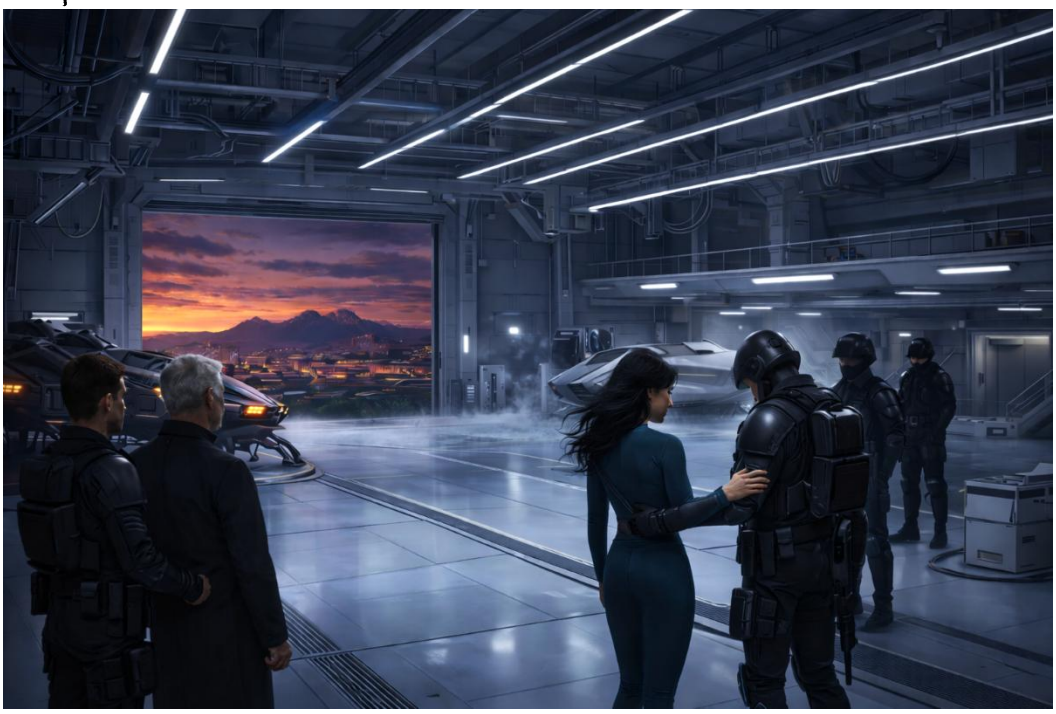
The Tree Farm

Scriptor Paul Hathcoat



Chapter 2 ~ The Airtight Garage

"That's strange," I remark.

"Wut?" Father replies.

"The armed team at the VOQ airlock. Who are they? I assume they're humans."

"They're Spettro, Sybaris Space Security. I recently formed them under the Department of Defense. Didn't you know?"

"No. Why didn't you tell me?"

"It was classified. Now you know," Father explains.

Father pulls up on the yoke and hovers to a stop. The two-man team blocks our entrance into the facility with a "Halt!" Boom! The airtight garage doors slam shut behind us, preventing escape. There's nowhere to run, nowhere to hide.

I'm extremely concerned. Sybaris Space Security agents could mean trouble, and I suspect the worst. I face under house arrest for any number of minor infractions.

If cited, I will plead ignorance of the law, and my Father, Fling Chee Master, Western Fleet Captain Gilbert Ganymede Wog, a decorated Quadrant Naval Commander and highly respected colony member, will pull some strings. I will get off with a stern warning, a few hours of public service, and maybe a small fine. I always do.

But it's not a minor offense that worries me. Stealing hi-tech weaponry from a naval armory using my Father's clearance codes is a serious crime and one that's deeply frowned upon.

I've come to a fork in the road. I see only two choices.

Option number one, they arrest me and charge me with piracy. I will, of course, plead innocent to all charges.

I see myself interrogated, 'Robert Wog, you claim, and these are your words a voice inside my head told me to do it.'

'Yes, Sir,' I will truthfully reply.

'What did the voice tell you to do?' the Chief Justice General will ask.

'She said, arm yourself and beware of Nyt,' I will truthfully reply.

'A voice inside your head told you to steal weapons and beware of a mythical Sybarinian goddess named Nyt?' the Chief Justice General will ask with no small degree of doubt.

'Nyt is no myth. She is coming!'

'What were you going to do with the weapons?' the interrogator will ask.

'Defend humanity. You're going to need my help,' I will say.

'The Quadrant Space Navy needs a boy's help?'

'Yep, you do. Can I go now?'

After consulting naval doctors, I will be certified as mentally unstable.

Father will petition for leniency, and as part of a plea bargain, I will return all but one of the 'stolen' weapons. I'll keep my favorite, a vintage Colt No. 5 Automatic Rotary, Phased-Plasma-Pistol. I named her and hid Ms.Dixie where no one could find her.

Regardless of my generous repatriation of the so-called 'Naval property,' I will not get off with a warning or simple fine. Imprisoned in a psychiatric hospital for the criminally insane, I'll be unable to attend flight school. I'll be a disgrace, outcast, shunned. My dream of commanding a starship in the service of Dawn will end.

Option number two: I go down fighting and take these big bastards with me. I nonchalantly unlock the glove compartment.

The security squad is heavily armed. The men are sporting Black Shield Tactical jumpsuits and ballistic battle armor. They're big, and they look rough and tough and mean. They're scowling at me. I know a scowl when I see one. Father scowls at me all the time. I've given Father many reasons to be angry with me. His mad face is much more intimidating -- teeth bared and dancing red devils in his eyes.

I've given the security squad no reason to regard me with such scowling disdain. I didn't steal navel weapons. I liberated them. I only took back what rightfully belonged to me.

Father scowls and yells, but he would never harm me. However, these men might try, and Father risks injury in the crossfire. With my dear Father's safety in mind, I reluctantly chose option one, slowly moved my hands away from the open glove compartment, and cautiously raised them over my head.

"Father, you're a fleet captain. Why are they stopping us?"

"I didn't call to confirm my arrival."

"Is that a problem?"

"It damn sure is. The fleet sets sail tomorrow, and everyone is on high alert."

"Why didn't you call in?" I question his lapse in judgment.

"I forgot, okay, happy? Now listen, don't talk, stay seated, sit still, no sudden moves, smile, look stupid, and keep your hands away from the gun in the glove compartment. I'll give you the all-clear when it's safe. Then and only then can you get out and gather up Eleni. Do you understand?" Father whispers.

"I wasn't going to touch Miss Fifi. I was going to grab my Skypod."

"I said, do you understand?" Father growls.

"I understand."

Father's expression softens. "If this goes south, I love you, Son."

"I love you too, Father, but look," I point with an easy nod.

Eleni eagerly awaits inside the four-inch-thick, honeycomb quartz crystal airlock hatch. She's waving at us and bouncing up and down like a little spring. I love my new sister.

Next to Eleni are her meager possessions: two six-foot black torpedo duffels and a silver-titanate seaman's chest. She has a stylish white, spider-silk backpack slung casually over her shoulder.

"There's my girl," Father exclaims.

"There's my sister," I echo with heartfelt joy. I've always wanted a sister. My father and his lovely Portillian wife/bar-

girl have given me three - that I know of - Eleni being the oldest.

The squad cautiously approaches, shoulder weapons pointed.

"State your business," the squad leader barks.

Father drops his blast goggles and grins.

"Sir," the squad responds in unison, but they do not lower their weapons.

Father greets the squad with a formal salute. "At ease, men," he commands.

"Apple blossom!" the squad leader growls and continues the armed challenge.

"Dumpling," Father counters.

The men lower their weapons, breathe easy, and stand at ease.

"As you were, men. Sorry," the Captain shrinks. "I forgot to call ahead. My bad."

"No problem, Captain," the squad leader reassures, "Keeps us on our toes."

"Well done, Sergeant. You've done exemplary teamwork. It pays to be cautious. Men, meet my favorite son, Robert." Father gives me a nod of approval.

"Welcome to the VOQ. How do you do, young Master Wog?" Warmly greets the sergeant. "We've heard many good things about you. I'm honored to meet you."

"Thank you, Sir."

"Have you been here before?" The sergeant inquires.

"No, Sir, not lately," I reply without a twitch. Why do you ask? Are you missing any weapons? "I didn't do it," I lie.

"Then no problem, young Master Wog. We'll have to give you the VIP tour someday if it suits the Captain," the sergeant cheerfully offers but draws his total attention back to my father. "Awaiting your orders, Captain."

"I've come for Eleni. She'll be living with Robert while I'm away."

"Excellent idea, Captain."

"It was Robert's idea." Father gracefully scissors out of his blood-red, high-speed, convertible T-pod. "All clear, Robert."

"Captain, Miss Eleni informed us you were coming, but she didn't mention young Master Wog, and when you didn't call in to confirm, we became concerned," explains the sergeant. I've positioned a quick-response squad inside." The sergeant nods toward the airlock.

"I would have done the same thing, Sergeant. Have the men stand down and tell them to get some rest. We've got a long day tomorrow."

"Aye, Captain," the Sergeant confirms, opens his squad comm, and turns to talk to his men.

"Good afternoon, Corporal." Father directs his attention to the second squad member while the sergeant chats up his men.

"I made Miss Eleni wait inside for her safety, Sir. She wanted to wait on the dock, but I wouldn't let her," explains the team sidekick, obviously vying for my father's approval.

"Good job, Son. That's why I put you in charge of my little girl's safety," Father praises the handsome young corporal.

"Thank you, Captain," the corporal beams.

"Resume watch." The sergeant ends his communication with the marine assault squad waiting inside, flips off his comm, and turns to his sidekick. "Corporal, open the hatch and let Miss Eleni out. Carry her gear to the Captain's T-pod, chop-chop," the squad leader orders.

"Yes, Sir." The sidekick jumps into action.

Father glares at me. I'm fiddling with my Skypod, looking for some good tunes to play for Eleni and Sara. Girls like music.

"I said all clear. Gather up your sister and load up her gear," Father sternly instructs.

"What are you going to do, supervise while I work?"

"Yes, I am. I need to speak to Sergeant Manning about some important war stuff. Now get your ass moving and go get your sister."

"Aye, Skipper," I bolt from the T-pod and race to join the swaggering sidekick.

"Hi, what's your name? I quiz the sidekick, march lock-step by his side, and extend a hand in friendship. "I'm Robert. My friends call me Wog."

No response? Do you dare disregard my hand of friendship? Did you not hear my father? "I'm his favorite son, Robert Terminus Wog. I am the one."

Silence? If you don't want to be my friend, perhaps you intend to test my strength? It would be best to think twice before stepping onto my path with an angry eye. I'll bust a fancy Fling Chee move on you so fast you won't know what hit you. Then there would be a horrible, bloody mess to clean up. I don't want that. Nobody wants that. Do you? Then bring it, big boy.

He's disinterested. I study his tanned face, closely cropped curly blond hair, hard-angled, clean-shaven jawline,

proud, determined brow, aquiline nose, and blue-green eyes. He's taller than me and carries a lot of dumb muscle. He's an Atlantian mix-breed like me. Well, not like me. He doesn't have any Sybarinian Squashatch Indian in him. Perhaps he's some poor, simple cousin on father's inbred side of the family. I'd guess he's about ten years older than me. It's hard to tell with Atlantian's. We don't look our age. "How old are you? I guess twenty-four."

No answer. "Did you fight on Caesura?"

Not a twitch. "Did you fight alongside Father?"

Silence. "Did you see the Devil Dancers? I say you did. I see it in your eyes."

A twitch. A darting glance. A moment of hesitation.

"Stand back, Hotshot." The sidekick glares, muscles in front of me, keys in the code to the airlock hatch, and stands at attention.

The heavy airlock slides open with an escaping whoosh of dense, moist, fragrant mist. I peek around the sidekick and Eleni; the jade jewel of humanity escapes her cyan crystal confines. Raven's black hair ruffled by the balmy breeze, she lights by the corporal's side and places a gentle hand on his strong arm. "Thank you, Magnus."

"You're welcome, Miss Eleni." Magnus stands at ease, unwinds, bows his head, and stares at his feet.

What about me? What about my thanks? "Ah-um," I clear my throat. Don't have me standing around.

Eleni turns to greet her hospitable half-brother at long last.

"Hi, Robert," Eleni rushes to hug me and kiss my cheek.

That's better, but less slobber, please. "Hello, Dear Sister," I return the affection with sanitary dry air smooches.

"Magnus." Eleni quickly turns back to her guardian angel.

"Yes, Ma'am." He brightens.

"Thank you for your protection."

"I was just doing my job," Magnus stutters.

"Is that all I am to you a job?" Eleni cools.

"No, Ma'am."

"Then, thank you for being my friend."

"You're welcome." Magnus blushes a warm red. He softens, slumps, and melts. Pathetic. I like the tough guy better.

"Please be careful, and don't let anything bad happen to Daddy," Eleni begs.

"Yes, Ma'am, we all watch for each other."

"Will I see you when you get back?" Eleni flutters her long eyelashes.

"See you, me? I, yes, if you want to, if it's okay with the Captain."

"Why wouldn't I want to see you, and why wouldn't it be okay with Daddy?" Eleni demands. "Do you want to see me again, yes or no?"

"I'm a corporal, and you're a fleet captain's daughter." Magnus turns in shame.

"Don't turn your back to me!" Eleni grabs his jumpsuit at the shoulder shield and yanks the simple idiot around. "You're Spettro, decorated for bravery in battle, you're a Robot Fighter, you're a gentleman, and you're my friend. Do you want to see me when you return?"

"Yes, Ma'am, I do."

Eleni smiles. "I do, too."

He looks confused. Yes, stupid, Eleni loves you. Magnus, Robot Fighter, you may be one of the strongest, bravest men alive, but you have a weakness: my sister. You're sun-warmed nut-butter in her hands - disgusting.

"Let's get rolling, kids," Father hollers from behind the T-pod, where he and Sergeant Manning are smoking, yucking it up, and telling stories. "Daylight's burning. We've got to pick up Sara before supper. Less talk, more action."

Magnus dutifully grabs Eleni's torpedo duffels. Eleni takes his arm and the two head for the T-pod. Wait, what about me? "Hey, who's getting the sea chest?"

Eleni smiles, "Could you get it, please?"

"Sure, I'll get it." I don't see any Robot Fighters volunteering.

"Robert, it's heavy. There's a cargo lift inside the lobby."

"Whatever," I mumble. I give the chest a critical scope.

Eleni's armored silver-titanate seaman's chest is a remarkably handsome piece of furniture. It's a Skooche™ SS Supreme. The maker's tag says it's guaranteed blast-resistant and watertight to one-thousand atmospheres. It's reinforced with braided black spider silk cargo straps and has a lovely brushed matte finish. I love it. I want one. Mine is old and junky, one of Father's hand-me-downs.

"Are you sure you can manage?" Eleni asks.

"No problem, Miss Eleni." I'm a beast made to bear your burdens. I was happy to see you. I thought things would be different. I thought we would be friends. I guess I thought wrong. You treat me like dirt. Whose idea was it to move you into my home? I suppose it's too late to leave you here or, better yet, send you back to Port Dawn.

Clasping the reinforced leather handles, I tug at the chest. The damn thing is heavy. Its export tagged two-hundred-twenty-five metric pounds. I'm strong; I can do this. I don't need help. I draw a deep breath, grit my teeth in determination, grip the handles, squat, and lift the chest maybe three inches before it drops to the deck with a bang. Everyone turns to look at me. "I'm okay, minor miscalculation."

"Robert, I told you it was heavy. Is that how you listen to me?" Eleni reprimands.

"What's in this thing, a rock collection?" I kick the chest in frustration.

"Robert!" Eleni snaps. "I said, get the lift. You'll hurt yourself. Magnus, can you help my little brother, please?"

"I can get it. I'm not a child," I yell.

"Robert, wait." Eleni leaves Magnus to finish loading her bags.

"What?" I explode, releasing pent-up rage. I didn't ask for this. I never wanted a sister. I'm the victim here. I have rights.

"Look at me," Eleni gently lifts my chin.

"Looking." I give her the stink eye.

"Don't be jealous of Magnus," Eleni soothes. "He's my friend. Let me be nice to my friend and thank him for his

service and friendship. He's leaving with Daddy tomorrow, and I may never see him again." She tears up and turns away.

"Don't cry, Eleni. I'm not jealous. Who said I was jealous?" I am, but I'm now getting the close interpersonal attention I deserve.

Eleni brightens. "You have no reason to be. What's wrong?"

"It's this stupid chest. I bench three-thirty all the time. I'm not sure what's wrong with me today. Low blood sugar, maybe, and lack of food, probably. Are you hungry?"

"Robert, we have all summer to get to know one another. We'll have lots of fun, you'll see."

"Promise?"

"I promise." Eleni guarantees with a wink.

"Okay. Let's go now."

"Thank you." Eleni kisses my cheek. "Will you let Magnus help with the chest?"

"Sure." Let him do the work. I'll supervise.

"Magnus," Eleni waves, "when finished loading, can you help us over here, please?"

"What's so special about this ugly old chest anyway?" I ask.

"The chest and all its contents are for you," Eleni smiles and points at my nose.

"For me? What's in it?"

"Birthday presents from Elsie, Epana, Mimme, and me."

"What kind of presents?"

"You'll have to wait until your birthday. I want you to be surprised. I'm sorry the chest displeased you; it was the nicest one we could find."

"Thank you, Eleni. The chest is nice. It's not ugly. I was mad because I couldn't lift it. Mind over matter, matter won."

"I understand," Eleni soothes. "Don't be mad. You're not weak-minded. I know the chest is heavy. We shouldn't have packed it so full."

"No, don't think that way. Full is good. It's not the chest. It's me. I've let myself go. I need to start exercising more."

Magnus finishes loading and comes running, "Yes, Miss Eleni?"

"Will you please help Robert with this heavy old chest?"

"Yes, Ma'am."

"I'll get the lift." I bolt for the lobby.

"Hold up. I got it." Magnus effortlessly swings the chest onto his shoulder in one easy, sweeping, graceful move.

"That's what I was trying to do." I marvel at his strength, balance, and agility.

"That's how it's done, Hotshot."

"Magnus, be nice to my little brother." Eleni punches his arm.

"I was nice."

"Be nicer. Please. For me."

Magnus deposits the chest on the T-pod's rear liftgate and then turns his attention to me. "Wog, when I return, we'll do strength training together at the squad gym."

"You and me?" Strength training with a Spettro Special Forces killer would be good, wholesome fun, and probably prove invaluable someday.

"That's an affirmative." Magnus grins and extends a strong hand in friendship.

I shake his hand with all the strength and vigor I can muster. Magnus, Robot Fighter is my friend.

"Robert, will you give me a minute alone with Magnus? Please, I want to say goodbye."

"See you when you get back," I salute Magnus.

"Boo-ya, I'll see you when I get back." He points at me, then his eyes, and pulls a fist over his heart in the Black Shield salute.

I happily slide into the T-Bird and strap into the co-pilot's seat. The T-pod will be mine after Father sails tomorrow. I copied a set of keys.

Okay, everyone in. Let's go now. I swing around to see what's taking Eleni so long. She's still talking to Magnus. I look over the control console to see what's taking Father so long. He is still talking with the Sergeant. Father, get in and drive this thing. Talk later.

Why am I always the one who has to wait?

Father finally finishes chatting with the sergeant, and they exchange formal salutes. "Eleni, say goodbye to Magnus, let's roll."

"Daddy, can Magnus eat dinner with us? There's plenty of food. Please," Eleni begs.

"It's okay with me if it's okay with his sergeant. Manning, could you excuse the Corporal long enough to take his evening rations with my family and me?"

"No problem, Captain," the sergeant assures. "Corporal, I want you back here by zero-one-hundred."

"Aye, Sergeant," Magnus confirms.

"I said okay, go on, get out of here," the sergeant shushes him off.

"Come on, Magnus." Eleni takes his hand and drags him into the back seat of the T-Bird.

Father slides into the pilot's seat and straps in. "Everyone buckled up? Robert?"

"Systems check," I respond.

Father glances over his shoulder. "Corporal?"

"Passenger and cargo secure," confirms Magnus.

"Drive fast, Daddy," Eleni exclaims.

Father revs the rotor and rotates the T-pod toward the garage doors. He secures the convertible roof. The hermetic hatches suck shut. He checks his gauges and waits patiently for the go signal.

Sergeant Manning salutes Father and crosses his forearms. The massive airlock disengages with a deep base foomp. The heavy garage doors rumble open. Manning uncrosses his arms, releasing us for take-off. He points to the open doors with a stab. "Clear!" he screams over the rising whine of the rotor.

I'm slammed into the back of my seat as we take to the air in a blast of silver light. We trace an arc into the deep blue sky. At a cold, thin altitude, we hover high above Sybaris Station. Far below, lights flicker on one by one, then by the thousands, and then by the tens of thousands. The tired and weary set aside their toil, and the sprawling colony stirred to

life. Dusty burnt orange settles over the desert basin. A radiant ball of red fire sinks into the dark eastern sea. It's evening; it's time to get away.