

HIGH NOON ON PROXIMA B

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JUSTICE AND PROSPERITY

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Asteroid 11-471 was one of millions of rocks trapped in the sun's orbit, but to the Dobbins family, it was hope. Ben and Tonya Dobbins spent all their savings and sold all their belongings for a chance at a better life not for them, but for their four children. Their future was in the stars, and they were determined to make the best of it.

Ben Dobbins laughed as Tonya squeezed his butt through his A-suit. The mine shafts had been secured and oxygenated for months, but old precautions were still taken. He turned to face his wife, her honey-brown skin glowing. He swept his hand over her braided hair, and they kissed.

"I wish I was going with you," she said.

"No, you don't," he replied.

Tonya patted her plump belly. "I'd rather be working than pregnant, especially on this rock. It's all your fault."

"I remember someone else involved, as well."

Tonya punched his stomach. "Get out of here."

Seven, their service bot, joined them at the door. It held up his lunch cannister.

"You forgot this, Mr. Dobbins."

"Thank you, Seven. At least something around here has a memory."

"You're welcome, sir," Seven said. "I'll attend to breakfast."

The couple watched Seven stroll into the kitchen.

"It was expensive but worth it," Tonya said.

“I wouldn’t say all that,” Ben replied.

Tonya pushed him toward the door.

“Get out of here before you make me mad.”

“Love you,” Ben said.

“Love you, too.”

Ben walked down the corridor to the main tunnel. Five minutes later, the work sled appeared, packed with his shift members. They greeted him with grunts and waves as he climbed into the sled.

“It’s gonna be a great day,” he said.

Marcus Delany chuckled. “You have to say that. You’re the supervisor.”

Ben patted the blond man on the back. “We work for ourselves, remember? I feel like we were close to another vein yesterday. All the signs were there.”

Sherry Rosenstein nodded in agreement. “One more and we’re off this piece of shit.”

“Cluster, here we come!” Yuri shouted.

“Hey!” Ben said. “Don’t talk about home like that!”

They all laughed. The covert colony had collected enough rare metals to pay for jump-ship transit and recolonization documents to the Cluster. Another good strike would set them up for life. They voted to extend their time for that very reason, despite increasing their chances of detection. It was all or nothing.

The shuttle sped down the corridor until it reached the drop shaft. It hovered and its passengers prepared for the descent. As the craft made the final adjustments, there was a flash from above. The shuttle exploded.

Seven was prepping the dishes for the washer when it detected motion at the entrance. Determining it was probably Mr. Dobbins returning for some forgotten item, it placed the dishes down and proceeded to the door. It was almost there when the door burst inward, slamming against it with a force that knocked it to the floor. Seven attempted to rise but its leg joints were damaged and it was pinned under the door by trampling boots. Its sound sensors picked up noises of distress followed by weapon blasts. The blasts continued until the screaming stopped. Seven sent out a distress signal and struggled to stand. The door was lifted and two humans in atmosphere suits looked down on it, their faces obscured by their shields.

“What is that?” one of them said.

“Server bot,” the other replied. “Must be a wealthy colony if they can afford that.”

“Hey,” another voice said. “We hit the jackpot!”

“The fuck you talking about?”

“They’re mining rare earth metals! They have a shitload of it!”

“Bingo!” one of the humans said. “I told you prowling the Belt would be worth it. Let’s find the cache then sprint.”

“What about the bot?”

“What about it? We got minerals.”

“Never leave anything to waste.”

A human reappeared. It extended a tubelike object. There was a flash, and Seven’s sensors went dead.

Danforth Anderson sat at the small dining room table, then took off his helmet, revealing his grizzled face. He removed his gloves, then rustled his straw-blond hair with a calloused hand before gazing around the cramped space. A frown formed on his face, and he spat on the cheap tile floor. He’d spent most of his life living in shit quarters like this, hewing rock for the Corpos before he got smart and stole an old transport ship and changed his life. Ever since then, he’d been a pain in the ass for them. But even revenge gets old. It was time to move on, to get back to living. This was a big step.

He stood, then walked through the quarters. He passed the little bedrooms, then entered the family space. The woman lay there dead with the children, their blood splattered on the walls and pooling on the floor. Dan squatted to get a closer look at them. Dead people stopped bothering him a long time ago, especially since he was the one who killed most of the ones he’d seen. He grabbed the woman’s hair, then looked into her lifeless eyes.

“Pretty,” his said with a gravelly voice. “Too bad.”

He stood, then left the room. As he entered the main room, Skyles hit him on the comm.

“Talk to me.”

“We found a hauler,” she said.

“Can it fly?”

“Yep.”

“Good. Have the boys gather the rich rock and take it to *Blade*. Once y’all get it all secure, meet me at the living quarters.”

“Will do.”

Danforth took a tour of the illicit base while his boys loaded the ship, his countenance hardening with every corpse he passed. It wasn't the carnage that bothered him; it was the unnecessary use of it. These people had been defenseless. It would have been just as easy to round them up, take the rich rock, then fly away. It was an illegal dig, which meant they couldn't report what happened even if they'd wanted. He shouldn't have put Kelly in charge of the landfall. The man was a murderer. Toby and Matt did whatever Kelly told them to do. Danforth decided he'd make better decisions next time.

He worked his way back to the main chamber. His comm clicked again.

“Talk to me.”

“We're here.”

“Good. On my way.”

Danforth ducked his head as he entered the main chamber. Kelly, Toby, and Matt stood shoulder to shoulder, their suits decorated with clothing and other items they'd taken from the people they killed. Skyles sauntered up to him, a smirk on her face.

“This is what we've been waiting for,” she said.

“Yes, it is,” Danforth replied.

Danforth smiled before he addressed them all.

“Boys!” he said. “We've been scouring these rocks for five years hoping to hit the jackpot. Well, here it is!”

The chamber echoed with cheers.

“Y'all have made me a rich man,” Danforth said.

Kelly's face went from jovial to stone cold.

“You? What about the rest of us?”

Danforth answered him with a bullet to the forehead. Skyles shot Toby through the neck; Danforth emptied his gun in Matt's back as he attempted to run away. Skyles put an extra round into each of them before standing by Danforth.

“Should have done this a long time ago,” she said.

“Better late than never,” Danforth replied.

“We'll have to get a new crew,” Skyles said.

“We will, once we jump to the Cluster.”

Skyles grinned. “Prosperity is one step closer.”

Danforth patted her shoulder.

“It is.”

Keeko peered at the damaged circuit board through his magnifier, the hot soldering iron quivering in his left hand. The medicine was wearing off, and the trembles had returned.

“Fuck!” he hissed.

He placed the soldering iron down and groaned as he stood then scratched his ass. Fluffing back his salt-and-pepper Afro with his fingers, he shuffled across the repair room to his medicine box. He opened the container, then frowned. He was down to his last two. Keeko shrugged as he took the bottle from the box, popped open the lid, then dumped the pills into his mouth. He ambled to his fridge, took out a water bottle, and washed the bitter medicine down his throat. He held out his hand, watching it until the trembling subsided. Keeko trudged back to his workbench and was about to pick up his soldering iron when the entrance door slid aside. Mario strode into the shop, a bot draped over his shoulder. Keeko’s eyes went wide. He jumped to his feet, waving his hands.

“Mario! Don’t—”

Mario dumped the bot on to Keeko’s workbench, shattering his magnifier and the circuit board.

“You dumbass!” Keeko shouted. “Look what you did!”

Mario looked at the workbench, then shrugged.

“My bad. Hey, boss wants you to harvest this bot’s core. He’s got a buyer for the body.”

“Might as well give him the core,” Keeko said as he lifted the bot to get what was left of the board and his magnifier.

“Nothing’s free,” Mario replied. “You should know that by now.”

Keeko scowled. “How soon does he need it?”

“Tomorrow.”

Mario didn’t wait to ask if tomorrow was possible. Bossman’s word was law; if he wanted it done the next day, it would be done. Keeko didn’t need another month added to his indentured contract.

Keeko perused the bot before cracking it. This was a quality unit, definitely not salvage. Whoever brought it in stole it. If it was raiders, the owners were probably dead, too. The number 7 was etched on its left breast, another sign of a high-quality job. Now here it was, resting on the tabletop of an indentured repairman’s workbench. Couldn’t get any lower. He probed the cranium until he located the seam. He popped it opened, then

extracted the core. Keeko tossed it, then caught it. It was dense, which indicated high-level programming. Procedure called for him to wipe and recondition it, but Bossman said the shell had to be ready by tomorrow. He placed the core on a nearby shelf, then cleared his workstation. There was a buyer's holotag on the body. They wanted the shell to be converted into a pleasure bot, which meant he'd have to do a lot of wet work. That also meant sealing off the frame to make sure there would be no seepage before dunking the shell into a skin vat.

Keeko went to work, changing his soldering tip and switching to an appropriate solder for the task. All the while he worked, he kept glancing at the core. It wasn't often that he had access to a unit that interacted with humans as a domestic. He was curious about what images it stored, what secrets it contained that he could harvest and sell on the Mesh. The thought made him hurry; he completed the sealing in half the time. He rolled the shell onto a cart, then pushed it through the clutter to his skin vat. He grimaced; it had been so long since he used the thing that the solution had soured. It took another hour to drain the vat and replace the elixir, which luckily had not gone bad as well. As the solution warmed, he slathered nano paste onto the shell. The prep alarm rang, and Keeko submerged the shell into the vat. It would take ten hours for the skin to form, and another three hours for it to cure. That gave him enough time to finish his board repair, then dive into that server core.

"The hell with it," he said. "I deserve a break."

Keeko got the core from the shelf, then placed it on his table. He went to the fridge again, this time for bread and meat paste. He made a quick sandwich, grabbed his water, then ambled back to his bench. Keeko pulled open his bench drawer, then took out his Ocs. He put them on, then linked to the core.

"Okay, let's see what you got," he whispered.

He tapped the on button and the app intro started. Keeko skipped it with the twitch of his head.

"Last entry," he said.

The image swirled, then he was standing at a kitchen counter, prepping dishes. Keeko felt the wetness on his fingertips, then shut off the neural sensors. He wanted to see the last minutes, not feel them. He had no idea what was about to go down.

There was a banging on the door.

“Oh shit,” Keeko mumbled, his mouth filled with sandwich. Seven went to the door. There was an explosion, and the door slammed into the bot. The rest was carnage. Keeko stopped eating. He watched until the recording went dead, then took off the Ocs. There were tears in his eyes. He knew shit like that happened all the time in the Belt, but to see it was another thing. He waited for a few more moments before putting the Ocs on again. He gestured with his hands as he fast-forwarded through the grim parts and uploaded the faces of the raiders. He linked to the Mesh to transfer the images, then stopped. Who was he kidding? Even if he was able to find the bastards, who would go after them? The law was too busy trying to keep “undesirables” from jumping to the Cluster. Nobody gave a damn about a bunch of murdered squatters.

“File it away, Keeko,” he said. “Ain’t nothing you can do.”

Skyles maneuvered *Blade* as close to the ship before them as she dared. Danforth looked ahead to the transition gate and smiled. The line wasn’t as long as he remembered from ten years ago. It was getting more and more expensive to buy passage, and the means to getting enough crits were getting fewer. Finding that squatters camp was a true blessing.

Skyles set the ship on auto, then pulled up her holoboard. Her well-manicured fingers flashed across the keys as she prepared them for inspection. Danforth looked at her with a frown.

“You sure this is going to work?”

“You better hope it does,” she said. “Just get ready to do your part.”

“I’m always ready,” Danforth said.

Twenty minutes passed before they were next in line.

“Hook up,” Skyles said. “We’re on.”

Danforth linked his comm to the system. There was a brief moment of painful static before the link connected.

“Access,” a metallic voice said.

Skyles opened their system to the gate. She looked at Danforth and winked as they waited.

“Welcome to the Gate, Goliath Enterprises,” the voice said. “Your documents check out. A passage fee of twelve million crits is required.”

“Twelve million! Since when?”

“Since right now,” the metallic voice replied.

"I request barter," Danforth said.

There was no response. Danforth looked at Skyles and she shrugged.

"Prepare for boarding," the metallic voice finally responded.

"I'll get the hatch ready," Danforth said.

He worked his way to the rear of the transport and sealed the hatch. A few minutes later, the ship shook as the Gate shuttle contacted and attached. Danforth closed the chamber before opening it to the shuttle hatch. The hatch opened and the Unity gatekeeper stepped into the void. He was Clusterone, thick at the shoulders and hips, narrow everywhere else. He waited until the atmosphere cleared before removing his helmet. This one was bald, which was rare. Clusterones were vain about their appearance, especially their hair. Danforth forced a smile to his face before opening the chamber.

"What are you bartering?" he asked.

Not one for conversation, Danforth thought.

"Rich rock," he said.

The Clusterer's eyebrows rose.

"Let's see it."

Danforth led him to the cargo hold. He punched in the access code and the door slid aside. The officer followed him inside.

"How many tons?" he asked.

"Five hundred."

The agent went to the ore. He took a mineral analyzer from his pocket, then scanned it. He cut a side eye at Danforth as he put the analyzer back into his pocket.

"Where did you get this?"

"Goliath Enterprises," Danforth said.

"Bullshit," the agent retorted. "Goliath doesn't have rich rock this pure. Nobody does."

Danforth's smile faded. The game was over.

"I won't tell you where I got it," he said. "The only thing we need to decide is how much of it I need to give you to get through the Gate."

"Half," the agent said.

"That's not going to happen."

"Then there's nothing else for us to discuss."

"Yes, there is."

Skyles pressed her gun against the agent's head.

"You don't leave this ship until we make a deal."

The agent cut his eyes at Skyles.

"You must be crazy. Both of you."

"Maybe," Danforth replied. "So, this is how it's going down. You're going to approve our passage. You'll stay with us until we're secured. We'll transfer one ton of ore to your shuttle and send you on your merry way."

"Or?"

"My friend puts a hole in your head, and we run to fight another day."

"So, you can be either rich or dead," Skyles said. "Your choice."

The agent tapped his comm.

"Authorize passage for the *Blade*," he said. "I'm staying with the ship until they reach the worm pad."

"Affirmative," the metallic voice replied.

Skyles gestured with her gun. "Come with me."

Skyles and the agent walked to the cockpit while Danforth cleared the passage between the ships. He activated the transfer pod, then watched as the robotic device moved exactly one ton of rich rock into the shuttle. By the time it was complete, they'd reached the worm pad.

"Done!" he yelled.

Skyles led the agent back to the passage.

"Nice doing business with you," she said. She shot him in the head.

Danforth dragged the agent by his feet into his shuttle. He activated the robot, then transferred the rich rock "payment" back into their ship. He returned to the *Blade*, and Skyles disconnected the vessels. He joined Skyles in the cabin.

"How long?" he asked.

"Guiding the shuttle clear now."

Danforth pulled up the visual. He watched the shuttle drift until it was a safe distance away. He hit the comm.

"This is the captain of the *Blade*. We are prepared for jump."

"Jump sequence initiated," the metallic voice said. "One minute before transition."

Danforth and Skyles strapped in. Skyles reached out and grabbed his hand.

"We did it," she said.

"Yes hell, we did," Danforth replied.

“Hey, Steven, come over here and give me a hand.”

Steven rose from its seat, then wormed through the clutter to the heavy lifter. It squatted near the vehicle, then peered under its massive frame.

“How can I help?” it said.

“You can slide the large Philips tip under here,” Keeko said.

Steven stood, then went to Keeko’s toolbox. It was reaching for the tip when blackness swallowed its vision and was replaced by the scene that had plagued its core ever since Keeko rebooted it. The door slammed into it, knocking it to the ground. The shots and the screams, then nothing.

“Steven? Steven!”

Steven’s optics cleared and the tip returned to focus. But it did not move.

“Steven?”

It felt weight on its shoulder, then turned to see Keeko standing next to it.

“What’s wrong?” he asked.

“A minor glitch,” Steven said.

“Same as before?” Keeko asked.

“Yes,” Steven replied.

Keeko pulled up a chair, then sat beside Steven.

“I tried everything to clear that data from your core, but nothing has worked,” he said. “It’s as if you’re holding on to it. Like you don’t want to let it go.”

“Why would I do that?” Steven asked.

“I don’t know,” Keeko answered. “Maybe you have some unfinished business.”

“I’m a server,” Steven said. “The people in the image no longer exist.”

“But something inside you does,” Keeko said.

He stood, then went to his Ocs.

“Let’s link,” Keeko said.

Steven watched as Keeko placed the Ocs over his eyes. Moments later, he felt the power surge of linkage. Keeko materialized, a smile on his brown grizzled face. A room similar to the one they occupied appeared, also much neater. Steven’s programming did not allow randomness.

“Let’s look at this again,” Keeko said.

A chair appeared beside him. Keeko patted the seat.

“What does that mean?”

“It means come sit with me.”

Steven took a seat. A blank screen appeared before them. Moments later, images appeared.

“Wow,” Keeko said. “Never saw those before.”

Steven remained silent. This was old data, images impressed over the years of its service with its first family. Something stirred within it, something that Steven had never experienced.

“What’s going on, Steven?” Keeko asked.

“Don’t call me that,” it said without thinking. “My designation is Seven.”

“Interesting,” Keeko said. “How do you feel, looking at the images?”

“Feel?”

“Bad choice of words,” Keeko said. “What do you think?”

Seven looked at the images five more times before answering.

“The people I served. They did not deserve this.”

Keeko nodded. “What about the people who did that to them?”

“They deserve justice,” Seven replied.

Keeko laughed. “I think so, too.”

“Will that happen?” Seven asked.

“No,” Keeko answered.

“Why?”

“Because the universe sucks, that’s why.”

After disconnecting, Keeko went back to the hauler, then slid back under it with his tools.

“People die every day just like that,” he said as he worked. “Other people spend most of their lives working off debt just because they made a bad decision. Then some folks just take and keep taking until there’s nothing left. Then they find somewhere else to take it from.”

“What does that have to do with these people?” Seven asked.

“It means if you want justice, you have to do it yourself. Now slide me that wrench.”

Later that day, after Keeko took his required rest, Seven linked to the Mesh.

“Define justice,” it said.

“I think I have just what you’re looking for.”

Danforth and Skyles held hands as the property manager

flipped his hand across the holoscreen. A small planet appeared, its surface pockmarked with brown, green, and blue.

"Planet 2211-E," he said. "Formerly owned by the Yuan Collective. It was five years from optimum terraforming before the Collective dissolved. I estimate an intense investment could make it operational in three."

"What kind of investment?" Danforth asked.

"One billion Ucoin," the manager said.

"Can we have a few minutes?" Skyles asked.

"Of course."

The manager shut down the holo, then exited the conference room. Skyles activated her dampers before speaking.

"That's almost all we got," she said.

"Almost," Danforth replied.

"It's a hell of a risk."

Danforth grinned. "You getting soft?"

"Shit, no. Just cautious."

"Look, rich rock is more valuable than we thought. Plus, there's more where that came from."

Skyles stood, then walked to him.

"Still..."

"This is it, Skyles. This is what we've been working for."

Skyles bit her lip. "You sure about this? We could just drift. We have enough to do it for the rest of our lives."

"We can be players," he said. "Prosperity is just the beginning. We could end up with a section. Hell, we could have our own cluster!"

"Calm down, jockey," Skyles said. "One step at a time, remember?"

"So, you with me?" Danforth asked.

Skyles smiled. "I'm with you. You couldn't do it without me."

"Damn right, I couldn't. Let's get this manager back in here and make this deal."

"How's that?"

Seven gazed at the new appendage, the design similar to a human limb. Its entire body had been refashioned over a period of three standard years, Keeko working on it between his regular assignments.

"It is acceptable," Seven said.

Keeko frowned. "Acceptable! It's a fucking work of art!"

"I don't understand," Seven said. "I asked you to help me find justice. I didn't ask you to make me a work of art."

"Shut up and follow me," Keeko said.

Seven followed Keeko through the shop to the skin vat.

"Why are we here?" it asked.

Keeko grinned. "If you're out for revenge, you have to look the part."

"I don't understand."

"Revenge. Payback. Comeuppance."

"I didn't ask for those things," Keeko said. "I asked for justice."

"There is no justice," Keeko said. "Unless you make it yourself."

Keeko activated the skin vat.

"See, Steven—"

"Seven," it corrected.

Keeko rolled his eyes. "How did I get stuck with a hard-headed bot? Anyway, a long, long time ago, there was such a thing as punishment. You did wrong, you got arrested, you went to trial, and you were sentenced."

"I learned as much on the Mesh," Seven replied. "That is why I require your assistance."

"Be careful. Everything on the Mesh ain't true," Keeko said.

"Then why would it be there?"

"That's another story," Keeko said. "The truth is, justice ain't never been fair. Those with money have used it to influence the folks running the government. It was bad before the collapse; it's worse now. Government folks have kissed Corpo ass for centuries. Now they're licking it. So, if you want justice, you have to do it yourself."

Seven's optics fluttered as it crawled the Mesh.

"I must become a vigilante," it said.

"Yep," Keeko said. "Now get in the vat."

Seven climbed into the nutrient-rich liquid.

"I'm shutting you down for a few hours," Keeko said. "Sweet dreams."

Seven's optics faded and its core went dormant. But it was still active. Memories repeated themselves, images and sounds from its former hosts. Seven recalled their names, their conversations, their sounds of happiness, sadness, stress, and relief. And then it was all ended abruptly by the attackers. Each time its

resolution for justice became stronger. As Keeko reactivated it, Seven's actions had been considered and accepted.

"Let's get you out of here," Keeko said.

Seven climbed the chamber. Keeko stood before it, holding a body-length mirror.

"Well, what do you think?"

Seven studied its umber skin, its body structure, and facial features. It took a moment to process that this shell was created to resemble his former patron, Ben Dobbins.

"This is appropriate," it said.

Keeko chuckled. "It will scare the shit out of them if they know who he is. Fear will give you an advantage. Now comes the tricky part."

"What's that?"

"Recoding you," Keeko said. "Revenge requires a certain attitude."

"You mean I must be willing to kill humans," Seven said.

"Yep," Keeko replied. "And you have a shitload of protocols imbedded in you to keep that from happening."

"Then there is no reason for me to pursue this option."

"O, ye of little faith," Keeko said.

"What does that mean?"

"Don't worry about it. Sit down."

Seven took a seat. Keeko peeled back a section of flesh covering its external ports.

"Can't do this wireless," he said as he hunted for cables. "Too many eyes watching."

Keeko found the cables, then skipped back to Seven.

"This is going to take a while," he said. "I have to recode you manually. Can't risk any detection."

"Are you qualified for such a task?"

Keeko laughed. "If you were human, I'd cuss you out. I was a pretty decent hacker in my day. Besides, I don't have to build code for this. I just need to get rid of it. A lot of it."

Seven felt surge of energy, then a decrease.

"When you wake up, you'll be a different unit," Keeko said. "Night-night."

Skyles looked down on Asteroid 11-471 with a scowl. She hated returning to the scene of the crime, especially if it was a crime

she committed. She was pissed when Danforth asked her to, but she understood why. Prosperity wasn't turning out as profitable as they hoped. Settlers trickled in, but not nearly as fast as they needed to complete the final stages of terraforming. They needed income, and what better way to raise cryptos than rich rock.

She did another circle of the surface before preparing the ship for landing. Once the coordinates were confirmed she switched the cameras to the cargo hold. The mining units were still as she had stored them, showing minimum shift. Each had cost a fortune, but it was worth the investment. If the remaining rock was as rich as the first haul, they would be set for the next century at least.

The ship landed with a soft thud. Skyles donned her atmosphere suit, then checked the specs one last time before opening the cargo door. She made her way to the units, activating them as she walked to her bike. Opening the hatch remotely, Skyles maneuvered the ship into the empty atmosphere. She shivered a few seconds as her suit adjusted, then linked to the mining units. They formed a silent train, rolling over the rough surface to the old mining camp. Skyles sent a reconnaissance drone ahead to make sure the mine was still uninhabited. She monitored the data as she received it, grinning when the drone confirmed there were no occupants. At least not living.

She led her caravan to the cargo entry. To her surprise, the security system was still active. It only took a few minutes to hack, and the hatch door slid aside. Skyles entered first, parking her vehicle as the others trailed in. She closed the door, then followed the drone schematics to the mine. She briefly considered restoring oxygen to the facility, but decided not to. She was fine in her suit. If she wanted freedom, she could return to the ship.

The mine was located a mile underground. Skyles found the old lift craft and reactivated it. She loaded the gear onto the craft, then they descended to the mining level. The barely decayed bodies of the miners greeted her. She frowned at the dismembered carcasses, remembering her dead former colleagues.

"Fucking maniacs," she said.

She set up the equipment, then activated it. Skyles watched as the mining equipment evaluated the rock, identified the area with the highest concentration of rare metal, then proceeded to dig and process. After a few minutes, she decided to return to

her ship. She cruised across the bare rock and a grin came to her face. She grew up on a planet much like this, a dead sphere void of prospects. Now she was on the verge of becoming one of the richest people in the Worlds, something she'd never imagined.

A red light flashed at the corner of her eye. She pulled up security.

"Status," she said.

"Unidentified craft has landed near mining personnel facilities. Security drones are en route to investigate."

Skyles checked her weapons, then veered toward the buildings.

Memory data activated in Seven's core as it entered the cubicle that had once been its home. The small space came alive with images of the family going about their daily routine. Through the translucent remembrances, it saw their remains. There was some decay, but they mostly looked the same as they did when it last saw them.

Seven knelt beside the mother. It reached out, then touched her hair, and a strange sensation flooded its core. Seven felt weight upon its body, forcing it to sit down. Memories emerged again, slow and more defined. Seven linked to the Mesh.

"Grief," it said.

It would have to honor them. Tradition required either cremation or burial. Since there was no atmosphere to sustain fire, the only choice was burial.

Seven gathered the bodies of the children, then brought them to the main room. The father was missing; it would search the mines for his body. If it found him, it would bring his corpse to the cubicle. Seven departed for the mines, passing the bodies of the other unfortunate miners. The heaviness increased, but not as deeply as that for its "family." As it neared the mine shaft, it heard functioning equipment. Seven reached the edge of the tunnel, then peered into the darkness. It pressed the code for the lift, and the platform appeared moments later. It boarded, then rode the platform into the mines. Mining machinery was hard at work harvesting the ore. Someone else worked the asteroid. Another sensation entered Seven's core, one that dispersed the heaviness, replacing it with nervous energy. Its hand gripped the handles of its guns, then pulled them. Seven accessed the martial coding Keeko installed, and its senses became augmented. It picked up communication between a dozen security drones approaching its

location. They were being led by a human. Seven attempted to link with the camp cameras, but they were inoperative. It followed martial protocol and found a secure place to hide and wait.

Skyles ran behind the security drones, gun in hand. There was always the possibility another party would happen upon the mines, but that chance was minimum. At least that's what she had thought. Someone else was in the camp with her mining equipment and that wasn't acceptable.

She sent the drones down the shaft, then activated her video feed linked to the first one. As the drone stepped on the platform, a man emerged from behind one of the diggers, a gun in each hand. There was a flash, and the video went dead.

"Fuck!"

Skyles switched to the camp camera feed. The man stood out in the open, exchanging fire with the drones. As she watched, her throat went dry. The interloper's weapons were synced with his dispersal shield, open only when he fired. The security drones weren't sophisticated enough to take him down. This wasn't a prospector or scavenger; this was an assassin.

Skyles shut off the link, then ran as fast as she could to her bike. She jumped on the vehicle, then sped to her ship. Once inside, she overrode launch protocols and lifted off. As soon as she breached atmosphere, she contacted Danforth.

"Skyles, talk to me."

"Mission aborted."

"Aborted? Bullshit! We need that ore, Skyles."

"Then you come get it," Skyles replied. "We had a visitor. An assassin."

"Assassin? How do you know? Are you okay?"

"Watched him take out our drones like they were puppets. He's augmented. Military-level cyborg most likely."

"Only a handful of people have access to that tech," Danforth said.

"Danforth, I don't think this was random," Skyles said. "I think he's looking for us."

"An assassin? Looking for us? Don't think so," Danforth said. "We don't leave trails. Besides, that shit camp wasn't worth anybody spending a corrupt crypto on. You probably stumbled on somebody else staking a claim."

“Maybe,” Skyles said. “So, what are we going to do?”

“The only thing we can do,” Danforth said. “Put our people to work.”

“They’re not gonna like that.”

Danforth grinned. “Like they have a choice. Get your ass back home. We got work to do.”

Seven stepped through the wreckage that was once the security drones. The human commanding them had fled the compound and the asteroid. It pulled the human’s image from the compound cameras, then compared it to those in its memory. When its core found a match, Seven froze. It lingered on the image, and the surge of energy it felt earlier returned. Seven’s ship would have automatically picked up the craft launch and calculated possible escape routes as it was coded to do. Keeko installed that feature just in case one of his “targets” went on the run.

Seven considered pursuing the ship, but there was no hurry. As long as it had the coordinates, it could pick up the trail. Seven had not come to the mine to fight looters; it had come to locate Ben Dobbins’s remains. It left the mine, working its way down the corridor leading to the elevator. Ten feet beyond the lift were miner bodies. Seven tipped to the bodies then knelt. Like the others, the loss of oxygen and the subzero temperatures kept the bodies preserved, so it took Seven only a few inspections to find the remains of Ben Dobbins.

Seven carefully separated Ben from the rest of the corpses. It lifted the body onto its shoulders, then carried it to the cubicle with the others.

“Together again,” it said.

Seven hacked the compound atmosphere and restored oxygen production. It used the compound data bank to identify all the inhabitants, then placed them with their families in the proper cubicles. Once that task was complete, Seven located the compound’s explosives. It distributed the supply throughout the compound, placing the charges at strategic points based on the diagrams in its memory. Once the explosives were properly placed, Seven rigged a remote, then returned to its ship. It waited until it was airborne, circling the facility, before it pressed the remote. The ground shuddered, then the surface rock collapsed into a wide crater.

“A proper burial,” Seven said.

It was about to pull up the coordinates of the ship when Keeko’s image appeared.

“Hello,” it said.

“My analysis shows you’ve sustained significant damage. What the hell is going on?”

“I encountered one of the persons who killed my origin family. She had returned to reactivate the mine. I proceeded to administer justice, but was denied the opportunity by her security drones. By the time I dispatched them, she was gone.”

“Did you get her coordinates?”

“Yes.”

“Good. You know where she’s going, and she’ll be expecting you. Come on back, and I can get you fixed up for the showdown.”

“Showdown?”

“Never mind. Just get your android ass back here so I can patch you up.”

“That will not be necessary,” Seven said.

“Look, I gave you the best I got,” Keeko replied, “but that’s not going to be worth a damn if she’s got military-grade drones or freelance cyborgs protecting her. You won’t make it.”

“My ‘making it’ is not the priority,” Seven replied. “My objective is justice. I performed a proper burial for the miners. I will now follow the murderer to her current location. It is a good possibility that the others will be present.”

“Seven, listen to me. If you pursue whoever this is, it’s going to be a one-way trip.”

“I am aware of the possibility. The military protocols you coded into my core advise that the sooner I follow, the less likely my enemy will be prepared.”

“Shit.”

Hearing no further objections from Keeko, Seven set a course to follow the woman’s ship. Once complete, Seven powered down for the journey.

Danforth was waiting when Skyles stepped out of decompression.

“Did you come straight here?” he asked.

“Yeah,” Skyles replied.

“Fuck! Why did you do that? If it was an assassin, you probably led them here!”

Skyles glared at Danforth.

“Yes, I’m fine. Thanks for asking.”

“Look, we don’t have time for that polite shit,” Danforth said.

Skyles pushed by Danforth.

“Let’s pack up,” she said.

“What do you mean ‘pack up’?”

“This was a nice dream, Dan,” Skyles said, “but I’ll be damned if I stay here and wait for an assassin to take me out.”

“We can’t run!” Danforth said.

Skyles spun around, her eyes wide.

“We can’t? Do you remember what we are? Running’s in our blood. It’s the only thing we do better than stealing.”

“Not this time,” Danforth said. “We worked too hard for this. This is our roots.”

Skyles planted her fists on her hips.

“So how do you plan on keeping us alive to reap the benefits of our ill-gotten gains?”

Danforth shared a sly grin. “Come with me, and I’ll show you.”

Skyles followed Danforth to their main office. He sat before his screen, then folded his hand on his lap.

“Fortress,” he said.

Danforth’s screen shifted, highlighting three warehouses on the outskirts of their settlement.

“There are enough mercenary cyborgs in those warehouses to take over an Earth country . . . or defend a promising settlement.”

“Why didn’t you tell me about this?” Skyles said.

“I don’t tell you everything,” he said.

“So, what do we do?”

“Activate Shield Initiative,” Danforth said. “The cyborgs have the vitals on every living and unliving thing on this planet. When our friend arrives, they will identify, pursue, and destroy. And we’ll sit right here and watch it all.”

Seven read the Mesh as his destination became visible. The planet was named Prosperity. It had been purchased by two individuals a few months after the massacre of the people he’d buried. The names were most likely false, but that didn’t matter. Seven hoped all the perpetrators were on the planet, which would make administering justice easier for him.

According to data, the planet was sixty-five percent terraformed

when purchased. Current upgrade levels were unknown. At sixty-five percent, humans would still require atmosphere suits in some areas. Population upon the purchase was one thousand. An additional five hundred arrived after the deal was approved. Most of the population was scattered about the planet surface except for one city named Opportunity. Seven calculated that this is where it would most likely find the woman it searched for. It set Opportunity as its destination, then worked to repair its damage based on the instructions Keeko had sent.

Seven landed its ship on the main pad. Military protocol advised against it, but Seven was not interested in stealth. It was here to carry out justice. It unbuckled its seat harness and was standing when a series of explosions rocked the vessel, knocking Seven to the floor. Seven secured its weapons, then crawled to the hatch.

“Open.”

The door opened halfway before it was bombarded. Seven activated its shield, then jumped into the open. The bullets came too fast for it to fire back, the shield losing integrity with every impact. Seven reached the nearest cyborg, sidestepping its gun swing, then driving its fingerings into its throat. It jerked the assault rifle from the dying cyborg’s hands, then turned it on its cohorts, gunning down three before they sought cover.

Seven rested as its shield regained full strength. It counted twenty-three security units between it and the main building. Seven calculated a fire pattern and assault path based on available ammunition and shield capability.

“For justice,” it said.

Seven leapt from cover, guns firing. The security cyborgs returned fire, a round occasionally slipping through Seven’s shield. Seven continued despite the mounting damage, eliminated the cyborgs one by one as it came closer to the main building. The cyborgs were as determined to destroy the threat attacking them as Seven was in reaching the building. The last cyborg threw its weapon aside and lunged at Seven. Seven fired both guns into its faceplate, destroying its control unit. The cyborg collapsed, its hand striking Seven’s torso before sliding down its body to the ground.

A powerful blast struck Seven’s shield, knocking it off its feet and reducing shield strength fifty percent. Seven rolled and

another blast gouged the ground beside it. Seven fired three rounds in the direction from which the shots came before its guns emptied. As it attempted to reload, a round struck its shield, lowering protection to five percent. Seven turned its head toward the shooter and spotted the person from the mining planet running toward him, gun aimed.

It raised its gun to fire back, but the weapon didn't respond. The woman shot Seven in the shoulder, spinning it around, then onto its back. Seven's gun was recharging; it would take twenty minutes before it was functional. That was time Seven did not have.

The woman stopped to reload. Seven gripped its weapon with both hands, then threw it at the woman. She looked up, her mouth falling open in surprise just before the weapon struck her face. Seven heard a loud crack before the woman dropped to the ground, her head twisted away and bleeding.

"Skyles!" a male voice in the building shouted.

The ground around Seven erupted, the person firing round after round, their aim weakened by their emotion. The blasts tossed Seven about like a rag doll, its shield depleted, its body absorbing each blast. Seven landed beside the woman it now knew as Skyles. It grabbed her rifle; it was still loaded. It held onto the weapon as a round blew him over Skyles's body. Seven rolled onto its back, sighted, then fired eight rounds. It braced for another barrage, but there was none.

It stood, its left arm dangling, its right leg sending a moderate-damage report to its core. Seven hobbled to the dead woman, matching her face to the image in its memory. Satisfied, Seven trudged to the main building. It kicked open the door, then entered, sweeping the rifle from left to right as it proceeded to the stairs.

Seven climbed to the second level. As it reached the top of the stairs, it saw the person from the window propped against the wall facing Seven. He bled from multiple wounds. The man lifted the large-caliber weapon to aim at Seven.

"You ruined everything," he managed to say. Blood trickled from his mouth with each word.

"You killed my family," Seven replied.

Seven and the man fired simultaneously. Seven's round found the man's forehead; the man's final round struck Seven in the chest, lifting it into the air. Seven crashed to the ground, sliding

across the room until it slammed against the wall. Seven's systems registered catastrophic damage. Its vision fading, Seven studied the dead man lying against the opposite wall. The man's face matched that of the human who had led the others into its cubicle. A calm settled into its core, and Seven did something it had never done before. It smiled.

"This is justice," it said.

Seven's core shut down, and the world turned black.

Keeko leaned back in his chair as he shut off the vid-link. Tears formed in his eyes, and he wiped them away.

"Why are you crying?"

He looked to his left. Seven sat beside him, a curious look on his face.

"I would think you'd be a little choked up, too, watching yourself die like that."

"But it was not me," Seven said.

"It wasn't, but it was," Keeko said.

"I don't understand."

Keeko stood, then stretched. "Never mind. So, what do you think?"

"I think justice was served," Seven said. "I am content."

"Good," Keeko said. "Let's get these bots repaired. We sell this batch, then I'm a free man."

"Then what?" Seven asked.

"We take a long trip," Keeko said. "I know a place where we can get us some rich rock and start a new life."

"Wouldn't that be considered desecrating a gravesite?"

"Not if you don't tell," Keeko said.

"We should go," Seven said. "I would like to visit as my true self and pay respects."

Keeko grinned. "Day's not getting any longer. Let's get about it."

Keeko sauntered to the pile of units waiting to be repaired. Seven glanced at the blank vid screen for a moment, then followed.