

REBOOTS

UNDEAD CAN DANCE



MERCEDES LACKEY
CODY MARTIN

**"Unfettered oddball entertainment."
—Publishers Weekly**

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REBOOTS

UNDEAD CAN DANCE

MERCEDES LACKEY & CODY MARTIN



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This is a work of fiction.

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PART ONE

BAD MOON RISING

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You know what they said in that ancient movie, about being in space? Well here's a news flash for you: in space no one gives a shit if you scream. Especially not your shipmates. Oh, you'd think your shipmates would care, right? I mean, it's just all of you against all of the dark and vacuum and whatever crap the universe has dreamed up to kill you? Another news flash: no. Especially if your shipmates are a bunch of sociopathic dirtbags that think dead puppy jokes are a laugh riot.

So the screaming and cursing in the aft drain chamber was pretty much "Tuesday."

So much for the glamour and excitement of interstellar travel.

We'd strapped Fred down for the blood-drain again, and since he was human, it was going well aside from all the noise. That would be me, standing in the corner, doing my best to look like an appliance, while Fred screamed and ranted. That would be the High and Mighty, watching, and occasionally changing out a blood-bag, since I wasn't to be trusted with something as important as their property. Three pints down, two to go, and Fred was still in fine voice. That was the thing about Fred being a Fur (ah, excuse me, I should be more sensitive, a "Were-person"); he regenerated the blood he was losing almost immediately. A couple spinach salads and a slab of beef and he'd be fine. Turn him loose under this planet's moons to let him feast on whatever he could catch and kill and he'd be more than fine. I never could figure out how it was that he could eat anything remotely living and carbon-based when he wolfed out, even if it would have poisoned him in human shape. Miracles of Were physiology,

I guess, but hey, no one pays me to be the brains—hardy har har. Come to think of it, no one pays me at all.

“We,” had him strapped down, by which I mean “me,” since the Fangs (and I will be damned all over again if I call Our Vampiric Lords and Masters anything but Fangs) never got their lily-like hands dirty if they could help it. They were the “mission specialists.” Meaning they had an excuse to be divas, or figured they did. It was up to me and the others to do all the work. And Fred, because he was lowest on this particular food chain. So yeah, that’s the shipmates. Three Fangs and a Fur, and the hate and contempt was so thick most of the time it’s like a fog in the air.

Barnabus was in charge today. Oh Barnabus, who really got the short end of the Vampiric stick. Someone had bit him late in life, and as you are when you get Turned, so you stay. So there he was in all his sagging, jowly glory, looking like a basset hound in a tailored jumpsuit. Can’t really wonder why he’s a douche; he has to look at the others, who may not be the supermodels of the Fang world but certainly are not coyote-ugly, and at himself, and grind his fangs. Even their jumpsuits look good on them, while his looks ... like a janitor uniform. Yes, here we are, hopping stars, and the attire de rigueur for space travelers is still the jumpsuit, go figure. Must drive the Fangs crazy, with their obsessive-compulsive fashion sense; it’s kind of hard to get designer labels hundreds of light-years from the nearest retailer.

The rest of the Fangs were lined up, waiting for their liquid lunch, and Barney was making them wait, which was not exactly *quelle surprise*. Barney was his usual patronizing self. He smiled snarkily down at Fred, who glared up at him. “Good boy, Fred. Nice doggie.” He patted the top of Fred’s head, then quickly pulled his hand out of reach when Fred snarled. Granted he was in human form, but some of the Wolf carried over, and he’d been known to bite.

“Shut up, Barnabus,” Fred said, then told Barnabus what he could do with himself and where he could put that hand in long, loving and profane detail, using only Barnabus’s full name. Oh “Barney” hated his full name; believe it or not, in the Before time there’d been some sort of soap opera with a Vampire in it by that name, and ... well, let’s just say for the aristocratic Fangs, a soap opera was to the Grand

High Literature of their kind (snork) as Mexican *lucha libre* wrestling was to the Olympics. Fred and the others chose to use Barney's full name as often as the occasion warranted to get under his skin, which happened pretty often, because he was really easy to aggravate. But with Barney sticking the verbal knife in and rotating it, as well as being none-too-gentle about the drain, *and* being parked on a world where he mostly couldn't go outside the ship, Fred was not happy at all and he was really heaping on the verbal abuse today. Not that I blamed him.

This particular dirt-ball must have had a dozen moons, maybe more, I hadn't counted. It wasn't my job to count things, just like it wasn't my job to think; I was just the guy they got to sweep up the shed fur and whatever the Fangs discarded and the crap that got tracked in, strap Fred down in case he wolfed out in the middle of a drain, fix the ship's systems occasionally under strict supervision, and rehydrate the dehydrated cattle brains and stick 'em in the feeding chute so the rest of the Zombies didn't waste away to nothing but bones. I mean, they could still do the job as bones except they tended to fall apart when they tried to pick up anything heavy, or were backhanded by a pissed off Fang-face. Inconvenient. God knows the Fangs shouldn't be inconvenienced by anything. Dicks. Oh, had I not mentioned this before? Yeah. I'm a Zombie too, which is why nobody gives a shit what I think, because I'm not supposed to be able to think. More on that later. Everybody has rude names for us. Reboots. Shambler. Deadhead. Bone Bags. Rotpot. Corpsicle. Mikey Jerkson and Chiller Thriller ... you know, I never did figure out where those two came from. Only the older Fangs seemed to use those two terms.

The Fangs—who really, really hate that name for our Vampiric Lords and Masters—got their rations from Barney, finished up the drain time on Fred and took their time in turning him loose. He did his usual ritual of pissing and moaning, cursing their families and hoping all the demons in the universe chose to pay them a visit, but he put more feeling into it today than usual.

“Someone woke up on the wrong side of the kennel this morning.” The Fangs never, never lost a chance to get in a dog-reference. The few Furs I'd run into before this cruise all seemed really

self-conscious about their animal sides, and Fred was no exception. Maybe it was because when they morphed out, they were pretty much ravening, mindless beasts on steroids. Poor Fred. All those moons meant he was wolfed out most of the time if he went outside or got near an unshuttered viewport. It wasn't that he had any choice in the matter; it was just automatic, as much of a physical necessity as the Fangs' need for blood, or a person's need to breathe. When he did go all wild-eyed and hairy, it was best not to be anywhere nearby. Imagine a five foot four accountant-looking guy turning into an eight-foot-tall unholy terror that basically wants to rip apart and eat anything that looks like it might be made of meat; that's what Fred becomes whenever he gets hit with the light of any moons, if they were full. You would think that the moon phase wouldn't matter on a spaceship; hell, conversely, you'd think that *being* in a spaceship wouldn't matter if the moon was full. What do I know? Maybe the Norms figured out how to put anti-moon-phase shielding on the hull—but it didn't work on the open viewports. I'm just the janitor, and I wasn't exactly a rocket scientist when I was alive. Besides, in a 'verse where Vampires, Werewolves, and Zombies exist as a matter of fact, some things just are and it doesn't matter that they don't make sense.

Fred was going on with his cussing for longer than usual too, his tirade becoming less profane and more inventive as time went on. "I'll tear you in half and throw you out of the airlock. When we're parked next to a yellow star." That was new. Death threats are not anything that this lot hasn't already made before, but when you start working in the specific weaknesses, it strikes a chord. Fred's idea would probably work, too. G-class yellow stars and those close to them in stellar classification are deadly to Fangs; the light crisps them nicely, and if they are out in it long enough, it reduces them to ash. One bit of trivia I can verify: there actually *was* a coating on the viewports that prevented yellow sunlight from hurting the Fangs, probably some kind of UV coating. I was supposed to paint a new coat of it on the inside once every three weeks. That vulnerability was what had kept the Norms on top against Fangs when the Great Uncloseting happened. Norms were top-notch at finding and exploiting weaknesses.

Antonio sneered. Antonio *loved* his full name. Antonio della Contani, supposedly some sort of Venetian royalty, right? I'm laying bets on him actually being plain old Tony Conti from Brooklyn who was Turned in the 50s, based on his taste in music and the fact that he acts like a punk thug in nice clothes. "Promises, promises. Puppy didn't get his walkies."

As usual, they were at each other's throats, verbally if not actually. Not that it mattered if they did tear pieces out of each other, they'd just regenerate, heal, both. The same wasn't true for the likes of me; I'd stay in a not-so-neat pile, with my parts wriggling around until my brain got tired, unless my bits got shoved into a recycling unit or someone was kind enough to stitch me up. And this wasn't exactly a kind bunch, if you get my drift. Besides, Zombies are a dime a dozen; we're nothing more than part of the inventory.

Yeah, that's the other thing about being a Zombie. Being Undead is totally rad unless you're one of *us*. Vampires are strong and fast and persuasive. Werewolves are giant hairy woodchippers on legs. Zombies are janitors. Smelly janitors. Disposable janitors. Whenever one of us breaks, they just shove the bits into the recycler and grab another one out of the hold. I used to have a name, forever ago. I don't remember those days all that well. Now I just go by Skinny Jim, when there's someone that bothers to speak to me. Which, let me tell you, isn't all that often. Zombies are not exactly what you would call stellar conversationalists, so why would they?

That's another thing. Not a lot of Zombies can talk. Most of us really are mindless—burnt out or burnt up by whatever made us the way we are. We can do simple tasks, sure, especially if shown what to do a few dozen times. But there's not a lot of intellectual stimulation amongst Zombies, if you don't count munching on the occasional rehydrated brain. You don't find us sitting around discussing Kierkegaard. So, I'm special in that regard; I've got some of my mind left, but no opportunity to show it. And no incentive, to tell the truth. The Norms—well there were no Norms out here in any great numbers so that was moot—still, what the Norms would do, I didn't like to think about. Not after the Zombie Wars. And the other Undead don't like the manual labor to be too bright, and I'm not sure what *they'd* do if they found out I was different. They'd

probably do what the Norms would do, and sad as my existence is, it beats the alternative.

“Fuckin’ elitist bastiches,” Fred muttered under his breath. Fangs. Thought they were the kings of the universe. Ask any of them, and they’d tell you. Not a one of them was ever some wino that got rolled for Type O-Pos in an alley, or would at least admit to it. Oh no. All of them had longer pedigrees than the winner of the Kennel Club trophy. And they *all* had the goofiest names you’ve ever heard of. Always something faux-fancy or exotic sounding. You never met a Bob the Vampire. He hated them, this ship and—well not the job, exactly, but after the first few new planets it had gotten ... routine. But this was a paying gig. Not the greatest gig in the universe, *except* for the pay, but it’d do for now. Now, of course, being quite a stretch; he’d signed on for three hundred years for this tour, give or take a decade. They were about halfway through their supply of Reboots, with the other consumables—spare parts for the hardware, mostly—at about the same level.

But it was at times like this ... most of the time, lately ... he asked himself: why would a bunch of monsters from ancient fairy tales and B-movies be out roaming the stars, anyways?

He knew the answer though: why else—the ones that had the power and the money made the rules.

And that would be the Norms.

It was because the Norms were the real kings of the universe, or at least, of Earth. They had the lock on the stakes, the silver bullets, the SunGuns. Oh, poor Norms, who just didn’t have the weaknesses of the Undead. The light of yellow suns didn’t make them fall into a coma at low levels of exposure or burn up at high levels. They weren’t terminally allergic to silver, or garlic. And they could run faster than any *Zombie* *and* they had flamethrowers. Only thing they didn’t have were long life spans, long enough to do serious space exploration. Fangs, Furs, and Reboots though, they did, and there wasn’t much out here that could actually kill a Fang or a Fur if it didn’t already know the weaknesses.

The pay for a long cruise was excellent, and without having to worry about dodging religious fanatics, or wolfing out and maybe

hurting someone or worse—or, for the Fangs, going comatose and vulnerable once the yellow sun came up—so, for the ones out of the broom closet, exploration was the mainstream place to be. There were more volunteers than there were ships.

So, things got along pretty smoothly, for the most part, back home, at least for the Paranormals that wanted to just get along with Norm society. Personally, Fred thought that a lot of them were sellouts. You could still find a measure of freedom on some of the colony worlds, and a lot of the Paras that didn't get exploration gigs had shipped out for those, or so he'd heard. But back on Earth? Stuck kowtowing to the whims of the Norms, never daring to even stick a toe over the line, always afraid of setting a "bad example" for the rest of your kind? To hell with that noise. The Fangs and Furs (the ones that weren't Underground and actually had some moxie) all cued up for their shots at a ship as first choice, colony as second. Fangs for crew, a Wolf or two for the fresh blood for the Fangs, and crew too, and the Zombies—the Reboots—for menial labor. Neither Fang nor Fur needed to worry about the Reboots chowing down on their brains, the Reboots ignored them both so far as feeding went. So the Norms on Earth got rid of their problems, everything was one humming happy assembly-line, and that didn't matter for crap out here. Because once you got out here you found out what the real pecking order was, and you were looking at three hundred years locked up in the same tin can as the creatures that considered you Lunch That Talks. And they'd really rather you didn't talk, just grovel and do what you were told.

It was Fred's job to make sure that the Reboots were sent to the right places and made to do the right jobs. He was a supervisor, for the most part, only taking care of the most sensitive jobs personally. At least he wasn't *just* the Fang cafeteria; he'd been an engineer before he got bitten, and he still was an engineer now. Today, he had a sensitive job to take care of. The ship's main drive was being finicky, so Fred had to eat some rads and fix it. On any vessel that held Norms, and there were a few, mostly Earth-system stuff, there were dozens of safeguards with redundancies and contingencies and so on. Not so for a ship like this. Paranormals didn't get hurt the same way

that Norms did, so it was more acceptable to cut corners, and thus costs. Ah the joys of space exploration.

He'd take some Reboots along to hold lights and pass him tools. A few extra sets of hands never hurt, even if the hands were prone to falling off at the worst possible time. Antonio still hadn't let him live down the time a Reboot's finger had snapped off and shorted the grav generator.

Fred pointed at the three nearest ones. "Command phrase: come with me. You, you, and you."

They didn't bother naming the Reboots; they all were dressed in cheap red coveralls—which he thought was a nice touch—and all responded to "you" so long as they noticed someone was talking to them. One of the ghoulies looked somewhat startled—or at least as startled as a decayed corpse can look—when Fred spoke to him, but Fred shrugged it off and started marching them all to the lift that would take him to the reactor. It was probably nothing more than a nerve twitch. You never knew with the Reboots. Once he thought he'd caught the one that looked like a desiccated surfer dude trying to skateboard. He chalked it up to the Fangs trying to fuck with him. It wouldn't have been that hard to stick a piece of insulation board on some casters and tell the Reboot to stand on it.

Were all the crews this dysfunctional? How could they be? How would anything get done if they were? Then again ... paranoia set in. Because it was true that it wasn't paranoia if "they" actually were out to get you, and there was no doubt that the minute the Norms thought the Paras just *might* get the upper hand, out would come all the stockpiled weapons, the stake—and SunGuns, the garlic spray, the silver-coated *everything*, and lots and lots of flamethrowers. The Norms just preferred things to not be chaotic and messy and dangerous. So *Maybe that was the plan; send our Kinds out in the stars to kill each other. And meanwhile, find some planets the Norms could use—y'know, as a "nice if it happens" bonus. That would just figure. Have the bad luck to get Turned, and as a Were no less, only to get shipped off to the stars to deal with Larry, Curly, and Shithead for however long it took until one of you snapped and you all killed each other. The way these lowest-bidder ships are built, the Norms could probably afford that, and it wouldn't be nearly as messy as a Norm*

versus Para war. He shook his head; thinking in circles like this was sure to drive him mad.

Or maybe this all was just paranoia, and the other crews all got along just fine, and the universe had decided to stick Fred with the most petty, vain, and antagonistic bunch of bloodsuckers ever created. Given how his luck usually went ... yeah, that would be about par for the course. It made more sense than some enormous Norm plot. Right?

Not that it mattered to him at this point anyway. Because whether it was part of a huge plot against the Paras, or whether it was just bad luck, he was stuck here with the Divas of the Damned for the foreseeable future. He muttered more curses as he made his way to the engineering section, thinking of all of the different ways he'd like to kill his shipmates. Well, re-kill. Actually, all things considered, he wouldn't feel unhappy if he got to re-kill all of them three or four times before finishing them off for good. *A Wolf can dream*

Man, Fred had it bad. Me, it didn't matter, the Fangs couldn't get a kick out of verbally tormenting me, and when they were in a bad mood, I could just make sure I wasn't the one within reach of their claws. It might get different later, when the numbers of us Reboots started getting a lot lower, but for now, I was just one more tree in the forest. Thing is, the Fangs could get all the reaction their hard little flintlike hearts desired out of Fred. The poor sap was a great big hairy ball of reaction, and the longer the trip went on, the shorter his fuse got. Reboots didn't have any brains except the ones we were munching on—har har—so we didn't notice and didn't react. Fred though, he was the only Fur on the ship, and the only one who acted with resentment when they were looking for someone to verbally abuse that wasn't one of them.

And the Fangs *loved* to make people squirm. I don't get it. I never had much to do with any of the other Para races before I got herded up with the rest of the Zombies I was with, shoved into a red jumpsuit and stuck in the hold, so ... were all Fangs like this? I don't know. But this lot really took the "fun" out of "dysfunctional." When Fred wasn't around, they fought with each other. When he was around,

they ganged up on him. It was like they weren't happy unless they were spreading pain to something other than themselves. Maybe it was part of the pecking-order thing that Fangs always seemed to establish, and maybe they figured they each had to be the Alpha, Fearless Leader Supremo, at least over someone; maybe that sort of thing came with being Turned. Or, maybe, we just got stuck with the biggest assholes the Fangs ever produced and the powers that be lumped all of them together to keep all the grief in one place.

We arrived at the section where the malfunction was. Fred started pointing at each of us Reboots, positioning us where he needed us, and then went about the task of fixing what was wrong. I was just supposed to flip a switch whenever he told me to. Looked like something dealing with the ship's coolant systems; a lot of heat got generated by the drives, and it needed some way to safely bleed off into space. I played along, allowing Fred to do his part and treat me like the others. It was boring, but it was better than ... well, what? Rehydrating brains, I guess. Waiting to get broken beyond repair, like the others? Like just another replaceable component on this ship? Or standing around and thinking. There's nothing much around here that makes for comfortable thinking.

Then things got even more "entertaining." Grigoire decided to make his entrance, when we were about halfway through and the ship was running on the APU—which meant no one got to do anything that wasn't absolutely necessary. Grigoire took special pleasure in torturing Fred; he really, really hated Werewolves, more than the average Fang. Before Paras were outed to the entire world, Fangs and Furs were already at each other's throats in some kind of eternal holy war, or something. When us Zombies started causing enough trouble for the Norms, both sides came to a truce to try and "save the herd," as it were. Didn't seem to do much to quell the resentment and hatred that immortal beings can harbor in the long run though; a grudge seemed to age like fine wine with some of them.

Grigoire was the vessel's astrophysicist, which meant on a scale of one to ten on "Uptight Asshole-ness," he scored a whopping seventy-three. He was probably the same when he was a Norm, if the near-ancient vids we have onboard of *The Big Bang Theory* are to be believed.

Oh right. Yeah we've got an entire shipload worth of anachronisms. You'll find that most Fang/Fur culture is based on the years between 1875 and just about 1990. Those were the Golden Ages for them. Before that, Norms were scarce enough that when enough Norms went missing, people noticed, and went hunting. After that, there were cell phones and computer networks, and when Norms went missing, the information got passed around the damn world in less than a day, and Norms went hunting. In between that, there were plenty of people around, enough so that you got runaways and misfits, and other types that would vanish, and no one would notice much of a pattern or really care, mostly because there was kind of an attitude that if you didn't march in lockstep with every other Norm, you deserved whatever terrible fate came to you. So that's when most of them got Turned. And that's where their cultural tastes got stuck.

And for those that weren't from that time? Well, Home Services supplied us with all the entertainment we were ever likely to get—as long as it was long out of copyright. So that meant a whole lot of twentieth and twenty-first century stuff and not much else, and absolutely nothing from the *House of Mouse*, because of the special copyright exception. What you see that much of tends to become part of you, and that's about all we see out here.

"Hey, Fuzzy Wuzzy. How's it going with the repairs? Try not to get any dog hair in the components; it's a pain to get out, you know?" Grigoire slapped on his best smile, which looked fake and painful stretched across perfect and blemish-free dead skin. "Oh wait, that's right, *you're* going to be the one to clean them out!" He laughed at his own humor. "Never mind then, carry on."

"Grigoire, not now. Think of it like this: if I don't do my job correctly, then the ship falls apart. If the ship falls apart, you'll be getting really cozy with a couple of red dwarfs. And I'm not talking the Snow White kind either, sucker." Fred was pissed. Poor bastard. In another unlife, I would've really had my withered heart go out to him. Here, he was just another prisoner that might end up busting me to pieces. "I don't come tell you dirty jokes while you're piddling with your equations, so how about you go brood about the unfairness of unlife, pine over the women you aren't getting to bite, or write Goth poetry or something while I do my job?"

“That’s really funny, fleabag. Make sure to comb some insect killer into that hair.”

I’m not sure why, because it’s no worse than any of the other shit they call him, but there was something about that name that always got to Fred. He put up with a lot of crap from the Fangs; but what other choice did he have? But whenever they called him that, he got mean. Fred put down his tools with a loud clang and turned to face Grigoire, an ugly smirk on his face.

“At least I still have all my hair. Must suck—hardy har—that you got bitten so late in life you were stuck with a comb-over. Tony said you were looking lighter around the North, by the way. You been picking at yourself again? You should know better than that. You haven’t got anything to spare up there.” Fred twirled a finger around the very top of his cranium, grinning evilly the entire time. And that was all that Grigoire needed. It’s an interesting thing, to see one of the Fangs really vamp out. It’s not too unlike the Weres, but a little more subtle. Grigoire’s eyes filled with murder and a cold fury that always unsettled me. Something happened that seemed to make the shadows deeper around him, calling on the infernal whatever-the-hell that animated Fangs, I suppose. He bared his terrible canines and leapt for Fred, claws extended. Fred partially transformed; his features became more bestial, with his hair growing longer and his muscles rippling and growing underneath his skin. He can do that half-transformation at will; he just can’t completely wolf out. He still has full control over himself in the half-state, which was good; if the wrong stuff was busted in this room, the ship had a fairly decent chance of exploding. Ah, lowest-bidder contracts

There was about sixty seconds of ultraviolence and way-too-fast ruckus, which was fortunately confined to a relatively robust part of the engine room; then Antonio appeared in the door, yelling at the top of his lungs. “*Knock it off, morons!*”

They froze. Antonio is the Captain. Top of the Fang food chain. I *think* there’s something in their instincts that makes the other Fangs obey him. Maybe he’s been Undead the longest, or he was born or Turned with a certain *whatever* that just made the others obey. Didn’t matter; they jumped when he said to. A good thing, too,

since otherwise this would have been a hulk floating in space about three months into the mission, inhabited only by us decayed types until the brains ran out. Not so much because they knew how to kill each other without helpful tools like wooden stakes and silver, but because they'd probably have blown something up and gone through a bulkhead, with the end result being the lot of them sucked out into deep space to form a fighting ball until they all froze solid, or Fred ran out of air. The Fangs didn't need air, but they wore suits to protect themselves from the cold and to be able to talk to the ship and each other. At near-zero Kelvin even a Fang will freeze solid and be unable to move. Fred, however, needed air, though he would last longer than a Norm would.

"You!" Antonio said to Fred, pointing. "Back to work. I want a hot shower and *La Traviata*. And you—" he pointed to Grigoire. "Act like a civilized noble, and not a thug. You can always be demoted if I choose. As far down the chain as I care to put you." Antonio always tried to play at being sophisticated and a part of "Undead royalty." I always thought it was a heaping pile of bullshit, personally. "So behave as if you deserve your position, or you'll be second in command to Fido." Tony got a wicked look on his face. "And I'll let him tell *you* when you can eat."

Grigoire hated being talked down to by Tony, even though it was his place in the chain of command, but that was just a whole new level of insult. I don't think it was my imagination, what there was left of such a thing; matters were escalating around here. He shrieked a terrible and piercing wail, and then went to work on us Reboots. I've been around when either the Fangs go woolly, or Fred has his moon phases going on. But never in such close quarters. He ripped through us, pulling Zombies apart with his hands, tearing at us with teeth. It was horrible to watch, but I couldn't move. He was working his way toward me, and I didn't dare run. To run would be to show that I knew what was coming—and that would show I could still think. I was dead either way. Well, dead again. Perma-dead. If I could have closed my eyes, I would have, but my eyelids are sort of glued in the open position.

"*Grigoire!*" Tony used a worse voice than before. It was the sort of voice that you used with a dog that just took a dump on the carpet in

front of you. The tone ... I can't describe it. If I'd had blood, it would have been frozen. More Fang powers. Even Fred went statue-still. Grigoire stopped with one clawed hand raised to rend me from stem to sternum.

Tony was really pissed now. "Not in front of the help, fool of a child," he hissed. "Back to your quarters! Now!" Grigoire fumed, shooting another savage look at Fred before he finally retreated. I tracked my eyes the barest few centimeters to look at Fred, then to Tony, trying to keep my face uninterested in the happenings around me. Kind of hard to be any more deadpan when you're already dead.

Fred cocked his head to the side. "That Zombie looked at me funny."

Tony sighed heavily, squeezing the bridge of his nose with his fingers as if to stave off a migraine. I think that's just another affectation on his part; I don't think the Fangs have such human concerns as headaches. "That's because you're funny-looking, Fred. Go take a flea bath or lick your ass or something. Just get the drives fixed first." If I could still evacuate my bowels, that would've been the moment for me to do so. That had been ... way too close. And dusty wheels had started to turn in my head.

"Pete, what other choice do we have? We're coming apart at the seams, here, literally." I pointed at Pete's left shoulder; he had been wedged between a mainframe core and its housing while trying to install some new wiring, and one of our less-than-awake Reboot brothers decided to push anyways. I was sewing him back up. "Nobody ever tries to fix us, because we're disposable!"

"Dude, what's the point? We go back home, and we're just more Deadheads. You know what they do to us, especially if they think we can talk and think and feel. Well, feel kinda, at least." Every conscious Reboot remembered what happened to Xavier, the short-unlived "Lord of Zombies" and his Zombie War. It hadn't been pretty even by Reboot standards, which you had to admit, were somewhere in the sub-sub-basement. Get out of the gutter, so those of us in the sewer can get some sun, sorta thing. Xavier had been the reason why the Fangs and the Furs came out of the broom closet to help the

Norms in the first place. Zombies on their own can be dealt with pretty easily, if a Norm has a lick of common sense. But, when you have one that can think and command all of his rotting brethren? One that can plan, make strategy, and has an almost endless army that doesn't care what parts get blown off while constantly replenishing itself? It was almost the end of the Earth. I wasn't there to see it; I was Turned years after. Doesn't stop me from still getting hives thinking about it.

I wasn't going to give up on *my* plan, however, because I didn't see how we had anything to lose. If we did nothing, we were consumables anyway, and eventually they'd be down to just me and Pete. "Do you want to get flushed out of an airlock? Our brothers and sisters can't tell the difference; they'd just float along, hungry as ever and not knowing the difference. But we're awake, man. If we're not insane now, think about what an eternity floating in nothing would do to you. Or if you got ripped apart—there you are, conscious and watching your bits get shoved into the recycler."

"Dude, listen." Pete had been a professional surfer, or so he claimed, before he had become a Reboot. He retained the sometimes annoying habit of reverting back to his former speech patterns when he was perturbed. "I get what you're saying, man, really I do. But look at us. We're just a couple of stiff's, man. They're Fangs and a Fur. What do we got against all five of them, dude? Seriously."

Then it hit me. The last piece of the puzzle fell into place. Not only did we need to ensure we weren't in line for the next temper tantrum, we needed an ally. And it wasn't going to be a Fang. "Fred."

"Fred, what?" Sometimes Pete can be so dense. I mean, dense even for a Reboot. It clicked for him a few seconds later, and realization shone through his milky-white eyes. "Dude. You're fucking insane already. You know that?" But that wasn't disbelief I heard in his voice. It was cautious admiration.

"Yeah? Who else gets a shorter, shittier stick than us? Fred. Who's got as many brains as Grigoire, and gets treated like the third-world hired help? Fred. Who would give anything to see every Fang on this ship turned into corpsicles? Fred."

Pete rubbed his stomach woefully. "Man, you know better than to say brains around me. I still got the urges, dude."

I smacked him lightly. “Focus, butthead. Fred hates them worse than we do. And—” I paused for effect. “—Fred can pilot this boat.”

“Yeah but ... oh, dude. If we come outta the closet ...” He shook his head—carefully, to avoid dislodging anything. “Even if he’s okay with it ... that can’t be taken back, like, there’s no do-over, and he has that any time he needs to pull something out for the Fangs, turn on us.”

I laced my rotten fingers behind the patchy scalp at the back of my head. “Pete, sometimes ... you’ve just got to look at the bigger picture.”

Whenever it was scut work that had to be done outside, it was Fred that did it. Usually. He was actually getting out of most of it in this star system; with six *visible* moons dirtside for the planet they were orbiting at any one time, there was a lot of “full moon” time—during which he was pretty useless. Inside the ship, he could stay human as long as he didn’t get mad and decide to go half-Wolf. Outside? All bets were off.

Though, just before the “drive incident,” Grigoire had locked him out to get back at him for some other petty damn thing, leaving him out for half a day. He’d pounded on the airlock door for an hour, screaming at them.

“Come on guys, will you let me in already? I’ve had like five minutes of me-time since you—HROOOOOOOOOO!”

“Someone turn Fred loose again?”

Yeah. Real funny. Wolfing out wasn’t any fun for Fred; “he” got lost in the animal and he damn well didn’t like it. After it ended, it was mostly a blur of images for him. Back on Earth? Lots of blood and terrible memories. Here, in deep space with nothing but Undead that he hated worse than the Dark Prince? Promises of dreams to come, and as a sort of compensation he could plant the Fang-faces over the vague images of whatever it was he’d ripped into. Still, he didn’t like being out of control like that. Well, now they could tote their own barges and lift their own bales. He got to stay in the ship.

Which of course meant ... he had to stay in the ship. Inside the same walls, breathing the same canned air, watching the Reboots.

Reading. Watching the Reboots. Rewatching the vid library. Watching the Reboots. It was getting so he was even considering cracking into the opera collection that only Tony ever watched. The best thing about being able to get outside was the air on the planets that had them—even when he was human, his sense of smell was better than a Norm's. So even with the CO₂ and air scrubbers, there was always this faint stench in the back of his nose from the Reboots. The Fangs wouldn't notice, of course. He didn't think they actually had a sense of smell anymore; most of them didn't need to breathe, outside of speech. As far as he could tell, all they could smell was blood; and the only one with the fresh stuff was Fred. But Fred's sense of smell extended outside the bounds of known science; he could compartmentalize a million different scents, and discriminate among them. Almost all of them were disgusting on this cruise. That made the times of being able to get out on a planet all the more important.

So he was stuck in here, which only made him think more, about a lot of uncomfortable things. There were only so many new deaths that he could imagine for his shipmates, so even that grew boring eventually. Ugly notions kept intruding. He knew the Reboots were expendable, but what if they all were? What if Home Services actually expected them to kill each other out here? That might explain the fantastic rate of pay; if they weren't expected to make it back, it wouldn't matter how much the pay rate was because no one would ever collect.

He shook his head, hoping to banish the ominous implications of his line of thought. There was work to be done, and it seemed like more than usual. The ship was always malfunctioning these days, but now that he was feeling irritable all the time, even the ship seemed to be trying to torment him. Such an idea, of course, was at odds with his logical brain; it was just the nature of such a sophisticated piece of machinery, just like it was in his nature to go berserk with a full moon and for the Fangs to be assholes. More so, really—the ship might be sophisticated in design, but she was still built by the lowest bidder. Still ... things had been happening that just were not in the list of “malfunctions.”

For instance, the lighting. It was never, never, never to have a UV component except in his personal quarters, or for the onboard

hydroponics garden; a garden that was for his sole benefit. He had to eat after all, and though Wolf might live by frozen steak alone, man did not, and this thing supplied all the needs: veggies, algae, and this fish called tilapia that bred like rabbits and sucked up seasoning so at least it didn't taste the same all the time. Some of the bulbs had gone missing not long ago; he suspected at the time that one of his crewmates were going to be playing a particularly painful prank on each other. So, naturally, as soon as one of the Fangs got a sunburn from a replaced bulb, he was the first one blamed.

Not a malfunction, and not an "accident." More like an "on purpose." But the Fangs all claimed innocence, and he knew that *he* hadn't done it—not that he could prove otherwise. It was almost as if there was a third party around here. Which, of course, was impossible. He'd heard of haunted ships before, though those were all Gremlin-haunted, but this one had been vetted back in dry-dock as Gremlin free—one of the few things that Home Services seemed to have done correctly on this flight. Could a Gremlin have somehow hitched a ride? But how? There weren't supposed to be Gremlins out here, and they hadn't taken on anything new. Besides, he knew Gremlins, and he'd booted all the Gremlins out on their shakedown run as he was supposed to do; that'd been three days of nonstop fun, crawling through wiring ducts, Jeffries tubes, and hydraulics.

Hell, maybe he was sleepwalking, and he really *had* done it.

Just one more charming item to add to his list of aggravations.

"He's dead, Jim." We were in the engineering section again. Whenever the Fangs or Fred didn't need us, those of us Reboots left outside of the holding pen were free to roam around, weighed down with tool belts. Kind of like free-floating tool chests with limited maintenance ability; if something minor was wrong, just point at one, give it the command, and have it do a job. If we got busted wandering around it wasn't as if it mattered.

One of our brethren had just that happen to him. I stared down at what was left of him. It wasn't even remotely pretty, and even as distant as my own emotions now were, I felt sick. "Must've been one

of those damned Fangs; Fred doesn't really knock us around, unless he's wolfed out and can't tell the difference."

He was in pieces, some of which were still squirmy and half-attached. I looked down at him and felt a dim desperation. Pete stared down at the bits too. He made a grunt that sounded uneasy, but before he could voice any objections, I cut him off. So to speak. "Pete, we *can't* stop now. Do you remember what happened when you died the first time? Before you came back?"

Pete shook his head. "Naw, man. I do remember I had caught a killer wave the day I died, and had found some good herb, too, but that's about it."

What I half-remembered woke the one emotion I could really feel well: fear. "Well, I remember. I didn't see any Pearly Gates, or fiery brimstone, or a light at the end of the tunnel. I sure as hell didn't get reincarnated, unless someone stole my spot in line. I just remember darkness before waking up again." I played with a frayed tatter of the broken Reboot's red jumpsuit. It had been ... well, empty, a void, a nothingness that is hard for me to describe now, and I doubt I could have described when I was alive. All I know is it was negation. The absence of life, the absence of *me*. It's what I imagined regular Reboots were like, all the time. Blank, empty on the inside, no purpose. "That scares the crap outta me, Pete. I didn't do much when I was alive, and I don't want to waste this second chance, such as it is."

Sighing out of habit rather than because I actually had breath, I took out a screwdriver from my coveralls, and plunged it through the eye of the ruined Reboot. Destroying what's left of the brain does destroy us permanently. It's about the only thing that does, other than incineration. Getting ripped to shreds will leave us helpless, but still "conscious" as long as the brain is mostly intact. Killing the shredded Reboot was a small kindness, all things considered.

Good old Barny decided to get revenge on Fred *and* his fellow Fangs.

Someone reported a landing-strut sensor misread. Fred went out to check it, during the twenty or so minutes when there were no moons up. And ... tried to get back in, only to discover the airlock

door mysteriously sealed, and he spent another forty-eight hours wolfed out and locked out. Barney wasn't too good at figuring consequences, however, because he'd locked Fred out under the moons with only a day's worth of stored blood left. Bad timing. Antonio was not happy. Come to think of it, he never was. This had pushed him from "glowering and miserable" to "glowering and furious."

The Fangs had been forced to go hungry for almost twenty-four hours, and once they got an exhausted (but well-fed!) Fred back on the ship, Tony had ordered them up into orbit to keep it from happening again. Fred was not a happy puppy, and that was not the only reason. Today sucked, and in more ways than one. It seemed that the ship was being extremely touchy; there were a number of subsystem failures that, while not serious, were time-consuming. Not only did he have to deal with the aggravation of having his crewmates bitch and moan to him about all of it, and "Why wasn't this fixed already?" it was also a feeding day. He was due to report to the medical bay in fifteen minutes; and at the last minute, Tony evidently decided that this was enough time for Fred to check out a potential atmosphere leak on the observation deck, so that everyone didn't suddenly decompress. Not that decompression would bother the Fangs or even the Reboots, but *he* would die, and that would leave the Fangs without food. At this point, Fred thought that dying quick and easy like that would be better than continuing on this trip; he wouldn't have to listen to them anymore, and his own last thoughts would be of how nice it was that they would die slowly and painfully of starvation, or much more slowly and not so painfully of starvation while sleeping. Bad things happened to Fangs that don't feed and then stay awake too long, and it wasn't much better for the ones that went into hibernation when food got scarce.

Grumbling loudly and cursing his lot in life, he stepped into the anteroom to the observation deck. Something that caught his attention was that the doors leading from the other sections were all locked, for some reason. He mentally shrugged, probably just another bullshit prank by one of the Fangs. Grigoire again, more than likely. Tony had come damn near to demoting Grigoire to "Fred's helper," and he'd only been talked down from it by the rest of the Fangs pointing out it would be a bad precedent.

Fred finally reached the observation deck—and immediately sensed that something was off. Next to one of the doors was a Reboot, and it was looking directly at him. Somewhere in the back of his mind, he recognized it as the one he'd caught on a skateboard.

And it talked.

“Sorry, bro. This’ll only last a couple of minutes.”

The Zombie flicked a switch, and closed the door between the two of them. Before Fred could even register what had happened, the outer shutters for the observation canopy slid open, letting the cold light of three full moons in through the viewport.

“Goddamnit, Tony. Fred was supposed to be here five minutes ago. I’m hungry!” Hephaestus, the ship’s navigator, was the whiniest of the Fangs. Whining was irritating to everyone, and only aggravated all the worst traits of the inborn jerk in each of the rest of the Fangs.

Not that any of them were going to win Miss Congeniality. Even *Fangs* considered all other Fangs jerks.

Tony scowled, and made a quick revision in the feeding order. “You’ll get your share, Hephaestus, just like the rest of us. Today, you’re going last, though, and if you make another single peep about it I swear to all the dark and sharp things of the Underworld that you’ll be floating home.”

Hephaestus looked down, cowed by his superior. Grigoire and Barnabus shared a nasty grin. Any suffering was good suffering, as far as they were concerned, and for Barnabus, this meant he got to move up one in the queue.

The intercom started up with a pop and a crackle. Tony rolled his eyes. Another malfunction. They’d stopped using the intercom on his orders because they were all playing “dueling DJ” on the damn thing for the first six years of the trip. Grigoire was the first to look up and cock his head to the side. “I know this song”

“I see the bad moon arising.

I see trouble on the way”

Tony had particularly keen hearing, and he was the first one to hear the main doors for the medical bay open, even above the music. He turned away from Heph toward the door. “About time, Fred. The

damn intercom is on the fritz again. Besides, this Vampire likes his room service prompt—"Tony didn't even have to take the milliseconds to sweep his eyes to the door to know what was wrong. He heard it, and smelled it. Fred was a monster, and bigger than ever; the more moonlight he took in, the more powerful he became when he wolfed out. All Weres were that way; luckily, Earth only had one moon to shed its light on all the dark creatures she possessed. Fred had become a nightmare of eight feet of hair, claws, and jaws, and had murder in his dark eyes.

They were running, but not nearly fast enough.

Fangs and Weres were both blessed with many dark gifts. Strength enough to topple buildings, supernatural senses, and in the Fangs' case remarkable powers of persuasion; provided, of course, the individual Fang trying to do the persuasion wasn't a complete douchebag. There are some things not even supernatural manipulation can overcome.

Like being a douchebag. Or an enraged and moonlight-drunk Werewolf in full form.

They were also inhumanly fast. Of the two species, though, the Weres were faster, and Tony cursed this racial difference more than ever. Fred had been on top of the group before anyone could even bare his fangs. They had been in the medical bay for blood, and blood there had been; it was splattered messily on every surface. Some of it was Fred's, but most of it was his Vampiric compatriots.

Fred regenerated at an incredible rate; they could have, as well, if they were supplied with fresh blood, but the only fresh blood was in Fred's veins and ... he wasn't exactly cooperating.

So they had run; Fred's Change could only last so long, if he didn't come in contact with moonlight.

For some reason, though, every single viewport shutter was wide open. Due to the way the ship was positioned above the planet they were supposed to be surveying and evaluating, they had visible moons on almost every side—three completely full ones above them, in relation to the ship's rotation. Fred kept getting stronger, and they kept running. There was no silver on the entire ship.

The Mission Planners from Home Services reasoned that Fangs or Weres killing each other would be suicide; without food, the Fangs would wither and sleep and maybe die before they could get back to Earth. So no silver.

As for the Fangs, the planners counted on “safety in numbers,” or so the brochure said. A single Were couldn’t hope to overpower the rest of the crew by his (or her, though female Weres were much rarer) self. That *should* have kept the Fangs in control. Obviously, the planners hadn’t counted on a situation like this one—multiple moons, all the viewports wide open, ship in orbit, and no way to get the ports shut without getting torn into tiny pieces. Well, someone *might* have been able to get the ports shut in one section, if he volunteered to be the one that would end up shredded. Right. *That* was never going to happen. An altruistic, self-sacrificing Vampire? Get real. One of the reasons they made it through getting Turned in the first place, rather than ending up another messy victim on a slab, was the fierce determination to *live* no matter what it cost. Which was, when you thought about it, more or less the definition of being self-centered.

So they ran, desperately.

“He’s right behind us, we’ve got to move!” Grigoire’s voice was a shrill scream; he had lost his left arm in one of the running battles, and it was only now starting to regenerate. Barnabus looked worse, almost as bad as a fresh Reboot; cuts and grievous wounds covered his entire body. He was holding his guts in with both arms and hobbling pitifully on a leg that had been twisted completely around in its socket. They all felt so weak. They were past due for their blood ration from Fred; it didn’t help that he was spilling their claret, expending their life force with each swipe of his claws or flashing of his horrid jaws. They also were looking to each other with hunger; they could drain one of their own, replenish their strength ... but Fred was chomping at their heels and they didn’t even have time for that.

“I know, goddamnit, but we can’t stop to open any of the doors, or he’ll catch up with us!” Beneath the panic and terror clouding his mind—two sensations that Tony had not experienced in millennia—an analytical part of him wondered why most of the doors

they came to were locked. It was almost as if they were being herded somewhere, driven ever forward by the beast at their backs.

“What’re we going to do, Tony? Oh fuck!—” Hephaestus went flying ahead of the group, tossed bodily by Fred. He slammed into a bulkhead with a sickening and wet crunch, his ribs protruding from his back from the force of the blow. Recognition clicked for Tony; they were at the airlock! Without thinking, he shoved the other two Fangs into it, then kicked Hephaestus inside, while hitting the activation relay so hard that the housing around it bent and creaked. In a split-second, the inner airlock doors closed with a snap-hiss. Fred barreled into the door, his fury fueling strike after strike against it. His claws raked against the metal to fruitlessly send showers of sparks into the air, and he howled impotently at having his prey so close but out of reach at the same time. Even if he’d had the mind to use controls, they weren’t where he could get at them. Shipside door airlock controls were all on the inside of the airlocks for a reason. Nobody could get shoved inside unconscious and spaced that way, or at least, not easily. You *could* override from the main control room, but that would take some significant planning, and Fred was not exactly thinking in this state.

Tony put his back against the bulkhead. He was in better shape than the others, but only marginally.

They were safe. Tony automatically began to plan. They could put on suits to keep from getting cold-damaged and protect them from sunlight. Grigoire could get to either the control room or the aux control from outside and override the viewports. Without moonlight, Fred would change back to human form eventually no matter where in the ship he was. Or, they could just wait him out, hoping he’d stay in this section.

They all began to chuckle, which broke down into full-out uproarious laughter. They didn’t really breathe, but it was a stress reaction that their dead bodies still remembered. It was a ghastly sight, in truth; four broken bodies, dead in most ways that counted, laughing and spilling more blood all over the deck. Tony had to wipe blood-tears from his eyes, he was laughing so hard. Fred continued to rage outside of the door, pounding against it relentlessly with his impossibly powerful fists.

Their laughter died as one when one of the space suits that was stored in a wall alcove stood up straight. The blast visor flipped up to reveal a Reboot inside of it, illuminated by the harsh helmet lights.

The grav kicked off, right on schedule, as I raised the blast shield on the suit. I looked at them through the visor, and all they could do was look at me in stunned silence as they rose slightly from the floor. I knew that this made no sense to them, that this was so out of character for a Reboot even their lightning reflexes would not be able to save them, especially without footing. So, baring my busted teeth through my patchwork lips in the most evil Bond-villain grin I could manage, I said, “Adios, suckers.” In two smooth motions, I flipped them “the bird” and then snapped up the safety for the outer airlock doors. In the old movies, they used to show people getting sucked into space in a rush of atmosphere, trying to scrabble and hang onto anything they could. It doesn’t really work like that, though, not when no one is ready for it, anyway. One second, the Fangs were there. The next, I felt a slight jolt against my restraint harness, and they were gone into the blackness, like darts out of a blowgun. There was nothing in the airlock but me and my suit; it was like Tony and the rest of his bastard brethren never even existed.

Then I waited; being a Reboot, I’m pretty good at that. When the banging from the other side of the door subsided, I waited some more. Couldn’t hurt to be too careful, and, besides, we had a plan. Stick to the plan. In movies, it was when you didn’t stick to the plan that things went off the rails. So, I just floated there, whistling some old commercial jingles to myself. Funny how that stuff sticks in your mind. I don’t drink anything, but there I was, rattling the words to a cola commercial around in my head, or what was left of it. Halfway through it, the outer doors closed and the chamber repressurized, and the grav came back on again. I unhooked myself from the restraint harness, looking to the door. There was a flash of hazard lights, and the heavy blast doors opened. On the other side, as planned, was Pete.

“Dude ... is that you?”

“No, it’s Hannibal Lecter. I’ve come for you, Clarice.” I trotted forward, enjoying the feeling of the artificial gravity again; weightlessness isn’t my thing, even though my stomach doesn’t really get queasy anymore. “Where’s Fred?”

“Probably sleeping it off somewhere, man. When he trips bad like that, he usually gets a killer headache afterwards. Dude, are you sure that we can trust him?”

“Pete, we’ve gotten this far. Time to take it the last mile.” Besides, he was the only one who knew how to fly this boat. While we could probably sit up here for a while, eventually orbit would decay and then ... a very fancy cremation. It was now, or never.

Fred woke up with a monumental headache. If he had been cognizant enough through the immense pain to think about it, he would have declared that this was the worst headache in the history of man, living or unliving. Once the pain went from mind-blanking to merely Olympic, he started to remember—or notice—a few things.

Like the fact that his clothing was in pieces, which meant he’d almost certainly Changed. And that his last real memory—before the usual flash of blood and screaming and then nothing but red, red rage—was of three full moons staring down at him, as if they were laughing at what would come next. And ... and a Reboot opening the ports.

While *talking*?

No, that part had to be a hallucination. His mind did that sometimes, right at the Change, as if it was trying to protect him from what was coming.

Looking around, he took stock of his situation. He was in a storeroom for tools. Sometimes when he wolfed out, the others would corral him into a room and lock him in until his Change wore off. Then he noticed that the door was torn inwards, and that there was blood all over it.

“What the hell is going on?” His voice was thick and scratched; even though he regenerated constantly, roaring and howling a lot took its toll on his human-again vocal cords. “Grigoire? Antonio?”

Anyone?” His eyes caught movement in the hallway beyond the door—a person-shaped smudge of shadow against shadows. Probably one of the Fangs here to chew him out for busting the door.

“Hey, which one of you assholes made a Reboot open the shutters in the observation deck? There were three goddamned full moons out there!” The figure stepped through the ruined door; it was dressed in a space suit, obscuring the identity.

“Oh, that was me. Sorry about that, friend.” Friend? He’d been called plenty while on this flight, with some of it so off-color that the Dark Prince, hell-red bastard that he was, would’ve blushed upon hearing it. But he’d never been called friend.

“Seriously, who is that in there?” That voice wasn’t familiar either. Had they—no, surely they hadn’t been intercepted by another ship! Okay, there’d been rumors of FTL in the works but nothing but rumors

The figure seemed to look down at itself.

“Oh, the suit.” The suited figure took off its helmet; beneath was the Reboot that had looked at Fred funny-like a few days ago. It grinned. A Reboot grinning

“I’m the local Sheriff,” it drawled. “Heard there was some trouble. Looked like you could use a hand, pard.”

He felt exactly the way he’d felt when he’d been taze-stunned at the end of his first Change by the Norm cops. “All the demons of hell, it talks!”

Could a Reboot look sheepish? This one shrugged, anyway. “Uh, yeah. About that. Name’s Skinny Jim. Pleased to meet you, Fred.”

Fred was so flabbergasted by this turn of events, that he found himself deep in a conversation before the “stunned” wore off. Oh, he had heard about the “intelligent” Reboots, but he’d always thought they were an urban legend. The entire “Zombie uprising” had occurred decades before Fred was even born, after all, and the general consensus among people of his generation had been that the “King of the Zombies” had been nothing more than a figment of the fevered imaginations of the authorities. Either that, or a manufactured “threat” to give them the power to do pretty much what they wanted to do with the Paras.

Joke was on him, it seemed.

Then the Reboot told him what had happened to his four crewmates.

Joke was—even more so—on the Fangs, who were drifting in a decaying orbit right now, and who would, if not rescued, eventually come to a fiery end, conscious and starving most of the way. *Serves the bastards right, all said and done. Just wish I could see it.*

They spent a good long while talking. The Reboot explained his plight, and what he had done about it. Fred wanted to be angry, wanted to be filled with righteous fury for being used. He knew that he should destroy the Reboot, and flush the rest out of the pen and into space, then report back to Home Services immediately.

But he couldn't bring himself to do any of these things. It didn't take him long to decide that things had just become a lot more interesting on the UES Cenotaph, and he suspected ... a lot more peaceful, too. No more getting drained to feed evil bastard Fangs. No more orders from Tony, needling from Grigoire, bitching from Hephaestus, or dueling with Barnabas. Taking stock of everything, Fred was suddenly happier than he had been in over a century and a half.

"Well, how about that. You know, Jim, I'd shake your hand, but—" He shrugged uneasily, looking at the deck.

Skinny Jim didn't have much in the way of an expressive face, what with the sunken eyes, retracted lips displaying broken teeth, and shriveled-taut skin, but somehow he conveyed resignation. "Yeah, I know, I'm a Zombie."

"Hey, it could come off!"

They both shared a laugh, although the Reboot's was kind of wheezy. It was the first real laugh that Fred had had for many, many years. One not tainted by *schadenfreude*, or at the expense of someone else. It felt good, and it felt clean. Fred also noticed that it was as if a weight was off of his shoulders, and that was also good, welcome.

A smile broke out over his face; he didn't immediately notice when another Reboot trudged up behind Jim.

"Oh, Fred, I want you to meet Pete. Fred, Pete. Pete, Fred."

The skateboarding one! Fred goggled. He felt his eyes bulging when it opened its mouth. "Yo, dude. 'Sup?"

“Ye gods, two of them! I mean ... two of ... you” It wasn’t every day that a Werewolf met a talking Zombie, much less two of them. The shock wore off quickly, though; after the roller coaster of emotions, combined with his still monstrously bad headache, he didn’t have the energy to stay stunned and stupid for too long. “So, why didn’t you guys talk earlier? Why didn’t you flush me out of the airlock with the rest of those scum-suckers?”

Jim stepped forward. “You remember Xavier. Right? The ‘Zombie Emperor’? After that, any of us that seemed to possess any greater cognitive ability than your average jar of mayo were exterminated. Being anything but another mindless deader didn’t do much for anyone’s survival chances.”

“Yeah, but that still doesn’t answer why you didn’t flush me out of the ship, also. If I weren’t cool with this, I could take the ship back to Earth. Or just re-kill you myself and save Home Services the trouble.” Fred placed his hands on the hips of his tattered jumpsuit, trying to present a strong front, even though he wasn’t truly feeling it.

“Honestly, that was the weakest part of the plan. But, you suffered just as much as we had under the Fangs, if not more; they actively hated you, while we were just scenery and mildly useful furniture. So, I—I mean, we—took a chance. It was worth it to see Tony’s face when all the atmo got sucked out into the ether and them with it.”

A fiendish smile crept across Fred’s face. “Damn, I wish I could’ve seen that, actually.”

“Good news is, I recorded it via the ship’s security system. Wanna see it?”

“Bet your ass I do.” He paused, thinking for a moment. “Well, what do we do now? We can’t really go back to Earth, which isn’t that big of a loss. Place is a hole, or at least it was when I left.”

Skinny Jim nodded. “Me and Pete thought about that. We figured that finding a decent planet with lots of yellow sun would be a good start, one that can bake us nice and leathery. High UV to sterilize the bacteria. Kill the rot, and a little oil solves most of our problems. For you, well, pick one with no moons and plenty of stuff for you to munch on, or only one moon and stuff the Were can eat, and when you go human again you’ve got the ship’s garden. As for

everything else—” he pulled out a deck of playing cards from his pocket, “—have you ever played poker?”

It took us a while, but we found pretty much what we were looking for. Yellow-phase star, no moons and not a lot of exploitable resources. Someplace that wouldn't offhand look too attractive to Home Services. We called it “Planet Hawaii,” since it was mostly islands, mostly tropical, and contrary to what you are probably thinking, “island paradise” planets are not on the top of the list for places to go. Home Services wants *commercially viable* resources, and the number of people that can afford to take offworld trips to tropical islands that vary only from the same kind you find on Earth by the exotic flora and fauna are ... well, you're not going to be able to find enough to support a single trip, much less a resort. Never mind that none of them would ever live long enough to get here, even with hyper-sleep tubes. You still age some, even when you sleep.

So this was our little pocket paradise. Screw the non-contamination directive, our seeds would grow here, so besides the hydroponic garden, we figured we'd have the Reboots out there doing the slave labor for a little plantation for Fred, and what with the place being mostly ocean and all, the water wasn't salt, so we just needed a nice big lagoon we could cut off from the rest of the oceanic biosphere. We'd find an island that had one, sterilize it, and seed it with algae. Once that got started we could transplant more tilapia, and bingo. Fred would be set forever. We did all that, and settled down, happy as beach bums can be.

As for us, all we needed was that nice hot sun and oil. Fish and some of the peanuts that the greenhouse had in it provided oil. We Reboots really didn't *need* to eat brains to keep going, so we saved the freeze-dried stuff for me and Pete for kicks, and let the others do without. They wouldn't touch Fred—more of the Para influence than anything—so although they moaned a lot, it was no big deal.

In six months, we were self-sustaining. Then it got better, because even the moaning stopped, and I found the Reboots scrounging some sort of fungus that they seemed happy to munch on. At least, I think it was a fungus. It was spongy, neon-orange, and when

I tasted it, it was actually better than the freeze-dried crap we subsisted on. I figured I would wait and see what happened to them in the long term before I moved the stuff onto *my* dinner plate, but it looked like a viable option for the others now.

I kind of hoped it wasn't sentient, whatever it was, but hey. Survival of the fittest and we were only harvesting one island, so screw it. If it wanted to survive here, it could evolve a mouth and talk to us, or grow some legs and run for it.

Naturally, Pete didn't hold any of my reservations, and started chowing down as soon as he tasted it. Whatever, while I dimly liked him for our mutual plight of Undead sentience, if he wanted to risk himself, I wasn't going to stop him, and I could watch *him* for signs of lapsing into the usual Reboot coma due to his new diet.

Fred and I could always change over to chess from poker if that happened.

So, Pete and I baked to a nice, healthy, flexible brown in the tropical sun. Fred got a tan. Pete taught us both to surf, such surfing as there was on a planet with no moons, and we all settled down to a pretty nice and quiet life. Even if I did smell like Planters Best from the peanut oil. Fred said it was a much appreciated change from perma-rot. Me, I never had noticed.

“Ante up, sucker,” I said, pushing my chips across the table. I had a good hand. A really good hand. Which meant that when Fred lost, he'd have to do my bidding, muwahaha. I was trying to decide what that would be. I was powerfully inclined to an external speaker system, so we could play some music out here. I was pretty sure he could rig it, and reasonably sure we could weatherproof it. We didn't have crazy tides due to lacking a moon, but we did have some powerful weather systems and seriously impressive storms.

Fred scratched the back of his head. “I feel like I'm forgetting something.” It was our third year on the planet, and things had been humming along fairly smoothly for awhile. The other Reboots were all doing their thing, we had the luxuries we wanted, and there wasn't anyone to bother us in this corner of the galaxy. The orange sponge hadn't evolved a mouth, and Pete hadn't turned into a wandering

corpse, so I'd added the tasty stuff to my menu. We hadn't bothered to check on the subspace radio for news for over two years, since it was all more of the same. So-and-so tin-pot dictator was toppled, new government rises, such and such planet was annexed for whoever corporation, Home Services celebrates the whatever. Those of us in the ships might have been taking the long and slow route, but communication was still at real-time speeds. It mattered little to us; we were separate, insular and sufficient unto ourselves. The *only* thing we got from the rest of the civilized galaxy was that we'd set up the computer to continue the automatic downloads of entertainment stuff, which flooded in faster than we could watch or listen to it. Home Services did that much for the ships, probably because otherwise the crews would kill each other from boredom—providing they'd been less like ours had been, that is. Life was good.

I should have realized it was too good. But, when you're on top, after having been in the gutter for so long

So here we were, at our usual game. We had a comfortable table and lounges pulled out of the ship, set up under what passed for trees—more like giant ferns, but they kept the sun off. Since there wasn't a breeze at the moment, a couple of the Reboots were working one of those overhead pulley-fans they used to have in India in the bungalows the English overlords lived in. Fred had a storage-closet-brewed beer next to him. Trust humans, once you get past basic food and shelter the next thing we think about is booze. About a hundred yards away, little waves lapped on the black sand—this was a volcanic beach. Behind us was the ship, Nestled up against a cliff. I had to laugh when I thought about our landing.

"Y'know ... I'm not sure that that was much of a landing."

"What?"

"Well, you did shear off a quarter ton of rock off of that cliff...."

"Y'know what they say? Any landing you can walk away from, is a good landing. So, stuff it, wrinkles."

We could still lift the ship if we had to. Like, oh, if one of the really *big* hurricanes decided to bear down on us. The fish and the veggies could survive one—better we got the hell out of Dodge if one of those things put a target on our island. So ... screw it. Fred had been right. It had been a good enough landing.

I grinned, staring at him. I could grin, now. The last time Fred lost to me, he made me—well, I guess you'd call them tooth veneers—to give me something that looked human-ish again, and the oil had given me nice, flexible lips, even if they were a bit thin. "You're stalling. Even Pete has folded already."

"No, it's not that." A perplexed look crossed Fred's face. "It feels like there's something I should have remembered. Something important. I just can't place my finger on it." I could tell that whatever it was that Fred was thinking about, it was bugging him immensely. I decided to take his mind off of it.

"No use, *compadre*. I'm not letting you out of this hand. I've got plans for my winnings, and you can't get off that easy." I gave him my best "gotcha" look. He was an aggressive player, normally. That *should* have gotten him back in the game, but it didn't.

I put my cards facedown on the table. "Okay, if it bothers you that much. Did you leave your lunch on the stove?"

He shook his head. "No, it's not that. It feels ... important."

"Is there an experiment you started and forgot to check on?"

Fred scoffed. "I haven't done an important experiment after the time I tried to stick three Reboots together for that—"

"I know, I remember!" If I slept, it would have given me nightmares. "Was there a news alert? Have you checked for one lately?"

He shook his head again, looking down at his cards. "No, I've scanned for our names, the ship's name, the Fangs' names, everything. Got it on automatic for the ship's computer, set up in a way so we don't get traced. Nothing on any of us, so far as I can tell. It's not that."

"Forget to check the weather?" That had happened once. It hadn't been drastic, but three of the Reboots had gotten washed out to sea, never to be seen again. No clue what happened to them. We hadn't exactly been vigilant about checking for aquatic monsters. We'd pretty much figured that if something couldn't crawl up on land to get us, we were good.

Suddenly, we all heard the whine of an extraplanetary booster engine powering up, quickly building to a frantic roar. All of us turned to look at the ship; even the Reboots craned their leathery necks in that direction.

“The *hell?*” I said. A single streak of fiery exhaust burst away from the top of the ship, with the bright point of light at the end of it blinking out of sight quickly leaving only the thick plume of smoke pointing like a finger, upwards.

A big, fat, middle finger to our entwined destinies.

“Oh,” said Fred, guilt plastered over his face. “Shit.”

“What?” I asked, sharply. Then even more sharply, “*What?*”

“That’s what I forgot.” He laid his cards on the table, face up—nothing at all but stray cards. “Ship’s emergency beacon. Launches automatically if the ship’s captain doesn’t check in after a predetermined amount of time. It’s so Home Services can recover the ship and any assets that are left. Tony was the only one supposed to know about it.” Fred looked up to meet my gaze. “I discovered it while I was bored and poking around some of the auxiliary systems one night. I kept meaning to deactivate it, but I never got around to it.” He looked down at his hand. “So ... y’all got your bags packed?”

Oh hell. But ... no point in making a deal about it. If there is one thing I am at this point, it’s pragmatic. So Fred screwed up. Right now screaming about it wasn’t going to change anything; the Fangs had tried that often enough, and look where they were now. “Any more of those things onboard?”

“Just the one that I remember finding.”

“Should we change islands, or whole planets?”

“With Home Services involved? If we could scoot out of this galaxy, it’d be just barely far enough.”

Bugger. Oh well. We could dump some Reboots to leave room for food for Fred, harvest what we had, and be off here in a reasonable amount of time. The Dark Gods in charge of our fate only knew how far we would have to go to get out of reach. Or if we could.

Right. “Let’s check the news. See how close they are to here.” That would let us know how long we had to get a good head start. Twenty years would be nice. I could scream at Fred all I liked once we were on the run.

Then again, given the guilt on Fred’s face, maybe I should just let him stew on his own. Without him, we’d have probably been drifting forever, and our plan never would have worked. Still, it was a colossal, colossal fuck up. *Deal with what you can, while you can.*

We ran for the ship, and started the computer scanning through the news. I checked the “colonized planets” list, Pete for the “messages from near-space” and Fred for stuff that needed a little more hands-on than what we were doing.

Fred made a strange noise. I looked over at him. Under his tan, he was pale. “Uh ... looks like things have changed while we’ve been going with drive on full for the past century and change. We’ve got new neighbors. And they didn’t get there by the long haul, like us.”

Oh, I did not like the way that sounded. My brain might not have been the best in the world, but ... “Please tell me that doesn’t mean what I think it means.”

“We’ve got not a whole lot of room to run, and we’re a lot slower than the competition.” He grimaced. “That’s the long and short of it, as it were.”

Oh ... *hell*. The Dark Gods above *and* below were laughing at us. That rocket’s contrail had been a middle finger after all. “No. FTL? Portal tech?” I begged him to say no with my beady little eyes. Fred merely shrugged. A lot changes in one hundred and some odd years. And we hadn’t been looking for it until now. And that was *my* fuckup. Fred was the techy, I was the one that had told the computer what to watch for in the feeds. But ... damn it, when we left, *everyone* said FTL was impossible, and the most anyone could manage would be near-light!

So everyone was wrong. Okay, fine. Now we could both wallow in guilt. Wallow later, move now. Definitely abandon some of the Reboots. Run a couple of wires into the lagoon, stun the fish, flash-freeze. We’d been taking care of the hydroponics garden in the ship instead of letting it go to pot, so Fred was set.

“Dude. I’ll get the Reboots harvesting brain-balls,” Pete said, and headed out of the ship. I looked at Fred.

“Ship’s mine,” he said. “If you guys can handle everything else.”

It was hard to think this fast. I hadn’t needed to in a long time. “Can we decide where we’re going once we’re up?” I asked. That would take one thing off the list.

“Yes,” he said instantly. “If you guys can get everything loaded back in, and whatever consumables—”

It had just occurred to me that there was something else we could leave behind ... all the crap we’d needed for the Fangs. Best

thing to do would be to sink it, so no one knew we'd lost them. The more we could confuse the issue, the better.

The blood storeroom could hold a lot of brain-balls . . .

"Have I got determination on what to dump?" I asked. Fred just nodded. He was already busy with what I assumed was preflight, pre-readiness stuff.

"As long as it isn't me," he added, jumping to another set of controls.

Right. Stun the fish and harvest. Harvest what we could from the garden and the rest of the island. Strip out the Fang crap. Sink it in the ocean. Would it be possible to simulate a wreck? Probably not, damn it.

I realized I was wasting time. I could think and plan while I did the first stages.

That, and curse all the Dark Gods.

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