

CHAPTER 3

NovaTech Building, Central Okyto Province (North London)

Thaddeus Wolfe sat motionless in the plush seat of the external elevator, its slow ascent almost imperceptible, except for the faint pressure shift in his inner ear. The outer wall of the null-grav pod was a seamless pane of reinforced plexiglass and afforded him a spectacular view of the city.

Wolfe, owner and originator of NovaTech, considered the sixth largest corporation in the world, the tenth largest in the solar system, stared hard at the muted neon crust of the streets below spread out like the glowing embers of radioactive fallout. The shifting mosaic of poisoned colours pulsed through the smog haze like a diseased heartbeat, staining the sky in lurid pinks and bruised violets. Even from this height, with the null-audio dampers deactivated, the noise of the city seeped through the pod's insulation, distant but unmistakable. It came to him as a continuous growl, layered with the sharp staccato of sirens and the low, organic murmur of thirty million lives compressed into too little space.

He had been born to a time when the landscape of the capital was unrecognisable from the form it now assumed. A city expanding in three dimensions, above and below ground level to contain its suffocating population.

He remembered a time when he could stand in the streets and see sky, unblemished by pollution, or shrouded by the man-made monuments that stretched across the landscape like silent sentinels. He hated the collective weight of humanity,

the pressure, the density. He rarely left the building these days, never walked the streets and only liked to experience the city from his lavish apartments on the ninetieth floor, or from this safe, enclosed capsule.

The elevator climbed higher, cutting through a drifting belt of airborne dust that rattled faintly against the pod's exterior. The sound reminded him of static. Off in the near distance, silhouetted against the begrimed sky, were several magnificent obelisk buildings, peaks neatly aligned against the horizon like a geometrically perfect mountain range. Even at this distance he could make out the huge hydraulic spotlights carving arcs through the dust and smog, lighting up the skeletal remains of earlier architecture, gutted towers that stood like stripped carcasses among the new structures.

As the elevator lifted above the diminutive buildings surrounding it, Wolfe could now see the whole capital stretch outward in all directions. From up here, it appeared as a beautiful, bespeckled carpet that hid the grime and decrepitude at street level.

London had long since lost its soul. Many called it Juku now. The name pulsed across holo-billboards in looping kanji and fractured English. Its neon heart pumped blood into the hardened arteries of an old city.

The area north of the Thames was known as Okyto, a corporate entity dominated by layered glass megastructures. The population was a mix of European and Japanese. Its centre encompassed Mayfair, Soho, St James and the Strand, with its boundaries north as far as Camden, east to Newham and west to Ealing. Japanese conglomerates

owned the skyline. Buy from us was the luminous message scrawled across a thousand towering facades.

Stretching south beyond the river was Xaanji province, dense and restless. Its structures were tighter and older. The area was populated with the descendants of Chinese, Indian and Russian immigrants. The Thames traced the northern boundary of the Triad Empire, west to what had once been Richmond, east as far as Greenwich.

In between Okyto and Xaanji provinces lay Kodo; Lambeth, the Isle of Dogs. Kodo was the fault line, where the two halves of the city collided. It was a hungry province, a borderland skirmish town out in the darkness, a shadow on the city's x-ray. Embers of the Yakuza-Triad Wars still burned fiercely there.

Thirty million populated Juku. Five million of them in Kodo.

This was where the lash and flail of crime spurred the city on.

This was where it bled.

Wolfe felt the elevator slow as it approached the one hundred and twentieth floor. He stood and turned towards the interior metal doors, reflexively straightening his jacket and sweeping a hand through his lustrous white hair. He never noticed the tiny crystalline spider which slipped down from the unseen housing above on a thin polymer thread. It caught the light only once, a glimmer like frost, and landed on the dark fabric of his shoulder. It scuttled toward the collar seam, and vanished beneath the material. The pod came to a halt with a soft magnetic seal and the doors slid open silently. He stepped out onto the expansive floor.

The air was cooler here, the lighting subdued. At the centre stood a large, black oval table, its glass surface alive with faint shifting data across the surface.

The Wolfe dynasty were already assembled.

At the head sat Callum Wolfe, the eldest son at fifty-eight and, paradoxically for a Wolfe, a diminutive five feet ten. He was still flush with the power given to him by his father when he had been made Managing Director of the company. He wore a formal black suit, grey shirt and black tie, snugly fitting his muscular frame. His eyes tracked his father as he crossed the room.

On Callum's left was Steven Wolfe, the youngest at forty-nine. He was the toughest and brightest of the Wolfe brood, a gifted intellect, ideally suited to his role as Development Director. His attire was deliberately informal, red synthetic leather trousers catching the light in faint fluid reflections and a black silk collarless shirt. He resembled his sister in many ways, with long, fine white hair flowing down his back and delicate features that made him appear almost feminine.

On the right was Leven Wolfe, the middle brother, red-headed and fiery tempered like his mother. Barely contained rage seemed to radiate from him, a restless volatility inherited from a woman long buried. His position as Marketing Director was nothing more than a token offering. He was bitter already, cursed by the knowledge that his younger brother was smarter and his older brother held more power. He overcompensated with his lavish appetite for drugs and women. Today, he had dressed in a luxurious, vivid blue Sakuri-Xien silk suit. The fabric was alive with

photon responsive fibres, subtly shifting tone with the light of the boardroom and bending it into sleek, liquid curves.

The fourth and final member of the family was absent, as usual. Addriane Wolfe was fourteen years old, and a ghost in her own family. She had been the only girl, born shortly before the untimely death of Thaddius Wolfe's wife. He had named her and then simply forgotten her.

The black glass conference table reflected the three faces of his sons as Wolfe entered. He took the seat opposite them. He didn't speak but made an inconsequential gesture with his index finger that carried the weight of command.

Callum Wolfe rose immediately and swept his hand over the table. The glass pulsed once, then came alive. A three-dimensional projection erupted upwards from the mirrored surface, humming faintly as photons locked into structured planes. Jupiter rotated before them, vast and slow, its atmosphere churning in violent bands of crimson and ochre. The Great Red Spot turned with patient menace, large enough to swallow worlds.

In the foreground, the asteroid belt drifted in layered depth. Countless rocks, from dust fragments to mountain-sized masses, slid through space in orchestrated chaos. Each object trailed faint metadata streams in neon glyphs, statistics scrolling in real time.

Callum reached into the projection. His fingers disturbed the image so it rippled like liquid. He selected a single object and the system responded instantly. The view snapped inward to a solitary asteroid which now filled the space above the table. It

tumbled slowly. Its irregular, kidney-shaped surface was jagged and pitted. Microfractures glittered where ice deposits caught the weak light from the sun.

“This is Wolfe 1,” Callum began. “An asteroid we purchased the rights to mine from Mars Corp.”

Thaddeus Wolfe leaned on the armrest of his chair and studied the rock. The small crystalline spider emerged from its hiding place beneath his lapel. Its limbs were filament-thin, refracting light into sharp prismatic shards. It climbed to his shoulder and anchored itself, molecular optical nodes dilating as it began to record.

Callum gestured to his brother Steven who stood. His gaze flicked once toward Callum and then toward their father.

“It’s mostly junk out in the asteroid belt between Mars and Jupiter,” he said. “It is largely composed of low-yield masses. Iron cores dominate with trace quantities of platinum group metals, and on rare occasions gold and silver. Extraction margins are narrow unless you hit a concentrated anomaly. Most independent asteroid miners anchor their ships to a single rock and just work it to get what precious metals they can. For most it just covers their running costs. Others can strike a rich vein and make a considerable profit. On a corporate scale it’s not worth the effort. Mostly it’s just balls of dust and ice.”

Wolfe shifted in his seat, the faint creak of engineered leather marking the movement. “What makes this lump of rock worthy of our attention?” he asked.

Steven Wolfe inhaled slowly. Again, he cast a quick nervous glance towards his brother.

“Two years ago, an asteroid miner was doing some prospecting work out in the belt. He discovered that this rock was somehow heavier than expected for its size, about 35% heavier.” He tapped the data stream and figures flared into visibility. “Before he could return, his ship was damaged in a micrometeorite storm. He was killed instantly but his ship automatically ejected his log. This was found six months ago by another miner and we obtained it from him for a price.”

Steven sat, and Callum stood again. “We showed the stats to some experts who speculated that it could have an iron core infused with precious metals. As managing director, I made the unilateral decision to retrieve this asteroid and send a team out to the orbit of Mars to mine it.”

Thaddeus Wolfe watched his eldest son describe what was the largest operation NovaTech had ever conceived, moving a one-kilometre asteroid into Mars orbit. Although the short-term financial outlay was vast, the long-term potential profit was enormous. Then he saw the flicker in Callum’s eyes. A micro expression of uncertainty, gone almost before it existed. It was the same look he remembered seeing from across a chessboard.

“How much did we lose?” Wolfe asked, calmly.

For a heartbeat, no one answered.

“Fifty billion in metal,” Levin said, finally. It was the first time he had spoken and he announced this information almost triumphantly. “I warned them against it but, hey...” His momentary pleasure evaporated, becoming sullen resentment. “What do I know? I’m only the fucking Marketing Director.”

For a moment, they were not executives commanding a huge multinational corporation. They were boys again, competing for their father's approval.

Hey dad, look what Callum did! Hey dad, Steven hit me! Hey dad, Levin broke my toy!

Wolfe shook his head wearily. He didn't shy away from blaming himself. He had cushioned them all their lives against the harshness of the outside world, given them too much control when he knew that none of them really had what it took. He had built NovaTech up from nothing over decades of backbreaking work, only to hand control over to his incompetent and entitled sons who thought running a company was nothing more complex than an AI simulation game.

"I assume," Wolfe said, keeping his voice level, "it was just another worthless lump of rock."

"It was mostly iron," Steven explained. "But it carried an unusually high concentration of nickel, cobalt and lead. Enough to register as an outlier. Enough to skew the mass profile and make it look far more valuable than it was."

"So no intrinsic value to speak of," Wolfe said.

"The cobalt and lead have use, yes," Steven said. "On paper, in reality, the cost of mining it outweighs the value of the metal."

"What is the overall damage?" Wolfe asked.

Callum answered before anyone else could. He sat forward, palms pressed flat on the table, expensive rings tapping softly against the glass. "We've had to lay off about 40% across the other companies," he said. Then, quickly, trying to get ahead

of the anger he could already sense building, he added, "Just enough to recover the losses. Not enough to surrender control."

Wolfe nodded. He let the silence grow until all three sons began to feel its weight. The boardroom's adaptive lights shifted toward evening mode, dimming to a bruised violet. It made their faces look less human, more like masks cast from expensive plastic. Wolfe realised that there was a genuine concern that such an enterprise could ruin NovaTech. The fear of entitlement meeting consequence for the first time. He understood enough to know that a venture this badly misjudged could ripple through holding after holding, strip leverage, trigger bids and invite scavengers. The outside world, the one he had spent a lifetime keeping from them, was not patient with weakness. It fed on it. Very soon the sons could find themselves dumped in a world they couldn't handle and were not equipped for. He realised he had stepped away too soon and should never have relinquished total control. When he finally spoke, his tone was as cold as the very rock they had pulled from the depths of space.

"If we have any more issues, that 40% becomes 45%, then 49%, and finally 51%, at which point we lose control," he said. "If we lose control, we lose NovaTech."

Levin shrugged. "So what, we're all rich," he said. "We all have plenty of TAP."

In a world abundant with acronyms, TAP was the very abbreviation of life itself. TAP stood for Time Allowance Portfolio.

Time.

Banked life. Purchased life. Traded life. Every citizen carried it, nested behind biometric locks, state firewalls and code heavy security barriers. Time was currency stripped to the bone. Time was rent on existence.

“Business doesn’t work like that,” Wolfe said. He stood now, and the table’s sensor lights rose with him, painting him in a sharp halo. “It will be like blood in the water. Like sharks, the other companies will smell it and begin to circle for the kill. If they strip this company, we all go down. They’ll take all the assets linked to NovaTech which happens to include all your precious TAP. Today you’re looking at living two centuries or more in luxury. Tomorrow you could end up with everything gone and only a week of TAP remaining, living in the dirt of ground zero and waiting for your heads to explode when the Scape terminates your account.”

“It won’t come to that,” Callum said, trying to sound confident but unable to hide the doubt in his voice.

“No, you’re right,” Wolfe agreed. “Because as of now I’m taking back full control of the company.” He let his gaze travel from one son to the next. “And you are all fired.”

Callum stood, his chair scraping on the floor. “You can’t fire us,” he protested.

“I just did,” Wolfe said. “I gave it to you and I can take it away. Just be grateful you’re my flesh and blood. If it had been anyone else, I would have had Degra Rhim kill them.”

The three sons paled at the mention of Degra Rhim, their father’s protector, enforcer, assassin. A man whose reputation was almost mythic. Wolfe adjusted one

cuff, then turned and walked out.

The elevator doors recognized him before he reached them. They parted with a soft pneumatic hiss. He began his descent from the heavens into the depths of the building. At his back the city buzzed. Huge freight drones drifted through the rain. Traffic lanes pulsed red and blue in silent rivers. Up here the air was filtered, chilled, expensive. It smelled like power. It smelled like money. Tonight, to Wolfe, it also smelled sour.

The small spider edged out from its hiding place and crawled down the length of his torso with mechanical delicacy, crossed the line of his belt, then dropped soundlessly to the elevator floor. When the doors opened, Wolfe stepped out without looking back.

The spider stayed where it was for one beat. The doors closed and the elevator rose again into the tower's luminous heights, taking the tiny crystalline arachnid to join its brothers, where they listened to everything and forgot nothing.