

# NOAH CHINN



# MOSSFOOT'S TALES OF WOE

# Mossfoot's Tales of Woe

Book One of the Mossfoot Muckabouts

*Noah JD Chinn*

# Dedication

For Fans of Elite and Oolite everywhere

## Dead Beginnings

I should by all rights be dead.

I used to be somebody. Born with a silver spoon in my mouth, I got into the Lave Academy on the fast track, paid for the best instructors, and was able to ditch after graduation without mandatory service and go independent. I never really thought about it as unfair. Sure, I heard other spacers talk about me behind my back, but I figured they were just jealous. It wasn't my fault I got a Fleur De Lance for my 18th birthday, nor that my dad was a sector commander in Her Imperial Majesty's Navy... which is about as pretentious as it sounds.

Those were the days.

Let's just skip to the part where my body was found pop-frozen in an asteroid field by do-gooder missionaries in an intact vac suit, my Lance so much scrap on the rock's surface. Slide on past the whole defrosting and rejuvenation process paid for by them no questions asked. Forget the fact that it was probably my own family that did it, or that I'd been declared legally dead, and if I was smart I'd keep it that way. Even ignore the fact that my one bit of luck was the missionaries offered me a beat up ship to get away on, one they'd planned on selling for scrap.

No, the reason I should all right be dead is that I ended up with an Adder, no ID, no money, no fuel.

And no joystick.

Like life hadn't pissed on me enough already, I was stuck with a ship so old it still used key-based maneuvering thrusters. This was back when people still thought space travel was all flight paths and exact procedures. The sort of thing where you go down a checklist and quite frankly a computer was better off doing it all for you while you took a nap.

You know, before people wised up to just how many pirates and privateers were really out there, and dogfighting became considered a basic life skill.

Oh, and I was pretty sure word of my premature declaration of death had gotten out and people were on their way to correct the problem.

I suppose there was always the Black Monks to go to. They were always eager to lend money... and far too eager about collecting it back. Quite frankly that might just have been exchanging one death sentence for another. Besides, without any witch fuel, I was stuck on Lave. My options were limited pretty much to scrounging for empties. By that I meant cleaning up the space lanes of asteroids. It's the space equivalent of looking for bottles in garbage cans for recycling. Doesn't pay much, but if I was lucky I could get a tank of fuel and out of Lave before ninjas or some crap arrived.

I figured it at least would be a peaceful way to while away the time and blast out my frustrations on the galaxy. The hell have I done to deserve this? Just because I demanded the most expensive champagnes in my Lance's dispensary? I have guests to entertain! Or maybe all those traffic tickets and police infractions I kept having to have swept under the rug. Those parties I organized on various stations that tended to get out of control? Who doesn't like a party?

But come on, it's not like I killed anyone! Well, not directly. I mean, there was that one guy I nudged out of the way en route to the docking station who crashed against its hull, but I think he was a pirate. He looked like one, and I'm sure he gave me the stink-eye before his ship exploded.

All I'm saying is, this is totally unfair. I did not deserve this!

So I'm turning big rocks in to smaller rocks, wondering how that actually makes space any safer...doesn't it just means there a lot more rocks out there to smash against your hull, small enough that you can't see them? I guess the shields handle them at that point. Anyway, that's when some jackass decides to attack me.

I did mention I don't have a joystick control system, right? Hell I don't even have a missile. Not even one of those little party favors that are only good for exploding uselessly when the other guy hits their ECM.

The only thing there is for me to do is run. Pick up trash some other day. Hope the space ninjas don't find me.

Except, I'm in an Adder, and pretty much everything out there is faster than me, including this asshole. Several hits to my hull and I realize three things: 1) I'm not getting away. 2) he's the only pirate attacking me and 3) he's in a Sidewinder with a pulse laser. sidewinder

As far as good news goes this is on par with "it's cancer, but...". However, I'm not one to look a gift horse in the mouth. I might have had all the breaks growing up, but that doesn't mean I wasn't a good pilot (not good enough to fend off six Viper Interceptors, but that's another story).

The next five minutes are spent not trying to throw up as I overcompensate with my roll and pitch, trying to get a bead on the little bugger. The pilot was green as a Thorian's butt crack. He'd dive at me headlong firing, then run away. No jinking, no special maneuvers, just in and out. Of course your standard Sidewinder has a head on profile about as thin as a sheet of paper, and my fine tune thrusters were as subtle as thrown brick.

Eventually I nailed the bastard, and when the fireball faded I saw the sweetest sight imaginable on my screen.

*Bounty: 22cr.*

So this piece of junk Adder with no hyperspace fuel, missiles, or anything else for that matter, still has its GalCorp bounty tracker intact? Who owned this ship before me? I'd made maybe 3 credits before that blasting asteroids for half an hour, not even enough to get a tank of fuel. Now I had enough for both fuel and some food to sell. Of course, best case scenario the profit from that food would only buy me another tank of gas, so for the time being you can expect me to keep on making the spaceways safe for all... of asteroids.

What? You thought I'd realize my true calling as a bounty hunter? What are you, high?



## Looking in the Mirror

Once I stripped away the facade of who I once was - the money, the ship, the heritage, the fawning social scene who clung to my every word; when all I was was cut away so close to the bone I could no longer hide behind family or fortune; when it came down to looking at myself in the mirror and judging myself as a man on my own terms, I was forced to come to a realization.

I am a coward.

No, not just a coward. I am the most craven little coward this side of the galaxy. Every stupid system is full of bloodthirsty pirates! They always left me alone because I had a Fleur Du Lance and that meant money, money for ECM hardened missiles and if you were really unlucky, a Q-bomb. You probably also had some cop buddies in Vipers just a radio call away, too.

But a rustbucket Adder with a pulse laser? You might as well put a sign on your thrusters saying "Free Kill".

Obviously you stick to the safer systems, but you know what? THERE'S NO SUCH THING! You read on the travel guide that the place is a stable democracy and you fly in and what do you know? It's coup day and everyone's invited. First come first serve for the wall to get shot against, no waiting.

By the time I finally managed to leave Lave I figured a nice safe corporate state would be the place to sell my discount rotting Spoo cargo and try and pass it off as haute cuisine to some sap. I had it all figured out. Jump in, move far far away from the main spacelane, and wait till I was in planet orbit before heading back for the station. Safe as safe can be.

You'd think that, wouldn't you?

Not one, but two pirates block my torus drive. At first I think they're just traders and fly away to get a clear path, only they stay on my tail. That leaves only two other possibilities.

"GO AWAY!" I yelled over the comms. "If you're missionaries, I've already found God. If you're pirates, I'm in no hurry to meet him!"

I'm not heading for the planet, the sun, or the witch point beacon so--oh look they're shooting at me what a surprise. Because that's the way my life goes these days. Last week I was in a zero-G bed with two models on my Lance, drinking globules of champagne off their bodies. Today I'm being mugged for 2 tons of crappy Spoo in an Adder that should have been recycled for the 20 credit deposit.

I think I mentioned before the impossibility of my outrunning anyone is my ship? The same is just as true when two are after you. I can't outrun them and I can't outshoot them, so what the hell is left. Outthink them? Hello? Space tactics at the Academy was better known as "nap time". I got all my tactics from the movie Top Lazer. Do a barrel roll, that's a good trick.

The only good news was that these pirates were worse shots than I was a pilot. They couldn't catch up too fast and kept taking turns making wild shots at me.

I was thousands of miles away from anywhere. No chance in hell of reaching the planet's space station, but I did see something else.

Coming from a rich family meant I know all about other rich people, and the Black Monks, for all their claims of solvency being a sin, are as rich as it gets. Seriously, does NO ONE wonder how they can afford such huge stations, deadly ships, and giving out loans that they enforce with deadly efficiency? What a scam.

But those big stations have really big guns, and they don't like it when people shoot at them... maybe these jokers can't hit the side of a barn, but maybe they can hit the broad side of a temple...

I never got a chance to try the scheme out, though. Just then, like an avenging angel, a GalCorp Viper started taking them on. Hallelujah! It drove one fighter off and started doing some serious damage to the Asp.

I had a clear shot to escape, make my way to the station and sell my goods. The police could take it from here. I didn't have to get involved.

But you know what? That asshole had pissed me off. I was minding my own business. It's not like I could be carrying much. What part of 2 ton cargo capacity don't you understand? You couldn't possibly expect to get a big payday from me. You're just squashing bugs. And quite frankly, I'm sick of being stepped on.



I spun around and joined the fight. Since the Viper was the real threat, the Asp knew it, so it ignored me - which was a mistake. I watched the Viper pound the crap out of the Asp until I saw his engines start to sputter, then finished him off.

"Thanks for your assistance" the Viper pilot said. "You head on somewhere safe, there might be more around."

"Will do, but I'll take that bounty first if you don't mind. I got the kill shot. Check your camera."

I might be a craven little coward, but I'm a GREEDY craven little coward.

## The Path Not Taken

God hates me. Either that or someone put a giant “kick me” sign on the back of my Adder. I swear I’m sticking to safe systems, but someone seems to have forgotten to tell the pirates that. I’d made maybe two profitable runs. Thanks to picking up space trash and two lucky kills I’d gotten enough credits to start trading for more than fuel money. Right now my goal was to get as far away from Lave as possible, since that was my last known location in my old life.

Fortunately for me, my Adder still had its old pilot’s idents intact, and that in itself seemed to be a pseudonym. Unless some poor sod actually had a mom who thought “Mossfoot” was a good name for a baby. Unfortunately that seems to be where my luck ended, because I can’t go to a planet without being chased, fired upon, cargo searched, or otherwise harassed. Half the time I’m sure it was done for kicks.

And if being pursued for cheap thrills and cheaper credits wasn’t bad enough, I had the bad luck to come across someone with money. How do I know that? Because they were flying a Fleur Du Lance.

My old class of ship.

Now picture this. A big expensive Lance comes barreling down on you, shiny new beam laser spitting death. And right next to him, a tiny souped up Sidewinder providing backup. Seem like a familiar setup? It was like the rich kid at school who’s a bully because he knows his parents can buy him out of any trouble he comes across, along with his toady sidekick, sucking up, praising him and kicking guys in the nuts when the big guy is done with them. This could have been me two weeks ago.

I never had a toady, though I’d be lying if I didn’t have some offers. But there was always something off putting about those enthusiastic hangers on that tell you how great you are. I’m fine with them at parties, when I can get them to fetch me drinks or take a grenade for me (check the reality show Jersey Outer Rim if you’re don’t know the term), but I don’t want them with me from system to system.

I'd also never hunted down and shot a space hobo. To be honest before I got spaced I'd never gotten a live kill in my life. Just sims. Scared off a few pirates in real life, but that was all. You got enough bling, people leave you alone.

But my lack of curb stomping wasn't because of some deep rooted morality. I'd seen broken down heaps like the one I'm now flying clogging up the spacelanes, forcing me to take ten seconds out of my busy schedule to Torus drive around them. Sometimes I'd fire off a standard missile at them, watch them run, knowing they couldn't afford ECM, then detonate it before it got in kill range.

But that's all. Just putting them in their place. Remind them they need to take the long way around and leave the corridor open for those of us with things to do. Point is, I thought they were beneath me, and the only reason I didn't do worse than I did was because I was already using up a lot of favors in my day to day life and didn't need the extra headache. I don't think I ever saw them as people.

Payback's a bitch, and she's got my phone number.

The Lance wasn't going to be satisfied with a scare. It wanted me dead. A cheap way to up his combat rating no doubt. I'd met a few pilots like that, too. The sort who saw it as doing a public service. And I was being serviced.

Once again I was outmanned and outgunned. And no stations or Black Monks to try and run to. No police to call out to, either. But I had one trick left up my sleeve—fuel.

I had just barely enough to jump to another system. Less stable politically than this one, but then, beggars can't be choosers, nor can the imminently deceased.

Those were the longest 15 seconds of my life... and given how often I say things like that, you get the idea of how long that is starting to get. Finally I see the blue light and I'm free. I'm in the tunnel. Suck on that, frat boy! See you in... this system? The first thing I see on my radar are two ships. I fly away as fast as I can. Maybe they're other traders. Maybe it's a coincidence. One red ping. Two red pings. Targeting computer confirms a Fleur Du Lance and a souped up Sidewinder.

You have GOT to be kidding me. How was I worth following into another system? How? This is bullshit!

I now have no jump fuel, I'm as far away from a station as I can be, and I have two fighters trying to kill me, preventing me from using the Torus drive for a quick getaway.

Well, good life while it lasted. Wish it had ended back in the days when I had been doing models in the Lance instead of now, though. This is kind of anti-climactic.

Might as well go for broke. I have one lousy missile. A party favor that will get jammed as soon as I fire it.

Or will it?

The Fleur probably came standard with ECM, but what about the Sidewinder? Probably not. And would Mister Rich Bully do his buddy a solid and jam it for him? Depends. Maybe it would be a laugh to see his buddy scamper off.

Worth a shot.

It seemed I understand the mind of the spacefaring asshole better than I thought. The Sidewinder went scrambling away while my missile spun in wide circles around him. I won't deny that I got some satisfaction when I saw it hit. I saw the engines sputter but before I could get the kill it was pulling away out of my range. And the Lance was taking that opportunity to smack me upside the head, blowing out my shields. It wasn't a beam laser he was firing. It was a military grade laser!

I had to let the Sidewinder go and focus on the real threat. Besides, with luck it wouldn't be back and I just had Goliath here to worry about. But how? I had no missiles and just a lousy pulse laser against a top-of-the-line Fleur De Lance. What chance did I have?

That's when I realized he was lacking something important. A rear laser. This guy didn't bother with rear defenses, because he never expected anyone to fight back.

I managed to get behind the Lance, and by god I stayed there, pounding away at its aft shields like a hooker working on commission. But the recharge on those ships is crazy fast. I was on him for ten minutes and still he showed no sign of weakening.

"Tired yet?" he said over the comm channel. It was the first time he'd bother speaking to me.

"Only of you still breathing, asswipe. I can keep this up all day."

"Funny, so can my shields."

"This how you get your kicks, stomping on guys you don't think can fight back."

"Ahhh, don't put yourself down. You're putting up a good fight. See? Oooh. Oooh. Those little blasts sting, you know. Just don't scratch my paint job, or I'll really get mad."

That was it. This guy had a weakness. He was an asshole. And I know how assholes think.

"Screw this, I'm outta here!"

I flew off towards the nearest planet. I figured the Lance would let me get away a bit, then hit me with everything he had. As soon as he did, I jinked and spun and wove until the steady beam cut out to intermittent pulses. He'd bled it dry. Just like I'd hoped.

We returned to our dance with me behind the Lance pounding on its rear shields.

"Hey, why don't you run again? Maybe I'll let you get away this time. I think I'm late for poker night anyway."

"Naw. I'd rather just kill you. Something tells me I'm not your first hapless victim. What's your combat rating?"

"Dangerous. Just five away from Elite, baby!"

Listen to how this guy talks. I'm not a person. I'm just a notch to him. Hell, he sounds like I should be happy for him, like I'm helping him achieve his dreams.

"Oh, and by the way, buddy of mine wants to say hi."

Of all the bad luck. The Sidewinder was back, guns blazing. He'd waited for his shields to recharge and came back for his master. I just hoped his energy reserves weren't back to full.

I veered off from the Lance, hoping to make this quick. The toady in the Sidewinder danced with me a bit, but I had his number down. This guy wasn't a real pilot, he just did the in and out thing like most amateurs, then ran away like a bitch when things got hot. Only this time he wasn't able to get far enough away from me.

Off in the distance his tiny ship made a tiny fireball, and I got a tiny degree of pleasure for it. His last words had been, "Help me, boss!" I didn't hear his buddy say a word about it.

I let him drain his mill-spec laser at me again, thanking God that the Adder was surprisingly maneuverable, even if it was slow as a slug. Once again the pulses started when the beam overheated and I was back on the guy's tail.

"Dude, this is pointless. You're just delaying the inevitable. Just jump out in your vac suit. I'll scoop you up and sell ya somewhere nice. After I trash your ship of course."

You know what? I take it back. This could never have been me two weeks ago, or any other time for that matter. I'm a bit of an asshole, I know that. But this guy makes me look like a choir boy. And the thing about assholes is, they tend to be overconfident. In fact the asshole-to-overconfidence ratio tends to scale in direct proportion to one another. Which meant this guy had no idea that his engines were on fire.

Wonderful thing, military lasers. Problem is, they don't just overhead like a bitch, they drain your energy too. which meant that once I did punch through his shields he was in a lot more trouble than he realized.

"Smell anything baking, jackass?"

That seemed to get his attention. The Lance darted off and started making a bee line away from me. "Hey, all right, I'll go. Jeeze, just get lost, will ya?"

I let go of the fire button. The way he said it. As if I was the bad guy. As if all he'd been doing was flick my ear and I had no right to get so upset.

I held down the fire button again. "Yeah, I don't think so. I'll send your regrets to the poker group."

"Cut it out asshole!" His ship was jinking a bit, but I'd knocked out most of his maneuvering thrusters. I could see him get ready for a hyperspace jump.

"Why don't you just eject? I'll scoop you up and sell you somewhere nice. After I trash your ship of course."

"This isn't funny, man!" He sounded legitimately scared now. I wondered if he'd ever been close to death before? Probably not, if radios had smell-o-vision I'd be catching a wiff of piss by now. Which meant that his Dangerous rating had to be built upon a lot of ships like mine. Punks he didn't feel threatened by. Space hobos just trying to get by until they came across the rich kid with too much time on his hands and no morals.

"You want funny, douchebag? Get reincarnated as a clown."

Bounty: 101 credits

## Of Typos and Tippy Pilots

"It's called a Fer De Lance, you know."

"What was I calling it?"

"Fleur."

I looked at Diziet uncertainly. "You sure about that?"

"Pretty sure. It's right on the manual. Also anywhere you read about it in the news, movies, the guys who designed it. You know, everywhere."

Much to my initial concern, I'd stumbled across an old flight buddy of mine. Diziet and I were in the Academy together. I cribbed off his notes if I happened to fall asleep during class, which was a lot.

Hey, it's not my fault. They're the ones who scheduled Tactics class at ten in the morning. I mean, who's awake by then? Anyway, Diziet was an okay guy, but when I saw him now I was afraid he might only see credit signs over my head. Turns out, he didn't even know about the attempt on my life. Seems the whole thing is being kept hush hush. Just one more problem for dad to sweep under the rug, I guess.

It also seemed that Diziet didn't much care if there was a bounty on me. We shared a brew and I told him how my life had gone to hell.

"And how long was I calling it a Fleur?"

"When did you get your old ship?"

"When I was eighteen."

"Yeah, since then."

"So why the hell didn't anyone tell me?!"

"You kidding me? Nobody ever wanted to talk back to the Golden Child. You never took criticism well."

"Shut the hell up."



“You telling me you didn’t have Cody busted for transporting pornography—that you planted by the way—when he proved you were wrong about witchspace time dilation theory?”

“It wasn’t about that.”

“Oh, what was it then?”

“About who could drink more Witchspace Pale Ale in 2 minutes. You must have heard the story thirdhand or something.”

“My mistake. That’s a far more mature reason, and yet it fits in better with what I know of you.”

“So why are you correcting me now?”

Diziet snorted. “You aren’t exactly in a position to do jack against anyone, are you? How’s it feel to be one of the unwashed masses?”

“Terrible.”

Diziet downed the last of his glass. “Good.”

“Oh, I guess you think I had this coming? That I deserved it?”

“Nobody deserves to be taken down by their own family like that. That’s why I’m not going to rat you out. You’re a spoiled assbat of the first water, but that’s not a crime.”

“You sure? From where I’m standing now, I can see why someone would have wanted the old me put down.”

“Really? Hmmm. Maybe there’s hope for you yet.”

Thanks to laughing boy’s bounty and a favor from Diziet with the local mechanic, I was not only able to expand my cargo bay to carry five glorious tons of Pan Galactic Thargoid Blaster (275 proof, it actually bends the laws of physics to make it possible), but also able to get something vital installed. I gazed upon its technological glory for many long minutes

“It’s.. it’s beautiful.” I said at last.

Diziet frowned. “It’s just a joystick. Honestly, I don’t know why this heap didn’t get an upgrade at some point. Hell, you might have been able to sell it for more as an antique if you had kept it as it was.”

“I doubt that. I checked the wiring. There isn’t a single original part left in this thing aside from that old key based control panel. But this control system? This just doubled my expected lifespan. So, I’m probably good till Thursday.”

"Hey, look, in all seriousness, why don't you sell this heap on some nice high tech world and lay low? Even at 40K, that's enough money to keep you comfortable for years till this all blows over."

It's not like I hadn't thought about it. Like from day one. But there was one problem with the plan.

"I know myself too well. I'd spend that on hookers and booze and eventually get my face plastered in the news again and then it wouldn't take long for dad to send the space ninjas after me. I'm better off if I keep moving."

"Space ninjas?"

"I never saw them coming and they shot my Flure... Fer De Lance to pieces before I could get a shot off. I'm pretty sure they used laser shurikens on me."

"Riiight. Well good luck out there... Mossfoot is it now?"

"Might as well go with the ident that came with the ship. It's worked so far. Thanks for everything, including the new ship ID code."

"You're not going to give it a catchy name? Just a redux serial number?"

"Would you name a ship held together with bailing wire? The new ID is fine. Thanks again."

"Your money's as good as anyone else's. Take care out there."

Now that I've got some working capital, I've learned that some of the best places to trade your wares is convenience stores. Most of the stuff there is overpriced like crazy, which makes it great to sell to. But the few things they have on sale? It's totally worth picking up precious metals there, maybe even some alien tech to pawn off on some backwood yokel planet. In short, I'm making a killing, and it won't be long before my ship is held together by super strength bailing wire.

"Incoming Adder, 000DESTRUCT0, you are cleared for landing. Check thrusters and match station rotation."

"Roger that, Station."

"Request confirmation on your cargo?"

"Four tons of Pan Galactic Thargoid Blaster."

"Confirm again, please? Your ship is registered as having a capacity of five tons, not four."

"Had a hyperspace jump malfunction that shot one of my crates into the void."

“Roger that. Safe docking.”

“(hic!)”

## Basic Economics

I got a system, and it's such a scam I can't believe I haven't been arrested yet. First, at an agricultural world, I fill up with liquor... in the cargo holds, I mean. Then I take it to a tech world with a floating convenience store, one of those places that the big space truckers pass by. They always need booze and are willing to pay extra for it (they just pass the extra cost on to their customers, so what the hell). So you sell whatever you have left in the hold and then pick up whatever they have on sale, usually precious metals they got from melting down old electronics as people trade in their latest dodads. Next, fly in system, but you don't head to the main station, oh no. First you stop by the casino. Lots of people down on their luck there, trading in their wives furs for just one more kick at the cups, or selling their jewelry. But the casinos don't need that kind of bling. They deal in cold hard credits, and so they're willing to set the stuff for a song to take it all off their station.

Then you go to the planetary station, sell the metals for a profit, buy some computers, fly back to the agricultural world.

trading

Lather, rinse, repeat. Within a few runs you're swimming in credits.

BWAHAHAHAHA!!!! Oh my God... oh... oh I'm sorry. Swimming in credits. I kill me. I mean, I'm talking about thousands here after a few circuits. Thousands! Wooo!

You do remember my background, right? Thousands of credits? I used to drink imported water more expensive than that. Well, actually I didn't, I never touch the stuff. But I could have. Now here I am thrilled when a cargo run nets me a few hundred credits. I sometimes lost more than that in trade deals because I couldn't be arsed to make an extra jump for a better price.

But now? Oh, I'm thrilled by a few hundred credits, make no mistake. One of my earliest purchases was a fuel injection drive. You know what's slower than a beaten up first generation Adder? Not much! So yeah, it cuts down on the pain-in-the-ass factor when ships mass lock you, but more importantly it lets you get away from those same pains-in-the-asses when they start firing on you. HA! Suck on my exhaust fumes, losers.

Unless you have your own fuel injection system in which case just screw off, okay? Pick on someone your own size.

But the fuel injection also means I make more trades faster. Bam bam bam. Come on. Time is money. Chop chop. I never really used mine much back in my Lance. I always had something (or someone) to keep myself entertained while the docking computers took over. Docking computers. I miss those. Thank God I'm actually a good pilot. It means that instead of splurging on those I can instead say, "No, I think I'd rather have an iron ass, thank you very much. And add in some better targeting computers while you're at it. I'd like to know if that jerk in the space lane is someone I want to run away from or not. Oh, and an escape capsule too. Why yes, I would like the optional auto-eject system. Do I look like I can be bothered about keeping an eye on my energy levels when I'm fighting for my life? Insurance comes standard? Greeaaaaaat. If I lose my crap-ass Adder I can get myself an equally crappy Adder to replace it. Hey, is that a tea dispenser?"

Yes. I'm considering a tea dispenser. After recent events I realize being boozed out of my mind is not the best way to defend oneself against pirates... or dock with a station without a docking computer... or talking with customs officials... or talking to girls at a club... or talking with random people on the street....

I think I may have a problem.

## One Simple Taxi Ride

I leaned back in my chair in the station tavern at Rateedar or Anexbiza or maybe it was Biarge... some hole of a place. Honestly after I learned to program my tea brewer add a little something extra to my drinks from the liquor cabinet I've been having trouble keeping track of where I go... or how I end up there. God, not only have I written the book on poor life choices, I just keep on adding new chapters to it.

But this fresh faced kid sitting across from me didn't seem to care about that. He was only interested in sharing his sob story.

"So you see, Grandpa Behen doesn't have much longer, and before he dies he'd like to see his homeworld one last time."

"Great story kid. Hire a taxi."

"I... I thought I was."

That was when I realized I was wearing a yellow cabbie uniform. Where the hell did that come from? But even in my tea-booze filled haze a hint of logic crept through.

"You hire all your cabbies at private meetings in taverns?"

The boy shrunk a little in his chair and looked around. "Well, you see. This needs to be on the QT. He's not exactly allowed to leave his nursing home. But he's just so sad and this is his last wish. I was told you were the sort of pilot who took jobs nobody else wanted."

"Who told you that?"

"Um... you did? Five minutes ago? You were standing on the bar telling everyone how you were invincible and not even GalCorp could take you down."

That rang a bell. I'd just upgraded my pulse laser to beam laser, and as luck would have it I got bushwacked by some pirates in broken down fighters. I would have ran away, but I had a half tank full of fuel left and they didn't have fuel injection systems like I did. I got a bit of cathartic release zipping in and out writing my initials on their hulls, and then what was left of their hulls. I'd spent so much time being the galaxy's bitch that it was hard not to indulge a bit with the tables turned.

That's right. I came here to celebrate all that... But I don't remember much else. Still don't know where the cabbie uniform came from. Jeeze, I have really got to work out the tea-to-booze ratio better. This is going to get me killed. How am I not dead already? Taking out some broken down Kraits piloted by losers more desperate than me was hardly securing my place in the "don't mess with me" books. Hell, my official combat ranking was still Harmless.

"Look, kid, I was mouthing off, I don't think I can--"

"He's willing to pay 2500 credits for the trip."

"--possibly refuse a dying man's last wish. Call me an old softy. Where do I pick him up?"

Next thing I know I'm on route to Soladise. I decided to keep the cabbie uniform as part of my cover. And just because I'm still on spacer skid row doesn't mean I'd lost my natural charms. Wasn't hard to convince the attending nurse that I was here to take Behen's neighbour across the hall for a nice Sunday drive around the planet (courtesy of his loving grandson who paid for it) then "accidentally" go into the wrong room.

"Pack up, Gramps. I'm taking you home."

The wizened old man was sitting in a wheelchair looking out the window. He turned and looked at me funny. "Home?"

"Yeah, home. The place you hung your hat. Where your heart is. That place on the range where the deer and the octolopes play."

He continued to look at me funny.

"Your grandson said you wanted to go back to your home world one last time before you die, remember? You were willing to pay tw.... five thousand credits to do so."

The senility passed like a fart in the wind. "Nice try, sonny. It was twenty five hundred."

I waved a hand. "Details."

"Well, this is a surprise. I didn't think my boy would find anyone. How do you plan to get me out? I'm not allowed to leave the home."

"But your neighbour is." I pulled out a dufflebag. "Now, you want to do this with or without sedation?"

Next thing you know, my Adder is taking off from the landing pad and a very confused elderly man is still standing on the platform, probably wondering when I was



going to come back for him after I'd said "I just need to put this bag in the cockpit first." I'm sure the home's staff will find him soon enough.

Once in orbit I unzipped the bag and unfolded Wrinkles McAncientPants from it and gave him the countersedative. Good thing I didn't hit any turbulence going up or it might have been like opening a bag of marbles. I could picture myself just leaving the bag back at the home in the middle of the night, pressing the doorbell and making a run for it.

Unlike my old Lance, this Adder didn't have any proper passenger accommodations. If I really wanted to I could have one put in, but that would kill my cargo capacity. Hell, an Adder doesn't even have a co-pilot seat, but I'd dropped a bean bag chair in the corner for him to curl up on and take a nap if he wanted.

The old man smiled at me. "Ahhh, it's so good to be free again. Look at all those stars! Why, it's like I can reach out and touch them if I wanted to."

"Great, gramps. Glad you're happy. Now, where are we heading? I was told it's just eight or so light years away." Twenty five hundred credits for a two jump taxi ride? Talk about easy money. And if the system in between had a convenience store I'd cut that travel time down in half.

"Yes, it's not that far. I was born on Qubeen."

"Qubeen. Got it." I switched to the Nav computer to set up a travel route.

What? No. You have got to be kidding.

"You said Qubeen, right? You sure you don't mean Qucerere or Quzadi?"

"I think I know where I was born, sonny."

"There is no way to get there!"

"Of course there is. You just pass through the Braxian system."

I frowned. "The Braxian system? You mean the system that went supernova during the Braxian Rebellion? The one that was completely wiped out and won't be stable enough to set up even a waystation in for another thousand years?"

"That's the one! Oh..."

"Yeah, oh." I checked the Nav computer for another route. Surely I could just make a little circle route to bypass this hiccup.

Turns out the only way to get to Qubeen was by going through the Galactic Center first. Well over a dozen jumps needed, and some of them through pretty hostile waters!

I tried to breathe and focus. I could do this. It was twenty five hundred credits. I'd get a bowl of water and kibble to set next to the bean bag chair and everything would be fine. I'd pick the safest routes, maybe make a few credits along the way. It wouldn't be so bad.

"You know, sonny, you remind me of myself at your age."

"Handsome? Charming? Still in possession of all his faculties?"

"Bored! It looks like we've got a long way to go, but lucky for you I know some of the best space shanties in the galaxy."

It was then I realized that I'd used the last of my sedative on the old man getting him out, and the side effect of that particular brand was long-term insomnia.

"One hundred bottles of beer on the wall, one hundred bottles of beer! Take one down, drink it all down. Ninety-something-something bottles of beer on the wall! Where was I? One hundred bottles of beer on the wall, one hundred bottles of beer..."

This job wasn't going to be worth it, was it?

## Infinity Bottles of Beer on the Wall

It wasn't until the second ambush that I realized something was up and it wasn't just the old folks home wising up and coming after me for am-scray-ing with one of their commissions.

We'd jumped from Soladies to Usanat when the first attack happened. A cloud of ships was just hovering by the witch point waiting. They picked up on my scanner as having clean records and so I assumed it was just a well defended convoy.

That was when I got a ticker tape parade of laser and death. Fortunately, I had tons of fuel for the injectors and managed to outpace most of them, but one little bugger stayed right on my tail. That was fine by me. With the upgrades I'd given the rust bucket I knew I could take him. It didn't take long to turn the table on him and get him in my sights. Jackass was costing me fuel, which was cutting into my profits. Hey, every minute spent kicking in the overdrive means I'm that much further away from a buying a ship that doesn't smell like feet and wood rot. The former might just be my passenger, but given the lack of wood on board, the latter odor remains a mystery to me.

"The House of Panac will not let you live!" the pilot yelled. I noticed that for a pirate he had very un-pirate like markings on his ship. Then again, most pirate ships are stolen and a fresh paint job is often the last thing on their mind. Didn't matter much to me then. Seeing as I splattered him to the solar wind I figured ship decor was the least of his problems.

I envied him somewhat. At least he didn't have an old coot in his cockpit constantly singing old spacer songs and forgetting half the words.

With that situation dealt with I kicked in the Torus drive to the nearest station. Like I said, I didn't think much of it then, but a few jumps later, when I encountered another group with similar markings and shouting similar nonsense, I figured I wasn't just being chased down by the Annihilists faction of the Jehovah's Witnesses (seriously, those guys do NOT respond well when you refuse to take their pamphlets).

This time they ambushed me right outside a convenience store. Rather than making an in-system run for it I made a jump instead, using the station as cover while the

countdown started then kicking in the fuel injectors to make the needed distance once I was decently blocked.

“So who the hell are the House of Pancakes and why should I be worried about them?”

Old man Behen shrugged in his beanbag chair and started singing a song about goblins. “See the little goblin, see his little feet, and his little nosey-wose, isn’t the goblin sweet?”

I raised an eyebrow. He was far too unconcerned about all this. Either he was completely senile, which granted was where the smart money was, or he was anything but.

Behen... the name exactly ring a bell, but it did sound familiar for some reason. Some rich corporate family perhaps, kids getting tired of waiting for their inheritance? Maybe the doting grandson was just trying to get gramps out of the home’s security and someplace safe for disposal... which given how crap it was really unnecessary. Maybe a cover story was necessary.

But the House of Panac? That had certain undeveloped world overtones to it, like feudal states or multigovernmental worlds. Granted some corporates named their organizations Houses, clinging onto those traditions, but...

“Excuse me, sonny. How much longer before we reach Qubeen?”

“About a billion years,” I said.

“That’s awful long. Why not just take a shortcut through the Braxian sector?”

I squeezed my joystick until I heard it creek. “Arrrrgh! The Braxian system no longer exists, remember? Supernova?” It was the fifth time I’d reminded him of this and by now we’d reached the Core Worlds, which rendered the point moot anyway.

“Oh right. Shame about that. All about that revolution they had, as I recall. That reminds me of another song. Oh they built the spaceship Tranic to sails the spaceways black, and they thought they’d built a ship that the Thargoids couldn’t crack. But the captain blew a fart and it ripped the ship apart, it was sad when the great ship went down...”

The joystick snapped off in my hand. Ugh. Maybe I had some superglue in the emergency supplies...

I’d slipped through the Core worlds more or less unmolested, sneaking past some more House of Pancakes ships before they registered who I was. Once I knew their game

it became easier to play to my strengths. Only zip to worlds with a high enough tech rating to warrant a witch-point station, fill up on gas and candy bars, zip back out. Avoid the corridor whenever possible.

Of course, it isn't always possible, either because of a lack of other stations forcing me toward the planet, or the lure of a great deal on goods being too hard to pass up. At least the profit making part of my plan hadn't been shot to hell, which was more than I could say for my ship. Most of my profit was going into repairs and maintenance. Last thing I needed was a hyperspace failure with a bunch of Pancakes flopping at me.

House of Panac... Orixan Behen of Qubeen... even the Braxian Rebellion... why did this all have a familiar ring to it? Probably because I'd spent days hearing the words repeated over and over in between annoying songs, and tales of Behen's youth. Never his adulthood when he might have actually done something interesting, but his youth when all he remembered were orange blossoms and his pet cat.

But the worst, the absolute WORST thing so far? The injection system had failed.

Oh, not the fuel injection system, that was working fine. The booze injection for my tea maker, which meant I had to drink the stuff straight again and fly sober. I tried sneaking a bottle of the good stuff in at a station so I could add it the old fashioned way, but the old geezer threw a fit and wouldn't shut up till I flushed it. So basically that added about a thousand years to the trip in a relative time and space kind of way.

At this point I didn't care. I just wanted this job done and over with, and fortunately I was getting close to the end. A few tricky jumps trying to avoid some anarchy type worlds and we were home free. But I was getting a bad feeling about this, and decided to spend a little something extra on my ship. It made it look even uglier than it was, but like all my additions to the ship it might just save my life. And my passenger's. I guess.

## All's Well That Goes To Hell

I sat on the floor of the pod, or the wall, depending on your view, staring at Orixan Behen who sat on the opposite side.

“Sorry about that,” he said.

My eyes narrowed. I couldn't even have a cup of tea to pass the time. There was no gravity in the pod.

“I said I was sorry,” he repeated.

I raised a finger to my lips, shushing him. It was the only thing that was going to keep him alive at this point.

We'd come into Qubeen into almost exactly the sort of shitstorm I had expected. The House of Pancakes were there ready to welcome us, and far ahead were the beams of an intense battle going on around the entire planet. But I had a plan.

“Okay, if we can skirt past these sentries we might be able to—“

At that point the old coot leaped up—not bad for a guy who had been in a wheelchair back in old folks home—and strode over to the console, pressing the wide band comm array button.

“Attention all vessels in the Qubeen system. I, Orixan Behen, rightful ruler of the seven houses, have returned to claim my rightful place to the throne. Set aside your differences and join me now in crushing this threat to our homeworld! To arms! TO ARMS!”

I looked at the man in shock. He looked upon me with the wise visage of a man who had played his part well, but no longer. A king in beggar's clothing, finally revealed.

“You.... goddamned idiot! You couldn't have waited until we got somewhere safe first?”

“The war for my homeworld is at a critical time. This war has been waging for months, but my sources informed me that now was the right time to reappear. These people need their King to stand along side them and fight and unite them once more. We shall come down upon them—“

“–in a rust bucket full of laser pockmarks? You do realize what you’re flying in, don’t you? How am I.... oh crap.”

There was no time to chastise him further, because the House of Pancakes was upon us all. I engaged the fuel injectors, but it was too late. Space became the most intense disco party of all time for about five seconds, until my Adder was ripped to shreds. I didn’t even have time to eject.

Thank god I’d installed a system to do that for me.

See, I had a bad feeling it would come to this. Oh, I didn’t know that wrinkles here was royalty, but it was pretty obvious someone wanted him dead, and more than likely their most concentrated effort would be at his last stop. I also knew that if they wanted him dead they were not going to let an escape pod get away, either.

That’s why I made a few modifications to it earlier, stripping out all but one of the thrusters and redesigning the outer hull so that it resembled a cargo canister. I’d filled up my cargo hold with frozen meat and other organics and made sure those canisters looked like my pod. One of them I had specially made to look like an escape pod, including a thruster that would burn for five minutes in a straight line if the ship were destroyed. It worked, since they trashed the canister before it got a click from the wreckage.

Without the ship engines providing artificial gravity, Behen and I were stuck here drifting with the rest of the garbage, waiting for the attackers to consider us dead and call it a day.

It didn’t take long for them to do so. It seemed they had a bigger war to fight.

Once they were no longer on radar I gently kicked in the sole thruster and aimed myself away from the battle. We’d take the long route around. The longer the better.

“But my people need me. I am a symbol to all that they are fighting for.”

“Yeah, well, sometimes people fight harder when they think they’ve lost what they’re fighting for and are just settling for revenge. We’ll get you home... sooner or later.”

“Thank you for keeping me alive,” Behen said. “You’ve done a great service for my people.”

“Great enough to double my fee?”

“Well, let’s not get crazy here. Wars are expensive, and we had an agreement.”

“Why you cheapass little raggidty boned fart weasel! You think twenty five hundred is enough to replace my ship?”



“Oh, I’m sure you have insurance.”

“What about pain and mental anguish? Namely YOU.”

“I had to keep my cover. If the enemy knew I was returning...”

“THE ENEMY DID KNOW YOU WERE RETURNING!”

“No, they suspected. I have no doubt they blasted dozens of other ships they thought might be bringing me back as well. It’s why I insisted on my grandson to find the most unlikely possible person to carry me home in the most unlikely of ships. A clever plan, don’t you think?”

I frowned. At that point I got the vac-suit out storage and put it on, spinning about in midair.

“What are you doing?”

“Just taking precautions. Might have an unexpected air leak. Stray beam hit. Micrometeorite. You never know.”

“Um... do you have another one for me?”

“Nope.”

I just sat there the rest of the trip in my vac suit, smiling. Not unsurprisingly, he didn’t sing a single shanty the whole way.

Not all treasure is in silver and gold, you know. Sometimes it’s just twelve hours of watching a man wonder if you plan to space him or not.

## All Hail the Conquering Nobody

I have one question for the universe: where is my goddamn tickertape parade and cheering fans? I don't mean to be sexist or anything, but a woman draped adoringly around my ankles wouldn't hurt either. For once, I actually deserve it.

Let's set the record straight: a deposed king, exiled after the Braxian Rebellion and separated from his home world when that sun went supernova (under suspicious circumstances I might add... those things tend to give you a few million years warning) is forced to go into hiding on some old folks home for over fifty years.

Yeah, that's right, King Wrinkle Scrotum is something like a hundred and seventy three thanks to the best nanotechnology royalty can buy. Even I couldn't afford that shit back in the day. I guess the saying is true: it's good to be the King.

Anyway, there's peace for a time but the planet eventually factions off and what's worse, the Braxian survivors (the House of Pancakes who'd been attacking us every step of the way) have established a rebellion and seek to take over Qubeen as their new homeworld.

Cut to present day, where a poor drunk shlub (who happens to be devastatingly handsome and charming and thoroughly mistreated by the universe for no good reason) is tricked into an "easy fare" only to find out that everyone wants his passenger dead. Rather than accepting defeat, our hero rises to the challenge, outwitting and outfighting (and more often than not outrunning) his enemies half way around the galaxy until at last he bring the deposed king home to the middle of a massive civil war – one that will only weaken all sides and fall prey to an external threat to them all.

Outmanned and outgunned, our hero's ship is destroyed, but fortunately his cunning sees them through, and the King is returned to his throne. With the king back to unite them, the others rally and defeat the invaders.

You'd think a guy who was instrumental in bringing about such a victory would get a statue in his name. But nope. First off it just wouldn't do for the history books if it recorded that the King triumphantly returned in a cargo canister (well, that's what it looked like anyway). Even arriving in an Adder wasn't acceptable (they kinda have a

point there, mind you). So instead they invented some BS of an experimental warship that rescued King Behen from a maximum security prison where he'd been in chains for fifty years and delivered him back to Qubeen just in time to ensure victory. Looks better when the movie is made.

Where's the justice I ask you?

It's probably for the best. This is exactly the sort of nonsense that would let my dad know I'm still alive, which is something I'd rather not have become common knowledge.

I decided to get off Qubeen before the executions started because, let's face it, executions are pretty much the next stop that this planet's crazy train is headed. I'm sure they'll gloss over that part when the movie is released, too.

I figured the one bright spot in all this was the fact I'd be getting a replacement ship. I figured a bright new Adder right off the assembly line would lighten my spirits a bit.

Unfortunately, while the King has the kind of money to get life enhancing nanotechnology implanted from a Tech 15 world a hundred light years away, but the local shipyard only carries last decades models.

The dealer lead me down the dry docks, past showroom models of Cobras and Morays and even a couple of Flure... Fer de Lances. Then we got down to the back end where there were Kraits resting on cinder blocks (no joke) and Geckos being stripped down for parts. And there, at the back, was a single green Adder, its wings deployed as if preparing to land on a planet.

"Isn't she a beaut?" said the dealer.

adder3

One of the retractable wings creaked and fell off.

The insurance covered all the extras I'd purchased so far, only most of them weren't available here. I'd get them installed for free once I reached a planet that didn't think the waterwheel was the next big leap forward in technology.

"Just get it space worthy," I groaned. "The sooner I'm out of this system the better."

## Strange Bedfellows

I looked over my new rustbucket, one that was somehow more beat up looking than the old one, especially with the modified escape capsule re-installed (hey, it's a good trick, could come in handy again). The station mechanic promised me the atmospheric wing was installed properly now, but I wasn't going to trust this heap anywhere near a planet.

As I got into my cockpit and prepared to leave Qubeen, I guess you could say I started having a good long hard look at myself. And while I looked good as always, I was starting to wonder if I cared for what I saw underneath. I love myself—hey, I'm a loveable guy—but I wasn't sure I really liked myself right now.

I'd been so obsessed with trying to survive, stay one step ahead of daddy dearest's space ninjas or whatever, and make my only home here just a tiny bit more tolerable, that I hadn't really considered whether or no I deserved what was—oooh, they fixed the booze injector on my tea maker! So long, suckers! Computer: Tea, Earl Grey, 50 proof!

I think I blacked out for a few jumps after that.

Next thing I know I'm orbiting some techy planet outside the Core Worlds on a Torus station with what I hope was a female cat person next to me, covered in frictionless bedsheets, wearing an RRS Service cap on my head and holding a bottle of... you know what? From the smell of it, it was probably better not to look too closely at the label.

The frictionless bedsheets let me slip away from the cat lady's literal claws (more cat than lady... definitely not your Kawaii Neko variety). I washed up and got back to my ship.

Seems that in the interval I'd wasted pretty much all my money, but managed to get my Adder back into decent shape, for a given value of decent. All the perks had been re-installed and even a fresh coat of paint hid the rust. It almost looked respectable. Shame I didn't have any money left, I had to ditch paying the hotel bill. Sorry cat lady. Hopefully it was already in your name.

The area I was in wasn't ripe with opportunities, mid-tech worlds at best with reasonably stable governments. I wasn't going to be making a killing in places like Esanee or Diedar. But at least I wasn't hearing any banjo music.

The RRS cap on my head turned out to be because I'd been doing some work for the Rescue, Recovery and Salvage Group, but given my long term inebriated state they didn't trust me with anything more than simple courier jobs to the main station (which was for the best for all parties involved).

Well, I had a full tank of gas at least. Not really enough capital to get started in the trading business, and besides, I didn't even remember what these planets had to offer. Maybe I could do another message run or two for them and get back on my feet...

## Hidden Gems

I am never going to love my Adder. It's too slow for my liking, and with only one energy bank to power my ship and shields I feel pretty much naked all the time in a universe-long gauntlet of frat boys with paddles that I have to pass through to pledge.

Okay, maybe not the best mental image.

But it's got its good points too, once you pump about half its retail value back into it in the form of extras. Energy boosters, enhanced armor, electronic counter measures, fuzzy dice on the windshield...

And a military grade super-duper pew-pew-kapow master blaster on the front. WOOO!

How did I come across this good fortune? Well, it all started with one lonely convenience store somewhere between the Core Worlds and the Xexedi Cluster. One of those armpit places off the main trade routes that most people only see in their rear view mirror. I ended up there hoping to use it as a shortcut, only to find out that it was anything but.

Once I realized this, I figured there was no point in going planetside and just stopped at the Pi-42 for an overpriced top up to get the hell out.

Pi-42 is one of those Constores that doesn't even bother with artificial gravity. Strictly free floating self-serve with a bored-as-hell attendant that is probably paying off a student debt. I figured I'd grab some zero-nutritional value mega-calorie junk food when I floated past the bulk cargo section. Found your usual stuff there. Bulk cannisters of food and alcohol that truckers sometimes drop off here instead of the main planet – either because of pirate activity or just plain laziness. Computers, machinery, you name it, they had it. All overpriced. Names of a dozen corporations on the sides of the canisters, some of them no longer even in business.

And then I came across the small boxes. The lock boxes. The stuff that fits in your cockpit instead of the cargo hold. Gold. Platinum. Gems. I figured they would just have a few left over scraps in each.

They were full. At least twenty five kilos of each of the metals and a bag full of gems. Then I checked the price. Actually first I blew the dust off the price (which in zero gravity is not the best idea, since the dust takes forever to settle again) and then I checked it.

They were under market value. Way under. Like potential 100-200 percent potential profit margin worth.

I nonchalantly went to the counter and bought a Lave Fried Trumble-kabab.

“Oh, and all this,” I added, placing the winfall alongside it. “Looks like it’s been here a while.”

The guy at the front had magnetic boots to better work the counter. They also kept him from leaving before his shift was done, and he looked the sort who wanted to do just that. Actually given Pi-42’s shoplifting policies, it was entirely possible his servitude was not voluntary.

He rang it up not even raising an eyebrow at the ridiculous prices.

“You wouldn’t happen to know if you were going to be getting any more soon?” I asked, trying to sound indifferent.

My attempts at being sly were wasted on the shlub. “That stuff’s being sold on commission. Got a guy who keeps coming here trying to dump what he finds in the inner asteroid field on me. I had to tell him to stop until I actually sold the stuff we had. I guess I could send him a message and let him know we can take more now.”

“Does he come here a lot?”

“Mostly for fried food. Crazy old miner. Obsessed with blasting asteroids. Keeps talking about getting a high score. The metals and stuff are just a byproduct to him.”

“Where does he get the stuff processed? Not here, I assume.”

“He lives on that ship. Got its own refinery. Just scoops, processes, delivers. You want any of the other stuff he collects out there?”

“Like what?”

The clerk shrugged. “I dunno. Those things are always taking up space.” He pointed to some strange looking escape pods in the far corner piled on top of one another like cordwood.

“He keeps dropping those off as well. No pilots in them, though, so I couldn’t give him the mandatory slave bounty.”

“That’s because they’re not escape pods,” I said.



“Whatever. You know anyone who would want them?”

I noted the distinct red and green hull markings of a Thargoid robotic fighter. There were at least twenty of them. “I might. Fill up my cargo hold with those and I’ll take them off your hands.”

I left the Pi-42 learning two things. First, I was going to be making a fortune running back and forth from here for a while. And second, do not, and I repeat DO NOT ever try to mess with that crazy miner.

## Princess and Portents

It had to happen eventually. I had to up and get a conscience.

I've fled from real danger at every turn. Sure, I've beaten the crap out of pirates who were stupid enough to attack my supercharged Adder, thinking it was as in poor shape as their broken down Kraits. I've fought more powerful ships out of desperation when fleeing wasn't an option. I've been a bit of a dick and swooped down to swipe GalCop kills both to boost my fighter rating, the extra cash, and to thumb my nose at my dad on the sly. I even zipped in, fired the last hit on a Thargoid mothership after a collective battle of private and government forces, and zipped out again.

Hey, I was in a low cash flow situation at the time and needed the extra capital to get back on my feet. Anyone would do it.

Needless to say this is not how I tell my tales at the local spacer bar, the Deep Helmet. Around other pilots, I'm outnumbered by swarms of pirates and barely coming out alive. I'm bravely taking on the Red Barons of the quadrant in one on one duels. I've assisted the local police who were in a jam, just to help out. And I've joined the charge against a Thargoid invasion, barely escaping with my life.

If there are any attractive women in the bar, the numbers involved scale appropriately. It's worked for me so far, and has kept me happy enough not to think about the life I left behind. Hell, I started to think this new life wasn't so bad.

That was before the ASL Princess Cruise.

It was a standard run to Xexedi. I'd gotten used to ferrying things back and forth between there and a little low tech agro-commie world nearby. Commie planets are safe enough, and Xexedi is as safe as it gets.

I was skirting the edge of an asteroid field, playing it safe, when I noticed a battle. That wasn't unusual. You'll usually see some scrapping between pirates and the locals. They pick on miners, hoping to take them out before they suspect anything. First they get a read on how long miners are working, and come back later when they're pretty sure the

miners have filled up. They call this Lurking, like an old lady waiting for someone to give up on a slot machine before it pays out.

But sometimes they're testing defences, to see if they're ready for a bigger raid. Usually the scumbags jump out system before it gets too hot for them. But if the timing is right and they got the numbers, they come in en mass.

And today they had.

Between me and Xexedi station was the biggest furball I'd ever seen. Dozens of ships flying about fighting one another, and in the center of it all a large cruise liner.

"S.O.S. This is the ASL Princess Cruise requesting assistance. Mayday! Mayday!"

I've encountered my share of distress calls – most of the time from people getting their kneecaps metaphorically (and their ships literally) broken by the Black Monks.

What made this different? I knew the ASL Princess Cruise. I'd been on it when I was five and had lived on it for two months. I probably knew every corridor of that ship. It was a civilian cruise liner that took families to all the best vacation stops along the space lanes, stopping at all kinds of resorts and safaris. They'd take you to binary star systems so you could watch the gas from a red giant feed into a white dwarf, spectacular, but still a thousand years away from causing a nova. It visited planets where whole cities were dedicated to entertainment.

It was a dream come true for any kid. And right now I could only remember two things: that I had complained almost non stop about there not being enough to do, and that there had been a thousand other kids on there that were getting in my way at the buffet line getting the chocolate pudding before me. A thousand.

I counted maybe a dozen sidewinders laying down the suppressing fire. At least two Cobra Mark IIIs were doing the heavy hitting and fighting off what meager defences had come to the ship's aid. The GalCops were being kept near the station by a separate detachment. And a Python was there to pick up the pieces when...

A thousand.

"S.O.S. This is the ASL Princess Cruise requesting assistance from anyone out there! Mayday! Mayday!"

A thousand.

I kicked in the fuel injectors and dove straight into the fray. "ASL Princess Cruise. Request for assistance received, transmitting IFF codes to your ship. Relay to all friendlies. Hang in there!"

What was I doing? The support ships were getting their asses handed to them. What chance did I have?

“Targetting Sidewinder. Firing. Sidewinder down.”

Who was this talking? This wasn’t me. Was it?

“Got a Cobra in my sights. Fox Two. Cobra down.”

I wasn’t me anymore. There was no sarcasm coming out of my mouth. No quips. Not even an insult to anyone’s mother.

“Firing. Sidewinder down. Acquiring new lock. Firing. Sidewinder down. Acquiring new lock.”

By the time I got the Python in my sights I was starting to get my senses back. It was kind of like mental exhaustion. I couldn’t stay in that trance forever. The Python came into my sights and I remembered why this ship was here, and what it was going to be scooping up.

“I’m going after the Python. Anyone else out there want to help me kick its ass?”

I heard a scared voice on the radio. “I can’t. I... have two on...”

“Roger that, coming on your six.” The Python could wait.

“There’s too man—” Static.

“This is the ASL Princess Cruise. Our engines are going critical. Mayday! Mayday!”

I could see the sparks flying from the aft section of the ship. One of the three engines had gone out and another was flaring, sending huge plasma plumes into the dark. I think I slipped back into the fugue state. I remember calling out targets, hits, taking evasive maneuvers, but none of it felt like me. By the time I started drifting from it this time, I had just finished off the python and used an ECM to take down its missiles, leaving my energy banks a bit too drained for my liking. I’d lost half my cargo bay and several subsystems. It was a miracle I was still in one piece.

There was one enemy left that I could see. A whole lot of white wreckage blips on the radar and not nearly as many yellow intact ships. Some purple blips indicated the GalCop cavalry had finally arrived. The last pirate was a Sidewinder Special with a bounty on its head that would make a Thargon blush. And judging from its markings, it was the ringleader of this event. Ship ID: The King.

I lined up my mill-spec laser on its aft side and sent out a com message directly to his cockpit before I blew his ship to hell.

“Hail to the King, baby.”

I couldn't resist. I'm only human. The jackass managed to eject just in time, and landed square in my fuel scoop. Nothing but net.

I changed to a wide band broadcast.

"ASL Princess Cruise. You are clear of pirates. Suggest you find a spacedock and get some serious air freshener to remove the stench. Over."

"Adder designation 000DESTRUCT0. This is GalCop Wing Leader V9. I'm sorry..." There seemed to be some static there, or he just didn't care to finish his sentences properly. I'm sorry? Sorry for what? For kicking more ass than I have in my entire life?

I swung my ship around to do a victory pass on the Princess Cruise, watch the passengers wave to me as I showed off with a barrel roll or something.

Only she wasn't there.

I looked down to my radar. The battle must have drifted farther away from it. I checked the few remaining friendly yellow blips. Moray. Asp. Sidewinder. Then I noticed just how many white blips there were. I'd zoomed in my radar for dog fighting purposes. Now I zoomed it back out.

There was a cloud of white blips out there, spreading gently in every direction.

Someone was talking to me on the radio, but I didn't really hear. Something about thanking me for my assistance and reward... I turned it off and headed for the Dodec station.

I tried not to think about who I had in my cargo hold. If I did, I might have done something that would get me into trouble, but I know I wouldn't regret. As it was, I was hoping the police would do it for me.

"What do you mean you let him go?"

The GalCop liaison clearly didn't have time for me, but I was forcing the issue. I might not officially be the son of a sector commander anymore, but that didn't mean I didn't know who to talk to or how to find a way to talk to them.

"You were well compensated for delivering him to the proper authorities, but he won't be standing trial. As I told you, he's part of an ongoing investigation."

"You mean he works for you, feeding you intel on pirates and smugglers and so you look the other way when he does his petty raids. I know how it works."

"I can't confirm anything you're saying."

“Funny, I didn’t know a fully loaded cruise liner in a corporate state counted as petty. Guess the rules have changed.”

“Who are you again? If anything comes up, I’ll be sure to—”

I spun around and walked out the door. “Never mind.”

I ended up in my favorite dive on the station, the Deep Helmet. I really needed a drink. A woman came up to me, easily an eight out of ten even without the beer goggles on, and sat on the stool beside me.

“Hey, I heard you were fighting those pirates out there. Couple of other pilots over there want to buy you a drink. And I’d love to hear any stories you had to tell.”

I looked the woman over. Maybe she was a nine. Pilot groupie. Otherwise known as “the sure thing.” You get them in both genders and gender preferences, and most species. I saw a few pilots in the back raise a glass to me when I made eye contact with them, one with a groupie of her own on her lap. I looked down at the bar.

“Sorry. Wrong guy. I think I just saw him leave.”

“Oh. Sorry.” She got off the stool and left.

I raised a finger for the barkeep. “Tea.”

“Your usual special blend?”

I shook my head. “Straight.”

## Dead Again

I thought the beeps of a heart monitor was something they added in the vids for the audience's sake. Hearing them in reality gets annoying really fast. Especially when it's something you wake up to after being in a coma.

So this is what happens when you get cocky.

"That is a nice ship," the woman said. Brandi, I think she said her name was. She was a regular at the Deep Helmet, one of the groupies who got off on pilots and were looking for a free ride, if you know what I mean.

I ran my hand over the ship's hull, feeling the welding marks criss cross like a giant metal jigsaw puzzle. "We're looking at the same ship, right?"

"Don't be modest, flyboy. She's a lot more dangerous than she appears." Her eye went over it in detail. "Extra energy unit. Mill-spec beam laser. Very nice. Bit risky, on something with only one energy bank, isn't it?"

I shrugged. "I try not to let them get a chance to exploit it."

"The hull's reinforced. I mean, really reinforced. And what did you do with your cockpit? It's like you dumped it inside a cargo container or something."

"I've been dead before. Not something I can recommend. Lots of 'me' time to collect your thoughts in, but no neural activity to actually do anything with it. So I try to avoid an encore."

Brandi smiled. "I can't believe you were ever taken down."

"In this? How can you not?"

She leaned against the hull, back arcing just enough to put herself on display. God I love being a pilot.

"So, tell me, flyboy. Why didn't you brag it up back at the Helmet the other day? After that pirate raid on the cruise liner?"

Ah hell. One of those.

"I wasn't there."

“That’s not what I hear.”

“You heard wrong.”

She looked me in the eyes, disappointed I suppose. Weren’t they all? But not a fraction as disappointed as I was in myself.

“Guess I did,” she said, and got off the hull. “I’m going back to the Helmet. You coming?”

Guess I wasn’t going to be showing off my fold down bucket seat in the cockpit any time soon. “I would, but I’ve got a cargo run to make. Unless you’d like to join me? There isn’t really room in the cockpit for two, but that would just make things more cozy.”

Brandi smirked. “I don’t think so. Take care, flyboy.” She walked off with a handwave that said better luck next time.

You know what’s more annoying than hearing your own heart monitor beep? Hearing it beep too fast, and then too erratically, and then realize your brain is all fuzzy and the disco party of pain going on is your body shutting down under protest.

That crazy miner dropping off loot at the Pi-42 was my key to the fast lane, but it meant being stuck in an armpit part of the galaxy I didn’t care to be. Xexedi was far more fun and besides, my Adder was doing just fine. The Xexedi cluster was tight enough that if I couldn’t outrun or outshoot someone, I always had enough witchfuel to jump somewhere else.

But the fact was I didn’t want to. I was considered an average pilot by the GalCop rankings, and it was starting to go to my head. I’d use my fuel injectors to scream into a docking bay only to break and swerve at the last second. I’d jump into minor pirate skirmishes whenever I saw them, confident my Crouching Adder, Hidden Upgrades shtick would see me through. Ever since the Princess Cruise, I’d felt more inclined to give pirates a hard time. Because fuck those guys.

Today I was flying through an asteroid field, doing some torus drive-by shooting of rocks for spare change and keeping an eye out for assholes as an added bonus. I figured I’d had things figured out.

I had made one unfortunate miscalculation, though. I’d gone and talked to the GalCop liaison about that pirate leader. I’d been inside their offices, which are monitored. And while all my IDs might be different now, my face sure as hell wasn’t.



Actually I'd made two miscalculations. I'd stayed in one area for far too long. If anyone was on my tail staying in one place simply mean they'd track me down all that much easier. I was getting complacent.

But right now that didn't matter. Right now I had a few pirates to splash. Three jokers picking on a miner. Judging from the state of all ships involved it looked like a cripple fight. But I wasn't beneath beating up a bunch of cripples, as long as they were evil cripples.

Then it turned out I'd made three miscalculations.

"Hey there, flyboy."

I didn't think you could hear your own flatline, but for whatever joke of a reason, be it the drugs or technology they had me hooked up to, I did. I didn't see the monitor, mind you. Everything swam to black, like an evening on Xexedi evil juice but without the pleasant buzz and ten times the hangover. But through it all I heard the steady flat tone of my own dead heart drifting away, fainter and fainter.

I never stood a chance. The words "Hey there, flyboy" had come through in the middle of the battle, when the Cobra MKI I thought had been about to blow suddenly had its engines and thrusters flare to life and launched a missile at me point blank as it screamed past. The missile hit me square in the hull, and my escape capsule barely launched in time. My cargo pod disguised as an escape capsule kicked in its thrusters and screamed away and I waited for the all-clear before drifting my disguised pod to the nearest space station.

I saw the Cobra fly away, stop, turn, and come back towards me. It stopped dead in front of my pod, engines off. Great. The bitch was showing off. Brandi or whatever her name was had worked me up at the Helmet, got me to show her my ship and in the process all my tricks. She even knew about the escape pod fake-out.

"It's just you and me out here," said Brandi. It was true. The miner had fled and the other two pirates were space dust. I didn't remember taking them out. Guess that miner had more fight in him than I gave him credit for. Or maybe Brandi didn't like to share.

Oh well. No point in pretending. "It's cold in space and I'm getting hungry. So, you going to scoop me up or what? My insurance will pay for my release. More than you'd get on the slave market."

"I'm afraid I wasn't hired to capture you."

Oh fuck.

“Space ninjas,” I muttered.

“What?” Brandi had no idea what I meant. The perils of in-jokes.

“Never mind.” So, this was it, huh? Well, that sucked. I didn’t even get a chance to go out in a blaze of glory, or more likely, kicking and screaming. Just a polite little ‘Hello, my name is Brandi and I’ll be your assassin today.’ And boom. Swell. “Do me a favor, would you? A condemned man’s last request. I’d like you to relay a message.”

“I might. What’s the message?”

“Tell my dad... tell him I know I wasn’t the best son. Tell him I know I was a greedy, selfish, egotistical brat and I’m surprised he put up with me as long as he did. Tell him I’m sorry I didn’t make more of myself before the end. But most importantly, tell him this: Tell him he really sucked ass as a father, and I hope his dick falls off so he doesn’t subject the universe to any more offspring. Okay?”

Silence on the other end, then. “One condition and I’ll relay your message, word for word.”

“What’s the condition?”

“Why won’t you admit you were at the battle over the Princess Cruise?”

Goddamnit.

“I know you were, because I was there as well. I saw you take down over ten ships. Why is it you’ll brag and exaggerate pretty much everything you do, but you won’t admit to that?”

My teeth were clenched so tight I think I broke a filling. “You were there?”

“Yes.”

“Were you one of the pirates?”

“I was in the asteroid field the cruise ship was passing, waiting for you. I had planned on ambushing you there when the liner came under attack. An unexpected complication.”

I thought about this a moment. “Then I’ll answer your question with a question: I was a mess after that fight. Half my systems were damaged. Why didn’t you finish me off?”

The laser on the front of the Cobra MKI powered up, and cut straight through my pod with a single pulse. I was blown into the vacuum of space. The last thing I saw was the asteroid the wreck of my Adder had settled on, and the fact that I was drifting towards it.

The last thing I thought was. “How does the same shit happen to the same guy twice?”

Someone had turned off the irritating beeping noise on the heart monitor. I saw two people talking at the foot of my bed, catching snippets of conversation.

“—for a while, but he pulled through.”

“—frozen, but no cellular—”

“—another five minutes and he—”

Yeah, yeah, heard it all before. So what missionary saved me this time? I’d have to actually make a donation or carry some pamphlets for them to other stations, I think. Only seemed right.

One of the figures left, and the other came and sat next to me on a chair.

“Hey there, flyboy.”

Oh fuck.

I reached for the nurse alarm button, but she already held it in her hand. “I don’t think you’ll be needing this. I was hoping for a bit of privacy. I’m not here to kill you.”

It seemed my voice wasn’t quite back yet, so I settled for just giving her the squint-eye of doom.

“My contract was specifically to destroy your ship and if you escaped in an escape pod, destroy that as well. I did both. It took forever to make sure the shot was going to hit the way I wanted. The contract also said nothing about not scooping up the body and taking it a hospital. Funny. It focused so hard on trying to avoid loopholes it didn’t even notice the loopholes it created. Now, if they had just said that they wanted you dead, well, you’d have passed out at the Deep Helmet and never got back up...”

My squint eye of doom changed to a single arched eyebrow of questioning.

“No I don’t know who put out the contract. These kind of things are done anonymously or with a false ID set, just like the assassins themselves use. Kind of like the one I found in your escape capsule wreck.” She placed a data crystal on the counter next to me. “Keep using it if you want. As far as I know I’m the only one who’s figured out who you are.”

The single arched eyebrow of questioning shifted to a furrowed brow of not-understanding.

“That’s a pretty expressive face you got there. You’re wondering why I went to all that trouble to blow you out of the sky and then save you. The first part’s easy. A contract is a contract. As for the second...”

She shifted her chair closer, to make sure I could hear her. “I’ve heard about you, even before the contract. When I took it on I learned everything I could about you. You can change your name and your ship and even your face if you felt like it, but you could never change who you are on the inside. That’s how you find a target. You learn who they really are and they can’t hide anywhere. And the more I read, the more I knew I was going to enjoy this job. I don’t go for innocent blood. And pal, you are as far from innocent as it gets. Sure, you’re no pirate or murderer or lawyer or anything, but I looked at your profile and asked myself ‘Would the universe be a better place without this asshole in it?’ And the answer was a resounding ‘Yes.’”

I conveyed a “thanks a lot” through an eye roll.

“Then I saw you fight. I heard you on the com channel. I heard your voice when you realized the Princess Cruise was lost.”

Now I tried something that got across “get to the point” though it might have just made me look constipated.

“The thing is, as I watched you fight, I realized I had hung back in the asteroid field, waiting for the right moment. I could have helped, but it wasn’t my job. You were my job. The thought didn’t even occur to me until after the Princess Cruise was lost. And what was worse, I didn’t feel nearly as much as I knew I should have over it.

“Then I realized that this guy I was supposed to kill—this egotistical, low life, cowardly scumbag who had coasted on his daddy’s coattails to get away with whatever he wanted—was a better person than I was. Not exactly the kind of revelation I was happy with, so I decided to prove myself wrong by meeting you. Figured it would take all of five minutes. But you refused to admit you even took part in the battle. That really pissed me off, because I knew why, and it meant you weren’t who I thought you were. I couldn’t go through with the contract. Not exactly, anyway.”

I’d finally managed to find my voice and croaked out, “Why do it at all? Why not just let me go?”

Brandi smiled. “Letting you go meant losing fifty thousand credits. You think I’m crazy? Punching your card meant I got to trade up to a Chopped Cobra MKIII. Besides, you’re still a self-centered, sexist jerk. How could I resist?”

Couldn't exactly argue with that point. I'd been staring at her breasts for most of the conversation.

She patted my shoulder and got up. "Like I said, your ID should still be good. Just get the numbers tweaked by a hacker so you don't show up as the same person anywhere. You show up on the radar again and people are going to start thinking you have nine lives. When you check out of the hospital, get a shuttle to the salvage yards. There's an Adder I trashed set aside for you there. The pilot ejected before it blew and I didn't bother finishing it off. I bet you have enough in savings to get it up and running again."

"Why?"

"Because I asked myself again if the universe would be a better place without this asshole in it, and this time I realized that maybe there was something worth keeping around." She left the room without the sultry swagger she'd used as part of her cover in the bar, without inflicting some kind of last minute pain on me as a sick joke, without even looking back. "Take care, flyboy."

## Shortest Infatuation Ever

I was released from the hospital a week later. No missionaries to thank, Brandi (or whatever her real name is) dropped me off at Xexedi's best hospital on the station.

What a fantastic woman. As much as I remembered her sultry cover story back at the Deep Helmet, it was the woman I saw in the hospital room that stuck in my mind. Red hair like the flames of a rocket. Statuesque. A face that was not so much born as created in the mind of an artist. My god, what a woman.

I'd never felt this way about anyone before. It was strange to say the least. She'd not only spared my life, but she'd given me a chance to start over. I wondered if I'd ever see her again? I caught a shuttle to the salvage yard and asked about the Adder heap that she'd left for me.

"Oh yeah, that." The foreman almost laughed when he said it. "You sure you want it?"

Thinking about what was left of my old ship I said, "Don't exactly have much choice."

"Don't say I didn't warn ya." He took me to the back of the yard, where an Adder, or what was left of one, lay on its side so as to take up the least amount of space. The cockpit was missing, of course, so it needed a new escape pod system. As for the rest it didn't look too bad. I'd have to take a look at it up close.

"Any idea what's left working in it?" I asked.

"The left turn signal, if you're lucky," the foreman said. "Look it over. I got some things to do. If you want to try and restore it, I know a guy who can do it for you, cheaper than the guys at the shipyard would."

So, this was going to be my new ship, huh? Could be worse. As I started inspecting it I thought again about Brandi. Good gal. Flawed personality, of course, but hey, who am I to talk? Got her heart in the right place, just like me. And a looker, too. Can't say I'd ever go out of my way to help someone like this...

Are you kidding me? The energy bank is busted? Those things cost... and the fuel injectors were just so much silicone spaghetti tubes. The thrusters were... nope, those needed to be replaced too. Wow... this was going to be expensive. A hell of a lot cheaper than buying a new Adder, mind you, and this time I'm going to do things right. Focus on profit. Forget about being a big damned hero, at least until I'm commanding a warship or something. Even if your ship's got an iron ass which...

"Goddammit, this ship isn't even armored!"

"I warned ya!" came the foreman's voice far down the yard.

Sigh... The problem was, I could focus on profit, sure, but sometimes you just can't avoid a fight. That means you still need to sink money into your heap of scrap parts just in case – money that would be better off going to my "Buy a Imperial Star Destroyer" fund. And that investment does not come out in trade as much as you'd like.

Still, at least Brandi gave me this start. Decent kid all around, not too hard on the eyes when you think about it. Best of intentions. And with the gold and platinum I'd had in my cockpit, I could probably get this heap up to my standards in no time. I might not have much after that, but at least I'd be back where I was.

I called out for the foreman to come and talk numbers.

"What do you mean the metals are gone?"

I was on the vidphone with my bank, who was supposed to have received everything from my wreck they could retrieve.

"I'm sorry, sir, but when you were taken to the hospital there was no record of anything being left with you. Just enough to pay for the hospital."

"But I had thousands of credits in there."

"I'm sorry. Your finances are secure, I assure you, but none of your cargo, of any sort, had been retrieved. My apologies."

I sighed, which I seemed to be doing more than breathing lately. I'd be mad right now but, remember, Brandi left me with my skin intact. That's something, right? Be grateful for what you got. "Okay, so how much can you do for this?" I showed him my bank account. He scratched his beard.

"My guy can get her flying, but that's about it. Rest is up to you."

I sighed. Square one, huh? Story of my life.

The thing is, if Brandi blew open my cockpit and scooped me up, and she got her hands on my ident data crystal, no way she didn't actually go through my cockpit and

find everything that was in there, including the strong boxes I keep my precious metals in.

THAT BITCH!



## The Remora

“Python escort to unidentified Adder... what are you doing?”

“Python escort to unidentified Adder, I repeat, what are your intentions?”

“Python escort to unidentified Adder, in case you are getting any ideas, I’d like to point out that all of our ships are equipped with rear mounted lasers and carry anti-ECM missiles, so if you think you’re being clever setting up for some kind of sneak attack...”

I turned on the comm channel. “Why do you think I’m following you guys?”

My new Adder, registration ID “DIEBRANDIDIE”, felt about as secure as a cardboard box in a rain storm. I think there’s a small leak somewhere. I keep hearing a hiss of oxygen escaping, I’m sure of it.

To get my replacement ship flying took every credit I had and a bunch I didn’t. I had to do some odd jobs for the salvage yard just to break even. I could have stayed on and got some fuel money and starting capital, but I saw a Python escorted by four Cobra MKIs jump system and figured, why not? They’re bound to pass through an asteroid field or something and I can earn some change popping empties.

While my fake pilot’s ID was kept intact, the hacker who got everything set up for my new ship had to wipe the old data on it. Said it was a precaution against someone tracking my movements up to this point. Now I’m just a goddamn “harmless” shmuck again. That is not as comforting as you might think. The thing about pirates is, they prefer to take on the harmless people of the world. From their point of view it makes good business sense.

From my point of view it makes them assholes. Hence my little tailgating escort party right now.

“Look, I’m not trying to cause any trouble. Just looking for a bit of safety in numbers, okay? I’ll even clear any asteroids in your path so you can stay focused on legitimate threats. Scan my systems. I’m about as big of a threat as a water balloon.”

There was a pause on the radio. “Python leader to Remora, roger that.”

“Remora. Ha ha. Stop it, you’re killing me. I’m just yucking it up here.”

Eh, it was a fair enough comparison to be honest. Sticking close to the big sharks and cleaning up the loose bits of food in its wake. I should get that painted on my hull, because I got a feeling that's going to be my life for the next week or so.

## The MF Effect

I'd like to preface this by saying I'd like the technology this event no doubt leads to be named the "MF Effect." I'd use my real name, but, you know, space ninjas and all.

I was waiting to dock at a Coriolis Station after I'd left my Python escort behind.

(Yeah... I left them behind... that last transmission from them wasn't "so long, sucker" or anything...)

And I got the all clear to dock. Yeah, yeah, kick in the thrusters, match rotation, read the latest issue of Maxim magazine, wait till the station grabs hold of your ship.

Only this time I looked up from my magazine to see a ship leaving the docking bay and heading straight for me.

My hands flew up in front of my face. "Oh shii—"

It hit me dead on, full speed. It was a huge cargo ship, a Python or a Boa, but I wasn't exactly paying attention because I was more worried about being a splat mark on its windshield.

It's simply physics, kids. For those of you planetbound in low tech worlds let me put it in more relatable terms. Imagine your donkey cart... wait, maybe that's a bit too low tech. Imagine your two seater electric car just got plowed into head on by an eighteen wheeler cargo truck. Multiply the mass and momentum of one and then multiply the mass and momentum of the other, then compare the numbers (I'm fuzzy on the math, but this sounds good enough to me). The bigger the difference, the bigger the splat.

This should have been a really big splat.

While I'm on the subject, why did my hands fly up in front of my face? What possible good was that supposed to do? Protect my eyes when I am forced to eat my own viewscreen?

Anyway, this is just one of those many times you have heard me say "I should have been dead." Only obviously I'm not since I'm writing this... though I have been technically a couple of times before but... oh skip it you know what I mean. Point is, I'm not a splat on a windshield.

When I peeked over my raised arms, I realized was no longer anywhere near the Coriolis station or the transport. In fact it was receding in the distance like I was using my Torus drive. Only I wasn't. And I was going faster than fuel injectors would let me, but I didn't even have those installed yet.

All of this was only slightly less worrying than the fact that my engine exhaust was streaming in front of me.

Fun fact about modern spaceships. A lot of it is automated. I mean, a LOT. I've seen people who don't know better complain about the physics of videos they see. Stuff in space does not seem to operate the way the laws of physics would dictate. And it's true, but that's because operating in a ship under true Newtonian physics is harder than you'd like to imagine. So most of it is handled by computers, thrusters, compensators, all kinds of stuff that is behind the scenes and so innocuous that you don't really know it's there. It's gotten to the point where every ship (except perhaps the Thargoids) use this same technology because it makes manual piloting that much easier for us.

And one of those things is a lack of going in reverse. A ship can go to a dead stop (in relative terms to the nearest planet-like mass) but not backwards. It simplifies things for everyone. Sure, there are some jocks out there who rip out those safeties so they can do unbelievable stunts, but they're by far the exception. For the rest of us, there is Ship Physics, which runs on rules that would piss Newton off to no end.

So, to sum up, I should not be flying backwards at this moment. Moreover, I should not be flying backwards at Torus-like speed when there are any number of ships around me that should be preventing it (or were for the first few seconds anyway till I slipped away from them), not to mention the planet I'm approaching at an all too unnerving speed.

Aaaaand I don't know how to stop.

How this happened is not nearly as important as how I was going to get out of it. I try turning my ship around, thrusting up, thrusting down, flying in different directions. My engines were responding, but didn't seem to be having an effect. I was going so fast backwards, the my engine plume was streaking in front of me.

For several minutes I desperately tried righting myself until suddenly it just stopped on its own. My engines worked properly again and I was slowly on my way back to the Coriolis station.

So now I had time to wonder about what the hell happened. The nearest I can figure it had something to do with our shields colliding. Ship shields are meant to both block

energy and matter, to protect against lasers and missiles. Ray shielding deals with incoming energy, while particle shields are of a repulsive nature based on magnetic/gravonic principles. The kind of advances that gave us artificial gravity and inertial dampners that keep our guts from going liquid against the back wall when accelerating at speeds like this.

(in case you're wondering, artificial gravity becomes increasingly difficult to maintain over larger surfaces, and require exponentially more energy as well. So plenty of ships use it—including cruise liners—but not most stations, which prefer to rely on rotation and put its energy to better use elsewhere.)

Anyway, I think somehow the two shields colliding created some kind of weird feedback and caused me to be repulsed instead of just being crushed against it like a beer can against a frat boy's head. I intend to report this incident and give them my flight data to analyse, on the condition that the phenomenon become known as the MF Effect.

One question, though... I wonder what ever happened to the other ship?

## The Trouble with Trumbles

So I picked up an unexpected passenger.

“Hey there little guy.”

The Trumble cooed on my dashboard. It had appeared out of nowhere when a ghostly Cobra MKIII flew by. I thought nothing of the ship, probably just decked out in stealth paint.

Seemed a shame to think these little guys were dumped into boiling oil and cooked up by the bucketful. Who would ever want to. It's lonely out on the spacelanes sometimes, and having a pet is just the thing I need to relax and feel like there is something warm and innocent in the great void.

Ten minutes later...

“No. No no no. Hey, those wires are not food. Hey! I just had that detailed! Wait! Not the dash! where are you going?”

Next thing you know the little bugger has burrowed into my dashboard and found his way into the space between the inner and outer hulls! I jabbed my hand down to try and grab it, but the bugger bit me and rolled off cackling.

Son of a...

So, forget what the adverts say trying to sell you Trumbles as a pet for your kids and listen to those adverts showing them as being tasty served in a bucket with dipping sauce. They are nothing but trouble.

It wasn't bad enough that it burrowed into my ship's systems, feeding through insulation layers and making its way back to my cargo hold. No. The little bugger started eating my cargo next! A ton of my best Green Thargoid Original Draft, gone! What do I get in return? A belch and more Trumbles!

The little ones think I'm their momma! They roll through the ratholes the original made then start scurrying all over the damn place, even getting on my viewscreen in the middle of a pirate ambush. I try caulking up the holes and stuffing them with whatever I think will keep them out, but nothing does. There is literally nothing they won't eat. I've

tried every poison I can find, but that's just condiments to these pests! A ton of computers with a side order of Rat-Be-Gone, please.

But the kicker? The real kicker? I can't afford to have a professional clean my ship of them. I suppose they know they've got me over a barrel and aren't afraid to slip my pants down to my ankles. The pilots at the bar just laughed when I asked them how to get rid of the bloody pests.

"They taste great with barbecue sauce!" said one.

Buggers, the lot of em.

Barbecue. Ha ha. I get it.

Problem is these little freaks dance all over. I tried an improvised flame thrower, but can't get a clear shot of any of them, or fry them in their holes (the ones I'll risk torching... most of them are way too close to sensitive wiring). The only thing I can think of is the fact they're in the insulation gap. If I can hole up the exits long enough, trap them in there, and cook the hull from the outside...

There is no way in hell I'm trying this stunt without a few simulated runs first.

"You do know you need heat shielding on your ship before trying to bathe in the sun like that."

I took off the VR helmet. "I do NOW."

See, I know this guy in Xexedi, Rax. Gives me a deal on my equipment, and fortunately for me he's got a VR simulator set up so pilots can test out their equipment before they install it. I tell him my problem and he shakes his head.

"You know how many space aces I have come in here thinking the same thing? Lots. You know how many come back and tell me it worked?"

I waited for an answer. Rax didn't give me one.

"Look, I ain't sayin it ain't possible. It is. I did it myself, back when I was flyin a Python, but them Trumbles are hella heat resistant. You have to get real close to something real hot and then not cook yourself in the process."

"That's why I want to try it out in your simulator a few times first," I said, then remembered how the last run went. "Maybe more than a few."

"Well that's the almost smart thing to do. Smarter thing would be to try and find someone wanting to start up a Trumble farm. It's hard to get a breeder, you know. Just one of them can start your own meat farm in no time flat. Most are neutered and breeders guard the roosters jealously, you know? You find someone looking to start a franchise

and they'd pay to get the ship cleared out, plus pay you a bit, I bet. But hey, it's your life and your ship."

"What's left of it, which is less and less each day."

"All right, all right. I'll set it up for you. Good luck."

"You do know you need to pull out BEFORE your cabin temperature tops out."

"I do NOW."

"Word to the wise. If you're sundiving and the cabin temp is blinking, you're already barbecue fuel."

"You're getting close, kid. That time you actually cooked the Trumbles before you got cooked yourself."

"Just set up the sim again, Rax."

"There you go! Burned the buggers clean. You do realize the money you spent on sim runs could have paid for a proper exterminator, right?"

"Shut up, Rax."

Staring down the photosphere of a star on an approach vector is not the most comforting of feelings. Sure, I've fuel scooped before. That's easy. But cooking off Trumbles? I ran the simulation six more times and made it five out of six.

Those are good odds, right.

What the hell am I doing?

I opted for swapping the IDs on a similar looking Adder and just taking it instead when no one was looking. Let that other guy pay for an exterminator. I'm not crazy!



## True Love

“It’s... it’s beautiful.”

The Adder I had, um, “swapped” to relieve myself of my Trumble problem was okay, but not really me. Seriously, who puts a decal of a giant dildo on the side of their ship like that? There are ladies out here in the spacelanes. I doubt many men would appreciate the site, either. Jackass deserves his Trumbles.

I was going to get a new paint job when I saw an Adder listed “for sale or trade” on the station logs. I decided to check it out.

What I saw made my jaw drop. The sleek angles, the buffed up engine pods, the inlaid cockpit. Your basic Adder looks pretty much a glorified shuttle pod, and about as graceful looking as a box of tissues someone stepped on at one end. But this? This looked powerful, robust, sexy as all hell.

“That’s an Adder?”

The man selling it seemed suitably impressed by my awe. “Yep. Did a custom job on the hull, as you can see. But don’t worry, it’s still all Adder.”

“I didn’t know that was even possible.”

The man cocked his head. “You never heard of a Kit Kobra?”

I shook my head.

“Popular with hobbyists. Started back in the day mainly with Cobras. You know, the MKIIIs? People streamline it, take out unnecessary or redundant systems, or add new stuff to it.”

“That I know, but that’s because of its hull design. Most opt for adding cargo capacity, though.”

“True enough, but the idea caught on for any ship, and next thing you know companies like Neolite started selling DIY kits: Kit Kobras. You take the basic chassis of just about any model, strip off the hull and slap on a new one. Full instructions included. You can turn your humdrum Adder into a sleek looking sporty flyer like this. I’m surprised you haven’t seen them before.”

I looked over this Neolite Adder. What a difference a kit can make. I'd always hated my Adder because it looked like I was a pizza delivery guy always late for a delivery, but this? This look said, "Back off." This look said, "I'm Elite, even if your scanners say Mostly Harmless." This look said, "If you catch up with me in the docking bay, I'll give you my hotel room number, baby."

"I'll take it."

The man looked a little concerned. "Hey, I don't want to talk myself out of a sale here, but you should know, full disclosure, it's still just an Adder."

"I'll take it."

"I mean, it looks great, sure, but the engine speed, maneuverability, everything is still stock."

"I'll take it."

"If anything, the hull is bigger than before, so you're actually a bit bigger as a target..."

"I said I'll take it."

"And looking over the ship you're trading, I'm not sure you're aware that you're kind of trading down a bit..."

I was too busy picturing myself flying in this blue badass. "Neeeeerooooooooommmmm... wooosh! Pew! Pew! Pew!"

"...and I don't exactly have the money to make up the difference. We could transfer some of the stuff I'm sure, but--"

"SHUT UP AND TAKE MY ADDER!"

## Dear Diary

So you all might be wondering, “Who is this asshole and why is he clogging up my Hyperradio feed with his ramblings?”

Well, I’ve already explained the first part way back.

As for the second, you shouldn’t be listening to country music anyway. It’ll rot your brain.

See, the thing is, it’s pretty damn lonely flying an Adder all by yourself. Even one that’s as sweet looking as mine. So after the space ninjas shot down my Lance and I had to start my life over again incognito, I needed to vent. So I started keeping a journal.

Only after about a dozen entries, I learn my new ID crystal has more going on with it than I previously thought. It’s actually a fairly complex piece of kit, built in with a number of bizarre programs and algorithms that no standard crystal has. It’s like finding out the chip on your bank card is actually a complex mini computer, and while it is set up to interact with your bank machine, it can also do so much more. It would probably explain how I swapped Adders so easily during my Trumble problems. I thought that had gone too smoothly. I thought only first gen Boa cargo haulers were that easy to hotwire.

Turns out one of its other tricks is to use your ship’s systems to broadcast on the hyperradio bandwidth within a seven light year radius. And it had been left on when I got it.

So, yeah, while most of the galaxy here was listening to the Zero-G Cup Soccer finals last week, and went crazy with the nail biting last fifteen minutes, hundreds of space traders in and around the Xexedi Cluster were unbelievably pissed off because they heard me complain about the woman who almost killed me and took all my gold instead. Sorry, guys.

Honestly, I’m surprised it took me so long to figure out what was going on. For a while now, people in the station bars quickly acted like they knew me once I started talking, and some would buy me drinks. I figured it was my natural charm. Then the

Zero-G Cup happened, and I encountered a strange increase in bar brawls whenever I was around. That's when I did some investigating.

So as you can imagine I was not pleased to learn that I'd been leaving a trail of breadcrumbs behind me for space ninjas to follow. They love bread crumbs. It's the only food small enough that they can slip through their masks to eat. Don't tell me space ninjas don't exist, by the way. They totally do. Just because you've never seen them doesn't mean they don't exist. It just means they're behind you. You're probably already dead.

Anyway, since I learned I'd been blabbing to God-knows how many people in the spacelanes for weeks now, I've managed to tweak the settings a bit so it doesn't pirate everyone's signal like before, and instead is accessible on nearby sub-channel. But I did decide to leave it on. It has a built-in signal buffer that keeps my broadcast location secret, so as long as I don't blurt out what system I'm in, I should be okay.

Why am I leaving it on? Eh, who knows? Maybe I'm looking for a sympathetic ear. Maybe I'm hoping I'll either serve as an example or a warning to others out there. Maybe I'm hoping these broadcasts gets to my dad, so I can thumb my nose at him by continuing to breathe. Maybe I'm hoping that woman who blew me out of the sky is listening. I dunno.

So, this is my mobile pirate radio station, I guess. My live journal.

No, it's not a diary... diaries are all about bitching about how life isn't fair, recording your little victories, and mooning about people you have crushes on and...

Ah hell, this is a bloody diary, isn't it?

## The Day the Universe Changed

I think everyone remembers the day the universe changed: 2084004

It's actually 3125 by Earth reckoning, the stardate there is based on days using an arbitrary galactic standard that's almost 6000 years old. It's also nothing but a pain in the butt for every sentient species in the galaxy, since the planet this standard is based off of died in a supernova over three thousand years ago, but nobody could agree on a new system.

And people thought converting Americans to metric was hard.

Anyway, 2084004 is not exactly the easiest date to make a meme out of, so most say 4004. The smart ones call it the Reboot.

4004 is when the universe went to hell. When the rich got richer, the poor got deader, and everyone flying the spacelanes lost someone they knew.

What's worse, I'm pretty sure I got a sneak preview of it way back when my dark days first started.

My own 4004 story goes like this: I was taking my revamped Adder to a system outside the Xexede Cluster on a typical cargo run. Computers, some metals, nothing special. It was all I could do for now because the more interesting work was drying up.

See, I'd been working with RRS for a while on some basic retrieval missions, earning a rep, and hanging out with the guys and gals there. It gave me a sense of purpose, and frankly that was something I'd been lacking for a while now. I thought things were going good.

But the rescue guys were getting all quiet. There had been a lull in pirate activity, and it was spooking the hell out of them. You'd think they'd be happy, but it's not like there had been a huge sweep of GalCop activity flushing them out. In fact, GalCop Navy patrols had also dropped significantly. Just some basic recon being noted in each system. Where had all the naval ships gone?

The same word was on everyone's lips: Thargoids.

Some of the RRS said there was a war going on in Witchspace and we were being kept in the dark. Others said they had found the Thargoid's home sector and were mobilizing for a major offensive. But neither of these accounted for the pirates—the idea of hiring them as mercenaries didn't quite track. It would take a hell of a lot of money to convince them to join up, and if things were that desperate, we were all in trouble.

The truth, however, was far worse. The truth was the Thargoids didn't give a rat's ass about us any more than their usual “kill all humanoids” daily mantra and yoga routines.

The truth was, the universe was about to change.

So on 4004 I was heading planetward when I saw a fight going on in an asteroid field. I figured I'd check it out, see if some easy credits were to be made. I'm a coward through and through, but I got no problem playing the hero when the odds are in my favor. Makes for great pick-up lines at the local station bars, and sometimes some very grateful ship captains. Ladies.

Unfortunately they had just taken out their target when I locked on to the nearest Krait and opened fire. My beam laser usually makes short work of these jokers in their run down heaps. Only, instead of fighting back or jinking, the fighter breaks off, and one of his buddies lays into me. I turn to face him only to have him break off before I can get a shot off and start taking fire from a third. They were working in tandem weaving in and out so I didn't know which one was the current threat, keeping me off balance, taking down my shields to so many fizzled photons.

At first I thought I was running up against pros, but then I had the strangest feeling I'd seen this tactic before.

In my Fer De Lance. Back when I was happy and rich.

See, I'm not the galaxy's best fighter, but I am a damn good pilot. I know how to skin-dance an asteroid or dock on the outer hull of a cruise liner that's flying at full speed. I can bounce my ship off a planet's atmosphere so that I drift lazily up to a station like I'd banked my own eight-ball into a corner pocket. I can make my ship sing. And that's why I recognized these maneuvers being used.

Six vipers. My Fer De Lance. My body frozen on an asteroid amongst my own wreckage.

Space ninjas.

To say I wet myself would be embarrassing, yet completely accurate.

Rather than fight, my instincts now were to flee. Maybe use the asteroids to help provide cover. The only reason I wasn't already dead was because these guys were using pulse lasers, while the Vipers had military grade weapons. It gave me enough time to kick in my fuel injectors, run, try and use the asteroids as cover, and think.

Why on earth would the space ninjas downgrade to crappy pirate ships with even crappier weapons? That made no sense. But the maneuvers were exactly the same. Maybe the ninjas opened up a space dojo? Ridiculous. But here's the thing—they weren't just similar maneuvers. They were exactly the same maneuvers. I had that fight against the Vipers burned into my memory, and unlike other events in my life, it wasn't open to exaggeration. What had always terrified me most about it was the precision involved. Being outnumbered in a furball is scary enough, being outnumbered by a choreographed assault is terrifying.

I'd lost most of my major subsystems before I got out of their weapons range, only to run out of witchfuel. Now I needed to get to the space station before they could catch up. And unfortunately, Kraits are faster than Adders. My ironhide hull had taken a beating and quite frankly there wasn't much left holding me together. It was going to be a long, slow, terrifying race.

But my mind kept going back to the maneuvers. Pirates didn't cooperate like this. They were more an every-humanoid-for-itself kind of group. You had your swarms, and you had big bullies with smarmy sidekicks and all the rest, but this coordinated? Never. Even their attacks on large ships seemed more like gang-bangs than military strikes.

Then I thought back to the ASL Princess Cruise. About their leader I captured, only to be let go by the GalCops. That "ongoing investigation" excuse.

Something about that battle always bothered me. While it didn't have the same hallmarks as this, I did remember the defense pilots were mostly getting their asses kicked. And while I had the fight of my life taking them on, one could attribute that more to luck – since I was in an Adder and therefore nobody's priority target. I got through it by being underestimated, while Cobras and Mambas were going down left and right around me.

The Kraits were closing in. I was never going to make it to the station, and I was too close to the planet to Torus-drive even if I... wait. The planet. Rather than heading for the station I dove towards the planet. I had external heat shielding (well, most of it was intact anyway). If they didn't, they might give up, or hang back further, afraid to get too close planet-wise.

It worked. They fell back. Stayed locked on me, but wouldn't advance into the atmosphere. My retractable wings were shot to hell, though, so I wasn't going to be landing planetside any time soon. Still, I was able to use this to get closer to the station and enter the safety of its Aegis. Within ten minutes I was thumbing my nose as they ran from local Vipers and I prepared to celebrate another day alive and drink a hell of a lot of alcohol at the local bar.

And that's when I realized it hadn't just been a bad day for me...

The bar was maybe half full, and no one was talking. Everyone was watching video feed from the all-news-networks, with headlines like "INVASION!" and "WAR!" And sure enough, some of the pilots there that had their own close encounters felt the same way. And there were already crazier theories, too...

Only it was none of these things. The media was just being slow in figuring that out. Nothing new there... one station was still looking for a lost airliner on earth from god knows how many centuries ago. No, this was no invasion, and it wasn't war in the traditional sense. This was much, much worse.

Everyone remembers the day the universe changed: 4004. Some call it The Day The Pirates Got Smart. The smart ones call it the Reboot, because pirates never get smarter. They're just as stupid and greedy and self-centered as they always were. No, this was something else.

After I lost it all, I had always been convinced my dad had put the hit out on me. Why? Well, I've been over that before. Stupid, greedy, self-centered.... wait why does that all sound familiar? Never mind, the point is, I figured I was just an embarrassment to the family and he figured his legacy would be better off without me. And maybe that's true. After all, I was shot down by GalCop Vipers and left for dead on an asteroid. Actually, quite literally dead until my body was recovered and resuscitated.

But another theory was building in my mind.

The tactics used by those Vipers and now by the Kraits, virtually identical in such a way that it hit the uncanny valley like an extinction level event asteroid.

I know what you're thinking—Artificial Intelligence. Well, not exactly. More like A.I. management of flight coordination. A.I. isn't at the point where it can truly fight for you. Not to mention even basic ECMs are known to interfere with their effectiveness (stations have to watch out for ECM use during automated docking maneuvers). And even Thargoids aren't keen on A.I. for their robot fighters without some kind of manual oversight on their warships. Given how long it took us to develop Hardened missiles to



counter the ECM defense, I wouldn't expect great strides being made in pilotless ships anytime soon.

But this is different. What I saw then and what I'm seeing now is A.I. being used as a kind of on-the-move Command and Control unit. Not flying for the pilots, but telling them how to fly, what maneuver to use next, and sharing that information with the other ships, adapting and updating constantly when they deviate from the plan so that it fits into a new plan.

It would take months to train pilots to use the kind of systematic in-and-out hit and run tactics used on me, but with A.I. Management calling the shots? They could do fly like aces and not even realize it. All they know is they are scoring hits, getting hit less themselves, and taking down their prize quicker than ever before. As an individual, they suck pretty much as they did before, but as a group? Deadly.

How do I know this? Because I'd seen the software being developed in one of GalCop's Naval divisions during a reluctant visit and chewing out with dad—just one week before I sucked vacuum. The kicker of it is that it's one-hundred-percent software based. No hardware required. Any ship can update their computer's software and jack into the fleet of their choice.

Thing is, I thought the code was years away from being a reality. That's why my so-called space ninjas seemed like a more likely scenario for so long.

So if my dad wanted me wacked, why would he send out military grade ships, but use this new A.I.M. coordination on them? Testing? Perhaps. But he could no doubt get six of his best pilots to do the job right and not worry about unexpected beta bugs.

But if they used this A.I.M. to get to me, the possibility exists that six ordinary pilots did the job. And that raises all kinds of new questions.

And now the bigger question – how did the pirates get a hold of it? How did ALL the pirates get a hold of it? The more I watched the all-news-channels the more I saw this was hitting everyone everywhere. The Old Worlds, Galcenter, Xexede, the Iron Stars, you name it. Even out in the Pulsar Worlds. For weeks the pirates had kept their heads low, with only minor skirmishes by individuals or small unaffiliated groups. Then, in one day, they came back in force and spanked us like an S&M dominatrix.

I didn't leave the station for a week. Not many did. People were keeping their heads low till we had some idea of what was really going on. The Navy still hadn't returned, though there were some reports of seeing them on patrol in the farther reaches of the system, but none of that was confirmed.

GalCop had nothing official to say on the news—fact is, the Deep Space Operations division is separate from Planetary Security. Guess which division my dad works for? Guess I still won't be getting any Christmas cards from him.

In that week on the station we all saw the universe change. It was calculated that pirates scored more than the GNP of an entire Tech 12 planet in that time. Money that would go back to Anarchy worlds and not only rebuild, but improve their fleets. Eventually the media clued in to the real reason the pirate strikes were so effective, and have now gone into blame mode for the next week. The week after that will no doubt see the conspiracy theories pop up.

Stable systems went into lock-down, increasing patrols to make sure their interests own were defended, but at the expense of the other systems around them. Aid packages were revoked “for the duration of the crisis.” Restrictions were added in all docking bays, as well as all kinds of “safety precautions” and additional paperwork. Detailed flight plans were required just to leave.

Anarchy or Feudal worlds found themselves not only slipping further into chaos, but effectively taken over by pirates, some of whom now had more money than the governments. Without the financial and military aid from neighboring better off worlds, there wasn't much they could do about it besides hold the homeworld and hope for the best.

And it only got worse.

Thanks to A.I.M., any straggler pirate in a beat up fighter could join an effective fighting force centered around a larger mothership, and go raid the wealthier planets. In response, these richer worlds installed their Viper fleets with captured A.I.M. software and organized strikes back into hostile territories. No longer in terms of military “aid” but attacks meant to cripple the offending system.

A new dichotomy emerged: If your corporate paradise happened to be surrounded by less stable worlds, you weren't safe anymore. And if your feudal state happened to be surrounded by corporations, you could expect them to routinely put you in your place. Which only ended up driving these governments to overtly or covertly fund the pirates...

There is no way in hell this can end well.

It no longer became about worlds cooperating to handle mutual problems despite their differences, it became world against world. Nobody's called it war—not yet—but if things keep going this way something has got to give.

Look, nobody ever said the galaxy was safe or stable before... but there was a new kind of organization and malice behind this new order that's made our humble space jockeys' skin crawl. The writing is on the wall, and it's in our own blood.

## The New Normal

Once the conspiracy stories started on the all-news-networks I had the feeling it was safe to poke my head out of the rabbit hole again. They only do that once they've run out of real news to report, which meant some kind of stability had been reached—for a given value of stable.

It's funny, but for all the initial hype of invasion and war that turned out instead to be the galaxy's largest pirate raid, nobody seemed to pay much attention to who the real victims were. Space jockeys, truckers, freelancers, call us what you will—we're the ones who went down by the thousands in these attacks.

Instead they talk about the economy and lost revenue. They focus on cruise ships that were hit because they can get shots of a floating teddy bear with half its face burned off from a laser blast, and wait for their Pulitzer because they think they caught an image that captured the "horror of the day".

Now that things are somewhat stable again, some pundits are calling us traders lazy or cowardly for not getting out there and filling the space lanes with profit again. Oh, for a spiked titanium dildo and five minutes alone with those jackoffs.

It's still going to take a while to understand the ramifications of this new normal, but whatever it is, we've reached it. The pirates and rogue states that were behind organizing this strike really knew what they were doing. A.I.M. coordination was a devastating advantage, but they knew the balance would shift back quickly once the software was captured and spread amongst the various governments. Now even traders are using it for their escorts, and suddenly the balance of power has shifted towards the center again. So the rogues made the most of it while they could.

Latest reports are that total financial losses are actually closer to the GNP of THREE Tech 12 planets spread throughout the galaxy, not one. And the pirates didn't lose all that many ships in the grand scheme of things. Once things started turning against them, they turned tail and ran... with enough money to effectively rule whatever systems their bases are in.

Still sucks to be a lone trader, mind you, and this is what I mean about ramifications. The push is on for everyone to buddy up with two or three other ships and install A.I.M. coordination into their system. With all the losses we suffered the big transports will make a killing for a while, but there's a vacuum that's going to be filled by young and inexperienced pilots who are going to be terrified at the prospect of flying out there alone, regardless of incentive programs, and they'll buddy up with other noobs and A.I.M. up to even the odds.

You might think the days of the lone trader might be numbered, but I doubt it. See, one key difference in the previous attacks on me is that I didn't know what I was up against. Just knowing you're dealing with A.I. tactical coordination helps determine how you're going to defend yourself. The experienced space jockeys out there are going to adapt quickly and some smug would-be pirates are going to be in for a big surprise.

Point is, A.I.M. has been a big pain in everyone's butt, but the worst of it has passed. The danger is still there, but it's time for us to go out there and reclaim the space lanes... in my case from a distance... with fuel injectors at standby.

I guess thank goodness for small favors – a government wanting to create an empire could have used it to blitzkrieg across half the galaxy before the rest of us caught on. Hell, they might have been smarter and set their ships up with self-destruct or systems purging to prevent the software from falling into enemy hands. Who knows?

Questions remain, lots of them, but now that we've reached the new 'normal' I guess it's time to see if the boys at the shipyard have put my hunk of junk back together...

## Destined for the Heap

“What do you mean, SCRAP?”

“I mean I can’t even let you fly this heap out of here to get a second opinion from a third-rate chop shop is what I mean. I’d lose my licence.”

I knew my custom Adder was in bad shape after 4004, but I figured if I could land it, I could repair it.

“It’s that Kit Kobra hull you got on. Heat melted parts of it, bent it into vital components, and going into the atmosphere after that didn’t help. You’re just lucky you had heat shielding left. Just about every system is compromised.”

“But—“

“Look, if you were rich and this had any special meaning to you, I could restore it, sure. Would cost you the same as a new ship, though. So just let the insurance get you a new one. I know a guy who—“

“Right, insurance! Can’t they pay to get it repaired?”

“I was trying to tell you before you so rudely interrupted. I know a guy who can get around the fact that you voided your insurance with this custom hull jobby. I’ll have this pressed into a cube before any assessor knows otherwise. And you get a new factory spec Adder in the process. It’s the best you’re gonna do. Really.”

adder2

I looked over the beautiful lines of my Neolite brand Kit Kobra Adder. I’m still no fan of the Adder, hell, even my combat multi-function-display seems to be surprised I’m flying one—keeps on warning me I’m on my last energy bank as if an Adder is suppose to have more than one.

But this ship had made life a bit more bearable, like I could pretend I was in something better, or at least more personal. Now I was getting stuck back in a squashed tissue box again. Yay.

The replacement Adder arrived two days later. I guess on the upside this time I had one right off the factory line. It had a bit more detailing than the earlier models which I

often thought looked like they'd been made in a cheap 3D printer on some low-tech world sweat shop. But it was still a squashed tissue box.

"I don't know why you went with the Kit Kobra anyway," the mechanic said as he watched me go over the ship systems before taking ownership. "These days you could have just bought yourself a Hobby. It's what they're based on after all."

I frowned. "Hobby?"

"Yeah, you know, like the bird. Those Kit Kobras were Neolite's way of introducing their rival ship line to places like here. Places with exclusive contracts with folks like Cowell & MgRath, ZPG, Gerege Federation and Faulcon de Lacy. They're what the Big Four call "rogue shipbuilders", you know, like Outworld—not that the term ever hurt their Adder sales. Hell, it probably helps."

I wasn't so sure about that – I was always a bit iffy about the fact my ship was built by a company who didn't even have their headquarters listed on any galactic map. But they were cheap, and therefore popular.

"So, Neolite is a megacorp way out in one of those parts of the galaxy you need a Hopper to get to. Seven or eight hops away. You know, next door, but in the wrong direction."

A Hopper was this guy's slang for a one-shot galactic hyperdrive. A cute innocuous name for something mind-bending. You think witchfuel is expensive? Try spending 5000 credits on a single ride on the Wormhole Highway with no return ticket. The upside is you end up in a section of a whole new galaxy as a result, with hundreds of new worlds to explore. The downside is the only way to get home again is by doing the grand circuit around our little slice of the Local Cluster. 8 jumps, 40,000 credits.

The Wormhole Highway seems to have been artificially created god-knows how long ago. Before we crawled out of the ocean at least. And with the universe always expanding some say it won't be long before the loop becomes unstable and collapses, but in galactic terms "won't be long" could be a million years or more. In the meantime, if someone discovers a way to Hop counter-clockwise, that person will be an instant quadrillionaire.

"Anyway, it used to be that all ships going around the galaxy were built in our neck of the woods, but that's not very efficient, is it? So the Big Four started licencing out franchises for factories. Only that raised the prices the farther out you went, even though it got cheaper for profits to return home the closer you got back to start. Economics, amiright?"

I shrugged. It's not like I invited this guy to babble on for an hour. Oh wait, I did by saying "Hobby?" Apparently that's enough to warrant a history of the galaxy being read aloud. I was satisfied with my new ship and added my personal (hacked) Ident crystal into the dashboard.

"So of course you got private ship-builders doing their own thing, but the main lines of ships are so popular that it's hard to compete. Then Neolite's president, Simon somethinorother, get's this great idea – copy the most popular designs, give them a sexy new hull design, screw the middle man and licences and voila! Worked like a charm and next thing you know they're everywhere in his part of the galaxy. Not much we can do about it here because it takes 40,000 credits just to get there to deliver a cease and desist order.

"But our neck of the galaxy is next on the grand tour for him. So when he tried to ship them here? They got impounded and melted down for patent violations. That's why he started the Kit Kobra side business. Get hobbyists excited about the look of his stuff, and it's perfectly legal–well, except for insurance problems, knowwhatimsayin? But the last year or so they've tweaked their designs to avoid lawsuits and there's nothing the Big Four can do about it. So you've seen the Neolites showing up more and more. The Neolite version of an Adder is called a Hobby, Asps are Hawks, Cobras are Eagles, you get the picture. Birds instead of snakes. So these days if you go to the right system you could have picked up a Hobby for the same price as an Adder."

It was true I had noticed a number of new ship designs, but hadn't clued in before now about the connection. I hadn't exactly kept up my subscription to Top Flight Magazine.

"So what's different about the Hobby?"

"Not much. Most of the Neolite ships are still blatantly ripping off original designs, just with some minor tweaks. Slightly faster engines, different maneuverability. Usually it's a trade off of some kind. I think with the Hobby they gave up the missile slot for a more powerful energy bank."

Eh, I always thought a single missile was fairly useless anyway. But more energy? That could be interesting. Wonder if I could trade up?

"Well, thanks for the novel, pops, but I'm good. Systems check out. I'm going to take her for a ride."

"No worries, no worries. Just be careful out there. I hear them pirates have gotten a lot smarter since 4004."



I shrugged. “Not as smart as you think. But thanks.”

I closed the hatch and got into the cockpit, then turned on the engines and waited for the systems to kick online. The bootup process was automatic, and the Ident crystal logged in my assumed ID.

Pilot Registration: Mossfoot

Then it asked for my ship's name. I sat back and thought about it. So here I was, stuck with a stock Adder again. Lord knows if I'll ever be flying anything else. But it is a brand new ship for once, so I might as well at least give it a proper name.

Ship ID Registration: Mossfoots Burden

No way to put in apostrophes? The future my ass.

## Fleabag

“Reow?”

Mossfoots Burden was getting some maintenance done and I didn’t feel like spending my credits at this station’s overpriced bar. Truth be told, since 4004, I’d been drinking less. Sure I might put a little something extra in my tea dispenser, but I hadn’t had an evening that started with a blackout and ended with waking up in strange clothes with stranger women in weeks.

It wasn’t because of some life-altering revelation or a need to change my life. It just felt like 4004 was the beginning of something, not the end, and I was still waiting for the other shoe to drop. When it did I wanted to be sober enough to hit the fuel injectors and high tail it to whatever system was safest.

So I was hanging out in the docking bay, reading over some stuff in the ship’s library, when I see this black cat hiding by my cargo ramp. It wasn’t the first time I’d seen the little fleabag hanging around my ship. Pretty much every time I came to this system it was waiting there. Probably expecting me to offload a ton of Friskiers and hoping to grab a tin. Too bad you don’t have opposable thumbs to use a can opener, fleabag.

“Reow?”

I looked away from the Neolite ship catalog I’d been perusing to look at the rear loading camera again. It was still there. Lurking. What the hell was it waiting for? What was it looking at? Directly at the camera? Well that’s a bit unnerving. I checked around the bay. The repair crew hadn’t come back yet for final details and nobody seemed to be paying attention.

I turned the hydraulics off on my rear cargo door, then let it drop like a ton of bricks in front of the cat—CLANG! That scared the bugger off right quick. Ah, the things one does to get a chuckle, I thought as I turned the hydraulics back on and raised the door again. I saw it by some cargo containers in the back, peeking its head out to see if it was safe to come out.

I went back to my catalog. Dang, I know it would keep me from getting a ship I could actually do some decent trading in that much longer, but I was really liking how the Hobby looked. And that extra energy could go a long way in a fight. But the smart thing would be to save up for a Cobra at the very least. Really all I wanted was out of this rusty Add...er...

Why was the cat sitting on my ship's windshield staring straight at me? That was... unnerving.

Okay, its tail wasn't swishing around, so it wasn't angry. But its eyes were locked on mine so it was clearly the spawn of the devil. No cat can be smart enough to figure out that I was the one that half-heartedly tried to splat it on the floor of a space station.

My thoughts went back to one drunkened black out night months ago and who I woke up with. "Look, kid, tell your mom that cross species breeding is impossible without a heavy dose of genetic modification, so I can't possibly be your dad."

No, that was stupid. This was just a plain black earth cat, not some young kitten phase of a humanoid cat species. You found earth cats everywhere these days, it seemed.

Still... the way it was looking at me. I swear it cocked one eyebrow... as if it had eyebrows. As if it was letting me know that it knew what I did, and was not impressed.

I turned on the engine and test fired the fuel injector, just enough to make the whole ship shake and vibrate in the restraints, making the cat bolt once again and run back to the crates.

If that didn't work, the front of my ship had a hell of a laser pointer that it could chase. Once.

"Reow?"

An old Earth ditty was stuck in my head and I couldn't get it out. Something about a cat coming back. I understand it ends well for the soul troubled by the feline.

Honestly, if I wasn't making such a killing on this milk run between systems, praying for the day I can buy a new Hobby or maybe something with more than tinfoil for armor, I'd be avoiding this station altogether. I think it knows that.

Today he's sitting on the roof of Mossfoots Burden, occasionally making his presence known, and is now more or less immune to the rumbling of my ship when I test the thrusters trying to shake him off. Hell, I think it put him to sleep last time.

I asked the dock workers about the cat but they all shrugged as if they'd never seen it before in their life, that I was making it up or something. When pointing at the cat didn't

work I went over, picked it up by the scruff of the neck, and dangled it in front of them. They just shrugged and said strays happen.

“You wants I should incinerate it?” one asked. “I only ask because some types gets all uppity if we talk about solving the problem that way.”

I looked at the dangling black bag of fur held in my hand. He wasn’t facing me at all. He just hung limp like a bag of trash. Maybe he expected me to dump him down the incinerator shoot after all. Maybe that’s what he’d come to expect from life.

Ah crap.

“No... never mind. Leave him be. I guess he’s not really bothering me.” The workers walked off and I called after the loudmouth in particular. “Don’t toss him in the incinerator, you got that? Leave him be.”

I set the cat down. He walked off as if saying, “Don’t do me any favors.” Actually it was more like a strut. Huh. Strays happen indeed.

“Just stay off my ship, you stupid fleabag.”

## Communist Efficiency

The politics of the universe are strange and varied. You not only have entirely different worlds to deal with, each with different cultures, but completely different species as well.

Thing is, with humans, we have this need to pigeonhole everything. Make things nice and neat. So when we call a particular alien bird-like, that's only because they have things that resemble feathers – even if they're microcapillary cooling apparatus that carries their water-thin blood to the surface in order keep their internal organs which are always a degree away from boiling reasonably cool.

Yeah, let's just call them birds. They look like a bird. If a five year old drew it. Next!

Same thing goes for politics. Megadodo Publications, for example, used to put out a travel guide you might have heard of, and not wanting to be bogged down by things like accuracy, decided to lump the governments of the various planets into nice and neat and completely inaccurate categories. Corporate State, Democracy, Confederacy, Communist, Dictatorship, Multigovernment, Feudal, and Anarchy. These became so popular that all guides took them on, and galactic maps use them as a shorthand for pilots to reference.

As general indicators of stability, they are okay, but consider the range of species and cultures I mentioned before and tell me if you think two Communist states are the same?

Actually, it turns out, closer than you think. Since all nav systems started using these for reference, and have for well over a hundred years now, you've had the strangest cases of conformity I think the galaxy has ever seen. Alien worlds classified as "Feudal" for example, looked to the ancient Earth culture to understand what these hairless apes were talking about. And they found that they liked what they saw.

Now you find these places adopting their own variations of titles like "Lord" or "Baron" (often with strange misspellings), arranging for duels and jousts (in hundred ton spaceships with frickin laser beams) and organizing "hunting lodges" where six legged reptilians can admire their collection of enemy heads (sometimes human), while smoking a pipe filled with Megaweed and saying things like "pip pip" for no discernible reason.

If these worlds weren't so dangerous they'd be amusing.

Same goes for Communism. You'd think that they'd take one look at how that worked out on Earth and decide to either go to war with us for the insult, or get their act together and try something with less oppression. But nope. They start putting up posters celebrating the glorious worker, go all minimalist and "efficient" in their ship and station design (other than what GalCop imposes for intergalactic trade purposes) and start hitting the vodka heavily.

Okay, so the last bit I can get behind, but the rest? I mean, most even use the hammer and sickle logo or red star.

And 4004 didn't help matters. They only got more paranoid and secluded and isolationist, not to mention adding on heaps and heaps of extra paperwork.

I go to a penal colony hoping to offload some alcohol (which should be no problem whatsoever) only to be put into a queue. Fifth in line. No big deal. Only ten minutes later I'm STILL fifth in line.

I look around at the other ships and there are one, two, there, yep, four prison transports all floating outside, engines off.

"What's the problem?" I ask mission control. "Why is nobody moving?"

And I swear to God for some reason these people, no matter how many arms or scales they have, insist on creating their own messed up versions of Russian accents. "Prison transport at docking position one require clearance papers to be delivered to dock."

"Fine. Don't they have it?"

"They have, yes, but papers must be delivered before clearance can be granted."

Oh God, I saw this in a bad sitcom once, I think. "And they can't deliver them because they don't have clearance."

"Exactly. We are asking for permission to have special exception made, which has been delivered on priority prison transport to allow this unfortunate matter to be cleared up."

"And let me guess, that's ship number two. Only you can't give them clearance to land to deliver the paperwork because the first prison ship is ahead of it in the queue."

"Errrr... yes. We cannot let any ship jump the queue without special permission, which this ship sadly did not have. So that is where third ship comes in."

"And why can't it jump the queue?"

“Is funny story...”

“So not laughing. You know what, I’m taking this booze to the main station. And if they give me any problems, I’m drinking it myself.”

I kicked the ship around and flew off, and at the main station I didn’t have much better luck.

Here I was only second in line. But what was ahead of me...?

“Worker’s Commuter 451, continue on vector. Acknowledge.”

“Worker’s Commuter 451, acknowledging.”

This was the fifth time I’d heard this exact same exchange. A Worker’s Commuter is a like a brick, only a brick is slightly more esthetically pleasing and much much faster. I’ve been inside one once. It’s like riding the most depressing subway in history on the same day your wife died and your dog blew up.

I’d been watching this thing drift towards the station for over ten minutes, like God had taken decided to be a postman for a day, was delivering His first letter, but took a moon-sized Valium beforehand.

And boring as this was, I was amazed that I was able to notice the inherent problem that was before me.

“Um... mission control, this is Mossfoots Burden. I think you have a problem with your current docking flight plan.”

“Mossfoots Burden, all procedures are being observed. Please be advised you will be contacted as soon as it is your turn to dock. Acknowledge.”

“Yeah, but—“

“Acknowledge.”

“Mossfoots Burden, acknowledging. But—”

My comm signal got cut and I had just about enough time to face palm before the fireworks started. The Worker’s Commuter has a very specific design shape, meant to slide into the docking bay like it was the aforementioned mailslot. Only both the pilot and the mission control had failed to note that this one was approaching it on the side, like putting a piece of bread in a toaster sideways. Nobody had set up a course correction and now...

Coriolis Stations are tough cookies. It takes more than a ship splashing off it to mess up its day. And from the looks of all the pods flying off in every direction, one could only

assume casualties were kept to a minimum. But without missing a beat the guy at mission control contacts my ship.

“Mossfoots Burden, you are cleared for landing. Acknowledge.”

Communist efficiency at its best, folks. No wonder they drink so much.



## Fleabag Again

“Reow?”

The cat had taken to sitting on top of a pile of cargo containers and watching me like some kind of lighthouse, its eyes reflecting light and concentrating it into a tight beam, no doubt trying to cut my ship in half.

I lowered the cargo ramp down and walked out onto it. I stared back at the black cat, arms crossed.

I have no idea where it came from, but a tumbleweed rolled across the hanger bay between us.

My eyes narrowed.

The cat lazily blinked. And waved.

Black male cat, Joey, 6 months old

Cats are not dogs. They do not bond with people in the same way. If this cat was attracted to my ship, it was because the ship vibrated in just the right way, or it was the right temperature, or it smelled like fish and I'd been inside it so long I no longer even noticed.

Cats are self-centered, selfish, and frankly egotistical creatures that don't think past their immediate concerns. Whatever its reason were for hanging around my ship, I was certain it had nothing to do with me and everything to do with itself.

I reached into my jacket and pulled out a bag of cat treats, shaking it loud enough for the stray to hear.

“Come on, fleabag, get in.”

Fleabag found a comfortable spot to sleep in the back of the ship, but his litterbox is a different problem. For now I just keep sand in the emergency airlock (not the one I normally use), which at least make it easy to flush. And if Fleabag becomes a problem well... I can solve two problems at once.

But so far he's been a pretty easy going companion. Sometimes he'll walk into the cockpit and leap up on the dashboard, staring out into space as if it knows exactly what's

out there—and is not impressed. He knows enough to get out of the way if we run into trouble. It was bad enough to have Trumbles getting in my way during a fight, I don't need a cat sleeping on my radar projector.

When we dock he usually strays a bit from the ship to check things out, then hurries back inside, perhaps thinking I might take off without him.

As far as Mossfoots Burden goes, I've got her upgraded about as good as can be expected, but honestly that's not saying much. I need to get something better, since I have a sinking feeling this new stability in the galaxy since 4004 is just a lull of sorts. Something else is going to happen, but I have no idea what.

All I know is, there was more to those mass raids and the stolen A.I.M. tech that allowed it to happen, especially with Her Majesty's Navy still out on maneuvers. The official word on the news is a new Thargoid threat that they're holding at bay in Cold-War style posturing of forces. But the fact this happened at the same time as the pirate raids? Hell of a coincidence.

Officially they said they believed the A.I.M. tech was given to the pirates by the Thargoids, and the raids were orchestrated in part by them, hoping to draw the Navy away and weaken the main lines. An interesting theory that I could almost believe if it weren't for two things:

First, the only tech we've ever gotten from Thargoids were pried from their cold, dead pincers. Their attempts at communication still come out as random gibberish. And they still think most sentient species are simply different flavors on the galactic buffet. They don't cooperate with anyone.

Second, I saw the A.I.M. software being developed with my own eyes on a Navy space station.

I suppose it's possible that the story is true and the tech I saw being worked on was intercepted or stolen and being reverse engineered for their own purposes. Dad never told me much of anything when it came to their top secret work, and the only reason I saw it being developed is because I went into the wrong simulator bay, one where they were testing the software out.

I don't know. I really don't. Right now, I only know I need to keep my eyes peeled, my ears open, and my emergency airlock clean every few days.

## Cub Reporter

So it seems my live diar... journal has attracted some attention. I was approached by a man from the Tionisla Chronicle the other day.

“We’ve been listening to your show,” he said. “When you’re out of range other people record it and forward it to us. You’ve got quite a following.”

I wasn’t on any real station this time, just a small depot on one of the outer planets of the system. One of those weird ones shaped like a pyramid. And since they’re not built by humans, it always reminds me of those ancient astronaut theories that were popular on old Earth, where aliens helped build the pyramids—as if we were too dumb to figure it out ourselves.

I wanted to correct the guy, tell him it wasn’t a show I was putting on. But he spoke again before I could.

“It’s quite a setup you’ve got going. Mobile pirate radio. Great way to reach the masses to tell them what the man doesn’t want them to hear. You really believe what you say about 4004?”

This worried me. I hadn’t really thought I’d have any followers. Not important ones anyway, or that they might put stock into my observations and theories. And I was... popular? That’s something I haven’t experienced in a while. But this time it was what I wanted least.

“Now, if I could just inquire about your father. Based on what we know, we’ve narrowed the list down to six possible officers in the Imperial Navy and was wondering if you could confirm—”

“Hold on,” I said. “I’m not confirming anything, certainly not to a news station. If you’ve been following my stories like you say, you know how much I value converting oxygen to carbon dioxide. It’s my second favorite thing. In fact you’re giving me a real good reason to stop yapping on the hyperradio waves altogether.”

“No! Don’t do that. That’s why I’m here. We’d like to hire you as a reporter. Human interest stuff. Investigative journalism. Whatever. You give us exclusive first rights to any story you break, and then you’re free to talk about it on your own show.”

“It’s not a show—”

“Whatever. People like your voice and we’re willing to pay to use it. What do you say?”

I didn’t exactly see the harm. I heard the Chronicle paid pretty well.

“Got anything lined up for an assignment?”

“Funny you should say that. Ever hear of a placed called Erehwon?”

I’ll take satirical novels of Victorian England for the win, Alex.”Erehwon? Don’t you mean Erewhon?”

That’s right, I graduated English Lit before joining the Academy. Deal with it.

“Huh?”

And of course he doesn’t get it. Why do I bother?

“Look, we’ve been hearing about a lost system not too far from the Galactic Core. Some traders claim to have been there, but they don’t want to give out details. What information we do get is conflicting. It might not even exist, but we believe there’s something out there. We want to learn more. We want pictures. And we want you to cover it in your own, shall we say, unique way.”

“Let’s skip right to the part where you talk about my own unique pay.”

“Get anything usable, and we could pay up to a thousand credits.”

I liked the sound of that. “You have my attention.”

“I’ll be honest with you. You’re not the first person we’ve sent on this assignment. But so far we’ve had... problems.”

“You’re losing my attention. Uh oh, Mr. Alcohol is waving at me...”

“It’s not what you think. Some took an advance on us and bolted, so we’re not making that mistake again. And yes, a couple of our other recruits never came back at all, but we chalk that up with the dangers of blind jumping between systems. Just make sure you jump with a full tank. Others claimed to have been there, but failed to bring back any usable pictures. They shut up on the details after we refused to pay, but we need facts and proof. We’re not publishing hoaxes.”

I raised an eyebrow. I've read the Chronicle before. "I seem to recall you published an article about giant space jellyfish roaming in asteroid fields?"

"We stand by our assertion that those are real."

"And they were eating passing cruise liners?"

"Okay, we don't publish hoaxes anymore."

I figured a thousand credits was still worth hearing him out. "So what do you know about this place?"

"Erehwon is supposed to be somewhere to the galactic west of Biorle, in interstellar space. Our guess is it's around a brown dwarf or other protostar, which is why it's not on any of the charts. Anything else is just speculation. But according to our sources there is a station, and it's inhabited. That's our money shot. Protostars and planets aren't uncommon, but they're only of interest to the science nerds. But finding one that's populated? That's a story!"

I considered the offer. Mossfoot's Burden was kitted out about as good as it could be. I was ready for anything outside of heavy combat, and my fuel injectors meant I could run away from that... I hoped.

And a thousand credits would go a long way towards getting a new ship. Okay, not a long way, but it was a start. Given that parcel deliveries were only paying a tenth that, why the hell not?

"Alright, you've got yourself a reporter."

## The Road to Erehwon

No doubt you've already seen the broadcast from the Tionisla Chronicle and saw the whole adventure in detail there. Mind you, that's the smartly edited version. I had two stupid little floating cameras buzzing around me the whole time, capturing every move I made, which means the Chronicle had something like twenty hours of useless footage as I investigated, interviewed, and tried and failed several times to make the right jump.

So if I'm short on details here, it's only because the Chronicle already provided all the best highlights. Given that they cut all that footage down to an hour (well, forty minutes plus twenty minutes of commercials) it's no wonder it made me look so good.

Well, they made someone look good anyway.

I had a feeling they weren't going to blur out my face or alter my voice the way I wanted, so I had a former pirate and tech guru buddy of mine, Redsphear, tinker with their floaty cameras a bit before I started my search, added a bit of code so that whenever the cameras recognized my face it altered it to look like movie star Brad Jolie.

That gave the Chronicle some problems. It's why they had to add that disclaimer saying it wasn't really Brad Jolie flying the ship. They claim it was their idea to protect my identity. Yeah, right. What do you think would have been more difficult for them, getting permission from Brad Jolie to use his likeness, or blurring out my face? This more or less justified my paranoia on the matter. They thought a blurred face would hurt the ratings or something. Score one for foresight.

Fortunately, Brad was cool with it. It was free publicity for his next movie and they struck up a deal to play some trailers during the commercials. I should get a bloody commission, pal.

So obviously I found Erehwon. I wasn't the first and I won't be the last. It's been a semi-secret among some coreward traders for a while now, and they were none too pleased by the exposé (all the more reason for the computer generated face change). Though I'm sure they're glad its exact location was never revealed.

And there's good reason for that. If you saw the Chronicle's special you know why the location and the exact means to get there weren't given. It's a dangerous place and should not be approached by casual traders. All those acrobatic stunts you saw on the show (played to the tune of Lenny Log-in's "Safety Zone")? You bet your ass I needed them. I wasn't just showing off.

Okay, maybe I was showing off a little. Just because you have to defend yourself doesn't mean you can't do it with a little style, right?

But of course it's the station itself that's the greatest mystery. In my opinion, the report the Chronicle aired only touched the surface of the questions it raised. And while those traders who have claimed it don't know much more about it than I do, I have to wonder if there might be more out there like it... perhaps with more answers.

Answers I'd be happy to uncover... for the right price.

No doubt the Chronicle will want follow up stories made, so I'm sure I won't be the last Tionisla cub reporter to grace the spacelanes of Erehwon.

## A Spot of Bother

So I finally found my way to the Akihabara of this corner of the Galaxy.

Ceesxe. Electric World. A planet whose future is so bright you have to wear shades. No, really. the entry point puts you on a direct course with both the planet and the goddamn sun. I swear to God I've spent more in glare filters for my ship than fuel, and the stupid things keep burning out on me. Was the government trying to be symbolic or something placing the witchpoint there? Is it to impress the tourists? Make it so pirates are at a disadvantage coming in?

Or perhaps, to paraphrase Jane Austin: "It is a truth universally acknowledged that a planet rich in good fortune must be populated by assholes."

Ceesxe is a great place to get your ship kitted out. It is literally the most technologically advanced planet around. Rumor has it some of the techies for the Imperial Navy developed part of a working cloaking device here... which they totally don't have. Nope. Nosir. No cloaking device here. That technology doesn't exist. Please forward all inquiries to the press officer and expect four to six weeks for a casual dismissal of your question.

Uh-huh. Remind me sometime to tell you the story about the disappearing Thargoid, would you?

Actually the Imperial Navy has finally come back. The press reported it a week ago, around the time my Erehwon story broke, which killed the ratings, dammit. But this was the first time I'd seen them myself. I saw a carrier with a full Viper escort attacking poor stupid shmuck, and, always willing to snatch a bounty from them, I joined in. It's not like Navy pilots get bounties anyway. No doubt they'll award the kill to whoever did the most damage for their own ranking purposes.

Besides, I wanted to get close. I had enough fuel to jump system if things got weird, but I had to know if I was in any danger around them, and try to get some answers about 4004.



It seemed my hacked ident crystal was not only not on any of their wanted lists, but also in good standing with the Navy. They not only talked to me, they gave me permission to land.

This identity crystal is just getting stranger and stranger. Features noticed so far:

- Built in bounty tracker, which means it's affiliated with (or hacked into) the bounty hunter guild.

- Clean ID that I seem to have a hard time getting dirty, regardless of what cargo I might have.

- Ability to break security systems on other ships (nice feature but I really shouldn't abuse it)

- Ability to broadcast a pirate signal over Hyperradio.

- Good standing with Imperial Navy?

And one other thing – I can't change the name. For some reason "Mossfoot" is hardwired in.

Anyway, once inside the carrier I figured I'd find out how much good will this ID could get me while still staying close enough to my ship to make a quick getaway.

I was really fooling myself at this point, I know. I was docked inside their goddamn carrier. If they wanted me there was little I could do to stop them. But for once curiosity was overcoming my cowardliness.

I got off Mossfoot's Burden and two soldiers waited at the bottom of the ramp. They saluted.

Interesting... I could get used to that.

"Welcome aboard, sir," one of them said. A lieutenant. "I'm sorry the Captain can't see you himself, but he's needed on the bridge. Does your ship require any repairs?"

I decided to channel my dad's tone and mannerisms. Easy enough for me to do, I often made fun of it after all.

"Negative, lieutenant," I made sure to pronounce it left-enant like he did. "Just a quick refuel and a spot of tea. Oh and a tin of tuna for my cat, be a good fellow. Right. Now then, what's your ship's current assignment? I've been out of touch and need to know I'm not going space crazy, what what?"

Yes, my father is that kind of officer.

"Standard system patrol, checking in with key worlds."

“And the status of the fleet?”

“Still on the Thargoid front.”

So that part of the story was true? “Jolly good. Hostilities?”

“Only the usual, sir.” That probably meant raiders attacking at random and communicating in gibberish.

An enlisted man arrived with the tin of tuna I’d requested. Nice. That kind of service meant some kind of half decent rank was involved, or at least specialist clearance. He also had some tea in a paper cup. Instant, no doubt.

“Don’t bother me with that swill, I have a proper kettle in my ship. Now, any intentions to bring the fleet core-ward due to the current crisis, what what?”

The officer looked slightly confused. “My understanding was the situation had stabilized. Has something changed?”

Stable? They call the situation now stable? Only in worlds like Ceesxe, stable planets surrounded by other stable planets. I didn’t want to press my luck with the wrong questions, though. One furrowed brow was enough suspicion for one day.

“Not as far as I know, lad. Like I said, I’ve been out of touch. Carry on. I’ve had a long day and still a ways to go. Let me know when I’m cleared to launch. Pip pip.”

The lieutenant saluted and I went back inside my ship. Fleabag waited at the top of the ramp, raising that imaginary eyebrow again.

“What are you complaining about? At least you got some tuna out of it. All they offered me was powdered tea.”

## The Akihabara of the Galaxy

One of the great things about Ceesxe is they have everything. They have the best night life around, and it's always night in space. Yeah, you'll find your GalCop standard Dodec station there, but they got the new SuperHub nearby, absolutely massive in size and a breeze to dock with. You've got a Hoopy Casino floating in the safety zone if you want to waste some well earned credits on overpriced drinks from underdressed men or women. Heavily patrolled by Vipers, an RRS station nearby in case search and rescue is needed... Hell, even the Constore at the witchpoint feels extra snazzy in a deep shade of purple.

Class all around.

I decided to dock at the Superhub for the novelty for it, though I was pretty sure I'd get a slightly better price for my cargo of furs there. Mossfoots Burden drifted into the center, was gently picked up by the tractor beams, and drawn into one of the many landing tubes on the Hub's inner surface. Bliss!

Oh, I had every intention of sticking around here for a while. The only downside of a place like Ceesxe was that it didn't have many other planets nearby. I like to keep my options open in case things go pear shaped. Still, the overall stability and security made up for it.

An ultrasecure agricultural world nearby to trade with, the Navy is clueless as to who I really am, easy money and a ship that is no longer falling apart. Life is good.

Why oh why did I have to think that? You'd think I'd have learned my lesson by now.

It started, as many of my problems are wont to it seems, in a bar...

The SuperHub's got more bars and clubs than the planet's surface. It is party town, and for the first time in my life I was feeling the old me coming back.

What did it matter if I had a lousy Adder? I'd already got a good 20K put away, I'd be buying back my pleasure cruiser in no time. And with all the tricks I'd learned since it all went wrong? I wouldn't just be living off my dad's fortune, I'd be making my own.

As for dad's protection? Well, this magic ident crystal seemed to have all that covered. Clean slate, and nobody seemed to know who I was. Maybe they didn't care, and I was just fine with that.

Now, if I decided to use Ceesxe as my base of operations, then the SuperHub was going to be my home. This place was class, money, and style all the way. I'd need some new friends—that is, connections I could shmooze into getting things done for me. Wouldn't hurt to develop a bit of a posse to help get my reputation to spread here. Maybe my news report on Erehwon would get me some traction. You know what they say, first you get the money, then you get the power, then you get the women... preferably in a Jacuzzi on your new pleasure cruiser. Yessir, the SuperHub was home.

I know what you're thinking. Aren't you falling into old habits? Aren't you becoming the same asshole you were before this started? Haven't you learned anything?

To you I say, shut the hell up. I was enjoying myself, really enjoying myself for the first time in God-knows-when.

So naturally it all had to go to hell.

I went to a bar that I figured would become one of my regular joints – Space Seed. Simple name, bit of a double entendre if you play it right, and it looked like the kind of place that wanted to have fun. Fun is good. People having fun are people who are more likely to listen to you, like you, and eventually do things for you. Fun is where things start.

They had a light show going on with the live music, but it wasn't an all out black-light kind of place. You want a place where you can see one another if you want to do more than get drunk and dance. Not that I wasn't going to do that as well.

Well, I was going to...

... until I saw The King.

I'd never bothered asking his name, but I'd never forget that face when I flushed him from the scoop of my ship. That biker's beard and eyes that had been replaced with black cybernetic implants.

"S.O.S. This is the ASL Princess Cruise requesting assistance from anyone out there! Mayday! Mayday!"

The ASL Princess Cruise surrounded by pirates. Better armed and equipped fighters trying to defend her so much space debris. I had the lead hostile Sidewinder in my sights.

"Hail to The King, baby."

The escape pod going straight into my scoop. A cloud of white blips on my radar. The Princess Cruise gone with all hands on board.

“What do you mean you let him go?”

GalCop's liaison telling me about the “ongoing investigation” and the fact the man who orchestrated the attack had to be released.

Two weeks later: 4004.

There he was. The King. Laughing with a group of men and women like he was... well... The King.

I had no weapon on me, but even if I did I doubt I would have pulled it. What pinged at me was far more primal. It demanded blood, the old fashioned way.

I suppose this should be the point where I tell you this wasn't The King.

His name was Herman Milquetoast (stage name Rageonaut Prime). Just a rockerboy who dressed like a pirate for his gigs and chose that particular look because he saw it on the Snoopers and thought it was “gnarlific”.

It kind of takes the cathartic release away and replaces it with an uncomfortable sense of dread when I describe the tooth I knocked out or the bottle I smashed over his head soon after. Also it makes the table I turned over on one of the women and the chair I smashed against the back of a friend of his a lot less justifiable.

It went on for a while, eventually leading out of the Space Seed and onto the street—via the window.

Let's just skip to where I'm in jail, shall we? I'm really not proud of what happened after that.

The GalCop officer sat across from me in the interrogation room, tapping his finger on my ident crystal. At least that was going to come and save the day for me again.

“You think this is going to protect you?” the man asked, a large bear like creature (that of course was in no way like a bear, but lumped into that category anyway). His body hair was closely trimmed with that clean cut “don't-screw-with-me” look that suggested he bent the rules for no one. And apparently he was psychic, too.

“I said I was sorry.”

The bear leaned forward. “Sorry? Do you have any idea how much personal and property damage was caused in and around that bar?”

I was willing to bet it would be somewhere around 20K. That was how my luck went.

“Look, it was all a misunderstanding. I thought that man was a notorious pirate known a–“

“And by ‘that man’ I assume you’re referring to the rock star who is currently in a body cast after you threw him off the walkway?”

“He landed in a fountain.”

“Which was not intentional. Witnesses reported you saying, ‘Who the hell put that there?’”

I bit my lip. Honestly I didn’t know what I could say to get out of this. It seemed the ident crystal’s privileges only went so far. “So, what happens now?”

The bearman sighed. “You’re lucky the Navy is in system. If they weren’t, I’d be happy to lose you in paperwork for a long time. But the moment I checked this they contacted me and asked me if there was a problem.”

Their oh so polite way of saying there is no problem, understood?

“It’s not like the Navy doesn’t cause their own problems here on shore leave, but this was just... excessive.” The officer cracked his very large knuckles. “I don’t like excessive, unless I’m involved.”

“I’ll be sure to invite you to the next party,” I said.

The bearman slammed both of his paws down.

“THERE WILL BE NO NEXT PARTY!” It took him a moment to regain his composure. Which was good, because it took me a moment to decide if I needed to change my underwear or not. “I may not be able to hold you for this, but I can ban you from entering the SuperHub again. Your ID is registered. You are no longer welcome here. Am I understood?”

“But... but... I like the SuperHub.” I’m pretty sure I don’t need to describe how pathetic that sounded.

“THE SUPERHUB DOES NOT LIKE YOU BACK! YOU HAVE BEEN UNLIKED! BEGONE!”

So that was that. Now every time I fly into Ceese I have to head to the crummy old Dodec station, and I see party central glinting in the sunlight just off the planet’s horizon. I can almost hear the music playing as I drift into the cold, lonely docking bay.

## Down in the Dumps

At the Ceesxe Dodec station I kicked a can of low-cal evil juice down the hanger, still smarting from my recent banishment. Stupid SuperHub, didn't want to party there anyway.

I hadn't bothered coming here before, and from the looks of it, neither did a lot of people. The party that was the SuperHub had relegated the Dodec to a purely functionary role, dealing only with large bulk transfers to and from the planet.

The only bar on board still open was called the Last Tap. It was actually called the Last Stop, but the S had fallen off and rust had run from a nail holding up the o giving it the tail of an a. In it was a collection of burnt out cargo runners only interested in the zero-g cricket scores or getting drunk enough to forget their problems.

Hell yeah, I could get behind that.

I was about to order when a voice said behind me.

"He'll have a tea with a touch of whatever will make his head spin added in."

I knew that voice. "Redspear?" I turned around and sure enough the former pirate was right behind me. "The hell are you doing here? The last time I saw you was in—"

"Yeah, I know, but after you blabbed about me messing with the Chronicles' cameras I decided to find greener pastures, lest some copyright lawyers came after me. The Chronicle might have got permission to use Brad Jolie's image, but I didn't. You know how those lawyers can be. Why do you think I was a pirate?"

"Better ethics," we said at the same time, and he sat down next to me. I caught him up on my recent troubles and banishment and he shook his head when I got to the whole bit behind the fight.

Pictured: Artist's Rendition of Redspear...

Pictured: Artist's Rendition of Redspear...

"Ah... The Reboot. Glad I got out of the game before 4004. You know, when I was doing raids it wasn't about the money. It was about survival. The world I was from, what you'd call an Anarchy world? It was one of those places strip-mined and exploited by the

corporates, then left to rot when they were done. We picked on food transports and yes sometimes blood was spilled, but it was either that or starve. And it was far less than they'd done to us."

I shrugged. "You don't have to justify your Robin Hooding to me. I've seen how it is."

"Yeah, but the Reboot? That was about something else. I see some of my old buddies now and then still living the life. It's become something else. The way they talk, it sounds more like revolution, making omelets and breaking a few eggs, and by eggs they mean worlds. Scares the royal piss out of me."

My spiked tea arrived. "So what are you doing now?"

"Ship sales, actually. Got a used lot I won after a hot night at the Hoopy Casino and a private game afterwards."

"Nice. What do you carry?"

"Well, lad, I could tell you about all the different ships I have. I could. Or, I could take you there and show you the one ship you really want."

I downed my tea in one go, almost scalding my throat in the process. "Let's go. This place is dead anyway." I nudged the pilot sitting next to me as I got up and he fell over.

The bartender looked over at the heap on the floor. "Ah, hell. Bob, it's Norm again. Get the defib!"

"Let's go faster," I said.



## Lost Love Found

Redspear led me to his used ship lot, past old Cobras and Morays, right up to the gleaming yellow hull of a new Fer De Lance.

“Beaut, ain’t she?”

“She’s even the same color as my old ship...” I said.

“I thought you’d like it.”

“I do, but it’s not like I can afford it.”

“Yeah, they are a bit overpriced, aren’t they? But you know, I figure if you want, I could set it aside for you. Sell it to you at cost, maybe a bit of a loss.”

I looked perplexed. “Why?”

“I can afford to. I had a VERY good day at the Hoopy Casino.”

“No, I mean why do this for me at all?”

“Eh, you and I might have been born on opposite ends of the economic spectrum, but I reckon we’ve kind of met up in the middle now, you know? I get where you are, because that’s how I felt starting out. And you get me because you’ve had to claw back from virtually nothing.”

“Nice speech. Now the real reason.”

Redspear grinned. “I’d like to look at your ident crystal again. Nothing invasive. No hacking. Hell, I don’t think I could if I wanted to. I just want to see how it’s wired, so to speak. That little thing is a lot more complex than anything I’ve ever seen.”

I thought about it. I didn’t see the harm, of course, but our casual friendship was not the same as trust. Right now that crystal was the only real edge I had in the universe. But maybe Redspear could clear up some of the mysteries around it.

I was about to agree when from underneath the hull of the Lance I saw another ship further off. I recognized the sweet angles of its dagger like tips and the bulk of its hull right away.

“You’ve got a Kit Kobra Adder?” I asked. “You don’t carry the kits by any chance. I was thinking maybe—”

“No, that’s not a Kit Kobra. Can’t carry those for insurance reasons. Though I can sell the kits. No, that there is a Neolite Hobby.”

My mouth dropped. This was the first time I’d seen an actual Neolite in a shipyard. I’d seen some in the docking bays, and of course some Kit Kobra refits, but never the real deal for sale.

“Can I have a look?”

Redspear nodded. “You know, you might really like this...”

Most Hobbys and Kit Kobra Adders I’d seen were blue, but this was a nice shade of green. It looked much the same as the refit I’d lost, but there were some subtle signs that this was designed this way, and not built around a different frame.

“The thing with the Kit version is, it’s still an Adder underneath,” Redspear explained. “Honestly it’s just so much unnecessary padding just to make it look right. That’s a real pain if you ever get stuck with a Trumble, by the way. But the Hobby? Sure, it’s based on the Adder’s capabilities and specs, but it’s also designed this way. It makes use of all that extra space. Want to look inside?”

I did. The ramp lowered and we went in.

I couldn’t believe what I saw.

It felt... huge. I’d read it had more space, but I figured that was a relative term. Like how a baseball is bigger than a golf ball. Doesn’t exactly matter when you’re used to a medicine ball.

“Yeah, Neolite knows a thing or two about comfort. And feng shui, too. A dragon could definitely be happy walking around here.”

While the cargo limits were about the same, they had taken the relatively cramped Adder quarters and made it much less claustrophobic. I suppose a stingy designer would argue it was a bad design because you could squeeze another ton of cargo space out of it, but I wanted the Fer De Lance all those years ago because I understood that not everything was about the ship. The pilot demanded comfort. The pilot deserved comfort. And I could live with giving up an extra ton or two of cargo if it meant having all this room to live.

“What are the specs like?” I already knew this but wanted to hear his take on it.

“Well, they dropped the missile slot to make room for an extra energy bank. A mistake, some say. A hardened missile can go a long way to getting you out of a tough engagement. Give you the time you need to run.”

“But an extra energy bank means your shields charge faster, and your weapons don’t drain you as much. Not to mention ECM use.” I knew the way that I liked to fight (or run away) and this definitely appealed to me.

“Other than that and the much larger cabin it performs much like an Adder. Same cargo limits, standard and expanded, same speed and maneuverability.”

“How much?”

“Stock? 65K. They want to be competitive with the Adder’s sticker price as well as trade-in value. But this isn’t stock. She’s already got a military laser installed, plus some other stuff under the hood. Say, 72K, after our buddy-buddy discount and a promise to look at your ID crystal?”

I had no idea how long it would take to rebuilt the life I once had, but just one look inside here and I felt if I was stuck inside this for the rest of my life, it might not be so bad. I wanted this ship. I didn’t just want it. I wanted it to be mine.

“Throw in a can of black spray paint and you’ve got yourself a deal.”

“What’s the spray paint for?”

I smirked. “Marking my territory.”

## The Bad MF

“What’s the spray paint for?”

I smirked. “Marking my territory.”

I’d been wondering about the name “Mossfoot” for some time. A code name, perhaps? Maybe just a handle some guy went by. Whoever he is, he certainly hadn’t cared about me impersonating him. Maybe he’s got more identities than just this. Who knows? Whoever he was, that’s the past. Who am I going to make him in the future?

I took the black spraypaint and started work, laying down the cutout and spraying evenly over it.

“You know, I could get a pro to do that for you for cheap,” said Redsphear down below.

“Naw, the stencil was enough. I want this to have a personal touch to it.”

So who is Mossfoot now? Terror of the universe and a force not to be reckoned with? Naw. I might love the Hobby’s extra energy bank and the room for comfort in the cabin, but it’s still just a fartweasel of a ship in the grand scheme of things. Still, that kind of underestimation probably saved my life back in the Princess Cruise attack.

Maybe a crafty shadowy assassin? Who am I kidding? I’m about as low key as an engine going critical. Also, not really into killing people who aren’t trying to kill me first. Cunning trader? With 5 tons of cargo space? Not likely. Miner? Nope. Bounty Hunter? Nope. Pirate? HELL nope.

“Did you register the ship’s name?” Redsphear asked from below the ship.

“Yep.” I was starting on the name now. The stencil kept it neat, but it wasn’t going to be a work of art. It wasn’t supposed to be.

“Yeah, that’s what I was afraid of. How can I help you, Officer Davis?”

A voice down below said. “Mr. Spear. I’m here because of another violation.”

I peaked down over the ship’s side. A scrawny balding man with a clipboard was there. Clipboards are always bad news. “Hey, Redsphear. Who’s the asshole?”

“The orifice in question is here to have you revise your ship registration, along with any... external references to its effect.”

“Say what?”

“GalCop Regulation 14.7 section B: No vessel shall have a ship registration that is considered profane by any of the major sentient species.”

I looked at the name I'd just spraypainted on the hull. That was profane? “Get the fuck out of town.”

“Mr... Foot, is it?”

“This guy really doesn't get the idea of single word names, does he?”

“I don't know. I could get used to calling you Moss,” said Redsphear.

“Moss works. It's actually derived from Moses, I think,” I said. “Does that mean I can call you Red? Or how about Spearmint?”

“I get called worse.”

“A-HEM!” Officer Davis huffed. “If you two are finished.”

“I got more,” said Redsphear.

“I could write a book,” I added.

“Your ship will not be allowed to leave with its current registration. I'm here to request you provide an acceptable name or allow a random hexadecimal reference code to be used.”

“I'm sorry, what exactly is profane about the ship's name?”

“It is a well understood abbreviation for something that is unacceptable.”

I swung my legs over the hull and looked down at Davis. “Is that a fact? The fact it also stands for my name—“

“Is irrelevant. The common parlance is all that matters. I refer you to Regulation 14.7 section C where it clearly states that what constitutes profanity is up to the discretion of the officer in charge. Myself.”

“He came in the other day and stopped a guy from naming his Boa ‘One Eyed Snake’,” said Redsphear.

Davis huffed again.

“As you can imagine, he's really popular with cargo haulers here. Most just get their ship registered at the Superhub.”

Davis shrugged. “There it is not my problem. Here it is.”

And of course I had a ban going on there. This guy was too straight an arrow to take a bribe. Violence, while pleasurable, would only get me banned off this station as well. And I needed Ceesxe to make some easy money still. The Hobby still had a ways to go before it was fully kitted out. I guess his anal attention to the rules might work against him.

I hopped down off the ship. “So, did you bother looking me up when you made your decision?”

“I don’t rightly care who you are, Mr. Foot.”

“Uh huh. Have a look now.” I handed him my ident crystal. It was worth a shot.

He slotted it in his clipboard and scanned the information. His eyes almost fell out of his head.

“I... er... I suppose this might fall under Regulation 14.7 section F regarding special exceptions for... special personnel.”

“Yeah, that’s what I thought. Let me have a look at that, would you?” I looked over his shoulder but irritatingly all I saw was a red window flashing with the words “SECTION W”. The hell did Section W mean? Whatever it is, it made this guy take notice. Not in a pants wetting way, sadly, but I suspect that’s because he didn’t know anymore about it than I did, only that it was above his pay grade.

“So, we good?” I asked.

“Yes, sir, Mr. Foot, sir.”

“It’s Mossfoot. One word. And this is Redspear. One word. Get it right or the next name you hear will be Mr. Foot-Up-Your-Ass. Capiche?”

“Yes, Mr. Mossfoot.”

“Good enough. Now fly off to your little desk and push some more pencils or I will mock you further.”

Officer Davis nodded and scurried away.

“That was fun,” I said. “Remind me to name all my ships here.”

Redspear looked at my new Hobby. “You sure about the name? You don’t want to tempt karma, do you?”

I shrugged. “Naw. It fits.”

“With that logo?”

“Especially with that logo. Get her sent to the docking bay. I want to take her out for a spin.”

I'd thought long and hard about who this new Mossfoot is, and he's me. Not the best or the bravest, not the richest or most powerful. Just a guy who knows how to not take himself or life too seriously. A bit of a joke when you get right down to it, but once cornered? Well, I'm still alive, aren't I?

When the ship got to the docking bay I hopped in, strapped myself in and took off. After my encounter with Officer Davis it was gratifying to hear traffic control say, “Bad MF, you are cleared for launch from Bay 1.”

“Roger that, Control. Bad MF taking off.”

As for the logo? The thing you have to remember about teddy bears is, they're still based on bears. They seem cute, friendly, slow and lumbering, but you never ever want to get in a fight with one.

## Who's Afraid of the Big Bad MF?

I remember an old Earth saying about life on a submarine: 99% boredom and 1% pure terror. That's often the case in space as well, unless you're actively going out looking for trouble, in which case you'll be dead sooner or later and problem solved. There's only so many times even the best auto-eject system will work as advertised.

But even sticking to the safest worlds, sometime trouble comes working for you.

Sometimes it calls you by name.

"Well, if it isn't the famous Mossfoot. You look outnumbered in that little Hobby, boy. Get him!"

I was on approach to a Constore when this message crackled over my radio. My first reaction to this was... whaaaa? My second was noting no less than five hostiles incoming. My third was that they were between me and the Constore. And my fourth was to turn 180 degrees and kick in the fuel injectors. Right now I couldn't care less about that extra energy bank. It meant nothing in a furball with that many bogies.

With the ships in my rear view I started logging in targets. Asps, Mambas, and a Cobra... ah jeeze. All fast ships. All deadly ships. All with a hard on for me.

What had Redspear said to me about tempting karma?

"Come on, I thought you were supposed to be a Bad MF," one snickered.

The fuel injectors got me away from the main pack, but one of the the Asps also had injectors and wasn't giving up so easily. Ever time I turned and tried to discourage him, he chopped up my shields like a ginsu knife. His precision aim was better than mine. I had to keep running to let my shields recharge, and I was fast running out of witchfuel.

And now I realized what the advantage of that missing missile slot was. I could have escaped to Torus drive range if that Asp had to spend the next minute dodging a hardened missile.

I wasn't going to run from this one, was I?

I turned the Bad MF toward the Asp and kept the injectors on, avoiding incoming fire until I was right on top of him. It only had a forward gun like I did. Might as well use



that to my advantage. Fortunately my ship had a tighter turn, and I was able to stay on him and finish him off.

But by that time the others had caught up. I took out before they could even start firing. From five to three. My Mil-spec laser had a far greater range than their standard beam weapons. Missiles were launched from the Cobra, but my ECM took care of them. I noted with some satisfaction how it didn't put my energy banks into the red like it usually does.

I had to run away to let my laser cool down, but did so on standard engine thrust only. They couldn't catch up too quickly, and I needed what little fuel I had for the injectors for maneuvers.

The third went down in much the same way as his buddy, in once concentrated burst, but the fourth was now on top of me, another Asp doing a number on my hull. We danced a while, I managed to get his shields down, but my weapon overheated, I was almost dry on fuel, and my energy banks were low.

Then he launched a missile. If I used my ECM now it would overload my system and, well, adios. But I had enough fuel for a few quick bursts. I could see the missile as it launched and positioned myself between it and the Asp.

The thing about homing missiles is, they tend to be very "as the crow flies if it had a spacesuit on" in terms of reaching their target. Which means it had to get through the Asp that launched it first.

When the debris cleared I noticed my radar didn't register any more hostiles. The fifth ship had fled. Well, let him. Maybe the next batch of pirates will think twice before messing with the Bad MF.

## What the [BLEEP]?

Officer Davis. We meet again.

Okay so I'm in the Ceesxe system and that's the problem. Seems that Officer Davis of GalCop has gone a bit mental, instituting a profanity broadcast ban on the entire system.

God knows how this tech even works. Some sort of probability based algorithm, I bet... Let's see... Officer Davis is a god[BLEEP] mother[BLEEP].

Yep. I actually used the words "darn" and "farmer". Okay, so that question is answered. The question that isn't answered is exactly what kind of psychosis Officer Davis is suffering from.

He's not singling me out, by the way. Every pilot in Ceesxe is getting the same treatment. And given the fact that most of the traffic going into the Dodec station he works out of are grizzled cargo haulers who use profanity the way neat freaks use soap? Not going to make him many friends.

I mean, I had started this entry talking about the stress pilots can undergo, and how staring at the abyss isn't good for your long term health, and this guy goes and [BLEEP]es off every pilot in the system (okay, that bleep was legit).

I'm sure it won't be long before this stunt gets shut down, but I wouldn't put it past someone to take matters into their own hands.

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Well. That didn't take long.

I was waiting to dock at the Dodec when I heard on the com chatter someone say "I found it. Back of the station!"

Seems that the transmitter Davis set up to censor everyone wasn't even part of the main stations com system. He actually set it up right on the station hull.

"Don't worry, I'll blast it off," someone in a Cobra said.

That's when Officer Davis made himself heard. "Any attack on GalCop property will result not only in offender or fugitive status, but immediate retaliation by station

defenses. You spacer types with your loose morals and looser tongues, corrupting the youth of the planet below. I will not stand for it. And according to Regulation 22 Section D, I am within my rights to monitor and censor all transmissions made in Ceesxe space. Do I make myself clear?"

"Up yours!" said a pilot in a Boa... Who knows, maybe it was the guy who was denied the ship registration he wanted earlier. At least he could cuss him out without getting bleeped.

"I ain't risking it," said the Cobra pilot. "[BLEEP]."

"[BLEEP]."

"[BLEEP][BLEEP]?"

"[BLEEP]!"

The general chatter went like this for a while, until a Carrier carrying two Anacondas called out. "Mayday! Mayday! Total loss of control on all thrusters! Engines on full burn! Mayday! Abandoning ship! Brace for impact Ceesxe Station!"

I've never seen anything quite as terrifying and awe inspiring as a fully loaded carrier ship crash headlong into a Dodecahedron station. The fireball was as bright as the sun for a split second as the oxygen tanks and witch fuel mixed in its bizarre ways. And the fact that the station was virtually unphased by it was just as remarkable. I've seen tiny ships splash off stations before, even a Python once, but a Carrier?

I don't know for sure if this crash was intentional. I met the pilot later and he refused to say a word until the insurance situation was cleared up. All I know is the carrier just happened to hit the station shields in such a way that the shockwave destroyed the transmitter on the hull.

Officer Davis was recalled planetside and sent for mandatory psyche evaluation, I heard. Stuck on the station too long. There wasn't actually an apology for his actions, as that would open them up for litigation or something, but they did promise to change the regulations regarding ship registration and com chatter "to better reflect the reality we live in."

About bloody time.

## Mulligan

Redspear waited patiently in the docking bay.

“Come on.”

“No.”

“It could happen to any one.”

“No.”

“You can’t stay in there all day.”

“Yes I can.”

“You’re being a child about this.”

“No, YOU’RE being a child about this.”

“Look, this isn’t like the Kit Kobras. The Neolite line is fully recognized and approved by all insurance companies. You’re Hobby is covered.”

From inside the escape capsule, I continued to sulk. Fleabag sat on the control panel, completely indifferent to my woe. “Bite me. That ship had all my favorite stuff in it. I just installed a tanning bed.”

“Yes, and isn’t that how you got caught with your pants down...so to speak?”

“Hey, it’s easy for spacers to get a pasty complexion if they’re not careful. Besides, I was in Ceesxe space. They got, like, a whole squadron of Navy ships flying around. Who would be dumb enough to attack me?”

“Oh geeze... Look the insurance will cover everything the black box doesn’t determine to be a preexisting condition.” That was insurance code for, if it was damaged during the battle before the actual explosion, tough.

“But I lost all my stuff, man! I just got a poster for my favorite classical music performers.”

“Who’s that?”

“Metallica.”

“But you still got all the gold and platinum you’ve been saving, right?”

"Yeah..." Lucky for me I keep all that in my cabin, in case of just such an emergency."

"Well, precious metals are at an all time high right now. Come out, sell the goods, and we'll get you a new poster."

"You don't understand. It's the humiliation. I've been shot down something like five times. First time was lethal, and another pretty close to it."

"Happens to the best of us."

"But mostly the worst."

"It's not like you have aspirations to be Elite."

"Well..."

"In a Hobby?" Redsphear snickered. "You do realize that's as much a clever play on words as it a bird of prey, right? That's not a fighter's ship. That's fighter fodder."

"It's got potential...at least till I can buy a Cobra or something."

"Look, would you just get out of the bloody escape pod so I can get you to sign these papers and I can order your replacement? You can sulk later."

"But I customized it and everything."

Redsphear sighed. "I still have the stencils somewhere. I will buy you another can of black spraypaint. Okay?"

Reluctantly I opened the hatch and got out. "Fine."

"Good. Now, come on. We'll go to the Last Tap and you can buy me a pint in exchange. Okay?"

I followed him out of the hangar. "You think anyone will have trouble with me using the same ship registration? No "Bad MF-2" or anything."

"I'm sure you'll be fine."

"Because that totally didn't count."

"Uh-huh."

"Now, if a Thargoid got me, then maybe my next ship would be the MF's Revenge!"

"Uh-huh."

"And if the Space Ninjas came after me--"

"Mossfoot?"

"Yeah?"

“Shut the hell up.”

## Two Times Nothing Equals...

"Tanning bed? Really?" said Redspear.

"Rickets is the number one cause of space jockeys not getting laid."

"Oh brother."

We were at the Last Tap, and Red was helping me get out of my funk. I'd ordered my usual: Tea, Earl Grey, Spiked. He ordered his usual, chocolate beer. We each found the other's choices disgusting.

"You know, I've been thinking about your ship."

"Oh?"

"You've been trying to get your old ship back, right? The Fer-de-lance?"

"Everybody needs a goal."

"And yours is buying an overpriced luxury yacht." Redspear took a swig. "Well, you're going about it the wrong way."

"How's that?"

"You can only carry five tons in that bucket you have now. Do you have any idea how long it's going to take you to buy a new ship with that kind of loadout?"

I shrugged. "I mostly deal with precious metals these days. Easier to carry."

"Yeah, but you can't always count on finding a good deal with those. These aren't the heady days of the Constore Bubble."

I snorted. Yeah, when those bulk trading stations tried to undermine the whole economy when they first came out. Some traders just traded back and forth between it and the planet making a profit. Didn't take long for the bottom to fall out of that and have things stabilize. They're still around, but the days of single trade thousand credit profits are long gone.

"Well I already expanded my cargo hold," I said.

"I'm saying cargo is not the way for you to go."

“What do you suggest? Rescue and Recovery aren’t really trusting me with much more than letters these days. Not since that pilot I was supposed to rescue got kidnapped by pirates and...well, you know the rest.”

“Hey, everyone makes mistakes. I’m sure you can work at that. They pay pretty well for some of their missions.”

“Yeah, the more dangerous ones.”

“You wanna live forever?”

“I won’t even dignify that with a response.”

“Okay, okay. What about inter-system package delivery?”

“The pay is crap on those! Fifty credits to take a recipe book to some backwater hole?”

“Only because they don’t trust you yet. It gets better as you get a reputation.”

“Let me guess, they get more dangerous, too.”

“You really are a coward, aren’t you?”

“Duh.”

Redspear sighed. “Well, I suppose you could install a HyperCargo system...”

“HyperCargo? I thought only big ships like the Anaconda could carry that.”

HyperCargo was your typical science gone mad. Cargo compression utilized a witchspace bubble to effectively carry along extra cargo with you in another dimension while taking up no space at all. Except for the HyperCargo generator itself, which is huge.

“They recently learned how to utilize your own hyperspace engines to form the bubble,” said Redspear. “Puts a tiny drain on your energy banks when in use. I just got the system on offer here as an upgrade.”

“Sounds good. Let’s get one fitted on the Bad MF... er... when the new one arrives.”

Redspear shook his head. “Yeah, but... look, it’s still meant for big ships. The size of the bubble is limited by the cargo area it occupies. You’d only get an extra five tons out of it.”

“Sounds good.”

“And there’s a small risk of losing the bubble and your cargo.”



I used my hands as scales. “Risk of losing cargo... risk of getting shot to pieces by pirates, mercenaries or pissed off mailmen by dealing in risky missions.” The cargo hand easily won out.

“The system costs twelve thousand credits.”

“Then I have just about enough.”

“Do you have any idea how long it will take for you to make that money back? Even if you were selling computers at a fifty percent profit, you’d only be pulling in, say, three hundred credits per run. And that’s under ideal market conditions. That’s forty trips, minimum. You’re more likely looking at fifty or sixty. And that’s just to get back to where you were.”

I shrugged. “I think of it as a long term investment. Besides, it should up the resale value of the Hobby when it comes time to trade her in.”

“Providing it doesn’t get shot to pieces first.”

“Do you want my money or not?”

Redspear finished his beer and set the bottle down. “Oh, I’ll take your money. Gladly. I’m just making sure you don’t come to me later with buyer’s remorse.”

## Buyer's Remorse

I tried my level headed best to be rational, but I still came out sounding like a kid.  
“Ahhhhh, you never said you had Shield Boosters coming in.”

“You never asked.”

“Come on, take my HyperCargo kit back.”

“What part of ‘no refunds’ did you miss on that particular piece of equipment? I warned you when you installed it, you can’t just un-install it and put it back in its box. It’s part of your engine now.”

“But the boosters will make my shields twice as strong—front and back! That’s twice the not-dying capability.”

“Well then, you’d better start saving up, right? It costs close to the same as the HyperCargo system... What did I say about how long it would take to recoup that money?

I sighed...

“See you in fifty borrrrrring milk run trips, buddy. Maybe when you get those boosters, you might grow a spine.”

Fifty borrrrrring milk runs later.

“Ha-Ha! Shield boosters! Double the shield output! I am invincible!”

“You sure about that, sport? You might want to take the simulator for a spin a few times, just to make sure you don’t get cocky in your next fight.”

One simulator run later.

“Ha-Ha! Barely a scratch! I am invincible!”

“That was against one easy ship with no rear laser, bub. Let me set the parameters for something you’re more likely to encounter. I’ll still go easy on you. Say two ships, one big one small? Up the AI a bit.”

One simulator run later.

“Ha-Ha! Never touched the hull! I am invincible!”

“Not bad, but you know as well as I do that counts as a low-end encounter. Let’s pretend you’re in real trouble. I’ll reset the machine with a fight you’d normally run away from.”

One simulator run later.

“Okay, so can you make sure my fuel-injectors are clean and working... and it is possible to get a second set installed in case the first get damaged? Maybe a third? Is there any way to boost them to run away faster?”

## Douchebag Returns

I'd managed to earn the trust of the RRS enough that they would let me handle a mission more complicated than delivering Valentine's Day cards planetside. A black box recovery. Standard stuff, nothing I hadn't handled before 4004.

The new shields proved their worth time and time again, however, as I ran into a disproportional number of bushwackers and skaliwags on the spacelanes. Normally I'd run, but having enough fuel for a quick getaway, I decided to take a chance. With luck if I took down enough of these bozos word would get out not to mess with me.

Eventually I found the black box, lost within an asteroid field. Some docile space jellyfish floated in the rocks and debris, and I had to pick up the black box quick before one accidentally ingested it.

I crossed my fingers for a moment, hoping the Chronicle really were making up stuff when they printed about that luxury liner being eaten by one...

But it was the long trip back that things started getting odd. People were waiting for me, right by the witchpoints, and opened fire. I fought or fled on several occasions, but according to my scanner their records were always clean. Whoever these bozos were, they weren't pirates.

However, the real kicker came just two jumps away from the RRS station, when, of all things an entire Carrier attacked me!

The first words I hear over my Comm channel are "Drop the black box and eject, buddy. I'll find somewhere nice to sell you. After I trash your ship, of course."

My mouth dropped. "Douchebag?"

Douchebag was my evil mirror image. Just weeks after I died and came back like a drunk Jesus Christ who didn't give a crap about anyone's sins, he'd ambushed me in a Fer-de-lance just outside a witchpoint, along with a Sidewinder toady of his.

It was one of the toughest battles of my life, one I thought for sure I was going to live to regret—but not very long. I had an almost stock Adder at the time, which meant I

was flying little more than the squashed tissue box it resembled. I'd fled to another system only to have them both follow me through my own hyperspace wake.

In the end I'd killed his toady and tricked Douchebag into draining his own reserves wasting his military laser on me during maneuvers, then getting behind him and pecking his shields till he was dust and frozen vapor.

Or so I thought...

But that taunt about selling me somewhere nice and trashing my ship, only Douchebag would say that.

I didn't have time to think about how he survived, however, as suddenly five beams of death pulsed at me from the carrier. I spun and dove out of the way (well, pretty much every maneuver can be called a dive or climb... it's all relative).

"Drop the box or we drop you! Fighters prepare to launch!"

Like my day couldn't get any worse. This was one of those new skeleton carriers. An I-framed vessel that was basically a large cabin to hold the crews of all the ships it was carrying and massive engines in the back, with a spine connecting the two. Along the spine the ships were mounted on either side. Sometimes on top as well.

These had been in development for a while, but gained huge popularity in light of 4004 and got rushed to market early. The idea was to make convoys easy and efficient. A carrier shows up as only one ship, and might slip by on long range scanners. The carrier itself was well armed as well, with over a half dozen missiles, and lasers both fore and aft. And in the case of a fight, the crews could rush down the spine of the ship and board their ships quickly, launching all at once, rather than one at a time like other carriers with internal launch bays. And due to the engines, these were supposed to have some seriously powerful shields.

Guess what else all these features makes these carriers ideal for?

In this case the vessel held nine Fer-de-lances. Three on either side, and three along the spine. It also carried two support Geckos on the engines and two Adders on the nose. That's a grand total of fourteen ships in one deadly package.

In short, if they had fuel injectors, I was screwed.

I turned and tried to run. "What do you even need the box for, Douchebag?"

"It'll look good on my mantelpiece, right next to your head, Mossfoot."

Ah hell, he knew who I was. I'd hoped the new ship would have thrown him off.

“I’ve been looking forward to this, buddy,” Douchebag said, firing another burst. ” My stupid escape pod wouldn’t launch and got stuck in the wreckage. You have any idea how long it took RRS to find me? Two whole hours! That’s two hours of my life I’ll never get back!”

Wow, this guy hadn’t changed much. Way to do some soul searching, Douchebag.

“But boy did you teach me a lesson. Never go in alone when you can have a posse with you.” Seems like he’d forgotten about his toady too. Such a loyal, thoughtful guy. “So I used my daddy’s trust fund to get this baby. And finding out someone wanted to stop you? That was just icing on the cake.”

“Blah blah blah, you’re boring the hell out of me, Douchebag.”

I was almost out of range when I heard him say, “Fighters, launch! Full fuel injection! Take down his shields and engines, but nobody finishes him off but me!”

Well, nice knowing you, life.

“Launch!”

Did I detect a hint of concern in his voice?

“Launch?”

Well, well, well... this was interesting.

“Come on, launch!”

I cut my engines, keeping him right at the edge of my radar range. “Problems with the docking rigs, Douchebag?”

“Shut up! LAUNCH ALREADY!”

Okay, the forward lasers on this carrier were a serious problem. But the thing is, a carrier is about as maneuverable as a planet.

Oh, this is so not your day, Douchebag.

I spun around and engaged, strafing my military laser along the bottom of its hull until it overheated.

“Ha! You think you’re hot stuff because you have a BFL? My shields recharge faster than you can hurt them.”

It was true. I don’t think I did anything to the carrier. But as I flew past I did notice one of the Fer-de-lances now had a nasty carbon score across its hull.

I smiled. “Yep. You’re probably right. Not much I can do about you, I guess. Guess I’ll leave.” I waited till my laser had cooled down and then made another pass at the carrier, targeting the ships on it instead. Two Lances puffed into heat and scrap metal.

“Oooh, that had to cost, what, close to a million credits? More, depending on the add-ons.”

“Hey, knock that off!”

“Okay, I will. See ya!” After the weapon was cool I said, “Eh, changed my mind. Let’s see how much more damage I can do! You know, for kicks.”

Five minutes later, I was tallying up the results.

“Let’s see, that’s 9 Fer-de-lances at, say, half a mill each, so about four and a half million. Plus two Adders at sixty-five thousand. You know, I don’t know how much Geckos go for to be honest. Let’s just round the whole thing up to five million credits. How’s that?”

Douchebag was sobbing on the other end of the comm. My laser had almost cooled down. I was on the carrier’s tail and he ineffectively fired at me with a pulse laser.

“So, care to tell me why the black box is so important to you guys?”

“Screw you!”

“You first.” I burned the engine pod as much as I could before I overheated again. It probably gave the crew pause, but Douchebag was right, his shields were too strong. I wasted another five minutes trying to convince him to tell me, but it wasn’t going to happen. He cut off the radio and focused instead on trying to hit me, which was also never going to happen.

My witchfuel was exhausted, but a carrier is thankfully slightly slower than an Adder, so I spent the next five minutes listening to him sob as I flew out of range, dodging his laser beams of eternal frustration, cursing my name, swearing revenge on me and my family, and generally making me feel pretty damn good about myself.

Only downside? Despite destroying thirteen ships on the carrier’s hull and the crew all being registered as offenders, I didn’t get a single credit of bounty or a single kill added to my reputation.

But I’ll take Douchebag’s wailing at an unfair and unjust universe as payment enough for today.

## What's in the Box

I docked at the RRS station and dropped the black box on the Chief Operations Officer's desk with a clank.

"Why the hell is this so important?"

The COO had no idea what I was talking about.

"I pick this up in an asteroid field at the edge of protected space, and on the way back I'm attacked four times by people with clean records. At one point a whole fleet of ships dropped on me. It was a miracle I wasn't killed on that one."

"What happened?"

"You wouldn't believe me. The guys at GalCop sure didn't, that's why I didn't get credit for... Never mind. Point is, people wanted me dead. More so than usual. And this is the reason why. It ain't made of platinum and rainbows, so I'm guessing it has to do with what's on it."

The COO looked at the cube a moment. "We were simply told it was a naval vessel that was destroyed in that field months ago, before 4004. The chaos of those times is why nobody sought to retrieve the box until now. But that's not uncommon. For insurance purposes black box retrieval are made a time priority, but in this case? The Navy simply wanted to determine what happened to their long range surveillance cutter."

Surveillance cutter? "Wait, this ship was on surveillance duty and destroyed shortly before 4004?"

"It failed to report in a week before. That was around the time the Navy had to pull out of the system due to the Thargoid emergency."

That emergency that the media kept being told about, but precious little was ever shown. The one that kept the Navy out-system for weeks during and after our presumably unimportant little emergency of a quadrant wide rampant pirate raids and instability.

The COO considered the box some more, then searched his computer for the mission file. "I suppose it was a somewhat unusual because of who asked for the retrieval. We



don't often have top brass making direct requests to Rescue and Recovery." He showed me his monitor and I read the name.

I'd like to say my gut did a flip or sank or some other metaphor that reflects irony or terror or having "a bad feeling about this," but the truth is, it actually felt kind of inevitable. Like I'd known it would come down to this all along.

The name on the screen was my father's.

"Good work on getting this to us in one piece, Mossfoot. I'll be sure it gets to the Imperial Navy from here."

I straightened up, putting on the best act of professionalism that I could muster. "Actually, sir. Since I got it this far, I'd be honored if I could deliver this to its destination personally."

## Of Monks and Missed Information

Rescue and Recovery didn't know about my connection to the Navy, other than the fact that I was in good standing with them—according to my ID anyway. And that was good enough for RRS to give me the go ahead to deliver the black box directly to them. They gave me the coordinates of the vessel it was to be delivered to and sent me on my merry way.

But it seemed like the day wouldn't be complete without some kind of additional coincidence thrown at me. As I went to the docking bay to get in my ship, a missionary vessel was just landing. And who should I see coming down the ramp other than Brother Mathias.

Of course it was. First Douchebag reappears in my life, then dad's back in the picture again, now this.

He was head of the order of monks who took care of me after I was killed. I never stuck around to ask many questions, and, come to think of it, even thank them. I'd just lost my Fer-de-lance, had been dead far longer than was socially acceptable, and was stuck with a crappy hunk of junk to fly away on and expected to be grateful.

It didn't help that I was even more of an ass then than I was now.

Brother Mathias didn't recognize me at first (I think it's mandatory for missionaries to have poncy sounding names. You never hear of Brother Billy-Bob or Sister Sue). I could have just walked on past, but, as I said, I never properly thanked him the last time we met. He was dressed pretty much the way you'd expect a missionary to be, or a Jedi. Only they don't have cool laser swords... I don't think.

"Brother Mathias," I said. "I just wanted to—"

"Oh bloody hell, it's you."

"—thank...you?"

Mathias shook himself. "I'm sorry. That was unprofessional of me." He huffed as he put on his game face. "What can I do for you, my son?"

“Not much, it seems. Look, I just wanted to apologize for leaving without thanking you, and being a general complaining jerk after you saved my life.”

Mathias smiled. “We believe all life is sacred. I was in fact working for the RRS when I came across your wreck.”

“Wait, you found me?”

Mathias nodded. “Many of my brothers and sisters work with Rescue and Recovery, particularly when lost pilots are involved. In exchange they provide maintenance for our vessels.”

“Were you sent after me?” I’d thought it was one of those galactic coincidences, like the time Marilyn Monroe appeared in a bar for three seconds from sheer quantum probability. Or so the story went.

“Of course. The odds of me finding you randomly would be like Marilyn Monroe appearing in a bar for three seconds... again. RRS picked up your ID when you were shot down and deployed the nearest rescue vessel, which happened to be me.”

Since I had Mathias’ ear, it occurred to me that one big mystery surrounding me might be cleared up.

“Brother Mathias, can you tell me something?”

“Of course.”

“Where did you find that Adder you gave me?”

That puzzled him. “It was just one of our old missionary ships, barely serviceable. But you were so convinced you were still in danger we did not mind giving it to you.”

“But the ident crystal in the ship...”

“...was yours, Mossfoot.”

Okay, so that sound you just heard? That was my mind blowing.

“Sorry?”

“We used the identity crystal we found with you in the wreckage. Was something wrong with it? Was it damaged?”

“Are you sure that was my crystal? Is there any way you mixed it up with someone else’s?”

Mathias shook his head. “Impossible. It was the only one we found on your person. It was in your pocket. We didn’t find another.”

That sound you just heard? That was my mind going supernova. The magic identity crystal that had gotten me this far, had been found on mewhen I died? The hell?

So, new question, where did I get it? I had a feeling I wasn't going to get much more out of the good missionary. I could tell he was playing it straight with me. Only one possibility presented itself, and I didn't like it.

I thanked Brother Mathias again, and meant it. Not just for saving my life, but for filling me in on this little tidbit, which answered some questions, only to raise a small fleet of others. As Mathias left to see the mission officer, robe flowing behind him, one more question came to mind.

“Hey, Mathy, do you guys carry laser swords?”

Mathias stopped and looked back, giving me a hint of a smile. “That would be telling.”

## Homecoming

The destination RRS had given me was only a few jumps away, back in Ceesxe. Of course. Everything seems to going in a big circle for me. I'd just left the damn place, but they keep pulling me back in. Maybe I could grab a drink with Redspear before I left again.

It seemed one of their Behemoth-class battleships was in system right now. Take a wild guess who was on board.

That's right, the president of the zero-grav cricket league and interplanetary karaoke star, Zal Kagen! I wondered if I could get his autograph while I was on board?

Oh, and my dad was there, too.

In fact, it was his ship, the Atomos. But just because I was going to his ship doesn't mean I was keen on a family reunion. While my space ninja theory had been thrown out in light of 4004 (and common sense), I was still pretty sure daddy-dearest had it in for me. I just wasn't sure in what capacity he cared anymore.

Pulling the same trick I had last time I docked on a Navy Carrier, I gave the ship my ident, told them my business, and waited for clearance.

It felt like I'd waited longer than I should, but that was just probably because of how my dad ran his ship. By the book. Even the slightest question probably required a requisition form being filled out, his XO being informed, general shouting, more forms. If it was important enough to get my dad involved, chances are I was screwed. But if it wasn't, then they would only end up doing what they knew they were going to do in the first place.

The comm officer on the Atomos clicked on. "Clearance granted."

Which was that.

After I docked, I looked down at Fleabag, who gave me his usual "attention will be permitted if you wish to lavish it on me" look.

"Alright, Fleabag. If I'm not back in an hour, fly off without me. Got it?"

Fleabag blinked.

“What’s that? You’re too loyal and won’t leave? We all go home or nobody goes home? What a great cat you are. I knew I could count on you. Well, since I can’t talk you out of it, just stay here, eat, sleep, and rub up against the legs of any Navy types that come in to look. Think you can handle that? Good.”

I took a deep breath and prepared to pull off the bluff of a lifetime. If I was going to find answers anywhere, it would be here. The black box I’d retrieved had something important about 4004, I knew it. Problem was only a Navy ship had the ability to access it. And if my dad was somehow involved, then this ship no doubt had even more secrets.

Having been on this ship a number of times in the past, I was worried about being recognized. Not by many, but a few. My dad, of course. His XO, Adams, who never seemed to be far away from him. A couple of the lady officers (for reasons I’d rather not get into), and some of the enlisted men I’d lost money to in poker (and for other reasons I’d rather not get into).

I solved this by giving myself a cunning disguise. I’d cut off some of my cat’s hair to create a mustache I could glue on. The bald spot would grow back soon enough, I assured Fleabag, who had given me a look pointing out I had more than enough of my own hair to do the same thing. Fleabag failed to notice that his idea wouldn’t have been nearly as funny.

I also wore a hat.

The truth was, people don’t always see who you are, they see what you are. As a security buddy once told me, “They don’t see the face, they see the badge.” So back when I was the spoiled brat son of their commander flying an expensive luxury ship, that’s all they saw.

But in this ship? With this ID? Working for RRS? A mustache and hat would be more than enough to fool anyone. The trick wasn’t to try and hide from them, it was not giving them a reason to remember me, and avoid the ones who would.

The ramp dropped and I stepped out. Two officers stood at the bottom of the ramp waiting for me.

The plan was like before—to take advantage of whatever clearance my “Section W” status granted me. Only this time I was going to tour the ship, talk to some personnel, access some computers and see what my crystal could help me drag out of this bulk’s memory. If I was around long enough for them to access the black box, I’d get a copy of that too. That was the plan.

The pair at the bottom of the ramp stood at attention. “In the name of Her Royal Majesty, you are under arrest.”

Or I could come up with a new plan

## To the Brig

Under arrest.

Okay, so this didn't go as well as I'd planned.

This wasn't the violent takedown kind of arrest like you see on GalCOPS, where a guy in a wife-beater shirt is dragged out of his Krait at a docking bay with his face blurred out and every other word bleeped out. This was the polite kind of arrest, where the two officers didn't even unbutton the weapons on their holsters, let alone draw them on me.

After, all, I was in the heart of one of their biggest destroyers. Where was I going to go?

The officers didn't cuff me, but did take my hat and identity crystal, then cordially lead me away. One in front, one in back. As they lead me through the hanger the first thing I noticed was the most obvious sign I was on my father's ship – his personal collection.

Sigh... I know I've only alluded to my family in the past, but that was mostly for my own protection. As you might recall, even the Tionisla Chronicle couldn't confirm my identity for sure based on the information I'd provided. What can I say? Space is big, and no doubt many officers had daydreamed of getting rid of their good for nothing leeches of spoiled sons, and some had acted on it.

But from this point on I'm sure most will reporters will probably figure it out. Not many naval officers have their personal antique ship collection on board the destroyer they command.

Man, that collection. He'd had most of them for as long as I could remember. I come from a rich family, not that you'd know it from looking at me this days, and dad has a collection of ships before he was twenty. So guess how I reacted when I got a single brand new Fer-de-lance for my eighteenth birthday? Oh, I loved it, but I felt ripped off, too. I thought I was owed one of the beauties from his collection.



I thought I was owed a lot of things, but I'll be damned if I could give you a reason why.

First we passed a Krait that was once owned by the Dread Pirate Svengali over seventy years ago. Next to it was a Sidewinder owned by the assassin Mr. Shush, who retired rich and alive (a rare combination) and claimed he never needed anything more powerful. There were a couple others, all lined up along the unused side of the launch deck, but perhaps his most prized ship was right at the very back. A bright red beauty that was quite literally one of a kind...

"This way," said the front officer, nodding to the exit on the opposite side of the flight deck. I followed, looking now at the functioning fighters. Vipers, mostly. A single wing of Viper Interceptors for Delta Wing, if I recall correctly, the Atomos' Elite pilots. And... holy crap.

"Is that... is that a Constrictor?" It had to be. I'd been following the Constrictor's development ever since I'd heard of it. A black-ops vessels, about the size of a beefed up Viper. It didn't have the sleek angles of a Viper, though, because of its radar-repellent hull.

On the rare days I'd visit here, there were a few members of the crew I considered cool enough to hang out with. Most of them claimed to have heard things about this ship. To hear them tell it, the Constrictor could fly at Torus-level speeds on regular engines and shoot laser beams and missiles in every direction by spinning around rapidly in something they called a "death blossom" maneuver. Yeah, it was all bollocks, but it still kicked in your imagination. Who didn't want to get their hands on a uber-death-ship?

"Eyes front, civilian," said the front officer. "You didn't see anything."

"Yeah, yeah, whatever," I said. Civilian, huh? Well that hinted at what they knew about me. Namely that I wasn't Mossfoot. "So, where are we going?"

"The brig. You will be bought to interrogation when Commander Adams is ready."

Adams, the XO. So dad wasn't even going to deal with me personally, huh? Typical.

Once we'd left the flight deck it was your standard boring cut and past naval regulation corridors until we reached the brig. The brig was all bars and no sense of class, not even giving prisoners privacy from one another, let alone the guards. Thankfully it was almost empty, except for one person curled up in a cot on the cell next to mine.

"Now, about room service?" I said as they shut the door.

The officer smirked and left before I could ask for the lobster bisque.

The body in the other cell stirred, a pair of eyes looked at me over a military grey blanket, and then I heard the words I never thought I'd hear again in this lifetime.

“Hello there, flyboy.”

## Unlikely Reunion

Only one person in the universe called me flyboy in that tone.

“Brandi?”

She stretched out on the prison cot and sat up. “Was that my name? Oh yeah, the airhead groupie persona, right.” Her hair was jet black now, but it was still her.

I’d like to describe soft curves and deep colored eyes and all that sexy stuff you guys are no doubt expecting, but really I’d be giving you the wrong impression. She sat on the cot covered up by the grey blanket as if she hadn’t had her morning coffee and cigarette and was damned pissed about it.

“Christ, you look terrible. How long have you been here?” I asked.

She shrugged. “Few weeks. Since we’re playing quid pro quo, what has you held at Her Majesty’s pleasure?”

“Just being me. Or being someone, maybe. Or not being someone. Not quite sure yet, to be honest. And how’d you end up on their naughty list?”

“Trying to get paid.”

So a few weeks ago would mean... “This would be the job you took on me? The one that was going to buy you a new ship? The one where you kinda but didn’t actually kill me because of a loophole in your contract?”

“That’s the one. Turns out my employer wasn’t big on loopholes. I didn’t think you’d make any noise before I got paid. Turns out you couldn’t wait to blab on the hyperradio again. Next thing you know instead of meeting with him, I get ratted out and a squad of soldiers are waiting for me instead.” She waved around her cell. “So thanks, for all this.”

I could have said something snarky, but the last thing I wanted to do was reinforce the lesson that the correct thing to have done would have been to kill me. “Sorry.”

She shrugged. “Eh, I’ve had worse. I got caught smuggling narcotics to a communist factory once. Compared to their gulags, this is the Ritz.”

“How’d you get out of that one?”

“The usual.”

“Seduction?”

She gave me a glare, and the finger. “Bribery. But that won’t work in a spit-and-polish place like this.” She ran a finger down the wall, checking for non-existent dust. “I mean, look at the crew. Even their haircuts have haircuts.”

That was true for most of the crew, for sure. But there were exceptions.

I huffed and dropped on my cot. “Well, if they have me, then that’s proof you didn’t kill me, so they can’t really arrest you for not committing a hit.”

“Thanks, but I got a feeling loopholes mean even less to these guys. I’d accepted a contract and destroyed your ship and your escape pod. Plenty of felonies they can line up there. Why did you tape cat hair under your lip, anyway?”

I felt my face. I’d forgotten about my disguise. “I’m trying to start a new fashion trend. Figured it’ll be big among the early teens at raves.”

The entrance to the brig opened and two armed guards came in. So I’d been upgraded from polite detainment to armed escort. I figured I’d start worrying when the arm-to-leg manacles came out.

“Well, I guess your dance card is filled,” said whatever-her-name-really-was. “See you later, flyboy.”

The guard led me down the hall, and I passed by number of people en route. Most of them didn’t give me a second glance, but one guy in an enlisted man’s uniform looked at me and said, “Hey, buddy, you got something on your face there,” pointing to cat-stash as he passed by. I looked back and smirked. Yeah, I knew that joker. Worked in the quartermaster’s office. I think I owed him money.

At last I was brought to an interrogation room. I’d seen these before. Dad tried using them once or twice when admonishing me for my behavior, hoping it would help intimidate me. I thought it was cool, like on those cop shows, plus I got to check how my hair looked in the two-way mirror.

Commander Adams was waiting for me inside. I’d known him almost as long as my dad. While dad was tall, had a fierce mustache (all the better to bluster in) and a slightly rotund midsection, Adams was short, in excellent shape, and was bald as a full moon. I suppose the best way to summarize his personality was this: he was efficient.

I sat down across from Adams, the guards waiting outside. Just me and him.

“Is that supposed to fool anyone?” he asked, raising an eyebrow.

“Oh, right.” I pulled off the cat hair mustache. Funny, if it had been dad I’d have left it on for kicks. But like I said, Adams was efficient. And that included making me do what he wanted without having to say or do much of anything.

Adams folded his hands on the table. “Well, the prodigal son returns. From the dead if I have heard correctly.”

“Still working on the water to wine bit,” I said. “You’d think I’d have figured that part out first, amiright? Huh? Huh?” I raised my hand for a fist-bump I knew would never arrive, and set my hand back down.

“Interesting, don’t you think, that you had to die to learn a life lesson. You’ve more or less raised yourself up by your own bootstraps since then, something your father had always hoped you’d do, but the rest...? I honestly don’t know if the Captain would be disappointed, or proud of what you’ve done with your life.”

“Given that you’re here instead of him, I think the answer is pretty obvious.”

Adams smiled, which was unnerving. That was not something he ever did around me.

He reached into his uniform’s breast pocket and pulled out an identity crystal. Given the spot of curry that still stained a bit of the top, I knew it was mine. They’d confiscated it from me as I was lead away.

“He doesn’t know that you’re here. Only a renegade pilot with forged identification that’s being held for questioning. So... questions. Let’s start with the obvious, shall we? How did you end up with one of my men’s identity crystals?”

I thought about what my dad might say in a situation like this, and one phrase felt particularly appropriate.

“Oh Bugger.”

## Revealing Hand

The truth was, I knew how I ended up with the crystal.

You see, the thing about difficult father and son relationships is the more one side remains calm during disputes, the more likely the other will find different ways to lash out. My father was great at staying irritatingly calm when it suited him.

I took stuff. At first it was deliberate. A rare book on my dad's shelf. A document he left on his desk. A pen. A credit chit. But in time I kind of became a small scale kleptomaniac. I would just pocket anything that looked like it might honk somebody off if it was missed.

And then there was the day I went into the wrong room. I'd been invited to hang out with some of the less respectable members of dad's crew for a friendly game of cards (that may or may not end up in profit or a fight—or both). But instead of the quartermaster's office I ended up in an R&D area on the same deck.

Technically I wasn't supposed to have clearance to places like this, but my pal in the quartermaster's office, Paradox, fixed me up for an all-access pass some time before. I didn't even know I was in the wrong room. They all looked alike to me. This one just had more computer monitors in it.

I spent five minutes quietly waiting as the tech nerds typed away on computers, watching various computer simulations on screens. Flight formations, combat maneuvers, evasive maneuvers. The usual. They ran this kind of thing all the time, analyzing past engagements, learning how their pilots might perform better next time.

But this was different. I quickly figured out they were in fact monitoring pilots in the sim chambers, and they were running A.I. script, but it wasn't the usual Us-vs-Thargoid practice going on. It was all pilot against pilot, but with A.I. constantly updating and advising the maneuvers on both sides, and constantly adapting whenever they deviated. This caught my interest, and I got closer to two of the pencil necked geeks to see what was going on.

What I was looking at, as you might recall, were the fledgling stages of A.I. Management. The techies were irritated with the results, though, saying it would be years before the system was any good.

That was when they noticed me and told me to get lost. Suitably fraked off, I did what I always did. I grabbed something nearby without them noticing and stuffed it in my pocket as they shoed me away. A crystal. I figured it would give one of the two guys a headache when he couldn't access his room that night.

One week later I was shot down.

"I will ask you again," said Commander Adams, hands folded and calm as ever. "How did you end up with one of my men's identity crystals?"

This may or may not have been the chair I was sitting in.

This may or may not have been the chair I was sitting in.

So... how was I supposed to handle this? You see, Adams had overplayed his hand straight off the bat. Had he simply said something like "How did you come across this unusual crystal" I could have come up with a number of stories, each more complicated than the last. He could have caught me in a lie each time, and eventually wheedle his way to the truth.

My men. My men.

Those two words said so much. This crystal was in the lab developing A.I.M. technology, the same tech that somehow ended up in the hands of every damn pirate in this part of the galaxy. I was shot down a week after taking it, but I wasn't exactly an easy pilot to kill. I may not be a combat fighter, but running away? I knew a thousand ways to do that.

I was shot down by standard Navy Vipers using A.I.M., but not the Elites of Delta Squad in their Interceptors. Why? The pilots sent after me needed to be loyal. But who could be more loyal on this ship to Her Majesty's Navy than Delta Squad?

Not loyal to Her, then...

So I'm dead for a while. Then I start flying around broadcasting my problems to the universe without even realizing it. It's only a matter of time before word gets back here.

But instead of more Vipers hunting me down, assassins such as Miss-what's-her-name in the brig and who knows how many others are hired to track me down. Why? Because the Navy was pulling out to face a massive Thargoid threat. And shortly after they've all left the region? 4004. Coincidence, or perfect timing?

When things settle down a bit I board a Navy carrier. No problems, no red flags. I learn my ident has Section W clearance. Whatever the heck that was, it meant that most people didn't ask me questions.

It turns out a Navy surveillance cutter had been destroyed a week before 4004, and this very ship is the one who requested RRS to retrieve the black box. What had that cutter seen?

Then I land on the Atomos, and BOOM, instant arrest. And dad...?

He doesn't know that you're here. Only a renegade pilot with forged identification that's being held for questioning.

Adams already knew how I got the crystal. This wasn't a simple "What did you swipe from your dad's desk this time?" situation. He wanted to see how much more I knew, and who else knew it.

And by tipping his hand the way he did, it meant that he had no intention of seeing me leave this ship alive.



## Ultimatum

I looked across the table at Commander Adams. He looked at me.

Bear in mind all those thoughts had gone through my head in like a couple of seconds, jumping up, dropping and bouncing around like I'd hit the super-multiball at a Hoopy Casino's pachinko lounge. The important thing right now was to figure out what he thought I was thinking. If he'd shown his hand like that it was deliberate, hoping to get a response. Might as well go with the obvious.

"Your identity crystal?"

"One of my pilots." That implied to me that there was more than one of these things. I vaguely recalled feeling several as I groped for something to pocket. They must have belonged to the pilots in the sim chambers testing the A.I.M. program. Probably everyone in the gang bang that shot me down had one. "You seemed to have been putting it to, well I can't exactly say good use. But use."

"What, you got a tracking device on that thing? Downloaded the history off it?"

"You've been quite reliable in telling the whole galaxy about your little misadventures," said Adams.

So now I knew he'd been following my transmissions. That means he'd heard all my theories about 4004 and how much I'd pieced together. And I already knew from the Snoopers that news agencies like GNN and the Chronicle were sniffing around in the directions those theories lead.

My concerns about escaping alive were not misplaced. If anything, I'd kind of low-balled the trouble I was in. I had a feeling things wouldn't stay polite for long.

I looked at my fingernails. "A fan, huh? Yeah, I've got a few these days. Must be making you a bit worried."

"Not terribly. Your ramblings are mostly relegated to the conspiracy bin, I'm told. I mean, space ninjas? Really?"

"It's like nobody in the universe has heard of poetic licence," I muttered to myself, though I wouldn't doubt it if Adams' men wore black uniforms and face masks at this

point, given that they all carried these uber-crystals that could hack computers, hyperradio, other ships, and who knew what else. What kind of black ops were going on here?

Adams shrugged. “Some people find it difficult to distinguish extreme sarcasm from sincerity without the proper context.”

“Poe’s law,” I said.

Look it up if you don’t already know. English major. Sue me.

Adams now leaned forward, serious and straightforward the in the manner that earned his men’s respect, and my annoyance. “Quite. You’re a fool, but you’re not an idiot. You know how much trouble you’re in, and you know how unlikely it is you’ll be leaving this ship alive. So if you answer my questions, we will see what happens next in the most painless way possible.”

Unlikely. See, you always have to leave a hint of hope while facing them with grim reality. Take note, future interrogators!

“Death isn’t the only option,” Adams said, reading my thoughts. “I have my crystal back, so you can’t use your pirate radio skills to interfere with what must be done.”

Not Naval business, not galactic security. What must be done. Yeah, table six’s ordered some Mein Kampf with a side order of Machiavelli, hold the morality.

“We can leave you on a low tech world in an Anarchy system. We have your ship and your accounts. I’m confident you wouldn’t be flying anywhere again in your lifetime.”

Remember, future interrogators, build on that hope. Let them think it could actually happen—if only you cooperate. Oh, and that “in your lifetime” bit was a nice touch, since it leaves the question open as to how long that might be. Plenty of wiggle room there for when he decides to finally twirl his mustache... if he had one. I guess he could borrow the one I’d made, I didn’t need it anymore.

It was time to take the flippant dial and crank it up to eleven. “Can I just cut to the chase, baldy? You don’t care about what I know. You want to know who else I’ve told and how much. You want names and a list, am I right? Something for your goon squad to quietly go after and investigate with their magic keys to the city for wherever they go, then decide how to deal with it. You’re all calm and collected, but let’s be honest. This is about damage control. I mean, how hard is it to keep my dad in the dark about your little operation here?”

Give Adams credit, he wasn't the monologuing type. I wasn't going to get some grand speech from him, nor was he going to tell me anything he didn't want me to know. My dad's involvement, or lack thereof, fell into that category.

So it's up to me to fill in the gaps here. I was pretty sure I had a general grasp of things. I'm fairly good at reading into people's intentions and the phrase "What must be done" spoke volumes.

I'm sure A.I.M. had been developed strictly for Navy use, but was probably being held back by one or two members of the team, who introduced bugs they could easily remove themselves and refined the program further on their own.

Adams has his own loyal black-ops squad, multi-role operatives who could handle ground operations as well as fly. Jack-of-all-trades types, but not super-agents. If they were, they wouldn't need to use A.I.M. in space combat or require super-ID crystals to infiltrate places. No, loyalty is the quality being sought after here, and technology was used to shore up their deficiencies. Even the code name made sense now. Pilots were given handles based on their personality. Maverick, Iceman, Joker or—if you happen to be a closeted pervert—Goose. My guess was the real Mossfoot wasn't the fastest pilot on this guy's dream team.

So Adams has A.I.M., and uses his space ninjas to contact the various pirate factions across the galaxy incognito, offering them this game changing tech. Maybe he gives them a taste, a freeware version. Hell, maybe that's what was used during the attack on the Princess Cruise and who knows how many other minor raids around that same time.

But he waits until the right moment to release the full version or give them the unlock key or whatever, and the pirates agree not to use it until the time is right—when the Navy is away facing down a possible Thargoid invasion, when they can't possibly return to help with the crisis.

Adams knows that the local GalCop defenses will acquire this tech from captured ships and start using it themselves (if they took too long, no doubt he'd have made sure the Navy's version was sent in the form of emergency aid). That leveled the playing field again, but not before the galaxy was shaken up, scared, off kilter, mistrusting of one another, and the whole political dynamic is thrown on its head.

And then the Navy returns, ready to help enforce this new order. Focusing their attention on the rich and influential worlds, and leaving the rest to fend for themselves, which only creates further instability, and thus a greater need for Navy presence.

So what about the black box of that Navy surveillance cutter on the edge of civilized space? Dollars to donuts says they'd accidentally seen the final meeting between Adams' men and the pirates. The cutter somehow gave their position away, and learned first hand how effective the new software was. It wasn't until things had calmed down that Adams decided it would be safe to send RRS on a salvage mission for it. It kept Adams from having to involve his men directly, and RRS wouldn't have the ability to decrypt a naval black box.

The real question now is, to what end? No doubt there's some delusional 'greater good' at stake here, but what? Were there dreams of going full Empire brewing? I could have asked but, like I said before, the man wasn't the monologuing type.

With the balls of the pachinko game in my head finally stopping their latest flurry, Adams pulled out a notepad and stylus and slid them over to me.

"That list now, if you would be so kind."

## Walk The Plank

As I am fond of pointing out to people, I am a coward. I talk a good game and know how to cheese people off and get away with it. But at the end of the day the only thing that matters is that I walk away with my skin intact.

I took the pad and started writing.

Don't judge me. If you were in my position you'd do the same thing, or at least consider it. What could I do? They had me. I was trapped on board my father's Behemoth-class battleship with his own XO either power-mad or working on orders from someone who was. This guy could use me as reactor shielding if he wanted and he'd surrounded himself with men who wouldn't even bat an eye at that fact.

Hell yeah I was going to write down names. I didn't get far, however, before he pulled the pad away from me and started reading.

"Aaron A Aaronson. Guy Incognito. Mr. Underhill..." Adams sighed as he continued down the list. "Abrahamo Linconi. I.C. Weiner. Seymour Butts. I Had Your Mum And She Was Fantastic? That last one is not even a name."

"Nope, just a point of fact."

I smirked. I'm a coward, but I'm not stupid. My information was the only thing keeping me alive.

Commander Adams buzzed for the guards to enter. "Take him to the secondary engine room. Make sure you're not seen."

"Yes, sir. What then?"

"Stick him in the thrust reactor."

Okay, so maybe I'm a little stupid. Who knew he was so touchy about his mom?

A view of where I was going to leave the ship... as superheated molecules...

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The men escorting me did so with their weapons out. If I had been a ninja I could have disarmed them and disappeared into a puff of smoke, then start a guerrilla style war

from corridor to corridor as I fought my way to freedom. Of course I wasn't a ninja so it was a moot point.

"So, um, I'm guessing it would be pretty pointless for me to offer you a bribe, huh?" I asked them.

"Pretty much," said the one behind me. They were taking me down some side corridors, away from the main lanes of shipboard traffic. The guard in front would go ahead to make sure the next path was clear before continuing.

"And if I start screaming for help?"

"We knock you out and drag you by the feet the rest of the way."

"Well, at least I'd be unconscious when you threw me in the reactor."

"Oh, we'd wake you up first," said the guard in front, checking the next corner.

"Do you have any idea what a pain in the butt you've been?" said the one behind me. "Adams was on our ass day and night till we found you. Then you went and didn't die? Talk about rude."

"And don't forget Mossfoot, sheesh. Does he have a bone to pick with you." It took me a second to remember they weren't talking about me. "He's still on flight deck cleaning duty."

"You think we should call him down? Give him the honors?"

"Naw. The Commander would call that inefficient. I'll record it. Give it to him for his birthday."

I almost, almost smiled, because not only had their little conversation confirmed that they were part of Adam's black-ops team, but that they were about as bright as I'd imagined. This I could work with. Maybe.

The trip to the secondary engine room was a lot shorter than I'd hope, by about fifty or sixty years. Only two people were there at the moment, and from the exchange of nods with the guards I knew I hadn't found allies.

"Engines offline?" the guard in front asked one of the engineers.

"For now. We just finished a maintenance check of the thrust nacelle. She's scheduled for a startup in five minutes."

"Sounds good. Open her up."

The second engineer went over to an access hatch to the main reaction chamber and opened it.

I raised my hands in front of me. “So, look, guys, aren’t you unhappy with your lot in life? I mean, wouldn’t you rather be the guys in charge instead of taking orders all the time?”

One of the guards laughed. “Why the hell do you think we’re part of Adam’s elite unit, dumbass? Throw him in!”

“No, wait! Art! Music! Have you ever considered something less violent?” Why did I have the sneaking feeling I’ve read about this scenario before and it didn’t work out for that guy, either? “I’ll give you my ship! My money! My collection of rare spoons!”

“You collect spoons?” One of the engineers asked.

“Well, no, but I could very quickly if you’re interested.”

“Get on with it!” the guard shouted.

The second guard pushed me through the access shaft and I tumbled down the curved side of the thrust chamber unceremoniously. The door shut with a clang.

I got up and dusted myself off. It was kind of like being in an empty subway tube with no tracks. I looked down the hall to where the reactor fed straight through, which for the moment was mercifully dark. Maybe I’d get lucky and the shields that kept the air in here during maintenance would go down first and I’d be blown out into space. But as soon as the other end started glowing, I was... well, let me put it this way: The Atomos is approximately two hundred thousand tons in mass, and these engines pump out enough energy to move her at the same speed as a Viper.

Far down the shaft, a blue glow began to grow, as did the high pitch whine.

“Ah bugger.”

## Fetch Me My Brown Trousers!

Spoiler Alert: Well, you're hearing or reading this, aren't you? You figure it out.

The glow began to grow and I felt the slightest tremor under my feet as the thrust nacelle chamber prepared to receive about as much energy as...you know there really isn't a proper metaphor for this I can think of—it's that much.

I scampered up the side of the chamber to where the door had been, sealed so smooth and seamlessly I wasn't entirely sure it had ever been there.

"Hey! I got names! Lots of names! Tell Adams I'll give him a goddamn phonebook!"

(It didn't occur to me until later that I was perhaps the only person on the ship who knew what those were. Sometimes the benefits of a classical education aren't so much benefits but annoyances.)

The glow continued to grow, as did the high pitch whine behind it. I had no idea how long it took these things to fire. Hell, maybe the chamber had already been flooded with enough radiation during the buildup that I was dead and didn't even know it.

I started to pound the crap out of the curved wall. "Come on! He needs me! He knows I'm a blabbermouth! He knows I've talked to people! He can't risk not knowing what I know!"

The glow shifted to a brighter shade of blue. Okay, maybe he could. I pounded on the wall until my hands were bruised.

Just then the seal cracked, the door opened, and I was dragged inside and dropped to the floor. A computer announced that the firing sequence was on standby.

Looking up, I saw Commander Adams staring down at me with the closest look to amusement as I'd ever seen on him, with the guards and one of the engineers around me like some kind of football huddle. One of them was recording the moment on a datapad, grinning like an idiot.

Adams looked to the guard with the datapad and held out his hand. The guard reluctantly handed it over. Adams tossed it inside the reaction chamber. The other



engineer sealed the door and restarted the firing sequence. A few seconds later, I felt a pulse through my whole body as the thrusters kicked in and the Atomos began to move.

Adams sighed. "Over a thousand years of technology and still some people are foolish enough to record their actions," he said. He handed me the datapad and stylus again. "The list, if you please."

I talked. By God, I didn't just talk, I squealed, I sang like a canary, I spilled the beans, I ratted out every person I knew with their real names and their current location: Diziet, Redspear, Brother Mathias... I'd have snitched on my mom if she wasn't already dead.

When I was done he picked up the pad and looked it over. Satisfied I wasn't jerking his chain again he said, "Take him back to the brig. I'll decide what to do with him once I check these." He sniffed the air before he left. "Oh, and get him a new pair of trousers. There is such a thing as dignity."

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"Back already?"

Whatsurname looked a bit less haggard now. She sat in her cot wearing the featureless grey jumpsuit all guests of Her Majesty were given. The guards had handed me one as well before they tossed me back in the cell next to her.

"You couldn't give me a bit of privacy to change first?"

"What's the matter?" the woman asked. "Afraid to change in front of a girl?"

After such an emotionally draining ordeal, I needed to get back to my old self. "Honey, I don't need an excuse to strip. It's just this is a bit more...awkward than you might realize."

"Crapped your pants, did you? Afraid of me seeing your backside look like you fell in a mud puddle?"

I admit it. That made me laugh. "There is such a thing as dignity," I said, echoing Adams words.

"No, there isn't. There's life. And if you want to live, dignity needs to be on the bottom of your priority list. Life is a lot messier and uglier than a pair of soiled trousers, so who gives a crap? Other than you, obviously." She gestured to my lower half. "If it makes you feel any better I'll look away. It's not like I want to watch. Gross."

Assurances aside, it was still embarrassing to change in front of her. I used my old clothes to clean up, tossed them outside of the bars, and put on the fresh jumpsuit. I felt better in clean clothes at least.

“Look, we’re all dressed up for the most boring soiree in the galaxy.”

She turned back around. “Oh, so you’ve been to Esredice?”

“It is indeed a boring planet.” I looked the woman over, and clearly she was doing the same to me. Each of us trying to figure out where the other stood or whether it mattered given the situation. “So if you’re name’s not Brandi...” I ventured.

“It’s Violet. For real.” She sighed. “If they caught you and by the look of your clothes you’ve given them what they want, they’re probably not going to keep me around much longer. So, be honest, given that you’re the reason I’m here, what’s next for me? Prison, or disappeared?”

I didn’t want to lie to her. “Probably disappeared.”

She looked away, dark hair covering part of her face. “Damn. Well, that sucks.”

“The same goes for me, if it’s any consolation.”

“Nope. Not really.”

I bent my head down so I could make sure she could see me smile. “Hey, kiddo. It’s not as bad as you think.”

“What, death?”

“Death? No, that’s horrible. I mean our situation.”

Violet looked back to me. “How do you figure?”

“Look, I just ratted out all my friends, even though I’m know I’ll end up dead in the end anyway. But look at me. I’m smiling, right? Why do you think that is?”

“Because you’re an idiot and don’t know any better?”

“I’ll give you half marks for that, but no. Let me tell you a secret.” I leaned in close to the bars and she did the same so she could hear me say, “You think this is my first time in this brig? I wanted to be sent back here.”

Then I backed up to the center of my cell, and started doing the Chicken Dance.

“Trust me, Violet. Dignity is at the bottom of my priority list.”

## Behold, The Chicken Dance!

*Wave-your-hands-like-they're-a-bird*

*Wave-your-arms-like-they're-a-bird*

*Wave-your-butt-like-it's-a-bird*

*Clap-Clap-Clap-Clap!*

(No, I don't know the actual lyrics...)

Violet was not impressed by my slick dance moves, but to be fair, five minutes of the Chicken Dance should be anyone's limit.

"Are you done yet?" she asked.

"Nope."

She rolled her eyes and turned back to her cot. "Wake me for the execution."

"Will do!"

The door to the brig opened, and finally I could stop. A man in an enlisted uniform came in, wearing a full head mask that looked like fractal static.

Violet didn't know what to make of any of this. "The hell?"

"You rang?" he asked, then wrinkled his nose. "Ah, geeze, who crapped their pants?" He looked down at my pile of clothes down at his feet. "Never mind."

"About damn time, Paradox. My arms were about to fall off."

"Well excuse me if security's gotten tighter since the last time you were here. Brave new world, you know. Fair warning, we're out of pizza."

"Would someone explain to me what's going on?" Violet asked.

"Violet, this is Paradox. Say hello, Paradox."

"Hello, Paradox."

"So you two are a comedy duo?" asked Violet. "Great, but I'd rather have fried chicken for my final request."

Paradox pulled off his static mask, revealing the middle aged wizard of supply and demand. “Snarky. I like her.”

“And I liked you better with the mask on. What is going on, already?”

“Paradox works in the quartermaster’s office and is the best kept secret on the Atomos. If you need something done, he can probably do it for you. If you need something done illegally, he can definitely do it for you.”

“I’ve had this ship wrapped around my finger since before his dad was in charge,” said Paradox. “So, when I saw boyo here being escorted by guards yet again, I kept an eye on the monitors and waited for the signal.”

“The Chicken Dance,” said Violet.

“Exactly. So, what is it this time. You smuggling in, or smuggling out?”

“Out.”

“Alright,” he held out his hand.

“Sorry. Bigger than that.”

“How big?”

I held my hand up to the top of my head .

Paradox quirked an eyebrow. “You can’t be serious.”

“Deadly.”

“Look, bringing you pizza or getting rid of contraband is one thing, but breaking you out? Do you have any idea what’s going on in this ship these days?”

“More than you realize,” I said. “Weren’t you following me on the monitors?”

“I’ve got work to do, plus that Navy stuff they keep bugging me about. I just waited for you to show up back here.”

“Well, I almost didn’t.” I gave him a quick breakdown of events, and as I expected he knew even more.

“Yeah, Adams has his own game going on this ship. It started about a year ago, surrounding himself with guys he trusted, giving them special training and equipment access. He’s got these special ident crystals that are—” he gesticulated his mind being blown. “But I didn’t know what they were up to. They communicate mostly in person, never online—at least, not in any way I know of. I figured he had his own scam going on, but that’s where my interest ended. As long as he wasn’t getting close to me, and I didn’t track on his radar, I didn’t care.”

"You should have."

"After what you just told me? Yeah, I should have." He thought about what I'd told him for a moment. "This gang can't be everyone."

"What do you mean?" asked Violet.

"Well, if the prodigal son here is right and that whole pirate reboot thing is tied back here, I don't think Adams is the one in charge. His operation... it's got more of a cell vibe behind it, you know? Not the head of the dragon if you know what I mean."

"So who's the head?" asked Violet.

"Well, it's not the Captain, I can tell you that much. Poor guy is clueless about Adams."

I'd guessed as much, but it was still a relief to hear it confirmed. It meant we stood a chance.

"I'd thought about pointing him in the right direction, help him figure it out on the sly. You know, in case Adams was actually competition. But I figured I'd wait and see."

That might have been for the best. I could imagine Adams going full blown coup under the right circumstance. I pointed to the camera in the corner of the cell.

"Those are all looped, right?"

"You think I'd have taken my mask off if they weren't?"

"What is that anyway?" Violet asked.

"Pattern recognition layout for my image overlay program. I can walk through the ship looking like whoever I want as far as the cameras are concerned, or erase me altogether. Obviously a bit of a problem if anyone is around in person, though."

"So what about the guards outside?"

"What about them? They were called away, won't be back for," he checked his datapad. "Two minutes. Ugh. Just a sec." He tapped a few buttons. "There. Steam valve busted, they'll need to take the long way around. Call it five minutes."

"I love this guy," I said. "I swear, I'd marry him if I swung that way. Hell, I might anyway."

"Easy now, you might not love me for long. I haven't agreed to break you out."

"After everything I've told you?"

“Especially after everything you’ve told me. I break you out and my life expectancy on this ship is about the same as a fruit fly with cancer. I’ll have to cut and run, and I’ve been working this ship for twenty years. This is my base of operations.”

“You telling me you don’t have a nest egg set aside somewhere?”

“Doesn’t do me any good if I can’t get to it, does it?”

I considered the problem, and reluctantly sighed. “I’ll give you my ship.”

That intrigued him a little. “Your ship, huh?”

“Yeah, we all get out of here together, scramble their sensors before we go so they won’t know what system we went to and keep jumping till we’re clear. You drop me off on a nice high tech world and continue on your merry way.”

“What are you flying?”

“A Hobby, one of the Neolites.”

“Pffft. Not much of a ship, that.”

I sighed again. “And I’ve got about twenty grand in my account.”

Paradox smiled. “That should just about cover it. Okay, I’ll see what I can do. Give me a half hour to come up with something.”

“Good, but for the record the engagement is officially off.”

## The Great Escape

An hour later we were all in a bar on Lave, celebrating our escape.

“Well, that was an incredibly unlikely series of events!” said I.

“You can say that again,” said Paradox. “I thought we were all goners. But I learned a valuable life lesson.”

“And I learned the meaning of love,” said Violet, holding me around my waist, her laugh tinkling like a wind chime.

I grinned. It was indeed a good day. “That’s right. And we couldn’t have done it without this device.” I held up the mystic glowing orb that—

Okay, okay I’m just messing with you.

“Hey, dumbass. You think your friend is going to bail on us?” Violet was laying back in her cot, arm covering her eyes to block out the bright white lights that they never turned off.

“Whatever happened to ‘flyboy’?”

“You just gave your ship to a con artist who we’ll probably never see again. It was time for a change.”

I chuckled, but she wasn’t entirely wrong, either. Paradox was a good guy, but at the end of the day he did look out for number one, lest he accidentally go number two... like some dumbass pilots I could mention.

But a half hour later Paradox was back, dragging in two bodies. He dropped them down on the ground.

“The guards,” he explained, covering their heads with fractal static masks like the one he’d worn. “And just about the right size. They’re not Adams men, though, so be gentle. Even if they wake up, those masks won’t come off without some help. Should buy us some time. Now start stripping.”

We got out of our jumpsuits, which left me naked as a jay bird again, but only for a couple of minutes. Then we were in Navy uniforms and they were in prison jumpsuits, their faces like some kind of digital Rorschach test.

Paradox tapped his datapad a few times and both our doors opened. “Perfect. Now, just one last touch and we can be going.” With that, he stabbed me in the face.

“OWWW! Goddammit, Paradox!” Paradox pulled the hypo from my forehead, which had only penetrated a few millimeters.

“Baby. That’s why I didn’t give you any warning.” He handed Violet another. “Shoot up. Doesn’t matter where, just in the general area of the face.”

“I know. I’ve used these before.”

My face wasn’t swelling, not exactly, but it was changing. Filling out in different places. Violet jabbed her hypo under her chin. In a few moments her jaw filled out, as did her cheeks, while her lips shrunk a bit, making her look more masculine. I touched around my face, trying to figure out how different I looked.

“You look gorgeous, boyo.”

“For a caveman,” said Violet. “Nice cro-mag head.”

“It’s enough to fool the cameras into not recognizing you and setting off the alarm. Where we’re going we won’t be able to avoid people. And trust me, we got uglier on board. Now, stick close to me. I’ve planned for an emergency egress for decades, but didn’t expect to have company.”

The foyer to the brig was empty. “Where to first?” I asked.

“Back to my den, unfortunately. Have to close up shop before we go.”

“You mean the quartermaster’s office?” asked Violet.

“No, that’s where I was got the drugs and other equipment I needed. I mean my office. Home, really.”

We followed him out of the foyer and down the hall. The thing about two guards flanking an enlisted man is that you attract a lot of attention, but not a lot of eye contact. People tend to act as if looking too long might get them mixed up in the affair. But as we continued I began feeling more and more uneasy.

“We’re heading to the bow of the ship,” I said.

“Yep.”

“Where the officers are.”

“That’s right. Now, stop acting like you’re guarding me and walk in single file.”

We did as he asked as he took us deeper into officer territory.

“I’m pretty sure my dad’s cabin is down here.”



“That it is. I’m parked right next to it, well, sort of.”

Before he could explain, he used his ident crystal on an access door to one of the air recycling rooms. We followed him in, ducking under vents and trying to block out the noise.

“This is home?” Violet asked.

Paradox smirked. “Well, I don’t sleep here, darlin, if that’s what you’re asking. But this is, as they say, where the magic happens.”

He took us to the back of the room, right behind the main pumps, where he opened an access panel for one of the vents. Only it didn’t lead to a small narrow tube we had to wiggle through like in the movies, but a long but narrow room, maybe a meter and a half across by five meters long, with barely enough room to stand. We had to stand in single file as Paradox set himself down in front of a narrow desk and computer terminal.

“Found this deadspace in the hull my first year on board. Not listed on any of the schematics. That’s when I knew I’d found a home.”

“Within spitting distance of my dad’s cabin,” I said.

“I know, if the symmetry were any more perfect I’d cry. This place is EM buffered by the machinery there, meaning casual scans can’t pick this place up, but also I can’t receive. I installed hardlines around to get past that, patching into the main network. From here I can see pretty much everything that goes on in the ship, monitor all communications, hack the system, whatever is needed.” Paradox sighed. “I’m gonna miss it.” He started tapping away.

“So are you going to send the ship into chaos or something?” I asked. “Give us cover for our escape?”

He shook his head. “I’m not the only computer expert here. If I start messing with too much stuff they’ll notice and start messing back. Too unpredictable. I’m just here to make sure certain doors are green lit for us to the hanger bay, then purge the system. With luck they’ll never find this room, but if they do there won’t be any useful data on it that could lead them to me.”

“Wait. There is one bit of hacking I need you to do before we go.”

“What?”

I explained to him how I’d ratted out everyone I’d talked to about the Mossfoot identity crystal. “Can you make that information disappear?”

Paradox nodded. “If it’s networked in.” He checked his system. “You’re in luck. It’s not networked in normally, but he’s got it docked. Probably running checks on the names. Blanking data...aaaaand...power surge! That’ll ruin his day.”

Looking around the small narrow room I noticed there were some shelves with various useful items. Counterfeit credit chits (Navy use only, damn), ident crystals, blank requisition forms already signed by the captain...

“Wait. How much do you know about Adams special identity crystals?”

Paradox did that mind-blown gesture again then went back to typing. “Most awesome piece of kit I’ve come across since I came on board. No way R&D here developed it, the man hours would have been outstanding and they’re busy on more navy-type stuff. No, that’s definitely Section W stuff.”

“Section W?” I asked.

He never took his eyes off the screen. “I’m surprised you didn’t know. You said you had one. Didn’t you ever check it out?”

“I tried, but on normal terminals it never shows anything out of the ordinary. I saw the words Section W show up once on a GalCop pencil pusher’s datapad, but that’s it.”

“Section W is officially an intelligence gathering arm of the Navy, but it doesn’t take a genius to know what the W stands for: Wetworks. The XO here has friends in some very low places.”

I almost hesitated to ask, but there wouldn’t be another chance. “Did you ever...”

“Hack one? Hell yeah. You think I’m going to let him keep that toy all to himself? I worked a variation of the system into my own crystal, running underneath the official software.”

“You can do that?” asked Violet.

“The crystal itself isn’t such a big deal. Just next-gen stuff, holds more data, can be more intricately programmed. Navy already uses it, and we’ll see them out in public in five years. What makes this special is the programming.”

“Can you make us a copy of one?” I asked. I figured Violet would need all the help she could get when we got out of here.

Paradox shook his head. “No can do. I had to build mine up from scratch based on what I learned snooping around some borrowed crystals. Hardwired right into the program is a quantum key that will not allow itself to be copied, only transferred. Trying to force a copy breaks the whole thing down, corrupting both sides.”

“Damn.”

“So can you steal one?” Violet asked.

“Yeah, if you ran into Adams’ men. But we want to avoid that, darlin.”

“No, I mean remotely. If one of those crystals are currently docked somewhere, could you transfer the data here?”

Paradox smiled. “I like the way you think. But we’re cutting things close as it is. Still I’ll... hello.” Paradox looked closer at the screen, then laughed.

“Oh, you’re going to love this, boyo.”

I bent down to look over his shoulder. Only one Section W restricted ident crystal was currently docked into a terminal on board, transferring its surveillance data to the ship’s computer.

Mossfoot.

I smirked. Honestly, how could I not? “Do it. And blank whatever data it transferred if you can.”

“Righto. But then we have to go. We’re behind schedule as it is.”

While we waited for Paradox to finish I turned to Violet. “I’ve got an idea.”

## So Long, Fleabag

Paradox heard me outline my plan and agreed to go along with it. He finished working his magic and burning his bridges, then shooed us out of his cramped workspace.

“Come on you two uglies, can’t wait here forever. Go!”

The plan had been to get back to the Bad MF in the docking bay and escape, hopefully with enough minor distractions going on at the time that we didn’t get shot down in the process. But getting hold of my special ID again opened up new possibilities, though nothing I could actually stick a flag on and call a plan. Honestly, I was just playing it by ear and hoping that Paradox wasn’t.

We hurried down the corridor as Paradox counted down, “Three, two, one... now,” and the corridor behind us suddenly started blaring with a loud klaxon and red flashing lights as a blast door came down.

“Two minutes to get to corridor J, or we get stuck behind one of those,” he said.

We’d only gotten halfway there when three men in security uniforms rounded the corner. Two were average sized, but the largest of them was saying, “I’m telling you, it was working before, and then nothing.”

“Whatever, MF, just tell Adams—“

They stopped, and the man looked down on me by a good foot and a half. His eyes narrowed.

“You.” They were the words of a man facing his lifelong nemesis.

I felt around my forehead. Either the disfiguring drug was wearing off, or he could see straight into my soul. I smiled.

“Uh... Mr. Mossfoot, I presume?”

He lunged at me like a bull and I barely got my arms up in time to protect my neck from being crushed. It didn’t matter, he got his hands around my neck and my hands. He lifted me up and pinned me against the bulkhead.

“You’re really not a teddy bear... are you?” I gasped. “More of a... grizzly!”

He squeezed tighter.

"Gack! I'm really... sorry about... oh screw it." I kicked him between the legs as hard as I could. He barely winced.

I guess steroid side effects did have their upside.

I didn't exactly have a good view of what was going on with the rest of the world, what with my own head being popped off being a more immediate concern, but I did hear Violet yelling and saw limbs flailing over Mossfoot's broad shoulders. I just couldn't tell whose.

"One minute," said Paradox as if his damn schedule was more important than my ability to breathe.

"You know... maybe... we could..." Damn it, my best weapon was my mouth and this guy wasn't letting me use it.

I kicked him again. And again. And again. The wince turned to a grunt, then a strained look, but I was fast losing oxygen to my brain. Finally he seemed to succumb to my cunning argument and was on his knees, which meant my feet were at least touching the ground now. A fire extinguisher across the head from Paradox ended the discussion.

"Thanks," I said.

"Just keeping us on time."

We looked to Violet. One of the guards was on the ground with a knife in his neck, presumably his own. The other was in a headlock about ready to pass out.

"Adam's men?" she asked. Paradox nodded, and Violet twisted his head around, Exorcist style.

"But-geeze-uh...DAYMN!" I blurted. That was the coldest thing I'd seen in my life, and I'd been spaced by the woman.

Unfortunately none of them had sidearms, but Violet took the folding knife from the one man's neck and rubbed the blood off on his back before pocketing it.

"I'd say thirty seconds now," she said, picking up the pace.

"I'm glad she's on our side," Paradox said. "I'll take eight."

We got to corridor J just as the next blast door came down. "At least that means nobody will find the bodies for a while," said Paradox.

"I thought you said you weren't going to send the ship into chaos," I said.

“Not the kind you had in mind, where the ship turns against its masters or whatever” he explained. “The ship’s computer has a simulation running and thinks it’s under attack, and its safety measures are responding like clockwork. Next up, we’ll need these.” He pointed to a room near the hanger bay, the display window showing the walls lined with zero-g vacuum suits.

Once inside the spacesuits we waited for the next stage, which conveniently announced itself.

“Warning,” the ship’s computer announced over the loudspeakers. “Hanger bay breach in thirty seconds. Evacuate immediately.”

As the crew either fled to a safe zone or joined us in the suit room, we were the first ones out, fighting against the crowd.

“Okay,” Paradox said. “Once we’re in the bay, hold onto the support railing for dear life. When it blows nobody will be able to get in unless they’re suited up or the air pressure returns to normal.”

I nodded as the three of us got inside before the doors locked and sealed. We found the railing and held on.

“Warning. Hanger bay breach in ten seconds,” the computer announced.

“All right,” Paradox said. “After this we’ll be parting ways. Good luck, you two.”

I nodded. “Thanks. I mean it.”

“Eh, I figure this way I feel I earned the extra twenty thousand on top of owning your ship.”

“One more thing,” I said. “There’s a cat in the ship named Fleabag. You take care of him, got it?”

“Um... you mean that cat?” Paradox said, nodding down the hangar. The loading bay of the Bad MF was down and Fleabag was sitting on the ramp. He stopped licking his paw long enough to wonder what the heck we were doing.

“Reow?”

With a whump and a woosh the bay shields flickered, dropped, and then it felt like God himself was trying to drag us into deep space.

Fleabag disappeared like a black dot into the night.

As we dangled like rag dolls in the rush of escaping air, I slowly looked over at Paradox.

“Don’t blame me! My plan didn’t have a cat contingency in it!” I cursed under my breath, but there wasn’t exactly anything to be done, was there? All we could do was go on with the next part of this hairbrained plan.

The last of the air gone, we dropped back down to the deck. Paradox shrugged apologetically and ran for my Hobby. He wouldn’t have any trouble starting it up with his ident crystal. I was more worried about me and Violet.

You might recall that I once traded ships when my Trumble problem got out of hand, and found it surprisingly easy to do. That’s because these ident crystals are meant to be kind of all-access passes for their special operatives, letting them commandeer anything they need as they needed it.

“So Paradox leaves. They think it’s you. We wait in a ship for the cavalry to take chase, then escape along with them,” said Violet. “Nice. What are we stealing. A Viper? Or that Constrictor I saw?”

“No, neither of those. We don’t know which ones they will or won’t get into.”

Besides, while I was sure my ident could let me swipe any of the navy ships easily enough, I didn’t know whether the fighters had an override that would let the Atomos swipe it right back. And I didn’t want to spend the next five minutes drifting in space trying to hotwire it while they surrounded us or blew us out the sky.

“So what are we taking?”

“Actually, the ship I have in mind doesn’t officially exist.”

## Mossfoot's Day Off

As Paradox disappeared inside the Bad MF, Violet and I hurried to the other end of the flight deck.

"I'm pretty sure that Constrictor doesn't officially exist," said Violet, pointing out the jet black top secret fighter as we passed it by.

"Yeah, but for all we know it's got some kind of self destruct if the wrong person tries to start it up." I said. "We need a ship I know we can trust."

It didn't take long for her to see where we were going, and what I had in mind. "You're joking."

"Why?"

She waved to the hodgepodge of ships before us. "Those are antiques!"

"Yes, and my dad wouldn't dream of doing anything to alter them—it would spoil the authenticity. Some of these are in perfect condition."

She reluctantly nodded. "They better be. Which did you have in mind?"

I pointed to the sexiest ship of the bunch, down at the far end. "That one. It's the only one with room for a copilot."

At first she didn't recognize it, then she saw the logo on the cherry red hull.

"That can't be..."

"It is. Come on."

The Cobra MKIII is one of the respected ships in the spacelanes. It succeeded the MKI model which had been in use for a hundred and fifty years. A capable fighter that at the same time is able to carry a decent amount of cargo. A true Jack-of-all-trades. You'd find them used by everyone—bounty hunters, merchants, miners, pirates, you name it.

This was not that ship.

Violet ran her hand along the hull as I lowered the access ramp. "The missing Mark II..."



I had to smile. I could tell from the awe in her voice that she'd grown up watching some of the same shows I did. The Mark II was a ship of legend. A glorious failure that epitomized the concept of the future-that-might-have been. It was a prototype that was so far ahead of the curve we literally didn't have the technology to build her at the time. But if we had been able to, it would have changed the universe.

"It's actually pretty overrated." I said.

That seemed to snap her out of it. "Huh?"

The ramp dropped and we climbed inside. "Well, I mean, she's still a damn good ship, and if the Mark II had worked as advertised it really would have been a game changer, but think about it, that was a hundred years ago. The game's changed a few times since then."

"I know, but still. The missing prototype. This is a replica, right?"

"That's what he tells everyone, but nope. Real deal. Cockpit is this way," I said pointing.

Violet chased after me. "Wait. If it's not a replica, then how do you expect to fly it? The Mark II didn't work."

I ducked my head and slipped into the sweet leather pilot seat. Just like old times. "Well, the third prototype did for a while, the one that Faulcon deLacy got involved in and geared more towards the mass market. But this is the second prototype. The one they were still courting the Navy with. And trust me, it works. Strap in."

She got into the seat next to me. They were bunched so close together so you always had to get in them from the outside left or right.

"That's awkward. You should be able to step through the middle."

"There's a reason for it," I said, setting the systems on standby. I didn't even need my ident key to activate her, he hadn't changed the passcode since last time. "Now we wait for Paradox to leave, and hope nobody saw us getting in." I just hoped we didn't have to wait long.

Violet looked around the cockpit, probably trying to see if it matched with her expectations. "Similar copilot layout to the modern Cobra," she said. She looked behind her and noticed a third control terminal directly behind me. "Bit of an odd place to put that, though. So, how did your dad get this ship? How does it even exist?"

The thing about the Mark II's mythos is that there's just enough truth to it to get people's imaginations soaring. The reason it failed was, indeed, because it was ahead of

its time. Paynou, Prossett and Salem had made all kinds of unreasonable promises as to what it would be able to do, and the designers had to fudge the numbers just to get it to prototype stage, hoping to fix it later. They couldn't.

"Everyone knows how the first prototype blew up on the launch pad, and the story goes that the second Mark II was scrapped just before its maiden flight, due to malformed alloys--"

"--But it was actually smuggled away by a secret organization who needed an advanced fighter to combat the Thargoids transformable giant robot threat every week?"

"Heh, no. But I watched Cobra Rangers as a kid too. A ship enthusiast, Maximilian Prefect, offered PPS extra funding for it so they could keep their struggling project afloat. Prefect spent the next twenty years working on this baby as his own personal pet project, sinking a small fortune into fixing the flaws from the inside out and even improving it past its design specs a bit. It's been bouncing around in private collections until my dad got a hold of it. I used to steal her for joy rides before he bought me my own ship."

"Paradox is leaving," said Violet.

I looked at the Bad MF as it lifted off the flight deck and left the Atomos, just as security rushed in too late to stop her and pilots began manning their ships to take up pursuit. I felt a bit sad seeing her go, I admit. Even more so for losing my ship's cat. But what Violet had told me back in the brig was true: If you want to live, dignity needs to be on the bottom of your priority list. And if that meant sneaking away in a rusty old antique, then so be it.

Besides, this antique was anything but rusty. I didn't just choose her because she had room for a co-pilot. I chose her because in her own humble way she kicked serious ass.

## Departures and Arrivals

The Bad MF was off like a very slow dart, veering off to the port side of the Atomos. As fond as I was of her, she was never the fastest ship in the galaxy. Fortunately she had a head start before the first Vipers could get off the ship. I just hoped Paradox knew what he was doing. He seemed confident he could hop to the next system and bounce from rock hermit to rock hermit, running them in circles. After that? Well, he sure sounded like he had a plan.

“How long do we wait?” Violet asked.

No less than ten Vipers went after him, but not the elite interceptors of Delta squad. “After those Vipers chase him through the witchpoint.” Actually I was hoping to see the interceptors leave first. I couldn’t outrun those.

Violet seemed antsy about being the co-pilot. “This is terrible. I’ve just got navigation and cargo regulation. No weapons, no missile or mine controls. I’m useless. Move over. I’m a better pilot than you.”

“You’re a better combat pilot, I’ll grant you that. But I’m better at running away. Besides, I’ve actually flown this ship before. You haven’t.”

“Fine,” she huffed. “Need me to tell you all the nothing we have in the cargo hold?”

“Just set course for... well not the nearest system and not the farthest. Something middlish.”

The tapped some buttons. “Middlish course set. Can we go now?”

I held a deep breath. “No... not yet. There’s something I need to do first.” I opened the comm channel to the bridge and asked for the captain. I knew how to get the direct line.

“Dad.”

“Son? Where in blazes? Do you have any idea—” I cut him off as he started blustering. If he was as clueless as Paradox said, I didn’t have much time to convince him he was in danger.

“Listen to me. I don’t have a lot of time and you might have even less. You can’t trust your XO. Adams works for Section W and he has a black ops unit working out of this ship right under your nose.”

“What? You can’t be serious. Talk some sense, man!”

“I am talking sense. I don’t know what his cover story was, but he’s the reason the pirates got their hands on the fighter coordination technology you were developing.”

“I’ve worked with the man for years, I–“

“Dad. I know you have a hard time believing me, but the man tried to have me killed. He did have me killed, come to think of it. I’ve been right here on your ship for the last six hours and you didn’t have a clue. Should your XO be holding back that kind of information? You gotta believe me.”

My dad didn’t answer right away. I hoped it was because he was considering my words and not just ready to blow a gasket.

“Crap.” Violet pointed down to the airlock. Another batch of security had arrived, and seemed to be heading this way. I guess they traced the call pretty quick.

I kicked in the maneuvering jets and pushed the Cobra MKII to the launch area. “Time to go.”

“Go? Go where?” my dad asked.

With the shields on, I ended up bumping into the Gecko next to me, one that once belonged to a bounty hunter known only as B.B. Duck, knocking it over and into the next ship and... well it got a little messy. These ships had been packed pretty close together.

“What’s all that racket, what what?”

“Um, nothing dad. Don’t worry about it. Just take care of that Adams guy before he takes over the ship in some creepy coup where you don’t know who to trust. Trust me, he’s probably already doing it.”

“Right. Well, I’ll see to it I get some answers from Adams. You, meet me on the bridge right now, you hear? We’ll get to the bottom of this nonsense!”

“Um, that would be a bit difficult actually, dad.” I could have shot out of the hangar any time I wanted, but I needed to position myself just right first.

“Go already!” yelled Violet. “What are you waiting for?”

“Just lining her up,” I said.

“With what? You’re wasting time, you moron. Go!”

My dad was only further confused by this chatter. “Son? What are you up to?”

I was pretty sure this was exactly where the Bad MF had been, and I was banking on Newton not taking a holiday. “There. Open the cargo scoop.”

Violet’s eyebrow rose. “What?”

“Just do it.”

She did and I warmed up the thrusters.

“Dad, I know we don’t see eye to eye, and I know I’ve been a huge disappointment to you, but these last few months have taught me a few things about what’s important in life. I never really appreciated everything you tried to do for me, and didn’t listen to you when I should have. I’m sorry. Just do me a favor. Don’t get yourself killed by a weasel like Adams. It wouldn’t look good in the family history.”

“Son, I...”

“Oh, and I kinda have to borrow your Cobra. Bye!”

“What?!?”

I pushed the throttle and hit the fuel injectors, pretty much against every undocking protocol in the book and shot into the black like a cartoon coyote with his ass on fire. Almost as quickly as I did, I pulled back on the throttle until we were crawling.

“What are you slowing down f—” Something beeped on her monitor. “Wait, something just landed in the cargo bay. Did you...?”

I smiled and gave her a wink as I kicked the engines in full again. “Just picking up a lost crew member. You can raise the cargo scoop now.”

Things were looking up for once. I looked back at the Atomos in the rear view monitor as we approached a safe distance to hyperspace jump. Just in time to see the Constrictor leave the hangar bay and set course straight for us.

“Ah hell.” Things are looking up for once. When will I ever learn not to think those kind of things?

## That Constricting Feeling

The Constrictor was one of those ships you read about in Jane's Fighting Spaceships where about ninety percent of the stats on it are listed as CLASSIFIED. I'd heard rumors of what it could do, but that was nothing unusual. Everyone had heard rumors.

Some said she could break the 7 Light Year jump barrier, others that she could run mil-spec lasers without over heating. Some believed she carried a cloaking device, while others thought the hull and engine were specially treated to survive a Q-bomb, allowing it to be in the center of a blast and be the only one to walk away.

Really, the only things I knew for certain about the Constrictor were this: she was incredibly fast, she was unbelievably maneuverable, and she was inexplicably pointed right at me.

The Cobra didn't even wait for it to fire on us before switching to Red Alert. Let me put that into perspective for you—a ships computer, without any kind of A.I. to make a judgement call, took one look at that ship on its radar, its heading and its power output, and effectively wet itself.

That's the Constrictor.

The moment the Red Alert klaxon rang, Violet's seat swung around nine ninety degrees. Before she was sitting beside me, now with a single smooth pivot, she was directly behind me, facing another terminal. She quickly figured out what that terminal was for—rear weapons mount, ECM and missile management.

"That's better," she said. "A bit retro, but I like it. Wait. This has a turret?"

"Only a 30 degree arc," I said.

"It's enough," she answered. I'm pretty sure she cracked her knuckles. "Just keep it in my sights."

Since that was basically the same as saying "run away as fast as you can" I had no problem with this plan.

"Attention Cobra. You are ordered to cut your engines and prepare to be bombarded."

I was pretty sure I recognized that gravelly voice, even though I'd only ever heard it once before. It was the voice of a mountain that somehow got its pilot's licence. I guess being clubbed by a fire extinguisher wasn't enough to keep the real Mossfoot out of the fight.

"Uh, don't you mean boarded?"

The laser blast that hit our rear shields told me no, he did not.

"Any chance we can negoti—" another blast made his position perfectly clear. I dove and pulled up, banked and rolled, trying to make myself as hard a target as possible.

"He's too far out of range," said Violet.

"That's impossible. This thing has Mil-spec weapons fore and aft."

"Maybe a hundred years ago," she said. "I doubt they're even civilian grade now."

With coordinates to another system already set, I activated the hyperdrive and kept dodging the Constrictor's beam. Fifteen seconds was a damn long time to stay alive in a dogfight, especially when you were outmatched. As the final seconds ticked by I had to steady out if I wanted to make a smooth jump.

"Five, four, three, two—"

The constrictor fired, I had to dive or be fried.

"—one...warning. Malfunction. Warning. Malfunction."

You never jink going into hyperspace, it's just inviting disaster, and given how old this ship was I was probably inviting it anyway. Instead of the friendly blue tunnel that looked like an acid trip, witchspace was crackling with purple lightning instead. Then it felt like something was pulling us out.

"Ohnonononono..." The Cobra was ejected into interstellar space, light years away from any system. Only we hadn't just been spat out. We'd been caught in a net.

"Thargoid!" I dived just in time before the green and red Thargoid battleship that had drawn us to its position opened fire. It was already releasing remote control drones after us, and to top it all off, the Constrictor had followed us through our own wormhole.

"Well, this keeps getting better and better," I said. I kept the throttle down but didn't use the injectors, they'd waste what little fuel we had, and I needed it all for another jump. Fortunately, the Thargoids aren't terribly picky on who they attack, and were giving the Constrictor a hard time.

Violet got out of her seat. "I've got an idea. Try not to get killed until I'm back." She ran out of the cockpit.

“Where are you going?” I yelled at a closed door. Damn. I went back to the controls. We were still within range of another system. I leaned over to lock the coordinates and start the hyperdrive again, just before I spun away from numerous beams and pulses lighting up the eternal dark of interstellar space. The Cobra MKIII was a slight improvement over the MKII in most respects, but she had one advantage over her eventual successor—maneuverability. And I made the most of it.

“Incoming missile,” the computer trilled.

Ghah! Why didn’t I have access to the ECM as well? I unbuckled and leaped over into Violet’s seat, activated the countermeasures, and leaped back into the captain’s chair. I’m sure that little design flaw would have been worked out before this ship hit the production line, but that didn’t do me any good now.

“Hyperspace in 5....4....3....”

I dove again and jinked, forcing the Constrictor and any bug-eyed aliens to readjust and not get a bead on me too quickly, then let go and flew straight for the last second and a half. I actually let go of the joystick, not wanting to jinx the moment.

Be were back in regular witchspace. Thank God. When we emerged, it was in a normal system with a normal star. But it wouldn’t be long before the Constrictor followed. I just hoped it was the only one.

I spun the Cobra one-eighty and flew through my own witchspace wake, then spun back. If the Constrictor followed, it would be facing the wrong direction. That would at least give me a chance to strike first. Laser hot. Missiles armed. Get ready to hit it with everything I had.

Violet got back inside. “I’ll give this ship credit, it’s got great compensators. I barely felt how much you were bouncing us around back there. What are you doing?”

“The Constrictor’s coming. I want to get first crack at it. We might get lucky.”

“No, you fool, run away!” She got back into her chair. “Do what you’re best at already. You’re not going to live through this with a stupid act of bravado.”

“No need to tell me twice,” I said spinning back around. “I was iffy about the whole idea anyway.”

But we’d only made it a few clicks before the Constrictor appeared on the rear radar and the ship went into Red Alert again. There was an intense blast of laser fire. It sounded like our shields were being shredded. Then, almost as quickly, it stopped. The radar was clear.



"The hell?" Dammit. It did have a cloaking device, didn't it? It was coming around for a final pass but didn't want me to know which direction it would be coming from.

"I got bad news, and I got good news," said Violet.

"What's the bad news?" I asked.

"The bad news is our rear laser has completely melted."

Well, that was the turd cherry on the crap ice cream sundae.

"And the good?"

"You now have exclusive rights to the handle Mossfoot."

I checked the rear view camera. Sure enough, there was debris floating around the fading blue witchpoint.

"How?"

"I removed the limiters on the rear laser and boosted its power output. It was never going to survive the heat, but I figured it was our only shot. All-or-nothing isn't normally my style, but..."

I nodded. Desperate times and all that.

With the crisis over, I had Violet's chair swivel back to its co-pilot position. For a moment, we just coasted towards the planet and caught our breath. It was funny, I'd ended up back in the same system as when I had left with that damn black box, hoping I'd find some answers. Be careful what you wish for. Geeze. I hope dad found that box as well, but Adams might have already blanked it.

We'd been in the belly of the beast and made it out alive. We'd found ourselves in the middle of some kind of galactic intrigue, possibly having seen only one small facet of something larger and more terrifying. Paradox was right. Adams wasn't the head of this dragon, just one of its claws. I just hope dad managed to chop it off before it was too late.

If the events that came from 4004 taught me anything it was this: whoever orchestrated it did not care what happened to any one person, or even entire planets. They had designs on the galaxy as a whole, and there would be no squeaky wheels getting any grease—only nails sticking up that needed to get hammered down.

## An Offer She Should Have Refused

“So, what next, flyboy?”

“Oh, it’s flyboy again, is it?”

“You have a ship again.”

“And you don’t.”

Violet sighed. “Yeah, insurance will cover just about everything, but not naval confiscation. And I doubt I could collect it from whatever impound lot its on, assuming I could even find it.” She looked over to me and smiled, probably the first friendly smile I’d gotten from her since the Atomos. “Still, I’m alive, and I guess I got you to thank for that.”

“Likewise.” I looked Violet over, sizing her up like I had before in the brig. Not in terms of measurements (though those were locked away in my memory), but in character. What kind of person was she? Could she be trusted? What do I do with her now?

“What would you say to a partnership?” I asked.

Violet shook her head. “You play things too safe for my liking.”

“True, but for the foreseeable future that’s exactly what you need to be doing. You think whoever Adams is working for wants us out here knowing what we know? But right now we have the advantage. We’re in a ship that officially doesn’t exist with an identity crystal that can slip past just about anyone’s attention. This ship’s got twice the cargo of your old Mark I, more if we shift things around a bit, so we could make some decent money laying low. We earn you enough to get yourself a new ship, and go our separate ways. Or we start our own biker club out on some Anarchy system’s asteroid belt, make matching jackets. In the meantime we have a good time and watch each other’s backs until the coast is clear.”

Violet considered this. I wondered if adding my own insight about her might help the deal. As I’ve said before, I’m fairly good at reading people and sizing them up.

“If you think about it, you’ll realize my plan is better than the one you’re considering.”

Violet half-snorted. "What plan would that be?"

"The one where you knock me out and dump me on the nearest station, take my ship and my ID, sell the Mark II to a collector, and use that money to get a much better ship and try to disappear. Right now your hand is on that pocket knife you took from the guard in case I try anything funny." My eyes hadn't left hers, but they didn't need to. I'd seen her hand slip down to her pocket the moment she tried to thank me.

"I could let you walk off the ship," she said. "You know you can't take me in a fight."

I nodded. "True. But your plan is exactly what someone looking for you would expect. Any collectors who could afford this ship will be contacted or monitored. Meanwhile we could be slipping around from planet to planet in a ship that nobody recognizes and assumes is some kind of custom job—at least, they will once we give it a new paintjob and some other little tweaks. I'd like to keep this ship in the family, but some of the controls here really do need a co-pilot to work properly."

Violet considered this and reluctantly conceded the point.

"But aside from the fact that my plan makes more sense, consider this. I knew what you were just planning to do to me, and I'm still letting the offer stand."

Violet's eyes narrowed a little. "Yes, and I'm wondering why. You know my angle. What's yours?"

"I'm guessing by how quickly you were planning to dump my body on the nearest landing bay that you haven't worked with many partners before. Or, more likely, you have and got burned by each and every one. Betrayed, ripped off, abandoned. Something like that." Yikes. Her reaction made it clear I hit the mark on that one. "Remember that time you almost killed me? You'd asked yourself if the universe would be a better place without me in it, and realized that maybe there was something in me worth keeping around."

She nodded.

"Let's just say I'm looking for the chance to prove you right, and that I feel the same way about you."

"I'm pretty sure I called you an asshole as well."

"I skipped over that part."

Violet bit her lip like she was at war with her inner nature. Just how many times had someone screwed her over to be that reluctant to trust someone again?

In the end she pulled out the pocket knife and held it in front of me, then laid it down on the dashboard between us. She offered her hand. “Partners.”

I took it. “Partners.” I sat back in my chair and took hold of the controls. “Set course for the nearest RRS station and request permission to land, Number One. First order of business, you install a tea maker, while I look up an old friend.”

Violet grumbled. “I am so going to regret this...”

## What's In A Name?

I found Brother Mathias on board the RRS station as I had hoped, attending another rescue mission briefing.

"You look troubled, my son."

I was. "Um... do you remember how you found my body? How you defrosted me, repaired the cell damage, got the brain working again and all that?"

Mathias nodded. "Yes..."

I held up a freezer box. "Do you do pets?"

A few days later, back on Ceesxe, Redsphear was just finishing up the paint job on my ship. I ran my hand down the fresh coat of paint. Red had never been my color anyway.

"Looks good," I said. "Thanks. And the registration?"

"Taken care of. Seems a shame to paint up a piece of history like that," he said. "But I'll grant you, it's still a sweet looking ship. And I set the computer to broadcast herself as a Cobra MKIII. They're about the same size, not all that different. People will just assume she's a custom job. Lord knows there's enough of those out there. Chopped Cobras, Cobra Couriers, Cobra Rapiers... even saw a gold Cobra once. Everyone wants to pimp their Cobra, it seems. Had to ditch the weapons, though. Rear laser was fried and the front's an antique. Put a starter weapon in there for you."

"But she's good to go?" I asked.

"Fit as a fiddle. Your dad sure took good care of her. Hope you do the same. She's a fine ship, really nice crew cabins, too."

I smirked. "Part of the reason I borrowed her so often. You know what they say, 'If the Cobra is a rockin...'"

"There must be something wrong with the lateral stabilizers?"

"Smartass."

"So what about your radio show?" Redsphear asked. "You going to keep doing it?"

The fact was I hadn't had a broadcast since my capture, and given how much was known now, I wasn't sure I should. "I don't know, it might attract the wrong kind of attention."

"Eh, I wouldn't worry about it. Just keep changing the stuff that could lead back to you... Or me for that matter. These days your show is considered lunatic fringe, from what I hear. The only people who believe you tend to also believe in aluminum foil fashion accessories. Most people at the bar think it's some kind of viral marketing campaign or that you're a kook too. But they all think it's entertaining as hell."

"A kook, huh?" I shrugged. "I've been called worse."

I met Violet back at the Last Tap, where she was nursing a drink and watching the news.

"Anything new?" I asked.

"Nope. Just the same old hit parade."

The hit parade she referred to was on right now, covering recent events on the Atomos. An attempted coup by the Captain's own XO, Commander Adams, who was now believed to have orchestrated the sale of naval fighter coordination software, which directly led to the events of 4004. A number of Adams men had attempted to seize the bridge, while others had engaged the Atomos' own fighters to establish space superiority.

Fortunately for everyone, while Adams had a lot of men under his sway, more than I ever suspected in fact, the Captain had surrounded himself in men of quality. Delta Squadron quickly reclaimed the skies, so to speak, while his crack marine company suppressed Adams' men at just about every corridor. Ultimately most had surrendered.

During the battle, Adams tried to claim a conspiracy on board involving the Captain's own son, a known rogue and troublemaker, who was the one actually involved in selling the navy secrets. But, as the Captain later pointed out, his son was dead, and in the aftermath it came out that it was Adams' own men who had killed him, months ago in an asteroid field. He even spoke to the press about it.

"The knowledge that my son's death was a direct result of Commander Adams betrayal of Her Majesty's Navy saddens me more than I can say. All I can hope is that he's found some peace in the deeps of space he loved so much."

Violet raised a glass to me. "To the dearly, or should I say, nearly departed."

I raised my glass to hers. "Let's hope he stays nearly."

The Captain had been hailed as a hero. He'd already been on the fast track to the Admiralty, now it seemed like that track got a bit faster. I smiled at the monitor and raised a glass to him as well. We both knew he was going to kill me for stealing his prize Cobra if we ever met again.

I could live with that.

Brother Mathias met at the top of the loading ramp to my ship, holding my cooler in his hands.

I sighed. "No luck, huh?"

"It was a partial success," he said, opening the cooler. Fleabag's head popped out. He had a white eye patch covering his left eye. Mathias sat the box down and Fleabag hopped out, running inside the ship.

"Looks like a total success to me," I said. "Well, other than the eye."

"Yes, well, the damage was a little more extensive than that, I'm afraid. We did what we could, but I'm afraid a little... augmentation was required."

I looked behind me back at the ship. Fleabag was sitting at the top of the ramp looking at me.

"Me-ow."

It sounded like a man had sneezed the word through a kazoo.

"Well, that wasn't creepy at all."

"Cybernetics. It's more or less filling in the gaps for the parts we weren't able to save."

"Neat!"

Brother Mathias rolled his eyes. "Neat. Revolutionary life saving technology used on a stray feline, and he says it's 'neat.' You do realize the only reason I did this was because I had an acolyte who required practice in such things before working on humans. That, and I had also heard about what happened on your father's ship. Not what the media reported. The true story."

"How...?"

"My order doesn't just deal in missions of mercy, but the trade of information. True information, which I assure you is much more valuable than what's commonly on the market. Now, the correct thing for you to do at this point is to say thank you."

“Hey, why didn’t you fix his eye?” I asked, not really hearing him. “I mean, you were there putting chips in his brain already, right? Never mind, he looks cool with the patch.”

Mathias looked to the heavens for strength. “Fair well, ‘Mossfoot’. I hope we don’t see one another again.” He turned to leave, but stopped at the bottom of the ramp, looking at the ship’s callsign.

“Where did you get the name from, if I might ask?”

“Eh, I dabbled in Latin. It’s not a perfect translation, probably got a word or something missing, but it’s good enough.”

Mathias nodded. “It is... strangely appropriate for you.”

“Viaticus Rex, you are fueled and ready for launch,” the station’s traffic control system announced. “Standby. Launch in ten seconds.” Fleabag sauntered off to find a spot to call his own. Once or twice his head ticked to the side.

“So what’s next?” asked Violet. “Do you have a plan about where we’ll go next? What routes we’ll use? Where we’ll stay away from? Contingencies for if your so-called space ninjas come looking for us? Have you thought about this at all?”

“Five...four...three...”

I looked over at her and gave her a smile. “I say, enough of this thinking garbage, let’s have some fun.”

“Viaticus Rex: Launch.”



## 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

*Be Careful What You Wish For, It Might Just Be A Curse*

## Bleeding Heart Yard

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The first half of the worst week of Peter's life happened when he was a young boy. Being cursed by a witch was bad enough, but what do you do when you don't even know what the curse is, or when it is supposed to go off? Twenty years later, in a part of London shrouded in myths and urban legends, it does.

Peter might have found his one true love, but there's a problem. His friend might be able to remove the curse, but there's a catch. There's a monster hunting people in London, but no one believes it. A secret government branch is investigating, but they're incompetent. And the woman Peter loves is doomed to die, but it's not the first time.

The second half of the worst week of Peter's life is about to begin.

*Enjoy the following excerpt for Bleeding Heart Yard:*

## 2010 An Outside Perspective

The drunk in the tavern had breath that could have been set on fire—and clothes that *should* have been set on fire—but that didn't mean he couldn't see or hear straight.

Like when he bumped into the guy in the suit next to the bar. Honest mistake, didn't mean it, but he clearly heard the suit say “asshole” *before* they connected. And the suit must have been talking to him, because when the drunk looked back he was shaking his fist at him.

Before the drunk was just pissed; now he was pissed off. He swayed unsteadily and glowered at the suit, who looked nervous. *Darn right you should look nervous*, thought the drunk, *I know kung-fu*. Well, he watched The Matrix at any rate, and was pretty sure he could do that stuff if he had to.

Then the man said “cock pee” to the waitress, which seemed like a strange insult, but he was hardly one to judge. Earlier that evening he called a pigeon at the window a “sumbitchering feather duster,” and the TV weatherman who said the upcoming lunar eclipse would be the first that fell on a winter solstice in four hundred years a “garfunkling nerdhole.”

The suit called the waitress a pig. Now the drunk was really annoyed. He liked that waitress and proposed to her at least twice a month. He was going to have to stand up for her honor. He could tell the suit was scared, too, because of the way he pretended to ignore him. Sure, he put on a big show—frantically looking through his wallet, dumping money on the counter, trying to use his cell phone—but the suit was scared. Really scared.

Before the drunk could challenge him to honorable combat—or just hit him from behind—the suit was out the door. The drunk stumbled after him, but lost him as his eyes adjusted to the dark. He stood dazed in the alleyway, wondering which way the coward went.

He saw a figure at the end of the cobblestone alley, but something kept him where he was. The small part of his brain desperately clinging to sobriety screamed at him, trying to save his life. In that moment of inebriated hesitation, he noticed something wasn't quite right about the person.

For one thing, people don't usually have ears that big and pointy.

Or that much hair.

And they usually couldn't jump atop a building in three short leaps.

For a moment the drunk just stood there and looked up at the cloudy sky. He was sure he heard a howl. For the first time in his life, he would have admitted to the police he was drunk.

He figured there was only one cure for a delusion like that, so the drunk stumbled back into the Bleeding Heart Tavern and ordered himself another drink.

## PART I

### WHERE IT ALL GOT REMEMBERED WRONG

This is a story about Bleeding Heart Yard:

Sir Christopher Hatton had but one daughter, Elizabeth. He adored her and raised her in a life of privilege in the court of King James I. She was renowned for her beauty and charm, and had several prospective suitors, though none could gain an advantage over the others.

One winter's evening in 1626, she was the guest of the Bishop of Ely at a ball, where she danced all night. The Spanish Ambassador, Señor Gondomar, arrived late for the party. He was a neighbor of the Hattons, and one of Elizabeth's many suitors. They danced but one time, and those attending remembered the tension between them. Some said they had argued while others claimed they had flirted shamelessly. Perhaps they did both, but regardless they left the party arm in arm.

On the morning of January 27, they found her body lying in the snow behind the stables of Hatton House, her arms hacked and chest slashed open. Those who found her swore her heart still pumped blood onto the cobblestones. Though suspicion lay with the Spanish Ambassador, no one ever proved who killed her. In the years to come the locals dubbed the stables Bleeding Heart Yard.

This story is not true.

1991

Peter was moments away from the first half of the worst week of his life. It would be almost twenty years before he saw the other half. It was a perfect summer day in the village of Columbus; the sun high in the cloudless sky, the air hot but not too dry. If you

went to the big hill by Purple Woods you could see all the way to Lake Scugog. The kids were playing baseball next to the church. The score was tied, Peter was up to bat, and everything was about to go to hell.

Peter was no good at sports, a fact of which he regularly reminded. For starters, he always closed his eyes when he swung, which was the first thing you learned not to do. The three outfielders, seeing him shuffle up to the plate, moved in so close they could shake hands with the teammates covering the bases.

Peter's father always said things would go better *this* time. When that didn't happen, he'd sigh and buy Peter ice cream at the old gas station before walking him home and making the same promise again. *Next* time. Then Peter would shut himself in his room and build things. Today he would finish his Norman castle, the portcullis just needed a little bit of—

“Strike one!”

Peter snapped out of it. He hadn't even seen the ball whiz by. He was glad his father wasn't watching today; he could picture the disappointment on his face, hidden under a mask of fatherly support. He knew he would strike out, he always struck out, but the least he could do was make an effort—

“Strike two!”

Again, Peter snapped out of it.

“Why don't you play t-ball instead?!” yelled one of the outfielders, who now stood beside the pitcher. Simon the umpire wasn't even paying attention anymore; instead, he talked to his girlfriend behind the batting cage. Peter's fate was that much of a foregone conclusion.

Peter's head sunk. He hated this game. He hated how it made his father feel about him. He hated how it made him feel about himself. He wished he could hit the damn ball once. Just once. He didn't care what happened after that. He raised his eyes and focused. He wouldn't go down without a fight. Blood rushed into his ears to the point where he couldn't hear their taunts and jeers any more, just the thundering current roaring past his ear canal.

He tried and failed not to close his eyes as he swung. But instead of the usual nothing, he felt a minor earthquake run through his forearms as the ball connected with the sweet spot. His arms seemed to extend naturally into a follow through. Had anyone taken a picture of the moment it could have been used on a Rookie of the Year baseball card. Out of habit Peter started to walk back to the bench only to have his teammates

wave at him to run the other way. He turned his head and saw a small white dot in the clear sky drift farther and farther. The outfielders stood dumbfounded, not having a chance in hell of catching it.

Peter jogged toward first base, eyes locked on the ball. The cheer that had started stopped short as everyone waited to see what would happen. It was like a dream—it just kept on going and going. His heart pounded and legs shook as it sunk in this would be his first ever home run. More than that, it would be a new record for distance! Peter was about to laugh and cry out and start some taunting of his own when everyone heard the unmistakable sound of glass shattering, followed by a soft *bang*.

No one knew how to react to this. Some gasped, others cheered, and a few laughed. In the end it turned into a thin smattering of applause, but Peter didn't notice. He had stopped dead in his tracks.

He saw which house the ball had hit.

\*\*\*\*

It wasn't fair. Peter had hit a home run. He had won the game. Yet rather than being heralded as a hero and carried on the shoulders of his teammates, they marched behind him like prison guards escorting a condemned man to the gas chamber.

The old two-story wooden house was on an unpaved road and had gravel for a driveway, but no car. They said it was older than the church. It looked it.

There were thousands of places like Columbus across Canada, small villages with a population of a few hundred that sprang up at moderately used intersections. And because of their isolation—the nearest city, Oshawa, was an hour's bike ride away—the children created their own local mythologies and passed them down from generation to generation.

Most Columbus adults remembered stories about the Old House. It had been abandoned since the Second World War, which made it perfect for tales of bloody murder, hidden treasure, and unquiet ghosts that left footprints in the dust with missing toes. It also made a great haunted house for Halloween. But Peter's generation had added a new twist, because a few months ago someone had moved into the Old House, and they said she was a witch.

Of the pack of children advancing on the Old House, most claimed to have seen the witch. Of them, half said she was beautiful and the other half said she was ugly, which led to the conclusion she was ugly and used magic to appear beautiful.

In the minds of children, this was what was known as *proof*.

The wooden fence around the Old House was once white, but hadn't been repainted in years; large flakes of yellowed dandruff still clung to its sides. A great tree had once been in the center of the yard but only a smooth stump remained. Peter pushed open the squeaky gate and walked up to the front door.

Something sounded strange. He realized he only heard his *own* feet on the gravel. He stopped and turned around. His entourage waited behind the fence. Simon grabbed the squeaky gate and shut it, as if he was afraid of what might escape if he didn't.

"Of course you should play baseball," Peter said, mimicking his father's voice. "How else are you going to make friends?" Some friends."

Peter was no athlete, but he was no coward, either. Besides, he didn't believe in witches or magic. Not really. All that mattered was he had broken someone's window and by God he was going to apologize and find a way to pay for it if he could. He was that kind of a stand up guy.

(Actually, he knew all too well that if it wasn't for the army of children watching his every step he'd be home working on his Norman castle, pretending it never happened and terrified that someone would rat him out.)

Swallowing hard, Peter grabbed the iron door knocker and rapped once, lightly.

"No one's home! I'll leave a note!"

The door yanked open a foot, and Peter could just make out half a woman's face and long raven black hair. He almost screamed, but rallied his nerves and did the honorable thing.

"Excuse me, miss? I'm sorry, but we were playing baseball by the church and I got my first home run ever and I think I might have broken your—" A hand shot out, grabbed Peter by the wrist and pulled him inside. The last thing Peter saw before the door slammed shut was his teammates running away like spooked rabbits.

The woman's back was against the door now. She held his wrist like an iron shackle, barring any chance of escape. Despite the dim light of the hallway, Peter saw half of her face clearly. She wasn't ugly, but she wasn't pretty the way women on TV were pretty, either. Her features were strong and angled. Peter's father would have called her handsome. She was also furious. She said nothing but there was hate in her eyes. When she brushed aside her long black hair, he saw why.



Blood dripped from her left cheek. He saw several deep cuts, along with something that glowed purple. She smelled vaguely of sulfur. Still silent, she held up the baseball. One side of it smoked and also glowed purple. Any doubts that she was a witch vaporized; he just hoped *he* didn't vaporize with them. She knelt down and examined him close, grabbing him by the cheeks and turning his head from side to side. Her eyes narrowed. She said exactly two words:

“You again.”

“Me? Did I? Was I? I'm sorry! I didn't mean—” Again he didn't have a chance to finish his sentence as she pulled him into the kitchen. She stopped in front of the fridge, and glared at him with narrowed eyes.

Everything got a little hazy after that.

\*\*\*\*\*

The next thing Peter remembered, he was back outside, walking down the gravel path in a daze. He stopped and shook his head to clear it. He wasn't sure how long he had been inside, but it had to be at least an hour. The shadows were longer.

At first he thought one of the kids from the game had waited for him, but Peter didn't recognize him. The stranger was about Peter's age, with dark black hair, and leaned against the fence with a Tom Sawyer grin on his face.

“Got cursed, huh?”

Peter didn't think to ask how he knew, because until the kid had said it he wasn't sure himself. Now some of the fog was lifting, enough to know the kid was right. Peter nodded.

“Maybe I can help ya,” said the kid. “Step into my office.” He took Peter to the tree stump and sat him down. “Did she tell you what kind of a curse it was?”

Peter frowned, trying to remember. He shook his head.

“Die before you're eighteen? Live beyond your years? Wealthy but never happy? Forever poor? Too fat? Too thin?” He rattled off others, but nothing sounded familiar. The kid bit his lip. “That sucks. If I knew what it was, I might be able to undo it. Maybe I can just convince her to reverse it.”

The shutters on the attic of the Old House burst open and the witch leaned out, buck naked, and let out a furious shriek.

“Or maybe not.”

“Get away from my boy, you horrible child, or I shall curse you again!” Her voice was deep for a woman, theatrical and strongly accented.

The boy shouted up at her, “For God's sake, mom! Get back inside before the neighbors see you!”

“Then I shall curse them, too!”

“You *already* live here, what more can you do?”

Peter's eyes widened. “Mom?”

“Yeah, unfortunately.” He certainly had the same hair as his mother, as well as the same dark eyes, but there the similarities ended. The kid must have misinterpreted his puzzlement for worry, because he knelt down beside Peter with a serious expression.

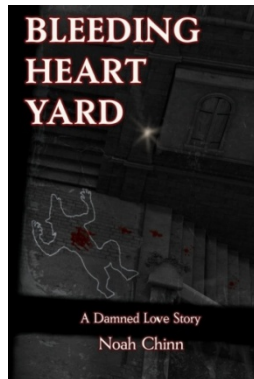
“Hey, it's going to be okay. It's not safe to ask her for anything right now, but chances are this curse won't kick in for weeks. Maybe years. We've got plenty of time to fix it. Well, maybe. I'm still new at all this. Sorta. I'm kind of old at it, too, I think. Meet me here tomorrow and I'll tell you what I've found out.”

Peter nodded in agreement, still a bit dazed from his ordeal. He didn't know what he was going to tell his dad, but whatever it was, it wasn't going to be the truth—even if he could remember what it was. “I better get going,” said Peter. “I don't want my dad to start worrying.”

The kid watched him get up. “You going to be okay?”

“I think so. Thanks. I'm Peter, by the way.”

“Zared, but you might as well call me Red.”



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.

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It's the end of the world, but not as we know it.

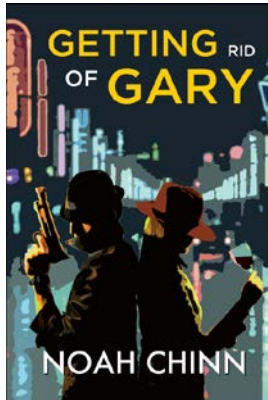
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Actually he has several.

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Someone from his own family – a family he hasn't visited in ten years.

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