

The Final Game

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My name is Dara. I was born and raised on Solaris VII and I've been trying my whole life to get off this damn planet.

I know I won't make it. Just as sure as I was born here, I'll die here.

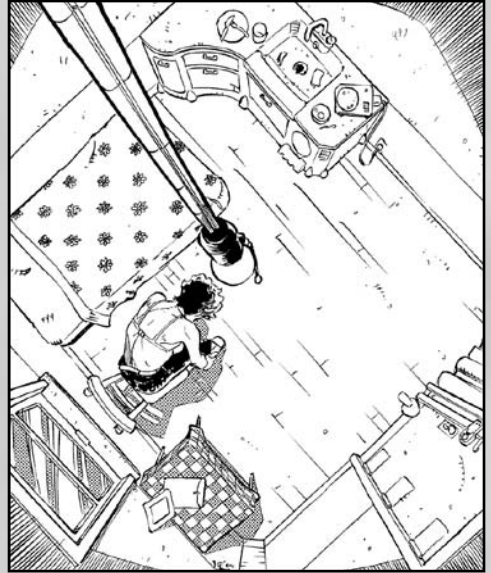
I didn't need that crazy old witch last week to tell me what I already knew, but it's good to have it confirmed. Worth every dollar I spent on that reading. It's good to be right every once in a while. You need it.

I pull up my old worn, greasy dark blue pants, the ones with the patches at the knees, and settle them on my hips. Then slip my feet into my worn red sneakers. No socks today.

To one side of the front door is the little curtained-off closet. I get my gray cotton sweater and pull it from the metal hanger. I look at the old nubby thing, hold it to my nose, and take a sniff. Not the freshest, but it's good enough for today. I pull it on. I make sure that the buttons are done up, roll up the cuffs. It wouldn't do for them to be dragging in the dirt and whatever else was on the floors at work.

Looking at the time I realize that I'd better get a move on or I'll be late for my shift. So, I quickly make my bed; the floorboards beneath my feet creak and moan a little as I move around the room. I take a look around at my small, tidy one-room suite.

It's still dark outside, but the one bare lightbulb in the middle of the little ten-by-ten room manages to chase some of the gloom away. The walls are bare and could use a good washing, but I'm proud of my little room. It isn't much, but I think I've done a good job of putting things together.



I have an old futon mattress, a double, on the floor in the corner by the little window. It's covered with a clean sheet and a faded flowered bedspread. Smells a little musty, but not too bad.

On the other side of my window is a little half table—pretty scarred up when I bought it, but with a blue and white dishtowel covering it, it works just fine. I even have a chair made out of real wood that I sit on at the table and have my meals while I look out my window. I even have a little hot plate set on the counter in the corner next to the sink across from the window.

That's one of the reasons I took this room, because it had a window. You can look out and actually see a tree. I like trees, but here in the city they're hard to come by.

I look at the old-fashioned picture in a silver metal frame on my table and pick it up. My sister sent it to me. It's of her and her daughter, my only family. My niece is five now. I've never met her. My sister was the smart one and pretty too. I'm glad at least she got out.

Last night I left an envelope addressed to her under the picture with a copy of the insurance policy, as my back-up plan. I'll post the original on the way to work today. It's not much, but at least I know the money will help her and my niece.

It's time to head out to the old Kubler Street Gun Club, not that I'm complaining or anything like that, I'm not. I'm real grateful to have the job. Or should I say I am very grateful to have *a* job. They're so hard to come by.

The Kubler Street Gun Club is in Silesia, in the Lyran sector of Solaris City and is one of the "protected" establishments north of the river. It's a massive complex and is fairly new. Closest competition is the Isher Weapons Shop on Balder and Dusseldorf Street.

Here we have two levels, the upstairs where most of the more refined clients go—basically the ones with a little cash who only want some legal action in one of the private shooting corridors or the marksmanship range.

Downstairs where I work, for 500 an hour, you can get a more expensive room, a nice duel perhaps. For 1,000 an hour you can get a livelier target. Or other adaptations of your favorite games can be arranged for your convenience and pleasure. This is where the real money is made—with the games the yakuza don't admit

to. The police know about them, but as long as they're paid and the rules are followed, everyone's happy.

Then after you finish maiming, blowing each other up and doing as much damage as possible, I come in and do my job.

I'm the cleaning lady.

Yes, I specialize in picking up the broken bits. Blood. Entrails. Other body parts that are left behind after the night's amusements.

It's a living, but not a very good one.

Before I reach my building, I turn from the main street and go into the alley. The air is heavy and picks up all the stench and odors from the river. Down both sides of the alley are huge, two-story high, heavy metal dumpsters sitting in a line. They look like 'Mechs at rest, just waiting for someone to step in and activate them.

I heave open the double steel-plated workers entrance door, on the side of the building. The light is dim in the narrow side corridor; the rain and mist seem to suck up any light and warmth. I slowly walk down the slippery, dank, gray cement staircase, down to the second level.

This isn't the door that the expert MechWarriors or the Young Guns come in through. No, there are other entrances for them and their handlers, as well as the bookies and gamblers. The Yakuza make good money on this and it's a respectable business.

I think back to this afternoon and an earlier conversation that I had with my landlord. He told me that the rent was going up this year and again next year too.

Rent's going up. I can no longer afford it. There's nowhere else to go. But what else can you expect on Solaris VII?

What's going to happen to the little people? Everyday I see more and more of them on the street. The police just chase them from one end of town to the other.

I don't matter, not really. I don't have a voice in what's going on in the big world, but I'm free. I'm not indebted to anyone. I'm following the same example as my parents. They had gone to an early grave, but they were free. But today is today and I have a job to do.

I'm always early—something I pride myself on. I punch in my time card. *Just like clockwork.* I smile at my silly joke; it's one that I use every once in a while when I need a smile.

There is a manila envelope attached to my punch card. I nod to myself and smile as I open it. I notice that my hands are shaking; my long slender fingers, now bony, dry and wrinkled, slip under the flap and open the envelope. I give it a cursory glance. I know what it is. I'm expecting it. I slip it into the pocket of my sweater.

I've been fired or, more correctly, let go. My employment contract with the Kubler Street Gun Club has ended and is not being renewed.

I let myself into the Hide-and-Seek-Arena, where I am assigned this month.

It's a large chamber set with false walls and ceilings. More of a maze actually. They use cement, stucco and brick to build it. Most of the walls are two stories high, resembling buildings on the outside with false roofs and floors. It looks real enough except these streets are narrower than the ones outside. No vehicles, except repair vehicles, ever use it. No one lives there.

Depending on the ordnance that's being used, they have to rebuild it fairly often. But that's the price of doing this kind of business.

I better hurry, clean and set it up for the next players. I take a quick walk through and look at the Arena. It wasn't too bad this time. I get the large, gray rolling plastic garbage bin, collect and dispose of all the items that I can identify, especially those that would rot, as well as any loose clothing, weapons and spent ammunition.

The schedule shows there are only two players in today's game—an expert MechWarrior, Howard, who has been playing for two years now, and a Young Gun by the name of Otis. They want an old-fashioned ordnance game, real weapons for real men, no protective gear allowed.

I've set up the Arena with some items that can be used as targets. Other things I left where they had fallen as natural obstacles. I always try to vary it a little.

I especially like the clown that I found a while ago in one of the neighboring dumpsters; it is perfect, with its bright blue button

eyes and big red smile. I pin it up on a window ledge; it gives the area a special, homey feel.

It has taken me a long time to save up the powder and plastic from the dud ammunition, but today I finally have enough and I'll have a front row seat when they blow up the entire building.

I'm pleased with my set-up this evening, especially the little clown that I've planted filled with explosives. I wonder who will detonate it, the MechWarrior or the Young Gun.

I've sent off the accident insurance policy to my sister. I'm ready to go upstairs and place a small bet as to the outcome of tonight's game, just like all the regular folk. It's a first for me.

Who knows? I might even get lucky and win.

The End