

Dead Man's Hammer By Christina Engela

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Preview

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Dead Man's Hammer

Imagine, if you will:

Somewhere in deep space, a bright yellow star lit the darkness around it, completely unaware that its light could be seen across enormous amounts of distance – and of course, time. During its enormously long lifetime – most of which had been spent in the company of its rather dysfunctional family of nine ordinary-looking planets – countless beings had named it from the far ends of distant telescopes, wondered whether there was any life there, and included it into numerous imaginary star clusters and constellations as they were perceived from their respective vantage points.

Once in the lifetime of this star– or maybe twice, beings had risen from the dust of their own worlds to look up at it in their skies, and called it names that meant “Light-bringer” or “Great Day Maker” before the illimitable dark blanket of extinction hid their faces from the universe. More recently however, beings from a faraway world that orbited a distant sun not unlike this one, gave it a name also. They called themselves *Human*, and they travelled here on a starship named the *Edsel* to establish a new colony on one of its chil – er, planets. The Humans called the star *Ramalama*. The name they gave to their new home? They called that *Deanna*.

Right from the start, the first Human colonists to arrive on *Deanna* found very little at all there to laugh at – which could account for the whimsy in the names given to various things they encountered on *Deanna* – as many a Deannan would attest, if asked politely over a cup of Hot Stuff Blend at Albrecht's Takeaways. *Ploplar* trees, *cherebub* bushes, *flatular canaries* – and *strato-penguins* all added to the charm of *Deanna* – and not just because they'd been given creative names! In most cases, the idiom “It is what it does”, applied. *Obsidian Crows* might seem funny at first, unless you just happened to ride over one with your jeepo five miles out of town and didn't have a spare tire – and although there was some reasonable expectancy of hitting one of these solid, diminutive brutes on the roads, it didn't happen nearly as often as one might think.

Deanna was pretty much as boring a lump of rock as could be expected – and it had promised the settlers who founded the colony some eighty years prior, nothing but hardship and lean years at first, until they could get things going properly – and delivered on that promise! So, with the stoic determination of frontiersmen in all manner of times and places, they simply got on with the business at hand – making a life here in the outback, where at first, everything had to come from the supply ships. There was little in the way of entertainment, aside from the hardships and struggles of everyday life – so they looked up into the sky, and saw the sun called Ramalama, who ruled the day. At night, they saw the two mad little moons in close orbit around the planet – and named them *Ding* and *Dong*.

Dong had been described most often as “a huge lump of nothing much, about one kilometer in diameter” while *Ding* was only about fifty feet around, consisted entirely of titanium and was a known navigational hazard to approaching ships. Despite being bright and shiny, pilots simply didn’t see it – either at all, or until it was far too late. This was where the saying “you’ve got a *Ding* in your fender”, popular among local space-jockeys, came from – and in fact, it wasn’t long before the small moon *Ding* was knocked out of orbit for the first time! Because the night sky looked so dull and lifeless and depressing without it, the colonists co-operated in putting it back up again – which became something of a regular occurrence as space traffic to Deanna – and collisions with the small moon increased over time.

In more recent times, since Deanna catered for a moderate slice of the tourism industry’s pie, the Tourist Office was given jurisdiction over the small moon. On average, it would take three specially dedicated heavy-duty space tugs to get the spherical lump of titanium out of its crater, and to put it back in orbit where it belonged. The usual administrative delays would hold up the process, usually while a specialized team working for the Tourist Office had it polished up again first. Suppose someone saw greasy fingerprints on it? Oh, the shame! Ahem – anyway, the tiny, shiny moon called *Ding* had become such a popular feature of Deanna that it had a whole page devoted to it in the *Galactic Tourist Guide*, and even in the prestigious *Encyclopedia Galactica*. Local jewelers even sold miniature silver, gold and titanium Dings as pendants, in various sizes, on chains.

By now, almost a century later, the planet *Deanna* was still just another third-rate colony in the vast and growing Terran Empire. Deanna was an average-sized world with a land-sea ratio of only 35 percent – which meant there was far less sea than land – and with such small moons, there were hardly any tides or waves to speak of at all – which meant that if you were a tourist looking for a great place to surf – then dude, *this wasn’t it!* Deanna had only one ocean, the *Landlocked Ocean* – which was fresh, shallow and – as you could probably tell by its name, landlocked.

Rivers from all around the planet ran from the ice caps and melting glaciers at the poles, into each other and into various lakes – great and small, and emptied into the Landlocked Ocean – which happened to be the largest and deepest part of the surface, and held all that water. The Landlocked Ocean straddled the equator, and covered an area roughly the size of the African continent on Earth.

There was plenty of arable land around the Landlocked Ocean, which was just as good for farming and building as it was for mining (and in certain cases, snorting). Deanna was a good place to farm, either with crops or livestock, and there was enough *Lantillium* to last a lifetime or two. Lantillium was a kind of nonferrous, nonmagnetic (apolar) metal used to line warp cores in stardrive engines – and also the inside of blaster emitter barrels. Because lantillium formed the backbone of the Terran heavy weapons industry, it was understandably a rather valuable commodity to the Terrans.

Over the eight decades since the establishment of the colony, the local population grew impressively with the help of new settlers, adding their expertise and skills to the workforce and economy. There were miners, farmers, businessmen, administrative staff and generally, just *people*. There were generations of them now, using schools, hospitals and shopping malls as if they'd always been there. Within the space of a single Human lifespan, amazingly enough, Deanna had already become home to over two million citizens of the Empire – and somewhere around thirty thousand aliens.

There were friendly alien races known to the Terrans, and many of their citizens passed through Terran space, and some stopped on Deanna – just passing through, as the saying goes – but some stayed longer than others. The largest number of non-human residents on Deanna were Jim-waians.

Jim-waians came from Jim-wa, a planet far from Deanna, and the Jim-waians who lived there were all identifiable by their unmistakable gray skin tones, even if they weren't wearing their traditional *seri-pha* (a kind of woven head-scarf). A great many of the Jim-waians who left their home world to settle elsewhere tended to be refugees of a sort. Jim-waian culture back home was very oppressive, Spartan, and fanatically religious – and those who moved off-world tended to be the sort looking to get away from all that harsh, violent, zealous interference in their personal lives – or, perhaps more aptly – to settle down where they *could* have personal lives.

Almost without exception, Jim-waians lived peacefully among Humans, tended to keep to themselves, formed little communities in the cities on Deanna, with their own little neighborhoods, and ran little corner convenience stores, tailor shops, or café's – like the *Insug'h Bahss* – a popular Jim-waian café on the corner of Lupus and Grain streets, in the lower downtown center of the capital of Deanna – where, technically, everybody was an *alien*...of one kind or another.

High above Atro City, the passenger liner *Ossifar Distana* had just entered orbit around Deanna. A huge red star on the even more ginormous white tail-fin proclaimed this gargantuan a ship of the Red Star Line, the largest and most successful star liner company in like, *ever*. The liner was one of the most luxurious of its kind *anywhere* in space, and ferried the cream of society across the void in opulence and style. Only the wealthiest could afford an apartment on this ship for a trip of any duration, even a short one around the proverbial block – in fact, even the crew was obliged to pay rent, which was deducted from their monthly salaries with the unerring precision of a pendulum slice.

On any given day, the *Ossifar Distana* carried around five thousand passengers, the actual figure varying slightly depending on where she was on the vast elliptical cruise that took her around the Terran Empire. When she'd entered the system that morning, she carried four thousand, nine hundred and eighty four passengers, five hundred crew, one dead body and one very puzzled Captain.

Captain Harald Biscay rubbed his graying temples as he stared, deep in thought, at the vast star-field on the large navigation display. The bridge of this luxury liner was usually bustling and busy whenever the ship entered a port, but today it was quiet, sullen and muted. It had been a pretty rough, worrying few days for him, in particular. Of all the things Captain Biscay had seen in his time, he didn't rate too many worthy of being remembered. Of the few examples of such items Captain Biscay rated that highly, was his uncle Jock – from the slightly insane Scottish side of his mother's family – the Petrucelli's. Pretty much anything uncle Jock did was memorable – he'd lit up a smoke inside an oxygen tent once, all innocent-like, and blew out the 53rd floor of Olympus Mons City General Hospital. The entire floor. Another time, while working for TexaCor as a mineral prospector, Harald's unusually accident-prone uncle forgot the shuttle's airlock door open – much to the brief annoyance of his late colleagues. *But*, right at the top of Harald's list – when Harald was a young man, his then rather elderly uncle would often play the bagpipes at strange hours of the night – shortly before being put away in a 'home'. Yes, *that* rated a mention, because Harald thought – or remembered it – as being rather funny. On the other hand, what he'd seen... just days ago now... *wasn't!* In fact, it was as far away from funny as...as... well, as far away as Deanna was from Earth!

On his regular scale of *Things That Went Wrong*, Harald rarely had to contend with anything more troubling than being maybe two or three minutes late at a destination, or a menu mix-up in the galley. A hefty passenger got stuck in the loo once, in suite 104 – took a couple of strong lads and a cargo strap to pull him free. No, his career working for the Red Star Line company – which he'd done pretty much all his life – had been pretty much all plain sailing, from beginning to end. Biscay had never served in the Imperial Space Fleet, nor seen anything more violent in person than a chef dropping a live crayfish into boiling water – and he'd been around the same proverbial block more times than he cared to count! *This* though, was a first for him! Something like *this* was bound to have a negative effect on business too, Harald thought, for the company anyway!

The corpse, ready for its trip to the surface, was being loaded up in shuttle bay two – kept away from the passengers in shuttle bay one, where they were boarding shuttles in an orderly fashion, for their visit to the planet below.

Captain Harald Biscay had never even seen a dead body in real – um, life before, leastways a body of any murder victim – and yet, almost magically, *there* it was. ...and it was downright mysterious!

Nothing unusual had been noted during the voyage; in fact everything had run smoothly until Security alerted Biscay about the stiff in suite 407. There were no indications of who'd committed the murder – there were no suspects – and no witnesses. Nobody'd heard or seen anything suspicious – and none of the passengers or crew were missing or acting suspiciously.

No airlock doors had been opened, or any transports allowed since their last stop four days prior either – in fact, Ossifar Distana hadn't encountered a single ship during that time! A careful examination of the passenger list revealed nothing – there were no notorious names there, nor any unsavory persons among the ranks of his crew... One thing was certain though, Biscay mused – the stiff in suite 407 hadn't offed itself!

Sumone Yiden Smiff was a businessman of note. *Was*, past tense! Through years of sweat and swearing, and amazingly smart (or incredibly lucky) deals, he'd built up a business empire that spanned the sum of known space! At 74 years, he'd stood at the apex of a career stretching half a century! Smiff wasn't famous, or ostentatious, and largely kept to himself. Smiff kept a low profile, and when he traveled on business – which was reasonably often in the earlier part of his empire-building years – he did so on the cheap, flying on loderunners and low-budget econo-liners. He often did so under assumed names, claiming to be anything from a banker to a (very) successful life insurance salesman.

Mr. Smiff had liked anonymity. In fact, he only ever made the cover of Fortune One Billion once, twenty-five years ago, and even then, he'd half-covered his face with one hand before the mammarazzi got off a shot! He'd managed successfully to avoid press and media attention, and lived reasonably comfortably without getting involved in any scandals or sinking to the level of installing golden toilets and doorknobs in the family mansion. He'd never married, although there were rumors he had a few kids scattered around space, which should keep his lawyers busy a while, Biscay thought. Smiff was wealthy, but he was also generous – and supported a list of charities as long as Biscay's right arm. According to his Chief of Security, that passenger had never broken the law in his life, at least not irreparably. Nothing about Sumone Yiden Smiff's life gave Biscay any reason to suspect the man deserved what he'd got in the end... which is why it was so surprising that he'd been found floating face down in the private spa in his suite, murdered. He *had* been murdered, unless it was a freak shaving accident – those old razors weren't called *cut-throats* for nothing! Yikes!

This was the unfortunate Mr. Smiff's first trip on the *Ossifar Distana*, and – as the man had related to him over dinner at the Captain's table on the first night of his voyage – his first real splash in life! All those years working hard and denying himself a luxury holiday, and look what it got him!

How and why a man like Smiff had met such an unpleasant end was a mystery – but one thing was clear: it had been planned and executed by someone with an obvious streak of cruelty. Theft was not considered a motive, since nothing was missing. All right, Biscay considered, nothing *seemed* to be missing. It's not as though Smiff had a manifest of his belongings or anything, alright? Nobody could tell if anything was taken because, quite simply, if it had, it was missing after the fact – and Smiff wasn't saying much. Pity. It would've been nice if he could say who killed him – sort of a retro-active solution to the murder, as it were! It wasn't even as simple as the deceased victim saying “the butler did it”... for if the butler *had*, there were a hundred butlers on the staff to see to the needs of the wealthiest passengers!

So rich a client having suffered such a messy death was an unsettling embarrassment to the company – and in turn, to Captain Harald Biscay! It was bad for business – and there was no way

around that. He'd taken all the necessary precautions right away, of course – he had the murder hushed up immediately, and his security staff was investigating the matter covertly but thoroughly. Ossifar Distana had five and a half thousand souls onboard – which meant five and a half thousand suspects! Three days, they'd been at it – and so far, not a thing. Now that they'd arrived at Deanna, the investigation would be taken further by the planetary authorities. Somehow, Biscay was of the opinion that this was going to be another contender for the *Unsolved Murders* show.

A forensic team (cunningly disguised as a cleaning crew) had arrived a few minutes before, led by a pair of detectives who introduced themselves as Birnbaum and Nirkman. The SODs were now rummaging through Smiff's stuff, examining every single particle in suite 407 and discreetly asking the crew uncomfortable questions. Biscay had a feeling – a *strong* feeling, about what they were going to find.

* * *

It was a Friday evening on Deanna. The *Ramalama*-set was spectacular, and back-lit the cityscape with a blaze of bright reds, oranges, yellows, and bronze, before settling low on the horizon into a dark, bloody red, before giving way to the comforting dark of night.

The lights on *Bottlenose Bridge* lit up, and lent the grand finale a fairytale kind of effect, as though to suggest that although the day had ended darkly – as all days do, there was still light in the world – and seemed to promise more yet to come.

In a central part of Atro City, in a penthouse atop a tall office building, a cocktail party had just started and jazz music played softly in the background. It was no coincidence that this was the tallest building in the area – taller than the Plaza by a whole five extra floors. The loftiness of the penthouse provided an excellent view of the surrounding city and the Bay, which was all laid out before Bartholomew Farrow – and all his guests – and tended to create the impression that they could just reach out and take something if they wanted it. At his 57 years, Bartholomew Farrow – the Managing Director of Mace-Polythorp Enterprises LLC – was vain and arrogant enough to think that's how it really was too! After all, the building belonged to him, and as a matter of fact, so did three of the surrounding city blocks.

For years, Farrow had ridden – nay, *surfed* the crest of his wave of success – and had been having a whale of a time doing it! When he wasn't at the office lording his success over his worker bees, he hosted exclusive private parties and went on vacations to display his wealth and power for all to see. His company held an impressive local portfolio – which included controlling interests in the mining industry, in construction, deconstruction, tech, medical, communications – pretty much anything one cared to name! Despite having everything most people would think would bring happiness, Mr. Farrow had no known friends. He was a loner, a man who didn't need people – just what they could do for him. Prevailing public opinion – which had been fueled by tabloid rags like the *Deannan Inquirer* and *Starstruck*, a glossy magazine – had it that Mr. Farrow was not a nice man at all – no matter what his company's PR department said. He had the reputation of being greedy, unscrupulous, and a cruel vicious streak ran through him like dye through wool. A number of missing local hookers lay at the root of some incendiary rumors

about the way he treated ladies of the night – and somewhere at the bottom of Hobo’s Gorge. In spite of how bad he was supposed to be, Bart had turned out quite the handsome man about town that evening – and Atro City was the town, and he was the man. He looked devilishly dashing in a tux, especially for a man his age – but then, wasn’t that what money was *for*? After all, didn’t the same tabloids that slandered him on a daily basis also claim that fifty was the new thirty?

He stood at the balcony railing, turned and smiled to his guests. He raised his glass at an attractive lady of slender athletic build, who wore a flowing, glittering black halter-neck evening gown, which appeared to have been drowned in black sequins. A black feather boa complimented her curly black hair, which had been pulled back into an up-style. Black rhinestones glittered from within the *do* as well. She wore a slender face mask which covered her nose and eyes. It was adorned black sequins and had a frill of small black feathers around it. She raised her petite wine glass to him with a dainty hand; drawing his attention to the long black velvet gloves she wore. Something inside him stripped a few gears and drooled involuntarily, but oh-so-enjoyably. He knew the names and faces of everyone at the party – including his employees – and he’d never seen *hers* before. Of course, that created a few problems of its own. It meant that she was either a gate-crasher, or a very, *very special* employee. Well, of a sort.

The mystery lady smiled a businesslike smile in reply with full dark red lips, while Farrow’s other guests milled serenely around them, chatting, drinking, and raiding the buffet snacks at the table. He smiled again and adjusted his own mask, which was covered in bright peacock feathers and made his nose itch just a little. Although somewhat unexpected, this guest made a change from the ordinary yes-men, corporate moles, back-stabbers and Judas Iscariots that usually surrounded him. The shady lady in question sidled up to him, still smiling attentively. It wasn’t often that he had a *genuine* assassin as a guest at one of his parties.

“Ms. Smith, I presume?” Mr. Farrow greeted with the warmest fake warmth he could muster.

“Indeed, Mr. Farrow.” The lady replied rather more pleasantly than he expected.

“I got your card.” He began. “In my bedroom, on my dresser. Um, I do wish you would tell me exactly how you got past my security system? Er, twice? Just so I know who to fire, you understand? In the interests of my personal security...”

As it was, the rest of Farrow’s security crew on duty tonight were for the high-jump – though they didn’t know it yet. Somehow, this very talented killer-for-hire had made it through three tiers of security checks required to gain access to his apartment, and that was no easy feat by the current standard – and not even for his employees – whose bio read-outs were all on file on the central computer.

“Secrets of the trade, Mr. Farrow.” His mystery guest replied with a naughty smile not unlike that of the Cheshire Cat. “Secrets I prefer to keep. ...In the interests of – *my* – security.”

“Ahem. No worries.” Farrow said, covering up his discomfort. “I take it everything is well in hand with your task, Ms. Smith?”

“Well in hand, Mister Farrow.”

“Don’t you even want to know why I hired you?” He mewed.

“Not really, Mister Farrow.”

Farrow smiled. The delight he felt was all over his face – well, over the bits that weren't behind a mask – delight he felt over a secret joy he'd been keeping from bubbling over inside him – one he all too rarely experienced in real life!

“You see?” He said to her. “That's exactly *it!* Everybody wants to know *why, where* and *what!* People these days can't just get the job over with! Mind their own damn bloody business! Why can't they be more like you?”

Ms. Smith – at least, for now – seemed to be paying him her full and ardent attention.

“Thank you Mr. Farrow.” The lady purred. Her eyes seemed to hold him in place like those of a well-fed cat watching a mouse scampering cheekily past it. “I'm so...very, very flattered!”

“Interfering do-gooders!” Bart Farrow continued, clearly wanting to confide in *somebody* about his plans, very badly – at least, in someone he felt would be able to appreciate matters on his level, and was unlikely to divulge them to anyone else. “I can't stand them! They don't take bribes, they don't fall for threats! Lousy liberals! What really pissed me off was preventing me from securing the deeds to a really lucrative mining site here on Deanna!”

“Ah yes,” Ms. Smith observed, sipping her champagne. “The famous lantillium deposit under the Grauffis ranch.”

“Er. Yes – how'd you know?”

“It's my business to know everything about my prey.” The shady lady teased, evading his question.

“Er, right. Well, it took my own people *years* of continuous failure, Ms. Smith. *Years!* Now, ever since – er, *you know who* entered the picture, none of my people want to go near the place!”

“As you say, Mr. Farrow.” She said with suddenly vague disinterest. “It's none of my business.”

“You know,” Farrow said, eagerly – undeterred, “I still don't know your name. Or your beautiful face!”

The beautiful face beneath the mask, which in a sense was really only another mask, smiled seductively at him.

“That's the only reason you're still breathing, Mr. Farrow.” Ms. Smith purred, making the icy and very real threat behind it sound almost like an invitation to bed. Yes, and part of Mr. Farrow would like very much to keep it that way – breathing, that is. Farrow's survival instinct began tugging furiously at his sleeve.

“You're not exactly what I expected.” He continued, straining to make conversation with what he was still trying to classify somewhat unsuccessfully as an *employee*. It didn't seem to be working, somehow, and it felt that he was doing a two-step somewhat awkwardly, in a patch of quick-sand. *Employee?* No – perhaps an equal? Farrow had never considered *anyone* an equal before! Hmm – a kindred spirit perhaps? Someone with... similar interests? Almost as though she'd been listening in on his thoughts, Ms. Smith doubted it. She leaned in closer to him, seductively he thought, but more in order to be heard more distinctly over the moderate noise on the balcony.

“Were you expecting someone taller, perhaps a blond – a waif wearing tight black latex, who would come flouncing up to you, holding a handgun with a long delicate-looking silencer

on the end, who would introduce herself by saying: ‘*Good evening, Mister Farrow – my name is Evelyn Smith and I will be your hired killer for the evening*’?”

“You are indeed a *fascinating* woman, Ms. – uh, Smith.” Farrow chuckled, utterly enchanted in the way that some people found themselves wondering what snake venom tasted like and if it went well with sherry or port. “Your name Evelyn, is it?”

Ms. maybe-Evelyn, maybe-Smith gave no reply; she just sipped her champagne further. Silence can also be an answer. Farrow, grew slightly uncomfortable and fidgety, finally realizing that although he could probably charm or buy his way into the undergarments of any woman there (and probably some of the men as well) – with *her* he stood no chance whatsoever! It came as shock to him that he might, perhaps, be completely out of his league – and out of his depth, with *her*.

Bartholomew Farrow hadn’t become a billionaire by the seat of his pants – he was far from stupid. It’s just that, like most males, he found himself more easily persuaded by ...perfection? Had he really just thought that? He cursed himself silently. “*Curiosity killed the cat!*” he was just thinking – and he realized that right now he might have been per-meowing at exactly the wrong place at exactly the wrong time! He smiled an automatic defensive smile, and surreptitiously took a short step back. This woman gave him the absolute chills. She seemed so cool, detached, calculating – almost mechanical, even. She was utterly *perfect!* What a sublime impact she could make in the business environment – a real hit!

“So tell me, how did you know *I* was your client?” He asked, genuinely intrigued. Of course, she could have replied “*How did you know I was your assassin, Mr. Farrow?*” and all too obviously, he would have been forced to admit “*Because you told me, Ms. Smith, and for no other reason.*” The truth was, other than this one face-to – er, *mask* meeting, Farrow still had nothing on her. Nothing at all!

“How sweet,” Ms. Smith thought. Corporate types – hiding behind their smoke screens and fire walls and Security and Personal Assistants, thinking they were tough and mean and forces to be reckoned with! They might leave a trail of figurative bodies a mile wide on the corporate battlefield – but to someone of *her* skills and talents – who thought and lived *outside* the box as a means of survival, it all looked rather insignificant and trivial! Besides, the trail of bodies *she* left behind was a *real* one, and it stretched halfway across the galaxy, like a bloody red spiral!

The shady lady had carefully imagined the shock of a client unexpectedly meeting the assassin he’d hired *anonymously* and thought he would never ever *see* – especially, ironically, in his own living room. The realization that she knew who they were, tended to scare the fear of all gods and numerous underworlds into even the most atheistic of her clients, and made them think *very, very* carefully about their own Human frailty. Ms. Smith, for the evening, knew only too well by then that this had the desired effect of inspiring deep thoughts about the consequences of divulging anything to anyone in Law Enforcement, or else they might just meet her *again* one day, very briefly, one last time, and just as unexpectedly.

“Good night, Mr. Farrow.” She smiled at him. “I really must be going.”

“Leaving so soon?” He asked, feigning disappointment surprisingly well, “Places to go, people to *do*, eh? *Ha ha*.”

“Ha ha. . . As you say, Mr. Farrow.”

“*Ahem*. Well, it was good of you to come.” He said, trying to recover the advantage he mistakenly believed he’d had. “Have a nice time, Ms. Smith.”

“Thank you, Mr. Farrow. I’m sure I shall.”

To Farrow, this little job looked to be turning out more of a personal pleasure for . . . Ms. Smith . . . than anything else. The shady lady smiled sweetly to herself as she made her way to the exit. It wasn’t every day after all, that she would have the pleasure of cleaning someone she’d once known.

* * *

The Slipped Disk had a reputation for being the wildest, most diverse night club on Deanna. It was located in the basement parking levels of *The Plaza*, the biggest shopping mall in Atro City, an imposing high building laid out in a triangle pattern with glass sides. Although it was a very stylish, very popular and upmarket complex, the basement was somewhat secluded – and most importantly, it had a separate entrance – so the corporation that managed the mall didn’t mind renting that part of the place to . . . what some considered less desirable elements in society.

Danielle and one of her roomies had gone out to the *Disk* for the evening. Mary-Jo was a pleasant enough girl to go out with; it was just her tendency to be a wallflower that put Danielle off a bit. Dancing was okay though, for her, and chatting to people. If she were ever to meet a nice guy – it probably wouldn’t be at the *Disk* – and it would have to stay strictly *above* the belt as far as she was concerned. And anyway, she was wise enough to know she wasn’t likely to meet a nice guy at a place like the *Disk*. That was, assuming there was indeed such a thing at all as a *nice guy*.

It was something of a stereotype that the regular clientele at *the Disk* could be – and often *was* – trouble – and sometimes more trouble than young Danielle knew she could handle. Mostly she preferred to just look and not get too close. Whenever she went out with Mary-Jo they usually ended up just sitting at the bar having drinks, eyeing the talent as it eyed them back, and didn’t *do* anything much about it. Not that Danielle would consent to a one night stand or anything – wisely, she knew that this was the quickest way for a girl like her (who wasn’t yet completely female, at least *below* the belt) to pick up trouble.

Mei’s beau, Gary, was awfully nice to her the few times they’d met. At least he treated her like a lady, even though he knew her little secret. Then again, he loved Mei – who was just like her, once. Mei seemed very happy with him. Perhaps there was still hope for her? Mary-Jo wasn’t interested in boys – but neither was she interested in Danielle, even though she accepted that Danny wasn’t a boy – she just pursued girls who had what she called “all-girl parts”. Not that Danny was interested in girls – or Mary-Jo either! They’d put that awkward moment behind them, and got on with being great girlfriends and dance buddies.

The nightclub was within walking distance of their apartment block, which was also in central Atro City – and also close enough to the University – putting it well within staggering distance! The streets were quiet, but reasonably safe, and it was warm enough for the frisky outfits they were wearing! Currently, the two miss-demeanors were walking home after a night out and a few too many *Lemon Spikes* at the bar. Mary-Jo was a very straight-laced kind of chick – aside from preferring girls – and didn't drink any alcohol either, not a drop – nothing but soft drinks the whole evening. (*Giggle!*) Which is why *she* was supporting Danielle on the walk home. *Straight-laced. Wa-ha-ha-ha.*

* * *

It was a beautiful Saturday morning, and Gary felt happy and grateful for all the good things in his life – things like, for instance, that he had a home to go to, a jeepo to get him there – and a girl waiting for him! Whenever Gary thought of Cindy-Mei he got all warm and fuzzy inside – a sure sign that he was in love! Yes, he was! He smiled at the thought. After four months together, Gary he was pretty sure she was *the one!* Right now though, he steered his thoughts as though they were connected to the wheel of the jeepo – there was the job in the San Fedora area he was going to find out about, and the road there.

Life had been pretty good lately to Gary Beck, also known – in his professional capacity as a bounty hunter – as “Beck the Badfeller”. Gary sat relaxed in his crusty old blue jeepo, behind the wheel as he drove on the open road. Atro City lay in the distance behind. He was on his way to San Fedora, a smaller neighboring city not far inland, to meet with Sheriff O'Donnell about some bounties he could pick up in his area.

Apparently San Fedora had a bit of a rustling problem. No, not things stirring in the undergrowth sort of rustling – cattle rustling...it seemed gangs of rustlers had been swiping red-horned wildebeest from the farms in the San Fedora area, and transporting them off-world to other colonies where they would sell them! According to O'Donnell, these were known repeat offenders – which meant Gary could make a *packet* if he got the whole bunch of them at the same time! The pickings were kind of slim in Atro City lately – thanks in part to his good work, and he could definitely use the money! Gary didn't like feeling like a leech around Mei – and being low on cash tended to serve as a good reminder!

Obsidian crows were one of Deanna's many diverse indigenous life-forms – and by the time Humans had first moved there, they still hadn't worked out why the chicken had crossed the road yet – so when they encountered obsidian crows... well, let's just say that chickens just sort of fell off the table at the roadside.

The big, heavy native Deannan birds tended to avoid cities, mainly because they didn't enjoy taking a roundabout route to anywhere, having to turn corners or follow a road like humans did. After all, how was a crow supposed to walk to where it was going if these silly Humans put all these buildings and roads and things in the way? Obsidian crows thought in an extremely linear fashion, and preferred to travel in a straight line – such as one might draw on a white board between points A and B, which typically symbolized where people were and where they wanted to be. Very little, if anything could deter an obsidian crow from following its

intended direct route – which frequently caused them to cross roads built by the colonists. This state of affairs was theorized to have come about because of a) *laziness* and b) obsidian crows tended to overbalance when turning corners too quickly – at least for *them* – and would sometimes fall over. At any rate, a school of thought among animal behaviorists posited that it wasn't the crows that crossed the road as much as it was the road that crossed the crow's habitat – but they tended to get ridiculed and scorned for the suggestion, so it wasn't mentioned too often.

These somewhat trivial, if not slightly annoying factoids were what occupied Gary Beck's mind for a brief moment as he rounded a curve in the road – and spotted a crow right in front of his jeepo! There wasn't enough time to react, and the vehicle's front right tire struck the plodding bulky toddler-sized creature square-on, and smashed it flat onto the gravel surface! The vehicle bounced as its left side launched over the obstruction, and in the moments that followed, Gary managed to keep control of the careening jeepo! Ice-cold, he eased it onto a clear stretch of shoulder beside the road, and cut the electric drive. In the silence, the only thing he heard was the sound of air rushing out of his punctured tire – and his mouth!

“Sssssssssshhhh...it!” He cursed.

Obsidian crows were well-known hazards to vehicular traffic on Deanna – especially out in the open spaces between Deanna's three largest cities – Atro City, San Fedora, and Fortitude, which was further north from there. In fact, some travelers often carried more than one spare tire due to the high incidence of unplanned liaisons with the creatures... and this was more or less what Gary wished he'd done! He angrily slammed the trunk lid of the jeepo shut! He'd run over the obsidian crow, and the jeepo now had a flat tire, front left! Unfortunately, it now also matched the spare wheel in the trunk!

Predictably, the hard-bodied bird-like creature struggled a few minutes to get upright, and merely shook itself off – and squawked at him, before climbing awkwardly out of the shallow crater to resume its journey.

“Yeah?” Gary shouted at it angrily. “Well, sod you too!” He picked up a small stone and threw it – it bounced off the creature's solid head at an angle with a hard, ceramic “*tonk*” sound – its only effect to make the creature squawk again and shuffle along a fraction faster.

There stood Gary Beck – Beck the Badfeller, most famous bounty hunter on Deanna – stopped dead in his tracks by no more than forgetting to check his spare tire at the start of his journey! Gary did his best to calm himself – after all, out here in the wild remaining calm often meant the difference between life and death – and sometimes more for one's own sweet self than those who got one wound up! Gary was stuck at the side of the highway, roughly seventeen kilometers outside the outskirts of Atro City as the crow flies – or rather, *walks* – and there wasn't a single vehicle in sight! In fact, he hadn't seen another car in quite a while.

Gary leaned his back against the higher side of his immobilized and slightly tilted electric vehicle, and sighed. He seriously entertained the notion that perhaps he should get a *crow bar* fitted to it after all! The things were made in San Fedora, so while he was there, he could kill two

– he broke off in mid-cliché, too infuriated at the thought of the crow to continue. Honestly, this was the *second* time this had happened to him in as many months!

Gary Beck carried a ten-mil automatic in a holster at his side. He preferred reliable old-fashioned projectile guns to blasters, and always had. There was just something more *real* about a good fire-iron in his hands than the light plasti-steel alloy casing of a blaster – no matter how cool it looked to shoot bolts of blazing plasma or lasers at bad guys! He gritted his teeth as he resisted the urge to *shoot* the *freakin'* crow with it, in the hopes that it would learn from the experience and hopefully wouldn't do it again!

“If the bullets wouldn't actually ricochet off it!” He thought.

Ramalama had moved higher in the sky already, and the day was getting on! Gary was going to be late getting to San Fedora for his meeting with the Sheriff, and no amount of cursing or shooting at obsidian crows was going to change that! He had his mobile phone with him, but – he thought, dancing around with the thing in his hands – there was no signal thereabouts either! Walking wasn't Gary's first choice – and right now all he could do was wait for a vehicle to pass by and hopefully stop to give him a hand. As a bounty hunter – even a good one with a lot of work, time was money! It seemed today that time was running out for Beck the Badfeller.

* * *

Lupini Street lay near the center of Atro City, the largest city on Deanna – and the capital of the colony. It was a broad circular road, which had several lanes across in both directions, and it surrounded a large, paved, circular public space. People sat on the benches which dotted the piazza and habitually threw food-related objects at the pigeons. In spite of the obvious, the piazza was called *Lupini Square*.

At the spot dead center of Lupini Square, a large very ornamental fountain splashed noisily yet serenely. Water foamed and sprayed into the air, and was sent cascading and splashing from various orifices and openings on the small island at the very ornamental center of it. The base of the fountain was essentially a great pool of water contained by a low concrete circular wall three feet high, and roughly a hundred meters around – and had been built long before someone in local government had had the brilliant idea of sticking the statues in the center of it. The island at the center of the fountain, where the water flowed from, featured an assortment of statues which had been added some time later. This had been done as a memorial – in honor of the founders of the colony.

A ring of five white marble columns stood at the center of the island, and held a white marble dish above them. Water splashed over the sides into the pool below, past the ring of five bronze statues that surrounded the circle of columns, looking outward at the city. The most prominent statue was a large bronze figure representing Adriano Lupini, who was the very first settler to set foot on the surface of Deanna. Lupini looked rough and tough – and bronze of course – dressed in bronze dungarees, wearing a plain bronze shirt and a worn-looking bronze hat! On his feet, instead of the more expected and ubiquitous bronze safety boots, Lupini wore bronze crocks! His bronze face displayed a bold look, and the determination believed to be

typical of the true-blue, dyed-in-the-wool Deannan settler! At the feet of Mr. Lupini's likeness, stood what looked like *crabby-grass* – or at the very least, a struggling clump of bronze pseudo-grass with little feet and lots of sharp little teeth captured in mid-snap by a very talented sculptor!

Aside from being remembered as the very first of the colonists to set foot on Deanna over eighty years before, Mr. Lupini was also credited with discovering *crabby-grass*, a menacing life-form that occurred naturally everywhere on Deanna. Crabby-grass intensely disliked being stepped on – which had the unintended consequence that Mr. Lupini also set the record for being the first person to actually *swear* on Deanna! Not surprisingly, the bronze Lupini didn't look very thrilled about it either. Unlike many of his peers, the actual Mr. Lupini still lived on Deanna – and although well-nigh on 120 years of age – still attended the Founder's Day Ceremony every year, in safety boots.

Just a few feet away from the bronze representation of Adriano Lupini, stood a life-size copy of Deanna's national bird – an obsidian crow. It was supposed to be a symbol of the early colonists' determination to stay and make a success of the colony in spite of all the hardships and setbacks, but its expression only made it look slightly constipated. It was quite a realistic sculpture – so realistic in fact, that an actual crow once almost drowned trying to reach it during mating season – and had to be sedated and relocated all the way to the other side of the planet, before it gave up trying.

Obsidian crows – although inoffensive and generally harmless creatures, tended to present something of a danger to travelers on Deanna. They frequently got run over because quite frankly, they were too damn slow to get out of the way – and anyway, they would just get up and walk off again afterwards. It was quite a feat indeed to injure a crow! Bullets and even blaster bolts just ricocheted off their hard skins and even the hardy jeepo tires would burst without causing the birds any harm! A study once conducted by the *Deannan Wildlife Appreciation & Experimental Society* based at Atro City University determined that obsidian crows experienced the harmonic frequencies of most bullets and blaster bolts as something similar to what a Human might feel being tickled lightly underfoot, with a feather!

Despite having a well-earned and enduring reputation as a road-hazard and a general obstacle to vehicular traffic, obsidian crows were regarded as completely harmless otherwise. They were flightless, mainly because they were extremely hard-bodied and far too heavy to fly – so unless one fell off a cliff or got launched from a catapult, they were pretty much grounded. *Anything* will fly if launched from a catapult, from aircraft with terrible flight characteristics, to a baby-grand – just ask the navy.

A statue of a horse stood next in line. Along with the usual cats and dogs and other farm animals, horses were one of the few domestic Earth animals to travel to the stars with Humankind. Strangely enough, when viewed directly from the front, the horse looked a little cross-eyed and seemed to be grinning... lopsidedly. A native of Deanna wouldn't find this strange at all, because a native of Deanna would almost immediately connect the dots between the horse – and the crabby-grass! Getting bitten back by its meal was a novel concept to most Terran animals, and horses on Deanna tended to be a little skittish and even became full-blown psychotic after a while.

The bronze figure of a woman held the next place in the ring of statues around the ring of pillars – not a bold, strong-jawed jeans-wearing pioneer type this time, but a dainty, dress-wearing, smiling figure that tended to evoke the image of Mary Poppins. Her name was Nicolette Andretti, and she'd been one of the better known and celebrated of the early settlers on Deanna. Although she once went by the nickname – given to her by the townspeople, when Atró City was just a collection of small, close shanty towns – “the Iron Lady” – Ms. Andretti was now almost exclusively referred to as “Naughty Nicky”. Historians had for years lauded her earlier, more official role in the early growth and development of the colony. They fondly remembered her as an innovator in the local farming industry – and then for her charity work in looking after the multitude of orphans resulting from the many accidental early deaths on the planet. Of course, it was only many years after her death, that Nicole was exposed as being Deanna's first serial killer – and while for a time, historians protested – the seventy-odd small bodies unearthed in and around the old *State Home for Orphaned Children* could not be argued away.

Although a petition had been launched to remove Naughty Nicky's statue from the memorial fountain, the Mayor at the time refused to allow it. “One doesn't remember the mistakes of the past by removing reminders of it – and our children can't learn from our collective history if we've chosen to forget it for the sake of convenience!” He explained – and Nicolette Andretti's statue remained – but was no longer honored at Founder's Day after that.

The fifth and final statue in the ring was an ornamental bronze globe that represented the planet Earth – the ancestral homeland of all the Terran settlers – a bronze sphere with all the continents marked out on it, slowly turned by the water pressure in the curved frame that made it look like an over-sized school globe. Most Deannans had been born and grew up on Deanna, and few had even seen Earth aside from in movies, documentaries, or news snippets on TV – and all the old folks being sentimental about a place they'd left behind lifetimes ago understandably made little sense to them.

Buildings of all kinds surrounded the piazza, and considering that Lupini Square was at the center of the city, the buildings there were older, stately, and invariably of an official nature. They stood close together, interrupted only by the four roads that fed into the circle that was Lupini Street, rather like gangsters standing shoulder to shoulder at a St. Valentine's Day re-enactment. The Governor's Palace looked all grand and regal, and was the official residence of the planetary governor. It was an official building from where the colony was governed, filled with offices staffed by day-workers – and the Governor lived on the top floor.

Atró City's municipal building stood beside that, a little off to one side – looking if anything a little intimidated, if that was the right word. The mayor of Atró City could usually be found there, in some meeting or another. Beside that stood a stout, serious-looking building – the Court of Justice – with its many pillars and myriad of steps (which according to urban myth) were designed to cripple lawyers! On the opposite end of the Square, on the other side of the Governor's Palace, stood *Atró City University*, a stately almost medieval-looking complex of buildings surrounded by a modest park, behind low walls and ornamental railings.

Lupini Square was the center of social life on Deanna, the heart of the city – but what made Lupini Square such a lively, vibrant place wasn't the buildings or the officialdom that surrounded it – it was the other stuff – the things not set in stone, and not held in place by railings, or nailed down by brass plaques and proclamations... it was the people bustling between the myriad of colorful small stands and shops which had been set up in old, brightly painted shipping containers that dotted the square here and there, surrounded by clusters of benches, tables and umbrellas. One of these was a coffee shop and street-café called *Albrecht's Takeaways*.

Saturday morning had started off rather nicely for Johannes Albrecht, the proprietor, who had just recently recovered from a nervous breakdown. Well, more-or-less. Albrecht had always been a little highly strung – like a violin string that had been wound up too tight, twanging and cringing for the next stroke which might be its last. The public seemed to be very fond of him, and his hot dogs and cold cats – which he claimed to make to an old family recipe (the way his *a'Mamma* showed him) – were very popular. Albrecht tended to exaggerate his quasi-Italian accent quite a bit, because he thought people liked it when he sounded “foreign”.

According to a recent survey conducted by the Deanean Tourist Office, the general public didn't care about his accent one way or the other, as long as the food was quick and the coffee was good. The survey results showed around 540 for and 120 against, with a few respondents who actually remarked “what accent?”

Albrecht offered bottomless cups of coffee – and a free doughnut with the 5th cup – but only on Tuesdays, and only if drunk while sitting down...because Albrecht knew nobody could drink that much coffee and stay seated. This clever bit of marketing was not unique in Albrecht's array of devastatingly clever schemes to squeeze as much as he could from the paying customer. He gave credit to clients, for example, *only* if the customers were over sixty, and *only* if they came to his shop accompanied by both parents and grandparents – until somebody actually *did* that! Albrecht had wriggled out of that one, by hurriedly offering a couple of local coppers two extra doughnuts each just to remove that little carnival freak-show before his customers noticed the smell!

Although he was strictly speaking, a small-timer, Albrecht had about twenty small tables surrounding his establishment, some of which were already occupied by customers that morning. His popularity with tourists and the locals alike made him rather unpopular with several other merchants around the square whose businesses tended to not quite keep up with his. Naturally, this led to some rather frisky competition, which Albrecht usually excelled in.

Cindy-Mei Winter sat at one of Albrecht's tables and casually sipped a tall mug of flavored coffee while sheltering from the bright morning *Ramalama* under a multicolored umbrella. Pigeons, the winged vermin of the galaxy, were already hungrily darting about among the tables, scavenging for crumbs and left-overs, and covered the square with their speckled blight like static on an old analog TV screen. Evidently there wasn't much *crabby-grass* in the center of town. She swiped her index finger over the DNA scanner of the small payment device Albrecht held out to her.

“Graci, thank you very much, signora!” Grinned Albrecht, laying it on thickly and tipping his Venetian gondolier style hat. Mei smiled back at him, before returning her attention to her companion as he left with his tray tucked under one arm.

“He seems to have recovered quite well.” Her companion observed. The younger girl with long dark wavy hair was Danielle Grauffis, and she was enjoying a large cool drink with ice. The liquid in her glass was green, blue, red and yellow all at the same time. It looked like a tropical bird had dissolved inside it, Mei thought. Each time Danielle moved the straw, it looked like the dying bird gave another spasm, sending swathes of color swirling round the vase-like container. Most of the locals had heard about the odd disturbance that had sent poor Albrecht on his short trip over the edge and back again, like he somehow had a bungee-cord attached that would pull him back each time. Mei giggled at the visual her imagination hit her with.

“I hear all you have to do, is ask him for two cups of Hot Stuff Blend, and then you’ll see what happens!” Mei joked. “No, *don’t!*” She protested – and giggled – as Danielle jokingly put her hand up as if to call Albrecht, who was busy serving another customer and fortunately hadn’t noticed.

Mei grinned. She was happy on Deanna – she’d started to make friends here: There was Fred, a dear friend from the planet Arboria who’d followed her here from the same ship she’d traveled on – the *Duval*. She also had Danielle, who was just turning 20 – and was fast becoming a good friend and understudy. They’d met through a series of misadventures shortly after Mei’s arrival on Deanna only about four months ago. Afterwards, Mei had decided to help her out a little. Danielle’s elder sister Jen – whom Mei was friendly with, but didn’t see as a friend exactly – had her hands full running a ranch at the outskirts of the city. There wasn’t enough money to see to Danielle’s continued education after finishing high school, so Mei very generously stepped in to sponsor her studies at the local University.

Then there was Gary, aka *Beck the Badfeller* – who was the main reason Mei stayed behind on this insane little planet instead of going right back to her family home on Mars. How had this come about – in fact, how had Mei wound up here at all – let alone, stayed here? Well, after her gender reassignment procedures back on Mars nearly a year ago now, Cindy-Mei Winter had left her old male life behind and as a reward, decided to treat herself to a nice holiday – and ended up *here* instead.

At the age of 30, Cindy-Mei Winter was one of the best field agents the CIA (Colonial Intelligence Agency) had ever thrown away. As soon as she came out to her family, friends and colleagues, she became a target for persecution, ridiculed and ostracized. Martian society was predominantly influenced by religious conservatives, and although her closest family members were among the more liberal on that colony, even they began to taste the intolerance and hatred being directed towards her. Life became so unpleasant, that she eventually had to go it alone.

Mei was forced to resign from a promising, successful job – throwing away an eleven year career – much to the satisfaction of the stuffed shirts at the Agency, who blew several gaskets on the first day she wore a dress to work! After that, she toddled off to officially become *Cindy-Mei*. Since then, she’d never looked back – and while her holiday had turned out to be nothing like

she'd expected – it had led her *here*. It wasn't as bad as all that – after all, she now found herself considering making Deanna her home! Life as her true self was like experiencing true freedom and a breath of fresh air for the first time! It was time to start *living!*

Technically Mei was still on holiday, and thanks to some smart (if not slightly unorthodox) investments she'd made while she still worked for the Agency, she was independent financially. Why should she return to Mars? Sure, she had an apartment there, bought and paid for, and a car, and her extended family... her mother too – but to be honest, her mother didn't need Mei in her life. Yes, they'd patched things up a bit before Mei left, but since the operation she hadn't heard much at all in reply to her messages, and lately, nothing at all. This left Mei in no doubt as to where she stood with her blood relatives. Home wasn't *home* anymore.

Danielle and Mei had been enjoying their Saturday morning together. There were no classes on weekends, and Danny was having a nice visit with her new friend and benefactor. For an old(er) person, Mei was a lot of fun, and besides – they had such a lot in common! Danielle was in a similar boat as Cindy-Mei when it came to “gender *disconfuckulation*”, as she called it. The appropriate medical term, she knew, was *gender dysphoria*, but what's a little humor between friends?

For Danielle, the journey had been a lot less complicated or dangerous than for Mei – something that, deep down, Mei was slightly jealous of. While Danielle had run the gauntlet of kid bullies at school, Mei had faced bigger bullies while working for the CIA, who typically worked to make life so unpleasant for her, it made suicide look like an intervention, or occasionally tried to get her killed – to the point where Agent Winter took her last few assignments alone. Danielle was one of the lucky few, Mei knew – the ones who got to be themselves earlier in life than most. She couldn't help it – she'd always just been Danielle. She could never bring herself to live with the alternative – which might have made life a lot easier for both her and her family, if being a boy offered anything she could have accepted.

Mei was familiar with Danielle's back-story. Since the death of both her parents and elder brother, Danielle and her elder sister Jen lived together on the family ranch on the outskirts of Atro City, near Skeggs Valley. The Grauffis sisters got on well together, at least. After the death of their parents, Jen had her hands full trying to run the ranch – which she did pretty much single-handedly, while her younger sibling had always been more interested in being *Danielle* than in getting her hands dirty like boys her age... It was an old, old story to Mei. Danielle's final operation was still quite a long way off, but the younger girl was every bit as pretty and feminine as any other girl in her classes at Atro City University – and not many people, if any, knew her little secret. Danny and her ex-CIA friend compared it to being under cover. In many ways it was *exactly* the same thing – especially if her cover got blown.

“So, tell me.” Mei smiled. “How're the studies going?”

Danielle shared a flat with some other students – all girls – within walking distance from the campus. They were girls who kept to themselves, and it suited her. Truthfully, Danielle really thought she was probably the wildest of the three, with her being what she was and all. Aside from that, she seemed pretty ordinary and boring – her grades were good and so were her test

scores! She was enjoying her studies, broadening her horizons and planning a future – which was a good sign. To Danielle, anthropology class was always a hoot because whenever the term *Homo-ananything* was mentioned, she would go into fits of giggles and end up almost falling out of her desk! *Homo Erectus* was her current favorite!

“Great!” Danny smiled back. “Anthropology is fun, and so is Life Sciences. Did you know that Dung Beetles on Earth roll their balls backwards? Apparently they also don’t really know where they’re going!”

Mei, who was part-way through a mouthful of coffee, narrowly avoided choking.

“Yes,” She agreed seriously. “I had a boyfriend like that once.”

“What?” Danielle grinned. “He rolled his balls backward, or he didn’t know where he was going?”

“A bit of both, I think.” Mei replied candidly.

* * *

Villainessa Tittel was a professional name, one that belonged to a hired killer, an assassin by trade. The woman it belonged to was the most fearsome hit-*ma* – er, hit-*woman* – at the top of the list of contacts on the rolodex of every crime family, mafia organization and gang between Ahghinos and Zarathustra. Unsurprisingly, that name also featured on the contact lists of at least three secretive Terran government agencies, including the CIA. Otherwise, it wasn’t heard much by ordinary folk – who perhaps only joked (or dreamed) about settling various scores with a hit-man, but lacked either the cash or the courage – or both to seek her out. At any rate, it sounded a good deal more impressive and scary than *Ms. Smith*.

Having come from a well-respected, law-abiding family (whose name certainly was *not* Tittel) this came as something as a shock to her parents. After all, they’d done their best to provide her with a life of relative comfort, and tried to instill a sense of right and wrong, and morality into her. Vil was no dummy however, so it didn’t take – and from an early age, she realized that in order to be the best at her chosen career, she would have to keep it quiet, and just make the best of all the opportunities life afforded her.

After a brief childhood – which ended shortly just after she'd done with toddling – the very serious young woman set her sights on her future career, and set about learning everything she needed to know in order to get there. This explains in part why she took the most diverse subjects school had to offer – even the elective ones. She excelled in the arts (especially the martial ones) and subjects like history (famous deaths) and biology (vivisection and the vulnerabilities of the human body). She cultivated an inordinate fascination with death, the causes of death, and the rewards that could come to the one who happened to be holding the ice pick at *exactly* the right moment.

From her early teens, Villainessa studied several martial arts, learned traditional activities like shooting, hunting, archery and bow-hunting from her uncles, and at school – fencing and chess, as well as newer sports such as paintball and lasersoft. She never made any friends as a child, that is, unless she spotted someone she thought she could learn something from. School bullies who made the mistake of trying their luck with her, had a tendency to vanish abruptly from school and just quietly resurface in hospital with broken bits and the kind of amnesia inspired by the knowledge that she could have done far worse.

Villainessa's parents – who were ordinary, mild folks – became concerned. Not that they'd failed to notice their daughter's morbid fascination with death, mass-murderers, assassins and serial killers – they had – it was just that it seemed to make her so happy... and well, she frightened them a little. They weren't the only ones who were, because the school principal called them a few times to ask some awkward questions about her home life and mental health, but after the brief chat Vil had with him in the privacy of his office, he resigned the next day and went to work for an aunt at her shoe factory.

At age eighteen, after eviscerating the best high school and extra-curricular education her parents could buy, young Vil left home and sought out the underworld. She hadn't very far to look. After just a few years, the hungry Vil met a string of successively more skilled hired killers in the employ of various criminal gangs and syndicates, and climbed the ladder voraciously. By the age of 23, she'd learned all that was possible from assassins who had (until then at least) been considered the best in the business, and eagerly moved up the rankings herself!

Even Vil herself didn't know why she'd turned to cleaning as an occupation, she just fell in love with the idea at an early age – like some kids do with the notion of becoming an astronaut or a doctor or a fairy, or Superman – except she never moved on from that like the others did. She killed because she liked it. It was the only thing that made her actually *feel* anything, like she was alive – that, and the fact that every time her score went up, so did her bank account! Part of her sometimes thought it was because she really enjoyed endings more than beginnings? Whatever! It didn't matter – and anyway, she didn't need to know a mark's entire pedigree or life story, or to have some kind of facetious moral justification just to collect her fee. Nor did she ever let pity or empathy stand in her way – not that she even understood what those vestigial words even meant!

Vil had never read much except to further her career or to research her next mark, but – unsurprisingly, whenever Vil did read – on those rare occasions when she read for pleasure – her

books were always dog-eared from the *back*. She was one of those rare individuals who never needed anyone, unless her target-sight was empty and needed filling.

Incidentally, her last name, “*Tittel*” was Latin for a very small thing, like the dot on an ‘i’ for instance – or in her case, something even smaller – her conscience. Vil had no qualms about killing and truly thought of it as her calling in life! Guilt or innocence were for the paying client to decide! Yes, Villainessa Tittel enjoyed her work – a *lot*, and getting paid for it was a plus! She loved to wear black leather outfits and stilettos. Her nails were always immaculately painted and manicured, not to mention tipped with titanium – which made them particularly deadly at close range! Although she’d mastered all sorts of weapons, her nails were her trademark – which she often laughingly thought of as ‘the final cut’!

Vil’s hair and make-up were always sublime and perfect. She was very pretty – at least in terms of the flesh that covered the bones on her face – but as most poets will tell you, beauty can be quite deceiving. The same poets who might have written about Helen of Troy as “the face that launched a thousand ships”, would probably write about *Villainessa Tittel* as the bitch that flayed all the crew, set them on fire, and sank them.

There was no reasonable explanation as to why this young woman had chosen this way of life – there was also no reasonable place to – well, to place the blame. *Assassin* wasn’t a reasonable occupation – it was right at the top of the list, with *serial killer*! Vil’s family had been mostly ordinary working-class people, and they were on the whole, respectable law-abiding citizens. They’d raised her as lovingly and morally as they could. Absent from the scenario were any causes to think that young Villainessa had been abused at Sunday school, or by relatives – Villainessa hadn’t suffered any abuse or trauma or maltreatment as a child! In fact, one of her late relatives had once described her as being “*just that fucked up of her own accord*”. Still, it just goes to show, that while some people always look for something or someone to blame for someone else turning out to be a monster, some people just are that fucked up without any external assistance.

Yes, Villainessa Tittel was cruel, heartless; ice cold, hard, tough, nasty – and every other term one might apply to describe the consummate assassin! As such, she was the worst kind; which meant that she took pride in her work, enjoyed what she did for a living – and that above all, she was *bloody good* at it!

From her shadowy vantage point, Villainessa Tittel’s cold green eyes held her next target in their icy gaze. What her target had done to incur a paid death sentence was none of her business. When she’d accepted the job, she’d sent the same anonymous response she always gave over the internet – a bank account number. Once she’d received confirmation of payment, the only details Villainessa had to work out were where, when and *how*.

Admittedly in this case, the identity of her latest mark had taken her by surprise and caused her to freeze momentarily. It was a little bit of a shock, if Villainessa Tittel could indeed be shocked. In her bloody career she’d ended many extremely diverse and varied lives – and like a bullet or a blade, Villainessa didn’t discriminate. Each of her marks were unique and vaguely

interesting people in their own amusing little way – like bacteria under glass to her – but *this* fairly blew her out of the water!

The rest of the job was straight-forward. *Where* was easy enough, it just entailed following a trail of transactions and a little routine surveillance – job done! *When* would present itself at the right moment, with a little foresight and planning... and then there was *how!* Vil smiled sweetly to herself. Now *that* always made things interesting! *Bloodless* was so dry – so ...*boring!* Vil liked leaving a nice big mess so people would notice and remember her work – *people* like the police, the clean-up crew, the coroner, the ambulance staff, the mortician, the undertakers – and probably half a dozen bystanders, camera crews and journalists as well – never mind the people who saw it on TV or the internet or the kids who saw it on the bottom of the birdcage a week later – and of course, all their friends and relatives – and *their* friends and relatives!

People – and a stellar magazine by that name – would talk about it for months afterwards, and those who attended the scene of her crime would eagerly show their friends at the pub pictures they took of her handiwork! Vil liked the free advertising the news coverage brought her – word-of-mouth advertising was always a plus and helped bring in more business! After all, her very satisfied customers were hardly inclined to brag about her work over drinks at the bar – or in court for that matter! At least, not if they knew what was good for them.

Villainessa Tittel, the shady lady, smiled in a mesmerizing cat-like fashion, and pulled back into the shadows. Now she had something *really* special to look forward to! She examined her long nails again, well pleased with herself. Oh yes – this was going to be very satisfying indeed!

* * *

The Plaza was the biggest shopping mall in the central area of Atro City, and it was a very busy place, especially on a Saturday. The mall was a hub of social life in Atro City, and consequently, of Deanna. People of all ages, many of them tourists visiting Deanna from off-world, were drawn to the close to a thousand shops within its tiered levels arranged round the triangular courtyard and the garden at its center. Among these fine stores were boutiques, café's, jewelers, tech and gadget stores, luxury goods traders, restaurants, movie theaters, and all sorts.

Somewhere on the second level, inside the flagship branch of *Halloway's*, a woman slowly walked down the household goods aisle. *Halloway's* was an up-market chain store franchise that sold everything from socks and lacy underwear and laserized can openers, to optical bathroom scales. She thought that rather amusing – after all, rather than make witty comments about your weight, the latest model of optical scale could take one look at you and scream before you stepped on it. It was guaranteed to be funny for at least the first thirty times or so. She doubted she could fit that under her dress, and moved on.

Someone else – who for the moment should remain nameless – was just thinking “*It's funny what humans will do when they think nobody's watching them.*” Behaviorists would most certainly agree with our nameless voyeur – after all, there were plenty of examples to prove the case-in-point on interweb sites like ITube, where videos of people committing the semi-conscious nose-pick while driving, or the half-aware ass-scratch while standing in the hallway

talking on a mobile phone, got double ratings. Or pocket billiards. Ahem. Or, as in this case – the fully intentional pocketing of a small portable movie player without the intention of paying for it!

It was apparent that the shoplifter thought she was alone in the aisle – when in fact, she *wasn't*. As the fairly nondescript and ordinary-looking woman rounded the end of the shelf at the bottom of the aisle, she brushed past a two meter high pot plant with thick fleshy green leaves and headed for the exit beside the check-out points. Suddenly, the shoplifter tripped and fell headlong onto the floor, spread-eagled. The small, boxed movie player she'd tucked under her shirt had slipped out and skittered a short distance away. She groaned, embarrassed, and quickly turned over – and discovered a vine wrapped tightly around her ankle. “*Now, how did that happen?*” She wondered, puzzled – hoping the store security hadn't been attracted by the sound of her fall! How had the plant fallen over like that? Had she walked too close to it? Was it a creeper? Creepers didn't grow *that* fast, did they? She tugged at it frantically – and realized in frustration that it wasn't letting go.

“Er...” She called out uncertainly. “Little help please?”

“Special Branch!” Said a husky masculine voice, from extremely close by. A branch that seemed to move on its own produced a shiny security badge from under some leaves, and stuck it under her nose. As it began to dawn on the shoplifter that it was the plant itself that was doing this – and speaking – her eyes slowly widened and her face became a mask of terror! The plant creature wiggled some other leaves that might have been eyebrows – if plants could have eyebrows – at her, and somehow gave her the impression that it was grinning as well!

“Who's been a naughty girl, then?” The alien teased, just as a couple of uniformed mall security guards arrived to take her into custody, and released the woman's ankle.

“Attaboy, Fred!” One of the guards had turned to grin at him proudly, “Well done!” – and winced as the shoplifter began to scream loudly and repetitively. “Oh, gods!”

“Shut up!” Said the second guard, reaching down to grab hold of the hysterical shoplifter who was screaming, her wide eyes fixed on the plant.

“No worries,” Said the plant-creature, and gave its colleagues a mock-salute with a tentacle-like branch. Her screams were still audible until well after the other security men had cuffed her and dragged her out of sight, to the mall security office.

What was this strange sentient, mobile plant? Where had it come from? Well, for starters, it came from the planet Arboria, which was known for being the only planet where the forests migrated with every seasonal change – and secondly, this individual was called Fred. Arborians came in all shapes and sizes, usually potted, and used two or more lower branches to move around, usually in a way that would cause jaws to go slack and lamp posts to be walked into by lesser beings.

The shopping mall had been Fred's current home, sort of – for a while now, in exchange for helping the mall security staff to keep an eye on things. The rest of the time, Fred parked his pot over at Cindy-Mei's place – in the lounge, close to the balcony door. The pay wasn't too bad, not that Fred really cared too much for currency – after all, what could he buy with it that he really needed? Air was free, and he could get water easily enough. Experience and knowledge – and

intelligent conversation – that which Fred craved more than anything, came free – or at least, cheaply.

Satisfied with another job well done, Fred adjusted his pot proudly as a man might adjust his belt. Fred's pot was fairly plain as pots went, but his bore an unusual new addition – a shiny medal had been riveted to one side, because – well, he had nothing to *pin* it to. The medal was the Solus Gratuiti Award, which (aside from commuting a death sentence) was the highest honor that the Terran Empire could bestow on anyone. Like most Arborians, Fred didn't place terribly much value on such material things – a simple "Thank you" would've sufficed, but the circumstances under which he received it had rather amused him, so he'd kept it. How Fred had got that, and very legitimately, was another story altogether – "Black Sunrise" if you really must know).

* * *

The day had worn on until it had been quite a busy Saturday morning at the office for Sheriff Peggy-Ann Muller, who was still trying to catch up on paperwork. It was nearly midday and it was just about time for her to head home and enjoy the rest of her weekend. Down-time was a rarity in her line of work, and as Sheriff, she was permanently on-call for any of the SODding Deputies or detectives who needed to contact her urgently at all hours of the day or night! It was exhausting and taxing! Peg leaned back in her chair for a moment and sighed, thinking of simpler days, before getting up to pour herself another coffee.

Among other things on her recently very busy itinerary, there was the latest of many frequent meetings at the Mayor's Office. Although these meetings only took about an hour, they were still long enough to spoil her Saturday... but she supposed, she had to be party to the planning for the coming Royal Visit. Peg wasn't a royalist at all – in fact, if there was one thing she was not, it was be like those people who cultivated a fascination with kings, queens, princes and princesses – and an inordinate number of dukes, duchesses, counts and countesses and whatever else carried a fancy title and did almost nothing in proportion to the amount of fame, wealth and adoration they received!

At the first planning meeting the previous week, all the local role players had received free copies of "*Majesty!*" – a dreadful glossy magazine that catered for royal fans... and collectors of kitsch coronation mugs, tea sets and commemorative jubilee trinkets. Her copy lay under one foot of her office desk, to balance it out – which pretty much summed up her views on the topic!

A parade would be held to welcome a still to be announced visiting member of the Imperial household to Atro City. Aside from the security aspects dictated by her job and sense of professional pride, Peg honestly didn't give a crap about some visiting royal dignitary! The same blood flowed in her veins as inside any of them, she knew – and although the Imperial family didn't usually go about foisting their pointy noses over everyone, their noses were still pointy – and they were still regarded by those who ran Human society as somehow being more valuable or more important than anyone else! She couldn't wait for that little fiasco to be over with!

Peg killed her coffee, and then opened her desk drawer and rummaged inside. That box of headache pills was in there somewhere. She frowned. It seemed to be hiding.

The irony – and annoyance – to Peg was that the visit was only due to take place in the next three to six months – with the *actual* date for the parade likely to be confirmed only about a week before the time! As a result, special additional meetings were being held regularly, aside from the other usual meetings with various committees to address public health and safety issues, Atro City council meetings, and other things that made her reach for stronger coffee.

Peg went over the last of the morning's reports on her desktop terminal. A visiting star-liner had reported an incident just after arriving in Deanna orbit several hours before. Apparently, someone aboard the Ossifar Distana had made a bit of a mess of one of their illustrious passengers! No crew or passengers were missing from the ship – all were accounted for, and there was no sign of any clue as to who dunnit. It seemed to Peg, that a perplexing little mystery lay in wait for the right eager-beaver detective to solve – and fortunately for Peg, she wasn't going to get involved in the "case of the mysterious death" which the Captain of said star-liner had reported to her on the blower *sotto voce* that morning – that's right, the one he wanted kept quiet, like. She'd assigned the case to two of her detectives, Inga Birnbaum and Floyd Nirkman – the SOD's own answer to Laurel and Hardy – which should serve the corporate, toffee-nosed elite right! Meanwhile, the crew and passengers of the Ossifar Distana remained at Deanna – and gods only knew what lay in store for them!

* * *

Saturday afternoon passed quietly and peaceably as usual, and then it was Saturday night. The streets of Atro City began to light up as they usually did just before dusk. Streetlights lit up the streets, and more festive, colorful decorative lights on the lamp-posts all over Lupini Square blinked on. Bottleneck Bridge glowed brightly on the horizon, under the weight of thousands of tiny fairy lights, and looked like something out of a fairytale, or a romance – or even a horror – give or take a little mist and a foghorn.

The Slipped Disk, or "*the Disk*" as its regulars called it, was situated in the basement parking level of *The Plaza* mall. It was a nightclub – more or less. That is to say, it was open twenty-four hours a day, and since there was no daylight down there, it was pretty much night all the time anyway. It had a small kitchen that served light meals during the day, offering visitors a somewhat limited diner style menu. The rest of the time however, it was very much a nightclub – one that catered to the diverse nature of Deanna's society. The only entry requirements were that visitors paid their dues, and didn't take issue with anyone else embracing their own diversity – or that of anyone else – inside the place. The "RIGHT OF ADMISSION RESERVED" sign above the door – and the hefty bouncer parked on a stool beside it – were there to ensure compliance with these two simple provisos.

Danielle Grauffis and her room-mate Mary-Jo were at the disk again, partying. There were plenty of friendly people to rub elbows with inside. Music played quite loudly at the dance floor, which was full of dancing, grooving figures illuminated by bright pulsing lights, lasers and UV flashes that made everything white glow in a thrilling supernatural fashion. Danny managed her

time responsibly enough – she had classes every day between Monday and Friday, and she treated Sunday through Thursday nights like school nights. Friday nights and Saturday were play time! As always, the bar counter – which was near the entrance – was surrounded by patrons three deep, collecting drinks from the bar. A rainbow flag hung on one wall, and in the center of the bar counter, a hollow plastic male torso, lit up from inside, stood covered in glitter. A pink feather boa had been draped round its neck, and it wore a lumo-green cowboy hat with a holographic blue band on its head.

Mary-Jo arrived back at the small table they'd secured for themselves, carrying two shooter glasses in one hand, and two *Lemon Spike* bottles in the other. She smiled at Danny as she plonked one of each down in front of Danielle.

“Thanks!” Danny smiled.

“Next round's yours!” Mary-Jo said over the music, and held up her shooter glass. Danny brought hers up to meet Mary-Jo's, and the two downed the swirl of green fluid together. Ah yes, tonight was going to be *fun!*

* * *

It was a sunny mid-Sunday afternoon on the main highway between Atro City and San Fedora – a small city about fifty kilometers away on the other side of Skeggs Valley. For Max O'Donnell, the weekend had been passing relatively uneventfully up to the point where he got a call just an hour ago from a very apologetic deputy at the office in San Fedora. – and O'Donnell's wife had put the Sunday roast on hold till he got back home after attending to SOD business.

Maxwell Sullivan O'Donnell was of genuine Irish-American descent, with maybe a little Cherokee thrown in – and was actually *from* Earth. He'd arrived on Deanna as an over-eager Colonial Deputy with a head full of dreams and a wallet full of zilch – twelve years later, he was the Sheriff of San Fedora and a man rich, if not in financial terms, then most definitely in law enforcement experience. Over the years, Maxwell had dealt with murders, robberies, hi-jackings and virtually all other varied crimes that had plagued Humankind at home before also following the species into deep space.

Max O'Donnell had built up extensive experience with numerous auto accidents and obsidian crow-related mishaps on the roads under his jurisdiction – and as could be deduced from the direction this narrative was taking, he was no newbie when it came to death.

As he pulled up to the crime scene in his private SUV, he saw the Sheriff's Office Department vehicle (with S.O.D. on the doors in big black letters) parked beside a pale blue, slightly shabby-looking jeepo. The lights on the roof of the black and white were still going round slowly, alternately flashing red and blue. Deputy Okuda was just wrapping up some scans and measurements he'd been taking with a hand-held crime-scene scanning device.

“So, what we got, Dave?” The Sheriff asked, shutting the door of his shiny red SUV. Deputy Okuda approached, the scanner still in his hands, and indicated over his shoulder with his free hand casually.

“Seems he hit a crow, about thirty meters back – the crater’s marked. Jeepo’s tire burst *there*,” He said, pointing, “...the vehicle veered slightly, and skidded up to *here*.”

O’Donnell eyed the small crater. True enough, it was marked all right – a little transponder beacon was sticking out of it. The skid marks in the dirt ran right up to the back of the jeepo where it stood, facing the way it had been going. It was leaning slightly to the left side because of the flat tire. The jeepo’s hazard lights were still flashing.

“So,” O’Donnell asked, eyeing the visible scramble marks at the edge of the crater and scraping at the little claw prints in the dust with his boot. “Who’s the body?”

“Some guy. No identification on him. Vehicle registration reads Atro City, belongs to someone called Gary Beck. Looks like it’s been here since yesterday.”

“*Gary Beck*?” O’Donnell repeated, recognizing the name. “Beck the Badfeller, Gary Beck?”

“Just ‘*Gary Beck*’, Sheriff – that’s what the database says, Sheriff.” Okuda said, reassuring the Boss as he turned and went toward the jeepo. I’ve no idea what aliases he might’ve had – was he a known felon?”

“Felon?” O’Donnell said, shocked. “How long have you lived on Deanna, Dave?”

“Four years now, Sheriff – why?”

“Four years, and you’ve never heard of Beck the Badfeller?” O’Donnell asked his deputy sarcastically.

“Nope.” Okuda shrugged. “Should I have?”

“He’s only the best bounty hunter and friend to law enforcement on the planet!” O’Donnell informed his junior, adding “*You putz!*”

“Yes Sheriff.” Okuda nodded as they drew alongside the jeepo. “Er – it’s awful messy inside, Sheriff!” He warned.

A ten-mil automatic lay on the gravel beside the front wheel. Its slide was locked open – somebody’d fired till they ran out of ammo! There were no casings because everybody used caseless cartridges these days – everybody that didn’t use blasters, that is. O’Donnell leaned through the open window in the door. True enough, it was messy inside alright! Something nasty had happened inside the jeepo... something *very* nasty! Flies were buzzing loudly around inside. A body lay inside; slumped forward, lying partly over both front seats. It was covered in blood and guts – it looked like its own blood and guts, and ...and – *stuff* ...he’d never even seen on the outside of a human being before! ...To say nothing of the smell! The wounds looked like something caused by – *claws* of some kind. O’Donnell gasped, then stepped back, looking slightly pale. He leaned on the jeepo for support, eyes wide.

As O’Donnell took a deep breath, the deathly silence around them was broken by another jeepo roaring past on the highway at the head of a dust cloud, heading in the direction of Atro City. O’Donnell removed his hat and mopped the sweat off his brow with a hanky. Okuda resisted the urge to say “*I told you so*”. He’d said it to himself in the bushes some way off on arriving at the scene. Twice.

“That’s him all right.” O’Donnell said sadly. “Beck! I spoke to him on the phone yesterday morning! He was supposed to meet me at the office – never showed up. Last I heard, he called in to say he would be late – he had car trouble.” He paused to wipe again before adding, “Didn’t think he would be *this* late, though. Or this kinda car trouble. Any leads?”

“There’s a set of tracks that come awful close to the jeepo.” Said Okuda, gesturing with the scanner. “It stopped over *there*. Wheelbase measurements and track scans say it’s a Targa 800 series.”

“Who called it in?”

“Uh – a Mr. and Mrs. Martin. They own a farm somewhere in the valley – I have their details... They were on the way to church this morning – the Reformed Puritan one in Dingle Street, Lugaluru. They didn’t stop, they just called it in.”

“Y’ don’t say?” O’Donnell commented, still distracted. “What car do they drive?”

Intuitively, Okuda shook his head. “A Vax 427.” He replied. “It’s an old one, a kind of ute – and they said they didn’t stop.”

“Did they see anything?”

“Just a jeepo that looked abandoned at the side of the road, no visible occupants. I was on patrol when dispatch called. This is what I found.”

“Fibers, DNA, prints?”

“Nothing fresh.” Okuda said. “Except just the vic’s.”

Ramalama beat down on the hilly plains of rural Deanna. Sheriff O’Donnell wiped his face again with his hanky and put his hat back on. The badge on the front proudly proclaimed him to be a S.O.D. – but he was a good cop, an upholder of the Law – a good guy. It pained him to see the end of a man like Gary Beck – a bounty hunter who was rumored to be so good at his job; he could find the missing day in a leap year! And now *Beck the Badfeller* was dead and only one thing was certain... Finding the cause of death on *this* one was going to be a real bitch!

* * *

It was ten thirty Monday morning and Peggy-Ann Muller – sitting alone behind her desk in the Atro City Sheriff’s Office, was not feeling at all well. Not that she’d had a rough weekend or anything like that – the weekend had been a nice quiet one spent at home with her washing, her music collection and her two cats, Ginger and Fucket. It had been one of those rare weekends where none of her deputies had called her, and she’d walked into the office that morning mistakenly believing that it might be a very nice Monday after all. That was so five minutes ago... She’d just opened an email from a colleague in San Fedora. As could be expected, it was bad news. Very bad news. No, it was worse.

She’d known Gary Beck for – well, for *years*... How long had she been with the SOD’s? She tried to do a little mental arithmetic, but under the strain of emotions, she just flat-out failed. Well, it’d been since *then*... and they were friends! More? Well, something had almost happened between them on one occasion – which, on reflection, she had often thought, was tantamount to *nothing* happening on many occasions... But they were friends in the end. “The end!” She thought, clutching at her chest as her heart literally stumbled and skipped a few beats.

Gary was... She couldn't bring herself to actually *say* it! *To put it in words, even inside her head...* It was too much! She'd always worried a little about him going out on his own, collaring criminals and the scum of Deannan society by himself. But he *always made it... he always came back.* Till now.

Being a bounty hunter was a risky job – everybody knew that, and no-one better than Gary. Still, it was bound to get him killed sooner or later. *Gary's de...* A tear slowly rolled down Peg's cheek. She was more his agent sometimes than his friend, she realized, but they were still good friends... They would sometimes meet for drinks at the '*Shock Diamond*' after work, usually in company with other off-duty SODs, and talk about the day they had. At least they used to, up until he met *her*.

Cindy-Mei Winter had changed something in him. They always did say the love of a good woman could change a man, but she'd never actually seen it happen before... And Gary was that. A good man. ...And a friend. *And he was...* a good man. So, despite their differences, Cindy-Mei must be a good woman after all, she thought. She'd lost her friend and Mei had lost a lover. *No – more than that,* she realized. '*Lover*' was such a cheap, dime-store romance way of describing something far more precious... Peg recalled the way Gary's face lit up whenever he talked about Mei. Gary really loved her and seemed to be so proud of her – told her how happy she made him – and dreamed of really getting a life together. At least, that was the theory. Well, none of that was going to happen, now.

Peg was not the kind of girl who would just sit down and cry. She was the tough '*chicks-kick-ass*' kind of girl who wouldn't take a beating lying down... but how did one stand up to Death? Losing friends hurt like hell! Especially in such a way... Like *that!* The crime-scene pictures O'Donnell had emailed her were... *horrible* – even to a hardened cop like her. Especially when the person who sent them didn't realize you knew the person in the pictures personally!

Wiping her eyes, Peg got up and reached for her cap. She put it on and pulled the peak down low to hide her eyes. Somebody would have to tell Gary's next of kin – which at the moment would be Mei. Gary had met Mei right there, in *her* office not so long ago – and Peg had always held that against him. Not like a grudge, but just a small nit to pick at him about. "*Why in my office? My office! Get your own office!*" She always ragged him. Peg still had a picture of the two of them together – it stood on the corner of her desk. Well, *they* were in it, but so was practically her whole team of deputies. It was one of the nights they all went bowling together. Big John had got his fingers stuck in a bowling ball and they had to use cooking grease from the bowling alley diner to get it off! She chuckled, blinking back the tears again. Gary was good with things like that – always handy to have around in a pinch! She wiped her eyes again, so no one would see she'd been crying, and walked through the rows of desks in the outer office. A blurry, vague-looking deputy brushed past, carrying evidence bags.

"Hi, Sheriff." He muttered.

"Hi." She answered vacantly, numbly making the agonizing trip past the counter and out through the front door. The fresh air outside was welcome. She inhaled deeply to fill her lungs with it, all the time acutely conscious that it was something *he* couldn't do anymore.

* * *

Cindy-Mei Winter had been settling in for a quiet day waiting for Gary at her apartment, when Peg arrived instead. The two women were not exactly on speaking terms. There was no friction between them exactly, but there was just that *'three's a crowd'* feeling where she and Gary were concerned. Mei knew Gary had once had feelings for Peggy-Ann, and it always made them feel a little uncomfortable around each other. All that seemed irrelevant now, as Cindy-Mei sat shaking with grief on the couch in her lounge. Bright daylight was filtering through the large picture windows that presented a beautiful vista of the city and the Bay.

Peggy-Ann had broken it to her as gently as was possible under any circumstances – but the news hit Cindy-Mei like a hammer blow nonetheless. There could be no worse news. Now they sat together in silence, just holding each other awkwardly. There were no words for either of them. Peg hadn't heard sounds of grief like that since her gran died when she was sixteen and her mom collapsed in the bedroom. It was heart-rending.

To their credit, the SODs were professional and discreet – even in San Fedora. At least Mei had learned of Gary's death from *her*, Peg thought, and not being blared over DNN on the TV, or the local radio stations... or on the front page of the Deannan Inquirer! It was common practice to keep back the names and particulars of incidents like that until next of kin could be informed via due process. Peg found herself regretting having to add to the weight behind the punch that had brought Cindy-Mei Winter down that hard...by telling her that her partner had been dead since at least mid-day Saturday. For almost two days, Mei – and Peg – had both gone on with life as usual, without even realizing that someone they both cared about lay dead in a city morgue!

“Well, now I know why he wasn't replying to any of my messages.” Mei managed to get out, and mopped her eyes with a tissue Peg had fetched from the bathroom for her. Peg had learned from Gary that Mei had been male once, but that was out of her mind now as she tried to comfort her – as they tried to comfort each other. It wasn't working, really. When Mei asked her how it happened, Peg told her all she knew – which, admittedly, wasn't much. It didn't help Mei any, it just set her off crying again. Peg hadn't brought up the pictures – she wasn't overly fond of Mei, but she would spare her *that*. She felt she owed Gary that much.

“Did Gary have any family?” Peg asked, almost ashamed to admit that she'd known Gary longer than Mei – and had no idea about his family background.

Mei shook her head.

“His mother died when he was young, and his dad just before he moved here.” Mei told her. “I think he might still have a few cousins on Gorda – his dad worked there, as a lumberjack, you know.”

“I didn't, actually.” Peg admitted, stifling a jealousy impulse. “He never got around to mentioning it – along with why he was called *'Beck the Badfeller'*.”

Mei actually smiled.

“That's because,” She explained, “one day – he was still a kid – Gary borrowed his dad's chainsaw, to impress him – and his dad's boss, and cut down a tree – and it landed right on his dad's boss's car... while he was inside it!”

“I don’t get it.” Said Peg honestly.

“Cutting down a tree is called *felling*.” Said Mei. A little light went on in Peg’s gray, unhappy mind, and she laughed.

“Okay – bad *feller!*” Peg smiled at her. “...Right...*gods!*”

“He never told you that?”

“I guess he never found the time.” Peg said dismissively. It didn’t really matter now anymore. The faint smile that had played on Mei’s lips faded away again, and she seemed to be fighting gravity.

“I want to see...” Mei said. “I want to see him.”

“You sure about that?” Peg asked, knowing it would probably just make things even worse for her. Mei nodded. *Then again*, Peg thought – Mei had been in the CIA. A morgue wouldn’t be a really unfamiliar place to her, would it? Still, nobody wanted to see a loved one lying on *that* table – relatives one wasn’t too fond of probably weren’t too hard to process – but not a *loved* one. That’s what made people *Human*. In that way, they were all vulnerable.

“It’s almost lunch time now.” Peg said eventually. “And it’s a long trip at short notice. We’d better go then.”

“Thank you, Sheriff.” Mei said through her tears.

“Peg.” Said Peg. “*Sheriff* is for the suits.”

It was over an hour’s drive by road to San Fedora. It was a long, dusty trek, and there would be the visit to the morgue, and then more emo time to deal with the trauma – and then the trip back to Atro City again, and they’d probably get back by early evening. Oh yes, it was a Monday alright.

As a male, Agent Winter had been in control of her emotions, at least to the world. She tried to hide behind the face she put on, sheltering behind the mask of *Agent Winter, CIA*. But it wasn’t working out – she wasn’t that person anymore. Hormones change your mind too. That, and the personal growth she had experienced since – and Mei was not as in control as she used to be *then* either. Mei turned her head toward the door hoping that Peg wouldn’t see the tears streaming down her cheeks as they rode on in silence.

How could this be? Her love was gone! Her joy had been ripped away from her, and her heart was breaking! She was sure she could feel it crumbling inside her! It was the most painful thing she had ever known – which for Cindy-Mei Winter, was saying an awful lot!

The scenery flashed past in a long wet blur as they drove past the low hills with their typical scrubby vegetation. Clumps of pale green grass and *crabby-grass* adorned the landscape. The only way to tell the difference was to step on it – or, as most imported Terran livestock found out eventually, to *eat* it. Or *try* to. This crazy little place had only just begun to feel like...*home*. A very pale ghost of a smile flashed briefly across her face.

“What is it?” Peg asked.

“I’m *pathetic*.” Mei said, keeping her gaze on the scenery as it flashed past the window in the door.

“No, you’re not!” Peg replied firmly. “The only reason *I’m* not crying is because then we’d both forget to watch the road – and ...what good would that do?”

They looked at each other, and chuckled a bit. Peg reached out and took Mei’s hand in hers, clenching it tightly before focusing back on driving.

“I never knew you were such a nice person, Peggy-Ann.” Mei said afterwards. ”I can see why Gary liked you so much.”

“Right back at you, hun.” Peg smiled back. “And it’s Peg, please – nobody calls me Peggy-Ann, except my mother!”

“They think a crow did it?”

“Seems that way.” Peg returned grimly. “Never heard of an obsidian crow actually turning vicious before. Or climbing into a jeepo – or hell, ever clawing anyone to death before!”

Neither had Mei in her short stay on the planet. Obsidian crows were not regarded as dangerous, except when the slow plodding creatures were crossing roads – and while they might occasionally snap at or claw someone in self-defense, they weren’t known for climbing into vehicles, or for seriously injuring humans! Anyone pushing the theory that a crow killed Gary was *really* saying that one and one was three – and if an obsidian crow could drive a sports car, maybe they could be right.

What seemed a long while later, the pair arrived in San Fedora. It was smaller than Atro City, roughly half the size. San Fedora was an industrial center that was fast developing. There were several factories, mostly automotive and related industries – and of course, the hat factory where most of the hats on Deanna were made. *Gary was so fond of his hat*, they both thought at the same time. The Jeepo factory was here somewhere too – right next to the Crow Bar factory, and the tannery that processed Red-horned wildebeest hides into leather products. The Crow Bar factory had a stylized obsidian crow as a logo on a big billboard just inside the fence beside the road. There were no prizes for guessing why they were called crow bars.

The last stretch to the San Fedora Public Health Clinic was agonizing for them both – as was the slow walk inside the building, and then to the mortuary. There was a separate entrance for that, right at the back – a quiet isolated piece of Purgatory in the here and now. The mortician on duty that day was a gray old man in a white lab coat. Like most morticians on Deanna – or perhaps everywhere, he was a retired doctor who probably just needed the extra money, or who probably couldn’t sleep at night. Whatever his reasons for pursuing such a morbid career, he blended perfectly into the white walls and brightly lit rooms. Peg shuddered to think what might cause somebody to *want* to work in such a place! By the look on the old man’s face he was probably thinking the exact same thing! He looked up as they entered, and seeing Peg’s uniform, just motioned them inside the viewing room. She couldn’t even begin to imagine the kind of person who would *want* to work here! Pumping gas or painting road traffic signs seemed healthier. Meeting people she knew as customers at a gas station was far less likely to give her nightmares than meeting them on a slab in the morgue as an employee! ...But then, she was about to meet someone she knew under those very circumstances!

Mei made herself hard inside to keep her composure while looking at the body, steeling herself with every step that took her closer to it, like the slow, dream-like, numb steps in a nightmare!

The steel mortuary table made a cold, hard bed for her Gary. His body lay upon it, torn and broken and bloodied – covered up to his neck under a white plastic sheet, which stuck to the raw red places. Gary was naked under the sheet, pale ...and so very still. His eyes were closed. They'd made an effort to clean him up a little for the viewing. It hadn't really made any difference.

Peg gave Mei's shoulder a squeeze, and left her alone with him, out of kindness and respect. Despite all her efforts, at the sight of him, tears welled up in Mei's eyes again! His lips, so warm and soft, were cold, hard and blue. His skin white and pale... Alongside the disbelief, grief and shock at the sight of him, there rose in Mei a dull, powerful force... Anger! Rage!

"How did this happen?" She thought fiercely, her mind racing. "How *could* this happen? Why? *Why?*"

Mei reached out with one hand, gingerly pulling the sheet back further until she saw the damage in its full horror! Slowly, she reached out, with trembling hands – and ran her fingers gingerly over the wounds, the cuts, the scratches, the bruising, the holes – *oh*, the gaping *rawness* of them! Glassy-eyed, her breathing suspended, Mei moved as if she was afraid of hurting him even more... There was something about the cuts, the tears, the bruising, the puncture wounds – the definition, the bloodiness – the *cruelty!* Her trembling fingers unexpectedly found patterns in the bestial collage of carnage... Familiar patterns!

"*Hands!*" Mei thought, her lips parting slightly at the shock of it "*Hands did this!*"

In a moment, Mei realized her fists were clenched white and her palms were on fire where she'd cut them with her own medium-length nails! She watched the slow gathering of blood in the small nicks in her palms until it began to pool, and gently touched them to one of his many wounds. It felt symbolic to her in a way. *Her blood in his, his blood in hers! One, forever!* Then, slowly, she took the sheet and covered him up to the neck again. She caressed his battered face, leaned low over him and placed a gentle kiss on his cold blue lips. A tear splashed as it landed on his cheek.

"*I'll never forget you.*" She said in a broken, choked-up and shaky voice. "*And I'll never stop loving you.*"

Peg entered again and slowly approached from behind, her safety shoes clicking on the marble floor. Mei straightened herself and tried to regain her composure. Peg stood close by and put a hand on her shoulder.

"What is it?" She asked, seeing the cold hard expression in Mei's normally gentle hazel eyes.

"Hands!" She said quietly. "*Not claws!*"

"I'm sorry?"

Mei lifted part of the sheet again, and demonstrated for her, placing her shaking fingers over the wounds.

“Yes.” Peg numbly nodded in agreement. Crow’s feet were smaller and the claws had different proportions to Human hands – and the wounds. The revelation left her cold. “I see!”

“*Hands did this!*” Mei said darkly, “Hands! ...*And I know whose!*”

“You do?” Peg echoed. “Whose?”

“Later.” Mei said in a faraway voice, wiping away her tears. “Tell you later. Need to think.”

END OF PREVIEW

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Thank you for reading my book! If you enjoyed it, won’t you please take a moment to leave me a review at your favorite retailer? I also welcome your thoughts about my book, and you may send these to me at christinaengela@gmail.com

Thanks!

Christina Engela

About the Author



Christina might not be the only writer – or even the only sci-fi writer from South Africa, but she is most certainly the most authentic, eccentric and unique sci-fi/fantasy/horror writer to originate from that country! She now has more than 20 published titles to her name – including a ‘how-to’ book about VW Beetles, a children’s book about bullying, and numerous fiction titles. If you would like to read more about Christina’s life and experiences, please visit <https://christinaengela.com> or <http://christinaengela.net> for more information.

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