

GOD OF DESOLATION

By

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First chapter only

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"A-hunting we will go, a-hunting we will go
Heigh-ho, the derry-o, a-hunting we will go
A-hunting we will go, a-hunting we will go
We'll catch a fox and put him in a box
And then we'll let him go"

Thomas Arne & John Gay

The Beggar's Opera

1777

CHAPTER 1

The tight straps locked her body in place. Her blindfold kept her veiled in darkness. She was stuck in the seat, had been for countless days. The gentle hum of engines droned, the sound buzzing in her ears. As time passed, and the others grew silent, the noise nearly drove her crazy. However gentle it had first been, the thrum was now screaming in her ears, drowning out the sound of her own heartbeat. Her body was forgetting how to be human. Her senses dulled. She was letting the drugs take hold. Even time had seemed to fade, days turning into weeks, and weeks turning into blurred confusion. How long had she been travelling? How long had she been strapped to her seat? And where was she headed? She didn't know, on the brink of going insane. Her breath became enraged and wild. She had to keep focusing, and not let the fluid IV cocktail put her in a half-awake coma. She needed to keep at it, to tear at her shackles.

Focus, she thought. Focus. Work through the problem. Fight. Ignore everything that happened before, and everything that will happen in the future.

She felt her breathing calm down. It was working. She realized she could sense her entire body again, and that she had fought off the animal panic. She was back in control, and she could keep trying to break free, to exist on her own terms. Right now, the world didn't matter. It was just Doon Gannon, and the chair she was stuck in. If she could conquer that, she could take on whatever came next.

Doon tried shifting. The straps wouldn't let her.

"There is no escape," some asshole had told her before liftoff. "No escape, ever."

"Fuck off," she said to the memory. "Focus, focus, focus."

The claustrophobia had gotten to her the moment the guards strapped her in. From the instant the transport ship launched, Doon had begun yanking and pulling on her restraints. She had struggled and strained against them, every day, every hour, every minute. And when she got too tired to fight, she spent her time mapping her surroundings. Without the use of her eyes, she had let her ears and her sense of smell do the exploring. The ship was clearly not filled to capacity, but she had sensed movement in the seat next to hers. The first few days of the journey, the person in it stirred. As time passed, her fellow passenger had given up.

Not her. Not Doon. She couldn't give up.

Doon had called out to the person sitting next to her a few times, but he never answered. She knew he was a male from an occasional sigh or snort, and she guessed he was young, but that was all she had learned about him. Still, this hadn't stopped her from profiling him, creating a mental picture of the man. After all, they had shared so much time together, and she didn't want to have him remain a mystery. Doon imagined him frail and thin, frightened and jittery, in need of her help – exactly the kind of person whose dire

circumstances had led her to become strapped to the chair, hurtling through darkness, destined to rot far away from everything and everyone she had ever known.

No more. She was done helping others. The victims were as cruel as their oppressors, and as far as Doon was concerned, the entire human race could go to hell.

All she could do now was improve her own situation. That meant fighting, and it meant not sitting strapped to a chair for weeks on end. It meant staying alert. Sane. And defiant.

Doon twisted her body back and forth. The straps coiling around her legs, arms and head had loosened over the lengthy journey. Time and friction could grind even planets to dust. Getting this far had taken what felt like an epoch, each moment dominated by painful wiggling. She could feel her skin, raw and bloody, rubbing roughly against the pressure points of the straps. The effort was worth it. If nothing else, it kept her from losing herself again. Doon shifted back and forth, yanking and pulling. If she could just get a peek, maybe she could know where she was headed. Any little bit of information helped. If she knew her fate, she could decide how to face it, even if that meant deciding how she would die.

Doon wasn't after the view out of the windows, if there were any windows. Out in the void, there was rarely anything to see. Nothing but fields of darkness, and she'd be as lost looking at them as she would be if the blinds remained. Her goal was the cockpit computer. What kind was it? Did it have a seat for a pilot? Could autopilot be shut off?

The shuttle was unmanned and flying towards a pre-programmed destination. Doon had figured that out after the first few days. No long haul shuttle would require pilots. It wasn't cost-effective. Which was lucky for her. It meant she only needed to get free,

disable the security system, and then she'd have the run of the place. Perhaps there'd even be an easy-to-use interface with a starmap.

Not that she'd know how to fly the damn thing. She pushed the thought away.

Someone coughed. It came from further back in the ship. She smiled. It had been so long since she'd heard much of anything human. They were all so quiet, surrendering to the drugs pumped into them. She didn't much like humans anymore, but with the constant low whir of the engine, she'd take any organic natural sound. The only break she'd gotten from the reactor noise was the squeaking of the automated guard system. It occasionally moved past her, breaking up the monotony with an unhealthy sounding metallic clang. It was clearly an old and worn-down unit. Nothing brand new hissed and screeched like that. Most of the time, though, it had been silent – probably in power-saving mode for the journey. That was fine by her. She didn't want it active. The machine likely wouldn't take kindly to her fighting her restraints.

As she wiggled, Doon made sure to keep her right hand relatively still. It was the only part of her body she was reluctant to move. Working with her left didn't bother her. She had trained herself to be entirely ambidextrous. Rather, her hesitation was pure self-preservation. Doon's saline solution poked loosely through the flesh of her right hand, and if she wiggled too much, it might fall out. That would remove the drugs, however mild they were, but it would also take away her only source of liquid and food. It was all one cocktail. Not knowing how many days or weeks or – God forbid – months the shuttle would travel, Doon didn't want to risk accidentally ripping it out and then slowly dying of thirst before she got to her final destination. Besides, the saline drip gave her such miserly amounts of

fluid to begin with that she was constantly hungry and thirsty. With all the effort she made to break free, dying from exhaustion was already a risk.

She guessed the company that purchased her imprisonment contract didn't do this simply to save money, but likely also for sanitary reasons. Whenever Doon and the other prisoners needed to urinate, they simply pissed their pants. The seats were designed to soak up the urine and repurpose it back into liquid saline energy. But the seats couldn't handle solid waste. Doon had been given a pill before entering the craft, one that made her stool entirely liquid, even after all this time. It had done a number on her stomach, and only seconds after swallowing it, she had evacuated her bowels completely. They had provided buckets, so clearly the side effect was common. She took great pleasure in kicking over the shit bucket before liftoff, particularly enjoying the loud curses that followed from her handlers. One of them wanted to beat Doon up for it, but the others calmed the unseen woman down and told her that punishing Doon was futile. Prisoner Doon Gannon, they had crowed, was already going to the most desolate fucking rock in the known universe. Too bad they hadn't been more specific. Space was full of places that matched that description.

Doon juttled her head back and forth, desperate to see something other than darkness. The strained movement made her nauseous. The lack of solid food got to her, raining havoc on her metabolism. Doon had been lucky not to hurl early in the journey, but now she thought she might have to puke after all. Another prisoner, seated somewhere behind her, vomited only a few days into the trip. The stink of urine and sweat got to the man, and he had gagged for hours before finally throwing up. The stench added to the already acrid scent of the ship, but it was worse for the man. The up-chuck had nowhere to go but into his lap, and then he'd had to sit in the filth for the remainder of the journey.

Luckily for the rest of them, the transport ship maintained artificial gravity. If it hadn't, the vomit would have floated throughout the entire ship.

Gritting her teeth, Doon forced herself to regain control of her body. She wasn't going to hurl. Not now. She inhaled deeply, filling her lungs completely. She wondered if that was such a good idea considering the weeks of accumulated stench in the cabin. Even though she was finally getting used to the smell, this felt like an ordeal. She exhaled completely, draining her lungs.

One more time, and another, and now I'm good, she thought.

Body oxygenated, Doon resumed wiggling, back and forth and back and forth. Her limbs slammed against the straps, slowly yanking them out from the seat. She felt the saline needle tugging against the inside of her right hand.

Screw it, Doon thought.

She continued battering the seat with her body. A couple of fellow prisoners groaned.

So there is life on this hunk of metal, she mused.

In the first few days, the other prisoners had called out to her to stop, to give up. It was hopeless after all. Her straining at the straps made a racket, and it was irritating to listen to, but Doon didn't give a flying fuck. If the others had any willpower, any sense of self-preservation, they'd fight too. But they didn't. They let the drugs win, endlessly pumped into their bodies through the saline solution, dulling their senses and making them okay with spending eternity stuck to a chair. How could they value their own lives so little? They had given up long before entering the transport shuttle, already imprisoned in their own minds.

Worthless, Doon thought, they're all worthless. And they deserve what they have coming.

Doon stopped moving for a second. She wanted to check on her progress. Shifting her left foot, she felt that the strap around her ankle had given a little, maybe half an inch. Not great. Her left knee fared better, with at least an inch of wiggle room. That was good. The thick strap around Doon's torso, however, had hardly moved at all. She wasn't sure if she'd even loosened it. Doon shifted her left arm. The straps across her elbow and wrist both gave about an inch and a half, enough for her to move her hand back and forth, but not quite enough to free it.

The brace around Doon's forehead felt much looser. And even better, the restraint attaching her head and neck to the back of her chair rattled when she moved. She heard something rip as she shifted. A metal pin from the brace poked against her skin. A few more jolts and she could force out the pin completely. If she managed that, she'd be able to look in whatever direction she wanted, provided of course, that she could somehow pull off her blindfold.

That ought to be my priority, she thought. Get rid of the blindfold. Now.

Doon began moving her head from side to side. A few days ago, all she had been able to do was forwards and backwards. The sideways maneuver strained on the blindfold. Doon wasn't sure what it was catching on, but whatever it was, she'd take it and be grateful. Throwing her head to the left, Doon felt a sudden stinging pain. The blindfold, made from harsh fiber, jerked loose and came down across her left eye, digging into her cheek and ripping open a small stretch of flesh. Blood trickled down, settling in the crook

of her mouth. She tasted the iron. A bright, extreme light pierced the top of her left eye. She closed her eyelid, pained by the intense luminosity.

I did it, Doon thought.

She hadn't freed herself, or even her head, but she had managed to regain her sight. Doon slowly opened her left eye, adjusting to the light. She remained patient, not wanting to do too much too soon. The intense quality of the light dimmed slowly. Doon's pupil was getting used to seeing again, no longer confined to black nothingness. She sat still and rested for what seemed like hours, though she guessed it was actually only minutes.

Hard to tell out here in the void, she thought.

The light that was so bright seconds earlier was now nothing more than a weak glimmer in the dark cabin of the transport ship. It came from up ahead. Doon strained to see. The back of the seat in front of her blocked the view of the cockpit, but Doon guessed the hull had an open design. No door between the cockpit and the prison transport compartment.

Yeah, this ship is rudimentary for sure, she thought.

The vessel had an engine designed for interstellar travel, but the passenger quarters were completely Spartan. That told her a lot. And she started getting a picture of the place she was headed to.

Doon tried twisting her head. She wanted a glance out the window. And surprisingly there was a window, immediately on her left. She guessed the ship had been retrofitted from a passenger vessel into a prison transport carrier, which meant that the floor plan likely included showers and a kitchen – not completely Spartan after all. What she wouldn't give for a shower. Straining, she tried to force her gaze out the window. Doon shifted her

left eye as far as it would naturally go. She could only see the edge of the window, and nothing outside.

Jolting her head to either side, forwards and backwards, and finally at odd angles, she sensed the head strap giving out behind her. With a powerful thrust, she tugged on the strap with all her might. The metal pin behind her head came out with a loud pop, and her head was free. The pin fell onto her shoulder and rolled down into her lap. Looking down – thank God, I can look down – Doon saw that it was within reach of her left hand. Twisting her wrist back painfully, stretching her fingers, her fingertips scraped across the edge of the pin. It was just out of reach. Doon tried again, almost getting a hold of the pin, tugging at it, trying to get enough purchase to pull it into her grip. The pin was a good-sized piece of metal, about four or five inches long and perhaps an inch wide. And it lay just beyond her reach.

It is amazing what you can break when you put your mind to it, she thought. If the head restraint can fracture, then so can the shackles around my wrist, damn it.

Doon twisted her left wrist further, and the nerves inside it fired desperate signals to her brain, begging her to stop. Her throat convulsed, and her bones creaked – for nothing. She was still stuck, the straps stubbornly refusing to yield. Her fingers danced across the surface of the metal pin without getting a firm grip on it. Taking a short break to catch her breath, Doon cursed silently. There was nothing to do but try again. And to endure the pain again.

Whatever it takes.

She bent her wrist further, nearly blacking out from the pain. Doon bit her lower lip hard, trying to distribute her sensory experience, to dole the agony out elsewhere in her body. This wasn't working. She had to change plans.

Move your legs, she thought. Do it now.

It was risky. The pin could fall.

So? If it falls, it falls, she thought.

Doon tried moving her legs, getting the pin closer to her wrist. She felt it move, threatening to roll down between her thighs.

Damn, this is hard with only one eye free, she thought. My depth perception's gone to shit.

Doon pushed the flats of her feet against the floor and lifted her buttocks as high as the straps would allow, trying to make the pin roll closer to her left hand. It didn't work. Her torso was still firmly locked in place. The pin remained out of reach.

No guts, no glory, Doon thought.

She jolted her leg up, and the pin bounced. Just as it was about to fall down between her thighs, she twisted her wrist hard, ignoring the pain, and managed to grab onto it with two fingers. Manipulating the metal pin, she grasped it firmly in the palm of her hand.

Better, Doon thought, but what the hell am I going to do with it?

She was unsure.

All this pain, and for what?

The pin had no particular use she could think of, at least not yet. It was too small to wield as a weapon – not against a robotic guard – and far too big to use for picking locks. Besides, all the straps were sealed with digital locking ports and controlled by the ship

computer. No keyhole to stick it into anyway. Doon held onto it. She'd find a use for the pin, sooner or later.

When you have nothing, even a piece of junk can be a boon, she thought. Yeah, keep telling yourself that, Doon. You're rich.

Her head finally free, she stared over at the window. The inside of it was dirty, but still possible to look through. Any dirt on the outside blew away long before the ship reached interstellar speed. Gazing out, Doon saw nothing but a single, large star. That likely meant they were getting close to their destination. Ships travelling through deep space usually avoided the gravitational pull of stars – saving energy, time and fuel.

Yes, Doon thought, we are almost there.

The star was massive and shone blue, much bigger than any sun Doon had previously seen. Even from a distance, it beamed brightly and occupied a huge portion of the window view. It was a wonder she and the ship weren't singed or burnt to a cinder. Through the blue sheen, Doon also saw some white light. That meant it was a Class-B star.

Jesus Christ, we are far off the grid.

The brightest and bluest stars were massive and short-lived. They expelled intense amounts of energy and radiation, and Doon didn't know of a single one that hosted habitable planets. Manned vessels hadn't even approached Class-O's – the biggest, bluest, hottest and deadliest stars. Not once, throughout the entire great human exodus out of the Terran solar system, had anybody been crazy enough to do that. The Class-B's, like the bastard shining in on her, weren't quite as big or deadly, but nobody wanted planet real estate in a B neighborhood. It wasn't the increased radiation. That problem had been licked centuries ago, and a quick medical appointment or a food supplement would negate any

space-related radiation damage within a day or two. The problem was why the fuck would you want to waste your time in a B or O system? Those stars rarely, as any schoolchild knew, strayed from their area of origin, which meant that they were likely near the giant molecular clouds in which stars were formed. Star factories. No room for human colonies. Or for life.

The guard was right, Doon thought. I really am heading to the most desolate fucking rock in the known universe.

“Prisoners will prepare for arrival,” an automated voice stated. “Estimated touchdown in fifteen minutes.”

Doon cursed silently. She wouldn't be able to get out of her straps in time to learn anything useful. In fact, Doon guessed she would have needed another full week of travel to get completely free. Glancing to her right, she saw the automated guard system gliding past her row. It was a featureless device, faded chrome surfaces with a single “arm” sticking out from the center of the machine. The “arm” ended in a plasma gun barrel, and Doon guessed if she'd gotten free of her seat, the guard drone would have shot and killed her. The thing could fire at will, melting her face and never having to worry about the plasma penetrating the hull.

Yeah, alone it would have been a risky proposition. No wonder the other passengers sat still.

The drone passed her, content to let the prisoners stew in their own filth. It was a low-tech system – not bright at all – and Doon figured she could use the opportunity on her way out to learn more. She could likely walk as slow as she wanted and the drone would be dumb enough not to notice that she was gathering information. Chances were that the

prison was fully automated, at least out here in the middle of absolutely nowhere, and she wouldn't have to worry about human guards upon landing. A more advanced machine with artificial intelligence, however – that was a high likelihood.

With only her left eye free of the blindfold, she strained to get a good look at the young man sitting on her right. Doon twisted her neck further, forcing her chest painfully forwards. The man came into her field of view. She had been correct about him. He fit the mental picture she'd drawn. He was young, and she didn't think he could quite be described as a man. His features were just too boyish. The Kid was likely only ten years younger than Doon – say around twenty-eight. That was just enough to be called a man by any standard, but Doon couldn't help victimizing him and making him appear childlike. She studied his slight build, dark skin and curly black hair. His eyes remained covered by his blindfold, but something told Doon that he wasn't completely innocent. She guessed he had sly eyes, and despite his obvious fear, Doon sensed highly developed survival skills in the thin, wiry man.

Yeah, he was like all the other bastards out there.

“Hey, you,” she whispered. “What's your name?”

The Kid didn't answer. His face remained stoic and blank. He avoided revealing any emotions.

So he's smart, Doon thought.

Speaking up was risky, and the drone might decide to come back and silence Doon in a painful way. It hadn't earlier, but one never knew with bots.

Doon sensed the ship shifting, affected by planetary gravity for the first time since takeoff. Through her window, she saw a small planet coming rapidly closer as the ship

circled down into its atmosphere. The planet was tiny and gray, nothing but a speck of dust compared to the massive blue star it orbited. The surface below appeared milky and dense, covered in fog. Descending towards it, Doon noted several bright flashes, some sort of static blast, dancing across the surface.

“I don’t know this system,” Doon said.

Of the few Class-B stars charted, none of them hosted a planet like this. At least not that Doon knew of. This was going to be a lot harder than she had originally thought.

Perhaps the asshole was right. There was no escape, not from a place this remote. Not ever.

But then again, there was a first time for everything.