

NOAH CHINN



VIOLET'S TALES OF WHOA!

Violet's Tales of Whoa!

Book Three of the Mossfoot Muckabouts

Noah JD Chinn

Dedication

To those who grew up wanting to be Han Solo, Malcom Reynolds, or even Jack Sparrow.

And to those who thought there should be more women like them.

Dead Again

My name is Violet Lonsdale and I'm worried I might be dead.

Actually I am dead. Very. I can show you my corpse, it's still in my old ship floating around a dead planet in a star system off the shoulder of Orion.

But I'm still alive, sorta, depending on your definition.

I'd been diagnosed with a terminal illness over a hundred and fifty years ago, and my friend was so distraught and unable to imagine going on without me as a companion that he asked this strange Order of medical monks to do the impossible.

Fortunately for him, these guys did the impossible five times a day. Unfortunately for him, four of those times also turned out rather disastrously.

My friend was one of the lucky one-in-fives. He'd been left for dead before, his Fer-de-Lance blown out of the sky by Navy Vipers that his own father's second-in-command had sent after him...long story.

They'd recovered his body and managed to bring him back to life using some experimental technology. The Order Brother Mathias belongs to is big on experimental technology, especially when it comes to saving a life.

So he figured the Order might be able to do something for me. It turned out they couldn't save my body but they thought they might be able to save my mind, and transfer it at the point of death to piggy back along on my friend's.

It worked—after a fashion. It took a while for the connections to manifest themselves, and then there was this whole incident where we both ended up floating dead in space for a hundred and fifty years. Neither of us are clear on the details, but whatever lead up to that resulted in his face getting badly burned and scarred—and if you knew how vain this man was you'd know how much that ticked him off.

Lucky for him the technology that saved his life before was still holding up. No way his body should have been recoverable after such a long time, but it was. He was a medical marvel, and yet the doctors only kept him in a short while to run their tests and wonder about the weird organic circuitry that covered his brain like a wet napkin.

That's me, by the way.

We were released and in time I woke up and became a part of his life again. It was an odd partnership to say the least, especially once it turned out I could control his body when he was asleep.

I also had my own share of existential crisis to deal with. Am I Violet Lonsdale, or just a reasonable facsimile? Am I sentient, or just a simulation? My friend told me that the fact I asked those questions should be enough to give me my answer, but couldn't you program a simulation to feel angsty?

I don't know. I still don't. I remember dying, slipping away, even my last breath. I was plugged in at the time, and could also feel myself being elsewhere—both in my body and my friend's. The idea was that everything that was me would be saved right up to the point where my brain died and the cord could be disconnected.

In theory, I am Violet. I'm just using different hardware. In fact? I dunno.

The world we woke up in was different than the one we left, and it took some time getting used to how things worked, but we did all right for ourselves, eventually earning ourselves a pristine Imperial Clipper right off the factory line...

...okay, so we stole it. Relax, the owner was a jerk anyway.

But in going about doing our business we ended up making some enemies, the worst of which was an Elite pilot working for the Alliance named Officer Dillon, who saw us as a thorn in the Alliance's goals and held a grudge like nobody's business.

Long story short—even though we were on the same side he blew us out of the sky. We managed to eject, but once at the station medical facility I soon learned there was no “we” anymore. Only I.

My friend's name is Mossfoot and I'm worried he might be dead.

Adaptation

I actually wasn't intending to continue these stupid journal entries, to be honest. That was Mossfoot's thing. He just sucked me into it now and then.

At first it was a kind of therapy, I think. A way to vent about the unfair hand he'd been dealt in life. Then, when he noticed people were listening to him, I think he got off on the minor fame it gave him. By the end, I think he just forgot how to stop.

So why am I continuing it? Also as a kind of therapy, I guess. Maybe it's like what they say about coma patients, that talking to them helps keep the brain stimulated. Maybe that's what I'm doing. Or maybe it's because when I'm doing these journals Mossfoot doesn't seem gone for a while. I don't know.

Let me start off with my own little whinge fest and just get it out of the way.

Now I'm not going to say that life dealt me an unfair hand. I had a good life, a good death, a second life I by all rights didn't deserve, and now my own body that I truly didn't deserve. I have no right to complain about anything.

But...

There's no two ways around this. I'm a woman, and I'm in a man's body. This sucks, for many reasons.

First off, there is hair EVERYWHERE. I mean, jeeze, if I shaved this body I swear I could make tiny toupes for a thousand gnomes. I'm not saying MF was excessively hairy. Far from it. Before the accident he was a handsome guy. It's just compared to my old body I feel like I'm cosplaying as a Yeti.

Contrary to what you might think, the fact I'm gay does not help matters at all. Just because I'm attracted to women in no way means I ever wanted to be a guy. I liked my old body. A lot. I kept in good shape, and, while I'm not narcissistic like MF was, I did think I cut a fine figure in the mirror.

I often used that fact to my advantage in my work. Well, those days are long gone. I accidentally flirted with a guy I was pumping for information out on Eleu recently, and you should have seen the look he gave me. So, yeah, my love life? Fuggedaboutit.

The fact my face now looks like it was run over by a runaway barbecue doesn't help matters. The luchador mask can only do so much. It's gotten to the point where I blanked out my face on my pilot's license. Fortunately you're allowed to do that these days – genetic scanning right on your license has made picture IDs largely optional.

So, yeah, this body isn't exactly my first choice for a replacement.

Then there's the...equipment. Look, I don't want to get into details, kids might be accidentally reading this, but let's just say that when it comes to bodily functions you expect things to work a certain way. Getting used to having a runaway fire hose to deal with takes time. I also feel like I'd held my breath so hard that my junk went from being an innie to an outie, which is confusing on so many levels.

Upsides? Well, there's no doubt that MF was in good shape. He's stronger than I was, though I was more agile and could definitely run faster. When practicing martial arts I've had to adapt my style to take this into account. Not bad or anything, just different.

I think MF might have slightly better eyesight than I did. I didn't need corrective surgery or anything, but I swear his vision is better than 20/20. Wonder if he got that worked on back when he still had a trust fund? I may have had better night vision, though. It's hard to tell through memory.

Our reflexes are about the same, so my piloting skill is on par with what it was before. So at least once I'm in the cockpit I can feel like my old self again. Which probably explains why I've been spending so much time there lately.

That's about it. Now that I got all that off my chest, I can move on. It's time to accept my life for what it is and simply make the most of it. There's just one last thing I have to do first. I'm not the most sentimental person, but I need to say this now and get it over with so I don't feel guilty if I don't repeat it every other entry.

I miss you, Moss. That won't change. Remember that.

There. Done. Moving on. Next time: what happened after I left the hospital.

Rise of the Troubadour

When I was let out of the hospital, I couldn't help but think something was wrong. It reminded me of how Moss described what happened when they found and resuscitated his body, something that shouldn't have been possible after a hundred-plus years, even if it was preserved in the vacuum of space.

Then, as now, the doctors performed a number of tests, were puzzled by the results, and then just let us go. I can only attribute it to the fact that given the thousands of different worlds with different technologies out there, and the trillions of people that make up the human inhabited bubble getting in different kinds of trouble, it gets to a point where you just stop being surprised anymore. It would probably take a Thargoid bursting out of my chest, singing "Hello, my baby!" to get a rise out of them—and only then if they've never seen Spaceballs.

Ah. I should point out, while Mossfoot was an English major, I dropped out of college to seek adventure, at first as a stuntwoman for the vid circuit. That got me interested in movies in general, to the point where you could call me a cinephile. So while MF often spoke with literary references or famous passages, the only way you'll hear me quote Shakespeare is if there was a decent movie adaptation of it.

Truth be told, my time as a ghost in Mossfoot's meat machine gave me time to correct that problem. In my downtime when I wasn't looking through MF's eyes I had a virtual "room" I could hide out in. Something Brother Mathias programmed in to keep me from going mental and suffering cabin fever from spending too much time with him. It looked like a 18th century library, filled with every significant book written up to 3200, and had a sun room I could sit out on and read in.

Obviously not every book occupied actual space in the library, otherwise the library would have been the size of a city. The way I figure it, the library was just for show. If I knew what I was looking for, I'd find it on the shelf in an instant. If I was browsing, the books would be random, but based on what I was in the mood for. There was also a catalog where I could search for things—again, no doubt interacting with what I thinking

about. I think Google came up with something like this back around 2050, before they took over that third world nation.

I read a lot of books while I was with MF, but between you and me most of them were ones I'd already seen as movies.

I lost access to the library after the incident. It's just not there anymore. I can't mentally project my residual self-image the way I used to, either. Not that I'd want to. That was for Mossfoot's benefit more than mine, though it was nice to see my old self again.

So no more ghost. I am the meat machine now. And I've got a lot of work to do.

Getting a replacement Clipper wasn't easy. After all, how do you insure a stolen ship? MF had taken steps to cover his tracks before we left on our last exploration trip, and by the time we got back our Clipper's history should have been clean and untraceable.

In theory.

In fact if the insurance company wanted to look over the wreckage and make a fuss, they probably could have found plenty of reasons to deny the coverage. With most ships they probably wouldn't bother—ships blow up by the thousands. The economy depends on it (MF has a theory of how the economy of the galaxy is in fact based on constant ship production).

The difference here is a Clipper is not a cheap ship. It's also a very exclusive ship—only Imperial citizens of a certain naval rank are allowed access. So that means to get a replacement ship requires verification of owner and purchase. So that meant I was screwed.

Or so I thought. Turns out I had an extremely good bit of luck, as my request for a replacement Clipper came on the heels of the celebration over the Emperor's restored health. The old fart had been on death's door for some time in an attempted assassination, and now that he was up and about again, people down in the Empire were going nuts.

One of the ways they were celebrating was removing the restrictions on Clipper ships—anyone in good standing with the Empire could buy one. As a result, the

insurance company had no problem providing a replacement. And if I ever lose this one I won't have to worry if there's a fire sale going on.

I named my new ship The Troubadour. Kind of a round about way to honor MF's English degree and literary pretensions. I think he always saw himself as a bit of a travelling storyteller, truth be told. And if I'm doing more or less the same thing, well, it just sounds like a good name to me.

The question now was: what was I going to arm it with to kill a certain Alliance officer?

Oh yes. I do indeed hold a grudge.

When I was shot down I had been testing weapon loadouts on the Clipper for a weapons manufacturer. Most were useful, some not so much. I continued this testing on my own now, hoping to find the perfect combination of death and destruction I could rain down on Officer Dillon. All you random pirates, Mahon supporters in 39 Serpentis, or civil war scrubs that got in way at Gateway? Your sacrifices for science are duly noted.

Funny thing is, at the end of the day it just made sense to keep things simple. Class 3 beams and Class 2 multicannons. Burn the shields, shred the hull. When you're in a dogfight you can't waste time lining up for a perfect shot with a cannon, particle accelerator or railgun. You want to keep the pressure on, and your energy use low.

So while she might not have a fancy weapon loadout that impresses people with big explosions, The Troubadour is kitted out the way it should be: to get the job done as quickly as possible.

Unfortunately, my hunt for Officer Dillon would have to wait. That's when the Cerberus Plague hit.

Three Headed Monster

Dajoar, 20 Ophiuchi, Eleu. Three systems, one plague. The media was calling it the Cerberus Outbreak, which I assumed referenced the three headed dog that guards the gates of Hades (learned that from the Harry Potter movies). Although it was referencing a strange three-pronged structure on the “head” of the phage-like organism, it could just as easily have applied to the fact it had hit three very closely connected systems.

And there was no way to save them all.

That's what got me headed into that part of independent space. Not because it could be stopped, but because it seemed it couldn't. If it had seemed like everything was under control and well in hand, I'd have let the space truckers who get off on ferrying crap from A to B handle it.

But when I saw the amount of supplies needed, and the amount actually incoming, my heart fell into my gut.

The Federation and the Empire both have warships the size of space stations. Either one could have loaded up one of those with medical supplies and helped out. But they didn't. All the posturing going on between the two meant that neither side could afford to keep their battleships away from their assigned maneuvers. And the Alliance has no true navy or warships.

So it was up to the rest of us to try and make a difference, to stop it from becoming a pandemic, and we never stood a chance.

Hanging out in a coffee shop at Tellus, near Gateway, I overheard some traders discussing cargo strategy.

“The local systems are tapped. I'll never load Bessie at any of them.”

“Asgaa is only a couple jumps away. I heard they still have plenty of basic meds and progen cells. Even tons of agricultural medicine.”

“Agrimed? What good is that?”

“Hey, don’t ask me. They’re buying it all at top credit. I think they’re taking the agrimed and trying to modify it at the base chemical level into something for humans. They’re that desperate.”

“Have you seen what Cerberus does to people?”

“They’re not even sure how it spreads.”

“I’d gladly take anything if I thought it might help.”

One of the guys got a sly look on his face at that comment.

“Say... maybe we could get something harmless, like sugar water, and...”

“You shut the hell up.”

“Dude, I will space you myself if you finish that sentence.”

“Sorry. I’m just deep in the hole with the Bank of Zaonce. Half a mill I need to pay back.”

“Yeah, well, you’ll make that back and more with the legit stuff. Don’t go to the dark side, dude.”

I smiled at that. MF and I might have different tastes in storytelling, books vs movies, but we both appreciate stories that stand the test of time. It’s fitting that George Lucas has a space station named after him. Just like H.G. Wells, I guess.

It was also heartening to see people join up and try and make a difference, even though the demand could never be met. But that didn’t mean they couldn’t help.

While the traders were far from organized, it seemed most of them had decided to focus their efforts on Eleu. So that’s where I went. The Troubadour might not go as far as some ships, stuck around 18 or so LY depending on cargo, but even in my current battle configuration she could carry over a hundred and fifty tons of cargo.

That battle configuration turned out to be rather useful. It wasn’t long before pirates started showing up, preying on traders bring medical aid. Some weren’t even there for loot—they had their own bizarre reasons for wanting the plague to continue and simply destroyed anyone they interdicted.

Ordinarily that wouldn’t be a concern to me. I was in a Clipper, after all. The only ship that could compete with me for speed was a Cobra.

One pirate in a Fer De Lance was left gaping as I boosted away from him. Guess some of Moss’s pragmatism had worn off on me. But the fact is if you’re getting stopped by a FDL, you can bet it’s armed to the teeth and isn’t looking for a fair fight.

Most of the time I danced with the pirates and showed them the error of their ways, but it didn't take long for them to get smart. Instead of interdicting one-on-one, they formed up in wings. And instead of using slow ships with big firepower, they started taking Clippers as well.

One such group, calling themselves Triadius, just would not stop interdicting me—and with two Clippers working in concert, along with a Python for heavy support, managed to drive me off. I came back later and made my delivery, these guys being distracted by some other hapless trader long enough to break through. Ultimately they were more of a pain in the butt than an actual detriment.

In the end, I managed to drop off over two thousand tons of medical supplies at Eleu, and a few hundred tons at the other two hot spots, but I fear it was a drop in the bucket. On my last run I had to put my shields up while I unloaded the cargo—a mob had formed in the hanger, and I was afraid of what they might do.

They had that look in their eyes. The look of people trying to save their loved ones and with nothing left to lose. Eventually security came in and broke them up, so I was able to transfer the cargo over to the proper medical authorities. But seeing that mob eye the canisters being carted off? I wonder if the loaders even made it to the hospital.

Emotionally as well as mentally drained, I returned back to Gateway, dreading to see the next GalNet update on the plague.

Funeral Ship

I tried to ignore GalNet, but couldn't. Reports of the spread of the disease only made me feel worse, like I didn't do enough. Key facilities on most stations in the three systems were no longer available, and all signs pointed to things getting worse in the near future. I could have done more. I should have done more.

What am I even trying to do, though?

I used to be a hard-core dedicated bounty hunter. It was never just about the money, though. I made sure the people with prices on their heads deserved what they were getting. I justified myself thinking that if Cmdr A-Hole gets spaced, that means a hundred fewer pilots and passengers are going to get killed by him. It was all about the books and numbers, and I always kept my figures in the black.

When I met Mossfoot I kind of left that life behind. Double crossed by my employer (well, to be fair I double crossed him first... I'd been hired to kill Moss and didn't finish the job. Long story, one which MF already talked about at length), we ended up working together and I started to think there was more to life than keeping my books in the black.

Mind you that doesn't mean I don't still enjoy showing off my combat skills, just that there is more to life. I'm just not sure what.

On the way back to Gateway I checked out an unidentified signal source near a star. Probably nothing. Usually just traders with temporary supercruise problems. Sometimes it's a wreck. Heck, I stumbled on a wedding once. Not this time.

A massive T9 cargo ship loomed in front of my screen, flying in a wing formation with five smaller T6s. They were heading in normal space towards the star, on a course that would have them crest the corona if they ever reached it.

"From the stars we came. From the stars we return. We therefore commit these bodies to the deep."

A white capsule dropped from the T9's cargo hold. A small burst from a solid fuel rocket flared and just as quickly died, leaving the capsule to drift on towards the star.

"Captain Mellissa Spano."

Another capsule dropped and flared.

“Lieutenant Commander Sasha Zuma.”

I'd stumbled on a funeral, for a number of pilots it seemed. Nothing to see here. I turned my ship away as discretely as possible, not wanting to disturb the service.

“Commander Richard Finch.”

I didn't want to jump right away, though. Better to get a good distance first.

“Lieutenant Itsuki Koizumi.”

So why was I flying so dang slow. Why was I still listening to the comm channel?

“Petty Officer Frederick Booth.”

Why was this bothering me? Why hadn't I jumped to supercruise yet?

“Petty Officer Danielle Davidson.”

Why was I having trouble looking at the displays? Why were they all blurry?

“Petty Officer Moe Atwal.”

I noticed one of the T6s break off formation and bank right. Missing man.

My jaw was so tight by now it was aching. I was angry. I was sad. I felt helpless. I wanted to punch something.

At that moment a Vulture appeared and opened fire on the convoy.

“Die, heretic scum! Blasphemers! Followers of a false god! Die!”

I had drifted far enough away that I probably didn't appear on his radar, but mine were top of the line.

Without thinking I turned and boosted back towards the funeral ship. The T6s didn't stand a chance in a fight, and the T9 was an only slightly better armed sitting duck.

“Break formation. Return to base! Abort service!”

“Negative on that, Funeral Ship. Leave him to me.”

The Troubadour's beam lasers burned into the Vulture's shields, giving him something serious to worry about. It broke off picking on one of the T6s and was forced to turn its attention to me. I checked this guy's rating: Dangerous.

Dangerous. That's cute. But in a past life, I was Elite.

“You dare side with the unbelievers? You can burn as well!”

I wasn't the only one with dual C3 beams, it seemed. He peeled off a ring before I could drift behind him, turning off my flight assist to get a better angle of attack.

“Do you want us to call for assistance?” the funeral leader asked over comms.

“Negative. You show your respect to the dead. This guy won’t bother you much longer.”

Twin multicannons added what they could to the damage output—I could afford to waste the ammo—and I had his shields down before he could pop a shield cell to recharge it.

The fight didn’t last long after that.

Funny thing was, I never found out what this guy’s beef was, or what kind of civil war was going on in this system that had his panties in a bunch. I didn’t even know if the other guys were stand up citizens. For all I knew they were slavers or working for an oppressive regime.

But at that point in time, it didn’t matter. Respect was due, and by God respect would be given. For those of us who had spent most of our lives in space, we all knew we’d end up like this someday. In the end, we all die alone. But we deserve to be remembered, if only for one brief moment by a handful of people.

The Vulture popped, but I noticed something unusual. The ejection seat was still in the debris. I’d hit the cockpit, and the remains of the pilot rolled gently among the wreckage.

“Thanks for that,” the T9 pilot said. “We owe you.”

I flew in closer and opened the cargo bay, scooping up the dead pilot.

“Request permission to join formation.” I said.

“Pardon? Wait. You don’t intend to...”

“I do.”

“After what he tried to do?”

“I’d like to think we’re better than that, sir.”

A pause. “Request granted. Form up on the port wing.”

I did so. Once there I opened the cargo bay again.

“From the stars we came. From the stars we return. We therefore commit this body to the deep.”

I accelerated a bit, dropped the ejection seat, and slowed down back to formation, letting it drift on ahead like the others.

“Pilot Dumbass,” I said.

It's not like I knew his name, and my sense of respect only goes so far.

The formation turned away from the star and started heading back to the local station. I stayed with them for a while, saying nothing until it was time to jump to supercruise, at which point I rolled The Troubadour side to side in a salute and jumped away to the next star system.



Deep Thought

The encounter with the funeral ship had affected me deeper than I realized. I didn't feel right behind a combat ship right now. I didn't feel clean anymore.

I'd always tried to live by a code I thought was honorable, to do good in my own way. It's like the Old West in some parts of the galaxy, and without people willing to do what it takes to keep people safe, a whole lot of innocent people get hurt.

That's how I justified my life as a bounty hunter. Justified being the key word.

It was a rationalization. I was a thrill junkie, I was a damn good pilot, bounty hunting pays very well, and I hate bullies. Note that what you might call morality is at the bottom of the list there. I talk about what's right, but in the end I did it because I got off on it.

In the end, I killed people because I enjoyed it. Deserving it was a secondary consideration.

Flying alongside the freighters, honoring the dead, I remembered my own grave floating near Orion. The paint on my Cobra MKI had been bleached white, making it look not unlike the caskets launched by the T9. And my mummified corpse looked out over a dead world it would never touch.

Before this I had been somewhat dormant in Moss's head, only able to break through in his dreams or times of severe stress. Moss had trouble remembering the past up to that point. But seeing what was left of me there allowed him to remember, and for me to finally break through.

I guess you could say it was when I stopped being a memory, and came back to life.

And what do I do with my new life? Start looking for reasons to kill people again. I weaseled it into MF's life on the side, assuring him he'd be safe, that I needed the practice, and, of course, that the people I was gunning for deserved it.

What a way to blow a second chance.

I had to try something different. I had to find meaning in my life beyond fighting.

I brought The Troubadour back to Dublin Citadel and docked her. It was a good ship, quite possibly a great ship, but it wasn't the ship I needed to be behind right now. This

was a war machine, and if I kept flying her, I'd keep finding reasons to shoot things down in her. She was part of me, but we needed some time apart.

"Put her into deep storage," I told the dock worker. "I'll be back for her soon."

I brought up the station's ship registry and searched for a familiar name. The ship Mossfoot and I had shared together for close to fifty thousand light years.

Vaiticus Rex II.

A Low Down Dirty Fuel Rat

Viaticus Rex II is a Lakon T6 transport retrofitted for exploration duty. Mossfoot had her kitted out to reach 28 light years in a single jump, and still had enough spare room in the cargo hold to outfit some home-like comforts. One of the Class 5 cargo bays had been converted into a gym, while the other was an entertainment center. He made it downright homey considering this is essentially the space equivalent of an old Earth 18 wheeler.

We'd taken the VR II on a couple of expeditions – the first of which landed him some unwanted notoriety with Lakon and a startup terraforming/colonizing corporation called Odyssey Expeditions. Moss had found a series of star systems close to one another with massive amounts of easily plucked resources and inhabitable worlds—several earth like, and a half dozen more easily terraformed.

Odyssey Expeditions bought this information from Universal Cartographics and noticed it had all been found by one man, and Lakon noticed that this had been done in one of their most basic no-frills ships.

And it wasn't long before the two tracked MF down and threw a crap load of cash his way, with an idea to use him as a spokesman for exploration, especially to appeal to the next generation of budding pilots. His face was a problem, though, so they came up with the idea of using a luchador wrestler's mask (it scored well with the 13-19 demographic) and a catchy nickname: Ranger M.

Moss had a brief but colorful career as Ranger M, having spoken at some conferences and banquets, press conferences, and consultation on a potential Ranger M cartoon series meant to help inspire school kids to become pioneers.

Of course, he blew it.

High on his own success he got drunk, bought himself an Asp with his new fortune, kitted it out to the gills, then followed some merc to a warzone and got himself blown up. Good thing the ejection system is automated and no longer based on pilot reflexes, otherwise the dumbass would have been spacedust, and me along with him.

I hated the damn mask, though, and refused to wear it, but if I was going to go exploring, I guess I owed it to Mossfoot to put it on for a little while. He really loved the Ranger M persona, while it lasted.

“Mossfoot! How ya doing? Long time, ya bastich!”

I'd been travelling down through the bubble and was currently in Imperial space. I had a quarter mill accumulated in bounties with the Empire while hunting pirates in the Alliance, and I figured now was as good a time as any to cash it in.

I'd just docked Viaticus Rex II and was heading to the pilot's lounge when I was pounced on. I hadn't expected to meet any familiar faces, however. Space is big—unbelievably big. The odds that I'd run into a familiar face should have been close to nil, and in fact kind of still were, because nothing about this guy was familiar.

The man looked like he'd stepped out of an Anarchy world in a war machine built from the wreckage of other ships. Black mohawk, handlebar moustache, and a small tattoo over one eye. He looked happy enough to see me, but his face told me he was more prone to scowling.

Okay, so this guy knew me but I had no clue who he was. I must have been asleep or reading when they'd hung out. So the question was how to fake my way through this and avoid a doppelganger-check from this guy. Unfortunately MF is the born fibber and flim-flammer, I just flub things up.

“Hi, uh... you.”

“Still wearing that Ranger M mask, huh? Well, it's a sight better than your real mug, am I right?”

I decided just to be myself, hope things worked themselves out. “You're not wrong. But I'm just wearing it until I'm out of inhabited space. Going on another expedition.”

“Nice. I knew you'd be heading out of the Bubble someday. You Ratted up?”

Okay, now he was just speaking gibberish. “Sorry, what?”

“For fuel, man. Never know when the Rat Signal might shine in the night.”

I'd reached my limit for bluffing, I needed a convincing lie instead. What did I know about Mossfoot that could possibly explain why—

“Sorry, man, you’re gonna have to forgive me. Last time we met I was really really drunk. I don’t think I remember a thing that happened. Can you refresh my memory?”

The mohawk’s man seemed to return to what I assumed was its natural scowl. “Ah, yeah, I should have guessed as much. You were pretty wasted.”

Whew! Playing the odds paid off.

His eyes narrowed. “Do you even remember my name?”

“Uh....”

A huff. He spat off to the side. “The name’s Badger, though you’ll find most people call me Surly.”

Gee, I wonder why?

“You and I hung out, after you’d dumped flying for the feds because they were a bunch of—and I quote—stupid heads with clipboards up their butts.”

Ah. Okay, I remembered that point in history. MF had just gotten himself on the Fed’s good books as a trusted ally, only to have it taken away from him two minutes later because of the alcohol he had on board—legal everywhere, except Fed space. They had a grudge against the planet it came from, it seemed.

That little stunt ticked him off, enough that he decided to start selling rare goods from Fed space and sell it in the Empire, making a tidy profit in the process.

“Right, I remember,” I said. “And we met...?”

“In Achenar,” Surly said, well, surly. Surlily? Suriallily? Never mind. “We talked exploration and you told me about the number of times you and other Bowmen you met almost found yourselves stranded because you’d stumbled across some badlands full of closed gas stations.”

Surly was using some of the explorer lingo MF favored. I’d never really bothered with it myself, but I got the gist of his meaning. Coming across too many unscoopable stars in a row could ruin your day, and potentially your life.

“So I came up with the idea of the Fuel Rats,” Surly said. “Load up a ship with an extra gas tank, some fuel drones, and provide a rescue service for explorers, or just greenhorn dumbasses who haven’t figured out where the bathroom is on their ships yet. You signed up as soon as I mentioned it. So did half the bar, as I recall. Makes you wonder why no one thought of it earlier.”

Okay, that was enough to work with. “Right. It’s starting to come back to me now. Wow, that was a long time back, though.”

“And we’ve been a hit ever since. Three hundred rescues and counting. Insurance companies offer us a small incentive since we’re saving them paying out for a new ship or compensating their families, but really we’ve found the pilots themselves to be more than happy to compensate. Not that we ask them to, but donations are sometimes...encouraged.”

That sounded like a shakedown to me. He must have seen it in my eyes. “Hey, it’s a volunteer organization. Most of us do it pro-bono. But I can’t control what terms each pilot sets out there with their clients. It’s like the motto says: We’ve got fuel. You don’t. Any Questions?” He paused for a moment. “I really need to clarify those terms. It just lends itself to misinterpretation.”

“And I didn’t stick around for this?” It sounded like the kind of thing MF would have been all for—maybe he really had blacked out after their meeting?

“Well, you disappeared about a week later. Stole an Imperial Clipper, I heard.”

Ah crap. He wouldn’t turn me in over that, would he? “Hey, it’s not like it seems...”

“Relax, you think I haven’t heard of the buttmunch you took it from? ‘Baron’ Kingsman is a total tool—the Angels hate him, so you’re already in their good books.”

“Angels?”

“Aisling’s Angels. You know, Aisling Duval?”

I knew of her. One of the major powers down in the Empire. “Anti-slaver, right?”

Surly nodded. “Right. That’s why I work for her. Dirtbags like Kingsman use their loan companies to force people into so much debt that Imperial slavery becomes their only option. And he profits off it. So hell, you won’t find anyone in Duval space to turn you in over that. More likely they’ll buy you a drink.”

“Well, thanks. Good to know.”

“So, answer my first damn question then. You going to Rat up?”

I shrugged. “I’m just in my old T6, it’s not exactly equipped for...” my voice trailed off as I thought about it. Why the hell not? I pictured the internal layout of the ship. I had an empty cargo slot I could convert to hold extra fuel. I could swap out the gym for a larger scoop, and replace the old scoop with a fuel drone controller. The entertainment room was mostly empty space anyway, I could fill the back wall with drones easily enough. Enough for a rescue, anyway.

“You know what? I think I will.”

“That’s the spirit!” Surly slapped me on the back, then shoved me towards the pilot’s lounge. “Now you’re gonna buy me a drink, jackass, for forgetting my name.”

The Rat That Jumped Ship

Surly sat me down at a booth and ordered me a water while he ordered himself an Indi Bourbon.

“You’ll need your wits about you,” he explained. “This ain’t just about a drink.”

“Oh?”

“I ever tell you how I got where I am?” He snorted after saying that. “The hell does it matter if I did, though, you’d have forgotten. But I remember your sob story. Navy brat who had it all, then lost it all, crawled back on his own terms. Amiright?”

That was Mossfoot’s story anyway. I nodded.

“Well I never had it all in the first place. I was a different kind of rat before, dock rat on Veach Hub over in Atins. Started as a kid, being a gopher for pilots who would toss a few coins my way if I brought them some bottled water. Eventually got a job running fuel lines to docked cargo ships, then working the cargo trucks. But I watched, and I learned whatever I could from those guys.

“Then some smuck with a trust fund comes prancing in with his shiny new Sidewinder, all whoopity-do I just turned eighteen the world is my oyster kind of dreck. I won’t bother with what the guy did to deserve it, but long story short I stole his ride.”

Well, I wasn’t going to judge him for that. I’d stolen far more than that.

“Spent my time hiding out in asteroid belts mining, long after the cops stopped caring to look for me, then turned to rares trading for the snobs in these parts with fat wallets and fatter heads. Even worked for Imperial Intelligence for a while, but we won’t talk about that. Point is, you pulled yourself up after a big fall—I started at ground level.”

Our drinks arrived and even though I was just having water they put a purple umbrella in it.

Surly savored the taste of the bourbon. “That’s the good stuff. Down here it’s a hundred credits a shot.” He seemed to get warm up a bit, though. Indi Bourbon doesn’t take long to kick in. “You know, Achenar isn’t the first time we’ve met.”

“It’s not?”

“Naw, I sent out a distress call down when I was exploring neutron stars down in Skaude sector. You were in range and tried to help me find a way back out. We were talking about that when I thought up the Fuel Rats. I’d also just bought my Clipper that night, and you went on and on about how you wanted one.”

I smiled. Mossfoot used to be big on getting a Fer De Lance, but something about the Clipper appealed to him—namely the combination of firepower and running away speed.

“So when I heard you stole one from Baron Kingsman, well, I knew I had to find you if you ever came back this way.”

I sipped my water, waiting for him to get on with whatever business proposal he clearly had in store.

“How would you like to work for Aisling Duval?”

I shrugged. “I work for anyone if the price is right. Don’t we all?”

“Come on, you’re dumb, but you’re not that dumb. Lines in the sand have been drawn, and everyone is trying to get as many independent pilots on their side as possible.”

“Yeah, and a lot are staying the hell away from all that. Declaring yourself is like putting a big target on your chest.” Fact was, I was already pledged to Edmund Mahon up in the Alliance.

“Look, we talked a bit about slavery before. I know you’re not a fan. Told me how you could have easily ended up in indentured servitude a couple times. Told me how you realized you’d been a bit of a bully back when you were a muckity-muck toff type and how you got a bit of perspective. Well, Aisling’s trying to make a difference. A real one. Slavery of any kind is outlawed wherever she’s got influence. She’s got support systems in place that help the little guy. Guys like you used to be.”

I shook my head. Aisling was a kid. “It’ll never work. She’ll either be dead in a year or she’ll go to the dark side and make compromises.”

Surly shrugged. “So what? It’s not about changing the world next week. Maybe she goes her whole life and doesn’t get slavery banned across the Empire. Maybe that life is a short one. But the people she touches now, the kids she saves from losing their parents or ending up as slaves themselves to pay off a family debt? Those kids grow up and make a bigger difference next time around. You want to make change, you look at what you can do in the long run, not what you can do by breakfast.”

I chuckled. "You've got passion, I'll give you that. So, what put you on the recruitment wagon?"

Surly shrugged. "When I was working as a dock rat, I believed the Empire's bull about meritocracy. I fetched water for privileged shmucks because I believed the system worked, and that I could make it there someday myself."

"Well, you did become a pilot."

"Yeah, but I stole the ship, and laid low till the cops forgot about me. Not exactly what the Imperial ethos had in mind. But I did that because I knew I was going to be stuck working a dock forever. There was no place for a guy like me to get a license, let alone a loan for a ship. And those uppity-ups, you think they even know how to fix the cupholder on their pilot's seat? They'd just buy a whole new seat instead. Those guys don't have merit, they have privilege."

"Aisling is different. She's got privilege, but she knows it. What's more, she knows it's wrong. That the system doesn't work as intended. But she wants it to. In a way, she's not a whole lot different from you."

Well, Mossfoot anyway, but I had to admit, I saw the appeal in what he was saying. Mahon was a good man, but the Alliance was doing fine for itself. The Empire, on the other hand? I never expected it to be anything but its stagnant aristocratic privileged self for the next thousand years. And guys like Denton Patraeus sure didn't help me think otherwise. He was like Baron Kingsman, but on a whole other level. A level that bent planets to his will.

"So what would you want?" I asked. "Assuming I was interested."

"For now? Information. Aisling likes the Alliance. She's got no interest in hurting Mahon's interests. But the fact is that illegal slave smuggling goes through there like nobody's business. A lot of it going to Archon Delaine's part of space. Kumo Crew territory. You know what happens to people there."

I groaned. He wasn't wrong. I'd been tracking countless offers for smuggling slaves within Alliance space, part of a railroad that would eventually lead them to the Kumo Crew. The local authorities cracked down on it where they could, but that was the one problem with the Alliance—each system was autonomous, and some weren't as opposed to slavery as others. It also just took on corrupt system to start a new network for the railroad, and accountability was all but nonexistent.

But as I said, I'd been tracking those offers. Keeping records of everything going on within a hundred light years of Gateway. Somehow Surly Badger knew that.

“With your records, we could send agents in to disrupt the railroads, maybe get some of those slaves into Aisling space where they’d be freed on the spot.”

“Okay, so you need information for now. What about later?”

“Up to you. There’s lots of ways you can help out. Spread the word about Aisling's efforts, bring back various agreements. Work it in with your usual trading if you want.

Great. Another goddamn paper route.

“You remember that you caught me just before I left on a major exploration trip, right?”

Surly lifted the bourbon to his lips for a sip and smiled. “Oh, I remember. In fact, I would strongly suggest you go on that trip anyway, and help out Aisling when you get back. If you say yes, that data is going to be put to use right away, and I’m willing to bet they’ll figure out where it came from.”

I set the glass of water down and crossed my arms. “So you’re basically saying that your bumping into me is no accident and that you had all these angles worked out from the start.”

“More or less. Saw your name on the station manifest, did some research, came and pretended this was all a big coincidence. Yep, sounds like my style.”

“Did you plan for me saying no?”

“With my silver tongue? Never crossed my mind. By the way, how’s the Cerberus plague situation up there? Did you manage to make a difference on your own?”

I opened my mouth to tell him to go to hell, only I found I couldn’t. I wanted to help, but what good was that data in my hands? In Alliance hands, even? It’s not like they didn’t know about what was going on, they just couldn’t do anything about it. Aisling’s people had the resources to do make a dent in the smuggling. Surly was just pointing that out to me in his own frustrating way.

“Goddammit.”

Stowaway

I will admit to feeling a bit guilty about defecting (more or less) to Aisling's cause. Mahon was a good man, and the Alliance was worth protecting. I just honestly thought the information I had could be used better by her right now. Hell, maybe they'd unofficially appreciate the action if it meant shutting down the underground slave trading running through Alliance space.

But I guess like everything in the Alliance, it would depend on what system you're on. Some embrace the idea of Imperial slavery, while others honestly don't give a rat's patooty as to where their slaves come from—and the very ethos of the Alliance means they have to honor those planet's beliefs, even then they're seen as immoral by others, and hope gentle pressure and persuasion can change things over time.

Same can be said for Fed space as well—just because a planet that joins the Federation has to officially renounce slavery doesn't mean it won't keep on truckin unofficially. The pressures of an ingrained culture and society can be enormous and take generations to turn around.

I saw Surly a couple more times before I left Cubeo, asking him to look over my rig and see if the new Fuel Rat attachments looked good. Viaticus Rex II could now hold twice the fuel if need be, but I figured I'd keep her close to her usual sixteen tons for weight considerations. He grunted his approval at the extra large fuel scoop I had installed.

All told the T6 had dropped a bit of range, from 28 to 26 Light Years, but that was because of the extra kit and the beefed up shields I had installed. I had a feeling I might need them.

As I prepared to leave I checked the fuel lines running along the bottom of my ship, as well as the hull, looking for anything to be concerned about. I'd had the dockers give the internal structure a once over to strengthen its integrity, a costly but worthwhile expense if you were going to be out for a long time. You could be flying an eggshell in short order if you weren't careful with that.

The paint job, however, stayed as it was. Moss liked the way VRII looked all dirtied up, and so did I. The vibrant green had looked a bit garish out of the shop, but with the exhaust and wear and micrometer scratches everywhere, it kind of reminded me a bit of an old earth army jeep. Rugged and functional.

Also, it's well known that thieves are less likely to steal your ship if it looks like crap.

I went up the cargo ramp, through the hold to check the various internal components. If I had a single regret it was that I couldn't fit an auto-repair system on board as well. Aside from that, everything was ship shape.

Inside the cockpit, however, was a different matter. Right on my dashboard was a small round ball of fur, right on top of the radar projector.

"Ah crap, trumbles!"

How they got on board I had no idea. I hadn't even heard of trumbles being a problem in 3300 and had assumed they'd been wiped out. These pests ate almost anything and reproduced like crazy, getting into every part of your ship.

I reached for my sidearm, hoping it was the only one, when the ball unfolded into a very long tube like shape and yawned.

"Ah crap, ferrets!"

Fun fact: Cubeo has a ferret problem.

If there's one thing mankind knows how to do, it's how to muck up and wipe out indigenous life forms by introducing new ones, either intentionally or accidentally. Rabbits in Australia, grey squirrels in England, cats and snakes on various Pacific islands, and humans themselves on Achenar.

Go read a history book—it happened.

Ferrets, it turned out, were borderline superpredators in this system, having been introduced as aristocratic pets, once they got out into the wild there was no getting rid of them. They even made their way on every space station in the system. I didn't learn this till later, though, when I told Surly about what I'd found. Rather than shoot it, I captured it to show him—capturing it involving all the dexterity and hard work of reaching over and picking up its limp body as it dangled from my hand like a wet noodle.

"Yeah, they're like rats here," he said. He'd come back to my ship one last time to see me off. "Though they actually eat the rats, truth be told."

"So, do I just dump it in the bin or something?"

Surly looked over the dangling cappuccino colored tail with legs. "Well, maybe not this one. This is a pet."

"How can you tell?"

"The ears are tattooed. That means it's someone's pet."

"So some rescue place to turn it in, then? Get it back to its owner."

"Oh, she's already with her owner."

I frowned. "You put her on my ship."

Surly smirked. "What can I say? I thought you'd be lonely out there. Last time I saw you, you had a cat. I didn't see a cat here anymore."

"No... she found a new home."

"Well, this little bugger needs a home. Trust me, they're almost like a cat in terms of taking care of them. You'll love it. And if you don't? Well, I hear they're tasty, too. Ferret-kabab!"

I rolled my eyes, Moss would joke about putting our old cat Dumbass in the airlock, but that wasn't my style. Still, he wasn't wrong about some form of companionship. Mossfoot had me. Who did I have?

"Thanks."

"No worries. Now get the hell off this station. You've got exploring to do, remember?" Surly walked off the ship with an offhanded wave.

I held up the furry tube to look at me. She was starting to wake up, and didn't look too happy about dangling in the air the way she was. Mossfoot would no doubt make an offhanded grumbling remark about having another mouth to feed, but I found myself liking the idea already.

"Hello, sweetie," I said. "I wonder what I'm going to call you?"

Trouble

I'm a combat pilot by nature, but that doesn't mean I can't adapt. It's like anything else, you look at what is required to accomplish the job, then look at the threats that might keep you from accomplishing it and devise a strategy to deal with those threats.

Since I got the requirements down pat, let's have a look at the threats.

Key threats within and near human space: pirates (moderate), crazy hermits (minor),

Key threats outside human space: stellar phenomena, fuel shortage, wear and tear on parts.

Okay, so dealing with pirates and crazy hermits is easy enough: run. The T6 couldn't fight its way out of a wet paper bag. Therefore despite the weight advantage (and therefore increased jump range) D class thrusters can provide, it's worth taking A instead. Same goes for shields, in case those threats are faster or heavier than me and I need time to lock onto another star system.

Sensors and life support, however, are not as important. I don't need top of the line sensors to run away from anyone who interdicts me, and once outside the bubble it doesn't matter if I have seven minutes of oxygen or seventy, if the canopy goes I'm toast unless my ejection seat can preserve me until a rescue ship arrives. Those can go D class.

Fuel shortage? Added an extra fuel tank. I can now carry 32 tons for any trips through fuel-poor badlands. Wear and tear? Not much I can do there, but MF had this ship's integrity down to zero after SagA* and it was still in good shape... well, good enough.

Stellar phenomena? There's always the chance of running into a stray asteroid or crash through a nearly invisible ring around a planet or gas giant. I've got shields for that. What about stars? Basically heat is your biggest enemy. Get too close during a scoop, or jump into a binary system where you get wedged between a pair, and you can start taking damage to your internal components.

The T6 tends to run a bit hotter than other ships, but with a decent powerplant this is largely taken care of. However, there's always room for improvement. Setting your

power distribution to engines and shields then turning it off can lower your heat signature a bit, so can turning off your shields once you're outside of human space (though, you'd wish they were up if you run into one of those aforementioned invisible rings, or a stray crazy hermit). Cargo hatch can also be turned off, sensors, even the fuel limpet controller until it's needed.

Basically turning off everything you don't need to explore with can drop your baseline heat a fair bit. That'll buy you a few extra and potentially precious seconds if heat becomes an issue.

That's about it. I reckon I'm as ready as I'll ever be.

* * * * *

Remember what I said about thrusters and shields? Well, that goes double if you've just given an opposing major faction all your ship data and effectively turned traitor in their eyes, no matter your justification.

It started with me watching my still unnamed ferret crawling around the walls of the cockpit like some kind of furry salamander. Before I'd left I'd bought her some GeckoPads™ like pretty much any pilot has to unless they like their pet bouncing off all the walls like a ping pong ball.

GeckoPads™ are non-magnetic adhesives that mimic the namesake's ability to walk on any surface in zero-gee, even glass. Most pets adapt to them rather quickly, and some of the smarter ones even figure out how to use it in concert with zero gravity – cats mainly.

This ferret, however, was still getting used to the pads, and walked staying as flat to the surface as possible, instead of its usual hunched back approach, hence the salamander comparison.

I was heading towards the edge of the Bubble, ready to start my little adventure, when she crawled over the viewscreen and blocked my view.

"Out of the way, you walking scarf," I said, and casually tossed her over my shoulder. She'd grab onto something eventually, I was sure.

But as I cleared the windscreen, there was a Vulture in front of it, standing between me and the station, weapons drawn.

A quick glance at the readout brought up the words Alliance Adjuster, and the rating: Elite.

I knew full well who he was here to adjust.

Kicking the afterburners, I dove as his twin beams scorched my shields. The station was eight kilometers away, I was sure I could make it there before he burned me to ash.

“Your day of reckoning has arrived, traitor! I knew your true colors from the start!”

I recognized that voice. Frickin Javert. I couldn’t believe Officer Dillon had travelled three hundred light years just to track me down.

Who was I kidding? Of course I could.

And here I was without The Troubadour, because I wanted nothing more than to take him down as well. Not today, though. Heck, I couldn’t even ram him to death if I wanted. My shields and hull weren’t cut out for that, while the Vulture was a tank.

To make matters worse, my casual tossing of the ferret across the cockpit had been taken as an invitation to play. She’d quickly crawled sideways around the cockpit, got right on the viewscreen again, blocking my view of the station, then shuffled down to the radar so I couldn’t keep an eye on the guy trying to murder me. When I tried to pick her up to move her again, she jumped up and grabbed my hand like it was a rabbit, playfully nipping at the fingers.

It would have been cute if I hadn’t needed that hand to steer with.

I shook the little bugger off again and focused on staying alive. Shields down to half. All I needed was to get within the station’s no-fire zone and...

...he’d keep firing, apparently. Crap.

Fortunately the station didn’t take to people violating the no-fire zone, and I could see Dillon taking a pounding. And that’s when the ferret, having crawled along the deckplates, decided to crawl up my leg.

“Ghah! Goddammit!”

I tried to squirm and shake her off, needing both hands to dodge incoming fire. I must have looked like I was having a seizure or something. I’d like to think I’d somehow inadvertently made myself harder to hit through sheer zaniness, but I doubt that was true.

Eventually Dillon had to break off his attack, the station having collapsed his shields.

“This isn’t over, traitor! I’ll be waiting for you!”

I rolled my eyes, requesting docking permission and breathing a sigh of relief. “Good luck with that, dumbass.”

I then looked over to the ferret that had almost gotten me killed. “And you. You’re nothing but trouble, aren’t you?”

At least she had a name now.

Once More Into The Black

Officer Dillon didn't bother me again after that. I made it to the edge of the Bubble more or less without incident, though I did see some other Adjusters that I had to avoid along the way.

I might have to have a talk with Surly about just how they knew how to find me so quickly. Figuring it out is one thing, but this felt more like he'd called them using my phone and left the line open or something. It wasn't so much a hunt as a targeted directed search.

Poised on the edge of civilized space the question now was, "where to"?

Well, that giant glass cloud that looks like the Eye of Sauron is always staring at me...maybe I should give it a good poke?

* * * * *

So that eye is called Barnard's Loop, and it seems to be a popular place for people to go honeymooning because I came across maybe two undiscovered systems the whole way there. Sheesh! They might as well install traffic lights out this way.

Back when Moss was exploring he rarely ever came across another explorer tag—here they're practically setting up condo show rooms and offering time shares to passers by. Not exactly what I had in mind.

The Loop however is impressive as hell. Over a hundred and fifty light years in radius, and filled or surrounded by other massive nebulae. Once inside the heart of it, and far enough away from whatever sun you dropped in on, the galaxy around you takes on a dark red hue, and you get this feeling that you're either completely alone, or not alone at all in the worst possible way.

Trouble didn't seem to care one way or the other. I don't think ferrets have the best eyesight compared to other animals... or maybe they just really don't care about anything outside of ferrety things. She still crawls along all the walls like a furry lizard, and has no

trouble adjusting to a lack of “up” in the world. If she can touch it, it’s ground, and that’s good enough for her.

Of course, Surly never did explain to me how to litter train the dang thing... I consulted GaliPedia after an accident in the cockpit and decided to keep her in the spare cabin until she got used to figuring out the zero-gee litter box. Fortunately I also picked up a sensor that lets me know when she’s done her business, so I can let her run around freely when there’s no danger of mini Tootsie Rolls floating about.

So...now that I’m out here...now what?

* * * * *

I’ve been watching a lot of movies lately.

I kind of got sick of books for a bit because that used to be all I had access to. Now with MF’s entertainment rig in the space cargo room I’m indulging in my old ways—four meter screen, surround sound, with optional immersive holotech on select movies. Bliss!

This is also my way of pointing out how little I have to do out here.

After spending some time around the Loop it really sank in just how little idea I had about what to do. Just wander from star to star? Planet to planet? It’s not like the T6 is kitted out for landing on any of them, and so far what I’ve been coming across has largely been discovered by others.

I needed an objective. A target. I’m the sort of person who is given a mission to complete, and exceeds expectations doing so.

MF, on the other hand, was happy just wandering around aimlessly for weeks on end.

Without someone to give me a mission, I had to give myself one. What was interesting about Barnard’s Loop, other than all the other nebulae inside it? I did a bit of research and came across something interesting.

Runaway stars.

It seems that when the star that created the Loop blew, the force was so great it sent a number of other stars flying away in every which direction.

Now, we’re ALL moving at incredible speeds – the planets around their suns, the suns around the galaxy, the galaxies within the universe, we’re all constantly in motion, so when we talk speed, it’s all relative.

So, relative the other stars that are (more or less) spinning around in an orderly fashion at similar speeds, these suckers are shooting out at hundreds of kilometers a second from one another, and dozens of kilometers a second from their neighbors.

After two million years, these stars have travelled about a thousand light years (give or take, depending on relative velocity) from their origin point.

I let that little bit of trivia sink in for a bit, imagining an explosion so massive it pushed whole stars away from one another, to the point where, two million years later, they could only see what where they came from looked like a thousand years before. They were explorers too, after a fashion, passing by thousands of other stars in the void.

I wondered how close they had ever gotten to another system, or if life on those planets ever saw the star passing by, inching across the sky for centuries? Though I doubted any of the runaway stars had planets, let alone life inhabiting ones, I imagined for a moment if life had evolved on one after their own second “big bang”, and intelligent life trying to make sense of a universe where evidence over time proved they were travelling through the stars in a way none of the others were.

There’s a science fiction novel in there somewhere.

And that was good enough of a reason for me to go. Runaway stars had captured my imagination. And so, from inside their birthplace at Barnard’s Loop, I’d be chasing after them, covering their two million year journey in a matter of days.

Who says science can’t be fun?

Interlude

Within the Halls of Innovation on Polevnic, Simguru Antal's true believers go about their work. It is not a duty but an honor for them, for they are furthering their leader's vision which will bring order to a chaotic galaxy and light where there is darkness. In these halls you would not see a single face that showed signs of dissatisfaction, or whose eyes were not alight with purpose.

Well, perhaps one.

"Brother Sparks?"

Brother Sparks halted, wondering how the man had recognized him. Had he an ocular implant that transmitted real time location data on everyone on Polevnic? Had someone slipped a tracking device in his drink and was now lodged in his lower intestine? Was he using a genetic trace sensor that scanned the air for flakes of dried skin or dandruff?

Oh, wait, it was the fact he was the only man in the Halls of Innovation wearing a hood.

He pulled it down and turned around. The young courier, smiling brightly, handed him a datapad. He turned and ran off with another datapad for another client.

Brother Sparks let it scan his thumb and his retina, then gave it a password to voice-analyze. Of course any amount of data could be sent instantly across any distance. Pilots communicated with one another between star systems and listened to Radio Sidewinder from Sagittarius A*. But that didn't make the data secure.

Transmissions could be intercepted and encryptions could be broken. One famous such incident involved the explorer Erimus, the first to travel to the opposite side of the galaxy, sixty-five thousand light years from Sol. Weeks before his expected return he seemed to have showed up early, to much fanfare, and ready to claim millions of credits.

Only that hadn't been the case at all. A preliminary data transfer had been relayed when Erimus feared that he would be unable to make it back alive. That had been

intercepted and decrypted, then merged with terrabites of worthless forged cartography data, and handed in.

It hadn't fooled anyone for long, but the pilot had almost made off with a small fortune in ill-gotten credits before he was interdicted and brought to justice.

This was why Stellar Cartographics insists on all explorers bringing their ships to an authorized station personally, so that the data core can be analyzed and the information proven to be authentic. It hasn't made many explorers happy, though.

But this was why, especially in places like the Halls of Innovation, sensitive communications required a literal personal touch. Everyone was on the same side, marching forward toward the perfection of human society. They were all on the same side here. Nobody had anything to hide.

Funny how many couriers one could see running about here.

Brother Sparks tossed his hood back up and headed for his Order's wing. It wasn't officially his Order's wing, of course. Officially the Order didn't exist. They'd been folded into the Utopian Commune fifty years before. But traditions were respected, to a degree, and his Brothers knew how to keep the old ways alive.

Brother Sparks sat down at his minimalist desk and skipped past the "Eyes Only" warnings to start reading the relevant parts.

He stopped, then leaned forward. Backed up several pages, then skipped ahead. Connected the dots.

Salvage and Recovery Report Summary 34992X

Station Outpost: Trevithick Dock - LHS 3447

Unidentified Signal: Derelict ship in deep space.

Ship class: Cobra MKII prototype (possible reproduction?)

Contents: One pilot (deceased), hold empty.

Report 1: Ship found by salvagers suffering from severe carbon scoring and drained power plant. Canopy breached. Deceased pilot suffered severe facial burns. Salvage returned to nearest space dock for evaluation and repairs or scrapping. Due to state of pilot body, ship assumed to be a more recent reproduction of the Cobra MKII prototype rather than an original. Possibly a KitCobra refit.

Report 2: Standard medical examination of deceased pilot indicates body is still in resuscitatable state. Taken to Emergency for standard RemLok procedures. Items found on board ship suggest it may not be a reproduction. Federation Galactic Aerospace Museum contacted with serial numbers for verification.

Report 3: Standard revival procedure failed. No cellular degradation observed despite prolong vacuum exposure. Advanced RemLock procedures authorized.

Report 4: Advanced revival procedures failed. Neurological and vacuum exposure specialists consulted. Experimental procedures authorized. FGAM expert confirms pilot's ship is at least two hundred years old and is most likely one of the lost Mark II prototypes, though it has been refurbished several times.

Report 5: Experimental revival procedures succeeded. Pilot has suffered memory loss but is making remarkable recovery progress. Neurology reports indicate unknown implant of organic and inorganic components covering his brain. Experimental RemLok implant? Nothing on file matching it for last two hundred years.

Report 6: Patient continues to make rapid recovery, on par with that of a normal long-exposure pilot rescue. Hematology reports unknown nanotechnology in his blood stream, now dormant. Could these have helped preserve his body in prolonged vacuum exposure in close. Blood work sent to Geneva Medical Research Laboratory on Sol for further analysis, along with brain scans.

Report 7: Pilot still suffers from memory loss but is considered fit to leave. Having no insurance, the Federation Galactic Aeronautics Museum has agreed to acquire the MKII prototype in exchange for all medical bills paid, plus an arrangement with the Pilot's Federation to allow him to resume work as a pilot. Pilot is... not happy about this arrangement.

End Report

This on its own was worth Brother Sparks attention. The procedures mentioned were within the fields his Order had worked on in the past. Fields they continued to work on in secret. Fields Simguru Antal was also studying, but with darker ramifications. It was a game of chess. His people ostensibly worked for Antal, yet helped made sure certain breakthroughs were never made.

Not all was well in Utopia.

However, it was the second report that tied in with the first that gave him what he needed. It had occurred months later, in Alliance space. It had been attached and forwarded because of the pilot's facial recognition match. Whoever in the Order had sent him this information had apparently now created a search string specifically for him, because there was far more where that came from, including something about a spokesman for Odyssey Expeditions called 'Ranger M'.

But it was this that grabbed his attention.

Audio Log of Dr. Pavel Klimt, head of pilot recovery

"Hoo boy, had a doozy today. Got five popsicles brought in from the local Combat Zone--bunch of stupid kids squabbling over turf like that means something. Three of them wake up like babies, one does into neuroshock and had to be brought in for advanced recovery procedures, but the fifth?

"Okay, you ever see a movie where you think the guy is dead, but suddenly he lurches up, back arched, gasping like he's been underwater for three minutes, eyes bulging out like he's seen hell and doesn't want to go back? Yeah, like that. Then he crashes back down, unconscious.

"Thing is, there was no brain activity. Not before, not during, and not after. There might be some kind of EM interference, but this guy was braindead.

"And then the braindead guy opens his eyes. He's looking around for someone, looks over at an empty chair, as if he expects to see someone there. Starts saying 'moss foot', which it turns out is his own name, and waving his hand in front of his eyes, like he's making sure he can see. Then he looks to me and panics. Yells out something about her brother, that I should tell Mathias something went wrong. I finally get a sedative in him and he calms down, but according to our scanners, still no brain activity. I mean, what the hell?

"That's not even the weirdest part. After this guy leaves, I send off a request to Gateway regarding what I'm seeing, trying to find out if a specialist can give me a call with some advice, but when I get an answer, it was a request from Geneva to forward everything I have on the matter. So I do, and what happens? It turns out I accidentally deleted everything about it after I sent it. Geeze. Sixteen hour shifts will do it every time. At least somebody's got the information."

End Log

Accidentally deleted? Maybe. Maybe not. The fact Geneva came knocking wasn't a coincidence.

Brother Sparks waved a hand over his featureless desk, which exploded into an elaborate holographic computer array. After several security checks, he dipped back into his Order's archives. It would take forever to search every experiment, but he had the information he needed to speed things up.

"Computer. Search keywords: Mossfoot, Brother Mathias. Secondary keywords: nanotech, long term vacuum exposure, brain implant. Cross reference and compile."

Brother Sparks leaned back while the machine sorted the millions of records, and quickly came up with a virtual folder file of results. He plucked the folder from the screen and checked how thick it was.

This might take a while.

Runaways

It took me a while, but I tracked down the three most famous runaway stars from the supernova that created Barnard's Loop, ranging between roughly 700 and 1200 light years away from the nebula: AE Aurigae, Mu Columbae and 53 Arietis.

Not much to report at the moment. Might not be for a while unless something amazing happens. Exploration is strangely meditative. It might seem like you're visiting the same types of planets and stars over and over, but you honestly never know for sure what is on the next horizon.

Listening to GalNet News I hear the Emperor's getting married. While I am a sucker for a royal wedding, given that he already survived on assassination attempt, I can only assume security is unbelievable tight.

Been chatting on the long range coms with other explorers, some making their way to SagA*, others farming the neutron fields for easy credits. I've always wondered why Universal Cartographics was so keen on black hole and neutron star data - it's not like they're risks for travel, per se. We know where they are already. I can only assume that the data is in high demand by the scientific community rather than prospectors and colonizers.

Trouble continues to try to find new ways to earn her name, though she is getting used to me and the ship. They say you can litter train them like cats. What they don't tell you is that they also like to take a crap as a way of marking the boundaries of their turf. Gotta break the poop-meister out of that habit before this ship gets a brand new funky smell added to it. And given that she's got access not just to the floor, but the walls and ceiling as "turf", well, yeah.

Hmmm... marketing idea: mobile cleaning unit with microthrusters and gyroscope. Follows pet at discrete distance. Sensors set to instantly recognize when pet is about to take a dump. Grabs pet, flies it to litter box. If it's too late it gives gentle tap on nose for correction, then cleans and deodorizes mess.

After hitting the last runaway I turned to a not-too-distant nebula called the Cave. From there, I'll probably choose a random direction and see where my feet take me.

Anyone reading or listening to these, you'll hear from me when I have something interesting to report. Until then, assume I'm getting one hell of a long term meditative de-stressing session.

Or watching Die Hard. I could just as easily be watching Die Hard.

The Emperor is Dead. Long Live the Emperor

So, the Emperor's dead.

Huh.

It's hard to get details out in the void. The only thing that broadcasts this far are things like Radio Sidewinder and GalNet, and that's because they're voice/text only. From what I've gathered since waking up in this era most people believe in Holo or Nothing, but the amount of data needed to transmit that can't be boosted across more than a few dozen light years.

Some of the pilots are chatting about it. One guy in the neutron fields near SagA thinks Patreus is being framed. Says it's just too damn obvious to have a member of Patreus's entourage do the deed. A gal out by Orionis then asks the questions "why wasn't Patreus at the wedding?" To her it's too convenient that he just happens to be there. So neutron boy says the assassin no doubt chose a uniform on the day based on what would make the best fall guy - when Patreus didn't show up, it became him. Orion girl counters with the fact that the Emperor had no line of succession and Patreus had long advocated that the next in line should be based on merit, not blood. But getting married would have made that impossible, since Arissa Lavigny-Duval would have been made Empress if the Emperor died. If he ever wanted a shot at being Emperor, he simply had no choice.

And so on and so on. It got pretty ugly after a while.

Honestly, I have no real love for the Empire. Like Mossfoot, I think they got bags of style in their clothes and cities and ships, but their views on human rights are disturbing to say the least. Aisling Duval's got the right idea, but I don't think she's got a real chance. I hope I'm wrong.

Sometimes I think it's better to just stay out here. Politics don't mean a thing a thousand light years in any direction. This assassination could make the whole Empire unstable, and who knows what will happen with the Federation. The Alliance will have to buckle down like they tend to.

Why should I care?

It's not that different than a thousand years ago, I guess. A lot of people live in a country, they may or may not have the ability to vote, but most don't actually feel like they have any impact on their country's direction. They simply go about their business, make money, make a life, try and do a bit better than the day before. But would any of them have a real plan on how to fix their economy, or fight a war, or rebuild their nation's infrastructure?

At least I know my ship. I know what makes her run, I can fix her if she breaks down. My ship is my world, and it just happens to transit through theirs once in a while.

Ghah. When did I get so maudlin?

I'm about two thousand light years from Sol. Sprinting from system to system, looking for points of interest. I think I'll try a different approach. I found what I hope is an unexplored sector of space and have squared off a one hundred light year square on the galactic map. Let's try doing a thorough scan of the whole grid.

The problem with exploring at top speed is that you end up missing all the stars in between. Who knows how many earth-like worlds does an Anaconda miss when they're jumping forty light years at a go?

I guess I'll find out.

This might take a while.

Sector MF-1

People are dumb.

Honestly I don't mean that as a disparaging remark, more of an observation. We are, in many ways, brilliant. We've composed symphonies that can move the entire species to tears, mastered the elements to turn dead worlds into living ones, have looked at laws telling us the speed of light is as fast as you'll ever go and given them the finger.

And yet we'll try to convince one another we're right even when we know deep down we're wrong.

Orion-girl and Neutron-boy are still arguing about the Emperor's death. BOTH of them got their facts wrong. Neutron-boy said Patreus wasn't in his entourage and was therefore the most likely suspect. But he was. It was President Hudson who wasn't there. Orion-girl said the emperor was getting married to Arissa Lavingy-Duval, when it was her mother Florence.

Do either of them nut (or ovary) up and admit a mistake? No, they double down. Neutron-boy insists Patreus is still being framed and that the footage of the attack showing him try to stop the assassin will eventually be revealed as fake just to try and throw suspicion on him. He's basically inventing new ways to prove his boy is going to be a fall guy, when he's in no danger of it at all.

Orion-girl on the other hand, is more than happy to believe the footage is fake (and all witnesses lying, I guess) because it supports her theory that Patreus is guilty. On top of that her mistake about who the Emperor was marrying was dismissed with a "Oh, we know who he was REALLY marrying" wave of the hand.

Space madness. Explorers call it gazing into the abyss. These two have been out in the black for months. You stay out here too long with only a radio for company and you start to create your own reality. And after a while you get very protective of that reality, treating any information that disagrees with it as a hostile attack. I quickly learned that me interjecting with my "facts" had no place in their discussion.

Or maybe they're both just nutters who like arguing.

* * * * *

On my way to the East Veil Nebula when I stumbled across a fascinating system. Dual binary, Red Dwarf with a Class-L dwarf star almost touching it. And only a hundred and fifty light-seconds away is an Earth-like world.

The system itself is very young, under a billion years old, so the life down there must no doubt be very basic. There IS life, my sensors can pick up that much, but what kind I have no idea. If it's anything like Earth they've probably only just learned the photosynthesis trick. Some science nerds might totally get off on this, since it might give them a window on the early stages of life on Earth.

The planet is smaller than Earth, but the atmospheric pressure is about the on par with it. It has a moon, but oddly enough it orbits this planet at a right angle to the rest of the orbital plane.

This binary system also has a water world and two other terraformable worlds in it rich in mineral deposits. About thirteen thousand light seconds away is another star with more planets orbiting it, including another water world and another metallic terraformable world. And orbiting all three stars in an even wider orbit are a couple of gas giants.

I hadn't come across any other explorer marks in quite some time, and decided this would be it. This was where I was going to plant my flag and map out a hundred-light-year box. Sure it wouldn't be legally binding in any way as "belonging" to me, typically planets belong to whoever can colonize it first (and one crazy hermit with a laser does not constitute a colony. Nor, sadly, does indigenous life).

But this is about sixteen-hundred light years from Sol - I can't imagine it being colonized any time soon. We're still stuck in a pre-supercruise mentality for space travel, and once we're over it, I can imagine the human Bubble expanding rather quickly. And I could see myself coming back here again and again, if only for this one world. Who knows what else there might be in the box, though?

So, sketching out the boundaries on the galactic map, I started scanning what I'm calling Sector MF-1. Hopefully it's not full of crap.

My God, It's Full of Crap!

Aside from the Earth-like I stumbled across, sector MF-1 is turning out to be a bit of a bust. Found some more water worlds and terraformables. One or two ammonia world as well. But there are far more crap sundaes out there than anything else.

...er... crap sundae means a small sun with nothing but iceballs orbiting it. Dang explorer lingo kicks in when you spend too much time talking to other explorers long range who have gazed too long into the abyss.

Speaking of which, Orion-girl and Neutron-boy forgot to set their comms to private when their latest conspiracy laden argument turned into comm sex.

Ewww. That got me back to exploration right quick.

My strategy for scanning MF-1 goes like this. First I carefully plotted out every star in the bottom layer of the sector, sweeping back and forth to ensure that I got everything.

Then I got bored and just started zigzagging all over the place hoping for the best.

I'll probably be heading back soon. Not only is scanning every star in a sector really hard to organize, it turns out sector MF-1 isn't even pristine territory. The top half has the tags of a half dozen explorers passing through. Maybe I'll scan the sector below it next, since it seemed to be reasonably untouched.

But at the very least I'll be back to explore the initial Earth-like, or at least its moon. Moss found a number of Earth-likes in his last expedition, but this one is all mine.

Well, that's it. I'm done. DONE! God, how Mossfoot ever coped with being out here for months on end is beyond me. Now I remember why I spent so much time locked away in my hidey hole during our previous expedition.

It's gotten to the point where I've been talking to Trouble like a co-pilot, and am imagining her talking back to me. I've become too wrapped up in the bickering love/hate relationship between Orion-Girl and Neutron-Boy like it's some goddamn soap opera. I'm

looking at crap sundae systems and wondering if the icy worlds might actually be ice cream. I'm looking at Barnard's Loop way way way off in the distance thinking it's watching me and judging me.

Most of all... I'M BORED.

MF was the explorer at heart. I don't know if it was because of the accident that turned our communal profile into a piece of abstract art, but he just didn't care much for interacting with people anymore. At least, not face to "face". Maybe he found solace in searching the unknown and learning about the galaxy. Me? I got my fill of that a while back.

Maybe he used exploring as a way of running away, I dunno. But if that's the case, so am I. After the Cerberus plague and my realizations about my career choices, I just wanted to get away from everything and everyone. And it's time I stopped. Maybe the science nerds will find some of the stuff I found in sector MF-1 interesting. More power to them. But I need to talk to people who aren't crazy in my life, alternating between planning a wedding and assassinating each other ten thousand light years apart from one another. I need purpose. I need a mission.

I need to go home. I need to find some excitement. I need to make a difference.

Career Day

I tried to track down Surly Badger once I was in Aisling space, but it turned out he had left to go on an expedition through the neutron fields near the galactic core. My own expedition had been less than fruitful. Less than thirty million credits for all my hard work, and still a long way to go before reaching Elite status.

Mind you, I don't really care about that kind of rank. I used to be an Elite combat pilot back in my old body, and quite frankly judging by the Elite competition I faced as a bounty hunter? Not that impressed. There are plenty of ways you can grind your way to a rank, subverting the intentions the Pilot's Federation had coming up with their system.

Want to be an Elite combat pilot? Fill up with shield cells, hang out in a tank in combat zones or high security resource extraction areas and pick off high ranking ships that have a half dozen other bogies on them already. Want to be an Elite trader? Check online for the most profitable trade route that other people already found and grind. Want to be an Elite explorer? Go to the neutron fields and... Oh...uh...sorry Surly.

To be fair, I'm wishing I had gone there too. I'm not a scientist, my attention span for the wonders of the galaxy is limited compared to Moss. He didn't mind travelling half a million light seconds just to scan a star that had a water world around it, on the off chance that it might have some islands. He'd also pour over the data he collected, looking for anomalies or seeming paradoxes in system formation and trying to figure out what happened. Not that he shared that side of himself often in his journals... I think he was afraid of being labeled a nerd.

Me? I was only interested in the Earth-likes on the off chance that maybe, just maybe, I'd see some lights on the dark side, a sign of intelligent pre-space life. Now THAT would be awesome. I'd come back the moment I could get an atmospheric capable craft and... I dunno... hopefully not kill them all with a cold virus I brought with me for starters.

Anyway, back in Aisling space and without any friendly or at least non-hostile faces to call on for help, I decided to check in with the Aisling representative and see if there was anything I could do to help the cause.

The Power contact was a stout bald man who would have resembled a laughing Buddha if it weren't for the fact that he had clearly never laughed in his entire life. I explained why I was there and he looked over my record.

"I see..." he said, scrolling through my file. Then back up. Then down. Then up again.

It wasn't a very long file.

"Am I to take it that you pledged your allegiance to Princess Aisling Duval on the premise of assisting those in need and abolishing slavery?"

I nodded. "That's right."

"Well, it seems you haven't been very productive in that regard."

"Well, I handed over all the data I had about underground slave smuggling between Alliance space and Archon Delane. I assume that was helpful?"

"Indeed, it was. But, there is an old Imperial saying that goes: What have you done for us lately? You flew off to God-knows-where for four weeks, coasting on your single accomplishment. I'm sorry, but at this moment you have no standing with us whatsoever."

"And I'd like to remedy that. Just tell me what you'd like me to do."

"Well, we have various media supplies we'd like to ship out to prospective allies, and contracts to take to those we wish to cement our commitment to..."

Oh God, not another paper route.

"Um... anything else?"

"Well, Princess Duval has been building closer ties with the Federation as far as Shadow President Winters is concerned. She senses a kinship of purpose between them, I am told. But the current President, Hudson, is a thorn in her side--and ours. I'm sure any accidents his ships would encounter at your hands would be seen favorably by us."

Oh God, not more murder... well, excessive property damage with a slim chance of murder anyway...

"Look, I joined Princess Duval's cause because I hate slavery, Imperial or otherwise. A close friend of mine was in a position more than once where he could have been forced into slavery, so it was important to him. Therefore it's important to me. Don't you have anything along those lines?"

The representative frowned. "Hmmm... perhaps. Are you familiar with Zemina Torval?"

"Senator, big in mining." That was all I knew really.

"Controlling shareholder of Mastopolos Mining to be exact. And 'big' in slavery as well. She talks big about treating them well on the Senate floor, but that doesn't stop her from crushing down ruthlessly on anyone who looks to enhance their rights, well being, or bids for freedom. As a result she has a number of political prisoners in her controlled systems. She keeps them shifting around in cryo tanks just like slaves, their whereabouts eventually lost under piles of red tape making it difficult for family or the media to discover their whereabouts. We have a vested interest in rescuing these prisoners, either to reunite them with their loved ones or so that they can work with Duval for a brighter future. How would you feel about helping us there?"

I thought about it. "So, basically you want me to be a pirate."

"Well, no. Not a pirate. You're freeing political prisoners from unjust confinement and--"

"Am I interdicting cargo ships?"

"Well, yes, but--"

"Shooting out the cargo hatch or spamming hatch breakers at them?"

"And not destroy the ship, that's very important, however--"

"Scooping up cargo pods and bringing them back here?"

"Yes, but I must emphasize--"

"Sounds like piracy to me."

"I take it you're not interested, then?"

"Hell no, I wasn't going to say that. I was going to ask you if the job came with a free eye patch!"

(S)He's A Pirate

"Yarrrrrr! Avast, matey! This be Commander Violet of the Trubadour. Be droppin yer booty or I will keel haul ye and send yer boat to Davey Jones' Locker!"

"What?"

I groaned. Nobody had a sense of fun while being mugged anymore. "Drop the prisoners or I blow out your cockpit."

"Are you wearing an eye patch?"

"Yes." I have a flare for the dramatic and kept video comms on. Sue me.

"And a weasel on your shoulder?"

"Ferret."

"What's with the weird hat?"

"Look are you going to drop your prisoners or am I going to blow your ship out of the sky?"

"But if you blow my ship out of the sky you won't get any prisoners."

Wow this was the mouthiest victim I'd ever come across. "Look, I'm in an Imperial Courier fully kitted out. You're in a Hauler. Do the math."

"I have done the math. One plus one plus one equals zero."

Uh oh. I knew this guy wasn't that bad at math. He was stalling.

Sure enough, two Vultures popped out and oriented themselves to open fire. I closed my cargo hatch and hit the boosters. I was out of there and in supercruise before either ship could lock on.

I could have fought them, but I was under orders not to destroy Torval's ships. At the end of the day she and Princess Duval were on the same side, and blowing up ships was frowned upon. These kind of piracy actions were more like counting coup.

I decided to base myself in Aisling space in a control system called Shapsugabus at a space station appropriately called Abe Dock. The nearest Torval control system was Caspatsuria, about two jumps away. I loaded up with limpets and went to work. Only

work turned out to be not as fun as I thought. Asking nicely wasn't doing the trick, so I needed to consider my options.

Being a pirate (even if I am rescuing prisoners the skill set is the same) is far different than being a bounty hunter. As a hunter I was expected to do one thing--blow up ships. Not much has changed in the last hundred and fifty years in that regard. If anything it's even more encouraged now with the improved safety of ejection seats and recovery systems. Pirates with large bounties on their heads might survive their ships being blown up, but they're tagged when the recovery teams pick up their ejection seat and have to pay the consequences once brought back to port.

Mind you, from what I hear a lot of clever commanders avoid these consequences in a number of ways, or at worst are forced to pay off legacy fines before they can go on their merry way and start blowing up more ships.

Welcome to the future. Some disassembly required.

So, here's your options as far as I can tell: 1) Ask them nicely to drop cargo (doesn't work), 2) shoot out their cargo hatch to force them to drop cargo (I tried this but had to stop before destroying the ship), 3) use hatch breaker limpets to yank the cargo hold open, then cargo recovery drones to pick them up.

Time for option 3. In theory the process should be straight forward. Interdict, melt shields, launch hatch breaker, collect loot. In practice? We'll see.

"Yarrrr! This be Commander Violet of the Trubadour, prepare to have creepy little drones do minor structural damage on your ship!"

My C3 beam laser took care of the Type-7's shields quickly enough. I launched a limpet.

The turned and smacked the drone into space dust with its stubby wing!

I fired another.

The Type-7 was armed with anti-missile systems. It shot the stupid thing down!

I fired three at once and hit the ship with multicannons to remind it who was in charge.

The Type-7 decided to take me on head-to head and opened fire with all its guns.

I lifted the eye patch off my eye to make sure I was seeing straight. "Are you kidding me?" I commed the ship. "Dammit, keep it up and I will defend myself. I just want the prisoners."

"Yeah? And I want to keep my job!"

The clunky Type-7 tried to circle around me. It had to be stalling for time, but this guy definitely didn't have a wing with him. He must have been waiting for the cops to show up.

Finally one of the limpets connected. I kept on firing at the ship in moderation, trying to aim for the thrusters so he'd be dead in space. But this guy wasn't going to make it easy for me.

Twenty seconds later the hatch was open and cargo containers were spilling out.

"Okay, now get out of there. You've done your job. Scram!"

"Screw you, buddy. It'll be my hide if I don't get those popsicles to spacedock."

Dammit, this guy just wasn't going to quit. He'd whittled down my shields and I didn't feel like taking hull damage from him.

"Last chance, punk. You can fly home or float home!"

His response was more weapons fire.

I lined up the plasma accelerator out on my left wing nacelle. I had planned on testing it out on a more heavily armed ship if I came across one. "Fine. Have it your way."

By the time I got back to Abe Dock in Shapsugabus I was feeling pretty good about myself. Granted, things hadn't gone exactly as I had planned, but I had a cargo hold full of prisoners to be freed. I'd helped people. I'd made a difference. I'd...

...earned absolutely no merits.

"WHAT?"

"It's not that we're not grateful for your assistance, Mr. Foot." While I was using Violet as my pirate name, there was no way around Mossfoot's moniker when it came to official business. "It's that you caused as just as many problems for us in the process."

Aisling's rep on this station was a thin, reedy kind of guy who looked like a pencil--and by that I mean he wore a yellow suit and had what I can only describe as a "circ-hawk"--a circular mohawk--right on the top of his head. We sat in his office which was white and curved and Imperial from desk to door.

"Oh, come on..." I protested.

"Shall we go over the video?" The rep tapped a holographic button in front of him and footage from my ship's camera started playing.

First he reviewed over the Type-7 I had to blow out of the sky.

"That was self defense! I gave him every chance to run."

"Yes, well, regardless the property loss does show up on Senator Torval's sheets and she looks to us to blame for it. That aside..."

The footage continued, where I was launching recovery drones towards the pods. I knew where this was going.

"Look, before you say anything..."

Pencil-neck raised a finger for silence as Imperial security came on the scene and scanned me. In my haste I tried to get out of the way, which cased the recovery drone with prisoner to splash against my hull.

"Well, I--"

"And this."

Next, in my panic I tried to scoop some up manually before I ran, only I was now competing with my own drones. More canisters splashed against the hull either from me rushing at them too fast or the drone failing to unload it properly.

"Well that was an accident, I'm new to--"

"And then your next encounter..."

A new video appeared where I interdicted a Type-6. The only problem was it had an escort of three Sidewinders with it.

"I think you know where this is going."

"Hey, I'M not the one hiring suicidal pilots to work for them. Those Sidewinders knew they didn't stand a chance and kept on firing anyway."

"And the T6?" He asked this just as it exploded on the screen after having dropped a few canisters.

"Um... unlucky shot?"

"Yes, you seemed to have had a lot of those. Let's run down the list, shall we?
Cobra--destroyed."

"Well you can't blame me for that, of course a Cobra pilot is going to try and take me on. Cobra pilots think they can take on anything."

"Then there was the Asp. He was actually trying to get away."

"Okay, that guy MAY have said something about my mother and by this point I was just getting used to these bozos fighting to the death. I mean, old habits die hard, am I right?"

"And then there's the question of recovery. Just how many prisoners did you leave behind, excluding the ones that met with unfortunate recovery accidents?"

"Every time I start scooping them up the Fuzz shows up. Next thing you know my shields are down as six of them pepper into me and I'm praying my hull holds out until just one more drone comes back."

"Yes, you seem to be very good at excuses, Mr. Foot. But the fact remains you've shot down Senator Torval's ships, who is an Imperial citizen and, at the end of the day, an ally to the Empire. The prisoners you managed to recover only barely balance the books on that regard. If you are to continue aiding the People's Princess, might I suggest you come up with some better tactics for prisoner recovery? These are actual people you are dealing with, and your casual attitude towards their loss is disconcerting to say the least."

Pencil-neck was right. I was used to being an excellent fighter pilot and didn't want to admit that I actually sucked at something. But as a pirate? Yeah, I sucked. I needed some time to re-evaluate my combat strategy, figure out what kind of targets to go for, and what kind of attacks would encourage them to leave, maybe not get greedy when it comes to recovery. I could run some simulations, but it was probably for the best if I didn't practice where actual lives were at stake.

I sighed. "Got any paper routes open?"

Just A Setback

My mediocre attempt at piracy had me doubting myself. I'd spent my life as a bounty hunter, and was starting to wonder if I could do anything else. I figured I could run some missions for a while while I was there and keep thinking about the problem. Maybe I needed to go old school, as in high school, and look for a guidance counselor.

I dutifully shifted media and propaganda filled cargo containers around, furthering whatever goals Princess Duval had going on, but my heart just wasn't in it. The only time I felt alive was when some Hudson Fed interdicted me, trying to stop the signal. I tried my hand at mining, thinking it might be the zen-like break I needed, only I kept getting attacked by morons who didn't realize that just because a beaten up looking Imperial Clipper was using a mining laser didn't mean its other three hardpoints weren't equipped with fiery pew-pew-pew deathly deathly bang bang.

Eventually I gave up and took my ship in to a high-tech system. The Troubadour was about due for its monthly overhaul, reinforcing the hull integrity, running diagnostics on subsystems, and I did my usual run down of equipment, power usage, and effectiveness.

Back on my old Cobra MKI I was constantly tweaking things, at times replacing my military grade laser with a simple beam (as effective as the old school milspec was, it overheated like crazy), going for a missile heavy or missile-less loadout, and eventually hacking the hyperdrive to circumvent the old 7 light year limitation everyone had gotten used to. There is never such a thing as a perfect ship setup, only what works best at the time.

As I checked the station's inventory, I came across an interesting reference and called over one of the mechanics to ask about it.

"What's a Prismatic shield? Something for rich people who want their shields rainbow colored?"

The mechanic smirked and nudged her grease monkey hat up so it wasn't blocking her view. "Naw, that's something new Aislings people came up with - refracts incoming energy, especially laser, as well as absorbing it, can take more punishment than your standard shield."

"How much more?"

"Let me put it this way, your 6A shields? A 6A PSG can take more punishment than a 7A, but still leaves your 7 slot free for cargo."

That sounded impressive. "What are the downsides?"

"Weight, for one thing. It takes more punishment than a 7A, but it weighs just as much, which is twice as much as the one you currently have. Plus it takes a lot more energy to run. Like 30% more than a 7A, and 50% more than your current model. And of course there's the cost."

I checked the figures. "Ouch."

She snorted. "Yeah, we get that a lot, and on dedicated fighting ships, like a Vulture, it's just not worth it. They're already starved for power in most cases. But a trader? Or a multirole? Well, you crunch the numbers and let me know what you think. We've got a few in stock if you're interested."

I decided to do just that, and started reviewing my ship loadout, how much power I used, and where I could save it. The Clipper is a big ship, with notoriously weak shields due to the amount of surface space it needs to cover. I was currently running two shield boosters to help make up for that. I could put on four, but then I'd have no room for useful components like chaff, heat sinks, or various scanners.

The PSG would give me a roughly 20% boost right off the bat, so it would be like having a third booster, without taking up the slot. But what about the weight? The Clipper's speed and maneuverability (not counting inertia) was a key reason both Mossfoot and I fell in love with this ship. I'd already upgraded the hull to military grade armor, and that weighted a hell of a lot. Would the shield end up slowing me down? What kind of weapons could I carry and still maintain my edge without sacrificing anything?

It turned out not to be as easy as I thought. There was no way I could have it all, so it became a matter of compromise. But compromise isn't the same thing as sacrifice. I figured I could do without a top grade life support system, and settle for a weight and energy economical D class setup.

I also found that while my dual beam setup was devastating in an initial volley, I sometimes had to shift power around once it ran dry, often at the expense of my shields. But if I swapped out a Gimble Beam for a Pulse, I'd be draining less energy while not giving up the hard hitting firepower of my fixed beam, and keeping more power diverted to shields longer.

I probably spent the better part of an evening looking over the numbers, experimenting with different setups, until I found one I liked. It shaved a couple of ticks off my top speed, and took a light year off my jump range, but I reckon overall it will be worth it.

After I was finally happy with this I sat back in my pilot's seat and sighed. All this talk of finding a different life outside of combat, and I just spent the past two days fine tuning The Troubadour for just that.

What was that Godfather reference? "Just when I thought I was out... they pull me back in."

Then I thought about it. No. Not really.

If that was actually the case I'd be in a Vulture or a Python or saving up for an Anaconda. Or I would have gotten a 7A PSG instead of 6. Why didn't I? Because I wanted the cargo space. I needed it. It was important. I wasn't trying to make The Trubadour a combat focused ship, I was trying to make her the best multi-role ship in the galaxy. She's my ship, and I can do anything I wanted in her. Anything at all.

So what was I going to do with her?

Eh, fight pirates, probably.

An Old Acquaintance

"Um... hello? Anyone out there?"

With the Troubadour kitted out for kicking ass and delivering pork rinds, I'd been checking up the bulletin boards and doing whatever struck my fancy. Even tried my hand at mining for a bit before I remembered just how much I hated it. I'd handed in my resignation to Duval's representative at one of her control systems and left on amiable terms. After my hasty rush to help her out and abandon the Alliance I realized I was better off not making enemies just because I wanted to go off and do other things.

I still felt a bit down because I was starting to think the only thing I had to look forward to was dealing out death or at least large insurance bills to dirtbags who deserved it. While a noble profession, unless you were taking them down in the midst of a hijack, you don't exactly feel like you've helped anyone but your own pocketbook.

I was in the midst of that funk when the distress signal came in.

"Um... kinda stuck here."

It wasn't on a distress channel, though, which struck me as odd.

"Who is this?" I asked.

"Cortex Reaver. Who's this?"

The name sounded familiar. Wait, I did know him. Shortly after I woke up in MF's head he was helping out some new pilots with advice and even some short term loans to get them on their feet. This guy was one of them.

"Cortex. Hey, I remember you. It's Vio... Mossfoot. Remember?"

"Vio Mossfoot?"

Great. Improv time. "Well, I go by Mossfoot by my given name is Violet. You can imagine why I don't go with that normally."

"Oh, hey, Mossfoot! Yeah. You back in the bubble? Last I heard you were off exploring."

"I'm back. What seems to be the trouble. And why aren't you using an emergency channel?"

"Yeah. I'm out of fuel and my comm unit is on the blink. I only have an open channel and Radio Utopia working. Can't reach the Fuel Rats."

"Yikes." Radio Utopia was a propaganda channel for Simguru Antal's Utopian vision, and if that was the only radio station I had to listen to, I'd take the eternal silence of space instead. Those guys creep me out.

"Yeah. For some reason nobody is picking up, though. You're the first one to answer. Think you can help?"

The Troubadour wasn't "ratted up" as the Fuel Rats put it, but it wouldn't take long to fit a drone controller and some fuel drones.

"Hang in there. Help is on the way."

This was the kind of mission I was waiting for. It wasn't about credits or blasting bad guys into space dust, it was about helping someone out who was in deep crud. Making a difference for one person whose life depended on it. Doing the right thing.

Unfortunately in my haste getting the Troubadour ratted up, I ended up accidentally replacing my fuel scoop with an extra fuel tank and didn't realize it until a couple of jumps before I reached him.

"Um... I'm just going to be a bit delayed. Sit tight, Cortex."

"I'm not going anywhere. Just listening to Antel talk about how technology will ascend mankind to a higher something or other. Please don't let his gibberish be the last words I hear before I run out of air in this bucket of bolts."

A quick run back to the nearest station and some module swapping and I was back on track.

Cortex Reaver had been in a Sidewinder when I first met him, and having a heck of a time. He ran into a common problem for young pilots where they want to get ahead and make money as fast as possible, but don't realize that some missions are just likely to get them into more trouble with local cops. Mossfoot had shown him the ropes a bit, and loaned him some Platinum.

Now he was sporting a Vulture. Deadly ship, but a crappy jump range. Even loaded down with military armor and a prismatic shield, my Clipper could outjump him by a fair margin.

I followed his Nav Beacon in and dropped out of supercruise. Here I was ready to be the hero for once, I activated the fuel drone and...all my systems shut down.

Dammit! I'd tweaked the hell out of The Troubadour's energy settings to get it just right as a multirole ship, but I hadn't checked whether the drone controller would redline the system or not. Which it did.

"Hang on... just need to make some adjustments..."

"You're new at this, aren't you?"

"I could take my fuel home with me, bub."

"Hey, I'm not complaining. Just observing."

I shut down some of my weapons (why they're on the same grid as things like the discovery scanner and drone controller I have no idea) and the lights came back on in my ship.

"That's more like it. Fuel away!"

It didn't take long to top him up enough to get him to a scoopable star. I followed him to the same system just to make sure everything worked out okay. After that we saluted and went on our separate ways.

It was a little thing. No money involved, no merits, no prestige, and it was a pain in the butt in terms of outfitting and power regulation, but it was the most satisfying hour I'd spent in a long time.

Old Habits Die Hard. Pirates, Not So Much.

I don't want to think I've simply accepted who I am. A killer. A hunter. A vigilante. Maybe I really am just a sim of myself and I can't fight my programming, but I don't want to believe that. I'd like to think I've broadened my expectations to include everything at my disposal. I've gone exploring and enjoyed that for a time. I've gone mining and enjoyed that for a much shorter length of time. I've done rescues and raced and gambled and traded goods and smuggled goods. I'm fine with all these things.

But there's no point in denying what I'm good at, either.

I decided to join up with Arissa Lavigny-Duval for a while. I didn't feel like showing my face in Alliance space again any time soon, and Senator Lavigny-Duval's stance on piracy is one I could not only get behind, but do well at supporting. I'm sure another goddamned paper route will be involved somehow, but thought of taking out corrupt cops as well as pirates makes my skin tingle. Corrupt cops make my blood boil as much, if not more than pirates. At least pirates are honest about what they are.

I'd also been considering a change of weapon loadout. Back when I was weapon testing, before I lost my friend and took over his body, the eggheads wanted me to use a loadout that combined lasers, multicannons and a railgun. Great in theory, but the firing delay made it impractical at the time.

However, Lavigny-Duval's people have looked at the problem and come up with something potentially more useful. They call it The Hammer, a rapid fire railgun. Each shot does less damage, but a three shot volley can inflict great damage, in theory. The firing delay is the same, but I have some ideas on how I might get around that without draining too much energy. We'll see. I'm doing just fine in The Troubadour as it is.

As a side note, I've seen a some multipurpose ships using the prefix ICV lately. Everyone seems to think that stands for Imperial Cargo Vessel, but then I look at their weapon loadout on the scanner and realize it could just as easily be Imperial Combat Vessel. No doubt the choice of prefix is intentional that way. Nothing like a pirate intercepting you thinking you're just another cargo ship only to realize they got the C part wrong. Might have to borrow that.

My anti-piracy got off to a strong start, as I ended up in an area where two systems were both trying to cut down on piracy coming from their neighbour, which basically meant I could jump back and forth between them both to rack up bounties, and cash them in. Sometimes I even got multiple bounties in the other system, and the old bounty hunter math still applies. Remember kids, when accepting multiple missions from the bulletin board, if the target locations are from the same system, 4 pirates plus 4 pirates equals 4 pirates.

One strange thing, though. As I was getting my ship repaired and recording this, some mechanic comes into my cabin and starts checking out my pilot and copilot chairs. I was hoping they were going to offer me an upgrade to those sweet looking Gutamaya Imperial chairs, but no. Instead he tells me my ship is already VR compliant and asks if I am interested being hooked up for CQC.

First off, I already have a VR rig in the entertainment room, and being hooked up while flying seemed unnecessarily lazy--not to mention dangerous. I mean I sometimes shoot over my targets just reading Galnet news. So I tell him no thanks and he shrugs and leaves.

Not sure what that was all about. Oh well, back to making space safe again!

Bread and Circuses

I continued my routine of trading and hunting, as well as delivering crime reports for Senator Duval and was feeling overall satisfied with my lot in life. I could only hope Moss would feel the same if he were here.

I decided to legally tweak my name a bit. Walking around in someone else's skin is creepy at the best of times, and being called by a different name doesn't help matters. By making Violet my first name maybe I could strike up some normal text conversations with people... I might even be able to pretend I'm my old self again. I'll just have to remember never to go to voice or meet them in person.

No. You know what? That's just wrong. If there's anything these past few months have taught me it's that I can't get my past back. My body is a desiccated husk circling a dead world off the shoulder of Orion, and my brain is an organic blanket of nanocircuitry hitching a ride on someone else's grey matter. There is no going back, only forward.

And forward seems to have taken me in a strange direction. I looked into the CQC upgrade that mechanic was talking about, then looked into more research about it.

I was both intrigued and disturbed by it.

Since coming back to the land of the living I hadn't spent much time planetside anywhere. Sure, Moss stopped off at Earth and took a grand tour of the big cities, including the underwater parts, but for the most part life has been on ships and space stations.

But when we were on Earth I noticed these virtual reality hubs people were going to, and suddenly the words "opiate of the masses" sprang to mind. People had these things in their homes, but those who couldn't afford a proper rig could rent them in huge complexes. In there you could do pretty much anything you wanted. Sure they have warnings on them like cigarettes a thousand years ago did, but nobody cared. If your reality wasn't up to snuff, you could have a second life online.

The sick thing of it was that it's not like you could have anything you wanted online for free... you could just get it cheaper. Can't afford a sports car in reality, drive a sports

car in virtual reality for a tiny fraction of the cost... But it's not real. You're already spending money to spend time in this make believe land, and now you're spending extra to get goodies that cost nothing to make or reproduce? It's not like there's manufacturing costs in the code, you know.

Ugh, I must be getting old... well, I guess I am over a hundred and fifty or so technically. But it just seems wrong somehow. The VR rig I have on board the Troubadour is strictly an entertainment system for certain kinds of movies. I never used it for a virtual world before. Quite frankly I got enough of that being stuck in the virtual library when I wasn't wanted in Mossfoot's consciousness.

But some of that stuff I learned about later was just sad... how people with low end jobs would use what little disposable income they had to get a decent virtual house to live in and spend all their time there with virtual friends in the neighbouring pods...

Then, not that long ago, there was a kind of backlash to it all, a kind of Tulip Mania Economic Crash if you will.

Oh, look it up if you don't know it. I read about it in one of the infinite books I was stuck with in Moss's headspace library. I still prefer movies and have yet to see it used in one.

At least in Fed space it seemed the latest generation of kids kind of rebelled against the VR bread and circuses they were being given, realizing--shock of shocks--that it wasn't real and going out looking for visceral 'real' experiences. This was leading to a resurgence of gang culture and spontaneous aggression in higher population centers. It went viral, so to speak. Kids went out looking for fights and bloodying each other up, just for the sensation of it being real. I'd see that as a positive thing if it wasn't for the fact that this youth rebellion had no direction, so it just lashed out everywhere.

But that leads me to how it is being harnessed by President Hudson. He used to be strongly against VR lifestyles, but he's since taken a new stand on it--harness it to create the next generation of fighter pilots.

And the idea wasn't just embraced by the Federation. The Imperials and Alliance jumped on it as well. Why be happy with your virtual mansion and hovercar, when you can be a Top Gun and fight for real cash prizes? You might just be good enough to get a real mansion someday! But in reality those exhibiting talent are approached about their respective government's incentive programs to join the local navy chapter. It's like The Last Starfighter or something.

See, movie references! I bet ten times more people got that one than the tulip thing.

So what does that have to do with me? Well, once this Close Quarters Combat competition started getting popular with the non-pilots who were learning valuable new murder skills, it seemed a number of old space dogs realized this could be used to increase their edge for their next pirate interdiction (either as the interdictor or interdictee). But hey, who has the time to get out of your ship and find a VR hub to rent a booth from? Why not just modify your pilot's seat so you use it from the comfort of your own cockpit?

Next thing you know pilots are able to take a break from their exploring a thousand light years away and engage in some virtual dogfighting to brush up on their skills against other pilots before heading back--just in case.

The beauty of VR streaming is that most of the data is already on your ship, the only information being transmitted is location and action related, which can easily be transmitted by hyperspace channels the same way Radio Sidewinder and Hutton Orbital Radio can broadcast all the way to SagA*, or how pilots talk to one another from across the galaxy in real time. The thought of being across the galaxy and taking time out to compete in a virtual gladiatorial ring thousands of light years away is a bit too weird to wrap my head around in some ways.

So, the question now is, do I go down this rabbit hole?

Hutton Mugged

So it seems Senator Duval isn't having a great week. Some kind of blitzkrieg took place, possibly by Hudson supporters and now her people are scrambling to to damage control. I've been doing my part. I mean, why not? I'm not a die hard Lavigny-Duval supporter, but I approve of her tough stance on piracy. Problem is, she's a traditionalist and not a reformer. And as time goes on I've got a sinking feeling that traditional values are going to lead to a whole lot of dead people.

Scratch that, I think reformers could end up exactly the same way.

Basically, we're all screwed. Grab yourself a Sidewinder and go find yourself an Earth Like World to settle down on a few thousand light years away.

As you might have guessed, I'm not having a great week either. And not just because Trouble got herself locked in an air vent somehow for the fourteenth time. Seriously, the three most common words that come out of my mouth with a ferret on the ship are "How did you...?" followed by a bewildered look. There's a reason the famous thought experiment isn't "Schrodinger's Ferret", because the correct answer would be that the ferret is neither alive nor dead, but in a completely different box somehow.

It's just starting to get to me how indifferent this universe is. For every Fuel Rat out there is someone who would just as gladly blow a stranded explorer out of the sky for a laugh. For every honorable pirate (shocking I know, but I've met some) there are two who would rather have another notch on their control panel than a hold full of goods to sell on the black market.

Take Hutton Orbital, for example. You can't jump directly to its secondary star, which is almost a quarter of a light year away, and it has its own station. It's considered an endurance test to some, a practical joke to others. Some enterprising entrepreneurs tapped into the zeitgeist of the moment and decided to create a rare collectable travel mug that will only be sold from there, using scrap ship wreckage for it.

Funny to think such a thing would be worth anything at all, but you know how the free market works. I talked about Tulip Mania in Holland almost two thousand years ago. Something is valuable only if everyone agrees it is valuable.

It seems some people disagree about the Hutton Mug. In order to produce it, they required pilots to bring them raw authentic ship scrap, and untold numbers of people agreed - seeing the insanely long trade route as a challenge or a laugh.

And others saw it as an opportunity to blow those people out of the sky.

Mind you, I wasn't there. I heard all about this on Hutton Orbital Radio, the other station I listen to besides Radio Sidewinder. There certainly wasn't any legitimate reason I could find for their actions--what they called a blockade. The scrap was worthless and the mugs wouldn't be produced for a week or more after the collection campaign was finished. All kind of pretzel shaped arguments and justifications flew around, but in the end the whole thing boiled down to "because we're jerks."

Murder wasn't on their mind, I'll grant them that. I swear these ejection seats are as much a curse as they are a blessing. Tin cans get popped, seats blip out a safe distance, and the medivacs pick them up and take them back to their last registered station (it's an insurance thing). Under ideal circumstances, the odds of death are low. But they exist.

The medivacs have been very busy lately. And not every pilot successfully ejected. All over a stupid novelty mug. Sheesh.

Down the Rabbit Hole

The Troubadour was docked in Kamadhenu for some long overdue repairs to the ship's structural integrity. Sure it's quick to slap on fresh armor plating or repair modules that can be easily slipped in and out, but when the bones of a ship gets weak? Those kind of repairs take time - crews have to sweep over the whole ship stem to stern, using high energy resonance scanners that target the ship's infrastructure and encourage the alloys to rebond and strengthen back to its factory specs. It was going to take a while, so I headed over to the local spacer bar for a drink and some conversation.

Turned out there was only one pilot there, and he was passed out. I asked the bartender what was up and he muttered about the damn tournaments.

"Seems like every trader or merc out there wants a piece of the action, so they're all jacked in back in their ships."

"Oh." It seemed CQC got very popular, very fast. And every ship cockpit was being equipped with these VR units? There was normally a hundred ships at Shajn Market, and right now almost all of them were plugged in to the same virtual world? Why did this give me a weird Matrix-y vibe?

(The Matrix is another classic movie that's seen a number of reboots over the centuries, usually around the time of a major technological leap when people get paranoid about machines taking over yet again...said the program currently in control of a human's body.)

I didn't want to seem rude so I bought a bottle of wine for the road, but I didn't see a point in hanging out in a place this dead. And if everyone was there, well, I had to admit, I was increasingly curious about this virtual gladiatorial arena.

Eh, what the hell? The structural repairs were going to take a few hours anyway.

I was going to ask one of the sweepers currently working on the ship integrity to call someone to install the VR plugin for my seat, but it seems they already did it while I was out. All part of the service, they said.

Yeah, that wasn't creepy at all. I'm asked, I say no. I turn my back, and they do it anyway. No charge. Looking back that should have made me a bit paranoid. But at the time I was simply excited to turn on, tune in, and drop out.

The VR program was installed in the ship's central computer (again, without my permission), and the seat provided the link, which connected directly to the brain via my flight suit's RemLock life support. Funny that the same tech that preserves your brain when you eject and are out of oxygen can be used to tap into it as well.

I wondered if it would even work for me. After all, technically I was a wet circuit napkin on MF's brain, and RemLock didn't exactly agree with me the last time I had to use it.

Fortunately it worked out okay. I strapped into the cockpit and the hanger disappeared from view. Now I was in a different hanger. Standing. This was weird, because I certainly felt like I was sitting. The VR experience was strictly audio/visual in nature, so I guess things wouldn't feel normal again until I was in a cockpit.

Just then, a man with long white hair and a regal face appeared in front of me, wearing a long white coat instead of any kind of flight suit. He kind of looked like an elf for some reason.

"Good evening, ma'am. This appears to be your first visit to the CQC simulation network. I am Simon and I am your virtual guide. I am here to help answer any questions you might have."

The word "ma'am" struck me. I looked down at my chest. Oh. Hello. Haven't seen you two in a while.

This must have been a sim thing. To coin another Matrix term, how I looked here was based on my own residual self-image, just like when I was projecting myself in MF's head or hanging out in the library.

I looked back to Simon. "Yeah, I'm new here. Where's the pew pew pew at, Elrond?"

Simon looked at me strangely, probably a 'processing' look. "I'm sorry, I do not recognize that term."

"I'm here to spend an hour or two killing fools."

"Ah. I see. Do you wish to go directly to your personal hanger or would you prefer to walk? For a modest subscription fee, you can walk freely around the entire CQC headquarters and interact with other pilots."

"Feels too weird acting like I'm walking around while sitting in a cockpit."

"I see you have our basic immersion package. For a modest fee we can upgrade you to full immersion that will provide full tactile--"

"No thanks." Good Lord was this guy going to start offering me extra lives for a 'modest' fee? "Let's just get on with the show, okay, Galadriel?"

"My name is Simon."

"Sure thing, Legoas. Show me the ships."

Simon teleported me to my pilot's hanger, and showed me how to conjure up three different ships available to me via voice commands and hand gestures--an F63 Condor, a Sidewinder and an Eagle.

"Oooh, I've never flown a Condor before." The F63 is the mainstay space superiority fighter in the Federation. I'd seen the around combat zones in the past. Not much of a threat against a larger ship on their own, but in swarms? From what I'd seen, in the right hands they could dance around Sidewinders and Eagles no problem. Their main disadvantage was they had no hyperdrive, and relied on larger ships to carry them where they were needed. "So, can I modify my ships at all, Glorfindel?"

"As you are new to the tournaments, you are restricted to basic loadouts. As your standings improve, you will be given access to different weapons, shields, and other accessories."

"Okay, so what is the gameplay like?"

"There are three tournament modes. Team Match and Capture The Flag both divide players into teams, while Deathmatch is every pilot for themselves. Each match is restricted to a maximum of eight participants, though fewer can take part in a match if eight are not available. Between matches you may review over your results and jump right into another match, or choose to visit the CQC Lounge, where pilots can hang out and socialize."

"Let me guess, for a 'modest fee.'"

"No, the Lounge is part of the standard CQC experience. But, for a modest fee--"

"Yeah yeah, never mind that, Arwen. So what do I do to get started?"

"Simply choose your ship and loadout and choose the kind of match you wish to participate in. When it is ready you will be instantly be deposited into your cockpit. All ship controls will be the same as on your own ship. Do you require any further assistance?"

"I think I got it.. um... crap, I ran out of elves."

"I have been called 'Keebler' by some." Was it just me or was there a tone of resignation in the sim?

"Eh, screw it. Thanks Simon. I'll let you know if I need help."

Simon nodded and disappeared in a pixelish kind of way.

"All right then," I said to no one in particular. "Let's get this show on the road."

But First, Some History

This was my element. The CQC fighters were all just right for dogfighting, each in their own unique way. The Troubadour might maneuver well under my hands, but the fact is it's not a fighter. She might look like one superficially, but the Imperial Clipper is over a hundred meters long, far bigger than an old Earth jumbo jet.

Me, I spent most of my previous career in the Old Worlds in a modified Cobra MKI, Lady Luck. To be honest, there wasn't much of the MKI left in her, I replaced everything I could with newer and better parts, to the point where I'd spent ten times her value on upgrades. But in my line of work it was better to be underestimated by your enemies, and a hundred and fifty years ago nobody thought you were much of a threat in a first generation Cobra.

But Lady Luck wasn't my first ship. Like most pilots I started off in smaller things, and learned the tricks of the trade doing system defense in a pre-hyperspace capable Sidewinder. Now that was a ship you did not want to fly without buying an ejection capsule, let me tell you. But that knowledge that you were flying an outmatched ship against pirates and raiders, relying on your wingmates, and knowing you couldn't go it alone and expect to survive... it had a way of making you step up your game.

And once your wingmates were splashed, it REALLY had a way of making you step up your game. That's part of the reason I went independent. After working as a stuntwoman, I'd toyed around with the idea of going military, but it just wasn't a good personality fit. And working private sector often meant you were underfunded - I put half my pay into keeping my own damn sidewinder in shape because the company wouldn't.

I cut my ties with them once I saw that a really bad guy with a really big bounty was in the system. Turned out he was on the station I was working security for, in one of the seedier bars the police never go into unless they're two days away from retirement. I risked it, using my charms to find out everything I could about him from his crew, and slowly working my way to the man himself.

What a piece of work. Five minutes with him and I realized not only that he was scum, but that scum like him was everywhere in the galaxy. They saw traders like cattle, livestock fit only for the bolt gun.

While I'm not as educated as Mossfoot in a bookworm sort of way, during my time with him you could say I got a bit of an honorary degree. Looking back I saw that this guy was a Barbarian, and no I don't mean in the Conan sense. I mean that human beings often divide along two kinds of society. Most of civilization is Tribal, in that the group takes care of one another and puts the needs of the whole over their own, at least in the grand scheme of things. That's why you have police and laws and government in them. Barbarians, on the other hand, live by the rule of individual merit. Might makes right. The strongest leads, the others follow.

That's an oversimplification, of course. Tribal societies can be filled with self-interest and barbarian societies can have laws and government. But in a general sense, it tracks. And this guy was a barbarian king if there ever was one. I knew taking him out wouldn't stop his gang. It just meant the second strongest there would either get a promotion, or have to fight the third and fourth strongest for it first.

But I also knew his bounty could buy me a new ship.

Long story short, I learned when he'd be leaving and made sure I was there waiting for him in an ambush. That's how I got the Lady Luck, and a taste for bounty hunting. Now that I was losing my taste for it, it somehow seemed fitting that I take those skills and put them towards having some fun. After all, in a virtual competition getting blown up wasn't just a possibility, it was a certainty. Pilots are free to take risks they'd never take in real life, and have their favorite form of fusion metal playing in their helmets like they're living in their own action movie.

Oh, side note, that's one way to spot an amateur bounty hunter--see if they have a mix tape. No pilot worth their salt will play action music during real combat. You have to stay calm and focused. Adrenaline has no place in a fight. Yeah, it kind of kills the cool factor a bit, but that's just one of the many ways reality and movies don't line up. I will admit, however, that I do from time to time imagine a soundtrack in my mind during a particularly easy fight. I'm only human...sorta.

But in CQC, there's no reason not to indulge your action hero persona and just go for it. You can be both Luke Skywalker and Biggs Darklighter in the same fight... sorry, Star Wars reference there.

Of course I'm no stranger to sims. Whenever I'm flying a new ship I want to know what its capabilities and limitations are. You do NOT want to try skindancing over an asteroid only to find out your inertia is heavier than you expected and become a pancake on its surface. But those sims are against computer AI bots. I often have them programmed to react to feedback from me in order to focus on any areas I might be deficient in. Which is good, but people are inherently unpredictable.

There's an old saying - "The greatest swordsman doesn't fear the second greatest swordsman, he fears the worst." And there is some truth to that. Spend too much time focusing only on the rules of engagement and doing things by the book and you're left unprepared when some moron does something you wouldn't expect in a million years. In a broader sense, fighting against pilots of all sorts of skill levels can only make you better and more prepared.

So, let's see what kind of challenge these guys really pose.

Close Quarters Combat

Let me describe a typical CQC match by comparing it to a real world fight.

In open space a one on one match more or less amounts to a combination of who can turn faster and who has more powerful weapons. While in group dogfights this can become more complicated (ie coordinated focus on a larger foe by several smaller ones) these two factors more or less remain the same.

Sure, there are tactics involved, selective use of boost, shifting of pips to different subsystems, chaff, shield cells, kinetic vs energy weapons... but in the end it really boils down to turn rate and weapons output.

In a real life extraction site, this can change a bit. Those big chunks of rock and ice can be used to your advantage, but if you're hunting in a big lumbering ship, chances are it still boils down to turn/weapons ninety-five percent of the time.

Now, into CQC...

I waved my hands in the hanger, conjuring up a F63 Condor. Small and fast. Just what I was looking for. I chose a team deathmatch competition and was soon teleported into the cockpit.

Looked pretty much the same as the one I already had. Sheesh... seriously, what I wouldn't give for the chance to customize my HUD at the very least - colors, sure, but also layout. And the seat... same old Faulcon DeLacy... I can't even get rid of that on my Clipper. You'd think Gutamaya wouldn't allow something that wasn't made entirely out of curves in one of their ships.

But I digress... I do that a lot, actually. Bad habit I picked up from Moss.

I chose Deathmatch because I figured there'd be better odds of one-on-one engagements than a free-for-all, and didn't care about coordinating teamwork like I would have to for Capture the Flag. After a short countdown, the match started.

I took about thirty seconds to get used to the Condor's controls. Let me tell you, it's a frickin hummingbird, and a good thing to, because I quickly found out people had a

whole other style of combat in CQC. I turned on some classical music--John Williams naturally--and smiled. I was going to enjoy this.

I scanned for targets on the radar and soon found them. Four at the other end of the field. My teammates were already engaging, so I kicked in the boosters to catch up.

The arena was an asteroid field with a station in its center--plenty of room to maneuver and find cover.

At first the combat seemed straight forward, pretty much what I was used to. The gimble weapons seemed to be more accurate in the sim than in real life, but then I'd never flown a Condor before to compare. They certainly didn't have as great a range as I was used to, but that didn't change much. I dove and pulled up and splashed some fools just like anywhere else.

But then I noticed just how much of an effect my maneuvering thrusters had. One guy trying to hit me with cannons had no luck whatsoever, I was flying sideways, pelting him with burst lasers, while his cannon shots drifted by harmlessly. I didn't just have to fly around an asteroid and reacquire a target, I could fly around it and keep my target in my sights.

I was doing just that when I noticed someone being very clever. He'd actually parked his ship on the skin of the asteroid, waiting for someone like me to fly by then attack from behind. Unfortunately for him I was hugging the asteroid in pursuit of another ship, not only did I see him, I was able to skirt around him and tear him apart before he could fly away. Good tactic, though. It was just bad luck on his part that it didn't work. I'll have to remember it.

It went on like this for a while, some of the pilots surprised me on how they used the environment to their advantage, and forced me to do the same. Some tried to lose me by flying through the space station's central corridor, forcing me to follow, and leaving me vulnerable if someone decided to try and come behind me as well. Energy management was also a key consideration--if your weapons were fully charged and you were going to joust someone, you'd best put everything into your shields.

This isn't to say I had everything my own way. More than once I'd realize someone was on my six only to see sparks fly and my cockpit disintegrate a moment later. Other times I was ganged up on by two or more pilots, making my survival even less likely. But more often than not I got the drop, or managed to squeak away if someone was on my tail.

In the end I walked away with a 1.2 kill-to-death ratio--so I was giving better than I got at least. Not bad for my first time out. Then I got a notice that a thousand credits had been deposited into my account. Turns out the CQC matches are watched pretty much on every planet, and even the noobs on the lowest rung get a lot of views by people hoping to spot the next CQC golden boy or girl. That means advertising revenue, which the tournament splits with the winner proportionally.

So, with a thousand extra credits in my account, I wondered if maybe that should go towards that "modest fee" Santa's not-so-little helper told me about so I could explore the place a bit more. Maybe later. For now, though I wondered if virtual drinks in the CQC Lounge cost anything. I felt like socializing.

Reality Bites

The CQC Lounge was full of people who must have paid a "modest fee" for some kind of visual upgrades, because there wasn't an ugly guy or girl in the whole lot. A number of private tables, some walled off with virtual "shields" to allow only certain members in, others open and virtually expandable to a larger size once more people joined it. The bar itself was kind of a holding pattern place for those who didn't want to join a group just yet. The bartender looked disturbingly like that guy from the first and fifth version of *The Shining* (the fifth version used a digital replica of the actor just to make it more creepy and ghost like for those that knew he died 500 years before - I should point out that every few centuries there is a movement in entertainment to remind us of our roots, which is why Homer and Shakespeare are still alive and well, but so is Kubrick and Kurosawa).

I had just ordered a drink (water - no point in wasting money on something I couldn't taste without an upgrade) and before I knew it I was slipping into bounty hunting mode. That is, I started eavesdropping. It's something that becomes second nature after a while. Guy and girl next to me--flirting, can ignore. Table directly behind me--one guy bragging about prestiging while the another accuses him of using a hack, might turn into a fight. Bartender down at the other end--giving advice to newcomer about how to use the facilities...I'm hoping he doesn't mean, yep, he means in her real life space suit because she's been here so long and doesn't want to go back just yet. Ick.

Then I noticed people disappearing. Not getting up and leaving, but blipping out of existence. It was happening more frequently now, and I was picking up a recurring theme over and over.

Emperor's Dawn.

These were the terrorists that the Empire believed was behind the recent assassination of the Emperor. Guess he wasn't Emperory enough for them. There was the usual fanatical BS behind their actions--returning to the old ways, glory days, proper values (which apparently include a heavy dose of murder) and so on. The combat pilots were blipping out because a couple of their bases had been uncovered and it was a bounty

hunting free for all. Imperial troops were taking care of the ground work, but Dawn has an ungodly number of ships at their disposal. A checkpoint and blockade was being set up to prevent any easy escape and so the Dawn were throwing their ships at the Empire in order to buy time and try and find a way to slip their key figures out to a new location.

As I've said before, I'm not in love with the Empire, but I hate terrorists even more than I hate pirates. At least I've met honorable pirates.

Suddenly it didn't feel like so much fun playing virtual combat when people were getting up and doing their duty--even if that duty was towards credits. I felt like a break anyway, outside of the cockpit this basic VR setup was counter-intuitive and kept reminding you you weren't in the real world (hard not to realize the hand holding a glass of water was in fact holding a joystick). I tossed the glass of water at the guy accusing another player of cheating and blipped out as it triggered the bar brawl I expected. Heh.

So far, two Emperor's Dawn cells were known to authorities. I chose the one at Maausk and signed up at the local station. There was intense fighting going at one of the nearby planets, presumably where they had hidden their base.

By the time I dropped in, fighting was well underway, everything from Eagles to Anacondas were in it, and it looked like a battle to the death. In this case, Emperor's Dawn's death. Seriously, it was a slaughter. The bounty hunters and Imperial forces kept their big ships focused on the heavy hitters. Anacondas and Pythons dropped like flies, and every so often my screen would flash blue with a bounty reward update. In old Earth terms the sound would be "Ka-Ching!"

The Troubadour was magnificent. The gimble burst laser could track even the fastest Eagle, while the combined burst/burst combination melted the shields of capital ships like... I don't want to say butter, that's such an overused metaphor... a really melty thing. Once the shields were down the multicannons would tear the hulls to shreds.

My shields weren't as strong as that of a Python, though with my prismatic shields and boosters she was stronger than she looked, and her weight was low enough that I got maximum maneuverability out of her, even though it was nothing compared to a Condor. Of course, she was also a large and easy target. Despite all that, the only time I felt I was in danger was when I took on an Anaconda alone, away from the main fight. She almost managed to get my shields down before her powerplant blew.

That fight had taken me a fair distance away from the main battle, and I figured rather than waste a shield cell I could just recharge a bit en route back.

Big mistake.

Halfway back, out of nowhere a red blip appeared behind me and opened fire. Shields down, hull taking damage. Where the heck had he come from? I had checked my radar just a moment before and was all clear. Thank God for military grade armor. I boosted away as fast as I could, but kept on taking a pounding. Dammit! I tried to get to supercruise but whatever was behind me as mass locking me. I locked on and checked the ship's readout--another Clipper, and it was staying a steady 2km behind me no matter how much I boost.

This was no ordinary terrorist. To keep up with me meant he'd outfitted a top of the line ship.

The readout listed him only as CMDR OD. But my gut told me this guy was CODE. Word was the pirate band had thrown their support behind Emperor's Dawn--for what reason I didn't know.

Unable to get to supercruise I high waked out to another star system before I lost everything and licked my wounds.

That. Hurt.

I mean my pride more than anything. OD had made a chump of me. How had he or she snuck up behind me like that? Regardless I wasn't going to let it happen again.

I dropped to a station and made some quick repairs, as well as a slight modification to the Troubadour. If OC was still hanging out there when I got back, I wanted to be ready. I replaced my spare fuel tank and added a secondary shield cell, tied into the first. It wasn't very powerful on its own (my ship's systems couldn't take the power load of a bigger cell) but it would give me an extra kick when I used it in tandem with the primary. It was worth experimenting with anyway.

Back to Maausk.

I didn't even have to reach the combat zone to find CMDR OD this time. He interdicted me en route. Good thing I'd listened to my gut about being prepared. I pulled back on the throttle and submitted to the interdiction.

Okay, flyboy, let's do this.

We dropped less than a klick from one another and opened fire more or less straight away. Neither of us had any illusion as to what this was about. From the start he seemed to have the edge, dropping my shields down and forcing me to use my supercharged shield cells sooner than I expected.

I mentioned before about how a Clipper was way bigger than an old Earth jumbo jet... now imagine two of those jets trying to dogfight. It was like slow motion compared to CQC combat, but about a thousand times more terrifying.

This guy was good.

OD had to pop his own shield cells before long, and I was beginning to wonder how long this would last--or if my heart would hold out. We thrust, jousted, rolled, turned flight assist on and off as needed, and kept jabbing at one another. I popped another cell, so did he. We collided at one point, and I hit the reverse thrusters to try and make the most of it, giving him everything I got as I backed up.

Then my shields were gone. Damn, I hadn't been able to pop the cell in time. OD's were down low, but if he... oh hell... the familiar ripple effect of a charging shield cell flickered. If he got that up I was done for. I poured on everything I had, beams and multicannons, diverting all power to weapons--certainly didn't need them on shields now.

Just before the shield had a chance to go up, they collapsed. Yes! I still stood a fighting chance.

Now we were tearing into one another's hulls. Lasers and bullets shredded each of our hulls, my canopy weakened with every joust, and I did my best to avoid head on weapons exchanges. It didn't matter. We dropped below 50% hull integrity and still no sign of either of us backing off. The canopy strained and cracked as shells ricocheted off. Another spin, thrust, turn, and then... the cracked canopy buckled and blew out, along with the ship's air.

Unfortunately, one of the things I'd skimmed on to make the Troubadour into the ship she was was life support. I had a D-rated system, which meant I had seven and a half minutes of air available. Swell, just swell.

Just then I saw a number of blips on the edge of my radar. I couldn't resolve them yet (sensor range was another point I'd skimmed on) but it had to be local security. If they got here in time, maybe...

OD's Clipper swung past me, flying over my head, boosting away at the same time I was boosting towards the incoming ships.

I caught a glimpse of his ship as it flew by, and saw his canopy had blown out as well. And maybe I was imagining things, but I think he saluted me as he passed.

Before he disappeared I received two text messages.

GF

TY

Good fight. Thank you.

I noted the hull strength on our ships - 30% vs 15%. He might have been able to finish me off, he'd had the upper hand for most of the fight, but I suppose he didn't want to risk it without a canopy and authority vessels incoming that could mass lock him. Chances are, he only had seven or so minutes of air as well.

Call it a draw, I suppose. I hadn't fought someone that good in ages. Even though Officer Dillon had shot me down, that hadn't been in a fair fight. CMDR OD had been rated Dangerous, and for once the rating seems rightly deserved.

So, after that dose of reality, I think I might stick to games for a while.

Hammer Time

My stupid VR hookup was on the fritz. I don't know what the problem was, maybe my body was just on the wrong time zone and nobody was on when I was.

In space there might officially be a galactic standard time, but many space stations do their prime business based on whatever part of their planet has the major stock exchange. Even more operate without any downtime at all. In short, "standard" time is meaningless and every pilot ends up with their own individual body clock. The sleep cycles and circadian rhythms of pilots are a constant point of interest, and every few months another research paper will come out talking about how pilots end up varying from a 24 hour cycle by two hours or more, plus or minus, over time, and how long it takes for crews with different patterns to get in sync.

Anyway, I was having trouble finding matches, and there were glitches with my rig as well, receiving unwanted audio feed from other pilots when I did get in. Nothing like an earful of static to drive you mental in a deathmatch. Seems like this new flood of real pilots onto the VR servers is taking its toll, and the techs are scrambling to work out the bugs.

So in the meantime I continued to help out with local pirate problems. The operations in Maausk ended, and I collected my considerable bonus, only to learn of a crisis in Amitrite.

En route I learned that I had gotten into Arissa Lavigny-Duval's good books and now had access to her top of the line proprietary weapon, the Imperial Hammer.

The Hammer is a rapid-fire rail gun, and something I experimented with in the past with mixed results. Overall I've found the most effective setup for The Troubador were a pair of C3 lasers, with C2 multicannons underneath. The multicannons might not do as much damage as cannons or railguns, but they make up for it with large ammo reserves and staying power.

But the Hammer intrigued me, and I figured it was worth giving another shot. It meant I had to change up the lasers output a bit to make it work, but I decided on a large

gimble cannon and Hammer on one side, with a fixed beam and gimble burst laser on the other.

In theory it should be a good setup. The hammer and cannon are fire linked. When using them, the cannon fires first while the rail gun charges, then the rail fires, followed by another cannon shot. Good damage output. In theory. In practice...? How do you find out if it's any good in the heat of battle without risking getting sent home in an ejection seat?

Turns out I'm not the only one asking that question. Amitrite was swarming with seasoned commanders looking to help crush the pirate menace, and a number of them were playing with new loadouts.

So it wasn't at all unusual to see the following exchange on comms:

I on I?

Sure.

50%

Sounds good.

See, bounty hunters are nuts. Didn't I ever mention that? Probably because they seem normal to me, which of course tells you I'm nuts as well. You can test in sims all you want, but that's not going to tell you how a real pilot reacts. You can find a pirate turkey shoot, but taking down noobs in rust buckets won't help you survive a real fight for your life.

So bounty hunters hunt each other.

Our line of work is lucrative enough that we can afford a few hundred thousand credits in repair bills if it means tangling with another seasoned pilot. I used to do this all the time back before I died, but hadn't seen the tradition pop up again until now.

I suspect the ultra-safe ejection seats made a number of trigger happy hunters figure it didn't matter if they asked permission or established rules—the real world didn't do them any such favors after all.

The backlash to that was that annoyed hunters took their ball and went home, not wanting to be part of this game of Cato Surprise (movie reference—see Pink Panther series from the 1970s, 2280s and the less popular Empire version in the 2750s).

So it seems that manners and etiquette are starting to win out again among the hunters. That didn't stop me from getting a Cato Surprise, though. Well, I guess technically it wasn't that. I actually somehow got a small bounty on my head (no clue

how I'm always careful with my targets) and this guy wanted to collect. But it was small enough he knew it was probably a misunderstanding.

I boosted away and had a chat with him as he plinked at my shields at a distance. We both knew how this was going to end, I'd get away and he'd be looking for another target. Once I convinced him I was another hunter, I sent the request.

50%?

Sounds good.

Turns out he used to fly a Clipper like me but recently upgraded to a Fer de Lance, like Mossfoot used to fly back in his spoiled Navy Brat days. He was eager to try it under real conditions, and I was eager to try out the Hammer.

With my shield recharged, we went at it, and I'm sorry to say it was pretty one sided. The FDL is a dedicated combat ship, after all. It has more in the way of shields standard than I do with my prismatic model and boosters. Add on top of that its 4 medium hard points and one huge hard point for weapons, along with excellent maneuverability, and you've got a hell of a combat ship. Just don't expect to take it exploring or trading much.

The Hammer worked as expected, alternating shots with the cannon all on its own without any special input from me. The problem was I wasn't able to punch through the FDL's shields to test its effect on the hull, where it's supposed to wreak the most havoc. I was down to 50% hull strength by the time I had his shields on its last ring.

Good fight, he texted—not everyone is chatty in space, or they keep voice comms open for more important things.

He was being kind. I'd had my ass handed to me. Still, I didn't mind. It was all part of the learning experience. I remembered from my days weapon testing that the large C3 cannon isn't terribly useful except for big slow ships and decided to swap things out. A large pulse and large beam laser combined with the Hammer and a medium cannon underneath kept my power use issues manageable, and should give me a more reliable bang for my buck.

So, I figured out what the problem with my loadout was and made adjustments, and he got to see what an FDL can do in a serious fight. That's exactly what this kind of dueling is meant to do.

Free Agent

My sparring matches with other hunters had given me a chance to see the advantages and limitations of the Imperial Clipper in a new light, and I'm pretty sure I found that elusive "sweet spot" of module tweaking and jiggery-pokery that would give me a well adapted all-rounder. Some pilots like to change their loadouts more often than they change their underwear, but I prefer something a bit more consistent except in special circumstances.

With Lady Luck I learned every little quirk and bad habit the ship had. If there was a sputter in the thrusters, I knew exactly when I could expect to feel them and under what circumstances. I knew how fast my shields would drain under heavy fire, almost as if the readouts were plugged into my veins. As a result I could work around them, or even with them to my best advantage. So while swapping mods might not seem like a big deal to some, those extra tons added on or taken off is going to affect my flight profile, max speed, turn rate, that sort of thing. Under ideal conditions if you pass your enemy you want to be able to turn your flight assist off, flip around, and get right behind them all with your eyes closed.

As The Troubadour stands, devoid of cargo she runs just a few ticks under the maximum possible speed. Mossfoot would have appreciated the prime running away power, but for me it's more about the turn rate. The Clipper has a lot of inertia to fight because of its weight, as a result it's agility is considered slow, but with the weight kept to a minimum it turns much quicker than other ships its size. The weapons loadout seems to work as intended now, the combination of a faster firing medium cannon with the Imperial Hammer wreaks havoc on ship subsystems, especially at close range--testing it out in a local conflict zone I had very little trouble with anything short of an Anaconda. Some shield cells as a safety net, an spare fuel tank I could swap out for cargo or a discovery scanner or even a bit of a boost to my shield cells depending on the situation, and everything just felt right.

And, oddly enough, I lost all compulsion to do anything with it.

It was like my curiosity itch had been scratched. Having finally found a loadout I could work with under virtually any situation, but still easily tweaked without mucking up the basic elegance of it, I decided to leave. Though I'd been working for the Empire for months, it had always been a bit reluctantly, siding with Princess Duval's anti-slavery stance, then going full merc backing Senator Langivy-Duval's anti-piracy campaigns. It had worked out well for everyone involved, hell, they even made me a Viscount or something, but it was time to go. So I shook hands with the local rep for the senator, wished them the best, got in the Troubadour, and plotted a course for Alliance space.

Er... after buying several more Imperial Hammers... hey, you never know when they might come in handy!

Hello Old Friend

Back in Gateway, at Dublin Citadel. I've been gone a long time, but not much has changed. Mahon has been doing well keeping the Alliance together--he's got enough to worry about with the hundreds of minor factions out there all squabbling with one another without having to deal with any major powers trying to take over.

At first I was going to re-up with him, then I remembered that with Mahon all I really did was run a paper route. Still, he does offer some bonuses for supporters in regards to trading, and I've been considering doing a bit of that for a while... do the ol' space trucker routine, say things like ten-four and good-buddy to random passing ship, pretending I know what the heck I'm saying... give a surprise to the odd pirate that think I'm easy pickings...

And really I feel I need to just throw my support in with him on principle. When I left him, I'd more or less defected in order to join Aisling Duval's anti-slavery campaign. I don't feel I betrayed him or anything, I only gave Duval information I'd already been collecting about illegal slave smuggling in Alliance space, but not everyone saw it that way... most notably a certain overzealous authority figure who is still on my list.

Oh, I have a list.

Anyway, for that reason alone I decided to sign on back with Mahon. The local rep had no problem with this. In fact, I suspected it happened a lot in the bubble. Some ship captains sign up for life with their home world, some sign on with a larger scope, fighting for their patron's interstellar ambitions, but the life blood of the galaxy is filled with free spirits who in many ways have no home outside of their ship. For them, allegiances are matters of convenience more than they are about morals.

I fall into that category as well. I'd be on call to do my part for Mahon when it matters, but for the time being I consider myself a free agent.

I spent a few days on Dublin Citadel to decompress, rented a room where Trouble could run around in real gravity... I think the girl prefers zero-gee and bouncing around with thruster boosts to be honest. I got the impression she found earth gravity dull now,

but that doesn't stop her from exploration. They say ferrets are like kittens that never grow up, and that's certainly true of Trouble.

I also found myself spending more and more time in CQC combat when I wasn't out walking in the parks in the habitat rings or watching sports in a restaurant--especially when I got a chance to test out the more immersive version at a VR hub. It didn't take long for me to decide to upgrade The Troubadour with as many upgrades as I could afford--which was all of them-- and start looking around for a league that I could join.

I think it might be because I'm not constantly reminded of being in somebody else's body when I'm in there. Now I feel more like myself, and people react to me the way I'm used to... well, mostly. One of the upgrades you can get for a "modest" fee includes altering your appearance in the game... including gender. So I never knew if the girl I felt like hitting on was actually a girl or a guy in a girl's body... I know, the irony is thick enough to make gravy.

Then, one day, as I went to the storage bays to get out the Troubadour for a cargo run, I realized my other ships were stored here as well... my Cobra MKIII, Lonely Heart. My ASP, which I'd never given a name since Moss and I abandoned the I'm Not Drunk in order to steal our Clipper. Heck, I'd even bought a Diamondback Explorer recently and kitted it out. I didn't even know why, just that I had credits burning in my pocket, and I felt like tinkering with a new toy. It seems like a nice ship, but I don't know if I'll ever use it. And last, but not least...

"Hello, old friend."

I touched the chipped green paint on the hull of Viaticus Rex II. Moss and I had probably traveled twenty thousand light years in it together, and I'd been in her another ten on my own. I'd come back from my last exploration mission because I was bored, itching for combat, but it wasn't because I didn't enjoy seeing new worlds and strange anomalies.

But now, with CQC, I could have both--the data stream required back to the bubble is tiny, everything except ship position and weapons fire are handled on board your own ship. Plus I could hang out more with people in the lounge as myself, and not have to deal with the harsher realities of fighting real people, no matter how just the cause.

A mechanic came up to me, asking me if I was ready to bring the Clipper to the main hanger for takeoff.

"No. I think I'll be taking out the T6 instead."

"Clipper can carry more," the mechanic said offhandedly.

"Maybe. But it's not cargo I'm after. Send her to the workshop, I've got some upgrades to install."

Return to Darkness

I didn't have a destination in mind this time, figured I'd go out till I hit unexplored territory, then just meander around. Might it some of my old favorites like the East Veil Nebula, or back to Sector MF-1 to pick up some more systems.

The difference between then and now was I had ways to keep myself entertained when the brave new worlds that unfolded before me all started to blur together.

"Ah, I see you've returned. I see you are some distance from home."

My personal Elf Simon appeared almost as soon as I entered the CQC prep room.

"Is that a problem."

"Not at all. Please be advised that while we ensure competitions to be seamless even over a distance of sixty thousand light years, the same cannot be said for communication with your fellow pilots in the Lounge. Rendering time for people you have not met before will increase the further you are from the CQC network, though they will be stored in your ship's data afterwards."

"Whatever you say, Dobby. So, are there any leagues looking for an experienced hitter?"

Simon nodded his head deferentially. "It would be fair to say that *every* league is. The influx of, shall we say, amateur pilots has lead to an imbalance amongst the more experienced career minded virtual sportsmen. You may experience some derogatory comments in the Lounge from these individuals until you have proven yourself worthy."

"You mean till I bust some cans open."

"As you say, miss. Until then you will be considered 'Helpless' among your peers, and treated as such."

"Kick ass, get respect. Got it. Be right back."

It didn't take long to sort out with the right people that I wasn't your average cocky punk trader with delusions of grandeur. I was grudgingly slapped with a "Mostly Helpless" label and offered a virtual drink, which I could now enjoy thanks to the VR upgrades I'd purchased for a "modest" fee.

It's not unusual to have noobs and greenhorns get hazed by the old guard, so I wanted to cut through that crap as quickly as possible, and the best way to do that had been to beat up some of the bigger names in the room. Of course, as often as not I got my ass handed to me. They knew the courses blindfolded, the places to hide, the powerups, the spawn points. And as a bounty hunter you try never to get shot down. In the VR world you have no qualm about strategically letting your ship go once in a while, even if it's just so you can swap to a different type.

There's a whole other world of strategy to be found in CQC, and not all of it is applicable to the real world, but a lot of it is. So, as I said, I gave as good as I got, and was one of the boys soon enough. That was what I wanted, to get comfortable with some key folk so I didn't always come into this place feeling like a stranger.

* * * * *

Two weeks later I felt like I was living two separate lives. Out in the dark, I had come into unexplored territory eighteen hundred light years from Sol., and decided to slow down in my race away from the bubble.

From here I could take my time, curve around the bubble, and find all the hidden gems right on our galactic back yard that most people zip by on their way to be the first to a certain nebula or beat the Buckyball A-star record to SagA.

When you get to this part of space you realize just how alone you are. Whole worlds lie beneath you, most just dead airless rocks, but still... massive.

Massive profits if they happen to be full of metal, too.

Of course it's not the money that got me out here again, I almost had enough cash to buy an Anaconda when I left the Empire. Credits are a bonus. What keeps me going out here, looking at dead world after dead world, is hope. Hope for something different, something strange, something wonderful.

The odd Earth-like planet is one such example. Someday I want to touch down on those worlds, see if their equivalent of grass is similar to ours or not. Find out if their animals are bi and quadrupedal like ours, or something else. See if there are any intelligent life forms destroying the environment in the name of progress, take them up in my spaceship making *whoop-whoop* noises, and stick probes up their butts. Consider it a hazing into the sentience club.

But it's not just that kind of life I look for. I keep wondering if *they* will return.

The Thargoids.

I'd seen Thargoids a few times, once with Mossfoot, up close and personal. I know they're real. But they've been gone so long that half this generation thinks they're a myth and the other half think they were invented by the government to keep humans from colonizing past the bubble.

Of course the appearance of certain Unknown Artifacts within the bubble has changed all that, and people are starting to listen to their great-grandparents about the old days. There's growing concern that they might be returning, and if they do, then what?

I'm afraid I wasn't around to know the details, but word is biological warfare was used against the Thargoids and threatened to wipe them out and their organic technology. Someone who thought genocide was a step too far made sure they got the vaccine, and they bugged back off to wherever they came from. To this day one of the key systems connected to all that, Polaris, is off limits to travellers.

But none of that is my concern. I just keep watching the night and waiting, hoping if they do come back they'll at least try talking to us first.

The scanner blipped mid-thought.

Salvageable wreckage found.

That was unusual. I'd never come across any wreckage while exploring before. A stray convoy once, and a signal source that turned out to be empty, but that's it.

I slowed down and dropped into normal space.

For a moment I thought I was seeing my future.

An Imperial Clipper, torn to shreds, floating in a debris field around a gas giant. I closed in and turned on the flood lights, taking a look inside what was left of the empty hull. It was like looking at a metal whale that had had its insides blown out, then flushed with a water hose until only the ribs and skin were left.

No sign of a crew, but as I circled around the wreck, my lights picked up laser damage on the hull. It was strange somehow. The Troubadour had taken its share of laser fire on the hull, but what I was looking at here didn't resemble any of that.

Perhaps the ship had a mirrored hull, and what I was looking at its laser reflective nature?

The only thing I found to salvage was a small data cache. Not much, and technically illegal for me to recover since I wasn't an authorized insurance rep, but it might have

some answers... and judging from the state of the wreck, I doubt a signal even got out for anyone to track.

With a nod of respect to the fallen crew and the data tucked away, I continued my slow meandering journey of discovery, hoping whoever had taken that Clipper out wasn't within a hundred light years of me.

Interlude

Brother Sparks sat at his spartan terminal, hands folded as he awaited his guest. To the casual observer there no evidence of any technology in the room whatsoever, but that, as many things were on Polevnic, was an illusion.

“Brother Sparks,” Simmentor Doozer was the sort of high-level management that tried to model their lives after their idol, in this case, Simguru Antal. He wore the same style of flowing robe, wore his hair in the same limp fashion, and tried to speak with the same calm authority as the leader of the Utopian movement.

Somewhat pathetic, truth be told.

Brother Sparks acknowledged the Simmentor’s presence with a nod. Technically this was his boss, the one who oversaw his activities, and the one he constantly had to outwit. Accountants wishing to hide their activities had to keep a second set of books, Sparks had to keep a second set of everything.

“I’ve been concerned about your recent inquiries into combat simulation software,” said Doozer. “It’s not within your allotted purview.”

Brother Sparks smiled. “You know as well as I that innovation comes from exploring problems from new angles. That’s all this is.”

“Brother Sparks, your Order was graciously accepted in the Utopian fold with the understanding you’d be helping us further our goals. You and your team are meant to be perfecting the Paradise construct for our reeducation centers. I don’t see how your attention to close quarters combat is in any way relevant.

“Are you familiar with the ancient Earth tribe known as Vikings, Simmentor?”

Doozer’s shudder wasn’t one of fear but disgust. “Barbarians.”

“Indeed, but organized, and with a very strong belief system. Until they were converted to Christianity they believed in their own gods, and their own idea of an afterlife was Valhalla, where they fought and died endlessly. I believe lots of food, drink and pliable fair members of the opposite sex were involved as well.”

“Your point?”

“My point being that Paradise is a subjective term. If you intend to make any of the Kumo crew change their ways, you must first *understand* their ways. They are more active in the CQC leagues than most people realize.”

“Pirates? Hacking the tournament?”

“Oh, the systems themselves are quite secure from tampering, but one still enters the tournaments with external identification, and those are far from difficult to forge in most independent systems. Honestly, are you surprised that pirates are using the open invitation to CQC to become better pirates?”

“Is nothing sacred?” Doozer whinged.

“In fact, I believe we are already hearing reports from traders suffering at the hands of these better trained and confident pirates. It’s causing quite a number of traders who sacrificed shields for extra cargo capacity to complain...those that survive, that is.”

“Antal protect us from unintended consequences.”

“Yes, well, one has to wonder if it was all that unintended. But that, as you pointed out, is not my purview.”

This seemed to satisfy the Simmentor, and he dropped the matter and opted instead for an update on the progress with Paradise. Brother Sparks waved a hand over the desk, bringing up the holographic consoles and proceeded to walk him through what stage he was on and what he was working on next.

Doozer left, as ignorant as he had arrived. It was the way of things.

Once he knew he was alone and unobserved, he waved his virtual console away and waved up his other console, the one connected to the Order’s private darknet.

Like all good lies there was a hint of truth to what Sparks had told his superior. But his real interest wasn’t in the Kumo crew, but one individual pilot participating on and off in the CQC tournaments.

His research into Mossfoot and Brother Mathias had confirmed most of his suspicions about what had happened in the Old Worlds long ago. His (or, more accurately, her) presence in CQC confirmed what had happened more recently.

He took a moment to look over what was recovered of Mathias’s research. The nanotech that had kept Mossfoot’s body viable for over a hundred years even after his RemLok failed was impressive enough, but the implant...Violet...Project Transporter

Sparks swiped to Violet’s dossier. A remarkable woman in her own right, a warrior with a conscience. Highly independent, doesn’t play well with others, always searching

for something more—these psychological traits were no doubt part of why the transfer worked. All follow up attempts in Project Transporter had the salvaged personality break down and collapse within weeks.

There were other possibilities. Mossfoot's ship had suffered an accident shortly after the transfer, which was how he ended up a hundred and fifty years forward. Perhaps the long dormant state both then and after Mossfoot woke up allowed the matrix to stabilize.

Also, Mossfoot was the only living person to take on the neural net. Project Transporter had been intended to save people's minds and transfer them to bodies that were brain dead for other reasons.

Then there was the possibility that Mossfoot's own experimentation had an effect. Project Cliché (it had originally been called Project Lazarus but, well...) had used nanotech to help revive the pilot after his initial ship destruction. But it was also meant to maintain and preserve every cell in the subject's body, even during long term vacuum exposure. What if those nanobots had somehow worked themselves into the organic elements of the Transporter implant, and played a part in stabilizing it?

It was perhaps, as they said in old days, a chocolate and peanut butter moment.

Still, this was all speculation, he wouldn't know anything until he had Mossfoot and his stowaway companion on the observation table, and that wasn't going to happen any time soon as he was currently thousands of light years away exploring.

But it turned out she'd developed a taste for close quarters combat. Hardly surprising. A lot of explorers were getting rigged up for that to help stave off isolation sickness, or just to have something to do other than scan rocks.

And so Brother Sparks had found his way in, and his way to observe his subject discretely.

Through an elf-like program named Simon.

Some Things Never Change

“Your team is victorious,” the computer trilled.

“That’s what I like to hear.”

I was teleported from the cockpit to the lounge, having gone my latest match 5 and 0. Sure, other pilots had higher scores or more kills, but more often than not they died only slightly less than they lived.

It was a change of pace for me. Right now I was taking a more serious approach, try to keep my real combat skills in shape, try not to focus too much on points. These were friendly matches anyway, it wasn’t going to count towards anyone’s league ranks.

In the lounge my oh-so-helpful aide (whether I wanted him or not) was waiting. “Shall I advise you on what new virtual beverages are on tap, miss?”

“I could have sworn there was an off button for you, Keebler.” I found my usual seat and looked around for familiar faces. Rather than acknowledge my slight (or better yet, tell me where the button was) Simon simply nodded.

“I’m here to ensure you experience in CQC is trouble free. If there is a problem, I could give you a customer feedback survey to improve my future performance.”

“Because *that’s* how I want to spend my evening.” Actually I found Simon’s presence a bit reassuring—the fact I could verbally abuse him without consequence was just a bonus. “How about you make yourself and tell me what Leagues here are looking for a professional?”

Simon didn’t even blink. Not that he did much anyway. “There are currently six thousand five hundred and seventy three teams with one or more openings available.”

“How many of them have real world combat experience?”

“There are one thousand two hundred and twenty five teams whose pilots rank dangerous or higher by the Pilot’s Federation.”

“Any way to find out if any of those are pirates or have a record? I don’t want to make nice with someone I might splash in the real world someday.”

“There are two hundred and six teams who do not currently have a wanted status.”

I blinked. “That’s...disturbing.”

Of course people became wanted for all kinds of reasons—friendly fire, overdue fines, defending themselves when they wander into the wrong Power’s territory. It didn’t necessarily mean what it sounded like.

Still...disturbing.

It turned out to be harder to find a team than I thought. Many pilots registered teams but didn’t actively do anything to fill them up. Some just wanted to register and hold onto their “cool” name before someone else could. Some were so over the top serious about their entry requirements that I didn’t even bother—geeze, they took things WAY too seriously and I was just here for a bit of fun and profit. If I wanted a military life I sure wouldn’t be plugged into a sim on my off time. These were posers if I ever saw them.

Others were more interested in putting out a strong media image, trying to develop a fan base and entering the right tournaments with the most exposure. Basically they were hoping to land a movie deal at some point.

Some people in the lounge weren’t even pilots—they were groupies, there to follow their favorite pilots up close between matches, like those media nuts I just mentioned.

Then there were the real pros. I could recognize them quickly enough in a match. They were the ones who knew when to break off an attack and boost. Amateurs get tunnel vision when they find a target, or think the kill trade is worth it as long as they get their target first. The pros boost, turn off their flight assist, chaff, and disappear. Then, while you’re looking for a fresh target, they’re sneaking up behind you.

Outside of a match you recognized them by their attitude. Bit laid back, confident, but not boastful. When a blow-hard in an expensive Top Gun vintage leather vest and Ray Ban sunglasses was telling tall tales to a crowded table, they didn’t stand up and shut them down, they stayed at their booth and smiled and remembered the commander’s name for later.

These were the cool kids. Not the bullies or the jocks or the posers or the medias or the groupies, but the ones who actually won tournaments when it mattered.

I sighed. Crap, it was like I was back in bloody high school.

Collectibles

Why can't I collect commemorative coins or MMMCCC Edition Magic The Gathering cards?

I tend to start my day with as much CQC as I can handle, then cool down the rest of the day exploring. CQC has a way of getting my nerves on edge--in a good way, mind you. But too much of that and it feels like you've got extra-caffeinated coffee plugged into you intravenously. Exploring is the perfect way to chill out afterwards.

Or it would be, if I didn't keep coming across wrecked ships.

At first it was just one, then nothing for days. Now I've come across six more in one day, at six different planets. It can't be any kind of improvement on my sensors, Viaticus Rex II is kitted out exactly the same as on my last trip--D class sensors for weight savings.

I can't tell from the wrecks how old these ships are - things don't rust or degrade in space and many of our ship designs have been in use for centuries. At best you'd have some idea of how long it took for the paint job to be bleached white by the local sun. Assuming there's any paint left.

And now I have a growing collection of small data caches. Technically illegal to pick up, they belong to whatever company hired these poor saps to die out here, but I couldn't help but feel that the information might be useful to someone somewhere to help determine what happened to them.

Most of these ships are Clippers. That's worrying. Typically only a Cobra is faster than a Clipper, so if they can't escape whatever destroyed them, what chance have I got? I've been running over emergency escape maneuvers in my head every day in case I get interdicted. Lock onto nearest star. Submit. Boost as often as possible. If shields drop, silent running, drop heat sink, change vector. Those things should buy enough time to high-wake to another star system and pray whatever found me doesn't follow.

I'll tell you one thing, I'll definitely have my computer jolt me out of CQC if any ships show up on my radar. I don't care if it's an unarmed Sidewinder.

Unintended Consequences

One of the problems I've been having in CQC is finding a team. Oh, there's no end of players, but even when we wing up they seem to be on the quiet side. As in silent. I've heard from some in the lounge that pilots think that the extra bandwidth used for chat causes lag which hurts their gameplay. The CQC techs say that's nonsense, that nothing short of video transmissions could affect lag, and even then that would only be once you're 500LY past the last relay. Problem is, rumors among gamers has a millennium long history of turning gut-instinct into scientific fact, and anything the simdevs say to disprove it is just some kind of false flag being waved to hide bugs in the code.

Sheesh. I got this damn sim in part so I could actually interact with people way out in the void, now they're shutting themselves up because of imagined bugs.

That's not to say there aren't real bugs in CQC, but it's something to be expected given that the whole network just expanded from planet side server hubs to a galaxy wide broadcast.

Galaxy wide... sheesh, thank goodness our communications are quantum entanglement based--basically that means that only our comm receivers can pick up the broadcasts, you can't pick that up in the background or even "hack" something like that. Could you imagine the ramifications if CQC was being broadcast across the galaxy in a way that any emerging civilizations could see? Imagine our first signal from an alien civilization back in the early 20th turned out to be non stop dogfighting. I think that would have gotten everyone on Earth in a panic. They'd think we were a blood thirsty warmongering race who cared nothing for the endless destruction going on all around... oh wait.

Still, here's the rub. While we don't need to worry about breaking any Prime Directive crap because our galactic transmissions are secure and point-to-point, our ships are NOT secure. I receive a transmission, my ship becomes a broadcast point that someone else CAN theoretically pick up on, albeit at the usual speed of light limitations, and degrading of signal over distance.

So if you're hanging out near an Earth-Like world, taking a break and playing some CQC, and they happen to be advanced enough to point the right kind of instruments in your general direction, they might very well see a in-cockpit view of you endlessly blowing away ship and getting blown up. Or picking up your GalNet feed, and while they might not be able to understand the words, they would understand the images. And if you know anything about the news, you know those images would be only slightly less traumatic.

Thing is, CQC has never mentioned any kind of etiquette or protocol in regards to this. Why would they? It's not their job. But neither has any exploration guild or Universal Cartographics, the tech is too new and they're probably still arguing over what kind of rules or safeguards need to be put in.

And by the time they get their act together and do something about it, how many civilizations will be affected and potentially damaged by this?

But you know what? Maybe it's for the best. If those guys know we're out here they'll have time to prepare before we arrive in force. Maybe watching and listening to us they'll figure out some things about space travel and escape their world. If Achenar 6c has taught us anything, it's that when the humans come, you better not have all your eggs in one basket.

Outsourcing

Still more data caches. This is creeping me right out now. I've spent months out in the black and nothing. Now? One week and over a dozen wrecked ships to be found.

I talked in the lounge with other explorers taking part in CQC and they're reporting similar things. Conspiracy theories abound, the most common of which are "they" are coming (and we all know who "they" are). But, while possible, I couldn't help but wonder if there was a better answer out there. One that was both plausible and appealed to my cynical nature of how mankind behaves. And I think I found it.

While in supercruise, we often pick up USSs in deep space--unknown signal sources. While in Supercruise it's pretty difficult to get an exact reading of what can be found there. Sometimes it's traders waiting for an off-station exchange or trying to make repairs somewhere pirates won't notice them. Sometimes it's an interdicted ship and its pursuer. Sometimes it's a wrecked ship and what's left of its cargo.

In the latter case it's usually not the wrecked ship that is putting out enough of a signal for a USS to be triggered, it's the canisters themselves. Whether it's legal or illegal to claim a particular salvage is besides the point, if you find it your ship will log it being found and if you don't pick it up that information will end up in the right hands eventually. Those people will eventually send their own trawlers to collect them at their own slow, lethargic pace.

A trawler is kind of like what MF and I do when it comes to collecting salvage, only legal and a lot more street sweeperish in nature. A T9 with a small wing of sidewinders or other small craft will get a contract to go into a system, spread out, and start sweeping, the fighters bouncing back and forth out of supercruise, collecting what they can, then dropping them off at the T9 until its full. The contract is jointly held by all parties that have had recorded losses in the system. The trawler manages to do this affordably at bulk rates, meaning those desperate missions for retrieving lost cargo suddenly get quiet on the bulletin board for a while. But they're slow, and they're not everywhere. It's kind of like waiting for garbage day.

Anyway, one guy in the CQC lounge (I'd blown him out of the sky four times in a row and he was going to take it out on my face in the bar until he saw I was a babe... if only he knew) pointed out that the data storage for cartographic data isn't equipped that way. The black box, sure, if it survives. But Universal Cartographics have long had proprietary hardware installed for recording and retrieving system data. They've got a monopoly on the whole market, and want to keep it that way. So, when it comes to retrieving lost exploration data, they used a secure frequency that was locked out of ship sensors, unless it's one of their own trawlers. In short, about the only thing most explorers have of value is their exploration data cache, and we're blind to those signals.

Or, at least, we were.

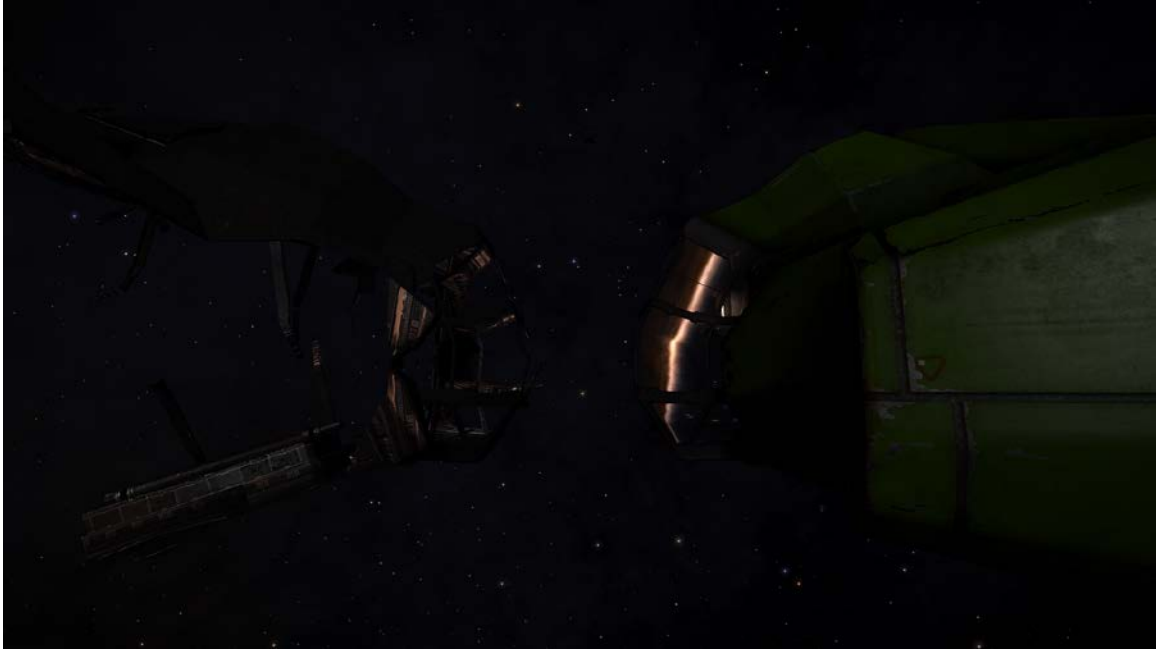
Seem the last firmware upgrade on ship sensors "forgot" to lock that frequency. I use the air quotes because even though there hasn't been an official announcement yet, I'm pretty sure it was on purpose. Pilots are starting to report missions cropping up from factions looking for lost data caches in deep space. Now, they might simply be taking advantage of the opportunity, but my guess is UC and their trawlers weren't getting the job done on their own. Space is too damn big for them to expect to reasonably find these things with their pitiful fleet, and there's all kind of pressure going on to collect as much as they can. Hunting for hidden Emperors Dawn cells in this unstable time for the Empire, anything that might record locations of the Unknown Artifacts springing up in and around the bubble...

...and the fact I've found a dozen wrecked Clippers and Pythons in deep space in a week hints at the possibility that there are other reasons as well.

So, yeah, they opened up their monopoly, but not for altruistic reasons. We're basically doing their work for them now. The amount of money being offered for data caches is laughable unless you've got a specific mission looking for them, but the data inside is locked and keyed to the relevant pilot, so we're not able to download that data and claim it for our own. Swell.

Still, I don't think that data should go to waste, so I'm collecting them whenever I find them. Once I fill up, I'll head back to the Bubble, or an outpost somewhere on the fringe and dump it all off.

A Look In The Mirror.



My cargo bay is almost full now, filled with small and large data caches. The latest was from a T6 wreck I came across, gutted, just a skeleton left behind. The cockpit frame was still intact, so the pilot couldn't have ejected. Or, if he had, half of him might have made the jump to a safe distress point, but the other half wouldn't have.

I'd been wondering what to do with all this stuff. I can't use it myself, and I don't want to go back to the bubble just yet. I'm enjoying having my cake and eating it too with this exploration/virtual bloodsport combination.

Then, back at the lounge, Simon the House Elf shows up while I'm sharing a beer with my wingmates for the evening.

"I'm sorry, madam, but I believe you wanted to know a discrete place where you could unload your acquired cargo?"

I turned in my seat. The guy had been hovering around me every day like some sort of valet. The slightest hint of a question and he pops up like a damned genie. I wonder if anyone else had these kind of problems with their Simons? Didn't he have an off button?

"Not that it's any of your business, but yeah."

"Might I suggest Takurua? It isn't too far off your current route."

My current route? God damned end-user agreements, I no doubt agreed to let them know where I was at any given time so of course they could track my general meandering path.

"Yeah, sure buddy, I'll think about it." I rolled my eyes and went back to talking with my wingmen.

Later, back in the real world, I decided to check out Takurua on the galaxy map. Not much to see. Population of 100,000. A terraforming project backed by Sirius Corp, and yet... huh. Pranav Antel seems to have taken an interest in the region. Can't imagine why, there's nothing much worth controlling nearby. The upkeep of having a presence there must be a drain on his resources. And there were other pioneering outposts in the region, so why suggest this one...

Of course. Simon's a sim. Even if the Feds are sponsoring the CQC tournaments, they're using Antel's tech to do it. Of course it's going to "suggest" things that are to his organization's advantage.

I just got my ass market researched. Sheesh.

What a Drag

Spending time in the void you get to thinking about little things. Those little things start off being curiosities, and end up bugging the hell out of you.

Here's something I can't believe I never asked myself before: why is there drag in space? For that matter, why is there a speed limit to our ships?

The more I thought about this the more it didn't mesh with my high school astrophysics class, or even my own experience. When I woke up inside a strange body over a hundred years in the future, supercruise was old hat, so nobody was really talking about why or how it worked, they just used it.

So, back in the days before supercruise you could clip along and accelerate as long as you liked. Of course, you also had to decelerate as well or overshoot your target. It took a hell of a long time, and there were plenty of ways to make the time slip by, but that was strictly a perception thing. You can trick your brain into thinking an hour is only five minutes by cutting down the mental frame rate until an emergency shows up, but that's all it is, a trick.

It could at times make combat tricky, depending on what era you flew in or how smart your computer was. When I started out, if a threat was detected the flight computer would automatically match relativistic speeds with the object, and if there was a fight to be had, you could do so more or less like an atmospheric craft.

Then later, during my long nap, people began to favor making the most of Newtonian physics, and for novice pilots combat degraded into jousting matches at thousands of kilometers an hour.

But all that changed with supercruise.

Thing is, combat can't occur in SC, so if you want to fight someone you need to drag them out into normal space with an interdictor. Dropping out of supercruise, either intentionally, accidentally, or by force, always brings you to a neutral speed relative to the closest strong gravitational body, like a star or planet.

Okay, that I get. But why is it after that you're stuck travelling two to four hundred meters per second? What's more, why is it that you actually slow down without thrust applied, even if you turn the flight assist off?

Turns out supercruise is to blame. While it allows you to cut through swathes of space like a hot knife through butter, gravitational wells still affect it, and when not in use it still wants to drag your ship to a neutral point relative to the nearest gravitational body, just like when you drop out of SC.

This drag field, if you want to call it that, is kind of like a static charge that affects the entire ship and everything in it. This even applies to fighters like the Condor and planetary shuttles, which don't have jump drives, but do use Class 1 supercruise engines to fly in-system.

Things such as hull shape and mass have an effect on your SC profile, which in turn affects how much impact thrusters have in normal space, determining the ship's upper speed limits and drag bleed after boosting.

Now, you might ask why this was never a factor before, given that we use the same engines to punch through hyperspace and use supercruise. Well, while they both use the same basic technology, they also circumvent conventional physics in completely different ways.

With hyperspace you're punching through to a point in space via another dimension, what's still sometimes called witchspace. With supercruise you're still in our dimension, but compressing the space in front of you, like the old Star Trek shows. And like a wise Scotsman engineer from that show once said, "Ya cannae change the laws of physics," but it seems you can warp them.

But that sort of thing has side effects. You can't just turn off the engine and let things go full Newton again. Even if the FSD is destroyed, that drag field takes ages to dissipate—there's a strong resistance for things to go back to the way they were.

Heck, the drag field even affects things your ship touches. Bump into a cargo canister and you'll see it slowly lose its spin and momentum and return to a null state, something that shouldn't happen.

So basically all this changed the rules of space travel, and it took lifelong spacers a bit getting used to, but terrestrial pilots who later graduated into space adapted easily enough. It felt familiar. It's part of the reason flight assist thrusting made a comeback, though a number of pilots insist on turning that off and having something that still

approximates traditional Newtonian physics, even if it's hamstrung by speed limits and drag now.

There. Finally. Glad I got all that out of my system.

You know what got me started on this whole crazy "tell me professor" rant? Because I bumped into a stupid data cache and noticed it slowly lose its spin and stop dead a few hundred meters away.

For some reason I saw that and I just couldn't let it go until I figured out why.

Of course, I got all this info from GalWiki, so I might have just read some crazy nutjob's pet theories on the subject and got everything completely wrong. Who knows, by next week someone might have edited it to say that drag happens because of an inverse coefficient of the speed produced by the cat and buttered bread perpetual motion dynamo housed inside the frame shift drive.

Hello Old Friend

En route to Takurua I ended up receiving a call from a familiar voice.

"Zdravstvuyte!"

"Gesundheit," I replied. "Ivan! Nice to see you again!"

I've crossed paths with Ivan Shevchenko a number of times. Mossfoot got drunk with him after his first major exploration expedition, back in his Ranger M days, and got his Asp shot off in a combat zone. I'd flown with Ivan as well down in Empire space. Good pilot, sometimes questionable morals, but a good guy to those who know him. He's one of the few people we'd told the whole brain time share thing to who believed us.

When MF was recording his journal to broadcast, just about everyone assumed it was a persona thing. Like a shock jock DJ or something. On those occasions Moss was recognized (usually wearing his Ranger M mask) he'd get treated like a minor celebrity, but the assumption always was that he was an actor, and so Mossfoot and Violet were both just characters he played. I think that made it easier for him to keep on broadcasting, to be honest. Felt like there were fewer potential repercussions for being honest.

Me? I haven't hit the broadcast button once since I took over. These are just for me.

Well, hopefully not just for me.

"So who am I speaking to today?" he asked.

"It's Violet," I said. "It's only me now."

"Only? I do not understand."

It's a long story. Want to come on board?

"You are exploring in your rusty T-6, yes?"

"Trusty T-6."

"I have seen your ship. I stand by my original statement."

"Yeah, I'm still in her."

"Then I suppose it is you who should come on board my ship. Where would you like to rendezvous?"

We met up in a system I was scanning. I'd dropped down to check out some wreckage and gave him a Nav Lock to help guide him to me.

When Ivan dropped out of Supercruise I couldn't help but whistle.

"Where the hell did you get that?"

The Faulcon deLacy model Anaconda stretched out over a hundred and fifty meters long, three times the length of my T-6 and half the length of an old earth aircraft carrier. On those rare occasions that a pilot found themselves with more money than you knew what to do with, most of them went Anaconda.

"I called in some favors, got some deals. I can't quite cover the insurance yet, but no doubt I will soon. You wish to come on board, yes?"

"Mother may I!"

Once on board, Ivan was more than happy to give me the grand tour. The cargo bay, the forward observation deck, the cabins, and then the cockpit. One thing struck me right away.

"No crew?"

Ivan waved a hand dismissively. "Bah. They demand too many things. Like getting paid. I have had her controls redesigned to accommodate a single pilot."

I thought about how damn big this ship was. Seriously, half the size of an aircraft carrier. "Doesn't it seem a little... empty to you?"

He sighed. "At times, yes. Once I have enough money for insurance, I may consider hiring one or two. But for now... So, where are you going?"

"Takurua," I said. "I want to unload some exploration data and a bunch of data caches I found in the void."

Ivan shook his head. "I was there not long ago. There is a civil war going on, and I believe you are allied with Edmond Mahon, are you not?"

"Technically, yeah."

"Technically is all that matters. The system belongs to the Sirius Corporation, but Pranav Antal controls it. I suspect his lackies won't take kindly to you interloping there. You could renounce your allegiance before you enter, I suppose..."

I snorted, "Does my ship look like it has a yellow stripe down its back?"

"Then allow me to escort you there. I was looking for some long range smuggling missions anyway. An excellent way to boost profits these days."

"Sure. I could use the company."

Ivan slapped my back and lead me out of the cockpit. "Excellent. Now, what has happened to my friend Mossfoot?"

In the mess hall, Ivan listened and nodded as I told the story over bags of coffee. I took a while.

"And do you think he is dead?" he asked when I finished.

"I don't know. I haven't felt him. I keep expecting to see a message left from him when I wake up, like maybe he could take control when I was asleep. Or maybe have a dream with him trying to make contact. Nothing. I have no reason to think there's anything of him left."

"But...?"

"But, I also can't access things I could when I was just hitching a ride on his brain. So if parts of myself are closed off to me..."

"Maybe he's in there."

"Maybe."

Ivan nodded. "The question then becomes, how do you get him back."

I snorted. "Small problem with that, the guy who implanted me probably died a hundred years ago. I say probably because I can't find any records of Brother Mathias's Order anywhere. I checked every database in the Old Worlds I could find. Nothing. Granted, they kept low on the radar even when I knew them, but it's as if they never existed."

"Well then, it's settled. They most definitely are still around."

"How do you figure?"

Ivan shrugged. "If this much effort has been made to erase them, there are only one possibility--someone does not want their existence to be known. Since they always kept a low profile, as you say, then they were never a public threat that required, shall we say, Stalinist revisionism. The only possibility that remains is that they did it to themselves, to keep an even lower profile. And if they no longer existed, then there would be nobody to erase all knowledge of them."

I wasn't as certain that was the only possibility, but it did give me some hope. It was at least an angle I could use to make further inquiries.

A Smelly Job

Whatever spat had been going on at Takurua was long over now, instead the system was full of "Psst, hey buddy" signals from traders looking to buy goods away from the prying eyes of the station.

I thought it would be easy getting into the station there, but Murphy's Law was in effect and I got interdicted by a member of Sirius security. Guess he thought Mahon had sent me here in my fearsome unarmed Type 6 to get up to no good and was going to put a stop to it. He didn't even say anything, just opened fire.

Pity he didn't notice the black Anaconda drop in behind him five seconds later.

I jumped back to Supercruise and made it to Foothold Orbital, an Orbis class station that was still under construction. I took the time to circle around and admire the buzzing blue lights of welding droids working on the outer hull... aaaand promptly got scanned by station security. Dammit. I forgot all those data caches I was carrying were technically illegal.

When I got inside I learned from the fines officer that I got dinged for 370,000 credits.

"Do you intend to pay the fine now, or after your stay with us?"

"Yeah, yeah, you'll get your blood money. Sheesh, try and do the galaxy a favor. Can I at least sell the data to Universal Cartographics from here?"

"I'm sorry, but UC does not accept illegally acquired data. They require confirmation of authenticity through a direct scan of the original ship's hard--"

"Fine, whatever. I'll just sell them all the crap I found on my own. Geeze, give a girl a break."

"Girl?"

"Never mind." I clicked off the comm.

I sighed and linked up to Universal Cartographics, starting to download what I'd found. I'd deal with the data caches somewhere else. I'd racked up a lot of systems in

only a few weeks. I was hoping it was enough to put me over the top. I'd feel better if I was ranked Elite again, even if it wasn't for combat.

"Zdravstvuyte!" came over the comm while I dumped data and glazed over what wonderful new discoveries I'd made.

"Gesundheit," I replied. "What kept you, Ivan?"

"That man who tried to shoot you down, I think I may have done more than simply dissuade him from firing on you."

"What do you mean."

"One moment. Coming in hot."

Hot? That meant he was boosting into the station... in an Anaconda. This I had to see. I looked out of the cockpit towards the mailslot and sure enough, a black Anaconda slipped in like an obsidian knife, powering on reverse thrust before it smacked into the opposite side of the station. He stopped right over my head.

"Sorry, there were some security ships looking at me funny. I did not wish to be scanned."

Looking up at his observation deck, I could see why. "Yeah, you got bits of Viper all over your hull."

"Damn. Is one big problem with the Anaconda. Very big blind spot. That explains the bounty on me."

"Sorry, dude. I didn't want you to get in trouble."

"Is not a problem. I see what kind of missions there are on offer here, and take one that gets me far far away until bounty is called off."

Dumping stellar cartography data can be very slow at times, so by the time I was done Ivan had already found several jobs he could chain together. Turned out being this far from the bubble people were desperate to find people to deliver goods back to civilization. He had several million worth of contracts standing by.

"What are you hauling?" I asked.

"Biowaste."

I paused. "Sorry?"

"The canisters say biowaste."

"How far are you taking them?"

"About three hundred light years."

"You're hauling several canisters of biowaste three hundred light years... for millions of credits? You realize that stuff is basically poop, right?"

"So?"

"So, who the hell spends millions of dollars to ship poop across the galaxy?"

"Eh, is not my place to question, only to deliver and get paid."

"Yeah, well, I'd be careful. Something tells me the poop is just a smelly cover. God knows what they've hidden in those tanks."

Ivan laughed as he got his clearance to leave. I suspect that in an Anaconda he's not really afraid of much these days. I just hoped that overconfidence didn't get him killed.

Though I have to admit, if you were going to smuggle something somewhere, a big can of crap would indeed be the last thing anyone would want to have to search through.

An Inch Is As Good As A Megameter

With Ivan gone and the last of my cartographical data uploaded, I got out a bottle of champagne I'd been saving. The credits were rolling in, and more importantly, that last tick towards Elite status.

I'm actually glad the Pilots Federation recognizes achievements outside of death and destruction these days. Back in my time, the only way to be considered Elite was through the blood of other pilots. And while in some ways the galaxy has gotten more violent, it's gotten less bloody as well. As a result, the achievements of business tycoons carry more weight, as do those of explorers. Maybe it's a sign that the galaxy is on the way to a more stable and peaceful state of being. Maybe someday there won't be a need for people like me. Heck, we even have the Pilot's Federation recognize CQC achievements recently. Maybe they'll phase out real combat altogether. People have argued forever that it only encourages pilots to be violent.

If someone like me can reach to the stars without ever harming another soul and reach... ninety-seven percent...

What?

NINETY-SEVEN PERCENT?

Of all the fricking... WHERE'S MY CLIPPER? I need to blow something the HELL up and then MELT the wreckage with my afterburners!

The local Pilot's Fed rep was absolutely unsympathetic to my plight. Hey, I COULD have gone neutron star farming like some pussies. I COULD have hit all the easy scores that others have already found. But no--I went out and did it the hard way. I went into the true unknown, boldly going where no woman in a man's body has gone before. Do they care? Does that score me any brownie points? Nooooooooo. Of course not. Fan-frickin-tastic.

Good God I'm starting to sound like Mossfoot.

Sigh... there's really only one option, isn't there?

Back into the goddamned void.

Missed Connection and Crossed Wires

Brother Sparks was late.

He'd made arrangements to fly to Takurua the moment he knew the Violet entity was en route. Unfortunately, it took time to do such things without raising suspicion. It had to appear as though this was something planned months ago, not yesterday.

By the time he'd gotten there, she was back in deep space, where Sparks could not follow--not without raising questions from the Simmentor that he could not answer.

But it was simply a delay. When she came back this time, there was one place he knew she would go. It was simply a matter of having a good reason for being there, and waiting until she arrived.

If only all my trips into the black had been this interesting. I don't think I've touched CQC since I started, but then, that's because I'm pretty focused on getting my Elite status.

My guess was I was only a hundred or so system shy of their requirements, but I wanted to give myself something else to do as well. So, after selling the data caches at a black market in a nearby system, I kitted Viaticus Rex II with a mining laser and refinery. I figured at some point I'd find a gas giant with untouched metallic rings, and I could load up the cargo bay with metal to haul back. Give myself a little bonus.

I was two days out when I came across another wrecked ship. This was in a completely different direction than before, and I hadn't come across the string of wrecks like I had before. Whatever had wrecked all those ships I found before, this wasn't tied into it.

Most notably because there was a survivor.

It struck me as odd that there was an escape pod out here. I hadn't seen an old school pod since I woke up in this century. In my day they were the only way to survive if your ship was getting melted by a military laser, but these days it's all about the ejection seats

with their micro jumps and RemLok fields to keep your brain in a nice Ziplock bag until a Galactic Search And Rescue ship picked you up and defrosted you at your last registered station.

Of course, if you were on a big ship, the crew might have to use old school pods, but even they'd be fitted with the same safety features.

So what was the deal here?

I closed in and opened the cargo scoop. There were life signs, and active ones at that—no RemLok stasis going on here. Once inside, I went down to the cargo bay, but not before slinging on my holster and making sure the pistol had a full charge in it. I didn't feel like taking any chances out here.

I opened the pod to find a middle aged man with a beard that looked wild enough to attack me of its own free will.

"Hallelujah! I thought I was done for!"

He looked harmless enough. Looked. "Not to be rude, pops, but that has yet to be determined. What are you doing out here in such an outdated piece of machinery?"

The man's eyes narrowed. "You a Bowman, or a Forty-Niner?"

"This time out? Bit of both."

"Look, I'll make you a deal. I'll show you a place with pristine reserves of metallic asteroids, and you can load your ship up to the brim, just so long as you take me back to the bubble no-questions-asked after."

Now it was starting to make sense. Pilots with a, shall we say, "colorful" background wouldn't want to have GSAR pick up their distress signal. Inconvenient questions might get asked. Pirates might end up being taken to prison instead of their last station.

In this case I suspected the guy was a Hatter--a lone wolf miner who had been out too long. He was probably paranoid, always worried about some unseen 'them' looking to claim jump them. If this guy was offering up a pristine metallic ring for a safe ride home, then he found something even better somewhere else.

I didn't care, let him keep his secrets. It would be nice to have some company.

"Okay, deal. This ship doesn't have a co-pilot seat, I'm afraid, so you'll have to hang out in the kitchen or whatever."

At that moment Trouble came trotting out like a furry salamander, sniffing at the wild haired man's pant leg. Ferrets are big into new smells.

The prospector looked down at Trouble and I swear he licked his lips. I quickly picked her up and placed her on my shoulder.

"Err...on the other hand, you know what? You stay in the cargo bay for now. You clean up, I'll get you some food, and maybe you can join me when you stop looking at my pet as a walking shish kabob."

The More The Merrier

The prospector's intel was solid - a pristine metallic ring located on the inner ring of a small gas giant. He must have claimed it before, because it had his name stamped on it on my nav computer. Probably why he wasn't shy about giving it up.

Once the hobo had something to eat and had a shave, I let him into the rest of the ship... though I kept Trouble in my cabin and kept the door locked.

He said his name was Ryan, but I can tell when someone fake names me the first time I use the name back on them. I didn't mind. This guy had his secrets and I had made sure I was the only one on board with a weapon. Didn't need him trying to hijack me to ruin my day.

I spent a while in the ring, long enough to load up with the most valuable metals, and headed back towards the bubble. I figured that would get me my last three percent.

I stopped off at the nearest industrial world, made a few million in metals and exploration data and....

99%

I grit my teeth. Goddammit! Without even thinking I went back to the T-6 and blasted off, heading to parts unknown... well, partially unknown. Unknown to me anyway.

Ryan came out of the shower room drying his hair. "We're leaving now?"

"You're still here?"

"You didn't give me a chance to get off!"

"I've been here an hour!"

"I wanted a shower first!"

"You could have showered on the station!"

"They charge you a credit for that! Besides, it was a Fed station. I'm... I'm not very welcome there."

"Oh for the love of..." I wasn't bothering going back. I had to scratch this itch once and for all. "Get dressed before your junk starts doing the zero-gee hula. I'll drop you off the next time I land."

"Yeah, sure, whatever. You want me to make some mac and cheese for dinner?"

"Alright."

Geeze did THAT sound domestic.

* * * * *

Ivan had sent me an email. He knew how close I was to reaching Elite in exploration and perhaps anticipated this moment.

The email simply read "In Case Of 99%, Break Glass" and I'm pretty sure he didn't mean my canopy.

The email was just a system name. Not far, only 400LY away. So I went, dragging Ryan the prospecting hobo with me.

I scanned systems along the way, of course. Every little bit helps. But just outside of one gas giant's orbit I came across another wreckage signal. Dropping in, I came across not one, but five escape pods.

Now I was faced with a quandry. Like Ryan, if they weren't already being rescued, then it was probably because they didn't want to be found by official channels. Maybe they had their own S&R that would come for them later. We weren't that far outside the bubble after all.

The other problem was, why they were so eager to stay off the radar. They could very well be pirates. If I picked them up, they would outnumber me by quite a bit.

It didn't take me long to scoop them all up. I decided not to worry, I had safety protocols in place, namely the big red button on my control panel. I turned on the intercom.

"Welcome aboard Mossfoot Spaceways. Your pilot today is Violet Lonsdale. Now that the cargo bay has pressurized, please remain in the cargo area for the remainder of your journey. The cabin and cockpit are for first class passengers only. Any attempt to sneak into first class will result in the immediate expulsion of you and your fellow passengers. The emergency exit is located the same way you came in and only takes one

button to open up, so bear that in mind. An in flight meal will be provided, and I understand today you have your choice of mac and cheese or cheese and mac. Thank you for flying Mossfoot Spaceways."

I clicked off the intercom and hailed Ryan to make enough food for seven.

The Last Flight of Viaticus Rex II

Ivan's coordinates were easy enough to follow, but I didn't know exactly what I'd find there. Just that it would be worth a lot.

When I dropped out of Hyperspace and checked the system map, I quickly saw why. "My God... it's full of stars."

I couldn't resist saying that. I think every Bowman has at some point.

Even Ryan, who annoyingly had taken to hanging out in the cockpit even though he wasn't properly strapped in anywhere, was impressed. Three black holes, fourteen stars, gas giants, and a half dozen worlds that looked ripe for mining.

Ivan wasn't kidding, this system just might help put me over the top, especially combined with all the other finds I had along the way. Sure, none of them were going to be new claims, they'd all been discovered before, but Universal Cartographics is always willing to pay for updated information and fresh surface scans. A snapshot of a system is only so useful, having information over time provides a better picture of what a system is like.

The black holes here weren't impressive like Sagittarius A* had been, just little ones that made the background stars flip over like acrobats. Still, they were worth a pretty penny. I'd always wondered why, though. Not because they were rare. Water Giant worlds, for example, were far rarer, but not worth much at all. Not because they were a navigational hazard, they were easy to avoid--supercruise easily negates the effects its pull. I suspect it has to do with scientific research. Neutron stars are worth almost as much, and they're just shy of a black hole in terms of their nature (though a bit more dangerous due to heat output). I can only assume the effect of gravity on space time are of great interest right now, and certain people are willing to pay a premium price for fresh data.

Once the scan was complete it was time to head back, but something had been bothering me for a while. I wasn't going to take this ship out again in all likelihood. It had

become something of a personal mission for me. A challenge, but I was much more at home in The Troubadour docked back in Tellus.

But this had been Mossfoot's home for the longest time. It was the ship he became Ranger M in. That point in history was a mixed bag for him, but it was still defining in a way. It was the first ship we'd bought together, after I woken up in his head. And I realized that in all that time, since he'd been defrosted and I'd come back on the scene, he had never once returned home. Lave.

I never got a chance to ask him why. Word was Lave was far from safe these days, filled with hotheads looking for a fight and pirates trying to claim it as their own. Officially the situation was well in hand and Lave was safe and tourist friendly, unofficially you took your chances going there.

But I wondered if he avoided it because he didn't want to be reminded of his old life anymore. The Navy brat with a rich daddy who'd been, let's face it, a complete jerk. He'd never gotten a chance to reconcile with his father before the end, even though MF had indirectly saved his bacon and made him a hero.

Before we left Lave that last time, before I died, he'd taken me to see his dad's place...albeit from a safe distance. We were on a hill overlooking the city. I wonder if even then he was thinking that was the last time he'd be coming here? I don't know.

I knew where I had to go.

It turned out the people I'd rescued on route were more than happy with my destination. As I suspected they were of the less law-abiding sort of people, and knew all the right things to say to curious ships passing by to make sure I landed at Lave Station safely. Their people paid well to see members of their crew safely returned.

Ryan got off as well, no doubt planning on going back to whatever hidden secret he'd found out there once he could get a new ship.

Me? I took a shuttle down to the surface while my cartography data uploaded.

I hardly recognized it. Lave used to be a dictatorship, but that had changed a long time ago, and aside from a few preserved historical buildings, everything was different. Everything had been torn down and replaced. Including the house Moss grew up in.

The hill was still there, though not the tree we'd hung out under. This was where I'd told him I was going to die, and what I wanted to do before that. A pointless little gesture based off a movie I loved.

But Moss had lost everything, his old life. We were doing all right for ourselves, but it was freelancers flying around in tin cans and parking at larger tin cans. We had money but couldn't settle down, there was always someone still looking out for us.

Part of him missed having a home, and realized how little he had deserved the one he once had. But he was able to accept that. What he couldn't accept was the idea of me not being around for company. That had led to a visit to Brother Mathias.

Damn... I never asked for any of this. I had been okay with dying. I figured it was my time. But I could tell how hard Moss would have it trying to get along without me. And I figured even if Mathias's proposal was crazy, even if it didn't work, it might at least give Moss some hope.

So I agreed, and look where it got me. Look where it got him.

I got up and left, taking the next shuttle back to Lave Station. This place had too many ghosts, and I was one of them.

My cartography data had uploaded, and there waiting for me in my message box was a congratulatory letter from the Pilots Federation. I was now officially considered Elite among their ranks in exploration. I now had a permit to visit the Shinrarta Dezra system, where the Pilot's Federation was based out of on Founders World.

Apparently the rank came with a hat as well, which had been delivered to the ship by one of the maintenance crew and left on my chair. I picked it up and left the cockpit.

Leaving Viaticus Rex II, I took a last stroll around her. Her green paint was worn and pockmarked, looking like she really had been all over this quadrant of the galaxy. I had the dockers add the Elite logo to the hull, but asked them to make it look just as worn as the rest of the ship. It seemed more fitting than adding a fresh coat.

One of the dockers came up to me to tell me the hull integrity had been fixed and she was ready to fly.

"No. I want to put her into deep storage. Take good care of her. There's a lot of history there."

The docker nodded. "Any idea when you're going to come back for her?"

I put on my Elite hat and gave my wandering boat a final look. "When I need her."

I left. I would catch a ride on a hauler or some other ship heading to Tellus and pick up the Troubadour there. But for now my mind was still on the T-6, and what it represented. I wasn't just leaving the ship behind, or Lave. I was also leaving behind the one thing that I hadn't been able to come to terms with.

Despite the hope Ivan had given me, my further investigation into the Order that Brother Mathias had belonged to had still come up empty. Maybe they had wiped out their records, only to get wiped out themselves afterwards. Yet another dead end, and the last one. It was time to stop living in the past. Time to accept what had happened and move on.

"Goodbye, Mossfoot."



Shinrarta Dezra

The Hauler dropped me off at Telus and I took the Troubadour out of cold storage. Some moron had given her a fresh coat of paint. Sheesh.

Don't ask me why, but there's something inherently pleasing to me about having a posh Imperial Clipper and having the paint job worn down. Feels like taking a rich yuppie and forcing them to live in the wilderness with only a survival knife for a week. Builds character. The Clipper is a great ship, but she looks even better with her hair down and tumbled, if you know what I mean. Find that naughty side to the buttoned up prim and proper librarian and...

...damn I haven't been on a date in ages, have I?

Well, the Troubadour still looked good even with a fresh coat of dark olive paint. Just the kind of style I wanted to arrive at Founders World in. I'd never been there before. Fact was, when I was alive I didn't even know it existed. Much like Sol, it had drifted off into legend until the Old Worlds opened up to the rest of the galaxy again. Long story, and one full of contradicting historical evidence--best not to think about it too hard.

Anyway, I fueled her up, set a course, adjusted my baseball cap, and left.

I wondered what I was going to find there. What kind of secrets did Jameson Memorial station have? Was there a secret handshake? Did I need to pass a secret initiation? Did I get to secretly put out hits on people I didn't like? Were there cookies?

I didn't encounter any trouble in Shinrarta Dezra. It was like any other system... kind of disappointing. Part of me had expected fireworks or our secret Thargoid overlords to show up and dance the can-can. Some kind of revelation. Something big.

Same thing happened at Jameson Memorial orbiting Founders World. Just a station. Ships and parts were cheaper here, I noticed, a Pilot's Federation perk, but that was about it.

I sighed. I made sure Trouble was in her cabin before I left--the last thing you want is a ferret having free reign of a ship twice the size of a jumbo jet when you weren't

around. With my luck she'd have taken a nap inside the main thrusters while they cooled. I was sure at least the spacer bar here would be full of interesting people with tales to tell.

Nada. Maybe they were in a different bar on the opposite side of the station. All I had here was a single drunk nursing a shot like it was his last. He looked like fun.

I sighed again and left. I'm not sure what I was hoping to find here. I suppose I felt the thought of leaving Mosfoot behind was supposed to bring some kind of karmic reward to make me feel better. Instead it was the same old same old.

How anticlimatic.

I guess I could have gone to the planet's surface, checked out the sights, learned about the history of the Pilot's Federation. I heard they had a derelict Thargoid ship as a tourist attraction at their main spaceport. Never seen one of those intact before. I decided against it. If there is one true thing about the universe it's this-- if you want meaningful things to happen, you just can't wait for them to happen to you. You have to make them happen.

Back at the hanger I noticed my ship was surrounded by more technicians than usual. Only, it turned out they weren't technicians.

Technicians don't carry guns. Or point them at pilots.

There was one among them who stood out. He vaguely reminded me of Simon from CQC, in that he affected an ethereal elf-like quality to him. Long blond hair, flowing robe, looked like a solid sneeze would knock him on his ass.

"Might I ask if I have the honor of speaking to Mr. Mossfoot, or Miss Violet?" he asked.

My jaw clenched. So much for the hope that these guys had the wrong hanger bay.

When I didn't answer, he simply smiled. "No matter. We'll have plenty of time to be better acquainted soon enough. You are coming with me."

My eyes narrowed. "What for?"

"There's the little matter of what's going on inside your brain. It seems you are connected to a project we have proprietary ownership of, from over a hundred years ago. From a group you may know as the Order? We are very eager to get to the bottom of it all."

I threw my hands up. "Finally! What took you guys so long?"

Let Me Pick Your Brain

Okay, so the goons with guns should have been my first clue that this joker wasn't going to be won over by my charm and diplomacy. I've talked my way out of a number of hairy situations, and into just as many.

In this case it didn't matter either way. The guy already had it in his mind where he wanted me, and it wasn't sitting across from him at a Starbucks sipping a mocha latte and shooting the breeze.

(Geeze, of all the franchises to survive a thousand years...)

He didn't even have the courtesy to say something cheezy like, "Sieze her!" He just pointed, and the guards, guns aimed straight at me, moved to surround me in a wide circle, while two of them moved in to no doubt secure my arms.

But he'd still made a rookie mistake. He'd made it perfectly clear that he wanted me alive. I was in no way under the same obligation.

The moment one guard was behind me ready to restrain my arms, I knew he had to put his gun away to do so. Once one hand was on mine, I knew where the other would have to be. With a twist and spin I had him chicken winged in front of me. The other hand already had his gun, and I was ready to use this meat shield to cover me while I fought my way out of the hanger. It's not like they could fire back.

Turned out I was the one who made the rookie mistake. None of them were carrying live ammo.

One Butch and Sundance freeze frame later and I was one the ground with about fifty trunks in my back, watching the pretty colors before I passed out.

Next thing I knew I was strapped down to a table, hooked up to a bunch of medical devices in a featureless room. Not even a poster on the wall of a kitten hanging onto a tree branch saying "Hang In There." I was pretty sure I was still on Jameson Memorial, but that was only because of the gravity.

See, it didn't have to be like this. If he had just asked nicely, I'd have been more than happy to play along. I wanted answers too, and this guy looked like he might be able to

give them or figure them out. But that possibility never registered with him. I was property in his eyes, and the restraints were to ensure that said property wouldn't go wandering off. And he certainly wasn't interested in sharing his findings with me.

The douchebag in question never gave his name, but a guard once called him Simmentor. If I had my galactic politics straight, that meant he was part of the Utopian movement, one of the higher ups. Okay, so what did the Utopians want with little ol' me? I had some theories, but they didn't really make sense. The Utopians were all about cutting edge technology and anything I had in me was over a hundred and fifty years old.

Clearly it was my brain they were interested in, since most of the devices they had were plugged into my head. What little I could see in the way of monitors showed they were watching Mossfoot's brain activity as well as the neural net wrapped around it hitching a ride.

Ordinarily this would be the part of a story where you'd have the villain explain their evil schemes, monologing, boasting, lines like "No, Miss Violet, I expect you to die," all that good stuff. Didn't happen. They weren't even asking me any questions. I tried engaging the doctors and the Simmentor, but they ignored me. I figured if I tried too hard to be annoying and force their hand they'd just sedate me, and I didn't want that. But still, they didn't have to be such dicks about it.

What really should have been worrying me was what that meant down the road. If they weren't talking to me, it was because they didn't want to humanize me, and that meant laser beams and skull caps popping off to get at the gooey center at some point.

Great. Just great.

Enter The Janitor

Obviously, since I'm dictating this, that did not happen.

I wish I could give a more detailed account of how it happened, but I can't. First there was all kinds of activity and hustle and bustle going on in the room. Then there was an odd high pitched noise, like a severe case of tinnitus, and I passed out. When I came too, there was a face looming over me holding a flashing device over my pried open eyes.

"Are you awake?" he asked, helping me up. I realized I wasn't strapped down any more. Then I realized that there were a whole lot of prone bodies on the ground, including the Simmentor.

I'm a quick study, so I knew that this was some kind of rescue. My rescuer was bald, dressed as a janitor, but whatever he'd been flashing in my eyes hadn't been for sanitizing toilets. Well, I hope not anyway.

"I'm awake. I assume questions come later."

The man nodded. "Yes. Let's move. I'll take you to your ship. We'll talk once we're safe."

I was able to figure out a lot in this short exchange. If the Simmentor's team were at all competent, and they certainly appeared to be, they would not have kept my ship in a regular docking bay, but put it into long term storage. If this guy had already made arrangements to have the ship put back on the main pad, ready for lift off, then he'd planned this escape to the last detail.

Also, it was telling that he was escaping with me on my own ship. If he had come on his own ship he'd be leaving it behind, so odds were he hadn't come on his own ship. So assuming he didn't already live here, which was unlikely, he'd traveled here as a passenger with the intent of escaping with me.

I looked down at the bodies as I grabbed my clothes. They'd stripped me down to boxers and a T-shirt, and I wasn't going out like that. Nobody seemed to be dead. My guess was they were all unconscious and without the janitor's special flashy device would stay that way for a long time.

"Hang on," I said. I went to the Simmentor and mounted his body on top of one of the female doctors in a very compromising way. Maybe I'd get lucky and he'd get his with a reprimand for workplace harassment over it.

I looked around the rooms. "Cameras?"

"Taken care of. We have a clear path to the hanger. Hurry."

"Just one second..." Not able to leave well enough alone, I stuffed the Simmentor's hand down the pants of one of the guards as well.

The bald man sighed. "We don't have time for... oh screw it." He tapped his smartwatch and a virtual camera took a picture of the scene. "I'll see to it he gets a copy. Happy?"

"Ecstatic. Let's go."

We hurried down the corridors, the janitor leading the way. "I figure we'll have a ten minute head start by the time we launch. More than enough time to clear this region of space."

"Are they going to track us?"

"They'll try."

"So, not to sound ungrateful, but I'd like to know why you're helping me at some point. Did I get your cat out of a tree or something?"

"Not now. Cameras are off but that doesn't mean something here might not record what we're saying."

It was a fair point, and a good sign that this guy didn't want to take any chances. I noticed two more unconscious bodies along the path we were taking, and another two by the doors leading to the hanger. They seemed like ordinary station staff, not Utopians.

Inside the bay was the Troubadour, surrounded by a half dozen unconscious technicians and dockers. Baldy went out of his way to move those who were laying too close to the landing struts or vertical thrusters.

"Get her prepped. I'll be inside in a second. Do not leave without me."

"Wouldn't dream of it, Baldy."

Something about all this reminded me of how Mossfoot and I escaped from his father's capital ship. His XO had been running a cell of a secret wetwork operation right under his nose, and had planned on disposing both of us once they had what they wanted. Fortunately Moss had known someone on board who was even more burrowed in than they were, albeit it in an entirely self-serving way, and helped orchestrate our escape.

Baldy got in and closed the cargo hatch. "You're all clear. Launch."

"Way ahead of you," I said. The pad was already rotating by the time he joined me on the cockpit.

Suddenly a warning flashed on my HUD: "100,000 Bounty for Murder"

"The hell?"

Baldy shook his head. "Someone must have woken up early. It'll disappear once someone verifies it's in error. In the meantime, they want you shot down and hope you survive getting ejected."

"Like hell," I said, "hold on to your butt." The Troubadour boosted out of the mailslot before the station or anyone else could scan us. After that it didn't take long to make a few random jumps and lose any possible tails.

Now it felt like time to get some answers.

Brother Sparks

Baldy took his time dishing out the answers. First he wanted access to my shipboard computer. Given that I probably owed my life to him, I wasn't about to start getting paranoid about his motives.

Still, I looked over his shoulder to see what he was doing anyway.

His fingers were lightning fast. Every time I tried to ask what he was doing he'd shush me and say "Not yet." He accessed my ship's registry, hacked it, and changed my ship ident completely. I wish I had a camera recording how he did that because that was the sort of thing you expected a team of pirate hackers to take a week to do off in the Anarchy systems, and he did it in half an hour.

"There. That should keep them off your trail for a while."

"Would be nice to know who 'them' are...or you for that matter."

"I suspect telling you my name is Brother Sparks might be...illuminating." He waited for a reaction that didn't come. "That's monk humour."

Though I didn't get the joke, I did see what he was getting at. "You're part of the Order?"

Sparks nodded. "Such as it is. Things have changed since your time. But then, you already know that."

"So those guys treating me like a lab rat were...?"

"Not of the Order. They work for Simguru Pranav Antal of the Utopian movement. The one running that operation was technically my superior. His capturing of you has made it clear that I've underestimated him. I just hope it wasn't fatally."

"For us, I assume?"

"And the Order. After the Old Worlds rejoined the greater galactic community, we continued our work as best we could. But the nature of galactic politics, with the Federation and Empire both vying for our knowledge, as well as other ambitious factions, we decided it was better of we disappeared. As you discovered."

"Wait, you knew I was looking for you?"

Brother Sparks nodded. "Only recently, anyone searching for our history tends to raise certain flags and activate certain alarms. I suspect it might be how the Simguru found you. But before that I was looking for you, tracking your movements, looking for a discrete opportunity for us to meet. Sadly, that did not go as planned."

"Guess not. So, look, forgive me for being blunt. I love a good revealing exposition as much as the next cinephile, but I kind of need you to get to the point."

Sparks turned in his chair. "I'm guessing I can't delay with the 'All in good time,' tactic?"

"Not unless you want a thousand variations on 'Can you tell me now?' over the next few hours."

"The short version is this--our Order, as you know, is dedicated to preserving life. We do so in a variety of ways. Genetic engineering, bionic implants, cybernetics, nanotechnology, like what was used in Project Cliche to repair and restore your friend's body."

"Project Cliché?"

"The team had originally wanted to call it Project Lazarus, but..."

"Ah. Got it."

"And in our ambitions to achieve the dreams of transhumanism, we also designed bio-organic implants such as yourself."

"Yeah, but I've got to be a hundred years obsolete in that regard."

"Far from it. Project Transporter had dozens of candidates, but only one success. You."

"Okay, so I'm unique, but why does that make the Utopians so eager to take an ice cream scoop to my brain?"

Brother Sparks snorted. "Sorry... I don't get a chance to crack many jokes where I was stationed. It's refreshing to hear sarcasm on this level. The reason they want you is the reason I don't want them to have you. Antal's Utopian vision has many merits, but he's far from saintly in the eyes of the Order. At first our focus was to help their more worthy goals, but as of late we've spent more time trying to hinder them, unseen, on their less noble pursuits."

"Well, that was a heck of a hindering you did back on the station," I said. "We might have been better off if you made that hindering a bit more permanent, though."

Sparks sighed. "We abhor violence and refuse to use it, but we recognize it is part of the natural order of things. If we didn't we certainly wouldn't spend so much time saving pilots that are hell bent on blowing each other up all the time. But we also believe that personal free will is part of the natural order of things as well. Antal, or at least many of those who champion his vision, do not."

"Still not following you."

"Project Cliché was simply advanced means to preserve and revive a pilot's body. Many of those techniques have been incorporated by the galaxy at large. Project Transporter, however, was an attempt to save a pilot's mind, for when even the body couldn't be recovered. But the means to do so is something that could be exploited in terrible ways. You've already experienced one of them."

I thought about it. "Mossfoot's dead because of me?"

Sparks shook his head. "Don't look at it that way, and don't blame yourself. Of course, Mr Mossfoot's case was an exception. Transporter was never meant to be used on a brain-functional human, but rather applied to a brain dead one. It was tested on brain-dead bodies at first, but it was hoped to be the last hurdle in making cloning a viable alternative for human life extension."

"Immortality," I said, half to myself.

"After a fashion. But it failed. Revived patients eventually degraded and went vegetative or homicidal. Project Transporter was scrapped shortly after you and Mossfoot disappeared."

"So these Utopians want to know why I work so we can all get our own personal Konami cheat code?"

"Perhaps that would be their line officially, if it ever became public. But I'm afraid far more sinister ideas are at play. Transporter didn't just allow for the transferring of memories and consciousness, it allows for their manipulation as well."

I felt a chill at the way he said that. "I think I see where this is going."

"Only in part. Yes, the technology could apply to their already effective reeducation techniques, but consider this. Imagine a population implanted with your technology, intended a backup. Personalities stored online and updated regularly so that even if the body was vaporized the last version could be uploaded to a new body, once it had grown."

"Right..."

"Now imagine that implant had a second personality attached to it. One suited to a ruling factions needs. Perhaps copies of various approved ideal subjects, perhaps something wholly artificial. And at the flip of a switch, so to speak..."

"They go all Violet."

"Precisely. The primary personality is destroyed or suppressed and the dormant personality takes over."

"Free will becomes a luxury, not a right."

"I fear it would be much worse than that. There are those within the Utopian movement who wouldn't see its use as something to only apply to dissidents, but to everyone, all at once, for the greater good. The final stage of their perfect vision, where all are one."

"Ugh. I'm getting shades of Emperor Palpatine here."

Brother Sparks frowned. "Sorry?"

"Never mind. Old Star Wars joke. Order 66 and all that. Palpatine is Antal in this case."

"Actually, whether Antal himself would approve, I have no idea. But I do know that those who are striving towards this goal would have no problem converting him as well, if it came to that."

"So, long story short, you don't want my brain falling into the wrong hands." Now there was a mental image I could have done without. Even heard a 'sploot' in my head as it slapped onto the Simguru's hands...

"Yes."

"So how do you plan to do that? A pragmatic person would just kill me, but killing isn't your thing."

"Correct."

"And believe me, I'm grateful. I'd rather avoid that option."

"As would we. You have much to teach us that would be beneficial to the preservation of life, if properly understood."

My eyes narrowed. "I'm not sure you should have access to it either. Let me be clear about something right now. As much as I'd like to stick around, I overcame my fear of death a hundred and fifty years ago. As far as I'm concerned, I'm already dead. I have no qualms about setting sticking my head in the main drive and turning on the afterburners if it keeps this Pandora's box out of everyone's hands. Yours included."

Brother Sparks seemed to assess me, as if determining if I was serious or all talk. He nodded. I think he decided it was the former.

"Now, about hiding out. You can't exactly give me plastic surgery. Believe me, we tried. It goes right back to fire burn victim chic. Facial recognition is going to spot us somewhere eventually."

"I believe I have a solution to that, but first I need you to set course for Sol."

"Sol? Why?"

"Because your survival, and that of my Order, depends on certain information being deleted or otherwise corrupted. Our Order is already in the process of destroying everything we have on Polevnic and evacuating, but Antal's people aren't the only ones interested in you. Your case is being tracked by the Geneva Medical Research Laboratory on Earth. And once they learn that the Utopians have made their move, it won't be long before the Federation makes theirs."

Solward Bound

Sparks had us hang out near Hutton Orbital in Alpha Centauri, pretty much the last place anyone would be looking for a Clipper since it can't dock there, but also because a member of the Order had been stationed there. I don't know if it was punishment, or just to get away from it all monastic-style, but she was thrilled to hear from Sparks regardless.

I waited in my cabin while he took care of business. I needed some time alone anyway. It was going to take a while for everything Brother Sparks had told me to sink in.

We were going to go to Earth, heart of the Federation, break into a high security facility in order to erase any records of Project Transporter, its ties to me and this body.

Honestly I could have thought of simpler solutions. Just because they couldn't kill me didn't mean they couldn't, say, put me on ice long term. Ditch me on a distant undiscovered Earth-like world with no comms relay. Hell, maybe just take me out of Moss's skull and stick me in a jar somewhere. Maybe that would...

I should point out I was recording these ideas when Brother Sparks walked in on me and interrupted my train of thought.

"You're not still broadcasting those, are you?"

I stopped what I was doing for the time being. "Naw, that was Mossfoot's thing. Deep down for all his whining he was a bit of a glory hound. Once he knew he had an audience he couldn't stop."

"It's just that you're doing it in the same format, I thought..."

"I told you I'm not broadcasting. That's not my thing. It's not for the galaxy at large."

"Then who are you--"

I stared at him evenly.

"Oh."

"So a bit of privacy, maybe?" I hinted.

"Certainly." He stopped at the door and turned back. "You know, I found the archives of Mr. Mossfoot's early recordings, as well as the ones this year, before... I just wanted to say he sounded like a decent person."

"He was a blowhard, a coward, a drunk, and a scheming womanizer," I countered.

"And?"

"He was a friend. I just don't like it when people talk of the dead like they were angels waiting to go to heaven, is all. Makes me sick. I don't want anyone doing that for me when I'm gone."

Sparks raised an eyebrow. "When?"

"Don't go all Freud on me, monk boy. I'm not planning on it, but the fact is we all die. And when I do, the last thing I want is whatever friends I might have still around to act as if I did no wrong."

"You don't feel you've lead a worthy life?"

"Swing and a miss, strike two. I'm just saying I know who I am. Good and bad. I'm defined by everything I do, not just what people like about me."

Brother Sparks smiled. "Fascinating."

"Message, Mr. Spock?" Sparks frowned and again I had to explain myself. "Star Trek reference."

"Ah."

"That's the problem with having access to over a thousand years of popular culture, preserved for all eternity on a variety of media. Ninety five percent of people will only be interested in what happened the last fifty years, and the other five percent will be stretched so thin that you'll need an online matchmaking service just to find someone who knows what the hell you're talking about. And they're probably on an outpost three hundred light years away."

"Apologies."

"Anyway, what's so dang fascinating?"

"You are, of course. I mean, I understand you believe you're you, but from my perspective I think I've always assumed an advanced simulation--but still a simulation."

"Oh, trust me, I've had days I've wondered about that too. I call them Wednesday. And Thursday. Friday. Pretty much any day ending in Y."

"Artificial intelligence isn't my forte," Sparks admitted, "I suppose existential angst could be simulated just like anything else, but let's just say I'm convinced yours is genuine."

"Does not compute."

Brother Sparks snorted again. "And humor is incredibly difficult to simulate. That much I do know."

"Okay, I can get back to Dear Diary later. What were you here for?"

"I simply wanted to inform you that arrangements have been made. We can head to Sol whenever you're ready. Do you need more time?"

I looked back at the recorder. "Five minutes. Let's get on with it."

Ah, Crap

"This will never work."

Brother Sparks shushed me. "Of course it will, have you looked at yourself in a mirror lately? You'll be lucky they don't throw you straight into ICU when we walk in the door."

For the birthplace of humanity, Earth was all right, I guess. Somehow you expected it to feel more grand, but I'd been to a dozen Earth-like planets, some terraformed, some natural, that felt just as big and majestic. Hell, some of the tourist worlds felt more like what I imagined Earth should be like.

But it's not as if this place was trying to put on a show. Billions of people live here, some of whom have never left the cradle. Hard to imagine.

Geneva, however, did have a look of splendor to it, like it knew it was one of the big important places in the Federation (though far from the only one) and wanted to make sure anyone travelling down by shuttle knew it too.

Sparks and I were on a planetary shuttle from Galileo station near the moon, which is where we had docked the Troubadour. It seemed Sparks's Order were everywhere we needed them. A subtle nod from one of the dock rats on Galileo let us know that our arrival would not be noted on any official logs.

By this point I felt like I was part of this quasi-religious Order, because everything I did now was a leap of faith, including going down to Geneva looking exactly as I normally do, without even a hint of a disguise. The same wasn't true for Sparks, who had his face completely redone on Galileo station to resemble a well known doctor from Everate. Even after we got off the shuttle and onto a tram, I kept expecting something to scan me and call the cops.

Sparks assured me this wasn't the case. "Fortunately we've nipped this in the bud. The only complication so far has been Simmentor Doozer finding you first. And he's unlikely to advertise his failure to anyone." Sparks shook his head. "I mistook him for a

fool, even enjoyed pulling the wool over his eyes. It seemed he enjoyed playing the part even more until he found something that suited his goals."

"But you said before the Feds would be looking for me soon."

"And they will, but they will find that exceedingly difficult when their facial recognition algorithms keep pointing them to the wrong people. The only true risk is encountering someone intimately familiar with your case, assuming there is anyone. It's entirely possible your case is being handled entirely by virtual assistants, pending review by a live researcher. Until Doozer found you, you were more of a hypothetical interest than an actual one, after all."

The Federation's Medical Research Laboratory was a large sprawling construct, impressive in size with a decent sculpture out front, but not exactly a work of art. The cover story provided was that I was a burn victim whose body's immune system had rejected current progenitor cell technology, which was more or less the truth, and ostensibly here to test out a new therapy. Sparks was the lead physician familiar with my case, there to assist if there were complications. Everything checked out at the front desk and we were moved on to the experimental testing wing where human trials were handled.

Believe it or not, this actually wasn't my first time in such a place. Back before I was a stuntwoman, when it was hard to make ends meet, I had volunteered for lab testing of new drugs a few times. They paid very well and I only did it because I was assured of its safety... all the weird ass mutations got sorted out in the earlier stages. This was more for monitoring minor side effects like power diarrhea or an overwhelming desire to argue on message boards--but I repeat myself.

Overall it just meant you spent a weekend wearing hospital chic, got decent food, maybe had to run to the bathroom once or twice (well one trial it was more like every hour) and then your next three months rent was taken care of. Sweet.

The wing we were taken to reminded me of those days. In fact I saw through one observation window a clinical trial going on, and the ass-revealing gowns they wore hadn't changed in a hundred and fifty years--or light years.

I'd been given a private room and for one terrifying moment, seeing the hospital bed there ready and waiting for me, I thought this had all been a trap and Sparks had just gotten me to come here without putting up a fight. I'd have given him props on a cunning and elaborate scheme if that had been the case, then broken his nose before they strapped me down.

Instead, Sparks checked out the computer terminal in the room, at first showing my fake patient records and charts. He quickly bypassed those to get to the hospital's mainframe. Something about how easily he did it made me think he wasn't hacking the system at all, but rather accessing a back door of some sort. He soon found the information he wanted, secured the room of any potential listening devices, and updated me on the plan.

"Accessing what's shared on the various distributed networks is easy enough. We already have things in place to track down your records and corrupt them beyond usefulness, but once such a process is detected, backups go into lockdown and become inaccessible. Once the threat has passed, everything damaged is going to be flagged for backup retrieval. So we need to start the attack from inside the central backup, which then directly contacts the secondary-backups wherever they are, even before the distributed network is hit."

"I'll pretend I understand how all that works and get to the 'where do I come in' question."

"Well, I had hoped your role would be limited to simply providing a cover to get us inside and assisting in our escape should we be discovered. But as it turns out I'm afraid I'll need you to make a slightly bigger sacrifice than that."

I looked at him until he dropped the dramatics.

"I'm afraid I'm going to have to kill you. Just for a little while."

"Oh, well, if it's just for a little while..." I said with more sarcasm than a legion of fandom forum trolls.

"The only way I can access the central backup is in their crash room, because it's right above it. You'll die, they'll transfer you to the crash room, and I'll handle the rest."

"So all I need to do is let my heart stop beating. Swell."

"Well, and cease all brain function."

"Fantastic! Do I get to crap myself as well?"

"I believe that is a normal bodily function when one dies, yes."

"You do realize we have to get away from here afterwards, right? I don't want them following the brown trail all the way back to the shuttleport."

"I'll take care of it. I have a couple of options in mind. I'll see to it you're clean with proper clothes ready before we go."

I sighed. What option did I have at this point. "You better. So what do we do?"

"We'll need to go ahead with the first stage of the new progenitor treatment, at which point I'll make sure you have a severe allergic reaction and flatline. That's pretty much it on your end."

"Nice to know that my most important contribution to this mission is to drop dead."

Sparks smiled. "The technical stuff would have bored you anyway."

The door to my room opened and a doctor walked in, looking at a datapad. "So... Mr. Mendez? Ready to try and get that handsome face of yours back?"

That was my cue. "Yep."

He then looked at the Brother Sparks. "And Dr. Hallywell, a pleasure. I've read your papers regarding progenitor application in advanced telomere decay. I'm thrilled that you've taken an interest in my research."

Sparks turned out to be a consummate actor. "I'm thrilled you were able to take us on with such short notice, Dr. Nagoya. I've heard promising things about your new approach, and Tom here is an unusual case. It should provide us both with a lot of useful information."

Dr. Nagoya nodded and gestured out to the hall. "Well, if you're ready, Mr. Mendez, we'll get you to the change room and we can get started right away."

The Mind Palace

Well, dying sucked. At least the first time it was peacefully in my ship. Never felt a thing then.

When Sparks said I'd have an allergic reaction, he did not warn me just how long that reaction would take to finish me off. First the burning all around my skin where the new progenitor cells were being tested, then my lungs were on fire, fillig with fluid, until I couldn't breathe and everything started to go black.

Aaaand, I think I actually remember crapping myself before it all went black. Lovely. The next thing I knew I was some place I hadn't been in a long time.

I was in a library. It was octagonal in shape. Six of the walls held countless books, one was a giant window providing light, and the last was the door I'd just came through.

My mind palace.

Okay, I know that term refers to something else entirely. It's a mnemonic tool allowing people to remember large amounts of information with instant recall. But, in a way that's what this was, too.

This was where I went in my down time to give Mossfoot some privacy. Given that I'm a cinephile rather a bookworm, I had at first not exactly seen this as an ideal arrangement. But storing tons of movies takes up a hell of a lot more memory than text files that can be applied to whatever I pick up off the shelf here, so that was that.

A single large padded blue chair sat in the center. Comfortable. It was exactly like the one my dad sat in when I was a kid. He'd always kick me off whenever he came into the room, so that made it even more special to sit in whenever possible.

And right now, I saw a familiar face using it. I couldn't believe it, but I'd always hoped.

"Hey there, flyboy. That's my spot."

Mossfoot didn't react. He looked like the way he used to, before the accident that made his face look like melted cheese. He was absorbed in a book, of course.

"I said, hey there, flyboy."

He still didn't react. That was odd. I tried waving my hand in front of him. Nothing. When I tried taking his book away from him my hand passed right through. He turned a page.

"Swell. Just swell." While I knew nothing about the tech that made all this possible, I could think of any number of SF shows that had similar situations and their pseudo-science explanations for it. It's like I was slightly out of phase with MF's reality, in my own little pocket. I could see him, but he couldn't see me, and we couldn't interact.

But he was alive. That was the important thing. He looked content enough. But then, the man loves his books. I checked out what he was reading now. Some kind of mystery novel with two detectives back to back on the cover.

"Getting Rid of Gary?" I'd never heard of it, or the author, one Noah Chinn. But then, the library was filled with just about every book there was.

Not knowing what to do, I sat down in front of him, hoping maybe he'd see a flicker of me at some point. Maybe he couldn't hear me directly, but maybe he could subconsciously, like a coma patient.

"Hey. It's me. I, uh, just want to let your know your body is in decent shape. Well, better shape, really. You never did do enough exercise in my opinion." I sighed. "So look, now that I know you're alive I'm going to do whatever it takes to get you back, okay? I found one Brother Mathias's techno-monks. If anyone can help, it's him. Granted, he just killed me, but it was on purpose, and just for a little while. Right now he's hacking the database of one of the most secure medical testing facilities in the Federation, while I'm lying dead on a table with a full load in my pants. Er, your pants. Yeah, sorry about that. Point is, if he can do that, I figure he can detangle our wires, or will know someone who can."

I looked around, thinking about what else there was to say that was important.

But I never got a chance to say it, because the doors opened, bright light filled the room, and everything vanished into white.

The Great Escape

My eyes flickered open, squinting at the bright light. But it wasn't of the "come into the light" kind where I end up reunited with my pet dog on the rainbow bridge, it was that crappy hospital light that hasn't changed in a thousand years.

I was on a stretcher, and Brother Sparks was looking down at me. "Ready to go?"

I struggled up. I hadn't been dead long, but my body was very much out of whack from everything that had happened to it--including whatever they did after my heart stopped ticking.

Looking around, I realized I wasn't standing still, but rolling down the hall. I wasn't the only one, the place was in a panic. "What's going on?"

"Bomb threat. Evacuation procedures are in place." Sparks smiled. "Wonder how that happened?"

I got it. This would make it that much easier for us to slip away in the chaos. Patients were being walked, rolled and carted out from every room we passed, until we were like a school of johnny gowned salmon swimming upstream.

"Everything work out?" I asked.

"We did our part, but the rest of the Order have to make sure there are no loose ends out there."

"And then what?"

Brother Sparks didn't answer, instead saying "Bump coming up" as he rolled the cart over a low curb in order to skirt around the mass of exodus people. We flowed around the outer edge, but kept close to be part of the mass, and soon got near the front.

"So how do we get out?" I asked. "It's gonna look suspicious if I'm running around in a hospital gown."

"Check between your legs," Sparks said.

I felt down and first off realized I was already wearing pants under the blanket. Then I felt a shirt down between my knees.

"Grab it and put it on once we're clear. Ready?"

I nodded, looking around the open lot full of people and noting several potential avenues of escape. "Piece of cake."

* * * * *

It didn't take long for us to make our way back to the shuttle station. Security was heightened because of the bomb scare, but Sparks had already accounted for that. We both had new identities again as high level off duty Federation officers, which helped wave us through the security checks. After that we were on our way to Galileo station, where the Troubadour awaited us.

I held off asking too many questions until we were safely on board the Clipper. You never knew who might be recording things. I got comfortable in my chair and put on my Elite baseball cap, ready to go when the word was given. As if sharing my sentiment that it was now okay to speak, Sparks informed me of what had happened in the hospital. How after my heart was beating again he had knocked out the crash room staff with the same sonic device he'd rescued me with. How he'd hacked the computer system in the room directly underneath via a hard line the crash room had access to, while somehow managing to clean me up and put on my pants for me, and topping it off with a warning of a bomb threat sent "directly" from the Federation's Anti-Terrorism Unit. The rest I knew.

"So, now what?" I really didn't need to elaborate, it was a rather all-encompassing question, and Sparks knew it.

"For the Order? We disappear for a time. Erase our records again. Antal's men will salvage what they can, and no doubt Simmentor Doozer has private files we won't be able to access, but all the information that matters will be lost."

"What about all the good work you were doing there?" I asked.

"Oh, anything that benefits the preservation of life will remain untouched. We're simply removing our fingerprints, so to speak. It's not as if we were ever motivated by fame or glory."

"And where will you go?"

"We have a small system on the edge of the bubble that has been prepared for such an emergency. Its government has secretly been members of the Order for three hundred years. Even I wasn't briefed on it until the evacuation order was given."

I frowned. "I guess I should say sorry for all that."

"Oh?"

"Well, I mean, I'm the reason all this happened, right? If I hadn't popped up on the scene you'd still be doing your work."

"True, but I may not have learned that Simmentor Doozer was aware of our covert activities and planning to use us for his own schemes. As a parting gift, we made sure that Pranav Antal knew what he was intending to do, and why we couldn't allow it. What the Simguru does with that information will determine what future dealings we have with him further down the line."

That puzzled me. "Wait, you're bailing out of there like someone pressed the big red self destruct button, but you're willing to go back to him?"

"I didn't say that. I said dealings. Antal's Utopia has laudable goals and commendable ideals. But we in the Order have a saying: Always listen to someone who is searching for the truth--always beware of someone who claims to have found it. It's people like Doozer we fear, especially if they were to become the guiding vision behind the Utopian movement. If Antal shares that fear, then we have much in common. And that is the basis for cooperation. In time."

It felt like that was all I was going to get out of him on that front so now it was time to address the elephant in the cargo hold. "And what about me?"

Sparks shrugged. "You are free to do as you wish. I can change your identity for you easily enough. You can start again wherever you like. Or you can stay who you are. The fragments of your existence that remain scattered about won't in any way point to the secrets you hold within you. As far as the galaxy knows you are simply a man who was thought dead for an extraordinarily long time, miraculously revived, and for a brief time was known as Ranger M." He snickered a bit at that. "I did enjoy that brief chapter of your life, I must say."

"Not my life," I said, which was as good a point as any to bring this up. "Mossfoot's not dead."

Brother Sparks cocked his head. "Pardon?"

"When you killed me, I was in the mind palace--what I call that virtual library I could stay in while leaving Mossfoot alone. He was there, reading a book."

"Are you certain?"

I nodded. "He looked the way he used to, before the accident that scarred him. But he couldn't see me, and I couldn't touch him."

"It may have been a memory of sorts," Sparks suggested, but quickly dismissed the idea. "No, I think you are right. I studied Brother Mathias's work as best I could, and that was always a likely possibility."

"So, can you get him back?" I asked.

Mathias sighed. "Honestly, it would have been better if he was dead."

That made no sense. "Why?"

"Because it puts me in an unenviable position, and possibly breaking my vows."

I had an uncomfortable feeling I knew where this was going, but I waited for him to say it.

"There is a way to bring Mossfoot back...but I'm afraid you're not going to like it."

Final Interlude

Brother Sparks turned on the lights to his temporary quarters and stepped inside. He needed some time to himself.

It was over. God forgive him.

Now he was left wondering what came next.

The station they were on was a staging ground for the last stage of the Order's exodus, chosen for a variety of reasons, including its extensive medical facilities, which had long been under the Order's guidance.

He tried not to think too much about what he'd just been part of, or the moral ramifications of it all, but in the end it had been Violet's decision. He had to believe it was what she'd wanted.

Sparks sat at the desk and logged into the computer terminal. He checked on the exodus's progress. Eighteen hundred brothers and sisters accounted for. Six still missing. One confirmed dead, but not because of the evacuation.

Sister Matilda had been a mole in Archon Delaine's pirate kingdom, trying to aid the plight of their growing number of slaves. Archon's men had a nasty tendency to dispose of those they felt were no longer fit enough for service, and Matilda had done her level best to keep as many as healthy as possible while also helping run an underground railroad into Federation space.

Her name and actions would be recorded, though it seemed small compensation to Sparks. Blips of data paled to a memorial everyone could see, and for the Order there were no such memorials. He'd told Violet that they were not motivated by fame or glory, and that was true, the lives they saved were their true testament, but dammit a thank you now and then wouldn't go amiss.

Sparks took a moment to check the last vestiges of his old life online, ensure that little if anything of his identity remained. So far it all seemed to be in order, except for one item—a mail account he had assumed was deleted was still active. Empty of all message, except one...

From Pranav Antal.

Ice shot down Sparks's spine as he checked to ensure all security measures were in place before scanning the attachment. It was an audio file, but there was nothing hidden within the code, just a fragment of an old Earth song.

*So will you please say hello
To the folks that I know
Tell them I won't be long
They'll be happy to know
That as you saw me go
I was singing this song*

*We'll meet again
Don't know where
Don't know when
But I know we'll meet again some sunny day*

Brother Sparks deleted the file, the account, and triple checked to ensure nothing could be traced to this region of space. He'd pass on Antal's message to the Order, of course, but as with all their dealings with him, interpretations would vary. Some would see this as a whimsical nod or salute to them as they left, letting them know he would welcome their return.

Others would see it as a thinly veiled threat.

Sparks leaned towards the latter, but not for the reasons others might think. The message claimed to have been from Pranav Antal, but it had sent been from the Halls of Innovation on Polevnic, not Antal's headquarters on the other side of the planet.

It was possible, he supposed, that the Simguru had visited the Halls personally when word of their actions had reached him. For all he knew, the message could have been sent from his own desk, once he'd learned nothing of use could be retrieved there.

But his gut told him otherwise. His gut told him someone else had left the message.

His gut told him Simmentor Doozer was not done with him, or the Order.

Brother Sparks sighed. He was responsible for all this. For drawing attention to Project Transporter, for not noticing Doozer's actions sooner. It was because of him that the Order had been forced to relocate. And for that reason he had to go.

He would not be joining the Order at this time. For all he knew, he was a weak link that might somehow lead the Simmentor to them. To him there was only one option that would keep his brothers and sisters safe.

Exile.

The Order would understand. If, in time, he was certain that Doozer was no longer a threat, he would join them at their new home, while the fathers and mothers planned what the Order would do for the next hundred years. He had time. They all did. More than most suspected.

Unfortunately, Sparks was left with the problem of how he was going to leave. The Order would no doubt grant him a simple ship for his journey, but he needed something both fast and resilient, in case Doozer continued to prove a cunning adversary.

One such ship came to mind...

About Face

The name I go by is Mossfoot, and I'm worried I might not be dead.

Actually I'm not dead. I know that. The fact I'm recording this is a bit of a giveaway, even if my old ship did blow up in a combat zone somewhere in Alliance space. I'm hazy on the details, because I wasn't the one in charge at the time.

For a while I thought I was in the hereafter, only I quickly realized that if the hereafter consisted of a single room with unlimited books, then the Creator had a sick sense of humor.

It's not that I don't like to read, it's just that an eternity in one room would be enough to drive anyone mental. The only way it could be more ironic would be if I needed glasses to read and I had accidentally stepped on my only pair.

Once I realized this had to be Violet's private space, I breathed a sigh of relief.

Once I realized I couldn't leave, I began to panic.

Before I go any further, let me point out that this place has no sense of night and day. It's always a lovely spring day filtering through the window...all the goddamn time.

You ever hear about torture techniques? Keeping the light on full blast is one such tactic. Sleep deprivation. I never knew if it was night or day. It was always day. Always.

Of course, the same is kind of true in a spaceship, only it's always night.

So, I tried everything to try and let Violet know that we'd swapped bodies and to please every so kindly give it back, but I never heard a word.

I knew this wasn't intentional, wasn't some grand scheme she'd cooked up to take over my body and live again, forever trapping me in some kind of digital purgatory. But as time went on I began to wonder, to doubt. I can't help it, I'm paranoid, and with damn good reasons.

In the end, it didn't matter. I was trapped here. I was never hungry or thirsty, and it turned out I never felt tired, either. And I had all the books I could ever want.

I decided to make the most of it.

I have no idea how much time passed. Weeks, months, more than a year? There was no way to tell. I can say I was here for four hundred and twelve books, though those varied in size from Dostoyevsky's *Notes From Underground* to James Joyce's *Finnegans Wake*.

Okay, fine, from *The Hobbit* to *Lord of the Rings*. I may be literate, but even I admit those other books are boring as all hell.

Then, suddenly, the doors to the room swing open, I'm covered in light like some cheesy movie, and the next thing you know I'm looking up at white hospital lights with the mother of all hangovers. And believe me, I've had some experience to compare against.

Two nurses were attending me, and one noticed I was awake. She smiled, pressed a button attached to some IV drip, and I was out like a light again. For the first time in God-knows how long, I was asleep.

It felt strangely unnerving.

The next time I woke up I was alone in my room. The headache had gone from a painful roar to an annoying mewl.

When I had my wits about me I sat up and swung my legs over the bed.

"Violet?"

I looked around the room for her image to appear, but nothing. She was still out cold, I assumed. The pain in my skull told me that she'd found someone who could fix our little identity problem... either that or she went for the Gilligan's Island approach and had someone drop a coconut on my head.

Getting to my feet I went to the bathroom to check myself in the mirror.

As soon as I walked in I jumped back out, thinking someone else was already in there. Stepping back inside I realized it had just been my reflection I'd seen. Except it wasn't me at all.

"Who the hell are you?" I asked the mirror.

I was bald, though that didn't surprise me, it's not like I had much to work with after the scarring. But the scars were gone, all of them. I had a face again!

Only...only it wasn't my face.

I looked this way and that, raised my chin, tilted, examining my new features. I looked...okay, I guess. I mean, it was a billion times better than the old pizza face look,

but I was kinda...average now. Okay, a bit above average, but certainly not my old handsome self.

But at least I had a proper face now. That was something. Hell, it was more than something, it was fantastic!

Nobody had entered my room to check up on me, so I looked around to see if there was any food or clothes. I figured someone would come and explain things to me soon enough.

On a table was a baseball cap with the Pilot Federation's Elite symbol on it, and a datapad with the words "Play Me" hand written on the screen.

I picked up the screen and tapped it. Violet appeared. Not me as Violet, but Violet herself. Before she died.

She smiled, but there was something off about it. "Hey there, flyboy. Don't get excited, this is just a virtual recording I'm taking inside a VR unit. I figured it would be better if I talked to you this way instead of you looking at your old acid-wash face and seeing me work you like a puppet.

"So...if you're watching this, and assuming you're not drooling like a vegetable with someone holding this pad up for you, then I guess the operation was a success. Congrats. How you got here is a long story, but let's just say I've taken steps to make sure you're fully briefed. Check the journal entries, I did my best to keep track of what happened and how we got here.

"So, there's good news and bad news to share with you. The good news is we figured out what was keeping you trapped in the library all this time.

"The bad news is, it was me. It was always me.

"I'm not the one to explain the details, but it happened when we ejected from the ship. It seemed that during RemLok, my neural net took over. Your brain was directed into my mind palace as a means to protect it, and I took over your body full time. The problem was, the effect was permanent. Incidentally, it's also the reason reconstructive surgery never worked on you. I was interfering with the nanotech that helped keep your body alive, making it think that your deep fried raisin look was what it was supposed to 'heal' you back to. The worst part is, in time your brain was going to degrade in there, until you were nothing more than memories and background noise. And there was no way you were ever going to wake up with me still around, so..."

I didn't like where this was going. I think she anticipated my reaction.

"Moss, listen. It's okay. Nobody is making me do this. It's my choice. I had a much longer life than I was ever supposed to have, and I've seen some amazing things. A universe far larger than I ever expected to see, or even knew existed. All that was all thanks to you. What kind of person would I be if I didn't return the favor?"

Anger began to rise up inside of me. "Goddammit, you *selfish* little..."

Selfish? What sense did that even make? But it just came out, as if somehow the thought of her abandoning me was her easy way out. Wait, *abandoning*?

God I could be horrible sometimes.

Violet continued. "Before, when this all started, you were afraid to lose me because we were still on the run. You didn't have many friends. No place to call home. No family you could count on anymore. You needed me. You were scared to death what would happen without me around."

Of course she couldn't hear me, I couldn't help but say, "That's not the only reason!"

Even to my ears the defense sounded weak.

"But that's not where you are now. You've made friends out here, allies. Even if you have to start over you know you can do it again. You don't need me anymore."

I paused the recording and muttered, "It's not about need." And that much was true. Didn't she understand? She *was* family. I loved her like a sister. Like a best friend. I loved her in that way that the whole damn universe seemed small and empty and pointless without someone like her to enjoy it with.

And I'd lost her. Again.

We live in an age of miracles, where having to accept things as they are is less and less acceptable. Where once we could only daydream of what we knew to be impossible, we know that if you travel far enough, are determined enough, and are crazy enough, anything might be possible.

We don't have to take no for an answer.

Who out there wouldn't make a deal with the devil if it would bring a loved one back? Who wouldn't walk down into Hades and try to lure them to the living world with their music? Who wouldn't ask a mad scientist to not just tread into God's domain, but take an unmarked van to load up as much loot as possible in before high tailing it back to reality?

Long ago, I knew I was going to lose Violet, and did not take it well. I did what I had to in order to save her.

Today, she knew she was going to lose me, and she had done the same.

Damn you.

I pressed play. “Anyway, let’s get down to brass tacks. Your new life. One of the Order can fill you in on the details, but it was my idea to give you a new face. Sorry if you feel you traded down, but I thought it was important you don’t stand out too much. There’s always the chance that footage of you from before the accident will come up, along with your real name. As for your pseudonym...well, look under the hat if you haven’t already.”

I picked up the Elite cap and underneath was an Ident card. I looked at the name.

Maurice Foot.

I snickered. One of the short forms of Maurice was Moss.

“The Order assured me that the wipe was thorough enough for the last year, along with a load of misdirection and red herrings in other ways, that only a slight alteration was required. I thought you’d appreciate the sentiment. Plus you got a backup in case you need to ditch the name for good. But I’m assured there are no less than ten thousand Maurice Foots in the bubble.”

“You’ve thought of everything,” I said.

“As usual, I’ve thought of everything,” she echoed. “So, really, all that’s left for you is to get into your ship and go. Once you’ve caught up on my journal you’ll realize just how lucky you are to have this chance. It could have turned out very differently.”

She paused a moment, looking for the right words to say. “I don’t want you to worry about me. Remember, I died a hundred and fifty years ago. The person talking to you now is just a simulation.”

“But still a person,” I corrected.

“I’m just getting switched off, that’s all. But I’ll still be around. We’ve been together too long for me to just disappear from your life. Any time you hear a bump in the ship you can’t account for, or think you saw someone leaving the room, that’s me, even if it is just an shadow.

“There’s a lot of things I’m going to miss, Moss. The thrill of a fight, the camaraderie of a packed bar, making a sweet deal or pulling a fast one on the authorities. Hell, I even developed a taste for exploration. But it would be a lie if I didn’t say I was going to miss you most.

“Goodbye, flyboy.”

Forward March

So, it looks like Radio Mossfoot is off the air. After having caught up with Violet's side of things I realized my amateur entertainer days are pretty much over, so this is just for me I guess. Maybe if things change I'll broadcast the lot. I always found something therapeutic about journals. I think Violet must have as well.

The Order was nice enough about seeing to my recovery, which didn't take long at all. I think they really just wanted to make sure my skull was screwed on tight and didn't pop open like the least fun jack-in-the-box ever.

A fair bit had changed since the days of Brother Mathias. I didn't remember women being part of the Order then, and their robes—those that wore them anyways—looked a lot lighter and less formal.

After two days I decided it was time to go. I'd watched Violet's last message a half dozen more times, and each time it hurt a little less. But things weren't going to get better with me sitting here waiting for my daily allotment of apple sauce or pudding cups.

I informed them I felt ready to go, and one of the brothers came to give me a final checkup and green light me. They did some scans, showed me my brain without that wet napkin neural net wrapped around it, and then how my skull was knitting in a nice neat circle.

For some reason it made me think of a crown of thorns, but that's just me being a drama king and feeling sorry for myself.

Once I was cleared, one of their sisters was told to show me to my ship. I was eager to get the hell out of this place. Everyone looked like they were hiding something, and a surprising number didn't make eye contact with me. I assumed that was a quasi-religious thing...until I reached the hanger.

"Your ship, sir," the sister said.

I looked at what was on the landing pad before me. "You're kidding, right?"

"No sir, that's the ship we're giving you."

I thought I understood the mistake. “Ah, I see. No, I don’t need you to give me a ship. Very generous of you, by the way. No, I’ve got my own ship. Imperial Clipper, the Troubadour. Class six prismatic shields, dark olive paint job, fastest ship in the galaxy short of a tricked out Cobra. Worth over a hundred mill. *This*, madam, is a beat up Sidewinder, which you get free with every kid’s meal at any fast food franchise.”

The sister looked apologetic. “I believe Brother Sparks left an explanation inside.” And with that she made herself scarce, like I was Patient Zero and she’d forgotten her hazmat suit.

I marched into the Sidewinder, half expecting to find this Sparks guy in there waiting for me. I’d read about him in Violet’s journal, and clearly I owed him a lot, I just wasn’t sure if I owed him a goddamned souped up Clipper.

There was no Sparks to be found, but there was another datapad on the pilot’s seat. Swell. Bugger couldn’t even face me himself.

I played the message waiting for me. Brother Sparks appeared, sitting in my cockpit.

“Greetings, Mr. Foot. I’m sorry I wasn’t able to meet you in person, it seems my time here is limited. For the sake of the Order I have decided to send myself into exile. It seems I may be a liability, and those who went to such lengths to try and capture you, who wish to use my people’s knowledge to their own ends, will not stop looking for me. So I go, and I have decided to take with me the only other liability on the station—your ship.”

I muttered under my breath, it was too much to hope he was going to say April Fool’s, I guessed.

“I know how much the Troubadour means to you, but if you think about it rationally, it is the most likely way Simmentor Doozer’s people would find you. Since I am on the run anyway, it makes sense I take a ship that excels at it. Rest assured I am not interested in owning possessions. Should this situation be resolved, I swear I will return her to you. In the meantime, the Order have promised to loan you a ship to continue your journeys on.

“Now, before you get hostile and defensive, I need you to listen. Your friend, Violet, gave up everything for you to give you a chance to live. Don’t throw that away because your ego insists on flying your old ship just because it’s ‘cool.’”

“Yeah, but a Sidewinder?” I moaned. “Really?”

“And speaking of Violet, I have one final request from her for you. She only wanted you to hear this if everything turned out well. Since you are watching this, it’s safe to say it has. She wants you to visit her one last time, where you left her. There’s something there she wants you to have. A memento. You’ll know it when you see it.

“Oh, and in the meantime I will be taking care of her pet cat-snake for you. It seemed unwilling to leave the ship, and Violet was unsure of if you’d approve of it. I will study up on the species to ensure I take proper care of it. Assuming I can find it.

“Again, I apologize for this, but we are both much safer this way. Farewell.”

I groaned. Typical. But far from insurmountable. When I went to la-la land, I’d had enough in the bank to buy another kitted out Clipper outright, and Violet would only have added to it given her bloodthirsty tendencies.

The ship was already registered to Maurice Foot, so I powered her up and checked my account status.

1000 credits.

My jaw froze in mid drop. This had to be a mistake. They were missing five zeroes there! I contacted the Order through the comm panel, and spoke with some lowly brother. After enough yelling, I got to speak to someone higher up, Father Marat.

He was less than sympathetic.

“Mr. Foot. You do realize we are not a charity, do you not?”

“Actually that’s pretty much exactly what you are,” I corrected. “Brother Mathias never charged me a cent.”

“That’s because the Order was subsidized by a number of governments back then. And now, until recently, by Antal’s Utopians. We no longer have such support anywhere, only that which we’ve set aside to prepare for such a possibility.

“May I remind you that it is because of you that we find ourselves in this position. Our people, scattered but with purpose, have had to flee, so that we might regroup in seclusion to plan for the future. Your friend Violet was willing to end her own life just to allow you a chance to live again. The man who allowed you to even have that chance has cast himself to the stars with no expectation of ever rejoining us. All because of you. And you have the gall to sit there and *complain*.

“So yes, we have confiscated your funds. We have also acquired and liquidated your other assets on Tellus, though that was as much a matter of security as anything else. We consider this a donation for services rendered, now and in the past, to help continue our

work. For your part, you should see this as a lesson in humility and thankfulness. The fact you have a ship or a credit to your name at all should be seen as a blessing, an unbelievable long shot. You have once again beaten the odds, and you only do the universe an injustice by whining about it.

“If you are half the man your friend claimed you were, I’m sure you will do fine. Goodbye, Mr. Foot.”

The comm channel cut off.

Well, give the man credit, he sure knew how to lay down the guilt factor. I took a calming breath and tried not to punch the dashboard. Okay, so, no ship, no money, but I still had my reputation. A few high level missions and I’ll be back in the game.

I checked the station’s bulletin boards, and just as I’d expected there were simple trade runs with tight deadlines that paid well over a hundred thousand. A few of those could get me a Cobra, and from there... I got on the comm right away.

“What do you mean, not qualified?”

The broker groaned. “Sir, the contract clearly states that they require someone with a Broker rating or higher with the Pilot’s Federation.

“Buddy, I’m not just a Broker, I’m...” I checked my status on the ship’s computer. “Penniess? Aimless? HARMLESS?”

“Yes, those truly aren’t the qualities we are looking for. But I do have a message you can carry to an outpost for us about five light years away. We could see our way to paying, say, a thousand credits for it.”

I switched off the comm. So, they didn’t just change my name on my old ID. This was a blank slate in every possible way. Everything I’d ever done, everything I’d ever accomplished, gone, just like that.

I began to snicker.

Then I began to laugh.

I laughed so long I was gasping for breath and verging on blacking out. My ribs hurt. I almost fell out of my chair and my hat fell off and rolled under the dash.

When I finally got control of myself there was only one thing to say.

“Whatever.”

What was I worried about? So I was starting from scratch. So what? I’d been dead before. I’d started from scratch before. I’d seen more crap in my life than most pilots ever

would, let alone survive. The universe wants to try and give me a hard time? Well then I've got three words for the universe:

Bring it on.

As far as I was concerned, this was a minor hiccup. Give me a week and I'll be in a Cobra. Give me a month and I'll have my Clipper back. Give me two, and I'll be captaining a frickin Anaconda.

Take it all, I don't care. You think you big time, universe? You ain't got nothin.

I started the ship's launch sequence and bent down to pick up the Pilot Federation cap, emblazoned with their exclusive Elite symbol.

"But I'm keeping the goddamn hat."

Epilogue

HR 1986 is an uninteresting Class G star near the constellation of Orion. Its distant companion, a red dwarf, is equally unremarkable. The primary has a single dead planet in its orbit, HR 1986 A 1, and around that orbits an ancient Cobra MKI.

The Mark I model had been out of service for fifty years, and this one had been floating around HR 1986 a century longer than that. Once a vibrant purple, its paint had long been bleached bone white and chipped with micrometeorite impacts. But on its hull the words *Lady Luck* were still barely visible.

A dead ship, around a dead planet, in an uninteresting star system far from civilization, chosen because of a single line from a long forgotten movie.

HR 1986 A 1 is a high metal content world, tidally locked to its star, and completing its orbit at just over two hundred Earth days. During its last orbit, the Lady Luck had had two visitors.

A streak of light, indicating a ship dropping from supercruise, announced its third.

The incoming ship was a Sidewinder, not built for exploration, but fitted with the most powerful hyperdrive its pilot had been able to save up for.

The pilot had gone by many names in his life. These days he went by Maurice, but anyone who knew him from the days before still called him Moss.

Moss pulled his Sidewinder alongside the derelict ship. He'd been here twice before, once when he'd escorted the ship to its final resting place, and again, two hundred or so days ago.

With his space suit on, Moss left his Sidewinder. The Bucket O' Bolts wasn't so much a name for it as a description, but at least it had gotten him this far.

Once at the Cobra's main hatch, he let himself in, looking back at his ship as if making sure it wouldn't waltz off without him. A glitchy maneuvering thruster made that a distinct possibility.

The first time was here, it was a last request to an old friend. His only friend, really. The only friend that mattered. The second had been in part because he'd lost his memory. Coming here had not only returned that to him, but, for a time, his friend as well.

This time it was like coming full circle. She'd asked him to visit her, what was left of her, one last time.

Inside the cockpit of the Lady Luck, Moss found her still locked into her chair. Mummified, well preserved, and facing away from the sun, the cockpit was lit only by what was reflected from the planet's surface.

Violet Lonsdale had been many things—a stuntwoman, a thrill seeker, a cinephile who specialized in ancient entertainment, a pilot who eventually took to the stars in a ship of her own. She'd been a trader, a miner, a bounty hunter, and even an explorer.

And for a brief time she'd gotten a second chance at that life, hitching a ride inside Moss's head. It had been an unusual arrangement, but in the end, one that couldn't last. It had almost killed him.

Moss had been told to come here by the man who had helped save his life, and, in the process, taken hers. The secretive Order that man belonged to were scientists and doctors following a quasi-religious calling to preserve life, and to do no harm to others. Brother Sparks had told Moss that Violet wanted him to have something back on board this ship, and that he'd know it when he saw it.

Looking around the ship now, Moss didn't have a clue what either of them meant. It was just a beat up old first generation Cobra with a dead body in it.

Before he'd lost her a second time, Violet had tried to ease the blow, reminding him that she wasn't really Violet at all. Violet was the mummified corpse in front of him now. She was at best a simulation who had hitched a ride with him for a time.

It hadn't made him feel any better, because he knew it wasn't true. She wondered if Sparks had felt the same way. Where had his "do no harm" philosophy come in when it took destroying one life to save another? Was her digital life any less real than his analog one?

He sighed, and went back to searching the cabin. He'd read more philosophy than most, from ancient Greek to modern Aliothian, and none of them had any answers. And given the disastrous attempts at artificial intelligence in the past, it wasn't a question people really wanted to ask anymore.

The light from his helmet landed on the dashboard, and a glint came from the right hand side. Looking closer, he saw a trinket there. A bobblehead in the shape of a female pilot.

Moss snorted. Maybe this was it? A simple memento to carry around with him. Something to remember her by.

But a few things didn't add up.

The flight suit the bobblehead wore was nothing like those worn a hundred and fifty years ago. It was very much from the modern day. It had no dust on it, and in fact some dust had been cleared before it had been placed. Strangest of all was the fact that it rested on a small handwritten note.

Moss picked up the bobblehead and read the note, which was not in Violet's handwriting, but in a far more formal hand.

It simply said: *All Things Strive*.

Puzzled, Moss took the trinket and returned back to the Bucket O' Bolts.

It seemed Brother Sparks had been here first, and left this here on Violet's behalf for him. She'd always had a certain sentimentality under her gruff exterior.

But the message Sparks had left, what did he mean? Perhaps it was a response to the question he'd just been asking himself, whether or not the Violet he'd known this past year had truly been alive.

If that was his answer, however, it did not make him feel any better.

Moss returned to his cabin, took off his helmet, put his baseball cap back on, and sat down. He looked at the bobblehead that had been left for him, at the Lady Luck looking back at him through the window and smiled. A chance to say goodbye. A chance to have something to hold on to. It would do.

He placed the bobblehead on the dash next to his radar and started up the thrusters.

The lights went off. The ship powered down. For a brief moment, Moss was running on emergency oxygen as his RemLok helmet slapped his baseball cap off to cover his face. Without gravity, the cap crumpled against the canopy and then drifted before his eyes.

"What the hell?" He checked emergency power. It seemed everything was rebooting in the ship. "Stupid piece of junk," he muttered. It was far from the first time the Bucket O' Bolts had earned its name.

At last power was restored and pressure returned to the cabin. Moss grabbed the cap dangling in front of him and put it back on. But his worries weren't over yet. The console was still going haywire. The shipboard computer's voice was a garbled mess of warnings and errors, the notification's panel had thousands of deleted files and overwrite warnings scream by, far faster than his eyes could keep up, until at last it went dead.

It booted up again with a hum, and Moss heard a voice he never thought he'd hear again.

“Took you long enough, flyboy.”

About the Author

Noah Chinn was born in Oshawa, Ontario, and has never really forgiven it for that. After high school he fled his hometown in favour of the freezing winters of Ottawa. Three years later it dawned on him that higher education and frostbite did not have to go hand in hand, and finished his degree in Toronto.

Shortly after university he moved to Vancouver, where he met his future wife, Gillian. He then spent the summer bicycling across Canada, which she thankfully didn't misinterpret as him trying to get as far away from her as possible. They moved to Japan for three years, where he taught English yet managed not to learn a word of Japanese.

It was during this time that he had a successful cartoon series called Fuzzy Knights, which centered on the exploits of toy animals playing Dungeons and Dragons, and an evil hamster trying to destroy them. Some have called this a cry for help.

He later moved to England with dreams of making it big as a writer – because with a BA in English Lit it was either that or serving fries at a burger shack. Noah's first serious attempt at a novel, *The Professional Tourist*, was set in a Tokyo language school. Unstable students (and teachers), biker gangs, and the homeless underworld of the Blue Village all featured in this slightly askew romantic comedy.

The book landed him an agent, but not a publisher. Unfortunately, in the way aspiring actors move to Hollywood and end up as busboys, the closest he came to literary success in England was working at several bookstores – each of which mysteriously closed down after his stay.

After writing several more manuscripts and moving back to Canada, he found more success in the North American market. He and his wife now live in Vancouver.

He now wears a hat.

Look for these titles by Noah Chinn

Now Available:

Bleeding Heart Yard

Trooper #4

Getting Rid of Gary

The Plutus Paradox

With a family like this, who's short of enemies?

Getting Rid of Gary

© 2013 Noah JD Chinn

It's August, 1985, and private investigator James Cote has a problem.

Actually he has several.

His wife Lettice is unemployed, over-active, and bored out of her skull. The cheating husband he'd been tailing for two weeks has been killed by his mistress. And someone has kidnapped his uncle Gary and shipped him off to Peru. Finding out who turns out to be harder than it first appears.

Enjoy the following excerpt for Getting Rid of Gary

James Cote sat reclined in his used 1978 Oldsmobile Custom Cruiser. A light gray trilby covered his eyes. The long shadow of a palm tree cut the car in half, but managed to miss him completely. A Casio calculator watch lay on its side on the dashboard, flicking away the seconds on its LCD screen.

He wasn't really asleep anymore, but wished to God he was. Keeping the tail on his target all day had been murder, only to be followed by a long boring stakeout at said target's love shack in the suburbs. The lovebirds didn't even rendezvous there until sunset.

At least it was almost over. He'd told his client as much the other night. James felt he had enough evidence as it was, but she wanted the case to be rock solid. No wiggle room for fancy lawyers to dance around. After today, he'd consider the investigation complete and the wife could begin the legal proceedings if she wanted. That was her business.

It was risky taking a nap, but Mr. McGillicutty was a creature of habit. James was sure he could get away with it—as sure as he was that he could type “BOOBIES” upside down on his watch—and just as sure as those were still on McGillicutty's mind.

The alarm went off and James groaned. So much for rest. He straightened his hat, put on his watch, and grabbed the Canon AE-1 from the passenger seat.

The detectives in movies might prize their gun or even name it, but this camera was James' most important piece of equipment. Classic black and chrome body and utterly

reliable—just hold down the button as long as you need to. He pointed the camera at the house and checked the focus. The cars were still there. He adjusted the exposure levels and put the camera down, then looked at his watch. He bet himself ten bucks McGillicutty would be out in fifteen minutes.

Half an hour later, James wondered if he'd accept an IOU from himself. Probably not. That worthless bum wasn't good for it. He decided to take a casual stroll up and down the street, see what was going on.

The house was what McGillicutty's people would call a starter home. Small, single floor with a tiny attic—the kind you and the missus would want to move out of once you realized how much room a kid really needed. It had a For Sale sign on the lawn that bore the name of one of McGillicutty's real estate companies. As far as James had been able to determine, the property had been on offer for three years now. It was in a quiet suburban neighborhood twenty minutes from downtown Orlando if the traffic agreed with you, which it usually didn't. James didn't see anything interesting from the outside and instead tried to get a nonchalant peek through any unobstructed windows, just to see if anyone was stirring within.

He found the rear bedroom window wide open, curtains flapping.

Great. He'd been made and they sneaked out the back. Swell. It didn't matter, though; he had enough evidence as it was. He'd simply aimed for overkill at the wife's insistence. Professional thoroughness and all that.

James peered through the window, mostly out of curiosity. It was unlikely they'd have conveniently left anything incriminating around for him on the floor, but it didn't hurt to look. Stranger things were known to happen.

Such as finding the half-naked body of Mr. McGillicutty lying face down in a pool of blood.

James felt cold. The pool was big and it wasn't spreading. McGillicutty's skin was pale. A small wound could be seen in his back, just off center. A trail of drying blood had rolled along his ample midsection until it hit a fold and followed the fleshy crevasse to the floor. His face lay to one side, mouth open. His glassy eyes stared at the floorboards. On the bed lay the mistress's bright red long coat and wide brimmed hat. But no mistress.

A snapshot of memory flicked through James' mind, almost too quick to register. Seeing the world sideways, looking into a face both alien and familiar—

Panic began to rise. He had followed this man for two weeks. He knew his habits. Harold McGillicutty liked action movies but always watched romantic comedies with his

lady love. He always left his spare change in donation boxes. He preferred Italian food. Tipped average. He was closing a big deal this week. His employees liked him. Only one of them knew he was having an affair. He wasn't a saint or a demon—just an everyday sinner, no different from the next guy.

James was breathing heavily, but it was like someone else was doing it. He felt his fingers shake and clenched his hands into fists. He squeezed his eyes shut. He could hear blood rush through his ears, the echo of his own pulse buried within the roar...

Then, without warning, it all went away like a switch had been flipped. The figure on the floor stopped being Mr. McGillicutty of Lawndale Road in Pine Hills. It was just a body, and it was the police's problem now.

James sucked his teeth. Got out his notebook. He'd have to find a payphone, call the cops, prepare his notes from last night, and record everything he saw and did from this point on. He already had a theory about what went down but couldn't be certain. Not without disturbing the evidence. Only one thing was certain; Mrs. McGillicutty wasn't going to like this one bit.

Two hours later, James was having an informal conversation with Detective Wilkes of the Orlando Police Department. The old wooden desk they sat at seemed out of place inside the white-walled department with punishing fluorescent lights that gave shadows no quarter. As a symbol of justice it was fine, but it was murder on the eyes. The donuts were bad and the coffee worse, but that was only because the department's usual supplier had a fire and they'd been forced to send out for Dunkin Donuts.

Wilkes was the sort of man who looked at donuts with scorn. His body was a temple—or at the very least a precinct—but he was pleasant enough to talk to. James' notes lay on the desk in front of the detective, and Wilkes was scribbling ones of his own.

“So what time did you say you nodded off?”

“Around four, I think. I set my watch for seven. He always left around quarter after to get to the office on time. Sun got in my eyes at six-thirty and I wasn't able to really sleep after that.”

Wilkes smiled. “You're lucky my partner isn't here. Falling asleep on a stakeout? You'd never hear the end of it.”

James laughed. "I just hunt wayward spouses. It's not like Tony Montana is involved."

"I know, but he'd say it's the principal of the thing. So you didn't see or hear anything?"

James shook his head. "There's no clear line-of-sight with the rear bedroom window without leaving myself out in the open. That's why I set up to catch them coming in and out instead. I wasn't aiming for blackmail photos; I had enough shots of them at restaurants and theatres to make the case. When I woke up, both of their cars were still parked on the street so I assumed they were both inside."

The mistress had also left her hat and coat inside, so it would have been that much easier for her to slip past even if he had seen her.

"Then you stretched your legs and noticed the bedroom window open."

"Yes, sir. I figured one of them spotted me on the way in and they snuck out the back together. Then I looked in the window and saw McGillicutty on the floor."

"Did you attempt to aid him?"

James shook his head. "He was long dead. There was a stab wound that had come out the back and too much blood on the floor. I thought it was better to leave the crime scene intact for the professionals."

Detective Wilkes leaned back. "That's interesting."

"That is?"

"Well, if you didn't disturb the body, how did you know the stab wound came out the back and not that he was stabbed in the back?"

James shrugged. "I could be wrong, but there wasn't much blood on his back, and it was a small visible wound. McGillicutty was a large man. If he had been stabbed in the back with a small knife, it wouldn't have come out the front, so the blood would have pumped out the back until he died. But if he was stabbed in the front with a larger knife, it could have made a small exit wound in the back, but the blood would still pump or drain out the large hole in the front."

Wilkes seemed to size him up, and his story. His opinion could go either way. James gave him an easy smile. "Hey, just because I chase cheating husbands doesn't mean I can't assess a crime scene. Like all private investigators I got my license by reading the complete works of Sherlock Holmes and trading in ten cereal box tops." This got a laugh out of Wilkes. A little self-deprecating humor never went wrong with the boys in blue.

“Like I said, I could be wrong. It could have been a long thin weapon in the back—like a letter opener—but I don't imagine that penetrating all the way through. Maybe a stiletto. Or maybe he was peppered with a dozen small stabs on the front and I only saw the one on the back.”

Wilkes looked at his notes. “Well, it turns out your first theory was right.”

James knew that was all the information Wilkes was going to give. This was a police matter now. They didn't want James to be part of it, and he was more than happy to oblige.

James considered waiting a day before contacting Ellen McGillicutty. No point in bearing the brunt of her grief when the police were going to do that for him, right? But in the end, he decided to deal with her now rather than later. He needed to get home. He needed this to be over. James waited until the police had spoken with her before visiting the newly-widowed at her gated mansion, which was big enough to have kept McGillicutty's love shack in the backyard as a pool house.

To say the woman felt conflicted was something of an understatement. She came across as the sort of wife that planned for a divorce but really only wanted her husband back. Wanted things the way they were. She was furious and distraught at the same time. Why Mr. McGillicutty felt the need to step out on her with a younger model of the same brand was beyond James. She was still a blonde bombshell, even at forty-five.

They talked in her spacious living room, where all the furniture was made with fine polished wood that bloomed into elegant swirling patterns wherever possible. He let her vent, sob, and get the last drops out of her system. When she finally calmed, she asked, “How did it happen? The police won't tell me anything because they're still investigating. They say they haven't even found that slut Harold was with yet.”

“I don't know for certain,” said James.

“But you were there. You must have seen something!”

“I'm sorry, I didn't.” James tried to avoid eye contact, but the widow clearly felt like he was holding out on her.

“Don't you have a theory?” she asked.

“You should wait for the police to finish their investigation. It won't help anyone to spout off half-baked theories.”

“It's better than their unbaked ones. Please, I need something to hold onto now, even if it changes later.”

James relented. “There's only one reason I can think of why the mistress climbed out the back window instead of the front and not take her car. She knew the front door was being watched. If I had to guess, they found out I was following them and your husband confessed that he was married. It's likely she already knew that, but regardless, it ended the same way: in a fight. Maybe he said he had to break things off. Maybe she forced him to choose and he made the mistake of being honest. She must have left the room to get a knife, probably from the kitchen. He had his shirt off and didn't have any defensive wounds on his arms, so he must have thought the fight was over and didn't see it coming.” James paused a moment. “This is all guesswork, you understand.”

He studied Mrs. McGillicutty's face. It was like stone, but far from impassive.

“I want you to find her before the police do.”

It took a second for this to register. “Pardon?”

“I want you to track her down, wherever she is. I don't care how long it takes. I don't care how much it costs. I want you to find her.”

“And then?”

“Then nothing. You tell me where she is. That's all.”

James leaned forward. “I understand you're upset, ma'am, but I think you misunderstand the nature of my job description.”

The widow kept her gaze locked on him. “You still work for me.”

James pulled up the briefcase he'd set beside the chair and opened it. “This is everything I've collected during the last two weeks.” He pulled out a large thick envelope. “Your late husband's movements, where he went when he was supposedly on business trips, and copies of the photographs of him with 'the slut,' as you call her. The police have all the negatives for their investigation. I'm afraid that concludes our business together. I'll send you my invoice tomorrow.” He put on his hat and got up to leave.

“Wait.” Mrs. McGillicutty's tone was desperate. She followed James to the front entrance, then stepped in front of him, bracing her hands on either side of the engraved oak door frame. “Isn't there anything I can do to convince you to stay? I'll pay you time and a half.”

James stopped, waiting for her to move. Judging from her thin but expensive gold watch, she could afford twice that—and if she had offered he would have said yes. “It’s not about the money,” he lied. “It’s what you intend to do.”

“I never said I intended to do anything.”

“That’s why I know you intend to do it. Florida has the death penalty, ma’am. I suggest you bear that in mind and let the police do their job.” He tipped his trilby to her and she allowed him to leave.

“Hi honey, you’re home!”

It had been an hour and a half drive, and James knew those would be the first words he heard when he walked through the door. As spontaneous and creative as she was, Lettice Cote wasn’t above dragging out a joke and beating it until only a wet puddle remained. She’d been torturing this one since they moved from California. While their place wasn’t quite the starter home McGillicutty had spent his last day in, it was on the quaint side. Lettice had once said all it was missing was a white picket fence and a kid out front selling lemonade for five cents. It also turned out to be a bit more than they could afford.

James answered with his usual response. “That’s my line.” And if history was any judge, that would be the last predictable moment of the evening. He sorted the mail, tossing away yet another million dollars from Publisher’s Clearing House and came across what he knew would be lurking near the bottom: the credit card bill. James sighed. It had been a bad year. Their savings were gone, and even when the McGillicutty invoice was paid, they’d still be in the red and they had a mortgage to worry about.

James sniffed the air; something was off. Either dinner was a unique kind of disaster or—

“Are you painting?”

“In the living room!”

Lettice was on a stepladder, dressed in blue overalls. A red paint cap covered her head and she had a paint roller in hand. The furniture was covered in cloth or plastic. She had just put the finishing touch on the ceiling. “What do you think?”

James looked up. “It’s black.”

“Do you like it?”

“I don't think ceilings are supposed to be black.”

“You don't like it.”

Given the walls were an off-white—a shade Lettice called cloud cover—and their sofa and chairs were green, it was admittedly an odd mix. “It's... unusual. You know, when you said you were going to go back to painting, I thought you meant finding work.”

“I'm trying, hon. I had two interviews while you were away. But I think they heard about Disney. I got that vibe from them.”

“Oh.” James frowned. That wasn't good. “I hope you're not blackballed.”

“I doubt it. Well, maybe a little.” Despite her perky tone, James could tell she was fighting off the mean reds. “I'll look into less mainstream and more independent work. I'd rather do that anyway. For now, I'll settle for painting at home.”

“Unless your name is Michelangelo, that's usually done on canvases. Not ceilings.”

Lettice came off the ladder and put the roller in the paint tray. “That is my canvas.”

James looked at the endless black abyss over his head. “Going post-modern, are we?”

Lettice smiled and stuck her tongue out between her teeth. “It's not finished yet, silly.” She picked up a can of paint by the plastic-covered couch, as well as a three foot long photographic print of outer space. “Once it's dry, I'm painting the universe!”

James looked closely at the photo—a high quality shot from NASA. “You're going to paint thousands of stars and a couple of galaxies onto the ceiling. By hand.”

“I'm also going to get the color of each as close as possible to the real thing.”

“You're bored, aren't you?”

“Unbelievably so. I was thinking about going to Sea World tomorrow, or maybe the big D. Wanna come?”

James held up the Visa bill. “Not the best idea right now.”

Lettice took it and looked it over. “Maybe we can afford Gatorland?”

“I'm not sure we can afford a movie.”

“Tomorrow's cheap night. Back to the Future is playing at the Plaza.” She pulled off her paint cap (actually an old knit wool cap drafted into the job) and shook her blonde hair loose. A number of strands floated up on all sides from the static. “You're back early,

aren't you? Wait, what day is it? Is it Monday? It has to be, or tomorrow can't be cheap night."

James let out a deep breath. Right now he was grateful for Lettice's eccentric side. It felt downright sane after the last twelve hours.

"What's wrong?"

James looked at her and gave a half smile. "Hell of a day."

"What happened?"

"I barely managed to escape from a Dashiell Hammett novel."

The next thing he knew, James was having a round of Whodunnit with Lettice—a game they'd played since they were first dating. Usually he invented a mystery for her to solve, but this time he didn't need to. James gave a detailed account of the day's events, and every so often Lettice chimed in with a question or observation.

Finally she said, "It might have been an accident. She might have panicked and fled."

"How do you figure?"

"If it was an act of passion, why did she only stab him once? If she stabbed him in the abdomen... doesn't that seem a bit odd to you? Wouldn't she use an overhand strike, come down on his upper chest?"

"Or she wasn't confident about her strength and used a double-handed thrust straight on." James clasped his hands together and demonstrated.

She countered by making a T with her fingers. "Maybe they wrestled over it, fell down together and he fell on it." She closed the T so it went from capital to lower case.

"Maybe, if he landed just off to the side of her. She pulls out the blade and the body rolls flat, the way I found it. But I'd still have expected her to track blood around. I didn't get a close look at the body, but I didn't see any defensive wounds. It's a neater story if it was a single intentional thrust she could pull away from."

"But regardless of murder or manslaughter, she knows you're out there waiting, so she sneaks out the window."

"Seems that way. Not that it matters. It's the police's problem now. I don't want anything to do with it."

"Oh, the glamorous world of private investigation. Magnum would be proud."

James got this from her all the time. “We don’t live in TV land, hon. You know that, right? You get sucked into one of these cases and nothing good can come of it. Everyone lies. Everyone is emotional. Everyone is unpredictable. Who says they won’t kill again if you get too close? And you should have seen the widow—what a piece of work. I’m sure she’d kill the mistress if she had the chance. At one point I think she was putting the moves on me just to keep me on the case.”

“Oh, really?” Lettice’s expression showed how likely she thought that was.

“Yes, really. Offered me time and a half, too. All she was missing was to be dressed in black with a veil while holding a small caliber pistol.”

“Bogart would have taken that case,” said Lettice.

“Yeah, well...” James took off his trilby and tossed it to the hat rack by the front door. It missed by a mile. “If this was a movie I’d have made that shot.”

“You missed on purpose.”

“Prove it.”

Lettice smiled, always ready for a challenge, but then the smile faded. “How do you feel after all that?”

“All what?”

“Well, you seem awfully nonchalant for someone who stumbled on a murder.”

“I’m fine.”

“But you’ve never seen a murder before. Not that I know of.”

“Jasper got shot, way back.”

“But he lived. Still calls you dumbass. This guy was dead.”

James shook his head. “It’s not like I was covered in gore. It was no big deal.”

“It should be. It’s not exactly an everyday occurrence. You should feel—”

“What should I feel? I only knew the man from the end of a telephoto lens.” He realized he had snapped at her. “I’m sorry. It was no big deal. Really.”

“If you say so.” Lettice walked down the hall and picked up his hat. She pretended to throw it with her off hand before hanging it on the rack. “You threw it left-handed,” she said. “Can’t imagine you intended to make the shot.”

James gave a nod of approval. “Maybe you should work with me instead of turning our living room into a planetarium.”

“Maybe if you took on more interesting cases than lost kittens, I would.”

James covered his heart, wounded. "There was that kidnapping case last year."

"Which turned out to be a spoiled runaway."

"The embezzling job at the bank?"

"Which never existed. It was a computer glitch."

"The blackmailed movie star?"

"Who only paid you to make the payoff drop. Hardly exciting."

"Glad my life keeps you so enthralled."

"I'm pretty sure my point was it doesn't."

"And Disney was an action packed thrill ride for you," said James, then reconsidered. "Oh wait. That was only the day they fired your ass."

The playful sniping continued until they ended up in bed, tossed the sheets to the floor and quickly followed them. Most of the time snide comments were made about the other's profession.

An hour later, the phone rang. James felt blindly around the nightstand over his head for the receiver.

"Must be another lost kitten, Sam Spade. Do you dare take the case?"

"Maybe it's Disney calling to say they replaced you with a trained monkey, you hack."

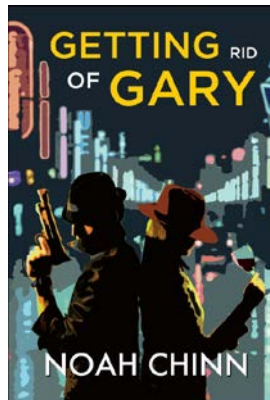
Lettice giggled as James finally dragged the receiver down. "Yeah? The grin on his face fell. "Yes, this is James Cote." He listened intently, then pointed to the dresser. Lettice got up and handed him a pad of paper and a pen. James took down some notes and asked some questions. "Thank you very much, officer. I'll be right down."

His wife was already putting her clothes back on. "What is it? Mistress found dead? Widow found dead? Widow and mistress found dead in bed together in S&M gear with a goat?"

James shook his head. "Nothing to do with that. It's my uncle, Gary. He was arrested for entering the country without a passport."

Lettice frowned. James' family all lived north of the border. "What? Canadians don't need a passport to get into the States."

"They do when they come in from another country. Gary entered from South America. No passport, no ID, and no idea how he got there."



It's August, 1985, and private investigator James Cote has a problem.

Actually he has several.

His wife Lettice is unemployed, over-active, and bored out of her skull. The cheating husband he'd been tailing for two weeks has been killed by his mistress. And someone has kidnapped his uncle Gary and shipped him off to Peru.

Someone from his own family – a family he hasn't visited in ten years.

Now James and Lettice have to travel 1500 miles to Toronto under the guise of a long delayed reunion to find out who hated Gary so much to ship him off to another country, but not enough to actually kill him.

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It's the end of the world, but not as we know it.

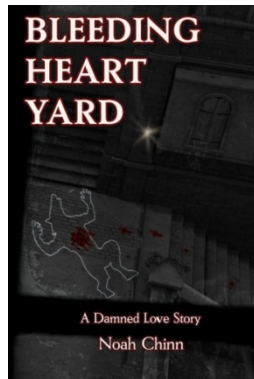
A woman wakes up in a motel on the outskirts of a remote Oregon city with no memory of who she is, a gun at her bedside, and a state trooper uniform. As she explores the world outside the motel it seems that civilization has come to an abrupt end, and whatever caused it is still out there, looking for the survivors.

That's bad. But it might also be the most normal thing that happens to her all week.

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Cursed by a witch as a boy, Peter has grown up not knowing what the curse is or when it will kick in. He doesn't even believe it's real. But as the winter solstice approaches, a lot of things are about to happen.

Peter is going to bump into the love of his life, he's going to discover a monster ravaging the streets of London, and his curse is about to go off in the most inappropriate way possible. It's up to his best friend, Red, to find a way to stop the curse before it gets any worse, and before the monster can take Peter's true love on a bloody first date.

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