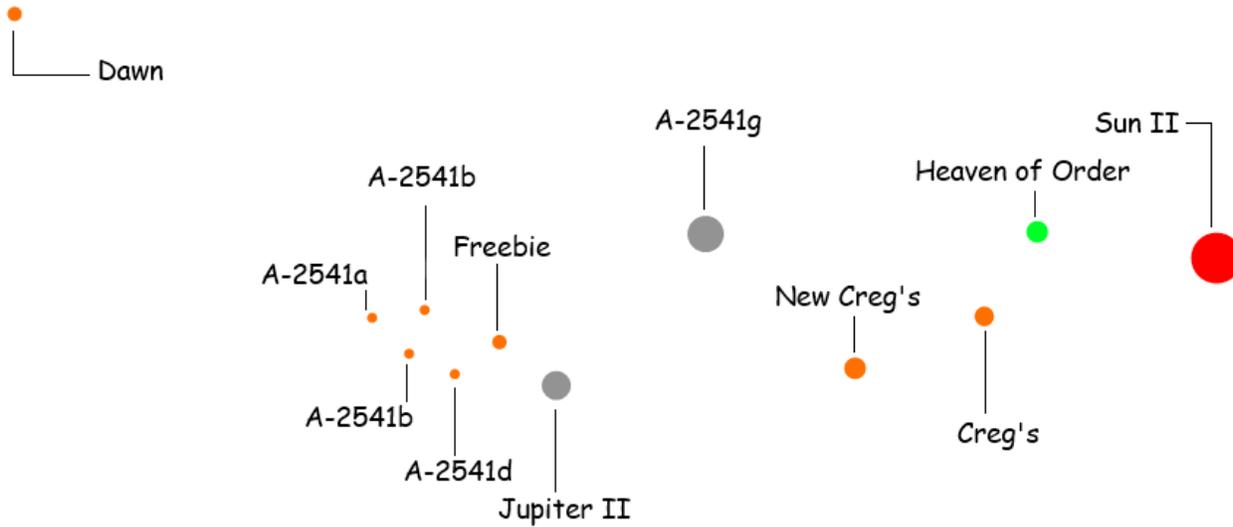


[Hermit arc] [2] [Serenade to Death] [9488]

Rev 2.4

This story runs parallel with [Hermit arc] [1] [Sslien] [9488]

Two clusters; Andromeda cluster chart



Green dot represents terran planets.
Black dot represents uninhabited planets
Gray dot represents gas planets, thus uninhabited.
Orange dot represents barren planets.

Dawn is a rogue planet and does not orbit any celestial body.
Heaven of Order (Later New Earth) has striking similarities to Earth except it has no ocean.

"Rrrrrrrrr -"

"Rrrrrrrrr -"

Phone was ringing in a dark room. However, no one seemed to be present.

"Rrrrrrrrr -"

"Rrrrrrrrr -"

In darkness, someone's groan sounded. Someone desperately reached for a lamp by his bed and turned on its light.

A man was struggling to answer the phone.

"Hello -," He frowned as light pierced his eyes. "This is Ninno."

His narrowed eyes soon gradually opened up widely. His sleepy eyes came to a sudden focus of terror.

"I will be right there."

He jumped out of his bed and rushed to his closet to dress. His hair was disheveled and his face needed a shave, but he didn't seem to care.

Ninno rushed to a hospital. When he reached where he was told to go, he was out of breath.

It was a sanitary room where recently dead people were being kept securely before they receive either their funeral or else.

"Mr. Ninno, I've been waiting for you."

A male doctor was writing up a report by a corpse. The corpse was covered with a white sheet.

"Please -," The doctor stepped aside for Ninno. "I need your identification."

Ninno took out his wallet from his jacket and showed him his ID. After then, the doctor was ready to lift the white sheet gently.

"Please verify the body," He said.

As he lifted the sheet, a pale, lifeless and peaceful, female face was revealed.

Ninno's face also became pale. He looked at the pale face as if he didn't believe what he was seeing. He tried to touch the face but the doctor stopped his hands.

"No, sir. Can you verify?"

Ninno sighed. "Yes, she is my wife," He said with a shaking voice.

"Thank you," The doctor responded with a nod. "Are you alright?"

"Of course, not ..."

Ninno was taken to an office. Two policemen were by a person who appeared to be a homeless.

"Sir, we believe this person is the suspect," A policeman pointed at him and informed him.

Ninno glared at the person. He was dirty and was wearing rugged clothes. He also smelled bad. His face was filled with fear and confusion.

"There were others as well, I believe. But we were unable to catch them," The policeman added.

"What is that supposed to mean?"

"Sir, we believe that your wife was raped to death."

Ninno's face started to fill with anger as well as agony. His wife told him that she'd be late since she was going to meet her old friends. And this happened. His life was perfectly fine until tonight. He had a career and so did his wife. They had no income issues and they purchased a house just half a season ago.

He wasn't thinking straight. As he gritted his teeth, he pulled out his energy blade.

"Hic- !" The suspect jumped out of fear as well as his chair and crawled to a corner while the policemen dashed toward Ninno to restrain him.

"How dare you!" Ninno bellowed.

"Sir!"

The policemen grabbed Ninno's arms and stop him. However, he was a class A hyper human and the policemen were average people. There was no way for the policemen to stop him.

He howled and raised his blade.

"Help me! Save me!" The suspect found himself in a corner. He was blubbering.
"Nooo!"

Ninno's blade went through his head to his chest. The suspect's eyes became loose and blood was shattered all over.

He was soon charged with a first degree murder. His lawyer insisted that he was not himself and anger had gotten the best of him. The overall situation appeared to be in his favor. However, it still did not change a fact that he murdered a

person in cold blood. Even at its best, he would still be sentenced for up to a hundred years according to his lawyer.

“I did everything I can,” His lawyer told him through a comm. channel. Ninno was confined in a jail, waiting for his verdict. “The verdict will be in your favor, but still you will be sentenced for at least 55 years, up to 100 years.”

Ninno couldn't care less and loosely replied, “Yeah, whatever. Thanks though.”

“Listen, I do have an alternative deal if you would like to hear.”

Ninno sneered. “Thanks, but no thanks. I will rot here. I feel better being in here.”

“I see.”

However, few days later, his lawyer visited him again. This time, he visited him in person. There were two men in black behind him.

“Ninno,” The lawyer spoke to him who was sulking in a corner.

“...Yeah?”

“These two men would like to speak to you.”

Ninno didn't bother even glancing at them. “What for?”

“It's regarding the alternative deal I've told you repeatedly about.”

“I told you I wasn't interested.”

“I did tell them, but they insisted.”

At this point, one of the black men pulled the lawyer aside. “I will take this from here,” He told the lawyer. “Your job is done, mister.”

Shrugging, the lawyer responded, “As you wish.” The lawyer, knowing fully well that his role in this matter was over, proceeded to an exit and left the scene.

“Mr. Ninno,” The man in black spoke with a firm voice.

“What.”

“We have a deal for you.”

“Keep that to yourself. I will stay here.”

The man in black glanced at the other man in black. He nodded at him and he turned back to Ninno.

“We can make your verdict far worse than it should be.”

Still looking uninterested, Ninno sneered and said, “Fine. I will rot here forever.”

“Mr. Ninno, we are trying to give you a chance to avenge your wife. You can rot here but you can also go out there and exact revenge.”

Ninno deeply sighed. “Why won’t you just leave me alone? Can you not see a suffering man when you see one?” He just wanted to be left alone. That was all truly he wanted. He had no intention to plead guilty and he had no intention to get out with some shady deals. He just wanted to rot.

“Mr. Ninno, I fully understand what you are going through, but you will regret if you choose to rot here. Again, I do understand your sentiment here. You want to rot here, I get it. But listen to me. You will soon want to be out of here and, when you do want to be out of here, you won’t have the chance we are trying to give you.”

The man’s persuasion seemed to have some effect on Ninno. He slowly raised his dropped head and was in thoughts.

He eventually asked them, “Just what do you want me to do when you get me out anyway?”

“Kill anyone you want. Of course, there will be some criteria on who but you won’t mind that much.”

“What the hell does that mean?”

“Mr. Ninno, you do know who raped your wife to death, do you not? It was a group of beggars AKA members of the Gypsies guild.”

And then the other man in black further back added, “We are giving you a license to kill them. Kill only beggars. No one else, but I reckon that will be good enough for you.”

Ninno’s eyebrows twitched at the word “kill”. A license to kill. Kill only beggars. Kill every god damned fuckers who messed with his wife.

“Are you speaking truth? A license to kill? Hard to believe you.”

He was shown a decree personally signed by Richard Bau. It was indeed literally a license to kill. There was an empty line next to his signature and one of the men in black pointed at the empty spot.

“Your name and your signature go there. Once you write your name down and sign it, the decree will become active,” He explained.

Ninno had no choice but to believe. Even so he hesitated. At this moment, one of them took out a pen from his pocket.

“You sign it right now and you get out right now,” He said. “It’s that easy.”

In the end, he sighed the decree and he was released immediately.

“You are free now,” They told him. “And you are also free to kill them. Law enforcements may be called in and even arrest you but you won’t be charged and will be set free. But we do advice you not to get caught since getting caught wastes time.”

The men in black called a cab for Ninno to get home. When he was about to get into the cab, one of the men in black stopped him and handed him over a sealed implant package.

“Mr. Ninno, you are to install this implant. It has been tuned to a special channel we’ve set.” Having said so, he handed him a paper which had a name and an address.

“You have an appointment tomorrow. He is a doctor and he will install the implant for you for free of charge. Go there any time tomorrow.”

Taking the implant package and the paper, he got into the cab and his long day was over.

When he woke up next morning, he wasn’t entirely sure whether everything that had occurred was just a big and long nightmare. He had a faint hope that everything was perhaps just a dream and perhaps calling out for his wife might actually confirm that it was indeed a bad dream.

He called out his wife’s name repeatedly and there was only silence. Still, he was skeptical that everything had indeed happened.

“Let it be a dream... Please let it be a dream...” He whispered to himself while he dragged himself out of his bed.

He shouted his wife’s name again and there was no response. As he went into a bathroom, he saw the implant package he was given as well as the piece of paper.

Covering eyes, he sobbed for a brief moment; it was no dream. Everything had indeed happened and his wife wasn’t coming back.

He calmed down fast enough, thinking that perhaps he was still in his nightmare. Looking at himself in a mirror, he found his disheveled hair and a face that needed to be shaved badly. After taking a shower and giving himself a shave, he dressed up and went to see the doctor he was told to visit.

The sealed package he was given contained a small, 1cm, comm. implant that was tuned for a specific frequency. Comm. implant was common in the era and many chose to install it. It didn't require a big and long operation to have it installed and, once installed, it would replace any communication devices one may have to carry. The implant was also powered by carbohydrate from blood and did not need any external power sources.

The operation was done in 10 minutes and, as soon as he was out of the clinic, he received a message. He touched the spot where the implant was installed to receive the message, which was right below his left ear.

As soon as he touched the spot, a voice sounded in his left year.

“Mr. Ninno, I see that you have it installed.”

“Who's this?”

“That is not important.”

“Fuck you. It IS important.” And Ninno turned the communication off at once. He wasn't a fool. He knew exactly what they wanted when he was shown the decree. They wanted to use him which he didn't exactly mind as long as he could get to kill those who murdered his wife, but he wasn't going to be a puppet.

He was being notified that he was getting a call but he ignored it. He was free and he had his own plans.

Knowing that the men in black could chase him down at any moment, he quickly moved out of his house. He wasn't planning to come back to the house and

simply left there. The house had a mortgage but his account had enough money for 2 seasons of payment.

He had only few things with him. He brought his energy blade and few cash cards. That was pretty much all he brought aside from his clothes.

Taking a good look at his house for the last time, he entered a cab. He was leaving Heaven of Order ASAP. If he kept ignoring the men in black, chances were that he was going to be arrested one way or another. He planned to turn rouge once he got off the planet.

He was going to exact revenge like the men in black suggested him to but he wasn't going to kill those they were going to ask him to kill.

When he arrived at a shuttle port, he saw the same two men in black waiting for him at the entrance. Putting his sunglasses on, he casually walked toward them.

“Short time no see,” He mocked them boldly with glee.

“I believed we had an agreement,” One of them told him calmly.

“We do. And I am leaving the planet to proceed with our agreement.”

“You ignored our contacts.”

Ninno placed his left hand on his waist. “No, I did not ignore you. I had some weirdo contacting me though. ‘Our’, you say? You should have told me, you know?”

The men in black were clearly skeptical of him. “If you want to go ahead,” He told Ninno. “Answer the call in front of us.”

He could have simply run past them but they would lock down the shuttleport. Therefore, that wasn't a good idea. He realized he was left with no choice and touched a spot below his left ear.

“About fucking time you picked the call,” The same voice he heard earlier spoke to him. His voice was clearly frustrated.

“I ask you again,” Ninno told him calmly. “Who is this?”

The voice growled and answered, “Fine, you made your point.”

He identified himself as a member of “Zealots”. It was a codename for a secret service which Andromeda council recently formed.

“We represent the council’s desire,” He said with an obviously displeased voice. “We are no common thugs you think we are.”

Looking lazily over the two men in black in front of him, Ninno disagreed. To his eyes, they were the same “thugs”. Nevertheless, he wasn’t going to say his opinion out loud at the moment.

“Alright, Mr. Zealot. What do you want from me?”

“We want you to follow our orders.”

“That,” Ninno started with a raised tone. “Was not the deal I agreed. I was told that I’d be free.”

“You will be free to do whatever you want, but first you must do us a favor. Give and take. It’s not hard to understand.”

Gritting in silence, Ninno stared lazily at the two men again.

“What favor?” He asked.

They apparently wanted him to kill someone on Heaven of Order. As soon as Ninno heard that, he walked away from the entrance which the two men in black were blocking.

“Are you asking me to assassinate someone?” He exclaimed in silence as he made sure that no one was around him. “Are you fucking serious? Don’t you have, like, a dedicated team to do that?”

“I am not going to answer your questions. The fact remains that we freed you from a sentence that would have cost you at least fifty years. Therefore, we expect a certain payment prior we set you free.”

Fucking motherfuckers...

“And if I refuse?”

There was a short moment of uneasy silence.

“You are going back and your sentence will be tripled.”

Ninno was a security guard at a research facility. He was currently on a paid leave due to the trial but he wasn’t coming back to Heaven of Order once he leave.

“Two millions,” He said.

“What?”

“Two millions and you let me go.” Ninno could hear a laughter from the comm.

“Bribing isn’t going to work, mister.”

But there was a confident smile on Ninno’s face as he answered, “Oh, I think it will work.”

“It won’t work,” He replied with an assured voice. Regardless, Ninno explained his plan.

“I will meet you at some place quiet, like a park. And then-”

“I said it is not going to work.”

Regardless, he continued anyway.

“I will give you a cash card of two million credits. I will knock you out and you can report me however you want.”

The agent repeated his stance, “It’s not going to work, mister.”

The confident smile was still on his face and he raised his voice. “It’s fucking two millions. Do you have two millions?”

This time, the agent remained silent.

“How often do you get a chance to get this amount of money? This is literally a guaranteed lottery,” Ninno continued on and the agent remained silent. “Two million is all I have and I am giving it to you in a cash card. You can report me however you like after that. Hell, you can even brand me a traitor if you dare.”

Ninno made a pause and the agent was still silent on the channel. Taking a deep breath, Ninno told him, “Two million if you let me leave this planet.”

Folding arms, Ninno stood idly on a fairly busy street. There were a lot of traffic considering he was in front of a shuttle port. People with luggage were moving in and out of the main entrance with haste. Everyone, except Ninno, was moving on the street.

“Deal,” The agent replied at last. “I will tell you where to go and we will meet there.”

Which happened to be a small park nearby the shuttleport. He could easily spot an agent because he was dressed in black. He could also see two other agents further ahead.

Ninno walked straight toward the agent who noticed him. He tried to warn him not to approach but Ninno was walking too fast for him to catch the right moment.

“Ready for a lottery payout?” Ninno bluntly asked him.

“Fine, just hand it over and knock me out. The two agents around me will make sure that the cash is recovered.”

“Sure, sure, whatever you say.”

Having said so, Ninno swiftly drew out his blade and pierce it through his belly. It happened so fast that it took a moment for the agent to realize what really happened.

Progressively frowning and turning pale at the same time, he glared at Ninno who was beaming a wicked grin back at him. Twisting his blade that was already through his belly which caused more bleedings, he whispered to him.

“This is what you get for being naïve.”

The two agents, noticing something was amiss, rushed toward the scene.

“Tell them that everything is fine unless you want me to cut you in half.”

The agent, now bleeding from his mouth, quickly told others over comm. that he was dying and needed immediate assistance.

“So be it,” Ninno whispered as he pulled his blade upwards, cutting the agent in half. “So be it!” He shouted loudly as he dashed toward one of the approaching agents and slashed him down. The last agent startled by the sudden turn of events and turned around to flee but he was cut down in the end by Ninno.

It was a park that was hardly used by anyone, and therefore, no one was around to report the event. Deactivating his blade, Ninno turned around and rushed to the shuttleport. He had to leave the planet before he became wanted.

His ticket was to Creg’s and, when he successfully arrived there, he expected wanted posters with his image all over the area. But there was none. The security seemed to be normal and there didn’t appear to be any extra guards. Regardless, he wasn’t about to get his guard down and purchased a ticket for Freedom colony

from there. However, he was told that he need to go to New Creg's for the ferry to the colony. Apparently, there was no ferry route from Creg's, yet.

And booking a flight to New Creg's was difficult due to lack of seats. He was forced to stay on Creg's for nearly a week before a seat was available.

Creg's and New Creg's were two more developed planets in Inner Andromeda cluster. Housing and living expense were significantly lower on those two planets, and new immigrants flocked in from Heaven of Order or from Smuggler's Den. Those coming from Heaven of Order was taking a step down to save credits in long term. And those coming from Smuggler's Den was taking a massive upgrade in their living standards.

Having been born and raised on Heaven of Order, this was Ninno's first time visiting Creg's and his first impression of the planet wasn't too bad. There was certainly a lack of skyscrapers but he felt the planet was developed well enough that he wouldn't mind living here which was the exact moment he frowned. His anger was quickly revived by the thoughts that his life would never be the same now.

He had a family and financial plans all laid out with his wife. But now there was nothing. Growling in silence, he entered a dark alley by a restaurant in the planet downtown where he spotted about six people in ragged hooded robes. They were gathered around one of garbage disposal module and was digging around food wastes. He noticed how dirty their hands were and imaged how his wife must have been violated by their dirty hands.

"Are you gypsies?" He demanded and was answered by none. Thus, he repeated with a louder voice. "Are you gypsies?" And again he wasn't answered. Gritting, he pulled out his blade and activating it, he declared, "So be it, motherfuckers. Just die."

He showed no hesitation and cut down the six people who fell without any form of resist. Panting violently, he was looking down at the bodies in a large pool of blood. They did not scream or anything. They simply ... died when he slashed them.

Henceforth, he started to visit every alley he could find and searched for gypsies, and when he found them, he asked them whether they were gypsies and cut them down subsequently. When the day was over, he had already murdered over thirty people. None of them fought back which begged a question.

“Did they really kill my wife?” He asked himself on a balcony of a hotel. He was positive that those he cut down were gypsies. Yet their passive behaviors even when facing impending death indicated that they weren’t the kind of folks who’d aggressively chase anyone and even rape. Granted, there could be bad seeds among gypsies. Still, he had to wonder...

It was night, and Ninno was in a bath robe, looking up on the sky from the hotel balcony. He had few shots of tequila and was feeling tipsy. The night sky of Creg’s was similar to the night sky of Heaven of Order. But there was a thin hue of dark green on the sky along with glimmering stars.

He had been married to his wife for thirteen years. They met for the first time at work. He was a security guard and she was a white collar worker at the company. Their relationship remained stoic for few years before they dated. Their dating relationship was rocky at the beginning as they broke up a few times before finally committing to each other. Their main topic for arguments was their family plan where Ninno did not want any child but she wanted two. Eventually, they agreed to have one child which yet to happen and never going to happen.

Sighing deeply, Ninno dragged himself onto a bed and started to snore soon after.

There was big news headline stating that tens of people were found dead in numerous alleys. They found no evidence of possible suspects but did claim that it appeared to be a work of a hyper human. However, there was no lockdown of the city or big new articles regarding a serial killer. There was the news and that was it. Nobody seemed to care about the gypsies, and Ninno continued to slaughter

gypsies until it was the day of departing. By time, he left Creg's he had killed a total of fifty four gypsies and that wasn't still enough to warrant any lockdown.

The Gypsies guild was, by its nature, at odds with governments. They weren't exactly welcome in United Sol. They were at bad terms with Freedom colony. Andromeda union tolerated them to some degree but they did not provide any kind of protection or civil rights.

All of above conflicts were primarily because no gypsy member paid proper taxes. For Freedom colony, Lila considered them a score sight. For United Sol and Andromeda union, they were virtually nothing because they refused to pay taxes and refused to obtain citizenship ID cards.

Therefore, even when Ninno killed over fifty of them, the local authority on the planet did not react. They did act at first, which was why it made to headline news, but there was no further action after that.

And for better or worse, it worked out for Ninno as he left the planet with bloody hands.

Upon arriving on New Creg's, he immediately attempted to book for a flight to Freedom colony. He was going to the colony because he believed that their HQ was located on the colony. But the ticket was hard to come by apparently.

"Our current flights are booked, completely," A ticket seller woman told him kindly. "The next available seat is 60 days from now."

"Can I book that seat then?"

"No, sir, our policy dictates that no tickets may be sold unless it's within 30 days."

"What kind of policy is that...," He mumbled. He wasn't angry however because he was going to look for another way, smuggling so to speak, because he could not envision staying on the planet for a whole month.

New Creg's was the last fully developed planet within Inner Andromeda. The planet also acted as a heart of space ferry networks due to its location. In many ways, the planet was similar to Creg's. It had light green sky and had a similar gravity as Creg's. Its population was similar also.

For Ninno, staying on the planet for too long was problematic. He wasn't certain why he wasn't being chased down after killing three agents but he was certain that he'd be chased down at some point soon. And New Creg's was the last lawful planet in the cluster. If he could get off the planet as soon as possible, his chance of being chased down would decrease a lot.

In fact, if he could reach Freebie trade outpost, he would be mostly free. Therefore, he asked a ticket for Freebie trade outpost.

"I am sorry, but you need a merchant license to access the trade outpost. Do you have a license?"

"The hell? You need a license?"

"The trade outpost is a restricted zone. There is a strong navy presence due to the pirates."

Sighing and gritting, Ninno bid good-bye to the ticket seller and left the shuttle port.

On this particular day, he felt like drinking and visited a bar in downtown of the city. Having to wait until sun went down, he saw the lively night life of the city. Couples were merrily hanging out on streets and the shops were fully in stock to display whatever they were trying to sell. Bright neon signs and busy chatters from the crowd.

Ninno recalled he used to be one of them on streets not long ago. At the same, he realized he could no longer go back. There was too much blood on his hands.

"Who cares," He consoled himself as he walked into the first bar he could find.

“Your ID?”

Two big men were standing by its entrance and asked Ninno his ID.

“The hell? What for?” Ninno aggressively talked back, feeling offended.

“Your ID please.”

“Do I look like a kid to you?!” Ninno exclaimed. “I am seven four year old for fuck’s sake!”

The big men looked at each other and reluctantly let him pass.

Taking a stool by a bar counter, Ninno cursed them rather loudly. One of the bartenders who was stylishly cleaning glasses inquired him.

“Something trouble you?”

“What?” Ninno exclaimed as he unexpected the conversation.

“Something trouble you?” The bartender stoically repeated.

“Nah, give me a shot of tequila.”

“On it,” The bartender answered indifferently.

While he was waiting for his tequila to arrive, his left leg was continuously bouncing up and down and his arms were restless along with his eyes paying careful attention to his surroundings. The bar wasn’t quite crowded at the moment and no one took a notice of Ninno’s restlessness.

“Something trouble you?” The bartender asked again as he slid a shot of tequila skillfully to Ninna who grabbed it and finished it at once.

“One more shot.”

Asking no further, the bartender nodded. After having five or so shots, Ninno became tipsy and it was when he started to talk.

“Yeah, I am troubled. Big time,” He said bluntly and repeated, “Big fucking time.”

“What did you do?”

“I killed a whole bunch of people along with some policemen, I guess. You can report me if you want. I couldn’t care less.”

The bartender retained his stoic expression on his face still and asked him, “Is that what is troubling you or is it something else?”

Ninno narrowed his eyes and glared at the bartender. “Who are you?” He demanded.

He shrugged weakly while retaining his stoic expression. “I am just a bartender although I do trade info.”

Ninno heard of such bartenders who sold information for certain prices. He knew he needed keywords to be able to access their services. He certainly did not know any keywords.

“Why are you telling this to me?”

The bartender raised his index finger. “One more shot?”

Growling, Ninno responded, “Fine.”

As the bartender prepared a shot of tequila, he explained to Ninno.

“You should know that you are currently wanted by the council.”

Ninno didn’t seem too surprised but he had to question why the police wasn’t after him.

“That is because the council placed a bounty on you to independent mercenaries. For some reason, they did not want the authority to deal with you which means only one thing. You’ve killed someone they wished to hide.”

“The zealots, they claimed,” Ninno said.

“Ah, the zealots. That explains.” The bartender slid a new shot of tequila to him.

“Who are they?”

“Just some secret police stuff they came up with. And apparently not good enough to deserve their title seeing how you got the better of them.”

Ninno snickered in response. He did get the better of them.

“So, what’s going to happen to me now?”

“You probably can’t get off the planet now. I saw the bounty this morning, so you are pretty much stuck here and mercenaries will come after you.”

He recalled how he was denied of tickets at the shuttleport. At that time, he had no idea that he was denied intentionally.

“I see. Why have you told me this? Are you expecting some form of payment from this?” Having said so, he placed his hand on hilt of his deactivated energy blade which was equipped on his belt.

“Woah, woah.” The bartender took few steps backwards in defensive gesture. “I am not asking you to pay. Calm down.”

“Speak up, what do you want from me?”

He stammered and sweated. “I, I just want some info from you.”

“What kind of info?”

“Simply tell me what really happened.”

“Hah,” Ninno snickered. “Why would you even care?”

“It’s not about that. We sell information. We also seek truth in events. The council gave us their version of story in the bounty mission info, but only a fool would believe their side of story. What is yours?”

Slowly, Ninno took his hands off the hilt of his energy blade. Placing back his hand on the counter, he demanded, "Give me one more shot of tequila."

Nodding, the bartender quickly readied a shot and slid it to him.

Sighing frustrated, Ninno told him his story, how it all started and how he was arrested and subsequently freed by some decree, how he killed the gypsies and how he eventually ended up on New Creg's.

"Quite an adventure," The bartender remarked.

"Adventure my ass," Ninno muttered. "My life is ruined and you call that an adventure?"

"It could be worse," He told him rather casually.

"Could be worse? What the hell do you mean by that?"

"You are not captured. Look at the bright side."

Gritting, Ninno was about to talk back but he remained silent. Sighing deeply, he stood up. "I guess I am done."

"Do you need a way out?"

Ninno thought the bartender was asking whether he needed someone to guide him out since he had many shots of tequila. "I can walk fine, thanks."

"No, I mean do you need a way out of the planet?"

Pausing, Ninno looked back at the bartender who was casually cleaning glassware.

"Who are you? I don't believe you told me your name."

"I am just a bartender. I don't think you told me your name, either." Although he knew Ninno's name already from the bounty post.

“You should know my name since you recognized me.”

“Fair enough,” The bartender grinned. “So, you need a way out?”

Ninno turned around and walked back to the counter, sitting down on the same stool.

“For how much?”

“25.000 credits. To Freedom colony.”

“How can I trust you that you won’t run away with the cash?”

“The nature of this business is based on trust. If you don’t or can’t trust me, there will be no deal, and you will be stuck here and will be hunted down.”

There was more than just trust on the line actually. For Ninno, 25.000 credits meant almost his entire credits he current had on hand. He was certain that his bank account was frozen and he didn’t have much in his account anyway.

“20.000 credits.” Ninno attempted to haggle but the bartender was firm on his stance.

“Listen, I have 26.000 credits. I can’t live off just a thousand credits, so cut me a slack.”

“Fine, 22.000 credits.”

Ninno fired a frustrated gaze at him but eventually he accepted the discount. After writing him off a cash card for the amount, he was told to wait for a contact and that he needed to stay low.

But staying low wasn’t in Ninno’s mind when he clashed with gypsies. This time, however, the gypsies fought back. In fact, the gypsies were waiting for him to attack them and stroke back.

Dodging a sonic blast fired by an ESP in a hooded robe, Ninno quickly posed to strike back.

“I didn’t know you knew how to fight back!” He ridiculed them as he pulled out his blade and activated it.

“We mean you no harm. Alas, you started it,” The ESP claimed.

“Hah!” Ninno uttered with a laughter. “You mean no harm? Don’t fuck with me here! I am the victim!”

The ESP seemed to have taken his words sincerely and responded a moment later. “What have we done to you?”

Not wanting to even recall the nightmare again, Ninno dashed toward the hooded ESP instead of answering. Casting a barrier, the ESP withstood his slash and levitated himself out of the alley. However, instead of chasing him, Ninno cut down few other gypsies in his reach.

“Stop!” The hooded ESP bellowed as he quickly descended down back to the alley. “They have done nothing to you!”

“As if I care!” Ninno shouted back while cutting down the last gypsy in the alley. His actions clearly angered the ESP in question and he pulled down his hood, revealing who appeared to be a middle-age man with a short brown hair, half of which were gray hairs.

“Why are you doing this?!” He demanded an answer. “You must have a reason!”

Looking over six dead bodies in a pool of blood, Ninno cast a satisfied gaze over the corpses. Then he glared at the ESP. “Who might you be?”

Blatantly ignoring Ninno’s question, he pushed his own question. “Why are you doing this?!”

Neither of them was willing to talk, and naturally they resumed to fight. It began with Ninno throwing a plasma knife toward him which was blocked by the ESP’s barrier. While the knife was in the air, Ninno dashed and ran on a wall to get

behind of the ESP in order to strike from back. ESP's barrier was, in general, a focus-base shield, meaning the other side of barrier tended to be weaker. He was hoping to break through the barrier which didn't turn out as he planned as the ESP turned around just as he blocked his knife.

“Why don't you just die!” Bellowing, Ninno repeatedly slashed the ESP's barrier non-stop for a minute, but the ESP held firm. And when Ninno had to stop because he was out of breath, the ESP stroke back by blasting a sonic wave to him which knocked him off the ground. At the same time, the ESP cast a soccer-ball sized fireball right at Ninno's chest which exploded violently on contact.

Having fallen to the ground, facing down, Ninno stayed down, and the ESP approached him cautiously. When he was close enough, Ninno rose his arm with his blade, piercing the ESP's thigh.

“Rookie mistake,” He snickered as he beamed a wicked smile at the ESP. Energy blades were basically highly active plasma particles. Therefore, the entrance and exit wounds on the ESP started to sizzle and he screamed in pain, tumbling as a result.

Pulling out his blade, Ninno stood up and slashed the ESP at once who activated a barrier as a last ditch effort but the barrier was weak. Ninno's blade smashed it with ease and the blade continued its trajectory, making a deep cut on the ESP's chest.

“Time to die,” Said Ninno who aimed his blade at the ESP's throat. “By the way, my name is Ninno.”

The ESP in heavily labored breath smiled despite of excruciating pain he was under.

“What are you smiling about?”

The ESP did not answer but Ninno found out soon enough. A group of policemen were dashing toward the scene, shouting, “What is going on here?!”

“Crap...” Turning around, Ninno disappeared into the dark alley and the policemen chased except one who looked after the wounded ESP.

It took Ninno a long time to lose the policemen, but he did close them and returned to safely to his hotel. For the remaining days until he received a call from the bartender to meet up at a designated spot, he was unable to leave his hostel due to increased amount of patrols. In addition, he was seeing who appeared to be mercenaries curiously wandering around his hotel.

In darkness, Ninno was swiftly running toward a secured door where a man in a bartender attire was standing. He punched in a passcode just as Ninno arrived and the two disappeared into the building.

They were apparently inside of a ground docking bay where goods were being loaded and unloaded into freighters. One of the freighters was loading cattle and that’s where the bartender pointed at.

“I’ve arranged a spot for you in that freighter,” He said while pointing still. “I will say upfront. It isn’t going to be clean or comfortable but you will be able to reach Freedom colony without hassle.”

Ninno didn’t quite want to imagine what kind of “spot” he arranged for him. The freighter had its rear cargo doors open and the interior was a mess. There were feces everywhere on its floor and groups of cattle were being lead into the cargo bay by few workers who manipulated robot arms from afar.

“What a ride for fucking 22.000 credits,” Ninno muttered although he expected this sort of solution. Sighing, he continued to mutter, “Fine, so be it.”

“Good luck to you.”

“What’s your name anyway? I don’t believe you’ve told me.”

The bartender gave out a defiant gaze as he spoke, "I am just someone who wants to make a change before I die."

"Right..." Shrugging, Ninno asked once more. "And your name?"

"It's Kerrard. Go now."

Ninno's spot was deep inside of the cargo bay in a corner. A cage was kindly arranged for him with a relative cleanness. Sighing and shaking his head, wondering what the hell he was doing, he entered the cage and sat down. There weren't feces in this cage but it did smell foul.

At one point, he could hear chatter of two people from a distance.

"How's the business?"

"The same as usual. Could be better. Could be worse. You?"

It was a casual chatter.

"Meh, my days are always same. But I suppose it could be worse."

The voices were getting closer and Ninno wasn't sure whether he was scammed at this point. He believed they were inspectors.

Eventually, the two people was walking by Ninno's cage. One of them seemed shocked to see him in the cage.

"What in the worl-"

However, his exclaim was cut off by the other's fake cough. Ninno could see him handing over a cash card to the inspector skillfully.

Smoothly, he continued, "What in the world. The cargo bay is so clean! All green."

And like that, the two moved away from the cage and eventually left the cargo bay. And soon Ninno could hear the cargo bay being closed.

And for the next three weeks, he stayed in the cage, mostly. There was no bathroom for a human to use. Therefore, he had to do his mandatory stuff elsewhere away from the cage. Maintaining hygiene also proved to be quite a challenge.

Needless to say, when the freighter arrived at Freedom colony, Ninno was smelling as foul as the cattle. And with his remaining credits, he threw away his old clothes and purchased a new set of wardrobe which were black leather pants and leather jacket to go with along with a white sleeveless shirt. He also paid a visit to an exquisite restaurant for feasting.

And in a day, Ninno's credits were down to less than few hundred. With his remaining money, he rented a motel room and took a shower and checked out.

He had a lot of time to think things over while he was in the cage for a few weeks. He had been mad ever since his wife's passing and hadn't been really himself, but spending a few weeks in the cage gave him the time to think things over.

His hands were bloody and like or not he had murdered too many people. He never believed that they were innocents. He never believed in the concept of being innocent in the first place. His brief was that, one way or another, everyone had sins. But he did accept the fact that the gypsies weren't likely the ones who raped his wife to death. Their stoic behaviors to everyone else indicated that they would have never bothered his wife to begin with.

Thus, he came to a conclusion that it was just some thugs or homeless who got the better of his wife and that he was subsequently used by the "zealots" for their own agenda.

Either way, it was too late for him to go back. And therefore...

He continued to kill the gypsies on Freedom colony. He no longer had enough credits to feed himself or let alone rent a room. Therefore, he continued to murder every gypsy he could find in alleys.

And...

“Pitiful scoundrels!” He exclaimed with a sneer as he saw a group of gypsies dashing toward a garbage module. “You have no place in the society.”

Turning his energy blade on, he dashed toward the beggars who were too busy digging through the food wastes to run or even dodge. He showed no hesitation in cutting them down and two beggars were fatally wounded as they fell backwards. The other beggars silently attempted to tend the wounded, trying to size their massive bleeding by simply applying pressure while completely ignoring Ninno who was about to cut them down as well. When he raised his blade to slash, his raised arm was enveloped in flame with woosh.

“What the?!” Uttering, he took his leather jack off and threw it away. “Who’s there?!”

A young woman came out of shadow. “You must be the bug. I am here to finish you,” She declared boldly with a confident voice.

She did not look like any gypsies he had run into. She was wearing a ragged robe but her bold and confident body language indicated that she wasn’t a gypsy.

He let out of a laugh in response. “Hah! The gypsies hired an ESP!”

“Let’s see how long you can laugh.”

The young woman pointed at him with her index finger and small orbs of fire were fired on him which Ninno did his best to deflect as many as possible. However, the fire orbs exploded on contact. Since deflecting appeared to be futile, he instead started to dodge.

“Can you still laugh now?” The young woman ridiculed him.

“You bitch!” He dashed swiftly sideway and started to run on a wall to get around her. It was the same tactic he employed against an ESP he ran into on New Creg’s.

Even before Ssilen could turn around, he was already behind her. He attempted to break her neck but his hands came in contact with black fire and his fingers were gone before he knew what happened.

There wasn’t any pain. His fingers were simply gone as if erased.

His eyes filled with doubts. His fingers were gone but there was no blood. His hands looked as if he never had fingers to begin with. He had never seen anything like so before, let alone black fire. Having lost fingers, therefore losing the ability to wield his blade, he jumped back and stared at his fingerless hands for a moment.

‘A class S ESP?’ was what came to his mind. If so, he stood no chance. Turning around at once, he dashed to get out of the alley.

“You aren’t going anywhere!” The woman bellowed as a fire whip expanded at lightning speed from her hand and grappled his neck. Immediately, he started to choke and, because he lost all of his fingers, his desperate attempt to free himself looked awkward.

The fire whip slowly started to burn his shirt as he was being forcefully dragged back to her.

“So, what do you have to say for yourself?” Sneering, she spoke. She wasn’t exactly asking him who was choking and being burnt alive at the same time.

“Wh...atever...,” He managed to get a word out before he passed out.

..... He was on his bed. He did not know why he was on his bed. The room was completely silent and he realized he was in his underwear. When he was about to get himself up, his phone started to ring.

Rrrrrrrr-

Rrrrrrrr-

Vacantly staring at the phone next to his bed, he didn't pick up the phone and let it ring.

Rrrrrrrr-

Rrrrrrrr-

He wanted the phone to stop ringing but it refused to stop ringing.

Rrrrrrrr-

Rrrrrrrr-

Eventually, he reached out to the phone with a slightly shaking hand. His hand paused just before pressing a button to answer.

Rrrrrrrr-

Rrrrrrrr-

In the end, his index finger pressed a button and he answered, "Hello, this is Ninno."

And it all began gain.

When he woke up, the woman was standing before him and he found himself in a circle of black fire. He thought he was dreaming but looking at his fingerless hands, he realized this was no dream.

"No, it's still a dream. This is a fucking nightmare," He whispered to himself. And then laughing hysterically, he told her aggressively, "What now, bitch? Should have simply killed me."

The woman placed one of her hands on her waist and spoke, "What's your story? I doubt you started to kill the beggars just because you suddenly wanted."

Indeed, but it was a long story and he no longer wanted to do anything anymore. Ever since smuggling himself to Freedom colony, he wanted to die. Committing suicide wasn't his cup of tea. Therefore, he intended to get killed by someone.

He shrugged. "I thought you knew the story? My wife was killed by them, so I am killing them. Ashes to ashes, dust to dust."

"Yes, I know that story but there must be more."

"There is nothing more. I am going to kill them until I am stopped."

"... You do know where you stand now, don't you? Your life is about to end. What is your name by the way?"

He shrugged again. "Ninno is the name, and yes, I do know where I stand." Slowly, he got up. "This black fire... Is it the same thing that took my fingers away?"

She responded with a nod. "Yes, it is called Hellfire. It consumes matters and returns them to nothingness."

Ninno beamed a peaceful smile. "Good, finally, at last, I shall be free from this nightmare." For him, he decided that he could no longer distinguish between dreams and reality. And whether this situation was reality did not matter to him. He simply wanted to end it.

"What are you-" Even before she could finish or even react, he attempted to walk out of the circle and his body was enveloped by black fire. In seconds, his body crumbled like a sand castle would and his black ashes vanished into thin air.

The woman narrowed her eyes doubtfully and stared at the spot vacantly.

Sighing, she said to herself, "You won this round, mister."

Fin