

By Clinton Lawrence

You can hear the saws and jack hammers. Not like you would hear them out of a pressure suit, with air to carry the waves, but you can still hear the vibrations as they travel up your arms and legs. I cut a piece of ice off and tossed it into the little railroad car.

When the train is full, we go back to our cells. A few more blocks, and we would be finished. I was sweating. I looked at the sun. It was strange feeling so hot with all this ice around, and the sun so small. It did not cause the heat I felt. The guards adjusted the pressure suits according to their whims.

The last train was filled, and the robots led us back toward the prison. Ahead of us, the train rolled on superconductive tracks and disappeared into a tunnel. We would never again see the blocks of ice we had cut.

The guards did not care if we talked on the way back, and the new prisoner, Gregorian, said to me, "Hey, Zander, where does the ice go?" He had just arrived the day before, and they had put him in the cell next to mine.

"I don't know. Peterson thinks they ship it off world, maybe to the inner solar system, but he's full of shit. I think they just make us cut it for the hell of it."

"The robots don't seem to do much."

I looked at one of the metal giants hovering next to the line. "They're pretty stupid, really."

"Seems incredible they could run a place like this."

"Yeah, well, I don't think they do. They have about enough imagination to randomly screw up the settings on our suits, and they're probably told to do that."

"So is there someone else on Pluto running the prison?"

"Not here. They don't have to be here. They could be on Mars, and it would be just as good. Better maybe."

"I guess you're probably right," Gregorian said.

"You'll get used to it. You either do that, or you die. Your choice. Well, maybe not."

Gregorian walked silently in line the rest of the way back to the cell. It was fine with me. I just wanted to sleep for a while. We entered the tunnel that led to the airlocks and followed it for about a hundred meters to a round chamber. The doors closed behind us, and the chamber filled with air. I took off my suit and saw a prisoner standing in front of me rubbing his hands together. He must have had his suit set cold. Gregorian hung his suit on a peg next to mine. When we all had taken off our suits, a door opened, and the robots led us into the main part of the prison and locked us in our cages.

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They let us eat together sometimes, but not usually after a day of mining. Instead, they fed us alone in our cells. The sound of an aluminum plate colliding with steel woke me. It was dinner arriving from a chute into the cavity carved in the wall at the back of my cell. I got up off my bed, and found that the lid

had popped off in the impact. Something green and gelatinous had spilled off the plate. Complaining would do no good, since the robots were programmed to ignore complaints. I scooped it back on the plate as well as I could and carried to the table along the side wall.

Next to the table was a window between the cells, with sliding shutters on each side. A set of steel bars crossed the window. My shutter was closed, but I heard Gregorian rapping on the other side. I opened the window.

"Want to eat together," he asked.

"Sure," I said. "Anything to take my mind off the food."

Gregorian took a bite, swallowed, and said, "I've had worse. It's not that bad. Do you know what it is?"

"Algae something," I said. "Everything on Pluto is algae something."

"I guess it probably would be."

"It's cheap, and nobody gives a shit whether we like it."

"Not surprised." Gregorian took another spoonful, and said, "So I hear you're a terrorist."

"Where the hell did you hear that?"

"Peterson told me. Said you tried to blow up Camilleri. I didn't know that was you."

"Peterson don't know shit." I put my spoon down. "Let me tell you something. The less you listen to Peterson, the better off you'll be. Okay?"

"Sure." Gregorian finished off his meal. "You didn't really tell me whether you're a terrorist."

"The courts think so. I'm here now, so I guess they're the only ones that matter."

"I can't imagine doing that. A spaceship, maybe, but not a city."

"What's the difference?" I said. "Let's just change the subject. Tell me why you're here."

"Piracy." Gregorian smiled as he told me. "I used to raid cargo ships and mining colonies in the asteroid belt. Good operation until they caught me last year."

"Wonderful. Listen, maybe I'd better explain to you how things work around here. Pirates tend to be lightweights in this prison. You ever kill anyone?"

"Yeah, a few times. Idiots that wouldn't cooperate, mostly. Never killed anyone I knew."

"Well, here you might have to. The guards won't do anything if you kill someone, and they won't do anything if anyone kills you. So you're on your own. How long you survive depends on your choice of friends and enemies. You understand?"

"Yeah."

"You ever been in prison before?"

"For a couple of years on Herculina. That wasn't for piracy, though. Got caught for fraud."

"So you're cheating bastard, too."

"I had some diverse business operations. Most of them they still don't know about."

"I thought so. They wouldn't have sent you here if you weren't a total pain in the ass. What you have to remember is that this isn't a normal prison. The robots aren't normal guards. They're here to feed us, and force us to work the ice mines, and let us in and out of our cells. Beyond that, anything goes. The robots don't give a shit what we do, as long as it isn't fun."

I looked at my plate, and noticed it was almost full. Gregorian had finished long ago. I took a couple of bites and swallowed quickly, trying not to let the gelatin linger in my mouth too long.

"What about escapes?" Gregorian asked.

"Be my guest, if you want to be a corpse."

"The guards will kill you?"

"The guards won't do anything, which is pretty much the same thing. You'll just die as soon as your suit runs out of air or power. There's nothing on this planet except ice and this prison, and there's no way to leave."

"Why?"

"What do you remember about landing?"

"Not much. I think I was drugged. I was on a ship, and then I woke up in a pressure suit, lying on my back on the ice. I couldn't move for a while. And then the robots came to get me."

"No memory of landing, right? And no sign of a ship taking off?"

"No."

"You want to know why? Because nothing ever takes off from here. They just land prisoners. The robots know when to expect new prisoners, so they send out a rescue team. Not that it matters to them whether the new prisoner dies. They're just doing what they were designed to do."

"I'm sure someone could find a way off," Gregorian said.

"I wouldn't worry about keeping my bags packed if I were you."

#

My back ached, but then it always did when we had to cut the ice. I thought they made the saws especially heavy, so that even in Pluto's tiny gravity, they would be a torturous burden. I calculated once that the weight of the saws must be composed of about five percent essential parts and ninety-five percent dead weight.

Gregorian worked next to me, loading the blocks into the train. That was the easiest job. The robots always gave the new prisoners these kinds of jobs. They tried to demoralize us by treating us steadily worse as time progressed. I knew what Gregorian's presence meant. The robots expected me to train

him. What was really annoying me at that moment was that he had his transmitter on, and he was humming while he loaded the blocks, almost as if he were happy.

Finally, I couldn't take it any more. "If you're going to do that, turn your damn transmitter off."

"Sorry. I didn't even know I was doing it."

Gregorian was silent for a while, and I continued cutting. I cut blocks that were approximately cubical, with irregularities from block to block, about a quarter meter on each side. They stacked well when they were cut that way, although since I was cutting and not loading, I was not sure why I cared how they stacked.

"Peterson's talking about following the train into the tunnel to see where it goes," Gregorian said suddenly.

"Peterson can do whatever the hell he wants. If he wants to do something stupid, we're all better off without him."

"What's so stupid about it?"

"Well, look at the goddamn tunnel, Gregorian. If you get down on your belly, you can probably just get through. You snag your suit on something, and you're dead if you rip a hole in it. And even if don't, you can't get back through the airlock. I guarantee you wouldn't survive to the next shift. Actually, I hope Peterson does try it. We could get rid of him, and if he blocked the tunnel, maybe we wouldn't have to cut ice for a few days."

"What do you have against Peterson, anyway?"

"He's an asshole and a moron."

"He seems all right to me."

"Well, you didn't have to live next to him for a year."

"He said he knew you when you were free. Met you on Vesta."

"I'm going to kick his ass if he doesn't shut up."

"So why did you want to blow up Camilleri?"

"I never said I did."

"Did you?"

"I don't want to talk about it. I'm here now, and there's no way to leave."

"How does Peterson know so much about you?"

"Go ask the shithead."

I went back to work and cut ice until the train was full. That's how we knew when to stop. The robots let us work as quickly or as slowly as we wanted to, as long as we filled the train. The trick was to take enough rests to make it through the day without pissing off everyone else who wanted to get back to

the cells. Peterson was one of the worst for doing that. He was the laziest of our cell block. Gregorian worked hard, but he was new and ignorant, and had not learned to pace himself. I considered informing him about the work etiquette, but decided it would be best to let him make his own mistakes. A good thrashing by the other prisoners would keep him from turning into another Peterson.

We filled the last car, and the robots told us to march back to the prison. Gregorian walked next to me.

"You know, I think Peterson's idea is pretty good. I might do it myself if Peterson doesn't."

I watched Peterson to see what he would do. "Go ahead, if you're an idiot. My back needs some extra rest." Peterson marched along with the rest of us.

I didn't think that Gregorian meant he would follow the train that moment, but he did. He was running next to the tracks behind it almost before I realized. The robots ignored him, and so did the rest of the prisoners. He was someone they barely knew. Peterson watched, but didn't move. He talked a lot, but didn't do much else. I let Gregorian go. If it was something he wanted to do, I would not be able to stop him. I had told him it was a stupid idea, and it was up to him to listen.

I watched as Gregorian crawled into the tunnel. Later, in the airlock, I asked a prisoner named Montanez, who had a cell next to Peterson's, to find out why Peterson had suggested exploring the tunnel.

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I was surprised when we had to go out the next day. I had been reasonably sure that even if Gregorian had managed to crawl through the tunnel without ripping a hole in his suit, he could not have lasted the whole night without the power expiring. And he definitely didn't come back to his cell. When we emerged from the prison, he was waiting next to the train.

"How in hell did you survive?" I asked.

"It was no problem."

"You're a lucky bastard, you know."

"Yeah. I've got to tell you what I found."

"Tell me when we're back in the cells."

"Okay," Gregorian said.

"And remember not to hum while you work."

#

They found something new to do with the algae. I didn't think it was possible. The plate was filled with a blue-green slime sauce which covered some baked algae pebbles. Gregorian thought this was pretty good. I guess pirates don't eat well.

"Ready to hear what I found in the tunnel?"

"Sure."

"Well, I crawled all the way to the end of the tunnel, and a door opened. There was a big room inside. I followed the train in, and the door closed behind me. It was like a big processing lab."

"They processed the ice?"

"Yeah. They heated it up in some containers and collected the methane and nitrogen and stuff as they boiled off, until they were left with the water. They dumped the water into a reservoir. I think they use the ice to run this place. That food you're eating probably grew in ice you cut outside, and so did the water you're drinking. Probably the air, too. So all that work isn't pointless after all. I

wonder why they don't tell us."

"You don't get it, do you?" I said.

"Get what?"

"They don't tell us because they don't give a shit whether we know. The whole prison could die, and no one would care. They just want to get rid of us forever. They

wouldn't send us here otherwise."

"I think you're exaggerating a little," Gregorian said. "I bet everyone here has some friends and relatives who care."

"So there's a couple of dozen people in the whole solar system."

"Better than nothing."

"They can't do anything for us, so what's the point?"

Gregorian didn't say anything for a while. I could hear him slurping his algae sauce from his spoon. When he finished, he got up from the table and left my view. I tried to finish mine, but couldn't, and ended up dumping it in the dirty dish receptacle.

Eventually, Gregorian came back. "I just thought you would want to know."

"Thanks," I said. "I'm glad you told me."

#

Gregorian got a letter. They didn't let us send replies, but we could receive letters. The prison received them by radio once a week. I still would get one from my old friends occasionally, but they were becoming less frequent, and no longer contained much information. My friends had become very careful what they wrote to me. From the information their messages did contain, I learned that some had been arrested for their association with me. The rest of our movement was in hiding. I knew little else.

It made me a little envious that Gregorian had received a letter. I expected it, since he had only been a prisoner for a few days. There would be people writing to him for a while. Later, when they didn't receive replies, they would gradually write less frequently, until Gregorian would stop getting mail altogether. It always happened that way.

I asked him who it was from.

"My brother," Gregorian said. "He said he's looking for a way to get me out."

"Pretty much everyone's first letter then."

"Yeah."

"He'll give up before long."

"Maybe. Who was your last letter from?"

"An old colleague. It's been a long time now."

"My brother's running the company now," Gregorian said. "Pretty much stopped the piracy stuff, though. We had some other things going."

"He'd better be careful what he writes."

"I don't think he gave anything away," Gregorian said.

"It don't take much to get his butt arrested."

"He can take care of himself. It makes me remember some of the stuff we did before I was arrested."

"It won't be long before none of that matters," I said.

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There was a fight. They usually happened on days when we didn't cut ice. On those days, they opened the cells and let us wander throughout the inside of the prison. Most of us congregated in the recreation room, which had no recreational facilities at all. The fights usually started over something trivial. I don't know what started this one. I just heard Montanez insult Gregorian, and then a crowd circled the scene.

This time, I wanted to help Gregorian, but I was at the back of the crowd and couldn't see what was happening. I had never had a problem with Montanez, but those who had often ended up with broken bones. I had always hoped he would get in a fight with Peterson and kill him off. He seemed the most capable of doing so. I didn't believe Gregorian had a chance.

They were on the ground. I could hear the grunts of both. I tried to look over the backs of the others, and it seemed to me that Gregorian was on top. The sounds from Montanez were higher and shorter. Then Gregorian got up, and I saw his mouth bleeding, and he was holding his hand. Montanez lay on the ground, alive but not moving, except for his eyes and mouth. Someone, it may have been Peterson, asked him if he was all right, and he didn't answer. It was a stupid question. No one touched him until the robots came to take him away. We never saw Montanez again.

Gregorian was one of us now. Not that it was something to be proud of. It was just a fact. I was the only one who asked him how he was.

"Fine," he said. "I think I broke a finger."

"What started it?"

"Don't want to talk about it now."

I let him wander back to his cell. I wished it had been someone other than Montanez. I had no special feelings for him, but he was useful. Peterson was up to something where it concerned Gregorian, I thought, and Montanez maybe could have obtained information. It didn't bother me to use Montanez this way. I had used others to achieve my aims, and others had used me. We all had used each other.

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"What do you remember most about the outside?" Gregorian asked me.

"I don't know. My friends, I guess. The good times we had together, our movement, the protests we planned. They don't mean much anymore, since we lost."

"I remember some of our raids best. One time, we got a liner that was carrying the president of Davida to Callisto. God, we got rich on that one. He was a fun guy. My brother was with us, which was pretty unusual, and we had a beer with the guy while we held him for ransom."

"That was you?"

"Yeah."

"Shit. What if they hadn't paid?"

"Well, it was a one hundred percent certainty that they would, so we really didn't have a plan. We were just out to make as much money as we could then, and the guy wasn't an asshole, so we probably would have let him go."

"That what they sent you here for?"

"No. They're still looking for suspects. They have no fucking idea who did it."

"And the President? He didn't identify you?"

"We wore disguises," Gregorian said. "Actually, we were lucky. We didn't know he was on the ship and just winged it when we found out. Luck is better than planning sometimes. It takes less effort, and can work just as well if you have it."

"So what eventually got you sent here?"

"Just for being a total pain in the ass, like you said once," Zander said.

"Maybe they think you did that one."

"Maybe. Doesn't matter to me if they do." No one spoke for a moment, and then Gregorian said, "So what's really the deal with Peterson?"

"Why did you have to bring up Peterson? Okay, I'll tell you so you'll shut up about it." I rubbed my forehead and looked at the floor. "I did know him when I was sent here. You were right that we met on Vesta. He was leader of an organization that was part ally, part rival to ours. We tried to work with them sometimes, but they always screwed everything up. Well, almost always. He was basically organizationally impaired.

"So one of us decided that Peterson's group had to go. It was embarrassing the whole independence movement. I think it was DeShields who decided that and came up with the plan. He was our best tactician. He devised a way to set up Peterson's group to screw up so badly that they would all get caught and sent to prison. I don't remember the details. I just know it backfired.

"Peterson apparently wasn't quite as worthless as we all thought. He had a spy in our organization. I don't know what made us think he didn't, because we had spies in his organization, but we blew it. The spy, of course, knew the plan and warned Peterson. He also knew of another one DeShields had devised, which we really had no intention of using. It was just a contingency if things got really desperate."

"That was the plot to blow up Camilleri?" Gregorian said.

"Yeah. I was against considering anything like that, but the other four members of our council approved it. DeShields was one of them. Then came the day they stormed our headquarters. They captured me, and killed the rest of the council in the battle, except for DeShields. He wasn't there that day, and I never saw him again. I don't know if he was ever captured. He may be hiding out somewhere, maybe on a little world in the belt.

I paused for a moment and then went on. "Peterson, though, is obviously a different story. Amazingly, he screwed up even this. When he tipped off the police, it attracted them to his operation, and he got arrested the next day. They got him to testify against me, though, and he had all these forged documents that made it look like we had planned the attack to take place in two weeks. I'm sure he expected to get a better deal out of it. They must have thought he was really an asshole to send him here after all he did for them."

"So why don't you kill him?"

"I don't know. Just could never do it. It wouldn't bother me if someone else did it."

"I think I know what you mean."

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Gregorian became like a God. I had never believed in God, so this was a problem for me. But he could not have done the things he did if the rules that applied to the rest of us had also applied to him. He seemed to change the rules at will.

We didn't follow him, or worship him, or even fear him. He wasn't even unfriendly, not even to Peterson. We just stayed out of his way. When we worked the ice mines, Gregorian wandered off. The robots didn't care who worked as long as the train was filled, and after his fight with Montanez, no one else dared confront him.

"What do you do all day?" I asked him once after he came back at the end of a shift.

"Exploring," he said. "I'm trying to find the location of the prisoner drop."

"Good luck," I said.

Then he started staying out all night. Then several days at a time. I went to look for him once, and couldn't find him. But he always came back eventually. One time he showed up on a day off. I had been

in the recreation room, and when I came back to my cell, Gregorian was sleeping on his bed. He must have found a way in through the train tunnel. I let him sleep.

When he awoke, he was very excited. "Zander, I've found the drop location. I saw them drop off a prisoner today. I think they put him in a different block."

"So how exactly do they drop them?"

"Pretty much as you might have imagined. The spaceship hovers and drops the prisoner from about thirty meters above the ice. The suit has an extra airpack which cushions the impact on the surface here. With the low gravity, the force of impact is apparently low enough to avoid injury. What I've got to do now is find a way to get thirty meters off the ground so I can get to the ship."

I could not see how Gregorian could do this. I still did not believe in God.

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We got another new prisoner. They put him in the cell next to Peterson, the one that used to house Montanez. I heard his name and forgot it immediately. It wasn't important to me. What was important was that Gregorian was around less and less. Only rarely did he show up in his cell. More often, we would see him crawling out of the train tunnel, or walking on the ice in the distance, or perhaps sitting on a hill and looking at the sky. As the sightings became less frequent, I felt a desire to look for him. I counted the days between sightings. When I realized it had been six weeks since I had seen him last, I decided that I had to find him.

I left the other prisoners at the beginning of the day. I had no idea which direction Gregorian might have taken, so I walked in an enlarging circle around the prison. I encountered the crews from other cell blocks working other mines as I walked. I knew that the other blocks existed. We just never had contact with them. They ignored me, and I stayed away from them. The robots stared at me as I walked, but made no attempt to stop me. Farther from the prison, I found the freeze-dried

corpses of some of those who had run from the prison into the desolation. I recognized some of them: Rasmussen, Sorentino, Lucas. Lucas had had the cell next to mine before Gregorian. I had never liked him much.

Finally, I came to an empty suit. I didn't know what that meant. Was it his suit? Had he escaped? Why was the suit here if he did? Had the robots killed him and leave the empty suit? Was the suit someone else's? Who, or what, was Gregorian really? It was clear that he had not been an ordinary prisoner. But I knew I could never solve the mystery of Gregorian because I would never have access to the necessary information.

I ran back to the mine, and arrived just as the train started toward the tunnel.

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Gregorian's cell stayed empty for several more months. I don't think this was because the robots thought Gregorian might come back. I am sure they knew that Gregorian was gone long before I did. They were simply waiting for a prisoner. One day, I came back from the mines, and there was someone in the cell. He had a face I knew intimately.

"Damn, I'm sorry to see you here, DeShields."

"You ain't kidding. Man, I thought I was all set. I thought they could never find me."

"Where were you?"

"Amphitrite. I mean, who the hell goes to Amphitrite?"

"I don't know. You hear Peterson's here?"

"Yeah. I bet one of his people tipped them off. Maybe even in a letter to him."

"Could have happened. But I think it was someone else."

END