

RESCUE ON DAEDALUS

WRITTEN BY WAYNE ABELA

They were still two hours from breaking Core space. The merchant ship Black Maria blattered on through the void, the antique chronometer counting down the seconds. Core space affected everything including time and space, gravity and electronics and Jace relied on the ancient mechanism more than the ship's sensors.

Core space affected everyone differently. Some species reported no ill effects at all but Humans, the principal users, felt a wide array of symptoms, from the physical such as nausea and pain to the esoteric, such as paranoia, waking nightmares or a form of existential dread. It gave Jace aching sinuses.

He had heard a poor analogy, one that didn't correspond to reality but tried to make sense of the non sense of Core space. Imagine 'real' space was a ball. Everything, all time and space, everything physical is on the surface. You can travel anywhere on the surface but not up or down because in this analogy 'up' or 'down' doesn't exist.

Inside the ball is a smaller ball which is Core space. This is a separate universe that corresponds to real space but is much smaller. If you travel along the smaller ball and resurface into real space you would have travelled significantly further than if you had travelled by real space alone.

In true human style a different plane of existence was used as a form of space travel. Finally, to enter Core space the ship would need to travel 'down' which of course is impossible in this analogy. Jace didn't understand the maths but then no one really did.

Core space was the freebooter's choice, a relatively inexpensive but terrifying way to traverse galactic space and the only way to avoid the crippling Lagrange Point tolls. It had been the only practical way to travel in the pioneer days but was now considered far too dangerous and uncomfortable for civilian use and it was eventually supplanted by worm

hole technology. The real disadvantage was that if your ship failed to complete the trip it would be marooned in a featureless void forever. Although not illegal the users of Core space tech were considered outsiders and under suspicion.

Jace had become captain of the Black Maria by default, originally signed on as pilot, the crew had slowly turned over in the next four years, people died or left and Jace reluctantly took command when his own captain died. It was a small ship and a small crew and the only imperative was survival.

Jay 'Lars' Larsen trudged into the cabin. Lars was the ship's mechanic, technician and medic. He had a mind for petty detail and it was that pettiness that kept them alive. He had just spent 16 hours working on the ship's coolant system.

"We got a mission?" he asked.

Taciturn and overweight what Lars lacked in social graces he made up for in technical skills, small talk was not a priority.

"Rescue mission. Some diplomat trapped on a derelict." said Jace.

"I hate those missions. We take all the risks and if they get killed we get nothing." "It's worth 30 Universal Assets."

"30 big?"

Jace could see Lars mentally spending the Assets on ship repairs. "Well, okay. I guess we'll need help though with Renton laid up."

Renton was the ship's professional point man, a trained soldier and all-round tough guy. He was currently in the ship's med bay recuperating from the last 'mission'.

"We're stopping at a Hive before we get to the derelict. We can hire a merc." "We wouldn't have to if Beck hadn't got shot in the butt."

Beck, the ship's speculator was an excellent merchant but not so comfortable in a fire fight, he was currently walking off shrapnel wounds.

The only other crew member was Faye, a young woman who acted as Lars apprentice. She was currently holed up in the store room that served as her bunk. She had only travelled Core space a few times and she spent the whole time clutching her stomach and wishing she were safely on the dull backwater world she had spent her life trying to get away from.

Jace handed Lars the ship's transcript and Lars watched the recorded video of the warp-link transmission from their current client, a human called Monty. The crew of the Black Maria were traders, but they augmented their living any way they could, short of piracy and treason.

The video showed a querulous merchant, obviously wealthy, demand that they rescue a diplomat from a derelict. He was evasive about everything except the layout of the ship.

"This guy's up to no good." said Lars. "You don't want to take it?"

"Didn't know this was a democracy. I was just saying he's not telling us everything. Could get us killed. Worse still we won't get paid."

"You're right, it's not a democracy but it's best to get all the angles."

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They met Renton and Beck in the med-bay. Renton was sitting upwards in bed, Beck was propped up against a unit trying not to let his butt touch anything. Renton's right eye and head was bandaged and his upper body was plastered in what resembled a blue fungus, an artificial microbiome slowly growing cloned meat back onto his wounds. The last mission had been a bust but no one had been killed and Renton would be on his feet in a few days.

Both men were already aware of the mission. "I don't like it," said Beck. "The guy's obviously into some black ops stuff and right now we could probably do with something a bit more safe."

Beck was a smallish man with a boyish face and an unruly blonde mop of hair but up close you could see the tell tale signs that he was in his thirties. He was a stubborn, selfish man but knew his business. Although the whole

crew were traders Beck was a true merchant. He had an ever watchful eye on the worth of all commodities and a stubborn streak that had them wandering from trader outpost to post refusing to sell or buy until he got the price he wanted. It was frustrating but Jace had to admit in the six months Beck had been aboard the crew hadn't skipped a single meal.

"Sorry, Beck," said Jace. "After that last fiasco we need some solid credit. We go with the Flo." Beck visibly winced at the mention of the last mission and refrained from rubbing his backside. No one had looked good that day.

"Renton, what do you think? Hire a merc?"

"I assume the derelict's in Purge space?" asked Renton in his easy, measured voice. "It's all Purge space." said Jace.

The Purge were a semi-sentient race of machines whose sole task was to harvest worlds. They were slowly turning the centre of the galaxy into a no go area, an area only traders were foolhardy enough to traverse.

"Then you need at least one more body." said Renton. "Faye isn't ready. But maybe you need someone with insider knowledge rather than a big gun?"

Renton had previously had a short but very instructive career in the military, as had Jace. The most instructive part he felt had been the realisation that it was best to avoid conflict altogether ; which seemed counter intuitive as he was so good at it.

"I have an idea on that." said Lars. Renton motioned Jace closer.

"If this works out maybe you can get a better auto-doc? Save me lying here dying of boredom." "If this works out maybe I'll hire you a nice Swedish nurse."

Renton nodded, satisfied and leaned back onto his pillow. "I've always liked you," he said. "Don't listen to what the others say about you."

Jace grinned.

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The chronometer ground down to zero. With a jarring sense of vertigo the monotonous nothingness was suddenly replaced with real

space. Everything felt slightly different, from the texture of surfaces to the pull of gravity. Jace's sinuses stopped throbbing. The sense of disassociation, not to mention a bone deep sense of relief, would last for a few minutes.

Jace transferred power to the ion engines and plotted co-ordinates to the nearest Hive, a human run trading post with a serial number for a name. Within a few hours they were docked and standing within a miniature world. A really slummy one.

Most Hive stations used the same basic design, resembling a set of rotating plates on a spindle. Hives had an Earth approximate day/night cycle and were large enough for people to live their entire lives on. The ones in the heart of the human sector were large, virtually cities, and anchored to an important gravity well in space such as a Lagrange point. In the fringes the Hives tended to be smaller and anchored to obscure moons. They also tended to be more squalid and rundown with poor policing.

Faye found the Hive fascinating. It was busy and multi-cultural with humans and aliens and things that were probably aliens but she was too polite to ask. The rest of the crew thought the place was a spinning accident waiting to happen that had seen better days and smelled like it had died.

"Okay," said Jace, "Lars and I are going to troll for mercs, you guys meet us back here in two hours."

Faye turned to Beck, "Want to check out the bazaar?" Beck shrugged, he was eyes deep on his trade indexer trying to spot where he could squeeze some credits while he was here. She dragged the frowning Beck along trying, but failing, to not look too much of a rube in front of the locals. The further she got from home the more she acted like a kid, like her old life had suppressed her childhood.

Faye was twenty with a short stylish haircut and almond eyes giving her an elvish appearance. She wore tough practical clothing and always carried an array of mismatched tools on her.

She had spent her life using and reusing components that had long passed their shelf

life. Although she didn't fully understand complex systems she did understand components and she was the master of the bodge - the ability to jury rig ugly but working solutions from mismatched parts. This natural ability with tech had caught Lars' eye and she had persuaded him to take her on as a woefully underpaid apprentice.

She suddenly had passage off world, free from her stifling world and her family. However, in trying to be independent she had somehow adopted two dads. The softly spoken captain who always checked how she was and only just fell short of saying 'I'm here for you, kiddo' and the grumpy uncle type, stingy with praise but lavish with criticism. Both inadvertently trying to raise her.

Life onboard was strange and uncomfortable and seemed to smell solely of cabbage and farts. Stimulating company was lacking, Renton seemed to regard her as a little sister and Beck tried to crack on to her despite lacking charm and clearly being old and at least thirty. Other than the maintenance mechs and a couple of the chattier vending machines there was no one else to talk to. Still, it beat being home any time even if she had to travel the vomit express. However, this insular life made dumps like the Hives considerably more attractive.

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Mercenaries didn't advertise themselves as such and often had impressive resumés listing them as cooks or butlers who also happened to have incredibly focused combat training - never 'gun nuts for hire'. In short you could look them up legitimately in a directory.

"This is the one." said Lars.

"Really?" said Jace as he frowned at the directory specs. He had hoped to find a human called Hunter who worked in this district, a man who had proven to be reliable and able to control his trigger finger. This thing was an unknown quantity.

"Trust me." said Lars turning away from the street directory. "Stationed in the local watering hole apparently."

Jace looked down the street of neon with every other doorway promising cheap and illicit enticement. "Which one?"

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"You can call me MAC." Jace looked up at the towering mech. It clearly wasn't a combat machine, painted a dirty white and scratched up red faded to orange. It seemed a lot more self aware than the average auto-gun.

"What are you?" asked Jace.

"I'm terribly offended. Now, do you have a job prospect or do you just need directing to a robo brothel?"

"He's a loading droid," said Lars. "You can tell by the feet."

Jace glanced down at the machine's spindly long legs and up to the huge chest and back to the nearly featureless head barely the size of a grapefruit and displaying only two eye sensors.

"I was a loading droid at one point, yes. I've been many other things since. How can I help?" "Do you know anything about Daedalus system ships?" asked Lars.

"I know everything about Daedalus system ships." "Do you have your own ordinance?"

"Yes, I have some big guns."

"Can I talk to you a second?" asked Jace dragging Lars across to the other side of the noisy bar. "I don't trust that thing," he whispered.

"Never took you for a techno-phobe, Captain." "What's a machine need money for?"

"I dunno. Machine lube isn't free?"

"A normal machine would just fall to pieces and not care. This thing has an agenda. It wants to live. I'm not comfortable with that."

"You know he can still hear us from over there?"

Jace glanced over and MAC nonchalantly waved. Despite himself Jace felt embarrassed. They adjourned to a quiet back room and Lars pulled up the specs of the derelict.

"As far as we know there's one survivor. Also there's likely to be a Purge presence." said Jace. Without hesitation MAC pointed at the map.

"These sections will be closed down. This area will have its own life support that can run for months. If anyone avoided being detected by the Purge they would most likely be here by the drive plate."

"Because of the interference?" asked Jace.

"No, the wildlife. This type of ship was notorious for breeding vermin. A single survivor could remain undetected amongst all of the smaller life forms which the Purge often ignore."

Lars looked up at Jace and failed to not look smug.

"Okay," said Jace, beaten. "You get a third of profit, if any. No profit you get a third of that too. You pay for your own funeral expenses."

"I've never worried too much about those." said MAC. It held out its hand.

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It took two days ion drive to get to the derelict, a mile long, century old platform used as a temporary base for colonists. Lars spent the time working with the ship's computer designing a new drone.

"Here it is," said Lars holding out what looked like a large heavy frisbee.

"It compacts down." he said defensively at the puzzled looks. Lars, Jace and MAC were in the main drive cabin, Beck stood in the doorway as the room was getting cramped. MAC had lowered its spinal column to stop from banging the sense cluster the others thought was its head.

Lars placed the object on the floor and pushed down, the frisbee concertinaed up into what resembled a large metal egg. A large metal egg with a single eye. An egg with slowly unfurling legs.

"Aesthetically pleasing." said MAC. Beck shook his head and wandered off. Jace tried his best to look pleased.

"Hire a designer if you want it to look pretty." said Lars. "This is what you get when only I've

got two days and the ship's computer is such a low spec."

"It's... great." said Jace. "What's it do?"

"Isn't it obvious? It's recon. Send this out into an unknown vector and you'll get full 5D data, much better than a blind sweep."

"How many can you print?"

"Erm, well this is it. We need a load of new materials if you want a run of them." "Thank you Lars, I look forward to seeing it in the field."

Lars forcefully snapped the drone shut and muttered off. The rescue team would consist of Jace, Lars and MAC and the hastily built and unproven drone. The rest of the crew would stay onboard the Black Maria and scan for activity.

They approached the derelict on silent running. All the talk of mission parameters and speculation as to what their client was up to had masked how dangerous this was. But now, approaching the lifeless husk of an ancient ship far from help the real threat of the Purge was felt by everyone. A species that attacked without provocation, couldn't be bargained with and had mysterious and therefore horrifying intentions.

They slowly and silently docked. The inner airlock was fused shut and had to be burned through. True to MAC's word the atmosphere was breathable if sour and metallic tasting.

They emerged into a large open area like an aircraft hangar. Everything was very quiet and still, the lights at minimum, the rot of metal and plastic and burst drains.

"Spooky," said Lars. He checked his scanner. "Low level electrical activity, minor life readings." "Do you want to activate the recon drone?" asked Jace.

"It uses a lot of power, maybe save it for later?"

"How you doing, guys?" asked Renton over the ship comms. "Fine." said Jace. "You picking up anything?"

"Couple of odd things. If I didn't know better I'd say another ship on silent running."

"Purge? Corps?"

"Not a chance. Maybe some skavvies or a faction."

"Or that jerk hired others to do the same job." said Jace. That could get complicated. "Okay guys, non lethal until we get confirmation. Don't want to shoot some working stiff's head off."

Lars frowned but said nothing. He didn't like killing any more than the next tech but he had a very strong stance on 'rather them than me'.

They picked themselves slowly through the ship going from one rotten room to the next approaching the vector MAC had suggested.

"Hey!" said Lars suddenly.

"What??" Jace looked around, scanning for trouble.

Lars hurried over to a dark corner and picked up what resembled a wide necked bazooka. "What are you doing here, buddy?" he asked it softly.

"What is it?" asked Jace. Lars looked scornful. He had no time for people who knew less than him in his chosen profession. Which was everyone as far as he could tell.

"Really? You're a captain of a ship and you don't know a DR12/30 when you see one?" "Gee, sorry", said Jace, "I've only ever had eyes for the DR12/31."

"I'm taking this. At least we'll get some decent salvage if nothing else." said Lars hefting the heavy mechanism and giving it a pat.

"Getting some increased life readings." said Renton over the comm. Lars looked at his scanner. "Yeah, looks like - aargh! Son of a bitch!"

Jace and MAC pointed their torches at Lars who was clutching his calf. Next to him was what looked like a beetle the size of a cat. It had unnaturally large jewelled eyes.

"It bit me!" yelled Lars. He swung a clumsy leg and the creature scuttled off into the dark.

"If there's enough of those together they can strip a human down to the bone." said MAC. "They're human tech origin so they can eat your protein type."

Getting eaten alive hadn't been on the agenda. Lars patched himself with a field dressing and they moved on, keeping an eye out for oversized GM insects. The further they went the more the ship systems were active and the less derelict it looked. The chances of their man being alive started to look good. The air started to smell better and there was even the faint breeze of air-con.

They approached a wide open area that was brightly lit. Something about it made Lars suspicious. "Hold it," he whispered. He took the flattened drone off his back, opened it up and primed it. The machine immediately made for the area then skirted the walls, it's wide flat legs making an oddly organic flapping noise.

"Getting good signal," said Lars. "Looks like-" he was cut off by the unmistakeable sound of a gunshot and the scanner signal cutting dead. "Hey!" he shouted angrily.

"You people!" shouted a clear female voice. "What's your business here?"

Jace sighed. He shouted from behind cover, "We've come to see a man about a thing!" "Oh, yeah? What man?"

"A diplomat!"

There was a long pause. Eventually: "I don't suppose you'll just turn around and get lost?"

"Lady, my ship's falling apart at the seams, if we don't get paid we'll be lucky to get anywhere including lost. If you want to blame anyone blame the idiot who clearly hired us both!"

Possibly some bad language. Then, "How about a truce? Not saying we're splitting the pay or anything, just that maybe we don't need to shoot each other."

"I ain't taking a cut for no one!" whispered Lars sharply. Jace shouted, "Okay!"

"Don't shoot!" A woman stepped into the clearing, holding her gun up perched on her finger. "I'm holstering this."

Jace revealed himself, his palms up. The woman was average height with a slim build and a cocky smirk. "Arianna Sabrine, captain of the Ion Hope."

She had a military bearing, upright, self assured, daft little half cloak. "Jace Dolman, Black Maria."

Behind Arianna loomed a Quell, an alien with two muscular arms that could bisect into four slimmer arms. It had the customary Quell scowl and legs that reminded Jace of an elephant.

"What is that?" the Quell asked, looking up and down at MAC. "Would you like me to shoot this one now?" asked MAC.

"Never mind that," said Lars hotly. "Which one of you clowns shot my drone?"

"I did," said an older man with a thick beard. "No offence meant. Did you design it yourself?"

"Er, yeah. We'll I cludged it together from some different specs, the computer glued it altogether." "I could see that it was a good bit of kit, I shot it automatically, sorry."

"Okay," said Lars mollified and a bit embarrassed.

"This is Lars, our tech." said Jace. "And MAC, I'm not sure what it is." "I'm charmed," said MAC.

"Gak," said the Quell. "Roykirk," the older man.

"What a happy family," said Renton over the comm. "Marshmallows, anyone?"

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Jace didn't know this crew but he'd met plenty like them, in fact they themselves were like them. Traders working just a shade outside the law but not hardened criminals. The truce might hold for a minute or a day or even a lifetime. But it didn't hurt to keep a wary eye out, truces could be broken the moment someone got greedy.

The two teams compared maps. "We've already been here," said Arianna. "Just a load of those flying things."

MAC pointed out another route.

"This area could be fortified even by someone with no knowledge. There's enough living space and access to provisions, assuming there's any."

They headed along a narrow access corridor, both Gak and MAC having to stoop. It was dark and claustrophobic and no one spoke. Apart from the occasional chittering they didn't come across any more of the insects. Lars found his feet and his eyes dragging. "Hot as hell in here," he said.

They came out to a wide brightly lit room. The detritus looked different here - not the decay of time but the untidiness of the living. Roykirk picked up a can. "This is fresh. There's someone here."

There were several rooms off the main one and in one of them they saw a man through the window, sitting on a bunk watching cartoons on his screen. He had made no attempt to fortify the room and the place was a pigsty. He had the look of an expensive man used to being waited on and quite likely to being dressed by others.

Jace opened the door and the man stared dumbfounded. "We've come to rescue you, sir," said Jace.

After a long moment the surprised look turned surprisingly ugly. "About bloody time! And you may refer to me as Your Eminence!"

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The ambassador had hand combed his hair and pulled on his long coat and stood upright, ignoring the state of his living conditions as if he had been no part of it.

His name was either Butler or he was demanding one, it seemed hard to tell as he constantly streamed abuse at the traders. The man was infuriated about everything. They had taken too long to rescue him. Why hadn't they brought provisions? Shouldn't there be more of them? Why are they going this way?

There was something off about him. He should have been relieved to have been rescued, relieved to just see a human face after being alone for so long. Jace had met

his fair share of the entitled but few of them were this defensive, the man was hiding something. Arianna leaned close to Jace and whispered, "Methinks the lady doth protest too much."

Jace nodded. It was funny how such an important official wasn't being rescued by the Galactic Corps. The guy was a crook.

They made their way back to the wide open area.

"Jace, I'm picking up a ship, travelling fast," said Renton, his usual laconic voice sounding worried. "Purge?"

"No, it looks like Corps."

It seemed too coincidental for the Corps to be affecting a rescue at the same time as the traders, more like a small sector commander was out looking for trouble. The Galactic Corps were the combined militia and police of the human sector and they didn't like traders.

"They're not slowing down, I think they're making an entrance," said Renton. Corp ships were equipped with battering rams that self sealed allowing the Corps to dock without need of an airlock. It was considered needlessly aggressive but common in the frontier worlds where the Corps were less polite and more likely to infringe on inconvenient rights.

There was a rending noise and the teeth clenching screech of metal. Both teams of traders scrambled for cover and prepared to stand their ground. The Corps were clearly in no mood for talking if they were ramming derelicts.

They could hear shouting in the distance and the stamping of heavy boots. The Galactic Corps appeared on the far side of the open area and took cover. Jace tensed up, a lot depended on how the Corps behaved. Without any sort of warning the Corps opened fire.

"Damn them!" said Jace. He didn't want to tangle with the authorities, but he wasn't going to let them just attack them unprovoked. "To hell with the non-lethal! They're shooting at us!"

The traders fired back.

"What the hell's going on?" shouted Butler.
"How's this a rescue attempt?" Jace grabbed him by the scruff and pushed him down to the ground.

"Stay there and shut up, you idiot!"

Roykirk stepped from behind cover and threw what looked like a grenade in the direction of the Corps. There was a 'crump' sound and three Corps soldiers collapsed.

"Concussion grenades," said Roykirk. "Bit dangerous in a built up area but does the job." MAC fired his rifle and there was a scream from behind a fallen slab of ship masonry.

"That was a confirmed kill," said MAC. "But does a machine have the right to harm any living creature?"

Jace stared at the machine, nonplussed.
"They started it! Philosophise on your own time!"

"Gak has no time for philosophy!" roared Gak as he unleashed his heavy weapons. Plenty of time for talking in third person though, thought Jace to himself. He turned to Lars to point out his witty observation. The man was slumped over. Jace quickly checked to see where Lars had been shot but realised from the Lars' slack face that something else was wrong.

"Any of your people a medic?" he asked Arianna. Roykirk scurried over keeping his head low. He realised quickly that Lars had been poisoned. "Was he bitten by one of those insect things?"

"Yes!"

Roykirk administered a stim pack. "This will keep him going but he'll need proper attention."

Lars regained consciousness. "The DR12!" he shouted.

"What, this?" Roykirk handed Lars the heavy lump of machinery that had slipped out of Lars' grasp. "Lars, you're going to have to leave that, we've got to get out of here." said Jace.

"No way!" Lars looked instantly lucid and very stubborn. "Jace, I've got some bad news." said Renton.

"Great!" said Jace, "it'll balance out all the good times we're having now!" "Purge incoming."

Jace gut clenched. "How close?"

"Really close. I think we're going to have to pull out. I mean now." The only way to shake of the Purge would be to drop into Core space where they couldn't be tracked.

"Do what you have to do to keep the ship safe." said Jace reluctantly. The Corps attacking unprovoked, Purge incoming and losing his ship all within the space of moments.

"You need a lift out of here, Captain?" asked Arianna.

"You going our way? Renton, go now, we'll meet you at the Hive." "Good luck, Jace."

There was a shrill human scream and they turned to see the Purge attacking the Corps from behind. The Purge consisted mostly of the creepy beige skeletons called the Harvesters and a few of the heavily built Devastators, crimson but for the white heads. Jace knew that the Devastators would hold back until the Harvesters had captured as many alive as possible and then the Devastators would destroy any who resisted.

Flitting quickly through the wreckage was an Assassin, deftly hopping over debris and making straight for the group. It would pinpoint the leaders and make a suicide run, it's chassis gleaming white and gun metal grey, strangely slick looking as if it had been birthed only moments before.

Roykirk deftly blew its head clean off but it barely faltered and kept coming. "Its brains aren't in its head!" said MAC.

The Assassin went straight for Arianna. Gak leaped forward and grasped the Assassin by the arms and pulled hard. Two of its arms tore off and the Assassin rotated around and held onto Gak hard with its remaining arms. Gak's skin rippled from blue to violet to red his eyes bulging with the effort of squeezing the Assassin. He yanked hard and the machine

exploded into pieces. Gak's skin texture fluttered back to a deep blue and he grinned.

"Not many win 'unarmed' combat with Purge, eh?"

Arianna laughed. She was about to say something when she spotted someone standing at the far edge of the room, a civilian. "Hey, Butler! Is there anyone else on this ship? Another civilian?"

"What? No!"

Jace looked towards where Arianna motioned and saw a woman standing impassively amongst the carnage ignoring the Corps and Purge alike.

"MAC! Shoot her! And no philosophy!" shouted Jace.

MAC shot the woman dead centre and there was a flash. There was a shimmering and the woman disappeared and was shown to be a Live One, an organic Purge cloaked in a holographic disguise. It was humanoid and naked but for the strips of holo cloak, it's small head hooded, it's skin grey.

MAC hit it again and it stumbled, then again and it fell to the ground. The hologram flickered on for a moment showing a dying woman. Jace shuddered.

The Purge hesitated for a moment as if waiting for new orders. Then with renewed ferocity they attacked the Corps and finished them. A Juggernaut, a Corps heavy, roared and dragged several Harvesters down with it before being despatched by a Devastator. The Purge then turned to face the traders.

"Where's your ship?" asked Jace quietly.

"They're blocking the way."

"Got a teleporter?"

Arianna whispered into her comms, "Tirgarde. Emergency extraction for seven."

"Seven?!" shouted back a male voice. The Purge charged and the traders shot at them, round after round. Harvesters exploded into pieces and were replaced by more. They ran eerily forward their arms outstretched to catch the traders in a ghastly embrace. Everyone

knew that you didn't let yourself be captured alive.

Jace's gun ran out of rounds and he fumbled for a clip, a Harvester only feet away. He doubted he would fare as well as Gak had.

There was a bright light and pain and a floating sensation. He lost all sense of time and space.

Arianna appeared in the extraction room of the Ion Hope. "Tirgarde! How many did you get?"

"Five! Six! And that's the last one!" Arianna ran for the drive room and dived at the controls, detaching the ship from the Daedalus. A Purge ship appeared before the Ion Hope. Arianna laughed without humour and hit the emergency button, preset for a destination light years away. Core space tore through the Purge ship and the Ion Hope punched through with a sickening sense of falling...

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Jace slowly awoke. He felt like he was seeping back into reality piece by piece. Eventually he realised he was slumped in what looked like a dentist's chair in a darkened annex.

"Hey, sleepy head."

Jace looked at Arianna smiling down at him. Without thinking he reached for her face and she lightly batted his hand away. "Easy, tiger."

"Did everyone make it? How long was I out?"

"We all made it. More or less. And you were out for ten hours." "Ten hours!"

"Guess you don't like my teleporter, eh? We're an hour from breaking Core space."

Jace's sinuses throbbed. The annex was a dimly lit area full of equipment and cargo crates which served as a recovery room by the brightly lit Extraction room. A slick looking, sneer of a man was checking the monitors. He assumed this was Tirgarde and judging by his attitude he didn't like non paying guests.

"What do you mean more or less?" Jace asked Arianna. Emergency extractions were notoriously dangerous.

"Everyone's alive but all of Gak's weapons are scrap. And, well, maybe you should talk to Butler."

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The man was different. It wasn't just that every hair on his head had fallen out and his eyes had changed colour to a bright green, his whole personality had changed.

"Claims he doesn't know who he is and has no memory at all," said Tirgarde. "The computer confirms that there's no memory clusters more than a few hours old. Everything else is there though, language, spatial awareness, concept awareness. It makes no sense how they can be separate from memories but there you have it." He shrugged as if to say, teleporters, eh?

"I understand that my name is Callan Butler," said the man. "And I'm a diplomat of some sort. And judging by the crew's reports and tapes I was a rather difficult person."

"So you don't know why we were there for you?" asked Jace. "You've conveniently forgotten the vital information that we would get paid for? Your arrangement with dear old Monty?"

"I'm sorry Captain. I don't know what I was in to and who I dealt with but I know it was nothing good. I have a sense that it's best if I disappear. Drop me at the nearest habitat and I'll be gone forever."

"You're taking this very well," said Jace. "You've had your whole personality wiped away."

"I'm a survivor, like you. I have a feeling that I haven't lost anything worth keeping. I don't have the memories but I do have a sense of foreboding. I was on borrowed time."

Jace looked at the man. He almost felt envious that he had been given a clean slate and would never pay for his past, whatever that was. But what a price, to have your very being washed away forever.

"One last thing," said the man formerly known as Butler. He took a data chip out of his lapel pocket. "This is as empty as I am. But I believe it still has some value."

Lars took the chip and glanced at it. "This is worth ten assets even blank."

"It was probably worth a hundred times that before," said Jace. "I guess we should split this six ways?" he asked Arianna. "Seven," said Tirgarde.

"Never mind, Jace. It wasn't a total bust," said Lars with an uncharacteristic smile. He hefted up the DR12/30. "This little baby will make our ion drive three percent more efficient."