

The Ease of Destruction

by

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The necroid ball bounced through a gap between the grate and the support beam where the grate hadn't been properly latched down. Phil didn't see the opening until it was too late.

She swore softly beneath her breath, watching the matte black sphere roll and ricochet down the air shaft, lodging in a crevice three meters below. Tensing, she held her breath, then groaned when she heard the tell-tale bleep and saw the flashing green pinpoints of light girdling the ball's smooth surface brighten for an instant.

Scrambling to her feet, she snatched up her tools and shoved them into her satchel. A glance at the black ball froze the breath in her chest.

The matte surface had cracked open in sections, the separate bits sliding apart as it reformed into its strange insect-bodied, monkey-limbed necroidal shape. Without waiting for it to complete its metamorphosis, she tugged her satchel over her head and shoulders and sprinted down the catwalk, abandoning the rest of her equipment beside the opened hatch on the systems unit.

Phil panted to a stop at the first access shaft she came to, fumbling at the control box. It took her three tries to get the locks to give, three tries and four and a half minutes. By now the necroid would have completely emerged and set off to execute its programming. She didn't have much time.

Phil raced down the passage, ignoring the angry outbursts of the station personnel and passengers she rammed aside as she fled.

She dared not take the chance that the necroid would knock out the transport controls before she could get back to the docks and her ship. She'd be helpless in the vacuum of the station's nucleus tube. Instead she stole a maintenance cart, speeding down through the black levels, passing the environmental recyclers, the waste treatment plant, and on through the orange warehouse levels, arriving at last at the blue level docks some fifteen minutes later.

She left the cart in a maintenance corridor and forced herself to walk sedately out into the docking bay lobby, her eyes dodging back forth in search of the first signs of systems failure.

"Phil! I've been looking for you. Are we still on?"

Phil stopped, wincing as she glanced at the clock above the customs station. With reluctant deliberation, she turned to smile weakly at the svelte blond lieutenant behind her. Carla arched flirtatious eyebrows, then frowned.

"What's up? You're sweating like you've run a couple miles."

"Yeah." Phil smoothed her hair, clenching her satchel convulsively. If she had actually planted the necroid, she'd have had an hour before emergence, then forty-eight minutes to full deployment. As it was, there was no telling how long she had to get off the station before the necroid destroyed it.

She forced her voice to be merry.

“I have been, as a matter of fact. I got an alert on my com. There’s a job taking bids for the Stendoy sector. If I can get mine in quick enough, I’d be on a regular run through here.”

She smiled suggestively, her stomach twisting. She liked Carla. She’d miss her. For a split-second Phil considered taking her off the station before it blew. Immediately she dismissed the thought. Fun as she was in bed, Carla was five-by-five regular space corps. It wouldn’t take her long to put two and two together. Better she died here than have to space her later.

“Then I’ll pick up a bottle of that Endoin wine Parkson’s been bragging about and we can celebrate.”

Ordinarily the other woman’s sexy, sultry voice would have sent warm tingles down Phil’s spine. Not this time. The clock kept ticking.

“I’ll be there as soon as I can,” Phil promised with a twist of her lips, and then gave into impulse and squeezed Carla’s rose-tipped fingers.

Carla smiled, that elfin smile which had drawn Phil to her in the first place, and which now made her heart seize. She nodded back, a lump in her throat, then pulled her hand away and gave the other woman a little wave as she retreated to her ship.

A few minutes later she mounted the bridge of the Nightowl. Station command gave her an immediate departure slot when she declared emergency status, claiming an overload in her drive systems. Procedures put her immediately on the top of the departure roster. They didn’t want to take any chances on her drives ripping up the bays—not now that the treaty with the Sepoys had gone through and traffic was up more than a hundred percent.

Ironic that, considering that the necroid even now was probably inserting a program into the station mainframes to set off a cascade reaction in the power grid. Once loaded, the

station would explode within minutes. That would pretty much put paid to the treaty, what with the trade delegation still on board. Phil assumed that that had been the point of the job. It didn't matter. She'd already been paid and politics never played into her accepting a job or not.

The power along the docks flickered as she maneuvered out the blast doors and gunned her engines. Ignoring the squawking protests from the station control operator, she made for the rift-gate, signalling coordinates as she went.

Just as the CO began threatening her with fines and blacklisting the Nightowl systemwide, the first explosions shuddered through the station. The blastwave caught her like a tailwind, carrying her through the rift-gate like a dingy on a storm surge.

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Phil sat back in her chair, reviewing the vid footage of the explosion, her face impassive.

There wasn't anything left but a debris field. Not one of the heavy transport ships orbiting the station had survived.

She encrypted the footage, sending a copy to her employer. She got up, arching her back in a catlike stretch. She needed a shower and a meal. It would put her back to rights, she told herself firmly. A narrow escape, but clean. Still jumpy about the close call, is all. The low after the high. Nothing else to it.

She thought of Carla and wondered where the other woman had been, if she'd died quickly. Of course she did, Phil told herself caustically. Everybody did.

As she turned to depart the bridge, a blinking message light on the control console caught her eye. She checked the communications log and saw that it was from Carla, received an hour before their encounter on the docks. Phil reached over, her fingers hesitating over the play button for a long minute, and then pressed delete instead.

She stared unseeing at the control panel, thinking of Carla's satin legs tangling with her own. She took a breath and blew it out, giving herself a shake.

"I have to get a cat or something," she told herself. "Take a vacation. I can't keep dating inside the target zones."

With a twist of her lips, she exited the bridge, heading for the shower, mentally calculating a list of prospective resorts in the nearby sectors. Something wild, with a lot of flesh and sport. If a stray tear slipped down the recyclers with her shower water, she refused to know.