

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Christina Engela lives in the sunny seaside South African city of Port Elizabeth (known as the Windy City, where she enjoys watching birds fly backwards) – a tourist haven with an unhealthy preoccupation with apples and whose mascot symbol is a Jackass Penguin – which should give you some idea. She attributes her weird sense of humor to her strange family and friends and perhaps having too much time to herself as a child.

At school she was known for her quirky poetry and weird sense of humor, which came in handy while directing a school play (which involved, incidentally, 3 toilet rolls, a walkie-talkie and a hammer marked 'exhibit A'). After completing high school in 1991 at the tender age of 18 she enlisted in the Army (ordinary work being scarce at the time) - and spent the next fourteen years wondering what the hell it was all about anyway and why is that fat man with the red badges shouting at me?

In 1999 she qualified as a computer technician (A+) and moved into the network support environment, where she gathered a lot of experience in Conflict Resolution and Self Control - and using Solitaire to teach people How To Use The Mouse without inflicting self injury. Traveling 5km just to push a power cable back into a monitor became a genuinely fulfilling experience. Hiding bodies became a form of creative self-expression. No, really.

She has spent 14 years working for the Military, where she says she finds 90% of her inspiration and also a great deal of story material. She still works there as a multimedia specialist, making corporate videos and other interesting projects - sometimes even stranger than the things she writes. She has always enjoyed writing her stories (and re-writing them till she felt she got it right) until someone shoved a keyboard into her hands and suggested that she try typing them instead... (Which made editing a LOT easier for one thing.) She says she likes to write from personal experience, but doesn't think anyone believes her.

Please post all comments or correspondence to:

[Tinaqirl@Ananzi.co.za](mailto:Tinaqirl@Ananzi.co.za)

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Loderunner

# ***Loderunner***



Imagine if you will:

Somewhere in the depths of space an ordinary, somewhat boring-looking medium-sized yellow star cast weird shadow-puppets across the dark interstellar wastes that belonged to the Terran Empire. Nine planets spun around it in suitably eccentric orbits – tiny slivers of matter that had rolled up into little balls and wished the rest of the universe would just bugger off and stop staring. When the Humans arrived here they settled on one of them and (in polite company) called it Home. Since it was a frontier world where roughing it was a way of life, there was very little at all to laugh at. So one bright sun-um, *day* – they called the star *Ramalama* – and named the two tiny moons of their new home *Ding* and *Dong*. (This is something of a local joke.) Since that time, *Deanna* flourished and prospered to become the bustling third rate colony it was today, which in case anyone is wondering, was a bright February morning in the year 2179.

Twenty odd years ago, the first colonists set up their basic settlements, which were cut from the wood of the local forests. Over time, these four little settlements became towns, which spread with the rapidly growing population, to form the urban sprawl now called

*Atro City.* This medium sized city was the largest on the planet. Deanna's prime business was mining Lantillium, which was used to line blaster emitter barrels and the cores of warp engines. (And to a lesser degree, to line the special coffee cups and jugs used to serve Hot Stuff Blend.)

As the entire basis of trade and commerce in the known universe (other than actual money) was interstellar transport, it was fairly obvious to anybody who saw the mine dumps on the equatorial plains of Deanna that it was a very important activity. Very large loderunner transports would arrive to pick up megatons of ore for shipping to other nearby colonies whose main business was ore processing and manufacturing, while also delivering cargoes of consumer goods and luxuries from other places within the Terran Empire. Needless to say, with a population of over two million, Deanna had other activities as well.

According to the Galactic Tourist Guide, Deanna was a prolific tourist destination – having miles of white sandy beaches, bright clear sunny skies most of the time, with only a gentle breeze and hardly ever a storm.

For the gaming fishermen there was the *Whatoosie River* and its native *cocka-snoek*, the main game fish of the resident *Skegg's Valley Dynamite Fishing Club*. *Cocka-snoek* were wily and tough and rather too bright for mere fish. You wouldn't catch much with a rod around here. Many inexperienced visitors would find the bait stolen from their hooks, which punctuated the discovery that their lines had somehow got snagged and tangled irretrievably around some underwater obstruction – sometimes tied together with neat little bows. Often several direct hits with hand grenades were needed to stun the creatures long enough just to catch them, gut them and fry them, but these former military types had become experts at it. For a modest fee, tours could be arranged via the booking office, which included an overnight stay on the banks of the river where one could drop off to a great night's sleep after a satisfying meal of *cocka-snoek* done on an open fire, and the sound the bits of shrapnel made rattling in your stomach.

The Landlocked Ocean was shallow, fresh and filled with all manner of interesting native life forms. The most popular of these was the shoals of *braking dolphins* that frolicked in the fresh shallow waters of the Greater Equatorial Fishbowl. These were small hand-sized marsupial creatures very similar to Terran dolphins. They were warm

blooded semi-intelligent air-breathers. People would come from light years around to see the endearing little creatures swimming in the blue ocean of Deanna. Their pouches tended to slow them down quite a bit, and sometimes the tourists would be treated to the sight of a shoal of *braking dolphins* actually swimming backwards in the strong current – making a spectacular underwater display when they accidentally swam through the tour boats' propeller. They were too small to train them to retrieve mines or torpedoes, but somebody did once train a few to retrieve unexploded hand grenades in the *Whatoosie River*, with predictable results.

As far as weirdness was concerned, Deanna was probably the centre of the universe. This was very probably the only place where Chicken Little would be right at least once a year. Its main claim to fame was having a small moon that occasionally fell out of orbit, usually at awkward moments – like when lots and lots of people were watching. The smaller of the two moons, known as *Ding*, was only about fifty feet around and consisted of solid titanium and was also a known hazard to shipping. The Department of Tourism kept putting it *back* again, never getting it *quite* right. It seemed it was scarcely back in its low orbit than some careless pilot would knock it down again. Sometimes it would take up to four large space tugs to put it back into



its low orbit – but only *after* the Tourist Office had spent some quality time polishing the marks and scratches off it. (Can't afford to have a shabby moon with *fingerprints* all over it, can we? I mean, what if someone *saw*?) Its larger sibling, *Dong*, is about a kilometer in diameter has been described as a large piece of nothing much with a flag planted on it.

Deanna was an interesting place for anyone to live, bearing in mind the word 'normal' only means 'statistically prevalent' or even 'demographically dominant'. What was demographically dominant on Deanna was jeans, boots and tweed shirts. Cowboy hats kept the heat of Ramalama off your head if you didn't want to look like yesterday's bacon 'n beans before you turned thirty. Anybody who was anybody drove fancy hydrogen powered SUV's and ATV's. Everybody else had plain old electric Jeepo's or used public transport or walked.

Where would tourism be without a little luxury and a taste of night life? There were several cities on Deanna, all moderate in size, but the largest was the capital, Atro City. For the connoisseur of fast-foods Albrechts' famous hotdogs and coldcats were sold fresh from his stall (Albrecht's Takeaways) on Lupini Square (For the sake of his own

mental health he had temporarily removed Hot Stuff Blend from the menu); it was home to Atro City University, which taught everything from algebra and make-up application to advanced stamp collecting; and it was also home to the planet-famous bounty hunter – Beck the Badfeller. Beck was a legend in his own lifetime. If Deanna had any folklore, then Beck the Badfeller was one of its main features. He was the local version of Robin Hood, the *Davy Crockett* of Deanna. The Local rumor mill had it he was so good he could find the missing day in a leap year.

*Beck the Badfeller* might be the best bounty hunter on Deanna, but if you were looking for a private investigator, then *Timaset Skooch* was your man. Timaset Skooch was a former Sheriff's Office Deputy in Atro City. After seven years of getting shot at for not much money, he decided it was time for a change. He did get paid better than when he was a Deputy – but not as regularly. Sometimes lately, he even got shot at for free. *Hmm*. He supposed that was the trade off.

It was a mild winter's evening in '*Japp's Saloon and Speakeasy*', in the northwest corner of the only legal red-light area of the city. (The S.O.D.s believed in crime management.) Timaset Skooch leaned back in the aluminum framed chair, checking his cards carefully while

wearing his best poker face. Across the table from him sat *Jonn Deire*, a large man who was trying very hard to out-poker face him and who didn't enjoy jokes about his name much. Three other men were sitting on the other sides of the table, opposite each other. One was a man called *Gary Beck* and the other was a gentleman who went by the name of *Peeping William*. *Jimmy Skoda* was tall and lanky and lost in the world of cards for the moment, while William seemed to be holding something behind his back, with his cards lying face down on the table. He had a rather bored expression on his scarred old face, which had a shadow on his forehead cast from the paint stain on the lamp shade above the table. It was shaped rather like the head of an obsidian crow. Gary Beck didn't like obsidian crows much. (One had got him killed once, but that was another story.)

"Your turn, Will." Said Beck cheerfully. "*Oh, sorry.*" Beck reached across the table laden with playing cards, cash and whisky glasses to pick up Peeping William's cards, and played for him. "*Oh-kay – sorry, nothing there this time, Will!*"

Peeping William was a wanted man and Gary Beck was the bounty hunter that found him – which brings us to why Will was looking

slightly bored. Peeping William was arrested by Beck over an hour ago, and was forced to wait while Beck finished another card game with his hands cuffed securely behind his back. Well, at least Beck was nice enough to let him play a hand or two, figuratively speaking. Will just grumbled something and rolled his eyes.

“C’mon bounty hunter – I ain’t got all day!” Grunted Deire.

“My turn again?” said Gary and put down a four of blacks. “Sorry.”

Ignoring the apology, the surly Jimmy Skoda plonked down a four of reds.

Jon Deire picked up eight yellowed and dog-eared cards from the pile, grumbling ‘*garrn*’ under his breath, while chewing on a frazzled looking toothpick. Skooch threw down a five of reds and said nothing. There was an impatient pause as the players waited for Beck to remember he had to play for Peeping William, who was still grumbling softly and rolling his eyes at intervals.

“Sorry, Will.” He said, dropping a five of yellows. Then he threw in one of his own, a seven of yellows. Skoda followed with a nine and scratched his overgrown chin thoughtfully, eyeing the kitty lying in the middle of the table. There was plenty of money there, as far as small-

time casual gamblers were concerned. For Skooch it would help keep the wolves away for a few weeks. The kitty got off it, stretched and yawned before lazily dropping off the edge of the table. Undisturbed, the players continued. Jonn Deire began tapping his fingers on the table rather nervously. Well, this was the moment of truth for Timaset Skooch who was next in line, wondering how fortune would favor him. Deire played a nine of blacks. There was an almost indefinable click as something slotted into place for Skooch, who dropped the eight of blacks on the pile. He cried out elatedly.

“How about that – *Uno!*”

“Oh, damn – *Uno again!*” Jonn Deire exclaimed, slapping his cards down on the table in disgust.

“The pot is mine, I believe!” Said Skooch, joyfully reaching for the pile of notes and coins as the assembly of players and spectators began to break up.

“Gentlemen.” Said Jimmy Skoda, getting up to leave.

Seeing a sneaky movement from the corner of his eye, Beck the Badfeller reached across and pushed Peeping William back into his chair.

“Not you, Will!” he said. “I’ll be with you in a minute.” Then he looked directly at him, smiled and said “Great game, Tim. Still, take it easy – you can’t win ‘em all, eh?”

“No, I certainly can’t!” agreed Skooch, grinning back. “Say hi to Mei for me.” His acquaintance Gary Beck, aka Beck the Badfeller rose and helped Peeping William out of his chair.

“Sure. And you say hi to Dory, ‘k? C’mon Will – let’s get you to the Sheriff. I need a cold one.”

“Yippee.” Said Will, brimming over with enthusiasm.

Timaset Skooch reached across the table and packed the notes together. He counted them out too. Seven thousand credits! Then he scooped the coins and the (ugh) gold tooth into an empty glass for the waitress. *Seven thousand credits!* But *what* was the plastic slip under it all?

“What the heck is *this*?” he asked, reading it. Jonn Deire sat across the table from him, his eyes red-rimmed and moist. The big man seemed to be dissolving from the inside.

“That’s the ownership papers fer ma’ pride an’ joy.” He said in a shaky voice. “The *Celeste*. That’s ma’ ship – ah knew ah shouldn’a bet ‘er. She’s yures now.”

Skooch stared, shocked. “You bet your *ship*? On a game of *Uno*? *What for?*”

“Ah needed the money! Ah had a few debts to pay off.” Deire said, subdued. “Ah didn’t think Ah’d really *lose*.”

He thought about it for a minute. The kitty was only around seven thousand give or take a gold tooth and some coinage – minus the ship – which must’ve been worth well, a *lot* more than seven thousand, even in scrap metal. An alarm was going off somewhere, faintly.

“What the hell am I going to do with a *ship*?” He said, slumping in his seat. He passed the document over to Jonn, who looked at him as if he were mad. “Here, I don’t want it. I can’t take your livelihood. You have that back!”

“*You don’t want mah Celeste?*” Deire said, glowering. Skooch realized he might has well have just called the man’s darling little sister a two-bit counter-clockwise thigh-scrubber from North Lugaluru. “Ah *lost* her to you, Mister Skooch - *fair an’ square!*”

*Okaay*. He noticed the area of empty space which had started to grow around them. He had unwittingly offended the man's sense of honor. And he was a *big* man. Taking the document back, he started looking it over. Under the grime and stains of ages past, it read: '*Terran Merchant Fleet Registration Certificate*'. Somewhere in the spaces indicated below were the name of the owner – one *Jonnulass Mc Watt Deire* and the technical specifications of the particular vessel. It was a *Rotanga* Class loderunner, first commissioned in 2068, certified to carry cargo and passengers with a total not exceeding blah, blah, blah.

"But it's a hundred and twelve years old!" He protested.

"She still works pretty good." Deire maintained. "Stardrive gets a mite twitchy at warp 4, but that's just a dodgy plasma injector."

Timaset didn't need a ship – especially not a flying museum piece! And as far as he knew, a dodgy plasma injector could drop you smack into a wormhole ending somewhere on the other side of the universe. Well, he could always sell the damn thing. He could use the money. Damn, he could *always* use the money! Maybe the crew would want to buy it over from him?



“What’s the catch?” Skooch asked. There had to be one. There was *always* a catch. Just like contracts and catches – there’s a loophole *somewhere*. You might not see it because it’s lurking somewhere in the small-print, looking at you with its beady little yellow eyes. There’s always a loophole. Sometimes it’s the one that slips around your neck and strangles you.

“No catch.” Said Deire. “On mah honor!”

Perhaps it was some kind of blessing in disguise? ‘*Yeah, right*’ a small imaginary figure with horns and a pitchfork whispered in his ear.

“Well, all right then.” Said Timaset Skooch at last, shrugging.  
“Thanks.”

“She’s parked at the space port, Bay 227.” Deire said, rising. “Ah’ll have mah things cleared out by tomorrow noon.”

“I’ll come around sometime then.” Said Skooch numbly as the dejected man walked out. Well, all right then. Pocketing his winnings for the evening, Skooch rose and waved at the barman on his way to the exit. As he drew level with the doorway, he slowed cautiously and paused a moment. Most guys who had just won seven grand in a card game in a dingy low class bar would stand a fairly good chance

of getting mugged as soon as they set a foot outside. But not Timaset Skooch. His reputation tended to provide him some protection. The denizens of the red-light district gave him a wide berth, unwilling to tangle with him... And that was possibly the last thought that passed through his mind before the world around him exploded into constellations of stars and other assorted bright lights.

When he finally awoke, lying in a puddle of his own drool, the first – ok, maybe the *second* thing to hit him, was that he was still alive. And that it was probably worse than being dead. But only because being dead probably didn't hurt quite so much. While pulling himself together and taking stock, he discovered that he'd been robbed. Money, all gone – the ship's papers – no, damn – he still had that! The only thing in his coat was him and the deeds to nothing much. Hmm, thieves with savvy. Fancy that. He was actually disappointed. He was convinced the thing was jinxed. His wallet was also missing. He had to get another one, but then what would be the point? He now had nothing to keep in it anyway. So now he was broke and he still had a ship to get rid of. Well, maybe he could recoup his losses that way. And he'd acquired a headache. Massaging the lump at the back of his head, he slowly made his way back to his Jeepo, now more determined to get rid of the damn thing than ever.

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Dorian Wintermuller was something of an enigma. At 27years, he was still not really what you might call gainfully employed. He was a qualified interior decorator and did the odd private contract now and again, but being a kind of new-age house-wife was less stressful. No, gainfully *un*-employed suited him better for now. It saved years on his life not having to fuss and fiddle – to say nothing of the stress involved in getting a client to understand the subtle differences between cerise and lilac. In the early 21<sup>st</sup> century there had been something of a second sexual revolution, carrying on where the original one had left off. First it was women’s liberation, followed by the gender equality revolution. People suddenly came in fruity new flavors of heterosexual, homosexual, bisexual, asexual and even omni-sexual – and of course, anything else in between that suited the individual. Not forgetting the transsexual and transgendered folk. Then followed a couple of new definitions like ‘metro-sexual’ which allowed ostensibly ‘straight’ men the freedom to be comfortable while dressed in funky styles, experiment with perfumes, make-up and nail varnish and even carry – um, man-bags. Everything available for the – um, *liberated* modern man. And that in a nut-shell more-or-less describes our friend Dorian. A guy with far too much good taste and style and sensitivity

to be content with blue jeans, a check shirt and 'old leather' after-shave. He had on a black silk shirt, brown slacks with silver zippers down the front and a pair of black, thick soled 'puppy squasher' ankle boots in the latest style. Thick gold chains encircled his neck and wrist, highlighting his long brown hair which was straight and cut in an elegant bob. There were a few rings too. Very camp. On the balcony where he sat, legs crossed, sipping at a tall thin glass of red wine while reading 'La Femme' magazine, he had a pretty good view of the back of Atro City University across an alley-way. Soft music played in the background as he heard the sound of a key in the front door.

"Honey, I'm homo." Came the sound of his partner's voice.

"Oh, Skoochy – that one's so old already." Said Dorian rolling his eyes and draining his glass. "Find another one, will you? Preferably something not quite so hurtful."

Tim disappeared past the open-plan kitchen, dropping his coat on the sofa as he passed.

"Got any band-aids?" He called out.

"Did you get rumbled again, darling?" Dorian called, showing concern as he rose and went inside to point out the little pack of band-aids in

the medicine cupboard in the bathroom that Tim was rummaging in. He'd dropped his t-shirt into the laundry already, and was standing with his back to him. He turned round and they embraced, his muscular arms encircling Dory's slim little waist, his slim little arms reaching round Tim's neck. Their closeness highlighted Dorian's petite and feminine build.

"You men," Dorian smiled up close, giving him a good view of his feminine features. "Couldn't find your own ass with a GPS!"

Tim laughed, and winced suddenly from his headache.

"I wouldn't need a GPS to find *your* ass!" He teased, knowing Dory's weakness was his misconception that his rear end was overweight. As with most of Dory's complexes, it was inaccurate.

"You're mean!" Said Dorian, feigning mortification. He withdrew his slender hand from Tim's hair, now wet with his blood and regarded it with distaste. "What happened?"

"Won seven thousand creds in a card game, then I got mugged."

He continued cleaning himself up as best he could, thinking a nice soothing shower and perhaps a nice relaxing evening with Dory over

a glass of wine and some dinner might cheer him up.

“And the money?”

“The money, Dory? What about me? I got my head bashed in.” He said, getting more serious. With Dorian it always came back to the material things. And no matter what, sometimes it was never enough.

“The money’s gone. But my head’s still here – a little dented, but okay. Not that you’d miss it, huh?”

“Oh, poor baby. Pain makes you grumpy.” Said Dorian, wiping the blood off his hands on a towel before leaving Tim to shower and clean and dress his wounds. ‘*That’s quite alright*’, he muttered under his breath. ‘*Do it myself.*’ A few minutes later he returned to the lounge area, to find Dorian relaxing on the sofa watching a local soapie with a fresh glass of wine. Popping some pain pills, he downed them with a glass of milk and slunk off alone to bed.

The next morning he woke up with Dory’s head on his chest. The soft smooth skin of her face was pressed against him. Her brown locks snaked across him, as did one slender arm. Pale morning light was filtering through the blinds over the window. S - *he* was fast asleep. He considered his life as it was. It wasn’t too bad; he had enough to

get by on. Okay, he was broke at the moment, but Dory owned the apartment and anyway, he had a credit card to take care of things like groceries and the odd luxury. Every so often he had to work like crazy to make a dent in the debt. And he had no issues about his gender or sexual orientation. Not really. He was comfortable and for the most part, he was happy with Dory. They'd been together for two years now. He had girlfriends – *real* girlfriends – before Dory, and had never intentionally fallen for her, but sometimes crazy things just happen. One night a guy goes to a new club, has a few drinks, meets a beautiful girl who completely blows his mind, and wakes up in a strange apartment next to her – and then she gets up to go to the loo, and pees standing up. And on the way out in a great hurry, he trips over her clothes and false boobs lying in a pile on the floor. What more could he say? He fell for a guy in drag and couldn't stop thinking about him. Shit happens. Being a private, um – dick, it was easy enough for him to find her again. She asked him to move in with her a little later. That was two whole years ago. All in all, taking stock, he was happy. Poor, dented – but happy.

His thoughts turned to his current situation. He still had the ownership papers of some decrepit old cargo ship in his jacket pocket. Thinking back to the previous nights happenings, he was sure it heralded bad

luck – but only if he kept it. An old ship was like an old Jeepo. If you held onto it long enough you ended up working just to keep up with the repairs. And then you spent all your dosh on the darned thing and ended up taking a bus to work. Perhaps he could turn this thing around? Get rid of it and bank the money? Hell, he never spent any money on it – theoretically, if he sold it for just five cents it would be a profit! There had to be a way he could get rid of it for more than that! A *lot* more than that!

His head hurt as he sat up, throbbing. Dory moaned softly as he slowly got out of bed, and turned over. He gave Dory a long tender look. He knew it wasn't perfect, but they had something good together. Dory stopped having wild nights on the town and getting beat up by nasty men, and he had someone to go home to. Somewhere where he felt loved and wanted and useful – even if he just came home with empty pockets and a hole in his head. At least he came home. And most of the time she was glad to see him, even when he came home the other way round. And it seemed to be working out for them. Sometimes she would still dress up for him. Mind you most of Dory's wardrobe was so middle-of-the-road; it was sometimes hard to tell if he was a guy or a girl. But then again, Dory liked it that way. Money was important to Dory, but he guessed – he



*knew* he was important to he- him too. Dory loved him in his own little way. If he didn't, he wouldn't be waiting up for him – he'd be out on the town. And he knew Dory hadn't done that in a long time. It was in Timaset Skooch's line of work to know things like that. In fact, he'd long ago stopped checking up on her activities and decided to just let it be. They had trust, and that said something about what they had. Struggling out of his usual morning gender-confusion downward spiral, he shook his head to clear the cobwebs, regretting it instantly. He groaned, and yawned, dragging on some clean clothes from the laundry basket by the door of the en-suite. The loud cartoon boxer shorts disappeared inside his black jeans.

"God, I need some coffee." He groaned in a gravelly morning voice. Hoping for a cuppa java to materialize by his elbow was pointless. Dory stirred, rustling the sheets as he turned over. He smiled at her. "Morning, hon."

Dory smiled, eyes closed. When they opened, he saw their lovely green shade, surrounded by lovely long black lashes. He almost went weak at the knees. He loved green eyes like that. Like Dory's.

"You going to work?" He asked in a soft, far-away morning voice. "Want some breakfast?"

“Yup.” He replied, dragging on his shoe laces. “And nope. It’s okay, I’ll get something on the way. Got to check something out. I’ll be back later.”

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Atro City Space Port was a rather large facility, with a huge concrete tarmac where smaller and sometimes medium sized ships would land and park. One side of the mac, the side closest to the highway, where it was visible, was almost always parked up – packed with cargo and small private ships. It looked like a really, really big airport, which in essence it was. The terminal buildings were enormous – an extensive complex of offices, baggage and cargo processing systems, storage areas, passenger waiting areas, even a medium sized hotel. There were also bars, coffee shops and stores of all kinds. He parked his Jeepo in the huge parking garage basement under the main building, worked his way through security and, once inside the complex fifteen minutes later, got a taxi to take him out to Bay 227. Flat bed and container transporters rumbled past them as they conveyed cargo to and fro along the service routes between the ships and the terminal. About four minutes later, he was delivered to where his new acquisition stood parked, one little sardine in the can, a ship

amongst hundreds of others, nearly identical in shape color and design.

The *Celeste* turned out to be a rather shiny little ship. Battered and dented, even scratched and scraped here and there, but definitely shiny. From the look of her, it seemed she'd run into *Ding* at least once. The tired old hull glinted brightly in the morning *Ramalama*. The skids were shiny new titanium upgrades, quite possibly the loderunner equivalent of a set of shiny new mags on a street rod. Yup. If this was a street rod, they would be spinners. One of them had a ground clamp on, which told Tim a few things. Firstly, that the space port authority was obviously not too enamored of the *Celeste*, its owners or crew, and secondly, the ship wasn't going anywhere. Not till it was removed. And that cost something. Usually money. 'Lovely', thought Timaset Skooch from where he stood at the foot of the main ramp at the bow of the ship. He hoped his new acquisition didn't also have neon lighting around the number plates, or those annoying little blue lights on the windscreen washer nozzles. Ultra-violet light tubes on the undercarriage were a definite no-no. He suppressed an involuntary shiver as the taxi pulled off, leaving him behind to face this nightmare on his own.

“Mister Skooch!” Greeted a booming voice. It was coming from up the ramp. Jonn Deire was standing there, in a pair of old denims and a tweed shirt, the dark maw of the ships’ hold looming behind him. The shape of the mans’ overgrown beard indicated that he was smiling. “Welcome aboard!”

“Thanks.” Said Tim, before adding under his breath, “I think.” He shook hands with the man tenuously. He was led up the ramp and inside, where he could see stacks of crates in the hold, which ran the length of the ship. One or two corridors crossed the open space where they adjoined the two sides of the ship, where, presumably, all the other places on the ship were. It wasn’t very neat or well packed. Even he could see that, and he’d never even been aboard one of these before. All sorts of detritus littered the deck. He checked the undersides of his shoes.

“Oh – um, sorry ‘bout that, mister Skooch.” Deire apologized sheepishly. “Sometimes we carries cattle.”

Assuring Deire that it was all right and his shoes needed a clean anyway, he let the man lead him deeper into the belly of the whale and more of the same. The corridor was narrow and grey. The sides were dull and not very clean, the carpets, where there were any, were

frayed and worn. Stuff seemed to have been trodden into them, stuff the autocleaner droids couldn't get out again. *They did have autocleaners, didn't they?* Frankly, saying that the ship seemed to be showing her age would've been a gross understatement. It was flaunting it, in fact.

"Red-horned wildebeest!" Deire continued, "You know, we have to pack 'em in real tight, or they fall over! You know what a mess that would make!"

"You must have a real ace cargo-master." Tim commented, tongue-in-cheek.

"Had." Said Deire, pausing to give him a regretful look, before adding by way of explanation: "G.F.B. got him."

"?" said Tim, giving him a blank look.

"Grezakian Flame Bird."

"Oh." He said, getting the picture. "Sounds nasty."

"It was, mister Skooch. It was." Said Deire sadly. "Killed Wang, badly damaged three containers next to the cages too. Owners had to claim

from insurance. Nasty business. Took days to collect all the bits and send them home. You have any idea what it costs to send human remains via courier these days?”

“Not really.” Tim admitted.

“And that smell! Stays with ya a long time, mister Skooch. Whole crew wanted danger pay after that – *and* asbestos suits. Y’have any *idea* what that cost me? An’ funny thing is, nobody wanted to take over as cargo-master.”

“Yeah, that is kinda funny.”

Tim had seen a Grezakian Flame Bird once, in the Atro City zoo, just once. It was shortly before the Exotic Birds Wing had to be rebuilt for the second time. They reminded him of the stories he’d heard about dragons as a boy. The head of the thing sort of hinted at one, looking for all the world like a giant lizard on two legs, but with bright blue feathers, not scales – which were always a little singed around the nostrils and beak and other more delicate places – which were usually bright pink, like the thing had been grazing on raw chilies all week long. Small scrawny wings sat high up on its back and seemed to do little more than fan the flames than anything else. It had raw acetone

for blood, and walked around the surface of its home planet, Grezak Prime, eating raw chemicals and crapping crude plastic explosive everywhere it went. Its breath was noxious, and its hiccups deadly. Its coughs were feared by even the hardest and athletic cargo-master or zoo-keeper. To say nothing of the um, flatulence. He'd seen an experienced zoo-keeper run once, flat-out too – at the mere hint of it. His young assistant hesitated. Vaporized, poor kid. He'd long ago made his mind up that if he ever saw a zoo-keeper running he'd try his level best to keep up. Silent and deadly had nothing on it. When angry, the bird could incinerate a full-grown man in seconds at a range of twenty feet. Sometimes even on purpose. Aim was the thing. Lucky they were mostly docile and peaceable. Mostly. And that was just the female of the species. The males just moped around, looking for females mostly, and suffering acute indigestion and passing gas. For the most part they did nothing more menacing than sleeping all day and blowing smoke-rings from both ends. Trouble is they were far too nervous and had a dangerous tendency to explode without warning. *'Something to do with the plumbing'*, Deire told him. *"Heartburn!"* He said, and then nearly choked in his own spittle laughing about it. He knew Deire wasn't kidding. He'd heard the male birds could explode with the force equivalent to ten

kilograms of C4 plastic explosive. He'd be running too, trying to catch up with the cargo-master and zoo-keeper.

Unbelievably, some idiots got it in their heads the creatures made good pets. Kind of in the same way that other idiots keep lions and leopards as domestic pets. It's an image thing, being in apparent control of such a large powerful creature with an aura of inherent fatality about it. They would invite friends and prospective business partners round to show off. Then one morning the maid comes in and the big cat's lazing on the couch looking well-fed and the only bit that she can find of the boss is something that might be used as an ashtray. But in the case of the G.F.B. the maid would be sweeping what was left of the boss into a dust pan while swearing under her breath about the extra-terrestrial bird crap all over the lounge tiles. That, or she would open the front door and fall into the crater that used be the lounge. G.F.B's didn't eat people, but they certainly had a reputation for killing them.

"O'course I still wonder how the hell Wang came to be here at that time of night – an' tied to the cage too. We found bits of burned rope among the ashes and bits on the bars. We kinda figured it musta been kinky sex."



“Kinky s –“ Tim repeated, his voice trailing off in disbelief.

“Real funny accident.” Deire continued unperturbed. “We just never found out who with. Even Bubba was upset about it – an’ there was no love lost between him an’ Wang ah’ll tell yer. Real funny thing.”

“Yeah.” Tim agreed, making a mental note to keep an eye on Jimmy, whoever he was. “Real funny.”

A centrally located elevator connected all three levels of the chambers to the sides of the cargo hold. It was worn, dirty and the doors looked like they had been kicked repeatedly from the inside, possibly by a small elephant with bad toothache. The car computer was semi-intelligent, apparently, and like a sailor’s parrot had learned some of the crew’s lingo.

“STATE YOUR F\*\*\*ING DESTINATION PLEASE.” It said in a bored tone. “YOU ARE NOW AT THE F\*\*\*ING FIRST LEVEL. IF YOU DON’T F\*\*\*ING KNOW WHERE THE F\*\*\*\* YOU WANT TO GO, PLEASE REFER TO THE BLOODY SCHEMATIC AT LEFT, OR IF YOU ASSWIPES LIKE I COULD JUST BLOODY-WELL TELL YOU WHERE YOU CAN F\*\*\*ING GO. IF YOU DON’T WANT TO GO ANYWHERE THEN PLEASE JUST F\*\*\*\* OFF.”

He exchanged glances with Deire. As a former cop, he had just counted four distinct violations of the Civil Code and about three other misdemeanors. The schematic on the left side of the car next to the manual control panel was old and yellowed. After a moment of squinting, he realized it wasn't a schematic layout of the ship, but an old photo of some interstellar beauty pageant winner from years ago. It was stuck on with tape.

"That's a really unpleasant bot." Said Tim, more disturbed and unsettled than he'd been all day so far. He'd been sworn at and abused before and quite regularly. He took it as a matter of course, an occupational hazard - but somehow being abused by a computer was... *unnatural*, that's what it was. It was like being sworn at by his shaver. Deire opened his mouth, about to reply – but the computer beat him to it

"WELL, F\*\*\*\* YOU TOO, TUBBY – AND ALL THE CRICKETS ON YOUR GRASS!"

"*Garn!* Let's take the stairs!" Deire suggested, recovering himself. Tim followed him out again, leaving the manic computer to continue its tirade. Well, one thing was for sure, of all the faults he'd seen on this new ship of his, that one had to be the worst – and it was going to

have to be... um, *fixed* – if he wasn't going to be tempted into emptying his blaster into its command interface. And what the hell did it mean by '*tubby*'?

Must've been talking about Deire. The next stop was the Galley. Wasn't that an ancient kind of long canoe with oars? Timaset was no marine expert or even a space ship enthusiast, and had no idea why anyone would call a kitchen that. It looked reasonably clean and serviceable enough, despite the persistent smell of beans and cabbage. At least he couldn't see any cockroaches. It was small and had a door that led into the little dining hall adjacent that looked like it could accommodate maybe twenty people. The swing door had marks that looked like someone had used it for target practice with a meat cleaver. The dining hall had a wooden table that lost its veneer years ago and the top looked like it had been scoured with steel wool. There were words carved into it and marks that looked like someone had been sticking knives in it for a long time.

"Kill - the - cook." He read out slowly. "Jimmy - is - a - in-bred - bastard."

A stout looking man in black slacks, yellow golf-shirt and a faded white apron covered (presumably) in food stains had materialized at

Deires' right shoulder, looking like he was the proprietor of a low-grade diner.

"This is Jimmy." Said Deire, by way of introduction. "He's the cook – and the helmsman – that means he flies the ship." Deire did a quick imitation of a man holding a steering wheel. He fervently hoped the ship wasn't actually steered with one.

"I know what a helmsman does." Said Tim defensively. "I watched lots of *Star Trek*."

"Hell, that makes him the Exo I guess. Me an' the boys jus' call him Bubba."

'*Never trust a skinny cook*', he thought. Jimmy stood about a head taller than Deire. He had an ear ring and grey stubble and his hair was shaven, convict style. Over that he wore a Rebel bandana, tied pirate style behind his head. He didn't see a parrot. He did have a paunch though. The only thing missing was the chopper, though he did have a well-used cleaver in one hand and one stuck in his belt. Hmm. He made another mental note never to turn his back on the man.

"Bubba." He greeted.

“Howdy.” Said Bubba, chewing thoughtfully on a tooth pick.

Next came a brief tour of the engine room. It was small, cramped and the floor was littered with stuff. It looked sort of technical, electronic. A short, pale little man with thick glasses leered at them from within the depths of an inspection pit inside the warp reactor. The bright lighting just made the place look smaller.

“Don’t step on that, man!” He warned in a squeaky voice. “Not unless you want to be stuck on this f\*\*\*\*ing planet, like, forever!”

“That’s Jimmy-Jo Jackson. We call him Triple-J” Said Deire. “The only engineer I ever met who got thrown out of the Imperial Starfleet.”

“Really?” said Tim, almost too afraid to ask. “Why would that be?”

Deire waved his hands round the room, indicating the clutter on the deck.

“Yeah, well, seems his ship was about to attack some Ruminarii scavengers an’ – *this’ll killyer* – he’d bin drinkin’ y’see an’ his assistant y’see, his assistant challenged him how fast could he strip the engine. An’ as it turns out he was pretty damn fast – the warp engine y’see, the warp engine was all over the deck, *heh-heh* – kinda like *this!*” He

grinned, ducking as a hydro-spanner came whirring past them, making a sound like a helicopter. It clanged into the bulkhead behind them, leaving chip marks in the paint. Deire chuckled all the way as they beat a hasty retreat back into the corridor, followed by the sound of another warp drive alignment tool crashing to the floor.

“Assholes!” Jackson shouted after them. “It’s not my fault, what with everything you bastards put this engine through, man – you f\*\*\*ing pedestrians!”

“Little touchy, ain’t he?” Said Deire, still grinning.

“Hmm.” Said Tim in agreement, starting to worry again about just what he was getting himself into. He was taking stock. Decrepit ship, one. Really insulting computer, one. Crew: Let’s see – so far, he had one compulsive gambler, a deceased cargo master with no replacement forthcoming, a potentially homicidal chef with a fondness for cleavers, and an anal retentive engineer with (thankfully) lousy aim. ‘*Wonderful*’ he was thinking, ‘*And the winner is...*’

The bridge of the Celeste was small, unimpressive and disappointingly so. He expected blinking and flashing lights, but just about the only light aside from the one in the ceiling was the one that

told the pilot the handbrake was up, or something equivalent to that. At least there was no sign of a steering wheel anywhere. The centre seat where the captain was supposed to sit squeaked and wobbled. It was worn and shabby. When he sat in it, it listed a little to one side. A cup-holder had been crudely screwed onto one arm. There were beer stains on the faded and worn coverings. A large display screen took up much of the front of the small chamber. It was obviously turned off, because it was dark and dull. He tilted his head a little. It seemed a little skew. Deire dutifully informed him that it was to compensate for the chair.

He was about to ask: "Why not just fix the damn chair?", when he paused intuitively, then added under his breath, "Nevermind."

There were two small control desks up front, which Deire informed him were for the helmsman (funny imitation of man with steering-wheel again) and the general functions of the ship, including comms and remote control of the loading gear on the cargo deck (which hadn't worked in about sixteen years) and so on. So much for the bridge. There was no Captain's ready-room or anything. He was rather disappointed, but then it wasn't a military ship after all. It was just a private cargo vessel, a loderunner. And there was no real

captain perse', just a skipper. A man with a Ticket to fly. And so the tour continued until it eventually ended in what was still Deire's cabin. It seemed he was a bit keen to leave, though not exactly in a hurry. His stuff had been packed into two large duffel bags lying by the door. Dark spots on the walls marked where picture frames had been removed. They were dark because there was less dust there. The carpet was still a little plush in places, but had been stomped flat for the most part. It was an ugly brown color which suggested dirt and heavy staining. He could only imagine what Dory, as a decorator, would have to say about it. Hmm. Or about the whole ship for that matter. Realizing he still had to tell her about it, he started wondering how exactly he was going to go about that task. He could remember one particular incident when Dory threw a hissy-fit that left a pile of broken plates and glasses in its wake. Lucky for him, Dory's aim wasn't too good. Lucky for Dory, he was quick on his feet.

They sat down at a small table with a bottle and two glasses on it. He checked the label. It was *Falling Sherry*, a recent addition to the local liquor stores, named after the incident that had taken place about a year previously, when an orbiting cargo ship dropped a superkeg of Samorian sherry onto an invading Ruminarii warship that landed at the space port. Square on target too. It went clean through the



aliens' hull and burned so brightly it could be seen from orbit, effectively ending the invasion. Amazing, the entrepreneurial spirit on Deanna. 100 proof, in fact.

"So tell me the truth." said Timaset at last, savoring the powerful aroma of the el cheapo hooch as he allowed it to dribble down his tingling throat. "Why didn't you just sell the ship?" He asked, suppressing a cough.

"I did try." Said Deire. "But honestly, mister Skooch – would you buy it?"

Tim hesitated.

"There – you see? There's yer answer. Not a single taker! Not a one!"

"Hmm." He said. Deire had a point. Theoretically he wasn't bound to take ownership of the thing, but one thing was clear – he needed some bucks, just one lucky break. Perhaps this could be it. Maybe he could get rid of it somehow, in a way that was profitable. Just one lucky break, that's all he needed.

"So does this thing actually work?" He asked poignantly.

“Does she *work*?” Deire repeated in a way that reminded him of the prior comment re his sweet little female sibling from North Lugaluru.

“Course she does!” He piped down a little, then added, ad nauseum:

“Well, if Jackson puts the engines back together, she will!”

“Hmm.” Said Tim, sipping again from the small grubby glass.

“An’ if he remembers to put everything back *right*!”

“Okay.”

“An’ if we can get that lousy ground clamp off!”

“If, if.” Said Tim in a tone bordering on sarcasm. “If the ocean was whisky, a lot of people would die of alcohol poisoning.”

“Mister Skooch.” Deire grinned madly, showing off his set of perfect teeth. “If the ocean was whisky, I’d be one o’ them!”

“Okay. I’ve been wondering about that ground clamp. So what’s that all about?”

“Oh, jus’ a small disagreement between me an’ the harbor-master.”

Said Deire quickly, avoiding his eyes.

“How small?” asked Tim.

“Oh, jus’ a thousand credits. Parkin’ fees, you might say.”

Silence settled on the two men, as they pondered things.

“Got any plans?” asked Tim.

“Well, I thought seeing as you’re the new Boss, I’d jus’ move down the hall an’ find me a new pozzie.”

“So you’re staying on then?”

“The Celeste’s mah home.” Said Deire. “Besides you’ll be needin’ a skipper. Where else should I go?”

Hmm. Where else indeed? Well, he knew where *he* had to go. Home, to try and explain the whole thing to Dory. In a way that actually made sense. If there was such a way. Then, on the way back from the hospital, he would have to get a few things together, probably for a short trip. Or maybe even a long one, depending on how Dory saw things. Taking leave of Jonn Deire, the Celeste and, very possibly his senses, he boarded another taxi and left.

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“Have you gone completely mad?” Timaset had never seen Dory’s nostrils flare quite like that before. Well, okay, maybe he had – but that was in the heat of passion – and *then* he didn’t feel quite as nervous as he did now. Or as threatened. He came home and told her about the whole business with the card game, the loderunner and everything. She’d taken it quite well so far. At least he was still standing and the cupboard containing the frying pans (and the knife drawer) were still closed. He was keeping a clear path between him and the front door anyway, just in case. He tried to sugar coat it with the whole *schpiel* about how much he loved her and how he was going to do this for *them* and how much *they* could make out of just one trip. But she just got mad anyway. Not that Dory was possessive or anything, she just hated being apart from him for long. That and having her routine disrupted. He sometimes tended to think it was more of the latter than the former, but that was usually just when he was recovering from one of their block-famous fights. Old Mrs Ransom across the hall once boasted she was going to sell tickets – or ‘ring-side seats’ as she put it. Of course the best thing about the fights was when they made up again. (Which was also something Mrs Ransom wanted to sell tickets for, but would *never* get the chance.)

“I’m getting a little tired of getting my head bashed in every other day, Dory.” He argued. “This is the only way. Unless I win the Lotto. And I’ve tried the Lotto.”

“So leaving me to go gallivanting across the galaxy is the way to make money now? As if your regular job isn’t dangerous enough!” She fumed.

“It’s just one trip, Love. People strike it rich in space all the time. This way I won’t have to be a burden on you all the time.”

“So the idiots you got the ship from are rolling in it, are they?”

Well no, not exactly, he thought. They were rolling in it, actually. Just that the ‘it’ in question wasn’t money. She sighed, sitting down on the couch, shifting the cushions as she did so.

“Oh Skoochy, you’re not a burden. We get by okay, don’t we?”

“Sure we do.” He said, and sat beside her. She draped one arm around his shoulders. “But I don’t want to have to keep getting shot at just to make a living. Sooner or later they’re going to get lucky.”

“You could get lucky.” She said at last, giving a tired little smirk. “You

could be my hubby.”

*Hmm*, he thought. He could become Mister Wintermuller. Or Dory could become Mrs – um, Mister Skooch. Now *that* would give the Most Righteous Reverend Ramsley Valcovar at the local Reformed Puritan Church a case of the absolute dingles. He might even have a relapse and go back to the Willow Gardens Resort for the Temporarily Insane for another – um, *holiday*. And that would be a *real* tragedy.

“My hubby. A kept man. I’d have you all to myself. You won’t *have* to work. You don’t even have to *now*.”

“Oh yes I do.” He grinned back, interrupting her. “Besides as things are, you get to keep me all to yourself anyway.”

“Good.” She said quietly, moving her arm slowly out from behind him. He froze, a suspicion forming in his mind. There was a dull *bong* sound as she lightly tapped him on the head with a large frying pan. He winced.

“Where’d that come from?” He asked. She smiled, dropping it softly on the carpet at his feet.

“A girl has her secrets.” She said. “Says so in the rule book.”

“But you’re not a girl, Dory. Not exactly.” Thankfully she’d already discarded her weapon. He regretted the words almost instantly, not because they were true, but because of the hurt look he saw in her eyes. The illusion was important to her. And he wanted her to be happy.

“Some day I will be.” She said looking away before adding: “With or without you.”

He was aware of Dory’s desires and plans, but the whole thing just perplexed him as it usually did. It was complicated enough just having a meaningful conversation with her about *anything*, let alone *this*. The he-him-her-she thing always gave him a headache. Perhaps it would be good for their relationship if Dory stopped being a boy and became a girl. An *actual* girl. They were pretty good with things like that nowadays, doctors. He once had a colleague in the S.O.D.s who lost an arm in a fire-fight with some bank-robbers. The medics just grew him a new one in their clone tanks. Two weeks later the guy was playing ping-pong like nothing happened. Imagine what they could do for Dory. He winced, getting a sudden stabbing pain in the nethers from the thought. His mind boggled. He wouldn’t have to face complicated pregnant silences when he introduced her at parties

anymore, for one thing. For another, he could stop having a complex about his orientation and she – well, she could live her life the way she always wanted. It was all just so... *strange* though. He took her hand.

“With.” He said at last, giving her hand a squeeze. “With.”

“You mean that?” She asked, blinking away the moisture in her eyes.

“Of course.”

Then they kissed, with passion and with love. After that the evening became something of a blur. Which is what normally happens when people have fun and time flies. Motion often distorts things. It’s all relative to how much fun you have. And wine too, wine sometimes does that sort of thing.

The next morning he left quietly without waking her. He had more business to attend to. Some distasteful business, in the rougher side of town. The industrial area of Atro City wasn’t the kind of place you went unless you really had to. Well, at least that’s how Timaset felt about it. He parked his Jeepo outside a run-down office beside a large junkyard. A burly looking man looking like a gorilla in a suit



grunted at him as he closed the front door behind him. A minute later he was shown into the boss's office.

Timaset Skooch disliked dealing with the criminal elements on Deanna. That wasn't to say he didn't mind collaring and busting criminal types – he was a career law-enforcer after all. But what he really, really detested was to have to ask one of them for a favor. And there were still a few who owed him favors. Giggling Harry was what some might call a big fish in a little pond, a small-time crime boss. A leader of a small enterprise that dabbled in this and that. Giggling Harry dabbled in shady imports. (Which co-incidentally, happened to be the name of his largest business enterprise. Shady Imports Inc.) And Giggling Harry was called Giggling Harry on account of what he did most of the time. He giggled. It was sort of a nervous tick. One that would suit any self respecting mad-scientist or any person on the verge of potential insanity. And yes, his name really was Harry.

He was a short tubby man with a bull-dog face. He habitually wore a hat and smoked thick stubby Mexicanna cigars. His favorite drink was Yin, from the rim-worlds somewhere west of the Southern Cross. At least, it was until Falling Sherry came along. A half empty bottle of the stuff stood on the desk in his untidy office. Harry pointed at it with

a nicotine stained forefinger.

“You wanna?” He asked in an unusually high pitched voice for someone of his build. Tim shook his head.

“No thanks.” The last thing on Deanna he felt like right now was some of that vile stuff, and no – not Yin and tonic either. Harry shrugged, drew deeply on his stubby cigar, and blew a purple smoke ring that slowly began to drift upwards and dissipate.

“What can I do fer yez?”

“I’ve acquired a ship, Harry.” He said. “I need a cargo.”

Harry giggled. “A ship? You leavin’ the law business, Skooch?”

“Law business is a bit slow on the pay side.” He countered. “Think I’ll try my luck in space for a while.”

Another short giggle. “Spacer now, eh? Hee hee hee. What you know about space, Skooch?”

Good point, he conceded silently to himself. Other than video games, movies and the fact that he’d traveled through space to Deanna as a young boy, he didn’t know terribly much about space travel. Or even

space commerce. When it came to it, he was a layman. *Sure, ask Dory, she'll tell you.*

"I'll try anything... once." Tim offered. "I just need a cargo. Just something to start me off."

"Cargo huh?" Harry said, thoughtfully. Then one ham-shaped fist came cashing down on the desk. A pile of papers slid over silently. "You t'ink I'm stoopid? I give you a cargo an' then you bust me? Get outta here!"

"No, seriously. I'm on the level!" Tim protested, meanwhile doubting how level he really was, going through with this in the first place. "Look Harry – you needed my help once, remember? And –"

"Yeah." Said Harry slowly. "Yeah! And you came t'rough f'me! That you did! Ok kid. It jus' so happens somebody I know needs a little cargo space. I'll set up a meeting, be at this place 2pm today." Said Harry, scribbling a note which he passed to Tim, following up with another little giggle. "But if yer screw me, ever'body gonna know what happens ta guys what messes with Harry Uiler!"

He read the note before folding it and stuck it in a pocket. He nodded.

“Thanks, Harry.”

*That* would be the part Tim hated about dealing with criminal types. That little threat part back there, the little bit at the back of the line that went ‘but’, ‘if’ and ‘screw’ and ‘mess’. It was indelibly etched in his memory and conscience. Especially the screwing part.

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A few hours later *Captain* Timaset Skooch was sitting in a rather dodgy looking bar close to Atrio City Spaceport, being offered money to transport two men to somewhere, as soon as possible, no questions asked. The arrangements were being made by a middle man with no neck and a tendency to smile a lot. He didn’t trust men with no necks. It usually meant they were connected in some other way. It also meant they would lose no sleep over having *his* body dumped over a steep cliff in the badlands at midnight, probably by someone else on the same payroll. The two men in question arrived, one a young-looking fellow – about eighteen or so, in a sand-cloak – which was rather unusual for Deanna, as most of the locals wore cowboy hats and the like. So, clearly this was not a local. His older companion wore a slightly wrinkled green metallic business suit and had white hair tied back in a neat short pony. The fact that he had not

one line or wrinkle on his face was somewhat disconcerting. Perhaps his pony-tail was tied too tight, he thought. The middleman grinned again, and introduced them (chronologically) as Misters Smith and Jones. *Hmm*. They moved in behind the table and sat beside their... friend. The boy sat quietly, observing the other patrons.

“So you’ll transport us to - where we want to go?” Jones asked.

“So where is that, exactly?” Asked Timaset.

“To an asteroid in the rings of Jupiter.” Said Jones, giving Tim a puzzling sort of look.

“*Jupiter has rings?*” Asked Tim, perplexed.

“Yes, actually – very faint ones – you have to look *really* careful like.”

“*Really?*”

“No – you need to take us to the *other* planet in that solar system that has rings. In fact it’s famous for them.”

“Oh. I see.” Tim said. “So what is it, some kind of local trouble?”

“Let’s just say we’d like to avoid any *Imperial* entanglements.” Said

the older one in a silky voice soaking in innuendo.

“Well that’s the trick, isn’t it?” He smiled back, thinking of a figure. “But it’ll cost you ten thousand, all in advance.”

“Think you can do it?”

“What? Take you and the kid here to an asteroid in the rings of – um, Jupiter?”

“No questions asked...”

“Um, right. No questions asked... Sure, Mister – *Jones*, was it? No problem.”

There was a niggling little feeling right at the back of his mind, where his subconscious was nudging him in the ribs, going *wink-wink*. This was all starting to look a little familiar somehow.

“Say, you haven’t got two droids with you by any chance?”

“No,” Said Jones blankly. “Just the two of us. Why?”

“Oh, no, nothing. Just a funny kind of feeling I had.” Said Timaset Skooch, getting up.

“Yes, I had one too.” Said Jones. “Sort of like someone walking over *your* grave, wasn’t it?”

“Something like that. Just more like de-ja-vu. Or something.”

“If this deal is distasteful to you, I’m sure there are plenty of *other* ships around who would be willing to take us where we want to go?”

Full of secrecy, Mistery Jones and Smith – and Mister No-neck leering over there, still grinning. He had an uneasy sort of feeling about this, it was like playing Politics with Nikita Krushchev (with points being awarded for the most backhanded insults delivered with the most unconvincing grins). But he could sure use the money – and perhaps he would get the chance to get rid of the bloody ship. Hopefully, somewhere along the line. Without anything nasty happening in the process. Well, to *him*, anyway.

“Okay.” Timaset agreed. “You’ve got yourself a ship. Mister Jones.”

“We want to leave as soon as possible.” Said Jones. Tim held out his hand. Jones gave No-neck a meaningful look and the leering man reached into his jacket pocket. He placed a weighty folded brown envelope in his outstretched hand. He unfolded it and had a look. It seemed the right amount. Good old Harry.

“No problem.” He said. “Be at Bay 227 in an hour. My ship is the Celeste.”

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With the cash in his pocket and one hand close to the blaster in his belt holster, Timaset Skooch went home to pack. Dory wasn't there. Disappointed, he went about packing what he thought he would need for about a month. He left her a brief note which he placed on her pillow. Feeling homesick already, he made his way to the office of the Harbormaster at Deanna Space Central. By the time he reached it, he was minus his blaster (which had to be handed in at Security) and under a security escort. The Harbormaster him or herself didn't see him personally, but his or her PA did, through a foot-thick plate-glass window. At least, he *thought* it was a window. It could've been some kind of display screen and the mousy little man on the other side could be in a secret bunker miles away somewhere else altogether. They communicated via an intercom. Security, security. The amount required to have the ground clamp released was 1040 credits exactly. Ouch. Lucky he had the money. He leafed the notes off, crisp clean (and he had no doubt, freshly laundered too) and placed them in the mechanical slot that opened in the counter top. A print out appeared



silently from another slot. A receipt. With a stylized cartoon obsidian crow giving a thumbs-up, saying 'Thanks, man!' at the top. 'Very cute.' He thought. And thus, more excited than he remembered being in the last few minutes, he left with the assurance the clamp would be removed forthwith – and with the butterflies in his tummy telling him he was excited about the trip. Ok, maybe the prospect of the trip. If the ship really did fly. And if that maniac in the ships' engine room knew his stuff.

Celeste was waiting outside. Shiny and old, bright but really scary, it stood there. A small droid that looked all wheels and arms was removing the grounding clamp from the front landing skid. Leaving the taxi, he went up the ramp, consoling himself that at least he got his blaster back and wasn't going in there unarmed.

His cabin was roomy but musty smelling. He dropped his bag on the bed. It didn't even bounce, but just landed with a muffled wooden blanketty sound. He pressed on it a few times to test it. The surface gave a little. Anybody hoping for a little bouncy-bouncy there was going to be disappointed. He presumed it was a good bed for people with back trouble. (And if you didn't already have back trouble, after a while, you would have.) A sound at the still open door made him turn.

It was Deire, leaning against the doorpost.

“Y’all settling in, Boss?”

Tim shrugged. “How far is that guy – uh, Triple-J? With the engine?”

“Nearly done, he said, shrugging back. ‘Bout an hour ago anyways. Why?”

“I got us a fare.” He said. “Passengers.”

“*Passengers?*” Cried Deire, nearly sliding off the doorpost with a look of total surprise on his furry old face. “Like, *boner fidey?*”

“*Bona fide* passengers.” Said Tim, beginning to unpack his bag.

“Two. They should be arriving soon.”

“Where’re they goin’?”

“The rings of Jupiter, apparently.”

“*Garn!*” Deire exclaimed.

“After that I figured we could head over to Mars and pick up some cattle to pay for the return trip. What do you think?”

“Sounds good t’me, Boss.” Said Deire. “Came to tell you though – there’s somebuddy outside wantin’ to see you. A lady.”

“A lady?” Tim repeated, making for the door. “Don’t know many of those. At the ramp?”

“Yup.” A puzzled sort of look crept over Deire’s face and he shook his head. “Jupiter has rings?”

“Apparently.” Said Tim going with it. “They say you’ve got to look really hard to see them.”

*“Garn!”*

“Yes, that’s what I thought too.”

As he turned the corner leaving his cabin, he overheard Deire’s voice saying with enthusiasm: “See Bubba – Ah told yer getting in some new blood would get us outta this mess!” He shrugged and went back outside. The visitor was Dory. And *hell!* She was dressed as Dory this time, a pretty brunette who fooled everybody who saw her and didn’t know her. *Really* know her. Perfect make-up and a perfect hair-do. She was wearing her short black skirt and a pretty floral Spanish top. The fish nets and short boots just did it for him. Then again, she

knew that. She was smiling at him, a coy little smile like the one that made him fall for her in the first place. He couldn't see any carefully concealed frying pans on her person. Not even a miniature one. A figure like hers just demanded frisking. *Down, boy.*

"I got your note." She said in a sweet, passable voice. She'd been practicing again. "So," she said after a long moment, "Are you going to show me around?"

That wasn't a good idea and went off pretty much as expected. Timaset managed to make it a rush tour by cutting out the worst bits. At least he managed to avoid the elevator, the cargo bay, the engine room and most of the (ugh) crew. That left the bridge, his untidy cabin and a short stretch of corridor with a stretch of half decent carpet. Needless to say, she was mortified, but said very little. Just a comment about how men like to 'rough it'.

"I'm not going to change my mind, Dory." He said calmly. "I've got to do this."

"I know, love." She said. "I didn't come to change your mind. I came to tell you I love you." She smiled, touching his face tenderly with one dainty hand. "And to tell you I'll be here, waiting."

“I’ll be back before you know it.” He smiled back. Their parting kiss was poignant and filled with longing. Just as she was leaving, the two passengers arrived. As the taxi carrying Dory vanished from sight, Timaset Skooch swallowed the lump in his throat, then turned and walked towards them. A small baggage conveyor droid was whirring along ahead of them, carrying their personal effects. Young Smith seemed distracted, and um, Jones virtually had to give him a smack to prevent him from tripping over the porter droid.

“Captain.” Said Jones, by way of greeting.

“*Mr. Skooch will do.*” Said Tim as he drew up to them. “I’m the owner. Mr. Deire inside is the skipper. Well, get your gear inside and let’s go. I think it’s best if you avoid the elevator, use the stairs instead.”

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A little while later, Deire introduced him to the two replacement crew members in the empty cargo bay. On a deep space voyage a ship’s doctor was essential. Or, at the very least, they needed a medic of some sort. He asked for a medic, but Jonn Deire had got him a fully fledged doctor.

“His name’s Nurse, Boss.” Deire giggled by way of introduction. “Don’t you get it? That’s his name – Nurse! *Doctor* Nurse!”

“So what?” Tim replied, a little embarrassed. “You were named after a tractor. What’s the big deal?”

Deire made a sudden retreat, grumbling under his breath as Tim stepped up to meet Doctor Nurse. Well, to be more honest, Barry Nurse wasn’t allowed to practice as a doctor anymore. Apparently he was removed from the Roll by the Medical Council who felt he’d spent enough time practicing and ought to have got it right by now. A hospital caught him burying a few of his mistakes and after a spell in *Lulu Penitentiary* he needed a job. As a medic he wouldn’t be required to do more than patch a few cuts or bruises, perhaps treat a bit of nausea or other tummy ailments brought about by Bubba’s cooking. No need for limb transplants or open heart surgery anticipated. Nurse was tall, thin and his hands were clean. He looked the part. Tim hoped he was. He didn’t want Nurse burying any mistakes around him.

“Welcome aboard, Doctor Nurse.” Said Tim, grinning as he shook the man’s hand carefully. “You’re lucky you weren’t a nurse, or perhaps your surname could’ve been *Doctor*.”

“Nice to meet you, Captain.” Said Nurse bluntly in the manner of someone who has already heard all the jokes and stopped thinking it was funny long ago. This just sent Deire into another fit of hysterics behind him.

“I’m the owner.” Tim explained pointing at Deire. “He’s the Captain.”

“Okay.” Nurse nodded.

“Any good at psychiatry?” He asked Nurse hopefully.

“Not really, Captain.” Said the new medic dryly. “I was a GP actually, but I was far better at autopsies.”

Tim nodded disappointedly. Bang, *splat* went that idea. If it had worked, it might’ve alleviated the apparent levels of blatant idiocy on the ship. Or perhaps merely explained it. Nevertheless, the autopsies might still be an option, especially if there were any more ‘accidents.’ At the same time it occurred to him his zoo had probably just acquired a new prime specimen of *Lunaticius Absurdicus*. He began seriously considering looking into a mirror to check if someone had written ‘*shit magnet*’ on his forehead.

“I’m the owner, not the captain.” Tim explained again, pointing at Deire. “*He’s* the skipper. And you are –?”

Their new cargo master was a really big lady by the name of Victoria Somers. She was tall and muscular and not very much on the feminine side. Her hair was short and by the look of her there was no doubt in Tim’s mind that she could do the job without having to ‘get a man to do it’. Deep voice too. To add to the confusion she insisted on being called Vic. So, smiling and shaking her hand, he welcomed her aboard. Afterwards, he considered adding an ‘e’ to the end of her handle.

“Thanks, Skipper.” She smiled.

There was a definite pause.

“Deire’s the skipper. I’m the – oh, fuck it.” He saw her looking at him in a way that made him think she was just teasing him. Oh well, he was tired of repeating himself anyway.

“Ok, how’s *Boss* then?” She suggested. “Is that ok?”

Definitely more lights on upstairs, he thought. Bit of savvy there.



“Sure okay, whatever floats your boat.” He smiled back.

So, there were Tim, Deire, Bubba, Nurse, Vic and Triple-J. Six onboard. That meant every profit had to be divided six ways. Heck, he couldn't afford to pay six salaries! But as the owner that meant *he* could claim the largest slice of the pie. That, or if he could afford it, he could just pay them salaries and charge them room and board. But he couldn't, so as soon as his piece was big enough to get out of this shit hole, he was going to sell them back their ship and bail.

As it turned out, the engines were already reassembled. All the lights on the control panels were green, so it seemed everything was installed properly. At least that's what Triple-J told him. A brief inspection of the engineering section revealed shiny baffle plates, blinking lights and funny little things that occasionally went 'beep' quietly. He got the distinct impression that if the Imperial Star Fleet had ships as old as this one, then this is how the engine room would look come inspection time. Even the little chromed nuts and bolts were gleaming. Even so, Tim wasn't too clued up on the nuts and bolts of space travel. Heck, he just barely knew about warp theory and such, in the same way that the average driver knows his car is powered by liquid fuel and not spirits. As it was, he barely knew

where to fill the hydrogen tank on his S.O.D. cruiser when he was on the force. As far as he was concerned, that's where *technical* people came in. What was important to him was that he couldn't see any obvious spare parts lying around, and no sparks flying anywhere in plain sight.

Triple-J was smiling madly and like most technicians, seemed dead keen to see what would happen when they fired up the thing they'd spent the last week working on. Tim reminded him that if anything (God forbid) went wrong and the engine did blow up or turn into a gravity well inside the engine room – *he* would have a front row seat.

“So what's that?” He asked Triple-J, pointing at a piece of equipment whose function was obscure to him.

“Primary field modulator control manifold.” Triple-J replied automatically.

“What's it do?”

“Uh –“ Said the engineer. “In simple terms, it's part of the cooling system – it helps to stabilize the temperature of the warp plasma injectors.”

“Okay.” Said Tim, trying to look like it meant something significant to him. “And that?”

“Interpolating generator unit.”

“W-“

“Generates the opposing magnetic fields that separate the matter-anti-matter fuel mix.”

“Uh-“

“If it fails at warp speed, people in *Proxima Centauri* will wonder where that pretty new star came from.”

“Great.” Said Tim, finally managing to complete a whole word. “And that?”

“That? It’s a baffle plate.”

“Why do they call it that? What’s it do?”

“Dunno – but it baffles the hell outta me, man.”

Right, then.

Over an hour was spent checking remaining things on the pre-launch check list. Like fuel, for example. There was still plenty of it, so luckily Tim wouldn't have to dip into the remaining nine grand to fill 'er up. At least not yet. Food and water stocks were also at acceptable levels. Everything seemed okay. With all the doors closed, the old hull even passed the pressure test with flying colors. The only thing that went 'pop' was Timaset Skooch's eardrums. Eventually, the main suspects were sitting at their respective positions on the bridge. The off-centre view screen was all lit up, showing the vast parking lot outside. Jimmy the cook was at the helm – no steering wheel in sight – and Deire was at the navigator station. At the clearance signal from the Tower, *Bubba* revved the anti-grav, dropped the handbrake and with a dull distant roar and some distressing creaks and groans, the old ship lifted off the tarmac and sped skyward like a warp-powered elevator.

Lift-off was like a bad ride in a roller coaster. In fact, Tim wondered if it wasn't really the insane elevator computer that controlled their launch into orbit. He made a mental note to kick it in the doors the next time he passed by. Extra hard. Choking down lunch again, he gave Deire a displeased look. Deire just gave him a thumbs up and grinned.

“Nice ride, hey?” He chuckled. “Better than I remember! Last time – ”

“I don’t want to know!” He bellowed over the vibrations, nearly overcome by nausea. He was sure he was green, even under the dim bridge lighting. God help him, he thought, choking down lunch yet again. He wondered how the passengers were handling the ride. Compared to a newer ship, or even a commercial shuttle, this must seem really primitive. Still, it wasn’t all bad – at least they hadn’t flown into either of Deanna’s small moons yet. Bubba seemed to be pretty competent so far. At least he was sure Dory would be cared for if something unpleasant happened to him. Having been a cop and a P.I. he was well versed in having a battery of insurance policies on his life and working capacity. Like a supermodel who insures her legs, he was fully covered; nevertheless, he was praying fervently that nothing worse than space-sickness would crop up.

The ship seemed to pause in orbit, as the decrepit engine management system switched off the anti-grav launcher and switched over to another propulsion drive to take them out of the system. For a distressingly long moment, gravity was suspended, as was everything loose on the bridge. A screw-driver and an empty beer tin drifted past him, doing slow pirouettes. Of all the things he saw floating about; a

pair of dentures was the last thing he expected.

“*Shorry!*” Deire gummed at him, before launching himself after his errant false teeth. He managed to retrieve them and return to his seat just in time before the gravity generators kicked in. The screwdriver thudded to the deck plate handle first and rolled over noisily. Tim swallowed hard and just held on to his chair even harder as the main drive powered up and they began to leave Deanna behind. A shudder rattled through the old ship as the power and acceleration built up. The old crate was vibrating like an old city bus on a dirt road. The crazy little place that was his home started shrinking on the slightly skew display. His home with Dory, a blue sphere with lots of green and brown mixed in. Some white clouds hung motionless here and there. This decrepit old wreck seemed far faster than it had a right to be! It was a depressing upsetting moment when he realized *Dory* was his home. And he was leaving her behind. And so quickly too.

The old relic cleared the planetary system in just ten minutes. As they passed a space marker sign that read: “System Limits.” It transmitted an automated female voice message over the Celeste’s intercom. “THANK YOU FOR VISITING THE RAMALAMA SYSTEM.” It said. “YOU MAY NOW ENGAGE YOUR HYPERDRIVE AT YOUR

CONVENIENCE. WE WISH YOU A SAFE AND PLEASANT JOURNEY.”

“*Garn!* Okay, Bubba – *Hit it!*” Deire cried enthusiastically. The maniac behind the wh – um, helm desk punched something on the console.

“Oh, crap!” He heard himself say, just as the deck seemed to drop out from under him. The jump to warp speed was unlike anything Timaset Skooch was prepared for. At first it felt like his body became weightless, and then it felt as though it was slowly turning inside out, being stretched thin like an elastic band. He waited tensely for something to go *snap*. Then there was a faint little sound vaguely like the note at the beginning of Looney Tunes, but as it turned out that was just the warp engines as they went to full acceleration. There were no fancy fireworks or flashy streaky light effects on the view screen – which suddenly appeared to be quite straight. Perhaps that was just the vibrations. By the time Tim’s stomach arrived, the screen was black with the inky waste of space outside, the stars tiny motionless pin pricks of light.

“There y’go.” Bubba reported to everybody in general. “Warp four.”

“Looks like warp three, jus’ a little more black!” Grinned Deire. “There,

Mr. Skooch – Four days to Jupiter. Better make y'self comfy!”

“Four *days*?” Tim repeated. He hadn't even brought a good book with for the trip. Or any kind of book for that matter.

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“She's old, Mr Skooch.” Deire shrugged, sitting at the battered old table in the appropriately named mess hall. “Four ain't that bad. Even the new ships still takes three days fer the same distance.”

It was several hours later, supper time in fact. He'd missed most of the day, having slunk off to bed to nurse his ailing stomach. Vic was somewhere on the cargo deck rearranging things. It seemed he was going to get his money's worth out of her. At least she didn't wait to be told to try and make things ship-shape down there. He liked that. It showed initiative. Doctor – er, Nurse was trying to cool his stew by stirring and pouring it with a spoon. It was irritating. Sounded like somebody taking a pee in installments. Nurse wasn't saying much. The passengers were chirpy enough, Smith and – er, Jones were chewing healthily whilst listening to the conversation with interest. Triple-J was on the bridge, piloting the ship.



“Well, he’s jus sittin’ there readin’ ‘zines or summin’ – ‘puter flies the ship.” Deire explained, enjoying the flash of sudden panic across his face as Tim remembered the elevator.

“An autopilot?” Tim asked, resuming scraping the bottom of his half empty bowl of stew with a plastic spoon.

“That’s right.” Deire smiled, pointing at the steaming pot in the middle of the table. In the background he could hear Bubba, busy in the kitchen. “You want some more?”

“Hmm?” He asked distractedly. He secretly longed for Dory’s stir-fry, which he often teased her was the only thing she knew how to cook besides maybe corn flakes. She made a mean bowl of corn flakes. At least it beat his hard fried eggs and black toast. Hell, at least it was nicer than the stew. “No thanks.”

“Don’t worry about Bubba.” Said Deire, explaining further. “Bubba don’t talk much – or eat with us much either. He’s a good cook, eats his dinner whilst he’s a’makin’ it.”

“Hmm.” Tim acknowledged, mouth full of stew.

“He’s from Hygoth, ‘riginally.” Deire continued. “You know it?”

Tim shook his head. The stew was actually quite delicious. Perhaps he was wrong about Jimmy. Somebody who enjoyed cooking and produced a stew this good had to be good as well. Surely? Then again, Timaset Skooch had been round the block a few times to know it didn’t work that way. After all, some cannibals must’ve been good cooks too and that didn’t make them good people. Just good at cooking them.

“Oh, I’ve heard about it.” The younger of the two passengers piped up. Tim noticed the look he received from his companion. It wasn’t a flattering one in the least,

“Out on the other side of the quadrant,” Deire elaborated, “One of them mining colonies – the bad ones with too much water and not enough air! A place so humid yer could sit and actually *watch* metal rustin’.”

*Hmm*, thought Tim, mouth full of stew, *that sounded like fun*. He made a note to stay away from Hygoth. Deanna was also mainly about mining but at least it was also a nice place to live if you didn’t dig holes underground for a living. Blue skies, plenty of fresh air and a fresh water ocean. Not terribly much rust either for that matter.

“Bit of a temper on him though – but he’s the quiet type. Kinda blows up regular – just all on the inside.”

“I know what you mean.” Tim smiled, with a full stomach. Deire erupted in a belly laugh.

“Hah!” He cried, grinning. “Still a landlubber, eh? Don’ worry Mr. Skooch – we’ll make a spacer of you yet!”

Jones and Smith helped themselves to more stew. Tim was observing the younger, still wearing his sand cape. He had medium length blond hair, bluish eyes and a face that could be called slightly effeminate. *Been hanging around Dory too long*, he chided himself. The elder, Jones, remained silent, enjoying his meal. Well, it was hard to tell if he was enjoying it. His face was completely expressionless. He almost choked on the stew as he remembered his mental reference to Jones tying his ponytail too tight. If the man even coughed he might split his scalp open. Either that or his elastic would fly off.

“So what’s your name?” Deire asked him, attempting to be friendly.

“Jones.” Said Jones.

“Jones.” Said Deire, grinning quietly. “Got a first name there, Mister Jones?”

“No.” Said Jones curtly without making eye contact, reaching for

another slice of white bread for his stew. Well, all-righty then. At least his answer wasn't '*Mister.*'

"And you?" Asked Jones in a surprising reversal of interest. Or was that *lack* of interest?

"Deire." Deire answered. "Jonn Deire."

Jones laughed expressionlessly. It seemed almost scornful. His scalp didn't split and neither did the elastic come off.

"What? You mean like a *tractor*?"

Silence fell as Tim noticed Deire visibly restraining himself.

"No, *not* like the tractor. Muh name's spelt D-E-I-R-E. Deire."

"Ohh." Said Jones, filling his mouth with food. "Still sounds like a tractor."

Undeterred, Deire turned to the younger.

"And you, boy?"

"Smith." Said Smith reluctantly.

"Where d'you come from?"

"Merangis II." Said the boy, getting an instant look of disapproval from Jones. He noted it and seemed suddenly a little fearful of his companion. None of this was lost on Tim, who was now quietly sipping at his mug of coffee and saying nothing.

"You got a first name, son?" Deire asked. The boy nodded.

“Jamie.” He replied, instantly cringing as he got another disapproving scowl from um, Jones. He rose stiffly.

“I think it’s time we retired.” He announced. “Come on, boy.”

‘Yessir.” Said Jamie quietly, getting up to follow Jones. The two left the room in silence, leaving the rest staring thoughtfully after them.

“Awful jealous, ain’t he?” Said Deire. “Say, you don’t think they’re –“

“A couple?” Tim asked, temporarily on the same wavelength.

“Yeah, a couple. He’s a bit kinky though, ain’t he? Boy’s a bit young fer him. Strange people. Had a friend once, turned out that way.”

“What way?”

“You know.” Deire hinted. “*Pink. Pansified.*”

“No.” Said Tim, following a line of thought deep into the bottom of his coffee mug. *Pink. Pansified.* Hell, why did people call them names like that? What was a pansy anyway? A flower? He’d never even seen one. And anyway, weren’t flowers supposed to be beautiful? His mind strayed a little, back to Deanna and Dory. Another below the belt remark from Deire just served to annoy him further. Dirty old man. He was tired and homesick and he was going back to his cabin to hit the sack.

“I don’t like to talk about that sort of thing.” He commented. “Who or what gender a person chooses to associate with is his or her own

business. But I think you're right – I do think there's something going on there. But not that. It's something else.”

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Tim slunk off to his cabin and tiredly dragged off his clothes before crawling under the covers. He reached out several times with longing, but found no-one there before finally slipping away into an ethereal world of darkness and swearing elevators. He saw Dory again, telling him she loved him while wielding a frying pan. He even smelled her scent and wrapped himself in his longing for her.

He was awoken in what felt like the middle of the night by a crazed banging on his cabin door. Stumbling out of bed, he was shocked to notice he had launched himself into the air and was doing somersaults. His view alternated between the dirty carpet and the stained ceiling before he collided with a brown bulkhead. Half asleep, breathless and totally puzzled, he cried out.

*“Hey, what the hell's going on?”*

No answer came to him as he hung there in mid air, clinging to his closet door handle. His feet were level with his head. This shouldn't be happening. Didn't this stupid space-going insane asylum have a

gravity generator? He rubbed his eyes, tried to focus and noticed to his dismay that he was starting to drift across the room again. Another fierce round of knocking came from the door. Scooting off the closet door with his feet and half swimming, half flapping like a strange looking bird, he reached the door. He had to press against the door post to open it. It was Jonn Deire, adrift in the corridor, in believe-it-or-not, stripy pajamas. They were blue and white. Make that off-white. He'd lost a slipper though, and it was obvious he'd forgotten to wash under his feet, probably for quite some time.

“What the hell –?” Tim began.

“Quick, skipper – down t’ the engine room!” Said his second in command. “The gravity net’s failed!”

So that was it. Off they went, for all intents and purposes flapping and scooting off the walls as they made their way to engineering. Jones and Smith showed no sign of life. Their door was still closed. They were probably still sleeping, though they might wake up somewhere other than where they fell asleep. This thought brought a smile to Tim’s face. Perhaps Jones would wake up on the ceiling, with a light fitting up his –

“Triple-J!” Deire roared outside the entrance to the engineering complex. “Hey, Jimmy-Jo!”

“Help!” Came a plaintive claustrophobic cry from inside. It was Triple-J. “Somebody get me outta here!”

Once inside, they could see why the engineer was so distressed. It looked like he’d been working on a distribution cabinet and got stuck inside. The maintenance panel was open and the nest of wires inside was exposed. It was a real mess, tangled and twisted and knotted. And in the middle of it all, in the centre – was Triple-J, looking like a pretzel the way he was trapped in the web of fiber-optics and other cables. Some assorted tools were floating around, bumping off the walls. Deire scooted over to him.

“What –?” Asked Deire, stunned. “You bin drinkin’ again Jimmy-Jo?”

“Don’t ask!” The trapped man spat, wriggling in vain.

“How the hell did this happen?” Asked Tim, flapping beside Deire. Both of them hovered in front of the cabinet. Just for the record, Tim couldn’t smell any alcohol on him.

“Didn’t I just say ‘*don’t ask*’?” He gritted through clenched teeth.



“Okay, okay. Now how do we get you out of this? What the hell happened to the gravity?”

“I thought I’d turn it off so we could all just float around a bit!” Triple-J replied with biting sarcasm. “I mean, it’s supposed to be fun, ain’t it? Ain’t this fun, Jonn? How about you, Boss?”

No, Tim thought. It wasn’t. It took some work, but after half an hour, they managed to get the twisting, swearing creature called Triple-J out of its nest in the distribution cabinet. This was not as easy as you may think, especially in zero gravity. It was like a bad-hair day for Dory. At any rate, at the end of it, Triple-J hung in orbit over his toolbox on the deck below.

“Thanks.” He sighed relieved, hanging in midair beside them.

“Pleasure.” Said Tim tiredly. “Now how do we fix the gravity?”

“That’s easy – just plug those two cables back together.”

The fault in the gravity net as it was called, came about when the engineer decided to perform some maintenance on the cabling, and got tangled up in it. During his struggle to get out of the mess he yanked out a cable joiner interface, which cut power to various

systems on the ship. These included the microwave oven in the kitchen, the main view screen on the bridge and also the gravity net. Of course, when they plugged it in again, everything started working again. Gravity came back very suddenly.

“So you weren’t drinking.” Said Tim a moment later, looking up at Triple-J, who had put his feet down just in time, kept his balance and was standing there looking at them smugly, along with the rest of his handiwork. “You sure you didn’t have something a little stronger?”

Tim picked his rear end off the hard deck in engineering. It felt bruised. His rear end did too. Beside him, Deire was rolling around, muttering “Oh, mah achin’ ass! I’m a’gettin’ too old fer this...”

At the same moment, echoing through the metallic corridors, came a long, frantic, falsetto scream that ended in a bovine bellow. There followed a crescendo of crashes and thuds, and a succession of splintering noises.

*“What the Edgar Allan Poe was that?”* Asked Tim in the new silence.

“Ah dunno.” Deire shrugged. “Le’s go see!”

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It was what passed for an early morning, just after breakfast. Tim was still tired from his midnight adventures – not to mention bored. There was nothing going on on the bridge. There was nothing going on in engineering either apparently. So he decided to walk around a bit. The source of the pandemonium they heard turned out to be the new cargo master – um, mistress – Vic. She had stayed up late to continue cleaning up the mess left by her predecessor, rearranging the crates left in the cargo bay, stacking them by hand. Obviously for the larger ones she used the small remote controlled lifter. It made life so much easier. But when things started drifting off the deck and floating around the cargo bay, things started to get a little out of hand. She tried to regain control of boxes she had just stacked as they drifted about, bumping into each other. All her hard labor in vain! The chamber was huge, running almost the length of the ship, nearly four decks high. The ceiling was plain gray deck plating and there were grid-work girders above and to the sides. She was nearly there when gravity kicked back in. Anyway, they found her under a pile of old crates and a variety of other left-over crap, including a few bales of straw from the last cargo of cattle. They carried the complaining, swearing patient up to sickbay and marshaled the medic – um, Nurse into action. Nothing serious, fortunately. But the cargo deck was

even worse off than before. It brought a wry smile to his lips. He could see this trip was going to be anything but dull.

He encountered young Jamie sitting at the foot of the stairs not far from the elevator. He seemed a little dazed and confused.

“Hi.” He said, venturing over.

“Hi.” Jamie smiled back.

“You okay?”

“Just a little shocked.” He revealed. “I’m not used to language like that. I don’t think I’ve ever heard so many swear-words in one sitting before!”

“Oh.” Said Tim, catching on. “Well I did warn you to use the stairs!”

“I know.” Jamie grinned back as Tim sat down beside him.

“You survive your little zero gravity experience last night?”

Jamie seemed to think about it a second, then gave a little giggle and nodded.

“Lucky I’ve been to the Astroplex.” He elaborated, “So I knew what to do. You know the Astroplex?”

“Yes. It’s a theme park on Earth. All about space travel and the colonies. My uncle took me there when I was a kid.” He remembered the visit. He was there with uncle Jeremy, his mom’s favorite brother. Most of the important colonies were represented there. The simulations were very accurate. The representation of Deanna showed everything from crabby-grass to strato-penguins and featured a simulation of one of *Dings’* many visits to the surface. He enjoyed that one because Uncle Jeremy kept diving under holographic bushes for cover. Thinking back, Deanna seemed strange to him then – although the reality was a lot stranger. But not as strange as trying to explain his uncle to the tour guides.

“Your parents take you there?” Tim asked. The boy smiled and nodded. “Where are they now?”

Jamie hesitated. “On Mars.” He answered, looking over his shoulder. “They live on Mars.”

“Where does your friend Jones fit in to all this?”

That tore it. Frightened, the boy rose, glanced round and looked him in the eyes before saying "I've got to go." Then he dashed up the stairs.

"Jamie." Tim called. The boy paused to look back down at him. "If you're in some kind of trouble, you can tell me and we can work something out. I can help you."

"No." Said Jamie before he disappeared, "Nobody can help me."

That was puzzling. Timaset Skooch sat there pondering the situation. Clearly there was something going on. Something that involved the mafia, a young boy and apparently, his parents. *They live on Mars*, he remembered Jamie saying. He heard the words in his mind, replaying them. *They live on Mars. They, not we.*

"He's right, you know."

Tim looked up at Jones who had somehow appeared at the foot of the stairs and was leaning casually against the corner of the wall right by him.

"What?" Asked Tim, slightly taken by surprise.

“The boy.” Repeated Jones. “He’s right. You can’t help him.”

“Why’s that?”

Jones sighed dramatically, as if he were a patient and doting teacher trying to explain some complicated lesson to a young pupil, and then sat down beside him. Tim was still fascinated by the man’s face. Wrinkle-free. A man that age. What was he, forty? Forty-five? Perhaps his pony tail really was too tight, he thought again. Jones rested his arms on his knees and made a slow steeple with his finger tips.

“You were paid rather handsomely to transport us to the rings of –“

“Um, Jupiter?” Tim prompted, provoking a slight reaction of annoyance from Jones. Good, he liked that.

“Yes. Jupiter.” Smiled Jones thinly, like the smile was the smile on a mask. A mask over – what? All this mystery was getting to him. “No questions asked, remember? And Mister Skooch, that arrangement was for our mutual benefit and protection. You follow me?”

“So far.” He replied. “Like a dog on a lead.”

“Hmm. Now if you start asking unwarranted questions, finding out things you shouldn’t be burdened with... you might end up knowing too much for your own good.”

Tim took this in, almost reading the words before they slid off Jones’ silken tongue, especially the last four words. That was a veiled threat. This whole damn deal was a veiled threat. And the smooth mask of a face that Jones wore hid only one thing. And Timaset Skooch knew pretty well what was underneath. A skull. A grinning white face of Death. Jones smiled at him faintly and cocked his head just slightly to push his point home. His eyes were sharp and mean and they bored into him. He didn’t know what kind of trouble Jamie was in, but now he was certain they were in almost as deep. This was more than just a simple transport exercise. Jones – and Harry – were obviously tied in to a bigger network. Fool! Did he really think he could collect on a favor he did for a man like Giggling Harry? A smalltime hood? A criminal hoodlum with no principles or honor? Damn fool!

“You’ve been paid well, Mister Skooch. I trust I won’t have to warn you about this again?”

“No, you’re right.” Tim smiled back coolly. “None of my business in the end, is it?”



“I’m so very glad we understand each other.” Said Jones rising. “See you around, Captain.”

He didn’t bother to correct Jones this time. He had more serious matters to think about. As Jones walked up the stairs, Tim sat some more and pondered the mess he was in. Tim had been a cop. Obviously he joined for the right reasons – *to protect and serve, yadda, yadda, yadda*. Naturally that line of work brought a certain professional curiosity with it. He would have to stem his curiosity, for all their sakes. They still had three days to go on this troublesome little journey. Yes, he had been paid. Paid by the mob as it turned out. Although he wasn’t even a cop anymore, it made him feel like a dirty one. A dirty rat. The phrase ‘*to make a deal with the Devil*’ struck a chord somewhere. That’s pretty much the sum of it. Jones, of course, being the Devil. And this could only spell trouble for all of them.

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The Sol System. Birthplace of Humankind, home to High Civilization and interplanetary taxes. (Of course, many felt it was also the home of interplanetary civilization and High Taxes.) The light of the Sun was distant, dim, almost just another star in the heavens. Her sub-light drive engaged, Celeste serenely passed the small dark world at the

extreme edge of the solar system. At long last. Four days had passed reasonably quietly, all things considered and, aside from Vic, who had spent just one day there, nursing scores of bruises and minor cuts – nobody had visited the sickbay.

Nurse was there most of the time, doing interesting things with beakers and synthesizers. It looked like a science experiment waiting to go wrong. Tim hadn't quite got around to asking *what* it was yet, but he would. Later. He just wanted to see how long the man would hold on to his eyebrows.

None of them saw much of young Jamie since the first day of the voyage. Mister Jones had kept him pretty much locked up in the cabin since their little chat. It became rather obvious to Tim that the boy was some kind of captive. He thought about that a long while, but couldn't fathom *why*. Jones took their meals back to the cabin every mealtime. Maddening as ever, Deire got the wrong end of the story as usual, and kept making little comments at the table in their absence about *'the love nest'* and the *'honeymoon suite'*. Tim passed his time thinking about how to help the boy, perhaps get him out of Jones's clutches without getting him and his crew into worse trouble. There didn't seem to be any way around that. Mister Jones was

*connected*, and obviously if something happened to him along the way and the boy didn't reach his destination at the asteroid in the rings of, um – Jupiter... Well, he was sure he and his ship would be marked and might very well run into... difficulties along the way.

He longed for Dory. He missed her terribly and wondered what she was doing. Had she been really serious about changing? He really hoped so, more for her sake than his really, because he had accepted her state of being long ago. But she always found accepting herself much more difficult, just as he had problems with his own sexuality, usually only when he was with her. He denied it to her, of course. And sometimes even to himself. But the truth was, deep down, it did worry him. He wasn't gay. He didn't feel attracted to males. But all the same, he really loved Dory. *Really* loved her. And it was more than just physical. Most of the time, even as a queen, she was very feminine, only he was still aware he was with another male. She made a nice looking woman at times. And he knew it wasn't about sex. It was about who she was inside. The body didn't quite match up with the spirit. He really, really wanted her to be happy.

Shaking off the homesick feelings, he returned to reality just as they passed the military outpost of Pluto Colony. It was the location of the

great final battle of the Gimp War between Humankind and the Ruminarii more than a century earlier. A lot changed at the Battle of Pluto. Suddenly the feared and fearless Ruminarii weren't quite so feared anymore. Or quite as fearless. And a small backwater species had just stolen the spotlight as it took a first tentative step onto the political stage of the galaxy. The routing of the mighty Ruminarii war fleet at Pluto signaled a change in the wind. Other political players in the universe sat up and took notice. They looked at the backward race with new eyes – and a new respect. For Earth, things were never quite the same again after that.

As the ancient ship cruised through the outer reaches of Humankind's home system, Tim experienced feelings of *déjà vu*. He was born on Mars. As a young boy he lived with his parents in Mars City, until his mother took a transfer to Deanna when he was twelve. He hadn't been back in the Sol System since. Part of him wondered if his father still lived there, somewhere. But that didn't matter to him much. Since they left, all that time ago, they never heard a word from him. Tim, in essence, grew up without a father. In his opinion he actually had a better childhood than many children he knew at school, who had fathers. So in retrospect, it wasn't all that bad.

Saturn is a large planet, almost large enough to be a small star in its own right. In fact, scientists have put forth the theory that if the gas giant were only a little larger, it would be dense enough to self-ignite and turn into one. Tim was rather glad it wasn't. Binary star systems were rare and the few known examples were unstable ones that frequently consumed some of their own small orbiting planets as their complex orbits coincided. The intense gravity fields also tended to tear planets apart between them. He shuddered. He put his flashbacks of the Astro-Science Channel out of his mind for the moment, and concentrated instead on the events at hand. Celeste was closing in on the famed rings of um, Jupiter. The rings were just one huge disk made up of millions of asteroids and smaller chunks of rock that from extreme distance looked like the smooth rainbow disks the planet was famous for.

Saturn had a few moons, mostly the same size as a decent planet. Only one of them was even inhabited and that was a mining colony called Miranda. Independent prospectors traveled the rings, looking for valuable ores and minerals, mining them and selling them. Io Station was a nearby space facility that processed ore and sent it back to Earth by Ioderunner and did some small trade between prospectors, local colonies and incoming spacers – small private

loderunners like Celeste. But Celeste wasn't heading for Io Station. According to the wishes of her passengers, she was being directed to the far side of um, Jupiter, opposite to Io Station. Out of sight and out of mind. The asteroid was huge, almost a small moon. Bigger than *Dong*, for sure – and *Dong* was about 15km in diameter.

Bubba was in his element as usual. He seemed to enjoy piloting the ship. Perhaps too much. He didn't know if this old thing could actually do a handbrake turn, but if it could he was sure Bubba would know.

“Just about there.” Bubba grinned from behind the control desk.

“Great.” Said Tim, relaxing in the hot seat. “Better let them know.” There was a cup of steaming hot coffee in the cup holder. It still hadn't been removed yet. He took a sip. It was at least three sugars sweet. Like treacle. Damn coffee machine still couldn't get it right. He made a mental note to do it himself next time. It made him miss Dory even more. She made a mean cup of coffee. Even his own never seemed to come quite as close.

The Celeste closed in on the asteroid. It looked lifeless, dark. Just one side of the sphere looked slightly lighter than the other, but that

was from the faint light of the Sun, millions of kilometers away.

“They sure this is the place?” Said Deire over at the sensor station.

“No energy readin’s, no life signs. Nuthin’.”

“That’s the co-ordinates they gave us.” Said Bubba. “Wait, there’s something moving down there –“

“Okay – I see it.” Said Deire. “It’s a shuttle. Comin’ up this way. Must be their ride home. Wherever that is.”

The shuttle came right into visual range, till it was hanging in space just meters off Celeste’s bow. It was a small commercial ship, a plain brown color that seemed to blend in with the natural coloring of the rings. On closer inspection it became obvious it had been painted in different shades of asteroid camouflage. Its navigation lights and beacon were off. Clearly its crew didn’t want to be seen by anyone else but them. Just then a message came over the com-system requesting them to standby to transfer passengers. It was a text message. Hmm. Secretive lot.

Deire sent them an acknowledgement signal, also in text, just badly spelt. It took a minute for him type it using the hunt-and-peck system and just one finger. Tim hoped “HOKY-DOKEY KIP YOR PANTS

ON” wouldn’t be a reflection on him. His Terran wasn’t perfect, but it was far from Deire’s level. He drained his syrupy coffee and went down below to get his passengers ready for transport. Jonn Deire went on ahead to prep the transmitter. Smith and Jones were already dressed and packed and waiting in their small cabin when Tim arrived.

“Time to go. This way please.”

He turned to lead the way to the small transmitter booth down the hall. The two arrived after Tim and their little baggage carrying droid, which seemed little more than an automated baggage trolley. Jones took one look at the antiquated transmitter equipment and stopped dead in his tracks. Young Smith also looked worried. More than usual. Deire looked up from the control desk by the platform and suppressed a grin.

“Somethin’ the matter, Mister Jones?” He asked innocently.

“You’re not going to put us through *that* thing are you?”

“Why not?” Deire asked, blowing a little dust off the display panel. A large daddy-long-legs scampered away looking for cover. “You prefer a spacewalk? Our suits’re just as old as the ship. Have t’fight off the



antique hunters. The transmatter was jus' upgraded though. Works fine. Nah reason to worry."

"Upgraded?" Asked Jones sullenly, "When? Twenty years ago?"

"Sixteen act'ally. But yer needn't worry, we're fully insured."

"Excuse me if that doesn't reassure me." Said Jones, trying to adopt a more confident pose. "You sure this thing will work?" He looked at Tim, who looked at the worn gray deck plating. He was staying the heck out of this one. "You aren't, *are* you?"

"Well –" He began, but Deire interjected by producing a PDA under Jones' nose.

"I got an idea, let's test it!" He suggested. "I'll send this down t'the asteroid an' beam it back. If it comes back in one piece –"

"And if it doesn't?" Jones interjected.

"Then y'can use the suits! He, he!"

Jones turned his back on the grinning Deire, took out a mobile and sent a signal. He looked at Tim and Deire.

“Thanks, but I think I’ll trust my people first.” He said, signaling to Smith to get on the platform. He joined him, followed by the baggage droid.

“Goodbye.” Jones greeted. Jamie just waved a sad little wave in parting. The look on his sad little face just cried out ‘*help me*’. Tim just waved silently. He had no idea what Jamie was doing in the company of men like Jones, or even how they were connected to men like Giggling Harry. He had no idea that Jamie was actually in any danger, did he? He was sure it would haunt him the rest of his life that he didn’t find a way to help him. Still, it wasn’t any of his business was it? Harry held up his end, hadn’t he? And ten thousand was still ten thousand. And anyway, Tim rather enjoyed breathing. He hoped to continue doing it for quite some time to come.

“See you ‘round.” Greeted Deire.

“I don’t think so.” Said Jones coolly. The two figures and their luggage began to sparkle and fade out. They were gone. Apparently their friends outside had some state-of-the-art equipment in that little ship. Well, that was that. They made ten thousand on the trip, with minimal expenses. He still had around eight grand left in the safe in his cabin and now it was time to move on to their next port of call. To

see if he could build on that little nest egg. But there was just one little thing...

“Go ahead.” He said to Deire, pointing at the PDA. “Test it.”

“On the level?”

“On the level.” Said Tim. After all, you never knew when they might need to use that thing – and then it better be working. Deire shrugged, placed the device on the platform and went round to the control desk. Pressing here and there, he induced a similar effect as when their two passengers departed. After the sparkle effect, the platform was empty. A moment or two later, he brought it back. When the sparkle faded, a small blackened lump on the platform made a muffled distorted beep, and then shorted out. It was smoking. They exchanged meaningful glances again. Deire laughed and shrugged at him.

“Guess there *was* reason to worry!”

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And so the ancient loderunner steadily exited the rings of um, Jupiter, making its way to the inner planets of the Sol System. The rickety old

chair under Tim was not much to look at, but it was comfortable. Well worn patterns had formed in the old leather coverings. A large rump-shaped hollow had formed in the seat from years of service under the old ships' skippers. And Jonn Deire wasn't under endowed in that department. The armrests were frayed and smooth and reflected some of the dim bridge lights. It was a small bridge. In fact, Deire pointed out earlier that small ships like Celeste had *flight decks*, not bridges. Big ships had *bridges*. And of course, military ships.

Nevertheless, Tim sat in the Skippers chair, watching the last of the asteroids drifting by as they left the edge of the rings for open space. A few minutes later, Bubba noticed something on the sensors. A small contact had broken cover behind them.

"There's a ship behind us, Boss." He said to Deire. "Looks like the same one that took our passengers off our hands."

"Mus' be goin t' the inner planets too." Replied Deire.

"They're getting' awful close." Bubba said. "Movin' real fast too!"

The ship moved closer, looking like it was going to overtake them. Just then Celeste lurched. The ancient decks shuddered noisily around them. In the instant of total shocked silence that followed, the

small craft passed them, showing on their view screen as it started to circle back.

“What was that?” Asked Tim in a quiet voice. “Did they hit us?”

Deire and Bubba looked at each other, eyes wide.

*“That wasn’t a collision!”* They chorused.

The small ship was coming back at them from the front. It seemed intent on flying right into the Celeste. And then there were bright flashes of weapons fire from the other ship and Celeste rocked violently as the energy bolts struck home.

“Evasive maneuvers!” Tim shouted. It was one of the few phrases he remembered from the many sci-fi TV shows he watched as a kid, and it seemed the right course of action. Bubba didn’t need to be told twice. He pushed the sublight throttle wide open and put the old ship into a loop back to the rings. The other ship was newer, smaller and faster than Celeste – and Celeste didn’t have any weapons. So they went straight back into the debris, dodging chunks of rock in the Creator’s rock garden. Their pursuers followed, being more maneuverable. Their progress slowed as the field densified further in. Tim, ice cold and mesmerized at the sight of rocks weaving across the

screen with each wild maneuver, gripped the arms of his chair in a stony silence.

“Watch out, they’re gainin’!” Deire reported, his eyes fixed on the sensor displays. Tension was running high on the flight deck of the old loderunner. Questions began gnawing at him. Why would Jones and his companions attack them? The P.I. side of Timaset Skooch smacked the rookie skipper side of him upside the head. *Because they didn’t want any witnesses, you dope! No questions asked, remember? And none answered either.*

To say Tim was surprised at the way Bubba seemed to be weaving the old ship between the asteroids was an understatement. The man was doing it like he was playing an arcade game. Only, if they hit anything the view screen wouldn’t say GAME OVER. It probably wouldn’t say ‘*splat*’ either. The other ship was still following, firing at them occasionally but less accurately now. The pilot seemed to be concentrating on not flying into a rock. As it was, the smaller bits were scraping and denting the hull and Tim wondered how long they could keep this up.

“How come they have weapons and we don’t?” Tim heard himself asking.

“Cos private ships ain’t allowed t’ carry weapons!” Deire shouted back above the excitement.

“So – *how come they have weapons and we don’t?*” He asked again, being completely ignored this time.

Deire and Bubba were old spacers, both having spent most of their lives off-world on some ship or other. It seemed from their conversation that most of that time had been spent on this particular ship. It was home to them and they were going to defend it to the end. The end of *what* exactly was a matter for future discussion. Swerving Celeste sideways around a large asteroid, Bubba looked seriously at Deire.

“How big you think is that ship there, feller?”

“Small.” Said Deire. “Maybe two crew. Not that heavy. Prob’ly fit in the cargo deck. What you thinkin’?”

“That’s just about the right size!” Bubba grimaced, maneuvering Celeste out of another turn and taking a straight heading. “Lemme know when they’s real close on our six!”

“Okay!” Deire grinned back.

Moments ticked by tensely. Tim didn't know what they were up to, but it was entertaining on some surreal level to watch these two old pros at work. A few more bursts of energy and vibrations in the ship showed their enemy was getting close. The closer they got, the more trouble they were in. Trouble was, that went both ways.

“Okay!” Deire reported. What happened next was a bit of a blur for Tim, but what basically happened was Bubba pulled the ship into a dead stop, tilting her nose down at an angle. At such close range, the pursuing ship had almost no time to react, tried to overshoot by turning under Celeste – and struck the larger vessel somewhere under the engine nacelles at the rear. There was a bit of a lurch, like Bubba had just gone over a cosmic speed-bump he hadn't seen till the last moment. The firing had stopped. So had the other ship. They could see it on the screen, slowly drifting away backwards, upside down. The once sleek nose was seriously in need of repair and although the damage didn't look critical, it would certainly slow them down a little and give them some time. He hoped Jamie was okay. The rest he didn't particularly care about.

“Should we take a look?” Bubba asked Tim.

Deire shrugged at him. “Are you kidding? Let's get out of here!”



Meanwhile, over on the small shuttle, chaos reigned. The collision had damaged many of the ships systems. The engines were off-line and re-entry would be a bit of a problem because of all the damage to the nose shielding. And the gravity was on the fritz too. Jamie was just floating out of his seat when he managed to pull himself back down into it and fasten his seat belt. The pilot was shaking his head to try and clear it after the impact while being cursed by Jones, who was sitting beside Jamie. Through the view ports on the flight deck they could see the underside of Celeste. For all their damage, the larger ship just had a few faint scratches on the underside of the shiny hull.

“Watch what you’re doing!” He shouted. “*Idiot!* They’ll get away! Get back after them! *Blast* them! Don’t make me come up there!”

“What do you want me to do?” The pilot roared back angrily. “Get out and push? Our engines’re offline – so are the weapons!”

“They’ll get away!” Jones shouted again.

“Let them! We’ve got our own problems! Landing will be really complicated as it is, with the heat shield gone!”

“Explain what you mean by ‘complicated’!” Jones demanded.

“Triple-ass-hot temperatures burning through the hull plating – how about ‘kiss your ass goodbye’? Does that describe it well enough for you? ”

Just then, they seemed to realize something didn’t feel right. The Celeste wasn’t leaving. And quite suddenly, Jones and the pilot noticed a faint tingling sensation, stared at each other, and started screaming. Moments later, Deire, Skooch and Vic were staring at two smoking, blackened lumps on the transmitter platform. They were inside out too and, lucky for them, quite dead. Pointy bits that vaguely resembled charred shoes stuck out the front ends. Deire grinned at them and then at Tim and thumped his hand on the control desk.

“Hell, that was good! This thing jus’ earned its keep for the *next* sixty years!”

“Looks like it was good for something after all!” Timaset Skooch smiled back, thinking *‘so much for your threats Mister – um, Jones. Veiled or otherwise.*

He didn’t take kindly to threats, veiled or otherwise. Neither did Jonn Deire, who never seemed to like Jones in the first place – or jokes

about his name much. And sometimes fortune favors the bold. Or the foolish. Or as it may be, the brave and foolhardy.

“Okay.” Said Tim, turning on his heel to head for the bridge. “Good job. You get rid of that so long and I’ll contact the kid. Vic, meet me at the airlock.” He paused to shoot a look at Deire. “This thing *does* have an airlock, doesn’t it?”

“Sure! Over on the port side, one deck up!”

“Does it work?”

“Sure!”

Just as he was about to go again, he paused to ask another important question. “You have working suits?”

“Sure!” Deire called after him in a satisfied voice.

“You better! I’m not going over there using *that* thing!”

Deire gave Vic a high five and grinned. “That’ll teach ‘em t’shoot at mah Celeste!”

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The inside of the shuttle was quite neat and rather comfortable looking as Tim exited the small cramped airlock. Gravity was working again. He popped the seal on his helmet visor and his eyes found Jamie. He was sitting at the control console formerly occupied by the pilot, where he unlocked the door for them. Vic came past him from behind, carrying a bag of tools, popped her visor open and indicated stern-wise with her head.

“You know what to do?” He asked her.

“Jus’ like throwing a wrench into a gearbox!” She grinned.

He waved at Jamie, who was looking his usual frightened self.

“You okay?” He smiled, and indicated the bag he was carrying. Jamie nodded and gave a sad little smile.

“Better get this on.” He jibed. “It’s cold outside.”

“What did you do with them?” He asked. Just then there was a faint humming in the air, followed by the sparkle of materialization. When the sparkle faded, two round flat lumps hung in mid-air for a split second before thumping to the deck.

“That answer your question?” Tim smiled. Jamie looked like relief had just flooded over him, and he was still enjoying it. The boy rushed up to Tim and threw his arms around him.

“Hey, it’s okay.” He managed to say in a comforting tone, despite being startled. “It’s all over. They can’t hurt you anymore. Well, unless you actually *tripped* over them.”

Jamie giggled. He pulled away and wiped his eyes, looked up at him and smiled. It was probably the first time he’d seen the boy smile.

“Thanks.” He said. A few minutes later, he was in the pressure suit Tim brought along, holding his case of worldly goods in one hand. Vic returned, looking pleased with herself. Seeing his enquiring expression, she nodded at him.

“Everything okay?”

“Sure, Boss.” She replied, giving a thumbs-up sign. “It’s not every day I get to blow things up! This is gonna be fun – you’ll see!”

Once back outside, they grabbed onto the little booster-sled that brought them across the void from Celeste. It looked similar in design

to an old-fashioned underwater diving sled. But in place of propellers, it had small rocket boosters for forward drive and even smaller maneuvering thrusters. They secured themselves to it with harness latches and held on to the plenitude of grab-handles at the rear. Tim piloted the contraption back to the looming shape overhead, which for now, was home.

Fifteen minutes later, when the loderunner and her crew were safely out of the rings, a small bright explosion flashed on the view screen, casting weird shadows among the multitude of asteroids. The light would travel a long way, Tim knew, and curious people would come and investigate the cause.

“Wow!” Deire exclaimed to Vic, who was standing behind him, watching. “You sure good at blowin’ shit up, sis! What y’do?”

“Oh, nothing.” She beamed back. “I just crossed a few wires, that’s all.”

“Really?”

“Well, actually, if you must know, I rigged a detonator into the main fuel sensor port.”

“Where’d y’git the detonator?” Deire asked. “We don’ have any o’ those... Do we?”

“Just something I rigged up.” Vic explained. “By the way I think uh – Triple-J might want to take a look at the microwave oven. It stopped working around the same time. Quite a coincidence, hey?” Then, seeing the blank expressions on their faces, she elaborated. “Hey, I worked at a mine workshop some years ago – you learn stuff!”

“*Ohhh.*” Bubba and Deire chorused.

“Well, let’s hope that took care of any evidence.” Said Tim, half to himself.

“What you mean?” Said Bubba, half surprised. “It was self defense! They wus gonna kill us!”

“Yes, it was, but we’re not going to go around telling anybody about it, are we? Bragging about how we *cacked* some mob stooges and rescued a hostage and blew up their shuttle at the next spaceport bar would be rather poor judgment. You don’t want their friends to hear about it and come after us as well, do you?”

“Yeah. Yer right.” Said Deire. “That would be bad.”

Bad? Tim thought. Giggling Harry was just small fry, and he intended to have a little chat with him on his return, but these people were connected to more dangerous fish than him. People with connections. Resources. Money. *Bad?* Bad didn't even *begin* to describe it.

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"Okay Jamie." Tim smiled from where he sat in the ships' old and worn but rather comfortable lounge, looking at him across a coffee table, sipping a mug of hot choc. There were some old magazines and other assorted clutter on it. They were alone, where Tim was trying to get to the bottom of this whole mystery.

"My name is Jamie." Said Jamie, flicking back his short blond fringe.

"But it's not Smith. It's Vallantdorf. "

"Jamie Vallantdorf." Tim repeated.

"Yes," Said Jamie, slowly and deliberately crossing his legs. "And one day it's going to be *Jaymie*, you know, with a 'y'."

*Oh, God.* Tim thought in sudden shock. *Not another one. How small is the fucking universe anyway?* What was *wrong* with him? Why hadn't he made the obvious conclusion? Had two years with Dory blinded him to the signs? J – um, Jaymie smiled at him.



“Of course, you know, one or two things will change.” He continued.

“Or maybe three or four.”

“Definitely three or four.” Tim smiled back.

“Are you shocked, Captain?”

“Tim. Call me Tim.” Said Tim. “I’m not the captain, I’m the owner. And no, not really. It explains a lot.”

“Ever met somebody like me before? You aren’t going to beat me up now, are you?”

“Yes and no.” Smiled Tim. “As in no, I’m not going to beat you up, and yes, I have. Several times in fact.”

“You’re not sorry you rescued me now, are you?” Jaymie smiled coyly.

“No!” Tim asserted. “I have nothing against transsexuals, Jaymie. In fact my girlfriend’s one.”

A moment passed in silence while they both took this in. Some PI he was! *Join the dots, Tim, helooo!* Then again, Dory had hoodwinked him a lot easier when they first met. Now he knew why Jamie’s lips always seemed to look like they did. Lip gloss.

“I just had no idea, that’s all.” He said.

“Is um, is Vic your girlfriend?” Jaymie asked innocently.

Tim laughed. That was quite a thought. He had images pop into his head of Vic throwing him on the couch like an old blanket and then forcefully ravishing him. Afterwards she would use him as a bench-press. *Brr!*

“No!” He laughed. “She’s on Deanna, where I live. Her name’s Dory.”

“Is she pretty?”

“Very.” He smiled, almost slipping into a sentimental spell. “I would never be happy with anybody else. You want to tell me what this was all about?”

“My father is Frederick Vallantdorf, the mayor of Mars City.” Jaymie explained. “Jones was our new butler. At least we thought he was until he kidnapped me. Daddy hired him because he was looking for a teacher who could um, make a man out of me. You see, Daddy knew how I feel, but he didn’t approve. *Doesn’t* approve.”

“Parents can be that way sometimes. Dory hasn’t had any contact with her folks for years either.” Tim commented.

“Anyway, it turned out he worked for the *Olduvai Trust*. Daddy used to talk about them all the time. How they were ruining society and how they were behind all the corruption on Mars.”

“So it was this *Olduvai Trust* that Jones and his friends were working for?”

“Yes. He said so. But his name wasn’t Jones either. I figured out that much. We kept moving. They took me to Salus for a while. Then to Ovion Colony. Then I stayed in a house on Merangis II. We stopped over at Deanna when his ship broke down and Jones arranged for you to take us to Earth. Jones was with me all the time. He called himself my babysitter. He knew why Daddy hired him and so he seemed to enjoy punishing me. He made me look at porno girlie magazines and other rubbish like that. He said it would make a man out of me. And he wouldn’t let me dress up. Or wear anything girlie. He was a real meanie. I think they were using me to blackmail my parents.”

“When were you last home, Jaymie?”

“About a year ago.” Jaymie smiled weakly. “I haven’t spoken to them since then. Jones would take a picture and send it home once a month just to show I was still alive. I tried to get away once. He beat me up so bad I could hardly stand!”

Tim’s dislike for Jones had just hit a peak. Fortunately there was little more he could do to the man to deliver justice or make himself feel

better. If there was anything left of him, it was a flat, blackened lump drifting among the astors in the rings of, um – Jupiter. With shoes on. He leaned over the coffee table and made direct eye contact with Jaymie.

“Don’t worry. You’ll be safe here. We’ll get you home, Jaymie.” He said firmly. “It may take a while, but we’ll get you home.”

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“And that’s about the sum of it.” Tim concluded, leaning on the dining table. The rest of the crew was gathered in the dining hall. Jamie was absent, getting some rest in a cabin down below. He had just put them in the picture. They had been listening intently. “Now you know.”

“Shame, poor kid!” Said Vic empathically. The rest of them nodded in agreement. “And that bastard!”

“Yeah!” Said Deire bluntly. “At least I was right ‘bout one o’them! An’ he looked a lot better the las’ time ah saw ‘im!”

“All flat and crispified!” Vic grinned vengefully.

“Wait, wait, wait!” Triple-J called out. It seemed at last one member of the crew was dissatisfied. “Lemme get this straight. You put our lives

at risk to save this little *bender* from a criminal organization like the *Olduvai Trust*? Tell me – are you nuts? Are you suicidal? ”

Tim pointed an angry finger at Triple-J.

“I hear a word like *bender* out of your mouth again and I’ll wash your mouth out with de-greasing fluid, mister! And anyway, what was I supposed to do?”

“I dunno – Just keep going? *Not* get involved?” Triple-J cried, waving his arms around. “I mean, as soon as they know the kid ain’t where he’s supposed to be they’re going to start lookin’ for the people that saw him last!”

“Yeah.” Said Bubba quietly. “And that’s us.”

“Near as I can figure it,” Tim reasoned, “We did the right thing. We delivered the fare, didn’t we? Things went south when they tried to kill us afterwards – that was self-defense. And we rescued the kid from the shipwreck, didn’t we? What else were we supposed to do? Leave him?”

There was a general rumble of agreement.

“Now, I’m not suggesting we go down to Mars and take on the Olduvai Trust!”

“So?” Deire asked, straight to the point. “What are you suggesting?”

“The gang will be looking for a boy, won’t they? We keep the kid under cover here on the ship, out of sight, where he’s safe. We go down to Mars and find us a fare and leave. No mess, no fuss.”

Tim had promised Jaymie he would get her – *him*, home. The trouble was, he didn’t know how he could. The mayor was sure to be watched by the men who kidnapped his son. And anyway, what would stop them from kidnapping him again after his return? He couldn’t take on the whole gang! But when the gang lost control of Jaymie, they lost control of the mayor... unless he didn’t find out... but then again, what if he *did*?

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Mars in real life looked different to the old pictures Timaset saw when he was a kid. It wasn’t the red planet anymore, in fact it was mostly green, warm and mottled by vast shallow lakes that stretched across what used to be dry dusty plains in the old days. It all started with the first Marsfarms back in the early twenty first century, which in turn led

to full scale terraforming towards the end of the same century. Crop farming was a big thing on Mars, and so was stock farming. Red-horned Wildebeest accounted for the largest slice of the economic pie on Mars. Vast ranches sprawled across the flat plains of the former red planet. Mars City was the capital city. It was also the largest market in the crop and cattle business in the sector. It was here that Tim and his ragtag crew hoped to find a new fare, perhaps a load of cattle to take back out to a colony world. Something profitable hopefully. This was one of Earths oldest colonies, inhabited by several million people who lived in large sophisticated cities. It seemed a nice place from orbit. It even had two crazy little moons of its own, *Phobos* and *Deimos*. Fear and Panic. Just like Deanna, he thought. *Just like home*. Except neither of the two moons fell down occasionally.

“Deploy heat shield for re-entry.” Deire ordered, breaking Tim’s thoughtful silence. Bubba worked the controls.

“Sure, Boss.” He quipped, “Don’ wanna forget it this time!”

“Yeah!” Deire grinned back. “We nearly got toasted then, didn’t we?”

Tim pretended not to notice. He even managed to not show an expression of hearing ‘TMI’ (Too Much Information). If Tim thought the

landing was nice, that was only because the launch from Deana was so bad and was still fresh in his memory. In fact, when the old ship's landing skids thudded and scraped onto the 'mac at Mars City Central Spaceport he just wanted to rush out and kiss the ground.

On his way out he stopped by Jaymie's cabin just to warn him to stay on the ship and keep out of sight. He knocked. When the door opened, he was surprised to see Vic there too. And Jaymie was wearing a skirt and make-up and looked... totally different. H – *she* was blushing. Tim closed his mouth when he realized he was staring. At Jaymie and her reflection in the dressing table mirror she was sitting at.

“Umm...” He began.

“Captain Skooch,” Vic called formally, “May I introduce, Miss Jaymie Vallantdorf?”

Jaymie gave a little curtsy, then giggled naughtily. To say he was stunned would be an understatement. He'd never seen anybody do a curtsy sitting down before. He never met anybody who could pull it off before either. He even forgot to point out that Deire was the skipper and he was just the owner. Besides, under the circumstances



'*Captain*' sounded pretty good.

"Just helping out a little, boss." Vic explained. "They'll be looking for a *boy* won't they? And you did say 'under cover'? Well *this* way... anyway, it seems like the *sensible* thing to do."

"Er... yes?" He ventured. He hoped that was the right answer.

"Vic's been helping me out with make-up and clothes." Jaymie explained. "I'm a little out of practice. And I had nothing left cos Jones didn't let me have anything."

"Just – " He stammered, blushing, "Just keep her on the ship. To be safe."

Vic and Jaymie looked at each other and smiled enthusiastically at each other.

"He said '*her!*'" They chorused. Clearly they were enjoying his discomfort.

He stared at Vic. It looked like they were having a really nice time. All girly-fied. She looked kinda funny with lipstick on. Near as he could figure it, he felt like somebody's wife who came home early and found

her husband dressed in her lingerie and wearing her make-up. No, not quite. But at least he had an idea how it might have felt.

“I didn’t know you *had* make-up!” He retorted before he could stop himself. “And... skirts?”

“Well, what do you think of me, Boss? I might be built like a brick shithouse and I might not wear much make-up but –“

He fled before he tied himself into more knots. Or before Vic did it for him. On Martian soil at the foot of the ramp, he stood looking at the light blue sky. He breathed in deeply. The air was fresh and clean. Much better than the canned recycled air he’d been breathing the last four days. Fluffy white clouds hung high up in the atmosphere. Just like home, he thought. Not Deanna, but just like home. No crabbygrass and no strato-penguins. No *Ding* or *Dong*. No Dory either. No, it wasn’t home. Not home at all.

Tim and Deire took a taxi to the cattle market at the edge of the tarmac, several kilometers distant. It was a wild-west sort of affair, all livestock barricades and cattle pens. The place seemed to be covered in mud or cow dung, possibly both. Little wheeled and tracked droids ran about everywhere like sheep dogs, wielding

electrified cattle prods. Funny furry rectangular shaped cattle stood around chewing cuds and bleating like oversized goats. And there were thousands of those. One of the little herder droids prodded a cow unexpectedly. It bleated with fright and fell over noisily. It lay there struggling to get up, causing even more mayhem. That's what you got when you scrambled DNA, Tim thought. Cattle that fitted into boxes but needed perfectly level floors and couldn't roll back onto their feet when they fell over because of their square sides. (You didn't order RHW spare-ribs, you got *square* ribs.) There was a lot of activity going on around them. It seemed some cattle were being driven into the back of a large container truck in the distance. There was some shouting and bleating as another cow fell over noisily in another pen.

They found a floor manager who directed them to a lawyer from the Mars Livestock Exchange. He was a tall thin chap, graying and balding. He wore a grubby grey suit, cowboy hat and a pair of galoshes, most likely for obvious reasons. The lawyer introduced himself as Frank Hugh from the company *Hugh, Tripp & Zhorr* and proceeded to draw up a contract between Tim and the ranchers on his PDA. Just at that very moment one of the nearest wildebeest did what

it was most famous for – it fell over. Sadly, that was it for Frank Hugh of *Hugh, Tripp & Zhorr*. It wasn't a pretty sight that was certain. *Splat!* He could see a name change for the abovementioned company in the not too distant future. Minutes later, a paramedic crew from Mars City General arrived to clean up the mess. It was yet another interesting event to add to his list of adventures so far. Perhaps he should start a diary, he thought. It would certainly make interesting reading when he was a hundred and forty, sitting on the porch with Dory, wondering what the heck life had been all about. How would today's entry go? Let's see –

*“Arrived on Mars just after breakfast. Went to Livestock Exchange with Deire to arrange a cargo of red-horned wildebeest to pay the fare for our journey home. Our lawyer got flattened by a falling wildebeest while finalizing the transport contract. Boy, he sure was flat. First time I ever saw paramedics using shovels. “*

What entertaining reading that would make! It took half an hour to find another lawyer to draw up a new contract. This time it was Michael Carmichael from Carmichael, Michael & Karr. He was calm and polite, but business-like. *‘Those are the risks’* He observed

stoically while working out the details of the transaction. He charged Tim a thousand credits, flat-rate.

After that, they left with assurances that a load of wildebeest would arrive at the ship by the next morning. A nice chunk of change in his pocket from that deal, Tim decided the best place for it was in the safe in his cabin. Back on Celeste, Tim went and made good on that impulse, depositing two thousand credits in the little vault behind his headboard. Then he readied himself for the next item on his list, and obtained a picture of Jamie, um --Jaymie, en-femme. This he took with him when he left again. He also decided to look up an uncle of his he hadn't seen in about twenty years. (*Not* the one he had to explain to the tour guides at the Astroplex.) The crew had already gone out with the intention of drinking and carousing in downtown Mars City. Vic decided to stay on board to look after the ship – and Jaymie.

A quick stop at the space port building led him to a public communications centre, where he sent an email to his friend and comrade -in-arms, Gary Beck.

*“Dear Gary,*

*In a tight spot and need a bit of a favor. Please give this mail to CM and ask her to use some of her resources to send it with the attached letter and picture to a secure private email address for Mayor Frederyck Vallantdorf, Mars City. His eyes only, as the old books say. ASAP as usual. Can't trust any of his aides or staff. Long story, fill you in and make it up to you both over a couple cold ones at Shock Diamond soon.*

*Much obliged,*

*Skooch.”*

Sure, he was following his own agenda, but after all why shouldn't he? Nobody else was going to bother with young Jaymie anyway, were they? Nobody really wants to be involved in somebody else's troubles. Especially if that person was called a *bender* and *pink* and *pansified*, among other things. Then he uploaded the letter he wrote to Jaymie's father earlier and attached the picture he got from Vic. That done, he sent it, hoping it all worked out. Gary Beck, aka Beck the Badfeller was a bounty hunter on Deanna, known unofficially as the best in the business. His other half was Cindy-Mei Winter, a

former Colonial Intelligence Agency operative. And, as luck would have it, a former male. Sometimes contacts like this came in handy. Beck had saved his bacon more than once. Perhaps this time too. He was pretty much out of ideas otherwise. It was a bit of a gamble, but if it paid off, Jaymie would be able to go home soon. Perhaps even within a month or so. And if his hunch was right, the *Olduvai Trust's* days were numbered. Then he sent a brief note to Dory, just to let her know he was safe, on Mars and all was going well. He told her he loved her very, very much and that he was longing for her.

The next thing he did was arrange for Celeste to be refueled. Five hundred credits later, yeah. Well, it had to be done or they wouldn't get very far at all. And now, he decided, it was time for some Tim time. His uncle's address was in his mobile, so he took a taxi. Twenty minutes later he arrived on the doorstep of a large house in the suburb of Typhus Bay. It was a wealthy part of Mars City, where many professionals lived. His uncle Jed was a professor of anthropology and archeology at the University of Mars City. He was also something of an adventurer and spent lots of time exploring Mars, mostly on foot. When he was younger he also tried his hand at extreme sports like mountain climbing and base jumping. The UMC funded many of his expeditions across the planet, in his search for

Truth and an excuse to find more interesting ways to try and kill himself. A long time ago, his uncle made the news by being the first to climb *Olympus Mons*. It was the tallest mountain on Mars and he did it solo, which was rather impressive and took him almost a month to do. He also made the news for being the first to hang glide from the peak upside down. Not surprisingly, he was also the last person to attempt that record. Strong updrafts on Mars apparently. Um.

Timaset Skooch, long lost member of the Skooch clan, was entertained all afternoon and evening by family he really never knew he had. And he thought he only had an uncle living on Mars! An aunt and twelve cousins and several second cousins later, he was all tuckered out. Uncle Jed reminded him a little of his dad, but he was just a bit more crazy. His Uncle Jed and his second wife M'ree had five children of their own and seven from his first wife. Apparently Aunt Vanessa was just as adventurous as Uncle Jed. Tim vaguely remembered her as a dark haired lady of slight build who was always immaculately dressed and made up, despite her taste for the outdoors. According to family folklore, she died laughing while going over Vertigo Falls – the highest waterfall on Mars – in a canoe, backwards. Her successor was much more of a homebody. She preferred saying home while Uncle Jed went traipsing about the



Martian wilderness, looking for traces of vanished Martian civilizations the scientists may have missed in the hopes of proving them wrong. He spent ages showing Tim his collection of what he called 'artifacts' – which to him just looked like a collection of old stones. Uncle Jed claimed they were proof of ancient Martian civilizations, like the stone tools found on Earth and so on. Tim was no paleontologist. Granted, they were Martian stones, they had an unmistakable red hue and they did have funny shapes – some of them (ouch) quite sharp, but to Tim they could've been anything. One was shaped curiously like the head of Donald Duck, and that seemed to be the most interesting of the whole display in his uncles' study. None of the Scientific community were paying any real attention to his ranting, though they did remember his famous hang gliding accident years ago. Funny that.

His cousins were mostly all grown up and had left home, just two were still at school and living with his eccentric uncle Jed and his batty second wife who seemed to live for her soapies. But his visit turned into a real family gathering when she called them all over to meet their 'long-lost' cousin. Uncle Jed called him the 'missing link' and spent a few minutes roaring with laughter. Hmm. Very amusing. He'd never met any of them before; in fact the last time he had any news from them – some twenty years ago, he was still a kid living with his

parents on Deanna. His cousins seemed to be respectable and doing well, which made him feel slightly threatened. He was surrounded by doctors, lawyers, a stock broker, a dentist and even a xeno-zoologist who kept asking questions about *crabby-grass* and *strato-penguins*. He was interrogated about his life on Deanna, his er, job such as it was, his meager income – and did he *actually* have a girlfriend? He said yes, named Dory and left it at that. It was really none of their business about Dory anyway. In the end she was more important to him than all of them put together and now so more than ever.

Supper was a feast consisting of three courses. *Wertle* soup, which was made from the yellow wertle, a tri-cotyledonous bean-like plant which grew wild on the plains of Mars. It went well with a twist of lemon, which gave it a salty taste. The crowning glory was the roast, which Uncle Jed informed him was wild Martian Quail hunted by Uncle Jed himself. When humans began terraforming Mars a hundred years ago; Martian Quail was one of the native Martian species that awoke from prolonged hibernation. The sudden increase in oxygen, temperature and moisture levels seemed to trigger their awakening. Suddenly Quail were everywhere, emerging from hidden caves and natural shelters under the ear – um, mars. Plants too – like the *wertle*, began sprouting from dormant spores and seeds across

the vast plains. Martian Quail roughly resembled Earth quails except they were the size of a bull and slightly more aggressive. Apparently it took a high explosive shell from an elephant gun to bring this one down. On reflection, it might also have made a small contribution towards the flavor. Tim resolved never to tangle with Uncle Jed.

This delicacy was followed by blue spider-apple ice-cream, another favorite on Mars. With caramel sauce. Yummy. The drinks were nice too, and just as unusual. Uncle Jed was partial to the local sparkling wine which was thick and sweet and dark and tasted like diluted syrup with thirty percent alcohol. You couldn't hurry a glass of the stuff – humorously labeled *Martian Plonk*. Well, you could – but you'd have to use a spoon and you'd probably have to chew it. The bubbles rose so slowly to the surface they seemed suspended like insects in amber. Swallowing one caused hiccups or flatulence and consequent giggles all round. It was slow going and after the third glass he was sweet up to the gills, not to mention slightly pickled and very popular. Having had a really nice but daunting time, he decided it was time to go home. Ok, not home – just back to the ship. Damn.

He asked Uncle Jed if he would call him a cab. He said he would. And he did. A man of his word, his uncle. Strange man. Not *quite*

ridiculous, just strange. On the other side of his family, his uncle Jeremy was ridiculous – but he was put in a home for the things he did. Like calling the Martian Navy stores and asking to speak to Warrant Vouchers. *That* was ridiculous. This was the sort of thing that caused him to cast a suspicious eye on his family gene-pool and wonder why he seemed to be the last sane member of the Skooch family. Considering his relationship with Dory and his adventures of late, it made him wonder just a little.

So, thanking Uncle Jed while politely ignoring his cousins' raucous laughter, Tim took out his mobile and called for a cab himself. It took slightly longer through the Interplanetary Exchange because he didn't have a direct number, but not long after that a cab pulled into the driveway and hooted.

Bidding his estranged and unusual family farewell with a packet of Martian Quail takeaway tucked under one arm; he took the Mars City Cab back to the spaceport. Once there, Tim rode another small electric taxi back to where he left that festering heap of misfortune, the Celeste. As the taxi trundled noisily over the joints in the concrete, he reviewed the events of the day. It was quite an evening. The trip had turned out more interesting than he originally thought, but then it had

all worked out just fine, didn't it? The taxi took him through the crew entrance of the space port and entered the tarmac, losing him amongst the myriad of parked ships around the edges. When it finally stopped, he paid the driver, generously tipped him a fiver and lurched tiredly out of the taxi. He walked until he suddenly noticed a puzzling absence of ramp. He froze. Come to think of it there was an even more puzzling absence of everything else that was supposed to be at the other end of the ramp. He turned round slowly, looking from one brightly lit occupied parking spot to the next. And no, none of the other ships in the area was the *Celeste*. If anything, they all looked newer. *Wait a minute!* Did he have the right parking bay? He read the number off the tarmac, painted in large blue digits. C477. Yes, it was the right one all right. So there he stood, in the shadow cast by one of the huge spaceport flood lights, staring madly at the empty parking space. Unbelievably, that festering heap of space trash, the *Celeste* – was gone.

He was beginning to think it might have something to do with the 10 000 credits he got for transporting those troublesome passengers. And possibly it was related to the little game of *Asteroids* they played in the rings of um, Jupiter on the way here. And yes, even more likely that it had a lot to do with their new charge, Jaymie Vallantdorf. *Damn!*

And it also meant that the *Olduvai Trust* had a pretty long reach and now had Jaymie in its clutches once again. This is it, he thought, he was losing his grip. Life had just passed him another challenge and he was about to fumble it and get thumped hard by the opposing quarterback. He could already imagine returning home to Dory, defeated and empty handed, with his tail tucked between his legs. Ok, maybe both tails. He gave a little hysterical giggle. How would he explain this to Dory? He would have to choose his words very carefully if he didn't want to see the new emergency room at Atro City General from the inside. Just telling her a complete fabrication about how he got rumbled again probably wouldn't cut it either. Tell her the truth? Now there was a novel concept... Let's see, while visiting relatives in Mars City he didn't know he had, his ship got stolen. It sounded believable, didn't it? *Didn't it?* No, he didn't think so either.

Just then, something came into earshot. It turned out to be singing, cleverly disguised as drunken carousing.

*'They tied 'er to a four poster bed, parley voo.'* It went, *'They tied 'er to a four poster bed, \*\*\*\*\* 'er till she was nearly dead – inky-pinky parley voo...'* After straining his hearing a moment he recognized the tune. It was a drinking song and it featured an axe, a rickety staircase, an innkeeper's daughter and the devil's wife as well. And the main

characters were three German officers who *crossed the Line* and did plenty of the other thing – um, *parley voo*. It was just then that his crew arrived from the nearby pub, blind drunk, puzzled and now unemployed as well. There were four of them, casting weird shadows on the tarmac behind him as they drunkenly swayed in different directions. Three of them were taking turns to carry Triple-J whose tongue was hanging out. Two of them had him by the legs and one by an arm. Either he was dead or just dead-drunk. It was rather difficult to tell at the moment and in all honesty Tim was past caring. They fell silent on seeing him – and the empty parking bay. The last disjointed strains of *'they dragged her down the rickety stairs, parley voo'* fading from his hearing, Tim just shrugged at them. It was all he could do really, under the circumstances.

“Somethin’s wrong wi’ this picture.” Slurred Deire, letting go of an arm. Tripple-J’s head made a sound like a coconut on wood as it bounced off the concrete. “Where’s the Celeste? *Where’s m’ baybee?*” He looked at Tim in what could only be described as ‘a threatening manner’. And hostile, yes, it could be called that too. “*What happened? Where’s she?*”

“I don’t know.” Said Tim, tiredly adjusting the parcel under his arm. “I

just got here myself.”

“Vic stayed on the ship.” Said Nurse, suddenly sober. “So did the kid!”

“*Garn!*” Exclaimed Deire. “She’s bin stolen as well! Both of ‘em!”

“That’s kidnapping!” Added Bubba. “*Again!*”

“She’s bin hijacked!” Cried Deire. “Aint there a law ‘gainst kidnappin’ somebuddy twice?”

There was a brief pause as they pondered the validity of this question.

Usually once was bad enough to get you life. Or death.

“Ah feel a mite sorry fer the hijackers.” Bubba commented objectively.

“Yeah.” Added Nurse, who was rumored to be an ardent Vic fan,

“She’ll sort them out!”

There was a chorus of approval from the small crowd. The unconscious form of the ships engineer was unceremoniously dumped at their feet in the parking bay, whereupon he gave a loud snore. Nice friends this lot. He tossed his takeaway parcel to Deire, who was too distracted to notice as it sailed past him. It bounced, rolled and landed neatly by Triple-J’s head.

“I don’t know if this has occurred to you yet,” Said Timaset Skooch very patiently. “But this is more than just a temporary inconvenience.



Without the ship we're stuck here, without money or a means of making any."

They stood there in quiet agreement, all shaking their heads or nodding.

"Any ideas?"

Silence reigned. Doctor – um, Nurse seemed to be intensely studying the approaching false dawn. Bubba was scratching his beer belly, deep in thought. He actually felt sorry for Jonn Deire. The big man was just standing there staring at the ground, looking as if he were melting from the inside. The others seemed lost and blank. Mostly sozzled and looking at the problem from inside a bottle. It was a kind of tunnel vision, Tim knew. He knew that feeling all too well. It's what happened when you staggered home from an all-night session at the *Slipped Disk* and found yourself staring down a blaster muzzle in a dark alley. Triple-J was just as useful, but at least he had an excuse. He was still lying passed out on the tarmac, using Tim's Martian Quail takeaway as a pillow. It brought things into focus for him. Triple-J was actually quite bright under the circumstances; in fact he had a head start on all of them. No place to go, he thought. They could end up sleeping on pavements for a very long time.

“Right then.” Tim sighed, running his fingers through his hair. “I’ll just hop back to my uncle’s place, sleep in the bath and start my new career as a milestone inspector tomorrow, shall I?”

“Got any money there, guv?” Nurse quipped in a quasi old-English accent.

“Not enough for tickets back home.” Tim replied. “Why?”

“I meant it as a joke.” Said Nurse dryly.

“Oh. Right. Ha-ha. Forgot to laugh. No, really.”

The novice loderunner skipper part of him was way out of his depth, but the P.I. part of him knew somebody somewhere must have answers. He looked round at the tall light masts that were everywhere around the tarmac. Bright light cascaded down from them, flooding the expanse of concrete and myriad of non-Celeste’s surrounding them. But they were also more than just lights, he knew. This was a space port and space ports had security systems too. The P.I. part of Timaset Skooch shushed the novice loderunner skipper part of him to a waiting chair, stuck a box of popcorn in his hand and told him to be quiet and watch the movie.

“Hey, where’re you going Mister Skooch?” Deire called as he turned and started walking away.

“To the Spaceport.” He called back. “I’m going to find out what happened.”

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Enquiries at the Harbormaster’s Office only resulted in more questions. Sure, the ship took off three hours earlier, and funny enough, the pilot had followed correct coms-procedures and everything seemed to be above board as far as the spaceport authority was concerned. Sure there were visual records of the ship leaving, pretty good clear videos too, but they just showed Celeste taking off into the sunset. Not much help there. The destination was also a puzzle. For the record, it was a rather nice sunset. The Celeste took off and headed west at low altitude. It never left orbit. At least not yet. He suspected it was already in a chop-shop somewhere, being stripped for its shiny skids and brightly lit optical window washer nozzles. Either that or it was being repainted in a different color and fitted with a bee-sting subspace antenna and a spoiler kit so it could be sold to an unsuspecting buyer, perhaps a space taxi operator. Another theory put forward by Nurse suggested it was stolen so it could be used to knock over an armored cash-in-transit ship in a heist. Those heisters were always on the look-out for nice solid old ships that could punch a nice sized hole in the hull of the

latter. And old as Celeste was, she was still pretty solid. Deire stood beside him with a faraway look in his eyes. His skin had turned a funny shade, almost as if they should be expecting a stroke or some kind of seizure. The man was tense and rigid and his lips twitched now and again. Probably livid, hearing all these things being discussed with the Spaceport Manager, a short man who was just ending a phone call and had introduced himself as Wallas Phreemantel. (With a silent 'p' – yes, as in 'bath'.) He looked up at them as he ended the call and smiled. It was the kind of smile that suggested he might have been a policeman dealing with worried parents who returned home on a Saturday night and found the liquor cabinet open and empty and whose teenage son had absconded with the family Jeepo. (Last seen driving around town with his friends, mooning pedestrians – um, coincidentally in the vicinity of a forty car pile-up on Route 3000.)

“Well gentlemen,” He said in a very calm and over-polite voice, “It seems your worries are over. A flight control operator has just reported that your missing ship is coming back here. It should be landing in about ten minutes. You will most likely find it at the same parking spot.” He gave them a look over the top of his spectacle frames that implied he wished they would leave now and stop wasting

his time. “Perhaps we may consider the matter closed then, gentlemen? Hmm? Perhaps you should discuss the use of your ship with your crew, *Captain?*”

Tim valiantly resisted not informing Mr Phreemantel (With a silent ‘p’ – yes, as in ‘*bath*’) that he was the owner, not the Captain. That only would’ve added to his embarrassment. His pride stinging from the acid of this last remark, Tim’s P.I. persona delivered a smart smack to the back of the novice skipper’s head. Both made a mental note to sort out the pilot. Whoever that would turn out to be. If it was Vic, well... he had a few thoughts about that. And if it wasn’t Vic... he had a few thoughts about that too.

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By the time they arrived back at the parking spot by taxi, Celeste had already landed and the ramp was extended. Bits of metal on the hull were going *ting – ting* as they cooled. Steam was rising from the drive section and OMS and landing thrusters. Jonn Deire stopped alongside him and rubbed his beard thoughtfully.

“Wee-ell, at least the skids’re still on.” He grinned, relived. Tim hadn’t noticed. He was fixated on the figure striding down the ramp and wearing a broad grin. It was Vic, looking very pleased with herself.

“Where the hell have you been?” Tim demanded.

“Come on in and I’ll tell you all about it!” She bragged. Enough was enough. They were all tired out and relieved to see their ship again, so they bundled up the ramp. He made a quick visual inspection. No sign of Triple-J – or his takeaway dinner either.

“And where’s Triple-J? Not under one of the skids, I hope?”

“No, I brought him inside just before you guys got here.” She explained, still grinning. “He’s in the lounge sleeping it off.”

“And Jaymie?”

“Spent the evening getting all prettified and then went to bed after supper. Missed the whole thing. Still fast asleep for all I know.”

He breathed a tired sigh of relief. At least they didn’t get her.

“Okay, so who gave you permission to just chuck off with my ship?”

Timaset asked coldly, following her inside. “They have laws about that, you know!”

“Um –“ Vic began, still grinning despite the interruption.

“Didn’t they used to execute people – I mean hang them or something, for that?”

“The term used was ‘*keel-haul*’, actually.”

“Okay, *keel-haul*.”

“Star ships don’t have keels.”

“Fine. Whatever. I could find one and make you haul it.”

The large woman just carried on smiling, in a maddening way that suggested she was in such a good mood she wasn't taking him all that seriously, especially considering he was almost half her build and couldn't very well *make* her do anything. Such a good mood that she didn't even bother to point out that the keel wasn't something she would be hauling – it was what *she* would be hauled *over*.

“In a moment you're going to stop whining and thank me.” She beamed, stopping to point into the cargo bay. And just up ahead, tied securely to an overturned forklift, were two burly looking men in suits looking somewhat roughed up. Timaset looked them over. They were conscious, but looked like they had just gone thirty rounds in the ring with some WWF wrestling star with a name that might include such descriptive terms as 'Killer ' or 'Reaper'. Strips of material torn from their own clothes served as crude but effective gags, which is why they weren't screaming for any particular reason. Imagine one or two bruises or cuts and a little blood here and there just for dramatic effect. They had black eyes, and four of those.

“There.” She said proudly, flexing her knuckles. They stared at her

wide-eyed in terror from within their gags. One made a high pitched muffled scream. She put a finger to her lips and the terrified captives fell silent.

“And this?” Tim asked. The rest had caught up and were staring. They seemed either too tired or still too drunk to focus. Tim turned and pointed to the entrance to the corridor leading off the cargo deck.

“You guys shuffle off to the diner – get straightened out. “ He ordered.

“Drink some black coffee. And get some sleep. I have a feeling this is going to be a long night.”

“Morning.” Said Bubba, blinking tiredly. “Night was yesterday.”

“Okay. Morning then. Whatever. You still here? Off you go!”

They shuffled off, muttering. He hoped they avoided the elevator. A load of cattle was arriving in the morning and he didn't want his crew hung-over *and* more traumatized than they had to be. Tim turned back to Vic to hear the imminent explanation. Yeah, it was a heck of a long night. Morning. Whatever.

“You were saying?”

“After you guys left, these two smart guys came on board and hijacked me.” Vic grinned, in a way that suggested she was amused by her own flashbacks of memory. “They were very brave. They held guns to my head and made me take off and head over somewhere



east of here. It was really funny, cos, you see, one of them started cussin' when one of his bullets..."

"That so?" Timaset Skooch interrupted, eyeing the captives tiredly.

"Did they say where or why?"

"No, because then I started hitting them and they didn't say much after that."

"Because you gagged them, I suppose?" Guessed Tim.

"No, because they were screaming too much to talk." She grinned.

"Apparently these tough guys can't handle it when a little girl like me starts beating up on them!"

"Hmm." Said Tim. "Did you check their pockets? Weapons, com links, anything useful?"

"Yes. I put it all on the table in the galley. You want to question them now?" Said Vic, flexing her knuckles. The prisoners were eyeing them with renewed terror. But Tim shook his head.

“Nah.” He yawned. “That can wait till tomorrow. I mean later. At least till after breakfast. Just make sure they can’t get loose, then get some rest.”

“Sure, Boss.”

“And don’t forget to close the ramp.” He said, turning to make his way back to the corridor.

“Sure, Boss.” She called after him.

“Good work, Vic.”

“Thanks, Boss!”

Tim was tired. It was so late it was already early. Funny how things like that work in cycles. And it was amazing how things like that can appeal to a fatigued mind like his was at the time. As he made his weary way down the corridors, he decided to check up on Jaymie. Her door wasn’t locked and her lights dim. There she was, fast asleep in bed. Amazing how quickly he made the mental transition from him to her, he thought. And he was thinking about himself, not Jaymie. The thought process was what he meant. It was like with Dory. One second she was a fem guy and he could see the man she hated. The

next, he could actually see the woman she was inside. People are funny animals, he thought to himself. He closed the door again quietly and continued on his way. On, to the next order of business, the things Vic had confiscated from their would-be hijackers. The diner slash galley was silent and empty. On the battered dining table was a small pile of objects. In his tired state he would call it clutter or perhaps something more descriptive or colorful. But he looked through it, just to satisfy his peaking curiosity. Two mobile phones, two hand guns – small caliber projectile weapons. The smaller one was a stubby little revolver. Tim hadn't seen a revolver in real life before, at least, not outside a museum. It was quite rusty and when he tilted it slightly while examining it, one of the bullets fell out the back. *Smith & Wesson*, he read. *Young America. Thirty-two caliber*. This wasn't a weapon, it was a curiosity. Perhaps an abomination, even. Something that belonged either in a museum or at the bottom of a harbor. The other was a Jupina Black Auto 10mm. Nothing wrong with that. Quite handy. There were two mobiles, reasonably new. No complete names or addresses, just numbers. They were stored under descriptions like '*Johnny Spikes*' and '*Freddy Boom-boom*' or '*Kilroy*'. He didn't think he would fancy meeting *Johnny Spikes* or even mister *Boom-boom*. Especially without some serious hardware in his hand,

and maybe some equally serious backup around the corner with tires screeching and sirens wailing. In his tired state of mind, he dwelt on the name 'Kilroy'. *Kilroy?* How would his friends describe him? *He seemed nice enough, but I wouldn't want to meet him if my name was Roy. If you get my meaning.* He yawned. There were no wallets or anything that could identify the two men tied to a large wooden box on his cargo deck. Hmm. Interesting.

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The next morning – or perhaps just later after the sun came up – there was a lot of loud and confused bleating as the cargo of cattle arrived at the foot of the ramp, waiting to be loaded. Meanwhile, some of Celeste's crew were preparing to herd the – um, herd up the ramp, still somewhat loaded themselves.

Vic did a head count as each of the ungainly red-horned wildebeest went up the ramp, nose-to-tail and swaying lightly from side to side as it fought for its balance. Some small wheeled herder droids scuttled around the edges of the herd, directing them towards the ramp. The delivery agent stood at the base of the ramp behind the rest of the herd, beside his mount – which was a kind of hover-bike that looked vaguely like an old Harley but without any wheels. He wore a baseball cap and had something resembling a clipboard under one

arm. When the last cow trotted up the ramp and into the cargo bay, he strolled up it to Vic and passed her the clipboard. Nurse nodded to her and said: "Two hundred." She nodded in agreement.

"Yup, I got that too." She said. "Where do I sign?"

"Right here." Said the agent, handing her a light-pen. She scribbled on the appropriate spot as the agents' eyes wandered the cargo deck, now alive with the large rectangular cattle that were the bane of his existence. Rectangular fluffy cattle were bleating and lowing and just generally spoiling his view.

"Been a good day so far." He grinned as them. "None o' them critters've fallen over yet!"

"Yeah." Said Vic in the tone of voice that suggested she would just tip them back on their feet if they did, no sweat. "Lucky thing."

"Yeah." Said the agent, his eyes falling on two lame, bored looking prostrated figures apparently tied to a large wooden box. "You...er... you always tie people up on this ship?"

Vic looked him in the eye without blinking and told him: "Just the ones who scratch where there ain't any itch."

He took the hint, swallowed and tipped his cap at them and went down the ramp. His hover-bike roared as he drove it away across the vast tarmac. Vic turned and looked at the two captives. Breakfast was happening in a few minutes. She had made a point of ignoring them up till now. One of them had soiled himself in the night. Both of them still looked frightened, perhaps even more so now. Positively terrified, now that they were surrounded by two hundred annoyed lab-bred rectangular-shaped cattle with a tendency to fall over at inconvenient times. Like when people might just be under them, for instance. One of them closed his eyes and looked away as a cow sprayed dung on the deck nearby and the pong began to spread. She smiled at Nurse. Perhaps after breakfast their tongues would be very loose. The boss must know what he wants, and *anyway*, she thought, *he is the boss*. She punched a key on the control panel by the ramp entrance and grinned as it began to rumble closed.

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Breakfast turned out to be surprisingly good, considering that the night had been almost non-existent. It was bacon and eggs with some crispy toast. *English*, they used to call it, back when English was what they now called *Terran*. Tim was enjoying the meal. He liked fried eggs and bacon. Bacon made from RHWB, with very straight rinds. It

reminded him of home. His mother used to make it as a treat Sunday mornings. And sometimes he'd twist Dory's arm to whip some up for him too. He gazed longingly into the clouds in his coffee. Deire was wiping bits of food out of his thick grey beard, while Bubba was still making noises in the kitchen. Vic was sipping black coffee, resting on her muscular arms, leaning over an empty plate and looking well satisfied. Nurse was nodding off, his plate still half-full. Triple-J was notably absent. The main attraction at this breakfast was Jaymie, who was seated beside Vic and receiving stares from the men-folk.

"Knees together." Vic chided her young apprentice, who complied.

"And straight back. A lady doesn't slouch!" She added. Jaymie rolled her eyes like a typical teenager and again complied. Vic's assistance had not failed to make an impression. She was wearing a floral top, and a neat pair of jeans. Her short hair was held back by a sparkly butterfly clip that also held a plume of synthetic blond hair a close approximation of her own shade. Hmm. It seemed Vic had been making good use of the local shops. Although Jaymie was somewhat flat in the chest department, the make-up and hair made up for it. And for the first time, a smile looked at home on Jaymie's face. She looked happy.

Deire grumbled, and found what could have been a speck of bacon (hopefully), examined it carefully, then flicked it across the room.

“What we gonna do w’ those two critters?” He enquired. “Bin there all trussed up like turkeys fer Thanks-givin’ since last night. Can’t keep ‘em forever.”

Tim took a thoughtful sip from his mug, and smiled faintly afterwards.

“They ain’t had nuthin t’drink or eat – and hell, one of ‘em even crapped himself last night. Lord knows what the cattle think.”

“Mooo.” Came Nurse’s contribution, followed by a giggle ending in coffee bubbles.

“Let me ask you something.” Said Tim in a quiet voice. “If you’re a tough guy, from a gang for instance – are you going to spill the beans right away? Or are you going to just keep quiet?”

“Well – I suppose ah’ll clam up, not say nuthin.” Deire reasoned.

“Don’t they have some code o’ silence or somesuch – *omelet* or somethin’? Anyways, we knows why they came – *her*, I mean – *him*, I mean – *the kid!*”

Jaymie just paused in her meal and smiled at Deire, displaying no obvious discomfort. Tim smiled inwardly, thinking *welcome to my world.*



“You mean *omerta*.” He smiled. “Then why waste time trying to get information out of two tough guys when all we need to do is wait? They’ve been sitting there since Vic tied them up. We haven’t smacked them around (much) or harmed them physically – in fact, we’ve just left them there. Tied up and helpless, gagged and unable to speak. So now they’re afraid, tired, stressed, thirsty, dirty and wondering when one of those cattle is going to fall on them. Or if we’re just going to take off and throw them out the airlock.”

“That sounds good, Boss.” Vic grinned. “Can I do for that? Please? We can toss them out just as we leave orbit and we can watch them burn all the way down through re-entry –“

Tim stared at her. She actually looked serious. And more, she looked *keen*.

“Are you for real?” Was all he could manage.

“Why not?” Nurse added. “You already disposed of Jones and his buddy?””

“Aren’t doctors supposed to adhere to the Hippocratic Oath or something?” Tim countered.

“Nah. That’s for doctors.” He grinned back. “I’m only a medic. Who happens to be good at autopsies and hiding bodies. Besides, they

and their cohorts know who we are and probably that we have the kid.”

“There are other ways, you know.” Tim argued. “I’m not the murdering type.”

“So you’re messin’ with their heads?” Deire added.

“Well, I’m not going to kill them, if that’s what you’re asking.” He looked at them with tired surprise. “Is that what you think of me? I mean, come on!”

\*\*\*

The crew of the Celeste worked their way through the huge herd of nervous cattle, heading towards the place where the two would-be hijackers were moored. The ship had taken off only thirty odd minutes ago, and the stress of the take-off had taken its toll on the wildebeest. Some had fallen over and were lying there, waiting patiently for somebody to come put them back on their feet. Vic went up to the closest one and kindly obliged. It looked at her, slightly puzzled, and trotted off to find some hay. It was a sight to behold. Most of them had put the herd instinct to good use, and had crowded together against one side, packing themselves in tightly so they held each other up. Tim was sure that the view from above would’ve resembled a red-brown brick wall, albeit a fluffy one.

They found the captives right where they left them. They were still in good condition, surrounded by mounds of cow dung and suspicious looking puddles on the deck. They were glaring up at their captors as they silently and menacingly surrounded them. Mad eyes, terrified minds. Wondering what was to be their fate? Watching the woman who had smacked them around the previous night, righting red-horned wildebeest back to their feet with her bare hands didn't help much.

To be honest, it smelled awful. But it wasn't the worst Timaset Skooch remembered. Finding a dead body in a flat, seven months post mortem... it leaves a pungent scent and flavor that lingers in the memory forever. He reached down and took the gag off one of them. Almost immediately he began to sing, like a canary. A dry-mouthed, madly terrified canary in a cage, smelling gas. Tim held up a finger to call for silence which fell instantly. Then he reached out and loosened the gag of the other man, who just stared at him insanely. He had been tied up and made to lie here for hours in his own mess, and was seething with anger and indignity and lord-knows-what else.

"Now," Said Tim patiently, "Would you two gents like to explain why you tried to steal my ship?"

It was almost like the Hallelujah Chorus, it was so musical. Just that it was off-key and they couldn't hear a word or even make out a sentence. They just poured out a mad babble like an insane out-of-tune choir that was unsettling the cargo. It seemed Tim had to just wave the 10 mil in his left hand at them and he could direct the noise to create a masterful opera. He held out a finger again, and smiled – just faintly so, as silence fell again.

“Hush.” He said. “You’re going to upset the cattle. Do you know what happens when cattle get upset?”

“Their milk goes sour?” Triple-J suggested from the peanut gallery. Bubba saw the look he gave the offender and promptly delivered a noisy smack behind the head with the flat side of the large cleaver he was holding. This almost broke the mood, which irked Tim a little.

“No.” Said Tim, recovering. “They stampede. You don’t want that, do you?”

They shook their heads with abject enthusiasm.

“Let’s try this again. Why did you try to steal my ship?”

“The boy.” The first one stammered. “We came to get the boy! Please don’t kill us, mister Skooch – I got a wife an’ four kids! An’ Oyday got a whole lot o’ dames dependin’ on him!”

The other man, presumably Oyday, smiled at him and nodded enthusiastically. Tim imagined a cartoon skit where the two would do a little song and dance, waving placards reading '*Clemency!*' and '*Please Don't Kill Us, Mister Skooch!*'

"Who would marry a low-life like you?" Tim quipped. The man half smiled and looked up at him.

"Let's not get personal, like."

Tim stood back and regarded them like a teacher would look at the kid who spent most of the time in the corner under the 'Dunce!' cap.

"You see, folks – we don't have the boy. Surprise, surprise. He left with Mister Jones when we dropped them off in the rings of um, what was that planet again, Jonn?"

"Um – Jupiter, wasn't it, boss?" Deire responded to the prompting.

"Right after that, we left and never saw them again." Tim shrugged.

"A little while later, we did notice some kind of explosion in the rings though. Maybe you should go look for them there."

"In the rings of, um – Jupiter." Deire volunteered, trying to be helpful.

"We don't have the boy or know what happened to him. And to be honest, I don't much care either. So gents, what we have here is a huge misunderstanding."

The two captives gave each other meaningful glances, and then began nodding in fierce agreement. This was their cue.

“Huge misunderstanding, yes!” They chorused.

Tim leaned in over them again, closely and sniffed. He looked at each one in turn.

“What’s that smell?” He asked innocently. “That you, or the cattle?”

They shrugged at him.

“If we cut you loose now, you can be off on your merry.” He said, waving the 10 mil in a suggestive manner. “And you are going to...”

“Get out of here as soon as possible, like!” Said the first.

“And?”

“Tell the Boss we had the story all wrong?” Smiled the second.

“Okay, Bubba – you can cut them loose now.”

Bubba approached, cleaver in hand, grinning. Tim began walking away, but stopped to turn and look back at them.

“Sometimes folk don’t like other folk trying to steal their ship.” He said, by way of parting. “Next time you guys have questions of that nature – just ask?”

\*\*\*

They dropped the pair of aspiring hijackers off on the outskirts of Mars City. The extreme outskirts. On foot, without mobile phones it would

take them a few hours walk before they reached civilization. Conveniently, the Celeste's tracking beacon chose that moment to malfunction. Tsk, tsk. First the microwave and now this. The state of the ship was starting to worry Tim. At least this would give them some time to get away. Without some mole at the space port in the employ of the *Olduvai Trust* spotting their departure and tracking their course. Considering that they were glad to just get away with their lives, the pair didn't complain much. One, Tim thought it was the first one, *not* Oyday – actually waved as they soared away into the pale blue sky. They never saw the brawl that followed.

Mars orbit came and went awfully fast. They weren't playing around – the sooner they got away from Mars the better. And the further, the better. The cargo of cattle was destined for Miranda, which was virtually on the opposite end of the solar system – which was probably a good thing. It also explained why the fee was only two grand – it was all just in the same system. Small potatoes.

A few short hours later, Celeste closed in on Saturn's moon and made a landing at the space port. It was smaller than the one on Mars, and even the one on Deanna – and just half as full. There they picked up passengers – four soldiers on a rec-pass who had been sampling the

carnal pleasures of the mining towns. They were on their way back to the base on Pluto, which wasn't terribly far out of their way (not that they actually *had* a way). He also loaded a cargo of used Jeeps also bound for Pluto Colony. The fee for that was a thousand, so he was generous and only charged the soldier-boys three hundred each, pocketing two thousand. Come dividend time, there would at least be something to put on the table.

The soldiers were rather amusing fellows. They introduced themselves as Mike, Jo, Vinny and Chong. All of them were in worn jeans and t-shirts, unshaven and looking very relaxed. They came aboard singing '*Three German Officers*', carrying Chong between them, under a small pile of kit bags. Some of them bragged with bruised knuckles and bragged about an interesting bar-fight in a Stokerville pub that morning. It was called the '*Queen's Arms*', but that was just because the '*m*' had fallen off. It took three squads of police to restore order and they spent the night in the local jail. Apparently they had a *very* good time.

Young Jaymie encountered them in the lounge and found their interest flattering, but made herself scarce because they weren't quite



sober yet, but also for more obvious reasons. Smiling coyly, she retreated to the safety of the cargo bay, where Vic was blasting the last of the detritus left behind by the cattle down the ramp with a high pressure steam cleaner. She and Vic giggled, and made jokes about soldier-boys for a while. Her voice was soft and feminine enough to pass as a girl, Tim noticed. Not bad for jus eighteen. He was sitting on one of the nose skids, enjoying a quiet moment in the fresh air. Granted, it had a hint of sulphur in it, but it still beat tinned air hands down. He'd been to the terminal building and checked his mail almost as soon as they arrived on Miranda. True, he could check it from his cabin terminal, but then some smart person could track their position through the connection. And no, he didn't like that idea.

There was a reply from Dory, the contents of which he felt are none of your business. But suffice to say, he was happy to hear from her, and to hear that she loved and missed him just as much. She mentioned nothing of any changes. He didn't mind the changes he thought she was planning, or what he was going to walk into when he got home – just as long as it wasn't a frying pan. Gary had sent a reply too, and it went something like this:

*'Tim,*

*CM delivered ure mail to the party. Amazing, isn't she? No reply received. Hope it went thru. Love to hear ure story. Shout if there's nething else. Best of luck.*

*Gary'*

The trip to Pluto Colony was just another few short hours. By lunch time Celeste was parked on the 'mac at Andresi Space Port just in spitting distance from Anderson Central, the capital city. Most of the people there were either in the military or in the business of supporting it. There was a major military academy there too, no pun intended. The cargo of Jeepo's were taken off by the collecting agent and his crew almost as soon as the ramp was lowered. Then they bade farewell to the four soldier-boys, who left Celeste clean-shaven and in full-dress green Star-Marine uniforms. Pluto was a cold world and no amount of terraforming could change that. Jaymie stood beside him at the top of the ramp, waving goodbye. She was wearing a different outfit, something a little too tropical for Pluto. He also noticed she was suddenly more, um – endowed than she was at breakfast.

“Damn, they grew fast.” He caught himself saying. She smiled and looked up at him.

“Stuffing.” She said, making a last wave to the departees. “For now.”

They paused to wave back. They were still carrying Chong.

“Think I’ll be getting home soon?” She asked him as they watched the four vanish into the distance.

“Soon.” He replied, pretending to be looking at the ships in the distance. “Hopefully.”

“Not too soon.” She said. “This is the nicest time I’ve ever had.”

“Hmm.” He said, hoping that would do.

“This is the first time I could ever be myself.” She said. “Ever.”

He finally turned and looked at her. “Your folks really don’t accept you, do they?”

“Not like this.” Her features were soft and pleasant, even when she was being serious. “Never like this.”

The importance of that to her made an impression on him. He imagined a life where he was trapped in a mould which he felt didn’t suit him and never had. Or tried to. It was hard for him. Dory told him those who weren’t *that* way could never truly understand. It wasn’t a

choice how you felt, you just *were*. No operations or treatments or ‘*cures*’ could change that, no matter how nice – or how terrible. The body and the mind didn’t match up and, regardless of the cause or explanation, the only way forward was to make the body fit the mind. The opposite was impossibility, a dream ‘*cure*’ for rigid intolerant society – and those like Dory who longed to lead a normal life, an ‘easy way out’ to just be like everybody else. But there was no easy way out, was there? *Who would put themselves through such turmoil if they had a choice? If it was that simple, just to choose?*

He swallowed the lump in his throat. He thought of Dorian, a million miles back home. What she had been through – and was still going through, just to be a whole person. To be what other ‘*normal*’ people took for granted. She had said to him once, ‘*If I had been born female I probably wouldn’t have appreciated it quite so much.*’ For one brief instant, what she told him made perfect sense. And he understood.

“It’ll be okay, Jaymie.” He said hoarsely. “One day they will. You’ll see.”

“Thanks, Tim.” She said, taking his hand in hers and squeezing it tight. “For everything.”

He punched the control that closed the ramp as they walked past. They went back inside, his arm around her slim shoulders.

\*\*\*

Tim had found a cargo on Pluto Colony, something taking them out of the Sol system at last. It was a cargo of video disks, packed in a large crate, destined for Tarsus, which was sort of on the way back to Deanna. It belonged to a collector who wanted them so badly he paid five thousand credits via a shipping agent just to get the stuff shipped. It was a bargain price, Tim knew. Even the cheaper formal freight lines charged more than that. Bonus. It wasn't exactly as thrilling as the cargo of Morosian Lemurs he turned down (on account of the ESP threat they posed to the crew) or the load of Grezakian Flame Birds bound for a research centre on Andronicus. The latter carried a fee of twenty five thousand, but he didn't feel it justified the risk. Vic had been an asset so far, and unless she turned out to be fire-proof, he preferred to hang on to her services as long as possible. As a cargo, a box of video disks seemed rather boring. A disappointment, in fact.

After barely two hours on Pluto, Celeste lifted her ancient rump off the 'mac at Andresi and headed skyward once more. *Tarsus here we come*, Tim thought. He'd been in space just over a week now. Okay,

a week and a half. In retrospect it had probably been the most interesting week of his life. Pretty much. For one thing, he never quite handled so much money in that space of time before. Granted, split six ways, it wasn't quite so much, but he was thinking of the gross. A few months of this and he could start thinking of going home for good. He could see why people became spacers. It was the attraction to travel, different worlds, new people and places – not forgetting the opportunities to make an easy buck here and there – just for renting out a space on your ship while you traveled. And why not – you traveled anyway. But he didn't want to be out here that long. Out here time passed, yes, but his life back home was paused until he got back. His life was in limbo.

The trip to Tarsus was three days long. He passed the time checking the ancient ships' equally archaic library. It was up to date right up to about thirty years previously. It contained e-books, movie files and even a plethora of old TV series. 'Dallas' was too corny for his taste. So was the 'X-Files'. Real aliens never looked like that and anyway, everybody knew the government within a government was in fact, just another government. *Duh*. Besides, aliens couldn't possibly do anything worse to the Human race than it hadn't already done to itself.

Just ask the Ruminarii. Fed up with TV, Skooch went down to the sickbay and paid a visit to Nurse, who was playing with his beakers and assorted glassware again.

“What is that stuff anyway?” He finally ventured after watching silently for a few minutes.

“Moonshine.” Said Nurse, not missing a beat. “Rocket fuel. Unadulterated, one hundred percent pure gummy-berry juice.”

Hmm. So Nurse had been browsing the cartoon section too, he thought. He chuckled. At least he’d been making constructive use of his spare time.

“What’s in it?”

“Strawberries, milk... thickening agent... What else? Oh yes, I had to use some of Triple-J’s degreasing agent as an alcohol base. Oh – and the strawberries are just for flavor.”

“Sounds yummy.” Tim commented. “Especially the degreasing agent. This an old family recipe?”

“Something like that. You get this right and it’ll blow you right out of your brackets.” Nurse chuckled, concentrating on the readings the medi-scanner was giving him. “Get it wrong and it’ll blow the top of your head off *and* kill you.”

“You know that was meant to save lives, not to help kill brain cells.”

Tim said, indicating the device he was holding and chuckled. “You learn this in *Lulu*? Advanced home chemistry for cons 101?”

“No.” Nurse countered. “No, in *Lulu* I learned about the pros and cons of using liquid soap in the shower.”

“Actually, I was wondering if you were going to blow up the sickbay, you know, lose your eyebrows or something.”

Nurse chuckled again. He siphoned some of the pinkish stuff into a small beaker and passed it to him.

“Have a toot.”

Tim took the offered beaker and sniffed it. It smelled like strawberries and maybe a little bit like turpentine. It looked sort of like a liqueur. Sort of.

“Go on, try it.”

*Okay, he thought, what the hell, why not?*

“Bye-bye brain cells.” He shrugged, and knocked it down the hatch. It took his breath away in several shades of strawberry. He wheezed. The fumes made his eyes sting. When he recovered, he noticed Nurse’s grin and managed not to scowl.

“Don’t worry.” The medic laughed. “They’re still there.”

“What? My tonsils?”



“No, your eyebrows!”

“It was absolutely...” Tim said, thinking of an appropriate description.

“Vile?” Nurse suggested.

“That’s it. *Strawberry Vile!*”

That set off another good round of chuckling.

“More?” Nurse offered.

“Please.” Said Tim, returning the beaker for a refill. The medic filled two beakers this time and joined Tim in what turned out to be a spirited evening that would come back to haunt him the next morning.

\*\*\*

Life was becoming routine, more-or-less. They were in space, traveling from one place to another, picking up cargo – or passengers, and dropping them off somewhere else. And getting paid for it. That was the best part. The planet Tarsus was not as young as Deanna. It was around eighty years ahead of that crazy little world, with a highly sophisticated infrastructure. It was just about on a par with Mars as far as that was concerned. Deanna on the other hand, had only been inhabited for something like two decades, mostly by people who wished they were somewhere else – like Mars – or Tarsus. Mind you, younger colonies like Deanna had their champions, like the people who felt they could make a better fresh start there rather than having

to fight for a place in the sun on a more established colony, where the best spots were already taken.

But all that was miles away now. Well, light years actually. In order to reach Tarsus, the *Celeste* had to cross the *Denosius Gulf*, a treacherous dog-leg piece of space that used to be part of what was known as the Omegan Quadrant. Not terribly long ago, this used to be a very, very dangerous place. Ships would go in and never come out. People would disappear in its black empty space. The cause of this phenomenon? The Corsairs. The once legendary and powerful pirate civilization that wreaked havoc on shipping lanes, launching raids on local colony worlds from within its unknown darkness. It all came to an end thirty years ago, when a fleet of Terran warships finally ended the scourge on Humanity, bringing peace to the Terran Empire. When Timaset Skooch was a little boy, he was thrilled by the legends and the cute little story books recounting the adventures of the legendary Corsairs. Only to be disappointed when he later learned they no longer existed. But that was all in the past now. Or was it? He wondered as he stared unbelievably at the object displayed on the still off centre view screen. They came to a full stop

upon seeing that it was a ship. It was a long thin cylindrical thing, a dirty off-white shade of forlorn loneliness.

“Well, what do you think, Deire?” He asked finally, breaking the spell of silence on the bridge.

“It’s a ship, Boss.” Deire replied, stating the obvious.

“No, *really*? I thought it looked like a strato-penguin!” Said Tim, rolling his eyes. “Of course it’s a ship! But *what* ship?”

Deire turned his attention to his console and started scanning the ship. It had just suddenly appeared on their screens, seemingly lifeless, adrift in deep space. Granted, this was off the regular routes, but ships didn’t generally just drift around in space, did they? As a rule, derelict vessels were marked on the charts and towed away for scrap by big towing companies like *U-Haul Interstellar*. This one was still here. He checked radiation readings, design catalogs and other basic technical information as was available to him.

“Looks like it’s been out here fer a while.” Deire reported. It’s an old one. ‘Puter says it’s a Janus Cargo Hauler. Hell, they stopped makin’ those a hundred years ago!”

“Oh, you mean like Celeste?” Tim quipped. It was cruel, but difficult to resist. Deire gave him a hurt kind of look, but continued his investigation.

“The registry number don’t, uh – register, Boss.” He said, finally.

“The number’s fake then.” Tim concluded. “Interesting. Any life readings?”

“Nope.”

“Any beacons from the Space Hazards Authority?”

“Nope.”

Hmm. This could be a slice of good news. An undiscovered wreck, just off the main space lanes. It was free salvage. If they could tow it to Tarsus, they could make a bit of money off the salvage. Of course, it went without saying that anything of value in the cargo bay – or anywhere else on board – would reflect in their bank accounts. If they actually *had* bank accounts.

“Salvage?” Said Deire, on the same wavelength.

“That’s what I was just thinking.”

“*Garn!*”

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A short trip across the void between the two ancient ships later, Tim, Deire and Vic were standing on the dusty deck grid of the derelicts’

airlock. She had a tool box slung over her shoulder. '*You never know what you might find over there.*' She said back on Celeste. That was true, Tim agreed. It was precisely why he and Deire were carrying pistols. Tim found the pressure of the Jupina Black in his holster through the padding of his pressure suit a comforting presence. Their helmet mounted spotlights revealed objects hiding in the menacing darkness, helmets, breathing apparatus. What appeared at first to be bodies hanging from the inner bulkhead were revealed to be pressure suits, still hanging on their mounts.

The ship was dead for all intents and purposes. Not one single energy reading showed on the little scanning instrument Vic carried. And no, no gravity either. Which is where the suits' magnetic boots came in handy. Vic cut the inner airlock door through around the locks. Handy little laser torch, that. No air came rushing in from the holes. For starters, that meant the air was gone, leaked out when the ship was abandoned, maybe. Or perhaps it was all just shut down and depressurized years ago? Who knew? Ships didn't stay pressurized for very long when the life support machinery was shut down. It was one of the little mysteries of space travel.

Deire and Vic forced the hinged door aside. Silence in a vacuum too. Oddly enough Tim almost heard the ancient squeal of the protesting hinges. It was like tomb robbing, only, he hoped it wasn't actually. The last thing he needed was to find bodies inside. Bodies complicated things. Especially where salvage was concerned. But all that aside, the door was now open and a small dark locker room loomed ahead. They stepped through, not seeing anything much worth looking at. It looked so ordinary. It was dark, just the light of there spots to see by, the light reflecting off the ice that had formed on every surface – the remnants of the ships' atmosphere. The doorway into the dark corridor beyond yawned at them.

"Well, okay." Said Tim, flashing his light down first the left and then the right of the corridor, "Deire, you go left, we'll go right."

There was an uncomfortable little silence.

"Why mus' I go down there alone?" Deire protested. "*Garn!*"

"Well," Said Tim patiently. "If there were three corridors, we could each take one. But there are two – and three of us."

If the pressure suits had pockets, Deire's hands would be in them and he'd be sulking. Vic was grinning, but not exactly volunteering to go down one side alone either. Tim sighed. It seemed no matter how far

the Human race had advanced, people still didn't like going into the dark, especially not *alone*. And they still felt uncomfortable about things that went *bump* in the night. Funny thing about a dead ship, floating alone in deep space. It's spooky.

"Oh, all right then!" Tim fussed. "You two go down *that way* – and I'll go *that way*!"

*Bunch of sissies*, he complained internally as they went off and left him standing at the doorway. As soon as the others wandered further away, the little communications system that tied them together adapted. Instead of him hearing their every word, it shut him off, as though they really were in another room, out of earshot. Now, in order to contact them, he would have to press a key on his wrist control band. *R'ight*, he thought looking down the long dark corridor. Trouble was, he found it just as spooky. It was a very lonely feeling indeed, just hearing his own breathing, and the muted *clump-clump* as his boots gripped the deck grid with each step forward into the darkness. Funny how he suddenly got cold inside the sealed environment of the pressure suit. His hackles were raised. It was silly, but he drew the 10mil and held it firmly in one hand. It was comforting. He just hoped Deire or Vic didn't plan on playing pranks or giving him a fright... They might be very sorry indeed.

He steadily made his way down the corridor, turned a corner carefully and, sparing an occasional backwards glance, went down it. There was a variety of crap in the air. It looked like thick dust particles, the kind that clung together in zero gravity. They were called *dust-bunnies*. And other bigger objects, like plastic cups, cutlery and silverware. And other bits of assorted rubbish. He batted them aside with his hands and waded on into the eerie silent darkness. And then with terrifying suddenness, he found himself staring into a face. Or what remained of it. It was a corpse, floating in mid-air off the deck, upright and motionless. It was frozen, in mid-scream, long hair spread out into space like dreadlocks. Freeze-dried, he thought. Nobody heard his scream, fortunately. As in fortunately, he would be spared the later embarrassment of explaining himself to Deire and Vic. People behaved a certain way in a group, he thought analyzing himself. All tough in front of people, but somewhat different alone. *Less pretense*, he thought, *less bravado*. More honest.

Swallowing nervously, he looked round. Nothing else like that in sight, thankfully. The corpse-icle was blocking the passage, so he reached out and – *urgh!* – prodded it gently over to the side. It was wearing tattered dusty black clothes. All in black. That used to mean



something not terribly long ago, he realized. Corsairs wore black. Not standard uniforms exactly, but just black in general. Like their hearts, so the old saying went.

“Sorry, Frosty.” He said to it. *Civility costs nothing*, he thought. And respect for the dead could go a long way, especially *here*. The further, the better. The corridor seemed to be leading to the cargo deck. He contacted Deire.

“Hey, you guys see anything interesting?” He asked. When he heard Deire’s voice it felt almost like a life-line, a ray of light in the darkness.

“Uh... Define interestin’?”

“Oh, I dunno – dead bodies? Maybe money?”

“Nope. Jus’ old junk an’ dust bunnies. You?”

“Nothing yet.” He said, “Just dust and crap and – oh yeah, one dead body.”

“Really?” Came Vics’ awe inspired voice. “That’s awesome, Boss!”

“Not really. I’m heading down to the cargo deck. Meet me there.”

“Kay.”

He remembered a board game he used to play as a kid. It was called, ironically, ‘*Loderunner*’. It had a big board with holographic images of

planets and systems on it, with little placeholders for your loderunner as you made your way across the board, wheeling and dealing. Sometimes your ship ended up in a gravity well or flying into an astorfield at warp four. Sometimes you strayed into a restricted are and your ship got confiscated and you took a space bus straight home, do not collect 5000 credits and no get out of debt free card.

You would pick a card off a stack and basically, it was just pot luck. One of them struck a chord in his memory. It went like this: *'You find a derelict Terran space explorer adrift in deep space. On board you find vast quantities of processed gold bars. You and your crew are killed by the mysterious and frightening alien that was nesting on the cargo deck. Nb. There is no such thing as a free lunch! (Unless you're a mysterious and frightening alien nesting aboard a derelict space ship, of course).'*

He couldn't tell what had killed the man that was now floating against the bulkhead. There was just no way to tell. At least he couldn't see bullet holes or any energy wounds from a blaster. Bite marks from some mysterious alien wouldn't have been entirely welcome either. Anyway, moving on.

Timaset Skooch persevered and went the rest of the way down the corridor, gave the elevator a skip for obvious reasons, and took the stairwell instead. It almost made the derelict seem kind of homely. Just like Celeste, just during a power failure or something. A wreck like this was worth a couple of thousand as scrap alone. Maybe not terribly much, but perhaps, say thirty large? The body troubled him. It meant they might not be able to claim the ship or cargo as salvage. That might go to the dead man's next of kin – unless it was an old Corsair ship, in which case the State would claim it all and they would just receive a set fee for towing. But there was always the possibility that the body might never be found, especially if they just er – *stored it temporarily* on one of the wreck's fins or something before towing it. Or put it on the – er, doormat outside the airlock. Then they could always claim well, *gosh, darn it was there a minute ago, honest!* Or then again, *not*. They never found any bodies, *what bodies?* Problem solved. He just hoped there was something worthwhile in the cargo bay. Something useful, something he could convert into cash. Hard cash, strong and fast. Not some outdated antiquated machinery or electronics nobody would want or need. Minerals or even chemicals he could sell at Tarsus, along with the scrap metal of the ship itself. Hell, the engines alone could fetch a nice profit! You could get good

money for used engines. Tim suddenly realized this space business was far more profitable than being a PI and getting shot at for free. For one thing, the turnover was far more. Mind you, he'd never been shot at with laser cannons before the other day, in the rings of, um – Jupiter either.

Finally at the bottom of the stairs, Tim entered the cargo deck. It was huge and cavernous and ran the whole length of the old ship. No sign of any um, mysterious and frightening aliens nesting there. Not yet. And there was cargo too, It took some seconds for his eyes to pick out what it was in the dark. To say the place felt cramped was an understatement. It was full. He was right by the huge doors, with his back to them, facing the huge mass of cargo so close to him he had only to reach out to touch it. And he did.

It was a mountain. A huge rectangular mountain, consisting of thousands of bricks, but a *mountain* nonetheless. A mountain of gold bricks. Glittering, shiny yellow gold bricks. They were stacked across each other, this way and that, to look like a huge wall, a monument to the mysteriously absent crew. His heartbeat racing, Tim looked down the length of the mountain of wealth. It went all the way down to the

rear of the cargo bay. He looked up it, to where he could just see where it stopped short of the top roof girders. That was – let's see now, a lot x a lot more, x by a lot high... Hmm that came to, let's see... Well it was a hell of a lot more than he could count up to! He attempted to pinch himself but the thick pressure suit foiled him.

Suddenly he realized his mouth was open and he was hyperventilating. The amount of wealth here was staggering. If this was a Corsair ship, then this must have been pirate hoard! Every pirate has a hoard; he remembered the old stories said. For a moment, he wondered which pirate this belonged to. *Blachart?* Or *Strings Levine?* Perhaps *Kilroy 'The Hammer'?* This was just incredible! Stupendous! *Unbelievable!*

*Wait-a-minute! What's the catch?* This was just too damned good to be true. And in Tim's experience – if it seemed too good to be true, it usually was. He checked. Nope, still no sign of any strange and frightening alien.

“Quite something, eh Boss!” Said Vic's voice suddenly in his ear.

He screamed. She screamed. Deire screamed too, but wasn't quite sure why.

*"Fucking Aunt Mary's Yellow Polka-dot Panties!"* Tim recounted slowly, after recovering his wits and forcibly dragging them back inside himself. "What the hell did you do that for?"

"Sorry, Boss." She explained meekly. "Thought you saw us."

*"Garn!"* Said Deire angrily, "What y'all hollerin' fer? Ain't there enough dead folk on this ship already?"

"You find some too?" Tim asked, putting his pistol back in its holster, thankful he didn't accidentally use it in fright.

"Nope. Just the same one you did. Up in the passage. It looked *cool!*"

"We gonna hook up a tow cable, Boss?" Deire asked. "Get this hunk o' junk to Tarsus?"

That made him think a minute.

"Hear me out a sec." He said. "The ship is worth maybe thirty big ones as scrap metal, the engines maybe twenty each. That's around eighty thousand."

*"Garn!"*

"Now the cargo is worth, *hell* – probably a hell of a lot more than that. Split six ways, that's a hell of a lot more even split six ways!"

"What you getting at?" Vic and Deire asked simultaneously.

“Why don’t we just take the gold, leave the ship and get the hell out of here?”

Deire indicated the looming mountain of wealth behind them with a thumb over his shoulder.

“That’s an awful lot o’ tonnage, Boss – ah dunno how long that would take to load t’ Celeste!”

“Maybe till the next millennium?” Vic added. “But not if –“

“Not if Triple-J can fix the transmitter and we beam it into the cargo bay!”

“Fix the transmitter?” Deire echoed. “We haven’t managed *that* in ten years!”

“Well we don’t want our newfound wealth materializing as a pile of lead or something even worse on Celeste, do we?”

“Ah sees yer point.” Deire nodded. “Le’s get back there so’s I can kick Triple-J’s rear end into gear!”

“I agree.” Said Tim. “Lets get back – this place creeps me out!”

The trip back towards the airlock went a bit quicker. They had fire in their limbs now. And in their hearts as well. Fortune awaited them on Tarsus. A cargo of gold! And pirate gold, no less! But of course, they would have to leave that little detail out, wouldn’t they? Another card

from his childhood loderunner game popped to mind. It went: *'You find a derelict Terran space explorer adrift in deep space. On board you find vast quantities of processed gold bars. You hold a very brief funeral in space for the former crew before taking stock. Claiming the find, you pay your crew wonderful bonuses, sell them your ship, and take early retirement on Venus at the spa's by the swamps near Venus Ville. You can buy that sky house over typhus bay on mars you always wanted! You kick your feet up, and sell your life's story to a writer who makes you famous. You live happily ever after. You buy shares in the sulphur plantations on Miranda and retire early. (You also get an unlisted email address, [sww.blank@blankettyblank.com](mailto:sww.blank@blankettyblank.com) and live under an assumed name.)*

Wonderful, he thought. He could spend the rest of his life not actually working, not actually getting shot at – at all, hopefully. For free or otherwise. And Dory could get her gender sorted out *chop-chop* – um, and they could spend the rest of their lives together. And it didn't have to be on that crazy little planet either. They could go anywhere now. His flights of fancy were reaching orbit by the time they arrived at the spot he had last seen the corpse-icle. He couldn't see it. It wasn't over where he'd put it, anyway.



“Hey you guys,” He asked by way of a joke. “Who moved Frosty?” Quite literally, silence fell. Or without gravity, just hung in the air and formed an unasked question.

“Wasn’t us, Boss.” Vic said in a subdued voice.

“We didn’t touch ‘im!” Said Deire.

The body was really nowhere to be seen. The clutter that had been there was still floating around, dust and bits of plastic and so on. But no body.

“Okay, no kidding now.” Said Tim seriously, shining his spots at the ceiling. Still no trace of Frosty.

“No, no kidding, Boss.” Vic insisted. “We left him right *there!*”

They stared at each others faces from the confines of the sealed pressure suits, across the void through their helmet visors. He lost all doubts that they were joking. He didn’t believe in ghost stories, but this was just too freaky under the circumstances. And he really didn’t care to hang around to hear any explanations. Seeing Vic scared, and Deire, was more than enough to convince him.

“*Back to Celeste!*” He breathed.

They got back to the airlock very quickly. Running with magnetic boots in zero gravity is something of an fine art, but they pretty much

had it down by the time they arrived, panting. Tim and Deire had their pistols out, more for morale than anything else. And Vic had her laser cutter out too, probably for the same reason. God only knew what good they would be against Frosty. Once inside, Tim forced the inner door closed and nodded at her. Looking back, he was quite glad he was polite to Frosty. He shivered, realizing at the grisly thoughts he was thinking.

“Weld it shut!” He ordered. “C’mon – *seal it!*”

She didn’t waste time arguing. Deire neither – he joined them and leaned against the door with Tim. Whatever had happened to Frosty, they didn’t want him wandering too far – like out the airlock for instance. *And over to Celeste. Stop it*, he chided himself. This is all just bullshit. Deire and Vic just played a joke on him and he was going to be their laughing stock for weeks to come. And he was going to kick their asses for it later. But he saw the looks on their faces, and they weren’t laughing.

The little trip across the void on the sled back to Celeste was a combination of relief and worry. At least they were out of that place. But a few furtive glances back to the wreck along the way showed he wasn’t the only one who was shaken by current events. Celeste was

a welcome sight as she grew larger. And the relief Tim felt on entering their own warm, bright airlock was immense. To say nothing of the feeling he experienced when the outer door slid closed. And there was still no sign of *Frosty*. He was actually glad to be back. So glad he almost called it *home*. And home is where you're safe in the end, isn't it?

Once back inside and out of the suits, Tim called the bridge. Bubba picked up.

"Whassup?" He answered casually.

"You see anything else come out of that airlock since we went in?"

Tim asked.

"Uh – nope?" Said Bubba, sounding slightly puzzled. "Just you guys. Why?"

He glanced at the other two, who were listening carefully, their faces the picture of nerves and excitement. There was a sense of relief. Perhaps a small amount of disbelief as well. Had they imagined it? Perhaps they had just taken a different passage on the return trip without noticing?

"Never mind. We'll tell you later. Thanks."

Next, he called Triple-J in the engine room.

“Yeah?”

“Get off your ass and fix the transmitter!” He ordered.

“But –“ He protested. “I’m busy tuning the Inertia drive!”

“That can wait – especially if you want a cut of what’s on that ship!”

“Why, what’s on that ship?”

“Fix the transmitter so you can beam it over and you’ll find out!” Then he flicked the general call button and announced. “Attention all crew! All hands to the cargo bay – we’ve got cargo to take onboard! *Yee-haa!*”

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It was gold, all right. Pure gold, in bars. And they had no stamps on either. Must’ve been processed hoard amassed by the Corsairs before the fall of their base world, *Meradinis* thirty years earlier. Vic had cleared the cargo bay of any remaining stuff that could be scraped over to one side to make way. Celeste had a bigger cargo bay, so it wasn’t a problem when Triple-J began beaming the load across from the derelict. It took about an hour before the last few bars materialized. And it was all gold, *still gold*, not something else. For once, the transmitter device worked as intended by its designers. And fortunately, Tim noted, there was still no sign of Frosty. Hopefully there never would be. It was one of those mysteries that he hoped

wouldn't keep him awake at night. He shivered.

He looked at the rest of the crew standing there, staring at the mountain of gold bars like they had just stumbled across the pot at the end of the rainbow. Deire was crying, an arm slung over Bubba's shoulders, the other over Triple-J's. He was actually crying. Tears of joy. And Vic was standing beside Barry Nurse, who reached out a tentative arm towards her shoulders, only to have her smack his hand away with a resounding slap.

"Don't try your luck." She mocked. "I don't come cheap!"

"How much does that cost?" He grinned, rubbing his stinging hand as she rolled her eyes.

"How much d'yer think that's all worth?" Deire asked Tim.

"Well..." He reasoned. "I don't know. But a lot, split six ways is still a lot. So I guess, gee – a lot?"

"He's right." Said Vic. "Whatever it is, we're rich. All of us." She looked around. "That reminds me – what about Jaymie?"

"She's not crew!" Said Deire. "*Nah-uh!* Six ways, the Boss said, not seven!"

Jealousy rears its ugly head, Tim thought. Jealousy and greed. Time to step in.

“Excuse me.” He said. The bickering stopped as their eyes turned to him. “I’m still the boss round here... And that means I decide the percentages... And I say don’t be greedy. Seven ways is still enough to keep your *grandchildren* out of work!”

“Seven way split!” Said Vic. “Cool!”

“Okay, speaking of splitting, let’s get to Tarsus and cash this lot in!”

“Now yer talkin’! *Garn!*”

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The spaceport terminal buildings on Tarsus were pretty nice. As a rule, spaceports pretty much followed a standard layout and design, but this one was a bit different. The bar was rather nice too. For one thing, he could get any kind of drink he wanted. And right now that was anything except *Strawberry Vile*. Bloody Nurse and his concoction! He chuckled. If Nurse were to set up a company to sell his brand there could be interesting results. He imagined the label on a bottle of the stuff. ‘*Doctor Nurse’s Strawberry Vile – Fortification For Those Special Occasions.*’ Yeah, while performing autopsies or hiding bodies. He was just relaxing a bit, wearing some fresh clothes he bought from one of the shops in the mall. A nice fresh pair of neat pants and a comfortable turtleneck sweater. It made a difference to how he felt. Not that he felt bad before, but now he just felt *better*. A

couple of shooters at the bar, and he improved on that too. Then, feeling well pleased with himself, he made his way over to the internet café. He got an email from Gary saying: *'The Olduvai Trust's been busted. Wide open, as the old books used to go. All over the news channel. Looks like your message got thru. Vallantdorf talking a lot lately. The Feds closed down everything. Biggest corruption scandal in history, yadda, yadda, yadda. Congratulations, bud. Great job. See you around.*

*Gary.'*

How about that? No really. *How about that?* Then he noticed another item. It was addressed to him, from the office of the Mayor, Mars City. *Click.*

*'Dear Mr. Skooch,*

*I wish to thank you for your assistance, but most importantly for your kindness and tolerance towards my son, Jamie. I realize he must have some imposition on you, but I reassure you I will compensate you for any inconvenience or embarrassment suffered. All the difficulties experienced with the Olduvai Trust have, thanks to your involvement, been resolved and it is now safe for him to return home.*

*Yours truly, in deepest gratitude,*

*Frederyck Vallantdorf*

He copied that to his mobile to show Jaymie later. Poor kid. If he knew anything from his experience with Dory, he was sure that was going to hurt. *But wait, there's more.* There was also something from Dory. Another intimate mail he didn't want y'all to read. He sent a reply, omitting anything about the payout they were expecting from the unorthodox cargo. Less tax, it was still a hell of a lot. He wanted it to be a surprise. He told her he loved her with all his heart and to expect him home soon with lots of news, all good.

Back on Celeste, he joined young Jaymie in her room to show her the mail he got from Beck and the one her father sent. She was glad about the Olduvai Trust, and that her family was safe again. Still, she looked a little sad.

"It's over, Jaymie." He said, trying to cheer her up.

"Yes." She nodded.

"You can go home now! Aren't you glad?"

She sighed, and looked at him.

"*Jamie, he, him, my son...*" She listed sadly, indicating her room, now almost totally feminized. Just like her. There was even a teddy on



the bed, on the frilly duvet cover. Only Vic knew where that came from. “If I go back, all this will end.”

“It doesn’t have to.” Said Tim, resting his hands on her shoulders, where she sat at the little dressing table.

“But it will.” She mourned. “He’ll just try to change me again, hire some other ‘*babysitter*’ to try and make a man out of me.”

“Jaymie.” He called, kneeling by her chair. “You’re eighteen. Almost nineteen. If you wanted to be a man you would’ve been one by now. Surely he will realize you’re old enough to know your own mind?”

“But he won’t accept it.” She concluded, “This is it for me. Don’t you see, Tim – I *am* home.”

That was one of the saddest conversations of his entire life. She could stay here, on Celeste, with the crew. He knew Vic would take care of her. But for how long? She had an equal share in the money, enough of her own to take care of herself. But where would she go if not home? She wrote her father an email, which he sent from his terminal in his cabin this time. The danger being over, there was no need to fly underneath the radar anymore. And that was also true, about many things. She said it was okay if he read it, so he did.

*'Dear Daddy,*

*I'm glad you are well and the Olduvai Trust is no longer a danger.*

*Perhaps now you and Mother will be free to live normal lives.*

*I am well, Tim and the crew of this ship have been very nice to me, in fact they were the first people who have cared since I left home a year ago. It feels so long ago, doesn't it? We just had another fight – about me, remember? That's why you hired Mr. Jones. To make a man out of me. Well, he failed. And you failed too. I will never be a man. Not even the most expensive doctors or clinics can do that.*

*Out here I have found freedom at last, freedom from Jones and from the old me. I have started to become the person I always wanted to be and found happiness. I have tasted it and now nothing can ever make me go back. Nothing you can say will ever change my mind. It's not my mind that needs changing.*

*You thought you had a son before but you never did, and now you're going to have a daughter instead. Maybe not right away, physically, but one day. If you don't want me as your daughter then you can always just claim your son Jamie died out here. And if you can't accept that fact, accept me, then I don't think I want to go home.*

*Home should be where you're loved. Where you feel safe. And I know where that is, now. Here.*

*Jaymie.'*

Wiping his eyes, Timaset Skooch sent the mail to Mayor Vallantdorf. He had to resist sending one to Dory because he probably would've just said something foolish. And he preferred doing that in person.

A day later, Bubba pointed the old ship back to Deanna at maximum speed. There were so many zeros at the end of his bank balance he didn't even bother to count them. The money had been transferred into the bank accounts Tim opened for all of them at the local branch of the *Interstellar Mutual Trust*, and they said farewell to Tarsus. Two days later, Tim saw the little blue sphere on the view screen. It was a welcome sight. They managed to avoid hitting *Ding*, which was always a bonus, and before long the old ship lightly set down on the tarmac of the space port at Atro City. Tim forgave Deire and Bubba – and even Celeste itself for the rough take-offs and landings. Deire knocked on the cabin door. It was open, and swung inwards. Tim was finishing packing.

"Goin' home fer a weekend?" He queried.

“Nope.” Tim grinned, squeezing past, carrying his kitbag. “I’m leaving. Going home for good!”

“But –“

“No buts, Jonn. I got what I was looking for. The up side is that we’re all better off for it. It’s just time to go, that’s all. I left the ship’s papers on the desk. Word of advice though, get that elevator computer fixed – it’s bad for business. See you around, *Captain*.”

“*Garn!*”

By the time he reached the now empty cargo bay, Deire still in tow, the entire crew had gathered there. The entire crew, that is, the entire crew – *and Jaymie*. It struck him he’d spent just more than two weeks on this decrepit old ship. Things had gone a lot better than he initially expected. Granted, it wasn’t a very long time, not in the slightest, but in that time he had seen things he never thought he would ever see outside a TV screen. He watched Jaymie change and grow from day to day. A lot had changed in that time. Almost like she had tried to make up for the last year in as little time as possible. She had help from Vic along the way, true, but it was to both their credit she didn’t end up walking *like* Vic. Or talking like Vic. Or – *never mind*. He felt slightly guilty, like he was assassinating her character *sotto voce*. It

was really quite nice of Vic to take her under her wing. It showed character. Her features and mannerisms had been reasonably effeminate all along, and all the other changes served to compliment her as a whole. She had come out of her shell in that time. And he would miss her. He would miss all of them. Even Vic. Ok, maybe not Triple-J. Or Bubba. *Deire*? Well, okay, maybe a little. And Nurse, well he would avoid drinks that contained strawberry *anything* from now on.

Bubba sauntered up to him and shook his hand. The ramp was down and the world outside beckoned to him. Somewhere out there, was Atro City, his Jeepo, crabby-grass and the rest of the mad little world called Deanna – but most importantly, there was Dory.

“This the uh, goodbye wagon?” He asked, swallowing a little lump in his throat.

“We sorta got the idea you wus gonna leave.” Bubba said plainly.

“Well, you know what they say.” He shrugged. “All good things come to an end.”

And he was right. This had turned out that way. A good thing. They survived and found their fortunes and maybe even some good friends along the way. What a journey! What a *ride*!

“He gave us the ship back!” Deire said in a voice bordering on tears.

“Heart o’ gold you have, Boss, a heart o’ gold!”

Tim just smiled modestly.

“What the heck.” He quipped, half joking. He didn’t have a use for it anymore. What else should he have done? Sell Deire his own ship back? It’s not as if he really needed the money. He wasn’t that much of a bastard. After all, he’d really just borrowed it in the process of finding his fortune. Sort of.

“What’s an old ship between friends anyway?”

He stopped to say goodbye to Jaymie, who was not holding together very well. Her collection of clothes still seemed to be growing mysteriously. Every time he saw her she was wearing something he hadn’t seen her in before. Today it was jeans and a floral blouse and a sparkly pink Alice band. She was just standing there, beside Vic, looking down at his feet.

“We’ll take good care of her, Boss.” Vic said, noting his concern. He didn’t doubt she would. Not for one second. But nevertheless...

“You can stay here if you want.” Tim said to her gently. “They’ll take care of you. Or you can come live with Dory and me till you decide

what it is you want to do.”

It was a genuine offer. She could learn a lot from Dory or even Cindy-Mei and anyway, space isn't the best place for a young lady to learn things. Especially not a young lady as young as Jaymie. And –

“*Son?*”

The deep paternal voice came from the bottom of the ramp. A man with dark wavy hair and chiseled features was striding up the ramp, leaving an impressive looking bodyguard standing beside a space port cab at the bottom. He was an imposing figure, broad shouldered and dressed in a smart pinstripe suite. It was Frederick Vallantdorf and he was making directly for Jaymie.

“*Daddy?*” Jaymie asked, surprised and all choked up. It was a bit much to handle all at once. He stopped in front of her, looking her up and down, his eager expression giving way to concern. She was actually quite pretty today. Like every day so far since Mars, he decided. The Mayor handled the change pretty well, all things considered. He was silent for a long moment. He seemed to be trying to take it all in. Jaymie seemed to cringe and Timaset Skooch and the crew of Celeste was ready for anything. Ready to close ranks around one of their own. But he smiled.

“I’m sorry.” He breathed. “Jamie – I mean, *Jaymie*. I’m sorry, about everything. It’s difficult for me, please understand.”

She looked up at his face, tears brimming over. This was her father, making apology, realizing he had his own faults, trying to reconcile with her. And so much had changed. And was still going to change. And this moment was filled with so much potential for the future. New horizons stretched out before them.

*“I’ll understand if you understand!”* She cried, and the two of them embraced. They were clinging to each other, Vallendorf dwarfing Jaymie, crying the tears of reunion, every other second one of them would murmur *‘I’m sorry.’* Tim had never seen such a large, proud man crying before – without shame, without another care in the world. It was the *perfect* moment. *“I love you Daddy, I missed you so much!”* She cried.

“Oh my, Jaymie, you’ve grown so *much!*” He cried, holding her even tighter, rocking from side to side. They separated again, Fredeyck still holding her by the shoulders. “And what a pretty girl you are!” Said the Mayor, admiring his daughter.

“Really?”



“Oh yes. I nearly lost you once... when they took you... But I’ll never lose you again! Jaymie, I want you to be happy. We’ll find you the best teachers, the best doctors! Just to make it all come true.” He told her, wiping his eyes with his sleeves. “I’m sorry I was embarrassed about what you are. I was thinking like a stupid politician, like the mayor of a city, not a father. And one day I won’t be a mayor anymore – and Jaymie, if I wasn’t your father anymore either that would just be the end of me... Will you forgive me? “

They just hugged again silently, the crew around them shuffling their feet and feeling like intruders. But at the same time they didn’t want to miss this. It was like a daily soapie fix. After a long silence, father and child separated. Wiping his eyes yet again, Vallantdorf turned to Tim, and grinning broadly, offered his hand. Tim accepted.

“Thank you, Mister Skooch!” Jaymie’s father smiled at him, “I may have lost a son, but at least I didn’t lose my child!”

“You have a beautiful daughter, Mister Mayor.” Tim said curtly. “I hope you know that.”

There was a brief flash of understanding between them.

“I do.” He said. *“I do!”*

Vallantdorf turned back to her, smiled, and said “Let’s go out for a soda and catch up! We can come back for your things later?”

She hesitated. It was like she was thinking about whether going home was what she really wanted. But it was. It *really* was.

“Okay.” She nodded and the two of them started off down the ramp together, hand in hand. Then she remembered something, stopped, then turned and ran back to Tim and threw her arms around him. He dropped the kitbag and hugged her back. There was no pretense from either side. There was genuine warmth, and it was the warmth and deeper understanding of friendship.

“You were right!” She beamed at him. “Thanks for everything, Tim!”

“I told you!” He grinned. “Come for a visit if you’re in the area? Dory would like to meet you. I’m sure she could show you a few things?”

“I will!”

She waved a smile to Vic, saying “see you later.” Vic gave her a double thumbs-up. Then she was off down the ramp again, following her dreams. At least they were real, now. And she was happy at last. Which reminded him...

The cab rolled off silently and suddenly the Celeste felt like his old school, years ago, on the last day of term. Like a family breaking up around him with far too many tearful goodbyes. He picked up his

kitbag again and started walking down the ramp, in pursuit of dreams of his own.

“See you around, gents.” He said in parting. “It’s been a slice.”

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Dorian Wintermuller was something of an enigma. At 27years, she was still not really what you might call gainfully employed. She was a qualified interior decorator and did the odd private contract now and again, but being a kind of new-age house-wife was less stressful. No, gainfully *un*-employed suited her better for now. It saved years on her life not having to fuss and fiddle – to say nothing of the stress involved in getting a client to understand the subtle differences between cerise and lilac. Besides, she owned the apartment and aside from that, she was pretty much financially independent. And that in a nut-shell more-or-less describes Dory. A girl with far too much good taste and style and sensitivity to be content with mere blue jeans, a plain top and blasé Nuevo French Perfume. She had on a black dress, and a pair of stiletto sandals in the latest style. A thin gold chain encircled her neck and she wore a dainty gold chain and an ornamental watch on her wrists, highlighting her long brown hair which was straight and cut in an elegant new style. There were a few rings too. And her nails were long and painted. Very elegant. On the balcony where she

sat, legs crossed, sipping at a tall thin glass of red wine while reading 'La Femme' magazine, she had a pretty good view of the back of Atro City University across an alley-way. The glass-topped table was covered with printed articles about gender reassignment. A box of hormone pills lay open on one side. Soft music played in the background as she heard the sound of a key in the front door.

"Honey, I'm home." Came the sound of a familiar voice.

Doubting her hearing, she rose and went inside to look. She froze. Her face lit up. Her make-up was divine. And her clothes were stunning. And seeing her now, like this, he had no doubts. No doubts whatsoever.

"*Tim!*" She cried. Then she descended on him, with little squeals and shrieks of joy. Arms around his neck, they spun round in a loving embrace. Then they kissed. It was heaven being in each others arms again after so long!

"*You're back!*" She said at last, stating the obvious.

"Oh yes I am!" He grinned. "For better or worse!"

"Really?" She laughed. "So which is it? Better or worse?"

“Better!” He said, looking deep into her beautiful green eyes. “I have so much to tell you! I did a lot better than I thought, actually.”

“Really? So was it as profitable as you thought? How much did you make on your ‘*grand adventure*?’”

“Oh, a lot!” He grinned. “Wait, let me show you!”

He handed her a little violet box and got down on his knees. It was one of those sweet, poignant, unexpected moments. One that jolts you to a sudden realization. It was just too much for Dory. The tears started coming all on their own. Gingerly, she reached out for it and opened it and saw the glint of gold and the sparkle of a single diamond. She didn’t really notice the design of the ring, or that it was a nice size stone with almost as many facets as their relationship. She didn’t really care about that. Or how much it cost. Or how little. She just knew it was a ring and the thing it symbolized.

Eternity.

“Oh, *Tim...*” She breathed. She kneeled too, so they looked in each others’ eyes. And right there, Timaset Skooch poured out his heart to her.

“Dory, you’ve put up with my failures, my faults – all my crap... All this time I never really understood you as much as I thought or said... But I do now... You’re my other half, my best friend, my love, my everything! I want you to be my wife too. I want us to last forever and ever. Please, say you want that too? Marry me, Dory? Be my wife?”

There was the faintest of little sounds, like the perfect moment sliding into place. That tiny little sound of a fragile, almost ethereal fragment of glass shattering. Like the sound a heart makes when it breaks from containing almost too much joy. It was the sound of all their dreams coming true.

“Yes.” She cried, smiling through the tears. “*Oh, yes!*”

Sometimes there can be a happy ending where a father can accept his child for who she is, and have a second chance at making things right before they go too far wrong in the first place. An ending where some crotchety old space jockeys get their ship back *and* a nice slice of the pie too. One of those special endings that feature a woman who probably wouldn’t turn many male heads in a bikini for all the right reasons, and perhaps, a former doctor who enjoys distilling strawberry flavored moonshine. Maybe even just the sort of ending where the leading man gets his girl, even if it turns out the girl is still

technically a guy, and it doesn't matter. And from this point on, they start a bright new future together. A future filled with love, joy and happiness and all the other fluffy synonyms for those things. An ending where, just for once, everybody is happy.