

Eucalyptus

By Nick Petrou

Someone was about to learn you didn't screw with Lorenzo and get away with it.

Lorenzo strolled out of an elevator into the *HMAS Antares*' bustling plaza. The moon grinned gap-toothed on account of a busted hex in the hex-glass ceiling. Not a star shone; the neon lights of the protein bars and moondust nightclubs had burned them all away.

Tommy Laser and Fatty Hammerfist walked beside him. Tommy's orange bodyglove drew attention to every involuntary spasm of his wiry neck, and Fatty was breathing like he'd taken the stairs from the ship's lower decks instead of the elevator. A stream of drones, droids, and flesh-and-blood people parted to avoid crossing the trio's path. Lorenzo led the way to an

apartment tower as tall as the *Antares* was deep. Inside, facing a plastic door on the 13th floor, he sniffed and said, “Open it.”

A motor-driven fist came out of Fatty’s trenchcoat, and in a flash the door lay flat on the floor. Most of the people inside the apartment scattered like rats. One dreadlocked numbskull stood his ground against Fatty and soon found himself hanging upside-down with Fatty’s metal hand locked around his ankles. Another — a stocky woman, maybe somebody’s mother — came at Tommy with a trowel and he slept her with a karate chop to the neck. A dozen others held up their hands like Lorenzo and his boys were police.

He chuckled.

The apartment stunk of nanite fertiliser and sweat. A cannabis bush like Lorenzo had never seen before stood in a wide plastic tray in front of a fake window that displayed a rocky red desert and an Earth night sky.

He lit a cigarette. “You see, when you go stealing high-grade fertiliser from the authorities, they start thinking why isn’t Lorenzo holding up his end of the deal? We supply Lorenzo directly, and *only* Lorenzo, doesn’t that mean Lorenzo protects us from bottom-feeding scum like you?” He went up to the cannabis bush and ashed in the soil. “What am I looking at here?”

“That ain’t no cannabis, Boss.”

“I can see that, Fatty.”

“It’s a tree,” said the upside-down dreadlocked guy, his face as purple as a bruise. “A baby eucalyptus. From Earth.”

“Yo, can we blast these fools already, B?”

“Shut it, Tommy,” said Lorenzo, rubbing a pale leaf between his finger and thumb.

Sure, he'd seen trees in the movies. But here — on a starship where three generations of his family had lived and died and where another nine would follow suit — no such thing. Locust farms and nondescript GM vegetables kept people from starving, while the cannabis seeds that great-great-grandfather Lorenzo had snuck aboard 150 years ago blunted the edge.

Lorenzo plucked the leaf and held it under his nose. “*Madone*, it’s beautiful. Fatty, get over here and smell this.”

Fatty kept hold of the dreadlocked guy and took the leaf. “Yeah, Boss. Beautiful.”

Lorenzo squatted and placed his palm on the soil. His eyes were level with the dreadlocked guy’s now. “So what’s it for?” he said.

“Nothing,” said the guy.

“It isn’t *drugs* if that’s what you mean.” The woman Tommy had kayoed was waking up. She sat rubbing her neck. “It’s a relic. A work of art. We never meant to get in the way of your operation. If you’d just let us go...”

Lorenzo smelled the leaf again. “Art, huh?”

“I’m getting itchy, B.”

“I said shut it, Tommy.”

Lorenzo stood and dusted his hands. He stared at the red desert emulated in the window behind the tree and the tree went blurry. “Okay, from now on, this is how it’s gonna be. You need fertiliser, you don’t go stealing from the authorities; you come straight to me. Straight to Lorenzo. *Capiche?*”

The dreadlocked guy nodded and Tommy growled and elbowed the wall.

The woman said, “Straight to you. Got it.”

Lorenzo relit his cigarette. “Okay, drop him, Fatty. Let’s get out of here.”

The dreadlocked guy crashed to the floor and stayed there.

On his way out, Lorenzo turned back to the woman and said, “Eucalyptus, huh?”

She nodded. “Eucalyptus.”

Back in the hall, Lorenzo turned to Fatty and said, “Maybe there’ll be nice trees on this planet we’re going, huh? You know, for all the little kids.”

“May-be, Boss. May-be.”

END