SNAKE EYES

STARK HOLBORN

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By Stark Holborn

The trade post stands alone, a dying ember in a hearth too vast for warmth. Not that any trade goes on; when you're desperate with thirst or hunger and someone will only part with your salvation on credit, it's theft, not trade, whichever way you look at it.

The winds crash in vast swells against the walls, as if they want to bear the building away, sweep it from the edge of the moon into the Void beyond.

Inside, two men sit at a table and don't speak. A hard place makes hard people and there is no harder rock than Lunar Body XB11a, now designated *Factus*. Both the men have been corroded by the system, pinballing their way between conflicts across the stars, until they washed up here, more rust than whatever once made them.

One has greying hair and a pair of blue fibreglass teeth that don't sit right. The other is younger, marked out as a former terraform rigger by his radiation-damaged face and his hands, swelled to twice the usual size.

The first man reaches into the pocket of his coat – a vast, crinkling silver thing too fine for this place – and takes out a canister, holds it to his nose and snuffs up the last dregs of oxygen. The younger man looks on, glue-eyed. An almost empty bottle stands on the table before them. Throat-Paint, commonly

known as. Only thing it is good for, swilling grit from a gullet, making you forget your dry mouth and chafed flesh for half a night.

The younger man pours the last measure sloppily, splashing his hand. He winces. His knuckles are raw from giving out a beating.

‘Scrap,’ he slurs. ‘Another.’

Across the room the bartend stops his anxious tapping about and goes to decant cloudy pinkish liquid into a second bottle.

The older man watches the younger suck liquor off his hand. Blood is caught in the grooves of his nails.

‘Clean yourself for love’s sake. You don’t know where they’ve been.’

The younger downs the last inch of thinner from the bottle and spits in a fine spray across his outstretched fingers. The raw liquor spatters the walls, but most lands on the figure slumped in the corner.

The head lifts. One eye looks out through tangled, oxide-red hair. The other is swollen shut. ‘At least spit it into my mouth,’ they croak.

‘Shut up,’ the older says over his drinking arm.

The prisoner lets their head fall back, smiling split-lipped. Obviously not long arrived on Factus, not yet whittled by the place, though the change has already begun. Reddened eyes, a deepening groove in the between plucked brows from squinting, a certain thirst that makes skin cling to bone, like a fruit with all the juice sucked out. Not that any of them remember fruit.

The prisoner is shackled ankle and wrist, tied to the stovepipe with a length

of cable that must have been pulled from the wreck of a ship. That's what Factus is, guts and gristle, the bits no one wants or has use for. But a fortune can still be made by the lucky, from the desperate.

'Gotta pay for this, Marl,' the bartend says, placing the second bottle down on the table.

'Give it us on honour, Scrap. We're about to earn ten thousand cash credits.'

Scrap hesitates. He wears a charge pistol at his belt, but it's ancient. No saying whether it actually works, or simply fizzes and flares enough to scare the gullible. He mutters, 'Don't do credit.'

Marl stops pouring and gives him a look. The threat it contains is simple, so simple it doesn't need speaking. Scrap works some spittle about his mouth and goes away behind the bar.

The prisoner licks their split lip. 'Is this what you're going to do with my bounty? Drink rotgut and stare at the walls? That's the trouble with this place. It drains the imagination right out of people.'

'Told you to shut up.'

'Just think of all the things you could do,' the prisoner needles. 'You could buy a little wagon, set yourselves up as a grub merchants. Or water barons. Or you could get a fine place like this for your ownselves, give up hunting. The possibilities–'

The younger man tips out of his chair and drives his pale, crusted boot into

the prisoner's side, once, twice, three times, his face growing pink with exertion in the tinny air.

'Enough.' Marl wafts away the cloud of dust. 'Don't bust any organs. Alive's ten, dead's only five.'

The younger man drops back, agleam with violence, as if all the wrong done to him is bundled in the person at the end of his boot. The prisoner retches and spits a precious gobbet of fluid, their heavy blue duster stained by pale bootprints.

'Water,' they croak.

Marl jerks his head at Scrap, who unlocks a tap with a key from his belt, and dribbles two inches of water into a cup. Marl takes it and contemplates for a moment before spitting deliberately into the liquid.

'All yours,' he says.

The prisoner holds his gaze in hatred as they take the cup and drink it down.

In the quiet that follows, a howl wracks the building, fingers of wind scraping at the metal walls, prying at the bolted door.

The prisoner starts. 'What was that?'

'The wind.'

'No.' They raise their head like a cat sniffing air. '*That*.'

They're right. When the wind's throat empties, there's another sound; a harsh, throttling cough.

Marl signals and Scrap squeaks open the shutter. 'A light,' he murmurs.

‘Looks like a mule. Someone alone.’

Lips stretching over his awkward teeth, Marl takes out a charge gun and rests it on the table. The younger man does the same, his weapon a manual pistol, older and crueller out here where there is no one to pull a slug from flesh.

The coughing engine grows louder until it wheezes and stops somewhere near the stable. A stretch of silence passes, like fabric pulled taut, until there’s a scuffle, a fist banging on the door. Once, twice.

At Marl’s nod, Scrap creeps forward to shoot the bolt.

The door is flung back, wind screaming in as if it has been waiting outside all this time, furious. It batters the place, sends faded posters flapping, the men swearing as grit gets in their eyes. Finally, leaning bodily on the door, Scrap is able to close it again.

In the swirling clouds of dust, a figure stands. No one saw them step inside. They look like the badlands themselves made flesh: every item of clothing sun-bleached, from the cape made of ancient thermal blankets to the old flight helmet, bearing a large dent in the back. They are completely still, and for a moment, a shiver lifts the fine hairs of the prisoner’s neck.

Then, the stranger reaches up to remove the helmet, dust cascading from their shoulders. The hair beneath is grey too, frizzed and flattened.

‘Bad night.’

The prisoner stares. The stranger is a woman, perhaps in her sixties, older than anyone they’ve seen on Factus. Her face has been toasted by the elements,

the lines and wrinkles deep, deliberate, as if they have been etched by an artist's hand. A faded a crescent moon tattoo surrounds one eye.

She looks around, sees the prisoner and the guns and raises heavy brows in surprise.

Marl smiles then, slow, spelling out every thought as he takes in the old woman's clothes, her well-laden pack.

'Easy, grandma. We're all friends here.'

'What a storm,' her eyes flick nervously from one man to the other. 'Thought it'd have my skin clean off and carry it away.'

'Most like,' Marl agrees. 'Nothing to do but sit tight and wait it out.'

There's only one table in the place, and so the woman pulls out one of the upturned crates that serves as a chair, and sits.

'Can't tell you how glad I am to find shelter,' she says. 'Travelling gets harder every cycle.' She smiles at Scrap, a real smile, not a threat. He looks almost taken aback by it. 'Do you have pálinka?'

He grunts. 'Throat Paint, or brine. Or syrup.'

'Oh, Paint's fine,' the woman says, shaking her wiry hair, sending dust flying.

The younger man is still staring, as if she has fallen out of the sky. 'What you doing out here?' he demands.

'Right now, asking myself the same thing.' She shrugs out of the overcape, revealing an ancient-looking jumpsuit below. 'I'm on the way to Redemption, to

visit my niece. She's a working girl there, just had a child. Made her the toast of the settlement, that. Never thought I'd live to see children on Factus. Poor thing picked the wrong moon to be born on.'

She searches her pack as she speaks. It's stuffed full. Marl catches the slosh of a water bottle, a greasy ooze of what might be fat, wrapped in plastic, canisters of air, even the gleam of a tin can. Oranges. He licks his stolen teeth.

'Ah,' the woman says, and pulls a packet free. 'Here we are.'

She untwists it to reveal a pile of grubs, still greasy with frying oil. 'Care for one?' she asks, already chewing.

Marl inclines his head and picks one out. The younger shakes his head, disgusted, looking from the woman to his partner.

'Does that offer extend to me?' the prisoner asks.

'Well, I don't know.' The woman looks at the men. 'What's the crime?'

Marl leans back, satisfied. 'That there's Doc Mollusc.'

'I'm sorry, I'm not familiar–'

'Wanted from here to Otroville for sticking up water shipments.' He leers at the prisoner. 'Not on moon a month and already wanted by the Bureau. Made the wrong enemies, this one.'

The prisoner gives him a withering glance. 'Can I have a grub?'

Marl picks one from the table. 'Catch.'

The fat grub tumbles to the floor an arm's length away from the prisoner. They stare at it for a long moment before worming onto their side, trying to

scrape it towards them with shackled ankles. While the older man roars with laughter, Scrap sets a glass down on the table.

‘Thank you,’ the woman says. ‘I’ll settle up when the evening’s done.’ She raises the glass to the room, meeting each eye, even the prisoner’s as they chew sullenly. ‘Egészségedre.’

‘Eggy what?’ the younger man barks.

The woman winces at the taste of the Paint. ‘An old saying, where I came from on Earth.’

She has their attention. Even the younger man’s hostility flickers, a sliver of the boy he must have been showing through, as he learned his planets from the murals on the walls of rest stops.

‘Earth?’ His hand rests on the gun he knows he’ll use before the night is out. ‘Real Earth? Then what are you doing here?’

‘What is anyone?’ She sighs. ‘I left when I was eighteen. Won a lottery place on the Decader, worked the cleaning shift for the voyage. Only, I didn’t understand inflation insurance, so when I got to Jericho…’ she shrugs. No need to go on. A familiar story. ‘Bounced around ever since.’

‘Bounced all the way to the hulks.’ The prisoner is staring hard. ‘That a collar scar on your neck?’

‘Is Mollusc is a warden name?’ she retorts lightly.

The prisoner smiles. ‘Did my time. Was released early on good behaviour. Sent here.’

‘What’s *your* name?’ the younger man demands.

The woman looks over her glass. ‘Me? Oh, everyone just calls me Ma.’

‘Ma.’ The older man squashes a grub’s head with his thumbnail. ‘Aren’t you afraid to travel alone?’

‘Afraid of what?’

‘Lots of bad people in the Barrens. It’s a hungry place.’

‘Lots of bad,’ the younger man agrees, toying with his gun. ‘And then there’s the Seekers and those… things.’

The woman laughs. ‘You mean the Ifs? Nonsense. And I doubt the Seekers would bother with a gristly old woman.’ She dusts off her hands. ‘No, if I’m afraid of anything out here it’s humans. You hear such terrible stories. Like that beetle hawker and her family, near Nozhovka, cut all to pieces for a miserable handful of Breath beads. Tragic.’

She doesn’t see the men glance at each other. Marl shakes his head minutely. Outside, the wind yawns, desperate to swallow the tiny building whole. The stove clicks. The prisoner goes still, abruptly aware of the tension in the room, of every breath being taken.

‘To think we might be stuck here all night,’ the woman sighs.

Marl’s fingers inch towards the gun, only to stop dead when something clatters onto the table. A pair of dice, carved out of bone.

‘Anyone for a game?’ the woman asks.

In the fitful glow of the sodium lamps, the pips look dark as scabs.

‘Where’d you get those?’ the younger man frowns. ‘They’re not allowed.’

She raises an eyebrow. ‘You don’t believe all those air-starved fancies, big grown men like you? *I* play every day and haven’t been eaten alive by demons.’ She sends the dice spinning across the worn tabletop. They all flinch – Marl, Scrap and the younger man – but the dice simply come to rest on a four and a four, harmless.

‘Eight. Not a bad roll, if we were playing for anything.’ She smiles, showing a mouthful of real teeth. ‘How about your jacket?’

Marl squints. ‘In exchange for what?’

She takes a little hand-sewn pouch from the pocket of her jumpsuit. Inside, Breath beads roll, sparkling in their coatings of amphetamine. ‘They’re good ones. For emergencies only.’

‘Alright.’

The woman nods and clambers to her feet, asking Scrap for a cloth to clean the spilt liquor from the table.

Immediately, the younger man lurches from his chair. The prisoner is hit by the bounty hunter’s stench as he passes; stale sweat and piss and rot from a bad tooth, but still, they lean to listen in close.

‘Marl,’ the man hisses. ‘I don’t like it. Those things–’

‘You saw. She rolled. Nothing happened.’

‘I don’t like it. Don’t like her.’

‘You don’t need to much longer.’

‘Let’s do it now, then. That tattoo, I seen it before I swear. And she knew about Nozhovka–’

Marl pats the younger man’s cheek hard and shoves him away as the woman returns. ‘Let’s play.’

‘Best of three?’

Marl shrugs, but the prisoner can see the sheen of sweat that has broken out on his neck. The woman rolls lazily, almost regally.

Two and three.

Marl shakes the dice like someone in supplication before letting go. They clatter on the metal. Two and four.

The prisoner watches the woman reach for the dice. It must be the light, because for a moment her fingers look red, as if slick with blood.

Five and one.

Marl gnaws in his lip and throws again.

Four and four. He grins.

Outside, something tumbles in the wind. The younger man looks up, jumpy, but Marl is focused, pupils pipped as the woman rolls.

Two sixes.

There’s a clatter outside. Scrap wrenches at the shuttered window, peering nervously. Marl scrapes up the dice, and for an instant, his hand is that of a corpse, the knuckles scraped to dull white nubs, tossed into a bucket with a hundred others.

He rolls. The dice land, two dark circles.

The woman looks up. ‘Snake eyes.’

It happens immediately, so fast the prisoner doesn’t even have a chance to breathe. Their awareness is ripped from their skull as the world turns inside out, as they are enveloped, rushed upon, torn apart by *things*, numberless, vast beyond imagining; all ravenous, with jaws opened wide to swallow everything down. Only the woman stands untouched by them, her eyes dark and inhuman as the mouth of a gun. The world is splitting apart, realities tangling in seething mass, but the woman moves through them all, sharp and deliberate – a needle threading worlds.

As Marl reaches for his gun she steps behind him, metal flashing in her left hand. The scalpel’s blade sweeps his throat before he can cry out.

A shot. The woman drags Marl’s convulsing body into the path of the bullet. The younger man yells, but she already has a charge gun in her hand and the next instant he is blown backwards against the wall.

Someone is screaming. Only when the woman looks their way does the prisoner realise the noise is coming from their own mouth. The cry dies as the woman lets Marl fall and reaches towards their face, her hands dripping blood.

A black bird falls from the sky. Footsteps lead into hell. A blade gleams. Dark sand and eternity and lives dragged from death with needles and chemicals and knives. One, many. A tally…

The prisoner opens streaming eyes. They are shaking in terror but they are

back in their body and the trade post is just that, a small, dismal shack, and the woman is just a woman, cold-eyed and bloody but human. Whatever was here, it has gone.

There's a pounding at the door and the woman levers herself to her feet to answer.

Strangers slide into the place, six of them, seven, bringing the night wind on their ragged clothes. Any relief the prisoner feels vanishes when they see the belts, hung with scalpels, hatchets, even saws. The strangers' boots are bloodstained, their hands and arms scored with scars. Tallies of lives.

'Done?' one asks, voice raw as the dust.

The woman turns to the bartend. 'Scrap, you're sure these were the ones did Nozhovka?'

The bartend nods repeatedly, pressed against the wall, eyes closed. One of the Seekers kneels beside the younger bounty hunter, who is trying to crawl for his fallen gun.

'Alive?' the Seeker asks.

The woman looks down. 'They killed seven. Four adults, three children. A great debt.'

With a nod, the Seeker draws a blade and cuts the man's throat.

The prisoner chokes in horror as the blood flows towards them. Across the room, two more of the Seekers have begun work on Marl, sterilising their instruments and scarred hands as they get to work opening his chest with an

automatic saw. Another lugs in a cryo-crate. Another dons a pair of gloves to carefully prise out his eyes.

A shadow falls across the prisoner. The woman. She kneels, takes their chin in her fingers, studying the bruises. The prisoner feels the tackiness of the blood, smells its overpowering rank iron tang. Seekers leave no survivors.

Then, the woman's eyes narrow and she brushes aside the prisoner's tangled red hair. Beside one brow is a tattoo of a tiny red cross.

'"Doc" Mollusc,' she murmurs. 'Are you a real doctor?'

'J… just a prison medic.'

Her fingers tighten. '*They* need lives. You understand?'

The prisoner nods frantically, although they don't. Seekers come forwards to haul them to their feet. Upright, they tower over the woman, but there's nothing they can do as she takes up the scalpel again and leans towards their chest.

Pain blooms. The prisoner looks down to see blood seeping through their shirt. Three small cuts mark their shoulder – two sloping lines and one across.

The woman wipes the scalpel on a piece of rag. 'So we know you.'

The prisoner stands, stunned, as their shackles are released, as one of the Seekers drops a medical kit onto the table beside them. The trade post has become a scene of horror, blood in great pools across the floor, clogging the sand, the stench of sundered flesh in the air. But Seekers work fast, and already they are packing the cryo-crates, carrying the organs away from the bounty

hunters' plundered corpses, ready to be sped to the desperate and the damned on this and other border moons.

'Leave the remains outside for the wind,' the woman instructs the cowering bartend. 'Show what happens to people who take what belongs to *them*.'

'Wait,' the prisoner croaks as she reaches the door. 'What shall I do?'

She turns back, the wind plucking at her tattered clothes, urging her away into the desert. 'Whatever you can.' Her lip twitches into a worn smile. 'Welcome to Factus.'

By Stark Holborn

Ten Low

Triggernometry & *Advanced Triggernometry*

Nunslinger

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