

Reinvention of Hans Christian Andersen's "The Brave Tin Soldier"

The salvage vessel 'Blue Mariner' eased gently into the docking port of the orbiting Eoli mining station. Whining turbines spun into life as recycled air was pumped into the airlock, re-pressurising the umbilical corridor. After a few moments the noise subsided and the outer hull door slid open.

Captain Nathan Lambeth clambered out of the airlock, grinning from ear to ear. He took a deep breath. "Ahh, nothing like the smell of reconstituted meat and dry-freeze spirits to welcome us home, eh Lars?" he said, as he slapped the huge reptilian on the shoulder. Lars grunted, "It's amusing what you humans call R and R."

They headed for the only place worth going to on a floating tin can like Eoli - 'The Stone Keep Tavern.' The place was wall to wall with the usual down and outs, bankrupt pilots and seedy 'roid scum. Those unlucky enough to wash up here either couldn't afford to leave or made a living overcharging the drifters who passed through.

They ordered drinks and pulled up stools at the bar, Lars giving his a wary look before cautiously settling his bulk on the dainty frame. He grimaced at the protesting creaks that issued. Nathan cast his gaze casually around the bustling room. Tinny retro-pop wailed from unseen speakers, drowned out by

the drunken shouts and enthusiastic dance moves of the tavern's inebriated patrons. One ambitious old timer was attempting what looked like the Conga.

His meandering blue eyes settled on a girl in the far corner. She seemed completely out of place amongst all the commotion. Nathan tried to catch her eye but she seemed determinedly preoccupied. She was poised on a similar stool, clasping a little bag embroidered with a pink rose. Her legs were crossed in a way that reminded Nathan of the little porcelain ballerinas his mother used to collect. He was so enraptured with her, he scarcely noticed that someone was speaking to him.

"Hmm?" he mused, half turning his attention to the interruption. "I said: if you want her, it's fifty, the little man at his feet repeated.

"Fifty? Fifty what?" Nathan replied, his reverie broken. The little man sighed in irritation. "Fifty credits of course! I can't have you staring at her all night for nothing, it's fifty for the night or you can sod off!"

Nathan nearly fell off his stool laughing. "Pay you?! Whatever for? Excuse me." he said, as he got off his stool to approach the girl. Enraged, the little man leapt up at him with surprising agility. There was a glint of metal and suddenly the little man was sprawled on his back on the floor, his blade having bounced off Lars' toughened exo-skeleton. "Let me know when it gets interesting" Lars sighed before returning to his conversation with the barkeep.

The little man recovered himself and spat venomously at Nathan's feet. "You better watch your back, Captain."

Nathan smirked as the little man picked himself up and left. The rest of the Tavern was unfazed by the encounter, such was the miner ethic of every man for himself. He looked up to find the girl but she was nowhere to be seen.

Maintenance work on the 'Mariner' the next day was slow going. Nathan had slept fitfully, visions of the girl haunting his dreams, and this morning he was greeted by a very unapologetic headache. Just before midday, Lars went off to source some supplies for their perilously low Medicon module. Nathan demanded Neurochem, and lots of it.

They'd moved the ship into the dry dock for easier access and he worked on installing new membrane filters for the mineral refinery array. About once a month they became saturated with dust motes and had to be replaced. Trying to keep them clean was a futile endeavour.

A sudden clatter startled him and he dropped his wrench in alarm. It fell between the grills of the hanger floor.

"Shit." he muttered to himself and then tried to squeeze his fingers through the gap to reach the wrench. He almost had it when a pair of worn boots came into his view.

"I told you not to stare." In the few seconds it took for Nathan to recognise the rasping voice of the little man, a foot was drawn back and forcefully slammed into Nathan's face. He heard the sickening crunch of at least one tooth breaking before his vision swam in a blur of colour and light and he blacked out.

He awoke in darkness, his head throbbing more than ever now. He put his hand up to feel his face and his fingers touched a sticky solution he guessed must be blood. His jaw ached and as he swallowed the metallic taste made him cringe.

Tentatively reaching into the darkness, his wet fingers brushed against a cool solid surface. Cautiously he fingered the barrier and, as the rest of his senses lurched painfully into focus, he soon discovered he was lying in some kind of box. Rapping his knuckles against the surface revealed the enclosure to be made of a metal composite. As he squirmed in the enclosed space, he was aware of dull mechanical sounds coming from the outside.

He tried calling for help yet despite his protests there came no answer. The noises outside became louder and almost familiar until suddenly they came to an abrupt end. Almost immediately an unseen force wrenched his shoulders up past his ears and his limbs were held fast by invisible bonds. He struggled for breath as his ribcage threatened to crush his distressed lungs. Then without

warning the pressure was reversed and he was violently thrown forwards in the capsule, unintentionally biting his lower lip and painfully spraining an ankle in the process. The capsular container shuddered under the force briefly before becoming completely still.

An absence of sound enveloped him, starving his ears, and he was soon horrified to discover himself free floating inside the box. His limbs no longer bound, now seemed unable to lie still of their own accord. Slowly, like some foreign object invading his body, an icy hand of pure terror clasped its fingers around his beating heart as it dawned on him exactly where he was: imprisoned inside a funeral casket, alone, in space.

He wanted to scream, anything, some act to defy the inevitable and reaffirm his existence. He told himself screaming was for the weak but really the sound wouldn't come, and besides, he knew it was a futile effort, everyone knew, such was the high mortality rate amongst miners.

He tried to slow his breathing, to prolong what precious little oxygen he had left. Maybe there was hope. Without a reference he had no measure to time himself. Perhaps that was a good thing although a part of him morbidly wanted to record the time of his death.

The surface-dwellers used to say the emptiness of space could drive a man crazy, too much time alone thinking was unhealthy they said. Nathan never did

agree, he liked only having to answer to himself. Even Lars, his companion of four years, only spoke when it mattered. Of course, space was not exactly the solitary life the old folks preached: everyone wanted wings nowadays and the skies were getting crowded.

Lying in the capsule, shivering from the onset of hypothermia, Nathan had nothing to do but spend time alone with his thoughts. Starved of input, the mind will go to great lengths to keep itself occupied. Whether it was the effects of the carbon dioxide build up he wasn't sure, but Nathan spent his last few moments before blacking out sailing his father's dinghy in the turquoise Mendrovian ocean he called home. Together, they silently sailed on into the darkness.

Farewell, warrior! ever brave,
Drifting onward to thy grave.

Dying is bad. Coming back is worse. Nathan thought later as he lay in his bunk, barely able to move. His lungs had screamed for attention like some greedy newborn the moment Lars had opened the casket, gulping down mouthfuls of excruciatingly welcome cold air. As luck would have it, Lars had chanced on the casket while running a test run on the new filters.

Nathan escaped with mild frostbite in his left leg and Lars had set a team of nanobots to work trying to save it. As he lay there, his ribs aching and his

whole body still trying to comprehend that he was indeed still alive, he thanked his nameless Gods for their pity and vowed to lead his life more carefully in future. Still, he couldn't get that girl out of his head and, despite Lars' rather forceful attempts to convince him otherwise, once he was able, he headed back to 'The Stone Keep' to find her.

She was still there, perfectly poised on the same stool, emerald eyes forever evading his gaze. The little man was nowhere in sight so Nathan decided to make his move. He hobbled across the dance floor, his left leg still encased in the Medicast slowing him down. Suddenly, seemingly without provocation, a stranger grasped him roughly by the shoulder and thrust the point of a hypodermic syringe into his stomach.

His vision blurred and swam as the poison did its deadly work. Nathan was aware of being placed gently in one of the booths, most likely to avoid attracting attention. The little man was a professional, he had to admit. It became increasingly hard to concentrate and as the loss of feeling seeped throughout his body, all thoughts of the little man escaped him.

As he lay there, unable to move, his only focus was the girl, not ten feet away. She patiently waited and now, finally, turned to gaze at him. Whether it was the poison or his enrapture with her unfathomable eyes, he seemed to lose all sense of hearing. Time itself was measured in the beating of his slowing heart.

The girl looked at him with a saddened smile and, in full view of his waning vision, dissolved in a shimmer of glittering light particles.