



## CHAPTER 1

# ARRIVAL

Caleb had a kill mission waiting.

Still aching from the shuttle journey, he took his place in line at immigration control. He was a lean, tanned young man of 19, with tousled dark hair and several days' stubble. He was dressed in a one-piece black suit. His right eye was covered with a black eye-shield and he wore a triangular stud in his left ear.

Immigration control was a bare, metal area, bathed in harsh blue light. Humans and aliens shuffled forward in four queues. The visitor at the

head of each queue waited for a green light, the signal for them to show their data-cards.

After 20 minutes, Caleb was second in line. In front of him was a Quaslon, a three-tusked creature in red robes. The Quaslon turned, gave Caleb a nod. It breathed out the red smoke that its race used as a greeting.

Caleb coughed, brushing the smoke away. 'Light's on, Tusky,' he snapped, nodding. The Quaslon, giving up on social niceties, shuffled forward.

'*Modify*,' said a mocking voice in Caleb's head. He shook his head. No. Not here. Not yet.

A few minutes later, it was Caleb's turn. He strode forward, slid his card into the reader on desk four. The officer, a young woman with a bald head and polished white skin, gave him a brisk smile.

'Good day, Citizen. Sorry for your wait.'

‘Fine. I’m in no hurry.’

Tiny scan-drones buzzed around the metallic bag that was Caleb’s only luggage. As the officer read his documents, her perfect eyebrows shot up a few centimetres.

‘I see you have some... history, Citizen.’

Caleb scowled, folded his arms. ‘Problem?’

‘We’ll see,’ she said. Her twelve long, white fingers moved over her invisible keypad. ‘Lift the tracker for me, please....’

Caleb sighed. He lifted the square of plastic, revealing his blank eye socket. ‘Gonna ask me how I lost it?’

‘Not interested,’ she said, scanning his face with a handheld device. ‘Just checking for hidden weaponry.... All right. You can put it down.’

‘I heard Station Zero didn’t ask questions,’ Caleb said. He snapped the eye-shield back on.

She glanced up at him briefly. ‘We stick to the essentials.’ Caleb’s data-card popped back out of the reader. ‘Well, all seems to be in order.’

‘Good,’ said Caleb. The drones scattered, allowing him to pick his luggage up. ‘Have a nice day.’

‘*Modify!*’ said the voice in his mind again, and once again he shook it off angrily.

Beyond the barrier, a woman in a crisp, white uniform was waiting. Her hair was grey and glossy, her dark skin smooth. She had high cheekbones and wore green glasses. Two burly male officers with rifles stood behind her.

The woman waved a hand. ‘Just step over here, Citizen, would you?’

‘I’ve... seen the girl,’ Caleb said, waving a hand behind him.

‘Yes,’ said the woman, ‘but you haven’t seen *me*.’ The ID plaque on her hand came to life, showing

her face and badge number. ‘Chief Alesha Quine. I head up the Security Force here. I know about you, Citizen Caleb Grayden.’

Her use of his name came as a shock. He tried not to let it show. ‘OK... so what do you want, Chief? My autograph?’

‘Just a friendly warning,’ said Quine. She grinned, showing a set of perfect white teeth.

Now Caleb was up close, his tracker saw the pinpricks of regen-tissue on Quine’s skin. To the naked eye, Quine was a woman of about 40. Caleb, though, guessed she was actually nearer 70 and on her fourth or fifth boost.

‘I know who you are,’ Quine continued, ‘and *what* you are.’

Caleb shrugged, grinned lazily. ‘Hey, it’s neutral space. I keep my nose clean, you don’t shove me out of an airlock. Works for me, works for you, Alesha. Can I call you Alesha?’

‘No, you may not,’ said Quine coldly. ‘All right, Citizen. Go about your business. I think we’ll speak again.’

Caleb gave her a mock salute. ‘Sure thing, Chief,’ he said, and he blew her a kiss as he moved through, bag hoisted on his shoulder.

Seconds later, he had joined the crowds in arrivals.

The hall was a vast arena. It was hot, noisy, and full of aliens of all shapes and sizes. There were green-skinned Balovians, scaly blue Warghis and humans of all races and types. The station staff were easy to spot in their crisp, white uniforms. At least twenty travel-tubes led off to the rest of the station.

Steam rose from the milling crowds. Coloured lights played on the various stalls, shops, social areas and bars. The noise of chattering, shouting, laughing and squealing – a thousand languages and dialects – filled the air. So did the pungent

smells of alien bodies, of cooking meat, of alcohol and smoking plants. Caleb had travelled a lot in his work, but he'd never seen so many different beings in one place. He looked around, taking it all in.

He was dying to modify now. The urge was so strong.

*'All right, babe. Your turn for a bit.'*

He ducked into an alcove behind a booth piled high with trinkets and junk. The stallholder barely glanced at him.

It only took two seconds. His body seemed to shimmer. Dark hair fell to his shoulders, his chest and legs became shapely, and the dark suit became a slim-fitting dress and boots. The shield over her right eye was still in place, as was the ear stud, and the hair was of the same jet-black hue. Otherwise, this was a totally different person.

Caleb had given way to Keara.

She looked both ways. She was hoping nobody had seen her. She hoisted the sparkling bag onto her shoulder and stepped out into the crowd again with a confident smile.

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In the shadows, the hidden watcher turned up the collar of a long, blue coat.

So, the watcher thought, a shifter. Here, on Zero. These people weren't good news. Radioactive mutants, hated in some parts of the galaxy. Under a kill order on many planets.

It was time to find out what this one really wanted.