

CHAPTER ONE

Late September in Petoria felt as if it were the middle of August, with unusually hot weather. The frigid air on the bus put James Russell in better spirits during his short twenty-minute commute to Downtown Petoria until he had to make the five-minute walk to Parsons and Parker's Shipping and Receiving Services.

James sighed once he stepped off the bus and winced from the sudden scorching heat and sun. It was only a quarter to nine in the morning and was already another one of those sweltering and muggy days.

James felt crummy, still sore and stiff from dancing at the discotheque last night. Break dancing was still the newest craze that he couldn't command his formerly gymnastic body before his growth spurt into doing. At least the clothes, with its bright, stretchy, form-fitting fabrics amid crazy patterned leggings and leg-warmers, looked great on the women.

James made his way to the brick building with solid cherry Windsor doors and whitewashed oak Monticello windows, finding it easily among the drab gray, tan, or red brick warehouses on the waterfront. Entering through the double

glass doors, he gave halfhearted waves to his coworkers who bypassed him.

Heading for his gray cubicle at the end of the corridor, James dreaded his usual duty of answering telephone inquiries for some product getting sent to another part of the world. When the questions over the phone didn't keep him biting the ends of his already pitted pencils, James fielded mail to other departments on his floor. He also typed documents on his trusty word processor, readying them for processing sent downstairs to the mail sorting section.

James didn't mind his job as it was easy, yet it gave him time to mull about working for Pome Computers. He enjoyed crafting code for the newest machine, the Orichide system. James socked away as much as he could from his paltry desk jockey paycheck hoping to buy the computer to tinker on in the near future. The Orichide had the fastest processor, displayed the most colors, and had an integrated synthesizer chip for sound. It was top of the line compared to other computers currently on the market.

James frowned, remembering his dashed take on acceptance at Worldwide Computing Machines as he typed another report. He considered the hard slap he received from the secretary and watched her shred his application. James had dated her for a time then stopped calling, not bothering breaking up with her properly.

"Come on," he had pleaded. "Just forward it to Human Resources! I won't even work on the same floor with you!"

"No," she snapped. "All you blonds are the same. I'm getting sick of this crap."

“Maybe you’re with the wrong ones--”

“Yeah,” she said and glared. “Get out of my office before I call security!”

When James left WCM, he caught his reflection on the glass doors. He thought himself average in looks, with short blond hair and narrow blue eyes that occasionally roved for the ladies, but at six feet tall and weighing at an athletic one-hundred eighty pounds, he stood out.

“*If that harpy hadn’t sabotaged me,*” James said to himself and his word processor chirped at him, bringing him out of his thoughts. A message on-screen stated the program needed a new floppy disk so it could automatically save. The floppies constantly stuck inside the machine and the program faulted from its unable to read it properly. He banged the side of the word processor.

“Great!” James grumbled when the screen suddenly went black, “A power failure!” He forcibly pulled the power cord out the wall. “Damn machine has been giving me problems all day!”

“Yo, incoming!” called Robinson, the office mail clerk.

James reached out blindly and captured a small box tossed to him. Looking down at it, he noted the new company desk calendars for the following year had come in and set the daybook aside on his desk. James sighed and looked up at the overhead clock, noting he only wasted two hours after starting his job that morning.

“Gonna catch the last ball game of the season, Russell?” asked Mitchell, another coworker.

“I’ll try,” James called back.

“I heard the Series is supposed to be matched up good.”

“Really now?”

Taking a break from the machine, James grabbed a problem ticket from his desk drawer and wrote his complaint to send to the Information Systems department.

“Like they’d get anything done!” he muttered, “Those party animals only come to work on Tuesdays after getting over their hangovers!” James blew a hard sigh and slipped the report into his ‘out’ box at the end of his desk.

Getting code for the Orichide during one of their shindigs was never easy from the reliable tech crew. Despite being clearly ripped from pills, booze, and lots of herb, James wished he could party with them, however his work came first no matter how soul-destroying. Now trying to get an actual machine to test it on was something else entirely...

At five minutes to twelve, James loosened his blazer, left his desk, and made a mad dash for the door.

“Hey,” called Simmons, “where ya going?”

“I’m taking off,” James called over his shoulder. “*My brain needs it,*” he thought and threw open the glass doors. “*Parsons and Parker keep me so busy; it’s no wonder they have a high turnover rate because of suicide!*”

James pulled out of his blazer and draped it over his shoulder, finding the morning heat worsened once it became noon. He saw across the yard that it didn’t stop the exercisers from doing their thing. They took part in the martial arts program provided as part of the Employee Assistance Division. Officially, it was for employees who felt they were going mad

from their job and to help them blow off steam as a preventive measure before the required 'three day think-over'.

Making his way to the nearby office park where other workers did slow-moving martial art exercises, James stopped nearby, staring at the women who did the delayed movements with the men.

"Down, Jim, cool it," he said to himself as his face flushed. *"You'll get yourself into trouble again!"*

Walking away, James recalled times he received complaints about his wandering hands and his comments to the female workers at Parsons and Parker. He didn't consider himself sexist. Women going out and doing whatever empowered them, he agreed with. James needed no help from a woman. He thought himself a decent cook and knew how to do his own laundry without turning his white work shirts pink, but always turned into a raving drooling Neanderthal when a beautiful woman caught his eye.

Parsons and Parker wanted to keep James since he lasted beyond the two-year mark without becoming depressed or suicidal and thought better to put him into the all-male secretarial department who handled heavy-duty typing and filing duties.

James bristled at the mere thought of working in that part of the cube farm. He found one specific coworker exceptionally unsettling. The man's unwarranted attention always crept James out to the point it nearly unnerved him and made him anxious about coming to work. He figured it had to be some kind of karmic backlash for treating women badly for so long.

Taking in a deep breath of fresh air, James headed to the rear of the office park commissioned by Parsons and Parker. It was rumored around the water cooler that the park, used as a time-out area for company workers from the office, gave those unable take it anymore enough space to shoot themselves in solitude.

His thoughts about the backbreaking company silenced once he took in the sight of downed charred trees and burnt grassland.

“Did a fire happen just here?” James wondered, dropping his blazer in surprise. He scanned the area that appeared scorched and flattened, with many broken-down trees. *“Or was it a bomb?”*

James found it odd there were no police or fire personnel around the area. Ignoring the nagging thought of what could have caused the strange incident, he checked his watch. James only had about a half hour to investigate, but his stomach told him otherwise. He picked up his blazer, figuring grabbing lunch at the food court and eating at his desk again would be a better idea as there would be plenty of time to look around later.

“Hey, wait!” an accented voice called to James as he turned to head back to the office. James paused then stepped back in mild alarm when a harried figure advanced, panting for breath. It wore a form-fitting uniform, having rips on the leg and chest. On its feet were heavy calf-high black leather boots long red leather gloves cuffed at the elbow covered its hands. A silver visor obstructed its face, but the lower half appeared human and had dried blood and many cuts on its lip, jaw, and chin.

Noticing a glowing golden pistol strapped to the stranger's thigh and an illuminated green staff on its back, James swallowed his fear and drew what little courage he had to back away.

"Please, wait," said the uniformed stranger, reaching for James. "I have an important message; it is a life-or-death matter!"

"I can't help you," James replied nervously, pulling out of the fighter's grasp. "I'm not getting involved!" He gave the stranger a critical glance, noticing from the sound of its voice, the stranger was seemingly a young male around his age. "What's with the weird clothes? You a fan of *Space Wreck* or *Space Junk* or something?" James scoffed and waved him away. "You missed the convention back in August!"

"*Space Junk? Space Wreck?*" The young man shook his head and gestured to himself. "These clothes aid me in my travels, good Sir!"

"Um, okay."

"I have been searching for so long; I think I found it now!"

James took another step away. "*Great, a lunatic,*" he thought and asked warily, "So, how does this include me? What *are* you searching for, exactly?" The young man grinned brightly and James quickly pulled into his suit jacket, immediately growing anxious. "If you tell me you're looking for me, forget it. I've already got one guy in the office lusting after me."

"But--!"

James stormed away. "I don't want to know!"

"Please!"

James paused for a moment, considering the strange uniformed man disoriented after getting banged up. He grunted and turned around, ignoring the nagging feeling that he was betraying his instincts to leave. “Anyway,” James demanded, “who are you and *why* are you here?”

“*How* did I get here is a better question!” the young man replied, smiling faintly. “I almost did not make it. I was followed.” He hustled up to James. “The kind who followed me would not have been much trouble usually if my equipment had not failed on me!”

“So you want me to *fix* it, right?” James snorted. “Look, man, I’m just a hobby programmer, got it? I’m doing the pencil pusher thing until I can break into Pome. I’m not fixing some crapola BUCOL machine.”

“So, you *are* interested! Good,” said the young man. “I hope to give you something before those guys returned--”

“If it’s enough to fight over, then no thanks!” James waved him off and glanced at his watch, noting the time. “Anyway, I’m running late. My lunch break is long over!” James began walking away.

“At least take a look,” the young man called after him.

James stopped and sighed heavily. “Alright,” he said. “I guess it doesn’t hurt to at least try...” James turned to face the stranger and froze in stark fear when the young man removed his visor. “Your eyes--!”

The faint crept up came quickly, blotting out James’s surroundings.

“Ugh,” James moaned once his mind returned to reality. He squinted and groaned as bright light seared his eyes. “Morning?” he muttered, “What the hell?” James sat up, holding his head. “This had better be a dream!” He found his clothing roughly rearranged, with his shirt unbuttoned, tie loosened, and his suit jacket halfway on his arm. “Did I get into a fight?” He heard a minute chirp in the distance.

“*What’s that sound?*” James thought as he straightened his clothing and glanced at his watch, noting the time. “*No matter; Parsons and Parker will open in a few minutes if I don’t hurry!*” He gasped as everything suddenly hit him at once and he recalled the strange meeting.

James saw himself sitting on the ground across from the mysterious young man who had blank white eyes. The stranger spoke to him candidly, yet did not open his mouth. In his free hand, he held the silver visor.

“*Now listen carefully,*” said the young man. “*I was originally sent here to obtain information about the ‘Supernova’ program of your planet.*”

“Who sent you?” James asked. “Why do you want to know so much about this?”

“*It is because of the streaming data emitted from your satellites which had brought the attention of my home world’s scientists.*”

“Who are your people and why is it I can only hear you in my head?”

“*We are a peaceful race and our intentions are to ask you to halt your program and join our federation of peaceful*

worlds. I thought Terra was more advanced, but I see it is not so.”

“You didn’t answer my question!” James snapped. “Besides, the Supernova program is just a missile defense system.”

“Before I could report my findings, I was attacked by Corpii,” the young man continued. *“They are also searching for this planet’s purported ‘Supernova’ program, especially something called the ‘Death Ray’. I can not let them destroy this planet searching in vain for technology that has yet to exist!”*

“Do you realize that the ‘Death Ray’ thing is in a movie?”

“However, I sustained numerous injuries in that one-sided battle. My scanners reported there was a restore point near here.”

“Restore point? You mean like a computer repair shop, right?”

“My scanner is failing and I need you to fix it. I know you are capable of such advanced machinery.”

“I have a good friend, Allen Jontei who works at WCM and builds machines.”

“You will need a Signet to access this particular machine, and your friend Allen is not strong enough.” The stranger took off his glove, revealing a mark on the back of his hand. *“Think of this brand as a sort of tattoo. Just touch my hand and I will do the rest! Do not worry; I will leave my GEARS unit for more information.”*

James reached out with a shaky hand, claspng it over the back of the mysterious fighter’s hand and felt warmth wash

through his body. A sudden crash came behind them and the young man quickly stood, hand over the hilt of his glowing pistol.

“What was that?” James cried.

“They have brought reinforcements!”

“Holy shit!”

“I will keep them at bay! Guard the weapon well!”

Suddenly everything brightened before descending into darkness.

“It’s no dream!” James blurted as he shook his head, clearing the fog of the past. “It’s real and the mark--!” He looked at his hand, noticing the tattoo on the palm. James scratched at his hand and rubbed his palm on the grass. Panicked, he realized it wouldn’t rub off. Immediately rising to his feet, James searched around for the strange visitor.

“Hey, Space Guy!” he called. “We gotta talk, man! Where are you?” Hearing another chirp, James whirled around, spotting a small palm-sized machine on the ground. “*What’s this?*” he wondered as he approached and perched down, picking it up. James turned it over in his hand.

On the face was a dark screen, with several buttons and an arrow pad. To James, it looked like a portable television unlike others crafted from manufacturers overseas. Glancing up, James noticed footprints on the ground.

Following the tracks to the edge of a cliff, he paused when he noticed a small charred object in the far distance. Pocketing the small device, James made his way along the cliff side, jumping down onto the small ledge below and approached two

smoking bodies of the strange young man and another who wore heavy armor.

“He’s dead,” James muttered to himself, “and so is his killer. I can’t believe this is happening; he’s dead and it’s because of this damn *thing!*” He glared with revulsion at his branded left hand that had the strange sigil of a single circle with a cross in its center “Why me?”

“In your language,” the haunting voice of the mysterious young man said to James, *“it would be called ‘The Signet’. You are the perfect choice and I am relieved! Hopefully you will not regret it later...”*

“I already regret it!” James thought and walked away from the smoldering crater.

Leaving the park and heading back for the offices, James greeted no one who passed him.

“Hey, Russell,” called Mitchell as he entered his cubicle, “had a hard night?”

“Yeah,” James called over his shoulder, “a real doozy!”

“Too bad we missed it!”

Slouching at his desk, James worked in relative silence, dreading the rest of the day and fretting about the mark on his hand.