

Sebastian listened to the skimmer's engines as they sped through the air. They had a quiet hum, belying the vehicle's size. The skimmer had been affectionately nicknamed, "the Stingray" by its team of engineers. It was sleek, with a small nose and two short wings, and had been painted a matte black, to blend in seamlessly with the night sky. Sebastian enjoyed skimmers, the antigrav engines keeping them aloft always made for a smooth, relaxing flight. He liked to stare out into the darkness and let his mind unwind, leading up to a mission. Reluctantly, he turned his attention back to the briefing.

"Oy, are you even listenin'? D'ya have any idea how much work went in to putting together all this info?" his handler, Lenny snapped. "The complete number of hostiles, every weapon they're usin', each guard shift change, the schematics of the entire goddamn base?"

"I got it, I got it, it's all locked up in *here*," Sebastian grinned and pointed to his temple.

"Yea, I'm sure," he said with a deadpanned expression, "Two months of fracking work going to waste, but whateva."

"*Either way*, our missions are always the same, unless..." Sebastian said and cocked his head to the side, "Am I taking any prisoners tonight?" At the other man's words, Lenny's already dour expression darkened even further.

"Fuck no, orders came from up top, Empress Kasildora says she wants to make an example out of this one," Lenny spat. *So, it's another one of those nights, then*, Sebastian thought with an inward sigh.

“Not a problem,” Sebastian said tonelessly. A strange expression flickered on Lenny’s face before disappearing. He wondered what it was, Anger? Disgust? Guilt? In all the time they’d spent working together, Lenny had never voiced any complaints about the work they did. A part of Sebastian wished the other man would just lay everything bare between the two of them. Did he think Sebastian would rat him out? Or worse, execute him on the spot for treason? *I guess it would be hard for anybody to trust a daemon*, he thought ruefully and wrung his hands together.

“Well, I s’pose that’s what they get for being rebels,” Lenny said, but the cold sentiment didn’t match his eyes. Sebastian himself had no love for the Empire but, like it or not, he was an agent of it. He didn’t choose this job, but he’d been training for it since he could walk. He didn’t have a choice back then and nothing had changed since.

His thoughts were interrupted when the pilot yelled back to the two men from the cockpit that they were approaching the drop site. Lenny left Sebastian to make his final preparations and returned to the front of the skimmer, slipping on a headset.

Sebastian checked his equipment, one imperial issue bolt pistol equipped with .50 caliber bullets designed to blow big holes through people, and a large combat knife. He also carried an assortment of throwing knives stashed within notches on his suit. Sebastian rotated his shoulders and bobbed his feet, feeling the armored plates click and shift with his movements. His armor set was slim and hugged his body, the markovian steel plating layered everywhere but his joints. The ensemble was completed by his helm, fastened to the rest of the set by magnetic clamps. It covered his head and face completely, the eye holes filled with red glass. The suit was painted navy blue, save for the Empire’s sigil; a pair of crimson bat wings, drawn onto his breastplate

and two more attached to his helm. Personally, Sebastian found the motifs a little gaudy, but they were mandatory for special operatives like him. He supposed his superiors wanted their enemies to know who'd ordered their execution.

“Alright, Sebastian, we’re over the drop site,” Lenny spoke into his headset from the cockpit, his voice filtering through a speaker in Sebastian’s helmet.

“Affirmative, let’s do this,” Sebastian replied, sliding on his jump pack. The skimmer’s doors opened then; the quiet space suddenly filled with roaring winds. He approached the opening and looked down into the night sky, an ocean of darkness broken only by patches of clouds. He quickly left the skimmer behind, choosing to fall forwards rather than leaping from the exit. Once in the air, Sebastian pinned his arms to his sides and clicked his feet together, speeding up his descent. When the greenish-brown blobs of earth grew too close for comfort, he pulled his ripcord.

At once, two antigrav jets attached to the jump pack clicked on with soft *whomps*. Sebastian flipped upright as his descent began to slow and he floated down the rest of the way. Grass was crunching beneath his boots a couple minutes later after he landed and ditched the pack in some bushes.

He took stock of his surroundings. *Trees, trees, and more trees*, he thought *And, oh look! A hill off in the distance, covered with more trees*. Sebastian sighed and started walking. The drop site had to be placed far enough away to avoid detection and it was roughly a 45-minute hike to the rebel outpost from where he stood.

“It’s a good thing Lenny bitched at me so much to memorize these landmarks,” Sebastian muttered, spotting the tail end of a familiar river. The journey was uneventful and other than literally scaring the crap out of some rabbits he made it to the outpost without any incident. It was a good thing so much of his training had been conditioning, otherwise the walk there would’ve broken him. Sebastian let out an appreciative whistle as he caught sight of the compound. As far as rebel bases went, it didn’t disappoint. He squinted, activating a special lens within his helm to enhance his vision.

He could see four large guard towers surrounding the property, with a handful of smaller buildings in between. It was the dead of night, so the place looked pretty quiet, only small groups of rebels clustered together around firepits, drinking and chatting. Various rebel paraphernalia littered the base as well; large pictures of Empress Kasildora with the words ‘OPPRESSOR’ painted over her face in red plastered about, graffiti of rebel symbols and slogans, and holographic images of flags shone on the side of buildings. They’d even dressed up some of their practice dummies in uniforms of the imperial police force. The navy-blue outfits were peppered with bullets and slash marks. *Cute*, Sebastian thought, *Not exactly keeping a low profile, are they?* No wonder the Empire had found their location so easily. What was it that they hoped to accomplish?

The Empress had whole countries under her heel, armies at her command and people like Sebastian to keep the citizens in check. She was a cruel ruler, no denying that, and whenever she made a decision that the commonfolk thought was unfair, like raiding a peaceful country for their resources, publicly executing her political rivals, or doubling taxes, small pockets of resistance would pop up. They were never very effective though; theft, vandalism, and shootouts with the police were the sum of their activities. Eventually, they were squashed, and the cycle would

repeat. The problem was that these insignificant groups represented opposition to the Empire, and if that idea took root among the people, it could lead to revolution, hence the mission.

He couldn't disagree with the rebels' motives, life in the Empire could be hard and he was sure everyone here had a story. You could only push a person so far, take so much, before they have nothing left but a need for retribution. Still, it didn't change the fact that he had a job to do.

Sebastian crouched and began to make his way towards the base. His every footfall was silent, his weapons at the ready, and his senses on high alert. He spotted a patrol near one of the towers and halted till it passed, there were too many people to pick off quietly. Sebastian had seen only one man within the tower, and he waited patiently for an opening. He flexed his fingers and listened as ten steel claws shot out of his armored gloves with a *shink*. They could slice through concrete like butter and would make climbing the wall simple, Sebastian just needed an opportunity. The tower's occupant was a middle-aged man, with craggy features and a salt-and-pepper beard, who looked exhausted. Sebastian stared, his muscles locked, poised for any opening as the seconds ticked by, waiting ten minutes, fifteen, twenty...

Johann pulled his jacket tighter around himself and shivered in the cold. His fur coat was doing little to combat the night's chill. It'd been a gift from his daughter, Liara. She'd said then that it was to keep him warm on these long guard shifts, but Johann figured it had also been an attempt to soften him up before she delivered her news that she'd joined the resistance without telling him. Oh, they'd fought after that, arguing back and forth for what felt like ages. He'd never wanted Liara anywhere near this work, it was too dangerous.

She'd stood firm though, and eventually Johann had folded. Liara was almost a woman grown now and once she'd made up her mind about something, there was little he could do to change it. Maybe her mother could've stopped her, before... Johann swiped the thought away with a scowl and tightened his grip on the barrel of his rifle. It was the Empire that had brought them both into this mess. He squinted out past the tower he stood in and saw naught but empty woods in every direction, just as it had been all night. He turned away and looked down into the camp. He could see Liara from here, clustered around one of the campfires with friends, laughing with her head thrown back. The sight filled Johann with warmth, she seemed happy here. Maybe things had turned out for the best; Liara was one hell of a shot too, the best sniper in the group, so he couldn't say she wasn't needed.

Johann felt a prickle of unease just then, like an insect had skittered across the back of his neck. He turned around and saw a creature standing over him. No, it was a man, but one encased in armored plating from head to toe. He was tall, and the suit only seemed to increase his size even further until he towered above Johann. He looked up at the intruder and saw a metal grille covering his mouth, a pair of red eye slits, and two metal wings attached to the sides of his helmet.

Recognition filled him when he saw the Empire's emblem painted on the man's front. Johann had opened his mouth to shout when the man struck, quick as a viper and clamped one of his hands around Johann's throat. The daemon's hand tightened to a vise and completely cut off his air supply. Johann tried to bring his gun around, but the daemon smacked it from his grasp. He fought with everything he had to jerk the hand from his throat but couldn't even move it an inch. What sort of monster had the Empire sent for them? He struggled desperately, beating his

fists bloody against the daemon's chest plate as black spots appeared over his vision. *Damn him!*
Damn him! Liara, I need to warn her! I need to... Liara...I...

Sebastian snapped the rebel's neck and carefully laid his limp body to the floor. *Damn it.* He hadn't meant for that to be so slow, if only the man hadn't turned around, things could've gone much easier. He commended the rebel's instincts though, Sebastian hadn't made a sound when he scaled the tower, yet the man had still sensed him through sheer animal instinct. If he'd been up against a normal person, he might've prevailed.

Sebastian moved on to the other guard towers, creeping silently amongst the shadows. The next man went faster than the first, Sebastian clapping a hand over his mouth, before slitting his throat. These rebels were sloppy, the guards barely trained and lacking discipline. Not for the first time that night, Sebastian wondered why someone of his rank had been sent for something this low tier. He supposed the answer probably lay in Lenny's briefing, but there wasn't anything he could do about that now.

He'd just slid a knife between the ribs of a guard in the last watch tower when an alarm sounded. He'd taken too long; someone must've found one of the bodies!

"I think I see something up there!" Sebastian heard a shout from down below, right before gunfire peppered the watchtower he was standing in. *Shit!* he thought, ducking. This wasn't how he'd pictured things going down, but no matter. He tossed the body of the latest guard he'd slain down to the rebels shooting at him. Sebastian heard a wet *crunch* and the gunshots stopped. Cries of shock and horror lit up the night as the rebels saw one of their fellows

splattered right in front of them. Sebastian whipped out his bolt pistol and returned fire, its barrel roaring as the huge slugs hurtled down below.

He shot a man in the throat, nearly blowing off his head and then a woman between the eyes, opening a crater in her face. The rest of the group recovered quickly and sprinted for cover. Sebastian chose that moment to leap from his perch in the watchtower, hitting the ground from a height that would've shattered anyone else's legs. He rolled through the grass and came up in a crouch, shooting through the backs of those fleeing. More people came out from the small buildings surrounding him and opened fire.

Bolt pistol in one hand, and combat knife in the other, he sprinted towards the enemy. His equipment was top of the line, while the rebels' was likely scavenged from wherever they could find it. Most of their bullets pinged off his armor's steel plating, a rare few managing to cut deep grooves in the metal. His bolt pistol alone outclassed much of their weaponry, punching through walls and primitive Kevlar vests. Those lives his gun didn't claim, his knives did. Sebastian was able to cover the distance between him and the shooters with ease. He swerved to avoid a bullet and got in close to sink his knife between the ribs of one man, angling the blade up towards his heart. Once the man began to shudder with death throes, Sebastian yanked the blade free and pivoted to shoot another rebel in the chest.

He ducked behind a building to replenish his ammo. Sebastian discarded the empty magazine, sliding a fresh one into its place and cocked the gun. He'd placed another rebel in his sights, finger on the trigger, his heart pounding in his ears, when everything went black.

He woke up on his back, staring at the sky. A sudden agony lanced through his head, like someone had pressed a hot poker into his skull. Sebastian couldn't see out of one of his eyes,

everything on one side of his body shrouded in darkness. The rebels had stopped shooting, Sebastian could hear cheers and people milling about. He couldn't have been out for more than a couple minutes.

Slowly, he took a gloved hand and ran it along his visor from where he lay on the ground. He found shattered glass and a hole where his left eye should have been. Behind the pain, he felt an unbearable itching sensation within his eye socket, which let Sebastian know that he'd started healing. *Fuck! Of all places to get injured... It'll take all night for me to heal enough to see again*, He thought. For what felt like the umpteenth time, he thanked the gods that regeneration was one of his gifts. Sebastian turned his head and saw that one of the watchtowers adjacent to his position had been filled by a single occupant. He squinted and could see that it was a young woman with a sniper rifle. She must've run up the stairs during all the fighting and waited for an opportunity. Hell of a shot to make though, the bullet had punctured his eye and gone clean through the back of his skull. He could feel it, the warm metal pressing against his nape from where it lay within his helmet.

He turned his head back in the opposite direction and saw the corpse of a rebel lying nearby, with a carbine rifle next to it. Sebastian took a breath, rolled over the corpse, snagged the weapon and slid the sight up to his remaining eye. *You almost had me*. Sebastian thought. Before anyone could react, he emptied the clip in the sniper's direction. Due to his loss of depth perception, most of the shots went wide, but one managed to snag the woman under her collarbone. He saw the force of the bullet spin her around and watched her fall somewhere within the tower. Sebastian lurched to his feet then and grabbed his weapons.

“Oy! Asshole!” A gruff voice called from behind the remaining rebels, “Judging by how you’ve butchered most of my men, and somehow survived that bullet wound, I reckon you’re one of the Empire’s Daemons.” A large man stepped into view, to which that adjective didn’t do justice. He looked to be at least 7 feet tall and had more than 300 pounds of muscle on him. The giant had a mane of black hair and a thick beard twisted into plaits. Both of his hands were curled around a double-bladed battleax, and he glared down at Sebastian, his emerald-green eyes alight with fury.

“I honestly wasn’t sure you lot really existed, thought you were just an old wife’s tale meant to keep us in line,” He said and began to move closer, “D’ya think you can survive having your fuckin’ head chopped in two?” *Probably not*, Sebastian thought, but chose to respond with bullets instead.

The rebel leader moved faster than what should’ve been possible for a human being, much less one his size and dodged Sebastian’s bullets. He was a dark blur and closed the distance between the two in seconds. Shocked, Sebastian just barely managed to roll out of the way as the giant’s axe swung past. It had sliced clean through one of the wings attached to his helm and cut a chunk off the steel plating over his head. If Sebastian had been a millisecond slower, the axe would be lodged in his brain right now.

What the hell was that weapon? It had to have been coated in Markovian steel if not something stronger. But only the government should have access to those kinds of material, and it was only given to high-ranking soldiers, or daemons like Sebastian. The only explanation is that he’d stolen it during a raid. But something this valuable would’ve been heavily guarded by

whole regiments of soldiers. *Really should've paid more attention during the briefing*, he sighed inwardly.

The giant's speed and strength too, were on par with his own, which shouldn't be possible. Sebastian's condition was incredibly rare. Out of every million people, a hundred could be born mutants, each with their own brand of gifts. Entire departments were tasked with locating these special children and procuring them for the government. This man's talents should've been discovered by the Empire and put to use a long time ago. They would've taken him in as a child, and trained him to be a daemon, just like Sebastian. To think someone with his powers could've slipped through the cracks. *Nothing can ever just be easy*, Sebastian's mouth twisted in a scowl.

He recovered and ran at the giant, shooting wildly. The rebel leader dodged again and swung his axe in an arc, slicing into Sebastian's arm. Sebastian dropped his gun and yelped as it cut through the plating and bit into his forearm.

"So, you *do* speak, eh?" the giant laughed and ripped his axe clear. Blood dripped from the gash in Sebastian's arm and fell onto the grass. Using his free hand, he launched a throwing knife at the rebel leader's eye. The giant dodged, but the knife still managed to open a wound in his cheek. The rebel leader sprinted forward and swung his axe to the right. Sebastian saw the blow coming and made to evade, until the giant feinted and hacked in the opposite direction.

The battleax cut into Sebastian's side and took a lump of his flesh. He howled in pain, but fought through it and dove forward, to slice through the giant's Achilles' tendon with his combat knife. The other man roared and crumpled to a knee, blood weeping from the gash. He dropped his axe and tackled Sebastian, whose own blade was knocked away in the collision. The two

pummeled each other in the dirt. Sebastian's armored fists left bruises and cracked bones, but the rebel leader went blow for blow, each hit denting or chipping his steel plating. The giant wrapped both hands around Sebastian's helm and with a roar and a savage yank, tore the magnetic seals keeping it secured.

Sebastian felt the night air on his skin and the sweat running down his face turn cold. The rebel leader then wrapped his large hands around Sebastian's neck and began to squeeze. He fought and tried to buck him off, but the other man was too strong. Sebastian yanked out one of his throwing knives and plunged it into the giant's side. The blade was far too small though and the rebel leader fought through the pain, leaning forward to bellow in Sebastian's face.

"The second you stop strugglin', I'm gonna snap your neck and cave in your fuckin' skull!" he spat.

Sebastian's vision was dimming, and he thought furiously for a way out of this. As his hands scrabbled in the dirt, he realized he still had one weapon left. Sebastian flexed his fingers, the claws shooting out of his gloves, and stabbed them into the giant's eyes. The big man screamed and clapped his hands to his face. Like lightning, Sebastian shot up and jabbed a knife into the rebel leader's neck. The giant fell forward, choking, as blood spurted from the wound. Sebastian pushed him away and gasped for breath, tasting sweet oxygen. The claws retracted back into his gloves with a soft *shink*.

He looked over and saw that the remaining rebels had thrown down their weapons and fled. Sebastian let them leave, if his superiors really cared that much about this place, he could track down the stragglers later. He located his damaged helm and slid it back on. He reclaimed the rest of his weapons and returned to where the giant lay still. Just in case, Sebastian emptied

half his clip into the back of the other man's skull, the body twitching with each shot. When he'd finished, half his head was gone. *Guess he's not coming back*, Sebastian thought with relief. With that settled, there was one last part to this mission.

Sebastian grabbed the large man by his armpits and dragged him to the edge of the compound. After stripping him, Sebastian used two of his throwing knives to nail the man's hands to the wall. Next, he took out his combat knife and slit open the giant's belly, his intestines falling out with a wet *plop*. Lastly, he carved the Empire's sigil into the middle of his chest. Sebastian then went about picking up the rest of the bodies and piling them up next to the giant's corpse. It was dawn by the time he finished. *This is probably enough of a spectacle for Empress Kasildora*, he thought with disgust. Terror would spread amongst the people once this place was discovered. He'd just been about to call for EVAC when he heard a scuff from behind him.

Sebastian spun around, bolt pistol at the ready and discovered it was a little girl. She looked about four or five and her bright green eyes stared at the corpses in confusion. Where had she come from? Had she been hiding this whole time? And why the hell would she come out now? *I'm too tired for this*, he thought and aimed his gun above her head. He'd only meant to scare her off but when she saw the weapon, her eyes went wide with fear, and she put her hands out in front of her.

Sebastian felt a force shove him and he went flying into the wall. The telekinetic push had broken the plates on his back and knocked the wind out of him. He lay there on the ground, defenseless and struggling to breathe. *What are the fucking chances?* He thought with a groan of pain and clambered to his feet. The child lay passed out on the grass, her black hair spread out around her. *Looks like that took a lot out of her*, he thought. *Telekinesis, hmm...*

His stomach lurched as the pieces clicked together. The same mutant gene that Sebastian and the rebel leader both carried could run in families. He glanced from the giant man's face to the child's, and then back again. There was definitely a resemblance.

"Fuck!" Sebastian groaned and clapped a hand over his face. She was probably the giant's daughter. *This **couldn't** have been in the briefing...Lenny would've said something...I think.* Leaving her to wake up in front of her father's corpse would be cruel, well, crueler than being the one who killed him in the first place. More importantly, if this little girl remained, the other rebels would find her and eventually she'd be used as a weapon. They'd fill her little heart with hatred and slowly turn her into a war machine. Maybe that's what her father would've wanted, maybe that was just, Sebastian wasn't sure. He tapped the muzzle of his gun against his chin while he thought. On the other hand, if he called this in, the Empire would take custody of her, and she'd be turned into a daemon. Instructors would drill her day in and day out, until she could use her gifts to throw buildings and deflect bullets. She'd live out the rest of her life dispatching the Empire's enemies, just like Sebastian. He looked down at the kid where she slept, oblivious to her situation. *She's so small,* he thought.

Option 3, he could hide her at his place for a little while. A couple months, just long enough to teach her how to hide her powers from both sides. After that, he'd find some distant relative unaffiliated with any rebel groups to ship her off to. Sebastian knew he had no right to meddle in this girl's life and she certainly wouldn't thank him for it, but he couldn't just stand by and do nothing. His decision made, Sebastian holstered his weapon and gently draped her over his shoulder. *Lenny's gonna flip his lid when he sees this.* Sebastian chuckled to himself and called for EVAC.

