

CHAPTER 1: TITAN STATION LENNIER, 2148

When his cabin's warning screen showed the ore transport three clicks out, Chief Engineer Randolph Borgus took off on the run. His apprentice assigned to docking duty, Allen Jarvis, had not responded to his page.

Borgus boarded the lift to bay level. His right leg went rubbery, as it had begun doing lately. Daniel Cowen, the younger man with him, reached for Borgus's elbow.

“Teach, you OK?”

“Just an old man getting weak in the knees with that hulk coming in, and Jarvis off who-knows-where.” Even at slow speed, an eighty-ton transport approaching a space station port packs one helluva wallop. For over twenty-five years Borgus had grilled his apprentice brood on how easily what appears routine can turn disastrous.

The car descended two flights and opened. Borgus shook feeling back into his leg and trotted ahead of Daniel into Bay Six. The docking enclosure stood three stories high, shaped in a horseshoe ring with two concentric portals in the flat entry wall. The immediate glitch was that the Station Commander's shuttle took up half the floor space. Why Jarvis had allowed the transport to approach an occupied bay was something the fool would answer for.

Borgus spotted the wiry technician with his girlie ponytail, pacing before the craft and shouting into his headset: “C’mon, I have a transport coming in. Why was this shuttle not logged? Yes, ask the Commander!”

Borgus reached Jarvis with his own demand: “Is that Schor’s personal staff you’re bothering?”

“Retro down, Borgus. I got it in hand. My new chief is on the incoming and knows I’m working this.” Jarvis referred to the associate engineering director, slotted to replace the retiring Borgus in two weeks. “So that’s why I had to ignore your page—no disrespect.”

Borgus whipped the headset from Jarvis’s head and jabbed a finger into his chest, sending him a step backward.

“You’ll respond to my pages on the instant. I’m still in the saddle here.”

Borgus gave the dock prep over to Daniel, while Jarvis ranted his objections. His response was to tear further into Jarvis about why he had a junior apprentice named Warren repairing the shuttle’s forward strut at such a time. As Jarvis made a feeble excuse about finding a broken interior strut brace, worse news came.

“Borgus!” Daniel cried. “Our scan shows the transport at three hundred meters and still coming.”

Borgus whipped around on Jarvis. “I thought you called to stop them!”

Jarvis’s eyes went wide. “I did. I *swear* I did.”

“Did you wait for a confirm?”

“How can I when you swiped my headset?” Borgus saw him lunge for the headset that Daniel held to his ear. Daniel pulled away, but Jarvis caught his arm. They spun and toppled over. Jarvis had snapped.

Although Daniel had a good forty pounds on Jarvis, the wild apprentice was on top, demanding the headset and shouting abuse. But with incoming transport about to ram the bay doors, Borgus ignored them.

“Impact alert! Seconds count.” He ordered two techs to lock out the small bay door. Borgus squeezed the comm unit in his ear. “Bridge, all frequency collision alert on Bay Six.”

Borgus shouted to Warren to forget the repair and clamp the shuttle’s landing strut to the floor. Jarvis rolled off Daniel and ran for the rear of the bay.

Daniel, on his knees and holding the retained headset to his ear, hailed the incoming vessel. “Borgus, no response! Eighty meters and closing. I don’t get it.”

Borgus cursed both Jarvis and the transport pilot as the sirens went off. “Everybody brace, find a hold!”

Warren ran away from the shuttle toward Borgus. One of the techs tossed Borgus a safety harness, its line anchored to a near wall.

The transport struck.

A crunching boom reverberated as the transport’s docking arm bashed the port door like a battering ram. The jolt felt like a Titan mine tunnel during a moonquake. The floor skidded from under Borgus, but he held onto the harness with one hand. Warren was thrown in a backward somersault toward the shuttle. A rushing hiss, followed by wind, told Borgus the collision caused a dreaded seal breach.

Three trainees were back on their feet, but one rolled toward the port, its puckered door showing a tear of black space. Warren lay curled around the shuttle’s forward strut, his neck bent at a bad angle; a fatality on his watch.

“I’m on Evans,” Borgus shouted, and leaped at the man being sucked toward the tear. Maybe this one could be saved. “Where’s the damn sili-foam?” He meant the foam jets, which should have activated.

The air grew colder and thinned fast. In under a minute they’d suffocate or freeze. The tear was a thin smile only a foot long and a centimeter wide, but the suction gradient still had enormous force. Daniel joined Borgus beside the unconscious trainee.

“Daniel, hold Evans while I grab a foam gun. The auto-sprinklers are dead.”

As Daniel cradled Evans, Borgus yanked a foam gun from the wall a few meters from the tear. The coil of attached hose came free, tripping him. He felt his own body lift. The force of the suction pulled him, back first, onto the tear. *A fly on flypaper*. Even as the burn registered, Borgus barked orders. The searing pain in his back felt like a welding torch, but his body had plugged the tear so Daniel could rush forward with two helpers. Then he howled in agony.

Borgus heard Daniel taking command. “On my signal we’ll rip him off by the right shoulder and you keep him on the ground. Now!”

They peeled Borgus from the wall. With the first new rush of suction, he saw Daniel spring for the gun on the floor. He squeezed the trigger and shouted that the hose was jammed even as he too was lifted. But someone had shoved a portable siligun across the floor and Daniel grabbed it. This one worked and the liquid jet hardened on the tear in an instant. Borgus vaguely remembered watching Daniel push the trainees off him. They rolled him onto his belly and he heard Daniel gasp. The doctors later described the wound in his back as an inch-wide gully. Daniel used the flat of his own forearm to staunch the blood from the foot-long gash.

“Stay put, Borgus, I’ve got you sealed. Are you with me?”

Borgus's breath came in gasps. Before he blacked out, he hoped that his wife wouldn't be too put out by his condition, forgetting she was two years gone.

CHAPTER 2: TITAN STATION LENNIER, AUGUST 2156

"Bartender, set me up with another," said the Duke.

Borgus recognized John Wayne's voice, sounding like it came from a nearby room through an open doorway.

He quickened his step through the dark alley, wood clapboard walls flanking him on both sides and a night sky with a half moon overhead. His hard leather boots made a hollow clomp and grind on the gravel underfoot. Borgus realized that he had the use of all his limbs, his full strength flowing through his body again. That in itself invigorated him. He turned the corner and a pair of rickety saloon doors appeared.

"Make that two," the Duke's voice said from within. "Got a pard comin'."

Borgus took one steadying breath, ascended the wood steps and then plowed on through the swing doors. They parted like vulture's wings, squawking on their hinges as

they flapped at his back. He stood on a floor of roughened, unfinished planks in a large room, two stories high. A smoky haze partly obscured the balcony and ceiling.

Borgus expected a room full of cowboys, and was ready to pick out the Duke from among many grizzled faces. But the saloon was empty, as though the party had come and gone, and he'd just missed it. The dark wood tables were littered with half-full beer glasses, playing cards, poker chips and ashtrays spilling over. No one occupied the pulled-back chairs and even through the haze, the bar along the back wall looked deserted.

Dammit.

He scanned the sides of the room for evidence of an exit that Wayne may have just taken. The crumbling plaster walls had no doors, yet did show familiar objects that drew his attention. There were racks of six shooters and nineteenth-century rifles not open for the taking, but in glass display cases, like ones in a museum. On a side shelf was a pair of bookends, between them several Zane Grey novels, a copy of *Shane* and even *All the Pretty Horses*, all of them hardcover first editions. A longhorn steer skull, its wide horns arcing out in a show of strength and menace, loomed high over a double casement window. Then it came to him that these articles, skull and all, were from his own quarters on the station. But now they were here.

Where the hell was the Duke?

Borgus heard a faint whoosh and snap, like someone shaking out a piece of stiff cloth. Behind the bar a rotund bartender was suddenly there, tying on a waist apron. He had mutton chop sideburns and a white shirt with brown vest, all straight out of the classic movies. And on a stool with his back to Borgus, sat a sturdily built cowboy in black shirt and brown vest, who had just laid his ten-gallon hat on the stained mahogany bar surface. The bartender plunked down two shot glasses and the cowboy reached for one of the

jiggers of orange whiskey. Borgus' scalp tingled as he recognized the distinctive profile, and it made him smile.

“What'd I tell ya?” the Duke said to the bartender. “Here he is now.”

“We meet at long last,” Borgus said, approaching the seat next to him. “I've been a longtime admirer of yours, and those who know me would tell you that I hand out a compliment a'soon as a miser would part with one of your silver dollars there on the counter.” Borgus was proud of his turn of phrase, consistent with the setting, as though he'd frequented such places all his life.

Wayne took a quick pull from his shot glass, then swiveled so that he looked Borgus straight in the eye. Although the Duke had long ago passed on in his seventies, his face and body were younger than the Rooster Cogburn character he played in Borgus' favorite film, *True Grit*. The physique and face were more like those of Ethan Edwards, the tireless Indian tracker of *The Searchers*. Here he was in his prime, about mid forties, chest broad, face just slightly weather lined, midsection still lean. This John Wayne was the epitome of the Spanish phrase the man had liked as his epitaph: “*feo forza y formal.*”

He held out his hand to the Duke. “Randolph Borgus.”

The Duke extended his own meaty hand, and his face broke into that hardened, crooked grin. “Set yourself down, Mr. Borgus. They told me to wait for you here and I'd appreciate knowing what's the occasion for this pow-wow.”

For the first and only time in his life, Borgus shook hands with the living Duke. “I reckon I've crossed over. And you being here is just perfect.” He took the offered seat.

Wayne gave him a cynical eye. “Perfect for what? Other than a shot or two of extremely aged whiskey.”

“Duke, there’s one hell of a mean outlaw that played the devil with my life, whom I affectionately call Joe. I’ve challenged him to face me time and again, but he just laughed at me and hid behind his shadowy cloak. But now I’m ready to take him on in his own territory. Much obliged that you could be here.”

“I reckon I could be your witness, see that it plays out fair,” the Duke said.

“Although it’s been too long since I’ve had the pleasure of drawing on a deserving wretch myself.”

“Then stand with me,” Borgus said. “He’s no human like you or I was. His reach goes way beyond that. Who do you think gave you your cancer? Wore you away in the very years of your late prime? We both got a long score to settle with that son-of-a-gun.” He would have preferred a harsher expletive, but the Duke had rarely cursed in his films.

The Duke nodded, a gleam in his eye. “If that’s the life-wrecker done it, then let me at him. We’ll face him together.” He handed Borgus the second shot glass and winked. “Here’s to the end of old Joe’s days of waiting to ambush us around every bend.”

In this rough setting, in all its dinginess suffused with the odors of tobacco and drink, everything felt right. He’d been born to sit on this stool, next to this man, and confront this common enemy.

“Tonight, Duke, we’ll be the ones waiting for him.” Borgus clinked glasses with the Duke then took his first gulp. The liquid fire poured down his gullet. At one time, he regularly took his end-of-the-day shot, but lately they hadn’t let him have any. They said it sapped his strength, but here and now it was just the stuff.

Borgus felt primed, more alive than he’d been in decades. He bounced off the stool and trotted to the middle of the saloon to face the swinging doors.

“You hear me, Joe?” He cupped both hands to his mouth. “I’m calling you out once and for all. Show yourself you old coward! You afraid of two measly old men?” He turned back to the bar and spoke in a stage whisper. “No offence, Duke, just trying to shame him into it.”

Wayne waved it off. “Don’t fret on my account.”

Borgus looked back to the swing doors and to the window. Each now had the same curious outside view. Instead of the outline of other wood frame buildings, there appeared only blackness with stars, as through the entire saloon were floating in the heavens. He hadn’t felt it lift up. But did it matter where they were? The Duke was beside him and they were loaded and ready.

“You hear me, Joe?” he shouted again. “Come and get us!”

From outside came the distant neigh and snort of a horse.

“I believe we’re going to have company,” the Duke said, putting down his glass.

Borgus listened and could pick out the rhythmic clop of hooves hitting hard earth. “Let him come.” He moved back toward the bar and tested his handholds on the white pearl grips of the two guns at his side.

The hoof beats ceased and Borgus could hear what sounded like the crunching step of a man’s boots approaching on gravel. “Hey Duke, what do you figure Joe will look like?”

Wayne put on his big hat and quickly withdrew the pistol from his right hip holster. “Looks like we’ll have your answer directly.” He twirled the gun on his finger, slid it back in its sheath.

The steps outside grew louder as they pounded on the wooden floorboards of the outside porch. The bartender cleared the whiskey bottle and their glasses from the counter and then gestured toward the entrance with his chin.

The Duke nodded as he tightened his gun belt. “We hear him, all right. Soon we’ll smell’em, too.”

This was it.

Borgus stood, pushed the stool back and flexed his hands, ready to draw his own guns. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw the Duke do the same alongside him. No better place to be, standing shoulder to shoulder.

The saloon doors began to swing inward. The Duke leaned toward Borgus with lips curled and began to say something.

But the voice that came was too loud in his ear, and not the Duke’s.

“Borgus, level five emergency. Borgus, come back!”

CHAPTER 3

“Borgus, I know this sounds crazy, but we have a level five security emergency and I need you.”

Blackness shrouded in as an acrid mist twitched in Borgus' nostrils. He sensed the beat of his heart quicken, felt the pinch of fingers gripping his arm. And worse, that exasperating quiver in his limbs had returned.

His eyelids flickered open into the artificial brightness of the space station's med-lounge. The place was starkly institutional with its tight-knit blue carpet under couches and chairs that were all sharp angles. The vision of the dingy saloon was now replaced by gray polymer walls and their textured pattern of overlapping octagons, interrupted at one end by a dull, modern photo-print of a complex molecule and at the other, an oval viewport showing the pinpoints of distant stars.

Borgus squinted into the sterile ultraviolet light as Chief Cowen's large face peered into his field of vision. "Borgus, you hear me? Level Five. I've had Bunya begin to reverse your drug. Try to stay with me now."

Borgus' eyes blinked again, about the only part of him that could still move without effort. Once again, he felt himself becoming a seventy-seven-year-old, ailing and paralyzed engineer aboard Titan Station Lennier, still confined to his airchair.

Daniel gripped his shoulders and shook Borgus as if he were some child's doll. "Keep looking at me, don't glaze over."

A year shy of forty, Chief Daniel Cowen was a personable leader who looked more like a husky athletic coach than a trim Station Commander. He wore the light blue jumpsuit of a high-ranking official, and his matching belt could not sufficiently taper his large gut, bulging over it. The fullness of his youthful face often held a welcoming joviality, but now his affable features were serious.

"Borgus, you can pass on later, but I need you, now. Major damage could happen to this station at any moment."

Borgus felt a momentary twitch in his chest, the old knee-jerk reaction of gearing up for a crisis. He could almost hear phrases from the past assaulting him: *Chief Borgus, the main console's not receiving. Chief Borgus, there's a mold blockage in the lower level air ducts. Chief Borgus, there's a breakdown in the main driller down on shaft four.*

No, no, they couldn't be rousing him to repair some damn system going down. He was through with all this. "Scat...done..." Even with the voice amplifier attached to his neck over his larynx, every breath seemed like a normal man bench-pressing his own weight, just to get his vocal cords working. In his condition, the damn station could melt for all he cared. He closed his eyes, willing himself back into the saloon, with the Duke, a duel he'd waited years to fight. . .

"Come on, Teach. Just focus on my voice." Daniel's tone had softened.

Teach? When was the last time he'd been called that? A lifetime ago when there were actual students under him, and he had a body that worked. He could feel Daniel's warm breath as the Commander leaned close to his face.

"This is a criminal threat, not a malfunction emergency." As if Daniel had read the question on his mind. "We've got a rouge ship sitting four clicks out, with nitro cannons trained on us."

Had Daniel said criminal? Like someone with mal intent threatening?

"That's it Bunya, bring him back to us."

On the left side of his airchair, Bunya, his nurse, detached the packet of the fatal sleep serum and replaced it with another. On the right side, Daniel leaned in, bracing his hands on the chair's armrests. He could feel the clammy heat of Daniel's meaty palms radiating to his own nearly paralyzed fingers, including the fourth one on the right hand, missing half an inch of its tip from a mining saw accident.

“Borgus, this unclassified ship is a sizable one, and they’ve apparently sabotaged something on our station already. Are you getting this?”

How did some deviant outlaws obtain a ship and get all the way out here to Saturn to pull this off? Why attack an outpost station like Lennier when there were lots of other such targets on the inner planets? Then came the question behind these inquiries.

What’s the matter, Joe? Not enough to wear me down? You that chicken to let me face you on the other side, so you send this distraction?

Borgus willed his head to turn, look Daniel in the eye.

Daniel smiled in recognition. “You hear me now, good. I want your help with handling this crisis. *Your* help.”

“Daniel... who would do. . .”

Suddenly, every part of Borgus’ body lurched to one side. Was Daniel shaking him again? No, his ears had popped as a bass vibration thrummed through the bulkheads, and even the lights had blinked.

“Oh my God,” Daniel said. He shouted toward the wall, “Lasky, Lasky, come in, what was that? Did they attack?”

Borgus sensed it, even in his groggy state. He’d felt that same lurch, same change in ear pressure, years ago down in the mines on Titan. He would witness the test of new explosives and feel it, even when he’d been several shafts removed. And who was the damned attacker?

Daniel was back in front of him. “Borgus stay put, it may already be too late. Something’s gone off in one of the lower levels. Bunya, continue feeding him the revival serum. Keep him awake.”

Borgus heard the faint ping of the hinged glass panel opening on the wall next to the nurse's station, then plastic crackling as Daniel extracted a portable oxygen mask and canister. "I've left one in there for you, Bunya, if the pressure drops." The airchair had its own oxygen feed that Bunya could activate for him; not that he cared. A plodding of feet, then Daniel was gone.

Perfect. Just great. Awakened and alerted to a crisis, then forced to wait while things go seriously to hell. One minute it's Borgus you can't die we need you, the next it's sit helpless like the lump you are and watch the station implode or whatever it would do.

At least when the Duke played a boxer in *The Quiet Man*, called out of retirement to fight again, he had an able body to battle with. The resulting brawl ran through the town, breaking windows, throwing chairs, even stopping for a drink. But Borgus had no such fit form to resurrect for any kind of contest.

It figured and had Joe's irony written all over it. Which was why, two weeks earlier, Borgus had determined to end his pitiful existence anyway.

He'd ordered Bunya to place him in front of a full length mirror, and taken a good look at what he'd sunk to. Slumped in his airchair, his shoulders were bowed, his once wide chest had caved in, and his limbs hung off his body like the spindly appendages of a desiccated insect. Draped over all of this shrunken flesh was a light tan hospital gown, which could have passed for a medieval shroud if not for the stylish little chest pocket. As though he'd stuff his old measuring square there in-between jobs. It was high time to cross over, quit the proverbial town called life. To die.

He'd go out at the end of a two day marathon of watching the Duke's best films, then once in the black beyond, he'd challenge Joe to a long awaited showdown.

Only Rosa, his former nurse, had come to know who Joe really was for Borgus, as once, in a rage, he'd leaked a reference. She had been testing the strength of his arms that day, three years ago, encouraging him to push himself to a standing position on a set of parallel bars. He got halfway up and then, as though a switch were thrown, his arms slackened and he collapsed, the bars slamming painfully under his armpits.

"Damn you, Joe, just take me and get it over with!" he shouted, his speech still near normal back then. He let his arms slip over the bars so that he sat on the floor, his head bowed. Rosa was immediately upon him, her hands on his shoulders.

"Who is this Joe...although I think I can guess?" Her Argentine accent sounded thick with reproach.

"The thing that wears me away, dammit," he admitted, "grinds all of us down eventually."

"Borgus, my love," she said, forcing him to look into her captivating green eyes, now burning into him. "You must not blaspheme the Lord so. Work with the power He gave you, ask Him to help—"

"Girlie." He shook his head. "I don't waste time begging to spirits that have left town. There's a darker one now in place."

Her mouth made a big O. "So you speak of the Devil, do you?" And with that he got a long lecture on not giving the evil one power by invoking him. Her imploring, loving concern actually touched him.

"I don't care what you call that sadist," Borgus had said. "But let's just suspend the religious talk and I'll try, try again."

In the two years that followed, Borgus came to believe that the young, capable Rosa deserved more than to be caring for his sorry bulk. His own adult daughter hadn't made the

best career out of her chances, but he'd do his damnest for Rosa. He made sure she got transferred to the hospital on Jupiter's moon Io.

This left the older, semi-retired Bunya to look after him. He'd been irascible with this barrel of a woman, barely five feet, dark skinned, and with fleshy cheeks that made her eyes into slits when she grimaced or smiled. But she'd learned to manage him, even backed him on his euthanasia decision. He owed her one there. She was mopping her brow now.

"...bomb...?" Borgus wheezed.

"Apparently so, and we can only pray..." Bunya mumbled in a tremor as her shaking fingers played with his monitors, his IV drip.

Poor thing, still cares about staying alive.

"Oh, I knew there was something not right about that strange man."

"What. . .man?"

"Yesterday, when you were watching the film about the cowboy with the eye patch. A man wandered in here, looking like he was staring at you. I'd never seen him before but he claimed to be a new mechanic from the Titan colony. His techsuit was soiled enough and he had this scraggly beard. Said he was lost, but this lounge is not even near the ore production area. He scooted out so fast and I got myself caught up in the movie with that old marshall in all that shooting he did for the young girl who lost her daddy. Then he had to ride that poor horse to death to save her from the snake bite poison. Took my mind right off that stranger."

First Daniel had said his help was needed, now a man in disguise had been aboard looking at him. This was all moot if the station had just sustained serious damage. He'd have been saved from his own death by poison, only to expire by freezing. Would the Duke still be waiting for him back at that afterlife saloon?

He waited for the telltale rush of air signifying a hull breach, as the life-giving oxygen atmosphere would force itself out of the pressurized station. How long would one such as Bunya stay alive as she struggled for breath? Even if she could don the oxygen mask, how long before she felt the frigid nosedive of the temperature burrow from the skin to her body core?

Still, if he were to die for real this time, he'd damned well wanted to know who the perpetrator was.

Now that he had activated the remote trigger, Allen Jarvis hunched over his console on the stolen transport and watched a full ninety seconds begin to count off on his display. His bony knees jiggled up and down, a habit that had worsened from sitting in confined spaces during his time in prison. Soon, he would call the Lennier clods and verify that this phase had worked.

Yesterday he'd felt plenty edgy when pulling a small craft into Bay Six, posing as a minerals mechanic coming up from Titan Station below to drop off a core sample. During his apprentice days on this hulk, several shuttles a week came up from the mining station below with pails of rocks from new veins to give to the lab goons to chop up, analyze, and make pronouncements over. In Jarvis' apprenticeship Borgus had reminded them day in and day out, that the financial blood of this station was what it could dredge up from Titan, that large moon below, and occasionally shoot back to Earth in huge barge loads as "industrial material." And also throw in the several surprise veins of heavy precious metals, like the platinum, which must have made the company honchos stinking rich. His sources confirmed that they were still doing the same dig-and-search routine now.

As he had approached, he received a coded signal from his contact—his cultivated spy aboard Lennier—that clearance had been given for his shuttle to dock. That meant his contact had in fact broken into the logging program and added his false entry as a routine mechanic coming up from the mining colony below, and not a shuttle off his large transport in orbit on the opposite side of Titan. Or maybe the clearance signal meant that he was being set up and walking right into an arrest. He hated having to trust people; he'd learned that the hard way. Six years of hazing in the brig and two more of planning had gone into this moment.

So stepping down the ramp as Mechanic Jim Rhodeson and checking in with the bay crew had been a blind walk into the dark.

The receiving officer met him at the bottom. "Palm print on the scanner, please."

Jarvis effected a disinterested shrug as he placed his palm on the screen. The flat of his entire hand had been coated with a micro thin elastic, imprinted with the real Rhodeson's characteristic lines and squiggles. Only the right had been done, and it passed.

"What happened to your left hand?" the officer asked.

Jarvis held up the required hand with a bandage wrapped around. "Burned myself on a piece of ore just after it was lasered from the mine wall."

"Too eager to pick it up?" The officer laughed. "We've all done that. What's in your bag?"

"Core samples of course." Instead of handing it to the man, Jarvis poured out the top contents only- a couple of old mineral fragments stolen from prison quarries.

If the man were going to reach for the bag, Jarvis would have to overpower him and run, but luck was with him. The bay grunt simply handed him a floor plan of the station

that directed him to the analyzing lab where Jarvis would leave the bag for study and then be able to grab a respite in the mechanic's lounge before returning to his shuttle.

Jarvis exhaled as he treaded into the old familiar hallways carrying his heavy tote bag, which supposedly held only a few personal effects and core mineral samples. Normally the bay scanners would scream *alert* concerning the explosives he did have in the bag, but his contact must have managed, thank hell, to shut down those sensors as well.

There were few walking stiffes in the halls, reassuring him that the station was in fact shorthanded, with most on extended leaves to the other Saturn station orbiting Rhea moon, or the inner planets. After eight years away, almost no one should remember him, but there were at least two of the scum who surely would: Borgus and Cowen. They were most of the reason he was here. His face felt naked as he passed a few live bodies on the way to the rec room, even though he'd had a full beard pasted on and makeup putty altering the shape of his nose and forehead. He ached to risk all and seek out his two foes, and look them in the eye, just to see if he could get away with being casual, to study them while they remained oblivious.

But he had one shot at this, and revenge would have to wait. His mission was ultimately larger than his personal grudge, as his new captain had reminded him. It could well end the reign of these frontier corporate despots and transform the way the outer planets would be settled from here on.

As though his feet remembered from old habit he took the left hallway, then descended on the B lift and soon pushed into the rec room. The pool table and bar stood where they had been, although some tacky decorator had gone loose in here since. He saw a new pattern in the nauseating wallpaper, and was that a blue felt on the table that had been red before? In every age, the "freshen-up" jerks came around to paste a veneer on the

same old shit. They'd even showed up to do that in his two prisons. Look how *vogue* we can make your hellhole.

There were three people in here now; two playing virtual pinball in a holo-booth and his contact in the flesh, waiting for him as arranged. As instructed, his contact informed the two in the booth that their time slot was over and within a minute they left the room, his contact following to make sure they were out of this section and that nobody new was on the way in.

Jarvis opened his pouch, took out the smaller device and slid on his back under the pool table. Same damn table where two other lackeys, eight years ago, hustled him into a game during the fateful shift that changed his life. The device fit neatly on top of the lateral crossbeam, and he rolled out. His contact stood at the door, having watched most of this. Jarvis felt his skin crawl.

"What the fuck you doing here?" Jarvis hissed. "You're supposed to watch the hall."

"It's clear, don't worry," his contact said. "I just had to see this part."

Jarvis imagined strangling the jerk. "Out of here! Now!"

His contact looked stunned, then something more sullen took over the face. Jarvis realized he'd have to suffer the comedown of pandering to this idiot, but it was necessary. "Look, you did well. Let's not mess it up, OK?"

The face looked more encouraged. "OK, here are your exit and main console codes." The contact handed Jarvis a slip, one that should have been smuggled onto his shuttle, but as they were face to face, he took it now.

Jarvis couldn't resist asking. "Great work. Long as you're here, do you know where they keep old Borgus?"

“Med lounge on level three usually.”

“Thanks, now lock up behind me and get scarce. I’ll see you at our next meet.”

More hallways, one lift and the weird onslaught of memories coming with each passing corridor. In that first year he’d wanted to fit into the apprentice ranks, to rise like his father in the engineering corps. Borgus was tough but still an encouraging type when you were new. But then came the tougher times of the second and third years, facing off against this same instructor who seemed to feed on squashing ambition from up and comers who wouldn’t suck ass. Jarvis figured that once it became possible for an apprentice to rival his own knowledge, Borgus had to knock you down a peg or three. The worst of the memories were of the accident, and then his final days under arrest in the station brig. In short, he’d been brought on eleven years ago like an upright man in hope, then taken off three years later like a dog in chains. All of it long ago and yet like yesterday. He missed this place and hated it.

Jarvis stopped at the med lounge entrance, not part of the original plan, of course. But he had to get a look. He took two steps into the room and saw the three-quarter size holo-images, nearly opaque, of cowboys on horses, squaring off for a shootout against a desert and blue sky. In front of it all was the dark silhouette of an airchair, the sole audience for this old reprocessed film. Jarvis edged within two meters of the seated occupant and stared at the face’s profile while a familiar canned voice barked on the soundtrack.

“Pepper, turn and fill your hands, you son of a bitch!” John AssFace Wayne on the screen, and the shell of Borgus in the airchair. The old pig was indeed ailing, like his contact and the blogs had said. As the guns began to blaze on the film, Jarvis studied the

gaunt face, the mouth half drooped. Justice of a kind to be sure, but the bastard was still alive. Maybe kept alive for himself to—

“Sir, can I help you?” It was a fat nurse woman, waddling up behind the chair.

Jarvis backed off; he had to play it safe. “Sorry,” he mumbled as he reached the door. “Just dropped my sample load and got lost.”

“You don’t look familiar—“

“New mechanic working ore transport from below. Looking for Bay Six?”

The nurse pointed the way and Jarvis began jogging. Time to get out. Do one more thing with the larger device in his bag, leave a note, and get the hell back on the shuttle, and out.

Now, a day later and back on board his transport, his console display had passed the ninety-second mark, and Jarvis gave it an extra twenty for good measure. He curled his toes in his boots to get his knees to stop bouncing. Then he entered the instruction to call Lennier’s bridge. They immediately put him through to Chief Cowen.

“Cowen here.”

“And Jarvis here.” His chest pounded, his free hand squeezing his left knee. “Y’know, this is great service, put through to Station Commander right away. I appreciate that.” His throat was so damn dry.

“Jarvis, I thought we had time here. What just happened in the rec lounge?” Cowen’s puffing voice sounded shrill, like the fat idiot was on the run. Jarvis had power now over these people.

“Easy, Chief. This first one won’t cause any implosions, it’s only a one-quarter T.”

“First *what?* How the hell do you presume—”

“Because it was me in person aboard yesterday planted it, and one or two other surprises. A good little preview.”

“What preview? I’m on my way to assess damage.”

A quick cough to relieve the sandpaper in his throat. “A preview of the maze it’s time for me to run you and Mr. B through. But I’ll give you minute to clean up, even two, then let’s talk again.” Jarvis broke the connection.

It had happened; the show was really in motion.