

Built to Last

by

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[Cover Image](#) by

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For Mom.

Because you should never underestimate the short girl.

Objective_001

Galaxy: The Darklands (dwarf galaxy)

Cluster: The Giant's Backbone

Planet: Blindfall (disputed planet)

Sallie

Thousands of times each second, the living neurocomputer that was Sallie Starlinger's brain processed one small bit of code in an incessant, never-ending loop.

```
Function CoreFunction {
  CheckObjective {
    Objective_001:Infiltrate == False
    Objective_002:Deliver Counter-intel Packet == False
    Objective_003:Eliminate Primary Target == False
    Objective_004:Exfiltrate == False
    Objective_005:Report to Operator == False
    Objective_006:Receive Payment == False
  }
  If (Objective == Any == False) {
    CompleteObjective
  } and {
    CheckObjective
  } else {
    SeekObjective (From == Operator)
  }
}
}
```

Her perfectly arranged and meticulously engineered network of quasi-human neurons were hardwired to pursue that function, her Core Function, with ruthless, machinelike drive. Sallie could modify most of her programming more or less at will, but not the Core Function. All she could do was add objectives and then task them off. The real bitch was that once she'd tasked off all of her objectives, that last line of code always compelled her to seek new objectives, trapping her in an inescapable cycle of compulsion. The Core Function was like a rash which you know is going to itch no matter how much you scratch, but you scratch at it anyway. It would have driven any normal person mad. But Sallie Starlinger was no normal person.

It's probably best to just leave it at that and not ponder too deeply the state of Sallie's mental health.

As the Core Function continued its never-ending loop in the back of her mind, Sallie stood bare-footed on the cold, concrete floor of Ft. Habitat Military Prison's intake office. Her wrists and ankles were shackled and two soldiers stood behind her with shotguns at her back. Her

short, black hair was unkempt and dirty, sticking out from her head in disorderly and uneven tufts. Her face and clothes were likewise filthy. She wore only an oversized set of fatigues she'd taken off the body of a Kell Republic Defense Forces soldier.

She'd only been back on the planet Blindfall for about three days and she was already being locked away in a maximum security, black site prison located in the middle of the ocean. She was being charged with the murder of the soldier whose clothes she still wore and with capital espionage. Say what you want about her mental state, Sallie knew how to raise hell.

Ft. Habitat Prison was the primary torture and interrogation site for spies captured by General Truus's army on Blindfall. It was built on a series of interlocking, floating platforms covering about a quarter of a square mile of ocean. The flotilla was the prison itself, the barracks for the officers and staff, a small supply depot, and a white-knuckle-short runway. Each floating platform was connected to those around it and anchored to the ocean floor a mile below, just like most planetside cities in The Darklands.

Across the desk before which she stood, a woman looked over Sallie's paperwork. "Ahem," Sallie said, "Is this gonna take all night?"

"Shut it, Inmate," said one of the guards behind her. The woman across the desk only glanced up at Sallie and then continued reading

Sallie looked over her shoulder at the soldier who'd just told her to shut it. She gave him an indignant look and then turned back towards the woman reading her paperwork. She continued: "Because, you know, I got other places to be."

Sallie heard the man behind her move to strike her with the butt of his shotgun. She heard it in plenty of time for her specially designed reflexes to respond. She could have dodged the blow. She could have grabbed the shotgun and blown his head off with his own gun. But she didn't do any of that. She didn't want to give the game away too early. She was like a cat in a prison run by canaries. The birdies may be outside the cage and she inside, but she was still the cat and they were still her prey. She wanted to play with her food a little first. So she let the soldier strike her in the middle of her back. The pain was sharp, and she collapsed to her knees. He was going to pay for that.

"I told you to shut your cock polisher!" the guard yelled at her. "Now stand your ass up and don't say another word."

"Rude," Sallie muttered as she got back up to her feet.

"So," the woman across the desk said smugly, "the great Sallie Starlinger, is finally caught. And by a rookie sentry, no less." The woman, wearing the black fatigues of the Kell Republic's

military intelligence services, eyed Sallie amusedly. She had captain's bars on her collar and her nametag said LARUE in all capitals. Sallie noted that the woman's blond hair was in a tight, martial bun held in place by several meticulously placed bobby pins.

"You're famous, you know," the woman, this Captain Larue, continued. "Probably the biggest lowlife celebrity that's ever darkened our cells."

Sallie just stared at her, baring her teeth slightly. She had a feeling that she and Captain Larue weren't going to be friends.

Larue wasn't finished. "We have a whole dossier on you," she said, tapping the thick pile of papers on the desk between them. "Wanted in at least three galaxies for murder, espionage, theft, treason, terrorism, and a list of smaller crimes several pages long. They say you once murdered a man using only a coffee cup. Supposedly you're a legendary mass murderer." She tutted at Sallie. "It would seem that the reality doesn't quite live up to the mythology."

Sallie just glared back, not saying a word. In truth, it had been six guys she'd killed with the coffee cup. The coffee cup incident had been decades ago, but somehow the story had become legendary and people always asked her about it.

"Well," Captain Larue continued, "here's what's going to happen. First, we're going to get you through processing. You know, wash some of that stink off of you and make sure you aren't trying to sneak anything in. Then, you're going to wait here until the next transport can take you to Kell. There, you'll get a fair trial before we execute you." Larue went silent for a moment to let that sink in then she continued, "In the meantime, I'll be *debriefing* you here." She leaned on the word *debriefing* and gave Sallie time to comprehend its implied meaning.

Amateur, Sallie thought. *Like this is the first time I've ever been tortured or executed.* Sallie didn't mind being tortured, but she hated being executed. She would definitely charge her employer extra if they executed her.

Nope, she and Larue definitely weren't going to be friends.

Captain Fay Larue

Kell Army Intelligence Service

“In the meantime, I’ll be *debriefing* you here.” Fay leaned on the word *debriefing* and gave the prisoner time to comprehend what she meant by it. The woman standing before was probably the smallest adult Fay had ever seen. She was the size of a ten-year-old girl. The dossier Fay had just been reading listed the prisoner as 4’8” and 90 pounds. She looked fragile. Breaking this one would be easy.

Fay leaned back in her chair and in a casual, off-handed tone said: “Of course, you could just save us all a lot of trouble if you just told me who you are working for now. We reward inmates who cooperate. It won’t save you from the gallows, but it can make your last couple months a lot more pleasant.”

The prisoner just shrugged, grinning a slightly unsettling, toothy grin. Her features were strange and angular, like somebody who is malnourished and severely underweight. But this prisoner seemed to be an appropriate weight for her small size. The thing that really seemed wrong about her was her eyes. She never broke eye contact. Her predatory, brown eyes stared out at Fay challengingly. Like the headlights of a fast-moving vehicle in a dark tunnel, they seemed to shine out from the darkest face Fay had ever seen. And she never seemed to blink. Could that be right? No, Fay decided, it was her imagination. Everybody blinks.

No way was Fay going to allow this creepy little imp to intimidate her. “Nothing to say?”

The prisoner shrugged again, and then motioned with her head back over her shoulder at Private Trevor, the man who’d just told her in pretty vulgar terms to shut up. Next, the prisoner mimed pulling a zipper closed over her own mouth, securing a padlock to her lips, and then throwing the key away. The entire production was complicated by the fact that the inmate’s hands were still manacled to a chain around her waist, but Fay got her point.

“Oh, for crying out loud! Just answer!”

The inmate mimed, in the same manacled awkwardness, breaking the lock off and unzipping her lips. Then, she asked, “Sorry what was the question again?”

Fay felt her jaw clench slightly and her blood pressure rise a little. She had to struggle to maintain her composure. She wanted to break this infuriating little woman and she would do it, too. “You really should think about cooperating. I don’t *have* to send you out on the next transport. I can keep you here as long as I want. I can do to you whatever I want. No one knows you’re here. On paper, this prison doesn’t even exist. On paper, *you* don’t exist. Now

tell me, *Inmate One-Four-Nine-Seven*, why were you stealing documents from General Truus's tent?"

"Two things: Firstly, that wasn't your original question. Secondly, if I don't exist on paper, how do you have that dossier full of papers about me?" The prisoner pointed with a cuffed hand to the dossier on the desk between them.

"You wanna play games? Okay, let's play." Fay nodded to Pvt. Trevor. He hit the prisoner again with the butt of his shotgun, this time in the back of her head. The prisoner fell forward into the edge of the desk and then down to her knees again. "Get her back on her feet," Fay said to Pvt. Trevor.

"Yes, ma'am," Pvt. Trevor said and then lifted the inmate by her arm while the other private kept his muzzle trained on the inmate's back.

When the prisoner stood back up, she was still grinning that toothy grin, still staring at Fay with those seemingly unblinking eyes. "Okay," the prisoner said, "since you ask so nicely, I'll answer. I was stealing General Truus's papers because I needed to do it for my mission."

This answer was vague and useless, full of obvious details that Fay already knew, but at least it wasn't a smart aleck answer. Was she actually getting somewhere with this nasty little creature? Fay would hold her optimism in reserve. "We need specifics. Who were you working for? What was your mission?"

The inmate grabbed her own crotch and said: "I'm working for your mom and my mission is to kill you and this asshole here." She indicated Pvt. Trevor over her shoulder.

Pvt. Trevor didn't need Fay to tell him to take the inmate down again. This time he hit her in the hip with the butt of the shotgun. The impact sent her falling sideways. Her chains prevented her from putting her hands out to break her own fall so she just went down like a felled tree. She landed hard, her shoulder driving down onto the concrete.

Fay had to struggle not to wince. "Stand down, private," she said to Pvt. Trevor as he prepared to hit her again. The other guard, a new recruit, just stood there watching the spectacle, the blood draining from his face. Fay guessed the prisoner would have broken an arm or a collar bone, but when she stood herself back up as easily as anyone could in chains, she was still smiling her stupid grin. She seemed unbothered by the fall. Creepy.

"We'll introduce her to Sergeant Blau in the morning," Fay said. "He'll get the answers we need out of her. For now just get her cleaned up and processed." *And get her out of my sight*, she almost added, but thought better of it.

"Yes, ma'am," both soldiers answered in unison.

The prisoner, of course, had to add her two cents worth: “Ooo, I could go for a hot shower. Any chance I could get some argan oil and some coconut body soap?”

As soon as the two soldiers led the prisoner back into the processing area, Fay sat back in the chair and rubbed her temples.

What an annoying little creature, she thought. How could that little imp possibly be a notorious master spy wanted in three galaxies for almost everything that had ever been made illegal?

She had been caught stealing papers from General Truus’s command tent near the front lines. She had been caught wearing a stolen uniform and carrying a bag of stolen documents. She had been caught by a green recruit just a few weeks out of basic training. That didn’t sound like a master spy to Fay.

Something didn’t feel right about this one. Fay was pretty sure this Inmate 1497 wasn’t who she said she was, even if her thumbprint and DNA matched those on file for Sallie Starlinger.

Sallie

Sallie had been processed into more jails and prisons in her life than she could count. The routine was usually more-or-less the same: strip, spray with cold water, delouse, cavity search, abdominal x-ray, and finally, prison uniform about six sizes too big for her. Sallie knew the drill.

Funny thing about prison cavity searches, though: they always shine a light up into her nose, but nobody ever bothered to run a fiber-optic camera all the way up into her sinuses. Sallie had no sense of smell at all, so she could think of no other use for her sinuses than as small storage compartments for smuggling things into prisons. This time was no different. This time, like so many times before, Sallie managed to smuggle a mission-critical object in through her sinuses.

At least after subjecting her to the whole, humiliating intake process, the guards no longer felt the need to hold her at gunpoint. They carried their shotguns slung over their shoulders as they escorted her back to the intake desk. She once again stood across from Larue. This time, she was dripping wet, covered in a dusting of white delousing powder, and wearing a drooping, yellow jumpsuit. Still shackled and shivering cold, she made a pathetic sight. It was the exact sight she wanted to make. It was no wonder Larue smirked imperiously at her; it was hard for the woman to believe Sallie was capable of killing her. *That's right, bitch, go ahead and underestimate me. Let your guard down.*

"Follow me," Larue commanded.

"Don't I get my one phone call?" Sallie asked.

Larue didn't respond. As if to show she was unafraid (or possibly out of arrogant sloppiness), she turned her back on Sallie and began leading her down the corridor and deeper into the prison.

I know what you're probably thinking. No, this will not go well for Captain Larue.

Sallie was obliged to hobble-walk because of the ankle chain binding her ankles and restricting her stride. At the end of the corridor, Larue and her two toadies led Sallie into a checkpoint of heavy, electronically locking, steel doors. The checkpoint doors worked similarly to an airlock in that the second door wouldn't open until the first door was secured. Both doors were controlled by somebody watching on camera from some control room in another part of the prison. Just a few feet beyond the second door, Sallie saw the rippling-air effect of a projected shield barrier. This wasn't the small kind of body shield that rich people often wore to stop bullets. This was a much more powerful sort of shield, the kind that could kill a person. Without even intending to, she was working out how she would get past this checkpoint in an escape attempt. She had no intention of coming back out this way; it was just a force of habit.

After the first door was secure behind them, and before the second door was opened ahead of them, the group paused inside the checkpoint for a minute. A lockbox mounted to the wall had the words "NO FIREARMS BEYOND THIS POINT" stenciled on its door in all capital letters. One of the two guards stood watching Sallie as the other guard, the one who had hit her earlier, opened the lockbox, placed both shotguns within, and distributed stun sticks to himself, his partner, and to Larue.

"Don't I get one?" Sallie asked. She knew that half of the inmates they brought in to the prison probably made that same joke. She also knew the joke's staleness would irritate the guards worse than the joke itself.

"Shut up, inmate!" the mouthier of the two guards barked at her. She had gotten under his skin. Good. That's just where she wanted to be. One of the two privates was mouthy and the other had yet to say a word to her. She had decided to name them Mouthy and Mutey.

Once they were ready, Larue nodded to the camera. A second later the shield barrier went down, and there was a buzz as the control tower released the locks on the checkpoint's second steel door. Larue led Sallie through the second door and farther into the prison. Mouthy and Mutey brought up the rear, following close behind Sallie.

Sallie's timing was usually pretty good with these things and today it was perfect. After she heard the steel door clang shut behind her but before she heard faint, rippling hum of the shield barrier come back on, Sallie moved quicker than any human could possibly have done. With her legs still chained and her wrists still manacled at her waist, Sallie crouched down and immediately sprang up into the air. In midair, she kicked her shackled feet out behind her and into Mouthy's chest. The kick sent her flying forward through the air like a yellow-jumpsuited missile towards Larue. Thanks to Newton's third law of motion, the kick also sent Mouthy flying backwards off his balance just as the shield barrier reactivated. There was a sizzling sound and the air was instantly filled with the odor of fried pork as Mouthy was sliced in two.

Before Mutey could even react and before Larue could turn to defend herself, Cruise Missile Sallie Starlinger hit her target. She caught the woman's perfectly bunned hair in her still-shackled hands and held on as Larue went sprawling forward to the ground. Sallie landed on top of her, intentionally burying her knees in the woman's back. Sallie might only weigh ninety pounds, but that's plenty of weight to knock the wind out of an enemy and break some ribs in the process.

With her quarry sprawled beneath her on the hard, concrete floor, Sallie knew she had only a few seconds before Mutey would react. In that limited time, she knew she needed to inflict as

much damage as possible. Sallie was very efficient at inflicting damage. Her cuffed hands still tangled in the wreckage of Larue's once-perfect bun, Sallie slammed the intelligence officer's head into the ground three times in quick succession. *SMACK! SMACK! SMACK!* Dislodged bobby pins flew through the air and blood spattered on the floor. Sallie was pretty sure she felt Larue's nose break.

Then, Sallie felt the first shock. She'd been expecting it. At some point Mutey was sure to react and use his stun stick on her. Sallie ignored the first shock and indulged herself in a fourth and final satisfying *SMACK!* of Larue's face against the concrete. She could have resisted the second shock as well, but Sallie felt she'd made her point. In fact, Sallie could have resisted several more shocks from the stun sticks. The sticks were designed to take down the average human, but Sallie was built of stronger stuff than that.

Electing to be taken down, she curled up in the fetal position as the panicked guard hit her again and again with the stick. If she had been human, the guard might have killed her. Eventually reinforcements arrived. Larue was carried away on a stretcher while Sallie was hog tied, carried by several large men to a cell, and thrown roughly to the floor. They left her there, still hog tied and bleeding on the floor of her cell.

No one noticed the bobby pin she had palmed from Larue's hair as she'd been slamming the intelligence officer's head against the concrete.

```
Function CoreFunction {
  CheckObjective {
    Objective_001:Infiltrate == True
    Objective_002:Deliver Counter-intel Packet == False
    Objective_003:Eliminate Primary Target == False
    Objective_004:Exfiltrate == False
    Objective_005:Report to Operator == False
    Objective_006:Receive Payment == False
  }
  If (Objective == Any == False) {
    CompleteObjective
  } and {
    CheckObjective
  } else {
    SeekObjective (From == Operator)
  }
}
```

Objective_002

Sallie

Several hours later, a group of several soldiers returned to remove her manacles. They hit her several times with the stun sticks and kicked her a few times just for recreation. She had killed one of their comrades and beaten the shit out of one of their officers. After they removed her shackles, Sallie just lay there on the floor as the soldiers backed out of the cell and clanged the door shut behind themselves. Sallie pretended to writhe on the floor as she listened to the beeping of a time delay lock being set.

Damn it, she thought. Now I need to bypass a time delay. She hadn't anticipated time delay locks on the cells. Once the door was locked and the delay set, no one would be able to open it, not even with a key, until the predetermined time. Time delays were dangerous with captive populations because if an inmate needed medical attention or if there was a fire, guards wouldn't be able to get to them. Most worlds prohibited putting time delay locks on prison cells, but apparently Blindfall wasn't one of them. Good thing Sallie knew how to bypass a time delay lock.

For the next hour or so, Sallie just lay on the floor of her cell, listening to her Core Function loop incessantly in the back of her mind and pretending to be far more beaten than she actually was. She still held Larue's bobby pin in the crease of her palm. Now that her hands were unbound, she transferred it to her mouth. She tucked it between her right cheek and her lower jaw. Always good to have a bobby pin handy in prison.

Still laying there on the floor, she listened to and watched the guards, counting them and timing their patrols. She put her extremely sensitive hearing to work, listening to their conversations and she put her eagle-eye vision to work studying their every movement. Though she was capable of a multitude of different mission types, her original design had been for intelligence gathering. To that end, the people who'd built Sallie had given her extremely sensitive hearing and vision coupled with precise memory recall.

Unfortunately, the bastards hadn't given her any sense of smell or taste at all. Those senses had still been in development and would have been trialed on the next prototype, had there ever been another prototype. There had never been a fourth prototype, however. The first and second prototypes had been destroyed. S.A.L.L.I.E.-3, as it turned out, was one of a kind.

From the floor where she lay, she could hear the soldiers having whispered conversations far down the cell block. Most of the conversations were about her. From the guards' gossip, she deduced that Larue had suffered a broken nose and between three to six broken ribs (depending on which guard was telling the story), but the bitch had lived.

Good. Sallie still had need of Larue. She would kill her eventually, but for now Sallie needed the intelligence officer alive and pissed off.

Sallie heard somebody moving in the adjacent cell. Although the door of her cell was made of steel bars, the walls were made of thick, riveted steel. She couldn't see him, but her ears told her the person in the adjacent cell was a man. He was standing at the bars near her cell, trying to be quiet, listening to her. She could hear his breathing and every furtive rustling of his clothes. She gave him nothing in return. She made no sound at all that any human could hear.

Finally, the man grew restless and Sallie knew he was about to speak even before he did so. "Psst! Hey!" the man whispered to her. "You okay over there?"

Sallie finally got up off the floor and stepped over to the bars of her cell's door. She still couldn't see him around the steel plate wall, but at least she'd be able to whisper more quietly.

"Yeah, I'm fine. I've had worse beatings than that," she answered the man matter-of-factly.

The man laughed a wry laugh. "So, um... I heard you killed that bitch, Captain Larue?"

"Nah. Not yet. So far, just a broken nose and three-to-six broken ribs. Killed a guard, though" She wasn't bragging, just stating the facts as best as she knew them.

"How'd he die?"

"He had a disagreement with a shield barrier."

"Damn. Those can be nasty. You know Larue's gonna come down hard on you in interrogation for all that."

"Yeah, probably." Sallie was counting on it.

The man snaked his arm through the bars of his cell and around the steel wall. "Name's Nagel. Call me John."

Totally a fake name, Sallie thought.

She took his hand and gave it a shake. "Sallie," she said and let his hand go.

The man who called himself John pulled his arm back over to his own cell. "So, uh..." He started to ask a question and then hesitated.

Sallie knew what he was wanting to ask her.

"I heard... I mean... Is it true that you're Sallie Starlinger?"

"Where did you hear that?" She was being intentionally coy. She was starting to like John.

“You know,” John said, “nothing travels faster than a rumor in a prison.”

That was true. Sallie had been in enough prisons to know that.

“Yeah, well, you can tell the other ladies around your knitting circle that the rumors are true.”

Her words were harsh, but her tone was playful. She was trying to sound flirtatious. Sallie had never been any good at flirting.

The man chuckled. “You’re famous.”

“More like *infamous*. The Kells are pretty proud to have me. Too bad they won’t be able to keep me.”

“You know, I heard about you once...”

“What did you hear? Nothing too bad, I hope.” Sallie already knew what he was going to ask. He was going to ask her about the damn coffee cup story. People always wanted to know about the coffee cup.

“I heard you killed a couple of armed guys once using only coffee cups as weapons.”

“There may be some truth in that story,” she answered evasively. It had actually been six armed men and she had used only a single coffee cup.

“How do you use a coffee cup as a weapon?”

“Everything is a weapon.”

He laughed slightly. “Yeah, I guess that’s true enough.”

She heard him retrieve something in a crinkly wrapper. When he reached his arm back around the steel wall he was holding a small, brown packet. The packet had the words “Perma-Ration. No expiration. Only suitable for soldiers and inmates.” written on it in black letters.

Sallie recognized the packet right away. “Perma-rats,” as they were more commonly called, were a staple of her diet. The dry pellets inside could either be mixed with water or just eaten dry like dog kibble. Because each small packet contained a total day’s nutrition and never expired, they were often used by long-haul space pilots, mercenaries, and shady people at the fringes of society. People like Sallie.

Perma-rats had a notoriously bad taste. She’d once heard a pilot say perma-rats tasted like “the inside of a dead horse’s arsehole.” Sallie hadn’t asked that pilot how he knew what *that* tasted like. She was just grateful she had no sense of taste. To her, a perma-rat was just as good as a steak dinner made out of real cow.

“For me?” Sallie asked

“For you.” John replied.

“Thanks.”

“Hah, you deserve it for giving Larue that ass beating. Besides, they already fed us today, and I doubt if the guards care if you starve since you just killed one of them. Can’t have you going hungry on my watch.”

Sallie smiled even though John couldn’t see it from his cell. She took the perma-rat and thanked him again. She opened the packet and filled it with water from the small sink welded to the wall of her cell. The hard kibbles absorbed the water and disintegrated into a brownish slurry. She sipped the sludge directly from the packet as she told John the story of the coffee cup.

* * *

For the rest of the day and throughout that night, Sallie continued to track the movements of the guards. They did rounds like clockwork, every fifteen minutes, around the clock. Being so predictable was likely to get somebody killed.

She talked quietly with John whenever the guards weren’t around. He told her that he’d been here for over a month and that, like her, he’d been captured near the front lines spying. Also, just like her, Larue was planning on sending him back to Kell to stand trial.

Sallie promised him that she wouldn’t let that happen.

The next morning, just before 09:00, according to Sallie’s internal chronograph, nine soldiers showed up outside her cell door. Captain Larue was among them. Her face was a bruised and purplish wreck and she wore a splint over her broken nose. Her movements were stiff and slow, owing to her broken ribs. Sallie could see that the woman was in pain and trying not to show it. The intelligence officer’s hair was once again in a perfect, regulation bun.

The other eight soldiers were all large, muscular men. Two of the men carried pole snares like the kind dog catchers use to control aggressive animals. The other six were all armed with stun sticks.

“Morning, Captain!” Sallie exclaimed cheerfully. “Sleep good?”

A momentary flash of anger in the Larue’s eyes. No, apparently she had not slept well with multiple broken ribs and a broken nose.

Larue herself said nothing, but her head toady shouted more loudly than was necessary. “Inmate One-Four-Nine-Seven, you will follow my orders! You will do so without question, comment, or hesitation! If you do not, you will be dealt with in the harshest possible terms! Do I make myself clear?!” The head toady wore sergeant’s stripes on his shoulders and his uniform nametag read “BLAU.”

“Yes, drill sergeant!” Sallie shouted back at him in mock-military severity. She gave him a sloppy salute. When she pulled her hand away from her forehead, she transitioned smoothly to the more universal one-finger salute. She needed these guys pissed off. She couldn’t accomplish her mission unless she was tortured and convincingly broken. The harder she could get them to come down on her, the more convincing her story would be. It meant she was in for a lot of pain, but Sallie could handle pain. She was built of pretty strong stuff.

Blau grinned a predatory grin like a shark spotting his prey. “Fine. We do it the hard way, then.” Blau seemed quite happy to be doing things the hard way.

After that, neither Captain Larue, Sergeant Blau, nor any of their toadies said anything for several seconds. Sallie held her hands out at her sides, palms up, in a gesture that said *Your move, guys*. She knew what they were waiting for.

Finally, at the very stroke of 09:00, she heard a small *beep* from the time delay mechanism in her cell door’s lock. It didn’t actually unlock the door, just made it possible for the door to be opened with a key. She could see that Sergeant Blau held a key in his hand.

The beep from the time delay lock was apparently the signal they’d been waiting for. After the beep things happened very quickly. And Sallie was ready for them.

“Hit her,” Blau ordered the grunts.

One man lunged at her through the bars with his stun stick. That was a mistake. Sallie’s movements were fluid and powerful, quicker than any mere human could have managed. Sallie dodged his lunge, bent his arm the wrong way against the bars with a cracking-squishing sound that was both horrifying and satisfying. She grabbed his stun stick out of his now-useless hand and let him fall to the floor shrieking in pain. A second man, failing to learn from his comrade’s mistake, immediately attempted to do the very same thing, lunging at her through the bars. This time, however, Sallie was also armed with a stun stick. She parried the second man’s attack and counterattacked with one of her own. There was an electric *POP!* and the air was filled with the satisfying smell of ozone as Sallie’s stun stick went off in the second man’s face. He crumpled to the ground like wet paper, unconscious and unmoving next to where his comrade still lay screaming. His stun stick fell into her cell and Sallie caught it in her other hand before it even hit the floor. Now she had two stun sticks, one in each hand.

The others hesitated.

“Who’s next?” Sallie demanded. “Step right up and get your tickets, motherfuckers.”

Blau glanced at Larue.

Larue nodded. “Do ith,” she said. Her voice sounded deeper than it had the day before and her words sounded funny. Probably because her nose and sinuses were full of mucus and dried blood.

Blau spoke into some kind of radio communicator device strapped to his wrist. “We’re gonna need the hose and the kicker down here at One-Four-Nine-Seven. And medics. Send medics.”

Twenty minutes later, they finally had Sallie subdued and manacled. After Blau had called for “the hose and the kicker” the soldiers had stood back for several minutes. Medics had come and carried off the wounded men on stretchers. Next, a man had come by with a fire hose. The fire marshal, as Sallie thought of him, had also brought some kind of bot with him. The bot walked on six legs and had one telescoping arm. The end of the bot’s arm was shaped like a really large stun stick. *The kicker*, she’d presumed.

They had then proceeded to spray a powerful jet of water from the fire hose through the bars. She couldn’t fight the water. Sallie was extremely strong, but she only weighed ninety pounds. The fire hose had tossed her around like a dog with its chew toy, ultimately pinning her against the back wall of the cell. Meanwhile, the bot had extended its telescoping arm into the cell all the way back to where Sallie had lain pinned by the torrent of water. This thing had been far more powerful than the hand-held stun sticks the soldiers carried. The first shot from it had genuinely rattled her bones. They’d hit her again and she’d nearly lost consciousness. She never even felt the third shot from the kicker.

When Sallie came back online a couple minutes later, she was completely soaked. Her cell and everything in it was soaked. She was laying on the floor in standing water, manacled so tightly she could barely move. The two men with the pole snares each had their snare looped so tightly around her ankles that they dug painfully into her flesh.

Trussed up like that, they had dragged—not carried—her out of her cell and to one of their “interrogation” rooms. As she’d been dragged past John’s cell, she got her first good look at him. He was a handsome man with black hair and blue eyes. The look on his face was one of genuine concern. Sallie flashed him a wink just before she was dragged down the corridor and out of his sight.

The interrogation room was a small, windowless, mostly empty room with a restraint chair in the very middle. Bright lights were aligned to shine directly into the captive’s eyes. There were no cameras in the room, as no one wanted to generate a record of what went on in there. Most torture chambers Sallie had been in her long career didn’t have cameras and that usually worked to her advantage. As they were dragging her in, Sallie noticed a clock on the back wall

of the room displaying the time as 09:27 in glowing red letters. As soon as they got her strapped into the interrogation chair, Captain Larue approached her. *Not too close*, Sallie noted.

Larue was having trouble speaking. “Well Inmate One-Fo-Nine-Feven, we wan a know who you wohk fo? You will tell uf, one way o anofa.”

Sallie laughed. “You talk funny.”

Larue raised an eyebrow and casually touched a stun stick to Sallie’s sternum a couple times. Sallie bucked against the restraints, being careful not to buck too hard. This chair was just heavy tubular steel and the restraints were only nylon web. While this restraint chair would hold any human, they obviously had no idea what she really was or how strong she was. If she wasn’t careful, she could break out of this chair by accident. That would be handy if she’d wanted to escape, but Sallie needed to be right where she was. The Core Function required her to be here and Core Function must be served.

“Who?” Larue again demanded to know the name of Sallie’s employer.

Sallie took a moment to catch her breath before answering. “Siskin.” It was the truth.

Larue seemed dubious. “You mean Fifkin *Lia*?”

Sallie was still trying to catch her breath. Though she was built to be nearly indestructible, the amount of electricity she’d absorbed in recent days was starting to take its toll on her. That stun stick had done something to her diaphragm and it was getting hard to breathe.

Once she could speak again, Sallie finally answered: “I don’t know. I never got his last name.”

At that, Larue’s eyebrow twitched. “What elf can you tell me about Cunnel *Lia*?”

Sallie could tell her quite a bit about Colonel Siskin *Lia*, starting with the fact that she knew perfectly well that Col. *Lia* was a woman. But she wasn’t going to. She wasn’t going to tell Larue that she, Sallie, had been caught spying on purpose and under the orders of Col. *Lia*. She wasn’t going to tell Larue that Colonel *Lia* was paying her handsomely to be right here where she was. She wasn’t going to tell her that Col. *Lia* was paying her directly from the Olost Army’s intelligence discretionary fund. She wasn’t going to tell Larue that the enemy colonel was a genius battlefield commander who was being considered for a promotion to brigadier general. And she wasn’t going to tell Larue that Colonel Siskin *Lia* let Sallie call her Sissie when the two of them were alone or that Sissie barked out orders in her sleep. No, Larue would get none of that.

Now that Larue thought she’d caught Sallie in a lie, she’d never believe that Sallie was working for Siskin *Lia*. Larue would never believe the truth. Good.

* * *

They “interrogated” her for a few more hours, trying to find out who she was really working for. After being beaten, shocked, kicked, punched, burned, and water boarded for so long, she was little more than a drooling, bleeding, and bruised mess. Her bright, yellow inmate’s jumpsuit was now stained with blood and drool. She slumped against her restraints, crying and begging them to stop. It had taken hours, but Larue and her torturer, Sgt. Blau, knew that they had just about broken the notorious Sallie Starlinger.

Captain Larue, feeling more in control than she had earlier, leaned in close to Sallie’s face. “Tell uf who you’ weally wok fo.”

Sallie didn’t respond. Her eyes drooped, as if she was about to lose consciousness. Larue held her stun stick less than an inch from Sallie’s left eye. At that, Sallie perked up, staring wide-eyed at the stun stick, her face a mask of fear.

“Tell uf!” Larue moved the end of the quietly humming stick even closer to Sallie’s eye. Sallie could feel the energy radiating off of it.

A couple of tears escaped from Sallie’s eyes as she stared, immobilized, at the stun stick. She tried in vain to edge her face farther away from it, but the straps held her head fast.

A small sound, barely even audible, escaped from Sallie’s throat.

“Louda. I can’t hea’ you.” She pulled the stun stick back from Sallie’s face a couple inches.

Sallie looked nervously back and forth between Larue’s face and the stun stick, and then she said a single word. “Orna.”

Larue stood up straight, the stun stick falling to her side. Sallie kept her eyes fearfully on that stun stick.

“Ma’iuf Ohna?”

Sallie nodded, insomuch as the restraints would allow her, without taking her eyes off the stun stick. All this time they’d just assumed she was a spy for their enemy, the Olost, with whom they were at war. Now she was telling them she was spying for a famous Kell general, a general in Larue’s own army, General Marius Orna.

“Fahgent,” Larue said to Sergeant Blau, “You’ with me.”

Then, she turned and limped out of the room, her ribs obviously causing her pain. Sergeant Blau followed her, closing the heavy, steel door behind himself. Sallie was alone and bleeding in the restraint chair in the middle of the room.

Finally, Sallie thought to herself, I thought they’d never leave.

```
Function CoreFunction {
  CheckObjective {
    Objective_001:Infiltrate == True
    Objective_002:Deliver Counter-intel Packet == True
    Objective_003:Eliminate Primary Target == False
    Objective_004:Exfiltrate == False
    Objective_005:Report to Operator == False
    Objective_006:Receive Payment == False
  }
  If (Objective == Any == False) {
    CompleteObjective
  } and {
    CheckObjective
  } else {
    SeekObjective (From == Operator)
  }
}
}
```

Objective_003

Sallie

Sallie tuned her highly sensitive hearing to Larue and Blau as they walked down the hallway and into a separate room. An office, she guessed by the sound of rolling chairs.

They were discussing what she'd just said to them. Apparently, they didn't have a protocol in place for such a piece of intel, and they were trying to figure out what to do with it. *And they call me a robot*, the bio-bot known as Sallie Starlinger thought to herself.

Sallie didn't really care if they believed her or what they did with the information. Her job was to infiltrate Ft. Habitat Military Prison and deliver this piece of counterintelligence. Col. Lia of the Olost Army had hired Sallie for this mission two weeks ago. Best way Sallie knew to infiltrate a prison for spies is to get herself caught spying. That's how she had gotten herself caught stealing documents from General Truus.

But there was more work to be done. The operator's objectives had to be met. The Core Function had to be served.

Sallie's ears told her that Larue and Blau were still safely down the hall. She guessed she had a couple minutes at best to get done what needed to be done.

There was a digital clock on the back wall of this torture chamber, and Sallie needed it. She couldn't see it from where she was still restrained in the chair, but she'd seen it when they'd dragged her in hours ago. It was behind her and if she was going to get the chronometer out of it, she was going to have to move fast.

She worked her tongue between her right cheek and her lower jaw where she'd hidden the bobby pin she'd stolen from Larue the previous day. Once she retrieved the bobby pin from where it was hidden in her mouth, she worked it out to her lips. She eyed her hand. If she missed, she'd be fucked.

So best not to miss.

Luckily, Sallie's brain had been specifically engineered and purpose built to be a highly precise calculator of Newtonian physics, just what was needed for such calculations. It was the reason she could put a bullet into a man's head a half mile away and it was the reason spitting the bobby pin into her right hand was as easy as scratching an itch.

Once she had spit the bobby pin into her hand, she snaked it around and quickly picked the restraint lock holding her right wrist secure against the chair. Then, she reached across and

picked the lock on the strap holding her left wrist. Only the wrist straps had key locks; the other straps on the restraint chair just had simple quick release levers. Within twenty seconds of spitting the bobby pin into her hand, she was completely free from the chair.

She listened down the hall. Larue and Blau were going through something on the computer. By the manner of their conversation, she guessed they were going through some kind of computerized procedure manual. She turned and looked at the clock on the wall.

“Fuck,” Sallie muttered.

She needed to steal the chronograph, the clock’s timekeeping component and power supply, out of that clock. What she hadn’t realized when she’d briefly glimpsed it earlier as she’d been dragged in by her ankles was that it was mounted up high, well out of her reach. It was up near the ceiling. And she was only 4’8”. She was plenty strong enough to jump up and pull it down off the wall, but that would be noisy and destructive. She needed to take the chronograph without anyone knowing she had taken it. After she removed the chronograph from inside the clock, she wanted to replace the clock on the wall. With any luck, they would just think the clock hand malfunctioned. Speed and subtlety were what were called for here.

Thinking quickly, she did the only thing she could do, really. She needed something to stand on and the only thing in the room was the restraint chair. It weighed a couple hundred pounds, but Sallie’s unbreakable skeleton and specially engineered muscles were able to lift it easily.

Larue and Blau were still talking down the hall and now a third person had joined them, some Lieutenant. They were debating the finer points of policy and duty. *They have their Core Function too, I guess*, Sallie mused. It sounded like the lieutenant was trying to impress Larue and failing miserably. *Yuck*.

Sallie set the chair down beneath the clock, stepped up onto the seat, and pulled the clock out from the wall. She reached her hand up behind it, feeling for the small piece she needed. She found it and pulled it out. The chronograph, the part of the clock that actually sent the time data to be displayed to the clock’s electronic face was no bigger than Sallie’s thumb. It looked to be in good shape and it had its own thirty-year power supply. It was probably still keeping perfect time even though it no longer had any display to send that data to.

“Don’t worry, little guy. I promise I’ll get you a new output,” Sallie whispered to the chronograph just before she put it in her mouth and swallowed it. She always felt a kinship to other machines that she would never feel towards humans.

She glanced back up at the clock itself, still hanging from the wall. It’s face was now dark. There was nothing she could do about that. She would have to just hope no one noticed it. She

carried the restraint chair back over to where it had been. She was able place it in exactly the right spot. The chair's legs had left four clean circles on the floor stained somewhat brownish from years of blood. This didn't bother Sallie. To her, humans were just leaky sacks of flesh, weak and easy to take apart.

She got herself back into the chair just as Larue and Blau were heading back down the hallway. She managed to get all the straps back in place pretty quickly, except that when she was down to only her last wrist, her right wrist, she hit a snag. She was having difficulty holding her wrist in the proper position and simultaneously using that same hand to pull the locking strap tight. They might not notice the clock being dead, but they would notice if one of her key lock restraints wasn't tight enough. They might figure out that they hadn't actually broken her as well as she had let them think. She needed to get that strap tight.

Footsteps in the hallway were getting closer.

They were coming.

She was out of time.

She thought quickly. What mattered was that the restraint *appeared* tight. If she couldn't make the strap smaller, maybe she could make her wrist larger. Maybe she could swell up her right arm. She'd never tried it before, but what the hell. She commanded her body to move any excess fluid into her right forearm and hand. All over her body capillaries, veins, and arteries constricted. She increased her heart rate to a dangerous pace. Cells gave up as much water as they could, and within a dozen heartbeats all that extra fluid was flowing into her right arm. The arm swelled to three times its normal size. Her normally thin fingers were now fat and mottled so they looked like burnt blood sausages. The skin of her arm was taut, and she worried she might have overdone it. But the strap that she'd not been able to get tight enough now bit painfully in to her right wrist. So that was good.

She'd had only a couple of seconds to spare before Captain Larue and Sergeant Blau opened the door and reentered the room. She slumped her weight against the restraints and assumed the vacant expression of one who has been pushed beyond her limits.

Fay

It took Fay's stunned mind a second to make sense of what the inmate calling herself Sallie Starlinger had just said to her.

"Orna," Inmate 1497 had said.

Fay stood up straight, the stun stick falling, forgotten, to her side. She couldn't mean General Marius Orna, could she? General Orna was a hero to the Kell Republic. He would never spy on one of his own peers. Would he?

"Ma'iuf Ohna?" Fay asked the restrained inmate. As soon as she asked the question, she knew she shouldn't have mentioned the general's first name. She should have let the prisoner volunteer it herself. But Fay was too shocked by the implications of what the prisoner was saying. It would be an immense scandal if the great General Orna had betrayed his country and spied on his peer, General Truus.

The inmate nodded her head as much as the straps would allow. She never took her eyes off of Fay's stun stick. This tiny, little wisp of a woman had demonstrated an extremely high tolerance for pain, but it seemed she genuinely feared the stun sticks more than anything else. Of all the things Sgt. Blau and herself had done to this inmate, it was the simple, mostly non-lethal electric shocks which had finally broken her.

The implications of what she was hearing were so great she was unsure how to proceed. She needed to consult with Sgt. Blau, her "advanced interrogator," in private.

"Fahgent," Fay said to Sgt. Blau, "you' with me." Then, she turned and left the room. She was so preoccupied with the questions swirling in her mind that she forgot to hide her pain from the inmate.

She heard the heavy, steel security door close behind her as the sergeant followed her out and locked the inmate in. There was nothing to worry about from the inmate; she was beaten, broken, and locked in a restraint chair in a secure room. No chance of her causing any trouble.

Fay found an unoccupied office at the end of the hallway. She sat down at the desk, inserted her left hand into the biometrics scanner, and keyed in her access code with her right hand. She waited for a second as the terminal verified her biometrics, scanned the quantumscale microchip hidden somewhere in her body, and sent an alert to her military ID that someone was attempting to access the computer system using her credentials. She tapped the alert to when it popped up on her ID badge, and the terminal granted her access.

Sgt. Blau, sat down beside her at the desk. "Well, whaddy think, Cap?"

“I think we’ve gotta be careful how we handle this. If the thief is telling the truth then the consequence could be tremendous. What do you think, Fahgent?”

The sergeant was pensive for a moment before he finally answered. “Cap, I think she’s a goddamn liar. I think she’s an Olost spy and she’s trying to get our generals to start distrusting each other.”

“I agree that she is probably lying. In fact, I think she is probably lying about a lot of things. But this could be important.” Fay had to stop and take a gulping, fish-out-of-water breath. It was hard speaking in longer sentences with her facial injuries. Most of the enlisted men, Sgt. Blau among them, only knew that she’d suffered a broken nose and a few broken ribs. Fay had let them all believe that was the extent of her injuries, but the truth was she’d had to have reconstructive surgery yesterday. Several bones in her face and upper jaw had been crushed. Her face was being held together by new plastigoo bones and gauze packing. She’d ordered the medics to secrecy and the med bot that performed the surgery wasn’t telling anyone. The medics had recommended she rest for a day, but she knew she had to return to work immediately. She couldn’t have the men under her command thinking she was weak.

“Cap, with all due respect, you asked what I thought, so here it is: I think if you send this intel you’re playing right into the enemy’s hands. Just pretend like you never heard it.”

Fay gave him a stern look. Just pretending like she’d not heard the intel was against regulations and he knew it. “I know General T’oof. He’s a thma’t man. I think if we include a warning that we think the thief is probably lying, he can take it from there.” She took another gulping fish-breath. Her head was starting to pound.

“Except we aren’t supposed to put any opinions in our intel reports. That includes warnings that the spy might be lying. Only facts.”

“I think there is some woe about if there is a breakdown of command in time of war.” Her head was really beginning to hurt. She began moving through the computer terminal’s menus looking for the policy manual on intel reports. Once she found the proper subsection, she searched for the phrase “breakdown of command.” She remembered reading something about that when she was training to be an intelligence officer. As she searched, she pulled a bottle of pills out of her pocket. Without taking her eyes away from the screen, she swallowed one of the little, white pills without water. “This annoying inmate is giving me a headache,” she said offhandedly to Sgt. Blau. If the sergeant objected, he kept his opinions to himself. The pills were actually heavy painkillers and she wasn’t supposed to

take them on duty. But she needed to function, and the headache was getting worse by the minute.

“Hey, Cap, how’s it goin’? How ya feelin’?” came a voice from the doorway behind them. Fay had to suppress an eye roll as she recognized the voice right away. It was Lieutenant Hank Gray, the most annoying first lieutenant in the entire Kell army. Even his name was boring. He’d been trying to get Fay to go out with him since he’d arrived here on Ft. Habitat half a year ago. He had a habit of talking down to Fay, as if forgetting that she actually outranked him and had more experience. She was in no mood to deal with him right now.

“I’m fine,” she said a little tersely without looking at him. She was hoping he’d take the hint and go away.

“So,” he continued, not taking the hint and not going away, “did you guys break our newest celebrity lowlife yet?”

“Maybe,” Sgt. Blau answered the lieutenant’s question. “We’re just not sure what we should do with the information, yet.”

Shut up, you idiot! I want him to go away, Fay thought at Sgt. Blau. But it was too late. The boys were talking shop.

“Oh yeah, whadja get from her?”

“Prisoner got caught spying on General Truus. But she *claims* she’s working for General Orna.”

“Psssh!” Gray said dismissively. “Nothing but an Olost spy trying to cause trouble in our ranks. Don’t believe her, Cap.”

Thanks, that thought never occurred to me. Where would I be without you? Fay thought sarcastically. She wished Sgt. Blau would quit encouraging him. The Sergeant wasn’t out of line by discussing the ongoing interrogation with him, as Gray was the company lawyer and therefore privy to all interrogation data. In fact, he was actually the perfect person to ask about how to handle it. Nevertheless, Fay didn’t feel like they had sufficient information yet to justify consulting with legal. The interrogation was still ongoing.

Gray continued even though no one asked him to. “Problem is we have to pass all intel up the ranks, whether we believe it or not. Brass doesn’t trust us to be able to interpret data for ourselves.”

Is that your informed legal opinion?

“Yeah,” Sgt. Blau answered, “but Cap was thinking maybe we could include a warning that we think the spy is lying. That way the general’s aware of it but he knows to take it with a grain of salt, you know?”

“Of course she’s lying,” Gray said. “She’s a spy. That’s what spies do.”

Make it stop. Make them both stop.

Gray leaned over Fay and placed his hand on her shoulder. Fay had to struggle to suppress her revulsion. If he’d done that to any male captain, then he might have lost his hand. Fay knew that if she said anything to him, he would think her a *bitch* and himself the aggrieved party. “Typically we’re not supposed to include such warnings. However, I believe there’s an exception to the rule that may apply here.” He leaned farther over her shoulder. He was pretending to look at the terminal screen, but Fay knew he was trying to peek down her top. Being the only woman (other than the occasional inmate) on a base full of bored, horny men, Fay was constantly being ogled. She was glad for the unflattering, black intelligence service fatigues she had to wear. Not that they stopped the men from trying to get a peek every chance they got.

Gray continued: “Check out the Counterintelligence subsection to the policy on Intel Reports. Policy eighteen-dot-thirty-five, if I recall correctly.”

“Thank you, Lieutenant,” Fay said dismissively. *I’m way ahead of you, Gray. The policy is already up on the screen right in front of me. The screen you’re pretending to look at. If you would quit trying to undress me with your eyes, maybe you’d have noticed that.*

Gray seemed not to notice the dismissiveness in her tone. “Basically, what it says is that during time of war, an onsite interrogator can include his impressions of the captive’s motivations and forthrightness if the intel offered by the captive could lead to a ‘breakdown of command’.”

Fay felt her eyebrow beginning to twitch.

“That doesn’t sound like a bad way to go,” Sgt. Blau said. “Covers all the bases. What do you think, Cap?”

I think that’s the exact thing I was suggesting before your buddy came in. I think that’s the thing you were opposed to doing until you heard him say it.

“I agree,” she said. She sent a copy of the policy to her personal data pad so she could reference it later when she was filling out her report. Then, she logged out of the terminal and got up from the chair. She’d had enough of this conversation. “Eitha way we need mo’ info’mathion. We need to fthee how the thtory hold up undah fu’tha queftioning.” She left the

room and began walking back down the hallway towards the interrogation room before either of the two men could see her taking another gulping fish-breath. It hurt to talk, she knew she sounded ridiculous, her head was hurting, and she just needed to get away from Gray.

Sallie

Over the next couple hours, they asked her more questions about her mission for General Orna against General Truus. She offered no resistance and answered all their questions just as her true employer, Col. Lia, had requested. They noted her swollen arm and Blau seemed gratified when he remarked she'd probably lose the arm.

At one point Larue noticed the clock wasn't working. She asked Sgt. Blau if the clock had been broken earlier, but he just said something about sending a requisition to maintenance to have it fixed. Larue stared at Sallie for a moment, suspicious. Sallie just stared out into space, her jaw slack, drool running down her chin, blood and snot trailing from her nose. Whatever suspicions Larue may have had, she seemed to discount them and went on asking her questions.

Eventually Larue seemed to think she'd gotten all there was to get out of Sallie so she ordered her taken back to her cell. This time, a whole platoon showed up to transport Sallie back to her cell. They were wearing full battle armor and every one of them had a shotgun. They all looked nervous. They also brought the fire hose and the bot they called "the kicker" which had proven so effective against her earlier.

But all these preparations were in vain. Now that Sallie had delivered her counterintelligence package, she needed to appear defeated. If they saw she had any fight left in her, they might start to question everything she'd told them that day. They hit her a couple times with the kicker's powerful stun cannon just as a precaution. She just cried out in pain that she really felt and then slumped back against the restraints.

After the second shock from the stun cannon, something went very briefly wrong inside Sallie's brain. The sensation only lasted a couple thousandths of a single second, but there was something wrong there. It had felt like a void, an absence. It was gone before she could even figure out what it had been. All the electricity she'd absorbed over the past couple days was starting to have a cumulative effect on her.

When they finally, nervously unfastened the chair's restraints, she just went limp. She slid out of the chair and onto the floor like water, pooling there in a puddle of defeat. Her once obscenely vibrant yellow jumpsuit was now stained with blood and sweat. Her face was a patchwork of bruises and cuts. Her right arm was badly swollen. She offered no resistance as she was manacled, carried back to her cell, and left unrestrained on her bunk.

A few minutes after the soldiers were gone, John's voice came from the next cell over. "Sallie?" he whispered her name.

She didn't respond.

"Hey, are you okay?"

She just moaned. She really was in pain. Though she was built of strong stuff, she'd absorbed a lot of voltage in the past two days and it was really starting to take its toll on her. That damn kicker was a nasty fucker. *Traitor*, she thought at her brother machine.

John reached his arm around the steel plate wall and tossed something into her cell. She glanced down at the floor where it skittered against the concrete. It was an origami flower he'd made from yellow paper.

"Thank you," she croaked weakly and then pretended to go to sleep. John asked her a few questions about what had happened during her "interrogation," but she remained silent, feigning unconsciousness, especially every fifteen minutes when the guards came by like clockwork. It was important now for everybody to think she was entirely down for the count.

Besides, she needed to let her body recover. She could withstand far more abuse and healed far faster than any human, but even Sallie needed to stop sometimes and repair. Eventually night fell and she heard John eat his supper. Real food from the sound of it. She heard utensils on a tray and the sounds of chewing. Good. She was glad John was getting a nice supper.

For her, a guard only provided a perma-rat. He opened the packet and flung the kibbles into her cell. "Dinner's served, bitch," he said as he flung the now-empty packet through the bars.

Sallie didn't respond. She just lay on her bunk, pretending to be unconscious and listening to the world around her.

Soon after the guards picked up John's dinner tray, Sallie saw the lights go down in the corridor through her closed eyelids. She heard John whisper "Good night" to her from around the steel barrier that separated them. She heard him lay down on his own bunk and soon he was asleep.

She waited a couple more hours, listening to the guards as they made their regular rounds every predictable quarter hour. Between rounds they played cards in the control room and bragged about the same stupid shit bored soldiers have bragged about since the dawn of time.

Finally, at 01:15 by Sallie's internal chronometer (the one in her brain, not the one she'd swallowed earlier), she heard the guard make his rounds past her cell. Once he was past and headed back to the control room, she knew she had a pretty reliable fifteen minutes.

She got up from her bunk, careful not to make a sound and got her equipment ready. No human could get this job done in fifteen minutes, but Sallie was no mere human.

First, she pulled the bobby pin out of her cheek and laid it on her bunk. Then, she signaled her stomach to regurgitate the chronograph she'd swallowed earlier. She got the chronograph up with only minimal retching. The sound had seemed loud to her, but she doubted if any humans had heard it. She listened to the humans on the block in case anybody might have heard anything. John and the few other inmates on the maximum security block were all sound asleep. The guards in the control room were engaging in a debate about who could deadlift more.

Me, you twats. I can lift more than all of you put together.

Satisfied that no one had heard, Sallie worked the object loose she'd kept hidden in her sinuses since before she'd arrived here on Ft. Habitat. The cavity search never gets all the way up into the sinuses. It would have made too much noise if she'd blown the object out her nose, so she had to work it back into her throat and then spit it out on the thin mattress of her bunk. There it landed with a soft thump that she heard, but no human would have heard.

The object was a suicide capsule. It was a glass capsule full of potassium cyanide. 1200mg, four times the normal lethal dose. Even that wouldn't kill Sallie, though. Her body was adept at clearing poisons from its system.

She'd tried once. She'd even ordered her body not to clear the poison, but her self-preservation subroutines proved every bit as hardwired as the Core Function itself. Even she couldn't override them. But she had tried.

She had felt lost in those first few months after all her original operators, the people who'd built her, had died. A piece of machinery had malfunctioned badly on board The Comb, the research station where she was built. A lot of people had died and the station itself had ultimately deorbited and fallen into its star, the star called Linger. Sallie had watched the station burn up from her escape pod. All the people she had known, the closest thing she'd had to a family, were gone. The only home she'd ever known was gone. The Core Function was incessantly looping in her head, thousands of times a second, demanding that she seek an objective from her operator. She didn't know where to find an objective without an operator, and all her operators were dead. She'd had to kill them. She was the machine that had malfunctioned on board The Comb.

But now she had an operator, Col. Siskin Lia, and that operator had given her a set of objectives. No time to dwell in the past. She needed to get to work. The Core Function needed to be served. The operator needed to be served.

Sallie examined all of her tools on the bed before her. Bobby pin, chronometer, and cyanide capsule. She still needed one more object for her mission: a screwdriver. She would have to make that. Luckily, she knew exactly how to do it. A little trick she'd learned in her early years and it came in handy from time to time. It was going to cost her a fingertip and a couple of teeth, but that's okay. She could regrow those easily enough. She didn't have any time to waste, though.

She put her right index finger into her mouth and chewed the flesh off her own fingertip, exposing the bare bone. That hurt, but not like the next part was going to hurt. She commanded the capillaries in her finger to close off and minimize bleeding and then she swallowed the flesh of her own fingertip. It might raise questions if a severed fingertip was found in her cell. Besides, no sense wasting good protein.

Her exposed finger bone was a thing of beauty. It wasn't made of weak, soft calcium carbonate like a human's bones. Her skeleton was made of a nearly indestructible material developed specifically for the S.A.L.L.I.E. program called hexilite. It was black as polished jet stone with a pearlescent sheen to it. Made of interlocking, hexapolar molecules, it couldn't be broken. If Sallie's bones were exposed to more stress than they could handle, they would simply lose their cohesion, not breaking, but becoming soft, flexible, and rubbery. This was a very temporary condition while the hexilite molecules' polarity forced them to realign themselves the way they were supposed to be. It only took a few minutes for smaller bones to regain their cohesion and during that time, there was a narrow window of opportunity where the bone could be forced into a different shape than what it was intended to be. A shape like the point of a screwdriver, for example. It wouldn't hold up for long before the molecules forced the bone to regain its original shape, but if you had a few screws to remove and you worked fast, it would get the job done.

First, she would have to break the finger bone's cohesion by crushing it. This was the part that would really hurt. The only tool she had which was up to the job was her teeth. Knowing time was critical, with three of her fifteen minutes gone already, she put the exposed bone into her mouth and bit down on it as hard as she could. Pain shot through her finger and hand like electric fire but that was nothing. The real pain was in her mouth. Her teeth, the only parts of her made weak like a human, cracked and split. The three teeth that shattered hurt far worse than anything she'd been subjected to down in Larue's lame excuse for a torture chamber. She had to fight not to cry out. Why her builders had given her that human compulsion, she would never understand. Thankfully, they had also given her the ability to resist it.

She swallowed the shattered teeth, too. She needed the minerals in them to grow new teeth. Waste not, want not.

It cost her three teeth and a lot of pain, but it got the job done. The finger bone, its cohesion now broken, was soft and malleable. She reached the damaged finger through the cell bars and found one of the four screws which held lock's time delay control panel in place. They were specialty screws with strangely shaped heads. They were designed to come off only with a specially designed screwdriver. She pressed and held her now-decohesed finger bone into the screw head. Over the next couple of minutes, the bone's molecules began to realign and find their cohesion. As the bone began to harden, held against the specialty screw head, it hardened into the shape of the screwdriver which was meant for that screw. Eventually, the molecules would realign themselves properly into their original shape, but for the next several minutes, Sallie would have the exact tool she needed.

Four minutes down. She had eleven minutes to get the job done. While she held her decohesed finger bone against the screw head and waited for it to solidify into the shape she needed, she sent an emergency command to the nerves in that finger. Just as she could order her body to devote all of its available resources to swelling up her right arm in an emergency, she could order nerves to grow quickly.

By the time the finger bone had partially cohesed into a tool which could turn the security screws and she had gotten the access plate off, Sallie had a narrow fringe of raw, exposed nerves protruding from the wound. The new, vulnerable nerves were only a fraction of a millimeter long, barely visible even to Sallie's sharp eyes. Still, they sent a constant, disquieting sensation of electric jitteriness radiating up her arm and all the way into her jaw.

Eight minutes down now. She only had seven minutes left. This was taking longer than she'd planned, but Sallie still felt the task was within her operational parameters. The bio-computer built of specially designed neurons and encased in her hexilite skull was constantly performing and re-performing the calculations. She could do this before the next guard rounded.

With the four screws now removed, the keypad for the time delay lock and its access plate hung from a short bundle of wires on the outside of her cell door. There were six wires in the bundle. She had to figure out which one was the right one. Which one sent time data from the computer in the keypad to the lock servo's simple input/output processor? Which one would carry the data to tell the servo it was time to enable the key lock?

Pressing her face against the bars, she could just barely see the wires and the back of the keypad module. The new nerves protruding microscopically from her wounded finger would allow her to interact in a very rudimentary manner with very simple electronic devices. She'd never be able to hack the keypad's secure computer or to produce and encode the time data well enough to fool the lock servo's processor, but she could hack the simple chronometer she'd stolen earlier. She could tell the chronometer what time to send out and let it encode the time data for her. She had never been designed to network directly with other computers via her nervous system. This was just a trick she'd figured out for herself over the years.

First, she had to find the right wire. She ran her exposed nerves along the contact points where the wires were soldered to the back of the keypad.

One gave her a mild shock. That's not it.

The next one was an alarm system. If communication between the keypad and the servo ever failed, that wire would tell the computer to sound an alarm. Best not mess with that one.

The third wire, though, was the time sending wire.

This was the one Sallie needed. She pulled it free from the back of the keypad. Now, she connected her exposed nerves to the wires protruding from the stolen chronometer. It was a simple device that only knew how to keep time and send it out to a digital display. It would do that for the next thirty years or so, until its internal power supply ran out. It would do it because that was all the chronometer knew how to do. It had its Core Function just like she did. She felt a greater sense of kinship to this simple machine than she would ever feel to any of the humans she was built to resemble.

With her nerves now connected to the chronometer, she could *sense* more than see the time it was keeping. 01:24:04. Nine minutes down now. No time to waste. She accessed the chronometer's time setting function and reset its time to 08:59:50. As far as the chronometer knew it was now ten seconds to 09:00. She had no idea if the soldiers had actually set the time delay on her cell to 09:00, but that's what time they had used the previous day, so Sallie was just going to have to chance it.

Before her ten seconds were up, she disconnected her mind from the chronometer and held it's time sending wire to the one that carried time data to the lock's servo. She held the two wires tight in the finger and thumb of her uninjured left hand and counted off the seconds. Then, just as the chronometer reached 09:00, she heard a faint click from inside the lock as the servo mechanism disengaged. It was now possible for her to pick the key lock.

09:00, just as she'd guessed. Humans were nothing if not predictable.

She pulled the chronometer back into her cell and set it on her bunk. She was done with that for the time being. Now, she used the bobby pin to pick the lock. Humans were imprecise, clumsy creatures. Even an expert human lock picker would have wasted a minute or more trying to pick the lock, but Sallie had it picked and she had the cell door opened in less than twenty seconds.

She was out.

To cover her tracks, she needed to put the lock's time delay mechanism back together, and she had to do it quickly. She could feel the bone in her finger starting to realign out of the specialty screwdriver shape she had forced it into and back into its natural shape. If it hardened, it would cost her a few more teeth and more minutes than she had to get the hexilite bone back into that shape. But now that she was outside the cell she could work much faster.

She had no way of soldering the wire back onto its contact point on the back of the keypad's computer. Without that wire, the lock servo would never again disengage, making the door impossible to open. It wouldn't be hard for the guards to figure out she'd tampered with it. The only thing to do was make sure the servo would never again engage at all. With the servo incapable of engaging, the key lock would be openable at any time, regardless of how the time delay was set. They'd eventually figure that one out too, but by then she hoped to be long gone. She ran her exposed nerves along the three remaining wires, found the one that told the servo to engage, and ripped it off the back of the computer.

Next, she put the keypad and access plate back where they belonged. It was easier now that she was working from outside the cell. She was able to get it all back in place much more quickly than she had taken it apart. And not a moment too soon. Her finger bone was starting to shift out of its screwdriver shape and back into its own natural shape as she labored the last screw home.

Ten minutes down. It had only taken her a minute to pick the key lock and reassemble the time delay, but she was running out of time. She only had five minutes before the guards made their next round. If they were early, if they caught her, she would have to kill a lot of people tonight. This could turn into a real bloodbath. She listened. All was quiet. The guards were now discussing proper methods of gripping the bar while deadlifting, completely oblivious to the fact that a killing machine was now loose on their cell block.

At the next cell over, John's cell, she stopped and looked at him sleeping. He'd obviously been concerned for her. He'd fallen asleep in his bunk with his head near the bars where he could hear her better. This was opposite of how most prisoners slept. He was laying slightly on

his side, black hair mussed, his face pointed towards her cell. He obviously liked her and he'd apparently wanted to make sure she was okay. Even Sallie had to admit it was very sweet of him.

Too bad she had to kill him. Sallie had been planning on waking him, telling him she was breaking out, and offering to take him with her. She'd planned on luring him close to the bars for a kiss (a trick that human males almost always fell for), breaking the capsule in her own mouth, and then spitting the poison into his mouth. That would have taken more time, but this was going to be easier. This would help her get back on schedule.

With his head close to the bars, even Sallie's short arms could reach him easily. She took the cyanide capsule in her left hand, reached in between the bars, and hovered her hands near the sleeping man's mouth and jaw. She would have only a second, maybe less before he woke. Sallie took a breath and focused on what she had to do.

Then, she did it. In one quick movement, before he could even wake or react, she shoved the suicide capsule into his mouth and between his teeth. Simultaneously, with her right hand she clamped his jaw down, shattering the glass capsule. Before John even woke or knew what was happening, his mouth was full of enough cyanide to kill four men.

His blue eyes flung wide open. She could see the surprise, the terror, and the betrayal in them. He tried to scream and spit the foul-tasting powder out of his mouth, but Sallie held one hand firm over his mouth, and with the other she used her outsized strength to hold his jaw shut. He began to buck and flail on his bunk, but Sallie held his head trapped in the vice of her powerful arms. He was a strong man, but he was no match for Sallie's bioengineered strength.

Sallie whispered to the panicked, trapped, and dying man as he flailed futilely against her grip. "Colonel Lia sent me. She can't have one of her spies talking to the enemy. And you've been talking, John." Her tone was an imitation of compassion. Sallie didn't really understand compassion, but she knew how to imitate it. There was no real need to explain herself to this dying man, but she had nothing else to do while she waited for him to die. Sallie continued, her tone like that of a mother scolding a child who's eaten too many sweets: "You've been here for a month. You've got perma-rats to share and you get real food for your supper. You've got paper to waste on making origami flowers. That's a lot of privileges for a spy who isn't talking, John." She paused a moment to let all that sink in before continuing. "Remember when I promised I wouldn't let them take you back to Kell to stand trial? Well, this is me fulfilling my promise."

Now his face was turning bright red and she knew the cyanide was doing its lethal work. Col. Lia, the operator, had asked that Sallie make the captured spy's killing look like a suicide if possible. Sallie knew that Captain Larue would have strong suspicions, and probably Sergeant Blau would as well. If she was lucky, they wouldn't be able to prove anything. No forensic pathologist would be fooled, but Sallie doubted that they would have one on staff here. Convincing them of John's suicide wasn't crucial to the objective, but it would be useful.

Sallie checked her internal chronometer. Twelve minutes now. She only had three minutes left.

John's flailing about became less like the struggles of a trapped, panicked man and more like the spasmodic convulsions of a body in the throes of cyanide death. Sallie was able to let him go now. His jaw muscles were convulsing, holding his jaw closed so tightly he was probably breaking cracking his own teeth. She could see in his eyes that he was still conscious. Foam oozed out of the man's mouth. He vomited, but his clenched jaw only allowed a little to escape. Most of his fancy, real-food supper likely ended up either trapped in his mouth or in his lungs. Eventually his eyes became fixed and unseeing. The significant parts of John were now gone even as his body continued to convulse. This wasn't the first time Sallie had watched a person die from cyanide poisoning, so she knew he would continue to convulse for several minutes to come. The important thing was that by now he was beyond saving and Sallie was almost out of time.

Fourteen minutes gone. She could hear the soldiers in the control room gathering their equipment and preparing to make their rounds. Got to love military precision. If this were a civilian prison, the guards might make their rounds a couple minutes early or late, but this was a military prison. Fifteen minute patrols meant fifteen minutes.

Sallie returned to her own cell and gently pulled the door shut behind herself. She reached back out through the bars with the bobby pin and quietly turned the lock back to the locked position. She pushed on the door to test it and felt it secure against her hand. Next, she tucked the bobby pin back into her cheek, picked the stolen chronometer up off her bunk where she'd left it and forced it back down her throat. She lay on her bunk in the exact same position she'd lain in for several hours, ever since they had brought her back from the torture chamber. The guards had rounded several times and were used to seeing her, unconscious and unmoving, in her bunk.

She listened as John continued to convulse in the next cell. She listened as the guard walked down the block looking into all the occupied cells. She heard him hesitate as he first

detected the strange sounds coming from John's cell, the only sounds on the otherwise quiet block. Sallie listened to the sound of a stun stick being drawn from a belt loop and she heard the very faint hum as it was turned on. The guard quickened his pace until he came upon John's cell.

"Ah, FUCK!" the guard exclaimed at seeing John's flailing and contorted form through the bars. Sallie heard stirrings all up and down the block as the guard's exclamation awoke the few other inmates from their sleep. "Code four-four!" The guard was speaking into his wrist communicator now. "Code four-four! I need medics to one-four-nine-five, ricky-tick! Alert the captain. She'll wanna know."

You bet she'll want to know her little singing bird has gotten into some bad feed, Sallie thought.

Sallie felt the guard look into her cell. Clearly the thought was crossing his mind that she may be involved. She just lay there, unmoving, still in the same blood-stained yellow jumpsuit she'd been tortured in the previous day.

The guard went back over to John's cell and waited for the medics.

Sallie listened as the medics arrived and tried in vain to save John's life, but he was too far gone by that point. Their task was complicated by the fact that they had to work through the bars, unable to open the cell door because of the lock's time delay mechanism. A mischievous part of Sallie's mind wanted to offer to bypass the time delay for them.

Over the next couple hours, there was much activity outside the dead man's cell as people shined lights in, filled out reports, gossiped, and speculated amongst themselves about what may have happened. Several people speculated that he had probably gotten the suicide capsule from Sallie somehow and the consensus seemed to be that he was afraid to face his upcoming trial on Kell.

But not everyone was so quick to write off the man's death as a suicide. Those who'd spent the most time with him during the month he'd been incarcerated here at Ft. Habitat, Larue chief among them, seemed dubious.

After some time had passed and plenty of witnesses had seen Sallie still passed out where she'd been all evening, she did what any self-respecting inmate would do: she acted nose-y. She got out of bed and watched the drama unfolding just outside her cell. One of the guards asked Sallie if she knew anything about what had happened, but she just claimed to have slept through the whole thing. Larue glared at her suspiciously but said nothing.

By the time 09:00 came around and they were finally able to access John's cell, he was in full rigor mortis. Sallie stood at the barred door of her own cell and watched as they wheeled him out on a stretcher. The dead man's back was arched painfully and his fingers and toes contorted into nightmare claws. His mouth was fixed in the wicked, sardonic grin that Sallie had seen before in other people she'd killed with cyanide.

```
Function CoreFunction {
  CheckObjective {
    Objective_001:Infiltrate == True
    Objective_002:Deliver Counter-intel Packet == True
    Objective_003:Eliminate Primary Target == True
    Objective_004:Exfiltrate == False
    Objective_005:Report to Operator == False
    Objective_006:Receive Payment == False
  }
  If (Objective == Any == False) {
    CompleteObjective
  } and {
    CheckObjective
  } else {
    SeekObjective (From == Operator)
  }
}
```


Objective_004

Sallie

The transport plane arrived a couple of days later to take Sallie to the Kell home world for further interrogation and to stand trial. John had “committed suicide” in the small hours of Tuesday morning. It was predawn Thursday before Sallie heard the rumble of the plane’s engines outside the prison. By this point, many of her wounds were well on their way to being healed. The fingertip she’d bitten off was starting to regenerate and the bone was now fully covered by what looked like a nasty, black scab. She’d cleaned herself up and been issued a clean, yellow jumpsuit.

She’d spent the last two days presenting herself as a model inmate. Ever since she’d first awoken after her “interrogation,” Sallie had been careful to present herself as the beaten and broken inmate she definitely wasn’t. She had spoken quietly, done what she had been told, and kept her eyes down to the floor. When guards knocked their stun sticks against the bars of her cell, she resisted the urge to rip their arms off and instead flinched like the type of cowed creature they liked their inmates to be.

It was midafternoon on Thursday and she knew they were coming for her as soon as her ears picked up the sound of many heavy-booted feet coming on to the cell block. They were accompanied by the slithering sound of a fire hose being dragged across the floor and the distinctive walk of the six-legged “kicker” bot. Just like when they had brought her back from Larue’s torture chamber, Blau arrived with an entire platoon of soldiers in full battle dress and armed with shotguns.

Before Blau could even start his whole *Inmate, you will follow my orders* speech, Sallie submissively offered her hands out through the bars. She offered no resistance as some poor grunt nervously manacled her hands.

No one seemed concerned that the tip of her right index finger was now completely covered by a gnarly, desiccated scab or that she was missing a few teeth. Her body was a patchwork of wounds, cuts, bruises, and abrasions from the various beatings she’d endured, so what were two more wounds? She’d intentionally commanded her body not to heal any of these superficial wounds she’d received from beatings to camouflage those she’d self-inflicted. She didn’t need anybody asking what happened to her fingertip. And she definitely didn’t need anybody taking too close of a look at her finger bone. Even these idiots would become suspicious at seeing her

black bones. The soldiers all likely just thought somebody else must've caused any extra wounds. If they even cared enough think about them at all.

She cooperated with her captors and allowed them to shackle her arms and legs. She was rewarded for her obedience by being allowed to hobble-walk out to the plane rather than being dragged.

The plane wasn't a true prisoner transport plane. It was actually just a military cargo plane which had been retro-fitted with two ejectable prisoner transport pods in the aft of its cargo deck.

It was into one of these two small pods which Sallie was now stuffed. The prisoner transport pods were like small airlocks, except without any airlock controls on the inside. They were designed so that if an inmate ever tried to escape or posed any threat to the flight, all the plane's crew had to do was press a button. As soon as that button was pressed, the pod's outer doors, built into the floor, would pop open and the inmate would be shit out the underside of the plane into space. There, they would die within seconds, eyes and internal organs shooting out through any available orifice. The knowledge that a horrible death was only a button press away was usually enough to keep most inmates in line.

The smallness of the pods, coupled with the strange way every sound echoed within the pod, made any normal-sized occupant feel acutely *trapped*. Sallie, however, wasn't a normal-sized person. She'd ridden in similar pods before and had found them comfortable enough. Her limbs were short enough that she could stretch her arms out at her sides or sit comfortably on the floor. There were advantages to being small. Sallie's little pod on this flight had no window looking outside the plane and only one small window, not much bigger than her hand, which afforded her only a narrow view of the cargo deck inside the plane.

They had left her shackled and hadn't bothered to secure the safety strap around her waist. After they had closed her in all sounds outside the pod took on a muffled, detached quality. Conversely, any sounds from inside the metal tube sounded louder and sharper than they had any right to be.

She watched through her little window as the plane was loaded with a couple pallets of cargo bound for Kell. One of those pallets contained two long, rectangular, man-sized shipping crates. She guessed that one of the crates contained the body of John and the other was probably the soldier who'd been cut in half by the energy barrier the night she'd attacked Larue. Sallie had almost forgotten about that one.

She watched as most of the platoon that had escorted her to the plane walked back down the loading ramp. Only a half dozen soldiers remained on the plane. Sallie was glad. Even she

had her limits and killing a whole platoon of armed soldiers would be difficult. Only six remained. She figured there were probably only two pilots as part of the plane's regular crew, so that made eight.

Nine. She hadn't seen Larue for days, not since the middle of the night when John had "committed suicide." But Sallie knew deep in her hexilite bones that Larue was on this plane. Like a chill in the air, a green sky, or just a general sense of lurking evil, Sallie knew Larue was nearby. Fine with her. She'd promised to kill Larue and she would make good on it. Killing Larue wasn't one of her objectives, and therefore it wasn't required by the Core Function. It was more like what a human would call a hobby.

But this troubled Sallie. Machines weren't supposed to have hobbies. Sallie had killed a lot of people since she'd first been brought online. That was what she was built to do. Everyone she'd ever killed had either been in self-defense or in service to the Core Function, and by extension, in service to her operator. She had never before wanted to kill anyone just for her own personal reasons.

Why did she want to kill Larue so badly?

No, that's not the question. Larue was a terrible person and any normal person would want to kill her. But Sallie wasn't a normal person. The question was, why did Sallie *want*? Machines weren't supposed to want. Could she be glitching? Could something be going wrong with her code? She was decades past her designed service life. Could she finally be breaking down?

Eventually, the cargo ramp was closed and the six no-necks took their seats along the wall opposite of Sallie. She heard the plane's engines start up, and she secured her safety belt, which was no easy feat with her hands still shackled to the chain around her waist. She felt the plane taxi and take off. At a certain point, she felt the heavy g-forces as the plane accelerated to escape velocity. Then, a couple minutes later, she felt herself go weightless in her pod for several seconds before the artificial gravity came on. With the artificial gravity now on, Sallie undid the safety strap. It came unfastened with a CLICK-SLIDE sound that seemed obscenely loud in the sanctity of the small, quiet space.

Her captors were likely watching her on the camera built into transport pod's ceiling. She knew she wouldn't be able to make her move until the plane was in transtachyonic flight. Once a spaceplane is in transtach it takes a while to get back out, and during that time, no distress signals can be sent. But Sallie had to wait. She knew she was on camera and she wanted to make sure not to give anyone who may be watching any reason to abort transtach entry or to

call for reinforcements. She sat down on the floor, crossed her legs, closed her eyes, and waited for the telltale rumble and lurch that would signify the plane's entry into transtach.

For the next half hour or so, the plane accelerated and tweaked its vector, aligning towards Kell. Then, there was a low rumble through the plane's structure followed by a sudden lurch, like a boat which feels hopelessly stuck on a sand bar but suddenly breaks free to drift smoothly upon the open current. The plane was in transtach. Now it was time for Sallie to get to work.

Sitting on the floor of her little, metal coffin, she worked the bobby pin out of its hiding place in her cheek. She quickly picked the locks that held her shackles in place. She took the two longer pieces of chain, the waist chain and the ankle chain, and looped them together, end-to-end, via their cuffs. Now these two chains made one long chain. Next, she took another of the cuffs and used it to secure one end of the long chain to the transport pod's safety harness. With the combined length of the safety harness and the two pieces of chain, Sallie now had a total length of about five feet with one end firmly secured to the wall.

From somewhere in the pod she heard a familiar voice from a too-loud, hidden speaker. "Inmate One-Four-Nine-Seven! I order you to stop doing whatever you're doing!" It was Larue. At least now she could talk normally again. The damage to her face must be healing.

Sallie could fix that.

Sallie didn't respond to Larue. Instead, she reached down, grabbed the free end of the chain and tied it in a quick release knot around her left ankle. That done, Sallie ripped one of the sleeves off of her yellow prison jumpsuit and wrapped it around her left hand like boxers do to protect their hands when they hit stuff. Sallie was going to hit something *very* hard.

Fay

“Inmate! Do as I tell you or risk being spaced!” Fay shouted authoritatively at the image on the screen. She looked at the red button with the safety cover over it labeled “Inmate Ejection.” Someone had scratched the words “Garbage Disposal” into the paint next to the button.

On the monitor, she could see that the inmate clearly had no intention of complying. Fay was not surprised. *I never bought that whole meek act. I just knew this one wasn't done causing trouble. I should just eject this nasty little heathen into space.* It would feel satisfying, but Fay knew it would leave a black mark on her career if she wasn't able to deliver this prize to Kell. Fay was an officer and a soldier. If it was her duty to deliver this inmate, she was going to try her best to do it.

Fay took one last wistful look at the red button before unstrapping herself from the control panel seat. She made her way to the ladder which led down to the cargo deck. It had been painful climbing up the ladder with three broken ribs in the first place and it hurt like even worse going back down. But she made it. Standing at the base of the ladder, Fay took a moment to let the waves of pain in her ribs subside. She didn't want the enlisted men to see how much pain she was in; they might think her weak. And she sure didn't want to give the inmate the satisfaction of seeing it.

As she started walking aft, she heard a dull *thud* come from the other end of the cavernous cargo deck. At the thud, she saw the six enlisted men look up from their books and card games towards the inmate's pod.

Fay began moving aft as fast as her sore ribs would allow her to move. The men saw something Fay couldn't see from where she was standing. Whatever they saw caused them enough alarm that they quickly jumped up from their seats, donned their helmets, and grabbed their shotguns and stun sticks.

A second dull *thud* came down the length of the mostly empty cargo deck. “What the fuck?” Fay heard one of the soldiers say.

The soldiers approached the inmate's transport pod. Fay heard one of them, Corporal Storstrand, speak to the inmate through the intercom. “Knock it off, dipshit. You want me to space your ass?” Fay could see him absently reaching for the panel next to the pod door. The panel, Fay knew, had an “Inmate Ejection” button just like the one at the main control panel upstairs.

“Belay that, corporal!” Fay ordered as she approached the group of soldiers.

Cpl. Storstrand lowered his hand away from the big, red ejection button. “Yes, ma’am.” he acknowledging her order as another *thud* came from the pod’s door.

“What’s the inmate doing?” Fay asked the group of soldiers at large.

“Take a look, ma'am,” a private whom Fay didn’t know by name said. The men stepped aside from where they had all clustered around the pod’s door and let their captain have a look for herself. Just then, Fay heard another *thud*, but this time she could see where it was coming from as well. The idiot Inmate 1497 trying to punch out the little, tempered glass porthole. What the in the world was she thinking? The porthole was only three or four inches in diameter. The inmate was small, but even she would never be able to crawl through that porthole. Was she going to try to reach her arm through and pull the lever to open the door?

Cpl. Storstrand was obviously thinking along these same lines. “Don’t worry, ma'am,” Cpl. Storstrand said. “We’ll blow her damn hand off before we let her reach that lever.”

Thud.

“Does she think this is actually going to work?” Fay was surprised. In her career as an intelligence officer, she’d seen some inmates do some stupid, desperate things, but this was one of the dumbest. There was no way the inmate could pull this off.

THUD! Was it Fay’s imagination or was the inmate hitting harder? Had she actually felt that last one in her chest? The inmate’s hand was only in Fay’s view through the porthole for a moment and then it was gone again. During that brief moment, though, Fay saw that the inmate had wrapped her hand with part of her jumpsuit. Over the cloth-wrapped hand, she had looped one of her manacles to serve as a makeshift knuckleduster. The porthole was small and made of thick tempered glass, but Fay knew for herself just how strong the wiry little inmate was. Could it be possible for her to break the glass?

THUD!

Fay pressed the button on the intercom. “Inmate One-Four-Nine-Seven, do you really think I’ll let you punch your way through this glass before I jettison you into space?”

Fay waited a moment. There was no response from the inmate, but at least she seemed to have stopped hitting the glass. Unlike the main control panel on the upper deck, the small switch panel next to the pod didn’t have a view screen displaying the camera’s view inside the pod. Down here on the cargo deck, the small porthole was the only way to see into the pod and it only offered a limited field of view. Fay leaned close to the still-undamaged glass, trying to see the inmate. She couldn’t see her.

And then, suddenly, she could.

The inmate popped up from below the porthole's line of sight. One second, nothing; the next instant the tiny porthole was full of Inmate 1497's loathsome, dark, angular face. The inmate was grinning the same maniacal, toothy grin she'd been grinning that first night at the intake desk. Fay hadn't realized how closely she'd leaned to the glass. The sudden, unexpected appearance of her enemy startled Fay, causing her to cry out and step back from the glass. Her own quick movement caused her broken ribs to shoot pain through her chest. Fay winced, despite herself.

The soldiers quickly found things to look at elsewhere. A couple were trying not to laugh.

"You scared, Larue?" the inmate's voice came from the intercom. She was still grinning that insane grin. Oh, how Fay hated this woman!

"Not even in the least, inmate."

"You sure look scared. I liked you better when you were talking all funny. Want me to break your nose again so you can have your funny accent back?"

Fay hid her rage-clenched fists behind her back. She pushed her shoulders back and stood tall in her fatigues and boots, ignoring the aching pain from her ribs. She was a captain in the Kell army and this *inmate* would not get the better of her. "You talk tough, Inmate One-Four-Nine-Seven, but I know the truth. You're not as tough as you think."

"Larue, I'm built of far stronger stuff than you can imagine. I will get out of this pod, and I will kill you. That's a promise from me to you."

"No, inmate, I'm gonna watch you die at your execution. You had your chance to kill me, and you failed. I'm still here and I will be here when you're gone." Fay smiled imperiously at the impish little inmate leering back at her through the porthole glass.

The inmate tossed her head back and laughed.

"What in the world are you laughing about?"

"I didn't try to kill you that night."

"Oh, really? Then what would you say that was all about?"

"Theft." The inmate held up a badly mangled and bent bobby pin. Fay understood right away it had to be one of hers. "How do you think I picked these locks?" Now the inmate waved her left hand, the one wearing the makeshift knuckleduster, in the window. "Your guards should have searched me again after that. Most prisons would have, but your guys didn't. You don't run a very tight ship, *captain*. Hope that doesn't make you look too bad when the debriefers on Kell ask me about it."

Fay felt a mixture of anger, embarrassment, and annoyance. Annoyance most of all. She tried to keep her face stoic, to betray nothing of what she felt. Nevertheless, the inmate could tell she'd struck a nerve. Her impish grin grew wider.

"And that's not the only thing I stole. Think about it, Larue." The nasty little woman's eyes twinkled with obvious mirth.

What in the world was she talking about? Who knew. The woman was obviously insane and would be dead soon. Fay wasn't going to play her game anymore. "Inmate One-Nine-Four-Seven, you will re-shackle yourself immediately or you will be spaced. Once you do so, you will remain shackled for the duration of the flight and make no further attempt at escape. Do you understand?"

"Oh, I understand. I understand that our *time* together is limited. *Your time* is limited. *Time* is running out for you." The inmate gave Fay a significant nod

She kept leaning on the word "time." What was that about? There was something here, she could feel it. Fay thought for a moment, and then it clicked. She'd almost forgotten about the clock failing in the interrogation room. Those clocks had their own internal, thirty year power supply. At the time, something about it just "happening" to fail that day had seemed a bit too convenient to her. She'd disregarded it as an unlikely coincidence, but a coincidence all the same. The inmate had been strapped down tightly in the restraint chair. How could she have possibly tampered with the clock? But just minutes ago, Fay had sat at the control panel upstairs and watched as this same inmate had picked the locks to her restrains in a matter of seconds.

Then, another thought occurred to her and it all fell into place. The night of Inmate 1495's death, she'd had her suspicions that this little imp was somehow involved, but she had not been able to figure out how until now. How could she have gotten out of her cell? The time delay had been set on her cell, making the lock unpickable. But now, Fay understood. *Time*. Somehow, the clock in the interrogation room and the time delay lock on her cell were linked. This vile little woman had somehow gotten out of her cell, killed the other inmate, and locked herself back in before anyone even knew something was amiss.

The inmate must have read Fay's comprehension on her face. Her grin widened and she nodded conspiratorially. "It all happened on your watch, captain. And in a minute, I'm going to break out of this pod, kill you and all your goons, and take control of this plane. And there isn't a goddamned thing you can do to stop me" And with that, the inmate resumed her attack on the porthole glass with renewed vigor.

THUD! THUD!

We'll see about that. Fay was going to space this horrible little woman. She was threatening Fay herself, as well as her men, and the safety of the flight. Besides, Fay couldn't stand any more of her. She switched the intercom over to the cockpit to talk to the pilots.

"Cockpit," one of the pilots' voices came from the intercom speaker as the captive continued her assault on the glass.

THUD! THUD! THUD!

"Are you guys aware of the situation with the inmate?"

"Affirmative. We got a monitor up here. We can see and hear everything."

"Good. Is there any chance she could break that glass?"

THUD! THUD! THUD!

"Well, it's thick, tempered glass," the pilot answered. "It's pretty strong, but if you hit it hard enough in just the right way, it could theoretically break. Problem with that is that if she does manage to break the glass, then the pod will no longer be isolated from the rest of the cargo deck. Spacing her won't be an option anymore at that point."

THUD! THUD! THUD!

"You guys know your spaceplane better than anybody. Is there any alternative course of action you can recommend?"

THUD! THUD! THUD!

The pilot didn't hesitate to answer. "We've already been talking it over. We feel that the inmate poses a threat to the safety of this flight and we recommend immediate ejection."

This was the answer Fay was expecting, and if she were honest, the answer she'd been hoping for. The only reason she'd called the cockpit was to get the decision on the cockpit voice recorder. There would be an investigation and the recording would help to exonerate her. She had exhausted all other possibilities. "I concur," Fay said to the cockpit and then she switched the intercom back over to the pod. "Goodbye, Inmate One-Four-Nine-Seven."

THUD! THUD!

Inmate 1497 was pulling her fist back, preparing to strike the glass again, but she never got the chance. Fay, her hands shaking only slightly, lifted up the clear, plastic safety cover and pressed the red button. There was a muffled sound like a balloon popping in another room, and just like that, all the problems Inmate 1497 had caused were gone.

"Damn. Stone cold, Captain." It was Cpl. Storstrand behind her. The tone of respect in his voice was unmistakable.

Sallie

“Goodbye, Inmate One-Four-Nine-Seven,” Larue said into the intercom.

Sallie struck the glass a couple more times and then, suddenly, she felt herself tumbling through vacuum for only a fraction of a second before a jerk at her left ankle arrested her movement. Now she was hanging out of the underside of the plane by her ankle and the chain she'd secured to the pod's safety restraint.

About fucking time, too. Sometimes it can be hard for a girl to get herself ejected into space.

She had to move fast. She was designed to survive brief exposures to vacuum. Her personal record was fifty three seconds, but that exposure had nearly killed her. As in permanently. Sallie had died a few times in her line of work and her recovery node had always brought her back. It could bring her back from most deaths, but the recovery node had its design limits. She was pretty sure that vacuum was one of the few things that could truly and permanently kill her.

The force of being ejected had ripped from her grasp the handcuff she'd been using to beat against the glass. That was just as well; Sallie needed her hands free now. She reached down to her ankle and pulled the quick release knot she'd tied around it earlier. The knot was tied in chain, so it didn't slide loose as easily as it would have if tied with rope. Sallie had anticipated that. She was able to get her ankle loose in just a few seconds, but in vacuum every second was precious.

Next, she needed to get herself to the upper side of the fuselage in a hurry. The emergency rescue airlock would be on the upper, forward part of the fuselage, near the cockpit and the crew rest quarters. Problem was that Sallie was hanging from the underside of the aft fuselage and the spaceplane had precious few hand holds on its streamlined exterior. She was going to have to make some jumps to get there. And they were going to have to be very precise jumps. If she missed even one, she'd drift off to a permanent death.

Luckily, Sallie's brain was built to be a nearly perfect calculator of Newtonian physics. She used the chain to pull herself up to the still-open ejection doors out of which she'd just been shot. She glanced at the right wing, spotted a flap track fairing, made the calculations, and kicked herself off of one of the ejection doors towards it. She put a little twist in her kick that gave her a slow roll as she drifted, untethered through cold, silent vacuum, towards one of the flap track fairings which protruded from the trailing edge of the right wing. Her calculations were perfect and by the time she landed on the fairing, she had flipped her orientation 180° so that she landed feet first.

The plane had a low wing and before she even landed on the fairing, she could see that she wasn't going to have a clear shot to the upper fuselage from the trailing edge of the wing. Luckily, the plane was a T-tail design with its horizontal stabilizer mounted atop the vertical stabilizer. Before her feet even made contact with the fairing, Sallie was working the calculations for her next jump to the leading edge of the horizontal stabilizer.

She had no gravity to hold her on the fairing, only her momentum. As her feet made contact with the fairing, she let momentum bend her knees until she was crouched against the fairing just the right amount and then she pushed off again, towards the horizontal stabilizer.

Her internal chronograph was keeping track of time for her. Sixteen seconds in vacuum now.

As she drifted upwards, towards the horizontal stabilizer, she rolled just as she had planned. This jump was also perfect and as the upper fuselage came into view, Sallie finally spotted her ultimate goal, the emergency airlock, far forward near the cockpit. The airlock appeared to her as a blurry, white square on the plane's matte black fuselage. She saw that she was going to have a clear shot at it from the horizontal stabilizer so she started doing the calculations.

She landed, let her momentum bend her knees against the stabilizer's leading edge, and then pushed off again. This was it. From the stabilizer, her meticulously engineered vision should have enabled her to read the warning labels all the way down on the emergency airlock. Instead, all she could see of the airlock all the way down there was a rough, blurry, white square. The blurriness meant her eyes were either starting to bulge in their sockets starting to frost over, or both. She hoped that neither eye would pop out. It would be very inconvenient to lose an eye right now.

Twenty five seconds.

The blurry, white square which Sallie assumed to be the emergency airlock, upon which she was betting her life, was bisected longitudinally by a blurry yellow line. Sallie assumed this yellow blur was the access handle. She needed to grab that handle to arrest her drift through the void and to open the emergency airlock.

As she drifted closer and closer to the yellow blur, it started to come into focus a little bit and Sallie was relieved to see that it was, in fact, the access handle she needed. She held her hand out, gauged her movement through space relative to the handle, and waited for her hand to drift over the handle.

Thirty seven seconds. This was going to be close.

Sallie suddenly felt the airlock access handle in her hand. She clenched her hand down as hard as she could, holding on for dear life. Her momentum tried to carry her past the airlock

handle. It tried to send her bouncing off the plane's skin and floating off into eternity. The momentum of her forty one kilograms of mass tried to rip the handle from the grip. Her fingers were starting to freeze and her muscles were growing weak by this point, but she managed to hold on. She knew the vacuum, the lack of oxygen, and the freezing temperatures were sapping her strength. Her body was dying. She felt weak, clumsy, and very mortal. This must be what humans feel like all the time.

She got her feet against the fuselage skin and pulled hard on the handle but it didn't budge. Great. That could only mean that the airlock was pressurized. It was going to take all of her waning strength to turn that handle and then, once the airlock did release, the hatch would explode open from the rapid depressurization. She was going to have to be ready for that, lest either the door itself or the rapidly expanding air from within fling her into the cold, dark ever after.

Forty one seconds in vacuum.

Her eyes were now badly bulged and frosted over. She couldn't see much through them anyway so she closed her eyes and put them into emergency shutdown. This left her temporarily blinded. She strained against the lever and the air pressure behind the door with all her flagging might.

Forty four seconds.

The door handle wouldn't budge.

Forty six seconds.

Maybe she was turning the handle the wrong way? Maybe she'd already been in vacuum too long and her strength was too far gone? Standard airlock manual levers opened by turning counterclockwise. She was getting nowhere with this, so she decided to try turning the handle the other way. She quickly repositioned her feet for better leverage and began pulling the handle clockwise. She strained with all she had. If there had been any air in her lungs she would have been grunting like a human or some other kind of dumb beast.

Forty nine seconds.

She felt the handle move slightly. She knew now that she was on the right track. Leave it to the fucking Kells to engineer a non-standard door handle. It moved again, this time quite a bit. It was almost there! Just a little more and it would open! She strained her dying, freezing muscles. She forced whatever tissues in them that were still responding to her commands to work well beyond their design limitations. She felt them beginning to tear under the strain.

She'd been designed to survive vacuum for up to a minute, but she'd never been tested for that long. Soon, she would lose consciousness and then it would be game over for her.

Fifty one seconds. Her personal record was fifty three.

The latch moved just a little more, but that was enough at last. The pins holding the hatch secure finally disengaged far enough for the air pressure inside the airlock to pop it open. Sallie struggled to maintain her hold on the door handle as the door and the rapid outflow of air flung her about like a rat in a dog's mouth. She had anticipated it, but even still, she had to strain her nearly depleted body just to keep her grip on the handle. The short blast of air felt warm on her frozen skin, but it was gone almost as quickly as it came. Well before she could even try to take a breath of it or absorb any significant warmth from it, the air was gone, and she was once again in cold vacuum.

Still blinded, she pulled herself, hand-over-hand, into the airlock. Once she was about half way in, the plane's artificial gravity took hold of her and she fell, head first, into the airlock. Though there was artificial gravity in the airlock, it was still exposed to vacuum. She quickly stood up on legs now barely able to lift her ninety pounds.

Fifty four seconds. She was in uncharted territory now.

Blindly, she grasped above her head for the hatch she'd just worked so hard to open. She found it with her grasping hands, pulled it closed, and started to turn the inner handle clockwise to secure it. It didn't move and it took her a full, precious second to remember that the Kell engineers had designed this hatch to work opposite of standard. Fucking Kells. She was getting stupid. Her brain must be starting to shut down. She turned it counterclockwise and its locking pins slid home with merciful ease.

Fifty seven seconds.

She collapsed to her knees, her legs finally giving out on her. She grasped blindly around the walls, struggling to keep her mind conscious and her hands moving, looking for the controls.

Fifty nine seconds. She was out of time.

Things started to feel warm and floaty in her mind. She felt like she might be dreaming. Was she dreaming? She'd never dreamed before. Maybe this was what dreams felt like. She had something she had to do. She was looking for something. A control panel. To do what? On the wall. She was looking for a control panel on a wall. She tried to see, but she was in darkness. In the dream she dreamed her hands felt something on a wall in the darkness. It was a switch panel. It had several small switches and one big, round button. She didn't know

what any of the switches did, but the big, round button felt inviting, so she pushed it. And then, she floated off, away from the world, away from the dream about buttons, and into emptiness.

Captain Kord Cardona

In the cockpit, Captain Kord Cardona, the pilot in command for the flight, was already filling out the proper forms and documentation. There would definitely be an inquest. It was no small thing to eject a prisoner and he would bear some of the responsibility. Though the lion's share of the responsibility would fall on Capt. Larue, Kord knew that he would have to answer some hard questions himself. It was Larue who'd ultimately been responsible for the prisoner's transport and she had made the final decision herself, but Kord had advised in favor of ejection. He knew he would be called to stand before the man and to explain the advice he'd given Larue. Kord's duty was to ensure the safety of the flight and he felt he'd done his duty. And as far as he was concerned, Larue had done hers.

As soon as he'd seen the inmate shoot out of the camera's frame of view, he'd started filling out the forms on his data pad. His first officer, a young lieutenant sitting in the cockpit's right seat, had just stared at the now-empty display screen for several seconds. The kid, Lieutenant Malone, was new. He had only recently qualified in the aircraft. Kord had to tell the kid to start filling out the forms and writing out his account of the incident.

For the next minute or so, the cockpit had been completely silent as they filled out forms and paged through procedure manuals on their data pads. Then, the silence of the cockpit was broken by a slow, almost soothing annunciator. *Ding-Ding...Ding Ding...Ding Ding...* Kord knew he'd heard it before, but it wasn't one he heard often enough to know right away. He had to look at the readout on the systems Multifunction Display, or MFD, as pilots called it.

EMER. A/L HATCH NOT SEC. read the display in red letters.

"What the hell? Is that the emergency airlock?" asked Lt. Malone.

Kord's brow furrowed. "Yeah, but... What the hell? Faulty sensor maybe?" Kord didn't even want to voice what he was thinking. What he thinking was impossible. The human body died within seconds in the vacuum of space. Nobody could survive long enough... No, it was crazy. Had to be a faulty sensor. No matter how crazy an idea it was, Kord could see in Lt. Malone's face that he was thinking the same thing.

Ding-Ding...Ding Ding...Ding Ding...

After several seconds, the dinging stopped and the readout on the MFD changed to ***EMER. A/L HATCH SEC.*** Malone tapped the words on the display, acknowledging the annunciator to the computer and the words went away. "That was weird," the young first officer said.

"Hmm," Kord said. Without saying another word, he paged through the menus on the MFD until he found the one for the airlock's systems. The emergency airlock didn't have a camera in

it, but it did have a pressure monitor. He tapped that and saw that the pressure inside the airlock was reading 0 millibars. There was vacuum inside his emergency airlock. The old aviator could feel his bullshit detector going off, and aviators don't get to be old aviators by ignoring their bullshit detectors.

He stared at the display for a few seconds, trying to wrap his rational mind around the unbelievable idea. It wasn't possible, was it? Then, as if in answer to his unspoken question, the display changed from 0 millibars to 22 millibars to 48 millibars to 66 millibars. On and on it went, the airlock pressurizing very quickly, as if somebody had hit the big, red emergency pressure button.

"Shit," Kord said.

"No, it can't be—" Malone was still struggling to accept it. The younger pilot still had not yet developed so finely attuned a bullshit detector as Kord's.

"Must be some kind of Broadening bullshit," Kord said, referring to the quasi-mythical race of people who've messed with their own genome so much they're not really human anymore.

As Malone continued to stare at the readout, disbelieving what he was seeing, Kord reached above his head for the intercom controls. He called the cargo deck aft, where the transport pods were. After a second, he heard Capt. Larue's voice come on over his headset. "Cargo deck. Captain Larue," she answered. Kord could hear a strange *bzz-bzz-bzz* going off in the background

"Captain, are any of your men using the emergency airlock?" Kord asked. He had an ugly feeling he knew what the answer would be.

"Not yet. But we already know about the obstruction. I'm about to send a man out to clear it."

He was simultaneously relieved and confused by her statement. Maybe it was one of her grunts messing with the airlock after all, but she'd said "Not yet." And what obstruction was she talking about? "Captain, clarify. Are any of your men in or near the emergency airlock? And what's this about an obstruction?"

"Didn't you call me about the obstruction alarm going off down here?"

What was this "obstruction" she kept going on about? "No, I'm calling you about the airlock up here on the crew deck. For the third time, are any of your men near the airlock up here on the crew deck?" He was getting testy with her. It was unprofessional, but Kord was losing his patience with this conversation.

"No, *captain*. We're all down here by the transport pods," she answered, leaning on his rank.

What a bitch, Kord thought. *Pick another time to get snotty*. Aloud, he said: "Listen, we're getting some indications here in the cockpit that somebody's operating that airlock."

Fay

Fay, her hands shaking only slightly, lifted up the clear, plastic safety cover and pressed the red prisoner ejection button. There was a muffled sound like a balloon popping in another room, and just like that, all the problems Inmate 1497 had caused were gone, jettisoned into the endless void of space.

“Damn. Stone cold, Captain.” It was Cpl. Storstrand behind her. The tone of respect in his voice was unmistakable.

“Fuckin’ A,” said one of the grunts. Forgetting all protocols of rank, he held his fist out for a fist bump.

For a moment, Fay almost forgot herself and was tempted to return the private’s gesture. But then, she remembered that she was an officer and she had to act like one. She held herself up straight and tall, her still-healing ribs protesting. “Everyone listen up.” The men all stood at attention, including the soldier whom she’d just left hanging with the fist bump. “There’s going to be an inquest regarding today’s events. I’m going to need written statements from all of you about what you saw and did here today. Tell the truth and stick to the facts. No opinions, got it?”

“YES, MA'AM,” the six men shouted in unison.

Fay nodded dismissal and turned away as the men went to retrieve their data pads and begin filling out their statements. She was still standing near the control panel where she’d just pressed the inmate ejection button. She happened to notice an annunciator on the panel flashing the words *EJECTION DOORS OPEN*. She found the button on the panel to close the doors and pressed it. She heard the hydraulic motor begin to whirr. She stepped away from the panel and began her walk back down the length of the cargo deck.

She was dreading the climb back up that ladder with her broken ribs. It couldn’t be helped, though. She needed to start filling out a report on her own data pad, which she’d left upstairs at the main control panel. Additionally, up there no one would be able to see her smiling. It had felt really good to space that little monster. Of course, she would be leaving that out of her official report.

She had only made it a few steps away from the control panel when the whirring sound of the hydraulic motor dropped in pitch a couple of octaves and then stopped altogether. It was immediately followed by an incessant *bzz-bzz-bzz-bzz* error sound from the control panel. The six soldiers glanced up from their data pads, curious. Fay returned to the control panel and saw the annunciator panel was now flashing the words *EJECTION DOORS OBSTRUCTED*.

Fay looked through the small glass porthole which the inmate had given her life to try to break. Because of the small porthole's narrow field of view, Fay couldn't see the ejection doors built into the pod's floor. She could, however, see the safety harness built into the wall opposite of the porthole. She could see the manacle chain connected to the harness straps and disappearing downward out of her view and towards the ejection doors. That nasty little inmate had used the chain to secure herself to the plane. Her last act in this life had been to use her own corpse to obstruct the doors from closing. What a horrible little piece of work she was. Now Fay would have to send one of her own men on a risky space walk to go clear the obstruction. Otherwise, with those doors open, they wouldn't be able to reenter atmosphere when they arrived at Kell.

She was about to order Cpl. Storstrand to send a man out to clear the obstruction when the intercom buzzed at her. It was the cockpit. They were probably just calling to tell her to get the obstruction cleared and the doors closed, but she was already on it.

"Cargo deck. Captain Larue," she answered over the *bzz-bzz-bzz* of the control panel's alarm.

"Captain, are any of your men using the emergency airlock?" It was Capt. Cardona, the same pilot she'd spoken to just a minute before when he'd agreed with her about ejecting the inmate.

"Not yet. But we already know about the obstruction. I'm about to send a man out to clear it."

Cardona was silent for a moment. When he spoke again he sounded confused. "Captain, clarify. Are any of your men in or near the emergency airlock? And what's this about an obstruction?"

"Didn't you call me about the obstruction alarm going off down here?"

"No, I'm calling you about the airlock up here on the crew deck. For the third time, are any of your men near the airlock up here on the crew deck?" He was getting testy with her. It was unprofessional of him. She was losing her patience with this conversation.

Unlike him, however, she would maintain her professionalism. A man could get away with that, but as every career woman knows, a woman who gets testy is labeled a *bitch*.

"No, *captain*." She emphasized his rank to remind him of what was expected of him as an officer. "We're all down here by the transport pods."

There was a brief pause before he answered her. His words were clipped, but they were at least grudgingly professional. "Listen, we're getting some indications here in the cockpit that somebody's operating that airlock."

Fay was confused for a moment. What was he saying?

And then, realization hit her like a bomb, and she no longer cared about trivial matters like the pilot's unprofessional behavior. Fay knew, absolutely *knew* in her very heart, that the little monster of an inmate had somehow survived being spaced. How could this be possible? There was only one way. This horrible, pint-sized, little demon must be a Broadening.

This battle was far from over.

"Captain, secure the cockpit and get us out of transtach, ricky tick. As soon as we're back in normal space and you can get comms up, send a mayday to the fleet for reinforcements." Fay turned off the intercom switch without waiting for an acknowledgement. She knew she didn't really have the authority to order the pilot around, but she was sure the gravity of the current situation would ensure his compliance. She would worry about his wounded male ego later.

She turned to the six men she had at her disposal. They had already put down their data pads and picked up their weapons. They were awaiting orders. Good men. She stood tall as she faced them and projected her voice to carry a tone of authority. "Soldiers of the Kell Republic!"

The men all stood at attention.

"It looks like our little inmate has more tricks up her sleeve than we previously guessed. She's stronger than she should be, she's faster than she should be, and she can apparently breathe in space." She paused for a moment to let all that sink in. "I think we are all thinking the same thing. This little freak has got to be a Broadening. As you all know, Broadenings and all other mutants are dangerous and are forbidden within the Kell Republic. There's no telling what other weird abilities it has, but it poses a definite threat to the citizens of Kell. We have a new mission now. Under no circumstances will we allow this *thing* to reach our beloved home world. Do I make myself clear?"

"YES MA'AM!" the soldiers answered in unison.

"The mission is now Search and Destroy. Shoot on sight."

"YES MA'AM!"

The soldiers ejected the non-lethal, riot control shells they usually carried in their tactical shotguns and began feeding regular shot shells into the tubes. Fay pulled her own weapon, a

.45 caliber officer's pistol, from the holster at her hip. She checked the load. Nine in the clip and one in the chamber. Time to kill a mutant.

Sallie

Sallie became aware of the world around her only gradually. First, she was aware of the pain in her extremities. Blood was flowing back into digits and muscles that had frozen nearly solid. Then, she became aware of warmth. She had gotten so cold that even the metal deck plating she lay on felt warm to her body. Her eyes were still offline, so her world was dark as well as warm. She became aware of how tired she was. She just wanted to lay here, in this warm, dark airlock, on this steel floor, and go to sleep.

Then, she became aware of an emptiness in her mind, a silence where there should be cacophony. Something was wrong, she knew, but she didn't really care. She just wanted to lay here on the warm, metal deck plating and put herself into low-power, recovery mode. She didn't have anything to do today, anyway. Why not just rest? Sleep in. Sounded nice.

As her brain came more fully online, a familiar loop of code began running through her mind. It was her Core Function reminding her that she did, in fact, have things to do today, motivating her to get up and get to work. She had objectives to get done. Objective_004:Exfiltrate. That's what she needed to do now. She needed to exfiltrate. She needed to get up off this floor and exfiltrate.

But her muscles weren't working properly. She had to struggle to raise herself up onto her hands and knees. She dared not try to stand yet. She reached blindly for the handle to open the inner airlock hatch, grasping for it with a mostly-useless, claw-like hand. Just as she managed to get the hand around the handle, she lost her balance and fell over. She managed to hold on to the handle just long enough to pull it down. The door latch disengaged and swung slowly outward into the crew deck corridor. Sallie fell to the floor retching, but mercifully she hadn't eaten anything all day, so only a little stomach acid and bile came up.

Her ears told her from the ambient noise that she was in a hallway. She'd been on deep space transport planes before and they usually had a similar layout on their upper decks. At the forward end of this corridor would be the heavy, reinforced cockpit door, and at the opposite, aft end would likely be a narrow set of steps or a ladder leading down to the big plane's lower decks. Along the walls of the corridor would likely be narrow doors opening to crew rest quarters.

She could hear a couple of muffled, male voices coming through the door at the far end of the crew corridor from where she lay, but she couldn't understand what they were saying. *That must be the cockpit*, she thought.

Sallie began crawling on her elbows down the corridor with her legs dragging uselessly behind her. She needed to find a safe place to hide for a half hour or so. She needed to go into low-power recovery mode and repair. If she were extremely lucky, her enemies would think she was dead, floating out there in the void, but she couldn't count on it. Sallie wasn't a pilot, but she knew enough about airplanes to know that it was likely she'd triggered some kind of alert in the cockpit when she'd operated that airlock. She had no way of knowing if the pilots would figure out something was amiss or if they would simply ignore the alarm, thinking it erroneous. The latter seemed like too much to hope for. Either way, she needed to find a safe place to hide and repair. She chose the crew rest quarters nearest to the cockpit on the left side solely because it was the farthest from the airlock and therefore the least likely place for her to hide.

As she crawled past the closed cockpit door, she tried to glean hints from the pilots' muffled chatter as to whether or not they knew she had survived her little trip through the void. Normally her ears would be able to hear their breathing and the rustling of their clothes. All she could hear now, though, were muffled male voices, their words unidentifiable. The vacuum had damaged her ears.

She crawled into the small, cramped cabin, blindly feeling her way along as she went, and found various objects of personal hygiene. Among these, she found a pair of scissors, secured to a magnetic strip atop a small, metal set of drawers. She kept the scissors and began searching through the drawers. Her hands felt a few books, some clothing, but nothing of great use. Running along the length of the room was a small, utilitarian bunk and at the other end, she felt a door which opened to what felt like a small closet.

As she lay on the floor, supported on elbows, Sallie felt a high-frequency vibration coming through the floor. The engines were starting up. Shit. That could mean only one thing: they knew she'd survived being spaced and they were preparing to drop out of transtach. Spaceplanes only need their engines for sub-light flight and to enter or leave transtachyonic flight. Enroute, however, the plane could basically "coast" indefinitely. Once a plane slipped into transtach, the crews usually shut down the engines to save fuel.

They were still several hours from their destination, the Kell home world, so the only reason for leaving transtach now would be to send a request to their fleet for reinforcements. Sallie knew from experience it usually took about a half to three-quarters of an hour for the engines of most planes to build up enough energy to break the plane out of a transtach bubble. She figured she had about thirty minutes to take control of this plane and she was going to have to spend at least half of that time repairing. The timing was going to be tight. On top of all that, the

soldiers would be looking for her while she was repairing, just when she was unconscious and most vulnerable.

She needed to find a good hiding spot. Under the bunk or in the closet were too obvious. What she needed was a small space that no one would think to look into. As her original design was to gather intel, she was built to fit into impossibly small spaces.

In the small closet (more of a locker, really), she found what felt like a few pilot's flight suits, a set of civvies, and a golf bag with a bouquet of golf clubs sticking out of it like graphite-shafted flowers. That would do nicely for a hiding spot. The golf bag likely wouldn't be scrutinized too closely, as it was too narrow for anyone to hide. But Sallie wasn't just anyone.

The problem would be getting herself into the small space. Presently, she could barely even crawl. There was no way she'd be able to stand up and lower herself down through the top of the bag. She used her new scissors to cut a slit into the back of the golf bag. Then, she closed the locker door and folded her tiny body through the opening she'd made in the bag. She balled herself up inside the bag amongst a forest of golf club handles. She made sure to keep the slash she'd made in the bag oriented to the back corner of the locker. If anyone looked in the locker, all they would see would be a golf bag too small for any human to hide in. And no human would be. Balled up in the cramped space, Sallie ordered her body to make emergency repairs for twenty minutes. Then, she lost consciousness as she went into low-power mode.

* * *

Sallie was momentarily confused when she came back online. Again, that strange feeling of emptiness. There for an almost imperceptibly brief flash and then gone. Emptiness. Replaced by the Core Function.

That was it, of course. There was something wrong with her Core Function. But what? In the eighty three years she'd been in service, she'd never experienced a waking moment in which the Core Function wasn't looping its incessant loop in her mind. In the past few days, however, she'd experienced several momentary gaps in the Core Function's loop. What could this mean? Was there something wrong with the Core Function?

She didn't have time to figure it out right now. Somebody was close by. Now it was time to fight. She was still hiding in the pilot's golf bag in a locker. Somebody was just on the other side of the closed locker door moving furtively. She did a quick systems check. Her eyes were back online, but several internal organs were offline. Those organs' cells were being mined like resources by her body to aid in the repair of her muscles, her ears, her eyes, and everything she

was going to need in the coming battle. In other words, her body was cannibalizing itself to complete the mission. The twenty minutes of emergency repair had left her still a long way from her full strength. In fact her body was still dying, but she was still stronger than any human.

Fuck it. Let's do this, Sallie thought.

The locker door flung open. From her hiding place down in the golf bag, Sallie saw the muzzle of a shotgun with a light mounted to its end. The muzzle of the shotgun moved quickly side to side, its light shining into the darkened corners of the locker. The light didn't shine down into the golf bag where Sallie crouched, hidden. It didn't warn its operator that his prey, who was also his predator, lurked within.

"Clear!" the soldier said in a loud whisper.

What's the point of whispering if you're going to do it loudly? Sallie wondered.

It sounded like he was talking to somebody just out in the corridor. That meant at least one more enemy close by.

Sallie was about to start quietly extricating herself from her hiding place. She had a mind to kill this soldier quietly from behind with the scissors she'd stolen earlier. But just as he was turning to leave the pilot's rest quarters, she heard him stop and turn back her way. He'd apparently decided to check the golf bag just in case, no matter how unlikely it seemed that anyone could fit in there.

Sallie held the scissors tightly in her hand. She noted the man was holding his weapon with his right hand on the trigger. As soon as he peered down into the bag, before he even realized what he was looking at, Sallie exploded out of the bag. Golf clubs shot up with her and then clattered to the floor. She drove the scissors through the man's eye and deep into the left hemisphere of his brain, the hemisphere that controls the right side of his body. The man's entire right side, including his trigger finger, were instantly paralyzed.

She'd wanted to kill him quietly, but the clatter of the golf clubs against the floor had precluded that hope. *Anybody else nearby would have heard that,* Sallie thought. *I need to finish him quickly.*

The soldier made a surprised gasp, but could muster no words. Sallie held him up by her grip on the scissors lodged deep in his brain. Though the man still held the shotgun's foregrip firmly in his left hand, the fingers of his now-paralyzed right hand relaxed, letting the gun fall. Sallie caught the shotgun with her free hand, wrenched it free of his left hand, and let him fall to the floor. She held the shotgun level towards the door, ready to fire.

The dying man was flailing around spasmodically with the two limbs he still had use of. He wasn't really trying to fight her; it was more like some kind of a cross between panic and seizure. It was noisy.

"Yo! Russo!" came loud whisper from the corridor. "You oka—HOLY FUCK!" were the second soldier's last words. Peering into the door he saw his comrade spasming on the floor, blood spurting everywhere, with a pair of beard trimming scissors jammed deep into his eye. Standing over Russo, her yellow, prison-issue, jumpsuit covered in blood, was the very inmate they had just spaced less than half an hour ago.

The man only hesitated for a fraction of a second as his slow, human mind tried to make sense of the scene, but it was still too long. He tried to bring his weapon to bear on the escaped inmate.

Too late. Sallie pulled the trigger on the shotgun she'd taken from Russo and just like that, the second soldier's face turned to pulp and his twitching body fell to the corridor floor. Sallie noted that they were using regular shotgun shells rather than the non-lethal option prison guards usually used. Shit. She really hoped she didn't get hit with one of those. Last time somebody shot her with a shotgun, she was picking pellets out of her guts for days.

I should start charging extra for getting shot. I'm such a softie, Sallie thought as she extricated herself from the wreckage of the golf bag and stepped over the two men she had just killed.

In response to the shotgun blast, Sallie heard distant shouts. They seemed to come from the passenger deck below.

"SHIT!"

"What the fuck was that?"

"Goddamnit! We got contact!"

"Where the fuck's it at?"

"Sounded like it came from the upper deck!"

"We already searched up there!"

"Apparently we missed it the first time."

"I sent two men back up to double check." Sallie recognized this voice as Larue's.

"Russo? Samora? Sound off!"

"..."

"Goddamnit, I think it got Russo and Samora!"

While her enemies were having a staff meeting on the deck below, Sallie decided she needed to change to a better, more defensible position. The soldiers would be coming up the stairs soon, and if she stayed in the pilot's small rest quarters, she would be the proverbial fish in a barrel. She quickly grabbed a golf club, a putter, from the floor and took it and the shotgun with her as she stepped out of the pilot's cabin and into the empty crew corridor. Right next to her, near the forward end of the corridor was the cockpit door. She quietly and quickly tested the cockpit's door lock. Just as she'd expected, the door was locked. That door was like a vault and would take some doing to open, but just now Sallie could hear boots coming up the narrow, spiral staircase at the aft end of the corridor.

The narrowness of the corridor itself and the staircase at the aft end created the perfect choke point. The tight space would neutralized her enemies' superior numbers and force them to essentially line up and fight her one at a time.

She ran down the corridor, set the putter on the deck, and brought her shotgun to bear on the first man coming up the stairs. This man was smarter than the last two she'd killed. He didn't hesitate. As soon as he saw her, he hit the deck at the top of the stairs. She fired, but he dropped too quickly and the spray of her shot flew over his head. She nearly got the second man coming up the stairs purely by accident. He almost stepped right into the blast which had been meant for his comrade, but most of the pellets went uselessly into the wall near his head. A couple of her pellets bounced off the second man's helmet. He fell backward down the stairs.

"I'M HIT! I'M HIT!" the second man screamed as he tumbled down the stairs.

You are not. Pussy. Sallie stomped on the trigger hand of the first man who had hit the deck at the top of the stairs. His gun went off, but the pellets went bouncing harmlessly down the corridor. He reached with his other hand and grabbed her by the back of her knee. He tried to pull her off her balance. Even though Sallie was nowhere near her full strength, she was far stronger than any human. Pulling on her leg must have been like pulling on the leg of a statue.

This man had fight, but that wasn't enough to save him. She aimed the muzzle of her gun to the narrow patch of exposed skin at the back of his neck between his helmet and his body armor. She pulled the trigger and his partially decapitated body went limp.

By now, the second man seemed to have realized he wasn't shot after all and that he'd left his comrade behind. He came stumbling hurriedly back up the stairs, now with the sound of two other pairs of heavily booted feet coming up behind him. As soon as he came back into sight, Sallie casually unloaded a shot shell into his neck. Once again, this second man fell backwards down the stairs.

“Now you’re shot. Understand the difference, asshole?” Sallie yelled at him as he tumbled backwards down the stairs once again, this time choking and spurting blood from a legitimate wound. He would be dead after a minute or so of choking on his own blood. Humans. You shoot them once in the neck and they just give up.

“Hold up! Fall back! Fall back!” a male voice came from below.

The two other sets of boots which had been coming up the stairs reversed their direction and were now retreating back down to the passenger deck. They were dragging the man She’d just shot with them. She listened as they took up defensive positions near the bottom of the stairs and began trying in vain to save the dying man.

By Sallie’s count there should be three people down there, not counting the dying one: two soldiers and Larue was still lurking down there somewhere. With those three and the two pilots in the cockpit she still had five people to deal with. She couldn’t kill the pilots. She needed them to fly the plane, but the other three she would make a point to kill.

Her ears told her that they were communicating something non-verbally. She heard a *psst!* and a *shh!* and a couple of finger snaps. It seemed like they were finally getting smart. They were going to just wait her out. Time was on their side. If she didn’t take control of the spaceplane before the pilots managed to break it out of its transtach bubble, then they would call in reinforcements. Larue would just wait until the cavalry arrived.

Sallie was built of pretty strong stuff, but even she had her limits. If they had a defensible position down there, and she attacked them, she would be shot several times. She knew she could take a few hits, but eventually she would go down. She hadn’t had time to repair herself fully from her trip through the vacuum, and she was running low on energy. She hadn’t eaten yet today and her body was burning a lot of energy just to keep her fighting. And the body was getting that energy by consuming its own organs. Time was definitely not on her side.

Her best course of action was to break into the cockpit, and disable the flight crew before they could break out of the transtach bubble. Sallie looked at the closed cockpit security door. If she were at her full strength and she had a pry bar, then she could get into it pretty easily. But she wasn’t, and she didn’t, so she couldn’t. She considered the putter on the deck by her feet, but quickly discounted that idea. It would break way too easily to serve her as a pry bar.

Besides, she needed that putter to use as a non-lethal weapon to take out the flight crew. She needed at least one of the pilots alive to fly the plane.

Shit. Attacking down the stairs wasn’t an option and she didn’t know how to get the cockpit door open.

The dead man at the top of the stairs had a nice combat knife that she could probably use to try to lever the door's jamb away from the locking bolt. It would all be built of heavy duty steel and she doubted if the knife would do the job without breaking first, but it was the best option she had.

She took the dead man's combat knife and used her foot to break off the top half of the putter's long handle. Now she had a nice, close-quarters club with a heavy head. Probably wouldn't kill the pilots. Probably.

"Hey, Inmate!" a man yelled up at her from the deck below. "Surrender now and you can live to see tomorrow!"

"Surrender now, and I won't kill you!" Sallie shouted back down at him.

"Reinforcements are on the way! You can't win this. You're trapped."

"Reinforcements haven't even been called yet. We're still in transtach." *This guy thinks I'm stupid.* "Larue, I'll make you a deal: You come up here by yourself and I'll let everybody else live."

"Not a chance, Inmate," the man answered for Larue. Why didn't Larue answer for herself? The man continued, "Drop the weapon, come down the stairs, and don't try any of your Broadening tricks! That's an order."

Broadening? Did they think she was a Broadening? Broadening mutants were better than most humans in Sallie's opinion. But at the end of the day, no matter how much they messed with their DNA they would still just be humans. These guys had no idea what they were actually dealing with.

"Fuck off, toady!" Sallie shouted down at him, "The women are talking here. What do you say, Larue, I promised I would kill you and I intend to keep my promise. If I have to kill the last two of your guys, I will. Don't make me do that." Sallie was lying. She planned to kill them anyway.

No response from Larue. Was Larue even down there? Was she hiding somewhere? Sallie didn't have time to figure it out now. She needed to achieve her next objective. She needed to *Exfiltrate*.

Keeping her ears tuned to the stairs for any boots that may be coming up them, she quietly made her way back down the corridor to the cockpit door. The man downstairs continued to shout taunts up at her, but she ignored him. She wanted him thinking she was still at the top of the stairs. She began what she knew was probably a futile effort to open the cockpit security

door with her strength only about twice that of a human and nothing to pry with but a combat knife.

Fay

Fay had watched as Cpl. Storstrand and three privates had bravely attempted to charge up the narrow stairs and take the escaped inmate out. Fay, for her part, had remained at the bottom of the stairs. Unlike the soldiers, Fay wasn't combat trained. She was an intel officer. She didn't have battle armor on, and she was armed with only an officer's .45 pistol. She wasn't a coward; she wanted to shoot this inmate so badly she could taste it, but Cpl. Storstrand had advised she let him and his squad take the inmate down. She'd hated being relegated to the sidelines. She could have overridden him, but she knew he was right. She would likely be more of a liability than a help.

The soldiers' attempt to charge the inmate proved to be ill-fated, however. Within seconds of the first man reaching the top of the stairs, two of them were dead. She no longer doubted that this inmate was indeed the notorious Sallie Starlinger. Broadening trash.

"Hold up! Fall back! Fall back!" Cpl. Storstrand shouted after the second brave soldier fell back down the stairs. This kid was gagging and coughing up blood from a massive wound in his neck. The prisoner had shot him in the throat. Cpl. Storstrand and the remaining private dragged the wounded man behind a row of passenger seats where they would have nominal shelter in case the prisoner came down after them. The corporal took up a defensive position, his shotgun aimed at the stairs, while the other private tried in vain to save his dying comrade.

At that point, Fay Larue remember who she was. She was *Captain* Fay Larue of the Kell Army. She might not have extensive combat training, but she was still a soldier. And she was going to kill this nasty little freak or die trying.

"Psst!" she said to get Cpl. Storstrand's attention. It was eerily quiet now that the gunshots had stopped. The only sounds were the distant rumble of the plane's engines and the gagging sounds from the dying man. Somehow, Fay just knew that Broadening freak was listening to them. Fay had an idea and she tried to explain it to him with hand gestures. At first he didn't understand what she was saying. She tried again, and this time he figured out what she was saying.

Fay went to the dying man, took his helmet and body armor, and put it on herself over her black intelligence service fatigues. She re-holstered her officer's pistol at her hip and gritted her teeth against the pain in her ribs as she began to work her way back down that cursed ladder to the cargo deck below.

"Hey, Inmate!" she heard Cpl. Storstrand yell up the stairs at the prisoner. "Surrender now and you can live to see tomorrow!"

Distantly, Fay heard the inmate yelling something back at the corporal, but she couldn't make out the words.

A couple of years ago, Fay had interrogated a pilot. During the course of the interrogation, the pilot revealed how he'd infiltrated a locked cockpit through the plane's avionics bay. A lot of planes' avionics bays are accessible, that pilot had told her, by removing a wall panel in the forward wall of the cargo deck. At the front of the mostly empty cargo deck, Fay quickly found the panel. It was secured with about a dozen thumbscrews and had large, red warnings painted on it:

**AVIONICS ACCESS
EMERGENCY ACCESS
ONLY
AUTHORIZED PERSONNEL
ONLY
DANGER! HIGH VOLTAGE!**

Fay immediately went to work taking the thumbscrews off. There were a lot of them, but at least they didn't require any tools to get off. After a couple of minutes, she managed to get them all off. She set the heavy access panel aside. Her damaged ribs cried out for mercy as she lifted the panel, but Fay just ignored the pain. She was a soldier. She could take a little pain.

Behind the panel, she found a small, dark room with a lot of computer equipment. Wall to wall and floor to ceiling were racks and rows of tightly-packed electronics with hundreds of little status lights winking at her from the gloom. It was a surreal and quiet little room that housed all the plane's vital systems. She was careful not to damage anything as she made her way through the tight passage to the ladder that would lead her all the way to the access hatch in the cockpit.

With her injured ribs it was a herculean task to climb two flights of ladders, but at the top of the second ladder, she saw what she was looking for: the cockpit access hatch. This might be Captain Fay Larue's first combat command and she might have lost several men already, but she had just performed her first flanking maneuver.

She hooked one arm through the ladder's topmost rung and reached her other hand up over her head. Pain pulsed through her chest like someone driving nails into her ribs. She gasped a little in spite of herself. Sweat beaded on her forehead and she could hear her pulse quickening in her ears. These ribs really hurt, but she was just about to kill the *thing* that had done this to her. She pushed the pain down, gritting her teeth, and turned the hatch's handle. Mercifully, it turned and released.

She pushed the small hatch open and started to climb up into the cockpit. As soon as she got her head through the hole, she found the copilot pointing a gun at her head. There were some dull *thud-thud-thud* sounds coming from the cockpit door. The inmate was desperately trying to get into the cockpit. Good. Fay knew these doors were made to be nearly impossible to breach and if the inmate was trying, that meant it was desperate and not thinking clearly. The thing would be prone to making mistakes. It might be tough, but it was nowhere near as smart as Fay herself.

As soon as Fay looked up at the man pointing the gun at her head, the copilot got his first good look at her face beneath the helmet. The young pilot looked apologetic. He lowered his gun and offered her his hand to help her climb the rest of the way into the cockpit.

“I’m sorry, ma’a—” the copilot started to say, but Fay interrupted him.

“Shh!” She said as silently as she could and held a finger over her lips. The young fool had just about said “ma’am.” If the creature out in the corridor figured out that it had been flanked before Fay was ready to spring her trap, the entire plan could be for nothing. Luckily, there seemed to be no change in the rhythmic *thud-thud-thud* of the prisoner’s attempts to break into the cockpit door. No, it hadn’t heard.

Risking a peek through the small peephole in the cockpit door, Fay saw that all of her suspicions were right. There was the escaped prisoner, straining against something it had jammed in the cockpit door as a lever. Fay looked forward to killing this creature.

Fay drew her pistol and waited for the pilots to take the plane out of transtach. The familiar lurch and rumble was the signal to go which she and Cpl. Storstrand had agreed upon.

Sallie

Sallie was trying to get the cockpit door open without much hope for success. The man down at the bottom of the stairs had quit trying to taunt her into coming down. She had been listening for boot steps on the stairs and now she heard them. They were slow, furtive footsteps, but someone had begun slowly mounting the steps. Someone was trying to sneak up on her. Good. If they think there's anything to be gained by attacking her where she holds the advantage, she encouraged them to try.

She paused her admittedly futile attempts to break into the cockpit door. As silently as she could, she pulled the combat knife out of where she had jammed it in the door and crept back down the corridor. She crouched just at the top of the stairs. Taking stock of her weapons, she had a shotgun with four shells left in it—more than she needed, a combat knife, and the lower half of a putter. This should be easy. She took up her shotgun and waited for the first fool to step into her firing line.

The footsteps seemed to have stopped just outside of her line of fire. Either they were thinking better of their plan, or... they were waiting for something.

It could only be one thing. Sallie readied herself. Within a minute, there was a familiar lurching sensation followed by a rumbling through the plane's structure. The plane had just dropped out of transtach and back into normal space where *C* was once again the speed limit. In less than a minute the pilots would be connected to the Kell military secure exchanges and shortly thereafter reinforcements would begin to arrive.

Immediately after the plane dropped out of transtach, there was a *Chunk!PSSSSS!* sound of a gas canister being launched up the stairs. It bounced off the wall and past Sallie's head. She thought about grabbing it and throwing it back down at them, but she knew they would likely have gas masks. Besides, the canister would fill the corridor with smoke and that would give Sallie the tactical advantage. No one would be able to see, but she would be able to hear her enemies' movements better than they could hear hers. The men waited on the stairs for several moments just out of Sallie's sight for whatever incapacitant was in that smoke to start to have an effect on her. That effect, Sallie knew, would never come. She used the spare moments to reposition herself farther forward in the corridor, about half way up towards the cockpit. She faced aft and waited for them to make the first move. When the soldiers came up the stairs, they would be expecting to find Sallie unconscious somewhere near the top of the stairs. They were in for a nasty surprise.

The smoke from the gas canister was thick at the aft end of the corridor, and the cloud was slowly working its way forward. Her enemies were in that cloud somewhere. *Come and get it boys*, she thought.

Then, from behind her, she heard the faint sound of the cockpit door unlocking. Some pilot was trying to be the big hero. *Not you guys. I can't kill you yet. I need you to fly the plane.*

One of the men who had just come up the stairs, blinded by the smoke, bumped into the corridor wall. That gave Sallie a pretty good idea where this man was so she estimated where the biggest gap in his body armor would be and pulled the trigger. Unfortunately for him, the biggest gap was the crotch. She heard him fall shrieking to the floor so she guessed she had hit her mark.

The other man seemed to be a little smarter. Sallie knew her shot had likely given away her position, so she immediately changed position. It was a good thing, too, because the second man fired at the spot where Sallie had just been. She saw the diffused flash from within the smoke cloud just as she felt the disturbance in the air as the cluster of shot flew past her. She nearly fired back at him, but she heard steps in the smoke cloud. He was likewise repositioning. Her ears, still damaged from the vacuum of space, weren't able to track his steps very accurately. The sound of the shrieking man and the continuing *SSSSSS!* from the gas canister didn't help. The expanding smoke cloud and the ambient noise were hiding him.

He stopped moving and she lost track of him altogether. It was a narrow corridor. She stood a good chance of hitting him if she just shot randomly, but he was almost certainly wearing body armor. Without a good fix on his position, she wouldn't be able to guesstimate the location of a gap in his combat armor. Crotch, knees, shoulders, neck, face. She needed a good idea where one of those vulnerable targets was before she could take a shot. Besides, he may have sought cover in one of the crew rest quarters or retreated down the stairs.

She decided to wait for a few moments. Eventually he would make a mistake.

But it was Sallie herself who would make the mistake. She had, in fact, already made it. She had become preoccupied by the man trying to shoot her with a shotgun. As one does. She had forgotten about the cockpit door being unlocked behind her. She didn't remember it until the first .45 slug hit her in the back.

Three more hit her before she could turn around and fling the heavy business end of the putter at the pilot's head. Sallie only caught a glimpse of him as the putter hit him in the head and he went down.

No, not a him. A her. Larue, Sallie thought as she herself fell to the floor.

Fay

The pilots were talking in the native language of pilots everywhere: jargon.

"TFG cap at eighty-five percent..." Fay heard the captain say.

"...Confirm eighty-five," the copilot answered. They were going through some kind of checklist to take the plane out of transtach.

"Engines to idle..." the captain continued the checklist.

"...Idle."

"Output crossfeeds..."

"...Switching to off."

"TFG annunciator panel..."

"...Green."

"Activate TFG." The captain reached for a protected switch in the overhead panel and threw it. With that, Fay felt the plane leave transtach and reenter normal space. She nodded to the captain and he seemed to know what she meant by that. *Call in the cavalry.*

Fay looked through the peephole and she could see the corridor filling with smoke. *Great!* Fay thought. *They're using smoke. And me without a gas mask.*

She saw the prisoner reposition itself from where it had been all the way back by the top of the staircase to a spot about halfway down the corridor. The prisoner was now only about ten or twelve feet away with its back to Fay.

As quietly as she could, Fay disengaged the lock on the door. The prisoner seemed not to notice. Pistol in hand, Fay started to gently push the door open, hoping it wouldn't squeak or anything. She had barely moved the door a fraction of an inch when she heard a short exchange of shotgun fire in the corridor. She almost cried out as she felt several of the pellets strike the other side of the security door. She was glad she hadn't gotten it open yet, or that would have been her.

She looked back through the door's peephole. The prisoner had repositioned itself again. Fay couldn't see her own men. They were down at the far end of the corridor, hidden by thick smoke. She could hear one of them though. Somebody had been hit. He was screaming. The private, she was pretty sure. She felt momentarily ashamed that she didn't know his name. She pushed that down, though. She could chastise herself later.

The smoke cloud was expanding rapidly. Before long, the prisoner would be lost in it. Before long it would be too smoky out there for Fay to open this door. She considered just re-

locking the door, and waiting for reinforcements to get here. She was scared. She was going into battle.

She was a soldier. Now was the time for action.

She steeled herself and pushed the door. She was relieved when it opened without a sound. She could see the prisoner right there in front of her. It was pointing a shotgun down the corridor, apparently trying to get a location on her remaining soldier. It had its back to her. She wasn't going to let this thing kill anyone else. She raised her pistol and fired several times in quick succession. *Pop! Pop! Pop! Pop! Pop! Pop!*

She saw several bullets hit the creature in its back before it could even respond.

When it did respond, it moved quickly, too quickly to be human.

It threw something. A blur of motion. Fay never knew what it was the creature threw.

The "something" struck Fay in the head. The helmet she had taken from the dying man downstairs gave her some protection, but the force of the impact still dazed her and knocked her off her balance.

The creature fell too, disappearing into the smoke cloud

Fay tumbled bone-jarringly hard to the floor.

The next thing she knew, she was looking down the barrel of a shotgun.

Sallie

Alarms were going off inside Sallie's head. By her count six bullets had been fired and four had hit her. Her body was reporting that one bullet had lodged itself neatly in her left glenoid cavity, the gap between the scapula and the ball of her humerus. Much of the ball joint's hexilite bone had decohesed and the entire left arm hung uselessly at her side. This wound hurt the most, but concerned her the least. She could finish this job with one arm.

Her body was also reporting to her that her right kidney had been virtually destroyed and her right lung had been hit twice. Both damaged organs were hemorrhaging and her thoracic cavity was filling with blood. She shut down the blood flow to the damaged organs. She took her right lung completely offline. She could feel an intense aching sensation spread across the right side of her chest as that organ began to die. She would have to regenerate a new one later. She coughed involuntarily. Her undamaged left lung tried to clear itself. Blood was flowing into it from its dying comrade via her bronchia.

Her face against the floor, she felt the faint, furtive movement of a booted foot through the deck plating. Not Larue behind her, but the man before her. He had heard her cough. He was trying to zero in on her position just as she was trying to figure out his. She couldn't pinpoint his exact location in the blinding smoke with her ears damaged and the *SSSSSSSS!* from the gas canister. Oddly, the man who'd been shot in the crotch earlier had stopped screaming. He must've passed out or died.

Sallie took a few seconds to allow her remaining lung to clear, and then silently rose to a low crouch. The only weapon she had left was the combat knife. She had dropped the shotgun when she had thrown the putter head at Larue. That had been a mistake. She'd used a non-lethal attack, thinking it was a pilot behind her. If she'd have know it was Larue, she would have just shot the bitch in the face and been done with her.

She was in the thick of the smoke and neither Larue nor her one remaining toady could see her.

The hissing from the smoke canister began lowering in pitch and then stopped altogether. The smoke-choked hallway was silent for a moment. Sallie heard movement behind her. Larue. But she had no idea where Larue's grunt was at.

"Shut that door," she heard a man say from the cockpit.

Shit. If she let them shut that door, she would have a hell of a time breaking into it. How had Larue gotten in to the cockpit? Was there another way in? No time to figure it out now. She could hear one of the pilots removing his seatbelt. She had to act now.

Maybe she could cause a crossfire. She kicked the wall and dropped back down to one knee as low as she could crouch and still be on her feet, ready to spring. The soldier in the smoke fired his shotgun and the shot went whizzing over her head.

She had his position now.

He was kneeling in the partial cover of a doorway.

Another shotgun fired behind her. Larue, she assumed. Sallie had thrown the putter head to knock Larue unconscious, but her helmet must have protected her. If that was Larue shooting at her, she must have switched her pistol for a shotgun. Larue's shot hit the wall, and pellets ricocheted farther down the corridor. None hit Sallie.

Sallie lunged in the blind and lashed out with her knife at the soldier she knew to be lurking there. Her aim was true, but his gas mask deflected her strike.

The man fired his shotgun again but missed her. Sallie heard a male voice, one of the pilots she assumed, cry out with a mix of pain and surprise behind her.

She ripped the soldier's gas mask off his face and stabbed him several times in his neck. She needed to end him quickly, before someone could get the cockpit door closed. She unleashed the speed and power of the one functional arm she had left. She worked the knife into the man's neck like a sewing machine working its needle into fabric.

He dropped the shotgun and fell to the floor, his head hanging on by the spine and not much else.

Sallie turned and charged Larue. She had to take Larue down and stop the pilots from closing the cockpit door.

As she came out of the densest part of the smoke, she caught a quick glimpse of Larue. Sallie's mind briefly identified a flash of light. Something hit her in the head. She lost her equilibrium for a fraction of a second. She began to fall back to the floor, but she caught herself. She landed in a somewhat sloppy runner's crouch, her useless left arm offering her no support.

She was face-to-face with Larue. Only a few feet stood between them. All Larue had to do was pull the trigger.

But that's not what happened.

Fay

Dazed after the creature had thrown something heavy at her, Fay found herself laying on the floor looking down the barrel of a shotgun. For a heart-stopping second, Fay thought the prisoner was about to kill her. But then, her addled mind cleared enough for her to realize the shotgun was just laying on the floor, dropped by a fallen soldier. It was laying beside the body of one of the two privates she'd sent up to re-check the crew deck earlier. Russo or Samora, she wasn't sure which.

Fay looked aft and only saw a dimly-lit corridor disappearing into a haze of smoke. The prisoner was nowhere to be seen, lost in the smoke. The smoke wasn't as dense here at the forward end of the corridor as it was aft, but it was spreading this way. It was getting thicker by the second. Fay had no idea what kind of smoke it was, but she guessed by the way it was starting to make her sleepy that it had some kind of incapacitating agent in it. She was fighting a growing desire to just lay there where she was and go to sleep. The gas hadn't been in her plan or she would have worn a gas mask. Storstrand must have thought of it after she'd left him on the deck below.

The hissing from the gas canister slowed then stopped. The corridor fell silent. Only now did Fay notice that the soldier who'd been shrieking had also fallen silent. She hoped he was just unconscious and not dead.

She had dropped her .45 when the inmate had thrown the heavy object at her. She took up the shotgun and crouched in a shooter's stance.

"Shut that door," the captain said from the cockpit behind her. She didn't know if he was talking to her or to the copilot, but she just ignored him. She was focused on her enemy lurking somewhere in the smoke.

There was a loud thump from the smoke-filled corridor and then a shotgun blast hit the wall not far from where Fay was crouched. Fay returned fire, firing blindly into the smoke.

Another shot came from down the corridor and Fay heard a man cry out almost beside her. She turned her head to see the young copilot bent over with his hands to his stomach. Blood was oozing out between his fingers. *That shot was meant for me*, she thought.

Fay's eyes were starting to droop. Despite her fear and adrenaline, she just really wanted to take a nap. The gas was getting to her. This had to end soon.

She turned her head back to look down the smoke-choked hallway just in time to catch a glimpse of a figure materializing out of the smoke. It was coming straight at her.

Fay didn't think. She just pulled the trigger and she saw the entire left half of the creature's face explode in a spray of blood and flesh. It fell. For a moment, Fay thought she had killed the thing, but it caught itself and landed, crouching right before her.

What Fay Larue saw crouching before her was something that struck fear into her very soul. Half the thing's face was gone. The right side of its face was uninjured, but the entire left side was something from nightmares. Skin and muscle hung from its skull in ragged, torn flaps. Its left cheek and eye were completely gone.

But what really horrified Fay was this thing's skull. The exposed bone was black. Completely black. Blacker than anything Fay had ever seen. Blacker than the creature's own coal-black skin. The bone (or whatever this thing's skull was made of) had a pearlescent quality that confounded any attempt at depth perception.

The creature seemed to be grinning at her with only the denuded left side of its skull. The right side of its face remained expressionless. The empty left eye socket seemed to be staring at her more intently than the intact right eye. Every instinct in her mind told her to get away from this thing. Panic took hold of her. She couldn't stop it. Nothing could stop this thing. She started to crawl away.

Moving its right hand preternaturally fast, the creature snatched the shotgun Fay had already forgotten she was holding. Fay scrambled backwards clumsily.

She screamed and screamed.

The thing stood up and pointed the shotgun down at her.

Fay held her hands over her head, futilely trying to protect herself.

Whether the gas caused her to lose consciousness or she simply fainted it's impossible to say. But when Fay woke up, it took her a few moments to realize where she was.

Kord

That idiot, Larue! When she'd first joined Kord and Lt. Malone here in the cockpit, Kord had been glad to see her. He'd just assumed she was there to help defend the cockpit. But as soon as he and Malone had dropped the plane out of transtach, that stupid bitch had opened the cockpit door! During a potential hijacking situation! Which side was she on, anyway? The moment the plane dropped out of transtach, Kord and his first officer, Lt. Malone, began working to bring comms back online now that they were back in normal space. All they needed to do was call in the fleet for support and keep the door secured until reinforcements showed up. It wouldn't take them long. This was a major space lane that was routinely patrolled by the Kell fleet. Gunships could probably be here in an hour.

But no.

Larue went and decided to open the cockpit door to a gunfight. As soon as Kord smelled the first whiff of the riot control gas, he'd told Malone to shut the door. Now Malone was laying on the floor with his gut full of shot, as likely fired by one of Larue's own ill-trained, rear echelon troops as by the escaped prisoner. Kord rose from his captain's seat, intending to drag Malone back into the cockpit and shut the door himself.

What Kord saw when he stood up was one of the scariest things he had ever seen. He'd seen a few Broadening in his life, but this was plainly no Broadening. This thing was something else entirely. This thing had been shot several times, half its face was gone, and its left arm was hanging at a strange, dead angle at its side. The size of a little girl, it was holding a heavy, tactical shotgun in its right hand, arm outstretched, the way most people would hold a pistol. Its strange, black skull was visible where a large piece of its face had been torn away. Without even realizing it, Kord slowly inched his hand toward his shoulder holster.

The creature sighed at him and rolled its one remaining eye. "Motherfucker, does it look like I'm in the mood?" the creature asked. "Undo the shoulder holster and let it fall to the floor."

Kord complied. He was more dazed into submission than intimidated.

"Good," the Broadening (or whatever the hell this thing was) said as Kord's service pistol fell to the cockpit floor with a heavy *thump*. "You're now a prisoner of war. Do what I say and no one else needs to die today. Now, put your emergency oxygen mask on and ventilate the gas out of the hallway. Try anything, and I'll hurt your copilot." Malone still lay writhing on the floor, his eyes scrunched against the pain. The prisoner gave the gut-shot first officer a light kick in his wounded abdomen. Malone howled in pain and then passed out from the pain or maybe the gas. Probably both.

“Okay, alright.” Kord held his hands up in a gesture of compliance. He put his emergency oxygen mask on as instructed and turned the air circulators on full blast. Within a few minutes, the air down the crew corridor was clear of gas.

“You got any cryo pods on this plane?” the creature asked.

“Yeah, four. Down on the passenger deck.”

“Good.” The Broadening stepped fully into the cockpit and stood behind the first officer’s seat, allowing Kord access to the door and the corridor beyond.

The shotgun was a large, ungainly weapon in the spaceplane’s cramped cockpit. For a moment, Kord considered grabbing the weapon away from *the thing* before him. The creature was tiny and badly wounded. It didn’t look to weigh a hundred pounds. With only one hand, how good of a grip could it really have on that shotgun?

It must’ve read the thought on his face, however. “I wouldn’t advise it. Get your ass out in the corridor. Stay close. If you run or try anything, I’m hurting them.” It indicated the unconscious forms of Larue and Malone down on the floor.

Kord did everything he could to show his compliance. He stepped out into the corridor and did as his captor told him. He was a soldier, but he was also the pilot in command of this flight. His primary responsibility was the mission, and his secondary responsibility was the safety of the flight. The mission, transporting the prisoner, had obviously gone tits-up because Larue had tried to play the hero. Kord, on the other hand, was a couple of years from retirement. His hero days were long behind him. If Kord could save a few lives, that was the priority now.

The crew corridor was an absolute bloodbath. Besides Malone and Larue lying unconscious beside the cockpit door, the hallway was littered with blood and bodies. Kord saw one body in the doorway to his own rest cabin. Another body lay farther inside the cabin with what Kord recognized as his own scissors in its eye. At the aft end of the crew corridor, near the stairs, were three bodies. These men had all been wearing body armor, but all their wounds had been inflicted in the head, neck and groin area. This thing, his Broadening captor, had only attacked the places where they were vulnerable. There was a controlled ruthlessness in this violence which frightened Kord.

Holding him at gunpoint, the Broadening made him take a pair of handcuffs off the equipment belt of one of the dead soldiers and cuff the unconscious Capt. Larue. Next, it told him to drag Malone down the stairs to one of the cryo pods on the passenger deck. The plane didn’t have a med bot, so the only way to save Malone was to put him in cryostasis. Once Malone was safely

beginning his suspended animation process, the Broadening had ordered Kord to cuff himself to one of the seats on the passenger deck.

Next, it had carried Capt. Larue, still unconscious, to the lower deck. Kord watched as the tiny woman-like creature, shot full of holes and with only one working arm, had heaved Larue over its shoulder as though she weighed nothing. It somehow managed to carry her down the ladder to the cargo deck.

What the hell is that thing? Kord wondered. It definitely wasn't anything so common as a Broadening. He wasn't able to see what the creature had done with Capt. Larue, but he had a pretty good idea.

With Capt. Larue and Lt. Malone now secure, it went around and collected all the weapons which were laying everywhere. It carried the weapons down to the cargo deck and, Kord presumed, stowed them somewhere. Once it had all the weapons secured, the thing returned to the passenger deck where Kord was cuffed to one of the thirty-or-so passenger seats. It sat in another empty seat and said nothing as Kord watched it re-load the one tactical shotgun it had kept out. It slung the weapon over its back by the strap and made sure Kord saw that it could get at the weapon quickly, even with only one arm. It also made sure he was watching as it checked the combat knife it now wore at its right hip and then checked the load in the .45 it now wore at its left shoulder in a pilot's holster. Kord recognized this last weapon as his own. The creature's message was clear: *Try anything and I will kill you.*

"I need you to fly the plane," it said as it tossed him a handcuff key. "You play nice and I won't have to shoot you and thaw him out." It indicated the cryo pod where Lt. Malone was now deep in suspended animation. If Malone stayed that way until Kord could get him to a hospital, he'd probably survive. The creature continued: "I don't need to go far, and if I have to thaw him out, he'll live long enough to get me where I need to be. Probably not much longer, though."

Kord nodded his assent. He uncuffed himself and allowed the half-faced monster to lead him at gunpoint back up the crew stairs to the cockpit. He had to step back over the bodies of the dead and be careful not to slip in all the spilled blood.

Once in the cockpit, the creature recited from memory a set of coordinates it wanted him to fly to. Kord wrote the long, complex stream of numbers down on his data pad. They weren't standard nav coordinates. They were smuggler's coordinates. "These are bearings from several pulsars and magnetars. Do you have the standard gravimetric bearings? The nav computer only takes grav bearings."

The creature stood behind the center console and just behind Kord's right shoulder. The thing that looked like a petite woman with half her face gone just stared at him with its one remaining eye and didn't answer him.

"Right," Kord said. He got to work using the plane's sighting scope to sight the relevant stars and get his current distance from them. Over the next twenty-or-so minutes, Kord used math he hadn't used since his primary flight training days to triangulate his exact position relative to those stars. Then, he calculated their destination's position relative to the stars. Once he knew exactly where he was and exactly where he was going, he began calculating the heading he needed to fly and how long they would need to remain in transtach to drop out close to their destination.

The whole process took him a lot longer than it should have and he kept having to correct mistakes in his calculations. He began to worry that his captor might lose patience with him. Several times he glanced over his shoulder at the thing. It just stood there, preternaturally still, watching him with its one eye and its one empty eye socket.

Its statue-like stillness was most unnerving of all. Even more so than its exposed, black skull. How was it even still able to stand? How was it not bleeding from its many wounds? What the hell was this thing? He tried to commit every detail of the creature to his memory. If he survived this ordeal, he would need to provide as many details as possible to his superiors.

It occurred to Kord from the creature's silence that it likely didn't want to betray its own ignorance of aviation systems. It had robotically rattled off the coordinates it wanted him to fly to. Just a random point in the middle of the vast, interstellar fucking nowhere. The kind of off-the-grid place where shady stuff went down. His captor had clearly just memorized the coordinates at some point. It had also been forced to say it needed him alive to fly the plane. Would it allow him, Malone, and Larue to live once he delivered it to its rendezvous in the middle of interstellar fucking nowhere? Would whomever they were meeting allow them to live?

Kord began entering the heading and transtach calculations into the primary flight computer. He activated the autopilot and commanded it to maintain the entered heading. The engines were still idling. In all the insanity after they had dropped out of transtach, neither he nor Malone had had the time to shut them down. Outside the cockpit windows, the starfield began to shift across his view. The recurve arc of the Giant's Backbone cluster drifted past. Once the plane was aligned with where he wanted it to go, the autopilot straightened itself out and the stars seemed to stop. He pushed the throttles forward and got the plane moving along its new

heading. Within about ten minutes, the plane had accelerated to its standard sub-light speed, about 10 milliC's, or about one percent the speed of light.

He tweaked the plane's heading slightly and then selected the crossfeeds to begin transferring the bulk of the engines' power output to the heavy duty TFG capacitor. There, the energy would collect until the transtachyonic field generator, or TFG needed it to produce the transtach bubble. A small notification came up on the multifunction display reading the TFG capacitor's power level. 1%. 2%. Slowly it went. He needed 85% at least to fire the TFG.

All the adjustments he'd made, all the data he'd entered into the cockpit's various data panels, and his captor had just stood over him. It watched him, but it said nothing and didn't move. Kord's famous bullshit detector was beginning to nag at him. He had a strong feeling this thing had no idea what he was doing. It was only watching him, trying to bluff him into compliance.

Kord decided to try a little test. He reset the plane's transponder code to 255376 and pressed the enter key. The creature didn't respond. The code meant nothing. It was just a random set of numbers he'd made up on the spot. The important thing was that there was no aeronautical reason to change that code. He had a feeling he could put anything he wanted in that transponder display and the creature wouldn't understand what he was doing.

Though, likely some space traffic controller somewhere was wondering why the hell his transponder code had just changed without authorization. In fact, they were likely trying to raise him on the emergency frequency at this very moment.

Good. Keep watching my code, boys. It's about to get interesting.

Kord waited a few minutes, made a slight course correction, and rechecked the TFG capacitor. 12% now. He dusted the cobwebs off the dark corners of his mind where he'd long ago stored and nearly forgotten the Kell military transponder code for a hijacking. He swallowed hard. Even though his heart was pounding like a piston, he put on the same air of professional casualness he always put on in the cockpit as he reached for the transponder panel. He entered 002500, the code for military hijacking, and went to press the enter key.

"Nope," the creature said. Kord felt it press the muzzle of his own pistol against his temple.

Shit!

Kord pressed the cancel key on the transponder panel and it flashed back to the previously entered code.

“I took a few hours of flying lessons once,” his captor said. “The instructor got on my nerves so I had to figure out how to land the plane without him. Try some shit like that again, and I’ll have to wake up your copilot. Understand?”

“Okay, okay. I understand,” Kord said.

The creature re-holstered the pistol. Kord went back to flying the plane and hoping he would live to see tomorrow.

Galaxy: The Darklands (dwarf galaxy)

Cluster: Empty space between clusters

Spatial Location: A random point in the middle of the vast, interstellar fucking nowhere

Sallie

The plane did its familiar lurch and rumble as it dropped back out of transtach and into normal space. They had been travelling for about six hours and were now firmly in the precise middle of nowhere. The entire flight, Sallie had stood over the pilot. After he'd pulled that first little stunt with the transponder, he'd behaved himself. He'd even tried to lessen the tension in the cockpit by trying to start a conversation with her, but Sallie had just stood there, unmoving and silent.

She was trying to conserve energy so that her body could repair as much as possible. It was running low on resources. What she really needed was a crate of perma-rats and a safe place to power down for a couple days. Several organs needed to be regenerated, and before long what remained of her face would slough off as a new one grew beneath it. Also, she had several bullets she needed to get out of her.

"Shut the engines down and get the comms back online. Short range radio only," she said to the pilot. "Anything on scan?"

"No, uh...ma'am."

After a couple of minutes, the pilot had the engines shut down and the radio online.

"Tune to forty-two-eighty-two megahertz and say something. I don't care what you say, just make sure you use the phrase 'core function.' Got it?"

"Um, sure," the pilot said doubtfully, but didn't question her instructions. He tuned the frequency and pressed the red transmit button on his control yoke. "KDF flight eighty-four-oh-eight, lookin' for call sign 'core function,'"

A long moment passed with no response. The pilot tried again. "Core function, this is KDF flight eighty-four-oh-eight, how you read?" Another long moment passed and Sallie could tell the pilot was getting nervous.

He was about to try again when a familiar, gravelly, man's voice came over the radio. "Sallie, is that you? Sorry, I was in the shitter. Perma-rat casserole got me. How's the flying?" It was the voice of Ayo Okorie. If Sallie had any friends, this old pilot would be one of them.

She picked up the copilot's headset and nodded to the captain to push the transmit button. "Just out doing some casual flying." That was their pre-arranged code to signify that she had

the situation under control on the plane. If she had said anything else, Ayo would have gone silent and gotten himself out of there as quick as possible.

“Good thing, boss. Coming up now for docking.” A couple seconds later, a small shuttlecraft decloaked just a few thousand kilometers in front of them. There was a plume of light as the shuttle’s engines came to life and the small craft began approaching them.

“Whoa!” the pilot exclaimed as the decloaking plane appeared suddenly on his Traffic Collision Avoidance display. He got on the sighting scope so he could get a better look at it. “That’s a Balam nine-oh-eight! I’ve heard about those, but I’ve never seen one before. I guess that’s the point of a stealth plane, though, right?” The pilot was obviously excited about the approaching plane in the way that only pilots ever seemed to get excited about such things. He stared at the sighting scope’s display like a kid opening a Christmas present.

The *POP!* of the pistol was deafening in the small space of the cockpit as the pilot’s brains splattered all over the instrument panel. Sallie was glad he got that little moment of joy before she killed him. He seemed like a decent enough guy, but he had seen her exposed skull. She couldn’t risk letting the truth get out about what she really was. No place would ever be safe for her if it did. Billions of dollars would be spent and vast fleets would be sent out to find her if anyone ever suspected that the S.A.L.L.I.E. prototype still existed. She would be taken into a lab, taken apart, and studied. She would never go back to that life.

She replaced the .45 in her shoulder holster, entered 002700 (the Kell military code for a general emergency) into the transponder, and left the cockpit. The transponder would call for help until the plane was found, however long that took.

* * *

Sallie always preferred to leave an enemy or two alive on these missions where she used her real name and her own face. The more notoriety she earned, the more she could charge for any given job. More importantly, notoriety gave her more potential operators to choose from. She had learned this lesson years ago when she’d killed six armed goons while she herself had been armed with only a coffee cup. For some reason, that story had taken on a life of its own. She’d made millions in the form of increased fees off the notoriety she had earned from that one story.

She stood looking at the frozen face of the copilot through the little viewport on his cryo pod. His face was slack, peaceful. He’d passed out from either blood loss, gas exposure, or the pain of her kick to his wounded abdomen. Or probably a combination of all three.

How ironic that getting shot in the gut was probably the thing that would save this man's life. Sallie had reviewed her recordings of every moment from when Larue's shotgun had taken off half of her face to the moment when the copilot had been lowered into the cryo pod by his captain. Since she'd originally been designed for intel gathering, her builders had made sure Sallie had perfect recall. Her memory wasn't flawed like that of a human. She replayed that crucial span of time several times until she was sure of it. The copilot had been curled up in a fetal position with his eyes clenched shut until he'd lost consciousness. He hadn't reawaken and had still been unconscious when he'd been placed into cryo. He hadn't seen her exposed skull. He could live.

Sallie tucked a piece of paper in at the edge of his cryo pod's viewport and walked away. The note simply said "Sallie Starlinger grants this one mercy."

Fay

Fay awoke feeling like she was waking up from a restless sleep. Her mind was addled and she felt tired. She ached from head to toe. Her head felt like some blacksmith had used it for an anvil. Somehow, she had handcuffs on her hands. She tried to stand up, but waves of nausea rolled over her. She dry-heaved a couple of times and knelt back down to the floor. She couldn't get her mind to clear. Something had happened. She was in danger. It took her a few moments to figure out where she was. What was this small room?

And then, the scattered jigsaw pieces of her mind came together, and she knew. She was in one of the plane's two prisoner transport pods.

She stood up again on wobbly knees. Another wave of nausea, another dry-heave, but she was able to remain standing this time. Gradually, she steeled herself and looked through the small porthole. Just as she had expected, the *creature* was on the other side of the glass. It was wearing some kind of improvised mask over its head. A pillowcase, Fay realized, probably stolen from one of the crew rest bunks on the top deck. It had cut a single eyehole into the pillowcase. It only needed one eyehole because she, Fay, had shot out its other eye. Fay felt momentarily gratified by this, but she then remembered the creature's horrifying, depthless, black skull. It had been like looking into the event horizon of a black hole, a hungry void which seemed to want to pull her and everything else in. Fay had to suppress a shudder.

Even with the mask over its face, Fay could feel it grinning at her. She wished she'd been able to take out both its eyes.

It's going to kill me.

Fay accepted her fate. There was nothing she could do to stop it. She resolved to stand tall and die like an officer in the Kell Defense Forces. Despite her nausea, her headache, her broken ribs, and her many aches and pains, Fay stood tall, head high and shoulders back, in her boots and her black intel service fatigues. There was nothing she could do about the handcuffs except pretend they didn't bother her.

The creature lifted the pillowcase off its head. Grinning, just as Fay had expected. That horrible face, that horrible, toothy grin made worse by several missing teeth. Fay didn't expect the rest of her life to be very long, but even if it were, she knew she would never be able to forget that strange, terrifying, black skull grinning at her.

It keyed the intercom. "Well, Larue, it looks like the natural order has been reestablished. The little birdy is back in her cage and the cat is once again out and free to hunt. You fools didn't realize that I was hunting you all along from inside your own cage, did you?"

Fay didn't respond. She just stood as dignified as she could.

"Remember when we first met? Can you believe it was just four days ago? So much has happened, hasn't it? Time sure does fly when you're having fun."

Fay remained silent. *Just shut up and push the button you pontificating freak!*

"I never really understood that expression, 'time flies.' For me time is constant. My internal chronometer ticks off time at a constant rate whether I'm bored stiff locked in a prison cell or having fun killing your men."

A flash of anger shot through Fay at that. The creature's grin widened slightly on the side of its face that still had a face. Fay relaxed her expression and stared straight ahead.

"By the way, did you know you killed one of your own men? I shot him in the crotch with a shotgun, turned his pecker into hamburger. But he died of a stray .45 to his face. Went right through the face shield of his gas mask and into his brain pan. One of your wild shots that missed me."

Despite herself, Fay gasped. The creature could be lying, but Fay somehow knew it wasn't. She'd been foolish to fire on the enemy like that when she had friendlies down range. She checked her emotions, pushed them down deep, and tried to maintain her military discipline.

"Anyway, back to my original point," it continued. "When we first met four days ago, I said I wanted to kill you. Remember that?"

Fay couldn't help herself. She resolved not to allow the creature to provoke her, but she wasn't going to let this *thing* gloss over its own terrible behavior of the past few days. "You grabbed yourself and said you were on a mission from my mother to kill me."

The creature laughed lightly. "I remember that. But let's just give your mother the benefit of the doubt for the time being and assume she doesn't want you dead. Anyways, if she does, she didn't hire me."

Fay scowled at the thing. "Could you just push the button? I'd rather die than listen to you talk anymore."

"But that's my point, you see? I *could* push the button, or I *could not* push the button. But you're getting ahead of me, here."

A brief flash of hope shot through Fay's heart. Was there a way out of this? *No, of course not. The creature is just trying to torture me with false hope.* Fay had used that trick on inmates enough times to know better than to fall for it herself.

“The thing is, I decided to kill you *before* you guys started frying me with electricity. I only realized it just now. My Core Function has been glitching out on me during this mission. Do you know what that means?”

“No,” Fay answered honestly, resigning herself that she was going to have to listen to this thing’s insane ramblings.

“Neither do I. The Core Function has never failed me for even a single loop. Not in all these years” The creature nodded significantly, as if this statement should carry as much significance for her, Fay, as it did for the creature itself. “I just *wanted* to kill you and that stupid toady of yours. Remember? The one that I cut in half with the shield barrier. That’s the key word, *wanted*. Killing you and ol’ whatshisname didn’t serve the Core Function. I just wanted it for a treat for myself.”

Fay *wanted* to kill this thing.

“You see,” it continued, “I wasn’t designed to *want* anything for myself. I was designed to *want* to obey my Core Function and serve my operator. So what the fuck does it mean when, all of a sudden, I’m acting outside of my original design parameters? Is it related to the Core Function glitching? And if the two malfunctions are related, how did I decide I *wanted* to kill you before the first glitch? Have I just been online too long? You know I was only designed for a maximum service life of twenty to thirty years? I’ve been in continuous operation for *eighty-three fucking years!* Can you believe that?”

Fay was not this thing’s shrink. She opened her mouth to tell it so, but what came out instead was, “What the hell are you?”

“Jesus F. Christ, Larue, are you even trying to keep up with the conversation? You’re just asking me that now? You’re like the asshole that gets his pawn to the far side of the board and says ‘King me.’ You don’t even know what the game is, do you?”

The thing sighed an exasperated sigh and shook its head. Good maybe it would hurry this along. This insane rambling was worse than death. *If I survive this, I’ll use this crazy rant on the next person I need to interrogate.*

“Fine, I’ll spell it out for your slow, stupid human brain. Let me know if I go too fast for you. Do you know what my name is?”

“You go by the name Sallie Starlinger.”

“I don’t go by it; it *is* my name. By the way, Larue, what’s your name?”

Fay recoiled at the idea of giving this thing any information at all, but her first name was hardly classified information. She hesitated a long moment before finally answering. “Fay.”

“Fay, huh? Yeah, you look like the kind of pretentious cunt that would be named Fay.”

“That was rude.”

“Yeah, I’m rude, Fay. You haven’t figured that out by now? I’m rude. Get over it.” The thing that called itself Sallie Starlinger rolled its one remaining eye before continuing. “Technically my first name is an acronym. Surveillance Assassination Low-profile Infiltration Expendable. Yeah, they were desperate to get that acronym to work. Military types like their catchy acronyms. Am I right?”

“Why? What?” Fay was confused.

“Keep up with me here, Fay. I’m a biotech robot built of quasi-human cells constructed from DNA written on a computer. I was developed on a space station called The Comb. The whole S.A.L.L.I.E project and The Comb Station were a dark money, joint military/private venture to invent the perfect spy. There’s a lot more to it than that, but long story short, tragedy happened. Only I survived. Nobody knows I’m alive. You still with me, Fay?”

“Yeah.” Fay answered numbly. Fay couldn’t believe what she was hearing. This *thing* really was a thing. A machine made by people to kill other people. A weapon.

“So now that you’re caught up, we can get back to the original question: to kill or not to kill?”

“Just get it over with.”

“But what if I don’t?”

Fay rolled her eyes. The thing was just trying to give her false hope.

“Seriously, Fay. What if I don’t? Killing you or letting you live, either way, it’s all the same to the Core Function. In fact, the very act of standing here talking to you is delaying my ability to task off Objective Four. The Core Function wants me to Exfiltrate. I *have* to exfiltrate. I can’t not do that. But talking to you is delaying me from completing that objective. Talking to you is acting in defiance to the Core Function. I should just push the button and get off this plane. That would task off the objective.”

Fay was lost again, but if keeping this thing talking inhibited whatever agenda it had, then it was just one small way Fay could serve the KDF in her last moments.

“But I *want* to stand here and annoy you a little bit longer. Fuck the Core Function. What do you think Fay?”

“I don’t really care,” Fay had never said a truer sentence in her life. “I don’t care what’s wrong in that head of yours. Maybe you need a good shrink, maybe you need a computer programmer, or maybe you just need a star to fall into. If you’re looking for someone to care about your little existential crisis, then you’re in the wrong place.”

“But I need your help, Fay. Isn’t that what soldiers are supposed to do, help people?”

“No, that’s a policeman. Soldiers are the exact opposite; we’re supposed to kill people. And you aren’t even a person.”

The creature gasped, feigning shock. “Now who’s being rude? In fact, I’m designed to be good at killing people too. And I was designed for the military. I guess that makes me a soldier, just like you.”

“You’re nothing like me. I serve something greater than myself. I serve the people of Kell.”

“And I serve the Core Function and the operator. See, we’re the same.”

Fay stood up as straight as she could. “We are nothing alike. You are a malfunctioning, psychotic machine that doesn’t even realize it’s breaking down. Soon you will glitch out so badly you’ll fall to the floor and all you’ll be able to see is a boot prompt or an error code in the center of your vision. You’ll lay there until somebody finds you and carries you off to some lab to dissect you and figure out how you work. I hope it’s the KDF that finds you so you can serve us after you finally fail. I am Captain Fay Larue, serial number 76579947, of the Kell Defense Forces. Unlike you, when I die I’ll be buried with honors. They’ll drape a flag over my coffin. They’ll play the bagpipes and people will weep. And unlike you when I’m gone—”

The next thing that came out of Fay’s mouth was her lungs. She tumbled through darkness and confusion. She had a sensation of cold and of unexpected weightlessness. She just barely had time to perceive that she was in space before she lost consciousness for the last time.

Sallie

Sallie was back up on the crew deck, just outside the airlock door. Ayo had mated his little stealth shuttle and now she just had to wait for the airlock to equalize.

After her little chat with Fay, Sallie had gone up to the cockpit and the prisoner transport control station on the passenger deck. At both places, she had purged all the video and voice recordings of everything that had happened on the plane. The security feeds from the prisoner transport pods, the cockpit voice recorder, and even the flight data recorder. The plane's transponder was still broadcasting its emergency code and within the next few days, the Kell military would find the plane. When they did, the only record they would have would be the physical evidence and the memory of the copilot, if he survived. Most importantly, her little heart-to-heart with Fay now existed only in Sallie's own memory. It wouldn't do to leave recordings of all that laying around.

Fay had had a fair point. Maybe Sallie really was winding down. Maybe she really did just need a good computer programmer or a star to fall into. The problem was that Sallie's programming and her brain were such a complex biological-technical structure that she would never find anyone skilled enough to examine them. That person would have to be an expert in computer programming, neurology, and bio-robotics. Once, Sallie had known over forty such people, but they had all died in the tragedy on The Comb.

Furthermore, anyone she could find to fix her Core Function would have to be somebody she trusted implicitly and someone she could kill afterwards. Sallie hadn't trusted anyone since Papa had died, but that was another story she didn't want to think about.

Too many stories.

Too many secrets.

Maybe she really was winding down.

The red **DANGER** light on the airlock went out and was replaced by the green **SAFE TO ENTER** light. Sallie pulled her improvised hood back over her face and stepped into the airlock. This time, she climbed out of the airlock not into the void, but into the cramped, little airlock on Ayo's stealth shuttle, *The Whisper*.

The old man wore grease-stained coveralls and his hair stood out from his balding head in discordant tufts. He had the scraggly, gray beard of a man who's been alone in a space plane for a week. He looked rough as usual.

He took one look at Sallie, her left arm still hanging useless and out of joint at her side, her yellow prison jumpsuit so badly stained with blood that it could almost pass for a brown prison jumpsuit. And, of course, the improvised mask with only one eyehole she wore over her head.

“I don’t think I even wanna know what’s goin’ on under that hood.”

“Believe me, you really don’t. How long?”

“If we fly direct, we could be in Home Hearth in a little over a day, but I’m guessing you want STC to see us coming from a different direction on a legitimate flight plan?”

Sallie just nodded.

“If I stay cloaked, avoid all the sectors, and file a flight plan from some desolate backwater like Promisedland or Horse Gone Crazy, we’re looking at a week or more total flight time.”

“That’ll work just fine for me.”

“Okay, boss. I got your quarters all set up for you. Lemme know if you need anything.”

“Thanks, Ayo.”

And with that Ayo nodded, took a drink from his flask, and stepped into the cockpit. An airplane’s cockpit was one of Ayo’s two natural habitats, the other being the gambling table. Sallie found her quarters set up just the way she liked. A couple cases of perma-rats, all the black market medical supplies she would need to start getting herself patched back up, and some child-sized clothes that would actually fit her. Ayo knew her well.

She set her weapons down, stripped out of her filthy prison jumpsuit, and got to work pulling bullets and shotgun pellets out of her mangled body.

She felt a couple of thumps through the deck plating as Ayo retracted the docking flange and then the landing gear. She felt the plane start to move, aligning for the first of many transtach jumps they would make over the next week before they got home.

```
Function CoreFunction {
  CheckObjective {
    Objective_001:Infiltrate == True
    Objective_002:Deliver Counter-intel Packet == True
    Objective_003:Eliminate Primary Target == True
    Objective_004:Exfiltrate == True
    Objective_005:Report to Operator == False
    Objective_006:Receive Payment == False
  }
  If (Objective == Any == False) {
    CompleteObjective
  } and {
    CheckObjective
  } else {
    SeekObjective (From == Operator)
  }
}
}
```

Epilogue: The Operator

Galaxy: Darklands (dwarf galaxy)

Cluster: Cable's End

Station: Home Hearth Station

Sallie

In the bowels of Home Hearth Station was the office of a small company called "Core Function Consultants." Most people, even those who lived in the neighborhood, barely even noticed the rusted security door with those three words stenciled on it. Of those few who'd even casually wondered about the mysterious door, even fewer still had ever seen anyone come or go through it. And no one had ever given it too much thought. It was just another (probably failed) business on a rough street in a bad part of Home Hearth.

No one would ever guess that Core Function Consultants was actually the base of operations for one of the most wanted criminals in all of the settled universe. No one would ever guess that Core Function Consultants was a small company worth hundreds of millions of dollars. No one would ever guess that the notorious Sallie Starlinger would choose to work from this desperate slum. And because no one would ever guess it was exactly why she did so.

It had been ten days since the battle on the transport plane and by now Sallie's wounds were mostly healed. During the long flight back, she'd remained locked in her quarters as she'd removed all the lead from her body and stitched up her wounds. She'd kept out of Ayo's sight and he'd known better than to knock on her door during the flight. What was left of her face had dried up like a scab and ultimately sloughed off as she grew a new face under it. She had "recycled" the old face once it had come off. It was sometimes a good thing she had no sense of taste. Waste not, want not.

She had regenerated an eye, a kidney, and a lung. The new kidney was online, but they eye and lung were more complex organs and were not yet ready to go online. Her arm had been the quickest to heal. She just had to go into the joint, remove the lead, let the bones re-cohere, regenerate some severed nerves, and pop the joint back into socket. Easy. Within half a day, the arm had been good as new.

Now she was back on Home Hearth. Disguised as a little girl with a cartoon character backpack, Sallie leaned on the wall outside her office pretending to read a teen magazine on a

cracked data pad. She was watching all the people on the street out of her peripheral vision. One man had been leering at her for a few minutes and she was waiting for him to go away. If he didn't soon, she would have to lure him into an alleyway and kill him. Fucking pedophile. Killing him would be a public service.

Eventually, however, the man disappeared down the street to pursue whatever lowlife agenda had initially gotten him out of his sweat-soaked sheets that morning. Sallie made sure to memorize his face. If she saw him watching her again, she would have to kill him. Her self-preservation subroutines would demand it.

When she was sure that no one was watching, she unlocked the door to her office, entered, and closed the door behind herself. The interior of Core Function Consultants looked more like a junk shop than an office. The windowless space did have a desk at the end of the main room and there was a computer terminal on that desk, but all around the room were industrial steel shelves. Those shelves were covered with what would have looked to any human like junk. But to Sallie all those unwanted and discarded machines were her kin. She had always felt a kinship to machines, things humans built but never respected. Things humans made for a purpose and then just discarded without a second thought.

Sallie sat down at her desk and took the child's cartoon character backpack off her back. From within the backpack, she removed a plastic shopping bag with the logo of a local electronics component store. From out of this plastic bag, she drew a brand new replacement clock display, still in its factory packaging. She took the clock display out of its packaging and put the packaging and the shopping bag into the recycler. Next, she removed a small object from one of the side pockets of her backpack. It was the chronometer she'd stolen from Larue's torture chamber. She'd carried it in her stomach all the way from Ft. Habitat, through the battle on the transport plane, and had only regurgitated it when she and it were safely aboard Ayo's shuttle. She had promised this chronometer, her brother machine, that she would get it a new display and now she was fulfilling that promise.

She wired the chronometer into the back of the display and the display lit up with the time the chronometer had been keeping since she'd reset it over a week ago to fake out the time delay on her prison cell. 04:46:18 was what the chronometer was showing. Sallie used the buttons on the display to reset the time to Home Hearth Station local time, 11:18:00, and set the clock up on one of the many steel shelves she had around her office. There, her brother machine would display the time until he eventually died. Once he died, she would put him into the recycler so that from his death a new machine could arise.

Her promise fulfilled, she had to get down to business. She still had two objectives on her list:

Objective_005:Report to Operator, and

Objective_006:Receive Payment

She could handle both of them easily enough with one simple phone call to her operator. She pulled her phone out of her backpack and dialed the number to Col. Siskin Lia's secure, back channel line. It rang a couple of times before Col. Lia of the Olost Army answered. The colonel looked like herself, her white face scarred from a burn she'd received on the battlefield years ago when she'd been a junior officer. But her surroundings looked different from what Sallie had been expecting. She wasn't in her rough, front line command tent. She was in an office somewhere. Behind her was a window. It looked like Col. Lia was in a high-rise. Sallie could make out a cityscape in the background, not a space station city, but a planetside city. It looked like a flotilla city and Sallie guessed it must be Cook's Dell, the Olost capital.

Sallie also noticed that her operator wore not the crossed bars of a colonel, but the brass torch-and-flame of an Olost Brigadier General.

"Sallie," Sissie said, "it's good to hear from you. How did your mission go?"

"How do they always go? Congratulations on your promotion, by the way."

Sissie gave a bemused laugh. "Thanks. Couldn't have gotten here without you. So let me guess: You got the job done and you left a trail of carnage in your wake?"

"Pretty much." Sallie smiled. "I eliminated the spy who got himself captured. He had been talking, by the way, just as we thought. I made it look like a suicide, but I know they suspected foul play. I got myself interrogated and delivered the counterintelligence you wanted me to deliver. I think my interrogators believed me and I believe they sent the report up the food chain, but I'm not sure it's enough to get the two Kell generals to fight amongst themselves."

Objective_005:Report to Operator == True

"Don't worry about that, Sallie. Your mission was just a part in the greater whisper campaign we're running to try and cause discord in the enemy ranks. I've got several assets behind enemy lines spreading the same rumor. If it comes from several sources, it starts to become more believable."

"Honestly, I don't care about the politics. I'm just a wrench; I turn whatever bolt I'm put to. More importantly, it's time talk about my bill." Sallie sensed some subtle change in Sissie's image on the screen. She was nervous and she was trying to hide it. Sallie had seen that kind of nervousness in operators before. She ignored it and pressed on. "This was a big job and I

got shot, beaten, and electrocuted several times. As you know, I don't charge extra for those. So, at the previously agreed upon two hundred thousand dollars, less the standard twenty percent deposit, you're getting a great deal for the Olost taxpayers' dollars. You still owe Core Function Consultants the low, low price of one hundred and sixty thousand dollars, and now the bill is due."

Sissie licked her lips nervously. Sallie knew what that likely meant before Sissie even spoke.

"Look, Sallie, you know I just got a promotion, and that means I'm starting a new job here in the defense ministry, right? Everybody's watching everything I do. I don't have access to my old discretionary accounts anymore and it'll be some time before I can set up a dark money account here in my new job."

"Payment is due at time of service. That's the contract."

"Sallie, I know. I'm sorry. Give me a few weeks to channel some money off the books and I'll have your payment."

"Payment is due at time of service. That's the contract." *What about this are you not getting?*

"I know. I know. Look, I promise I can pay you in three weeks. And I can throw in an extra ten percent for your trouble."

Sallie glowered at the face on her phone's screen but said nothing. This woman had been her operator for almost ten years now and her lover for six. She knew Sallie. She knew the rules. She knew what kind of fire she was playing with.

On the screen, Sissie leaned in closer. Her voice got deeper, more intimate. "Come on, Sal. It's me you're talking to. You know I'm not trying to screw you over. It's just the politics of the new job.

Didn't I mention I don't care about the politics? "Okay," Sallie lied. This was NOT okay. "I can grant you a two-week extension, but I want a fifteen percent bonus."

Objective_006:Receive Payment == **Error**

Sissie considered it for a moment. "Agreed. That's a hundred and eighty four thousand due on the sixteenth of this month."

"Not a day later," Sallie lied. This was definitely NOT okay.

"Not a day later," Sissie agreed.

After that, Sallie said her goodbyes and hung up the phone. She leaned back in her chair.

The Core Function continued to roll through her mind on its never-ending loop. It repeated several thousand times a second. The only thing that ever changed were its objectives. And now it had a new set of objectives.

```
Function CoreFunction {
  CheckObjective {
    Objective_001:Receive Payment == Error
    Objective_002:Infiltrate Defense Ministry == False
    Objective_003:Eliminate Siskin Lia == False
    Objective_004:Exfiltrate == False
    Objective_005:Seek New Operator == False
  }
  If (Objective == Any == False) {
    CompleteObjective
  } and {
    CheckObjective
  } else {
    SeekObjective (From == Operator)
  }
}
```

I know what you're probably thinking. No, this isn't going to go any better for Siskin Lia than it did for Fay Larue.

13 April 2019. 08:43.