

Warpaint

written by Holly Lisle

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By Holly Lisle

PART ONE: Darkout

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CRAZED, STARVED, THEY CLUNG ALL over my shuttle's hull, bashing at it with anything they'd been able to grab. Those crammed up against the moleibond forward viewport were trying to bite me, unable to understand why they could see me, but couldn't reach me. The screeching and clicking of their teeth and claws on the hull made my skin crawl.

Insane, all of them. Staring, mindless monsters—Legends, they called themselves when they were functioning normally, or vampires, though in truth they were neither. They were humans who'd changed themselves into horrors.

They'd bled dry the little moon I was trapped on, and without fresh human blood to drink, hadn't been able to hang onto their sanity long enough to escape. Starvation had stripped them of their pretense of humanity, revealing their pure essence. It didn't kill them, though. It would eventually kill them...probably. I knew they could exist in this nightmare state for months. Maybe they could go on this way for years. I'd never seen one dead of starvation.

But they had to starve to death sometime, didn't they?

I would have destroyed them, had there been fewer of them, had there been more of me, had I had a way to shoot them with the one weapon that would have destroyed them—my blood. Only by my best guess, there were a couple thousand of them on and around my shuttle, swarming over it and me like ants on sugar. Like rats on a corpse. Like...name your own nightmare.

They blocked my sky.

My shuttle hull was moleibond. Best stuff in the universe, moleibond: light, impervious to radiation, tough as hell. You can subject it to massive gravities, hit it with fire or light of any composition or in any concentration, slam it with projectiles of any composition, and you won't scratch it. You can shoot massive shock waves through a moleibond hull and turn the entire contents into pudding, and a cleanup crew can come along with a big hose and a pressure sprayer and have the flawless hull ready for resale in the time it takes to wash out the goo.

Moleibond is indestructible unless you have an Anabond drill or Anabond cutters—but even a little resort moon will have a few Anabond tools on it, because you do have to fix the stuff that breaks inside.

So my theoretical outside survival time was limited to the arrival on the moon of a fresh meat shipment—a transport full of live tourists. The second one of the Legends got fresh blood, his mind would start working, he'd realize that my survival was their destruction, because I had seen what they were, and he'd go get the damned Anabond cutter and come after me. All he had to do was cut a hole in my hull. One hole, and I could not leave the atmosphere.

My real survival time was under a week, though, because I'd failed to fully stock the emergency rations. Carelessness on my part, or exhaustion, maybe. I had three days' worth of water, and almost no food. It would have been enough had I been hoping for quick rescue from my home ship, in orbit around the moon.

Only problem there was that my home ship belonged to me, I flew alone, and at the moment, I was on the damn shuttle. And I couldn't call out via comlink for help from anyone else, because once I landed, I discovered that all live com to and

from Tropica Petite had been cut. Tropica Petite was running a stream of programmed fake chatter through its com, making the resort seem like someplace real people would still want to go, and someone had set its autodrone to handle shuttle landings.

No rescue would be coming.

Meanwhile, I was—judging from the appearance of my attackers—the last source of living blood on the verdant, terraformed moon, and at least two thousand mindless monsters were determined to have me for lunch.

In my favor, I had myself, my shuttle, my wits and my rage.

So things weren't looking too good for my long-term prospects.

And this had started with a job I took just because I had to keep my ship in space, had to pay my docking fees and refueling, had to pursue the monsters I hunted. This was not supposed to have anything to do with the damned Legends. This was supposed to have been a milk run, a simple job of locating two women who'd extended their vacation without notice and getting them back home to their worried, waiting husband.

* * *

Less than twenty-four hours earlier, I was sitting in the Hammergirl Lounge in the bleak, windowless core of the Hammerfield Mining Station, a space station that spun just outside the farthest edge of the Hammerfield asteroid belt. The miners were indies. They owned their own rigs, and mined and processed the rare ores civilization craved. The indies had a nice setup going. They owned their own means of production, they were partners in their methods of distribution, and between hard work, intelligence, and skill, they'd made a name for themselves as a station full of winners.

Hammerfield Station's biggest byproduct was billionaires.

However...

The Hammergirl Lounge was a strip club, and not, as I had

requested, a quiet, comfortable restaurant.

Worse, my client was late. This annoyed me, because I had better things to do with my time than fend off scantily clad women who wanted me to buy them drinks, or drunk drill jockeys who wanted to buy them for me.

In all fairness, a woman sitting alone at a table in a strip club is going to cause that club's denizens to make certain assumptions.

I had the long blonde hair and blue eyes of Candibelle on the stage at that moment, the coffee-with-a-touch-of-cream skin of Torch—who looked anatomically impossible to me—and the Old Earth Asian cast to my features, including the almond eyes and epicanthic fold, of the drink girl who'd just asked me if I wanted to buy a lap dance from any of the girls on stage. All of that courtesy of three biological fathers, and the psychotic mother who'd bought their genes and paid some illegal gene-hack to rearrange them to make me. On the other side of the equation, I had my mother's height, and the solid muscle I'd earned living at two Gs aboard my ship and working all those muscles through daily combat routines. And I was wearing a ship suit, which fit like skin because it was designed to stay out of the way.

While I doubt I was anyone's particular fantasy, I apparently looked like someone who intended to be on one end or the other of a financial transaction that included the removing of clothes.

My name is Cadence Drake, but I was officially dead, so I was using a deep-cover alias created by a friend of mine named Storm Rat.

My client had contacted me as my alias, JT Loggins. The real JT Loggins had been murdered by space pirates, and one of Storm Rat's minions had identified the body during a salvage sweep, and had grabbed all details of her identity, which

Storm Rat had cleaned for resale—JT had been from some low-tech world with abysmal document security, so Storm Rat had been able to alter the few records that described her short, miserable arc through existence to make her look like me. Not having to have melanin lifts or bone restructuring or any of the other things I'd had to live through to get the job done in the past was a surprising benefit to being officially dead. It was, as far as I could tell, the only benefit.

My client's name was Nat Phangar. We hadn't met, we hadn't spoken, and billionaires can buy excellent security, so I was having no luck worming my way through Hammerfield Station's comlinks into the station data. All I knew about my prospective client was that he was rich, and that he paid a lot of money to keep his personal life and details completely off the datastream.

And that he was late, and getting later.

I don't work for people I don't know, so I hadn't yet accepted the job. I wanted it, though. A two-hundred-fifty-thousand-ruet retainer was sitting in escrow, verified and validated, to be dropped into my—well, JT Loggins'—credit account the instant I greenlit the contract.

But I didn't get a dime of the money if I didn't agree to the contract, and fuel and supplies for a Trans-Fold Navigation, or TFN, ship are expensive. First, there's the fuel for the two sublight drives. Rare-earth-stabilized bismuth trioxide isn't cheap. But the fuel for the TFN unit, which takes the ship through the folds of hyperspace from origami point to origami point, is incredibly expensive, and I was getting low. So I kept my ass in the chair, ignored the naked bump-and-grind up on the stage, cringed at the loud music, and nursed my non-alcoholic drink.

Then a short, blonde woman dressed in a miner's jumpsuit, her hair mussed and her skin flushed, pushed her way into the club

like someone in the middle of having a very bad day. She looked around, studied me, frowned, and walked toward me, her steps hesitant.

“Red and black ship suit,” she said as she reached my table. “You’re JT Loggins?”

“You are...?”

“Nat Phangar,” she said, and held out her hand.

I stood, took her hand, and tightened the muscles in my right palm just enough to shoot the microfilament nanoviral needle into her palm as our hands touched. She didn’t even flinch. “JT Loggins,” I said. “With the first name you gave, and you referring to yourself as the husband of the two women named in the contract, I assumed you’d be male.”

The corner of her mouth twitched. “Knowing Cherry Korvitch, from whom I bought the recommendation, I assumed you’d be a petite, curvaceous, green-eyed red-head. Life is full of surprises.” She studied me for a moment, assessing, then added, “She raved about you.”

“It wasn’t because of anything personal, I assure you,” I told her, sitting back down. “I did a job for her, she liked the results. I don’t get involved with my clients.”

“That had to have been a first for Cherry. Not that you’re her type, but I could see where she would have made an exception. As for me and my situation, though...” She sat carefully in the seat opposite me, and her eyes narrowed. “I’d figured when Cherry recommended you, you’d be...” She paused.

You can see people working their way through the thicket of gender politeness and prejudice. I could have jumped in, but generally it’s better to let them get where they’re going in their own way.

She sighed and shrugged, “I assumed you’d be lor. Not hinter.”

“You lost me. Lor?”

“Women who prefer women and who want multiple permanent relationships. Hinter is anyone who isn't lor. I figured you for lor because Cherry was so pleased with you, and thought it meant you wouldn't have a problem with my arrangement with my wives.”

I shrugged. “With a few exceptions, I have no interest in my clients' personal lives. I won't work for slavers, thugs, pedos, or killers, and before I sign off on your contract, you're going to give me proof that you're none of those, and you're also going to convince me the women you want me to find are not hiding from you.” I took a sip of my drink and continued.

“And you must understand that while I will find your wives, if they refuse to come with me, I will not use force to bring them to you against their will. I'll record their statement, present it to you as my evidence, and you'll still owe me costs and follow-through for having found them. As for who you choose to be with, I don't care. If you're all adults and all there because you want to be, I have no problem helping you.”

She studied me, and sighed. “But you don't go my way, do you?”

“No. I don't go any way anymore. The man I loved was murdered, and the part of me that could love anyone, or desire anything, died with him.”

“Then I apologize. From my assumption, I figured this place would appeal to you. And I like it, and the food's good. Speaking of which.” She waved one of the barely dressed drink girls over and said, “Pepper, two Surface Specials.”

The girl left, and Nat turned back to me. “The work out here is hell, but when you own your rig and can run processed ore straight through the station system, the money's amazing. So I can afford you. And my wives love me. I take good care of

them, I make them happy, I make sure they get to live the lives they want." She grinned. "And I get to live the life I want." Her eyebrows furrowed and her eyes unfocused. She didn't say anything else.

"But..." I prompted.

"I'm not sure why they're running through so much money at the resort. It isn't like them. And neither is the fact that they haven't sent me any personal coms since they got there."

I nodded, getting a feel for the real issue. "You realize people change," I said. "You think you know them, and then you discover they've met someone, they've been seduced by some other sort of life..."

"Not Nicci, and not Sugar. They're the two best wives I have."

I sipped my drink to keep from saying anything stupid.

"Seven," she told me with a little smile, so apparently my eyes asked what I'd managed to keep my mouth from blurting out. "I have seven wives. Most of them I met here."

The food came, brought to us by a woman introduced to me as Summer. The food was all real. Fresh fruit, fresh meat, fresh vegetables, all surface-grown, all flavored by a real sun in a real sky. I ate everything my client put in front of me.

And I watched her. She ate the food, too, but I've discovered they are capable of eating food. They simply can't digest it. They chew, they swallow, the food sits unchanged through their atrophied gastrointestinal system until—best guess here—they regurgitate it.

I was looking for a sign that she was one of them. My recent past is a nightmare of up-close-and-personal encounters with bloodsuckers, and I'd given myself every advantage I could to survive these encounters. The microfilament I'd injected into the palm of her hand carries only a few dozen copies of the

nanovirus that lives in my bloodstream. That nanovirus, injected into the bloodstream of a Legend in large numbers, reacts with the nanovirus that changed the normal human being the Legend had been into a blood-drinking, nearly immortal, almost unkillable, superhuman nightmare. Within minutes of a full dose of the nanovirus, the nanovampire would swell up and explode.

All it did to humans was turn their blood into a substance poisonous to vampires.

To my way of thinking, win-win.

Sitting across the table from someone who suddenly swells up and explodes, scattering bits of flesh and blood across a large room, however, causes unwelcome attention.

So I have a microfilament injector implanted in the palm of my right hand. When I tighten my palm in contact with human skin, the injector delivers a tiny dose of AntiLegend nanovirus that allows me to make sure my client is not a vampire already, and to guarantee that my client will not become one between the time I take the job and the time I return to get paid.

I found from my one experience working—unknowingly—for a Legend that you can't count on collecting your money. They think they don't actually owe you for services rendered, you being what they consider lunch.

In half an hour, the virus would reach a level in my client's bloodstream that would, if she were a vampire, cause her skin to develop a fine sheen of sweat. It would have no physical effect on an unmodified human.

If I saw the sheen, I would publicly, verbally, and somewhat loudly accept the job instantly—because any time you eat someplace public, someone somewhere is recording everything you say. I would then tell my prospective client I would require the upfront portion of my fee two days from that date,

sign the contract, and leave. She would accept that I was in her employ, and return to her plans. I would put as much space as I could between myself and her, because within twenty-four hours, the nanovirus with which she'd been injected would reach critical mass, and overrun the nanovirus she'd put into her own bloodstream when she decided to become a monster, and she would come to a horrible, messy, permanent end. And I'd have an alibi. I was someplace else when it happened, and with my client dead, I wouldn't get paid.

Only she didn't develop that sheen of sweat.

So we ate good food, and she watched women take off their clothes and told me which ones she was considering as possible future wives, and I took her contract because she sounded very much like she liked the wives she had, and like she was afraid someone might be taking advantage of them because they were beautiful and young and rich and trusting, and because they were staying at a pricey, elegant resort likely to be full of people who wanted to be friends with women like that for less-than-honorable reasons.

It all made perfect sense, it all seemed so clean and clear and obvious, and I thought the thought you *never, ever* permit yourself to think if you want to survive, which is, "*I need the money, and how tough could it be?*"

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SO THERE I WAS, WITH my view through all my shuttle's viewports comprised of my personal nightmare made real—gaunt, crazed, fanged faces and starved, clawing bodies layered on top of each other so deeply midday was nothing but more night

to me.

For them, things could only stay the same. They would stay where they were until food arrived, and some of them would kill, eat, and get smart, and then come after me.

For me, the situation could only get worse. Every second I lost came off a clock numbered in days.

I started digging through my supplies, inventorying.

I had very little in the way of weaponry. Two sticky pies—deep-space concussion weapons that latch onto the hulls of ships and use the rigidity of the hulls to blast amplified shockwaves through the contents of those ships. Doesn't damage the hulls. Purees all contents—including people—within the blast radius.

Sticky pies are next to useless in any open space. They can destroy something attached to them, but they have no way to compress soft tissue if they don't have a rigid surface against which to compress it.

I had my two neatly hidden, illegal ship-to-ship guns. These were loaded with hole-punchers, twenty-five rounds apiece. The guns, if found in most star systems, were worth a sentence of from five to fifty years in local prisons. Survival is worth more than five to fifty years in local prisons, so I had them. They were useless against anything that could go through hyperspace, but there are lots of in-system criminals, too. In-system criminals own in-system ships.

From a shuttle's perspective, the great thing about in-system-only ships is they're not moleibonded, and they're not moleibonded for two reasons. The first is this: there are no natural in-system forces that duplicate the nightmarish twisting, folding pressures of hyperspace, so all things being equal, moleibonding is a useless extravagance.

And the second reason is this: a moleibond hull makes a ship approximately ten thousand times more expensive.

Interceptors, whether owned by governments or criminals (and if you can always find a difference between those two, you're better at this than I am) are faster than shuttles, and a hell of a lot more maneuverable in tight spaces. All the pilot of a TFN shuttle needs to do if attacked by a non-TFN craft is punch a hole or ten in its hull. The atmosphere in-ship either leaks slowly into space, or decompresses rapidly, depending on the size of the holes. Either way, the folks in the ship lose their will to fight.

Hole-punchers work well against humans, too.

They are useless against nanovampires. Nanovampires are not supernatural, not undead. They have nothing to do with those disgusting Old Earth legends of magically animated corpses who seduced women, drank blood, and only came out at night—except for their origin in someone's screwed-up desire to control people.

Nanovampires are the products of science, of an engineered nanovirus that adapts users at a cellular level to be stronger, faster, blood-drinking living people capable of going out in daylight, of crossing water, of tap-dancing on silver crosses and looking at themselves in mirrors, seducing and controlling men and women against their will...and of auto-regeneration. When you punch a hole in a nanovampire, the hole closes over, heals up, and stops being a problem for the vampire before he's even aware that he's been hit. The monsters were designed to withstand anything but being burned at tremendous temperatures, or having their heads separated from their bodies. And the nanovirus in their bloodstream is hellishly efficient in patching them up on the fly.

Fifty rounds of hole-punchers wouldn't even distract the bastards.

And that was it. The shuttle weapons were supposed to be a stopgap to get me safely back to my ship.

And all of that meant this: I had nothing else to throw at the vampires but me.

It was in the despair of realizing this that my idea formed. It was a pretty little idea. Dangerous, but if it worked the payoff would be lovely. And if it didn't, I was dead anyway.

I had a RexSurvive emergency med-kit aboard, which is what you have to make do with when you don't have a Medix handy.

Folks on technologically regressive planets don't have Medixes. Neither do folks whose worlds are controlled by religious or political demagogues. But rejuvenation technology, which started on my home world of Cantata, has spread through settled space, and in civilized places (including on my ship), you can throw your badly damaged self-or friend-into a Medix, and it will fix everything that's broken, cut, crunched, skinned, poisoned, or otherwise damaged.

You can't reju a corpse. Dead is dead. But anything else? The Medix has you covered.

My kit contained two bags of sterile artificial plasma expander with tubing and vein-taps, wound spray ("Fills and Pressurizes a One Meter Wound in Two Seconds!"), four press-on heart restarters, five skinjects of non-addictive painkiller, instant splint wrap, and the Emergency Cookie. The Emergency Cookie is RexSurvive's gimmick, and it's the reason I've never had a med-kit made by anyone else. The Emergency Cookie is a big cookie, about the size of your hand with fingers outstretched. It's vacuum-sealed, guaranteed to last forever if the pull-tab is untouched, and you can get refills of the Cookie for free any time you have to purchase refills of any of the other items. The med-kit company claims to have thirty different flavors of Emergency Cookie, all guaranteed

delicious and reconsta-free, but there is no way of knowing which one you'll receive. Every Cookie is a surprise.

I—and I'm sure a lot of other space travelers—have “lost” items from my med-kit on numerous occasions, and paid to have those items refilled, just so I could get more Cookies. You can't get them anywhere else, or in any other way, and they really are delicious.

That's why my shuttle med-kit has four press-on heart restarters and two plasma expanders, instead of one of each. But just one Cookie, because I always ate the new ones as they came in.

On my ship, the Corrigan's Blood, I have twelve Emergency Cookies tucked away in their RexSurvive kits...and that is down from an all-time-best level of twenty-three.

Where the exquisite Emergency Cookie is concerned, I have no willpower.

I sighed, took out both one-liter plasma expander bags and the wound spray. I punched holes in the top of one of the two bags with my knife—so much for sterile—and poured the fluid into the trash receptacle. I then sprayed wound spray lightly over the hole. The wound spray expanded quickly and dried within seconds, and made a tight, if ugly, seal.

The average human body has about five liters of blood in it. You can go down a quarter of a liter and only be slightly woozy. You go down half a liter, you're going to be less than functional. I was going down a full liter—roughly twenty percent of my body's volume, which is enough to make your heart race, your breathing speed up, your skin sweat, and to cause you to get dizzy or faint. But I needed a lot of fresh, warm, tasty blood, and because there was only one of me, and at least a couple thousand of them, and I was only going to get one shot to save my own life, I had to make my one shot count. I needed as much blood as I could get into the bag.

I hung the full bag of plasma expander from the sidelight next to my cockpit seat, and lay the other bag on the floor beside me. I ripped the membrane covers off the vein taps, and pressed them against the skin on the insides of my arms just below the crooks of my elbows. I felt the icy cold of the antiseptic numbing agent, and then nothing else. Both taps glowed green. I set the line of blood flowing out of me into the empty bag on the floor to half-speed, and set the line of plasma expander flowing into me to quarter speed.

I'd empty faster than I'd fill, but I wanted the blood bag on the floor to be as pure and free of fluid expander as I dared. And I wasn't sure how much I dared, so I was a little conservative.

Then I opened the cookie pack, and ate the cookie. Golden-Flake Chocolate Chip.

I made the cookie last as long as I could. While I had it, I didn't have to think about the warmth of my blood in the tubing against my skin as it flowed out of my body. I didn't have to think about how strangely heavy and personal that tube felt. I didn't have to think about how I was getting dizzy, or about the way I was having to work to breathe.

I nibbled the cookie.

Good cookie.

And then there was no more cookie, and I felt oddly bereft, but also warm and fuzzy and very far away from myself.

I closed my eyes.

When I opened them, my sky was still nothing but monsters. I didn't remember the one in the red sunsuit being there before, but I did remember the one in the blue-and-white resort uniform, so the Legends were jockeying for positions nearer to me. I wasn't looking at the same crazed eyes and peeled-back lips and razor fangs I'd had before. I was getting to see those belonging to the truly motivated nightmares.

The bag on the floor was full of my blood. The bag hanging from my sidelight was empty.

I'd either passed out or slept, but either way, I didn't feel too badly. My fluid volume running through me was the five-ish liters it should have been, and the plasma expander carried red blood cells around just as well as my regular plasma. Not as many of them, unfortunately, so I still felt light-headed.

But I was ready for the next step.

I pulled off one vein tap at a time, and sprayed the skin with wound spray. Felt the skin pucker and tighten.

If I stood up, I knew I'd be dizzy, but I didn't need to stand up. My launcher for the sticky pies was on the right side of my control console, hidden under the shuttle's in-flight entertainment system. Which worked, by the way. Sporcs and cops and regulators all check that sort of thing when they're searching your ship for illegal weapons, and Storm Rat's weapons guy had done an amazing job of making the entertainment system elegant, sophisticated, and entertaining.

I did the careful keypress-plus-faceplate-press combination that opened the launch chute. I removed both sticky pies, and used a combination of wrapping the blood-bag tubing around one of them, then spraying it into place with wound spray to make sure it would stay put.

I dropped the modified sticky pie into the chute, put the unmodified pie in after it, and closed the panel. A quick swipe of the right controls brought up my weapons HUD. I aimed the sticky pie at a building with a flat, solid surface the sticky pie could adhere to, which was a good two-hundred meters from my position, and launched.

My modified sticky pie exploded on impact, the air two-hundred meters away from me filled with a mist of warm, fresh, living human blood, and the vampires clinging all over my craft

vanished, thudding and scrabbling and clawing through the writhing mass of each other, launching toward that smell-mindless, uncaring about traps, incapable of suspicion or reason or any sort of thought.

They were the incarnation of hunger and horror fighting to drink their own death.

The instant the last sound of scrabbling against my hull vanished, the weight of a couple thousand nightmares all trying to claw their way into my shuttle designed for a maximum load of five people vanished, and I pounded the launch sequence into the controls and lifted free of what remained of Tropica Petite.

There would be fewer vampires on the resort moon the next time someone visited it. My poisoned blood would ensure that.

I hoped all those monsters would get a good taste.

* * *

All frequencies are monitored.

You can't know by whom or for what purpose; you can't know how often or how intently, but outside whatever tiny shell of privacy you manage to build for yourself and those you love, someone somewhere is listening.

This is the universe we live in. You say nothing without acknowledging that someone else might hear it, and if you have something to say that you know people who want to kill you are listening for, you don't say it anywhere it can be overheard. You don't even hint about it.

What I'd found on Tropica Petite was deep inside the hell I'd lived in for the past year, deep inside the warzone where I'd been fighting and losing ground against the nanovampires who'd gained nearly every advantage by tossing aside their humanity. And the sane, well-fed versions of the monsters I'd left behind, the ones who had used the advantages they'd bought to

sidle into positions of power and prestige and fame—with the goal of turning settled space into their own private feeding ground—were listening for any sign that someone had recognized them for what they were.

They knew I'd known what they were. That I'd found a way to kill them. Word spreads through the corridors of power.

But they thought I was dead.

And I knew they weren't.

These two facts were my advantage.

It was not enough of an advantage, and I was losing ground.

So I sent a simple, clear-text transmission to Nat, with the following words. "As you suspected, your wife found religion. Will meet as agreed for further instructions."

I hoped that Nat would be a smart woman, would figure out from the numerous errors I'd hidden within the plain text that I'd run into a big problem that I couldn't discuss—and that she would keep her mouth shut and show up at our agreed-upon rendezvous point, her favorite strip club.

The whole job had been in-system, which meant no origami points for me to negotiate, and no high-level tracking I'd have to elude—but it also meant the vampires had established themselves in the system, and could be anywhere.

I didn't get a call-back. That either meant Nat was being smart, or that Nat was in trouble.

I showed up at the club with enough disguised weapons on me to take out the entire station. And Nat wasn't there.

Trouble, then.

I asked around, casually. Said Nat had asked me out on a date the next time I was on the station, and I'd called and left a

message, and she hadn't showed up.

And one of the dancers said she'd been killed a couple days earlier in a freak explosion out where she was mining.

I nodded, and thanked the dancer, and went back to my ship. Hit the telltales I'd set up to let me know if anyone had tried to tamper with the ship while I was gone. Everything came back clean.

Nat could have died in an accident. Only I didn't believe that.

I felt the pull of people in power making things happen.

And I got the sudden, overwhelming urge to get the hell out of the entire star system before some of those things happened to me.

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