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ON *DEBATABLE SPACE*

PHILIP PALMER



ARTEMIS



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Preface

I was fourteen years old when I first read Artemis McIvor's account of her life and times. It was a wild and rambling tale and it seized my imagination. These are quieter times, and we look back in awe at the great history of our civilisation, in all its absurdity, barbarity, and cruelty.

The book I read was somewhat erratically edited, and in publishing this new corporeal edition¹ we considered very carefully whether to delete some of the interpolations from this unnamed and now forgotten scribe before eventually deciding to retain them. However, readers should be aware that large sections of McIvor's manuscript were excised by this editor for reasons which in the eyes of posterity appear spurious; and all these deleted sections have now been lost. And, apparently, McIvor herself showed no interest in revising her manuscript, even when the charges against her were dropped.

So this is the story of Artemis. She was not a revolutionary, or an idealist; she was merely a survivor. But we salute her spirit.

Henry Exon, publisher-in-chief
Heritage of Humanity Books

Publisher's Note

The events described in this volume predate the planetary carnage wreaked by the entity known to history as the Hive-Mind. In consequence, several of the planets named by Dr McIvor no longer exist.

The following text is unamended from the original highly amended first edition, published by Wa Out of Orbit Books.

BOOK 1

REVENGE⁴

Prison Break

“Fuck you,” I said, then walked into the kitchen. Picked up the mug of scalding hot water. And threw it over my own face.

It hurt. A lot.

I could feel my skin melting.

I began to scream.



Let me back up a little. Who was I saying “Fuck you” to? Why throw boiling water over my own face? And why was I screaming like a bratty little girl? (I can, I assure you, take a lot more pain than *that* without whining about it.)

To know all that, you’d have to know why I was in the high-security wing of the Giger Penitentiary on the arid wilderness that is Giger’s Moon, in the midst of the greatest prison riot of all time.

It’s a long story. I’ll tell it when I’m ready. For the moment just stay with the basic facts. Boiling water, melting face, girly screaming from me. And then Teresa Shalco running after me, shouting “Bitch!” and “Whore!” and other such expletives, before punching me viciously and knocking me to the ground.

I wept and huddled, playing the helpless victim. And Shalco screamed a great number of mostly unfounded insults at me, whilst savagely kicking my prone body. It took three DR dubbers to pull her off.

It was all going according to plan.



Giger’s Moon – I’m digressing now, bear with me – is a boon to lovers, if you happen to live on the planet of Giger.

The Moon is a third of the size of the planet it orbits. And thus appears to Gigerians as a glorious silvery orb that fills half their night-time sky. Its surface is scarred with cliffs and craters that cast dark shadows which, to the imaginatively minded, resemble the faces of mythical beasts. There are ruined cities up there too, and eerie ziggurats made of solid metal which have no discernible function like desk ornaments the size of skyscrapers. All products of the mysterious alien civilisation that once dwelled there.

And – I love this bit! – Giger’s Moon is believed by most Gigerians to have an aphrodisiac effect that is in inverse proportion to its size.

In other words, when there’s a full moon, the hearts of lovers will beat just a *little* faster.

When there’s a half moon, lust starts to really stir.

And when the moon is a thin crescent – oh boy!!! – shameless and indiscriminate carnality ensues.

Which I guess is why they call it the Horny Moon.

~~No one knows how Giger's Moon became a barren wilderness. Or why its original three-legged five-headed inhabitants fled. Or where those strange denizens of Giger's Moon went to. Or indeed (okay, I admit I'm the only one who wonders this) whether they wore hats on any or all of their five heads.~~

Nowadays, the Brightside of Giger's Moon is a vast Industrial Zone. And the Darkside of Giger's Moon is where they house the Penitentiary. It is the second largest prison in the Solar Neighbourhood after Pohl Pen. It houses recidivists and sociopaths and stone cold killers. As well as all those generals and soldiers and Corporation lawyers who were so astonishingly evil they couldn't get pardoned in the round of judicial amnesties that followed the Last Battle.

Security here is formidably tight. No one has ever escaped from the Giger's Moon Penitentiary. Until now.



“Keep your head still,” said the doppelgänger robot, and I kept my head still.

The DR sprayed my scalded face with healant, and it stung like fuck. I could feel the skin becoming stiff, and I knew that in about forty-eight hours my burned flesh would start to regenerate.

“My eyes!” I whined, “I’m fucking blind!” I wasn’t, in fact, but the dubber operating the DR was too dumb to know that. His silver-skinned robot-puppet shone its torch in my eye and my pupils didn’t dilate; and the idiot at the controls thought that proved something.

“Shackle her,” said the DR, and the two other DR-dubbers put magnetised shackles on my arms, pinning them behind my back. Then they did the same with a bar-shackle around my ankles. Then they fastened an explosive collar around my neck and strapped me to a trolley. They were taking no chances.

Teresa Shalco, meanwhile, had fucked off. Even though she was the aggressor and I the victim, no one attempted to arrest *her*. Because she was the *capobastone*, and hence the Boss of this entire fucking prison, and was hence pretty much untouchable.

The lead DR wheeled me on my trolley down the Spoke. Past the R & R rooms. And past the F Spoke cells and through twelve sets of force fields, until we reached the Outer Hub where the prison hospital was located.

“What have we got here?” said Cassady briskly – that’s Cassady Penfold, hospital trusty, five-foot-nine, ruby-haired and, oh, my lover – as I was wheeled into the receiving area. I groaned and raised my head and looked straight at her. Cassady, bless her, didn’t flinch at the sight of my melted face.

“Gang violence,” said the DR. “Burns on face, torso injuries, big mouth.”

“Can we use cosmetic rejuve to restore the skin texture?” said Cassady, in her usual gentle half-murmuring tones.

The DR was silent a moment, as the dubber at the other end of the virtual link considered this question. Although in truth there wasn’t much to think about. Waste high-quality cosmetic rejuve on *recidivist*? “No,” said the DR.

Then the DR picked my stretcher up with one hand with effortless strength and dropped me on to the bed. I groaned, trying to sound as if I was in agony and filled with abject despair at having forever lost my lovely looks.

The agony part was real enough.

“Anyone else to come?” asked Cassady.

“Nope,” said the DR, and then the light went out of its eyes and it was motionless.

Now there were only two of us with functioning minds in the reception area. Me and Cassady.

The hospital reception was a large oval room with a mirrored ceiling (don't ask me why, but it made looking upwards a dizzying experience) and a hexagonal purple and green virtual array hovering at its heart. It also had the standard SNG pale-pastel walls of the kind that always made me want to blaze away with a projectile gun full of primary-coloured paints. And there were of course, carefully embedded in the walls, micro-cameras that covered every single area in the room. But it was a fair bet no one in the surveillance centre was looking at us. Not *now*. Not with all the shit that was going down.

“The riot's started?” asked Cassady.

I consulted my retinal display. “You bet your arse,” I confirmed.



There are, so I am assured, not that I give a damn about such things, many cool things about me.¹

Such as for instance, my hair. Which is long and lustrous and, these days, vividly yellow-blond.

And the fact I have a scary stare that can terrify the toughest of tough guys, even though I am slight and girlish-looking.

And the many augments which my paranoid mother built into my DNA, which give me all kinds of amazing super-powers.

And my personality, which has been described by friends as “acerbic” and “sarcastic.”²

And my philosophy of life, which many feel is “immoral” and “vile,” but is based on a principle of savouring every moment to the full regardless of consequences.

But the coolest thing about me by far, in my view, is the fact that I am the daughter of an archivist.³

Yeah, I do mean it. That really *is* cool.

For you see my father, from an early age, taught me all about *databases*. Their architecture, their hidden byways, their lock-outs and encryptions, their base codes, their security protocols. Almost all databases you see are built on the ruins of their predecessors. So most systems can be decrypted if you understand the *archaeology* of that database.

It helps, too, if you have a Rebus chip, as I do – it's a small addition to the standard brain chip implant, which allows me to directly access databases from any quantum computer brain in shortbarrel range.⁴

This is why I spent a year on Giger. Staring up, every night, at the Moon. (Which is how, by the way, I learned at first hand, and – oh boy! – *often*, about the Horny Moon phenomenon.)

Dekon is the name of the QRC on Giger's Moon. It's linked of course to Ariel, which is the name of Giger's own planetary computer. (Or possibly Ariel is a clone of Dekon?)⁵ I spent the aforementioned year finding a way to explore the dusty corridors of Dekon's mind. And when I succeeded, I set up a permanent data-pathway into my implant.

Now at any moment, night and day, I can conjure up a living map of the entire prison. I can see which Spokes are locked down, which force barriers are on Red Setting, and where the DRs are patrolling.

And this was what (lying on a trolley in the hospital reception area, flanked on all sides by pastel-

coloured walls, face burned off, next to my red-haired lover Cassady) I could now see. A prison in crisis. Inmates rioting and attacking DRs and smashing “hidden” cameras (‘cause everyone knows where those fuckers are). And then DRs being unleashed *en masse* from the Spoke Storage Bays to contain the riot. General chaos in the A, B, C, D, E and F Spokes, and the Outer Hub. In short, a prison riot.

This of course was why the doppelgänger robot in the hospital reception area had been switched off. The human operator was needed elsewhere.

Meanwhile, as I was witnessing the riot in my mind’s eye, Cassady was unfastening my shackles and explosive collar with the electronic lock-decoder I had purchased some weeks before. And when I was finally free, she passed me a roll of toilet paper. I grimaced.

Time for the next stage in my plan.



I am not, repeat NOT, providing any visual or tactile details about what occurred during this next stage of this escape plan.

Suffice it to say: I took the toilet roll. And staggered to the john.

Once there, knowing I was unobserved, I wept hot tears on to my scarred cheeks at the thought of things that had happened some years before. Bad experiences that were the motive for – but we’ll get to that.

Then I stopped weeping. Got a grip on myself. Covered the toilet bowl in plastic film. Swallowed six laxatives. And awaited the results.

And a little while later I had a scrubbed-clean cylindrical package of mouldable organic explosive. Enough to blow up a skyscraper.

I should add that this wretched thing had been there, concealed in the deepest recesses of my colon for nearly six months. That is what I call forward planning.



Let me go back in time a few months, and tell you how I first met Teresa Shalco. That *capobastone* bitch who beat me up, remember?

It was my first day in Giger. I’d been through all the scanners. They’d x-rayed and ultrasounded me; and had missed the bomb up my arse, and the bone-claws embedded in my hands. And they’d also DNA’d me to confirm I was who I said I was. Which in fact I wasn’t. DNA archives are so fucking easy to hack! So, officially, I was Danielle Arditti. Psychopath. Serial killer. Assassin.

Then they dressed me in a purple overall and I stood in the Holo Hall and listened to Prison Governor Robbie Ferguson explaining the rules of the establishment. No drugs. No drink. No sexual molestation. No gang lingo. No murdering other inmates. No fomenting rebellion against the democratically elected government of the Solar Neighbourhood. Oh, and this was the absolute killer; moral rehabilitation classes were compulsory.

Fuck! I’d rather be beaten and hosed down with cold water.

After the bullshit briefing, I went to the inmates’ bar and got slaughtered on cheap rum.⁶ And, when in my cups and dribbly with rage, I vowed to kill the entire fucking Parliament of the SNG. Shalco heard me at the height of my rant and laughed. She told the barman to give me a free drink,

grinned at me, and eyed me up.

“Danielle,” I said, introducing myself ritually, despite my drunkenness: “*vangelista*⁷ of our Beloved Family. I respect the authority of the Clan.”

Shalco held out her right hand. Her middle finger was a stump. I kissed the stump.⁸

“Do you fuck girls?” she asked me. I grinned, but shook my head. I didn’t, then.

“Shame.” She grinned back. She had an infectious grin. “How’s the booze?”

“It’s, um.” I took another sip of the free booze she’d given me. It was whisky, not rum. Richer and more wonderful whisky than I’d ever drunk before.

“Four-hundred-year-old malt,” Shalco informed me.

“They spoil you guys.”

“I have some contacts.”

The prison bar was in the gym. Some nutjobs were chinning up and lifting weights around us. And then Shalco introduced me to Bargan Oriel, who was playing solitaire at a table, while drinking a six-hundred-year-old bottle of port.

Oriel was Shalco’s *quintino*. He was a thin man, with a vulture’s beak nose, and a piercing stare. (He had two artificial eyes, I later learned.) He’d been *quintino* of the New Earth Clanning, which was comprised of seven planets in the Alpha 4 sector of the Solar Neighbourhood. His boss, Trajo Marol, had been a legendary monster, responsible for organising massacres on behalf of Gamers on an awe-inspiring scale. Marol was killed resisting arrest, despite having been slipped enough sedatives to put a buffalo to sleep. Now *that* was a story.

Anyway! Oriel was a quiet man, who exuded an aura of control freak. He was however very charming to me, offered me some port, and told me a series of very funny stories about his life on New Earth III.

I disliked him immensely. He had a knack of pitching his voice so low you had to lean in close to hear him. He was impossible to interrupt, because he left such huge pauses you could never be sure he’d finished speaking.

And he was, like so many of these guys, enveloped in self-love. I mean! If he could have fucked his own arse, he would’ve done.

Shalco, by contrast, was exceptionally likeable. She was a big woman – tall *and* broad – with an appealing extrovert personality, who took her power for granted. I’d heard good things about her from the Clan scuttlebutt sites. She was considered to be fair, and generous, and at times merciful. Though she was, of course, a Boss, and it goes without saying that Bosses have to be tough.

And oh yes, she *was* tough.

The DRs broke up the party at nine p.m. and escorted us to our cells. I was in cell 2333x. The x meant it was on the twenty-fourth floor of the cell complex. The hardglass lifts carried us up twenty at a time. A DR ushered each of us into our cell, and closed the door behind. The doors were heavy and metal and slammed loudly when they were shut. That was for effect.

I was drunk and cheerful. It had been a sociable evening. In the course of it, I’d met a few old friends. Though they didn’t recognise me of course, because I was taller and black-haired (not blonde) and somewhat bigger busted when they knew me. And my eyes then were brown, not blue. And my face, of course, was quite different. My body language was maybe similar, though I’d worked hard at that. And my voice – well. The timbre had changed. And I’d altered the rhythms of my speech, and of course my favoured catchphrases. No more “Yo’ mollyfocker” as a term of endearment. I missed that. It was a phrase that had once defined me.

The cell was small. A bunk, a toilet, and three hangers for clothes. I had three sets of purple

overalls, in case I fancied a change. One pair of black shoes, no laces. There were still bracket marks and screw holes on the hardmetal floor, where the torture bench had been removed and replaced by an actual bed. The ceiling was slightly curved. It was like living inside a tin can. There were no books on the shelf, which by the way was a breach of my human rights.⁹ And there was no mirror, which was also a breach of my human rights. The walls were not soundproofed, which meant I could hear the prisoners in the neighbouring cells wanking, or talking, or even fighting. This also was a breach of my human rights.

There is a four-hundred page SNG Act of Parliament¹⁰ outlining in some considerable detail all the human rights which even the scummiest and most evil prisoners are deemed to possess. I found it hilarious. Human rights! What the fuck *are* those?

At three a.m. the doors of all the cells were opened. And, or so I assumed, the corridor and cell cameras were all switched off. I stayed put. I heard the movement of prisoners outside. The chatter of conversation, the casually muttered asides, the occasional burst of subdued laughter. And after a while I heard, as I had been warned I would hear, the sounds of rape.

It went on all night long. The victims, I knew, would all be non-Clan. Hence, fair game. Some of them would be young – men and women in their early twenties. (Younger prisoners had their own juvenile wing.) And it was part of Clan culture that in prison the powerful should always abuse, sexually and in other ways, the less powerful. It was considered a form of redemption, believe it or not – a way for Clannites to reassert their lost authority. It was a credo that disgusted me, and which I have always failed to comprehend. But there was nothing I could do about it.

I'd covertly marked my door with a finger-scratched "V" as the DR had paused before ushering me in to the cell. V for "*vangelista*." It meant I was exempt from assault. My icon of protection.

So I stayed in my cell. I listened to the screams and groans which filled half that long night. I did not sleep. It brought back memories. But they were memories that I did not wish to endure, so I forced my mind to be blank.

I can do that, you see. I can make my mind entirely blank.

Remember this was not, none of it, my fault. Nor was it my responsibility.

So I blanked it out.



I slept for about two hours, which was all I needed. At five a.m. the prisoners returned to their cells and the doors were closed. At seven a.m. the doors opened again and we all filed out and queued for the elevators.

The view on the way down was disorientating. The cell blocks formed a vast tower at the centre of the prison, with the elevators on the outside. Beyond the circle I could see the Spokes which were the work and recreation areas. Beyond them, I could see the wilderness of Giger's Moon, grey and waste behind the impermeable hardglass walls of the biodome.

I shared an elevator with nineteen other inmates, one of whom was a seven-foot giant. He stood very close to me, and leered down. "You missed a good night last night, *vangelista*," he said, grinning. I ignored him.

"Maybe tonight?" he offered.

I ignored him. The lift stopped. The DR stepped out.

I elbow-struck the giant in his ribs, breaking several. "Speak," I said quietly, "when you are spoke

to.”

The other inmates shuffled around us to conceal the brawl from the DR's view.

The giant grinned at me. His teeth were large and ugly. “You aren't allowed to do that, *vangelista*,” he said. He was in pain, obviously, but you'd never have known it from his tone of voice. “I have the protection of the Clan.”

I stared at him, scarily.

After fifteen seconds, he flinched.

I walked away. That round went to me.

I went to breakfast. It was synthesised mulch. The dining area had clearly once been a recreational area for dubbers. Because in the old days, the prisoners here weren't given food, they were just injected with nutrients. I could see the outlines where a swimming pool had been filled in. White lines demarcated a former baseball pitch. They'd been a sporty lot, those old devils who once had run the Giger Dungeon.

Teresa Shalco joined me at my table.

“Just to outline the rules,” she said cheerfully, as she sat down.

“Fuck you.”

“Whatever your status elsewhere,” she continued softly, “you have to earn it here. *Capisci?*”

She beamed nicely at me.

“*Non capisco.*”

Shalco continued to smile, but she didn't mean it.

“First and final warning,” she whispered.



The following night the same thing happened. The footsteps, the doors opening, the howls of pain and regret.

At one point, I went out on to the landing and tried to differentiate between the howls of pain. To locate the worst and most terrible howl. When I had done so, which took a long while, I walked down the corridor and entered the offending cell.

“No more,” I explained.

There were three of them engaged in the atrocity. They stared at me in astonishment. Appalled at my effrontery. Shocked at my stupidity.

Then they came at me.

I smashed heads. I broke bones.

Then I dragged the unconscious bodies out and dumped them in the corridor. And returned to the cell to see how the abused prisoner was bearing up after his ordeal.

He was bearing up, in my view, remarkably well. The prisoner was lean and young, and he grinned at me with open relief. “Thank you,” the prisoner said. “That was well – fuck. Thank Christ it's over.”

I shrugged.

“They'll make you pay for what you just did, you do know that?” the prisoner added, sorrowfully. I felt. He was young, but he clearly knew the way of the world. Later, I learned his name: Tomas.¹¹ But I never actually got to know him.

“Whatever,” I said.

I went back to my cell. I waited.

No one came for me. They were waiting for permission.



The following night, they had their permission.

I sat on my bunk in my cell and waited. I heard the footsteps outside the door. I heard the murmur of voices, cursingly vowing to “split my arse” and “rip my tongue out of my mouth” and other such grisly pledges. And I heard the handle turn.

But it did not open. The door had been locked by Dekon, acting under my instructions. Thus overriding the earlier “unlock” signal sent by the corrupt dubber who allowed this nightly anarchy.¹²

I can do that, you see. I’ll explain how later.

Banging and shouting followed, and continued for some time. But the bastards couldn’t get in. And eventually they lost interest. My lynch mob dispersed and they returned to their cells.

I hugged myself with delight – I love such moments of elegant victory – and then I slept.



Teresa Shalco joined me at breakfast.

“Who the fuck *are* you?” she marvelled.

I shrugged.

“You know that,” I said calmly. “You’ve spoken to my people on Ariadne?”

Ariadne was the planet where the real Danielle Arditti had served the Clan.

“They say you’re dead.”

“I don’t feel dead.”

“They say you’re a bitch.”

“They got that right.”

“You’re in the Clan, okay?” Shalco told me patiently. “So you have to accept my authority. If you have a beef with your fellow prisoners, come to me. But don’t take the law into your own hands. Nothing happens without my permission, that’s the way of our Family, am I right, *vangelista*?”

“It’s too loud. The stuff they get up to. I can’t sleep.”

She sighed, as a mother might sigh when her child has been a scamp. Shalco had a warm and comforting presence. It was tempting to yield to the allure of her maternal loveliness. But I reminded myself she was a Boss. Hence, evil and dangerous scum.

“There’s only one way out of the dining hall,” Shalco warned me. “You have to pass through a womb to get from here to the rec hall. And you *have* to go to the rec hall, because the DRs won’t let you stay in here. Oh, and by the way, the cameras will be turned off.”

“I guessed something like that might occur,” I conceded.

“Your best bet is to stay here,” Shalco said, kindly. “Let the DRs come for you. If you refuse to obey an order they’ll detain you. You’ll go into solitary. Best place for you.”

“Why are you telling me this?”

“Hey, you’re a nice kid,” said Shalco. “I don’t want to see you hurt.”

I finished my coffee. It was, frankly, awful. “I’ll be going,” I said.

I got up. All eyes were on me.

I walked down the metal staircase and handed in my tray.

All eyes were on me.

I walked towards the exit door that was the only way out of the dining area.

All eyes were on me.

I entered the womb. A womb, by the way, is a rounded corridor of a kind you only ever see in prisons, with sealable hardglass gatewalls at each end. When the gatewall at one end closed, the gatewall at the other end would open. Like an airlock.

This womb was wide, as broad as many actual rooms. The sidewalls and ceiling were grey, unpainted – no pastels here. And at the far end of the womb, I could see a mill of prisoners peering through the hardglass to witness the violent altercation that was about to take place.

There were six of them in the womb with me. They weren't even attempting to conceal their evil intent. They just stood in the centre of this grey cage, ominously, waiting for me.

Seven Foot Giant was one of them. He carried a knife the size of a scimitar. I guessed it had been built in the workshop, out of stolen hardmetal.

His companion, who I mentally dubbed Big Ugly Motherfucker, was shorter, but just as broad, with a leering expression and bad skin.

And then there was Big Black Bald Guy, a black man with a shiny bald head and a body-built physique. He wore a vest so I could admire his bulging arms and his tattoos of women with breasts like moons.

And there were also two female Noirs who stood like shadows, dressed all in black to complement their jet black eyes, effortlessly graceful. They were clearly ninja-trained, and were eerily focused.

And finally Three Eyes, another giant, six-and-a-half foot high, with three eyes. That meant he was from Golgotha, there's a fad for it there.¹³

Three Eyes carried a baseball bat with spikes.

I glanced behind me. The rear gatewall was now sealed. No going back. Shalco had already warned me the cameras would be out of action. There was a window in the middle of the corridor, and through it I could see a DR store cupboard. But those DRs were all switched off. So, it was just me and them. One against six. I've had worse odds.

Though not often, and I didn't always win.

"Kiss my finger," I told the six mollyfuckers, calmly and quite politely.

"I scorn your authority, bitch," said Seven Foot Giant, which was the gravest of insults for someone of my (alleged) Clan rank.

"Does your penis," I asked, still using my calm and polite voice, "look really odd? I mean, disproportionately small, compared to the rest of your lumbering frame?"

"I scorn your authority," he repeated.

"And how do you cope with doors? I mean, do you have to like *stoop*?"

"I scorn your authority, and call upon you to defend it," he said for the third time, clearly struggling to keep himself in check. But these proprieties have to be observed.

"I defend my authority," I said, and that was the cue for the fighting to begin.



Ten minutes later I walked out of the womb into Spoke A.

My shoulder was stiff, from throwing a really awkward punch. My ribs hurt. My hands hurt. And I had the mother of all headaches. But, of course, I acted as if nothing untoward had occurred. I walked

into the Spoke A rec room and picked up a magazine and started to read it. It was a geek mag, full of racy images of ion drives and rocket engines, with a little section on how to solar surf, and a centrepiece spread about building up abs without rejuve.¹⁴

Half an hour later a platoon of DRs arrived to arrest me for my breach of prison discipline. They stomped me through the Spokes, manacled and collared, their blank silver faces conveying all the contempt and rage that their human handlers could muster.

In the scuffle which had preceded this moment, I had managed to cripple and kill all six of Shalco's crew. Seven Foot Giant now had a broken skull and no eyes, and was admitted to the prison hospital with no heartbeat either.¹⁵ Oh, and his scimitar was broken. I had kept a shard of it as a memento. The other five were battered, broken, and also dead.¹⁶

None of them were true-dead, however – I was too skilful for that. And there was no camera footage of the fight of course. But dozens of prisoners had watched the combat through the hardglass doors, and clearly one or more of them had been coerced into stoolpigeoning.

And so now I was due to endure a month in solitary confinement, as my punishment for fighting other prisoners without sanction, and with excessive force.

I was looking forward to it.

You see, these days I get twitchy and restless when there are too many other people around me. I prefer wide open spaces; or failing that, small cramped spaces, and my own company. I'm sorry, that's just the way I am. These days.

Besides, I needed to recuperate. My hands were badly bruised, though the knuckles were unbroken. My skull however was fractured. And at some point during the fracas I'd been stabbed in the liver. But my healing factor had already kicked in. In a few weeks I would be, as my father used to say, much to my irritation, "as right as rain."

You know, that phrase used to drive me mad!

One time, when I was a kid I mean, I burst into tears in front of my father when he was putting me to bed. And my father had looked at me in horror. Until, much to his relief, he realised he had the solution to my problems. An aphorism! "Go to sleep," he had told me, with a big smile on his face, "and in the morning, you'll be as right as rain."

Hey! I don't know why I just told that story. Not very relevant, huh?¹⁷ Move on, Artemis, tell the tale.

So, long story short: I was feeling pretty good about myself after the fight in the prison womb. My reflexes hadn't let me down. My fighting skills were still second to none. Only the thin red line on my throat betrayed how close I'd come to being decapitated and thus experiencing true-death in those first muddled lightning-swift moments of the *mêlée*.

Picture it:

There I am, licking my lips anxiously, fear in my eyes, as I walk towards Seven Foot Giant and his ugly pals. They read my seemingly fearful body language and they relax, just slightly. Enough to give me my edge.

Seven Foot Giant lunges first, trying to impale me with his sword. So I duck down low, come up with a punch to the ribs. His sword's backswing catches my throat a nick and I see a spurt of blood – yeah, that was the worst moment. But I give his body a tug and momentum propels him onward and the sword takes a slice from the skull of Big Black Bald Guy.

More blood spurts, but not mine this time. Seven Foot Giant is wheezing, the broken ribs have punctured his lung and I'm behind him and I leap up and catch his head in my hands and twist to one

side. Broken vertebra, and I've managed to gouge his eyes out too. He falls like a building being demolished and I push off his body and fly up in the air and kick Three Eyes with both my heels on his chin. The impact rocks me, but it rocks him even worse. That's Big Black Bald Guy down, Seven Foot Giant down, and Three Eyes dazed and confused. Big Ugly Motherfucker, however, is biding his time. He will be trouble, I predict.

Then the Noirs come at me. They are elegant and achieve perfection in their every graceful movement. By contrast, I am a savage pit bull hound at bay. Elbows and heels and head butts, those are my weapons of choice. I keep it close, their finesse doesn't get a look in. I break their skulls because I know their sinuous bodies will constantly evade me. But grab a head with both hands and butt it and you can't miss.

The head butts hurt me like hell – that's when I broke my own skull – and it sure ain't *kata*. But the Noirs are down and weeping now.

Then Big Ugly Motherfucker makes his move, and he is fast, very fast indeed. His punch misses my head by a fraction, and I know that if his fist had connected my skull would have exploded. But it didn't, and it doesn't, for I am even quicker than he is. And I keep moving and snap back, and deliver a punch to his balls and an elbow strike to his head. This slows him down considerably. Then I punch him in the chest and his heart stops and he dies.

As he falls, his ugly face is consumed with disbelief. Here is a man, I guess, who has never lost a fight before.

Three Eyes is still in the fight though, as is Seven Foot Giant, despite his terrible injuries and his blindness. But that's to the good, 'cause he's just lumbering around now, getting in the way of the unconcussed fighters. I fall on the floor and weave like a snake and flip Three Eyes and Seven Foot Giant off their legs then savagely strike and kill them when they're down.

The Noirs are also back in the fight but slower now. And I get faster and my form becomes perfect. I am a *karate-ka* with open hands and a mind empty of confusion now. This bit would look beautiful if you could see fast enough to follow the different moves. Knife hand, claw thrust, side kick, roundhouse kick, kick-while-leaping, somersault, body twist, the whole repertoire. Savage strike to the face of the assailant in front, duck and weave and backheel to the rear to smash the head of the mollyfucker behind. Then repeat. And repeat, and repeat. And then, like shadows struck by sunlight, the Noirs are no more.

Ten minutes five seconds, and the fight is over. At the end of the combat, I am still standing and they are all clinically dead, but kept brain-alive by the oxygen capsules in their brains. There are stars in front of my eyes, and my heart is pounding so fast I fear I will stroke out.

Then I press the button for the gateway to open and I stroll, as I've already said, through.



My trial was brief. I wasn't allowed a lawyer. The holo of Prison Governor Ferguson appeared, heard the charges, and passed the sentence. One month's solitary to cool me down, plus twenty years additional moral rehabilitation therapy. (Yeah, that last bit really *did* scare me.)

As they dragged me to the Solo Cells, I howled in triumph: "VICTORY!" So the whole prison block would know what happened.

But then my troubles really began.



I had thought, you see, that it was all going to be plain sailing once I was in solitary. I would take my supposed punishment, actually a holiday for someone like me, then re-emerge refreshed and ready for Phase 2 of my plan.

I didn't think I would actually be *punished* by the prison authorities. It didn't, for pity's sake, even occur to me that such a thing might happen.

Because those days were gone! Or so I had been told. And so it was declared on all the news portals, and in the prison documentation. The days of beatings, sensory deprivation, brainthrashing, and cruelty beyond belief. The days of the Corporation regime, when Giger was a dungeon, not a prison.

THESE days every prison had a Specialist in Prisoner Welfare advising the staff on how to respect the human rights of the scumbag inmates. Even major infractions of the rules – drug-dealing, rape, murder – were liable to incur the mildest of sentences. A telling off. A brief period of solitary. A few more ghastly mornings sitting in a circle with fellow sinners repenting and vowing to be more empathetic from now on. But nothing that's actually going to hurt.

Thus, I had reasoned, all I had to do was tough it out for a few weeks. Sit in a cosy cell playing mental chess with myself. Then when I emerged I'd be Queen Bee of Giger. My rep would be secured. And I could do my deal with Shalco, prior to launching my escape bid.

That, as I say, was the plan.



They didn't bother with shackles. They didn't even slo-mo me. They just led me into the punishment block; and then they attacked me.

The blow was fast. I didn't even feel the air behind me stir and suddenly I was on the ground, bleeding from my ears. My skull was fractured in several more places. I could hear a roaring sound, like the wind whistling through my eye sockets. I got to my feet. The DRs took a step back. One of them had blood on its metal fist.

“Cruel and unusual punishment,” I told them coldly, “is now barred under the laws of the SN Government. It is also an offence to—”

All three DRs moved, but this time I was ready for them. I threw one DR against a wall, struck the second in the neck, dislocating its power supply. And failed to see the sucker punch from the third.

I went down. A powerful hand picked me up.

“You can't do this,” I explained.

And then a fist hit me in the face. And all the cheek and jaw bones whose graceful harmony of parts made me look like *me* were shattered and crushed by a single violent robot's punch. The DR smiled, an eerie silver smile, and opened its mouth. In the mouth were metal fangs. I groaned inwardly.

I tried to strike back, but the DR caught my hand and broke my fingers so I could not make a fist. And then it—



No more.

I took a beating, that's all that needs to be said. Every bone in my body was broken. Then acid was poured upon my body. Then the sprinkler came on and sprayed salt water on my fleshless dying carcass.

But none of this really happened. It was all in my mind.

What *really* happened was that I was led, shackled and hobbled, into the punishment block; and at some point during my journey a sedative dart had been injected into my body, causing me to lose consciousness and wiping my short-term memory.

Then my body was taken to the lab and wired up to the brainthrasher. The reality simulation machine that is used to administer violent punishments to criminals and rebels alike.

They used to call it the "brainwiper," and it can indeed be used for that. To erase memories, to rebuild personalities by implanting false experiences. But more usually it's used to inflict pain. A myriad types of pain. Pain so intense that the hapless offender will (out of sheer despair and desperation) find remorse in his or her black soul, and henceforward turn over a new leaf. Only to find that the pain does not cease. Repentance is not an option.

It's torture without physical damage. There's no limit to the amount of agony you can inflict on a victim, because **THEY CANNOT DIE**.

Within thirty seconds of taking that first punch, I knew this was a simulation, and so I settled in to endure it.

But it took longer, much longer, than I expected or could endure.



Time manipulation, you see, is the cruellest of tricks. If you can alter a person's inner chronology, then a second can be made to last an eternity.

In reality, I spent only two days in the brainthrashing device. That's how long it took them to realise their error. And that's not long at all, not really.

Because, fortunately, help was on its way. For the moment I'd concluded the fight with Teresa Shalco's goons, I'd sent a signal via my Rebus chip to Dekon, alleging malpractice at the Giger Penitentiary. Alarm signals had been sent to the SN Government. And this meant the Recon Committee would soon be on the case, anxious as always to protect their precious "human rights." This was my failsafe strategy – for I've always been cautious to the point of paranoia when I know my arrest is imminent.

And thus, it only took two days for the Recon Committee to come to my rescue. Two days! Before a doppelgänger bureaucrat touched down and ordered my release.

But in my mind, those two days were two hundred long, terrible, agony-filled years.

I used all the survival tricks I had learned in my time with Baron Lowman to ameliorate my agony. I blanked out the world, and all my sensations. Dwelled upon my happy memories. Schemed terrible revenges. Conjured up music in my mind. Tried, quite simply, not to actually *mind* what was happening, as the hallucinations became increasingly more vivid and painful and gothically brutal.

Eventually, as I was being quartered – my legs and arms wrenched off my body by straps fastened to a wheel which was being turned by my OWN BLOODY FATHER – the pain suddenly stopped.

"You're free to go," said the DR and I realised I was sitting in a chair fastened to wires. The DR unhooked me. I tried to stand, and then I swooned.

Yeah I did. I actually passed out, aka fainted, aka “swooned.”

~~Being flogged, hung, drawn, eviscerated, quartered, and feeling the heat from the flames which are roasting your flesh – it can really take it out of you.~~



I swaggered into the rec room in Spoke A. An old looking guy with a bald head and facial wrinkles eased up to me.

“Take a seat,” he said.

“I’m fine,” I told him.

“Take a seat.”

He had his hand on my arm. He eased me over to a bench. I sat down. I felt my vision start to swim. I wanted to cry.

“Head up, look proud, don’t let the bastards get to you,” the old guy said.

“I’m fine.”

“You’re not fine. You look like shit. Don’t let the Clannites see you like this. Take a minute. Take ten. Eat this.”

He passed me a square of something brown. Chocolate. I ate it. It tasted of nothing. I remembered the taste of ash. I remember eating my own—

No! I forced myself back into present reality.

“Who are you?” I asked suspiciously.

I ate a bit more chocolate. This time it tasted more like chocolate. A lifetime of memories came flooding back. I’d eaten this stuff before. Hadn’t I?

But... when? I couldn’t remember.

“My name’s Billy,” said the old guy. “I’m a trusty. I’ve been where you’ve been.”

“My name is—” I said, and realised that I had forgotten the details of my assumed identity.

“I know who you are.”

That made one of us.

“Billy, will you—?” I said, and couldn’t think of the next word.

He waited patiently.

I shook my head. I couldn’t remember the words. Any words.

He offered me a glass of water. I sipped it. It refreshed me.

I felt a surge of delight. *That* was what I had meant to say. I had been thirsty, and wanted a drink.

I sipped again.



“Who are these people?”

Billy had led me through wombs and rooms that I didn’t recognise, into a dining hall I had never seen before. A high vaulted chamber where silent men and women sat, staring into the far distance.

“Political prisoners, by and large,” said Billy.

“There are no political prisoners,” I said scornfully. “Not any more. They were released after—”

“Some of them wouldn’t go.” Billy nodded at a old grey-haired man with blind staring eyes.

“Carter Broderick. Leader of the June Revolution.”

I stared at the old blind man.

“Broderick is dead,” I said, stunned.

“That’s the story that went out on the news.”

“*That’s* him?”

I stared at Broderick. He stared back at me. A stare that haunted me for years after.

“Two hundred and fifty years in the brainthresher,” said Billy. “There’s not much of him left. But that’s him.”

“Is he bitter?”

“Beyond bitter.”

“Mad?”

“Beyond mad.”

“He’s a hero,” I said. “A genuine hero. Some say greater than Flanagan.”

“Flanagan was a chancer. Carter Broderick was an idealist.”

“You followed him?”

The bald guy laughed.

“Nah. I fought him. I was a Space Marine. I served the Corporation loyally.”

“So what are you doing here?”

Billy spat. An affectation of his. “I served the Corporation loyally,” he said bitterly. “A lot of us ended up here, after the Last Battle.”

“There were amnesties, weren’t there?”

“Not for the ones like me. Not for what we did.”

I looked at Billy again. He was old and had skin that was weathered and worn, but he carried himself with the special grace of the true warrior.

“Were you a Soldier, with a capital S?”

He glared at me.

“Nah. Wash your fucking mouth out. I was a volunteer. Not a zombie. I made my choice, and stuck with it. We all did. Back in those days.”

“Why are you helping me, Billy?”

“It’s what I do,” said Billy, grinning shyly. “I help people, if I think they can help *me* in some way.”

“In what way?”

“I want to escape.”

“Escape is impossible,” I explained.

He grinned at that.

“You don’t need to be so fucking coy,” he said, “There’s no surveillance in this room. It’s considered to be a breach of their human rights. These aren’t prisoners, you see. They’re just – well, they just won’t leave. So you can speak frankly. Will you take me with you?”

“What makes you think I’m planning to escape?”

“I know. I know your sort. And I know what you did to those guys. You’re on your way out of here and I can help.”

“I don’t need help.”

“Of course you need help.” Billy smiled. He was holding something back.

“Give,” I said.

He gave: “They’re planning to kill you tonight,” he said. “Shalco and her people. In your cell. They’ve bribed a dubber. A DR will come into your cell at midnight and force your tongue down your

throat. They'll call it suicide."

"How do you know?"

"I'm the lookout."



This was Billy's story.

He really *was* an old-timer. He'd been a green recruit during the Loper Insurgency, and a veteran with fifty years experience when Earth was invaded by Peter Smith. He'd fought, of course, on the losing side, but quickly switched allegiance.

Billy was a hundred and twenty-five years old when America rebelled. He was at the Siege of Beijing. By the time he was two hundred, he'd quelled forty-five uprisings and was awarded a Purple Heart after losing his legs and eyes in the Belt War.

Billy was the laconic sort. "What was it like?" I asked him one time. "Serving the Galactic Corporation?"

"I didn't," he said. "I worked for the army."

"You served in the Marine Corps. The Marines were fully owned by the Galactic Corporation."

He shrugged at that. "I worked for the army. I did what they asked me to do."

"You never had, like, moral qualms?"

"Nope."

"Never?"

"Never."

"How many people did you kill, Billy?"

"We don't keep score. It's not a game."

"Ball park."

He thought about it. "Couple of million," he hazarded.

"Couple of million?"

"Not counting entire planets. Just enemy combatants killed in action."

"*Millions.*"

"You asked for ball park."

"I did," I conceded.

Billy had been a doppelgänger rider and pilot. One of the best.

This was after he'd lost his legs and his eyes of course. His army insurance covered the cost of limb and organ rejuve. But that meant ten years with stumps, walking in an exoskeleton, viewing the world through artificial eyes, before the legs and eyes grew back. But he was still fit for virtual duties.

The truth, you see, and ignore whatever you've heard elsewhere, is that doppelgänger robots really *AREN'T* that scary. They're strong, for sure, and vicious, without a doubt. But also slow. Operated by amateurs and volunteers with no real idea how to fight. *Most* of the time.

But for the serious action engagements, in the days before Soldiers were bred, the doppelgänger department used crippled and aged Marines to ride their robot bodies and spaceships. That's how they enforced order on the ten thousand and more colony planets in which the Corporation held the majority shareholding.

"What was it like?" I asked.

Billy smiled. Memories of his doppelgänger days always lit a spark in his soul.

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