

# Chapter 1

Silica  
Liberty  
Maximum Security Prison

Jericho Williams was seated on the edge of his cot, scratching his chin stubble with his prosthetic fingers, watching a prison guard walk by his cell.

‘We lacked the resources to produce the numbers I had in mind,’ Jericho explained to the man interviewing him. This was the first attempt by a journalist agency to seek his side of the story since he was incarcerated. Since he and Sabre Company had tried to overrun the Universal Community. ‘Greer sent us a Shifter, which we used to—’

‘Escape the UC forces,’ the journalist interrupted. ‘You took advantage of the Kai-ol technology trade. We know all that, Mr Williams. People want to know who you really are and why you did what you did.’

Jericho gave the man seated by a card table opposite him a threatening glare. ‘To reassemble and begin resource procurement in other realms,’ he said, finishing his sentence. ‘It’s pronounced *Kee-yol*, and I am a Colonel, not a “mister”.’ He gestured to a pile of letters stacked on his narrow bookshelf. ‘Though the attention is flattering, this ceaseless “fan mail” is littered with inaccuracies and exaggerations.’

Jericho eyeballed the twenty-something-year-old youth, disgusted by the latest “hipster” fashion. He was wearing skin-tight jeans cut above the ankle, no socks, plant-based loafers, a V-neck T-shirt, and facial hair shaped so close it looked like carpet. The final insult to Jericho’s senses:

a tangled bun of hair tied at the very top of his head. ‘Clearly, Mr Ponce,’ Jericho continued with disdain, ‘you don’t know “all that”.’

‘It’s Tronce,’ the man said tersely as he stood to pick up the letters, printed from Williams’ fan-sent transmissions. He took them back to the card table to inspect. ‘There are people out there who want to read about Jericho Williams the villain, not Williams the two-dimensional, one-armed psychopath.’ Tronce noticed the messages were sent from lawless outer rim settlements that had rejected UC society soon after the Great Migration.

‘I see,’ Jericho conceded with a reluctant sigh. He took his pillow, removed its slip and returned it to the head of his bed. ‘You want to know me.’ He folded the cloth, under the table, lengthways thrice.

‘We need to give the reader a redeeming quality they can relate to,’ Tronce encouraged, poised to take notes on his digital pad while it recorded audio.

‘Come closer, boy,’ Jericho grumbled, using the lock mechanism on his prosthesis to grip one end of the cloth. ‘I won’t be raising my voice or repeating myself.’ Arms under the table, he began to twist the cloth with his good hand.

Tronce moved his chair closer. ‘Pretend I’m your audience. Give me a reason to like you. Give me an angle that—’

Jericho flipped the table, tossing the letters, and looped the pillow slip over Tronce’s head. Pulling him down, he locked both knees against his ears, yanking hard, cutting off his air.

‘Throttled duck,’ Jericho said with a chuckle, dominating Tronce’s squirming attempts to free himself. ‘That’s the sound, the same sound everyone makes when they’re being strangled.’

He pulled the cloth tighter and leaned down. ‘You want to like me,’ he whispered. Tighter still. ‘How’s this for a redeeming quality? Does this work for you?’

He took a deep breath, drew Tronce’s head sideways to free one ear and shouted, ‘How do you like me now?’

The cell door unlocked. Two guards rushed in and pinned Jericho to his cot.

Though his cell visits were now revoked, Jericho was allowed a face-to-face in the prison meeting room, while handcuffed and chained to the table.

A guard unlocked the meeting room door, and Jericho could see it was one of his Automated Machine units. Reprogrammed to serve its captors.

The journalist from two days ago was ushered in and he sat across from Jericho.

The door closed and locked.

‘How’s the neck, Ponce?’

Tronce opened his mouth to correct Jericho but only managed a pained whisper.

The chain pulled taut when Jericho leaned to cup one ear. ‘What’s that?’ He gave an approving smile. ‘My story must be quite lucrative for you to brave coming back here. Now.’ He clapped, clinking his handcuffs, and searched the table before him. ‘Where was I... ah, yes: Dennis Conroy, Luther Saint and I were soldiers of fortune. Our numbers – those we trusted – were dwindling. Sabre Company was literally perishing, despite the efforts of so many philanthropically financed poverty-eradicators and peace crusaders. The nail in our coffin was hammered in when those paying us to fight or create their wars were evicted from Earth.’

Jericho paused while Tronce cleared his throat. He twisted a cough lozenge out of its wrapping and gestured for Jericho to continue.

‘When Branner released the first batch of his machines, we saw an opportunity, a way to turn the tide. We stole an AM and had it disassembled and analysed, only to find it couldn’t be tampered with, not without the unit shutting down and becoming useless. We needed Branner’s schematics. Saint and I stayed behind while Conroy joined the other once-powerful people in exile.

‘We infiltrated a factory as technicians, with a little help from the late Commander Greer. Worth noting, actually,’ Jericho said, pointing to the console Tronce was using to record the interview with a chuckle, ‘he was defenestrated by one of Silica’s heroes, Fiona Parker.’

‘You’re saying she threw him out of a window,’ Tronce clarified. ‘Her official report didn’t mention that.’

‘Kicked, actually. I saw the security footage. That wife-murdering sleaze finally got what was coming to him... but I digress. So there we

were in the factory. I created a distraction’ – he traced the burn scar over his scalp – ‘that damn near got me killed, while Saint hacked the system.’

Jericho recalled duct-taping a metal-cutting lance to a crate. He had set the flame against a cable holding one corner of the catwalk on which he’d stood, thinking he would have time to move to cover before his distraction began. But a factory security AM came out of nowhere to apprehend him. The two of them grappled, the cable was cut and the hot end lashed Jericho’s head.

‘I wouldn’t have made it out had Luthie not been there.’ A nostalgic twinkle shimmered in Jericho’s eye while he relived the thrill of the skirmish. His back pressed against Luther’s, fending off AM after AM, until they fled aboard their ship and escaped with the data.

His gaze fell as he was hit with a wave of sadness, lips pressed ruefully. He glanced at his interviewer, seeing something in Tronce’s face he hadn’t seen in anyone’s since his imprisonment. Lack of judgment. Even the other inmates hated him, hated Dennis Conroy more.

‘Meanwhile, Conroy had gone to Silica,’ Jericho continued, with a grunt. ‘Made himself comfortable, backstabbed his way up the party ranks, poisoning every faction from the inside with scandals, paranoia and murder. When he was ready to bury his remaining opposition—’

‘Wait,’ Tronce said, raising his hand with a transfixed expression. ‘Go back... You called him “Luthie”, wh—’

‘Let me finish,’ Jericho said impatiently. ‘Conroy gave Saint and I the order to enter Silica. Saint commandeered a resource carrier and we flew in with a crew of our own AMs. We programmed them to build a new factory and, in turn, an army.’ He watched Tronce’s furrowed brow relax into a realisation. ‘What? Come on, out with it.’

‘You loved him,’ Tronce whispered.

Jericho’s expression betrayed nothing while he leaned back. He’d opened his mouth to reply when black smoke bloomed around Tronce. Jericho’s eyes grew wide at the horror before him.

Dark tendrils coiled outward, revealing a monster in the form of a serpent, rising two metres high, balancing on its tail, its mouth closing over Tronce’s head, a ring of serrated teeth rotating, slicing through his skull. Tronce stared at Jericho, his jaw hanging limp. The cough lozenge rolled from his tongue to the floor. Spasms shook his body. Blood oozed down his pale face. The tendrils rolled inward, enveloping the serpent and its victim.

In a gush of smoke, two humanoids stood in its place, and the cloud dissipated.

The taller black-clad man's lips spread into a sharp smile. 'There is much I would like to discuss with you, Mr Williams.'

Jericho called out for the guard, but no one came.

'Dampening cloak field,' the other explained. 'Your captors and their surveillance can only see and hear the last five or so minutes of whatever you and this unfortunate chap were doing.' He gestured to his black rubber uniform. It shimmered and changed into tight jeans and a V-neck T-shirt. His hair rose into a topknot, and his face became Tronce's.

Jericho's eyes darted to the taller one. He clearly wasn't human. His eyes were white, but for pinpricks of black. Sharp bone protruded from each of his elbows. 'What are you?'

'We are Raekeem, and I am Lord Telsta,' the alien said. Another sharp grin. 'I think you might be interested in what I have to offer.'

## San Francisco VR House

Speeding through the forest, Lana revved her snowmobile when she saw an opportunity to take down her opponent. She veered toward a hillside, increased her speed and climbed a gradual slope that soon became vertical. Lana was travelling fast enough for her snowmobile to cling to the wall of ice. She looked down to her right to see her opponent matching her speed.

Ahead, the wall was curling like a wave. She swung her body and pulled on the handlebars before the lip of the ice curl and barrel-rolled her sled. Now inverted, flying over the lead racer's head, she reached with one hand, took hold of his jacket collar and let her momentum pull him off his vehicle. The man cried out when Lana released him in time to brace herself before her snowmobile landed flat. She sped on while he tumbled through the air and hit a tree. His sled veered sideways and careened over the hill crest.

Lana swayed away from the picket lines and slid through the finish tape, still leaning to keep the vehicle from tipping after her stunt. She turned sharply, riding the brakes to a sliding stop, throwing snow against

the cheering crowd. Gloved hands were raised high, and the hoods and ears of their Ushanka hats bounced, while men and women called out her name. Lana stepped up onto her seat and thrust her hands high, soaking in her victory. She hopped down and lifted off her virtual reality headset. The game continued in her ears while she looked to the control room.

‘That was incredible!’ she said through excited breaths.

The team of programmers and engineers in the control room sat at their computers, staring in slack-jawed silence. They jumped when Rachel erupted from her seat.

‘I want a go! Lemme go in!’

The two of them paused when the owners of the gaming company, VR House, entered the grey room. They looked to the padded wooden pillar and the AM unit wrapped around it on the floor.

‘We’ve never seen anybody do that,’ one of the women said. ‘We’d like to use your gameplay in the promotion.’

Lana shrugged. ‘Sure. I didn’t break anything, did I?’

One of the engineers was checking the gaming rig Lana had been sitting on. It was attached to a mechanical arm that could swing, turn, roll and invert the gamer using it. The seat and handlebars could be swapped out for a body harness to give the gamer the feeling of being in space, or it could be used for flying and skydiving simulations.

‘The Jock will need some repair, but the rig is fine,’ the engineer said. ‘You’re good to go, Ms Navara.’

VR House had a partnership with the Branner Factory. The factory would send male and female base models called Jocks for testing, while the VR gamers got to interact with them in sport and combat games. Jocks had no personality programming and no facial features. They were robotic manikins with athletic physiques, which were graphically mapped inside the VR games to be any character, wearing anything, and given any scripted voice.

Rachel gave the sled racing game a go, and she and Lana left VR House an hour later. Lana wanted to go for a run, so she took the Golden Gate Bridge toward Sausalito, while Rachel took the car to pick up Sam from a lab at the Civic Centre.

It was March, and the end of the day was warm. The wind was strong. Lana’s ponytail whipped behind her. The occasional pedestrian recognised her and waved as she ran by. People knew her, and they knew

the work that she and her colleagues at the Portal Hub did. It was four years since Sabre Company had been defeated and everyone who fought them were world-renowned heroes.

The Hub was built into the mountain facing the Atlantic Ocean. Lana ran from the bridge to a path overlooking the water. The sun was setting, and the ocean waves were crashing against the rocks below.

A tone sounded on Lana's console, notifying her that a public service announcement was being live broadcasted.

'Statistical data, collected from one hundred Council-run focus groups across Earth and selected colonies, has yielded a disturbing shift in social prejudice targeting those of us categorised as "single". The Council is currently discussing countermeasures with Earth leaders as well as with all colony mayors.'

Lana arrived at the Hub, dumped her clothes in the washing machine and headed for the shower room. Meg Green, the most well-known journalist in the world, always delivered news with candid and considered professionalism. Today, her tone was severe.

'Investigations concerning causal links to national suicide rates were what prompted the need for a focus group campaign,' Green continued. 'People are no longer being driven to self-harm due to financial disparity. But singlism has once again reared its ugly head.' Her last words sounded angry. There was a pause, and Lana heard a frustrated sigh.

'It took the Wealth Sacrifice and Redistribution Initiative and a "campaign" for a spotlight to finally be shone on what's been happening to people like me for decades.'

Lana was washing herself with the volume turned up. She turned off the water when she heard what Green had just said.

'We've been bullied and alienated. Those of us who have to see a shrink and pop pills so we can get out there and be among you want singlism to stop.'

Lana dressed and carried her clothes to hang them outside. She was facing the bridge when she saw the traffic slowing to a halt. Pedestrians, cyclists, and runners all stopped.

'In many cultures, singlism has not only been acceptable etiquette for coupled people, it has been institutionalised and, until now, legalised. No more, a senior councilwoman promised me today. And I quote, "Discriminatory behaviour, such as making single people feel invisible, unimportant, incomplete, less than human, can and will be reported".'

Severity of punishments will be discussed in the coming days. Until then, fellow U-Comms, respect your fellow human being'

Lana heard soft clapping in the distance. Others joined. And soon, the Golden Gate Bridge became a mass show of solidarity.