



SHIPJACKING

She had another name, long ago, now unremembered. It had been given to her. A meaningless label, nothing more. Over the years, she had used many others when it suited her. Wearing and discarding them when they were no longer useful. Only one name mattered.

Lethe.

This is who she had become. What she had become. The name known only to her sisters. Never more than twelve. Sometimes less. Unwilling to wait, she had taken the name from the one who had come before her. There had been twelve then; leaving only one path to claiming her place among her sisters. The path of blood. A rite more than four thousand years old is no small thing.

“Control your breathing,” she said, cold and flat over the secure comm channel. She could feel the Sidhe’s mind unraveling, close to pure terror. She despised weakness, even in her prey. But she needed the hacker. Without her, their plan was doomed. Failure was never an option.

“I’m trying,” she gasped. Floating in the black surrounded by the endless void was awe-inspiring and, all at once, utterly terrifying. Her heart was hammering in her chest. She felt like she might pass out. The blackness closing down on her.

“Breathe in slowly through your nose,” the Sister counseled, taking just enough of the hard edge off her voice to get the result she needed. “Then, slowly out through your mouth.”

“Okay, okay.”

“Now, close your eyes and do it again.” The rest of the operators, except one, were Black Flag. Hardened mercenaries. Murder floating in the black. She could feel them as well. Hunters waiting for the kill. The Solarian gun hand was born on Ares Station. His parents highly placed in the exiled Cult of Anubis. Born to those who worship death, he would do what needed to be done without hesitation. A ruthless, self-serving bastard, he was easy to read and control.

Having completed dozens of missions for the Red Sisters, she never had to step out into the infinite before. No doubt had entered her mind. Psychically gifted, years of merciless training had forged a highly disciplined mind. Only two things troubled her, the Sidhe unraveling and *him*.

She could feel him now, kilometers away. The Reckoner. He was stronger than she expected. No matter, he would soon be dead along with the dog soldier reducing the threat profile of any opposition to a degree that would guarantee the success of her mission. She would not be stopped.

“Again,” she could feel the Sidhe begin to pull it together; not much, but enough. Maybe. “Now open your eyes.”

“Okay,” she came back on the comm. Her voice a whisper. “I’m okay”.

“You better be, or nobody gets paid. Wire your shit tight.”

“Yeah, boss.”

“Status?”

“On it,” she said, letting out a long, slow breath, ignoring the hungering void all around her. She looked down at the tactical vambrace clamped over her skein. The integrated cyber-slate lit up. She was back in her element now, at least for a heartbeat. “Connections up, we’re five by five.”

After the Machine Plague, a remote connection into any system, let alone a ship, just didn’t happen. But she had pulled it off. More than a few glasses of whiskey, not synth, the good stuff and a willing smile - an unspoken promise - had the Plutonian paying, thinking he was getting laid.

He was good, that was for sure; better than her. Maybe one of the best hackers in the *Outland*. Made it easy to feed his ego. She had almost felt bad, but he was an asshole. That made it easier. Anyone crazy enough to have a wireless interface stuffed into their brain-pan deserved to get brain jacked. She had been relieved she didn’t have to sleep with him. Cold and technical wasn’t how she liked to roll.

The sedative, slipped into the bottle they took back to his hab at the spaceport, took that off the table. She dropped a few reds to be sure it didn't knock her out. Once he was down, the purpose-built Plutonian worm slithered right into his neuralware. He had bragged about all his enhancements being installed in Serenity on Kharon. Ironic really.

Now she was jacked in via his head-space and the *UMC Rakshasa* was hers.

"Seal the door to the engine room and keep the sensor scrub running."

"Done and done." Maybe she was pulling it together, the thought of disappointing the Red Sister more terrifying than sucking vacuum. And the money was good. Real good. The Venusian yacht was ancient and had been in the hands of pirates for centuries. It got shot to shit when they were run down and executed, but the crew that bought her at auction as salvage on Triton had been fixing her back up. It was worth twenty-five million standards they figured. Her cut would be just under four. More than she could have ever imagined.

"Where's the Scalpel?"

She had the sensor feed floating in front of her in an instant running from the slate through the cable jacked into the base of her skull to her optical nerves. "Smooth, he's good. Matched the cutter's rotation on the first shot. They're docking now."

"Make sure they see only what we planned. Time to move."

She closed her eyes again and focused on her breathing. The void was calling again. The augmented reality feed faded and when she opened her eyes again the rest of them, killers in the dark, had fired their rocket belts and were closing in on the ancient yacht where it hung in the black like a battered, still elegant, bird of prey. The Sister had made her train for this in a sim for a few days, so it didn't go horribly wrong. It wasn't nearly enough. Her finger hesitated over the activation stud. *What could possibly go wrong?*

At a touch, the rocket belt fired and she followed the rest of the team. Her working-class parents had spent more than they should on ballet lessons for her on Oberon. A little culture for their only kid. Then her mom got sick.

Still, she was pretty agile, almost graceful, as a result. Maybe it would pay off. *Almost four million.*

Near hyperventilating, she reached the yacht and managed to hit feet first as planned. When the mag-clamps in her boots locked on, she let out a long, slow breath. She was pretty sure she hadn't peed herself. Pretty sure.

"Caelix, engage the lock-down protocol and open the airlock. Kilgore, secure the port corridor and then proceed to the gallery. If you encounter anyone other than the targets, eliminate them. Jabari, secure the bridge."

The port airlock cycled open, and the Black Flag operators moved smoothly inside. Part of their namesake, their dead-black combat skeins were styled after some long forgotten fascist regime from the twentieth century in what was now the European Socialist Federation on Terra. The sealed system completed by skull-like helmets with industrial-styled rebreathers.

Corsairs, they had sided with the collaborators when Aegis VI dropped the hammer on the Free State and things on the Flotilla went more to shit than the baseline. With everyone inside, the airlock flooded with air and the interior door finally opened. Six in all, pulse carbines at the ready, the Black Flag moved down the corridor leading to the yacht's central gallery with well-oiled precision.

As tall as the corsairs but rail thin, the Solarian moved languidly into the corridor trailing behind the operators. He was too fast to bother drawing the gauss pistol slung low on his hip.

The Sister removed her helmet and simply let it drop to floor of the airlock. She was stunning with long void-black hair. When needed, she could soften the hard and murderous cast that marred her beauty. It had served her well more than once. She pulled up the hood of her voluminous blood-red cloak and moved down the corridor with purpose.

"Take off your helmet. You won't need it again. You'll breathe easier."

Caelix slowly unsealed her helmet, but only after double checking the ship's atmospheric composition. She mag-clamped it to her belt and moved out of the airlock. The door cycled closed behind her.

“Go to the engine room,” said the Sister as she reached the gallery. “Lock the doors again once you get inside and stick to the plan.”

Still a step or two behind, Caelix moved out onto the gallery balcony. Two stories, the gallery ran most of the length of the yacht from the captain’s cabin aft to the saloon in the bow. There was little sign of her original grandeur. The pirates had been harsh masters and she showed her age. You could almost feel it. She thought about drawing her laser, hoping not to need it, and then drew it anyway.

“Do not fail me, Sidhe.”

The Sister didn’t watch her go. The operators had secured the gallery. Half of them up on the balconies and the others down in the gallery below. She went over the railing and landed easily in a crouch five meters below, the blood-red cloak settling slowly around her. Rising full of purpose, her will focused inward opening her mind to her surroundings. Primitive humans had called it the third eye. It was so much more.

The Sister could feel her target, not more than twenty meters away in what must be her quarters. There was another woman with her, but no sign of the bodyguard. The target was armed and wary. That was to be expected. To prevent any intrusion attempts jumping from the comm system to the computer system that controlled the ship the two systems were not connected in anyway. Standard protocol for all systems throughout the *Outland* in the wake of the Machine Plague. As soon as the Sidhe activated the lock-down protocol, odds were high that someone would notice, and they still had internal comms. A jam-buoy they dropped in the black near the cutter would have activated by now baffling external comm traffic; looked like solar static.

At this phase, lack of chatter on their comms was a good thing. Everyone knew their job. Nothing to talk about meant everything was going according to plan. By now, the boarding party from the *Rakshasa*, lured by the promise of easy salvage, would have disabled the “malfunctioning” thruster on their cutter stopping the perpetual spin. As soon as they attempted to access the bridge system to figure out why the cutter was drifting abandoned in space, the self-destruct daemon they planted would activate.

It would seal all doors, shutdown the safety protocols, and overheat the reactor until it went critical. They would be atomized and off the board. It also left her team with no way out.

It was Sun Tzu that said, “Throw your soldiers into positions whence there is no escape, and they will prefer death to flight.” She had read the *Art of War*, as written, in Chinese; one of the many languages she spoke. Once one began to unravel its meaning, it could be quite instructional.

She began to taste victory and moved assuredly towards a door on the side of the gallery not far from the captain’s cabin. “Open the starboard luxury suite door.”

“Affirmative, boss,” Caelix came back. “I’m almost to the engine room.”

“You are behind schedule. Move faster,” she said as the door cycled open in front of her.

Unlike the rest of the ship, a serene, well-appointed suite lay before her; refurbished on Oberon to suit its occupant. Designed after the minimalist style of the Protectorate’s elite, shoji separated the different rooms of the suite. The dark wood floor of the central room was covered with tatami mats. While the Sister marked all of this, it drew none of her focus, that was reserved entirely for the two Sidhe in the chamber. They were as unlike each other as they were unlike the hacker. Both had clearly been asleep and wore kimonos.

The handmaiden, who stood between the Sister and her quarry, had a laser pistol leveled at her, hand trembling. She wore a grey cotton kimono trimmed in deep red with a simple Shippo pattern. Slight, she had the white skin and pale hair of her kind. Her features were a bit too sharp, and her eyes bore a hint of pink. They spoke of both fear and fierce determination.

The Sister had little doubt she would pull the trigger. She had served her mistress since she was eight years old, living around the edges of a life otherwise unimaginable to one of her lowly birth. Her smile was wicked and full of malice as she stepped towards the handmaiden.

“Do not take another step,” the handmaiden said. Her voice surprisingly steady.

An instant later, as the Red Sister kept moving, she fired. A lance of searing, lethal energy deflected off the Sister's left shoulder as her Grade III screen activated. She glanced down at her shoulder for a moment, eyes narrowing, as her mirthless smile faded.

Before the handmaiden could fire again, the terrible force of her will lashed out. A wave of focused psychokinetic energy crashed into the handmaiden hurling her across the room through the shoji on the other side slamming her into the dark wooden wall covering the bulkhead.

"Hello, princess."

Morrigan Ui' Ardri-Mor, whose mother was the fourth great granddaughter of the emperor, stood resolute before her wearing a deep red silk kimono trimmed light blue, an intricate pattern of crane and cherry blossoms picked out in the silk. She had perfect, almost translucent, alabaster skin, snow white hair, and eyes of palest blue.

Unlike her handmaiden, part of her training as a member of the imperial family was conducted by the Protectorate. She keyed the activation stud on the handle of her sword. The short, single edged blade with a square guard crackled to life. Based on her stance, there was little doubt she knew how to use the power sword. This also, the Sister had anticipated; never failing to know her prey intimately.

"Drop your sword. The contract is more than flexible regarding your condition," she lied. It was quite specific that she be delivered entirely unharmed. That always complicated matters. It made the next few moments dangerous. The screen was the best money could buy, but the power sword – in skilled hands – was more than capable of cutting through it.

"I will spare your life if you leave now," the princess said in a tone that made it clear she was accustomed to being obeyed.

"Will you."

The princess said nothing and did not falter, holding her ground.

The Sister was equally accustomed to being obeyed for a very different reason. One of Dysnomia's gifts, she could subvert the will of others, crushing it to her own.

As her mind reached out to seize control of the princess it was as if she tried to squeeze water in her fist. Surprised for the first time today, she hesitated. It almost cost her head.

The princess came forward, her weight behind a fast, downward strike. It glanced flashing off the screen as the Sister slipped to the side barely avoiding the blow. A slicing horizontal strike flowed from the first forcing the Red Sister to retreat. Her hand found the handle of the whip coiled at her belt. The princess ceased her relentless attack as boiling plasma roiled down the length of the whip. The Sister let it crack and then slither across the floor between them, a deadly serpent waiting to strike.

It was always about leverage. Combat. Extortion. Power in all its forms. And leverage was all about pressure.

Her eyes focused on the princess with deadly intent, the whip waiting to bite and burn. She shifted part of her perception, sensing the handmaiden crumpled and broken against the wall behind her.

"She's still alive."

The princess held her ground.

This was a question the Sister could not answer. Far removed from the imperial court, there was still plenty of data on Morrigan Ui' Ardri-Mor and even a psych profile. This was out of the profiles scope. Did she value the life of her handmaiden?

"Very well."

It was a small tell. The princess' eyes narrowed just for a moment as the handmaiden's slumped body rose off the floor seemingly of its own accord, hanging in the air like a broken ghost.

The Sister smiled.



Manfred Kilgore had been Black Flag before things went to shit in the Free State. The cards were on the table. Siding with the Jovians was a better bet. This gig was another matter, entirely. One final job; more standards than he could spend. But that remained to be seen.

The corsair looked over the balcony at the gallery below. Two other operators held the corridor near the luxury suite. The Red Sister walked out in the process of coiling the whip at her hip. Behind her, the princess trailed. Somehow, seeing her in person was different. She walked with a cold, dignified grace that wasn't quite evident in the digitals. He could see the Sister speak directly to the other operators. He switched on the helmet's amplifier.

"Secure her in the ship's locker," she ordered flatly. "No one sees her but me. If she continues to cooperate, see no harm comes to her."

"We've got a problem," came the Solarian killer from the bridge. "Cutter didn't pop and they're back on the Scalpel."

"Activate the weapon systems and destroy them."

Kilgore gestured, moving the other Black Flag to directly cover the door to the stairs that led up to the embarkation deck.

"Negative, AI's not near good enough and its too late to get men into the turrets."

"Prepare to repel boarders."

"Dash Ransom approaching."

Kilgore could feel the dull thud of the Scalpel being attached by the mag-clamps after docking in the nest. He figured it would be thirty seconds. Manually hack the airlock door, secure the embarkation deck, down the stairs to the gallery.

It was one of those things that happens too fast. You see it, but it's a blur for just a second while your brain sorts it out. Only fifteen seconds.

The Reckoner was like an ashen-grey shadow coming through the doorway, launching off the railing and covering the impossible distance across the gallery with ease. The closest operator on the other side fired a short burst. It flashed off the air in front of him as the Reckoner held up his left hand, a

psychokinetic barrier deflecting the burst of laser fire. There was no follow-up shot. The katana slashed out in a brutal downward stroke as the Reckoner landed smoothly on the balcony and the operator lost his head.

The operator by the door on this side swept the barrel of his carbine around and moved to the railing. A supersonic gauss round boomed punching through the back of his helmet blowing his face out the other side.

Fuck. Kilgore kept the carbine trained on the door. His targeting system engaged. *Asshole turned his back on the door. Don't make that mistake twice.*

"Two down. Hostile in the gallery," he growled into his comm.

A lean, feral figure in battered white combat armor took the doorway, mostly gun. But the gauss rifle was as tall as he was and too slow. The mercenary's targeting system locked onto the dog soldier and Kilgore fired, a tight five round burst. The dog soldier dropped back into the cover of the doorway, a searing mark smoldering off this shoulder where his unit insignia had previously been crudely scraped off.

Predatory, it was back around the corner in an instant, faster this time. Kilgore's targeting system locked on again. Before he squeezed the trigger, he looked down; a pair of holes bigger than his finger smoked through his armor. The gauss rounds punched through the reinforced plating of his skein shattering his clavicle. The report of the supersonic rounds washed over him like a tidal wave. His left arm dropped useless at his side. He felt his knees buckling as he slumped against the railing, everything faded in and out. Seemed like slow motion, he saw the Reckoner go over the railing on the other side and drop to the gallery floor below, blood burning off the power sword. *Three down.*

The Red Sister fired that weird-ass antique-looking pistol she carried. He felt it scream, tearing at the edge of his fading consciousness. The Reckoner's head snapped as a searing beam of focused psychic energy tore across his face ripping through the back of his hood. It felt like it burned his soul. He didn't slow. The whip flashed. He cut it in half. For just an instant, it seemed as if their wills locked. She tried to

level the psi-lock pistol. The Reckoner cut off her hand, then her head. Kilgore thought she looked surprised at the end. He was. *Four down.*

An abomination, its ancestor's genes spliced with an arctic wolf by Martian genetic engineers, it was bred for the frozen wastes of Callisto. And it was on him. The thing snarled as Kilgore tried to bring the carbine up one-handed and knocked it aside. Everything flashed as the thing smashed the butt of the gauss rifle into his face. Distant somehow, he heard the helmet crack; maybe it was his skull. *Five Down.*

A few minutes before all hell broke loose, Caelix reached the engine room door. A schematic of the yacht lit up through her optical nerve. It should be current, lifted from the spaceport on Oberon where they had made repairs after their run to Sycorax.

Crazy bastards, no one went to the junk moon in Cro territory on purpose. And no one ever came back. The crew of the *Rakshasa* did; hunting salvage to repair this old bird.

She could have gone down the private ladder from the captain's cabin, but it was too exposed. The main door opened onto a platform halfway up the engine room wall. She would have a better vantage point from up here. Her finger swept the door open in the augmented display and the one in the meat-world in front of her did the same. She took a long breath and let it out before poking her head around the corner to look.

The engine room was two stories tall to accommodate the reactor and impulse engine. The main engineering console was down below, about five meters off to the left. The Plutonian was slumped over the console. She kept the laser pointed in his general direction, unsteady in her hand, as she moved down the metal staircase to the engine room floor. Even with him slumped over the console, the four-gun rig he wore made her nervous, very nervous. She recognized the disruptors in the shoulder holsters. Bad business, they had an evil reputation. No one was exactly sure what it would do to his neuralware when he jacked his data spike into the yacht's system and the worm activated.

Once she reached the floor, she edged forward slowly, one meter at a time, the laser pointed at his back. The thought of her flesh being torn apart by the disruptors unshakable.

"We've got a problem," came the Solarian killer from the bridge. "Cutter didn't pop and they're back on the Scalpel."

Not good. Not good at all. Her hand shaking so bad she kept her finger off the trigger, she jabbed the barrel hesitantly into the Plutonian's back.

"Activate the weapon systems and destroy them."

Their own ship will kill them. Better them than us. She grabbed the Plutonian's shoulder. It didn't take much. He slipped to the floor like a puppet whose wireless strings had been cut.

"Negative, AI's not near good enough and it's too late to get men into the turrets."

Caelix put her laser on the console and sat down in the now empty seat taking direct control of the yacht's systems. There were no cameras on-board, so she scanned all the doors to make sure they were still locked out.

"Prepare to repel boarders."

Shit. The Support Vehicle Nest. *Should have checked that first.* She pulled up the nest control. *Fuck.* The scalpel was already docked. Embarkation airlock. *Still have a chance to keep these fuckers out.* The airlock showed locked, but only for a second; then it dropped off the system entirely.

"Dash Ransom approaching."

Full brain spiral. True, Caelix was a criminal. She signed up for this gig, lured by the payout. Before this, small-time. Nobody got hurt. Nobody got dead. There had always been a way out.

"Two down. Hostile in the gallery," Kilgore growled into his comm. She hadn't liked any of the corsairs. Kilgore least of all. He seemed like the kind of prick who would sell out his mother. Betrayal cost him in the end.

Another level of terror reached her lizard-brain. One of the operators keyed his comm. Nothing. Just a wet, phlegmy sound, like someone drowning in their own blood. Then, laser fire.

“Boss?” she croaked into the comm. Nothing. “I’m in the engine room. Boss? Anybody-“

“Shit’s gone sideways,” cut in the Solarian. “I just heard laser fire on the lower deck. Must be where they locked up the princess. Everybody in the gallery is down.”

“Down... What do you mean-“

“Shut up and listen,” Jabari said. “I’m almost to the Scalpel. I’ve got Vega Vonn. I got what I wanted. She’s worth a lot to the Jovians. If you can get to the scalpel in sixty seconds, you’ve got a shot.”

“Okay,” she stammered. “You’ll wait-“

“Not a chance,” the Solarian said flatly. “You’re worth nothing to me.”

“But-“

“Fuck,” he came back, not really talking to her. Caelix heard another voice, it seemed distant over the comm.

“I’d surrender if I were you.” It was a woman’s voice, must have been standing next to the Solarian.

“Shut the fuck-“

There was a shot, so loud pain shot through her head as it came over the open comm channel. Maybe she should have opted for a hand comm like the Solarian. Maybe not.

“You alright,” said another distant voice, a man this time. The comm must be jammed open. It happened sometimes if they got fried by too much feedback.

“Cut these fucking cuffs off,” the woman said. Her tone had a hard, murderous edge. “You good?”

“I am.”

“Your face is torn to shit.”

“I am aware,” the man said. “A psi-lock pistol is a fearsome weapon.”

“Princess?”

“Secure.”

“Jabari?” Caelix almost whispered. Knew it was a mistake. Did it anyway.

“At least one left,” was the last she heard from the comm before it squelched out as if it had been stomped on.

Shit. She dug the earbud out and let it fall. She looked at the console. *I still own this ship. Maybe I can-*

The thought never fully formed. The engine room door lit up on her console, manual bypass. Ever so slowly, she looked over her shoulder and reached blindly for the laser. The door cycled open.

With tactical precision, someone looked around the corner. Just long enough for her to take a wild shot with the laser. It wasn’t even close. She started edging along the console moving away from the stairs that led up to the door.

Keeping the laser pointed at the open door, she tried to think of something to say. An arm, only exposed from the elbow down, flashed into view. Gone before she could squeeze off a shot. Something clattered at her feet. *Oh Shit.*

The suppression grenade went off with a blinding thump. Her cyber-shades had flash suppression, so they blacked out for half a second, saving her eyes. The concussion put her on the ground, bleeding from the ears. Detached, slow motion. Like her brain had been disconnected.

It seemed an eternity before it turned into a painful ringing in her ears. That was when she saw him walking towards her. A kid really, not even eighteen. He was wearing a high-end Solarian mesh armored flight suit, deep red, flashed with gold trim. He had on slick cyber-shades; old-school, like aviator glasses. He had a heater leveled in her general direction; designed to cut through heavy armor, what it did to flesh was never pretty.

He was saying something, but all she heard was ringing. He gestured with the heater. It was hard to process. He stepped slowly forward and used his right foot to send her laser sliding across the floor.

He said something else, most of it was a jumble.

“Fifteen shares,” was all she finally made out. He crouched down right in front of her, holstering the pistol in the process.

“You broke my hacker,” he said simply, gesturing towards the Plutonian.

She tried to speak, but her tongue was still disconnected from her brain.

“You want his job?”

