

Prologue

Warships of three distinctly different designs floated silently in interstellar space. All necessary preparations had been made, so the fleet sat in standby mode except for a few vigilant sentries.

Without fanfare, a communications probe decelerated to subluminal velocity nearby. After a series of electronic handshakes, the probe delivered its message.

Execute.

Chapter 1 – October 30th, 2274, 1647 UTC

Special Agent Liam Ward nursed his beer, or whatever it was that they labelled as such in this place. At least it was cold, though; the temperature of the liquid alone was worth the credits. For some reason, Ward had pictured the colony planet of Newport as temperate and pleasant, not dry and deathly hot. Apparently, this planet was rich with minerals used in electronics and many spaceship components, so when a survey company discovered it only a day's travel from an existing jump tube they claimed it on the spot. None of this really had anything to do with why he was sitting in this run-down bar, but thinking about it helped pass the time.

The fact that this colony had less than 50,000 residents was far more relevant, as that meant that it had a governor appointed by the Unified Earth Government instead of a locally-elected government. A single governor on a small planet dominated by corporations was often far easier to bribe than dozens of officials in a bureaucratic, representative government. Consequently, Newport was rife with gray- and black-market dealings.

Normally, Ward would be here to investigate or arrest people involved in some of those dealings; but today he was here for something far less savory. Unfortunately, it was a matter of life and death. So he continued to sit and nurse his beer knowing that he was likely being watched, which frustrated him more than the climate and the bad beer because he couldn't spot his quarry. Since he was no slouch at counterintelligence, it meant that his secret admirers were very good. Normally, this would be disturbing; but, supposedly, they were on his side, so maybe it was a good thing.

"You're in my seat," a gruff, tattooed man said to him as he approached from the entrance of the bar.

Ward eyeballed the man, who was larger but older, and sensed that this was not related to his mission. Ward was a professional, though. Well, he was capable of being professional. Occasionally, he even acted on this ability. "Alright," he said to the man as he moved two seats down.

"That's my seat, too," the man informed him.

This guy was really starting to annoy Ward, but he was here on official business.

"Alright, where would you like me to sit?" he asked as he stood up.

"Outside," the man said with a straight face.

Ward sighed.

Ward's new nemesis continued to stare him down in response.

"That doesn't work for me," Ward said.

"Well, we have a problem then."

Ward stared the man down as Ward made his decision. "I'm so far out of your league you didn't even know we were playing a game, son," Ward said to the older man, his tone deadly serious.

The man seemed to sense that Ward wasn't the easy mark he'd originally fingered him as, and subtly, possibly subconsciously, shifted into a slightly more defensive stance.

There were what Ward referred to as People of Action, which could include soldiers, gangbangers, spies, criminals, cops, and average civilians. These were people who were capable of both great and horrible things; they ran into burning buildings to save the innocent, committed the most horrendous crimes, and everything in between. But they *acted*, and when they did, it was decisive, win or lose. Capable people like this could often sense their own kind and knew trouble when they encountered it, whereas the less capable tended to end up as Darwin's victims.

For better or worse, the man either ignored his internal threat warning receiver or decided that he was too far in to back down. When he attacked Ward, it was with a relatively clumsy—but powerful—right-handed haymaker. In almost a blur, Ward closed the distance to get inside of the punch and used his attacker's momentum to throw him past Ward and into a nearby table, which was knocked over as the man fell to the floor.

"Now you've done it," the barkeep said as Ward's attacker reached for a weapon; but by the time that the attacker could look up at Ward, let alone finish drawing his weapon, he was staring into the barrel of a very unique pistol.

"We can play for keeps," Ward said evenly. "Your call."

The stunned but angry man decided that discretion was the better part of valor and promptly departed the premises, but not before yelling, "This isn't over, punk!"

Ward hoped to be off this rock by nightfall, though; so he wasn't too concerned.

"Pretty impressive," another man said as he approached. Upon inspection, Ward could tell that he was artificially intelligent. "You might be the fastest human I've ever seen ... in fact, I *know* you are, but knowing it and seeing it are two different things."

This must be who Ward was here to see. "So you set that up?"

The AI laughed. "No, no. It was only a matter of time though, in a place like this. Come on, follow me to someplace more secure."

Ward obliged the man and followed him out of the bar after sending some extra credits to the bartender for the trouble. Once they were down the street and not within earshot of anyone, Ward asked, "So who are you with?"

"Interstellar Intelligence Agency," the AI said simply.

Ward sighed. He hated spies.