



GRIMDARK FUTURE

TROUBLE BREWING

ONE
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RULES

SHORT STORY

TROUBLE BREWING BY RG LONG

A thousand neon signs hung above in the rain-soaked cityscape. Only some of them read Helix Conglomerate, but all of them were, in one way or another, owned by the megacorporation. Though their role in the Barthaba Singularity Crisis had seen their fortunes fall in the Inner Sphere, their shadow loomed large in the Sirius Sector, especially in Virex Prime.

Swiftclaw watched the rain drip down from glowing lettering as it was caught in updrafts from industrial vents and ribboned off of the canopy tarps of humble street stalls. The fluorescent light reflected from the drops, making artificial rainbows in bubblegum hues before the raindrops pattered against the maze of asphalt below. Street hawkers, office workers, and corporate mercs all seemed to step in rhythm with the rain, and even the Jackal busker down the road seemed to play along on his cracked string box.

Tail feathers swaying, Swiftclaw slipped between people without brushing a sleeve. Claws clicked only when he allowed them to. In many places, a Change Daemon Champion would draw unwanted attention walking out in the open, but in a city the size of this, few bothered to turn their heads.

With a gentle motion, Swiftclaw sat next to the most unusual sight on the street: a Robot sitting at a noodle stand. No doubt; this was his impatient client.

Swiftclaw sat down beside the robot, leaning back and setting down his case. Swiftclaw spoke first.

“Here to enjoy the food?”

“You chose this spot,” The Robot snapped, though she was careful to keep her voice low. “You were supposed to retrieve the prophecy today. Do you have it with you?”

“Not yet... but I will before this meeting is over,” Swiftclaw replied crooning, as feathers pricked up. “First, I have some questions.”

“Not a part of the deal,” the Robot replied, her sensors honed in on Swiftclaw’s case, filled with credits she’d given as a down payment.

“We both know your credits aren’t worth much to me,” Swiftclaw said. “I took this job out of curiosity. If you don’t satisfy mine, then I might just keep my prize.”

“The Reignitionist Legion won’t allow you to...” The Robot started but Swiftclaw held up a hand to stop her.

“We both know it will be a lot easier to just tell me now rather than have your little Legion try to hunt me down. You’re looking for a prophecy sold by one of the Star-Priests who fled the war in Loppian,” Swiftclaw said. “Frog-Mages have gone to some length to encode it. You wouldn’t happen to know what’s on it, would you?”

The Robot paused, looking away at the city. Swiftclaw could not read the metallic face of the machine before him, but he could hear the whirring of systems. Then, the Robot drew out a small device between her fingers, clearly Saurian-designed.

“We have a digital cypher. This prophecy is rumoured to speak of the Paradox Drive, which could be used to...”

Swiftclaw stopped her again, spurring the Robot’s gears to audibly grind as she quickly slipped the cypher back into her cloak. The Swiftclaw stood up and looked out.

“My courier should have been here by now,” he announced to her. “You must excuse this embarrassment.”

He stepped forward, swinging his cane, Dimension Slicer, to open a wormhole just large enough to step through. It was sealed before his client could follow him.

Swiftclaw clicked his tongue against the inside of his beak as he looked down on the crowd from his perch. Rain and dense crowds made it difficult to see, but his eyes locked onto it immediately: a narrow side street choked into alleyways; three Saurians surrounded a man against a rain-slick wall.

The man wobbled as he looked over them. His creased, beer-stained uniform jacket bore the logo of the Helix Conglomerate security division. In both hands, he clutched a compact case, held close the way a drowning man clutches a float.

Swiftclaw passed through the surrounding crowd as they tried to keep their distance and pretended not to see the mugging.

“Hand it over,” one of the Saurians snapped. The Saurian cracked the joints in his claws as his two friends moved to cut off the drunken security worker’s escape.

The Swiftclaw’s neck bristled, centring the weight of his Dimension Slicer in his palm, and he stepped into the scuffle like a dancer accepting a partner’s hand.

“Looking for this?” His voice cut through the commotion like an owl’s cry piercing the night.

The Saurians turned their heads to face the Daemon. Calmly, Swiftclaw raised a case identical to the one clutched by the cornered security guard.

Rain ticked onto the street like impatient fingers. The Saurians’ eyes went narrow as they scanned the Change Daemon.

“This isn’t a place for a dapper chicken like you. Hand over the case, and we’ll pretend we never saw you,” the Saurian said.

“Ah, but I’m rather fond of this case,” Swiftclaw said. “It’s quite difficult to find a good quality one, as I’m sure you’re aware.”

One of the Saurians lunged. The Dimension Slicer answered with a soft, resonant hum. Space thinned to a porcelain sheet as he drew the blade and slid. One heartbeat, he stood three strides away; the next, he was close enough to count the leader’s scales, the blade’s edge kissing the implant housing and flicking his grip open. A knife clattered into the water.

The second swung wild. Swiftclaw’s free hand caught a wrist, turned, and used the man’s own weight to write a quick lesson across the pavement. The third got one solid step backward before a lateral cut of air snapped him off his feet with a burst of pressure and rain. Swiftclaw pivoted, let the blade’s hum fade, and palmed it away as if embarrassed by the fuss.

It was over in seconds. A clean victory.

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As the Saurians lay groaning, the market's hum resumed as the gathered crowd turned back to their business.

The "drunk" security worker straightened, dusting grit from his sleeves with sheepish dignity. The weave in his step appeared to iron itself away.

"I appreciate the help, stranger," the courier said, his tone even and calm as he set down his case and extended his hand to Swiftclaw for a handshake. Swiftclaw set his own case down as he bowed with a flourish and then took the man's hands.

"Take care of yourself." Swiftclaw said, picking up the courier's case. His accomplice nodded, eyes flicking to the case in Swiftclaw's claws, and turned away. In moments, he was gone, disappearing into the crowd while whistling something off-key, feet splashing through shallow puddles. The courier did not look back as he went. Professionals rarely did.

As he turned back towards the noodle shop, he saw the robot standing before him, her robotic foot tapping on the pavement.

"Ah," Swiftclaw said, leaning in, "I believe this is yours."

"Step back," the Robot said firmly. "I'm not giving you anything until you show me what's in your case."

Swiftclaw chuckled as he pulled the case before him and slid the latch with ease. The case opened with a satisfying click.

Inside, cushioned like an egg in velvet, sat a tin of Eternal Dynasty dragon-lotus tea.

"That is tea," the Robot said.

"That's no mere tea," Swiftclaw replied, one eyebrow raised. It's Faing Clan Dragon Lotus tea. Quite rare here, valuable enough on its own. But, of course, it's what's on the inside that matters."

Carefully, he took his free hand and broke the seal on the packaging before unscrewing the lid. The gentle floral aroma broke through the smell of asphalt and rain.

"That still appears to be tea," the Robot replied.

"Hrm." Swiftclaw plucked a feather and poked it gently into the tin; he heard a soft tap as it reached the bottom. He stirred it. Nothing but the leaves and petals. "Unfortunate. There appears to have been a misunderstanding with the delivery. I will resolve this."

Slipping the tea into his coat, Swiftclaw moved his Dimension Slicer abruptly, cutting a new wormhole. Stepping back to his lookout's perch, the Change Daemon looked down on the planned route, one he'd set up for his accomplice specifically in case of such an encounter.

Sure enough, the off-tune whistle continued. The feathers on Swiftclaw's neck bristled with delight; he'd found him. Another flick of the cane and a wormhole opened below him. Swiftclaw calmly stepped forward, off the building and through the void.

The wormhole opened over the courier as he walked, and Swiftclaw landed talons-first on his accomplice's back, easily bringing him down with the momentum.

The man wheezed as he hit the pavement; the case which Swiftclaw had given him bounced ahead on the concrete. He

groaned as the pain set in, but he tried to reach out and recover the case before any other passerby could snatch it from the ground.

"Wrong package," Swiftclaw said.

The worker grunted with pain, turning up to Swiftclaw. "Look, I did what you told me to. Vendor, codeword, walk. No detours."

Swiftclaw studied the man's eyes, his breath, and his scent, the trifecta that caught most lies.

"Mm." Swiftclaw angled the tin so the man could see. "Dragon-lotus tea is a fine vintage for rainy evenings, but I find it pairs poorly with disappointment."

The courier swallowed. "Look, I don't know tea from toxins. I did what you told me and took what I was given. I didn't look inside, and I didn't ask questions."

"Usually, a wise decision. Unfortunately," Swiftclaw said, picking up the case that the man had dropped. "I can hardly let you walk away with my money until you help me clear it up."

The courier blinked, tilting his head in confusion, but Swiftclaw dug his talons in, causing the courier to wince.

"First, there were the thugs you encountered," Swiftclaw said. "It's possible they just have a taste for tea, but it's rare that's a cause for muggings. Did you know them?"

"I saw them after I left the shop." The man grunted, "One of them followed me for a while, but you arrived before they got close enough to try anything."

"Of course." Swiftclaw's eyes narrowed as he loosened his talons. "If they already had what they were looking for, they wouldn't have tried to rob you. But someone else must know what our vendor was carrying."

"So," The courier said, twisting his neck to look at Swiftclaw. "Maybe someone convinced the vendor to give me the wrong box?"

Swiftclaw tilted his head and stepped forward, taking his weight off the courier. "That's a possibility, though it doesn't narrow down my suspects."

The courier tried to pick himself back up as Swiftclaw leaned down to snatch away the case in front of him. Examining it, he shook his head and tossed out a few credits in front of the courier.

The courier blinked. "Why?"

"You didn't deliver my package, but you've been an entertaining chat..." Swiftclaw crooned, "Now. I have a vendor to see."

Seeing his opening, the courier grabbed the credits and shoved them in his pockets before picking himself up and vanishing into the market's tide. Swiftclaw watched him go, then turned the tin in his claws. Rain freckled the polished surface; neon bled across his distorted reflection.

This has been a long shot; the seal on the tin and case was unbroken, after all.

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He tucked the tin beneath his arm as if it were the thing he'd wanted all along and drifted with the current, letting the crowd carry him two lanes over before cutting back. He passed a stall selling counterfeit Clan crests, a gambling den disguised as a fortune-teller's tent, and a clinic that promised to realign your spines through channelling the spirit.

The rain softened to a mist as the noise settled into a conversational murmur.

A security patrol in Helix uniforms drifted past in their weatherproof cloaks, faces blank under rimmed hoods. One of them glanced at Swiftclaw's coat, at the lapel feather, and decided, correctly, that he was not the sort of problem worth taking on for free. They moved on.

Swiftclaw checked the time by the old-fashioned expedient of looking up; a pharmacy displayed the time, half-obscured by steam. It was getting late, but that hardly mattered: Virex Prime never truly slept.

Swiftclaw set off again, unhurried grace in his stride, as if leaving a party early without insulting the host.

The street vendor's stand was a humble thing wedged into a narrow strip of pavement between two glowing neon holograms.

Steam drifted from battered kettles, the air rich with the sharp, floral tang of freshly steeped dragon-lotus tea. A rainbow of tins, jars, and vacuum-sealed packets was stacked in precarious towers behind the counter.

Swiftclaw approached casually, his claws tapping a slow rhythm against the rim of the tea container he carried. The vendor, a wiry Kusarian with skin like weathered leather and low mandibles that seemed sharp despite his age.

The vendor's smile was polite but thin.

"You're far from the tourist districts, stranger," the vendor said, pouring a careful stream of tea into a small tasting cup.

"I have a particular taste," Swiftclaw replied, setting the container down between them. "I was hoping you might tell me a little more about this package..."

The vendor's eyes flicked down, then back up too quickly. His hands busied themselves wiping down a clean counter that didn't need wiping. "I sell a lot of tea, stranger. Can't be expected to recall every sale."

"Of course." Swiftclaw's voice stayed smooth, but his tail twitched behind him. "Maybe your ledgers could tell us instead."

The vendor leaned back, his smile fading and eyes narrowing. "You don't look like Helix Security. Show me a badge, stranger, and I might show you my ledger..."

Swiftclaw's eyes scanned the shop, reading through the labels marked in the standard Kusarian dialect of the Eternal Dynasty. Then, he found a match.

"You misunderstand me," Swiftclaw crooned with a gentle tone, stepping towards the shelf with the tea. "An associate of mine picked up this tea for me a little earlier as a gift, but it wasn't quite what I expected."

"Your associate has excellent taste, friend." The vendor leaned forward. "These are Faing Clan Dragon-Lotus leaves. It is exceedingly rare here but is the finest we have on offer; perhaps you have only ever tried Wao or Royal Clan leaves. They are good but not quite the same..."

"Might I sample the aroma?" Swiftclaw said, leaning forward, "I might be interested in purchasing a second case."

"You can smell it once you buy it, friend." The vendor replied, closing his hand on the case. "It has travelled far and at considerable risk and expense."

"Have you sold much?" Swiftclaw said, looking at the case which appeared almost full except for a single missing tin.

"It just arrived," the vendor said, leaning back. "The case is full except for the one which your associate bought."

"Could you tell me if there was anyone else asking about them? I might need some time to get the money together, and it would be a shame to let this lot slip through my claws."

The vendor's eyes narrowed as he leaned in toward the Daemon until Swiftclaw leaned his case forward, showing the credits which he had taken off the courier. The vendor's brow rose, and he straightened himself out.

"There was someone here earlier before your friend. A Kusarian, maybe from the Yoan clan," the tea vendor said. "He asked about it, but I turned him away. It seemed like he wasn't ready to pay. I would not wait long, though; this is very good tea, friend."

Swiftclaw nodded. "I will see you soon. Sooner than you think."

The Daemon tossed some credits on the table and walked out. He didn't go far, though; instead, he tapped his Dimension Slicer and opened another wormhole. Moments later, he was perched in the shadow of a flickering neon sign across the street. From here, he had a clear view of the stall. The minutes passed slowly; the scent of tea hung thick in the air.

Two hours later, his patience was rewarded. An Eternal Dynasty ninja moved with precise steps, every motion coiled with restrained power. He laid down some credits on the table, and the vendor opened the crate. The Kusarian ran his fingers along the case, tapping each one lightly as if testing for a hidden weight. The Ninja gave a curt nod, exchanged a few words with the vendor, and walked off with one of the containers tucked under his arm.

"Found you." Swiftclaw cooed softly.

With a flick of his wrist, Swiftclaw used his dimension slicer to open a wormhole ahead of his quarry's path as the Ninja stepped away from the stall.

When Swiftclaw appeared before him, the Ninja moved his fingers, activating a control on his belt. A shimmering disc of warped space snapped into existence, and the Ninja leapt through. In the next instant, he was gone, teleported only a short distance away by his displacer pack, onto a balcony.

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Swiftclaw's neck shot around. He saw a trace of the wormhole in the corner of his eye; it seemed that the Ninja was using some crude approximation of his Dimension Slicer. With a swift motion of his wrist, Swiftclaw opened another wormhole.

He emerged behind the Ninja, grabbing him on the shoulder.

"Now, now," Swiftclaw crooned. "At very least, you could at least introduce yourself."

The Ninja turned with a fluid motion, swinging a sickle which Swiftclaw had not even seen him grab. Swiftclaw dodged, but the Ninja took the chance to tear himself from Swiftclaw's arm and start to run into another wormhole.

"I am Xyeng," the Ninja replied as he leapt through. "And you will not catch me."

"How uncouth," Swiftclaw replied, clicking his beak as he slipped his Dimension Slicer through the air.

Swiftclaw burst through a stall selling skewered meats, the smell of sizzling spice snapping past him as he carved open another slit in reality. He dived through, reappearing atop a sagging canopy just in time to see the Ninja vanish in a shimmer of bent air.

A flick of Swiftclaw's wrist ripped open a fresh tear, and he stepped through into a narrow alley. The Ninja was halfway down it, but in the blink of an eye, they traded places, the Ninja slipping behind him with a kick aimed for his ribs. Swiftclaw rolled, the strike grazing his armour, and retaliated with an upward slash that split the air into a jagged portal.

They flashed across a line of hanging lanterns, scattering startled patrons below. A cart stacked with ceramic pots exploded into shards as the Ninja dived through it, phasing out before the impact reached him. Swiftclaw emerged on the other side of a shimmering fold in space, catching the Ninja's ankle with the hook of his staff, only for the Ninja to twist free, launching them both into another blink-step.

Over the tops of cargo skiffs they danced, each jump timed so closely that their afterimages blurred. At one point, Swiftclaw emerged directly in front of his opponent mid-leap. They collided chest-to-chest, grappling in a weightless instant before slamming through separate portals, hitting the ground hard but rolling to their feet in unison.

Swiftclaw stepped forward, ready to finish the fight.

The Ninja didn't stay pinned. He vaulted sideways off the balcony rail, catching a loose banner cable and swinging onto a suspended scaffold two stories down. Swiftclaw followed without hesitation, slicing the air beneath him and stepping out onto the scaffold mid-stride. It swayed under their combined weight, the cables groaning.

They clashed again, blades ringing, the city's glow flickering between them through the gaps in the slats. The Ninja disengaged with a low sweep, forcing Swiftclaw to hop back, then leapt away to a rooftop crowded with solar collectors.

Swiftclaw gave chase. They wove between mirrored panels, reflections of each other's movements darting across the glass like duelling ghosts. The Ninja vaulted over a maintenance bot and vanished in a shimmer.

Swiftclaw reappeared just above him, dropping with the weight of his strike, forcing the Ninja to roll aside.

They tore through a rooftop garden next, scattering tall hydroponic towers and sending fragrant green shards into the rain. A startled gardener shouted curses in three languages as they blinked away again, across a narrow gap, onto a tram gliding along its mag-rails.

Swiftclaw landed like a bird of prey, knees bending to absorb the tremor. The Ninja was at the far end of the tram's roof, crouched and ready.

A single heartbeat of stillness passed between them before they rushed forward, blades meeting in the middle. The clash sent a spray of sparks across the night, reflected in every wet surface.

One more blink took them both off the tram and onto the skeletal frame of a construction site. The steel beams sang under their boots, and the wind caught in the open spaces like a distant scream. It was here, with nowhere left for the Ninja to run without risk of a fatal fall, that Swiftclaw saw his opening.

Then Swiftclaw caught the angle he needed. He slashed his Dimension Slicer in a precise arc, knocking the tin to the ground where it clanged against a bare metal beam. The Ninja leapt to save it, but Swiftclaw knocked it away again with his foot and stepped down on the Ninja.

"You fight well, Daemon," The Ninja said through narrowed eyes.

"You made for an interesting opponent," Swiftclaw crooned, tilting his head toward the tea container. "Unfortunately, you didn't know all the pieces in play."

He slid his hand into his coat, drawing out a small device: his employer's cypher.

"I wanted leverage," Xyeng said. "The Saurians are desperate to retrieve their prophecy unread. If you use that, they would rather kill you than pay you."

Swiftclaw looked down at the case and replied, "Then it would be wise for you to move along. Because to me, that sounds like a challenge worth taking."

The Eternal Dynasty reached for his sickle, but Swiftclaw pressed the Dimension Slicer against his neck.

"You have bested me this time, but I will win in the end." Xyeng said with a hiss. "Whatever you are scheming, Virex Prime is nearing a boiling point, and when it erupts, I will claim its prize."

"Do what you like," Swiftclaw says. "I have a different prize in mind. You see, I consider myself to be in the business of making the impossible possible."

The Ninja hesitated for only a breath, then, with the reflexes of a highly trained assassin, he somersaulted off the roof and into the wormhole opened by his displacement pack. His movement barely disturbed a raindrop.

Swiftclaw stood alone now, the neon city breathing around him in pulses of light and shadow. Rain hissed against power lines, dripping from signs in streaks of pink and turquoise.

TROUBLE BREWING BY RG LONG

Somewhere far below, over the thumping music of late-night clubs, a voice echoed out.

“I found you, Swiftclaw!” The robotic voice echoed from below, “You didn’t think you could steal from the Reignitionist Legion and get away with it, did you?”

Swiftclaw chuckled lowly as he lifted the case filled with the payment that he had taken from the courier.

“I did, in fact.”

With a flick of his wrist, the credits stuffed inside the case fell over the city like rain, blowing in the updraft of the vents and reflecting the light of neon signs as they scattered over the streets. Soon, his Robot client was lost in the crowd of desperate, greedy souls scouring the street for what he had cast aside.

Swiftclaw flicked his Dimension Slicer, tearing a new wormhole. As amusing as the spectacle was, he had places to be.