

TOP CUT

REBEL
FRONTIER

01

⚠ SURVEILLANCE

ACCESS GRANTED:

LOCATION: TYCHO CITY, LUNA

SECTOR: WHITE DRAGON MARKET

DATE: 2303.2425

ACCOUNTS RECORDED: MULTIPLE; AKANE SORAGI, RIN KUBO.

LORE FILE 001: UNLOCKED



RECORD:
RIN KUBO

Rin nodded at the woman running the noodle stand, tipping her oversized tricorn as she walked past. The woman didn't look up or say anything, she just carried on stirring the broth and fiddling with the temperature dial. That's how she knew she was in the right place.

The White Dragon Market in Tycho City's Chinatown district housed an elevator hidden behind a flashing neon menu. This was the only way into a fighting pit—the kind of place where people came to earn a few credits, or try to settle up debts owed to the shadow factions. The pit had no official name, though everyone who attended called it the Top Cut. The reason why depended on who you asked ...

The fighters said it was because the pit skimmed the best talent from every district in Tycho—that only the sharpest edge made it down here. The bookmakers said it was simpler than that: the house took the top cut of every purse, every bet, every side arrangement made inside its rusted steel walls, and had done so reliably for twenty years. The regulars, who had been coming long enough to have stopped caring about the romance of it, said it was because the pit itself was literally cut into the top of a decommissioned water reservoir buried four floors below street level—that the whole room was just a repurposed tank with an open ceiling and the ambitions of a hundred desperate fighters poured into it. All three explanations were probably true.

Rin let out a deep sigh as she descended.

Third time's a charm, darlin'.

She had been here twice before—once to watch a fight, once to be in one—and on both occasions she had left with exactly what she came for and a bruise she hadn't planned on. This time she was hoping for just the former.

The elevator opened and the Top Cut hit her all at once. Bass from the sound system hit her in the chest before the noise caught up, the way a thunderclap follows lightning. The air had its own atmosphere: one of fried soy oil drifting down from the market above, industrial sealant rising from the maintenance corridors below, and the coppery, living smell of people hitting each other for money. She moved past three deep rows of spectators packed around the pit, their faces lit blue and pink by the gelled work lights, the whole room built to look like a dance floor, which helped with the blood.



RECORD:
RIN KUBO

As she exited and made her way past the bar, the two fighters in the current round were taking each other apart with the calm efficiency of professionals who had long since passed the point of anger. The crowd was making the kind of noise people only made when they were watching something real. But Rin wasn't here for the fighters.

There he is!

Kefentse sat in a booth at the far end of the bar. A large, dark man, broad through the shoulders and waist, and a bald head that caught the light in a way that made it look lacquered. He wore narrow rectangular sunglasses despite being underground in a room lit like a neon sunset. He never explained them, and those who knew him knew not to ask. He had the stillness of someone who had decided long ago that nothing in this life was worth moving quickly for—which was either profound wisdom or an elaborate affectation, and Rin had never quite worked out which. He dealt in weapons and off-market tech the way other people dealt in weather: steadily, without preference or judgment, and always at a price calibrated precisely to your desperation.

"You're lookin' real thrilled to be alive, Kef," she said, dropping into the booth and sliding next to him.

"I'm always thrilled," he replied, his gaze unwavering from the fight across the room. "You took your time."

She propped her elbow on the table. "Traffic. Luna traffic. You ever try to get through the White Dragon interchange on a Friday night? It's a spiritual experience."

Kefentse reached next to him and slid a flat case across the table. She put her hand on top of it before it had stopped moving, feeling the weight of it through her palm—the familiar density of something packed carefully in static foam.

Something in her chest unknotted that she hadn't quite admitted was tense.

Finally found one.

For two months she had been chasing down a replacement part for a dialysis unit. In that time she had sourced three possible suppliers—Kefentse was the first who had actually come through.

Cho will live to see another day. She allowed herself a small smile. Now back to EC-13.

"The chip," he said.

Rin set it on the table, Kefentse palming it and slipping it into his jacket pocket without checking the balance, which meant he already knew what was on it and had decided it was acceptable.



RECORD:
RIN KUBO

"Pleasure doin' business," she said, tucking the case under her arm and sliding out of the booth.

"Sit down a minute."

Rin looked back. Kefentse still hadn't looked at her, his eyes fixed on the pit where one of the fighters had just gone down to a knee.

That's not a request.

She sat back down.

"I heard something last week," he said in his measured, bassy tone. "Apollo rotated their freight security on the outer routes. Looks like a new contractor—not Ex-Mil, something private with no public registry." He picked up his drink. "Whoever it is, they've already got rid of two independents off a Prosopon supply line. Neither of them were running anything bigger than what you just put under your arm."

Rin was quiet for a moment. "Got rid of them how?"

"The kind that doesn't come with a severance credit." He set his drink down. "I'm not telling you to stop. I know better than that. I'm telling you to assume whoever tipped you in last time might not be reliable cover going forward."

She brushed her hair back. "That's real thoughtful of you, darlin'!"

"It's not thoughtful. It's inconvenient." He finally turned and looked at her, the sunglasses making it impossible to tell exactly where his eyes landed, but she felt them. "You go missing, I lose a reliable customer. That's commerce."

It sure is, she thought, staring at her reflection in his lenses.

"I'll be careful."

"You'll be reckless," he replied, turning back to the fight. "You always are. Just be reckless somewhere I don't have to hear about it."

"Kefentse, hun, I might get followed on occasion, but I've never been caught," Rin replied with a grin.

"That's exactly what people say right before it happens."

"Don't be worryin' over little ol' me, sugar," she replied, tipping her hat again.

She turned and sashayed toward the elevator, but paused three steps from the doors, feeling something change—not a sound anyone could hear, or a movement she could point to, but something in the texture of the room. A shift in attention directed at her, coming from a direction she hadn't accounted for.

Unaccounted, yet familiar.



RECORD:
RIN KUBO

Hmm.

The corners of her lips curled up slightly.

Rin had spent enough time in enough rooms like this one to trust that feeling the way she trusted her ship's instruments: as data—and useful data at that. She caught a glimpse of a brown jacket moving through the crowd near the bar as the last two inches of the doors closed—unhurried, too casual, with the ease of someone who was neither drunk nor here to watch a fight.

She recognized the jacket before she recognized the face.

“Well, shoot,” she said pleasantly, to the closing doors.



Four floors up and a hundred feet of market corridor later, the brown jacket was still behind her.

She had paused at a vendor stall selling counterfeit data chips and checked her own reflection in the display screen. Brown jacket, red hair trimmed to a mohawk, and a yellow flight suit moving through the foot traffic at the patient, methodical pace of someone who had learned long ago that rushing got you noticed. That was Akane's particular skill, and Rin had catalogued it early in their acquaintance: she didn't lunge, she didn't panic. She simply kept going with the quiet certainty of someone who believed the answer was inevitable and was content to let it arrive.

Girl, you got a good tip this time.

Rin hugged the case tighter against her ribs and turned north, increasing her pace.

The White Dragon Market at this hour was a living thing—tiered, loud, and dense with patrons—she moved through it like she had done this a hundred times, because she had. She ducked under a drone lane, the faint ozonic tang of exhaust hitting the roof of her nose, then cut left through a textile stall into the food court where the vendors were still hollering out their last orders of the night over the chatter of the crowd. In an attempt to put some more distance between them, she vaulted over a street divider and overturned a cart of scrap metal, scattering its contents across the floor plating like spilled ammunition.

She checked the reflection in a storefront window. Akane hadn't slowed, and still wasn't rushing.

Alright, I'll give it to you. You're good.

Rin reached into her jacket pocket and activated a transmitter, clicking it twice. It was a small thing, matte black and no bigger than a thumb drive—and it signaled a single receiver in all of Tycho City. Then she adjusted the case one last time against her ribs, and started running. 🤖



RECORD:
AKANE SORAGI

"She's already running," Akane said into her bracelet.

"Yeah, I figured—which floor?" Takashi replied.

"Three. She's moving north—" She slipped through a gap between a hardware stall and the wall and kept moving. "The north corridor, where does it terminate?"

"It doesn't. It opens onto an access platform on the east side of the megatower, which leads to an exterior boardwalk running along its edge."

Dammit. Where is she going?

Akane sped up.

"The boardwalk is forty stories up," Takashi added.

"Forty?"

"Yeah. I'll keep checking if there are any other exit routes she could take."

He paused.

"Hey, Akane ..."

"Not now."

"It'll take me thirty seconds to pull the layout, I can do two things at once." Another pause. "This is the fourth time this year you've chased a Rin tip. Sixth if you count the two that didn't pan out. I'm not keeping score, I'm just—"

"You're keeping score."

"A little bit, yeah." She could hear him exhale. "There are other contracts, and ones that definitely pay better. There's a Vlast Teknika skip-trace that came in last week, the bounty alone would cover your dock fees for—"

"I'm a little busy, Taka."

"I know. I know you are." His keyboard clicked. "Rin's good at what she does, that's all I'm saying. You keep ending up in the same place and she keeps not being there."

Akane moved through another gap, one hand on the wall. "She was there tonight."

"She's running tonight. That's different." The clicking stopped. "Dad wouldn't want you burning yourself out chasing—"

"Boardwalk layout," Akane said. "Please."

She could feel him deciding whether to push the subject.

He didn't.



RECORD:
AKANE SORAGI

"Forty stories up, and no exits that I can see," he said again, softer this time. "I'll keep looking for alternates though."

"Thank you."

Akane turned north and started running. Rin had exactly the kind of mind that found exits before it found anything else, and if she reached the boardwalk first the window would close to whatever distance existed between Akane's outstretched hand and a very long drop.

The corridor narrowed ahead where a cluster of people had stopped to watch something on a holoscreen. She darted round them without breaking stride, shoulder-barging one into the rest. Whatever was in the case had slowed Rin marginally—Akane had noticed it in the bar, watching her tuck it under one arm and noting the way she moved with it—protective and unwilling to put it down. It seemed to matter more than any of her regular pickups, which meant this wasn't a routine resupply.

It never is with her.

She pushed through the surface access doors thirty seconds behind Rin and stepped out onto the boardwalk.



Tycho City at night, from the outside, was the kind of view that made you briefly forget whatever you were supposed to be doing. The boardwalk ran along the exterior face of a megatower forty stories above surface level, extending out above the crater. The whole city was encased inside a giant oxygen dome—scratched and fogged at the edges from decades of microimpact and maintenance neglect, but clear enough to produce the unsettling sensation of standing out in the empty void of space itself.

At its edge, the rim of Tycho crater surrounded the city. Its towers of light, with elevated transit rails threading between them, were so densely packed they looked like a circuit board. Above it all, the Earth hung in the black sky, vast and blue-white, and entirely indifferent to the specific small drama being conducted forty stories above Luna's surface.

Akane noticed Rin at the end of the boardwalk, no longer moving. Her elbows rested on the railing as she looked up at the planet like she had nowhere else to be.

Akane stopped several meters back and checked for exits—no stairs, one door behind her, and one long drop—before bringing her eyes back to Rin who had turned at the sound of footsteps and was wearing the expression of someone who had been caught, but had already decided that 'caught' was a loose interpretation of events.

"You been here before, sugar?" Rin asked, cheerful as anything. "Come look at this. Earth from up here is just somethin' else."



RECORD:
AKANE SORAGI

"What's in the case, Rin?"

"Medical equipment. If you wanna check it, go right ahead." Rin still hadn't moved from the railing. "I got nothin' to hide on that particular score."

"I guess it doesn't really matter in the end what's in there, does it." Akane took a step forward, reading Rin's weight, her feet, the particular set of her shoulders. Looking for the thing that came before the movement. "That's not why I'm here."

"No," Rin agreed. "What matters is the bounty." She brushed her hair back over her shoulder flippantly. "You know, most girls just ask me to dinner."

"If you keep running Apollo supply routes, eventually they'll stop sending bounty hunters and start sending something that doesn't have to bring you back in one piece."

Something shifted in Rin's expression—small, but there. "Well now. That's almost sweet." She tilted her head. "You worried about me, Akane?"

"I'm just trying to collect a bounty. There's a difference."

"Sure there is." The smile settled into something steadier, and Akane could feel Rin studying her with the calm, unhurried attention that she had learned over the years to find more unsettling than being shot at. "Can I ask you somethin'?"

"I can't stop you."

"How long you been runnin' me down? Specifically me, not your other contracts."

"Twenty-six months."

"And in twenty-six months—" Rin let that hang for a moment—"how many times you actually had me?" The smile reached her eyes and stayed there. "I ain't bein' cruel about it. I'm jus' curious. Because the way I figure it, you're real good at your job. And I mean that. But every single time, somethin' gets in the way. Makes me wonder if maybe we want the same thing, after all."

"I want you to stop stealing," Akane said.

"And I want Cho to live to see another birthday. Funny old world."

Rin's eyes flicked upward for a fraction of a second—a brief, controlled movement to the dark sky above them—and Akane tracked it, beginning to understand it a half-second too late. She was still processing the name Cho, trying to remember if she'd heard the name before or what relevance it might have. By the time she looked up there was already a shape moving, blocking out the stars with its silhouette, angular and running without lights, descending with a precise, calculated trajectory, planned by a pilot who had done this exact thing before.

Rin was already on the railing.

“Don't—” Akane surged forward.

Then Rin stepped off. 🤖



The fall was not like falling on Earth, which was the only reason she had ever been willing to try it.

Luna's gravity was lower than EC-13's. It was gentle and patient, giving her the long, strange floating seconds that Enceladus' artificial gravity could never offer—the crater walls rising in front of her as she dropped, forty stories of rock on one side, and neon and crowded steel on the other. She held the case tight against her chest with both arms wrapped around it, her long, wavy brown hair whipping against her face as she fell.

If it goes wrong, at least I'll leave a pretty mark on the floor.

Her ship came down to meet her.

No drama, no sweep—just a clean descending line, the ramp already extending from the rear as it came level. The thrusters pushed warm exhaust downward, hitting her face a half-second before she landed on the ramp. She landed hard enough to knock the breath clean out of her chest, then rolled before her hand caught the safety grip inside with the automatic certainty of muscle memory.

She lay on the ramp for a moment with her eyes on the dark sky above her, breathing.

“Good girl,” she told the ship.

The ramp began to rise. Through the narrowing gap she looked back up toward the boardwalk and found Akane at the railing with both hands gripping the bar. The expression on her face was hard to read at this distance, though not so hard that Rin couldn't make a fair attempt at it—the expression of someone who had been running the same calculation for just over two years and had just encountered a variable that didn't fit. Standing very still, with the particular stillness of a person deciding what to do with that.

Twenty-six months and you still don't know what to do with me. That's almost endearing, darlin'.

Rin raised her hand. Not quite a wave—more of an acknowledgment, one professional to another, as the ramp closed. 🤖





RECORD:
AKANE SORAGI

Akane stood at the railing watching the ship climb, its running lights disappearing through an access port in the dome, into the blackness until it became one more point of light among thousands and she couldn't say which one it was.

The Earth rotated slowly in the sky above Tycho. The cold came up through the soles of her boots and the recycled air tasted of sealant, distant food, and the particular metallic dryness of a filtration system that had been filtering the same atmosphere for decades. She stood in all of it and didn't move.

Shit.

Her bracelet pulsed. "Akane?" Takashi's voice said carefully.

"She got away."

"I know—I had her on satellite. You okay?"

Akane looked at the city. At the specific density of Tycho's light. "This gig was different. More personal than her other jobs."

"Maybe she was getting something for someone she knows," Takashi said.

"More than likely."

She stood there a moment longer, then pushed herself away from the railing and turned her back on the view. "Pull everything we have on the MMC colonies. Supply schedules, contract terms, incident reports—all of it."

"That's a significant pull. What are you looking for?"

She walked back toward the access doors; one hand in her jacket pocket, the other brushing loose red strands out of her face.

"I don't know yet. Pull it anyway."

The door closed behind her. Above the empty boardwalk the Earth kept turning, indifferent and very far from home. ☠

PERSONAL RECORDS

FIELD NOTE:

APPENDED TO BOUNTY FILE RF-0426 (FUGITIVE: RIN). AUTHOR: A. SORAGI. HANDWRITTEN. UNDATED.

RIN SAID A NAME TONIGHT. CHO. SAID IT THE WAY YOU SAY THE NAME OF SOMEONE YOU'D EXPECT THE OTHER PERSON TO ALREADY KNOW—NOT A TARGET, NOT A CONTACT. SOMEONE SHE CARES ABOUT MAYBE. WHOEVER HE IS, THAT CASE WAS GOING TO HIM.

NOT SURE WHY I'M WRITING THIS DOWN. IT'S NOT RELEVANT TO THE BOUNTY.

SHE JUMPED OFF A FORTY-STORY BUILDING RATHER THAN PUT IT DOWN.

I DON'T KNOW WHAT TO DO WITH THAT. █