

CHAPTER 1 – RABBIT’S DEN

If international tension was a physical object, it would take the form of napalm.

This was the unfortunate truth of the ruined city of Huarang. It was once a mining community backed by the sovereign state of Silus, a union of formerly rural kingdoms. Before then, the city-state of Colossus held it in its grip.

In the Colossian-Era War, Era boasted being the most industrialized society on the continent. In doing so, they won the public favor of Huarang and other satellite territories of Colossus. This began the war.

Colossus was a state built within towering walls at the border of the Wasteland. They needed the tribute of its territories to provide raw materials for its consumption.

Any resources they needed were created via Multi-Polymer, a type of synthetic element. Colossian scientists could make it to suit their needs, but gathering raw materials was still essential to their livelihood. Therefore, the intervention of Era was more than a threat to Colossus’ survival.

It was rather unfortunate that Huarang happened to sit atop a deposit of rich minerals.

Once upon a time it was a simple community. It did not boast anything too important, but it was a place of tactical importance.

Colossus had to get every edge they could in a war they were losing. As such, the Colossian military made sure to level the city to the ground.

No one came back to settle ever since.

After the war ended, Era did not send sufficient aid to rebuild Huarang. Silus was left to their own devices to clean the rubble and save the ruined lives of their people.

At this time, the land was only used as an R&D site.

Now was the time to strike.

* * *

Captain Ford could see the job site. He kept low to the ground and whipped out his tactical binoculars.

The Huarang outpost was built atop sand. The base had a concrete base and solid buildings built atop it. Guards patrolled the buildings closest to the base's center. Some operated search lights to look for possible intruders around them.

A long fence surrounded the perimeter, with the same warning posted round it. Ford couldn't read it, but he knew it said "Keep Out."

Two entrances were visible from their position. The closest had a shorter distance from the garage and main bunker. These were the places of most importance: where the vehicles were parked and where Huarang's soldiers were quartered, respectively.

According to his intel, this outpost had sublevels below the sand. Three sublevels to be exact. The lowest level had a power generator that powered the whole facility, and the second lowest level had their reserves for rations and a shelter in the event of a bombing.

It was the first sublevel that had the captain's interest. That was where the payload was.

Captain Ford put away his binoculars. He flipped down his tactical visor and spoke clearly into his headset.

"Find the Rabbit's Foot," he said in a low voice. "You know what to do."

His team followed suit. They were a full six-man team dressed in tactical gear for breaching the compound. All were armed with rifles.

No one would see them from a distance. Dark colors to better camouflage them in the night. Red streaks of smart-fiber wires ran along their sleeves to utilize their integrated technology in their clothes. The team had no patches stitched to their arms to signify their government of origin, but there was no doubt that they were Colossian.

Captain Ford pointed to the left, then to the right. His team split both ways. The first lieutenant brought the explosives with him to the other entrance.

The second lieutenant went with Ford and breached the farther entrance. He had the lock picking kit in his possession, so

he was supposed to approach the doors first. Captain Ford followed the lieutenant in.

“The fence. Breach it.”

His lieutenant put his rifle back and pulled out a laser cutting tool. The tool was ideal for being more lightweight than wire cutters.

It was also the size of a pen, so no one outside the Colossian military would understand how powerful it was.

A small laser came from the tool. The lieutenant angled it properly so the beam would only hit the sand, and not draw attention from the Huarang guards. He quickly made a small hole for him and the captain to crawl through.

Captain Ford followed the lieutenant through. They used the cover of night to approach a building that led to the first sublevel.

The time was drawing near. He radioed in the rest of the team. “Status?” he hissed.

“Traps are being deployed,” the first lieutenant replied across the base. “We’ll be ready when you are.”

At this time, they found another door. The captain watched his lieutenant use a kit of wires and picks to open the keyhole.

“Good. We’re approaching the Rabbit’s Den.”

This was nearly as easy as cutting the fence. He opened the door and made sure not to make too much noise doing so. The two of them entered the base and closed the door behind them.

Thankfully the base was not well lit. It was an aging structure that survived the firebombing all those years ago. The building would not fall, and Silus could not afford to lose it either. Propaganda showed images and slogans promising progress and a bright future.

But these barely covered up the truth: this building was in decay. Chips and cracks in the surfaces of the walls and pillars betrayed that image.

Captain Ford looked at the device strapped to his forearm: A ComPad. It was a lightweight device that gave his tactical suit

more capabilities. It also had the means of extracting any form of data from any kind of computer.

The captain pressed a button on his ComPad. His body became the same color as the dim walls. His lieutenant's suit also became camouflaged with their environment. They hugged the walls and kept marching forward.

Suddenly, footsteps came from down the hall. They came with the distinct sound of latex rubbing against canvas.

Captain Ford held up his fist and stopped his partner. They hid against the wall, where they were virtually undetectable.

A guard walked right by. The guard wore a thick hazmat suit. Rubber and latex formed an airtight bubble around his arms, body, legs, and head. Only a plastic window revealed his face, but he was protected from chemicals and gasses.

The man checked the closest corner to him for anything suspicious. Little did he know that the Colossian intruders were right under his nose.

The guard shrugged and moved on. Captain Ford signaled his cohort to follow him deeper into the compound.

"All this security makes you think what they're doing here," the second lieutenant mused.

The captain turned back to eyeball the lieutenant. They were in the clear to whisper, but he was under orders not to make noise. The lieutenant lowered his head to avoid the captain's gaze.

"We're on a mission," said Captain Ford. "And I'd rather not get caught find out."

They made their way past a laboratory brewing with chemicals in vats. Within that room were more personnel in hazmat suits. These men were researchers, but the outermost ones held onto their weapons closely.

Both the captain and lieutenant couldn't help but look out of their peripheral vision. Every scrap of intel helped for these jobs.

The vats were marked with the universally accepted "toxic" sign: three broken circles linked to form a triangle. It eerily looked like a skull. But that was the point.

They continued to breach the base. After a few evasions from other guards, Captain Ford knew they were getting close. More guards meant that the Rabbit's Den was close.

And then they saw the room. It was labeled something in their language, but this was definitely the place. Two doors with reinforced glass blocked the way. Captain Ford peered in through the reinforced glass.

"We're here," he said. "Cover me."

The Rabbit's Den was something they codenamed back in Colossus. It was a room of observatory equipment and other machines for testing. But what they really wanted was at the heart of the room: The Rabbit's Foot.

The Captain's target was an object at the heart of all this equipment. It was a piece of metal suspended in a GRAV tube that suspended it in air. To his knowledge, it was a volatile material that could not be held by the unprotected hand.

Huarang's scientists called it Bihu, but Captain Ford knew it as the Rabbit's Foot. And Colossus' high command made the Rabbit's Foot their top priority.

Captain Ford opened the doors. No one was watching the room this time. A camera in the corner monitored all the activity in the den.

"Are the cameras down in this room?" he asked.

"Yes, sir," said the first lieutenant over the radio. "You're clear."

Captain Ford let his subordinate cover the door. He approached the Rabbit's Foot and examined the machine keeping it in place. Now it was time to take it and all data concerning the foot.

He quickly deduced what sequence of buttons to press to release the foot. But it would take at least a minute. The captain pulled out a chord from his ComPad and jacked it into the machine. After a series of buttons, he began to extract the information.

"Still clear?" the captain asked.

"Clear over here," said the lieutenant.

He looked at his captain. Captain Ford was still at work extracting their information. The hard part was almost done. But they were still in enemy territory. Anything could go wrong now.

“Captain, do you have it?”

“Almost, kid.” Captain Ford grunted. “Just chill.”

Captain Ford looked once more at his ComPad. The data was being transferred now. A loading bar indicating that process began to fill. Now they had to wait.

“We got trouble,” said the second lieutenant over the radio.

Suddenly, sirens blared overhead. Lights flashed across the halls and in the den. Captain Ford looked up. The base was on high alert. They knew they were being invaded.

“Damn it!”

The lieutenant guarding the door saw men running from down the halls. “We’ve got company!”

He opened fire. The guards took cover, but they continued to push. A wave of bullets came back in response. The lieutenant took cover.

They were vastly outnumbered. There was an escape plan. But the captain’s team had little time.

“Make a hole!” Captain Ford shouted. “Hurry!”

He drew his weapon and took cover behind the console. The ComPad kept transferring the data all the while. Captain Ford kept his weapon trained on whoever would approach the den. His partner stepped away and to the designated spot in his briefing.

The lieutenant pulled out a device like a small ring with two handles. He spread it to become the size of a manhole cover. This was a tactical drill they could use for their escape.

Two small laser cutters lit up on the underside of the ring. The lieutenant brought it down and began drilling. He could work fast, but they were short on time.

One of them could be caught and tortured for their information. The lieutenant knew he was expendable, so they would probably get him. But at the very least, Captain Ford needed to escape with their payload.

More shouting came from out in the halls. The guards were gaining in numbers. They had to act fast, or else the mission would be in vain.

“Captain!” said the lieutenant. “I’m almost there!”

Captain Ford quickly checked the ComPad. 82% complete. He reached for the radio.

“Blow ‘em all, boys!”

Outside, the charges detonated. They went off around the base simultaneously to throw off Huarang’s guards. The garage, entrances, and exits for all points of the base were destroyed in one go.

While the blast was not enough to threaten the lives of anyone in the base, no one could leave until the rubble was cleared.

And they could make their escape if they were fast enough.

Captain Ford checked his device once more. 100% complete. They had the Rabbit’s Foot. He plucked the cable out of the console and the actual object out of its place in the room.

By now the lieutenant had finished his work. He lifted the drill ring and revealed a new manhole for them to escape through.

“Data verified! Let’s get out of-”

Rapid fire entered the doorway. Machinery sparked as bullets hit the sensitive equipment. More than a few found their mark. The lieutenant shot his head up.

Captain Ford stopped breathing. Fresh holes bore across his chest. The shock was too much for him to act or speak. He collapsed on his knees.

“Captain! No!”

The lieutenant blind fired behind him. He didn’t bother aim. The guards backed away. He had a couple seconds to escape. They were in no condition to fight now. He dragged the Captain and dropped him down the hole he cut through.

“Leon, the data,” Ford said with a labored breath. “Grab the data.”

“I got it, cap,” his lieutenant replied.

Captain Ford fell down the hole. A soft thud was heard, but this was expected. The lieutenant prayed to himself that they could extract in time. He turned back to see the guards.

The distinct sound of a metal pin being pulled rung. The lieutenant knew what that meant. He dared to steal a glance behind him. One Huarang guard pulled a pin on a grenade. They were going to throw it.

He leapt down the hole. The grenade went flying after him. The lieutenant did his best to covert his head so shrapnel wouldn't hit him. But this was going to hurt if it didn't kill him on impact. The guard threw the grenade.

He felt it before his brain could figure out he took some shrapnel. The blast knocked the wind out of his lungs and threw his mind into a haze. Metal punched in his back like knives as bits of the explosive shell cut through his suit.

And then the lieutenant blacked out.

* * *

The next few minutes were a blurred haze to 2nd Lieutenant Leon Marksmith. He lay on the floor of the second sublevel awaiting someone to come find him. He could not move, and the captain did not stir all the while.

A few muffled voices sounded down the hall. These belonged to the rest of his squad, and they came to pick both of them up. They were getting out of there.

They ran as far from the base as they could to make sure the Huarang guards could not see their getaway. Now that they vehicles were locked behind rubble, there was no way they could catch up either.

An escape chopper was parked behind a sand dune half a kilomark away from Huarang. The chopper had some first-aid supplies that they desperately needed.

Leon was carried to the escape chopper on the back of the first lieutenant. Captain Ford was carried in as well.

He hoped that they could do something before it was too late. But a sinking feeling told him that perhaps it already was.

Even before the squad applied the gauze and pliers to Leon, he had a sinking feeling. They were helping him first. If that was the case, Captain Ford didn't make it.

After the aid was administered, they were already flying away to the nearest base. Captain Ford lay on the floor of the chopper. All eyes turned to him. They removed his helmet. Ford did not stir, nor did he raise his chest to breathe.

Captain Ford was dead.

Leon took off his helmet. He could barely move after taking that blast, but he could only stare at the man he failed to save.

Leon closed his eyes. His fists clenched with sorrow. While they successfully stole what they needed, he had failed.

Suddenly, he felt something he hadn't felt in a while: curiosity. What was so important that they lost a captain's life for? No one told him in the briefing. Leon wanted to know.

He raised the captain's arm to look at the ComPad. His squad mates said not a word, but they were responsible for reporting in everything that happened before, during, and after their mission.

Leon didn't care. He had to know what data they stole. He opened the file to see a still image. It was a hunk of misshapen metal identical to the one that Captain Ford had in his possession. That was it: one image with no context for it beyond being "the Rabbit's Foot."

Leon looked for more. But the rest of the text was written in pictographic symbols that had no meaning to Leon. This was all a language he could not hope to understand.

"Let it go, Leon," said the first lieutenant.

Leon looked to the first lieutenant. He stared back with a calloused expression that had seen tragedy too many times. From the look of his eyes, the lieutenant expected Leon to do the same.

"Alright," Leon finally said.

"We're still going to have to report this. No one can see this data."

"I know. Just leave me alone."

Leon finally set the captain's hand across his chest. Even after setting it down, he couldn't help but let his fingers slowly let go one last time.

CHAPTER 2 - HONORABLE DISCHARGE

The medical ward of Rhodes smelled of crude alcohol and drugs. These were standard smells one would expect from a clinic, but this was a repurposed flight hangar.

As a satellite territory of the Colossian state, Rhodes could only do so much. This facility used surgical tools and medicines that outdated the standard upheld by Colossian hospitals.

The air reeked of sweat. No ventilation could flush out the hot air. Not to mention there were infectious diseases more prominent on this side of the world.

General Pierce Spvone tried to ignore the stench, but he made his displeasure too obvious. The general was a stocky man with hair that stuck up at an angle regardless of how it was combed.

He made a face the moment he walked in, which drew the attention of a few nurses. One offered to lead him through the ward. That nurse tried to be friendly to ease his troubled mind. So the general followed, but he still drew attention by refusing to change his expression.

General Pierce walked past beds that nursed Colossian troops. Some returned from battles scarred. Some were too hurt to show hope of recovering. Some were just waiting until their pain would go away.

Pierce would have given them all his condolences. But he had to see someone that was of bigger concern to him.

The nurse leading the general turned a corner. One bed was sanctioned off from the others by a curtain.

"How bad is it?" asked General Pierce.

"A dislocated shoulder, a broken arm, some burns, a bruised foreleg, and multiple lacerations on his head," said the nurse. "We've taken care of what we could. But be patient. He's been through a lot."

"Let's see him."

The nurse let the general in and closed the curtains behind her. General Pierce took off his hat as a sign of courtesy.

Leon stared back. He sat back against the post of his bed. Brown hair began to grow back on his scalp and jaw line. Per Legion regulations, he was supposed to shave it regularly. Now Leon was letting it grow back.

He was built lanky, but he still had a fair amount of muscle on his body. That was how he met the Legion's physical prerequisites.

His left arm hung in a sling on his shoulder. One leg was suspended in a splint. A large bandage bound a sanitized rag against half his head. Sweat clung to his head due to the heat of the ward.

Some time since the attack on his base passed, as shown by the unshaven fuzz covering his jaw line. He may have recovered in body, but Pierce knew better than to judge a soldier by his forced smile.

"Sir," said Leon in an empty voice. He tried to rise.

"At ease, kid," said the general. "You shouldn't be moving yet."

Leon tried to rise, but gave up and lay back down.

The general gave a smile. "You're a lucky kid. Few people don't shake off a grenade explosion."

He said nothing.

Pierce came closer until he was a friendly distance between him and Leon.

"If it makes any difference, you served your country well. The Rabbit's Foot was essential to protect the Lord's position. It was good that you kept it out of foreign hands."

"Oh," said Leon. He was unsure how to feel about such praise. "I'm honored, sir."

"Are your wounds healing alright?"

Leon attempted to smirk back. "I'm recovering fine, sir. Though I doubt I need a cast for my leg. It doesn't hurt."

Pierce shrugged. "I'm not a doctor," he said. "So I wouldn't know if you needed it or not. Just keep it on. What else has been happening around here?"

"Nothing much," said Leon. "But I'll be honest. The food here stinks."

Pierce chuckled. "I would think so."

"Was there a reason you wanted to see me, sir?" said Leon. "I don't think a personal visit from a general is necessary for a guy like me."

"It may not be my place to tell you how to feel," said the general. "But I can say that you'll be happy to know that you're going home. As of today, you are honorably discharged from the 9th Legion."

"Why?" asked Leon.

General Pierce pointed to Leon's leg. "Because of this. You won't be running into the fray with an injury like that."

Leon stared at the splint and sling. He didn't feel any pain down there, but perhaps he didn't feel it due to the medication he was on.

"With all due respect," he said, "I don't know how to feel about this."

General Pierce became stern. "Two weeks is plenty of time to recover from scratches and burns," he said. "But the mind requires more time to heal."

"Sir?" asked Leon. "What are you getting at?"

The general smirked slightly. He then produced a calling card from his pocket and held it out. "Colossus feels like a different place after you fight her wars," he said. "If you feel you need help, I want you to give us a call."

Leon took the card. On it was a handwritten phone number. "You didn't have to do all this for me, sir," he said.

"Ford was my friend, Leon," said the general as he put his hat back on. "And I consider you as his family."

The general checked his watch. "There's a call I need to take in a few minutes, so I need to go. You'll be fine. Trust me."

The general saluted. Leon saluted back with his good arm. General Pierce closed the curtains behind him.

The nurse waited for him outside. She carried new bandages, cotton balls, and antiseptic. As she tended to Leon again, Pierce pulled out his cell phone and walked away. He made sure that his voice was not too loud.

"Tell the others to be ready," he said.

Leon took a lengthy flight across the Wasteland. He flew out the same day he was discharged with a clean bill of health. The sooner he was out of there and back in Colossus, the better he would feel.

On the flight, Leon let conversation with the general sift around in his mind. He looked at the sling and cast around his arm. His leg was definitely alright, which made him wonder why the staff ever bothered suspending it.

The cast was off now, thankfully. But the doctor's orders were absolute. If Leon was officially unfit for active duty, then they wouldn't let him back into the field. Not that he felt like going out there again.

The commercial flight was comfortable at least. Leon almost mistook his seat for a cushion from heaven. He grew too accustomed to hard cots and sleepless nights.

Flight attendants also gave him complimentary snacks and drinks. Leon didn't think much about the amount of service he was getting.

"Now entering Colossus," said the captain from the cockpit. "Please fasten your seat belts as we make our descent."

Leon did just that. He fastened the belt across his waist with the buckle tight around his lower abdomen. Not that he expected turbulence when flying over the Wasteland, but it was a safety precaution everyone had to follow.

Though he knew his status was a luxury, Leon couldn't help but shake the feeling that things were too perfect.

I'm only going home because I'm injured, he thought.

His flight arrived on the landing strip and into a hangar. Leon and the other passengers exited the plane in an orderly fashion. The soldier stopped dead. He was outside now, but the area was too familiar.

Hot air and clouded skies greeted Leon as he emerged from the hangar. Skyscrapers and tall buildings pierced the horizon and covered half of all Leon saw. Vibrant hover cars darted among these buildings.

Leon knew where he was. But the answer still hit Leon like a ton of bricks. *I'm in Colossus.*

Colossus boasted itself as the self-proclaimed heart of industry. That claim was met with the higher standard of life for its citizens.

Every civilian around Leon was either walking on land or flying a hover car in the air. Neon billboards flashed bright colors that contrasted with the limestone-colored concrete around him. Colossus was cold, yet somehow homely to Leon. This was where he grew up.

Some people were talking into their cell phones on the concrete walkways. Others were rushing from place to place with some job they had to do. They were the civilians who lived in this picture-perfect city.

And this is what every tourist sees the moment they land, Leon thought.

He may as well have been a tourist, even though he was returning home. All of this was so unfamiliar to him. Skyscrapers towered over everyone on the ground. Hover cars darted this way or that, adding to the city's lively bustle.

Despite feeling dread, Leon felt great to be back. Working in the military for two years could really make a guy homesick. Leon missed everything in Colossus—the crowds of civilians, the towering skyscrapers stretching along the streets, even the smell of ozone exhaust from the flying cars.

He would have loved to marvel at everything, but Leon had somewhere to go too. His temporary home.

Leon grabbed his duffel bag from baggage claim. He pulled it aside and checked its contents quickly. Between his folded shirts, trousers, and socks were the things he was looking for.

Below all his other possessions were his sand faring goggles, the dual ammo pouches, and a sidearm clipped in its holster. All of it was Legion-issued gear, and he kept the gear they would have taken from him otherwise.

No Colossian citizen was allowed to keep military gear on them. But Leon's personal effects were mementos of his service in the 9th Legion, and he wasn't going to lose these after coming back.

Leon zipped up the duffel and walked out of the hangar.

CHAPTER 3 – LOOSE LIPS

The road was as full of pedestrians as the sky was filled with hover cars. The low hums of engines passed above many Colossians, all unafraid of the vehicles overhead.

Leon marveled at the sight because hover technology was relatively new. The current Lord of Colossus wanted this advanced machinery available to the general public, so he funded the development of commercial hover cars.

Two years ago, Leon's neighborhood would have been lucky enough to see even one vehicle. Now there were hundreds of the vehicles darting about.

As Leon traveled down the streets of the home he knew so well, he realized how much it had changed. In two years' time Lord Petrellox, the autocratic leader of the city-state, had nursed Colossus back to a seemingly full recovery.

The streets were clear of litter and graffiti. The people walked with an air of security and confidence. Homeless and the degenerate Colossians were replaced with honest working citizens.

Leon's mind boggled at the thought. Colossus, a city once ravaged and drained dry from war, was now on its feet. The early years were certainly the bleakest, but now prosperity was everywhere to be seen.

This was Colossus now. A shining civilization knocked down in humiliation was now back and better than ever.

"Love thy Lord," Leon muttered the Colossian national motto. "Love thy Colossus."

Leon needed a place to stay. His best option was the Colossian Military Academy. It was CM Academy for short. This place was a training facility for the youth of Colossus' armed services. They were also required to provide temporary quarters for returning veterans.

Leon arrived at CM Academy. The Colossian Military Academy was a repurposed medieval castle with the finest education for tomorrow's Legions.

He walked through its fortress-like doors to the entrance podium. A huge security guard sat behind the front desk. He was busy fiddling with his computer.

The guard looked up at Leon. "Ya need somethin'?" he asked in a bumpkin accent.

Leon wasn't fazed by the accent. That was to be expected. There were a series of social reform projects to make former undesirables into model working citizens. Most were required by the Committee on Public Morale to be just that.

The Committee on Public Morale was a new branch of the government that mandated social welfare. Their first task was to oversee the rehabilitation of all social outcasts so they would better find work, own homes, and the like.

Their efforts produced significant results.

Today unemployment hit an all-time low because of them, since every Colossian citizen was a worker now. Now all the former undesirables look exactly like the "model citizen" so they would blend in with everyone else.

But the most obvious way to tell them apart was by their endowed accents.

The guard glanced at Leon for a moment and gave a skeptical look. "What the 'ell happened to yur face?"

Apparently some scars bled out across his face. Leon ignored the remark and presented his identification card.

"Second Lieutenant Leon R. Marksmith," Leon replied. "Reporting in."

The guard looked down at the monitor of a computer built into the podium. Next, he typed in Leon's name into a touch screen keyboard. Leon waited a moment.

"Ya're registered into da system," the guard said without looking up. "Seriously, yur face looks like 'ell. Go to da medic's office first."

"I've had enough doctors for a while," said Leon. "Just get me somewhere to live for a week."

The guard tapped more buttons. "We 'ave an open room on the fifth floor. Ask for keys at the guard up there."

"Thanks."

Leon walked past the podium to an elevator in the back. He entered the elevator and saw a screen with a button for every floor in the building.

There were five floors total in this building. Leon pressed the button for the fifth floor, and the elevator carried him there. The guard on that floor gave no trouble. Leon received his room key and went to his new room.

Inside was a bed installed into the wall, a metal wardrobe opposite of the bed, and a matching set of a wooden desk and revolving chair at the center of the room. A lone radio sat atop the desk. A sink with a bathroom mirror was adjacent to that.

Leon stepped up to a window fixed in its cinderblock confines. He saw that his room overlooked Colossus. While the outdoor view was somewhat comforting, the room itself was stifling. Good thing Leon wouldn't be living here for long.

The lieutenant set his belongings down and sank into the chair. He sat transfixed on the window and the blank sky beyond it. Sound was blocked out by the thick walls. There was no background sound of traffic or any sign of life.

Leon was alone in a blank room. For a few minutes, nothing mattered. And Leon liked it that way.

It was a strange feeling he had. An absence of responsibility was a chance of having freedom. There wasn't anything to do. There really wasn't anything he wanted to do.

No job. No people to see. He would have plenty to do once he actually found a job to sustain himself. By then he would be working for a wage at some desk job. Right now, sitting down was as much freedom as he was going to get.

Leon let the silence sink in a bit longer. And then he turned on the radio.

"...back to an Evening at Poole's" said a man.

There was applause. Evidently this was a radio talk show. Leon never heard of it and kept listening. The applause subsided, and the talk show continued.

A rather cheery and artificial voice came on the radio. "This broadcast brought to you by the Committee on Public

Morale," it said with a pre-recorded line. "We're always keeping an eye out for you."

"Mr. Poole," said a guest. "It's great to be on the show."

"And it's good to have you here," said a snobbish speaker. This was Mr. Poole. "I hear that E. Co will be resuming their latest line of Multi-Polymer?"

"That's right," said the guest. "The stuff we make cars out of. Computers too. Everything we make these days, actually. Everyone else in the world wants it!"

Canned laughter played on the radio.

"That's great to hear," Mr. Poole continued. "But in other news, we lost some boys a few weeks ago. Lord Petrellix is doing his best to deal with the situation. Some mothers are putting up a fuss about the troops' contribution to the Colossian cause. What would you say if your neighbor's son perished?"

The guest gave a nervous laugh, and then cleared his throat. "Above all, the Colossian cause comes first," he said. "Any life must be held in high respect. But the wellbeing of our society embodies us all. As long as each Colossian man, woman, and child works to promote the greater good, no life is wasted."

Mr. Poole began clapping. The audience did the same.

"I couldn't agree more," said Mr. Poole.

"But what brought that up?" asked the guest.

"I can safely disclose that we halted production because Silus had stolen the plans from us," said Mr. Poole. "Can you imagine a different government producing one of our only unique exports? That would make ours less unique, less valuable. And a market at large would begin to buy from them, and not us."

"That's the nature of a free market, I suppose," said the guest. "But it is troubling to have this sort of thing happen."

Leon found himself clenching his fist in annoyance. These weren't the facts, as far as he knew. Captain Ford never mentioned any of this. What did some radio personality know of the truth?

How much was what I was told true?

"Exactly!" Mr. Poole was sounding more invigorated now. "The danger of Multi-Polymer would go beyond that! Just think

about how dangerous it is to create a synthetic element! One neutron off, or one faulty control rod, and boom!"

A pre-recorded gasp of an audience played on the air. Leon was nearing his wit's end with this man.

Mr. Poole continued. "A whole factory could go up in smoke! It's best that we be the only creators of Multi-Polymer, because God knows what could go horribly wrong in someone else's hands--"

Leon dropped his heel on the radio. A loud bang shook the desk he rested his feet on. His radio went silent.

The solace of silence returned, but Leon was not feeling relaxed at all. His hand shook. Leon realized how high his pulse was, how sweat began to bead his forehead and palms.

Mr. Poole's words could have been invigorating on a different day, but they sounded infuriating now.

But the worst part was that Leon felt absolutely lost and confused. Was anything he did that night that mattered? Is this how Captain Ford's efforts were to be used? As a tool for someone else to parade around as if it was theirs?

Leon was clueless. His Legion days were over. Leon knew that he wasn't supposed to talk about anything they did to anyone. He also survived only to let Captain Ford die.

Despite all that, Leon had to make his life mean something. Should he tell the truth, even though he wasn't supposed to?

Before he could act upon his musings, a knock echoed through the room.

Leon snapped his head back. Another knock came on his door. He realized then that he was beginning to break out in cold sweat. The lieutenant wiped the moisture from his brow. He then opened the door.

The visitor was a man in a uniform. He wore a red armband and blue colors. Shiny black boots and a ceremonial militia beret added an excessive level of authority to his appearance. He was from the Committee on Public Morale.

The visitor grinned. "Lieutenant," he said.

Leon reflexively snapped at attention. "Sir," he said.

The visitor laughed. He removed his beret to reveal a bald head.

"You don't even know my rank, and you salute," he said. "You are a very trusting man, Leon."

Leon didn't take that as an "at ease." So he remained standing erect. The visitor helped himself into the room. His eyes scanned every detail from floor to ceiling.

"I hope your move back to Colossus hasn't been too much trouble," he said. "Your day has been going well, yes?"

"Yes, sir," said Leon. "If I may know, who are you?"

The visitor spoke with his back to Leon. He was still scanning the room. Things like foreign objects or contraband could be brought overseas from returning veterans, and he was supposed to take note of whatever Leon might have brought with him. That was his job, after all.

"My name is Hugo Ernst," he said. "I am with the Committee on Public Morale. My job is to make sure our citizens know the state of affairs. You know how people get when they panic, don't you?"

Leon felt his stomach sink. "Yes, sir."

Ernst looked around the room. He opened the metal wardrobe and looked under the cot. He then peered at Leon's duffel. Leon gulped. Ernst opened it slightly and peeled the canvas apart to look inside.

"I assume you will keep your past experiences confidential?" said Ernst. "we will have to intervene if anyone talked too much."

"Understood, sir," said Leon.

"Can't be too careful. Loose lips sink. . . well, you know."

Ernst saw only folded clothes stacked atop each other. This was common, as Leon brought everything he owned in one bag. He rose and began to step out of the door.

"As you were," said the Committee man.

Ernst smiled again and put his beret back on. Leon saluted. The visitor left and closed the door behind him.

Leon listened carefully for the sound of footsteps. Ernst walked away from his room and down the hall. Leon turned to his duffel and removed his clothes to look inside.

His effects were secretly stashed away in a faux compartment. Leon's clothes lay on top of cloth body armor. One surface was blank, and that was to be the faux bottom of his duffel. That armor was installed there in the event a Legionary was left alone in a war zone with his duffel.

But Leon lifted the board to see what he smuggled back home. Thankfully Ernst hadn't seen the rest.

Leon's knife, gun, holsters, and other Legion gear he had brought with him to Colossus. Thankfully Ernst hadn't checked for that secret compartment. Or else he would have been forced to confiscate all that.

No Colossian was allowed to own a gun, not even returning veterans. Leon's gear was the last memento that he was still his own man. A master of his own space and hopefully his destiny.

From the looks of it, the Committee would be keeping a close eye on his destiny from now on.