

## Chapter Four

Rumil found herself hiding in a cardboard box tipped on its side, and she couldn't help but recognize the irony.

"Fifteen staryears later, and I'm cowering under boxes again," Rumil muttered to herself.

She started to think about that time, but she quickly suppressed the memory. She needed sleep desperately, and she wasn't going to get it thinking back on her past.

Even then, sleep did not come easily to her. She was certain that Timothy Honore was lurking just around the corner, waiting for her to fall asleep. Even if she somehow escaped him, no doubt it would be right into the clutches of Justin Feroz, who was surely also waiting for her to make a mistake.

When she finally did manage to sleep, she was plagued with the same nightmares that have haunted her since she was a child. She dreamed of being surrounded by complete pervasive darkness, save for a large clawed hand that was rising out of the void, as if trying to snare her very soul. No matter how she tried to avoid it, the red-scaled hand flecked with flaming red hairs kept getting closer, until the ichor-stained claws disappeared from her vision. From between the gaps of the menacing fingers, she could see the outline of horns, and of teeth that would make a Ferian seethe in jealousy...

Jerking awake, and nearly ripping the box with her flailing, she fought back the initial impulse to scream. She instead panted heavily, wiping away sweat that threatened to slip through her saturated eyebrows. Peeking up outside the box, she noticed that the sun had set, and that darkness once again reigned over that hemisphere of Talos.

She knew what she had to do now, even though she didn't like it, and no doubt her employer would not, either. But she had no other choice. Stepping out of the box, her eyes scanned the darkness for the network terminal that usually rested outside every building with a GalNet connection. Fortunately, she spotted one right across the alley, running across the fire escape steps.

She liked that idea because it meant she didn't have to go out in the open street. She wasn't even sure if she was safe in this alley, much less out in the open, nighttime or not.

She managed to hook the nails of her thin fingers underneath the terminal cover. With a grunt of exertion, the cover came off, flying out of her hands and landing with a loud clang on the alley floor below. Rumil froze, her eyes and ears probing her surroundings for any signs that anybody was approaching to investigate.

Five ticks passed before Rumil dared turn her attention back to the GalNet terminal. She examined the haphazard mess of wires; a tangle of red, yellow, brown, and blue. Judging from the fused portion of the red transfer cable that led to the network splitter, it appeared that she was not the first person to do what she planned to do to this box.

"Good thing, too... I don't have the proper cutters with me," Rumil muttered, and proceeded to work the fused section apart. Taking the smaller copper-colored wires inside the plastic cover, she unwove them and reconnected the plugs. Removing her PCU from her satchel, she confirmed her initial concern: the GalNet box was a significantly older model, and the plugs inside were incompatible with the slots on her unit. With a resigned sigh, she reached back inside her satchel.

After some rummaging, she took out a remote networking adapter, resembling nothing more than a small black cube a little less than a Tackem to a side. She connected the network box's plug to one slot on the adapter, connected the adapter to her unit, then opened and turned

on the unit as she sat down and placed it across her legs. The size of her dual-mobile model was inconvenient at times, but mono-mobiles didn't have the power or capacity she sometimes needed, and carrying two PCUs for hacking meant there was twice the liability if one was confiscated or stolen.

Her login screen appeared on the display and she entered her password, then accessed her network features. To her expectations, the GalNet flared to life before her, and she quickly typed in the address to the general access chat sites. Working entirely from memory through the network quagmire, she typed in requests for a very specific user to join her.

Normally, such requests were not answered promptly for any number of reasons, but she knew that the user on the other end would reply quickly, and true to form, he did.

*>>This had better be good, Bonamede.*

Rumil didn't have much patience for her contact's attitude.

***>>Stuff it. I'm in a real bind here. I've got a Solarian and a Kiros Knight on my tail, and I can't get off planet.***

***>>I see. The Solarian Military has seized your currency card... You've put us all in danger just contacting me.***

***>>How else was I supposed to get out of here?***

***>>You won't. I'm leaving now.***

For a brief moment, Rumil was about to panic, then regained her cool long enough to type:

***>>You know all too well that I'm the only one that has any hope of getting into the Kiros and Solarian servers. No one else in the organization has my skill.***

There was another pause from the other end, and Rumil was beginning to worry that her contact had indeed left. Finally, the reply came:

***>>All right... you win. I'll arrange passage for you to get off planet. You'll find the instructions on your fifth messaging protocol. Do not contact this protocol, through message, or chat, ever again, as it is probably already been compromised.***

***>>Understood.***

***>>You better come through for me, Bonamede. The boss is not going to look kindly on this action.***

***>>I won't fail. I can't fail.***

***>>You're right, you can't.***

With that, the connection terminated, leaving Rumil alone again. She discovered she was trembling, but not due to any chill. It didn't matter where she ran to... she was terrified of every side.

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As Rumil's contact feared, the chat room had been compromised. From the PCU resting on his lap, Timothy Honore monitored the conversation. He frowned at the contact's parting orders. Timothy had only managed to detail out *four* of Rumil's messaging protocols, and those had been tough to divine to begin with.

Rumil used public-domain protocols, and no doubt her contacts did as well. These protocols could be totally anonymous, meaning they didn't require any personal information whatsoever to start one. People wanting to use such protocols could leave every information field blank, if they so desired. It made it very hard to track down potential criminals.

Fortunately, he did get something out of the discussion. Like Timothy had suspected, there was a higher influence running the show, and Rumil was not their only hacker... but from the tone, she was one of their best.

He had to admit that she was quite wily. She had discovered his carefully placed tracking module, as well as eluded capture when he had closed his sting. The young blonde had managed to keep one step ahead of him so far, but he was determined that it not remain the case for long.

Her parting words to her contact continued to ring through his head. She had said she "couldn't fail." Why? What was her employer holding over her head that she felt she *had* to succeed?

Timothy was not comfortable with so many questions, as it made his job considerably tougher. If Rumil was being coerced somehow into hacking for whoever was employing her, he didn't want to get too rough, not if he wanted to keep a clean conscience.

He finally lifted his head from his display, and analyzed the starport around him. It was dismally empty, which was somewhat surprising for a metropolis of this size. Artificial lighting was lined up in rows across the white textured ceiling, and it cast light down onto sixteen rows of red cloth chairs, ten to each row, with a long aisle dividing them down the middle. He sat in the farthest northwest corner seat, with a clear view of the main entrance so he could analyze all the comings and goings into the area. Only three people were in the waiting area with him, but from his position, he couldn't tell much beyond the fact that they were male, judging from their hairstyles and manner of dress.

He had anticipated that Rumil would attempt to leave tonight, but judging from the implied meanings in the chat, that wasn't going to be the case. That meant she could feasibly wind up heading to any of the three starport regions in the city, and at any time.

He had to start his search almost from scratch. He considered questioning the staff from the Ducha Delight, Rumil's last confirmed location, but decided that they probably wouldn't have much information to give him. Besides, gathering the staff for such questioning would probably take time he couldn't afford.

As that thought passed, his comm unit beeped three times, and he quickly snapped it up and flipped open the small black device. Timothy had never counted on luck in any of his investigations, but he never complained when he got any, as he did right now.

A thin, red-haired Arcadian face with bloodshot green eyes popped up on the minute screen, and said, "Knight Honore, we have found something you might find useful. A GalNet transfer box was broken into on an alley between 110 and 112 East Severn Causeway. It might be your hacker... but I doubt it. A lot of hackers use that trick to get into the GalNet, and remain out of public eye."

Timothy nodded. "Right now, I'll take anything I can find. Thank you. You've been a great help, Captain."

The enforcement officer huffed, and replied, "Well, anything that gets you and that hacker off my planet, I'm completely game for."

Timothy didn't respond to the comment. There had always been tension between Arcadians and Solarians. Fortunately, that didn't stop them from assisting each other as much as feasibly possible. Finally, Timothy said, "Regardless, I admire your assistance, despite your concerns."

"Yeah well... perhaps you aren't such a bad character yourself, Honore. I'd advise you not to stick around too much longer before I change my mind."

"Have you heard any reports about a Kiros Knight in the area?"

"Not as of yet. All I know is that one arrived about a day after you did. He hasn't contacted us at all."

"He seems pretty content on having me do the work, and then swoop in like a vulture... typical Kiros, I suppose."

"And typical Solarian too," the officer stated dryly. "I'll be honest, you've been the first Erani investigator I've seen who's actually been willing to do any dirty work at all. They've always had us handle the job, then take the credit for it, Kiros and Solarian alike."

Timothy cringed at the thought, and didn't like the idea of his fellow Knights and Army comrades being labeled in that fashion, even if he ruefully admitted to himself that it was somewhat accurate. Finally, he laughed softly, and said, "Perhaps I'll end this transmission while we still are on talking terms. Good night, Captain. Get some sleep. You look like you need it."

"I'd wish the same for you... but I doubt that you will get much tonight," the officer said tiredly, rubbing his eyes with his right hand. "Good night, Honore."

Timothy closed the comm unit with a smirk and folded up his PCU, sliding it into his luggage pack and closing up the hard-covered container that was nearly as large as he. Nonetheless, he effortlessly lifted the pack in his left arm and, while holding his right arm out for balance, carried it off to the security modules along the back of the waiting area. Timothy examined the module numbers for the one he had reserved earlier, and tapped his combination onto the keypad. Opening the heavy hypersteel door, he slid his luggage pack into the large interior and closed the module again. The door snapped shut with a reassuring clang of hard, unyielding metal, and Timothy strode away, leaving the waiting area, and out the main entrance to the starport.

Meanwhile, as Timothy left, the person farthest in the front of the waiting area regarded him cautiously. Justin Feroz wished he had brought sound enhancement equipment with him; then he could have heard just what Timothy was talking about, and to whom he was talking.

"Trust me, I *can* dampen my aura, moron," Justin whispered as he rubbed his throat, angrily leering at the exit the Solarian had used to leave the starport. It *still* throbbed with pain whenever he took too deep of a breath, and Justin was *really* looking forward to returning the favor when it presented itself. However, right now, he had other concerns than revenge.

Once he was certain that Timothy was a good distance away, Justin rushed to the security modules. He stopped in front of one of them, certain that it was the one that Timothy had used. Normally, his superiors would have frowned on what he planned to do, but they had specified very clearly that it was of the utmost importance for Justin to bring the hacker to justice. He had quickly realized that Timothy had likely been put on the case considerably earlier, and so Justin needed to know whatever the Solarian knew.

Justin frowned. Had his father conceded to allowing Justin to pursue the case when he

had first asked, Justin might not have been in this mess. As it was, it had taken a full ten-cycle before his father finally agreed... and that had put Justin at a considerable disadvantage.

Thus, the Kiros Knight was resorting to theft, of a sort. He slipped his hand into a sensory glove, and touched the keypad of the storage module. He waited for the processors in the glove to work out a compatible interface with the lock mechanism, and tapped in the appropriate commands on the wrist of the glove. Finally, once Justin had broken through the coded data, he just let the glove guide his fingers along the keypad, tapping out the correct combination. The door suddenly cracked ajar with a soft click, and Justin smiled in satisfaction, quickly opening the door like an anxious child ripping open a present... only to find nothing in the module.

Justin blinked three times, and realized the obvious truth. He had picked the wrong storage module. Glancing to his right and left, he knew that it was *one* of the modules nearby.

Looking back to the waiting area, it didn't appear that anyone was paying any attention to him, nor had any security officers been through recently. "Thank the Creator God for inept security," Justin mused as he shuffled one module to his left, repeating the process he performed on the first one. This one opened as well, and fortunately for Justin, *this* module contained the luggage pack he was looking for.

Justin examined the locking mechanism for a brief while, and then went over the combination he had spied off just moments before. Sliding the combination bars into their proper order, he heard the pleasant sound of the locks releasing, and pushed the top of the pack open. Now confronted with neatly folded and arranged articles of clothing and hygiene, he began carefully weaving through it in search of the PCU that Timothy had placed inside.

"Tsk... tsk... what a square. I wonder if he even folds his socks..."

...beep...

The sudden sound quickly drew Justin's attention. Most luggage packs that he had encountered didn't beep, regardless of the reason. He paused his search, looking for the source of the sound.

...beep...

Now he was concerned. Based on the little experience Justin had, Timothy was a clever and vicious sort when provoked, and Justin didn't doubt for one second that searching the Solarian's luggage pack would provoke him. Finally, he saw the small black detonator device underneath the front flap of the pack... its red light preparing to beep the third and final time.

Unfailingly, it did so, followed with a surprisingly large explosion.

Justin leaped back with all his strength as the luggage pack promptly burst into a plume of flame. Even then, he had to quickly teleport the remaining several Tacks to avoid being consumed by the fiery wake.

His teleport was somewhat haphazard, and Justin fell on his backside as the fiery plume died away, leaving only Timothy's unflappably resilient carbide armor remaining where once the entire pack had been. The walls around the security module were now painted in shades of charred black that gradually faded from the blast point.

The Kiros Knight panted heavily at his narrow escape, and then impulsively shouted, "That Solarian is a *lunatic*! He needs to be put away before he *kills* somebody!" In a softer voice, he added to himself, "Namely me..."

Justin then saw the approaching mass that was starport security. "Of all the times to decide to do your duty..." Justin mumbled before he jumped to his feet, and bolted at top speed out of the starport. By the time security also burst out the main exit, Justin had disappeared into

the night.

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Timothy followed the directions he had been given to the site of the network box in question. Glancing around to make sure that he wasn't disturbing anything, he jumped up the fire escape to the exposed terminal. It didn't take a long examination for him to determine that the box had indeed been hacked into. However, he would not be able to determine if Rumil was responsible without doing some hacking for himself.

In a sequence of events extremely similar to the one Rumil had just used a mere tenth-cycle before, Timothy had his PCU running the GalNet, trying to locate the user protocols that had passed through recently. He smirked as he connected his unit into the frayed wires of the beleaguered terminal box. He had sensed someone watching him back at the starport, and so had used a little sleight of hand to make said observer think he had put the unit into his luggage pack. *Anyone* who tried to then break into the pack would be in for a bit of a surprise.

Transmitting the request via his investigative status, he was then assaulted by all the users that had sent and received data through the box. Several hundred logins had been recorded, but Timothy expected as much. Even private GalNet usage had a considerable amount of logging, much less a business like the one this particular box was mounted onto. He scrolled the display down to the latest accesses, and his eyes finally stopped at the second to last one. All the other logins had a routing code, corresponding to the network console they had used inside the building. However, this one had no such number, suggesting the login came through *before* it split off into the various consoles in the building. Logically, he came to the conclusion that the hacker, whoever he or she was, used that login.

Timothy was ninety percent certain that the hacker in question was Rumil, but wasn't willing to bet it all just yet. There *were* a considerable number of notable hackers on just this planet, and so Timothy went deeper to gather more information, running the login through the public domain database. While the downside to public protocols was that anybody could get one with no personal information, at the same time the account's activity is open to be viewed by *anyone*, and Timothy didn't even need to use his investigative privilege.

What followed was a list of individual service protocols that extended almost as long as the login list for the network box. Hundreds of messaging protocols, chat protocols, site protocols, and others flew about the display. Timothy instinctively went to the fifth messaging protocol, but knew better than to be so naive. He would have to arrange to have eyes on *every* protocol, to ensure that he got exactly what he wanted.

He packaged up all the protocols that he was able to discern, just to make sure that none of them were being masked as something else, and had them sent to Investigative Services on Centris, capital of Solaria. He concluded with the message that surveillance of every protocol on that list was of the utmost urgency, and to return anything they may find with all due haste.

Satisfied that he had done all he could feasibly do, Timothy prepared to return to the starport, when he got another buzz on his comm display.

The same tired enforcement officer appeared on the screen, his face reflecting extreme disdain. "Knight Honore... I wish to inform you that your luggage pack exploded in South Starport Number 3."

"Any casualties?" Timothy asked with genuine concern. He had expected Justin Feroz – concluding that Justin was the only person who'd be interested in Timothy's luggage – to *at least*

take the pack to a secluded location.

“Fortunately, no... but I am afraid to say that everything save your armor was completely incinerated.”

“That’s fine,” Timothy answered, his voice reflecting his relief. “Clothes I can replace, lives I cannot. I’ll return as soon as possible to collect my items. Thank you, Captain.”

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Timothy recovered his carbide armoring twenty ticks later, and put it on since he no longer had a luggage pack, but it was not until two tenth-cycles after dawn that he finally got word back from Centris. They came to report that they had indeed intercepted a transmission to one of the messaging protocols with instructions as to where a flight would be leaving off Talos.

Timothy regarded the instructions warily. North Side Starport #1, flight leaving for Fraus Starport in Iomet, Altair at 9.15 ET. It didn’t seem like it would be this easy to hunt down Rumil again. He didn’t need to consult his comm to have a pretty good idea just what time it was, but out of habit did so anyway, and the small device confirmed it was already 8.22 ET. Normally, that would have been plenty of time, but unfortunately, he had never seen *any* of the North Side Starports, and even if he had, it would likely be so hectic there that teleporting into the thick of it could be quite dangerous.

Thus, he hastened to the nearest rail station, which he was able to see from his position on the street. He waited at the sliding panel doors long enough for him to squeeze through, and rushed up to the ticket desk. A Demodian, her hair dyed a unique shade of neon green, scowled at Timothy’s impertinence. “I’m sorry, sir, but I will have to ask you to get in line like everyone else.”

Timothy flipped open his credit fold, making sure that his ID was clearly visible. “I am Solarian Knight Timothy Honore, working with the Talos Enforcement Office. I request *immediate* transit to North Side Starport number One.”

The lady frowned, but couldn’t adequately dispute Timothy’s claim, the carbide armor painting as clear of a picture as possible that he was more than some fraud trying to get a quick seat. Rather than hold up the line any further, she conceded, “Very well, Sir. Board rail sixty-four on track seven, and we will arrange the rest.”

“Thank you, miss. I appreciate your assistance,” Timothy replied, bolting full speed towards the rail that he had been instructed to board. Once he literally jumped from the waiting pad into the door of the rail, he allowed himself to relax.

Seating on the rail appeared to be tightly packed at best. There were only five other people on the rail, but the seats looked as though they were made for humanoids less than a Tack and a half in height, which ruled out almost the entire Arcadian majority on this world. As it was, even Timothy’s rather slight Erani frame would be crunched trying to fit in the minimal space between the blue padded-cloth bucket seats bolted to the rail floor.

Timothy addressed the group, and said, “I apologize for any inconvenience, but this rail will have to make a no-stop route to the North Side Starports. I am sure that you will be reimbursed for your trouble.” Outside of five frustrated groans, there was surprisingly little objection to the statement.

Stepping along the grooved rubber flooring that was likely used to siphon off wet shoes and boots, he quickly slid into the front seat of the rail. Looking back to the front desk, he waved appreciatively as the rail door slid closed, and the automated systems kicked in. The rail

initially jerked, and then smoothly slid along the fixed track with almost awe-inspiring speed, soon rising over the tops of all the buildings in the city save the tallest commerce towers. Had Timothy been a little less anxious as to his hopefully timely arrival, he might have allowed himself the luxury to examine the sight of Talos from this new vantage point.

Viewed from the high above, the city looked considerably less tainted than from street level. Someone on the rail would only see majestic buildings, both of antiquated brick and smooth polished hypersteel and fiberwall. The personal vehicles and people would appear merely as ants, so visitors would be unable to see the muggings, the prostitution, the crime and immorality. However, they would also miss the charity, the families, and the inner communities.

The bullet-shaped rail veered along the magnetic guide to the left, swerving past a towering skyscraper. Its mirrored windows reflected the rail as it passed, as well as the morning sun. Timothy was momentarily blinded by the gleam out of the corner of his eye.

Despite that, Timothy Honore never squinted, never even turned his head from its position straight ahead, as if his skull was fixed solid to his neck. His focus was dedicated to one goal, one purpose, and that one purpose alone. So intense was that focus he didn't even think to regard the powerful psionic aura following him from below...

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Justin Feroz knew that there was no way that he'd be able to keep pace with the rail zipping over the city in the taxi vehicle that he had "commandeered." However, at least the Kiros Knight had a vague idea where his Solarian counterpart was heading, and could try to plan accordingly. Pushing the throttle of his hover to its full acceleration, he took off after his quarry.