

PRESENT DAY

JOHN Harper leaned the upper half of his body on the thick-glassed wall of the air-rail. He stuffed his hands into the pockets of his gray ship suit while his fingers danced with a half-smoked cigarette he kept from last night. The 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 and away from the others, who grew nauseated and sickly from the skin-tightening speeds the air-rail moved along the Spire's gleaming metallic hull. The ride, all thirty kilometers straight up, was just the daily commute for him. The others, he noticed, maintained a gaze locked onto their 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 patches, doing his best to smooth them over. He knew they never would.

He didn't like admitting it, not even to himself, but the anxiety in the room was contagious. It was mainly Warreners in the lift this morning. Warreners were from the Warrens, as the name states. They were meant for the warm hearth of their earthen homes, with the drifting of musks as the seasons warmed, moistened, and chilled the dirt around them. The warmly lit noks, their literal holes in the walls, where they all retreated to at the end of the day, were what a Warrener wanted. Not anything the Spire had to offer.

John siphoned a deep breath as he took in the view, turned, and made his way towards a 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. 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's words laid the pride on thick.

The kid nodded.

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

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

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 us of 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.

"Listennnn," He soothed with a confident ease, ripping them from their trance. The small crowd moved around him as if they were sheep, and he was the shepherd. 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 wall behind him. "You're not used to it. And *that*," He pointed behind them to the Spire. The ultrastructure scraped at heavenly grounds, with the looming presence of the Voyager Covenant's yoke on them for the entire world to see.

"There's no great way to put this," His voice was 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.

Scatter Control tethered to the Spire like a hideous growth. It was the home of a discriminating haze that was released into the atmosphere, filling and denying the collective memory 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. At the end of the day, you'll be right back here with me."

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 learn. It was worthless to give them 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 voices weaved together like a symphony of angry robots screwing as they barked orders. The empty gaze of their all-black eyes squirmed, the darkness concealing any modicum of humanity in them. Their weapons, gravatic saddles, or just Saddlers, slung across their chests, prepared to tether anyone to the ground with a crushing dose of harnessed gravity. Non-lethal, but not fun, either.

"So," John let the word drag out as he woke up the glyph-deck on his wrist.

"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 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. Looks like we got a promotion," Six smirked. "Or a demotion. How would we know, right?" He kept walking.

Six, more formally known as TP-66, didn't miss opportunities to remind him that even though John thinks he's hot shit, he was still a memory-sapped test animal like the rest of them.

John followed, mumbling obscenities to his frustration. "Well," He shook off his nerves. "Will today be our last?" His words mocked.

"You know me, Zero. Today is always the day." He shot him a

quick smile. John knew him long enough to see the nervous man behind it.

“Cowboy,” John said as he fixed his attention on the mission brief. “This ship 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. “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 stare of something non-human as their eyes stayed fixed, 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. What the hell did he even do to get to the point of dog-fighting experimental ships 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 Warrener just like him, and shuddered at the thought of himself having come up here every day since he was that age. Coveys and their haze.

Six piled into the ground car, John following 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 at John’s wanting presence for nervous conversation by avoiding eye contact and wringing his hands.

“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 even to be here.”

Six scoffed. “Rumors. Who’s to say? You don’t believe that, do you?”

John scratched his chin and 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 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 were a pair of aggressively sharp ships surrounded by a low thrum of planar-drive warp. Six sighed, passed several glances between John and the ships, and reached for the door handle.

Before opening it, he 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. Then his 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 account for its curve as it revolved around the Spire. 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.

He linked his glyph-deck to the ship’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. There was nothing that could

reasonably explain the sensation of knowledge flow and muscle memory that collided with his nerves once he got behind the sticks. It was as if it were some great ancestral inheritance and not some devilish way of somehow 'activating' him when the time called for it. The point is, he had no damn clue how it all worked thanks to those who kept the haze pumping.

"How we looking, Six?"

"Good," The voice crackled through static. "I'm getting sealed up now."

"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 with that, John ripped off. 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 ship's thrust forced his spine deeper into the seat than he anticipated. The G-force pulled on his skin, adding twenty years to his face as he reeled upward in an uncontrolled climb. He leveled out, caught his breath, and stuffed a hand down his ship suit to see if he had pissed himself.

His speakers hissed. "-eyes on you."

John caught his breath, then said, "Say again your last, Six?"

"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, Nicholas' ship was painted bright green on the left side of his cockpit. The only issue was that 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 tense in his seat.

"Chromatographic shielding," Nicholas chided.

John stumbled over the word several times to himself before he 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's 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 wingman's asking!"

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

"Eyes up," Nicholas barked. "Two, bogeys crossing us at angles two-"

"Should we engage?" John smirked, breaking Nicholas' train of thought. He could have sworn he heard him cursing 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's laugh reeked of 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. "Angles two-three-three-"

"Bandit spike!" John's system 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. His speakers sizzled around him as he grabbed for his ears and plugged them.

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 rechecked the air, 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 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 targeted 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 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 shot. 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, but since the

bogey was no longer active, it wouldn't be a problem anymore. His hopes were just that, hopes.

“TP-0,” Intense warbling filled his cockpit. John glanced at 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 radio.

John made his way towards the Spire, unmistakable 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 of the world, his voice along with it.

He wanted a cigarette.