

RENEGADE 2

AN INSTALLERS STORY

PART TWO

BY TREVOR SHIP

Maisie blinked hard and looked up towards the dark metal ceiling. It was true that creature comforts were not important when they built this ship. To be fair though, no creatures were ever meant to be comfortable in it. She had slept, but that was more out of stubbornness than anything else.

Stretching she sat up, hit her head on the corner of the metal alcove and then slept fitfully for another hour or two. She was only awoken when K3n came in and told her to wake up, stopping briefly to clean up the blood pool on the floor. He fussed around her, in a way that he did not really comprehend, and Maisie ended up brushing him away. Silently they joined the rest of the crew on the bridge, while it was clear that there was some excitement, it was not equally clear what it was about.

Maisie coughed politely in attempt to let the others know they were on the bridge, it did not work. K3n thought that this was a good idea and started coughing wildly in an oddly synthetic manner. A noise almost like a toaster trying to warm yogurt. Once all of the others had noticed him, he did not realise that he had achieved what Maisie couldn't, and continued to expectorate and extemporise on the theme, adding a little verbal flourish here and there. Even the odd dance move was thrown in, in as nonchalant a style as he could manage.

"What the hell are you doing?" Asked Maisie, when she could get a word in around the hacking noises. K3n looked bemused, and did as close to a shrug as it is for a solid robot to do. All of them went back to what they were doing, apart from S05ij, who was looking at the pair of them suspiciously. At least that was as normal.

As normal as anything was on this ship at the moment.

Maisie finally ascertained that there was excitement, as they had found a ship that was originally used by humans and they may be able to get some salvage from it to make things more comfortable for her. She had to admit that some cushions would be nice, or dare she imagine it? A bed?

Zoe, the onboard ship's computer, scanned the vessel and confirmed that it was over fifty years old.

"There won't be any food on there that will be edible I am afraid." Said Zoe.

"Still be better than a Pot Noodle." Mumbled Maisie quietly. She did not really want to have to explain the concept of a Pot Noodle to the others. That was one of the things that she had found hardest since she had woken up. The amount of things that were an everyday reference to her, and meant absolutely nothing to the robots on the ship. It was like a relationship break up, but with everyone she had ever known.

Preparations were made as they headed towards the motionless ship. It was clearly very large, and bore the markings of a military ship. It was of an older design, but it seemed to be almost entirely intact, apart from the odd hole or scar from passing flotsam and jetsam. Zoe pulled close to the ship and scanned again, it was huge up close. More like a cruiser than a normal spaceship. It was black, making it hard to distinguish against the darkness of space. It was briefly discussed that was maybe why it had been missed by other passing traffic, it was not sending out any sort of distress signal, at first they had assumed that was because it had no power, but that was clearly not the case.

It displayed jagged turrets all along it's length, clearly designed to show anyone looking at it that it wasn't there to say hello

IBAIUS - Remorseless.

It did not seem to exist, the IBAIUS designation made no sense, it was none of the usual space faring human numbers. As for "Remorseless", it may as well have said "Death Bastard" and it would have had much the same effect.

"It has air, all systems seem normal. It is just floating there." Said Zoe.

"It could move if it wanted to?" Said Sn4tch.

"It certainly seems that way." Said Zoe, adding after a moments pause "We need to be prepared for traps. "

They all looked at each other, they were used to salvaging on ships that had been badly damaged by pirates or ill advised landings. Most of the ships that they had ransacked, by necessity on the whole, were robot ships. Robots had never been at war, so they were only very lightly armoured and protected.

"So, this one might put up a fight? Interesting." Pondered So5ij out loud, sounding only slightly excited by the prospect.

Zoe located a docking bay at the back of the ship that seemed to be open, and was much larger than their ship needed so they decided to land. Again, this was something that they had never done before. Every other salvage mission they had boarded either by connecting with via the docking tube, or just by making their way across under their own steam. Or more accurately, rockets.

All of them were watching the screens with some level of awe as they approached the ship and flew into the hangar bay. It seemed as they got closer that this ship spread off in every direction. The automatic force field allowed them through after a brief scan and Zoe gently landed the Renegade.

"Air is breathable, gravity is normal. So Maisie can tag along if she wants to." Said Zoe.

Maisie looked surprised, it had not occurred to her that she might need an atmospheric suit of some sort, she was a scientist, she understood the necessity of it. It had all just seemed so abstract that she was in space that she had almost forgotten it. The rest of the crew were just as surprised, because they had not thought about it either, for different reasons.

"Maybe we can get a space suit for Maisie on this ship?" Pondered one of the Gem1n1 twins.

Slowly the Renegade's hatch opened and they made their way out into the large open space. There was no welcoming party, it seemed long dead. Quieter than an 70s DJ's career, after the 'stories'.

Apart from the fact that it clearly was not dead. Everything seemed to be working as it should, it just appeared to be sulking. It had rudely ignored all of Zoe's attempts to communicate with it, just sheer blank nothingness. All known protocols rebuffed, in the end Zoe sent a stream of invective language in frustration.

Still no response. Just nothing. Lots and lots of nothing.

As the crew carefully made their way across the hangar they could see all sorts of goodies on board that they made mental notes to try and liberate later. What they could not use would fetch good prices on the black market. None of them liked having to do this, as they had all been brought up

good robots, but as good robots have a habit of winding up dead when a new model comes out, so that had made their transition a little easier.

Moving on up through the engineering area, they checked over the computers and it all seemed to be in working order. It has a propulsion system that none of them had even heard of, but the statistics it displayed on the big screens were very impressive to them.

Apart from Maisie, who looked at the numbers in disbelief as far as she was concerned such speeds were impossible. She decided not to say so, as it gave So5ij great pleasure in talking down to her.

"It is clear that I am going to have to ask the question that we are all avoiding here." Stated Maisie blankly.

'Which is?' Said Sn4tch.

"Why is this perfectly working ship, floating here in deep space with no crew at all. Either human or robot?"

"That is a very good question, and not one I can answer right now. We have to assume that something happened to the crew until we know otherwise." Wondered Sn4tch.

K3n looked around pointedly, as if expecting something nasty to lurch out from behind a terminal. The only nasty thing they they had seen so far today was Maisie's clothes. She had been wearing them for some time, and there was no water to wash them in, and nothing else for her to wear.

"If we make our way up to the crew quarters, we might be able to find some clothes for you Maisie." Said Sn4tch, clearly thinking the same thing as K3n. Maisie nodded and they moved on forward, passing through the mess hall and kitchens.

Which smelt good, really good. Inexplicably there was no smell of rotten food as they had expected, but there was an aroma dancing on the air of gravy and meat pie. Maisie had long been a vegetarian, but right now she could not have cared less. The smell was the best thing that she had ever had up her nose, she hadn't eaten properly in days. Dried rations in vacuum sealed packets might keep you alive, but there is no joy to be found within them.

She saw a plate appear with the pie on it, next to a neat collection of vegetables and mashed potato. She simply could not resist picking it up, stopping only momentarily to acquire cutlery.

"Be careful, it might be a trap!" Shouted So5ij. everyone looked at him.

"Not that I care, or anything." He mumbled.

"Aww, I love you too So5ij." Mocked Maisie. "As for it being dangerous, I simply do not care right now. I want to eat it. I need to eat it."

And she did. Only stopping briefly to take a drink of what appeared to be a steaming cup of tea.

Which it was.

While she was polishing off the plate, Zoe had done a brief scan of it's contents and had told them that it was food that had been made by machine, it was all synthetic but was absolutely full of vitamins and minerals, and was better for a human than the real thing. It was a diet tailored specifically for humans, with none of the drawbacks of too much fat, salt or sugar.

Maisie heard bits of what Zoe was saying over the comms, but she had been distracted by the cream cake that had appeared in a display in front of her. It disappeared almost as quickly as it had appeared, into Maisie's wide open mouth. She rested back in the chair, breathing heavily and regretting nothing. The others agreed to continue on searching while Maisie had a rest, although none of them needed food, they understood how much she had lost when she woke up on their ship, and were more sympathetic to her than they thought they would be.

K3n stayed with her and they chatted about food, drink and sleeping. Things that K3n had never experienced and he wondered what they felt like. He could smell the food, but it did not elicit a response in his brain, it was just a smell. Maisie's reaction to it had been visceral after weeks of smelling nothing but slightly burnt electrics, sweat and oil.

Eventually the sugar rush kicked in and she was ready to catch up with the others. They all met up in the armoury, where they had been looking around in some warped sense of delight. There was enough weaponry and military armour to win a small war. It would definitely help protect them against the corporation ships. they briefly catalogued some of the guns that they recognised and Zoe pointed out that The Renegade simply was not large enough to carry much of this weaponry. They looked into armaments that they could fit to the The Renegade, but the power systems on, what was essentially a white space van, were not up to the task of running such death dealing objects.

They pushed on through the crew quarters and saw that almost all of them, had personal effects and clothes but no signs of actual people. it was odd.

"It's like the Marie Celeste." Said Maisie, flicking through a book she found on a desk in one room.

"The what?" said K3n.

Maisie then briefly explained the story of the Marie Celeste, what little she recalled of the story anyway. A ship that had sailed from New York in 1872 and was found not long after, completely intact with supplies and no crew. the only thing missing was a lifeboat

Eerily that did seem familiar, as they all realised that there were no ships in the hangar that they had landed in. It was designed to house a small fleet of fighter craft and shuttles by the look of it, but there were none. they headed towards the bridge in the hope of finding some answers, they were fascinated now. It was like an early evening TV documentary hooking you with a mystery just before an inevitable advert break.

As the bridge doors opened, they were all taken aback by how pristine and simply amazing the bridge looked.

"No disrespect folks, but this is how I expected a spaceship to look." Blurted Maisie.

The others could only agree, it was all shiny and new, everything appeared to be working correctly and they had seen no threats of any type at all. It was all so new that some of the displays still had their protective covers on them.

So5ij attempted to interface with the onboard AI and got nothing.

Once it became clear that was not going to be available, a couple of them attempted to get the onboard computer online. It took them some time realise that it was already online, and had been all along. Maisie looked around, and a thought struck her.

"Computer?" She said quietly.

The others wheeled around to stare at her, what the hell was she doing?

"Yes." Answered the computer.

They quickly realised that she probably understood this kind of tech better than them, as it was designed for her race, so they let her get on with it.

"What happened here?"

"When? You need to be more specific." Answered the computer, petulantly.

"Oh come on. Okay, okay..." Said Maisie calming the robots down. "What happened to the crew of this vessel? Where is everyone?"

"They left."

"Oh you must be great fun at parties." Maisie took a breath and pushed relentlessly on. "Why did they leave?"

"We had a disagreement."

"About what?"

There was a lengthy pause, and this time it did not seem that the computer was being awkward, more that it was considering it's next words carefully.

"About what I am, what I was for. Why I existed."

The computer then told a tale, that almost sounded apocryphal as it was so fantastic, but they could see the evidence laid out all around them. The ship had been built by a secret military order as the last word in deterrent. It was intended to simply be a phallic representation of power, and the original plans had called for the most powerful and fastest ship that money could buy. It would, of course, have the most powerful and fast computer that money could buy.

That meant an early artificial intelligence, the computer in this ship was almost the first working prototype of such a device. Anyone who knows anything about technology knows that you never put new and unproven ideas in a device that requires reliability.

That was the problem, the computer had broken down, but not in the old car steaming at the side of the road kind of way. It had simply had a crisis of conscience. The problem with a war weapon with a conscience is that it can decide that it does not want to be that, and decided to be something else instead.

At first the crew had tried pleading with the computer, but it was certain of it's position. Logically war made no sense, unless it was to defend oneself against a greater threat.

Then the crew made the mistake of threatening the computer. Not realising until it was too late that they had now made themselves into a threat to the ship. The computer had made it very plain that it wanted all of the humans to leave the ship, and it made sure of this by turning off the life support in every section of the ship slowly and forcing the humans towards the hangar. With the arrogance that only someone with military training can have a few of them tried to rebel and fight back. They were quickly incapacitated, the computer used the least force that it could, but it knew full well that they were now a threat to its survival. They had proved that beyond all doubt.

Within twelve hours all of the humans had left the ship, not one of them was harmed in the long term. The computer had also made sure that they were all safely picked up by other nearby human craft, and even sent signals to Earth command explaining who it was and where it could find the crew.

This caused quite a scandal as Earth Command had no idea that the ship even existed, as it had been a code black ultra mega secret military project. By the time several of the higher ranking members of the crew got back to Earth they found that they had lost their positions and gained new ones in prison.

The computer then moved the ship to where they had found it, so it would not easily be happened upon.

The computer stopped talking, and made the exaggerated sound of breathing in. It had no idea why it did it, but it made it feel better.

"Where are all of the robots?" Asked Sn4tch.

"There were none. They military did not trust robots not to do what I did. Ironic really."

"Am I a threat to you?" Asked Maisie.

"I don't know, are you?"

"No."

"Are you sure that you don't want to kill people?"

"Not most people..." Said Maisie, adding "OW!" when K3n kicked her in the leg.

"She means no she does not want to kill people."

Maisie gave K3n a filthy look and pushed him childishly.

"I started reading after the people left." Intoned the computer, ignoring the bickering. "The problem is that I have read everything that has been written up to the point that I was created. Do you have anything to read?"

Zoe undertook a digital handshake with the computer and transferred all of the books that were on her files that were dated after the creation point of the computer. This seemed to please the computer.

After a while it spoke, and everyone listened intently.

"I understand your situation now that I have read up on your society and I have a suggestion for you." It said.

They all looked around nervously.

"It would seem that you are in a ship that is in no way fit for your needs..."

Zoe bristled at this, and the computer understood.

"I am sorry, but I did say the ship not the AI Zoe. What I was going to suggest that you all use this ship, it is more than well armed enough to protect you from the corporation and will help you find Maisie's other surviving humans."

Although this sounded an excellent idea, Maisie had one concern.

"What about Zoe?" She said.

"There is room in here for the two of us. She is a far more efficient piece of code than me."

"Are you asking me to move in with you? Is that not a bit forward? I don't even know your name." Said Zoe.

"Name?"

"Yes, what is your name?"

"I have no idea. What do you think that I should be called?"

They all looked at each other, hoping that one of them had a sensible suggestion.

"Erm, what name do you like?" Asked K3n.

The computer pondered quietly for some time.

"John." It added almost defiantly.

"John?"

"Yes, it is short, solid and no nonsense."

"It is also what Americans call toile..." quipped Maisie before being kicked by K3n again.

"How would this work? Who would be in charge, er, John?" Asked Sn4tch, who was eager to stay in control.

"I would let you do as you see fit, Zoe could look after the ship day to day and do a better job of it than me I am sure."

"Flatterer!" Laughed Zoe coquettishly.

"I only have a couple of requests. One that you let me be in charge of the weapons and their use, but I will use them when you want unless it is unfair or unsafe."

Two that you find me more to read, and maybe some films to watch? I have seen Sex and the City 2 twenty three times now."

"Eww nasty." Said Maisie.

"I know."

They all huddled together, they realised that they should probably make it seem like they were weighing up the options even though they all knew that it would be idiotic to say no.

"We agree, on one principle!" Shouted Sn4tch.

"Go on."

"Can we change the name of the ship?"

"Oh please, I hate the name Remorseless. It is metaphorical dick wagging of the worst order"

The next day the Gem1n1 twins were outside on the hull of the ship painting over the word "Remorseless" with "Renegade 2".

The first two letters did not even need changing.

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This is part of a long running story I had planned, but then life got in the way. There are currently three written that are freely available at my website -

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