruckus of instruments. But he could not stop, or soon he would have a ship full of soldiers. He yanked open one last panel as the music stopped suddenly and the speaker made his appologies for the "technical difficulties" before continuing his earlier speech. Thomas was panting in the heat and practically slammed the last panel shut.

His interface beeped, "All calculations are set and systems are warmed up and ready."

"Perfect timing, Dex," He gasped, taking a moment to catch his breath when he heard the speaker begin to enter the home leg, "Son of a.... Dex! Give us full power! We need full thrust now!"

The light thrum that pervaded the ship suddenly grew and then began to deepen as Thomas felt a faint acceleration in his gut. He turned himself and pressed his feet against the core as gasps and shouts began to filter through on the broadcast. The speaker stopped speaking and began yelling at someone else where. Thomas pushed smoothly off the core and catching the edge of the maintenance access threw himself inside it. He crawled back out into the white corridor and brushed himself off. He turned and ran to the bridge. As he reached the bridge the heat had become intense, his tongue hung out of his mouth and his breathing was in ragged gasps. He stopped for a second to take a quick glance and then threw himself into one of the helmsman positions.

"I need," Thomas swallowed for a second, "I need visuals, and turn off that blasted

racket."

The broadcast, which at this point had dissolve mostly into yelling and confusion, suddenly stopped and the dark screens around the bridge suddenly leapt into life. The image cleared and Thomas looked just in time to see them begin to clear the confines of the drydock. He grabbed the controls at the station and pushed them forward to increase thrust. The ship response was nearly immediate as it began to accelerate towards open space.

"Dex you got those coordinates set and everything spooled?" Thomas' headset beeped an affirmative. "Good then send them to me and open all vents and sinks on my mark!"

The ship cleared the drydock and began to accelerate more rapidly now that it was free of the power restraints. Thomas mentally counted down the seconds and then yelled at Dexter.

"Now!"

There was a whirl and set of mechanical clicking sounds and suddenly the view outside became awash with plasma ionized particles that danced around the ship. Many would have stopped to admire the beauty of the moment, but Thomas knew he could not afford the luxury. He flicked a few switches and then triggered the jump drive. A shiver of energy ran down the ship and a crack in space appeared at its bow. Light began to distort around it, bending back along the length of the ship but the crazed energies venting from the ship hid it from outside view. Then in a bright flash they were gone, vanishing into the vastness of space.