



CRIMINAL INTENT

Trevor Baxendale

**BIG
FINISH**

It was dark in Pod One.

The prisoner preferred it that way. It allowed him to concentrate, free from all distractions.

Well, not quite all.

There was the nerve-shredding hum of the containment field that surrounded him in a perfect, shimmering energy cylinder from floor to ceiling. To the naked eye, the cylinder was a thing of beauty – a faint, coruscating glow in the darkness. It looked harmless enough, but it was not harmless. The frenzied buzz that the field generator made was a clue: it sounded like a metal box jammed with hornets that had been genetically engineered to exist in a state of perpetual, mindless fury. The containment field was like that; motionless but angry. Very angry. Touch it and it would have your hand off.

So the prisoner was careful not to touch it. He simply sat very still in his metal chair. He could afford to be patient.

‘They made a mistake when they put me in here,’ he said.

Outside the humming energy cylinder were two guards – elite Federation troopers, X-class, seconded from the Supreme Commander’s secret personal guard. They had red visor bands around their black helmets and carried multicharge autoblasters that could cut a man in half with one shot.

Neither of the X-class troopers turned to look at him, or gave any indication that they had heard him.

‘I know you can hear me,’ he said. ‘The energy field nullifies living tissue, not sound or light waves.’

The troopers did not respond.

‘You can see and hear me,’ the prisoner continued patiently. ‘Just as I can see and hear you.’

The troopers ignored him. They might have been carved from solid rock.

‘I can see your eyes behind the visors of those helmets,’ the prisoner said. His voice was low and soft, the quietly assured tones of a man who is used to getting his own way. ‘I can see when you blink, even in this light.’

Neither trooper acknowledged him. The prisoner knew that they had a weakness, however. It was true that X-class troopers were incorruptible, but they were only human, and so not

infallible. Behind the two troopers, standing on either side of the pod, were two mutoids.

Once, they had been women – hand-picked from the elite ranks of the Federation's finest martial servants, brain-wiped and rebuilt with military-grade bionics. They were emotionless, relentless and beautiful.

Both mutoids were positioned to face the containment field where the prisoner sat in his steel chair. They were there to guard the guards. They did not tire. They did not grow bored. They did not even blink.

At regular intervals, each mutoid in turn would take a phial the size of a man's thumb, located in a storage tank at the rear of the pod, and insert the tube into the specially designed cavity in their chests. The blood serum contained in each phial was the mutoids' only sustenance. They did not require food, water or sleep. Only blood. Because of this, some people, ignorant of the bionic rebuild and computer-like brain of the mutoids, referred to them as 'vampires'.

The mutoids simply stood to attention, staring straight at the prisoner. Their unblinking gaze never left him. The standard blasters holstered on their right hips stayed where they were, although the prisoner knew that a mutoid could draw and fire its weapon in less than 0.65 of a second. Accurately, too. There was little that could escape the attention of the laser targeting filaments incorporated into each mutoid's optical nerve. That's why they were only issued with standard blasters. They didn't need anything flash.

'I can hear you breathing behind those respirator masks,' the prisoner told the troopers. 'Every breath. In. Out. In. Out. Every breath.'

Finally, one of the troopers turned his head to look at the prisoner. The troopers were human, they got curious. It was inevitable. The prisoner stared up at his own reflection, distorted in the tinted lenses of the respirator helmet.

'I can get out of here any time I like, you know.'

The trooper didn't look. He didn't even reply. He wasn't allowed to enter into any conversation with the prisoner. Those were his orders.

'I only have to say the word,' said the prisoner, 'and I will be free.'

No reply.

The prisoner smiled. 'Do you want to know what the word is?'