

# The Back Room

## A White Fire Short Story

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Toni Delle was an agent on a mission.

Roch'alie Myres—mechanical engineer and co-creator of a new exceedingly dangerous mag-rifle—was her only shot at finding the missing Doctor Telksh. Myres was also a gambler and a bad one. Toni, who'd been playing cards since she was a kid, planned to take full advantage of this weakness. She'd arrived on the planet Uxt in the early hours, so headed directly to The Reef, figuring that's where she'd find him. The Reef was not exactly as she'd remembered it, still it was a bar, and every bar had a back room for nefarious activities.

Her canine robot partner, Mate, was at her side. The size of an old Earth g-shepherd, fake brown fur covered his metallic body designed to simulate a flesh and blood animal. Mate had been bought as a child-hood pet, but he was anything but a pet to Toni. He was her eyes and ears in a place like this and she trusted him absolutely. Right now, her plan was to get Myres out of the bar so she could question him about Telksh. Toni strode into the bar's back den as if she belonged there quickly sidestepping a departing patron before she walked into them. The room was poorly lit, but through the smoky air she made out several game tables. The den was small but that didn't seem to deter the crowd of avid gamblers and onlookers from crowding close to watch the action.

Perspiration broke out across her skin as the room's intense heat threatened suffocation. The scent of illegal drugs, smoked, sniffed or otherwise inhaled assaulted her nose leaving her lightheaded. Blinking rapidly, she glanced at the tables. A dejected figure

quietly stood up from the largest table and collected his meagre coin. He pushed past Toni leaving his seat vacant. Ordinarily, she would have observed the game for a while but in rooms like this if you didn't sit in when you had the chance you might not get another.

Toni slipped into the chair and grinned at the players around her. Mate growled, capturing everyone's attention, giving her a chance to survey her opponents without their knowledge. It was almost a science the way she analysed them. Part of her was sickened by how easy it felt slipping into her old moves and chatter, just like slipping on her old school uniform. Sitting here made her skin crawl. There was a reason she'd gotten out of the game after all.

Myres matched the image Toni's shipboard Computer Intelligence Interface—Zach—had found for her. Hugely overweight, he sat opposite caressing the large number of chips stacked front of his belly. His eyes were watery and bloodshot, and his hands shook as he swiped away the sweat beading across his forehead.

He squinted at the C-bot. "Is that creature allowed in here?" No one answered. Toni skimmed the rest of her opponents.

To her immediate right sat a tall thin human, his long moustache was located beneath an equally long nose and quivered nervously as his darting gaze flicked between Mate and Toni. Next to him sat a large proud woman who, unlike Moustache and Myres, had only a few coin-equivalent chips remaining at her position. On the woman's other side sat Myres and next to him was a man with the coldest stare Toni had ever seen. His bald skull was dark green in color and his teeth gleamed through the gloom. Green Skull stared at Toni over his cards, watching her read the table. *There's trouble.*

A glance to Toni's immediate left showed the last of the gamblers. The well-dressed man calmly fingered his cards. Two men stood directly behind him and monitored the room. *Bodyguards?* The suited man looked somewhat familiar. Toni was sure she'd seen his picture

in the holonet feeds. To play at this table he'd have to have a lot of money. Toni didn't. At her pay scale she never would, but she'd been playing Duilk since she was a kid. She didn't have much coin on her, so she'd have to bluff the first few rounds, or better yet, win.

A flash of red drew her eyes to the woman over Myres' shoulder playing at the Ges table. As if sensing Toni's attention, she glanced up. Her crimson hair shimmered in the smoky light, the strands contrasting with her lightly green-tinged skin. Two gleaming fingerhorns on her forehead were tipped with red. *What's a nymph doing here?* Toni observed the pile of chips in front of her. *Winning, obviously.*

Toni returned her focus to her own table. "Gentlemen, Madam. What's the bet?"

"Fifteen," Moustache answered.

"You got enough to play these stakes?" Myres gestured toward her chip-less position.

"Deal me in."

Toni won a large pot in the first round then proceeded to lose heavily. As she ran her fingers along the digital plastic cards a cold chill ran down her spine. She was enjoying this. Perhaps a little too much. She'd slipped so easily into her grifter past, reading her fellow gamblers with ease. The thrill of manipulating them buzzed in the back of her mind. It would be all too easy to take everything and the truth of it made her dizzy. She pushed the ill thought aside. Toni chatted for an hour, talking nonsensical things like the latest holonet film or gossiping about the love lives of Tren and Chia, the holo-actor couple currently all over the feeds. Anything to keep the noise going.

When the timepiece on the wall reached three, Toni casually addressed Myres.

"Congrats on that last round. You're awfully good. Probably not luck, am I right? Ugh, I haven't had much luck lately, been surfing a bad wave for a while you might say. Hopefully, tonight's my lucky night." The rest of the table looked bored with her endless nattering.

"Would you believe I had to sell my favorite electro-phaser last week to cover it? Modified it

to my own specs even. Usually, I'm a better player, I'll win enough to get it back. Eventually. But..." she trailed off and sighed loudly, huffing her stale breath over the table. Moustache's nose wrinkled.

"Privately modified?" Myres glanced up. "In what way?"

Signs of life at last. "Oh, I had the shift reconfigured, the handle shortened and a few other items turned or tightened. I was playing against a guy I used to work with, shenghi lovin' asshole swindled me cold."

Myres's eyebrows twitched, it was echoed by his lips.

"Bet," Green Skull demanded.

"You against a little friendly chatter, pal?" Toni asked. Green Skull's fingers clenched, cracking his bones loudly.

The bodyguards behind Mr. Terroc—she was right, he was famous—stood straighter. One lowered his hand to the butt of his weapon. The table's occupants froze, as did the entire room.

"Oh, let her talk, she may lose more." The woman who had haughtily introduced herself as the Duchess snapped. No one at the table had addressed her as such. *Pretentious faker.*

"Thank you, Madam. I appreciate that." Given the few chips remaining at the Duchess's position, Toni didn't think it would be herself who lost everything tonight.

"I prefer to play in silence," Moustache added. He'd spoken his name several times but for the life of her, Toni couldn't pronounce it.

She glanced at her cards and at the considerably larger pot in the centre of the table. Now was the time to make her move. "Nine, Queen-seven."

"Damn." Moustache slapped his cards down.

Toni collected her chips and grinned. "My luck must be changing."

“Don’t speak too soon,” Mr. Terroc said. He had played in silence, up until now, watching Toni carefully as she placed her bets. He seemed more amused by her antics than annoyed.

Green Skull’s eyes narrowed as he stared at Toni’s hands. His fingers twitched again. Toni collected her chips and dealt a new round. As she’d won the last hand, it was up to her to finalize the bet. “Call. Seven deuce.”

The Duchess threw in two cards. “Deuce.” Heavily bejewelled hands glinted as she pushed her few remaining chips into the pile.

Toni spoke again, glancing coyly at Myres. “Have you seen that new phaser they’re talking about?” Since he worked in the weapons industry, she figured she’d get him interested, draw him out and convince him to leave the table with her.

“Ahhh... of course.”

“Reckon they’ll be pretty rare soon. Not many made, they say. Each one numbered. But I heard the grip gets bloody hot if it’s used continuously. You’ve probably heard about that, right? Do ya reckon it’s true?”

“Who knows.” He tapped his cards.

Green Skull’s eyes became tiny slits. “Call.”

*Shenghi, I won’t get a thing out of Myres if Green Skull keeps interrupting.*

Myres threw his cards down followed by Moustache, Mr. Terroc and Green Skull.

The Duchess placed her cards into the centre of the table with deliberate care. “Six.” Unfortunately for the other woman, the cards Toni had picked up turned the game in her favour, a heart knight, an ace of dreams and a seven of fantasy.

“Twelve,” Toni said.

Mr. Terroc gave a slight nod to acknowledge her win. Green Skull stared at the enormous pot in the middle of the table, his scowl growing darker.

The Duchess rose. "I'm sorry gentlemen." She nodded to Mr. Terroc and swept regally from the room. Toni dragged the large pile of chips to her side. She stopped as movement to her left stilled her hands. With a growl, Green Skull pushed up from his seat, chair hitting the ground behind him with a crash.

Toni cursed. With her body bent over the table, she couldn't reach for her pistol. Green Skull drew the dagger sheathed at his waist. The bodyguards behind Mr. Terroc touched their weapons waiting for their boss to give the order.

Green Skull's eyes were dark holes in the hazy light. Toni didn't so much as twitch. "Is there a problem, friend?" she asked.

Not a single person dared breathe as they waited for Green Skull's answer.

He didn't make one.

Very slowly, and without taking her eyes off her enemy, Toni gathered the scattered chips and pulled them toward her seat. *How, exactly, is this helping get Myres out of here, Toni?*

As her hands came closer to her body, Green Skull raised the dagger.

Toni kept her palms flat and inched her chair back. Her eyes never wavered from Green Skull's fingers.

Neither spoke. The spectators around them either ran out of air at the same time or remembered they needed to breathe simultaneously and took a collective breath.

*Why isn't he doing something? Why am I not doing anything? Why isn't anyone saying anything?*

The muscles around Green Skull's eyes constricted.

In one move, Toni tipped the table forward, knocking Green Skull off balance and ducked behind it. Cards, chips and drinks flew everywhere as the table crashed down. Toni landed on her knees as the dagger sailed over her head, its razor-sharp blade thudding into the

wall behind her. Toni's eyes widened. The knife's handle protruded from the painting of Mary et Laye hanging beside the door. A howl announced Mate had joined the fight. Toni peeked over the edge of the table. Green Skull knelt on the other side gasping for breath; Mate's jaws locked tight around his throat. Green Skull's arms trembled as he tried to pull the giant C-bot off. With the slightest pressure, Mate could snap his neck. Green Skull's eyes bulged.

Toni rose to her feet. Myres, despite his bulk, had jumped from the path of the fallen card table and was huddled behind a large armchair in the corner. The Ges table's occupants and all the spectators stared, eyes glued to the confrontation on the floor.

Beside Toni, Terroc and his bodyguards stood silent, three pistols trained on the fallen gambler. Toni dusted her hands down her pants and checked her pistol was in its holster before she strode to her partner's side. She knelt and clicked her fingers in the furious gambler's face. "You didn't answer my question. Do you have a problem?"

Green Skull tried to speak but no sound emerged.

A hand touched her shoulder. She peered into Mr. Terroc's clear blue gaze. His bodyguards' weapons were still raised but the suited man had holstered his own. "If you would be so good as to call off your bot, I am the owner of this establishment and I will deal with this personally."

She didn't want to hand Green Skull over to the man, but if she arrested him here she'd blow her chance with Myres. Toni accepted the offer and backed away. If Green Skull attacked again, she'd be ready. "Release him, Mate."

The C-bot's growl rumbled low inside his chest. He opened his mouth. As Green Skull rose, Mate growled again, exposing sharp metallic teeth. Where the previous growl threatened the gambler in a clear message not to move, this one warned that if he tried anything he wouldn't know what hit him.

The bodyguards grabbed Green Skull's arms. Mr. Terroc held out his hand and one of the bystanders offered up his pistol. Mr. Terroc took the weapon and shot Green Skull in the chest. The dead man would have collapsed had he not been held in place by Mr. Terroc's guards. Toni watched, speechless, as Mr. Terroc handed the pistol back to its owner and ordered his guards to remove the body. Several darkly-dressed waiters restored the table, replacing each player's chips and beverage. The bodyguards returned empty-handed and the game resumed like the fight had never happened. Toni collected her winnings, swearing internally. Mate paced behind her for a time before he settled down to watch the room once more. No one joined the game in Green Skull's place.

Toni would never get the conversation back on track to hook Myres now. She would have to change her game plan and find another way to get Myres out of the room. She eyed the timepiece above the door. A few turns would give her time to come up with a new strategy.

Moustache was soon out. With a bow, he stumbled off toward the exit. Toni rubbed at her eyes, freeing grit from the corners. She blinked, taking the departure as a chance for a break. It seemed Myres and Mr. Terroc had the same idea. Mr. Terroc stood and spoke quietly to his bodyguards. Myres gestured to one of the girls at the nearby bar for another drink.

Toni held her hand over her glass to refuse the proffered refill. Myres looked a little worse for wear. He slumped back in his seat, resting his head against the frame and stared up at the ceiling with half-closed eyes.

Toni stretched her arms and groaned loudly. Myres shifted, watching her from the corner of his eye so she arched her back a little further. He leaned in her direction as Mr. Terroc moved back to his seat. Break time was over.

"You said your phaser was modified?" Myres asked.

“What?” She wouldn’t need to start a conversation at all. Myres was doing all the work for her. Not wanting to appear too eager she blinked slowly and rubbed her temples. “My phaser?”

Myres leaned close. “The one your partner stole.”

Mr. Terroc tapped a fingernail against the table. Myres shifted back into his seat. Toni dragged her cards to her chest and reached out to rest her fingers gently against Myres’s elbow. “Yeah, it was my favourite, I loved that stupid thing. My partner—my friend—betrayed me. I feel so used.” She tapped her fingers against his arm before pulling her hand back to place a card face down on the table.

Myres stared at his elbow for a long moment and placed his cards down pushing all of his chips into the centre.

“We finish here and I’ll show you a specially modified phase-knife. Delicate work. It’s a real beauty.”

“Wow,” Toni breathed and shoved her chips into the pile, squinting down at her cards. “Does your guy do freelance? I have my modified plans with me. I just need a guy, gal or they to fix me up.”

Mr. Terroc called. Toni examined her hand. Not happy, she pulled a card from the pile. “If I’d had my phaser, that Green Skull would never have dared pull that knife of his.”

Myres placed another card down. “I might just know a private, no-questions-asked phase modifier who could help you out. You show me the plans and I’ll see what I can do.”

*Gotcha.* She placed her cards down and fanned them out. “Three and seven.” Laughing, she pulled the chip pile toward her seat.

Myres threw down his cards and stood. “Come have a look, if you like the workmanship and I review your plans, I can give you his name.”

“Yeah, righto, I’ve won enough tonight. Looks like my luck has changed after all.”

A flash of red spun Toni around, but there was no one there. She was clearly still on edge. The guards behind Mr. Terroc stepped forward but after a sharp look from their boss, they relaxed and nodded to Toni as she left the table. *What's wrong with this picture?*

Mate sat at the door waiting for her. He moved as Myres passed and fell in behind Toni. She stopped to grasp the hilt of Green Skull's dagger—still stuck to the painting beside the door—and tugged to remove it from the wall. There was a long gash right in the center of the painted woman's forehead. Intensely grateful the picture had not been her head, Toni slipped the dagger into her belt and followed Myres from the den. Play time over, it was time to go to work.