

Firefly by Firelight

Cast:

Angel Coville, First Mate/Muscle
Erin Fitzpatrick, Pilot
Pandora, Comms/Tech
Lewis Matheson, Engineer
Jerome Kiehl, Zero-G/Aux. Muscle
Dr John Lau, Medic

Pride was still docked at Highpoint above Verbena but now stood ready to launch, hopefully without indecent haste this time. A quiet second voyage was seen by all as a necessity. Perhaps reassured by the high level of Cerebus security surrounding *Pride*, the captain had taken himself off to deal with unexplained personal business, leaving the first mate to oversee the ship's final preparations. Its tired crew had spent the last twenty hours finishing repairs and locking down the sparse cargo that now stood netted to the sides of the dimmed cargo hold.

It had been hard work but instead of sleeping or meditating, they were all gathered in the cargo hold, sitting on a motley assortment of furniture. The elegant Lewis had somehow found time to change, and was chuckling as he bowed Erin to a battered galley chair. The lively redhead had provided a steady stream of acerbic comments about their situation ever since the initial launch. A notably silent John, in rumpled casuals, slumped into another seat. Jerome was perched on nearby cargo in neat and simple tan coveralls. Their young techie, Pandora, looked even more waif-like than usual leaning against her rucksack on the decking at Erin's feet. All had gathered in the gloom at the insistence of a grinning First Mate Coville who'd produced half a case of wine seemingly out of nowhere.

"It's time we christened this ship and I don't intend to waste wine on a hull," he'd said as he herded them to the hold with Jerome trailing to carry the crate.

Most of the others had dug out a bottle or two to bring along. Battered metal cups had been passed out and now Angel was walking the circle, pouring wine into each. Caught in another social *faux pas*, Pandora stared in dismay as her mug of green tea was topped up with something decidedly more alcoholic.

"Ah, what's this christening all about, sir? And does it just involve turning wine into water?" the young techie asked politely.

"Old tradition... from Earth-That-Was I reckon," replied Jerome quietly after downing his cup of wine. "Sent a ship to sea with blessings and luck. Though I 'spect it was for the crew mostly. Get 'em thinkin' right and believing they'd be okay." Feeling unusually talkative, Jerome continued after leaning back in his chair, "Guess sailing the

blue in wooden ships was 'bout as chancy as sailing the black in metal." His hand reached out and touched a metal support pole. "All sorta things could go wrong; you could sink, another ship could blow you up, pirates, storms, doldrums...." He got a smile as he glanced around the dim and shadowy hold, sensing the mood. "And, of course, there were the monsters..."

The room got quiet as people settled in to hear more. Jerome was inwardly pleased to see the surprise on Pandora's face.

"Things aren't so different now, really. We've all dealt with pirates and broken-down ships. But you might not have heard of the Shadows." He let it hang there while he refilled his cup. He leaned in, bring the group closer together.

"First time I came to the black I was an apprentice machinist on the *Bel Amica*, a passenger ship making the Core–Border run between Bernadette and Persephone. This was a couple of years before the war, but things were already tense outside the Core. Hostilities kept the number of passengers down. Some say it was economic troubles that brought the *Bel Amica* to her end after that trip, but I have my own thoughts on that."

"We'd left Bernadette in good order, catching final passengers off the orbital and then burning for the black. As many ships did those days, *Bel Amica* was set a course to avoid the ranges of pirates, moving away from the typical lanes. That meant we were in a quiet part of the black, away from the Cortex points and other ships for several days."

"As the resident greenhorn," he gave Pandora an almost-kindly glance, "I got tagged with third shift watch of the secondary systems. The *Amica* was showing her age and several systems needed watching every few hours. But I had plenty of time to wander the ship, getting to know her inside and out. Then I found more than I'd been looking for."

"At first it was a voice, a woman's voice. I thought it was a passenger gotten lost or something, but as hard as I tried, I couldn't find her. She called to me and I'll admit that if she looked half as beautiful as she sounded, I'd have broken a few company rules to be with her."

"This happened three nights in a row before I told my shift boss, a spacer named Goodsend. I'd expected him to tease me about 'hearing things' but his face became grave and pale."

"'What did she say to you?' was all he asked. I repeated the few phrases she had said and he just shook his head. 'You stay in your bunk third watch. I'm moving you to second watch maintenance.'"

"I was pleased to be working a shift where people were awake the same time as I was, but it was a lot more work. Nevertheless, it kept me from the voices and I started to forget about them."

"The last night we were out before returning from communication silence, I was woken from a deep sleep. The bunk room was deserted which never happens. I feared there was an attack or emergency so I jumped into my gear and headed toward my action station. Nobody was there or anywhere I looked in the ship. I called over the intercom, but no response. I was alone on the ship."

"That's when I heard her voice again. 'Jerome... I need you...' she called to me. I figured if I could get to her, I'd get some answers to what had happened to the ship. I ran through the ship after her, calling out to her. I started to get glimpses of her, a beautiful woman in the silk robes of a Companion, dancing away from me around corners. Reaching her was all I could think about. She was the loveliest thing I'd ever seen," he said pausing, then softer, "or ever will."

Jerome paused for several long moments, pleased that the listeners were rapt in their attention.

"They stopped me before I opened the secondary cargo door and depressurized the ship in addition to blasting myself into a quick trip into the black. They said I'd been calling out to a woman as they pulled my hand off the release lever and back into the main section of the ship. Everyone was there and looked concerned for me. I tried to explain what had happened but Goodsend hushed me up."

"We made comm contact later that day and the last few days of travel were without incident. Goodsend locked me in a closet when I needed to sleep and kept me working with other people all the time. Never would explain to me what had happened."

"The *Bel Amica* never left Persephone again, even though she had years left in her. Company ordered her cut up for scrap and Goodsend was there until the last hull plate had been auctioned off and hauled away."

"Years later, I'd learn from others about 'the Shadows', ghosts of dead passengers who draw the living to their deaths. Supposedly only happens when you're flying out of comm... in the black..." He let his words trail as he looked around the cargo bay as if seeing through the walls and out to the black emptiness that waited for them.

The crew stirred and murmured appreciation as the tale ended. Pandora though, looked thoughtfully towards the machine room.

"Sirens" she decided eventually. "The old ocean tales had mermaids and sirens to sing ships to their doom. I guess you can't put them outside when vacuum won't transmit sound." She raised her cup and drank a toast to Jerome. "Oh Lord, this stuff tastes vile!"

Jerome nodded with a slight smile at her appreciation. "There were tales in all cultures about such ghosts, such sirens. I know there is truth behind them all."

Their new doctor set his cup down between his feet and coughed, he looked a bit paler and more tired than one would expect, like he hadn't slept in a few days. John wrapped the fingers of his left hand round his right fist, tugging at the skin behind his knuckles while his thumbs pushed hard at each other. "We have things like that back home, though I don't think they came from Earth-That-Was." He coughed, then looked around at the encouraging circle of faces. "Newhall," he added, by way of explanation.

"Most people just think there's water there, nothing in it. But there's a lot more than just water. Fish of all sizes, colors; don't know how many were set there when we terraformed the place, but they've found ones we don't recognize." He stared down at the floor, eyes boring a hole in it while one shaking hand reached up to rub at the side of his face.

"Since most of the real land's hard to come by, lot of people live out on the artificial islands. More like anthills than islands, most of the people living inside rather than topside. If you were lucky you'd get a spot in first tier, on the outside. Less than thirty feet down, lets you see everything out there. Like having an aquarium built into your wall. Course some folks say we're the ones in the aquarium. Never say who'd be doing the watching though."

"I remember, way back when I was a kid, they kept telling us to keep the lens shut if you had the light on," He paused, "Big bowl-shaped windows let you see out. Not much to see if you're too far down, but sometimes they had lights on so you could look out. Weren't supposed to have your light on though. If you wanted to look out, lights had to be off. Never made much sense to us as kids, but we were kids. There were lots of things they didn't explain to us. We figured it was just one of those rules."

John swallowed, his eyes lost somewhere beneath the deckplates, "There was a kid I kind of knew, name of Remy. Troublemaking kid, but nothing too bad, he just kept challenging everything. I remember him being grounded a couple days for that; parents found him with a flashlight, tapping on the lens, trying to get fish to swim by. Seemed like too much punishment for something so minor."

"Then one night I was about half asleep and I heard this thump," John kicked his heel against the crate Jerome's resting on, producing a dull, muffled noise that made Pandora jump, "and I woke up in time to see something just out the lens. Didn't get a good look at it, but it was big. Something alive, from the way it moved. There were these spots on its skin, glowing like a light. Bluish white light. I didn't know what it was but I closed the lens tight and curled up under my bunk in the corner, hoping it wouldn't come back."

"Wasn't much after that alarms started going off and bulkheads started sealing. Standard procedure for a hull breach, same has here in the black. Lock it all down as best you can and keep it from spreading. Except you're more worried about what comes in than what goes out."

To the crew's surprise John trembled as he related the story, though whether it was from memory or something else was hard to say, "Next morning Remy wasn't in class. We didn't hear anything, but his parents left Newhall not long after. They came in and locked all the glass down, special passcodes so nobody could unlock it. One of the other kids said they went by Remy's old apartment and it was sealed and marked hazardous."

John looked around, smiling wanly, then broke into another coughing fit, knocking over the cup of wine between his feet. When it stopped, he held out a hand, fingers spread, twitching like a leaf in a gale. He firmly set it on his knee and pulled himself up to full height, "Sorry. I think... I'm gonna go lie down. Just a flu or something m'sure." He staggered off into the dark, heading for the aft cabins.

Jerome studied the doctor carefully. The man had only recently joined them and had been quite erratic at times. He wondered how many demons the good doctor was wrestling with. Any thought of finding out was dismissed. Jerome had a few of his own he wasn't ready to share.

"Remind me never to get sick on this ship" murmured Pandora, stirring uneasily as the sound of a door sliding shut drifted back to the small group.

Shaking his head, Lewis spoke once the doctor was out of earshot. "I'm sure he'll do his job. I wouldn't blame him – he may have reason enough to be troubled." His comment was met with quiet from around the circle, but he let it drift in the dark for a moment.

A soft whirring *click* broke the thick silence. Erin slid her small camera capture back into one of the myriad of pockets lining her jumpsuit with her right hand. Feeling all four remaining sets of eyes turn towards her, she slid off the cargo crate she was perched on and walked quietly forward with her hands in her pockets.

The light, cast by the lantern at her feet illuminated Erin's face from below and brought the reddish color in her hair to the fore, leaving her face wreathed in a fiery glow. "When I was growing up," she started, breaking the silence with the sound of her voice. "We used to have holidays from school. Each summer, after classes were let out, my folks would take us on trips to Fed-run parklands and the idea was we were to play with the other kids whose parents also could afford the trip, and leave our parents alone." She smiled at the memory. "Neither group, parents nor kids, were fooling the others, but it gave everyone time to play away from t'other."

Erin tilted her head back to stare up into the darkness of the cargo bay. "There was a lot of play at night too. Boys and girls sneaking off to do all manner of unseemly things in the bushes." She dropped her gaze and managed to be staring straight at Angel for her next statement. "Some of it more unseemly than most." She paused a bit, waiting out the hint of laughter from the group in the shadows around her. "But this isn't about sexual escapades. That's a different story." She added, with a wink to the First Mate,

before returning to her narrative.

“I was about 14 the last summer we were up there, and I knew what was going on in those bushes, see, and as always, I was quite curious to find out what sort of shenanigans was a’going on. I wasn’t too sweet on anyone, spent most of the time up to that point with my nose in a databook. But then that should be no shock to any of you.” She added in an aside, with another grin at Pandora who was quite familiar with Erin’s reading habits on the bridge. “This year though, there was a bit of a difference. There were fewer kids about, and most of them huddled in groups. You see, a killer had escaped from an asylum a month before, and that asylum was only a few hundred kilometers from the resort.”

She sighed, eyes dark hollows from the shadows cast by her cheeks. “A bulletin came over the Cortex saying that the killer had been spotted in our area, and to be on the lookout. ‘A lunatic, with dark hair and a slender build’ was the sensationalized description that the talking heads on the news gave. But the most chilling thing was ; the killer had a titanium hook for a left hand. A hook that he used to gut his victims, eviscerating them rather messily.”

Erin slowly started to pace a slowly widening circle around the lamp at her feet as she spun her tale. “Most of the parents kept the kids indoors, but some of the older teens snuck off to a small cave nearby where, as all kids are drawn to, some more of those unseemly things took place – mainly drinking and such.” Her boots made soft, *clumping* noises as she paced outwards.

“This time around, however, the unseemliness had drawn attention, and the kids did not return. I snuck into the caravan of parents who went to look for their wayward children and they soon enough found the cave.”

Erin paused, giving Pandora an apologetic look. “The cave was splattered with blood and all of the kids, every *single* one of them, had been gutted. Ripped open from throat to abdomen, and smallish bootprints led out from the cave.” Erin sighed, and closed her eyes. “There was so *much* blood.”

Resuming her pacing, she passed by Angel, and then Lewis. “The killer was never caught. People still tell tales such as this one to scare their kids with.” Shaking her head, Erin’s pacing brought her further around the circle of her crewmates. “Some folk even say that the killer was the first of the Reavers, escaped out into space where that hook still is stained with the blood of those children.”

Her pace falters a bit as she approaches her original, starting position, lit by the lantern at her feet. “Some folk claim that the killer walks amongst us simply waiting for the right moment to strike, when people are at their least suspecting.” She turns to look each of the remaining members of her crew in the eyes, her own glance turned cold and dark.

“And I say... I say they’re *right!*” With a final, snarled word, Erin brings her hands up out of her jumpsuit pocket and in the glow of the lamp, you can see at the end of her left arm is a shiny, titanium, *hook*.

In Erin’s right hand was a concealed camera taking a capture of all their reactions. A muffled sound came from the greenhorn, who had both hands covering her mouth and very wide eyes. It took a moment to realize that Pandora, accustomed to Erin’s vile humor on the bridge, was desperately trying to muffle a laugh. The well-worn tale had brought a smile to everyone’s face, even a perfunctory one from Jerome.

Angel was outright grinning as he pulled a battered bottle of stronger spirits out of the inner pocket of his duster and set it on the crate next to him. His battered metal mug was blackened, no light reflecting from its surface. It looked like a metal sake cup, although several times larger. Downing more wine to wet his whistle, Angel leaned back in his borrowed galley chair and let others talk on, pleased by the turnout thus far. Not that he had given anyone much choice in the matter.

"To be saved fer special occasions. This just may be one," Angel finished with a wink at Erin. "That said, anyone wants some just needs ta ask, I'll share."

A wry smile twisted Lewis’ lips as he shook his head slightly, turning down the offer of stronger drink. He’d hardly touched the first cup, beyond a polite sip.

Jerome stood from his crate and stepped over to Angel. They'd nearly come to blows during their first voyage together and there were lingering issues between the men. "May I?" asked Jerome, holding his mug toward the battered bottle.

Angel looked at him serious for a moment and then a grin spread wide on his face. He lifted the bottle and poured the zero-g engineer a generous helping. Jerome nodded. Perhaps they would get along after all.

At some point during this exchange the engineer must have gotten to his feet, almost magically appearing behind the somewhat rusty folding chair he’d been seated in. Arms folded across his chest, the smartly dressed Lewis stepped around his chair, moving forward far enough to let the flickering light throw him into sharp relief. A somewhat eerie sight; it gave him the appearance of a well-attired vampire.

“All this talk brings to mind a situation, I encountered several years ago, while I was visiting my brother on Osiris.” Lewis spoke softly, gazing off into the middle distance, his arms still crossed. “Some of you may have heard tell of a man, a figure from about forty years ago, a man by the name of Dr Jackson Everard.”

Turning, Lewis began to pace around the outside of the circle of light, barely staying half-illuminated. His footfalls soundless, he still spoke almost too softly to be heard.

“Dr Everard was well-known on Osiris, being one of the most prominent of the Medical Elect. Wealthier than Solomon, the good Doctor became so influential that he stopped practising entirely, in favor of politicking.” Lewis let out a soft chuckle. “Of course, in order to attend all those fancy banquets, Dr Everard needed someone on his arm. Which, of course, meant Companions.

“The Doctor being as wealthy as he was, and a fine gentleman to boot, had no trouble attracting a fine lady, whom he took to calling on for every major state event.” Lewis ceased his drifting movement around the circle and turned to gaze at each of his remaining colleagues, one by one.

“As you have probably heard, Dr Everard eventually began pleading with his Companion mistress to leave her trade and marry him. He had fallen in love, he said. Unfortunately for the poor man, his lady love had no interest in settling down with a vapid, self-serving politician.

“Eventually she broke off all contact with Everard, feeling put-upon by his ceaseless requests for her attention. The Guild issued a black mark on his registry entry, and the Doctor was crushed. He withdrew from politics, society, and his friends. In fact, he disappeared....”

At this, Lewis took a sudden step back from the fragile circle of lamplight, disappearing into the dimness of the cargo hold. Complete silence boomed in upon the huddled group for a moment, before the engineer’s voice returned, echoing so much that it seemed to come from everywhere at once.

“Now, the Doctor didn’t give up on his lady love; no, he was sure he’d have her, one way or another.” Lewis’ voice, normally calm and low, developed a sneer. “Followed her, the good Doctor did, back to her private chambers at a Guildhall. And there he made sure she’d be his. And no one else’s.

“When her friend found what was left of her the next morning, Jackson Everard made sure her friend also learned what the price for being a Companion was. And he didn’t stop there, oh no. He kept on killing.”

Lewis’ echoing voice shifted, seeming to draw further away and then closer again, wavering in the darkness. “They caught him, eventually, cornered him on Whitechapel Street, outside the Guildhall. Gunned him down, but he crawled into a hover nearby; and they shelled the vehicle as he began his escape. Blown to bits, it surely was. Bits so small they never found his body.

“And so everyone felt safe, and the whole affair was washed from the foreground.” Lewis spoke with a croon now, a mocking tone. “Things were better again, the brave men of law enforcement having done their job.

“But, of course, you know it doesn’t end there.

“About a year later, a Companion was killed on her way to meet a client in the government district of Capital City. Knifed with a blade, just the way the others had been. And then, another year later, it was the House Mistress there herself, murdered in her chambers. There were reports, stories about an impeccably dressed gentleman, a man of obvious standing, leaving the scenes with his grisly trophies in hand. The Cortex news services picked it up, and soon Doctor Jackson Everard had become Gentleman Jack.

“Oh, come *on*” protested Pandora. “How credulous do you think I am? The story is older than I am. Everyone knows it is a myth!”

“‘Gentleman’ Jack is a lowmarket fable” confirmed Jerome. “He’d have been in his 80s when he killed Mistress Avaline if what they say was true.” the older man scoffed, rubbing his hands absently like he was trying to remove dirt or stains.

Lewis broke in rather abruptly. “It’s no myth. I have *seen* him.

“I was at a ball, a few years back, when I was visiting with my brother on Osiris. The governor’s holiday bash: a brilliant affair, attended, of course, by several Companions. During one of the dances, the floor had been cleared for the governor and his Companion to open the number, and they stood very proudly in the middle of a circle of high-ups, fine gentlemen and ladies. The music started, they stepped towards each other, and the lights shut off!”

At that moment there was a brief hiss from the single lantern at its place on the floor; it stuttered, flared, and died. Speaking across the sounds of confusion over the loss of light, Lewis continued.

“There was a flare from the lights then. Just one, and it lasted only the briefest of spans. But there, standing with the couple on the dance floor, was a man dressed all in finery, holding a bright knife above his head.”

With exquisite timing, the lamp flared back to life for a moment illuminating Lewis, standing in the middle of the circle, a dark smile twisting his face in the sudden light, before the lamp faded into blackness again.

“The light died again, there was a scream, then shouting. When the emergency lights belatedly kicked in, the governor was kneeling on the floor, cradling the bloody remains of yet another victim of Gentleman Jack.”

Suddenly returning to its proper setting, the lamp warmed back up to full strength. Lewis was no longer in the middle of the circle. Instead, he was sitting back in his chair, hands steepled before him.

He nodded, once, slowly. “No myth.”

Jerome scowled and looked coldly angry. He focused on refilling his mug held in a white-knuckled grip. Pandora looked genuinely frightened for the first time that night but he clearly wasn't interested in explaining. Erin leaned down and gave the girl a reassuring hug.

"A fine tale, Lewis, and regardless of myth or reality, a mighty fine telling," Angel replied with an easy smile on his face, his tone calming and warming at the same time. "Let's remember why we're here. I reckon some may forget; it's for the drinking and the relaxin' of course."

While speaking, Angel had stood up and begun walking the circle again, two fisted. In one hand was a bottle of wine, and in the other the stronger spirits he had offered previously. He intentionally ended his circuit at Pandora, looking down at her expectantly.

"Come on, cher" Angel urged with a wink and a smile. He paused, waiting for the girl to bring up her mug for him to refill. After doing so, he grinned adding, "I mean, don't you have a talk you've heard in the black? After all, everyone else in th' crew has offered their own story thus far."

"What?" Pandora protested, "But I don't know any ghost stories. I mean..." she faltered, looking up at the circle of unrelenting faces. "I just don't believe in that stuff. There's just no such thing as ghosts."

She paused, searching the depths of her brimming cup for support. "Look. Even if those events are true, there's always something wrong with what people perceive. Where you stand makes a big difference to what you see. And things can get decidedly warped right out on the edge.

"Take space travel, for instance. Everyone 'knows' that means going out into the black. In the Core, and the urban parts of the Borderworlds, that's literally true. But if you are out on the Rim, or working away from a ship's spotlights, the sky is not black at all. It glitters pure silver, star upon star. Some Rim folk say it is even bright enough to read by.

"But that is not the whole truth either. I, ah, had a friend once, who was left drifting in deep space. No lights from anywhere nearby, not ship nor planet. That silver void turns pretty strange in time, when your eyes have hours to adjust. The silver glow flares to a dazzling white blaze. What merely glittered before becomes piercing sparks of intense color.

"Now the retina can play strange tricks with light like that, especially when oxygen deprivation is involved as well. Things *move* out of the corner of your eye, forms shimmer and dance away from your line of sight. Strange shapes scintillate at the edges of vision. When the hiss of static on an empty comm channel begins to pattern itself into faint female singing, it would be reassuring to explain it in everyday terms.

“A more whimsical person might well start believing in ghosts. Might even start wondering what would happen if she joined in the song and began dancing.” Pandora shook her head, “Whereas a sensible soul would recognize the first stages of hypoxia coma and just keep very still and breath quiet-like.”

Pandora shivered, suddenly uncomfortable on the cold deck plates. “Anyway, my point is that some situations are naturally strange. And people are too. Especially people. Most of us have a voice of social conscience. In a few, that inner voice urges them to genocide. Many hear echoes of friends or family in their mind, while others carry nightmares. And some, well some live in a really bizarre place indeed.

“The was one kid I knew who was convinced that everything would be put to rights if only he could find a banana. The right banana. Mind you, this was during the war when all of us lived off refugee parcels and fresh rats. I don’t think I’d even seen a banana, back then.

“He used to take the most insane risks on just the rumor of fruit being shipped through the port. I’d see him walk across burning rubble or weave through firing arcs in pursuit of his quest. It shaped my view of humanity ever after; that a person could be a force for good or for evil, or for the liberation of bananas.

“I find it very strange that people are so willing to invest their worst fears and hopes in the supernatural. As if ghosts somehow followed humanity all the way from Earth-That-Was. It just seems to me that what people are most haunted by, are themselves.”

"Or what they've been, or become." Lewis' break into Pandora's flow drew sudden glances, but he didn't meet their eyes – he just frowned into the distance. "Ghosts of other people might be the stuff of stories," Lewis' eyes flicked to Pandora's, and they were blanker than a dead sensor feed. "But what about the ghosts people make of themselves?" After holding her gaze moment longer the engineer blinked, looked away, and finally took a bit more of a sip from his cup.

Pandora had woven a different kind of spell and most in the hold began to stretch or sit and ponder the dregs in their cups. Jerome stood, intending to head to the forward cargo door. Erin stopped him with a look, and an wry smile. As he wavered, Angel spoke up again, trying to regain folk’s attention.

“Interestin’, cher” Angel commented, a bit louder than he needed to. He leaned back on his borrowed galley chair, glancing over the remaining crew. “Ta be honest, it seemed a lot like a ‘I don’ believe in ghosts’ cop-out” Angel teased. “I’ll let it slide if’n everyone else will, jus’ ta preserve yer innocence a little while longer.” Pandora, as usual, just looked puzzled.

Adding to his cup yet again from the hard stock, it seemed as though Angel was

drinking rather more than he should in preparation for the tale he was about to tell. He whistled a popular tune, *Time is on my side*, as he poured. “My tale, ya take what you want from it, ‘cause I’m only gonna tell it once. Yer lucky ta get that much, my friends.

“It starts with the Reavers; yes, the Reavers,” Angel offered, “Everyone’s heard of them and it don’ matter if ya believe the stories told of their origins or not, it matters little. That’s ‘cause they’re the beginning of the tale, not the end. Some of us have been around fer a while, some more than others. I certainly thought I had seen everything an’ things couldn’t get much worse. But talking of worse; few years back I ended up on a bounty ship, hunting Reavers – crazy, huh?

“Reavers are crazy savages, but a mess of them are crazy smart. Traps an’ tortures ta boggle any sane mind, slipping in where they don’t belong, destroying lives And that’s just to the one’s they kill. One reaver in particular we were hunting; locals called him ‘The Demon’. Apparently the Demon could still talk and think better than most even if’n he did tear up his, or her, body a mess. Yeah, it was *that* messy, or so I heard.

“Demon had a crew, and a habit of torturing some survivors lightly. Some even looked hardly touched. Within a day or so, the survivor would kill someone else; a loved one, someone close, then kill themselves. No one could explain it, and those with the wherewithall were spending serious credits to see this thing gone for good. I signed on with a good crew an’ decided I wanted some of those credits. Who wouldn’t? We’re talking crazy amounts of credits, now.” Angel laughed a brief, bitter laugh.

“Our crew talked with witnesses, what there were of them. A handful were supposedly standing right there, but remembered nothing of the acts their own eyes should have seen, *their own eyes*. Others finally gave us information, though who knew how useful it was going to be. Apparently, leading up to their murderous act, the survivors would whistle a little tune.” Angel paused in the tale to whistle it again: *Time is on my side*. “A couple o’ witnesses would whistle it, a grin on their faces and a glint in their eye, almost as if they knew more than they was letting on – a joke only they knew.

“The Demon was getting sloppy. A mercenary crew, not ours, managed to come face to face with the Reaver and some of his crew. Demon wiped half of them out, leaving half alive and unharmed. We caught up with the merc survivors, were first on the scene. Our leader didn’t like taking chances, thinking the thing would come back around, as Reavers are wont to do, but we had to get the intell on how to face him. Gruesome sight that. May you never see anything like it in your lives, my friends. Totally normal mercs just standing around with the carnage and, well, yeah, just a couple of feet away.

“Six survivors: five without hardly a scratch near as we could tell. Our doc checked them out. They were fine except for what they saw with their eyes. One was just smiling, even winked at me – I should have shot him on the spot. I kept my eye on him. About ten minutes later he starts whistling a tune: *Time is on my side*. I knew there was trouble to be had; the man’s brain pan was all messed up. He drew and me and a buddy killed him dead. Our doc ordered the rest strapped down until we could get a handle on

what was happening to them. Most of us just wanted to leave them to whatever would happen.

“Minutes after being strapped down, another one started whistling that damnable tune, tearing through his restraints like they were tissue paper and grabbing a scalpel. He looked right at me and said, ‘What goes around comes around, Angel.’ Stupid move on his part. He was shot, disarmed and restrained again – with no memory of what he had just done, or so he pleaded. I was of a mind to agree with him, almost.

“Captain had seen enough. We all had. We sent out a distress wave for the survivors and chased after the Demon – we weren’t gonna get paid nursemaiding another team. We had ourselves a hotshot pilot, though not as good as our Erin here, who managed to get us on the trail almost like magic. We were on his tail and his ship was in clear view, that’s went everything went and got humped. Our missiles never fired, and I was the lucky one sent to see what had happened.”

“Munitions was bloody. Tiny had been strewn across the room, parts all about. The firing mechanisms were humped by the time I figured them out: they weren’t an option. I did hear whistling, and I chased after the tune. Now to set it straight: no Reaver had gotten on our ship, and the mercs we’d left behind were left behind.

“Comms were screaming and crew was moving; we were on the defensive. I get to the whistling and it’s the Doc, smiling all easy, blood covering him up the arms to his pits, spatters everywhere. Looks me in the eye and says, ‘What goes around comes around, Angel’. Now I’d got no love for that Doc so when he lunged for me, I shot him. Dropped him solid. Got no time for that with Reavers coming. I figure the Doc’s gone all blue with what he saw an’ all, and I’ve got to get to defending the ship. I ain’t getting eaten, or worse.

“I found a spot next to the Kid, who was the greenhorn on our crew. He was so new he wasn’t allowed over to the Reaver ravaged merc ship, so I’m thinking his brainpan’s probably the safest to be around. Wouldn’t you? Anyway, I was lining up the best shot for the access port and the Kid starts whistling. A half a glance to the Kid and he’s smiling and looking at me. ‘You can’t stop me, Angel... just walk away otherwise... what goes around comes around.’

“I didn’t even think the Kid knew my name, and he was acting all weird. I had no idea what the hell he was talking about. He turned his gun on me while I was looking all bug-eyed at him – but a quick pop with the butt of my rifle sent him to sleepy land and more importantly shut him up.

“Reavers started flowing into the ship, and the crew I was with was shooting each other more than the Reavers. Don’t need no more details than that. Happy times, huh; the battle was lost and I made for the shuttle – only to be barred by the Captain. He was rushing to get into the shuttle and escape when he saw me coming, a load of Reavers on my six. Needless to say, he started shutting the door on me, then he just stopped.

He stepped out of the shuttle doorway, whistling that damn tune: *Time is on my side*. 'Smart little Angel,' the captain said, grinning, 'following my advice....' The Reavers hadn't given up the chase and I needed to get out of there, never did see the Demon, least I don't think so. The shuttle had enough juice to get me into a shipping lane, and an Alliance ship picked me up shortly thereafter. Not much to the tale after that, that's a whole other tale there.

"Thinking now about it: something was going on back then. Who knows if Demon's ever been caught – if anyone even cares to figure out what the heck happened back then." Angel was quiet a few moments, staring hard into his empty cup, lost in his own thoughts.

Resuming his usual sharp, efficient motions, Lewis strode silently to the local controls console and began reactivating the lights. As the big, overhead bulbs slowly began warming up, the familiar soft buzz of the lighting system filled in some of the quiet left by the storytellers. Seeing that Jerome had begun manhandling the excess furniture back to its rightful places, Lewis went to give him a hand.

"Quite a collection of tales tonight," Erin commented as she collected discarded cups and bottles. "Seems our crew has more than its share of darker stories." They clattered out, leaving a thoroughly baffled Pandora to sit zazen in the echoing hold.