

# SILHOUETTE

by ARTHUR McMAHON



# CHAPTER ONE

## *Shades of Home*

“Millennium V, a Leviathan class cargo ship was hijacked at 2300 standard yesterday en route to Erde by way of Fujisan. Yarlian gangs, we believe. They wanted nothing with the ship, only its contents. Killed the entire crew. Jettisoned their bodies. Took every last ounce of cargo aboard and left the hollowed out vessel to float through the cosmos. Contractors from Erde were sent to recover the ship.” Ticker stood at a large, wooden dining table as he addressed his peers. Heavy curtains covered the windows. Assorted table side lamps supplemented the soft lighting of the homey room. “Erde was furious. Leaders demanded action by the Intergalactic Senate, but their voice went unheard. The people of Fujisan could only mourn their

losses without aid from the community. They don't have the resources or technology to go after the attackers.”

“That is why we are here,” said Presider Folami. “Humanity needs representation in the Senate. For too long we have been ignored by the intergalactic community at large. Our individual worlds do not have the necessary resources to defend themselves against alien threats. We need strength, unity.”

“Cooperation,” said the shadow in the doorway. All faces at the table turned toward the apparition. The figure melded seamlessly into the darkness of the room beyond. The shadow stepped forward, revealing its petite frame. Its matte-black suit blended with the shadows, and as it walked into the bright lights of the meeting chamber it still appeared as if it was caught in the shade.

“Yes,” said the Presider. All eyes turned back to the Folami. “Cooperation. We are all here, every one of us, because we strive to rebuild the Cooperation. There are a dozen human worlds, and each one is under constant threat of alien misconduct. Yarlian gangs continue to raid our trade ships, all but uncontested by our own defenses. FF scavenger ships pilfer our unprotected satellites and space stations. Planet Nye is enslaved by a Burmin mining corporation. Secretary Richards, your planet's moon has become an established outpost for an unknown entity without your permission. People, leaders within

your homeworlds, the time to act is now.”

“But how we act is important,” said a stocky man in a brown suit which was adorned with golden pins. “This woman in the black outfit, she is an assassin. She murdered Archon Pewts by your orders. She's been the cause of other deaths, havoc, and destruction. We have yet to even see her face, so how can we trust her? You call her an ally; I call her a menace. We cannot continue to be so ruthless. Political negotiations are the path to rebuilding the Cooperation.”

“We must do what is necessary, Minister Rivera.” The Presider’s voice erupted with rage and sorrow. “Victor Pewts was a man I called friend. He was a good man, a man with a family, but he was leading Erde down a path that would only worsen humanity's standing in the galaxy, one that would divide us even further. He acted as he thought was right for his people, but he failed to see the larger picture. His beliefs could not be swayed.”

“And at the upcoming Erdian Delegation Meetings you seek to replace him,” said Rivera. “You killed a world leader so that you could succeed him.”

“We are at war, Minister.” The Presider struck the table with her fist. “Humans are politically insignificant. One of our planets is enslaved and no other entity cares to take note of it. Our people—not Erdian, not Nyian, not any one planet—but all of

our people, humans, we are being mistreated and murdered by numerous alien factions without the intergalactic community even batting an eye for us. We must act now before humanity is reduced to nothing more than a scattering of tribes as the alien factions take over our worlds, one by one.

“Our operative Silhouette is a vital key to our success. She does what needs to be done by the Presider's command, my command, like the Enforcers of the past.”

“The Enforcers were more than assassins,” said Rivera. “They were diplomats as well. One would have the sense to enter a discussion at the very least before killing someone in the name of the Presider.”

“We do not have the benefit of the power the Cooperation once held long ago where we could spend time on political discussions,” said the Presider. “No one outside of this table fully knows who we are and what we are striving to achieve. You, the other leaders here at this meeting, and I deal with the politics. Silhouette handles everything else. I will say no more on this topic. We have more reports and planning to get through.”

The Presider looked around the table and met the eyes of each individual. Once satisfied that none would voice anymore concerns, she turned her attention to the shadow in the room. “Silhouette, you may leave. I will speak with you later.” Folami waited for Silhouette to exit, holding on to the silence and

tension in the room until all of the world leaders at the table returned their gaze to her. “Ticker, thank you for your report. President Dawkins, how went your talks with the Ethnarch of Revel?”

“As expected, Presider. He sees no benefit in joining our cause.”

Silhouette left the safe house, sneaking through the city’s dark alleys and then crawling through a window into an abandoned building’s basement. She stripped off her shadowsuit, which was similar to peeling the darkened skin from a ripe banana, and pulled out a pair of flats and a periwinkle dress from the purse she had stashed in a rusting file cabinet. She rolled up her shadowsuit, tucked it inside the purse, and carried it over her shoulder as she exited through the back doorway. “Guess I’ll head home for a bit.”

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Susan Singh stepped through one of the public gates at Mercado Square, her encrypted identification cards preventing the transit system from tracking her movements, ensuring that no one could follow her. A series of transports later and she was on the other side of Erde. She always took the long route home.

Her apodment hovered high above Crater Bay, a cube among

thousands which slowly orbited around the bay area. The cities below were electric, full of bright lights and regulated chaos. The bay waters were a dark pit of tranquility in the heart of it all.

Sue entered her home, removing her dress and flats as she walked through the living space. Her skin was white as cotton, marked only by dark bruises, many old and some new. She undid her ivory hair, letting it fall to its full, wavy length, and with her fingers she caressed the translucent strands, massaging her scalp as she entered the bathroom and stepped into the steamwash. She took a quick peak at the mirror before it fogged over and saw that her small frame was well toned, but she also noticed that her hands were scraped and scabbed, the dried blood matching her crimson eyes.

She bathed and rinsed. The drymoist passed over her body like a ribbon of desert wind, followed by a spritzing of coconut-scented moisturizer.

Sue pulled on her nightwear and sat in front of the mediabay. Displayed were all of her favorite media outlets. The Presider, Erdian Vice Archon Folami, and perhaps soon-to-be Archon of Erde, was featured on half of the stations. Sue's eyesight focused on a particular broadcast and the mediabay brought that station to the foreground.

"Yes," said Folami. "Victor Pewts was one of my dear friends. His family and I had gathered many times over the years, and

though he is our Archon, his family had always treated me as one of their own. He was like an older brother to me.”

“My condolences, Vice Archon Folami,” spoke a reporter, “but now that Archon Pewts is gone, do you see yourself as the next Archon?”

“That is for the Erdian Delegation to decide,” said Folami.

“But you have not always been in favor with many of the Delegates,” said the reporter. “The position is yours by right. Do you fear that the Delegation will stray away from tradition and vote for another to take Pewts’ place?”

“Now is not the time for such talk,” said Folami. “My friend, our leader, is dead. Let us respect him and his family by giving him some time of remembrance before we move onward with the politics. Give the man that much. Erde was not built in a day. It will not collapse in a day either.”

The mediabay sensed Sue’s waning interest and suggested other outlets for her viewing. Sue’s eyes scanned the sidebar and found a sci-fi movie she had been meaning to watch. “Warlocks summoning sentient souls to possess robots and take over the universe,” she said to herself as she read the description. “Sounds like a perfect popcorn flick to me.” The bay selected the movie for her. She nodded off before the title screen had faded away.

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**Brrrrzzzzzp! Brrrrzzzzzp!**

The mediabay buzzed. Sue pushed the throw pillow off of her face and sat up. Her movie had paused and been thumbnailed to the corner of the display. Through bleary eyes, she focused on the center of the screen where it read “Boss Lady Calling...” in gradually enlarging text.

**Brrrrzzzzzp! Brrrrzzzzzp!**

“Answer,” said Sue. “Yes, Presider?”

“Hello Sue. We need to meet. I’m already down by the edge of Crater Bay. Can you be at Coyote Hills in fifteen minutes?”

“Be there in ten.”

Sue slipped on her shadowsuit and left her apodment. One of Presider Folami’s personal transports was stationed outside of the doorway. Sue stepped onto the transport’s loading platform and sat in its lone seat. The stabilizing cushions puffed up, filling in around her body, and the transport shot off towards the public gate nearest to Coyote Hills.

The transport landed and Silhouette hustled over to the bayside park. Coyote Hills was one of the few places around the

bay which had not yet been inundated with city lights. Despite the late hour Silhouette was able to quickly locate the Presider standing near a dry creek bed and saw that not another soul was out wandering the park. Silhouette was standing next to Presider Folami before the woman noticed her, but Folami did not startle.

“Presider,” said Silhouette.

“Sue.” Folami turned to look at her Enforcer, but all she could see was darkness. Silhouette peeled off her suit’s headpiece. Her bright hair gleamed in the dim moonlight, and her head appeared to hover in the darkness. Folami’s brown eyes met Sue’s red stare. “You must be well acquainted with the recent upgrades to your ocular implant, seeing as you found me so swiftly in the night.”

“I’m still getting used to the vision enhancements and stuff, but at least no one can tell that I’ve had the illegal modifications done. My Ocu isn’t just the standard media player that everyone else on Erde is getting installed these days, that’s for sure.”

“No one will ever know.” Folami stepped forward and gave Sue a hug. “How are you, Susan?”

“Fine, Presider.”

“But are you well, Sue? Really? We haven’t been conversing lately, not as much as we once did.”

“There has been a lot of action recently, Presider. A lot of

progress. The Cooperation has gained some serious momentum in the last year. We've been busy, is all."

"That we have, Sue. Rebuilding the bridges of humanity is a difficult task. It has been taxing on us all." Folami grabbed Sue's hand. "Victor was a good man, but sacrifices must be made. For humanity to stand, we must be united. No individual is more important than the freedom and security of all sixty-billion of us spread across the dozen worlds. We are being dissected by the scum of the galaxy, decimated through our own self-created division. We must stand together."

"I couldn't have said it any better myself, Presider."

"And you, Sue. You have had to sacrifice more than many of us. You have had to put aside your emotions, your heartache, for a long time. And your family. For all of these years that you have been by my side, I have known your true desire. I have asked you to bide your time, and you have done just that."

"I've done what I've had to for the Cooperation, just as you have, Presider. My family will be free the day the Cooperation is reborn, and if that day comes later rather than sooner, well, then at least I know the people of my planet will one day be free. My father is a strong man, strong enough for himself and my brother. They'll dig the mines for as long as their bodies can hold out."

"Your mother was strong as well," said Folami. "From the

stories you have shared with me, she was stronger than anyone could have asked of her. She struggled through her sickness to care for her family. Your mother remained resilient as she stared down Death himself. She kept you out of trouble and helped build you into a strong person, despite her weakening body. She surrendered her remaining strength and put it into you, Susan. She sacrificed herself for you and your family. I believe it is time for you to make right the reason for her sacrifice.”

“Presider?”

“Susan. We have been preparing for this mission for a long time, the one only you and I have ever discussed. This is a task which will remain strictly confidential; not even the members of my council will know of this.” Folami put her hands on Silhouette’s shoulders and met her eyes.

“Susan. I want you to infiltrate the Burmin slavers on Planet Nye and destroy their Juggernaut, the orbital command ship of the invasive alien party. As you already know, the Juggernaut is not only the Burmin headquarters for the planet-side forces, but also a hub for Burmin galactic transport and communications, the keystone that holds together their planet-wide domination. It is time for you to free your family.”

Sue stood speechless. Her mind raced with thoughts and questions, and she turned away from the Presider, looking off into the dark hills. She watched the tall brown grass as it

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undulated in the soft nighttime breeze. The wind was brisk, salty. She turned her eyes to the stars above, focusing on the few twinkling lights she could see between the hovering apodments overhead.

“Why now, Presider? After all this time, all of this waiting. Why now?”

“In a few days time I will be elected as Archon of Erde by the Delegation. In a few weeks the inauguration ceremony will take place. In a few months many of my new policies will be voted into law and some real progress will be made. I am sure of all of this, and I can assure you that everything will go according to plan. I will make it happen.

“At the time when my aptitude as Archon is widely known, and my more radical ideas are called into question, it will be the aid that Erde gives to Nye which will propel the desire for cooperation among all of the human worlds. There will be an outcry of support as planet after planet joins our cause in the wake of Nye’s liberation. We will eradicate the Burmin menace from our section of the Verse, and then the Yarlian gangs, and then the rest of the scavengers and thieves that plague our space. But the liberation of your homeworld, Susan, that will be the spark which ignites the fire.”

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Sue returned to her apartment where she grabbed her homehub tablet and swiped over to the appliances. Coffee. She flicked on the brewer, knowing that a long night of thinking lay ahead of her. A red square blinked in the corner of the tablet, meaning that someone had left her a recorded message via facemail. Sue activated the message and her friend's face took over the screen. Sue swiped Linn off of the tablet and the image was projected in front of Sue as she walked around her home. The message played and Linn's image followed Sue. When Sue directly looked at her friend they made eye contact, otherwise Linn's image moved off to the side to avoid being in the way.

“Hey lady,” Linn's voice rang out from the tablet. “I have to cancel our plans for tomorrow night. All of a sudden, Elise decided to have another party for her bridesmaids. You know if I blow off her gig she'll have a fit. I don't get this whole parade up to the wedding crap, but it is what it is. At least her douchebag groom won't be there. Whatever. Let's reschedule for Saturday? Get back to me. There's this awesome beer garden down in Fusion Valley I haven't shown you yet. We can hit up the Laugh Track after. Anyways, face me back!”

Linn's smiling face disappeared from view as the message ended. A cup of pressed coffee waited on the counter. The aroma was light, floral, heavenly. Sue took the hot coffee, placed it on

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the parlor table, and then she cozied up on the couch, triggering the mediabay to resume the movie she had started earlier. Her coffee cooled as the opening scene unfolded. Sleep took her before she could take her first sip.

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Thoughts raced through her mind as she transitioned from deep sleep to waking panic. The world spun. Her mind felt pressurized, like it was going to explode. Was she going to die? Memories of her family clashed with the possibilities of her pending decision. She could feel her thoughts as they overworked her brain. They were like a colony of ants running around inside of her skull. They itched. They stung.

Sue noticed that she was hyperventilating. Her fingertips were going numb. *Calm*, she thought. *Calm down. Breathe.* Her thoughts were out of her control, but she could restrain her breathing. *Slow breaths.* Her heart was beating too fast. She covered her face with a pillow and inhaled. *Deep breaths.* After a minute of focus, she had it under control. By concentrating on her breathing, Sue had also slowed her racing mind. She had regained her composure.

She had only then noticed that her alarm was beeping, and so she shut it off.

Could she do it? The mission was too big. Too much. What was Folami thinking? Her family: her father, her brother. She could save them. Smuggle them off of the planet to a safe place. But take down a command ship? Rescue a planet of people? Alone? There was no way. How could she ever presume to take on such a responsibility?

There was little time for her to recover from her panic attack as she had to get ready for an appointment with her trainers, not unlike any other weekday morning. Stand-up grappling was today's focus. It was a grueling exercise and she hated it. Because of her small frame, grappling nearly any opponent was an uphill battle and she would never win a wrestling match, but there was reason for the training. She only had to pull her opponents close, eliminating any reach advantage they may have over her. The goal was to hold her enemies long enough to stab something into them or punch their throat.

She arrived at the gym, and during warmups she knew that her head was not going to be in it today. Her instructor took advantage of her distant mind and twisted Sue into some painful holds. She could not stop it, but she did not quite want to. The pain was a useful distraction and helped her focus her thoughts.

Worrying accomplished nothing. Sue had been waiting for this opportunity ever since her freedom was purchased by the Presider. She could set her family free, or at least she could try,

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and she needed to try. Sue was knocked down by her trainers, taking open palm strikes to the chin and wooden staffs to her sides. She was pinned into agonizing positions and held until she screamed, and through the pain she transformed her fear into fuel. Instead of fearing what she could lose, she focused on what could be gained. Now was the time. There was no longer any doubt in her mind as to what her decision would be.

Sue left her dojo with her body beaten, but her mind strengthened. She set off to meet with the Presider.

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“When do we begin?” asked Sue. They met at one of Folami’s residences, a modest house set in the foothills of large, snow-covered granite mountains. It was the house where Leslie Folami had raised her adopted child, Susan Singh. The house they had both called home.

“I will soon be inaugurated, and so you must begin your journey immediately.” Folami moved a sheet of fresh baked cookies from the oven to the counter. “I’ll be signing bills into law before you even arrive on Nye. You’ll have some months to complete your mission, but when the time comes for Erde to attack the Burmin, you must be ready. Syncing the timelines is crucial, all must line up tactically and politically for this to work.

Here,” Folami took off her oven mitts and reached into her pocket. She handed Sue a data drive. “Load this into your Ocu.”

“Anything new?” asked Sue.

“An updated timeline of events, a comm code so you can send me an encrypted message from inside the Juggernaut, the most recent information we have on the Burmin, and the coordinates of a man we’ll call X. He will provide you with more intel than we could have ever hoped for.”

Sue loaded the information wirelessly into her Ocu, the data becoming instantly accessible to her mind and stored for future use. “That’s quite a few things, Presider.”

“Sue, please call me Leslie. We’re alone here.” Folami put two of the cookies onto a plate. “Here, have some.”

“Sorry Leslie, and thanks.” Sue took a bite. Warm gingersnaps were her favorite. She could not help but continue to chew as she spoke. “So go on, explain the new things.”

“The timeline better lays out what I expect to transpire over the next six months politically, and when I need your mission to be completed.

“You will use the comm code to relay to me when to launch our attack on the Burmin with the Erdian armada. The Juggernaut must be destroyed or disabled before our fleet can move in, otherwise that behemoth will devastate our forces. Put together a plan and notify me forty-eight hours before we should

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attack, and there will be no contact before that to prevent the Burmin from breaking the encryption and tracking your location. I will not respond to any messages you send, and so you must trust that they will go through.

“You can read over the new intel on the Burmin when you find time. It’s not much, but I expect you will receive a great deal more from X. Your transport will depart on Sunday. Toruk, my pilot, will take you most of the way, and from there you will be launched in a dropcraft which will land in an abandoned quarry. There should be minimal Burmin presence nearby, but you will have to quickly vacate the area and make your way to the provided coordinates. You will find a farming residence. Inside will be X. He will give you all of the intel he has gathered on the nearby Burmin compound and anything else he can provide. I trust the man, but be cautious. We do not know if he is being watched.”

“Land on planet, get intel, infiltrate the Burmin compound, find my way up to the command ship, blow it up somehow, but give you a call before I do,” said Sue. “Got it.”

“Yes. Do not be overconfident, Sue.”

“Oh, I’m not. I’m scared as shit that I’m going to fail. If I don’t make it...”

“Sue.”

“If I don’t succeed, Leslie, Presider, you will still work to free

my family, right?”

“Of course. Not only your family, but the entire planet of Nye, and all of humanity. We are all prisoners in one way or another as the situation currently stands.”

“I’m not talking about your life’s work to rebuild the Cooperation and unite humanity and all that. If I fail, I want my family’s freedom to be your top priority. Leslie, do I have your word on that?”

“It would be the least I could do for you. Yes, you have my word.”

“Thank you.”

“Leave now and prepare for your journey, Sue. You will be gone from this world for quite some time.”

“What about my stuff and my place?”

“They’ll be taken care of. Do not worry about your things. Be at the safehouse by dusk on Sunday. I’ll see you then.”

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Sue flipped over the sushi restaurant’s menu, unable to make a choice. Her eyes were unfocused, distant.

“Would you pick something already?” said Linn. “The waiter’s going to be pissed if he comes back and you’re still not ready.”

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“I just don’t have much of an appetite,” said Sue.

“Well, I’ll order for you then. Here he comes.”

“You two ready now?” asked the waiter.

“Yeah,” said Linn. “I’ll have the grilled soba. Get my girl here the Frostarc assorted nigiri plate and we’ll both have a double vodka with a splash of plum juice.”

“Linn! I...”

“That’s all for now,” said Linn. The waiter nodded and walked away. “You’re feeling down and I’m going to bring you back up. All drinks are on me until you start smiling again. What’s up anyway?”

“I, uh... it’s work,” said Sue as she brushed back the hair from her face. “I’ve had a big project dumped on to me all of a sudden. It’s a lot to think about, lots of stress.”

“Work is work. Don’t let it ruin your social life. Leave it at the desk.”

“If only it were that easy. Look, I’m going to be gone for awhile.”

“Awhile?”

“Yeah, a long awhile. They’re sending me to another planet to do some research. It’s out in uh...it’s in a remote place. I won’t be back in the bay area for a long time and I won’t have any way to call you either.”

“Well that blows,” said Linn. “How long is it? Can you turn it

down?”

“I don’t know how long, not for sure. Six months if it all works as planned, much, much longer if it doesn’t. Much longer. And no, they’ve got me pretty much locked in.”

“Government stuff?”

“Yeah, government stuff. I can’t really turn them down or I’d be in big trouble.”

“Is this because the Archon is dead?”

The vodka arrived just in time. Sue gulped some of it down, winced, and then took another swig. “Yeah, pretty much. Kinda sorta all about that.”

“Damn,” said Linn. “Well, it’s not like you haven’t disappeared on me before.”

“A little bit different this time, but yeah.”

“Ok. Well, finish that drink and let’s get another round. We’re hitting the town tonight.” Linn raised her glass and Sue did the same a moment later, clinking them together. “To tonight, because nothing matters more than the here and now!” Linn worked her way down her drink. Sue finished hers shortly after.

“I don’t feel better yet,” said Sue. “We better order a couple more.”

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*Thank God the Presider said to meet at sunset.* Sue did not wake up until noon, and she struggled to remember how she had made it home. Flashing memories of last night's wild party lights pained her aching head while her sore thighs and ass reminded her of the hours she had spent on the dance floor. She and Linn spent most of the night together, but there was one man who had grabbed her attention by the night's end. She had fun with him, that was for sure. They danced together and later found a quiet place. She was alone with the dude for a couple of hours, but at some point Linn had called her and came to pick her up from wherever she was. She remembered getting into the car, both women laughing over something while the driver took them...somewhere. They got more drinks at a casino or someplace, and then....

She made it home, and that was all that mattered. Linn had left her a wakeup text. "Be safe on your trip," it said. Sue was inclined to check her bank account to survey the night's damage, but what did it matter? She would either be dead or have everything taken care of by the Presider. Nothing on Erde mattered anymore, but that was not true; she knew she was just being dramatic. It's just that freeing her family was all she could think about now. Uniting humanity was a bonus, sure, but even that paled in comparison to finding her father and brother.

“Oh yeah,” Sue said to herself, grabbing her homehub tablet and flicking through the presets. “I almost forgot how smart I was.” She activated the hangover mode she had put together. All of the lights in her home dimmed to their lowest setting, her windows shaded themselves, coffee brewed, breakfast meats sizzled on their own, and on low volume a morning talk radio station started to play. The only thing she had to do for herself was reach over to her armchair and grab another pillow to put over her head. The crisp, cool pillowcase on her cheek was refreshing.

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“Where is she?” asked Toruk.

“She will be here,” replied Folami.

Silhouette stepped forward from of an adjoining room, fully covered in her shadowsuit.

“You’re late,” said the Presider.

“I was waiting to see how many people would show up,” said Silhouette. “You didn’t tell me that the pilot was going to be here. Will anyone else be stopping by? How much does he know about the mission?”

“You knew that Toruk would be your pilot for this assignment. He has been informed of nothing beyond his role to

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play, and no one else is here. Only us.”

“Good to see you again as well, Silhouette.” Toruk stood tall and was dressed in his formal pilot’s outfit, helmet and all. “Still spooks me every time you pop out of the shadows like that.” Susan knew the man; he had acted something like an uncle to her when she was still a child in Folami’s care, but he did not know who Silhouette was, and she had to keep it that way.

“Sorry,” said Silhouette. “Your presence surprised me is all. Can’t be too cautious.” She looked into the man’s dark brown eyes and wanted to say more. Sue did care for him, but Silhouette did not. It was business. Silhouette turned back to the Presider. “So nothing has changed, then?”

“Nothing,” replied Folami. Only the Presider knew who Sue was both with and without the mask. The lives of Sue and Silhouette remained separate, the Presider being the only link between the two.

“Toruk,” spoke the Presider, “I have no more directions for you. Will you please go prepare the ship for departure.”

“Yes, Madam Vice Archon.” Toruk left the safehouse and Folami stepped closer to Sue. “Toruk has been by my side for decades, and you’ve known him since you were a child. You do not need to be so discourteous toward him.”

“I know,” said Silhouette. “But I don’t want to reveal who I am. I’m afraid that if I talk with him I’ll give myself away.”

“A good Enforcer is diplomatic,” said Folami. “It is a skill you must improve upon. We will work on it when you return from your mission.”

“I have a couple of weeks cooped up in that ship with him to look forward to,” said Silhouette. “I’ll have to have some sort of conversation with him, I suppose.”

“Consider it more training, and a chance to get to know a man from another perspective. You will soon be longing for conversation, no doubt. This will be a long, lonely mission for you.”

“Yeah, unless I find my family.”

“You know that will be unlikely. Remember that freeing the planet will bring freedom to your father and brother. Do not endanger your mission by jumping off track and searching for them. Stick to the plan, Sue. It’s the only way we can ensure your family’s safety.”

“Yes, Presider.”

“Be safe. Be cautious,” said Folami. “Above all else, come home.”

“I am going home, Leslie.” Silhouette’s eyes welled up and her lips quivered. She scanned the area, saw no cause for alarm, then pulled off her headpiece and looked with affection into Leslie’s eyes. “But I will come back. I promise.” They hugged and whispered goodbyes to one another in a long embrace. “Thank

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you,” said Sue, “for everything.”

Sue pulled her headpiece back on and left the safehouse. The ship’s engines hummed a pleasant buzz and the moon was a full, bright beacon in the sky. She felt the humidity in the air, smelled the sweet flowers of the garden, tasted the salty tears which had dripped down to her mouth; Sue focused on her senses, wanting to fully experience what might be her final moments on Erde. Toruk waited in the cockpit, letting Silhouette take all the time she needed. She looked over to the nearby skyscraper skyline and followed the buildings up to the dark sky above. *After all of these years, she thought, I’m going home.*

## **CHAPTER TWO**

### *Darkness Within*

It was a quiet journey. Silhouette did not put much effort into the small talk the Presider had hoped for. The modest ship was equipped with an exercise room where Silhouette spent most of her time, though she did join Toruk in the cockpit every evening to look out at the stars. It was a time they both enjoyed. Silhouette found it difficult to make discreet conversation with a person who knew her only as Susan, but it was easy to talk about the stars.

“How far out there have you flown, Toruk?” asked Silhouette.

“Feels like everywhere,” he replied. “Many, many parsecs. I’ve been to all of the human worlds, and once out to the Senate.

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I only docked there, though— waited in the ship. I've never set foot on an alien world."

"Me neither," she said. "But I think Nye will be pretty close."

"Yeah. I mean there's gonna be people there, at least. I've heard of people being kidnapped and taken to strange alien places where no human's ever been before. Who knows what kinda crazy shit they've seen."

"They never make it back to tell, do they?"

Time came when they neared their destination. Toruk positioned the ship while Silhouette situated herself in the dropcraft. For the sake of furtiveness, her dropcraft was being let loose quite a long distance from Nye.

"Approaching drop point," said Toruk. "Are you ready?"

"Of course not," replied Silhouette. "Let's do it anyway."

"If you say so. Good luck."

"Make that wish more than once; I'll need it."

"Will do. Drop rockets firing in three... two... one."

Silhouette's body jolted backward, but she was held stiffly in her seat by the firm, rubbery cushion which had enveloped her. She could not move much else aside from her eyes and fingers.

Hoses were attached to her body for nutrition intake and waste disposal, the craft was designed to keep her alive and well nourished for the days it would take to reach her destination. The buttons within her reach controlled various displays, but

one released an intravenous fluid which would put her to sleep. Some may consider using the drug as a sign of weakness, but Silhouette did not care. She had nothing to gain from being awake, staring at numbers and meters that she had no control over, so she tapped the button and slept. When she woke up and saw that everything remained functional, she hit the button again. She slept right through the entire flight.

\* \* \*

“Yaaahhh!!!” hollered Silhouette as she woke to her body being injected full of epinephrine. The landing sequence had been initiated, which included ensuring the passenger was alert and ready for action. The craft was hurtling through Nye’s atmosphere.

Panting and eyes wide, she watched as the altimeter displayed an increasing rate of descent. Silhouette braced herself for a jarring impact, though she knew better than to expect the thing to crash. The altimeter plummeted toward zero, but a boost of force halted the dive in the moments before collision. Several feet of altitude were gained prior to the craft gently lowering itself to the surface.

The craft landed with a thud, but the suspension kept most of the impact from hitting Silhouette. The door slid open and the

interior padding expanded, pushing her forward and out of the ship. She found herself in an abandoned quarry, as was planned, and she took her first steps in several days, slowly accelerating as she started up the dirt road which led to the top of the quarry.

At the crest of her climb she turned back to see her craft glowing a bright orange, collapsing in on itself as it went through its destructive sequence. The smell of burning metal, plastic, and dirt stuck with her as she left the quarry.

It was night. Wispy clouds were illuminated by the bright, red moon.

Silhouette loaded data from her Ocu and accessed the directions to find the man the Presider called X. She flipped the mental switch to activate her visuals, launching a semitransparent topographic map which was displayed across her vision. She found herself in the Drägg Desert, a place for bugs, rocks, and not much else. Accessing the global positioning system would get her noticed by the Burmin, so instead she plotted her course manually, which felt odd. The GRID ID for X placed the man's farm a few degrees north of true west, adjacent to a set of tall cliffs and a creek.

She ran. The night was quiet— empty— without a living soul around to be seen, but that did not ensure that no one was watching. Silhouette used the shadows of rocks and the shading of hills to connect the dots of her path, always staying close to

the comfort of darkness. The farm was miles away, but she did not lack endurance.

Sweaty, but not exhausted, Silhouette approached the outer wire fence of the property with caution. She rolled under the lowest strand and moved along the inside of the fence. Acres of green things were lined up in rows and a small house with a barn stood at the far end of the field beneath a stone cliff. She made her way toward the house.

Silhouette came to a stop at the edge of the planted field nearest to the house and concentrated on her senses, hiding in the vegetation. An array of insects besieged the solitary porch light. A light breeze blew, making waves in the tall wheat. Fertilizer was used recently. The odor was pungent. Nothing seemed to stir in the barn across the way, and chickens slept in a pen next to the house, sheltered from the breeze and softly clucking to one another.

The shades of every window were drawn, but Silhouette activated the thermal sensor in her Ocu and peered inside, seeing a single man sitting in an armchair next to a lamp. The water heater was the only other source of heat inside the home.

Silhouette moved to the corner of the house opposite of the man and tried the window, but it was closed. She gradually applied upward force to the glass until it budged. She slid it open, very slowly. When it was open just wide enough to fit her

small frame, she climbed inside.

The bedroom was neat and simple. Everywhere was dark. She crept through the open door and down the hall. The man sat in the front room reading a book in the weak lamplight.

“Hello,” said the man. Silhouette was startled, not expecting to be detected. She froze in place and thought to retreat. “I kent see yeh, but I know yer here. Not quite as sneaky as yeh might think yeh are.”

She remained silent.

“Don’t come any closer,” said the man. “I don’t want to see yeh.” He paused, waiting for a response, but there was none. “I knew yeh would be here t’day. They told me, and so I waited. There’s now a breeze licking my cheek that wasn’t there a few minutes ago, that’s how yeh gave yerself away. Was no draft before.”

“Are you X?” asked Silhouette.

“Yes. They den’t tell me yer name and I den’t want to know.”

“You have something for me?”

“Yes. If yeh leave this room the way yeh came in there will be a small table in the hallway on yer right. The data drive in the drawer is yers. It contains everything I know.”

“What kind of data?”

“Maps, itineraries, schedules, other mishmashes of details on the Burmin at Jhiik Compound. Take it and leave.”

“How did you come upon this?”

“Years of obedience and a good memory. After decades of quality service, the Burmin released me from working the compound to come out here and grow their food. A gift of insignificant freedom, but at least it’s outdoors.”

“This will help more than you know.” Silhouette opened the drawer, grabbed the data drive, and immediately started loading the information into her Ocu.

“I think nothing. I know nothing. Get out of here and don’t come back. Yeh cannot stay on this farm tonight. If I find that yer still around this place in ten minutes I’m going to notify the compound. We never spoke.”

“I understand.” Once the data transfer was complete, Silhouette crushed the physical drive between her thumb and forefinger and tossed it back onto the table. “Burn it.”

And with that Silhouette left the way she had come. Once outside she closed the window and ran away from the man’s home.

\* \* \*

Silhouette climbed a trail of switchbacks up the stone cliffs, finding more pastures and farmland which were divided by a single strip of paved road. She moved north, away from the road

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and around the backside of several cultivated fields. The farms were spread along a plain which was bordered by two separate hillsides, both joining into one as they intersected in the distance. She ran for the hills, using the terrain to keep out of sight as dawn encroached upon the horizon.

Large boulders rested atop the westward hills, most having rolled away from their peaks and collected into piles within various depressions. An outcrop of rocks held in place by a few scraggly trees had caught Silhouette's attention, and she decided to use it as a shelter. She sat down and scanned through the files in her Ocu.

Maps. Detailed maps, mostly of the Jhiik Compound. X had created a digital 3D rendering of nearly every space within the Burmin camp. The corridors and rooms were labeled with names and the purposes for each; there was detailed information on the routines of the Burmin officers, including where they could most often be found and at what times. He had listed the names of certain Burmin and human slaves who accepted bribes, and there was even an inventory of weapons in the armory. *How did that man get into the armory?* A few spaces in the maps contained limited information or estimations for what they were used for, and a couple spots were altogether dark and unlabeled, but overall this was a gold mine.

There were other maps, far less detailed representations of

some of the streets in the neighboring cities of Vix and Heron Springs, but nothing on the nearby villages. Silhouette already had maps for the cities stored away, but X had provided some useful information on the towns, such as caravan routes and Burmin gathering places.

She studied the documents for hours. The files were digitally available to her at a moment's notice, but she wanted to memorize all that she could. After numbing her brain with names and numbers, she finally decided to rest. The first day back in action was always exhausting.

\* \* \*

Vix was the largest city near the Jhiik Compound, and that meant the easiest to get lost in, to hide in. Back alleys cross-stitched the city blocks and there were always piles of trash to hide behind or parked vehicles to duck under. Sue had never visited Vix as a child, but it was where her mother had been born. She had heard plenty of stories about the city from her parents. It sounded like a nice place, at least before the Burmin had arrived.

Silhouette blended into the city's shadows and watched as both human and Burmin walked the streets. People hustled, often carrying heavy loads, each one busy or at least pretending

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to be. Humans skittered around passing Burmin, staying out of reach and not making eye contact, behaving differently than the people she was accustomed to seeing on Erde. They showed no personality, only fear— or survival, if that could be called an emotion. They moved about like rats. Silhouette looked over her shoulder into the dreary backstreet that she had been moving through, and watched the people for a while as they slunk in and out of the alleyways, staying out of sight and darting over to their next source of cover. The overflowing dumpster at her side was ripe with spoiled food and she was crouched next to a heap of crusted, sticky gunk. Rats. That's all these people were.

The Burmin, on the other hand, walked tall and were tall. They were a bit larger than the average human, but appeared massive compared to the skulking Nyian populace. Their body shapes varied, often having broad torsos and big feet, and the bones in their faces were striking, prominent and more angular than a human's, but not in a grotesque way. Their spines protruded from their head and back, making them appear strong and sturdy. The Burmin had no hair and no nose. Their ears were big, floppy pieces of skin which were worn similar to how people wear their hair, ranging in size, style, and color. Some of their ears were long enough to be tied or knotted. *Do they keep on growing forever and need to be trimmed?* Silhouette wondered.

It was odd, all of it. Humanity was struggling to find its place in the universe, and here Silhouette was witnessing the future that the Presider was working to prevent. Who would have ever thought that an alien corporation could have enslaved an entire world and gotten away with it? It was unfathomable, but here it was.

The Burmin had come to Nye because the planet's depths were rich with rare minerals, and the surface was habitable. If they were to simply exterminate the human population and take over the planet, they would be subject to discipline from other intergalactic powers since mass killing was a big no-no under intergalactic law. Instead the Burmin arrived as a corporation, a business which built a global presence overnight and disregarded all Nye law. The planet's paltry forces were unable to dissuade the colonization.

Burmin ships filled the skies, preventing any aid or escape, and they built compounds to establish order and control on the ground, forcing all Nylings to become indentured servants to the Burmin corporation. The Burmin quickly established among the human worlds that any attack against the corporation would be seen as an act of war against the entire Burmin race, and the retribution was guaranteed to be devastating. The Intergalactic Senate cared little about planetary labor disputes, and without an official seat in the senate the people of Nye did not have

enough power to bring attention to the injustices they faced. No one in all of the Verse was going to help.

With no support, the Nylings were easily subjugated and given meager provisions in exchange for hard labor. Everyone worked the mines with the most obedient workers gifted less arduous service positions. The Burmin had enslaved a human world, and no one was going to do anything about it.

Though there was no genocide, humans did disappear, and as a child Sue nearly did.

Years ago, when she lived with her family on Nye, Sue's mother Aasha was sick. Despite her illness Aasha was still required to work, and the Burmin offered no medical attention. Through the help of a friend, Sue had learned what medicine her mother needed and she would sneak away at night to steal medication and food. One night she was caught and thrown into a cell where she was neglected and cutoff from her family. Time passed slowly in that cell. She was unable to keep track of the days and weeks as they passed. One day while she was still locked away another Nyling, a servant in the compound, shared word with her that her mother had died.

Sue stopped eating altogether, but was kept alive with forced nutrient injections, and after some time she was carried onto a ship with all of the other prisoners. Someone told her that they were to be sold as slaves to the highest bidder. Before heading

further into the galaxy to be put on the galactic black market, the transfer ship made a short stop in human space where the lowlifes of the free human worlds would gather for their own nefarious purposes. The prisoners were placed together in a room for viewing and selection. Sue laid on the floor in apathy, eyes open and staring at the wall.

Luckily for Sue, someone liked her. She was purchased by a dark-skinned woman with a veiled face. After being nursed back to health, she was thrust into vigorous training of her body and mind. The woman promised Sue that her family would one day be free.

\* \* \*

X's data was remarkable. Silhouette used the information to identify a particularly popular tavern in downtown where Burmin congregated. She needed to find a way into the compound, and following a drunken Burmin home should not prove difficult.

The Rathskeller was a modest business which did not try to call too much attention to itself. The back door was propped open, venting a brightly lit, noisy kitchen. A cook stood outside in the back alley smoking something in one hand and scratching his ass with the other. He snorted loudly and spat out something

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gross, then flicked his smoke into the alley and stepped back inside the kitchen. Silhouette stepped toward the door and peeked inside.

Men and women raced this way and that. They were not serving any human patrons, not at this time of night. Odd meats were being sliced and grilled, and the colors did not seem natural, but to Silhouette the smell was intoxicating. She had not filled her stomach since landing on Nye. The aroma of warm spices and fresh bread wafted through the air and it was painfully pleasant.

Silhouette saw that people moved in and out of the swinging door at the opposite end of the kitchen and noticed that it led to the body of the tavern. She wanted to find a way in. Inside she could spy on some Burmin and maybe she would be lucky enough to grab a quick meal without being seen, of course.

Next to Silhouette, just inside the alley door, were the light switches. She flipped them and the room went completely dark except for two gas burners off to one side of the kitchen.

“What the fuck?” yelled a cook.

“Who turned out the lights?” said another.

“My fillets are burning!” shouted one more. “Someone give me a damn light!”

Bodies moved with confidence in the darkness, having worked in the kitchen for years, but they still felt around, hands

outstretched as any momentarily blinded person would do. Silhouette activated her Ocu's night vision as she leapt, ducked, and moved her body around the cooks, making her way toward the tavern dining area. A waiter burst in through the swinging doors and Silhouette slipped behind the man, sliding through the doorway on one of the backswings. She disappeared into a dark corner of a decorative alcove near the restrooms and hid behind a large potted plant as the kitchen lights came back on. Her shadowsuit bent the light around her body to create the illusion that she was nothing more than a shadow.

“Which one of you turned out the goddamn lights?” shouted a cook. “I burned my fucking hand!”

A Burmin passed Silhouette as it left its table and walked into the kitchen, brandishing its gun. The cooks went quiet. A moment later some pots and pans were knocked over and something hit the ground, hard. A man squealed in pain, quieting as the Burmin hollered at him. Silhouette could not understand what the alien creature had said, but she understood through its tone that it was furious. The Presider had tried to help her learn some of the language, but human knowledge of the Burmin race was sparse. The beast yelled something about anger, and something about food, but Silhouette could not understand much beyond that.

The night rolled by. The Burmin were rather jolly for most of

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the evening, enjoying each other's company over games and conversation. At one point a human waitress approached a table to refresh drinks, but she spilled some ale on top of a game board and one of the Burmin players smashed his mug over her head. The table laughed over the incident and another waiter brought over fresh ale and cleaned the table while the bartender hustled over and dragged the unconscious waitress back into the kitchen. The Burmin went back to their game.

As the night went on, all of the Burmin became less rowdy, subdued by food and alcohol. Silhouette was planning on tracking the most drunk Burmin in the room, but a horn blared from the street and the bartender ran over to open the front doors as every Burmin patron got up from their seats and left all at once. From her position Silhouette could see that they all were loading into one large vehicle together. It must have been their ride back to the compound, but it was too risky for her to run out and hitch a ride, so she decided to be patient and wait until another opportunity arose.

The human workers stayed late to clean and reset the tavern for the next day. Silhouette hid in the darkness until everyone had left for the night. She noticed that each of the workers had taken a bag of leftover food on their way out. *Must be the perk of the position*, she thought. Silhouette never saw what had become of the injured waitress.

Once alone she raided the kitchen. Many of the ingredients were familiar to her, but the meat most certainly was not. Hunks of it filled the fridges and were mixed into soups and sauces, all of it purple and with a somewhat viscous quality to it. There was a cooked steak of it on a shelf in the walk-in fridge, still a little warm from the grill, and she decided that she was going to try a bite. She unwrapped the plastic around it and sunk her teeth right in. "Not bad," she mumbled through the meat. *A little... I don't know, fishy? Feels kind of like chunky peanut butter that's been fried in lard.*

She filled herself and stayed the night in a storage closet. Nothing in the Verse felt more magical than a full belly.

\* \* \*

Silhouette left the tavern in the early morning and stayed out of sight for all of the next day. She returned to the Rathskeller's cluttered alley in the evening, watching as Burmin walked into the tavern from all directions after sunset. They packed in to the public room even tighter than they had the previous night. Other than the occasional cook on a smoke break, the alley remained lifeless late into dark hours.

Until it was not.

Two Burmin turned off the sidewalk and into the alley,

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unaware of the phantom hidden in the shadows. They wore identical beige and green bodysuits, a uniform of some sort, and looked quite similar to one another. Silhouette enjoyed finding the unique features of a goon and giving them a nickname for it. She examined them from her hidden place behind a garbage dumpster and noticed that one had dyed its low-hanging ears with blue stripes, and the other had its ears tied back and also suffered from a severe underbite. Stripes and Chinderella walked up to the kitchen's backdoor. A panicked cook grabbed the doorknob and pulled the door shut, locking it with a loud click.

Stripes leaned up against the door and reached into its pocket, pulling out a small knife and a baggie filled with turquoise goo. The Burmin rolled up its sleeve and sliced its upper arm, quickly covering the wound with the goo and rubbing it in. The bleeding stopped and Stripes shivered in pleasure. The Burmin took a deep breath, exhaled slowly, and then passed the equipment over to its friend.

With the two Burmin caught up in their choice of recreation, Silhouette moved in closer, staying out of sight and moving behind a stack of pallets. If she wanted to sneak onto the Burmin bus she needed to create a distraction.

Stripes closed its eyes and raised its face to the sky in ecstasy. Chinderella sliced itself, then lowered the knife and held on to it

loosely while it shoved its fingers into the baggie of goo. Silhouette slinked around the pallets and slid her hand close enough to reach out and grab the hilt of the knife, and, before Chinderella could react, Silhouette twisted the blade with a quick, powerful motion and pulled the weapon away, slicing Chinderella's wrist. Blood dripped from the Burmin's hand as it stood there, the beast becoming confused then enraged as it turned toward its attacker. It reached out to grab her. Silhouette stayed low and swiftly ran behind Chinderella, then she rammed her knee up into its groin. The Burmin bent over in agony, then Silhouette slid back around to its front and flung an elbow into its throat. Chinderella choked and grabbed at its throat, taking a few steps back and then falling to the ground. The burly creature struggled for breath while its bleeding wrist dripped on its neck and soaked into its uniform.

Stripes was slow to react. Through the euphoric haze given by the turquoise goo, its friend seemed to be dancing, but the red blood around Chinderella's throat brought some clarity to Stripes' vision. Only then did it see the shadow holding a bloodied blade, standing over its companion. Stripes was momentarily stricken with paralyzing horror, but willfully transmuted the fear into a burning rage. The blue-eared Burmin reached out with both hands as it ran for the shadow.

Silhouette ducked under Stripes' grasp and rolled toward its

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flank. She stabbed twice into its side, one between its lower ribs and one deep into its armpit. *Not deep enough*, she thought.

Stripes let out a squeal of pain and turned to grab at her again, but Silhouette seized its reaching arm and countered the momentum, swinging back in front of its body and jamming the blade into its gut. She stepped in rhythm with Stripes as the Burmin turned back once again, stabbing at it several more times. Stripes reached down to cover its bloodied stomach. Silhouette hopped to the creature's side and slammed her elbow into its left arm between its tricep and bicep, striking a nerve, causing Stripes to holler in agony. *Too much noise*, thought Silhouette, *too messy*. Down the alley she saw that the same compound bound bus from the previous night had pulled up to the front of the tavern. She knew she had to finish this now.

Seeing Stripes bent over in pain, Silhouette leapt up on its back and stabbed viciously at its exposed neck. One...two...three hard strikes before the Burmin whipped its head back in response and Silhouette had to jump off its shoulders, but she rebounded quickly and with a powerful leaping strike she rammed the blade up high into the side of Stripes' neck. Silhouette angled the blade so that as gravity pulled her back down the knife tore through its neck and blood gushed from the wound. Silhouette went to duck under his swinging arms once more, but Stripes managed to grab her with one arm and then

wrapped the other around her waist. The Burmin pulled her close and lifted her off the ground.

Silhouette wriggled her arm free and thrust the blade into its larynx. She pulled her hand away, leaving the blade lodged in its throat, and then struck the base of the hilt with the ball of her palm, driving the blade further into its gullet. Stripes dropped her and scrambled to pull the blade free, but it had been lodged in too far.

Stripes fell to the ground, weakly scratching at the knife. Chinderella began to rise, still trying to cope with the bruised esophagus and lack of oxygen. Silhouette hopped over Stripes's blood soaked corpse-to-be and kicked Chinderella in the mouth, knocking the Burmin back to the ground. She stomped with all of her strength onto its throat and felt something crush under her foot. Chinderella's eyes went wide and the Burmin's body trembled in pain and fear.

Silhouette fled down into the depths of the alley. She climbed over a fence and turned to see that Chinderella had crawled partway over to the lifeless body of Stripes before becoming still. Some of the Burmin who had gathered to load into the shuttle bus now stared down the alley, bewildered. Silhouette ran off as drunken Burmin waddled down the passageway and approached the bloody corpses of their friends.

Silhouette found a hose to wash away the blood. Her suit had

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to be clean to be effective, so she washed off and then ran back toward the tavern, taking a path around the corner of the Rathskeller opposite of the excitement in the alley. Several Burmin stood at the entrance to the bloodied alley, and a couple looked on from inside of the shuttle bus. Silhouette moved from the cover of the buildings and crept along to the street-facing side of the bus, keeping low below the view of the passenger windows. The shuttle had many exterior cargo compartments which would not likely be used by a bunch of drunken, bed-bound Burmin. She pulled gently on the latch of one of the compartments and it opened with ease. She crawled in and pulled the door shut. *Time to ride.*