

# Honest Work

By Tyler McAndrew

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## Year 3105: Somewhere in the Exo

Zaid Black was a man of few words. He preferred action.

Maybe that was the military training the Sovereign gave him or maybe that was just a hard-earned lesson of life in the Arcturus System. Living under an authoritarian rule tends to leave one with little trust in the value of words.

From the helm of his advanced assault ship, Zaid watched the stars and listened to the hum of the HIT drive as he and his crew were catapulted through space. Sitting in relative silence in the dimly lit main deck as the men of his old unit worked efficiently around him navigating the ship to the rendezvous. The raid on Ceto Station had been successful, but they had separated to make it harder for the Sovereign to track them into the Exo. This had led them almost a day off course but now that they were only a few moments away from regrouping with the second squad Zaid could feel that old familiar tension between his shoulders building again.

"What is our ETA?" Zaid demanded curtly, not even looking away from the holo-screen image of the surrounding stars.

"We are only a few moments out from the Rendezvous, sir. Second squad is still maintaining Comms silence."

Zaid grimaced at his own impatience. It wasn't like Simmons to keep him waiting. In all the years they served together the man had always been unfailing in his punctuality. This was why he had chosen him for this assignment. There were few men he truly trusted, but there were some bonds forged in combat that are never really broken.

When he felt the comm notification come through on his haptic band Zaid very nearly jumped out of his seat. But the communication was not from his old friend, but from an old business associate. With a wave of his hand, Zaid dismissed the images of the stars and replaced them with a frail yet rigid looking old man.

"Consular," said Zaid with thinly veiled impatience "It's been awhile! What is it that I can do for you?"

"I have received reports of a raid carried out on Ceto Station, Mr. Black. Some very important technology and weaponry have been taken. Sovereign technology," the mans face deepened into a frown causing the lines of his age to show more deeply. "I don't suppose you would know anything about that?"

"Well I can hardly be blamed for not being up to date on the comings and goings of the Sovereign. It has been months since I've received a contract from you. My attention has been elsewhere". Zaid very nearly smiled.

"Don't take the Sovereign for fools, Mr. Black! We can recognize the technology used in this theft of Sovereign property. Don't forget who funds your activities!" The Consulars face had begun to turn a darker shade that didn't translate quite as well through the holographic image. This time Zaid did smile.

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"I don't seem to remember you objecting to our activities back on Goshen," said Zaid allowing a little of his anger to show on his face. "At least not until the media started asking difficult questions. How did your people phrase it? 'Rogue elements amongst the lawful blockade of a dissident faction?'"

Iciness filled the room as the Consular stared him down from Millions of miles away.

"You won't get away with this Zaid, the Sovereign will not allow it. You will pay for your crimes!"

"The Sovereign already paid for my crimes, Consular. I appreciate your business." Said Zaid, disconnecting the communication with a wave of his hand.

If any of the men among the crew had overheard the conversation, none of them showed any sign of it. Their training made them understand the risk of following orders. And their loyalty was well paid for. Zaid had made sure of that.

He had always known that the Sovereign were using him to do their dirty work. The Terran rebellion had made him rich after all. But had it been worth the price? If Zaid hadn't made it possible, someone else would have. He might as well profit from it.

"Powering down the HIT, moving to impulse. Approaching the rendezvous" said the helmsman, breaking Zaid from his reverie.

"Bring it up on the main screen."

With a few swift practiced motions, the soldier followed orders. Light coalesced along the walls at the front of the room forming numbers that blurred together into an image of the space ahead of them. Showing blinking stars, endless darkness, and pieces of debris.

They had found the second squad.

As the moment of shock passed over him in an icy wave it was slowly replaced by the familiar warmth of anger.

"No signs of life." The helmsman reported dispassionately.

"Check again," Zaid snapped. "I want to know what happened here!"

As his men poured over their consoles in a flurry of action Zaid leaned forward in his seat as the tension in his shoulder slowly began to build. Who could have done this to one of his squads? They were carrying some of the most advanced weaponry in the Sovereign arsenal and were well trained. Did the Sovereign catch them? Not possible, they had made a clean break from Ceto station before anyone had known what was happening.

"I found something", said one of his men. "It's a buoy of some kind. It's sending an unknown signal... It's a message."

His voice came out as a low growl as Zaid issued his order.

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Light coalesced once again, forming an image on the main screen. A bound figure in a familiar uniform kneeling in front of what appeared to be a ragged team of heavily armed men. He recognized the Constellation Corp uniform on the captive, but his face was down to his chest as the man clearly struggled to even stay on his knees.

Who were these men? They appeared to be armed and armored with mismatching gear, and half starved. How could such a poorly organized force overpower his trained men? Then the man at the front began to speak.

"Zaid Black."

His name so plainly spoken set Zaid back. It wasn't often that he was at a disadvantage.

"This is a message from the Terran Coalition"

The man grabbed the back of the kneeling figures uniform and shoved him forward revealing the face covered in bruises. It was Simmons.

"Do you remember Goshen?"

With little warning the unknown man raised the firearm he was holding in a smooth motion. The light of the weapons discharge played off the shadows on Zaid's face. The slight darkness in the room, the only thing hiding his fury.

"We do."

It was there that the message ended. Short and to the point. Something that Zaid would have found refreshing after years of Sovereign double speak, if not for the method of its delivery. Silence stretched on for what seemed an eternity. No one dare spoke.

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"Contact the rest of the Constellation Corp" Zaid said into the empty silence. "We have a job to finish."