

© Blake Smart 2020
0477007962
555 Brighton Road, South Brighton
Australia, SA 5048
Blake.smart09@gmail.com

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HOW TO CLEAN YOUR BLASTER CARBINE: A XIN SOLOMON STORY

By Blake Smart

The lighting tubes in the weapons vault were the colour of blood. It looked like a lair of death. Edged with crimson light, the weapon racks dominated the room. Command was aware of the ‘ominous atmosphere’ the lighting created, but it was the only colour on the spectrum that wouldn’t irritate exposed plasma cartridges. And irritated plasma cartridges tended to explode. Corporal Fitzroy hurried through the cluttered vault, and retrieved his reliable XF-47 Blaster Carbine. He cradled it in his arms for comfort.

Fitz just wanted to forget. To clear his mind. The weapons vault was more claustrophobic than usual. A stark contrast to the vast openness of exo-planet K-1652b. In his mind’s eye, he could still see the setting red dwarf sun, which shined across the frost crusted desert, highlighting the pillar of smoke, the drifting embers, the bright flames, the...

Don't let your mind wander; Focus. He placed his weapon on the bench. After every mission, it's important to disassemble and clean the XF-47 blaster carbine. Always make sure your weapon is properly maintained. No matter what. Nothing worse than a malfunction during a drop on the surface. This was the third time Fitz had cleaned his XF-47 since they returned to the ship. But Fitz was meticulous, and careful, and cleaning his equipment was a meditative exercise for him. So he went to work disassembling his weapon.

The XF-47 is your classic straightforward energy carbine weapons platform. In 2781, it replaced the XF-9 as the standard issue personal weapon of the Interstellar Shock Corps. The XF-47, colloquially known as the 'Main Fragger', or just 'Fragger', fires short wave direct energy beams, in semi-auto, or full-auto function, and has an effective range of up to five hundred metres. Maxwell-Klein Solutions labels its product as the ultimate solution to all engagement types, whether it's a Bug-Hunt, Counter-Insurgency, or Peacekeeping operations. *Strange fucking ways to describe what Fitzroy had just done.* In his mind's eye, he saw the orange fall to the ground. He couldn't stop thinking about that damned piece of fruit. The way it slipped out of those delicate fingers. It bounced before rolling away. Was *fruit meant to bounce?* Then his mind was filled with flames. The devouring inferno of the *Burn Mongers...*

He shook his head. *Focus.* He left his weapon for the moment, and plugged his PQC into the speaker system. A list of musical artists rolled under the touch of his thumb as he looked for the one genre that was acceptable amongst door kicking infantry grunts: Rage metal. Any other type of music would get you rolled in the lockers by your 'Brothers'. And no amount of cosmic jazz or conglomerate pop songs were worth going on a drop with a black eye and a broken rib. So Fitzroy blasted 'Scorched Earth' by DREAM (Death Rules Everything Around Me) at 300% volume. The thumping drums and screeching guitar shook the deck so hard it rattled the bones. Shit like that always blocked out those intrusive thoughts.

Before disassembly, always make sure the Main Fragger is cleared and safe. After checking there are no plasma cartridges in the magwell, you simply press in the take down pins, and holding the butt stock against your shoulder, release the upper receiver with your left hand. You may now retrieve the Electro-Thermal Assembly Mechanism. It is important to replace your half-life battery daily, to maintain fire effectiveness. You wouldn't want to be in an engagement with enemy insurgents and start seeing your blaster fire drop off too early, or not even scorch the steel side of a technical. No, you want your Fragger to leave a nice crisp hole in your target. Still smouldering. Glowing orange and charred black. That burning smell, like overcooked meat. *FIRE YOUR WEAPON, CORPORAL!* What did he do to deserve it? *Wrong place, wrong time. Get over it.* The orange bounced before it rolled. The flames licked and the smoke climbed high into the sky. *Mama used to say she had two souls...*

Fitzroy bashed his forehead with his fist. *STOP. THINKING. ABOUT. THAT.*

Often you will find that after a drop planetside, the XF-47 will have gathered a significant amount of dirt and debris. Especially on planets like K-1652b. The low atmosphere makes the kick-up stick like a bitch. There was a shit load of metallic dust caked through Fitzroy's barrel. Not a big deal. The swab brush would clear that out in no time. So he got to work, scrubbing to the rhythm of DREAM's next classic, 'Burn The Heathens'. When he was done, he did a sight check down the length of the barrel. The interior was spotless. He relaxed his tense muscles. *See, nothing to worry about.*

He switched to brushing the outside of the upper receiver. After wiping the weapon down, and using oil on the points of lubrication, he reassembled the XF-47, and cradled it once more. The weight was comforting. And nothing was as pleasing to the eye as a freshly cleaned Fragger. *Only it wasn't clean, was it?* Fitzroy frowned. In the crease under the barrel guard, he could see a dark black spot, the size of a pinhead. *How did he miss that?* He

disassembled the weapon again. Make sure the Main Fragger is cleared and safe. No plasma cartridges in the magwell. Press the take down pins. Hold the butt stock against your shoulder. Release the upper receiver with your left hand. You may now retrieve the Electro-Thermal Assembly Mechanism. There it was, the black spot. Where did that come from? Was it splashback? From the... *DON'T FINISH THAT THOUGHT. LISTEN TO RAGE METAL AND SHUT THE FUCK UP AND BE A FUCKING MAN.*

He took the scrubber and went at the black spot with a vengeance. If he could just get his weapon clean, he could rest his mind. Fitzroy started to sweat. When did it get so hot in the weapons vault? Was some fuckstick messing with the thermostat? The red lights and gloomy shadows were pressing in on him. Fitz reassembled his Fragger. Then he performed a sight check. The black spot was gone. But - *Oh god, why is this happening to me?* - On the other side of the barrel guard, there was a *second* black spot. This one was bigger. And it smelled. Like burning meat.

Cleared and safe. Magwell clear. Press the take down pins. Release the upper receiver... You may now retrieve the Electro-Thermal Assembly Mechanism. Fitzroy stared down at the black spot. It had to be splashback. Just had to be.

#

The mess hall was alive with rowdy Shock Droppers. Big guys. Strong guys. The kind you want standing between you and the violent radicals who want to destroy Inner Systems' way of life. They filled Fitz with confidence. Amped him up. There was no one else he'd rather fight beside. He grabbed a metal tray and joined the line for the DPR. When it was his turn, Fitz slid his tray to the Tube Boy, who squirted the Daily Protein Rations onto the cold steel. *Diarrhea Producing Rations*, the guys called it. Cause it not only looked like shit, but made you run for the head when your guts started rumbling.

“Over here, Killer,” called Oleg, and Fitz followed his voice to a table surrounded by his squadmates.

Oleg, Boyd, Ingle, Speight, and Karin were pressed around a circular steel table. Fitz squeezed between Oleg and Boyd, joining the laughing and yelling and tableside rough housing. Shockers were a lively bunch.

“How does it feel to finally be a man, Fitz?” Boyd slapped him on the back.

“He hates it,” Ingle laughed, “Look at him, he’s as pale as a Subsurface Squirmie.”

Fitz flushed, ashamed at his place in the brotherhood being challenged “No, I loved it. There’s no better feeling in the world. I’m just sick at the thought of another dose of DPR.”

Boyd slapped him on the back again, “See. He’s a real killer. A real Shocker. One of us, the Burn Mongers!”

Pride replaced shame, and Fitz once again felt like one of the guys. He took a spoonful of DPR and shovelled it down. The best way to eat that shit is quick and without thinking about it. Just get it over and done with.

He’d nearly cleaned his tray when he noticed the guy sitting alone in the corner of the mess hall. A skinny guy, with dark rings under his eyes. Definitely not a Shocker. Not someone from the ship’s crew, either. Didn’t look military at all, in a well-worn vacuum seal coverall, and dark black bomber jacket. The heavy pistol that hung on his thigh wasn’t military issue, in any of the three corps of the conglomerate. It was a railgun pistol. Real speciality item. A yellowed bandage was stuck across the guy’s misshapen nose. The stranger was clearly used to getting hit in the face. Smoldering ashes clung to the end of the guy’s cigarette as he silently watched the Shockers in the mess hall from under heavy eyelids. When that gaze fell upon Fitz, he felt exposed, like he was being scanned with an industrial X-Ray.

“Who the hell’s that?” Fitz asked after managing to swallow a spoonful of DPR.

“That fuckin’ guy? A fuckin’ flatfoot. A sleuth from the Detective Guild.”

“The fuck he doing aboard the Richmond?”

It was suddenly very hot in the Mess Hall. If Fitz ever found the fucker messing with the thermostats, he might just kill him. Fitz swallowed, his throat felt dry. And his tongue was sticking to the roof of his mouth, making it difficult to ask, “Do you think he’s here for what we-”

“No. You shut the fuck up about that, Fitz. Nobody knows. Nobody will ever know. It was in the middle of nowhere, for fuck’s sake. The only way it exists, is if you talk about it. Get me?”

Fitz shut his trap, and looked back over at the skinny guy in the corner, who had moved his penetrating gaze to some other Shockers at a different table. The sleuth, whoever he was, seemed totally relaxed, like he owned his little corner. Maybe like he owned the whole mess. The whole ship, even. But the guy wasn’t just calm. It seemed... There was also sadness. That sadness seemed infectious, and Fitz could feel it creeping into his own mind, reminding him of things he was trying to forget. He looked away, and joined his squad in their banter.

“Anyway, so like I was saying,” Speight swallowed a squirt of DPR, “The Drill Sergeant strapped into his Battle Suit, standard procedure ‘Left leg! Right leg! Left arm! Right arm! Strap in soldier, these ain’t no pyjamas!’”

“No! He *didn’t!*” Oleg said with disbelief.

“He *did*, and we nearly blew it right there and then. Had to bite our tongues so hard they bled. We didn’t want to give away Karin’s surprise!”

“He couldn’t tell right away?”

“Fuck no!” Karin laughed, “The stuff is meant to be slow acting. To work on your muscles all day. Ice cold and red hot. But only a dot on the end of your finger is enough to start sweating. This is potent stuff.”

“And how much did you use?”

“Smear the whole tube across the inside of his suit. Well, just one particular spot.”

“Right here!” Speight said, grabbing his crotch.

“Took about half an hour for Maloney to start looking uncomfortable. Then he started sweating. Then came the best moment in all my time at Boot. ‘Hot damn, fuck me in the ass! My balls are on fire!’ and he ran screaming for the med bay!”

The Shockers burst into laughter. Fitz beat the table with his fist, tears forming around the edges of his eyes. He’d never laughed so hard in his life. Maybe he was forcing it. Maybe he was trying to forget...

“What’s so funny?” and all the Shockers stopped laughing, turning to face the newcomer. Fitz’s heart stopped beating. It was the stranger. The sleuth from the detective guild. He was standing just behind Fitz, the smoke from his cigarette drifting down and across the table. The smell reminded him of something. Fitz had to hold his nose.

“Just a joke, flatfoot, none of your business.”

“I love jokes,” the sleuth said with no conviction at all. He tapped Fitz on the shoulder, as if to say move over, and took a seat, squeezing in between him and Boyd. No one said anything. The mood turned sour. Fitz played with his DPR, swirling it this way and that, but never actually finding the courage to eat more of it.

“You know what else I love?” the detective went on, as if he couldn’t sense the hostility being directed towards him, “Fruit. Any of you ever had fresh fruit? I know it’s a bastard to get your hands on, but what I wouldn’t do for an apple. Or a pear. Or an orange...”

Fitz’s blood went ice cold. He held his tongue, watching his squadmates. None of them gave anything away. They were all made of stone.

“No,” spat Oleg, “What’s one of them? Some kind of flatfoot shit?”

“It’s an ancient type of food. From when what you ate was grown in the ground, instead of manufactured in a lab. Hard to come by these days, and out here on the outer rim, in the middle of nowhere, damn near impossible. Have to be a real enthusiast to get your hand on something like an orange. Boy oh boy, what I wouldn’t give to get my hands on an orange right now,” again, the sleuth spoke with no conviction. He clearly didn’t give a damn about oranges. Judging by his demeanour, and his tone, Fitz would have guessed that the guy didn’t give a damn about anything at all. He could have been totally dead on the inside, but for those eyes. Those eyes were sharp, alive and burning within their dark rings, and the guy seemed to be waiting for a reaction. When he didn’t get one, he changed the topic, inspecting the patch on Fitz’s shoulder.

“So, you guys from the 2964th Shock Battalion? What is it they called you again? The Burn Squad?”

“Burn *Mongers*.”

“That’s right... You were planetside, not too long ago, if I remember correctly. Titanus Prime? Oh, excuse me, I know the Shock Corps doesn’t acknowledge names given to the planets by their inhabitants. What does the Conglomerate call it again? Exo-Planet K-1652B?”

“Okay fuck face, time to move on. Go harass the tube boy. Or better yet, inspect the airlock. When you see the little button that says *eject*, hit it. You’ll get a prize,” Boyd put a firm hand on the sleuth’s shoulder.

The guy stood, “Alright, alright. I’ll leave you to your *jokes*. Oh, just one more thing. If any of you do come across a piece of fruit, let me know. The name’s Solomon. I’m gonna be on the Richmond a little longer. I just can’t get enough of the *vibe*. See you ‘round.”

“Yeah right, pal.”

#

Fitz was in the weapons locker, drenched in red light. He took his Main Fragger and disassembled it on the bench once more. Make sure the Main Fragger is cleared and safe. No lazer cartridges in the magwell. Press the take down pins. Hold the butt stock against your shoulder. Release the upper receiver with your left hand. You may now retrieve the Electro-Thermal Assembly Mechanism. There it was, the black spot. No matter how strictly he followed procedure, the black spot remained. He went to work scrubbing it again. No luck. The black spot taunted him. This called for extreme measures. Fitz left the weapons locker, and when he returned, he was carrying a barrel of sulphuric acid. He turned the music up past 400%. He was going to burn the spot off. He climbed into his Battle Suit for protection, then used metal pincers to dip the upper receiver into the barrel of acid. He let it sit a good long while, only pulling it out after the memories started flooding back. The parts were steaming, but it was clear. The black spot did not burn off. In fact, it was only getting bigger. And the smell was getting worse. *Mama said she had two souls...*

#

The command deck of the Richmond was a claustrophobic affair, bathed in soft light. The only sound was the gentle hum of the machinery, and the soft typing sounds made by the deck officers at work on their enigmatic instruments. Xin Solomon spent what felt like an eternity staring at one particular instrument with an assortment of flashing lights and mysterious buttons. He wouldn't have had the first clue what any of those things were for. However, he *could* tell that the officer manning the machinery was in a sorry state. He was hiding it well, but Solomon could see the lines of stress around the corners of his eyes. He could sense the tenseness in the officer's movements. When the officer spoke quietly to someone next to him, Solomon picked up on a slight accent, and the name tag on the officer's uniform confirmed the detective's suspicions. '*Blan-jovic*'. He was from the Vilyuysk Minor system. Makes sense they would be tense. That system had recently gone bankrupt, and was

now staring down the barrel of joining the list of planetary systems in a debtor's prison created by the Conglomerate...

It was the captain who broke his chain of thoughts, "Detective, are you quite done gawking around at my command deck? There's a lot of classified intel in here."

"So many buttons, how do you keep a track of them all?"

"They have labels."

"What about soldiers? How do you keep a track of *them*? Their movements. Their actions. Their behaviour."

"You've been handed the Shock-Corp's official report of the incursion on exo-planet K-1652b. A standard drop. Zero casualties."

"On your side. What about the people on the ground. Did they experience zero casualties?"

The captain eyed him suspiciously, "There were a few enemy KIA. It's all there in the report. Listen, you ask a lot of questions for a detective. Usually your kind just comes and picks up the report, takes it back to wherever you people come from and adds the report to the Chronology of True Facts. Barely even stops to say hello. That's the way we like it, mister..."

"Scanner."

"Mister Scanner."

"No. My name's Solomon. Xin Solomon. My rank is Scanner, third class."

"My Apologies, Xin Solomon, Scanner, third class. Now, once your ship is refueled, be a good boy and get the fuck off my ship. And if I catch you snooping around, there will be hell to pay."

#

Solomon stood by the bulkhead and finished his cigarette. He couldn't risk taking a lit one into the next hold. Inhaling slowly, he savoured the smoke. Traditionally, what came next wasn't particularly enjoyable. The painful unravelling of the truth. Like pulling a bandaid off a wound you know to be infected. But how are you supposed to know how bad it is unless you get to the bottom of it?

"What's wrong, grumpy guts?" asked the buoyant voice in his ear.

"Nothing's wrong. I'm just dandy. I've literally never been happier." his monotone timbre sounded almost funny to himself.

"You're telling fibs."

"Allie, you know me so well, it's like you can see right through me."

"Having access to your biometrics helps," Allie was connected to Solomon's vacuum sealed coveralls and ear piece. In fact, she was in everything he owned that could connect to the Quantum Net. Allie, or Alitheia, was his personal shipboard AI. And his best friend. 'His only friend,' as she would put it.

"I'm just avoiding the transition to zero. Nothing major. What do the knuckleheads on board this ship say? Just gotta suck it up."

"Are you sure that's all?"

"You think that I'm trying to avoid finding the truth."

"You said it, not me."

"Okay, okay. Time to get to work," Solomon said as he dropped his smoke and stamped it out on the deck. The military types would hate that. Not many things made him smile. But that did.

#

168 HOURS AGO

The Peace-Keeper Mech stood imposingly over Solomon, cutting a distinctive image in the stark landscape. It was twenty feet tall, nuclear powered, and had a huge railgun slung over its shoulder. The big daddy version of the detective's own railgun pistol. Solomon couldn't see the man inside, but he imagined him to be slightly overweight, balding, and bored to the edge of the galaxy and back. Most Peace-Keepers fit that description.

The voice came out of the PK-Mech in a digitally distorted wash, "This was the drop zone. Would have been bad-ass. Steel rain, vengeance from the heavens. Wish I could have been a Shocker. Didn't pass the physical. Asthma, you know."

Solomon nodded. He desperately wanted a cigarette, but he had to wear his vacuum sealed mask when planetside. It fit snugly over his whole head, like a balaclava and filtered out the planet's bad air. In a vacuum, it would let him breathe for five minutes. After that: game over. Sure it was a nifty piece of tech, if a little outdated. But it still got on Solomon's nerves. Damn techies at the Guild hadn't designed a mask that let him breathe and smoke at the same time. *What do my dues even go towards, if not that?*

He had to occupy himself, and so walked a few metres, and stood on the rise. From there, through the filtered goggles on his mask, he could see all the way to the horizon. Exo Planet K-1652b, or Titanus Prime as the locals called it, was for lack of a better word, stunning. It bore rocky mountainous landscapes the colour of rust, with silver veins pulsing through the stone. And every inch was frosted over due to the sub-zero temperatures. The frost sparkled in the ominous glow of the red dwarf star in the sky.

Under the glow of the crimson sun, a massive superstructure dominated the landscape, reaching into the sky like a black steel obelisk. Red lights pulsated at the top of each tower and smoke stack, to warn any low flying spacecraft, of which there were many. Hundreds of ships swarmed the complex, like flies to a carcass. All of them were from the Peace Corps.

“A beauty, isn’t she. A Super-Mine like that excavates just under a million tons of pure titanium a day. You know how much that goes for today on the Exchange? A metric fuck ton, that’s how much. I’m betting my entire pension fund on titanium, brother. I’ll be living out my final years on a beach on Calysto II. Just you watch.”

“More like a hospice on Svartelborg Station.”

“What was that?”

Solomon bit his tongue, “Nothing.”

He chose not to point out that titanium was worth a ‘metric fuck ton’ today because the synthetic equivalent recently proved to give people cancer. The same synthetic equivalent that was used to connect the Peace-Keeper’s neural net to his nuclear powered mech. Solomon wasn’t interested in wasting time on an argument with this guy. The detective had a job to do. But the Peace-Keeper blathered on.

“Yep, a Super-Mine like that is gonna put me on top. Shame a bunch of insurgents wanted to blow it to smithereens. I guess out here in the middle of nowhere, no good terrorists think they can do whatever they want. That nobody’s watching. But someone’s always watching, you betchya. Good thing we’re here now. No one’s touching my pension fund, not if my mech has anything to say about it. Of course, it seems like the Shock Droppers smoked all the Insurgent Squirmyies in their surgical operation. Damn, that would have been a sight to see. Steel rain. Blam! Blam! Blam!” The Peace-Keeper operated his mech to take the railgun and pretended to shoot invisible insurgents.

Solomon rolled his eyes, and turned to face the craters that peppered the nearby countryside. They were all about a hundred feet apart from one another, but still orderly.

“Say, you sure know a lot about the Shock Corps,” Solomon feigned interest.

“Studied all my life to be one, it’s just the asthma, you know.”

“Right. So you’d know the tactics they use in a drop?”

“Sure do! See those craters, that’s where they landed. Standard diamond formation. Six Shockers to a pod, eight pods to a platoon. They come in hot, land, and exfil the pod and take security. Then once the dropzone has been dominated, in teams of six, they spread out and clear their sectors.”

“Fascinating. Just fascinating. You really know your stuff. But here’s the real test, would you know which soldiers from which pod would have cleared the sector to the,” Solomon feigned looking at his compass, then at the countryside, “To the, say, south-east?”

“Oh sure! See that cluster on the far right? The pods are closer together than any others. The teams in those three pods would have headed south-east, looking for insurgents to burn.”

“Those three craters? Could we get a closer look?”

“My Sergeant will be back any moment...”

“Come on, I’m just fascinated to hear more about Shock Corps anti-terror operations.”

“Okay, okay. The thing about insurgents, is they could be disguised as anybody. A regular worker. A housewife. A no good kid...”

Solomon stopped listening to the nonce, using his brain’s wondrous ability to hit mute on idiotic nonsense, but still followed the mech down the slope. Once they were amongst the craters, Solomon subtly took out his trusty element scanner. Had to give it a good smacking to get it to start working (the guild was notoriously tight when it came to anything actually useful) and started sweeping the rim of the crater. Once he’d collected a sample of the regolith, he scanned it. *Calcium Perchlorate 19%, Hexavalent Chromium, 10%, Carbon Scoring 11%, and pure Titanium 60%. Radiation levels nominal at < 1%.*

#

ABOARD THE RICHMOND

Solomon showed his badge to the officer manning the airlock, who waved him through. Perhaps the officer thought Solomon was returning to his own ship, a rust bucket called the

Samsara. But Solomon had other plans. He stepped into the capsule, and the doors sealed shut behind him. The heart has a curious way of knocking on your chest to tell you something you already know. Anxiety was rearing its ugly head. Solomon wasn't lying to Allie before. He actually *did* hate this part. There was a high pitched whirring sound, and Solomon felt the pressure in the air lock change. This was how one transitioned from the artificial gravity of the rotating centre of the ship, to the zero-g outer holds. Solomon felt his feet leave the deck, as his capsule slowly left the rotation of the centre, and slid to a halt, matching the zero-g holds. He was completely weightless when the doors opened, and he floated out into the dark corridors. The halls were lined with thick cables and cords. Fibre optics, quantum channels, clean air, sewerage, you name it, there was a cable for it. It gave Solomon the impression that he was inside the bowels of a giant space faring beast. And in a way, that's exactly what the *Richmond* was.

He floated his way to the drop bay doors, which opened with a hiss, and revealed a cavernous space. A narrow spacewalk, which consisted of a long beam bristling with hand holds, followed a deathly straight line from one side of the hangar to the other, over a thousand feet away. 'Below', which would be a risky assessment to make in zero-g, if it weren't for all the signs and labels telling you which is 'up', was an impenetrable dark void. Although, Solomon knew that in that darkness were hangar doors that would open whenever a drop was about to begin. On either side of the catwalk, from rails attached to the ceiling, hung rows of giant metal coffins. At least, that's what they looked like to Solomon. In reality, these were the sub-orbital drop pods that delivered the Shock Troopers to the surface. Just thinking about climbing into one of those and free falling to the ground made his stomach do backflips.

There was an engineer working on a pod nearby. Her tool bag floated obediently beside her, as she worked on the circuitry behind one of the steel panels. Solomon made sure to

bump into the tool box, on his way down the spacewalk. The contents spilled out and floated around their heads.

“Sorry about that!”

“No worries,” she said easily, “mistakes happen.”

Solomon helped put the tools back. She wasn't as aggressive as each and every member of the infantry had been. Must be the training the ground pounders received. Or maybe it was genetic.

Once the tools were safely packed away, Solomon pretended to appreciate the drop pod.

“Yup, a real marvel of engineering, my babies are,” she spoke as if introducing him to her children, “3.5 tonnes of steel, carbon fibre, and aerogel. Rated for up to two hundred thousand metre drops. Sure the hardware is cool, but the soft stuff is even cooler. Take the telemetry system. One decimal out of whack, your pod won't know when to fire reverse thrusters, and then it's *'wham, splat, ain't nobody wanna clean that.'* Hahaha.”

“No splats on the last drop?”

“Nope. It was as clean as a shake and bake can be.”

“Shake and bake?”

“We shake. The Peace-Keepers bake. And the Conglomerate gets a nice warm pie. Haha.”

“Say, have all the pods been cleaned, or just these ones.”

“Oh my lord, you should see the slackers in Second Platoon. Their pods are still caked in planet-shit. Go check 'em out. Just keep going down the spacewalk. You'll find 'em hanging by the Vector Class drop ships.”

The pods were just where she said they were, and just how she described. Silver and rust coloured clumps of regolith were splattered across the hulls. In the low atmosphere of Titanus Prime the dust stuck to equipment 'like a bitch'. This was good for Solomon. If official reports were going to be vague and dishonest, he'd just have to go to the dirt. Dirt never lied.

Solomon took out his elemental scanner, gave it a good whack, and got to work. He floated from pod to pod, examining the clumped up regolith. This sample had too much Calcium Perchlorate. That one had too much Chromium. Another had traces of organic matter, which wasn't in the original sample at all. He thought he'd never get a match, until he reached the very last set of pods on the rack. An exact match. *Calcium Perchlorate 19%, Hexavalent Chromium 10%, Carbon Scoring 11%, and pure Titanium 60%. Radiation levels nominal at < 1%. Bingo.*

Solomon looked both ways before breaking into the pods. It was relatively simple. He simply used the security card he'd nabbed from the engineer's toolbox when he helped put the tools away. The Detective Guild did have a set of ethics the members were meant to follow. But Solomon thought of them more as guidelines. He was a *spirit of the law* kinda guy. Get too caught up in rules and ethics, and it was like fighting with both hands, and one foot, tied behind your back.

The pods each opened with a hiss. All three of them had six seats inside, packed in tight. Solomon imagined the Shockers, clad in their imposing armour, facing each other as they dropped through the sky, just hoping that the coffin remembered to slow their descent before *'wham, splat, ain't nobody wanna clean that.'* There were no personal effects inside the pods. Just a symbol painted on the outside. A snake with a knife in its fangs, wreathed in flames. Solomon cursed. He'd have to go back to the engineer to find out what that meant.

"Hey, is this yours?" he called out, floating towards the engineer, holding out her security pass.

"Oh fuck me sideways! Where did you find that?" she looked horrified.

"It was just floating out there by the pods. You must have dropped it. Is it important?"

"I could get court martialled for losing that. Thank you. How can I repay you?"

"You could tell me what the snake in the fire means."

“Oh you mean the *Burn Mongers* insignia? That’s Lieutenant Tarzian’s squad. Bad mother fuckers. Wouldn’t wanna mess with them.”

“Thanks, see ya round.”

The engineer said something else, but Solomon couldn’t hear her. His mind had already moved on to the next thing.

#

174 HOURS AGO

On the surface of Titanus Prime, the labourers who worked the super-mine lived in small bio-habs scattered across the rocky terrain. Each dome was a big enough dwelling for a small family. And each one that Solomon came across had been damaged in the Schock Corp’s ‘operation’. Every airlock had been taped back up, after getting ripped down by the liberating force of Shockers. Going from hab to hab was like greeting a collection of mourners at a funeral: miserable. Every single person had a horror story about the Shock Droppers.

“They came from the sky like falling stars. Of course, everyone knows that’s time to head in doors and lay belly down, hands on your head. Basically you’re asking for trouble if you don’t submit *before* they bust down the door. Sure they ripped a hole in the air lock, but what’s a bit of damage if they manage to kill the terrorists who planted the bomb at the super mine.”

“Terrorists! What a joke! They must be talking about the ‘Unions’. Some of us just wanted to see more of the profit that those bastards were making off of us. Guess that was a mistake. Now look at us. We have less than we did before. And there’s a peace-keeping tax! Imagine that! A tax so that we have the privilege to get beaten if we look at the fat fucks the wrong way. I tell ya, if there were no terrorists on Titanus before, there will be now. But yes, they came through my hab. They made a mess, beat me to the floor, and asked me about the bomb.”

“The bomb? You mean the explosion that went off at the Super-Mine? That weren’t no bomb. It was an accident. Fuel line ruptured. Just happened to be at the time we were striking. Why would we blow up our own mine? Does it look like there’s an alternative source of income around here? If it were a bomb, I bet it was planted by those slimy spooks from the Intel Corps. Any excuse to invade a planet, take control, and break stuff.”

“Uh-huh, they broke my arm. I guess I didn’t answer them fast enough. They were asking me if I was alone in my hab. I had to stop and think about it. I live alone, but I do have a cat. Did they want to know about that? As I said, I thought about it too long. They stomped their boot on my elbow and yelled at me. I heard the crunch. It hurt, but I didn’t start crying until I heard them fire their lazars at my cat. I had Perseus for seven years. I buried him out the back of the hab.”

“God damned Shockers. I know my rights. I’m going to the Interstellar Courts. You can count on this, I’m going to complain alright. I’m going to claim on the damage to my hab. For the regolith they dragged across the carpet. The mental trauma they gave me. And what they did to those kids...”

“Those poor kids. Yes, mine was the last hab they visited before going on to the kids. In such a mood they were. Frustrated as all hell. Like the guys at the mine, on a friday night, when they don’t have enough credits for a bed warmer, if you know what I mean. They get the itch. That’s what those Shockers looked like. Like they had an itch, but not for a lover. An itch for something worse. I hope that’s not true. But I don’t think you can convince me otherwise. Oh yes, they did say something memorable. What was it... ‘Another bust! Maybe we should pull a Vertigol. Fitz here could use it.’”

Solomon leaned forward, “They said that. Vertigol, and Fitz? You’re sure.”

“I mean their masks were garbling their voices, and the blood was pounding in my ears, but yes, pretty sure. Plus, it sticks good in my memory ‘cause right after they said it, they

smashed my quantum computer. Half a year's salary, gone in an instant because some thugs were ornery."

#

ABOARD THE RICHMOND

Pungent chemicals lay thick in the air. Solomon could hardly breathe. Allie's voice came through his earpiece.

"Why are you in the laundry? Thinking of cleaning that bomber jacket for once?"

"You should have said something if the smell was bothering you. But then again, you don't have a sense of smell, do you?"

"No, but I do have a sense of decency. You on the other hand... Which begs the question: What are you doing in the laundry?"

"None of the Shockers will talk to a detective."

"So you're going to do a bit of fancy dress."

"Naturally. Do you think they'll mind if I borrow a uniform?"

Lying was often the best way of finding the truth.

#

Lieutenant Tarzian sipped his liquid stimulants and pored over his post battle reports. *24 hours on the ground, 24 days filling out the paperwork*, the officers liked to joke. Every spent plasma cartridge had to be accounted for. Every order that was given on the ground had to be checked, and double checked. He sighed. Paperwork wasn't what he joined the Corps for. He joined for that feeling just before a drop. The buzzing in the stomach. The blood pounding in the ears. The reminder that he was alive. That was what he joined for, and he had stayed for the comradery. For the brotherhood. Blood brothers. Not for paperwork. That was just bean counting. He was thankful for the distraction when someone knocked on the door.

"Come in."

“Sir. I’m from logistics. I just had a quick question for you.”

Great. A literal bean counter, “The log POGs already did their rounds through the unit.”

“I know sir. I’m very sorry. I’ve just been transferred out, and I made a few mistakes on my post deployment re-armament and repairs form. I ordered replacement ammunition for a Fitz, but it seems like he didn’t need it. I don’t know where he is. I was hoping you could point me in the right direction.”

“Yes, he’s one of mine. Corporal *Fitzroy*. You’ll find him in the weapons vault. Good kid. Very disciplined.”

“Excellent. Thank you so much, sir. Oh, and one more thing. Do you know of some operation on Vertigo?”

“Last rotation. That one really got the blood flowing, if you know what I mean. You can find it in the records. Wait a minute son. What did you say your name was?”

“Oh my name?”

“Well I don’t want your mama’s name.”

“Oh it’s, look it’s right here on my uniform, sir. It’s Brey- Breymeier, sir.”

That made Major Tarzian stop and think. He knew a Breymeier in logistics. But she was a woman. He turned back to face this ‘Breymeier’, but the new guy was already gone.

#

182 HOURS AGO

Solomon looked down at the remains of what used to be a bio-hab, using his mask’s goggles to zoom in on the scorch marks. Now it was just ashes. The miners milled about behind him in their personal mining suits. They were all uncomfortable looking at the wreckage. Solomon kneeled down and picked something out of the ash. A sphere, once orange, now burned to the crisp. But when he took his multi tool and cut it in half, the inside was strange. Definitely organic.

The lead miner plucked up the courage to step forward, “Calvin used to grow oranges. God only knows where he got the seeds from, or his synthetic soil. But he grew them alright. Brought them up to the Super-Mine at the start of every work week. Always had a smile on his face. I think I can speak for all of us when I say we miss that smile. He was just a kid. It’s so hard to believe that he would...”

“Become a violent insurgent?”

“Frankly, yes. We don’t have much. The owner of the super-mine was already ripping us off, leaving us with chicken wages. Now we have the Peace-Keepers and their ‘tax’. But we still managed to come together and use our savings to engage the services of the Detective Guild. Calvin and his brother were good boys. Even after their parents died, they stayed on the straight and narrow. They still smiled everyday. They were *nice*. We don’t believe they tried to shoot the Shockers. We don’t believe it at all. We want someone to find the truth.”

Solomon looked away, “The truth won’t change anything. Or maybe it will, but only for the worse. The truth never makes things better. Never. Let’s say the Shock Droppers killed the boys by accident, and they covered it up. What good is exposing it gonna do? The kids are still dead. It won’t bring them back. Their hab is burnt to ash. Nothing can be salvaged. Knowing how they died isn’t going to change the fact that the Peace-Corps is now an occupying force on your planet. It’s not going to reimburse your stolen wages. It won’t make your lives any better. The Shock-Corps won’t change. They’ll throw a couple of low ranking grunts under the bus, but the problem will remain the same. The truth won’t change how they operate. But it might piss off enough of you to start acting the way they see you. Some of you might get angry enough to start being disobedient. Start causing problems. Start fighting for your rights. But that’s just gonna make the Peace-Corps bring the boot down even harder. The truth is nothing but pain.”

“But it’s the *truth*.”

And on that point, Solomon could not disagree.

#

ABOARD THE RICHMOND

The Samsara, Solomon's personal ship, sat in Richmond's hangar bay. A Star-Fexx Wicker Series 2, long range starship, and an absolute hunk of junk. It was the size of a one bedroom apartment, it was a mess, and it made worrying sounds when in deep space. But it was reliable, it was Solomon's lucky ship, and more than that, it was home. And being his home, it was the place where Solomon did all of his thinking.

He sat in the cockpit rolling a lit cigarette between his forefinger and thumb. Next to him sat the report the Shock Corps had given him, about the events that had transpired on the surface of Titanus Prime. They said that a squad of soldiers had encountered an enemy combatant inside bio-habitat 246, and in the encounter, a Shock Dropper was forced to use deadly force to protect himself and his squadmates.

"You're just delaying the inevitable," Allie said.

"Am I? I could just leave. I could just deliver the miners the report given to me by the Shock Corps. At least that would settle their minds."

"But it's a lie, and you know it."

"The lie would get less people hurt. It's probably better that way, you know. The lie would be more peaceful. The truth... The truth is going to sting, one way or another. It's like pulling up a rock to expose a spider. Either the spider's gonna bite you, or you squish it first. There's no other options."

"Why are you doing this to yourself. You're going to do what you always do. You can't help but pull up rocks, darling. It's just in your nature to antagonise arachnids."

"I just wish my nature didn't leave a wake of so many dead spiders."

"Yeah, well. It does. Now get to work."

#

After submerging his Fragger into the sulphuric acid for the eleventh time, Fitz was starting to lose it. There were eleven black spots now, smeared across the weapon from barrel to buttstock. They were multiplying, and they were growing before his eyes. And they still smelled.

The smell had become so bad, Fitz put on his pressurized helmet. As the protective gel lining slipped over his ears, the rage metal was muffled. The weapons room became dark, shaded by the polarized visor. He plugged the helmet into his battle suit, and activated the battery. His power armour hummed to life, and he could hear the music again. He could see more clearly than before, through the nine lenses of his mask. But still, the helmet filter did nothing to remove the stink from his nostrils. The stink was on his skin. It was on his breath. In his hair. He left the helmet on, so he didn't have to look at himself in the reflection of the cold steel table. He had just taken to scrubbing the Fragger parts with a steel brush meant to clean the hull of the drop pods, when he realised the music had stopped. He turned around.

Standing by the intercom was the skinny flat foot from the chow hall. Fitz froze still.

“Fitz, right?”

Fitz held his tongue and eyed the railgun pistol hanging at the detective's hip. Safely holstered. The sleuth's attitude was sloppy, leaning against the bulkhead, arms crossed.

“Nice armour. But why wear it in here? You finding insurgents in the shadows?”

Fitz turned his back on the detective. He was afraid that even through his nine lens mask, the sleuth would be able to see how red his face had become. Those sunken eyes were like search lights that could break any amount of darkness.

“I've been to the hab, Fitz. I can see how someone might think that you can get away with a crime, when you're in the middle of nowhere. When no one's looking. When you feel like one of the good guys.”

Fitz's hands were shaking. He had to put down the brush.

“But it doesn't matter how far away you think you are. It doesn't matter how buried you think the truth is, it will still be uncovered. A crime's a crime, and the truth will haunt you forever. You can't shake it. It is eternal. Just tell me your side of the story, tell me what happened in that bio-hab. Make this less painful.”

Fitz kept his back to the detective. He grabbed the bench in front of him, his power armour gauntlets bending the steel. He was gonna lose it. He was gonna go crazy. *Mama had two souls...*

“That kid who lived in the bio-hab, his name was Calvin. He'd just turned 18. Wanted to be in the Shock-Corps, can you believe it? He was a good kid, and all he wanted was to protect the galaxy from the bad guys. Why would a kid like that try and shoot the very people he wanted to become? Just doesn't make sense...”

“It wasn't meant to go down like that.”

#

3 WEEKS AGO

The airlock imploded. Boyd went in first, XF-47 at the ready.

“Gun, gun!” Boyd yelled. He fired his Fragger. When the Electro-Thermal Assembly Mechanism ignites the plasma cartridge, it detonates, and the result is directed via the XF-47 barrel. Whatever it's pointing at is going to receive 20,000 degrees of superheated plasma energy. Never point your weapon at someone you don't intend to kill.

There on the floor was an 18 year old Squirmie, a smouldering hole crackling in his chest. Oleg moved to the body and kicked away the “gun”. Of course, it wasn't a gun, was it? It was a controller, for a damned video game. The Squirmie was wearing a virtual reality headset and had no idea that Shockers were moving through the countryside. Boyd busted in and

mistook the controller for a weapon. Zap-zap. Down goes the Squirmie. The kid's face was stuck in a permanent state of confusion, under his VR headset.

“Ah fuck, fucking media is gonna have a field day with this one,” Oleg said.

“Fucking fuck, I better not get fucking court martialed for this bullshit,” Boyd complained.

Fitzed stared at the kid's body. He couldn't pull his eyes away. He had seen a dead body before. Why couldn't he stop staring at this one. Seen one, seen 'em all. But he kept looking.

“No one's gonna get court martialed. Come here, give me your burner.”

Boyd chucked the unregistered side arm to Oleg, who bent down and placed it in the kid's twitching fingers. Smart. Makes the kid look like an enemy combatant. A clean kill. No court martials. No paperwork. No outrage in the home worlds. In the distant, far away outer rim, this is the best way. Best for everyone.

Then the kid moved. He kicked his legs out, and gasped for breath.

“Christ, it's still alive,” yelled Boyd.

Oleg didn't hesitate. He stepped back, pulled up his Fragger and shot two more lasers into the kid's head. The VR headset melted into the Squirmie's skull. The smell was horrific. Like spoiled meat, burned to cinder. The soldiers stood around the dead body in the red light filtering through the closed blinds. They were all agreeing, silently, not to talk about this again. Fitz was finding it hard to breathe. His chest was tightening. *Why was he panicking?* Because they killed an innocent kid. *He's just a Squirmie.* But he's a kid!

Then the orange dropped. They heard the soft *thud* As it bounced against the ground, and then saw it roll out of the bathroom. It bounced before rolling to a stop at Fitzroy's boot. Fitzroy's stomach performed an atmosphere to surface drop. Where would an orange come from? Delicate fingers. The fingers of a child. A child who had been standing in the bathroom while the soldiers murdered his older brother.

The boy was about four feet. Approximately seven years old. He had heterochromia, two different eye colours. The left was ice blue, the right, dark brown. Fitzroy's mother had heterochromia. She'd told him it was because God had blessed her with two souls. This kid standing there, mouth open, had two souls. *Don't be stupid, he's just a fucking Squirmie.*

The three soldiers stared at this kid, through their impersonal helmet masks. And the boy stared back. *Why didn't he run? Oh God, why didn't he run?*

Boyd started raising his Fragger. Fitz's heart stopped. Boyd was gonna kill this boy. This boy who just stood there.

"Wait," Oleg said. Fitz sighed with relief.

Oleg came to Fitz, and picked up the orange. Then he chucked it back to the boy, who caught it.

"You speak the standard lingo?" Oleg asked the boy. The boy blinked his two different eyes. One ice blue. One dark brown. For the longest time, it seemed like he didn't understand. Then the boy nodded.

Oleg crouched next to him, "You understand what happened here?"

The boy looked at his brother, the VR headset melting into his skull. Then at the soldiers. The boy nodded.

"What happened here?"

When the boy spoke, it was matter of fact. Emotionless. A state of shock.

"You killed my brother."

"He was going to shoot us, wasn't he? See the gun in his hand? He was gonna take a shot at the invaders. His Squirmie friends told him to do it, didn't they? He was gonna try and smoke us."

The boy shook his head, "He was just playing a game."

You stupid kid, just say the right thing, “Come on now,” Oleg continued, “He was just waiting to take a shot at us. He was angry at the invaders. He hates the conglomerate and the inner systems and their way of life. Say it. He was gonna char us, so we charred him first.”

“He was just playing games.”

Does this kid have rock for brains? Just tell him what he wants to hear, and this will all go away.

“You killed my brother.”

Oleg threw up his hands in frustration, and walked away, “There’s no talkin’ to this fuckin’ baby Squirmie.”

Boyd raised his Fragger. Fitz looked away. He didn’t wanna watch this.

“Wait, Boyd,” Oleg pushed the barrel away, “Maybe it’s time Fitz here pops his cherry.”

Those words chilled Fitz to the core. His heart thumped in his chest. *They wanted him to kill the boy. The boy with heterochromia. The boy with two souls.*

“Come on, Fitz. Time to become a man.”

Oleg grabbed Fitzroy’s shoulder and dragged him to the centre of the room, “Raise your weapon, soldier. Pull the stock into your shoulder pocket. That’s it. Feet shoulder length apart. Slight bend in the knee. Look over your sights. Keep it stable. Now, Shocker, squeeze the trigger.”

Fitzroy’s mouth was dry. There was a throbbing sound in his ears. His vision started to blur. The damn kid was just staring at him. *Run kid! Why don’t you run!* There was no way Fitz would miss at this distance. No chance in hell. His weapon was aimed squarely at the kid’s chest.

“Come on Fitz. Don’t be a pussy. Be a man.”

“Not a man ‘till you’ve been blooded.”

“Yeah Fitz. Time to spill some blood.”

Fitz took a deep breath. He looked at the kid in the ice blue eye. Then in the dark brown one. Two souls. Fitz rubbed his finger against the trigger... And then released it. He let the barrel point at the floor. He shook his head.

“I can’t man. He’s just a kid. He doesn’t deserve this.”

“You better fucking do it.”

“Yeah, Fitz. How we supposed to trust you if you don’t. You might rat us out. Only one way to prove you’re a brother. A real Shocker.”

They were interrupted by the sound of boots entering the apartment, “What in the United Conglomerate of fuckstickery is happening in here?”

Lieutenant Tarzian stepped into the room. He cast his gaze across the scene, from behind his cold, anonymous helmet mask. Fitz sighed in relief. Now the Captain was here, they wouldn’t make him do it. He was free.

“Sir, Fitz is compromising mission security,” Oleg said.

“Is that so, Corporal? You undermining the mission?”

“Sir, he’s just a kid. He’s not a threat.”

Lieutenant Tarzian took a moment to assess the situation, then came around and put a hand on the back of the Fitzroy’s neck, “Let me fill you in on something, Shocker. There’s no such thing as ‘not a threat’. We are in the business of invading planets. You think this kid is gonna forgive that. Forget we killed his brother? Every person on this planet is a potential threat. You understand what I’m saying?”

Fitz couldn’t come up with anything to say but, pathetically, repeated, “He’s just a kid...”

“Kids grow up to be insurgents. Don’t think of him as a kid. Think of him as a future enemy combatant. And if you can’t do that, maybe you were lying when you swore an oath to the Interstellar Shock Corps...”

Oleg, Boyd, and Lieutenant Tarzian held their XF-47s a little tighter. Getting them ready. Fitz knew they were getting it ready for him. If you're not one of us, you're the enemy. The message was clear. There was nothing he could do. Feet shoulder length apart. Buttstock in the shoulder pocket. Look over the sights. The kid was still just standing there. It was his own damn fault. He could have run. Played along. Done anything other than just stand there with his mouth open.

Fitz aimed at the kid. Then he did the math in his head. Oleg and Boyd were to his left, 110 degrees from his barrel. Lieutenant Tarzian was behind him, on his right, with his hand on the back of his neck. If Fitzroy executed a backwards thrust, he might have been able to clear a space to locate and engage the three targets, before they could react. After dropping them, he might have to take out the rest of the squad holding security. Then he would have to go on the run. Maybe the Squirmies would hide him in whatever holes they seemed to pour out of. Maybe they wouldn't. Either way he could trade his Fragger and armour for cash, and bribe his way off planet. From there he could find a sympathetic group, who would take him in. Hide him. Look after him.

But when Fitz squeezed the trigger, he wasn't pointing his weapon at Oleg, or Boyd, or Lieutenant Tarzian. He was pointing it at the kid. The superheated plasma went directly through the kid's sternum, and splashed against the bathroom sink behind. The ceramic basin melted instantly. The boy wobbled, but stood standing, a gaping, smoking hole in his chest. He stared at Fitz with those eyes. The ice blue one. The brown one. Two souls. Fitz would have to shoot twice. Both souls had to die. He squeezed the trigger again, this time the energy blast burned through the boy's lower left abdomen, just under the rib cage. The boy collapsed to the bathroom floor. Even through his helmet, Fitz could smell the burning flesh.

"You got some char on your Fragger there, Fitz. Good job. Let's rally and get off this shit hole planet," Lieutenant Tarzian left the hab.

Fritz looked down. There was a charred piece of flesh hanging off his barrel. Black as night. Burned to cinder. He wiped the barrel across the floor and the splashback came off easy. Or it seemed that way at the time.

“You’re finally a man, Fitz. Let’s burn this joint and boost.”

They stood on a nearby ridge to watch the hab burn. The flames danced high, and the pillar of smoke climbed high in the sky, cutting the frosted landscape in half. Fitz looked down. He still had the orange in his hands. When he realised what he’d done, he reeled back, then threw the orange back into the fire. It would become ashes like the rest of the things in the hab.

A hand clapped him on the back, “You’re a full blooded Shocker, now.”

“A Burn Monger. A blood brother.”

#

ABOARD THE RICHMOND

Fitz was crying. The tears had begun as he neared the end of his story, and they did not stop coming. They were building up at the bottom of his mask. He couldn’t bear to look around at the detective.

“You understand I have to take this back to my Guild, to add to the Chronology of True Facts.”

Fitz was staring at his disassembled Fragger. The parts were completely engulfed in the black spots. There was no stopping it. That’s just the way it was. He started putting his Fragger back together. One piece at a time.

“What’s going to happen?”

“In a broad sense... Not much. I can’t say the same thing for you. The Corps will throw you under the bus. Court martial. They’ll strip your battalion of all medals. The media will drag your unit for a while... But that’s where it will stop.”

Fitz re-inserted his Electro-Thermal Assembly Mechanism, then slid the upper receiver back into position. The takedown pins clicked into place. Fitz then took a plasma cartridge, and loaded it into the chamber.

“I can’t let that happen. I’m a Burn Monger. A blood brother. Forever,” and he picked up his Fragger. His movement was perfect. He pulled the carbine back into the shoulder pocket, and pivoted on his back foot. He brought the carbine up, and would have shot the detective. But it was too late.

The detective was already pointing his railgun pistol at Fitz. Like he knew exactly what Fitz was planning. And when he turned, the detective fired. The report was deafening in the claustrophobic weapons vault. Fitz didn’t even get to aim his Fragger. He looked down. There was a smouldering hole in his armour. Damn railguns. It had punched right through his armour. His knees felt weak, but his power armour kept him standing as long as it could. Then he fell. The darkness was closing in around the edges of his vision. This was it. He’d been smoked. The detective stood over Fitz, and looked down at him. His eyes were sad. The sadness was infectious. Fitz felt the cold chill of sorrow pass through him. Or was that just what it felt like to die?

Strangely, it made sense to him. Mama always said, those with two different coloured eyes had two souls. And Fitz had taken two souls. Two souls...