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## CHAPTER 1: THE MAN IN THE BROWN COAT

Inhabited Space Station Robert Heinlein Three,  
1 January 2468 AD

“FIFTEEN THOUSAND GIOVEINOS? Not enough, not nearly enough, mijn vriend (my friend). You’ll have to do better. Begrijp je (Do you understand)?”, said Dieter Rasmus. He struck a finger against the fifteen-centimeter holo-globe floating above his open palm, and it began to twirl. Annoyed, Dieter transferred the hologram from the golden orb to the projector on his desk.

“No, no. Not since all this mess began have any of us been able to unload any sky-clear. Everyone’s afraid to get in the middle of the war between Tǒngzhìzhě (Ruler) and De Gevaarlijke (The Dangerous),” said the figure, who for now was safely on the other side of the holo-projection. The image filled a box that began on the top of the desk and stretched two meters high.

“Then spike ’em. It’s what everyone does.” Dieter waved his hand, his elbow on his desk. “It’s not my position to tell you how to hold up your end of our arrangement. De kogel is door de kerk (The bullet has gone through the church). You have responsibilities to me, I have responsibilities to others, and so on and so on.”

The figure stepped closer to the holo-projector, face filling the projection field. Strands of red hair with lime-green stripes fell in front of Kjetil Morgenstern's eyes—eyes that told his story before the words came out. “No, you can't make me do this. I won't. It is different when they come to me, but you and I both know—one taste, and it goes on forever.”

“You mean until they're dead. Een groot verschil (A big difference). Kjetil, you owe me another ten kilo-punten for this last week and yet another vijfentwintig (twenty-five) in seven days—but you can do me this one thing, and I'll leave you until next month. Bonasera has a cousin; she sings at the Metis. Wheel Five.”

“Bonasera will kill me. This will start another round between De Gevaarlijke and Tǒngzhìzhě.”

“Leave that to me. Bring her and two of her Tǒngzhìzhě friends for good measure. I already told you how. We meet tomorrow night at midnight—fifth wheel location.”

“No, I can't.”

Dieter pounded the desk with his closed fist. “Your last week's take was twenty-five thousand gioveinos. You owe me. Bring me what I ask.”

Kjetil half-turned away. His voice faded to a whisper. “And what will you do with them?”

“There are questions you don't ask. Nee? Tomorrow at midnight. Don't be late.”

Kjetil cast his gaze down to his feet, avoiding Dieter's eyes. Dieter smiled and closed the connection.

*Nee, Kjetil, you don't have it in you. That's why tomorrow I'll replace you with someone who does.* Dieter rose and walked with vigor as he climbed the steps out of the sunken level he used for a workspace and headed to the apartment's main entrance. It had been a hard week, and he didn't need Kjetil's reminder about Tǒngzhìzhě. Tomorrow's transaction would put him in a better mood. He paused for a second

at the door, glancing about the spacious, crescent-shaped room, and spotting nothing out of place, he left. Lights in the room winked out after the door slid closed, leaving only the solar-powered safety lights marking the entrance and the direction of the front of the space station. The locks fastened. All was silent.

In the darkness, a hand, cut off at the wrist, appeared at head height. The fingers moved, forming Holo Sign Language commands patterned after the old American Sign Language gestures. The holo-projector on the desk went dark, and the security cameras spaced about the apartment followed. A second hand appeared and pulled at something, and an entire figure emerged. The figure—a man—surveyed the room, taking in all his surroundings, and then began to fold the stealth cloak up. It shimmered in the dim room, and parts of his body would momentarily vanish as the silk-thin cloak passed over. He folded it quickly and tucked it into the lining of his long brown coat.

From a different pocket inside the coat, he drew a cloth pouch smaller than the palm of his hand. As he slid his finger across the seal, the pouch opened, and he spoke his first word: “Fly.” A golden cloud of dust flew out of the pouch. The cloud paused briefly above him and then scattered to the ceiling, spreading evenly throughout the apartment.

His left hand reached up into the darkness, and a fifteen-centimeter golden orb formed above his open palm. A strange word parted the silence in the room, and the golden globe grew brighter and illuminated the figure. He stood nearly 190 centimeters tall, weighing just over 110 kilos, with short, jet-black hair. The light of the orb glistened off his hair, revealing a royal-blue tint at the ends. His brown skin bore an unusual texture throughout, resembling a citrus peel. Orange eyes glowed in the golden light.

He brought the orb to the desk and again used HSL, this time to turn the holo-projector back on.

The 3D projection field lit up in a faint violet hue, and inside the hologram, vibrant objects floated. Many were orbs with a snapshot of their contents set aglow. He signed again to the golden globe in his palm. The communication device, a common vidcom, made the assigned connection, and inside its holographic orb, a 3D avatar of a large, smiling black man appeared. Quickly it vanished, replaced by the live image of the man raising his head off a desk. Unlike the avatar's face, this one wore no smile; light shined off worried eyes. The man in the coat flicked his fingers through the orb of his vidcom into the holo-projection field, transferring the image to the larger display.

"You made it," said Heady Topper, more commonly known as just HT, a name he came by through a not-so-discriminating taste in beer.

The man in the brown coat placed a finger on his lips.

"Yeah, yeah," whispered HT. "If they catch you—puff—we're both floating out an airlock. But how do you punch through the encryption? It must take you like forever."

The man in the brown coat then reached up into the projection field with his vidcom's orb. A 3D object glowed high above him in the violet field. He pointed and snapped his fingers, and the object moved within reach. He touched the glowing cube with his vidcom orb, and it opened, revealing De Gevaarlijke accounting records controlled by Dieter Rasmus.

"That's it? I guess you really are a sorcerer—okay, okay, I see them. I'm ready for the transactions," said HT, who grew chatty under stress.

The man in the long coat touched the first account, and it emptied out except for eight gioveinos—Tǒngzhìzhě's lucky number and calling card.

"Got it," HT confirmed. The man in the coat glanced up at him and nodded before touching the other account objects one by one, leaving eight gios in each. "This Gevaarlijke and Tǒngzhìzhě war," said HT, trying to stay calm, "not so big after we finish siphoning off

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Gevaarlijke funds like we did the Tǒngzhìzhě—just us lieutenants in too deep to let go. I was one of them—but no more. Not after they got greedy—after Pim—and all the other deaths. We’re going to fix them, aren’t we?”

Again, the interloper placed his finger over his lip, this time more dramatically. “Ja, het spijt me!” responded HT.

The man in the long coat started to reply, but the pulsing alarm on his vidcom caught his eye. It came from the nano-drones he’d released outside earlier.

“Oh—time to move.” He accessed the last few accounts and waited for HT’s confirmation.

“Move. Move. Move. Get out of there now,” said HT.

The man inside the room waited until he heard “Klaar” over the channel, and then he closed the link.

The door locks disengaged. The echo of the mechanical releases filled the room, and with a final HSL command, the man in the brown coat shut down the holo-projector.

The doors parted, and Dieter Rasmus burst through. Glee filled his face; he’d trapped a mouse in a cage. In his hand was a short scepter, which he lifted high. He squeezed the finger control, and blue lightning erupted from the scepter’s head. The long line of lightning hissed and crackled as Dieter whipped it back and forth. Behind him, six other men and women flowed in. They fanned out across the room, staying along the outer rim while their captive backed away from the holo-projector in the sunken workspace a few steps below.

Dieter smiled with bright, shiny teeth, his eyebrows so high that a wrinkle formed on his forehead. “Well, well, I caught a space roach. I thought I heard someone else in the room.” Recognition filled his face, and he smiled some more. “Not unhappy it’s you. Never liked you, or your story. That’s why I never hired you. Who let you in? Iemand heeft je binnengelaten, (Someone let you in).” He shook his head. “No matter; I’ll know soon enough. Huurling (Mercenary), you’re dead. First, someone steals from Tǒngzhìzhě, and they accuse

us De Gevaarlijke.” His smiling face suddenly twisted in anger. “They retaliate, piling up De Gevaarlijke bodies—mijn familie (my family). And now I find you stealing from us. We’re killing each other at your profit. Niet meer (No more).

“You will never leave this room alive. With your dying breath, you will tell how you got in here, how you stole all those gios—and you’ll give them back—and then you will die, slowly. With this, I’ll cut pieces off you until you hurt so much, oh, so much. You’ll ask me to finish you, and I won’t. Not until you give it all back.”

Dieter smiled again, even wider than before. “And the Tõngzhìzhě gioveinos—those you stole from them, you give to me.”

Dieter snapped his wrist, and blue lightning crackled across the apartment. A second snap flashed before the intruder, who immediately drew his hand up in front of his face, his fingers spread wide. The blue lightning sizzled and died out as thousands of nanos absorbed the electric shock and dropped to the floor. Dieter’s companions then brought out the tools of their trade: plasma swords, long daggers, and more lightning whips.

“What? You say nothing. You feed this war. Dozens from both families die fighting each other—and you say nothing?”

The man with the orange eyes blinked. The eyes opened slowly, and he spoke. Dieter and his bodyguards heard only two syllables of the first word. The other three syllables fell beyond the range of human hearing. They all heard the second word.

“Fire.”

The emergency doors sealed the main apartment entrance and the rear exit, and all air evacuated from the room, causing the temperature to instantly drop to an icy cold. Then a smoky, fire-retardant gas filled the room at high pressure, clouding vision and knocking several of the bodyguards off their feet. In the corner, a flashing hologram showed the location of a box of emergency breathers. The lightning whips dimmed but remained functioning, their crackle now a high-pitched sizzle. One of Dieter’s men went for the breathers.

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Gasping an oxygenless breath, Dieter struck, and the remaining De Gevaarljke followed.

