

“Ah, shit!” Gayle, who had just slammed his thumb with a power-wrench, jumped up and shook it. “Damn it!”

He shook his hand madly to work the pain away but it didn’t help. He went to stick it in his mouth but stopped short when he remembered that it was covered in grease and, instead, wiped it on a dirty rag.

He looked at the bike with disgust, “Goddamn it, reduced to this!”

He looked up from the half-stripped gravity bike, among the thinning crowd he caught sight of a figure illuminated in the holoVid glow. She was moving down the lane past the electronics stores and fast-food diners. It wasn’t so much her beauty that caught his eye, she was dressed workman-like in a pair of khaki drills, a black singlet top and hair pulled back in a pony-tail. It was the saunter that captured his attention - a walk of supreme confidence. To Gayle, her every movement seemed deliberate and cocksure; she munched on a *real* apple as she headed straight by him, a blue satchel tucked under her arm.

“Hey, good-looking – “ He leaned over the bike, “I’m finishing up here in a minute – how about *you* buy me a beer?”

If looks could kill, hers had just blown away the sun. Her eyes, like black holes, threatened to engulf the world around them. She passed by without a word but hesitated, then threw the apple core over her shoulder, “In your dreams greaser.”

Stunned, he caught the apple as he watch her hips roll by saying to everyone, *Move out of my way*. Clearly, she was someone who handled herself just fine, the RockCutter blaster holstered on her belt reinforced that statement. Instantly he wanted her and thought, *Always want what you can’t handle Gayle boy!*

He sighed and turned back to the bike and the task of reassembling the primary gravity generator, which was in about a million pieces on the workshop floor. “Goddamn parents, who’d call a boy Gayle anyway?”

About a half hour later Serd, the workshop owner, turned up to close for the night. Gayle gave him a fiery glare. “I finish at 1800, next time you’re late I’ll scarper and leave the shop for the station trolls to pillage.”

Serd folded his arms over his abundant flesh, “Last time I remember I was the boss around here. You finish when I say you do or you’ll find yerself in a cold-cell.”

Gayle grunted, he was in no mood for a fight. He grabbed his bag and tossed it over his shoulder. “Whatever, I’m out of here.”

He badly needed a drink, the last thing he needed was another night in a cold-cell. He still had a crook neck from the last week when he had been picked up by station command officers for ‘disorderly conduct’.

“Be in at 800, and don’t get too drunk you tosspot!” Serd shouted after him. “Weavel wants his bike back by tomorrow night, make sure the work is done right - the first time. No mistakes Gayle – it’s your last chance!”

“And what? You’ll get another greaser? Fat chance out here!” Gayle said calling Serd’s bluff. They were at least a hundred million clicks from anywhere.

“Don’t push me Gayle, you’re not king shit around here!”

With a dismissive wave Gayle walked away. For six months he’d put up with Serd and the drudgery of Coolands, a backwater station in orbit around Eris, a dwarf planet about as far out from the Sun and Earth as you could get and still be in the solar system. He had

needed to be far away, far away from everything back then. *Maybe things had blown over by now*, he pondered but quickly shut his mind to that thought.

The street had filled with folk as Gayle glanced up to the dissolving sky, which had turned a pleasing rosy colour; It was an expensive sky. “God-dam council, a freakin’ painted sky?!” At least it was a good job he spat approaching the intersection of Ryker lane and Neptune road. On the corner, a faltering holo vid over the window declared, “Orbit Bar – Cleanest in the Kuiper Belt!” Gayle allowed himself a wry grin at the contradiction and pushed through the discoloured plexi-glass door.

At this hour of the early evening, a happy bubble of post-work talk washed over him. The sound system was pumping out an old favourite. He approached the bar; a few of the customers gave his unwelcome glances.

“How about a beer Dale?” He said.

Dale Whitehead, the proprietor and barman, groaned as he wiped the stained bench-top. “You know your banned from drinking here Gayle. I’ll get you a water for 800 credits.”

“Fuck that, the booze is cheaper,” Gayle threw up his arms. It was true, a quart of water cost almost as much as a bottle of whiskey these days. “Come on Dale, that was weeks ago – I just need one drink – to round off the day.”

Dale winced and shook his head.

“It’s always ‘just one drink’ Gayle. Not here – I can’t afford your ‘just one drink’. There’s always some guy who looks at you funny or somethin’ and before I know it there’s chairs through my window...”

The barman had muscle, Gayle conceded, the kind that comes out of throwing men like him out of bars. He thought for a second about jumping over the bar and helping himself. Gayle hardened his jaw, “So that’s it?”

Dale nodded firmly at his friend – they had hit it off when he’d first come to Coolands. After a moment his expression softened and he leant closer to the mechanic, “Look, why don’t you go down to *The Mercury*?”

*So now he was someone elses problem.*

Gayle slammed his hands on the bench and pushed off from the bar, “Thanks Dale, your a real pal!” Of course, Dale didn’t know that he’d been banned from there also after his antics last week.

Frustrated, he turned around. Less than a meter away was the woman he’d seen earlier in the lane-way. She was sitting on her own at one of the battered, small round table, gloatfully sipping a frothing beer; the blue satchel lay in front of her. Now, so close to her, he noticed the perfect ellipse of her jawline and her nose straight as an arrow; her lips, full but pale, curled into an indeterminate scowl. Gayle glanced irritably at the beer then turned for the door. Now he was full of anger and he *always* did something stupid when he was angry.

Just as he reached the door it flung open in his face, and three men entered – the middle man he knew instantly. *Weavel.*

“Hello Greaser, hope my bike’s ready?” Weavel said right in Gayle’s face. He was a lanky hoodlum with a jaw too broad for his narrow head, pale ice-coloured eyes and a cheap suit, the jacket the colour of dried blood was a little too big for his frame. It was exactly the sort of gear a small-time crime boss with an over-bloated opinion of himself wore. Gayle immediately wanted to hit him but the lack of alcohol in his blood made him conscious of the fact that he would have to get up and face the consequences tomorrow.

Slowly he stepped aside but held the man's gaze for a little too long. Out of the corner of his eye he could see Dale had come from around the bar, his jaw set, "On your way Gayle, or I call Cliff to come put you in a cold cell."

"That's right, run along Greaser." Weavel lingered on the last word meaningfully. ". . . if you like you might get a drop down at *The Mercury*?"

Gayle shot the barman a hurt expression who immediately looked away guiltily, so *Dale was in their pocket, like most of this damn station*. With a smack he caught the door as it swung back to close.

Weavel and his cronies didn't wait for Gayle to leave but passed by and gathered around the table where the woman was now possessively holding the satchel in her hands. Incensed, Gayle slipped out the door onto the street. *What was Weavel up to?* He thought. An access ladder in the lane-way led up to a window, it was an emergency exit from the upper story and Gayle knew he could get a good vantage of the scene if he liked. He considered for a moment scrunching up his face, "Your curiosity is going to be the death of ya!"

The window was closed but unlocked and Gayle, flicking open a switch-blade, gently forced it up so that he could get his fingers under. There was no real danger of being heard in any case, the blaring music in the bar took care of that. He checked the lane below, which was now darkened – the fake sky now having turned transparent, revealing the twinkling stars. There was no one on the lane but many people passed by on Neptune road thirty meters away. When he chose his moment, Gayle was pretty sure no-one was looking his way and he slipped head-first through the window.

Of the thousands of times he'd been in the Orbit Bar he'd hardly noticed this level, it had always been closed as far back as he could remember and what was behind the bar had always demanded his interest rather than what lay above it. Looking about now, he felt vindicated that his lack of interest had been warranted. This area was full of mundane boxes, crates and broken furniture covered in dust – clearly it was now Dale's de-facto storeroom. *In better days this level must have been full of tables and happy customers, merrily drinking*, Gayle mused. A mural depicting a sleek-looking, albeit out-dated, vessel streaming through the Kuiper ice fields filled the wall and hearkened back to the golden age of colonisation.

Crouching down, he crept his way between the crates to the mezzanine balcony which circled the main bar below. Directly below he could see the woman holding up the satchel in one hand, waving it about nonchalantly. Weavel, who was rocking back in his chair, followed it with his eyes but appeared to be waxing lyrically or telling some cock-bull story, though Gayle couldn't hear what was said over the music. Weavel's two goons stood either side of him, one fingered nervously with something in his jacket pocket, the other tilted his head side to side, cracking his neck, clearly bored.

After a short while, leering meaningfully over the table, Weavel seemed to come to his point, and the woman frowned, shook her head and got up to leave. Raising his hands in mock helplessness Weavel seemed to take offence to this and rose slowly from his seat as the thugs either side of him, now paying attention, moved forward to grab her.

*What the devil are they up to? Whatever it is I bet what's in that satchel is valuable.*

The woman, backing-up towards the bar, nimbly leapt onto it evading the clumsy men. She grabbed hold of the bottom rail of the balcony. Below, the scene was madness as screaming patrons tried to get out of the way. The henchmen, crashing through chairs and tables to try and get to her, failed to reach her before she swung herself up and over the balcony rail and onto the crates right above the mechanic. Slipping, she dropped the

satchel right onto Gayle's head. It was then the first shot was fired. It punched into the crate sending fragments of plexi-plast in all directions and continued on its journey burrowing into the mural-covered wall behind it.

Realising that his life was going to be short if he stayed put, Gayle leapt to life stuffing the satchel into his jacket and, thinking quickly, pointed to the open window, "Out!" A series of shots rang out, peppering the space around them and showering them with debris; by some miracle neither of them were hit. The woman, who looked at him with some surprise, needed no prodding and she rolled fluidly through the window onto the emergency stairs. Gayle followed on her heels but paused to see the furious face of Weavel pointing at him accusingly.

"I'm gonna kill you Gayle!" Weavel squawked, his face turning scarlet.

*Awww, shit, why did I get involved? I was just getting to know this place too!* He thought as they rattled down the emergency stairs. They bolted down the lane back towards the workshop. A few men were staggering obliviously in the dark and the pair became entangled among them, the smell of strong whiskey made Gayle desperately want to snatch one of the bottles from them. Behind them they heard a shout and glancing back saw that the two henchmen had bowled out of the bar. He saw one raise his gun and a flash but he didn't pause for the result. The familiar crack followed a millisecond later and one of the drunks let out a yelp and fell onto the woman groaning; the others scattered like rats.

"Come on, I've a bike in the workshop!" Gayle said fumbling for his key-card. He scanned it over the lock and reefed open the roller-shutter of the workshop with a clatter. Fortunately, Weavel's bike which he had been working on was pretty much complete, accept for some cosmetic plates that he had been cleaning up ready for spraying. He kicked the bike free of the stand, engaging the auto-hover mechanism and he threw his leg over the seat.

"Get on!" He snapped. The woman who was frowning at the partly disassembled bike.

"Does it work?" She said, doubt colouring her voice.

In truth he was sure that it was mechanically sound but since working on it he'd learnt it was a temperamental beast. Gayle winced, "I guess we'll find out." Seeing few alternatives she swung on behind him; his body enjoyed her warmth but he didn't have time to appreciate it.

"Come on baby!" He turned the engine over which complained, spluttering a jet of blue flame from the exhaust.

The thugs were only ten meters away, and Weavel not far behind, when the engine finally ceased its antics and roared to life. "Fucking stop them!" the racketeer barked, firing his gun wildly, the shots extinguishing a holo in a shower of sparks behind them.

"Phew!" Gayle squeezed the accelerator hard and release the brake, "Hold on!"

With a high pitched squeal they veered out of the workshop and, underestimating the power of the engine, Gayle lost control and rammed straight into a series of trash cans stacked on the other side of the lane-way.

"Fuck, Idiot!" The woman swore kicking away the garbage cans, "I thought you could drive one of these fucking things!"

"So...rry." The apology seemed lame and Gayle hardened his jaw as the first of the two ruffians bore down on them.

Surprising Gayle and the thug both, the woman pulled out a wrench, which she had

somehow swiped from the workshop and concealed. Far too committed the thug flailed frantically to pull back before she struck him, but it was to no avail and her swing landed true collecting the attacker in the skull with a sickening crack. He wouldn't be getting back up in a hurry.

Meanwhile the second thug, grabbing hold of Gayle's arm, forced the bike to veer towards the wall, scraping along it, ruining the panels.

"That's my fucking bike you moron!" Weavel's voice was a hollow squeal and Gayle wasn't sure if it was aimed at him or his mut of a henchman. Regardless, Gayle released his grip on the brake and at the same time twisted the accelerator to maximum, the resulting thrust almost launched the bike into the air leaving Weavel and his man tumbling behind in a haze of blue flame.

Within a second and a half they had reached the end of the lane which connected into a 'T' intersection, "not bad eh?" He shouted over the whine of the engine. Skidding into the corner he expertly dodged a bunch of revellers gathered around a street stall selling fried KriegSticks.

"Cut the crap, watch where your going Greaser," She hissed.

Gayle speed away and within a few turns was at a safe distance, he felt the woman relax a little in the seat behind him.

*Now what?* Gayle thought. They were safely away from Weavel for now but on a station of this size there was few places to hide, eventually they would be found. He slowed the bike and pulled over in front of a holo fountain, a casino in the vogue of ancient Rome, with faux doric columns and a chariot adorning the entry was illuminated behind.

She got off the bike without ceremony, "Give me the satchel."

Gayle looked at her demanding hand, "Fuck you! I just saved your ass!"

"I don't have time for this," She groaned, " just give me the satchel and I'll be on my way."

"Why should I?"

She pulled out her blaster, "Because I'll blow your brains out if you don't."

"Who the fuck are you?" Gayle watched her closely, he was usually pretty good at picking a fight, at least when he was sober. Several passers by looked on with concern. He folded his arms defiantly.

"I'm a prospector." She sighed impatiently, "the satchel?"

Gayle examined the satchel, it was pale blue-coloured and wholly unremarkable. Turning it over in his hands he discovered a label and read it aloud, "Captain Meron Landar?"

"You're a Captain?"

She shifted uneasily, "what of it?"

"I saved your life. Now, if you've got a way off this station, I need a ride." He thumbed meaningfully back in the direction of the bar.

"Forget it, I don't take passengers." She replied looking around, staring down a bunch of youths who had stopped to check them out.

"No Passenger, no satchel." He shook his head. "Besides, I'm more than a passenger, I'm a greaser remember?"

She scoffed. "And what does that mean? A Grav-bike ain't exactly a starship. What makes you think you can work one?"

He raised his arms modestly, "We ain't all what we seem lady. Used to work on Mercury Fives during the war."

She scrunched up her mouth, deliberating the matter. "Alright, I'll take you as far as my next port then your on your own. "

He nodded, "Agreed."

Meron smirked ruefully, "good, you can start by fixing my blaster."

Just as she spoke some guards came out of the casino and pointed towards them, one saying something into his comDev. Gayle revved the engine, "We better get going, I'm sure Weavel has these guys in his pocket too."

They sped off towards the space-lock. Gayle hoped that they could get to Meron's ship before Weavel could, otherwise things were definitely going to get messy.