

# Corner Bar Magazine

## Volume 8 Number 4

Page 1 – FAMILY SECRETS by Julie Brandon. Ms Brandon is a writer, playwright, poet, lyricist and member of a fabulous improv group living in a suburb of Chicago. As you may imagine, she's fond of words.

Page 9 – DIE EISENFRESSERIN by Christopher Stevenson. Mr. Stevenson is a writer and librarian in Washington, DC. He once won a ghost pepper eating contest. He has two cats: Sacco and Vanzetti.

Page 12 – MAMA'S LAST SUPPER by Sylvia Cumming. Ms Cumming lives in Southern California with her husband and two elderly cats. She has had a number of short stories published, most recently in *Alternate Reality Magazine*, *Freedom Fiction Magazine* and *The Museum of Americana Online Literary Magazine*. She would love to say she is working on a novel but actually she is just snacking and watching videos about cats or police car chases. As research, of course.

Page 15 – THE ACE IN THE HOLE by Sam Middleton. Mr. Middleton is a freelance communications specialist and ghost writer, specialising in business thought leadership. He currently resides in Colombia.



# “FAMILY SECRETS”

by JULIE BRANDON

When he died, their father had two requests. Had William known about them earlier, it might have been possible but by that time, the damage was done. He and his brother, Phillip, had been estranged for almost fifty years. William never fully explained what happened to Jeannie and Rob. He mentioned it in rather cryptic terms over the years, but no clear explanation was ever given. Truthfully, neither Jeannie nor Rob cared enough to ask for details. They had never met Phillip and felt no attachment to him. He was just another unknown aspect of their father's past. According to William, Phillip had moved away from their hometown forty-five years ago. He never returned, not even when his parents died. No letters, no Christmas cards, no contact at all. Basically, it was radio silence from the moment he drove away. For a long time, Jeannie and Rob believed he was a figment of their father's imagination. When they were young, they searched the trunks in the attic for some record of Phillip. All they ever found were pictures of William as a child and his parents. Once, Jeannie questioned Mary Ellen, their mother, about Phillip. She quickly told Jeannie to never mention his name again and refused to discuss it. In time, Rob and Jeannie lost interest in their mys-

terious uncle until the morning the letter arrived.

It was unsigned and had no return address. The postmark was smudged and unreadable. As was his custom, William opened the daily mail at the breakfast table. Upon reading the unsigned letter, he paled and cried out. As he tried to rise from his chair, he stumbled. The chair crashed to the floor and William fell to his knees. Mary Ellen rushed to him and knelt beside him, murmuring vague soothing sounds. With a shaking hand, William handed her the letter whispering, “Phillip.” Mary Ellen read the letter in silence. She closed her eyes and reached for William's hand. “It's finally happened,” she said. Both Rob and Jeannie, who had come home for the annual summer visit, looked at their parents in surprise. Jeannie jumped up to help her mother back to her chair while Rob rushed to his father's side.

“Dad, what is it?” he asked. William put head in his hands and didn't answer. “Come on, Dad. Let's get you up off the floor.”

After righting William's chair, Rob gently grasped his father's elbow and helped him rise. William sat down heavily, still not speaking.

“Is it something terrible?” Jeannie

asked. William looked up at Jeannie and nodded.

"My brother Phillip is dead and it's my fault."

Mary Ellen shook her head. "Oh no, you mustn't say that. He's been gone for years. We don't even know where's he's been living."

"But I never tried to find him, did I?" William pounded the table with his fist. "I just let him go to save myself."

Tears rolled down his cheeks. "It's my fault, Mary Ellen. My fault." Their mother stood up.

"No, William, it isn't." She walked over to him and held out her hand. "Come, dear. Let's walk in the garden for a bit."

William sighed and rose. He took hand and they silently left the room. Rob and Jeannie stared at one another.

"What the hell is this?" Rob asked.

Jeannie shrugged her shoulders. "I have no idea. To think, Phillip was a real person after all." She tapped her spoon against her coffee cup. "Perhaps now we can get an explanation for his disappearance."

Rob nodded. "Let's talk to Dad after he's calmed down. Agreed?"

Jeannie frowned. "I suppose that's best."

William didn't join the rest of the family for dinner. When asked why he was absent, Mary Ellen merely said he was tired and needed to rest. Ron gave Jeannie a quick look. Their mother was uncharacteristically quiet throughout the meal. Once they finished eating, she excused herself and went upstairs to her husband. Rob

threw his napkin down in disgust.

"Jesus, they're stonewalling us again," he said.

Jeannie knew just how he felt. Their parents had never been very forthcoming. Most of what Jeannie and Rob know of their family history had been cobbled together from scrapes of overheard conversations throughout the years. It was frustrating to think that the answer to Phillip's disappearance was known by the two people who didn't want to talk about it.

"How do you suggest we go about it?" she asked. "Divide and conquer?"

Her brother sighed. "I guess the old way is the best way. I'll tackle Dad and you work on Mom. Okay?"

Jeannie nodded. "We're not going to make any progress tonight. I'm going to make some tea and read. I'll see you in the morning."

After his sister had gone up to her room, Rob sat on the back porch listening to the nighttime noises. The house backed up to the woods. When he was young, the nocturnal rustlings of small animals had frightened him. William had calmed his fears by taking him on nighttime hikes. Once Rob had seen for himself how the animals scurried away at their approach, he relaxed and began to enjoy the sounds. He smiled at the memory. He hoped that he could convince his father to share why he believed that he was responsible for Phillip's death. It was time to put this particular family secret to rest. Upstairs, Jeannie sipped her chamomile tea, her open book forgotten on the nightstand as

she tried to figure out how best to approach her mother. Mary Ellen could be as stubborn and closed mouthed as her husband. Once a subject was closed, that was it. No matter how much Jeannie had whined as a little girl, her mother remained unmoved. Damn this secretive family, she thought. No wonder neither Rob nor she had long-term relationships. As soon as someone got close, they both scuttled off like frightened rabbits. She heard the door to Rob's room shut. She often worried that once their parents died, the two of them would end up living here alone. The lonely spinster and her oddball brother. Jeannie snapped off the light and tried to sleep.

The next morning, neither William nor Mary Ellen came down to breakfast. Jeannie was concerned.

"Something's wrong, Robbie. I just know it."

Rob sighed and continued to butter his toast. "Just ask Lena where they are."

Lena had been with the family for as long as they could remember. Sort of a housekeeper/cook/maid combination. Jeannie went through the swinging door that separated the dining room from the kitchen. Lena was slicing vegetables for that evening's dinner, her back to Jeannie.

"Lena, where are Mom and Dad?"

Lena continued her work. Jeannie remembered that she was going a little deaf and spoke louder. "Lena, where are Mom and Dad?"

"Why, I expect they're in their bedroom, Miss Jeannie. They sometimes have breakfast in front of the fireplace."

Jeannie thanked her and returned to the dining area. Rob was placidly eating his toast. Jeannie poured herself a cup of coffee and sat down. She began tapping her spoon against the side of the cup.

"Good God, will you please stop doing that?" Rob growled.

Surprised, Jeannie dropped her spoon into the saucer. She had broken the habit years ago and wasn't even aware she'd been doing it. She looked across the table at her older brother.

"You don't have to snap at me. Have you been able to figure out the best way to talk to Dad?"

Rob shook his head. He's been up most of the night and was tired and out of sorts.

"Maybe we should wait until tomorrow."

Jeannie stood up. If they waited too long, their parents would sweep the whole thing under the rug, never to be discussed again.

"No. It's now or never. I'm going up there this minute. They can't hide from us all day. Coming?"

Grudgingly, Rob followed Jeannie upstairs. When they arrived at their parents' bedroom door, they hesitated. As children, they were never allowed in the room unless expressly invited and even then, were made to feel like interlopers. Taking a deep breath, Jeannie tapped lightly on the door.

"Mom? Dad?"

There was no answer. Jeannie turned worried eyes to Rob. He gave her a reassuring pat on the shoulder. He knocked loud-

er.

"Mom? Dad? Can we come in?"

No answer. Rob carefully turned the doorknob and opened the door. William and Mary Ellen were sitting in the Queen Anne chairs on either side of the small fireplace. Neither acknowledged Rob or Jeannie as they entered. Jeannie felt a shiver of fear. Rob approached their parents.

"We missed you at breakfast.

Everything okay?"

William sighed and shook his head.

"Nothing will ever be okay again, son. I'm no better than Cain."

Mary Ellen made an impatient gesture. She took a deep breath.

"William, how many times do I have to repeat myself? You are not responsible for your brother's death."

William gave her a small sad smile.

"Yes, dear, I've heard you each time. However, am I not my brother's keeper? I should have followed him, searched for him. My life has been a fabric of lies."

Jeannie stepped forward. This had gone far enough.

"Dad, unless you tell us what's going on, how can we help you?"

William laughed. "My dear girl, no one can help me now. As Lena would say, the chickens have come home to roost."

Rob snorted. His mother looked at him with disdain.

"You find this amusing, Robert?"

Rob sighed. "Of course not, Mom. It's just the same old song and dance routine. Jeannie and I are adults and if there's a problem affecting the family, we are fully

capable of helping sort things out. You two don't have to shoulder all of life's problems alone."

Mary Ellen and William exchanged a glance. Mary Ellen gave him a small nod. Jeannie and Rob sat down on the hearth rug and waited. After a few moments, William began to speak.

"The beginning of this sad tale started more than sixty-five years ago. You didn't know your paternal grandparents. They died before your mother and I met. Such cold and unkind people. Neither were affectionate. My father was a strict disciplinarian and Mother followed suit. Phillip and I were born eleven months apart so in a way, we were more like twins. Mother even dressed us alike until we rebelled at age twelve. Father was very particular about with whom we associated, so we didn't have any friends. We had each other." William paused. "Our father seemed unhappy with our easy camaraderie and forced us to compete with one another to win any approval. At first, we objected to it, but that only made matters worse. If we refused, one of us would be beaten. It didn't matter to my father which one of us he hit, so long as he sowed discord between us. In time, pitting brother against brother became the norm in our household. Slowly, our close relationship suffered. How could it not under such cruelty?"

William fell silent. "When we were twenty and nineteen, respectively, Phillip came to me with a plan. He had decided to run away from home and wanted me to come with him. I told him that he was a



fool. We argued for quite a while. Finally, I told him to go alone. He made me promise not to tell our parents. I grudgingly agreed.” Tears welled up in William’s eyes.

Mary Ellen leaned forward and patted his hand. “Dear, you don’t have to continue right now.”

“If I stop, I may not have the courage. The children have a right to know the truth.”

William glanced at Rob and Jeannie. “Even if they think less of me.” He bowed his head. Jeannie reached up and grasped her father’s hand. “We could never do that, Dad.” William blinked back tears. Rob was astonished. He had never seen his father lose his composure. After clearing his throat, William continued.

“Over the next few weeks, Phillip carefully planned his escape. He had been systematically hoarding any cash he could get his hands on. Our father held the purse strings, and we were given a limited amount of pocket money. At first, he encouraged me to come with him but when he saw my reluctance, soon stopped. Although we had been forced to become adversaries, Phillip was my brother and I loved him. I was petrified at being left alone with my parents and secretly admired his courage. He kept waiting for the opportunity to leave and it finally came when our parents were to attend an event at the mayor’s home. Neither of us had been invited. Phillip whispered to me earlier in the day that this was his chance. After our parents left for the evening, Phillip asked me to meet him at 9 pm by the fountain in

the formal garden. He had stolen clothes from the stable boy to better blend in once he was in town. I begged him to tell me where he was going but he refused, saying it would be better for me not to know. After promising to send word soon, Phillip, my only brother, my only friend, walked out of the front gates and out of my life forever.” William paused.

Jeannie looked over at Rob. As much as they disagreed, she couldn’t imagine never seeing him again. William took a deep breath.

“My parents were unaware of Phillip’s defection until the next morning. All hell broke loose. My father questioned me over and over. When he finally realized that I didn’t know where Phillip had gone, he simply stopped speaking to me. Everything I said was met with silence. My mother spoke to me as little as possible. My life, which was unbearable, became even more so. Every day I regretted not leaving with Phillip. And then the unthinkable happened. My parents were killed in an auto accident. My father had never changed his will. With Phillip gone, I was the sole heir to the family fortune including this very house.” William smiled at Mary Ellen. “I was finally free to live a normal life. I was heady with the freedom. It was then your mother and I met. I convinced her to marry me and here we still are.”

Rob frowned. “What about Phillip? Did he ever send word?” His father hung his head.

“There was one letter about a year after he left. Our parents were dead by then. He

was somewhere in Oregon. I never answered the letter. Over time, I began to blame him for abandoning me. I lived in fear that he would return and claim his half of the inheritance.”

“Mom, did you know about this?”  
Jeannie asked. Mary Ellen nodded.

“I did. Your father told me just before we married. I assured him that if Phillip ever came back, we would face it together.”

William continued. “As the years passed, I pushed memories of Phillip fur-

ther away. They were too painful, and I just wanted to forget.” He took deep breath.

“Around twenty years after my parents’ death, I came across a letter my father had written to me prior to his untimely death. It had gotten swept up with other papers and I never saw it. In it, he requested that after his death, I find Phillip and any offspring he may have. He wrote that he intended to disinherit Phillip but just couldn’t do it. He also asked for my forgiveness. I was stunned and very conflicted. If I



found Phillip, I would have to give up half off my inheritance. I found I couldn't honor either of these requests." William covered his eyes with his hands. "Now you know what kind of man I truly am."

Rob and Jeannie were stunned into silence.

"Who sent the letter?" Rob asked after a few minutes. "Can we see it?"

Mary Ellen walked over to the small desk in front of the bay window and retrieved the letter. She handed it to Rob. Jeannie slid over next to her brother and read it with him. Jeannie frowned and read out loud.

'Phillip is dead. We'll be there soon.' What does that mean? Who'll be here? Are we in the middle of a bad melodrama?"

William shrugged. "Does it matter? At last, I can stop living a lie." He stood up. "I do believe that I'm ready for some breakfast." He held out his hand to his wife. "Shall we, dear?" Mary Ellen took his hand, and they left the room. Jeannie and Rob stared at each other in astonishment. Jeannie stood up and stretched.

"This is unreal. It's hard to imagine our strait-laced father is so shady. And Mom went along with it! What next?"

Rob stared into the unlit fireplace. Things had certainly taken an unexpected turn. Jeannie walked towards the door. "Coming?" she asked. He nodded and they went downstairs to join their parents for breakfast.

The rest of the day passed quietly. Mary Ellen spent time gardening while William read in the library. Rob and Jeannie drove

into town, returning a short while before dinner. Dinner conversation was light and relaxed. It was obvious to both Jeannie and Rob that their father's confession was going to be swept under the rug, never to be discussed again. William and Mary Ellen took a walk in the garden after dinner and retired early. Jeannie joined Rob on the back porch swing. They sat in silence for a while. Jeannie sighed.

"I suppose all we can do is wait." She rose and stood at the porch railing. "I've never been good at waiting." The porch swing creaked as Rob stood up.

"I know but there's no hurrying things." Rob put his arm around Jeannie's shoulder and gave her a squeeze. "Don't worry, sis. It'll all work out. You should get some rest." Jeannie patted his hand and said good night. Once she had gone upstairs, Rob stayed out on the back porch long into the night.

Rob was the only one at the breakfast table when Jeannie entered the dining room. She looked at the empty chairs.

"No Mom and Dad again? Should we check on them?"

Rob shook his head. "Personally, I'd rather have a good breakfast first." He took a sip of his coffee. Jeannie sat down across from him and served herself from the covered dishes on the table. She and Rob heard Lena's heavy tread above as she made her way to Mary Ellen and William's bedroom. Suddenly, there was the sound of a heavy tray hitting the floor and a woman screaming. Jeannie and Rob jumped to



their feet and ran up the stairs. Lena stood weeping in front of the open bedroom door. Rob ran into the room while Jeannie comforted sobbing Lena.

“Miss Jeannie, it’s too terrible. How could they do such a thing?”

Rob backed out of the bedroom, his face pale. When Jeannie started for the door, he held up his hand to stop her. She had to see for herself. William and Mary Ellen were stretched out on the bed, fully dressed. At first glance, they seemed to be sleeping peacefully. Then Jeannie saw the empty pill bottles and note on the nightstand. Jeannie reached for her cell phone and quickly called 911. Rob closed the bedroom door and helped Lena downstairs. Once she was settled in the kitchen with a cup of tea with a splash of brandy, Rob joined Jeannie in the front parlor where she was waiting for the police. They sat in silence. The police cruiser came speeding up the gravel drive, scattering stones. Jeannie thought about how displeased her mother would be until she realized her mother would never be displeased again. Rob got up to answer the pounding on the front door and let the police officers into the house. After answering questions for what seemed like hours, the medical examiner transported their parents’ bodies to the local morgue. Lena’s sister drove in from the neighboring town to take Lena back to her house.

They showed the police the letter William had received and explained its significance. The detective had removed it and expressed his condolences to them. He and

the medical examiner agreed that it was a joint suicide. Finally, Rob and Jeannie were alone. Rob looked around the room.

“I guess it’s all ours now.” Jeannie nodded. “That was clever of you, sis. I’d never have thought about sending that letter.” He poured himself a drink from the liquor cabinet and handed one to her.

Jeannie smiled. “Our parents weren’t the only ones with secrets. Once I heard that those developers offered to buy this property and Dad had turned them down, there was only one thing to do. I knew it would send Dad over the edge.” Rob looked at his sister with admiration. “I looked for Phillip several years ago and found his obituary. I thought it may come in handy one day. Even though Phillip died destitute thirty years ago, he helped us get what we wanted.” She raised her glass. “A toast to Phillip, the ghost who got his revenge from beyond the grave.” They began to laugh. No one heard them in the big empty house except for the nocturnal animals who fled at the sound. ❖

# “DIE EISENFRESSERIN”

by CHRISTOPHER STEVENSON

There is a blue house with red shutters on main street. For generations, the Wexler family lived there.

Johannes Wexler moved here from Germany in the 1700s because he heard the mountain in those parts had gold. When he arrived, they only had iron. So, Johannes became a blacksmith and did a lot with ironworks. He made a pretty good life for himself. He married Dorcas Schiffer and they had 16 kids together. Over 30,000 descendants from here to Biscayne Bay and beyond.

When his first son was born, he had no nose, so he crafted one out of iron. It was a bit heavy and kept falling out, so he created straps for his son to carry it in his nostrils. He painted it white and smudged it with dirt.

One summer night, while the son slept, *die Eisenfresserin* came to visit. Chomp! Chomp! Chomp! The noise was so loud, they could hear it five mountains over. Johannes awoke to run to his son's bed and there *die Eisenfresserin* sat atop the boy, eating the ferrous snoot, one nostril at a time.

“What are you doing?” asked Johannes.

“You have been stealing my food from the hills and springs,” said *die Eisenfresserin*. “I am reclaiming what is mine.”

*Die Eisenfresserin* then sniffed the air. She walked toward Lilly, a daughter who had earlier scraped her knee.

“You take my food and put it in your body?”

Johannes said, “It's blood.”

“Ah,” said *die Eisenfresserin*, who sniffed deeper. “Your blood is made of dead stars, just like the iron in the ground and in your boy's nose. Quite a revelation. Perhaps I will take your children and turn them into fountains from which I can draw my vitamins as I need.”

She walked over to a chair and sat for a minute. “I shall cut you all open and feast on your blood!”

“Wait! What if instead of killing my family, we provide you with iron to eat?”

“I think I'd rather prefer eating your children instead,” said *die Eisenfresserin*, gripping her 7-foot tail.

“If you kill us, you'll only get the iron from us once. But what if we left out iron for you every night? We would be your servants!”

“Well, I only feed once a month, and the sound of servants does sound appealing. Leave a pound of iron out on the 13th day of the month, and we have a deal. This shall be your family's duty for all time. If there ever comes a time in which

your family does not comply, I will travel through time and chop off the noses of all in your paternal line, past and present as a warning. A second time and I will become a wife to all your daughters and great-granddaughters and so forth. A third time and I will suck the blood of all the firstborns. Do you understand?"

"I do."

And things were great for 200 years.

First chunks of iron were put out. Neighbors would steal them. Every time the Wexlers managed to catch the loss and replace it before they lost their noses. Finally, in 1869 Ronan Wexler built a shed. He used copper bolts to hold the joists together, and fastened them with iron nuts. The next morning, when they woke, the iron nuts, one-pound worth, would be missing. Wexler and his descendants kept putting out iron every month on the 13th day of the month until Martin Snooglesby came along. Snooglesby, while descended from the Wexlers, did not believe in the superstitious stories of *die Eisenfresserin*. Snooglesby was not a great father nor a wonderful husband. He'd given his wife Miranda three daughters, but he loved the beer and the sportsball more. One year, Miranda found a sportsball that doubled as a sex toy and beer coaster online, and Martin called it the best present he ever got.

In regards to *die Eisenfresserin*, Martin was pretty sure someone was stealing his nuts. He ditched the shed and bought a brand-new plastic one from Walmart.

On the evening of the 13th of that

month, *die Eisenfresserin* knocked on the Snooglesby house.

Martin answered, and there stood *die Eisenfresserin*, with a piece of the shed in his hand.

"You feed me dead dinosaurs instead of the pieces of stars?"

"What?"

*Die Eisenfresserin*, took her razor-sharp claws and swiped Martin's nose. At that moment, every Wexler descendant and ancestor in the paternal line lost their nose.

"I will have dead stars in my stomach or I will have your women."

"Dead stars?"

"You've been warned."

The next day Martin was out in his yard scratching his head when a little boy named Max Wexler walked up and said, "I see you decided to break tradition."

Martin turned to see little Max without a nose.

"What the hell!?" said Martin.

"Yep," said Max. "We all lost our noses. My father, my grandfather, my great-grandfather. We have a painting of Johannes Wexler and it's suddenly without a nose. We look ridiculous. Like skeletons. This is all your fault. So, are you going to set it straight?"

"He said he wanted dead stars."

"She," said Max. "And she wants iron."

With this information, Martin went door to door looking for iron, but everyone was afraid of him when he went to the door.

As it got dark, Martin was still looking for this cursed metal. Not the brightest

person, he walked by so many objects with iron and steel in them, but it never occurred to him.

In the meantime, *die Eisenfresserin* came back and crawled into bed with the wife.

Tired and weary, Martin returned to the sounds of high pitched wails from the bed chambers, wheeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeew!. Out walked an extremely happy wife with jiggling thighs.

"All my life I'd been atheist, and now I believe in God," she said to her husband.

Martin ignored her and sat on the couch and turned on the TV.

Then there was a knock at the door. It was little Max.

"Look man, I don't know what to tell you, but the Wexlers would like their noses back. I borrowed my Dad's credit card. Here's a pound of iron supplements I found online."

"Thanks kid!" Martin called up to *die Eisenfresserin*, "Hey you! Come down here, you wife-stealer!"

*Die Eisenfresserin* made her way down.

"Yes?"

"I'll make you a deal."

"No deal."

"What if I give you these pills and you can take them whenever you want? I'll set them out by the shed when you run out."

"Why don't I just drain the blood from all the firstborns in town instead?"

Impatient, Max barged in front of Martin.

"Because it's messy," said Max. "And, it's kind of mean."

*Die Eisenfresserin* was impressed when she tried one of the pills. "Not bad. Not as gritty as the stuff in the ground, and not as smooth as the nuts. And you are right, child, it is not as messy as sucking the blood from firstborns. This is just perfect and not as mean as killing. What is your name, boy?"

"John Maximillian Wexler."

"Indeed, not Snoogles-loogie like this man," said *die Eisenfresserin*. "I return all the noses of the Wexler men."

"And the women?" asked Martin.

"Your wife and daughters are free to go."

"Thank goodness!" Martin got down on his knees and thanked the creature.

Martin's wife ignored him and followed *die Eisenfresserin* out the door.

"Miranda?"

She didn't answer. She disappeared into the darkness of the night. The daughters followed, never to be seen again.

Martin said, "I will order you a pound every month."

*Die Eisenfresserin* said, "Don't bother. I get them from Amazon with American Express."

And then she disappeared, too.

The old folks tell of Martin still living in the house, watching sportsball, and drinking beer. While he never sees Miranda, he sometimes hears her wail. Everyone does. Any time a fire goes out and is ignored, and the wind blows through the exhaust pipes, you can hear her.

"Whhhhheeeeeeeeeeww!" ❖



# “MAMA’S LAST SUPPER”

by SYLVIA CUMMING

The table was fit for a holiday on Mama’s expiration date. Flowers in the center, a roast, mashed potatoes, green beans, the works. Mama untied her red apron and draped it on the chair back behind her as she sat with a sigh. I recall thinking how tired she looked.

“A meal to remember,” Papa said, passing the roast beef to Laird, who heaped his plate with pink-centered slices. “You saved the best for last.”

“My last,” Mama agreed, stroking her shoulder absently.

All five of us were there, Laird home from college all the way down to Bean in his booster seat, plus Mama and Papa. I don’t think any of us wanted her to go.

“My professor said, back in the 2000s, no one knew their date,” Laird said. His scruffy beard waggled when he talked. “There was even a game where people guessed how and where someone died. ‘Miss Peacock in the dining room with the wrench.’”

“It’s so weird to think people just went about life back then, as though it were normal. No one ever had a chance to prepare,” Petunia said, running her finger around her plate. She licked the last of the gravy off it.

“Don’t use your finger, Pet,” Mama said. “Take another serving if you’re hun-

gry.”

“When did they start giving expiration dates to people?” Junie asked. She was the second youngest, two years younger than me.

“Way before you were born,” Mama replied. “It was part of the genetic lottery.”

“You won, Bean,” I said to my little brother. “You’ll outlive all of us.”

That set Bean off.

“I don’t wanna!” he wailed, climbing down from his chair. “I want my mama all the time!” He stomped down the hallway, diaper drooping, into Mama’s room and slammed the door.

“Thanks, Chuck,” Pet said sarcastically.

“Laird brought it up,” I replied. “It’s no secret, it’s right on Mama’s shoulder. Today, two-thirty, right here at home. That’s why we’re all here.”

“The idea was,” Papa began from the far end of the table. “The idea was to improve productivity. If you knew your time, you’d hurry to get everything done, provide for your family and make good memories.”

“But it didn’t work like that at first,” Mama added. She was up again and starting to clear the table. “There were riots. And a lot of the dates were wrong.”

“There are the Apatheticists,” Pet said.

"My friend Joy's mom is one. She just lies in bed all day, waiting. She's due to go next year, in Vail, Colorado. The trip is already planned."

Papa nodded. "It's still not settled science."

"You mean there's a chance I'll live past my date?" I asked, scrunching my shoulder up so I could see the tattoo. January 1, 2136 at 1:12 a.m. A New Year's accident, maybe. I shivered.

"Nothing is ever certain, that's why it's called a lottery." Papa said. "There's the government bonus, though."

"I don't want a bonus," Junie said. "I want Mama."

Mama picked Junie's plate up and kissed her on the head. "I know," she said.

Papa said, "It's good for us. No surprises, time to prepare and all."

"The government gives a bigger bonus for a parent. You can all go on a nice vacation and scatter my ashes," Mama said.

Everyone was quiet for a moment.

Then Pet said, "A family portrait! We need a photo to remember Mama by. I know, Laird can take the picture with his old camera thingy."

We pulled the couch away from the window so Papa could stand behind and put his hands on Mama's shoulders. They looked like an old timey couple from the nineteen hundreds, with the rest of us crowded around Mama as though our love could stop her from expiring.

Laird was just about to take the first photo when Petunia said, "Where's Bean?"

"Oh, heavens," Mama said. She had

Junie on her lap instead of Bean.

Laird made a face and shook his head. "We'll never get a family photo at this rate."

Mama stood and set Junie down on the couch. "He's probably fallen asleep on my bed. I'll get him."

Then Papa's electronix went off and he went into the kitchen to take the call.

"Everyone else, stay where you're at," Laird said. He was looking through the viewfinder. "I want to take some test photos."

I was scrunched up against the far arm of the sofa, and Pet's hair tickling my nose made me sneeze.

"Let's play a game," Junie said. "I spy with my little eye something red."

"That's easy. Mama's apron on the dining room chair," Pet said.

Papa strode back into the room rubbing his hands together. "So, where were we?"

"In the middle of Laird's photo shoot, which has yet to happen," Pet told him.

"Where's your mother? She's the star of the show," Papa said. He had taken his place behind the couch.

Junie stood on the couch and put her arms around Papa's neck. "She's dead, dead, dead."

Papa pulled Junie's hands away and turned to the window.

"Don't be an ass, Junie," Laird said. "She just went to get Bean."

"But it's two-thirty," Junie pointed to the mantel. "Look at the clock."

"That clock's slow," I said.

But everyone was already off the couch and racing down the hallway into Mama and Papa's room.

Mama lay on the bed, one arm flung out and one across her body. Strands of her brown hair spread across the pillow and onto the quilt and a ray of sunlight fell across her still chest. One flip flop had fallen off her foot, and her pants had scooched up one freckled calf. The worry lines around her closed eyes had smoothed out, and her lips were set in a slight smile. Bean was nestled against her arm, staring up at her face.

A knock at the front door broke the silence.

"There's the knackers," Pet said. Her eyes were wet and her nose was red.

"Don't call them that," Papa said.

"Mama?" Bean said. He touched her lip with one finger. "Wake up."

Papa sat on the bed next to her and smoothed her cheek.

Mama's hand was still warm. When I think of Mama now I remember Bean, tapping her shoulder on one side and me with my hand resting on hers, and Papa weeping on the other side of the bed in that room that was too small and too busy for death.

The pounding on the front door sounded far away, as though someone had turned the volume down on it.

With a sigh, Papa pulled himself up and drifted down the hall to answer it. Pet was gone, in her room crying in private, I guessed. I picked up Bean and took him out back, where Junie sat drawing in the dirt with a stick. There were muddy spots

where her tears had fallen.

"We didn't get a picture of everyone," Junie said. "We didn't get to say goodbye."

"But we did," I reminded her, resting Bean on my cocked hip, the way Mama did. "She cooked this last supper for us, and there we all were, just being us together. That was her goodbye."

Junie leaned against me and sobbed. Bits of conversation drifted out the screen door as the knackers did their job. Laird stepped outside, squinted at the sunshine, and lit a cigarette.

Finally, I heard the front door slam then the sound of the knacker truck driving away.

Papa appeared at the back door looking gray.

"Well," he said. "That's that."

Behind him, Pet appeared wearing Mama's red apron.

"Isn't anyone going to help clean up?" she asked.

I pulled Junie up and together, we all went inside. ❖

# “THE ACE IN THE HOLE”

by SAM MIDDLETON

Carlisle Jags wanted nothing more than to find the last members of the human race. But standing in the scrap moon’s cramped executive office, listening to Christie fail at diplomacy, she couldn’t help but think it was never going to happen.

“Listen, Tinkerbelle,” he said to the tin goblin sitting opposite, “we’re not messin’ around here.”

He leaned over the desk, both hands pressed into the stainless-steel surface, his molten skin charred black and angry underneath the military green wife-beater.

He looked like an ape. Then again, he always looked like an ape.

“We know the pure breed is here,” he said. “And we know you know where it is.”

The tin goblin cackled maniacally, iron jaw gnashing like a broken waste recycler.

“You don’t have the jurisdiction,” it said, the harsh metallic tones unable to hide the glee in its constructed larynx.

The whole time, Jags had kept one eye on Jackson Le’rue. Waiting for him to use that oil spill of a voice to coolly steer the conversation to a conclusion that suited her.

But up until now, he hadn’t said a word.

He’d eased himself into a chair behind the desk, placed one leg atop the other, and

let Christie do all the talking.

Up until now.

“How’s this for jurisdiction,” her boss said, placing a plastic electro-dilator on the desk. The pistol’s translucent white casing and membranous green barrel cavity made Jags think of bioware and surgical equipment. She hadn’t even seen him reach into a holster.

Dangerous, that one. Very dangerous.

The tin goblin’s red LEDs considered the gun, then flared with rage. “No weapons allowed on the moon!”

It hammered one of its tiny fists on the table top and turned to the woman standing next to it.

She could have been a wax statue.

Corded muscles lean as grappling wire and petroleum glazed marble-white skin screamed high-grade DNA splicing. Given the clear absence of perspiration under the sleeveless leather jacket, Jags was betting reptilian genetics.

“No weapons!” the tin goblin said again, its metal voice the perfect inflection of accusation and question. How did he get a weapon in here, and how did you let it happen?

The woman looked down at the construct, her feelings about the reproach concealed behind ridged ocular mods black as



dead space.

But before she could respond, Jackson shrugged apologetically.

“As impressive as she undoubtedly is,” he said, his cosmic blue eyes taking her in the same way he might look at a new point defence system or torpedo upgrades, “she ain’t got shit on the kit we’ve got.”

He smiled at the tin goblin.

“Same kit’s telling us you’ve got a stow-away.”

The tin goblin paused, LEDs dimming to a soft crimson. “Mr. Cochrane’s moon,” it said, pointing a finger downwards at the desk to indicate the moon, “Mr. Cochrane’s stowaway.”

“Except it ain’t,” Jackson said. “Mr. Cochrane is the one absent the jurisdiction. Me and my crew, being legitimate and UW registered gene salvagers, do have jurisdiction.”

The tin goblin’s laugh sounded like compacting metal. “You take me for some tin pot servo monkey? I think you got no such registration. I think you and yours is full of space waste, Mr. Le’rue.”

“What I think,” Jackson said, “is when we inform the United Worlds Gene Authority that the good Mr. Cochrane is harbouring a pure breed human being, they’ll impound this entire moon.”

He chuckled but the laughter didn’t reach his eyes.

“I don’t think Mr. Cochrane would be too happy with that particular state of affairs. I think if that happened, Mr. Cochrane Chance would reconstitute you right back into whatever scrap heap he

made you from.”

Here we go, Jags thought. This is what it had all come to. Six long months running with a human bounty crew. Gene salvagers who’d sell her to the nearest meat market the second they got a whiff of what she really was. Months of lying, charming, and constant gnawing fear. All for this. The moment where the tin goblin would call Jackson’s bluff or they’d find one of the galaxy’s last pure breeds. One of the last members of her race. Her kin.

She tried to ignore the way her fingers itched at her sides. And the teardrop of sweat crawling its way down her back.

The tin goblin opened its jaw, and then shut it again. Looked up at the women and then back at Jackson. Somewhere, far away, a small part of her was impressed that something made from old engine parts could convey such human-like defeat.

“You search scrap moon,” the tin goblin said, “you don’t call UW.”

Jackson chuckled. This time, it did reach his eyes.

“Pleasure doing business with you,” he said, and Jags released a breath she hadn’t realized she’d been holding.

Then she noticed the woman.

It was impossible to tell but she had the distinct impression those grooved lenses were staring directly at her.

#

Jags stood on the *Orion Queen*’s operations deck, the four other crew members lounging in crash seats and looking up at her, expectantly.

But she couldn’t really see them. All

she could see were those eyes.

Or lack of eyes, to be more accurate.

It made no sense. Everything was going to plan. Exactly to plan. But just picturing the lidless black ellipses made her feel like a hunted animal.

Although, when you were one of the last of your species, that was a fairly regular feeling.

“You were saying?”

Jags didn't know who'd spoken, then she saw Ebby Le'rue, her pixie-like face screwed up and designer lips pouting furiously.

Jackson's twenty-three, going on twelve-year-old daughter, was making a show of drumming her purple-tipped fingernails on her seat's armrest.

“Right, yeah,” Jags said, gathering herself. “It's there.” She pointing at the



cracked navigation screen hanging over the ops table. Its 2D display was showing the dark green mass of a waterfall flowing over the lighter green of a crater. "That's where the human is."

Every member of the crew leaned in a little closer.

"How's it hiding inside a waterfall," Christie said.

"It's not inside the waterfall," Jags said. "It's in that."

She pointed at an angular shape to the left of the fall line.

"It's a disused furnace," she said. "The waterfall used to be its power source, and its fail safe. Would've stopped it from going supernova."

"How the hell do you know the human is there?" Ebby said.

"Because I have tracker genetics," Jags lied, adopting what she hoped was a suitably exasperated tone. "Why your dad hired me, remember."

Ebby's coal-black eyes narrowed on hers. Jags held her gaze, if only so she didn't have to look at Jackson. Something about his cool blue eyes always made her think he could see right through her façade.

"I dno' about this boss," Christie said, giving Jags an excuse to break eye contact. "I mean, why would a human even hide on a scrap moon in the first place. Not like it's gonna' blend in. Goblin's probably just screwin' with us."

"It's the perfect place to hide," Jags said, more forcefully than she'd intended. Jackson knew Christie was an idiot, but she

couldn't take any chances – not now she was getting so close. "No one would think to look here precisely because it wouldn't blend in."

She chanced a look at Jackson.

Reclining in his seat, he held a filterless, cream-coloured cigarette between his fingers. The smoke, thick as burning tar and smelling of engine oil, coiled towards the ceiling.

"So what's your plan?" he said.

Jags breathed a small sigh of relief and turned to the skinny man sitting next to him: "Can you hack the control system?"

Daedalus Hux ran a hand through his receding hairline, reshaping the messy yellow tufts. Within the space of a second, his hypersensitive eyes had darted from her, to the screen, to Jackson, and then back to her.

"Sure man," he said. "Disused facility like that, don't see why not."

"Good," Jags said. "Because there's coolant shafts throughout the furnace. We'll need you to access the controls, then flood the furnace – from bottom to top. That'll drive the pure breed to the exit shafts on the surface. One of us sits outside with the *Queen* and waits for the human to come to them."

She turned to look at Jackson again, her heart speeding up. It knew the importance of what she was about to say, even before her mind had formulated the words.

She could not mess this next bit up.

"We split," she said carefully. "Hux, Jackson – you guys find the control room. Christie and I will track the human, stay on

comms and let you know when to start the flooding.”

This was the way it needed to go.

She could outrun a brute like Christie. But if Jackson refused – if he wanted to pair with her – then the plan would become a whole lot more problematic. Because Jackson was not Christie. Jackson was a first-class pirate and slick-as-shit killer who’d got this far in life by not getting fucked over in the very sort of fuckery Jags wanted to pull.

His gaze bored into her like a laser-lock and for every second he remained silent, her heart skipped an extra beat.

Slowly, he turned to Christie.

And laughed.

“Didn’t I tell you she was a regular space raider?” he said. “Our ace in the hole.”

Jags didn’t know what Christie made of that because she was watching Jackson for a double-bluff. Any indication he could see through her plan.

But so far, so good. Or so it seemed.

“You got two problems though,” Jackson said. “First, is our friend with the eyes – name’s Malice. She’s a sentient. Can detect our genetic sequencing and all of our edits. Means Cochrane knows the human is here, and means he wants to find it.”

It took Jags a second to realize who he was talking about.

And then an ice cold wave swept through her, drowning out all thoughts of eluding Christie and escaping with the human.

If the tin goblin’s silent companion could detect genetic sequencing, could detect edits, then she knew Jags had no edits. She knew Jags was, without a doubt, a pure breed human being.

“Which brings us to the second problem. Malice can’t track the human,” Jackson said. He gestured with his cigarette held fingers in Jags’ direction. “She’s not quite the specimen as our little huntress here. She’ll need physical contact to identify it as a pure breed.”

*Needs physical contact*, Jags repeated to herself, slowly releasing her grip from the edge of the ops table.

She’d been nowhere near the woman.

If she had, Jags would be sitting in some cage somewhere, waiting to be harvested.

“That’s why the tin goblin’s let us on the moon,” Jackson continued, thankfully oblivious to Jags’ inner turmoil. “It’s *allowing* us to find the human because it can’t find it on its own. Now we can go in cloaked to this furnace, but we’re on borrowed time the moment Hux jacks its systems. We gotta’ move fast. Real fast.”

He took a drag on his cigarette, the chemicals causing the edges of his irises to blaze white. “Ebby’ll keep the *Queen* running right outside the front door. That’ll bring the goblin to her. As soon as we have the human, she meets us at the exit shafts.”

He looked at each of them in turn: “then we’re off this shit heap and burning straight for Exolor Prime.”

Jags felt like she’d dodged a volley of plasma fire.



She'd avoided being caught by this Malice creature, and now Jackson had bought her plan and run with it, exactly like she hoped he would.

As soon as she caught the human's scent she could slip Christie. Take his radio and have Ebby bring the *Queen* around. She'd have to kick her off the ship but that wouldn't be hard. The last thing little miss Le'rue would expect would be Jags holding a dilator carbine to the back of her head.

She could do this.

All she needed to do now was turn off the *Queen's* cloaking programme. It would give her less time, but it also meant the tin goblin was more likely to catch Jackson before Jackson caught her.

Everything was still going to plan.

#

Hux crouched below a jacked security panel, his frenzied vision hidden behind a pair of visor-like glasses. Every so often he would jerk as another terabyte of compromised fire wall erupted across the neon-black strip, like a magnetic storm.

To their east, a real storm was playing out. Nine thousand metric tonnes of water a second falling 1,500 meters to punish the rocks below.

"Soon as these doors open," Jackson shouted over the cacophony, "we got three hours."

They didn't.

Shortly before take-off, Jags had set about disabling the cloaking programme. She knew just enough about the *Queen's* computer network to make it look like it was still running when they took off.

Best guess, they had less than an hour before the tin goblin arrived – and time was ticking.

To stop herself from checking her wrist watch, she adjusted the sling on her dilator carbine – for the third time in as many minutes.

"Jagsy baby," Christie said, bringing his mouth close to her ear, "don't look so worried. Hux was born with bio-replicators. Could hack his way into Tres-2b if he wanted to."

He sniffed at her neck. "We'll find the human. If it's really here."

Jags recoiled from the smell of sulphide and very cheap cologne.

"First," she said, "no one is born with malware bio-replicators, you idiot."

She positioned the carbine to sit in her shoulder a little more snugly.

"Second, you call me Jagsy baby again and maybe I'll remember I don't need a chargrilled monkey to find this human. Maybe I'll remember I can do that just fine all on my own."

Christie rounded on her, his own carbine looking like a child's toy between his biceps.

"You know how I got this skin?" he said. "I was in Tres-2b. Round the clock blackout, fifteen Earth minutes of artificial light every three solar rotations, and hotter than hell. Black market surgeon spliced me up so I could walk straight out the front door without anyone seeing me leave. So believe me when I say, I am not to be fucked with."

Jags didn't believe a word of it. And

she was about to say as much when Hux gave a violent shudder. His goggles went black and the doors to the abandoned furnace shunted apart, releasing clouds of dirt brown dust and stale air. It whirled around them like miniature cyclones.

"Some shit-hot encryption for an abandoned facility," Hux said, as he stood and rubbed his eyes. "There's a major environmental system in here too man. Doesn't make sense for something that used to melt space junk."

"What about life signs?" Christie asked. "You pick anything up?"

"No, man," Hux said. "There's too much interference. Bunch of weird electric signals overlaying the whole place."

Christie bared his teeth and spat. "I am liking this less and less."

"We're on the clock," Jackson said, "so we're doing this no matter how much you like or dislike it Christie."

He stepped into the furnace.

Hux followed him in, then Jags, and then reluctantly, Christie.

Moving between partitioned walls the colour of black iron, their every step rang on the grated flooring. Overhead, lights flickered on as they walked further down the corridor.

"Hux?" Jackson said, when they came to another pair of containment doors.

Hux pulled open the security panel and held his thumb down on a square button. "Command override," he said. "Huxley. Open internal doors T-one, T-two, and TR-one."

The security panel released a negative

blaring and flashed red. A women's voice with the archetypal serenity of all basic AI, said back: "voice command not recognized."

Hux ran a hand through his hair and leaned in closer, his eyes roving over every inch of the security panel.

"Command override," he said again, accentuating each word. "Operator, Huxley, XO4LM8-52."

The security panel flashed green and the AI responded: "Welcome back Operator Huxley. Your local access has been upgraded to full security clearance."

The containment doors pulled apart.

Ahead of them, fifty meters down another corridor, an identical set of doors also pulled apart. Whatever room they had opened onto was tinged with a pale blue light.

"Yeah, man," Hux said, "we are open for business. This baby's all ours boss."

"Nicely done Mr. Hux," Jackson said. "Now if you wouldn't mind showing us to the control room."

Hux nodded. "Yeah, control room," he said. "You got it boss."

He headed down the second corridor and towards the strange blue light. The rest of them followed behind.

"We got the primary conversion chamber," he said, pointing with his chin at the room ahead. "Control room is fifty, maybe sixty meters above it."

They passed a smaller passage on their left, its heavy containment door, sandwiched between two partitions, was wide open.

“Due east,” Hux said, pointing at the side corridor, “that’ll take you to the lower levels. Access from with-” he stopped abruptly as they passed the third set of doors and stepped onto a grated walkway overlooking the conversion chamber.

It was shaped a bit like a laboratory flask, but a thousand times bigger. Curling around it, the walkway turned into steps and ascended to a small room with steel shuttered windows.

But that wasn’t what Hux was looking at.

In the middle of the chamber, pulsing a white-blue light, was a cylindrical generator roughly the size of the Queen’s drive core. With every pulse, Jags could make out hundreds of small bronze skulls, razor-like mouth pieces, and pointed ears. An army of tin goblins, arranged like soldiers on parade and each one hooked up to the generator by a long snaking cable.

“No fuckin’ way,” Christie said.

For once, Jags had to agree with him. In an age that glorified the biological, so much anthropomorphised metal was practically heresy.

“Guessing those would be your weird signals,” she said.

Hux gripped the walkway’s railing, his eyes going into overtime as he took in the scene below.

“We got a major situation here boss,” he said, his voice edging towards a higher pitch. “A lot of major situations.”

Christie looked over the railings and eyed the tin goblins like they might come alive if he got too close. “What the hell

does this mean?”

“Means Cochrane’s gonna be pissed when we flood his toy soldiers,” Jackson said. “I’ll bet my share of the bounty none of these things can swim.”

“Hux,” Jags said, “if you activate the coolant tunnels will these things wake up?”

Hux, eyes wide and apparently glued to the goblins, laughed nervously.

“I dno’ man, I dno’,” he whined. “Whole system is linked. Maybe I could deadlock the generator, separate it from the rest of the network. Or maybe these things go full kill-switch the moment I try and turn ‘em off.”

Jags’ mind began racing through scenarios, trying to decide which option was better for her. An army of tin goblins chasing down the crew could be a nice decoy. Would be a real shame if that decoy caught up with her though.

“Change of plan,” Jackson said. “Christie – you stay with Hux. Any of these things decide it’s wakey-wakey time, you put ‘em back to sleep.”

Christie grabbed the back of Hux’s jacket and pulled him towards the stairs. “Let’s move man.”

Jags watched them climb the steps, desperately thinking of anything she could say to change Jackson’s mind.

“Jags”, he said, and it was as if his voice was constricting around her sternum. “You and me get to hunt some human.”

There was nothing she could do.

Christie had been a sure thing, almost guaranteed. But Jackson – the slick-as-shit killer – was not.

She'd need a distraction to get around him. A big one. And if not, well, she'd been given a carbine, and she'd have to use it.

She could do this.

She had to do this.

"I hope you can keep up," she said, smiling back at him while backing out of the chamber. She turned towards the side passage and to the lower levels of the furnace.

Behind her, Jackson's chuckle sounded like he was gargling petrol with bits of concrete.

#

Jags knew the human was close. She wouldn't have been able to explain – even to herself – how she knew it was close. But she knew it was a fact, nonetheless.

It was like a smell, except at the base of her skull instead of through her nasal passages. More like a sense that relied on the basic kinship of the same species. An evolutionary bond that transcended time and space, going all the way back to Miocene Africa and its hunter-gatherer planes. She just knew one of her tribe had been here.

"Hux," she said, clicking on her hand radio, "we've passed the ground tunnels – you can flood them and open containment doors R-four and R-five."

The radio clicked as Hux connected: "you got it," he said. "Flooding ground tunnels and opening doors R-four and R-five."

The radio clicked again as the connection dropped.

Beneath her feet the grates began to shake as their level filled with water. Ahead

of them, some twenty meters, a containment door swung open onto a rising staircase.

"How's Cochrane's toys?" Jackson asked over the radio.

It was Christie who responded: "quiet as a tomb."

"That's what I wanted to hear," Jackson replied, and dropped the connection.

It wasn't what Jags wanted to hear.

She'd decided either the arrival of the tin goblin or its extended family turning on (or both) would be her moment to act. But they'd been at this for nearly an hour and there was no sign of the tin goblin or any suggestion that the rest of them would wake up.

On top of that, Jackson had remained just behind her the whole time – at a sort of five o'clock position. Almost like he was waiting for her to turn around and fix her carbine on him.

She pulled herself up the stairs, feeling the perspiration at her temples and on her lower back, despite the cool air from the flooded tunnels.

He didn't know, she told herself. It was just the panic playing tricks on her – that all too familiar knot at the bottom of her chest.

As soon as she was sure she had the human in her tracks, she would act.

There was no way he would see it coming.

"Bit of a predicament, wouldn't you say?" Jackson said.

"What?" she said, her head snapping round to look at him.



Jackson nodded at the corridor stretching before them. It was split into a cross section and lit with the sort of blinding white light found in triage bays and medical camps.

"Bit of a predicament?" he said again.

Her heart removed itself from her mouth when she realized what he was referring to. She flashed a smile at him in the hopes of erasing the thoughts her face might have betrayed.

"Not for me it isn't."

She took a deep breath and walked up to the cross section. Closing her eyes, she forced calm upon her body. A feeling of serenity began to form in her extremities and then within her stomach, her chest, and then at the back of her neck. The feeling of oneness that came with a connection to another member of her species.

When she opened her eyes again, she was facing the right hand passage.

"Hux," she said into her radio, "we're at a cross-section on R-five-A. If we head down the east passage where do we come to?"

It was several seconds before her radio clicked and Hux picked up the connection.

"Err, level R-five-A," he said, his voice crackling with interference. "Due east you got a direct line to the upper levels. Only one way that goes."

She looked at Jackson. "We're closing in on it."

He was smiling at her, shaking his head.

"I tell you something," he said, as he followed her down the corridor, "I am

mighty glad we found you instead of that Malice."

He let out a short chuckle.

"Now she would've been a handful. You can just tell with a woman like that. And she wouldn't have got the job done like you have..." he trailed off.

"I am just a tad curious though."

With her mind on the human, Jags was only half concentrating. "Curious about what?"

"Well," he said, "what exactly she'd say about you?"

There was more chuckling.

"You know, if she ever got her hands on you."

The oneness she'd been clinging to drained from her like punctured vacuum, and the feeling of being a hunted animal hit her like a gut punch.

This couldn't be idle chit-chat. Jackson Le'rue didn't do idle chit-chat.

She focused very hard on keeping her voice level.

"She'd say you were lucky to have me."

Jackson's chuckle turned into full blown laughter.

"Now ain't that the truth," he said between breaths. "Ain't that the truth indeed."

The impulse to bolt down the corridor was almost overwhelming. Instead, she tightened her fingers around her carbine's pistol grip, moving her index finger onto the trigger.

"There is just one other, minor little detail I wanted to bring up with you," he said. "You see; you weren't wrong about

Hux's replicators. About him not being born with them."

She grunted her acknowledgement, not trusting herself to speak.

"Our dear old Huxley acquired his replicators from the navy," he said, laughing. "Ensign Hux would you believe. Anyway, while on a mission in restricted space – the black ops kinda' mission where no one's watching, if you know what I mean – Hux acquired for himself a few new toys. The experimental kinda' toys. The ones they were testing on their little covert mission."

The corridor took a turn to the right. Jags, hanging on every word Jackson was saying now, let her legs carry her round it automatically.

"See, that was the deal we made when he came aboard," he continued. "He gets to be part of my auspicious crew on the condition he share some of his new toys. So you see, the *Queen* ain't any old burner. She's got the sort of AI that'd make Cochrane's tin goblins look like sock puppets. So I know the cloaking was turned off. And I know exactly who did it."

The muzzle of Jackson's carbine was strangely warm against the base of her skull.

"You didn't really think I was going to let you wander off with Christie did you?"

She felt a hand on her shoulder strap as Jackson unbuckled her carbine.

"Throw it behind you," he said. "Slowly."

She did as she was told. Her body moving with a kind of weightless apathy, her

arms heavy and awkward. She was like an animal caught in a snare, too scared to fight back.

The click of Jackson's radio jolted her into reality.

"We got a problem here, boss," Hux said.

The grating had started to vibrate beneath her feet and the lights were flickering, struggling to stay on.

"The generator," he said, his voice getting faster and faster, "it's just powered up. And it's powering up Cochrane's goblins. I dno' what I did but they're waking up boss. There waking up fast."

In the background there was the sound of wrenching metal and Christie's angry shouts.

"Hux," Jackson said. "Shut that shit down."

"I dno' boss. I dno' if that's a good idea!"

"Listen to me Huxley—" the carbine's muzzle burrowed into Jags' neck as he said it, "—override that generator. Flood it if you have to. We'll deal with whatever comes next."

When he next spoke, Hux sounded shell-shocked.

"Alright boss, overridin'."

The connection dropped.

A second later, the walls vibrated, causing little dust clouds to fall from the ceiling.

A second after that, the lights went out, plunging them into darkness.

And a second after that, the furnace shook so violently her legs buckled and she





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hit the floor.

There was a thump, and something skittered across the walkway in front of her.

Her entire world continued to quake and then ceased as quickly as it had begun. The lights flickered back to life and she looked up to see the skittering object had been Jackson's radio.

She threw herself at it, diving across the grating, but her fingers fell short – a hand had clawed into her calf and was dragging her backwards.

"I don't think so girly," Jackson said. "I think"

But Jags turned and kicked him between the teeth before he could tell her what he thought. Free of Jackson's grip, she grabbed the radio and sprinted towards the containment door at the end of the passage.

"Hux," she shouted. "Hux – I need you to open passage A-five!"

She was meters away from the door.

"Hux! Do you read me?!"

The radio clicked confirming the connection, and immediately produced the sound of gun fire.

"I dno' if you heard but we got a bit of situation here Jags! Like a tin-goblin-hive-mind kinda' situation!"

"Damn it Hux – remember what we're here to do. I need you to open A-five!"

Jackson was getting to his feet now.

She fell flat against the door, the pleated steal hard and implacable beneath her leather jacket.

All she could do was watch as Jackson reached for his carbine.

"Hux!"

"I'm on it, I'm on it," he said. "A-five open."

She fell into the adjoining passage as the door swung open, and scrambled up the stairs. The next section was a hundred meters away. She sprinted towards it.

"Hux – remember those environmental controls you told us about?" she said as she ran, her mind grasping at the most immediate thing she could think of. "I need you to access those and flood passage A-five-P with a toxic gas – anything poisonous."

"Toxic gas?! What the hell, man! That wasn't part of the plan?"

"Just do it Hux – then we can get off this rock!"

She could hear Jackson bounding up the stairs.

"Hux?!"

"Yeah alright, alright. System's showing carbon monoxide, carbon dio-

"That'll do," she cut across him. "Now seal A-five-P and open P-one."

Overhead, vents opened in the corners of the ceiling and there was the sound of gas being released under pressure.

She sucked in some air and held her breath. At the end of the corridor, she heard door A-five-P clamp shut just as Jackson came over the rise, his shoulders hunched and mouth twisted into a bloody smirk.

"Jagsy," he said. "What's with all the theatrics?"

He stepped onto the walkway, a carbine in each hand.

"I ain't gonna kill you," he said. "Even



if you hadn't pulled that trick with the cloaking programme, I knew you were human this whole time," he chuckled but it was a pained, weakened sound. "You're my ace in the hole, remember. I need you to find your little friend. Then I've got myself two pure breeds to harvest."

He stumbled, his knees hitting the floor, and surprise flashed across his usually cool features.

Behind her, door P-one opened and she jumped through it, releasing her breath and sucking in clean oxygen.

"Seal P-one!" she shouted at her radio.

"Sealing doors P-one," came Hux's frantic reply.

The door swung closed, leaving Jackson Le'rue on all fours gasping for air.

Whatever part of the furnace she'd come to was different to the partitioned corridors and tunnels that had come before. A single-file walkway with a series of steps ended in a covered stairwell, and large, rust-coloured tanks with domed tops lined either side of the grating.

She made her way to the first flight of steps.

Then the radio clicked on and Ebby's static-filled voice echoed off the walls.

"Jackson, do you copy? What's going on in there – *Queen's* picking up a tonne of energy?"

Jags stopped in her tracks and stared down at the radio. How exactly was she going to handle this?

"Ebby – this is Jags. My radio's bust so I'm using Jackson's. Err, we've decided to split up – take the human from two

angles."

She waited for an answer.

"Ebby, do you copy?"

The radio clicked its connection.

Ebby's tone was flat.

"How did your radio get busted?"

Jags had to hand it to her – she'd inherited her father's keen sense for bullshit.

"Ebby this isn't the time to start with the moody post-teen act."

"Jags," Ebby said more forcefully, "how did your radio get busted?"

"Cochrane's hiding a goblin army down here – some of them attacked us. That's where your energy spike came from."

It was the best she could think of on the spot.

"Is my dad ok?"

For a very small amount of time – maybe a second, maybe slightly less – Jags actually felt sorry for Ebby Le'rue. No matter how obnoxious she might be, she really did care about her dad.

"It's Jackson," Jags replied, "of course he's ok."

There were several seconds of silence before Ebby responded.

"Alright," she said, "what do you need me to do?"

"Jackson and I have almost got this thing, so just be ready to bring the *Queen* around when I say so – got it?"

Jags heard Ebby breathe through her teeth. "Yeah, I got it," she said.

One small victory, Jags thought as she clicked off the connection and climbed the next flight of stairs.



But whatever triumph she felt evaporated with the sound of automatic weapons fire hitting the door behind her.

What the actual fuck?

Was that the tin goblins using the carbines to shoot their way through the door? How had they made it here so fast?

Her brain stopped trying to figure it out the moment the door erupted with white-hot flares and exploded open. A cloud of grey smoke filled the doorway and Jackson Le'rue, a carbine in each arm, stepped into the passageway.

"Jagsy, Jagsy, Jagsy," he said, his face an unhealthy looking blotchy-pink and his irises glowing with a pale, almost-white-blue light.

"Did you really think that was going to stop me?"

He limped up the stairs, putting all his weight on his right leg.

"Haven't you been paying attention?" His laugh was wet and gargled, his grin stained like a snake that had just fed.

"I was born in poison! I breathe poison!"

Backing down the walkway, Jags clicked onto Hux's channel.

"Hux - you there?"

"Jags!" Hux's panicked voice spluttered from the radio.

"Jags-" there was the sound of something exploding, Christie yelling, and bursts of carbine fire "-we're outa' here, man. There's too many of them. You need something doing, now's the time."

"Open all coolant valves on level P-one and unlock the exit!"

"Opening coolant valves. Ok man, we're gone - see you topside!"

Hux clicked off the connection.

"Try breathing this asshole," Jags said, and a moment later jet streams gushed from ducts in the walls, spraying both her and Jackson in freezing cold water.

She turned and ran towards the stairwell.

Carbine fire burst around her, the white plasma shells splashing off the tanks and sizzling under the flood.

Her heart pounding, she practically threw herself into the stairwell and began grasping at each rung, pulling herself towards the hatch twenty meters above her.

She was halfway there when the stairwell shook and her foot, wet from the spray of jet streams, slipped.

Clinging to the rungs with both arms, she looked down. Jackson had made it to the stairwell, his lower body submerged in the now waist high water.

She watched as he took aim at her with his carbine, knowing she was too late. Knowing he couldn't miss at this range. A burst of white spat from the end of the weapon and she closed her eyes, unable to look at the ball of death hurtling towards her.

Something hot and electrified streaked past her.

She opened her eyes.

Jackson was still aiming up the stairwell. He released another shell and Jags cringed against the rungs, but again, it shot passed her by several inches.

She looked up and immediately under-

stood what he was doing. He was trying to blow a hole in the containment hatch. He was trying to guarantee his own escape.

Without thinking, she pulled herself up the stairwell. She might not stop Jackson from following her but she wasn't dying.

Not right now, anyway.

Another plasma shot zoomed past her and splashed against the steel rim, half of it now a white-orange from the heat.

She grasped at the next rung and pulled herself towards the smoking hatch. Ripping off her jacket she pressed it against the hot metal, praying that Hux had unlocked it for her.

One hand on a rung, the other against the hatch, she pushed as hard as she could.

It shifted by an inch.

She stepped onto a higher rung and pushed again. The heat from the metal searing her skin and the smoke making it almost impossible to breathe, but she didn't dare let go. She cried out against the pain and the weight of the hatch but kept on pushing until it opened and crashed onto the flooring above.

Soaked in sweat and dizzy from the heat, she half pulled, half crawled her way to the next level. She reached for the door, intending to close it on Jackson, but stopped when a shout of surprise came from below.

Looking down, she could see Jackson halfway up the stairwell. Most of his body submerged in water, his arms wrapped around one of the rungs, and the carbines floating next to him.

It was the first time she'd ever seen him look scared.

And then she saw why.

Two pearls of luminous red swam beneath the choppy waters. A second pair lit up next to it. It was joined by a third. And then a fourth, until the water around Jackson was like a cluster of evil suns in the night sky.

The first bronze skull and its elfin ears emerged inches behind Jackson. It was followed by two bronze shoulders, and then a tiny bronze hand clawing its way up his back. Another hand emerged and wrapped itself around Jackson's neck, squeezing at his larynx like it was little more than rubber tubing.

Then the waters surged, turning into a crimson maelstrom.

Jackson Le'rue, his mouth contorted into a silent scream, his eyes ghost-white, and his skin a haemorrhage-streaked sickly-grey, was plucked from the rungs and dragged to a watery grave.

Not waiting around, Jags fell on the hatch door.

"Don't even think about it," a voice said from behind her.

It was Ebby.

"Stand up, and turn around with your arms raised," she said.

Once again, Jags did as she was told and came face-to-face with Ebby's carbine, pointed directly between her eyes.

"Bet you thought you were going to pull this on me, didn't you?"

Jags, her mind still very much on the tin goblin death squad below her, edged

away from the open hatch.

Ebby mimicked the movement, the pair of them circling.

"Thought you were so clever, didn't you?" she said. "Tricking your way onto the crew like that. Playing the good little space pirate. Bet you thought you'd got my dad fooled. But I wasn't. I was born with advanced senses – inherited a canine offshoot. All the way from Old Earth."

Jags kept on circling, forcing Ebby to do the same. Forcing her closer to the hatch.

"Then Jackson spliced me with some really rare stuff. Some sort of psi edits he'd bought in deep space," she said, proudly.

"So I knew there was something off about you when you made a big deal about having tracker genetics. And I knew you were lying to me when you said your radio was busted."

She was standing directly in front of the hatch now.

"I'll ask once – where's Jackson? Where's my dad?"

A stocky metal frame with jagged peaks for a mouth and a pair of fiery pin-pricks for eyes climbed onto the hatch door.

"I think you'll be with him very soon," Jags said.

"What?" Ebby said. "What's that supposed to mean?"

The tin goblin opened its maw and bit down hard on Ebby's calf.

She screamed, her eyes wide with terror.

Another tin goblin sprang from the open hatch as Ebby tried to turn and face

her assailant. She fell to the side as the second tin goblin bit into her thigh and the two constructs began dragging her backwards.

"Jags!" she cried, letting go of her carbine and clinging to the hatch door.

Jags was pinned to the spot, her arms still raised like they'd been frozen in place, her heart pounding against her chest.

And then it was over.

Four immaculate, purple-tipped finger nails gripping the rim of the hatch was the last she saw of Ebby Le'rue.

And then for second time, she dived on the hatch door.

She pulled it up with both hands, let it slam shut, and then spun the locking wheel. Pain blossomed in her palms and she fell backwards, landing hard on her backside. The door was still scorching hot from the carbine shells.

Unable to stop herself, she cradled her hands in her arms and whimpered, both palms a blistered reddish-pink and becoming heavy with swelling.

She needed to move. She knew she needed to move. The tin goblins would be coming for her next and she didn't think that door would hold them for long.

She forced herself to stand and then took in the chamber around her.

It was dark. Too dark to see how large or small it might be.

The only light was natural, and came from a thin beam pouring out of a hole in the ceiling. It fell on the only thing the chamber seemed to contain – a raised platform, in the centre of which was what

looked like a cross between a disused drive core and an antique generator.

Without a better idea, and still cradling her ruined hands, she made her way towards it.

On one side of the object was an L-shaped handle extending from a small door. Gritting her teeth against the pain, she used her elbow to push the handle to the right. Then, as the door unlocked, she used the same elbow to force it ajar. It groaned as she leaned against it and pushed it open with her shoulder. Releasing another involuntary gasp of pain, she looked down at what her efforts had bought.

In front of her, slumped in its seat like the remains of an ancient king of Old Earth, was the skeleton of a human being.

Someone stepped out from around the other side of the object.

“Find what you were looking for?” said the woman’s voice.

She was half-concealed in darkness but there was no mistaking the grooved lenses or the bright red LEDs floating next to them.

It was Malice and the tin goblin, perched atop her shoulder like some demonic pet.

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For a moment Jags forgot the pain radiating from her palms, and simply stood there.

She’d lost. She’d failed to find another human being.

She’d outwitted the crew, escaped Jackson, escaped Ebby, and followed the scent to where the human should have

been. She’d been so close.

Except she hadn’t.

There was no human to find. She’d been tricked. And now she’d been caught.

Looking into those artificial eyes, it was as if she could see her own emotions reflected back at her. The feeling of having something ripped away that had never existed in the first place. Like an orphan being told their long lost family had been found, only to be told it had all been a mistake.

“You did well,” Malice said.

The tin goblin made a noise that could have been a scoff but sounded like gears grinding together.

“Did well?” it said. “She almost became plasma dust.”

“I think she could’ve handled Jackson Le’rue,” Malice said. “Anyway, she’s still the best tracker we’ve found.”

Jags was suddenly present again and an iota of hope sparked to life inside her chest. They thought she was a tracker? That meant they didn’t know she was human. That meant she might actually get out of this alive.

Malice’s smile was the saddest thing she’d ever seen.

“You think we’d go to all this trouble if you were a human? If you were a pure breed Jags, we’d have just plucked you from the *Orion Queen*. Saved ourselves the trouble of entertaining a man like Jackson Le’rue.”

Malice gestured at the chamber with both hands.

“All this,” she said, “was to see how good of a tracker you are.”

Jags realized she was taking shorter and shorter breaths. Her mind split between playing along and denying it with every fibre of her being.

"The skeleton?" she said, almost whispering the question.

"All we have left of the human race. And the only way we could lure you to the moon."

Jags was shaking her head now, her lips pressed tightly together. They were involuntary movements.

"You just knew the human was on this moon?" Malice said. "Of all the possible places a human might hide, you just knew it would be in this facility? And you never wondered why you knew exactly which passage to take, which corridor to follow?"

"Because... I'm human," she managed to sputter. "We're part of the same species."

Malice reached out and held her wrist. Jags tried to pull away but her grip was too strong.

"Look," Malice said.

Jags looked down. Beneath her skin her veins had begun to radiate a deep, almost emerald green.

"You were made Jags," Malice said. "You were made to track down the last humans. You're not one of them."

Her mouth was dry. Her throat felt like it was tightening up. The shock was making her want to wretch – this wasn't possible. She knew she was human. She'd always known.

The tin goblin started laughing.

"What the hell's so funny?" she growled at the construct.

"This crazy lady wants to be human," it said to Malice.

"I can see that," Malice replied.

The tin goblin pointed at Jags. "You want to be on the run your whole life? You want to be hunted? Get your DNA harvested? Get drained inside out for your juicy bits? Is that it?"

The tin goblin threw back its head and shrieked.

"Alright, that's enough," Malice said, as if she was chiding a small child.

But something the tin goblin said hit home. The same part of her body that usually played host to a roulette of crippling fear or overwhelming relief. The part she spent most of her time trying to suppress but couldn't because its fight or flight response was constantly dialed up to eleven.

That part of her evaporated. Like a candle being snuffed out.

In its place something warm grew – something she didn't recognize.

Until she did.

It was belonging. It was safety. It was the knowledge that she wasn't one of the last of anything.

That she wasn't on the run.

That she was in fact the very thing she'd been pretending to be – a hunter.

It was a feeling so powerful she'd actually forgotten about the pain in her hands.

She saw Malice smiling at her. And like the feeling in her chest, it too felt warm.

"We work for an organization," she said. "An old organization. As old as Old Earth itself. You're here because that organ-



ization wanted you to be here. It wants your skills Jags. It wants you to help us find the last of the pure breeds. To help us rebuild the human race.”

No one had ever asked her to be part of anything before. She’d always cheated or lied to fit in. Hidden herself in order to be like everyone else.

“It’s a bit like a family,” Malice continued.

The tin goblin’s head rotated slowly, looking at Malice with LEDs faded to a reddish-magenta.

“As close to a family as we’ll ever get,” she said to it.

The tin goblin’s tiny shoulders shrugged and then it turned to Jags.

“So what do—”

“I’m in,” Jags said before it could finish speaking.

Malice was smiling at her again, and Jags decided she liked that smile.

“She’s in,” Malice said to the goblin.

“You’re in,” the goblin repeated at Jags, and it too had managed to turn its crooked little peaks into something resembling a smile. ❖

**END TRANSMISSION**