

# Without Jurisdiction

Voitek Sudal pushed through the crowded streets of Harrow Bay, skirting the edge of Smuggler's Cove where the law and order of the ISA gave way to a teeming chaos of criminality. On this border between law and lawlessness, he stood out. His armor was too clean, his back too straight, his mien that of a man who not long ago operated within clear boundaries. Those boundaries had been removed, but the old habits remained.

He had crossed into Smuggler's Cove proper when his private comm channel—the one he'd paid an obscene fortune to keep private—buzzed. He ducked into a nearby alley and put his back against the wall. The comm continued to buzz, but no threats emerged. Voitek tapped his wrist pad, opening the channel. "Who the hell is this?"

"You sound paranoid, Sudal," said the man on the other end.

"Justicar Urias." Voitek named his former commanding officer. "I thought the Paladin Corps agreed to let me resign without interference or restriction."

"That hasn't changed," the justicar said.

"Then what do we have to talk about?"

"I have a job for you. A contract."

"Already got one."

"Yes. Farisa Sull," the justicar laughed. "A five-thousand-credit bounty for one of the most accomplished trackers in the Thousand Worlds?"

"Now, how might you know that?" Voitek said.

"The terms of your discharge did not preclude surveillance."

"Of course. Well, it's been a real treat catching up, Justicar . . ." Voitek's finger poised over the cancel button on his wrist pad.

"Sull doesn't have the information you want on Korren Bray."

The name sent a spike of white-hot rage into Voitek's brain, and he clenched his fists hard enough to make his knuckles crack. Long seconds went by before he could speak. "And you do, I suppose?"

"What do you think?"

"I think you've lied to me before," Voitek said. He shook his head and cursed under his breath. "All right. Send the dossier."

"I can do better than that."



The next night saw Voitek in the shipping district of Harrow Bay, a new face and contract on his wrist pad. The man was only known as Tyrex, an Aeternus Continuum vassal boss who had infiltrated the shipping guild and enticed dozens of dock workers and cargo loaders into joining the Temple. The ISA's relationship with the shipping guild was tenuous—sending a squad of Paladins into one of their warehouses after Tyrex would create trouble among certain elector families. Still, the ISA couldn't tolerate dozens of AC spies right under their noses, so an outside operative made the most sense.

Voitek moved quietly through a maze of cargo containers, some as large as buildings, toward the massive open doors of a guild warehouse. The cavernous space beyond was dark, and he stopped beneath the shadow of a huge shipping container to listen. He adjusted the range and acuity of the audio sensors on his helmet and picked up faint voices. He adjusted further, and one voice rose above the rest—one that was grating, powerful, and sizzling with the frenetic passion of a zealot.

"I'm in position," Voitek whispered into his comm. His private channel was becoming less private by the second.

"Pushing Arc now," Lieutenant Dineska said. When Justicar Urias sent over the dossier on Tyrex, he'd also put a Warcaster at Voitek's disposal. Generally, he preferred to work alone, but Tyrex would certainly be guarded, and the enhanced firepower would be crucial in his capture or execution.

Arc flowed into Voitek's mechanical systems. He checked his force constrictor—a weapon he'd had made for him shortly after leaving the Paladin

Corps. The lozenge-shaped device looked more like scientific survey equipment than a weapon, but it fired focused streams of gravitons that, when charged with Arcanessence, could crush a target or pin it in place.

Voitek knew Urias had to pull some exceptionally long strings just to get him Warcaster support. Tyrex was probably making serious political waves for someone above the justicar.

Rushing forward, Voitek covered the short space of light between the cargo containers and the entrance to the warehouse. He ducked inside and noted the warehouse seemed mostly empty, a vast stretch of concrete nearly a mile in both length and width. Much of it was dark, but a bright light burned roughly two hundred yards from his position. It looked like as many as two dozen figures stood around it.

Now the voice he'd heard through his audio sensors rang strong and clear. Tyrex was giving a sermon, and the thundering cadence covered Voitek's advance.

As he suspected, the vassal boss had guards; he counted four raiders armed with spiker rifles. They patrolled the shadows just outside of deck lamp Tyrex and his potential recruits clustered around. Four was more than he could handle at once, even with a Warcaster. He needed to reduce their numbers.

Voitek tapped his comm. "I'm gonna need some help," he said to Dineska. "Four vassals and Tyrex himself."

"Stand by," Dineska said.

Again, Voitek felt energy pour into his systems, but this time it was not simple Arcanessence. His looked down and saw his body shimmer and disappear in the darkness. A cypher, and a useful one.

From behind a small shipping crate, he watched the vassals circle their leader, all the while looking for patterns or inattentiveness. As he did, Tyrex droned on, preaching about conquering death with the holy modifications offered by the Temple as well as striking back at those who would hold them back. Primarily the ISA.

One of the vassals had wandered farther from the light than the others, but his attention remained focused on Tyrex. Voitek unsheathed his wrist-mounted combat knife, and as the vassal neared, he sprang out, wrapped one hand around the man's mouth and plunged the knife deep into his back, puncturing his lungs and stealing the breath from his scream. Voitek pulled the corpse into the shadows and moved swiftly toward the next vassal. Unfortunately, this time, despite the cypher blurring his outline, the vassal spotted him.

Voitek aimed and fired his force constrictor, smashing the vassal with a blast of gravimetric force and flinging him backward. The weapon was shockingly loud in the giant, echoing space, and Tyrex's sermon disappeared abruptly behind the sharp crack of spiker rifles.

The vassals fired into the dark, and their first shots missed, but Tyrex himself opened up with a rattling burst from a pair of submachine guns. Bullets whined through the air, a few ticking off Voitek's armor.

Those shipping guild members listening to Tyrex's recruitment pitch had no taste for fighting, and they scattered in all directions, creating momentary confusion and cover for Voitek to advance.

Again, energy suffused his mechanikal systems as Dineska channeled another cypher. Voitek's movements became more fluid, and the vassals rushing him moved as if time had slowed for them. He blasted one with his force constrictor, crumpling the man's chest with the ghoulish crack of splintering ribs, and then narrowly avoided the next vassal's glowing fusion knife as she lunged at him. Voitek drove his own blade into the vassal's throat and pushed her away to bleed out.

That left Tyrex alone now, and he had no intentions of fighting. His blunt features split in a grin and the mesh emitters on his battle armor pulsed red. His outline faded and became indistinct as the mimetic cloak took effect. As it did, he kicked over the deck lamp, plunging the warehouse into absolute darkness. Voitek's quarry was about to escape.

"Diveska," Voitek said into his comm, "he's activated a mimetic cloak. I'm losing him."

"Not good. I don't have a cypher for that." Voitek cursed, plucked a null grenade from his belt, and flung it at what he hoped was a bit past the spot Tyrex had been. The grenade detonated in a flash of azure light, revealing Tyrex running toward the far exit of the warehouse. The null grenade had shorted his mimetic cloak, but it didn't slow his pace.

Voitek took careful aimed and shunted the Arc in his systems through his force constrictor. The blast caught Tyrex square in the back, but instead of tearing him to pieces, it smashed him to the ground and held him there, the gravitational equivalent of eight hundred pounds holding him immobile.

Voitek shook his head in relief, then pulled a pair of stasis cuffs from his belt. He tapped his comm. "Tell Justicar Urias I have his package. He better have mine."



Voitek sat down at the bar in one of Harrow Bay's better dives. The patrons were uncultured but not violent, and he didn't stick out overmuch. He ordered a double Konestan fire brandy, and his private comm buzzed just as the drink was set before him.

He sighed and hit his wrist pad. "Justicar Urias. Is there any point in my scrubbing the log number of this channel?"

The justicar chuckled. "Well, you have the credits to burn. We just deposited one hundred thousand into your account."

"I don't care about the money," Voitek said and took a sip of his drink. "What do you have on Korren Bray?"

"He's on Severin," the justicar said. "We have his last known coordinates. So, I'll send that information as well."

Severin IV was held by the Aeternus Continuum, an industrial hellscape overseen by the most powerful members of the AC clergy. Bray himself wasn't AC, but he was an information broker, and the Temple was always in need of new intel on its enemies, something Bray had supplied on numerous occasions. Once, that information led fifteen Paladins into an ambush. Only one survived.

"Last time I tried going after him, you stood in my way, said it was outside of The Paladin Corps' jurisdiction," Voitek said.

"I did, and it was," the justicar replied. "But you're not a Paladin any longer. You don't have a jurisdiction."

"Then I guess we don't have anything else to talk about." "Listen, Sudal, I—I wanted to go after him. I would have taken you with me. You know that." The justicar's voice shook. "I have as much reason to want him dead as you do. More. My son—"

Voitek didn't want to hear what came next, didn't want to hear the pallid excuses that let a murderer walk free. "Justicar, if you need absolution, find a priest."

He closed the comm channel with a stab of his finger, tossed back his drink, and stood. "I have work to do."