

When the Mind and Body Become One  
By Chuck Challenbach

I still don't know how my arm got torn off on Themis. I do know that I made a good friend there in a young Maverick girl named Hotwire. She fixed up my missing arm and helped me out of a few jams. She's a good kid, and sort of cute too.

As my self-diagnostic programs repaired some of my missing memories, I realized who I was and what I was doing. They call me Talker. They think that's funny, because I don't have a mouth. A diplomacy bot without a mouth, what a laugh. Look, I didn't as to be a DR-614. You play the cards you're dealt.

I work for the Cartel. My job is information gathering. Mostly, that means I listen, watch, and record. I've got some sizable data storage devices, if I do say so myself.

After my rescue at the hands of noble Hotwire, we scrambled from Themis in a hurry after she developed some gambling problems. We headed for the Rats' Nest on Ceres, where she thought she could find a job.

As luck would have it, since my brains were still scrambled, the Gongen I was keeping tabs on had followed us. I have a strong hunch that they were involved with my missing arm going missing. The Gongen thugs made a scene, and we had to make a quick exit once again. I told Hotwire that The Gambler would treat her will if she got me to Europa, and we were off.

We found a fast taxi and made it to the transport terminal in record time. That driver got a big tip, let me tell you. I found a bean counter working for the Cartel at the terminal. He smuggled us aboard a hulk on a return trip to see The Boss. The accommodations were less that sumptuous, but Hotwire only complained for a couple of hours.

She was worried about meeting the famous Gambler, but I told her he was a sweetheart when you get to know him. She figured I was lying just to make her feel better. I told her she had a future in the diplomacy biz, and that she was correct. That Gambler guy is a right bastard when he wants to be. Which is most of the time.

We got to know each other over the forty-hour trip. The Haggard Hulk we were riding had a heck of a drive to get us there that fast, but we also had a close approach. My traveling companion was impressed with the SG accel.

Hotwire was a Cog. She grew up on Themis, but she always wanted to see the Outer Rim and find her fortune, or something corny like that. Kids always spin these kinds of tales, but they're enthusiastic and don't usually know enough to get scared. I like that.

Luckily, we didn't have to bend around Jupiter, since that gravity well is a hull breaker. Europe was on this side of the Big Planet, and when we got close we were met by a couple of Cartel Type-II ships. The Gambler had'em all fixed up to welcome visitors. She spotted some extra cannons too.

The procedure for a visit to Europa hadn't changed. We powered down and they boarded us. Some thugs came on board with heavy hardware and treated us real badly. They did a cavity search on the ship and both of us too. Hotwire didn't like the frisking, but I told her not to give them any lip. The Gambler's boys are not the forgiving type.

With a close escort from the two fighters all the way down, we landed at one of the visitor pads at The Gambler's complex. Hotwire's only comment on the place as we completed our approach was, "Wow." Our new friends the thugs yanked us from the hulk and ushered us through the connecting tunnels to see The Man himself.

There were dozens of scanners, some handled by techs and some hidden in the walls, as we stepped through sealed doorways into antechambers. I'd been through this before, but Hotwire was getting pissed.

Finally, two big double doors opened up into the biggest office I've ever seen. Two skinny white-faced mannequins stood at either end of a huge desk in the back of the room. I'd seen this red haired pair at the Rats' Nest. A large figure sat behind the desk, his back to us. A bald head shone prominently above the chair back.

The skinny guys both turned toward the desk and said in unison, "They're here, Boss."

The Chair whirred as the motors turned it, and Hotwire saw The Gambler for the first time. He sighed rather loudly and looked us both up and down. "New arm, Talker?" he asked, in that deep, gruff voice.

"Yep. Courtesy of my friend here. Her name's Hotwire. She rescued me on Themis. I was pretty beat up." I gestured toward her with my new, heavy lifter arm.

"Can she talk?" asked the Gambler.

"Yeah, I can talk, Mr. Gambler. I didn't care much for your boys frisking me, and those scanner probes are too personal for my tastes, what you need..."

"Okay, enough talking, shut up now." He squinted one eye at her and raised the other eyebrow. A withering look. She withered. "Look, girlie, I appreciate your rescue of our bot here. Here's a small token of my affection." He paused and each of the redheads gave her a thousand credit marker. "There might be more, depending on the info we've got here."

"Um, okay, thanks," stuttered Hotwire, taking the markers. She looked at her boots.

"Not let's get dwon to business." The Gambler put his meaty hands on the desk and leaned forward. "Talked, tell me what you got. Just the digest version, we'll examine your files later." He looked from one redhead to the other. "Spiderboys, get some chairs." Hotwire noticed that each of the redheads had a large spider on his shoulder. She shot me a "yuck" look.

We took our seats. The chairs were metal and uncomfortable. I opened a wireless connection with the desk computer. A holo screen appeared across the front edge between him and us. I fed the display some of the records I had stored as I spoke.

"You sent me to Themis to spy on the Gongen. The hot top you got said that some Gongen operatives were looking for a Maverick scientist by the name of Crookshank. Sounded like a bad holodrama to me. I founded Crookshank on Themis." The holo showed a scrawny scared man wearing goggles on his head and tech overalls. "That's what I'm good at, finded people. I have a way of blending in, being innocuous, acting like a piece of furniture. Most humans don't take much notice of bots anyway. Their loss."

"Keep it moving, bot," growled The Gambler.

I hit the fast forward. "I followed the geek for a few days. Man, that was boring. He thought he was being sneaky, running down alleys with double backs. I could follow him across town just listening to his hammering heartbeat." Crookshank glanced over his shoulder in the holo leaving a cheap hotel.

"Okay, here's the payoff." I slowed the holo and it showed a dark meeting with the scientist and four Gongen, the same ones that found us at the Rat's Nest. "Crookshank returned a sample to the Gongen. Something they had given him to analyze. He told them it was truginium. They didn't know the word, so he told them what it was."

"Some radioactive crap they burn off in the mines on Ganymede," said The Gambler. "Never been worth a cred."

"Yeah, well funny thing is, the Gongen guys got interest at this point," I told him. "Crookshank gave them some hard data," in the holo he handed over a small data drive in exchange for some cred markers, "and they paid him off."

The Gambler was stroking his chin with his hand at this point. I wanted to tell Hotwire this was a good sign, but I couldn't right then. I'd have shot her a meaningful glance, but my bot face is lousy at that.

"Run that back so I can hear it, Talker." The Gambler leaned forward and peered at the holo. I rewound and started again, turning up the volume.

“Ganymede is the only place I know of to get this,” said Crookshank. “All the mines there burn it off. It's radioactive, so it's difficult to store.” He paused, looking curious. “What... do you want it for?”

“We found these traces in a meteoroid impact. We wanted to know what the material was. We don't think it's anything important.” The Gongen looked stern, as if he wanted Crookshank to believe him

“I heard that one of your big bots stopped working on Gongen,” ventured the scientist, nervously. “I don't suppose this has anything to do with that?”

“Nothing at all,” snapped the Gongen. “Your career as a scientist will be prolonged if you stop asking questions and specialize in answering them.”

The Gambler said, “Alright, that's enough. We'll analyze it over the next few hours. See the data techs to get it downloaded.”

I cut off the transmission and the holo fizzled. “I know the drill,” I replied. “Hard to believe somebody is interested in truginium, isn't it?”

“The Gongen aren't the only ones taking an interest,” said The Gambler. “But that's not your concern right now. Download that data and we'll prep you for your next trip.”

“Thanks, Boss.” I would have grinned. “What do you have for Hotwire here?” She sat up straight and smiled weakly.

“She's no Earther spy, we've run her history,” said The Gambler, leaning back. Hotwire's jaw dropped. “She's young and nobody knows her, and those are assets in my business.” He looked at her, eye to eye. “Looking for a job, girlie?”

“Yeah, sure!” Hotwire brightened.

“You're kinda perky, and I don't like that. If you're gonna work for us, you'll have to get laid back.”

“I can do laid back, really. I can.” He looked unconvinced. “I'll work on it,” she said firmly.

The Gambler laughed. He had a good laugh, but I hadn't heard it often. “Alright, girlie. Talk to Ajax at the front desk. We'll see what we can do. Maybe you should go with Talker here on his next trip. You two work well together.” She grinned and put her hand on my arm. “Now get the hell out of here, I got serious work to do.”

We muttered our thanks, stood up, and walked out. The Spiderboys removed the chairs. As we left, we passed a tattooed, half-mech Maverick that growled around a cigar at us. She strode through the double doors, and we heard The Gambler rumble, “Three hours of knife work, and you can't get this guy to talk? How much of him is left?”

Hotwire shuddered. The doors closed with a thud, and we went about our business on Europa.