

CHAPTER ONE: JOHN

John Harper leaned the upper half of his body on the thick-glassed wall of the air-rail, his hands stuffed into the pockets of his gray ship suit while his fingers danced with a half-smoked cigarette he kept from last night. The individual stitches on his shoulder patches were dry rotting one by one, giving in to their old age and lending a curved appearance to the big yellow letters that read 'TP-0'. Test pilot, identification number: zero.

He stared up, the nausea the air-rail inflicted on others as it straight-lined at skin-tightening speeds up the Spire's metallic body didn't affect him. The ride, all thirty kilometers straight into the air, was just the daily commute for him. The others, he noticed, maintained a gaze that locked onto their own feet.

The air-rail always smelled bad. Pheromones, he knew. He was sharing a room that was sealed tight with about thirty others, and they were all pissing their pants over one thing or another. He glanced at one patch, TP-399XD. He couldn't even bring himself to understand what that number meant. He brushed the curves and folds of his own patches, doing his best to smooth them over. He knew they never would.

John turned his back to the crowd and set his gaze on the vast expanse of earth that he sped away from. He looked out, the sky dominating his view over the land, and convinced himself the deep breath he had just taken filled his lungs with the air from out *there*.

He didn't like admitting it, not even to himself, but the anxiety in the room was contagious. It was mostly Warreners in the lift this morning, most he didn't recognize, but the ones he did panged at his

heart. He knew one as a kid who came up through the farm system, his dad had been tri-cropping the Warren's hydro-farms since John himself could remember. Now, here he was blasting up the Spire in a ship suit, and John knew his days of making food miracles happen with his father were over.

He siphoned another deep breath as he took in the view, turned, and made his way towards the kid. The crowd parted, shuffling feet and silent stares.

The kid was sweating, fidgeting. John reckoned he couldn't have been more than 17 years old. Fucking Coveys bringing a child up here, inhumane is what it is.

"Hey," John said, his voice deep as it was soft, like a bear hug.

He didn't speak, but his eyes shifted towards John and the twitch in his mouth told him he tried. He was tall, so John didn't need to squat like he usually would with kids.

"You're a Warrener, aren't you?" John laid the pride on thick.

The kid nodded.

"Good," He smiled and patted the kids back. "Me too."

He gawked, then smiled. He nodded at the patch on John's shoulder, then retreated within himself when he glanced at his own.

It was easy to read, John placed his hand on the shoulder where his patch was. "That doesn't mean a thing, kid. But, you know what does?"

The kid's eyes shot toward John as if he were seeing him for the first time. "What?"

"Being a Warrener," John squared with him, both hands on his shoulders. "The Coveys think we're just some cave-dwelling rats. Right? How many times have they tried to remind of us that?"

The kid's laugh was rebellious. "Fucking right," He said, and John suddenly remembered he wasn't so much a kid.

John's lips curled into a tight smile. "Right," He turned from him, a few eyes were already looking his way.

"Listen!" He yelled out, ripping anyone from their fear trance. His shout bounced across the room a few times and the small crowd moved around him as if they were sheep and he was the herding dog. It made his skin crawl, every single time.

"Now," His tone lower, lighter, the boy enfranchising him on his

side. "I get it. This?" He wrapped his knuckle on the glass wall behind him. "You're not used to it. And *that*," He pointed behind them to the Spire. The ultrastructure that scraped at heavenly grounds, the looming presence of the Voyager Covenants yoke on them for the entire world to see.

John took a moment to study the crowd while their attention undivided. Warreners from the noks and Sand Flatters, whose name speaks for itself, all had eyes pointed at him, waiting for whatever was going to come out of his mouth next.

"There's no great way to put this," His voice like a beautifully sad song, "But you have nothing to be afraid of. As long as you don't die, the haze will take care of you, right?" He pointed up and hoped his smile looked twice as confident as it felt.

They were passing a station that tethered to the Spire like a hideous growth. To them, it was Scatter Control, the home of a discriminating haze that released into the atmosphere, filling and denying the collective thoughts of everyone breathing it in. It was a beautifully tuned instrument, precise enough to recall every detail of your personal life, yet barely retaining what you owed the Voyager Covenant—just enough to function independently.

"Remember," John grabbed their attention for a final time. "It'll all be over before you know it, and you'll be right back here with me at the end of the day."

He shuddered inside. He said it almost every day, and everyone knew it was an empty promise. The haze catches everything they don't want you to remember, to know. It was worthless to make them feel hope. He hated himself for it, and he did it every day.



"What took you so long?" The voice was disinterested despite the pointed question.

"Ah," John waved his hands in the air. "You know how these Covey assholes can be sometimes," He thumbed behind him where a gaggle of Voyager Covenant militant types clumped around the air-rail gates, their warbling androidal voices weaved together like a symphony of angry robots fucking. The endlessly empty gaze of their eyes squirmed under their lids, the all-black contacts concealing any

modicum of humanity on their face. Their weapons, prison-grade gravatic saddles, or just Saddllers, slung across their chests at a low ready position, prepared to tether anyone to the ground with an oppressively crushing dose of harnessed gravity. Non-lethal, but not fun, either.

"So," John let the word drag out as he keyed a few prompts into the glyph deck on his wrist, waking it up for the day.

"So, what?" The man grumbled.

"C'mon, Six. Tell me."

"About?"

"Last night? You wouldn't shut up about asking her, and now you're tight-lipped?"

"Zero . . . *Zero*." He sent the mission briefing to John's glyph-deck and his wrist lit up like Christmas.

John paused in his tracks. "Dog fighting. . ." The words slid from his mouth like a hello from an old flame. "Seriously?"

"Serious as death. Looks like we got a promotion," He smirked. "Or a demotion. How would we know, right?" He kept walking, his back moving further away from John. Six, more formally known as TP-66, didn't miss opportunities to remind him that even though he thinks he's the best thing to happen to combat aviation since the invention of the planar-drive, he still was a memory-sapped test animal like the rest of them.

John followed, mumbling obscenities to his frustration. "Well," He shook off his nerves. "Think today's the day?" He knocked him on the shoulder.

"You know me, Zero, today is always the day," He shot him a quick smile, but John knew him long enough to see the nervous man behind it.

"Cowboy," John said as he fixed his attention on the mission briefing displayed on his glyph-deck. "This jet looks serious. Hold up," John paused. "Can you read this word?" He pushed it from his glyph-deck to Six's, his brow furled.

"Really?" The word 'chromatographic shielding' was first on the long list of features the jet's profile displayed. "Didn't know shield was such a hard word to say. Maybe you're too dumb."

A punch to the arm from John, Six rubbed it and laughed. They

entered the briefing room and stray gazes from a series of all-black eyes penetrated John's body, he felt the cold hard stare from something non-human as their eyes stayed in place, but never losing sight of him.

"Questions?" The warbling of a Covey in a small room made John's spine drop into his groin. The Covey nodded their head towards Six's glyph-deck. "About the mission."

"None," Six said and John echoed, they were dismissed and as they left, John considered if the meeting was a fever dream. Maybe it was from the nerves of having to hop back into the cockpit, one more dreaded day of the unknown. What the hell did he even do to get to the point of dog-fighting experimental jets for the Coveys? How long had he been doing this bullshit to be trusted in this sort of position? Trust was a funny term to use.

He smoothed his patch over and felt the simplicity of the identifier. TP-0. Zero, not even first, whatever was before first, that was him. He thought of the boy on the air-rail, the Warrenner just like him, he shuddered at the thought of himself having come up here every day since he was that age and not a single significant thought to show for it. Fucking Coveys and their haze.

Six piled his squat, thick frame into the ground car that would take them to their jet, and John followed up with a slap to the ass that said 'Git in there'. The car lurched forward, and he knew they were on the clock now. Six leered John's wanting presence for nervous conversation by avoiding eye contact and wringing his hands out.

"Alright," John forced it anyway. "What's wrong, man?"

Six's body exhaled. "Something about this. . . rubbing me the wrong way, is all."

John cocked his head back. "Can't be the worst thing you've ever done, right? We survived the stress-test evolutions to even be here."

Six scoffed. "Rumors. To make us feel better. Who's to say? You don't believe that, do you?"

John rubbed his chin and suddenly questioned his entire reality, but only for a second.

"And by the way," Six continued, his cowboy facade John had pointed out earlier was melting away with every second. "Why do you always talk like that? Like you *know*? You got salt on your boots, Zero, but--"

"It's John."

"What?"

"It's John, Six."

Six leaned in to close the space between them. "You trying to get us both killed? If they heard you using names," He leaned back and shook his head, his eyes blinking wildly.

"Then, what? They'll kill us? C'mon, Six. Like you always say, we're sheep to the slaughter anyway. And by the looks of it," He tapped his glyph-deck, the mission briefing still pulled up. "We're heading to the slaughterhouse right now."

Six shook his head and John knew he meant it, but he also knew he was easy to convince.

"Six, just tell me. Hell, maybe you have and it just gets caught in the haze's net. Right? No harm if I forget," John leaned back and crossed his arms, a clever smile across his face.

The ground car slowly braked and outside the window, there were a pair aggressively sharp combat jets surrounded by a low thrum of planar-drive warp. Six sighed, passed several glances between John and the jets, and reached for the door handle.

He squeezed, pulled it towards him, and before opening it held out a hand to push John back into his seat.

"Nicholas," He said with a hint of sorrow. "Nicholas Bulkely."

John's smirk stretched into a great smile and before he could say anything, he was interrupted.

"My fiancé... well, girlfriend, Tijjres Bulkely. God willing you don't need it, and god willing that if you do, the haze don't catch it."

John's stomach sank at the thought of having done this before.



The Flight Disc made John feel like a singular atom resting atop an old music record. His eyes needed a double take to accurately account for its curve as it revolved around the Spire, he questioned if there even was a curve. The disc was a microcosm of the ultrastructure it lived on, except that would imply it was microcosmic. It stretched endlessly and was littered with space-faring vessels of all shapes and sizes, enough to invade a planet. And sometimes, that made John wonder.

John linked his glyph-deck to the jet's HUD and set it aside while he waited for it to finish the pre-flight. He hated to admit it, but he gave the Coveys over at Scatter Control some credit, the professional and not the moral kind. If there were two things he knew how to do really well, it was hurry up and wait, and fly. Other than that, he couldn't exactly give you an executive summary of the last twenty-something years of his aviator profession. If you asked him, he'd tell you he's just plain lucky with a dash of skill tossed in. And if that didn't work, he'd tell you his day-to-day was probably a lot of simulations, the kind of thing that saves dollars and lives while still collecting the same data. The point is, he had not a damn clue thanks to those that kept the haze pumping into the air.

"How we looking, Six?"

"Good," The voice crackled through static, "I'm getting sealed up now," Referring to the jet's lack of ejection seating. The captain goes down with the ship in Voyager land.

"See you out there," John tipped his imaginary cap and told the planar-drive to distort the world around him until his jet lurched on the edge of the Disc. A Covey from control warbled something indiscriminate into his ear, and if John answering with a simple 'Roger that' wasn't enough to let them know he wouldn't put too much effort into deciphering their robotic tone, then him launching his jet from the Disc immediately after, would. Noiselessly, the jet ripped its tethers from the disc and tore the sky into two as it pierced into the atmosphere.

"God damn!" John yipped, his view of the abyssal sky turned darker, the jet's thrust forced his spine deeper into the seat than he would have ever imagined, the G-force pulling on his skin and adding twenty years to his face as he reeled upward in an uncontrolled ascent. He leveled out, caught his breath, and stuffed a hand down his ship suit to see if he pissed himself.

"-eyes on you," His speakers hissed, and he knew the part of his brain that shut down senses during emergencies most certainly turned his hearing off during that masterfully executed takeoff.

"Say again your last, Six? That you?"

"How in the hell," Nicholas laughed, "Did you manage to fuck that up so gloriously?" John heard him bellow before he cut out. "Anyway, need your beacon, no eyes on you."

John fumbled around the cockpit, his pride not letting him route the command through his glyph-deck that connected to the ship.

"Any day now."

He sighed, with a few quick swipes of the finger on his glyph-deck, Nicholas' ship was painted bright green on the left side of his canopy's cockpit. The only issue was, it was damn big. He scrambled a few instruments, making sure what he was seeing was actually there.

"Six," John stared at the green light as it almost subdued his entire canopy.

"Zero."

"I think you're on top of me."

A short moment passed. "Hm," He hummed. "And I think you're under me."

John pulled back, dropping his altitude by a safe clip that released the vice grip his throat held his balls in.

"I still can't see you," John strafed his gaze through the expanse. "You got me?"

"Uh oh," A realization coming through the short words.

"Uh oh what?" John was tensed in his seat.

"Chromatographic shielding," Nicholas chided.

John stumbled over the word several times to himself before his eureka moment tipped his head back, his mouth in the shape of an 'O'.

"Okay," He said. "I don't get it."

"You can't see me because these shields can *blend in*. With anything. Get me?" Nicholas' tone gave John the impression he was excited to be in the situation.

"And that's a good thing?"

"Depends," Nicholas said. "Who's asking?"

John slapped his hands on his console. "Your fucking wingman's asking!"

Nicholas laughed heartedly then abruptly unkeyed his transmission. When his voice came back over the net, the skin on the back of John's neck tightened up.

"Eye's up," Nicholas barked. "Two, bogeys crossing us at angles two-"

"Should we engage?" John smirked, breaking Nicholas' train of thought, not to mention any semblance of discipline they were trying

to maintain. He could have sworn he heard him grunting and cursing him through his speakers.

"It's an evasion mission," Nicholas grumbled.

"Right, evade by taking them out first. That's the whole point, is it not?" John had even convinced himself that he meant it.

"Did you even read the mission brief? Or did you stop at-?"

"Dog fight, yes. I stopped there," John was laughing to himself as if he wished others were there to witness his bravado.

"One of these days," Nicholas sighed, "You're going to get yourself killed trying to shoot your way out of everything."

"Not today, cowboy. Go 'head, finish your call out."

Nicholas breathed into the open channel, an exhale that sounded like he saved his own life by talking John off a cliff. "Angels two-three-three--"

"Bandit spike!" John's systems blared red, an alarm inside his jet screamed for his attention. He was being painted with targeting lasers.

"Break right, now!" The two split, their beacon's connection fried along with any other communications packages, his speakers sizzled around him, he grabbed for his ears and plugged them, alleviating himself of the nauseating frequency and pitch.

He was flying dark now, and he had just remembered an enemy missile was on a collision course with him. He strafed his eyes around his canopy, his head jerking anxiously over each shoulder, looking for the guaranteed death of a fire cone trailing behind a high explosive projectile traveling at mach-fuck.

There was none.

His stomach tightened, did it hit Nicholas? He checked the air again, no fireball crumpling to the ground. The bandit spike wasn't a missile, it was a jammer. He slammed his hands on the cockpit. He felt hopeless and being literally invisible to his wingman didn't help.

Like he was being toyed with, a bogey moved across his false horizon, there was no way in hell he noticed it first, not after being targeting like that. They knew he was in the dark, and they weren't counting on him to manually fire a few missiles off. The likelihood of landing one was the similar to pinning a fly to a tree with an arrow at 100 yards. Luckily for John, he sucked at math and would never

submit to statistical reasoning.

"Looks like you were wrong, Six," He gritted his teeth and armed a few fast movers. "Shooting your way out works every time if you do it right."

His hands were sweating as they fumbled around the controls. A false inexperience clawed at his guts, but deep down, a familiar, cold serenity settled in, telling him he'd been through this song and dance countless times.

The enemy, a black aggressive scar across the sky, turned on its side, exposing its underbelly right as he manually lined up his ordinance. An area defense setting would launch enough fast movers to account for his aiming errors. He flipped the trigger guard out from blocking the red button at his side and pressed it, his ship shuddering with the force of twenty high-velocity missiles punching off its body with enough force to rip a hole in the Spire itself.

He watched as the wall of fire cones closed in on the target with suffocating speed before a perfect square of explosive heat and blast painted the sky, the twin flaps of sharp black wings plummeted towards the earth in an engulfment of flames.

"Splash."

He mopped sweat from his brow and checked his comms. The jamming attack should have been an active threat and, considering the bogey was no longer active, wouldn't be a problem anymore. His hopes were just that, hopes.

"TP-0," Intense warbling filled his cockpit, John glanced his instruments, still dead. It didn't make sense. "End exercise, return to the Flight Disc." The transmission cut and he still couldn't use his own radio.

John made his way towards the Spire, unmissable in the high sky. It was a lonely, quiet flight. He wanted to talk to Nicholas, to hear whatever dry humor he could think of during the brittle moment. He was scrubbed out from the world, his voice along with it.

He wanted a cigarette.