

## **FINANCIAL FREEDOM**

### **A Tech Infantry Novella**

by

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### **Chapter 7: Hidden Assets**

[\(click here for galactic map\)](#)

On New Madrid, it took Heth a day or two to meet with the power armor technician, but he didn't mind. Heth simply used the time to plot his convoy's return trip home. The biggest challenge was avoiding an obnoxiously long detour by negotiating safe passage through Kalintos. Although the star system and its jumpgates were firmly in Federation hands, there was still fighting on the main planet, and it was considered an active war zone—meaning it wasn't open to commercial traffic. That didn't stop Heth from *trying*, though, wheeling and dealing, exploiting legal loopholes in international trade agreements, and dropping every important name he could think of. Interestingly, once Captain Gergenstein was mentioned, things suddenly went a *lot* smoother. Whoever the shady officer was, he obviously commanded a lot of respect—or a lot of fear. Heth couldn't decide if he was excited or worried to have signed a contract with such an obviously powerful human.

The catch was that in exchange for free passage, Heth's convoy had to drop off a shipment of fuel and provisions with the Earth Fleet task force in orbit above the contested planet. That was no problem—Heth just used the opportunity to sell the Earth Fleet a few tons of Mungunwha algae. As he suspected, quartermasters were always worried about feeding their soldiers and spacers. Finally, Heth negotiated an excellent price for filling his remaining cargo containers with exotic New Madrid seafood,

popular with both Ministry humans and K'Nes... although they'd have to settle for frozen fish, obviously.

So all in all, Heth was in a fairly good mood when he entered the power armor repair shop, pushing an antiquated suit of power armor before him on an antigrav pallet. Heth had recently promised the LEO of Miao Mercantile, under pain of termination, that he had proof he hadn't broken a contract after all, that the deal had been sabotaged instead. The problem, of course, was that Heth *had* no such proof. But, if he was lucky, he might just walk out of here with what he was looking for.

Heth pushed the pallet past low, wide tubs of nanobot sludge. Modern Federation power armor was comprised of millions of tiny nanobots, getting power and instruction from a central suitcomp. These tubs, by the look of it, were either repairing or recycling damaged and partial suits into new ones.

Heth looked around for his contact, the lab technician, and finally spotted him at a cluttered desk in a corner. He was staring at multiple holoproj displays showing schematics, readouts, and other technical data Heth couldn't even begin to interpret. The tech had the rumpled look of the recently-promoted, over-worked, and sleep-deprived. As Heth approached, he noticed buds in the man's ears. Heth could hear the music clearly, and wondered why the man hadn't gone deaf by now. Then again, K'Nes ears *were* considerably more sensitive than humans...

After standing there unnoticed for a few moments, Heth attempted to "clear his throat"—a human custom for courteously announcing one's presence. Unfortunately, the K'Nes's attempt sounded more like a growl.

"Jesus!" The tech nearly jumped out of his seat. He looked around, saw no one... then looked down and saw Heth. "Oh." He blinked his bloodshot eyes, taking in the sight of the black cat in a business suit, pushing a pallet containing an old suit of power armor easily twice the feline's size. "Uh... you Heth Miao?"

"Miao K'Rowr K'Heth, actually," Heth clarified politely, offering a clearplaz business card. "But yes, I'm the vendor you're expecting."

"Oh. Okay." The tech tossed the card on his desk without even glancing at it. "Sorry, he, uh... didn't tell me you was gonna be a cat."

"Please, a *K'Nes!*" Heth tried to stifle his irritation, but it still came out a bit huffy.

"K'Nes, sure," the tech said. He looked over the power armor. "That a Mark 100 Centurion model?"

"It is." Heth nodded.

The tech gave a low whistle. "Whoa... that's gotta be forty years old if it's a day! Where'd you *find* a relic like that?"

"I'm afraid that's proprietary information," Heth answered, then pushed on before the tech could argue the point. "Given the current rather chaotic state of the galaxy, you'd be surprised how much some customers will pay for *any* suit of power armor. Even an obsolete model like this one—assuming you can get it working—can turn a handsome profit."

"Wait—that's *Fed* armor." The tech frowned and looked confused. "But you're not Fed... are you?"

"It's my property, I assure you, legally purchased as military surplus before the Caal Invasion," Heth lied smoothly, pulling a datapad from his inside breast pocket. "I

can show you the sales documents, if you wish." It wasn't true, of course. The obsolete armor had simply been abandoned when the Federation garrison withdrew from Nhur in K'Nes space... and the Miao had quickly appropriated it for resale. Still, Heth's documentation would back up his story. The Miao had many assets at their disposal, and expert forgers were one of them.

"Uh..." The tech hesitated, and Heth could see him weighing the possibilities in his mind. As always, humans opted for less work. "Nah, that's okay. If Gerg—er, 'The Captain' sent you, then I ain't gonna argue with it. Around here, it pays not to ask too many questions—unless you *want* to end up on the Kalintos front. So!" he said, leaning closer and examining the armor. "What's wrong with it?"

"If I knew that, then I wouldn't require your services, now would I?" Heth answered, trying and failing to contain his exasperation.

"C'mon, pal, you gotta give *something* to work with here! How's it broken? Is it frozen? Not morphing? Won't respond to the user? What?"

"The power is drained," Heth explained, "and it won't hold a recharge. Consequently, the nanobots are stuck in their default form."

"Hmm. Ever had a problem like this before?"

"Yes, actually. This was one of a set of sixteen suits sold to the customer." Heth left out the detail about the customer being the Holy Terran Empire. "When the sales representative came to examine the merchandise, every suit performed perfectly. But by the time I delivered them, all sixteen suits were exactly like this. And as you may or may not know, the K'Nes don't look kindly upon one of their employees breaking a contract like that." *And thus began my downfall...*

"*Sixteen* suits?" the tech asked, eyes widening in alarm. "Where're the rest of 'em? I mean, how big of a job is this gonna be?"

"I insisted on keeping one suit, so that I could determine what went wrong," Heth explained, "to make sure it never happened again." *And to test it for signs of sabotage*, he mentally added. "But we allowed the client to keep the defective merchandise—along with a full refund, of course."

"Really? You cats let 'em keep the tech *and* the money?" The tech whistled again. "Must be one hellova important client!"

"You have *no* idea, I assure you." Heth tried not to roll his eyes.

"Well," the tech said with a sigh, "let's check this suit out, then." He stood and adjusted the antigrav on the pallet, levitating it until it was level with one of the nanobot tubs, and then rolled it in before turning back to his console. The tech was used to the sight, but Heth couldn't help watching in eerie fascination as the nanobots absorbed the armor. The contents of the tub, seeming near-solid, suddenly seemed to melt into a sludge, sucking the armor down into its depths, then re-solidified. A second later, it seemed near-solid once again.

"Diagnostic & repair bay," the tech explained. He sat down and opened software programs as the holoproj display brought up a three-dimensional image of the power armor suit. He entered a few commands into the terminal, then studied the results. "Well, they're definitely not holding a charge," he said. "And it's not just some of the bots—it looks like all of 'em. And, uh... yup, just as I thought. They're not registering commands from the suitcomp, either."

"I see," Heth said, even though he didn't. "Is that... a serious problem?"

"Dunno," the tech shrugged. "Depends on what's causing it." He tapped out more commands into the computer terminal while data and images flickered across the holoproj display, far too fast for Heth to keep up with. "Crap. Well, the suitcomp's fine—hardware *and* software, far as I can tell. That means the problem's with the nanobots—and they're *millions* of 'em." He sighed. "Well, if it was an easy fix, then you wouldn't have come to me, would ya?"

Heth assumed it was a rhetorical question and remained silent. Humans were fond of asking them.

The holoproj display zoomed in, magnified thousands of times, and the tech analyzed and examined a random nanobot. He entered some more commands and looked at the test results. "Well, good news is the bot appears to be fine physically—I'm not finding any damage to the hardware. Hmm. Let me check the firmware..." He entered a few more commands. "Wha—hey! That's weird..."

"Indeed?" Heth prompted.

"Firmware's been changed. Don't recognize it. Like they re-flashed the memory or something..." He ran some more diagnostics. "Okay..." he said slowly, "the firmware's functional—it's not just corrupted junk data. Far as I can tell, it's been reprogrammed to accept power and instruction from a different source than the suitcomp."

"And what could have caused that?" Heth asked, tail swishing as he got closer to the answer he sought.

"Eh, this happens every now and then nanos from different batches of armor get mixed up together," the tech said with a shrug. "Sometimes a bot begins

reprogramming all the others during a firmware update or something, setting off a chain reaction that spreads throughout the whole suit like a virus. It's rare—we got safeguards built in to avoid that kind of stuff—but it's been known to happen."

"I see," Heth said, whiskers twitching thoughtfully. "Can it be repaired?"

"Oh, sure! Just gotta isolate and reprogram the infected bots. How long you say it's been busted?"

"Oh, a couple months, at least," Heth answered.

The tech grimaced. "I was afraid you was gonna say that." He sighed and shook his head. "It's probably spread to every nano in the suit by now." He entered some more commands into his terminal. "Okay, there we go. The repair bots in that tub will fix the suit's infected nanos."

"That's all?" Heth asked in mild surprise.

"Oh yeah. It's a relatively easy fix, once you know what you're looking for. Just takes time for the fix to replicate throughout all the millions of nanobots in the suit."

"How *much* time?" Heth asked, leaning forward, eager.

The tech shrugged. "Depends on the suit. This old one? Couple hours, maybe."

Heth did the math. Assuming the Holy Terran Empire had the right tools and equipment—which they almost certain did, somewhere—the sabotaged power armor the Miao had all but given away could be fixed cheaply and easily in a matter of days. He'd nearly bankrupted himself refunding the Empire for the defective merchandise... and now it looked like they would end up with fifteen perfectly functional suits *and* a full refund. Apparently, the Emperor was not just a King and a God—he was also a tightwad.

Heth's fur began to bristle. The Imperial sales representative, Zechariah McNeilly, had all but *destroyed* Heth's savings, career, and family... all just to save some money. Heth felt cheated, scammed... and he didn't like it one bit. K'Nes culture was quite clear—and harsh—about how to handle a client who didn't live up to their end of the bargain.

Heth looked back at the tech. "What caused this 'infection'? How did it happen?"

"Well, I can figure out where the infection came from, I guess." The tech scratched his chin as he opened another diagnostic program and ran it. "The firmware update spreads exponentially, so I should be able to trace it back to its point of origin. Probably a nano from a newer model of armor, I'm guessing." He opened yet another program. "I'll search for foreign nanobots in the suit. Gotta be one somewhere... probably a whole bunch of 'em..."

The black cat and the pink ape made awkward small talk while they waited for the diagnostics to complete. Suddenly a new image popped up on the holoproj display.

"*There you are!*" the tech exclaimed, leaning toward it and increasing the magnification. Suddenly he frowned. "Wait... what *are* you?"

"Problem?"

"No, no. Just... uh... I don't recognize this nano. It's not from one of the later models. I don't think it's one of ours... a bot from an old Eastern Bloc suit, maybe? Here, let me check it against the database." The pair waited in silence until the result appeared: *No Match*. "Really?" the tech asked, incredulous. He looked at Heth. "This a K'Nes nanobot or something?"

"I'm afraid I really wouldn't know," Heth admitted honestly. "I specialize in trade, not tech."

"This is *really* advanced!" the tech muttered as he analyzed the unknown nano, fascinated. "It's *tiny*—smaller than anything *we* got, that's for sure... and, wow, they got a lot packed in there! I mean, this bit, right here... I'm not even sure what that is..." He increased the magnification again, examining the mystery nano. "Almost looks more animal or vegetable than mineral, know what I'm saying? I mean, it's almost like it's organ—*oh God!*" He froze utterly still for a second. Then he looked around in near-panic, searching for anyone or anything watching them.

Heth leaned forward, ears swiveling toward the tech, sniffing the air. He suddenly caught the unmistakable stink of human fear.

Finally convinced they were alone, the tech spun back to his console and began shutting down programs, deleting data, erasing logs...

Heth stepped closer and whispered into his ear, "What is it? What's wrong?"

"N-nothing!" the tech gulped.

"Don't lie to me!" Heth hissed. "You think I don't already know what this all means?" He didn't, of course—but bluffing was an art form any K'Nes of his experience had mastered.

The tech looked around again nervously, then said to Heth in a voice barely above a whisper, "Look, if the Horadrim are on your ass, then you're in deep shit. Whatever you did to piss them off, I don't want any part of it. You were never here. *Capisce?*"

Heth kept a stone face as a wave of shock rolled over him. *The Horadrim? Sky Father above—what have I gotten myself into?*

No one knew much about the Horadrim, but everyone knew *of* them—enough to fear them, at least. They were a very old, very secretive, very *powerful* race of aliens—and, thankfully, also a dying race. There were only a handful left alive, although no one knew exactly how many; it was the only thing that kept them from conquering the galaxy with ease. For now, if one left them alone, they'd leave you alone—but their part-nanotech, part-biotech science and technology was insanely advanced, and they were *very* protective of it. And, suddenly, the tech's analysis (and fear) made perfect sense. *A highly advanced, partially-organic rogue nanobot in the armor... of course it was Horadrim. What else could it possibly be?*

As the pieces continued to fall into place in Heth's mind, he began to understand how a Horadrim nanobot could have ended up in his suit of power armor. Vin Dane, the God-Emperor of the Holy Terran Empire, was Horadrim—although his human followers didn't like to dwell on that. It was Vin Dane who (as his followers like to mention at *every* possible opportunity) had "saved us from the Caal" by organizing the last-minute, desperate defense of the Federation and destroying the Caal invasion fleet at the Battle of Avalon. He'd convinced the few remaining Horadrim to join the fight, and it was their semi-organic god-ships that had turned the tide of battle. Now, whatever Horadrim were left worked for the Holy Terran Empire.

Who had, of course, purchased the suits of power armor from Heth.

"Go on, get outta here!" the tech said, making urgent shooing gestures with his hands.

Even though his mind was still reeling, Heth's K'Nes instincts didn't fail him. "Not without my property!" he insisted, pointing a claw at the nano-tub containing his obsolete suit of power armor.

The tech looked at Heth as if he had grown a second head. "You're insane!"

"Would you rather I left the evidence here with you?"

"Oh. Right. Good point." The tech spun around and hammered a new command into his terminal, and the power armor rose up from the nanobot sludge. He heaved it onto the antigrav pallet and shoved it toward Heth. "Now take it and *go!*"

"*And a copy of your diagnostic results, if you please?*"

The tech blinked at Heth, incredulous. "Seriously? You *want* that?"

Heth merely stared back, paw outstretched, open and waiting.

The tech hesitated a moment, unsure, then apparently decided the quickest and easiest way to get rid of the insane cat was by capitulating to his demands. "Whatever," he said with an exasperated sigh. "It's your funeral, pal!" Heth waited patiently while the tech compiled the data in record time, then slapped a datachip into Heth's eager paw. "Here! And remember—you don't know me!" He sighed in relief when Heth finally turned to go.

Heth pushed the pallet out of the repair facility, doing his best to keep his tail hairs from standing up like a bottle brush. Slowly, he calmed down, gathered his wits, and tried to think through the situation rationally.

He'd found the answers to his questions—but it only raised other, more disturbing questions. *Why did the Horadrim blow my deal? It seems like an awful lot of trouble to go to just to save a few credits... not the mention the risk of their all-important*

*nanotechnology falling into the wrong hands. And how did they do it? None of this makes sense...*

Well, Heth thought, *at least I got what I came for.* He finally had proof that his armor deal with the Empire had been sabotaged. At least, he *assumed* it was sabotaged. He couldn't think of how Horadrim nanobots could have possibly gotten into the power armor accidentally. Someone must have put them there deliberately—and Heth suspected he might know who. He didn't know *how* or *why* yet, true—but this much evidence, at least, should be enough to convince the Miao LEO that Heth's deal was undermined, that Heth neither knowingly nor intentionally broke the contract. The promotion was as good as his.

Heth looked down at his antique suit of power armor on the antigrav pallet, and thought about the precious secret it contained. *Horadrim nanobots... Sky Father above!* In spite of himself, his face slid into a fanged smile. *There's got to be a way I can flip this for a major profit!*