

Jupiter Justice Excerpt

by Donald J. Hunt

"Ah, I know that look on your face, Captain Schroeder. You think we are paranoid, but we are paranoid by necessity."

Jupiter 2269.

A suspicious shuttle explosion. Two deaths. Rico Schroeder must unravel the mystery before a terrorist plot plunges the colonized solar system into war with the deadliest weapons ever created by humanity.

- ONE -

Taz seemed distracted, which was not normal for him at all. Test pilots were a strange breed—focused like a laser, full of bravado, and half crazy. Whatever else they might be, they almost never came across as scared, regardless of what they might feel inside.

"Hey, Taz, good luck with the test flight today," Rico said.

"Thanks, *broja*." "I just wish you were here watching my back, Rico, like down in French Guiana, you know?"

The way he said it gave Rico a chill, even over the OptiComm. Taz had been a friend a long time—since basic training, when they were both in the Corps. A few years after basic, after his cousin had been murdered, Taz had called Rico when an officer had

been murdered down in French Guiana.

The case had been rough, and they had both almost been killed.

Taz hesitated and then said, “There’s—” and then faltered into silence.

“What’s up, Taz?”

“Nothing, Rico. Nada. Just nerves I suppose.”

Rico gave a light chuckle. “You? I’ve seen less stable asteroids.”

Tiago Vaz—Taz to his friends—gave him a wry smile. “Yeah. Just watch your back, okay?”

“Always.” The screen pixilated and the young pilot’s face disappeared for a moment. Rico frowned and double-checked his ship’s instrument panel. Some higher magnetic fields from Jupiter today, but all the other sensors read five-by-five. His friend’s face reassembled on the screen and he asked, “What aren’t you telling me, Taz? What’s going on?”

“I wish I could tell you more, *broja*. Confidentiality agreement, you know?”

Rico’s screen flashed red. A request came through from Tiago to go off-log and encrypt their transmission. Highly irregular, and typically against team policy between competing ships. Rico hit the Accept icon.

“I could get yanked from the test today for going dark, Rico, but a lot of weird stuff is going on. Juarez was asking a lot of questions a few weeks ago and now she’s dead.”

Rico’s penchant for doggedly pursuing details kicked in. “Weird how?”

“Like Sistema Solar’s new business partner last year, for one. It just doesn’t add up. Sistema had

plenty of credits. Why add in another company and lose half the prize money? Plus, when they came in, they were pushy, you know?”

“What new company? Pushy how? I'm not following you, bud.”

“Look, I've got to get out of encrypted mode before someone notices. If...” again he paused. “If anything happens, Rico, check into it. For me, *broja*. But be careful.”

Three hours later, Tiago Vaz was dead. The *Domínguez*, the experimental ship for team Sistema Solar, had exploded. Taz never stood a chance.

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“Did you hear about the *Domínguez*?” Jane asked over the Optical Communication array, after she'd welcomed him back.

“Yeah.” Rico heard the tension in his own voice. He swallowed it down. “I knew him. Just spoke to him today. We went way back.”

“Oh, Rico, I'm sorry.”

“Yeah. Me, too.”

Silence took over for a heartbeat or two. When you live and travel in fragile cans that, if ruptured, will leave you dying in the dark void of space, anytime a pilot dies it gives you pause. Fortunately, few accidents occurred on ships or stations. Redundant safety protocols helped prevent any but the most cataclysmic events, but if you wanted to live, you never relied on protocols. There was no such thing as “foolproof” in space.

But Rico suspected that mechanical failure had

nothing to do with Taz's death. He felt a hollow chasm in his chest, and all the losses of his life tried to escape from the box he had locked them in. Murder had touched his life too many times. The ghosts from his past threatened to well up and drag him under.

Mostly to distract himself from the dark alley he'd wandered into, Rico pushed the dead aside and asked, "How's the *Amazing Grace* coming?"

"Well, she's beautiful, but the latest sims are definitely not." Jane hesitated, and Rico's radar for trouble went off. *What did she mean by that?* He started to ask, but she said, "Uesugi's waiting for you in the lab. We'll meet you there, and she'll fill you in. She's called a meeting as soon as you're station-side."

"Okay, thanks. Rico out."

Rico had put on his team jacket—required to be worn at all times while in potential public venues by their team sponsor contracts—and entered the enclosed screening room while talking with Jane, leaving behind the chill and the smells of lubricants and coolants that permeated the hangar bay. He stepped up to the retinal scanner, and a red laser beam flitted across his eye.

"Welcome back to Axion Station, Rico," the bodiless computer voice of the station said. The station CPU was a Candra IV-R. "All nanotechnological organisms have been verified. Rico, your nan-bots report that they have removed all of the plaque from your teeth and your arteries."

"Thanks, Candra," he said with a half smile. "My doctor and my dentist will both be thrilled. Security update?"

"All systems operating within normal parameters.

You have a haircut scheduled for today.”

Rico hit the smartwall and then the mirror icon. He gave himself an exaggerated, suave smile and chuckled. He examined his face in detail. He needed a shave, that was for sure. He had considered nanobot iris coloring, but a girl he’d dated once had gushed over his “chocolate brown, soulful eyes,” and, after an endorsement like that, he’d decided to leave well enough alone. His thick, dark-brown-almost-black hair was just past the tops of his ears and brushing the top of his collar. A few bangs kept falling down—a constant nuisance—but they weren’t in his eyes. The haircut could wait.

“Candra, reschedule please. I think I can hold off another week.”

“As you wish, Rico.”

The hatch door opened with a hiss of equalizing air pressure, and he entered the main hallway of the donut-shaped station. He stopped and breathed deeply, enjoying the filtered air. His ship, the *Outlier*, needed some new filters. At the moment it had the pungent tang of locker room. Compared to the air on his ship, the station smelled like springtime in Puerto Rico.

As he walked down the hall, Rico marveled once again at the real wood panels alternating with stone in this sector of the station. The expense involved in harvesting and shipping the wood to Axion must have been huge, even from the relatively nearby Wong Arboretum.

Rico pushed open the door to the lab and saw Dr. Kita Uesugi, retired Captain of the United States Air and Space Corps, as well as several other team

members, among them Jane Osgood, head of communications, and the test pilot, Xavier Sorrenguard.

“Hello, Useugi-sama,” Rico said, using the Japanese honorific. After her retirement, Kita had been invited to teach the next generation of space pilots and researchers for the island nation and so had returned to the land of her ancestors for a few years. Rico had visited her a few times in Tokyo and had been impressed with the deference they paid her. As a result, he'd adopted the honorific as his own to show his respect and affection for her.

She *tsked* at him. “Not so formal. Greetings, Rico-san. Welcome home.” Kita smiled. Her black, shoulder-length hair framed deep brown eyes. She brushed it back, and returned her gaze to the computer display in her hand.

“Hey, Hot Shot,” Xavier said. “How was the Europa run?” Xavier stood a little under two meters tall, blond, and towered over Uesugi at only a meter-and-a-half. The broad-shouldered man appeared more as an asteroid miner than Axion's star pilot. His bronze skin divulged the fact that he stayed in the tanning booth longer than needed to simply create vitamin D.

“Same old. Got the replacement parts we needed.” He'd wanted to put in some hours at the stick and, after the antimatter shipment got stolen, Uesugi had put Rico in charge of supply runs.

“D'you hear about the *Domínguez*?” the pilot asked. To Rico, he practically mimicked the old men from his grandmother's church, eager to gossip and spread bad news.

Rico didn't sigh, but he wanted to. He did not want to rehash this topic all day. "Yeah, Zavier," he said. He directed his next question to Jane. "Any clue what happened?"

Jane shook her head, her medium brown curls swaying and dark brown eyes somber. "They're going over traffic vids and reworking their numbers now. They claim their calculations were spot-on, their sims clean, and a remote controlled test went down without any problems. They thought they had the prize sewn up. They've been over the numbers dozens of times now, but nothing yet."

Uesugi said, "I spoke with their team leader, Joseph Juarez, to express my condolences. His niece, Lucille, died last month in a decompression accident." She paused and her eyes were hard flints of brown granite. "They believe Adala had a hand in the explosion onboard the *Domínguez*."

Rico whistled. He knew of Adala, of course. After the destruction of the Iranian city of Karaj, the Sinai Accords ended millennia of fighting. The governments finally found a way to work through their differences without leveling another city, but fringe elements such as Adala clung to the older beliefs. Adala meant "justice" in Arabic. Their *raison d'être* was the overthrow of governments corrupted by religious tolerance and the re-establishment of orthodox sharia law—as interpreted by their own imams, of course. They saw space trade and colonization as a particular threat to the cohesion of Muslim beliefs. Decades ago, they had rammed a supply ship through both cylinders of Hilm al-Salaam Colony—or something similar to that—he could not

remember the exact name. They killed almost everyone except for half a dozen people in a hydroponics lab. It had been on the news and blogs for months.

“Any clue why they're pointing the finger at Adala? Why would they care about a space race?”

Jane shook her head. “No. Nothing yet. Um, There’s a service on Prime Station tomorrow for the pilot.”

“Anyone going?” Rico asked. Jane deferred to Uesugi with a glance.

“I've asked people to stay on station,” Uesugi said, “until we solve our own simulation difficulty, so we do not have a similar accident. However, Jane tells me you knew the pilot.”

“Yeah,” Rico said. “I knew him.”

“I expect you will want to attend the service?”

Rico nodded. “I'd appreciate it, Cap.” He didn't want to go into his connection to Taz, at least not in a public setting. His past was his own damn business.

She nodded in return. “Of course, Rico-san.”

“I heard the *Domínguez* lit up the sky near Himalia like a new star,” Xavier said. “Dem’s da’ breaks, as they say.” Xavier let out a short laugh.

Rico had only been back fifteen minutes, but already he'd had enough of Xavier. “Shut up, Xavier. A pilot died out there. A Jupe. One of us.”

Xavier gave an arrogant smirk that made Rico fume even more. “Not one of us, Rico. One of *them*. One of the other teams out there fighting for the AMMATT Prize, in case you forgot. Pardon me for not crying because those sun-baked Sammies suffered a set back that might help us win.”

Rico snorted in disgust and turned away. Although he was not from South America, derogatory terms like that one got into his spacesuit. He wanted to pop him one, but he'd learned to keep his cool a long time ago.

Zavier talked to his back, feeling defensive, no doubt. "Hey, man. We're talking about 117 *trillion* credits, and if you think—"

"Enough, gentlemen." Kita interrupted quietly. "I cannot concentrate with all your babbling; we have our own problems."

She walked away from them, and over to the sim table. They passed an old, unlabeled photo with several people in lab coats hung on the wall. Rico was amazed at all the people with bald heads. *I'm glad they found a cure for that problem*, he thought to himself.

Jane spoke softly to him as they followed Uesugi. "People are pretty tense. With the explosion of the *Domínguez*, and the arrival of more antimatter, teams are pushing harder than ever to launch. A New Delhi coder claimed on one of the forums that they'll be ready for a test run within a week. The post got pulled, but I saw it before it did." She stopped talking as Uesugi began the sim and began speaking.

"In the simulations we have run, when we combine the matter and antimatter the magnetic field cannot contain the reaction. Candra, please bring up simulation 43-b-17."

The computer carried out the command and *The Amazing Grace*—named after the naval admiral and computer-programming pioneer Grace Hopper—appeared instantly on the holo. Her sleek lines

practically sang of speed. Shape did not matter out here in space, but aesthetics were still a point of pride for a lot of spacers. She looked tremendous. The simulation ran through various stages. "Maximum plasma speed obtained," the computer said. "Magnetic antimatter containment holding."

Other than Candra, the ubiquitous hum of air being forced through the station was the only sound. Grim faces gathered around the table. Rico already felt as if he was at a funeral. Zavier's pale face glowed in the simulator's light.

Jane cast her eyes at Uesugi, who gave a nod without moving her eyes from the screen. "Initiating anti-particle teleportation," she said.

"Antimatter-matter combustion successful." In this case, combustion seemed one the greatest understatements in the history of humanity.

"Magnetic combustion chamber holding at effective one-hundred percent. Gamma shielding one-hundred percent." the computer said.

"Opening nozzle. Engaging thrust." The ship shot dramatically ahead.

Jane read the numbers scrolling across the bottom. "Point one gigameters per hour. Point five gigs. One Gig. One point five. Two."

The simulated ship exploded in a spectacular ball of orange flames. Rico watched the simulation with a queasy feeling, knowing it would be Zavier or someone else he knew in the pilot's seat.

Federico "Rico" Schroeder knew the risks. He'd broken a leg flying hang gliders off the mountains near his grandmother's home in Isabela, Puerto Rico. Rico had not been a test pilot in the ACS, but he hung

out with a lot of them. When there was a new engine to try, Rico flew it at first opportunity. He knew that if you wanted big gains, you had to take risks.

Uesugi turned to Xavier while the sparks from the simulation flickered out. “The rules specify a human-piloted ship. We would much prefer to break the one gig mark and have our pilot live through the experience.” She shifted her gaze around the room. “Okay. As you know, a new shipment of antimatter has recently arrived from beyond the heliosphere on the robot ship,” Kita Uesugi continued. The heliosphere was the outer edge of our solar system, and the place where robot ships could collect comparatively large amounts of antimatter for the first time in human history. With just a fingernail’s worth—and a working drive—the solar system could open up in brand new ways. If they could get their antimatter drive working, the Jovian Planetary Zone would be less than four *days* away from Earth, instead of taking up to two years. Regular trade with the Jupiter orbital colonies would finally be possible, but only if they could avoid creating a miniature sun when they hit the thrusters. The changes within the solar system would be as dramatic as when the combustion engine became the dominant form of transportation back on earth.

“We must resolve this before Prime Station releases the antimatter to the teams. Everyone. Regardless of your role, go over everything again. We’ll meet tomorrow evening at nineteen hundred hours.”

* * *

Flying had always been Rico's passion—anything and everything and, of course, the faster, the better. His grandmother always worried about him. “Federico, I don't like you jetting around the solar system,” she'd said one cool summer night while they sat on the porch listening to the sounds of the evening. Strange how noisy planetside was. He'd teased her and said, “They don't use jets in space, abuela.” She'd tsked and snapped at him with her dishtowel. Rico always chuckled when he thought of his grandma's reactions to the speeds involved in space travel. When Rico had told his old-school grandmother that he had flown at a little over 160,000 kilometers per hour before her eyes got wide and she just stared at him.

He loved flying atmospheric and space ships, and reading about them, and was an obsessive trivia buff when it came to aerospace history. It had been his escape as a kid, after his parents had died. They had only been the first in a long string of deaths that had led him to where he was today. First his parents, then his grandmother, and then his uncle. Others, too. Too painful to think about, so he had formed a hard shell around those memories, and trained his mind to no longer go there.

Joining the United States Air and Space Corps ROTC program had been a fairly easy decision. Fly and get money for college. After a hitch in the Reserves, you were done and out. That had been his plan, anyway. Then his cousin, Jackie, had been murdered during his senior year. She had been murdered on Mars while at college there while he

had, literally, been a world away. Even if he'd been there, what could he have done? Nothing.

Rico and Jackie had both been betrayed by someone they trusted. Then she was dead, just like so many others in his life. When he'd gone through his psych profiling, as part of his vetting for the military police, the psychiatrist had warned him that with the extensive losses in his life, forming intimate relationships would require special attention and effort, moreso even than other military personnel.

That was a lot of psycho-babble for, “Dude, you have had a crappy life, and it has messed you up.”

It was not quite as bad as all that. Close. But not quite. Fortunately, he'd also had some good influences along the way, to help him get back on track.

In spite of no investigative training, Rico had taken leave and gone to Mars. He'd found his cousin's killer, and held the man's life in his hands. Rico could have killed him easily. He'd not merely been tempted to kill him—he'd *wanted* to kill him.

He'd blotted the name from the ledger of his mind. Banished. Outcast. Scrubbed from existence. Since that day, he'd refused to allow himself to even think the man's name. He was only *the killer*.

Jackie's killer had taunted him, laughed at him, and her death had just been the last of a long string of betrayals that Rico had not even been aware of until that last encounter. In retrospect, his naiveté had been understandable. The killer's mocking revelations had made Rico's face hot with embarrassment and anger and had made the betrayals all the more profound.

After Jackie's funeral, Rico went back home to

Branson Rings. He'd been coasting through the Air & Space Corps up until then, at least as much as anyone can coast through the military. Rico surprised his instructors. He applied himself to his studies with the vengeance he had withheld from the killer. He went from a mediocre student to virtually straight A's. Rico had found his calling and, until The Unfortunate Incident, he never looked back and never changed his trajectory.

He studied forensics, criminal psychology, and even xenology. Although earth's expatriates strongly objected to being considered aliens, definite differences had emerged in the psychology and physiology of colonies in earth's orbit, around Venus, on Mars, in the Belt, and now around Jupiter. Rico had always been fascinated by how quickly distinct cultures had emerged. Much the way children will cast aside the traditions and mores of their first generation immigrant parents, the bold pioneers of space forged new societies on whatever rock or habitat they clung to in their efforts to survive.

After he graduated from Hallsworth University, he'd done four years as a greenhorn officer, and then eight more in the Office of Criminal Investigation. He'd been happy serving in ASC, and his career had been promising—at least until French Guiana. He didn't want to think about that part much, but his mind went there anyway—a dog licking a wound.

Rico's assignment in French Guiana had changed his life—not all for the better, but one bright spot had been meeting Inés Villaverde. Taz had introduced them. That thought made him smile, because they had been running from thugs with machetes at the time.

The three of them eluded their pursuers and then drank Jeune Gueule beers nonchalantly at an oceanside café while eating a Vietnamese dish called Pho.

He flashed back to Cayenne's Central Market where the café sat, reaching out into the Atlantic Ocean. He remembered the way the sun shone on Inés' black hair that day.

Inés Villaverde. She gave one hell of a good backrub. He remembered the graceful curves of her body, wonderfully in shape, but not all muscle and bones.

Rico blew out a sigh. That had been a falling star—fast and fleeting—with a fiery crash at the end. He tsked to himself. Man, he wished things had gone differently.

French Guiana was also how he'd met Major Kita Uesugi of the United States Air and Space Corps. She'd been stationed there at the time and they'd crossed paths during his investigation. He'd saved hundreds, maybe thousands, but thirteen people had still died. Thirteen. He knew all their names to this day.

Major Uesugi had stood by him, and her testimony had helped considerably at his trial. He'd been exonerated at the court martial proceedings, but the whole ordeal left a bitter taste in his mouth. It had been a shark feeding frenzy, and he had been chum in the water. Rico had resigned his commission after that.

Rico had made a difference, maybe, for a while, but it had not ended well.

After he left the Corps, he got a job as a “star

jockey.” Really, he was nothing more than a glorified truck driver, picking up and delivering Helium 3. Still, it was cheaper than therapy and more fun, if you didn't mind spending weeks at a time alone. Rico had always been comfortable with his own company. He enjoyed people's company, but he appreciated quiet time as well.

Two years ago, he had just arrived back at Chou Station for another shipment when he received a message from Kita Uesugi. They were getting ready to test a breakthrough matter-antimatter engine, and she wanted him to handle security for the team. With the high stakes riding on the contest, the team worried about espionage or sabotage.

Flying for a while had been fun, but it was definitely not challenging with all the automation these days. And, truth be told, you can only watch so many vids, play so many games, and read so many books on the long flight from Jupiter to Earth or even Mars or the Belt. Rico wanted to get back to something more challenging. He gave notice with Chou InterGalactic, and he had been working with Axion ever since.

Rico drank a cup of JavaJazz and stared at the data on his board again before he launched for the funeral service over on Prime Station. Everyone had gone over them before, and even Candra had redone the computations with the same results. No one had found a critical error thus far. So Rico sipped his fourth cup of Jazz. He figured the teleportation of antiparticles into the combustion chamber must be the problem. Teleporting *regular* particles posed a substantial challenge and had only recently become

reliable. Even so, only particles could be teleported. Not even something as simple as a pebble had been successfully teleported. Their team was the first to attempt teleporting antiparticles, at least as far as they knew. If the teleport coordinates “landed” slightly off, this could cause the explosion when anti-molecules contacted real matter outside the combustion chamber. Or maybe the magnetic field for the combustion chamber deteriorated in a rapid cascade failure. But the computer had failed to detect any such problem.

Candra interrupted his thoughts. “Rico. You asked me to inform you when it was 0-six hundred hours. It is now 6 AM.”

“Thanks, Candra. Hey, Candra, while we’re gone, pull up the simulations from this past April. Compare all the programming code and the mathematical equations and flag all differences between each sim and the most recent one.”

“Yes, sir.”

“*Gracias, Amiga.*”

“*De nada, Señor.*”

- TWO -

Rico's trip over to Prime Station took a little longer than an hour, and the time to reflect brought up memories of his own first home in space, Branson Station. Branson Station was larger than his current home, Axion Station, and even larger than Prime Station. Branson also had the best views in the solar system of both the earth and the moon, as far as Rico was concerned, since it was fairly close to both.

Most stations start out with one small ring to house the construction workers. They are small in circumference, to save costs and get things going. That small size, however, means that they have a dizzying rotation speed. They need it to create a near-earth gravity. From that small ring, a central axis is built, and then additional, larger rings are added. The larger size means a slower—and far more comfortable—rotation speed.

Branson had been no exception. Her first ring had been only 100 meters in diameter. Even if you were sleepwalking, you could make it around that old metal donut in less than ten minutes. That wheel cruised along at close to four revolutions per minute. Plus, on the smaller rings, the gravitational pull is greater on one's feet than on one's head. It can be pretty disconcerting. Even many experienced spacers could lose their lunch under those conditions.

The workers had been a tough, raucous band—hard working, hard drinking, and hard fighting. They'd been proud of their ability to ride the ring, and

they'd wanted it commemorated. When the station was done, they'd suggested that the first ring be kept as a tourist attraction, quasi-amusement park ride, and historic monument. The CEO had loved the idea. Visitors and locals could all test their mettle on the First Ring.

Back before she'd been killed, Rico's cousin, Jackie, had come up from Earth to Branson Station. He'd taken her into that smallest ring when playing tour guide for her. They'd both been about sixteen. Jackie'd described it as, "sorta like when yer on a roller coaster, at just the right spot in a loop, where your body is mashed into the seat, but your head feels lighter—only not quite as extreme as that. Close, though!" She'd laughed. She'd also told him that adjusting too suddenly gave her vertigo.

Walking straight, in line with the ring's rotation, wasn't too bad, but if you tried to turn to talk to someone, or walk at an angle, then you felt like someone was pushing you upright. "I feel like I'm a gyroscope," she'd said over drinks while they watched the planet below them from the Earthgazer Lounge. "Or, remember when we were all at the ocean? When the waves were behind us, they weren't much of a problem. But as soon as you tried to go sideways to get the beachball, the water took you out!" He did remember and they both laughed. Rico poked her arm. "Yeah, but I'm not sure that's a fair comparison—that wave was over my head!"

"Excuses, excuses! Anyway, that's how it feels in the small ring." She frowned in thought, not satisfied with her illustration. She sat there a moment, trying to grab an elusive thought. "No! No, I got it!" She

grabbed his arm. “Remember when we were at that amusement park, where we were on the spinning wheel?”

Rico nodded. “*Sí*, and we thought Lucia was going to be sick?”

“Yes, but before that, we tried lifting our arms and legs away from the wall, but the spin would push our arms and legs back down? *That's* how it feels for me, if I move wrong. Not as strong, you know? But that pushing sensation.

“For the most part, the larger rings aren't like that now that I've been up here awhile. The worst is bending over and feeling as if I'm losing my balance because of that spinward thing. That still gets me. Ugh!”

Rico chuckled. He'd never had that problem.

“The wall fountains and stripes help, though.” Throughout all seven rings that were eventually built onto Branson Station, architects recessed flat, enclosed water fountains into the walls. The addition added a more organic, less sterile feel to the station. However, they also had another equally important benefit. Instead of the water falling straight down, as it would on earth, the droplets curved in the opposite direction of the station's spin as they fell. Earthers said the curving water reminded them of pouring water out a sprinkling can in a high wind, or pouring soda out a car window. Most stations that accepted “space virgins” also had prefab walls with periodic indented curves painted in relief for the same reason. The water and the curved stripes reminded visitors that items—and people—fell in that direction and to watch their step. Jackie had adjusted in three or four

days but other poor souls could take weeks to adjust.

Prime Station workers on the other hand, had cut up and repurposed their first ring. She was months from Earth and supplies. Everything that could be reused was.

Prime Station had five rings now: Command ring, two agricultural rings, a dedicated research ring, and Farside Ring. The tourists preferred the larger and newer, Farside Ring, which was more than a thousand times bigger than Command Ring. It took a full hour to completely circle around to the same spot and boasted earth-normal gravity. It contained three hotels, dozens of bars, and condo units. There was even a recreation sphere at the center of Farside. Rico had been there, of course, but he preferred the less flashy Command Ring.

The Command ring had replaced that initial small torus habitat. Command still served as the main docking ring for supply ships and provided temporary berths for their crews, as needed. It also housed the station traffic control personnel, security, as well as various research and administrative offices.

For the most part, Command Ring on Prime Station, orbiting Jupiter, retained the same utilitarian décor as when it was first built, with steel, plas, and plastic comprising the walls, and a functional, plain grip-floor. At over 1,600 meters in diameter, Command Ring had a reasonable gravity of .85 of Earth's, and a leisurely one revolution per minute. At a brisk walk, it would take about 45 minutes to walk all the way around the ring. Techs and researchers from the other stations came here to socialize and to trade goods.

At the moment, Rico sat in Command Ring's only bar, The Spartan, watching the moon Callisto on the viewscreen. The bar smelled of mold and rancid fruit juice from too many spilled drinks. The real-time viewing screens had been installed years after the ring had been completed; neon lights, a huge fish tank along the inner wall, and color-shifting chairs had also been added in an attempt to brighten up the place. The tank bubbled happily. If nothing else, the amazingly close view of Callisto, with Jupiter looming beyond, still struck awe in even the oldest space hands. Even at this distance, the planet, with its swirling mass of storms, took over so much of the view that it always gave Rico the impression they were being sucked in.

Rico raised his glass in silent salute to his friend and sipped at an Old Fashioned, enjoying the sweet-bitter taste. Today, they would be honoring Taz. A pilot, a spacer and a "Jupe"—one of their own. He wondered how many of them had a personal connection to the man, as he had. Doubtless some of his teammates would be here.

The service was disappointingly short, however. Tiago's fellow team members listed the pilot's accomplishments, with just a few anecdotes that gave a brief glimpse of the man's life and personality. Seems as if a guy should have more of an epitaph than a twenty-minute synopsis of his life and a commemorative chocolate bar. Tiago Vaz had been a huge fan of Brazilian chocolate, so his friends had created chocolate bars wrapped in a collage of his favorite things and accomplishments in bold colors. A nice touch, but it still left Rico feeling shortchanged

and glum.

“Hell of a way to wrap up a life,” Rico muttered to himself.

Rico observed the moon and stars beyond the window and let out a deep breath. He gestured and a middle-aged man with salt and pepper hair came over and refilled his drink.

The doors to the bar whisked open and four security guards stepped in, preceded by a short, hawk-eyed man. The guards carried state-of-the-art LLAMs, the Less Lethal Auto-adjusting-to-Mass Riot Gun.

“Ladies and Gentlemen,” Hawk-eye said in a no-nonsense tone. “There is an emergency situation, and Prime Station is under lockdown until further notice.”

A din of protests rose from the assembled crowd.

“What about the antimatter shipment?” a man called out.

Hawk-eye glowered at the man as if he might pounce and devour him whole then and there. After a slight pause, not heavy-handed, but long enough to make the point, he replied in the politest tone, “Sir, it took more than twelve years for the robot ship to come from beyond the heliosphere to arrive at our humble station. Another few hours will not make a difference.” He held up a hand, forestalling any objections. “I know you are concerned about the AMMATT Prize. All the teams are under the same constraint. That will have to suffice.” The man turned his steely gaze on Rico. “Federico Schroeder, would you come with me, please?”

Rico peered at the man skeptically, but shrugged and finished off his drink. He followed Hawk-eye out

the door, and he felt the eyes of the mob following him. Two guards came with them, and two more remained behind just inside the doors.

The man spoke crisply and with bold confidence. “Walk with me, please. My name is Rueben Holt, Assistant Chief Security Officer. I just got promoted, you might say, to temporary head of security, and we need your help.

“What kind of help? And what happened to Bahru Wagle?”

“Ah. You know the Chief of Security?”

“Yes. We met at a workshop on security for Jupiter stations.”

“Well, my boss has been missing for several hours; we cannot raise him by comm, and we cannot track him using his locator beacon. We're quite concerned. Especially given what's happened.” He walked on for two beats before continuing. “I understand you have some experience with investigations, Captain Schroeder?”

Rico nodded. “A little. Um, it's just mister now. I'm retired.”

“Well, you, sir, are the best we have. There's been a murder. My boss has disappeared, and I have little experience in this area. We have received orders directly from Earth—from the United States government—recalling you to active duty for the duration of this investigation. Dr. Uesugi has been informed of the situation and has agreed to cooperate.” He handed Rico his AI pad and showed him the order.

Rico grunted. Typical.

Holt, a short, sparse man, walked at a fast clip. He

was probably five years older than Rico. He had a gaunt face, drawn tight and bony.

“The victim's berth is on the opposite side of Command Ring, within the Sector 270 hangar bays.” Every sector of Command Ring was identified by the degrees of a circle. Station Control, by tradition, always sat at zero degrees (or 360 degrees), which had added more opportunities to make administration the butt of jokes. Command Ring had two primary hangar bays, located on opposite sides of the habitat, one set centered around 90 degrees, and the other at 270 degrees. “A few things you should know before we get there. The victim, Hujjat Malik, worked for Dubai Intergalactic. As such, they want one of their own people in on the investigation.”

Rico stopped walking and stared at the man. “That's highly irregular. What if someone from Dubai is involved?”

Holt walked a few more steps before realizing that Rico had stopped walking. “You've been out here awhile now, Captain. You know how it works. Money makes most of the rules, and Dubai has a considerable amount of that. You'll have to do the best you can. The person they want on board seems decent enough, though. His file presents him in a good light. He's a doctor of sorts.”

Rico set his mouth in a flat line. He was not at all happy about being drafted into this mess without a say, much less having the investigation compromised from the get-go. However, he also knew Holt was right. Rico couldn't do anything about the situation, except refuse the post, and he wouldn't do that—not if it meant letting a killer get away.

“Fine. But I want it on record that I’m protesting this ‘representative’s’ involvement, and I object to being strong-armed into taking him.”

Holt inclined his head. “Duly noted.”

Rico started to ask what, “doctor of sorts” meant when they arrived outside a door with two more guards, also armed with LLAMs.

“I realize you have experience with this, but you still might want to brace yourself.”

The door whisked open, retracting into the wall to save space. The body laying on the bed caught his attention immediately because of the gruesome hole that erupted from his stomach. Folds of skin peeled back like a macabre flower in bloom. Rico caught the heavy-sweet tang of iron and copper from the blood that covered the bed and pooled on the floor. It was a grisly scene.

As Rico examined the room from the doorway, another person walked up, but other than giving the man a quick glance, Rico remained focused on the tight temporary quarters. The deceased clutched a physical book in his hands. Printed books were rare these days. Rico could not make out the title from the hall. Based on the wrinkles on his face and the extra weight around his mid-section, the man on the bed was between the age of 40 and 50. Middle Eastern, dark hair and dark complexion. Married, by the ring on his finger. Two daughters from the framed picture on his nightstand. Possibly nieces or family friends, but a person does not usually bring a photo for an overnight—especially a stand-alone frame—unless it is someone important to them.

“Did you serve, Mr. Holt?”

“I was an E5, sir. Staff Sergeant,” Reuben Holt replied. Rico had figured as much. He had the bearing and efficient manner of someone ex-military.

The new arrival wore a heavy green Nehru-style suit with a satiny sheen to it, a high square collar with rounded lapels, no tie, a button shirt, and pearl buttons. He had a neatly trimmed mustache and beard and dark skin. His complexion was light, actually, but still darker than Rico’s own. He had strong, but not overstated cheekbones. He gave Rico the impression more of a Middle Eastern movie star or a shuttlebuster than a real doctor. Brown eyes watched Rico but gave nothing away. He stood tall—close to two meters in height—but not as tall as a spacer.

“Right,” Rico said.

Holt cleared his throat uncomfortably, and gestured to the newcomer. “This is Dr. Raheem Kuzbari, and this is Captain Federico Schroeder. Dr. Kuzbari is the Dubai Intergalactic Chemicals representative. He rode over from Dubai station with a retired couple, and the victim, Hujjat Malik. The victim was one of their team members.” The two guards who had followed them took up positions at both ends of the hallway.

Rico gave him a polite nod. “Call me Rico.” They shook hands.

“Any investigative experience?” Rico asked him.

“I have a medical degree, and I have done autopsies, Kuzbari replied. “Mr. Holt told Dubai Intergalactic Chemicals of the situation and, since I was already here, they assigned me to assist. Do you want me to preserve the scene?” Kuzbari held up a 3D cam.

Rico cast a glance over at him and nodded. “Sure, that would be helpful.” Kuzbari’s preparedness surprised him, but Rico kept his face neutral. Efficient. Maybe he’d be useful to have on the investigation, but he disliked having the Dubai doctor pushed onto his investigation—it compromised anything the man touched.

Holt tipped his head, eyebrows knit together. “Dr. Kuzbari is being modest. He’s an expert in nano-medical programming. He’s published papers on the topic.”

“Really?” Rico replied noncommittally. “Were you and Dr. Malik friends?”

Kuzbari shook his head. “No. I just met him on the trip over. Dubai Intergalactic is a large station, and I just came out from Earth two months ago.”

Rico gestured into the room. “What can you tell me about the victim?”

Kuzbari answered. “Not too much. Physicist and engineer. He told me that he and the pilot from the Sistema Solar team who died, Tiago Vaz, shared a passion for the Royal Game of Ur. An ancient board game, similar to Parcheesi. They would play it by computer over optical signal. I believe you call it the OptiComm.”

“What brought you over for the funeral?”

Kuzbari, distracted by the body in the room, said, “The shuttle.” Then, realizing how that sounded, he gave an apologetic smile and added, “I did not come for the funeral. I merely hitched a ride. I am giving a lecture in a few days on medical advances.”

They turned their attention to the corpse again. Rico said, “It almost looks like he got hit from behind

with some sort of archaic bullet. See the way the wound is much larger in the back and peels open? How big is that exit wound? 20 or 30 centimeters? Any ideas what caused it?"

Kuzbari hesitated. "Without closer examination, it would be hard to say. A rat could possibly do that; it's improbable but we are close to the docks." He turned to Holt. "Any rats in this area?"

Holt shook his head. "Unlikely. They're around; where there are ships, there are rats, but they tend to stay in the conduits, work tunnels, and near food storage.

"Probably some sort of weapon." The doctor pulled out an electronic device and flipped it on. It made a warbling noise until he ran his fingers over the glide screen.

"What's that?" Rico asked.

"Bioelectric scanner. Detects electrical activity as subtle as that put out by a human body. It can help determine time of death."

Rico grunted. "That reminds me of a shrapnel wound. I just never saw one from a guy just laying in bed."

Rico and Kuzbari slipped on sterine gloves and booties and broke the seals activating the heat pack. The covers instantly shrink-wrapped around their hands and feet forming a thin, durable shield. Rico walked in and did a quick perusal all the way around. He preferred to take in the room before he examined the body. His instructor had told him, "Skim the surroundings first. Check the body, but don't let it distract you. He's dead. He's not going anywhere. Inspect the room. Look for threats. Watch for

evidence.”

An AI pad sat undisturbed in the corner. The victim’s uncard, a combination of ID and bank/credit card, sat on a dresser. Three books lay on the bed. Up close, Rico could make out the book in the man’s hands: *Antimatter Collection Beyond the Bow Shock*.

To the man’s left, toward the wall, a book with Arabic letters on the cover lay on top of blood-soaked blankets. Pointing it out, Kuzbari said, “*Qur'an*. Not an overly conservative Muslim, however.”

Rico gave him a quizzical expression. “You can tell that from the *Qur'an*?”

“No, the wedding ring. Although more accepted in recent years, for many they are still *haram*. That is to say, sinful.”

“Enough that someone might kill over it?”

Kuzbari hesitated. “Possibly.”

Rico wondered if something as minor as a wedding ring, at least from his perspective, anyway, was enough to get a terrorist group such as Adala involved. It seemed dubious, but maybe someone went rogue, or they were trying to issue a warning to others, or both. Maybe someone stepped off the ring from crazy-fanatic to just plain crazy.

Rico considered Kuzbari's second theory about a weapon. It seemed almost as if a giant spear had thrust up through the bottom of the bed. Impossible, but that's how it appeared. Drawers occupied the space under the bed, and they appeared undisturbed. The man's eyes stared at the ceiling, wide circles of horror, as if he knew that he lay dying. His hands and face, drained of blood, had a gray pallor.

Kuzbari said, “Based on the wound location, he

took awhile to die. Stomach wounds can be particularly painful and slow to kill. This certainly seems personal.”

Rico said, “I agree. It sure appears gruesome enough to be personal, or perhaps to send a message. I saw a guy last for days with a stomach wound once. We were pinned down. Anyway, it wasn’t pretty.”

The doctor gestured toward the hallway and asked, “Did he activate the emergency call system by wallscreen or voice?”

Reuben Holt shook his head from the doorway.

Rico shook his head in turn. “From all appearances, he just laid here, even after his stomach erupted. Why wouldn’t he have called for help? This is definitely one screwy case.” He spoke directly to Holt. “I’ll do what I can, but I can’t make any promises.”

“I’m done,” Kuzbari said. “With your permission?” The man held his hand over the victim’s eyes, which stared at the ceiling.

Rico hesitated and then nodded.

Kuzbari closed the dead man's eyes and said something Rico did not understand, presumably a prayer in Arabic. When he finished, with Rico's help, they spread out a specialized plastic sheet. They picked up the body of Hujjat Malik and lowered it onto the plastic. The doctor unfolded a frame and placed it around the body. Next, he sprayed a chemical on the plastic, and it transformed into a hard, opaque shell to preserve any evidence.

Holt, Schroeder and Kuzbari stood in the hall while the medical team moved the body to the med lab. Two guards remained in the hallway while others

searched for the missing head of security.

“So,” Rico said, “Tiago Vaz, a pilot from Sistema Solar Recursos Ilimitados, dies in the first test flight any team has been able to pull off. While at his funeral, an acquaintance of his from Dubai Intergalactic, Dr. Hujjat Malik, gets killed.”

“That hardly seems a coincidence,” Kuzbari said.

“Agreed. Reuben, can you have all Tiago's and Hujjat's communications pulled and sent to my AI pad? Let's see if we can find some connection besides some ancient Parcheesi game.”

“Yes, sir.” He pulled up his own pad and typed in a few lines. “I've got someone working the protocols. We'll have it in a few minutes.”

Reuben held up a finger and touched his earpiece. “Holt here. Go.” He frowned, listening. “Well, tell them they can't.” Another pause. “No, I—Bah—Space me. All right. I'll be right there.” He gestured at Rico and Kuzbari to follow. “Come on. One of our guests has called a vote to force us to let them all go.”

“Before the investigation is complete?” Kuzbari asked.

“They can't do that,” Rico said. “We haven't even interviewed anyone yet.”

“Yes, they can,” Holt said.

“I better get down to the lab, then, and see what I can find out from the body, stat,” Kuzbari said. He peeled out of his sterine gloves and booties, and tossed them into a reclamation chute. He snapped the sleeves of his shirt and jacket back into place.

“Computer, provide Dr. Kuzbari with the route to the medical lab.” A red line with a matching arrow appeared on a nearby smartwall and pulsed its way

down the corridor, leading the way to the lab. Kuzbari nodded and hurried off, his heavy bag in tow.

Holt marched crisply through the halls, staring straight ahead and deadly serious. Rico kept pace with him while the man talked. "Someone's using the Jupiter Articles of Mutual Cooperation to throw his weight around. He's called a vote."

"A vote? On what?"

"The constraint clause. At any time, any one of the member organizations can call a vote challenging any policy issue that restricts the activity of any other member, even if it does not constrain themselves or their interests. They only need a one-third vote to overturn any constraint."

"Right. I remember reading about that when I relocated out here. Struck me as pretty nuts. That's almost anarchy." Rico said.

"Pretty much so," Holt agreed. "It is about as *laissez-faire* as you can get. Anarchy with the illusion of governance. Passing a regulation takes 85 percent. Overturning one is as easy as floating in zero-g. It is intended to give corporations the maximum freedom possible; none of the corporations or the governments wanted any interference out here. Raw materials are not the only reason groups set up operations so far from earth. You think it's difficult getting a resolution passed at the United Nations?" Holt gave a grim laugh. "Try Jupiter."

They walked on in silence for only a meter or two before Holt continued, "There's another complication. I knew I was running low on air when I tried stopping all traffic out of the station, anyway. Closing the rings down starts costing a fortune pretty quickly. A few

hours aren't much, given the distances between here and the belt or Earth. Keep it up for much longer, however, and we're talking millions of credits lost each day. With my supervisor missing, I'm in charge, so I had to make the call. Was it the right call? I don't know. Regardless, even without the group of citizens and employees clamoring in the bar, if I try to lock down the station for long, my ass will be tossed out an airlock."

They hurried along, exchanging trivial talk for the rest of the fifteen-minute walk back to the bar. Holt stopped talking as they entered the bar to a harangue of shouts and protests. Rico followed behind him.

"All right, all right!" the hawk-eyed man shouted. "That's enough!" The crowd quieted and he said, "Who called the vote?"

"I did." A stocky dark-haired man with light skin and blue eyes said. He had an accent Rico could not quite place. South American. Portuguese, maybe, but not quite.

"You are?"

"Ted Martel. The Articles are quite clear, Mr. Holt. We can call a vote on any situation that inhibits our actions."

"I'm sorry, Mr. Martel. Who do you represent?"

"I'm from French Guiana. I represent Sistema Solar Recursos."

At the mention of French Guiana, Rico's nerves sent a wakeup alarm through his body. Taz dies and suddenly there's this guy Martel who is from French Guiana, but also claiming to be part of Sistema Solar Recursos. Unusual to have a French Guianan working for a Brazilian company. The two nationalities did not

get along all that well.

That was both odd and interesting,. French Guiana sat on the northeast coast of South America, north of Brazil. After a string of economic crises, Asia—primarily India, Japan, and China—and the Middle East's Dubai emerged as the leader, and led the way in the development of robots, nan-bots, nanomedicine and space development. South America emerged just behind those nations as a hub of space activity, largely because of the French Guiana Space Centre. Since the tiny nation was part of both the European Union and the Unión de Naciones Suramericanas (UNASUR), it stood uniquely positioned to facilitate trade between the powers. They marketed themselves as “The Center of Space,” and the wealth flowed to those in power, while those living in the ghettos surrounding the port scabbled to survive and hoped for the chance to get into space for a better life.

Reuben worked his mouth as if biting back words or trying not to spit. “Fine.” He addressed the crowd of researchers, pilots, and others confined to The Spartan. “A man has been murdered. A scientist. If you leave now, we will lose vital information that may help us catch the killer, and you will be letting the murderer escape.”

“Well, I don't know anything about it,” a man of enormous girth said.

“We've got a prize to win!” someone yelled out.

“And shipments of H3 to get moving,” a man with a Mandarin Chinese accent said. Rico spotted him, but did not recognize him.

“Call the vote!” a woman toward the back

shouted. A chorus of “Call the vote!” rang out and then a tense silence again fell over the room.

Martel gave a sad smile. Rico didn't believe it for a minute. “We grieve for our compatriot, inspector. However, we are very close to winning the Prize, and Tiago would want us to press on. It is the best tribute we could give him.” He raised his voice to reach the entire room, while still keeping his eyes locked on Holt's. “All those in favor of ending our confinement and releasing the antimatter to the teams, say Aye.”

“Aye!” erupted from the crowd.

“I believe that satisfies the vote, inspector.”

Holt turned to the two men guarding the sliding doors and said, “Let 'em go.” The crowd surged through the doors and in moments had dispersed through the narrow corridors to ready their ships.

“I'll delay them as long as I can,” Holt told him.

“All right,” Rico said. “Put in a priority request to all the companies for whatever recordings they have on Tiago's flight. I know everyone was watching. Maybe we'll see something.”

“Where will you start?” the station officer asked.

“Always start with the victim's known associates,” Rico said. “I think I'll go see what our Sistema Solar representative, Mr. Martel, can tell us while Dr. Kuzbari is doing the autopsy.”

- THREE -

Rico caught up with Ted Martel who was giving orders to a man outside his ship, a mid-sized interzone vessel capable of traveling the distance between Earth and Jupiter.

“Pedro, *vamos*. Open the cargo doors. I want us ready to launch as soon as the antimatter arrives.”

As Rico approached, Martel glowered. “What’re you doing here? Where’s your little Arab friend?”

Rico ignored the hostility. “I’m investigating Hujjat Malik’s death.”

Martel’s face flushed red with rage. “Ah. And what about my teammate Tiago’s death, eh? Who is investigating that? Pah!” He threw up an arm in disgust.

“You think someone sabotaged the *Domínguez*?” Rico asked.

“Ask your friend,” Martel said, still glaring. “You got a lot of guts coming here.” He stepped toward Rico with his fist clenched. Rico’s first impression of the man as stocky was not quite right. Rico did have a few inches on the guy, and Martel’s broad shoulders and bulky arms were evident under the cold-resistant flight jacket, but he was not heavysset or awkward in the least. His sinewy grace gave the impression of a predator about to pounce. The other man, Pedro, had disappeared inside the ship.

“Who? You mean Dr. Kuzbari? Do you have something you want to say, Mr. Martel?” He shifted his feet and his balance, ready in case Martel came at

him, but kept his hands by his side and his face blank.

“I don’t want any trouble. I’m not threatening anybody,” Martel sneered, turning his face aside.

Rico said, “Mr. Martel, if you have any information that can help us catch Tiago’s killer, I want to do that. He was a friend of mine.”

Martel softened his tone, but not by much. “Catch him and do what? There is no justice out here except Jupiter justice, eh?. You are American, right? Just as with your Old West frontier, we fight our own battles out here.”

“Do you have information about Tiago’s death?” Rico pressed.

Martel stepped closer and jabbed a finger in Rico’s face. “You’ve got a lot of *cojones* asking me that.” He clenched his jaw and leaned in close. “We know what your friend and his team did.” Rico did not give ground. He kept his breathing even and his body relaxed, waiting for Martel to make his move.

Instead, Martel stepped back. “Keep that piece of flotsam off my dock, and you stay off it, too. I didn’t kill Higgitt. But if we figured out what Dubai Intergalactic has been up to, maybe somebody else did, too. *Adios, adieux.*” He spat on the dock and stalked into his ship.

#

Kuzbari watched through the scope as the nan-bots he’d injected into the hard carapace made their way over to the body. Although he’d worked with nan-bots for years, he’d never ceased to be fascinated by them. It amazed him that they could fly through

the air, actually move through a person's lungs examining for signs of cancer or some other problem and then, just as easily, enter through a blood vessel wall and swim through a person's bloodstream. They truly were miraculous inventions.

Kuzbari leaned forward as the group of nan-bots sent their observations of Malik's body to his terminal in real-time. Something was wrong. As soon as their scans hit the cavity, a different cloud of nan-bots rose up like a swarm of angry hornets. They charged Kuzbari's nan-bots, and the video feeds all winked out. Panicked, he switched channels to the group he'd sent toward the head and had them pivot back. A score of nan-bots raced toward his team. Ignoring the aggressors, the doctor zoomed in on the background, where a group of them had emerged from the body. Hundreds if not thousands of them were settling against the hard shell of the autopsy carapace.

They were trying to cut their way through.

Kuzbari stumbled backward off his stool. "Oh no, oh no, oh no," he muttered as he scrambled for his black cloth bag, his normally calm reserve shattered. His nan-bots must have triggered a defense response: eliminate anyone probing the body. His head jerked up. Was that his imagination? Had he heard the shell cracking? Sweat broke out on his forehead as he pawed through his bag. "Come on, come on!"

He pulled out a rod that looked like a miniature satellite dish, his own invention. *Finally!* He pulled the trigger, sending an intense rapid-flux magnetic field at the carapace. He couldn't see the microscopic robots, of course, so he went over every millimeter of the shell. Then, just to be safe he ran the field over his

own body. He sat down on the floor, setting the degausser down next to him with trembling hands.

#

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theworldsofdonhunt@gmail.com

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