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**Opening Extract from...**

# Crashing Heaven

Written by Al Robertson

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# CRASHING HEAVEN

Al Robertson

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# Chapter 1

[Look out of the window, Fist,] said Jack, speaking inside his mind so only the little puppet could hear him. [Snowflakes.]

As their shuttle wheeled around, the sun snatched at the snowflakes' great ice bodies and made them blaze, leaving even Hugo Fist with nothing to say. There were a dozen of them hanging in the cold, empty space before Station. The smaller ones sparkled with reflected light. Maybe five hundred metres across, they revolved in the void, bodies shimmering gently. The larger ones were majestic crystal shapes, dense with fractal complexity. They glowed partly with the sun's fire, partly with their own inborn light. The abandoned Earth roiled behind them, its toxic cloudscapes an insult to their cold perfection.

[A Totality battle formation – here?] whispered Fist. [We really did lose the war, Jackie boy!]

[According to East they arrived a month ago. Supporting their peace negotiators.]

[You been onweave? Checking the newsfeeds? I thought you'd given up on that.]

[I wanted to see what we were coming back to.]

[I'm sure. You've been mailing Andrea again, haven't you? Harry's dead, she's single, you've come all the way back from a Totality prison, and she still won't reply?]

Jack said nothing. Andrea's mails had sustained him through the last two years of prisoner-of-war life and helped him come to terms with his imminent death. He thought she'd be overjoyed to hear that he was returning home to Station. But she didn't reply to the message he sent announcing his return, or any that followed it. He turned back to look out of the window.

The shuttle was nearing the snowflakes. They drifted in the darkness like so many frozen stars, policed by clusters of monitor drones.

Station – Kingdom’s greatest achievement – hung behind them. Jack had spent seven years remembering his home. It was nine kilometres long and, at its widest, two and a half kilometres across. Every single centimetre suddenly seemed so ugly. The twin cylinders of Homelands and Docklands were corroded metal dustbins sprouting from opposite sides of the Wart, the hollowed-out asteroid wedged between them like a dirty secret.

Only the cargo jetties of Docklands held anything like beauty. They shimmered above the near tube’s round, open mouth in sparkling lines, reaching out from the Spine to score order on the void. The Spine was speckled with spinelights, their blazing light creating one more day on Station. It disappeared into Docklands, running all the way down Station’s central axis to the distant tip of Homelands. And of course, there was Heaven – a blue-green ring wrapped around the end of Homelands. Its perfect light was too cold to move Jack. He’d left any allegiance to the Pantheon gods far behind five years ago, when he refused to fight any more battles for them.

The shuttle altered course slightly and Docklands came into view, a curved clutter of factories, offices, housing estates and entertainment zones. It was as if some giant, half-broken machine had bled buildings on to the arched inner wall of a hollow cylinder, until something broadly like a city had clotted into being. It was too far away to make out much detail. Memory filled the gaps. Jack remembered the Docklands streets he’d grown up in, and then left so comprehensively behind. ‘The inside of the dustbin,’ he thought, then smiled sadly as he imagined Andrea scolding his cynicism. She’d helped him find their beauty again, in those few hidden months they’d had together. Then the rock hit the moon and everything changed. She’d brought so much into his life more recently, too. He winced at the thought of her absence. He’d missed her so much over the last few weeks.

Fist caught the movement but, with no access to Jack’s deep emotions, misunderstood it. [We don’t need to worry about snowflakes any more. The Totality like us now.]

Jack sighed. [They shouldn’t,] he replied. [You and I destroyed enough of them.]

[Before your little change of heart.]

The shuttle moved past one of the larger snowflakes. A cold shining arm loomed towards the window. Silver lights flickered within hard crystal ice, each shimmer a thought pulsing in one of a thousand virtual minds.

[Just think, Jack. I could have killed one of those. If you'd let me.]

'No,' said Jack, out loud. One of his guards heard and briefly stared at him, then at the empty seat next to him. Jack didn't notice. He was looking out at Docklands again, tracing yesterday across its streets.

The shuttle docked at one of Station's jetties. The guards escorted Jack down to a cell in Customs House. He hung his coat on the back of the door and nestled his little Totality-issued suitcase down beside the cell's single chair. His new suit itched. Hours passed. There was water, but no food. Fist, bored, was sleeping. Little snores echoed in Jack's mind. Memories of Andrea darted between them, trailing grief and loss. Familiar thoughts followed. Her silence was impossible to understand. Perhaps something had happened to her. Maybe she needed his help. He had to find her. After a while, more immediate needs distracted him. He banged on the door and shouted for something to eat. There was no response. He tried to sleep, and in a confused half-dream found himself falling through darkness towards nothing.

At last a new guard startled him awake. He walked Jack down a windowless corridor to a small, brightly lit room. There was a desk with two plastic chairs in one corner of the room. A balding, portly customs official sat behind it. He asked Jack to sit down.

[Don't show off,] Jack told Fist as he stretched and yawned. [I don't want him realising you've hacked your cage.]

The official had a strong Docklands accent. He was brisk and ostensibly courteous. He confirmed Jack's identity, then asked which Pantheon god had been his patron. 'No wonder you're so fucked,' he said when Jack replied 'Grey'. Then, a return to formality and a barrage of questions.

'When did Grey certify you as an accountant?'

'On the day of my twenty-first birthday.'

'When were you seconded to InSec?'

‘Three years later.’

‘What was your role?’

‘I was assigned to work under Inspector Harry Devlin as a forensic auditor. Investigating links between the Panther Czar nightclub and Bjorn Penderville’s murder.’

The official snorted.

‘Why didn’t they use an InSec specialist?’

‘It was Grey’s will. I didn’t question it.’

[That’s not what you told me,] said Fist.

[Quiet.]

‘When were you reassigned to outer-system duties?’

‘After the attack on the moon. It was decided that the Penderville case was low priority. I understand it was never resolved.’

[Not going to share your conspiracy theories, Jackie boy?]

[No. Now shut up.]

‘What was your specific Soft War posting?’

‘Aggressive ongoing counter-mind actions.’

The official stared at a screen that was invisible to Jack. With every answer, his fingers moved through the air, taking notes on a virtual keyboard. Then there was a pause. He looked straight at Jack, challenging him.

‘When did you defect?’

‘I didn’t defect. I surrendered.’

‘I have the date of your defection here. Please confirm it.’

‘No.’

[Aren’t you taking this rather seriously, Jack?]

[The Pantheon betrayed me. I didn’t betray them. I just stopped doing their dirty work.]

‘I can’t proceed without your co-operation. And if I can’t complete this interview I can’t admit you to Station.’

‘Sandal’s watching, isn’t he? You’re not normally such sticklers.’

[Oh, come on Jack. We don’t want to go back to Callisto. Totality prisoner-of-war life is so boring.]

‘You’re a dangerous man, Forster, and you have an improper attitude to the Pantheon. I don’t need to be in their sight to do my duty. When did you defect?’

‘I did not defect.’

[Oh fucking hell, Jack, when I take your body I don't want to be stuck in some out-system backwater. And what about Andrea? You're going to let pride stop you from finding her?]

Fist's words cut through Jack's anger. But before he could reply, the room's door slid open. The official turned towards it, surprised. 'Forster's right,' announced the woman who came into the room.

She was short and broad and middle-aged, and she moved with the unfussy precision of machinery. Dark grey combat pants and a baggy black T-shirt hung off her stocky frame. Her face had the lived-in look of an old sleeping bag. There was a blue tinge to her skin. She'd dyed her hair to match it.

'You people don't normally care about this sort of thing. Anyone would think you were looking for an excuse not to admit him. Which would be illegal.'

The official turned pale. 'Who are you?' he snapped, not quite regaining his authority. 'Where's the guard?'

'I dismissed him. And I'm an observer. Look.'

The official's eyes refocused. Jack assumed that identity information was flickering a couple of feet in front of his face. 'I see,' he stammered. 'An honour.'

'Good,' the woman said, enjoying the official's discomfort. 'Now, finish the questions. And – Forster's reply is accurate. He did surrender.' She turned to Jack. 'Not that cowardice is really any better than treason, but still. Attention to detail.'

'I'm not a coward,' Jack snapped back without thinking.

[Fuck's sake,] groaned Fist.

'No, you just gave yourself up to the enemy,' said the woman. 'Without firing a shot. But we'll skip over that.'

Her accusation stung. Jack thought of Andrea and forced himself to swallow his anger. The questions continued. To his relief, none were contentious. Most were designed to assess how well he'd adjusted to life offweave. Even though his answers were blandly reassuring, the official was still nervous. He kept glancing over at the woman. She'd reclined on one of the plastic seats, with her feet up on another.

[Who can she be?] Fist wondered. [InSec? You should let me take a proper look.]

[Too risky.]



The pauses between questions grew longer and longer, then at last became a silence. The official stared determinedly down, his fingers skittering across his invisible keyboard. His hands shook. ‘Oh, for gods’ sake,’ the woman snapped. ‘Stop putting it off. This is the interesting bit.’

‘I’m just getting the details right.’

‘Sandal gave you weaveware to protect you. Don’t you trust your patron?’

The official swallowed and stood up. He was quite short. ‘I need to see the puppet.’

When Fist shimmered into being the official took a step back and swore. The puppet was surrounded by cageware that manifested as a virtual set of spinning silver rings, revealing then hiding fragments of his body. There were little black polished shoes, a scarlet cummerbund, bright red painted lips, a black bow-tie, dangling, unarticulated hands and varnished shining eyes.

‘I don’t know why you’re so scared of me.’ Fist’s thin high voice had a singsong quality to it. Wooden teeth clacked as he spoke, punctuating his words with sharp percussive bangs. ‘You can hardly even see me. And I’m all locked up. Poor little Hugo Fist, all locked up.’ He glared at Jack. ‘It’s the story of my life.’

The official didn’t reply. He wouldn’t even let himself look directly at Fist. He moved round the cageware, ticking off each ring as he found it fully operational.

[Imagine if I reached out and touched him, Jack. Just tapped him on the shoulder. I think I could. How he’d jump!]

[Hush, Fist.]

The official picked up an MRI wand and moved over to Jack. ‘Stand up,’ he ordered. ‘Keep your back straight.’ He held the wand close in to Jack’s back and waved it up and down, scanning his spine and skull for the embedded hardware that was Fist’s physical self. Jack felt a light tingling. ‘Oo! Tickles!’ giggled the puppet.

The woman moved closer to Fist’s cage, bending over to peer at him. ‘Well, here you are,’ she said, fascinated. ‘The last of the puppets, still embedded in your puppeteer.’

‘Just you wait,’ Fist tittered. ‘He may be the boss now, but I’ll be pulling all the strings soon.’

‘So you really are going to take full ownership of his mind and body?’ she said. ‘Fuck yes,’ replied Fist. She turned to Jack. ‘And how do you feel about that?’ she asked, needling him. ‘This little creature, wiping your mind? Killing you?’

‘I’ve had a year to get used to the idea,’ said Jack wearily. ‘It’s old news.’ He felt a sharp combination of rage and grief start up in him, before the acceptance he’d worked so hard to feel choked them off.

‘He doesn’t have any choice!’ chirped Fist. ‘And I couldn’t stop it even if I wanted to. He’s just got to say a couple of goodbyes, then it’s party time for new flesh me!’

The woman turned back to him. ‘You really are a poisonous little fellow, aren’t you?’ Her tone was almost admiring.

‘As the gods made me.’

‘Half a metre of wooden viciousness, all dressed up for an elegant night out! Our masters have quite the imagination.’

She rapped the cageware with her knuckles. The official winced. There was a soft crackling sound. A couple of the rings shimmered, then reasserted themselves.

‘I don’t think you’ll make it to any balls, though.’

‘We’ll see, missy.’

She laughed, delighted.

‘I look forward to it.’

The official finished his checks and put the wand down. ‘All done,’ he told Jack. Then he stood silently, staring at the woman and waiting for his cue.

‘The puppet’s contained?’ she asked.

‘Yes. Fully.’

Fist snickered in Jack’s mind.

[Quiet!] hissed Jack.

‘Then I suppose we have to let him out, don’t we?’

‘That’s what the peace treaty says.’

A barely perceptible movement and the woman was standing in front of Jack.

[Oo, snappy!] Fist’s voice was full of admiration. [Not such a used-up old hag after all.]

She placed her hand on Jack’s cheek. It was colder than a hand should be. ‘I’ve done my bit. Seen all I need. So I’m going.’ Her

touch frosted Jack's skin. Her face came close to his. There was a soft purple light in her eyes. 'I know people who are terrified of you two,' she whispered, her voice rich with threat. 'Give me one tiny chance and I'll show them you're nothing to be scared of.'

The door slammed shut behind her. The official gaped, astonished at her inhuman speed. [Now she's just showing off,] commented Fist as he disappeared too.

'I'm free to go?' asked Jack.

The official started, as if he'd forgotten his prisoner was there. 'Yes.' He went to his desk and reached into a drawer. 'Here's your cash card. InSec have charged it up with all the money you'll need.'

'Can I go onweave?'

'No overlay, no commerce, no search, no social. Just mail and fetch access, to talk with your loved ones.'

[That'll make finding Andrea a bit tricky!] giggled Fist. [No distractions, then. Just a lovely, lovely family reunion. Your living dad and your dear dead mum.]

'InSec's made a formal request for an interview. Assistant Commissioner Lestak's sending someone to pick you up from our landing pad tomorrow morning. The meeting is a condition of your parole. If you don't attend, you'll be found and imprisoned.'

He led Jack down empty corridors into a lift. It shuddered and began to fall. The official gave Jack a look of deep contempt. 'If it was down to me I'd put you out of an airlock, and let you freeze with your fucking terrorist friends,' he hissed.

'The Totality have always denied attacking the moon,' replied Jack. 'They blamed a rogue mind, acting alone. I believe them. And the Pantheon were looking for revenge, not justice.'

The lift doors opened. The official shoved Jack out. 'Now fuck off.' There was an empty atrium and a midnight street. Tiredness hit Jack harder than any interrogation ever could. Suddenly all he wanted to do was find a room and sleep, and never wake to see the dawn. He thought of Andrea, sighed, and then stepped out into the darkness of Station.