



WESLEY CHU

TIME

SALVAGER

The New Novel from the Author of THE LIVES OF TAO

TIME SALVAGER

WESLEY CHU



A Tom Doherty Associates Book
New York

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TO MY GRANDPARENTS AND THOSE WHO CAME BEFORE ME

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I grew up in a rural part of Taiwan in the back of my grandparents' convenience store. My memories are hazy, but I remember vignettes—lush jungles, swarms of dragonflies, green everywhere, and lots of rain. Some of my sharpest memories include making a bow and arrow out of a kite and shooting it at my brother (totally safe, I'm sure), biting the principal's son's nose until he bled during kindergarten because he took my toy, and stealing instant noodle packages from my grandparents' general store so I could suck on the pepper during nap time.

My paternal grandparents raised me until I was five years old while my parents were in the United States getting their advanced degrees at the University of Nebraska (Go Huskers!). For the most part, it was a good childhood, except for having an outhouse, showering with a bucket, and having chickenpox nip at me once in a while.

When my parents returned to take my brother and me to America, I remember telling my crying grandmother that I'd stay with her. I didn't, of course, but I always wondered what life would have been like if I had never left Taiwan. On one hand, I probably would have studied harder. On the other hand, I probably wouldn't have become an author.

I reflect on the decisions made by my parents, grandparents, and ancestors that have led to where I am today, writing this acknowledgment for *Time Salvager*. A change of heart, a freak accident, or a seemingly inconsequential left turn instead of a right at some intersection, and everything could have been different. I hope they're all proud of what came from their choices, mistakes, and sheer luck.

My mother's father passed away before I was born; her mother when I was in high school. My grandmother on my father's side passed away eight months before my first book, *The Lives of Tao*, came out. My surviving grandfather, a retired teacher, is now in his nineties. He's still sharp, does exercises, and loves that new television I bought him in 2013 when I went back to visit. That may be the last time I see him alive.

To all my ancestors, thank you for leading lives that have allowed me to exist, to be an author, and to present *Time Salvager* to the world.

This book is dedicated to you.

Wesley Chu, Chicago, September 2014

ONE

END TIMES

A sliver of light cut through the void, shooting toward the center of the battle display. Every soul on the bridge, breaths collectively held, eyed its path as it streaked across space. The room was dead quiet, except for the droning voice counting down to the point of impact. An explosion the size of a thumbnail blinked and flowered to fill half the display, then darkened again.

The bridge erupted into cheers as the Neptune Divinity flagship's holographic avatar disappeared. But the celebration was short-lived. Captain Dustinius Monk's voice cut through the chatter.

"Station status!" he demanded. The grim news of the health of the ship trickled in.

"Shield arms down," a bridge acolyte said.

"Mobility thrusters offline," another added.

"Aft hull breached."

The list of the ship's injuries continued to grow longer as each station confirmed the already perilous situation. It was a miracle and a testament to her crew that the *High Marker*, the flagship of the Technology Isolationists, was still intact.

Grace Priestly yawned, bored. She was usually bored when dealing with the painfully slow mental pace of average humans. She wondered how long she would have to wait for someone to say something interesting.

Then Monk's second in command, sounding close to panic, reported in. "We are not past the termination shock wave, Captain!" The chatter died and the room became dead silent again.

"Can we get any of the shield arms functional?" Monk asked.

"Not without extensive exterior repair."

"Get me just one damn shield arm and I can deflect the blast!" Captain Monk roared, his voice cutting through the tension in the air. The rest of the crew froze in place. "What about engines? Shield thrusters? Any way to move her? Anything, for space's sake!"

"We're adrift, Captain." The acolyte standing next to him shook his head. "Power core down to sixty percent. There must be damage to the Titan source as well."

"Convert more immediately."

The acolyte's face turned white. "Captain, the systems acolyte reports the converter is gone."

"Gone? How is that possible?"

"She is at a loss, Captain."

Monk pulled up a display and stared at the blast wave of the Neptune Divinity flagship. He brought up another screen and scrolled through the data projections. His body stiffened and the blood drained from his face.

He glanced over at Grace, who stared back with cold indifference. Monk began spitting out orders in rapid succession, doing everything he could to prevent the impending disaster. Every hand on deck

worked frantically as the ship's clock counted down to the impact of the wavefront barreling toward them.

Grace knew better. They were doomed the instant the fusion missile struck the enemy ship. With the main engine and side thrusters offline and all three shield arms inactive, the *High Marker* was completely exposed. The brunt of the blast wave would carry her away from the solar system toward the heliopause, from which no ship had ever returned.

Grace knew this was a high probability outcome, as did Monk. That's why, with the *High Marker*'s propulsions disabled, he had asked for her authority to execute a planet cracker missile at such short range. Even knowing the potential consequences, she had still ordered it launched. After all, if they were going to die, the least they could do was take out the enemy.

The captain and his crew were fighting to save the *High Marker*, but as far as Grace was concerned, they might as well be attempting to raise the dead. There were definitely enough bodies lying around the ship for them to try.

Still, it amused her that Monk fought so hard against the inevitable. The captain was a smart man, having been a spacefarer for all of his eighty years. If Grace hadn't known better, she would have guessed that the noble captain was trying to do whatever it took to save his ship. But Grace did know better. He was putting on a show for her, because having the High Scion of the Technology Isolationists die on his ship would shame his family line for all time.

Or perhaps Captain Monk wasn't going through the motions and was actually deluded enough to try to pull off a miracle. Grace certainly hoped not. She'd hate to think she had made the mistake of putting an imbecile in charge of her flagship. Well, there were no such things as miracles, and Grace was tired of watching their pointless exercise. The *High Marker* was doomed.

The blast wave's impact jolted the ship, knocking those standing off their feet. Half a dozen more alerts lit up the battle display. Grace, sitting in her gravity chair, watched the crew scramble to combat these new problems as the *High Marker* was swept up by the forward force of the blast.

Grace stood up and looked at her pet. "Come, Swails. When the good captain is ready to report, I can call my cabin."

Swails, her man pet, stood and fell in step next to her. Her wrinkled hands caressed his perfect face. The poor idiot was incapable of grasping what had just happened. He had probably never had an original thought in his beautiful head, but then, that was the way she liked her pets. The bridge crew stopped what they were doing and waited respectfully as she passed.

"Oh, do continue trying to save the ship," she remarked, gliding out of the room. Those dolts would work themselves to death playing this futile game. Such a waste. Grace thought she had guided the Technology Isolationists to be better humans than this.

"Come, pet," she said, motioning to Swails again as she walked down the wreckage-strewn walkways. The flagship *High Marker* was the most advanced ship ever built by man. What the Technology Isolationists lacked in numbers and resources, they more than made up for in power and technological prowess. But even then, sheer numbers and resources could overcome that power, and that was exactly what the Neptune Divinities had been doing. There was only so much opposition any faction could muster without proper resources, after all.

The *High Marker* had been set upon shortly after her rendezvous with the research base on Eridanus. The flagship, her two escorts, and the dozen or so reinforcements summoned from the planet below took on sixty-some Neptune Divinity ships and won. Pyrrhic victories might not be true victories, but they were still better than the alternative.

The ship attrition rate on both sides of this massive battle was near total, save for the *High Marker*.

which was now being knocked out of the solar system. Unless they could repair the engine, a feat no ship had ever accomplished without a space dock, they were doomed to die either in the cold of space or upon impact with a celestial object. Grace hoped the *High Marker* crashed into something interesting like a plasma cloud or a black hole, out of scientific curiosity, of course.

She decided to maximize the use of her remaining time alive and have her pet fuck her senseless. Might as well die happy.

They reached a partially collapsed intersection of the ship. A metal beam and several large fragments of debris blocked their path. Grace saw the blackened remains of a leg sticking out from the rubble and carefully stepped over it, trying to avoid dirtying her dress.

“Help me, pet,” she said.

He dutifully complied, gently holding the tips of her fingers as she slowly swung one leg over the beam, and then the other. She moved well for a ninety-three-year-old. Grace watched as Swails jumped over the beam and fell in line beside her again. His movements felt wrong. She played the mental image of him over and over in her head. Something had been bothering her since they had boarded; Swails wasn't himself today.

Details were what differentiated the smart from the brilliant, and Grace was the foremost mind of her generation, and one of the brightest to have ever lived. Soon, it wouldn't matter anymore. She stared at Swails's genetically modified face; it was perfect. He looked like her pet and even moved like Swails, but something behind those eyes betrayed him. They weren't quite as vacuous as her pet's usually were.

He was an impostor in all the small ways that most people wouldn't notice, but she wasn't most people. Perhaps he was just ill and had suffered a bout of momentary thought. It happened from time to time, though the breeders did try their best to wean that tendency out of them. Well, no matter. There was only one thing she needed him for anyway.

The lights on the ship flickered and dimmed by exactly 18 percent. No doubt the good Captain Monk was conserving power to sustain the ship on the remote chance that they might be rescued. Grace's mouth cracked upward into a small smile. The foolish man was just prolonging their torture. If he really wanted to do the right thing, he would open all the air locks and instantly kill everyone on board. That's what she would do. But then, she was known for her mind and sexual appetite, not for her heart.

Grace did wonder how the power levels on the *High Marker* could have fallen so precipitously. Like every other modern space-faring vessel, the power source was located at the heart of the flagship. It was almost impossible to damage the power core without destroying the ship, and there were many scenarios where a 94 percent core leak could occur without some sort of catastrophic failure. At a later time, she would have been keen to solve this little mystery. Right now, not so much; she had flashier baser goals in mind.

“Come, pet.” She motioned to him again. “Let us retire to my quarters.”

Again, she noticed the slight change in his footsteps. They were wider than Swails's usual stride by a few centimeters. His posture was slightly more erect; the pressure of his hand on hers a few degrees less gentle. Swails wasn't acting fully himself today, but as far as she knew, no technology existing today could completely change someone's appearance. And if it did exist, she would have been the one to invent it. Just to be on the safe side, though, she reached out and caressed his face once more to make sure there wasn't a hologram or illusory veil in place. Yes, the perfect face was still his.

They entered the antechamber of her quarters. She looked over at her two blindfolded kill mutants standing in the corner. Those two pets were quite different from the man pet; violent and slavish.

loyal, but prone to excitement and hard to control. All the lights and noise on the ship could send them into a frenzy. Leaving them here was for the best. Still, she was comforted that they were now back within earshot.

“A cup of warm water, pet,” she ordered, “and fetch my wrap. If we are to die tonight, I wish to do so in comfort.” Swails brought her the water as she disrobed.

Grace looked outside her portholes into black space. By the angle of the stars streaking across the window, the out-of-control tumbling of the ship seemed to have worsened. She expected the gravity to be cut at any moment to conserve energy. Monk was predictable, if anything.

She tore her gaze away from the portholes and gestured for Swails to attend to her. This could be her last fuck, so she wanted to enjoy it. Her pet was the finest of his litter; she would miss his tender touch. At least she had tonight.

She lay down on the bed and motioned for Swails to fulfill his duties. He obediently stripped and performed the Slave’s Prayer to request permission for the honor of joining a master’s bed.

Grace studied Swails’s movements; she had seen him perform the ritual dozens of times before. The gestures were correct, but he was missing his usual grace. As he finished the prayer, Swails fell to his knees at the corner of the bed, spread his arms out, and looked up at the ceiling.

Instead of giving permission, Grace crawled seductively to him and placed her palm on his hard-toned chest. She ran her hand down his stomach, feeling all the familiar grooves and bumps of his muscles. Then her fingers wandered up to his heart. She closed her eyes and listened. The beat was impossibly fast for a clone. She cupped his chin with her other hand and lowered his face toward her.

“Who are you, stranger?” she asked.

Swails hesitated for an instant. “You know?”

“I’ve suspected since this morning. You haven’t been Swails all day.”

A smile broke out on his face. “You’re a rare woman, Grace Priestly. It’s an honor.” Swails left her bed. He walked to her desk at the other end of the room and began rummaging through her belongings.

“What are you doing?” She stood up and retreated to the corner of the room, alarmed.

Swails ignored her as he picked out papers, scans, and datachips. He tossed aside several random books and sorted through her personal tab files, generally making a mess. Grace hated messes. Then he pulled out the recently engraved Time Law Charter and lingered on it, his fingers brushing the inscriptions. He had found what he was looking for.

The charter was the culmination and moral principle of the past ten years of her research. The technology was ready. All humanity needed was a force that could responsibly wield this new power. If her new agency was successful, Grace Priestly would be credited with not only saving mankind, but propelling the Technology Isolationists to new heights. That allorium-engraved charter he held in his hands was the guiding law of this new agency, Chronological Regulatory Command, and it would lead them out of humanity’s self-inflicted starvation.

“Put that back!” she yelled. “Kau, Trau! To me!”

Her two kill mutes burst into the room with their blindfolds lifted, exposing their glowing cybernetic red eyes. It grated on her sensibilities to resort to violence right before her end. Grace was never one to favor such heavy-handedness, but this thing wasn’t her treasured pet. In fact, she was sure he had killed Swails. Now, she wanted answers.

“Capture. No kill. No kill.” She enunciated the words carefully. The kill mutes were of low intelligence, and every command other than “kill” had to be communicated clearly.

Trau leapt into action, a dozen small blades extending out of his arms and legs. He charged the impostor, slashing with his limbs, while Kau moved into a defensive position between her and Swails.

his own blades exposed.

“Alive!” Grace barked.

It seemed she had given those orders to the wrong person. Trau reached Swails faster than any human could and raked the impostor across the chest with enough force to split an unenhanced in two. Instead, a faint yellow shield surrounding Swails appeared and burst into sparks, creating an electric backlash that bounced Trau’s blades harmlessly to the side.

The impostor retaliated, moving so quickly his body blurred. The two whirled around each other in a deadly dance, Trau’s blades and the strange yellow sparks flashing in the air. Just as quickly as the melee had begun, it was over.

One moment, the impostor was next to Trau, the next, he was standing behind the kill mute. With a flick of the stranger’s wrist, Trau went flying across the room and slammed into the wall so hard that blast shields on the portholes lowered from the force of the impact. Trau’s steel-infused back snapped with a loud crack against one of the structural beams jutting out of the wall. He emitted a mechanical wail and went limp, the red glow in his eyes fading.

Grace gaped at the fallen kill mute. This was impossible. These were class-six cyborgs! They were each designed to defeat a platoon of armored marines. Panic seized her as her gaze went back to Swails, or whatever the thing was that looked like her pet.

Kau continued to keep his body in between her and this impostor. He would attack on her command and most likely die just as quickly. Swails eyed Kau with unworried interest, as if just waiting for this fight to finish so he could continue with whatever task he was here for. Looking closely, she could see a soft, translucent yellow glimmer hugging his skin, and then her eyes trailed to the allorium charter the impostor had left on the desk during the melee.

Then it all made sense.

“Kau,” she said, pointing at the door. “Leave the room. Make sure I’m not disturbed.”

The kill mute looked at her hesitantly. These cyborgs were not completely stupid after all. They recognized a strange order when they heard one.

“Go!” she repeated.

Eyeing Swails warily, Kau stepped over Trau’s body and shuffled out of the room. The impostor ignored the deadly kill mute, seemingly unconcerned. Kau paused just as he was about to leave the room. He looked at the impostor, then, with a grunt, left. Grace noted that pause. Apparently, there were still some kinks in these level sixes that needed ironing out.

“Close the door,” Grace ordered.

The impostor raised an eyebrow, no doubt either surprised that she was willing to remain alone with him or that she was still ordering him around. Nevertheless, he complied, closing the double sliding doors. Their eyes met, and for the first time, Grace saw depth in Swails’s eyes: awe, sadness, regret, pain. These were all emotions the real Swails should not have been able to feel.

“How far from the future?” she finally asked.

Swails smiled. The shimmer from the strange yellow shield faded, and then his face began to erase itself line by line, as if a recording of someone drawing a face was being played backward. She watched each feature recede until there was nothing more than a bald empty mass of skin where the face should be. Then the entire head disappeared, replaced by a lighter-toned, white-skinned man with an unfashionable display of facial hair.

“Twenty-sixth century, High Scion.” He bowed nearly down to his knees. For a second, it gave her hope that the Technology Isolationists had prospered into the future, if her position was still honored. “How did you know?” he asked.

Grace tsked. "Your disguise only fools a few of the senses."

~~He bowed again, this time not quite so low. "The legendary Grace Priestly. You're exactly a you're revered."~~

Grace studied him more closely. He was a tad thin for Grace's taste; she liked her men a little larger than perfection standard. He had a handsome face, symmetrical, at least, with features approximately 70 percent facial ratio of optimum. The intruder had a long thin face, sunken cheeks and other imperfections associated with a spent soul. Within seconds, those brown eyes, slight curved nose, and distinctive chin told her everything she needed to know about his background.

"How fares mankind three hundred years in the future?" she asked, studying his every facial movement.

His skin was almost translucent in the light of her cabin. Had this man ever felt direct sunlight? He had the look of a spaceborn: pale, tall, and lanky, typical of someone who spent his entire life between the planets. His brown hair was unruly, leaving him looking dirty and disheveled. Strange, she had assumed someone from the future would be better groomed. By Technology Isolationist standards, he wouldn't look like someone allowed into the communes, let alone her ship.

"If only I could bring good news," he said.

"Of course, you won't be able to tell me anything, seeing how that might change events."

He shook his head. "News of the future wouldn't matter in this case. The charter's second law..."

"Travel to the past is restricted to truncated time lines and within appropriate lengths for the chronostream to heal in event of ripples," she recited.

"Yes. You remember."

"I wrote it last night."

"It's the second-highest Time Law."

The realization of what his words meant struck Grace like a physical blow. "The *High Marker* is be my grave then."

She did something uncharacteristic and ground her teeth. It was a childhood habit she had broken as a teenager. Now, all she wanted to do was make up for all those lost years and grind them to the roots. "I knew we were doomed; the probability of surviving was slim, yet it feels different when a doubt is removed."

Then all the feelings she suppressed behind her cold facade leaked out of her. Grace sat down on her bed, unsure whether she was angry or sad. Her body shook with conflicting emotions. She wanted to laugh, scream, and burst into tears all at once. For the first time in decades, she didn't know what to do next. She closed her eyes and dug her nails into her palms. She was the High Scion! Revered, even hundreds of years from now! That was worth something, yes? Right now, though, the honor felt hollow.

She looked up at him. "Why are you here?... Of course. It was you who drained and stole the *High Marker*'s power source."

He nodded. "And the charter. It's a desired relic."

"So this time travel agency I envision exists? It prospers?" Grace's chest swelled with pride.

He hesitated, then gave her a halfhearted smile. "The agency is cherished and loved. It's all that stands in the way of humanity's collapse, High Scion."

A lie, or at least a truth he did not believe. It mattered little. With her death around the corner Grace didn't care about splitting hairs. "I see. Very well, then. You may take it."

He bowed again. Bowing must be common in the twenty-sixth century. No one ever did that now. Grace kind of liked it. She watched as he strolled to the desk and picked up the charter, hefting it.

one hand. For such a supposedly desired relic, the time traveler didn't treat it with what she thought was proper reverence.

He made a gesture with his other hand and a black circle materialized in the air next to him. She watched, fascinated, as he deposited the charter into the hole. Then the circle blinked out of existence.

"How did...?" she asked.

"Inflationary theory applied," he said.

"Alan Guth?"

He shrugged. "I only use it. I don't know how it works."

"I see." Grace looked out the window. "At least science has progressed by leaps and bounds then. I am heartened by that."

"Unfortunately, no. I wouldn't lie to you, High Scion."

She stood up and walked up to him. "Now what? The ship is doomed, you say. You have the charter and have siphoned the power source. Now you abandon the time line?"

"As per your directive." He seemed almost resigned to her fate.

Grace seized on the slim opportunity. "Take me with you," she blurted out, clutching his wrist. The time traveler's resolve wavered; conflict flashed across his face. "Even in the future, there must not be many like me."

"None with your mind," he agreed, shaking his head. "But, the first Time Law prohibits—"

"Screw the Time Laws!" she said. "I wrote the damn things, most of them half-drunk while intellectually masturbating. They mean nothing. Take me with you."

Grace was begging now but she didn't care. For the first time in over half a century, her emotions overcame her. This felt shameful, but her work wasn't complete. She had too much to offer humanity still. She had the entire Technology Isolationist faction to care for. Worse yet, now that her lifelong ambition of utilizing this recently discovered time-traveling technology had been proven successful, there were so many possibilities to explore. She just had to be a part of it. Thoughts of visiting the utopian ages of the twenty-first century made her heart skip a beat.

"Take me." She sobbed and threw her arms around him.

The time traveler averted his eyes. "I ... I can't, High Scion."

He held her in an embrace for several awkward minutes. Finally, he pushed her away and she noticed his eyes glaze over for a brief moment.

"I have to go," he said. "I've already stayed too long."

She released her grip reluctantly, pulling herself together and regaining her composure. She remembered who she was again. "How much time do I have?" she asked.

"I don't know, High Scion. Historical records indicate the *High Marker*'s last known location was one hundred forty-eight AUs past Eris. Then the ship disappeared."

She wiped her wet face. "Call me Grace."

The time traveler looked at her one last time and gave her one last bow. "It was an honor, Grace. I'm ... I'm sorry."

There was a bright yellow flash, and then the time traveler that had worn Swails's face disappeared.

TWO

JAMES GRIFFIN-MARS

A burst of light temporarily blinded James Griffin-Mars, and he found himself staring at the dull glow of the sun ninety-eight AUs away, a lone yellow point in black-speckled space. A strange ring of total darkness surrounded it.

It took a few seconds for the lag sickness to subside as James sucked in large gulps of air from his atmos band. He hadn't thrown up from time-travel-induced nausea since his first salvage and wasn't about to make that fresh-fodder mistake again. Smitt would never let him live it down. If anything, this sick twisting in his guts should feel like an old friend by now. The lag sickness had been coming on stronger of late, sometimes even lasting hours after a foray. Maybe it was just this particular salvage, but the pain and bile rising into his throat hit him harder than usual.

James squeezed his eyes shut and counted down from a hundred, using the beating of his heart as a metronome. Floating in the empty space didn't help with the nausea, and his body seemed to have inherited the *High Marker's* rotation when he jumped back. He was spinning fast enough to wring the liquid out of his body. The atmos band around his wrist managing the environmental shield was the only thing keeping his insides together in the vacuum.

James pulled up the time on his AI computer band: 22:38:44, 05, June 2511, Earth Standard. Exactly sixteen hours, fourteen minutes, and thirty-three seconds since he had first jumped back to the exact same date and time in 2212.

A distant voice, like sound coming from the other end of a long thin tube, crackled inside his head. "James, this is Smitt, you back in the present? Come in, my friend." There were ten counts of silence before the voice repeated itself. "James, this is Smitt, are you back in the—"

"I'm here," James answered, his comm band relaying his thoughts back to his handler. "Any ripples?"

"Negative. Swails's body was found back on Eris, but the ripple only affected a three-week stretch before the time line healed over it. How's the package?"

James activated his exo-kinetic band and pulled himself out of his spin. The ring of darkness surrounding the sun disappeared into a lone black circle as his body stopped rotating: the dwarf Eris. He stared at its black surface, so different from the glittering display of life he'd seen just a few short hours ago from his point of view. In the past, Eris was a bustling colony, brimming with lights, life, and constant movement. Now, it was an abandoned husk. James opened the netherstore container and checked its contents. Nodding with satisfaction, he raised his head and looked back at the sun.

"Smitt, all packages secured. Pick me up."

"Sending the collie your way. You came back a bit farther out than we predicted. Hang tight. What took you so long?"

James pulled up the tactical from his AI band. Smitt was right. He was twenty minutes late on his

return, courtesy of those last few moments with Grace. At the speed the *High Marker* was hurtling through space, that twenty minutes covered a vast distance. Still, it had been worth the delay to spend a few more moments with the legendary Mother of Time.

Sixteen hours ago, he had jumped back to 2212 on Eris and snuck onto the *High Marker* before it took off. Then he had murdered Swails, sent the body back to Eris in one of the cargo containers, and spent the entire day impersonating the pet as he watched Grace Priestly at work. It was a magnificent experience.

Still, he had almost missed his window. If he had dallied another twenty minutes on the *High Marker*, at the speed it was flying out of control, James would be dead by the time the collie got to him. Even now, being twenty minutes off, it'd take the collie over an hour to reach his position. That was the tricky part of ship jumps. Placement and parallel periods were two completely separate variables; both had to be carefully calculated. And no matter what, the present time line continued. The amount of time James spent in the past had to be added to the present during his return jump.

Forty minutes later, James caught a glimpse of a small flickering light traveling from the center of the black circular mass that was Eris. As the collie approached to intercept, the light slowly grew larger. Space had a funny way of distorting distance. While the gleam of the collie started out no larger than the nail of his forefinger, it grew steadily. It was still another half hour before it finally pulled up next to him.

James willed his exo to push him toward the collie until he stepped onto its starboard wing. A few breaths later, he was inside, strapping himself into the pilot's seat. He connected his bands to the collie's power source to maintain his levels, but didn't bother compressing the interior of the collie, preferring to depend on his atmos for air.

Chronmen generally had an unsavory reputation within the solar system, but no one ever called them careless. Careless men in his profession did not live long. At least once every few months, James would hear about someone who knew someone who had deactivated his atmos in an old collie, only to pass out and never wake up because of a slow decompression leak.

The collie, short for Tang Collinear Streaker, was relatively reliable as three-hundred-year-old ships go, but then again, she was three hundred years old. Whatever paint might have been on her when she was first built had long since flaked off from the constant abuse of space travel. Her starboard side was a mismatched patchwork of armored plates that made the collie look like its halves were separate pods welded into one deformed monstrosity.

The interior of the ship looked like the cell of a brig, a plain rectangular box with a metal bunk on one long side opposite the hatch, and a small latrine and storage bin in the far back. The ceiling was barely tall enough for James to stand up, and there was just enough room for a person to pace in circles if he felt like exercising. Otherwise, besides the control panel and seat up front, the bare-bones collie was low-tech in almost every other way. That was what made the ship so desirable. Complicated ships made for complicated maintenance.

James watched as the life support systems came online and reported the ship's status. He didn't bother following the health check. If the damn thing blew, there was nothing he could do about it. Even if he knew what had to be done, he wouldn't know how to do it. Chronmen had enough on their plates just doing their jobs without worrying about the mechanics of their ships. It was up to the nukes and Smitt, his handler, to deal with the rest. The only thing James knew about this contraption was that when the blinker on the upper right of the console turned green, which it had done just now, he'd be ready to go.

"Smitt, I'm inside *Collie* now," James thought, as he opened one of the lockers and threw on

chem suit to cover his near-naked body.

“Good job, man,” Smitt said. “When are you going to give the old girl a proper name?”

“What’s wrong with her name?” James asked.

Smitt chuckled loudly with a snort that James had gotten used to and thought endearing. “You’re the only chronman who names his collie *Collie*. You’ve got the imagination of a metal plate.”

James grinned. “Saves on paperwork. Anyway, coming home with package in tow.”

“Excellent.” There was a pause. “How did you pull it off? I mean, did you meet her? Talk to her? Grace Priestly was supposed to be heavily guarded. Does she look just like those vids of her?”

“She was ... worthy,” said James. “Remarkable. Even to the end.”

“She knew about you?”

“You’re not called the Mother of Time and hailed as the smartest person in history for nothing. She figured it out quick enough. Took it better than most.”

“How did you get close to her?”

James grunted. “How else do you get close to a lord during the Warring Tech period?”

“You fucked Grace Priestly?” Smitt’s voice went up an octave and cracked. James couldn’t have been shocked him more by saying he had discovered alien life. “So ... um, how was it?”

James leaned back and looked out the aft window. The ship had windows only on the port side, and the starboard side was covered in plates. The engines came to life and the collie slid around Earth toward the Ship Jungle. He thought back to holding the weeping Mother of Time in his arms.

Following the Warring Tech period after her death, the Core Conflicts of the origin planets—Venus, Earth, and Mars—drew in the outlying colonies. Eventually, the wars’ resource demands became so great that the outliers—Eris, Pluto, and Mercury—were resource-suffocated until they eventually had to be abandoned. Eris, once a scientific bastion of the old Tech Isolationists, was now a planet of ghosts.

A beep from the console tore James away from the window. The collie was about to enter the Ship Jungle. The space ahead began to clutter as more and more specks of what looked like gray dust dotted the blackness. The vid on the collie’s dashboard registered thousands of approaching signals, the carcasses and bones of hundreds of thousands of ships that had fought over the gaseous and chemical resources of the solar system’s gas giants—Jupiter, Neptune, Uranus, and Saturn. The Gas Wars, which had taken place seventy years after the Core Conflicts, were said to have been the deadliest conflict in the history of mankind, causing a billion deaths over a span of forty years.

The collie maneuvered into the graveyard, navigating around and among the hulks that had been used by previous generations. There was still good mining here, though the real payday lay in the past. James saw the insignia of the AR Star Fortress, one of his past salvages. He remembered that one well. The Star Fortress had been a mobile base that housed a quarter million of Mars’s Flak military and was their launching point to claim Oberon, a moon of Uranus and the home base of the Kuma Faction. In the end, the Star Fortress base broke and three hundred years later, James reaped massive rewards off its power core, which should have bought an entire year off his contract. Instead, he pissed away six months of the buyout on whiskey and whores.

“*Collie*’s responding sluggishly. Might need you to work through some of these controls,” Smitt said, static covering much of his words.

“Switching to manual.”

He took control of the ship and began to guide her gently through the debris field. The collie had already slowed to a crawl as they neared Neptune. The junk field grew more congested the closer he got to the planet. James was, at best, a passable pilot, and maneuvering through such a dangerous

section of space pushed his skills to their limits. Without Smitt's help, there was no way he could have navigated *Collie* through this hazard zone.

An exhausting seven hours later, the collie finally exited the Ship Jungle, little worse for the wear other than a few scrapes and minor collisions. It'd be another few days before he reached the ChronoCom outpost at Himalia Station. Exhausted, James put the ship back on auto, lay down on the rusty metal bunk in the back, and activated his cryo band. Within seconds, he felt its effects as sleep swept over him. He needed the rest. Time travel was a wearying affair and a strain on the mind. Hopefully, his brain would be too exhausted to dream; James doubted the musings of his unconscious mind would be pleasant.

THREE

HIMALIA STATION

Just as James was drifting off, someone shook him awake. On reflex, he powered on his exo bands, expanded his field, and lashed out. The powerful exo-kinetic system—the military-industrial complex being one of the few industries still innovating—practically made him a god whenever he ventured back in time. The yellow glow of the exo sparked to life, expanding outward and slamming the intruder into the interior wall of the collie. A kinetic coil sprouted from it and wrapped around the man's waist. It squeezed.

“Whoa!” the dock engineer gasped and threw his arms up. “Easy there, Chronman. You're among friendlies.”

It took James a few moments to realize where he was. He froze, glancing in both directions before dissolving the kinetic coil. He had been dreaming when this poor soul had tried to wake him. Fortunately, the dream had already faded from memory, though it wasn't hard for James to guess what it was about. He only had nightmares these days.

He glanced at the terrified engineer. The man was holding his breath, waiting for James to say something. The fool should know better than to wake him so soon after his return from a salvage run. Strangely, James was ambivalent about almost killing the engineer. Not that he took pleasure in harming others, but if the accident had happened, would it matter? He wasn't sure if he'd feel anything either way.

James sat up on his bench and shook his head. “What the abyss do you think you're doing waking up Chronman that way?”

“I'm ... I'm sorry,” the engineer said. “We left you alone in here for four hours. Your handler sent a word to wake you and retrieve the marks from your job. Shipment to Earth goes out in a cycle. I need to bag it.” His eyes moved down to look at the netherstore band around James's wrist.

James held out his left arm to the engineer.

“Uh, Chronman?” The engineer pointed at the yellow shielding around his body. “You're still on.”

James looked down and then back at the hull of the ship. Finally, he powered down his exo bands, watching the fields waver before flickering off. He felt a rush of stale air and inhaled the heavy odor of oil and metal. The station's filtration generators were on half power again. James flipped the netherstore container's link to the engineer. “Have at it. Two items. Register to S-yi and C-san.”

When the transfer was completed, the engineer scurried out of the collie as fast as he could. Chronmen were the second-highest operatives in ChronoCom and also the most feared by the ruck-sucking civilians—for good reason. It took a special sort of person to be a chronman, and it wasn't the good kind of special.

A prerequisite to becoming a chronman was five years of grueling training at the ChronoCo

Academy on Tethys. Officially known as time operatives, chronmen had to be intelligent, quick to adapt to changing situations, and be good actors. They also must have short memories of their past assignments.

Good chronmen also shared negative traits. They tended to be antisocial, short-tempered, excessively violent, and borderline suicidal. Needless to say, the life expectancy for people like James was short.

Still, in spite of all their psychological problems and eccentricities, chronmen were considered critical to maintaining the power supply for all of humanity, so nearly everything they did was tolerated. Some even argued that having eccentricities made good chronmen, rather than the jobs causing such behaviors.

James walked down the ramp of the collie and passed through the crowded docking hangar. Himalia Station was a launching point for mining operations to Jupiter as well as one of the outer ChronoCom offices this far out in the solar system. Right now, mining operations were quiet while salvaging operations were in full swing.

James paused as a yellow collie—the *Ramhurst*—one of the newer ships, still sporting its paint job, came in hot on its landing and nearly took out half an engineering crew. Not having seen Palia in several months, he waited and watched as several engineers scrambled to the ship and pried the door open. A few seconds later, they floated Palia out on a gurney and sped off.

James grabbed Kia, Palia's handler, as she ran by. "What happened to her?"

Kia shook free. "Curellan Mining uprising. She got caught during the retrieval. Barely got her back. Sorry, James; talk later." She sped off.

James watched them all disappear down the corridor toward triage. He hoped she pulled through. Palia and Shizzu were the only surviving chronmen from his graduating class at the Academy, and James couldn't stand Shizzu. The rest had either died on assignment or poked a giant in the eye, which was chronmen-speak for steering your collie toward a gas giant and letting go of the controls. Palia dying would make for an awkward reunion between him and Shizzu.

Another group of engineers rushed by, this time toward a collie he didn't recognize. James got out of their way and headed out of the dock. He was supposed to report to Smitt at Hops—Handling Operations—but instead, he headed to the lower levels and toward the Tilted Orbit.

Himalia Station wasn't as large as other bases. Though the largest moon after the four satellite colonies around Jupiter, Himalia was only 170 kilometers in diameter. Still, it had a population of a quarter million, mostly gas miners, military, and ChronoCom personnel, which skewed the gender demographics slightly toward men. More like six to one. The pleasure boys and girls were so scarce and sought-after that they were almost as well respected as chronmen. Even then, most of them were transient. They'd arrive, get rich in weeks from nonstop work, then bail out as fast as they could.

The halls of the station were three sides' metal and the ceiling a layer of natural rock. The moon's elliptical orbit subjected the surface to extreme temperatures, necessitating that the majority of the base be kept underground. This made all the corridors incredibly cramped and dusty, as showers of pebbles and debris continually rained down on the station's inhabitants.

The light flickered, as it tended to do when the power was kept to a third, which these days had become the new norm. James, walking in a hallway barely wide enough for three people abreast, moved with the downward flow into the residential section. Though cramped and claustrophobic, Himalia Station was one of James's favorite bases of operations. Most inhabitants were too transient to bother knowing, and the few permanent residents knew to leave one other alone.

James reached the Tilted Orbit and sat down at the bar. Several of the grease-faced miners sitting

on both sides of him got up to give him space. It wasn't that people hated him; they just knew better than to get in his way. ~~No one messed with a chronman. And if one messed with you, you just took it.~~ James didn't abuse his position of power often, but he knew some who did. Since chronmen were a class that stood between society functioning and completely falling apart, it was a capital offense to injure one of his kind.

By last count, there were fewer than twenty chronmen on Himalia Station and maybe a hundred on Earth, with possibly three thousand across the rest of the solar system. Three thousand minus one on Palia didn't make it.

"Jobe," James gestured. "Whiskey. Whatever crap no one else can afford, and a round to every soul here."

The bartender nodded, brought over the bottle and a tin cup, and gave him a generous pour. "Cover your tab, James." He walked away to provide each patron his free drink.

James barely looked up as a few of the other patrons toasted him with their tin cups. It was something he did every time he returned from a job. Some had mistaken the gesture for friendliness. Nothing could be further from the truth. The few who tried to thank him personally were met with a blank stare and a turn of his back.

For the next hour, James sat alone, ignoring the increasing number and the growing cacophony of the patrons as more miners and station workers streamed into the Tilted Orbit. He stared at the bottle of whiskey, the level of which decreased by the pour; it was down to half now. His thoughts wandered back to the whiskey Grace had ordered him to pour for her. Swails's job was also that of poison taster, and the two whiskeys he had tried while in her service were divine. The past had some truly great whiskey, not this crap they had here at the edge of hell.

James looked around the packed bar. There were only two drinking holes on the station, so both were rarely empty. A few other chronmen had walked in, each staking their claim at different parts of the bar. Other than a slight tilt of the head, none of them acknowledged the others. Like James, they sat and drank alone.

Even with this many people in such a confined place, there was still no one around him. No one was willing to take the chance of standing too close to a chronman. James lifted the tin cup and took a sip. Well, almost no one.

"You're supposed to report to Hops before you make your way here," he heard Smitt say behind him. It was better than having his handler's damn voice piped directly into his head.

"I broke a dumb rule; fire me." James shrugged and signaled to Jobe to bring another cup. He poured the so-called whiskey to the brim and slid it over, sloshing a third of it on the counter.

"Easy there." Smitt cupped the whiskey gingerly in his hand. "Just because you're a rich guy among men doesn't mean the rest of us are. There's a reason the miners are drinking swill and you're drinking..."

"Swill," James muttered, taking another sip. He turned to his only living friend in the solar system. "You want to know what I've tasted before? What I've seen? Remember that salvage during the twenty-first century with the formation of the Luxe Empire? There was this drink they were just handing out like water..."

Smitt lifted his drink. "It's called champagne, James, and thanks for rubbing it in."

"Not just that. It seems every time period before ours was better. We're sucking on the dregs of civilization. Frankly, I'm tired of coming back." He slammed his fist on the counter. The bar grew quiet. Usually, fights breaking out between the patrons was no big thing, but when a chronman was involved, everyone paid attention. James looked around at the staring eyes, then shifted his gaze back

down to his cup. He hated the attention; all chronmen did. They were trained to keep a low profile. “It’s like waking up to a nightmare every time I return,” he said, eyes focused back on the dark liquid at the bottom of his cup.

Smitt patted James on the back. He was probably the only human being James allowed to do that. “Past is dead. Script’s run its course. All you see when you go back is the illusion of choice.” He was used to James’s ramblings by now. It wasn’t like these were revelations that had just occurred to James while he was soul-searching over a cup of whiskey. This rant might as well have served as his debriefing every time he returned from a jump.

James looked up at the crowd, half of them still keeping one eye on him. He had gotten into scuffles with quite a few of them, before they had found out who he was. Once they had found out, though, they had just stood there and waited for him to beat on them. He never did. That took the fun out of brawling. That was why he never wore his ChronoCom insignia.

James slid his hands through his hair and lowered his head to just above the bar’s surface. “I don’t know what I’m doing. I need a change of scenery, to get out of this shit hole.”

“You just might,” said Smitt, reaching over and plucking the bottle out of James’s hand. He gave himself a generous pour. “As your handler, it’s my job to see to your needs. You have a new salvage. It’s an on-book luxury call with a big payout.”

James frowned. “What the fuck you talking about? I just got back. I have mandatory downtime. Not to mention I’m already two weeks late on my miasma regimen. Listen, the lag sickness—”

“Already got you waived. You can catch up on your regimen after the job. Trust me, it’s worth it,” said Smitt. “Stoph was originally on book for this but he poked the giant two days ago. ChronoCom is low enough on experienced chronmen as it is to spare a Tier-1, so I volunteered us for this little gem. It’s a private request from some shiny wig on Europa, so you know they have full scratch. Helps keep the lights on, yeah?”

James sighed. “Thousand in the Academy and they can’t maintain chronmen levels. What the black abyss are we doing?”

“You know ChronoCom can’t afford to screw up salvages these days, and the cut rate at the Academy is eighty percent. Death rate for chronmen is what, seventy-five percent before two years. We got maybe five hundred guys on hand that ChronoCom trusts for Tier-2 jobs and up, and you remember what happened with that idiot Jerrod swapping in the fresh fodder straight out of the Academy. Kid died and the entire salvage was ruined. Eight hundred units of transferable power for a battle cruiser lost forever because the handler assigned a near-ruck.”

“Did they at least jump him into the beginning of the scenario to give the time line another shot at a jump?” James asked.

Smitt shook his head. “Nope. Put the fodder smack in the middle of the salvage. That whole time line is too frayed and unstable now for another jump. But those’re the rules. Usually only one shot at a salvage. That’s why there’s only a hundred or so of you Tier-1s, and why you make the big scratch. There was a beep and Smitt’s eyes glazed over for a moment. He frowned. “Make that ninety-nine. Palia didn’t make it.”

“Guess it really will be me and Shizzu at the reunions.” James raised his cup to his former classmate. Now they were down to two. He wondered which one of them would be the last man standing.

Smitt grinned. “Just you, actually. Shizzu joined the chain, raised to auditor while you were fucking Grace.”

“That fodder Shizzu is an auditor?” James ground his teeth. He couldn’t think of anyone more

unworthy of rising up the ranks to become a watcher of the chronmen. “You have to be kidding. Why did that asshole do to deserve that?”

Smitt shrugged. “It surprised a lot of people, to be honest.”

“Black abyss.” He threw back the cup and slammed it down on the table. “Whole agency is going to hell.”

Smitt stood up and again patted him on the back. “Get some sleep. You’re heading to Earth at the second rotation with the next shipment.”

James made a face. “Earth?”

Smitt grinned. “You have to take one for the team once in a while. You said you wanted a change of scenery. You didn’t say how nice a one.”

FOUR

MING DYNASTY

There was something about the city of Luoyang in northeastern China that reminded Auditor Levin Javier-Oberon of Habitat-C3 Oberon, the colony of his birth. Maybe it was the thick soot in the air, the uneven gray brick streets and walls, or just the sound of the city constantly buzzing at all hours of the day; it was definitely the squalor. That was the thing about poverty: no matter what planet or time period, squalor was squalor.

Humanity seemed to shit itself the same way in 1551 C.E., during the height of the Ming Dynasty as it did in the present. For some reason, the damn race never learned how to stay out of the gutter. Maybe that was why scientists estimated that mankind would be extinct by the year 3000. Well, not Levin and the rest of ChronoCom had a say in the matter.

He passed by a small koi pond in the slightly less squalid merchant district and paused to observe the ghostly glassy-eyed fish swimming around in the clear water. He looked at his own image reflecting through the ripples, his paint band doing an admirable job blending him in with the thousands of pedestrians walking through the city.

His gaze moved up beyond the waterline to the stone and wooden building that wrapped around three sides of the pond, to the curved tiles that arced up to the center point of the roof. Behind it, the sun was half covered as it made its daily journey toward the western horizon. It was almost time.

Levin willed the fourteen bands clinging loosely against both of his arms—six on his left, eight on his right—to tighten. He didn't bother masking them with his paint band, instead passing them off as iron rings, commonly used by mercenaries as a blocking bracer. Like most operatives, he preferred to use as little of the paint as possible when on a job. Assuming his paid sources were correct, he would have need of those bands very soon. Levin walked up a short flight of stairs and swung open the red double doors that led him into the Hong Jiu Inn.

It was a busy night, filled with patrons, but not more than the usual that he had observed over the past two days. The eating area was packed with merchants, locals, and soldiers. A group of drunken Uyghers filled three tables on the far left, caravan troops by the look of them. The table adjacent to theirs seated a group of Mongols. The guards kept careful watch over that entire end of the inn. It wouldn't take much to ignite a confrontation.

To the right of the door were at least three of the city's gangs. Levin recognized two of them: the Yellow Snakes and the Dirt Dragons. Levin frowned; none of these people looked like any of Cole's men. Then he noticed a scrawny ruffian walk up the stairs to the second floor and disappear into one of the rooms.

Of course. Cole was a big man now. These grunts weren't worth his time. Levin walked through the crowded area, slipping between benches and chairs filled with toughs, traders, and pleasure girls. Doing this quietly probably wasn't going to be an option, but he'd have to try. It had taken him two

weeks just to locate the feared and infamous Fist of the Low Laying River, or whatever the hell he was calling himself here. It'd be another month to find him again if he left this inn without Levin's hands around his neck.

A bouncer standing at the base of the stairs stopped Levin with a hammed fist and shook his head. "What's your business, pig?"

"I have business with big brother up top," said Levin, his comm band translating his words into Han.

The bouncer looked him up and down, and grunted. "A pig like you belongs down here with the other swine. Go away before I beat you so terribly your mother feels it." He shoved Levin on the chest.

Levin caught the shove nonchalantly with his left hand and twisted the bouncer's thumb at an odd angle. He tried to pull away but Levin's exo held his grip like a vise, and he squeezed until the bouncer's knees buckled.

"Are you sure you wish to block my path, friend?" Levin tightened his grip. "The Jiang Hu is vast. Do you know all its masters?" He squeezed even tighter.

The bouncer quivered and bobbed his head up and down several times. "I'm ... I'm sorry, Sifu. Please forgive me."

Levin let the bouncer go. The fewer ripples the better, though he didn't worry much about them here. The odds of a time chronostream self-healing in this cesspool of an inn were high. Still, best not to take chances. That boy had already made enough ripples for both of them, running away from the present. The poor fool knew better. No one ever escaped the auditors.

"Next time, know who you disrespect before you are taught a permanent lesson," he said.

The bouncer scurried to the side and let him pass. Levin continued to the top of the stairs, which opened to a hallway that overlooked the eating area on the right and had a row of doors on the left. He went to the door on the far end, where the sounds of revelry were loudest. Cole would want easy escape routes out of the building, and the window overlooking the eating area below gave him a clear view of people coming into the inn. Not that it would help him much in this instance. Levin's paint made him look like the other thousands of Han walking in the city.

Levin slid the double sliding panels outward and intruded on the private dinner of two dozen scruffy-looking men at a pair of long tables on each side. Two men and a girl sat at a smaller table on a raised platform on the far end. The one on the left looked the part of a Low River gang member, possibly a lieutenant or a second lieutenant. The one on the right was a pleasure girl draped over the man in the middle.

"I seek Ko Li," he said formally.

All eyes turned toward him. Levin stifled a grunt. Of course Cole would make himself look like god among these men. The real Cole looked ordinary in every way possible, save for a pockmarked face from a childhood disease that had ravaged his body. This paint job he now wore made him look like an Adonis. No wonder he was causing ripples. Vain and stupid. At least Cole had made himself look indigenous enough; just taller, more beautiful, better fed, and built like a giant. Definitely not the best way to remain inconspicuous. Well, if the guy was going to try to live a fantasy, he might as well have gone all the way.

"How dare you?" A skinny bandit at the end of the table stood up and snarled, puffing out his chest. He must be the lowest among them.

Levin kept his eyes on Cole, half-expecting the fugitive to take off at any moment. Instead, Cole nodded at the skinny bandit.

The bandit stomped up to Levin and pointed at the ground. "You address Sifu Li as 'master,' you

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