

the dregs had bothered to show. We had two idiots in rental armor who, despite what they'd told me over the com, had clearly never been outside of the central Terran systems, and one kid whose "combat experience" turned out to be a medical discharge from Republic Starfleet boot camp. The fourth was a veteran with a solid record I'd had high hopes for, but I could smell the alcohol on her as soon as she came up the stairs, and I didn't even look at Caldwell before I declined her.

Thankfully, the fifth and final applicant looked like a winner. According to his résumé he'd been in the Terran Army for five years as a gunner before moving into private contract work. We didn't really need a gunner since Mabel did all our ship-to-ship shooting, but he had some armor experience as well. Of course, by this point I was ready to take anyone who wasn't a liar or a drunk, but when I stuck my head out the lounge door and peered down into the freshly repaired cargo bay, the man who peered back up at me wasn't the one pictured on the application.

"Who are you?" I demanded.

"I'm here about the job," the man answered.

I scowled. The man standing at the base of the cargo bay stairs was thin and dark skinned with thick, curling black hair going gray at the top and brown, laughing eyes that made him look like he was smiling even when he wasn't. He was older, fifty maybe, but he carried himself like he knew what he was doing, and the gun case strapped across his back looked sleek and expensive. Unlike the others, who'd been almost impossible to understand through their heavy Wuxian accents, this man spoke perfect Universal. He also bore no resemblance to any of the pictures on the applications I'd set aside yesterday afternoon.

"This is a closed interview," I said. "We're not talking walk-ins."

The man looked around at the empty cargo bay. "But it seems I am the only one left," he said. "If the position is not yet filled, surely it would be no trouble to look at my credentials at least?"

My eyes went back to the expensive gun case. "Come on up."