

Galaxy Gun

By Jack Eden Doyle

Chapter One: Dead Air

A message was broadcast across the cosmos: "Hailing all cowboys. Come prove your skills." Once word spread, the citizens of the galaxy turned wild with excitement and every cowboy wanted in. Out of millions of applications, only seven of the very best were chosen. The stage was set, the showdown imminent. The whole galaxy held its breath, waiting to see which one of those seven was the greatest gunslinger of them all. There was only one way to find out. With a good old-fashioned shootout!

Logar limped down the dark and empty hallway. His robotic leg clanged against the metal floor with each step. Since he arrived at the station, he had wasted no time to rush off in search of the other contestants. If he found them first he could get the drop on them.

He had a bad feeling. The old ranger had been through his share of bad situations. He had waded through the muck and filth of the galaxy's worst and experience had taught him what a trap looked like. So when he felt as though he was walking right into a trap, he trusted his gut. Another cowboy was trying to get the drop on him.

Logar came to a doorway on his left that opened up to an empty office engulfed in shadows, another empty room the same as all the others. The ranger stopped. A small puddle seeped out from the room. In the dark, it was difficult to know for sure but it appeared to be thick and viscous, like some kind of oil, slowly spreading across the floor. He waited, hand on the grip of his gun, as he listened. After he heard nothing for far too long, Logar pulled his gun loose and swung it wide as he stepped into the doorway. He aimed into the bleak nothingness of an abandoned office. There were no movements, no sound, nothing but the smell of oil covering up a wretched stench. For a moment he watched the darkness, weary and mistrustful of the unseen.

Finally, Logar resigned himself and returned to the hallway. A nagging feeling followed him, a warning that there was someone or something nearby. No light came from the fluorescent tubes running the length of the ceiling. No power to the computers in every office. The electricity seemed to be out. He was breathing so he

knew that the space station's oxygen recycling systems still functioned. But there was no disrepaired system of the station that could have left that oil spill. The old ranger's instincts were finely tuned and he rarely made mistakes in his judgement.

Logar heard something scuttling behind him. He spun around to face behind, drew his gun, and pulled the trigger. Despite his age, the ranger's aim was deadly and he was fast on the draw, with a rusty old revolver which had seen him through his share of trouble. Plasma pumped from a back-mounted canister, through a metal tube, and into the handle of his gun. A bright burst of purple plasma erupted from the barrel. The plasma bolt soared down the hallway and splashed against the dark carapace of a giant bug. The bug let out a horrendous screech, with a painful and piercing pitch, before it reached for its weapon to return fire. It drew its revolver and slammed one chitinous hand down on the hammer. Each time the hammer came down the bugman pulled the trigger.

The bugman kept shooting and Logar was forced to take cover in the doorway. A flurry of molten bullets scorched their way past, cutting the air in blurry streaks of blaring red and orange. His ears were still ringing from the bug's overwhelming screech.

"Karabast, I'm surprised to see you here," Logar shouted into the hallway. His thick southern galactic accent gave a certain twang to his voice. "I should'a recognised the wretched smell of your faeces from a mile away."

It had tried to lure him in, then sneak up behind him. Luckily for Logar, he had been expecting a trap and managed to turn the moment of surprise around on the bugman to get the first shot. But he was still pinned at the doorway, unable to get out and find a more defensible position.

"You won't escape this time," Karablast hissed.

The flow of molten bullets stopped. Logar knew that its beady black eyes would be watching the doorway and waiting for him to sneak a peek. He would not give Karablast that chance.

"How did a dung beetle like you crawl its way into a competition for the best cowboys in the whole dang galaxy?"

"Did no one tell you? I am the best cowboy," the bug hissed. "And now I get the chance to kill anyone who dares to steal my title. When I win this, I won't just be the best cowboy in the galaxy; I will be the last. That's what I'm doing this for."

“Well that just sounds lonely,” the ranger said softly. “Such a crappy thing to waste the prize on.” Karablast’s response was to let out another awful and deafening screech. “Shut yo darn yapper!”

Logar reached for a chunky metal cylinder hanging from his belt. He would see what the bugman thought of this. With the press of a button, a red ring lit up on the cylinder and a countdown began.

“5,” an automatic voice from the grenade started counting.

Logar threw the grenade into the hallway. It hit the metal floor with a heavy *thud*.

“4.”

He heard a hiss. The bug had spotted the grenade.

“3,” the voice said over the sound of Karablast *scuttling* away. Logar hated the way it *scuttled*. It made him feel as though something was crawling all over his skin.

“2.”

Now peeking from the doorway, Logar saw the bug running away, down the corridor and towards a far set of blast doors. His plan had worked.

“1,” the automatic voice said.

Logar ducked back inside of the doorway. First, there was a monotone beep from the grenade that signalled its imminent detonation. Then everything, all at once, shook. The entire hallway was shaken as a mighty wave of energy surged down the corridor. There was a brilliant flash of blue light. Before the calm could follow, Logar heard a crack. This was his chance, he ran from the doorway. The old ranger limped as fast as he could, the sound of cracking glass followed him across the window and down the hallway.

Logar hit a big red button on the wall, closing the blast doors behind him and not a moment too late. On the other side of those steel doors, the window gave way. One tiny shard of glass at first. Then it all went. A terrible suction pulled everything out of the shattered window. Recycled air rushed through the broken window. The vacuum dragged everything out into the desolate void of space.

Logar had seen Karablast scurrying away in the opposite direction. He guessed that the vacuumed corridor and two blast doors now separated them both. If Karablast wanted to come for him again, then the bug would have to travel all of the way around the entire space station. Logar had looked over maps of the station

before arrival. The station hosted several main sections, separated by thick steel blast doors, all connected to make a large ring.

That damn bug had come at Logar's back, from a section of the space station behind him. So someone else could have landed in this new section. Another cowboy could be here already, lurking and ready for an ambush. However, he was not in another long hallway. Logar had entered a large cafeteria, which he presumed to have been used by the station's staff. It seemed abandoned except for the faint aroma of burnt food that still lingered. Logar guessed that this space station had not been constructed for the competition. Instead, he thought that the station was an abandoned wreck before the company found it and decided to host this tournament onboard.

Logar carefully looked around. After too many years of hunting bounties, he knew to never rush into a bad situation - if you are going to get into a fight then you might as well fight on your terms. A trail of burn marks lead away from the blast doors and through the cafeteria. The ranger recognised laser burns when he saw them. He figured that there must have been a fight here. The room had three different corridors splitting off from it, each in a different direction. His old eyes watched each of the three corridors in turn. Whoever had won the fight could still be here.

Logar heard footsteps from his left. The soft padding of bare feet against the metal floor. And then from the right. Another set of footsteps rushed towards him. It was too dark to see down the corridors, and he could not shoot in two directions at once. Logar grabbed two tables on either side, one in each hand, and tipped them up. The old man ducked behind his two panels of makeshift cover. The footsteps to his right reached him first. He drew his gun.

A blue man, tall and lithe, came sprinting down the corridor to Logar's right. Logar aimed. But before he could shoot the blue man melted and shot forwards. A blue gelatinous blob streaked towards Logar. It swooped past him, driven onwards by an unseen force.

Logar spun around to see the blue blob strike a red-skinned woman in the chest. And to his bewildered eyes, Logar watched the red woman melt into a thick mucus-like liquid. Both the red and blue fluids mixed into a deep purple before the entire gelatinous mass began to take shape. At first, it resembled a giant human, a

hulking man standing well over twelve feet. Then came the details. A strong jaw and keen eyes formed, and Logar finally recognised the face.

“Omni,” Logar said with a smile on his face. “I knew you'd be in this competition.”

But the purple man drew a gun from each hip and opened fire. Metal slugs whizzed past Logar's head and something heavy thudded against the floor. Logar smirked and behind him a decrepit old robot full of bullet holes had fallen to the ground. The robot lay on the floor as red oil leaked out around it to form a puddle.

“Mighty fine shooting, old friend,” said Logar. He turned back to smile at his friend. “I see you're still using those rusty old revolvers. You should invest in some Omega Tech iron.”

“Hmm. What they lack in firepower they make up for in utility,” Omni replied.

Those banged-up, rusty revolvers had served Omni for years. They fired low-calibre rounds and were otherwise seemingly unimpressive but the two guns could construct their own ammunition from trace elements in the air and atmosphere. The purple man never had to reload his guns.

Omni returned the smile as his piercing eyes watched Logar intently. “That robot was not one of the seven competitors.” His voice was deep yet soft, a reassuring mixture of both soothing and stern.

“Well, what d'ya mean?” Logar asked.

“When I arrived, I was immediately attacked by several robots as soon as the pod doors opened. And since then, several more have attempted to shoot me. Something about this seems off.”

“I was thinking that too,” the old ranger agreed. Since his arrival, this whole space station had felt wrong to him. “No lights or power of any kind. Except, o'course, for the blast doors and the oxygen recycling systems. And this station was most definitely not built for this competition. No matter what the brochure says.”

Omni nodded. “You are right. It seems that our sponsors found this station empty and refitted it to suit our needs. Additionally, I have found another system running off of the electrical supply.” Omni pointed one of his thick, purple fingers up to a corner of the room. Through the dark Logar could see a red light where he was pointing. “Cameras.”

“Someone on this station's watching us.”

“It is possible that they are broadcasting this live,” Omni replied. “If they are streaming this to a live audience then the company will have to honour their word and give the winner the prize.”

“I'm happy to compete for a title, but I don't believe the prize is real,” Logar said. “You seen anyone else since you got here? Any famous cowboys?”

“I ran into Three-Eyed Throp,” Omni answered. Logar was well aware of Three-Eyed Throp's nasty reputation. “We exchanged gunshots before he scribbled something on the wall and ran away. He was too fast and I was accosted by more robots before I could chase after him. Have you met anyone else yet?”

Logar shrugged. “Only Karrablast, the filthy bug. We went our separate ways after my grenade got between us.”

He saw his friend's sharp eyes narrow their focus on him. “Be wary of Karrablast. It is a dangerous enemy and you would be wise not to underestimate it,” Omni warned as he maintained his steely gaze.

“Rumours say it survived a nuclear bomb, like a cockroach under a rock,” Logar said with a nod. “I figured it wouldn't like being stranded in space very much, though, so I took a risk. We'll deal with Karablast later and, if we're lucky, another cowboy'll get rid of the pest for us. For now, let's you and me see how far we can get together. And then, when we're both the last two cowboys standing, we can have a good old-fashioned duel.”

“That sounds like a reasonable plan,” Omni said. “For now we should follow Throp together before he can get up to any of his tricks.”

Chapter Two: Three Heads

The metal door opened with a sudden whoosh. Logar's steady hand hovered above his holster with a practiced calmness. This section of the space station was another long corridor that wound onwards. But unlike the offices and small rooms which populated the first section, this one was a tunnel made almost entirely of glass with no doors or branching hallways. Narrow and curved. Steel beams and rings secured the glass tunnel and held it in place. It appeared to be a viewing area from which to look at space.

"Over there!" Omni called out.

Around the steady curve, from behind one of the metal columns, was a mass of dark feathers. They could hear Throp muttering to himself as he scratched against the steel. Then Throp's heads poked around the side of the beam. One, two, three, black-feathered bird heads each with a single beady eye. Logar shuddered to look into those eyes. In unison, all three heads squawked at them.

"Hey!" Logar shouted. "There's no need for name-calling." Again the heads all squawked together. "Now you're just being mean."

Logar drew his gun. With precision and speed, he aimed and centred the barrel on Throp's middle eye. This would be the day that Three-Eyed Throp would meet his end. Then he saw a tangle of red hair. Throp hauled a young woman from behind the beam and held her in front of him. His ebony wings folded and tucked away behind him. Logar's gun wavered. Throp pushed the girl forward.

"Logar!" Omni called out. "Be careful shooting in here! You could break the glass."

Throp's three heads all cackled. The birdman squawked again.

"Throp's right, we could hit the girl. Who the Hell is she?" Logar asked.

Throp, as expected, squawked his answer.

"What?! There's no way." And yet Logar believed the birdman.

"I do not believe he is trying to trick us," Omni chimed in. "How else could the girl have gotten onto this station?"

Logar groaned. Why was it so complicated? She could be one of the seven cowboys, as Throp had said, here on the station to compete. Or she could be an innocent bystander he had smuggled aboard to trick the other contestants. Throp had always been a nasty liar, the foul fowl was famous for his dark and twisted ways

of manipulating people. If this girl was a contestant then she had come unprepared with no weapons or equipment. Not even a holster for a dropped gun.

Throp dragged the girl backwards with his talons clutched around her head. She walked like a lifeless husk as the birdman pulled her. Logar kept pace with Throp and followed the birdman down the glass tunnel until he came to a stop next to the steel beam on which Throp had been scratching. Logar looked at the beam. So that was why Throp had been scratching on the beam, he had carved writing into the metal. His metal leg clacked against the glass floor. There, in crude letters scratched into the metal, the disgusting birdman had left a command. Logar read it.

“Enough of this!” Omni shouted as he pulled out his gun. Against his better judgment, they had to risk the glass eventually. “If she is a cowboy then she is our enemy too.”

“Take a bullet for me,” Logar whispered under his breath as he read the writing.

Omni drew one gun and fired. A single shot with deadly precision. This bullet was destined for Throp. But the wicked birdman had a way of avoiding death when he most deserved it. Logar stepped in the way at the same time Omni pulled the trigger. A lead bullet punctured the old ranger. The force of the impact made him take a step back. Then he fell to his knees.

“What the Hell?!” Logar screamed.

Omni ran to his injured friend’s side. “Why did you step in the way?” he asked as he passed by the steel beam and its writing. His head turned to see what Logar had seen.

“No!” Logar shouted.

Omni snapped his sights back to his injured friend. What could have possessed him to willingly step in front of a gun? Unless, Omni feared that he had not done so willingly. Just as the girl Throp held hostage was not willingly obeying the birdman. Somehow, Throp had taken hold of their minds.

“Don’t read it,” Logar warned.

“What did it say?” Omni asked.

“It said to take a bullet...” Logar said as he fell into Omni’s strong purple arms. “For Throp. I don’t know how but he made me follow the command he scratched into that steel beam. The moment I read those words I couldn’t stop myself. It was like his writing controlled my mind.”

“Then the girl?” Omni asked. Logar nodded, it most likely meant that she had read those same words and was waiting to take a bullet for Throp. “Dang it. Is there any way we can remove the writing to break his spell?” Omni did not even know if it worked that way, removing the writing could very well have no effect on Throp’s possession of the hostage.

Throp gave a loud squawk and then cackled.

“Don’t let Throp leave with her,” Logar warned. “Once she takes a bullet, I bet she’ll be free. That’s what happened to me. But until then he’s using her like a darn meat shield.”

“Fine,” was all Omni replied before standing up.

His gun still in hand, Omni aimed at Throp once more. Then he lowered his gun to aim at the girl’s leg. She would not be hurt too badly and Throp would lose control of her. Throp squawked and raised his gun to point it at the poor girl’s head. Hypnotised by the writing, she did not flinch or make any attempt to protect herself.

“You won’t get away with this!” Logar shouted.

Once again Throp began walking backwards and dragged the girl along with him. She followed and remained silent, staring at nothing as though in a trance. Throp’s gun was still pressed against the side of her head. But Omni had a second gun. His left hand shot downwards and drew his second revolver with blinding speed. He pulled both triggers at the same time. One aimed at the girl’s leg. And the other aimed at Throp’s gun. A lead round shredded the poor girl’s shin. The second bullet knocked Throp’s gun from his hand and the weapon landed heavily on the floor, the bullet ricocheted away.

Logar heard the crack. Omni and Throp saw it. But the girl had just woken up to a whole new world of pain, she had yet to hear the glass cracking. Logar knew from personal experience what a bullet to the leg felt like. Even though she could be another cowboy, an enemy, he could sympathise with her pain. But a stray bullet had cracked the glass. There was no time for sympathy. He had a hole in his stomach and a lead ball rolling around in his gut.

“Run,” Logar shouted. He clutched at his stomach and stood up. “Now! Before the glass breaks!”

Logar, Omni, and Throp began a mad dash to the door. Logar limped, his metal leg slowing him down. As they reached the pained and panicked girl, Omni hauled her up high onto his mighty shoulder and kept running. Throp was the fastest

and he had a head start. He reached the end of the long glass tunnel before them. Logar and Omni ran as fast as they could. Throp raised a talon to the button. Omni was a few steps in front of Logar, but he was not close enough. And the cracks were spreading around the glass tunnel. If they were still in the tunnel when it broke then they would all be pulled out to the vacuum of space, to slowly drift away and die.

Omni threw the girl. Like a ragdoll, she sailed through the air with a scream and hit Throp. Her collision surprised Throp and knocked the wretched winged man away from the door controls. Omni made it to the doorway and aimed both guns at Throp.

“Hold it right there!” Omni ordered. “Do not move a muscle.”

The cracks chased Logar down the tunnel. His metal leg thudded the glass with each step. His limp slowed him but he kept pace barely ahead of the spreading cracks. If the glass broke, he would be sucked out into space, just a cold and lifeless drifter in a big and empty universe. The cracks reached Logar as he stepped through the doorway. He smashed his fist into the button and the metal doors slammed shut.

“That was closer than I would have liked.” the old ranger grumbled.

“How close would you have liked?” the girl asked.

“Are you sure the mind control has worn off?” Omni asked. “I don’t want to kill him until we know for sure.”

Logar and the girl both nodded. “I’m sure,” Logar answered.

“Don’t you dare shoot him,” the girl ordered. “This prick is mine.”

Omni eyed her up. She was short but stocky. The girl looked like she could hold her own in any ordinary fight but against Throp’s towering size and razor talons, she stood little chance. She needed a weapon and Omni was not about to offer up his guns. Throp was already back on his feet and his three eyes were fixated on the girl. Omni and Throp both knew the girl would lose in an unarmed fight.

“Do you have a gun?” Omni asked. Throp laughed before squawking at them. “You did not bring a gun? This is a competition between the seven best gunslingers in the galaxy and you failed to bring a gun?”

She smirked. “I don’t need one.” The girl pressed her hand against her bloody leg, winced at the horrendous pain, and then pulled away her blood-soaked hand. “Thanks, by the way. If you hadn’t shot me, I’d be bird food.”

From her palm the blood began to take shape, bubbling and boiling, until it formed into a gun and she grasped the weapon. Her aim was not great, but Throp

was only a few feet in front of her. She pulled the trigger and a bullet made of blood shot forward in a scarlet spiral. Throp was too fast. Logar's human eyes could not see the bullet. Even Omni, with his bioengineered body, could not see the bullet. It travelled too fast for them. But not for Throp. He stepped aside and watched as the bullet coasted past him. Then his three heads turned back to the girl.

Throp squawked. Then dived forward bearing both taloned hands. Ready to slice the girl open. But suddenly, he stopped. Logar and Omni had heard the gunshot and before they knew what was happening Throp had stopped still in front of the girl. He was just about to bear down upon her but something had brought him to a halt.

"I made that one just for you," the girl said with a smirk on her lips that gave away her self-satisfaction. "Everyone knows how fast you are, Throp. You're famous for being so fast and clever. You're always thinking of a trick but you never thought that someone else could pull a trick on you. I knew you could dodge an ordinary bullet. So I made one that you couldn't dodge. That blood bullet turned itself around and hit you in the back."

Throp squawked.

"A poor choice of last words," she said before pulling the trigger three more times.

Each round of her blood burst into Throp's chest and knocked him backwards. The three-headed bird fell onto his back and closed his three big, black eyes. The girl turned towards Omni and Logar, still brandishing her gun and now aiming it in their direction. Logar had done little to stop the blood spouting from the bullet wound in his stomach. But still, he smiled.

"Glad I got to see Throp bite it after all these years," Logar said before being taken over by a fit of coughing. Omni would have rushed to his side if the girl had not been pointing a gun at them. When Logar recovered, he continued. "Omni saved you. From Throp's mind control and from that glass tunnel. You owe him."

"But I don't owe you a bloody thing, mate," the girl spat harshly.

"Don't sweat it" Logar replied. "I'd rather take another bullet than have you owe me."

"Logar, what are you saying?" Omni asked. "We can find a first aid kit and patch you up."

"Hey!" Logar shouted abruptly. "We agreed to duel at the end. You and me, when everyone else on this dang space station was dead. Well, I won't stumble

along, to be dragged to the end an' put out of my misery at the last moment. I don't want that kind of pity. I want to die because Omni, the only person I respect in this whole galaxy, was the one who shot me. No one else deserves to kill me. I am Logar, the fastest darn gun in the galaxy." He coughed and blood splattered down his chin and clothes. "I am the ranger. And the ranger I'll be, to my dying day."

"To your dying day," Omni said softly. He raised both his guns.

"Pour some whiskey for me."

The sound of rapid gunfire filled the room. Omni unleashed a hail of lead bullets from both guns. It would not be just one bullet that killed the last ranger. Let it be known that he died in a storm of bullets.

Omni stood quietly for a few minutes. Watching over his friend. But eventually, he turned his attention back to the competition. And the girl. Who no longer had her gun. In the time that Omni had been mourning his friend, the girl had bandaged her leg with a strip of cloth torn from her jumpsuit.

"I want to know your name before we duel," Omni demanded.

She just smiled. "We aren't duelling, honey. Your friend just died and he says I owe you. It's poor taste to disagree with a dead chap, especially when he's right. My name is Tessa but you'll know me better as Convict Forty-Seven."

At last, Omni understood. She was just like him. Another prisoner who had been taken from some outback prison world and sent to a laboratory on the dark side of an uncharted moon. One hundred convicts were bought for corporate experimentation in a painful series of attempts at making super soldiers. That's how Omni had been made and it is how this woman had gained her blood powers.

"I am Omni," he replied.

"No, darling, you're Convict Ninety-Nine," she said. "Throp was Convicts Eleven, Twelve, and Thirteen all mashed up into one. I saw the barcode on his arm while he was holding me." She idly rubbed at her neck.

"Well that explains the three heads," Omni said. "All three convicts spliced into one mutated body."

"Since I owe you one, and you've just lost your partner, then I guess I can help you," Tessa said. "We can partner up. Until the end, that is. But you know what happens when no one else is left."

"Fine."

He had not met many of the other convicts from that sordid experiment. At least they had something in common, Omni had always assumed that Throp was an alien, not three people who had been taken and warped by a mad scientist. Omni's piercing gaze watched Tessa as they began to make their way further through the space station.

"Me, You, Throp, and your friend," Tessa listed. "That's four so far. So out of seven cowboys, there's still three left on this station."

"Logar saw another before he met me," Omni said. "Karablast. It is a beetle person of some distinction."

Tessa nodded. "I've heard of it. Fast on the draw and covered with an armour-like carapace. It's got the largest bounty in the whole bloody galaxy."

As far as Omni had seen of her, she had seemed prepared. "If you have heard of Karablast and expected it to compete, did you plan a way to beat it like you did with Throp?" Omni asked.

She simply shrugged. "Nope, no plan. I've not got the firepower to beat it and neither do you. If we run into Karablast then we'll need to run away and hope that someone else takes the bloody bug out. Which leaves two other people we haven't met yet."

"I would place my bets on the Pale Ape being among the competition," Omni suggested. "Though I am not sure who the last cowboy could be."

"Yeah, the Pale Ape seems like a solid guess," Tessa replied. "He's famous enough to be in this competition. And he's more than capable of taking out Karablast, but he'll only have one shot to do it. So let's hope to whatever god you worship that the bug and the ape meet each other before we meet either of them."

"Logar believed that Karablast could not survive in the vacuum of space," Omni said. "He broke a window and Karablast ran away. It could be the freezing temperature, the loss of pressure, or the lack of oxygen, but it was not willing to risk being expelled from the station."

As they talked, the pair walked from one adjoining room to the next. Mostly offices with minimal decoration. Metal chairs sat at metal desks with flat computer screens, a few rooms had fish tanks with no fish, and empty plant pots full of grey soil sat in squalid corners.

"Did you study the potential competitors?" Omni asked.

“Best I could do on such short notice,” Tessa answered. “Unfortunately, it’s quite difficult to research seven of the most dangerous people in the galaxy.”

So far, each section of the station was built for a different purpose. They were all separated by bulky steel doors capable of isolating any system from its adjoining segments. This section seemed to be clerical, where all of the station’s paperwork was handled. Omni and Tessa passed through one room that was occupied only by a dozen large printing and shredding machines, now powerless and defunct.

Tessa limped on her injured leg. It would slow them down if left untreated and Omni hoped that her injury would not be a liability. At least the bleeding had slowed.

They passed through an old office with a dead screen large enough to cover one wall. An unlit fish tank filled the far wall. Tessa stopped in the middle of the room. Omni stopped at the doorway, only a couple of feet behind her. For a silent second, he watched her and waited. But she did not move.

“Did you hear that sound?” she asked, finally breaking the silence.

Omni furrowed his purple brow. “Hear what sound?”

Then there was a terrible scraping noise like that of nails being dragged across a chalkboard. Or, as it were, something sharp against metal.

“*That* sound,” Tessa answered.

No electricity was running to any of the machines or computers. Could it be another cowboy? Or another robot dragging its decrepit metal corpse through the rooms?

Tessa knelt on one knee and prodded at her leg. She began drawing on the floor with her blood. This time she drew a large revolver with a long barrel. She picked the bloody drawing up off the floor and cocked it.

Again they heard the horrendous scrape and how she was sure that it was coming from behind them. Somewhere back through the offices they had walked through. Omni drew both guns and prepared his aim. Tessa stood by his side with her bloody six-shooter. Some haggard creature stepped up to the doorway of the previous room. Its shape blotted out the light and stood as a hulking silhouette. Then they recognised the mass of three heads and black wings.

“Throp!” Tessa shouted.

She pulled the trigger and a bullet of blood burst from the barrel. Throp stepped to the side with incredible speed. He was too fast for their eyes to follow. The bloody bullet splattered missed and against the doorframe.

“Damn it, I didn’t expect him again...” She had drawn the wrong gun.

Omni aimed with both revolvers and unleashed a stream of lead. Rapidly pulling the weighted triggers. Lead bullets filled the small room, spraying far too many for Throp to dodge them all. Throp screeched in pain as the hail of bullets hit him. Iron bullets pelleted his body but they were not strong enough to take the birdman down. Omni kept firing, not needing to stop and reload his weapons. Tessa aimed her heavier and far more powerful gun. This was her chance while Throp was distracted. She squeezed the trigger and marked her finger red. The bloody bullet burst from the barrel and traced its way towards the screaming birdman. A thin trail of bloody mist followed behind the crimson projectile until it hit its mark. The bullet struck Throp in his middle eye and blew it into fleshy chunks. His middle head fell lifeless between the other two. The remaining two heads squawked together.

“Too late to complain,” Tessa replied. She pulled the trigger again.

His sharp talons clutched at the pulpy remains of his eye but he watched Tessa intently. Throp easily leaned to the side and the second blood bullet narrowly whipped past his third head. Throp’s two remaining eyes spun back into his heads. Then he lurched forward and both black eyes rolled forward to lock onto his prey. The girl who had shot him. Tessa steadied her aim and hoped for the rampaging birdman to slow down. She only had one shot left. The bigger the gun she drew, the less bullets she had to use. And she had drawn a big gun.

With a frightening speed, Throp dashed across the room and to the doorway. But before his nasty talons could sink into Tessa’s tender flesh, Omni blocked the doorway. A massive twelve-foot warrior of rippling purple muscle. Any regular person could not stand against the mighty strength that Throp bore down upon Omni. But Omni had been engineered to fight. Few could match his physical power.

Omni and Throp wrestled in the doorway while Tessa tried to get a clear shot. Omni wrapped one arm around Throp, still brandishing his guns, he put the barrel directly against Throp’s chest and pulled the trigger.

The giant purple man was too big for Tessa to aim past him. She had a big gun though. And Throp was too dangerous to not take every measure no matter how extreme. Throp swiped his talon against Omni’s chest and a spray of purple blood matted his black feathers. But Omni grabbed Throp and kept a tight hold. Tessa pulled the trigger. Her final bullet of blood cut its course towards Throp’s left eye. Her aim was certain though she could not see her target as she had to aim through

Omni. The bullet carved through Omni's flesh and came out the other side. Piercing straight through the warrior to strike its true target.

Throp screeched when his second eye burst into a flurry of fleshy chunks. As Omni fell to his knees he was showered in blood and the mulched remains of an eye. With both guns still in hand he looked up. He wanted to keep fighting but the guns slipped from his fingers as the last of his strength ebbed away. Throp's left head fell, dead. But Throp's right head continued to drive him onwards. The last head squawked but Omni was done listening to the crazed bird man. There was not enough space for Throp to use his wings so Omni had ignored them in the fight. He had not needed to worry about Throp trying to fly away.

The one-eyed birdman, with two dead heads, scrambled past Omni. A messy hole had been blown through the purple giant, her protector. Throp closed in on the girl. He raised a deadly talon high above his head and swung it down with a fell strike. But before his attack could hit he was yanked backwards. Omni had stood back up, mustering the last of his strength, and with handfuls of Throp's wings pulled the birdman backwards. Throp screeched in pain as Omni pulled both wings in opposing directions. It was now or never. This was the last of the warrior's strength and he gave it all to finish this fight. Omni's mighty muscles gave all of their power to rip the wings off the birdman. Bloody feathers were scattered around the room and blood sprayed against the metal walls. The wings' muscle and sinew were torn apart as they were wrenched from Throp's back. Hunks of flesh and plumage fell to the floor. Done with the dirty deed, Omni threw down the detached wings.

Throp spun around and lashed out with his razor-sharp talons. The birdman cut a deep laceration across Omni's stomach. But Omni caught the taloned hand, still slick with his purple blood. With the last of his immense strength, Omni snapped a long talon off. Another screech of pain came from the remaining head but Throp stopped abruptly when Omni thrust his talon into the last eye.

Omni let go and Throp's body fell to the floor. Finally, it was done. They had killed Three-Eyed Throp and hopefully for the last time.

Tessa looked at the hole in her companion's chest, the hole she had made. Her eyes widened. She had thought it was worth going through Omni to kill Throp. This man had already saved her twice in the short time since they had met. There was a terrible pang of guilt in her stomach. Was this it? Would he die too? Omni managed a weak smile. She had never wanted someone to not die before. In all of

her long life of crime and cruelty, she had never felt a single shred of remorse or guilt for taking a life. Until now.

Omni's purple skin began to bubble, as though tiny pockets of air were forming somewhere deep inside of him and rising to the surface. He started to split down the middle with a string of purple goo connecting the two halves. Then the purple started to drain from his skin. Leaving behind two different colours. Tessa watched in stunned silence. As Omni's body was fully fractured in two, the colours were divided equally. One half was red and the other half blue. Their twelve-foot height promptly shrunk down as though they were made of wax and melting beneath a flame.

Then Tessa heard the voice. High-pitched and soft, like the voice of a young woman. "Hi, I am Hal," the voice said. That was when Tessa saw a partially formed mouth on the red half. Like moulded clay, a face began to take shape. A piercing pair of eyes opened. Her skin was bright red with a near-perfect complexion. "And that is Alf."

Tessa looked to the other half. Now blue and taking shape. Half Omni's great height and very thin body, the so-called Alf's face formed into a strong jaw and high cheekbones. His skin was a bright blue even in the dark. "Sorry about this," Alf said. "Most people freak out when watching us separate from Omni." His voice was soft but deep and he spoke with the same confidence as his purple predecessor.

It took no more than half a minute for the red and blue bodies to divide and fully take shape.

"What was all that?" Tessa asked.

"Well, we each are both one half of Omni," Hal said, as though that explained anything. "Normally, we can separate and rejoin as much as we want but that bullet hole did some real damage."

"I'm sorry," Tessa replied, her voice soft and low.

"Omni is resilient and heals fast, but enough damage will slow him down," Alf added. "But at least in these bodies, we are not injured. For now, we must remain separate so that Omni can heal from his injuries."

"Right," was all Tessa could manage. She was confused, to say the least. Was the famous Convict Ninety-Nine a fabrication of two people in one body? "So, are you two the sixth and seventh contestants?"

Hal shook her red head. Her short, red mohawk wobbled its spiky tips as she moved. "We are not contestants. Omni is the cowboy but we are not very good at fighting in half."

"So why did you make Omni?" Tessa asked.

"We did not," Alf answered. His jaw was tight as he spoke.

"We were altered, like everyone else in that experiment," Hal continued. "Just like you said that Throp was made from two people, Omni is made from both of us. The mad doctor first experimented on Alf, and later on me to see if he could repeat his success. While we are not good fighters our bodies are scientific marvels."

Tessa nodded. "Okay, so which one of you is Convict Ninety-Nine?" She needed to know who saved them all. Her time in that lab had been far worse than anything else she had ever experienced and Convict Ninety-Nine had started the riot which set them all free.

"Well, I am Convict Nine," Alf started.

"And I'm Convict Ninety," Hal followed. "I was the mad doctor's last experiment. So the first time we combined into Omni, the doctor called us Convict Ninety-Nine. That was Omni's only name until after he escaped and he gave himself a new one."

So they had both saved her? They were both just as responsible for the riot and the escape as Omni was. She only wanted to know one last thing. What had become of the mad doctor? The other convicts had all whispered that the doctor had been killed on the night of the escape. That Convict One, the very first of them to be taken by the doctor, had been the one to kill him. Tessa hoped that the doctor had suffered.

"Is it true you saw Convict One kill the doctor during the breakout?" Tessa asked. "Is it true he died?"

The bird's body suddenly heaved. Tessa turned to watch the corpse. She wanted to melt away and hide, in a single moment she had become terrified that Throp would rise again, again. There was no time to be struck motionless by fear, she needed to draw another gun. But as Tessa was about to kneel, Hal stopped her.

"Not now, we should go," Hal said.

Tessa looked from the dead bird to the red woman. "We need to make sure he doesn't get back up."

The corpse heaved a second time, its chest rising and spasming before collapsing back down.

“I don’t think he is getting back up,” Hal said as she shook her head.

“Then what the Hell is that? Dead bodies don’t normally move that much.”

Tessa asked when Throp’s carcass heaved a third time. Like the body was trying to cough but no sound came out of the dead mouths.

Alf, who had been intently watching the dead body since it first moved, spoke up: “We need to leave the room. Now.”

The old man took a deep breath in. He flailed around, unconscious and unaware. Then he came to a gentle stop and he peeled his heavy eyelids open. For a peaceful moment, he lay still and found some quiet in a gentle rest.

Logar sat up. His stomach hurt but that was probably normal after being shot. The ranger checked himself to see there was no wound or blood, just a scar. Even his clothes were dry and unstained. So it happened again. Logar had begun to wonder after too many years if he was dreaming the first time he had died. He had hoped he could have some peace after a painful life instead of being brought back again. Maybe the mad doctor had been right that Logar would never know peace ever again.

The old ranger tried to stand up. It takes considerable patience to get on your feet with only one foot. Death could not keep his soul but it had certainly kept his body parts. After a few arduous seconds and some frustrated thumping against his prosthetic leg, he was back on his feet. He took a moment to look over the metallic limb and check to see that each lever and button was working correctly.

With a quick look around he saw that Omni and the girl had already gone. But then his attention turned to the puddle of blood with no corpse. Throp had also gone. It seemed Logar was not the only person who refused to stay dead. He felt more annoyed, rather than surprised.

Red footprints in the shape of bird feet lead away from the scene. It was clear which way Throp had gone but Logar was more interested in where his friend was. It would be best if he met up with Omni again. His only clue was Throp’s bloody trail. Maybe Throp had followed Omni and the girl. For now, he had no other clues so the old ranger followed. After a few rooms of sparsely decorated offices, the bloody tracks gave way to scratchings on the wall. Logar followed the words but was careful

not to read them this time. What was Throp hoping to achieve? Why would the crazed birdman write on all of the walls?

His thoughts were disrupted by the sound of gunfire. Logar drew his gun and hurriedly limped through the offices. He could hear voices ahead. He recognised the girl's voice and two others. They were just around the corner. Then Logar heard the powerful boom of an explosion. He ran as fast as he could through the offices. Finally coming to a stop when he found Hal and Alf lying on the floor. What had happened to Omni?

Logar squeezed the handle of his gun, one finger hovered over the trigger guard. Throp could still be around. Or so could the girl. The old ranger was not willing to take the chance. He knelt beside Hal and tapped on her shoulder.

"Hey, you alright?" Logar asked, keeping his eyes and gun pointed at the doorway ahead.

"Ugh, yeah," Hal groaned and swatted his hand away. "You sound very concerned."

"Now, now. Sarcasm doesn't become you," he replied. Logar kept watching the doorway without checking on Alf. "What happened to Omni?"

"He got shot in the chest, so we have separated until he's healed," Hal answered. "And we killed Throp. Again."

"And the girl?" Logar asked.

"Tessa's back in there," Hal answered. "Throp's dead again but he blew himself up. I don't think she escaped the explosion."

Logar nodded. "I'll go check. Just wait here." He stood up and began making his way to the doorway.

"Old man!" Alf called out. "Be careful, Throp may be dead but he has still got a few tricks up his sleeve."

Logar had seen the scratchings on the way here. It seemed to him that there had to be a greater plan. Was Throp really dead this time? One step at a time he inched towards the doorway. Gun at the ready. But when he came to the doorway he found a room that had been ravaged by an explosion. A shattered fish tank had flooded the floor and all of the furniture lay in broken pieces. In the middle of the room was the girl, Tessa. And beneath her was Throp's bloody body. The body's chest was torn open as though something had forced its way out. Logar figured the birdman could have kept the bomb inside of him.

Tessa pushed herself up and off the avian corpse. Had Tessa tried to block the explosion with her own body? Had she sacrificed herself? Logar slipped his revolver back into its holster.

“Whoa!” Tessa stood up, grinning. “Wasn’t sure that would work.” She held up a small shield, round and dripping. She marvelled at the protective barrier which had saved her life. “First time making anything other than a gun. And I didn’t even use my own blood, that’s another first.” Then she spotted Logar. “Oh, you didn’t stay dead either.”

“Try not to sound too disappointed,” Logar replied.

She just shrugged. “This competition has to end eventually.” The shield gave way. Falling into bloody chunks and splashing into a puddle around the girl. “How’d you survive?” Tessa’s eyes narrowed as she eyed him suspiciously.

It was Logar’s turn to shrug. “No idea. Only the second time I’ve died so I’m not sure how it works. How’d you survive?”

Her grin returned. “I made a shield out of Throp’s blood.” Not just guns and not just her blood. Logar would be sure to remember those details. “It protected me but the shockwave clearly ruined everything else.” With wide eyes, she looked around the office. “Man, that was a powerful explosion. Throp almost killed us all even after we’d taken him down. Twice. Talk about stubborn.”

“Omni got shot?” Logar asked.

“Yeah,” she looked down at the floor, becoming less lively. “I shot through him, to get to Throp.”

Unconsciously Logar’s hand went back to the handle of his gun. “Did you get Throp?” he asked. Tessa answered with just a nod and Logar let out a slow, controlled breath. He eased his hand away from his gun. “Omni will be just fine.”

“Guys!” Hal called from the previous room. “You are going to want to see this.”

Logar and Tessa came rushing back into the room, both of them looking around for the next threat. Hal quickly saw Tessa smothered in blood.

“You’re bleeding?!” Hal asked.

“No, it’s not mine,” Tessa answered. “I used Throp’s blood to make a shield. Are you okay?”

“We have a new problem,” Alf said as he pointed through the remains of a window to another room. “What are they all doing?” he asked.

One room over, through a window which had been blown open by Throp's blast, was a crowd of dilapidated robots with rusty guns hanging at their hips. All of their LED eyes stared at a wall with no expressions upon their cold, iron faces. Their laser-like focus was on a series of scratches and markings that had been scrawled on the wall.

"Looks like they are just standing there and staring at the wall," Hal answered.

"But they are all armed," Logar added. "This is bad, they're reading. Throp must have scratched instructions on the walls all around."

"What does it say?" Tessa asked.

"Obviously, he did not read it," Alf interjected. "Right, Logar?"

"Of course I didn't," Logar snapped. "I ain't no fool."

Alf looked to Logar with a single eyebrow raised.

"Let's get out of here before we find out what they're reading," Tessa suggested. "We can keep going forward, through the officers."

The four of them began creeping towards the blown-up office that was now Throp's bombsite. Quietly walking around Throp's cadaver and onto the next room. Quietly and quickly they passed from one office to the next. Until the silent crew of four came to another set of steel blast doors. With the press of a button, the doors whooshed open. They were all quick to get through the blast doors and only allowed themselves to relax when the doors sealed behind them.

As soon as the blast doors slammed shut, they all let out a sigh of relief.

"Phew, that was too many bloody robots," Tessa said.

"Why are they even here?" Hal asked. "What kind of space station was this before it was abandoned?"

They had arrived in what appeared to be some kind of reception or foyer. One long desk ran against the wall, with a small alcove set into the wall behind it. Nestled inside of the alcove, behind the desk, there sat a little robot. Its metal frame was short and squat. Layers of green and white paint had flaked off to expose the bare iron beneath. On his flat, rusty chest was a printed serial code: CW-8Y. One little LED in the middle of the robot's face fizzled and blinked. The little robot rolled forward to greet them.

"Hello there, guests," it said with a frazzled voice. "I am CW-8Y. Welcome to the hotel... Error, unable to access the name of this location... We sincerely hope that you enjoy your stay. All attempts to damage hotel property, harm staff and

employees, or negatively affect the experience of our other valued guests will result in your immediate expulsion from the premises by the hotel's security staff. We appreciate your compliance.”

Quirky robots like this were common across the wider galaxy. Logar had most often seen them serving as receptionists or clerks, and even as mechanics on a few occasions. This one seemed to think the space station was a hotel and, perhaps, the station had been a long time ago. At least now he had some idea about why those other robots were on the station: They were likely the security staff, or what's left of their corroded remains.

“Inquiry; are you the responsible party for spreading a virus among hotel security staff?” the little robot asked.

“No, mate,” Tessa answered. “Do you guys think this virus was caused by Throp's writing?”

“Answer unknown,” the little robot responded. “That information is currently unavailable.”

“Probably,” Alf answered. “Hey, bot, do you know where the other guests are?”

The robot's lights blinked for a moment. Logar could hear its processor whirring around inside of its little head. Then it gave its best answer: “Answer unknown. That information is currently unavailable.” There came a knock at the doors. “That is the security staff requesting entry. I shall open the door for them.”

“Woah, little bot,” Logar said as he pulled on the small robot's arm before it could get to the door. “You don't need to do that.”

“Warning! Please do not attempt to restrain me,” the little bot called out. “I am a servicing and maintenance robot, I must assist in diagnosing and fixing the virus.”

“I don't think the security bots are safe to be around, cause o' the virus and all,” Logar said. The little robot stopped to think and again filled the room with the noise of its processor rattling around inside. “Ain't there no way to deactivate 'em? Then you can fix that virus. Help us to help you.”

The robot's LED eyes flashed. “Conditions acceptable, I shall fulfil your request. All hotel employees are connected to a local server bank. Please follow me as I will require your assistance to override the security network and shut down all operating security staff.”

The robot wheeled across the reception area and stopped at a set of doors before it turned back to wave the guests through. The crew began to follow. Hal held the reception door open for them, letting Alf and Tessa both pass through before she followed. The door led to a narrow corridor.

Logar followed from the back, staying at the rear of the group. He was about to walk through the doorway but stopped when he heard a terrible grinding noise. The old man looked back at the steel blast doors to see a rusted pair of hands prying the doors open. Prying them open wider, inch by inch.

“How about we pick the pace up, yeah?” Logar suggested as he slammed the reception door shut. The little robot locked the door and then rolled forward to guide them. Logar limped down the corridor as fast as he could to catch the crew up. “The security staff are forcing their way through the blast doors.”

Hal and Tessa shared a worried look before Logar pushed the pair onwards. The sound of groaning metal grew louder. The little robot stopped the crew in the middle of the corridor, outside another set of doors. Tessa tried the handle but found these double doors were locked.

“I require your assistance,” the little robot said. “Under normal circumstances, only a staff manager can access the server array.” The little robot reached down and pulled a seamless panel from the floor. “Please lower me down. I will need to enter the server array from this access hatch and then open the doors from the inside.”

“Tessa, help me lower him,” Hal said.

The two girls heaved the robot from the floor and lowered him down the hatch’s opening. They let go and the robot landed on in the whole his four wheels before rolling away. He went down the hatch and out of sight.

“So now we wait?” Logar asked.

“Guess so,” Hal replied.

Alf grunted. “I will not wait here to idle away our time. This is a competition.”

“Unless Omni is ready to fight, you’re better off waiting, mate,” Tessa replied.

“She’s right,” Hal added. “Omni is in no condition to fight yet. For now, you and I need to survive.”

Still, they could all hear the grinding of metal as the security bots strained to force the blast doors open. Logar watched the doorway, waiting for the bots to come bursting through. He reached for his gun.

“Hal, Alf, be ready to draw,” Logar warned. “We may have a fight on our hands before that robot returns.” At his words, Hal and Alf each drew their revolvers. “Tessa, you got anything to draw with?”

“This makeshift bandage ain’t for show,” Tessa said as she knelt down to press at her wound.

“You should try disinfecting your injury,” Hal said.

“I lost my leg to infection from a bullet wound,” Logar added as he reached down to tap his metal leg. “Omni and I were escaping prison and I got shot. But I kept going and I limped my sorry ass out o’ there. Until I got shot again, in the head. That’s when I died for the first time. It was years before I could remember what happened and it’s always been a bit fuzzy but I guess a bullet in the brain will do that.”

“Wait. You were in prison with Omni?” Tessa asked. “Is that how you meet him?”

“I met Alf in prison, actually,” Logar answered. “Then some crazy scientist bought us from the warden and shipped us out to a research facility.”

“Wait, you were there too?” Tessa asked.

“Yeah, about that,” Hal began, “Logar was Convict One. He was the first prisoner the doctor experimented on.”

“So Omni told you about us convicts, huh?” Logar asked. “Quite a few of us are famous. It was bad though, what happened to us all. Not dying is proving itself useful though. A few of us are competing, it seems. Me, Omni, and Karablast too. I even think Throp may have been one of us.”

“He was,” Tessa said, interrupting the old ranger. “I saw his barcode when he held me hostage but... I’d have never thought you were one of us.” She pulled up her sleeve to reveal a barcode tattooed on her forearm.

“Well damn,” Logar said. “Sorry kid, I don’t recognise you. There were ninety of us-” He looked at Hal and Alf in turn. “Ninety-one of us. Didn’t know everyone.”

Tessa pushed her orange sleeve back down to cover her arm. “I can’t believe your wrinkly old arse is Convict One. You died, gave your life to kill the doctor and set us all free.”

“I weren’t being altruistic,” Logar replied. “Was just trying to break out.”

“You did more than that,” Alf commented, his voice sharp with bitterness. “You killed the one person who could fix us.”

“Oh quit your pouting, blue,” Logar retaliated. “You could’a stayed if you wanted. I didn’t force you to leave. We all know that place was Hell and the doc was never gonna help any of us.”

Alf slammed a blue fist into the wall. “You were never trying to find out if he could help us. Like always, you were looking out for number one. You did not help anyone except yourself to escape.”

“Alf, it is not like that,” Hal chimed in. “He did help us. He helped all of us. Omni walked out and left the place behind before we had a chance to find someone who could reverse what had been done to us.”

“When it came time to save lives and help people to escape, Logar was too busy looking for revenge!” Alf shouted. “He cared more about going back to kill the doctor than helping any of us. He always has, and always will, put himself first. When we were in prison, before the doctor bought us, he called himself the lone ranger. You never needed anyone else, Logar, and you do not want anyone else.”

“Get off your high horse, Alf,” Logar returned. “The one being selfish here is you. In the decades since, I’ve not seen you or Hal, only Omni. We both know who’s choice that is.”

“Shut up! The both of you are as bad as each other,” Tessa shouted. “While you pair are being mardy, a horde of corrupted robots are trying to claw their way through the blast doors so they can come and kill us all. Your two’s bickering may quite literally be the bloody death of me before a single robot gets here.”

Alf tried to shake his hand to ease the throbbing, he had hurt his hand when slamming it into the wall. Logar saw and smirked but said nothing else.

The grinding noise stopped. The robots had opened the blast doors. They were coming.

Chapter Three: Death Command

The door at the end of the corridor swung open. A lone robot, gripping a rusty revolver in its metal fingers, stepped through. It twitched with a constant spasm that ran down its arm and into its hand.

“Loogaaar,” the robot groaned as its electric voice crackled.

Logar felt the hairs on the back of his neck stand up. “Nope.”

With a precise aim, he fired. Scorching plasma pumped through the gun, and burst from the barrel. The vented muzzle flashed purple and the plasma blast lit up the corridor with a violet hue. Liquidised plasma struck the robot and melted a hole through its chest. The hole sparked. Then the robot collapsed to the floor.

“Keep ‘em coming and I’ll shoot ‘em all down!” Logar gloated.

The metal remains of the robot flashed red. Then detonated. A small explosion with a bright and intense flame. The *boom* echoed down the corridor, threatening to burst Logar’s eardrums. A small flame continued to burn in its metal husk.

“What was that?!” Tessa shouted.

“That is what happened to Throp,” Hal said. “He blew up after he died.” It was a guess, at best, but it made sense to her.

“You think Throp wrote an order for the robots?” Logar asked. “Then he read it himself, so that if he died he could kill at least one more person? Ugh. Yeah, that sounds exactly like something that wretched creature’d do.”

Two more robots came through the doorway as they stepped over the scrap heap that was their blown-up comrade. Side-by-side at every step, they marched forward as a deadly duo.

“They will blow up too. Drop them before they get close!” Alf ordered before he opened fire. His bullet missed and dinged off the wall.

“If you can’t shoot straight then focus on getting those doors open,” Logar shouted. He returned his focus to the robots coming through the doorway.

Logar pulled the trigger twice. First one blast of plasma burnt off a robot’s head. A second blast melted another bot’s legs and it hit the floor with a clang. The first robot flashed red and then blew up, destroying the crippled second robot in the blast.

So they’ll blow up even if it damages another bot, Logar noted.

More corrupted robots entered through the doorway. They formed into two columns as they entered the corridor, stepping into formation and marching forward. Logar kept firing but the security staff filled their ranks faster than he could shoot them. Back-to-back plasma blasts flashed purple in the dark corridor. The robots returned fire. Their rusty guns and outdated programming made for a terrible aim. But despite their inaccuracy, the robots had sheer numbers.

Then the downed bots flashed red. The explosion engulfed the marching ranks. But still more robots stepped through the doorway and started shooting. A bullet shaved Logar's cheek but he did not flinch. A sliver of blood dribbled from the cut, ran down his cheek, and dripped off his sharp chin. He wiped it away with his sleeve.

Tessa sat on the floor, prodding at her leg for blood and drawing with the red pool that had gathered beneath her.

Logar kept shooting. Every precise shot took down a robot and when its rank was filled with another robot, the dead bot exploded and took out several more. Despite his speed with the gun, even though they were blowing each other into smithereens, they continued their march onwards. The unending tide of deranged metal crept closer.

"Get those darn doors open!" Logar ordered.

Alf ran to the doors. He applied all of his meagre strength to pry them open but he barely strained the metal doors. Hal ran to his aid and they each tried to pull apart one door on either side.

Logar spied Tessa at his side.

"There's too many of 'em," Logar said. "What you got, kid?"

"Take this, old man," Tessa said.

She brandished a large cannon that she was now pushing into Logar's hands. The weapon dripped on the floor. Logar saw her leg. It looked like she had gouged the bullet out and made a bloody mess. She had left a red footprint behind with every step she had taken.

"What'd you do to your leg?!" Hal screamed. She left the door and ran to Tessa's side.

"I gave us a fighting chance," Tessa said. "But I can't handle this cannon, not in my state." A small puddle of her blood had started to form at her feet. Her skin was

already paling and a shiver had begun to set in. "Logar, take the weapon. You'll have to shoot it."

The robots continued their assault. Bullets pinged off the walls, floor and ceiling. At least, in their dilapidated state, they were bad at aiming. One bullet whipped through Hal's mohawk and she panicked before ducking. A few red strands of hair drifted down to the floor. Logar holstered his own gun before he took the cannon from Tessa's shaking hands, grabbing the heavy weapon by a set of handles. He felt the warm wetness of her blood on his hands as the weapon's weight pulled him down. How much blood had she used to make such a heavy cannon?

"Alright everybody, stand back," Logar warned.

The ranger braced himself. He had to be precise. If his aim was off by the tiniest amount he feared that this powerful weapon could tear through walls and potentially rip a hole in the side of the space station. He pulled the trigger.

One shot. The force from the blast splashed the cannon into a wet, red spray which covered Logar, the floor, and wall. It released a blast that surged forward as a thin red paste travelling at supersonic speeds. Like a wave it washed through the robots, splashing red and shattering them all, before it continued onwards. The door was reduced to scrap metal and Logar heard a loud crash from the reception room.

Then there were a dozen red flashes before the robots exploded. From the reception room they all heard the long string of explosions.

Logar's hands were shaking from the terrible force that had swept through his entire body.

"That was disgusting," Logar commented. His hands were dripping with Tessa's blood. He wiped them on his trousers.

"Great shooting!" Tessa shouted as she literally jumped for joy.

"Take it easy, kid," Logar teased.

Tessa stopped jumping and stumbled as she lost her balance. "Okay, I'm starting to feel a bit light-headed."

Hal braced Tessa as the bleeding woman's legs buckled beneath her. Hal held Tessa around the waist. "You need to rest."

Still, they could hear metal groaning. From beyond the doorway, out of sight, more robots marched towards them.

"No time for resting," Logar interrupted. He pointed to the doorway. "We're not done here. Get a move on, everyone."

More robots. They continued through the doorway. Stepping over their fallen as they opened fire. Logar drew his revolver again and began to shoot them down. One at a time the robots fell to a purple plasma blast before they flashed red and detonated. A bullet grazed his upper thigh, on his good leg, and drew a trickle of blood. He let out a groan but kept his deadly aim fixated on the robots.

“Loogaaar,” the robots all said in unison, their glitched voices full of static.

The doors next to them burst open. Waiting on the other side was the little robot. His red LED facelight flickered.

“About time,” Alf complained.

“I have encountered a problem,” the little robot said.

“Oh what now?” Logar asked. He pulled the trigger and another deranged security bot melted beneath a bolt of plasma.

“It seems that the server array been moved to a remote location, in an annexe that has been separated from the rest of the station by a set of monorails. We can access the annexe via those monorails.”

“If the monorail leads us away from here, then I say we get on board,” Alf said.

“I can confirm that one set of the rails leads away from here,” the little robot explained. “There are other sets that lead from the annexe to other-”

“Then get going,” Alf interrupted. “Show us the way, now.”

The little robot spun around on his wheels. “This way, then. Please follow me.”

The security bots were slow. Their rusted mechanics only allowed them to shamble forward. But the iron horde continued after them despite Logar’s best efforts. He made a last shot, dropped a single robot and watched it flash red, before he ducked through the doors and closed them behind him. Though their movements were sluggish, the robots were strong and would make short work of such doors.

Logar limped a couple of feet behind the group and kept looking back at the door. He had holstered his gun but kept his hand waiting, ready to draw.

Hal supported Tessa as they walked together. Tessa’s leg left a trail of blood down the short hallway. After a few metres, the hallway opened to a small train platform. A set of dark tunnels ran to the left and right. These tunnels, with their floors dropped a few feet lower than that of the platform’s, hosted a long-running steel beam. That was the monorail.

“I don’t see a train,” Logar said.

“I have already requested a carriage and it is en route to our location,” the friendly robot replied.

“Can’t it be en route any faster?” the old man complained.

“Grumpy,” Tessa said.

They heard a humming from down the tunnel. Logar stepped near the edge and leaned over to see a bright light at the end of the tunnel. It was rapidly getting closer. Logar dodged away from the edge of the platform. The lights burst from the tunnel and filled the hallway before the breaks slammed on and the carriage skidded to a halt. Metal breaks screeched as they scraped against the rail. The clamped breaks released and the train hovered on a powerful array of magnets. A single carriage filled the length of the platform, linked to a long line of a dozen carriages.

Back at the bottom of the hallway, the doors slammed open. There stood the host of corrupted robots.

“Loogaaar,” they all called out.

Logar shuddered. “I hate the way they say my name. Can’t they say someone else’s name?”

“Alright, everybody, get on board,” Tessa called.

The carriage’s door slid open with a smooth whoosh of air. The crew all stepped into the carriage before its doors slid closed. It was brightly lit inside and they struggled to see the approaching bots through their own reflections on the window. The window cracked when a bullet struck it. The train’s engine hummed and they pulled away from the platform.

The train rocked side-to-side as it sped down the magnetic rail at an incredible speed. Despite how old the rest of the station appeared, the train looked new with a shiny chrome body and bright lights. Logar suspected that the monorail had been built as a new addition to the space station, perhaps by Omega Tech when they purchased the station.

“Those were some creepy robots,” Tessa said. She was laid down with her feet up on a bench and her head resting in Hal’s lap.

Hal chuckled. “I am glad to not see them again.”

“We ain’t done on this space station yet,” Logar said. He sat on a single chair by the door beside the little robot at his side. “We may run into more.”

Alf sat with his legs crossed on the bench facing Hal and Tessa. He frowned at them both before turning his attention to the next carriage. A thin door with a small

window divided this carriage from the next one. Alf tried to spy further down the train, through the little windows.

“You two think Omni will ‘ave recovered by now?” Logar asked.

“He will have recovered enough to continue fighting,” Alf answered.

“I don’t think so,” Hal disagreed. “He is not entirely recovered and he could get hurt worse because of his injuries. We should not rush him.”

“Fine,” Alf grunted. “We should be safe for now, anyway. I doubt that the other cowboys will be at the server array.” He kept his eyes focused on the little window.

“Thank you, Logar,” Tessa said, her voice weak.

“What are ya thanking me for?” Logar asked. “You made that cannon. Without it, the first wave of those robots would ‘ave killed us.”

Tessa shook her head, her hair brushing up against Hal. “I don’t mean for the robots, you old codger,” Tessa said. “I thought I was gonna die in prison, rot away while my family forgot about me. Then the scientist bought me and I wished I had been forgotten. You know the horrible things he did.” Tears welled up in her eyes and threatened to break loose. “I’ve never been religious but I started praying, each and every night. And you answered my prayers. You and Omni set us all free. Thank you.”

“Hey now, don’t go getting sappy kid,” Logar said. “I didn’t do it for anyone else. I wanted out of that Hell hole just as much as you did.”

“I am glad we met,” Hal said as she played with Tessa’s hair. “Alf and I had been together for so long that I forgot about myself. Being Omni is like building something bigger than yourself. As amazing as it is, it consumes you.” Tessa turned over to look up at Hal as she spoke. “Before coming to this station, Alf and I had not separated for years. We can separate when needed but we have lived as Omni for a long time. While Omni sleeps we do not dream. When he eats or drinks we taste nothing. When Omni feels they are his feelings, not mine.”

“Do you not want to form Omni again?” Alf asked.

Logar saw that the blue man had turned his attention away from the window and back to the group.

“We need Omni to win this competition,” Hal said. “After that, however, I would like to let Omni rest. I would like to be myself again.” She looked down at Tessa and a smile crept over her crimson lips. “I would like to have dreams again, listen to music, and taste food. And have my own feelings.”

“You’re being selfish,” Alf said. “Doesn’t what Omni wants matter? Or what I want?”

“We’ve been Omni all of this time,” Hal replied, speaking just a little quieter. “You’ve both had what you want for a long time.”

“Whatever,” Alf said as he turned back to peer through the doorway.

“What happens if Omni dies?” Tessa asked.

“I believe... We die too,” Hal answered. Teardrops formed at the edges of her eyes before they broke free and rolled down her red skin.

“So Omni has to live and win, so you can live too,” Tessa said. She raised her hand and wiped the stray tear from Hal’s soft cheek. “We can make that happen.”

Hal reached to grab Tessa’s hand and held it against her face. Her red hand encompassed Tessa’s pale one and squeezed it tight.

“I won’t ask you to forfeit this competition,” Hal said.

“No,” said Tessa. “I’m not here to take the title. And I don’t need the prize. I think I found what I wanted.”

“I think so too,” Hal said. “You found me, all of those years ago and I lost you. Now you’ve found me again. Wishes really do come true.”

Tessa frowned. “What do you mean?”

“We’ve met before,” Hal answered. “Before I looked so... Red. Before the experiments and the doctor. You were smuggling prisoners and we got caught. I was arrested and sent to prison.”

“You were one of the prisoners,” Tessa said as she sat upright. “Yeah, I think do remember you. But you were one of the slaves I was smuggling away. Had you always been a slave?”

Hal nodded. “My parents became slaves when they sold themselves to a big company to pay off their debts. Then I was born a slave.”

“I was arrested for trying to free you,” Tessa said. “That’s why I went to prison. That’s how I ended up being bought by the doctor.”

“I am sorry,” Hal said. “I did not know.”

“No one knew,” Tessa said. “We couldn’t have known, any of us. You were innocent, just trying to escape slavery. I failed to smuggle you safely to freedom. It’s me who should apologise to you.”

“We have a problem,” Alf interrupted. “Those robots are on the train.” He had watched through the little window between carriages and spotted the robots making their way up the train. “They are coming this way.” One carriage at a time.

“The security staff are slow but they will arrive at this carriage before we reach our destination,” the little robot said. His LED light flashed.

“Can we decouple the carriages?” Logar asked.

“All carriages can be controlled from the driver’s cab at the front of the line,” the little robot answered. “I will lead the way.”

“Hal, take Tessa and follow the robot. Alf, you handle the decoupling-”

“Do not tell me what to do,” Alf interrupted. “I will separate the carriages and you can cover our retreat.”

Logar smirked as he drew his gun. “I’ve got ya back.”

Automatic doors let the robot out. Tessa limped, with her weight pressed against Hal, and they both followed the robot closely. Alf trailed after them as he grumbled underneath his breath. Logar remained.

If he went down the carriages to meet them, then Alf would not know which carriage to decouple. Logar had to stay and wait. For now, he watched through the windows. He could see them. Red lights blinking from far away. They seemed to be chasing him, calling his name. Perhaps Throp’s virus had specified that they must hunt him and not anyone else. But he had been dead when Throp wrote those instructions on the wall, so why would the birdman target him?

The robots clanking and clunking could now be heard a few carriages over. He could hear their distant voices calling his name. “Logar,” in their broken and crackly voice. The old ranger took a moment to breathe. They were nearly here.

As the first security robot stepped into the neighbouring carriage, Logar readied his gun. He swiftly took aim and fired. The dull thud of the revolver hammer rumbled through his gun and pulsed into his hand. It was the beating of a ballistic heart. This is what Logar lived for. Plasma erupted from his weapon and melted through the small window just as a robot stepped up. It was splattered with searing hot plasma from a second shot. The robot’s body melted as its rusted framework fell apart. A red light flashed behind the door and Logar knew an explosion was imminent. The metal door was blown out of its frame and fell with a heavy clang to the floor.

Logar unleashed hot plasma through the doorway. Rapidly pulling the trigger. The hammer thudded time and again, striking a primer into a chemical held inside of the gun. This primer completed a circuit through the gun, allowing an electrical current to pass through the gun and into the liquid plasma. When induced with electricity the plasma became volatile and explosive. This explosive reaction propelled the plasma out of the barrel at a frightening velocity.

Time and again he felt the hammer come down. His aim was perfect. Every shot hit its mark, destroying one deranged robot after another. Lights flashed red and bodies blew up. Whatever this train was made of, it was unharmed by their martyred explosions.

Then he saw it out of the corner of his eye. A metal hand reached up past the glass. A robot had crawled along the outside of the cabin. Its metal hand clawed against the glass. Then its head appeared at the side window.

“Logaaaaar,” the robot called through the glass.

Logar snapped his aim to the decrepit robot on his flank and he fired. The plasma scorched a hole through the glass and the robot. He watched the purple light fall behind the window and then heard the explosion of a self-destructing robot. It did not even shake the carriage.

He heard a heavy clang as motors moved. Something beneath the floor was moving. Logar assumed it was the coupler to the next carriage. Then came a horrible cranking noise. Logar felt his stomach drop as he realised that the motor had jammed. The coupler must have gotten stuck. He needed another way to separate the carriages.

“Damn it,” Logar complained through gritted teeth.

He pulled a cylinder from his belt. His last grenade. With the press of a button, it lit up red and he lobbed it through the doorway.

“5,” he heard the countdown begin as he turned to run.

Logar ran, through the connecting door, and into the next carriage. He shut the door behind him. He could not hear the countdown over the clamour of metal limbs running towards him. He pressed his body against the door. There came a brilliant blue light that filled the cabin and flooded through the windows and the carriage was violently shaken. The sudden force cracked the door. The explosion knocked down both the door and the old ranger.

His ears buzzed as he lay on his back, staring up at the lights on the ceiling. The door's weight pressed down on him. With a groan, the old ranger shoved the metal door aside and sat up. He slowly breathed and hoped his world would stop spinning. When he closed his eyes he felt a rising sickness, like a pit had emptied in his stomach and was filling up. It took a moment to get control of himself and not vomit. Then he opened his eyes.

"Loogaaar," the voices buzzed in unison from the previous carriage.

He quickly inspected his gun. A leak, a loose fixture, or any chance of the plasma getting out could be incredibly dangerous. Primed plasma could be highly explosive and had to be contained. The gun appeared to be undamaged. Then a bullet hit the weapon. It was knocked from his hands and into the air.

Logar's eyes narrowed on the first robot in the doorway. With wicked speed, he snatched his gun back from the air and aimed. A single trigger pull pumped the robot full of plasma. As its corpse flashed, Logar stood up and began making his way back to the next carriage. He barely flinched when the robot blew up.

He closed another door behind him and kept limping towards the next one. These robots moved sluggishly enough that even he could outpace them. The old ranger moved from one carriage to the next. Until he came to the driver's cab.

Inside he found three people and a robot panicking over a control console.

"I think the coupler mechanism isn't working," Logar said. "Sounded like it got jammed."

"They've all bloody jammed," Tessa replied. "We're trying every carriage but they're all getting stuck." A screen in front of her flashed red with a dozen text boxes. "Stop telling me there's an error and tell me how to fix it, damn it!" She slammed a fist into the console, cracking a keyboard and sparking a small electrical fire.

"Well, that certainly will not help. We need another way to separate the carriages," Alf said.

"There is no other way to perform a mechanical decoupling but a sufficiently large explosion could be capable of separating the carriages," the little robot answered.

"How big?" Tessa asked. "I can draw a bomb or something."

"No, you have lost enough blood already," Hal said.

"She's right, kid," said Logar. "I've seen a dozen robots blow up on this train and my grenade did nothing more than break a door down. This'll take something

really big to blow it up. All I can think of is my fuel can. It's full o' primed plasma but you'll need an electrical charge to trigger it."

He reached back and pulled the canister from his belt. It was heavy in his hands, still full of unused plasma. Despite the, risk Logar had made use of plasma weapons for years - he even brewed the dangerous chemical himself in massive vats.

"That could work," Alf said.

"But the blast would come into the cab," Logar added. "So we'd need to close the doors."

"So somebody has to be on the other side to detonate the tank," Alf said.

Logar nodded. "Pretty much."

"That's suicide!" Tessa objected. "Literally."

"It's my tank and my idea," Logar said. "And if I die, well I may come back to life."

"That would be impossible," the little robot said. "Making an estimate based on the size of your fuel tank, I have determined that your entirety would be vaporised, removing any possibility of regeneration or resurrection. But it would be painless."

"We are running out of time," Alf said. "They will be here soon and we have to make a decision."

"Fine." Tessa stood up and snatched the canister from Logar. "I've got this."

Anaemic and injured. But her will was iron. Tessa had suffered for most of her adult life but now she had found something, someone who took that pain away. She would not let these robots take that from her.

"You will require this," the little robot said. The front of his body opened and a cattle prod was pushed out. "This should be capable of providing a sufficient charge to trigger the explosion."

Tessa took the tool from the little robot. "Thanks."

Alf stepped in to stop her. But after a moment of hesitation he stepped aside to let Tessa pass. The thin carriage door opened automatically and she stopped at the doorway. Tessa looked back and for the first time Logar saw the tears which freely rolled down her cheeks.

"I'm sorry, Hal," Tessa said.

Tessa stepped through to the next carriage and the door slid shut behind her. For a moment she looked back through the window, her eyes longing for Hal. Then

she turned away. Hal had made her feel safe, like she had been in her innocent youth. Before she had smuggled slaves off mining colonies, before she had been arrested and sent to prison, and before that vile Doctor Hart had experimented on her.

“No!” Hal scream.

She burst up and out of her seat. Logar grabbed her around the waist to hold her back. She kicked at him but he kept a tight hold.

“Hey. Hey! This is her choice.” Logar tried to settle her down.

“Her choice?!” Hal screamed. “You let her. You can come back to life but you let her go in your stead. She can die. She can die...”

“She will die,” the little robot said.

“You are the fastest, the lone ranger, but you let her take the canister. You could have stopped her.” Tears streamed down her face. Beneath their wetness her red skin had paled, dark red turning pale in streaks down her soft cheeks.

“Hal-” Alf tried.

“No! You let her walk past you!” Hal continued to shout. “For a second you had a spine, but then you stepped aside. Both of you, You are both to blame! You want to win, Logar? You would let her die so you can win? Her life meant nothing. What do you want to wish for that is worth sending her to die? If winning the prize and making that wish so important to you?”

“Only one of us ain’t going to die by the end of this,” Logar said. “I didn’t change anything.”

“I should put another bullet in your stomach!” Hal drew her gun.

Logar snatched the revolver from her, his hands moved so fast they were a blur to her teary eyes. Hal looked at her hand, puzzled by how suddenly the gun had disappeared. Then the anger returned to her face as her brows furrowed and her jaw clenched.

“You let her take the canister!”

The explosion rocked the carriage. A brilliant purple light filled the tunnel, shining through the windows. The last light of Tessa. It followed the monorail through the tunnel a long way before dimming and fading. The explosion ripped the tunnel open and blasted the walls into space. After a few seconds, the shaking stopped and the carriage continued on the monorail.

“Each carriage is pressurised and secure,” the little robot said. “We are safe.”

The rest of their monorail ride went by in silence. Hal remained seated and silent, occasionally casting a sharp glance towards Logar and Alf. Alf never stopped looking out of the window. Logar had taken the time to put his old gun aside, now without a fuel tank, and he holstered Hal's weapon for himself.

When the carriage came to a large gate made of spiralled plates of metal, the gate spun open and let the carriage through before closing behind them. The carriage braked and stopped.

"We have arrived at the annexe," the little robot said. "Here we will find the server array."

"What is the point?" Hal asked. "All of the corrupt robots must be gone now."

"It would be best to know for sure," the little robot said. "We can not risk the security staff causing harm to any of our valued guests."

Alf and Logar said nothing on the matter. When the automatic doors slid open, the little robot led Hal onto the platform. Logar and Alf followed behind. They left a small gap between them as they walked.

"You did let her take the canister," Alf said with a quiet voice, careful not to let Hal overhear him.

"An' you let her walk by," Logar whispered under his breath.

"I admit that," Alf said, he still talked quietly. "I let her go to her death so that I could live. There is nothing fake when I have done wrong. You, on the other hand, smile and lie. You have always pretended to be a 'good guy' but we both know how you scheme. You knew, as soon as you had suggested using your plasma, that she would sacrifice herself. Heck, you planned it."

Logar stopped in the hallway, placing a calloused hand on Alf's chest and stopping him. "Don't mince words," Logar said. "If you wanna duel then we can duel. Omni may have a chance but you, blue boy, ain't got a prayer. I can drop Omni out of the competition, easy, with one bullet right here and now.

"So you think I lie to get what I want? That I deceive? Then I might remind you that I am letting you live cause I made a promise to Omni, to fight him at the end. If all I cared about was winning then you'd be dead already. I wouldn't even need to hurt Hal, without you there's no Omni. While Omni is healing, you two are dragging me down. So shut up and keep your sorry ass out of my way until you pair can be useful again."

"Hey, you two coming?" Hal asked.

Logar looked to see her waiting for them. Hal and the little robot had stopped at another set of doors. Large yellow letters read 'staff only' across the double doors.

"Keep your mouth closed, or be ready to back up your words," Logar warned before he limped onward.

Alf watched him walk away. His hand waited, his fingers itched, above his holstered gun. Logar spun around and whipped out Hal's rusted revolver. The gun was aimed at Alf. But he did not pull the trigger.

"You're not that fast, Alf," Logar said loud enough that his voice echoed around the platform. "An' you're not that smart either. Wanna catch me by surprise? Don't think about shooting me in the back right after we've had a tiff."

Hal groaned. "What are you two arguing about?" she asked. Though she had stopped crying, the pale streaks cutting down her cheeks had remained.

"The usual, Alf ain't happy about nothing," Logar answered.

"Cut it out," Hal said. "We deactivate the remaining security bots. Then we clear out whichever contestants are still alive. Finally, Omni and yourself can have your bloody duel. Until then you two can stop bickering."

"Sounds good to me," Logar replied.

"Fine," was all Alf said.

The little robot opened the doors for them. They came into a mass surveillance room that made up most of the annex. Hundreds of computers and displays, all organised into separate areas, showed camera feeds from each section of the space station. These were the only computers they had seen on the space station with electricity. Tall server banks stood in long rows at the back of the room.

"About time, I've been waiting forever." In the middle of the room, perched on a rolling chair, was a man in a grey suit.

"You a cowboy?" Logar asked. His hand was ready at his gun, waiting to draw it when needed.

The man shook his head. "Not quite, but I am playing the game."

"What do you mean?" Alf asked.

"Well, it's really simple," the suited man replied. "One of you stands to win a prize. A one-of-a-kind prize. You were all promised this prize to bring each of you here, while my employer is making money off of your show and wow!" He suddenly clapped his hands on that last word. "What a show it has been. Apparently,

viewership rocketed when you guys killed Throp. But when the new numbers come in for poor Tessa I bet they'll break television records.”

“Don't you dare say another word about Tessa!” Hal shouted.

“What does this have to do with anything?” Logar asked.

“Right,” the suited man said, as though he had been reminded to get back on track. “The big problem for Omega Tech is that if you win the prize then they lose something far more valuable than money.”

“Omega Tech sent you here to kill us then?” Logar asked. “Guess that wish prize is true.”

“Well, legally, the company can't offer a prize that you can't win,” the grey suited man said. “Oops. And they really wanted to draw in the best cowboys. So Omega Tech offered a wish granting star to the winner, but they've got no intention of paying out.”

“Inquiry; what is the source of the heat signature approaching the space station?” the little robot asked. All four of them turned to look at him as he pointed to a computer screen.

“What is the silly robot talking about?” the suited man asked.

“Do you care?” Alf countered.

“You're right, I don't,” the suited man answered.

“There's a problem with your plan,” Logar said.

“Oh? And what's that?” the man asked.

“We're seven of the best cowboys in the galaxy,” Logar said. “You ain't got a chance against us.”

The man was forced to stifle his laughter. “Cowboys. Hmm, that's funny. But I'm no cowboy. God, I wouldn't ever cut my paycheck from a bounty board, that would be embarrassing.”

“Then who are you?” Alf asked.

“I'm a professional. Not some rum runner with an old gun and a bucket of spit,” the man said. “I'm a hitman for more distinguished clients. Real jobs that make real money.”

“What did you say about Tessa?” Hal asked.

The man paused to focus on her. “Oh, right. That she probably made television history. Her death will be the most watched death in the wider galaxy.”

“You insensitive bas-“ Logar began.

“That’s the way she’d have wanted it,” Hal declared as she interrupted Logar. “No one will forget her now.”

“So I think I should finish you two off while you’re separated, nice and easy,” the man said as he pointed from Hal to Alf. “But you, Logar, you look like you can draw. What do you say we put the kids to bed and sort this out with a real duel?”

“You got a piece?” Logar asked.

The man smiled. “Of course. A professional always keeps their concealed carry close at hand.”

Hal backed away, taking slow steps to move closer to Alf. Logar’s eyes remained fixated on the suited man, while he kept his hand floating above his gun.

“You won’t win,” Logar said. “But you can walk away. You’re not a cowboy, you’re not competing. Forget the pay check and walk away with your life.”

“See, my problem is simple,” the hitman said. “Whatever Omega Tech is willing to pay me is obviously worth less than the prize. Maybe I want to make a wish. So I am competing. Please, try to outgun me, Logar. Go ahead, shoot me. I bet you can’t wait to see what I have up my sleeve.”

“Heat signature is five thousand metres away and rapidly approaching,” the little robot said.

“You’re bluffing,” Logar said. “You ain’t the first hitman I’ve run afoul. You’re all just a bunch o’ fancy suits for the Guild with no principles and no honour.”

“If you thought you could take me, then you would have drawn that gun already,” the man replied. “We both know that you’re old and getting slow. I’m better than you and that’s all there is to it.”

“Four thousand metres,” the little robot continued to count.”

“What do you want?” Logar asked. “You don’t strike me as the type to talk about shooting someone instead of actually shooting them. An’ you could have opened fire as soon as we came into the room. Why are you making threats?”

“Because you’re smarter than all of the other cowboys,” the suited man said. “You don’t want to be a cowboy anymore, getting paid pennies to carry your ass around the galaxy and do someone else’s dirty work. I figured you’re looking to retire.”

“Three thousand metres.”

“You ain’t sized me up quite right” Logar replied. “I’m the greatest cowboy and being a cowboy is all I want in life. But I won’t be lied to by anyone, not even Omega Tech. So I want information in return for your life.”

“I’ll tell you anything you want,” the man said as he adjusted his tie. “If you forfeit from the tournament.”

“I’d rather put a bullet in your head than forfeit!” Logar warned. “You’ve got no chance in this tournament either way.”

“Two thousand metres.”

“You give yourself too much credit, old man,” the hitman in the suit said before chuckling. He wore a wry smile and looked down his long nose at Logar. “There is no version where you win this. Only by walking away, and getting out early, do you keep on living.”

“You’re no hitman,” Logar said softly. “You’re just a dead man and you don’t know it yet. Your hearts stopped beating but that big brain is too busy thinking it’s so much smarter than e’rybody else to have noticed yet.”

“One thousand metres.”

“Cut the crap,” the suited man said. “Walk away Logar or I’ll put a big hole in your head.”

“I figured out why you didn’t shoot at first sight,” Logar said. “And I know why you keep on talking. You’re hoping I’ll fall for your act and bow out. An easy win for you with no threat. No risk. Cause you’re nothing but a coward, a yellow bellied coward hiding behind words instead of letting your gun do the talking. So I’m not forfeiting and you’ve got this one chance. How fast can you shoot me down? Before I pull my gun from its holster and put an end to your crap? Are you that fast?”

The suited man eyed Logar. “You can still walk away from this.”

Logar made no response, he just waited.

The bounty hunter made a move for his hidden pistol. *Bang.* A trail of smoke slithered from the tip of Logar’s revolver. Hal looked at the suited man, slumped over in his chair. Blood had started to stain the grey suit. Two more loud gunshots to the chest and Logar was confident that the hitman was permanently retired.

“Impact imminent,” the little robot warned.

A stream of light and fire ruptured the walls and burst through the wall and into the room. The intense flames came to a rest in the middle of the room gently hovering over the slumped over corpse of the hitman. Even though the hull had been

smashed open, there was no loss of pressure or air. Logar used a hand to shield his eyes from this bright light.

“Where is my brother?” the blazing ball of light asked, its words hummed through the room.

“Your brother ain’t here,” Logar said. “It’s only us cowboys on this station. You’re interrupting our competition.”

“Cowboys?” The light flickered and then dimmed as it shrunk down.

The blinding light passed and the flames took a shape. Where once a small star had blazed in the middle of the room, there now stood a man with glowing skin and waves of fiery hair.

“Is this a cowboy?” the starman asked. “I can compete.”

Logar had no idea what this light-turned-man was up to. But he knew a duellist when he saw one. It had torn through the hull of the space station but somehow everything was normal. No loss in pressure, no vacuum. If anything, the starman himself seemed to emanate a force of his own which pulled at Logar. A gravity stronger than the pull of the vacuum.

“If I compete and win, you will return my brother to me,” the starman declared.

Logar knew, despite his confusion, that the starman could find his brother. The prize, any one wish, could grant this intruder his brother. But the prize was for the winner and no one had won yet.

The ranger drew his gun. The starman raised his arm, fingers pointed forward. Logar was faster than the starman. He aimed and fired. The bullet stayed true and struck the starman in his neck. A perfect shot. If the starman was human; it would have hit his carotid artery and within fifteen seconds the starman would have bled to death. But the starman was not human. The bullet melted against his glowing skin as he took aim. His finger pointed forward at Logar as though he was imitating a gun. He pretended to shoot with his finger and a jet of searing fire leapt from his fingertip. Logar was struck through the chest by a lance of heat and light. He stood still, stunned, with a hole through his chest. The old man fell backwards. A whisper of smoke trailed from the starman’s finger.

The starman looked at Alf and then Hal. “Are you cowboys?”

“No,” Alf replied as fast as he possibly could. “There are three cowboys left, elsewhere in the station. You will need to take the monorail to connect to the rest of the station.”

“Show me,” the starman ordered. He raised his hand to his lips and blew on his smoking finger. The last wisps of grey faded away.

Alf led the starman towards the door. Hal stayed to the side and out of the way as she watched Alf walk away with a man-shaped star. As soon as the walking sun had left the room, the gravity went with him. A suction began at the large hole in the hull, where the starman had come through. First the air began to rush out. And smaller objects were pulled. But the further away the starman went, the worse it got. Until the room was rapidly depressurizing.

Hal sprinted over to Logar’s corpse. She stood for a moment, her crimson hair whipped around her. Computers, screens and cables were pulled out of the surveillance room and into space. Only the heavy server towers stood firm, bolted to the floor. Hal grabbed Logar’s arms and began dragging him to the servers. She planned to hold on tight to the only part of the room not being ushered into the vacuum. But the suction continued to grow. It got harder to breathe with each second that passed.

Hal felt her body lift from the floor, a pit swelled in her stomach as she lurched without any control. Logar’s lifeless body flew past her, and with a desperate reach, she clung to his legs. Together, they were sucked out of the space station.