

Mercenaries of the Galactic Frontier

Return to Planet Perun

This story is told from the point of view of the featured character. This work does not claim to be a definitive history, but stands as an account of events from one character's perspective. Some names have been changed -Editor

I. A Trip Through The Woods

Vincent guided the Kismet into orbit around the planet of Perun. "Back to this rat hole," he said as they hit the upper reaches of the atmosphere. The Kismet shuddered almost unperceptively and Vincent grimaced because he liked a perfectly smooth transition. He was a perfectionist.

Vincent glanced over at Captain Lynx who was sitting in the chair next to him. She did not even notice the change. She was staring at the invitation they had received from Sheriff Ketch. Long black tresses framed her lovely, heart-shaped face; she was a woman that had earned Vincent's admiration. She was his Captain. More than his Captain- a comrade and a long time friend. She had led him out of the darkest time of his life and given him a new life as the Kismet's pilot.

"I still don't see the profit in this," said Vincent.

Lynx looked up from the invitation. He deep brown eyes met his. "We're building business relationships," she told him.

"They're taking advantage of us," objected Vincent. "This little jaunt is costing us fuel . . . Will probably cost us ammo too, and is certainly costing precious moments out of my life."

"Goodwill, Vincent," smiled Lynx. "We're building goodwill. Perun's a frontier world with valuable resources. They're going to have lots of trouble in the future. If we accept this invitation and come to their celebration they'll call us next time they have a paying job."

"But they don't pay," insisted Vincent. He understood what Lynx was saying, but he needed to play devil's advocate. He knew the value of politicking. If the colonists of Perun could get their mines

fully operational they would become a very wealth colony. But if's and when's would not keep the Kizmet flying and he hesitated to pass on paying jobs in favor of building goodwill.

“The crew needs a break,” countered Lynx. “Good home cooked food. Fresh air. Some dancing and music. You know how much Casey is looking forward to this. She has not stopped talking how much fun it would be to dress up and go to a real homespun frontier ho-down.”

“Yeah,” grumbled Vincent, then he added under his breath. “She never shuts up when she gets something in her head.”

Vincent checked the coordinates on the navigation consol and lift the microphone to the speaker. “We’ve got turbulence ahead. Grab hold of something steady. Perun’s atmosphere sucks.” He clicked off the microphone, before adding. “Just like the rest of the planet.”

Vincent guided the ship down from orbit. The Perun sun, called Khors, after the Slavic winter sun god from Lost Earth, was slipping behind the horizon far behind the ship. The sky was purplish, red and orange with turbulent, swirling clouds.

Electric storms were always the worst at sundown and outside the ship violent electrical charges arched across the horizon. The ship was buffeted by turbulence and Vincent fought to keep the ship steady. He could hear the pounding thunder through the ship’s hull. Vincent could have avoid the storm on the descent, but he purposely flew through it. He loved the electrical storms of Perun. Truth be told, he would have made the trip just to watch their beauty.

Below the ship was the Perun Wastes. The streaks of lighting arched from the dark clouds to the ground striking craggy rocks that jutted up hundred of feet in the air. Between the upthrust crags, the ground was mostly cooled lava flows, but there were some grassy fields and forests as well, but most of these were burned black from fires caused by the lightening. It was endless cycles of growth, raging fire and then growth again.

Vincent had read a scientific report that some of the plants were developing an invulnerability to fire. This expedited evolution was a common side-effect of the Genesis Cell Colonies used to terraform planets. Making worlds suitable habitats for human beings is not an exact science. There are many variables and sometimes the Genesis Cells unintentionally create strange or adaptive life forms

that populate the planet. Perun has a number of these species already, the commonest is an electrically charged plant that the colonists have aptly dubbed a shocking stalk.

After a few long moments the ship was through to storm. Vincent would have preferred to linger but they had an appointment to keep. He glanced over at the Captain. She was calm and collected on the outside, but her white knuckled grip on the armrest of her seat told Vincent the harrowing descent has affected more than she showed.

“We were not the only ones invited,” said Vincent. “Captain Ventross is here as well.”

“It will be nice to see him again,” replied Lynx.

Vincent landed the ship without so much as a jolt and followed Lynx down into the cargo hold where Ionn and Vale were waiting. Ionn was first of the new series of androids. Lynx and Vincent had liberated him from a corporate research facility and he had joined their crew. He was incredibly strong and almost unstoppable in combat. He was carrying mounted blaster over his shoulder; Two men could barely move the blaster, but Ionn handled it like it was nothing more than a knapsack.

Vale was a telepath. He could scan your mind, communicate telepathically and sometimes read thought waves from remote locations or those left behind in the area. He was a good man to have in an investigation and he was no slough in a fight. He could throw psi projectiles with his mind.

The Professor chugged up behind them, a little out of breath. “I’m here,” he said. The Professor was a big man and not very athletic, but he was able to heal injuries, restore life and loved everything intellectual. He was a great chess player and Vincent spent many hours gaming with him.

“No body else going?” asked Lynx.

“Walt’s got the sniffles,” said Vale, “Casey’s just running late.”

Vincent hit the bay doors. Motors whined and dim glow of Perun’s evening haze fell across the ramp. The wind carried the faint scent of smoke out of the wasteland to the east. Vincent clicked on his gun belt and checked his equipment, energy beam pistol, grenades, 2 foot composite steel-ceramic blade he used for close quarter fighting. He ducked under the shoulder strap for his rapid-fire beamer. He walked down to the edge of the ramp and looked out into the waste. A single bolt of lightning arched illuminating the barren landscape. The storm was over.

Captain Ventross and Nick were walking towards the Kizmet with a local. Ventross was a tall man. He wore a cowboy hat and brown suede jacket. He wore his guns low on his hips like a gunfighter from Lost Earth. His navigator, Jake was average height with dark hair. He was dressed all in black and carried new model submachine gun and a slug-throwing pistol.

“Good evening,” spoke Ventross.

Vincent nodded.

Lynx came down the ramp and gave Ventross one of her winning smiles. “Hello. Captain. I’m glad you are here. It’s nice to see you again.”

“Likewise,” Ventross, tipped his hat to Lynx.

Ion, Vale and the Professor followed Lynx down the ramp and exchanged their greetings.

Vincent moved away and studied the landscape. Perun was a harsh world, but he’d seen worse. Much worse. The colonists here were lucky. The worst thing they had to deal with were the terra-forming abominations, but these beasts mostly stayed in the Wastes. When they did stray they were easy to deal with if you packed enough fire power. Vincent noticed that Ion carried their portable heavy weapon. Only Ion, with his augmented strength, was capable of carrying the weapon, but they often shared the responsibility of firing the mounted weapon depending on the circumstance of the fight. Ion was a beast in melee, but Vincent relied on stealth, scouting and shooting. They made a good team, but Vincent didn’t like to rely on others. He walked back up the ramp, opened his weapons locker and pulled out a rocket tube and a case of rockets. *Firepower.*

Casey’s hurried footsteps clattered on the metal causeway above. She ran down the bay stairs with her green Mystic robes flowing around her. Her blond hair slightly out of place. “I’m so sorry I’m late.”

“Don’t bother rushing,” Vincent told her as she reached the bottom of the stairs. “They left ten minutes ago. Captain said for you to stay here with me and guard the ship.”

Casey looked stricken, “The Captain knew how much I wanted to go to this celebration. I’m so sick of ship rations. I’ve been looking forward to this since we got the invitation. How could she do this to me?”

“She didn’t do anything,” spoke Vincent as if lecturing. “You did this yourself. You have to learn to be on time. Didn’t they teach punctuality in Mystic school. Your life could depend on the accuracy of your arrival. We need to be able to rely on you. Casey. Let this be a lesson to you.”

Casey began to tear up. “I tried! I really tried! My hair. . .”

Just then the Captain poked her head around the edge of the ramp and called up, “Vincent we’re ready to go. Get Casey we can’t leave without her.”

Casey glared at Vincent.

Vincent shrugged, “After you.”

Outside the local who had walked over with Ventross was speaking, “My name is Jacob Housen. The Sheriff sent me to guide you to my homestead where the celebration will be taking place. We really appreciate what you did for us a few months ago. We’re not a rich people, but we always pay our debts.”

The group of Mercenaries followed Jacob. They made their way through the knee high grass and to the thickly wooded forest to the east of the landing site. “The trail through the woods to my homestead is this way,” spoke Jacob. “On the way to meet your ships I saw a few crows from the Waste circling over a clearing in the forest. You may want to ready your weapons.”

“I thought the terra-forming abominations stayed in the Wastes?” asked Ventross.

“They do . . . generally,” spoke Jacob.

“Generally?” asked Ventross.

“Well, yeah,” replied the farmer. “But something in the waste has got them spooked. We’ve seen some shocking stalks on the edges of the woods and crows deeper in the forest. We can handle the stalks, but the crows can fly over our defense perimeter so there’s been a few attacks in the community. We’ll need to be careful.”

“What do you mean something is ‘spooking’ them?” asked Ventross.

“Dunno,” said Jacob. “Like you said the terra-forming abominations prefer the Wastes, but something is driving them out. We’ve seen injuries on a few of the beasts consistent with beam weapons. Most of the colonists have slug-throwers cause they’re cheaper.”

Vincent shook his head in disbelief. “They’ve got trouble in the waste,” he whispered to Lynx. “What a surprise. And so for the price of a meal they trick us into coming here and dealing with their newest problem.”

Lynx hushed him, but Vincent saw her face was grim.

Jacob did not appear to hear Vincent’s complaint and continued talking loudly with Ventross, “It would be good for our community if you would kill the abominations on the way to the celebration. We would really appreciate your help.”

“It takes ammo to kill mutant beasts and ammo costs,” interrupted Lynx. “Filling our bellies is great, but we’re not looking to do charity. We are mercenaries. The term implies that we need to get paid.”

“Well, I guess you’ll have to talk to Sheriff Ketch about that,” drawled Jacob. “We’re poor farmers and can’t pay much. I just thought, you being experts and all could do the job nice and easy. If you want to circle around the clearing I’ll understand, but it’s a long way. Or maybe you want to just go back to your ship; all that good food will be going to waste.”

“Captain!” cried Casey, “Please its been so long since we had a nice home cooked meal. They went through all this work to set up this celebration. We can’t go back to the ship just because of a few mutant beasts. Let Ionn and Vincent take care of it. They’re not even dressed for the occasion.”

“It won’t take much ammo to kill a few crows,” spoke Ionn. “But Captain, I’d do it with my fists if you’re worried about the cost of ammo.”

“The issue is not how much ammo it will take,” spoke Vincent, defending Lynx. “We need to stand on principle. It costs to keep the Kismet flying. Mercenaries get paid. We can’t keep doing jobs for free.”

“Vincent. Captain Lynx. I’m hungry. I’m going to take the shortest route to the food. If I gotta blast a mutants to get by I’ll do so,” said Ventross. “You can’t fly on an empty stomach. I’d appreciate having your guns with me, but I’ll go though these woods alone if necessary.”

“The decision’s been made for us,” yelled Vale from the back of the group. “There are three shocking stalks coming up on the Professor and I. Let’s start wasting some of that ammunition.”

Vincent looked at Lynx.

Lynx shrugged. "If we leave Casey will cry. Ion wants to blast things. Vale and the Professor are about to be zapped. And I'm hungry, too. Let's just kill the muties and go to eat."

"You're the boss," sighed Vincent.

"A little help back here," yelled Vale as he fired the slug-thrower he'd drawn. The air filled with the smell of burnt gun powder.

Vincent circled to the right flank. He saw Ionn drop the heavy weapon on the ground and advance to engage the stalks with a steel blade in each fist. Lynx moved to stand next to the Professor. They would not need his healing powers, shocking stalks were not much a challenge. They had fought them the last time they were on Perun, but just in case she would keep the Professor covered. Ventross and Nick were circling on the opposite flank, both were firing their slug-throwers.

The racket of the slug-throwers irritated Vincent. He wondered why most mercenaries and almost all colonists preferred slug-throwers. Was it the rapport, the recoil or the feeling of power that made them attractive weapons or maybe it was just practical guns did not require as much maintenance. Maintaining and repairing beam weapons required knowledge of mechanics and well as electronics, slug-throwers just needed mechanics. Vincent preferred beam weapons. He like the unmistakable sterile gush of the beam as it sliced through the air. He liked the smell of ozone and the lack of recoil.

But Vincent wasn't going to use either of his beam weapons on the stalk approaching him. Instead, he choose to aim his rocket launcher at the undulating plant. He'd bought these rockets were fairly cheap. He squeezed the trigger and the roar of the rocket launcher masked all other sound. The rocket struck the plant on the left, closest to Vincent. The yellow stalk which exploded into a rain of green pulp.

Ventross and Nick took down the plant on the right and Vale finished off the center one with Ionn's help. The woods were eerily silent for a moment. Then the sound of Vincent slamming another rocket into his launcher broke the stillness.

"A bit much," said Ventross, pointing to the rocket blasted plant pulp.

"One rocket, one kill," shrugged Vincent.

“I thought the saying was “One shot, one kill,” said Nick.

Vincent offered him a lopsided grin as hefted the rocket launcher into a carry position over his shoulder.

“If you are ready we should move along,” suggested Jacob.

He led them deeper into the woods and after they walked for a time he stopped them, “The clearing up where I saw the mutant crows is up head. Do you think we could swing by and clear them out. It would be a service to our community. You could be saving someone’s life.”

“Why not,” said Ion before anyone could speak. Then he looked back, “As long as the Captain agrees.”

Lynx shrugged, “Why not? What’s few more rockets.” She gave Vincent a look that told him not to waste the rockets on crows.

They moved up to the edge of the clearing and saw the mutant crows fluttering in the field. They were feasting on the carcass of some four legged beast. They were much liked oversized crows except for the electrical current that arched between their claws.

“We call them storm crows,” whispered Jacob. “They shoot lightening from their talons.”

Vincent studied the field and then turned to Lynx, “Captain, there’s no need for us to run out there. I suggested we place the heavy blaster here on the of the clearing. I’ll use its range to bring the crows down.”

She nodded, “Ionn get the gun ready for Vincent. Vale, Casey you’re with me on the right. Professor be ready to set down a healing node. We don’t know what these creatures really can do.”

They moved to their positions.

“You want us on the left,” said Ventross.

“I was hoping you would offer,” replied Lynx.

“What about me?” asked Ion. “What am I going to do?”

Vincent and Lynx exchanged glances.

“You’re the bait,” Vincent told him. “Someone’s got to draw them over here.”

“You want me to walk out there?”

“They may fly away when we start shooting,” explained Vincent. “We need to give them a reason to stay.”

“So I’m the food source?” asked Ionn.

“It’s only a few birds,” smiled Vincent.

“Do they eat android?” asked Casey.

“You raise a good point,” replied Vincent. “Maybe we should use Casey as the bait. I bet she’s tasty.” Vincent pretended to bite in her direction. “What do you think Captain?”

“No!” complained Casey. “I’m in a dress!”

“Stop crying Casey,” said Lynx. “We’re not going to use you as bait.”

Ionn finished setting the gun and Vincent checked its placement. He always double-checked anything that another did. When he was done he looked at Ionn, “Whenever you’re ready?”

The big android shook his head in exasperation. “Next time someone else is going to be the bait.” He walked out into the clearing. “Over here!” He shouted to the bird. “Come eat me you feathered pieces of . . .”

The crows looked up. Their eyes sparked and lightening arched between their talons. Ionn hesitated. “Are you sure about this Vincent?”

Vincent hoped the heavy blaster would knock the light bodied birds around. “You’re fine,” Vincent assured him. “I got you covered.”

“Vincent!” Ionn ground his teeth. “They’re coming.”

Ionn started backing away. He fired the heavy cannon in his chest and the bird dodged out of the way. The gave the crows pause. They fluttered, circled and began to caw, balls of electricity swirled built up below their talons.

“They’re casting!” yelled Ionn. The center crow through an electrical blast that struck the grass a short distance in front of Ionn. “This is nuts!” shouted the android. “I’m coming back.” Another electric blast barely missed him.

Vincent opened up with the mounted blaster and everyone else fired as well. Ionn dove to the ground. Black feathers fell like rain all around him.

“This is crazy!” he shouted as he rolled onto his back, beams and bullets flew just over his body, slamming into the crows. Two tried to escape, but one of the birds swooped down to claw his eyes, Ionn parried the blow and batted the bird away with his blade. “Make Ionn the bait! Every friggin’ time!”

In a few moments it was all over. The three crow carcasses lay a short distance from the big android. Ionn stood up and brushed the feathers off his battle armor. “Great plan,” said Ionn. “Next time we should consider using someone else as the bait.

“You’ve got all the armor,” said Casey. “It makes most sense for you to be the bait.”

Ionn grumbled something under his breath.

“All is well that ends well,” laughed Lynx as she reached out to flick a feather off Ionn’s armored shoulder. “Not even a scratch.”

“We really appreciate this help,” said Jacob. “The defense perimeter of my farm is just ahead. Follow me please.”

He led the mercenaries to the laser fences and as he entered the gate code, he explained, “These fences and sensor systems make up the main part of the communities interlocking defense perimeter. Most of the terra-formed abominations can’t get past the fences. The fences also help alert us to brigands and pirates who may try to attack our farms.”

II. Everything Tastes So Good

The edge of Jacob’s homestead was about one hundred yards beyond the defense perimeter. The field was recently harvested and the stalks of sheered plants remained in the soil. Above, stars twinkled and Perun’s single moon, Perperuna, cast its coppery glow downward. The comet Slava streaked through the western sky.

On the far end of the field, a single story house, a barn and an equipment garage came into view. Between the house and equipment garage were strung lights. Two tables with chairs were set up near water storage and filtration system. A number of colonists were standing around. They cheered when they saw the mercenaries crossing the field.

A man and a woman separated themselves from the colonists. Vincent recognized both of them. Kenneth Dennison was the Nomad captain who had lost his ship and the other was Cynthia Steele the attractive Nomad navigator.

“Thank you for accepting my invitation,” spoke Dennison. “I trust the mutants did not present you much trouble. The woods have become increasingly dangerous. We apologize for any effort you expended on our behalf, but have prepared a wonderful evening for you. Good food and marvelous entertainment. It’s the best we can afford to thank you for saving my crew and defeating those responsible for shooting down my ship. Afterward there’ll be time to dance and drink the night away. We are expecting most of the colonists and their families to attend.”

“Sound’s like a great evening!” said Ventross.

“It will be!” said Cynthia. “A celebration of your victory!”

As the mercenaries began to blend into the crowd, Vincent prepared to place the mounted blaster on the edge of the festival.

One of the girls walked over to him and said, “You won’t need that here. It’s a party!”

“I don’t like to be caught unprepared,” said Vincent.

“There’s nothing to worry about,” she assured him. “The defense perimeter keeps everything out.”

“What about the crows?” asked Vincent.

The girl did not respond.

Vincent cleared his throat and said more softly, “It would be foolish to have this gun and not make it ready for use.”

“I see,” she said, as if she understood everything. “Have you been a mercenary long?”

Vincent looked at the girl. She was maybe eighteen or nineteen. “More than a decade.”

“You don’t look that old,” she flirted.

“Must be my easy living lifestyle that keeps me young,” Vincent laughed.

She didn’t understand his sarcasm. “Will I see you at the dance?”

“I don’t dance,” said Vincent. “But if you want to skip the dancing and get straight to sex you

can meet me after dinner.”

The girl did not know how to address Vincent’s crass remark. “I have to go,” she stammered and then she walked off. Before she disappeared into the crowd she offered him a backward glance that Vincent believed contained a hint of promise.

Vincent didn’t care. She was too young and foolish for him to find attractive. He wouldn’t turn down the offer of her body, but he wasn’t going to work for it either. Of course if she started yapping some foolishness about taking her off Perun to live a life of adventure, he’d just walk away and let some other mercenary crush her dreams.

Vincent noticed the Nomad navigator, Cythia, was flirting with Captain Ventross. This surprised Vincent. Nomads were generally a close knit community and did not establish relationships outside of their people. Cynthia was touching Ventross’s arm and was clearly coming on pretty strong.

Vincent heard her telling Ventross, “I’d really like to get off this planet. I don’t think another Nomad ship will be by this way for awhile. Do you know anyone with an opening on their ship?”

Before Ventross could answer, Vincent called to her from his seat next to the mounted weapon, “Cynthia, I think the Kismet has room for you.”

“You think so?” asked Cynthia.

She started to rise and move toward Vincent.

“We have much more room on our ship,” said Ventross quickly. “There is only the two of us.” Ventross point to Nick.

“You would not want to be a third wheel,” Vincent told Cynthia. “You’d be breaking up the happy couple.”

Ventross’s face darkened and he started to rise.

Lynx appeared suddenly on the scene. “Vincent, we don’t have any room on our ship. All our berths are filled.”

“Well I was thinking we could throw one of our less useful crew members out the air lock to make room for Cynthia.”

“Not me!,” said the Professor who was the newest sign on.

“Certainly not you,” said Vincent. “We need your healing powers. I was thinking perhaps . . . Casey.”

“Captain!,” cried Casey.

Vincent kept a one eye on Ventross and the other on Cynthia, but continued his banter. “Come on Casey. We need a navigator. I’m tired of doing all those calculation myself in the lonely cockpit.”

Casey cried out. “Vincent just wants her on board for . . . for . . .Captain!”

Vincent saw Cynthia moving back towards Ventross. *She really wants passage on a mercenary ship. Amazing.* Vincent wondered what kind of dynamic was going on here. *Perhaps there was a soured relationship between Dennison and Cynthia?*

“We’re not throwing anyone out an airlock,” said Lynx with a finality that calmed Casey. Then she turned to Cynthia and said, “I am sorry, but the Kismet is all full up. I am not sure why Vincent is offering positions on *my* ship.”

Casey offered Vincent a beaming look that told Vincent she had won. Vincent ignored the look and focused his attention on Cynthia’s face.

“I don’t think she’d want to go on a ship where they throw people out of air locks,” offered Nick.

Cynthia shook her head, “Not really.” Vincent was sure Cynthia wanted to get off this rock. Her only choice was the Kismet or the Sword

“Then you’ll accept passage with us?” asked Ventross.

She nodded.

Ventross was happy; the situation was diffused. Vincent sat down wondering what was going on. Nomads never jump ship.

Lynx stomped over to Vincent. “What was that all about. You trying to start a gun fight with Captain Ventross. He’s quick Vincent! Maybe quicker than you.”

“Maybe,” said Vincent patting the mounted blaster that was sitting next to him and ready to fire, “but it would not have went that far. I like Ventross. He’s a good man. I was testing the Nomad. She’s serious about booking passage. Something’s not right. Ventross might be in danger. Maybe the

Nomad's want his ship."

"Or maybe the girl just wants to get laid!" snapped Lynx.

"They don't do that," said Vincent.

"Not everything fits into your little box," replied Lynx.

"Nomads don't separate," insisted Vincent. "They stay together."

"Maybe a lover's quarrel?" suggested Lynx.

"I considered that, but Dennison more like her brother than her lover. Nomad shipmates are like that. They only have relations with Nomads from other ships when they meet for trade or conclaves. The situation's itching me."

"Yeah and I know you like to scratch and scratch until your itch gets all red and bloody." Lynx sighed. "What do we care? Really, Vincent, why does this matter?"

"I can tell when someone is running," said Vincent. "Maybe there's a bounty on her? Perhaps a good one."

"You're not a bounty hunter anymore," Lynx whispered. "You gave that up when you joined my crew. We don't need the kind of heat we'll get if you go back into business."

"Never fear, my friend," whispered Vincent. "Those dark years are behind me forever."

Lynx met Vincent's eyes, "Try to enjoy yourself tonight Vincent. Life is too short spend every moment seeking some percentage."

"Is this the pot calling the kettle black?"

"Quaint, Vincent," replied Lynx as she walked away, "Very quaint."

Vincent watched her go and then looked around the room. Ventross was still talking with Cynthia. Vale was flirting with the girl who had spoke with him. Casey was talking to a preacher. All around people were having fun. Vincent toyed with the safety on the mounted blaster. *He did not fit in here. These were good people who were full of hopes and dreams. They lived simple, peaceful lives. They raised families and prayed for their safety. A man like him had no business sharing their company. Vincent sighed. His parents were going to be homesteaders, but they were swindled and murdered. Maybe he would have been just like these people, but instead he*

was their opposite.

Vincent's musings were interrupted by the arrival of the food. Trays of wonderful smelling delights. Broiled fowl breasts covered in melted cheeses, noodles baked in a sauce, bread and pastries, drink, various leafy green salads. Vincent's excitement grew as he gazed on the other succulent platters. This was *truly* a feast.

When the preacher stood up to give the blessing Vincent cringed.

"Welcome colonists and mercenaries, welcome friends and families to this repast," began the preacher sweeping his hands wide. "We are gathered here by the grace of the Infinite Light to seek every desire and to fulfill every wish."

Ventross groaned softly. "It's going to be a long blessing," his whispered and a few of the mercenaries within range of hearing laughed, most of the colonists glowered.

The preacher did not hear the comment and launched into his rhetoric, "In the beginning there was only light, which some beings took to calling "god." The Light was all giving and created the vessel to receive all. It was a good match between the two. The vessel had infinite desire to receive and the light had infinite capability to give."

"However, the vessel soon grew guilty. It was shamed that it received everything for nothing. In an act of rebellion it closed itself off from the light, this act shattered the vessel. Scientists call this the big bang. Everything in this universe is a piece of the shattered vessel. Thus it is the nature of everything to want to receive. The difference between a rock and a human is the human has a greater desire to receive than the rock. Hence, the rock just sits there and does nothing, while the human struggles every day to receive more."

The priest paused to let his words sink in. Vincent had heard this rhetoric before. Preachers of the Infinite Light were common enough and certainly vocal enough. Vincent thought about going for the food, but he could not be so disrespectful . . .yet.

"Human strife, but also human achievement, can be attributed to the desire to receive. Pride, arrogance, gluttony walk hand-in-hand with all our greatest endeavors. You cannot have one without the other. Humans that learn to focus their energies correctly can fully actualize human potential and

lead more fulfilling lives.”

“You must learn to focus your energies correctly,” The priest let his eyes fall over the mercenaries. “You must learn to channel your negative thoughts into positive achievements.”

Ventross rose with Nick and went to the food table. Vincent was only one step behind them. Some of the less religious colonists followed. The others mercenaries started to rise. By this point the succulent smell of the feast had drifted across the entire assemblage.

The preacher seeing that he was losing his audience concluded quickly. “And may the Infinite Light bless this food.” The preacher was the next man in line.

Vincent dished himself a plat full of food. He sat down on the crate he had pulled up next to the heavy blaster and started to eat. *The food was a good as it looked. It almost made the ammunition expended to worth it. Almost!*

After the meal was finished Dennison, the Nomad Captain, called for everyone’s attention, “I’d just like to start the next part of the evening. Nomads have a tradition of tale telling. Whenever they come together for a feast they sit in a circle and share stories. Some of these stories are real, others a made up, many more are stories that people wish were real. I’d like to continue that tradition here on Perun. Please accompany Cynthia and I to the field where we’ll have our traditional tale weaving. Following that we will return here for music, dancing and other festivities.”

III. Murder by Mystic!

Captain Dennison and Cynthia arranged the mercenaries and colonists in a large circle. Each participant was given a candle which they were instructed to lit and placed into the ground in front of them. Dennison explained the rest of the ceremony, “Each person tells a story. After they tell their story they put out their candle. The tale weaving is concluded when all the candles are out. Please let us begin.”

Vincent listened to Dennison tell the story of how the mercenaries destroyed the destroyed the gun that was shooting down ships in orbit around Perun. Vincent having lived through the events did not find the story near as interesting as the colonists who listened with rapt admiration.

A few colonists told tales of encounters with abominations from the wastes. Vincent filed the pertinent facts away in his mind. Slow-moving rivers and stagnant ponds were likely to be inhabited by eels that shot blasts of electricity, stay away from green lizards that have glowing tails because they can shoot electrical blasts and watch out for lightening storms because they attract giant crows. What Vincent really wanted to know was why the mutant beasts of Perun all seemed to develop electrical powers? Maybe he'd ask the Professor.

Cynthia rose and asked, "Has anyone ever been to the Galactic Core?"

This caught Vincent's attention. Vincent had intimate knowledge of the Core. He had spent many years in the employ of the Eclipse, before its fragmentation. The question brought back memories of tragedies he would rather forget. He looked around and heard some of the mercenaries eager to impress the beautiful Cynthia telling her of the number of times they'd visited the dark sunless place.

Vincent said nothing. He squeezed eyes shut, but the mental images that swam before them would not go away. Half his lifetime was spent in the core. Bloody dark years that ended with the loss of all he loved, but that was his old life. He had a new life now with Lynx and the crew of the Kizmet. He was a mercenaries and mercenaries worked solely for profit, there was no need for high minded ideals, just simple business sense.

"I'm going to tell you the story of Leena, a navigation officer on a convoy ship," began Cynthia.

Vincent listen as Cynthia told the story of young Leena whose crew was slaughtered by Dark Mystics, but she alone was spared because the Dark Mystics sensed in her the ability to manipulate mana the energy of the universe which gave all Mystics, Light and Dark, their powers.

"Leena was brought back to the Dark Mystic's home base deep in the Galactic Core," Cynthia whispered. "Here they tested the girl to see if she would a suitable Dark Mystic."

Everyone was silent and listen with rapt attention as Cynthia continued her story describing the harsh training that Leena underwent against her will. Their were suitable gasps as Cynthia described the initiation ceremony.

Vincent was not impressed with the tale, as much as he was impressed with the way Cynthia told the story It was the same spooky tale that was told countless times over campfires throughout the

universe. Everyone had that nagging fear of being captured by Dark Mystics or pirates, but Cynthia told the story with a vigor that pulled at the heart.

“But in the end, Leena did not become a Dark Mystic,” announced Cynthia. “She was able to escape just after her initiation. She fled into the galaxy and lives her life in fear because the Dark Mystics continue to hunt her!”

Vincent chuckled at the stories humorous end; no one ever escaped from the Dark Mystics. Before he could consider the issue further, a scream echoed from the area of the celebration. It was followed by the cry of “murder!” The mercenaries quickly ran back to the tables.

The preacher was dead. A steel blade was driven through his chest. A number of colonists were standing around the body.

“You were standing over the body with a gun,” cried a woman who pointed to the Trader.

“I didn’t do it,” yelled the Trader. “I ran over to help him. I only drew my gun after I saw the knife.”

“You could have stabbed him then drew your gun!” retorted the woman.

“Let’s settle down,” spoke Ventross. “I’d like you all to come with me.” He led the colonists to the side and began to question them.

The Professor knelt down to the corpses. “I can revive him,” he spoke.

“Do it,” said Lynx, then she turned to Vincent who was looking at the footprints around the body. “What do you see?”

Vincent looked up. “The killer wore smooth sole boots. None of the colonists Ventross is questioning are wearing matching footwear. The killer moved from the wood line, paused behind the priest and then killed him by driving the blade through him back to front. Afterward the tracks lead back into the brush.” Vincent walked over to the brush. “A few broken twigs. Nothing I can follow. It was a professional. Someone skilled in assassination.”

The priest coughed as life returned to the body. The Professor rose and said, “He’s okay now.”

“What do you remember?” asked Lynx. “Who killed you?”

The Preacher was disoriented. "I was killed?" He asked. He reached down and felt the slick blood still on his shirt. "I was killed. Blessed stars I was murdered." He turned to the Professor. "You brought me back?"

"Yes," replied the learned man.

Vale walked up. "Do you need my services?"

Lynx nodded, "It would be easier."

Vale began concentrating, "I will use the power of thought to pierce the veil of the past. I will ascertain events beyond the sense. Images recorded on the fabric of time. Energies remaining behind."

Vale grimaced. His moved his hands in repetitive patterns and he chanted intonations that unlocked powers in the universe. His eyes glowed with senses beyond the human range and he spoke, "I see the preacher. I see a shadow. . . No, it is a man enveloped in shadows with a knife on the preacher back. The man whispers, 'Preacher has she confessed her sins?' The preachers asks, 'Who.' The man of shadows replies, 'You would know the who if she had.' The man of shadows drives the knife through the Preacher's spine. The preacher falls. The man of shadows runs back toward the wastes."

Vale dropped to his knees. "It was a Mystic that killed the preacher. . . It was a Dark Mystic. There's Dark Mystics here. They are coming for some one. The Dark Mystic used a power to make the Preacher forget the conversation."

Everyone was silent.

"Light protect us," cried one of the colonists.

"What are we going to do?" sobbed another.

"You have to help us," spoke the Trader to Ventross.

Ventross didn't respond and the Trader called to Lynx. "Captain Lynx. You crew can't let us die!"

Just then the perimeter sirens began to wail.

"What now?" muttered Ventross.

"The perimeter defense grid is down!" cried Jacob as he ran toward them. "Undead are inside

the perimeter. They're capturing townspeople and dragging them back into the waste."

"Dark Mystics use undead as shock troops, because they are easily created and trained," spoke Casey. "One of their tactics is to capture people, kill them and turn them into undead. In this manner they can have an instant army. The Dark Mystic will keep building their forces until they have sufficient numbers and then they will release their horde to overrun us."

The colonists standing around screamed in terror.

"Way to spread panic," Vincent told Casey.

Casey look sheepishly at the colonists.

"We need to get the defense perimeter back up," explained Jacob. "Three of the generators have been sabotaged. We'll need to repair them."

"We?" asked Vincent. "Thanks for dinner, but I'm sure the Kizmet will find a paying job somewhere."

"You can't leave us like this?" cried Jacob.

"Can we, Captain?" Vincent asked Lynx. "Please."

"If there are Dark Mystic here we are obligated to stop them," yelled Casey. "We cannot ignore this threat. Dark Mystic will destroy the galaxy if brave people don't make a stand against them. Everyone must do their part to destroy the Dark Coven! I'm staying even if you decide to go."

"If the Captain says the Kizmet's leaving your little ass will be slung over my shoulder," snarled Vincent. "Unconscious if necessary!"

Casey opened her mouth, but Lynx shouted, "Enough you two! Ionn, Vale, Professor. What's your positions? I'm not making the call on this one. The Dark Coven is nothing to trifle with."

Ionn clicked the safety off his weapon. Vale said, "Stay!" The Professor shrugged, "Today is as good as any day to die."

Lynx looked at Ventross. "Are you with us?"

"Yeah," replied Ventross. "Let's get the defense perimeter active. Then we can discuss payment."

"Vincent take the point," said Lynx. "We're going to repair the defense perimeter."

“Your boat; your rules,” said Vincent a little stiffly, but he moved ahead in the direction that Jacob indicated.

IV. Fighting For the Perimeter

Captain Lynx had the crew of the Kizmet gathered in the woods a short distance from the defense perimeter. Ventross and Nick were with them, as was Jacob and a few colonists who decided to help.

Vincent joined them a moment later. He addressed Lynx, but spoke loud enough for all the mercenaries to hear, “Captain, you got groups of undead guarding each of the three generators. The tracks on the ground indicate the breach is indeed a body-jacking run. The Dark Mystics are capturing colonists and dragging them off to raise as undead.”

“I was right,” Casey pointed out.

“It looks like the panels have been opened and some of the wires have been cut and pulled out,” continued Vincent. “The damage may be repairable if we can close, but there’s a lot of undead out there.”

“There are only five wires in each of the panel boxes,” explained Jacob. “The wires are all color coded. The perimeter will go back up when all the wires are reconnected properly. Fixing each panel will take only about a minute.”

“Okay,” said Lynx. “Vincent got a plan.”

“I suggest we hit the left panel box first and then the center and finally the right,” began Vincent. “We can set the heavy blaster up after we take the center panel box. That way we can easily support the right and left boxes.”

“Sounds like a solid plan,” agreed Ventross. “I’ll rewire the boxes with Nick.”

“Okay,” said Vincent. “Ionn you take the led. I’ll be on your right, Vale get the left. Professor get ready to put down a node if we get in trouble. Captain you approve?”

“Let’s get it done,” Lynx responded.

Ionn lead them through the woods. They caught the undead unaware. A hail of bullets and

beam fire drove the undead back. The mercenaries secured a position around the first panel box and Ventross began his work.

The undead counter attacked and in the close trees the engagement became a hand to hand melee. Vincent dropped his rapid fire beamer which swung around his back on a shoulder strap. He drew his short blade and pulled his pistol from his belt. He wielded the blade in his left hand to fend off skeletal claws as he shot with his right into his attacker's chest. The beams seared smoking holes into the undead. The creature fell and Vincent stepped over its corpse.

"We're clear here!" shouted Lynx. "Move to the next panel."

The mercenaries advanced in a ragged line, firing as they moved. The undead did not have ranged weapons and they tried to take cover behind trees. As the mercenaries reached the second panel the battle again became a melee.

Ionn went toe to toe with two undead. His massive android fists, breaking undead bones into brittle fragments with every blow. Ionn was the great equalizer in any fight. The android was stronger than three men and Vincent had seen him take a rocket shot to the chest and still function normally.

Ionn led the charge to the third panel while Vincent set up the mounted blaster. Undead reinforcements were coming from the waste. Vincent swivelled the blaster on its turret mount and the undead scattered seeking cover as Vincent began firing.

Ventross finished repairing the center panel and moved to the third. There was still fighting going on by Ventross worked on the panel as Nick kept the undead off his Captain.

Vale and Lynx were fighting back to back surrounded by undead. Vincent rotated the blaster around and fired in their directions. The shots landed all around shattering branches and sending the undead seeking cover. Lunx and Vale slipped away to join Ventross and Nick at the panel. Ionn retreated back to the third panel as well. The group of mercenaries were being hard pressed.

At the center panel, the Professor and Jacob we huddle down next to Vincent. Vincent was swinging the gun madly trying to keep the advancing undead back. Most of the undead were to his front advancing from the waste to reclaim the perimeter, but a group was moving up from behind them toward the repaired generator. Vincent fired at them and they scattered.

He swung the mounted blaster back to the front. "Let's get the perimeter up," he shouted.

Ventross responded with more than a little irritation, "I'm working on it!"

"There's one coming up from behind," shouted the Professor.

"Take care of it!" yelled Vincent who could not stop firing to their front. The undead had gotten to close, if he moved the gun to fire elsewhere they would be overrun.

The Professor stood up, summoning his mental powers. He struck the undead with a psi projectile. The undead staggered, but kept coming.

"Keep him off me, Professor!" shouted Vincent.

The Professor threw again and the undead stumbled, but kept coming. The Professor ran to the undead and threw himself on the waling corpse seeking to delay the monster's advance with his body if necessary.

Vincent was firing point blank into a wall of undead when the perimeter finally came up. The undead to their front pulled back. Vincent turned the gun ready to fire, but the Professor was standing over the fallen undead. The large man was breathing heavy, but he had vanquished his enemy.

"That was close," sighed Vincent.

"You're telling me," gasped the Professor.

Jacob was terrified and babbling incoherently.

Firing died down at the right panel and the mercenaries regrouped around Vincent.

Ionn mopped up the few undead who remained in the perimeter.

After a few moments Jacob recovered himself and hugged the Professor. "You're a hero," he told him. "I thought that skeleton was going to kill us!" Then he addressed all of them. "You're all heroes. Thank you." The man was overcome with emotion. "Please lets go back to my house."

The arrived back at the tables and the sight was terrible. The colonists were huddled together. Dennison and Cynthia were with them trying to consol them.

"They've taken my wife," cried one of the colonists.

"They got my boy!" yelled another.

"All we want to do is live our lives in peace," pined another.

Vincent grew angry. *This needless suffering . . . This foolish tragedy. Dark Mystics, criminal organizations, damn them all!* Vincent's hand tightened on his gun, but then he forced himself to relax. *I can't right every wrong. It's not my fault the universe is the way it is. I'm a mercenary now. I work for profit.* Vincent sighed. The words in his mind sounded hollow.

"We have to help these people," insisted Casey. "We need to go into the wastes and recover the missing!"

"You'll do that!" yelled the colonist who had lost his son.

"Of course," said Casey. "It's our duty."

"What she means is, 'It *will* be our duty once you pay us,'" said Vincent.

The colonists looked confused. A few of them muttered about the greed of mercenaries.

Someone cried out, "We have no money."

Another asked, "How can you take advantage of us in our hour of need?"

"Yes Vincent. How can you do?" asked Casey. "These people have lost everything. Their loved ones have been taken. We are in a position to do the right thing. We can help them and rid the galaxy of a Dark Mystic!"

"Okay" said Vincent. "Let's go into the waste and get ourselves a Dark Mystic."

"You'll help!" beamed Casey. "The plight of these people has moved you?"

"No," said Vincent flatly. "Someone has to be offering a large reward for the capture of a Dark Mystic."

"I can lead you into the wastes," Cynthia told them. "Captain Dennison and I spent a lot of time out there recovering salvage from our ship. I'm confident we can track the undead back to the Dark Mystics."

Lynx nodded. "Then it's settled. We will go rescue the colonists and capture the Dark Mystic."

V. A Journey to the Waste

The moon was high in the sky and the ragged file of mercenaries trudged through the bleak

landscape. Terra-forming was a great process, but its failures were readily apparent on almost every terra-formed world. Great swathes of rock and stone, undeveloped by the process. Many retain radiation zones, horrible infections and mutations. This part of the Perun was relatively innocuous, but Vincent kept a close eye on the sensors he carried with him. His pack contained a respirator and other emergency survival gear. Most mercenaries did not carry such equipment, but Vincent learned by others mistakes.

They crossed over a ridge and went between a narrow chasm. Above them were large spider webs. Lynx called a halt to their movement. "Vale what do you sense?"

Vale used his clairvoyance, "There's life above us in the caves."

"Is it a threat?" she asked.

Vale reached out with his mind, "Don't touch the webs and we'll be fine."

Before Lynx could warn her crew, Casey asked, "Can someone help me out? I'm sorta stuck to this squishy material. I think its some kind of web."

The ripid-fire swosh of Vincent's beamer drowned out Lynx's reply which would certainly have hurt Casey's feelings. Vincent had seen the red eyes peeking out of their hidey hole. He knew enough about the wastes to know giant spiders feed on anything that stumble into its lair and contacts their webs, including humans. Vincent's beams tore smoking holes into its face. The spider retreated back, but other furry eight legged beasts dropped down on them. Most were about the size of a man's head, but a few were man-sized.

Ionn pulled Casey off the web and then used his chest cannot to blast apart one of the larger spiders that was dangling down on a vertical web.

"I hate spiders," screamed Casey.

Ventross and Nick opened up with their slug-throwers. The spiders retreat up the cliff face and began throwing down webs. Ventross and Nick were covered in the stick strands.

A spider dropped down next to Cynthia and tried to bite her on the leg. Ionn squashed it with his fist.

Casey danced between falling spiders and reached Ventross and Nick. The web that encased

them was magical in nature. She used her own magic to unreveal the webs surrounding them. The were freed.

Ionn smashed a few more spiders and Vincent's beamer aided by Lynx's rifle kept the rest in their holes.

"Let's move through this," shouted Lynx.

Once past the webs they took stock of the situation.

"Well the undead know we are coming," spoke Vincent. "We'll have to be careful on an ambush from this point on."

"You're right," said Ventross. "We made a lot of noise back there fighting through the spiders. I'll walk point with Nick. You be ready to reinforce us if we're hit."

"Okay," agreed Lynx.

The started out again. Ventross and Nick were about thirty feet in front of the rest. Cynthia was with them. Predictably as they entered a small grove of dead gnarled trees a group of undead rose to surrounded Ventross and Nick. Lynx moved the rest of the mercenaries up to support. Ionn dropped the mounted blaster so Vincent could ready the weapon.

"Why are you pursuing us?" asked one of the skeletal undead with glowing red eyes.

"You've got some colonists as your prisoner," spoke Ventross. "We want them back."

"This is none of your affair," spoke the undead. "Leave or be destroyed."

"Why are you here?" asked Nick. "What interest do the Dark Mystics have in the settlement on Perun."

Vincent mounted the blaster as Ventross bantered with the Undead. After Vincent heard the undead with the glowing red eyes say, "This is your last warning." He looked over at Lynx, who nodded.

Vincent depressed the trigger and the weapon came to life. The Undead with the glowing eyes exploded in a shower of bone fragments. Ventross's group took cover as the crew of the Kismet fired down into the clearing. The undead retreated under the withering fire.

The crew of the Kismet were still gathered around the mounted blasted when Casey

whispered, "I think Cynthia is a Dark Mystic."

"That's crazy," said Ionn.

Lynx didn't say anything when her crew looked at her.

"No. It's not," insisted Casey. "Have you watched her. She seems really nervous."

"Vincent. Will you please tell Casey how crazy she is," asked Ionn

They all looked at Vincent had just finished dismounting the mounted blaster for Ionn to carry. He looked up and starred at Casey, then looked at Lynx. "I think Casey's right."

"Stop fooling around," said Ionn angrily.

"Don't fry your circuits, Ionn," spoke Vincent calmly. "Casey's few cards short of a full hand, but in this case she may be right. I thought there was something wrong with that story Cynthia told at the taleweaving. I said as much to the captain. I think it's worth looking into."

"Great!" Said Ionn. "Just great. "Why didn't somebody fill me in sooner."

"No proof," shrugged Vincent. Then he pointed to Ventross and Cynthia laughing together, "Too many variables. I think our fellow Captain's mighty eager to get her on his ship. He may be smitten and not take kindly to such an accusation."

"We need to do something," said Vale. "We can't go any further traveling with her, she could turn on us at any minute. She could be leading us into a trap."

Their conversation was interrupted.

"Is something wrong?" called Ventross.

Cynthia must have seen all eyes fall on her, because she moved closer to Ventross.

"What's going on?" asked Ventross.

Lynx and the crew of the Kizmet spread out. Vincent slipped off into the woods unnoticed.

"We think Cynthia may be hiding something?"

"Like what?" asked Ventross.

"We think she's a Dark Mystic," blurted Casey.

"That's crazy," Ventross replied.

"That is exactly what I said captain," spoke Ionn, "but let's ask her a few questions before

things get out of hand.”

“Ventross. You’re not going to let this happened?” said Cynthia.

“Let’s talk about this,” said Nick.

“Keep your hands away from your weapons,” threatened Ionn.

Ventross looked at Cynthia and shrugged, “What harm can a few questions do?” He moved away leaving Cynthia standing in the clearing. “Come on, Nick. Let’s see how this plays out.”

Lynx and Vale stepped forward. “I’m going to have Vale poke around in your find.”

“Like hell you are!” said Cythia.

“Let’s not be hasty,” said Ventross.

“Let’s not!” shouted Ionn. His cannon was aimed and ready to fire.

Cynthia started backing away.

“Don’t run honey,” Lynx said. “You won’t like what happens.”

“Screw you,” she shouted as she bolted.

Vincent appeared out of the shadows and dropped her to the ground with a resounding wack to the back of her skull. He grabbed Cynthia’s boot and dragged her unconscious form to Lynx and Vale.

“I see you got your dog well trained,” sneered Nick.

Vincent turned to him and said, “Woof.”

Vale kneeed down and scanned her mind. “She has undergone the right of initiation. She’s a Dark Mystics.”

“Unbelievable,” swore Ventross.

“There’s more,” said Vale.

“What more do we need?” asked Casey. “Let’s kill her!”

“No way,” said Vincent “Let’s sell her!”

“Wait a minute!” shouted Vale. “Stop making plans and listen. She fled the Dark Mystics. The story she told was her story, what she left out was that she rebelled against her master. She has spent the last two years hiding from the Dark Coven. Living in fear. She thinks the Dark Mystics on Perun

are Apprentices sent by her old master to hunt for her. That's why she wanted to get off planet with one of the mercenary ships. She doesn't want to hurt any of us. She's hoping to help us kill the Dark Mystics."

Ventross brightened, "Well then, she is on our side after all."

Cynthia woke up and looked at Vale, "Bastard."

'Are you and apprentice," asked Casey

"I am just an initiate," replied Cynthia. "I escaped before they started teaching me. I am not an Apprentice."

"Then your soul is not yet tainted," spoke Casey.

"What are you two talking about?" asked Ventross. "What's the difference?"

Casey explained, "A Dark Mystic is initiated in a ceremony by a Death Lord, but the newly initiated only becomes an apprentice by proving themselves worthy. Normally, they perform some horrible task that makes their soul unredeemable. At this time they take a new personal name and assume the surname of the Death Lord who becomes their master. Apprentices remain in service until they become powerful enough to break free and become Death Lords themselves. This sometimes never happens; there are no strict requirements to become a Deathlord. Weaker Dark Mystics may stay apprentices forever, because masters will destroy those that abandon their line prematurely. The Dark Coven is getting more powerful."

"Well now we know everything," said Lynx. "But we need to decide where to leave us. Do we continue the mission?"

"I don't see why not?" said Ventross.

"We can kill the apprentices on Perun and then bring Cynthia back to be redeemed at the Temple," added Casey. "If she has not committed to the ideals of the Dark Coven she may be allowed to join the Mystic Coven."

"Any other concerns?" asked Lynx.

"We could sell her to the Dark Mystics and salvage some profit from this mission," suggested Vincent. "The Dark Coven will leave Perun and the colonists will be safe. There is no risk to us and

only profit to be made.”

“Mercenary!” sneered Cynthia. She looked as if she wanted to spit in Vincent’s face.

“Let’s only entertain realistic suggestions,” corrected Lynx. After no one responded, she added, “Then we go on.”

VI. The Confrontation with Dark Mystics

The mercenaries crept across the broken landscape. Mist had begun to collect in craters and other low-lying areas. Small critters scurried away causing rocks to chatter down the crags that rose around them. Soon they came to a vast field of loose earth, ahead they saw the Dark Mystic encampment. The field had some large areas of thick brush.

Two gun towers were on either end. A series of thick-wall sleeping domes nestled between them. The Dark Mystic apprentice was waiting on the edge of the camp with two red-eyed skeletons. These were wights often used as military commanders by the Dark Coven.

The apprentice and his commanders were flanked on either side by a horde of undead. Skeletal and zombified colonists hastily created into a defense force, but deadly none-the-less. Most carried clubs, but some had slug-guns. Vincent didn’t see any beamers.

“This is not going to be easy,” said Ventross.

“Let’s stop here,” suggested Vincent, “So we’ll be out of the turret’s effective range.” He turned to Ionn and said, “Mount our gun,” then to the group he whispered, “Captain, with your permission I have a plan.”

Lynx shrugged, “It’s more than I got.”

Vincent stepped forward, “There is no need for us to fight. None of us want to trifle with the dread Dark Coven. This who mission has gone bust leaving us with expenses noone will cover. We have your run-away with us and we’ll sell her back to you.”

“No,” shouted Casey. “Vincent you can’t!”

“Scum,” snarled Cynthia. She would have run off, but Ventross moved to assure her that she would not be sold.

The Dark Mystic spoke softly but his voice carried loudly across the field. “We have you at an obvious disadvantage, but we will trade for the girl if you can make our bargain less costly than wasting ammunition to kill you.”

“How’s the instalment of our gun coming?” whispered Vincent.

“Still working,” said Ionn through clenched teeth.

“Well the I think we can let her go for fifty energy crystals,” replied Vincent. “As a Dark Mystic you must have an ample supply.”

“It would be cheaper to kill you.” The apprentice laughed softly.

“Then make a counter offer,” suggested Vincent.

“Thirty.”

“Forty-five,” said Vincent. “There is always the chance we could win.”

“Not likely,” said the Dark Mystic apprentice.

“Forty then,” offered Vincent.

“Done.”

A few moments later one of the wights carried a chest over to Vincent. Vincent opened the chest and examined the contents. “There are only twenty crystals here.”

“You will get half now and the rest when the girl walks to us,” whispered the Dark Mystic from across the field.

Vincent closed the box and stepped back to the mercenaries. He put the crystals in their supply box.

“Send the girl back with me,” insisted the wight.

“I don’t think we can do that,” said Vincent. “The price is forty. We need to receive the full amount.”

“Give me the girl!” shouted the wight. “You’ll get the rest.”

“Ionn,” said Vincent.

“I want the girl!” the wight demand.

“What Vincent?” asked Ionn.

“Is the gun ready?”

“Yes, Vincent. ” replied Ionn

“Then why isn’t it shooting?” asked Vincent. “You should be shooting!”

Ionn fired the mounted blaster point blank at the wight standing in front of them while muttering, “No body ever fills me in on the plan.”

The wights body exploded in a shower of bone fragments.

“Kill them!” shouted the Dark Mystic. “Kill them all and bring me the girl.”

The first wave of skeletons lurched forward. Those that had guns fired as they came. A shot hit Casey, who screamed more startled then hurt. She went back to the Professor to be healed, complaining about the tear in her robes.

The Professor had already created a power node and was ready for her and any other wounded. He used his mind to draw power from the node and channeled the energy into healing Casey’s torn skin.

Vincent took control of the mounted blaster to allow Ionn to take charge of the battle line which formed on either side of the mounted gun. Vincent swept the line of skeletons as they approached, but had to be more selective in his firing as soon as everyone blended into a chaotic melee.

Ionn smashed through skeletons fighting his way to the remaining wight commander.

Vale threw psi projectiles directing their mental energy with his hands.

Lynx fired her slug-gun.

It was three on two as Ventross and Nick fought to Vincent’s left. Vincent swung the gun over in their direction and evened up the odds. Ventross tipped his hat in Vincent’s direction.

Cynthia stood next to the Professor wringing her hands.

The battle raged and then suddenly the skeletons were withdrawing.

“Are they retreating?” asked Casey.

“Redeployment, is more likely,” said Vincent.

“Where’s Lynx,” asked Ionn.

“Now I too have a prisoner,” whispered the Dark Mystic. “I think this women is your Captain.

You should listen to her commands. Tell them, Lynx. Tell them to give me the girl.”

Lynx turned to the mercenaries. Her face was skeletal. She spoke, “Give him Cynthia.”

“They made her a skeleton!” shouted Ionn. “Let me kill him.”

He started forward. Vincent leapt from behind the gun and grabbed his arm. Ionn didn’t even notice the extra wight. Vincent dug in his heels, but the powerful android dragged him along like a child.

“Stop, Ionn,” yelled Vincent. “This is what he wants. The turrets will kill you before you reach him. Stop. We need you to fight here. Let me get Lynx back.”

The turret fired. The ground next to Ionn exploded showering them both with dirt.

“Ionn!”

Ionn pulled back and stood behind the blaster. “Get her back Vincent.”

“I’m going to sneak around, plant charges on the turrets to blow them and grab Lynx in the confusion,” explained Vincent. “You all protect the girl.”

Cynthia looked appreciative.

He could not help adding, “We may still have to sell her if things go bad.”

Cynthia looked away and Vincent headed off into the darkness.

As he crawled from bush to bush, he heard the Dark Mystic talking and Ventross saying something back. He could not make out their words as he crawled through the dry brush. He had a horrible thought that maybe the Dark Mystic was drawing them into conversation for reasons of his own. The Apprentice did not seem like the parleying type. Then, he heard Ionn shout, “No way that will happen.”

Vincent hurried, knowing the discussion was drawing to a close, either way. As he drew parallel to the gun towers the firing started again. He looked over to them and his heart sank. The group of skeletons pressing their front was only a diversion. Vincent saw the wight had led a group of skeletons around behind. Ionn alone hold the front, while the others faced the wight and the mass of skeletons in the rear. There was nothing he could do for them. The turrets needed to be destroyed and his first loyalty was to Lynx.

Vincent reached the left tower and set his demolitions charge to explode in one minute. He circled between the tents and placed the other charge. Thirty seconds later both towers exploded in flame. The brightness illuminated the surprise on the Dark Mystic's face.

The Dark Mystic was even more surprised when Vincent leapt out of the shadows and knocked out Lynx before her skeleton form could react. He began dragging her away hoping the Dark Mystic would not follow.

His luck did not hold. The Dark Mystic and a tough looking skeleton in armor followed him. "You can't escape me." Said the Mystic drawing closer

"I was hoping you would be too distracted to follow," replied Vincent.

"Hardly," sneered the Dark Mystic. "This is nothing more than mild entertainment." The Dark Mystic moved his hands and began to chant, "By the powers of the dark coven I cast this energy."

Vincent leapt away, but realized he was not the target. Lynx's skeletal form was suddenly awake and she lurched to her feet.

"Walk to me," called the Dark Mystic.

The Lynx skeleton obeyed.

"The rescue's not going as planned," admitted Vincent.

"You're dead," said the Dark Mystic to Vincent. Then to the armored skeleton he spoke, "Kill him."

As the skeleton in power armor advanced forward, Vincent watched the Dark Mystic and Lynx walk back to where the mercenaries had set up their position.

"Sorry I can't stay around to be killed," Vincent told the skeleton as he eluded away. The armored undead pursued. The skeletal being, devoid of flesh but still possessing muscle was as fast as he, maybe faster with the augmentations of the armor. He pulled his pistol and fired a few shots behind him. The skeleton took the hits and kept coming. It was gaining on him. His back was exposed.

Vincent turned to fight pulling his short sword out with his left hand. He blocked the skeleton's initial strike with the sword and fired point blank into the skeleton's chest. He squeezed off two more shots in rapid succession aiming for critical areas. The armored skeleton staggered back. Vincent

pressed, swinging his blade he cut a gash across the skeletons ribs. One more shot and the skeleton fell.

Vincent sprinted back to his comrades and found the carnage of impending defeat.

The mounted weapon was smashed. Ventross and Nick were still fighting a group of skeleton.

“Where’s the girl?”

Vale was trying to splint his broken leg. Casey was trying to help.

“The Dark Mystic took her,” said Vale.

Vincent turned to Ionn. He was cradling the skeletal Lynx in his lap. “I killed her,” he said.

“Let the Professor fix her,” said Vincent.

“I can’t,” said the Professor. “If I bring her back to life she’ll just attack us.”

“I killed her,” Ionn repeated.

“Casey what needs to be done with Lynx?” asked Vincent.

“She needs to be returned to her form and then the Professor can bring her back to life.”

“Can you perform this return?”

“Yes,” replied Casey. “But it will be difficult. The ritual may fail if her spirit is not strong enough.”

“Do it now,” Vincent told her. “Ionn, Lynx will be fine. Help Ventross with the remaining undead and tell Lynx what’s going on when she’s awake.” Then to Vale, “Which way did they go?”

“The wight and the girl headed into the woods,” explained Vale. “I don’t know where the Dark Mystic is. Give me a minute and I’ll come with you.”

“No,” said Vincent. “You get yourselves set right and then follow as a group. My trail will be obvious. Keep a watch for the Dark Mystic.”

Vincent headed off after Cynthia.

VII. Vincent’s Pursuit

The wight was moving quickly, but Vincent easily closed the distance. He was an expert tracker and the wight was leaving a very obvious trail. He found the wight and Cynthia in a small

clearing. Cynthiah was unconscious and the wight appeared to be waiting.

Vincent crept to the edge of the clearing and unloaded his rapid-fire beamer into the wight. The force of impact knock the wight down onto its side, but did not kill it. The wight climb to its feet and started to Vincent.

Vincent quickly reloaded the beamer and fire again with only a seconds aim. The beams left smoking holes the wights left side causing it to almost spin around. Vincent reload again and raised the gun to fire, but the wights claws shredded the beamer's steel barrel.

Vincent dropped the useless weapon and parried a blow that would have killed him using a double hand block taught to him more than twenty years ago by an old body combat master. The shock of the block sent pins and needles up Vincent's arms. This skeletal create was really strong.

Vincent drew his short blade and parried another blow that would have stunned him if it had landed. The wight continued to press the attack, while Vincent fought defensively giving ground and watching for an opening. He saw the opening and struck. His blade landed solid and the skeleton dropped to the ground.

Vincent had that feeling of being watched about the same time he heard the Dark Mystic exclaim, "You again."

Vincent looked up and saw the robed figure striding across the field. It looked as if the Dark Mystic's feet were not event touching the ground.

Vincent drew his pistol and squeezed the trigger rapidly emptying the magazine as he had done against the wight. The Dark Mystic stepped causally to the side and dodged all of the beams.

Vincent's pistol was empty. He reached down to reload and found no more pistol magazines. He had plenty of magazine for the rapid-fire beamer, but that was broken on the ground. He placed the useless pistol back in the pouch.

"I seem to be at a disadvantage," said Vincent as he switched his blade from left hand to right.

"You and your comrades have been at a disadvantage since meddling in the affairs of my Master," replied the Dark Mystic.

The Dark Mystic advanced and Vincent circled away. Then they both heard some thing very

large crashing through the wood. Branches snapped and mumbled cursed came to their ears.

“That would be Ionn,” said Vincent. “Coming to kick your ass.”

Vincent backed away into the shadows. The Dark Mystic made a few steps to pursue, but Vincent gambled that he would not move far from the girl with Ionn closing in. With a final warning look the Dark Mystic returned to Cynthia. It looked as if he was going to pick up her body and make a run for it when Ionn exploded from the woodline in a shower of broken branches and foliage.

Ionn’s eyes focused immediately on the Dark Mystic standing in the clearing. “You will die!” shouted Ionn and as charged with steel blades flashing in the star light.

The android and Dark Mystic met a few paces from Cynthia’s unconscious form with a flurry exchanged of blows that each managed to somehow block. Unlike Vincent who struck and retreated, Ionn stood his ground. The Dark Mystic seemed to draw power from the conflict itself. His force sword rang against the steel blades used by Ionn. Sparks flew in all direction.

Ionn scored a few initial hits, but the Dark Mystic seemed to be learning Ionn’s fighting pattern. The Mystic’s blade licked in between Ionn’s defenses, scoring hits with increasing frequency. The android pressed his attack and tried changing his style, but the Dark Mystic was trained in sword styles passed down for a thousand generations.

“Great, I think we finally found something that Ionn can’t beat,” muttered Vincent as he began moving up to support Ionn. He crept through the shadows, believing his best chance for success was to stab the apprentice in the back as he was occupied fighting the android.

Vincent’s plan completely unraveled when the Dark Mystic landed a stunning blow on Ionn who staggered under the impact. The Dark Mystic used that moment to drive his blade into Ionn’s chest. The android feel heavily to the ground.

The Dark Mystic pulled his blade out and turned to face Vincent who had crept to within a few feet of striking distance. Vincent stopped creeping and stood to face the Mystic.

“A few more steps and you would have been mine,” said Vincent.

The apprentice smiled and jerked his head, “I sensed your approach.”

“Mystic tricks,” shrugged Vincent. Up closed Vincent could see the Dark Mystic had suffered

in the fight with Ionn. Deep gashes leaked blood, but the apprentice still appeared strong.

“You can sell her now and walk away from this,” the apprentice told Vincent.

Vincent frowned. “I never considered going through with the sale,” Vincent told him. “I would have taken your offering and the girl.”

The apprentice laughed, “After you gave her to me I would have killed you and taken our offering back.”

Vincent shared his laughter. “We should end this before we begin to like one another.”

“I hope your are eager to die,” said the apprentice.

He pressed into Vincent. His force sword humming with every blow. Vincent blocked each strike with his short blade and tried to keep out of range. He wished he had brought more ammo for his pistol. At least he'd have a fighting chance, blocking and shooting.

“You are good at running, but you can't parry my blows forever. No unaugmented human can hope to best an apprentice of the Dark Coven! You will weaken, falter and then die beneath my blade.”

“I just have to last long enough for Ionn's systems to self repair and reboot,” Vincent told him.

The apprentice looked over at the fallen android. There was genuine concern in the Dark Mystic's face. “You'll never last that long,” asserted the Dark Mystic.

“You trying to convince me or yourself?” taunted Vincent while trying to hide his exhaustion. The exertion was taking its toll. The apprentice was younger, faster, stronger and filled with the power of shadow, but Vincent had traveled the galaxy and was once considered one of the best. *Economy of motion, Vincent told himself. Make every movement count and don't waste your effort. Bide your time, stay alive and an opportunity will present itself. Do something he does not expect.*

Vincent remembered, he still had his grenades. He pulled a shrapnel grenade off his belt and tossed it at the apprentice even though they were at close range. It exploded. The apprentice was caught in the burst; Vincent narrowly missed being wounded by jumping aside at the last moment.

“You trying to kill yourself as well,” laughed the apprentice trying to hide the severity of the wounds.

“One fights with what he has,” challenged Vincent as he secretly popped the pin on another grenade.

Blood seeped from a dozen small punctures as the apprentice staggered toward Vincent. Vincent could see that hate alone was keeping the Dark Mystic moving; hate and perhaps the dark energies that swirled in his soul. No human could have suffered so much and kept fighting.

“I’ll kill you,” swore the Dark Mystic.

“Maybe.” Vincent tossed the grenade.

The grenade’s burst hit the apprentice in the chest, driving small pieces of metal into his body and knocking him off his feet. His force sword bounced away. The Dark Mystic struggled to rise.

Vincent cautiously walked up and drove his blade through the apprentice’s stomach pinning the Dark Mystic to the ground. The Mystic tried to cast a spell, but only blood poured from his mouth.

“Stay here,” said Vincent. Then he heard the others coming.

Casey shouting, “Ionn. Where are you?”

Lynx shouting, “Ionn! Ionn! Vincent where are you?”

“Actually, lets go into these shadows.” Vincent pulled out his sword and dragged the barely conscious Dark Mystic off into the shadows. When they were hidden from his comrades, Vincent explained. “I think Ventross and Casey would favor just killing you. If the Sheriff finds out you’re still alive he may want to try you or something stupid like that. I’ve got other plans. The Kizmet’s got too many expenses. So tell me can I get more credit from selling you to the Galactic Coalition or do you think your master will pay to have you back?”

The apprentice gurgled; to Vincent it sounded like an attempt at laughter. “You think that’s funny?” asked Vincent.

The apprentice died. His body turned to dust and Vincent was left holding an empty black robe.

“Creepy,” said Vincent.

VIII. Celebrations

The revelry was in full swing as Vincent made it back to the celebration. He was still carrying the Dark Mystic robes. No one noticed his entry. His eyes searched the crowd. Vale was dancing with the attractive medic from the GenE war. Ionn was talking with a group of grungy mechanics while showing them the internal circuitry of his forearm. They were suitably impressed. His eye lingered on the young colonist who was flirting with Casey. The boy was keeping his distance and Vincent let it continue. He'd crush that situation when the boy began to think he was going to score.

His eyes found Lynx, Ventross and Cynthia talking with Captain Dennison. He moved towards them but did not join their conversation.

"I can't believe that you were initiated as a Dark Mystic," said Captain Dennison.

"I am sorry, Captain," said Cynthia. "I didn't want to lie to you, but I was desperate."

"What's going to happen now?" asked Dennison.

"Captain Ventross is going to give me a ride to the Mystic Temple on his boat," she replied. "Casey tells me they have a process called Redemption. I may become part of the Mystic Coven."

"Well I wish you luck," Dennison told her.

"Thank you." Cynthia left the Captains talking and made her way to the food table where Vincent joined her. She did not look pleased to see him.

"Evening," said Vincent as he offered her a lopsided grin.

She looked at Vincent sourly, "I'm surprised to see you smiling."

"And why not smile?" he asked her.

"You should be disappointed. You didn't get to sell me. I got rescued by Ionn."

"Yes," said Vincent. "Heroics is part of Ionn's programming."

"What do you want?" she asked him, and then she added with a grin of her own. "I'd rather not be in your presence."

Vincent feigned affront, "I brought you a parting gift."

Vincent gave her the black robe that was left behind when he killed the Dark Mystic. She recognized the cloth immediately and her eyes went wide. "Just in case your Redemption fails you may be needing a good robe."

Vincent left her clutching the robe to her chest.