

A TRIP AND A HALF

The thrill of the burn was incomparable.

Fumes of the narcofungus, rising from the bonfire into the afternoon, had wafted up into Saxton's brain through his nose. A perk of working in Narcotics Disposal was that you could get buzzed on the contraband so long as it disappeared—sure, signs at base said to use a gasmask during burnings, but certain higher-ups could look the other way.

He thought back to General Vissier's address on screen every morning at the mess hall—"Defeating the drug threat requires strong bodies and sober minds!"

What a sucker.

Not that he'd say that to Vissier's big bald face, though.

Soldiers all around him were losing their composure and falling to the purple soil in giggling fits. The fungus toxins had slowly but surely got a hold of Saxty, making him feel every heartbeat and twitch radiate throughout his body—and it freaked him out.

So busy was he pondering the depths of his own anatomy in a sweaty haze, he had forgotten he was on another planet.

Much like a fungal rush, the novelty of being on a new world had quickly worn off. Oh, sure, the fields of pink wheat outside the rocket's window were breathtaking on day one of his service, but it had taken under a week for the true barrenness of the land to really strike him. Not one town or strip mall as far as the eye could see! Just endless sloping grassland, nothing beyond the base, nothing but—

The fungus was getting to him.

He remembered his procedure for getting a grip on himself.

Just start counting. Fingers, one two three four five six seven eight nine ten.

Toes, one two three—

He could guess the rest.

Private Krelper waddled up to him, stumbling in his metal armor.

“Good God, rookie!” he empathized, staring into Saxty’s eyes with his weary pupils.

“You’re wasted! Remember the mantra. There’s no reason to be paranoid. It’s all in your head.

There’s no reason—”

Krelper was cut short by a blinding light and a burst of ashes from his chest. He lay prone and twitching, a laser-cut hole in his torso.

It took Saxton a few seconds to react in earnest.

Atop the rim of the bonfire crater, several day-vision goggles strapped to gasmasks surveyed the scene.

“Smugglers are back!” screamed one officer, pummeling the alarm button.

Saxty supposed he should’ve been affected by Krelper’s death. Cut up, as they say.

But his brain was still on the rollercoaster, even as a genuine panic enveloped the firepit.

“To arms!” shouted an officer who had scrounged up some sobriety. The flashes of the blaze were joined by the blinding lights of the Corps’ lasers, and then met in turn by the Smugglers’ crossfire. The officers shot in vain with shaky grips, hitting only some of the

belligerents as they streamed into the pit. They were gaunt, wearing raggedy fatigues still stained with soot—a symptom of a life confined to the subterranean tunnels. Their day-vision goggles let them see clearly whenever they trespassed on the surface, having developed oversensitive eyes through generations in the caves.

“Don’t let them take back the contraband!” yelled Officer Mornos. She dived to tackle one Smuggler who was making for a pile of fungus shavings.

Saxton lost his footing and threw up. The rush of adrenaline from the sickness was when the truth blindsided him—this was what being in the fray was really like. No glory, no way to tell who was on whose side, just a desperate struggle to crawl out of a mudhole alive.

And the training simulations back on Earth had always depicted the Smugglers armed with rakes and shovels, not guns.

Stumbling backwards away from the chaos, Saxton felt the urge to burrow underground like a small mammal. He convulsed when the jolt of a taser shocked his neck and sent him plummeting to the soil. As he lost consciousness, he sensed being pulled along the ground by a figure in a gasmask.

When he came to, Saxton felt in the air the unmistakable damp atmosphere of the underground. He was laid on a cot still in his armor, beneath a ceiling of mottled, drippy rock fixtures lit by flickers. Once his eyes adjusted, he placed the source of the incessant dripping—small wild clumps of narcofungus hanging off the stalactites.

*If I was just tall enough to reach that, he thought. That’d hit the spot.*

He tried to leave the bed but learned his limbs were still jelly, something he wasn’t sure if he should blame on the taser or the particles in his lungs.

He saw that same ghostly combatant in the white gasmask strolling across the cave floor towards him, like a vision in a nightmare. A reach for his pistol revealed an empty holster at his side. Despite Saxton's general indifference to ideas of the metaphysical, he found himself praying for a quick and easy death.

With rubber-gloved hands the mask came off to reveal a woman's face, stoic with milky gray skin and white frizzy hair.

Saxton had never seen one of them unmasked up close. The effect was quite alien, even if he knew in the back of his head that she was human like him.

She held out both gloved palms to show their emptiness.

"I...am not...your enemy," she said, parsing the words like a teacher. "I am not going to hurt you. Do you understand?"

Too wasted to answer, Saxton turned over as dribble fell from his chin to the pillow.

The woman took a glinting object from her pocket and jabbed it into Saxton's hand. He felt a stinging wave of pain before he even knew it was a syringe.

His mind jumped to the films he had seen on Earth about the Smuggler Forces, about their torturing and eating of enemy prisoners. He was convinced that his number was up and had a grim acceptance of fate wash over him.

Only he didn't die. Rather than pain, he experienced sobriety taking over, as if his inebriated brain was a bathtub whose plug had been pulled.

"Sorry it stings," said the woman. "But I need you to have a clear head right now."

“What?” he slurred, rubbing his eyes. “Aren’t...aren’t you going to kill me?”

“No,” she said. “You’ll bear witness for us. Now eat.”

She shoved a lemony protein block into his hand, making his mouth water. As he continued coming down from his high, he realized the absurdity of his situation.

“What are you *talking* about?” he said. “I can’t accept food from the enemy! And I’m not going to go along with whatever you—”

*“I am not your enemy,”* she said with a voice as cutting as an icepick.

Saxton didn’t know how to respond. Defeated, he swallowed the protein block.

Didn’t taste like any poison he knew.

Before he’d finished chewing, the woman stood him upright and began walking him down the room and into a tunnel. His legs were still tingly from the electroshock.

“I hope you realize,” he said while she guided his steps, “That I’ll get out of here, and...I’ll come back with my comrades and light up this whole place.”

She jabbed a pistol in his hip.

“I knew it,” he growled. “The food was just softening me up, and now you’ll kill me! The true face of a criminal revealed.”

“It’s only insurance,” she said, as if to reassure. “Dunno if I can trust you. Not yet, anyways. But there’s a good chance your point of view will be changed.”

“You’re not making any sense.”

E.M. Barker

“I make plenty of sense,” she said as they trekked a claustrophobic cavern tunnel with shovels in the wall. “There have been others from your ranks that saw the light. You can join them.”

“Traitors,” he muttered. “You must’ve either brainwashed them or paid ‘em off with your blood money.”

She made a low groan of disappointment.

The two exited the tunnel for an expansive valley, with dozens of stalactites long as upside-down pine trees hanging over his head. Massive clumps of narcofungus made them look even more like the conifers in Earth’s oxygen dispensaries. Saxton was startled by a whoosh when he noticed a denim-clad Smuggler in midair, buoyed by a jetpack. Dozens of similar Smuggler folk were zooming through the air with fiery bursts, hovering at stalactites to collect fungus clippings.

Almost like a beehive.

“Here’s our farm,” the woman said.

“It’s barbaric,” Saxton replied, while noting how ripe and succulent some of the fungus looked. “How can you live with yourself, exporting deadly poison across the stars? What about the addicted kids? Do their deaths matter?”

“If narcofungus is so deadly,” she said, “Why do you ingest it so often?”

She smiled as he fell silent.

“That’s...different,” he said. “It’s a necessary part of my service, to destroy the contraband. So what if I get some pleasure from it? It’s not like I’m putting money in the pockets of a drug empire.”

“We’ve watched,” she continued. “You breathe the fumes day and night in your ranks. I can tell that you’re new, but others have done it for years. Yet you don’t fall ill, or dead. Isn’t that unusual for a deadly drug?”

Saxton hated himself for not having an answer prepared. He mulled over her words and tried to think of a different subject of conversation.

He looked closer at her gun as they passed under an electric light—and its familiar model number.

“Hey! That’s my weapon you’ve got!”

“No it isn’t,” said the woman. “How can it be yours? It says ‘property of MuCo.’ Right there.”

“Very funny,” chided Saxton. “That’s not what that means. MuCo may be a generous benefactor to our cause, but it’s still *my* gun.”

“Why do you think that is?” asked the woman. “Some company bankrolling your army.”

“It’s out of the goodness of their hearts!” he recited. “They want to protect everyone across the planets from narcofungus, not just their customers.”

“Oh, *please*,” she said. “Have you ever met anyone from MuCo personally? I mean, not just pencil pushers—people with power, the big spenders signing military checks. Ever seen them? Do you even know what they look like?”

Saxton combed his memories for the faces of MuCo's leadership.

Surely it had to be there, somewhere, in the swirl of newsvids and adverts.

They departed the valley for a small, low chamber with sparse LED lights on the walls. She motioned for him to sit on a bench carved out of the rock, then handed him back his weapon.

"Who *are* you?" he asked, dumbfounded. "Why are you doing this?"

"I'm Akron," she said. "My friend'll explain the rest."

There was a burst of light next to her, and a familiar glowering old man with a bald and pockmarked head materialized.

"At ease, solider," General Vissier said, in the same dulcet tones he used over the speakers at base.

Saxton dropped his gun.

It was the man he'd seen thousands of times onscreen before staring at him with measured blinks, and the same creased uniform collar and whiskery lip twitches.

"General Vissier?" he called. "Did they capture you too?"

Saxton went and reached out to touch him, and felt his hands pass through his body.

"You're not the real Vissier!" he declared.

"I'm as real as can be," said the holographic general, "Considering there was never a real Vissier to begin with."

"That's not true!" Saxton cried.

“Think about it,” Akron chimed in. “You’ve never seen this man outside of screens and holograms. He’s a virtual puppet who can be programmed to say anything, including by us.”

“Lies!” yelled Saxton. “General Vissier, born December 32nd—”

“Falsified records,” said the hologram. “General Vissier is an intellectual property devised by MuCo for the war effort. He is a digital PR phantasm.”

“As am I,” said another hologram that shimmered into being next to Vissier.

He had a mole and an auburn mustache under a beret; the exact same face as the holographic recruitment officer Saxty had applied to on Earth.

A lump formed in Saxton’s throat.

“You’ve been lied to,” said a third hologram who appeared—a dowdy woman, the captain of Saxton’s deep space troop convoy whom, in retrospect, he had only ever seen on screens.

“This is the terrible truth,” said Akron. “There’s not a single human being in the chain of command of your army or at MuCo. All automated.”

Saxton could barely raise his quivering voice.

“But...why?”

As if answering him, the three holograms opened their mouths and let streams of gold light shoot out. The streams combined in midair to form a shifting blob; all lines of numerical code in a cloudlike shape.

“What you’re looking at is the Managerial Intelligence,” said Vissier, light still streaming from his face. “A century ago, MuCo declared bankruptcy, and its leaders resorted to a change of management—or rather, no management.”

“The first company to be completely run by an AI,” added the recruitment officer. “It knew that MuCo’s future depended on claiming this planet’s real estate, but had to remove the human colonists already living there.”

“Meaning my people,” sighed Akron.

Suddenly the image in midair changed to several headlines from Earth publications Saxton knew, all warning about the fungus menace.

“The MuCo intelligence knew it had to win public support for the war,” said the captain. “So it manufactured a drug panic. Created digital politicians and pundits and alarmists to sway galactic opinion—a charade of holograms.”

“The fungus is our only livelihood,” lamented Akron. “It wasn’t outlawed until the AI wanted it to be, so it could destroy us.”

Saxton doubled over, clutching his reedy hair until it ripped. Their words were burning through his brain, planting terrifying possibilities.

It couldn’t be true.

It just couldn’t.

He picked up his dropped pistol and pointed it at Vissier.

“You’re lying!” he sobbed. “I won’t be brainwashed by you!”

Saxton shot into the holograms, making them dissipate.

“No! Stop it!” Akron yelled.

But she disappeared in a puff of smoke, as did the rest of the cave around him.

To his great surprise, Saxton was now in a featureless little grey room where many men with labcoats and clipboards applauded.

“Congratulations, soldier!” said one scientist. “You resisted your captors’ anti-patriotic temptations and stayed loyal to the cause. You passed the testing simulation!”

A bug-eyed Saxton spun around to see a window showing Chicago’s skyline in the distance.

“How am I on Earth?!” he hollered. “Where the hell is Akron?”

“Everyone you met was a simulated character,” said another scientist. “But it’s an accurate recreation of what your deployment will be like.”

“This isn’t really happening,” chuckled Saxton. “I just smoked too much! I gotta get back there, I gotta find her!”

He jumped through the window and stumbled bleeding through the parking lot, calling out for Akron.

On the floor above, the gathered technicians watched as their test subject ran off into the horizon.

“Great, just what we need,” said the main scientist. “Another one.”

