

## One Man: No Plan, K'Barthan Trilogy: Part 3

### First chapter sample.

The first thing that forced its way into Deirdre's consciousness was the pain. The second thing was an ardent longing to be asleep still. She supposed there were some parts of her that didn't ache. Yeh, her eyelids were OK. And her nose. That didn't hurt. Or her left ear. Anywhere else pain free? No. It would seem not.

Ugh.

These reflections were disturbed by Deirdre's usual first thought upon waking in the morning, which was that she could quite do with a wee. So she was going to have to get out of bed. Arnold no. Not yet. She wasn't quite ready for that. Any movement was going to smart. The need to wee wasn't that urgent. It could wait.

In the meantime she would take this slowly, try to relax away as much of the pain as possible before she moved – she steeled herself – but, eventually, she would have to sit up. She closed her eyes and concentrated on the pain management techniques she'd learned in training. That was a lot of pain. It was only to be expected of course, she'd spent nearly two hours, maybe more, fighting at levels of intensity which few people would expect to maintain for more than ten or fifteen minutes – even in combat. It wasn't just that she had taken a beating, she was aching and stiff from such marathon levels of exertion. Never mind. She consoled herself with the fact that her opponent would also be nursing a few bruises this morning, but hand-to-hand combat with Lord Vernon was not an experience she wished to repeat. Not without reinforcements, anyway.

She added some relaxation techniques to the pain management routine and began to feel better. When she was convinced she'd managed about as much pain as she was going to, she steeled herself and sat up.

“Arnold's, smecking, sweaty—”

“Morning Lieutenant,” said a voice and there, next to the bed, perched casually on a chair, was a Blurpon.

“Snoofle!” She was delighted to see her new friend from the laundry and laughed, which hurt. “Ouch...”

“I was going to bring you some breakfast but you were still asleep so I thought it'd wait until you woke up.”

“I was worried. Captain Snow zapped you with a crowd control stick.”

“Yes.”

“It must have hurt.”

“Only when I came round. I'm guessing you're the same in that respect.”

“Yes. I'm sorry they got you. I shouldn't have let that happen.” Deirdre wasn't very used to apologising and she seemed to be doing a lot of it these days.

“I can't see what you'd have done to stop it.”

“I should have seen it coming. I've never lost one of my people.”

“You didn't lose me. Anyway I'm not actually under your command you know, you're strike operations and I'm espionage.”

“It's all Resistance...” she shrugged and let the matter drop. “How did you get here?”

“General Moteurs. He tells me you turned up here, suffering from exhaustion and half delirious and you...” he tailed off.

Deirdre buried her head in her hands.

“I told him about you? Is that what he said?” Would she really have been that much of an idiot?

“He said you were mumbling ‘no not Snoofle’ and that it piqued his interest so he looked

me up in the staff records.” Why did Snoofle’s version of General Moteurs sound so much more benign than hers, Deirdre wondered. Snoofle was still talking. “There was no need to worry, Captain Snow’s goons dumped me in the dormitory. Head Launderer Sid saw them leave and came to find me with a couple of the others. They were still with me when General Moteurs arrived.”

“He went to the dormitory?”

“Yes.”

“Himself?”

“Yes.”

“He’s a General.”

“Yes. Imperial Guard, you have heard about them?”

“I know they exist but I have never encountered them; my targets have always been members of the regular army and the security forces.”

“That might make sense. Rumour has it that the Imperial Guard are better behaved than their Armed Forces colleagues.”

Yes, D’reen – Mrs Pargeter – in the Laundry told me that,” said Deirdre.

“The ones in the grey are almost decent,” quoted Snoofle, in a very passable impression of Mrs Pargeter’s voice.

Deirdre smiled.

“Just so,” she said. “Surely, it’s unusual for them to be outside Grongolia.”

Snoofle shrugged.

“Not really, they guard individuals, in this case, Lord Vernon.”

“But his own troops do that.”

“Yes – Captain Snow and his lot. I’ll be interested to find out what the Imperial Guard here really do.”

So would Deirdre. She looked around her. She was in a bedroom. Sunlight streamed in through floor to ceiling windows along one side. Through them was a balcony and beyond it lay the city of Ning Dang Po in all its glory. As living quarters went, these were pretty ritzy. So was the room, understated, for sure but elegant; expensive, antique elegant, except for the double bed which was clearly new and fitted with crisp white sheets. They were clean on for her use, Deirdre realised. Then there was her shirt, someone else’s expensive shirt. It was a pale cream, unbleached, soft and comfortable. Raw silk? Yes, by the feel of it. She rolled up the sleeves, which were a bit long and noticed the bruises round her wrists where Lord Vernon had held her down and... she turned her head abruptly away from Snoofle. She had to put that from her mind. So easy to say, so hard to do. She closed her eyes and clenched her teeth. She. Was. Not. Going. To. Cry. Without thinking, she drew her knees up and hugged her arms round them. The sudden pain very nearly succeeded where her recollections of Lord Vernon had failed.

“Lieutenant, Ma’am?” said Snoofle gently. “I am a great believer in the restorative properties of coffee.”

She could have hugged him but that would probably have hurt, too so instead she took the cup he was offering her and drank it gratefully. It was still warm but only just.

“Thank you.” she smiled wanly.

“Forgive me if I am speaking out of turn but I am aware of what you must have been through. Everyone knows what Lord Vernon does to the female staff – that’s why Room A is a Blurpon only pick up – and after Captain Snow blitzed me with the control stick, I kind of put two and two together. My apologies if it has come to something other than four.”

“No Snoofle, you’re correct, as usual. How come you’re only a group leader? Why aren’t you a lieutenant?”

“Unfortunately, my career is following the same path as one of Denarghi’s first cousins. He tends to get the plum jobs.”

Deirdre had already detected a certain cynicism in Snoofle’s attitude to Denarghi, now it was beginning to make sense.

“If that’s true then Denarghi’s a fool.”

Snoofle smiled.

“Goes without saying, Lieutenant, Ma’am.”

“And a week ago, I’d have called you out for saying that. Arnold! What is happening to me?”

“He finally showed you his mean streak,” said Snoofle. Dead right. Deirdre changed the subject.

“We have to get out of here.”

“I don’t think we can at the moment. The General has us where he wants us and if we cross him—”

“He gives us to Lord Vernon. Yes but we need to make a plan of action.”

“Too true, Lieutenant.”

“Snoofle, don’t call me that. As you noted, correctly, you’re not under my command.”

“Rosa then?”

“No the ‘Rosa’ thing’s been blown apart and I can’t sustain it anyway. Deirdre. If you please.”

Snoofle smiled.

“Deirdre. More coffee?”

“Please.”

“If you need it, the bathroom’s just down the hall.”

“Thank you.”

“But... I gave General Moteurs my word that you wouldn’t escape. Or go anywhere near his desk and until we can find a way to neutralise his hold on us, I believe we should obey him.”

“He’s not going to know,” said Deirdre.

“I fear he is. He’s put three armed guards at the end of the corridor – if we try, they’ll tell him.”

“When they come round...” she said.

Snoofle smiled.

“You are in no state to do any more fighting,” he said.

He was right. Bummer. Gingerly she got out of bed and stood up. It wasn’t as bad as it could have been but she still felt distinctly wobbly.

“Here, you can lean on me if you like,” said Snoofle.

“That won’t be necessary.”

Noting the three guards the other end, Deirdre made her way slowly down the hall to the bathroom, with Snoofle following. Somewhere along the way he acquired a big fluffy towel and some clean clothes which he handed her.

“Will you be alright in there?”

“Yes, Snoofle. I’m a member of the Resistance, a strike force officer and I’m a lieutenant. I think I can cope with a few bruises.”

“I didn’t mean the bruises. I was thinking more of—”

“Snoofle,” Deirdre cut in. The expression of concern on his face betrayed his thoughts.

“Sorry.”

“Understand this; I may be feeling emotional but I’m not going to go in there and cut my wrists—”

“Well, no, of course you’re not because any sharp objects in there have been—”

“No. Not because of that, because I’m a trained assassin, a member of the Most Holy Order of Ninja Nimmists and I don’t do self-harm. I do revenge. If someone knocks me down, I get up and get even.”

“But—”

“Snuffle. I’m not going to kill myself, OK?”

“Ma’am.”

Deirdre smiled and took the towel and the clothes from him.

“However, your concern is noted.” She did appreciate it, even if it was a bit irritating.

“Thank you.”

“Sorry... you would like some breakfast when you finish, yes?”

“Yes please.”

“I know you prefer muesli but maybe today you should have something more substantial, I didn’t think you’d enjoy a fry up but what about kedgerree?”

“You’re the boss, Snuffle. Cooking is not usually my concern.”

“With orange juice?”

“Yes... please.” She added the ‘please’ as an after thought.

“It will be ready and waiting when you’re done.”

“Thank you,” she said again and shut the bathroom door.

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