

NOAH CHINN



MOSSFOOT'S CONTINUING TALES OF WOE

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Book Two of the Mossfoot Muckabouts

Noah JD Chinn

Dedication

To Fans of Elite: To '84 and beyond!

A Fresh Start, Not a Fresh Face

In another time, in another life, I was somebody. Truth be told it feels like a dream, or a lie I told myself so often I wanted to believe it, but every so often bits and pieces come up reminding me at least some of it has to be true.

Once, I was the son of a Navy Captain...or did he become Admiral? I'm a bit hazy on the details. I do know that I used to live the good life. Even from a young age I was flying his fancy ship collection, with or without his permission. I had all kinds of friends willing to do anything for me just to be in my inner circle. Women threw themselves at me...

...no, really, I swear. I didn't always have this horrible scarred face. I used to be quite the looker.

I had money, fast rides, faster women, and a first-class pass out of any trouble I found myself in thanks to my dad's connections. I had it all.

Then it all went to hell.

I'll spare you the details. My understanding is the recordings were saved by a bunch of people and kept alive on the bootleg circuit until recently, when it suddenly became a hit. Not that I'll see a penny. Identity issues aside, it's considered public domain now.

You see, I've been away for a long time now.

The short version is like this. My dad's XO tried to murder me because I'd inadvertently stolen a piece of kit from him that proved he had a secret black-ops going on in the Navy. My luxury yacht was blown out of the sky and I was left for dead.

Fortunately my corpse was recovered and I didn't stay dead long. Hiding with a new identity and a crap-ass ship, I had no choice but to survive without the support system I'd been so accustomed to.

I did okay for myself. Not great. I got by, I guess. But I couldn't escape my past, and when it caught up with me, I uncovered a dark conspiracy.

In the end I saved the day, sorta, with the help of a woman who *also* blew me out of the sky once... That seemed to happen to me a few times it seems... Anyway, we got away on board one of my dad's antique ships and were ready to start a new life.

Then it all went to hell again.

Things get especially hazy at this point. We had just docked and gotten my Cobra MKII repainted, ready to start cruising the space lanes as a team, and the next thing I know I've been found in my derelict ship in interstellar space, somewhere near a place called LHS 3447.

Over a hundred years later. Way over.

And this is where I have to call my past into question because the universe is different now. Way different. Different in ways that made me wonder if I was just living an even more insulated life than I realized. If we all were.

It seems that what I thought of as my galaxy was just one isolated part of a much larger one, artificially cut off from the rest by an imposed 7 light-year restriction on hyperdrive jump technology. Or Frame Shift as they call it now.

I'm not going to go into details. Trust me, it makes my head hurt just thinking about it. I remember when I came from there were different alien species being around, and access to different galaxies, but when I talk about it now people stare at me like I'm a bloody lunatic.

Nope, as far as the galaxy is concerned humans are the only space-faring creatures around—aside from the Thargoids. At least they still exist, but nobody's seen them in decades, it seems. There are two galactic powers, the Federation and the Empire, and if you ask me they're both full of crazy people. Lave and the worlds I once knew are still around, over a hundred light years from where I am now, part of an Alliance of independent worlds. How I got here from there I have no idea.

All I know is I was found in my ship. Dead. Again. Seriously, it's becoming a bad habit with me. What brought me back this time is so much techo-magic-mumbo-jumbo involving nanobots and progenitor cells and stuff. And the only reason they bothered to do all THAT to me is because the antique Cobra MKII I was found in could pay for it. Barely. They didn't bother to heal the scars on my face, though. Said that was "elective" or something. I look like someone dropped a frickin hot pizza on my face.

They also wanted answers. I got your standard polite military debriefing, where my story was repeated time and again from every angle—but if I'd been gone for over a hundred years, what good would that info do anyone?

I dunno. When they were done I was allowed to go on my merry way. My pilot's licence was renewed and with what little was left over from the "finders fee" from the Cobra I was able to afford a small ship. A next generation Sidewinder.

Great. I used to pop those tin cans for fun in another life. Now I'm stuck flying one? Why does the universe hate me so much that it's not content with just killing me, but is trying to do it as often as possible? The little buggers haven't changed much in three hundred years, other than being jump capable now.

And so it begins. Starting over with a hole in my memory like a black hole in a much larger universe than I ever expected to see. Everyone I know is long dead...

But on the bright side, everyone I know is long dead.

Fire Sale

Oh, this gets even better. Turns out I had even less left over from the antique sale. Technically I don't even own my ship. It belongs to the Pilot's Federation. No wonder I got such a good deal on it. So I can't just sell it and settle down on a nice planet with a bunch of pool bunnies.

That used to be the dream... though it was a space yacht with a pool that ran the length of the ship and cheerleaders acting as lifeguards. But for some reason that doesn't hold the appeal it once did to me. I'm not sure why.

Maybe it's because I became a thrill junkie, and the old easy life just doesn't cut it anymore. That seems to ring true. That's the problem with having a black hole for a memory, I can never be sure what's true and what's misremembered.

So, I've got a grand total of a thousand credits to my name and a ship I don't even really own. Though apparently any upgrades I buy for it I do own. Yippee.

Once my licence got cleared and I checked out on my piloting and medical exams, I checked out the cockpit. A Sidewinder. It looks like a baby Cobra in some ways. Kinda cramped.

Living in this is like living in a floating bachelor apartment. Not so much a pilots cabin behind the cockpit, more like one of those capsule hotels you find on back-end space stations. Though I have to admit, it's kitted well enough for entertainment. Vid screen over the bed and descent sound system.

The cockpit's also impressive. The multi-function-displays are a serious upgrade in terms of functionality. Funny to think such a basic ship has such a bad ass display. Not to mention voice commands and head tracking targeting.

I could get used to this.

The bulletin board was a bit light on missions. I got stuck carting fruit from one system to another for a third party. Decent money to be made working like that, more than enough to live on. Live well, even. But my ambitions are a bit higher than that.

Bigger ship. Faster ship. Something with a billion megawatts of shields and a neutron star's worth of armor to keep me nice and safe.

On my second run some joker tried to interdict me. That's a new trick. It used to be that your in-system jump drive (or supercruise) would kick out any time you came close to a large enough mass. That's still the case, but it's more of an emergency brake on really big things like planets or stars. So you can zip past ships and stations at close to the speed of light far faster than you ever could before.

But with the right equipment you can kick someone out of supercruise and engage them while their frame shift drive is forced to reboot. It's ostensibly meant for police and licenced bounty hunters, but let's face it, it's the first thing a pirate is going to buy.

Fortunately, evading an interdiction isn't too hard if you're a decent pilot, and let's face it, I am. If I'm facing pirates, I'm doing it on my own terms.

Speaking of which...funny thing happened on the way to the trading post. My HUD picked up an unrecognized signal source. Now this is often because of something bad that's happened, such as a ship forced out of supercruise. Also ship wreckage. And wreckage means drifting cargo and that's free money.

But when I dropped out to see what it was, it turned out there were three pirates lying in wait, giving off a distress signal.

Well I'm no sucker. I turned around and got ready to get the hell out of there when I noticed something strange on the readout. I hailed the lead pilot.

"Um... guys? You're here to take my cargo, right?"

"That's right. If you know what's good for you, you'll dump your cargo and bail, punk."

"You must have been expecting a bigger ship, huh? Something with more than a few lousy tons of cargo?"

"We'll take what we can get. Dump it, or we open fire."

"Sure, sure. Just answer me one question first. You were expecting a bigger ship, right?"

"Anything is bigger than a Sidewinder."

"True, but that's not how I knew. You know how I can tell?"

There was no response, but I could picture their puzzled expressions.

"Because you all ditched your shields for extra cargo room."

I learned later that inexperienced pirates gain a certain amount of street cred for running without shields. Now, I'm not one to go out looking for trouble, but there's only so much stupidity I can take before I take it upon myself to teach valuable life lessons to those in need.

"Today's your lucky day, guys. If there's one thing I know about Sidewinders, it's that they come with ejection pods standard, and you can't swap them out for an extra beer cooler. Ship. Deploy weapons."

The Economics of the New World

Life is cheap... well, to everybody but me it seems. I've technically died enough times that I've become extremely adverse to the experience--not that I was ever looking for it in the first place.

But 3300 is a very strange time indeed, and the reason for it all boils down to the fact that death ain't what it used to be.

Back in my time... ghah, I can't believe I just said that like some old fogey. Though technically I am something like a hundred and seventy-seven now. Anyway, back in my time if you got shot down you were dead. Your only hope was to activate the escape pod in time and hope to hell that whoever did it wasn't looking for some extra income selling you on the slave market. But now...? Well, I've gotten ahead of myself. Where I should really start is how great a pilot I turned out not to be...

"Docking approved. Proceed to Bay 14."

Up till now I'd been docking at the local outposts, which look like oil rigs in space. I have to admit I always found those a bit tricky, because there's no real sense of up or down on them, landing pads are scattered about like acne on a teen's face. Ugh. I really shouldn't be making fun of them right now, given my own condition. It reminds me of the time I asked a woman out shortly after I was shot down and scrambling to make a new life for myself, not realizing half my charm came from my family name and pocketbook. I got a martini tossed in my face for the trouble.

Now replace the martini with acid and imagine she smashed the glass in my face as well for good measure.

Anyway, I'd had to do low-grav dockings on outposts before, usually convenience stores and the like. But now I was approaching my first big-ass station. My god was it beautiful. Not one of those ugly dodecs that look like giant dice for someone's intergalactic session of Dungeons and Dragons, this was meant for comfort. The habitation ring on the outside with clear panels allowing light down on the endless loop of parkland. Honestly, that sight alone made space feel a bit less cold and lonely. You spend too much time out in the deep black and you start to think the universe is nothing

but metal panels and electronics. Seeing those forests in space is like a breath of fresh air through the vacuum of space.

The center of the station is the docking, trading and administration area, with the familiar mail slot docking port. Hell, it seemed even bigger than the ones I was used to, which was fine by me. So with docking granted I slipped inside, leaned back, and waited for the station's auto-dockers to do the rest...

"Warning: Loitering violation. Please clear the entry bay."

Huh? Oh, I guess I hadn't nudged myself in enough. I pushed the thrusters forward a bit more, only to get another warning.

Wait... they weren't expecting me to land my ship inside this station by myself, were they? No major station anywhere did that - it was a recipe for disaster to let pilots deal with traffic control on their own. Another warning, and the countdown timer was ticking down. Oh crap.

Okay, not a problem, I could do this. Gravity here is 0.1 standard, pretty much like at the outposts... piece of cake. I can do this. I can totally do this.

"I have no idea how you did this."

The dockworker was one part annoyed and three parts amused, looking at how I'd managed to wedge my Sidewinder on the docking pad... sideways, upside down, and on an angle.

"You do have a pilot's licence, right?" he asked, then scratched his head as if wondering what equipment he'd need to untangle this Gordian Knot.

It had started out easily enough, but then I'd overshot the pad a bit, ran into the guard panels, panicked, overcompensated, and... well, this.

"I've never had to dock inside a hub before," I said.

"Well, you're lucky I was on hand to lock you in manually. The pad's docking system isn't supposed to lock down and let you disengage unless you're within a ten degree range of tolerance. Figured you for a scrap, though." Scrap seemed to be the local term for what in other times was called a noob or greenhorn. In this case it's because many starting pilots earn their early paychecks hauling scrap from one station to another.

"I swear I'm a better pilot than this. I just panicked is all."

"Well, panicking can cost you more than just a fine, kid...er...sir...um...ma'am? Sorry, it's the face."

"Sir is fine." At this point I was considering wearing a helmet 24/7, and was I really thin enough to be mistaken for a woman? I guess I could stand to put on a few pounds. The regen process had taken its toll in muscle as well as fat.

"Well, as I was saying, you can... oh crap, there's another one." The sealed docking hanger I'd been lowered into had its own air supply, and as a result I could hear through the walls the faint sound of high energy weapons fire.

"What's happening? Is the station being attacked?"

The worker checked a monitor by the far wall. "Nope. Some dumbass is stuck under a bridge."

I came over and looked at his monitor. Sure enough, a hauler was wedged under a bridge with cargo trucks driving around the station's circumference, and it was getting mercilessly pounded with laser fire. The pilot was clearly trying to get away, but kept making the same mistakes over and over again.

My jaw dropped. "Wha... why? Why don't they just shut off the engines and get a team out to set it straight? Haul it back to a pad?"

The worker shrugged. "Station control can't be bothered. They figure the pilots will never learn that way, this way is easier."

The hauler blew up in a brief ball of flame, and scrap littered the ground like gently falling snow in the reduced gravity.

"Plus we get to keep the scrap and cargo."

I was still flabbergasted. "But he can't exactly learn anything NOW! What's the punishment for loitering?"

"Pretty much the same thing."

What callous dictatorial dystopian hell had I been dropped into?

The worker looked confused. "What? It's not like he's dead or anything. He's got his pod."

I hadn't seen an escape pod. Come to think of it, even though my Sidewinder came with one standard, I didn't really know where it was.

It took me a while to figure out what was going on, and how it had changed the universe, possibly for the worse.

As I started off explaining, death used to be a big deal. If you didn't activate the escape pod in time - assuming you had one - you were dead meat, and nothing short of a me-shaped miracle would change that. As much as I complain about the universe using

me as its personal urinal, the fact I've survived death three times now does not go unappreciated. In fact my bad luck is no doubt just its way of balancing the scales of luck.

Turns out, one of the big advances in the last hundred and fifty-odd years was in the realm of pilot safety.

Any history buffs out there? Remember the early forms of powered locomotion, like cars? Well, those things started off with squat in terms of driver safety for a while, then they developed the seatbelt, and later on the air-bag to cushion the blow of an impact. Crash survival went up immensely. What we got now is like the air-bag times a billion. Though the term "escape pod" is still used, there is no pod, per se. It's your seat. Your seat has its own little power source, thrusters, and stasis field generator. When your ship blows, it kicks you free of the debris with the thrusters and you're more or less out dead once the stasis field kicks in. But it's the easy kind of dead that just takes a defib and adrenaline to reboot. The stasis field keeps your body in a recoverable state and the seat sends out a distress signal for retrieval teams to come pick it up.

The net result of this is that pilot recovery and survival is at an astounding 99% in standard accident and combat scenarios. Not so high as to be guaranteed, so people still do their damndest to not get shot down, but high enough that those DOING the shooting down can sleep easy, knowing they're not a mass murderer (other than that 1% "oops" factor).

So as I said before, life is cheap. For a given value of life.

It all reminds me of one of those old science fiction shows from a millennia ago. Some starship crew comes across a planet where wars are all fought in simulation rather than using actual guns and bombs. Only in that case the casualties politely queued up for disintegration like they were British Lemmings or something.

Only here you don't even have the consequences of that, and it has taken its toll on society. The galactic economy is propped up in part by the constant manufacturing of replacement ships, driving ship costs down. Insurance agencies thrive on the constant trickle of revenue made by replacing ships, and offer easy loans to those who can't afford to replace outright, the cost of which is gradually taken out of the pilot's income. Pilot retrieval is a lucrative and full time business at most stations, with little ships that barely show up on any radar darting in and out for quick pick ups and returns in exchange for a slice of that sweet insurance pie. Piracy now is viewed largely as an inconvenience and bounty hunting has become a part time sport miners do on weekends. And this is why it's

Noah JD Chinn

become easier for a station to not bother with traffic control and docking ships, letting the pilots handle it themselves, then blow up the loiterers or someone stuck under a bridge, rather than to actually get off their butts and do something about it.

In short, it's INSANE.

Roll With It

Then again, whoever said I was sane?

The way I see it, stupid pirates with no shields = easy money. And half the time when they take out a cargo ship they have to leave half the crap behind because even without shields their tiny cargo bays are filled.

And so, much like the first time I had to start over in life by collecting empties (blasting asteroids) for spare change, I've taken on the role of Mossfoot - Galactic Garbage Man, cleaning up other people's messes and punishing potential litterers with semi-deadly force.

I wouldn't be so flippant about taking out other pilots, even if they are pirates, if it wasn't for the epic survival gear everyone has now. That 1% risk? Well, they are pirates, and for all I know they finish off ejected pilots before the vultures arrive (what I call the pilot retrieval shuttles).

Who knew being a garbage man could be so profitable? I stumbled across trade data, military plans, silver, all kinds of great stuff that was worth a small fortune compared to the piddly cargo runs being offered that I could actually handle in my Sidewinder. The one problem is selling it. That's another change from the old days. Used to be there was a galactic sense of "finders keepers" which of course kept the pirates happy.

Merchants, however, got sick of that crap and created a foolproof means of identifying cargo containers. Before departure, each cargo container is encoded with an ID that is tied in with the unique engine signature of the ship carrying it, while the ability to disable the ID is tied directly with the biorhythmic signature of the pilot. So only the pilot can disable the ID, and if any other ship carries the cargo it's registered as stolen - no exceptions.

This means pirates with stolen booty will be easily identified on a casual cargo scan, and fined or blown up accordingly. But it also means there's a monopoly on licensed salvagers, and those are locked down by the same station-run gangs as the pilot retrieval vultures.

Did I happen to mention the sweet economic situation these nearly-death proof escape pods have provided some people, and how it's made them rather unscrupulous in the process?

But not all stations play that game. You look hard enough and you'll find yourself a black market or two, with the means of deactivating the cargo ID and buying goods off you no questions asked.

I've been making a list of local black markets, particularly those on oil-rig type platforms. They've got very little security and you're unlikely to be scanned by a passing Federal ship. So that's where I take my shopping cart full of empties these days. And thanks to a few lucky scores, I quickly had enough to buy a ship that was truly my own and not on permanent loan from the Pilot's Federation.

An Adder.

Sigh... some things never change.

Okay, somebody answer me this – how the hell can we go two hundred years and still be flying the same frickin ships? Take the Cobra MKIII, for example. You'd THINK there'd be a Mark IV by now. It's only been *literally* two hundred and one years since it was released. And other ships flying around are way older designs than that!

Granted, in many ways they aren't the same ships at all. That forced hyperdrive cap of seven light years was something only imposed in the independent worlds around Lave and GalCop and all that. Seriously, if I thought the conspiracy I uncovered within the Navy was bad, it was a schoolyard prank compared to the lie everyone lived through.

Had I not been pop-frozen and lost in space, I probably would have lived to see the end of all that. While most people still act like I'm nuts when I talk about the intergalactic wormhole and aliens so numerous it was like you just randomly picked out nouns and verbs from a hat, I do find vague references to it now and then. Seems to be a sore spot people are trying to forget.

From what I can gather the seven light-year limit was a means of isolating a section of our galaxy where the wormhole route was before it collapsed, to both allow intergalactic trade but keep it from spreading onto the rest of our turf. A galactic quarantine. Each of the galaxies had one, presumably. The concern being those other galaxies might have slightly different laws of physics, and that could destabilize things if too much interaction was allowed to take place. Seems like a weak sauce of an excuse, but it would explain how one race had edible poets, I guess. Or how juice could embody

an abstract concept such as evil, and *not* just be a metaphor. Only Navy ships with ultra-top-secret clearance were allowed to break the limit, or even know about it.

And that might very well explain the mystery of where they all went after 4004... well, 3150 by our reckoning. You might remember the universe was plagued by pirates and rogue factions when a special pilot assistance and coordination software was developed that make coordinated tactics a breeze and our ships became easy pickings. And the Navy sat back and did nothing, presumably addressing a Thargoid threat on the frontier. But what if....?

Never mind. It doesn't matter anymore. Ancient history, literally. The wormhole collapsed, and most of the aliens went back before it did. Nobody talks about it anymore. Back to ships.

Some ships like the Cobra MKIII look mostly the same as they did before, just a bit more flourishing and detail on the outside. But on the inside? Completely different, from the engines to the entertainment centre.

Then you have other ships like the Adder I just bought. About the only thing they kept the same was the name. No longer the stepped-on tissue box of old, this looks more like an old-school shuttle with a bit more attitude. The atmospheric wings are no longer retractable, but fixed, and it mounts three weapons instead of just one.

In fact EVERYTHING outside of a basic hauler mounts more than one weapon.

The Adder is a completely different ship on the inside, too. It's also far more customizable and modular in nature, and it seems the concept of cargo compression has been given up as a bad idea. However, the feng-shui masters have managed to make the most of the internal compartments and cargo storage is far more efficient. I was able to fit about twelve tons of cargo into it, and still keep the important stuff I wanted like shields intact.

It's actually a pretty decent ship, all told, and can be upgraded to something a lot better. But I don't plan to hang on to it long. I miss the comfort afforded by my old MKII, and even though it's probably in a space museum around Sol somewhere, I can at least get my hands on the enduring legacy it created.

Time to save up for a MKIII. Time to have a home.

It is my role in the universe to have moments such as this. Same station. Same dock worker. Different ship.

"I *still* have no idea how you did this."

This time I'd managed to wedge my Adder on the docking pad... sideways, upside down, and on an angle.

What could I do but shrug and slip him a Ten-C for activating the manual clamps again before station control decided it would be easier to just blow my ship up for scrap? I'd made a dozen perfect landings before this, but the one time I overcompensate avoiding an Orca on takeoff from the pad ahead of me and this happens. Because God's a wanker and I'm his favorite piece of tissue.

It hasn't taken me long, but I've almost got enough for my Cobra. I haven't had time to get attached to the Adder, really. Some of its features do remind me a bit of the nice Neolite custom hull I had back in the day, but to me it's a means to an end.

And what the hell is that end? Now that I'm adjusting to this time, but the fact is I'm alone. This dockworker is the closest thing I have to a friend and I don't even know his name. I've had longer conversations with pirates trying to get me to drop my cargo.

I have a sneaking feeling I'm running away from something I don't want to think about. That if I look too hard in the mirror I'll see past the scarred, melted face and see something inside that's really troubling.

Well, you know what that means... time to get a custom made tea maker! The kind with the special "optional extra flavors" nozzle at 80 to 90 proof.

So you see the thing about your basic Cobra is it was originally designed for certain deep space military purposes. Trust me, I know these things. *hic* Don't ask me how I know. It wasn't until the company tanked after the MKII fiasco and taken over by what-his-nuts that it was repurposed as a multi-role civilian trader. But they didn't really change anything, see? *hic* Yeah, they added a couple of guns, sure, and make a chassis that could take the strain, but other than that, it's a MKII through and through.

And I used to have one. THE one. That was my baby. Well, my dad's baby. But I took it, and possession is nine tenths of the law, am I right? Especially nowadays. *hic* I tell you, I thought the law was weird and lenient in my time? The kind of crap I've seen stations turn a blind eye to? Or what I've heard about from other pilots? Sheesh. And yet they'll blow up your ship for loitering, too. Hell, some jerks even let themselves get blown up if it means they can take somebody out with them for crits and giggles. Or just so they can get a fresh paint job.

Well that ain't my bag. *hic* Someday those morons are going to fit into the "oops" factor and evolution will attend to the rest. I'll keep myself alive and in one piece and go spread my seed across a thousand worlds like Captain Kirk.

For some reason that last bit wasn't funny. I wonder why it wasn't funny? I'm always funny. I'm a funny guy. Funny, that.

hic

Rescue Mission

Ghah... my head. Geeze, your body goes a lousy hundred and fifty years without any booze just because you've been deep frozen like some woolly mammoth and suddenly your body forgets how to process alcohol.

I got a sinking feeling it had more to do with the progenitor cells and nanotech that brought me back, though. Sure, you guys can give me the liver of an eight year old, but you can't make my face not look like it was dragged through a mile long cheese grater.

I've taken to wearing a helmet whenever I leave the ship now, which for some weird reason has caused some people to high-five me and call me "Stig". Not sure what kind of complement that's supposed to be. You can't go past the pilots bay with a helmet on, though (security reasons, you might as well be wearing a ski mask in a bank), but I can get to the local bar at least, which is all the human contact I need for now. They look at me strange when I use a straw for my beer (about the most I can handle right now) under my visor. Well, screw 'em.

My God, do I really feel that alone in the universe right now? Maybe I'm not just wearing a helmet to hide my cat vomit face.

Wait, why does that ring a bell? Didn't I own a cat once?

Helmet off, inside the Orbis station's habitation ring. Wow. These really are like cities in space, with a surprising amount of greenery everywhere. If it wasn't for the obvious curve in the distance on either direction, you'd think you were planetside.

I felt ridiculous being inside a pet store. Might as well have been a bloody nail salon. But I realized if I didn't do something about my attitude I was going to end up going space-happy and fly my ship into a sun.

The animals here were perfect. Unbelievably so. Genetically engineered to be exactly what you wanted. There were dogs that had vocabularies of a hundred words, thanks to enhanced intelligence and a translating collar they wore. They had elephants

that were one-tenth normal size and fully domesticated, hamsters the size of footballs, and cats...

...actually, cats hadn't changed much. I suspect something in their DNA stubbornly refuses to have anything to do with bowing to our will, even on a genetic level.

But a cat was what I needed right now. Dogs are too needy. With a hundred words, the only ones I'd ever hear would be "Come back!" every time I left the ship. And one-tenth size or not, an elephant would be a pain to clean up after. No, I needed a companion that could take care of herself...

...um... sorry. Kind of spaced out for a moment there. Anyway, it didn't seem right to just pick one at random, so I was waiting for inspiration to hit. In the meantime I picked up what I knew I'd need to go with it. Food, litter box, automated micebot to chase ("Now with twelve different activities and four AI levels of difficulty!")

That was when a guy came in to complain to the manager.

"Yes, I'd like to return this cat, please." He had the annoyed voice of a father who was also a businessman and who didn't have time for fathering but did so out of obligation.

"I'm sorry, what seems to be the problem?"

"I bought him for my daughter's birthday tomorrow." Ha. Nailed it.

"It's a she, sir."

"Whatever. The stupid thing managed to get out of its carrying case and into my son's workshop and burned its face on a laser welder. Look."

I turned just enough so I could see the cat out of the corner of my eye, being held up at arm's length like a baby that had just crapped its diaper. It was still a kitten, but not at that defenceless stage. It had long hair of a grey/black/white patter that kind of reminded me of a raccoon (yeah, we have raccoons on Lave, they manage to get everywhere, it seems). It also had one side of its face burned in a straight line, right over its left eye.

"I can't give my daughter this! It's wrecked."

"Have you tried taking it to a vet? Maybe they—"

"Yes, yes, they said the scar will heal and they can replace the eye and fur, but not for another week. My daughter's birthday is tomorrow! I'd like a replacement, please."

"It's not our policy to return an animal just because—"

The man rolled his eyes. "Fine. I'm in a hurry here. Just take it and dump it back in the vat or wherever you grow them. It's completely useless now anyway."

It would just so happen that this hairy little kitten turned and looked at me with its good eye at that point. Of course it did.

“If you won’t help me I’ll take my business elsewhere. But first I’m demanding a full refund!”

With one hand I scooped the cat up from the man’s grasp. The man turned to yell at me, saw my face, and then saw my fist.

“Keep the change.”

The store manager didn’t say a word as I laid out the supplies I had gathered in the cart. “All this.” I paid and walked out with the kitten draped on my shoulder.

That’s one nice thing about this face. People assume you’re a thousand times tougher than you really are. He gave me a half nod as I left, and I knew I wouldn’t have the cops harassing me on the way back to my ship.

Sometimes inspiration hits. But when it comes in this form, it’s nice to hit back.

Having acquired a travelling companion, it was time to check my bank account, and see if all my garbage collecting had paid off. Along the way, I tried think of a name for my new companion, which I had been told was an offshoot of the old Maine Coon breed, which was why they were being sold at Maine Hub. This would have meant more hair than I cared to deal with, but one of the genetic tweaks that took with this breed had to do with allergies and managing shedding.

I was teetering between Lucky due to her circumstance of coming into my possession or Scratchy based on what she was doing to my back, when I saw my numbers. They were good, but not enough for a Cobra, even if I traded the Adder in and everything with it.

I must have muttered my disappointment aloud because the guy waiting for the terminal said, “Didn’t you hear about the sale?”

“What sale?”

“Ships and gear are ten percent off in LHS 3447, including this station.”

Ten percent? I did the math in my head and it came up thumbs up.

“Looks like we’re both getting a new home, kitty. Ow!”

What's In A Name?

The Cobra MKIII. What can I say about it I haven't said before? It's a classic design and all around good general purpose ship. A home away from home for pilots for over two hundred years. There are more expensive, more powerful, and more luxurious ships, but they aren't without their trade-offs in terms of upkeep, combat, or generally larger combat profile. Some have fancy nacelles to give them more speed and manoeuvrability, but a fully shielded Cobra could cut through those like butter if it ever got rammed.

And it was close enough to my MKII that I could pretend everything hadn't changed. Hell, maybe it would help me remember some things.

So now I had to determine a name for my ship as well. But first thing was first, take this ship out and shake it down, make sure it works the way I think it should.

After running through the pre-flight check, and making sure the kitten was secured in her box for the time being, I took off and spun the ship around to look at the station.

What a beautiful sight. I don't think I'll ever get tired of seeing the habitation ring on these things. I decided to go in for a closer look, buzz the parkland.

That was when an unidentified fluffy object floated into my view.

For a moment I thought I had bought a lemon and this ship had a bad case of Trumbles, but it was in fact my cat, who had somehow gotten out of her carrier and was floating in the cabin. I hadn't fitted her with GeckoPads™ yet, I was so eager to get this ship going I had forgotten, which meant she was bouncing off the walls as I manoeuvred into position and was not spinning around like a whirling dervish. Thank goodness I hadn't hit the afterburners.

I instinctively reached out to grab her, and once she got my arm everything went to hell.

“Ow-ow-ow-OW-NO KITTY!”

I had to hit the thrusters to keep myself from ramming into the habitation ring's support pylon as it swung by.

Instead I accidentally hit the afterburners.

“NononoNONONONO!”

If you go to Maine Hub in LHS 3447 and look really close at the habitation ring near the main baseball field, you might see a glint of light reflect from the scratch my Cobra left behind.

My ship did not fair nearly as well.

“Eject. Eject. Eject.” The computer trilled the words as I gripped my cat and hoped to hell the stasis field worked at advertised. This was not the way I wanted to end up part of the “oops” statistic.

I don’t remember much after that. I hit space, my lungs burned, and I was out cold. When I woke up, I was back in the station, my cat in a wire cage with a thick padlock on it—I can only assume I told them what happened in some delirious state of semi-recovery—and I was being shown the terms and conditions of my insurance agreement, and how much I was going to have to pay back in order to cover the loss of the tragically nameless Cobra. It was a lot.

I would get a replacement ship, but I was back to collecting garbage for a while until I built up some capital to trade with.

I looked over to the wire cage, where the kitten was licking its paw like nothing had happened all day long. On the upside, I did get a name for my cat out of it.

“Dumbass.”

It turns out Maine Coon cats are infamous for getting into trouble. I fitted the GeckoPads™ on Dumbass and it took her only a few hours to get used to life in low to no-G situations. Her sleeping tank is a closed off centrifuge to simulate half earth gravity, but just like pilots we need to get some real gravity once in a while. Medical technology can only put off the effects of lack of gravity for so long.

You’d think this would be the start of a series of heart-warming stories or amusing anecdotes about the trouble Dumbass got into. And maybe under other situations that would have been the case.

Unfortunately, just as space and time are curved, so is life, and it threw me another one.

“Commander Mossfoot.” The man waiting for me by my ship was clearly part of the Federation’s Navy. Why he was here was anyone’s guess. Aside from some teaching the occasional pirate the need for good manners, I wasn’t exactly making a name for myself.

And sure, I'd done some favors for the Navy now and then, but that was just so I could get access to the Sol system and general networking. Good for business and all.

"That's my name. Well, sort of." I saw no need to use my real name at all anymore. That life was over.

"We know. I've been briefed about your work in the Alliance systems a hundred and fifty years ago."

Uh oh...I didn't like the sound of this. Also, I couldn't be sure what he meant exactly. My assumed name was, after all, assumed. The person I assumed it from having been a pilot working for a secret wetworks unit under the command of my father's XO.

Long story.

"That life is long gone," I said, figuring I'd keep my story applicable to either identity just to be safe. "I'm strictly freelance now."

"I understand. But we know you are a skilled pilot and have certain skills, and your position puts you in place of deniability for my superiors. It's clear that you haven't given up fighting altogether, even if you have cut back. We were wondering if you would be interested in putting your abilities to more productive use than picking up space junk and slapping around teenagers with more money than sense?"

"Not particularly," I said. "I don't mind spacing idiots who think property damage is fun. Well, it is, obviously, but people might get hurt. I don't care for that."

"Strange. We saw nothing about ethics in you psych records."

Ah. That answered which identity they thought I was. Oh, wait, maybe it didn't. Not if they were using my pre-death psych eval. I'm pretty sure I was rubbish at that. Pretty sure the term 'self-centered narcissist with sociopathic tendencies' had been written down on it somewhere. But that was a lifetime ago. Well, a few if you're keeping score.

"You seemed quite eager to participate in various black ops before. We had you down as a man who understood the long view when it came to galactic security."

Okay, NOW it cleared up who he thought he was talking to. The other guy. Great, even now I couldn't escape that mistaken identity problem. I considered clearing it up once and for all, but the man spoke first.

"If it's a question of payment, I assure you the pay is quite generous."

I opened my mouth. Shut it. Opened it again. "Define generous."

"One hundred and seventy thousand credits."

"Holy crap, who do you want me to kill?"

Noah JD Chinn

“Exactly.”

From Job to Obsession

The man's name was Tiberius Miller. Head of a terrorist organization operating within the regions nearest to Sol. His real name was Joe, but he changed it to Tiberius to sound more threatening. Nobody would follow Joe Miller.

The officer made the briefing exceedingly simple. Scout out the areas around Sol and track this man down. Terminate with extreme prejudice. Get paid.

A hundred and seventy thousand credits was enough to buy a small squad of Sidewinders or a few Adders to give you an idea of what this was worth. Hell, I could retire if I really wanted to with that kind of money.

And the guy was an honest to goodness a-hole. When it came to galactic politics there are always two sides to every conflict, often a lot of grey thrown around, but anyone who takes on passenger transports to make a point deserves whatever he gets.

Still, was I really up for this? It was one thing to defend myself in combat. Heck, I even went so far as to go "Oh deary me, here I am lost in space with a cargo hold full of silver, whatever will I do" over comm channels to lure suckers out once in a while, but this was different. This was hired murder. No pod was going to be recovered.

For the life of me I don't know why I signed up, or why I did it so quickly. Something had changed inside me. No, that's not right. Something was missing. I didn't know what at the time.

"Excellent. Now, once you relocate to Sol you can begin. But before you take him on, we have a general "seek and destroy" quota to fill in the same region for his followers. I recommend you take them on to learn the kind of tactics Miller is teaching them."

"What will I get paid for that?"

"A proper promotion within the Federation Navy. We can't reinstate your rank of Captain, as you aren't formally enlisted. But promotions within the civilian arm of the Navy will have its own rewards, as you are no doubt aware."

“Plus the uniform is a chick magnet,” I said. Mr. Buzz Cut was not one for sarcastic humour, it seemed. “Fine. Go to Sol, get set up, search the systems, take on some renegades, and kill their leader. That about it?”

“Yes. Congratulations, Commander Mossfoot. You’ve made the right choice, and are helping make the Federation a safer place.” He shook my hand, but I honest didn’t care about the Federation. To be honest, galactic politics had been the last thing on my mind.

The two superpowers were the Empire and the Federation. My old home at Lave was part of a group caught in the middle called the Alliance, which primarily tried to take care of themselves when the giants got all sabre rattling. Then there were independent stations and systems not affiliated with anyone in particular. That’s about all I knew. Recent events? Something about the Emperor being sick and some wedding postponed in the Empire, and the VP dying in the Federation... just whatever I hear in passing on Galnet.

So it wasn’t any sense of loyalty that was making me do this. If I had any of that left it would probably go to the Alliance anyway. What can I say? I’m a sucker for the underdog these days. So, again, I couldn’t figure out why I so quickly agreed to risk my life like this, other than the prospect that this could open up business opportunities and of course a huge pay day.

It took me a day to reach Sol system, jump after jump, picking up some extra credits scanning planets and systems with outdated cartographical data. When I finally got there with Dumbass sitting in the co-pilot’s seat, I was less than impressed. Sol was the home of humanity, but it wasn’t my home. This was more of a curiosity than anything.

I rented a room on Galileo, the station orbiting Earth’s moon, where Dumbass could be safe while I went and did the most reckless thing in my life to date. I had enough pin money for a good room, and to hire someone to check in and feed the cat every day. I’d also found out that Galileo was weighed down with silver and needed shuttle pilots to ferry it to Earth in a timely manner, so I was able to build up more capital in the meantime while I got ready to hunt.

The pirates were easy. I barely gave them a second thought. Some random interceptions around Wolf 359, pretending to limp around in a ship full of liquor, it wasn’t long before I either found or was interdicted by the local renegades. They didn’t last long.

Then I got word from a Federation contact that Miller was at Barnard's Star. And with that the game, as they say, was afoot.

I drifted through the expanse of space between Barnard's Star and the nearest station for hours, checking every passing ship and every strange signal.

I'd like to say I had some niggling worries about this, or that I stared in the mirror one day and didn't like what I saw, but the fact is none of that was on my mind whatsoever. Just finding this guy, spacing him, and cashing a paycheck.

It wasn't like he didn't deserve it. I ran across the work of Miller's followers everywhere. Wrecks of trading ships drifting, their cargo spread about and not even collected. It wasn't even stuff worth collecting – grain or toxic waste or basic chemicals. They were trying to scare traders off from the area, and probably doing a good job of it.

But like I said, I wasn't thinking about any of that. No sense of outrage or vengeance or duty or justice. Nothing.

I saw another anomaly show up on my HUD and checked it out expecting more rubbish.

Instead I found Tiberius Miller, already powering up and preparing to fire in a frickin Anaconda. The biggest and most lethal craft available on the civilian market.

"You think I don't know why you're here?" He shouted over the comm. My shields took a battering as I tried to thrust myself into a firing position, but it was no use. Beams stroked against my hull like I was getting lashed with a laser cat-o-nine-tails.

"You can suck space like the rest of them, Federation goon!"

A bright purple orb struck, and my ship was thrown off course. Shields were down. I hit the afterburners, hoping to get some distance.

"Incoming missile," the computer trilled.

I jinked to the left and right, using lateral and vertical thrusters to try and get a bit more manoeuvrability, but my hull kept on taking a beating. Where were my shields? Why weren't they recharging?

"Taking damage," the computer said.

"You think I don't know that?" I yelled. Miller had made a chump out of me, and I'd be lucky if I got out of this alive. The shields still weren't recharging, but I had made enough distance that I could check the systems panel to find out why.

He'd blown them out. That purple orb that hit me had wreaked all kinds of havoc on my ship and fried the shield generator completely.

I was out of this fight. I managed to clear enough distance to engage the frame shift and get the hell out of there, with less than half my hull integrity remaining.

Now, you would think this would have taught me a lesson. That I'd remember that it was my cowardly sense of self-preservation that had kept me alive (more or less) for so long. That I'd go back to Sol with my heart racing, my tail happily between my legs, ready to pick up Dumbass and just go off trading metals and luxury items again.

Instead I looked at my credit balance, intended to rebuy my ship in case of accidents, and asked myself if I had enough for bigger guns.

The outfitter wasn't the sort to ask questions. Whether people came in to expand their cargo capacity or turn their ship into a death machine didn't matter to her, so she didn't bat an eye when I asked what the most powerful weapons a Cobra could hold were.

"Well, you've got four weapons mounts, the top are class two, bottom are class one. What are you outfitting for. Defence?"

"Offense."

She nodded. "Uh-huh. Well, the Cobra can pack some decent power, depending on what you want to trade off on. Fixed mounts are slightly more powerful than gimbled or turreted mounts—fixed mounts don't have to worry about diverting energy to servos and whatnot. But of course a gimbled mount is going to do half the work for you. You just need to keep the target in general line of sight."

I was a good enough shot that I didn't need gimbled mounts when it came to energy weapons, but projectiles had lead time to worry about.

In the end I outfitted her with what I thought was the best I could get. A rail gun on one side, burst laser on the other, with twin multi-canons gimbled underneath.

"I need to test her out. Any combat going on in the area?"

Maybe it was the way I said it, or the fact I clearly didn't care who was fighting. "Uh... there's actually a bit of a civil war going on in the system. You'll find some combat zones marked on your HUD if you're Navy affiliated... I assume you are?"

I nodded. "That'll do. Thanks."

I have no idea who was fighting or why. It didn't matter. I just found the combat zone, near a planet with a mining facility, chose a size for my IFF to register with, and opened fire on the first red dot to pass my radar.

The whole time I wasn't really thinking about fighting, I was looking at damage inflicted. Sure, I could look at stats about power consumption and damage per second all I wanted, but that wasn't a substitute to seeing how it played out in the field.

And so Eagles and Cobras went down with relative ease under my new rail gun. Ammo consumption might be a problem, but this was about taking out Miller. I could stand to have that eat into the profits a bit.

An Anaconda entered the fray and I tested my kit out on it. Dang those things had powerful shields. I'd have to remember that.

Along with my team mates who I could have just as easily been fighting instead under the metaphorical coin flip, we took down the shields and battered the hull. The rail gun worked well enough against its reinforced hull, but by the time it was taken out I was out of ammo.

Still, should be good enough for a one-on-one fight. The important thing would be to stay behind it, where its more powerful weapons couldn't hit me.

Without a word to anyone, I left the combat zone, returned to the station, cashed in my service bond to pay for rearming the rail gun, and headed back to Barnard's Star.

This time I located myself near the only viable outpost, hunting for signals. If Miller was operating out of this area, he had to use this station to re-arm and repair, possibly using forged idents to avoid attracting attention, but then again on outposts like this more blind eyes were turned than anyone liked to admit.

This time Tiberius was good enough to announce himself, and offer me a chance to leave. I took this to mean that he was scared of what I was packing, and figured he should be. I powered up and tried to flank him, but by the time I got around he was already facing me again. We traded volleys of fire like two warriors charging each other with swords for a running swing.

Sparks flew off my console, my shields were gone—again. Hull integrity was down to 32%. Then I heard a distressing crackling noise.

“Warning. Canopy compromised.”

The cracks along the cockpit continued to spread as the Anaconda swung about to try and hit my rear. I hit the thrusters as the cracks webbed across my view.

“Oh hell.”

The good thing about explosive decompression is that it blows everything outward, otherwise I’d have had giant shards of canopy stuck in my chest. The emergency life support kicked in as the air pressure left, but I wasn’t dead. For now. Miller was still behind me firing missiles.

I put all power to engines and what was left over into shields. I had fifteen minutes to get to the station, listening to the muffled warnings of my computer, the sound of my own laboured breathing, and the steady ticking down of my oxygen reserve as the nearby oil-rig in space came mercifully into view.

Again you’d think I’d have taken this moment of terror as a chance for reflection on my life choices. And again, you’d be wrong.

“Back again?” Despite the repairs made, the outfitter could tell my ship had been through hell, largely because I’d left the paint job as it was.

“Your weapon suggestions sucked,” I said to her.

“They weren’t my suggestions,” she said. “You wanted the most powerful gun I had. I told you what that was. But power isn’t everything.” She showed me her inventory. “If you actually want a suggestion, I’d go with two of these.” She pointed to hefty-looking fixed beam lasers that were on display. “Two of these can peel off the shields off just about anything.”

“Even an Anaconda?”

She shrugged. “Given enough time. You’re hunting a ‘conda? Geeze, you really are as stupid as you are ugly.”

“And there goes your tip.”

“Look, even if you take the shields down you need to get through its armor. Those multicannons won’t do the trick. I suggest using more dedicated canons instead. Hits harder, but slower. It needs to be used at closer range, or at least if he’s coming at you head on—which presumably you don’t want to do. If you got the shields down and you’re close, you strafe him with this and he’ll feel it. Better yet, get the gimble type and target his subsystems. You might get lucky and crit out his reactor.”

It sounded like good advice. There was just one problem. I didn't have enough money for the full set.

"Sell the discovery scanner. And the fuel scoop."

She did the math and shook her head. "Sorry, you're still sixty grand short."

"Sell the cargo bays."

"Okay...how many?"

"All of them."

For the first time the outfitter looked concerned. "You sure about that?"

"Cargo bays aren't going to help me win a fight."

"Sure, but, it's the way you're saying it. You know you seem a bit...obsessed, right?"

"Hadn't crossed my mind. Do it."

Flying alone in my Cobra, waiting for Miller to show his face again. The outfitter had called me obsessed. But I wasn't. Not the way she meant it, anyway. Keeping at 30km/s, searching for stray signals that might give away Tiberius's position, I realized what the problem really was.

I just didn't care anymore.

All I had was this—a ship, and a mission. So I was focused, yes, but not obsessed. I didn't feel enough of anything right now to be considered obsessed.

This time around I didn't find Miller. He found me. I was interdicted, and rather than fight it, once I saw it was an Ananconda on my tail, I killed the engines and let him take me.

"You again?" he said, opening gun ports. I did the same. But rather than gunning my engines forward I turned and hit the afterburners.

"That's right, you better run!" he yelled after me.

But I wasn't running. Once I was up to a good speed I turned off flight assistance and let momentum carry me away from him while I brought my ship and guns around to bare on him. Once in position, I put flight assistance on again and put the engines in full reverse.

It had the desired effect. I was just barely in range of his lasers, but that was it. And with my more precise sense of aim, I drilled on his shields at the edge of effective range,

diverting power to weapons while keeping enough in engines and shields and keep me away from him.

“You’re not getting away from me that easily,” said Miller. “You’re a punk, just like the rest of those Federation goons. And I will boil up your ship and watch the void take you.”

I said nothing. I didn’t care enough about him to banter. I only cared about removing him.

He must not have rearmed his missiles since our last encounter, because I wasn’t hearing any warnings. My shields were still in good shape and his were going steadily down.

“Stop running like a coward and fight me!” Miller yelled. It seemed my tactic was pissing him off. His lasers were sputtering as they struggled to get enough power from the engines, which seemed to be dedicated to engines now. But still I kept focused, steadily burning his shields like he was an ant and I was a magnifying glass.

At last the shields were down and I lobbed cannon shells at him from a distance. It took a few seconds just to reach him, but after the first hit he jinked and avoided the others. I could keep burning him, but his shields were starting to recharge. I decided to engage, get to his rear if possible, and do as much damage as possible before the shields went up.

“That’s more like it,” Miller said as I reversed the engines once again. I used my vertical thrusters to try and arc around him in a wide circle, getting strafed for my trouble, but I thought my shields could take it. I was wrong. By the time I was on his six, my hull was down to two thirds. But this time I wasn’t running. Nothing critical had been hit, and my shields were already recharging.

The dogfight that ensued lasted for what felt like a lifetime. Each of us burning at one another’s shields and doing minor hull damage, ticking away at one another’s life with a thousand paper cuts.

It was a testament to my skill, I suppose. An Anaconda outclasses every other ship in terms of shield strength, firepower, and hull plating. Your only hope against one is to get hit as little as possible. So I figured I had to be delivering a ten-to-one damage exchange ratio this whole time.

And it was starting to get to Tiberius. “Butcher! Murderer! You can’t kill my people with your ships so you starve and strangle them with taxes, sanctions, embargos until

they are meek and beaten and willing to be ruled by you. You think you are better than me? That you are upholding what is right? Your cause and your government are a fraud.”

I said nothing, trying to knock out his reactor before the shields went back online, but he was getting to me.

“I am fighting for something better. I fight for the freedom of my people, and you only fight for credits. What does that make you? They call me a terrorist, but at least a terrorist believes in something. What does a mercenary believe in besides money?”

This guy was just about on my last nerve. He’d hit my shields and both of my cannons were knocked offline. Damn. This was bad. His ship was holding together by a thread, but so was mine. And so was my patience.

“You are a pointless fool fighting for no one but yourself, for no reason but you can.”

Then the jerkwad had the balls to start quoting literature.

“You will die and be still, never shall be memory left of you after this, nor regret when you are gone...”

That was all he said, but I knew the rest by heart. He was quoting Sappho.

*You will die and be still, never shall be memory left of you
after this, nor regret when you are gone. You have not touched the flowers
of the Muses, and thus, shadowy still in the domain of Death,
you must drift with a ghost's fluttering wings, one of the darkened dead.*

Something snapped.

I honestly can't tell you what it was, but those words meant something more than Miller realized. It was as if he'd slapped my soul. As if he'd known how empty my life was in a way I had only been vaguely aware of before. I had nothing to care about other than a kitten back on Galileo station. I had no family, no friends, no life to speak of. I had nothing. I *was* nothing. I would leave nothing behind.

“Shields online,” the computer calmly said. But I was anything but calm. For the first time since I took this assignment, I was mad. No, *furios*.

“Burn in hell!” They were the only words I ever said to the man. I held down on the fire button and cut straight into his hull, hitting the afterburners, by accident or on

purpose, I have no way of knowing. My ship wedged right in behind his engines, causing a catastrophic meltdown, blowing my ship back, and tearing what was left of his to shreds.

My ship spun out of control. The controls fried and canopy cracked. Number one engine had broken off and blew apart a safe distance from me, but number two was going critical. Thrusters offline. Life support offline. Tea maker still functional.

“Eject. Eject. Eject.”

Everything got real quiet, and not just because of the sudden vacuum in the cockpit. The computer’s voice telling me to eject didn’t sound right. They sounded like someone else. I looked over to the empty co-pilot’s seat, only to see it wasn’t empty after all.

A woman sat there. Tall, dark hair, wearing an outdated pilot’s uniform from the Lave systems. She looked at me with a sarcastic half-grin on her face, shaking her head slowly as the ship disintegrated all around me. Despite the fact there was no air and she had no helmet on, I heard her clear as day before everything went black.

“Dumbass.”

Purple Haze

“Okay. Tell me a story,” the woman said. She was sitting next to me on a grassy hill overlooking the spaceport on some planet. I wasn’t sure which.

I should have recognized her, but I didn’t. I wanted to ask who she was, but the words wouldn’t come out. I just looked at her, trying to place the dark hair and eyes, and that sarcastic smile of hers.

Eventually she got tired of waiting. “Fine. I’ll tell you one. It’s a story from Earth over a thousand years ago. It seems like a simple police story at first – a retired cop needs to stop a bunch of fugitives who are on the run for being different. But by the end you realize it’s about something else entirely. It’s a story about life, finding meaning in it, and trying to figure out what it’s all about. About regret and coming to terms with how things must come to an end.”

I looked at her, puzzled, wondering what this story was.

“It’s called Blade Runner.”

I woke up. The bright lights designed to make microbes and bacteria run for the hills had a similar effect on my eyes. I looked around. I was in a hospital room. Again.

“We’ve really got to stop meeting like this,” I said to the walls.

I guess the monitors told people I was awake, because it wasn’t long before a nurse came in to check on me, followed by the Federation officer who had assigned me to track down Miller. The officer waited patiently as the man asked me some inane questions about how I felt and left. I wished the uniform had followed him out, but he didn’t.

“Feeling better?” the officer asked, even though the nurse had just asked me the same question. I nodded. “You should know that Miller’s escape pod was found not far from yours. He’s in Federation custody.”

“Swell,” I said. “I still get paid, right?” To be honest I didn’t actually care about the money. I just hated the idea of going through all that for nothing.

“We would have preferred dead. Cleaner. Now we have to deal with certain inconvenient civilian legalities. But yes, we consider the contract fulfilled, Lieutenant.”

My brow furrowed. Had I just enlisted?

“You’ve been rather busy. We noticed. The pirates around Barnard’s Star, joining our forces in an engagement around Wolf 359. Passing communications and supplies in-between. It didn’t go unnoticed, or unappreciated. We tend to show that appreciation in the form of rank. Honorary, but it does entitle you to certain privileges and entrusts you with more difficult assignments.”

“Swell,” I said again, knowing this wasn’t the only reason he was here.

“We’ve arranged for your ship to be replaced and returned to the combat specs you had upgraded it to, and took care of the insurance for you through your account.”

“Thanks.” Wait, they could access my account?

“We take care of our own,” the man said, trying to be as straight and true as his crew cut. “When you’re feeling up for it, we’d like to discuss the possibility of further assignments.”

I began to chuckle. Here I was in a hospital bed, having just faced the realization that I had nothing in my life. That existence was an empty and meaningless void. That nothing I did was going to be remembered or cared about... And here this guy was asking me to go out and keep at it.

“I think I’m out for a while,” I said. “But I’ll keep your offer in mind.”

“Very well. I can imagine that took a lot out of you. My comm channel will be open if you change your mind.” He nodded and left without another word.

It turned out I had been transferred back to Galileo, since that was considered my “official” residence. Dumbass was in good shape at my lodgings and hadn’t grown too much. She even recognized me...or just assumed I was bringing food.

I got her in the carrying case, packed up her stuff and gave the keys back to the front desk. I’d considered dealing with this existential crisis here or on Earth, but it just didn’t feel right. My new and still nameless Cobra was as close to a home as I had. But honestly, I wasn’t going to sort things out.

She was waiting for me at the outfitters as I’d requested. The chief mechanic there was a lot less attractive than the one who’d kitted her out during the hunt for Tiberius Miller.

“You the owner of a Lonely Heart?” he asked.

“What?” I’m pretty sure that was the name of a classical song from way back.

“That Cobra. Lonely Heart. Is it yours?”

Great. The Federation takes care of its own, my butt. They didn’t get me a new ship, they got me a used one. With my luck it would need an overhaul of everything from the engines to the life support system.

I looked over her. She was definitely a used ship. But then again, I was pretty used myself. I smirked. “Guess I am.”

“Right. Well, we got those mil-spec beam lasers your officer buddy asked for, but I gotta say, that’s a lot of firepower for your power plant to handle. You sure you want two?”

I looked back to the ship and thought about what I intended to do with her.

“No. Sell one of the beam lasers and put in a mining laser instead. Get some cargo bays put back in, and add a small refinery.”

The man checked out the specs on his datapad. “Yeah, she can handle that just fine. Anything else?”

“Yeah. Replace anything that looks like it’s ready to wear out and give her a new paint job.” Just because I couldn’t get a decent makeover didn’t mean the Lonely Heart couldn’t.

I needed some time to think. Alone...more or less. This was as good a way to get that as any.

Oh My Darlin...

I was in Luten 205-128, using a station named after HG Wells as my base of operations, hoping to find a bit of peace and quiet. Dumbass was so used to zero G at this point that she routinely walked up the walls and on the ceiling, sometimes pouncing down on me from there when I entered my cabin. It would be a while before I let her anywhere near the cockpit after the last incident.

How to describe mining? I don't know, I'll let you know if I do any, because I spent a whole week spending more time fighting off pirates and defending other miners than doing any actual mining. Sure, I eventually got a full cargo hold, but it was mostly full of rock that my refinery spat out like it was made of broccoli.

But it seemed like every ten minutes some joker was scanning me to see if I had anything worth stealing. Ordinarily I'd be trying to avoid confrontation, but I was in a bad mood to say the least, and these guys often got the business end of a beam laser before their scan was even finished. They often seemed quite surprised by my aggressive response, like there was some kind of arrangement with the frightened miners in Adders and Sidewinders around this belt. A protection racket, no doubt. Taking their cut.

Well I just spent the last six hours blasting giant crappy rocks looking for slightly less crappy rocks inside them, and I'm not about to have some joker who considers shaking people down a legitimate form of work to take them. I figured they'd get the message. Instead they just brought in more ships. They wanted to make an example of me.

Unfortunately for them, the feeling was mutual.

By the time my cargo hold was at maximum capacity I didn't feel one ounce more relaxed, because I'd spent ten times longer fighting than mining. And the ore in the area turned out to be low grade, and largely mined out. I returned to HG Wells and sold my cargo, making about 20,000 credits.

The bounties I collected came to about 200,000.

I needed to get further away. Luten 205-128 was too close to Sol. Too much traffic, both in terms of miners and pirates. Having picked up a tip at the pilot's lounge, I set my sites further afield. A system called Genetrix was supposed to have some decent mining, and no station in the system whatsoever, meaning fewer people bothered to go there.

It sounded perfect.

The Lonely Heart had a more powerful Frame Shift Drive now, so the trip over seventy light years away was made in only three or four jumps. I learned that a nearby white dwarf system, CD219, had a refinery in it, McKee Ring. At least I wouldn't have to go very far to dump off my cargo or get some gravity time in for me and Dumbass.

After making all the necessary arrangements at McKee Ring, I moved on to Genetrix, found the asteroid belt I had been told about, dove in, and got to work.

I'd never grown a beard before, and, thanks to my lovely combination of burns and scars, I never would. But if I could I was easily out there long enough to be a mountain man.

Ever play an old Earth game called golf? At first it starts off being an excuse to have a really long angry walk. Then you get okay at it and start taking pride in your general improvement. Then you get good enough that any slight mess up frustrates the hell out of you and you're back to having a really long angry walk again.

Mining is kind of like that, but in reverse, since you're trying to get the hole in one by having the ball land inside your ship.

It's bad enough having to scoop up fragments like they're discarded cargo, but then you gotta process them, and rarely do you ever find anything with a decent amount of pure metal in it. Highest I found was in the fifty percent range.

But it wasn't about the metals and minerals, it was about the peace and quiet. Aside from a single Sidewinder who (briefly) tried to mug me, I turned the experience into something more Zen-like.

So I mined, I pet my cat, I checked my cargo holds to see how much good stuff I'd collected, I got my cat out of the refinery bin before it went back online, I ate, I got my cat out of the air recycling system, I read, I got my cat out of the airlock (which I'm certain I had locked and encrypted) before it blew open.

But most of all I sat in my chair, looking at the gently tumbling rocks, lit by the nearby sun, and wondered what it was all about.

Maybe this was all that was left in my life. Scraping by a living until the day one vital organ or another gives out and I'm found as salvage a week later. Well, what's left of me after Dumbass realizes there isn't any other source of food she can open.

I kind of envied the pilots out there with a sense of duty, either fighting for one of the big three factions, or simply acting as their own little guardians of the galaxy as freelance policemen. Heck, I almost envied the pirates. Sure, they had no morals but at least they felt like they had purpose. It's just that their purpose came at the expense of yours.

I looked over at the co-pilot's chair, and sure enough there was Dumbass, even though I always keep the cockpit door locked. How does she do that? She was there sitting and watching the purple mining laser as if she was going to jump through the viewscreen any moment to grab it. And I wouldn't put it past her to try.

I even envied Dumbass. At least she had it all figured out. With her there was never a why, only a try.

"It's called Blade Runner."

I was back on the hill listening to the woman tell me a story about a retired cop hunting down and killing artificial humans. I'd actually seen the movie before as a kid, but the way she told the story it was like she was talking about something else entirely. She focused on the subtext of what the story meant, how unfair the replicants situation was, how brutal Deckard's job was, and ultimately, the importance of grace and forgiveness, and the importance of life itself.

When she got to the point where Roy Batty saves Deckard's life, she had a distant look in her eyes, looking off into the growing night sky as she repeated his final speech. "I have seen things you people wouldn't believe... Attack ships on fire off the shoulder of Orion. I watched c-beams glitter in the dark near the Tannhäuser Gate. All those moments will be lost in time, like tears in rain."

She then turned and looked at me. "Time to die..."

I woke up with a start. It was the third night in a row I'd dreamed about her, and I knew darn well who it was now... I just didn't want to admit it.

I mentioned before the black hole of memory I have in places, but also that my journals were in the public domain (and bizarrely popular among a small subset of pilots). The thing is, I've never bothered listening to them after the first eight or so. The gaps it filled did me no good now, and only gave me a building sense of dread, like I didn't want to know.

But I knew. I knew enough, anyway.

I'd lived my early life getting through life on wit, charm, money, and my father's influence. When I lost the latter two, I found out how much I'd actually relied on them, because the former two didn't get me as far as they used to.

But in all my time I'd only come across a few people who'd cared absolutely nothing about my wit or charm, and only one who'd agreed to work with me in the close confines of a ship for more than 24 hours.

Hell, she even killed me once. It's how we met.

I got up, ate, got the cat out of the zero-g toilet she'd somehow gotten into, and went back to work. Drill, scan, drill, scan, drill, scan, scoop, scoop, scoop.

My eyes drifted back to the empty co-pilot seat. We'd busted out of my father's carrier in his prized antique MKII prototype together, then laid low as the fallout from those events blew over. She'd reluctantly agreed to work with me, at least until I could afford to replace the ship she'd lost.

And then...? It was still all hazy, except for the dreams.

"Whatever happened to you, Violet?"

Violet Tendencies

I suppose I should set the record straight before someone fan-fictions the crap out of what I've been saying. Violet and I never did the Cobra with two backs. Not that I didn't suggest it once or twice on long trips between systems. Thing is, I was never her type—her type lacked a Y chromosome.

But really that was just another way for her to call me on my BS. Of course I was going to try and seduce her. That's how I'd always handled relationships with women. It would have made things easier for me—let me trivialize our partnership, or treat her like I would any other woman. She wasn't having any of it.

With sex off the table, or anywhere else, I had to treat her like an actual human being. I remember wondering when my life had become a bloody after-school special, but the fact is we worked well together. I provided the schmooze at stations, bargaining for better prices and feeling out slightly shady deals, she provided cover fire when said shady dealings went out the airlock, and I had to run with a briefcase full of credits. She always had a plan ready for escape, and a head for tactics. Bounty hunting had been her bag long before we ever met, running away from trouble had been mine.

We'd been doing that for at least a year, I think. And then? Not a clue. Only the dreams, which were giving me a really bad vibe to be honest.

It was a month now that I'd been scouting asteroid belts and planetary rings. Every couple of days I'd stop back in at McKee Ring to offload and get some grav-time in.

Only this time I realized that my self-imposed exile therapy wasn't working. I might have had all the time in the world to think, but what I was thinking about wasn't helpful.

I was wallowing.

I had the whole universe out there, and here I was hiding in rocks. Okay, so maybe I didn't want to go back to my social butterfly ways just yet. Maybe I was sick of people, or maybe I was afraid of making new ties after having lost all of my old ones. But that didn't mean there wasn't stuff to do out there. What was that line from the story she told me?

"I have seen things you people wouldn't believe... Attack ships on fire off the shoulder of Orion. I watched c-beams glitter in the dark near the Tannhäuser Gate..."

A bit poetically violent, sure, but the meaning was still there. Roy had seen some crazy stuff in his time. And what makes up who we are other than the sum of our experiences.

Did I want my experiences to comprise of drilling rock all day? Or did I want to see some crazy stuff?

That day I sold my mining drill and refinery, and fitted my ship with an advanced discovery scanner and detailed surface scanner.

The mechanic at McKee Ring didn't seem too surprised by the change, but he did ask, "Which way ya heading?"

I looked around the station as if I could somehow see through its walls.

"Which way is Orion?"

It took me some time to reach the edge of inhabited space. There are WAY more inhabited systems out there than I was used to a hundred and fifty years ago. It can be pretty overwhelming looking at them all on the star chart, to be honest.

The star I had in mind was just off the shoulder of Orion, but not actually part of the Orion constellation. Most of those stars were way too far away for my liking. I was used to at least having a station to send an SOS out to if I got into trouble, and back in my time, that was every station. Not so anymore.

I wandered from system to system, only stopping at stations to do repairs and check on the value of a hole of Indi Bourbon I was carrying. That stuff's in demand, and the further you go from Epsilon Indi, the more it's worth.

Eventually I reached Empire territory. Now, I can't say I know much about the Empire in terms of policy. Most of what I hear on GalNet has to do with the soap opera going on in the palace, with the Emperor on death's door and a royal wedding being called off.

I do know they allow slavery, which I've never been cool with. They dress up the language and try to make it like a legit kind of debt repayment, but it still grinds my gears. They also seem to have a smug sense of meritocracy to them to justify just about anything. Sure it's not a democracy, but it's a place where you can get ahead if you prove your worth.

Contrast that with the Federation, which is a democracy that's rife with corruption from what I hear, and everything gets bogged down with special interests and whatnot.

To be honest, if I had to choose sides I might very well go with the third option—the Alliance. That makes up much of the area of space I used to know, including my home world of Lave. I say “if I had to” because from what I hear a lot of the better known Alliance worlds are full of douchebags gaming the system to make the lives of pilots like me hell. They say you can't go home again, but in my case it's more like I don't really want to.

The Imperial stations I came across seemed much the same as those in the Federation—modular designs that work, keep a familiar baseline so that pilots travelling long distances don't get confused and make costly mistakes, that sort of reasoning.

The folks there didn't say much. I didn't hear any docking announcements, and the repair people just seemed kind of grim and duty bound. Maybe these guys were banished to the outer planets and just stopped giving a flying fig anymore.

The last inhabited station I was in was Vinge Hub in Lovaroju. The system I wanted to go to was maybe 200 light years away, but my stupid navigation computer could only calculate 100 light years, so I had to find a mid-point destination to program in. One that would take me through Hades Sector MH-V, Col 285 Sector OR-V, Synuefe XV-S and all the rest of the alphabet soup.

Hey, there are 400 BILLION stars in our galaxy, you can't give them all cool sounding names. And if you just let any old bloke name them, half of them would end up being references to dicks. So I can't say I really cared about the names, but they did help emphasize the fact that from this point on, I was going out alone.

And for the first time in a long time, I felt something I wasn't sure I'd ever feel again.

I felt excited.

Well, if I thought leaving inhabited space would mean never running into another human being, I was sadly mistaken. Not in every system, mind you, but every so often I'd have a blip on my radar, a passing Asp, Adder, or Cobra like mine. We'd more or less grunt greetings over the comm, then ignore each other and go our merry ways.

Even if a system has been scanned, Universal Carteographics pays top credit for fresh and updated data. They sell that information to miners looking for metal-rich worlds

to exploit or would-be colonists looking to set up their own hippy-dippy Eden off somewhere... no doubt dying because the local vegetation is all poisonous.

The further I went out, the fewer these people were. Just as I thought I'd seen the last of them, though, an Adder showed up on my radar somewhere in Synuefe VP-U B36, and as I ignored him and scouted the numerous planets of the system, the bugger suddenly interdicted me!

"MINE!" he yelled as we hit normal space.

He started shooting at me with a rather pathetic pair of multi-cannons.

"What the hell is wrong with you?!" I said over the comm.

"MINE! YOU CAN'T HAVE IT!" Can't have what? I didn't have a clue, but he wasn't giving me a choice but to fight.

I hadn't really had the Cobra equipped for combat, though, so the fight was... well I can't say exciting. More like long. You know how two kids who don't know how to fight spend half an hour slapping at each other and actually getting hit maybe one in then times, making pathetic whining noises?

Yeah, this was that kind of fight. I kept hoping the bugger would just go away, but he fought to the bitter end, burning up in a bright ball of flame, no ejection seat to be seen.

Damn. What was his problem? The only thing I could imagine is that he'd gone space crazy and was jealously defending this "find." The system had numerous metal-rich worlds and even one suitable for terraforming. It would have brought in a pretty penny back home, and with a 50% bonus if I was the first to visit it.

Well, it's mine now. Hope that was worth dying for, crazy man. How long was he out here for to get like that? Maybe I shouldn't stray too far from home. If I start talking to my cat, or worse, myself, I'll be in deep trouble.

Deep in the Black

I'd been out here for a while now. Once in a while I'd pass by another explorer and we'd link our ships and share a drink—I'd show them the marvels of my "special" tea-maker, while they would crack open a bottle of whatever hooch they had on hand.

It seems to always be called "Indi Bourbon" by explorers, even if it was made in the cistern of a toilet. In fact, they tend to have their own short hand when talking about their travels, which I had my most recent companion explain to me in detail. You stay alone out here for too long and you soon start to crave human contact.

Apparently, in explorer speak, I'm a Bowman (explorer), and since I still have my guns on my Cobra, I'm a 'Battle Bowman'. Since I have a set destination in mind, I'm 'locked on', while my companion was just on 'walkabout'. He captains a 'flying brick', or Lakon Type 6, which seems to be an apt description given how it looks. He noticed my ship wasn't equipped with a 'La-Z-Boy' (advanced discovery scanner) so he figured I spent a lot of time 'hunting shift' (looking for the parallax of stars and planets out of my intermediate scanner's range). And so on, and so on.

Seems like everyone out there has their own lingo. Traders, bounty hunters, miners, explorers, even pirates. I'd never really thought about it much before now, but then, I never had as much time to think as I do now.

As time went on, Bowman encounters became few and far between and then stopped altogether. I didn't mind. Right now I was more interested in the different systems I would find.

Before I was pop frozen, it seemed like every system was the same. There was only ever one planet you bothered heading to, and one station you were usually interested in. Lately I've become keenly aware of the multitude of other stations a system might have, and other planets besides the main inhabited one. Then again, in those days I thought all ships had a seven light-year limit on their hyperdrives. Most people in the area now known as the Alliance did. We thought only bigass Navy ships could break the 7LY barrier.

But the fact is a Cobra can actually hit over twenty light-years a jump if properly outfitted, which makes most of the galaxy accessible. If only I had known...

During this trip I saw a lot of amazing things – a star system orbited not by planets, but by a dozen smaller stars, gas giants orbiting dwarf stars so close to one another you wondered how they didn't crash into one another, or if someday they would. I even tracked down my first black hole—no easy feat without a La-Z-Boy scanner. I had to climb out of the system for tens of thousands of light-seconds, just so I could see the orbital paths of the planets that were orbiting it. From that I was able to guesstimate its location and dive straight towards it.

In hindsight, not the smartest thing I ever did. But I eventually found it, bending light around it like an invisible ring. That would get me a shiny credit or two back Solward.

Each new system had the possibility of new surprises, and if it didn't have any it was easy enough to move on to the next system. I was...content. A feeling I hadn't felt in a long time.

So naturally it wasn't going to last. You should know me by now.

I reached a system that, if viewed from Earth, was just off the shoulder of Orion. An uninteresting place, to be sure. Big yellow sun, but only one metallic rich planet orbiting it.

And an unidentified signal source orbiting the planet.

I blinked when I saw this on my HUD. The last USS I'd seen was four hundred light years back. Only a few possibilities came to mind as to what it could be, none of them good. The most likely was a fellow Bowman whose ship was destroyed but still putting out a distress beacon.

I came in close and pulled out of Frame Shift, finger ready on the trigger, just in case it was another crazy hermit type.

It was a ship, but it wasn't destroyed. In fact it was in perfect condition, silently orbiting the metallic rock below.

And something about it seemed familiar.

I got closer. Whatever it was, it had been here a long time. The paint was bleached white, so it was impossible to tell what color it had originally been. Er... unless it was always white, that is.

The profile of the ship made me think it was an Asp at first, but no, it was more like a Cobra, except...I actually gasped at this point. It was a Cobra, but a model I hadn't seen in a long time.

A hundred and fifty years, to be exact.

It was a Cobra MKI, the first of the series. They stopped making them ages ago and the only place you could see one now would be in a museum, probably next to the MKII prototype I was found in.

I inched my ship closer, to try and get a look inside the cockpit. There was, indeed, someone there and they were, indeed, long dead. The pilot didn't have a helmet on, so once I got close enough I could see the telltale signs of mummification. But at first, just for a moment, I thought...

I shook it off, and circled around the ship, looking for a serial number or something so I could report the find back home. An ancestor somewhere would no doubt appreciate having the mystery of this person's disappearance solved.

Nothing.

Well, I wasn't going to give up that easily. I decided to pop out the airlock and get inside. I brought a power cell with me so I could power up the ship's computer and download its logs. Least I could do, since I couldn't exactly bring the ship back with me.

Walking inside the old Cobra MKI was like entering a tomb. No lights, dust particles everywhere, no sound. I wasn't going to bother turning on life support, for all I knew it could break down at the worst possible time. And I couldn't shake the strangest feeling that I'd been here before.

I reached the cockpit, where the pilot sat waiting for me. No, seriously, it felt like the pilot was waiting. I half expected the seat to turn around and face me when I got close enough. But it didn't.

I plugged in the power cell and the cockpit lights flickered to life. It was funny to see the old radar and multi-function displays come to life. I'd gotten so used to the holographic projections this felt like a serious nostalgia kick. So far, so good. I accessed the main computer, brought up the log...

...and promptly lost my mind.

The ship's name was Lady Luck. That didn't ring a bell, but what did ring a bell was the name of the pilot.

I looked over at the mummified pilot in the captain's chair, eyes sunken, teeth grinning at me, and then at the name tag on her antiquated flight suit—Violet Lonsdale.

And then I looked behind her, where another Violet stood, leaning on the top of the seat staring at me. In the same flight suit, without a helmet on, far from dead, and also grinning at me.

“Took you long enough, flyboy.”

The Late Great Violet Lonsdale

I figured it was settled. I'd officially lost my mind. Been in deep space too long. Stared too long into the Abyss, as the explorers say.

I was staring at both the corpse of my only real friend and her not-corpse standing behind it as if she'd played the biggest prank of all time. Which, if things were as they appeared, would be quite accurate.

"Is it starting to come back to you?" she asked. "It must be, or I wouldn't be here. And here I was thinking I'd be stuck on the sidelines forever, listening to you mope and monologue inside your own head like bloody Hamlet for all eternity. Talk about purgatory."

I backed against the ship's console, as if that was somehow going to get me away from this madness. "H-h-how?"

"Oh, hey, you can use your voice box after all, even if you do sound like a cartoon character who's seen a ghost. Let's not get into the how just yet, shall we? I'm really worried about breaking your brain. And neither of us want that, trust me."

Violet circled around the set to look at her body. "Boy, I have not aged well. But, you know, if they brought you back so many times..." At that point she seemed a bit sad, resigned. "No, I guess even now there are limits, aren't there? And it's not like anyone else could have survived what you did."

"W-wh-what do you mean?"

"I mean, do you honestly think a body would survive a hundred and fifty year deep freeze unless there was something special going on with it? Think, flyboy." She jerked her thumb to the mummy. "This is what should have happened to you."

"I was in cryo-sleep," I said. It's what I'd been told, anyway, when I first woke up.

Violet made a buzzer sound. "Wrong answer. Since when did you ever have a cryo chamber in your old ship? Though I guess in a way they could be technically telling the truth..." her voice trailed off a moment, but before I could prompt her she continued.

“Look, here’s the short answer. You’ve been patched up a number of times, and some of the treatments were... experimental. Remember Brother Mathias?”

The name rang a bell, but I couldn’t put a face to it.

“He’s the one who saved you the first time you got splashed. Remember that? Bunch of Vipers your dad’s XO sent after you?”

That I did remember. When I’d lost my cushy privileged life and had to start over with nothing, not even my real identity.

“Brother Mathias and his order did cutting edge experimentation in medical science. What they did to you? Well, I don’t know the details any more than you do, but what I do know is you’ve got more nanites floating in you than you want to know. They’re the reason your body could still be resuscitated when you were found. Without them...” Violet jerked a thumb at her corpse once again.

“So why didn’t this treatment become standard use on people?”

“Ever heard of the term ‘grey goo’? Think of that, but only applying to a specific DNA signature. You’re the only test subject that didn’t end up happening to. And that’s why they tried so hard to bring you back when you were found. All those tests they ran? It wasn’t just to make sure you were feeling okay.”

Come to think of it they did take enough blood samples over time to fill an elephant.

Violet looked wistful again, looking over at the captain chair’s silent occupant. “That’s why, when you heard about...” She didn’t finish.

“Heard about what?”

Violet turned back to me. “Tell me a story.”

“Okay. Tell me a story,” Violet said. She was sitting next to me on a grassy hill overlooking the spaceport on Lave. I had just shown her my dad’s house, albeit it from about forty miles away. We were still on the run, after all. I couldn’t just show up on his doorstep and invite ourselves to dinner.

I didn’t answer. I couldn’t. We’d been hit by the worst possible news and I was still trying to process what could be done, and kept coming back with nothing.

Eventually, she got tired of waiting. “Fine. I’ll tell you one. It’s a story from Earth over a thousand years ago. It seems like a simple police story at first – a retired cop needs to stop a bunch of fugitives who are on the run for being different. But by the end you realize it’s about something else entirely. It’s a story about life, finding meaning in it,

and trying to figure out what it's all about. About regret and coming to terms with how things must come to an end...

"It's called Blade Runner."

I listened to Violet tell the story in her own unique way, but I felt numb through most of it. She focused on the subtext of what the story meant to her, how unfair the replicants situation was, how brutal Deckard's job was, and ultimately, the importance of grace and forgiveness, and the importance of life itself.

When she got to the point where Roy Batty saves Deckard's life, she had a distant look in her eyes, looking off into the growing night sky as she repeated his final speech. "I have seen things you people wouldn't believe... Attack ships on fire off the shoulder of Orion. I watched c-beams glitter in the dark near the Tannhäuser Gate. All those moments will be lost in time, like tears in rain."

She then turned and looked at me. "Time to die..."

I looked away. It wasn't fair. None of it was. Violet was more than a friend, she was family. About the only family I had, and I cared about her more than even my own dad. And here she was, talking so calmly and so resigned about her fate. And here I was, unable to accept it. I wanted to punch a hole in the hill until it was deep enough for me to hide in forever. I wanted this all to go away.

We'd been through a lot since we'd stolen the Cobra MKII prototype from my dad's private collection. The Viaticus Rex, as we'd dubbed her, had been a great ship, and we'd traded and schemed and fought and ran like heck through most of the galaxy in her.

And after a couple of years we'd earned enough money to buy Violet a replacement Cobra, just like I promised. She dubbed it the Lady Luck, and almost the very next day discovered just how ironic that choice of name had been.

Two weeks. That's all Brother Mathias could guarantee. I'd done everything short of threaten him with a blaster to do something for her, but there was nothing. The disease itself was beyond medical science, and whatever had kept me alive would in all likelihood turn her to a pile of grey goo in a month.

Back on the hill, Violet looked up at the stars once again. "Off the shoulder of Orion..."

It was all starting to come back, but that didn't answer the most pressing question.

"How... how are you here?" I figured it was about time to come back to that, despite Violet's concerns for my fragile brain.

"I'm not here," she said, then tapped the side of her head. "I'm here. Well, here," she corrected and pointed at my head instead. "Mathias couldn't save my life, but he could save my mind, with a little help. He had a new experiment to try, and you were desperate enough to try anything."

"You weren't?"

"To be honest? I'd made my peace. But you were terrified, mostly at the prospect of being alone again, so I agreed to try. They had a device attached to my head, scanning my brain, picking up and duplicating everything, scanning and re-scanning over and over."

"Making a copy."

"Technically. But the weird thing was it wasn't a one way street. I could actually feel the connection the whole time, like an in-and-out-of-body experience. The way I see it if it was part of me for so long, and it was active right up to the point I kicked the bucket, maybe it is me. If not, it's a hell of a facsimile. Let the philosophers argue about transhumanism and all that crap."

Okay, so far my brain hadn't broken from the news. "So how did you get here?"

"We'd picked up a lot of secrets from the Navy, if you'll recall. The seven light-year limit lie was one of them. Once I knew that there was only one place I wanted to go."

Back on the hill, Violet looked up at the stars once again. "Off the shoulder of Orion..."

"What's that?"

Violet sighed. "You know, according to those Navy records, the Federation and Empire don't extend out that far, or even in that direction. Every system we've been to in our lives has been inhabited. Every single one. But there's so much more out there. So many worlds none of us have seen. I've spent my life shooting up other ships, following my own code... it just never occurred to me that there could be more out there."

"Like Thargoids," I countered

Violet chuckled. "Spoil sport."

"What if all that area is unexplored for a reason? What if that seven light-year limit is about keeping us safe?"

"It's about keeping us penned in," said Violet.

“I’m serious. What if it’s so we don’t wander off and kick up a hornet’s nest. Maybe the rest of the galaxy is one big Thargoid nest and human space is just this tiny speck they haven’t quite wiped out yet?”

“Wow, you can really be a downer.”

“It tends to happen when my friends are dying.”

“Look. I don’t have much time left. This is what I want. We know how to break the jump limit on our ships now. I don’t have a homeworld, so there’s no place for me to be buried. Let’s go to Orion. Once I’m gone, leave my ship there and come back, or go to Sol. Visit Earth. Start a new life altogether. But let’s do this first, okay?”

I thought about it, but not for long. It was what she wanted, after all.

“Okay.”

“I can only assume something went wrong on the return trip for you,” Violet said. “I’ve got no better idea than you do about how you ended up in the deep freeze.”

“So after you...” I gestured to the mummy, “I somehow uploaded you into my own head?” I could see now that there was a band, obscured by hair, that ran around the mummy’s forehead. A few signs of circuitry showed, as well as a port of some sort by the left ear.

“More or less. Mathias messed around with your noodle so I could piggyback on it. From what I saw while he explained it, you’ve got something hugging the outside of your brain like a wet napkin. That’s me. I’m surprised the tech boys who thawed you out didn’t notice it.”

“Why didn’t you show up before?”

“I couldn’t after the accident. It seems to be connected to your amnesia. I was here, but locked out. I managed to make contact a couple of times, in dreams, and once when you kamikazed your ship into that terrorist’s Python....dumbass.”

I remembered. “So, are you completely separate from me? Can you read my mind?”

Violet shrugged. “Hey, I’m as new to this as you are. It took a while for the neural handshake to get established, and by that point you were en route to Sol and then...” She raised her hands to get across ‘whatever the hell happened next’ to me.

“So, unless you’re looking in a mirror, I can’t even tell if you’re just thinking this conversation or talking to yourself in a ghost Cobra. Heck, you might be saying my words as well for all I know.”

That puzzled me. “You can’t see me? You’re right there.” I pointed at her still standing next to the chair.

“Yeah, no. That’s more like me projecting my residual self-image, doing what I think I would be doing if I was out there in my own body. It’s supposed to help make sure neither of us goes crazy being in the same head or something. Fact is, I’m seeing out of your eyes the same as you, so you can imagine it’s kind of weird for me to look at myself talking to you right now. I mean, really weird. But, on the upside, it’s like I’m watching a movie about me whenever I want. I look good.

“Bottom line, flyboy, is that I’m back and here to stay. Now that we’ve paid our respects to the dearly departed, I suggest we get back to your ship and continue on our way.”

“Um...actually, I think I’ve had enough of exploration for a while, if it’s all the same to you. I think I’ll head back to Sol and see some doctors... and a shrink. Or twelve. Just to make sure I’m not crazy.”

Violet rolled her eyes and groaned. “Wuss.”

A Violet Partnership

I don't know if you're reading this or listening to it (my current arrangement with one of the distributors of the original broadcasts insists on both formats), but let me ask you something. How do you think you'd fare being put into this situation?

Maybe you're all cocksure that it would be no problem, but I put it to you that you really haven't thought it out enough.

"Wow, that's what you look like now? I didn't think your ego would stand for it."

That's what she said to me the first time I washed up in the bathroom of the Lonely Heart, en route back towards Sol. She was referring to the scars and burns she saw as I dried my face, of course. I stared at her in the mirror, seeing her clearly behind me in the reflection, even though she wasn't there.

The mirror also answered one question I'd had – I spoke my half of the conversation out loud. The rest was in my head. So while people wouldn't think I was schizophrenic, they would think I had an imaginary friend. Whole other kettle of crazy.

"Apparently there are some miracles medical science can't perform," I said. "They tried reconstructive surgery while I was being revived, but it went back to this before I even woke up."

"Must be the nanites."

I put the towel down. "So you can project your image wherever you like, but you can't make it so I don't see myself like a dropped pizza? Great help you are."

"If beauty is only skin deep, then mental projections are even more superficial than that."

"So? At least I could pretend I could pick up someone at a bar once in a while."

"There's the jerk I know and tolerate. At least you're starting to sound like your old self again. Look, I'm not here to make you look good. I'm here to keep you from going mental."

"Making me look good would be a start."

But the worst part was that she was right. Looking back I had been depressed, listless, directionless... who knows how long it would have been before I flew myself into a sun? I'd been desperate to keep Violet alive for a reason, and that reason was even more important now in 3300 than it had been a hundred and fifty years earlier.

I still had more questions about our arrangement, and probably would for a while. "So, are you always... on? Awake? Not sure how to refer to it."

"Well for the semantics I guess that depends if you see me as Violet or just a simulation. But to answer your question, I sleep when you sleep. I even dream, oddly enough. Or maybe I'm piggy backing on yours. It's hard to be sure. And it's not like the erotic dreams can help clear up the question."

A horrible thought occurred to me. She would see everything I did. Everything.

I shuddered. "Oh, God, I'm going to be celibate the rest of my life now, aren't I?" Not that I would stand a chance with anyone short of a prostitute (who'd no doubt charge triple at this point).

"Look on the bright side. At least we share the same taste in porn."

"Like I could ever.... With you... Just no! You better find a way to switch yourself off or go to sleep without me or something, but I don't think I can live like this without some quality 'me' time."

"Hey, it's no picnic for me either, bucko. I am quite literally a lesbian trapped in a man's body. Think any woman is going to believe that line?"

If nothing else the semantics question had been answered. This was definitely Violet.

In the time we were out in the black, Dumbass had grown from a kitten to a larger kitten. Violet took to him, just as she had my last cat, Fleabag.

"I'm surprised you even like cats considering the names you give them." She seemed to be laying on the deck, watching him chase a laser dot in his centrifugal gravity wheel.

"I like to think that they give themselves their names."

At this point were back in civilized space. I'd sold my stellar cartography data for a decent amount, even planted a flag in a couple of uncharted systems it turned out, which provided me a bonus. I might have made more trading, but that hadn't been the point. Finding Violet aside, it had been an eye opening experience. And there was so much more out there to find.

The SC guys said that less than one percent of the galaxy had been properly charted and catalogued. And while most of the “firsts” had already been achieved (first across the galaxy, first to circumnavigate the rim, first to Sagittarius A*, and so on), there was always new things to discover, and new firsts to be had.

And I wanted to go back out there, but not in the *Lonely Heart*. She’s a good ship and all, but really meant for the populated worlds. The part of me that wanted to go back into Big Sky Country wanted to do so in a way that could make the most of the journey. I had just the ship in mind for that...

“I notice she only has one seat,” said Violet. “I’ll pretend not to be annoyed by that fact.”

“Oh, the idea that I wouldn’t have to look at a co-pilot’s seat and see your ghostly visage never once occurred to me when buying her,” I replied.

The Lakon Type-6 is what’s often referred to as a flying brick. A trader’s ship by design, I’d been looking over the performance stats on it and realized it could be converted into a heck of an explorer vessel. The cockpit (which, yes, could only seat one) offered a fantastic view in all directions. By my calculations I could fill the cargo area with exploration gear and still have two huge empty cargo bays left over to play around with. I had plans for those areas.

First I needed credits to upgrade her. The Frame Shift Drive it came with ran notoriously hot—some pilots if they first boosted away from a problem and then kicked in the FSD found themselves showered in sparks as everything overloaded. But stuff like that was easily fixed if you had the time and money. Time wasn’t a problem. Money?

I suppose I could have sold the *Lonely Heart*, but to be honest I just couldn’t bear to part with her... any more than I could Violet, I guess. She might not have been my old MKII prototype, but she was the first place I’d had that felt like a home since I’d been so rudely woken up in this century.

Besides, when I got back I might very well need a combat capable vessel again, and this brick was most certainly not that vessel. It only had two small hardpoints for weapons, and unless I was going up against numbnuts who thought it was hardcore to pirate without shields, it just wasn’t worth trying to fight in it.

No, my time and effort was going to go into speed. Better thrusters, better power couplings so I could boost more often, stronger shields to hold off an attack until I was out of an enemy’s range. That was the advice the local truckers gave me, anyway. An

L6 could make you a pretty penny on the trade routes, it was just important to treat her right, and not try to turn it into something it wasn't.

"But does it make tea?" Violet asked inside my head.

I was way ahead of her on that. "Oh, I transferred my special tea maker over from the Cobra." After all, if I was going to slog cargo to pay for her upgrades, I'd need something to help make the time go by... and my 'special' tea was just the thing.

I don't know at what point he got the transfer to another station or if there are multiple clones of him, perhaps at EVERY station, but by the time I climbed out of my L6 after my first landing, I just knew who was going to be waiting for me in the hanger.

"You know," the dockworker said, "the thing about those bricks are they look pretty much the same upside down as they do upside right."

"Shut up," I said. But I still gave him his usual tip for bringing me inside before the station's defence systems kicked in and turned my brand new brick into brand new gravel.

He's right, you know." Violet said.

"You shut up, too."

Helping Out, Getting Ready

There's not too much to talk about my life as of late. I've been making the Palladium run from Tau Ceti to Sol over and over again – decent profit to be had, close to 100,000 credits per trip, though I hear of others making a lot more on other routes.

Traders take their business seriously. Since it can get rather repetitive (as I'm finding out), it becomes a game to find the best possible routes making the most profit in the shortest amount of time. There used to be a scam going on with smugglers offering great rates on... ahem... “performance” enhancers (wink wink), which made millionaires overnight until the Feds cracked down on it.

But the high profit routes also have risk, because naturally enough that's where pirates tend to go. After all, who cares about buying something at 14,000 per ton to sell at 15,000 (for a mere 1000 credits profit), when you could just steal that same cargo and make the full 15,000 for yourself?

At least, that's how it works in pirate math. There are other problems involved that they never quite take into account – risk vs reward, time vs profit, etc. But honestly I don't think that's why most of them do it. To them it's fun, doesn't involve anything above a third grade education, and the risks of death are sometimes absurdly low (I've gone over the ejection systems and how they've effectively changed the galaxy's economy—and even its morality—earlier).

Violet and I have taken the time to get more comfortable with our arrangement. She's been a bit mum about just how “inside” my head she is or can be, but as far as I can tell she's respecting my privacy.

It turns out she can read from a library of thousands of books when she doesn't want to watching through my eyes—something Brother Mathias thought ahead on I guess. This is provided in her own “virtual” reading room for it where she can be herself and not just watch herself second hand. So I think she spends time there just to feel normal.

Dumbass likes our new home, more room to run around in on the floors, walls, and ceiling. She's gotten used to even jumping in zero-g to the point where she'll jump from the floor, turn 180, and land feet first on the ceiling. Probably a good thing I got her as a

kitten, she's adapting rather well, though she's going to be disappointed when she tries those tricks station-side next time we're getting some gravity time in. So, for now, that's her new normal.

As for me, I'd spent so much time away from people I found myself strangely more communicative over the radios. Spending my time hailing other traders—even came across one who knew who I was. That was a bit of a thrill. Of course they didn't believe any of my stories, but said I was a hell of a storyteller. Damned with faint praise, I guess. Could be worse, they could have opened fire.

I've even been offering what little advice I could to people new on the space lanes. Came across a guy in a Sidewinder just starting out and had quickly managed to get in the Federation's black books. That's the problem with a bureaucracy, it's really easy to screw up and not even realize you have until it's too late. So I've been helping whenever I can with some advice on what missions to take, what to upgrade on his ship, and where to find good routes locally. So I guess that's my new normal.

Not that any of us have any idea what normal is anymore.

The good thing about making friends is you get to call in favors. My flying brick was about as useful as a broken lightbulb in a fight, but she could carry decent cargo. I played it safe in the heavily policed systems near Sol, but word came down the trucker pipeline that there was a big construction project going on over at Yembo and they'd pay top dollar for metals brought in, plus bonuses if the project reached certain goals.

The prospect of big money was always welcome, but it also meant pirates would be on that region like a fat kid on a candy bar. And a T6 loaded with precious metals might as well have "Cadbury" printed on the side of it.

So I called in a favour or two and got myself an escort, the guy I'd been helping out earlier. I was a bit surprised to find that he was still in a Sidewinder. Last I'd heard he almost had enough to buy a full-fledged Cobra, but then I learned the reason why—he didn't need anything else.

On the way to Yembo I was interdicted several times, but more often than not he was the one pirates would pick on first. Get rid of the wimpy Sidewinder escort, then take on the undefended bar of chocolate, nougat and caramel. This turned out to be their first and last mistake as he would dispatch them and rejoin me in a matter of minutes.

For my part, while I certainly couldn't fight in my brick, I had dumped my money into faster engines on it. If there's one thing I know how to do, and do well, it's run

away. Any time I was intercepted I managed to run and escape back into Supercruise before my escort even got to the scene to assist me.

So in the end the Yembo run was a success. In addition to the metals I'd brought I also carried some rare items such as Indi Bourbon, which sold for a ludicrously high amount this far from Sol. I'd heard traders talking about "rare runs," and now I could see the appeal. Sure you had a long trip to take to offload them, but the return on investment could be staggering.

After my escort and I parted ways, I realized my brick was just about in as good of shape as it could be for exploration. And what I couldn't afford now, I could make up by filling up on various rares and taking them to the edge of populated space.

"Hey, Violet, you there?"

I didn't see her, but I felt her rustling about, presumably in her 'room'. "Can it wait a minute? Poirot is about to tell everyone who killed the millionaire."

"Just wanted to find out if you had any particular direction in mind when we head out exploring again."

"You're ready?"

"Pretty much. Are you?"

She appeared next to me now, leaning on the cockpit bubble, looking out into the sea of stars. "It's not like I can socialize with anyone the way you can. Sticking around here just makes me miss having a body. So I'm ready."

"Okay, which way do you want to head?"

"Someplace interesting, that's all I care about."

I thought about it. "What's that's line from Peter Pan? Second star to the right, and straight on till morning."

Violet frowned. "I'm pretty sure they stole that from Star Trek."

Space. The Final Frontier... these are the voyages of the... the...

What the heck was I going to name my ship?

It had been informally known as The Brick for as long as I had known her, but if I was going back into the deep black for God-knows how long, I figured she should have a proper christening.

It was Violet who suggested Viaticus Rex II. The original Viaticus Rex, very poor Latin for “King of a Journey” had been the name of my old Cobra MKII prototype, once we had gotten rid of my dad’s cherry red paintjob and changed the serial numbers.

It was named that as a sign of a fresh start, both for me and Violet, after surviving a conspiracy that went deep into the Alliance Navy and managing to disappear after that. We had every intention of staying off the radar as long as possible, earn enough credits to buy Violet a new ship, and... well, you know what happened after that.

Before it had been more of a joke, indicating that we were on the run like some old TV show involving corrupt small town cops and good ol’ boys jumping over rivers in their supercharged flag painted car.

This time, however, it was all about the exploration. With the money we’d saved, I started tinkering with the internal systems, ditching some cargo space for a detailed surface scanner, and buying the best discovery scanner I could afford, which sadly wasn’t the best.

After that it was a matter of extending my jump range. Anything that wasn’t vital was ditched, and that included weapons. I wasn’t going to need them. I was confident enough to escape casual interception, and big threats like the Thargoids hadn’t been heard from in a century. Heck, the current generation seemed to think they were a myth, and even older people assumed they’d died out. Maybe they were right?

Once it had been stripped down and built back up, I’d managed to stretch the frame shift drive to just over twenty-eight light years—thirty on a half full tank. Only dedicated exploration vessels could jump farther, and they were way out of my price range.

And after all that, I had sixty-four tons worth of space left over. But it wasn’t as if I was going to be trading anything out there. I figured I could convert the area into an entertainment center and workout facility before I left populated space. The pilot’s cabin on a Type 6 is fine, but if my first exploration in the Lonely Heart taught me anything, it’s that cabin fever could be a real concern. You might start talking to yourself, and not just because the uploaded consciousness of a dead friend is haunting you.

I decided to load up the cargo area with various rare items found around the Sol systems, intending to unload them at the last homely house. That scored me close to a million credits, which was enough to upgrade my discovery scanner to something that was top of the line, then replaced the cargo racks with a holo entertainment kit and a grav-wheel workout center.

The question now was where to go. I didn't really have a destination in mind, so I figured just heading towards the center of the galaxy was a good place to start. Sagittarius A*, or Saga, was a popular test of endurance. Like climbing Everest on Earth, plus you got a great view of a supermassive black hole at the end.

Pirates and data miners harassed us for the first few hundred light years, but as you know I've got running away down to a science. Never took a scratch to the hull, but at least their scanners got a great view of my middle finger whenever I turned the flight assist off so I could spin around before kicking in the FSD.

Even Deeper In The Black

If you were out in the far depths of space, far from every human settlement, you might find a large cargo ship, thousands of light years away from the nearest trading station. At first you might wonder how it got there. Then you might wonder what was wrong. Because that ship would be spinning around and around like it was derelict or out of control.

But if you went inside you'd find that the ship's crew, all one of them and the ship's mascot, were just fine, though you might get a little dizzy watching them.

The Viaticus Rex II was spinning fast enough to simulate something approximating Earth gravity along its outer edge. Due to its shape this was best appreciated along its aft and starboard sides in the cargo bay area. I took advantage of this by running along one side, jumping up past the rotational axis point, flipping, and landing on the other, then running back. While that sounds really acrobatic, let me assure you it's easier than it looks. Plus I had lots of time to practice. And Dumbass was still better at it than me.

One downside of exploring with the Type 6 was it wasn't equipped for planetary landing. I heard there was a refit in the works, but it might not be ready for months yet. Not that I had found many worlds worth landing on.

I was in the Norma Arm, deciding to follow it around Widdershins around the galaxy for a while. Sagittarius A* could wait for another journey. I doubted I was going to try and make the full circuit, circumnavigating the Milky Way. Bit too ambitious for my blood right now. I was about 6000 light years away and was starting to feel homesick.

Not that I hadn't seen amazing things. Black holes and hypergiants, ammonia worlds teeming with life, water worlds ripe for terraforming, jovians circled by rings so pure with metal you that from a distance could see the reflection of its parent world scattered back up to you. Violet always showed up for a new discovery, and never seemed to think I spent enough time appreciating them before moving onto the next one. Maybe she had a point, but it seemed a bit hollow to see these amazing worlds and yet not be able to set foot on them. I felt like a tourist, albeit one with a big payday coming when I got back. I hoped.

Sometimes scale was a problem. One star seems about the same as another aside from color, so it's hard to appreciate how big it might be when it's filling your screen during a fuel scoop. I got around this by flying out about 500 light seconds, the approximate distance of Earth, and having a look back. That's when you knew how big it was, and sometimes this view was incredibly impressive.

But it was around this time that I decided to ditch the Norma Arm and head out into the expanse between the arms. There wasn't much there in terms of big sights, a couple of Nebula, one of them pretty small, but my logic was that I was probably going to be going through a lot of virgin territory as a result.

I'd heard about explorers coming across parts of the galaxy that were inaccessible. Sometimes it was for military reasons, like the outpost on Polaris, but for others...well, the official reasons were hush hush. Explorers simply couldn't lock onto certain regions of space, certain star clusters, but nobody knew why. If I came across one of those, maybe I could find out why. I'm no stranger to conspiracies after all.

And if they were blockaded? Well, there was always the running away option. That's a good trick.

Hello? Testing, testing, one, two, three. At least the voicebox works.

Okay, let's see what else works. Arm movement...check. Leg movement...check. Dumbass asleep...check. Cat asleep...eh, she doesn't care.

Nice. I'd forgotten what that feels like.

So, what to do first?

Oh crap, is the recorder on? How do you erase this thing?

No no NO! I said erase, not transmit! Godda—[Transmission lost]

It's been weeks now since I left Sol, and I think I'm done exploring for now. And it's not just for my sake. Violet is good company, when she can be bothered to come out of her "room". It's like she's hiding from me, though I'm not sure what I did to tick her off.

Eh, that's no different than before. We've always had an antagonistic kind of friendship. It worked well for us. But that's also the problem, because we were always able to storm off and cool down in our own ways before. I'd get drunk, she'd get in a fight, whatever worked. It's not so easy now when we're literally stuck together.

So I guess she's doing her best to keep her distance so we don't drive one another crazy. But I can't imagine that's good for her any more than it is for me. We need human contact again--even if it's only vicariously for her, it'll still help.

And it was time for me as well. I feel like I've found my calling with exploration, but at the same time that can't be all that there is. The journey is only as good as the return, I suppose. And there would always be a chance to go out and do it again.

So I set course for home.

In all my travels, I've seen many wondrous things. A blue hypergiant that would have filled the sky if Earth were orbiting it. Worlds ripe for terraforming, and ammonia worlds with life I doubt any scientist back home has ever seen. But the one thing I wasn't able to find was an Earth-like world with land mass. Oh, I'd found Earth-likes that were just water worlds with better atmospheric conditions, but nothing I could actually land my ship on (well, if it could land).

But then...

"Hey, Violet. You there?"

She didn't appear, but I heard her voice. "What is it?"

"Look."

Outside the window was a world covered in blue and green. The Viaticus Rex II hung over it in geosynchronous orbit, looking down. There were mountains, and islands, and great plains stretching out before us.

"It's beautiful."

"It's ours."

"What do you mean?"

"It's unregistered. No one's been here before. When we get home we'll be registered as the discoverers."

"You mean you," Violet said, somewhat dejected.

"You mean my pseudonym," I countered. "Let's face it, the question of who you, I, or we are is up in the air enough that I think we can both take claim to the name Mossfoot."

Violet didn't say anything at that. She's usually quick with a jab or retort, but instead she said, "I hope you remember that."

We were definitely going home at the right time. Ominous tones like that are not healthy. If she got depressed, maybe I'd end up getting depressed through some weird kind of neural osmosis. Who knows how this crap works?

"Of course I'll remember it. We're a team, right? Now, shut up and enjoy the view."

And for once she did.

Fame and Misfortune

I didn't expect the hub-bub I received when I got back. You'd think I'd have crossed the galaxy or something instead of just a twenty thousand light year loop.

It started when I reached the first Federation station. I started offloading data, taking pride in my work. Hundreds of worlds and systems never before explored or researched. A lot of boring rocks, for sure, but a number of interesting worlds that might someday have life or already had life we'd never before seen.

But after I sold enough data at that station to get in their good books, I decided to travel to another. See, I have a simple philosophy in life - be everyone's friend and they're less likely to shoot at you and more likely to help you out in a scrape. So I went from station to station, selling enough data to make everyone happy and get them calling me by name, then move on to the next one.

This seemed to attract some attention. By the time I got to M. Goberchev in Sol to check on my old Cobra, a representative from Lakon Spaceways was waiting for me at station.

Along with a press conference.

Maybe you saw the vids. God I hope not. But even if you did you wouldn't have recognized me. Because of my scarring they made me wear a mask and changed my name--all part of the promotional angle they said. I looked like a frickin masked wrestler promoting his next match.

It seemed I had stumbled across a few worlds that were of significant interest, a line-up of metal works with easy pickings to last a hundred years, along with habitable or easily terraformed worlds at the beginning, end, and middle. They were only a thousand light years from Federation space, and a prime candidate for an ambitious expansion project Lakon was co-founding.

So I became their poster-boy for exploration, calling me "Ranger M" because I managed to reach that level of achievement.

Ranger M. Jesus. If you see a luchador called Ranger M on a lunch pail, please forgive me. Did you know they're going to make a cartoon about me? They even made Dumbass into a character as a faithful but clumsy sidekick--though obviously they gave her a different name. Lakon is hoping to encourage more explorers into the deep black as well as promote their latest update on their successful Asp line.

It also turns out I came back at just the right time. Exploration data had become all the rage, due in part to Lakon's campaign, and demand for data had gone through the roof. I hadn't asked how much I made while dumping the data, having the money forwarded to my Sol account, figuring I'd get a surprise when I got there. Then the whole Lakon thing happened and I forgot.

But here's the thing. I don't care about the money. Out there I didn't just discover new worlds, I discovered new things about myself. I finally faced down that spoiled brat son of a Naval career officer who had coasted through life on his dad's money and influence and realized just how pointless it had all been, and how the life I'm leading is so much more rewarding than money, parties, and meaningless sex.

I mean, it's not like I've become humble or modest or any of that nonsense. I'm definitely not a monk. I've gained perspective, that's all. I know what's important in life and how lucky I am to be where I am, able to do what I want without endlessly moaning about now it was all taken away from me. Money isn't everything.

And so, now that this nonsense with Lakon is finally done with, I've decided to check my account, and depending on how much I have there, celebrate appropriately.

WAAHHHHOOOOO!!!

I'm king of da whole frickin galaxsheee!

hic!

Shweet! This thing worksh... but it's sheems to be printing off two of everything I shay.

Huh, I wonder if Violet shtays shober when I get pished? Have to ashk her.

What? You'll have to shpeek up! It's too loud! Yesh, I shaid two Indi Bourbonsh, one with lemon the other lime!

Anyway, show it turns out I'm ricsh.... like really shmeggins ricsh. I'm using a portable recorder so I can introdushe you to all my new friendsh here at the shpasher bar. Shay hello everyone!

Hey, you! Yeah you, shexy. I'll give you a hundred thousand credits if you kiss this ugly mug right here, right now! Two hundred! Come on, I don't care if you have a moushtash...OW!

Eh, she wantsh me. I can tell. Everyone here ish jusht great. Including thish shwell guy right here, Ivan. He's a freelansh fighter pilot and wantsh to go kick shome ass in the combat zone over in shome shtupid shtar shystem... shays I can join him if I want.

hic!

Hell yeah, I'm shhhow there! Kickin ash, takin namesh. Don' you all know who I am??? I'm frickin Ranger M!

I'M RANGER M I TELL YOU! NEXT ROUND SH ON FRICKIN RANGER M!!!!

WOOOO!! RANGER M HAS AN ASHP!

DIE YOU FRIGGIN REBELSH SHCUM! SHIX GUNSH, BABY! EAT FRIGIN LASHER DEATH!

WHAT? YOU WANNA PIECSH OF ME? OH, YOU TOO HUH? YOU HAVE ANY IDEA HOW MUCH I SHPENT ON THIS SHHIP? I CAN BUY AND SHELL YOU ALL! I'M INVINSHIBLE!

YOU ALL FRICKIN SHUCK! I'M RANGER M!!! RANGER M!!!

So... that went badly.

It seems I'll be in the hospital for a while. Um... where to begin?

I found that portable recorder and listened to what I'd been jibbering before, trying to make sense of it. I remember going to see my bank account, decided to celebrate in a respectable way... it all got a bit hazy after that. Was I singing the Ranger M cartoon theme song at some point?

I seem to recall some fighter pilot named Ivan was hanging out with me, drinking way more than I was. He convinced me to fly into a combat zone with him... But I only had a T6... and my Cobra was still in storage.

Wait, no... I spent most of my fortune on a fully kitted Asp. Oh God, did I really use my Ranger M card to try and get a better deal on an Asp? Oh man, the bragging is all coming back. I may have actually said I was the face of Lakon Spaceways and demanded a free bobblehead of myself to go in the ship... Well, that explains the visit I had an hour ago.

Basically I can kiss any Ranger M royalties I had coming goodbye. While I've been laid up here a Lakon rep came over and pretty much forced me to sign over any claim I had on the identity and dumped me as a spokesman. No idea if they're going to scrap the campaign or not, they might just give some other explorer or out of work clown a mask and pretend he's me.

Whatever, they can have it. Even if the cartoon did have a really cool theme song.

Crazy Ivan

“Dobriy den!”

At least, I think that’s what Ivan said. Something Russin-ish.

You ever notice how certain cultures hold on to their cultures with an iron fist like the French, while others assimilate everything around them like the English? I have no idea where Russia falls in that category, it’s just something that occurred to me since I’ve been spending so much time in Sol.

Back in Lave there really wasn’t that kind of diversity, other than a basic North/South divide that was more centered around sports competitions than anything major. But Earth? It’s about as divided and layered as I remember from the history books.

Anyway, this was Ivan’s way of saying hello. Average looking guy, wearing Federal fatigues, but of the Reserves variety I see a lot of freelancers wear.

I have no idea what I did to endear myself to him, but for some reason he felt obliged to visit me in the hospital. Of course the whole reason I was in the hospital was because of him, and I mean that in more ways than one. After all, he’s the one who talked me into flying into a combat zone while drunk as a skunk. I told him this and you know what he says?

“I drink two times what you do and I fly fine. It’s not my fault if you can’t hold your vodka.”

Okay, he didn’t say vodka, that’s just me going for the obvious Russian pilot stereotype. It was actually Lavian Brandy, which he had imported to the station himself and I had been buying rounds of for everyone, calling it Indi Bourbon (everything expensive is Indi Bourbon to me).

I asked him to shed some light on the day before for me, given my current blank. Even Violet couldn’t fill in the gaps, I hadn’t heard from her since I got drunk. Maybe she’s in her reading nook nursing a hangover as well.

“Well, you came into the bar as happy as can be, wanting to celebrate a big winfall...” Oh, as an aside, I could break up his English in some cartoonish way, but just trust me, he’s got a Russian accent, but speaks English just fine. “I could relate to that, since I had had a few myself. It’s a good time to be a pilot, you know. So I celebrate with you.”

“And the whole ‘let’s take on the rebels at... wherever that was’ thing?”

“You told me you’d been in deep space for weeks and had no excitement in all that time. That you were restless for a good fight and if I knew anyone looking to hire a merc.”

“Wait, I said I wanted a fight? That doesn’t sound like me.”

“I admit to my shame that you were not really yourself. Looking back I should have known but at the time I just thought you were having a very good time. So I thought I would give you what you wanted. I was heading out to a low intensity combat zone anyway, and the way you talked I figured you’d been in your fair share of scrapes. I had you tag along. I figured you could handle it.”

“I heard the recording, Ivan. I was barely coherent.”

Ivan said nothing, then I realized he was trying to hide a smile. “Okay, so I thought it might be a good laugh. Look, you were talking about buying the biggest baddest ship you could, and seemed to have your heart set on an Asp. I figured those were pretty durable and if I was watching your back I could record you stumbling around thinking you were the god of war or something.”

“And instead you got me blown up.”

“Hey, I brought you back here in one piece, didn’t I? Heck, the stasis field barely had time to kick in before I scooped you up and flew back to the nearest station. You were fine.”

“Thanks for that, anyway.”

“Least I could do. You were highly entertaining.”

“Doesn’t pay for my insurance bill, though. Do you have any idea how much it was?”

Ivan shrugged. “You didn’t seem very concerned about money last night. Where I come from, that usually means you have too much of it. One way or another, the universe corrects these things.”

“How very Zen and blame-deflecting of you.”

“Well, I suppose part of the reason I am here is to apologize for all that. It was still hilarious... and since you are no longer Ranger M, you won't mind if the videos I took go viral under that name. They already have several hundred million views on GalTube.”

I groaned, but really, somehow this just felt like par for the course.

Eventually I was discharged, but that didn't mean I was ready to fly again. Due to the way I'd lost my ship I was almost in danger of being in breach of insurance statutes and losing it all. Twenty-Five million credits down the drain in one super buffed up Asp shaped fireball.

Fortunately what little pull I had with Lakon Spaceways was enough to get them to overlook this, and honour the insurance agreement. I suspect the recent exploits of Ranger M was bad enough press and figured it would only get worse if I made a stink about the whole thing if I lost it all... which I totally would have.

I mean, in a way they're the one responsible for this. I never asked to be made a celebrity. I was just selling my data and they come along and force a mask on my face and put me in front of a bunch of cameras. It brought back all my bad habits. For a moment I was a kid again, and I don't mean that in a good way. The sense of privilege and entitlement, and having the money to back it up...

I wonder if they have a Spoiled Brats Anonymous support group?

But it's not a total loss. I still have my Asp, and it is pretty well kitted out, mostly B rated equipment. Not bad. Not bad at all. B rated stuff doesn't come cheap. I could sell her, I suppose. Recoup most of the money. But the Asp is a solid ship, other than an uncomfortably exposed power plant, but for the most part it's built like a tank. I think I'll hold onto her for a while.

I've put the Viaticus Rex II in a hanger on Abraham Lincoln in Sol, right next to my Cobra the Lonely Heart.

As she currently stands, this Asp can carry almost as much cargo as the Type 6, but at the same time have more firepower than the Cobra. She's not as fast or manoeuvrable, mind you, but she's no slouch either. Here's hoping Dumbass doesn't mind her new quarters.

So, it looks like I'll be stuck here for a while with the... what the heck did I name this ship anyway? I vaguely recall being asked to designate a name with Starport Services

when I bought her, but I was also arguing with the sales rep who thought I might not be ready to fly her. It looks like I officially named her...*I'm Not Drunk*.

Aaaand it looks like I wanted to be rather emphatic about that point, because I added a rider to my insurance forms stipulating that any replacement Asp I get must keep this designation or it forfeits the contract.

Swell. Just swell.

Meat Puppet

Well, I figured out why Violet has been so quiet for so long. I can only assume some readers or listeners will have figured this out by now.

Let me start at the beginning. I'd gotten the I'm Not Drunk checked out and spaceworthy again, but was still a couple of days away from feeling like flying again. So I'd gone back to the spacer bar to catch up on some sports.

The Asp is a comfortable enough ship (more so than the Type 6, since it's designed for long range exploration) but it doesn't feel like home yet. And I can't get that stupid name out of my head. So I needed a different kind of normal to touch base with, and the local bar has always been that place.

Unfortunately it turns out that I hadn't only made friends at the bar that fateful night before I was shot down.

"Did you say my old lady had a moustache?"

This was coming from a very large man. Large enough that he had his own satellites orbiting him, in the form of smaller, but no less intimidating men. They were wearing the black and red colors of the Satan's Choice gang.

A thousand years ago they'd have driven motorcycles. Here they flew fighters. Not pirates, mind you. No, they were careful to stay just on this side of the law. They smuggled drugs and slaves, whatever paid the most, and they took contracts to take out whoever if it paid enough, but they left regular shipping alone.

Scumbags, but smart scumbags. And big scumbags with muscles and chains and black leather and I really really really didn't want to be there anymore.

Unfortunately one of the satellites broke orbit and blocked my exit.

"You offered her two hundred thousand credits for a kiss. You think my old lady is a whore?"

"Hey, I was drunk. I was just having fun, letting off steam."

The bruiser cracked his knuckles. "Yeah. Letting off steam. I like to do that too."

“Maybe he’d like to let me kiss him for two hundred thousand credits,” one of the little moons said.

The bruiser nodded. “Yeah. Maybe he’d like to give us all that much. We’re open minded that way.”

Looking around, I was guessing the fee to get out of this mess with my bones intact was somewhere around a million credits. Which I didn’t have.

Now if Violet was here she’d no doubt have taken them on while I ran off somewhere or helped from a safe distance. Unfortunately I was here alone and for such a big guy that bruiser’s fist flew really, REALLY fast.

After that? Well, I’ll tell you the rest once I go to bed, no doubt.

After that? That’s where I come in. That first punch knocked Mossfoot out cold, but it also meant I could take over.

I’d been testing my ability to use his body while he was asleep for some time now, partly in case something like this ever happened, but also... well, look being trapped in someone else’s body is really not a picnic. I don’t know if I’m really me or just a simulation of me, but in either case it’s very isolating and I was going crazy.

I considered this arrangement a win-win. Whenever Mossfoot’s asleep, I can come out and use his body. His brain actually still goes through its REM cycle while I’m in charge, so he wakes up as if nothing happened. Once or twice he had a few bruises he couldn’t account for, but it’s taken me a while to be able to use this body like my own.

And as upset as he might be with this new arrangement, he couldn’t argue with the results. The gas giant’s lackies were a piece of cake, even basic aikido moves let me redirect one into another over and over until I could land a solid shot and take one out, then rinse and repeat until the lackies were whittled down from four to three to two to one.

The last one I used to trip up the behemoth, because while Mossfoot works out, he was not cut out for that fight. Heck, I wouldn’t have been cut out for that fight – I’d need at least a baseball bat to work with, and for a sports bar, this place was surprisingly lacking in improvised weaponry.

Call it “pulling a Mossfoot”, but I took the opportunity to run away.

So... yeah. Guess the cat’s out of the bag now. *Surprise!*

She forgot to add that when I woke up I was back in the I'm Not Drunk, flying to another system because those Satan's Choice dudes decided to chase me.

That's when Violet came clean about everything.

So, yeah, this is my new reality. Like the old one wasn't confusing enough. You know, every once in a while I run into a fan out there who takes the time out to tell me they like my stories and ask how much of it is actually real... you'd think ONE of them would have warned me that this crazy chick was taking over my body. Thanks a lot, you bunch of filthy animals.

Still, she probably saved my life. It also explains what happened with Ivan and why Violet had been quiet for so long. My guess is at the high level of inebriation I was at, Violet was similarly affected and our consciousness were swimming into one another, so I was saying things that I normally never would, and she was taking over during my frequent blackouts.

So, in other words, just like getting really drunk.

I'd like to say I'm mad, but I'm not. I am, however, concerned. Despite her reassurances that this is as far as our connection goes, I cannot shake the words of one of the great classics, where the villain in a deep rumbling voice says:

"I am altering the deal. Pray I don't alter it any further."

Greetings, Trusted Ally

I've been in the Federation for a long time.

As I've mentioned before, it's not through any sense of loyalty. I grew up in what's called the Alliance now, but the world I grew up in a hundred and fifty years ago was a lie so I haven't been keen on returning since getting defrosted.

No, I was in Federation space at first because of its novelty, getting to visit the birthplace of humanity and all, and then because I got comfortable there. I got myself allied with a number of systems because it's always smart to have friends. When the universe is full of people trying to kill you, it would be stupid not to.

But I tell you, sometimes the bureaucracy here drives me nuts. The number of forms I have to fill out every time I stay in dry dock longer than five minutes... ghah! And sure they're all about law and order and keeping the peace, but it's in that same frustrating paperwork kind of way.

And every single time I think I've got things figured out they throw a loop on me. Okay, so I learned about the perils of smuggling cargo early on. No harm done, just meant that Fed ships kept a closer eye on me for a while. Hey, back in my time salvaging was a way of life. Stuff like that is easy to remember. But then every once in a while they hit you with things you had no idea about, and make no sense whatsoever...

After the Ranger M fiasco and the encounter with Satan's Choice, I decided to make myself scarce and make a few credits in my Asp. The I'm Not Drunk is a capable fighter (when, er, I'm not drunk) but in its current layout holds almost as much as my Type 6. That made it ideal for stocking up on rare items and taking them to the edge of populated space where they'd be worth a small fortune. I could make a million credits that way easy, and not have to worry about pirates along the way.

I've compiled a list of systems near Sol that sell these unique items, everything from rare booze to boner pills to weight loss drugs that are really parasitic lifeforms... hey, I don't judge. Hitting them is just about enough to fill my ship to capacity.

After finishing this game of galactic hopscotch I came back to Sol briefly to put Dumbass in our rented room on Galileo. She needed the gravity and I didn't know how long I would be out for delivering these goods. That's when a representative of the Federation's came out to greet me. Not a military man. Not in the least.

"Welcome, trusted ally!"

Well, that was new. "Hello to you too." He was a thin, bald man in work clothes that probably cost as much as my ship.

"Careful," said Violet inside my head, "He might be trying to convert you to Pastafarianism or something."

"Quiet, I'm still not talking to you."

"You just did."

"Shhh!"

The rep didn't notice me muttering to myself, fortunately, and came to shake my hand. "I like to come out and meet with every pilot personally who makes the list."

"The list?"

The man grinned. "The Federation recognizes your achievements, Lieutenant Commander," Hey, I got promoted and didn't even realize it. Nice. "But that is strictly a military concern, and not one that reflects your importance to us as a whole. At this point we would like to convey upon you full Allied status within all Federation systems. Congratulations."

That was the best news I'd had since I lost my Ranger M gig. Like I said, it's always good to have friends. Being an Ally meant that any Fed system I'm in, even if they'd never seen me before, would send out ships to help if I got ambushed and attacked, plus I could expect all kinds of basic discounts on stations and accommodation.

"Wow. Thank you. Thanks a lot."

"Well, we do what we can to honour those who spend so much time in our... systems... Is that what I think it is?"

My cargo ramp had been lowered, and my consignment of rares brought out for a routine inspection. Among them were kegs of whiskey.

"Is that... is that Eranin Pearl Whiskey?"

"Sure is," I said. I had a growing sense of pride in me, as if I was part of something bigger, and they were welcoming me with open arms despite my face that's made for radio broadcasts only. "Going to take it out to the edge to comfort our deprived

Federation cousins out there. You know, I really shouldn't, but tell you what, let's open one up and have a glass to celebrate. My treat."

"Oh my. No. This won't do. This won't do at all."

"What's wrong?" I asked.

"Uh oh," Violet whispered.

"What's wrong? This whiskey is illegal."

"Illegal? Buddy, I've imported enough hooch to this station to power it for a year. Alcohol is a legal drug in Sol."

"Yes, but Eranin succeeded from the Federation thirty years ago and this... this travesty is their way of rubbing our noses in it. It's clearly marked on our prohibited lists."

"What? Where?"

"Chapter 12 of the Imported Goods Act, Subsection AA-23, as a footnote to Paragraph 7." The man brought up the obscure section on his datapad as if it was the title page. "Oh, I'm sorry, but I'm afraid we're going to have to fine you for carrying this. This cannot stand."

"But I'm a trusted ally, remember? I'm on the list."

"No, Mr. Mossfoot, I'm afraid you're on the *other* list now. Please pay your fine promptly and be on your way. If you stay away from such subversive elements in the future, we may reconsider our position at a later date. Good day."

And with that he was gone, just a gleam of bald partially blinding me as he turned and left.

I checked my watch. "Well, that was the shortest turnaround of fortune I've had in a while."

"I'm pretty sure it's a new record," said Violet. "You didn't even get the secret decoder ring or learn the Feddy Handshake."

My teeth clenched. I was still trying to ignore Violet, but she was probably right. A new record.

I waved to the cargo personnel. "Load it back up. All of it. I'm leaving."

"What about Dumbass?" asked Violet

"She's coming with us," I said, which confused and scared one of the dock workers who thought I was talking about her. I went back inside and prepared for takeoff.

“You’re not going to just go out to the edge to sell the stuff and sulk out there, are you?” Violet asked.

“No, I am not. That’s not the only place these goods will be worth a fortune.”

“Well, distance makes all the difference,” Violet reminded me. “The further the better.”

“I know. That’s why I have the perfect destination in mind. These guys want to have me join their secret club just to kick me out again? Fine. We’re taking this load to the Empire.”

The Empire Has Cookies

If conscience, ethics and spite ever met in a perfect storm it was this week. No sooner do I leave to haul my rare cargo down to Empire space that I hear the news on GalNet. The President of the Federation ordered an attack on civilian ships in Lugh. Nine thousand civilians were killed, on purpose, all because they thought they had intel that an enemy leader was among them.

My God.

Look, I'm no angel, and never claimed to be. I'll stoop to all kinds of lows if the price is right and far lower if I believe the target has it coming to them, but knowingly shooting refugee ships? Let's just say I didn't want to be in Fed space for a while. The stink was getting to me.

Ivan was good enough to fly escort to me into Empire territory. He had some pull down there and said he could smooth over any rough edges I might have settling in.

The Empire is... interesting. I stopped off at Liabese, near the capital of Achenar. Mostly because I figured making a name for myself closer to the capital would get me a permit faster. Turned out I was right. It took me less than a week to get an Allied status with them—they gave me a fancy pin to wear on my cape and everything. Not that I have a cape... but capes seem to be an Empire thing. Why don't I have a cape? Capes are cool! Note to self, get a cape.

Anyway, it had taken over three months of nonsense to get the same results with the Federation, only to lose it five minutes later. I made a few runs back to Fed space to pick up more rares for quick sale back in the Empire, which seemed to please these fancy pants types to no end. It also managed to somehow smooth things over with the Feds, so I'm technically allied with both sides.

Hey, who am I to complain? If it means they send out rescue ships faster I'll game. But for now I'm staying clear of the Feds except for when I need them. It just doesn't feel right to hang out there.

Politics is big and complex and I know there are no easy answers, but some things ARE easy. You don't shoot down refugee ships because you think a single bad-guy is on board.

So it looks like Ivan had a similar idea to me. I don't know if it was Lugh that got him to shift bases or just wanted a change of pace, but he decided to hang out in the Empire for a while as well. He seemed to think there was good money to be made dealing with all the faction in-fighting in the area. But I had a funny feeling the way he talked, as if I should already know all this. I checked my status on the control panel...

"Violet?"

"You know, this Asp does have two seats but the other one is directly below you. Who thought THAT was a good idea? How can I mentally project myself somewhere I can't even see? Lamé. What's up?"

I looked at my current combat rating. "Um... you haven't been 'practicing' your flying skills, have you?"

"What makes you say that?"

I noticed that wasn't a denial, and knowing she could see what I could see, focused on my current rating of Competent up from Novice.

"Oh... well, Ivan called a few nights and asked if you wanted to make some easy money. So I figured, you were asleep and I could use the practice..."

"And the fact I'm a Squire now in their military?"

Violet actually managed to sound sheepish, so I could only assume even she felt guilty about whatever nightly hijackings she was doing of my body. "Ivan found out about some bad people and I figured you wouldn't mind if you knew how bad they were... I put the money to good use, you know. You've got better thrusters now."

"What rating?"

"A."

My eyes widened. Those were worth five million credits. My personal greed was competing with my sense of self preservation. "Please just don't get me killed. And if you think you are going to get me killed... please don't wake me up."

"Deal, boss."

Ivan didn't know about my "arrangement" with Violet, and I wasn't about to tell him. Heck, I have yet to find anyone to believe that it's actually true. People following my story either assume I'm simply being colourful, suffering some kind of PTSD, or am mentally unstable. So I've given up trying to convince folks. You want to think I'm just spinning yarns? Fine. My invisible laser frogs will take our pancakes elsewhere.

Despite Violet's promises of keeping me out of harm's way, the continuing influx of funds and upgrades to my Asp tells me she's lying her ever loving fool head off... dear God I wish there was a way to lock her in her room when I'm sleeping.

Ivan always seemed to wonder why I was so much more cautious in a fight when I was the one in charge, but didn't say anything. Instead he was interested in profit and advancement. We had similar philosophies that way – make money and make friends. The key to a successful life in space travel.

But there was always something a bit mercenary about him. Like the only thing that mattered was the money and the friends were just a means to an end.

I don't think it's sociopathy. Not in the way we commonly think of it. Maybe it's just because he's raised in this never-fail ejection seat age I talked about before. Maybe to him it's all just a game and nobody ever gets hurt. I dunno, maybe if he realized real people were getting hurt during his rampages in hot zones he'd change his tune.

But I doubt it.

Why am I so sure? Our last cargo run together. He'd traded up to a Type 7 Lakon transport, hoping to work his way up to something big with lots of guns and armor. He wanted to know if I'd fly escort duty for him. "You'll get 5% on the profits, along with whatever you make yourself along the way."

Not a problem. "What's the cargo?" I asked.

"Slaves."

At first I thought I didn't hear him right. "What?"

"Imperial Slaves. Not the unlicensed kind. Good profit margin on these ones."

I've said before that I don't truck with slaves, and there's a very simple reason why. In another time and place I could very easily have been one. Of either kind.

First off there are your straight up old school slaves. People who are forced against their will into labor. These people are sometimes rounded up by pirates on fringe worlds during raids (all the more reason to hate the buggers), and the people who buy them treat

them as badly as those who kidnapped them in the first place. As much as people like the Federation try to stamp these things out, there is always a market for them somewhere.

Back in my time, sometimes these slaves were made up from pilots who ejected, only to get their pods scooped up by the guy who shot them down. Some people made a sport of it. And on more than one occasion I was almost on the receiving end of that.

Then there are Imperial slaves, which is a form of indentured servitude. People who get into various forms of debt can pay it off by signing a contract to work as a slave for a set period of time. The Empire considers this honourable, claiming it promotes a strong work ethic in its citizens and provides redemption for those who otherwise would have become a burden on society.

The problem is, there are so many ways to exploit this – loopholes that can stretch out a one year contract into ten, new debts added onto old, interest charges, and various legal loopholing that can, and have, turn these people's lives into hell. What you see on the vids of hard working Imp slaves doing their duty does not necessarily reflect the reality. Rebellions have been fought over this, only to be crushed in the name of order and honor.

Even if it was all above board, who cares? At the end of the day it's still slavery.

And I could have been one.

Think about it. When I first lost everything over a century ago? I literally had nothing. It was only because Brother Mathias gave me a beaten up rust-bucket of an Adder that I was able to start rebuilding my life.

And then again when I was defrosted in the present day. Since I was found technically dead, in Imperial space the ship I was found in might have been deemed Empire salvage and my entire recovery bill (assuming they even tried to revive me) would be placed on me as debt I'd have to work off.

Do you see where I'm getting at here? It's a hard universe out there, and as we all know I've had my share of bad luck. But there are so many others out there, countless others, with less luck than me. How can you not feel sorry for those poor saps?

I told Ivan I was sorry, but I wouldn't be able to fly escort for him. He asked why, and like a moralistic fool I explained. My point was lost on him. Either he bought the Empire line about honourable indentured servitude or he just didn't care. But in the end it was profit margins that won out.

So with a nod we parted ways, and I was a lot less keen on getting a cape.

Noah JD Chinn

Rummaging somewhere inside my head, I could have sworn I heard Violet say, “I knew I was right about you.”

Mossfoot Morality and Manual Mechanics

For those not in the loop, what I meant by that goes back to the first time I met MF a hundred and fifty years ago...when I had a body and I blew his ship out of the sky.

It was supposed to be an easy hunt. I spent some time tracking him down, had read his full portfolio. Heck, I'd even gone undercover as a flyboy bunny at the spacer bar he hung out in to get a feel for the man, and he was a grade A jerk the universe was going to be better off without.

Then, before I could move in for the kill while he was on a delivery run, he answered a distress call. A passenger liner, the Princess Cruise, was under pirate attack, and to my surprise he ran straight for it to help.

Outnumbered, outgunned, and outmatched, he joined in the system defence forces and helped turn the tide... but not before the Princess Cruise itself was lost.

I still shot him down the next day, mind you. Right through the cockpit, though I was careful not to hit him. Hey, a bounty is a bounty, but that bounty was on his ship, it never specifically specified the pilot being dead (I figured I could still collect on that technicality. I was wrong, but that's a whole other story).

So I scooped him up before he was cold and took him back to the station, and when he recovered, I let him know why I did what I did.

I told him I saw a different man that day, someone that maybe the universe wasn't better off without. I'd hoped he'd prove me right.

MF is fond of reminding people that he's no angel, but I'm even less so. I have a code, and I like to think I have ethics, but at the end of the day I'm still a killer. Despite all his bluster, Mossfoot doesn't run away from fights just because he's a coward...though that's certainly part of it.

We've done a lot of good together over the years, but one could argue there was always enlightened self-interest at play in some fashion. But today was different. Slavery is perfectly legal in the Empire. There was no trouble for him to get into, no possible downside to accepting the commission. Heck, the profits would have been good and

helped his standing in Empire space. He was even friends with the other pilot. And yet he still said no.

It might have taken a hundred and fifty years and my own death to find out for sure, but it's nice to know I was right about him.

Pirates. God I hate pirates.

I'm not against making a dishonest buck, but I am much more a con and swindle the unworthy sort of cad. You know, people who are making tons of money but make that cash through questionable means so there's no harm in making them...share...some with...me.

Oh crap. I'm that guy now, aren't I?

I've been making decent money in my Asp for a while now, collecting rares in the Federation, trading them in the Empire, and then buy rares in the Empire for the Federation. It hauls in close to a million and a half each way if everything goes smoothly. I'm sure I could make more finding a nice reliable Palladium route somewhere, but this way I get to see more of the galaxy.

Of course the trouble with rares is, pirates tend to know that traders like me will be coming there. Bigger traders don't bother with the rares routes, due to the small quantities most stations offer of those prized items. Instead those traders make more faster and more sticking with standard trades.

And small ships like me can be mass-locked by bigger ships, giving them plenty of time to blow you to pieces if you don't heave-to and prepare to be boarded.

That's what happened outside of Vega.

Now I'm no stranger to interdiction, but this guy was different. You could tell right away he wasn't your generic pirate, and he sure as heck wasn't one of the stupid ones who didn't carry shields so they could carry more loot.

No, this guy was smart, and he was in an Imperial Clipper.

My God, what a ship. If I wasn't busy crapping my pants I'd have had an erection when I saw it.

You can't buy these babies in the Federation, or the Alliance, or anywhere else for that matter. It's exclusive to the Empire and is a work of art. A deadly work of art.

"What's the CODE, lad?"

Ah crap, a code pirate. This group was well known for offering “safe passage” to traders by paying a fee for a code that could be used to bypass any of their interdictions. These guys were pros, so that meant I needed to be doubly worried.

“I said, what’s the CODE, lad?”

“Um... swordfish?” It was worth a shot.

“Disable your engines and drop your cargo. You have ten seconds to comply.”

I snapped out of it. Okay, there was no way I’d outfight this ship. He clearly knew what he was doing. But then again, so did I.

“I don’t think so, buddy.” Escape vector set, full power to engines, boosters on, engage frame shift drive...

The FSD whined and complained, a warning popped up on my HUD. The mass of the Clipper was slowing my FSD’s charge rate to a crawl.

“Oh crap.”

The pirate started opening fire. I switched power from engines to shields, but this thing had two large weapons mounts as well as two medium ones. I knew my shields wouldn’t last.

“Let me take over,” Violet said. “Let me take this guy. I can do it!”

“Knock it off, Violet! I’m busy running away!” I didn’t think Violet could actually take over unless I was asleep or unconscious, and I wasn’t about to hit myself over the head with a bottle.

I jinked and swerved and boosted, and Violet kept yelling in my brain.

Personally, I blame her for what happened next.

She made me panic. An expert coward such as myself knows exactly what I should have done in this situation. Running away directly was the stupid thing to do. All I did was make myself an easier target. I couldn’t outrun his Clipper, so all I was providing him was long distance target practice.

No. First off I should have jumped systems. Using the FSD to go to another star works differently than supercruise, and isn’t locked in the same fashion, though it does take longer to charge under normal circumstances.

I also should have turned into him and got right on his back, kept him busy and spinning around trying to keep up with me while my engine charged. Even if he got some solid hits on me, so what? He was getting them on me at range as well. Chances are he’d have hit me less and the next thing you know the engines are ready to go.

And chaff. I also forgot to use my chaff. A Clipper's big hard points are on the far ends of it nacelles, and those are almost certainly going to be gimbled to give the pilot better fire control.

Had I had a calm head and not so distracted by Violet, things might have ended up differently. Instead I ended up drifting dead in space with my engines blown.

The pirate's voice came back over the comm: "Care to reconsider your stance there, lad?"

"Um... on second thought, I guess you can have my cargo," I said.

"Thank you. Much obliged."

I braced myself for getting spaced after I unloaded my cargo. It didn't happen. "So... um... you're not going to blow up my ship?"

The pirate snorted. "No. Why would I do that?"

"It sort of seems to be the sort of thing pirates do."

"Maybe the stupid ones. Doesn't exactly encourage repeat business, does it? Consider this, lad. Next time we meet, you'll probably be more inclined to give me what I want instead of this song and dance, am I right?"

The logic was sound, even if I knew in my gut I wouldn't make it easy for him. "Sure."

"Exactly. You kill your target, that's one less person out there who will make things easy for you later on. And what have you lost, really? Sure, your ship's a bit of a wreck, but that's on you for running. Still, it's a heck of a lot cheaper to fix her than to replace her, am I right?"

Again, I had to agree the logic was sound. "True."

"So you walk away from this wiser, and I walk away richer. Besides, those ejection seats aren't as fool proof as they say. I'd hate to have your blood on my hands."

Well, of all the things I expected, this conversation was somewhere down with finding a space unicorn. "Wow. Um, okay then. Thanks... er... thanks for not destroying me."

The pirate finished scooping up my rares, which, now that I thought about it, did not represent a significant financial investment on my part. Rares were worth a fortune to sell once you got over a hundred light years from their source, but they were cheap to buy.

"No problem," he said, turning his ship around and leaving me alone. "Now just remember that if you run into me again."

Oh, I intended to, but not the way he expected. Next time I needed to prove to myself I had that calm resolve to escape this guy the way I should have. But before I jumped systems, I'd be sure to drop him a few tons of cargo for his trouble.

No reason a gentleman pirate can't be rewarded for showing some basic decency. Of course, I was still stuck here dead in space with no engines.

"Any chance you can give me a tow to the next station?"

"Sorry, lad. Consider this the price you pay for not following the CODE."

Very basic decency.

"Okay... how about this?"

The lights flickered and died in the cockpit. All I could see were the spinning points of light outside the window. "Good job," said Violet. "You killed life support. Glad you put Dumbass in the life support carry box first"

The visor slipped down over my helmet the moment power was cut. "It's only for a minute. I need to access the FSD and the life support power runs right through it."

We were still drifting in space, engines dead, spinning like a sleepy ballerina. When I was exploring I had an auto-repair unit taking up some of my cargo space. It was a life saver when out in the deep black and you were ten thousand light years from the nearest station. But in civilized space, I never thought I'd need one. Just about every system had at least one station that could perform repairs, and I kept the I'm Not Drunk in tip top shape, like all my ships.

Violet thought I'd have to ditch my ship, use the distress signal on the ejection seat to get someone's attention, but I wasn't about to give up my ship like that. Besides, the insurance was insultingly high.

"So what exactly do you plan to do once you've accessed the drive?" asked Violet. "The thrusters are swiss cheese right now. You'll never repair them."

"That's where you're wrong. I don't need them to be fully functional, just functional enough. If I can strip part of the hyperdrive element and bypass the safeties, I should be able to use those parts to get thrusters back online. We can get her properly fixed at the next station, it's only five hundred light seconds away."

Violet seemed unconvinced. "I really doubt you can just fiddle around with it a bit and get it working again."

She turned out to be right. Oh, I could get the parts I needed from the FSD, but I then needed to house it and bracket it to stay in place, and that required me stripping parts from other parts of the ship. Then to power it, I needed to rewire it and provide an alternate energy intake to the distributor, which meant more parts were stripped.

By the time I was done, just about every subsystem in the ship had some parts borrowed from it, and the thrusters looked like a science fair project.

“And this, to you, is a better solution than ejecting. You’ve more or less loosened everything holding this rust bucket together! You’ll fly apart the moment you turn it on.”

“Hey, trust me,” I said. “It’ll work.” I was running out of oxygen on my life support, so I really really really did hope it worked. “All right. Power on.”

The ship’s computer acknowledged and powered up the ship. The lights came on and oxygen was restored to the cabin.

“All systems online,” the computer said.

“See? Online.”

“I’ll believe it when I see the engines work.”

“Would you relax? You know how to blow things up, I know how to fix them. I worked on my dad’s collection of classic ships for years.”

“Learning how to hotwire them is not the same as learning how to fix them.”

“Very funny.”

Okay, I’ll admit I wasn’t as confident as I sounded. But even the diagnostics systems agreed I’d restored some functionality to the drives. Granted, this was the same computer that had just called me Mass Effect a moment ago. What the hell did that even mean? Was it calling me fat? Suddenly the name “I’m Not Drunk” seemed to have more to do with the ship than with me.

I got in the cockpit seat and strapped in. “Think of it this way, Vi. Worse case scenario, the ship blows and we eject anyway like you wanted. Call that Plan B.”

I turned on the thrusters and the ship stabilized itself. “HA!”

Violet humphed. “Okay. I’m impressed. Now what about getting us somewhere? How long at normal speed to the nearest station.

“On thrusters? Something like six months. No, we’ll hit Supercruise.”

“You mean the FSD?”

“Yeah.”

“That part of the ship you cannibalized most to get the thrusters back online.”

“Right.” I locked in on the nearest station and engaged the FSD.

“Friendship Drive charging.”

“Did it just say Friendship Drive?” asked Violet?

“Um... I needed some of the parts from the ship's computer as well.”

“Roger that. Preparing for Plan B,” said Violet. “Nice knowing you.”

“4...3...2...1...enrage.”

And about ten seconds later I started breathing again. We were on our way.

A few minutes later we were docked and the talk of the space port. Engineers from the opposite side of the station hitched a ride on the auto-loaders that loop the station in order to see what was left of the I'm Not Drunk.

At first I was flattered, then it got boring. After signing a few spanners (for luck, I was told), I asked how much it was going to be to repair properly.

“All that? Well, we got a special on refabricated parts and should be able to take care of that mess for, say, 11,000?”

Eleven thousand credits to repair a ship worth several million? Talk about a deal.

Once left alone, Violet stood next to me inspecting the damage.

“Should have let me fight,” she said.

“Not happening,” I said. “And stop asking. I don't think you can take control unless I'm out cold.”

“So? Keep a mallet handy. Your life might depend on it.”

“Whatever. If you weren't yelling in my head so much I wouldn't have panicked.”

“Sure, blame the disembodied spirit. Still, you did a good job patching it up.”

“Thanks.”

“And I hope after all this you learned something about dealing with pirates that know how to count higher than their IQ.”

“Oh I did,” I said. “I learned that I want an Imperial Clipper. Bad.”

Five Finger Discount

My new goal of getting a shiny new Imperial Clipper hinged on two things: getting on the good side of the Empire, and earning more than twenty million credits—for the storeroom model. It would cost a lot more to get one in decent shape for anything I had in mind for it.

Going up in the ranks in the Empire wasn't too difficult. The Empire is very merit-centric. You prove your worth, you go up. You crash... don't expect a safety net.

I did mention the nature of Imperial slavery, didn't I?

Obviously there were lines I wouldn't cross, but for the most part it was above board...well, mid board. It depends where you set the board, really.

Combat stabilizers, for example. Drugs to help soldiers stay alert in long engagements. Illegal in most systems on the open market, but a few outposts manufacture the stuff directly for the military. But not everyone in the military gets the priority they'd like, so discrete requests for people to help them get priority are put up on the local bulletin boards. Find the right station, grease the right palms and you can load all you need.

Oh, and, um, I think Violet tracked down a renegade general and blew him out of the sky when I wasn't paying attention. I decided not to ask about it.

I managed to make my way up to Lord that way.

I wonder if you get your own planet once you make Baron? Baron Mossfoot. Hmmm. I like the sound of that.

Shame I don't like the company I keep nearly as much.

“Okay, so tell me again why this isn't the stupidest idea you've ever had?”

Violet's always been my rock of confidence.

“Shhh! We've almost got it!”

I'd been formulating the plan for weeks. Keeping an eye on traders, looking at who had a certain focus on trading slaves.

Funnily enough it was Ivan who clued me in to my final target. It seemed he'd quickly changed his mind on trading slaves and this a-hole was the reason.

Baron Leon Kingsman. Real piece of work. Dressed in Imperial foppery like he was high grand duke of the Emperor's chamberpot, putting on airs, and someone who didn't just trade in slaves, he created them as well.

Ever heard of Kingsman Microloans? It's one of those institutions that end up being a last ditch effort for people trying to avoid indentured servitude. The "micro" part of the name is for legal reasons, the company is in fact willing to back you for as much as you're desperate enough to ask for.

And through the magic of compound interest it was also the last stop before you became an Imperial slave...something Kingsman's catchy adverts conveniently failed to mention. Half of the people who take out loans with them end up on the commodities market.

Their justification is that they're in fact saving the other half, but given how they end up making more profit from those who become slaves than from those who repay their loans, it's an excuse that rings hollow. Add on top of that a couple of scandals involving cargo that was "lost" because it was financially advantageous to do so, and you have one unlikeable dude. Ivan had dealings with him, and that ended up opening up his eyes and dropping the slave trade like a hot potato.

And Baron Kingsman flew a really nice Imperial Clipper.

The Empire is full of good sorts too, of course, just like anywhere in the universe, and just like anywhere in the universe, I'd made my share of friends and contacts during my trade runs. The kind who could get me into Kingsman's hanger after an "emergency" docking reassignment that another friend arranged, depriving him temporarily of his private hanger. Then his ship was discovered to be contaminated with trace amounts of a radioactive element that required immediate treatment, at least two hours. But the VIP lounge was on the other side of the station...

None of those involved had ever had loved ones trapped by Kingsman's loan company. Nope. Not at all.

So here I was inside the good Baron's "Kingmaker", a custom Imperial Clipper painted in the color of Imperial credits, trying to essentially hotwire it. I'd had lots of

practice on my dad's collection way back, and some of those had even better security than this.

Violet made herself virtually comfortable in the co-pilot's seat. "At least I can picture myself here," she said.

"Aaaand, bingo!"

I hopped up from under the console and turned on the computer. The factory reboot took a bit longer than I would have liked. If his security was on a separate grid he might already be informed about the hotwiring and on his way back. But I doubted it. Something about this guy just said "privilege" and guys like that tended to assume the world and everything in it was made for them. He wouldn't take the kind of precautions a guy like me would.

The factory reboot finished and the ship powered up. "Greetings Commander. Please insert your identification now."

Perfect. Blank slate, the way I'd hoped. Without wasting time I gave it the new pilot info, gave the ship a new name for this very occasion, requested clearance from the docking bay, and got ready to run like heck.

To protect those who'd help make this possible, it was important they seemed to do all they could to stop me, once they "discovered" the mistake. That meant station weapons would be online. Fortunately this guy had chaff installed.

"You're going to have to boost," said Violet as the landing pad rose.

"I know."

"You realize this Clipper is docked at a large pad for a reason."

"I know."

"Okay..." Violet leaned back and prepared to enjoy the show.

"Docking released. Engines engaged," the computer trilled.

"Attention Kingsman's Nutsack, you are in possession of a stolen vehicle. Disable engines and prepare to be boarded or we WILL open fire."

"That's our cue."

I rose off the pad and gunned the afterburners, dropping chaff and hoping to hell something like a Type-9 wouldn't come lumbering through at that moment. The letterbox on a station was narrow enough that there was very little room for error on my part. Tilt too much while going too fast and the nacelles would snag on the cow-catcher and rip right off, shields or no shields.

Luck was with me, though, as I blew through the station exit in a hail of laser fire and chaff, clearing their perimeter and with local security in pursuit. I punched in a flight path out of Empire space and was gone in a blip.

While cruising in witch space, I leaned back with a satisfied smile on my face.

“Nice job,” said Violet.

“Thanks.”

“So, tell me, how much does a Clipper go for?”

“Around 25 million or so.”

Violet nodded. “And you had to leave your Asp behind, right? You know they’ll impound it to make up for the loss.”

I shrugged. “That only costs around 6 million.”

“Aren’t you forgetting all the upgrades you had on it? A-Class FSD, thrusters, power plant, life support, that sort of thing? What do you figure the net value is of that Asp right now?”

I did some quick math in my head, then frowned.

“Shut up.”

Okay so I may have kinda sorta messed up. Once I crunched the numbers I realized I lost about 10% credit value wise by stealing this basic Clipper over my heavily modified Asp.

But I’m only a little annoyed about that. There is the moral victory after all, sticking it to Kingsman put a smile on my face, and leaving Imperial space with one of their exclusive Clippers was something of a coup in itself.

The ship is gorgeous, and I don’t just mean the looks. It carries twice as much as my Asp and for its size it’s incredibly nimble and fast. It has hardpoints for larger weapons than I’ve ever used before. Anything it can’t outfight it can outrun, which is just the way I like it. Sadly Kingsman didn’t bother upgrading it much, but it did have that new-ship smell, so it might have been right off the lot. At least that would tick him off even more.

But now I had a new problem. I needed to lay low for a while. The Clipper is a fine ship, but it needs a lot of work to get the way I need her to be. And that’s expensive. Not to mention there could very well be discrete requests made to certain interested parties to make sure I didn’t get to enjoy it for long.

Fortunately, I had an idea.

“Oh no, not this ship again.”

“What’s wrong with this ship?”

“I have nowhere to sit!”

We were back in Sol, at Abraham Lincoln station. My other two ships were there as well: my Cobra, the Lonely Heart, and my Lakon Type-6, Viaticus Rex II.

I shook my head. “Honestly, is that your biggest concern? You don’t have a body.”

Violet didn’t reply, but I realized that she, in fact, did have one. Mine. But lately I’d been hard on her for using it without permission and she’d promised to do so only in an emergency. We were stuck with each other so it was important we were able to get along.

I sighed. “Fine. You can take over whenever I’m asleep while we’re out there. Deal?”

“Deal!”

Heck, the way I saw it, it meant we’d get a lot more exploration done, which meant we’d have enough money to really kit out that Clipper when we got back.

It’s strange how much the Viaticus Rex II had stuck with me. She wasn’t a fighter. Heck, I didn’t even have any weapons installed. Two Class-1 lasers weren’t going to do much against anyone but the stupidest of pirates. I was better off running. I’d been fiddling with the components today, adding a better fuel scoop and trying to squeeze an extra light year out of her jump engines. I felt more satisfaction when I’d succeeded than I had stealing that Clipper.

Like on her maiden voyage, Dumbass was secured in the pet enclosure in the back. I’d given Viaticus Rex II a fresh paint job, going for a vibrant green instead of the rather bland steel from before.

I washed up in the ship’s bathroom and pulled out my green and red luchador mask from the drawer. I may have lost everything as an explorer before, my endorsements, speaking gigs, even the cartoon they were going to make, but they never did take away the mask.

I don’t like to admit this, but I really wished the cartoon had happened. I mean, I know it wasn’t really about me, just the company’s media-friendly branding at play. But

something about it seemed to resonate with me. That life was an adventure, not because of what happened to us, but because of how we chose to view it.

I put on the mask, looked at myself in the mirror and thrust my chest out.

“It is time for the return of Ranger M!”

Violet stirred. “Um... just for the record, I’m so taking that off when it’s my shift.”

My heroic pose did not waver. “Very well then! Onwards!”

A Shift In Power

At long last, I'm almost back.

For weeks I'd been in the void, travelling to the East Veil Nebula, hugging the bottom of the galaxy, and coming up on Sagittarius A*.

I've seen some stuff.

Coming back, I picked up transmissions from Radio Sidewinder, keeping me up to date on GalNet news (I really need to get that GalNet feed upgrade for my entertainment system). And I realized that while I was away, the galaxy changed without me.

The President of the Federation is dead. Not that I cared for her much, she struck me as either incompetent or unable to keep herself from being undermined by others. But the vacuum that created... why do I have a feeling that is just the beginning?

It got me thinking. Just where do I stand in the universe? I've always been the kind of guy who just wants to make sure he's comfortable, got some credits, and can do what he wants.

I mean, think about it. I just visited over two thousand different star systems. I found a half dozen worlds with carbon based life on them, almost as many with ammonia based life. Dozens more that could be inhabited some day. Stars that filled my screen or could barely be seen. Gas giants so close to a star the gravity warps its shape. I can just go out and DO these things, answering to no one but myself.

How many people get that chance? I think most pilots take it for granted how lucky they are. You consider a 32,000 credit sidewinder cheap? Might I ask you how much a single ton of food costs? A credit isn't like an old Earth dollar, you know. You give a credit to a beggar on a station, you've just given him room and board for a week.

We're the big fish, and even the smallest of us are rich as princes, and sometimes I think just as detached. We forget that our actions have consequences. That shipment of guns you brought to that station, do you even know what faction it was for? Do you care? Do you have any idea what they'll be used for or what the political situation is in that

system? Did you just arm a resistance faction or an oppressive government? You'd be surprised how few pilots care.

Maybe I should start caring.

I'd first worked for the Federation, then left them in a huff to work for the Empire, then left THEM in a huff as well. When I left the Bubble, it was in part to wait till the heat was off over the... er... "acquired" Imperial Clipper now docked at Abraham Lincoln station (getting its serial numbers burned off, deleted, and otherwise expunged).

I haven't been back to Lave since I woke up in 3301, and it got me thinking. The Federation is on the path to war, I know it. That Hudson guy is a patriot... the worst possible kind. The Empire might end up fighting each other as much as the Feds, scrambling to take over when the Emperor kicks the gold plated bucket...

... in short, they're a bunch of bloody loonies.

I've taken some time while in the black to read up on the Alliance my homeworld is now part of, arising from a need to buffer themselves from Fed and Empire expansion.

They're disjointed and often unorganized, each system is strongly independent and they rarely seem to agree on anything unless it's a greater outside threat.

...in short, they're a bunch of bloody loonies. But maybe they're MY kind of bloody loonies.

When I get back, I'm using all this stellar cartographic data to get in good with the Alliance. Then I can find out if they're a side I can get behind.

One downside of being out in the black for so long is, well...

I crashed my ship, okay? I forgot not to boost while entering a station, okay? I'm an goddamned idiot, OKAY?

Thank God I sold my data first. At least I'm still rich.

Well, kinda. Let's say I have lots of capital. I made about 75 million on this trip, reached Pioneer status with the Pilot's Federation, and immediately sunk that money back into my ships. I also made a few bucks selling all my ships shields, then buying them back at a 15% discount at 78 Ursae Majoris. That got me back a few mill. But after upgrading my Clipper to something combat ready, replacing the Asp I lost while I acquired the Clipper, and, well, that whole "crash" incident, I still have enough money in the bank for insurance.

So, now that I'm back and sold all my data, what kind of exciting things are there to do back in human space?

Hmmm... the Lembava system has a system-wide community goal... for... exploration data. After I just finished selling all my exploration data...

...sigh... I'll get my T6...

My planned return to the long dark got a bit sidetracked.

Back in Sol, my buddy had finished taking care of my acquired Clipper and even gave her a fresh paint job. I approved. Something about the pristine white the Empire favors that gets on my nerves. Like they're too good to get dirt on their capes.

Viaticus Rex II ended up with a lot of dirt. Paint worn off all over, exhaust marks, micrometeor scratches... I got her fixed up but told the dock rats not to touch the paint job. It gives her class. Also, a little trick I picked up - if your ship looks brand new it's a lot more likely to get stolen. Just ask a certain loan-shark back in the Empire. Pirates don't wander the docking bays looking for beat up pieces of crap. They're looking for the ones that say "money" as well as "noob" and a fresh paint job can say either, or often times both.

So yeah, I go out of my way not to fix the paint job on my ships. Let those pirates think I'm so hard up for credits that I have to cut corners like that.

Anyway, my Clipper was ready to go. Not a thing on her to trace her back to Baron Kingsman. But I figured she'd have to stay in dry dock a while longer while I went out and made some more credits exploring - I was about halfway from Pioneer to Elite status by the time I'd finished selling off my data.

I was having a drink at the spacer bar on Abraham Lincoln, remembering what it was like to have human contact again, when I noticed the pilots were sounding a bit more on edge than I remembered. The death of the President had shaken things up more than I'd thought, but it didn't end there - the Empire was even more factioned than before and more open about their oppositions to one another.

It used to be that pilots went wherever the wind blew. Sure, you had your patriots out there, loyal to a cause, but for every one of them you had four or five others who switched sides whenever the money was good. But the tone at the spacer bar was

different now. Someone had decided to ditch supporting Hudson and start working for Winters, and the buzz at the table was--retribution.

"You don't bail on someone just 'cause you don't agree with them," said one. "A message has to be sent. Loyalty matters."

I thought it was an isolated incident, but then then at the other end of the bar I heard some Winters supporters talking about undermining some key Alliance trade worlds. These were ordinary pilots, mind you... they normally never talk in those terms, just where the money is.

Now, Violet had been keeping to herself as of late. Sometime after reaching Sagittarius A* she got all quiet like, spending more time in her library in my head. I don't even know what she got up to with my body when I was asleep - she sure didn't spend it flying to other worlds.

But now her ears perked up, so to speak, and she asked me if I could get her the news feed from GalNet. I did so, and together we read up on what was happening in the galaxy.

"I don't think I like this," she said. "You're going to want to think long and hard about where you call home."

I was inclined to agree. Most of the news stories were the same old same old, but you could sense something more going on. There was a shift in the wind, you could read it in between the lines. There was more and more pressure to not just pick a side, but stick with it. Every side with skin in the game had something to offer, proprietary tech the others couldn't offer, bonuses for trade or bounties, even cash incentives for continued loyalty.

And if you left? Well, it seemed clear that more than hard feelings might be at stake.

I didn't like this. Not one bit. These were war drums being beaten for sure, but not all sides rattled sabers. Some talked about expanding trade deals and offering financial incentives to worlds that joined them. Some seemed downright noble (bordering on naive) on their platforms.

In all there were nine key players out there, not counting Archon Delaine, the pirate king. That guy is just a barbarian in a space suit. Unfortunately, he's got all the other barbarians flocking to him and might be a real problem as a result.

But aside from him you have the Winters/Hudson split in the Federation, a four-way factioning off of the Empire, a couple of independent interests... and the Alliance.

Home.

Well, I say home but I still haven't been there yet. But the area they call the Old Worlds is by in large part of the Alliance now, and quite frankly it's the only major power out there that seems to believe in good old fashioned freedom. I don't mean that in some crazy gun-show Libertarian way, I just mean old fashioned democracy, something the Federation seems to have forgotten about. What they call democracy here is more like a giant episode of Earth's Got Talent. And of course the Empire scratched that word out of the dictionary.

I look at that sad sap running the Alliance right now, Edmund Mahon and I would not want his job for all the credits in the world. He's dedicated to keeping the Alliance together and bringing together the other independent worlds, but isn't going to use force to do it. He's up against blood thirsty dirtbags like the new president, Hudson, and Senator Patraeus, the sort who believe that might makes right.

He's got the deck stacked against him, and he doesn't even know it yet. Because at the end of the day, there are more pilots out there spoiling for a fight than there are looking to make a semi-honest buck or help out their fellow man for a reasonable fee. Out of the big three factions, even though this guy doesn't have any opposition within his own ranks like the others do, he's the underdog.

My kind of guy.

Violet must have overheard some of my stray thoughts, because she said, "Time to head home?"

I nodded, though to everyone in the bar it seemed like I was nodding to myself. "Time to head home."

You Can't Go Home Again

I made my transition from Sol to Alioth as quietly as possible, moving one ship there then flying back in a used Hauler and selling it before grabbing the next ship. Nobody raised an eyebrow, certainly no Fed pilots looking for imagined traitors to the cause.

Of course, Donaldson Station in Alioth turned out to be a bit further than I liked--five thousand light seconds away. That's a lot of wear and tear on the ol hull over time. But it did get me started, establishing new contacts and getting information.

I've been wondering what kind of ship to run now that I'm back in the Bubble. My T6 is fine for exploration, but as a trader she's as defenseless as a guppy on a sidewalk. My Asp? I have to admit I love the range and firepower on that, but it handles like a boat. A boat in molasses. My Cobra is certainly an old reliable. Great speed, decent firepower... heck, I even had her hull upgraded so she could take more punishment in a fight.

And what about the newly acquired Clipper?

Well, she's got the speed to run away that I so desire, carries more than any of my other ships, and while her shields might not be the most powerful, knowing I can run away from anything I can't take on more than makes up for it.

Firepower?

"Eh." was Violet's professional opinion. We were sitting in the cockpit, she mentally projection herself on the co-pilot's seat.

"What? She's got two Class 3 hardpoints, plus a couple of Class 2s underneath."

"Sure, and about as far apart as they can possibly be. We'd have to use gimble weapons, and that feels like an unnecessary drain on power."

"We could compromise. Keep the starboard weapons fixed and the port weapons gimble?"

She considered this. "Would take a bit of getting used to, but it might work. But she's big. You won't be able to land on any outposts."

I shrugged. "I can live with that. We've been cooped up in a flying brick for so long I think we deserve a bit of luxury, don't you?"

"Speak for yourself. I knocked out a wall in the library and added a Jacuzzi. I'm fine."

Given that she was referring to the mental space she occupied in my head when she wanted to be alone, I was a bit concerned that her metaphor meant she was taking over more of my brain. "Ummmm..."

"I'm kidding," she said, then went back to considering the ship at hand. "Hmmm... well, her inertia is a bit of a problem, but she turns on a dime. I just wish we could get more out of her FSD without compromising anything."

"Let me worry about that," I said. I had been looking forward to tooling around with the components and getting the most out of it.

"Could trade her in for a Python. You have more than enough saved up. It's small enough to land at an outpost. More armor. More firepower."

"And nowhere near as fast or maneuverable. No thanks! Remember my motto."

"To Strive, To Seek, To Find, And To Run Away If I'm Outgunned."

"Exactly."

Violet was right about the size, though. This boat is big. Almost too big. When I walk down the halls I feel like I should be commanding a crew instead of just talking to myself. I don't even know where Dumbass is. That darn cat disappeared the moment she got in...I just hope she figured out where the litter box is.

Honestly none of my ships felt "perfect" for me and my needs. Maybe I'll try out each of my ships in my little fleet and see what I end up preferring. Or if I can find a home base closer to the jump point I might just swap out as needed.

Now, let see what this Mahon guy is up to. Ask not what Mahon can do for you... actually, why shouldn't I? Yo, Mahon, what can you do for me?

Turns out what Mahon could do for us is give us credits if we helped him shuttle around trade agreements, and what we could do for Mahon was shut the hell up and get delivering, chop chop.

Ugh. This is not what I signed up for when I agreed to hitchhike in MF's brain. I'm a combat pilot, not a courier.

Violet here, in case you needed it spelled out for you.

Mossfoot seems more than happy with signing on with Mahon, but I'm bored silly. Aside from getting intercepted from a few zealous followers of other major powers out there, we've literally been shuffling papers around.

Look, I know Mossfoot likes to play it safe. Hmmm... maybe that's the not the right term. If he really wanted to play it safe there are plenty of other things he could be doing. He likes to play the odds, and weigh them heavily in his favor. I've seen him fight, not just flee. He knows how to handle himself. But for a guy whose already died twice, he's scared to death of, well, death. It's only gotten worse to be honest, even though those deaths had been temporary. Some people would walk away from that feeling invincible, MF realizes it means his luck reserves have been depleted. He's interested in going wherever and doing whatever sounds like fun, and facing death is not one of those things.

Me? I'm an adrenaline junkie. Always have been. Even before I starting flying I was climbing mountains, deep sea diving, mixed martial arts. Hell, I was a stuntwoman for the vids back in my time, which is where I caught the flying bug. My girlfriend at the time was the pilot of the shuttle I had to skydive out of, and she shows me some maneuvers between takes. Told me I had a knack for it.

See, piloting isn't just about twitch reflexes and hand-eye coordination, and it's certainly not about jerking the stick around like you're wacking off to tentacle hentai. You need to have a subtle touch, get so used to your machine that it's like an extension of yourself, so you know when you tell it to dive, you don't just dive, you end up pointing exactly where you wanted without even looking.

So that's how I got into flying. How I got into combat? That's another story for another day. The here and now is all that matters and I was bored silly with MF having a paper route. I didn't care if his long term plan was going to net us five million a week, I needed to see some combat.

We'd relocated our ships to Dublin station in Gateway, to be closer to where the "action" (cough cough) is. However, it turned out there was some action to be had after all. A couple of the local minor factions were squabbling, to the point where a small civil war had broken out. They'd decided to settle their differences near the planet Hope, just a little bit away from Dublin station.

So I waited till MF was asleep and took our ship for a spin.

It wasn't hard to decide on a side. One side was clearly a bunch of criminal thugs looking to expand their turf, and that was all the excuse I needed to join the others.

There's something particularly cathartic about blasting pilots who have no business being in space. That's the thing about incompetent novices and pilots who are at best mostly harmless--I'd feel bad about blasting them if it wasn't for the fact their ultimate goal was to blast people even more harmless than them (like traders who don't pay their "taxes"). You take up a life of crime, you should darn well be good at what you do. Otherwise you deserve the smackdown you're gonna get.

I had racked up a couple hundred grand in bonds when I noticed something odd - someone on the IFF was not registering as friend or foe. Undecided. Fair enough, every merc who enters a combat zone starts off that way.

But he was hanging out awfully close while I took on a python piloted by someone who clearly flunked their driver's test. He didn't stand a chance, but my shields were taking a pounding. By the time I took out the power plant my shields were down.

And that's when the jackass struck.

A goddamned sneak attack. He was waiting for my shields to drop before opening fire. Within seconds my hull was dropping faster than my respect for this twerp. I boosted away, realizing that maybe Mossfoot wasn't so crazy about keeping this giant boat as our primary home. He'd sunk everything he had into her, and it showed. I don't think anything short of a Cobra could catch her, and this guy wasn't in a Cobra.

The worst thing you can do in a life-or-death situation is panic, so once I was on my way, dropping chaff and boosting, I checked what it was I was up against.

Name: CMDR Guitardog. Rank: Master. Ship: Vulture.

What a frickin appropriate ship name. No wonder he did so much damage. He was packing the same kind of hardware I was, but on a much smaller ship. By the time I was out of his weapons range I was down to 30 percent hull. Knowing he couldn't catch me, he turned back to the fight, assuming I'd run home to lick my wounds.

That was his first mistake.

When I said MF kitted this ship out I didn't just mean in terms of engines. Soon the shields were back online and I had spun around. If Moss had been awake he'd have been having kittens. I boosted back to the warzone. By the time I got there my shields were at full strength.

This commander's tactics had stuck in my craw. He'd tried to be clever, not showing up as hostile so he could get close, and waiting until my shields were down to strike. It was a cowardly move, by a cowardly pilot.

And now he was going to pay the price.

Guitardog didn't even see me coming, focused on another target. I boosted in and reminded him what a mistake it was to leave a job unfinished.

I'll give the Vulture credit, though, it's decently nimble and built like a tank. He broke off and ran, with me running in hot pursuit. He tried to activate his jump engine. Mistake two. The Clipper is large enough to mass lock just about anything.

He tried to use his chaff to throw off my weapons - after all the Clipper's hardpoints are too spread out to make fixed point firing effective. Except, as you may recall, Mossfoot suggested keeping the starboard weapon mount fixed.

Shields gone, Guitardog was scrambling to escape, and eventually he did. In the end he used what I called The Mossfoot Maneuver. When facing pirates you can't outrun and are masslocked by, don't even think about entering Supercruise. Lock onto another starsystem and jump. It's risky, but when you can't win a fight, it's your only hope. This guy was down to under 20 percent hull by the time he finally got out.

I may not have gotten the kill, but one of us left the combat zone and the other never did. I'll chalk that up as a win.

Faction Friction

Well, that was interesting.

I'd just woken up and watched a video log of Violet explaining to me through my own body about why my Clipper was surrounded by workmen and repair droids at Dublin Citadel. Somehow the Squeegee Squad had gotten in my bay and were working on my windows, even though no one had requested them, making my windows dirtier than they already were. I made sure the cargo hold was locked tight.

Thirty percent. The ship was down to thirty percent hull and yet she went right back into battle? God, one of these days I'm going to go to sleep and never wake up and it won't be from natural causes.

It's not that I don't understand Violet. I do. More than you realize. She's got a death wish, and has as long as I've known her. Well, death wish might be the wrong term, but calling her an adrenaline junkie is just glossing over a much deeper problem. And it's not helped by the fact that she is quite literally dead, hijacking a ride on my brain, and may or may not be a mere simulation of herself.

Oh, that reminds me, I had some people sniffing around my logs and contacting me with seemingly innocuous questions. I did some research into them (I'm not without talent in terms of investigation) and got some disturbing signs that these people might have been folks trying to determine if my implant violates legislation regarding artificial intelligence.

It's times like this that I remember how much of a pet project of Dr. Frankenstein I am. Brother Mathias would have a lot to answer for if he wasn't long dead. Nanites in my blood keeping me alive against all odds (though trust me, that's not something I want to push my luck on. We're not talking miracle level regeneration here, more like preserving the body from decay), and some kind of organic circuit on my brain housing the memories of my partner that may or may not violate anti-AI laws (and if so, I do not intend to be around for them to remove it).

Sometimes I wonder what Mathias's Order were working towards back then, and if the Order still exists today? The Utopians would probably dig them. Hell, maybe they have ties back to the Order?

But I digress.

Violet, regardless of how you view her current state of consciousness, has always been looking for purpose, but tempered with a mistrust of authority. She doesn't trust others to provide the answers, whether they're religion or government. I think her thrill-ride youth and life as a bounty hunter were part of that search. But it's like a drug, not actually curing the problem, just alleviating the symptoms, and always needing another hit.

It's going to get us killed someday.

I have no problem taking the pass less laser filled. My plan working for Mahon is to hang out in the pilot's lounge on Dublin Citadel, fill my ship up with enough paperwork to choke a planet-sized bureaucracy, and dump it all on some poor slob's desk out on the edge of Mahon's influence. Lather, rinse, repeat. I've crunched the numbers and it won't be long before I'm way up in the ranks, taking easy money on a weekly basis. Five mill at least.

It's not like it's completely without risk. I've been intercepted a few times, had to fight some, run from others (partly because the paltry bounty they were worth wasn't worth the potential damage to the ship), and the system I've been ferrying paperwork to recently slipped into an Anarchy state. Once I'm a bit more settled I'll see what I can do to help some minor faction get things back in order there.

But I don't see why I need to be all "Live a little" all the time. I am living. I've got a plan. A long term plan that could see us safely inside an Anaconda eventually.

Mind you, this paper route IS a bit boring... just a bit...

...sigh.

Eagle 5 is what some people call a longhorn, a seasoned pilot who's seen it all. The handle comes from his old callsign, back when he was in the military.

"There's more than one way to skin a rat," he told me.

We were hanging out in one of the pilot lounges on Dublin Citadel. He recognized me from my Ranger M days even though I wasn't wearing the mask ("no one else could be that ugly") and I'd seen him around since I moved to Gateway.

“Look, you’re here because you believe in the cause, right?”

I shrugged. “More or less. Let’s just say I believe in the other causes a lot less.” Well, there was that girl in the Empire who was anti-slavery who seemed okay, if naive. And I didn’t really know where Winters in the Federation stood compared to the dead president. But others? Hudson? Patraeus? Torval? They could suck a frag canon for all I cared. And the pirate king Archon Delaine could suck a plasma accelerator on overload.

“Yeah yeah, you’re a bad ol mercenary whose only here for himself. Like I haven’t heard that story a million times.”

I could have corrected him. I was certainly here for myself, but mercenary? That sounded too much like work.

“My point is, you’re bored silly playing paper boy, aren’t you?”

I shrugged. “I guess.”

“Let me show you a different way you can help.”

I followed Eagle 5 in my Clipper to 39 Serpents, inside Federation space controlled by Zachary Hudson.

“Mahon’s a decent guy, but he doesn’t have the balls to do what needs to be done,” Eagle 5 said over comms. “Hudson’s encroaching on Alliance space, trying to gain influence over our systems. Once he has that it won’t be long before he’s getting Fed friendly factions controlling the local stations and the next thing you know they’re singing up to start waving the big sparkly circles.”

The last bit had been a reference to the Federation’s logo, which defied any easy descriptive euphemism. At least the Empire had a straight forward eagle, and the Alliance’s logo had been called the fractured triangle, both by detractors and supporters.

Eagle 5 was flying a Cobra, which meant we were flying two of the fastest ships in the galaxy. He was also running an interdicator. The moment he latched onto one of Hudson’s logistics transports, however, I felt myself wondering if this was a good idea. I was not the aggressor type.

Eagle 5 dropped off my radar as he pulled the transport out of supercruise. “Don’t leave me hanging, buddy, this guy’s got backup!”

I sighed and followed his Nav lock in. Sure enough, the Dropship had a couple of fighters backing it up, and, partly out of reflex, I opened fire, taking out a Sidewinder, blowing it out of the sky.

6,500 BOUNTY FOR MURDER OF FEDERATION ESCORT

My heart skipped a beat. Murder? He didn't eject? But the seats... the damn ejection seats... The frickin 95% reliability rating...

"Oh God..."

"What's wrong?" Eagle 5 asked.

"He didn't eject. We're just here to stop the cargo ships. I just killed him. I didn't mean—"

I could have sworn I heard Eagle 5 snort. "Relax, ya big baby."

What had I gotten myself into? Don't mistake my reaction here for being squeamish, I've killed. Back in the day, I'd blown pirate ships out of the sky and ran over their escape pods on full thrust. But it was people who deserved it, people who held life in such low regard that the universe was better off without them. And now I was flying with a psychopath. I was one of them.

"Listen," Eagle 5 said, "That's just how the computer responds to unsanctioned destruction. It's always listed as murder even if the pilot is fine. Just like with a bounty it's always listed as destruction even if you put a rail gun shot through the pilot's forehead. Besides, you think several thousand credits is a fitting bounty for actual murder? Life is cheap, but it's not *that* cheap."

Well, that was some relief. Some.

Eagle 5 took out the other escort almost absentmindedly. "You're going to have to get your head out of your butt if you expect to make it out here. These guys are strengthening Hudson's position, and from here he can push straight into Alliance territory. We need to keep this area unstable, force him to waste resources keeping it under control. We need to undermine him along the border or that border is going to shift its way all the way to Alioth. The Alliance can't be protected by trade agreements alone."

"I'm not stooping to murder to defend the Alliance. Give me a stand up fight any day."

"By the time it comes to that you'll be out manned and outgunned. You going to stick around to fight to the death then?"

"Er..." Let's be honest. Probably not.

"Thought as much. Now, target that Dropship's engines while I convince them they're better off flying home in an ejection seat than a coffin."

And that's how it started. For the next few hours Eagle 5 would intercept Hudson transports, I'd follow in with my Clipper, and together we'd take them out. Most of the time it wasn't anything close to a fair fight. And the bounties kept piling up.

By the time we were done there was a 100,000 credit bounty on my head in the system.

"Don't worry about it," said Eagle 5. "The food sucks here anyway. And if you're desperate to do business in this system later, just wait till the heat dies down and quietly pay off the bounty. I'll give you some names to contact." Clearly this was standard operating procedure in Eagle 5's world. "Come on, let's head home."

Several jumps later and we were both back in Gateway, giving proof of our actions to the station's contact with Edmund Mahon. He made sure no one else was in the room before signing off on the report. Though he didn't want to make a public fuss about it, that one day of warmongering gave us more standing with Mahon's people than three long days of paper shuffling. But I still wasn't sure how I felt about it all.

For the sake of my conscience I checked the system logs from 39 Serpentis the next day for a list of pilots that were actually killed and compared it to my recorded crimes, hoping no names matched up.

There was one.

Male. Age: 35. Ship: Viper. Allegiance: Archon Delaine, the pirate king.

Oh, well, that's okay then.

Of Bounties and Mission Math

"Um, Violet?"

Sometimes Violet and I need alone time. And by that I mean taking shifts in my body and not interacting for a while. Sure she gets the short end of the stick, eight hours of "me" time as opposed to sixteen, but I didn't invent the circadian rhythm, I just live it. Anyway, it had been a while since we talked.

"Yeah?"

"I had a look at the transactions tab. Under bounties."

"Um... oh. I can explain."

"You doubled the price on our head in 39 Serpentis?"

"Well, yeah, but the way I see it is this - we're already wanted there, right? And a hundred thousand or two hundred thousand, either way a bounty hunter is going to come after us. But only in that system, right? If we were to spread things out, sure we might not be attractive in each individual system, but we might end up with a system-wide bounty on us, and then everyone will be after us wherever we go."

I sighed. I guess I had this coming once I opened that can of worms.

"Look on the bright side," she said. "We're now in the second highest tier in Mahon's faction. That five mill a week you were looking for? We're already there. And it'll get even easier to hold onto that. Heck, you could probably just do it with your paper route in another week or so."

"Uh huh... and this bounty in G 165-13?"

"That was an accident! I took on a job to bump off some troublesome git. I didn't realize she wasn't actually wanted. Found that out after I shot down her wingman. It's okay, he survived. I scrapped the contract after that. Turned out to be for the mafia. They had a classier sounding name. Sorry."

"That system is right next door to Gateway!"

"Um... yeah... sorry again."

I groaned. The fact was even though I was only wanted in 39 Serpentis (well, and that other incident) any bounty hunter with a kill warrant scanner could see I was worth enough to make my destruction worth my while.

"Maybe it's time we went on a little road trip?" Violet suggested.

I considered it. The Sirius corporation was offering big bucks for exploration data. I'd been giving them whatever I'd been picking up inside the bubble, but a bit of effort could bump me into one of the higher profit brackets. "Yeah. Maybe."

While planning my next exploration gig I continued working for Mahon in my Clipper, and avoiding trouble wherever possible. It's currently called the Odyssey, but that was a placeholder name while the ID tags all got changed. I've been meaning to think of a proper name for it, because the more I fly her the more she feels like home.

Oh, I won't be taking her on my next expedition. Definitely not. Viaticus Rex II is still my go-to exploration vessel, which is odd given that my Asp out performs her in every way. But I'm not ready to give up on the old girl yet. I'm hoping to make Elite in her, then maybe she can be retired.

But not sold. If life has taught me anything it's that you can lose your ship and everything in it and no amount of insurance can buy it back. Best to have a backup lest you end up bumming the Pilot's Federation for a Sidey loaner until you're back on your feet.

I have plenty of reasons for loving the Clipper, but what happened to me the other day might just explain why she's quickly becoming my favourite.

While doing salvage work for an Anarchy system in Mahon territory I have to check out every signal source—you never know when it'll what you're looking for. And there are folks out there who count on that, and set traps.

Gold. Tons of gold just drifting in space. I smiled as I dropped my cargo hold and rolled my eyes. Like candy from a baby.

I'd scooped up about four when a half dozen Anacondas arrived.

"HA! I can't believe that worked! Get 'im, boys!" called the lead Anaconda.

I closed my cargo hold and calmly boosted away, full pips in shields, the rest in engines.

The lead Conda was still hooting. "I'm such a genius, this'll... hey, where you going? Get back here with my gold!" All ships opened fire, but I was already getting out

of their weapons range and mass-lock ability. I didn't even bother wasting a chaff on them.

I pulled that stunt on those dumbasses four times in a row. Sure it wasn't a huge profit, but it was worth it just for the satisfaction.

Most pirates are dumb. They think it's all about firepower and mass locking to prevent escape. And since the Anaconda has the most weapons and the largest hull, that makes it the best.

If they were smart, they'd be pulling the gold trap using Clippers.

Violet here with some bounty hunting math.

Ever go to a system that is going to hell in a hand basket? Where just about every faction there can agree on one thing and that is "pirates are bad" (unless said faction are pirates themselves)?

Stick around a while. Collect a bunch of pirate bounty missions. For example, I had four from one station, all for the same region of space. One wanted 3 pirates dusted, another wanted 5, a third wanted 9 and a fourth wanted 6. How many pirates did I have to blow up?

If you said 23, then your bounty hunting math needs some work. The correct answer is 9!

See, since all those missions are in the same region, and a kill is a kill, one kill counts on all missions. It's not like I had to bring back ears or pelts as proof. You four factions wanted a dead pirate in sector X? You all got it. It's the same one, but that's not my problem. Pay me.

So remember, kids, when stacking bounty missions, only the highest number matters.

This message has been brought to you by the formerly living bounty hunter Violet Lonsdale, who believes all good deeds still deserve a decent reward.

Mossfoot's Magical Menagerie of Misplaced Mementos

I decided to hold off my next exploration trip a bit and just lay low in the local systems, not look for trouble—though it seems that Violet has been doing that for me behind my back. At least she didn't get any extra bounties on my head.

I was back working my paper route for Mahon, but while waiting for my cargo to fill, I noted a number of requests for lost (or “lost”) items to be recovered. Black boxes, experimental chemicals, ancient artefacts, you name it.

I figured “Eh, what the hell?” and decided to see if I got lucky on the way back looking for them. Space is full of debris, and sadly much of it is recent. If you set your scanners right, you can pick up the faint dying frequencies of destroyed ships or the location beacons of cargo pods normally tuned for a specific corporation to locate and pickup. If you drop into every weak signal you come across, you can find some amazing things. Also a lot of crap.

Maybe I was just having a lucky day, but I ended up finding everything the yahoos at Dublin Citadel were looking for, plus about twice as much extra. I was sure to have the specific stuff they wanted.

The great thing about salvage is desperation jacks up the price. I got several times more for these goods than I would have on the black market. Sadly none of the leftovers could be sold on the open market, they still had their anti-theft beacons intact and the black market takes its cut to circumvent such things.

I had just gotten the last batch of goods back to its happy owner when another person swung by my hanger.

“Hey, I heard you were collecting lost goods out there?”

“Yeah.”

“Great. Some experimental chemicals were lost out in the Tellus system. Any chance you picked up some there?”

Fact was I had tons of extra experimental chemicals in my hold. I was about to go to my contact in the black market to unload them. But I hadn't been to the Tellus system.

“Uhhh... let me check. Actually, why don't you have a look at these containers and see if any fit the bill...”

The guy practically grabbed the first container he saw. “Perfect. Thanks.”

And with that he paid the standard recovery fee. He didn't actually care what system it came from...

A woman poked her head through the hanger door. “Excuse me? I understand you've been locating ancient artefacts? You didn't happen to find any in G 128-33?”

Had I even been there? I was at a couple that started with G, for sure. “Um, want to see what I have in stock?”

And that's where it began.

“Congratulations,” said Violet during our next little chat. “You're a floating junkyard.”

We were in my cargo hold, which was full of retrieved canisters, some of which were fresh, recovery beacons still blinking, others so old they were pockmarked with micro-meteors to the point where they resembled a teenager's face.

I'd come to an epiphany of late—a large number of the people looking for goods did not in fact care where they came from or if they were the exact right kind, only that they got it (or a suitable substitute) to keep them from getting in trouble with whoever they had to answer to.

To that end, I had gone out and once again donned the cap of the galaxy's garbage picker, filling my hold with the items that were in demand. Whatever was left over, and there was always a lot of it, found itself sold off over the following day as word spread and people came to see what I had in stock.

I had become my own black market. Heck, I was considering having a collapsible storefront set up that I could set up in front of the loading ramp.

“What amazes me is how you've never once been scanned by the police,” Violet added.

“Well, a couple of times I was, but that's the beauty of the Clipper, she's big, but she's fast enough to slip in before they can finish their scan. And I'm in good standing with the Alliance and with Mahon himself, so they tend to turn a blind eye.”

“How much did you make on this run?” she asked.

“The requested pickups? About a million. Selling the leftovers? Another million and a half, either here or at other stations. Word is getting around, and business is good.”

“I guess it pays to be a garbageman.”

“That’s object retrieval specialist to you, missy. I’ve also decided on a name for the Clipper.” I waved expansively around the ship’s interior. “Say hello to the Dyson Sweeper.”

“Cleaning the galaxy one piece of litter at a time.” Violet scoffed. But even then she realized that sweeper could be interpreted in more than one way—it could equally apply to *her* way as well.

That Miserable Guy

I was taking the late shift for Mossfoot when the customer walked in. We'd had a full cargo hold full of various odds and ends and MF said the key to maximize profits was to always be available. So he was getting twenty winks while I was busy with the riff raff. Moss had in fact gone to the trouble of getting a tent to act as a storefront, bringing out a selection of canister types to let customers know what we had in stock, covering up the landing ramp and providing what he called a certain *je ne sais quoi*.

I said it made us look even more like a floating junkyard.

The man who'd entered was tall, dark, handsome, and would have been my type if I at all swung that way. But I was bored as heck so it was still hard to muster any enthusiasm, and the disinterest showed in my voice.

"Welcome to Mossfoot's Magical Menagerie of Misplaced Mementos, how can I help you?" I said it about as brightly as a burnt out light bulb.

"So, you are dealing with stolen items, are you?"

That tone grabbed my attention, and only now did I realize the man was wearing an Alliance police uniform for Gateway sector. Ah crap.

"No, not at all, officer! These were simply lost and, uh, we're providing, uh, a service to, uh, return them to their, uh, rightful owners."

"For a nominal fee, no doubt," the man said, looking at me like I was scum.

"I prefer to think of us as a charity with generous tippers, Officer..." I waited for his name and batted my eyelashes at him out of habit—don't judge, I use every weapon in my arsenal when I'm in a situation—before I remembered I was not only in a man's body, but one with a face that looked like it had beheld the opened Ark of the Covenant.

Goddammit, why did this have to happen to me during my shift? MF would have been much better suited for flim flammings the officer.

The officer's eyes narrowed. "Officer Dillon. What kind of scam are you working? Claiming all the proceeds go to some charity for disfigured hobos?"

Geeze, what crawled up this guy's butt and died?

“I’ve had my eye on you for some time, Mister ‘Moss Foot.’ You’re trouble. You claim allegiance to the Alliance, but I don’t trust you. You’re a smuggler and a pirate.”

“Hey!” He might as well have called me a lawyer.

Undeterred, Officer Dillon stroked a finger over one of the older canisters, and examined the dust. “And I consider you a threat to us, regardless of Edmund Mahon’s embracing nature.”

I didn’t like where this was going.

“Due to the interference of the Pilot’s Federation and the Alliance’s constitution, I am unable to do anything to you while you are docked here. But rest assured I will be keeping my eye out for you...and your ship.”

“I take it this is the part where you say I should watch my step?”

Dillon smiled. “No, this is the part where I tell you that if you come back to Gateway and I see you I will blow you out of the sky. I don’t care what your legal status officially is. I don’t care if you’re never been scanned I don’t care if you’re carrying nothing but puppies and chocolate.”

Officer Dillon turned left. “Consider this your going out business sale.”

What the hell did Violet get me into?

She explained as best she could and quite frankly I didn’t know what to make of it. I’ve seen some policemen with a hard on for the law before, but this guy... something about him seemed familiar.

Not that I ever met him, I mean something about him reminded me of something, but I couldn’t put my finger on it.

I figured it was probably nothing. I doubted I’d ever actually see this Officer Dillon out in the spaceways.

Boy was I wrong.

A few things I should point out. Officer Dillon isn’t some greenhorn trying to prove something by taking down a big fish. I’ve come across those kinds of officers before. I’ll be scooping cargo when an Eagle shows up, sees I’m full of, er, questionable goods, and open fire. I calmly put all my pips to shields and continue picking up my cargo, then fly off before he’s even got my shields down to half strength. Usually I complement them on their excellent aim as I leave, and assure them they’ll get me next time. Cops need encouragement that way sometimes. Don’t want them to feel bad.

Officer Dillon was not one of these cops.

“Submit to Alliance Authority Interdiction.”

I rolled my eyes. I didn't know at the time it was Officer Dillon, and often times I just evaded interdiction, but this guy was good and so I submitted so I could boost out of there and save us all some time. Unfortunately I didn't submit fast enough, so my ship spun out of control for a bit due to the speeds involved when I dropped out.

I'd barely righted myself when the Anaconda opened fire.

“JESUS!” I boosted and fled, but this guy had my shields almost down before I was out of weapons range.

“You are in violation of Alliance law, submit or be destroyed.”

More like submit AND be destroyed. “Hey, I'm clean! You didn't even scan me! You just opened fire! What's the deal?”

“I apologize. I thought I made my intentions clear to you before, smuggler.”

So this was Officer Dillon, piloting a police Anaconda. Rating:

Elite.

To reach Elite you need a lot of ship kills under your belt. A lot. If this guy was career police that means those kills were all pirates and smugglers... which meant he had a lot of practice.

Fortunately, I had a Clipper.

Of course he didn't catch me, but I still had a job to do, and I wasn't going to let some starched uniform keep me from it. So I kept on tracking signals and picking up stray cargo.

And he kept on coming after me.

EVERY single time I tried scooping cargo, there was the Anaconda, jumping after me and opening gun ports. If I was too long in Supercruise, he was interdicting me all over again. This guy was like a dog with a bone, and I was that bone.

“Geeze, this guy is serious.”

“Why don't you just blast him?” Violet said. She must have peeked in at some point and saw the trouble I was having.

“I don't shoot cops,” I said. “And neither do you.”

“Yeah, but this guy's a real jackass. I'd make an exception. At least blow out his thrusters.”

“Tempting, but no. Ethics aside we’ll be wanted in Gateway, and I really don’t want to see Dublin Citadel welcome us with a 21 gun salute to the face next time we drop by.”

“Pity.”

“Yeah, pity.” To be honest I think Officer Dillon was counting on this. That he could be as doggedly persistent as he wanted and there was nothing I could do about it. He had the law on his side, and me? I was flying a stolen Imperial Clipper full of illicit cargo.

“Javert!” I cried out.

“Huh?”

“That’s who he reminds me of.”

“Huh?”

I kept forgetting that while I was an English major, and until recently, all her literary knowledge came from movies. “The inflexible and unrelenting policeman from Les Misérables.”

“Oh right. I think I saw the movie. One of them, anyway. Guy really couldn’t sing.”

Officer Dillon lived up to his new nickname. My own personal Javert was relentless.

Whenever I returned to Gateway he was lurking somewhere in Supercruise, waiting for me. Then BAM—interdiction. Or he’d wait for me to drop to check out a weak signal and drop in unannounced, guns blazing.

This guy was obsessed. I found him snooping around my hanger at least three times when I set up shop. Maybe hoping to find something he could arrest me with, or just continuing to justify his vendetta against me in the space lanes.

I hadn’t had a chance to talk with him yet, so I confronted him as he left during his most recent inspection.

“What the hell is wrong with you? There’s Kumo Crew out there picking off T6s and Hudson supporters trying to hurt the Alliance in his name. Why are you picking on me? I’m on your side!”

Dillon looked down on me. I should mention this guy is tall. 2 meters easy.

“You are not ‘on my side,’ no matter what your official standing is in this system. Don’t flatter yourself into thinking you are the only troublemaker on my radar. Mahon’s a good man and he doesn’t deserve the likes of you coming in and undermining his efforts.”

“The hell I am! Look, pal, I was living in Alliance space way before there WAS an Alliance. I was there when there was still a Galactic Cooperative around. Now I might have missed a lot of what happened between then and, but I get where Mahon’s coming from and what the Alliance stands for.”

“You do, do you? And those trade agreements you load up on while selling off your... junk. Where do you take them? Do you take them where they’re needed most? Or just to the nearest relevant station to dump off? When you fight in his name, do you care what ships you take down, or are you just happy for the merits their broken hulls bring?”

Oh. Ohhhhhh.....

It occurred to me that I could see the legs, if not the head of the bug Violet had told me crawled up this man’s butt and perished.

“You think I’m just along for the ride.”

“I think your actions do more harm than good. Those trade agreements you dump off with no regard can influence where the Alliance extends its influence. We have dedicated men and women analysing what key system are most suitable to extend our hand to, and you have been unloading in an anarchy system that doesn’t even have a stable government to sign on with. Those ships you shot down with,” he checked the datapad in his hands, “Eagle 5... A man, I might add, who abandoned the Navy for the sake of pursuing wealth. 39 Serpentis is simply the closest to Gateway, and all Alliance systems along its border are heavily fortified. It poses no strategic significance. And yet through all this you find yourself within one of the highest ranks among Mahon’s fold.

“You are a threat to the Alliance, Mr Foot, simply because of who you are, and I will see you destroyed.”

“Huh. Second highest, you say?”

“Indeed.”

“Wow. I bet a guy like that probably as a bit of clout. Lots of say over what the Alliance does next.”

“Unfortunately. No doubt you’ll waste those votes as well.”

I smiled. “Far from it. I assure you, I’m going to put them to the best possible use. See you around.”

When Officer Dillon left I got on the com system and spoke to my Power contact on the station.

“Hey, I just wanted to check up on my status with you guys... uh huh... uh huh... right. And what privileges does that entail? Uh uh... Trade bonuses, nice... new weapon type after long term service? Interesting. Votes on Alliance affairs? Yeah. How many of those do I get? Uh huh... uh huh... Great. Now, just one more question. Can I trade in my votes to get someone in the local police force demoted?”

I thought that would be the end of my troubles with my own personal Javert, but boy was I wrong. Demoted from Anaconda captain to patrol duty in a Viper, he still interdicted me at every turn. If anything I'd only made his obsession worse and further justified his hatred of me.

And of course I still couldn't shoot back at him without getting in trouble.

It just got insane after a while. On more than one occasion this guy followed me right to Dublin Station and kept on firing as I tried to dock. Once, I jumped in at the rear of the station, and had to skin dance over the damn thing to avoid his fire, weaving through the habitation rings and solar arrays. He just didn't care, he kept on firing anyway. How this guy didn't get another demotion for that kind of reckless behaviour I don't know.

One time, and I swear to God this is true, he somehow interdicted an interdiction. No joke. I was getting interdicted by a pirate, and was about to submit so I could show him the error of his ways, when suddenly over the coms I see “I have you now!” from Dillon, and BAM, he's the one who drops instead of the pirate, who no doubt was still in Supercruise wondering just how the hell he pulled that off.

He wouldn't be the only one. That should be impossible, yet Officer Dillon had somehow gotten between me and the pirate and took over the pirate's interdiction.

I have to admit, I was impressed. This guy was good, it's just a shame he's such a massive butthead. Because of him I'd had to invest in shield cells to give my ship a quick boost while I'm scooping and he's desperately trying to blow me out of the sky.

And it's not like he doesn't know it's futile to try and take me out in a lone Viper. He's just so angry and obsessed he just doesn't care. Granted, my patronizing tone assuring him he'll get me next time couldn't have possibly helped, but seriously, there was no smoothing things over with this guy. Ever.

And then, just like that, he was gone.

I'm flying to Dublin Citadel and there are no warnings, no interdictions from law enforcement, no rage filled messages from Dillon. He was just...gone. Same thing the next time I returned to Gateway. And the next time. And the next.

Had he gotten himself killed? He made it clear I wasn't the only guy on his list, maybe one of them had enough and spaced him? I'd like to think that it wasn't someone like me, though. Hopefully it was some local pirate faction, and he went down in a blaze of glory defending law, order, and the right to have a pole up your butt so far you can brush your teeth with it.

I'm gonna miss you, Officer Dillon. You were the Wile E Coyote to my Road Runner.

Firing Solutions

“I have a proposition for you.”

Usually when a guy asks me that it’s because of the outfit I’m wearing and I have to tell them to get lost. Now that I’m in MF’s body with a melted cheese face, I know that’s not likely to happen again, so I assumed this offer was legit.

“What kind of proposition?”

The man smiled and opened a briefcase, showing me a variety of brochures and magazines. “I represent Kestral Defense Industries, and I think you and I might be able to do business together... Ranger M.”

Mossfoot’s brief and disastrous foray into being a public icon for the youth of a generation—God help them all. Last I heard Odyssey Expeditions had tried reviving the brand with a more kid-friendly guy who didn’t need to wear a mask, and instead wore a stylized uniform that walked the line between practical and superhero.

“Look, that’s way behind me, so—”

“Don’t misunderstand me, Mr. Foot. Your Ranger M...shall we say, experience?...is what brought you to my attention, but after following your exploits I think you’re exactly what we need.”

“What, to get as far away from inhabited space as possible and never come back?”

The man snorted. “Hardly.” He waved to my ship, which at this point looked like it could use a fresh paint job. “I’m here because of this. We don’t see many of these Clippers up in Alliance space, you know.”

Ah. Being an Empire ship, they’re a bit choosy as to who exactly can get their hands on one. Mossfoot on the other hand was a bit choosy about who exactly he stole it from. But the man was right, they weren’t a common sight in the Alliance, largely because you had to go through the Federation first to get to the Empire from here.

“We’re looking into working with shipyards to develop something similar, and, more importantly, the weapons they will use. But the Clipper has, shall we say, a unique design choice in terms of its weapon layout.”

"It's a right pain in the butt," I said. Mossfoot might love the Dyson Sweeper, and I admit it flies well, but quite frankly I've never been happy with the weapon hardpoints.

"That's why we want to hire you, to run some live fire tests using an assortment of different loadouts. We'll install a device to monitor the results of each combination. We want to try a variety of things, focusing on gimble and fixed weapons."

"No turrets?"

"Not at this time."

I was intrigued. "What kind of live fire tests?"

"There's a civil war going on a couple dozen light years away in Hooriayan. Very intense. We'd like you to get involved, doesn't matter which side you choose, and take on a variety of ships with each loadout. If at all possible, take down an Anaconda with each. If you feel you can."

I smiled. "You wouldn't be approaching me if you didn't think I could."

"True. But your combat record is...inconsistent. Sometimes you're highly aggressive, taking on ships far more capable than yours and in greater numbers. At other times you're more...shall we say, timid?"

I tried not to laugh at that. Wouldn't MF just love to hear that? Timid. "I have my reasons," I said. "What's the pay like?"

We talked numbers for a while and I was satisfied. I'd heard about the conflict in Hooriayan, it was near G 166-21, an anarchy system, and was in danger of becoming an anarchy itself. When MF found out about this, that would be the argument I'd go with to justify my actions.

The real reason was I was sick of playing garbage man of the galaxy. Especially once Officer Dillon disappeared. At least he kept things somewhat interesting.

"Right then, when do I start?"

Mossfoot gave his reluctant approval to my contract with KDI, but trusted me to be smart about it. And by smart he meant a) keep him alive and b) not get him into trouble that would follow us around for the next year. What a worry wart.

The Clipper is a fine ship in terms of handling, but as I've often complained, its weapon placement leaves much to be desired. Most pilots opt for an all-gimble approach, and that works fine, except when the enemy uses chaff. And trust me, if he sees

you in a Clipper, he will. That's why MF insisted on the single fixed beam, and I agree with his reasoning.

A Class 3 Beam packs more punch per second than any other weapon and melts shields like butter. The other Class 3 is a gimble pulse, which uses much less energy, still packs a decent punch, and continues to keep the pressure on even when the beam misses. Plus if the enemy uses chaff, having one wonky pulse isn't going to hurt your power reserves too much.

The Class 2 mounts underneath were gimble multicannons. These were my choice. It can be hard to lead shots with a multicannon, especially in a big ship like this.

Anyway, the guy from Kestral Defense Industries had specific loadouts he wanted and reports on my findings as well as the data from the recorder they installed.

First up – full gimble pulses. You ever see a really old movie called Star Wars? I think they made about twenty of them or something, then an unsuccessful reboot of the franchise somewhere in the mid 2400s.

Flying full gimble pulse feels a lot like flying an X-Wing fighter. It does a remarkable job taking down shields, but the problem then becomes the hull. This is why I prefer to keep something kinetic on board. I found taking down enemy hulls took longer, even when targeting subsystems. I will admit it does not drain energy very quickly, but as expected, chaffing became a problem.

(Right now I'm pretty sure MF would tell me to try using talcum powder for that. I've hung out with him too long, I think, if I can predict his lame jokes.)

Overall, it's not a bad setup, but not quite my cup of tea.

Next loadout – Fixed C3 beam and Gimble C3 Fragmentation Cannon. In theory a great combination. Beam to take out shields, frag cannon to wreak havoc on subsystems. The problem here is the Frag is only really useful against big ships. Anything smaller than a Python and most of those projectiles are missing, even at close range. Granted, a point blank shot on a subsystem is one of the best feelings I've had that didn't involve a vibrator, but you're getting yourself in trouble when you need to focus on trying to hit those sweet spots. This loadout is best used in a wing where everyone has a role to play, rather than someone going it alone.

Next up – fixed railguns. First they wanted to try two railguns, but that just seemed like a waste to me. They're spread so far apart using both meant one would probably miss in all but the largest of targets. So I decided to power one down to save energy, and

power it up when the first ran dry. Not a bad idea, it meant I'd get sixty shots instead of thirty.

In theory this is a good setup. A good railgun shot to a subsystem can put the fear of God in any pilot. The problem is division of resources. While you're focused on getting that railgun shot your other weapons aren't being used to their full potential. And that power drain means that if you want to fire more than once you can't afford to be using your other weapons anyway. Not to mention the shot delay while the railgun powers up.

This setup almost got me killed. Twice. It's easy to forget that you're not in a small fighter when you're flying a Clipper. You are in fact flying something much bigger than an old Earth 747. So while you're focusing on lining up your kill shot, you are staying relatively still, which makes you a very large target.

Can't recommend this layout. Hopefully they won't have me use it again.

I'm having my doubts about this next mission. I suspect that somewhere in Kestral Defense Industries is a brain trust of people who have all these great ideas that look good on paper, but have absolutely no idea if it's actually practical in real life. Take for example my latest loadout.

Given my feedback on the railguns, they wanted me to test a combination of fixed and gimble weapons. Fixed beam and gimble burst, with multicannon and railgun for cleanup.

What. The. Heck?

First off burst lasers are not all they're cracked up to be. They use almost as much energy as a beam, but don't do as much damage. Also the C3s simply don't target subsystems well and have poor armour penetration, in my experience.

And a railgun with a multicannon? Okay, I get the idea. Do a bit of damage while your railgun charges, and even if you miss you've done some damage to the subsystem. In theory. In fact, the multicannon also takes a bit of time to charge up. I just don't see this working rather well.

The worst part? The energy output meant I needed to upgrade my powerplant from a B class to an A. Not only does that cost an extra ten million credits, but MF was very keen on keeping the B. The B class powerplant weighs sixty percent more than the A class, but that extra tonnage is mostly armour plating. The A class might give you more

juice, but ask any Elite pilot what they aim for in a dogfight and the answer is always the same—the powerplant.

Still, a contract is a contract, and I can always run away if I get into too much trouble.

The next thing I knew I was in space. I mean, I'm usually in space, but I was short about six hundred tons of metal surrounding me.

Floating in space, in an ejection seat. The Dyson Sweeper was now someone else's trash to clean up. I now learned a new downside of being inside MF's body—the stasis field doesn't affect me when I'm in control. Remember, I'm hitching a ride on his consciousness, but I'm still an organic circuit wrapped externally around his brain like a wet napkin, technically separate from him and operating under different rules.

As far as I could tell he was blissfully in a coma and wouldn't wake up until a rescue ship came along and dropped us off at the medical facility in Davis Port. On the other hand I was fully aware of the fact that I was spinning in space, completely helpless, body paralyzed and technically dead. I was lucky I could even see out of the eyes that were frozen open.

Off in the distance was the glitter of lasers from the combat zone. Once ejected, the seat boosts you clear of the immediate debris, then provides a short one-shot hop in supercruise to clear you from the area of engagement before burning out. That same one-shot boost also sends out a pulse to alert Search & Rescue where to pick you up.

A way better system than what they had back in my day. Back then you had to buy an escape capsule, and it was all too easy for a vindictive pilot to either shoot it down or capture it and sell you off as a slave. But things are different now.

Floating in space gave me a chance to reflect on what went wrong, and how I'd explain it all to MF once he came to.

My gut was right about the weapon layout. It was just too busy. Too much stuff to keep track of, and the railgun problems from before still existed.

This is what happens when you let nerds design your ship rather than pilots. They're all about min-maxing bonuses and advantages and forget that in the real world you don't have time to exploit each to the fullest. You need to make snap judgements and be able to think on the move.

Sigh... I've never been shot down before. MF? Sure, quite a few times. I even shot him down once. It's how we met. Me? Hell no.

So what went wrong, I hear you ask. Well, it was a domino effect of mistakes that began with that crap weapon loadout, and continued with having the unarmoured powerplant. During the confusion of battle dealing with four different weapon types being used in two different ways, with various delays and heat management to worry about, I forgot to use my shield cells correctly. But none of those things are what got me blown up.

No, that was all Officer Dillon.

Jesus, I thought Mossfoot's Javert was dead, but no. He'd left the police and joined with the Alliance military to fight the good fight to keep Hooriayan within her fold. I learned later that Hooriayan was his homeworld, and he'd been given command of another Anaconda. It turned out we were fighting on the same side.

That didn't stop him from switching sides just to blow me out of the sky.

Officially they're calling it an IFF failure, and an unfortunate accident. Yeah right. I'm lucky I ejected in time. Right after he took out my power plant he was aiming for the cockpit, hoping to fry me as the seat jumped clear.

So that left me drifting in space to watch the fireworks from afar until the rescue ship arrived and scooped me up. It was almost comical inside there. He'd scooped up two other pilots before me, and we all had frozen looks of terror on our faces.

But none of this was the worst part of the experience. That came after we returned to Davis Port and the medical team took us to Recovery. I finally blacked out as they administered some drugs and got to the work of resuscitating Mossfoot's body.

And then I woke up.

By all rights it should have been MF that woke up. I looked over at the doctors and nurses and they were all looking at my readings with concern. Specifically my brainwaves. I heard them mutter about this being highly unusual. Then they came over and examined me, asking me questions, looking back at the scanners.

"What's wrong?"

The doctor checked my pupil dilation for what felt like the fourteenth time. "Do you feel normal, Mr. Foot?"

"As normal as ever after being in suspended animation in a vacuum," I answered.

“It’s just... well, our equipment must be faulty. Never mind. Get some rest and we’ll talk in the morning.”

“No, wait, what is it? What’s wrong?”

“It’s just that according to these readings, you shouldn’t be conscious. We’re not getting any significant brain activity from you at all, though we are picking up some odd electromagnetic interference from a strange implant that might be affecting the readings. According to the brain scan, you shouldn’t even be alive.”

Oh no, he had that wrong. I was alive all right. It was Mossfoot I was worried about.

MMIA

Mossfoot? Mossfoot?

I'd been trying for days to contact him, and I hadn't heard as much as a grumpy yawn anywhere inside our head.

I refused to accept the idea that he was gone, but there was simply nowhere for him to be. Right up until I was released the doctors said they weren't picking up anything from the central part of the brain, and only mild readings from the cerebellum and brainstem. I couldn't exactly tell them about me, given MF's recent concerns as to whether or not I'd be deemed illegal AI tech. So I had to play along, and accept their explanation that perhaps the implant wrapped around the brain (ie me) was interfering with their readings.

But it was entirely possible that Mossfoot was gone. Best case scenario was that he was in a coma. The upshot of this was that I was keeping his body alive and in shape in the meantime. I had to hold onto that small bit of positivity.

I was faced with the possibility of having my own life again. I'd died before of a degenerative disease, my body is still drifting in my old Cobra MKI off the shoulder of Orion. This transplanted consciousness (or reasonable facsimile) had been MF's way to survive being alone.

Now I was the one who was alone. I didn't even have Dumbass anymore.

I'd always left the cat back at the station before going out on a combat run, and when I finally got out of the hospital and checked on it in our rented room, the dumb furball was nowhere to be found. Must have snuck out as I was leaving. By the time I tracked it down, it turned out Dumbass had already been adopted by a six year old girl who called it Mrs Piddles and dressed it in a bonnet.

I didn't have the heart to take it from her. The cat had been through enough with us anyway. Humiliation aside, she'd have a safer and more stable life with a proper family. Dumbass didn't have anything with me. Heck, I didn't have anything anymore. No

family, no friends (I tended not to show up around MFs friends, too damn confusing after a while), just a ship and a body I didn't even deserve.

Sure, I wanted a body again, to be my own person...but not like this. It wasn't fair to Mossfoot, and when you got right down to it, it was my fault.

Scratch that. It was Javert's fault.

That man had crossed the line. But revenge and obsession can go both ways, my friend. You'd best hope I learn forgiveness and soon, because unlike Mossfoot, I do not care if I end up being wanted in Gateway, or the whole goddamned Alliance. I see you again, Officer Dillon, I'll show you how big a mistake you made. I'll go straight up Wrath of Khan on your ass, and everyone who flies with you. And unlike Khan, I won't monologue, trying to drag things out and savour it. My ship's got high-speed recorders and instant replay for that.

If you hear or read this, I've got one piece of advice for you. Run.

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

It's the end of the world, but not as we know it.

Trooper #4

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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.

Enjoy the following excerpt for Trooper #4

The vast courtyard within the castle walls exploded with life. Commoner and noble alike were awed by the fountains of sparks that shot from brass barrels high into the evening sky. Tantalizing smells both sweet and savory drifted on the wind, along with music and laughter.

A young girl of three years wandered alone through the festival, her eyes filled with curiosity. She looked at every man and woman as if each was the most amazing thing she'd ever seen. Older children played with a ball in a clearing, but she wasn't interested in their games. The simple pleasures of an empty apple crate were more enthralling. It could be a cart, or a fort, or a boat...

Musicians, singers and actors warmed up for the evening's performance. Nearby, people waited patiently in line to gaze at the growing number of stars through the Royal Astrologer's wondrous spyglass. And next to them a bard sang the history of the land—great battles fought, great deeds done.

The girl was alone, but wasn't afraid. It wasn't in her nature to fear such a wonderland.

She ran. Through forests, streams, and hills the girl ran till she could run no more. There was no thought behind this, only instinct and timing.

The city was dead. Lia was dead. *Everyone* was dead. Everyone but her.

Exhausted, she collapsed at the top of a wooded hill. For a moment, she thought she saw a man hunched over a campfire, a strange blue dome next to him. But it was just her imagination. There was no man here—only trees, dead leaves, and darkness.

Shivering, the child covered herself in leaves and slept.

Day 1

The day started like any other. The sun came up, and in twelve or so hours it would go back down again. The world could end and this would still be true.

The early light of dawn filtered through brown curtains, staining the walls of the small bedroom. A woman in white briefs and a T-shirt slept on top of the brown covers, her arms and legs sprawled across the double bed like the chalk outline of a homicide victim.

The light began to drill through her eyelids. She winced and turned her head, but her brain had already started waking up. She opened her eyes. Beside her was a brown chair, a blue shirt and dark pants crumpled on the seat. A belt draped over its back.

Her brow furrowed as she tried to make sense of what she saw. The clothes seemed out of place, like a pimp at a funeral. Were they hers?

She lifted her head to scan the room. There was no sense of familiarity, none of the comfort you felt when you woke up at home.

Her heart beat faster; she *wasn't* home.

It began to race when she had to admit she didn't know where home was.

She sat up, grasping at the details of the room. A large TV sat on the dresser across from the bed. Beige carpet covered the floor. The bathroom door stood wide-open—white tiles and porcelain dimly lit by a small pane of frosted glass. No one there. The front door was shut, a notice framed on it. She got up for a closer look. No words, just a diagram of the room.

She opened the curtains and let the light pour in. Outside was a parking lot connected to a two-lane road with a police car stopped on its shoulder. Beyond that was nothing but dry grassland. Next to the parking lot was a tall sign—MOTEL—with an arrow that arced over the word and pointed down.

She went back to dress and stubbed her toe on something hard. She winced and looked at her feet.

A long pump shotgun lay on the floor next to the chair.

She jumped back as if the weapon would shoot her of its own free will. It must have fallen over, having been propped against the chair. For a moment, her fear came from recognition; part of her *knew* why the gun was there. As soon as she felt an answer creep forward, her mind pushed it back into the shadows. She looked to the nightstand. Next to the lamp was a black automatic pistol. She looked at the clothes on the chair again and saw a metal star glint on the blue shirt.

It was a uniform. The nametag under the five-pointed star read: T. Felice

She had no idea if that was her name.

She tried on the clothes, put on the belt, but didn't touch the guns. The uniform fit, but the nametag in the mirror was as indecipherable backwards as it had been forward.

She was a cop? It didn't seem to click with her. Aside from the guns and uniform, she could have been a reporter or an aristocrat and it would have made as much sense.

She looked back to the pistol on the nightstand. It was a Glock 22, which held fifteen .40 caliber rounds and was standard issue for many U.S. law enforcement agencies. The shotgun was a Mossberg 590. She was pretty sure not many rich aristocrats knew that. Maybe if they lived in Texas.

She looked at the nametag again.

T. Felice.

Tonya? Tiffany? Tammy?

These names belonged to someone with a trust fund.

Toni? Thelma? Tash?

Those didn't feel right, either, but Felice sounded okay. Felice it was until further notice.

She picked up the remote off the dresser and sat on the bed. She turned on the TV. Nothing. She pressed the power button again, tried to turn on the power manually, unplugged the set and tried another socket. Nothing.

Felice tried the lamp next to the TV, then the one on the nightstand, then the main room switch. No power anywhere. Great.

There was a jingling in her pocket. She fished out a brass key attached to a plastic tag twice its size. On one side, it said *MOTEL*. On the other, *104*.

Felice went to the door. She turned the handle, and then changed her mind. She went back, picked up the Glock, put it in the holster, and propped the shotgun back against the chair.

The air was still brisk this early in the morning. She walked out into the parking lot, which was empty. There was no sign of anyone else at the motel. There was no one in the police car across the road. It was most likely hers, too.

She raised her hand to her eyes and scanned the horizon, but there was little to see aside from flat grassland. Distant mountains skirted the edge of the world, and though the sky above was clear, dark thundering clouds loomed beyond the range.

Five or ten miles past the motel sign, a small city stuck out of the grassland like a concrete island. But it was all wrong. Smoke rose from half the city in thick black plumbs, and once or twice she saw a lick of flame. Barely visible at this distance on the road was a pile up of cars that spilled off the shoulder and onto the grass. They, too, were smoking.

The day had started like any other. The sun came up, and in twelve or so hours it would go back down again. The world could end and this would still be true.

It had.

Felice ran back to the motel. Her instinct was to grab the shotgun, but by the time she was inside she realized how pointless that was. There wasn't another living soul in sight. Apart from the city, the pile of cars, and the mountains in the far distance, the motel was the only thing around. *She* was the only thing around.

Agoraphobia hit hard. She felt like a speck of dust in the grassy void of existence. She closed the door and braced herself against it, panting. For a moment, she thought she'd never leave the room again.

Felice shook her head. Whatever was going on, hiding under the bed wouldn't help. She went back to the mirror. She didn't know how amnesia worked, but knew different kinds were brought on by different events, such as injury or trauma. She didn't see any bumps or bruises on her head, but judging by the burning remains of civilization down the road, trauma was a pretty safe bet.

She'd hoped the person staring at her in the mirror would have some answers. She didn't. Short black hair, deep blue eyes, a shape somewhere in that healthy range between fat as a cow and thin as a bean pole (Were those farm metaphors? Was she raised on a farm?). Her reflection didn't look familiar, but didn't look unfamiliar, either. She could have looked like anyone and she might have had this same numb non-reaction. A man's reflection would have surprised her, though. That was something.

“This is me,” she said to the mirror. “Whoever I am.”

She stepped back outside, a sudden wave of claustrophobia beating out her agoraphobia. On the assumption it was morning, she had some basic compass bearings to work with, but there was just as little to see out here now as five minutes before. A fresh billow of smoke and fire appeared on the far end of the city to the north and drifted upward, but that was all.

She strode to the police car. At least she could do something productive. The cruiser was a dark blue—so dark it was almost black—with two yellow stripes and the state police star on the doors. The passenger’s side door was jammed shut with a deep dent; dust covered the hood and lights. She got into the driver’s seat and tried to start the engine. Dead. Not even a whine.

“Goddammit.”

She popped the trunk but found only a spare tire, jumper cables, and an empty gas can.

Felice looked back at the hotel. Not another car around? She could understand a place like this being empty, but what about the owners? Surely they lived here and had a car. Though if the city was any indication, maybe they were smart and got the hell out of wherever-she-was.

Where *was* she?

A hundred yards in either direction was a sign on opposite sides of the road, both facing away. She walked to the sign farthest from the city.

Now Entering
Fort Rock City Limits
Population 4000

The city was visible between the sign’s legs. Four thousand? One of the zeros must have fallen off; the city looked bigger than that. Presumably the sign closer to the city had a standard *Now Leaving City Limits* on it, perhaps with a rustic *Please Come Again* tacked underneath. She covered her eyes from the sun to scan the rest of the world. Still nothing, aside from the dark clouds behind the mountains.

So I am T. Felice of the—she checked her star—Oregon State Police. I’m at a motel at the edge of Fort Rock. I have no memory, my car is dead, the city is on fire, and

I slept with a pistol and shotgun within easy reach last night. Other than that, it looks like a nice day.

It was true; aside from those behind the mountains, there wasn't a cloud in the sky.

Felice sighed. There was only one place to go that didn't require several hours hike. It couldn't hurt to make sure the motel owners weren't home. Maybe this lot was visitor parking only and their cars were somewhere behind the building. It was worth a shot.

The single storey motel was built in an L shape with a dozen rooms along its length. The short, disconnected stub at the bottom would be where the manager lived. A small restaurant or convenience store sat beside it, or perhaps they just offered a jug of OJ and plate of donuts as their continental breakfast. At the very least, there were a couple of vending machines outside.

At the door to the manager's office her gaze caught on something: the door was ajar (which was promising) because the lock had been forced (which was not). The splintered wood on the doorframe made her uneasy.

Felice looked down at her right hand. She had drawn her Glock without realizing it.

With her left hand, she slowly pushed the lobby door open, listening for anything out of the ordinary. Weapon ready, she stepped inside. Empty. She moved, slow and silent, behind the wood counter and checked every corner, but found nothing aside from a water cooler. She looked at the keys on the wall behind the counter. Only Room 104 was missing.

She holstered the gun and began to relax. The break-in had probably been her own doing. She'd arrest herself later.

God knew what was going on in Fort Rock, but for now, at least, she was okay. She had to believe that or she'd snap. Given her amnesia she'd most likely snapped once already. She tapped the desk bell, which shattered the suffocating silence, then just as quickly faded.

"Hello? Anyone there?" She didn't expect an answer and wasn't disappointed. Felice checked the phone. It didn't work, of course. The motel register was open on the counter, but she couldn't make out the names—they were just so many chicken scratches. Cheating couples and hookers with their johns trying to avoid a paper trail. The last name on the list wasn't hers, but then she hadn't seriously believed she would break into a motel fully armed, steal the keys, then politely sign the guestbook.

She rectified that now, taking a pen and writing *T. Felice* on the first fresh line,

then 104 under the room column.

She looked at her handwriting. Very neat, not something you'd expect from someone who could kick in a door. She wrote in the comments box: *Clean and tidy. Wasn't disturbed all night. Would recommend to all my friends, if I knew who they were.*

Felice searched the rest of the building. The manager's room was locked. She found a key under the counter. No point in breaking down every door in the place.

It was another motel room, much like her own. The designer couldn't have won many awards for creativity. The bed was made. The window didn't face the sun, so the room was dim and filled with shadows. Felice shut the door.

As fear subsided, long term planning began to take root. She had to check the power, try to get the car running, and try to contact, well, *anyone*. She also had to hunt for food, and the restaurant was right next to the reception area. She wasn't hungry—not yet—but it was the easiest thing to take off her list.

The restaurant was well lit by three full wall windows. It was more of an enclosed patio than a solid structure. The blinds were up so she could see the main road. The smoking remains of the city were clear in the distance, as was the stalled cruiser about a hundred yards behind.

"Don't mind me, I'll find a spot." Felice sat at one of the white hardtop tables, food forgotten for now, and watched the smoke and fire.

"What the hell happened?"

The scenario she had pieced together was this: she had bolted from the city like a bat out of hell, only to stall outside this motel. When she couldn't locate a manager, she'd broken in, taken a key, let herself into a room, undressed, and collapsed in exhaustion.

Whatever happened in Fort Rock was bad enough she *really* wanted to forget.

She sat there, trying to make sense of the hell on the horizon. Another plumb of fire and smoke rose from a building. It would have been massive if seen up close, but from the restaurant looked like a tiny puff of orange and black.

"One Mississippi. Two Mississippi. Three Mississippi. Four..." She stopped counting after twenty, then, a few seconds later, heard a dull rumble. The fact there wasn't so much as a breeze to hinder the sound unnerved her.

How did that work again? Five seconds to the mile? Five miles away? Maybe she was counting fast. Felice snorted. It was a pointless question. How about a better one: what was on the menu? Pancakes. She definitely felt like pancakes. And eggs. And

bacon. And sausage. But mostly pancakes.

Only...if there was no power, anything in the fridge had probably spoiled; even if it hadn't, what would she cook with?

Felice looked to the kitchen and got up. *Maybe they have Froot Loops.*

From the corner of her eye, she saw movement on the road. It caught her attention because it was something, not the same old nothing that existed along the rest of its length, surrounded by more grassy nothing.

Someone was walking out there. Felice strained her eyes to make out who it was.

Who cares? It's someone!

She abandoned the hunt for dry breakfast cereal, ran out the door, and took to the road. People meant cooperation, support, and answers.

It turned out long stretches of nothing could skew your sense of depth perception. At first she thought the person was maybe a mile down the road. Turned out he was a lot closer, and a lot shorter.

She slowed down as she reached him. He couldn't have been more than nine or ten. He shuffled forward—dressed in a blue private school uniform—but didn't react at all to Felice. She knelt before him; he almost bumped into her, but stopped at the last second.

“Hey, you all right?” she asked. The boy didn't respond. Something told Felice to back up. She did, and the boy started moving once more. He swayed slightly from side to side, then stopped again when he reached her. Felice had the strange feeling the kid was moments from lunging and eating her brains. She looked at his downturned face. His skin was pink and healthy; his eyes looked normal.

“Are you all right?” she asked again. Still no response. “My name is Felice. I'm a police officer. I want to help you, okay?” The boy still stared at the ground, as though patiently waiting for her to get out of the way. When she did, he continued to shuffle forward. Felice followed alongside him.

“Can you talk?” Apparently not. “Are you hurt?” Apparently not. “Can you tell me what happened?” Apparently not. “Geez, give me something to work with, here, kid.” She was starting to get angry. “Tell me about yourself.”

The boy stopped and blinked. Her words were starting to sink in. Sometimes you need to kick with a boot instead of brush with a feather. She tried to keep the momentum going. “Where are you from?”

The boy turned and pointed to the burning city. “Gone.”

“Pretty much figured that one out, thanks,” Felice muttered under her breath, then repeated her earlier question. “What happened?”

The boy looked at her. His eyes were of the kind of hazel you couldn’t quite pin down, and his hair was somewhere between light and dark brown. He had the most confused look on his sad face. His mouth opened and closed a couple of times, as if searching for words that wouldn’t come.

“Hey, you’re okay now. I’m going to take you somewhere safe. Follow me, okay?”

The boy didn’t nod, but followed. It would have been faster to carry him, but that didn’t feel like the right thing to do, like he might throw a tantrum or have a seizure if she tried. Instead, she stayed a couple of steps ahead and kept to his pace. All this time having walked away from a burning city, alone...he had to be in shock, and unbelievably tired.

Despite the school uniform, he couldn’t have been at school today. This scale of destruction didn’t start and end in the span of a couple of hours, and most of the fires had burnt themselves out. The boy must have hidden overnight and wandered this way at daybreak. If he was dressed for school, whatever happened in town probably occurred between 8am and 4pm yesterday—perhaps the day before.

She looked at Fort Rock again. Assuming it (whatever *it* was) happened yesterday, and since this wasn’t Old London Town, the fires couldn’t have simply spread from building to building. They must have started in a whole bunch of places.

A stranger and more immediate question was, why the hell was one of said burning buildings moving toward her?

Felice’s eyes widened. It wasn’t a building, but a truck. She picked up the boy and ran off the road. She saw people burning on the hood and roof of the car, and heard a scream as it roared past in flames, but even that couldn’t quite cancel out a deep, empty droning noise that chilled her to her bones. The truck suddenly veered off the road and slammed into the motel restaurant as if guided by a homing beacon. The back end of the truck exploded.

“Oh hell no.” Still carrying the boy, Felice ran back to the motel, to Room 104, and set the boy down on the bed. “Stay here!”

Felice grabbed the fire extinguisher and axe from the manager’s office. The smell of burning flesh, gas and rubber filled her nostrils, making her stomach twist. She couldn’t put the truck out with one lousy extinguisher, but hoped to keep the fire from spreading. Fortunately, the office and restaurant weren’t directly connected to the other

rooms.

She chopped and dragged what flaming bits of the structure she could and blasted others with the extinguisher until the canister went dry. Hours passed before she felt comfortable leaving the blaze alone, though she made time to check on the boy every so often. Eventually, the fire seemed to give up and burn itself out, leaving the restaurant gutted and the manager's office singed. The wrecked truck and the bodies both in and on the vehicle sat in the center of the restaurant like some morbid college prank.

Blackened from soot with a number of ember burns on her clothes and hands, Felice wiped the sweat from her forehead, making a flat grey streak. She checked her watch. It was stuck at 11:02. Great. That didn't work, either. She gave a deep sigh. It didn't matter what time it was. The rest of the madness could wait until tomorrow for all she cared.

Felice went back to her room, exhausted. The boy was asleep in his clothes. She couldn't blame him. He lay stiff on his back, not curled up or on his side. If his hands had been crossed over his chest, he'd have looked like a funeral display.

She went to the bathroom to wash up but stopped at the door. She didn't want to go inside. Something at the back of her mind screamed at the thought. Her hand drifted toward her gun as she peered in. There was more light now that the sun was starting to drop behind the motel, and what came in bounced off the white porcelain and tiles so she could see everything.

It was empty, but not unused. The shower curtain had been torn down, bits still stuck to the rod's metal rings. The rest was left on the floor. Something could have been hidden underneath. Felice went back for her shotgun, then used it to drag the plastic sheet aside. Nothing. So why had she torn it down? What had she been afraid of?

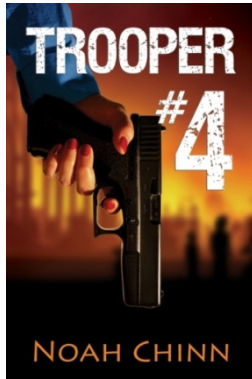
A sudden need to use the toilet overrode her concerns. For all she knew, she'd been holding it in for a week. The instant she flushed she regretted it—no hiss came from the tank, just a gloosh down the bowl. She confirmed her fears by checking the taps at the sink. No fresh water.

"Of course there isn't." Felice looked at her hands and didn't even want to look in the mirror. She'd probably scare the kid back into a coma when he saw her.

They wouldn't get very far without water, that was for sure. Felice went back to the manager's office. There had been a water cooler by the reception desk that she could drag back easily enough. There were also the vending machines outside. One was big and red with a generic COLA logo running down its side. The buttons offered such famous brand

names as Cola, Orange, Lemon-Lime, Root Beer, and Water. The other machine was full of junk food; chips, cookies, gum, and candy of a variety a remote place like this could afford.

She had no change. Not that it mattered, because there was no power. Not that it mattered, because she had an axe.



It's the end of the world, but not as we know it.

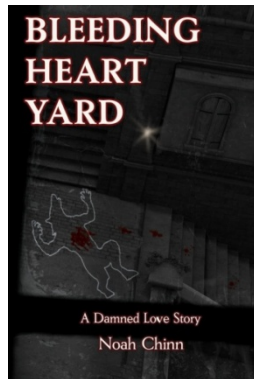
A woman wakes up in a motel on the outskirts of a remote Oregon city with no memory of who she is, a gun at her bedside, and a state trooper uniform. As she explores the world outside the motel it seems that civilization has come to an abrupt end, and whatever caused it is still out there, looking for the survivors.

That's bad. But it might also be the most normal thing that happens to her all week.

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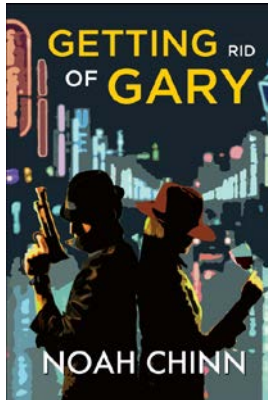
Cursed by a witch as a boy, Peter has grown up not knowing what the curse is or when it will kick in. He doesn't even believe it's real. But as the winter solstice approaches, a lot of things are about to happen.

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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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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