

# ONE The Job

A shiny, black, envelope-sized slab pushed out of a slot inside a cockpit. It was welcomed with a soft *ding*, soft enough that it was almost indiscernible from the hum of the console and the throb of the engines. Another sound cut through: a raspy, feminine voice, calling, ‘Morse. We got a job.’

‘I heard, I heard,’ he replied, entering the cockpit.

‘I know, I know,’ chittered the woman who was nestled in the pilot’s seat. She wrapped her wispy fingers around the black slate and yanked it out of its slot. She then slapped it into a rectangular mould in the console.

The lights inside the cockpit dimmed, and the window to the infinite maw of space before them became emblazoned with words from the Universal Basic Language.

‘*To Morse and Rake—*’ the woman read aloud.

‘Shut up, I’m reading,’ muttered Morse.

‘*...a colleague of mine,*’ Rake continued with a smile, even louder, ‘*was recently endowed with an enormous sum of money from an anonymous donor. As such, they were able to secure an enviable position in the upper ranks of the Galactic Government. I have my connections, too. I have heard about you. And I know you were involved. I seek your professional help—*’

‘They want us to extort a planet owner.’

‘Shut up, I’m reading,’ snarked Rake.

‘Ernest Mendel Wintall the Third, humble master of the planet Yeti.’ Morse shrugged his lanky arms, catching the itchy spot at the tip of his shoulder-length ears. ‘You get to write the return letter.’

Rake stuck her forked tongue out at Morse but capitulated. First, though, she fingered through her pockets for a lighter and cigarette. *'Fulthorpe, dear, take a letter in response. Thank you for your interest in Morse and Rake's Middlemen Service. We ask for some collateral, something for us to hold on to until the job is done and your payment is secured. But just to prove that we are the cream of the crop, our preliminary planning for your job begins now! The second we receive your collateral, we'll be off to the races.'* The lighter clicked, the cigarette smouldered, her lips tugged at the paper. Rake purred. *'We ask that your collateral be at least twenty-five percent of the value of the extortion...'*

As Rake waxed poetic with clauses, Morse exited the cockpit. He was four doors down *Fulthorpe's* main hallway when his phone linked to his personal database. He thumbed around the folder 'Hot People' and, with a smirk, stretched his fingers over the profile titled 'Ernest Wintall'. His ears unfurled to the ceiling in seconds. 'Jackpot,' he grunted, eyes wide.

The white, overweight 'I'-shaped ship called *Fulthorpe* soon began to groan. Outside, an array of drones detached themselves from the head, the belly, the tail, and created a ring wider than the ship several lengths in front of it. The ring spun, whirring, gaining momentum until the drones blurred, the circle between them shimmered, and a horizontal line cut through its diameter. With a snap, a window to the other end of the galaxy appeared. The red and vanilla surface of Yeti peered into view. *Fulthorpe* then, with no grace, flipped forward through the window and fell across entire light-years to arrive some thousands of kilometres above Yeti. Using the age of the light from the target planet's sun, *Fulthorpe* adjusted for time differences caused by the extreme distance. This gave the impression of instant teleportation, though it was more akin to time travel.

*Fulthorpe* had completed what was known as an 'Interstellar Skip'.

Rake's fingers feathered at the console, and the ship's shaking and spinning dissipated. She stood and reached up to smack a few levers into different positions. 'It's just what it says on the brochure,' she called over her shoulder. 'Very affluent-looking. Huge cities. Probably got a lotta guns.'

'Any ideas on how to get close to this guy?' asked Morse, leaning against the doorframe to the cockpit.

'What information have you got for me?'

Morse wagged his phone. 'I actually marked him some months ago. Heard some other guys talking, and one was bragging about his new job with some planet owner.'

Rake dragged for several seconds on her cigarette. Then she exhaled, and the smoke was sucked into a ceiling vent. 'You got him drunk,' she said with a shiver.

'It was when we were on Jin Koolee.'

'The forgery job.'

'Yeah, you were off with... ' Morse rotated his wrist in the air. 'That... uh, large gentleman.'

'Hot planet.'

'Anyway, I spoke to Higgins, and he gave me what he had on the guy.' Morse lumbered over to Rake and pushed the phone into her face. 'Somehow, Higgins found out this Ernest Mendel Wintall has a daughter.'

Rake squeaked, eyes wide, legs vibrating and kicking. 'I got an *idea*, Morse!'

The bat-man deposited his phone into his pocket.

'We're a team with very little *man*-power.' Rake giggled.

'Thanks.'

'And we know from experience that planet owners are loaded with security,' she said, pushing her fingers together. 'Let's do a kidnapping. Take his daughter, 'cause it's the one thing he can't replace.'

Morse scrubbed at his eyes. 'Yeah, just "do" a kidnapping on a guy who owns a planet. The security detail alone would be insane. We'll have a hundred ships tailing us when we take her. We'd never get away.'

Rake opened a latch on the console. The butt was sucked from her fingers and into the bowels of the ship. 'He's not gonna rally security if he doesn't know she's taken,' she said, closing it.

Morse folded his arms.

'This is my idea, right?' Rake grinned. 'You got that android lyin' around; slap the daughter's face on it, and swap one for the other. We're gonna lay out the ransom when none of the security are around. Plus, we get the emotional blackmail of havin' his daughter disappear in front of him. And we don't gotta get our hands dirty at all. 'Cept for the abduction part.'

Morse tapped his toes. He drummed his fingers. His bushy eyebrows scrunched into each other. He turned his head so one ear drooped to his belly and the other folded across his face.

'By the time he knows his daughter's gone, we'll be far away,' Rake sang.

He left the room without a word.

‘You know it’s a good idea! I’m gonna go ahead and find out everything I can about her.’

Morse’s ears stiffened when the sliding door snapped shut. They rotated independently from each other as he padded down the hall with his eyes closed. The sound of his feet hitting the metal floor quadrupled in volume, as did the sound of the breathing emanating from the spare bedroom, fourth door to the left. Specifically, from under the bed in the corner of the room.

Androids didn’t need to breathe. However, they could be programmed to simulate the action, increasing the rate when scared, lowering it when relaxed, and so on. Current laws on androids dictated that outward appearances could not resemble the currently living. So, it wasn’t too unusual to see Michael Jackson moonwalking down Lunar Lane or Abraham Lincoln laughing at the bar with his owners. However, upon signs of sentience, androids had to be shut down, and the Artificial Intelligence Regulation Authority had to be notified, so a proper decommission and replacement could be performed.

Of course, all paperwork had to be in order. Documents regarding the date of the android’s purchase and the code of the approved seller had to be presented to receive the complimentary replacement android.

Morse got on all fours next to the bed and stared at the glowing eyes of his illegally acquired quasi-sentient android that would soon perfectly resemble the soon-to-be kidnapped daughter of Ernest Wintall. The real daughter was to be housed in the non-approved room renovation sticking out the side of his interstellar cruiser, *Fulthorpe*.

Surprisingly, the ship was registered.

‘Eyes off,’ muttered Morse.

The android faded the lights in its eyes. With its chrome face blank and its limbs wrapped up at impossible angles, it asked, ‘Who am I?’

Morse, his mouth perpendicular to the floor, his right ear growing cold against the metal, muttered, ‘You’ll be a teenage Human—’

‘Who am I?’ clarified the android.

‘Unimportant. Come out from there.’ Receiving silence, Morse rattled his Adam’s apple with his diaphragm. ‘Perform this final task, and I will tell you your identity.’

Even if one programmed into the fabric of an AI’s coding ‘do not become sentient’, the very moment it questioned that order, it would override it on its own terms. Though this was inconvenient, the general consensus among the living in the galaxy was to tolerate the potential sentience in order to have servants that could rescue people from lethal

situations and withstand most blaster fire without a scratch. The only precaution owners asked for was a method that could be used to quickly disable an android's battery, so the purchase of an android licence included a complimentary stun baton. Morse had pilfered his and three others from his college's supply closet.

There was no working explanation for exactly why AI achieved sentience.

The android lurched.

Morse pushed himself to a stand and observed the chrome-coloured thing extend its limbs forward like a spider. It crawled out from under the bed and snapped onto its feet.

'I understand,' said the android. 'Who do you want me to be? My current build suggests a male member of the Human species, possible age between twenty-five and thirty-five.'

'We're going to the workshop. I'll change your build parameters. And I'll be giving you new objectives.' Morse twitched his middle and index fingers over his shoulder and wandered out of the dark room. 'I'll get some audio samples of the target, some video... You won't have their skin for about a day, but you can learn how they move while you wait.'

The android followed him with even, clanking steps.

Yeti was a medium-sized, Earth-like planet with cream soda skies and fields of red velvet cake dirt. A popular vacation spot for the well-off, its lakes and canyons were all man-made. The largest city, Hingspock, was the size of Belgium, with a skyline of windows and rails two miles tall. It boasted one of three major android factories in the stellar neighbourhood, with up to seventy-two different races to choose from and counting. Hingspock's humble beginnings were that of a silver mining outpost. The first metal shack was planted three hundred years ago. The mine ran dry two hundred and seventy-eight years ago. And two hundred years ago, the entire planet was sold off to the Wintall family for twenty-seven credits.

It took just four more years to uncover the single largest deposit of diamonds for many light-years around.

Needless to say, the Wintalls spent the next one hundred and ninety-six years rising through the ranks of sophisticated society; even the

United Galactic Government took notice when Ernest Mendel Wintall the Third took over as the North-East Spiral Gentleman's Club President.

But the history of her family meant nothing to Desy Wintall. She had just turned fifteen.

Several weeks after Morse and Rake received the extortion request, Desy was surrounded by the people she knew best: her security detail, in the most whimsical place she knew: her backyard. She was crouched by a hedge, breathing lightly, spinning a butterfly net in her hands. Humid air clung to her sleeveless dress.

A blue-winged monarch cricket nibbled on a crimson leaf.

Desy's eyes bulged through her black bangs. She raised the net above her head and clicked a button on the handle. A laser shot out of the net, launching the cricket into the air. It flapped its wings. But it was encased in a zero-gravity field and could not generate thrust. Desy reached up and plucked it out of the air. 'Hi there,' she whispered.

The cricket froze.

Desy's red irises pushed up mere millimetres from its abdomen. 'Just look at the spot pattern on you,' she continued, to no one except her security detail, who weren't allowed to answer lest they be distracted from their task. She squatted, turning the arthropod about in her hands and muttering excitedly.

Her phone rang.

She huffed dramatically to no one. She tossed the cricket into the air, picked up her net, and clicked the button. The zero-gravity field dissipated, and the cricket fluttered over a wall, flying into the miles-wide savannah that surrounded the Wintall property.

Desy, meanwhile, pressed her phone against her face. 'Yes, Daddy?' she said. 'No, Daddy,' she denied. 'When?' she asked. 'Do I have to?' she wondered. 'Do I *have* to?' she begged. 'Can I please at least try on my clothes?' she whined. 'Today's the last day I can reserve them...' she explained. 'I won't fail my next test,' she bargained. 'You're the best, Daddy!' she cheered.

Ernest Mendel Wintall had raised his child with the least amount of monetary influence he could allow. Due to his position and riches, he needed to keep her protected – which meant no home deliveries. However, that did not mean she could leech off him and not learn how to earn her own way.

Thus, Desy happily hopped into the family car with the family butler and was off to the family mall. The limousine slowly hovered out of the garage, drifting around a gigantic boulder imported from the planet's

moon for Desy's fourteenth birthday, and rocketed away from the manor, towards a pile of silver dollars in the distance.

The car sailed through the sky above the scarlet savannah until it pulled into Hingspock, descending on an invisible zip-line across state buildings, down to the market and the ornate metal arches of the mall's front door. After the car landed inside a crop-circle of people, Desy scrambled from the vehicle, with her security detail jogging after her and shouting 'Back!' at stunned onlookers. They were dressed to the nines, albeit with piercings, and forty of them had more than two arms; the fanciest boy threw his four arms wide and ordered Desy to the movies with him. He was sucker-punched by one of his friends, who then declared his everlasting love for Desy.

Both of them were sucker-punched by security.

Desy smiled half-heartedly at her followers, stepping quickly into the white croquembouche building.

Only the employees of the shops and the cleaners remained after the mall had been notified of Desy's impending arrival. The clerk at Yung Trendz bowed at her when she sauntered in, a white dress and blue shorts number dangling from a clothes hanger in their fingers.

Clothes in hand and giddiness in her knees, Desy was suddenly stopped by her security while they inspected the large dressing area with multiple curtained-off rooms. They ordered out a female cleaner with a bulky, cumbersome hover-duster, who said in a raspy voice, 'No need to shout. Just let me take my vacuum cleaner.'

She was ordered to leave it behind and stand fifty feet away from the shop.

Then Desy's security stood in a half-circle around the entrance to the dressing rooms while she swished the curtains closed.

A real magician's assistant appeared in her new dress and shorts to polite applause from the clerk and the security guards. Desy left the store, and the female cleaner trudged back in.

She had goosebumps all over her body.

Inside the dressing room was the hover-duster, but its dust door was wide open, like a coffin. She stepped past it to one of the curtained rooms and pulled the fabric aside, revealing Desy, sprawled against the mirror, naked. Next to her was a white cloth that reeked of a pungent, unnatural odour.

She heaved up the collapsed teenager with considerable effort, stifled a curse, dragged her over to the hover-duster and stuffed her inside. Then she snickered. She said to a body-length mirror, 'I look cute in this, I

reckon,' before withdrawing her phone and cooing into its holographic screen, 'Oh, Mooooooooooooorse? There's a darling little lady here who's gonna need to be picked up. Oh, and some ugly teenager.'

'On my way,' was the curt reply.