DEEP BLACK

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Edited by
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Acknowledgements

This work would not have been possible without the help of many people. The germ of the idea for the story came from a series of sci-fi roleplaying sessions with my gaming buddies: Lawrence Sheffield, Steve Ratter, Michael B., and my brother Jason. Some of the characters were influenced by a pirate campaign run by Brian Jamison for me and my brother, our friend Josh and my brother-in-law Richard Mandl. Gaming and fiction have always been intertwined for me.

After the sci-fi rpg sputtered out, I started thinking about stories in that universe and wrote it into a thirteen episode animated series with great encouragement from my dear friend Quinn. Realizing that I might never have the means to produce an animated series, I let the story hibernate. When I began designing a sci-fi starship boardgame (Battlestations) in 2001, I needed aliens to use. I thought I'd never get the rights to use Star Wars or Star Trek so I just mined my Deep Black universe for aliens and modified the universe to reflect an atmosphere that was more fertile for gaming as opposed to fiction.

My fascination with the Deep Black story would never be satisfied until I brought it out so I started working on the novelization a few years ago. Along the way, I got support from my friend Dean who was kind even when he said “It needs a lot of work.” When I was ready to get serious, my friend Janice Sellers agreed to edit it and she did much of the “lot of work” to make the novel more readable.

This is a story about wanting to do the right thing even when you aren't sure what that is or whether you are up to the task. It is a metaphor for my life. I hope you find some truth in it as well.

A note to Battlestations fans:
You might recognize some of the aliens herein as very close to those in Battlestations. This novel is set in a universe parallel to that of Battlestations but it isn't a “Battlestations” novel. The most glaring differences are the lack of cloning technology and the bit about the earth going off- “bang”. Now on with the show.
Contents

I: All the King's Horses
II: Murder
III: Conspiracy
IV: Memory Lane
V: Wetwork
VI: Assassins
VII: Deep Black Ink
VIII: Betrayal
IX: Family Reunion
X: Crossfire
XII: Renewal
XIII: Final Showdown
for S. Quinn,

Thank you for being a bright muse in the time of a dark sky.
All the King's Horses

Even moving at several times the speed of sound, objects as large as tectonic plates can only look ponderously slow. Suddenly, chunks of the planet that had danced a slow dance for eons scattered spaceward and the magma locked underneath jetted forth. In that one instant, the Earth was no more. The shattered remnants of a once proud planet drifted out across the screen as though captured in slow motion. It was real-time even if it wasn’t live. It had been nearly ten years, but the data cube would never degrade. Neither would the need for closure. The whole scene was captured and replayed endlessly on the screen wall in the office of Miss Edna Forberry, Director of Xenoprotocol.

“Aunt Edna,” as she was affectionately known by those with whom she worked (and who therefore had entirely no affection for her) was a matronly fiftyish woman when the Earth went up in the accident. Like most humans, the loss of the Earth had struck her like the loss of a parent — shock gives way to the dawning realization that childhood is irrevocably gone. The parallel didn’t stop there. Mother Earth had been by that point in the equivalent of a nursing home. It was hard to imagine that the bread basket of a republic that spanned light years was by then importing more food than it exported. Earthbound culture clung to traditions that had helped them grow from the infancy of technology but eventually had become albatrosses on its neck. Overpopulation, religious squabbling, and pollution from centuries of learning lessons the hard way had made the Earth much less the shining blue globe than what one saw on the screen. But thanks to the kindness of memory and the orbital distance of the camera that had captured its demise, that was how it was immortalized.

Aunt Edna’s office was a contrast of light and shadows. A large empty wooden desk separated a cushiony chair from five rather Spartan chairs. Although it was her office, she stood almost at attention while she waited for a man in the shadows to speak. Even unseen, he exuded a presence. What light he stepped into played
across the single shock of white in his jet-black hair as he addressed Edna in a rich baritone.

“Don’t you get tired of watching it? It’s been ten years.”

Edna's English accent was West-End posh. “I’m watching it in reverse. It’s good for the old morale.”

“All the king's horses ….” The man in the shadows felt his mouth broaden to the kind of fake smile that eyes never share.

Almost on cue the explosion on the screen began to reverse itself.

“Do you half think anyone watches the explosion of the Waykin homeworld?” Edna wondered aloud.

“Not in reverse. The Waykins nearly all died on their planet. They didn’t reach out to the stars like we did. There is not enough left of them to matter.”

BZZZZT. The intercom shattered the moment of reflection.

“You’re two-thirty appointment is here.”

Aunt Edna paused to look to the man in the shadows.

“There’s some live vid I need to show you about their mission first.”

Aunt Edna held down the intercom button long enough to say, “Have them wait, if you please.”

Arenas are as old as the human civilizations that love and hate them. From the first time two men met in a circle in the dirt, the dichotomy was born. Violence for spectacle is wrong … and it is impossible not to watch. Those who wonder whether the fascination with violence is a phase in human development will continue to have a long wait to see it outgrown, if at all. Each civilization does what it can to separate itself from this odious echo of barbarism. Games are codified, and outright mortal combats are moved off-shore, off-planet, or off-system. No doubt, however, there is always a profit in it. The distance from civilization enables the brutality to escalate. Clerks and mechanics, doctors and lawyers, all are willing to pay for the privilege of connecting vicariously to bloodshed.

This arena on the planet Bomba was perhaps the largest in audience, considering its almost live feed throughout the galaxy. It was also the most brutal, if you considered that the impressive human imagination for violence was multiplied by scores of aliens. Ancient Roman emperors had to limit themselves to only the permutations of men and beasts on a single planet and almost stone age technology. The latest impresario, Karg of Pdoge, now could add so much more
to his spectacles, the largest of these shows in what appeared to be the peak of inhumanity. Perhaps it would be better described as the peak of inhumanity “to date.”

Thousands of live fans screaming, squawking, chirping, buzzing, and making noise of every type imaginable drowned out the music at moments. This was no mean feat. Center stage, a human with a sword shared a great round-floored room with what could best be described as a meter-high mound of spaghetti without the sauce. If not for the fact that the pasta (a Waykin) wielded a nasty sword as well, it would have inspired the man to make a joke about the lack of meatballs. As it was, Kendellson knew who was supposed to supply the marinara, so he kept his game face on as he circled left.

Is there a flank to these piles of crap? he wondered.

Could this be the last moment of my life? the Waykin wondered.

His name loosely translated into Lightweight, because Waykins enjoy oxymoronic puns and Lightweight was a fighter by trade. Kendellson’s name meant someone in the distant past by the name of Kendell had had a son. Of course, that left unanswered the question as to why that man had been Kendell or whether he was the one responsible for the red hair and tall muscular build of this modern Kendellson. Lightweight probably had equally striking differentiating features if one were a Waykin. But to an outsider, they all pretty much looked the same.

Kendellson sent in a quick probe that was met with a solid block and counterstrike. He had to dive backward as he blocked. Lightweight wasn’t skilled in the use of the weapon, but its entire body was one perfectly orchestrated fast-twitch muscle group ready to strike. The Waykin rolled around the ring chasing Kendellson counterclockwise. It had apparently figured out that humans indeed had flanks, but Kendellson rolled to his feet and kept backing up in a circle. The Waykin was quick but not fast. Some catcalls came from the audience as the human retreated. A nervous tentacle in a control booth far above the action waited to flip a switch in case things got too boring. Lightweight tumbled up the side of the bowl to gain some momentum and came back in slashing. Kendellson blocked while leaping over the Waykin and it tumbled underneath
him.

The crowd oohed and aahed at the pass. The Waykin rolled through and Kendellson landed flat on his back. Lightweight rolled up the side of the bowl again and back down with more force, but Kendellson had skipped back to his feet by the time it reached him. On this pass, Kendellson didn’t jump as high and didn’t put much into the counterstrike. He landed on a trailing tentacle just as Lightweight swept under him and stopped the Waykin short.

In that instant, two beings and none other knew the fight was over. Lightweight’s momentum spread him out and his sword was nowhere near to block.

Kendellson wasted no time and hacked and hacked again. *There’s the marinara.* He finally allowed himself a smile as the mass of tentacles in front of him convulsed and gave up their juices.

Even though the viewscreen in Aunt Edna’s office was already blank, the man in shadows turned away from it.

“I’ve seen enough. We’ve got to stop it. It’s just not right.” The elderly man’s voice betrayed no sympathy for the Waykin.

“It is only a little bloodshed. Frankly, sir, I don’t quite see how it relates to the Society’s mission.”

“The only way we’re going to be able to build a future for humanity is if we learn to separate ourselves from the aliens.”

“Forgive me, sir, but it appears the humans win more often than not.”

“Don’t you see? Consorting with any aliens, even this grizzly competition, humanizes them in the eyes of the masses. We need clarity. Also, that Pdoge commentator, Karg, owns the channel and he’s making a mint.”

“So we need a black ops team to stop these games.”

“Eventually, yes. I don’t expect this bunch to do it, though.” The man in shadows consulted a clipboard-sized datapad before continuing. “What do we have, a boy scout, a defective, a psych patient, and an artificial?”

“He’s real enough. Only his DNA is artificial. And before you ask, no, that’s not a typo on his age. He’s one of Lindstrom’s.”

“Whatever. He’s not natural. The woman looks familiar somehow.”
“She’s been surgically enhanced so much she jolly well might have been a potted plant to start with. While they were doing the obvious bits, they genetically re-engineered for strength and reflexes.”

“The handicapped one will function normally?”

“Better, in theory. His cybernetic brain was originally intended for autonomic functions. He’s adapted to it and uses it like a built-in mainframe. It’s more of an asset than a handicap.”

The shadow man let out a scoff and touched the datapad to see the next profile. “At least the leader’s normal, although his test scores aren’t much.”

“Right. Well, there’s not much to him, but I thought we needed someone to keep the others in line. His psychological profile was positively brimming with honor and duty.”

“Fine, fine. I don’t think this group will amount to much. They didn’t score high enough on xenophobia.”

“Well, sir, if this first assignment doesn’t improve their xenophobia—”

“It will kill them.” Shadow man’s voice cut her off.

Aunt Edna let an almost exasperated sigh. ”Forgive me, sir, but if you think they’re so hopeless, what the devil are we using them for?”

“We need more information before we send in a first-rate team. I don’t want to risk quality stock. I’ll be watching through the observation window.”

The man in the shadows snapped the datapad off as he slipped through the door to the observation room.

Aunt Edna toggled the intercom button and took her seat.
“T’m prepared now. Send them in, please.”

The door opened and Fletcher Hawkins walked in deliberately with his dark eyes fixed on Aunt Edna. Of average height and a lean rangy build, Hawkins was thoroughly unassuming except for a trick of the light perhaps that made Aunt Edna feel he could see the shadow man in the reflection of her eyes.

Next through the door was Ariel Ventano. Chronologically she was 42, but she could easily pass for half that. Aunt Edna had to stifle a smirk at the younger woman’s impossibly cruel beauty. It’s
not that it wasn’t natural, but Aunt Edna had skimmed the rather extensive medical files. Everything was technically natural, from the gene-spliced follicles that sprouted auburn hair on the top of her head to the painful bone lengthening procedures that had added nearly six percent to the length of her long legs. There was nothing in between that was untouched. The same gene-splicing treatments to cause the growth of luxurious hair could be applied to other parts as well. Facial sculpture sounds less painful and less accurate than grinding bones away with subdermal sonics. Ariel had a kind face that showed no kindness. Some of the techs at the asylum she’d spent the last two decades in believed it possible she could be cute if she smiled, but it was an untested hypothesis. At least it had saved them effort on reducing laugh lines.

Closely behind Ariel came Ferdinand Lindstrom. “Freddie the Hammer,” as his friends called him (but he had none), was tall and powerfully built with rich black skin, wavy blond hair, and an epicanthal fold around his bright blue eyes above a strong Roman nose. An almost feral air surrounded him. His eyes darted quickly about the room, soaking in the data. He painted everything he saw with his eyes and each pass made it more his own. On the first pass he found people, doors, and weapons; on subsequent passes he’d find weaknesses, traits, and opportunities in greater depth. For Hammer, life was a constant test, and failure was not an option.

Last to enter the room was James Vincent, who could charitably be described as doughy-looking. Of course, the kids of his youth hadn’t been charitable and chose instead to comment on the cybernetic extension that wrapped around his head. He’d gotten in a fight once when he was about 8 and thought he’d won and silenced the bullies. The kid he had beaten up was bigger than he was. He found out the next day that the bully had been scared of damaging little James’s cyberbrain. He went from object of derision to hero to outcast in one day. He walked into Aunt Edna’s office like the lost boy he still was even at the age of thirty.

“Take a seat, please.” Four uneasy bodies found four chairs. “Nice view, ma’am.” Fletcher nodded at the screen. “Thank you. Call me Aunt Edna, dear.” “That’s not Pdoge,” Hammer stated plainly. “Correct, Mister Lindstrom. You don’t have to be old enough
to remember the Earth to miss it, then, do you Mister Lindstrom? Mister Fletcher, I believe you also lost your father on Earth. It’s the Republican Navy’s job to keep what’s left of humanity alive.”

Hammer fidgeted in his seat. He was constantly in motion. If you ordered him to be still, as his drill instructors frequently would, Hammer would become compulsively still and practice rigid isometrics. The only muscle moving would be the almost occasional beat of his powerful heart, which would actually rock him in his chair slightly. When one sergeant complained about this, Hammer took to increasing his heart rate to the point where the vibrations couldn’t be seen.

“Yeah, the Office of Xenoprotocol is making the universe safe for what’s left of humanity,” Ariel recrossed her legs.

Aunt Edna pursed her lips. “Of course not. You are all well aware of rumors to the effect that the accident that destroyed the Earth wasn’t an accident?” She paused long enough to get nods. “Our mission is to find out who did this. On screen: cue Earth explosion.”

Once again, Aunt Edna’s wall came alive with the image of the Earth exploding. All five heads turned to watch it. Even though they all had seen it countless times, the image of the destruction of their homeworld was impossible to ignore.

James Vincent broke the silence. “I thought it was only conspiracy theory wackos who thought it was more than an accident.”

“Thank you for the delightful characterization, young man. I have something of a reputation for being a stickler, or even a cold-hard bitch, if you'll excuse the language. ‘Wacko’ is a new one.”

“What about the Ferguson report?” Ariel asked almost bored. “Yes, quite comprehensive. Quite convincing. Also quite a necessary bit of fancy to calm a galactic government on the brink of chaos. The human race was hardly in a position to hunt down the killers and exact justice. It was better to wait.”

“Why? Let’s find them and kill them,” Hammer gritted out through clenched teeth.

“It’s the finding that will be the hard part, I’m afraid.”

“Is that how we fit into all this?” Fletcher asked.

“Well, I would have liked to have started this meeting by
congratulating you all on graduating in the top five percent of your class on the naval placement exam,” Aunt Edna began.

Even Hammer’s dour face split into a wide grin.

“Hammer here must have cheated unless you count double points for P.E.,” Vincent cracked.

“As a matter of fact,” Aunt Edna continued, “it’s apparent that he wasn’t the only one who cheated. On screen: video Cheaterdoc.”

The group’s smiles faded as the wall screen view changed from the perpetually exploding Earth to a series of short video clips demonstrating, in turn, evidence of Hammer craning his neck to look at Vincent’s desk and footage of Ariel buying answers from a relatively shady-looking fellow.

“One question on the test was never covered in the study guide and yet all four of you found the answer. How could each of you have known the exact beam length of the first craft equipped with string-drive technology? Mr. Lindstrom. Ferdinand, is it?”

“Freddie the Hammer.”

“Of course. Mr. Lindstrom, you got top marks in the physical requirements but somehow thought you needed a perfect score in the written test as well. Peeking at Mr. Vincent’s test was a good bet. Except you got caught.

And Ms. Ventano, your scores were adequate otherwise, and your progress at weapons and vehicles quite impressive, but did you really think the chap selling the test answers was for real?”

Ariel Ventano shrugged her perfect shoulders.

“Mr. Vincent, your cybernetic brain—”

”Is perfectly legal!” Vincent interrupted.

“And yet your uplink to the infonet was at least as unwelcome as your outburst here. You'll be well advised not to make a habit of interrupting me.

“Mr. Hawkins, do you have something to say for yourself?”

Fletcher refused to rise to the bait. His dark eyes met Aunt Edna’s icy stare without flinching.

“Mr. Hawkins, would you like to share with the class how you got your answer?”

“Just a lucky guess, I suppose.”

“It wasn’t multiple choice.”

“I didn’t take multiple guesses,” Fletcher shrugged.
“At any rate,” Aunt Edna continued unruffled, “the evidence we have against each of you is sufficient for disqualification and dismissal.”

Hammer leaned forward in his seat and relaxed. Aunt Edna didn’t know Hammer well enough yet to realize that for him to relax was a sign of bad things to come.

“There’s one test I didn’t cheat on: Dem Mock.”

Aunt Edna stared back with a preternatural calm.

“He’s talking about the martial art of killing in a single strike,” Ariel explained.

“Ending your own lives as well, you see,” Edna retained her calm. Her eyes darted skyward to a security camera mounted on the end of a gun barrel that tracked motion. “You’d be dead before you left this room if you carried out the threat, and I might like to remind you that even repeating a threat like that could have dire consequences.”

By the time Edna could purse her lips again, Ariel had snatched a pen off her desk and thrown it into the camera gun’s gimbal, jamming it. The motor whirred and ground in place.

“You still couldn’t leave this room, much less this base, with much hope of a future.”

“Why do you think we joined the Republican Navy in the first place? Do we look all full of future anyway?” Vincent asked. “If we fail, these two goons go off to some agricultural moon. The girl is waiting tables in a low-grav strip joint, and I’m plugging my cyberbrain into a sewage treatment computer system crunching numbers on Pdoge.”

“The way I see it,” Ariel almost whispered, “we’ve got nothing to lose.”

Fletcher raised a hand slowly and waved the group down.

“Take it easy, Aunt Edna didn’t gather us here to hear threats or to threaten us. If she’d just wanted to dump us on the street, she wouldn’t have given us the personal treatment. What’s your angle, Aunt Edna?”

“Quite, Mr. Hawkins. My ‘angle’ as it were is that I wish to offer the four of you an alternative. There is less glory in it but perhaps more opportunity to exercise your … creativity?”

“Talk,” Hammer said.
“As you know, the Republican Navy is limited in its scope by its accountability to the Republican Senate. There are those who operate within the bounds of the law but outside the realm of decency and there is nothing the Navy can do to stop them. However, a small group of unofficial individuals acting on their own initiative might have more latitude. Your unique talents and teamwork make you ideal operatives.”

“And if we’re caught, it’s no skin off your nose,” Fletcher observed.

“Correct yet again, Mr. Hawkins.”

Hammer began to unconsciously flex his fists. “What’s the mission?

“The broad goal is, of course, to find out which aliens are responsible for the destruction of the Earth and exact revenge.”

“By whatever means necessary.” Ariel’s voice held a thin hope. She’d been dealt a cruel hand and relished the opportunity for a little payback. She didn't mind who was on the receiving end.

“Yes.”

“We’d be doing gray operations then,” said Vincent.

“Or black ops,” said Ariel, whose mood was noticeably lifting as Fletcher’s sank.

“Deep Black,” Aunt Edna finished the line of thinking. “That will make a fine code name for your little team. If you’re interested —”

“Count me in.” Hammer almost jumped out of his seat.

“Whatever.” Ariel feigned a lack of enthusiasm.

“Beats sewage treatment on Pdoge,” said Vincent.

“I guess we’re in,” Fletcher concluded. Aunt Edna passed each a datapad.

“Very well, then, you will be assigned to regular naval duties. When on assignment for me, you’ll be officially on leave. If you bring a little heat on yourself, the Navy will bring you in and reprimand you for being AWOL. If you bring a lot of heat on yourself, another team will be assigned to damage control.”

“They’ll clean up our mess?” Hammer asked.

“Sort of,” Aunt Edna smiled.

“If we are more trouble than we are worth, we get early retirement,” Fletcher explained, “and our parting gift is a piece of lead rather than a gold watch.”
“Yet again, Mr. Hawkins.” Aunt Edna was impressed. “Perhaps you are more than a lucky guesser. Since you seemed to be able to keep your cool better than the rest in our little, uh, interview, I’m assigning you to be the team leader.”

“When do we start killing the aliens?” Hammer asked.

“I do appreciate your enthusiasm, young man, but I’m afraid it’s not that simple.”

“Nothing ever is.” Ariel’s lift in spirits proved to be fleeting.

“Patience is a virtue, dear. We’ve had ongoing operations for ten years now, quietly gathering information and striking where we can. If we move too quickly, the aliens could find an excuse to finish off the human race. We need to find the aliens responsible and gather proof. We can’t just go on a willy-nilly campaign of slaughter.”

“I could,” Hammer sulked.

“I appreciate your work ethic, but I’m afraid there's more to it. We need to find the aliens responsible and gather proof. We have other missions we run as well.”

“That’s a relief,” Ariel said. “I wouldn’t want to get bored.”

“Ms. Ventano,” Aunt Edna’s eyes darted toward the camera gun, “I’ll excuse your indiscretion as an unfamiliarity with the rules. I'll be most grateful if you'd be kind enough to refrain from vandalizing my office in the future.”

“What happens when we get in trouble?” Vincent asked.

“There is only one level of discipline I exact and it is fatal. Dismissed.”

By the time Ariel could mutter “Whatever” Hammer had leaped up, bouncing off the desk and the wall to grab the pen from the camera gun’s gimbal. He landed and handed it to Aunt Edna with a broad grin. Aunt Edna pursed her lips and the team left the room.

When the door slid shut, the shadow man slipped back into the room from his side door.

“They are a handful …,” he offered.

“You still don’t think they have a chance to stop the games?”

“At this stage, they’re just chumming the waters.”

“It’s practically a shame. I mean, they’re almost likeable.”

“Do I detect a melt in that frost, madam?”
“Dear, not that I like them, but I see a chemistry. Except for the girl, they can be endearing to the simple.”

“The girl is attractive. She’ll elicit sympathy, and Lindstrom’s brute force should generate a lot of support. What’s Hawkins here for? He didn’t actually cheat, did he?”

“Heavens, no. He didn’t even come close on the answer. I do like that he played it close to the vest. We need somebody to keep a lid on the rest of them.”

“They are a bunch of loose cannons.”

Aunt Edna switched the video screen back to the perpetually exploding Earth. “What if they do stop the games?”

“Great,” the shadow man scoffed, “I’m just not getting my hopes up. At this stage, we could use just a little recon and a few martyrs. I was impressed with the human we saw on the vid clip of the games. What’s his name?”

“Kendellson. Shall I look into recruitment?”

“His xenophobia index looks high enough. Don’t waste any resources on him until you see if he survives the games.”

It didn’t take long for Aunt Edna’s orders to come through. The Deep Black team was resting comfortably in the Pdogle station’s rec room for less than an hour. Hammer was beating Ariel at ping-pong and Vincent had managed to disassemble the automatic line judge. Hawkins was fast asleep when the crisply dressed crewman entered the room and delivered a crisp envelope along with a crisp salute.

“Real paper?” Vincent marveled.

“No electronic paper trail.” Hawkins took the envelope and waited for the crewman to seal the door behind him.

“So, Fletcher, you think we’ll get sent to Xental?” Hammer asked.

“Nah, they have enough meat to die on the ground. I think we’ll be in for something more cerebral.”

Hammer and Vincent huddled around while Fletcher opened the envelope. Ariel took the opportunity to score a point on Hammer as he dropped his paddle on the table. Vincent dropped the electronic line judge and it shattered into a thousand pieces.

“Don’t be in such a hurry, meathead. We’ll get in over our heads soon enough.” Ariel strolled around the ping-pong table and
looked over Fletcher’s shoulder as he opened the envelope.  
Vincent, Ariel, and Hammer huddled around Fletcher and read as he opened it.

“Is this some kind of joke?” Vincent asked.
“We’re going to Bomba!” Hammer cheered.
“Intellectual?” Ariel asked Fletcher.
“Maybe not,” Fletcher shrugged.
“This doesn’t seem a whole hell of a lot like searching for the conspirators who blew up the Earth,” Vincent offered.
“Well, we can’t just go sifting through what’s left of the Earth with a magnifying lens. It looks like we’re going to Bomba.” Fletcher crumpled the paper and threw it into a trash incinerator.

Two shuttles and seventeen hours later, the Deep Black team was aboard the passenger liner *Kindness*. Fletcher didn’t waste any time getting started with planning. Hammer was more than willing to monitor the games’ progress on the on-board vid system.

A Xoloxian was hacking at a Clouvan colony using some spiked chains. The commentators’ cute remarks inspired Fletcher to kill the volume quickly. The group watched in silence for a few minutes before Ariel posed a question.

“Why exactly is it we’re going to shut down the games?”
Hammer reacted as though she’d slapped him in the face.
“What do you mean, ‘why?’ That’s the mission, that’s why.”
“No,” Ariel shook her head and a few wisps of hair danced across her face, “I mean why did they make that the mission. If we know why, we may have a better idea of how.”

Fletcher shifted in his seat. “How about we want to stop the games because they are cruel and barbaric? That’s got to be enough why. Now how do the games work?”

After a little research in flight, Fletcher was brought up to speed on how the games worked. It was essentially a single-elimination tournament in a random configuration of terrains and weapons. Each contestant was fitted with a vital signs telemetry device to determine exact moment of death. This last bit was quite valuable to the death-time pool wagering contingent.

“Let’s just do the job. The less you know, the better. Nice shot!” Hammer regarded a blow landed by the Xoloxian.
“Why the vital signs telemetry?” asked Fletcher.
“Big money changes hands over the time of death. A bill to ban the games dies on the Senate floor every year.” Ariel’s voice reflected perpetual boredom.
James Vincent looked up incredulously from his hopeless attempt to reassemble the pile of broken bits in front of him. “You follow politics?”
“Old habits die hard.” Ariel flicked her gaze back to the video screen where the Xoloxian was shredding the Clouvan and fourteen sets of vital signs flatlined in a matter of seconds. “But not as hard as that Clouvan did. They want to ban the games because it is bad for the kids and interspecies violence is bad for interspecies relations.”

Vincent chuckled, “But the people love it. I’ve been a fan for years and from what I’ve seen, if anything it promotes interspecies relations. You get really interested in how they interact and you find yourself rooting for aliens you never heard of against even humans sometimes. Like check out this Hkanthon. They might win a match once in a while but they never win the tournament. Gutsy little bastards, they are. It’s hard not to root for them.”

Hkanthons are ten-legged insects covered in thin fur with an abdomen the size of a steamer trunk. One stood opposite Kendellson on a log bridge over a long drop. Each contestant carried a large ax.
Kendellson took a whack square at the carapace on the back of the Hkanthon, but the blow glanced off harmlessly. The insectoid scuttled around to the underside of the log and scuttled forward. Kendellson chopped two of the legs on one side in one strike as the Hkanthon spun up underneath him, slashing at his legs. Kendellson barely leaped up in time to avoid the ax and brought his own down to lop off two more legs. Then he gave a swift kick in that direction. The Hkanthon hung on for a just a second before falling.

“Acid or spikes?” James’ smile faded as the monitor went black with a message: “Please deposit 10 more skoos.”
The rest of the group groaned but Fletcher was relieved. “We’ll never know.”
Ariel flicked a coin into the slot without getting up and the
monitor came back just in time for all to hear the splash of the acid and see the monitor frozen on a time of death at 1:47.

“Nice shot, Ariel. I would like to win the games before we shut them down. There's nothing in our orders against that, is there?”

Hammer was always comfortable boasting but never comfortable shirking orders. “Growing up, it was the only vids we got to watch live.”

“Some parenting.”

“My parents died with the Earth. The orphanage was all I ever knew.”

“That was only what, nine years ago?”

“At any rate,” Fletcher interrupted, “our mission is to take those games down. Getting mixed up in them is the last thing we're going to do. We're going to put an end to them, Ferdinand.”

“Hammer. Call me 'Freddie the Hammer,' and entering the games is the last thing a lot of people do.”

Ariel stood up and crossed the room. “What's the point? Even if we nuked the place, somebody else would start something like it somewhere else.”

Fletcher sat up on his bunk. “Then we've got to hurt not just the games or these people putting it on but the entire concept of the games. Mr. Vincent, I've got some ideas for some equipment I'd like you to cook up.”

“Cook up?”

“You're the tech. See what you can make of these sketches.”

Fletcher tossed a datapad to James Vincent, who didn't realize that by accepting the pad he'd also accepted the nickname. From then on he was known as “Cookie.”

“Great. I'll see what I can 'cook up.'”

It's always night on Bomba, as the planet has no sun. It is still young enough that the hot core keeps the surface warm, but it has a very thin carbon dioxide atmosphere. Geothermal heat provides plenty of cheap power and lights everywhere make it practically daytime. Most of the planet is uninhabited, but the brightly colored main thoroughfare covers almost an eighth of the surface. Visitors need to rely on breathers.

The shuttle landed near the outskirts of a heavily populated area
outside a huge enclosed stadium. Its doors opened up to an airlock, where the Deep Black team was met by a pair of guards, one human and one a jacklike Xoloxian with six appendages. The human was dressed in a suit with a pair of sunglasses, a breather, and an earpiece. The Xoloxian carried what had to be a weapon, but it looked almost too large for one of its six arm/legs. It also carried a voicebox hanging from one of its shoulders/crotches. This box came to life as the human guard zipped a walkway onto the shuttle's airlock.

“Fletcher Hawkins and party?” Fletcher nodded.

“We've been expecting you. Right this way.” The guards frisked them and rifled through their bags, stopping with Cookie's suitcase and holding up some tools.

Fletcher spoke up. “There's nothing contraband here, is there?” “Not on Bomba, but we are pretty strict about what we allow in the arena.”

“I need this stuff for routine maintenance and emergencies with my cybernetic brain.” Cookie tapped his implant and gathered up the tools.

“Oh, I see. You must be the manager.” Cookie's puzzled look at Fletcher was lost on the guards. “Yeah.”

Hammer picked up the rest of the luggage and the guards led the foursome on a meandering route that snaked its way through tubes up to the stadium's back entrance.

The human passed out sunglasses. “Put these on. Karg meets all contestants personally.”

“So?”

“So you're meeting Karg. Blindfolds for all of you, even the manager, and follow me.”

The sunglasses automatically switched on as they were put on and emanated an area of darkness that completely blocked the wearer's vision. With each member having a hand on the shoulder in front of him, the team made its way through a few corridors and up an elevator before stopping outside the broadcast booth while some heavy doors opened. Once inside the booth, Karg reached out a tentacle and removed their blinders for them. Karg's breath, like that of all Pdoges, contained chemicals that inspire fear and
nausea in most biological organisms. The sight of a Pdoe isn't much better, especially when it is smiling – and Karg was smiling. “Best of luck to you.” Karg extended a tentacle toward each member of the team.

The rest were nonplussed, but Fletcher reached out and shook the tentacle, much to Karg's delight. “Best of luck to you as well.”

At this, Karg let out a laugh that fell somewhere between a foghorn and a bad case of flatulence. “HOUGH! HOUGH! HOUGH! HOUGH!”

Hammer looked around the control booth at the plastisteel window separating them from the rest of the crowd. “So this is where it all happens?”

“Best seat in the house.” Karg smiled again.

Ariel couldn't help but wince. “Aren't you worried about this window here with all that chaos going on outside?”

“HOUGH! HOUGH!” Karg rapped the plastisteel with a tentacle. “Some of the fans get it, but I've got two meters of plastisteel. It would take a tactical nuke to get in here.”

Cookie sighed. “This place is like a fortress.”

“We have to be able to keep the broadcast going even in the event of an attack.” Karg was serious now.

“Attack?”

“Once in a great while, some peaceniks will come and try to kill us all. Ironic, isn't it? Hough! HOUGH! We're set up to continue broadcasting from this booth for days in the event of a siege.”

“Great.” It was Fletcher's turn to sigh.

“Now, if you'll excuse me, you've got to prepare for your debuts, and I've got some work to do here myself. Good luck to me, HOUGH! HOUGH!” With that, Karg handed back the blindglasses and turned back to the broadcast board. The team was unceremoniously dismissed. They donned their glasses and allowed themselves to be led to their waiting room.

Once the team was inside the room, the human guard in sunglasses that had led them in removed their blindglasses. The Spartan quarters contained little more than a free vidscreen, two bunks, and multispecies toilet facilities.

“Which one of us is stuck with this room?” Ariel asked.
“All of you share this room. Don't worry, you won't be in it for long. Just the rest of your short lives.” The guard in shades cracked a smile every time he made that joke. He had become accustomed to laughing alone. He began the process of fitting the vital signs collars to Ariel, Hammer, and Fletcher with a tool like a pop-rivet gun that locked them on. After a few final adjustments he confirmed through his wrist radio that telemetry was being sent before turning to advise the team of their schedule.

“The collar will beep two minutes before your match.”

“You sure know how to give a girl the red carpet treatment around here.”

“Look, Miss. Everybody thinks they're special. We get sixty-four creatures a day that think it's all about them. When your neckband beeps, just walk out that door and go to the door at the end of the corridor and wait until it opens. Good luck,” he sneered as the door slid shut behind him.

Cookie opened his toolkit and started laying things out. “I thought we were just fact finding. This is moving awfully fast. I was hoping to recruit one of the contestants for this. I've only got enough parts for one. Who's it going to be?”

“Recruiting a contestant sure got easy. Besides, what could be a better way to find facts than in the games?” Hammer couldn't contain his joy. “I'm going to win the whole stinkin' tournament. Stay away from my collar.”

Fletcher looked over at Ariel. “How would you like to die?”

“I'd rather die for real than get caught with your stupid plan. I'm used to getting the short end of the stick. This is just par for the course. Life is what it is. I'd rather take my chances killing stuff, thank you. Besides, it was your idea anyway, Fletcher.”

Cookie went to work on Fletcher's collar, occasionally scorching him with the microsoldering iron. Hammer had found the controls for the vidscreen by this point and it flashed to life. On screen a pair of Pdoges wrestled. The team watched with mixed emotions as the two Pdoges squeezed the life out of each other with bare tentacles.

“That was a yawner.” Hammer began limbering up as the vital signs slowed on the screen. “Do you think we have a lot of time before our next match? I hope I'm next.”

“Let's just hope it isn't Fletcher next because I'm not quite done
here.” Cookie could feel the sweat dripping onto his cybernetic brain.

Ariel's neckband beeped.

“It looks like I'm off.”

“Wait.” Fletcher held up a hand. We can stall them. I can—”

“Oh, thanks my 'knight gallant,' but I'll be fine. Dying on this lump of crap planet is better than living on the lump of crap planet I spent the last 15 years on.”

With that, Ariel walked out the door and turned right. When she reached the end of the corridor a door opened and she stepped into an elevator. Another man wearing sunglasses was waiting inside. He handed her a crossbow and a quiver with a dozen quarrels. It surprised her.

“Don't I get some sort of alien weapon?”

“Turns out, there aren't as many alien weapons as you'd imagine. It's pretty much a human thing.”

“I guess I'll make do with this. What am I up against?”

“Beats me. When that door opens go on in. The waiting can be the hardest part. It can make you crazy.”

“Been there. Done that.”

“Try to think of something that will make you angry. It makes you fight better.”

“I'm way ahead of you.” Ariel's thoughts went back to a different chrome building where her vital signs had been monitored.

The New Antarctic Center for Well Being wasn't renowned for its success rate. It was known for the way it treated the mentally ill with dignity and a minimum of suffering. Dignity meant the rich families of the loved ones were spared embarrassment. That's also who experienced the minimized suffering.

Ariel was strapped to a chair with electrodes on her head. A doctor was interviewing her while a nurse silently watched her vital signs.

“It's been nearly fifteen years and you are still showing no signs of improvement. If anything, you're getting worse.”

“I am. I have. I mean I am improving. Not getting worse.” By this point Ariel was on the high end of the desperation cycle to get
out. It peaked every few years then ebbed, to be replaced by depressed acceptance that her fate was sealed. The cycle would repeat.

The nurse, still silent, merely looked at the doctor and shook her head.

“Why do you want to kill your husband?” he asked.

“I don't. I don't care any more. I just want to go home to my son.”

The silent nurse shook her head again.

“Your son is a grown man now. He has declined to return your correspondence. Does that bother you?”

“It's not his fault. He'll be all right when I can talk to him. He … it just that his bastard father filled his head with crap. He should die.” She had lost it. She knew her outburst meant the silent nurse had won and her hopes would fade again, but she just couldn't take it.

“Temper, temper.” The doctor was pleased because the breakdown gave him enough of a nugget to fill his report and keep her in the cell and keep the payments coming.

“You should be grateful to your husband. He provided all of this for you. He's kept up payment on your youth and beauty treatments as well as this expensive therapy. He must love you very much.”

“Of course he does.”

The silent nurse shook her head again.

“Screw you too.” Ariel craned her neck against the restraints to look in the direction of the silent nurse. “Can't you say anything? That's why I'm crazy. I'm locked up with you two: dickless and speechless.”

“Dickless?” the doctor enunciated carefully. “Is this a reference to your nymphomania? Are you threatened by the fact that I won't indulge your sickness?”

“Go to Hell. Both of you.” Ariel went deeper in her description of what the two could accomplish along the way and upon arrival in Hell. The nurse had heard every curse word before, but the composition was such that it made her blush. The doctor was distracted by a call from an outside line. He looked up and his questioning took a different tack entirely.

“Ms. Ventano, I'm afraid I have some bad news. It will be
difficult for you to get closure on your issues with your husband, as I just received word that he's unfortunately passed away. However, as you now pose no threat to anybody else, I'll be ordering a recommendation for you to continue outpatient therapy under the supervision of your own local mental healthcare provider back on your homeworld.”

Ariel hadn't clearly heard anything the doctor said after “passed away.”

“But I don't have a local healthcare provider. I don't have even have a homeworld any more. Where am I going to go?”

“Surely you can find one. Nurse, prep the next patient.”

Ariel Ventano walked out of the clinic and into a recruiting office because she was ready to learn how to use a weapon. Even though the source of her rage was dead, the need to kill wasn't easily put aside.

Now Ariel was in the elevator on her way to the arena. It struck her that she had no desire to kill a random alien, but like the rest of a life that had washed over her, it didn't matter much what she wanted or didn't want or how desperately. Things just happened to her and she had lost the habit of trying to make sense of it all. The door in front of her opened and she stepped through it.

Back in the waiting room, Cookie was working feverishly to finish the alterations to Fletcher's neckband before his turn came up. Ariel's battle on the arena floor raged on the vidscreen. “Hey, guys!” Hammer called out. “Ariel's on.” Cookie kept working but Fletcher and Hammer intently watched the vidscreen.

Sweat beaded up on Cookie's forehead as he worked on Fletcher's collar. “This thing is giving signals now. If I disconnect it, we're out of Deep Black and in deep sh—”

“So don't disconnect it,” said Fletcher

Ariel was stalking her prey in some sand dunes. The green numbers on the left of the vidscreen represented her life signs. On the right were 17 blue sets of numbers.

The arena techs prided themselves on their set dressing. The sand dunes were complete with clumps of short grass. Ariel didn't have to wait long to find out what she was up against. She soon
spotted a Clouvan and skewered it with a crossbow bolt. The crowd roared at first blood, but Ariel knew she had at least a dozen more to kill and not nearly that many bolts.

Clouvans are groups of tiny entities that can operate independently of one another or as a group. When joined, they have a collective intelligence. When separated, they have more of an animal intellect. Each member of the cluster is milky white and about twice the size of a human fist, with six spindly black appendages radiating out from the body. It can use the appendages to connect to the rest of the cluster or for movement when alone.

A Clouvan scuttled forward over the dune directly to Ariel's right. She ducked left and rolled right into the trap the rest of the cluster had waiting. They squeezed off a shot just as Ariel put her hand up in front of her face. The barbed bolt ripped through her left forearm and poked out the other side. The arena's sound technicians also took pride in their work: The crunch of the shattered bone was sickening. The crowd went wild.

Ariel and the cluster both reloaded and fired. Ariel was diving left as she fired and the Clouvan missed wide. Her own shot struck right in the middle of the cluster, killing four instantly and mortally wounding another.

Back in the waiting room, Hammer and Fletcher were still watching while Cookie worked. Fletcher was relieved that five vital signs dropped with a single shot. Without looking up from his work, Cookie asked how.

Hammer explained, “Most of the main cluster is linked. They could have functioned separately at one time, but the ones at the core are usually atrophied or pregnant.”

“That's a nice thought. Hey, Hammer, you sure know a lot about xenobiology.”

Ariel continued reloading with her feet and her good hand. In a brief flurry, she swung the bolt sticking out of her left forearm like a weapon and slashed one of the Clouvans rushing her. A quick finish of the reload and she was firing again into the cluster. One of the units climbed her leg, so she dropped to one knee to crush it. Another shot from the cluster necessitated another roll. This time, she lost the rest of the bolts in her quiver. The remaining Clouvans were staggered. Ariel was out of quarrels. She reached into her empty quiver and quietly cursed as she came up empty. Blood ran
freely down her wounded arm. Swinging the crossbow in her good arm like a club she managed to pulverize the cluster. Some of the Clouvans were slain in the onslaught. Others skittered off to hide.

The crowd cheered some more and the commentators came back on the vidscreen.

"It's going to take a while for that human to finish mopping up all the Clouvans. This match is all but wrapped up. Now might be a great time to break to Senator Willoughby's prerecorded message."

"By the way," Karg stage-whispered in an aside, "now's a great time to go relieve yourself as well."

Senator Willoughby looked sixytish, with a kind face that filled the vidscreen with as much warmth as a vidscreen could convey. In fact, he was well beyond sixytish, and the kind look masked the kind of tough love that drowns kittens in a sack. His deep voice had an Earther accent despite his being a third-generation colonist.

"Friends, citizens of the Republic, aliens and humans, what you are watching is wrong. If we cannot live together in peace then we should not live at all. Violence against our—"

The senator's speech continued, but a beep in Fletcher's neckband meant that the speech went as unheeded in this room as it did in the rest of the galaxy. Fletcher's life was about to be on the line. He looked nervously at Cookie.

"Are you done?"

"Not really."

"What the hell does that mean?"

"I don't know the frequency yet, but I can figure it out without you here. It will take a while. Stall."

"How long?"

"Five, maybe ten minutes."

"I'll just have to make do until then."

"Here, I'm closing up now."

Cookie replaced the seal on the neckband and Fletcher walked out the door and turned right. "Don't worry about it. Do what you can."

"When's my turn?" Hammer was dejected and went back to watching the vidscreen. "It looks like Ariel is done."

Ariel stumbled to the edge of the arena, where a door opened up for her. Inside, a team of medical technicians quickly whisked
her away on a hovergurney and began replenishing her fluids and binding the broken tibia. They didn't even bother to seal off the wound or apply a tourniquet to the arm. There was plenty of good blood to replace that which was pumping out to the rhythm of Ariel's heartbeat. Blood was cheap.

Soon enough, they had the bone knitted and had sealed the arm in a clear cast that rapidly filled with a glowing indigo fluid. Before she knew it, she was being wheeled out on the hovergurney back to the room where Cookie was working and Hammer was ready to watch the opening moves of Fletcher's bout.

Fletcher himself was now in the elevator with the guy in sunglasses, who had the same advice for Fletcher he'd had for Ariel. “Try to think of something that makes you angry. It makes you fight better.”

As a boy on Unfewn, Fletcher was far from wealthy. His father had worked a long-haul freighter route to Earth and was dirtside when the Earth went up. Like all other traffic that day, his ship had been grounded for safety reasons. As an irony in a day of ironies, that safety precaution had been a death sentence. His widow had worked as a music tutor to make ends meet. There weren't a lot of people wealthy enough on the agricultural moon to pay for music lessons, so Elaine Hawkins was grateful for the work she got. One of her less than stellar students, a sixteen-year-old boy, had arrived late as usual. Elaine opened the door.

“Tommy, you're late again?”

“Whatever.” Tommy tossed a datapad to Fletcher as he walked in the door. “Here, kid. You can do my homework.”

Fletcher looked to his mother.

“Go ahead, sweetie. You won't be able to get into any of the good academies if you don't have anything to study. Be a good boy and say thank you to Tommy.”

“Thanks, Tommy.” Fletcher took the datapad and went to sit at a desk while Elaine led Tommy into the music studio/laundry room.

Once inside, Elaine asked Tommy if he'd been practicing. He assured her he had, but the awful sounds soon coming from his violin told a different tale. Fletcher left the apartment to do his work out on the front step. Tommy's ears burned red.

“You haven't been practicing, have you?” Elaine wanted to be
delicate, because she desperately needed the tutoring fees.

“Screw you.” Tommy knew she needed the fees as well. “If it wasn't for people like my dad, you and your brat would starve to death.”

“I can't abide that behavior. I wouldn't be doing your parents much good if I allowed you to be so disrespectful. I'll have none of that lip from you, young man.”

Tommy smiled. “If you play your cards right, you'll get more than that.”

“Don't be rude.”

“I know it must be hard being widowed and you need a man. That's why you sleep with your students.”

Now it was time for Elaine's ears to turn red, but her reaction was from rage. She had nothing to be ashamed of. At least not until this day.

“You little cretin,” she shouted, “I most certainly do nothing of the sort! Stop this right now or I shall have to tell your parents.”

“Tell them what? And who are they going to believe? And are they going to care? And what's going to happen to your brat? There's only one way to keep this between you and me.”

The young Fletcher could hear only the loudest parts of the argument up to this point, but the silence afterward was worse.

The adult Fletcher stepped into the arena and picked up a large pouch of grenades sitting between him and what looked like a roofless maze stretching out past it. He slung the pouch over his left shoulder and began to run through the maze. Almost as quickly as he vacated the entrance, a grenade sailed overhead and detonated behind him. The Kyrrenian — Nkrk Nkrgle — wasn't wasting any time.

Kyrrenians have seven septadextrous limbs. That's like being ambidextrous but with five more limbs. This one was using two or three at a time to hurl grenades, which made for quite a lively display. It also afforded Fletcher the opportunity to triangulate his opponent's location. He took a calculated risk and lobbed a grenade in that general direction.

Back in the waiting room, Ariel had arrived to no fanfare. Hammer was engrossed in Fletcher's match and Cookie continued
to work feverishly.
“There, I got it!” Cookie looked up and finally smiled.
“Got what?”
“Control of Fletcher's neckband.”
Cookie pushed a button, and in the arena Fletcher's neckband beeps a short beep. Fletcher turned and ran toward the nearest wall of the maze. After scrambling two steps up, he slapped just shy of the top of the wall. More grenades flew overhead. Fletcher stuffed half a dozen of his own grenades in his shirt and left the pouch behind. Another run at the wall was more successful than the first. The weight reduction was just enough to get him to the top and cling for dear life as a near miss rocked him.

A quick pull brought Fletcher to the top of the wall with a bird's-eye view of the maze. He saw the location the enemy grenades were coming from much more clearly. Fletcher pulled the pin on one of his remaining grenades and held the safety until he saw another of his opponent's grenades sail by. As it did, he flipped the grenade he was holding into the pouch he'd left behind and ran along the top of the wall past an intersection.

Fletcher's grenade and the Kyrrenian's grenade detonated close enough together that it couldn't be determined who went first. Of course, Fletcher's also set off much of the rest of the explosives in his pouch, so the resulting explosion was quite resounding. The crowd went wild. The Kyrrenian was surprised to hear such a large explosion without hearing the signal ending the match, so it scuttled forward to investigate. It wasn't unusual to have to mop up a crippled foe and put it out of its misery. The Kyrrenian's pouch was well past half empty by this point. It advanced slowly.

As soon as the Kyrrenian approached, Fletcher reached for a grenade and lost his footing, slipping off the wall and dropping what looked like his last grenade in the process. He'd made the move intentionally, but none of the onlookers was puzzled at the bungle. It was all too common for a beginner to make what ought to be a fatal mistake. Fletcher caught himself by his fingertips and hung on the opposite side of the wall out of sight of the advancing Kyrrenian.

With the sound of the grenades ringing in his ears, Fletcher couldn't hear the scuttling of the Kyrrenian's approach, so he had
to guess. He waited a moment, then hoisted himself up and over the wall in one motion. Fletcher landed on the back of the Kyrrenian, wrenched free the grenade pouch, and flung it over the nearest wall before his opponent understood what was happening. It became hand-to-hand combat.

The Kyrrenian had broken Fletcher's fall as well as two of its own appendages. It used one of the good ones to deliver a crushing blow to the side of Fletcher's head. The human's ears were really ringing now. He went sprawling, and on the vidscreen, all of his vital signs flatlined. Sometimes being a hero means you have to die.

Back in the waiting room, Ariel smirked at the screen. “Good, he deserved it. Stupid-ass farm boy would have gotten us all killed sooner or later.”

Cookie stopped adjusting dials on his makeshift apparatus long enough to look up. “Jesus, Ariel, you are cold. Fletcher's a good kid and he dies and it's 'so what?'”

“Doesn't matter whether I like or not, does it?”

“Come on, let's go collect the body.”

Ariel's arm was still in the cast but she was recovering physically if not emotionally. The three left the room and headed down the corridor. Before long, they were challenged by another man in sunglasses.

“Where are you going?”

“To get the body.”

“Wait here, I'll call for an escort.”

Right at this moment, Hammer's neckband beeped. He smiled. “I was beginning to worry I wouldn't get a turn,” and he ran off gleefully down the corridor.

Hammer was met by the same sunglasses-clad technician with the same advice about getting angry. He didn't have any more trouble dredging up a motivational memory than the others had.

Dr. Lindstrom’s office was ornately paneled with hand-carved wood. Each detail was in exact proportion. Lindstrom himself was tall and paunchy with thinning gray hair. He was known as the father of the perfect man but was about as far from perfect as one might imagine. A younger Hammer stood at attention across the
desk from Lindstrom, who looked up from a paper he had been reading.

“Why did you let them do this to you?”
“I didn't let them, they just did it.”
“Why you? Out of all of you, why is it your brothers decided on you? You are as strong as any of the rest, as quick, as bright. What is it about you that made you become the victim?”
“They decided, not me. Ask them.”
“So you let them do this to you.”
“I didn't let them. I fought. I broke Charlie's nose and Danny's knee—”

Lindstrom interrupted, “And you didn't fight hard enough. You fought to maim, not to kill, and you failed because you weren't man enough.”
“I tried,” Hammer whimpered.
“Don't talk back and don't whimper. I have half a mind to let them do it again.”
“Please, no. Oh, please, no.”
“Did it hurt?”
“Yes, sir, yes, it did hurt.”
“Good and goddamned right it should hurt. Stop that whimpering. If you don't act like a man, your brothers are going to treat you like a woman.”
“If they try again, I'll kill every last one of them.”
“That's a good boy.”

Back in the arena, back in the real world, Hammer stepped out of the elevator and into the roar of the crowd. A grid of balance beams crisscrossed the arena only a few centimeters above a pool of bubbling acid. The distance between the intersections of the grid was about three meters. Hammer picked up a long polearm as he stepped onto the grid. The long flat blade extended well beyond the gaps in the grid. A Pdoge by the name of Plodgeshnogt entered through the opposite door. It had at least a dozen multijointed limbs protruding up to four meters from its head/torso. The head/torso itself sported three openings resembling the human sphincter more than anything else. Karg, the owner of the games and their announcer, was the only Pdoge Hammer had met before, but Hammer had relentlessly studied xenobiology from a combat
Hammer rushed forward but the Pdoge parried his blow and whipped around for a counterstrike. Hammer ducked the blade but the Pdoge dropped its wrist a bit to slash across the human's cheek. Blood spilled into the acid with a satisfying sizzle. Hammer was knocked back by the blow but managed to keep his polearm and use it as a bridge across the gap between two beams. He turned a back handspring to end at yet another beam. The pole flexed and Hammer felt the sting of the acid on his knuckles before he vaulted up to his feet. The Pdoge trumpeted something out of one of its holes, but without a translator, Hammer was at a loss. He advanced again with more caution.

Hammer's speed and agility allowed him to keep the Pdoge at a distance. The Pdoge splashed at him by beating his blade against the surface of the acid. It was all Hammer could do to keep from getting fried. He knew he would run out of steam or luck shortly. The splashes were getting closer. The match started to drag and the crowd was actually booing Hammer for not taking it to the Pdoge again for another exchange. Hammer felt shame and looked down. This was how he noticed that the polearms weren't suffering from the splash of acid but the beams themselves were beginning to get pockmarked. Hammer continued his circling of the Pdoge but now with a purpose and managed to send a few splashes back. Hammer orbited the Pdoge three times before he moved in for the kill.

Freddie the Hammer hurled his own blade at the Pdoge in what looked like a desperation move. The Pdoge easily deflected the blade and moved forward to get at the defenseless human. It advanced right into a spot that had had all four supports weakened by the acid splashes. Hammer snapped a kick at the beam in front of the intersection he was standing on and it gave way. The other three intersections supporting the Pdoge quickly followed suit and with a great creak the Pdoge slipped into the acid. The sudden entry of the Pdoge into the acid caused quite a wave that would have overtaken Hammer had he not leaped up and grabbed onto one of the cameras in the corner of the room. His grin filled viewscreens across the galaxy.

Ariel and Cookie went to Body Claim. It was a brightly lit white
room full of coffins and urns in various colors, shapes, and sizes, but mostly black and white. Body bags of several sizes and shapes filled a few gurneys. A detail of two sunglasses-clad guards flanked Ariel and Cookie as they went to inspect Fletcher’s body. A technician in a white lab coat picked up a clipboard and walked out from behind a desk to hand it to Cookie.

“You must be the manager. Sign here.”

“Could you give us a moment, please?” Ariel looked soulfully at the guard escort.

“Whatever. We'll be right outside.” The guard walked outside and the door slid shut behind him. The technician stayed.

“Hey, you looked great in your match. Shouldn't you be resting up for round two, Miss?”

“Shouldn't you be minding your own business, jerkwad?” Ariel's emerald eyes flashed anger.

“Sorry. I just get used to death in this job. This must be hard for you.”

“Not as hard as it will be for you, believe me.”

“Which body is his?” Cookie was getting uncomfortable with Ariel's tone.

“Right here.”

The technician unzipped the body bag to reveal Fletcher. His chest was rising and falling. All three noticed it at the same time. Ariel and the technician were surprised. Cookie wasn't, because he'd dialed down the vitals himself when he'd hacked the neckband. The technician spoke first.

“Hey! He's not dead.”

“No, but you are.” Ariel took the clipboard from Cookie and smashed it into the technician's throat in one motion. The technician stumbled back, holding his throat, and collapsed. Fletcher shot up off the table and tried to give him first aid, but there was nothing he could do.

“Ariel! What the hell are you doing? Do you think we can just kill him?”

“Do you think we can just let him live?

“You can't just kill innocent people, he's done nothing wrong.” Fletcher unzipped himself from the body bag and stood up.

“Grow up, Fletcher. Do you think 'black ops' means we just kill the right people for the right reasons?”
“I guess she's right, Fletcher,” Cookie chimed in, “we couldn't have risked letting him live, and we needed a body anyway—”
“You two are as bad as Hammer, you're psychotic. I can't have you killing people left and right.”
“Uh, Fletcher, honey? I don't think we have time for a lecture or a time-out right now. And by the way, welcome back from the dead.” With that, she planted a kiss right on Fletcher's lips.
“Uh, thanks?”
And then she slapped him across the face.
“Why didn't you and Cookie tell me you were going to fake your own death?”
“We didn't know it was going to work and we didn't want to have to rely on your acting ability. Come on, we've got work to do. No more killing. Do you understand me?”
“What do you think 'black ops' is supposed to refer to? The color of our underwear?”
Cookie smiled, “I'll show you mine if—”
“Shut up, you worm.”
“Jesus, his coat's still warm. Help me put his body in the bag. Look,” Fletcher was off the table and putting on the lab coat by now, “I'm the team leader and I say no killing unless it is absolutely necessary. This guy was just a lab tech. How long until your next match, Ariel?”
“The rules guarantee her at least an hour,” said Cookie. “It's been about forty minutes.”
“Ariel, you need to get back to the waiting room. Cookie, you need to ship this body off to wherever my corpse was supposed to be going.”
“Where are you going?”
“I need to find a way to disprove the old adage 'dead men tell no tales.'”
Fletcher managed to effect a casual air as he walked down the corridor with various aliens passing him in all directions. At a crossroads, he came upon a pair of human guards in sunglasses standing in front of some strong-looking blast doors. All doors are by definition made to be opened, so Fletcher approached the guards with a smile and ran his new-found ID card through the scanner. A numeric keypad lit up on the wall next to the door.
After a few moments a speaker on the keypad barked out a comment.

“Enter your code, numbnuts.”

Fletcher depressed what turned out to be the talk button and spoke up. “Uh, I'm sorry. This is my first day and I've already forgotten my code.”

“Hold on.”

Fletcher was beginning to hope the simplest con might work. He smiled at the guard by the door, who took the time to examine his badge.

“This badge is for Body Claim. You aren't authorized for broadcast. Go back down that corridor you came in from and turn right.”

“Thanks.”

“Whatever.”

Fletcher started to turn to walk away and then consulted the guard one last time. “Pretty uptight in there.”

“Hey, don't worry about the guys in the booth. It's their job to bust your chops a little. Especially the newbies.”

Fletcher continued his turn and walked off, making his way through several corridors and elevators back toward the waiting room where Ariel, Cookie, and Hammer were waiting.

The volume on the screen was low and Fletcher hadn't yet returned. Maybe it was the pain meds, or perhaps it was surviving her date with death, but Ariel was feeling uncharacteristically chatty.

“So what got you into the service, Cookie? Your parents must be loaded with being able to pay for that tin brain and all.”

“A broken engagement, actually. I'm here to get away from a girl.”

“It's hard to imagine a heartthrob like you getting dumped.” Ariel's voice dripped sarcasm.

“Actually, I broke it off. I found out she didn't love me. She just wanted to marry me for my parents' money.”

“Jesus, your parents must really be loaded.”

“Screw you.”

Hammer laughed and Fletcher picked that moment to return, saving Ariel from answering questions about her own marriage.
“I'm back. Did you miss me?”
“We've mourned your death already once today, that was enough.” Ariel was still on a buzz.
“Did you find the broadcast booth?” Cookie was eager to get off the subject of his love life.
“The control room is behind some blast doors on level 18.”
“We'd need a nuke to get through their blast doors.”
“Or an angle,” Fletcher smiled. “Even the most sophisticated systems are manned by people. That's the weak point.”
At that moment, Hammer's neckband beeped.
“I'd love to help you,” Hammer grinned, “but I've got a match!”
Then Ariel's neckband beeped.
“Looks like I do too.” Ariel sobered up in a hurry.
“Unless the two of you want to fight, it's time for contract renegotiation. Follow me.”
Fletcher walked out the door and led the team toward the elevator. They were stopped at the door to the elevator by another man in sunglasses.
“Where do you all think you're going? The two of you have a match.”
Hammer dropped him with a blow to the temple. It wasn't fancy or fun but it was efficient and he knew it wasn't time to play. Before the body hit the ground, Ariel was on him searching for weapons but came up empty.
“Damn. No piece.”
Fletcher was trying to administer aid. “No pulse, either. He's dead. Hammer, you just killed him like that?”
“Uh, Fletcher, honey?” Ariel's voice was full of mockery.
“Hammer wasn't here when you asked us all not to kill people because we're nice secret agent assassins.”
“I'll say it again, then. No more killing. Hammer, you didn't have to kill him.”
Hammer merely shrugged.
“We're here to do the right thing, not rack up a body count. The ends don't justify the means. No more killing unless our lives are directly in danger. Understood?”
“Huh?” Hammer was still stunned at the idea anybody would
care that he'd killed that guard.

“He means,” Cookie articulated, “no more killing.”

“Unless you have to,” Ariel added.

The return trip to the broadcast bunker was uneventful. By this time, enough video surveillance had tracked the Deep Black team that Karg himself conducted the interview through the intercom.

“What seems to be the problem? Don't the female and the big dark human have a match to get to?”

Cookie spoke carefully into the intercom. “That's just it. We need to see somebody about our contract—” He was interrupted by Karg.

“Your contract is iron clad.”

Fletcher whispered into Cookie's ear. Cookie repeated, “We're not going anywhere until we at least get a hard copy of the contract.”

Inside the broadcast bunker, Karg saw the time to his next match counting down. He didn't like being under pressure. He didn't depress the intercom button but spoke to his assistant, a human by the name of Peters. “There's always something, isn't there? Bring them a printout of the contract and bring half a dozen well armed goons. I don't want any trouble.”

It didn't take Peters much time to print out the contract. A phalanx of six goons armed with rather nasty-looking energy rifles of some sort formed up on either side of the Deep Black team. Peters opened the door and stepped out, handing the contract to Cookie.

“You aren't the first to try to renegotiate. We've terminated contracts before. It's not a pretty sight.”

“Are you threatening us?” Ariel asked.

“Well, you don't want any trouble, little lady. Do you?” Peters opened his coat a little to reveal a blast pistol.

“As a matter of fact, I do,” Ariel smiled.

The Deep Black team was a blur of motion, starting with Ariel, who pulled the blast pistol from Peters' coat and in one motion shot him in the head and then shot the guard to her left. Hammer swept the knees of the three guards flanking him. Fletcher jabbed his clipboard into the teeth of the guard in front of him and Cookie grabbed the rifle of the remaining guard. That delayed his entry to the melee long enough for Ariel to pop him while Hammer dealt
death blows to the three he'd swept — a temple shot, a heart shot, and a throat shot — and he stood up holding the rifle of the last one. Fletcher smashed his clipboard over the head of the guard with broken teeth and pulled loose his blast rifle as the guard crumpled. The flow of Ariel's execution shots had the broken-toothed guard up next, but Fletcher knocked her arm up so the shot carved a shallow burn into the wall instead.

“They're playing for keeps. Don't jerk around, boy scout, or you'll get us killed.”

“I'd rather that than just kill some poor bastard who doesn't deserve it. Don't go psycho and I won't have to waste our time. Get it?”

A barrage of shots was now coming through the blast door as it was swinging shut. Fletcher jammed the clipboard in the hinge, stopping the door long enough for him to pull one of the grenades he'd saved from the arena out of his pants.

“I've still got a grenade.”

“I thought you were just happy to see us,” Cookie mused as Fletcher tossed the grenade through the open door and ran in after it.

Inside the control room, the grenade skittered to a stop as the inhabitants all scrambled for what little cover there could be in such a tight area. They closed their eyes, covered their heads, and said brief profane prayers as they awaited an explosion that never came.

“Drop your weapons.” Fletcher leveled the blast rifle at the techs, who quickly complied.

“HOUGH! HOUGH! He didn't pull the pin!” Karg bellowed.

“We need the equipment intact.” Fletcher gestured at the array of production dials and monitors.

“The personnel here are, however, quite expendable.” Ariel winked at Fletcher.

“Right,” Fletcher nodded. “Nobody is going to get hurt. Ariel, Hammer, tie them up. Cookie, we've got a show to go on the air.”

“It will take me a few minutes but the show must go on.” Cookie went to work negotiating the various panels of the control room.

“We're going to have to tape delay it so we have time enough to
“get out of this hellhole alive.” Fletcher's voice started to crack as he realized the danger was passing and he now had time to think about survival.

Karg spoke up. “It took some balls to fake your own death.”

“It was a big risk that Kyrrenian wasn't going to drop a grenade on you for good measure,” Hammer added.

“I've known some Kyrrenians. They wouldn't do that.” Fletcher sounded more confident now.

“None of the Kyrrenians I know would even be in this kind of a circus to begin with.” Cookie pointed up at the in-booth camera.

“We're ready to go to tape.”

Fletcher wasn't looking forward to being in front of the camera. He fidgeted a bit. “Hammer, why don't you convince our friend to testify that the games are a hoax and a sham and that he's been ripping off all of his viewers?”

“My friend?”

“Karg.”

“You can't get me to testify! The games aren't fixed. There's no point. It's great entertainment. I've done nothing—” Karg's protestations were interrupted by the business end of a blast rifle pointed at his his torso.

“Oh.”

“Now we can go on tape.” Fletcher gestured to Cookie, who started the tape.

Cookie gave Fletcher the go-ahead signal as the red light atop the camera switched on.

“My name is Fletcher Hawkins. I was contestant number 2314. You saw me die earlier this afternoon at the hands of a Kyrrenian, didn't you? But how am I still here?”

Fletcher's voice rolled over the tape of the earlier match.

“I didn't die. It's a scam. They paid me to take the fall and fake my death. What about the neckbands? Check out my heart rate.”

Cookie adjusted the dials on his remote control for Fletcher's neckband and the vital signs came back to life, shot up to beyond human range, and even managed to crank out a few bars of “Twinkle, Twinkle Little Star” before shutting off again.

“Does it look like my heart rate should be 250? But you people, the true fans, deserve better than what Karg has done here to you. You deserve the truth.” Fletcher paused for emphasis.
“Demand a refund. Watch this crap if you like, but now you know it's all rehearsed and you know anybody who puts on another scam like this is probably just ripping you off too. Real fighting isn't this exciting and rehearsed. You've just been screwed and I recommend you think twice before buying into anything like this again.

“My angle on this deal is that I was promised more than they chose to deliver. I had to take matters into my own hands to get Karg here to come clean. Now it isn't about the money, it's about shutting this sphincter-faced hate-monger down. But don't take my word for it. Karg?”

The camera rotated to show Karg. It is normally difficult, if not impossible, for anybody else to understand the body language of Pdories, but there was no missing this. Karg could see its empire crumbling before it.

“It's true,” Karg honked. “It's just a scam and I had to come clean now because this man couldn't be bought.”

Fletcher got in the last word. “Don't believe everything you see on the vids, folks.”

Several dozen light-years away, Aunt Edna's office was silent. The shadow man didn't bat an eye. He could have been a statue but for the steady breathing. At long last he spoke.

“Damn.”

“They accomplished the mission, at least,” Aunt Edna offered. She tended to tug her skirt straight when nervous, and she wasn't often more nervous than when the shadow man was silent like this.

“Yes, but they did it wrong.” He threw his hands up in disgust. “They outwitted a Pdoge. They should have killed him.”

“Nonetheless, on paper, they succeeded. Shouldn't we upgrade their status?”

“Perhaps from martyr to patsy.”

“Excuse me?”

“Their faces are all over the vids now. We can use their fifteen minutes of fame to our advantage. I've got a mission in mind.”

“What is it?”

“Back on Capitola, Senator Hagan is afraid for his life. He needs some bodyguards that the people will believe in, and they'll
do nicely now that they've gained a reputation on the vids.”
“But shouldn't we have top-notch people dealing with his safety?”
“I'll take care of it personally.” The shadow man left without saying good-bye.

On the trip back from Bomba, the Deep Black crew enjoyed some R&R. Ariel cleaned a gun. Hammer did some calisthenics, flipping back and forth from hand stands to hand stands. Cookie was fiddling with something, and Fletcher lay in a bunk with his eyes closed.

Ariel spoke up. “I guess we should be pretty proud of ourselves for stopping the games.”
“It was the right thing to do.” Cookie reached for a smaller tool.
Fletcher sat up and looked from face to face.
“Go ahead and tell yourselves whatever makes you feel better. We killed a lot of people today. Sure, they were working in a sleazy business, but who's to say they didn't have a right to live?”
“What do you mean, Fletcher?” Cookie looked up. “Sixty-three intelligent beings were dying in that stinking arena every day. We put a stop to it.”
“How many techs and guards did we kill to make this problem go away?”
“I got seven confirmed kills myself,” Hammer piped up between flips.
“The sixty-four who entered every day did it by their own choice. The ones we killed were by our choice. Is it worth it?”
Fletcher lay back down and closed his eyes, but sleep didn't come for a very long time.
2

Murder

It was called the Universal Republic, but in practice only a small portion of the Milky Way had yet been explored and was represented in the marvel of engineering that was the Senate chamber on Capitola. The gallery was separated from the floor of the chamber by a full meter of plastisteel despite the fact that extensive regulations existed to keep weapons of all kinds off-planet. The chamber itself rose up in a dramatic sweep that made even the furthest seats feel like they were right on top of the action. It was often said that there wasn't a bad seat in the house. That saying didn't apply to Senator Bethlehem, the honorable human from New Heartland on this particular afternoon, even though his chair was within the chamber. His seat was to become all too uncomfortable all too quickly.

The Waykin senator by the name of “Near-Miss,” in his role as Acting President Pro-Tem of the Senate for the day, rose and banged a gavel before speaking through his voicebox.

“The Senate will come to order for a vote on the issue of sponsorship. The chair recognizes the distinguished Senator Bethlehem of New Heartland, who rises to a point of order.”

Bethlehem was entirely average in physical dimensions as well as in his role as a senator. He rattled very few cages, voted along party lines, and generally kept himself out of trouble. He was the kind that when the revolution came, the revolutionaries would look around and assume he'd been with them. Today, he was going to rattle some cages.

“Colleagues, friends, fellow citizens of the Republic, it is with a heavy heart that I rise today to bring to light a foul conspiracy—”
Please go to kickstarter.com and support this novel so everyone can read the rest.