

Chapter 1: Just Call me Heeljack

Most people think of growing up as picking up your bag and leaving home, but in my opinion you haven't grown up until you've realized you don't have a home to go back to — that the life you had was just an idea cooked up by your folks; and usually that beautiful parental ideal wears pretty thin when you start popping pimples and humping anything with a pair of legs on it.

I'm old as hell now, and have made myself a home out here on the edgeworlds. I got kids caterwauling around, raising hell, and more wives itching for it than I got 'it' to give anymore. But being an adult is all about making your own home and trying to do it better than what you got — and what I got wasn't exactly hard to beat.

I suppose I owe you a formal introduction, so call me Heeljack like everyone else does and let's leave it to that. It's not my Christian name but it served me just fine when I rode through hell on my way to being saved. You see, I was born on a mining colony over in the Omaha System, a big red dustball called Platte if you're familiar, and while my folks and the better part of the colony called themselves faithful they mixed worship with gossip into a nasty wine called politics. My pa fancied himself a future church Elder for Platte and while he was busy I took a nasty turn somewhere along the line and ended up a profligate sinner without an ounce of pity or shame in me.

It all ended poorly of course. I was drinking like damn fish by fifteen years old, and killed a man at seventeen — as much a shock to me as anyone else the way it happened. After study one day, me and some of my friends were knocking back shots of high proof stuff down at the loading docks when a pair of crewmen from a passing trader came by and struck up a conversation. Our little arcology never had more than a single vessel visiting so we knew their outfit immediately. We were all kids and hiding behind corrugated crates about ten foot tall and

six times as wide — full to the gills with copper which was about the only thing Platte was good for.

They were friendly at first, no doubt interested in having a taste of our hooch. We peppered them with questions about spacer life.

I had myself a brown bottle of wine, or so I called it. It was some juice based crap I brewed myself down in an abandoned maintenance shaft of the arcology's heating level. One of the spacers, a dark haired fellow about a head taller than me, asked for a nip of my goods and I was happy enough to oblige.

He took a half empty bottle, sucked down a deep draught and gave it back to me containing only about half a spit's worth of backwash.

"The hell," said I, "you got money to compensate for that mighty sip?"

"Not a drop," said he, "and I suppose if you have an issue with that you ought to take it up with one of your weirdo 'Elders' for adjudication."

He knew he had me by the balls. We followers of the latter day saints don't take to drinking as a habit but rather as a sin. And being about five years my senior I suppose he felt entitled to take what I had without a care in the world. My friends, none of them any older than myself, all had a good laugh at me and I felt like the assembled group had built up quite a tab at my expense.

I had hell's fire burning up my neck, my hands shaking. "Give me a kay and we'll call it even."

The grinning bastard had the gall to laugh right in my face. "I'd rather just walk away and be done with ya."

And he did, or attempted to at least. He made it about three steps before my switchblade found lower back. He cried out, fell down holding an arm out to block me, but not fast enough before I caught him with three more strikes — rear thigh, front thigh, stomach — each left a gaping red mouth in the fabric of his jumpsuit.

I was still shaking, blood thundering in my ears. "Got a few kay to spare now, smart guy?"

He was scrambling away on his rear end as best he could, calling me every name in the book. His shipmate swooping in beside him in case I went after him again, but neither he nor any of my friends made a move towards me as I stood frozen with knife in hand.

I heard my friends arguing behind me.

"Call the doctor, he's bleeding bad from that leg."

"But the alcohol..."

"There's worse things than penance — by Jehovah his face going gray."

I didn't wait to see how it resolved, an animal instinct in me knew I'd delivered a killing blow as swift as it was stupidly done. Without a word I walked to the personnel gate, screwed on an atmospheric helm, and slung a spare oxy tank over my shoulder before striding out into the rust red desert beneath a star strewn sky. I didn't look back if anyone followed me.

By all accounts I should have been chucking up that half bottle of booze I'd drunk, but instead I felt a serenity greater than prayer had ever given me. It was a new side of myself I would have to grow more acquainted with in my exile, a clinical coldness that fed off the terror of others.

At that age I'd never spent much time surface-side, and I remember how alien it felt to walk fully suited — the way the muffled crunch of gravel echoed up from the boots, but the cross wind which fluttered my loose sleeves didn't touch my face. I didn't know where I headed, only that here wouldn't do.

White lights projected against the grounded ship, a hulking mass of metal on a lake of concrete besides our pyramidal arcology. I went the other way, over a rocky dune to a supply shed and found what I sought, a covered air speeder used for mineral surveys, staked beside a few tarped down boxes. I ripped the sheet off the speeder, ran my citizen card, and blasted the motor.

I had by then some notion of a plan. In truth it was a plan I had been considering for the better part of a year but hadn't had the cojones to try for fear of breaking my mother's heart — but there was no avoiding that now so it didn't weigh on me none. It's strange really, but the murder freed my mind and made such petty things as the expectations of others seem so trite.

I burned vapor through the night, the speeder's motor vibrating against the hood as rusted hills curved up and down beside me on the way due north to the nearest arcology called Smithtown.

I won't bore you with all the thoughts racing through my head that night. They were probably much the same as any other man expecting execution and swung on a dime between euphoric self-realization and panicked self doubt. I didn't regret what I'd done, but I sure did regret how I'd done it.

Dawn's light came and woke an ammonia yellow sky as my speeder's motor began to stutter as the power block ran dry.
