

# Vic I

There was so much more emotion in the north. The land of Australis has only a narrow range that most would considered habitable. She had traveled by camel then fishing boat to the warm currents of the Amundsen Sea. Two days prior, she landed on Thistle, an island in the Pig archipelago. She had only met with the fishers, farmers, and tradesmen of Thistle but figured all who lived in the Pig islands were about the same. They were all so loud.

Standing in a common area, she heard shouts in thick slang, laughter, boast, hammering, buzzing, slamming of wood on wood. It blended into a dis-coherent howl like an avalanche composed of demons. So Vic avoided common areas and kept her ear covers on even though it wasn't cold. A part of marshal equipment her mom gifted to her for her first mission was audio inserts for her ear covers.

Audio of a four count metronome played in them. The sound played in the right then the left, switching each count. The sound was generated from a circuit her mother's mother designed. It was powered by the most valuable thing she'd ever possess. The seven kilogram solid state battery that signified her status as a marshal.

Their batteries came from the bodies of stored or worn down instances. The batteries would last for centuries. But no one knew how to make them anymore, not even the instances. Nor can they manufacture many of their essential components to keep their bodies in active operation. So we marshals handled much of their interactions with human affairs. Our bodies could heal somewhat and our children live in whole new bodies.

Vic met an instance for the first time five years ago when she was eight. He was funny, and nice, and his name was Jake. He worked with Vic's mom often. He said the next time they'd meet she'd be a marshal and he'd give her her first mission. That day was today. She simply had to brave the cacophony of the common spaces to get to the Transient Performers Union building. She counted to slow her breathes.

*One, two, three, four, hold. Two, three, four, release. Two, three four.* She inhaled counting on beat to the sound of the metronome that grounded her within her body. She passed through the the curtain of her bunk. The looks, sounds, and commotion hit her like how she imagined rain might. It hadn't rained yet and the thought of it still terrified her. *Eyes down, three, four, hold.* She wore her camel skins despite the heat.

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No one had paid her much mind. She wasn't yet tall like her mother. Vic figured the people of the Pig islands left shorter folk alone. The humans here that were her age moved in packs of their own consensus. She considered for the first time that perhaps she'd rather stay short than be like her mom. She had a year to make up her mind about such things. Perhaps Jake would have thoughts on the utility of a marshal's chosen height. He would be in the musical practice room already. In a standby state with a local contact protecting him from unwanted notice.

"Looking for singing lessons young miss." A friendly human asked as she approached.

It took her a moment to parse his accent. "Yeah" she muttered. "I uh-have an appointment."

He looked down at some records and pretended to read. "Ah yes with a Theo?"

Theodore Nelson was a common code name marshals used. She nodded and the warm, but in a nice way, human indicated for her to follow. Her mother taught her many tactics to read people. It was an area her kin struggled. But what they lacked in broad awareness of a social vibe they made up for with focus.

Her guide moved with a careful, confident gait. Perhaps they were a dancer, or perhaps a threat. Vic was regaining her bearing from her passage through crowded common space. This hallway was filled with just the two of them. Gentle white noise played from speakers in the ceiling. The lighting was a late April twilight. Vic maintained her nervous shuffle that was now an act. It would be safer if this unknown human didn't see her as sure footed.

They stopped at a sturdy metal door and unlocked it. "The door can be locked from inside." They said and then promptly returned to their post. She watched them walk away until they were out of sight. She opened the door. *One, two, three four.* She entered the room. Locking the door behind her.

An unfamiliar mechanical body rested on standby in front of her. Her mom had told her that sometimes instances will move their computer systems into different bodies depending on circumstances. Most instances alive today run in a low power mode in some secret location humans don't go. But Jake was supposed to be in his versatile human like frame. Designed for direct human interaction and to use equipment built for humans. This was a combat frame. Her mom had shown her the remains of one once. Vic started to leave the room. Something was very wrong here.

"Please jack your audio phones into the box." A voice recording stated. It was generated by an instance but lacked the personality they normally give to their voices.

There was a 1/4 inch TRRS compatible jack in a metal box with a green LED next to it. It was on a stool with a thick wire running to behind the combat frame. She approach the box slowly. Not sure what to look out for. No one had trained her for this scenario. Her real training was

supposed to start with her first mission. This seemed way too advanced. She disconnected her headset from the EMDR metronome circuit. Then carefully and precisely connected to the box.

"Hello" the voice of an instance said. It wasn't Jake. This voice presented with a feminine staccato. "I'm Olive. I am meeting with you instead of Jake. You may speak softly and I will hear you. What is your name?"

She should have known Vic's name if she was assigned to replace Jake. "Why am I not meeting with Jake?" Vic whispered toward the mechanical beast.

"His systems missed a few check ins. His whereabouts are unknown. His activities were outside of the consensus. My investigation led me to this meeting." Olive reported then fell silent.

"I'm Vic. I'm a marshal. Meeting Jake was the start to my first mission." Vic reported back.

"When was your last communication with Jake?"

"Five years ago?" Vic said. "But uh-the meeting was setup through my mother. Jean. She's a marshal too."

"We will contact your mother." Olive stated. "Did you know anything about what mission you were supposed to be doing?"

"Being an intermediary for talks with one of the millennials that live in computer systems like you. The one with dementia."

"When was this supposed to take place?"

"I don't think it was a scheduled thing or that the bro-bot knew about it." Vic hesitated nervously then continued. "I was supposed to pose myself as someone interested in joining his reenactment group."

"Okay. We will continue with that mission to see if he is involved in some way. Take the box on the stool. If the light is green then I will be on the other end. I will know when you are have connected your headset. I will not be able to hear you. Return to your housing and await further instruction." Olive commanded then went completely silent.

The light on the box switched to yellow. Vic traced the cord to the wall. It was not plugged into the combat frame like she had assumed. She was carefully not to touch the frame as she removed the plug from the AC power outlet. She collected the box and secured into inside of her camel skins. She looked back one last time at the frame before exiting. The thing was terrifying. It was meant for that purpose. She was baffled by the humans that built such a thing.

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Vic was feeling hungry. She had stayed in her bunk since she'd returned from the meeting. It would be wise to walk around the village and get to know the area. It would be wise to eat. The crowds were too much though. Nowhere she'd ever been, except a meeting, had more than five people in it. And the meetings were okay because everyone mostly only talked one at a time. She'd lost count the number of people she'd seen as she walked back from the music building.

Her bunk had its own AC and DC outlets. She confirmed her battery was fully charged then had plugged in the box to the AC outlet. The light was red at first then yellow and had stayed like that for a few hours now. Vic figured the box must contain some instance manufactured secure communications tech. It looked user serviceable. She considered opening it up out of boredom but circuits were never her area of interest.

She thought better of it. She wouldn't want to do something that could mess up her first mission. She finished her pulp novel while waiting for Olive's message and didn't have a radio to listen to the radio plays. She opened her bunk's curtain. This place felt so unbalanced. It was either over or under stimulating. Both were undesired but only one would get her food. She exited the bunk. She looked back at the little box with its yellow light.

Vic disconnected from the wall. She found it had a barrel jack on its back label 12 volts. Well here goes nothing. She connected the device to the battery system secured to her back. The LED went red and stayed that way for longer than before. Then switched to yellow. She connected her headphones and secured the box to the batteries harness that she attached most things to with cord. She carried everything she had brought with her. It made her feel more mobile and secure.

There was currently no one in the bunk room and so no one to see what laid hidden under her camel skins. She was feeling warm in her outfit. Thistle was too warm and muddy. She supposed all marshals have to get used to how other humans lived in order to do their duty. Vic would adapt she decided. No metronome played in her ears. The next thing they would play is Olive's voice. Vic began her mission to acquire food.

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Her mother had told her about the Pig island cafeterias. They had all kinds of food from all over. Most ate there at least one meal a day. Vic then hadn't grasped the sheer crowds they brought in. Luckily it was an unusual time to eat according to the meal time clock as it self identified with the text above it. It was a twelve hour analog clock. These were used a lot on the Pig islands. It only had one hand though. It had hour makings, no numbers, and was divided into three section. They were breakfast, lunch, and supper.

Below the clock the sign read *Open 8 am to 8 pm PIT*. This island chain shared one time zone despite what they had for a day night cycle was fairly diverse. The big island was on the American Central Time. The American Federation was the only group Vic knew of that still bothered with multiple internal time zones.

PIT didn't play nice with other time zones. It shifted by minutes over the seasons and centered itself based on population census of the islands. There were regular spokes consensus meetings that changed it. Her mom said *We abolished time. The Pig islands tried liberating it instead*. Her people's system worked best she thought.

The clock indicated that a new meal would be served in two hours. Perhaps for her next visit, she would try late morning. Even the reduced crowd was a bit too much for her.

"Headphone confirmed in place." An instance generated voice stated. It was the same voice without personality as before. "Please disconnect, hold for a moment then, reconnect to acknowledge."

*Shit. Okay where is the outhouse.* Vic made her way and witnessed a line. A line, to an outhouse, that held more people than she knew the first names of. There was no break from the crowds. Someone bummed into her and she fell to the ground.

"Apology young sprout." The masculine person said in their thick accent. They continued moving and dissolved into the crowd.

Vic stayed on the ground. Machines all around screamed in their motion. Two men nearby were either fighting or laughing as they grappled one another. The mud on her bare hands felt cold. She wiggled her fingers gently and rhythmically. Sound from her headset blared once more and she ripped them off. A pleasant chill of air caressed her left ear. She closed her eyes and counted to slow her breathing. *One, two, three, four. Hold.*

She stayed like that for a time as her body cooled down. She considered removing her boots to feel the cool mud on her feet as well.

"Are you alright?" a brisk voice asked. Vic looked up and saw a girl her age who presented very feminine. "Your dress like someone from Australis. Is that where you're from?"

"Yeah." Was all Vic could manage. She grabbed her ear covers that laid exposing wires snaking into her camel skins. She shoved them through a flap. *Did the girl see that?* Personal electronics could draw unwanted notice.

"That's cool. I was uh thinking-" the girl paused giving her a moment. She had to find out what the girl had seen of her equipment. The message could wait. Her training was clear on this.

"Do you want to go for a walk?" Vic interrupted. "I don't do well with crowds."

"Um sure yeah totally. I know a spot we could go. Folks don't go there much. A friend and I- Well yeah I think you'd like it. No crowds." She affirmed.

"Sounds nice. What's your name? I'm Ellen." Vic lied.

"Ellen huh. I like it. Nice on the tongue. I'm Cosma Aphrasgia Delenor. I go by Cosma, or Commie. Some folks just call me Sma" Cosma giggled. "Did you pick your name Ellen?"

"Uh yeah." Vic said.

"That cool. You're so- different but in a cool way. So uh- need a hand up?"

"Thanks." Her hand was cold and soft like fresh snow.

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The two had been walking for a while up a rocky hill that flora had yet to break ground to. Cosma explained that there wasn't anything useful up here and it was difficult to climb. She'd only hiked up it once or twice. They were about halfway up when they stand down on a dark flat rock. They could see much of the town from where they sat.

"Thistle. The town not the island expands to all the usable land. Things do die down in the late PM though. It's a hard place to avoid crowds."

"Never been in a crowd until I got here." Vic said.

"What's it like where you're from?" Cosma asked. She was a person that expressed excitement freely.

"Colder, no clocks, more electronics." Vic stated.

"No clocks?"

"Yeah. We just check in with each other. Listen to our bodies. No one's ever late."

"So is that what was in that cloth that fell out your pocket? Looked like speakers." Cosma observed.

"Yea- Uh- They are an audio head set. I use that cloth to cover my ears to keep them warm. I slide the head set in to uh- keep them hidden." Vic admitted.

"No way! Do you have a portable radio?" Cosma exclaimed.

Vic considered. She technically had a highly secret and encrypted portable radio. "No" she said. She decided that was essentially true. "I have an EMDR metronome circuit my grand mom made."

"Can I listen to it?" Cosma asked.

"Uh- sure yeah. Let me-" Vic began sorting through her flaps. She disconnected from the surely green light emitting box and into the circuit she had sewn into her harness. The headset emerged from neck opening to her over cloak. It was still inside her ear covers. She could hear the metronome alternating between the two ear inserts. Vic pulled some slack through the cloaks neck hole. "I can run it so its longer" Vic started. "But-"

"It's fine." Cosma reassured and smiled. She put in both inserts and her head hovered just above Vic's shoulder. "Um Ellen?"

Vic hesitated in momentary confusion. "Uh- Yeah Cosma."

"Touch okay?"

"Sure." Vic assured thinking the question old. Cosma rested her head on Vic's shoulder.

"Yeah that's nice. Mind if I listen for a little bit?"

"Sure." Vic repeated and felt Cosma rest more of her weight on Vic. They sat like that for a good while. Vic looked at the town and at this distance it looked quite manageable. Perhaps she could train herself to process crowds by starting here and walk slowly toward town. Stopping before she became overwhelmed. Maybe Cosma would want to walk with her.

"Emergency alert." An instance generated voice blared from under her camel skin cloak. "Please connect immediately to hear broadcast."

"Ellen what was that? I thought you said you don't have a radio. What's the emergency?"

"I don't technically. It's a personal emergency. Please don't tell anyone." Vic pleaded.

"Tell what?"

"Anything." Vic said and got up, the headset already removed from Cosma's head. Her hair was slightly disheveled. "Nothing that you've learned about me please. To anyone. We can talk later and I'll explain. Promise."

"Don't worry I ain't no snitch." She winked. Vic had never noticed how cute a girl could be.

Her face felt warm. "I really enjoyed meeting you."

"Emergency Alert" The box droned and Vic immediately jack in to stop it. She was moving fast down the hill's path. Olive's voice came through the headset.

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Vic was at a dock. The clocks had told the workers to go elsewhere. She sat on the cool ground between a large rock and a wooden crate. Wood here was often much rougher than back home. It could sting too especially the newer cut wood. Vic had been running her hand across the crate. It felt old and was smooth and sturdy.

At twilight she made her way into this position. The sun had spiraled below the sea and bright stars filled the sky like it was mid June. Thistle, by consensus, banded exterior lighting between 9 pm and 7 am if the sun was below the horizon. The moon was not out. It was truly dark.

Gentle fresh snow tapped the ground and wood around her. Vic felt truly safe for the first time since she arrived in Thistle. She thought about her interaction with Cosma earlier. She couldn't let something like that happen again. Especially while she was on a mission. Vic felt like she could trust Cosma to honor her privacy but that was just luck. If it had been someone else she might have failed her first mission.

Her mom established communication with Olive. Apparently she vouched toward Vic's competence as a Marshal. That was nice to hear. Vic expected her mom to ask her to be pulled off mission. But she thought Vic could handle this. And so she decided her mom was right.

The dock had a fishing sailboat moored to it. It was much like the one she arrived on. Vic heard the soft crunch of snow. The snow was thin on the ground but fortunately still able to make an audible sound when a foot landed on it. Vic spun around and saw Cosma. She was wearing a fitted parka. Her hair, cheek bones and chin were recognizable even in the starlight.

"Did you follow me?" Vic asked in perhaps more than a whisper.

"Maybe. We-"

"Wait." Vic interrupted. "Come closer, speak softer" she continue as soft as snow tapping.

Cosma moved closer and put a hand on Vic's arm "How can you see right now?"

"I've been out here since twilight."

"I know. Me too. My eyes cannot make anything out in this light." Cosma whispered. "I thought you'd move and I was getting cold and so-" She hugged Vic. She felt very cold and her body was shivering. Perhaps her parka was damaged.

"Here." Vic opened her camel skins and wrapped them both inside. If there was light, Cosma might be able to see the items on Vic's harness she'd prefer unseen. But Vic believed that she couldn't see. Both of their head shared one head hole. Cosma was quite cold against her body.

"You're so warm."

"Yeah I've felt hot since I got here. Thanks for helping me cool off." Vic half joked.



"You're so odd Ellen."

*Oh that name. Why did I choose my grand mom's name to give her.* "Actually-" Vic paused. "My name is Vic. When I said it was Ellen I was lying."

"Oh sweet is that because your like an operative or something. My great great great great? grandfather was one during the strikes. Heard so many stories growing up. They always said that the safety folks were all ages. Even kids like us."

"I'm thirteen."

"I'm fourteen. Were still kids though."

"Maybe in Thistle."

"So am I right? Your some kind of operative or spy or something." Her excitement was making her louder.

"Why did you follow me. We could have talked about this later."

"Well if I did then you'd probably just have lied to me. But don't worry I'll keep your secrets."

"I'd hope so. This is my first mission. I really don't want to screw this up."

"I don't care but are you a red lily or something?"

"What? no I'm not a fascist."

"I don't-" Cosma stopped herself. "What are you then?"

"Can we please talk about this later. I need to stay still until first light."

"We're getting covered in snow though. If we move back under that roof we won't lose much line of sight." Cosma suggested.

"The point is to be covered in snow. We're just cargo. At least that's what I hope we'll look like when the sun returns."

Cosma held Vic tightly and jostled her slightly. "This is boring."

"You can still go back. The sooner you leave the less likely your tracks will be noticeable."

Cosma considered. "You said I can stay so I'm going to stay."

Vic crouch down to a resting position and Cosma matched her. "Get comfortable I guess."

Cosma moved around now entirely under the camel skins. She was looking up at Vic as she rested against her. "Are you a robot?"

"I am a friend to them."

"So you've met one before? Was that that voice that came from under here?" Cosma said her voice luckily muffled by the skins. Her excitement was proving risky.

"Let's talk later." Vic whispered. "For now we need to be as still and quiet as fallen snow."

Cosma tightened her grip around her waist in response. After a time, she fell asleep. Cosma's sleep sounds were soft and inaudible to all but Vic.