Lovereading.co.uk
Helping you choose your next book

You loved your last book...but what are you going to read next?

Using our unique guidance tools, Love**reading** will help you find new books to keep you inspired and entertained.

Opening Extract from...

The Noise Revealed

Written by Ian Whates

Published by Solaris

All text is copyright © of the author

This Opening Extract is exclusive to Love**reading**.
Please print off and read at your leisure.

THE NOISE REVEALED

By Ian Whates





First published 2011 by Solaris
an imprint of Rebellion Publishing Ltd,
Riverside House, Osney Mead,
Oxford, OX2 0ES, UK

www.solarisbooks.com

ISBN: 978 1 907519 53 6

Copyright © Ian Whates 2011

The right of the author to be identified as the author of this work has been asserted in accordance with the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988.

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise, without the prior permission of the copyright owners.

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

Designed & typeset by Rebellion Publishing



Printed in the UK

For Margo Whates, my mother,
who doesn't read my work
so may never realise this book is dedicated to her.

PART ONE

CHAPTER ONE

JOSS BRENNAN STARED at the screen, trying to decide why she wasn't more delighted at what she saw there. After all, wasn't this every tramp miner's dream – the pot of gold at the end of the celestial rainbow? Yet she felt more nervous than excited.

"Has to be a ship," she muttered, to nobody in particular.

"Yeah, but what kind of ship?" replied Crane, who, in the absence of anyone else, was the nobody in question.

She could feel him at her shoulder, a too-close presence nearly as irritating as the sweat that prickled her short-cropped scalp. More than that, she could *smell* him – none of them had washed in more days than she cared to remember; there were too many other priorities out here. Personal hygiene tended to drop to the bottom of a long list. She knew without looking that he'd be clinging to the wires above his head with one hand and to a pipe to one side with the other, which was the only way two of them could fit into the cramped cabin unless she was willing to offer him her lap. And she wasn't, not Crane.

Joss grunted. "Beats the hell out of me."

Joss knew ships, but these readings didn't match any she'd ever heard of, even granting that this was a derelict and so likely to be an old model, almost certainly pre-War.

"Well," asked a voice made tinny by the ship's internal comms system, "are we going in or what?" Wicks, the engineering guru who kept them in space; third and final member of their merry little band.

"Patience, Wicksy, patience," Joss murmured in response.

She glanced around at Crane to gauge his thoughts, and found him trying to suppress a knowing grin, which disappeared the second her gaze fell upon him. Damn! He'd caught her playing with the bullet again, turning its familiar, machine-smoothed length between the tips of her stubby nail-bitten thumb and forefinger without her even realising.

It was a comfort thing, something she had a habit of doing when she was nervous or uncertain. Joss knew that, which was fine. So did Crane, which wasn't.

She dropped the bullet immediately, allowing it to dangle from her neck from its delicate gold chain, scowled at Crane and turned back to her screen. Screw his advice, whatever it might have been. *She* was captain of this ship and the decision was hers to make, no one else's. She looked at the readouts again, recognising what prompted her misgivings: life had taught her the hard way that when something looked too good to be true it probably was. But she also knew that if they turned away now without ever finding out what was down there, the wondering and the 'what ifs' would drive her nuts.

Joss took a deep breath. "Okay, people, we're going in."

"About time," Crane muttered, which, she guessed, told her where he stood on the issue.

"Wicksy, get kitted up. Crane, you're staying with the ship."

"But…"

"No buts. We don't know what's waiting for us down there. Somebody has to stay onboard *The Gold Digger* to monitor the situation and be ready for a quick lift-off if needed, and it's not as if I'm spoilt for choice here… That somebody is you."

She unbuckled and climbed out of the chair, legs aching a little from so long spent in the same position. Shit! When did she start getting old? "Take us in, close as you can," she said to Crane, who was forced to back out of the cramped cabin to let her past. "I'm gonna get ready."

At its heart, *The Gold Digger* was a decent little ship – had

been when she took it over and would be again, if and when Joss ever got enough money behind her to take care of all the little jobs that credit flow had forced her to neglect – and Crane was a competent enough pilot. She had no qualms about leaving him to handle the landing while she suited up.

They were a long way from home, having been forced to go further afield than ever before by all the tension building up over mining rights. The loss of *The Polly Anna* was the final straw. She'd known that crew, had drunk with them often and even woken up with one of them after a particularly ribald night – not an incident she cared to dwell on. She wasn't about to let *The Gold Digger* be the next craft to suffer an 'accident.' So, after a hasty pow-wow with Wicksy and Crane, Joss had taken a gamble and brought *The Gold Digger* out here, way beyond what could even be viewed as the fringe of human space, to a virgin system whose asteroid belt held the promise of mineral treasures. They were far enough out that profit margins were tenuous at best, but if they *could* make enough just to tick over, at least until things settled down a little, the gamble would have been worth it.

Now this, first time out: a ship; a wreck; a God-only-knew-what. It was on the smaller moon of the first planet in-system from the belt. Pure luck they'd passed this way and seen it at all.

"Touchdown in one minute." Crane, suddenly turned all business now that he was in the chair.

"Anything on visual yet?"

"Dunno. There's a sort of hill where the readings are centred."

"Sort of?"

"Yeah."

She sighed. "It's buried then, whatever this is."

"Maybe."

"Crane!" The man really could be an asshole sometimes. She needed a break from this. Not only her, they all did – time spent somewhere that had a surfeit of bars where the three of them could vanish and get tanked up without having to look at

each others' ugly faces for a while. Such a small group, cooped up together for days on end… minor irritations were bound to become big ones, and some of Crane's were never all that minor in the first place.

"Hey, don't yell, I'm doing my best here," he assured her. "This just… well, it looks too regular."

She stopped, in the last stages of sealing her suit. "Man-made, you mean?"

"Could be. You can make up your own mind in a bit."

Suit sealed, Joss hastily strapped herself to the wall beside Wicks, scant seconds before the whole ship vibrated and then bucked and jolted to the irregular rhythm of landing, a passably smooth one considering the lack of a proper landing field. Both she and Wicks were out of the airlock in quick order, striding through the swirls of dust kicked up by *The Gold Digger*'s arrival, until they were looking at… something. They stopped and simply stared.

"If that's natural," Wicks said, "then I'm a one-legged whore from a Frysworld cathouse."

"Better hop on over and take a closer look then," Crane quipped in their ears.

"Shut it, Crane," Joss growled, "and keep your eyes glued to those friggin' sensors."

"I'm on it, don't worry. Nothing moving out there 'cept you two little bunnies."

In front of them stood a vast dome. How it could ever have looked like anything natural as they came in was beyond her; it certainly didn't from down here, despite being the same basic colour as the surrounding rocks.

"Crane, any chance the dome itself is what we were picking up?"

"None. Whatever brought us here is inside."

Joss had known as much, really, but the confirmation left her facing the second major decision of the day. Obviously this wasn't some undiscovered wreck waiting to be unearthed

and claimed for salvage. If it *was* a downed ship – and that still remained a big 'if,' given the readings – somebody had beaten them to it and invested a considerable amount of time, effort, and resources in building a shell around the damned thing, presumably intended to conceal it. And then, apparently, they'd gone away again. So where in Hades' name did the crew of *The Gold Digger* fit in? They didn't; not in any profitable way.

"What do you reckon, Joss?" Wicks asked. "Do we pull out now before someone notices we're here?"

"Could do, probably *should* do… but then we'd always wonder, wouldn't we?"

"Yeah," he sighed, "there is that."

"Don't see that we've got anything much to gain, way things look; but we're here now. So we might as well do what we came for. Come on." She started forward again.

It wasn't far. Crane had brought them down as close as he could, on a patch of ground more level than most. To their left, a ridge of rock paralleled their course, standing perhaps three times head height. To their right a vista of barren rock opened up. Joss barely paid attention; it was indistinguishable from a hundred similar places she'd been to. The dome – that was where her eyes focused. She couldn't help but think that anyone who'd gone to so much trouble should have done a better job of hiding whatever was contained here. There were ways of fooling sensors, of cloaking things far more effectively than this had been. Unless they were meant to notice; unless this was a trap, a honey pot to lure them in.

"I…" The unexpected voice in her ear startled her.

"Crane? You got something?"

"Not sure. For a minute there I thought… Oh, shit!"

"What?" She stopped dead in her tracks.

"Life signs, a dozen of them, on that ridge to your left."

"I thought you said there *weren't* any life signs."

"That's right, I did, because there weren't, but now there are."

Joss had already turned to face the ridge, and she could see them: identical figures, arrayed in a line along the ridge. Military, had to be, judging by their stance and the look of the guns they each hefted. They didn't approach, but just stood there, holding their positions.

"You want to hear the rest of the good news?" Crane asked.

"There's more? Go on."

"Three ships above us, came out of nowhere; small but heavily armed, and they've got weapons-lock on me."

She'd been right: a trap, of course it was. Ships and men camouflaged behind technical wizardry far too sophisticated for *The Gold Digger* or her crew to pierce, and she was willing to bet that the dome wasn't deserted either, whatever their sensors reported. Why couldn't she just have flown straight past this godforsaken rock?

At least Wicksy was experienced enough not to ask her what they should do next. He could calculate the odds as readily as she. The only thing they *could* do was wait and see what was required of them; thankfully, that didn't take long.

Sound doesn't travel in vacuum, so Joss didn't hear the canopy start to raise, but she felt it. Even through insulated boots the soles of her feet reported the rock trembling as the dome split at ground level; a horizontal seam which, bizarrely, reminded her of a grinning mouth as it grew ever wider. Light blazed from the expanding slit, causing Joss's faceplate to darken. After a fractional delay, the visor recalibrated and she could see again.

As the dome continued to open, three figures strode through the centre of the gap, their elongated shadows stretching out across the barren landscape to where she and Wicks waited – three fingers of darkness questing towards them. One stood slightly in front, flanked by the other two; guards, both carrying heavy guns in case anyone doubted their status. But it was what stood behind them that really caught Joss's attention.

The dome had lifted most of the way now, the side closest to

her sliding back until it presented a half-dome, which in turn provided a backdrop to one of the most astonishing things Joss had ever seen.

"Holy mother of God," Wicks murmured from beside her.

She knew what he meant. Joss never had been a believer in much beyond her own capabilities, but this was enough to have a person invoking any deity they'd ever heard of. It was a ship all right, and a derelict one, an ancient wreck, just as their initial readings had suggested; but now that she actually saw the thing, Joss could understand why those readings had been so confused. What stood framed within this half-dome, like some giant hatchling breaking free of its egg, was jarringly different from any ship Joss had heard of. Not just cosmetically different, but conceptually, philosophically so. She saw thrusting bulks that looked more organic, or perhaps geological, than anything shaped by intelligence – huge splinters of rock fused together by a flow of lava; yet clearly they weren't, and somehow these bizarre formations combined to form the hull of a ship, or perhaps multiple hulls congealed into one. Broken, with what she took to be the front section shattered against the moon's surface while the aft pointed skyward like a handful of clutching fingers, or the frozen tendrils of some grounded cephalopod reaching for the stars. The structure was impressive, if shockingly different.

One thing was certain: nothing human had built this ship.

"Captain Brennan," a voice said smoothly. No surprise that their comms had been compromised, though the quality and speed of the newcomers' intelligence was a little unnerving. No one ever called her 'Captain Brennan' over the comms. The foremost of the three figures raised an arm, presumably to identify himself as the speaker. "My name is Hawkins. One of my men is going to board your ship and bring her into the dome. I presume we all realise the futility of resistance?"

No argument there, and they were all still alive, which she took as a good sign. "Crane, do as he says."

"No kidding," the familiar voice came back. "You really think I *wasn't* going to?"

She ignored him. Who were these people? ULAW, had to be; some secret government installation set up to glean all they could from the derelict alien ship. How long had they been here? What the hell had she got herself and her crew into?

The men on the ridge were still there, but at least the guns weren't pointing in their direction any more. She started forward again. "Come on, Wicksy, no point in standing around out here until our air runs out."

The closer they came to the dome and the unlikely structure it housed, the more awed Joss felt. There was something beautiful about the strange ship, for all that it wasn't whole. Trelliswork, looking like rusted filigree from this distance, jutted from the hull at irregular intervals, though whether this was part of the original design or some form of scaffolding erected since the craft's demise, Joss wasn't sure, although she suspected the latter.

They'd reached the dome's perimeter, where Hawkins and his two goons waited, and her attention switched reluctantly from the derelict. She refused to kowtow by acting either guilty or apologetic, but instead marched straight up to the man.

"Thank you for co-operating," he said as she stopped before him. As if he'd left her with any choice.

"So, what happens to me and my crew now?"

"That rather depends. Let's go inside."

She and Wicks followed as he walked the short distance back into the dome, the two guards bringing up the rear. If anyone there *wasn't* thinking about the alien craft, then it was someone other than her.

"What… what is that thing?"

Joss would have happily kicked Wicks all around the perimeter and back for that. She'd been determined not to ask; didn't want to give this Hawkins the satisfaction.

"Ah, yes… the reason we're here, obviously." He stopped walking. They all did. "Spectacular, isn't she?"

She. Why were ships always 'she'? Joss would have been hard pressed to think of anything more phallicly masculine than the thrusting hull components of the derelict, yet still it was referred to as a 'she.'

"This single ship has yielded more insights and revelations than… well, more of that later." Which struck her as a good sign – the fact that there was going to *be* a 'later.'

They resumed walking, Joss deep in thought. She realised they'd stumbled on a secret. She wasn't entirely sure *whose* secret, but it didn't take a genius to realise that this was a big one. A universal truth about secrets in general and big ones in particular was that people tended to want to keep them. If she followed the logic too much further it was going to lead to some very depressing conclusions. Her only comfort, the thing she clung to, was the fact that none of them were dead yet.

"You were unlucky," Hawkins explained. "Normally this place is so tightly shielded you could have passed directly overhead without the faintest notion we were here. But we suffered a systems glitch just as you were approaching. As I say, bad luck."

"Funnily enough, that's exactly what I've been thinking of renaming the ship of late."

Hawkins didn't comment.

They entered an airlock built into the dome's inner skin. Big enough to take the five of them and more without crowding, she noted. Presumably built that way to accommodate work crews and equipment.

On the far side, Joss got to see Hawkins's face clearly for the first time as he removed his helmet. Older than her, but not by much; ten years at the most. Although several shades darker, his hair was as close-cropped as hers – a habit common among those who frequently wore space suits – and he wasn't unhandsome in a clean-cut sort of way, but incredibly pale-skinned, as if sunlight was something he'd vaguely heard about but never experienced.

One thing she'd grown increasingly convinced of. "You're not ULAW, are you?"

He chuckled, "No, we're definitely not ULAW. We're the habitat."

The *habitat*? Who the hell were they when they were at home?

He was still smiling. "Welcome to Far Flung, Captain Brennan."