

The Judge

Book One of the Coranite Chronicles

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This book is dedicated first and foremost to the One for whom this book was written. Then to my dad and mom for their great support over the years with their patience and love. To my sister, who has helped out along the way. And lastly, to all the LCBC Youth, for their encouragement.

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CHAPTER 1

Delivery

His back against the wall, Darek sat down near the thriving marketplace and placed his satchel by his side. The wait was getting on his nerves. He watched as the crowd moved about. Biting his lip, he glanced at the faces of the people, searching for a certain someone.

Then he found him. An old man came walking down the busy street. Their eyes met.

The old man was grim and solemn, not a hint of anything pleasant in his expression. He stood near Darek and said, “You’re the delivery boy?”

“That’s right,” said Darek, looking up at him. “And you’re late.”

The man nodded but said nothing in reply.

“What’s the pay for the job?” Darek said. “That’s all I need to know.”

“Five thousand credits.”

Darek jumped to his feet and exclaimed, “Five thousand?” His loud, disappointed voice startled the people around them. “Are you kidding me? I thought this was an off-world job! Some of the local jobs are worth just as much!”

“It *is* an off-world job,” said the old man, his voice cracking. “But don’t you worry. That’s just the advance. I’m not the client. I’m what you’d call a middleman. When you deliver the package to the real client, you’ll receive ten times the amount.” The man held up a thick envelope and waved it in front of Darek.

Darek hesitated, trying to hide his desperation with a poker face. He needed the money, but such a low advance was suspicious. Too suspicious.

“Take it or leave it,” the man said, tapping his foot impatiently, “I already have others lined up for this job.”

Gritting his teeth, Darek snatched the package from the old man. “I-I’ll do it.”

“A wise choice.” The old man revealed a fleeting smile and handed Darek a piece of paper. “Here are the instructions for the delivery. I will deposit the credits in your account by the end of the day.” Then the old man walked away without so much as a goodbye.

As he watched the old man disappear into the crowd, Darek heaved a heavy, heartfelt sigh. He wondered how wise of a choice it really was. Darek had worked in the delivery service for years and knew the risks that came with it. No one cared about delivery boys. Off-world jobs were often dangerous—sometimes even suicidal. Receiving high pay in any other job would be considered a blessing. But for a delivery boy...it usually meant death. If you survive, you bask in glory and riches. If you don't...they'll always find someone else.

Darek stuffed the package in his satchel and went back to the Albiore City Delivery Agency, which was only a block away from the market. He stopped to look at his reflection in the front window. He looked like a wreck. He straightened his ragged black jacket, dusted off his ripped jeans, fixed the shoulder strap of his bag and roughly combed his shaggy brown hair with his fingers. When everything looked as good as it could, he smiled at his own reflection. Then he turned bright red as he looked through the window and saw people snickering at him.

He entered the agency through the sliding glass doors.

“Darek,” said the female receptionist at the front desk, “what are you doing here? I thought you went home.”

Walking past her, Darek said, “Just went to speak with a client.”

“Oh, Darek.” The receptionist frowned. “So you took *that* job? Leave that job up to the veterans. If you wait a few more days, I'm sure we could get you something more suitable.”

“Thanks for the concern.” Darek stepped into a closing elevator. “But I don't think I can wait a few more days.”

Darek got out on the fourth floor. He walked down the hall and headed straight for room 406. The door was already open. Darek peered inside.

A man sat at his desk, hammering away at the keys of his computer. The man was thin and pale, his blond hair combed down with a greasy shine. He kept the blinds shut, leaving just an ounce of sunlight through the cracks. As he typed, he kept one hand on the keyboard at all times. Every so often his other hand would venture off, seizing a piece of pie for his pointy lips. The trash bin by his side was overflowing with crumpled pastry boxes.

Even though Darek was at the door, the man ignored him, continuing to work. In an attempt to get his attention, Darek rapped on the door. The man didn't even blink; he intensified his typing until it sounded like a sudden downpour. When he finished the last word on the page, he placed the final period with a slam of the finger and then looked up.

"Darek Wayker," the man said, as he adjusted his glasses. "Did you take the job?"

"That's a stupid question," said Darek. "Of course. Why else would I be here?"

"Heh, all right. Then I'll take it off the listings," said the thin man, chuckling. After he stared at the computer screen for a moment, he burst out laughing. "Man, you took it! You really took it!" He laughed so hard that tears jetted from his eyes. "I can't believe it! You actually took it! The day has finally come!"

Feeling somewhat uncomfortable, Darek shot him a look of disapproval. "If you don't need me for anything else, I'll be going."

"Wait, wait." The man calmed down, wiping away the tears. "Darek, we've worked together for a while. Do you mind if I'll be honest for just a second?"

Darek crossed his arms. "I think I'm going to regret this, but I'm listening."

"I hate your guts, Darek. I really do," the man said. "You've caused me so much trouble. You have no idea how long I've waited for this day. You've finally chosen a really bad job, Darek. *Really* bad. Quite a few boys haven't returned from this one."

"I bet you're happy," Darek said, his eyes narrowing.

The man nodded with a wry grin. "I am. But let me just give you a word of advice—full of truth and clarity. Don't do it. The job is *not* worth it. As much as I hate you, I'd be downright heartless not to warn you. Fail this one, Darek. Fail it and never return."

Darek walked to the Guridoh, the only tavern by the agency. Since it was so close to the delivery agency, many delivery boys would frequent it for meals and socializing. He sat at a table with a few of his friends, including his best friend, Jenson, whom he had worked with several times on occasion.

Jenson was chubby, had curly brown hair, and always wore a pair of black goggles atop his head. Though only seventeen, just two years older than Darek, he was highly respected by all the delivery boys. He held the record for the most jobs completed with a perfect

success rate. He was also a genius. Jenson would take international placement tests for fun and, though he'd get perfect scores, he'd never submit them for review. He was a strange person for sure. Darek knew that once Jenson was out of this dump, he'd be able to land a high-ranking government job easily. But he never seemed like that kind of a guy.

Jenson inched his chair up to Darek's, poured him a glass of sweet punch and asked, "So, how'd it go?"

Darek banged his head against the table in despair, surprising everybody. Darek lifted his head slightly to speak, his forehead now swelling bright red. "Well, I did it. I took the job—the only job that was available." His head fell back down. He muttered, "It's all because I failed the last few jobs. Talk about bad luck. And if I fail this one..." Darek sighed.

Even if he didn't finish the sentence, Jenson knew what Darek had on his mind. All delivery boys had reputation points. Success helped them garner more points, and if they had more reputation points, they would get higher priority when it came to picking jobs. But if they failed jobs, they would lose points. If they had no more points left...it'd be the end. Darek would be thrown out—all ties severed—and he'd have nowhere to turn to.

"Now come on, it can't be *that* bad," said Jenson, trying to cheer him up.

"Yes, it is *that* bad. This job probably won't be easy. A guaranteed one-way ticket to..."

Darek couldn't draw up the breath to finish what he was saying. His head facedown against the table, he just stared at the wood surface and sighed again. Jenson watched Darek mope for a long time. It hurt to see his friend so hopeless and sad. The pain was unbearable. He needed to help him, somehow, someday. There was only one idea he had in mind, one that was a big risk. But if it could save Darek from his troubles, it would be a risk well worth it.

"Say, I've got an idea!" said Jenson. "How about we trade jobs? I've got a local delivery to make and it pays well. As long as I'm successful, they'll never find out we swapped. I'll let you log it under your name. That way you get both rep and credits."

Darek said uneasily, "I don't know. If you mess up, we'll both be kicked out."

Jenson grinned. "You think I'm going to mess this up? Who do you think you're talking to? I'm Jenson the Great! I've never screwed up *any* job in my entire life!"

“Your entire life, huh?” Darek thought about it. It wasn’t a hard decision. Jenson *was* the best in the business. He straightened up, handed Jenson the package and gave him a great big smile. “Well then—Jenson the Great—I’m forever in your debt. If there’s anyone in the universe who can handle this job, it’s most definitely you.”

Jenson examined the small envelope. It felt pretty light. “What do you think is inside?”

“Don’t know, don’t care.”

Darek took a sip of the refreshing punch. It was called Heaven’s Punch, a specialty of the Guridoh; though, with its thickness, you’d think it was a smoothie. It was so rich, so sweet and creamy that a single cup would make you spoil your appetite—which was perfect for those who couldn’t spare the credits for a meal.

Jenson read the directions and found it interesting. “Deliver to a man named Liam on planet XR36-B.” He looked at Darek. “What kind of crazy job did you pick up? No one ever uses a planet ID.”

Darek shrugged, scratching his chin. “Maybe the client thought it’d make things easier.”

“Planet names are always enough.” Curious to find out the name of the planet, Jenson flipped open his pocket computer and accessed the planetary database. He thumbed through it and said, “What the—a nameless planet...outside Federation space! No wonder everyone’s been avoiding this one. Hitching transports won’t even get you within a hundred parsecs.”

“Look, it was literally the only job they had open,” said Darek. “I would’ve waited for another job, but the barkeep is serious about kicking me out if I don’t pay the rent on my shack. But that doesn’t matter anymore because *you* have a way to get there, right?”

Jenson tried to keep a straight face but soon smiled. “As a matter of fact, I do. I’ll show you something cool later. It’s something *amazing*...that’s all I’ll say...” Jenson paused. “Speaking of which, I just remembered something. That old man—I forget his name—stopped by. He said something about an early shipment.”

“*What?*” Darek’s face lit up, bright as a summer’s day. It was as though all of his worries vanished for an instant. Even if Jenson didn’t mention the name, Darek knew whom he was talking about. “Rodrey stopped by? And the shipment came in early?”

Without waiting for a reply, Darek bolted for the door. Then he ran through the bustling city streets, tripping several times along the way as he bumped into pedestrians. Though he knew the way to

Rodrey's shop by heart, he still glanced across the street signs, afraid his bubbling excitement would cause him to miss his destination.

His dash soon came to a screeching halt as he reached a suspiciously empty part of the road. Everyone seemed to be avoiding that one area for some reason. He thought he heard a murmur coming from the alleyway and decided to take a little peek. Some people were in the alley. It was the city police. They were wandering about, interrogating some men. Darek's attention was drawn to the posters they had plastered all over the wall. It was an unsightly picture of Darek in the middle of a meal, belching, with food bits strewn around his lips.

Darek wondered why they were looking for him. He also wondered how they managed to take that photo. He observed them for a while, trying to catch even the tiniest bit of the information from the movement of their lips. The honking and rumbling of the cars made it impossible to hear anything. Darek tiptoed closer, his hand cupped around his ear.

While focusing on their conversation, he felt a hand rest upon his shoulder. A shiver ran down his spine. The sudden fright made him want to scream. Another hand came from behind and covered his mouth. Next thing he knew, he was dragged into a building. Darek wrestled to break free, but then he stopped struggling when he realized where he was. It was Rodrey's shop. He turned and saw Rodrey—the bald, portly shopkeeper.

“What'd you do this time?” Rodrey crossed his arms, looking rather stern.

Darek smirked. “No idea.”

Rodrey shut the blinds to block out prying eyes. “Looks pretty serious. Just this morning, I've seen several new patrols.” He opened a slight crack in the blinds and peered out. “You'd better lay low for a while. Who knows what they're up to?” Rodrey looked back to find Darek already taking a seat by the counter. “But I guess you could care less about that, huh?”

Darek fidgeted, watching as Rodrey crossed the room. He couldn't wait to see what Rodrey had in store for him today. This was a tradition between the two of them. Every week Rodrey's shop would receive new shipments, and Darek would get a chance to see some cool stuff. His shop sold all kind of things a delivery boy could use, including the latest hi-tech gadgets and weapons.

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