

## *The Mechanic*

Roy Sterling never would have made a good thief.

Thieves were silent, precise, invisible, and had a hell of a lot more ability than a homeless grease-monkey and his tools scraping parts at an abandoned space yard. Probably had a decent salary waiting for them too. Only idiots stole without guarantees anymore, too much risk and not enough pay-off. Yet here he was, squeezing himself into the creaky emergency hatch of a Model 31 *Neso*, a direct throwback to the original *Neptune* Series. As a kid, Roy might've given anything to twist the clock back a few hundred years and go soaring above Earth. From what he saw in the antique digital photographs, it used to be beautiful.

The hatch did its job with marvelous flair, as it became all too clear that passengers weren't supposed to re-enter once they'd escaped. *Just perfect*. Roy rescued his snagged belt loop from a rusty hinge and hauled himself up the rest of the way. Almost as if it were too weary to hold itself up any longer, the lid dropped forward and the little light from outside was slammed away. Roy was plunged into a new world of darkness so complete that it filled his nostrils and lay heavy on his lungs.

His flashlight was on in an instant, and he had to stand there, blinking stupidly for a second before the fuzzy brilliance faded. A narrow corridor and solid metal walkway greeted him, stretched forward maybe a hundred feet and then turning off into nothing but blackness.

He got moving.

Private space travel had been outlawed a few years ago – someone, somewhere had decided that it was too risky for safety, and, more importantly, for their bottom line – but the re-possessors didn't exactly take painstaking strides to comb over each vessel. By the time all of the ships had been rounded up, they'd moved on to the next corporate giant that made their wallets bark.

Roy, for his part, had been too late. He'd been discharged from service in the midst of the chaos. Mothers and babies and refugees and rich people all clamored over each other, savagely aiming for one of the last 40 departing ships. There were fires in the streets and children left behind for the sake of a ticket. Riots killed thousands on this planet alone, just because people needed to get home, back to parents or kids or brothers. Most of them didn't make it there, and Roy refused to lament his own hastily given-away boarding pass. It had gone to a good cause. She didn't have enough money for two tickets, and the idiot woman had been about to dump her four-year-old at the nearest hospital.

No, he'd never regretted letting that mammoth of a ship shoot into the sky without him. It just meant he'd have to get creative with his passage home.

This particular old junker was more of a beast than the huge commercial fliers – the ones that gave cruises through nebulas and toured the fabled Dark Moons of Glauco 6 – ever could hope to be. The *Nesos* were freighters, built to impress investors as the colossi they were, but Roy had yet to see one this outrageous. It possessed the most unnecessary security system, with what looked like lead-plugged (who lined *anything* with lead nowadays?) doors that could fall and block off the rest of the passageway with just a simple word from control. Every so often he'd pass a

key-and-lever box labeled “Total Decontamination,” and a fire axe could be found on at the bend of every corner. He eventually strode over to one for closer inspection and... wait... was that blade infused with *tungsten*? He pulled back. Roy hadn’t been allowed near a true spacer in years, but he’d never had a shoddy memory, and there had been a mass production of nearly ten thousand *Nesos*. None of them had been this concerned with losing their cargo.

And what a maze! The air system in this clunker must be phenomenal, what with bizarre diagonal passageways and staircases in every few corridors that all seemed to lead to a different destination. Roy couldn’t even fathom how they got the sucker together, and oh how he’d love a blueprint!

*Clink!*

He glanced down at what he’d stepped on, the evidence spread all-out underneath his boot. Glass. He kneeled and poked at what looked like the remains of a test tube, just like back in his childhood chemistry set. A ripped, sticky label lay there with it, any words washed out by who-knows-what. He squinted, trying to make any inkling of a word out, but all he got was one measly letter. T-something-or-other.

There was a cool, clear residue on his hands, but no holes in his trusty work boots, so Roy stood himself up, wiped his hands off on his thighs like any good mechanic would, and pressed on.

The architect of this ship, he finally decided, was a genius. If he hadn’t worked with galactic vessels for a career, hadn’t known the underbelly of a spacer like his own reflection, Roy would’ve gotten lost right after that hatch clanged shut. Any thieves or stowaways would be utterly screwed.

The thought of losing himself in this mess of dark and quiet had him shuddering, and the pathway seemed to grow darker still. Roy gripped his flashlight, tenacity beating in his blood. *Get it together, Sterling.* His footsteps reverberated through his body and for the life of him, he couldn't understand how silence could be so deafening. *Stay focused.*

In fact, his door should be around here somewhere, shining with opportunity. There was only one room, one piece of machinery on this clunker that Roy was truly interested in and it was right... *Ah-hah!*

Corroded, outdated, and growing flimsy, Roy took in the door with the big red lever like he would a winning lottery ticket - with a lot of awe and a bit of respect. And, with that respect in mind, he planned on ripping it from its hinges.

Cracking both his neck and knuckles, he leaned down to try the lever when—  
*SCREEEEEEEEEEEECH!!!!*

Roy fell on his backside and smothered his ears, heart lurching in his throat. The shriek echoed everywhere, and anywhere it could. It reigned down on him from the ceiling, throughout every corridor, from inside the very room he hadn't unlocked yet. It howled on like some sort of raging animal. Like he was in the belly of a murderous beast instead of a condemned spacer.

But then it faded away, disappeared as no echo could, and silence snapped back into place with the brutality of a thunderclap. The darkness was a wall breached only by his meager pocket-light, and if something sinister should prowl out of its depths, Roy was in no position to sense or stop it.

He breathed heavy, forcing himself away from nightmares that were ridiculous and half-formed mental monstrosities that chased away reason. He was on a mission. *On a mission, Sterling, understand? It's an old ship. Things get creaky. Don't psyche yourself out and leave without what you came for.*

With that thought (and a good glance around with the flashlight), Roy heaved his shaking body up and seized the red lever. Hopefully this would work. He was not quite confident in his trembling hands to delicately unbolt a door.

Fate gave him a gift today, and let the door squeak itself ajar. He stepped into the cabin and set eyes on his target immediately. It wasn't exactly hard. They were still glowing, just as he'd prayed they would be.

Canisters. Military-issued premium fusion capsules, and most of them were still completely full. This *Neso* had been decommissioned not long after it had gone in for a tune-up and a refuel. It was Roy's lucky day.

He set to work with his tool belt, which once again proved itself well worth the bother of sneaking it through a tight space. With these canisters he would – *finally!* – be able to buy passage on a smuggler's ship and get off this revolving trash heap. He unscrewed bolts with renewed fervor and clipped wires with a ferocity he'd never known. He could hardly recognize himself.

The last capsule gave way without much fuss, and Roy started stuffing the little suckers where he could – a couple in his belt, several in his huge pockets, and on from there. The time of shifting through space yards was finally over. He was going home.

It was then, of course, that his light went out.

Yes indeed, his trusty flashlight had decided to kick the bucket right then and there, leaving him with nothing but the eerie glow from his prizes. Roy groaned, rubbing his temples. Finding his way back through this labyrinth of a ship was not going to be fun.

He inched his way back to the door, identifiable by the all-consuming blackness on the other side. He wondered how the canisters would fair against long passageways and was grateful once again that he knew his way around a spaceship.

But that feeling was squashed when he heard it. He stiffened, ears on alert, and yes, there it was again, just behind him. A low, very definitive, threatening *growl*. And quieter than that, but very much there, the sound of movement. Whether it was a slither or the swish of a tail or the click of a claw, Roy didn't know, but there was *something* in there with him, and it wasn't human, and it wasn't friendly.

He didn't stop to think about the heavy door that would have kept all but those with opposable thumbs out, nor to wonder how something could have survived so long in this room without food. The growling grew louder, and Roy bolted. It all happened faster than blinking – the sound of breaking machinery to his rear as the creature pursued, leaping through the only escape he had, slamming the metal barrier shut, and waiting for the inevitable crash of flesh on metal.

It didn't come. Roy almost started to relax until something more alarming reached his ears.

*Snick...snick....snick...*

It was scratching at the door. Good God. It was *scratching at the door*. He had to clamp both hands over his mouth the keep from crying out. The symphony of claws on

cold metal continued with its creepy, constant rhythm, amplified by the girth of the ship and by liberty of being the only noise to be heard.

*By the stars* . He had to get out of here. Now.

Armed with nothing but the shining cylinders and his tool belt, Roy tore down the hallway he'd come from, desperate to escape the awful, malevolent creature that scratched at vaulted doors instead of trying to break them down.

But that sound was with him now. He could hear it deep in his soul, the scraping resounding in his head and out. *Snick...snick...*

“GET OUT!” he roared, punching the nearest wall so hard that he fell against it. Sobs threatened to escape from between his gritted teeth, and Roy clutched the capsules for dear life, giving it his all to calm down.

There was a problem, though. His brain seemed to have a mind of its own, and he began to see things. Terrible things, flashed across his mind at light speed. The worst of the riots he'd seen a few years ago: the children killed, the babies abandoned... the burning of his childhood home, a memory he hadn't acknowledged in years... the worry for his parents' safety, for his younger sister's welfare in his absence, all of it multiplied a hundred-fold. Tears began to fall, and they wouldn't stop coming.

It could have been hours that he sat there, remembering terrible things and imagining worse. He'd no idea how he'd gotten like this, or why. He sobbed and kicked and bawled like a toddler, completely helpless to the all-too-real visions his own brain had concocted. *What is happening to me?*

Eventually, like all nightmares, this one finally ran its course. Roy was curled up and exhalers were stolen from him, yanked out of his throat and he couldn't get oxygen in between. But that slowed too, and gave way at last.

He pulled his way up the wall, knees knocking. Unable to trust his own legs for fear of crumbling back to the floor, he inched along the corridor, quaking hand clinging to the cool, flat surface.

He was near the exit now, the trek back having flashed through his mind and out of it. But he'd found his way, and thank whoever-was-looking-after-him for that.

Still trembling a bit, he glimpsed the hatch in plain sight, anxious for his return. A wavering laugh shook his whole being and he turned back to the tranquil, solid wall, just a piece of the hell-house he'd driven himself through. "I beat you," the small realization sparked in his chest. An odd sense of triumph flowed through his veins as he regarded the *Neso*, and the laugh ripped through him again, agony on his raw throat. "I beat you, you *goddamn* spacer!" It was only his voice that reverberated through the halls, and the canisters clunked down as he began to kick at the ship that'd brought him all this heartache. Over. And over. And over.

Breaking off only when he reached the point of collapse, Roy turned away, the emergency hatch stunning in the greenish shine. He shoved every single hideous thought he'd had on this rusty tub away, back into a bit of his mind that he'd no idea he possessed. It was now time for positivity. It was time for celebration.

He began to gather all his prizes. Even without the few he'd lost, it looked to be a hell of a payday. *C'mon*, he scrambled to snatch the capsules, all rolling away from him and into the opposite wall... *Hold on a sec. Why are they rolling?*



It was the last thought he had before it was bashed out of him.

Roy flew like a ragdoll into the wall he'd brutalized, his shoulder screaming in agony. He didn't even notice that he'd banged his head too, until a warm trail of blood trickled down his cheek.

Instinct taking over, he lunged for the last ten feet between him and salvation, gravity working strangely against him. He landed on his stomach, but not on the floor, more like the angle that separated it from the wall. If he wanted to run for it, he'd have to run perpendicular to the ground, so he crawled on this weird surface, clambering over a fire axe and keeping tight hold on his treasures. *The ship is falling.*

It made perfect sense, even though a small voice reminded him that all space yard junkers were kept welded down to prevent things. Roy was terrified, though it'd been obvious that the ship was resting comfortably on the ground. *But that was outside*, he shook his head, vision suddenly blurry. *Outside's different.*

At long last, he laid hand on the wheeled lift of his exit. *Let's go, let's go. C'mon.* It was heavier than last time, and the spacer was still falling. *I'm not dying in this place!*

"Ow!" all his furious tugging had irritated his finger, and he briefly caught the congealed, bloody cut. He briefly recalled the broken test tube from an eternity ago, but then the hatch gave way, and it was all forgotten.

He plummeted down, much farther than it'd taken to climb up, but he landed, relieved, and found no more strength left in his body. He rolled over, sweat mingling with dirt and blood, and opened his eye to hazy sight.

Just in time to see the *Neso* plunge down to crush him into oblivion.

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The sun seemed to have gulped down the planet it was so bright, and the sudden voice was just as harsh.

“Hell! Look at him!” It was a slightly accented, high-pitched sound that grated heavily at Roy’s eardrums. His spine tingled, abuzz up and down like tiny insects creeping around under his skin. He licked at his lips, but he was pretty sure that all his tongue did was flop around, a block of iron in his mouth. “How long has he *been* here!?”

*Good God, shut up, woman!* – He was fairly confident by now that the evil screeching giving him a headache came from a female.

“Can it, Gacy,” a smoother, deeper, more masculine voice entered the mental picture Roy was painting. “He was trying to say something a second ago.”

*Was I?* Roy couldn’t remember *anything* really, except the crushing, squashed sensation of... that’s right... the ship had fallen on him!

“Must’ve been out here all night... poor idiot,” the effortless tone washed over him, a wonderful improvement from the shrieky woman a few moments ago.

*How in the galaxy did they move an impounded spacer?*

“You don’t think he was actually in the *ship!*?” she screamed even when she whispered.

*Then again... I don’t feel too squished. Nothing’s hurting, so no broken bones or punctured lungs.* He tried to move, but gave up almost immediately and clenched his teeth. *Okay, strike that. Shoulder feels pretty dislocated.*

“Of course he was. T-90. What else could’ve done this to him?”

*But other than that, I don't feel much of anything. Wait. Did what to me?!*

“Motherf-”

“Lieutenant,” the man’s words were weighty with warning.

*What did it do to me?!*

“Look at that! It’s starting to work out of his system, see? His eyes are going nuts!”

*They are?*

“Yes, sir,” she was calmer this time. Maybe her superior had finally found a way to tone her down. “The flailing will start soon. What should we do?”

It was several long, fearful minutes before Roy got his answer, “Well... we could always take him inside.”

The woman snorted, and he accent became more pronounced, “Right. And let’s just let him roam free too, shall we? He can writhe and keen about the whole ship!”

*I would never do that,* Roy had to admit; he was slightly offended.

“Well, what do you suggest we do with him, Gacy?” a small amount of gruffness entered his voice. “Shoot him?”

*That’s hardly necessary,* he desperately wished the sun would run behind a cloud or something. All this brazen whiteness was starting to tire him out.

“Why not? You heard Coup say that the emergency hatch was all bent outta shape. The little rat busted in and tried to steal T-90!”

*What the HELL is T-90?!*

“You wanna be the one to explain to Cap what happened?” the man growled. “Cause he’s not a fun person to irritate this early in the morning. A dead body we have to hide isn’t going to help things, either.”

Roy listened as she clicked her tongue, “Then what the hell are we going to do with him? We can’t very well take him anywhere, not in this state.”

A long pause, and Roy waited, straining to see past this blurry radiance.

“Got a hold on all the fuel capsules, “ his smooth voice muttered almost to himself.

“What?”

“Right,” the man clapped his hands together, and Roy winced. “We’ll tranq him, then move him to the med bay and wait for it to wear off. Shouldn’t take more than a couple of hours.”

There was a *whirrrr*, and Roy, immobile, imagined a gun warming up. “You sure, sir?”

“Sure,” he responded, Roy suspected with a careless shrug. “We get our power back, and *he* can defend himself to our good Captain.”

Gacy didn’t respond, but Roy was beginning to make out shapes above him. A bushy mustache to one side, piercing, girly eyes to the other, and a small shape between them. It was clearly a weapon, and the red blinking warned that the safety was off.

A whoosh of air, a tiny prick right below his knee. The vibrant white light that had been fading suddenly flew back in full force. Roy felt his eyes bulge, and he

couldn't look away, drawn like a moth to a flame. Ringing chimed in his ears, and the brightness grew stronger still...

...and then the world swallowed him whole.