

The Investigator

by B. E. Waymire

The town had disappeared. Dust and rubble covered a ten-kilometer area. Buildings had been blown apart. Most of them now stood no more than two stories, and none taller than four. No human bodies could be seen, but their shadows still scarred the few buildings remaining upright. At the edge of the blast radius were smaller pieces of structure that had survived, strewn amid smashed vehicles.

The pieces began to move. They slowly bounced back to the epicenter, then flew through the air. Rubble fused and reconstituted into recognizable objects. Cars tumbled back to their parking lots. Finally, the bright energy of the explosion appeared and reversed into itself, disappearing into a duffel bag sitting on a single market stall.

Investigator Price stared at the footage, scanning it forward and back, frame by frame, focusing on the bag that held the bomb. Two frames forward, the light had destroyed the stall, but about five meters out, the shockwave was disintegrating bystanders and throwing debris. One frame back, the light was penetrating the bag. No one around had yet realized the danger. They were just milling about, unaware they were about to die.

Ultimately, fault lay with one man. Mykos Imola had taken responsibility for the attack. No one was surprised, and no one questioned it. Explosions and chaos fit his *modus operandi*.

The video of his confession played. His smug, stubbled face stared toward the camera. Was there anyone the Investigator wanted more to punch? No, he decided, not that he could think of.

“I planned the attack on Riverside,” Imola was saying. “My associates carried it out. It was glorious, wouldn’t you say? The entire town, disappeared! Do you think for my next trick I could make a planet disappear just like I did this place?”

“You’ll soon be disappearing into an Argosian Prison,” growled Price. “Artemis, how long until we break hyperspeed?”

The ship’s AI faked a yawn. “Destination coming up in approximately half an hour, sir.”

Price nodded and slinked from the cabin into the cockpit. A half-hour of waiting in the command chair, which was admittedly almost as comfortable as the bed, and the blue-white fragments of hyperspeed light slowly resolved into a clear starfield with a pair of standouts: the system’s star, Tiberia 9, and the planet, Vorgun. Officially known as Tiberia 9S, Vorgun was a tiny blue-green dot bathed in the light of its giant blue star. Artemis estimated another half-hour of coasting before they would reach high orbit.

Sooner than expected, the comm started blinking with a connection request. Price accepted.

“This is Annabelle Station. Incoming craft, identify yourself.”

“This is Investigator Damien Price in the Skyslip-class patrol ship, ISA Huntress. The governor is expecting me.”

“Hold course while I check your clearance.” The line went silent for five minutes. “Clearance granted. Follow the projected route to Carpathia.”

“Copy that, Annabelle Station.”

The navigation display crackled and showed two lines, one making several spirals down to the planet—that would be the guide from the station. The other showed a wide slingshot. That would be his current path. He flipped over and fired the main thrusters until the two paths converged.

Soon, he entered Vorgun's atmosphere. Gentle touches to the controls brought Huntress into an entry angle, letting the increasingly thick atmosphere smash against the ventral heat shielding. Frictional fire licked around the cockpit windows for several minutes as atmosphere compressed and the ship slowed. The ship only caught lift after it slowed and the fire disappeared.

Vorgun was rather sparsely populated by a couple billion, making it a rather small planet for one so important to its system. Sprawling cities acted as hubs for most of the population, each connected to the others by roads running through hundreds of kilometers of wilderness. Some farms and smaller settlements could be found in between, of course. Most of those dated from the time of the original colonists, from the looks of them. Price spotted one of the planet's Edens nestled in a valley.

The comm came alive again. "Huntress, this is Carpathia City Airspace Control. Confirm contact."

"Contact confirmed, Carpathia," Price said. "Ready for guidance."

"Keep true to heading, Huntress. Will transmit final guidance to your computer when you come within our primary airspace."

Price confirmed and descended to put a thousand and a half meters between him and the ground. Three minutes later, the guidance computer

trilled and projected a line onto his computer around the outer edge of the city to approach the spaceport. It was quite a way off, considering the sheer size of the city. The outer residential districts extended out so far that they might have covered more ground than the city itself. Price turned on the autopilot and relaxed.

“Sir, two craft approaching from 010,” Artemis announced just after Price had relaxed.

The radar showed two contacts coming from the north. Their trajectory was not a normal traffic insertion. Their flight paths showed them to be leading to him. There was no need to do that unless they were on an intercept course. Price’s finger hovered over the arming switch for Huntress’s pulse guns. No reason to commit just yet, but also no reason to be unprepared.

The comm once again came alive. “You have entered restricted airspace. State your intentions.”

Price rolled his eyes. “Tell that to your traffic controllers. They gave me this clearance.”

“State your intentions.”

“I am an ISA investigator. Your planetary governor invited me.”

The two intercepting craft flew to either side of him. They were not normal police aircraft. They were more like giant birds, really, with articulated wings on either side of their main hulls. Under the wings hung a pair of gauss guns. The only other visible armaments were chin-mounted pulse guns, both of which were aimed right at Huntress.

Price considered deploying his own guns. There should be no need for that. On the other hand, anyone who would so much as threaten a spacecraft with ISA markings should not be counted on to make logical decisions. Imola tended to have friends in high places, too...

The two suddenly made his job easier. “Don’t deviate from the course you were given.”

Both aircraft immediately, but slowly, fell back.

“Artemis, keep track of those two,” Price said. “If they try that again, I think we have a few tricks to show them.”

Fortunately, they did nothing for the remainder of the flight. Traffic control vectored Huntress behind an inter-system passenger liner. The liner, an irregular tube roughly three times Huntress’s size, clumsily set itself down in its place, then floated up again to adjust slightly, then some more. Price was forced to manually hover for nearly fifteen minutes while the liner’s pilots perfected their landing spot. Surely by then the passengers were as irritated as Price was. He would just have to irritate the pilots by setting Huntress onto her pad with perfect grace.

The ramp hadn’t even fully dropped before a woman strode up to it with a tablet in her arms. She stood impatiently watching Price walk down the ramp, adjusting his flight suit and weapons.

“Greetings, Investigator,” she began as he stepped on the tarmac. “I am office assistant to Governor Jameson Culday. Welcome to Carpathia. We trust you had no mishaps on your way in.”

“I was intercepted by two goons,” Price said. “Does that count?”

“The Governor will speak to you about that and more.” She motioned for Price to follow. “Please, this way.”

Price didn’t even get to see the terminal. The woman instead took him to a car that was hovering above the tarmac about thirty meters away, just out of the landing zone. When he was comfortably strapped into the luxury vehicle, she cleared her throat and began speaking.

“This is the largest city on Vorgun,” she explained. “Like most metropolises, we have a preponderance of problems as we try to manage both this city and the rest of the planet. Inequality here is the worst on Vorgun, and possibly within this system. The police have had issues lately restraining protestors, but our city is still beautiful.”

“What are the protestors doing?” Price asked.

“The governor is working on legislation addressing their concerns.”

“That doesn’t answer the question.”

“You are here on ISA business, are you not? Protests shouldn’t concern you.”

Price shrugged. “True enough. Just call me curious.”

The governor’s building was in the middle of an extensive park surrounded by a two-meter fence. Its swooping design stood out from the relative plainness around it. The moment the car flew over the fence, turrets popped out of the building and rotated quickly. The assistant entered something on her PDA, and the turrets retracted. Nothing else attempted to stop the car before it settled on a concrete landing pad near the building.

No one greeted them when they landed. The assistant simply herded Price into the house. The investigator had little chance to view the collection of artifacts and oddities within before he was dumped through a set of double doors. The assistant then abandoned him, tightly shutting the doors behind her.

Price straightened his flight suit, more out of habit than need. “That was quite the sudden influx of rudeness.”

“Do forgive her,” someone said from behind a desk. “She can get nervous in my presence.”

“And you are?”

“Governor Culday, of course. You are Investigator Price?”

“I am.”

“Glad you’re here. There is much to discuss.”

“So I’ve heard. Let’s begin with why I’m here.”

“We can help each other, Investigator. Your terrorist is here, in my city.”

“Yes, I know.”

“And he is in the employ of my opponent.”

“Do you have proof of that?”

Culday smiled. “I am quite sure, sir.”

“Just give me all your information, then, and I’ll get on with it.”

“We found Imola at a hotel downtown. My police are already there. Just flash your badge.”

The hotel was as decrepit as Price could have imagined in a city like Carpathia. The outside looked alright, but peeling paint, rusted metal, and warping plastic marred the interior. Every elevator in the building was beset with problems, leaving the stairwells as the only way to reach the fifth floor, where Imola had been tracked. Price could swear he saw rust falling from the bare metal steps every time someone touched one.

Imola's room was little better. Stained blankets lay scattered and hanging off the bed, the carpet was ragged and discolored, and the coffee pot had recently overflowed. A local investigator refused to stay in the bathroom for more than five seconds.

"This is unlike Imola..." Price said. "He normally leaves everything clean enough that you can't find any evidence."

The local lead investigator shrugged. "Witnesses tell us he and his friend were in a hurry when they left. They probably didn't think much about cleaning."

"I need the security footage—when you can send it to me, of course." Not that Price needed permission. He just preferred to ask nicely before doing it himself.

"Would if I could. The cameras were shut off when they escaped. We've got footage of Imola entering the building and nothing more."

"Would you mind giving me the files anyway? I may be able to glean something from surrounding footage."

"Knock yourself out."

Price's PDA chimed with a file request. He accepted and watched a file transfer of several terabytes begin. While the data flowed into his device, Price walked over the scene, carefully avoiding anything that looked like important evidence. Not an easy feat, given the haphazard way everything had been thrown about the room.

Imola's habit of never leaving a mess usually meant he also left little evidence of his presence. The chaos in the latest one only made sense as a diversionary tactic, and one that would likely have been less effective than the usual. Could the police have been mistaken about Imola's presence?

The local police had moved on to the other areas of the suite, combing delicately for clues. Price glanced about the room once the police were gone. Just under the blanket on the floor, there was a glint. Price knelt and reached for the shiny object, then pulled it out.

It was campaign pin... old fashioned, to say the least. The name Rickard Apelion was engraved in a small circle surrounded by a cluster of stars. Culday had mentioned a political rival of his without giving an actual name. If Price had a guess, it would be this Apelion.

"Inspector Price," the police chief called. "Did you find something?"

Price quickly pocketed the pin. "I only thought I did. It was nothing, I assure you."

"That's unfortunate."

"It's time I see the security footage."

"Do let us know if you find anything that can be of use to us."

“Of course.”

Stepping in the investigation’s way would be in poor taste, of course. With that in mind, Price retreated to a lobby area and sat down with his PDA ready to show him the videos of Imola in the hotel. The police presence would dissuade anyone from coming to look over his shoulder, but he still took a spot with his back to the wall where no one could possibly sneak up on him.

The file the police chief had transferred was a library of videos, each one marked with only the date of its capture, with a few skips where there was no footage. Price started at the newest one and went backward. The further he checked, the more he was convinced that the police chief was right that the footage contained no clues except that Imola had been there at one time. No one had come to visit him, at least on the footage. If visits had occurred, they were when the cameras were turned off. That, or the footage had been deleted.

Price pulled the pin out of his pocket and stared at it for a moment. “Well, a clue is a clue.”

Of all the surprising and unexpected things Price had ever seen, the residence of Rickard Apelion was one of the least. The man had purchased an entire building near the heart of the city. The lobby was polished to a mirror shine everywhere and had staff walking about in matching uniforms, including someone to receive guests, expected and not. An abstract fountain

stood in the center, providing a landmark for the central seating area and a reminder of art fads long forgotten.

“Good morning, sir,” a security guard said to Price. “What brings you here today?”

Price flashed his badge. “ISA Investigator Price. I just have a few questions to ask Mr. Apelion.”

“Absolutely. He’s in his office on the third floor.”

“My thanks.”

“Oh, and Inspector...”

“Yes?”

“We humbly request you power down your sidearm and leave the core with us. We have to be careful about supposedly accidental discharges lately.”

Price pulled out his bulky pulse pistol and took a moment to stare at the guard. Even with the pause, the guard did not move for his own weapon. He kept his eyes a little harder on Price, however. So, he trusted his request to be followed, but was prepared. With a smile, Price flicked the power switch, and the pistol fell lifeless. He then removed the power core from the frame and handed it over.

“We appreciate your cooperation,” the guard said. “Your power core will be kept safe, and you can get it back when you leave.”

As an ISA official, Price was technically immune from trivial matters like firearm possession bans. But with three guards nearby, pulling

that card might cause more trouble than it was worth. Instead, he strode past them into the main stairwell.

More mirror surfaces and marble-like stone greeted Price in the hallway to Apelion's office, broken up only by the carpet that lay over half the floor. Thankfully, the door was unmistakable, having its owner's name engraved on it in golden letters.

"Please come in," someone said beyond the ridiculous door, as if they were expecting him.

Behind a large desk sat a clean-shaven older man with a suspiciously full head of hair. He stared at his PDA, while also managing to acknowledge Price's entrance.

"My apologies for the unexpected intrusion, sir," Price said. "I merely have a few questions."

"I'm sure, Investigator. Please sit down. This will only take a moment."

Price took a seat in the chair indicated. It seemed to adjust to his body, providing an incredible level of support and comfort shortly after he sat down. He made a mental note to inquire about the chair's origin.

Wordlessly, Apelion typed something out on his PDA, then set it aside and glanced at Price. His eyes were bloodshot and tired, and his jaw was set as if he were ready to explode.

Much to his credit, Apelion maintained an aura of calm over the rage. "Why are you here, Investigator?"

Price took in a deep breath. “I’m following up on some information I’ve received.”

“You are ISA. I would’ve thought the police had given Imola over to you by now.”

“Well, my other duties include searching for any possible benefactors who might be assisting the terrorist.”

“And you suspect me.”

Again, Price studied Apelion’s face. He might have reason to lie, but nothing on his face showed it.

“Governor Culday sent me to the hotel where Imola was found. Nothing else.”

“Did Culday also say that I was responsible for paying Imola to hurt his supporters so I could win the upcoming election?”

“He didn’t say as much specifically about you,” Price responded.

“He said it to everyone else.”

Apelion took his PDA and opened a video. It showed the chaos in the aftermaths of several of Imola’s bombings, then one that Price had never seen footage of. People scrambled all around as the cameraperson, apparently a sadist of some sort, tried to capture everything happening. Just when the footage became almost too much to handle, Culday’s face appeared.

“These terrible scenes are from terrorist bombings from all over the sector,” the governor stated. “Including one from our very own capital. Ask yourself, good citizen, can someone who refuses to deny funding to these

terrorists put a stop to them? I think not. Keeping me as your governor is the only way to end this.”

The ad ended and Apelion exited the video player with a forlorn look. “He was referencing me in that. Not long ago, an explosion happened at a demonstration from my supporters. They were blamed for terrorism, and the media demanded I condemn them. I condemned the attack, but I also condemned their assertion that it was only my supporters who were responsible.”

“That is very interesting, sir,” Price said. “Unfortunately, I need solid proof if I’m to find any of Imola’s benefactors.”

“My people have Governor Culday’s public bank statements. Please look at them, at least. They show much that he hasn’t told you.”

If Price could verify them, he would consider it evidence. “Just send it to my PDA. I’ll look when I have a chance.”

“Gladly, just give me the in—”

Lights flashed red. Alarms sounded.

A guard barged into the room with sweat pouring down his face. “Sir, we’re under attack. We have him pinned in the lobby, but precautions demand we move you to a more secure location.”

“Guard, if you have a spare, I need a power cell,” Price said.

“What do you need it for?”

“Mine is currently in the lobby, awaiting my return. And I’m ex-Twilight Battalion.”

The mention of Twilight Battalion was enough. The guard snatched a spare cell from his belt and immediately handed it to Price.

Price stood just out of view at the bottom of the stairwell. The shooter was behind an overturned sofa. From what the investigator could tell, he was using a light pulse rifle in a depressingly amateurish way. He would raise his rifle over the edge of the obstruction and fire in a random direction. So far, it seemed only one of the four guards was wounded.

Behind the shooter, from Price's perspective, was a statue of someone he assumed was important to Apelion. It portrayed everything down to the feet, a perfect weak point. The pistol let out a high-pitched whine as Price increased its power. A deep breath, then he brought as little of himself as possible out of cover with the pistol aimed straight at the statue. A solid pulse beam seared into the legs.

Price retreated to cover just in time to see more pulse beams slice the air where his head just was. The idiot could apparently get lucky. The shooting stopped just long enough for a loud thud and a scream. Price peeked around the corner in time to see multiple stun beams spearing the shooter.

Once the light died down, he could see the shooter bent over his cover, body limp. His muscles couldn't possibly move after such a barrage. The rifle had clacked over to the nearest guard's feet, an impressive throw for a young man during muscle shut down.

Price knelt to get a good look at the face. God above, he was just a kid. Had he even finished puberty yet? “So, what was that all about?”

The kid’s voice was small and weak. “If I didn’t, we would all die.”
“Would you really?”

“Letting Apelion win the election would be like allowing all history’s greatest dictators to rule over this world.”

“That sounds like an exaggeration, but I’ll keep it in mind. How does that sound?”

“He will—”

One guard grabbed the kid and hauled him up by his collar. “Police are on their way. No need for the ISA to get caught up in domestic problems.”

Price nodded. “I agree.”

“I didn’t know we had clearance to let anyone see Imola,” the police receptionist said absentmindedly, staring at her PDA instead of Price.

“You shouldn’t need clearance to give an ISA investigator a glimpse of a noted intersystem terrorist,” Price noted.

“Fine, whatever.” She pressed a button on her console. “Can someone come up here and take this ISA stooge to the terrorist?”

It wasn’t long before a cop came for the ISA stooge. Price followed him through the corridors in the back of the facility. The cells were farther back than he expected, and they walked past even those into an area isolated from the rest of the building.

Imola was alone, in a room with nothing more than a chair and table. His beard was a bit scragglier than it was in his confession video, and his face looked older. Solid steel shackles clasped his hands and feet together, and his head hung. Prison and terrorism must have finally taken their toll.

The cop spoke his first words. “The room is soundproof. If he gets rowdy, you’ll have to signal me.”

Price fingered his sidearm. “I can take care of that, if the situation calls for it.”

“Press the button on the inside when you wish to leave. It’ll alert me.”

Imola barely glanced up when Price entered the room. His eyes seemed to move, and his body shifted slightly.

“I finally get to see the monster face to face,” Price said. “And yet it just doesn’t feel right with you in such a state.”

“And?” Imola groaned. “What do you want with me?”

“I’m here to bring you back to Argos for processing.”

“The region’s ISA seat? Yeah, that’s about right.”

“That’s how all this works, Imola.”

“So, what’s next?”

“You’ll go to trial, and I get to figure out your benefactors.”

“I don’t need anyone to pay me.”

“You may not need it, but you don’t reject it.”

“I never tell. You know that.”

“So I’m just wasting my time here? Maybe I should take you now and be done with it.”

“I know what the process requires. I could be in here for another week before you get to remove me. Maybe someone will let me escape before then.”

“And who would that someone be?”

Finally, Imola looked up with a sadistic smile crossing from ear to ear. “You’d like to know, wouldn’t you?”

“I would.”

“The clues are all there. You just have to not be completely blind, Investigator.”

Price sighed and turned to leave. “I’ll be back for you, terrorist.”

“See you later.”

Price pushed the button to alert the guard, tapping a tiny, almost invisible disc to the wall at the same time. He looked back, searching for a last word. None came.

“I’ll be starting the extradition process soon, officer,” Price said as he walked through the door. “Imola deserves the punishment coming for him on Argos.”

Whatever else Huntress might lack in facilities, it had one thing Price needed: quiet. True, Artemis had tried to endlessly chat upon the investigator’s return, but that was halted with a quick command. Now he was kicked back in the cockpit, staring at the two screens in front of him as

they scrolled through the cornucopia of information he'd retrieved since his arrival.

Even with his seasoned investigation experience, the insufferable blandness of all that information wore away at his patience. Thousands of tiny donations to activist groups, some big ones to supporters... Culday and Apelion certainly spent like politicians. The only difference was Apelion's business ventures. He was a businessman, so that was as expected as a politician spending money they didn't have to please people they didn't like.

"Wouldn't it be more comfortable in the cabin?" Artemis asked.

"This data is already testing my alertness, Artemis," Price responded. "If I were more comfortable, I'd be asleep."

"Some audio data came in for you while you were scrolling. The transfer just finished. Would you like to hear it?"

"Go ahead. It's probably nothing."

The bug Price put on the wall was transmitting. At first, it was just muffled sounds, some of which might have been Imola murmuring. An apparent door slam came, then some more cacophony.

"Greetings, Mykos Imola." Price sat up. That voice sounded incredibly familiar... "Have my guards been keeping you company?"

"Miserable, Governor. Just miserable."

So Culday was visiting the terrorist. Interesting. He seemed to be attempting to disguise his voice, too. Intelligent, but ultimately useless.

"I hear Investigator Price had a little chat with you," the governor continued.

“What of it? I know the law well enough. He’s here to extradite me. I committed crimes all over the region, after all.”

“What did you tell him?”

“Nothing, really. Just that all the clues are there if he wants his answers.”

“Disgusting pig. I should kill you here.”

“And if you do, all you have done will be revealed.”

A pause followed. So, Culday had done something that Imola could blackmail him with. A politician breaking the law wouldn’t be strange, per se, but that Imola wouldn’t divulge it was. What was their arrangement?

“I will deny everything!” Culday asserted.

Imola was probably smiling as wickedly as he could. “You promised me a new life if I helped you win the election. Seems the information I hold might prevent your victory. Although... you’ve already lost if that investigator’s gamble paid off.”

Price took in a breath. Had Imola noticed the bug? He certainly took his sweet time telling. What was his angle? Culday yelled something incomprehensible, interrupting his thoughts. The bug’s microphone buzzed and eventually gave out with a sudden burst of noise.

The moment the audio went dead, Price bolted upright in the seat. “Artemis, how long ago did you receive this?”

“Transmission began half an hour ago,” Artemis responded.

Something told Price he needed to move five minutes ago. “Begin startup. We need to get flying now.”

“Affirmative.”

He tried calming himself as the engines spooled up. “Do we have anything coming in?”

“I detect two contacts closing in fast. Two thousand meters altitude.”

The Huntress’s long-range cameras could properly resolve images thousands of kilometers away, normally. Even with an atmosphere in the way, Price spotted the two incoming craft. He gritted his teeth. They were the same two that intercepted him when he came in.

“Artemis, activate electronic countermeasures,” Price ordered.

“Already done.”

The system began bombarding the pair of interceptors with powerful dummy signals. Hopefully, that would keep the guns and missiles from properly targeting him. Continued fiddling with the controls brought the engines to full power. Huntress began to rise. Four bright fireballs launched from the incoming attack craft. An instant later, all of them smashed into the ground around Huntress. Dust and cement covered the ship.

Too late for an easy takeoff. Price hit the throttle, accelerating hard less than ten meters off the ground. With countermeasures still going against the attackers’ computers, they would have significant problems maintaining a steady lock. If he wasn’t moving, however, they could make up for that with manual aiming. Another gauss round came in and sliced through a piece of armor on Huntress’s starboard wing.

Finally up in the air and moving, Price deployed the pair of pulse guns that were the only weapons he could use in an atmosphere. Just his

luck to be caught in a spot where he wasn't armed enough against his attackers. Price would have to add some more weapons back on Argos.

He keyed the comm button with a general broadcast. "Incoming craft, cease engagement immediately. You are attacking an ISA agent acting in official capacity. This is grossly illegal and will go beyond your planetary boundaries as far as the courts are concerned. Again, cease engagement immediately."

"We can't do that, investigator." The voice was the same one that had led the intercept earlier.

"Well, Huntress has a few surprises."

Price had lied. He would just have to outfly those two. Huntress's body fuselage and powerful thrusters let her catch lift easily, which Price used to quickly gain altitude. The two patrol craft split up. Their chin guns released pulse beams, only one of which struck Huntress's armor, to little effect.

A smile crept across Price's face. While his two new enemies were being bombarded with dummy signals and confusing messages, his targeting was unaffected. Both pulse guns fired. Two beams slammed into the nearer target, slicing through armor and lighting the atmosphere around the impact points with tiny bursts of energy. He rocketed above them. Thrusters screamed as Price flipped over and fired again.

The other attacker came back. Both gauss rifles fired, missing by what seemed like centimeters. Price swore and rocketed to the side a little

too late. A pulse blast singed Huntress's armor just behind the cockpit as he moved away.

One attacker came from behind, one crossed his path ahead. The one behind launched more pulse blasts. Some missed, some hit. The strikes were coming too close to his engine. If they broke that, Price was dead. He had to even the odds somehow.

Price turned hard, trying to follow one patrol car and avoid the other. While he did not quite succeed at the latter, his hard turn brought him within view of the rear thruster of the other. He centered the targeting reticle as close to the center of the thruster as he could, then squeezed the trigger.

The pulse beams slammed almost exactly where the reticle had pointed. Energy flowing from the thruster ripped through the gashes made by the pulse beams and tore through the housing, then the rear hull. A few more flashes of blue showed the engine sputtering out, and the craft fell from the sky.

Price focused all countermeasures on the remaining enemy and accelerated into a hard turn. On the way, he dialed down the pulse guns' output slightly. With expert use of secondary thrusters, he continued the turn and still brought his nose in line with the last remaining attacker. The pulse guns aimed slightly above the nose, as far as they could. The reticle centered on the main thruster.

The patrol craft spun on its axis. Gauss and chin guns fired at once. Huntress screamed with alarms as her wings were perforated by hypersonic tungsten rounds. That didn't prevent Price from pressing his trigger. Pulse

guns fired in one short beam after another, slicing through armor plate and blasting apart subsystems. The craft stumbled as Price flew over it.

Price brought his weapons back to full power and fired both where he thought the cockpit was. He was hoping to scare the pilot into giving up. Unfortunately, it was less armored than he expected, and the entire nose exploded under the force of the blast.

For what seemed like an eternity, Huntress rode the wind, letting it rock her side to side at a constant altitude. Price's heart pounded. He tried forcing his breathing to slow while he stared at his status screens. The gauss rounds had broken through the cabin and holding cells. Those would need to be patched before he even thought about going back to Argos. The pulse gun had mangled the rear armor, but there was no lasting damage.

“Artemis,” Price said, “Open a channel to Argos. I’ll need some backup here.”

Two days later, Price watched ISA security walk Culday onto their shuttle. The governor—former governor—stared at the ground, refusing to look anyone in the eye, though he did spit in Price's general direction. His steps were kept short by shackles on his ankles, and his arms hung low with the weight of shackles on his wrists.

After finding the bug, Culday had murdered Imola, but a dead-man switch had activated, releasing the details of every single illegal act Culday had perpetrated. Price cared little the terrorist was dead. Honestly, it was probably more justice than he would have received in an ISA court. Culday

being hauled away on attempted and actual murder charges seemed like perfect karma. Obstruction of justice, bribery, conspiracy to commit terrorist acts, and a host of other charges on top of the murders would nicely send him up the hierarchy to the regional judges.

Captain Mulvaney, captain of the ISA cruiser Erebus, gave Price a hard slap on the back. “You did well. Couldn’t you have saved your ship, though?”

“Huntress just needs some holes repaired,” Price replied. “I can patch her up to transit condition as soon as this is over and get full repairs on Argos.”

“Yeah, after I’ve wasted my fuel getting over here.”

“Fine. You have my permission to take all the glory upon your return.”

“I’ll take that offer, I think.”

“Now get out of here.”

Mulvaney smiled and tipped his cap. “Good luck, Price. I’ll buy you a drink when you get back.”

“Better make it three or four!” Price shouted back.

The shuttle ramp retracted into its spot on the ventral hull. It rose into the sky a few moments later, only accelerating away after it was about twenty meters up. The shuttle became a dot as it rose ever higher, shrinking until it was replaced just by the light of the thrusters.

With Mulvaney gone, Price stared at Huntress. “Time to patch you up. This hunt is over.”