

Drip..., Drip.

It was the sound of the water, falling from the ceiling into the puddles on the floor, that woke me up. Shame, the dream had been a good one, I was back on Vincas, in Brian's bar, before my present situation had even begun. At that point, I didn't even know who Jennis Warren was, that Hanlon wanted a word with him or why he had chosen me to go and get him.

I was on my fourth or was it the fifth, drink of the night, they were mostly mixer but only Brian knew that. It had added to my reputation as a hard-drinking, no-nonsense, dependable businesswoman. There was a new man in town, he said he was a miner on furlough, he didn't know it yet; I was planning to get more than friendly before the night got much older.

Drip..., Drip.

It must be raining outside, again. I was in some sort of cellar; I'd been here long enough to know that the roof leaked when it rained. And it rained a lot. I was wide awake now, before the good bit of the dream too. In the gloom of my cell, I could hear the wind howling, through the small, high window. The one at ground level, with the bars, or else I'd have been out of there before you could have said bonus payment. The thin light of early morning illuminated the puddles on the floor of my prison, at least my bed was raised off the ground and I didn't have to sleep in the water.

I had been here three days and I had a plan to get out, although it was going to take me a while longer to put it into operation. It just needed to happen before Warren came back with his buddies.

At the moment, there was only one other person here, my guard was an obese man called, predictably, Tub. If I could only get him inside my cell, I could see if my plan worked. If it didn't, I knew that Tub had been instructed not to kill me, so there was that.

I heard him shuffling down the alleyway. “Here’s your breakfast,” he called, “keep back.” There was the sound of a key in a rusty lock and the door opened. I heard the *smack* as a self-heating food pack hit the floor. I resisted the urge to say thank you, that was the start of a slippery slope. The door slammed shut, the key squeaked. I went and picked up the pack. Pressing the button on top of it would activate a small electric heater in the box that warmed your food.

I had another use for that part of the pack. Cold eggs and bacon weren’t too bad, a small price to pay. The food eaten, I dismantled the box, throwing the card down the hole that had been thoughtfully dug in the corner of my new home. The battery pack, wiring and switch joined the others in a small gap I had found in the brickwork, which I covered up with dust. Five more should be enough to do what I was planning.

There was nothing else I could do. I sat on my bed, listened to the wind and rain. It was hard to put my finger on the point where it had all started to go wrong.



I’ve been working as a bounty hunter for a few years now, ever since I came out of the service, with a particular set of skills and no legal use for most of them. A lot of us ended up working in law enforcement or private security, very often, we ended up chasing old friends who had chosen a darker path. My father had run the business for as long as I could remember, before the cancer got him, he passed it all on to me.

I wouldn’t want you to get the wrong idea. My life wasn’t normally this dangerous. I spent most of my time repossessing ships, dealing with bankruptcy and divorce settlements. Very occasionally, I had to track down and capture a fugitive, even then, most of them came quietly.

What had made this one escalate?

The day after I'd met the miner, whose name I had already forgotten, Hanlon, a licensed credit broker had come into my office, like he did at least once a week. He helped himself to coffee and the battered chair that dad had sat in most of the time. Anyone else and I'd have told him to get out. Hanlon was OK, dad had liked him, he put a lot of work my way.

"I got a job for you. If you want it." It was the way he always spoke, no social niceties, purely business. At least you knew where you stood with him.

"Good morning, Hanlon. Sure. What're you offering me?" I responded in kind.

He sipped his coffee, "this is good stuff, where did you get it? Oh, yeah, you heard of a man called Jennis Warren?"

I racked my brain. I'd only got out the good coffee because I needed the caffeine, so far it wasn't helping much. "Nope, what's he done?"

"Never you mind. He owes me, and he's run. I want you to find him. You can bring him back or hold him till I get there. Usual fees."

That meant bringing him back, holding him paid a lot less. "You got a warrant, something legal I can wave at him?"

He shook his head, "not this time, it's off-book."

That meant I had no backup. Wherever I was, I couldn't use the local law to help me out. If I got caught doing anything dodgy, I would be in trouble. The money for an off-book job was better though. It had been a slow few months. I had expenses.

"OK, give me a clue." As for why he wanted Warren, that was well above my pay grade. Probably better that I didn't know. Hanlon was always straight with me, my father had trusted him, as much as he had trusted anyone. That was enough.

“He’s got a ship, called *Marion’s Hope*.” He drained his coffee, “I’ll see you when you get him back.” He got up and left me to it. “No *good luck?*” I called after him. He didn’t answer.



There’s two ways it can go, when someone is on the run. If they’re regular folk, they can be spotted pretty quickly, even though there’s plenty of planets they could be on. Honest people who’ve fallen on hard times or made a mistake are not brilliant at hiding their tracks.

When it comes to people for whom getting caught is an occupational hazard, it can be hard to get a first glimpse of where they might have gone. If there’s a warrant, you can use official channels, if not, well, let’s just say that there are other ways.

I put in a few calls and did some digging. Jennis Warren appeared to belong to the first sort, the normally honest. He was a businessman and mine owner from Walloh, an industrial planet. Outwardly he ran a respectable operation, it was profitable and there were no obvious reasons why Hanlon would want him. The ship, *Marion’s Hope*, was one of his freighters, it carried containers of ore around between his facilities. Again, all very legal. There had to be something that I was missing.

According to flight records, he had last been seen leaving Vincas, heading for one of his companies old mining settlements, on a planet called Boranx. It was a good five-day journey, the guides said that the mine was uneconomical, it had been closed and decommissioned. If that was true, why was he headed there? It would be as good a place as any to start my search.

I locked up my office and headed to the port. My ship, *Double Six* was always ready to go, I kept it stocked and fuelled. In less than a week, with luck on my side, I could ask Warren what all the fuss was about. Before I persuaded him to come back with me.



The battery packs were a liquid polymer sandwich, designed to give a high voltage for a short burst of heating, via a ceramic element. As kids, it was a dare to put the exposed battery contacts on your tongue and press the button. Even after they had been used to heat the food, you still got a tingling jolt, the bragging rights were dependent on how long you could stand it for. I reckoned that by connecting several batteries in parallel, I could boost the current enough to shock Tub, as long as I could get him to stand in one of the puddles. It wouldn't be enough to kill him, but it might just disable him long enough to help me get out.

By climbing on my bed and jumping up, I could grab the window bars and pull myself up far enough to take a look outside. I could see my ship, the *Double Six*, was sitting where I had left it. Warren and most of his men had left in *Marion's Hope*, an old and battered freighter. Maybe he'd spotted one of the two trackers I'd placed on the hull, maybe he hadn't.

With him gone, that just left me and my guard, we were probably the only people on this rock. The aforementioned Tub. He had already indicated what he was likely to do with me, if he got the chance. So far, Warren had put him off with threats, proving that he had some morals. Now he wasn't here, how long would that keep me safe? No doubt his mother loved him but Tub just wasn't my type.

Time passed, lunch arrived and another battery joined the stash. When the food was delivered, Tub told me that he was bored and wondered if I might like to entertain him later. That made me decide that I had enough battery packs.

I spent the afternoon wiring the batteries together and linking them to one single switch. All I had to do was get Tub to stand in one of the puddles and toss the circuit in. And hope he didn't fall on me.

It was starting to get dark when I was ready to go. I laid on my back on the floor, in one of the only dry patches, knees bent and ready to rise. The batteries were hidden under my body. My

finger was on the switch. I started moaning and screaming, as if I was in pain. To add to the effect, I pushed my fingers down my throat and made myself vomit.

After a minute or so, Tub rattled the door, “what’s going on?”

“That food was off,” I said, between groans, “my stomachs cramped and I can’t stop puking.”

“Tough.”

“Can you get me some water?”

“No.”

This wasn’t working, I played my trump card. “Warren won’t be happy if I’m sick, he’s told you to look after me. Anyway, if you want some action later, you’re not going to enjoy it if I stink of diarrhoea and vomit.”

That shut him up, I could almost hear him thinking.

“Wait, no tricks.”

I answered by retching a few times.

There was a pause, then I heard him return. The key squeaked.

“Stay back,” he said, “I’m going to open the door, I’ve got a bucket and a cloth. And some medicine. It’s mine, I use it to settle my stomach.”

Was it kindness, or fear of Warren? This was no time to get sentimental.

He peered around the door, “get up and onto the bed.”

“I can’t move,” I said, “my stomach has gone into spasm.”

He took another step, now he was inside and I could see he had a bucket and a pistol, pointed at me. He was standing close to the water, in between two of the puddles. One step, forward or back, would do it.

“Help me.”

“Do you think I’m stupid?”

“Of course not, I just need,” I retched again, stretching out one hand toward him.

He stepped back, “hold it right...,”

I rolled, flipped the switch and threw the batteries as his foot splashed into the puddle behind him. There was a flash and a single shot as he threw his arms up and cried out in pain. The bullet whined as it bounced off the wall, I hadn’t reckoned on that. Then he collapsed to the floor, the gun landed across the room. It had gone suddenly quiet. Carefully, I stood, he wasn’t moving.

He had got a lot more of a shock than I was expecting, surely that must have drained the charge.

I picked up his gun, there was only one way to find out. I brushed the side of his head with the back of my hand, tensing for a shock. Nothing. I felt for his carotid pulse. Nothing.

He was dead, he must have had a heart attack. This was no time to feel bad, although I did. The shock shouldn’t have killed him, his lifestyle had to take some responsibility. At least he hadn’t shot me, that would have been a sad way to go.

There was a bunch of keys on his belt, I took them and left the cell, locking him in.

I had no idea how long I had to get organised before Warren returned. I wasn’t going anywhere, there was no question of my leaving. I still had a job to do, if I could get back on the *Double Six* without him knowing, I would have the advantage.

I found my stuff in a room down the corridor, Tub had been using it as a bedroom. It all still seemed to be in the backpack. My belt, with its double holsters and weapons, was hanging from a hook. I buckled it up, threw the pack on, went up the steps, unlocked the door and stepped outside.

The wind howled and rain lashed at me. *Double Six* and safety was a hundred yards away.

It was then that I heard the sound of a ship approaching. I had to run.

Running into the wind was hard going, coupled with the muddy earth it felt like I was moving so slowly, all the time the approaching ship got louder. I couldn't tell which direction it was coming from. If I couldn't see them, maybe they couldn't see me.

I reached my ship. I wasn't headed for the entry port. I had been made to watch as that had been welded shut by one of Warren's crew, with a triumphant grin. I'd even looked sad. The stern ramp was out of the question, it couldn't be operated from outside. I was more interested in the auxiliary door I had got the yard to fit and disguise as an engine inspection panel. I ducked under the hull and found it.

I pressed my thumb against the seal and it popped open, while behind me, the area was illuminated by powerful landing lights. I pulled myself inside and locked the hatch behind me. Warren couldn't get me now. As far as he was concerned, I couldn't be where I was. With luck, he wouldn't know where I had gone. He would have to search for me in the dark and the rain.

I had time to plan my next move. Warren was still my target. But first, a shower and some clean clothes. Then I could wallow in a bit of guilt, for the life I'd taken.