

# Keep Counting

*Aren Pariyani*

Three long nights spent cruising on the outer edge of Córdoba should have filled Dario with some sense of pleasure. Popular media personality Jocian Elveric once said that “A couple days ‘n nights out ‘flourishin in the sun-sparkled ‘enviros surrounding Córdoba oughtta do any of you worn-down city folk good. Because our fair and plenty city ain’t the only sight on our beauty of a planet.” In truth, spending any time out of the city just felt worse. Too close to the rot and decay of modern urban life, but just far away enough to embolden the dream of something better.

No, the true prize was up above. “Into the stars, away from the shit,” as another, more grounded media magnate once said. Besides the worn-down spirit, the three-night bender out of town left Dario with the worst sleep he had had in months. Maybe his decision to sleep in the crusty room at his brother Marcel’s apartment wasn’t the best choice he could have made. The decrepit room was filled to the brim with stacks of boxes—their uncle’s one-time study reduced to the second greatest fire hazard in Weilen. Dario had already gone through his waking motions: clothes, a shave, the regulars. The only thing he was missing now was his datapad. Finding it meant work, and work meant spending less time in squalor.

*Allure Information Co.* was to some, the beating heart of Córdoba. To others, it was a shadow conglomerate comprising the worst of the city. Eleven years working for *Allure* and Dario still relied on his brother’s small apartment for any permanent dwelling—a hand-me-down from their late uncle where they grew up. Marcel was sitting across from him on an old office chair. The years hadn’t been kind to his brother. Thirty-seven, and the wrinkles had already consumed his countenance. Yet, Marcel would proudly regard himself as the happiest man in Córdoba.

The fact that his brother was present meant only one thing to Dario and, not long after he began his search, he was proven correct.

As he slowly spun in the rickety chair, Marcel began, “You know what your problem is, Dario? You’re always runnin’ full speed at life! You move past everything so fast you never see enough of it!” Dario ignored his brother’s lecture, instead wandering about the room searching for the datapad.

“Remember that girl you met a couple years ago? What was her name, Maria? Know she’s a doctor now? Yeah, ‘workin out of one of those colony ships. Permanent assignment, too. Real shame you ended things with her.”

Dario, hoping to end his tirade, replied, “What are you playing at, Marcel? You damn well know she left me.”

“Really? ‘Cause from what I remember it was your sorry ass who scared her off trying to get her to board that junker going off-world. Thing probably ended up in the scrap heap rather than anywhere else.”

“Why are we even talking about this? Besides, where’d you hear about this? How do you know?”

“Grapevine’s awfully long around here, Dario—especially when it’s coming off a colony ship.” Marcel swirled a finger up, “A Weilen kid blasts off this shit heap? Talk of the whole ‘fuckin town.”

As insular as Marcel’s life was, he was right, at least partially. Most of Córdoba was too preoccupied with not catching a stray bullet or being the unfortunate bystander of gang disputes. But those living in Weilen, Córdoba’s poorest district, had the wildest aspirations of all. To go from the lowest of lows to a bright future in the stars was almost like a rite of passage.

Marcel kicked one of the boxes in front of him, sending the stacks of yellowed paper fluttering onto the floor.

“Man, I just know my lot. Far as I’m concerned, sky’s an illusion. When you learn to think like that, the whole damn thing becomes clear. Like shit, man, at least put your mind to one thing. Want out of here? Do something about it, but just stop jumping from one thing to the next.” Dario gestured to Marcel’s right arm, “Mind rollin’ up your sleeve? Then try telling me all that again.”

Marcel leaned forward in the chair, the faint squeal of the old thing filled the dead air, “You know that ain’t the same, Dario. All that shit, know what I did? I left it behind.”

“Mhm. Ever think of what your ‘lot’ is? You know damn well you’re sitting on the bodies they buried when it all went down. That’s why you sit your ass in here all day,” Dario pointed out the window, “Streets still remember what that ink stood for.”

Marcel stood up from the old chair, hand on his back, and inched toward Dario, “And I remember what it cost us. So I left it all.”

“And you left everything else too,” Dario grabbed the datapad, slipped on his jacket, and started for the door. “Gotta go now. Get up off that chair a few more times, yeah? Wander around a bit, it might get your brain working some, get some original ideas floating around in there.”

He was to meet his occasional partner, Kosta, in an alleyway near

the old Cranham Electric Plant. Possibly the only spot in the city that you could guarantee would be free of prying eyes. The plant had been shut down years ago, due to the toxic chemicals leaking from the sublevels. The city never took any proper actions to end the leak; it was easier to ignore it and let it seep into the rest of the city, so as to make it just another part of life in Córdoba. Most other alleyways in the city had long since become their own self-sustained, self-contained shanty towns.

At first, decades ago, the corporations fought back when the poorest residents of Córdoba took advantage of the free real estate offered by the wider roads cutting in between the high rises. But, where high rises took billions in investments and backroom deals, a shanty only needed scrap, which the city had plenty to provide. In those days, the wealthy ignored the shanties. Some even believed they found it amusing to look at the cityscape and admire the contrast.

The fastest way to the meet was through the public railway line. The windows of the old railcars were completely covered with graffiti and other scrawlings long since rendered illegible. No one ever cared to clean them. Most Córdobaans would rather look at anything but the burning skyline of their city. Be it on the morning commute or sundown return, staring at the drab metal shell or even the sullen faces that reminded them of themselves was better than the view outside. There had been a time when Dario looked at the skyline as if it were inviting him into a world where all he had to do was grab hold, but now, he was glad for the obstruction. It was easy to discount the culprits of the art display as mere vandals but, eventually, the glass and steel facade of Córdoba's oldest still operating rail line just wasn't a big enough target.

Whatever the sentiments expressed on the scratch-and-spray canvases were, they were always true, always things these people believed in. They didn't pile on after decades of living in the city like this, all of it's there from the moment you're born or unlucky enough to find yourself landing at any of the city's thirty-seven orbital landing pads. To Dario, the truth had become that nowhere else was any better for the majority.

Dario scanned his index finger over the vandalized glass, feeling the microscopic indentations in the sections scratched through with crude implements. Most of the scrawlings were typical of the graffiti seen around town: inflammatory remarks toward corporations, poorly drawn gang insignias, colorful drawings by children, and even some small, scratched-over words defending corporations.

But most common of all was the foremost sentiment in Córdoba:  
*Fuck you.*

Dario considered adding his own two-letter revolt. But what would

it be about? Be it scorn for an ex-lover, the corporation that threw you out onto the streets, the streets themselves, or any other target, every day spent in Córdoba brought a new moment to spark even the smallest rebellions and, sometimes, the basic sentiments tell all. Somewhere out in the infinite reaches of the cosmos, on a pale dot, sat Córdoba's sibling. A century and a half ago, somebody gave the name a second chance; who knew if the reincarnation would last anywhere as long as its first model did?

Kosta was waiting at their arranged spot; as expected, not another soul was in sight. Kosta was dressed in his signature style, complete with ankle holsters and an assortment of pouches, traditional holsters, and other accessories strapped outside and under his heavy green jacket. His manner of dress often confused Dario.

The appeal of *Allure* was that there were no strict rules or standards to adhere to, yet Kosta was dressed and prepared for an occasion that rarely came. The high-flying mercenaries offering their services at exclusive dives around town had long since left behind small-fry work for stable, often off-world contracts, many of which necessitated preparation for violence. Factory workers at Sangura or Ollerich plants were too busy grinding out the gears of heavy machinery and their own bodies to worry about how their uniforms looked. But Kosta? His look had more in common with street gangs and other rackets based out of Weilen and other crime-ridden districts. Not exactly the look you want when jobs put you near rival factions. One wrong turn, one wrong look, and you are nothing but an extra digit on the daily crime statistics. Dario preferred to dress more conspicuously. A dark, faded synthetic-leather jacket with plenty of room and breathability was the cornerstone of his ensemble—courtesy of an old, tattered mercenary handbook he found in his youth amongst his uncle's hoard, and regarding style, it served him well. But Kosta had fourteen years on the job to Dario's eleven, perhaps blending in with the most openly vicious of Córdoba's underbelly had its benefits.

"Took you long enough. Got your 'biz here," Kosta sent the contract to Dario's datapad. Working as a pair meant one had to be the designated contract holder. Either party could amend the partnership agreement at any time, but Dario liked working with Kosta. Plus, a partner meant the occasional access to more lucrative two-person jobs.

The sing-song beep emanated from the pad, and the holo display slowly scrolled the text:

**MARKED AND EXECUTE.**

"What's wrong, D-man? Told you this day would come!" Kosta pushed a hulking metal case out from under him toward Dario and knelt to open it, "Got your gun here."

Dario grabbed the pistol from the case. It was a Tempora 55c with a built-in biometric scanner pre-configured to only recognize Dario's fingerprint. Working for *Allure* guaranteed anonymous contracts without any overhead, except for selling out just a tiny bit of your soul. Whoever relayed the gigs for *Allure* had next to no contact with those who'd complete them; the corporation served as a middleman for those without the means to seek out their own contracts. The terms ensured that the biometric data was strictly for the protection of the contractor. As far as *Allure* was concerned, the assurances were all they needed; every would-be employee willingly gave them the authority to harvest any biometric data they wanted. Who knew where and how they actually used the data?

Dario ran his thumb over the sensor, the texture completely matched his thumb's—a firearm of unusual design rarely seen in the hands of anyone not working for *Allure*.

"Who's the mark?" Dario asked.

Kosta kneeled down and sat beside the open case, "Some exec or somethin' out in Ibreus Tower."

"Really? Got me after one of them? They send mercs armed to the fuckin' teeth into those towers all the time, you sure *Allure* would send those pickings our way? "

"Well, don't think you would stick a ganger five hundred meters up and tell him 'to stay put.'"

"Fuckin-A," Dario peered to his left, and just over the crumbling remains of the Cranham plant's side buildings were the spires of the downtown metropolis' megatowers. One of those spires corresponded with Ibreus Tower, an older tower but one of the city's most exclusive, where handshakes and a round of off-world cocktails were all it took to trigger war or just the latest in a series of cost-cutting measures that would inevitably affect only the lowest of the low.

Dario knelt and grabbed the holster from the weapon's case; even the holster was custom fit to his waist. He slipped it under his jacket and let it sag to the left, just as the handbook described. "You couldn't take the job?"

"Nuh-uh. Came direct for you—someone on the inside likes you."

"Or they just really want to send me into the Viper's den."

Kosta laughed, "Shit, you ever seen a Viper? Street trash like you and me would get booted from one of those urban gardens they got up downtown."

"You know what I mean."

"Nah, man, I'm tellin' you, got a fan. They're even rolling out the VIP treatment," Kosta tossed his datapad to Dario, "Check it."

Dario flicked through the pages of the contract's file. Brief, just like every other contract. Most of the pages were filled with the terms and conditions that every beginner erroneously agreed to. On the final page was a small, grainy image of the mark. His name was *Giraud Landry*. He was an old, balding man wearing round glasses. The only other detail he could make out was the copious amounts of cybernetic implants lining his face. The function of the implants, if there were any, was impossible to discern from the low-resolution image. The only text on the page was what Kosta had meant, to the right of the image, in large, block text:

*You are expected.*

He'd never dropped a contract once in those eleven years—four hundred and thirty-seven contracts complete—and nothing had ever held him back before. Sure, most had been simple jobs like disposals and deliveries—short, uneventful, safe work. But in the absence of any direct overseer to pat him on the back with a bonus or promotion, Dario needed something to pride himself in, and punctuality was good enough for him. The apprehension couldn't be blamed on a lack of experience either; like any good Weilen kid, he learned to fight young. The possibility of violence was inevitable for anyone working for *Allure* long enough, let alone living in the city. If he'd considered it a week before, he'd have ditched the contract and let someone else have a go at it, but something about the particulars of this job poached him to the side of accepting. *Allure*, he thought, *Damn fitting name.*

"Where are you off to?" Dario asked as they left the alley.

"Delivering these burnt-out batteries to the Piranha Electric plant out on Baker Street, why?"

"Mind giving me a lift?"

"Uhh, fuck it, sure. Front passenger seat, slip those batteries into the back." Where others would have put their earnings toward a home in a less violence-stricken neighborhood, Kosta saw the value in a set of wheels.

"Sheesh, these things reek," Dario said as he moved the batteries to the back seats and placed the gun onto the narrow central armrest.

"Like I said, burnt-out," Kosta gestured toward the alley, "Better the killer you smell than the killer you can't, eh?"

As Kosta's ride cruised out of the cramped alleyway and into the open expanse of Weilen's lower streets, the smell of the malfunctioning batteries faded. In its place came the derelict sights of blackened skeletons of old automobiles, shuttered storefronts, and half-deserted streets—a boon for Kosta's urge to speed through Weilen. Once they'd left the district and the sights changed, Córdoba's more colorful buildings began to whizz by. Uniform, but with vestiges of individuality, the buildings lining a given street

rarely adhered to a consistent color scheme, but even at high speeds, the blurs of the shanty towns in between them broke through the sun-soaked oranges and yellows.

At an intersection just before the bridge leading to the upper district, Kosta grabbed the gun issued to Dario. He chuckled as he studied its form, “Ever tell you about the gig I took out in San Serena? Had me one of these pieces of junk; older model though.”

Dario snatched the Tempora from Kosta’s hand, then pointed at the intersection. “That’s the one where you waterlogged the phony imports?”

“Nah, this was a year, maybe two, before we met up. Shit, I don’t know why I never told you about this one. So, a contract comes rolling in, and it’s some blowhard amateur named J.T. Murphy. Word around the streets was that he and his kid bro, T.J., shot up some other amateurs. J.T. caught lead and landed in a coma, and some hustler wanted to sunset him.”

Dario laughed, “Yeah, why haven’t you told me this one before?” The vehicle hurled forward onto the bridge. What would have been a thirty-minute ride had transformed into a series of starts and stops.

“So,” Kosta resumed, “I think this is an easy hit, intel says the back alley clinic he’s at is low security, and most of his boys are picking fights elsewhere—Shit,” Kosta raised his upper lip and grabbed the scar running across the side of his cheek, “Scar was so fresh then that I probably coulda waltzed in and just flashed it at anyone inside, make ‘em think I was one of them.”

“What happened next?”

“I took the inconspicuous route. Snuck right around and through one of the half-broken windows. It wasn’t long until I was right there facing our comatose friend. Except, intel forgot to consider that T.J. may want to be by his brother’s side. So here I am, face to face with the wrong Murphy, so I end up putting them both down. But if T.J. catches the bullet engraved with J.T. on it? No sweat. Maybe some sadist who gets off on that poetic shit feels a little deflated. Who cares? Look, my point is, if they’re sending you into that tower with a plus one, then you better make your one shot and make it square.”

“Think this is some game for them?”

“Definitely is for someone, and I don’t want to know who.”

By the time they reached downtown, the glass of the megatowers was bathed in the glare of the fading sun. Kosta dropped Dario off several blocks from Ibreus Tower. Walking toward the imposing structure, Dario hid the Tempora in his jacket pocket and pulled the holster up underneath. In a display of deterrence, sadistic challenge, or both, the city’s upper district

inhabitants found pleasure in openly flaunting their combat capabilities. Anything from tech-enhanced bodyguards and drones to mechanized limbs to the latest in-fashion personal weaponry. But the sight of a Tempora only painted one picture: that of a baleful visit by one of the bottom dwellers come to stamp the life out of one of their own. In the lobby, the receptionist at the front desk—the only person inside—gave Dario a friendly smile.

“Do enjoy your time at Ibreus Tower,” she said.

He’d never set foot in a corporate tower, at least not past any of the dank, less-than-polished parking structures below the corporate buildings. On his way up to the forty-second level, there wasn’t another soul in sight.

The door to the mark’s room, 429, opened right as he reached it, as if someone were waiting for his arrival. The loft looked like any of the city’s upper-class dwellings would look: sterile. Except this one looked like it had a biohazard squad comb through every nook and cranny to shatter any hint of personality that remained. Only trace hints of what was once the home of an executive suite remained. The outline of what was once a lavish kitchen and two white sofas were all that was left.

He looked over to the mark, who was standing a few meters past the door.

*Giraud Landry.*

The name didn’t ring any bells, nor did the face. You didn’t have to spend much time in the corporate world to understand that the danger wasn’t from the faces and names plastered on high rises or holo-ads. A man like Giraud Landry, *unknown*, was where the actual threat lay. This wasn’t some entry-level techie who barked up the wrong supply chain; the average worker who mucked things up this badly would have gotten a quick bullet to the brain. It was merely a statistical anomaly for the pencil pushers who would have to draft up an official termination and not even a twinkle in the eye of those who ordered their death. Just another piece of human salvage to add to the trash heap lining the city’s outskirts. But this? This was different.

Uneasy with their distance, Dario moved to get a closer look at his target. The man in the grainy picture he saw just two hours ago already bore the resemblance of a corpse, and now, the man standing in front of him seemed to be somewhere beyond death. He wore a white button-down shirt with the sleeves pulled up, revealing veiny forearms with traces of purple and blue, as if his veins were expanding. Underneath the expensive slacks and the typical corporate wear was a gaunt figure that seemed to be more suspended than sustained by his faculties.

Dario slowly inserted his right arm into his pocket and pulled the Tempora out far enough to see the scanner. The light was still red. The geo-

location within the firearm should have activated the sensor once he'd entered the tower, unless someone was tampering with the activation. *What were they waiting on?* Dario thought as he looked at Landry.

Compared to the bright, fluorescent lighting in the hallway, the room was growing darker with the setting sun. The shutter at the edge of the west-facing window began to close, darkening the room even more.

"Ah, I see you're giving the windows a good look-over," Landry walked over to the window as the screen opened, "Really squanders the splendor of being so high up, doesn't it?"

Far in the distance, miles away, were several of the orbital landing pads. A massive colony ship was taking off as the shutter began moving.

Landry began to follow the shutter as it closed, "Funny, isn't it? To buy into a trip to the stars only to see none at all. The holo-projection displays on all the sub-decks show nothing but advertisements and sanitized filtered views. It's for the esteemed to see the miracles of our work." Landry followed the shutter as it opened again, craning his neck upwards as the ship began to break the atmosphere, "Really, the best view is from down here, or really, up here. I'm curious, what's your take?"

Dario moved away from the window and sat on one of the sofas, "I've never been," he answered. Landry stepped away from the window and, methodically, walked toward Dario and sat on the chair across from him. Upon seeing him closely, Dario noticed the scar tissue where he'd seen cybernetics before. "Took your implants, huh?" Dario said.

Landry sighed as he scanned three fingers across his face, "Not the smallest price to pay, but you learn to feel the lack of it rather than to care for its absence. Though I will admit, the hormone regulation was a treat in a pinch."

Dario pulled out the Tempora and rested it on his lap.

Upon seeing the gun, Landry laughed, "And here I thought they would leave me with some dignity. Forty-five years I gave them," he said as he stared at the gun, "How many do you think you'll get through?"

Dario moved the gun to his side, "Doesn't it give you some comfort? Knowing what's ahead?"

Landry leaned back into the chair, taking on the appearance of a business magnate about to offer a deal to Dario. "There's an old Earth writer who wrote of soldiers gored by cannon fire, of men stabbed and bleeding out in dark, lonely forests. And they all believed until the very last moment that they'd survive by some divine or contrived miracle. That they'd be rescued. In such desperate circumstances, a man thinks whatever it takes to keep the soul intact. But you tell a man in no uncertain terms that his life is forfeit, that on some preordained time, he'd die, then you destroy some-

thing deep, something profoundly human inside of him,” Landry removed his glasses; streaks of red and white swirls obfuscated his brown irises.

*Took his ocular implants, too, Dario thought.*

“Know what I think? We’ve just gotten so damn good at it all that we can kickstart those dreams, those illusions, and crush them all in a single day,” Landry gestured toward the door with his right arm, with the left toward the gun. His eyes remained fixed on Dario, “Do your *job*. Or do your *job*.”

Underneath Landry’s raised arms, Dario noticed the outline of wires running up his arm. Implants reserved for the top military brass and the wealthiest of the wealthy could sustain life in even the most dire circumstances. With a kitchen as bare and lifeless as the one in front of him and eyes so sullen that he looked like a dead man walking, Dario concluded that Giraud Landry was the lucky recipient of state-of-the-art cyberware giving him sustenance. He was probably the only person in Córdoba, maybe anywhere, *unlucky* enough to be strapped up with cyberware like that. Attempting to remain motionless, Dario eyed the sensor; the darkened room made it easy to tell: Green.

Dario raised the pistol in slow, calculated movements and pressed his thumb to the sensor. Landry remained in the same position as before, his right arm raised, head pointed directly at his specter, as if rigor mortis had set in hours too early. His eyes followed the barrel of the gun, the twirls growing as his pupils dilated. The motor underneath the fingerprint scanner vibrated, unlocking the trigger mechanism. Dario squeezed the trigger.

For a fleeting moment, the muzzle flash lit the room in an orange hue. The shutters opened, but the sun had long since disappeared below the horizon. In the dark, lifeless room, the only color left was the blood spatter staining the sterile chair on which Landry had died, a small gift of life. But Dario couldn’t be sure—it was only in his mind’s eye.

On the way out, the lobby receptionist once again shot Dario a friendly smile. “We hope you enjoyed your stay at Ibreus Tower, Mr. Mackenzie. Have a pleasant evening.”

After exiting the building, he felt a vibration in his coat pocket. Kosta’s datapad. He must have forgotten to hand it back. A second vibration, this time from his other coat pocket—his datapad. He pulled it out and read the text scrolling across the display:

**MARKED AND EXECUTE.**

Eleven years on the job, and not once did he receive the same contract twice. He pulled Kosta’s datapad out and scrolled through the terms, agreeing with each and every one.

He headed for the nearest rail station, boarded it, and sat in an

empty cabin. The railcars of corporate centers and cities' upper-class districts bore no resemblance to those of Weilen.

Through the pristine windows in front of him, Dario watched as a massive colony ship descended toward the city, bringing thousands of new arrivals and replacements for the departed of cities most cutthroat. Maybe Giraud Landry's replacement, too.

The railcar whirled into motion, descending up the vine back toward the hell that was Weilen. Dario let the inert firearm sag into the holster and pulled out his datapad. The pillars of fire and smoke around the colony ship dissipated and the floodlights powered on; the glow reached all the way into the railcar.

As he agreed to the terms on his end, the dead man's words rang in his head. The first shot had counted, the second was waiting in the barrel. He swiped across the final term and tossed the datapad aside. Perhaps his life was already forfeit.