

PARANORMAFIA

CHAPTER



THE SPACE WALL (PART 1)



Snow swirled in ragged sheets under the sickly wash of Frostica's streetlights, the air so sharp it felt like being cut. It was five in the morning; the city slept in frost.

Pluto's severed head sat skewered on a rusted spike by the curb, half-encased in rime. One glassy eye stared blankly at the snow while an ice crow hopped and pecked at frozen flesh. Frost rimed the jaw, blood had already blackened where it met the cold. The sight drew stares and a kind of brittle laughter from the men gathered around it.

Carl shifted his weight and spat into the snow. He wore an orange prison suit like a uniform of complaint – thick, scuffed fabric that did little against the wind – and the big black "0" stamped across his back looked like an afterthought. His ginger beard was flecked with frost.

"Well, that guy sure knew how to party," he said, forcing humor into his numb voice.

The guy next to him – Jex – stamped his feet and hugged his arms. He, too, wore the orange suit – the fabric hung awkward on his slim frame, sleeves too long and collar too tight. Spiky black hair stuck up through frost, and a small number 4 tattoo on his cheek looked almost comical against his chattering teeth.

He peered at the impaled head like a man trying to understand a bad joke

"What's the boss doing up there?" he asked, nodding toward the parked dumper truck.

"Beats me," Carl said, rubbing his hands inside his gloves. "He does that every morning. Guess he

thinks he has more freedom up there.” His laugh came out like steam.

Kaja sat on the flank of the dumper truck, orange suit neat and uncomplaining on him, as if it were just another layer of skin.

When he moved into the light the others could see the vertical black stripes across his grey irises – thin bars that made his eyes look hollow and motionless.

He had short spiky black hair, with four strands that fell on his forehead like a spider’s legs, poking at his eyebrows.

He didn’t stamp or shuffle, he didn’t visibly feel the cold. He only watched Pluto’s head with an unblinking, almost clinical stare.

“Keep staring at it like that, Kaja!” Carl called, trying to jab at the silence with noise. “I swear, I think he’s about to come back to life.”

Jex snorted a breath that fogged in the air. “He’s gonna kill him again in his grave with that stare, poor bastard.”

Kaja’s voice was flat, efficient. “Get the equipment ready. We start in five minutes.”

Carl threw up his hands in mock outrage. “Come on, make it ten. What do I need to bring again?”

“Quit goofing around,” Kaja said without inflection.

Carl shook his head and grinned through numb lips.

“If I don’t, who will?” He stamped his boots and blew on his mittened hands.

Jex hunched his shoulders and rubbed his fingers. “It’s freezing out here. Stupid company didn’t even give us coats. Are we really gonna work like this?”

Carl waved a mittened hand. “Hey, at least we’re not naked.” His joke fell thin; his teeth still chattered.

Kaja stood and flexed his hands without a shiver. “I’ll rip the asphalt. Carl, break the big chunks. New guy, load the wheelbarrow and drop them in the truck.”

“You guys are nuts,” Jex muttered, shoulders tight. “I can barely feel my face.”

They set the perimeter heat machines – boxy rigs that hissed with a short, mechanical breath – at the corners of their job site. The devices gave off a strong, localized warmth that melted the ice covering the crumbled black asphalt while everything beyond remained hard and white. The men moved in that small halo of heat like moths around a single lamp.

Kaja crouched and wedged his fingers beneath a pavement chunk the size of a mattress. He didn’t grunt or flinch as he lifted; the slab came away with a sound like tearing cloth and exposed the raw rock carpet beneath. Carl hauled the sledgehammer and followed Kaja’s direction.

“Hit it there,” Kaja said, voice precise.

“You won’t have to tell me twice!” Carl bellowed, swinging the hammer down until the chunk fractured with a brutal crack.

Jex wrestled slabs into the wheelbarrow, breath staccato in his throat, fingers sluggish with cold.

“Hey, your cart’s full, buddy. Get a move on,” Carl called, stamping to warm his feet.

“Nah, that’s it, guys. I think I’m done,” Jex announced suddenly, slumping to a concrete block and clutching his frozen hands.

Carl laughed, breath ragged. “What’s wrong? Getting cold feet?”

“No, for real! I think my fingers are gonna fall off. If I just killed Spacemask, I wouldn’t have to deal with all this bullshit!” Jex said through his teeth, half-angry, half-afraid.

Carl snorted, amused. “Ah yeah? Wanna be a bounty hunter, eh?”

“Damn straight,” the new guy shot back. “Imagine having all that illegal crap wiped away just by catching one man. If I could infiltrate the Revstars, I’d get his ass.” He blew on his fingers, still shaking from the cold.

Carl laughed. “Sign me up, bud.”

Kaja’s tone cut through the air like a frost-edged blade. “Quit messing around. We have work to do.”

Carl rolled his eyes, grabbing his sledgehammer again. “Yeah, yeah. You should learn to have some fun once in a while, Kaja. It won’t kill you.”

Kaja didn’t answer – just tore another slab of frozen asphalt free with a sharp grunt. Steam hissed

around the heat machines as they worked, the morning pressing in heavy and pale.

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Hours later, across Frostica's residential zone, the night had deepened into something still and sharp. Their new job site was a quiet driveway lined with ice-coated fences and dim lamp posts. The same heat machines hissed at the perimeter, carving out faint islands of warmth in the otherwise frozen dark.

Kaja dropped a thick chunk of asphalt onto a fully loaded wheelbarrow with a dull thud.

Carl wiped frost from his beard, the exhaustion creeping into his voice. "Son of a bitch actually ended up quitting after all... I guess this job isn't cut for everyone."

He shook his head, breath misting. "You sure you don't want to swap? I don't mind hauling it to the truck this time."

Kaja pushed the wheelbarrow toward the dumper parked at the curb. "Pick up what's left on the ground."

Carl gave a low whistle and started gathering the scraps. "Man... I don't know how you do this seven days a week. The boss works us from five a.m.

‘til almost midnight. How do you even catch up on sleep?”

Kaja, still pushing, said flatly, “I don’t.”

Carl chuckled weakly. “Shit, I do this for three days and my body’s wrecked for ten. The boss better know he’s lucky to have you.”

He glanced around – the last of the driveway was stripped clean, the rock carpet glinting under the light.

“I guess that’s the last of it,” Carl muttered. “We’ll leave it as is, yeah? You’ll roll it over tomorrow?”

Kaja nodded. “Yeah.”

“Call the boss, then. I don’t wanna sit two hours at the gate again for my damn paycheck.”

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The hour was late, and the city slept under its sheet of white silence. Frostica’s night had a sound – a low hiss of freezing wind scraping along the metal walls and the distant hum of heat vents clearing paths through ice. The glow from the vents came and went in pale bursts, casting fog-like steam that rolled across the snow-slicked streets.

Carl’s breath shivered in front of him; his beard crusted with ice. His hands were red and

cracked, his breath fogging as he rubbed them together. His prison-issued orange work suit clung stiff to his knees, frozen damp.

Beside him stood Kaja, motionless in the same thin uniform – the thin fabric clinging to his frame, no visible discomfort in his posture, eyes dim and unreadable.

The new guy was gone, long gone.

Their boss – a small, wiry old man who dressed like a king pretending to be a teenager – paced back and forth in front of the gate that led to Level Zero.

He was swaddled in a massive fur coat, boots with heat soles, and oversized mittens that made him look like he'd stuffed his hands in pillows. The man was sweating under all that luxury while everyone else froze.

He wasn't shivering. He was furious.

"You guys made me look like a fucking moron!" his voice cracked through the cold, sharp as ice on steel. "When I tell customers to take everything out of their driveways, I can't just call them back and say their appointment's cancelled because my men are a bunch of turtles with their heads up their asses! I lost two contracts because of you, and that's coming straight out of your goddamn paychecks!"

Carl blinked at him through the frost. "What? Come on, boss, it's not our fault that new guy decided to quit. Name another two-man team that could've done as much as we did! Heck, Kaja didn't even stop for a second! Give us a break."

The Boss jabbed a mittened finger at him.

“Watch your fucking tone, Carl. Here’s what I’m gonna do. You’ll still get your pay today.”

Carl’s relief slipped through immediately.

“Alright! That’s what I’m talkin’ ab—”

“Zip it! I’m not done.” The Boss’s mitten rose again like a warning. “You’ll get your pay today, but I’m keeping three quarters of it, for all the crap you’ve put me through.”

Carl’s jaw dropped. “But boss—”

Before he could finish, Kaja lifted an arm in front of him – a calm, silent stop. He bowed slightly, his tone low and even.

“Thank you for your consideration, sir.”

The Boss’s expression brightened, pride swelling in the cold air. “Now that’s what I like to see. If you wanna get paid, do like Kaja here – and thank me with your fucking head down.”

Carl’s jaw tightened. “Tch... Thank you, sir.”

“Hahahaha!” The Boss threw his head back, his laugh rasping through the night. “God damn, I love being a boss!”

He stomped towards his truck, steam curling around his boots.

Kaja silently headed towards the customs building, his breath invisible despite the cold.

Carl trudged behind, muttering under his breath, rubbing his arms as his teeth chattered.

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The inside of the customs building was a different kind of cold – dry, mechanical.

The air hummed with power from the walls, sterile and humming beneath a blinding ceiling of white light.

The metal floors reflected every step like mirrors dusted with frost.

Three lines of inmates stood waiting for inspection, all in the same orange suits.

Grey-armored guards lined the sides, helmets hiding their faces behind pinkish-red digital visors that blinked with static white spikes – expressions made of light. A laser pistol hung at each guard's hip, ready but unnecessary; fear already filled the room.

At the front, a monitor flickered on, showing a cartoon robot face – eyes and mouth made of digital symbols, shifting between “:D” and “:I.”

“Next,” it said, its voice chipper and hollow.

An inmate shuffled forward, placing his belongings into the tray beside the scanner.

“Please place all possessions into the container,” the robot continued. “Then stand in front of the scanner and await further instruction.”

Further down the line, Kaja's wrist buzzed. A soft tone pulsed from the small screen embedded in his digital watch – the link. He lifted it slightly, glancing at the numbers flashing across the surface.

+5 credits.

He exhaled through his nose. *Looks like my pay went through. That brings me to forty-seven thousand, eight hundred and eighty credits. To make it to the next level with*

Jinki... I'll need eighty-seven thousand, six hundred. That means—

“Next,” the robot called again.

Kaja stepped forward, placing the company's truck keys into the container. The cold metal tray clicked shut as he entered the scanner's zone.

“Good,” said one of the guards, his voice muffled through the helmet. “Stand right there.”

The scanner flickered to life, tracing a red lattice across Kaja's body.

The grid glitched — static rippled along his silhouette, and his figure flared crimson.

Eighty-seven thousand six hundred, Kaja repeated inwardly. Five more years if things go well. If the boss keeps stealing off my paycheck, that's closer to eight. And all these workers quitting on day one lately... there's no way that's just coincidence.

His pupils darkened faintly. A green tint seeped into his eyes, and the black vertical bars within them began to converge toward the center.

He's setting it up, Kaja thought. To keep our credits for himself.

The scanner shrieked. The sound tore through the room like a blade.

The monitor face flickered red, its eyes turning into flashing exclamation marks. “Echo user alert! Echo user alert!”

Kaja froze, jaw tightening. *Shit.*

The green in his eyes vanished, replaced instantly by dull, lifeless gray.

The machine fell silent. Its lights normalized, hum steady once again.

“Hey!” one of the guards barked, pistol already drawn. “Don’t move a muscle or I’ll shoot!”

A voice interrupted him – calm and authoritative. “Stand down.”

A taller guard approached from the rear, armor the same design but deep crimson. His visor was solid black.

“What’s going on here?” the red guard asked.

“The scanner went off for a second,” the first guard said quickly. “Should I kill him?”

The red guard’s head tilted slightly. “Calm down. Only experienced Mask Users can hide their Echo. This guy comes through here almost every day. For him to be one, he’d have to be a Mask User and learn concealment overnight. Do the math.” He waved dismissively. “The scanner glitched. Move him through.”

The guard hesitated. “Yeah... that makes sense.”

He lowered his weapon and gestured toward the exit. “What are you waiting for? Scanning’s complete. Move along!”

Kaja gave a short nod. “Yes, sir.”

He stepped through the final barrier, the hum of the scanner fading behind him.

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The world on the other side of the gate was built from metal and silence.

Two massive walls extended outward from the gate, covered in vertical white lights that pulsed faintly as they stretched toward the city ahead.

Beyond them, Level Zero sprawled – endless rows of identical grey cubes, their surfaces split by thin strips of light that cut down the middle of each.

Above, thick clouds pressed against the sky like stone, sealing out any trace of sunlight.

A sharp, visible line in the night sky marked the border between Level Zero and Frostica. On the far side, snowflakes drifted endlessly in the frigid air, but here, inside the boundary, the cold could not touch them. The temperature held steady at fifteen degrees Celsius; residents walked completely unaffected by the chill beyond the barrier.

The floor beneath Kaja's boots was red, textured like carpet. There were no vehicles. No streets. Just endless walking paths through the grid.

A soft voice called out from the shadows of one of the walls.

“Kajaaaa!”

He barely turned his head before someone leapt onto his back – a flash of ginger hair and laughter breaking the monotony.

Luma's orange inmate jacket was tied around her waist, revealing a white tank top beneath. Her cheeks were still lightly flushed from the sharp bite of Frostica's cold, fading now in the milder warmth of

Level Zero, though her grin burned bright enough to melt it.

“Did you miss me?” she teased, tightening her arms around his neck. “Hey, don’t move; there’s something on your cheek.”

She kissed him, once, twice. “It’s my lips.”

Kaja stood unmoving, eyes fixed ahead, their gray sheen unbroken.

A soft whirring drew near. A small spherical drone floated toward them, its camera iris adjusting with a chirp.

“Citizen #35789 and Citizen #48562,” it said in its gentle mechanical tone. “You have infringed upon Law Number Eight – public displays of affection. A five-credit penalty has been deducted from your accounts.”

“You’ve gotta be kidding me,” Kaja muttered.

Luma giggled. “They already took the points, so they won’t take them twice. Might as well make it count, don’t you think? If you come over to my place, I’ll let you do whatever you want with me.”

He sighed quietly. “Sorry, Luma. I have to work tomorrow. I can’t lose any more credits.”

Her smile faltered. “Again? What’s the matter with you? You think I’m ugly or something? Guys ask me out all the time, you know.”

“Then maybe you should go out with one of them.”

“I don’t care about them,” she said softly. “I love you, Kaja. Why won’t your eyes look at me like they did before?”

“It was just a mistake,” he said. “Stop dwelling on it.”

“It wasn’t a mistake,” she whispered. “You can lie to everyone else, but it won’t work on me. I saw the real you that night, and I want him back.”

“There’s no fake me, Luma.” He stated walking. “Be careful on your way home.”

Her voice trembled. “Can’t you at least walk me there?”

He sighed, rubbing his neck. “Fine. But don’t drag your feet. I’ve got four hours left to sleep.”

Her mood shifted instantly. She beamed, wrapping herself around his arm. “You can sleep over at my place if you’re too tired.”

He gave her a sidelong glance. “Come on, what did I just say?”

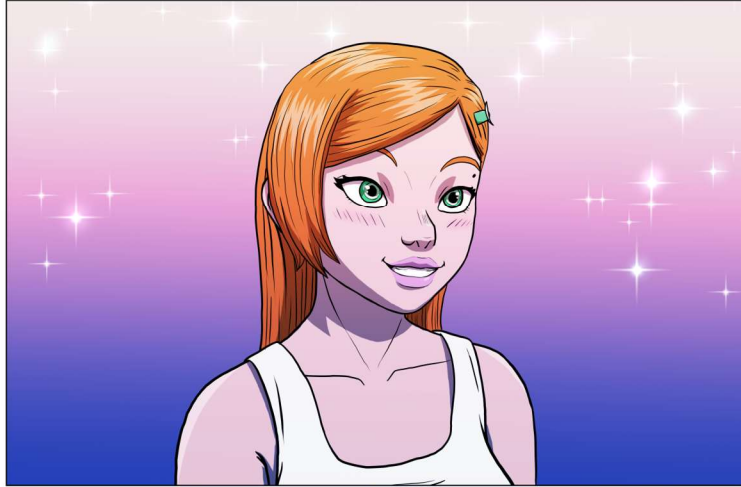
She only grinned wider. “I’ll pay you back the credits! You don’t have to cry about it.”

He didn’t respond. Together, they disappeared into the maze of glowing corridors, their footsteps swallowed by the low hum of Level Zero’s eternal night.

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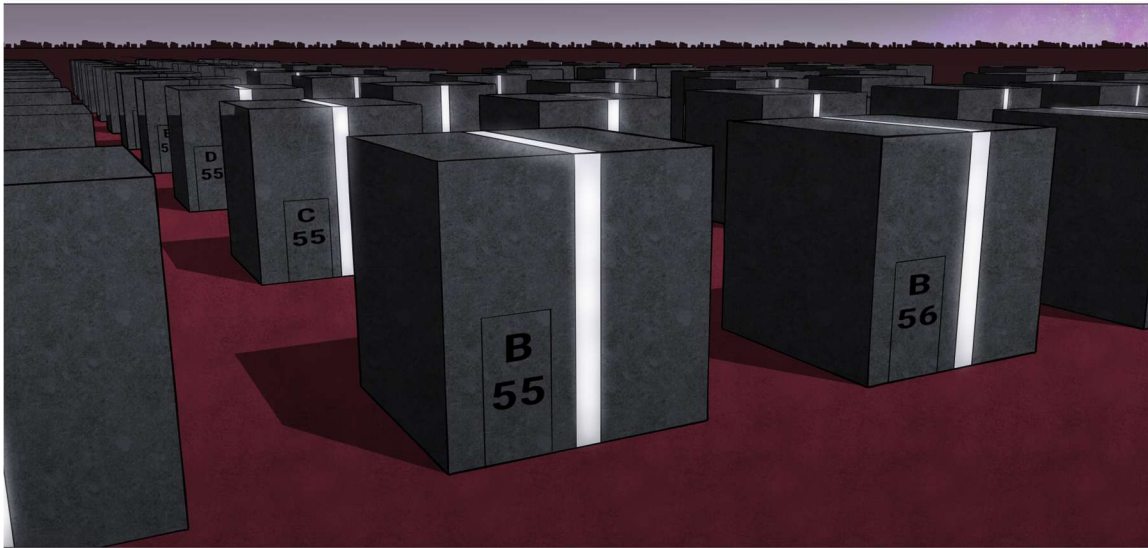
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The red-carpeted floor of Level Zero stretched in neat, unbroken lines under the grey sky, bouncing the cells' white neon lights.

The metallic walls of his cubical block glinted faintly, the door marked B-55.

Outside, the corridor was empty except for the soft hum of distant machinery.



Jinki's boots clattered against the red grid as he stepped out, sleeves of his orange prison suit tied around his waist, revealing the rough "ZERO" tattoo on his chest and the dead king symbol on his neck.

His wide spiky blond mohawk flared outward, his skin pale brown, eyes bright orange with hints of red.

Jinki froze mid-step, orange eyes widening in surprise at the sight of his brother.

Kaja's expression remained calm, almost unreadable, but the subtle lift of his brow betrayed recognition.

A low hum cut through the air. A Sphere drone drifted down from the clouds, black shell gleaming.

Its single red eye locked onto Jinki as it hovered behind Kaja.

"Citizen#69463. You have illegally exited your residence after curfew. A 4 credits penalty has been deducted from your account." Said the flat robotic voice.

"You're out late," Kaja said evenly, his voice low, measured.

Jinki grinned, pushing his hands into the pockets of his prison pants. "Come on, big bro! Hang out with me, just for tonight. We've got to live a little, you know?"

Kaja didn't react, only stepping fully onto the red-carpeted floor in front of their shared home.

His gaze drifted past Jinki, impassive, as if assessing the quiet of the empty streets.

"It's past curfew, Jinki. We'd already be at society's next level if you helped me instead of wasting your credits like this every night," Kaja said flatly.

Jinki snorted, leaning back on his heels, spiky blond hair catching the dim light. "Fuck that! I don't know about you, but I only got one life to live. And I'm gonna live the fuck out of that bitch."

Kaja's eyes stayed cold and steady. "I won't bail you out forever. Remember that."

Jinki's grin widened, and he took a few steps closer, voice low but excited. "You know Spacemask's Revstars liberated the Metal Capital recently, right? Level Zero's probably up next. You better start spending those credits before they're useless."

"This whole war is just an illusion, Jinki," Kaja said evenly, tone calm, eyes unreadable. "The World King could shut it all down tomorrow if he wanted. You should know that; you were there."

Jinki's smirk faltered for a moment, but he quickly shook his head. "You've never seen how strong Spacemask is, so what do you know?"

"Enough to be convinced," Kaja said, voice flat.

Jinki laughed softly, but the excitement lingered in his eyes. He casually placed his hand on his brother's shoulder. "Whatever. It's the fight of the year at the pub tonight. You sure you're not coming?"

"Don't get in trouble," Kaja said, voice even, almost like a statement of fact rather than a warning.

Jinki chuckled, brushing a strand of spiky blond hair from his forehead. "Relax, Kaja. I know how to handle myself."

The two stood for a moment, the faint hum of the hovering drone the only sound between them.

Kaja's expression didn't change, his posture calm and collected, waiting for Jinki to move along.

Jinki leaned back slightly, still smirking. "Don't tell me you're mad because of that little penalty?"

“I care enough to make sure you don’t shoot us in the foot,” Kaja said, flat, precise.

Jinki laughed softly, pushing off from the wall. “Alright, alright. I’ll keep it under control. Don’t worry about me.”

Kaja nodded once, subtle, controlled. He opened the door to their residence, slipping inside without another word, leaving Jinki outside, restless and full of energy.

Jinki watched his brother go for a beat, then finally moved off down the alley, ready for whatever mischief the night might bring.

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Further down the narrow alley, a sector guard stepped out from the shadows, voice cutting through the silence. “Hey, Jinki! Five hours past curfew. What are you doing here?”

Jinki’s lips curled into a mischievous smirk. “I’m broke. Cut me some slack, will ya?”

“No can do. You know the rules,” the guard replied flatly, digital eyes scanning him with mechanical precision.

Jinki’s gaze flicked to a side passage behind the guard. “Hey, what’s that? Holy shit, watch out!” he shouted, pointing urgently.

The guard instinctively turned his head to follow the warning.

Seizing the moment, Jinki flipped him the middle finger with a sharp grin and sprinted down another corridor, yelling over his shoulder, “Suck it, dumbass!” as he darted away across the red-carpeted floor.

He barely had time to react before another guard, hidden until now, lunged from the shadows and tripped him. Jinki crashed against the carpet, sprawling. The second guard straddled him, pressing him down.

“Argh! Get off me!” Jinki shouted, struggling beneath the weight.

“Where do you think you’re going?” the second guard said, keeping him pinned on the narrow hallway’s carpet.

“Two on one? Damn near illegal, guys. Better report this to your supervisor,” Jinki muttered through gritted teeth, frustration and amusement mingling in his voice.

The first guard advanced, baton raised. “Still got jokes left, eh, Jinki? Hope you’re proud; you just added a beating to your daily tax.”

The baton came down with a sharp crack across his face. Pain flared, and Jinki’s teeth clenched as the guard’s digital eyes bent into a mocking grin. “Nothing personal, Jinki. I just love being an asshole.”

Blows rained down relentlessly, each strike echoing off the sterile metallic walls. Jinki grunted sharply with every impact, the narrow corridor

amplifying the oppressive weight of their assault, his
body twisting and straining to endure.

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