

## Grey Stone Mining Corporation Septis Four, outside of Novick City

The only sound Colbosh could hear was the wind, followed by gusts of sand blasting into his covered face. The only color he could see was a dull gray as the sun faded in the nonexistent distance. One foot here might as well be a mile in distance. A single degree off in direction and you could wonder the dunes for eternity. He had brought along a direction finder that was built into a unit that he wore around his gloved wrists, but it had stopped functioning several hours ago. His only hope at finding his way back to the safety of the city was to follow a herd of Bomars. That were following the scent he had laid out several days ago. If his direction finder had been working he would've been able to navigate around them with ease. Instead he was trapped by his own device he should've gone back to the city hours ago instead of venturing out to find out if his scent was drawing any of the creatures in.

He couldn't see them so much as he could smell them. It was a sour weed smell. They were close by; he couldn't see them yet, but that was a good thing. Bomars were extremely carnivorous; they fed off the Gomas that burrowed beneath the sand. If he got too close to them, it was possible they would pick up vibrations from his movements. Their eyesight was bad but they had special pads beneath their feet that allowed them to pick up vibrations beneath.

He stopped at the crest of a dune. Several meters away he could make out the outline of several Bomars. They stood on four legs, had torsos covered with long hair that extended out into long necks. Their heads were large, with big teeth protruding from a maw that could swallow several large boulders. There were no visible eyes, just a white ridge of some kind where eyes should have been which stretched across their faces. From Colbosh's knowledge of the creatures, the ridge was geared toward smell.

He had been hired by the mining company to eradicate these creatures from the nearby city, but instead he had been using them to his own means. Except now he was at their mercy. One of the Bomars looked back in his direction. He froze in place. It made a loud noise with its head tilted back. The noise bellowed over the wind and then it looked back in his direction once again.

The weapon he carried on him was powerful enough to drop maybe one or two of the creatures before they reached him, but after that the rest of the herd would zero in on his scent or the vibrations of the weapon and he would be no more. His quest for vengeance would be over. The death of his people would no longer have meaning and those responsible would never be found. This was not how it should end.

Another Bomar looked in Colbosh's direction. His hands were already digging beneath his cloak for the weapon he had strapped behind his back. If they started coming in his direction, he would take the time to try and take head shots. It was possible that with a couple of good shots he could take down several before they were on top of him.

The two Bomars looking in his direction were joined by a third and then a fourth. The weapon was in his grasp and drawn out from beneath his cloak. He went down on one knee, ratcheting the round chamber back. The AR- 517 was an excellent human weapon. It had a tactical scope on top designed for desert warfare. He flipped the lid cover back off the scope and

put his goggled eye to it. A colored display filtered out most of the blowing sand and he was able to line up the crosshairs on one of the heads of a Bomar. The scope factored in wind and distance for the shot. If he shot now, the Bomar he had lined up in the sights would go down. There was no doubt about that.

His finger relaxed on the trigger and he pressed the safety release. In the distance one of the Bomars bellowed again. Through the scope he could see the creature move. It was scratching one of its large legs into the sand. Then another joined in. Soon all four were digging their feet in the sand with vigor. The Bomar in Colbosh's scope stuck its mouth down into the hole made by their feet. When it lifted its head out, a baby Goma was wiggling in its maw. The Goma was only about half the size of the Bomar.

Black blood squirted from the Goma as the beast bit down hard into its long tubular body. A meaty part of the Goma fell away and the three other beasts dove for it with their long necks. He didn't watch the rest; instead he stood back up and pressed the weapon's safety back in place. It took several minutes for the beasts to devour the Goma, and when they were done they began to fall away one by one, back on track to the city. .

Dim, whose name derived from his function as a "droid interpreter matrix," floated high up in the ceiling of Novick City. There were several large structural beams surrounding him; he was the size of an adult human head with a few lenses that protruded from its armored shelling and was easily small enough to fit between two support beams laced together. From here he could not be seen by anyone but he had an excellent view of almost everything. For the past couple of days he had remained here cracking into the local security channels. Twenty-one hours ago he had succeeded. He now had a direct link with city security and all military channels. About an hour ago, an arrest warrant had been issued for his owner Colbosh by Commander Grant.

There was no indication on any channel that his owner had arrived back in the city. Most of the communications for the past several days had indicated that his owner was dead. The mental link he shared with his owner was silent, but that had been anticipated due to the thick walls of the city and the distance his owner was traveling away from him. This did not mean his owner was dead as some had conjectured.

In fact his owner had been due to arrive at the east wall door about an hour ago, according to Dim's internal database. Due to the nature of his owner's mission, his database was full of examples of his owner being behind schedule. Every hour his owner was overdue, though, the odds went up that his owner had met his fate in some way without Dim's knowledge.

Without his owner, what would he be? There was no such thing as freedom in his programming. If his owner didn't show up within the next day or so, he would be required to go and find his body.

"Security Team Alpha!" A male voice broke in over the military channel. "Someone has just tried to access the east side door, please investigate immediately!"

"On the move," another voice said.

Dim was also on the move. It had to be his owner. He was the only alien that had been reported outside the city and he had been given a security card that would have allowed him access in or out of the city wall. The rest of the population was prisoners and their movements were extremely limited.

Two military guards in full armor were already standing by the door when Dim arrived. One was standing by the door near the control panel, while the other stood back with his weapon

lifted into firing position. Dim's link with his owner was still not working; he couldn't warn him that he was now wanted. If he intercepted the guards, though, it might give his owner an edge over them.

"Greetings, Masters," he said, floating near the guard.

The guard turned his weapon on him. "Hold it right there, droid! What's your purpose here?"

"Masters, I am a Droid Interpreter Matrix," he said.

"What's your purpose?" said the guard with the gun aimed at him. The guard by the door also had his weapon trained on Dim now.

"I provide dialectic interpretations for my owner."

"And where is your owner?"

There was a strong banging noise from the door.

"I believe my owner is behind that door."

"Who is your owner?"

"My owner's name is Colbosh."

"Okay, droid, stay there. Thomas, scan the droid. Let's make sure he's not carrying anything."

There was another loud bang at the door as the other guard left and approached Dim. He moved a small scanning device in his hands side-to-side and then stuck it back in a pouch on his belt.

"It's clean, sir."

Over the security channels Dim heard the guard with the weapon still drawn on him asked to report to Commander Grant. The commander was giving the guard permission to open the door. Dim and his owner were to be taken to the local security cell to wait for questioning. Grant had also routed more troops to this position.

Two more guards arrived within sixty-eight seconds. They took up positions around the door in a fan pattern. Then they opened the door. A swirl of sand blasted in, darkening Dim's visual receptors. The link with his owner was instantly restored. He poured the information to him about their immediate capture, but it was too late; the sound of gunfire erupted around him.

Colbosh could make out the outline of the large wall of Novick City. From this distance it looked like a small mountain rising out of the sand. He could no longer see the Bomars but their scent was still heavy in the air. They had moved to the south of him for now. Perhaps they had picked up the vibrations of some more Gomas in the area, he thought. He no longer needed them; soon he would be in the city and he could finish his task there. He hoped that the beasts would make their way back toward the city in time to give him the diversion he needed.

He told himself not to worry about it. Once the beasts got close enough to the city, they would pick up the vibrations from the machinery and mining going on. They would be on the city wall just as they had in the past from the records his droid had found for him. When the company first arrived here, the beasts had destroyed their first mining facility, killing all of the workers. Since the construction of the walls, the beasts had been kept out, but it didn't stop them from attacking from time to time. The company had taken precautions to help lure any Bomar herds from getting too close. The creatures were a lot smarter than the company thought, however. So the company was forced to try and eradicate the creatures before they got close. This was what Colbosh had been hired for.

At the edge of the wall, he found the light for the outside door blinking red just above a

pile of sand almost covering it up. He dug into the sand, slinging it to the sides until he uncovered enough of the door to insert his key card in the control panel. On the first attempt it stayed red, so he yanked it back out and forced it back in. This time the light over the control panel turned green. The outer door opened by rolling out of the way, revealing a small alleyway from the outside door to another door at the far end.

Somewhere behind him he heard the howl of a Bomar. They must have found what they were after and now they were moving back in his direction again. This was excellent; his plan was falling into place. Soon he would have one of the convicts that had been responsible for the destruction of his world and he would get the answers to his questions, regardless of who he had to kill.

After a few steps into the alleyway the door began to roll back into place behind him. There was a small light illuminating the alleyway. Sand was up to his ankles as he stomped to a stop in front of the second door. The key card was still in his gloved hand. He forced it into the slot on the control panel and the light stayed red. The second time he tried it, the light remained the same. It was after the third time he realized something was not right. He tried to feel for the link with his droid, but there still was no little hum in the back of his mind where the droid's voice used to be.

There was something in the construction of the wall that was blocking his signal. It had to have been the new metal Grey Stone was extracting from this place. The company had obtained a very lucrative contract with the military to use this new metal in the construction of its newest ships.

If his access had been cut, then that meant military soldiers were on their way to bring him in. He didn't have much time to act. This alleyway was a terrible place to be caught in a gunfight. He had no room to move. Now that he was inside, he doubted that he could get back out.

He left the key card in the control panel and dug into his cloak. His fingers found the package wrapped up inside his inner pockets. After he pulled it out, he pulled the plastic wrapping off it. The material was sticky on his gloves and it almost took his glove with it as he slapped it to the inner door. There was a small plastic box attached to the substance and he pressed a button on the box. A yellow light lit up and he stomped through the sand back up the alleyway. His AR-517 was in his left hand, lowered down at his side. With his right hand, he smashed his gloved fist into the light in the alleyway, putting it into total darkness.

He took a kneeling position down at the far end of the alleyway. He flipped the lens off his scope and peered down it again. The scope was now displaying the alleyway as if it was completely lit. With his other hand, he felt along the side of the weapon until he found the small depression built into it. He would wait until the door started to open, then he would press the button. If the guards were dumb enough, they would be close to the doorway and hopefully his weapon would take out a majority of them.

If they had some intelligent soldiers here then they would be fanned out away from the door. The explosion still might take one or two of them out, but there might be more to deal with.

He heard the grind of the door before he saw it start to roll out of the way. There was a buzz in the back of his head and then he heard Dim's voice talking to him. Dim was warning him about something, but his eye had focused on his first target as the door continued to roll out of the way. The crosshairs were lined up on the soldier's neck. It was a small target, but it was the only exposed vital spot. He pulled the trigger.

Blood spraying from the soldier's neck was the last he saw before he placed the crosshairs on another guard. He pressed the button on the side of his weapon. The force of the blast knocked him backwards, but he remained in control of his weapon. On his belly, he repositioned himself to fire his weapon again.

Through the scope he placed the crosshairs on a young human with his helmet half off. The young man had blood streaming from his ears and his mouth hung open. The human turned his head toward Colbosh, his blue eyes wide. Colbosh pulled the trigger.

He could see no more movement; he pushed himself to his feet and approached the end of the tunnel. How many dead, he thought. With the link now working between him and his droid, he would be able to find out how many of the troops survived the blast and what their current positions were.

"Owner!" The response came back in his head as dialogue. "Three of the troopers are down. The fourth is taking a position several feet to the left of the entrance. Display coming up now."

In Colbosh's mind he could see a thermal image of the trooper, standing just where his droid had told him.

"The trooper is preparing a grenade, Owner."

The visual displayed in front of him like a small projection showed the trooper reach for something on his belt, pull it loose, and step away from the wall. There was little time to react. He took off at a dead run the rest of the way to the end of the tunnel and threw himself out the end as an explosion erupted behind him. He tucked into a roll, and when he came to a stop with one knee up he was already bringing his weapon to bear on the lone remaining trooper.

A gush of air exhaled from his covered mouth as something hit him in the chest. His right hand had loosened around the grip of his weapon and he almost lost it. Around him he could hear bullets hitting the ground. He forced his weapon to his shoulder and without scope-aided aim, he pressed the trigger in rapid succession.

Some of his bullets hit the trooper in the armor. The trooper stumbled back for a second, which gave him the time to bring the scope to his goggles and fire.

"Owner!" Dim said. "More troopers have been diverted to this location. I fear that someone has uncovered our true purpose here. Should I begin planning our escape route?"

"Where is the Qui'than?"

"We do not have much time, Owner," Dim said.

"The *Qui'-than!*" He growled and tossed the head wrapping to the side. Now his face was totally uncovered. He could see the area around him much better. Blood from the dead troopers was pooling on the sandy floor. There was no movement from their bodies; they had come to rest like so many of the aliens he had killed in the past, to rest in bent-up or twisted postures. Some had their legs and hips turned opposite from their torsos; others had curled up into a ball on the flooring. It was always the same, just like the smell.

It was a putrid decay smell, like someone had just dug up an old patch of earth. He would remember these troopers' faces, not that his memory was that great, but his link with his droid provided instant access to any combat he had been involved in. Dim would give him a full breakdown about whom he killed, what their rank was, and so on. He could never forget what he had done, not that he cared to. The troopers that fell today were the first on a long list of victims that would lead him to discovering who had killed his people.

"Owner, the Qui'than is in the local club, second floor. There is another person with him. A human female."

“Show map,” Colbosh said. The visual in front of him changed to an over-view of the city. His droid had highlighted in red a direct path to the club, and he also displayed the current position of the troopers heading in their direction. There were at least twenty yellow dots and they were coming in packs of five, each group taking different routes. He might have five minutes at most before they intercepted them.

The club was toward the center of the map and the troopers had already passed it. He was situated at the east wall near the sewer plant. Further to the north was the command center, trooper housing. To the west were the mining facilities and prisoner quarters.

If he and Dim made their way into the sewage plant, they could keep the troopers forces divided up. The odds were still against him.

He took off at a jog in the direction of the sewer plant, and Dim changed the red marking from the club to the plant. An estimated calculation was displayed for him at his present speed to his arrival there. A secondary calculation told him the possible interception time of the other troopers.

The troopers were still about two minutes behind him when they reached the gated fence. He shot the lock loose from the fence and took off at a run. The visual in front of him showed one group of the troopers closing in behind. There was a small series of steps in front of him that lead to a metal door. He slammed into it with his full weight and it broke from its hinges. The impact made him off balance and he rolled past the door onto a metal grating.

From behind he heard bullets rip into the opening. When he looked at the visual, he could see the troopers closing in on the door. They were fanning out. Behind that group another set of troopers was moving in through the fence. The grating ahead of him was a catwalk over several pits of chemicals. The place reeked of human scum. Humans were about the foulest smelling creatures in the galaxy.

“Owner, I have identified an escape route for us.”

Colbosh was watching the grating below his feet. The greenish chemicals below him bubbled up as he dashed toward the other end, where there was another door and a series of steps off to the side that led down to the chemical vats. The display Dim had been sending him changed from the blue dots that represented the troopers to an interior map of the sewage plant. There was a route highlighted in yellow through the door ahead, along with something circled in red in the same room he was in now.

“There is a chlorine reservoir several meters to our left. I will plant an explosive there while you hold the troops by the other door. In the other room is a service tunnel that leads beneath the city.”

Despite the foul stench around him, Colbosh smelled the repugnant odor of humans entering the building. He had made it to the other door at the far end of the catwalk when he spun around with his weapon raised, laying down a barrage of fire to the other end. The door was already partially open as he backed into it. His droid had already dropped low and was heading for the chemical reservoir. The only job he had now was to hold the humans at bay long enough for Dim to achieve his mission.

The bullet count was down to six, and then he would have to ditch the weapon for his backup pistol. The troopers had been doing a good job so far keeping him confined behind the door frame while they made their way down the catwalk. His droid was still providing him information from the display of the interior map of the sewage plant. The other set of troopers were entering in through the other side of the building. Soon he would be trapped.

“Accomplished!” he heard Dim announce in the back of his head. There was a pause

long enough in the firefight to let him line up a shot. A trooper marching up the catwalk was replacing a clip in his weapon when Colbosh's bullet ripped through his neck.

He was down to five now and there were four troopers still coming toward him. The troops approaching him from behind were getting closer; he could smell them now. Some tried to mask their scents with chemicals, but that only made them smell worse.

"I need cover now!" Dim said.

Despite the hail of bullets pounding the door, Colbosh twisted the gun around the edge of the door frame and let loose a last blast of fire. When the gun clicked empty, he dropped it onto the flooring and pulled the .40-caliber pistol from beneath his cloak and continued firing. His droid floated up from the flooring, but took several hits which ricocheted off its armored hulling before floating past him.

The nine shots Colbosh had in his pistol were down to three when he was able to shut the door behind him. He took his empty AR-517 and jammed it in the door handle. It wouldn't stop them for long, but it would buy him some time.

From around a metal tube below him, a bullet hit him in the shoulder. His body armor absorbed most of the impact, but it still hurt. There was no time for pain, only reaction. The catwalk he was on made him a visible target to the troopers. He had to get off here and quick. His droid took several more direct hits as it dropped down toward the floor. Colbosh followed suit, dropping to his knees and rolling off the side. Bullets echoed around him and another impacted his chest armor.

His feet were the first to hit the ground and his knees absorbed the rest of the impact. Dim was nearby, low to the ground with all visible lights turned off. It was easy for the droid to blend in with the rest of the piping and machinery in the room.

From the visual Dim was sending him, Colbosh could see the exit route highlighted on the map. At a dead run he would be able to pass by any of the troopers in the room.

There was an explosion in the other room that rocked the foundation. Fire erupted from the catwalk along with a human ablaze. Now was the time to act. A full sprint made his lungs hurt as he inhaled the noxious fumes. Dim followed behind him. The access door had an old-style turn-wheel handle on it. It didn't take much force to turn it. Once the door was open there was a stairway leading down into an unlit tunnel.

On the display Dim was sending, the troopers had abandoned the building. None had followed them into the access tunnel. Soon they would be at the club and he would learn what info he needed.

"Owner! There are reports that a herd of Bomar has been sighted near the wall. Commander Grant is diverting some of the task force hunting us to the outer wall. Your diversion is working!"

Would it divert them enough, though? The creatures were a huge threat to the city, but only if they attacked. The mating scent he had used to lure them here should have been a strong motivator for them.

"Troops have begun searching the access tunnel, Owner. Commander Grant has also turned off the Transponder IDs. I no longer have access to the troops' movements. Do we proceed with our mission?"

"No!" he said. It had taken him weeks to learn that the Qui'than that had come to his world on that fateful day was here, and he was not going to stop. The blood of his people called to him, and there would be no rest until the guilty parties had been brought to justice. He would kill every last human he had to, to get the information he wanted.

They didn't encounter any more troops until they exited out of the access tunnel and arrived at the club. There was a line of humans dressed in bright yellow jumpsuits by the door of the club. A lone trooper was checking over the humans before letting them in.

"The Bomars are approaching the wall," Dim told Colbosh. "Grant has ordered all troops to open fire."

He couldn't hear any of the gunfight going on around them, but unless the humans managed to kill all the creatures before they reached the wall, then he still might have time. He had to hurry.

"I will provide distraction, Owner," Dim said, floating away from him toward the line of humans.

Colbosh made his way around toward the back of the line, where a couple of humans of varying colors were huddled together. They were passing a cup of some kind between them. The smell from the cup was toxic; it was a homemade poison humans had made during the war. He had tasted it once and it made him vomit it back up. That had been the last time any human had offered some to him. How they could stand it, he didn't know.

A bearded white man with missing teeth looked down at him. He was almost eye-to-eye with the man, but he was at least a few inches taller.

"Where the hell did you come from?"

There was no time for conversation, so he hit the man in the side of the head with his pistol. The man's eyes were frozen in place as he fell to the ground. The other two men looked as if they were going to protest, but seeing the weapon in his hand, they took off at a run.

Ahead of him he made out Dim locked in conversation with the trooper, so he pushed his way through the line. The trooper didn't notice him until he was almost on top of him, obvious poor training on the trooper's part.

The trooper's mouth parted as Colbosh grabbed him from the side by his shoulder and forced him into his bent knee; then smashed the butt of his pistol to the back of the man's head.

The humans that had been in line dispersed around him in a hurry. Some ran into the club, others disappeared into the city. He took a moment to take the weapons from the trooper. The trooper had been carrying an unmodified AR-517 with one extra clip, and a service pistol. The pistol he placed beneath his cloak, the AR-517 he checked over. He pulled the cartridge out and found a full load, then slapped it back in.

"Chatter amongst the troops on the outer wall report at least twenty Bomars," Dim said in the back of his mind.

Where had so many come from? He hadn't come across that many in the past two weeks since he had been here.

"Three have been taken down. Grant has ordered all available troopers to the outer defense wall."

Things were looking up. With that many creatures, the troops would be tied up for hours trying to eradicate them.

The club was in disarray as Colbosh entered. Humans were fleeing toward the exits. Those that got in his way he pushed or shoved away from him. Dim floated safely above the crowd. So far he had only spotted one trooper in the building. He was standing amongst the crowd trying to bring the people to order. Colbosh crept up behind the trooper, grabbed the man's chin with one clawed hand and the back of his head with the other. With a swift twisting motion, the man's neck snapped in his grasp. The trooper collapsed to the floor and it was time

for Colbosh to move again. The target was close.

A Qui'than had a very different odor than humans. Qui'thans had an ugly exterior which excreted a gooey substance to protect them from their planet's harmful radiation rays. It was a plant-like smell, bitter but not repugnant.

Colbosh vaulted two steps at a time until he reached the top. Some more humans passed him by and he pushed one down the stairway. The blood was roaring in his ears; the Qui'than's smell was growing stronger. Through not the first door, but the second door on the left, the pale wrinkled skin of the Qui'than lay sprawled out on a bed. Its flabby arms were above its head and restrained by cuffs to the bed post. The secretion from its body was sticking to the sheets.

Its small black eyes opened wide. At first it pulled against the restraints.

"Who you?" the Qui'than said in broken English.

The arrogance of the guilty? Soon Colbosh would know everything.

"Who you, who you?"

There was another smell in the room: the repugnant smell of a human. A woman with long black hair emerged from the rest room. She was wearing a translucent flesh wrap with orange strips covering her reproductive organs.

Dim floated up beside the Qui'than as the woman approached Colbosh. About a week ago he had made contact with the woman. She was a local prostitute here.

"You're late," she said.

"My owner thanks you for your patience," Dim said in response to his owner's thoughts. She stuck out her hand, palm upright.

Colbosh pulled a credit chip from beneath his cloak and slapped it into her hand. The Qui'than was still screaming in the bed as she left the room with a smile on her face.

"My owner wishes to know who helped you," Dim said.

"Who you?" the Qui'than said.

It was trying to convince him that it didn't know what he was talking about. He would continue with the questioning. If that failed, he would try another method.

"If you tell my owner who hired you to kill his people, I'm sure he would be willing to let you go," Dim said.

"Nothing, I know nothing," the Qui'than said.

Its dark eyes dashed back and forth from Colbosh to his droid. It was obviously nervous. He just had to keep pressing. Intimidation had always worked for him in the past.

He let out a growl and showed the Qui'than his teeth. It quivered and strained at the restraints, but the bedpost didn't budge.

"It's no use covering for others. If you just tell my owner what he wants to know, he will let you go," Dim said.

"Nothing, nothing, who you?"

Colbosh placed the barrel of AR-517 in the Qui'than's face.

"I know nothing, nothing."

"It could be possible that its memory has been altered?" Dim said in the back of Colbosh's mind.

That was impossible; the Qui'than was lying. He was just trying to protect himself from whoever was responsible. It was time to try another route. Colbosh broke the post from the bed and with one hand lifted the Qui'than and rammed him into the wall.

The wall crumpled in under the impact and the Qui'than collapsed to its knees. With two strides Colbosh grabbed the thing's restraints and began dragging it from the room. When he

reached the top of the steps in the now empty club, he tossed him down it.

The Qui'than let out a series of grunts and cries as it rolled to a stop at the bottom. At first it didn't move but then it wriggled around some.

"Owner, reports from the Command Center are reporting a heavy attack on the eastern wall. Grant is recalling some troops to the inside, to start forming a defensive barrier. Our path to the rooftop should be unimpeded."

At the base of the steps Colbosh grabbed the restraints again. The Qui'than didn't resist much this time as he dragged him along the floor.

Their route through the city to the elevator shaft that led to the rooftop went without incident. He did have to knock the Qui'than in the head with his AR-517 at least once. That knocked it out for a short time, until they were riding up the shaft.

The Qui'than moaned once and its gaze moved slowly from Colbosh to look out through the metal grating at the city streets below. To the east Colbosh could see the wall begin to buckle in. There were troops rushing toward the area.

"Owner, the troops are reporting that the Bomars are breaking through the eastern wall."

He gave no response. The only thing that mattered at the moment was the answer to his questions. The Qui'than could defy him as much as he wanted, but very soon it would have to choose between life and death.

The elevator came to a stop at the top. Colbosh opened the grated door and dragged the Qui'than into the small maintenance room. Control panels blinked on the wall. Ahead was a door where Dim was already punching in a key code from a small arm extended from its armored shell. The door lifted open, allowing a blast of cold, sand-filled air to burst in.

Colbosh shielded his eyes at first, and then with the Qui'than in tow, forced his way through the door. He wished he had kept his goggles, but things had happened so fast.

His leg bumped into something. He had found what he had come up here for. An old hoisting system was attached to the side of the wall. The Qui'than was fighting to break free from him, but with a butt of his head into the Qui'than's, the creature slumped down to the sand-covered flooring.

He could barely make out the alien crumpled at his feet. It didn't take him long to wrap the hoisting chain around the Qui'than's restraints. Once that was done he lifted the alien to its feet and slapped it in the face. Its dark eyes focused on him.

"My owner wishes to know who helped you kill his people," Dim said. "My owner knows that you were part of the team that destroyed his world's atmosphere generator."

"I know nothing. I know nothing."

The monstrous rapidity of the alien's voice annoyed Colbosh. He kicked it from the side of the city wall. He heard it scream over the wind for a few seconds before he hit the stop. Two Bomars were waiting for the Qui'than down below. He could see one of the creatures move toward the kicking Qui'than's body. Another bit one of the alien's feet. He hoisted it back up, lifting it over the wall.

The alien's eyes had taken on an orange tinge. Its body was secreting more of the goo-like substance than before.

"Please tell my owner who helped you," Dim said.

"Nothing, I know nothing."

"If you just tell my owner the information he needs—"

Colbosh tossed the alien away and let him go further down the wall before pressing the stop button on the hoist. The Bomars were still there at the bottom waiting; the alien was

screaming and Colbosh just could barely make out the Bomars fighting over the alien's legs. One of them bit the alien's leg off and the other fought to get it from the first beast's mouth.

When he hoisted the alien back up, its eyes were already closed. It had to have been unconscious, but Colbosh was prepared for that. He pulled a syringe from a small pouch in his belt. The neck was the best place for the injection. The alien's eyes jerked open when the needle punctured its neck. Its pupils were now completely orange and its mouth was moving rapidly, as if it was trying to say something.

"I know nothing."

"If you just tell my owner, everything will be okay," Dim said.

"Nothing."

Its body was shaking uncontrollably. Why wasn't it telling him what it knew? Colbosh let it go, and this time he didn't stop the hoist. Down below there were some roaring noises. He didn't look; he should have, but he couldn't quell the questions rolling through his mind.

"Owner, it is possible that the Qui'than's mind has been altered. Their anatomy is very acceptable to human operations."

Could they have intentionally altered its memory? Now what was Colbosh supposed to do? How could he find the information he needed?

"Owner, I think the Qui'than's life has come to an end."

Half of the Qui'than's body had been bitten away. Colbosh hoisted it up as quickly as he could, but there was nothing he could do now. He dropped the body to the floor of the roof and pulled a knife from his belt. With a sawing motion he severed the head from the alien's dead body.

"Your ship is en route to us, Owner," Dim said.

Colbosh could see it just off in the distance. It wasn't a large ship; it had a cabin and a cockpit, but that was about it. It wasn't that he couldn't afford something better, it was the fact that this ship had become home over the years. He had added several modifications to it, some of them illegal. That wasn't important at the moment. What was important was what he should do with the Qui'than now. How could he get the information he needed from the dead? There was a possibility; it wasn't cheap, but there was a way.