

BOOK ONE OF THE PAX ARCHIVES

PAX
NOVUS

ERICA CAMERON

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For Kate, who pushed me to reach for the stars.

AUTHOR'S NOTE

In the 15th century, high heels were invented in Persia. For men. Their original purpose was helping soldiers keep their feet in the stirrups of their saddles. When the trend reached Europe, it became a fashion fad for male aristocrats who used the shoes to appear taller and more intimidating.

In 1918, an article in *Ladies' Home Journal* said, "The generally accepted rule is pink for the boys, and blue for the girls. The reason is that pink, being a more decided and stronger color, is more suitable for the boy, while blue, which is more delicate and dainty, is prettier for the girl."

The conceptions and expectations of gender change as societies shift, and I fully expect that trend to continue as humanity heads into the future. In fact, I'm hoping for it. This aspiration is one of many reasons why the Pax Archives includes an established and accepted third gender pronoun.

The "ze" pronoun set was derived from the earlier "sie and hir," and several characters, including one of our main narrators, use these pronouns in this series. Below is not only an introduction to the grammar of the "ze" pronoun set, but also a list of terms I created as an alternative to inherently gendered terms.

Thank you for reading, and to anyone who falls outside the binary society currently holds us to...

I see you.

Ze	<i>Ze</i> laughed
Zem	I called <i>zem</i>
Zir	<i>Zir</i> eyes gleam
Zirs	That is <i>zirs</i>
Zirself	<i>Ze</i> likes <i>zirself</i>

girl/boy/woman/man—zeran
plural of the above—zeren
girlfriend/boyfriend—zefriend
son/daughter—zirle
sister/brother—zisther
mother/father—zirazi
mommy/daddy—zazi
grandmother/grandfather—zearazi
grandma/grandpa—zeze
aunt/uncle—zaunle
wife/husband—zirali
Mr./Mrs.—Z.
mister/missus—zinis

Video Log on private databank

*Excerpt from a speech during a Terra-Sol annual investors meeting at DLPRC, Weapons & Defense Systems section
Speaker: Jeminina Kolar, Executive Vice President
Terra-Sol date 3811.236*

Transcript below

Now, in cycle 572 of the Intersystem War, our profits have never been higher, thanks in part to the newly available upgrades to the standard energy shielding. Every government in every system clamored for an exclusive contract, but not one of them walked away when we said no.

[Jeminina raises an eyebrow] I wonder why?

[audience laughs]

The weapons and defense systems segment of the Donnager-LaForge Private Research Corporation is unique. No company in any inhabited system can offer you a safer investment. War is the only certainty in this galaxy, and the minds working in the DLPRC labs create the most devastating weapons and the most powerful defenses. Coming or going, we have everyone covered. [Jeminina smirks] For the right price, of course.

CALIBER

*Historical Archives, Terra-Sol System, Planet Earth
Excerpts from the Pax Treaty and Charter
Signed and ratified during the Thirty-First Intersystem Peace
Summit
Terra-Sol date 3579.128*

The primary mission of this fleet is to serve the citizens of the quadrant and ensure those without any stock or stake in the outcome of war have the necessary means to survive it.

Section 1.01 Name.

The ships covered under this treaty, to be of varying types within the same class, will henceforth be referred to as Pax-Class Cargo Ships. Within this document, and in all successive legal proceedings, this fleet will be referred to as the PCCS. The body of people, stations, and resources comprising this entity as a whole shall hereafter be referred to as Pax Ships, Stations, and Citizens (PSSC).

Section 4.06 Deliberate harm.

Should any ship owned or primarily crewed by a particular system be found to have caused deliberate or preventable damage to any PCCS, the system in question will be made to replace the ship, including all registered cargo, at its own cost. Should the system's government and military refuse to comply with this mandate, no PCCS will either buy or sell at stations and outposts controlled by that power. Additionally, all the system's current alliances will be considered void.

Section 5.10 Crew and citizenship.

All captains and crew must disavow all ties to any planet, including citizenship. Their citizenship, and what rights, duties, and privileges such status confers, will transfer to the ship on which they serve and the Pax Class Governing Council (PCGC) based on Paxis Station.

Section 5.11 Children and citizenship.

The above transferal applies also to children born aboard a PCCS, but may only include children born planetside if all guardians are included on the crew and/or if all guardians are willing to accept the revocation of

citizenship on behalf of those children. Parents or guardians remaining planetside must acknowledge both in writing and on recorded holo-vid that they are also hereafter relinquishing all guardianship claims to the child as well as any expectation of contact or communication with the child.

Section 8.06 Passengers.

No passengers shall be carried aboard any PCCS except in code-locked cryopods. In the case of providing aide for those in danger of grievous bodily harm, all survivors should be immediately put into cryostasis or sequestered in a secure location until the PCCS has pulled into its next port and passengers can be unloaded to be rendered assistance by the local government. Any persons found to be in violation of this order by carrying an individual whose name does not appear on the crew registry, on a cargo manifest, or on an addendum list of rescued persons transported in cases of emergency shall be suspected guilty of treason. The captain is required by this charter and all local governmental law to either administer the appropriate trial and punishment or to immediately turn such persons over to the nearest local government to be dealt with according to the mandates of their legal system and laws.



PROLOGUE

RISTON

Terra-Sol date 3811.237

Riston never forgot the smell of burning human flesh.

It had been three Terra-Sol cycles since the fleet of first-strike ships bombed Ladadhi out of existence, but time didn't seem to matter. Ze recoiled sharply from the odor and the memories that burst out of each particle, assaulting zir brain. It was almost like cooking animal meat, but with the addition of something metallic—the sulfurous tang that showed up once the flames hit hair. Riston hated that part of the smell the most. Of course, it was also the hardest part to erase. Even away from the source, it could cling, refusing to dissipate for days.

The smell got stronger. A new wave of desperately suppressed memories blasted through Riston's faltering mental blockade.

Warning sirens blared through every speaker for miles and jolted Riston awake.

Hands gripped zir small frame and threw zem out the front door.

Rough stone scraped zir bare feet bloody as the whine of Araean fighter jets grew louder.

Bombs fell. Explosions shook the world. Riston tripped and crashed into the shelter.

The door slammed shut, cutting off zir brother's screams, blocking out the sight of the fire devouring Ladadhi, and leaving zem with nothing but the *smell*.

Shuddering, Riston closed zir eyes and pressed zirself flat against the wall. Ze thought ze'd left this behind when ze escaped the smoldering ruins of zir home. An instant, though, was all it took to shatter all the work ze'd done in the intervening cycles to shove every bit of zir old life and the day ze lost it all into a deep mental crevice. Experience had already taught zem to fear the smell of metal and meat and sulfur. Catching a whiff of the scent now, in the quiet halls of Datax Station, sent zir heart beating dangerously fast and made zir hands shake.

Fear warred with an inescapable urge to *do something*. Needing more information, Riston forced zirself to take a deep breath. The scent, though it was only a whiff in the air, nearly choked zem. There was a fire nearby, and someone was caught in it, but no one was screaming. Or running. There weren't any alarms blaring through Datax Station's engineering level. If the fire was big, evacuations would be ordered so the level could be flooded with fire suppressant. It had to be done. There weren't any other options when living on a fallible human construction of stone and metal orbiting a star. Heat damage to the air filtration systems would cause even more deaths than a fire.

Those alarms hadn't been tripped, so Riston wasn't in immediate danger. But someone else was.

Ze flicked zir hood over zir head and pushed into the main corridor, hoping the power source in the ID scrambler in the top of the hood was still working. If ze got caught in a zone ze didn't have clearance for, ze'd be tossed out an air lock. Or at least thrown into a

holding cell until they found zir real ID and shipped zem back to the planet ze'd barely escaped from alive the first time around.

But here you are, heading into trouble anyway. Why can't you ever leave it alone?

Because the ghosts of Ladadhi had been chasing zem for three cycles and ze couldn't stand to let someone else die the way zir family had. Not if ze could stop it.

Zir thick-soled boots thudded on the grated floor, the weight of every step shifting the metal plates slightly. Soft white light left spots in zir peripheral vision when every third stride took zem past the lights set in brackets in the walls. Ze ignored them for the info panel set between brackets. The station's logo sat static on the display. It was a good sign. Warnings would appear on every screen on the level if the blaze was growing out of control. There was nothing, and no one ze passed seemed to have noticed the stench, not the three-body crew working in a narrow side-passage to fix the six-degree fault in the cooling system, and definitely not the officer striding down the narrow corridor too fast to see anything not directly in front of them.

Then again, the smell was probably only obvious to Riston. It couldn't be more than a hint in the air, and it'd probably be gone in less than a minute, sucked into the scrubbers and eliminated particle by particle. It wasn't gone yet, though. Riston breathed deep, sure that ze had to be getting closer to the source. Then, ze saw it. Outside a sealed, restricted access door was a small, twisted piece of metal on the grated floor. Blackened but not melted, it nearly blended in with the varying shades of gray and black of the corridor. These corridors were all metal on metal on metal, and it was too easy to miss inconsistencies if you weren't looking for them.

Cursing under zir breath, Riston pulled zir stolen comm out of zir pocket, opened a hidden partition to access the program ze needed, and held it against the security sensor. Ze watched the hall out the corner of zir eye while zir program cracked the permissions of the door.

Sixteen seconds.

Twenty.

Too long. There were footsteps in the corridor, and they were getting closer. People might overlook zir existence when they simply passed zem in the hall—ze'd stolen his station-emblazoned hooded jacket from a forgetful, low-level engineer—but no one would believe ze had the clearance to enter this room. And if ze had to waste time arguing with someone about permissions, whoever was inside would probably die. If they weren't dead already.

With a soft *snick*, the door opened. Ze turned to look down each side of the curving corridor. No one in sight on the left. Someone in a crisp white uniform approaching on the right.

Cursing silently, Riston forced zir shoulders back, trying to mimic the stance of Datax's young, overconfident engineers. Zir heart was pounding too fast, and it made zir movements too jerky. Anyone paying attention would practically see the anxiety coming off zir body in visible waves. Ze could only hope the white-clad PCCS officer with the ring of tight black curls encircling their head wasn't paying attention.

Ze rushed into the room and knelt next to an engineer lying on the floor. Ze checked for a pulse. It was there, no matter how erratic it was. Breathing a little easier, ze looked over the rest of the wounds. Their singed uniform was fused to blistering sections of skin and the side of their head was burned to the scalp—the source of the worst of the scent—but second- and third-degree burns covered their arm. Fire suppression foam was just starting to dissolve, and it was clear from the engineer's injuries they'd dived *toward* the fire in order to do something. Whatever it was, Riston hoped it was worth the injuries they would have to live with.

Then ze realized there had been no electronic *ding* of the door sliding shut and locking behind zem. Someone else had followed zem in, and they were standing in the doorway, keeping it from closing.

Shit. A smart survivor would run, but there was an unconscious engineer in front of zem, and they were half covered with burns. Riston couldn't be the kind of smart that meant leaving this person to

suffer. Only seconds had passed since ze'd entered the room, but every second counted in situations like this. Making several decisions in quick succession, Riston scrambled to the cabinets under the main console.

“What are you looking for?” The voice was high-pitched, but it was the tone more than the words that made zem pause. There was no suspicion or threat. And then they made it more confusing by adding, “Maybe I can help.”

So, ze answered. “If I can find a med-pack, I might be able to save their arm.”

A click. A scrape. The person behind zem took a step. “Try this.”

Riston flinched. No blow came. The motion in zir periphery was simply a hand offering a tube of salve, and yet there was nothing simple about any of this. The salve was an incredibly powerful and expensive ointment, and the hand was a high-quality cybernetic prosthetic, far above the standard models made freely available to the general public. Surprise and curiosity made zem risk a glance up at zir unexpected assistant.

Immediately, ze wished ze hadn't. Tall, tanned skin, and terrifyingly pretty. Brown eyes with upturned corners watched zem from under gently curved eyebrows, and the face as a whole seemed far younger than expected. Most importantly, they hadn't moved while Riston blinked at them in shock; they were still smiling tentatively, their hand outstretched to offer zem exactly what ze needed to help the engineer, who was beginning to rock and groan with pain.

Nodding, ze carefully took the salve, grabbed the first-aid case from the cabinet, and hurried back to the patient. The carbon-reinforced ceramic knife in Riston's boot was a little broad to be useful slicing through the uniform shirt, but ze didn't have time to search for something better. Thankfully, instead of leaving, questioning zem, or issuing orders, the PCCS officer knelt and gently helped Riston cut and peel cloth away from burned skin. Every motion spoke of patience and practice, but Riston doubted their core expertise

was in medical because they didn't offer any advice or corrections as ze worked. Soon, ze'd cut enough of the cloth away to begin smoothing ointment over the blistered skin. The salve was even more potent than ze'd expected, seeming to ease the engineer's pain almost instantly.

"You sure you won't get in trouble for giving this away?" Riston asked quietly.

"No, I'm not, but being able to tell the captain I helped save one of the station's best technicians will help. It'll mean the station commander owes the PCCS a favor."

Riston's hands paused. Ze looked up. "This is one of their best techs?"

"Has to be." The officer gestured to the machinery along one wall. "Only upper level engineers are allowed to handle the rotational control systems."

Ze looked down, moving a little faster. "Which is how you knew I didn't belong here?"

"No, the tech in your hood told me you didn't belong here."

Oh no. Ze had to get out of here before anyone else arrived. If the PCCS officer noticed the ID tech in zir jacket, station security would, too. Even if ze got away today, they'd triple-check every single ID scan on this level, looking for the one that didn't have the right history. Once they started *looking* for Riston, they'd find zem. Zir ID simply wasn't *that* good.

But the officer handing zem a roll of nano bandages was between zem and the door. Ze wouldn't be able to leave without pushing past them, and if they grabbed zem with that prosthetic, ze wasn't going anywhere without ripping one of zir own limbs off. So, ze kept working. Ze wrapped the burned arm and watched the bandages compress to stop potential blood loss, because these came from a basic emergency kit and that was just what they were programmed to do. The medics would have to fix the settings. *If* they got here in time. The engineer was starting to shiver with shock or pain or...something.

Whatever it was, Riston doubted it was a good sign. Why hadn't an emergency crew arrived yet?

Getting up and purposely not looking at the PCCS officer, Riston went to the wall panel. Immediately, ze saw the problem and manually sent the fire alert that a glitch in the system—maybe the same that had *caused* the fire—hadn't allowed out before. Then, without a glance, ze shifted toward the door, trying to stay a full arm's length away from the officer.

"Where are you going?" They didn't move, but ze saw them watching zem.

"Away." The door opened at zir approach, and Riston scanned the hall. Not empty, but no sign of security yet. Ze flicked the hood up to cover most of zir face. "Thanks for the help."

"Wait!"

Riston ran.

Footsteps followed close behind zem, fast and heavy, boots thudding against the grating. Ze didn't look back—couldn't when ze had to watch zir path to avoid the few people ahead—but it sounded like the officer was catching up. Riston risked a quick glance back as ze turned a sharp corner.

An impossibly tight grip caught zir arm and held.

Ze stumbled, zir upper body jerking to a stop and zir legs continuing another two steps. Thrown off balance, ze veered hard to the right, one arm wheeling as though that'd be enough to keep zem from crashing. Zir back slammed into the wall, trapping zem between the cold, sloped metal wall and the PCCS officer crushing zem. As soon as ze had zir feet underneath zem, Riston tried to push off and bolt.

Tried. The prosthetic hand tightened so hard and fast it sent shocks of pain shooting down into zir hand and up to zir shoulder. Ze gasped and flinched.

The officer's hand loosened, but they didn't let go.

This is it. I'm dead. Ze waited for accusations or threats to start, bracing zirself for anything...except what they actually said.

“I’m Ensign Cira Antares, she.” She—Cira, apparently—waited expectantly.

All ze could think to say was, “Okay.”

One side of her mouth quirked up. “This is usually where you’d give me something to call you.”

Interesting. Not asking for zir name, just a moniker. Oddly, it made zem want to tell her the truth. “Riston. Ze.”

There was no logical reason for it, but something in her posture seemed to relax. “Is that your first name or last?”

“I don’t have a last name anymore.”

“Literally, according to what little I was able to find about you.” Although her expression was pleasant, there was a keenness to the expression around her brown eyes that unsettled zem nearly as much as her words.

“You looked me up? How? You have neural implants?” Ze looked again for implants, but there was still no glint of the tiny shifting mechanisms in her eyes.

“No.” A secretive smirk curved her full bottom lip. “But I’ve seen you before.”

“No one sees me.” Ze made sure of it. Staying hidden was what kept zem safe. Besides, ze *definitely* would’ve remembered meeting someone like Cira before.

“The first time was more than a cycle ago. I was waiting for a delivery for my captain, and you were in the passage off the upper-level dock.”

First time? Riston’s mind snagged on those two words. They didn’t make sense. Had ze somehow missed her more than once? Ze tried to think back to the day she was talking about, but ze spent a lot of time in the maintenance passages of the station’s docks.

“I missed the beginning of the conversation—those passages echo, and it makes eavesdropping complicated.” She paused, almost like she was waiting for Riston’s reaction. When ze didn’t even blink, she kept talking. “I heard enough, though. You gave a huge chunk of credits to a kid whose mother was sick. Credits you’d been saving up

to buy an ID that'd pass all the security inspections. Which would've gotten you a job and an actual *life*."

Oh. Now ze remembered. "I— That was..." The words choked zem, and the itch to be *anywhere* else flared to life, but Cira was too close, and her cybernetic hand was still locked around zir arm.

"That was an incredibly selfless thing to do," she finished for zem. Her upturned eyes softened, and her black ringlets danced as she tilted her head. "You caught my attention, so I got a picture of you and used it to search for your ID."

Riston's breath caught. "What'd you find?"

"Enough." Cira scanned zir face, though Riston had no idea what she could be looking for. "I know you told me your real name and that you're not originally from Datax, but not much more than that."

It took an effort for Riston to keep from slumping in relief, although if the sensors in Cira's hands were sensitive enough, she'd still feel the twitch in zir muscles that ze couldn't fully suppress.

"The next time we docked here, a friend of mine looked for you. Ze watched you run interference between security and some refugee orphans who'd slipped off their transport ship." She raised one gently sloped eyebrow. "A couple people ze talked to claimed you almost got caught. Twice."

"Exaggerations." But they weren't. The second time, ze'd had to leave one of zir bags behind to squeeze into a gap barely wide enough for zir skinny body turned sideways. It cost zem a hundred stashed credits and the jacket ze'd been wearing the day ze escaped from Ladadhi—the jacket that had belonged to zir brother.

Footsteps echoed through the hall, the steps numerous and heavy enough to rattle the grated floor. An emergency team had finally arrived. Cira glanced up the hall, her expression shifting quickly until it settled on a resigned wince.

She isn't supposed to be down here, either, Riston realized. Although regulations were looser when Pax ships were docked at a station, anyone serving on board a PCCS or on Pax Station was legally required to limit contact with anyone who wasn't a Pax citizen. She

might get her whole ship sanctioned if she was found here talking to zem.

Instinct took over. Riston used Cira's grip on zir arm to tow her to the closest storage compartment. Unlike the restricted access panel, the security on this one took less than a second for zir program to crack. Ze hurried them both inside as soon as the opening appeared. The door slid shut behind them just before the emergency response team turned the corner.

"Adrienn's gonna be so mad," she muttered, her eyes on the door. Riston wanted to ask why. Ze didn't. Cira glanced at zem, though, and seemed to see zir curiosity. "It was a risk coming down here to find you. Hacking into the security feeds before we leave to black out the whole time I was down here is an even bigger risk." Then she smiled, relief brightening her eyes and warming her whole face. Ze found zirsself leaning in like a piece of space junk falling into orbit around a powerful star. "At least there's a legitimate technical glitch I can blame this time."

"Okay." Ze didn't understand what reality ze'd fallen sideways into, and zir heart was still pounding from too many close calls. Ze couldn't think of anything else to say.

She released zir arm and stepped back, but only about a half a meter or so, close enough to grab zem again if ze tried to run. "Where's your family, Riston?"

"Gone." Dead and gone and burned to ash so small there hadn't been remains to bury.

"Do you have anyone here?"

"I don't have anyone anywhere." Riston rubbed absently at the spot on zir forearm where ze'd definitely find bruises in the shape of her fingers later. "Definitely not here."

For almost a minute, Cira studied zem. The inspection went on so long ze caught zirsself scanning her irises for implants again, but there didn't seem to be anything technological lurking in her eyes. She just...wasn't looking away.

And then she asked, "Want to try your luck somewhere else?"

“Luck?” Riston had run out of luck a long time ago. Honestly, ze considered it a miracle ze wasn’t dead yet. “I don’t have luck. Are you offering some?”

“In a way. I’m offering a ride, and at the end of it, I’ll leave you somewhere new. You’ll have a clean ID and a few credits to your name, enough for you to build a new life.” Her expression shifted, something in the same family as sympathy and pity glimmering in her eyes. “What you have here isn’t a life, Riston.”

Ze stepped back, unexpectedly stung. “I never said it was, but—”

“You’ve been risking everything to help others,” she cut zem off. “Over and over again. It’s time for someone to do the same for you. You’ve earned a chance to start on an even playing field for once and build something better for yourself.”

This couldn’t be real. Riston’s older brother had often said, “If it’s too good to be true, it’s a trap,” but he’d usually been talking about business deals, news feeds, and their parents’ offers of clemency. Still, Cira’s offer definitely qualified as too good to be true.

Pax ships were only allowed to carry passengers who were locked in cryostasis, and those pods were exorbitantly expensive even to rent. Forget buying one. The sixty-three credits Riston had were enough to feed zem for a couple of days, but ze was several *thousand* short of being able to step on board Cira’s ship. Sure, it had sounded as though she was just going to hand zem a cryopod *and* an ID chip *and* all the credits ze’d need to establish zirsself somewhere new, but how often had something like that happened in the history of humanity? Even if her offer was legitimate, it must come with a massive debt to be collected at some later date. One ze likely wouldn’t ever be able to repay.

“Is there *anything* worth holding on to here?” Cira’s voice went soft. “Let me help you.”

Ze wanted to, wanted it so badly ze found zirsself leaning into her again, sucked into her gravity, but taking the leap from yearning to accepting...

There was an old saying—ancient; Old Earth stuff if ze remembered right: *better the devil you know*. Riston knew how to scrounge and scrape on Datax. If Cira kept to her word and her ship dropped zem somewhere else, ze wouldn't know the customs, the dangers, and maybe not even the language. Yes, life here may be ten different kinds of awful, but at least ze knew what to expect.

But what ze could expect was nothing. Ze'd never get a job on Datax because zir ID wasn't good enough, and zir minor hacking skills weren't enough to build zem a better one. Buying the ID or the hack was *thousands* of credits, which would take zem cycles to save up again, and ze had nothing of value to barter for the service, either.

So why in the name of every black hole in the universe was ze even thinking about turning away from a chance to escape?

"I know this is a big decision," Cira said, unfailingly patient, "but once the emergency personnel make sure their tech is okay, they'll start looking for the person who patched the engineer up. Whether you come with me or not, you really shouldn't be on this level by then. I'm going to do what I can to wipe the system, but it's not impossible that someone will remember seeing you. Things will turn ugly fast when they figure out you're not in their system."

And she was right. Which was why it was so reckless of zem to have gotten involved at all. But that *smell*. It seemed like ze was pathologically incapable of walking away from it.

Despite the danger, ze stood there searching her face. Ze didn't find anything to convince zem to turn down her improbably good deal.

"If you're serious, and as long as you know I got literally nothing to pay you back with, I'll be more than glad to accept a ride, Ensign." Ze held zir breath.

"We better get moving, then." Smiling, Cira leaned in, her face alight. "Tell me, Riston. Have you ever seen *Pax Novis* before?"

*PSSC Intersystem News Feed
Terra-Sol date 3814.119*

- It is day sixty-three of the mine worker strike on Tau Ceti's Shadhima colony, and authorities have had no success in bringing corporate, government, military, and civilian sectors to any lasting compromise.
- The week-long battle between Arae and Casseta resulted in the decimation of a Pavonis outpost on the moon Surka when an Arae battle cruiser crashed into the moon's surface. While official reports have not yet been filed, it is believed all 673 residents of the research facility perished in the event. Pavonis Command has issued a statement condemning the incident and demanding restitution.

*PSSC Intersystem News Feed
Terra-Sol date 3814.143*

- The three-cycle drought continues to devastate the Draconis planet Vohtu, and leaders have cancelled all exports of perishables. Research teams are still hunting for both a cause and a solution to the drought. A Tau Ceti fleet ostensibly carrying one of these teams is currently en route, following a course that will take them straight to the farm moons of Vohtu. While research could be the mission's true purpose, more than one Draconis leader is calling for their government to recall several military ships to stand as a defense line in case their neighboring system has a different target in mind.

*PSSC Intersystem News Feed
Terra-Sol date 3814.236*

- Riots and protests have sprung up in multiple systems. One PCCS lieutenant was assaulted and seriously injured when caught in one

such event on Datax. The PCGC has raised the alert level for all Pax citizens. Captains are urged to look closely at the atmosphere of each port before disembarking. Crew should be prepared to improvise should captains restrict off-ship access to all but the minimum necessary personnel.



CHAPTER ONE

RISTON

Terra-Sol date 3814.237

Riston hadn't thought optimism was something ze'd been burdened with much of. Clearly, ze'd been wrong. Some part of zem had been convinced ze'd find the perfect gift in the markets of Ahngi-te, the largest city on Nea-gi, even though ze only had one hundred twenty credits to zir name and no way to earn, beg, borrow, or steal more. And ze needed a *lot* more.

For six thousand credits, ze could get a pair of twentieth-century Earth pistols in a display case. Ze leaned closer to the window and zir eyebrows rose. They came with an authenticity holo. Most didn't anymore. Earth wasn't talking to the rest of the systems these days, like a parent who'd decided to wash their hands of their unmanageable children.

For twenty-five hundred credits in the civilian defense shop next to the antique dealer, there was the new StunSheath. It covered the arm from elbow to the middle of the palm, was flexible enough to not restrict movement, was able to integrate with other personal tech, and could deliver a shock so powerful it would, according to the manufacturer, singe the ends of your assailant's hair. That part sounded like bullshit to Riston, but the rest? Definitely useful.

For eleven hundred credits, there was a brand new skinprinter that included a kit of inks in hundreds of colors, shades, and types, and could even create holo-tats. All it needed was an uploaded design.

Cira would love any of those things, but unless Riston came up with a foolproof plan to steal them in the next, oh...five minutes, then ze would be walking away empty-handed.

Not like it mattered. It was an important anniversary, sure, but only to zem. Ze was delusional if ze thought Cira Antares would remember why tomorrow was more important than any other day they'd survived. Bringing her a present would probably only confuse her.

Sighing, ze stepped into an alcove between shops and looked out over Nea-gi. The system's twin suns beamed cheerily through the latticed glass roof, but the clouds spread out below the floating city roiled like a dark, endless, stormy sea. They were char black and only lit by the lightning spreading like a neural network across the sky. Frequent electrical storms were one of the reasons no one lived permanently below the cloud cover on Nea-gi. Ahngi-te floated safely between the dangers of the clouds and the vacuum of space. All the lightning did was create a pretty show for those who had the time to peer down and watch it.

Knowing zir own time here was running out, ze slipped zir hands into zir pockets, rolled zir shoulders back, and forced zirsself into the saunter of a young PCCS officer. Ze knew the stride because ze'd watched it hundreds of times. Lived on the same ship as plenty of those officers, too, though they didn't know that.

Mentally shaking zirsself out of that particular sinkhole, Riston turned zir attention to the market itself. Ahngi-te looked almost the same as it had on Riston's last visit. The floors were made of a pale mottled-green recycled composite. The walls alternated between tall windows, giving shoppers views of their distant planet, and white trellised pillars covered with greenery that added spots of brilliant color to the otherwise pale city. Small ponds sat at the base of the pillars, and their tops supported the domed glass roof of the market's main thoroughfare. Under the scents of food and perfume was the unmistakable smell of a hydroponics bay—recycled water and growing things. Everything else was gleaming white, all of it shined up and polished so brightly Riston was always wary of touching anything.

A casual observer might claim Ahngi-te hadn't changed. Riston wasn't a casual observer.

The two other times Riston had visited Nea-gi, ze'd been able to forget the war every occupied system in the quadrant had been fighting for the last five-hundred-fifty-plus Terra-Sol cycles. Now, a peacekeeper was stationed at every corner, each wearing a helmet Riston knew was equipped with a camera. Behind their face shields, their eyes tracked both the information on the embedded screens and the shoppers meandering through the market. Extra screens had been installed above the shop marquees, their displays rotating between news feeds, advertisements, and government propaganda. However, like the peacekeepers' helmets, these units included cameras and microphones equipped for facial and vocal recognition. Both screens and peacekeepers were not only monitoring for outside threats and serious violence, but also for hints of civil unrest. According to the PCGC's latest update, anyway.

Even if the government wasn't beginning to turn their all-seeing eyes inward, they still logged the IDs of every visitor to their pristine city. Riston was glad the ID chip Cira had given zem when ze'd boarded *Pax Novis* three cycles ago was good enough to hold up against any routine scrutiny.

But that didn't erase the uncomfortable tingling sensation of being watched. It was distinct from the uncomfortable sensation of being pulled down toward the planet's surface with every step—that ze knew well after three Terra-Sol cycles spent in artificial and not-quite-planetary-weight gravity. Ze'd learned how to shrug off the weight and pressure of a true gravitational force, strolling as though ze didn't feel it any more than the natives. The niggling conviction someone was watching zem, though...

Ze passed another intersection, and the peacekeeper's head turned to track zir progress. Heart jumping, Riston forced zirself to keep zir pace, to look directly into the pale eyes of the gray-clad peacekeeper, and to nod a greeting. After a beat, ze got a curt nod in response.

No alarms rang. No force appeared to apprehend zem. However, the moment made zem hyperaware, and ze wasn't the only one on edge. There was an air of disquiet today, almost like the city's atmo-filters had malfunctioned and pumped in a hint of the lower atmosphere's sulfur dioxide, just enough to leave everyone on the verge of panic and unable to explain why. Riston hadn't been in a place that felt like this since the weeks before Ladadhi was destroyed. Given how that had ended, Riston was glad ze wouldn't be around to see what—if anything—was coming for Ahngi-te.

And ze still didn't have a present for Cira.

Riston really was more worried about Ahngi-te's hidden panic than zir failed shopping trip, but one problem was solvable. The other wasn't. Ze couldn't fix what was wrong here. Getting Cira a gift to say thank you for...well, for everything? That should've been within zir power. Ze was out of time, though. If ze didn't head for the docks now, ze'd miss the last shuttle to the space station. It looked like ze'd be leaving Nea-gi with exactly the same number of credits ze'd arrived with.

After scanning the ID chip implanted in zir wrist at five different checkpoints, ze was finally allowed to board the shuttle. Ze was just early enough to get the seat in the far rear corner, and ze quickly

stowed zir pack underneath the seat. The position wasn't out of sight of anyone on board the shuttle by any means, but it was easily overlooked. That's what ze needed to be—easily overlooked.

Riston was one of the many war orphans who'd gone missing somewhere along the convoluted route to “safety.” Zir new ID was good, but nothing was perfect, and if some perceptive security tech monitoring the shuttle's passengers tagged zem as questionable, ze'd be grabbed as ze exited, arrested, and likely never seen again. A few cycles ago, ze might've been sent to work in the mines or the factories scattered across the barren planet's surface. Now, ze was practically eighteen. There would be no slow death in the mines; ze'd be shoved straight into military service to die quickly. It didn't even matter which army ze was shoved into because, when stripped down to the core and weighted on an even scale, all the systems came out looking just as guilty and just as innocent as any other. The only way ze'd ever see the stars again was in the hold of some warship on zir way to invade some other underfed, beleaguered colony. The only time ze'd ever see *Pax Novis* again would be in video archives.

And Cira? Getting caught would mean never seeing her again. After, of course, getting hauled in front of Captain Erryla Antares and her officers and being forced to watch confusion cross their faces as they told the guards they had no idea who this imposter was, but ze certainly wasn't a member of *their* crew. Captain Antares would be telling the truth when she said she didn't recognize Riston; Cira wouldn't be. Cira would lie about Riston to protect the other stowaways, to protect her mother, and to protect *Pax Novis*, the ship so many people called home. Ze wouldn't even blame her. The ship and its crew were far more important than zem.

Someone settled into the seat next to zem, and Riston closed zir eyes, resting zir temple against the bulkhead and hoping that'd be enough to deter zir new travel partner from striking up a conversation. After listening to several deep breaths, though, Riston wasn't surprised to hear a raspy tenor voice say, “Excuse me?”

Reluctantly, ze opened zir eyes and glanced at zir seatmate. They were taller than zem, even sitting down, and wiry in the way people tended to be when they grew up in artificial rather than planetary gravity. They were several decades older, too, if Riston had to guess, and yet they held themselves back from Riston with a polite deference. Their glances down at zir pristine white uniform seemed filled with longing. It took a few seconds of increasingly awkward silence before they cleared their throat and finally began to speak again.

“It feels strange to ask, but I don’t often see a PCCS officer in person rather than on a screen.” They waited, and when all Riston did was raise zir eyebrow, the stranger continued. “Do you know how many engineering positions will roll over to general application this cycle?”

Riston blinked. “Sorry, no. I don’t. Are you thinking about applying?”

“I already have.” They smiled, the expression laden and layered. “Every time I finish a new degree program, I try again. If there’s an engineering slot open this cycle, this will be the fifteenth time I’ve put myself up for consideration.”

Which shouldn’t have been surprising. Once the Pax Governing Council had entered its second century, the number of applications for citizenship rose, and the number of acceptances plummeted. PSSC society had boomed from within, and enough children had been born into Pax families to make recruitment a much lower priority. The Council no longer needed to risk bringing in outsiders who might—whether wittingly or unwittingly—bias others for or against a particular system. Now, out of the thousands upon thousands of applications the council received, only those with expertise in at least one necessary field were accepted.

This person had studied for cycles and still not been deemed good enough. What gave Riston the right to wear this uniform when it had been constantly denied to someone who’d worked for it? Guilt pulled on Riston’s stomach like a gravity well.

“You were born into the PCGC service, weren’t you?” Their words were rushed, and their expression tense. It was a question most people wouldn’t dare ask.

The only answer Riston could give was, “Yes. It’s been my family’s home for generations,” even if that was what *ze wished* instead of what was actually true.

The stranger nodded. “You don’t understand how lucky you are, then. Out here, I... I think the only time I ever feel safe is when I’m on a station where a Pax ship is docked. As long as that ship is there, I know no fleet will risk knowingly or openly launching an attack.”

I know exactly what you mean. Ze, however, hadn’t had the same realization until ze’d been on *Pax Novis* for several months. Ze’d been watching mirrored data from the ship’s sensors and spotted a small squadron of Araean fighters on the edge of *Novis*’s sensor range. The fleet remained within range for several hours, but not once had Riston been worried they’d change course or lock weapons on *Pax Novis*. Not only would attacking a Pax ship get a system dropped from the fleet’s delivery schedule, they’d also automatically break every one of their alliances. Ze’d felt absolutely secure hidden within the white walls of a PCCS. The realization had almost floored zem. It had been the moment ze’d decided to beg Cira to let zem stay even though they had been mere days away from the end of their original agreement and ze had been about to leave the ship behind for good.

Sometimes, ze still had a hard time believing she’d said yes.

When they opened their mouth to speak again, Riston knew ze didn’t want to hear anything else, and didn’t want to answer more questions. An uncomfortable mix of guilt and resentment churned in zir gut, each feeling so strong ze wasn’t sure if ze was more likely to punch the stranger or throw up on them if the discussion carried on. So ze quickly forced a small smile and said, “Good luck this cycle.”

Their mouth closed with an audible snap. It took a few seconds, though, for them to exhale and give up on the conversation.

Then the shuttle doors sealed, the hull began to hum as the engines came to life, and the craft slowly eased away from the city’s

dock. Riston rarely watched the viewscreen on these flights—ze cared a lot more about where ze was going than anything ze was leaving behind—but this time ze kept zir eyes focused solely on the receding city, a massive white disc-shaped platform protected by a dome of glittering glass. The dual light of the system’s suns sent prisms reflecting in every direction, and it created a series of broken rainbows over the intermittent flashes of lightning in the clouds below.

It was a spectacle billions of people in the galaxy would never see. Although Riston appreciated the beauty of the scene, ze couldn’t help exhaling in relief when the shuttle rattled as it blasted through the final turbulent layer of Nea-gi’s atmosphere. Another minute and the flight smoothed out. Soon, Mitu, the largest space station in the system, came into sight, and with it came *Pax Novis*.

In Riston’s admittedly biased opinion, *Novis* was the best ship in the galaxy. It was home, and seeing it always sent pleasurable chills across zir skin. Despite zir failed search in the market for Cira’s gift and the biting unpleasant thoughts the brief conversation with zir seatmate had stirred up, ze knew ze’d feel better as soon as ze was back on board. The stranger had been right—the only safe place in human-occupied space was on board a Pax-class cargo ship.

The gleaming white hull of PCCS *Novis* extended from its docking port in either direction, so big it looked more like a new extension of Mitu Station that just hadn’t been painted yet. From most angles, *Pax Novis* looked like a massive white multifaceted rectangle with three saucer-shaped sections rising from one end. Those were the living quarters, kept separate from the command and cargo sectors where the crew worked. Forward, the body split to create a massive external cargo hold. Modular cargo pods were held between twin gangways extending from the main body, and a quick look told Riston’s knowledgeable eye that the last of the modpods were about to be fixed in place.

Ze’d spent more time on the planet than ze’d realized. Either that or the Mitu’s loading crew had been quicker than usual in uncoupling the containers destined for this port and attaching new ones. Hurrying,

Riston grabbed zir pack, disembarked, and jogged through the shuttle bay while simultaneously digging through the pack for zir coat. The uniform always served zem well planetside, but on stations it tended to bring more questions than respect. Workers in port recognized the personnel who handled docking each Pax vessel. Someone seeing a new face in a familiar uniform would only bring Riston the wrong sort of attention.

Struggling to keep moving while fixing the set of the coat over zir shoulders, ze aimed for a supply closet on the far end of the massive shuttle bay. Zir vacuum suit was hidden inside, covered by the detritus a station collected and forgot about after operating for more than six hundred Terra-Sol cycles.

As Riston approached the hallway leading to the machine shops and storage compartments, ze cast one last look back at the busy bay. Ze hadn't passed through the room without being seen—that was impossible—but it didn't seem like anyone was giving zem more than a casual glance, and that was good enough. Picking up zir pace, ze rounded the corner—

And collided with someone coming toward zem from the opposite direction.

The other person cursed and stumbled backward a few steps before catching themselves on the wall. “Damn, watch where you’re going, you—” They looked up and the words stopped.

So did Riston’s heart. It had been a few cycles, and the time between their last meeting on Dax and now hadn't been kind, but there was no mistaking Minya Pon. On the same day she earned the three-prong scar marring her left cheek, her jaw, and the length of her neck, she had, inadvertently, saved Riston’s life once on Dax. If she recognized zem now, though, she might also inadvertently end it.

“Stars,” Minya breathed. “You look so much like...”

“Sorry about running into you.” Heart pounding so hard ze could barely hear zirself think, Riston picked up the bag ze'd dropped and looked anywhere but at Minya’s painfully familiar face. “Hope I didn't hurt you. I'll watch where I'm going better next time.”

“Wait, are you—”

Ze didn’t stick around to hear the end of the question. Walking at a fast clip, ze was down the hall and around the corner in seconds. Only when ze was out of sight did ze release a shuddering breath and look down.

She hadn’t seen the uniform. Although zir coat wasn’t on quite right, all that was visible of the clothing underneath was a strip of white. That was better. Not okay, but better, because even though Minya had seen zir face, she wouldn’t be able to report that an orphan she’d known on Datax—one who was probably considered either missing or dead by everyone who’d known zir name—had inexplicably turned up dressed like a Pax officer. No one cared where orphans turned up so long as they weren’t costing anyone credits or time. Impersonating a Pax officer, though, would get Riston tossed in a prison cell for at least a full cycle. And if they decided to look closer at the only Pax ship docked at Mitu when ze was captured because ze’d been careless? That would cause problems ze’d never forgive zirsself for.

Bile rose in zir throat, and zir hands shook as ze pulled the coat tighter around zirsself, but ze managed to pick up the pace without stumbling. One more main corridor, one smaller side passage, and ze was finally at the supply closet. Ze stopped outside the door, took a deep breath, and tried *not* to look like ze was on the verge of absolute panic as ze stepped inside.

Thankfully, the room was empty. No one was inside, and zir vac suit was the only one left in the room. The others had left nothing but a note behind.

Wish you were here, Zazi.

Hope you didn’t get lost.

G-Tr-S-Ti-

Thank the stars. All four of them—Greenie, Tinker, Shadow, and Treble—had been and gone safely, then. If ze didn’t hurry, *Novis* would leave without zem.

It only took two minutes and thirteen seconds to fit the suit on over zir PCCS uniform—ze'd done this so many times over the cycles, ze could probably beat a seasoned Marine—but it was harder than ever today. Zir hands wouldn't stop shaking. Fear and an overactive imagination turned every sound outside the door into Minya directing the station's security to search for zem, but no one came into the room. No one even tried.

Still, despite knowing that ze was cutting it extraordinarily close, ze waited seven full minutes to be *sure* the hallway outside the closet was clear. Ze'd rather be left behind than risk trouble following zem back to Cira.

The trip from the corridor to the emergency air lock usually took three minutes. Riston's heart was still pounding double time, and zir breath came so quickly it was creating spots of fog on the inside of zir helmet. For the entire trip, every camera on the suit was on and active, projecting their independent views in a row of tiny boxes in zir periphery. Movement behind and to the left registered on one of the sensors. Riston flattened zirsself against the wall seconds before Minya crossed at a nearby intersection. She was walking slowly, scanning up and down the hall as she passed, but she didn't stop, and she seemed to be alone. But she might be back.

As soon as Minya was out of sight, Riston ran. Two more corridors and the air lock was right in front of zem. This, though, was the hardest part. It took at least nine minutes to go through the protocols to "test" the air lock and assure it that, yes, ze really did want the blasted thing to open, and yes, ze really meant it, and *no, don't alert the station engineer, dammit!*

Then, finally, the gravity of the station released zem. Shoving aside everything but the empty stretch of space ahead, Riston pushed into the black where few of zir problems could follow. Ze activated the suit's small thrusters and aimed zirsself straight for home.

*Station Security Video Feed
Gaivai Station, Casseta System
Terra-Sol date 3809.100
Transcript below*

[A family of three, all wearing the white uniforms of the PSSC, are walking through the loading dock of Gaivai Station. They stop when the youngest, a child of approximately eight cycles, sees a long line of children being guided onto an old passenger vessel. Most of the children's clothes are either torn, stained, or both, and several are crying quietly. None look at any of the people who've stopped to watch the procession.]

Erryla Antares: [quietly] Of course, this had to happen today.

Cira Antares: Where are they going, Mama?

Meida Dalil-Antares: A new home. [muttered] Hopefully.

Cira: What happened to their old home?

[Meida and Erryla exchange glances; Erryla crouches next to Cira]

Erryla: You remember we talked about the war? [Cira nods] And you remember we talked about how sometimes, when one system attacks another, people sometimes die?

Cira: But they're not dead. [she points to the children boarding the refugee ship]

Meida: [pushes her hand down] Pointing is rude, love. And we know they're not dead, but...

Erryla: They're war orphans. It means their families, and anyone else who might've been able to take care of them on the station or the planet they come from, are dead.

Meida: [muttered] Dammit, Erryla. Softening. We talked about softening this.

Cira: Oh. [she watches the children slowly boarding the ship while both her mothers watch her] Couldn't we take care of them? There's plenty of space on our ship.

Erryla: Cira, we— [she sighs] No. I'm sorry, love. We can't take any of them onto the ship with us.

Cira: But why? We have space, and they need help.

Meida: The people on this ship are going to help them. They'll find them another place to live.

Cira: But you don't think they'll do a good job helping. [Meida tries to protest, but Cira crosses her arms and interrupts] You don't. I can tell.

Meida: [after a pause] I don't know that for sure, but you're right. I think it'll be easy for the people in charge to make mistakes. There's simply too many people to help, and not enough people helping. But nothing we can do will change this. Even if we took some of the children on board *Novis*—

Erryla: Which we *can't* do.

Meida: [nods] But even if we did, there would still be thousands—maybe hundreds of thousands of others in the same situation. It wouldn't really help anything.

Cira: It would help the people we helped.

Meida: Cira, we...

[Meida and Erryla exchange weighted glances; Cira's attention stays on the children as the last one boards the ship and the door closes behind them]

Erryla: Come on. We're going to be late if we don't leave now, and you know how Captain Meechim gets when I don't get back on time.

Meida: Crotchety old man. Why hasn't he retired already? I heard the PCGC is about to force the issue, so maybe *Novis* will have a new captain in a cycle or two.

[*Cira follows Meida and Erryla out, her eyes on the passenger ship even after the docking air lock closes*]