

Inner Workings

The Quartermaster tapped the comm-stud behind her right ear and waited. After a few seconds, the Warcaster on the other end acknowledged by using The Quartermaster's name. Her real name. She grimaced. These days, she thought of herself only as The Quartermaster. Mercenary, arms dealer, criminal—that was her identity, not the woman to whom that other name belonged. That woman was vulnerable. That woman had secrets that could be used against her.

"I'm approaching the meeting site," The Quartermaster said as she entered the port district of Bastion, the great city of the Iron Star Alliance. Here ships of all shapes and sizes delivered goods night and day, creating a swirling chaos of men and women. She pushed through until she reached a landing pad without a ship. Conspicuous, but not unexpected.

Seneschal Hieronymus Hale stood in the center of the platform flanked by a pair of Paladin enforcers. The seneschal wore the same heavy compound armor as his guards, though he'd removed his helmet, revealing a rather ugly man with large, ungainly features, all save for his eyes. They were light blue, like a clear Konesta sky.

The Quartermaster noted the mesh emitters on the paladins' armor glowed but dimly. That made her wonder. She whispered into her comm. "He's on his own, right?"

"Yes," came the short reply.

The Quartermaster didn't trust the Warcaster on the other end of the comm, but the man had more to lose by not backing her play. That was enough.

"Quite a feat to clear an entire landing bay in the busiest port in the Thousand Worlds," The Quartermaster said, smirking. She never smiled if she could help it. It gave away too much.

"I am a seneschal," Hale said, as if that sufficiently addressed the matter.

The Quartermaster approached to within about ten feet, one hand resting gently on the butt of her assault rifle, very much like the ones the Paladin enforcers held at low ready. Hale wore a pulse pistol and an arc blade with an ornate hilt. Weapons had not been prohibited for this meeting. She wouldn't have come if they had.

"Shall we do business or do you want to keep dangling here like a couple of Konestan carrion bats?" The Quartermaster asked. The question drew a scowl from Hale. She wanted him uncomfortable, off balance, and he looked like a man who might start at a little bluntness.

"Do you have the weapon?" Hale asked.

The Quartermaster nodded. The reason for this meeting was slung across her back. She put her assault rifle in carbine mode by shortening its barrel and stock and then unlimbered the other weapon. It was jet black, with a short, shrouded barrel, a pistol grip, and a truncated stock for easy maneuverability. "Your paladins will be facing these little honeys on the regular very soon."

The seneschal squinted and frowned. "It looks like a standard issue spiker rifle to me."

"It sure does," The Quartermaster agreed. "Until an AC Warcaster juices up a bunch of vassals and their spiker rounds start eating holes in your armor like moths through old cotton."

Hale visibly blanched.

"Yeah," she added. "Nasty."

"How did you acquire this weapon?" Hale asked. The Quartermaster didn't like that question, and she liked Hale's body language even less. Seneschal Hieronymus Hale was not a subtle man, and when he put his hands to his weapons, the message was clear.

The Quartermaster played along like nothing was amiss. "Do you want to purchase the weapon or not?"

"The only way you could have obtained this weapon is through direct dealings with the Aeternus Continuum," Hale said.

The Quartermaster rolled her eyes. "Figured that out all by yourself, huh?"

"Then you admit to a capital crime?"

The Quartermaster sighed. "Seneschal, you are about to do something very stupid."

"I'm about to apprehend a wanted arms dealer and criminal ringleader," he answered, smiling. It was an ugly thing, the smile of a man who was not accustomed to the emotions that went with it.

Arc flooded The Quartermaster's systems, and the mesh emitters on her armor blared fiery yellow. She transferred the spiker to her right hand and unlimbered the assault rifle with her left.

"Take her!" Hale shouted and drew his pistol and sword.

The Paladin enforcers brought up their rifles but far too slowly. She shot one through the helmet with her assault rifle then demonstrated the new spiker for the seneschal on the other Paladin. She fired the Arc-fueled weapon. It made a heavy chuffing sound and left a slight trail of green energy. The round struck the second enforcer's breastplate, pushing him back a step. Then it began to eat. The steel around the bullet hole expanded, and the enforcer screamed, clutching his chest, trying to tear his breastplate off before the corrosion reached his flesh. His screams became bubbling shrieks of agony before the spiker round killed him; The Quartermaster almost felt sorry for the poor bastard.

Hale managed to get a shot off, but her friend had powered her systems again, and the pulse round glanced harmlessly off The Quartermaster's Aegis shield. She charged him, swinging the spiker like a club, and smashed it into the seneschal's head. He dropped to the ground with a grunt.

"Don't kill him," came the Warcaster's voice.

She pointed the spiker rifle at Hale, and he stared up at her, eyes glazed. "It's your lucky day, Hale. My friend says you get to live."

"Friend?" Hale said. "Warcaster."

"Maybe you should have thought about bringing one if you were gonna pull this shit." The Quartermaster grinned. "Then again, maybe you did, and maybe that request was denied."

Hale's eyes widened.

"Yeah, you're a hot shit in the Paladin Corps, but you clearly don't know how things really work, even in your own government."

"Give him the rifle," the Warcaster said. "We still want to examine it."

"My friend says to give you this." The Quartermaster put the spiker rifle at Hale's feet. "I guess the ISA wants a look at these things, and, well, I aim to please."

The seneschal looked from the weapon then to The Quartermaster, his mouth an O of horror. He'd put the pieces together.

"I've transferred the credits," the Warcaster said. "Leave the area."

"Well, I gotta run. Pleasure doing business and all that." The Quartermaster turned and left, likely leaving Seneschal Hieronymus Hale to question his place in a world that had just grown wider and more dangerous. That made her smile.