

# COLD WAR

By Rebecca M. Senese

After the cops left, taking Wilson's wasted corpse, Pete was still shaky from panic. So close, goddammit, too close.

When they'd rung the buzzer at five that morning, snarling into the vid-cam, he was sure they'd come for him.

Spike ratted, he'd thought wildly as his trembling fingers fumbled on the door lock keypad. The cops waved piercer guns, powerful enough to blast through a three inch steel door, never mind the thin slice of plexiwood that was the apartment door.

Some damn high security building, Pete thought.

Finally his fingers cooperated, punching in the code. The door inched open then swung wide as one of the cops kicked it. The shiny, ominous end of a split-fire, twenty-five round, piercer gun jammed under Pete's nose. The smell of oil and death nearly choked him.

"Wilson?" snarled the cop. "Bunter Wilson?"

Pete blinked in surprise. He pointed across the narrow six foot apartment. Wilson cowered against the wall, emaciated shoulders scrapping peeling paint. Bony fingers clutched the sheet. Glazed eyes stared out in fear beneath thinning blond hair.

The cop pushed Pete away and three of them strolled into the room. A lieutenant wearing a shapeless black overcoat and armoured gloves opened a leather case. He glanced at the contents and back at Wilson.

"Bunter Wilson, you are charged with skipping your six month test," the lieutenant said. His voice grated from too many herbal cigarettes. "As such a blood test is to be administered immediately. Having skipped the test, you have no right to legal counsel and any conclusion

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drawn from the following blood test is deemed valid and admissible in court."

He drew out a thin pencil-like object. The tester. A nod to the other cops sent them gliding forward. Wilson didn't bother to struggle as they held out his arm.

Pete had heard of cases where the blood tests were wrong. Fat lot of good that did the poor jerks who had to take them.

Wilson flinched as the tester beeped once and lit up. Red. The lieutenant's face was glacial.

"Bunter Wilson, you have tested positive. Your twenty-four hour amnesty period has been waived due to your noncompliance with the law."

Pocketing the tester, the lieutenant pulled out a twister wand and jabbed it at Wilson's chest. As the wand touched him, the cops let go and Wilson's body quivered, jerking to the rhythm of the lethal dose of electricity. The smell of cooked flesh filled the air. Pete gagged.

Wilson's body flopped to the floor when the lieutenant switched the wand off. One hand lay, palm up, dirty fingernails pointing at the ceiling as if beseeching mercy from an uncaring god.

Without glancing at him, the lieutenant left, mumbling about paperwork, leaving the heavily armoured cops to carry Wilson. They picked him up unceremoniously and dragged the body out of the apartment.

Pete scurried into his biker leathers, the stench of Wilson's passing still strong and rank in the air. He had to get the hell out before the cleanup crew arrived. They were supposed to come with the cops and look for any contraband on the premises, but things rarely went the way they were supposed to. Witness Wilson.

If they found Pete here he'd be screwed. Totally. No telling what they had on him already.

Three blocks away the familiar white van streaked past, heading for the apartment building. Pete ducked his head so they wouldn't get a good look at his face. Too damn close.

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Just his luck to find a roomie who wasn't a health freak or an organ hunter only to have the cops waste him. A skipper, who woulda thought that about Wilson?

He aimed down Yonge Street, the early morning air stinking of sewage and pollution wafting north from the poisoned lake. Although he knew it was too early to make contact he was going to do it anyway. Things around here were getting too hot too fast. No telling what the cleanup crew would uncover. The apartment had been in Wilson's name and Pete had been very careful about not letting anything slip but it would be noticed that he hadn't stayed for the debriefing. Noticed and reported.

Time to collect his stash and blow this town.

Angling down York Street, he hit Queens Quay. Around him, the buildings of a bygone era reached up for the sky, as pathetic as Wilson's hand. After the lake poisoning, the rich had fled from their luxury condominiums and gangs of squatters had taken over. Not even the police came this far south.

The stench was bad so he pulled out a face-filter. It was an old one, but he hadn't been paid for the last shipment yet. With the apartment gone, he didn't know how Spike would contact him.

The heaviness of the sewage crept through his worn filter. At least it was bearable. He adjusted the strap over his crooked nose. Seals never closed properly around it.

A dull, yellow sun glared down as Pete circled the buildings. He couldn't see anybody but he knew better. The gangs were watching; he could feel their eyes the way he could feel a custom inspector's suspicions. They wouldn't touch him yet though. Not with the red handkerchief of the Hapslam gang tied around his right arm.

It was dangerous to be this early but there wasn't anywhere else to go. His hands still trembled, remembering Wilson's death dance. He had to get his stash now.

Finally a figure appeared against one of the ruined doorways. Swathed in rags, it glided towards him across the barren parking lot. Only when it got within six feet could Pete tell it was

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a woman.

"Where's Matrix?" Pete said. He didn't need this right now.

"He got caught yesterday, up around Rosedale. Tested positive."

Pete closed his eyes. Oh great. Now what? If Spike found out he lost a shipment, running from the cops would be the least of his worries. Spike was increasingly nervous about the crackdown on her smugglers. Too many of them had turned or just plain disappeared.

"I'm your contact now." The woman's voice broke into his thoughts.

He opened his eyes to study her, or what he could see of her. Deep brown eyes stared out at him over a filter mask that looked even older than his. Tufts of black hair peeked out from the rags wrapped like a turban around her head. Impossible to see the shape of her body under the various pieces of fabric covering her.

"Who the hell are you?" Pete demanded. He patted his left thigh where the thin plasti-wire knife rested. She was small, but he knew how vicious these homeless could be. He wanted her to know he wasn't intimidated by her.

"I'm Vriana," she said. "Matrix's daughter."

Pete pursed his lips. Matrix had never mentioned a daughter, but they'd never swapped life stories. Mostly business, which was how Pete liked it. No attachments, no losses.

"Where's my stuff?"

"It's safe," she said. Pete waited, but she merely stared at him.

"Look, I can't pay you now. You get paid when I get paid. I have to make delivery."

Her dark eyes narrowed. "This isn't about money. I want to meet your lead. We want an adjustment to the arrangement."

Shit, he didn't need this now. "What kind of adjustment?"

"I'm not discussing it with you, just your lead."

"Give me my stuff first." His fingers itched to unfasten the plasti-wire knife cover but violence was the wrong way to respond. He didn't underestimate her.

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Apparently she didn't underestimate him either. Her gaze barely flickered from his face but she took a shuffling step back.

"Are we going to stalemate?" she said. "Matrix said you were smarter than that."

He was smarter and at the moment, hungry. Hell, so they wanted to meet Spike, what did he care? He was a middleman, he didn't care about agreements.

"Food first," he said.

#

He was grateful she didn't tell him what was in the stew. As they squatted by the fire in the lobby of an old condominium complex, he snuck glances at her over the edge of his cracked bowl. Without the filter mask, he could see the resemblance to Matrix in her face; the long nose, the high cheekbones. Her dark eyes contrasted her father's blue ones, but they held the same expression, hard and intense.

"You got my stuff on you?" Pete asked casually.

Vriana shot him an amused look. "Hurry up."

Before they left, she exchanged her homeless robes for the chic patched leathers and mock furs of a fake slummer. The vertical stripes accentuated her slim waist, curving her hips even more. With an effort, Pete looked at her face. Her brown eyes were steely. He didn't want to know how she'd acquired such an expensive outfit.

"Move," she said.

He led her up York Street to Queen where they headed west. He removed the red band from his arm and stuffed it in a pocket. The kid gangs here didn't appreciate homeless affiliations. Vriana studied the street and the barricaded store fronts. She's probably never been this far north, Pete realized.

He zagged up Spadina and spent time wandering around the decrepit shops.

Vriana glared at him. "How much longer?" she asked.

"As long as it takes," he said. He ignored her scowl. He had to make sure they weren't

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being followed.

Finally they ducked in the back way to Massey College. He steered her past the tables, loaded with black market merchandise and upstairs.

"You smuggle all that?" she asked.

He glanced down the stairs, at the row of fresh fruit, the meagre stacks of blank paper, and the folded clothes guaranteed to contain no tracer threads.

"Not all, but some."

At a thick oak door, he stopped and knocked once. A few moments passed. Vriana shifted impatiently from foot to foot. She blinked rapidly. Pete suppressed a smile; she probably didn't even realize she was being scanned.

The door opened, granting them admittance. Spike, sitting behind a dark mahogany desk, waved them in. Her scuffed leather boots rested on the desk's elegant top.

"I don't give a shit what he says," Spike shouted into the phone. "Make sure." She slammed down the receiver and ran one wrinkled hand through her grey streaked hair.

"Hello Pete," she said amiably. "Tell me why you've brought me some homeless tramp and not my shipment."

She was in a bad mood. The more Spike smiled, the angrier she was, and right now she was positively beaming. Great day, Pete thought, and it wasn't even noon yet.

"My holder was lost in a Rosedale sweep," he said. "She says she's got the shipment and wants to talk to you."

Thankfully, Spike's scathing gaze turned to Vriana. "And what do you want?"

Vriana didn't even flinch. "We want to review the terms of our agreement."

"Your terms are more than generous and not open for negotiation."

Vriana smiled coldly. "We know you deal with other homeless gangs. You won't just lose one shipment if you refuse to talk."

Spike leisurely cupped her hands behind her head. Pete winced; was Matrix's daughter

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stupid or just plain blind?

"You homeless aren't the only game in town," Spike purred. "We have options."

"You won't even listen to our terms?" Vriana said. Interesting change of tactics, Pete thought.

Spike shrugged as if she didn't care either way.

"It's a better deal than you have now," Vriana continued. "We hold your shipments for you and instead of paying in cash, we'll take equipment. At a generous turnaround for you."

Spike dropped her arms and leaned forward. "What kind of equipment?"

Vriana said nothing, but it started to fall together for Pete. Everything he'd ever seen out at Harbourfront pointed to it. Matrix and his books, the desperate methods they used to erase ident markers and discourage police from patrolling the area.

"Laboratory," Pete said.

Vriana cursed and glared at him. Spike's look was quizzical.

"The homeless can get any kind of weapon," he said. "Anybody can with the right amount of money, but laboratory equipment is something else."

"What the hell do you want with that?" Spike asked.

"What do you think?" Vriana snapped. "Hasn't it occurred to you what they're doing? They're infecting us all and we have to find a way to stop it."

Spike rubbed one leathery cheek. "Why would I want to stop it?"

Vriana sputtered. "Why? What? How can you...?"

"Why," Spike continued, "would I want to stop something that makes me so much money? That pays for a market like the one downstairs? Things could be a lot worse."

"Worse!" Vriana shouted. "What could be worse?"

"Dead for one," Spike said. "If even it were suspected that I gave you the equipment you want..." She shrugged at the inevitable.

"You won't deal, you don't get your shipment. Not this one or any other."

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"Fine," Spike said, rubbing her nose.

Shit, Pete thought. The kill signal. Bad idea. The homeless pursued their grudges with a vengeance and killing Matrix's daughter could lead to a war. From the look on Spike's face he knew if he didn't do it, he'd be dead. So he did what he always did when faced with an impossible situation.

Fake incompetence.

He reached for the plasti-wire knife, deliberately shifting his right foot to draw Vriana's attention. He allowed her another second as he drew the blade, then there was no turning back. If she didn't realize what was happening he'd have to kill her.

The blade came free, humming in his hand. He struck with his left hand. Immediately, she pivoted, hand flashing down. Pain spazmed in Pete's forearm and he allowed the knife to drop. Vriana didn't follow through as he expected but whirled on Spike.

"Is this how you deal with your contractors?"

"No," Spike said. "This is."

She pulled out a pistol and fired.

Pete rolled, knocking Vriana's legs out from under her. She collapsed on top of him, the shot zinging over her head. Pete mumbled curses under his breath; could this possibly get any worse?

Vriana twisted, pulling something from her pant's pocket. With a snap, she flung it up in the air as Spike stood to get a better angle. Vriana's hand clamped over Pete's eyes, but didn't entirely protect them from the blast.

He heard Spike's strangled cry and a thump. When Vriana released him, he climbed to his feet. Spike lay crumpled behind her desk.

"A light shock wave," Vriana said. "She'll be out for a while." She studied him curiously. "Why did you warn me?"

"Call me stupid," Pete said.

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"Looks like you're out of a job," she said. "Want a new one?"

He turned to look at her. Her dark hair was tousled in a mess around her thin face, the fake furs around her shoulders askew. She looked normal, just like anybody else.

"You're infected, right?"

She bobbed her head. "Most of us are. It's burning us out, the older ones are really bad off. But you'll know that soon enough."

He blinked at her stupidly. "Huh?"

"I'm sorry, Pete. You're infected now too."

#

"What the hell do you mean it's a cold?"

Vriana shook her head. Dark hair swayed. The neon lights in the mall made it glint.

But Pete wasn't interested. Here he'd risked his job for her only to find out he was infected. Just great.

"That's how it's spread," she whispered. She threw a glance at the shops. It was an upper-class mall, she'd probably never been in one before, Pete realized. He tried to remember what he thought when he'd seen the regulated shops, the healthy upper classes walking around in their designer style-of-life suits with matching air filters and oxygen tanks. Never saw their faces, only the masks.

"You don't have a cold," he said.

She reached into a pocket and pulled out several white capsules. "Decongestants."

Pete turned away to watch a couple walk by, their masks decorated with garish strips of colour and bits of metal welded on. The latest fashion.

"We're inside," Vriana said. "Don't they ever take those masks off?"

"No," Pete said. He took hold of her elbow and steered her away from the gang of upper classes she was staring at. "The virus?"

"Oh right. We think the purpose is to clean the organs out of waste products."

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"What's wrong with that?"

"What's wrong is it burns people out. And some have been disappearing."

"Yeah, the testing," Pete said.

Vriana shook her head. "No, not killed. Disappeared. We think they're harvesting the organs for transplants."

Pete stared at her. She looked serious. So that's what this was about, the request for equipment. Weapons they could get aplenty, but lab equipment was something else. Probably wanted to develop some kind of vaccine or something.

"We need that equipment," Vriana said. "You could..."

"No, I can't do anything," Pete said. "I'm finished here. I got friends in South Am, they aren't so strict down there. Maybe I'll pick coffee beans or something. You can do whatever you want."

She looked about to protest but Pete motioned toward the exit.

"I think we've shaken any tails. I'll take you home."

#

The sun was bleeding across the horizon in a sunset that reminded Pete of vomit when they hit Queen's Quay. The familiar homeless buildings stretched in front of them. Pete frowned and slowed down. Some kind of transport was parked in front of one of the buildings. A thin vein of smoke drifted out of the buildings' front door.

"Cops," Vriana hissed just as a concussion grenade came whizzing toward them.

Pete grabbed her arm and threw her back. The grenade exploded, sending shockwaves through his system. Pete's brain felt scrambled. His skin tingled. Angry shouts filled his ears.

Time to get out. Pete forced his aching body to move. Nerves screamed as he climbed to his feet. The shouting got louder and now he could hear the pounding of armoured boots. He grabbed Vriana's arm, trying to drag her to her feet. Through drifting smoke he caught a flash of a swiftly moving figure.

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Getting closer.

"Come on," he shouted, stumbling a couple of steps, still pulling Vriana's arm. She was moving now, slowly rising to her feet. One hand fumbled with the buckle on her belt. It dropped to the ground. Then with a surge of sudden strength, she raced past Pete, this time dragging him in her wake.

He didn't look back as he ran. The flash lightened Vriana's hair, sending a long shadow racing out in front of her. The wind came a moment later, its force propelling Pete even faster. A personal nuke, he realized. Shit, the homeless were well equipped.

Hadn't done them much good.

They kept running until Pete's lungs felt like they were going to burst. Gasping, he grabbed Vriana's arm and dragged her to a halt. She tried to pull away and Pete noticed the panic on her face, the way her eyes darted wildly. Poor kid, he thought, first her father, now her whole community. But he couldn't let her freak out, they had to keep their wits.

"Where you going?" he snapped. "Get your mind in gear. I don't have time for bullshit hysterics."

She stared at him a moment, eyes still wild, then anger crossed her face like a cloud. It brought her back to herself, just like he intended.

"You bastard," she snarled but he stopped her with a raised hand.

"You're right, I'm not going to argue the point," he said. "But unless you've got an idea, running like that will only attract attention."

The way her head drooped told him she was listening. Good, maybe their asses weren't cooked. Yet.

So now what would he do with her? Leave her behind? Even as he thought the words, he knew he couldn't do it. Matrix had always been a fair contact. Not a friend; Pete didn't have friends, couldn't afford them. But if he had, he would have liked one like Matrix, maybe even one like this intense woman standing before him.

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Pete sniffed, rubbing his nose. His sinuses were clogging up and he could feel the beginnings of a headache pound out a rhythm in his temples. Just great. But it did give him a thought.

"I have an idea," he said. "Some place the cops would never think of looking."

#

Granny hadn't stopped wiping his hands with a handkerchief since they walked in, Pete noticed. He'd ushered them immediately into a small room off the foyer entrance as if their mere presence would pollute the apartment's atmosphere. The bay window in the room faced east, showing the glow from the Pickering Nuclear Plant. Granny stood there now, his tall, skeletal form awash in fabric. Beady eyes stared out from behind thick glasses. He glanced at Vriana and wiped his hands.

"What do you want, Peter?" His voice held all the tension of a man being force to do something distasteful.

Too damned bad, Pete thought.

"I need information and passage," he said and then sneezed.

Granny frowned, thin lips etching an ugly line across his face. "I don't know..."

Pete pulled out a rumpled rag and rubbed his nose. "I do," he said softly. "I know lots."

Granny stiffened, posture ramrod straight and so tight Pete thought Granny's spine would snap.

"You know I wouldn't be here if it wasn't important," Pete said.

The man sagged, nodding, looking even more glum. He wiped his hands one last time and stuffed the handkerchief in the pocket of his flowing jacket.

"Talk," he grunted at Pete.

Pete talked. Wilson, the stash, Vriana, Spike, the cops. Vriana scowled when he spoke about the homeless's virus theory but Pete knew he had to tell everything. Granny would sense a left out piece.

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By the end, Granny's thin face was crinkled with amusement. "Transplants, eh?" he challenged Vriana. She stared back at him, fists clenched.

"I can see how you thought that." He nodded absently to himself. He turned toward the window, eyes defocusing. Pete tensed in anticipation. Info dump.

"Virus adaptus they called it in the lab, a joke name for a not so humorous disease. It does clean out the organs, but more than that. Adaption, regulation, genetic manipulation from the inside out. The testing confirms the effectiveness of the virus, green for uninfected, red for mutation, yellow for appropriate adaption."

"If not transplantation," Vriana said, "then what?"

She'd spoken before Pete could stop her. He glared at her, silencing her next question. Her answering glare told him she didn't know what was going on but he couldn't explain now. Pete held up his hand to entreat her not to say another word.

But Granny didn't seem to have heard.

"Harvesting is completed at an early stage and the yellows are brought in for further conditioning," he continued. "Reds are destroyed because of possible transmittal of the mutant strain. Greens are left alone and may never be infected. In this way, they can ensure a specific type for transportation off-world."

Pete bit his tongue to stop from speaking. His headache pounded across his skull like a drumbeat. This was always the hardest part, waiting for the info dump to finish. Usually he could be patient, but this cold was a constant reminder that his life as he'd known it was over and he was desperate for answers. But interrupting could be fatal to the reader and there were no better readers than Granny.

"Labour camps," the thin man announced. "Off-world camps unsuitable for non-adapted humans. That's why the genetic reconfiguration as well as neural shut down of all upper mind functions. The virus begins the process internally but external physical mutation and erasure of neural processes must be done in the lab. Everything not related to obedience and work is

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erased."

Vriana's face, pale to begin with, blanched white beneath her dark hair. Pete imagined he had the same haunted look. What was he now, a red, a yellow? What was she?

He waited another moment but Granny was finished. Slowly the man came back, blinking, hands fluttering amongst the folds of fabric. After a deep breath, he shook his head.

"Nothing else."

"What the hell was that?" Vriana exploded.

"He's a reader," Pete said. He rubbed absently at his temples.

"But all readers are regulated, the government..." she paused as the skin on Granny's face tightened.

"We don't discuss that," Pete said mildly. She gulped and nodded.

"Are you sure that's a true reading, Granny?" Pete turned back to the thin man.

"As true as it can be."

That told Pete little. It could be true but it could also be a block. Many times he'd used readers in his work, but he's always been careful to verify everything. Too many corporations and governments employed senders to muddy the information the readers would dig up. A kernel of truth could be hidden in what Granny had said but there was no way to be sure.

Unless Pete metamorphasized into some inhuman monster.

A sneeze itched at his nose. He rubbed it. Already the lymph nodes on his neck were swelling. The cold, the virus, sure had a hold on him now. Monster. He suppressed a shudder.

Well, if he was going to do that, the least he could do was keep his mind from being sucked away by government scientists. He imagined Vriana felt the same.

"Okay Granny," he said. "That was the information. Now the passage."

"Hold on, Peter," Granny protested. "That took a lot. It's more than I give my paying clients."

"Consider it your payment," Pete said.

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Granny's hands twitched as if he wanted to pull out the handkerchief and wipe them. When he settled for rubbing them on his pants legs, Pete knew he'd won.

#

Against the light from the wall screen, Vriana's face took on a greenish glow. Pete wondered briefly if the virus caused changes in skin colour, then shook his head. There was no sense in being morbid.

Granny hunched over the keyboard, staring at the display. His skin colour looked positively putrid, but that was an improvement as far as Pete was concerned.

"Not that way," Granny murmured. He plucked at the keys. "Lord, Peter, what the hell did you do? You've got warrants all over the place."

Vriana's face tightened and Pete felt himself frown. Dammit, they had to get out fast before the net closed in. Maybe, just maybe, pissing Spike off had not been one of his smarter moves. He'd never thought her revenge would reach so wide.

"Okay, I think I have something," Granny said. "It's going to cost."

"Whatever," Pete said. He dug out a forged bank chip and handed it to Granny.

"It's a father-daughter, heading for Chile. I can reroute the tickets and give them your id."

"Daughter?" Vriana asked.

"Not gonna get anything better," Granny said.

"Good enough," Pete said. He had friends down in South Am. He and Vriana could disappear. He allowed a smile to touch his face.

"That'll do."

#

Vriana tugged at the collar of her style-of-life suit.

"Stop that," Pete hissed. His voice came out like a whine through the mask.

"This is so damned uncomfortable," she said.

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"Not as uncomfortable as being shot in the head."

She released the collar. "Pete, could he be right about the virus?"

Even through the distortion of the filter, he could hear the fear in her voice. It touched a similar chord in him but he couldn't afford to let it resonate. He couldn't be distracted.

It was a job, that's what this was. He took a deep breath and his professional mask helped push the fear away. This was his last smuggle, the most important. No way would he blow it.

It was the only way to think about it, the only way to keep the memory of Wilson's death dance at bay. The only way to keep from wondering about Matrix. Had he been a red when they found him in Rosedale? Or a green? Pete's head ached dully and a cough tickled his throat. The damned virus, damned cold. Anger rose up to blot out the fear but neither emotion was useful. Being emotional meant he was concentrating on something other than the job, and this job, more than any other, was too important.

"It doesn't matter," he said. "We'll worry about the virus when we get out of here."

She stared at him for a moment and then nodded.

Just then the boarding call for their shuttle came over the loud speaker, almost unintelligible. Pete took Vriana's elbow and began steering her through the crowd, toward the gate.

He didn't know what made him look back, maybe nothing, maybe instinct, the same way he knew which officials to bribe and which not. He caught a flash of grey silver out of the corner of his eye. Amidst all these colours it was probably nothing, or it was cops.

In a split second, he knew and oddly, the knowledge took the fear away, leaving a sense of calm. He was a smuggler and the cargo was all important. The cargo, the woman whose arm he clasped. Warm and wild, strong enough not to need him. Not after this. Somehow that made it easier.

"Hold on to your ticket," Pete whispered to her. "Don't say anything. Keep looking straight. Go through the gate and get your seat. Remember to dump the id when you land."

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Vriana, whatever you do, whatever you hear, don't look back."

And he released her arm.

She kept walking, the hard learned homeless discipline gave her that. Even when Pete broke and ran, trailing armoured-clad cops like bouncing marbles, she kept walking. As the hulking gorillas closed in, stunner sticks raised, he saw she'd taken his instructions to heart.

She did not look back.

Damn good smuggle.

The world turned black.

#

They must be approaching planetfall, the creature that had once been called Pete thought fuzzily. The hibernation units had started to hum an hour ago, slowly wakening their cargo. In his, Pete stretched, arm pairs unclenching. The unit was too small for him to stretch his many legs, so he kept them retracted. He realized he'd awakened first. He was always first to do something. When he'd begun to realize this, he pretended he didn't know or couldn't do it until later. That way his conditioning was less, that way they'd missed a few things.

A few things like he remembered what he'd been before, a smuggler, a human. The others didn't remember but after being in contact with him for a while, he noticed a slight spark of awareness alight in their many eyes. And this started him wondering.

He wondered exactly what the nature of this virus was, exactly how much mutation arose in the virus before it registered as a red. Was there a margin for error?

And slowly, since most thoughts came very slowly right now, he realized that maybe his greatest smuggle wasn't Vriana (whoever that was), but himself. Himself and this virus. This mutated virus.

And not a customs inspector for a billion miles.

Pete snuggled in his hibernation tank and waited for his fellows to awaken.

END