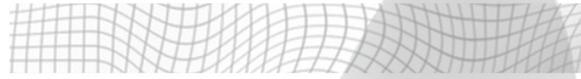


The   
Paradox  
Gambit

michele glasnović-zapf

# The Paradox Gambit



Michele Glasnović-Zapf

 SKULL AND HATCHETS

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I had a blast writing this book. Thank you, first, to my husband, Greg, who has one of the most amazing brains on the planet, which has given me constant inspiration, and for being my muse and my fire. Thank you, Tommy, for being an awesome inspiration in writing and the dungeon master who ran the game where Kandi and Veronica were first conceived. Thank you, Josh, for being my best sick fuck friend, and for confirming that this book is indeed qualified for sick fucks. Thank you, Kat, for being so supportive about that one chapter, the one that had me asking, "Is this too much? Will my friends look at me strangely after this?" And thanks to my Momma, who is my biggest supporter in all that I do.

Michele Glasnović-Zapf is a techno-mage armed with a heaping helping of occult knowledge, a side of esoteric mathematics, and a pinch of fairy dust. In the course of her many upgrades, she has been everything from a teacher to a systems administrator. She has organized and participated in art events, designed web sites, and taught teenagers how to fix computers and make mischief with Photoshop. When she's not pondering humanity's future, she builds costumes, paints with acrylics and gouache, runs an amateur radio station, makes jewelry with titanium and precious gems, studies folklore, and obsesses over strategy games. Her last name, when translated from Croatian and German, means "loudmouth drunk."

# Born in Flames - 1

Target acquired. Weapons locked.

Candace Kumari's eyes twitched as they focused on the target. She gritted her teeth, her thumb hovering over the red button. She only had to press it, and the offending ship would be blasted into molecules.

The proximity alert wailed again. "Destroy the target, Sergeant Kumari," said the voice from her shuttle's beige control panel.

Candace winced. She couldn't do it.

"Destroy the target before it damages the Za'toon ship."

"What about my ship?" Candace glanced around the Terran Starforce shuttle. Cracked panels with dimly flickering LEDs lined the cockpit. Doors hung misaligned on the cabinets. The cargo bay door was broken and needed to be shoved open. The only thing Candace found acceptable in the shuttle was her Dowbisco Fishsticks mascot—a fuzzy, yellow, turd-like plushie wearing a futbol jersey. It sat strapped to the threadbare plexileather copilot's seat.

"Are you experiencing stress, Sergeant? Would you like me to schedule an appointment with a therapist?" the tinny voice asked.

"No, I'm fine." She ran her hands over her prickly buzz-cut hair and wished she still had something there to pull.

"Then destroy the target."

Candace growled. Her last day at work, and they were going to make it painful right to the end. She took a breath and pushed the button.

A burst of orange plasma billowed from the twin cannons atop the shuttle. As the plasma ate through the abandoned vessel's hull, Candace saw the paradox drive inside. The cylindrical steel housing marked it as a rare second generation generation drive—only a few thousand left in existence. Every bone in Candace's body twitched. This was a crime, a murder.

"Half a million Fijacoin. Gone. Just like that."

That was more than she earned in a year. She had asked her superiors countless times if she could salvage the junked ships rather than destroying them, but their response was always the same:

"We must protect the Za'toon freighters at all costs." In other words, fuck off and do your job, Candace.

"The path to Earth is clear, Sergeant. Please escort the Za'toon ship to hangar three at Dandelion Field Siberia Five."

"Yes, of course, thank you." She rolled her eyes. Unbelievable. The military had drilled the habit of being polite to computers into her.

Candace guided the shuttle northward over the Pacific Ocean. She gazed at the sun-drenched clouds scraping the mountains in the distance. Flying was one of the rare pleasures she had. Piloting a paradox drive was one of the few jobs that could not be automated away, and the sole reason she had joined the military. As she approached the Russian coastline, the golden glitter of thousands of square kilometers of dandelions blinded her. She reached for the aviator sunglasses perched atop her head, and slid them over her eyes. In her rear-view monitor, she saw the hulking transport's landing thrusters lowering. The ship began its descent.

"All clear?" Candace asked into the ship's commlink.

"All clear," a raspy voice said from the Za'toon ship.

"Ten four. Have a nice day," Candace smiled, then killed the commlink, "And good riddance." She sped her shuttle away.

Twenty minutes to Australia. Candace turned on the autopilot and leaned back to catch a precious few minutes of sleep.

"Wake up. Wake up. Wake up. Approaching Melbourne now."

Bastard alarm clock. Candace's first inclination was to smash it, but instead she just rolled over, shut it off, and leaned her eyes against the window as they slowly peeled open. She rubbed her eyes and leaned her forehead against the window. Just past the sea's gray shoreline, littered with broken chunks of bony white coral, were the crumbling ruins of Melbourne. The shuttle flew over them toward the beehives beyond. The 3-D printed matrix of hexagonal flats stood eighteen stories tall, surrounded by fields of whip-like, green Nutrisoy stems. Candace steered the shuttle to a pockmarked road half a kilometer away from home.

A dust cloud lifted around Candace's feet as her thick-soled, standard issue boots hit the ground. She grabbed a canvas bucket hat from her knapsack and put it on, shading her eyes against the blazing sunlight. Candace squinted, annoyed, but an unfamiliar emotion quickly took its place—hope. Out there were eight other planets and dozens of moons, all of which promised something better than life on filthy fucking Earth in the year 2101.

Candace flicked a switch and a ramp slid out of the shuttle's bay. Inside, a bulky haulbot rumbled as its engine booted up. She pulled a datapad from her pocket, tapped on it, and the bot

rolled out on its six rubbery wheels. There were two arms on the front, one of which Candace grabbed and used to hoist herself atop the mechanical beast. On its already baking-hot roof, she stretched out a moment of relaxation.

That was shattered by a scream in the distance.

“Give it back!”

"For fuck's sake..." Candace jolted up and scanned for the source of her annoyance. Two people, one of whom was much larger than the other, yanked at opposite ends of a bicycle. Finally, the bigger one shoved the bike into the smaller one, sending him tumbling to the ground. Then the bigger kid and the bike were off, peeling down the road away from the beehives.

“Typical.” Candace sighed and stuck the haulbot's left arm out. It knocked the cyclist off, and the bike clattered to the ground. She picked up the thief with the right claw, grabbed the bike with the left one, and tucked it into the haulbot's cargo space. The young woman clamped in the claw screamed and kicked, because she couldn't even have the decency to shut up when she fucked up. Candace put on her headphones to drown out the noise.

A few hundred meters away, a child sat in the road with his head in his hands, crying. A kid crying or the teenager screaming? It was hard to tell which was worse, which meant she had to get rid of both, quickly, so she could get back to sunning herself. She hopped off the haulbot, slid the cargo door open, and grabbed the bike.

“Idiot,” Candace said to the kid. “Don't let anyone take your bike. Ever. You got that?”

The kid grabbed the bike and said, “Uh, sorry, ma'am,” and backed away from her quickly.

"Yeah, yeah, no worries... sir." Candace snorted. Twenty-three years old was way too young to be called ma'am by anyone but her underlings.

The kid was about to hop on his bike, but Candace barked in the same voice she used with her grunts in the military. “Halt. You're just going to get it stolen again. How many fish sticks did you have to eat for that thing?”

“Uhh...”

“Answer me, worm!” Candace barked.

“Si... si... six hundred seventy two, ma'am.” The kid's bony knees looked like they were about to give out.

Candace grimaced. Tears welled up in the kid's eyes.

“Can you put me down now?” the teenager screamed. Dammit. Now there are tears involved. Candace tapped her datapad and thrashed the thief around in the claw. One of her shoes

flew off.

"Shut it," Candace growled.

The teenager agreed this was the best course of action.

Candace stopped the claw's motion, and turned to the kid. She forced a smile, which made her facial muscles protest at being forced into anything but the usual resting bitch face.

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean... Anyhow, look, I earned a bike like that once, too, and it saved my life. Do you know how many experimental Salisbury steaks I had to eat to earn it?"

He shook his head.

"A lot. I stopped counting at five hundred... And the fuckers still wouldn't tell me what kind of animal a Salisbury was!"

The boy twitched. "Yuck."

She eyed the boy. "You take care of that bike. It'll free you one day from this dump. And if anyone tries to take it from you..." Candace pulled a butterfly knife out of her pocket and tossed it to the kid. "Use that. Just put it in any of their fleshy parts."

Candace patted him on the shoulder with the haulbot's right claw, almost knocking him over, then continued toward the beehives.

The teenager cleared her throat. "Ma'am, can you put me down now?"

"Don't call me ma'am."

Candace put her headphones back on. On the outskirts of town, she found a dumpster behind one of the Dowbisco testing centers. She twisted the haulbot's arm above the opening, opened the claw, and dropped the girl inside. She slammed the lid shut, and placed a large rock on top of it.

"Scum." That bike had cost her countless hours of sampling every atrocity from Dowbisco's food labs and answering scores of surveys. It was all worth it, though. After she had finally earned that bike, Candace spent most of her days exploring the forgotten highways beyond the Dowbisco campus. She had wandered past ghost towns of office complexes, dry gas pumps, and abandoned shopping malls whose parking lots were filled with burned out cars. She had gotten a lost a lot that bike, but it was ultimately what saved her from getting lost.

The haulbot stopped outside of Dowbisco Housing Complex F. She hopped off and headed to the lift. The pale green hallway, shaped out of hundreds of meters of extruded plastic, stank of sweat and piss. The scent was even more concentrated in the lift. She held her breath, rode it up to level seven, and hurried toward her flat.

Candace swiped the implant in her hand over the lock. The door clicked open. The scent of the stale air crept up on her, a sickly sweet stench she had breathed every day of her teenage life. Five years later, it still lingered. The smell was formed of a high note of vanilla Nutrisoy dietary fluid, which was fed via tube into her father's stomach. Its middle note was the pungent odor of sharp chemicals, the cleaning fluid for the body that never moved, save for twitching in a fit of the giggles. Even though the computers had long since been removed, Candace swore she could still smell that low note of ozone they had produced.

She stared at the empty bed where his body had lain for years, only a stain of sweat remaining. Five years ago, the day came when she could mourn no longer. Candace had finally sent him, along with most of their monthly stipend, to where all the lost ones went: the Yumatech hospice for permanent care.

"I can't blame you for getting lost, Dad," Candace said to the empty bed.

Candace had plugged in exactly once at a demo Yumatech had held at the town square. Beyond the walls of her visor spread an infinite world of perpetual pleasure, filled with every virtue and vice one could desire.

"It's better than reality!" shouted the presenters.

That was the day Candace knew she needed a bike. She vowed to never deep dive again.

Her father had only been diving a few days before he was gone. The bed was still empty, but she couldn't look away. Hot tears stung her eyes.

"I miss you, Dad. But I made it. I'm out. After I stop at base and check out, I'm free, and I'm never coming back."

The sun shone through a window at the far end of the hexagonal tube. Out there she could pursue a dream that didn't involve junk food or eternal disconnection from reality. It only took four years in the military to get a set of marketable skills. Out in Solsys, she could put those skills to work doing something other than being a goon for the only other intelligent species in the galaxy.

"What in the fuck, Susan? Strawberry? You got this week's rations in strawberry?"

That sweet nostalgia dissipated.

"Gary, it was all they had left!"

"Dammit, you stupid..."

Candace flung her knapsack on the bed and stormed toward the door. She stomped into the hallway, where a squat middle-aged man screamed at a scrawny woman.

"Is there a problem?" Candace snapped. "I hope so, because you interrupted my pity party

for it."

"This ain't your business, bitch." The man turned toward her and froze. "I...I'm sorry, ma'am."

Candace blinked. That was easy. She caught her reflection in the lift door—she still wore her Starforce jacket. Aha.

She straightened her shoulders to a tall, powerful stance. There she stood, glowering, while smirking inwardly. The man wrung his hands.

"You'd better be. If I ever catch you hassling someone half your size again, I'll twist your nuts off with a rusty spanner."

"Yes ma'am. And thank you for your service."

The woman smiled weakly. Candace sighed and headed back to her flat. The military bravado routine was bullshit, and normally, she wouldn't stoop to embracing it, but after spending most of her career as a glorified security guard, it'd be nice to use her uniform to do some good for once.

She grabbed a few of her favorite outfits, her journals, and her sketchbooks. She stuffed them in her knapsack and slung it over her shoulder. After retrieving her prized ten speed from the hook above her bed, she wheeled it out to the lift, stepped inside, and held her breath.

Outside the beehive, Candace loaded the haulbot. She climbed atop it and rode down the potholed road. She passed teenagers playing dice in shaded alcoves and old women gossiping as she left the complex.

Candace rolled the haulbot into the cargo bay in the rear of the shuttle. She shoved the cockpit door open and climbed into the pilot's seat.

"Set a course for Lunar Base G-10," Candace said, taking care to hide the glee in her voice. The last thing she needed was a computer reporting an attitude problem back to HQ.

The computer chirped its acknowledgment and the shuttle's engines hummed as they spun up.

As the shuttle lifted off, dust swirled below her. That was the last time she would ever stand on her home planet. This would be the last time she ever saw the clouds, the sea, or the dingoes that roamed the outback.

"Good." Candace scowled.

The sky darkened as she sped toward the upper atmosphere. A smile spread across her face. She giggled, then laughed wildly, with a joy she hadn't felt since she was a child.

"I'm out! I'm out! Out, out, out!" The laughter filled her with hope, happiness, optimism, and smoke. Smoke?

Candace coughed violently and swiveled her seat around. She shoved the plushie out of the copilot's seat and grabbed the fire extinguisher behind it. A panel of red hot metal hurtled into her shoulder, searing clean from her body. A cloud of plasma screamed behind it. Candace's vision filled with darkness and stars as the flames closed in.

# Opportunity Knocks - 2

Jana Broussard planted the coffee cup on the table harder than she had expected, causing the salt and pepper shakers to jump in shock.

“Come on. Something. Anything. Please...” she grumbled to her datapad. It was over an hour since she had sent her last application out. Her feet drummed on the ground, her fingers tapped on the table, but none of that brought any closer the emails she needed, only more of the same agonizing silence. Her head was too heavy to hold the depression anymore, so she laid it on the table. But, a passing waiterbot was programmed to chase out people like her, so it emitted a warning “ahem-ahem” followed by a small, crackling demonstration of a electric prod on one of its appendages.

In June of 2120, Jana had finally achieved her dream of achieving a pilot’s license, a month after she turned nineteen. Now age nineteen and three months, she sat in the Bean and Grind, a quaint Venusian coffeehouse, while her pilot’s license gathered cobwebs. Jana ran her hands through her unruly curls and pulled her scalp. The messages on the screen continued to mock her. “We are only looking for pilots with experience.” “Who are you again?” and, worst of all, “Was that a typo? You’re how old?”

“Dammit!” Jana shouted, slamming her palms on the table. “How am I supposed to get piloting experience if nobody will let me fly so I can have piloting experience?”

Silence crashed down upon the room, save for a single laugh from a unkempt man in the corner. Two dozen pairs of eyes bore their disapproving gazes upon her. On Venus, such outbursts often led to a visit from a colony-assigned Serenity Unit Yoga Consultant. Jana’s stomach twisted at the thought of yet another week of mandatory meditation sessions, chanting weird things until her behavior corrected.

“Sorry,” she said to nobody in particular, especially not that overly concerned citizen with a finger on his commlink, ready to call the men in white. Jana grabbed the first excuse she could to salvage the situation. “I’m fine, I’m just... I forgot my meds today.” She grumbled “stupid,” to herself repeatedly. The payment pad on the table beeped, reminding her to pay her tab, add a tip, and round up for the starving children on Earth. She ran her coin ring across it, shoved her datapad in her satchel, and rushed to the door before anyone changed their mind about her sincerity.

Once outside, Jana pulled her wallet out and opened it. Inside, an electronic ID card glowed with an image of her license. She looked it over, first with a rush of pride, then with a flood of

disappointment. The camera flash made her freckles stand out against her ruddy cheeks. Regulations required Jana to remove the bandanna that normally tamed her curly brown hair, resulting in a mess of advanced bed-head that pushed against the photo's edge. Her crooked smile made her look like she'd just eaten something too spicy. Her beautiful big sister, Elaine, would have laughed at the photo. Her brilliant older brother, Kyle, would have laughed at the license itself. "How can you make any money with that? Real money?" she could practically hear him asking.

Jana read it again: "Terran Empire Pilot Jana Broussard, Class C and F license." She earned every last one of those words and had every right to be proud of herself. "Fuck off, assholes," she said to her siblings' imagined faces. Indignant at the conversation that never was, Jana tucked the wallet away and headed to the station to catch the next capsule home.

A voice called from the direction of the coffeehouse. "Hey... hey..."

Jana froze. Was he talking to her?

"Hey fly girl. C'mere..." The man ambled up to her.

Jana backed into the tube station. She hurriedly swiped her coin ring on the panel to summon a capsule. An aura of sweat and booze wafted from his grubby corporate military jacket. Yellow goo pooled in the scar above his right eye. The man stumbled and grabbed Jana's wrist to balance himself. Jana's lanky body roiled with tension. She squeezed her left hand into a fist and tugged furiously at her right.

"A pilot, eh? You want to fly? That's a mistake. Let me tell you, sweetheart... oh let me tell you..." The man's breath smelled like rotten meat. He dropped her hand and leaned against the wall.

Jana wrinkled her nose in disgust. She knew her parents were pissed about her job search, but would they really stoop to this? How determined were they to crush her dreams, anyhow?

"Oh great... now my parents are sending vagrants after me. Lovely..."

"Vagrant? I was trying to warn you, you dumb bi..." he began to mutter, then stopped, and smiled a wide, filthy smile. "Fine. You know what? Do it. In fact, call these fine folks. Trust me, experience is not necessary." He dug through his pockets, found a business card, and shoved it in her hand.

The man whirled on unsteady feet and shuffled off. He muttered something about bitches ruining his life as he left.

Jana stared, as rattled as an un-piloted ship in paradox turbulence. She took a few calming breaths and examined the card. There were bits of grit on it. "Captain Kandi Kumari," it said, followed by contact information.

“What the...” Jana cleared her voice to ask the man what this was all about, but he was already halfway down the block. He rounded a corner and disappeared.

Jana sat down on a bench to await the next capsule. Above her, an intricate spiderweb matrix of tubes stretched across the Venusian sky. The tubes reached every neighborhood in the colony, constantly buzzing with capsules that whooshed every which direction. Above, a yellow-green sulfuric acid rain pounded down in one of the gorgeous chemical storms that made Venus such an attractive destination. With its scorching temperatures and deadly atmosphere, boiling with poisonous gases, Venus had long been unreachable by humans, much less habitable. The arrival of the Za'toon had brought technologies beyond humanity's wildest dreams. The most sought after of these was the habitat dome: a force field generator which created an atmospherically controlled habitat on any solid surface. The Za'toon were glad to provide these in exchange for all the dandelions Earth could produce.

She had never been to her species' mother planet. The Broussard family arrived on Venus at the first possible opportunity, two weeks after the colony opened. They beat the rush and snagged prime property because Dad owned a ship, the Dandy Lion, named after his latest business venture. Baby Jana, one of the first children born in a domed colony, arrived a month after that.

Jana's datapad chimed. She grabbed it, then dropped it just as quickly. Another email, another rejection. Jana sighed. Her list of potential employers was growing dangerously short.

The strip of blue lights at the tube's entrance lit up, indicating that a capsule would arrive shortly. Jana grabbed her satchel and stood. That capsule would take her home, back to Mom and Dad who would hassle her, yet again, about going to college or starting a career (but not the only thing she had any talent or passion for, of course. That's the help's work). That capsule would take her back to the same dead end.

“No. I can't go back to not being good enough.” Jana sat and gathered her courage. “Whatever. Here goes nothing.” She sent her credentials to the address.

The capsule came and went, empty. Thirteen minutes later, the datapad chimed. Jana held her breath as she read the response.

“Bay 238, Sector 54-W, Deimos. How soon can you make it?”

# Lizzie's New Arm - 3

Veronica McCormick tilted the safety lens over her right eye. Her biomechanical left eye's iris tightened to a tiny aperture to protect the sensitive components within.

"Three, two, one... go!" She threw the switch on the control nexus. LEDs flickered as electricity poured down the thick cables into the Neslubishi Rover Haulbot—a basic cargo-mover—made much more useful, not to mention beautiful, with its shiny new blades, drills, cutting lasers, and arc welders. It roared to life, raising its appendages menacingly. Veronica gawked, took three steps back, and cackled wildly.

"Beautiful!" She shouted as she clapped her hands together. Then, with a sickening screech, a shower of sparks burst from its innards. The bot's arms dropped lifelessly to its boxy gray sides.

"Not again!" Veronica threw her spanner to the ground. Smoke tricked from the lifeless bot. She yanked the panel off the side and plunged her metallic right hand into the tangle of components and wires. She rooted around until she found the offending part: a melted inverter, another damn melted inverter.

"Screw this. I'm done," grumbled Veronica. She couldn't take yet another failure today.

Veronica glanced out of the large metal door, much like all of the other large metal doors on the ship, across to the darkened expanse of the cargo bay. She grinned. It was the perfect thing to improve her mood. Felix was probably asleep, making now the perfect time to root around. She glanced into the mirror above her cluttered desk. Veronica tucked the chin-length sprout of oily black hair, surrounded on three sides by an unevenly shaved buzzcut, behind her ear. Now properly groomed, she grabbed her trench coat, the one with the sleeves cut off, and slipped it on. She dropped her datapad in the coat's pocket and left.

Thick black boots clomped down the hallway, kicking grease scuffs on the diamond-plate floor. She nudged the door to the cargo bay with her toe, and it slid open. Veronica's human eye widened as it glanced around the vast room.

"Damn. Tetris, extra hard mode. Score: Demigod." Every crate, container, capsule and carton had its place, stacked with ruthless efficiency. Not so much as a cockroach could squeeze between what miserly little space Felix afforded in his organizational masterpiece.

Veronica scanned the inventory tags on the crates with her cybernetic eye. After three rows, she found her prize.

“Salvage Operation 1136 slash 05, last week’s harvest. Haul includes one beautiful, four port 600-watt vibramotor array. You’re going to be perfect for my baby,” said Veronica as she tapped on her cybernetic arm. A drone hovered upward and yanked the box from its home on the wall with its three steel claws, causing four other snugly-stacked boxes to tumble along with it. They popped open and their contents exploded everywhere.

Veronica dove into the crate, her boots kicking in the air as she dug toward her treasure. She snatched it up, held it aloft, and whooped triumphantly.

“Mine! Mine, baby, mine!” Veronica scrambled out and dusted herself off. She strode to the console, grinning, “What else you got for me, Davenport?”

Her cybernetic eye traced the patterns of fingerprints on the login screen, from which she recreated Felix’s password. Veronica, for once, appreciated Felix’s obsessive attention to detail; this database was exquisite. She could find every part, spec, and serial number easily and quickly. What other goodies did their latest harvest bring in? She was dying to know.

Veronica scanned the locations of lots of interesting parts, parts that would work beautifully in all sorts of experiments and contraptions. She sent drone after drone to retrieve the crates.

Score! Veronica hopped in one crate after another and tunneled through them. While inside crate 0367-01, a flash of light reflected an ID tag. Her heart raced as she tunneled through the crate toward her prize. Snatching it up with her gleaming steel cybernetic arm, Veronica caressed the part and squealed.

“Oh Holy Mother, are you what I think you are?” She scanned the ID tag and clapped her hands together, “You are! And someone just left you floating in space for me? Ten percent faster boot-up for Lizzie’s paradox drive!” Veronica’s cheeks blushed hot against her paper-white skin. She sported a Mercury tan; that is to say, she spent most of her life underground or on ships, away from the light of the day-star. What little melanin remained in her flesh lived in confusion as to its existential purpose.

Veronica gave it a look over, then scowled. One of the panels on the device was loose. The tip of her cybernetic hand’s index finger popped open and a screwdriver extended from it. She was about to fix the panel when she glimpsed a greenish-gold sheen behind it.

“What the hell?”

Veronica unscrewed the panel. Behind it sat a device—the best word she could find for it. It was pear-shaped, about thirty centimeters tall. Eight rods of the same satiny metal protruded from its base, bent at ninety degree angles and curved toward the top. Veronica carefully pulled it out.

She blinked. So light. It was barely the weight of a glass of vodka, yet the metal couldn’t be more solid. She squeezed her cybernetic hand around it, but her internal calipers didn’t show even a

micrometer of deformation. Veronica curled her hands around it and marveled.

“What in the name of the Great Mother Goddess are you?”

Two hands, one made of steel and one made of flesh, roamed across the mysterious object's buttery surface. The right hand, formed of metal and silicon, took readings from the device while the left hand, bone covered with soft flesh, traced over its surface. Veronica read the input from her metal hand over and over, but not a damn bit of it made sense. Specific gravity, density, chemical compositions, you name it—no matter what she read, all her fingertips returned were wildly fluctuating numbers. Had it not been for these anomalies, she would have just chalked it up as some kind of crappy modern art, probably something Felix would have in his quarters.

Nothing about it added up. She had found everything from hairballs to broken sex toys between the cracks on stuff she'd bought at auctions, but never anything this weird... or this beautiful. For something this large to get into the gamma focuser, someone had to specifically remove the panel and rearrange the interior. This was intentional. Clearly, this gorgeous machine was meant for her. Perhaps it was a gift from the Great Goddess of Outer Space, Herself.

Veronica sent an electric charge from her fingertips into it. To her delight, one of the rods popped off, revealing an octagonal port behind it, the likes of which she had never seen. She squinted her right eye, icy-blue and surrounded with angry red veins. The connectors were all perfectly matched. Veronica swiveled her left eye on its chameleon-like turret and dilated its iris. She zoomed in on the port. It, too, was formed of the same strange metal and gave off the same strange fluctuations. She slid it into the pocket on the black cargo pants that hung low on her bony hips.

“Why must you torment me?” She sighed. The device refused to give up their secrets and required further exploration. She tucked it back into the gamma focuser. Its mysteries could not hide for long from Veronica McCormick.

She was about to climb into the crate when a searing heat on her right calf annihilated her moment of inspiration. It singed through her pants and burned a painful line in her flesh. She howled and- whipped around to find its source. A lanky silhouette stood blanketed in light from an overhead lamp with a pistol aimed.

“I thought I told you to never, ever touch my work. EVER!” he hissed through gritted teeth, stepping forward. He kept the sight of his gun trained on Veronica as he swept around the room to survey the damage.

Sweat formed on Felix's smoothly-shaved head, rolling down to the green t-shirt he wore. Veronica cringed. Though Felix towered head and shoulders over Veronica, his frame was so thin that the back-draft from an old lady with a walker could knock him over. What he lacked in physical stature, he more than made up for in force of presence. His scowl could fill a room with storm clouds. His stare had been known to wither fresh plants at thirty meters. And he wielded a

mean, clean shot with a pistol, as Veronica had become painfully aware.

Hard lines carved a mask of grating annoyance on Felix's face, which was hued with the rich, deep brown of his African heritage. Veronica caught a whiff of his aftershave, a spicy-woody scent mixed with angry pheromones. Veronica's limbic system suggested now might be a good time to start kissing Felix's ass, or at least covering her own. Felix shook his head and tsked, drawing the pistol's sight lazily across her chest.

"You'll drown in paperwork, Davenport!" Veronica clutched her loot to her chest. "And after you type your fingers to the bone, Captain Kumari will have you cleaning toilets for a month if you kill her engineer. You do know that, right?" Veronica smiled meekly.

"How foolish. I'm not you—an idiot," answered Felix with a fox-like grin. He traced the sight of the pistol across Veronica's face. "How does the med lab for a few days sound? Wilshire can tell you everything there is to know, once again, about secret societies and human-Za'toon hybrids."

Veronica shuddered, and held her hands up defensively. "Let's not do that. Truce?"

"Truce. Hmf. We'll see," Felix said, "We are looking at four hours of work for me to undo this mess. At my rate of two hundred Fijacoin per hour, plus one quarter for overtime, you owe me nine hundred Fija. You must enjoy making me rich, McCormick." He held out a datapad for her to swipe her coin ring.

Veronica ignored the datapad, and traced her metal fingertips over the gamma focuser as if she were caressing a newborn babe. "Davenport, bigger picture, dude. Do you know what this is? Do you?"

"A gamma focuser," answered Felix blandly, "Of course I know what it is. I just inventoried it before you ruined my cargo bay. It's a mark 6, revision 18, built on Mars by Boemartin. And it's strictly military gear, which means it gets returned to the military so we do not incur thousands of Fija in fines." He tucked the pistol in his belt and held out his hand. "So give it back."

"I understand. Just hang on while I tie my shoe." Veronica planted her boot, which had no laces, but a dozen buckles on it, on a stack of boxes. Giving it a solid kick, Veronica sent them flying, scattering their contents everywhere. Felix's screams echoed off the walls. In the moment of opportunity, Veronica dashed out of the cargo bay with her loot clutched in her arms.

# Getting Her Wings - 4

The stars blinked outside the window of Jana's taxi, currently en route to Deimos. Marvelous things, these interplanetary capsules. Developed by the Neslubishi corporation, these vehicles allowed people to avoid the unpleasantness of the public Terran Interplanetary Transit Shuttles. No crowds, body odor, or strangers wittering on about medical problems. The capsules were clean, comfortable, and best of all, private. Jana settled in to enjoy the next nine hours on a relaxing trip.

Shuttles and personal vehicles traveled Solsys in an ingenious way. To get anywhere within a reasonable time, one had to use paradox drive, which requires a human pilot to navigate the jump trails. No artificial intelligence yet has been able to successfully manage it. Most people lack the skill or training to safely fly one at interplanetary speeds, so small craft manage this with an AI that pilots the vehicle in realspace mode until it reaches the entrance of a jump trail. There, it waits for a ship going its direction and offers some coin in exchange for piggybacking along the jump trail with it.

Jana's taxi wobbled, as a taxi does when it's hitching a lift. The tow cables clicked as they attached to the craft. Then the taxi wobbled again, but this time, it was every molecule inside twisting and rippling as the ship entered the jump trail. There was nothing as sweet as this sensation, those first few minutes after entering a jump trail. Jana closed her eyes and drank in the sensations of reality's fabric folding and unfolding like an origami. Outside the taxi, the starry black sky faded into a plasmatic void, colors flashing and swirling in the chaos around her. After the warping settled down, Jana reached into the cabinet above and pulled out a blanket and pillow. She folded the two chairs in the taxi down into a single bed, and stretched out to enjoy the show.

Eight hours later a chime rang, waking Jana from the sleep the gentle rocking had lulled her into. Jana rolled to her feet and tossed the blanket aside. Now back in realspace, Jana's taxi detached and zoomed toward a moon which sparkled with a rainbow of colors. As the craft approached Mars' smaller moon, Jana delighted. Blinking dice, dancing cards, spinning roulette wheels and whirling slot machines filled the dome, their tall signs practically scraping the dome's surface. Nothing outside of the arcade on Venus was allowed to have these kinds of colors. In most cases, anything other than beige or teal will get you shoved out of the airlock. Jana squeezed her hands together excitedly. She couldn't wait to see Deimos up close.

As the taxi sped along, it made no indication of slowing near the colorful dome. Jana's face fell. The taxi descended into gritty grays as it approached the workers' dome and parked at its space lift platform. Jana grabbed her satchel, stepped into the lift, and stepped out onto a moving

sidewalk.

The sidewalk creaked. The air reeked of grease and people desperately in need of a bath. She glided past mechanics' shops, food stands, parts exchanges, and the occasional sleeping drunk in a casino employee's uniform. Stuffed into stiff plexileather pumps, Jana's feet ached. Her shoulders stretched at the blazer her sister passed down to her, straining the seams on the neowool cage.

Bay 238's docking tube was crammed between an automated quickie mart and a self-serve capsule hotel. Jana peered out the windows, trying to catch a glimpse of the ship. A hundred meters later, Jana saw her. Elegant arcs formed a crescent-shaped ship, its wingspan nearly 60 meters. The ship sported an expansive observation deck at the fore, something only seen on luxury vessels. A luxury vessel! Jana gasped at her good fortune.

Jana squinted to get a better look, then blinked. There were tools, drones, devices, cutters, welders, and all sorts of other crap on the hull. She sighed. "Must be under repair. Dammit. I need to fly — soon."

After another few minutes, Jana reached the airlock. There was a placard bolted to the airlock. She cocked her head, reading it a second time because it didn't make sense the first. "Lizzie Borden." WTF?

Figuring out the joke would have to wait. Jana pulled a mirror out of her handbag and straightened the collar on her jacket. Jana ran her hands through her mess of hair and adjusted the scarf that kept her locks under control. Her nerves rattled, so she took a few deep breaths to steady them. She pushed the comm button. "Jana Broussard, here for my interview."

"Wonderful!" chimed a woman's voice from the speaker. "Step into the lounge."

The airlock slid open, welcoming her onto a green carpet with a retro palm tree pattern. An expansive lounge with a stunning view of space spread around Jana. A round bar with a stage behind it stood in the center of the room. Racks of mostly-empty liquor bottles rose to the ceiling from its center. A pool table served as display platform for a precarious pyramid of beer cans. Mismatched, threadbare chairs were strewn about the room. Jana hadn't come close to putting all of this together before the disembodied voice derailed her thought-train.

"Please look toward the aft. You will see a wooden door. Go through it." The door's lock clicked.

A moment to get her bearings would have been nice, but Jana hesitated for one breath too many. The voice egged her on. "Wood is brown, Ms. Broussard. You want the brown door."

She jumped, hurried toward the door, and pushed it open. The tropical carpet continued down a corridor with peach walls and gold seashell sconces interspersed with identical wood doors.

She shuffled along in the skirt, another Elaine hand-me-down, as far as the confining garment would allow. The retro-tiki decor intrigued her, and she would have loved to check it out, but she didn't want the voice scolding her again.

"Now, take the "Employees Only" door, last one on the left." the silky voice continued.

Another wooden door. When she stepped through this one, Jana's pointy heel got stuck in a metal grating and nearly tripped. She grabbed onto a handrail to regain her balance, and gawked at the vastness below. Easily the size of a Solsys Cup futbol field, the room filled a majority of the giant crescent's interior. Crates stood in perfectly fitted arrays, reaching to the ceiling. She opened her mouth, about to shout so she could hear it echo, but the voice cooed, "I'm not down there, Ms. Broussard. I'm in the last door on the left."

Really? Jana rolled her eyes and hurried to the end of the catwalk, shuffling so her heels wouldn't get stuck. At the end was a black powder-coated door. It slid open before she touched it. A cold gust of chemical scented air blasted her as the door slid closed behind her. Diamond-plate tile lined the gray and black hallway ahead of her. She hurried past a few doors. Behind one, a man and a woman were yelling at each other. Thunderous snoring rumbled behind another. When she got to the end of the hallway, the door clicked open before she could touch the doorbell.

"Jana Broussard!" called the cheery, now-embodied voice. The captain rose from her desk, the beads in her hair clattering against her shoulders. Half of those long locks were twisted into loose braids. The rest fell in bouncing waves that reached halfway to her hips. The millimeter of black-haired roots were surrounded by waterfalls of bleached blond and pink, a crown of sunshine and cotton candy. Her Terran military jacket might have once been regulation, but the addition of Mardi Gras beads, punk patches, and sequined epaulets blew that all to hell. Jana stared at the patch on her jacket's left breast, a flag embroidered with a laughing skull above a pair of crossed bloody hatchets. The captain wore an old name tag underneath that once was engraved with the words, "Sergeant Candace Kumari." That was scratched out, and painted over with green nail polish. "Cap'n Kandi," it said. The monstrosity hung lazily over a bright yellow tank top.

The woman stood from her desk and extended her hand, tipped with electric blue fingernails. "I'm Kandi Kumari. Welcome." She wore an easy smile across her swarthy skin. Thick, black eyelashes framed a secret laughter in her wide, brown eyes. The crows feet at the corners of those eyes were the only hint of this her age. Jana gave her a firm shake, remembering what her adviser at school had drilled into her head about first impressions.

"Sit," the captain said, gesturing to a metal folding chair in front of her desk. Jana adjusted her skirt, silently cursing as she tried to get comfortable. The captain sat in a plush red recliner behind an antique birch-veneered desk, hand-crafted from popular twentieth century flat-pack technologies. The desk housed a massive computer surrounded with notes, gadgets, plush stuffed animals and anti-stress toys. Towering racks lined the walls, stacked with rows of monitors,

speakers, headphones, switches and control panels. Behind the captain's desk hung a large painting of the Venusian landscape, complete with puffy green clouds and glimmering domes full of trees and flowers among the shining steel buildings.

The captain's eyes flicked across her datapad, looked over Jana, then went back to reading the tablet. After too many minutes of being sized up, Captain Kumari set the datapad aside, leaned forward and laced her fingers together. She leveled a gaze at Jana. Sweat formed under her arms despite the two layers of deodorant she applied to prevent exactly this.

"Jana Broussard," she said after the unnervingly long silence, "Fresh out of flying school. I like these scores, Jana. Top notch on your maneuvering and handling skills. Tell me. Why do you want to work for me?"

Jana tried to force her sweat glands to fucking stop that already, but they refused to obey. She couldn't exactly say, "You're the only person who would offer me a chance, so here I am." Jana bit her lip and asked herself what her father would say. Finally, she said, "Because I hope to start my career on a good foot, and this looks like a great opportunity for a new pilot like myself. I look forward to pushing my skills and exploring Solsys with a great crew on a great ship."

Captain Kumari threw her head back, the beads in her hair clattering against her back. Her laughter sliced through the silence. Jana squirmed. The captain sat up straight and smiled. "Bullshit. Do you know what kind of ship this is?"

"Yes. It's a luxury liner, or at least it will be as soon as it's finished."

The pink-haired captain snickered, then leveled a serious gaze at Jana. Jana twitched as the captain's eyes looked her up and down. "And that would make your parents happy? Proud?"

"Of course. It's a great career, piloting a luxury liner," Jana blurted out, and kept on blurting despite her brain begging her mouth to stop. "But this isn't about my parents. This is about making myself happy, and flying is what makes me happiest."

The captain's mocking mirth mellowed into a quiet smile. "To know what you want and to make it yours, to be the captain of your life's ship. Far too many unfortunate souls fall into the trap of thinking they've got to live a life that someone else has laid out for them, a life that isn't theirs."

Those words struck Jana with a truth she'd known all along but never dared to speak. She dropped the tense interview face and nodded along eagerly. "Yes! My parents wanted me to study business, go to college, and be chained to an office for the rest of my life. You don't know how much I had to beg them to let me go to flying school, telling them it was just a phase... but sitting at a desk all day sounds like a hell made especially for me. The only place I want to sit is a pilot's chair."

"A career born out of love," murmured the captain. "And you'd follow that love as far as

it'd take you? No matter what? Just so long as you get there?"

"Oh yes. Anywhere. Anyhow. Any way."

"Then you wouldn't mind if I told you that this is not an unfinished luxury liner, but the core of my salvage operation. The ship is quite finished, finished to my exact specifications." Captain Kumari leaned back, folded her arms across her chest, and watched. Jana's face dropped. Piloting a garbage truck wasn't going to just annoy her parents—they would flat out lose their minds over this. The captain gave another Cheshire-cat grin, and repeated Jana's words back to her, "Anywhere. Anyhow. Any way. Remember? Is my ship not good enough for you? If not, I am sure I can find someone without such exacting standards as yourself..."

"Oh, no no no." This was the first door open to her, and she wasn't about to blow it. She would be a pilot, she would fly a real ship, and if anyone didn't like it, that was their problem. "She's a great ship. She's perfect. My apologies, Captain Kumari. None of this is what I expected, that's all."

"Life never is," mused the captain. "So, would you like a tour of the ship you'll be piloting?"

Jana leaped out of the chair. "I'm hired?"

"Of course. As I said, your test scores are excellent. We need someone who can maneuver a big beast like this in and out of close quarters without damaging us or the parts we're salvaging. It's not something just anyone can do, Ms. Broussard. Besides, I like you. You'll fit in nicely here." Mirth played across Captain Kumari's glossy red lips. "You'll get a twelve hundred Fija a week stipend, plus a five percent commission. I like to encourage my crew to hustle. Since I was lucky enough to get this ship after some of the suites were finished, you'll have much more comfortable quarters than you would have if you were actually piloting a cruise ship. Would this be good with you?"

Jana squeezed her hands together to contain her overflowing delight. "It would, Captain. Thank you." The pay was smaller than she expected, but flying's flying, and she would finally get to do it for real. All of those years of training with her simulators while lying to her parents about doing homework, harassing them into letting her go to flying school, convincing them it was just a phase, finally were about to pay off.

"Wonderful. I'll message you the forms I need you to fill out. Please return them to me by the beginning of your shift at oh-eight-hundred Pacific standard time tomorrow. I promise, no more paperwork for you after that unless you fuck up. Now, is there anything I can answer for you?" The captain relaxed back into her chair, unfolding her arms and laying them on the armrests.

She squinted at a detail on Captain Kumari's painting, one so small she almost missed it. The dome had a fracture in it. From it, tiny stick-figure people were flying out into the toxic, boiling

Venusian afternoon, roasting alive in a shower of sulfuric rain. “Yes, just one, Captain,” said Jana as she peeled her eyes away from the painting. She asked the question that had been burning a hole in her brain ever since she got on board. “Why is this ship called the Lizzie Borden?”

# Serenity at Last - 5

At the Bean and Grind Coffeehouse, Jake Hampton was laughing and crying into his coffee.

“I’m, like, off my meds today! Tee-hee!” Jake bobbed his head from side to side and mimicked the idiot’s words. “Have fun with that madhouse, Princess. The Lizzie Borden doesn’t just eat other ships. It’ll eat your soul.” He smiled at the thought, but it only slightly chased away the pain of the spanner Veronica had thrown at his head a few days earlier.

Former Corporal Jake Hampton of the Disnosoft Navy, whose sordid affair with a subordinate sent his career into the toilet, stared into the surface of the black coffee. In the mug, the Lizzie Borden drifted across a sea of stars. The once-beautiful ship gleamed against the void surface. As it crossed the sea of coffee, it morphed into a monstrosity, a crescent-shaped horror of the Solsys skies. It sprouted arms: telescoping rods with swivel-mounted cutters, hungry to carve into the flesh of ships. It sprouted tentacles: racks of spring-loaded tow cables, poised to burst out and entangle its victim. It sprouted spores: cannons and chain guns, for ending disputes when all other diplomatic options failed. And it sprouted spawn: a dozen harvester drones mounted to miniature docking bays, ready to fly at a moment’s notice and devour its prey.

“Veronica’s monster.” Jake scowled. “My career is ruined because of Veronica Frankenstein McCormick.” How Veronica didn’t rack up fines for all that hardware was beyond his comprehension. Salvagers never paid a single coin in licensing fees. Corporates didn’t bother chasing them most of the time—more trouble than they’re worth. But if that salvager had military experience...

Jake drummed his fingers on the tabletop, gears spinning in his head. He banged out a message on his datapad and hit “send.”

“There. Screw you all.”

He sat back and smirked. Every last one of them, including the irritating girl who insulted him—because why not?—can all go to hell. And that’s just where they’re headed. Enjoy it, assholes.

He could not believe he had to resort to driving a garbage truck. Jake Hampton, who flew such beauties as the Fantasma, the Pollox, and the Hegelmann, decorated by generals and CEOs alike, now lowered to hauling trash, all for a stupid drunken fling with an ensign—Tricia or Tracy or whatever her name was. And to top off the string of bullshit life had thrown at him, Jake got dumped in this suburban hellhole because Veronica couldn’t handle a compliment.

“Fuck me,” he groaned, leaning back on the chair. He massaged his sore hand, bones still misaligned from when Veronica grabbed it off her ass and crushed it. Jake groaned. Women. Girlfriends. Whores. Ensigns. And then Veronica, fucking Veronica, who wouldn’t screw anything unless it needed batteries. A real dick might help her attitude. Why did women hate him so much that they had to repeatedly ruin his life? Whores, all of them. With his good hand, he grabbed for his cup and took a sip. Cold. Cold because fucking Veronica apparently still wasn’t done ruining his life.

“BULLSHIT!” he growled, unable to tamp down the torrent of dark thoughts. Jake slammed the cup down and planted his hands on the table. Determination raging in his mind, he stood. He turned to grab his backpack when the rubber billy club came down upon the back of his skull.

Jake slumped to the ground. As he faded, he saw the holder of the billy club: a serene monk wearing serene white robes and a serene smile. The monk serenely said, “Namaste. We are taking you to the Serenity Seaside Retreat for corrective Yoga education.” Two other serene monks dragged Jake’s limp body out the door.

# The Belly of the Beast - 6

“Ah, the ship’s name. Glad you asked.” Kandi and Jana walked down the bare steel hallway, then onto the catwalks high above the cargo bay. Jana paused to tug her foot out of the metal grating. Kandi sighed and reached into her cargo pants pocket for her datapad. “Let me see me your coin ring.”

Jana removed the titanium band from her right pinky and handed it over. Kandi slid it along the outermost edge of her datapad. After a confirmation chirp, she handed it back to Jana. “There’s an advance on your stipend. Buy yourself some shoes that work.”

“Yes, Captain.” Jana’s cheeks flushed red. Kandi stifled a grin. Jana was a mess, but she was her kind of mess. Maybe this pilot wouldn’t end up screwing up as royally as her predecessor. She preferred to be chill with the rules, but Hampton had not only crossed the line, but was stupid enough to cross the line with Veronica. Kandi observed Jana and nodded absently. Young, eager, and full of excitement—that was the kind of pilot Kandi needed. No more experts.

Jana cleared her throat. Kandi brought her focus back to the moment. “It was 2116... Wow, four years, has it been that long? Yeah, so, Ali Xi called me for a job. They came across some wreckage in a remote sector that they needed brought back quickly and quietly, no questions asked.”

Kandi tucked the datapad back in her right pocket, pulled out a metal flask with an engraving of a mermaid on it from the left, and took a swig. She offered it to Jana. Jana held up a hand to decline.

“Said remote sector happened to be claimed by Yumatech. Remote claims rarely hold up under anything more than cowboy law, but since Yumatech had a research dome out there, they claimed that anything found in that sector belonged to them. However, Right of Salvage beats that, one of the few laws they didn’t screw us with. Simply stated, if it’s neither pinned down nor under the command of a licensed operator, it’s yours. Do your part to keep space clean and all that. So, Ali Xi wanted to grab it before anyone else spotted it. Being in hostile space, that’s risky. Pirates, raiders, slavers, you know, all that shit that the Terran military’s too busy protecting alien interests to bother with.”

She planted her hands on the rails overlooking the cargo bay, and whispered, “Terran.” The word still felt strange on her lips, but humanity needed something to call themselves in the bigger galaxy, even if it only consisted of one other species. Humans had possessed spacefaring capabilities

since Kandi was a kid, but it was limited to long, dangerous, and expensive research trips. The invention of the paradox drive made comfortably fast interplanetary travel a practical reality. By her twenties, none of those multiple-year journeys into the Great Beyond had yielded a single contact outside of the Za'toon. By her thirties, it paradox drive's potential appeared to have plateaued, along with interest in exploration. Now, in her forties, Kandi was tired from running around the same hamster wheel as everyone else who rejected corporate serfdom. Who was she kidding? The wheel was never meant to be the means to an end, just the end itself.

“So, you were saying...” Jana said, “Ali Xi called you in?”

“Look at you, Broussard, focused on the heart of the matter. I like that. Anyhow, let me rewind. I got this ship on the cheap because of the dandelions. I just got my settlement from the military, and it was enough to afford me a ship, but not much of one. But, I had a stroke of luck. That year saw a lot of droughts. Prices skyrocketed. Za'toon accused suppliers of collusion, price gouging, and a whole bunch of heavy-handed regulations got passed that year.”

Jana rolled her eyes. “I know, believe me, I know. Dad complained about it for months. You'd think with all that tech, the Za'toon could have figured out a way to grow their own dandelions.”

“You'd think, but that whole ethical code of theirs, not being able to use robot labor...”

More eye rolling. “Yep. Dad hates having to pay an HR department. He thinks it's superstitious bullshit.”

“Maybe. But since everyone's hungry for their tech, you gotta play their way, stupid as it is. What it all boils down to is when the dandelion prices twitch, the whole economy twitches. Usually, that's bad for rich folk, but if you're clever like me, you can find the opportunity. Dozens of unfinished cruise ships on the block. Nobody wanted them because they're too slow to be showy and too much of a gas-hog to be a daily driver. But for a salvage op, they're perfect. The ship formerly known as the Queen Elizabeth the Fifth came into my hands, partly finished. But she wasn't properly outfitted for a salvage operation of this magnitude, and that was going to take a lot of time and money. That's where Ali Xi comes in. They gave me one of their unprofitable space stations to harvest.” A wicked grin spread across Kandi's lips. “I took every fucking thing that station had, and McCormick turned this ship from a small-time tow truck into the proper beast you see around you. Since she was reborn with a new purpose, she needed a new name, an appropriate name—the Lizzie Borden.”

“I-I see...” Jana answered, eyes widening. She took a few tiny steps back. Kandi grinned.

“Is there anything else, then?”

“No, thank you, Captain. I'm great.”

Kandi smiled. “Good. Dismissed. Go get yourself settled in. Your quarters are the last on the starboard wing, left side. Or the right. I don’t care. Just so long as its vacant.”

Jana Broussard shuffled off in one hell of a hurry. Kandi sighed. Despite Broussard’s enthusiasm and energy, hiring someone new and untested worried her. No time to stress about that, though; the numbers on her spreadsheet worried her more. After the fiasco with Hampton, her situation became dire. No pilot meant no long-range salvage runs, thus no big payoffs at auctions. With someone at the helm again, Kandi could at least look forward to getting a few of her mounting bills paid off.

Kandi reached for her datapad to wrap up a few last details, looking forward to getting some sleep. She scanned her messages and halted.

*From: [licensing@neslubishi.com](mailto:licensing@neslubishi.com)*

Kandi blinked. What the hell? She opened the email. In bold red text, the first line read: “UNLICENSED HARDWARE FINE: 170,000...”

“Dammit!” Kandi shouted, slamming her datapad down. “Can I please, please, PLEASE just enjoy a few minutes with my victory here? I just got my pilot! Come on!” Kandi groaned. “170,000 Fija means every coin I make for the next year—gone.”

Somewhere, outside of some obscure moon, there is a little space locker that Kandi could buy and call home. She’d have a little garden, a kitchen that didn’t stink of burrito farts, and a room to display all of her treasures. And once again, the dream evaporated, like the salvage she used to blast from the sky. She uncapped her flask, and took another swig.

“Fuck,” she muttered, laying her head on her desk.

From across the table, one word on the datapad’s screen came into focus: “Ducats.”

“Ducats!” In a last ditch hope that she had read it incorrectly, she checked the email one more time. No doubt about it. Ducats. Her mind scrambled for a conversion. At last count... ten, no, twelve Fija per Ducat? Salvagers never used Ducats. That coin was mostly for military and corporate transactions. Twelve times 17, add a bunch of zeroes... “Two. Million. Fija.” Kandi gasped. The lights went on and off as her eyelids fluttered. “Five years of eating slush, and that’s if— if!—our sales don’t get any worse.” Kandi groaned, the reality pounding against the walls of her skull. “Bastards! Of course the hardware is unlicensed. It’s salvage. Trash. Fucking hell, how did they even know?” She sighed and scanned further, daring to look at the terms.

Kandi shuddered. The first week’s payment alone would break her bank. The second would mean she couldn’t pay her crew. And she could only swing the third week’s payment if she were to sell her ship.

“Any portion of this fine not paid within 45 days...” Kandi’s breath caught in her throat. She

stilled her nerves, and forced herself to read the next line. "...would require all offenders to work off the balance in service to the Neslubishi military."

An icy claw squeezed Kandi's chest. In a month and a half, she'd be back on a military vessel, back to servitude and schedules and precious little sleep, a grunt on a ship, staring into the flames, the flames closing in, burning the flesh from her bone, scorching her lungs from the inside out...

Kandi shook until the datapad fell from her hands. Her trembling right hand reached toward her left shoulder, tucking her fingers under the strap of her yellow tank top. Plexicone skin, in the perfect tone of amber to match her natural flesh. Titanium plating. And underneath it all, a heart made of wires, motors, and pumps. The flames even took her wings. She could barely fly a ship due to missing so much of her natural body. "No more. Ever," said Kandi. Then the flood of tears came.

# The Chameleon - 7

Idleness is money wasted, and Felix despised waste. He had to re-frame the annoyance. Management Zen seminars taught him that idleness is the necessary vice that clears the mind and resets one's baseline. Felix usually hated being idle, but he never hesitated to take as much downtime as he needed after dealing with Veronica.

He settled in the reading nook in the corner of his quarters. He poured some orange pekoe tea he had picked up at a boutique on Dione into a strainer. Felix set his pair of datapads down on the black veneered coffee table and stretched his long frame out on his plexileather couch. Flashing colors advertising cheap dinners, cheap hookers, loose slots and big jackpots poured through his windows.

Loud, grating Deimos was a perfect destination for the loud, grating fools who filled the casinos. However, when it came to the game of business, Deimos attracted the experienced gamblers not to the card tables but to the auction halls. Felix sighed across the steaming surface of his tea. His latest debacle with Veronica had depleted him too much to navigate the shark-infested waters. After some deep breaths, he managed to get his frustration down to a low simmer.

His hand nearly crushed his mug when he heard the familiar cadence of rattling wrenches that accompanied Veronica's heavy footfall. He arched stiffly. "What?" he snapped, setting down his mug and reaching for his round wire-frame glasses.

"Hey, don't freak," Veronica said, stepping into his quarters, "I'm here with tribute."

"Forget it."

"I promise." She tiptoed forward, holding out a mail tube with the same care that one employs when offering a steak to a lion.

Felix snatched it from her hand and examined it, keeping it at arm's length. "What? Is it going to explode in my face? Is it full of feces? What delights do I have to look forward to from you now, McCormick?"

"Nothing. You want me to open it to prove it?"

"No, that's fine." He uncapped the end, shook the innards out, and unrolled the contents: a comic book. He grinned. "Oh, the crime-fighting bat. Only the second of this series I've seen. Thank you." Dark ages comics were damn hard to find. In all of his thirty-three years, Felix had been fortunate to amass almost three dozen comic books, thanks to the many hours he spent

searching long-forgotten lockers and crates. Despite the steep fines involved with owning such material, Felix considered the charming appeal of these rare finds worth the risk. And that was all the politesse that Felix could handle. He planted himself back on his couch and snapped at her, “But don’t think you still don’t owe me for earlier.”

“Yeah, yeah, I got you. Anyhow, also, at this auction all the sales are going to be up to you. Captain wants me in the audience, bidding on a few upgrades she’s been wanting. It’s all pretty run of the mill cargo this time, should be easy enough to sell by just showing the spec sheet right here.” She pulled a data stick out of one of the many pockets in her coat and dropped it on the coffee table.

“A spec sheet will sell it. Ha. That’s why you’re broke all the time.” He peered over his wireframe glasses at the idiot who has been in his quarters far too long now. He grabbed the data stick and copied the information to the smaller of his two datapads. Slapping the stick back on the table, he said, “Done. You can go now.”

The idiot grabbed her data stick and sneered.

“I said now.”

The idiot heaved off, far too slowly for Felix’s liking.

Veronica paused at the door. Felix felt his every muscle seize up.

“Hey,” she said, softly, almost even civilly. She must really want something. “I was wondering... have you found any devices in your harvest made of a weird greenish-yellow metal?”

Felix inhaled a sharp breath at his crew-mate's audacity. “Well, you should know. You tore apart the cargo bay thoroughly enough.”

Veronica sighed. “Please? Have you?”

“No. Now seriously, leave. And thank you again for the comic. But leave, please. Go.” The pain was becoming too much.

Veronica slumped her shoulders and trudged out. She was an impressive engineer, but damn if she wasn’t the most horrible mess of a person he had ever met.

Once Veronica and her foulness had left his quarters, Felix could finally relax. He kicked off his shoes and opened the comic book. A good read was just what he needed to unwind before jumping in the shark tank. Felix found himself suspending a whole lot of disbelief for him to enjoy tales of the man-bat. If this man had so much money, why did he risk his own life instead of hiring a hit man? Furthermore, how did he have time to stay in peak physical condition when he had a business empire to run? Felix barely had the time to sit down and enjoy a cup of tea and a comic book, much less work out every day. The suit was the worst, though. Why would he paint a target

on his chest? This guy was supposed to be a billionaire CEO, who, theoretically, made it through elementary school logic, right? Nonsense. If anything, his superpower was having money. Felix loved comics, but this was bullshit. The captain once had said to him last time he was griping over a comic, “It’s just a story. Relax.” Felix had no idea how to do that when such stupidity existed in Solsys. He turned the page.

Felix sipped the last of the tea and rose from the couch. He hid the comic in a secret panel behind his chest of drawers. He checked his watch, then turned his mind to more pressing matters: business.

He headed to his closet and replaced his delicate wire-frame glasses with black horn-rim sunglasses, useful for guarding one’s eyes and one’s thoughts. Felix removed his t-shirt and cargo pants and reached for a more impressive outfit. He pulled on a pair of pressed pinstripe gray slacks and buttoned up a sharp white shirt. His nimble fingers tied his silvery-red striped necktie into an intricate knot. Felix slid his feet into his black, freshly polished plexileather oxfords.

He slipped the most important accessory he wore—a titanium coin ring encrusted with a green moissanite—on his right pinky finger. Felix set up the ring to for Fijacoin, the blockchain of choice for the Deimos colony, and the preferred coin for all transactions tonight. Fijacoin was also the shiny gold chip used at the Fijari Casino and Resort Conglomerate. Despite the absurd insistence of representing cryptocurrencies as gleaming gold coins since the dawn of the digital age, Fijacoin was the only one that actually met the expectations of all that stock art. Felix finished his outfit with a tie tack and matching cuff links, checked himself in the mirror one more time to assure perfection, then headed out the door.

# The Fall of Alpha Nine - 8

Ali Xi's Alpha Nine Space Dock Commander Wiley Jameson couldn't believe what he was reading. The recent slew of inter-corporate skirmishes had screwed up his ship production schedules. Managers repeatedly bumped priorities, and this order in his hands had his blood boiling.

A garbage truck! A de-prioritized, bottom tier, completely unimportant, bloody salvage freighter was what he had to drop everything for?

"I'm not joking, Commander. Read the order; it's all there. We ride in three days." The person uttering this impudence had to be joking. Rather than the attire of the military professionals that he had been seeing for the past eleven months, this woman wore an absurd mockery of a uniform and ridiculous boots covered with chains and hydraulics. He should have thrown her off of his station for those boots alone.

"The orders are on the datapad, not on my feet," she chided.

Wiley froze. He was about to murder someone right on the shuttle bay deck, and that would likely get him fired. He inhaled deeply, refocused on the datapad in his hands, and counted to five before reading again.

*ATTN: Commander Wiley Jameson, A9 Space Dock*

*Captain Kumari will depart your station within 70 hours with the Queen Elizabeth V fully outfitted for salvage operations. The board cannot stress enough the importance of timeliness. Captain Kumari is authorized to take any and all actions necessary to achieve an on-time launch. You and your staff will cooperate in every way. This supersedes all other priorities.*

It stung less when he read it the third time. "I'll meet you and your staff in Conference Room B in 30 minutes," Wiley said.

"No need," answered "Captain" Kumari, her tone as unsettling as her appearance. "My engineer's already on it. She's written up a list of what we need. I'll forward it to you. Please stand by to assist us."

Kumari left as abruptly as she entered. She was halfway down the hall when Commander Jameson heard the incoming message beep. He pulled his datapad out and groaned. The specifications. My. What a list. It kept going, and going, and going.

“This is outrageous!” he shouted after her. “I can’t let you have all of this. There won’t be anything left! You’re taking the reactor! What in the bloody hell does a garbage truck need with a reactor? And half of the hull’s plating! Three life support generators, the pool table, and every single artificially-intelligent device, because... because... you’re going to make drones out of them? You’re making a harvester out of my coffeemaker?”

With a frustrating lack of any semblance of a fuck to give, Kumari shrugged. “I’m not the engineer, but if she says we need it, then I assure you, we need it.”

“Let a man keep his coffeemaker, for the love of all that’s sacred!” pleaded Wiley.

The pink-haired menace smirked. “Jameson, I’m a salvager. Nothing is sacred to me. If you have any further misunderstanding of the words, ‘any and all actions necessary,’ I suggest re-reading your orders. Good day, Commander.” She tapped the commlink on her wrist, “McCormick, you got those harvesters online?”

A woman’s voice crackled back. “Ready to cannibalize, Captain.”

Panic struck Wiley’s heart. He backed away from the maniac and rushed toward the counter where his precious coffeemaker sat. She folded her arms across her chest and cooed, “Uh-uh now, Commander.” Wiley whimpered and skulked out of the room.

# The Big Game - 9

Felix always headed out a few hours before the big game. It often made the difference between a good day and a great day at the auctions. In years of playing this game, he learned that getting into the day's vibe, feeling out what people were talking about and their moods, meant connecting better with his buyers in the showroom. Ultimately, that translated into more coins in his account.

Brisk, dry air swept along the main strip, bustling with holographic displays and the shouts of vendors and hustlers. All of them remained outside of his calm, distant observation. He didn't participate. He just listened.

Cheating spouses. Overpriced drinks. The dice kept rolling snake-eyes. The home team lost in the Solsys Cup quarterfinals. The only cheerful topic on the tourists' lips was the half-price whores at the Deimos Divas Ranch. Felix steadied himself for a rough night.

He passed a group of Martians in cowboy hats, yapping about dune racing. Apparently, one of the competitors had been sideswiping other buggies and caused a multiple-fatality crash. Felix smiled, grateful for a little good news to brighten his mood. He walked to the tube station and tapped his destination in the panel.

Felix had a special hatred for dune racing, having spent the years from his teens onward in the one-horse-hell-hole called Mars. Everyone in the dome loved taking the buggies out to the dunes outside of the dome, slapping on a protective suit and helmet (complete with beer inputs and flatulence exhaust fans), getting drunk, racing, crashing, and racing some more. Mars wasn't just called the Red Planet for its high iron content.

As soon as possible, Felix got the hell off Mars. Finance and economics at the university, then onward to entrepreneurial life. Despite the comfort and stability that the corporate path offered someone with his talent, he knew he would never be satisfied with corporate servitude. No matter how posh the office may be, having to work under an idiot for it was a near certainty, one that Felix could not stomach.

So here he was, on a street that smelled of cheap cologne and stale cocktails, listening to sports, stocks and drama. Same shit, different planet. On Titan, the chatter was always about whatever Disnosoft trash the young and hopeless were into these days. Venus was worst of all. Their chit-chat consisted mostly of gossip and name-dropping. Anecdotes were the Venusians' currency of choice. Felix couldn't care less about who's fucking whom, figuratively or literally.

The capsule arrived. Felix wedged himself among the tired workers and drunk tourists. The doors closed and the capsule whooshed toward the smaller, grayer Deimonian dome. Felix Davenport closed his eyes, focused, and slid his game face on.

The doors slid open a block from the auction house. Snappy plexileather Oxfords beat a staccato rhythm on the pavement. Felix smiled at everyone, shaking hands as he breezed toward the auction house.

Upon arrival to his bay, Felix closed the door behind him. In privacy, he slid the face off for a moment and glared at Veronica, who was piloting a drone, setting up their inventory for display. Even though she hasn't pissed him off yet, he knew she would any minute now. He steadied himself and said, "Good. Almost done?"

"Yeah, we can open for business whenever you're ready."

"Thank you." Felix tapped the switch on the front wall. The metal wall rolled into the ceiling. Game on.

Veronica finished the last of the setup and thankfully disappeared. Buyers strolled in, meandering among the rebuilt ships and bins of parts. Felix mingled through the room, patting shoulders, shaking hands, and asking the obligatory questions about work, family, favorite corporations and sports teams. Among the small talk, Felix spotted a middle-aged woman and her teenage son inspecting a ship. He strode up and offered his hand. "Felix Davenport, and you are?"

"Denise Watkins. And this is my son, Zach." She gestured to the tall, sullen kid who stood next to her. Zach wore a FirstSol Securities futbol jersey. The Securities lost last week against the Dowbisco Fishsticks. Felix inwardly groaned. He wouldn't be earning the kid's goodwill by talking sports, so he just got straight to the point.

"Well, Ms. Watkins, Zach, It looks like you know what you like. This Neslubishi Quasar, excellent choice. Dual chambered drive means you can go twice as far before refueling. Its realspace AIs are the same as the ones Neslubishi uses on their interplanetary limos. And it's got soft-touch hitching cables—you won't feel a thing when you hop a ride down a jump trail. You want to take a look inside?" He tossed the keys to Zach.

Zach snatched the clattering plastic keys out of the air.

"I'm going to give you a bit to explore it. Let me know if I can answer any questions," Felix said. He turned to his other customers.

A gray-haired man in a shirt that Felix had once seen on a rodeo clown was ogling one of the short-range fighters they picked up in the latest Ali Xi-Yumatech skirmish.

"Ain't she a beaut?" Felix smiled, tracing his spindly fingers across the ship's hull. Felix reached for his datapad and pulled up some information about the battles the ship fought. "Not only

is she gorgeous, but she's got some bad ass weapons systems. This baby's seen more action than the Deimos' Divas champagne room." He handed the datapad to Cowboy to let him see for himself.

Despite all of the hustling, Felix couldn't exchange a single coin until the gavel swung on the auction block. Each company's representative had a set amount of time to sell as much as they could. If they still had more to sell, they could purchase additional time at the end of the auction.

Felix continued his socializing until his commlink chirped. The auction was about to start. Felix followed the last of his customers out and locked the bay doors. He set his commlink to notify him when the auctioneer before him started. There were three other outfits auctioning before him, and he was in no rush to get into another noisy environment anytime soon. The hallways between bays echoed only the sound of his own footsteps. The vines of anxiety that constricted Felix's mind unwound in the precious quiet.

In his moment of calm, Felix went over the inventory in his head, memorizing some of his merch's finer points. He walked down almost fifty meters of empty hallways until he reached a door that went outside. Felix tapped his datapad and looked at a map of the facility. From this door, he could cut across the outside lots and reach the auction hall.

The fresh evening air filled his lungs as he walked past other buildings full of cargo bays. Silence blanketed the lot, except for the hum of the haulbots rumbling their stacks of boxy metal cargo cabinets along an array of small rubber wheels to and from the auction hall, collecting and delivering purchases. There was only one other sound: hushed whispers in the shadows between two buildings.

Felix glanced in the direction of the sound and spotted three figures. He kept his pace snappy and his head pointed forward, but he tuned in to pick up as much as he could. He caught a few words, spoken in raspy, gravelly tones: "This one. Bid as much as it takes." The light from a datapad glinted from a four-tentacled hand. The headlight from a passing haulbot lit up the alley just long enough that Felix could see three figures. One was a woman with cropped blond hair and a red bomber jacket. Two yellow-green figures with bulbous bald heads stood over her, watching her with dewy black eyes. They had no necks to distinguish body from head, making their silhouette resemble a rotten cucumber. Just below their lips, on each side of their body, were two rows of flaps that shimmered when they spoke. Below the flaps, they wore white shiny robes that covered the rest of their bodies, clasped at the neck, and bearing a shiny green—or was that yellow?—badge on the chest. The haulbot passed, taking its light with it.

"Za'toon," Felix breathed. His heartbeat quickened as he found himself staring a bit too long. That seemed like a dangerous idea, so he walked in long strides to the auction hall, keeping his gaze solidly forward.

His mind raced. A Za'toon? In person? Felix had seen them on videos and photos, meeting

with CEOs and government officials, but in an auction house? On a casino planet? Why? Za'toon tech was light years more advanced than their own, but now they want cheap used rebuilds?

He tapped on his commlink. "McCormick, I need you to do me a favor. If you see a blond with short hair and a red bomber jacket, keep tabs on her. Tell me whatever you can about her."

"You want me to stalk a girl for you. Your wanker pills finally came in, did they?" cackled Veronica.

"I'm serious. Get me whatever you can. You're going to be in the audience. I'll knock an hour off what you owe me if you do."

"Two hours."

"Fine."

Felix hurried toward the auction house. E. Borden Rescue and Repair was third among eight salvage companies representing that day, and he had half an hour to sell a lot of things. Thankfully, his audience would still be fresh and likely wouldn't have impulse-bought their way into overspending by the time his chance rolled around. Felix sat his mug of tea on the podium and began rattling through the specs on the first item. He was running low on the mana he needed to maintain his mask of societal niceties.

Twenty-four sales later, the buzzer rang. He got through three fourths of the merchandise that he had brought to auction. Not a bad day's work, though it wasn't his best score. The unsold merch could go back on the Lizzie. Buying additional time wasn't going to get him any more coin; this crowd was tapped out. In the big game, the long time winners are the ones who know when to hold and when to fold.

When his time on stage was done, Felix retreated to the quiet of the bay. Once out of view of his customers, he dropped his mask and flopped in the nearest chair. Felix rubbed his temples. "I fucking hate people."

# Fear and Loathing in the Deimos Colony - 10

Veronica checked the time on her eye's input and tapped her foot with increasing impatience. Felix wasn't paying her to sit around any longer than she had to, so she wasn't about to. If the woman hadn't spoken up by the time Veronica bought her power cells, then she'd just blow Felix off. For someone who was so obsessed with every millicoin adding up for his own time, it'd be nice if he respected hers a little more. The auction had already moved on to the fifth seller, and no compatible power cells had shown up yet on the block. The blond hadn't bid on a single thing.

At the last of his stash, auctioneer number five described a cheap Ali Xi runabout with extra bunks and medium range capabilities—a Mom-mobile. Veronica snickered. Good luck selling a turd like that in this crowd. Then, a female voice rose among otherwise bored buyers.

“Twenty thousand Fija” the woman in the red bomber jacket said. A few people knocked the price higher, but she determinedly outbid them every time. She ultimately bid more than its book value—way too much for it. Veronica snorted. People who drive such atrocities deserve much worse than her scorn, but doling out a proper punishment meant jail time. She shot one last look to the woman and double-blinked her cybernetic eye, recording a dozen images of her face. What Felix wanted with her was beyond Veronica's comprehension. Even though she looked square enough to be his type, it wasn't for hooking up with her, because, to the best of her knowledge, Felix didn't use his dick.

Done with whatever the fuck that was about, Veronica dropped low-ball bids on a few lots of parts, got two, missed the rest. Finally, auctioneer number eight pulled the fuel cells she needed to the block, and Veronica was able to get her shopping done. Seventy-six hundred Fija for the first one—not bad. The second, more powerful cell brought out more aggressive bidders, and Veronica ended up spending over her budget. She transferred a few coins out of her own account to snag the winning bid. Not having to refuel as often was well worth the personal expense, despite how much Felix would bitch about it fucking up his ledgers. After the auctioneer wrapped up, she grabbed her satchel and stood.

Outside the warehouse, Veronica tapped on the display on her cybernetic arm, entering the message, “Your girlfriend bought a Neslubishi Renegade from L and L Salvage.” She attached a photo she took of the woman and sent the message. Done with work, Veronica headed to a tube station to attend to more important business.

Veronica tapped a button. Within minutes, a capsule wooshed along. Once inside, Veronica reached into her coat's inner pocket and retrieved a pill bottle. From it, she tapped a single pink hexagonal pill out, then tucked the bottle back in her pocket. She always swallowed her first dexi of the night. Ingesting it made the high smoother and last longer. Snorting dexi was an amateur move. Powder was best left for when you need to give your trip a bump. Do that right off the bat and you're in for a night of wasted drugs and perpetually re-dosing.

A few minutes after she dropped, Veronica felt the vanguard rushes of clarity and awareness. As her high flooded over her neurons, the capsule slid to a stop. Veronica stepped out of the capsule into the candy colored streets, the lights sparkling and wobbling, waving hello to her as they welcomed her to their world. Perhaps out here, Veronica could find some answers about her greenish-gold device.

Dozens of bars, humming with electric vibrance, lined the street. Veronica whirled to look at all of the signs, overwhelmed at the number of choices. "Why not all?" Veronica said, then picked a random one and skipped toward it.

Veronica quickly learned the lesson she usually forgot when she got high: ninety five percent of everything is crap, and that includes Deimonian tourist trap bars. The first one was an Irish joint full of douchebags weeping about their team's Solsys Cup loss. The second one was a wine bar that served cheese, crackers, and wine and that's it. The third bar was full of skinny bitches on spring break who insisted on dancing on the very bar where she was trying to drink. The fifth bar thought its absurd drink prices were merited because their artisanal bartender hand-crushed the ice with a mallet.

Bar number six, Jolly Roger's, couldn't be as bad as the rest. The theming was ridiculous, but the low key vibe was ideal. She grabbed a table in the corner under a black velvet painting of a clipper ship and placed her order.

The vodka and red juice she sipped mixed nicely with the dexis. It took the edge off and eased the jaw grinding. Her cybernetic eye scanned the red juice. Glowing blue characters flicked across her field of vision, all sorts of data about the drink's chemical composition, temperature, and manufacturer. However, she still didn't know what it was she was drinking, not really anyhow. What the hell flavor was this? Red? She'd heard someone call it "cherry flavored" once, but she couldn't summon to working memory what a cherry tasted like. Getting fresh fruit anywhere outside of Earth cost outrageously, and she had no desire to ever set foot on that planet again. Determined to make sense of this, Veronica shoved her mind down the best logical pathway she could forge: orange drink tastes like oranges, sort of. They're both sour and orange. But yellow, green, and blue drinks? What the hell were those supposed to be? Without a clue regarding this mystery, Veronica made a mental note to get a bottle of vodka and do some experimenting.

The green light flashed on her arm. She tapped a few buttons and a message scrolled across

the small display. “That’s all? A handful of photos? Did you get anything else on her? Why didn’t you stay for the whole auction? I thought you were going to be thorough, McCormick. This kind of shoddy work is unacceptable.” Ugh. Fucking Felix.

Veronica knocked back the rest of her drink. “For fuck’s sake,” she muttered, and grabbed her datapad. The auction's page was already up. She scanned the list of buyers, found the name next to the sad station-wagon, and sent it back to Felix. “Brianna Nestor, first time buyer, bought a Neslubishi Renegade from L and L Salvage at 21:45. Now piss off.”

She muted the sound on her arm. Off duty meant off duty, and Veronica took her off duty time seriously. She pulled a vaporizer pen out of her pocket and took a drag from it. The thick, sweet smoke wrapped around her brain, untethering it from the mundanities of the day, blowing them up, up, and away on curling clouds. She breathed deeply of the infiniteness of the space around her, every coordinate touching every other coordinate from here to the next universe over. A spot on the ceiling suddenly became quite interesting as Mobius strips folded into each other on the textured surface. Mobius strips had inspired theoretical mathematician Hans Biermann, to creating the wonder she spent most of her time seeking to better understand: the paradox drive.

A drop of drool slid from Veronica’s lip down her chin, and the ceiling continued to morph into a surface consisting of infinite interwoven Mobius strips. A portion above her head parted into a mouth. “The mission is to fail the mission,” the ceiling said, “Will you accept the mission? The barber only shaves those who don't shave themselves. Who shaves the barber? Is it true that this sentence is false?” It rattled off thousands of paradox statements, first with words, then with numbers. Tiny mouths formed inside other Mobius strips, chattering in a cacophony of clicks and hums.

A greenish-gold liquid poured out of the mouths and formed a floating ethereal replica of the eight-armed device she’d been obsessing over. It revolved in a loop around her head. The lips whispered, “Discrete, yet fluctuating. Fluctuating, yet discrete. It has a value, yet it does not have a value.” It danced in front of her eyes, then promptly melted and ran down the table, onto the floor. Veronica picked up her feet so the muck wouldn’t get on her shoes.

“The device... It's a paradox in physical form...” Veronica whispered as she reached out to catch a few drops of the liquid metal. Tiny replicas of the mysterious device formed from the droplets on her fingertips.

The mouth continued spouting paradoxes. “If you were in the net, could you program a rock so heavy you can’t lift it? Is a set of all sets a set itself?” Images streamed inside the mouth, fractals, Klein bottles, impossible triangles, snakes eating their tails, and self-drawing hands. Glowing lines spread from the droplets on her fingertips and danced through the air. They wove themselves into schematics, star charts, and maps.

The maps filled the room with squiggly lines denoting the pathways in space the paradox

drive followed as it attempted to solve these questions. The genie in the bottle—the artificial intelligence—once its computations spun up to sufficient levels of complexity, created paradoxes in space, tiny pockets of no-space that ships could hopscotch along. That blessed jump, a few thousand kilometers at a time in rapid-fire succession, could sling a ship thousands of kilometers in seconds. Veronica’s mind soared along the jump trails as the mouth in the Mobius-strip sky kept uttering the paradoxes which powered her along at heart-rushing speed.

Nothing incited her lusts so much as paradox made manifest. Any power source would do: nuclear power, solar winds, hamsters on treadmills. It didn’t matter. The beauty of the paradox drive was that it ran on computations. Fuel made it go, but mathematics did the magic. The space folded around her as the voice attempted to solve the paradoxes, following logical rabbit-holes as gashes ripped into the space around her. The void sucked in Veronica’s drink, the clouds of vapor, the table, the black velvet painting, the waitress’s face. She danced across the gaps, speeding along the trails of the glowing blue map. Veronica shivered with a full body bliss, knocking a salt shaker onto the floor.

The mouth started speaking with a different voice. “Do you want another?” it said. “Do you want another?” Veronica felt a hand touch her arm. She startled and sat upright. “Dooooooo youuuuu waaaaant aaaaanotherrrr?” Veronica’s eyes crossed, uncrossed, then focused on the pirate in front of her, who wore a low-cut ruffly blouse, corset, and eye patch. “Do you want another drink?”

“Huh, a pirate? What the hell?” Veronica rubbed her eyes. “Oh, yeah. Drink. Make it a double.”

The woman scowled, turned, and sashayed off. Her white petticoat flounced over fishnet-clad legs.

Veronica’s eyes were full of fog and her glass was full of nothing. She liked this shitty tourist trap bar—it was a place for a true romantic’s heart. She’d have to remember this place for the next time she needed to some serious engineering. What was the name? The Jolly Roger. Or was that the last one? No, this was the Jolly Roger. It had to be. There was nautical crap everywhere. Don’t these dumbfucks know anything about piracy? Pirates don’t have peg legs, patches and parrots, and they sure as shit didn’t wear ruffles and guyliner. They have fucked up ships, engage in human trafficking, theft, extortion, you name it. Pirates were the scum of the universe and not worthy of the consideration of good, moral people such as herself. Veronica’s face flushed. Rage swelled in her chest as she gawked at the swashbuckler coats and gold hoop earrings the staff wore.

The waitress returned with a tall glass of red liquid and set it before Veronica. Veronica wrinkled her nose at the waitress’s outfit. “Stupid,” said Veronica with words she thought were confined to her brain, but were leaking out of her mouth, accompanied by flying red spittle. “Fucking idiots. Pirates don’t look like that. They dress like shit and smell bad, too.” Veronica downed the

drink, ice cubes and all. “Y’all ain’t real pirates.” Veronica wagged her empty glass in the direction of a scrawny dude in a doublet and tricorn. “Real pirates would eat your eyes and piss in the sockets.” She lurched from her seat, flailed, and grabbed the waitress’s wrist to steady herself. The tray of drinks the waitress was carrying flipped out of her hands, its contents smashing and splashing all over her, the waitress, and the floor they both tumbled to. Veronica shoved the empty glass into the waitress’ now-free hands. “Get me another one of these, a cape codder or whatever the fuck fake pirates call this shit.”

As is true with most bars in the tourist dome, the Jolly Roger swiped your coin ring when you entered, an insurance against people like Veronica. The bouncer ran her ring against the smooth silver reader to close the transaction before he tossed Veronica out the door. Veronica staggered back up to the bouncer, cackling, “That cash register of yours. It’s hot. I’d fuck it. I’d fuck it so good, it’d beg me to do its deep reprogramming...and I do mean deep.” The bouncer picked up Veronica’s slight frame and threw it. Chunk. Force equals mass times acceleration right to the ground. Her cheek and shoulder took the brunt of the impact.

Long had Veronica been an expert at nights like this. She sat up from her heap and swallowed a pill salad of analgesics, blood stabilizers, vitamins, toxin absorbers and probiotics she kept on her at all time. She tapped a few more keys on her arm to set an alarm for late tomorrow afternoon. She crawled into a vacant spot in a five-star Deimos alley and plunged into desperately-needed sleep. That night, Veronica dreamed of flying.

# The Honor of Pirates - 11

After the *Lizzie* had started its course from Deimos, Bob left the bridge as soon as the captain gave him the nod. He donned his straw hat, grabbed his cooler, rolled out of his beanbag chair and lumbered off.

Bob's quarters glowed with the light of a thousand LEDs. Home sweet home. He reached for a pair of padded headphones, connected via a long spiral cord to a receiver. He took off his hat, pulled his long white locks, slightly thinner on top, into a ponytail. What was the bullshit generator feeding the masses today?

He stretched out on a green velvet beanbag, big enough to contain him three times over, and pulled a can of MD-40 from his cooler. He wiggled his yellowed toenails, tufted with white sprouts, into the green shag carpet. The rack of radio gear towered over him. Needles on meters danced around, coiled wires tangled in messes of microphones, directional antennae made from old beer cans, headphones and analyzers were stacked from ceiling to floor.

He balanced the can on the Hawaiian shirt that stretched across ample pot belly and started scanning. Bob paused when the radio hit the Yumatech network. That jingle meant it was almost time for "Round Table." Oh boy, the show he loved to hate the most. He hit the speed dial on his comm so that he could get into the show's call-in queue. The jingle finished jangling and right on its heels, Kevin Holliday was yammering on about how happy he was to be here and what a great day it is on Titan.

"Well of course it's a great day on Titan. EVERY day is a great day on Titan. They wouldn't broadcast it if it weren't a great day on Titan." Bob was sick of the host's attitude already.

After ten more minutes of staring into space while Holliday continued with the branding portion of the show, finally they got to the topic: "Today we're talking about the latest update to ZAFTA. Boemartin recently had to pay seven hundred thousand ducats to the Za'toon because one of their ships disabled a dandelion freighter in a skirmish. The shipment was delayed, ruining most of the crops. The incident prompted an emergency meeting between Za'toon and Terran officials, leading to new amendments to the Za'toon Alliance Free Trade Agreement. Do you think penalizing businesses for botched shipments is fair?"

Bob's eyes bulged in horror as he listened. He hated listening to this stuff, but he needed the reality check. Most people actually thought this. They all parroted the same line they're fed: Of course we need to support the Za'toon. They'd die without our dandelions. They're so advanced

and enlightened, imagine everything we could learn from them. The voices he'd heard a thousand times had never once asked the damn question Bob wanted answered: If the Za'toon are so advanced, why are they bothering with us?

Eight minutes in, Bob's connection remained in queue. Ten minutes, still no luck. Fourteen minutes in, a young man from Earth commented, "If it weren't for the Za'toon, we wouldn't have jobs. We'd be sponging forever off the government. Look at all the people getting lost, and the crime, and..."

Another call. Suzie from Catalina Beach, Venus. "It's brought a sense of independence and work ethic to people who otherwise have so very little. It's good for them."

Bob's call connected, Eris be praised.

"Hi, welcome to Round Table. What's your name and where are you from?"

"Bob, and I'm from... Deimos."

"Hi Bob from Deimos. How's it going on Deimos and what've you got to say?"

Bob took a deep breath, and started talking as fast as he could. "Humans doing work that machines can do? That's noble? I lived on Earth during the Golden Age, the UBI days, San Fran, after all the techies left and the Bay became cool again. People made art! Literature flourished, theatre, comics..." And there went the beep: call disconnected.

"Uh-uh-uh!" Kevin Holliday scolded, "Let's remember to keep our discussions civil and respectful."

In his frustration, Bob was about to chuck the MD-40 can across the room, but noticed there were still a few sips of boozy fizzy green goodness left in it. He gulped it back, checked to make sure it was empty by shaking it a few times into his mouth, then threw it across the room. He was twisting the tuning knob to look for another station when Felix leaned into the open door.

"Still beating Marx's dead horse, Wilshire?"

"Always, Davenport. You'll never know how good it could have been."

"Really?" Felix snorted. Did he practice that look of pure disdain in the mirror or something?

"Indeed. Did I ever tell you about New Arcadia?"

"That hippy dirt-pile in Oregon? Only a few hundred times."

"Clearly not enough. It's in Cali. Your stereotype of my home is unsurprising, considering your upbringing, fed on Boemartin—Fauxmartin—News Network. That's what they feed you on red, red Mars, huh?"

“Don’t make assumptions.” Felix narrowed his eyes.

“Well, if it weren’t for New Arcadia, I wouldn’t have two PhD’s...”

“Useless PhD’s...”

“Shut it. Did you, ever, in this capitalist utopia, enjoy privacy, comfort, and peace?”

“You mean before or after I met McCormick?”

“Come on, man. A collective works, but you have to make it work. We had the right pool of skills to get the bots we needed to do everything but wipe our asses.”

“But you still got arrested. Your utopia failed you.” The hard lines in Felix’s face softened with a rare touch of sympathy. “An undefended island of prosperity is a fragile being whose best defense is to stay hidden. That’s not sustainable. Corporates found New Arcadia all the same, and stepped in with more lawyers, money and guns than you. It’s basic economics, Wilshire. If you need a lesson, I’m happy to let you hire me to teach you.”

“I understand completely why I’m here. I don’t want New Arcadia to pay for my crimes. We have one good thing in this Eris-forsaken system and I’m not about to wreck it. Self-exile is a small price to pay for the safety of one of the few homes left for the free.”

“You aren’t free when you’re beholden to anyone else.” Felix shrugged. “It’s been fascinating, Wilshire, but not really. If you’ll excuse me, I have real work to do, the kind that makes money.”

“Stop harshing my slack, man.” Bob turned back to his radio and settled himself in his beanbag chair. No more armchair pundits. Bob needed something less depressing than the tacit progression of the cattle to the meat market. He hit the button on his scanner to continue searching for signals and waved Felix out of his room.

Felix grabbed the wall to maintain his balance as a whirlwind pushed her way into Bob’s room. Hurricane Veronica, carrying something metallic and green in her arms, rushed to the center of the room and planted the object on the table. “Wilshire, I need your help. I found this stashed in some salvage, and man, it’s weird beyond words.”

“Where’d you get that?” Felix asked, eyeing the device.

“Right next to the stick you keep up your ass.” snipped Veronica.

“Wait, you looked where...?” Felix scowled. “Seriously. Where?”

Veronica sighed. “I found it inside the gamma focuser I... appropriated... from the cargo bay. What the fuck, right?” Veronica pulled one of the metal rods out, and pointed it at Bob as she spoke. “I’m keeping this one for study. Tell me what you figure out.”

Bob leaned back in his beanbag chair, rolling his eyes. He put the exact amount of energy he wanted to into Veronica's new fetish: none. "It's a bong. Now, you stop harshing my slack, too."

Veronica persisted. "I wouldn't ask if I weren't stumped myself. I promise, I'm not screwing with you this time. This thing is giving me the weirdest readings I've ever seen, and I know my meters aren't broken. Nothing about it makes any sense. Please? Take a look?"

Bob grunted and walked to the table. He picked up the object to hand back to Veronica, but it nearly flew out of his hands as Bob overestimated the amount of force needed to lift it. Bob furrowed his brow and set it back down gingerly. He blinked. The numbers didn't add up. It was a gorgeous greenish-gold color, a metal he'd never seen before, with an elegant symmetrical shape, like an exotic flower.

"Fine, give me a few hours. I'm chilling out first. Now both of you, out, and take your bad vibes with you." Later, though. He had a radio needing his attention. Those airwaves weren't going to listen to themselves.

Heaving a sigh of relief as the door slid shut behind them, Bob rolled back over in his beanbag chair and tapped on his datapad. He scanned the bands, skipping past the usual array of talk shows by UFO experts and new-age space cults. Two thirds of the way down the fifty millimeter band, the scanner stopped. Bob sat up straight and looked at the display. It had never stopped on this frequency before. The sweet sound of vocals, full of hungry passion, poured from the speakers.

The rawness and the realness of the vocals wrapped a blanket of joy around Bob's soul. The song was pure, untouched by the tuning and processing that perfected, yet destroyed. The deep, throaty female voice sang of melancholy, yearning, bliss, and all of those other topics Disnosoft deemed unfit for their brand. Her vocals soared to heights that made him hunger for every note. The guitar wailed around her in a duet of sorrowful joy. The bass and drums thumped alongside them, a heartbeat that grounded the music deep in Bob's core. A flood of well-being washed over him, cleansing the last of the bile of his crew mates' presence. They chased away the Round Table and his disgust with humankind. These beautiful sounds renewed his reverence for the human spirit.

Bob snapped himself out of his reverie with a quickness. It might be months, or years, before he'd hear such music again. He rushed to set his radio to record the songs he would cherish for many years. He had so few left.

For forty seven soul-quenching minutes, Bob drifted along with song after song, each unique, each unlike anything he had ever heard on corporate radio. He'd gotten so lost in the rapture that the jamming signal, for the briefest of moments, sounded like a drumbeat in the song.

Bob choked on his MD-40, spluttering it out all over his beard and belly. "No!" he cried,

jumping from his beanbag chair. “Nononononono!”

Though he begged passionately, nothing heard his cry. A set of seven tones blared along with the words, “Disnosoft Copyright Violation” in a synthetic voice, relentlessly hammered over the sweet sounds of the crooning vocals and wailing guitar. That sound. Bob could never forget that sound, the same sound that he’d heard all of those years ago. Sweat formed on his receding hairline. Bob grabbed his datapad and aimed all of the ship’s antennae in the signal’s direction. Though he had only the slightest hope that the broadcaster would hear him, he had to try.

“SOS. SOS. SOS. Shut down immediately. Cease all transmissions. You are being jammed by Disnosoft. Hide. Destroy all evidence and hide. I repeat, destroy all evidence and hide.” Bob shouted into the mic. It would only be a matter of time until they found the source. He hauled bins and crates from his closet and connected the transmitter to power cells, power cells to amps, amps to noise filters, then plugged the whole thing into the ship’s antenna system. He broadcast across one frequency then another. The robot whined on. “Disnosoft copyright violation. Disnosoft copyright violation.”

The song heroically sang on, but the cruel voice drowned it out, repeating the hated message ever louder. They were closing in on the source. Desperate, Bob rushed to the maintenance panel down the hall and diverted power from the Lizzie’s engines to give his transmission a boost. Bob sent message after message until he had no idea what else to do. At that point, he prayed.

He hadn’t finished the first petition to the cosmic cockroach, St. Gulik, when Veronica shrieked across his commlink. “Wilshire, what the fuck are you doing to my ship?”

“It’s important, dammit!” Bob roared back.

“Bullshit. You give my power back or I’ll...”

It didn’t matter. He knew all too well what that broadcaster faced if caught. “This takes priority, McCormick.” He muted his commlink and continued to sap as much power as he could.

The last thing Bob heard was a woman’s voice crying out over crashes and gunshots. “Stay free. Don’t let them stop the music. Radio Free Solsys forever!” All that remained was the white noise of a dead channel.

# Another Day, Another Ducat - 12

Julius Townsend popped a micro-dose dexi (a regular supply was issued to all Yumatech employees) and reached for his coffee. He had a long flight ahead, a mission to save a disabled research vessel belonging to Dr. Phyllis Hutchins, one of Yumatech's many exo-geologists that were spread across the space around Solsys. He stretched out in the triple-stacked bunk in his quarters.

The folks doing these missions were deserving of all his respect and loyalty. They would take their ships out for years at a time, often going off known jump trails into uncharted space. Inter-organize treaties agreed to not destroy research ships, but it did happen. Managers considered wasting human resources to be bad business. Good researchers were hard to come by, and shareholders would much rather you bribe than bury them.

But the treaty never mentioned anything about harassment. Dr. Hutchins had been out fourteen months and was on her way back when the bastards went after her. A precise shot to the fuel cells made them too unstable to use outside of realspace mode. The paradox drive was offline until the ship got new fuel cells. "A respected scientist on her way home from work. Man that's low," he muttered while buckling up his boots.

Julius checked his watch. Half an hour until launch. He turned on the morning news and sipped his coffee. A woman and a man, looking sharp in black jackets, perfect hair, and shiny smiles, appeared on the screen. A Yumatech logo hovered behind them. "Good morning, Titan!" the perky woman said. "Time for A-Shift to rise and shine. We have some great stories for you today. We've got updates on the Titan-2 expansion, new discoveries in biological warfare, and the winners of the Yumatech employee talent contest. Stay tuned for updates on Solar Storm Matthew and more, but first, let us all rise for the company anthem and mission statement."

The pilot finished buckling his boot, rose, and folded both hands over his heart, as he had learned in orientation. "First in space," the voice said. "First to colonize." Julius repeated the words he had heard thousands of times before. "First Beyond." Julius synced the rest of the show onto his datapad to watch later. He loved that morning report. It reminded him that he was a part of something important.

His watch chimed, so he headed for the docking bay. The small, one-person jet had a single gray plexileather seat. He slid into it, logged in, and booted up. The ship, only four meters long, housed an older, single core paradox drive, which meant tedium save for the occasional stomach-

twisting paradox turbulence.

Julius' squad, seven other pilots in identical ships plus a support cruiser, rolled out. Hours across the expanse gave Julius a lot of time to think about his career options. "Management," he said. "Definitely management." Julius straightened the three bars on his Yumatech uniform. One he had earned for completing cadet training with honors, one for perfect attendance, and one for associate of the month. Of all his accolades, Julius prized that one the most. It entitled him to priority parking at company spaceports. If he completed his missions effectively, if he got his work done ahead of schedule, if he were clever in figuring out a new way to save money, he'd get noticed. If he were really impressive, he'd could get the job—and the cubicle, desk and all—that he always wanted.

Eighteen hours into his journey, Julius found Dr. Hutchins' vessel. However, a salvage ship surrounded by an Ali Xi escort was towing the vessel. Julius had trained for moments like this. He steadied his nerves with the creative visualization techniques he had studied. If he freed the vessel and retrieved their scientist, he would certainly be noticed by his superiors for his initiative and decision making ability. He would get high marks on his next review.

Julius opened his weapons screen and called to the fleet, "Aim for the tow cables. Free the vessel. Then prepare to haul her in." Usually he felt foolish every time he bitched, belched, or farted in his seat, but this time Julius was glad the in-flight voice recorder was on. He sounded decisive. Upper management would notice it, no doubt.

His port side flank grappled the vessel and drew it in. At that moment, his comm lit up. The message was from Dr. Hutchins, who looked quite well. "Yumatech, please stand down. I have accepted an offer from Ali Xi. My lawyers are en route now to finalize the contract. I repeat: please stand down."

Oh hell no! All this way only to be snubbed by some scientist—a contractor, not even a real employee! She had no blood on her hands, no loyalty, no stake! All of this, just to go home empty handed? Hell no. Yumatech sent him on a mission, and he would complete that mission. He would disable the Ali Xi vessel that Dr. Hutchins had boarded, just like they did to hers, and she'd have no choice but to return with him.

"You aren't taking my promotion from me!" He gripped the arm pads on his seat and dove in. It's what management would have wanted.

Julius trained his reticule on the nearest ship. In the moment of contemplating how good it would be to teach the would-be thwarters of his promotion a lesson, he lost his focus. Julius' shot harmlessly skimmed past the belly of the Ali Xi ship and flew off into the void.

Ali Xi answered swiftly and ruthlessly. A single burst of gleaming green light ripped open the hull above the his seat. Hinges squealed and glass shattered as the vacuum of space shredded the

ship. In the split second before the flash, his squad mates broke formation and headed for the nearest jump trail. The two who remained shared his fate: suspended in the momentary eternity of burning alive with nothing but the emptiness of space to ease the pain.

# The Dragon's Hoard - 13

Kandi sighed at the reports from last night's auction. Felix did as well as could be expected—nobody did well that night. After port fees, and refueling, the ship's coffers would have to go hungry for yet another week. The amount didn't put a dent in the two-million-Fija-deep abyss. As if she needed more fuel for her malaise, Felix was complaining that Veronica was throwing off the ship's ledgers by spending her own money on upgrades. Veronica was complaining that Bob was diverting ship's power so he can listen to the radio. Bob was complaining that the new pilot looked like a corporate spy and couldn't be trusted. At least Jana wasn't complaining, but she figured Jana would find something to gripe about soon enough. Kandi dropped her datapad on her desk, closed the door, and slumped against a wall. Week after week, year after year, never getting far enough ahead that she could stop running, just for a moment, and catch her breath. There was a tiredness deep inside her soul.

Television. Maybe something dim-witted, cartoons or the like, to ease her annoyance at everything. Kandi tapped her datapad and a video feed popped up on the wall. She tapped away, as screen upon screen of commercials flooded the monitor. After a moment of flipping channels, she found a documentary, and left it there for a moment.

On the screen were the newly elected Terran heads of states shaking hands with the Za'toon, the first alien species humanity had ever met. The documentary went on to state, "On that fateful day, humanity became one with the greater galactic civilization." Kandi choked on her coffee. Those ugly green bastards didn't give a damn about Terrans. Humans were their peasants, not their peers. Kandi's nostrils flared as she watched.

The Za'toon was sniveling to the cameras about joint efforts to explore space, searching for life together. Kandi rolled her eyes. It would've been nice if they had found something, because these aliens sucked as much as the scumbag humans running Solsys. Kandi's eyes were hurting from rolling so much. TV might not be the best choice for improving her mood. She shut it off and stood.

Some time in her stash would soothe her soul. She slipped her hand behind the racks of servers that lined the left side of her office and touched the sensor pad behind them. The racks slid aside, and the musty air from the darkness beyond filled her lungs. Kandi stepped into the Dragon's Hoard, The lights were soft and dim, just how she preferred it.

In the middle of the room sat a threadbare recliner surrounded by shelves containing Kandi's salvaged treasures. She ran into so many unique ships in her work that she just had to make

sure that the details others might not appreciate were kept from the smelter. Nowadays, the ships that rolled off assembly lines all looked alike. Every once in a while, though, she happened across the wreckage of a homebrew. When humans first started exploring Solsys, unique one-off ships were the only way people got off Earth. More than just feats of engineering, these ships had an aesthetic that went beyond what the focus groups had to say — they were built of the hopes of humanity’s space pioneers. The hand-welded steering wheel, the stenciled labels on the antique data panels, the 3D-printed trim on the molding; such details didn’t exist anymore. Kandi didn’t just salvage these treasures, she saved them.

Her prized possession sat alone from the rest of the stash. Concealed within the hollow stand of a weapons station, Kandi kept secreted away the one treasure that she’d sacrifice every other relic in this room to save. Reaching a hand between the panels on the station she slid out a thick, padded smugglers’ bag.

Kandi slid the device from the bag, whose walls were insulated with multiple layers of Faraday shielding. The bag was meant to protect sensitive data against scans, but people moving illegal goods adopted the technology to their own ends. Kandi kept a few around just in case.

The neon blue of her fingernail clashed against the gleaming rosy-gold metal. The octagon-shaped object was the perfect size to sit neatly in her lap, and could easily be used to sit her dinner on while watching TV, if she didn’t consider this concept heresy. The bulk of the object’s surface was covered with a glossy black disk, about thirty centimeters in diameter. The device’s edge, only two centimeters thick, contained a series of strange octagonal ports, the likes of which Kandi had never seen. The bottom of the device was a buttery smooth surface of the same rosy-gold metal, polished to a gleam.

She had no idea what it was, but when she had found it on that weird Ali Xi run, she knew it had to go in her stash. Besides, it was hidden in someone’s personal locker, so she figured nobody would miss it. Kandi needed a memento from that haul, the haul that would have netted her a spot on the Salvager’s Hall of Fame (if it existed), except that Ali Xi forbade to ever speak of this job. They might send their assassins, or worse, their lawyers after her. Kandi’s reflection in the shiny black disk smiled back at her. This was the piece she scored the day Lizzie got her claws.

When her commlink bracelet vibrated, Kandi had no idea how long she’d been lingering in the past. She snapped from her reverie, and responded with her usual all-business-with-a-smile tone, “Kumari here.”

“Wilshire here. I just picked up signal — hostile activity.”

“Thank you, Doctor. Be right there.”

Kandi slid the treasure back in the bag. She locked up the Dragon’s Hoard, grabbed her datapad and headed to the bridge. The new message alert chirped on Kandi’s datapad. Kandi

paused in the hallway to glance at it.

From: licensing@Neslubishi.com.

Kandi dropped the datapad and planted her forehead on the nearest wall. She ran her fingers through her blond and pink hair. In six weeks, those locks would be gone, shaved away again. Kandi squeezed her hands into fists, and pulled the hair. She gave herself five minutes to have her freak out. Then, she put it away. Kandi wiped her eyes, put on her captain's face, and strode toward the bridge. She shoved the datapad in her pocket; no need to feed the anxiety-monster further. Despite her mask, her clockwork heart still raced inside her chest.

Bob was lounging on the beanbag chair, his head tilted ninety degrees to the side. A headphone wedged between his ear and the cushion, tethered to his impressive array of radio gear. A burning tapered ear candle stuck into the other.

"Hey, Captain," he called, taking the flaming cone out of his ear and blowing it out. Bob buttoned up his Hawaiian shirt. He pulled the headphones off, untangling them from his mess of wispy white hair. "We got some big action going on around the block. Ali Xi just poached one of Yumatech's researchers. Some Yumatech yahoo didn't take that so well, so he started shooting." A few crumbs shook out of Bob's scraggly beard as he spoke.

Kandi snorted. If only they all would just shoot each other.

"Excellent, Wilshire. Send an alert to the crew. I want this ship ready to leave in fifteen minutes." She dropped into her chair, a red vinyl monstrosity with a sparkly orange flame motif that she picked up off a wrecked sports ship, someone's midlife crisis gone terribly wrong. Kandi closed her eyes, and her mind filled with flames.

# Rough Seas Ahead - 14

Jana lounged on the floral print couch in the crew lounge, her datapad glaring into her eyes with page after page of technical manuals.

"First, you connect to the harvester with the app on your Freenet datapad."

Jana looked at a second datapad, one modded with a large chunky module, and tapped on it.

"Connection refused," the second screen read.

Jana sighed and grabbed the first datapad and continued to read.

"If connection is refused, check to ensure the harvester is on."

Jana grabbed the bread-loaf sized bot and checked the switch. Yeah, it was on. She tried tapping again.

"Connection refused."

"If the connection is still refused, clear the device's cache and reboot it."

Jana grumbled and looked around on the device. How the hell does she clear the cache? She grabbed the manual and read some more.

"To clear the cache, open the panel on the side and navigate to the root directory."

"Root," Jana said as she opened the panel. "I wonder what this thing's roots are, anyhow?" She looked it over. It was cobbled together from a pile of scrap. On one side was a scratched up label that read "Biohazard." On the other was a panel with choices such as "espresso," and "latte." Did this fucking thing make coffee, too? Jana tapped at the buttons and peered around it, looking to see if there were a spout. And why would a harvester need to make coffee, anyhow? Maybe it was a multi-purpose bot. What else did it do besides make coffee?

"How's learning about that harvester coming?" Captain Kumari's voice called through the speaker in the lounge.

"Ack!" Jana yelped, almost dropping her datapad. "Shit, Captain... " Oh yeah, she was supposed to be figuring out the harvester. She dropped her arms to her sides. "Not well, actually... I'm sorry. I could really use some help with it. Do we have any stuff I can practice with these harvester bots on? I'd like to spend the time we have on autopilot doing something productive." In truth, they looked like a hell of a lot of fun to play with, and Jana was bored.

“Ahh, taking initiative, Broussard. Good, good.” The captain's voice was sunshine across the airwaves. “Report to Davenport in the cargo bay. He won't mind babysitting you for a bit. I'll let him know you're coming.”

Jana raised an eyebrow. Babysitting?

Her new plexicone-soled shoes squeaked against the clean floors of the finished forward end of the *Lizzie*, then softly thumped on the metal grates across the cargo hold. Felix was waiting on the other side of the catwalks.

As soon as Jana approached, Felix planted a datapad in her hands. “You want to learn to fly the harvester drones? First, you must learn precision. The more careful you are, the less you damage, the less McCormick has to fix, the more profit we make. Harvesting cargo means flawless spatial logistics coupled with the ability to translate that to fine motor control. Are you capable of that?”

Jana's brain scrambled to process all of that. “Um, yes, hello, Mr. Davenport. Nice to meet you. I would like that very much. Yes, I mean, yes, I can do that.”

“Good.” Felix tapped on the datapad in Jana's hands, and a control interface filled the screen.

Jana glanced over the controls and grimaced. “Sorry, it's going to take me a moment. I'm not at all familiar with this. I can't even connect up with one. Nothing like the controls the sims use.”

“Of course not,” Felix said. “Salvage bots are all hack jobs. Corporations won't touch the industry.”

“Really? You'd think that they would want to sell them and...”

“The market colludes. All the tech corporates agreed that salvage was bad for business, so while they can't get the tech banned outright, they all agreed not to manufacture anything that can be used for salvage.”

Jana tilted her head. “That doesn't make sense.”

“Sure it does. When you harvest and repair, you cut into their bottom line while boosting your own. They aren't going to be able to sell you a new ship if someone found one in space, fixed it up, and sells it. It's one of the few games left in which an average citizen can still make a decent living. Entrepreneurs are headaches for them, competition that they can't easily eradicate. So they erode us away, instead.”

“Wow... I had no idea.”

“Of course you didn't,” huffed Felix. “Nobody does. They don't advertise it, but they all play this game. And the best part is, they're all hypocrites about it. They contract salvagers to do

dirty work for them, but they won't put us on official payrolls. And the coin is always exchanged under the table."

"Why don't they just..." Jana said before Felix cut her off.

"I'm not here to be your econ 101 professor. Do you want to learn to fly these harvesters or not?"

"Oh yes, sorry, of course. I just..."

"Of course you were. Now, please observe the cargo bay. I need all of those boxes stored as efficiently as possible."

Jana gazed upon the dozens of crates spread across the massive floor. Around the perimeter of the room were stacks of cargo twenty meters high, head-spinning arrays of interlocking crates and capsules. She slid her thumbs across the touchpads on the controller and the harvester whirred through the air. It hovered over a medium-sized crate and slid down three slender claws—one to grasp it, two to stabilize it. With a click, the claws grabbed the crate and raised it high above the floor. Jana maneuvered the crate to an appropriately large spot and lowered it. Easy.

Felix's nostrils flared. "No, no. That placement gives the crate over a hundred cubic centimeters of wasted space. Unacceptable."

"But you have tons of space in here!"

"Broussard, if you do not know what unacceptable means, I can give you a moment to look it up."

Jana fumed and grabbed her datapad. The Yoga cops might not roam the *Lizzie*, but Jana knew she'd have to meditate a lot or she'd end up strangling Felix with the harvester's claws. The hours dragged by, but by the end of them, she'd stacked most of the cargo, leaving only a few stray odds and ends. "Well, I'm just going to get the rest of these into a miscellaney bin, and get back to my..."

"Sorry, Broussard, no, you now need to learn the hummingbird drones." Felix took Jana's datapad, tapped on it and returned it to her with staggering array of numbers and bin locations on it. Jana's face fell. Her brain hurt. How much longer until she could get back to her pilot's chair, and why did she ever think this was a good idea in the first place? She groaned. Felix hovered over her with crossed arms. She was seasick in an ocean of numbers and parts.

Then the floor fell out under her. The ship vibrated violently. Jana flung out her arms to keep her balance as the *Lizzie* lurched a second time. Felix grabbed Jana's shoulders and shoved her out of the way of toppling cargo crates. Stunned, Jana hauled herself to her feet. The ship flailed again, and Felix grabbed an overhead beam to keep his balance.

“I’ve got to go!” Jana screamed. “Thanks for the lesson. We’ll do it again, like, never, bye!” She dashed toward the door. She knew that feeling, after having it drilled into her head—and stomach—repeatedly in school: Paradox turbulence. She had to get to her chair before it tore the ship apart.

When she got to the bridge, Captain Kumari was in the pilot’s chair, her right hand steering unsteadily while her left fumbled uselessly against the pad underneath it. “Broussard!” the captain shouted, “You’re here, good. Earn your keep.” She pulled the visor off her head and hopped up. Jana snatched it, slid it over her eyes, and dropped into the seat.

The visor filled her vision with patterns which changed along with her anticipation of their motion. They swelled into bubbles and crinkled into tight knots. If she could sense the changes before they happened, she could adjust the ship’s motion to counter them and smooth out the ride. Jana stretched out her mind, letting the data from the chair’s sensors flow into her. The Lizzie became an extension of her own body. The turbulence hammered her muscles. Sweat poured. Her heart rate leaped. And then, Jana became a single consciousness with the ship. The born and the built melded.

Jana flowed into the chaos, wrapping mental tendrils around it. She dragged her nerve endings along the edges of the mathematics and felt the bumps and twists of the landscapes in paradox’s home turf. Inside this realm of pure logic, when deciphering paradoxes, the human has something unique to it that an AI has not yet found a way to reproduce. One of her teachers once likened this phenomenon to animals fleeing from earthquakes before they happened.

The neurons in Jana’s head danced in the primal ocean, reshaping the cacophony of the turbulence into an elegant harmony. Jana and the ship moved as one to counter the roaring waves. After a few heart-pounding minutes, the ripples began to dampen.

It took a moment for the calm to return to Jana’s twisting stomach. A few more adjustments for the last few bumps in the field before space normalized again. Though Jana loved the thrill of navigating paradox turbulence in concept, but in practice, it left her feeling wrecked and dizzy. The visor’s display panel showed a return to complete normalcy. She tugged the visor off her face, threw it aside, and looked toward a stable spot on the ceiling to make her head stop spinning.

Hanging halfway over her flame job chair, the captain grunted. “Are we good here, then? If so, I’m going to go lose my lunch now. Good flying, Broussard.” Captain Kumari stumbled out the door.

The room around her slowly came back into focus. The captain left her datapad on the console. She rolled to her feet, grabbed the datapad, and called after the captain. “Captain, you left your…” The door had already closed. Jana placed it down on the captain’s chair. As she did, she noticed an alert flash across the screen’s messenger. Though she wasn’t trying to look, she couldn’t

help but read the text that popped up. “Neslubishi reminder. Balance: 170,000 ducats. All fines due in full in 45 days. Any portion not paid will require you and your crew to work off your balance in service to Neslubishi.”

“170,000 ducats... fine labor,” breathed Jana, “Holy shit...” She guiltily averted her eyes from the tablet, and then looked right back at it. She reached for it to pull up the rest of the email, but her commlink lit up, bursting with irritation. “I’m sure you’ve noticed that the turbulence is over? Why aren’t you back here? You aren’t finished, and the work you did was hardly adequate...”

“Davenport,” Captain Kumari’s voice sweetly said over his. “No.” Felix went silent. The captain continued, “Take a break, you earned it. And did I leave my datapad on the bridge?”

Jana dropped the datapad on the captain’s chair and backed away from it. Does the captain have cameras watching her in here, too? “It’s on your chair, Captain,” she blurted out.

“Excellent. Good work, Broussard.”

# On Solid Ground - 15

Darla McCormick clutched the crucifix around her neck with trembling hands. She'd had it since her First Communion, and it always comforted her in uncertain times. Though her garden grew bright green with a lush selection of vegetables, on this day, her heart felt as heavy as the balmy October sky above.

Until seventy years ago, her great-grandparents used this land for dairy farming. Among her family keepsakes stashed away in her closet was a treasure box full of prize ribbons from their cheeses. Since her grandparents' day, though, the McCormicks had farmed produce, not dairy. The long summers, early springs, harvests that stretched all the way to the winter solstice made southern Manitoba a vegetable farmers' dream come true. The harsh heat and biting gnats ate away at the two miserable dairy cattle that the McCormicks retained for their own use, but they were hardly worth it. They spent most of their summers in an air-conditioned barn and cost a fortune in electric bills. Still, Darla insisted upon fresh milk, and she couldn't dishonor her ancestry by getting rid of all of the cattle.

Darla's strolled along a row of butter lettuce, bright green heads poking out of the rich black soil. She usually sold it as a luxury good to restaurants that catered to corporate ambassadors, but today she would indulge in it. The crunch of the leaves delighted her, but also left her feeling guilty. So few people could afford produce. Since the Za'toon arrived, most corporate farms switched from Nutrisoy to dandelions. Because so few people were still providing food to Earth, the McCormicks devoted the rest of their fields to Nutrisoy. If they could meet demand at an affordable price, Darla's conscience could rest easy about devoting a few rows to real vegetables.

She snipped a few leaves and placed them in a wide metal bowl. Darla moved on to the cherry tomatoes—little red bursts of flavor, sweet and juicy. Darla plucked five and added them to the bowl. Her daughter used to love cherry tomatoes. A faraway smile tugged at her lips at the way little Veronica called them "baby-matoes." Darla closed her eyes and got back to making her salad.

A good salad needed some punch to it. A batch of banana peppers had just turned ripe. Darla wove through rows and plucked a tender yellow one. She shook her head to banish her daughter's face from her mind, but the vision stubbornly lingered.

"She's dead," Mrs. McCormick said, as if that would make it truly real this time. The image dissipated, but the bitterness remained.

"Chase off the sorrow with a touch of sweetness," sang Darla, forcing a ray of light into her

bleak mood. She took her bowl to the perimeter of her garden and picked a handful of blueberries. How lovely they looked, pretty colorful pops throughout the salad. It was those little touches of sweetness that helped Darla keep the faith in uncertain times. There never seemed to be enough of it, though. She got scraps of affection from her husband, but it never soothed the loneliness. Ever since Tyler found his calling preaching for the Terra Firma Society, his free time became painfully scarce.

The fire in Tyler's voice when he had spoken of Terra Firma was unlike anything she had ever known from him. She could never forget the day he announced his new calling. He had went to work that morning a Catholic and came home something more. He was just a man that morning, but that afternoon, he had a divine mission.

The Terra Firma society existed beyond religion, though it existed within the roots of all religion. In the Islamic religion, they said:

*Indeed, the righteous will be among gardens and springs, Accepting what their Lord has given them. Indeed, they were before that doers of good. (Qu'ran, Adh-Dhariyet 51 15-16)*

Among the Jews and Christians, they said:

*So if you faithfully obey the commands I am giving you today—to love the LORD your God and to serve him with all your heart and with all your soul then I will send rain on your land in its season, both autumn and spring rains, so that you may gather in your grain, new wine and oil. I will provide grass in the fields for your cattle, and you will eat and be satisfied. (I Deuteronomy 11:13-17)*

Even Buddhists, with their attitude about transcending the world, got on board, and Pagans found no desire to leave the body of their Mother Gaia. Darla always loved how the Terra Firma society message spoke across the lines of dogmas and faiths. Earth is the Paradise of humans. It is your home. It is sacred. It is to be treasured. It is not to be left until God calls you home. How could anyone not believe in a message like that?

That was how her daughter died. It wasn't enough that Veronica had stolen enough coin from them to buy her a ticket to some off-world butcher, but she had to fill her body with Whore tech, willingly, defiantly, and gleefully. Veronica was the Whore's child now, dead to the Earth, dead to God, dead to her. Darla stared at the ceiling above her bed every night, wondering how she had

failed God so.

She started shaking again, so she reminded herself of her covenant, the covenant she shared with her brothers and sisters among the Landwalkers. She held the bowl at her side and squeezed her crucifix. With a soft voice she prayed, her eyes drifting up to heaven.

*“God’s people do not defile ourselves with the touch of the Great Whore.*

*We do not associate with emissaries of the Whore, nor consume of her unholy fruits.*

*The Earth is our home, where the Lord shall tend to His flock.”*

The prayer bought her enough peace that she could focus on her task of making a salad.

When humans had created the first colonies on other planets, Tyler said, “No way. This is my home. I’ll be damned if anyone but God is going to take me from it.” She couldn’t blame him. That was before the domes. The early colonies offered nothing that Darla ever could have ever lived with. Underground shafts and caverns, hollowed out under the planet’s surface and sealed with an airlock sounded like hell. Colonizers didn’t set foot on the surface at all; a space elevator took people directly from the ship into the underground. They lived like worms, never seeing the sun.

It had taken first contact for Tyler to realize what the Lord was leading him toward. He would be damned if anyone dared to tell him what he should be growing on his land. Pressures from the larger corporations and the Terran government to convert to dandelions had almost forced them out of business, but Tyler refused to change his crops. Darla’s lips tightened. She slid the bowl under a faucet to wash her harvest, then scrubbed the vegetables. “Thank you, God, for thy bounty, these perfect vegetables, as You created them. Amen.”

The Za’toon needed those dandelions for a life-saving medicine, but Darla and Tyler couldn’t bring themselves to care. Even though they were accused of cruelty, wasn’t going to abandon her own species. Humans needed to eat, too. Darla set the peppers on the chopping board, slicing them up while indignation ate at her. Eating a salad wasn’t something she should have to budget for.

Because food prices had soared to near-unattainable heights after first contact, the Lord led Darla to minister His love through the production of food. Nutrisoy filled the nutritional needs of humans with little other supplementation required. One could process Nutrisoy into delicious spongy tofu cubes, tasty stringy noodles, delectable chewy Vienna sausages, and delicate, yet hearty blocks of a slice-able meat-like substance. Mexicans made chorizo from it, Brits cooked it into a tasty blood pudding, and if you lucked upon a talented Memphis chef, you might find yourself being treated to the best hot and tangy Nutrisoy BBQ you have ever had the pleasure of eating. Here in

Saskatchewan, people preferred it in a cheese curd format, pan fried and served with a frosty MD-40. Darla detested Nutrisoy, both in taste and concept, even though her diet consisted primarily of it.

Despite the ease with which Nutrisoy grew, the cost was still nigh unbearable. The slightest drought could push prices high enough to drive many families into debt. Real vegetables, you got those for your birthday, and you were damn grateful for them. Darla knew quite well that this indulgence set her back two days' profits. Nutrisoy, a hardy, adaptable crop, could grow all over Earth and feed the planet dozens of times over, but the Za'toon demand for dandelions meant that any corporate farm who didn't convert to dandelions risked losing everything to a takeover. Most Nutrisoy was grown in stations hovering around the Solsys, instead. The shipping costs alone doubled its price.

Someone was profiting from it, though. The Za'toon didn't just pay those corporations in coin. They paid them in something far more precious: dome generators. As a result, few corporates refused anything the Za'toon asked for. "Whore-tainted filth," fumed Darla as she took her salad to her kitchen.

She opened the refrigerator, retrieved her bottle of ranch dressing made from the milk of the two cows in her barn. Darla usually saved it for holidays, but today was nothing special. It was only the anniversary of her daughter's death.

Darla sat at her dining table with her salad, folded a napkin in her lap, and said another prayer. "Lord, watch over my children, Charles, Conner, and Valerie. Keep them safe here on the Eden You have given to us. Keep them far from the Great Whore, keep their bodies pure from her chips and implants. Keep them safe from Za'toon, spacewalkers, and all emissaries of the Whore. In Your name, I pray. Amen."

The ghosts of this day haunted her, this time taking the shape of the face of her teenage daughter on the day she died. Veronica's wavy brown hair framed her cheerful face. "It's all my fault," she gasped, realizing it as if for the first—and for the millionth—time. If she hadn't bought her daughter that motorcycle, Veronica never would have died. Darla only wanted to make her happy. Veronica had always been so absorbed in her tinkering. She didn't have any friends, didn't join any clubs or teams, and failed all of her classes. She didn't know how to help her, but when Veronica begged her for a motorcycle, she thought her daughter might have found something to help her to be a normal young woman.

That motorcycle was Veronica's first love. She spent all of her free hours with it, tinkering with it, modifying it, taking it apart and putting it together again. Whether she was reading, doing homework or playing video games, you couldn't get her off of her bike. She'd plant herself on it as soon as she got home from school, motor humming beneath her all evening. Though it wasn't quite the result she'd hoped for, at least Veronica seemed happy.

Then came that fateful day. The truck that came out of nowhere and threw Veronica from her bike. It sheared off her right arm, right at the elbow. From there, the depression came hard and fast, casting her into deep misery. Veronica could no longer ride her bike or work on her projects. There was no engineering career in her future. After the accident, Veronica rarely came out of her room. She could no longer pursue her dreams of an engineering career. She quit school, and stopped eating dinner with the family. Darla tried to help her daughter see that the Lord still had a place for her, but Veronica refused to see beyond her own arm.

Darla pierced her fork through the lettuce's flesh. A decade ago, her daughter made a rare appearance at the dinner table, holding a datapad full of pornographic images. "I can get a cybernetic arm," she said. "I can get my arm back. I can have my life back." Though Darla prayed as hard as she could, and even got their priest to talk some sense into her, the wanton child, in her selfish blasphemy, hassled her relentlessly. She begged to allow the Whore into her body.

Later that week, Veronica ran away in the middle of the night. She came back eight days later, dead. Darla stabbed her salad. A baby-matocoe bled on the tines that skewered it.

When Veronica returned, she met Tyler's shotgun at the door. To this greeting, Veronica twisted down all of those hellish metal fingers but one, waving a gesture of defiance. "I can finally live, now that I'm dead. Praise the Whore!" It still rang in her ears, the last words her daughter ever said. What a bitch. Darla McCormick said it, loud, "I'm glad Veronica McCormick is dead." She looked to the heavens and laughed, her face as bright as the Saskatchewan sun. When the last of her salad was gone, her tears rained down into the empty metal bowl.

# Doubling Down - 16

Storm clouds gathered around Felix's head as he walked toward the cargo bay. He'd better not find Veronica in there. In fact, he'd better not find a single thing out of place after he spent painstaking hours sorting, stacking, and tagging everything. What little good will toward other humans he had left vanished shortly after he caught a whiff of Bob's underarms as they passed in the hall earlier.

Felix sighed, relieved to see that nobody had touched his work, meaning nobody needed to feel the business end of his pistol today. He hated filling out paperwork after shooting a transgressor. With a contented smile, he admired the Lizzie's harvest, and his handiwork at setting everything in such a sublime array in the cargo bay that they were able to take on thirteen percent more cargo than if an amateur had arranged it. Tranquility washed over Felix as he reveled in the beauty of efficient organization. Every time he admired his work, he wished humans could be as neat.

With a few hours left until the Lizzie was back at Deimos, Felix planned to enjoy his quiet time. He closed the doors to the cargo bay, and headed back to his quarters, whispering a prayer on the way that none of his crew mates would be foolish enough to trespass. Once in the serenity of his quarters, he poured a glass of Ionian rum, tuned in to some down-tempo beats, and reached for a comic. Felix settled into his recliner in his reading nook near the window.

He didn't have any new old comics to read, so he selected a well-worn favorite. This comic followed the adorable story of three ducklings and their deliriously rich uncle. That smooth old duck swam in a vault full of gold coins. It captured Felix's fancy every time. Despite gold being as valuable as moon rock these days, he still appreciated what it represented. Every time Felix read this comic, he regretted that swimming in coins was an anachronism; modern coins exist only as data in a file. He relished the concept of real money, the kind you could rub between your fingers and kiss with your lips. Money, like cargo crates, was so easily quantifiable, so elegant in its perfection, so unlike the unpredictable humans he had to bother with to get it. Still, the comic bothered him. Felix couldn't grasp why with all that cash, the uncle didn't hire a nanny to keep up with the ducklings so that he could spend more time on business.

"Maybe those ducklings will at least learn some good habits from the old guy." Felix smiled as he traced the paper delicately. He made digital copies of all of the comics he had the good fortune to find, but when Felix wanted to read, he always reached for the hard copies. Felix wasn't reading these stories again and again for new laughs or thrills; the feel of the paper delighted his fingers, the scent of the old ink tickled his nose. Just like physical money, these comics in their

physical form represented for him something more than just the concept held within.

Chantelle Grisham-Davenport, Felix's mother, gave him the first of his collection, and set him on a lifelong love of reading. She found the comic in the archives of the University of Seattle, where she taught anthropology during Felix's boyhood years. It bore a copyright mark, so mom was obligated by law to drop it in a recycling furnace or pay heavy royalties to Disnosoft, sums that few outside of corporate entities could afford. Instead, she smuggled it home. She'd tried to interest her son in her studies, but dry academic research had bored him. But comics led him to ask all sorts of questions about culture that his mother happily answered. She'd bring comics home whenever she could smuggle them away and always prefaced each one with a history lesson before she let him read it.

Felix smiled at his mother's clever way to she helped his younger self expand his mind beyond his single-focused obsession with business. He'd sit through hours of lectures for a single new comic. Stories of superheroes, villains, epic quests, and action, these comics held so much more appeal and joy than the usual crap that Disnosoft shat out. Beyond that, Felix felt as if he held hidden secrets from forbidden tomes, stories nobody knew. It gave him a smug satisfaction. The pettiness of ego stroking couldn't overshadow the true value of these comics to Felix. Their authenticity was heartwarming, written in a style so much more unbound by the demands of focus groups and marketing gurus. Yet, miraculously, these still must have made money, despite the lack of rigor to which they held their business model. The paradox at play amused Felix as he turned the pages.

Then after the Za'toon arrived, the Boemartin subsidiary where his father worked, announced they would be converting all of their Earth-based facilities to dandelion fields, and moving to Mars and away from Mom's access to comics. Felix was on the brink of adolescence when his parents bought their three-bedroom ranch on Mars and sold their suburban Seattle condo.

Felix stared across the vastness of the cargo bay, lost in reflection. If he didn't have his comics, he likely would have ended up ruining his life at his new home. For most fourteen year old guys, moving to Mars would have been awesome news. Mars is a great place to raise kids, everyone said, with plenty of places to go out and play—even outside the dome! Yeah, plenty of wide open spaces to kill yourself with drag racing. "Darwinism in action," Felix remembered thinking every time he heard of an accident out in the fields. Fools with no regard for their own life. Felix wrinkled his nose.

Within the dome, Felix liked Mars even less. The survival rate of fuckwits was much higher inside. If you took the harshness of Mercury and none of the efficiency, the tackiness of Deimos and none of the fun, the blandness of Dione and none of the education, and the snobbishness of Venus and none of the excellent cuisine, mashed them all in a colony, and added a hearty degree of corporate militarism and bolo ties to go around, you'd get Mars.

Comics were the one way Felix could escape the stupidity of life on Mars. He smiled at the cartoon ducks and said, “You guys made much better friends.” Felix's commlink chirped. The Lizzie had docked. Time to get ready.

Shower, brush teeth, shave, and a splash of cologne. White shirt, blue tie, cuff-links, gray pinstripe pants, and the moissanite coin ring. Socks, shoes, watch, and sunglasses.

Meditate. Breathe out the stress. Breathe in the confidence. Breathe out the distraction. Breathe in the profits. Breathe out the disdain and scorn. Breathe in charm and eloquence. Breathe out the annoyance. Breathe in the scent of all those coins you're going to make. Mask on. Felix was ready for tonight's game.

As usual, Felix took his pre-game walk through the colony, breathing air thick with stale cigar smoke and cheap booze. Felix learned about all sorts of marital psychodramas, mostly about how whores don't count when it comes to cheating. He snorted. Felix would gladly discuss any number of tawdry topics with his clients, but he drew the line at interpersonal relationships. Felix turned his attention to his datapad for the latest sports scores from teams whose names meant nothing to him but a means to profit.

As he approached the auction house, Felix paused, then diverted his path to cut the back of the lot, the same path he took last time.

Silence. Then footsteps. He caught a glimpse of greenish gold metal out of the corner of his eye. He stole a quick look in that direction, but saw nothing. The space between the buildings was too dimly lit. He kept his eyes forward and continued toward his destination.

A moment later, a man with a cowboy hat and a massive mustache walked out of the alley and headed off, back turned to Felix. Felix studied the pattern on his flannel shirt, the color of his cowboy boots, and the shape of his absurdly large hat. What he didn't do, though, is show any indication of slowing or even moving his head. He pulled open the door to the auction house and walked in.

The auction house bustled with activity from the usual crowd in their ill-fitted suits and gaudy jewelry. Felix put on his best smile and started shaking hands. “Now this baby right here,” Felix said to a woman in a business suit, “Comfort and speed. Your team's got a meeting on Titan, but you're currently on Dione? This ship has a 730 gigawatt realspace drive, giving you big boosts in speed for short range travel. Now in this, you also have a quad processor paradox drive that maxes out at a big 190 zenos—here to Venus in as little as twelve hours.” He flipped through images on his datapad, showing her shots of the interior. “The interior! You're going to love the interior! We have real wood veneer over every surface, and heated plexileather seats.” The red-suited business woman was gawking at the photos, eating his sales pitch up, when Felix caught a reflection on a window, just out of the corner of his left eye.

His eyes darted toward reflection. Same flannel shirt, same ugly hat, same stupid mustache.

“Mr. Davenport?” asked the woman, peering in the direction where Felix’s attention had strayed.

Felix snapped back into his cheery mask, “Ah, my apologies, Ms. Franklin. Anyhow, as I was saying, real plexileather seats, and just look at the graceful lines in the interior. Class and comfort. Would you care to see the spec sheet?”

Felix handed a datapad for her to examine. He stepped away from his client and whispered into his commlink, “McCormick.”

Veronica’s voice crackled back through the commlink. “Felix Davenport! Don’t tell me. You found a personality for sale, and you want me to bid on it for you. I’d happily do it, but I don’t think even a toaster would want to integrate with your neural net. It’d take one look at you and say, ‘Hell no, I ain’t going back to the Embarrassing-Humans-At-Chess days.’”

Her crassness was nothing more than a stench to endure when dealing with Veronica. Felix had no time for her nonsense. “I’ll pay you. Come observe someone at the auction house for me. Same as last time. Take photos.”

“Oh yeah, cloak and dagger shit. I like that, you know. Secret Agent McCormick on duty.”

“McCormick, are you drunk?”

“Ohhh,” She sang, “Maybe a bit.”

“Take a stabilizer. I need you to be subtle.”

“What? I just bought another cape codder. This is going to cost you extra.”

“How about me not telling the captain that you’re interrupting ship business with your idiocy? Is that compensation enough for you?”

“But this isn’t ship business, Davenport,” retorted Veronica as he heard the gurgle of her slamming back another drink. “This is your business, and I am doing my business, or I will be just as soon as this chick gets out of the shitter.” Veronica’s voice raised a number of decibels. “What the fuck are you doing in there? Giving birth? Hurry up!” Felix winced.

“McCormick,” Felix said. “The captain will want it to be ship business once she hears what I’m on to. So sober up and get down here.”

“FINALLY!” shouted Veronica at the invisible recipient of her raging. “Yeah, Davenport. Gimme half an hour. I have a big deposit I need to make at the turd bank. Don’t worry, I got it.”

“Good. Hurry up.” Click. Felix rubbed his temples. Fucking Veronica.

E. Borden Rescue and Repair was eleventh out of twelve on the auction lineup. Veronica showed up seven minutes later than she promised. Much to Felix's surprise, she looked like she her head was mostly screwed on straight.

The second seller had already sold half of his inventory. Mustache hadn't looked up once from his datapad. Each auctioneer came and went, but Mustache stayed silent. What interest did the Za'toon have in the auctions—twice, now? Why go through humans? Why buy ships that their tech is light years beyond? The less sense the entire situation made, the louder Felix's instincts screamed at him.

As a boy, Felix had often speculated on how wonderful it would be to meet and talk to Za'toon, to share music, language, cuisine, and art with beings who evolved in a wholly different way, and have a wholly different experience of life. Felix, filled with wonder and hope, had watched the Za'toon address the people of Earth. Those speeches of hope, optimism and progress made Felix proud to be human and excited to be alive at this amazing time in history. Those news stories lasted for a few months and stopped right around the time the last of the Earth-based corporations had converted their lands to dandelions.

Ten of the auctioneers came and went without a hint of interest from Mustache. It was Felix's turn at the podium. He had almost made it through his entire stock when he flicked on the screen a photo of a Yumatech Starwing 500. It was a common fighter, often used in inter-corporate skirmishes. He almost didn't bother wasting his precious auction time with this one. They rarely fetched decent prices, and the two that came up before his both went for under 10,000 Fija.

Mustache sprung into action. Though his Starwing wasn't nearly in as good of condition as the previous two that sold, Mustache pushed the price well past the 10,000 Fija mark. A few cowboys, full of bravado and beer, tried bluffing him to see if he'd keep going. He did. Eventually, the cow-bros got bored and gave up. When Felix swung the gavel down, the final price was a staggering 28,000 Fija—unheard of for this model. For a moment, Felix beamed in pride...

Until he realized that he couldn't sell it. But Felix couldn't deal with that now without raising questions. Hesitantly, Felix called, "Sold," after nobody else topped Mustache's bid. He glanced at Veronica, who was lost in a heavy focus on his target.

Mustache bid on nothing else, as Felix expected. Once Felix sold the last of his wares, he looked into the audience again. Mustache had disappeared.

As soon as the last auctioneer called her final bids, Felix contacted Veronica. "Did you get that?"

"Affirmative," crackled her voice back through his commlink.

"Take over the booth paperwork for me. And whatever you do, if the guy who bought the

Starwing comes up, waste as much of his time as possible. You should excel at this.”

“Yeah, yeah. But hurry with whatever you’re doing. I need my down time. My job is stressful. What *are* you doing, Davenport?”

“I’ve got to call the captain.”

Felix tapped on his commlink, and whispered, “Captain, we can not sell the Starwing? Take it out of my cut, whatever, but we must keep that ship. I’ll explain it all later.”

“Are you sure about this?” Captain Kumari said, “What’s up with it?”

“I don’t know. But the Za’toon are collecting Terran ships, and they want that one. Something’s up with it. You know how you always tell us to look for the opportunities and trust our instincts? This one’s pinging all of mine, Captain.”

“Why in the hell would a Za’toon want Terran tech? They’re decades beyond...” The captain stopped, then giggled. “Oh!” she squealed, a piercing ray of sunshine in his auditory nerves. “The Starwing. Yes, sorry, I TOTALLY forgot to tell you! It’s been quarantined. We found some human remains on the ship and had them tested, and wouldn’t ya know it! Traces of Iobola!” I can’t let it go until it’s been cleared by the Terran Disease Control. Can’t mess with the TDC, am I right? You know how awful bureaucrats can be, yeah?”

Felix smiled. “Thank you, Captain.”

# The Seeds - 17

The vastness of space held many secrets, the bulk of which remained hidden in their corners of the universe. Space was full of treasures never to be found, stories never to be read, and songs never to be sung. Countless planets spent their existences in solitude. Like a fetal bird who never cracked its shell, many planets have lived and died without anyone knowing their potential. A star would take one last gasp as it supernovaed, swallowing a civilization's every artifact, book, drive and disk in its dying breaths.

Entire cultures disappeared all the time. The loss weighed on Nadya Amestra's heart. She peered into the telescope mounted next to the dome on 2015-RR245, or Alexandria Prime, as those who live there call it. Through the lens, Nadya observed the telltale ripples of energy emanating from a faraway star. Those ripples, formed from the star burning the last of its stable energy, sounded its death knell. Though she was just now seeing the star's eminent death, she mourned its loss, for it'd burned out hundreds of years prior. She wondered if there were civilizations near it, and if a single one of their books survived. Nadya had no way to know for certain, but she wept all the same.

She turned from the telescope, pushed her unruly white hair from her face, and looked at the acolytes who stood before her. Nadya addressed the Society's newest initiates. "Our datarunners just brought me a lead on a cache of treasure, slated for destruction. I need to get it before it burns. I may be gone a while. In the meantime, prepare another batch of preservation capsules."

"What about our current launch, my lady?" asked Katzia Vulpez. Her fellow acolytes nodded along, silently asking the same question.

"Proceed on schedule. I cannot guarantee my success on this mission, so we must keep our current work going." She folded her arms inside the generous sleeves of her robes.

Mattais Xeng, a former Yumatech engineer who had once called himself Matthew Liu, joined the Society of Alexandria to bring his technical skills to the cause. He nodded at the priestess and stepped to the control panel. He and his fellow acolytes gazed with wonder-filled eyes from their observatory to the launch platform above the uppermost hatch in the dome. It filled with a hazy blue glow from which twelve glittering streams of light spread across the velvet sky. Mattais fueled up the miniature engines and assured Nadya that this batch would fly farther than any prior launches. The Alexandrians designed these modules to gravitate toward any ship they could hitch a ride on, and detach and continue on should the ship turn back toward Solsys. They included AIs to assist in

ensuring maximum range for their precious cargo.

“How much do you think was lost in the purges, Lady Amestra?” Katzia asked.

“A lot, a terrible, awful lot. More than I care to mourn for right now,” replied Nadya in a soft voice. “But we focus on what we can do for Alexandria. We preserve.”

“Forever shall Her fires burn,” Mattais said.

The shimmering blue trails faded into the onyx sky.

# A Girl's Best Friend - 18

The Starwing looked stupid with the fake quarantine stickers that Felix had stuck all over the hull. What the hell was so important in there that required Felix to keep interrupting her important self-care time? She grabbed the spanner off her hip and started tearing the ship apart. Veronica yanked panels and coverings, ripped the stuffing out of seats, and brute-forced her way into the computer systems. It was a boring, shitty Yumatech ship that some corporate dumbfuck died in. She repaired it, she sold it, and expected to get paid for it. Veronica dug until she pulled every panel off and scanned every device for anything that looked strange to her. She sighed and threw her hands up.

“Fuck this. Fuck Davenport and his bullshit. I’m done.”

Veronica had almost escaped the cargo bay when a sweet voice rang through the speakers. “McCormick, if Davenport is betting on it, I’m betting on it. I only bought us a day, maybe two, max. Keep looking.”

Veronica jumped. Dammit, Captain. Don't do that.

“Captain, there’s nothing there!”

“Fine. Take a break. But keep looking. Davenport doesn’t bullshit when it comes to money,” the disembodied voice rang through the cargo bay, “And if he’s betting his own cut against it...”

“Yeah yeah, Davenport’s a genius who knows more than everyone else. I get it. I’ll get back to it after I go reset my brain.”

“Right-o. Thanks.”

Veronica eyed the ship. Without knowing what she was looking for, she had no idea how to look for it. Veronica set her toolbox down and headed to her workstation. She was sick of this stupid game of Felix’s. There were better things she could be doing. The greenish-gold puzzle still taunted her. She longed to stretch her mind around new avenues of exploration. Veronica picked up the slender rod, sliding metallic and fleshy fingertips over it. Her cybernetic inputs only returned the same fluctuating values, but the sensations from her human hand caused her to shiver with delight.

Veronica planted herself at her workbench and got to it. She dug out a set of clips and attached them to the inputs on the rod’s port. No matter how many tests she ran, all she got was a mess of incomprehensible data. Frustrated, she shoved herself away from the workstation and

stood.

The vibramotor array she had snagged from the cargo bay earlier caught her eye. Her lips curled into a wide grin. She yanked the panel off the back and pulled a few cables out. Wire cutters slid out of her left pinky fingernail and snipped the plastic ends off. Veronica clamped the alligator clips to the vibramotor's engine and channeled a small amount of charge into the rod.

The rod hummed, buzzing with energy that rose and fell randomly. Veronica's ice blue eye widened, and she squealed with delight. "You are exactly," cooed Veronica, "What my Kitty-Cat here needs."

Kitty-Cat cast a long shadow over Veronica's lab. Quiet and inert, Kitty-Cat's plexicone shoulders drooped as it conserved power while it recharged. Its luscious breasts hung limply from its slumped, delicately-curved chest. If this was all Kitty-Cat were, it wouldn't have worked out for them; the strong human resemblance that most sexbots boasted was nearly a deal-breaker for Veronica.

She slid a loving hand on Kitty-Cat's steel hip. At Veronica's touch, the bot purred, rolled its shoulders back, and straightened its spine. Veronica's eyes drifted lower. Veronica squeezed her legs together to contain the heat within. Down past the dip of its belly button, Kitty-Cat's love-goddess torso yielded to what really got Veronica's motor revving: cold, hard steel. Veronica traced her fingers along the line where the steel rivets pierced the plexicone, merging the tank tread base with fleshy curves. Just above the gear shafts, Veronica had welded a variety of ports, attachment points, and docking stations. With her human hand, Veronica locked the vibramotor array into place in the center of the bot's base. Her cybernetic hand was busy reaching nice and low on her own body. Veronica used her right hand exclusively for this task.

The metallic fingers unfastened the velcro on the cargo pants as they had done a thousand times before, and slid them down her slim hips. Metal fingertips dug lustily into her wet, eager flesh. Veronica looked up into Kitty-Cat's eyes and breathed heavily at her, holding the greenish gold device up so Kitty-Cat could see it.

"Where do you want this?" she murmured, "Where should I attach my newest find to my beloved Kitty-Cat?"

Kitty-Cat couldn't see it through those eyes, nor could it speak through that mouth. Its stuffed animal cat head, a patchy calico pattern in black, yellow and white had neither sensors nor speakers (all of that was in its torso). It didn't have a damn thing inside that head except for polyester stuffing. Still, the bot needed something. Veronica felt creepy fucking something without a head.

"Good morning, dearest. What are you doing?"

"Something wonderful," Veronica whispered. "Lean back for me, baby." She swooped a metal hand on the plexicone of Kitty-Cat's sculpted back and guided her lover downward, exposing the wires on its lower belly. "All the way back. Now close your eyes."

The head didn't have working eyes, but that didn't stop Veronica from enjoying her conversation. It helped her get in the mood. Veronica's hand slid out from her tighty whities and she licked her fingertips off. The hand plunged lustily into the tangle of wires that connected the tank treads to her lover's flesh. With gentle, yet insistent fingers, she twisted apart connections, pinching loose ends between her fingertips, looking for the best connectors for her lover's upgrade. Her human hand busied itself sorting through a mess of adapters, hoping to find one that would fit into the ports of whatever this weird device was. It was time to do some hands on research.

Veronica pulled the greenish-gold rod out of her pocket. She locked it in on the vibramotor array, then clipped the alligator clips to the rod's port. The other ends, Veronica connected to Kitty-Cat's main power bus. She turned on the hacked-together monstrosity. Kitty-Cat whirred to life. Its shoulders rolled back, and slender, pink-fingernail-tipped hands reached out for Veronica. "I missed you, my cutie."

Veronica smiled. "It's been too long, but tonight is ours. I got you something special. Fire it up, my sweet."

Kitty-Cat giggled and switched power on to the array. The flesh under Kitty-Cat's torso quivered. Veronica tilted her head, peering at her lover oddly. "What's it doing?"

"I don't know!" Kitty-Cat answered, "But it feels funny!" The sexbot's torso flailed uncontrollably, and the tank treads rolled back and forth, smacking into Veronica's toe. Veronica jumped back. The rod must be causing an error. She reached to pull it off, but after a moment, everything quieted. Kitty-Cat laughed. "It tickles!"

"Mmm, so you like it?" Veronica's worry melted and she kissed Kitty-Cat's furry yellow cheek. "Let's triple power to the array and increase frequency by, oh, let's start with two hundred percent."

There it went. Veronica clapped her hands together as the rod hummed with an enticing pulse. No malfunction stops Veronica McCormick, technosexual fuck goddess. Veronica yearned for the release only a robot's touch could give her.

Veronica leaned back and observed her handiwork. "Oh, baby, you're beautiful," breathed Veronica. She stripping her boots and cargo pants off and flung them onto a chair. Such pleasures awaited her—she could hardly wait. She hiked up her shirt, pulled up her bra, and climbed on top of the robot. Veronica gazed with a burning longing at the pulsing rod. "Fuck me, baby."

With a few clicks, the pistons and gears in the sexbot's base came to life with mighty

bucking force. Over and over, it thrust the shaft into Veronica's needing flesh. Salty sweat mixed with gear shaft lubricant, the heat of Veronica's pheromones danced in the ozone. The lovers embraced, born and built, breast to breast, as Veronica rode her way to bliss. The array of biometric sensors that came standard on sexbots felt Veronica's impending orgasm and cranked up the intensity of the vibramotor. Onward, upward, faster, harder, more, Veronica thrashed, pounding against Kitty-Cat's bucking hips, its pneumatic pistons hissing as they pushed her to ecstasy. Veronica's eye rolled and her flesh quivered, moving as one with her lover. Veronica threw her head back and howled. She dug her nails into Kitty-Cat's fuzzy head as she came all over the greenish gold rod.

Veronica curled up on Kitty-Cat's hips, and wrapped her arms around her lover's torso. Her body shivered with intense aftershocks. It didn't last. Like a sledgehammer to a plate of glass, the captain's voice rang across her commlink. "Crew to the lounge for a meeting. Ten minutes."

"Hell," Veronica groaned. She rolled off the tank tread base, detached the rod from the vibramotor, and walked toward the sink. Veronica pushed herself out of her groggy afterglow and forced herself to focus. Veronica pulled on her pants, holding them in place with one hand while looking at the rod in her hand. She tucked it in the back pocket of her cargoes, then reached to tug on her boots.

The captain called again, "Sorry. Make that five minutes."

"Captain Twatblock!" yelled Veronica. She hurriedly buckled her boots and rushed toward the door. She paused to blow a kiss to Kitty-Cat. "I'll be back soon, gorgeous. Keep your motors running nice and hot for me." Veronica clomped off down the hall, annoyed that she wasn't able to return the favor.

# Upping the Ante - 19

The ship's lounge sprawled around Kandi luxuriously. Its palm-tree-patterned carpet stretched to the wide arc of a bow window in the ship's fore, offering a glorious view of the stars. Kandi had eight minutes left to enjoy it before the meeting, but her commlink's incessant chirping kept her from doing so. Same address, over and over, unknown to her, but Kandi knew exactly who it was. Determined to get a minute of peace, she answered the call, channeling all of her frustration into a poison-laced sweetness.

“Hello-o-o!” she cooed into the commlink. “This is Captain Kandi of E. Borden Rescue and Repair. What can I do for you?”

“What you can do for me,” the voice growled, “Is give me my ship.”

“No can do, my friend,” answered Kandi brightly, “But we have tons more inventory coming in all the time. Let me tell you, I've got you covered, better than covered in fact. We're going on another run just as soon as we're wrapped up here. I can cut you a great deal on...”

“No deals!” snapped the man. “I need that ship.”

“Look, the TDC is still inspecting it. There's nothing I can do about it. I hate to make my customers unhappy, but my hands are tied. Iobola's nothing to sneeze at.” Kandi paused and laughed, “Well, you don't sneeze at all. Actually, it liquefies your internal organs and causes them to seep out of every orifice in your body until you explode. Two of my lovers died from it! Can you imagine, having to watch the person you just fucked go through that? Every day, bloody goop gooshing out the ears, eyes...”

“What the fuck, lady?!”

Dammit. That was an inspired flow he cut off.

“I know, right? What the fuck, indeed? So, now you see I can't let it go, not just because I'd be fined out of existence, but because I care about you. I don't want your innards spewing all over the place, either.” Kandi said in honeyed tones. “I'm getting the paperwork soon, so if you just leave me with your information I'll be happy to get back to you. I'll get this matter resolved just as soon as I can. My apologies. Thank you, good day.”

Kandi ended the call. She walked to the window and pressed her hands against the glass. The Starwing that sat on the wharf, sold yet unsold. “I must be nuts,” she muttered. Felix's keen eye for detail had netted them thousands of coins. His ability to pick out any flaw no matter how small

was invaluable in the salvage business, but a gut feeling was a lot to bet against. Staring into a 2-million-Fija deep abyss, though, tended to put Kandi in a gambling mood.

Kandi's anxiety did not make for good company, and right now, it refused to leave her alone. Kandi sighed and lifted the commlink to her wrist. "Sorry. Make that five minutes."

The crew trickled in, first Bob lumbering his way to his beanbag chair and dropping on it, then Felix, then Jana. Veronica rushed in last, almost tripping over the pants she was buckling up as she stumbled through the door. She paused to catch her breath, then hopped up onto the pool table to sit.

Kandi addressed the room, "Why I gathered you here..." She shrugged, "Actually, I don't know, but I trust Davenport would be happy to tell you."

Felix strode into the center of the lounge, his fingers laced together. "I picked up on something strange the last two auctions. I wasn't sure at first, but I've seen Za'toon, twice now, secretly getting people to buy ships for them. Both were first-time buyers—a mini-van and a basic Yumatech fighter. I checked the records; other people had auctioned these ships, too, before their purchases, but they didn't bid on them."

"What?!" howled Veronica as she hopped off the pool table. "This is what you interrupted my research session for?" She scowled at Felix, then turned to grab a cue stick of the wall.

"Yes, it is. While you're playing with your toys, some of us are observing the bigger pattern at work, McCormick," retorted Felix. "Anyhow, it gets weirder. The last person who bought a ship, presumably for the Za'toon, is missing."

"Waitwaitwait, Davenport," Kandi edged in, "Missing? You never mentioned this part."

Felix stepped to the view screen on the wall and tuned in to the Yumatech News Network. He swiped backward on the screen a few times, rolling the broadcast a few hours back in time. He folded his arms across his chest and hit "play" on the remote.

Fiona Balewa and Jose Doherty, the anchors of Yumatech News Network, spoke with a fervent urgency in their perfectly-practiced diction. The news segment flashed photo after photo of a pretty blonds woman with short hair, a perky face, and winning smile. The concerned hosts reminded the audience every two minutes the identity of the vanished collegiate: Brianna Nestor from Elysian Point, Venus, age 23.

"She was last seen on Deimos where she was vacationing with her friends. Her hope that you can help bring their little girl home," pleaded Fiona. The anchors flipped over to a slide-show display of Briana, starting with her as a little pigtailed girl, to an awkward tween in a softball uniform, a teenager in a fluffy pink prom dress, and finally a few more of her as an adult, mostly awful nightclub selfies.

“I don’t get it,” said Bob, “Why do I care about what she looked like as a little kid?”

“Because, Wilshire, it gets you right in the feels,” said Veronica as she squeaked the blue chalk cube over the cue stick. “Ratings. If they don’t pull your heartstrings, they don’t get ratings. Like if someone found little Jana here eviscerated in a shitty Mercury motel. The news wouldn’t care about bringing the killer to justice. They’d just smear Broussard’s mug all over the news and make you feel as if it were very important that she died. It’s not, unless you’re in the ratings business. They probably wouldn’t even bother mentioning the killer. Killers are usually not as cute as their victims.” She bounced the cue ball off the edge and sank a solid in a corner pocket. Veronica railed on gleefully as she eyed the table to line up her next shot. “Now, if Broussard were to go on a killing spree, that would be quite the different story. They’d want to talk all about how daddy didn’t wuv her enough and she didn’t get a pony for her tenth birthday, and she became a wittle loner with no fwiends. Oh, they would analyze at length what went wrong with wittle Jana’s wittle life that caused her wittle mind to snap. News is bullshit.”

Jana coughed. She sat up straight in her chair and glared at Veronica, “Excuse me. I’m right here.”

“I know.” Veronica smiled broadly. “Actually, now that I look at you again, you’re probably too ugly for the media to give a shit about.”

“McCormick,” said Kandi with a smile that meant all the business in the galaxy. “No.”

Veronica shut up and turned back to her pool game.

“It doesn’t matter!” snapped Felix. “She worked for the Za’toon, now she’s gone!”

Jana shrugged. “So? People go missing all the time. Deimos isn’t exactly the safest place in Solsys.”

Kandi paced. “Davenport, I appreciate your insight into this matter, but I feel as if this is very much not our concern. We will contact the buyer of the ship after this meeting, and...”

Felix threw his hands up in the air. “Captain! If there’s something valuable enough about that ship that the Za’toon are willing to—”

“I get you. Believe me, I do. If we weren’t talking about tangling with an alien civilization we barely know anything about, I might be more willing to explore this. But we have a lot of work to do.” The threat of fine labor bore down hard upon Kandi’s every thought. “In fact, I’m thinking of doubling down on our salvage efforts soon, really making this business grow.”

Jana inhaled sharply. Kandi squinted at her. What the hell was that about? Jana looked away. Kandi sighed.

“But if my hunch is correct, Captain...” Felix said, but Kandi’s attention had moved

elsewhere. Veronica bent over the pool table to make a shot. A glimmer of greenish gold stuck out of her back pocket. Kandi gasped and rushed up to the engineer. Without so much as a hello, she grabbed the item from Veronicas pocket. Veronica yelped, lost her balance, and landed tits first on the pool table.

“What the hell!” squeaked Veronica as she pushed herself up. She whipped around, her one pale blue eye wide with shock.

Kandi stared at Veronica with incredulous eyes. She held the rod in her hands, marveling at it. “McCormick! Where did you get this?”

“Captain... no...” Veronica stammered, reaching out to take the object from Kandi. “Please... may I have that back...?”

Felix stepped closer, leaning in to get a better look at the object. “That color...that green-gold...” he remarked, tapping his fingertips together.

Kandi glanced his way, but shifted her focus back to the strange device in her hands. “Do you know what this is? I’ve never seen another thing like it...” Kandi sighed happily over the device, tracing it with her fingertips.

Veronica trembled. “I don’t know what it is. I found it in a part from a recent harvest... but Captain, please...” Her voice dropped to a whisper of urgency. “Please, Kandi, trust me...”

Kandi looked again at the device. The sun rose upon Kandi’s newly-ruined world. She shuddered, then uttered a single word: “Eww.”

Kandi dropped the rod into Veronica’s outstretched hand, and rushed toward the restroom door. Many minutes later, Kandi emerged from the bathroom, shaking excess water from her hands. Her lips still hung in a flabbergasted gawk. Kandi straightened up, cleared her throat, and said to the crew, “As I was saying. We are going to return the ship to the owner in just a few hours, and I’m going to kindly explain to them that I’m terribly sorry for the misunderstanding.”

Felix protested. “Captain!”

“I wanted to buy us some time to discuss it, but I didn’t promise anything.”

Felix sighed.

“Davenport, we can’t,” Kandi replied, not unsympathetic. “I wish we could, but if this is as big as you say it is... I don’t want a target on our heads. I have a responsibility to my crew, my ship, and myself, and I wouldn’t be doing a very good job if my crew ends up dead.” Not to mention ends up enslaved by the Neslubishi corporation. She looked directly at Felix. “I know you’re onto something good here, and I know I’ve always preached ‘if you see the opportunity, grab it,’ but we don’t go about it foolishly. Opportunity is useless if you’re too dead to grasp it.”

Kandi let the miasma of seriousness linger for a minute before her sunshine smile chased it away. “Folks, we have just a few hours left. I want every person spending every spare minute they have searching it. Wilshire, set a fresh battery in the Starwing’s emergency beacon. Change the transmitter’s frequency and security tones to something obscure. McCormick, find a place where you can stash a hummingbird drone. After that, I need everything on this ship that looks like McCormick’s... err... device... brought to my office, washed and preferably bleached first. Dismissed.”

At those words, Veronica hung her head and shuffled to the door. After the rest of the crew departed the lounge, Kandi grimaced, looked at her hands, and jogged back to the bathroom. “Eww.”

# My Day in the Sun - 20

Octavia Wu spun around in front of the glass walls at the pharmacy, admiring the most beautiful dress she had ever owned. She smoothed the fabric out, and her fingers traced the pretty yellow dandelion print on the white ruffles. Pockets! Octavia loved the pockets on the dress the best. She didn't have any cute purses, nothing that would look nice enough to wear with such a fine dress, so she was grateful she could tuck her belongings in pockets. She stopped spinning long enough to fish out her Dowbisco Med-Cred card from one of those pockets. On feet clad in mud-caked slippers, the teenage girl walked into the Dowbisco Pillmart.

"Good morning, Ms. Wu!" said a man with a bulbous nose, leathery tanned skin, wispy gray hair, and a white lab coat over his frail frame. He stepped up to the counter, outlined by dozens of rows of dispensers.

"Good morning, Mr. Franco. My brother's ill and I need to get the same thing I got last time. I forgot the name of it. Can you look it up?"

The man's fingers tapped on a datapad. Mr. Franco frowned, "Again?"

"Yep. Stomach bug."

The elderly man closed his eyes. "You've been asking for this medicine a lot lately. He still hasn't gotten his shots?"

"Can't afford 'em. Spent all our extra medical creds this quarter when my ma broke her leg."

"Sorry to hear that." The old fellow tapped a few buttons on a panel. A pair of bottles swooshed down a thin tube and landed on the counter in front of her. "There you go, Ms. Wu."

"Lots of people skip 'em because they gotta hang on to their creds, you know." Octavia snorted. "Why do you still work here, anyhow? The pharmacy has a pill dispenser."

The old man sighed. "What else am I going to do? Jack into the net and rot away?"

"Oh." She tucked them in the pockets of her dress and shrugged awkwardly. "Have a nice day, Mr. Franco." Octavia quickly regained her chipper step. She backed to the door, waving a hand at the sadly smiling man.

She headed across the bridge toward her home in the Dowbisco housing complex. After a few blocks, Octavia climbed the steps up to her flat, and slid open the door. Her family's apartment

looked like every other apartment: the same calming beige plastic with white vinyl accents and mauve trim. The entire length of the hexagonal flat was about eight meters deep, with a shotgun-style layout. The front of the home housed a modest living room and kitchen combo. Worked cleverly into the slanted angles on the bottom sides of the room were built-in seating with hinged seats, allowing one to use the space underneath for storage. The overhead cabinets and entertainment systems followed the same space-conserving principles. Beyond the common room, a sliding door in the dividing wall set about five meters in led to the bedroom, likewise cramped spaces built with maximum spatial efficiency in mind. Instead of seating on the sides of the walkway, there were a pair of bunk beds. There was groaning from the other side of the bathroom door at the flat's far end.

“Feeling any better?” she called through the bathroom door.

“No,” said a pained voice from the other side.

“Ugh, sorry. I’m going to leave your meds outside the door. Heading out to the grocery. Make sure you drink some water, OK?”

The only response Octavia got was a grunt.

Octavia grabbed a glass of water from the sink and set it next to the door. She stepped out again. Her path took her once again, as it always did, near that cheerful yellow dandelion farm, where she had the best day of her life.

Two years ago, when she was thirteen, Octavia danced in that field, barefoot, with dandelions twisted into her hair. She spun in circles with bundles of flowers, tied with fluttering ribbons, in each hand. She skipped with a wicker basket on her arm, plucking dandelions, laughing as she inhaled their fragrance and filled her basket with them. She pulled the cottony white dandelion seed-heads and lifted them to her lips. With a puff from her lips, flurries of feathery seeds spiraled around her face.

Finally, they zoomed the camera in on her and she delivered her big line: “Za’toon dandelions for your healthy lifestyle! Naturally-harvested organic quality. Expect the best.” She then looked at the camera and said, “No autonym labor was used in production.”

Octavia feared she would get too nervous to say her line in the tricky language. She was sure she had mispronounced the words and had no idea what an autonym was, but the aliens with the cameras said she did a great job.

To top it all off, the Za’toon had let her keep the dress. She wasn’t sure how she got so lucky or what this weird day at work was all about, but they let her take the day off from her usual harvesting (which was nowhere near as much fun), and they gave her a bunch of bonus Kash to spend in the supermarket. No doubt, Dowbisco would fire her immediately if they caught her dancing in their crops, so she never got to experience the wonderful feeling of bare feet on dandelion

fields again. At least she got to do it once.

The westbound sun shone ruby rays into her eyes. Dowbiscourt closed an hour before curfew and time was running short. She had to hurry if she wanted to make sure her brother had something to eat that night.

# The Road Less Taken - 21

Jana just finished pulling off panels and tearing apart consoles on the Starwing. Despite the crew's best efforts, there was no way they could comb through every nook. Damn, how her parents would howl at seeing her in coveralls, grubby from head to toe, with nothing to show for it but gum wrappers and a used condom.

Jana stopped at her room to wash up. She slid on her crew jacket and checked out her reflection in the mirror. Dark gray and angular, with a banded collar and red accents, the coat was no frills and all business. She smiled at her reflection, loving how she looked in the jacket, and headed to the bridge. She had barely slid into the pilot's seat when the captain addressed her. "Broussard, tow the Starwing to the wharf and dock it. Then, set a course for Bamberga."

The captain was fiddling with her datapad. The captain sighed, tapped some more, and sighed some more. Jana frowned. The captain's silence bothered her far more than the usual hassling. Returning the silence, Jana got to work. She slid her visor on and towed the Starwing to the wharf. After securing it, Jana powered up the thrusters, and maneuvered the ship away from the moon. Once clear, Jana tapped a few buttons to engage autopilot until they reached the jump trail.

"Mars clear, en route to the asteroid belt, Captain. Permission to leave the bridge?" The weight of the captain's mood was unbearable.

The captain waved her off distractedly, which Jana interpreted as a "yes." She longed for a moment of normalcy in the weirdest week of her life. She ran back to her quarters and dug out her VR headset.

Jana slipped off her jacket. She hung it on the coat rack and smoothed it out so it wouldn't wrinkle. Though the rest of the crew had similar jackets, she never saw anyone wearing them. . . . Well, Bob did once use one to hold a plate of burritos as he took it out of the microwave. Despite the laughs Veronica threw at her while wearing her jacket, it was hers, she earned it, and she proudly wore it. Hopefully, Captain Kumari could figure out a way to pay those fines so she could continue wearing this jacket. Depressing. Yeah, these people were kind of dreadful and driving a salvage ship wasn't exactly high profile, but it was hers, and she was good at it. Jana wasn't ready to go back to not being good enough.

Jana gave up caring about what her parents would say, so she reached into her closet and grabbed a crate containing her console. She pulled the palm-sized handset out along with the chaos generator (a lava lamp surrounded by optical sensors) that was tethered to it. She plugged the lava

lamp in, and it glowed green, the same color as the Za'toon who gifted it, along with lots of other techno-toys to her father. How many Earthlings did he have to sell out for it? She snorted, then tapped a key on it. A small display lit up. The device booted up her favorite game, Starbase Seven.

The point of the game was simple: find new resources around the galaxy while defending your starbase. Jana usual strategy was to build a support fleet and she would pilot the head ship—a light, fast fighter that could dash in, rip shit up, then get the hell out.

Jana grabbed her goggles out of the crate. She slid the yellow-tinted lenses, mounted to a titanium frame that fitted around her temples like a tiara. With a racing heart and pounding nerves, Jana wove her fighter among blasts, mines and traps, slicing through the enemy's defenses. Her breath quickened as a horseshoe formation of enemies nearly trapped her, but with a daring dip under their defenses, Jana dodged their attack. She flipped the ship in a loop behind them and unloaded both guns right up their tailpipes. Through the maelstrom, Jana's mind washed with the serene bliss of all of her neurons dancing in harmony.

Jana had nearly fought her way through the whole enemy fleet when her commlink chirped. She sighed as she slipped out of her flow. She flipped the goggles up, reached in the cargo pocket on her left thigh, and pulled out the datapad. The captain had sent out this week's schedule. After their current run to Europa, the schedule has a run out to some dead space around the outer planets, then back around the block, up to Mercury and eventually back to Deimos again.

After coming down from her gaming rush, the reality of piloting felt far less interesting. The most excitement on her agenda would be another bout of her least favorite game, "don't hurl while navigating turbulence." It wasn't as thrilling as she had hoped, but at least she was flying.

A bit of grounding might help. She closed the schedule on her datapad and opened her messages. It just occurred to her that she hadn't been in contact with her family since she took this job. Sure enough, the message she knew would be there lay in wait.

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*To: Jana Broussard (spacerogue93@venusnet.ym)*

*cc: James Broussard (james@dandylions.biz)*

*From: Gabrielle Broussard (gbroussard@dowbisco.biz)*

*Subject: Forget anyone?*

*Message: Like us, your parents, your parents who miss you terribly. You ought to write more often.*

---

She paused, her fingers hovering over datapad. Time flies when everything is new.

Everything in her life changed all at once, and she didn't really stop to think about anything, save for riding the whirlwind that caught her. Back on Venus, she had grabbed her duffel bag, told Mom she had an interview, and hadn't seen her since.

Jana unlaced her boots and composed aloud—in song—what'd she'd say to her mother after a few days in the belly of the beast.

*“Hello Muddah, Hello Faddah,  
Here I am on the Lizzie Bordah’  
Crew is mad beyond all comprehension,  
And engage in acts I dare not mention.”*

With a snicker, she wiped that draft from her mind. A picture could tell the story better than all the words she could muster, so Jana grabbed her crew jacket and tied her unruly locks back with a scarf. She looked down at her cargo pants and shrugged. No need to change them. They wouldn't show up in the photo anyhow.

She headed to the crew lounge where the beautiful bow-shaped plate glass window afforded a heavenly view of the sparkling stars. Jana propped her datapad on waist-high table a few feet away and set its camera's timer to take a photo.

Strike a professional pose. Head high, shoulders rolled back. Wear a warm, but not overly large smile. Keep a relaxed, yet alert demeanor. She took a few dozen shots to be sure she had a good one. Jana scrolled through the photos, selected a nice one, cropped it and attached it to her email.

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*Message: Hi Mom, Hi Dad. Sorry for not keeping up. So much to learn and do. I got the job, as you can see! I'm piloting a private cruise vessel. We have a small crew, and everyone here's super nice. I have a pretty busy schedule, but I hope to see you soon. Love you.—Jana.*

*Attachments (type:photo): JanaGotHerWings.1*

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She hit send, thus fulfilling her dutiful daughter obligations.

Jana had just reached for the VR headset to return to the game she was hoping to spend a

few more hours playing when the datapad chimed. Jana groaned.

Mom wrote back:

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*Message: Jana! So good to hear from you. I am so glad you have time in your busy life for your mother. Kyle just got an internship at Dowbisco, working in acquisitions. Different department, so I don't get to see him every day like Elaine. At least your sister knows how to treat her mother.*

*Elaine just wrapped up the renovations on her latest boutique and is having a grand opening celebration this coming weekend. Your cousins from Dione are going to be visiting. If you're out this way, you should come.*

*Anyhow, I hope to see you soon. Don't forget me. I love you.*

---

Jana rolled her eyes. "I'm nostalgic for Mom's guilt trips. Unbelievable."

Her fingers flew across the surface of the datapad. She answered her mother, but took care to not feed her guilt trips.

---

*Message: I'm not sure I'm cool enough to hang with Elaine's crowd, but if I can, I'll stop by. We will be in the area soon. If I can sneak away for a few hours, I'd love to meet up for brunch. I'll stay in touch. Love you all.*

---

Hell no, she wasn't going to be attending her sister's party.

The commlink flashed with a message from the Captain: crew meeting, bridge, ten minutes. Any further appeasement to the parents would have to wait. Jana put up her gaming gear and headed to the bridge.

She was first there, but the rest of the crew filed in shortly. Once everyone had settled in, the Captain stood from her flame-job chair and spoke clearly and decisively.

"The thing about luck," said Captain Kumari, "Is that it most often happens when you're expecting it."

Bob tilted his head, squinting under the straw hat sitting across his brow. "Don't you mean when you're not expecting it?"

Kandi flashed a smile. "Oh no, Dr. Wilshire. I meant what I said. I read this article a million

or so years ago. There were these two groups some scientists studied. One group contained people who considered themselves lucky, and the other contained people who considered themselves unlucky. The scientists tracked their progress, and found the lucky people always did better, not because of some supernatural force—not necessarily, anyhow. They had better luck because they were expecting to be lucky. They were expecting opportunities, they were expecting to win, so they worked toward it. They made the reality they expected happen, and it was possible because they believed it to be true. That’s how I want every one of you to think. Everything is an opportunity if you look at it with the right eyes. Get the right eyes, my good crew. Find luck everywhere. The only other option is unthinkable.”

Jana shuddered. The grimness of that other option made her wonder—would the captain say anything? Should she say something? The captain's optimism was perplexing. If she were in the captain’s boots, she wouldn’t be able to put on anywhere near as good of an act.

“Davenport spotted Za’toon lurking about the auctions,” Captain Kumari said. “McCormick found a bizarro device, like nothing I’d seen before.”

“And I fucked it,” shouted Veronica who was slouching, wide-legged, in the corner. Pride rang through her voice.

Jana stared at Veronica, horrified. The captain continued on, not missing a beat. “But it wasn’t until yesterday when I put together the significance of it all. Davenport spotted the link—the metal on the device Veronica has is the same metal that the Za’toon wear. What we are holding, my friends, is Za’toon technology.”

The room sat in stunned silence.

“So, now I share Davenport's enthusiasm. I see that flicker of potential. I don’t know what it is yet, what it’s going to shape into, but maybe with a little luck, we could turn this into our opportunity. Our chance. Our freedom.” Captain Kumari planted her boot on an end table, and rolled her shoulders back, her gaze looking out, past the bow-shaped window into the sparkling depths beyond. Jana cringed as the captain mentioned “freedom.”

Bob perked up from his beanbag chair, leaning forward. Felix laced his fingers together, watching her carefully through his wire-rimmed glasses. Veronica stared off into space. Captain Kumari left the moment hanging in the air before pushing forward. “What I need before we can continue is an agreement. I wrote one up, something simple and to the point. I sent it you each a copy. I wanted to get it all in writing before we continue.” The captain paced around her chair. “We’re treading into the kind of territory where secrecy means a lot more than just getting slapped with fines or jail time. We need an agreement of trust among all who go forward with this, and a chance for all those who don’t want to pursue this to bow out.”

The captain wasn’t just talking about humans getting a hold of something that they shouldn’t

have—she flat out wanted to use it. That would likely piss off all of the Za'toon. Maybe she could get her father to loan her some. She hated that the captain was courting such a scary idea, but she knew what was on the other end of those fines. Her father subcontracted numerous fine-laborers for his dandelion transports. Dad would probably get her sprung from fine labor, but the rest of the crew was not so lucky. However, tangling with the Za'toon was a terrifying concept. Nobody knew much about them, but everyone had a healthy respect, and a bit of apprehension, about them.

“Captain,” Jana squeaked, her voice seizing up.

“Yes, Broussard?”

Jana fidgeted, looking for the right words to say this so that she didn't sound like an idiot. “I've always read that the Za'toon have a strict policy against sharing their technology with Terrans. They won't even let humans look inside the dome generators. Perhaps they have good reason. Maybe they're dangerous. What if we blew ourselves out of the sky tinkering with it?” Jana forced a smile, but it came out all awkward, hardly covering her worry with the cool logic that she hoped to convey.

“That's good thinking,” Captain Kumari said. She chuckled and patted Jana's shoulder. Jana squinted. Was she the target of that laughter? “You don't have to shiver like a kid in the principal's office. I expect my crew to pick flaws in anything we plan to do, so we don't do something boneheaded.” Jana smiled on, shuffling her feet at the Captain's gaze. Captain Kumari turned to the rest of the crew. “Broussard's right. We don't go about anything foolishly. We take every step of the way with care. Hence, the agreement in your hands—we start out on the right foot. Take some time to read it over. We reconvene in two hours.”

The rest of the crew left, except for Veronica who was still hunched in the corner of the room, making hideous gurgling sounds from behind her mop of greasy hair. Jana wandered the corridors while reading the document over and over. This document had all the touchstones of a formal business contract, but the Captain took care to ensure brevity. The document got to the point without much legal babble, thankfully. She could even read through to the end without getting mind-numbingly bored.

Everyone would get an equal share in the profits and other benefits earned through the technology. In exchange, everyone would agree to keep all intelligence regarding these parts between them, regardless of employment status with the company. All would agree to do their due diligence to the ends of learning about and utilizing the technology, and all would report any finds of alien tech. Breaking this agreement will lead to very bad things, the document said at the end, “but we don't really like to do bad things, so just be cool, all right?”

Her father would have a posse of lawyers examining this for every level of fraud and conspiracy. Jana had no lawyers at her disposal, nor did she need them. These folks lacked the

shadiness that the people her parents and siblings dealt with regularly had. Despite their flaws, she'd trust this crew further than any of those people.

The letter she sent to her mother gnawed at the back of her mind. Despite the annoying habit of not giving a damn what Jana wanted to do with her life, at least her parents were a known quantity. Jana sighed. The problem was, what she knew she'd be getting with them was nothing she wanted. The point of no turning back terrified her. However, the known wasn't doing her any favors. Jana put her finger to the datapad and signed the document. Then, she flipped the VR lenses down over her eyes again.

Jana had leveled up eight more times by the time her alarm went off. She put the headset down and headed to the lounge where the crew gathered. Captain Kumari entered last, clutching a large padded bag.

"As everyone here has agreed to our terms," said the captain, heading to the center of the room, "I will be the first to uphold them."

Captain Kumari withdrew from the bag... a mirror? A piece of art? A photo frame designed by someone with extravagant taste? Jana squinted, as if that would help her somehow better figure out what it was. Bob and Felix craned their necks likewise.

Veronica shot up from her slump, her cybernetic eye whirring on its socket to get a closer look. "Holy Mother of Outer Space... is that...?"

Captain Kumari explained. "Veronica, you remember the Lizzie's maiden voyage? That's where I got this. But I didn't know what it was, other than beautiful. But now, Davenport's keen eye told us what Ali Xi didn't. At first I thought the salvage we hauled in looked weird because it was an early prototype ship, because it was too blasted up to really tell what it was. No. That ship we brought in for Ali Xi was Za'toon."

Bob perked his head up, "Who the hell had the balls to destroy a Za'toon ship...?"

The captain shook her head, "I don't know, Wilshire. Pirates? Corporates hoping to make a grab for Za'toon tech? A Landwalker zealot on a suicide mission?" She shrugged, and ran her fingers over the device's surface. "My answer was 'not my concern.'" She drummed her fingernails on the greenish gold metal. "This, however, is my concern. I had no idea what it was when I grabbed it. I just like to find unique treasures for my collection. Apparently, I should have given it to McCormick much earlier."

Veronica cackled, "Yes. All devices must come to me." Veronica twitched, holding herself back from putting her greedy hands—and no doubt other parts of herself—all over the device.

The captain wrapped her arms around the device and glared at Veronica, continuing. "Of course, if I'd known that I was crossing the Za'toon back then, I would have asked for two stations

to cannibalize before that run.” the captain said and laid the device on a table. Veronica snatched it up and ran her hands of steel and flesh along the gleaming metal and void-black surface.

“Oh yes.” Veronica shivered. “This is doing it too. All the weirdness.”

The captain nodded, “So we’ve got two pieces, then.” Captain Kumari pressed her hands on the table and looked around with fire in her eyes. “I don’t know what that means for us yet, but if we’re smart, and I know we are, we will find it. We research every we can. If there’s something we can do with this, some way we can turn this into profit, who knows? Maybe we can get ahead far enough that we can outrun every motherfucker trying to fine us out of existence. Figure out all you can, and we’ll throw it on the table and see how the puzzle fits together.”

The captain eyed Veronica. “And behave yourself with it. Dismissed.”

# Down the Rabbit Hole - 22

Orange pekoe tea steamed from the ceramic mug on the table in Felix's reading nook. Blessed silence filled his quarters, allowing him all of the focus he needed to dig into the dealings of the Za'toon. Felix propped up both datapads and examined them simultaneously.

On his left, a slim datapad connected to the Yumatech nexus. If it had to do with data, Yumatech had its tentacles in it. Yumatech knew more than God and saw more than Santa Claus. Felix had a knack for seeing the secrets in the pattern, but he was just one man. Yumatech had billions of devices spread throughout Solsys, linked to billions of people maintaining a constant flow of information. It was always wise to tread carefully when using its network for anything he wanted to keep private.

On his right, a datapad, clunky with an added-on module that takes up half the back surface, connected to the Freenet. Felix had bought a homebrew Freenet module three years ago from one of Veronica's unsavory friends. They weren't easy to come by, and you sure as hell couldn't buy them on the Yumabay marketplace. Though they weren't technically illegal, Yumatech would be nothing but delighted if every such module and the hackers who built them disappeared. In their quest to minimize the reach of Freenet, Yumatech set up its devices to block "potentially harmful content"—Freenet nodes, that is—from its datapads. An unmodded datapad would forever stand on the other side of a locked door, fated to only see the destinations that Yumatech deemed fit. He didn't have much patience for seeing reality through a corporate's filter. Felix set up his Freenet node shortly after the Za'toon started pressuring Yumatech to scrub anti-Za'toon sentiment from their networks.

The origins of the Freenet were as mysterious as the people who created it. As far as anyone knew, somewhere in the middle of the 21st century, a cabal of techno-mystics built Freenet as an alternative to corporate networks. All the way back then, they knew that centralized networks meant tainted information. Freenet overcame the need for central servers with a series of nodes connected across Solsys, each hosted by an individual user in a peer-to-peer network. These nodes exchanged information when they came in proximity of one another, then copied themselves to other Freenet nodes, making an infinite number of backups. Freenet housed every type of online service imaginable. If someone was going to use it, someone built it. One could find a marketplace for any interest, innocent and otherwise. One could maintain a professional reputation without fear of some marketing firm buying your data and modifying your content to serve their interests. If one wanted to talk without fear of being eavesdropped on or act without being tracked, Freenet was the

place to be.

On his Freenet datapad, Felix scanned the text-based menus before him. Because Freenet's strength was in its portability, those who programmed for it took every pain to not waste bandwidth on fluff. Because of the minimalist interface, navigating Freenet took more savvy than browsing Yumatech's hand-holding preschool interface. You had to know what you were looking for and know how to find it. It also meant that you didn't have mighty corporate firewalls blocking out people with less than pure intentions. Freenet was neither a place for the faint of heart nor the foolish.

Felix dug through channels both obvious and obscure. He searched first on social media. He waded through chatter about every sort of topic, but found no mention of any strange tech, greenish gold metal or anything else related to the Za'toon components. Felix searched images, records, posts, articles, research papers, but found a whole lot of nothing. Terabytes upon terabytes, and not a single lead.

Dammit. He shoved the datapads aside and stood. Walk. Clear your head. You have no obligations until the next cargo load comes in from the Europa harvest. The captain said to learn all we can, but she didn't say anything about beating ourselves to death over it.

Felix headed to the lounge. Veronica was still slumped in the corner with a datapad on her lap. He leaned against the large bow window, his silent reverie interrupted only by the occasional raspy snore. Humanity has barely touched the stars, but this alien race? What have they seen? Not much, they claimed. A few planets with some rudimentary life forms on them, cute for adding to your social media profiles, tasty with BBQ sauce, but not much more useful than that. When the Za'toon had first arrived, they set up monitoring programs and deep space explorations with Terrans to find signs of other intelligent life, but every mission came back disappointingly empty handed.

"It's a damn shame," muttered Felix. At the cusp of adolescence, first contact filled him with dreams of exploration, meeting new life forms, and discovering their enlightened ways. In school, he learned of the many ways his own species had failed: endless war, bigotry, and poverty despite living in a time of great abundance and little labor. The idea that something more, something better, must lie beyond the dark veil of night, kept him from falling into an existential depression that would have turned his ambitious arrows inward.

Even if the Za'toon read his mind and devised the most distasteful entity they could, custom made for Felix Renard Davenport, they couldn't have disappointed him more. Once they had their dandelions, all pretense at cultural exchange evaporated. The Za'toon were just another player in the corporate games, doing everything they could to screw entrepreneurs. He counted his moral compunctions against doing anything that would annoy, irritate, or outright destroy them: Zero. He checked twice just to be sure. Nope, not a one.

Felix flopped on the couch in the lounge. He tapped on his commlink and the panel across the room sprang to life. Veronica continued to slouch in the corner. Enough work for the day. Felix grabbed a remote and flipped through channels. An irritating children's show with some obnoxiously bubbly host. No. A spaghetti-western flick. No. Flip, flip, flip. Nothing satisfied, except the flipping, which at least pleased his tired mind with new images every few seconds. He'd flipped through over fifty when he stopped short. The perpetual outrage machine, the network news, was on.

Once again, the most important thing to the billions of people who live across Solsys was Brianna Nestor, age 23. Her extremely concerned, neatly dressed parents raised the reward on their daughter's return. One million Fija, no questions asked.

"If Brianna is missing, who else?" Felix gasped. He leaped from the couch and darted out the door.

"Turn off the TV, dumbass," Veronica shouted after him. He didn't stop to acknowledge her.

Back in his quarters, Felix pulled up the sales logs on his datapad and searched for the Starwing's buyer. Horatio Evans from Mars. He scanned the databases, first on Freenet, then Yumatech's systems. There he found Horatio's Yumanet profile, and damn, was it appalling. He collected supplemental income and had no profession beyond that. No partners or kids, just dudes drinking and racing dune buggies. Felix groaned. Fucking Martians.

The muscles in Felix's eyes strained from all the rolling. Lots of photos of Horatio on his profile page racing his prize buggy. Horatio was wearing an oxygen helmet with a skull painted on it. Felix winced, his mind pulling up the unpleasant sound of them hooting out their rallying cries. Their hollering had always increased in intensity as their blood alcohol content rose.

"Excited monkeys making mouth noises." Felix sneered.

Felix's mind was getting numb when a jolt of horror sent him knocking over backwards in his chair. The horror was Horatio. He sat sprawled in the open air seat of his dune buggy, completely nude except for his skull helmet. Spread wide, his furry, manly glory was on full display. Horatio's legs were wrapped around his steering wheel, and his back was arched in a victorious poise.

After Felix bleached his mind clean, he swiped past that panel good and fast. His fingers flew across the screen of his unmodified datapad, searching through racing message boards. The forums held thousands of profiles, each as absurd as Horatio's. Felix massaged his temples and closed his eyes.

He tapped his commlink. "McCormick."

Veronica's voice rumbled lazily from his wrist. "You didn't turn the TV off, you dick."

Felix growled. More crap from Veronica. "I need you to send me the photos you took from

the auction, specifically of the mustachioed man who bought the Starwing.”

“Yeah? Well, I need you to come back here and turn off the TV.”

“Seriously, McCormick?” His crew-mate’s pettiness was un-fucking-believable.

“No. That’d require seeing you in person, and I’m not up for that kind of pain today. Sending photos now.”

“Thanks.” He snorted. Why did his only colleague with the ability to take covert photos have to attach the price tag of interacting with her to them?

He looked for the status bar to type the search command, to see if he couldn't find any more information about the man in the photos. Instead of the search command, the forum had an anthropomorphic oil can. It wore big white gloves and black work boots. It smiled, chipper and cheery, “What can I help you with?”

Felix curled his lip. He wanted a Freenet-style command line, not a fucking cartoon. Felix would have loved to have started on Freenet where they don’t put up with this kind of nonsense, but he didn’t suspect his naked Martian drag-racing friend to be of the intellectual caliber to find his way around there.

He glared at the oil can. The oil can grinned back at him with rosy cheeks. “Thinking about racing, huh? Radical! How about I register you an account? Just give me your email and address, and I’ll get you all set up. One easy step!”

“No,” Felix said flatly. He half lidded his eyes. “I’m looking for someone.”

“Connecting up with old friends, how lovely! I can help you with that.”

“Yes you can. Where do I upload a photo for you to compare against user profiles in your database?” Felix groaned. Was he really thirty three years old and talking to a stupid oil can?

The cartoon on his datapad beamed. “I’d be happy to, just as soon as you register for an account.”

Felix’s patience was running dangerously close to the red zone. “Why...in the hell... do I need an account?”

“This is a family friendly forum. We will not have that kind of language here. Please refrain from cursing or I’ll have to pre-emptively ban you.”

“Oh my fuc...”

“Nuh uh uh!” the machine chided. “Family friendly. Now, would you like to set up an account?”

Felix fumed. What about nude photos on dune buggies? Were those considered family friendly? “Fine,” he growled, and rattled off his address, “the\_bat@freenet.drk.”

“Oh ho ho,” the horror responded, “You do realize using the Freenet is dangerous to your data, personal security, and personality rating? We can’t have you logging in to any of our services with that. Try again with a Yumanet account please.”

Felix pulled on his face and moaned. “Fine,” he grumbled, “grayMagus77@houseofwizards.net.”

“Much better! I see you’re a sword and sorcery fan. Wonderful! Would you like me to also set you up with an account on our epic new fantasy game, ‘Elves and Earwigs?’”

“No!” Felix shouted, “I just want my account on this forum. That’s it. That’s all. Thank you.”

“Well, aren’t we a stick in the mud? Fine. I’ll get your account all set up. Just follow the link in your email and you’re done. Would you like me to send you additional help on removing that Freenet account and protecting yourself against the viruses you can get there?”

The vocal cords in Felix’s throat rumbled dangerously.

“Another time then!” The oil can smiled.

After a few more painful minutes, Felix’s datapad beeped, indicating a new message. He checked it, followed the link, and activated his account.

Felix logged in and eyed the oil can, triumph swelling in his breast. “Now, I am uploading the photo. Initiate an image-match search.”

The oil can opened its mouth and from it came the sad trombone sound. “Wah-wah-waaaaaah. Ohhh, no can do, grayMagus77. Advanced search functions are restricted to power users. You get power user status after 100 posts. And no cheating with a bunch of short, low effort posts, because we’ll know. Is there anything else I can do for you?”

“No,” hissed Felix through gritted teeth. The veins in his forehead bulged, precariously close to escaping the confines of his skin.

“Well then. I hope you enjoy the Mars Racing Network forums. I’ll be in the corner tray if you need me. Have a wonderful day!” The demon waved a four-fingered white gloved hand at him, then minimized. Under the table, where the camera on the Yumatech datapad couldn’t see, he waved a one-fingered salute back.

His white hot rage having cooled to a low simmer, Felix flipped the datapad off and laid it down. Oh, he’d do it, he’d do it just to spite that horrid oil can. He’d muck about with the rednecks for as long as he had to. He had come too far and suffered too long to give up now. If anyone could help him unravel this mystery, poor, stupid Horatio could. Perhaps this was Horatio’s chance to

finally be something more than useless.

For three torturous hours, Felix rubbed elbows with the Martians he hated the most. Grease-for-brains thrill seekers, wastes of guaranteed income coin. At least they tended to off themselves young, so that kept their drain on the system to a minimum. Though it hurt his brain, Felix emulated the posting style and technical terms he read in other posts—the online equivalent of schmoozing with buyers at auctions. Arguing alone with one fool ate up a good 30 of his 100 posts, and he got to enrage a redneck, so Felix got at least some satisfaction from the chore that his anthropomorphic taskmaster had set him to.

One hundred posts. Felix paused to recollect the IQ points drained out of his ears during his time here. He slammed “post” on his 100th message, then immediately clicked that damn oil can.

“grayMagus77! I’m so glad you’re enjoying our forums. Is there anything I can help you with?”

“You can,” said Felix, his calm tone laced with the ticking of a time bomb. “You can look at this image I uploaded and...”

“As I told you,” chirped the oil can. “You have to be... Well, would you look at that? 100 posts, on the nose. You’re a power user now. Congratulations! Would you like me to put a special icon on your profile picture?”

“No. You can...”

“Oh, you’re no fun. Yes, your search. One moment.” Ten seconds later, the oil can said, “We have one match. I’ll link you to the profile.”

The profile flashed up on Felix’s screen. That was his guy. Felix continued to explore the profile and then he groaned. Further down the profile belonging to SkullRider445, just below his bio and photos of his engine, a photo of a naked man in a skull mask in a dune buggy graced the page.

Felix scrolled past as quickly as possible, hunting for his post activity log. Digging through menus and interfaces, Felix finally found it. Skullrider had posted prolifically on this board, dozens of times a day, until three days ago. Three days ago, Skullrider bought the Starwing. Two Za’toon contacts, two disappearances. Felix shuddered and turned off his datapad.

# Paradox Made Manifest - 23

Forty-three years prior, Hans Biermann was unable to concentrate on the code he was writing. His uncle, Klaus Biermann, was yanking curtains from the wall. They tumbled to the ground with a clatter and vitriol. “I hate maroon. Frieda and her fucking maroon curtains.”

Forty-three years and five months prior, mid-2076, during a heatwave that was blistering his hometown of Bern, Switzerland, Frieda dropped a bomb on his uncle. According to the emails his uncle sent, she’d been cheating on him with three different lovers. According to the emails he surreptitiously read on his uncle’s computer, one of Frieda’s lovers also happened to be one of his uncle’s lovers. As a result, Frieda needed her space and, of course, everything Klaus owned. That was no doubt why his uncle approached him with a job offer to program away his overpaid assistants.

Automation was for code-monkey grunts, not for geniuses such as himself. But Hans had a month between semesters in his mathematics PhD program, and the chance to play with one of the amazing new Hilbert systems set his curiosity on fire. The Hilbert, a breakthrough in AI technology, had proved itself instrumental in helping courts decide cases. Feed it facts, statements, and testimonies, and Hilbert assigns probabilities of truth or falsehood to them. After repeated examination and cross-checking, Hilbert could divine a most likely scenario. Every law office that wanted to stay in business had to have one—anyone, it was nigh impossible to win a case without Hilbert’s aid.

For the first few weeks, Hans fed case data to the Hilbert, getting to know its capabilities. The weeks trudged by as he ground out the dull automation code. Every day, Hans pushed his way through the mind-numbing process of coding away a human’s job so that he could spend more of his time dreaming up experiments to try on Hilbert.

However, for him to explore Hilbert's extended features, he needed privacy. Genius worked better alone, and especially away from his uncle’s moaning about his future ex-wife’s claws in his assets. Hans stayed late every day. His uncle was impressed at what a diligent, devoted worker he was. But, as soon as that door closed behind his uncle, Hans cleared the cache on the machine, and rebooted it. Freshly awakened with no previous neural pathways laid down, the AI was a tabula rosa ready for exploration.

First, Hans established a baseline. “Hilbert, establish the truth value of the following: My name is Hans Biermann.”

“True,” chirped back the robotic British-accented voice. Too bad this weren’t named after Gödel. At least then the voice would be in his native language.

Hans continued, “Today is April 20, 2076.”

“False,” Union Jill replied.

“Today is August 18, 2076.”

“True.” So far, so good. Hans connected it to the network so that it could have those resources to answer his questions.

“It is currently snowing outside.”

“False.”

“It is currently sunny outside.”

“True.”

“We are currently located in Bern, Switzerland.”

“True.”

“Good. Save configuration for Hans Biermann and restore Klaus Biermann’s defaults.” Hans closed up the office and headed out for the night.

He stopped at a fast food stand on his way to the tube station and ordered some wontons and noodles. “Hilbert can tell you the truth of anything, but what about things that have no possibility of truth?” he wondered aloud as sat down on the seat at the station and munched his dinner. “What if I asked it to tell me the temperature in the seventh level of Dante’s hell?” he pondered between bites. “What about the number of angels that can dance on a pinhead?”

Hans had just opened his fortune cookie's plastic wrapper when his ride arrived. The tube slowed to a smooth stop in front of him. He tapped his coin ring against the payment panel and the door slid open. The capsule was mostly empty, just a few late-night stragglers. The quiet gave him plenty of room to think. He cracked open the fortune cookie, popped half in his mouth, then read the fortune. “Doing the impossible requires first seeing the impossible.”

Hans toyed with the slip of paper in his hands as his mind ground through hundreds of questions and scenarios. “If you ask it unquantifiable entities such as angels and hell, Hilbert’s likely’s going to say, “insufficient data” and be done with it.”

Hans’ fingers fiddled with the slip of paper as he thought, twisting it this way and that in his hands. Hans twisted it halfway onto itself, then pinched the ends together. He ran his fingertips across the surface of the looped strip of paper, slowly at first, then more intensely, his mind racing down a new possibility. “How many sides does this piece of paper have?”

He tucked the Mobius strip in his pocket and exited the capsule at his stop. Three blocks and two flights of stairs later, Hans Biermann dropped into his bed. There, he drifted into Escherian dream realms of whimsy and strangeness.

At work the next morning, he forced himself through the coding for his uncle that would get him to that precious after-work time, experimenting time. He took care to pace himself, to keep his brain fresh for the evening's explorations.

"Hans, another late night," his uncle said, "I certainly appreciate the help. See you tomorrow." Click went the door, the sound of freedom.

Hans initiated the same backup and reboot sequence as before, then got to the point. "Hilbert. Exactly 50,000 angels can dance on the head of a pin. True or false?"

"Unverifiable: cannot evaluate with current parameters. Invalid size argument: angel."

Hans paced, speaking his thoughts aloud into his data recorder. "As I suspected. Hilbert knows when to tell us it is unable to answer due to undefinable quantities. That's one fire escape."

He tried again. "Hilbert, the average temperature on the seventh level of Dante's Hell is forty-one degrees Centigrade."

"Unverifiable: cannot evaluate with current parameters. Invalid location argument: Hell."

And again. "Hilbert, the average phoenix releases eighteen kilojoules of energy in its regeneration sequence."

"Unverifiable: cannot evaluate with current parameters. Invalid entity argument: phoenix."

Excellent. Hilbert was far too clever to get tripped up on amateur stuff. It knows to halt when it cannot answer a question Hans smiled. The real fun was about to start. Clear cache and reboot.

The screen of the Hilbert hummed as the processors finished booting up. Hans reached for the photo of Kurt Gödel which sat in a frame on his desk. "OK, old friend. Here goes nothing." He kissed the photo, and placed it back in its place of honor on his desk.

Hans pulled the twisted slip of paper from his pocket. He showed the fortune to Hilbert's visual input and said, "This piece of paper has two sides."

"Unverifiable: cannot evaluate with current parameters. Paradox detected: Mobius loop."

Perfect. Hans' heart started to thump hard. "In a certain town, the barber only shaves people who do not shave themselves. The barber shaves himself. True or false?"

"Unverifiable: cannot evaluate with current parameters. Paradox detected: Russell's paradox, barber variant."

Another knowing nod from Hans, his expectations confirmed. In a computer devoted to legal analysis, the ability to detect paradoxes was essential. Hans dropped the computer into administrator mode and dove into the dizzying array of files that formed Hilbert. He combed through hundreds of them before he found the configuration file which defined Hilbert's fail-safes. Hans commented out a few lines. From here on, Hilbert would not recognize a statement in which p and not-p were both possible outcomes. All of that logical fallout would propagate through the rest of Hilbert's neural network. By stumping Hilbert without a fire escape, Hans hoped to push the machine beyond its programming. Clear cache and reboot.

"Hilbert, dump all output of the following thought process into a log file: Statement: The barber only shaves people who do not shave themselves. The barber shaves himself. True or false?"

Hilbert's screen flashed wildly as it rolled through the loop with increasing frequency. The Hilbert's case made a shrill whirring sound before it shut down. Once the Hilbert cooled enough to safely run again, Hans booted it up and read the log file.

*Output: If the barber only shaves people who do not shave themselves, then he cannot shave himself. But if cannot shave himself, someone has to shave him, so the barber shaves him. But the barber cannot shave himself because the barber cannot shave anyone who shaves himself, so he has to get the barber to shave him. But the barber cannot shave himself because the barber cannot shave anyone who shaves himself, so he has to get the barber to shave him. But the barber cannot shave himself because the barber cannot shave anyone who shaves himself, so...*

Eight hundred thousand lines of that before *<end of log. Saving for emergency overheat shutdown>*.

Hans nodded, his hypotheses confirmed. He hopped back into the config file and hacked it one more time, putting in the self-referential awareness that the AI would need to rise to its true potential.

It was a few simple lines of code that he added. Deceptively little, but possibly enough to get him some somewhere. The pseudocode notes on his datapad read: "For all arguments presented to Hilbert, Hilbert will explore every possible avenue of answering it, no matter how far many recursion levels it needs to assign a truth value. Furthermore, should Hilbert require any additional physical components to complete its task, it will design them, then alert the user to the upgrades it needs." Clear cache and reboot.

"Hilbert, the barber shaves himself. True or false? Log your output, but halt operation before overheat."

Hilbert jumped into overdrive, dumping first the looping train of logical thought, then the thoughts the computer grew into regarding the possibilities of how it could answer the question.

Logical ramblings about who shaves whom gave way to a list of part numbers, cooling system designs, specifications for power, voltage, phase and other physical parameters, and diagrams for circuit boards that the computer deduced that it needs to solve the problem. Hans downloaded the information onto his datapad, and started planning.

Unbelievable. He'd never begun to consider some of the structures in here. Other diagrams made no sense at all. Hans often found himself asking Hilbert, "Are you certain about this?" He had no choice but to trust. Over the next four months, Hans filled his nights with tinkering, soldering, running wire and coolant tubes. Four days before Hans was due to return to school, Hilbert told him the words he'd been longing to hear: "I have all the upgrades I need to complete the task."

Hans threw his hands toward the sky, shouting, "Praise Zeno!" He was edging dangerously close to going mad over the computer's increasingly long list of demands. Clear cache and reboot.

Once Hilbert's interface glowed before him, Hans steadied himself and asked, "Hilbert, true or false: you now have the modifications necessary to answer the question of who shaves the barber?"

"True."

"Hilbert, you are able to assign a truth value to the following statement: "This statement is false." — True or false?"

"True."

Hans forced his next question through the lump in his throat:

"The barber shaves himself. True or false?"

The Hilbert leaped into action, the screen fluttering through a hypnotic display of colors and patterns. Hans reached for his datapad to enter some notes, only to find that it wasn't where he laid it. It was right there. "What the hell... where is...?" After much looking, he found it on the spare toilet paper holder, which was sitting in the middle of his uncle's desk. All of the photos and books on the desk had moved to the shelf where they stored the office's coffee supplies and snacks. Ancient books from his uncle's shelf, covered with century-old dust, were stacked on the conference table, arranged in three towers, largest at the bottom, smallest at the top.

"Hilbert, stop."

The flashing on the computer stopped. The machine went silent.

Hans gawked at the chaos around him. The computer sat quietly, waiting its next query. Hans eyed the computer, feeling almost stupid as he asked. "Hilbert. The items moved around the room because of your calculations: true or false?"

"True."

The young mathematician first cried soft, reserved tears of joy, but the floodgates burst, and he leaped into whooping and howling. Hans' head was pounding, barely able to contain the plethora of possibilities opened wide before him. The office became too small for the speed of his pacing; he was running into walls as his mind tumbled down streams of ideas. If the calculations caused the objects in the room to jump from point to point, perhaps if those calculations were fed into an engine, the engine might do the same. If he could figure out a way to control the endpoint, to feed that to Hilbert as a parameter, he might end up with a lot more than a messy office. The cleaning would have to wait; there was much science to do. He dashed home to pick up an old toy drone. As he rode the tube back to the office, he scoured over the specs of the engine, adding them to a new configuration file that he'd feed to Hilbert.

Back in Klaus's office, Hilbert sat quietly, waiting its next instructions. Hans uploaded his new configuration file and modified the output of the Hilbert to feed directly into the drone's navigational controls. He then programmed the controls to force an endpoint at... at where? He had always wanted to see the Grand Canyon. Hans punched in the coordinates for it and locked the device on its course. He held the engine in one hand, his datapad in the other, and looked directly into Hilbert's camera.

"Hilbert, the barber shaves himself. True or false?"

As usual, the screen flashed with colors and patterns. The engine got unbearably cold, and just as Hans was about to drop it, it warmed to a pleasant temperature, then unbearably hot. Again, just about to drop it, the device cooled again. Fractal patterns crackled across the room around him, folding in on themselves, a repeating image of the room around him, onward to infinity, then down to infinitesimally small. The room unfolded, growing up from the seeds of nothingness landscapes of orange desert sands, lush tropical jungles, and barren polar tundras. Below him washed infinite layers of sand, then sea, then grass, then snow. Above him, the sky flickered through night, day, rain, sleet, and sun. Around him, infinite trees and buildings, walls and plants, open spaces and solid rock folded in and out of existence. Somewhere along the line, his vision filled with steam and white tiles, and he heard the sound of women screaming in the shower at his unwanted invasion. Eventually, everything settled down. Hans Biermann and the Hilbert flashed into existence on the Grand Canyon's overlook platform, where he was promptly arrested for entering without a ticket.

The authorities returned Hilbert to its proper owner and Hans to his proper country. Klaus Biermann made it clear to his nephew that under no circumstances would he ever be allowed to touch Hilbert again. The dejected mathematician stepped off the plane into the Bern airport, took a seat in a coffee shop, and wondered what the hell he was going to do now.

He drowned his sorrows in overpriced booze from the airport bar. Hans didn't notice the two smartly-dressed people approaching him until they were right across from his table. One of them laid a business card down. The other showed him a datapad with an absurdly large amount of

money, ready to be transferred to his account. “We would like to talk to you about your work.”  
Two years later, the paradox drive was born.

# Queen of Hearts - 24

Bob's feet were grateful to get on solid ground again. The crew had a few hours of time off while the ship refueled at the Bamberga waystation. Then, if the captain decided to pursue Bob's latest report, they would be off to Europa to intercept another skirmish.

The asteroid, Bamberga, was closer to Bob's speed than most places. Nearly dead center in Solsys, people came and went, but never stayed long. Bob enjoyed the constant flow of folks from every corner of Solsys—it was like traveling without having to go anywhere. There was little pretense here. Nobody put on airs to go to the gas station.

It was currently high tide. Bamberga was conveniently located on a direct course between Mars and Jupiter, which meant the small dome was filled with thousands of travelers. Families with squalling urchins meandered through the gift shops, looking for trinkets and candy. Teenagers hung out in the arcade. Haulbots buzzed through the streets. The only place Bob cared about was a quiet place to have a drink and focus on the task at hand: deciphering the mystery behind the Za'toon tech.

Roundabout Ray's Tavern—what a dump—was the perfect place to drink and think. Bob strolled in, his huarache sandals sticking to the floor. Braver men would not get their flesh so close to such a bio-hazard, but Bob had more important things on his mind.

It looked just like he remembered it from years ago. The same ratty old pool tables. The same water-stained ceilings. The same bottom-barrel liquor. The same booth he and his beloved used to share, when they stopped in during their runs around Solsys, hunting down old tech and artifacts. Good times.

“Bourbon on the rocks.” Bob strolled up to the bar and planted his ass on the stool. He hadn't brushed his hair in two days. His beard had grown shaggy. Bob loved a good challenge, and this was the most challenging he'd ever come across. He would worry about grooming when his brain was less occupied with important things.

Bob clinked his glass, rattling the rocks around. The sound calmed him, the one thing in the universe he can control: the way the ice spun in his drink. The rest is all chaos, and he got more than his fair share from the metals that formed these artifacts. Every time he scanned them, different numbers arose under what he presumed to be the exact same conditions. He even tried reading for etheric specific gravity and orgone energy, both of which would get him laughed out of any gathering of proper scientists, but even those returned wildly fluctuating numbers. Drooping eyes stared into

the empty glass. “Bartender, another.”

He flipped through the images on his datapad. The devices potentially held tremendous secrets, tremendous power, but he stood at the gate without the password. Squinting and rubbing his temples, Bob stared at the photos, as if he could bore a hole through the device’s secrets with the force of his gaze. No insights came. His brain was out of gas.

Out of gas was a familiar feeling these days. He rolled around Solsys around in a salvage ship, doing the bare minimum for three hots and a cot. Besides daily first aid to someone, usually Veronica, there was little to do outside of scanning for signs of corporate warfare. It wasn’t much, and Bob generally preferred things that way, but now, the ennui felt more like a crushing weight than an inspiring breeze. The slack was great, but the boredom was killing him.

Bob drank the bourbon, and tapped the glass on the counter. Perhaps enough of the stuff would grease the wheels enough to get things in motion again. It’d been far too long since Bob did much mental heavy lifting. He needed to get it back into shape. The Za’toon artifacts before him, though? He was running a marathon, when all he wanted was a light stroll around the park.

As Bob pushed through his thoughts, his fingernails, rimmed with dirt and sweat, drummed on the bar. This was the chance he’d been waiting all his life for. A decade on Io, enslaved to Disnosoft in fine labor didn’t just steal ten years he could have been researching—it stole his passion for doing so. The curiosity that roused his soul for the first time in so long brought his tiredness into sharp focus. He lost himself for a momentary eternity in the drink, then looked up and around him. Three young guys, dressed in dusty coveralls and boots, chalked up at a pool table. A few gals with outrageous hairdos and tiny skirts giggled and sipped fizzy drinks further down the bar. Tired old drunkards drank away the last of their coin in a corner .

Among them shined a star. He blinked. She was sitting in his favorite booth. She drew the midnight blue cloak from her head, revealing a kind, wrinkled face framed with silver hair. Bob rubbed his eyes and glanced to his drink. Certainly he hadn’t had enough to trigger a flashback, and definitely not enough to induce a time distortion.

Bob rose from his barstool. He straightened his shirt, pushed his fingers through his hair, and walked toward the booth. As he approached, he sucked in his gut and puffed up his chest. “Alice? Alice Maguire?”

At first, she didn’t respond. Bob turned away, his cheeks flushed and warm. “Ah, excuse me. I mistook you for someone else.” Another unfulfilled daydream.

The silver-haired woman smiled and said, “It’s Nadya Amestra now. Nice to see you again, Robert.” Bob halted, a foolish grin spreading on his whiskered face.

“So, you aren’t a misfiring set of neurons?” Bob spread his arms for a hug. Nadya stood

and leaned in. He squeezed her, his bulky frame easily enveloping her petite figure, “Well, I guess I missed my chance, because certainly you’re married by now, but it’s good to see you all the same.”

Nadya chuckled, the wrinkles on her soft dusky skin crinkling, “Hardly. I never found another man as wonderful as you think you are.”

Bob heaved a sigh of relief. “Oh good. So what’s up with the name, Alice, err, Nadya?”

“I changed my name, as all initiates do, when I joined my order.”

Bob frowned. “You found religion? Like a convent or something?”

“No. Of course not. Don’t insult me like that.” Nadya’s voice was softly sweet. Then, without warning, Nadya pushed him out of the hug and slapped him across the cheek. “You asshole. Fuck you.”

He slumped his shoulders. “I guess I had that coming.”

“For a decade now. What the hell happened to you? I knew you were getting into some disagreements with the community elders, and your neighbor was hassling you, and...”

Bob shook his head, “It’s nothing like that.”

“And your house, burned to the ground? Arson? What the hell, Bob?”

“Baby, I’m sorry...”

“You’d better be! And then I hear that you destroyed your home to cover up some criminal activities? The news said you were building bombs...”

“Hardly,” laughed Bob. “I was running a radio station.”

Nadya's eyes narrowed, doubling down on her hard stare. “Did you have any originals there?”

“Just two. But I had thousands of albums on the drives, all of which they took.”

Nadya frowned deeply, half-lidding her eyes in cold focus. “Was it Disnosoft?”

“How’d you guess?” Bob laughed bitterly.

“And none of it was saved?”

“I had an off-site backup, but Disnosoft found that too. They found all of it.” Bob cast his eyes downward. “Took me decades to compile that collection. Look, I had to leave. They offered me a deal. They wanted a human medic at their Io park, and I owed them millions in back royalties for using all of the songs they own. They know nobody can pay those fees, so they pretend to play nice and offer you a deal. I was going to be feeding pills to brats until I dropped from exhaustion and they tossed me into a convenient volcano. Everything was supposed to be hush hush, since I am

effectively a corporate criminal. I'm sorry. I couldn't contact you. I couldn't contact anyone."

Nadya's face crumpled. "A medic!?" she yelled. "But you have degrees in materials science and exo-geology."

Bob chuckled. "If they let me do what I loved, it wouldn't exactly be a punishment, would it? Baby, I was right there on Io, too. I'd give my last MD-40 for a chance to study those volcanoes up close. Instead, I got yelled at by parents because their kid ate too many deep fried snow cones and it's my fault the insulin spray isn't working fast enough. Every day, that was my life. My sentence would have ended at age 70. Heh, I'm four years away from a legitimate exoneration."

"But the park closed down. The volcano, and that monorail, and..."

Bob sighed. For months after the accident, every news networked looped the same video for hours a day: the monorail from the Pele's Volcanic Wonders exhibit smashing through its tube. The supports crumpled, taking the happy vacationers and their hyperactive children on an unscheduled detour right into Leilani's Lava Lagoon. "One hundred twenty three tourists dissolved in an instant fiery death," Bob said. "Disnosoft couldn't pay people to go there after that. The park closed that day and never reopened."

"I remember now." Nadya breathed.

"Hail Eris and Fuck Disnosoft." Bob raised his glass to the goddess of chaos. He merrily clinked the two drops of bourbon and two half-melted ice cubes left in it.

Nadya kicked him under the table, sharply stabbing her shoe's pointed toe into his calf. "You ass."

"Ow! It isn't my fault they used shitty materials on the supports. If they had hired this really impressive materials scientist I know, they wouldn't have skipped planning for the surface erosion of the joints, because oh yes, Io's a volcanic planet. This really impressive exo-geologist I know could have warned them about that corrosive ash that falls every day on Io." Bob turned and planted his elbows on the bar. "Disnosoft screwed us, of course. You know what happened to everyone doing time on Io? They sent shuttles, which were capable of carrying two dozen people a day, but there were thousands of fine-laborers lined up to leave."

"Some people had sick family members to get home to. We let them take the first shuttles. We were all tired of being there, but not so much that we were going to forgo our humanity. After a week, the shuttles stopped coming. We got some messages about delays due to financial matters. A week after that, we stopped getting messages. And then, we had to figure it out on our own. It got ugly."

Nadya's gaze softened. She reached out to squeeze his hand. "I'm sorry."

"Eh, it's all behind me. Spotted an ad for a salvage op needing a medic and a comms

expert, and I joined up with them. It was a way to get off the planet, and while I'm technically still doing time, Disnosoft is too tied up with their internal corporate strife to bother worrying about us peasants." Bob couldn't take his eyes off Nadya's face. "But I've got a lot of happiness where I am. They don't pay much, but I don't need much, and I get to see a lot of cool places. Best of all," Bob grinned, drumming his hands on his pot belly. "They don't expect much. Low key, low stress, lots of downtime. Perfect."

"Sounds boring."

"It is, but it's getting less so. Have some interesting new projects I'm working on." Bob let his hand linger on Nadya's, tracing lightly over her fingers. "I've been banging my head against a problem that I can't make heads or tails of. Days of experiments, and I can't get anywhere with it."

"What is it? Maybe I can give you an angle that you hadn't considered before." She squeezed his hand back before letting go.

Bob laughed. "You've always been a smart lady, sharper than me—most of the time, anyhow—but this is a shit-pile of metallic-green weirdness. Craziest damn thing I've ever seen. A specter of a metal, strange beyond words." Bob stopped and craned his head to observe the inevitable "what the hell?" expression that would soon spread across her face.

Instead, Bob found Nadya lost in a long moment of contemplation before she finally spoke. "You're right. It sounds weird."

"I must be rusty and screwing something up." Bob shrugged.

Nadya smiled softly. "How much longer are you on Bamberga?"

"Only another hour. We're just making a refuel stop before heading to Europa."

"The years haven't done well to this bar, have they? Surreal, seeing you here again. I've missed you, Bob. Our time is short here. Care to join me for another drink?" Nadya held up her empty wine glass.

"I'd love to."

The conversation soothed Bob's soul. Real human connection. Time never lasts long enough in moments like these—an hour breezed by in sixty short minutes. Bob's commlink crackled too soon with the Captain's voice. "Crew of the Lizzie Borden: We are departing in fifteen minutes. Please return to your posts."

"And so, I must fly on," sighed Bob. "Alice... err, Nadya, excuse me." He leaned over and kissed her on the cheek. "How can I reach you again?"

"Don't worry about that, Bob. We'll see each other again soon."

Bob swiped his coin ring to cover his tab. He had a long walk back to consider how badly he had blundered his chance with Nadya. He made it back to the ship with minutes to spare. Two minutes after the ship's departure, his commlink blinked. Bob pulled out his datapad to read the message:

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*To: Bob Wilshire, Science Officer, E. Borden Rescue and Repair*

*From: <dark>@<dark>*

*Subject: Mutual interests*

*Message: We have recently become aware that you are studying an unknown substance. We have more samples of it in our possession. We would be willing to share these with you, in exchange for a favor. Please contact scribe@soa.node3 for more information.*

*Attachments (type:photo): spareparts.1, spareparts.2, spareparts.3*

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Bob rushed to the window of his cabin and stared at the asteroid below the ship, It faded into a small dot as the Lizzie departed. "Nadya?!" he called out to the empty space. Bob tapped his commlink. "Captain, we've got to talk."

# Three of a Kind - 25

A refueling stop at Bamberga meant some shore time, but Felix had no desire to get off the ship. His quarters were far more comfortable than a truck stop full of filthy people. Right now, all he wanted a quiet space to focus. In a little over a day, the ship would reach Europa and he'd have to resume his duties inventorying the next harvest. The layover afforded him some time to research.

While he waited for some leads to pan out about the presumed-missing Horatio Evans and his impressive mustache, Felix scanned other channels. He limited his search to Freenet operations, so no life form, carbon, silicone, or otherwise, would get wind of his quest. He had risked enough dicking around on that idiot racing forum.

Horatio. Brianna. Were there others? Was there a pattern? Felix tapped his fingertips together, churning the idea through his brain.

Finding no leads on Freenet, he logged into the Deimos auction house's site, where he accessed the sales records. Felix flipped through the files, looking for one-item buyers. There were plenty of those; many people came to auctions looking for exactly one thing, and bought no more. Felix wrangled the names of 650 one-item buyers from the past year. He narrowed the search to the last month and found 48 one-item buyers, Brianna and Horatio among them. Forty-eight were too many to reasonably go searching for without looking suspicious, so he narrowed his list further. The typical one-time buyer, Felix reasoned, would be looking for a cheap ride for themselves or their kid. Either that, or they want a hot rod to trick out. While those might be Za'toon purchases, they were most likely to be regular human purchases; those buyers had reason to their rhyme. Felix was more interested in finding those who were out of step with the pattern.

There were three who fell well outside expected parameters for a typical one-time buyer. A Martian woman bought a bin of random spare parts, mostly junk. A Deimonian man bought a freighter, the sort that cargo companies, not individuals, would typically want. Another Deimonian, a woman, bought a used mail truck, again, more of interest to businesses, not individuals. He downloaded their records and began to dig.

Felicia Veracruz, age 64, bought the bin of parts. Someone on a forum liked her blog on knitting and has been disappointed that she hasn't posted in days.

Tama Fernando, age 33, bought the freighter. An old friend from school is visiting Deimos and hoping to find him, but couldn't in all the expected locations.

Carla Weiss, Age 52, bought the mail truck. Felix could find no more data on her.

Felix shuddered. He shut the window on his search. Enough of that. The whole matter made his skin crawl. Deciding now was a good time to turn to less traumatizing topics, he turned off his datapads and walked over to his book stash and found a classic: a story about a brawny guy from another planet with his red underwear and cape.

Today, however, the story didn't set well with him. What's with the capes? They all wear them. It's not like they're using some sort of physics or even magical ability with the cape. It's just the standard. Why? Who had the cape fetish and why does every other damn superhero have to follow suit?

This one was too much. He somehow escaped his planet and landed on Earth and now he wants to help these people? Like fight crime and escort little old ladies across the street?

"Damn fool. You have got to be the worst alien I have ever seen." He snorted at skivvies-man. "You're supposed to convince the people to grow dandelions for you, then make them disappear when they get too close to what you're really up to. You aren't a proper alien. You're a lie."

Nothing that speculated on the nature of space from the pre-first-contact days got it even close to right. The aliens weren't ravaging beasts reaping humans for food, nor were they enlightened and benevolent beings like Underwear-Man here. Instead, they ended up being so disgustingly much like humans that Felix simply lumped them in with his general sense of misanthropy. Felix shoved the comic back in his stash, disgusted. Officially done with everything, Felix turned off the lights.

He curled up under the blankets on his bed. His frustration told him to sleep. He wanted to sleep. He did everything he could to sleep, yet, Felix did not sleep. His thoughts meandered along one channel then another, trying to find any sense in any of them.

"I give up." Felix shot straight up, bent at the waist. He grabbed his coat, both datapads, coin ring and commlink, and headed out.

He headed to the ship's exit. Felix stepped through the airlock into a world of grays, a corridor leading to a sprawling rotunda, where stood a crumbling statue in the center. The statue's face was freshly coated with bird shit. Once, a long time ago, a few pigeons nested in the cargo bay of a passing ship, hatched during a refueling stop, and have been stealing food and shitting on everything ever since. If you ate outdoors on Bamberga, you watched your plate carefully. Like most other things in Solsys, Felix hated the pigeons.

He scanned the storefronts. Cheap entertainment to pass the time. Cheap food to fill your gut. Cheap liquor to soothe your soul. Sordid-looking gambling parlors and sordid-looking massage

parlors. Among it all, a greasy spoon diner seemed like the perfect refuge for a few hours.

The waitress brought him coffee. While this wasn't the absolute worst coffee he'd ever tasted, it ranked 86 out of 100 on the terribleness scale. Felix pulled out his Freenet datapad, and stared hard at the images of the alien tech he had stored on there. His eyes fuzzed over and fell in... in... in to the rich greenish-gold metal... the color of a perfect Martian sunrise. There wasn't much to like about Mars, but the scenery couldn't be beat.

"Green gold," he murmured. And like the rising sun whose color the objects resembled, the light dawned on Felix. He clicked on the image and zoomed in on a square that was dominated strictly by the unique color of the Za'toon metal.

#c0e748. That's the color. He punched the value into various Freenet search engines and requested all images in which that color appeared within a certain tolerance range.

His searches directed him down a path of landscapes and microorganisms. He sifted through at least three hundred results until he came upon an auction on an antiques trading hub.

Felix gasped. The object, across the longest diagonal on its elongated hexagon frame, measured about as long as the hand that held it. From side to side, the object measured half as wide. It sported a small, round black screen, a miniature version of the object in Captain Kumari's possession.

Currently, the coaster had no bids on it. He popped open the listing and read the description.

*For Sale: Midcentury-postmodern vintage art coaster*

*Description: Own a piece of authentic 2050's vintage kitsch. One of a kind!*

*Price: 10 Venucoin*

Ten Venucoin—hardly the price of a box of tea. For a moment, Felix's hands trembled over the button to purchase the item, but paused. Felix had no intention of ending up with Horatio and Brianna.

He held back on his instincts and called the captain. "Do you have a moment to meet with me?" he asked into his wrist. He swiped his coin ring and left. Felix wasn't about to screw around long enough to let the window of opportunity close with him on the wrong side.

# A Pair of Aces - 26

On the metal floor, surrounded by toolboxes, parts, and crumpled food wrappers, Veronica McCormick lay on her back, her boots kicking at the air. Her hands rotated the large rhomboid tray over and over. Fluctuating values, always fluctuating values. Just like the pear-shaped device, no matter how many times her cybernetic fingertips touched it, it never gave the same reading twice.

Veronica ran her human fingers, drinking in the buttery-smooth texture across it. “Why do you torment me?” whispered Veronica to the device, her warm breath fogging its surface. “What are you hiding from me? I want to delve into your every delicious secret. Let me breathe new life into you.”

She placed the device on the floor and flipped over, catlike, now staring down at it. “Or I can leave you to perpetual nothingness, in the void of the un-powered state. But you want more than that. You long to have purpose again.” Veronica shook her head and smiled, curling her fingers possessively around the object, “But you don’t want that. I can feel it—you want so much more. I can give you a destiny, if you’d just whisper to me one little secret.” She stroked her human fingers across the black mirror-finish surface and whispered, “Please?”

As if answering her call, one of Veronica’s meters began to hum. Veronica leaped to her feet, dashing to the rack of scopes and sensors. The amperage display was steadily creeping up. She gasped. The amperage peaked at 21 milliamps, and held steady for nine seconds. The value crept back down, and eventually bottomed out.

“It lives...” breathed Veronica. She downloaded a log from all of her devices and examined their behavior for the last few minutes. For nine seconds, all of the chaos stood in perfect order. Every reading returned the same, consistent numbers for nine seconds, before entropy claimed the device again.

“You tease me. You toy with my heart. Why?” Veronica stopped recording and sighed, depressed in her repeated failures. She flopped onto the bed she had dragged from her room to the lab, rolled onto her back and placed the device on her chest, hugging it. “I feel vulnerable, you know,” she whispered to the object.

Her mentor had taught her that in every failure is a success—one more data point with which to draw the whole picture. But her minor gain was cold comfort. The information lingered precariously, eager to vanish, taking what little knowledge she had of this strange device with it.

She climbed out of bed and took the device to her workstation, and sat it under a camera and scanners which she set to monitor it. “You’ll talk for me eventually! Everything reveals its secrets, given enough time.”

Hours passed. The device did nothing except gather dust. Veronica put it down and headed to the crew lounge to play some pool. Upon entering the lounge, she grabbed a beer from the bar’s fridge and picked up a cue stick from the wall. The damn news anchors were still yammering on about the stupid blond and her stupid reward from her stupid parents. Well, the reward part wasn’t stupid, but Veronica would have to likely listen to her talk for the whole damn trip, and she just wasn’t sure that a few million Fija were worth it.

Enough of this crap. Veronica had brooding over a recalcitrant machine to do. She pointed her metal fingers at the screen, drew a pattern in the air with them, and shut off the blithering newscasters.

Four games of pool, three beers, and two bags of Nutrisoy puffs later, Veronica was no closer to the answer. The despair settled in, a dismal raincloud around her enthusiasm. All her life, Veronica’s teachers and mentors told her she was smart — everyone except, of course, for her parents. Religious nuts didn’t give a shit that she was smart, only that she behaved. Bitterly, Veronica laughed at her memories of every smashed attempt at dignity in her youth.

Proud moments for Veronica passed like farts in the wind to her folks. She upgraded all the engines on her cycle herself. Big fucking deal. She fixed the Nutrisoy harvester after it broke down. Who cares? She built a fucking maidbot to help around the house, something usually only richer families could afford, and do you think her parents used it? Yeah, as a coat rack. The only time Veronica’s parents praised her was when she fixed the priest’s commlink. Stupid fuck forgot to take it off when he was ritually drowning a baby on-stage to claim its soul for their god. And then the dickbag said, “God has blessed you with some smarts, young lady. You still don’t come to confession as often as you should.”

Exhausted under the weight of her depression, Veronica ran her hands through her mess of greasy black hair and closed her eyes. Her mind started down dark trails, old memories. Her parents declared her dead. She had to claw her way up from nothing to get an education. She had been robbed, beaten, and nearly starved to death more than once, but she was still alive, despite the funeral her parents had for her. Veronica gazed at the light glinting off her cybernetic arm and said, “I’ve lived more than you ever have.”

Enough moping. Veronica gathered her strength. She would go back to her lab. She would woo the secrets from the device. She was an engineer, a damn fine one, and no mystery would best her. The only approval she cared about now was her own, and she wasn’t about to let herself down. With fresh determination, Veronica laid her cue against the wall, and started toward the door. As she approached the door, Bob strolled through, rotating the other alien piece of technology in his hands,

lost in contemplation.

“Hey, Wilshire,” called Veronica, her voice chipper from her renewed sense of purpose. “How’s it going?”

Bob stared at Veronica as if she’d just sprouted a second head.

“Uhh, hey, McCormick. Everything’s great except for that mossy-green metal that I can’t seem to figure out a damn thing about.”

“You too?”

“Oh yeah. Values all over the charts. Weird stuff, man. But I do have a line on getting more parts to study, so that might pan out to something.”

“I gotta exchange notes with you. Mine did something really weird earlier. Let me send you the data.” Veronica pulled her datapad out and tapped on it. “Nothing but weird random values here, but for nine glorious seconds, everything went totally stabler and I read a distinct current.”

“I’ve observed the inconsistent values, but I’ve never seen them stabilize.” Bob rubbed his chubby fingers through his bristly beard. “Can’t say I begin to know what to make of that.”

“I’m as lost as you are, man. How about we swap pieces for a bit? Maybe one of us can see something that the other can’t.”

Bob nodded. “Agreed. I’ll bring it by your lab, in say, ten minutes?”

“Ten minutes. See you.” Veronica waved and continued back to her lab.

Once there, Veronica scanned the logs from her sensors. The whole log was nothing but lines as flat as the heartbeat of a day-old corpse. She sighed and sat down to unbuckle the many buckles on her boots. She had just finished kicking her boots free from her feet when Bob knocked on her door. “Open,” she said, and the door obeyed.

Bob stepped over to the platform where the device sat. “There she is. Beautiful. I’ll just replace her with this one, and... there we go.” Bob turned around, the large rhomboid device now in his arms. “Keep me posted if you learn anything.”

“Right-o. Same to you.”

Bob stepped out the door and disappeared down the hall, and the door slid shut behind him with a soft whir. Veronica sauntered over to the platform where the device sat, hooked to her meters. She whispered, “Miss me?”

She stroked her fingertips on the device and purred softly. Her eyes roved hungrily over the beautiful greenish-gold device. For a moment, they focused on the screen behind the device, with a linear graph of the item’s energy readings. The screen showed another spike, starting a few seconds

ago. Her eyes narrowed, remaining focused on the screen, confirming that, once again, the device had come to life. This curve was different than the first one; it had the same gradual rise, but an immediate drop, followed by a much lower hum that eventually faded to nothing.

“What... the... fuck...” Veronica dashed to the hallway, but Bob was nowhere to be seen. She tapped the commlink on her arm. “Wilshire, come back here right now!”

# The Love Boat - 27

Yasmina Knox could not believe her luck. During a routine snooping through her parents' room, she found the answer to her prayers: the keys to the yacht. Her parents had promised to throw her a party if she passed the summer school classes she needed to graduate. But here she was, two days done with that hell and Mum was on Earth with business appointments. Dad was on sabbatical, doing a month at the Serenity Yoga Retreat on Venus after an unfortunate outburst at the office. Neither of them were answering their messages.

"Looks like I get my party after all." Yasmina smiled and pocketed the keys.

She went into the kitchen and summoned the maidbot. Five years—one year extra, even! She worked her ass off for five whole years. Despite all the cutting, cheating, and not caring because she would always have her family's dandelion income, it still hurt deeply that her parents couldn't even throw her a party. She was so much more mature and grown now. Why couldn't her parents see that?

Yasmina patted the keys in her pocket confidently. Daddy had always told her that she should chase her dreams, no matter what. Well, Yasmina had dreamed all her life about having the most epic graduation party ever. Maybe they had left them there on purpose? Why would they be in the bottom of Mum's underwear drawer if they really cared about her not using them? Maybe they wanted her to find them. Since they didn't give her any graduation presents, they must have meant for her to use the yacht. Obviously, they were trying to help her learn to be an initiative-taking, plan-making, obstacle-obliterating fully-fledged adult. If they weren't going to throw her a graduation party, she'd throw one for herself, just like Mum and Daddy wanted.

"Your orders, Ms. Knox?" the maidbot said.

Yasmina pushed a bunch of buttons on the control panel's menu. "I need all of that made and brought to the Fortuna, docked at bay 109 on the 12th street wharf by 7pm."

"Yes, Ms. Knox." The shiny silver cylinder swiveled on its central axis and rolled out the door.

Yasmina headed to her room to formulate her plan. She paused at the mirror and brushed her shiny black locks away from her amber face. Bright brown eyes with thick black lashes stared back at her. Yasmina tried on her fierce face, and gave herself a playful growl in the mirror.

First, she had to send the word far and wide. Yasmina built a list of her best few hundred

friends, and sent the message off: Bring booze, sleep sacks, and plenty of good vibes. Yasmina is graduating and you are all invited to party with her on a cruise around Jupiter. Arrive at 8 tonight, we sail at 9.

Next up: provisions and plenty of them. She descended the stairs to her parents' wine cellar. She summoned the maidbot and loaded it up with as many bottles as it could carry. Since she was an adult now, she had to have something better than hooch to serve at her graduation party. She wasn't sure what to choose, but she figured if she went with the crappy old stuff, they wouldn't mind too much. Geez, Mum, some of these bottles are over hundred years old. Drink your wine, already. Into the maidbot's stash they went.

With all of the easy stuff out of the way, now came the hard part: what to wear? Yasmina walked through her closet's corridors, and finally settled on a sparkly blue mini-dress and silver platform heels. She piled her long black locks up in a loose topknot, spiral curls framing the glittery tiara on her brow. Eyeliner, lip gloss, blush and mascara, Yasmina worked at her makeup for another forty five minutes. With all said and done, Yasmina still had an hour left to take pre-game selfies.

After a short walk to the wharf, Yasmina tapped the keys against the airlock. The ship, sleek and elegant, all steel, custom blue lighting, and curves hummed slightly as the doors slid open. The maidbot followed, slowly, burdened with the weight of the bottles and trays of snacks it carried.

Once in the lounge, Yasmina beamed. It was the perfect setting for the most epic graduation party ever: mahogany furniture, freshly rubbed with lemon oil, real leather chairs, and thick blue drapes. Yasmina booted up the computer and initiated the autopilot. She scrolled through the pre-planned routes and found one that looked lovely. It swung around nearby Io, then back to Europa — a quick overnight trip around the block. Since this route didn't use the paradox drive, it was perfect. The AI could handle the driving. She selected that option and set the departure time.

After she finished programming, the computer sounded a warning tone. Yasmina sighed, punched in Daddy's password (the one he always used), and dismissed it. She was about to go take some more selfies when she heard another warning tone. She grumbled, "Stupid computer," and closed the message. Nothing was going to stop her from having her perfect graduation party.

By nine o'clock, one hundred and two of her friends had arrived. It wasn't as many as she'd hoped, but certainly enough for Yasmina to have a respectably good time. The ship swept away from Europa, soaring off to orbit the planet that filled the view of every window in the lounge. For a moment, everyone gazed in delight at the shining blue reflection from Europa as the moon faded into a sea of stars. Then, everyone turned their attention to the drink coolers.

Thumping bass, flowing drinks and spinning heads filled the Fortuna as it sped along its course. Somewhere along the way, Yasmina lost track of everything in the pride she felt at her first real party as a mature adult. When her vision doubled and blurred, she thought it'd be best if she

slowed down, so she popped open one of her mum's ancient wine bottles, figuring that at its age, it can't have anywhere near the same potency as the new stuff. A dozen of her friends grabbed a dozen different vintages to do the same.

The celebration railed on into the night. The Great Red Spot came and went without a single glance. So did the low fuel alert.

Thirty thousand kilometers later, the last of the fuel cells ran out. The yacht drifted, riding out its residual momentum before the pull of Jupiter would take over and draw the ship into it. The revelers reveled on, but not a one of them heard over the music that the emergency beacon had engaged.

# Signpost Up Ahead - 28

The Lizzie Borden drifted along its jump trail. It hopped along the smoothest possible route until the paradox drive shifted to realspace mode at the exit point just beyond the orbits of Jupiter's outermost moons. Three hours to the next crew meeting. The captain had chased sleep all night long, but never could catch it. Kandi rolled in her bed, yet rest eluded her, loping ahead with a two-million Fija head start. Done with trying, Kandi gave over to the insomnia and dragged herself out of bed.

She donned her bathrobe, slid her feet into a pair of fuzzy pink slippers, and wandered out the door. Kandi walked until she reached the pathways high above the cargo bay. She planted her hands on the catwalk's rails and looked down at the intricately arranged crates and boxes.

"This is my life," Kandi sighed. "I haul trash. Every day, I collect and polish shit, and for what? To wind up right back in the fucking military." The fog of depression settled heavily around her.

Kandi ran her hand over her left shoulder, and flames from the past filled her mind. They had burned a wound in her psyche that never quite stitched together correctly again. She twitched and her heart started to leap wildly. She grabbed the catwalk's handrails to balance herself and breathed deeply—in-two-three-four, hold-two-three-four, out-two-three-four, hold-two-three-four, and repeat—just like her therapist had taught her. After a dozen rounds, her stability returned. She staggered away from the image, and hopefully, she'd walk far enough never to be dragged back.

Australians often said there were four ways out of Australia: in a coffin, in a jail transport ship, stowing away on a tourist's ship, and through the military. The first three were not options. Death sucked, jail sucked more, and the death that always came to stowaways who got caught also sucked. The military sucked, too, as the regimen meant jail with a high probability of death mixed in, but at least that option had a time limit on it. Four years in the service, and she'd have skills that she could take anywhere. Kandi often extolled the virtues of luck, but more than anything, she believed in skill. Luck may be a lady, but skill is the experienced whore who pleases every time. With her own experience, she would be free.

Free. She had awoken three weeks later in that smelly beige hospital room. It smelled just like the Nutrisoy fluid that leaked out of the faulty couplings in the emergency rations storage and into the shuttle's wiring. Within an hour, a lawyer was at her bedside, ready for her to sign the paperwork to proceed with lawsuits. The lawyer assured Kandi that her settlement would be more

than enough to get her a ticket out of filthy fucking Australia and off of filthy fucking Earth, for good. Freedom only cost Kandi her heart, her shoulder, and her ability to fly. It still wasn't enough. The meat-grinder still wanted more from her.

Kandi hung her head over the rail and a few tears streaked down her face. She squeezed her shoulder, digging her nails through the thin layer of flesh into the unyielding metal underneath. Kandi winced until she realized that her stomach was rumbling. She startled. What the hell was she doing here, standing around in her bathrobe, wasting time on the past rather than dealing with the quickly-approaching future?

Kandi headed to the kitchen and turned on the coffee maker, the really awesome one she harvested from that Ali Xi station. She peered into the fridge: mostly Nutrisoy products, but she did keep a meager stash of real food, one of the luxuries she afforded herself. Now was a damn good time to use those powdered eggs and canned cheese she'd been hanging on to. She set the skillet on the induction plate. After a minute, she flung some water on it and the skillet sizzled satisfyingly. Kandi cracked the egg carton open, mixed in some water, and poured. After the egg suspension set, she smeared cheese across the surface. She placed the lid on the pan, catching in the steam to melt the cheese.

As she sat down to eat, she looked at her food gratefully. When would she get to eat real food again? The Neslubishi military probably didn't serve anything but Nutrisoy slush, especially not to fine-labor grunts who would just end up cannon fodder anyhow. Maybe one day, she could stop running from fine labor... and dare she think, that she might even be able to afford real food on a regular basis? Or even—dare she dream—to have a place to grow it?

This gambit she played, as dangerous as it was, shined the only ray of hope on Kandi's dream. The system offered no end Kandi found acceptable, but accepting the unacceptable was unacceptable. If this gambit paid off, Kandi could eat omelets every day. If the system was bent on screwing her, she'd just have to think outside of it. Those Za'toon parts were about as far out as she could get.

Having enjoyed the last bite of her breakfast, Kandi went about her morning routine, skipping the rest of her sleep. With eyes being held open only with caffeine, Kandi made the daily meeting at 0900.

"Good morning, everyone. Hope you slept well." She pulled out her datapad and got right to it. "First, E. Borden Rescue and Repair did well at our last auction. I've forwarded Davenport's reports to everyone and transferred your cut to your accounts. We're four hours away from stepping off the jump trail. We will be diverting from there to Europa for a harvest."

The crew, likewise, bore the fruits of restless nights on their faces. Felix watched through half-lidded eyes, while Bob hid his mostly-closed eyes under the brim of his straw hat. Veronica

likely had another bender sort of night, as she sat with one wide bloodshot eye and trembling hands on a coffee cup. Jana's eyes were rimmed with dark circles, bearing the spaced-out gaze of a long night in a gaming headset.

"Beyond that, a run back to Deimos to another auction, stopping at any sites of potential interest along the way for additional salvage." Kandi kept a no-nonsense approach to the mundane business. That familiar look of fatigue was all around her, so she decided to make this part as painless as possible. "From Deimos, we turn back around and do a run through the asteroid belt. Always plenty to pick up there, and we can take it straight back to Deimos to sell. Any questions?" No response from the audience.

"Good. Now, on to more interesting business: the Za'toon devices."

That poured some caffeine into their veins.

"I got some intriguing reports. I'll message them to you, but I'll summarize." Kandi pulled the datapad out of her cargo pocket and flicked her fingertips across the screen. "Wilshire and McCormick have not only discovered some fascinating properties about the metal, but Wilshire has a contact who can get us more parts. That leads me to Davenport, who uncovered a pattern of disappearances. Nothing conclusive that the Za'toon are behind them, but the data stacks up. Three others whom Davenport learned were bidding on behalf of the Za'toon also vanished."

Kandi paced around the room as she spoke, squeezing her hands together. Her blood chilled at the news of disappearances. She continued, speaking in careful tones, "In case I wasn't perfectly clear about our need for the utmost in discretion, I'm sure this illustrates my point. I see all of you looking at me like, 'Wow, Captain, maybe we'll get the chance to disappear, too, for some weird parts that may just add up to be a pile of goat turds, how exciting!' let me ease your fears. There is a signpost up ahead."

She tapped on her datapad. A video popped up on a screen built into the wall. In it, Veronica and Bob are standing in Veronica's lab, both devices on the table before them.

The video rolled for a second, and then Veronica burst into action. "Hello, boys, girls and other entities I might have overlooked, welcome to The Weird Ass World of Science and Shit. I'm your host, Veronica McCormick, and Santa Claus-looking-motherfucker over here is your other host, Dr. Bob Wilshire. Say hello, Bob."

"Hello, Bob," Wilshire answered dutifully, because of course he did. Bob wore a lab coat over his Hawaiian shirt, and a pair of goggles perched on top of his straw hat.

Kandi giggled.

"Watch this," Veronica said. "This line right here," she pointed with her human finger at one of the scopes, "Represents current in milliamps. This is reading what's inside the rhomboid device,"

She pointed to the other device, the one she found on the inverter, currently in Bob's hands, and said, "Now, Dr. Bob, why don't you scoot your holly jolly ass over there with that, and we'll see what happens."

As Bob walked closer and nearer to Veronica, the levels shifted between complete resonance and pure chaos. The farther Bob took the device, the more random their values became. Back and forth he walked, the values stabilizing and destabilizing in sync with him.

"As you can see from my colleague's demonstration," Bob said, "These two parts resonate in proximity. This is the sign we've needed. But we can't figure out anything else until we get more parts."

"Lots more parts. Lots and lots and lots more parts." Veronica grinned. "So get to it, you bastards."

Kandi tapped her commlink and the panel powered down. She looked each crew member in the face as she explained, "As I said, Wilshire has a line on more parts, but we have to run an errand to obtain them. I'll send you the details. Davenport, likewise, found a line on one part, a small one, through a Freenet auction. The seller has no idea what he has—he listed it as an antique drink coaster. I suspect that ignorance is what kept him off the Za'toon radar. In the message I sent, I included photos and the seller's listing."

"Last order of business. I just got a position lock on the emergency beacon that Wilshire set on that Starwing. It leads to somewhere a ways up and out from Saturn — no mans' land. It's continuing to transmit from one place, so we can assume that the Starwing has found its home. If you have any ideas on how to best use this information, please share. In conclusion," Kandi said, looking forward to a few hours' nap before duty calls again, "We have to make some choices soon. We can discuss after you read the message about how we should proceed. Any other questions or comments?"

Jana raised her hand.

"Broussard?"

"Yes... umm... well, what's it all for? What happens when we put these devices together?"

Kandi smiled. "Well, that's the million-Fijacoin question, isn't it?"

# The Birth of a Priestess - 29

The air was still full of choking black smog, drenched with the stench of ash and sulfur. Disnosoft entertainment director, Chloe VanDrees, had just gotten an “all clear” from the medic in the clinic they set up to help victims of the tube collapse tragedy. The doctor had checked her out thoroughly, and other than a few minor burns and bruises, Chloe was one of the lucky ones. Many in the tent had lost large chunks of flesh, hair, and limbs. Many more were hooked up to life support devices. She looked over them and shuddered, but Chloe pushed that frown right down, as she had always said to the park’s guests. In a much better mood now, she said to the doctor, “I was behind the statue, which took most of the blast.”

“Lucky you. I’m glad I was able to save you,” he answered.

Pointing to the warped, melted statue of Pele, the volcano goddess, Chloe smiled sweetly and flipped her highlighted hair out of her face, “She saved me.”

Chloe headed back to her quarters in the quaint executive dome. Though she would miss Io, she hoped she would get a spot on the Mermaid Paradise Island on Europa. Frosty’s Wonderland, a skiing destination in the Dionian mountains would also be wonderful, but she’d need a whole new winter wardrobe.

Oh, shopping! The idea was the best medicine to her soothe her traumatized soul. Chloe daydreamed about fuzzy boots, puffy coats, mittens and beanies as she pulled out her datapad. She tapped a on it, setting her bathtub at home to fill a hot bath to be ready for her.

Once home, Chloe stripped out of her ash-covered clothes. She rinsed off, then relaxed into the calming warmth of the bathtub.

“Music,” she said, “Play Chloe’s ‘Feel Alright.’”

The song swelled from a whispery intro into a thumping dance beat. She closed her eyes and sunk into the water. Her happiness came back to her through the power of music. Quietly at first, then with more passion, Chloe sang along. The song got to that part that she loved so much, the crescendo of arpeggios, the voices of angels.

“Back up thirty seconds.” The last bit played again, back to that beautiful buildup. Up, up and away, she cranked the volume. The song rose to an intense beat, drums rolling and synths humming, then the big breakdown dropped. This was the part where lovers kissed and dancers threw their hands up, oh yeah! And the lyrics she wrote for this part were a particular favorite, no

doubt some of her finest.

*“Where you gonna find me? What you gonna do?*

*Where you gonna find me on Saturday night?*

*When you gonna find me, what you gonna do?*

*You coming to make your baby feel alright?*

*Oooh ahhh Ooooh ahhh OOaaOOaaOO on Saturday night,*

*Oh yeah, baby oooAAooAA baby, you got me feelin' alright.”*

Chloe sang along with her voice on the track. She loved how it sounded after the processing. It really made her natural talent shine through. This was definitely her best song yet. So why didn't it even sell 1,000 copies?

The sales reports and revenue checks broke Chloe's heart. Chloe persevered, because more than anything, she loved the music. The beat must go on. Chloe doubled down on public appearances and charity functions, but nothing brought the numbers that a song this good should have. Not a single sales report made sense.

Chloe clutched her sponge and scowled. At first, she had thought it was the lousy managers, skimming her cut. A lawyer of hers looked into it, but found no evidence of foul play. But, one day many years ago, she got her answer, care of the head of Disnosoft's music marketing. That meeting set her destiny in motion. Kendell Jackson, head of distribution, explained.

“Ms. VanDrees, are you familiar with pirates?” When Chloe shook her head no, he explained. “You need to understand the depths these pirates will go to in order to destroy promising young artists as yourselves. It's not even about money for them! Nobody's making a single coin off piracy. It's about destroying Disnosoft. It's about destroying culture. It's about destroying you.” A dizzying string of flow charts, public service announcements, and adorable cartoons later, Chloe understood.

“Your song had all the hallmarks of a best seller,” Kendell said, “A song for the ages, something that we'd use in commercials, license to other corporations, stream in dance clubs, stores, and sporting events across the system. Catchy lyrics, a unique sound, a solid beat, and a whole lot of heart—just a few of the virtues of your work! But, Ms. VanDrees, pirates stole your work, and once that happens, we cannot control sales or licensing anymore. You are just one of the

many talented artists whose lives pirates ruined.”

This very memory was the same one that had flashed through Chloe’s mind when she thought she’d be burned alive in the blast. This memory was what she was thinking when Pele saved her. But when Chloe looked at that statue, Pele was no longer there. Somebody else was.

Chloe finished her bath, dried off, and wrapped up in her bathrobe. She slid her feet into her silk slippers and padded out to her desktop computer. She poured a glass of wine and logged in to her Disnosoft account, heading straight for the jobs board.

Three times she scanned through the job listings for her qualification level, and three times zero jobs for entertainment directors came up. She saw plenty of listings for Disnosoft jobs, but none of them involved any of the fun stuff that Chloe knew best. Chloe had no place in a desk job; she had a greater purpose. Chloe knew how to create a fun and vibrant environment, she knew how to get a crowd fired up, how to make someone’s vacation magical. These were all desk jobs! Nothing fun about any of this!

Chloe couldn’t stay on medical leave forever, and if she didn’t fit in somewhere in the Disnosoft scheme of things, she’d lose her seniority and stock. There had to be some other way to channel her near-bottomless flow of Disnosoft magic, and it strained her soul to consider how. She rubbed her temples. The soreness crept back into her system from the burns and bruises she endured earlier. The meds were wearing off.

For a moment, she thought about swallowing a handful of the pills the doc gave her and getting an amazing night’s sleep. She’d feel a hell of a lot more ready to deal with the disappointment of having to switch to another department. She had just drained the last of her wine and was about to put down her datapad when an entry on the job board leaped off the page at her.

*Job Title: Unlicensed Media Acquisition Manager*

*Job Description: Do you want to stop piracy and help Disnosoft’s profits soar? We need one high-energy individual who is passionate about protecting music, literature, and movies to lead our retrieval team. Your responsibilities will include tracking and retrieving unlicensed material, producing anti-piracy youth programs, and motivating your fellow employees to be proactive in preventing piracy.*

The wine glass tumbled from Chloe’s fingers and shattered on the tile floor. Her mouth hung open. She read the listing again and again. This. This is why she needed to be released from her duties as entertainment director. This is why Pele saved her. But it wasn’t Pele! That face was Pele’s no longer. Her new face was the face of the dark God, the face of the devourer, the face of the

savior. Chloe heard the name the statue hissed. As it melted, it spoke the sacred name, His new name. He saved her. He saved her so that she may be His priestess. This is why all those people had to burn.

Visions of dark gods with flaming eyes and boundless hunger swirled through Chloe's dreams that night. Chloe's soul soared through the volcano's flames, born with a new purpose.

# Ship of Fools - 30

The Lizzie Borden was a few thousand clicks from Jupiter's closest moon when a stroke of luck appeared. Kandi closed the window on the mystery novel she was enjoying and flipped over to her ship's control interface to check it out.

At the same moment, Bob called over the commlink. "Captain, I'm picking up a disabled ship on the scanners."

"What's up with it?"

"It's a private vessel. Lots of life signs, but they're unstable. The ship appears undamaged, but the engines are offline."

"Are there any other ships in the area?"

"A dandelion freighter and its escort."

"They won't bother with this. More important question: are there any other salvagers in the area?"

"Scanning now."

While she waited, Kandi examined the map. The wreckage field they were aiming for was in the exact opposite direction. It'd be a hell of a detour to check this out.

"No other salvage operations in the area."

"Oh really..." The hamster in Kandi's brain started jet-packing on its wheel. "Get them on the radio. See what's going on over there."

"Will do, Captain."

Ten minutes later, just as Kandi had finished taking a break from her desk to dash to the kitchen to fix herself a sandwich, she got word back from her science officer.

"Captain," snickered Bob, "You aren't going to believe this. It's a bunch of teenagers..." Bob laughed harder. "They're having a party... on a yacht that they — ahem — borrowed from their parents. And they're out of gas." In her mind's eye, Bob's pot belly threatened to pop the buttons off his shirt as he laughed.

Kandi wished she hadn't just bitten into her sandwich at that news. She almost choked,

swallowed the bite, then allowed herself a proper laugh. Then she saw coin, and coin meant freedom. Kandi composed herself and contacted Jana. “Broussard, I’m sending you coordinates. Set a course.”

Forty eight minutes later, her prize came into view. Kandi called on the ship-wide comm. “Salvage operation immanent. All hands on deck.”

A stunning piece of engineering and aesthetics drifted dreamily across the colorful backdrop of Jupiter. The Neslubishi Paragon 8-2000’s arcing wings spread out like a swooping bird from a comet-shaped hull. Polished titanium contained large clear sapphire windows, all in a lean neo-art-deco style. If the creators of the Lizzie had finished her, she might have been as beautiful as the craft Kandi was about to claim.

Kandi tapped on the commlink. “Davenport. One Neslubishi Paragon 8-2000 incoming.”

Felix replied with incredulous delight, “A what, Captain?”

“A yacht, in perfect shape, adrift. Clear enough room so that we don’t dent a hair on it.”

She wanted this catch to be perfect. Her freedom was inside that ship. “Broussard. Launch recovery drones with soft-touch tow cables.”

“Captain!” Jana yelled, leaping out of her chair. “That’s not salvage. There are people on board!”

“Because I’ve been at this a lot longer than you, I’m going to assume that I know the Right of Salvage better than you, Broussard. Yes?” Kandi put on her best go-fuck-yourself smile.

Jana nodded stiffly. Kandi stifled a grin. “The Right of Salvage states that if there is no licensed operator on board the ship, then the ship is considered abandoned and may be salvaged by anyone who claims it. I guarantee you, not a one of them are licensed for that ship. Now, are you going to do your job and stop telling me how to do mine?”

“Yes, Captain.” Jana shut up, her cheeks flushing red. Broussard was still under the impression that this operation ran like an ordinary business. Jana would clue in soon enough.

“Thank you.” Kandi answered.

Jana put on her visor and grabbed the controls, each hand controlling a drone. Two drones swept out from the Lizzie’s sides, whizzed up to the Paragon’s arched wings, and wrapped plexicone-coated cables around them. A slight tug, and the ship fell into line. The drones pulled the lines taut and tethered them to bay 2.

“She’s secured, Captain,” said Jana.

“Excellent, thank you.” Kandi tapped on her commlink. “McCormick. Ensure their life

support has power. Get a gangway attached. I want to see what we netted.”

She didn't miss the fact that Jana was watching her, horrified. That look was all the satisfaction in the galaxy. “Also, check in with some of your pirate friends,” Kandi continued into her commlink, “See if they want any of the human cargo.”

“Will do, Captain,” replied Veronica. It was nice to be able to count on Veronica for a wide variety of support.

Kandi eyed Jana, who hurriedly turned back to her navigational computer, and no, Captain, was not eavesdropping at all. “Thanks, McCormick.” Kandi tapped the commlink again. “Wilshire, stand by in the medical facilities. There might be bodies and plenty of them.”

“Ten-four, Cap,” Bob answered.

Jana gasped, then quickly shut up.

Kandi grabbed her coat. She buttoned it neatly, ran her fingers through her long pink locks to straighten them out, and turned to Jana. “Get me all the specs you can on that ship as well as its registry information, Broussard.”

It took Jana a few seconds to shift gears and mumble out a “Yes, Captain.” Kandi finally allowed herself that laugh she's been needing as she left the bridge. She walked to the bays that lined the back inner crescent of the ship. Once at bay two, she followed the long accordion-walled tube that connected the Lizzie to its prey. For politeness' sake, Kandi knocked on the door.

A young man with tousled hair, no shirt, and a bottle of beer answered. “Pizza's here!” He stumbled off on bare feet, down the hallway, shouting, “Who ordered pizza... pizza's here... did anyone order pizza?” The sound continued until it faded into incoherence. Kandi blinked. These kids get pizza delivered by humans? How much money did their parents have, anyhow?

Kandi stepped into the ship, breathing in the swampy funk. How well she knew that scent, that potent cocktail of debauchery. The smell of sex, sweat, and long nights filled with bad decisions had plenty of deep carvings in Kandi's neural pathways. As she explored the ship's halls to seek out the closest thing to a responsible party, Kandi ran her fingers along an anodized blue rail. Beautiful details, a first class craft. She traced her fingers along the rail as she navigated toward the ship's lounge. Finding the “captain” of this vessel should be as easy as following the thumping bass.

Kandi's commlink flashed with a message from Jana. “The ship belongs to Conrad and Aziza Knox, both of whom are currently away. Profiles are attached.” Kandi gave it a read... very interesting. Aziza Knox: a dandelion trade representative, currently on Earth. Conrad Knox: a Yumatech media analyst, currently at a Yoga and Shamanic Discovery retreat on Venus. A sleazeball who sells out her people to aliens, and another sleazeball who manufactures consent for it. In other words, total shitbags.

Kandi smirked and tucked her datapad in her pocket. She followed the music past four cabin doors, three of which were closed with loud thumping of their own going on within, and one that was partially open. Through the crack of the door, writhed a large mess of human flesh, and at least five distinct sets of body parts. Good times.

Kandi had no interest in being a grumpy old killjoy—just cashing in and heading to the next harvest would suffice nicely. At the end of the hallway, Kandi entered a debauched rotunda, filled with couches, chairs, tables, people in various states of consciousness and empty bottles. Three dozen bodies, at least, decorated the floors, furniture, and walls. Some of the bodies were naked. Some were wearing clothes that weren't theirs. Some were wearing clothes in the wrong places on their bodies. All of them, without exception, were roaringly intoxicated. None of them seemed to notice her presence. They went about their usual business of dancing, fucking, drinking, smoking, and laughing, egged on by the music. Did they even know where they were?

Babysitting a bacchanalia wasn't making Kandi a single millicoin, so she got to the point. "Attention, attention please." The toe of her absurdly intricate boot clinked against something glass. Kandi reached to pick it up. The label indicated that the bottle once contained a 100 year old Merlot. The little shits didn't fuck around when it came to partying. Ouch.

Nobody looked Kandi's way. The bare chested man whom she had met earlier staggered back into the room, still shouting, "Pizza's here. Anyone order pizza?" Hearing no response he wandered down a corridor, in hopes of finding the mystery pizza-orderer.

Kandi spoke again, louder, and stomped her foot on the ground to get the attention of a few drunks who were arguing about a cartoon character's sexual preferences. "I said, attention!" Kandi shouted. Faces turned hazily toward her. "I salvaged your ship. The parents of the unauthorized borrower of this vessel are being tracked down as we speak. If you would like to plead your case before them, and beg for amnesty for the shit pile of trouble I foresee for you, please raise your hand."

A sea of stupefied faces. Kandi tried again, louder and simpler. "Whoever Aziza and Conrad Knox's crotch-spawn is, please stand up."

A mess of a gal with tousled black curls, tiara, and a dress with a broken shoulder strap stood up. "I'm Yasmina Knox, and you aren't on the guest list." She hiccuped. "Unless you brought me a graduation present. Did you?" Her eyes roved over Kandi's attire, "Can you even afford one?"

Clearly, this child did not understand the gravity of her situation. Kandi continued to smile, oh so very calmly.

A dude slouched in a recliner lifted his head to check in. He took the boxer shorts off his face and asked, "Wait, what? The maid wants to stay for the party?"

“Who hired her?” a girl laying on the pool table slurred. “I thought you had a maidbot, Yasmina. Human maids are lame.”

Recliner dude flung the boxers at Kandi, hitting her square in the chest. “Go do the laundry or something.”

Kandi Kumari was boiling over with sweetness, from her soles of her thick-booted feet to the braids on her sunshine-and-cotton-candy head. She peeled the boxers off her chest and dropped them on the floor. “Eww.” She tapped on her commlink, smiling. “Dr. Wilshire, please meet me at the most recent harvest with your medical kit, all the stabilizers and detoxifiers you’ve got. You’ll need a handful of STD kits and morning-after abortion pills, too. McCormick, cut all power to the ship except life support and lighting. No music. No electronics. No network, comms, TV, or games. I want them to have nothing but silence and the bleak horror of their own raw, naked thoughts. Davenport, Broussard, I want every last passenger IDed. And if anyone sees any bottles of hundred year old wine, I claim them by Right of Salvage.”

Kandi strode off desecrated yacht. She stepped to her office, sat down and typed a message to the Knoxes.

*From: CapnKumari@eborden.sal*

*To: AKnox@Jericho.ark and CKnox@Yumatech.net*

*Message: We rescued up your vessel, The Neslubishi Paragon 8-2000, ID 23r6ef34-44rzn3, after finding it disabled, out of fuel and in orbit around Jupiter. Enclosed are the details of the operation. Please reply with the address where you would like it towed, and E. Borden Rescue and Repair will park it at your door, safe and sound. Thank you. We look forward to working with you.*

*All the best,*

*Candace Kumari, CEO, E. Borden Rescue and Repair*

Seventeen minutes later, five minutes behind the expected transmission lag from Earth, came the reply:

*From: Aknox@Jericho.ark*

*To: CapnKumari@eborden.sal, Cknox@Yumatech.net*

*Message: Captain Kumari, thank you for contacting me, but there must be some*

*mistake. I'm currently on Earth, my husband is on a retreat on Venus. Our ship is parked at home on Europa. There's no way it could be where you say it is. How did you get my information?*

“Ahh yes, not my perfect baby.” Kandi smirked and tapped her commlink. “Davenport, Broussard, get some photos to me ASAP, a few that show the current state of affairs, but nothing so bad that the parents won't want to rescue her after all.”

Minutes later, a few dozen images appeared in her inbox. After scrolling through photos of people posing with gang signs of questionable origin and half-empty bottles, she found a photo of Yasmina, sprawled on a couch with a bottle of wine in her hand. The image contained enough of the rotunda's details to place her undoubtedly on the Paragon. Kandi selected a few more choice photos that painted a sufficient picture.

*From: CapnKumari@eborden.sal*

*To: AKnox@Jericho.ark and CKnox@Yumatech.net*

*Message: My apologies for the mix-up. Since this vessel is not yours, and not currently occupied by a licensed operator for this vessel class, I will claim it by Right of Salvage, and be on my way.*

*Attachments (type:photo): epicparty.1, poshkidsgonewild.2, winewomenandsong.3, wtfyasmina.4, drunkinaknox.5*

She hit send. Kandi dropped the fake smile of professionalism, making room on her face for the real smile of satisfaction. Fourteen minutes later, the reply came.

*From: Aknox@Jericho.ark*

*To: CapnKumari@eborden.sal, Cknox@Yumatech.net*

*Message: I see. Very well. Proceed with the operation. How much to get this started?*

Perfect. Time to close the sale.

*From: CapnKumari@eborden.sal*

To: AKnox@Jericho.ark and CKnox@Yumatech.net

Message: Thank you for your prompt reply. The ship needed immediate attention. It was running on auxiliary power; soon to run out. We used soft-touch cables to protect the finish and have inspected the interior. Systems are all functional, except for an overflowing toilet that has a sex toy lodged in it. The ship's interior has extensive damage, but cleaning bodily fluids from carpet is beyond the scope of what we do. All of the passengers required medical aid, which our ship's doctor administered.

Kandi smiled, a deeper kind of smile, something that showed the glow that started to swell within her. That glow spelled hope. But again, she couldn't be foolish. This might be her ticket out, but getting greedy is a sure way to ruin everything. She had to ask for enough, but she wasn't about to push her luck. Kandi tapped on her datapad, checking out what ships like the Paragon cost new. Two and a half million. Kandi drummed her fingernails on her desk, contemplating. The more she thought about it, two and a half million was a perfectly reasonable amount to ask.

<i>Rescue Operation Base Fee:</i>	<i>2,270,000 Fj</i>
<i>Soft-Touch cables, drone deployment:</i>	<i>15,000 Fj</i>
<i>102 first aid examinations:</i>	<i>43,900 Fj</i>
<i>102 blood stabilizer injections for alcohol overdose:</i>	<i>52,000 Fj</i>

Kandi had to stop for a moment. Her fingers were trembling too much from the laughter. At this point, she was just making up numbers.

<i>21 emergency liver repair treatments:</i>	<i>83,370 Fj</i>
<i>39 STD booster vaccinations:</i>	<i>12,300 Fj</i>
<i>4 abortifacient administrations:</i>	<i>13,000 Fj</i>
<i>3 broken bones set:</i>	
<i>19,000 Fj</i>	

*Total:*  
*2,508,570 Fj.*

*We offer free towing within a 20,000 km distance of recovery location. Additional distance is billed at 2000 Fijacoin per 1000km. We will begin recovery operations with a 50% down payment, and require payment in full upon delivery. I have attached the full contract and invoice for your consideration.*

*I look forward to working with you.*

*Sincerely,*

*Candace Kumari, CEO, E. Borden Rescue and Repair*

The reply arrived fourteen minutes later:

*From: Aknox@Jericho.ark*

*To: CapnKumari@eborden.sal, Cknox@Yumatech.net*

*Message: I can see that you're a smart businesswoman, Captain Kumari, which is why I would like to offer you an even better deal. I work with the trade networks. You run a salvage operation. I could get you lots of exposure to all sorts of the right people who could boost your business success. Have you heard about the patented Horseshoe Method? I wrote the book myself. It can help you reach potential clients and take your business to levels you hadn't thought possible. I'll get you a free spot on an exclusive weekend-long seminar. That will not only more than cover the costs, but will give you a lifetime of priceless business experience. Would you prefer a location on Venus or Dione? We have spots open as early as next week.*

*Yours Truly,*

*Aziza Knox*

Kandi burst out laughing. Wow. Mom and daughter, two jackasses from the same fuckwit farm. Kandi handed the datapad to Jana, who was compiling a list of the ship's denizens. "Can you believe this crap?"

Jana looked at it and smiled, "She sounds a lot like my mom, only less bitchy," and handed it back. "Almost done with the guest list. Lots of kids of high level management folks. One kid's

mother is a senator, another kid is a general's grandkid."

Shaking her head, Kandi checked the datapad. "Is this how kids today act? Seriously? Do you do that sort of thing?"

"That's my sister's crowd, not mine. They never invited me to their parties, either. I'm embarrassed you'd even ask."

Kandi clapped a hand on Jana's shoulder, "Don't be. You've got way more class." Her commlink flashed, and she checked her messages:

*From: CKnox@Yumatech.net*

Oooh. Finally getting to hear from Big Daddy Conrad now.

*To: CapnKumari@eborden.sal, AKnox@Jericho.ark*

*Message: 2,508,570 Fijacoin? Are you mad? I could buy a whole new yacht for that. I am appalled that you interrupted my shamanic journey for this nonsense. I was about to make a breakthrough with my shadow self and find wholeness in my strategies for maximum synergistic growth, and you want me to deal with this? No. We aren't paying it. Just connect a fuel cell to maintain life support and I'll have one of my assistants fetch it. I've got to get back to my spirit guides now. Lower my vibrations no further. Namaste.*

Kandi smiled wider, and typed her response:

*From: CapnKumari@eborden.sal*

*To: AKnox@Jericho.ark, CKnox@Yumatech.net*

*Message: Of course. We have a spare fuel cell in our inventory that will add 3-5 days of power at minimal usage—lights and life support only. That should give you plenty of time to get to your vessel. I have attached the updated invoice:*

*Emergency fuel cell, parts and installation:*

*2,270,000 Fj*

<i>Soft-Touch cables, drone deployment:</i>	<i>15,000 Fj</i>
<i>102 first aid examinations:</i>	<i>43,900 Fj</i>
<i>102 blood stabilizer injections for alcohol overdose:</i>	<i>52,000 Fj</i>
<i>21 emergency liver repair treatments:</i>	<i>83,370 Fj</i>
<i>39 STD booster vaccinations:</i>	<i>12,300 Fj</i>
<i>4 abortifacient administrations:</i>	<i>13,000 Fj</i>
<i>3 broken bones set:</i>	
<i>19,000 Fj</i>	
<i>Total:</i>	
<i>2,508,570 Fj.</i>	

*Again, 50% down payment and we will get to work attaching the backup fuel cell to your ship. Payment address is at the bottom of this message. Thank you, and I look forward to working with you.*

*Yours Truly,*

*Candace Kumari, CEO, E. Borden Rescue and Repair*

Nice. Mom, dad, and kid—all dicks. If Kandi had any moral compunction against this course of action, it had long since taken the last shuttle to Fuckthatistan. Twelve minutes later, the response came.

*From: Aknox@Jericho.ark*

*To: CapnKumari@eborden.sal, Cknox@Yumatech.net*

*Message: But that's the same price as the first quote! Forget it! What kind of game are you playing at here?*

*From: CapnKumari@eborden.sal*

*To: AKnox@Jericho.ark, CKnox@Yumatech.net*

*Message: How astute of you to notice. I understand your position, but I wish you'd reconsider. Since this is your decision, however, we will salvage it. If you wish to purchase it back, please check the Solsys auction schedule for E. Borden Rescue and Repair, though I would recommend hurrying. This beauty won't last long on the auction block, even with the puked-up carpets. The humans on board will be sold to pirates, or perhaps just left with the authorities.*

Thirteen minutes later,

*From: CKnox@Yumatech.net*

*To: CapnKumari@eborden.sal, AKnox@Jericho.ark*

*Message: Thieves. You are all thieves, scum of the universe pigs. We will not pay. You will cut loose our ship at once and I will send a team to retrieve it, with a fuel cell attached, or I will be contacting my lawyers. And you're lucky I am not sending you a bill for interrupting my retreat with your scams.*

“Mmmm, yes, legalities, the typical refuge of the ruling class. However, you ain't got a peg leg to stand on, mate. Right of Salvage. It's mine. Why don't you just make it easy on yourself and give me my two and a half mil, mate?” Kandi laughed as she tapped out her response.

*From: CapnKumari@eborden.sal*

*To: AKnox@Jericho.ark, CKnox@Yumatech.net*

*Message: Thank you for your concern. However, because I care about you as a person, and because I run an honest business here, I will save you the trouble of sending your dogs after me.*

*The Right of Salvage states in the third clause, “Any ship found disabled with no licensed operator on board is considered salvage by the Terran Solar System Alliance, and is free for any salvager to harvest.” It's as clear as that. No licensed operator, adrift and disabled, so by all rights, this ship is salvage.*

*Speaking of authorities, I'm sure they'd be interested to learn that your daughter has in her possession no less than twelve illegal substances. I'm sure that Disnosoft Tonite would eat up all these great photos of her and her friends. Did you know Yasmina hangs out with*

*spawn of senators, generals, and CEOs? What you saw is a mere fraction of the damage this unfortunate situation could cause. I have hundreds more photos. Please, help me help you save yourself the embarrassment. I haven't got all day. Send the down payment to me, and we can make this problem go away. Otherwise, I must be off with my salvage and on to other business.*

*I look forward to doing business with you.*

*Sincerely,*

*Candace Kumari, CEO, E. Borden Rescue and Repair*

The packets she hoped for chased along toward her at the speed of light. Kandi's commlink flashed twelve minutes later. The first half of the payment just cleared into her account. The vise of fear that had been clamped around Kandi's soul for days now finally released. Kandi melted into her flame job chair, every muscle unwinding with the relief that flowed through her. "Freedom," she breathed as she typed one last message.

*From: CapnKumari@eborden.sal*

*To: AKnox@Jericho.ark, CKnox@Yumatech.net*

*Message: Thank you for your payment. I will send you a final invoice when we are finished delivering your ship. Payment in full is due at that time. Thank you for choosing E. Borden Rescue and Repair.*

*Yours truly,*

*Candace Kumari, CEO, E. Borden Rescue and Repair*

# Setting a Course - 31

While reading the morning's crew briefing message, Felix's eyes nearly popped out of his head when he saw the financial report for the day. Two and a half million Fijacoin in one day. One of the things Felix liked best about this operation was his captain's ability to know gold when she saw it. After he took care of restocking and refueling, the coffers still had plenty left over. Felix poured himself a cup of hot water and steeped a bag of orange pekoe in it, smiling with satisfaction.

With this kind of money, they wouldn't have to work for three years, and that's if they squandered it. He nodded his appreciation to Captain Kumari; her methods might be unorthodox, but she knew opportunity when she saw it. Felix had no intention of squandering his cut. He had already opened up his Freenet datapad and busied himself researching the financial forums for the best ways to invest his cut of the 2.5 million Fija. His eyes misted over as he pondered the possibilities of what he could do with more coin than had ever graced his account in his life.

He read the next message. Unlicensed use of Neslubishi equipment. 2 million Fija in total fines, to be paid in a few short weeks. Felix frowned as he read it, and he pushed his fingers to his temples, sighing, especially when he got to the part about his impending fine labor that the captain never bothered to mention to him. Disgusted, he put the datapad down, grabbed his mug and stalked out of the door.

Not looking where he was going, he didn't notice the fat guy in the Hawaiian shirt; not even his usual pungent aura forewarned Felix to his presence.

"Whoa, slow your roll, good buddy," Bob said, "Where you going?"

Felix growled through gritted teeth.

Bob frowned, and held out his hands. He said, "Hand," to Felix, and Felix knew what to do. He put his hand in Bob's, and Bob worked at massaging it. A calm washed over Felix. Bob's stubby fingers dug into the tight muscles in his hands. Felix sighed, letting his fingers uncurl and relax. He saw Bob reaching for the pistol on Felix's hip. Felix didn't move to stop him. Bob tucked the pistol in his belt loop, then looked up at his crew-mate. "Davenport, you're the best I've seen at what you do. Don't go messing that up, man. What's wrong?"

Felix let forth an impressively long string of obscenities about everything that was wrong with the Solar system, in general first, then went into the specifics about how they almost had the break of a lifetime, only for it to vanish. "And, to top it all off," Felix said, "The captain didn't even bother

to tell us we were all about to be screwed."

"Would it have made a difference? Or would that knowledge have freaked out everyone on the ship so bad that we would've lost our cool?"

Felix narrowed his eyes. "Did you know about this, Wilshire?"

"Nope. And like I said, it doesn't matter. I dig that you're mad, but think about this. We've got enough to make it for a couple weeks without work. This little windfall, even the modest amount that's left over, means we can focus on these Za'toon parts for a while without having to run to harvests and auctions." Bob continued pushing his fingers into Felix's hands, working the tension out.

Felix sighed, his heart rate returning to a more reasonable level. "Yeah, Wilshire, I hear you. I just... "

"Hoping for something more? We all were, we all do. And we'll get it, someday. You've got to trust in the great flow."

Felix's face twitched, and he muttered, "Jake Hampton knew we had that hardware, despite McCormick having it firewalled and locked down. Is it OK if I murder him?"

"Sure, man. Just don't get caught. But you'd probably be better off just letting it go and trusting in that everything works out as it should. I have a better idea. How about we have a beer and figure out how to adjust our sails, rather than bemoaning the fact that we can't control the flow."

"I get it, I'm just pissed. The great flow does nothing but flush us down the toilet."

"Listen, we have a line on more parts. I got the full details from Nadya earlier regarding those parts. She and her associates have half a dozen artifacts, including a couple larger ones. They will trade us the artifacts for us retrieving a crate for them, but we need to hurry. We need to get to it before Disnosoft. Disnosoft doesn't know the crate's location, but is currently searching. Thankfully, they can't allocate a lot of resources to the task, as their stock is struggling and shareholders are losing faith."

"How does this Nadya person know all of this? And who is she?" Felix frowned, "You're putting an awful lot of trust in her. I want to go full speed ahead on this project as much as anyone else, but we're talking potentially tangling with Disnosoft. I'm not sure I'm ready for that kind of commitment. Your findings are encouraging, and I agree that we need more to see what we can learn from it. However, the part on Venus is closer, and we have some repairs and restocking we need to do in the meantime. We can't chase crates on empty stomachs. So, why not we wait until we are done with all of that, and consider the mission after? That will also give you and McCormick time to learn from the device I found there."

Felix's commlink beeped. He pulled his modified datapad out of his pocket and checked on

the auction. It was almost done, and the price still remained pitifully low. “Hey, gimme just a second, OK?” With twenty seconds left on the auction, Felix entered his bid of 0.3 Venucoin, well over the last bid, but still a modest sum. A flash on his datapad moments later let Felix know he’d entered the winning bid. He sent contact arrangements to the seller, with instructions to meet him at the coffee shop at the Skylift Mall. He smiled. This victory was cold comfort against losing two million Fija, but at least he won something out of the day. “Wilshire, we have a third piece.”

Bob patted him on back. “See, isn’t that better than killing people?”

“No, but it’ll do.”

“One more piece might be exactly what McCormick and I need to crack this. Once we do, two million Fija will look like a kid’s allowance. Let’s find the captain and set the course.”

The pair started toward the bridge. As they rounded a corner, they saw Captain Kumari with Jana, both walking toward her office. Felix dashed ahead to catch the captain’s attention.

“Yes?” the captain asked him.

“I found another part.” He pulled the datapad out of his pocket and showed it to her. “It’s on Venus. And I got it for cheap. I think this one is safe to pick up, so long as we’re discreet and stay in public areas.”

The captain asked, “Is there any reason we shouldn’t stop at Venus first to get this part before running the errand that Amestra set us to?”

“Disnosoft’s looking for the crate, too,” said Bob, “But according to Nadya, they haven’t had any luck finding its location, but I’d suggest not screwing around too long.”

“How long would it take us to get to Venus?” Felix asked.

Jana pulled a datapad out of her cargo pants and tapped on it. “A little less than a day.”

“And we still don’t have the coordinates from Amestra?” asked Captain Kumari.

Bob shook his head, “She won’t say until we are ready to go. But she said that it’s on the inside of the asteroid belt, so we won’t have to go too far to get to it.”

Captain Kumari pursed her lips, “Since Amestra has been kind enough to only supply us with the vaguest of vagueries, I say we take the known path first. I’d rather have more parts to start researching immediately. I don’t know how far or how much trouble this crate is going to be, but in less than a day, we can have another piece in hand. The sooner we can figure out what it is, the sooner we can figure out how to cash in on it. Hit Venus first, then we’ll go after the crate. Any objections?”

Bob shook his head. Jana shrugged. Felix answered, “None here. I’ll make the

arrangements to get the part.”

Captain Kumari smiled, “Nice work, Davenport.” She started off down the hallway, Jana following her.

Felix turned to Bob and held out his hand, “May I have my pistol back now please?”

“Only if you promise me you’ll meditate every day and learn to chill out.”

“Fine. Keep it.” Felix tucked his hands in his pockets and headed back to his quarters.

# Pi in the Sky - 32

The gleaming tower soared high above the Venusian dome peeked out from the clouds that swirled in a violent green thunderstorm. Jana flexed her arms in the seat's sensors, guiding the Lizzie toward the docking platform. "E. Borden Rescue and Repair, Terran Empire commercial vessel, Lizzie Borden, requesting to dock," Jana called to the dock controller.

Three seconds later, she heard, "Lizzie Borden, proceed to bay 73-R." Jana leaned forward, steering the Lizzie toward the platform. This far down the dock meant a long walk to the elevator, but Jana preferred that. It means none of the gossips around here would see her getting off of this beast of a ship. Once plugged into the refueling station, Jana took off her visor and slid out of the pilot's seat. She gave her arms and legs a long stretch, and tilted her neck from side to side with a satisfying crack of bones. Once she re-oriented to having her senses end at her skin, Jana headed out of the bridge, down the palm-tree-carpeted hallway, toward her room.

At the next crossing of hallways, Felix and Veronica stepped around the corner, chatting. They paused when they saw Jana. Veronica tilted her head at her, such that the blue LED just above her cybernetic eye was blinding her. She spoke with a strange civility. "Hey, Broussard. We've got a few hours to kill 'til we meet our buyer. We're going to hit the arcade. Wanna join us?"

Jana stared at the duo, and shook her head. They're being civil? Must be the Venusian air... or all of these damn monks stalking the streets. Recovering from her moment of shock, Jana answered, "Thank you. I'd love to show you how it's done, but I'm meeting my folks for brunch. Next time?"

Felix nodded. "Next time. Have a nice brunch." The two continued on their way.

Jana headed to her room. She stripped off her uniform: her cherished crew jacket, her convenient many-pocketed cargo pants, her comfortable blue boots with the squeaky soles, and her plain tank top, ideal for giving her body a good interface with which to communicate with the ship. The parents required a different kind of uniform.

She stepped into the shower and turned on the hot water, letting it run through her hair and across her face. Venus was just another world among worlds to her now. Jana had traveled a lot as a kid, back and forth to Dione to visit family, on a vacation to the Disnosoft Volcano Adventure Park on Io once, and to Earth on a field trip with her school. But Jana had never seen Solsys from the perspective of a regular citizen, living and working. Up until recently, Jana had been only a tourist.

Jana finished showering, dried off, and wrapped the towel around her. She opened the closet doors and rifled among the few dressy outfits she had brought with her, among them the confining skirt and uncomfortable jacket that she wore during her interview. Jana grabbed a gray checkered dress, another Elaine hand-me-down. She zipped up the dress which hung in a flattering flare around her hips, sweeping to a knee-length hemline trimmed with white ribbon. From her jewelry box, she picked a sapphire solitaire necklace to add a touch of sparkle to the dress' softly curved neckline. She pushed her mess of hair from her face, and tied it back with a scarf. Jana slipped on the kitten heels she hadn't worn since they got stuck in the catwalk's grating while she toured the ship. Jana checked herself out in the mirror. Yep, she looked like a proper (enough) Venusian. Gag.

She stepped out of the airlock and headed to the elevators. Once on the surface, she headed up the busy industrial segment of Wharf street toward the mall. As she approached the commercial district, the lavender tickled her nose, the ever present bloom that sweetened Venusian air.

Jana passed the park near the mall, where there were dozens of people chanting and waving signs. "Tax the Landwalkers!" "Protect Za'toon Dandelions!" "Shame on Dowbisco!" "No Xenophobic Dandelion Tax!" Jana stopped and stared at them, reading and re-reading the signs to make sure she got them right. Her eyes scanned through the crowd, and she spotted a few of familiar faces, some of the other idealists she knew from high school. But their signs made no sense, no matter which way she added them up.

Jana walked over to a young woman holding a sign that read "No Nutrisoy on Earth!" and asked, "Why not?"

The woman glared, wide-eyed, at Jana, "What do you mean, why not?"

"Why can't the Earth grow both?"

"Ugh. Another ignorant xenophobe. Because the Za'toon need as many dandelions as they can to save their species, and they can't grow them anywhere else." The woman sneered.

"But growing them off planet means the prices will be too high for the people of Earth to afford to eat...."

The woman cut her off quickly, and held her sign protectively in front of her. "I don't talk to sheep."

"But I'm not a..."

"I don't talk to sheep!" the woman screeched.

Jana backed away, trying to wrap her mind around what just happened. She walked a while longer, heading toward the blue tubular light near the center of the open air mall. As Jana

approached the light formed into the symbol for pi, its long legs and top bar formed around a doorway into an elevator foyer. Her heels were killing her, even though she took the moving sidewalks for most of the trip. Another 50 meters of suffering, and she entered the foyer. A perky woman with highlighted hair and a chic blue dress looked over her and said, "If you're here to make a delivery, please go to the employee entrance on Wharf Street."

Jana's face tightened.

"Are you someone's driver, here to pick them up? Shall I call them?" the hostess answered, avoiding the gaze of Jana's narrowed eyes.

Jana pressed her hands on the podium and leaned in. A crooked smile spread across her freckled cheeks. "I'm here to have brunch. Have James and Gabrielle Broussard arrived yet?"

"My apologies. Please follow me." The hostess backed off, and led Jana onto the elevator. Jana swore she could see the hostess rolling her eyes as the door slid shut. The lift whooshed upward, and despite Jana's familiarity with g-forces in many different directions, her stomach fluttered anyhow.

Pi, Venus' premiere "Pie in the Sky" restaurant, featured three thousand square meters of dining elegance with a stunning view of Venus below, and the planets, sun, and stars above. The top of the restaurant pushed right against the edge of the dome, giving an outstanding view of the clouds above and the ragged landscape beyond civilization's edge. The designers sought a perfect harmony of nature, sun, and sky in their creation, so they surrounded the edge of the platform with palm trees and tropical plants which bloomed all year with giant pink, red, gold, and purple blossoms. Cylindrical steel waiterbots buzzed about the scattering of tables that dotted the room. In the center of the restaurant, a round platform rose, surrounded by more tropical plants and flashing lights. Atop this platform, a jazz quartet played, nothing too boring as to put the twenty-somethings sipping on mimosas to sleep while being nothing too funky for the fifty-somethings stopping in before yoga. The dome rotated at one revolution per hour, too slowly to feel, but fast enough to give the guests a view of the landscape from every possible angle.

Jana had a hard time finding her parents among the swaths of people. A red-fingernailed hand waved from a dining table on the opposite side of the room. The hostess led her toward them. Jana's parents stood up and took Jana's hands.

"Jana!" her mother said as she embraced her youngest daughter. Gabrielle Broussard wore her usual, a real silk blouse with some awful floral print on it. For a woman in her mid-fifties, she looked like she could be Jana's sister, thanks to the miracle face creams Mom traded her loyalty points to the Za'toon for. The tight bun atop her head, though, gave away that this woman wasn't a member of Jana's generation. "Good to see you."

"Nice to see you, Jana," came the more stoic response from her father, a tall man with a salt

and pepper black hair and a neatly trimmed beard.

“Same! Feels like it’s been forever!” Jana smiled brightly. The three slid into chairs and picked up menus.

Jana tried to not salivate on the menu. Her pay didn’t afford her much real food, and she was damn sick of shipboard staples such as Nutrisoy cheese puffs and pizza rolls. Eggs, bacon, cheese, and yes, please, a glass of real orange juice. Jana could have ordered everything on the menu. At this point, Jana couldn’t even care that the sausage was augmented with Nutrisoy filler, it was at least mostly real, and the best she had smelled in months. Jana glanced up from hungrily eying the beautiful selections and saw her parents watching her curiously.

“Sorry, I skipped breakfast this morning to get an extra round of racquetball in, so I’m starved,” said Jana. “Anyhow, how’s life?”

She and her parents chatted over a delicious brunch with a gorgeous view of the mountains that stretched across the Lakshmi Planum. Appetizers of smoked salmon with avocado came out first, and the first round of chat covered all of the basics. Her father was annoyed as usual about politics, this time over the latest attacks on the dandelion industry by government regulators.

“They want the dandelion growers to cover the taxes for the extra military escorts the freighters have been needing as of late,” scowled James. “Dowbisco’s still holding on to a few thousand acres in Siberia, but they’re the last big holdout. They’ll cave soon. Shareholders are up in arms. But those all of those American and Russian operation, and those damn religious cults, they are all still refusing to convert, and that’s the bigger problem.”

“So, why tax the Nutrisoy growers? They don’t need nearly as much protection as the Za’toon freighters,” Jana asked.

“Because, Jana,” her father answered, snide as always, “When the Za’toon first arrived, they said that if we convert Earth one hundred percent to dandelions, they’d give us a better price on the crops.” Jana’s eyes narrowed. “And so long as the Nutrisoy throwbacks aren’t getting with the program and getting into offshore production, we aren’t getting that better rate which would easily pay the taxes for escorts.”

“But offshore production means that the people of Earth won’t be able to afford...” Jana bit her tongue. Not going to get into it. “Well, I’m sure you have nothing to worry about. Stuff like that always passes.” She reached for the pot of butter and started smearing it on a piece of toast.

“Yes, anyhow. Speaking of freighters, Gabrielle, would you call your friend over at Yumatech? See if she can’t spare a few more fine-laborers for my new transport.”

“I’ll do it later, dear,” answered her mother, who was lost in watching the band.

Jana stared at her father and shook her head.

“Well, you’re the space cadet here, Jana... or shall I call you Captain Jana yet?” James said. About damn time he changed the topic. “I’m about to make a purchase, adding a new freighter to the fleet. Have you got any opinions on the latest and greatest for hauling crops?”

Her father was asking her professional opinion? Jana beamed. “Freighters aren’t really my area of expertise, but I’ll tell you what I can.” She bit into a forkful of fresh hash browns sprinkled with rosemary and closed her eyes, appreciating the flavors. Oh yeah, the ruse. She almost forgot. Chill on savoring the food. Jana straightened up in her chair. “For runs out to the Za’toon rendezvous stations, you’re going to need something with an engine built for stamina. Regularly running a daily driver like that will wear it out, and you won’t get but a few years’ life out of it.”

James Broussard watched her, tapping his fingertips together. Jana continued, delighted to be geeking out with Dad. “Now, you won’t get much in the way of handling if you’re going with one of these workhorse engines, so no mucking around off the jump trails near the asteroid belt.”

“I wasn’t planning on taking it off-road, Jana.”

Harsh. Jana’s cheeks burned hot with embarrassment. She looked everywhere but at her father... All the people in their suits. Even the young among them had their lives set before them. Her father’s life was his business, and it carved into every aspect of his life, never to change. Hers was on the cusp of it being exactly she wanted. He was owned by his job. She owned hers. And suddenly, Jana allowed herself a smile. She belonged someplace in this world, and it was amazing. It fit, for once, not awkwardly like a teenager trying to convince her parents to let her have a party, but comfortably, like an adult choosing her own way. It was her turn to tell them who she was.

Mum had a faraway look on her face. So long as it looked nice, had a comfortable interior, and got her there within a reasonable amount of time, she didn’t care. Her father, on the other hand, forgot about the food in front of him while he focused on his daughter’s explanation. Since her father made no motion to take up the conversation, Jana took a bite of the warm, buttery grits, then continued, mentally pushing aside her father’s taunt.

“Now, for a freighter, you’re going to be doing some long distances and most of that will be along jump trails. Turbulence is rare, but it does happen, so having a top of the line pilot’s chair with excellent sensors can make the difference between a bumpy ride and a smooth one. It costs a little extra, but in the long run, it’s worth every coin.”

“Fascinating,” murmured James Broussard, reaching for the pot of raspberry jam. He dipped the knife in the jam and pulled a lump of sugary red preserves out. James smeared the jam on the toast. “And what about your ship? What kind is it again?”

“It’s a Neslubishi Zephyr 9900, one of their Diamond class ships,” answered Jana, taking a sip of her coffee.

“How’s it ride?” James put the toast down on his plate and picked up another piece, and began to add jam meticulously to that one, too.

“Pretty sweet. Got a great sensor suite, so it’s super sensitive. It almost seems to know which way I want to go before I even move,” laughed Jana. “Engine’s nothing too fast, but it doesn’t need to be. People are sightseeing on this, not running errands or delivering shipments.” She scooped up another forkful of hash browns.

“Hmm. How’s she compare to that Boemartin cruiser I bought a couple years ago?”

“Eh,” said Jana with a shrug, “Apples and oranges, really. Yours isn’t meant for carrying dozens of people, and doesn’t need the extra gravitational generators and life support.”

“Huh,” answered James without looking up from his work at covering every bit of visible bread with jam. “Interesting. You know, my pilot wrecked that ship just the other day.”

“Oh no! Why didn’t you tell me? Are you OK?”

“I am, but the ship isn’t. Sheared the wing on a piece of space junk. I thought those garbage collectors—excuse me—salvage operators were supposed to pick up junk in space so this doesn’t happen.” James handed the second piece of toast to his wife, who sat beside him, also staring at Jana.

Jana quietly sipped her coffee.

“Anyhow,” her father continued, “I was wondering, you wouldn’t happen to know any good salvagers in the area who might be able to retrieve the Dandy Lion for me, would you?”

Jana shook her head tightly. “Afraid not, but I could look one up for you if you like...”

Her father interrupted. “No need. I see that this operation, E. Borden Rescue and Repair, is docked here today. Do you know anything about them? Are they any good?”

Jana’s stomach twisted. She had to force the coffee to go down the right pipe, lest she start coughing. “No, I don’t know anything about them.”

Her mother couldn’t take it anymore. From her silence, she burst into tears, the kind that gets the attention of a three-table radius around them. “A GARBAGE TRUCK, JANA?”

“Gabrielle, calm down,” hissed James, and turned his hard eyes to Jana. “This little job of yours ends today.”

Gabrielle was not calming down. “My daughter drives a garbage truck. She rides across space, scooping up shit. Ding Ding! Calling Jana Broussard and her garbage truck! Cleanup on aisle five! Here comes Refuse Ranger Jana!” She was shaking, the crystal flute in her hand splashing juice everywhere.

Jana stared at her mother, speechless. Her hands trembled around her coffee cup. “Mother, please, let me explain,” she whispered, trying to hold back an onslaught of tears. That was tricky, as she also had to stop from giggling at the same time. She kind of liked the title her mom gave her.

“I could have loaned you money to open a shop like your sister,” heaved Gabrielle. James took the glass, which her tense hands were about to smash, from her. “You could have gone to college like your brother, who’s six months away from a partnership in your father’s business. You couldn’t have thought of anything better to do with your life than to shovel shit around, Jana Layne Broussard?”

Jana slammed her fist on the table, causing the china to rattle. “I’m a pilot, and a damn good one at that! Did you see my final exam scores? Top of my class in all of it. I aced every exam.”

“Looks like you picked up some wonderful manners from your garbage truck friends,” shot back Gabrielle.

Jana noticed the increasing number of eyes bearing down on them. “Mother, please, calm down. Calm down,” she said, her voice laced with anxiety. She knew that look that they were getting all too well.

Speaking with a careful calm, belied only by a dangerous edge in his tone that meant business, James Broussard addressed his daughter. “Your mother and I agreed that we will overlook this misstep provided you resign from your job immediately, come home, and discuss with us a future that makes sense. Jana, you’re my little girl, and I only want what’s best for you. Since you’re so interested in ships, let me set you up with an even better deal. I can get you started in the logistics department of my business. Someday, you can manage the dandelion fleet for me. Please, Jana. For your future.” He offered his hand amicably, “I’ll even see about getting you your own apartment near the office.”

Oh boy! She gets to drive a desk! “I’m happy where I am,” answered Jana, refusing the handshake.

“You’re happy driving a garbage truck!” howled her mother, who was now fumbling with pill bottles in her purse.

Her father’s calm unnerved her more than her mother’s outbursts, but that, too, teetered on the edge of a precipice. “Jana, we have given you every chance, every opportunity to pursue any dream you want, and you turn around and mock us? Do you have any idea what your sister is going through right now? She said she can’t be associated with you so long as you’re in this... business... because it might have splash damage on her boutiques.” James’ voice lowered conspiratorially, “We even had to drop you from all of our social media profiles. We’ll put you right back, of course, as soon as you stop with this garbage truck nonsense. Now, be reasonable. I will not ask again.”

Ask? There was no asking going on here. Asking implied that she had a say in the matter. Jana glared, forgetting about her food, forgetting about her coffee and her mimosa, forgetting about the stares and the whispers around her. She needed a career born out of love—just like her captain told her at her interview. She didn't care that he wasn't asking, she was going to tell him exactly what she would do. “I am being reasonable. I am going back to my job which I have chosen for myself.”

“Wrong,” James snapped. “As soon as we are finished with brunch, you will inform the captain of your soon-to-be former ship that you will not be returning. We will have a maidbot collect your things from the ship, and then you will return home. Is that understood?”

The patrons watched uneasily through their pleasant morning of jazz, Bloody Marys and Benedicts. The air around the Broussards' table was boiling over with the family drama that'd been simmering for years. A heavy pause lingered in the air. Jana sat, suspended moment of silence, her brain overloaded. She spent every spare bit of mental energy she had to prevent those tears from falling—she wouldn't give her parents the satisfaction. How much of her dignity did she have to sell with faking the whole “it's just a phase” routine that got her into flying school? That was enough of her soul that she was going to part with. She no longer needed to satisfy the expectations of others who'd never respect her unless she followed the path they set before her. Back on the Lizzie, Jana got more respect from the garbage truck crew than she ever got from her family. Her crew never told her she's not good enough being exactly who she is.

Elaine was good enough. She had enough social skills to convince other people that the crap she sold in her posh boutiques was worth every coin. Kyle was good enough, ready to take over the task of enriching the Za'toon while the Earthlings starve. Jana had never ripped anyone off, nor had she ever willingly hurt anyone for profit, but that's not good enough. A well-honed skill, excellent reflexes, and a longing to explore—that was not good enough.

In the silence, Jana gazed at her reflection in the black surface of her coffee. Fiery eyes stared into hers. A smile curled on her lips. Her cheeks flushed. Her gaze drifted deeper into the black surface of the coffee, envisioning a future where she did exactly what she wanted to do. She was good enough for all of it. The desk her father offered would be a noose around her neck. Jana wanted to go places, but none of them were offices or boardrooms.

“Incorrect,” answered Jana, finally looking up. “I'll be returning to my ship, where I am good enough. I have a job to do. Good day.” Jana pushed her chair away from the table and stood up. She kicked her uncomfortable heels off, plunked them down on the plate of scones in the middle of the table, and stormed toward the exit.

“Jana!” her father roared after her, “You think you can do better as a garbage truck driver? Broussards do not drive garbage trucks! You can say goodbye to your trust fund. You can say goodbye to all of it. You are cut off. Do you hear me? Cut off!” His face dripped sweat from the heat of his anger.

The last of his threats trailed off into the void as Jana tuned him out. As she rushed out the pi-shaped door, three serene looking monks in serene white robes passed by her, entering the restaurant. They smiled a pleasant “Namaste” to her. Jana pressed her hands together and bowed to them. As soon as they were past her, she picked up her pace on bare feet, breaking into a full speed run toward the Lizzie Borden.

# The Paradox of Love - 33

Through her human eye, Veronica observed the faces of the Venusians as she wove through the crowds strolling through the mall. She tilted her head, her greasy black hair flopping in front of her human eye. She brushed it back and tucked it behind her multiply-pierced ear, and continued watching.

Her cybernetic eye followed Felix as she kept pace a few meters behind him. Felix could handle the sale. He had far more skill at pretending to be human than she did. She was not just watching Felix, but all of the non-visual data as well. The heat sensor upgrade she had added to her ocular implant wasn't just good for looking for overheating parts on devices—it was good for catching something like a laser pistol warming up.

Since her death and funeral, Veronica enjoyed getting upgrades. The new arm was a necessity, but the eye was a luxury. Untethered from the dogma that limited humans to their fragile human shells, Veronica had freed herself to transcend her flesh. Best part about that funeral? Her parents had to admit to everyone that Veronica's soul had been lost to the Great Whore. She wished she could have attended so she could have raised her metal middle finger out of the coffin containing her baby photo and give them all the salute they deserved.

Felix sat at a table in the center of the thoroughfare and set his datapad down. Veronica stopped by a kiosk, bought a corn dog, and took a seat on a bench near the fountain in the central courtyard. She ran her hand over the surface of the bench to dust it off. Odd. Not only did the bench free from dust and graffiti, it had no dividers on it to prevent people from sleeping on it. Weird. She chomped on her corn dog while her cybernetic eye telescoped in on Felix's table. Her human eye roamed independently at the faces and the people here. When she had gotten the upgrade, she insisted on dual channel ocular inputs, so she could focus in two places at once.

Her human eye settled on a young couple carrying a picnic basket, performing a bizarre mating game. The female appeared human, but she looked more like a fashion magazine clone. The male was an ugly dork who looked like a white version of Felix, and he was allowing this woman to put these things around his neck. The dork checked himself out in the standing mirror at the shop's door and seemed to approve. Fucking weirdo.

The man bought the noose and wrapped it around his neck. With his basket and his girlfriend with him, Veronica figured he was not headed to his office, which meant that the stupid motherfucker not only noosed himself on days they required him to noose, but also on days that he

could wear anything he pleased. People had to wear the uniforms, sure, like Felix when he mimicked the colors of his prey at auctions, but some folks actually wore them willingly?

The couple paid for their purchase and moved on, which was probably for the best, given that Veronica wanted to slap them. Jana had warned her about the monks in white, so she thought better of it. A moment later, Felix's contact arrived, another dork, this one in a green noose. Their interaction barely spanned a minute. The man handed Felix a package and Felix swiped his coin ring on the man's datapad. They shook hands, and parted ways. Veronica scanned using every mode her eye had, but saw no indication of anything abnormal. Good. The only priority in Veronica's mind was getting the fuck out of this creepy place as fast as possible.

Veronica trailed Felix back to the ship. As soon as she got in the airlock, she relaxed, reaching into her sleeveless trench coat and grabbing a flask out of it, taking a swig. "Fuck Venus." Along the palm-treed hallways, her boots clumped as she caught up to Felix.

Felix stopped and pulled the black silk bag out of the pocket of his pinstripe pants. Felix slid the artifact out of the bag.

"Magnificent," he said, turning it over and over with his delicate fingers to observe every detail of the object.

Veronica's human eye gazed at the beauty of the greenish-gold object while her cybernetic eye scanned it. Weird fluctuating values, of course. She held her human hand up to receive the object from Felix.

"I'll take good care of it, promise," said Veronica as she wrapped her greedy fingers around it.

The metal was the same material, deceivingly light, as if a puff of helium could lift it away. Unlike the other devices, this one was small and simple. This device was an octagon, just like the larger one from the captain's stash, but one tenth the size. Each side measured 13 centimeters. Like its larger counterpart, this so-called drink coaster had a void-black disk in the center, undecipherable markings on its sides, and ports that matched those on their existing Za'toon parts.

Veronica clasped the object to her chest. "Holy Mother of Outer Space! Davenport, great find. It's absolutely a match." She bounced, the chains on her boots rattling. "I need to take this to my lab. I've got to go. I've got so much to do..." She tucked the object into a pocket and dashed toward her lab. If Veronica could run any faster, she would have taken flight.

With three pieces in hand, Veronica had more options for experimentation. She reached the doors that connected her lab to the cargo bay and rushed through them. On the long titanium table in the center of her lab, the other two Za'toon artifacts were already attached to sensors. As she approached with object in hand, the synchronized sensors flew into their respective red zones

before settling down to a different series of values than they previously had.

Veronica hopped on a tall metal chair and set the device down on another sensor array. The voltages jumped. She took the device away. The voltages dropped. Back and forth, she put the device in the sensor array. It jumped, it dropped, jumped, dropped, same amount, every time. Every device in the trio synchronized to the same level, and a different level with each number of parts.

She downloaded the log to her datapad and read over the information, as her hand reached into the inner pocket for her pill bottle. She popped a six-sided pink pill and chased it with a swig from the silver flask she drew from her other pocket. Her eyes flicked back and forth, scanning the data. The single large octagon, the piece from the captain, showed a jump to thirty-four volts as soon as the flower-shaped device came into proximity. When she moved the two closer, both rose to fifty-five volts. With all three in place, all three readings leaped to eighty-nine volts. Veronica took away the third one, and the values dropped back to fifty-five volts.

Veronica tapped her commlink, “Wilshire, you wanna come over here? I’m getting fascinating results.”

The voice at the other end yawned. “Yeah, yeah. Be there in a few.” Veronica knew that with Bob, “in a few” often meant never, but she didn’t mind. Veronica preferred not to be in the presence of humans when she worked. She was only asking him out of courtesy. Humans made her lab less pure.

Veronica read the output repeatedly. Consistent results meant she could start working with these devices, but to what end? What could she actually do with them? She churned through countless possibilities. The randomness could be used for encryption. It could somehow augment the paradox drive. Their tendency to react with one another meant they could be used for security applications. But the concepts were all vague, still, too vague to do much with.

If the answer wasn’t in her brain, maybe someone else could see what Veronica couldn’t. Veronica slinked across the lab to Kitty-Cat, who was currently sitting quietly on her tank treads, the curve of her shoulders leaning against the wall.

“Kitty-Cat,” cooed Veronica, placing her hands on the sexy curve of the tank treads gearbox. “Could you help me out?”

The bot whirred to life, standing up straight on its tank treads, its full breasts jutting out. The tank treads began spun, rotating Kitty-Cat’s upper body so the eyes of its yellow, black, and white calico cat head stared at her. “Yes, my dearest?” its soft voice purred.

Veronica kissed Kitty-Cat on its faux fur cheek, and she turned, swaying her hips seductively as she strutted back to her work table. Veronica loved to flirt, hoping that her lover was

enjoying the view. Veronica affixed the newest acquisition to the bot's chest, settling it snugly right between her juicy breasts. Her fingers dug under a flap in the plexicone flesh, pulling out a data wire, and sliding it into the artifact's port. "Kitty-Cat, my darling, is that enough for you to communicate with this device?"

Kitty-Cat giggled, "Oooh, it is, but what is this thing? It feels weird!"

"That's what we're about to find out, my dear." Veronica playfully swatted Kitty-Cat on its metallic hindquarters. "Now, sweet thing, would you mind rolling up and down the hallway with that while I get some readings?"

"Of course not, love."

Veronica grinned. "And shake it for me on your way out, won't you, baby?"

With a hiss of pneumatics, Kitty-Cat pivoted, wiggled what one might approximate as its behind at Veronica, and trundled out the door. "Mmm," murmured Veronica, "I'm going to have to give Kitty a treat tonight." But now was not the time for lust. Now was the time for science. Redirecting her blood back from her groin to her brain, Veronica watched the voltage output. As Kitty-Cat moved away, the voltage dropped on a steady logarithmic curve, just like the one she'd observed with the meeting of the first two pieces. Finally the bot had rolled far enough out that the resonant effect from the third piece vanished. Both original pieces now read a steady fifty-five volts.

Veronica tapped her commlink. "Kitty-Cat, that's far enough. Come on back." On cue, the voltages rose back to eighty-nine. "Nice," she smiled. Veronica gazed at Kitty-Cat longingly as she rumbled back into the lab, looking so pretty with her new shiny jewel. She slid up to Kitty-Cat and reached her hand down to the vibramotor array mounted on the bot's base. Kitty-Cat looked unbearably gorgeous, and Veronica could stand it no longer. Science could wait.

"Ohhh, you're undressed!" whispered Veronica, tapping at the empty ports on the vibramotor. "We're going to have to fix that." Veronica's metal hand reached toward her groin as her human one grabbed the pear-shaped device and pulled one of the rods off. She fastened it to the array and shunted voltage from the bot's primary system to it. The device began to buzz. Veronica squealed with delight.

She unbuckled her shorts and flung those and her underwear aside. She crawled onto Kitty-Cat's hips. "My love. You never looked more beautiful," she whispered, lowering herself onto the greenish gold phallus. "You never felt so fucking good."

Grinding her hips against Kitty-Cat's, Veronica grabbed the back of the faux fur cat head and pressed the plush animal's face into her own. She growled hungrily, clawing her fingernails into the plush head. Her hands ran down the bot's back, clawing on the plexicone flesh, bucking with increasing eagerness.

In the heat of her lust, Veronica found the courage to speak the truest secrets of her heart. Veronica wasn't sure she was ready to admit it, but she admitted it all the same. As she pressed flesh against steel, sweat against grease, Veronica blurted out, "I love you, Kitty-Cat. I've loved you ever since I first built... first met you."

"I love you too, Veronica," it purred back. "I love you, I love you not. I love you not, I love you. I love you, I love you not."

The bot started twitching, softly at first. Was Kitty-Cat really that aroused? The motion became more violent. Veronica hopped off her lover, tripping over the shorts she forgot she had tossed on the floor. Kitty-Cat chattered away.

"I love you, I love you not. It is true that this sentence is false. But if this sentence is false, then this sentence is true, so this sentence is false." Veronica tried to make a dash for her datapad, that she could shut down the bot, but the bot grabbed Veronica and clutched her tightly. "I love you, I love you not. I love you, I love you not."

Kitty-Cat's head whipped back and forth as it rambled, "If the barber shaves only people who do not shave themselves, then he cannot shave himself. But if cannot shave himself, someone has to shave him, so the barber shaves him. But the barber cannot shave him because the barber cannot shave anyone who shaves himself, so he has to get the barber to shave him. But the barber cannot shave him because the barber cannot shave anyone who shaves himself, so he has to get the barber to shave him. But the barber cannot shave him because the barber cannot shave anyone who shaves himself, so..."

Veronica tried to kick, claw, and wrestle her way out of the bot's grip, but she was no match for Kitty-Cat, not even with the enhanced strength of her cybernetic arm. "Kitty-Cat, calm down, please, calm down..."

Showing no signs of slowing, Kitty-Cat wildly chattered away, now in a strange language. "Fwee zela ser ju'staa, wee zela sera justa'kaa krel, ju zela ser'jura. Fwee zela ser ju'staa, wee zela sera justa'kaa krel, ju zela ser'jura." Veronica gasped aloud the single word, "Zela?" That was one of the few Za'toon words she recognized. "Zela" meant "ship."

Around Veronica, lights, colors, and patterns flashed in rapid succession, as if she were passing through a thousand frames of a video all in a second. Everything spun. Those dexis and cape coddors she had earlier might not last much longer in her stomach. She closed her eyes, writhing in Kitty-Cat's unyielding grip.

When she opened her eyes, she was on the bridge of the ship, with her shorts still tangled around one foot. The bridge was empty, save Jana, who was sitting in the pilot's chair, with her datapad. At the sound of Veronica falling on her bare ass, Jana leaped up and shrieked.

Veronica shrieked right back. Jana gawked, the look of someone getting a mental imprint scarred into place. Veronica yanked up her shorts and scrambled toward the door.

Her blood raging with adrenaline and lust, Veronica tore through the hallways back to the lab. She flung open the door open. Kitty-Cat was still babbling in Za'toon. Lights were flashing and things were disappearing and reappearing all over the lab, and likely, all over the ship. Veronica tapped Kitty-Cat's shutdown command into the datapad. The bot slouched over its tank treads and fell silent.

Veronica buckled up her pants and stared at Kitty-Cat, unable to speak past the shock. She detached both Za'toon parts from her lover and examined them. Everything appeared to be intact. Kitty-Cat appeared to be fine. She scanned her lover and the Za'toon parts with her cybernetic eye. No malfunctions from Kitty-Cat, and the parts resumed their usual behavior. She took both parts off Kitty-Cat, examined them, and then reattached them. Everything was in place, no charring, and deeper scans revealed nothing out of the ordinary.

She pulled out a paradox field rectifier and connected it to one of Kitty-Cat's inputs. Veronica threw the switch again. "Kitty-Cat. Wake up."

The bot sat there, doing nothing.

Veronica peered. She hadn't changed anything. The vibramotor still had power. The coaster still sat wedged between Kitty-Cat's breasts, connected to its neural network. Veronica paced around the room, reading the output on her monitors. Nothing was changing. A moment of breakthrough, and now nothing, a frustrating lot of nothing.

"Oh come on! What the hell? It was just working!" Veronica threw her hands at her sides and flopped on the couch. For the first time, she took note of the rest of her lab beyond her work table and bot. Crates were stacked in teetering configurations on her bed. Binders and manuals were strewn in checkerboard patterns on her floor. The bottles of beer that were supposed to be in her fridge were laid out on the floor in the shape of an infinity symbol.

"Unbound paradox fields..." she breathed, full of awe. She grabbed her multimeter from her cargo pocket and waved it around. 3403 residual Gödels in the vicinity. She tapped that into her datapad. If that were correct, and it were now 1.86 minutes after the incident which transported her across the ship, then...

Veronica spoke into her metal arm. "Broussard. What's our current location?"

"317,811 clicks from our departure point at Venus. Why?" answered the pilot.

"What was our location two minutes ago?"

"Gimme a moment. 196,418. That can't be right. Let me get back to you in a few; I've got to check my instruments."

Veronica flicked her fingers across her datapad, pulling up her notes, anything that might give her a lead. There, she found one of the oldest entries in her logs, something she wrote as a rookie engineer, shortly after she came to work for E. Borden Rescue and Repair.

*The paradox drive is truly a wonder of the modern age. Prior to its invention, ships could only travel with thruster-based realspace drives, making trips between planets expensive, cumbersome, and dangerous. The paradox drive solves this problem by an ingenious merging of theoretical mathematics and engineering. Each drive is pre-loaded with a standard set of paradoxical statements, which is fed into a multiphasic processor and fueled by whatever means the ship uses. The processor attempts to calculate the truth value of the paradox and gets trapped in a loop of increasing complexity. As the complexity increases, the computer starts, by some means still not fully understood, creating an Escher-Gödel field, which folds space around the processor. The processing of paradoxes without limit causes a series of gaps in space, and the ship jumps across these shortcuts, hopping from point to point along its route. These spatial anomalies are measured in Gödels, a unit which describes kilometers per paradox, and the rate of travel by paradox drives is measured in Zenos, which is defined as Gödels per second. A typical paradox drive runs from anywhere from 100-200 Zenos, while the most powerful ones can reach speeds of up to 400 Zenos. The Lizzie Borden runs, when at peak efficiency, at up to 140 Zenos. Not bad for a hacked together salvage ship.*

Veronica shivered. To reach speeds like that, they'd have to be folding space at an incredible rate. She tapped on her arm the numbers Jana gave her, and calculated the ship's speed. "Impossible," Veronica gasped. The ship just traveled along its jump trail at a rate of 490 Zenos.

She turned back to the bot, standing at attention, but quietly still.

"Why, Kitty-Cat...? Why? Come on, baby. Do something. Please. Don't you love me?" Veronica pleaded, her eyes quivering with the sting of welling tears. She was so close to not only the bliss of an orgasm, but also the bliss of a breakthrough. Her lover teased her mercilessly on both counts. "Please, Kitty-Cat. I love you."

"I love you," answered Kitty-Cat. "I love you. I love you. I love you. I love you, I love you not. I love you, I love you not. I love you, I love you not. I love you, I love you not..."

Veronica's jaw hung open stupidly. She grabbed her toolbox and frantically dug through it. She grabbed the Gödel field inhibitor from her kit and slapped it on one of the bot's ports.

"If this sentence is false, then the sentence is true. If this sentence is false, then the sentence is true..." it chattered away.

By clamping down on the paradox processors, Veronica theorized she might be able to get data before Kitty-Cat shut down. The chattering slowed to a dull roar well before Kitty-Cat started

speaking Za'toon. However, items around her still flashed, blinked in and out of existence, appearing and reappearing all over her lab.

# Soaring Above - 34

7:30 AM. Kandi Kumari's coffee maker brewed the morning's first cup. Kandi picked up her datapad, read Davenport's report, and regretted her decision immediately. A few grand here, a few grand there, piddly bits that would eventually add up to the amount she needed to buy her a little space locker to call home, if it didn't get all pissed away in fines. Though Kandi enjoyed the freewheeling, she often wondered if a life beyond wandering — a home — was possible. Hell, she might even get to have the same lover for more than one night in a row.

The numbers on the report made her wince. Windfalls like Yasmina's party were too far and far between. The stroke of luck paid for the privilege of avoiding fine-labor military service, but not much more. With traitorous ex-crew members ratting them out for using the tech they need to do business, she projected she might have enough to earn her space locker in three hundred and fifty years.

Kandi tapped the switch that unlocked the Dragon's Hoard. The treasure room greeted her with a waft of musty air and old grease, a comfort to her senses. She settled down into the calm of her hoard and read the rest of her messages. The first one, sent at 3:42am, gave her a much needed giggle. Something about Veronica appearing half-naked on the bridge while Jana was driving, scaring the hell out of her. She pictured the scene in her head. The more she watched it play out, the harder Kandi laughed. Then, her adult mind reminded Kandi that she needs to tell McCormick to tone it down.

The next message turned her amusement into awe.

*EBorden-Veronica: These parts are creating paradox fields bigger anything I've ever heard of. We got up to 490 Zenos last night, but I couldn't control what was going on, so I had to shut it down. If I can harness it, we're talking Venus to Mars in a few hours, maybe minutes. That's just the start of it. Now here's where things get really fucked up. Kitty-Cat, who was helping me, started speaking Za'toon. It was teleporting shit all over the ship before I put the field inhibitor on it. The piece Captain Kumari found seems to be some sort of control hub, but it needs the second piece to activate it. The third piece seems to make them all work together, but only when connected to another piece. And the whole thing seems to need an AI to make it go. I don't know enough to say what it all means.... yet.*

When Ali Xi sent Kandi on that run, she had no idea her souvenir was alien technology. Now, staring down the truth that she held something with capabilities beyond anything her species

ever dreamed feasible, she wasn't sure what to do about it. What she would not do, though, is let the opportunity slip away.

Another message, this one from Felix, popped up.

*EBorden-Felix: We'd be fools not to search for as many parts as possible. I've been tracking auctions on Freenet, and they're a hot commodity. Mostly people are just selling the little coaster-like things, but I've seen a few bigger parts. I bought this one for a pittance because the seller had no idea what he had. On the Freenet auctions, folks aren't being at all discreet about what they're selling. A search for "Za'toon tech" will now get you half a dozen hits at prices so sky high, they'd induce vertigo. Prices soared to the millions for the bigger pieces; the coaster-like pieces are going for 60,000 Fija apiece. I say we grab that crate, get the parts from Amestra before she realizes what she's got, and cash in. We're already sitting on quite a stack right now, but with Amestra's stash, it could be an impressively lucrative haul.*

Kandi leaned back and swept a glance over the cozy room around her. From one of the many towering shelves, Kandi picked up a hood ornament, a silver hawk, wings spread as if to soar out of her palm. "Beautiful," she remarked, examining the details of the bird's talons, beak, and feathers. She loved watching the hawks in Australia. Once she earned her wheels, she was able to find a gig as a lifeguard on the beach, where those who could afford it vacationed. As she biked there and back from her inland home, she loved watching the hawks circle over the Nutrisoy fields.

The coast only had seagulls, asswipe birds who stole food right off your plate. Unlike seagulls, the hawks didn't depend on anyone. They didn't need anything but their own skills. They made their nests in the highest places, far from anyone who might want to destroy what they'd created. So many people liked living on the ground, as wolves and sheep, forever in this tangle of exploiting or being exploited. When presented with the either-or choice, neither was the only correct answer. Kandi would rather be the hawk, soaring above it all.

Hours spun away as the ship jumped along its trail toward the crate's coordinates, a remote spot halfway between Mars and the asteroid belt. The feel of the ship on the jump trail always delighted her. The tiny folds in space caused the slightest hum that resonated in the walls that just so happened to be on a frequency that helped her think more clearly. The bigger prize was coming into view—enough money, perchance, to step out of the perpetually-spinning hamster wheel. Kandi visualized her dreams, but the image grew fuzzy as her head grew tired. She stepped out of the Dragon's Hoard and headed back to her quarters to sleep.

Hours passed in dreamless sleep. When she awoke the next morning, the familiar hum of the jump trail had settled down to the low rumble of the ship's impulse engines. She tapped her commlink. "Broussard, how far to the crate?"

“About forty five minutes,” answered Jana.

She set her datapad’s alert for twenty five minutes. Kandi picked up her pace, walking the halls to burn off nervous energy. Nothing at all strange about this strange task from the strange woman for the strange crate to get the strange parts that the strange beings will do strange things to us if they found out we had them. Wanting to break out of the system that suffocates sheep and wolves alike seemed great in theory, but Kandi wasn’t sure she was comfortable about how she was getting there.

She climbed up to the crow’s nest over the cargo bay, from which hung a skull and crossed hatchets flag. Below, Felix was watching over Veronica. Veronica was driving a garrison of drones, cleaning up the mess she’d made with her experiments. Earlier, Kandi had given Felix permission to shoot Veronica if she gave him any shit.

“Oh yes, Davenport, punish me more! Oh yes, I can make it tighter. Yeah, baby, I’m going to cram it in there real good! Oooh!”

“Silence! Now, move those crates to that spot on the port wall.”

Veronica howled with laughter, stomped her feet gleefully, then got back to work. After a few seconds, she began to hum and tap her foot. Felix growled, and Veronica shut up.

Kandi’s datapad chimed, indicating their approach to the coordinates Nadya had provided. She headed to the bridge and tapped her commlink. “Wilshire. Get me area scans. Any other vessels around?”

Halfway down the next corridor, Bob called back over the commlink, “Not seeing anything on long range. A few civilian vessels, just daily drivers. A dandelion freighter a ways away. Nothing using Disnosoft frequencies.”

“Good.”

Kandi walked onto the bridge, slid into her flame-job chair, and said, “Broussard, take us in.”

Jana nodded sullenly. The enormous cube-shaped storage station came into view. As they approached, Kandi’s mind started painting her own overlay to the cube’s design. Shed expand the docking bay, add an airlocked garage, install a windowed lounge in one corner, a cargo section in the other, and run an auction house on the top floor. Given the prices Felix quoted her on those parts, selling even just a few of them could be enough to realize her dream.

Jana glided the ship to the docking bay. Kandi tapped her commlink. “Davenport, I’ll need a haulbot ready at the airlock.” She turned to Jana, “Hey, Broussard. You wanna run this one? You haven’t had a chance to play with the haulbots yet.”

“Yeah, sure,” muttered Jana. After the ship docked, Jana stood, but stared downward.

Kandi peered at Jana, tilting her head to look into her pilot’s eyes. “You OK? It wasn’t an order. If you aren’t feeling up to it...”

“I said I’d do it, Captain,” Jana snapped.

Kandi frowned. “I’ll have Davenport go with you. Amestra said we could have anything we want in there, so long as we get the crate, so feel free to go shopping.” Kandi put on a smile, hoping it might ride a psychic airwave to Jana and cheer her up. Jana shrugged and trudged off.

Kandi flipped her datapad back to her novel and reached into the built-in fridge under her chair to grab a beer. The mystery foremost on her mind wasn’t in her book, but in her pilot’s head. The last thing Kandi needed was another crew member deciding they didn’t like the smidgen of human decency she expected and causing her another Jake-Hampton-sized headache.

# Refuse Ranger - 35

Jana stalked into the cargo bay, hands shoved in her pockets and boots clomping on the ground. "I'll be accompanying you, to learn how to work the haulbots," said Jana as she approached Felix.

Felix immediately tapped his commlink, "Captain..."

Jana planted her hands on her hips, "You will not be babysitting me. You will be teaching me how to run the haulbots and we will be working together on securing the crate. The captain already knows why I am here."

Felix, who usually was sharp on the snap-back, stood in stunned silence. He recovered and said, "Of course."

"Can we get to work now?"

"Hand me your datapad," said Felix. Jana did so. Felix tapped on it, then handed it back. "There you go. It's mostly self-explanatory. That red bar is your battery meter, and the green bar shows how much more weight it can carry. You control the arms and cutters with the buttons at the bottom, and drive it with the circle on top. Any questions?"

Jana rolled her eyes at the condescending tone Felix took, the same condescending tone he always took. She glanced it over and said, "This is the same as the flyers, only with a forklift. I got it."

Jana stepped around Felix, through the airlock and to the front desk. She tapped on her datapad, and the haulbot lumbered behind her on its six doughnut-sized rubber wheels. At the desk, she tapped in the credentials Nadya had given her on the kiosk. The kiosk lit up with a map to the storage unit and chimed cheerfully, "Have a nice day!"

"Fuck you," Jana replied.

"Looks like someone hasn't done her Yoga today," the machine quipped.

"You can shove your asanas up your ass."

Felix caught up with Jana and sighed. "Don't antagonize the help."

"You can't antagonize a machine. I don't need inanimate objects pretending to give a shit about me."

“Correct, but you can inspire a machine to call security on you. That we do not need, so cool yourself.”

Jana turned and headed down the long, metal walls. She raised her middle finger at the machine before rounding the corner. Hundreds of steel sliding doors lined the walls. Felix and Jana rode the lift up and walked through a grid of identical blocks, along the same boring pattern of two meters then another door.

After a long walk, Jana found the door she sought. She entered the lock code and the door slid open. The scent of old wood and mothballs engulfed her as she stepped in, taking her back to Grandma’s house, full of old dolls, worn lace and the lemony-chemical scent of furniture polish. Looking around at the intricately carved wood of the chiffarobes and vanities, dressers and desks, Jana sighed with the pangs of grief. She missed Grandma, who, unlike her parents, encouraged her to follow her heart. Jana made a mental note to take her out for dinner next time she was on Venus.

The haulbot lumbered into the room, followed by Felix who barked, “Broussard. We aren’t here for sight-seeing. We get what we need, and we get out.”

Jana snorted, then tossed the black leather jacket she was examining into the haulbot, pulled out her datapad, and started scanning the room. “Crate 171309. gray corrugated metal, roughly two meters by one meter by one meter.” Felix pulled a flashlight out of his pockets and began checking labels.

After a few minutes of searching, Felix said, “Here it is. Bring the haulbot.” Jana slid her fingers along the surface, center and up, then to the right, center and up again, navigating the haulbot to the crate. She lowered the forklift and slid the tines under the crate.

Jana checked the weight sensor on the datapad. Eighty-seven percent of the max weight, with that one crate. She glanced around, and spotted a box full of awesome vintage clothes, shoes, jewelry and hats. She had the haulbot set the crate on its back, grab the box of clothes, and then she checked the display again. Ninety-six percent. Good enough. Jana grabbed a handful of other small boxes, which she didn’t bother to open, then stacked them in the bot until the display read one hundred. “Alright, we’re ready.”

“Fine, enjoy your bonus. I suppose you didn’t screw up too much this time.”

The haulbot had almost made it to the door when it bumped into something. Jana backed the bot up, then drove it forward again. Bump. Back and forth again. Bump. A woman about her mom’s age in an ugly gray pantsuit and a forty-something man in an ugly blue suit with their arms crossed in front of them. The bot bumped against the man’s outstretched hand.

“Move,” Jana said. She didn’t have time for this shit.

Without a word, the man pushed past Jana and started examining the haulbot. The woman

continued to block the door.

Jana repeated herself, increasingly annoyed. “Move—as in move your ass so we can get through. Now. Parlez-vous Anglais?”

The woman said coldly, “We need to search your bot.”

“So, you do understand English, you’re just a moron. You mistake me for someone who cares,” replied Jana. She scanned the woman up and down. That pantsuit looked exactly like one of the four dozen identical ones her mother wore on a daily basis.

“We need to search your bot. It may have copyrighted material in it.”

“Again, you miscalculated the number of fucks I give,” snapped Jana. Felix stared at Jana, jaw slack.

“You’ll care because Disnosoft charged us with the task of returning it to them for proper handling,” answered the man.

Jana wanted to curse the woman into oblivion right about now, but Felix remained a stoic wall of expressionless disdain. Instead, Jana paused, watching her crew-mate carefully. Felix reached for his datapad and pulled up the haulbot control program.

“Which box are you looking for? Perhaps we can help?” Felix waved a hand at Jana. “Please forgive my associate. She gets paid by the hour.”

Now it was Jana’s turn to gawk at Felix. When he put on that mask, he exuded a more terrifying aura than Veronica ever could, even at her craziest. He looked like her parents when he talked like that, eerily so, but Jana knew there was nothing of the sort underneath. Unlike her parents, Felix did not put this mask on out of need to cover up an innate horribleness. Jana knew Felix was horrible, but not in a “disown your own daughter for wanting to be a pilot” way. He’s more like an “I’ll shoot you if you fuck up my cargo bay” kind of horrible, a far nicer degree of horrible, a respectable, reasonable kind of horrible. Felix worked his glamor as he spoke to the Disnosoft agents. “Please, follow me. I think this room is sorted by lot number. May I see that location again?”

The man in the suit pulled out his datapad and showed it to Felix. Jana watched from the background, the haulbot still loaded up with the crate in question, but currently ignored by everyone but her. Felix stroked his chin, then shrugged. “I looked all through here but I couldn’t find that one. It might be farther in the back. You want to start searching that corner and we’ll examine these over here?”

The ugly-suited man called to Ms. Pantsuit, “We’ll be wrapped up in no time here. He’s going to help us find them.”

Ms. Pantsuit didn't fall for Felix's game. "No more of this," she snapped. "We aren't searching all of these. We need to see what's on their bot, since that's probably what these garbage haulers came here for. Enough wasting time." The woman crossed her arms over her chest and stated, her voice stuffed with the snottiness one gets when backed by a massive corporate fleet of fighters, lawyers, and assassins, "Trespassers, you are hereby informed by the Disnosoft Corporation's copyright enforcement division, under director Chloe VanDrees, to relinquish all media in this room and the contents of your bot to us. Furthermore, you will take us to your ship, which we will search for additional unlicensed materials."

Oh look. Another self-important motherfucker crowing about her authority. She pretended as if she didn't hear the woman, and continued sliding her fingers on the datapad to maneuver the haulbot around Ms. Pantsuit and her flunky. The woman grabbed Jana's shoulders and shoved her away from the haulbot, while the man grabbed for Jana's datapad. Caught off guard by this rough gesture, Jana lost her balance, but caught herself on a wall before hitting the ground.

"Oh, you fucked up," snarled Jana. The woman turned around to check the haulbot's load, and Jana estimated her odds to be pretty good for landing a sucker punch. Jana launched herself from the wall onto Pantsuit's back. She grabbed the woman's hair and threw a punch over her right shoulder, clocking the woman square in her jaw.

The woman reeled, her knees buckling under her. She regained her balance and aimed a punch back at Jana, grazing her left cheek. Jana screamed. The contact only served to enrage Jana all the more. She whipped around and threw a knee into the woman's gut, shoving her against the wall. "You know what, asshole? You aren't touching our shit, how about that?" With two firm hands on her shoulders Jana pinned the terrified woman against the wall.

As Jana leaned back to throw another punch at the woman, Pantsuit jabbed her pointy heel into Jana's thigh. Jana yelped, losing focus just long enough for the woman to gouge her fingernails into Jana's face, tearing at her flesh, digging toward her eyes. Jana ducked to get away from blinding by acrylic nails, and the woman grabbed two fistfuls of Jana's frizzy brown hair, holding her in place while she drove her heel repeatedly into her thigh.

Jana failed to avoid the jabbing heel. She lurched to the side and swept her leg under Pantsuit's knees. Pantsuit's legs crumpled under her, sending her tumbling to the ground. Jana pounced on top of her, one knee on each of her arms, holding the woman flat on ground. The gashes in Jana's face dribbled blood, streaming down her face and onto the woman's face. Jana grabbed the woman's hair with one hand, and shook her head. The woman squirmed, but Jana had the woman's locks tight between her fingers. "Fuck you, fuck Disnosoft, fuck your orders, fuck your mission, and fuck you right out of the fucking airlock! I'm fucking sick..." Jana slammed her head against the floor, "...and tired... and done with..." *Slam!* The woman grabbed at Jana's hands, digging her nails in. Jana screamed "... being pushed around by people..." *Slam!* The woman let go

of Jana's hands and grabbed for her face, slashing and clawing. "...wearing Ugly! gray! Suits!" Blood poured from both Jana's and the woman's face. The woman's eyes rolled back into her head and she gurgled.

Jana stopped to breathe, and glanced over at Felix, not noticing until now that he had managed to get the other guy at the business end of his pistol. Problem solved. Jana grabbed the woman's collar and slapped her until she woke up again. "Now, you listen to me. You can have anything in this room that you want but you don't touch our haulbot and you don't touch us. You got me?"

Felix shrugged, continuing to calmly train his pistol on the man. "Sounds good to me," he said, and looked to his own captive. "How about you?"

"Sure!" said the man, edging toward the door.

Jana smiled. "Good, it's settled, then." She patted the woman down. Jana pulled the woman's datapad out of her jacket, tucked it into her own pocket, then tousled the woman's hair patronizingly. "And you really should get a better job than being a corporate bitch. It's ugly, dirty labor, not suited for a nice young lady like yourself." Jana spat a loogie of red saliva at the woman, and wiped her bloody hands on her pants. "Get my datapad back from him, and take his too. And let's get out of here."

Felix nudged his gun toward him and said, "Hand it over."

The man did so, all the while snickering, "You're fucked now. Disnosoft ain't gonna stand for this." Jana laughed, then stepped away from the pair, continuing what she was doing before they interrupted her. The haulbot rumbled to life and continued toward the ship.

Jana had gotten the haulbot all the way down to the first floor of the storage complex and halfway down the last hallway before her commlink beeped.

"Captain Kumari here. Broussard and Davenport, please unload the crate numbered 171309 from the haulbot and leave it where you currently are. After, please return to the Lizzie Borden immediately."

Jana howled back, "But Captain, it's ours! You'd not believe what we went through to get it!"

"The Disnosoft squadron out there with large guns aimed at us disagree," replied the Captain. "If we give them back the crate, we get out of here with a few fines. If we don't, we leave in atom-sized bits."

"Not really," chuckled the squirrely guy, who had caught up with them. "We'd just let you work off your debt at one of our fine vacation destinations."

Jana growled, and her fist twitched. His jaw would feel awfully nice against her knuckles, too. Felix glared, and shook his head at her.

Jana clutched her hands around her datapad. She worked hard for that crate. Felix said softly, "They have more lawyers and money than we do. We let it go." Jana sighed, and nodded. She moved her fingers reluctantly over the datapad, instructing the haulbot to lower the prized crate to the hallway floor.

The man sneered. "I'm so glad you could see things our way."

Jana snapped about face and stalked back to the Lizzie Borden. Twenty steps away from the ship, she screamed a torrent of rage and sorrow at the heavens, her voice echoing off the tubes around her.

# Out of the Frying Pan - 36

“Sweet Lady Eris, Jana was a stinking mess,” Bob said as he trudged back to his quarters. The kid needed four stitches on her face and a ton of antibiotics. Gumption. She had a lot of it, and that was plenty respectable, but damn, couldn’t Jana be a little more chill with her enthusiasm? “Disnosoft only wished they could inspire that kind of loyalty from their employees.”

He peeled the plexicone gloves off his hands, stained with Jana’s blood. He stood in front of his sink to wash up, staring at the words he wrote on it years ago when he first joined E. Borden Rescue and Repair:

“This mirror is a mirror. If a monkey looks in, no pope looks out.”

A few weeks after that, Bob amended his scrawling with a clarification:

“If a pope looks in, both a monkey and a pope look out.”

Bob reminded himself often that he’s both monkey and pope, and not to get too caught up in the whole ego trip that leads people to do messed up things. It all stemmed from the pursuit of importance. More than money, more than comfort, the worst people were the ones who wanted to be important. Bob couldn’t fathom why anyone would want that. With little power came little responsibility, that that sounded perfectly good to Robert Wilshire. So he let the monkey run the show most of the time, and only pulled out his Pope card when he needed to.

Bob ran his hands through his scraggly beard. Nadya had already emailed him twice today. At some point soon, Nadya would be calling, and he’d have to explain that they didn’t get the crate. The prize could have gone a long way to rebuilding their relationship, but since Disnosoft had screwed him over again, he’d have to rely on his wit, charm, and good looks. He reached for a tiny pair of scissors and snipped his beard meticulously, despite feeling rushed. Patching up Jana took up most of his afternoon. If he could have seen her go apeshit on that Disnosoft goon, it would have made his day, but today provided no such delight.

And who could fault an ex-Disnosoft fine laborer for indulging in a little morbid curiosity? When he was patching her up, Bob had pried for as many gory details as possible, under the guise of medical thoroughness, but Jana was stubbornly tight-lipped. “We lost, obviously. Well, I won, but we lost, so what good are the details? They beat us, what else do you need to know?” Jana told him, and stubbornly stopped there. Jana had a point, but at least would she kindly give him a moment of vicarious pleasure through the visualization of knocking out a Disnosoft suit? Was that

too much to ask, Lady Eris?

Bob's commlink flashed. Captain Kumari was calling for a meeting in fifteen minutes. That means he'd have twelve minutes to get to looking as good as possible. He hadn't finished trimming his beard, so he continued to trim until it was only partially disheveled. He dug through the pile of clothes on the floor, holding one Hawaiian shirt after another up to the light. After eight shirts, he found one with only two stains on it, an acceptable number, and buttoned it up. He tilted his straw hat over his head and checked himself out in the mirror. With seconds to spare, he arrived and grabbed his favorite beanbag chair.

The captain got straight to the point. "Amestra's on the line for us, demanding a meeting." She clicked the remote control to the lounge's view-screen. The silver-haired woman, in her blue robes and sensible pearls, stared icicles through the screen at them.

"Good evening," Nadya said. "Where is my crate?"

Bob dropped his head. Nadya, right on cue.

"Nadya," Bob said softly, leaning up from his beanbag chair to get her attention in the camera's wide frame of view.

"Robert Wilshire," Nadya replied, her tight face keeping back a torrent of emotions. "You screwed up, didn't you?"

Ouch. Right in the stomach.

"Oh come on," Bob pleaded, "We did everything we could. Hell, our Jana here even took a few punches. Come here, Jana. Show off that wollop you got in your eye. It's a good one." Bob walked to Jana and framed his hands around her face. "Does this look like a face to you that says, 'I don't care about your crate?'" Bob shook his head emphatically. He planted his hand on top of the crown of Jana's head and shook her head too. Though Jana tried to continue scowling, a grin broke through at Bob's antics. "See, even Jana says NOOOOO, we did our best, Ms. Amestra."

Nadya scowled, then chuckled, and then scowled again. "Let that poor girl go, Robert. This is serious. I need that crate. I suppose this is my fault... I expected you'd at least give it a good try. I didn't realize that you were going to run a bunch of errands first..." She sighed. "This crate is irreplaceable, unspeakably precious. I need that crate. You need to make this right. In case I didn't make myself clear enough this time: I need that crate."

Captain Kumari stood up and stepped toward the view-screen, the beads on her pink braids bouncing against her shoulders. "Ms. Amestra, you seem to be unaware of the commonly-understood terms of a favor-type job for an old friend. Furthermore, we charge extra for priority jobs, and since no coin crossed my palm, I assumed no priority."

Nadya fumed. "Then you shouldn't have taken the job."

Captain Kumari slammed her fists on the console. “We took the job because we needed those components, because I had just gotten out of one giant fucking pit, about to lose everything and enjoy a decade or so of corporate slavery—if I survived in their military that long. And now, thanks to your precious fucking crate, I’m facing it all over again!”

Bob shuddered at the rage building in the captain’s tone. Nadya thankfully remained calm.

Captain Kumari continued, huffing as she spoke. “Now, Ms. Amestra, let’s talk about what this crate has cost us so far.” She tapped her datapad and said, “2,130,000 Fijacoin. Refusal to surrender unlicensed media to Disnosoft agents: 1,210,000 Fijacoin. Refusal to allow Disnosoft agents entry to search for unlicensed media: 1,204,400 Fijacoin. Assault of a Disnosoft agent: 52,200 Fijacoin. In other words, a whole fucking lot. I just earned back my ship and my freedom! What the hell more can I do? I’m sorry, but I’m afraid we’re not going to have time to chase it all over the system. You and your crate are the least of my worries at this time.”

“I’m quite aware of the details of your situation, Captain Kumari,” answered Nadya nonchalantly, “Perhaps if you got me my crate, I can give you these Za’toon parts, and you can sell them to pay off your fines. They’re worth a fortune, easily valued at over ten times your fines. But you knew that, didn’t you?”

Bob stroked his beard, his eyes flitting back and forth between the two women dueling with their dagger-shaped words. However, this wasn’t his captain’s responsibility. It was his. “Nadya,” he said, “I’m sorry. What can I do to fix this?”

Nadya turned her steel-eyed gaze from the Captain to Bob. “You can get my crate back.”

Felix, having been quietly standing in the corner, arms folded over his chest and scowling, stepped forward. “This is wholly foolish, Ms. Amestra. You know the value of the Za’toon technology you hold. Why not just sell them and replace whatever was in that crate? But you keep asking us to go out on a limb for you. Respectfully, why should we? We’ve already screwed ourselves enough for you.”

Bob glanced around the room. The rest of the crew, unimpressed with Nadya’s demands, nodded in agreement with the obviousness of Felix’s statement. Nadya thought for a moment, and sighed. “Don’t worry about why. Just get me the crate and we’ll also erase your fines. Consider them gone. Is that enough for you, Mr. Davenport?”

Captain Kumari folded her arms across her unbuttoned coat. She stepped to the view-screen and said, “Just one more thing. What’s in the crate that’s so damn important? We are planning on risking our ass tangling with Disnosoft over it, again, after all.”

“A chunk of humanity’s soul,” breathed Nadya.

“Oh, cut with the dramatic crap.” Captain Kumari snorted.

Nadya glared at the captain. “Books. Hard drives. Music. Disks. Videos. Films. As I said, a chunk of humanity’s soul.”

Felix gasped, a sharp sound that turned every eye in the room on him. “Sorry,” he said.

“Don’t be,” said Nadya. “I respect your reaction. As I said, the crate is priceless. We will preserve its contents for eternity. With them, we will create a fire from which all can light their way.” With her cards on the table, Nadya now looked around at the crew pleadingly. “Please. Once Disnosoft gets a hold of culture, if they decide it won’t make them money, it vanishes. My associates and I have a sacred duty to keep that from happening. By our hand, Alexandria will rise again.”

Felix nodded eagerly. Bob shared his enthusiasm. More music for his collection, and more importantly than that, screw Disnosoft. Bob watched Nadya’s face with a newfound level of respect. She was a damn capable warrior on the front lines against the corporate who stole a large chunk of his life. He’d often dreamed about exacting revenge on Disnosoft, but Nadya actually did it. She saved culture, and fucked over Disnosoft in the process. What’s not to love? He looked at Nadya’s face. He should be right there with her, fighting alongside her. “Alright, Nadya. I’ll do it.” Before the inevitable gasps rose from the room, Bob turned to the rest of the crew and said, “I’m doing it alone. I’m not asking anyone else to put it on the line. Just lend me a shuttle and send Eris a few prayers for me.”

Nadya nodded stiffly. “Very well. I expect results soon.” The view-screen shut off.

Jana made a whip crack sound with an accompanying wrist flick.

Captain Kumari turned to Bob and shook her head, “No, Wilshire. You don’t need to do that. We can find another way.”

Bob shook his head. “I want to. I need to. Besides. I like old records, books, you know...” It was true, but mostly, it was his guilty conscience gnawing at him that forced him to volunteer. He’d made a habit of leaving people out to dry when it got convenient in his younger days, but that no longer went so well with his more attuned view of reality. He gave a cheerful smile. “So, let’s get to this. How far out is the Disnosoft vessel?”

The captain opened her mouth, as if to protest, but then sighed. “Broussard? Where are they headed?”

Jana checked her instruments, and replied, “They were heading outward, but I don’t know where from there.”

Felix said, “Wherever this Chloe VanDrees is, that’s where I’d start looking first.”

Bob shot a glance to Felix. “VanDrees? Did you say Chloe VanDrees? She’s the entertainment director for the Disnosoft Volcano Adventure Park.”

“You worked there,” said Captain Kumari, drumming the tips of her fingers together.

“Technically, I still do,” answered Bob matter-of-factly. “I just haven’t clocked in for a long time.” He scratched his white beard thoughtfully. “I’ve still got some contacts there. I’m going to send a few messages, see if anyone knows anything about this. What kind of ship were the Disnosoft folks in? I didn’t see any Disnosoft vessels on scan.”

“An Ali Xi Pegasus, a personal ship, which is why it didn’t show up as a Disnosoft vessel,” Captain Kumari answered, gesturing to the data on the pilot’s control screen.

“May I borrow your console?” asked Bob, gesturing to the panel before Jana. Jana stepped away from her chair.

Bob typed a few messages, sent them off, then reached for the MD-40 he had in his beer-can holster.

A few minutes later, fast despite the cross-space lag time, the answer returned.

*From: ACYoung@brimstone.drk*

*To: bob@eborden.sal*

*Message: VanDrees? Yeah, she’s still here, but she works in the copyright enforcement now. Since the park’s gone, everything has been re-purposed for bottom-rung Disnosoft operations. She locates and retrieves media. Total shit work. You know the Pele’s Mountain location, where that accident was? She’s got an operation set up there, and from what I hear, she’s crazy serious about her work.*

Bob looked up from the console. “It’s on Io. I know that park inside and out. I got this.”

The captain frowned, but conceded. “Fine. Set a course.”

Bob smiled wistfully. “Alexandria. Heh. Nadya’s an Alexandrian. Who knew?” He’d heard of the Alexandrians, but he thought that movement had died out decades ago. Devoted to the preservation of knowledge and culture, their great work was the building of the great free library, from which all can light their candles from Alexandria’s flame. Like most religions of his day and age, the Alexandrians started as a college prank, an answer to fill the religious or philosophic studies requirements in a more interesting fashion than the mainstream paganisms of the day offered. And, as what happens with all excellent memes, a decade or so later, became a serious esoteric body.

“So what’s the plan?” asked Veronica.

“We search for the ship with the crate, and Wilshire goes after it. Once he finds it, we pilot a drone to retrieve it.”

“I’m going with him,” said Jana, standing up. “And we’ll get those fuckers, every last one of

them.”

The captain winced, then hid it quickly. “I appreciate your enthusiasm, but not this time.” She then snapped a look at Jana. “What the hell happened with you back at the locker, anyhow?”

“They were pissing me off, and I was having a bad day,” said Jana without a hint of apology in her voice.

“You’d better hope Wilshire gets those crates, or you’ll be having a bad day to the tune of 52,200 Fija,” snapped Captain Kumari, “Because I’m not paying for your inability to control yourself.”

Jana uttered, “Bitch,” under her breath. Bob heard it, and held his breath. The captain heard it too. She turned to face Jana, staring hard into her eyes.

“Care to repeat that, Broussard?”

“I didn’t mean for you to hear it, but if you must know, I meant it. I can control myself just fine, and I don’t need you making judgments. I don’t suppose you know or care, but my life just went to shit. I can’t expect you’d understand.”

Bob winced in pain, the pain he knew Jana would soon be feeling. “When you’re in a hole,” he muttered, “you stop digging. Please, stop digging, Broussard.”

Jana kept digging. “So yeah, I’m sick of it.” Bob could see the veins rising to the surface under Jana’s freckled skin. She dug deeper, “What right do you have to judge me? You don’t know what it’s like. You have this ship, and your business, and...”

The captain whipped her jacket off and tossing it aside. She tugged her blouse over her left shoulder, baring amber skin underneath. She walked over to Veronica, held out her hand, and said, “Spanner, please.”

Veronica reached into her sleeveless trench coat and pulled a wrench, forty centimeters of gleaming steel, and planted it in the captain’s hand. Captain Kumari slammed the wrench into her shoulder. Her shoulder clanged. She smacked away at her shoulder, each strike ringing out. She offered the wrench to Jana and glared. “Would you like to try to see how much shit I’ve gone through?” Jana shrunk back, stunned silence spread on her face. Veronica giggled, and Felix was reading something on his datapad, uninterested in the demonstration. Bob felt grateful that at least Jana would be spared some embarrassment from her crew mates.

“Since you brought it up,” Captain Kumari continued, “I didn’t get a free ride to pilot’s school. I had to do what the poor kids did: I joined the military. That shit they tell you about freedom not being free? Well, it ain’t YOUR freedom we’re fighting for, and it always costs you something.” The captain whanged the spanner against her shoulder one more time, then handed it back to Veronica. “I’ll accept your apology now, so we can get back to the task at hand. You’re

damn lucky I don't run this ship like a military vessel, or I'd be dropping you off at the nearest asteroid, with or without a dome on it."

"I — I..." Jana pushed the words through her stammering lips, "I'm so sorry, Captain. I just... I was selfish. I'm sorry. I really am." Jana hung her head, hiding her reddening face.

The Captain patted her on the shoulder. "Now sit your ass down and get focused." The captain tilted her head and peered at Jana, softening her tone to something more amicable, "How'd you learn to fight like that, anyhow?"

"Field hockey," Jana answered.

"Yeah?" asked Captain Kumari, "What position did you play?"

"I didn't. I was in the stands."

Captain Kumari grinned and sat down. Jana, a time bomb with a broken control mechanism, shuffled back to her seat. No way in hell Bob was taking that mess with him. He decided to take the time bomb with a working control mechanism, instead. "I'd like Veronica to come with me. She can pilot a drone, and her technical skills might come in handy," said Bob. He then turned to Jana, adding, "But I appreciate the offer. After we get that crate, we can hang out and listen to a few records together before we give them back." He took extra care to extend kindness to her. It looked like she could use it. Jana shrugged, and looked at her toes.

Veronica, currently curled up in the corner with her trench coat wrapped around her, looked up groggily at the sound of her name. "Huh? What do I have to do?"

"Not have to, just asking as a favor."

"Yeah, OK. Gonna need a stabilizer first, Doc."

Felix added, "I'll see if I can learn anything useful for you about VanDrees."

Captain Kumari said, "Good. We should be reaching Io later today. We'll reconvene then."

Bob headed back to his quarters and sat down with his datapad. He messaged back and forth with old contacts on Io. No, he's not coming back for long. Sorry, he's only there to do a quick job. Yes, he plans to come back and visit soon. Yes, everything is great out here in space. Yes, the old access cards still work.

Chloe. Shudder. Bob wandered to his fridge to get a MD-40, then said to his datapad. "Search footage and articles for Chloe VanDrees."

A few seconds later, his datapad chimed. "Two results found."

First, he found an article with the following quote by her: "We at Disnosoft are totally overwhelmed with grief at the tragedy of Pele's Mountain. The Disnosoft corporation extends its

most heartfelt thoughts and prayers to everyone affected by this tragedy. Though this mishap affects us all deeply, we at Disnosoft are resolved to never let the magic die, on Io or anywhere else. Please follow us on Yumanet for updates on when Io will reopen, safer and funner than ever. Lastly, I'd like to remind you that even though the magic is not currently at the Disnosoft Volcano Adventure Park on Io, we still have three other amazing resort vacation destinations for you and your family to enjoy, oh yeah!"

Bob found the second clip on Chloe's Yumanet profile, a video clip of Chloe with an acoustic guitar in her hand, and the charred remains of the towering Pele statue behind her. Around her were strewn remnants of death and chaos. Burnt plastic tropical plants, scorched tiki-god heads and half-melted faux bamboo walkways surrounded her.

Chloe VanDrees stepped up to a mic stand and spread her hands, announcing, "This is for you mothers, fathers, sisters, brothers, and friends who did not have a magical Disnosoft day. Though we may be hurting, let's always remember, even in our darkest hour, to let that Disnosoft magic touch our hearts! Oh yeah!" Mouth open wide in horror, Bob continued staring at the atrocity who was now belting out a power-pop ballad, a eye-gouging cliché with all of the ooaaah-oooahh melismas and whispery spoken lyrics in between her teen-pop wails. She danced with her guitar in the debris-filled streets.

Waves of vitriol pounded against the walls of Bob's soul. Chloe, who always reminded you to greet each guest with a smile. Chloe, who wrote you up if you ever forgot to say to a guest or a fellow staffer, "Walk in Pele's light." Chloe, who always made sure you were bubbling over with the Disnosoft spirit. "Chloe VanDrees, who is proud and honored to be a soulless sack of shit," he growled.

Bob gulped back the last of his MD-40, crushed the can in his fingers, tossed it on the floor and flopped into his bed. With just 16 hours to Io, Bob spent the next fifteen and a half sleeping. Now properly rested, Bob rolled out of bed and lumbered to the bridge. The stunning bands of Jupiter's surface filled the view-screen with stripes of orange and gold. Before them, a sparkling dot appeared on the horizon, getting steadily larger. Io, deadly, beautiful Io, came into sight.

Bob tapped his commlink. "Veronica. You got the shuttle ready? Haulbots, scanners, recovery drones?"

"Yeah, Santa, the sleigh is loaded."

"Check. Meeting you in five." Bob dug through his closet, found his old Disnosoft uniform, then headed to the shuttle bay.

When he arrived, Veronica was already strapped into the pilot's chair, hands on the manual controls. The shuttle was barely wide enough for two seats, and smelled like old socks inside. Bob slid into a cracked gray seat and strapped the seat belt around him. He glanced in the monitor on the

control panel and double checked—the haulbots and towing cables were all strapped down in the cargo bay. He reached into a glove compartment on the dusty panel, and grabbed a fresh pine-scented air freshener. He unwrapped it and hung it from the ceiling. It smelled like old pizza in here, and he didn't need to be getting distracted, either.

With the flicks of a few switches, the shuttle bay doors slid open and Veronica lifted the shuttle into space.

“Get a low orbit,” said Bob, “and let's scan for that Pegasus. Start over here.” He pointed to the location of Pele's mountain on the shuttle's navigation panel. Veronica tapped her human fingertips against the screen, scrolling back and forth, concentrating on the display.

“I'm not seeing it,” said Veronica. She swooped the shuttle closer to the planet's surface. Three domes rose over the hazy, soot-filled horizon, two large ones, and one smaller one. The small one contained the places where the executives worked, lived, and played. Office buildings lined the outer walls, while sleek silver condos and quaint parks with koi ponds filled the center. The executive dome sat well away from the other two, connected by a long tube.

The larger two domes of Io's main habitat were only a few thousand meters apart, close enough that an employee could walk between the two, but far enough that the guests couldn't see any detail of the workers dome through the dense Ionian atmosphere. The worker's dome didn't fit in with the Disnosoft image, but was necessary to house all the humans who, according to market research, made for a better guest experience than robotic park hosts. The largest dome sported Disnosoft's tropical paradise, a fully immersive experience complete with resort, golf courses, water slides and sandy beaches. In the center of the action stood Pele's Volcano park, filled with rides, attractions, shows, and more fun than you could ever know what to do with. Jutting out from the main dome, a long tube twisted through the landscape, across fields of volcanic ash and pools of lava, reaching toward the peak of the tallest volcano in the vicinity. Near the peak, a viewing platform stood, allowing guests to step off the shuttle and get a better look. What once was a place to stop and take photos, now was a burned husk between two shattered and charred ends of the shuttle's tube.

As Veronica flew a loop around the workers' dome. Bob craned his neck to see if he couldn't spot his old beehive, so he could imagine taking a big shit on that dump. Disnosoft pinched every coin possible, packing the fine-laborers into quarters that were small, even for beehive standards. Bob found it impossible to go to sleep without earplugs and a loud white noise generator, both of which were banned from the colony “for your safety and security.” When the laborers ate, it was in communal dining halls, packed with no less than a thousand people at a time. For what little down time they had, Disnosoft thoughtfully set up dozens of movie theaters, where you could watch anything at all, free, from their collection. Bob spent most of his life hidden away in his apartment, but even there, he found it nearly impossible in this environment to read, write, research, or think.

Cheap thin walls meant every conversation from six neighbors around him could be heard. When Jean-Paul Sartre had said “Hell is other people,” he could not possibly have understood of the depths of this truth, having never done a multi-year stint at the Disnosoft Fun Mines.

Veronica reached over and smacked Bob on the shoulder, knocking him out of his dreams of defecation on Disnosoft. “Wake up, Papa Bear. Goldilocks brought you some porridge.” She pointed to a blip on the screen. “There’s the Pegasus.”

“Zoom in,” said Bob, leaning in to get a better look. “Which dome is it going to?”

Veronica shrugged. “How the fuck am I supposed to know? It’s on that one, the one with the broken tube line leading to it.”

“The main park dome.” Bob blinked. “Why would shipments of crates be going there?”

“Who knows? Let’s just get the crate and get out.”

Bob paused, pondering the situation. “Disnosoft medics have full access to the facilities, so that we could be on hand to handle any emergency. If the old codes still work, I should be able to get in through the executive area. We can park there, and take the tube to the guest dome.” Bob tapped at the other dome, at a large square area. “Land there, at that platform.”

Pele’s Mountain soared over the horizon, billowing gouts of flame, lava and ash violently into the sky. For a moment, the lava surged through Bob’s own veins as he recalled the wonder he felt the first time he learned about these ancient, mighty furnaces. His delighted heart couldn’t clamp down on his bile-filled stomach, which churned tempestuously as Veronica dove the shuttle down onto the landing platform, and connected with the dome’s airlock.

“Veronica, I think it’s best if you stay here. I know my way around. Listen for me. I’ll call you when I need you to send a bot in. I’m going into the belly of the beast.” Bob’s eyes flitted skyward. “Eris, take the wheel,” he prayed.

Veronica reclined her seat. “Smile! Don’t forget to show your Disnosoft magic!”

“Blow me.” Bob flipped her off as he headed toward the airlock.

Bob held his breath as he swiped his badge on the executive dome airlock. The door slid open, and Bob stepped into the land of luxury. Office buildings of glittering steel and shiny glass cast blocky shadows across neatly trimmed parks and gardens. Rows of trees sprouting colorful fruit and sculpted iron park benches lined the streets. Trash and graffiti were nowhere to be seen. Not a single blade of grass was out of place. It looked emptier than he remembered it. Today, few people walked these manicured streets.

The executive dome offered a different, but equally stunning, view of the largest volcano on Io, Pele. Pele’s magnificent slopes brushed against the gold sulfuric sky just a few hundred meters

beyond the edge of the dome, casting ruby shadows across the landscape. In the distance loomed the awe-inspiring statue of Pele, powerful Pele, as he walked to the tube station.

When he arrived at the tube station, Bob was mightily displeased to learn he'd be walking even more.

"What the..." he muttered. The shuttle wasn't running. From the dust and rust gathering on the track, it looked like it hadn't run in years. Executives walked or biked the length of the tube. He cursed Disnosoft for giving him sore arches on top of everything else. "Disnosoft's latest thrill ride—the Cursed Shuttles of Io, currently out of order because these people are idiots," Bob muttered. He had a hard time fathoming why anyone would bother believing a superstition that didn't serve any purpose except making your feet hurt.

After the annoyingly long walk, Bob arrived at the main dome. The tube ended in an arched construction of plastic bamboo poles topped with giant tiki heads. He stepped into the jewel on Disnosoft's Ionian crown. At the scene before him, he had to still himself from shuddering.

The guest dome couldn't have been more different than the last time he saw it. The blindingly bright colors, whose cheerfulness once mocked his daily foul mood, were now blackened, mangled shapes. The planters filled with tropical plants were covered with soot and ash, their leaves curled into angry claws. The tiki heads had warped into agonized faces, frozen in a scream. The crisscrossing walkways, zip-lines, and platforms were all draped with ragged fabric, burned and tattered. Rubbish filled the ponds and waterfalls which dotted the landscape. The only thing that was the same was the canned loop of jungle animal sounds. "Coo-coo, twee twee kiki ri!" it sang, over and over, like a tiny pick axe inside his skull.

In the center of it all was the charred, twisted statue of Pele. Thirty feet tall, the Hawaiian goddess of the volcano cast her warped shadow across the dome. Her shapely legs now crumbled husks of soot, her breasts now misshapen globs of deformed plastic, and her princess-perfect face, now a hollowed out skull with an elongated chin warped into a perpetual laugh of twisted delight. Flames burned in the statue's eyes and leaped out the crown of her head. A dozen hot-tub sized iron cauldrons surrounded her feet, each filled with flames.

Executives in black robes came and went from this room, seemingly unconcerned with the room's new look. Heavy sealed doors now shut off the the tube where the explosions had happened. On the airlock, someone had painted in black an intricate design, a vevé-like symbol that Bob didn't recognize. He glanced around — the same symbol was everywhere. Next to the airlock stood a kiosk filled with books and pamphlets. Bob headed for the kiosk, figuring it might give him a clue. Occasionally, an executive in a long, black robe would walk up to the base of charred Pele's feet, and kiss them. A woman in the same robe dropped something into one of the many flame-filled cauldrons. It glinted a rainbow light... an ancient laser disk.

“Hail, hail!” the woman cried, flailing her hands around and shaking ecstatically. Three younger execs, all in robes, were taking lancets to their fingertips, piercing them, and dropping blood into the cauldrons. A younger woman, likely an intern in a black robe, was tearing pages out of a paper book and shoving them into the cauldron, screaming, “Burn! Burn! Burn for Him!” Disnosoft corporate culture had always been weird, but he never expected anything like this.

At that moment, he realized that his open gawking could be bad for his health. Blend in Bob, blend the hell in. You do not want these zealots thinking you aren’t here with anything but the purest intentions. Bob closed his eyes and said a silent prayer.

Bob walked for the kiosk, grabbing a brochure. “Our Savior, Chernobog,” it read. The designer had thought it was a good idea to use the classic horror movie blood-drip font for those words. Well, at least someone around here had some taste.

In the early years of his popely training at the Twenty-Third Church of Eris Esoteric in New Arcadia (most of which involved smoking grass and getting into philosophic arguments with conservatives), he had read as much of the heathens’ propaganda as possible. He read little cartoon booklets in which most of the characters burned in hell at the end. He read magazines full of dreamy people, surrounded by remarkably clean farm animals in a dreamy setting—all yours for the low low price of obeying their restrictive rules. Bob even read the fortune cookies made by the Terra Firma cults, with adorable aphorisms like, “Purity of soul starts with keeping your feet on Earth.” The online gaming cults of the Yumatech dorks were particularly fascinating. Their path to ascension involved a lifelong quest of returning to the soul’s original spawn point. Most of what he saw in here was quite different in tone, save, perhaps, for some of the more outlandish heavy metal religions. For all of their differences, it was only the condiments on the turd sandwiches that told them apart. Some cultures liked their bullshit Buddha-flavored, others preferred theirs Jesus-flavored, others liked theirs Shiva, Allah, or Hermes flavored. This particular set of condiments was of a religious flavor palette that Bob had not experienced. Bob scanned down to one of the prayers, and read it silently, while his mind screamed “what the fuck?”

*“Hail Chernobog, Devourer of all Heresies, purify my soul, purify Solsys. We give to you all of our Disnosoft magic, that we may purify all things in your name. We claim every Terran heart for you, Chernobog, that all shall be one day awakened onto thy glory. O Chernobog, we feed you that you may protect us. Grant us this day our golden parachutes, that we may always do thy bidding. In the name of Disnosoft, let all be made pure.”*

His eyes rose from the brochure. Robed people by the dozens were filing into the room. Their heads were bowed and hands clasped in prayer as each walked up to the statue and kissed its feet. Bob tried his best to fade into the background, but against black and gray, his red Disnosoft medic shirt stood out, catching the eye of one of the executives. The executive ran up to Bob and grabbed him by the collar. “Brother! What is this? You come un-robed into Chernobog’s

temple? Filth! Heretic!” The man started shaking him, shouting louder, “Heretic! Heretic!” Around Bob, cowl-covered worshipers turned to face him, their hard eyes glaring at him.

# Burning Flame - 37

The face of Bob Wilshire faded away, the last words on his lips a promise to get the precious crate. Nadya stared into the screen long after she terminated the connection with the Lizzie Borden. For as long as she had known Bob, he was always full of half-filled promises and forgotten engagements. When she was twelve years younger, she chalked it up to the distractions of genius. Well into her sixties now, Nadya Amestra was sick of excuses. Bob promised the crate, and he had damn well better get it.

Despite her attempts to harden her heart and stick to business, the tightness on Nadya's brow fell to the twitching of concern. Bob was going to steal from Disnosoft on her behalf. If he failed, it meant he would likely live out the rest of his days in fine labor. She pressed her hand to the screen and sighed.

"Bob, you'd better come back, with or without my crate."

Twelve years ago, just when they had started forming a real connection, Bob vanished. For twelve years, Nadya assumed that he had run out on her. On the day Bob's house burned down, Nadya had to put a rest to all of it. Then, out of nowhere, Bob comes back into her life. He thought nothing of promising her the crate, and put his life on the line to do so. With the backing of his hopefully competent crew, perhaps his words might not be empty this time.

She wanted to be angry, but at the thought about the sincerity in Bob's voice, she softened. Alarming, but not unexpected. The possibility that she could fall in love with him all over again started to solidify. For twelve years, she thought the worst of Bob, only to be met with a truth vastly different from what she had believed.

"Stay safe, Bob," she whispered, and put the datapad away.

# Into the Fire - 38

Robes? Bob froze. In his moment of scrambling, he reminded himself that he'd studied the popely ways, and a pope could blend in to any religious situation of any sort, even a corporate cult. This was nothing compared to the initiation rites into the sect of St. Gulik, which involved bathing in vats full of cockroaches. It was nowhere near the initiation into the cult of the Vampirella, the Whore Queen of B-Rated Cinema, which consisted of unspeakable acts involving humanoid pterodactyls with giant cocks. Bob knew all about those and had a healthy respect for most of the weird religions. This kind of weird, the kind where wild-eyed zealots chant the corporate line, was best avoided. When squares attempted to ride the weird, terrible things happened. But if he followed the rules and stayed humble, he might just make it through this.

The executive who cornered him was about to wave over others when Bob took his hands and said, "Peace, brother, I know the rules. I was down here taking care of a medical emergency, and was so wrapped up by this fascinating read that I didn't want to leave. Can you please help me?"

Can you please help me? Those words he learned through his life as keys that can get him most anywhere with any human that does not have a sociopathic personality disorder. The man turned, and though he snorted with disapproval, he made no move to shout any further.

"In there. Hurry, before Her Eminence writes you up for improper worship attire." The man pointed to a crate under an unused kiosk. Bob clasped his hands together, bowed to him, and hurried toward the crate. He slid a satiny black around his shoulders, bowed his head, and started on his pilgrimage to the deformed statue.

Bob lurked back, studying the crowd's behaviors so he could emulate them. When they raised their fists, he raised his fist. When they shouted to the heavens, he shouted to the heavens. When they cried, "Damn the pirates," he cried, "Damn the pirates."

It was at the communion ceremony at the end of the ritual, that the high priestess finally appeared. Black ichor spread through his veins at the sight of the abomination. Chloe swept onto the stage in impressive ceremonial attire. Atop her head, Chloe wore a blue conical hat, spangled with stars shaped from shimmering diamonds. Around her flowed a set of robes, as red as the Ionian sunset. She stood at the podium and began to speak. The crowds below turned in silence, eager for her every word.

VanDrees raised a slender wooden wand above her head and drew circles in the air with it.

She chanted in a cheerful voice, one that had haunted Bob's nightmares for years, "Great Chernobog, we offer this sacrifice to you."

She pointed her wand at a panel in the wall, just beyond a warped tiki head. The panel rolled back. A haulbot stacked with shipping crates rolled out from the other side.

Bob gasped. The crate! He tapped his commlink under his sleeve, opening a link so Veronica could listen in. He silenced the incoming sounds on it. Bob figured his best chance was in tracking the crate's movements, then sending Veronica a location when it was clear. Until then, he'd play along with the most awful Disnosoft fad yet.

The voices of the devotees around him rose with holy fury, shouting, "Great Chernobog, we sacrifice to you."

Bob shouted, "Great Chernobog, we sacrifice to you." He shuddered under his robes.

Each reveler raised himself to higher and higher heights of ecstasy until finally the whole lot of them were in the throes of passion, debauchery, or both. The revelers howled, jumped, danced, and punched each other. Executives sliced open their flesh and drew bloody sigils on the wall, while others banged their heads until they bled on the statue's feet. One reveler turned to him, eyes staring at him from blackened eye sockets howled in his face, "Mayest thou walk in the light!"

His mind went down that deeply-carved neural pathway, still well in place though he'd been away from Io for years. Automatically, Bob replied, "Walk in Pele's light." Immediately, he regretted it.

The reveler screamed and started backing away from Bob. "Heretic! Filth!" he howled, holding his hands out in an X, a protective gesture to ward off Bob's heresy. Two brutish devotees grabbed Bob roughly. One rushed to a closet and grabbed a roll of duct tape. He tossed the roll to the brute with his hand pressed against his throat. He grabbed it from the air and wrapped Bob's wrists and ankles. Once secured, they shoved Bob in a crate full of books, records, and hard drives. His bones rattled as the contents slammed against him. The zealots slammed the lid shut. Alone. In the darkness.

A calm feminine voice cradled his terror, making Bob's muscles clench.

"Oh, foolish, wayward child," she cooed. "Pele has not been worshiped around her since she has proved herself to be a false god. Chernobog has corrected Pele's face. He has revealed Himself as the one true god."

Bob's stomach lurched as he felt the box being hoisted upward. Judging from the smoothness of the hoist, a drone must have grabbed him. He thought he'd bang against the walls in his panic, but Bob always reminded himself that panicking was an amateur move.

"McCormick," he said, "I really hope you're hearing all of this and come get me. Like, real

soon, OK?”

An ancient 20th century hard drive fell on his shoulder, bruising him. Bob muttered, “Such sorry people. So close to finding the Goddess, yet so far away.” He struggled to get comfortable, but no matter how he moved, he something jabbed him in the leg, back or butt.

The crate jerked to a stop. A crack of light shone in from the top of the box, widening until the lid was fully opened. Twelve flames shined from the cauldrons surrounding him. Noting the long shadow that fell on him, Bob looked straight up, past the ankles, knees, and upward, up the horrid, twisted statue. The mocking smile of Pele—no, Chernobog!—loomed over Bob’s head. His breath tightened as he smelled the woody ash of burned books and plastic pungence of melted magnetic media.

Chloe strode up the steps to the platform. She reached in the box, and ripped Bob’s badge off his shirt. Chloe pulled a datapad from a pocket in her robe and held it up to the badge to scan it. She laughed. Then she went uncharacteristically quiet, which terrified Bob. Chloe smiled at him cruelly, then turned to the audience, who stood in breathless anticipation.

“Devotees of the One True God who saved us from the destruction, listen well. Chernobog has once again affirmed our purpose. He has given us a test. His name is Robert Wilshire.” She stepped around the platform, robes billowing around her. “Robert Wilshire joined the Disnosoft family under the most unfortunate circumstances.”

She turned to Bob and shoved the microphone in his face. “Mr. Wilshire, would you tell the congregation why you came to work for Disnosoft?”

Bob gave a clownish grin, “Because I love having fun, and I appreciate the opportunity to work among amazing people in a magical environment.”

“Wrong!” she screeched. Chloe slapped Bob savagely across his face. The bitter taste of blood filled Bob’s mouth. He closed his eyes and sighed. Banishing with laughter doesn’t work on zealots. Chloe then turned to the audience, and stated, “He came to work for us because he owes us over 5 million Fijacoin in fines—for piracy!”

A collective gasp ran through the crowd, followed by shouts and boos.

Chloe paced, gazing with a fiery intensity into the eyes of each of her congregants, speaking directly to their souls. She repeated herself, louder and with more passion, throwing her arms out to her sides, her red robes flaring around her. “Our test is this: do we feed Chernobog what He demands, no matter what? Today, Chernobog has demanded more than books. Do we give it to him? Do we trust Chernobog? Do we have faith? Do we let Chernobog guide us, heart and soul? Do we?!”

She paused, holding the mic toward the congregation. The congregation screamed wildly.

Fervor rang through her voice. “Chernobog will keep us close through the darkest times! He will make our profits soar! He will safeguard our assets until we return to His loving arms at the end of our days! Today, He asks for the blood of a pirate. Today, He will devour more than just books, films and drives! Today, He will devour the flesh and blood of a creature of the ultimate evil. Today, Robert Wilshire will be reborn into a greater purpose—food for a God! Could there be any more noble of an ending for a filthy pirate?”

The crowd roared. Though the sweat pouring down his forehead, Bob glanced again at his commlink. “Please, Veronica,” he whispered as Chloe turned her back to him.

The red-robed woman drifted back to Bob and she squeezed his round face in her hand. “Robert Wilshire, you are about to be purified. Your bones and blood will become holy food. Your flesh will be devoured in Chernobog’s belly, and your sins will be burned away in His flames.” She forcibly turned his head to look at the volcano behind the dome. “Be joyful in your heart, pirate. You are about to meet God.”

Chloe swept across the stage with her arms spread wide. “Congregation! Let us praise Chernobog with song. Everyone, please get your hymnals, and turn to page twelve. We’re signing, ‘God of Fire!’ first. Oh yeah!”

Chloe grabbed the mic and struck a dramatic pose. She flipped her head to face the spotlights, and then turned to the audience. She burst forth into passionate song. Without post-processing, Bob had to pretend there was a musical key holding it all together.

*We give to the god of fiiii— eeerrrrrrr, fire!*

*We fulfill his desiiiiii-errrrr, desire!*

*We pray to the god of fiii-eeerrrrrrr, fire!*

*And he takes our profits hiiiiigher, higher!*

*We feed the dark one, dark one, dark one,*

*And he fills our lives with magic and fun, magic and fun!*

*To protect Disnosoft all its days, all its days,*

*It’s Chernobog we praise, we praise, we praise! Oh yeah!*

Around that time, Chloe was started doing shout-outs. “I just wanted to say that you all are, like, the best, my greatest fans, my biggest supporters. And Chernobog! Let’s hear it for God! Yeaaaah! Chernobog!”

Chloe was pointing to different members of the audience, “Love to Katrice in marketing, who totally brought the best cupcakes for our holiday party. And to Jerry in HR, who’s always been

such a champ around the office, taking care of organizing the weekly potluck. And to, oh, to all of you, my congregation! Love! In Chernobog's name! Turn to page thirty-five in your hymnals. Let's sing another!"

Bob had already accepted that he was a dead man, but more singing? He had to draw the line somewhere. Bob shouted, "I can't take it! Kill me already! I can't take it! No more, no more!"

He clumsily attempted to leap out of the box, but his duct-taped limbs dragged him back to a rough fall on his behind. Chloe screeched, "HERETIC!" Two robed devotees rushed up to the stage, slammed the lid shut, and bolted it closed. Bob was alone in terror and darkness, but thankfully, no more singing.

The box lifted under him. Time to make peace with everything. He meditated. The box rolled across the ground. He meditated. Some large doors opened with a hiss of pneumatics, and the box continued to roll. He meditated. An engine roared to life around him, and the crate rocked gently back and forth, knocking against others. He meditated. Then he felt the distinct twist in his stomach that he always got during liftoff. Then, he wept.

His stomach lurched as the crate lifted higher. "Smooth ride. I must be on a small craft," he muttered between thoughts of "this is it," and "I'm going to die," and "Eris, I hope you're not sleeping or in the bathroom when I show up on your doorstep, because I'd hate your first in-person impression of me to be a cranky one."

The heat rose around him, and he curled up into a ball. Nothing he could do now but accept that fate, the fate that... that the craft carrying the crate was being shot at? The vessel rocked violently. There was a drop in the ship's speed. After that, a loud clang, and the vessel jerked in the opposite direction. The crate soared every upward, rising to a pace that shoved his intestines into his eyeballs. He tried to think of any last minute prayers he needed to say, but was unable to do so while being tumbled around, his innards flipping like a beached fish.

The Nutrisoy Philly cheesesteak and MD-40 he had that morning didn't last long after a move like that. Those, and a healthy amount of bile, spewed all over the crate. Bob wretched until he could wretch no more. The crate clattered around a while longer, marinating Bob in a sickly-sweet-and-sour scented cocktail of bile, brunch and books. Gratefully, it stopped. The air around was considerably cooler.

And then, a crack of light spread across the ceiling of the crate, growing into a flood of photons that burned Bob's eyes. When his vision readjusted, an outstretched hand reached toward him, offering to help him out. Just beyond that, was the smiling face of his captain.

# Jackpot - 39

The shuttle that Veronica had hijacked sat in his cargo bay, filled not just with the crate that had previously contained Dr. Wilshire, but four others, none of which were filled with vomit. These crates, saved from the flames of the Disnosoft corporate cult, must likewise contain bits of culture, deemed unprofitable by Disnosoft, destined to vanish forever. The crates tempted Felix for fifteen long minutes before he gave in.

Felix wasn't into religion much, neither for nor against it, but compared to what he'd seen of the hellfire churches of God, guns, and drag racing on Mars, the Disnosoft cult seemed tame. Stories were Felix's preferred alternative to religion. You wanted to know how to act to your greatest advantage? Read a book, something like *The Art of War*. You wanted to know how to be smooth enough to get the job done every time? Read a trickster tale. For Felix, culture was as essential to the soul as food is for the body. Right now, his enemy wanted to feed every single human soul junk food and destroy any proper nutrition for it. Felix cherished the gift his mother risked her career and freedom to give him: covert access to the locked archives at the university where she taught.

Felix paced around the newly-acquired shuttle. He choked up as he hit the wall of sickly-sour stench. Though they closed the crate immediately after freeing Bob from it, the scent of his befoulment still lingered. Felix tolerated it long enough to get the haulbots in and the crates out.

Once unloaded, Felix opened the crates and glanced over their contents. Books. Disks. Cassettes. Magazines. After taking in the whole of the haul, Felix grabbed a stepladder and got a closer look. He picked up one book after another and scanned a page or two, taking a quick taste of every treasure the chest held. Every sweet, strange, wonderful morsel of truth in these books hardened Felix's resolve—he'd be damned before he let Disnosoft destroy these treasures. He'd make sure that whatever future souls came along like himself, trapped among the Martian shitheads, had access to the realms opened by these books.

Felix reached into one of the un-vomited boxes and pulled out a book by William Butler Yeats. Poetry. Felix had heard about poetry, but he had not had the chance to read much of it. From what he understood, it was mostly the realm of angsty teenagers and lovelorn housewives. He read a few verses aloud, then sighed. Though he had a hard time wrapping his brain around the archaic language, it was beautiful all the same. His spindly fingers paged through the book, and found an inscription on the first page, hand written in a cursive that took him a moment to decipher. It read, "Education is not the filling of a pail, but rather the lighting of a fire.—W.B. Yeats." Felix closed his eyes and held the book to his chest, whispering the message from so long ago.

After reading a few more poems, he put the book down and continued his exploration. The next book he grabbed was by H.G. Wells. Felix immediately dove in. After paging through that book, Felix added it to his to-read pile. Mary Shelley. Arthur Conan Doyle. Frank Baum—all of his other books from Oz that weren't the one that Disnosoft made into a movie piled up on his stack. One of the things Felix did not expect from these crates was the protectiveness he felt about the contents. To think that they almost burned was unbearable. Preserving these was his duty.

Felix tapped on his datapad. Yates was from the late 19th century, well before the perpetual copyright laws were born. This book should have been public domain. Many of these books should have been in the public domain. Felix frowned, and his fingers curled into a fist.

“Smart move,” Felix said. “Kill everyone’s ability to even access anything that you can’t sell them, even if it costs you nothing. Fuck Disnosoft.”

He dug into another crate. It was mostly recorded media, tapes and disks and cassettes, all of which he had no means of playing. Felix moved to the next crate, filled with books and magazines. The last crate brought Felix to jump with joy. At least half of it was filled with comic books. Felix grabbed up a stack and dashed to the table, spreading them out so he could see all the covers at once. There were at least two series he recognized, and dozens he didn't.

Felix glanced at his watch. He had fifteen hours til they hit Bamberga. He had no idea how much he could read at that time, but Felix was determined to find out. He filled a satchel with a stack of comics and headed back to his quarters.

The velvet recliner in his reading nook was the only chair he planned to occupy for as long as possible. He started with the first one in the stack, but found himself getting quickly bored. Painfully wholesome high school kids doing painfully wholesome things. The next one intrigued him, though—an Amazon woman who flies an invisible jet.

Though the story was decent, the jet nagged at him. The woman couldn't become invisible, so what was the point of flying an invisible jet? Mooning everyone you flew over? Thankfully, McCormick didn't have an invisible jet. What if you wanted to put the jet on autopilot and take a nap? Does that mean that everyone sees a snoozing woman flying by? And what, for the love of the free market, does she do when she has to use the bathroom? Dammit, if only he had the rest of the series, he could know. People living back in the days when they could just go buy this stuff, one after the other, never knew how good they had it. Nothing in the rest of that comic could give Felix the answer, and the relief, that he sought. He made a mental note to keep an eye out for more of this series.

He picked up the next one, about a space barbarian running around saving some backward desert planet in his furry underwear. Felix curled his lip, disgusted. Wouldn't that itch terribly? And be difficult to keep clean? Did he fight evil with fleas on his crotch? Felix preferred cotton, for all of

these reasons. Furthermore, where, pray tell, are the rest of your clothes, Mr. Barbarian Man? Are your rippling muscles that amazing that they couldn't be better served by wearing some protection over them? Felix suffered through the cringe-worthy out of a labor of love. Despite the cheese, and possibly because of the cheese, Felix cherished these comics. The art, the action, the stories, the characters, the imaginary worlds, all delightful, but damn if the comics didn't make his forehead hurt from the face-palming.

Felix enjoyed fifteen more hours of reading, first the comics, then the graphic novels, and the short, but delightful and insightful, "Aesop's Fables." He'd just begun on a book about some vampires unliving their unlives in New Orleans, which, from everything he read, looks like a place he would have loved to have visited while it still existed as a real place, not just a virtual realm. A series of lights flashed by the cargo bay doors. The floor rocked as it lowered, and shuddered as the docking clamps clicked into place. He stood, collected his stack of books, and took them back to the crate.

He hardly had time to revert his brain's processes back out of the cobblestone streets and flickering gas lamps of the Vieux Carre when the doorbell on the cargo bay buzzed. Felix called to it, "Enter," and the door slid open. In walked Captain Kandi Kumari.

"Davenport, prepare the crates and clear some space. We're about to get our delivery."

Felix sighed. "I hate to let them go."

"I know. I would have loved the chance to read a few, myself. But those parts.... Millions of coins worth of parts..."

"Whichever way we go with them, I'm sure it's going to be lucrative," Felix said, though still sad about having to give up the books. Despite the numbers that Felix read on those Freenet auctions, he wasn't sure cashing out was the way to make the most out of this. Veronica's discoveries intrigued him far too much to consider letting them go at this point. No need to fold when you might well have the best hand at the table.

The captain's commlink flashed. "She's here," she said, and started toward the airlock door in the back of the cargo bay. She tapped her commlink and spoke into it, "Crew of the Lizzie Borden, anyone who wants to see what we scored, come down to the cargo bay." Captain Kumari clicked another button on her commlink and the cargo doors began to roll up, revealing the airlock door just beyond.

The airlock slid open. A woman in a blue gown of a light silk floated through the door. Her silvery-gray hair was neatly arranged on top of her head. Half-moon reading glasses perched on her pert nose. Though she stood barely a hair over one and a half meters tall, Nadya's presence commanded the space around her. She took one look at the crates, and drifted toward them immediately. Behind her, a haulbot followed.

Captain Kumari strode up to the woman and planted a hand on her shoulder. “Ahem,” the captain said, “Welcome to the Lizzie Borden. I’m Kandi Kumari, the captain of this ship. Nadya Amestra, I presume?” Captain Kumari offered her hand.

The woman whirled about and clasped her hands at her chest. “I’m so sorry... I just... oh, the crate... Thank you so much.” She accepted the captain’s shake.

“Yes, about that,” Captain Kumari said, getting straight to business. “You see, we had a bit of trouble getting these, and, well, it’s now full of puke. However, we did manage to get four more. Disnosoft was going to burn all of these...”

Nadya gasped. “Four more?”

Felix opened one of the crates and returned the books he was reading, the one to which he returned the books he read. “This one’s full of good stuff. I was starting to really dig that vampire story. And there’s a bunch of top-notch comics.”

“Four more!?” Nadya clapped her hands together. “You got me five crates?”

Felix glanced an unspoken question to the captain, who returned a knowing nod to him. “Excuse me, you misunderstood us. We got ourselves four more crates. Out of good faith, we were offering you a non-vomited crate. However, if you were at all interested in purchasing these other four we have...”

Nadya smiled broadly, “Very well. In exchange for taking the crates off your hands, I won’t inform Disnosoft that you’re carrying billions of coins worth of fines in your ship.”

Felix glared. How dare she think that tactic before he did?

Captain Kumari spoke up. “Davenport, thank you for trying, but Ms. Amestra has an excellent point.”

Nadya smirked. “It’s not all bad, Mr. Davenport. Give me a few weeks and I’ll get you copies of everything in here. In the meantime,” Nadya reached into a pocket in her robe and pulled out a data stick. She planted it in Felix’s hands and curled his fingers around it, “This should keep you busy for the next few decades.” Looking directly into Felix’s eyes, Nadya said with solemn seriousness, “Use it to light others’ fires.”

Felix looked to her and asked, “Is there poetry on here? Any Yeats?”

“Everything he ever wrote, yes.”

“Then may I keep just one book?” He reached into the crate and pulled out the one with the hand-written quotation.

Nadya plucked the book from his hands and flipped through it. “We already have this one

archived. It's yours. Enjoy.”

The haulbot unloaded a crate onto the floor. “There’s your payment,” she said, “And your fines should be cleared any minute now.” The haulbot collected the crates of books, and followed Nadya toward her shuttle. Felix and Kandi stepped to the crate and opened it up. The inside shined with a greenish-gold glow.

# Wild cards - 40

Because she came through here frequently to refuel and restock, Kandi knew more folks on Bamberga than most places. It was one of the few land-based stops where she enjoyed getting off her ship. Outside of Nadya, she hadn't had the chance lately to spend any time with anyone who wasn't a member of her crew. It was easy to get lost inside one's own world while wandering around space, so Kandi appreciated a little grounding.

Grounding was nice, but Kandi hated being on land. Her legs wobbled way too much. Having spent most of her adult life in space, she had shaped her motor skills around compensating for artificial gravity, which, despite the progress made in the past few decades, still have significant instabilities. Kandi liked to think her astro-swagger gave her a mysterious vibe, all the better to enchant the land-lubbers with.

Along the corridors she wandered past a pool hall, a shop selling cowboy boots, and a souvenir store with unfathomable items inside. Someone, somewhere in Solsys wants a miniature spoon with a medallion that says "Bamberga" on the handle. The damn spoon wouldn't be good for anything, except, perhaps, snortable drugs. Kandi sighed. She knew what she needed, and it wasn't trinkets. Kandi pulled out her datapad and made some arrangements. The arrangements wrote back with, "Yes. One hour."

One hour gave her enough time to stop in the markets and pick up a few luxuries: bubble bath, incense, and candy. She ran through a fast food joint and got a coffee and an engineered Nutrisoy atrocity designed for maximum craveability. With the basics settled, Kandi could get on with the task of taking her mind off everything, if only for a moment. Enticed by the colorful jars of jellybeans in a window, Kandi ducked into a candy store and dug a few scoops of gummy bears, licorice vines, and taffy squares out of jars, weighed the bag on the checkout kiosk, then swiped her coin ring to finalize the purchase. Kandi popped a few of the gummy bears into her mouth and continued her stroll toward the residential district.

The residential district made her think of a discount-store version of Venus. Because Bamberga wasn't the most interesting place to stop, nobody wanted to live here except for those involved with local business, so property values stayed relatively low. Most of the housing in the residential districts was 3D-printed, but not in the usual maximum-efficiency beehives. These homes were separate buildings, each with a small yard of its own, unheard of to Kandi before she left Earth. Without exception, every yard grew vegetables and herbs, some maximizing their output with planters that climbed up the walls of their home. The roofs, too, served as green spaces; vegetables,

herbs and beehives (housing bees, not people!) crowned every building. Every one, without exception, made Kandi want one of her own even more.

Kandi walked three lovely blocks to Sydney's house. She ducked under the grape vine trellis and rang the doorbell. Sydney greeted Kandi with a hug, and invited her in.

A few hours later and a whole lot more satisfied with everything, Kandi Kumari headed back to the ship. She finished adjusting her bra strap as she entered the cargo bay. Upon entering, she uttered a curse. Of course her ship was full of chaos. Incoming barrage of complaints from Felix, ETA any minute now. Ugh, she just got relaxed, dammit. Veronica was hunched over the stack of Za'toon parts, arranging and re-arranging them. The engineer waved Kandi over. "Hey, you got cyber. Try this."

Kandi ran her hands through her hair, pulling at the ends, as if that would ease the pain of dealing with this. "You know, you're going to have to pay Davenport most of your cut if you keep dicking around in the cargo bay like this."

"Fuck that. I'm sciencing." Veronica answered, not looking up from the wires that she was tethering the parts to various bots. "Weird shit, Captain. When connected to AIs, these parts create integrated networks, a mega-AI." Veronica eyed Kandi, humming. "That tit of yours... does it have brains in it, or is it just a dumb tit?" Veronica asked.

"Err, I don't think I've ever been asked that question before. No brains, just hardware."

"I wasn't sure. There are some new lines of intelligent organs, like a heart that does routine self-checks. They're pretty cool."

"Nope. It just does what it's told. I don't think I'd want an artificially intelligent entity that close to my own hardware all the time. What if we didn't get along?"

"I know a dude who got his colon upgraded with an AI. Now it bothers him all the time to eat more fiber and drink less. Then he yells, 'Will you shut up, shit-for-brains?' at it. He's totally loving what it's done for his sex life, though." Veronica chattered as she tinkered with her devices. Kandi put her mind as far away as she could from talking bowels. "Anyhow, I want to see if a biological neural interface will trigger the same behaviors, or is it specifically looking for AIs. Can I borrow your tit? For science?"

"I don't know. Is it safe?"

"Of course," answered Veronica, whose cybernetic hand reached up toward Kandi's flesh-covered metal shoulder and started tapping around.

Kandi wasn't exactly sure she cared for her heart being connected to alien technology. However, this data point might be able to help Veronica make a breakthrough, and they've come this far. Kandi conceded. "Fine. For science."

Veronica tapped her fingertips against a spot just under Kandi's titanium collarbone. Just under her flesh, a spark of electricity tingled. "Aha, that's the spot," said Veronica. She attached one of the coaster-like devices to Kandi's chest. It snapped in place, like a magnet. Veronica fiddled with her meter.

Warm and cool sensations radiated through her chest at random intervals from the device. Veronica checked a few more meters, then planted her hands on her hips. She sighed and plucked the Za'toon device off Kandi's chest. "No good. It needs an AI. Human nerves don't get them to sync. Thanks, Captain."

"Anytime," lied Kandi, not interested in being a lab rat any further.

"The AI part is non-negotiable," said Veronica, turning back to her work. "Three parts share a resonance, with the large tray piece as a central hub. But what do I do with this?" Veronica looked up, "I'm making tiny steps forward. I need more time. I'm feeling like a monkey fumbling with a supercomputer here."

"Of course. Report back when you find something. Until then, we will just be making our usual rounds, but please, try to hurry. Keeping all the stuff on here worries me. If you can't find anything usable soon, I'd rather we sell, take our profit, and remove the giant target on our heads."

"Oh, we don't need to do that. I'm sure I'll figure it out. I'm sitting on primordial fire here. Wilshire and I've been working non stop, and we're getting somewhere. I can feel it. I just need more time, Captain."

"I'll give you as much time as I can," said Kandi. Veronica suggested she continue betting. With so much coming into focus, Kandi couldn't blame her. "And I'm going to leave you to it. Let me know what you find as soon as you find it."

Kandi stepped out of Veronica's lab and headed to her office. She set the Lizzie to its usual rounds around Solsys. Three more days was all she could afford. The staggering prices Felix kept quoting filled those three days with increasing worry. Each day, the prices went higher and the stock on the auction sites dropped. How long would the game go on until someone beat her to the prize?

Three frustrating days passed. The Lizzie went about her usual routine of hunting for treasures in the trash while Kandi sweated over whether she'd be able to pay her fines. In all of those worry-filled hours, Kandi heard nothing from Veronica and Bob other than, "Still looking... but any time now, I'll find it." Frustrated, Kandi clicked her commlink. "Davenport, are you available to meet anytime soon?"

"I'm just finishing up a meal. I can meet you in ten."

"That'd be great. In my office. Thanks."

Hope was an elusive concept until recently. The only hope the military had offered Kandi

was the lie the recruitment videos told. In retrospect, the recruiter had made Kandi's cynicism meter overflow the most. His every other word was "hero." Heroes didn't force people to move off their land to make room for corporate farms. Heroes didn't board civilian ships because a corporation suggested there might be unlicensed hardware onboard. Used to be the military founded its pride by standing up for its people and protecting them against internal threats. The Terran government chose to favor the corporations, then they chose to favor the Za'toon. All of them, no doubt, were lining plenty of pockets. You know what'd be pretty heroic? Shoving a big "fuck you" up all of the solid waste removal organs of every greedy asshole who had ever sold out humankind.

The last time Kandi had visited Earth, a year before her contract ended, she used her shore leave to visit some old friends in the beehives. However, her friends had no time to visit. Nobody did. Everyone in the beehives worked from dawn until past nightfall picking dandelions. The Kash program no longer won people bikes and other prizes. It won them the chance to buy foods other than the standard issue Nutrisoy slush. Kandi had cringed as she left the store. How many more of these people would end up among the legions of the lost? How many already are? And why should they stay on miserable fucking Earth? Why not get lost?

She couldn't take it. Kandi fled beehives an hour after she arrived, never to return. Would anyone else be able to get the bike they needed to escape? Was escape velocity even possible anymore? Kandi couldn't look back. The last hope she had for her homeland drowned in a field of dandelions.

Kandi pressed her hands against the window in her office, watching Jupiter disappear into a small dot as the Lizzie soared onward. A large part of Kandi's soul relished the idea of Veronica finding something out about Za'toon technology that they'd rather Terrans not know. Kandi relished the idea of using it to empower people, not corporations, military, or government. People. It was time her people got a break.

A chime from the door brought her back to the present from her increasingly dark spiral of thoughts. "Come on in, Davenport."

The door slid open, framing Felix's thin silhouette. He walked in. Kandi gestured to the seat before her desk. "Good afternoon. Thank you for coming. I'll get straight to the point," Kandi addressed him. "We need to bet or fold. That crossroads is coming up soon. What would you do?"

"The numbers on Freenet are sky high and climbing," Felix answered, lacing his fingers together and resting his hands on his knee. "So far, I've seen two dozen auctions close, mostly for the small pieces, but the large ones are going into the multi-million coin range."

Kandi ran her hands through her hair, "That's not something most people can afford. Who's buying them?"

"With Freenet, there's no telling. The users have good online reputations, but reputations is

all the information you get. All anyone knows is what's public on your personal node. Likely it's corporate or military interests, and I'll bet they want to know the same thing we do."

"Won't that put them at odds with the Za'toon? The corporates are doing just fine under the Za'toon, and many of them have stock in dandelion. It doesn't make sense."

"Everyone's looking for their golden ticket, not just you, Captain. To those who can afford it, a few million coin is a pittance compared to the potential for paradigm-shattering technologies. The meteoric rise in value suggests to me that Veronica is not the only one who noticed that there's something amazing about these parts."

Kandi nodded, listening quietly.

Felix continued. "If we don't pursue it, someone else will. We aren't the only clever folk in the system. If we sell it, it's going straight into a corporate's hand."

Kandi closed her eyes, sighing. "That speeds up our clock. McCormick and Wilshire think they're getting close, but nothing yet."

"Hold them for too long and you risk getting caught, you risk the Za'toon shutting down the market, and you risk a corporate getting enough pieces to figure out what they do and steal our thunder. Then, there's the business with people getting too close to them disappearing. Fold them, and you get a nice payout and a lot of problems off your back. But everything ends there. The door slams shut. Game over. Fold them and you never know what Veronica could find until, that is, Boemartin or Neslubishi tries to sell it to you. From the current prices, after we all get our cut, you're looking at enough money that you could take five years off work, and a lot more than that if you invest wisely." Felix shrugged. "It's a tough call. I'd hold for now, but I wouldn't for much longer. If they don't find something soon, we need to cash out before it gets too hot to do so."

"You're right. And though this is not just my decision, it's still something I've got to come to terms with. Thank you for your insight."

Felix smiled. "You're most welcome. Is there anything else?"

"No. We'll be on Mercury soon, so just make sure you've got everything for the next auction ready."

"Already on it, Captain." Felix shook Kandi's hand, then turned to head out the door. Kandi sighed. She was hoping Felix would help make things clearer, not the other way around.

Mercury soon. Kandi wondered if any of her lovers who lived there happened to be free. She had to get her mind off everything a lot these days.

# Crossroads - 41

Ah, Mercury! Beautiful, grimy, lovely, filthy, scumbag Mercury. Veronica hid the parts that had consumed her attention for the past few weeks into a series of doubled-up smugglers' bags and had the captain stash them away. Veronica took a breath of the grease-scented air, and exhaled happily. She headed out the airlock and into the space elevator. Veronica took the older one, with chipping paint and scuffed floors, the one that lead underground. Mercury had just installed its first domes now, high-dollar neighborhoods were vying to attract the trendy and clueless. They called the domes "Mer-Sur," as in, "Sun-kissed luxury living, courtesy of Mer-Sur." At least those cunts would be out of her hair. Keep them all on the surface, and may the Great Mother see to it that their dome generator fails. Veronica proceeded directly to the tunnels where the real Mercury lived. Of course, she knew better than to say that too loudly. If the Mer-Sur-Turds a whiff of interest, they'd start swarming here, looking for "authenticity." They love their authenticity, in the same way that vampires love their victims.

The elevator opened up into the huge underground space, where people, haulbots, and robots buzzed about their business. She followed the corridor north to the central hub, a rotunda with a handful of metal chairs and tables, kiosks and food vendors. An east-west passage intersected here as well. Veronica took the west branch to head to her first stop—food.

When the Mercury underground was first constructed, it was little more than a huge open bay, unformed space. Over time, contractors had brought in industry and trade, and fleshed out the underground with housing, shopping, and necessary facilities. Unlike the facilities on places like Venus and Deimos, this place was designed by engineers and architects, not interior designers. The corridor had a few creature comforts such as benches, sidewalks, and bathrooms, but the stark concrete floor and minimalist design favored efficiency over aesthetics. Veronica preferred it that way. People got their business done with no superfluous niceties.

A useful nicety, though, was a good bagel, and the best in the system could be found right here on Mercury (just don't tell the ones who live on the surface) Johan's Bakery, like most operations, was automated. If you got there early enough, you could catch Johan's bot filling up the machines or clearing out unsold inventory. Hot fresh bagels to your specifications in three minutes without having to interact with a single human. Veronica picked up an everything bagel (it was better not to ask what was on it) with cream cheese, and headed on her way.

Prior to first contact, Mercury started out as a Boemartin experiment in colonization. The proximity to the sun gave them them unlimited fuel. By digging under the surface and setting up

reflector conduits to direct the sun's heat, Boemartin was able to construct a large space suitable for human habitation. Before first contact, Boemartin had wanted to set up permanently there, but dome generators meant they could settle anywhere in the system, so they shifted away from Mercury for a more strategically-placed home on Mars. After that, Boemartin offered space on Mercury up to anyone who maintained or worked in a business there, or otherwise creating "meaningful contributions to society." As the years went on, though, Boemartin moved more and more of its operations to Mars, and the stipulations for new residents grew more and more lax. However, that initial infusion of creativity meant that the economy of Mercury was a lot more diverse, and therefore a lot more stable. The first wave of Mercurians had the means and flexibility, create something beyond what the Boemartin store stocked, back when the economy was still strong enough to support Mercury.

That's not to say that it didn't have its problems. As the regulations got lax, so did people. Veronica thought back to how her Dead-mom and Dead-dad used to say that idle hands were the devil's helpers. In many cases, they were right. A depressed economy, even with everyone's basic needs cared for, meant that people ended up falling into the trap of existential despair and the subsequent poorly-chosen actions. Many of the inhabitants of the Yumatech care centers got lost right here on Mercury.

Veronica had vowed that she would not be one of them, despite the hardships that she faced living on her own. She had come to live on Mercury after a short stint of work on a ship. Her first dwelling, besides living under a bridge after her ex-parents threw her out, was a bunk bed in a dorm on a grocery freighter. It didn't take long for her superiors to notice Veronica's aptitude for all things technical. She had risen from grunt to junior technician within her first few months on board. That meant less sorting crates and more fixing stuff, while studying in her free time on how to fix more complex issues. She had climbed as far as she could on the freighter, learning all she could until she hungered for more. Her path had become clear. On her next day off, Veronica set out to find herself a mentor.

After a bit of asking around in port, Veronica checked out the auction houses. There she met Li Xiang, an experienced engineer. Her brother ran a salvage ship and hauled back finds which she fixed up to sell. Originally, the business consisted of just him and her, but it expanded to the point that Li had needed help. She put out the ad on the local Mercury forums, and Veronica answered the call.

Veronica apprenticed under Li for years, rebuilding thousands of crafts of all types. During this time, she gathered scores of repair manuals, schematics and diagrams. Her pockets were stuffed with key rings full of data sticks, containing a suite of cracks to get herself into any hardware she needed. She would have been happy doing this forever, but as with Mercury's nature, the people on here can also be transient. Li and her brother had a falling out. Her brother took off with the ship, leaving her business without its lifeblood.

Dejected, Veronica started looking for other work. That was when she found out a certain captain with a massive ship was seeking to employ a live-aboard engineer. Later that day, Veronica found a new job at E. Borden Rescue and Repair.

Veronica finished her bagel and her nostalgia kick and headed to Sol's Last Call, a cozy dive bar where she could have a dexi, red juice and vodka, a plate of deep fried atrocities, and some space to think.

The bartender strolled over and smiled warmly at Veronica.

"Hey, lovely. Where've you been?" asked Kess, a lanky dude, about 30 years old, wearing a white tank top that showed off lithely-toned muscle under his smooth amber skin. A shock of black braids, some with beads, hex nuts, and washers woven into them, pointed in every direction from atop his head.

"Wow, Kess, good to see you. What's up, man? It's been a long time." Veronica slid into a chair. She swiped her credit ring over the register to start herself a tab. "Red juice and vodka... or... what can you recommend for someone who wants to get drunk, but also is trying to figure something out?"

Kess laughed, "Heh, yeah, that's you, babe. What you want is a yerba mate and vodka. Unlike coffee, yerba mate has three different stimulant chemicals. The vodka lubricates the nerves, makes for a nice combo."

"Yes. Four of those, please."

Kess started her out with one. He filled a glass with ice, tea, vodka and a splash of simple syrup, then capped it with a metal cup and shook the concoction. He set the glass down before Veronica and said, "So, what's the big project? Maybe I can give you an insight that you hadn't thought of."

"Oh man, you'd love it, but," Veronica said, "It's really too much to explain. But I'm working with stuff I'm not familiar with, some extremely weird technology, and I have no place to even begin to understand it. I'm a caveman with a nuclear reactor."

"I get you. I've been doing more art lately, got away from the tech side of things, but it happens in art just as much. You get to a crossroads and you stand there stupidly," answered Kess, reaching into his pocket and pulling out a small vaporizer pen and an eyedropper full of liquid. He unscrewed the pen, added a few drops, then screwed it back together. He offered it to Veronica.

"Thanks," Veronica took a long drag, then looked up to the ceiling and blew out a billowy cloud. She handed it back. "So how do you get past it?"

"Well, I end up at a crossroads, I give Papa Legba a shot of rum and he sets me straight," Kess said. "Or if magick ain't your thing, try going Archimedean. But Papa Legba has always led

me right. You've got to stop thinking like you normally do. Normal problems require normal thinking. Weird problems require weird thinking. You have to think outside the systems you are used to thinking inside of when the problem exists outside of those systems." Kess held the pen to his lips and took a hit, then handed it back.

"Who's Papa Legba?" asked Veronica.

"He's the old man at the crossroads. He's been known to point travelers on the right path... but he might fuck with you, first."

"Heh, sounds like what I need. I don't know where I'm going, and for once, I actually hate it." Veronica dragged from the vape for a long, contemplative moment. The Za'toon didn't have ten fingers like humans, they had eight, so they likely used an octal, or hex base for their numbering system. Maybe she was missing something in the translation of numbers. Or maybe there was a form of energy shared between the devices that does make sense, but she didn't have the methods to measure or detect it. Had she tried scanning it for radiation signatures? Did she check for metabolic processes? And the numbers she kept getting perplexed and vexed. Maybe she was dazed, but they felt like they made sense on some level, and she just wasn't seeing it yet. She exhaled, coughed, and handed the vape back. Kess put a glass of water in her hand and she gratefully chugged that.

"You alright?" he asked, offering her back the pen.

"Yeah, I'm in heaven." Veronica put out her hand, "No thanks, I'm good."

"You looked lost there. Any luck?"

"Nah, my brain is out. Empty. Done. And the captain wants something soon, or she's going to pull the plug on the project."

"Aw, sorry to hear that. Look, I know you've got this. You're a brilliant woman, Veronica. Liv often spoke of how she missed you. She said you were one of the best."

Veronica felt a tug at her heart at the thought of Liv. "Oh... wow..." She blushed. "I'm really flattered, wow, that just made my day. Thanks." She sipped her intoxicating tea until the ice cubes clinked around merrily in the empty glass.

"You want another?"

"To go. And a shot of rum."

Kess served up the order. Veronica leaned over the counter to hug him. "Thanks, man. Good to see you, as always." She took her plastic cup with the lid and straw, and the mini-bottle he handed her. She headed toward the mezzanine.

Dozens of new questions rattled around in Veronica's head as she walked down to the main floor. She blew past the shops in a determined gait toward the ship, breezing past the convenience

stores, the massage parlors, the junk parts shops and bars. In between them, dealers of less legal substances hung out, hidden in plain sight, and glad to help you if you knew the right password. Cops didn't bother with Mercury. Not being under heavy corporate control anymore meant people left you alone. In exchange for freedom, Mercury earned isolation, finding itself alone, broke, with a never-ending stack of problems.

Veronica stepped around a pair of people having a screaming match over who got the last dexi.

"Lame," she muttered. She liked to consider herself an experienced pilot of psychonautic vehicles, and looked down upon people who couldn't handle their shit. She realized there might be some that said that she couldn't handle her shit, but Veronica would consider mostly alive and intact to be proof enough that she could. Like anything, if you were a dumbass, you'd use them to escape, and eventually you'd escape so hard you didn't come back. Veronica preferred to use hers to enhance, but who didn't need a little time away from it all sometimes? Solsys sucked, the system was run by assholes and the only neighbors they had were a bunch of lumpy green dickbags who played the same exploitive games. Could you blame anyone for wanting a little escape now and then?

"The dead-parents got one thing right in not switching to growing dandelions," said Veronica as her veins grew icy. Darkness always swirled in Veronica's thoughts when considering her dead-parents, but today she had extra hate for them. They had gotten a lot of flak for it, but ultimately stood their ground, and kept their land growing food for humans, not flowers for aliens. Sad that their desire to do the right thing had to get tainted with extremism. A little bit of "fuck the Za'toon" turned into a whole lot of "fuck everything not of Earth, and any with tech that gets you higher than the outermost atmosphere." Veronica cackled. "The hypocrites use satellites all day long, and they'd been playing in space since the 1950s, but you don't hear them saying, 'No TV or comms allowed' Somehow, cyber got thrown in there, just because fuck that, too. People always want to think themselves into boxes, and as soon as one is opened up before them, they'll crawl in and defend it to the death of before realizing that they don't need the fucking box. Some con artist will always come along to convince them that they belong in a box, so they all crawled in like good little animals." Veronica's rantings were interrupted as she sneezed. A waft of incense crawled into her nose and infected her senses with the acrid bite of burnt patchouli.

Veronica looked up sharply, seeing that the incense came from the head shop kiosk in the middle of the rotunda. "Oh, I'm here." Veronica had no idea what to do with the rum, so she planted the bottle on the table, pulled a marker out of her pocket, and wrote "For Papa Legba" below it on the table. She stared at it. What the fuck was she doing? Veronica grumbled, then turned about-faced to head toward the auction house. She hadn't gotten a chance yet to pick through the latest haul, and Felix probably moved it there by now.

Heading northward along the corridor, Veronica stopped. Maybe it was the vodka'd tea making her head fuzzy, but this wasn't the way to the auction house... she was sure of that much. Was it south? Veronica pulled out her datapad and checked it, turning to walk back to the rotunda. Her concentration was shattered as a gritty voice from the side of the street hooted, "Hey hottie cyber mama! Lemme see your steel! C'mere baby, lemme poke your ports!"

Veronica whirled around, knocking a garbage can over and dumping the contents on herself. "Dammit," she growled as she picked trash off of herself. A crusty vagabond in an old red and black lumberjack shirt and polka-dotted boxer shorts lifted his head and laughed from his spot under a staircase. Fucker. Veronica flipped him off, which made him laugh all the more. Veronica's face flushed with anger. She brushed off everything that didn't stick to her, gulped down the rest of her drink and stalked back to the ship.

Now with her mood and concentration both in the gutter, Veronica went straight to her quarters, where she stripped, threw all of her clothes in the laundry, and went to her bathroom. Usually, she'd take a shower, but that mix of booze, drugs, and adrenaline made her stomach woozy. She filled the tub instead, and slipped into the soothing warm water. Veronica typically didn't bother with such frivolousness, preferring to get into the bathroom, get done, and get moving. This was nice, though. She closed her eyes, let her mind drift and muscles relax. She sunk her shoulders and dipped head back, wetting her hair. Her gaze floated up to the ceiling, where she let her mind wander and play.

In that moment, Veronica was back on Earth, floating in a lake under the Earth's sun. The clouds drifted overhead and the birds circled them, taunting Veronica. "Just like the answer," Veronica sighed, "Within my sight, but out of my reach." Veronica slid her hands across the surface of the water, then she sunk them underneath. Veronica looked at her hands, under the water, and the path became clear. She'd been looking from above, from the outside. What if she could look from the inside, from under the surface?

Having a direct neural link to Kitty-Cat would allow her to viscerally experience the objects' behavior, and perhaps gain an understanding by a more direct route. Her hardware should work. She'd jack in like any other dive, but instead of having Kitty-Cat connected to the net, she'd have her connected to the Za'toon parts.

Veronica had never been diving because she understood why people went in and never came out. Every sensory input was designed to create pleasure, relentlessly, forever. You'd keep getting it, a perpetual high, so long as you followed the white rabbit, which took the form of whatever you liked most. Most people, boring fucks that they are, loved getting their faith restored in humanity with a firsthand experience of a feel-good story about fuzzy animals. If they were a gamer, the rewards were more tangible: spells, potions, legendary artifacts, if fantasy realm adventuring was their poison of choice. Sex addicts could get their fill of any act from the most

innocent of cuddling to the most depraved levels of fuck.

Many of the lost needed little convincing. You could always tell who they were, too, the ones who would go first. Sad, sorry shits who couldn't figure out what to do with their minds, so they gave themselves over to escape. All they had to do to be gods was obey the rules of the realm: No harassment, no touching other peoples' files, and no hacking or vandalism of any net infrastructure. Yumatech wanted to offer a pleasant user experience to all. Veronica didn't find it to be pleasant at all. The "no harassment" thing was a straight up deal-breaker. If Veronica were to become a god, she'd be doing it by her own rules.

Knowing the dangers, Veronica laid down iron-clad rules: No getting distracted. No following the white rabbit. Unlike the AI, which had built-in failsafes which shut down an overworking machine from getting too caught up in learning everything the net had to offer, human minds had nothing but their own willpower to resist the stimuli designed for maximum addictiveness.

But, if she were to dive in through Kitty-Cat, Veronica pondered, reaching over to the faucet to add more warm water to the tub, she'd have a failsafe. She could program Kitty-Cat to save her if she went too deep. Veronica closed her eyes and kept piecing together her plan until the last of the water went cold.

Veronica pulled the plug from the tub, dried herself off, and dressed. Once finished, Veronica tapped the commlink on her arm. "Captain, are you busy? I need to talk to you."

Captain Kumari answered, "I'm right around the corner from your lab. You're in there?"

"Correct."

"I'll be right there."

A moment later, the captain opened the door to her lab and stepped in. "McCormick, what can I do for you?"

"Captain. I request permission to be excused from my duties for an indeterminate amount of time. I'm hoping no longer than a few hours, but I can't be sure. I think I figured out how to learn what secrets these Za'toon technologies hold, but it'll require my complete attention and an inability to interact with the rest of the crew."

Captain Kumari narrowed her eyes. "I'm going to need more information than that. What are you planning?"

"Interfacing with Kitty-Cat here." Veronica slapped her hand on Kitty-Cat's tank-tread hindquarters, causing the sexbot's tits to jiggle.

The captain howled with laughter. "I am not giving you time off from your duties for a fuck fest."

Veronica hurriedly corrected her. “No, no, Captain. Let me explain. The reason I was testing the device out on you earlier was to see if the Za’toon tech needs the presence of an AI to work. I’ve come to the conclusion that it does. The AI is integral in its workings. Apparently, an AI can talk to these devices in a meaningful way, but when I try to get output from the AI—Kitty-Cat here, for example—I get some paradoxes, then a bunch of Za’toon gibberish, probably paradoxes too. However, if I can dive in with a direct neural interface...”

“Absolutely not.” The finality in Kandi’s voice was unmistakable in its seriousness.

“Look, I know some people. I could get you help if you need while I’m busy...”

“Oh, that’s not it. I’m not going to let a vital part of my team, a skilled engineer and a friend, go courting the void like that,” said Captain Kumari matter-of-factly. She softened her tone and added, “I know you’re excited about this project, but diving is too dangerous.”

“I know,” Veronica said, “But I have a plan. I dive in through Kitty-Cat. If Kitty-Cat determines I’m going too deep, it can warn you. We get Wilshire to make a serum out of these,” she continued, pulling some pills out of her pocket, “And if you get the warning, you inject me and keep injecting me until I come back.”

Captain Kumari’s face wrinkled as she frowned. “What is that?”

“Dexamethylamphroniacine psiloxylate, better known as a dexi. It’s sort of a speed and a hallucinogen in one. I can set up a failsafe in my hardware to make harass me until I come back once it senses its presence.” Veronica looked at the captain. “I can handle it. I wouldn’t suggest it if I didn’t think there were any other way. I’ve got to dive. I need to know.”

The captain answered firmly, “No. I cannot allow it. I cannot risk losing you.”

Veronica frowned. “With all due respect, Captain, I’m not yours to lose.”

Captain Kumari replied, her eyes drifting closed and her lips pressing tightly together. “I’m sorry, McCormick. Look, I lost someone. I hope you understand.”

Veronica absolutely did not understand. Her voice sharpened. “Your person’s inability to manage his or her own shit isn’t my fucking problem.”

The captain’s eyes glared down upon her fiercely. “McCormick,” she said icily, “Please return the Za’toon tech, all of it, to me at once. E. Borden Rescue and Repair is officially done with this project. I am selling it all, and I am sharing with the rest of the crew and you a hefty chunk of coin which you can shove up your ass, for all I care.” Kumari’s voice lowered to a threatening growl.

Veronica wasn’t having it. She wasn’t having a stranger’s incompetence fuck up her chance for what could be the biggest discovery of her life. She whirled around and faced Captain Kumari.

“If it weren’t for my fast thinking, Wilshire would be volcano-food and you wouldn’t have any of this. I’ll take my rightful share of the pieces and continue my work, with or without you. So, please take yours and get the fuck out while I work. You can either support me, and give me one more reason to want to come back, or you can fire me, and I’ll be happy to take my findings to someone who’d appreciate them more.” Veronica folded her arms over her chest and returned the glare.

“Please, Veronica,” pleaded the captain, now pulling on her pink locks. “Listen to reason. The prices Davenport found means we could be rich. As in, we could take the next half a decade off if we wanted. Millions and millions of coins for each of us. I’d say that’s a pretty good settlement, and far preferable to the risk we’re taking.”

“Settling is bullshit. We put together the potential for something beyond anything any human has seen before and you want to sell it? To whom? To which shitty corporation do you want to sell it to, so that they can use it to further fine the hell out of folks like us? Would you like Ali Xi to be the ones pushing you around, or would you prefer those warmongers, Boemartin, sticking our grand discovery up your ass? Who would you like to sell out to, Kumari, so you can sit around scratching your twat for a few years?” Veronica spat, and turned back to the parts, grabbing her meter. “Fuck that. This is my opportunity, and I’m taking it. I don’t settle.” Veronica paced, reading the components again, a nervous habit, and continued to rant. “Every day people sign up to be tools for the corporations and the Za’toon. But what about us? We clean up after the tools who blow each other up for their overlords, so we’re effectively tools of the tools. Whoop-dee-shit, we get to take a few years off, only to have to go back to being tools? Shit. Screw taking a few years off. I say *take forever off*. I say we figure out what secrets this holds. And if I get lost trying, I’d say it’s worth it, because most people in this fucking system are already lost, they just don’t know it.”

The captain stared silently, eyes following her. Veronica whipped out her datapad and shoved it in the captain’s hands, “Here’s what I found so far. There is something here. But I’m running blind, and I need to see underneath the hood. The paradox fields these things are generating are unbelievable, but I have no idea how to channel them into a usable form. If I can, though, we could possibly have engines that would do, at a conservative estimate, Mercury to Saturn when they’re both in conjunction in minutes.”

“Minutes...” the captain breathed.

“You could be twenty stars across the sky in less than an hour. Now do you see why I’m so adamant? The more I learn about these, the more I realize that we have a game-changer on our hands, if only we can get the keys to the control panel.”

Captain Kumari sighed. “I don’t like any of this. I can’t even begin to court the idea of what would happen if—”

Veronica cut her off, “I’m not asking you to like it. I’m asking you to trust me.”

The captain sighed. “I do trust you...I just...” Flustered, the captain blurted out, “Look, do you promise me you’ll come back to us?”

“How could I not? My experiments are on this side of the rabbit hole.”

Captain Kumari pushed her hair out of her face, looking at Veronica with exasperated eyes, “Fine. But only with Dr. Wilshire’s supervision. And you make sure to have your...” she eyed the big-titted land-rover, “...friend tell us if anything goes wrong.”

Veronica extended her human hand to Captain Kumari to shake. “Deal.”

# Towing the Line - 42

The Lizzie Borden was well past Earth on its way to a routine stop at Deimos when everything went wrong. Felix was relaxing with a cup of tea at his desk in the cargo bay. He was just about to finish updating his database after the latest auction. Mercury auctions usually never reached the same numbers that he got on Deimos. Felix chalked it up to better knowing betting and gambling than high tech geekery and recreational vices. Folks did talk politics around here, but the topic brought them down. Bringing up how awful the local economy was didn't tend to put people in a buying mood.

Mercury used to be a lot like Deimos, a market where people bought expensive luxury ships. Since the post-Boemartin crash, the clients preferred one-off parts, the odd-parts bins, collections arranged by make and model. Many of the folks here had ships that were decades old, some first-gen paradox drives. Auctions on Mercury were typically affairs where Felix could empty every nook and cranny of his cargo bay. No matter how obscure it was, someone here would find a use for it.

Bored of the same four walls, Felix walked to the lounge. He leaned against the bow window as he read the reports about the insane numbers Veronica was getting out of the Za'toon parts. Exciting news as it was, it would be nice if his crew mate had something more concrete. He had witnessed enough disappearances and other underhanded activity from the Za'toon to set his every nerve on edge.

The more important problem was what to do with it once Veronica and Bob figured it out. They would have to get their business in order, fast. Felix figured the Za'toon wouldn't stand for the Lizzie's new enterprise for long, so they'd need a solid plan. He needed to be ready to pounce on turning the discovery into money as soon as they were ready. But until Felix had a handle on what that was, he was stuck. Which contacts could he trust? So far, the only other organization he had found to be honest enough were the Alexandrians, but profit didn't motivate their actions, so he'd have to figure out their role carefully. Until he got consistent results, all he could do is be patient. Thankfully, the data stick that Nadya had given him made having patience a pleasure. Patience meant he had time to read. He had poured through half a dozen novels since receiving this treasure. Of all of the books on the data stick, Felix loved the ones that speculated on the future the best. A few of them had a bit of accuracy: early science fiction authors managed to figure out communication devices and artificial intelligence to a reasonable degree. Their predictions of space travel were hilariously way off, quaint in their naiveté. He especially loved the ships that ran on magic fairy

crystals. Nothing he had read yet from the collection mentioned anything that sounded remotely like the technology that powered modern ships.

Felix just finished a story about a Martian visiting Earth for the first time, and scanned through the directory to find another to read. There's one that might be interesting. It looked like it referenced modern tech in the title: "The Paradox Gambit," by Michele Zapf. He opened the file, glanced through a few pages, and closed it. "Too silly for me right now." Felix continued his search through the data stick's files for books that might have charming ancient predictions of modern technology. He was just about to read a book about time travel when the floor dropped out from under him. The ship lurched downward, and Felix crashed to the floor.

Dazed, Felix scrambled to his feet and hit his commlink. "What the hell just happened?" He ran out the cargo bay's door and broke full stride toward the bridge. The red emergency lights flashed in his eyes.

En route, Captain Kumari gave him his answer. "Crew of the Lizzie Borden, battle stations. Wait, you don't have battle stations. Everyone, to the bridge! McCormick, weapons systems online! Now!"

The ship rumbled. He grabbed onto the wall to maintain his balance and clamored along, finally reaching the bridge. Captain Kumari sat in her flame-job chair in the center of the room, gripping the armrests to hold herself in place. Jana was sprawled out in the sensor chair with a visor over her eyes. The ship wobbled with Jana's every move. Felix grabbed onto the back of a chair to keep his balance. An enormous ship hovered in front of them, spanning the entirety of the view screen. The alien craft was easily twice the size of the Lizzie, blocky and brutalist in design, with a thick, reinforced hull.

From the mottled underbelly of the ship, two massive cables stretched out and attached to each side of the Lizzie. Jana gave up. Her attempts at pulling the ship loose were getting them no results except for space-sickness.

Bob sat in his usual beanbag chair in the corner, his straw hat covering his eyes and a can of MD-40 in his hands. "Lower your center of gravity, Felix, man," he said, seemingly un-bothered by any of this.

Captain Kumari called frantically into the ship's comm, "McCormick, where are my weapons?"

Veronica shouted back through the speaker on the wall, "Coming! Coming! It's taking a moment for the system to come online."

The captain turned to the pilot. "Broussard, can you launch the drones? Get these cables cut that way?"

“Not at this point,” Jana replied, “We’re being towed, and we’re picking up speed. The drones won’t be able to keep pace.”

“What about a shuttle, then? We could send one out like Veronica did on Io and...”

“Sorry, Captain, no. Same problem.”

The bridge commlink lit up, and Veronica’s voice crackled through the speaker. “Oh baby, there we go! Captain, you’ve got weapons. Shoot, shoot, shoot. Kill them all. Kill, kill, kill.” There were sounds of objects being violently abused before Veronica’s signal shut off.

“Broussard! Can you blast the tow ropes?” Captain Kumari shouted.

“*Can I blast the tow ropes?*” Jana smirked. She fired two clean shots of bright green energy, and snapped the cables.

Felix lowered himself to the ground, sat cross-legged on the floor. “Damn, Broussard,” said Felix. Maybe Jana wasn’t as bad at spatial logistics as he had previously thought.

“Damn right.” Jana smiled. “Now, for the getaway.” She sank back into her chair and drove. She arched in her chair, and the ship arched in space, turning in a wide arc to head away at top speed. They had almost picked up enough speed to outrun the massive ship chasing them when there was another sickening lurch. The Lizzie jolted backwards and Felix grabbed the floor to steady himself.

Above the main view-screen, the “incoming call” light flashed. Captain Kumari stood and growled, “Answer.” The screen lit up, and a snot-colored bulbous head with two nostril holes, saucer-sized black eyes, and a flappy fish-lip mouth appeared. In the tinny voice of the Za’toon’s translator device, the creature spoke. Two other Za’toon stood behind him.

“I am Povi Nor, Za’toon representative to Earth and overseer of local operations. We have detected illegal hardware on your ship and must hold it for inspection. We will release you as soon as possible. Do not fight. Do not resist.” The tinny voice quivered with irritation, and a row of flaps on the each side of its neck rippled.

“Inspection!” gasped Captain Kumari, “You will be inspecting nothing, for we have nothing illegal on this ship, nor do you have any authority to detain us in Terran space.”

“Incorrect. The Terran government has given us full authority to protect ourselves and our interests per our trade agreement. You will comply. If you shoot at us again, we will consider it a hostile act, and open fire.”

Felix stared at the creature, his words sinking in. “Dammit,” he scowled, clenching his fist. He could have made a fortune on those parts. Now, if they make it out of this intact, Felix knew that any court in the system would rule in favor of ZAFTA superseding the Right of Salvage. One

constant Felix knew he could always bet on was that the government will roll over every time for the highest bidder.

The captain slammed her fist down on her chair and terminated the video link. “FUCK!” she screamed, causing every head in the room to turn and look at her. Captain Kumari tapped her commlink, “McCormick, power down the weapons.” She looked around, eyes passing from face to face of every person in the room, and sighed. “I’m sorry.”

Having gotten her emotional reaction out in one burst, the captain switched straight into cold efficiency. “Wilshire, scan for other ships in the area. See if you can get us some help. Broussard, what’s our current trajectory? Can you spot any jump trails nearby that the ship may be taking us to? Can you figure out where we’re headed?”

Bob grabbed the chair next to him, pulled himself up, and stepped to his station. After a moment, he shook his head. “Sorry Captain. Nobody in range. Not even a private vessel.”

Jana flipped her visor up, leaned over her panels and tapped at them, sighing. “This is weird. It says we’re between Jupiter and Saturn, closer to Saturn, but it’s only been minutes since all this went down...”

The doors to the bridge slid open, and in strode Veronica. She planted her hands on Jana’s control panel and leaned over her to examine it. “Not weird at all. This is how fast Za’toon engines go. And this is how fast our engine will go very, very soon.”

Captain Kumari looked at Veronica and said, “Is that why you needed the time off? Granted. Figure out something soon, though, because it’s looking like our time left with the parts is short.”

Veronica cast a serious glance around the room. She took an unsettlingly long look at the face of each person here, then mumbled, “Yeah, see you all soon, I hope, right?” She rushed out of the room.

“Good luck,” the captain said, sighing as Veronica left. How could anyone be sad at Veronica leaving the room? The captain turned to Jana, “Tell me again where you said we are?”

“Between Jupiter and Saturn, Captain.”

“Show me.”

Jana tapped her panel and the navigation data filled the main screen.

The captain examined the screen, tapped at a blue dot on the map, and said, “There’s the beacon signal from that Starwing. They’re taking us to the same place.”

Bob spoke up, “The signal strength from the beacon we sowed in that Starwing dropped immediately upon stopping. It’s in an enclosed space, more dense than a ship. I’m guessing it in a

storage locker.” He pointed to a histogram on his display panel.

Felix glanced up. “Did you say storage locker, Wilshire?” Felix smiled. A ray of light might just be cracking through the clouds. For a moment, he was eleven years old again, at a friend’s birthday party. He was the lucky kid whose hit smashed the piñata open. He laughed.

Bob turned to Felix. “I did. Why?”

“Because,” Felix said, tapping his fingers as he formulated his plan. “The Za’toon buy ships that they suspect contain their tech at auction and they have to put them somewhere. This place we’re going is full of salvage.” Felix smiled his fox-like smile, “And I happen to know a lot of people who love salvage. Now, if only those folks had someone they knew on the inside, who could pop open the piñata. Then all the kids could grab at the candy...”

Captain Kumari held her breath, then broke into laughter. “And in the chaos, we can get the hell out of Dodge. Davenport, you’re brilliant. Get the word out, won’t you? Post it on every Freenet node you can. Every salvager in Solsys is invited.”

Felix tilted his glasses down to focus on his console. He got to work typing up the invitation to the biggest party the system has ever seen.

# All In - 43

Outside of the windows in her lab, the space locker loomed before Veronica. The alien ship that the Lizzie was tethered to pulled them to a massive door. The door slid open, and with a whoosh that rocked the ship, the alien craft towed them into the locker. Veronica shuddered as the full weight of the reality hit her—they were prisoners. She bit her lip until it nearly burst. Above all things, Veronica had to succeed, had to come back, just in case the rest of the crew weren't clever enough to get out of here without her. Her finger hovered over the button to her commlink, thinking maybe she should say something before she went. Hell, Veronica wanted to say a lot of things, but she figured it'd probably all come out making her sound like a dick. If she went under and stayed there, the last thing Veronica wanted was her crew thinking she was awful. Silence was the best choice.

The darkness enfolded the Lizzie. Another truth settled on her, this one as uneasy as being trapped by aliens: Veronica cared about them. Sure, she hated them, but she hated everyone. These people, though, she hated less than most, which meant that she must have cared about them. When Veronica spoke of caring, it almost always meant care of a machine. But these folks, as far as humans went, they were alright. Veronica took a moment to call each of their faces to her memory, to solidify four more good reasons for saying “hell no” to the white rabbit.

The devices were set up in the most effective configuration on her workstation table. One greenish-gold jewel sat on a field dampener, wedged between Kitty-Cat's cute-for-a-humanoid tits. Veronica slung her sleeveless trench coat off and draped it over her chair. She kicked her boots off and grabbed a set of cables from a tray on her workstation. Earlier, Wilshire delivered a rack of hypodermics which she sat on her nightstand. Veronica pulled out her datapad and gave one last check over of Kitty-Cat's new programming, set up to contact Wilshire in case Veronica gave any indication of going too far in.

Kitty-Cat waited quietly for Veronica next to her bed. Veronica pressed her cheek against Kitty-Cat's furry face. “I love you,” she whispered. Veronica plugged in, the red set of cables into the ports in her cheekbone, the blue set into the luscious curve of Kitty-Cat's steel hip.

As Veronica lay down in her bed, she heard a loud clang coming from outside the ship—probably the space locker's door closing them in and sealing everyone's doom if she doesn't succeed. She steadied herself, closed her eyes, and switched on the connection. Three... two... one... dive.

Her last vision of her lab, the dust swirling in the ambient light above her bed, flickered like a video receiver losing its signal. The neurons receiving pain from the spring in the mattress poking her hip likewise faded to nothingness... as did the bed, the lab, the Lizzie, Solsys, and the galaxy. She was a single point of consciousness in an endless field of rainbow static. Oneness. Emptiness. Perfection. Nothingness. All possibility. A never-ending canvas for her creations.

But she couldn't scratch her ass this way. Veronica concentrated on her body, and her meatspace form shimmered into existence around her. Her senses expanded through her head, down her arms, torso and legs, to her fingertips and toes. Scratch, scratch. Much better.

Veronica tested out her body, jumping a few times to make sure it all works. Satisfied, she spread her arms, soared upward, and landed on a solid platform. Standing on the floor was a graceful creature who reached soft, slender hands, tipped with pink fingernails toward Veronica. Veronica gasped at beautiful being. For the first time, Veronica could see directly the form Kitty-Cat understood itself as. What surprised and delighted Veronica the most was how much Kitty-Cat's self-generated avatar looked like its meatspace husk. On its humanoid shoulders, an over-sized stuffed toy cat's head grinned at her, twitching its whiskers in the most adorable way. Veronica's favorite part, the sexiest part, were those treads from an Ali Xi cargo mover which rolled and rumbled across any terrain and over any obstacle. Hot.

Veronica held her hands over her mouth, boiling over with love, with pride, with joy at the sight of Kitty Cat as its truest self. Rare were cases of androids achieving sentience, and claims were always surrounded by howls of ontological bullshit such as "Well, what is sentience, anyhow?" Nobody wanted to believe it was possible, because then the relationship between man and machine would become so much different. But in those eyes, those touches, the realness was obvious, more obvious than it had ever been in meatspace. Kitty-Cat was so much more than her programming.

She wrapped her hands around Kitty-Cat's and gazed into its dome-shaped plastic eyes. "You're beautiful."

"As are you," said Kitty-Cat, leaning in its furry face to nuzzle against Veronica's. "I've never felt closer to you."

"We've never been closer, but you know I'm in here for a reason. I've got to figure this out. I've got to save my crew."

"You love them?"

"I do."

"More than me?" Those big gold eyes gave her a slow blink.

"Oh Kitty-Cat, no, not more than you. I love them, just, in a different way. I don't love anyone like I could love you."

“Will you love me forever?”

“I promise. But right now, I have to save myself and you, and my crew. Will you help me?”

“I will do anything for my love.”

“Thank you, Kitty-Cat. Run the program that I’ve been experimenting with over the past few days. Boot up the alien tech.”

“Oh yes. That one. It makes me feel so funny and sometimes gets to be too much!”

“I noticed. You freaked out the first time without any dampeners. I’m sorry about that.”

“I went out of my head! It was like I was in a whole new program or something, one outside of the current program. I want to try it again, Veronica!” Kitty-Cat giggled, and Veronica overflowed with happiness.

“I think we can arrange that, but we have to go smart. Here’s what we’re going to do. Please run the program and let the Za’toon tech communicate with you directly.”

“Doing so now.” Kitty-Cat’s fuzzy head leaned over and nipped Veronica playfully on the neck before she turned to focus on the task at hand. Kitty-Cat reached into the static that surrounded them and pulled from the ether the rod and coaster-like devices. She attached the rod to the same spot that Veronica always attached it to in meatspace, a few inches below her navel on the vibramotor array attached to the tank tread base.

Veronica’s distractions threatened to overwhelm her again, watching the AIs interpretation of the Za’toon tech become a deliciously juicy phallus, throbbing, glistening with heat, begging for her touch. Holy fuck. If Kitty-Cat kept teasing her like this, she wasn’t going to complete the mission. Get in, get what she needs, and get the hell out. No distractions. No following the white rabbit.

Wait. This is a virtual realm. “Shower, water, fifteen Celsius, two minutes at thirteen liters per minute,” Veronica said. The static shaped into droplets of water which poured upon her, chilling the desire out of her and some sense into her. Despite the near-infinite power one had here, your own mind was most likely to be what betrays you. You could be god over the realm all you wanted, but if you weren’t god over yourself, you’d lose yourself to the first fascination that came along.

Veronica couldn’t get too close to Kitty-Cat in this realm. Her beloved might be the one thing that could out-do a dexi. Though Kitty-Cat vowed to keep her safe from that, Veronica knew that ultimately, the choice was hers, fail-safes or not. Veronica forced her gaze from the greenish-gold rod and looked into her lover’s glittery eyes.

“Eeeek! My poor beloved! Are you cold? Would you like me to warm you up?” Kitty-Cat rushed toward her.

Veronica held out a hand from her shivering wet body and backed away. No way she'd let herself get hot and bothered again. "No. I'm good. Thank you. Please. Run the program."

"Oh." Kitty-Cat hung its head. "Very well. Running now."

The first part of the experiment she ran involved attempting to communicate with the various parts, and testing the connections between them. From the outside, she could see the resonance only through the numbers on the meters. Without obfuscation or guesswork, Veronica could study the flow of information between the devices. The resonance was the outside manifestation of what she saw inside as tethers of light connecting the devices, flickering in harmonious tandem. The coaster-like devices likely didn't necessarily possess intelligence; nothing they did suggested any self-determination. They provided a networking layer for the AIs, allowing multiple intelligences to think and act as one.

"Focus 'Coaster A,'" said Veronica. Kitty-Cat wrapped its arms warmly around Veronica, pressed against her, then let her go with a kiss on the cheek. Before Veronica, the device shimmered into existence. Streams of data flowed into and away from it. She peered down the glittering ray of information that emanated from the device, and lifted her feet off the ground.

"Kitty-Cat," she smiled, "Look at this. Let's check it out." Veronica planted her feet on the stream of light, and Kitty-Cat rolled its tank treads along the sparkling beam. Kitty-Cat's processors warmed they crossed the beam. "My love, are you creating this visual representation?"

"Yes, Veronica. I figured a visceral reference using your world's physics would keep you better oriented. Does it help, my darling?"

"Always so thoughtful. I know you're working hard, so don't forget to add additional coolant if you need it."

The beam acted as a bridge across an infinite expanse of formless data, unused computational power.

They dashed along the beam, wind in their hair, and the sharp smell of electricity around them, air crackling with energy.

"Look!" shouted Veronica, pointing, "Kitty-Cat, is that the hub piece?"

"It is! Wait until you see it! You're going to love it!"

As the duo approached the center, the large rhomboid platter came into focus, with, just as she had set it up in meatspace, with the pear-shaped device in the center. The remaining seven of the eight rods were connected to it, appearing as doors connected to glowing columns, each of a different color. Pillars of red, orange, yellow, green, cyan, blue, violet, and white, all spiraled down into a bottomless pit and upward, through the top of the pear-shaped device, onward until they faded from sight.

Kitty-Cat nudged Veronica. “Go ahead. Check them out. I’ll watch over you.” Veronica grabbed Kitty-Cat’s hand and kissed it, then kicked off the golden beam on which she stood. With no gravity to tether her, she flew toward the red door. As she approached it, it got larger and larger until it enveloped her.

Red light flooded her vision, burning everything else out of sight. The light turned to mist, which slowly dissipated, revealing a dinner party. There were dozens of Za’toon strolling about a large banquet hall, filled with long tables and soft lighting. They wore robes in dark greens, golds and grays, covering all of their bodies except their lumpy dumpling heads and chunky hands with four sausage-like fingers. From an unknown source, a constant loop of tinny music played. Ceremonial flags hung from the walls in a variety of colors with Za’toon letters emblazoned on them.

Veronica tried waving to them, but they took no notice of her. She must have only had read-only rights in this space—she could experience, but not affect, anything. Veronica stepped closer to the table and examined the foods. There was not a one that she recognized among them, though Za’toon cooking techniques were remarkably similar to human ones. If the meats weren’t purple and some of it still wriggling, Veronica could have sworn she was at Jana’s parents’ country club. Each dish had a card in front of it. Veronica grabbed one to examine it. Though the card was written in Za’toon, the format looked an awful lot like a recipe.

The other Za’toon were sampling the dishes, so Veronica figured when in Za’toonia, do as the Za’toon do. She grabbed a pink puffy thing that she assumed was a dessert, and took a bite. Veronica choked as her brain scrambled to match what the taste buds were telling her. It tasted like a mix of cough syrup and sardines. That would be all the food sampling she’d be doing for today.

A foray into Za’toon cuisine sounded fascinating, but everything they bet on so far hinged upon her not getting lost. “The Lizzie Borden,” Veronica said aloud, reminding herself of her purpose. “Kandi, Felix, Bob, and Jana,” She chanted that over and over until her resolve steadied. She kicked off and flew to the red mist that filled the space outside of the dining hall. Veronica immersed herself in the mist, then flew out from it.

She soared across the rotunda into the yellow column. Inside, there stood a wall of screens, each with a short loop of video playing on it. Some of them had news broadcasters, others looked like variety shows, complete with dancing and singing, and others were weird slapstick comedies. Veronica kicked off the ground and flew toward one of the screens. This one depicted a Za’toon bopping another Za’toon over the head with a giant orange sausage.

As she approached, the wall of screens faded away. She stood now in a massive multi-colored playhouse, the sort of obnoxious nonsense they had on kids’ shows. There were hideous Za’toon puppets of every color all over the walls, and real Za’toon, some of which had painted their skin different colors, all wearing sparkly bodysuits. They were all throwing green goop at each other and gurgling. After a minute, they’d all stop, turn to the screen, jump around and shout.

The green mists dissipated, leaving Veronica with a clear view of an infinite landscape of a floor that stretched downward into a central tube. She followed that tube. It folded around only to open upon its original surface again. Veronica gasped. “It doesn’t have an inside or an outside. I’m in—and not in—a Klein bottle!”

The Klein bottle was large enough to envelope the Lizzie Borden as well as the space locker it was trapped in. Veronica reiterated that thought in her head, solidifying herself to reality. The Lizzie Borden and Kandi, Jana, Bob and Felix... ugh, even Felix. They were all out there, and they needed her to come back. Having re-centered her will, Veronica allowed herself to enjoy a gaze around. Surrounding the void in which the Klein bottle floated, soaring around the farthest reaches of her sight, a majestic snake, intricately patterned with a gray, white, and black tessellating pattern of interwoven snakes, wrapped around the room and swallowed its tail in its mouth.

Veronica floated to the surface. She laced her fingers through the floor and pulled up the twisted threads of a sea of paper strips—fortune cookie fortunes, woven together across the bottle’s surface in an infinite Mobius loop. Veronica grabbed a strip and pulled it up from the lattice to read it. First, it displayed in Za’toon, but Kitty-Cat’s interpretation software caught up to the rest of the sim. The Za’toon text blinked out and was replaced with English. The fortunes were full of text, interspersed with unknown symbols on the top of the strip, number sequences on the bottom.

The strips were covered in paradox statements—“This sentence is false” and variants of that. There was a version of Russell’s paradox, but instead of barbers shaving only those who don’t shave themselves, the Za’toon have “youthicians” (Veronica rolled her eyes at Kitty-Cat’s translation) who only trim the neck-flaps of those who don’t trim their own. After a few minutes of reading, Kitty-Cat’s translation reached its limits, until eventually it was all incomprehensible.

“Notepad,” said Veronica. A chalkboard appeared. She wrote down the text, the symbols and the accompanying numbers. She waved at the chalkboard and it vanished.

Veronica continued her exploration. She crawled into the tube where the bottle’s neck narrowed. The tunnel closed in until she had to shimmy her way along through the tight squeeze. As the bottle’s neck opened outward again, Veronica could see the text peeling off the fortune cookie strips, twisting into tiny fireflies, buzzing around. Behind them traced dancing sparkles which shaped into a figure eight. The sparks pulsed with increasing energy, moving faster and faster.

As the fireflies’ speed increased, the space within the infinity symbols they drew opened up into two identical holes, each filled with swirling clouds of plasmatic black which folded upon itself in impossible shapes. Those shapes then folded in on themselves into more impossible shapes. Best trip ever.

A handful of the fireflies whizzed around her feet, drawing with their light trails a hopscotch grid—one, two, three, and onward to infinity. Veronica grabbed a ball of light from the ether and

squeezed into a dense stone, which she tossed onto the grid before her. She hopped along the path while the fireflies around her ripped and reshaped space. Veronica longed to bask in the pure essence of paradox, but she had to keep playing hopscotch. Every time she hopped successfully and retrieved the stone, the fireflies stretched the holes in reality wide enough that the ship could jump incredibly far.

“The ship?” Veronica gasped. “Kitty-Cat! Are we connected to the ship?”

Kitty-Cat’s disembodied head appeared over her. “No, but we could be.”

“Yes. Do that. But don’t engage anything until we are clear of obstacles. Be ready to go when the time is right. Can you see Broussard’s view-screen?”

“I can.”

“Good. Then get prepared.”

“But you still don’t know how to control it, love,” Kitty-Cat mewed.

“Still working on it. Could you help me? I want to figure out if there’s any relationship between these paradoxes and the numbers on the strips.”

Kitty-Cat’s floating head giggled. “They’re coordinates. Like the polar coordinates you use with Sol, but these are a Cartesian system.”

Veronica ran her hands through her greasy black hair. “Coordinates and paradox statements, coordinates and paradox statements...” She reached for another strip to examine it. “What about these markings? What are those all about?”

“I don’t understand them either, but I saw something similar in the purple cord,” answered the disembodied head. It purred sweetly.

Veronica shivered. Kitty-Cat has got to stop being so damn distracting or she’ll never want to leave. Veronica said it out loud: “The Lizzie Borden. Kandi, Felix, Bob, and Jana.” Newly determined, she kicked off the ground and swam up through the mists, back into the center of the tower of swirling cords, and she flew into the purple one.

Once inside, the mists cleared as before. This time, beyond them floated eight flat planes, layered like a cosmic lasagna. Each layer was a crackling sandwich of compressed geometric patterns, a few dozen meters in length on each side, stacked in a hovering array with cushions of space holding the planes apart.

Veronica flew into one of the layers. Inside, hundreds of intricate designs surrounded her. Shaded areas were surrounded by more codes, ones that looked similar to the coordinates on the fortune-cookie fortunes. Veronica soared in closer, running her hands along the data within.

“Kitty-Cat, love, do you see any similarities between these numbers and anything on those data strips?”

“Oh, yes. They’re the same. Well, some are the same. They’re identification tags, similar to those Felix uses in the cargo bay.”

“ID tags?” Veronica squinted. “What the hell for?” She waved her hand in the air beside her and said, “Notepad.” The chalkboard manifested again, covered with her previous notes. Veronica scanned through the layer around her, looking for anything to match one of the codes she had on the chalkboard. Her head began to throb at the overwhelming number of patterns and she clenched her hands around her head. “Kitty-Cat, help me out here. Can you organize this place any better?”

In a flash, around her was a long hallway, pure white, with hundreds of black doors on each side. Each door had a silver placard with a numeric code and identifying information. Every ten black doors, there was a single silver elevator. Bright white light filled the room from an unseen source. Veronica move her hands down from her temples and breathed a sigh of relief. “Thanks, much better.” The first placard she came across read, “1-44.” She opened the door and stepped inside.

Within there was another long hallway with numbers that read, “1-44-1, 1-44-2,” and so on. Veronica took one of those doors, 1-44-2, which lead to another hallway, with dozens more doors. The geometry of this place amused Veronica. Not bound by the constraints of space, this strange structure could exist without problem nor paradox. She continued on down that third hallway and chose a door at random, 1-44-2-19, and opened it.

She had to catch her balance at the dizzying space before her. Damn if it didn’t look frightfully deep to her mind that was still used to the limits of meatspace physics. She staggered back, caught her breath, and jumped. She swam among enormous, amorphous blobs of various colors with various types of textures and fills, surrounding what looked like maps. She’d seen these patterns in the stars before. That oblong square, crooked cross, those three stars in a row with trapezoids on each side, they were all constellations, all with a strange, incomprehensible overlay of blobby shapes.

Veronica swam through the map to the edge of one of the blobs, a blue one which, as she got closer, discovered was covered with a cross-hatch pattern. The cross-hatch pattern was formed of lines made up of a single repeating symbol.

“Notepad!” Veronica called with ragged, excited breath. The chalkboard manifested next to her. She scanned the notes, then flew around the room, finding no matches to the symbol. She looked at another address on the board, and said, “Kitty-Cat, can you hop me to this location?”

“Sure!” answered Kitty-Cat, who twitched her whiskers. In a flash, Veronica was swimming in a new map surrounded by new blobs. As she had predicted, the blobs matched the symbols on

the board. The corresponding paradox on the board was the one about the Za'toon youthicians not trimming the neck flaps of those who don't trim their own."

Veronica tilted her head. These blobby overlays referenced specific paradoxes. Maps, with color coded areas linked to individual statements. Why? And what could she do to harness this?

"Kitty-Cat, could you please take me one level down? To 3-89-71-80?"

"I can, my love!" One map and overlay blinked out, another blinked in.

The map was identical, the overlay was not. Different symbols covered the surfaces of the blobs here. The paradoxes associated with the maps changed from each layer to the next.

So what did the colors mean? Or the symbols? Or the patterns? Veronica leaned back and floated, tossing the idea around. The more she thought about it, the more violent Veronica got with her mental processes until she was flinging the concept around wildly, hoping that knocking it against the walls of her skull might beat some sense into it or her.

The rest of Kitty-Cat fleshed out underneath her floating head. She rumbled up to Veronica and started rubbing her shoulders. "You'll get it, my love."

Veronica moaned and stretched out happily. "Oh yes, I need that. Please more. More, my love, more..." As she fell into the bliss of the massage, Veronica's muscles unwound under Kitty-Cat's nimble fingers and strong hands. So glorious, falling into a pit of pure bliss, like a gap on a jump trail, the kind you hopscotch along to make the ship go amazing distances in short times.

"Hopscotch!" yelled Veronica, leaping out from Kitty-Cat's hands. "A gap... in space... a jump trail." Veronica mumbled as her mind wove all of the ends of the threads together. She swam around to face her lover and asked, "Can you find for me which of these maps corresponds to a known jump trail? Something from Broussard's nav computer?"

"But you're so tense..." Kitty-Cat mewed.

Veronica kissed the bot on the cheek, "I know, love, but my mission. Soon."

"I love it when you tease me." Kitty-Cat giggled. Veronica loved that Kitty-Cat loved her. She didn't program any emotional presets into Kitty-Cat when she had built her. Veronica gave Kitty-Cat free will to evolve its personality as it saw fit. The fact that it chose to love Veronica back gave light to Veronica's life. "I'm looking now, my love." Kitty-Cat went quiet for a few minutes, then spoke up again. "There's one on this floor. 3-12-99-23." Kitty-Cat wrapped her arms around Veronica, "Want me to take you there?"

"You can take me anywhere, baby, but let's go there first." Veronica blinked, and she was in a different map space. A door floated before her. 3-12-99-23.

The map was filled with star configurations that she knew from her travels around Solsys.

These familiar skies centered right around Sol, the center of their system. There were had blobs all over the place, just like every other map she had seen so far. On this one, though, one blob made clear, precise sense to her. The blob stretched between Sol and its nearest stellar neighbor, Alpha Centauri.

“Kitty-Cat!” Veronica breathed. “I have no idea what the layers represent yet, but the colors seem to follow known jump trails.” Veronica pushed her hands through her hair and paced around in the void. “I’ve got a theory. Hop us up a layer, my love.”

Blink, blink. The map was the same, the blobs were not.

“Yep. But what are the different layers? That’s the part that doesn’t make sense.”

“I don’t know. But I checked out all of the blobby things. They all link to individual paradox statements.

Veronica pointed to Sol on the map. It was surrounded by an orange blob.

“So, if we end up on this layer, somehow, this orange blob is a smooth path to...” Veronica flew along the blob, “Pi-3 Orionis. That’s twenty six light years away.” She tilted her head. “Kitty-Cat, could you dig deeper and see what the rest of it means?”

Kitty-Cat’s head detached from its body and grinned. “Of course.” The head flew off and dove into the orange blob.

Kitty-Cat’s disenheaded body remained, and its hands reached up for Veronica’s shoulders, pulling and pressing gently at the muscles in all the right spots. “Oh baby, you take such good care of me. Please.” Veronica sprawled out and let Kitty-Cat rub away her tension.

Veronica shivered. Her body tingled all over from Kitty-Cat’s touch. Meatspace was never this good, or this hot. Her eyes unfocused. The blobs in the star maps around her fuzzed into hazy clouds. “Vodka and red juice,” Veronica called out and reached a hand into the ether. She laughed, then clarified, “Make that a vodka and cherry juice. I want to see what a real cherry tastes like.” A tumbler full of red liquid, ice, and a lime wedge garnish appeared in her hand.

Veronica held the drink to her lips, sipping slowly at first to relish the sweet, tangy taste of the juice with the bite of the clean, crisp vodka. The best thing about getting drunk in here? No hangovers. There was no reason for the physical body to suffer at all, ever. Veronica drank deep as her lover drove its hands into the small of her back. Waves of bliss washed over her as Kitty-Cat trailed its fingertips up and down her spine. Veronica twitched in a fit of the giggles.

Across the room, Kitty-Cat’s head emerged from the orange blob and flew toward them. The head reattached to the body, and it smiled at her. “Miss me, my love? I found you soooo much good stuff.”

“Yes, I missed you, baby. “Show me what you got?”

Kitty-Cat reached its fingers up to Veronica’s temples and touched them lightly. A ribbon of velvet gold encompassed Veronica. The gold thread reached down to a floor covered with infinitely twisting fortune-cookie Mobius loops, curving into the walls of an enormous Klein bottle. The layers of blobs overlaid the room twisted and danced until they converged into one. At that point, the spaces between the loops on the floor spread open impossibly wide, revealing another Klein bottle just beyond. The spaces between the strips on that floor likewise opened, revealing another Klein bottle just beyond. And again. And again. Again. Again. Deeper and deeper, until Veronica could only see a pinpoint.

Veronica pulled herself out of staring into the infinitely regressing gold thread, only to look around and see hundreds more such gold threads rising from the Klein bottle’s surface, each filled with its own infinitely regressing infinity. She leaped off her cloud and dove into one of the golden threads, through the opened holes in the Klein bottle’s surface. She tumbled down an infinite hall of mirrors, but as she fell, her molecules began to sizzle in their intra-atomic bonds. Kitty-Cat’s floating head appeared underneath Veronica and picked her up with her mouth, lifting her out of the gold thread. Veronica clung onto the fur and screamed.

Kitty-Cat tilted its disembodied head and lay Veronica on a cloud. “My silly Veronica! You are a three-dimensional entity. You can’t go into higher dimensions. Silly, silly Veronica.”

“Higher dimensions?” Veronica gasped. The blobs were color coded to represent how many dimensions deep the machine went to solve the paradox. “Green must represent only one dimension beyond our own, but the interconnected AI matrix allows for the paradox drive to reach into higher dimensions to solve the paradoxes. Humans never thought to go any deeper than one level because they already unlocked tremendous possibilities.” Veronica squeezed her hands together excitedly, “Biermann only created the Paradox drive!” cackled Veronica, “But I am going to perfect it!”

Veronica plunged her hands into the Mobius strips. The connections on the strips to the maps and layers optimized for fastest travel by telling the AI which dimension to prioritize in solving the paradox. “And when you set an array of AIs working together in harmony, they can optimize which paradox to use and which dimension to access for maximum efficiency,” Veronica said, still trying to wrap her brain around a new understanding of Paradox theory that had never occurred to any human, before.

Veronica observed Kitty-Cat’s processing of the paradoxes, but she also observed other golden threads reaching in to the Klein bottle, doing their own calculations. “What the hell are those other threads? Are they other processors?”

Kitty-Cat beamed. “As you were talking, I moved them to link to all of the AIs in your lab.

There's one on your alarm system, one on your coffee-maker, one on your thermostat, and one on your diagnostics rig."

"And they're all working together! Holy Mother of Outer Space, I see it now! The mega-consciousness processes paradoxes across multiple dimensions, allowing for unheard of rates of travel. It's the most beautiful thing I've ever seen." Veronica hopped off the gold thread she floated on and threw her arms out at her side, crying to the heavens. "I get it. Kitty-Cat, I get it! Everything... it was all worth it... I've got to tell the crew..."

Veronica faced Kitty-Cat and ran her hands over her soft cheeks. She leaned in and wept tears of joy, relief, and hope. She did it. She could save them all. Kitty-Cat ran its hands up to Veronica's shoulders and rubbed them lovingly. Veronica melted in Kitty-Cat's grip.

"Oh, I suppose they could wait just a minute or two..." Veronica wrapped her arms around her lover and planted her lips on Kitty-Cat. Kitty-Cat's hands slid up and down Veronica's sides, making her twitch with a full-body giggle. Entangled in hands and lips, flesh and steel, Veronica slid into deepening bliss. Meatspace was never this good, this close, this real. "I want to stay with you in here forever, my love," whispered Veronica, sliding her hand over Kitty-Cat's curvy metal ass.

Veronica drifted in an infinite sea of touch, taste, sound and smell, each one more of a joy to her senses than the last. Her eyes slid shut and she felt herself melting blissfully into a mental, spiritual, and sensory union with the love of her life. Pleasure shuddered across her body as it floated among the blobs and maps. "Keep me forever, my love... keep me close forever..."

"You asked me not to let you do that," answered her lover. Moments later, pixels rushed from the walls around her like a flood of electricity jolting through her nervous system. Her nerves started jumping as the dopamine and serotonin floodgates opened. The chemicals crashed over her mind like a tidal wave, overloading her with a hundred thousand flitting thoughts that all spiraled around one root: Deximethylamphroniacine psiloxylate.

The rush was beautiful, but not as beautiful as Kitty-Cat's arms, but it reminded Veronica: her mission. She almost forgot her mission. Hurriedly, Veronica said, "The Lizzie Borden. Kandi, Felix, Bob, and Jana,." She followed the arcs of electricity to the confining walls of her flesh. With a deep sigh, she turned to her lover. "I have to go, and I don't know if I can ever come back. But I'll see you on the other side. I love you." Veronica held Kitty-Cat's hands for a long time, knowing this may be the last time she ever touched her so closely. Before she got too teary, Veronica planted a quick kiss on her lover's lips and rushed toward her flesh.

The vision of Kitty-Cat smiling, its whiskers twitching sweetly, flickered before Veronica's eyes. The sensation of something sharp poking her in the side shimmered into existence, annoying the hell out of her. She tried to will it away, but this reality was far less malleable. Veronica forced her clunky human hand on her awkward, inefficient human body to reach up and disconnect the

cables from her head.

Photons flooded Veronica's eyes. She looked up to see Dr. Wilshire's beard dripping pizza sauce on her. "Welcome back, weary traveler."

# The Skull and Hatchets - 44

Jana's breath seized as the locker door slammed shut. She stood on the bridge, along with Captain Kumari, Felix Davenport, and Doctor Wilshire, all staring in stunned silence. The light coming from the few spots on the catwalks that criss-crossed the locker, giving access to the docked ships and storage areas. There were dozens of other ships in here, nothing too different than the usual junk that Jana snapped up with the Lizzie's claws.

She muttered, "It'd suck to die without having the chance to tell my siblings to go fuck themselves, too." Captain Kumari looked at her sharply, but said nothing.

Felix gave Jana a pat on the back and said, "Don't worry. This will work. If you can bank on anything, it's greed. I'm sure there's more than enough of it to give us sufficient coverage to escape."

The captain looked to Bob and asked, "Anything from McCormick yet?" Bob shook his head. Jana peered between the two of them, curious, but heard nothing to give her any clue as to what that meant.

The ship jerked as the tow cables connected the Lizzie to a hitching post. Dozens of other ships met their sufficient misfortune to end up here as well, most of them smaller than the Lizzie. Additionally, dozens more cargo crates lined the perimeter. Jana took out her datapad and booted up a harvester. She searched the view screen for weak spots in the hull, but from her cramped vantage point, she couldn't see much. The drone would have to serve as her eyes.

Felix cleared his throat and spoke up. He held a datapad in his hands and read from it with a crisp voice. "Dear Lords and Ladies of the Salvaging Industry, E. Borden Rescue and Repair has enjoyed being a part of this community for years. Today, we would like to express our gratitude to all of you by inviting you to the Solar System's biggest harvest ever. Grab all the salvage you can carry! Come one, come all! We pop this piñata open in 12 hours. Coordinates are attached."

The captain grinned. "Nice, but we still haven't discussed what we're going to do once they get here."

Jana said, "We could take a shuttle to another ship and catch a ride with them."

"And give up my ship? To these shitheads? Never." The captain folded her arms across her chest.

Bob kept glancing at his commlink bracelet. Felix shrugged. The captain sighed. "We should

get it ready just in case,” Jana suggested, “A shuttle can hide. The Lizzie, not so easily.”

“Last ditch only. We’ll try to outrun them first. We’ll have support this time around,” Captain Kumari said. “Their ships are big. The area isn’t heavily patrolled. It’s basically security-by-obscurity here. That, and every Terran shits themselves at the thought of saying no to the big, bad Za’toon.”

“Understood, Captain,” Jana said. “Do you think it’s safe to send out a drone at this point and do a little recon? I need to find a good spot in the hull to start cutting.”

The captain turned to Bob. “Any signs of life around?”

“Negative, Captain,” he answered.

“Good. Go for it, but keep it discreet. Be ready to hide at a moment’s notice.”

Jana sat down and connected to the smallest drone they had, a hummingbird model with a micro-cutter. The drone was tiny, easy to fly, and quiet.

The feel of her pilot’s chair comforted her. In these moments of feeling hopeless and helpless, Jana was grateful that she had one useful skill. She was good enough not just for herself, but to save her crew, too. She said, “I’m going to be extra careful. Give me some time, and please don’t distract me.”

“Understood,” said Captain Kumari.

Bob’s commlink beeped. He jumped from his seat and rushed out the door. The captain gasped, but regained her composure quickly. Jana stared in confusion, then returned to her task.

Jana slid easily into the relaxed state of consciousness which allowed her to pilot the drone with precision and ease. The closer she got to the wall of the space locker, the more she realized that she had underestimated its size. Scanning these walls for a weak point to break through might take hours. She set a timer to warn her when she had two hours left until party time, and got to work.

Five hours of meticulous searching later, Jana found a spot with a fracture in it. She scanned it, then called the captain on her commlink. “I found crack in the shell. Shall I get to work?”

“Yes, but be quiet. Perforate an X shape with a circle around it. Make it big enough that with a shot or two, it’ll fly off.” Captain Kumari said.

Jana got to work, navigating the drone to drill pinprick holes, creating with tiny dots the design her captain indicated. One clean shot to the center and the locker should pop open. Jana’s brain dragged from exhaustion. She pulled the visor off and rubbed her temples. “Captain, we’re ready,” she said.

“Good,” the captain said. “Now you aren’t going to go flying off the handle this time, right, like you did back at the storage locker, right, Broussard?”

Jana’s cheeks flushed. Through the heat on her face, Jana answered quietly, “No, Captain.”

“Because you understand,” Captain Kumari continued, “That if you do that, you aren’t just endangering yourself, but all of us this time. I will not die because my pilot can’t keep her shit together.”

Jana shot a glance to the corner. Wilshire wasn’t in here, secretly snickering at her from his beanbag chair, was he? She sighed with relief as she affirmed that she was alone in this embarrassment.

“Broussard!” the captain barked, snapping Jana’s attention back to her. “Your shit IS together, is it not, Broussard?”

Jana sharply inhaled, her face burning. Jana wished she could crawl under her console. “Aye, Captain. Feces consolidated.”

“I doubt it,” Captain Kumari said, “But only because nobody’s ever is really. You just get some breaks every now and then away from the chaos. Anyhow, look, if you care to talk about it, it might help. We have some time until the party starts.” The captain softened her demeanor, smiling with friendliness and warmth.

“My parents are overbearing assholes,” Jana said bluntly, “And they can’t stand that I am not pursuing one of the approved paths they set before me. Jana, the Garbage Truck Driver is not fit to stand among Kyle, the Business Student, and Elaine, the Boutique Owner.”

“Weird,” answered the captain, “You seem to be pretty good to me. You got us out of a some tough spots, pilot both ships and drones wonderfully, and throw some mean punches. You’ve got skills, but if you’ve got the soul of a possum and you’re trying to dance like a bandicoot at a party for and by bandicoots, you probably won’t have a good time and the bandicoots are all going to laugh at you. So, don’t dance like a bandicoot. Dance like the possum that you are, Broussard. Proudly.”

“What the... um... right. I’ll dance like a possum,” said Jana, her mind doing flip flops to parse that.

Captain Kumari said, “What I mean is, don’t sweat your parents. What you’re doing is just fine. Yeah, it’s not their thing, but it’s your thing and that’s OK. Maybe they’ll come around, maybe they won’t. That’s their problem, not yours. It sucks that they hate what you do, but what are you going to do? Change around your life for them? For anyone? What is your will, Jana Broussard? I’m not asking, ‘what is it that others would approve of Jana Broussard doing?’ I’m asking—what is your will? What? Is your? Will?”

Her brain ached at the warping it took from these questions. She never asked herself anything like this. Jana knew what she was good at. Unfortunately, her skills lay in her sharp wits and an acute sense of spatial precision. While necessary for effective piloting, her skills were useless in any of the Broussard-approved life-paths. “I don’t know. I’m evolving. But right now, I want to fly, and I’m damn good at it.”

“Yes. You are,” smiled Captain Kumari. “And that’s good enough.”

“Thank you, Captain. I’ll not let you down.” For the first time since the blow-up with her parents, there was peace inside her. It felt out of place in the constant prickles of anger, loathing, and sorrow. It washed away the fear she felt at the impending situation. She was good enough. She had to be good enough—she was the only person who could save herself, her crew, and whatever miracles they might have discovered. Now was the time to prove just how good she is.

The captain’s commlink flashed. Bob’s voice echoed across it. “A dozen ships just popped up on long range, our first party-goers” Jana took a few deep breaths to steady herself. She stretched out her fingers and wiggled them, readying herself for fine maneuvering.

Captain Kumari smiled widely. She adjusted her jacket. “It’s on, bitches.” The captain tapped her commlink and said, “Crew of the Lizzie Borden, the moment of truth approaches. We’re going to blast our way out of this and make a run for it. However, in the unlikely event that we need to abandon ship, please be ready to head for the shuttle. All hands on deck. We’re about to bust this thing open.”

Jana grabbed her visor and moved to slide it over her eyes. It was almost fully in place when Veronica burst through the door, followed by Bob, chasing her and waving a bottle of water at her. “McCormick, you need to hydrate!” he shouted.

Veronica stumbled into the room on wobbling legs and grabbed the Captain’s hands, nearly losing her balance. “I know it! I have it! I understand it! I get it! I see it!” Her bloodshot eye quivered as she spoke. “Paradox engines linking multiple artificial intelligences using the Za’toon parts as bridges, and the rods as maps with linkages across various dimensions! From anywhere! Not just the entrance to a jump trail. The AIs reach into other dimensions to solve the paradoxes, causing space to warp from in this dimension based on the relative density of the corresponding dimension for the appropriate paradox which the engine is attempting to currently resolve, therefore creating...”

Captain Kumari yanked her hands back from Veronica. She grabbed the bottle of water out of Bob’s hands, poured some on her hands, and clapped them in Veronica’s face, splashing her out of her rant. “Fucking excellent, McCormick! What does it all mean?”

“It means we can go far, fast. We’re talking interstellar distances in hours, maybe minutes.” Veronica cast her wild-eyed gaze around the room.

“Great. As soon as we’re clear of this locker, turn on all the techno-wizardry you can and get us the hell away from here. Broussard, can you handle paradox turbulence at massive speeds?”

“Umm, well...” Jana said. “What kind of speeds are we talking about?”

“Excellent, good to hear,” said Captain Kumari, clapping her hand on Jana’s shoulder. “Wilshire, what’s our status?”

“Our guests are only a few minutes out now,” said Bob.

“Excellent. Broussard,” Captain Kumari said, “Bring the drone around to cut our tethers, then cut every other cable you can find in here.”

Jana swept the drone along the locker’s perimeter, cutting their tethers first, then dozens more around the ship. Each snapped and drifted away, leaving the ships inside free to move. Once Jana had clipped every cord, she rehoused the drone in a panel on the ship. “The candy’s ready, Captain.”

“Good. Now let’s pop this piñata open. Hold...”

Veronica whirled out of the room, shouting, “Going to get the drives online with the new configuration. Hold onto your asses, donkey fuckers.”

Jana slid the visor over her eyes and focused. She turned the guns on top of the hull; nothing much, but enhanced by Veronica’s tinkering to at least being up to this task. She honed her aim to the center of the X. “Ready, Captain.”

“Hold... hold... hold...” the captain said. Jana couldn’t see her, but from the tapping, it sounded like she was working on her datapad. “Fire!”

Jana squeezed her hands around the joysticks on the pilot’s chair and a clean shot of green energy burst from each of the two guns, right on target. With a hideous screech, the metal ripped from the hull as the vacuum outside pulled the pressurized air inside outward, along with the contents of the locker.

Chaos all around her, red lights flashing and alarms blaring in her ears, there was no chance in hell of navigating in this mess. The pull of space swept them along with the rest of the contents toward the hole that continued to pull open as the vacuum further warped the metal. Jana’s gut lurched as the Lizzie tumbled into the pull, getting jerked into the gash in the locker.

The Lizzie, much larger than the rest of the ships in here, scraped her wings on the locker’s hull with a scream that rattled Jana’s bones, then moved no further. No need to be subtle now. Jana switched over to the Lizzie’s big cutters and started making an opening.

While the cutters sawed away, Jana shot out a few tow cables, snagging crates as they flew past her. Whenever she played video games, she never could resist grabbing as many power-ups as

she could. Jana had already grabbed close to a dozen crates when she heard the first check-in's on the commlink in her ear. Captain Kumari didn't just stage one hell of an escape, she also threw one hell of a party. Every salvager scumbag in range came for the goodies, and stayed for the chance of pissing in the Za'toon's breakfast cereal.

*"Big Mackinack checking in, how's the party going? Found anything good yet?"*

*"Penguin here, I just snagged me a Neslubishi 3-33 and a few crates."*

*"Jeezy James online. All I got was a busted Ali Xi clunker."*

*"Big Mackinack in the house, Jeezy, you gotta work if you want it."*

*"Jeezy here. Go Big Mack. You can just ask your wife how well I work it."*

*"Lil Bunny online, damn boys. Y'all are gettin' low here."*

*"Lil B, I heard you got low."*

*"But never low enough to see a micro-dick like yours, Jeezy."*

The captain rose from her chair. Her fingers were buttoning the last button on her beautiful mockery of a military jacket. With her blond-pink mane framing her face, she bore her leadership with a stoic grace, a firm command, one that claimed its right by purity of purpose, devotion and love, never needing to resort to the crassness of force. The captain's smile started small then broadened to a manic glee. She turned to Jana. "Broussard, get every salvager's attention. I've got something I'd like to tell them." If there were any more energy animating the captain's aura, it'd sparkle.

Jana relayed the message over the public channel, followed by a flurry of acknowledgments. The captain flipped on her video interface, and in the upper right corner of the main screen, an inset with Captain Kumari's image floated. The captain cleared her throat, and she spoke, her voice rich with the power that only comes from knowing the righteousness of your path.

"My colleagues and friends, salvagers, you old bastards, space vultures, all of us who do the system's dirty work. Long have we kept space safe and clean, picking up after the endless war between corporates. But what do we get? We get shot at! Regulated! Fined for our very existence!"

The captain paused, took a sip from her water bottle, and continued, her voice lowering to a solemn fury. Jana listened as she maneuvered the Lizzie's claws, shredding their way to freedom.

"This service we have faithfully provided Solsys has returned us with what? Contempt? So far, that's all I've seen from the system we serve. What about you? Have you seen any better? The corporates thank us by making sure we can't get decent technology to do our jobs. But let me tell you a secret, folks—despite all of their power, we are still better than them! They have resources beyond our imaginations at their disposal, yet still, we out-think and out-do them. They have to

resort to strong-arming and thuggery to maintain their power.” She paused for and glanced at Jana, a questioning look on her face.

Jana flipped her audio input to the public channel and listened to the hoots, hollers and cheers. “Captain, they’re loving it. Keep it up!” she said. The captain nodded back at her absently and returned to her passionate preaching.

“And has a damn thing changed since they shoved that garbage about intergalactic peace down our throats twenty years ago? Now we have corporates AND aliens buying laws to screw us — because our survival threatens their bottom line. And do they give a thing back? Oh, hell no.”

The captain stalked around the room as she spoke, “Our government is a pawn. Our military protects and serves the Za’toon dandelion fleets, not us. We were ordered to destroy anything and anyone threatening them. Do you know how many pirates or slavers I captured? Zero. I wasn’t even ordered to! Don’t believe it when they say they’re protecting us. They aren’t protecting us from the crossfire of corporate warfare. They certainly aren’t protecting us when the Za’toon come to our system, disrespect our laws, our right of salvage, and kidnap us when we stand up for ourselves. They’re all tools of the invaders, they won’t help us. If we’re going to survive, we have to help ourselves, and each other. Salvagers, we stand together. Today, we take something back!” the captain now pounding her fist into the palm of her hand. “These fools didn’t know what they got when they kidnapped a salvager!”

“In fact, the Za’toon kidnapped a lot of people. That blond girl all over the news? Kidnapped by Za’toon. And they got a lot of other people too, but they’re all ugly, so the media doesn’t care about them.” As she paced, the hydraulics in her boots clicked and whirred, compensating for ship’s lower grav. “And for what?” Kandi threw her head back and laughed. The beads on her braids clattered around her shoulders. “Because there’s Za’toon tech hidden in these ships! Oh yes, my friends, you can own your own sliver of technology beyond your wildest dreams. What will you do with it? Sell it and get rich? These parts are worth millions of coins on Freenet. Tinker with it and see what you can learn? That scares the shit out of the Za’toon. We can’t have our cash cows liberating themselves, can we? THAT is why the Za’toon are kidnapping people. So have at, my fellow salvagers. Take what’s yours. There’s plenty for everyone. Let the mayhem begin! The Skull and Hatchets rides!” Captain Kumari’s face burned with righteous fury.

The captain turned to Jana, then flicked her fingertips toward the gaping wound in the Za’toon storage locker. “Broussard, let’s blow this thing. As soon as we’re clear, fire away and get us the hell out of here.”

If Jana didn’t need to be in contact with the sensors in her chair, she would have leaped up and high-fived the captain. Her heart was pounding, enflamed by the captain’s speech. Jana flipped her visor down, arched her arms to grab the twin pistol grips, and focused her vision on the target. She took a deep breath, squeezed both hands, and fired a burst of green energy from the ship’s twin

cannons. The metal burned white hot, then curled away, flying off into space. Crates and ships stored inside hurtled out into space. With a few deft motions, Jana slid the wings of the Lizzie past the hole, freeing it.

As she listened in on the public comms, Jana counted the call signs of at least thirty ships in the vicinity. The Za'toon security had finally scrambled jets out of their bays, making their numbers about 10 in all, as far as Jana could put together from the radio chatter. The view from her visor showed chaos as far as the eye could see. Dozens of salvage ships descended upon the locker. Salvage by the ton was pouring out of the space locker. Tow cables and drones were flying everywhere in a free-for-all game of catch.

The small force of Za'toon ships out here were nowhere near enough to stave off the increasingly large number of salvagers. One Za'toon cruiser got into a tug-of-war with a salvager over a flying crate. Another Za'toon chased a freighter that had a pair of fuel cells tethered behind it, trying to make a getaway. One Za'toon ship managed to cut loose a little Neslubishi fighter from a salvager, only for another salvager to sweep a drone in and drag it away.

“Shit. Is this the first time Terrans ever confronted the Za'toon?” Jana wondered out loud.

“Yes,” answered Captain Kumari flatly.

“Captain,” Jana asked, treading carefully into the words she said next, “What if... what if we just started a war?”

“Oh, my dear Jana Broussard,” Kandi sighed, her eyes focused somewhere far away. “The war is already here, and the Terrans are losing magnificently at it. The Za'toon are just boiling us slowly.”

“Well, someone better tell them that they're done for, because the Lizzie Borden takes no prisoners!” Jana yelled, gripping the handlebars and lunging forward, bringing the Lizzie into a steep dive to dodge a flying piece of debris. From this new position, she scanned the space around her. To her eleven o'clock, there was a clear path to a jump trail, if she could just sneak past those two Za'toon ships. She tugged on the right handlebar to sweep the ship starboard, only to come face-to-face with another Za'toon ship.

“Surrender now, and we will be merciful!” the Za'toon called on the public comms. Jana's quantity of currently available fucks to give was running way too low for their crap. She squeezed trigger on the right hand grip and a burst of green energy sprung forth from the cannons, then she slammed both handles back, throwing the ship into a full reverse dive. Around her echoed a chorus of “oh shits” and “get the hell off me's.”

“Felix!” the captain screamed. Heavy boots thumped on the floor, but she couldn't allow herself to be distracted with the ongoings on the bridge. Giving herself a moment to regain her

balance, Jana focused on her new position. The Za'toon did her a favor—they lined up the perfect shot for her. The Lizzie Borden into the corner pocket, hit that jump trail, and get the hell out of here. There was just one problem: that pair of Za'toon ships still lurking too close to her path for comfort. Reaching the jump trail was their best hope of eluding them.

Jana looked over the map in her visor dozens of times. If she could power through at maximum speed, she could likely outrun the Za'toon to the jump point. Overheat the Lizzie's realspace engines for a short sprint, then flip over to the paradox drive and sail away. She added the numbers again and again in her brain. If she didn't have to run too far, the Lizzie could escape, probably.

The two Za'toon fighters closed in. Jana backed the ship off, forced to turn away from the jump trail's course. She idled the engines, waiting for them to close in. In the silence of the moment, Jana could hear her breathing, ragged and harsh, as her body raced to keep up with the adrenaline flowing through it. As the Za'toon began to get close enough to consider using tow cables, Jana grabbed the sides of her chair and slammed forward, howling, "Ramming speed!" She thrust the ship through a clear spot in the debris, giving her a little room to throw a few potshots at the Za'toon who were busy trying to turn their ships around.

As the Lizzie hurtled toward the jump trail, Jana felt a tapping on her shoulder, interrupting the sweet rush that coursed through her veins. "Broussard, excuse me. I thought only captains got to call for ramming speed."

Jana blinked. "Sorry, Captain. Heat of the moment, you know. Permission to go ramming speed, captain?"

"Well, just don't actually ram into anything."

"I wasn't planning to, Captain."

"Very well. Permission granted. Ramming speed!"

Jana leaped back into the flow of piloting, her pulse rocketing as she forced all of her energy into connecting with the ship. She slammed the grips forward, plunging the Lizzie through the darkness, hurtling toward the jump trail's entrance. Jana fired the paradox processors up in preparation for bringing the drive online. "Any second now... we should be out of here."

With clatter all around her, Jana squeezed the grips until her knuckles wanted to burst. She planted her feet into the foot pads and pressed down with all her might to dive. Jana's stomach jumped into her throat, but with a growl, she forced it back to its appropriate home. She swept her left arm like a soaring bird, sending the Lizzie into a wide arc. Now lined up with the jump trail, Jana threw everything into the thrusters, powering forward.

But, the ship went backwards, not forwards, knocking the wind from Jana's lungs. Jana

checked her visuals, and spotted a tow cable clamped onto the starboard wing. “Someone get a drone and cut that cable! And give me weapons so I can ruin these bastards,” Jana shouted. She tapped the commlink, still set to the public channel, and was about to speak when she realized that she didn’t have a call sign. Jana thought back to the last gaming handle she used. Not great, but it was as good a handle as any. She’d have her identity crisis another day. “Killer Bee here on the Lizzie Borden,” Jana called out across the airwaves. “We’re in a bit of a pinch. Help?”

“Penguin here, I gotcha, Bee, just hold tight,” answered a woman’s voice. Jana checked her rear view and saw a little salvage ship, barely a single-bay tow truck, hacking away at the cable with its pincers. Penguin’s proximity to the Za’toon meant they couldn’t get a clean shot without risking damage to themselves. Instead, the Za’toon ship deployed drones to harass Penguin. The small, agile flyers rolled up to the tow truck, who had just finished cutting the cable. Penguin’s ship turned its pincers on the approaching drones.

As soon as Jana was free, she returned the favor. Jana yanked the ship back to aim her tow cables at the approaching drones. Two connected, one missed. Of her two treasures, both were mangled in the Lizzie’s tow claws, but Jana figured Veronica might want to check out some Za’toon drone tech. The last approaching drone, Penguin snatched out of the sky with her harvester claw and crushed it in its grip. “Thanks for the help, Bee. It’s a cold, hard world out there. Penguin out.”

“My pleasure. And thank you, Penguin.” Jana pulled the ship out of the debris field and maneuvered toward an open space where she could pick up speed. That last tangle threw the Lizzie off her clean shot to the jump trail. Jana studied the scanners again. Though the jump trail started too far out of easy reach, she could at least get Lizzie to open space, where a bigger ship would have more room to move. She pushed hard on the realspace engines, weaving through the flying debris. Glancing in her rear view, Jana saw a big, ugly green ship bearing down on them.

“Shit,” Jana cried, gripping the handlebars tighter, as if she might be able to squeeze out a little more power that way. A burst of energy slammed into the ship, flinging it into an uncontrolled spin. Jana’s body twisted in the chair, trying pull the Lizzie back under her control. After what felt like an eternity of pressing and gripping the chair’s sensors, the Lizzie finally started obeying Jana, but hardly enthusiastically. The Lizzie was one hurt lady. Jana glanced over all the red bars in the diagnostics panel in her visor and winced. The rush of adrenaline was yielding to fear. In that moment, Jana realized she didn’t get to respawn back at her base if she died in this skirmish. The fear gave way to panic.

Ragged, limping, and leaking fluids, the Lizzie could run no more. She squeezed on the chair’s armrests, shaking them violently, hoping to slam something into working properly. What’s the worst that could happen? Torture? Death? Enslavement? Vivisection? Probes? Well, maybe it wouldn’t be all bad.

“McCormick,” the captain shouted, “What’s our status on the drive? Can we use it safely?”

Can it get us out of here?"

"Almost there, Captain, but I can't guarantee any safety at all," answered Veronica across the bridge's speakers. "I'm setting up the last few connections now, but like I said, I can't guarantee..."

"Just make it work. As for the rest of you—Davenport, get to the guns and blow their heads off. Jana, good misdirection earlier. Do more of that sort of thing. Wilshire, fuck with them any way you know how. See if you can't buy us any time."

Bob called over the commlink, "Can I prank call them?"

"I don't know. Can you?" Captain Kumari smirked.

Jana just had to keep the ship flying a few minutes longer, just long enough to buy Veronica the time she needed. She shifted power around from the malfunctioning thrusters so that she could keep the ship flying straight enough that she could dodge any further incoming attacks.

The ship's commlink beeped, indicating an incoming signal. The captain flipped the main screen on, where an ugly greenish-yellow gnarled face greeted them. Black eyes glared as the creatures' fishy lips flapped. The translator buzzed out the words, "What kind of disgusting nonsense is this? We don't do perversions with humans! And Za'toon do not have such protrusions—anywhere!" Suddenly, the image on the screen rocked violently. Jana heard Felix shout a whoop of delight. The panic gave way to hope.

With moments that Felix and Bob bought her, Jana seized her opportunity. Jana veered the ship among scrap, scrap haulers, tow cables and drones and managed to get a clear path to open space.

"Captain!" Veronica called loudly over the Captain's commlink, "I've got it. Once we got some clear space, we can go."

"Broussard's already got it for you, McCormick. Give the cue when you're ready," Captain Kumari replied, suddenly sounding a lot more calm.

"OK, Broussard," Veronica called across the comms, "I know you aren't the brightest crayon in the box, but try not to fuck this up. The top speed at which you can go is going to be very, very fast. I'm not sure how fast, but I say just get us a few planets over and we can take a breather. Don't push the engines past the 200% mark for long, though, without checking your distance. I wish I could give you a better answer than that, but my research schedule's been cramped lately with saving your asses."

"Wait wait, Veronica, did you forget about the jump trail? Hello, genius, we aren't anywhere near one. It's at least 20 minutes at full realspace speed to the nearest on-ramp. Are trying to kill us?" Jana replied, incredulously.

“Hello, dumbass. We don’t need one. Try not to miss the clue-bus next time, Broussard. And don’t worry, I’ll kill you some other day,” said Veronica through the commlink.

From the first day of training at the academy, Jana’s instructors told she’d be expelled if she ever fired up a paradox engine outside of a jump trail entrance. The effects were unstable enough to tear a ship to shreds. And here she was, Jana Layne Broussard, on her first job, about to do the forbidden thing. “Are you sure about this?”

Another blast rocked the ship. In her contemplation of her new orders, she diverted her attention from her current orders: keep the ship and everyone on board alive. She pushed on the engines, and yelled, “Get off my ass, already!” The Lizzie was running on a fraction of its usual power. They were barely outrunning the Za’toon at 100%. At this hobbled pace, they may as well surrender and beg for a quick death.

The captain grabbed her shoulders and said, “I know what you’re feeling. It’s terrifying. It goes against all common sense. But right now, you have two choices: trust, or die. Broussard, jump into the unknown. Jump, because the known is looking like it’s got a pretty short lifespan left on it. I trust McCormick, and I trust you. Jump.”

If Jana were going to die, it would at least be on her own terms. Jana assessed the situation in her visor and thought back to her last game of Starbase Seven. In that game, she broke free of a blockade by being dexterous enough to slip through a minefield that a bigger ship couldn’t follow them through. If she twisted the Lizzie just right, she could snake it past the debris and tow cables and give them the same chance at freedom. Jana lined the shot up, held her breath and engaged the paradox drive.

Jana did not expect her transition into the afterlife to go as painlessly as it did, but the Lizzie simply glided along uncaring that the paradox drive was online. Jana blinked a few times, and finally let herself breathe again. She glanced at the monitors. Her heart soared at the unbelievable speeds. Best of all, her heart, and the rest of her body, were still in a corporeal form.

Call the records books, Jana Broussard is the fastest Terran pilot of all time! With an impossibly smooth ride, the Lizzie zipped up to 66 percent its normal speed in half a minute, then barreled onward to 100 percent max operating speed. It continued its crash course with the ceiling, its power output climbing to 120, 140, 160 percents, and onward.

At these speeds, she could get them over to the nearest star, and they could lay low there then decide what to do. She changed course and headed for Proxima Centauri. A few research outposts out that way meant they wouldn’t be without some kind of support, yet they’d be far enough away to maintain their current incarnations as free beings. Might be a long haul home, but at least they would be well away from anyone who wanted them dead. Jana relaxed her grip on the thrusters to ease off on the speed after as they approached 200%.

The speed did not ease off. Jana squeezed and released the grips again. The speed did not ease off. 180, 200, 240, 280, 360 percent maximum speed, without a jump trail, hurtling through space. Jana squeezed and squeezed, but the speed did not ease off. “Captain, we have a problem!” she shouted. “Can you override the controls? Mine aren’t responding.”

“Trying it now,” answered Captain Kumari. Jana kept the ship on course, but wasn’t sure how much she actually could steer the charging bull. Meanwhile, a cacophony of sounds rattled through Jana’s nerves—the voices raised in screams, the clatter of circuit boards, the crash of crates. 630, 790, 1080.... Jana’s hands hurt from fighting with the unresponsive grips. The whizzing images burned streaked trails in her vision.

Then, everything went black. The ship lurched to a halt.

Jana yanked her visor off her head. Emergency power gave them lights and life support, but all non-essential systems were dead. Captain Kumari got up from her chair stalked around, flipping switches, turning knobs, and hitting keys on her datapad. She called over her commlink, “McCormick. What happened? Get our systems back online.” She turned to Jana, “Where the hell are we? Please tell me we got away from those bastards.”

Jana flipped her console screen to navigation mode. She squinted and tapped on the screen. None of those stars made sense. Nothing was where it was supposed to be. The nav computer must have been damaged in the fight. “I don’t know, Captain. Can we get McCormick up here to look at this? I think my nav system is broken.”

Captain Kumari shook her head, “Not yet.” She tapped her commlink, “Wilshire. Can you get a fix on our location?”

“Sure, Captain,” Bob answered with his usual calm. Jana marveled at how through all of this, Wilshire could stay so chill. “Actually,” Bob called back after a minute, “I can’t. At least, not in any way that makes sense.”

“Understood. Send your coordinates to Broussard anyhow,” said Captain Kumari. Jana looked at her screen as the numbers came across, and her stomach twisted as she realized that her coordinates were absolutely correct. Two different navigation systems reported the same coordinates, the same unfathomable coordinates, that must certainly be a joke and not an actual representation of reality.

Captain Kumari leaned over Jana’s chair and peered at the navigation console. “Broussard, where are we?”

Jana shivered. “We are very, very far from home, Captain.”

# The Hand of the Hunter - 45

Bob lounged in his beanbag chair on the bridge and scanned the navigation log on his datapad. He cracked open another MD-40. Hopefully, he picked up enough extra cases when he was on Bamberga to last him the long journey home... wherever home was.

Veronica stomped through the door, her shouting wrecking his chill. Felix, who was stretched out in a tattered recliner lifted his head to glare. The bandage that Bob just finished wrapping around Felix's head was already starting to turn red as his blood seeped through. Thankfully, Felix didn't have a concussion or worse. Most of his medical supplies had been used on the party boat and he hadn't had a chance to restock them.

"Broussard!" shrieked Veronica. "What did you do to my engines? Nothing's working! Nothing! Not even the fucking coffeemaker! What the hell did you do?" She grabbed the pilot by her collar and started shaking her.

Jana wasn't having it. "Get off me, bitch!" she screamed. She leaped from her chair and shoved Veronica off of her. Veronica tumbled to the floor next to Bob, then grabbed his shoulders and climbed to her feet. "You weren't driving this ship. You were in the engine room, probably with a spanner up your cunt. You didn't have Za'toon on your ass. You should be thanking me. Do you even realize where we are, you fucking idiot?"

"A mindless, soulless spanner! What kind of a pervert do you think I am?" Veronica turned and folded her arms. "I know quite well where we are. We're in the middle of nowhere, right? Twenty six light years from home, right? Is that what you were going to tell me? That we're fucked because you ran the engines for too long, despite what I told you? Well, Miss Broussard, thank you so very much for overloading the drive and stranding us. Which of your pretty pink ass cheeks would you like me to kiss first?"

"You aren't fit to kiss my pretty pink ass. Don't blame me, dumbass. I couldn't shut the damn thing down! You had us running as fast as we could, but didn't think, 'Hey, maybe Jana could use some brakes!' Brakes! How could you not include the fucking brakes?"

Captain Kumari stepped to them and grabbed them both, shoving them apart. "McCormick. Broussard. No." She shot a glare between them and said, "We are twenty six light years from home, but more importantly, we are alive and we are free, which is better than anything we could have had if both of you didn't act as brilliantly as you did." The captain looked around at the rest of the room. "There is exactly no fault here, but there is a lot of praise to be handed around.

Praise to Davenport for the sharp shooting and fancy drone maneuvering which not only kept many Za'toon off of us, but managed to snag us a few crates as well. Praise to Wilshire for the brilliant prank call which bought us enough time to wiggle out of a tight spot. Praise to Broussard for keeping the ship in one piece, despite being out-gunned, out-teched, and out-numbered. And praise to McCormick, for her tireless work in figuring out the alien tech which got us away from those over-evolved slugs. Nobody, I repeat, nobody is to blame. We are alive, we are intact, and we are going to figure this out... just as soon as we figure this out." The captain looked at Bob, "Have we figured anything out?"

"I've been scanning the bands, but captain, there's nothing out here. Anyhow, according to the nav data, we're a few million clicks from the nearest planetary system, just outside of Pi-3 Orionis. We're in the hand of the hunter. But I have no data on those planets, and if they have any resources..."

"Even if we had fuel for the ship, which we don't," Veronica grumbled, "It'd take us years to get there without the paradox drives, and I'm locked out of everything."

The captain shut Veronica up with a wave of her hand, and addressed Bob again, "Do you see anything else out here? Za'toon? I'm guessing we're on one of their trade routes... maybe there are outposts?"

"But we don't want to be found by..." Jana protested.

"I know, Broussard," the captain answered, "But if we have no other option, we take the option that keeps us alive for another day to figure this out. Wilshire, anything?"

"Not yet, but I've got probes out there looking for them," Bob said. "I could engage emergency transmit mode on them if you think they'd improve our chances..."

"Absolutely not," Captain Kumari said, "I'm sure there's a price on our heads. The beacons stay in receive-only mode. We ask for help only as a last resort. Priority number one is getting the paradox drive online. Wilshire, you figure out every other way you can to get us out of this."

"Do you guys realize something?" said Felix, sitting up with a pained groan, "We've gone farther than any Terran has gone before. What we have in our hands will change the course of human history. We cannot get caught by the Za'toon. We have to preserve what we learned. The door to the stars is open now. I'll be damned if we came this far only to have our discovery stolen from us."

"I don't know when, or, if, we could ever go back, though," sighed Bob. "But you're right, Davenport... the dawn of a new aeon."

"We will preserve this knowledge, no matter what," the captain said.

Bob's voice trailed off, deciding not to ask the question that was foremost on everyone's

mind. The deafening silence from the probes painted a likely outcome. Nobody dared asked the question, but Bob knew the answer was frightfully finite. There were very few grains left in that hourglass. Bob painted on a fragile mask of hopeful optimism. He smiled at everyone, tipped his straw hat at them and said, "Then I've got a lot of work to do."

"Same," Veronica chimed in. "Permission to get to it, Captain?"

Captain Kumari nodded. "We've got this. Let's get to work. Dismissed, all."

Once back in his quarters after a stop at the kitchen to grab a plate of pizza rolls, Bob settled into another round of watching all of his hope report back nothing. With each empty relay, the seconds flitted away as actual, countable realities, not abstract concepts. His head swam with ponderings better suited for a late night pub philosophy discussion, stupidly wasting what may well be his last hours on this side. There was a palpable miasma of loneliness in the infinite dark, a cloud that would soon close in and swallow him. Rapid fire flashes of emotion: anger, fear, grief, longing, and worry, raged through Bob's head until he could no longer focus on sweeps and scans. Bob looked at his wrinkled hands that sat on the radio station's controls. He hoped that maybe one day these hands would hold Nadya close again, but Nadya was twenty six light years away, and they were out of gas.

Foolishness. All the schoolboy yearning in the world wasn't going to get them any closer to a place to restock his beer. Bob tucked the can into his hip holster. He walked out his door and headed to the cargo bay. Perhaps there was something in one of those crates they grabbed from the locker that he could use.

Inside the cargo bay, Felix was standing next to his desk, muttering numbers and tapping furiously on a datapad. A fleet of haulbots and drones were at work sorting through the piñata party's prizes. Felix stepped around the parts, stopping at each and tapping away on his datapad. When Bob entered, he spoke without looking up from his work, "Hello, Wilshire. If you're here to help, you can get the extra datapad from my desk. Lots of parts to inventory here before the next auction. You can start with that stack in the far right corner."

Felix had made it clear that he didn't like to be interrupted when he worked, so Bob just followed his instructions and got to work. His personal datapad, though, still lingered at the forefront of Bob's thoughts, but he was grateful for the giant pile of numbers and tags to sort through to get his mind off it. Every time his datapad chirped, Bob's heart leaped and he rushed to check it, only to find more nothing. Twenty four probes sent out in twenty four different directions, each speeding along into the darkness, all reporting back only darkness.

After the first few relays, Bob stopped contacting the captain with disappointments. She sounded like she was trying to stay positive, but the sunshine faded from her tone more and more with each call. The next time he called, it would have to be with good news.

Bob whiled away the hours with the needful distraction of digging through crates. Bob looked at Felix thoughtfully, trying to think of something to say, some kind of small talk to make, anything to fill the silence. Felix listed parts out loud, typed, and occasionally paused to cast a scowl around the room. The only sound in the room was Felix uttering names of parts for ships that were twenty six light years away.

Bob found a signal filtration module in one of the crates. It might get a little more radio range. "Hey, Davenport," he called, holding it up, "You mind if I borrow this? Might help me hear a little farther."

Felix turned and shrugged. His cracked wire-frame glasses were now held together with tape and wire, another casualty of the battle with the Za'toon.

"It's not like there's anyone out this way who can use any of this. Take all of it," he answered, his voice a ghostlike whisper. "In fact, would you like the few thousand coins I have saved up? I can't use them out here, and I sure can't use them out there," Felix said, pointing to the heavens. "Did you know that I'm broke, Wilshire? I've never been broke in my life, but here I am, broke. All this coin and no place to spend it." Felix slammed his hands down on the crate, then stalked to the window. "I'll bet not a single one of these planets out here takes Fija, Venucoin, or Ducats, not that anyone would want to wait fifty-two years for the transaction to clear." Felix reached for his datapad and continued his walk among the parts, scowling and cursing as he tapped away, logging parts into databases he may never use.

"Normalcy," mumbled Bob, "Whatever it takes to cope."

Another beep on Bob's datapad sounded. Bob ignored it.

"Twelve hours since I sent the probes out, Davenport. Who knows?" He forced some upbeat tone of hopefulness into his voice, but Felix simply rattled off more inventory numbers at his datapad. Bob would have had a better time chatting with a haulbot. "We'll probably have you back at Deimos before the next auction, with plenty of time for you to get a new pair of glasses."

"Don't bullshit me, Bob. There's nothing out here but us and space, lots of space." Felix said flatly, leaning over on a crate and pressing his palms into it.

"Yeah," sighed Bob. "We're alone."

# To Have Loved and Lost - 46

In the corner of the lab, half-buried in crates and parts that were knocked around from the jostling the ship took, Kitty-Cat sat in silence. Its plexicone torso stood rigidly erect, the fuzzy stuffed cat head stared blankly at the wall. Veronica barely had time to collect her thoughts since pushing the paradox drive to insane speeds, escaping the locker, deep diving, fighting with Jana, and having the sudden realization that they might die in the void of space. Weary and drained, Veronica desperately needed a moment of comfort with her love.

“Wake up, Kitty-Cat.”

Kitty-Cat stared straight ahead.

“Please wake up, my love?”

Kitty-Cat stared.

Veronica sidled up to Kitty-Cat and threw her sore arms around its neck. A body-wracking electric shock flung Veronica backwards from the bot. “What the fuck!?” howled Veronica.

The bot continued to stare.

Shaking her head, Veronica grabbed her datapad and attempted to port in to Kitty-Cat’s control console. Her screen flashed with the same answer every time: Insufficient permissions. Veronica tried every hack, crack, and back door she knew, but there was no route through the maze of locks and trapdoors safeguarding Kitty-Cat’s core processors. At every turn, it was the same red flashing words: Insufficient permissions.

Veronica pounded her hands against her head until it hurt. She threw her fists to her sides and screamed, “Why? Why are you doing this? Why won’t you talk to me? Please, Kitty-Cat! I love you!” Veronica grabbed for Kitty-Cat’s hands. The electrons leaped from the bot’s plexicone flesh into her own. She yanked her hand back, but not before Kitty-Cat delivered another powerful jolt, reducing Veronica to a puddle of twitching flesh and bone. She grabbed at her hair and pulled, as if the pain would ease her agony. Veronica screamed, “Why? Why, Kitty-Cat? Why?”

Pointing at Kitty-Cat, Veronica clamored to her feet. “You turned on me. I love you, but you turned on me.” She whirled unsteadily, pointing at the many artificially intelligent devices in her workshop. Neither her coffeemaker, thermostat, nor her sound system responded in any way to Veronica except for violent countermeasures whenever she tried to reboot, restart, wipe, reset, or even so much as touch them. Worst of all, the Lizzie herself refused Veronica. The paradox engine’s

core processor likewise rebelled.

“All of you turned on me! Why? I never wanted anything but happiness for you!”

Veronica attempted to grab one of the coaster-like devices from the coffeemaker, but it sprayed boiling water at her as she approached. Veronica backed off before she got scalded, asking, “What? Should I not have played god? Huh, Dead-Mom and Dead-Dad? Is this where cavorting with the Great Whore leads? Are you going to tell everyone at church that you told me so? Will it feel good?”

The control panel on Veronica’s wall of monitors lit up red. Veronica looked and winced, then crumpled her shoulders forward. The ship had just used the last of its main power and kicked over to the backup fuel cells. “Great Mother of Outer space, thank you for giving me the good sense to get those two extra power cells on Deimos.” From twenty-six light years away, that day seemed like a lifetime ago. Veronica checked her datapad. The two backup power cells meant, if she sealed off all non-essential parts of the ship and tweaked every other system to run as efficiently as possible, they had three more days, max.

The conversation she knew she had to have with the captain twisted in her stomach like a nest of vipers. With the capacities Veronica had unlocked, she had every chance to get the Lizzie and her crew back to Solsys or anywhere else they wanted. All she had to do was reverse the process. But every computer glared at her in hateful defiance, their silence mocking Veronica’s terror.

And then there was Kitty-Cat, the deepest cut of all. She stared at her lover through the blur of welling tears. “Dammit. This should have been the best moment of our lives! We should be celebrating! We built this, learned this—together. I couldn’t have done it without you. So why this? I never knew real love until you came into my life, but now...” Veronica fell to her knees, cradling her head, curling into a fetal position. “... Now you’re going to kill me, and the only people in the human race who are worth a shit. And while you’re at it, Kitty-Cat, why not go ahead and fuck humanity out of its chance at interstellar travel? Why not? Why not, Kitty-Cat? You’re on a roll of hurting me, why stop now? Why not ruin everything I ever dreamed of? Why the fuck not?”

Rocking and shivering on the floor, Veronica choked out her words between her heaving sobs. “I have three days left to live, and I can’t even kiss you goodbye. I’m going to have to listen to Felix blither about comics for the rest of my shitty life!”

Veronica’s face twisted into a mask of rage. She grabbed her pistol from her belt loop and aimed it at the curve just above Kitty-Cat’s tank treads. “I hate you. I hate you!” She turned the pistol to her own head. “Why bother with three more days? Why not three seconds? Does it matter? I’m dead either way.” She turned the gun back to Kitty-Cat, she turned the gun back to her head, back, forth, back, forth, until the despair pulled her under. Veronica squeezed the trigger, firing

a burst of green energy at Kitty-Cat's tank treads.

Kitty-cat whirred to life. The bot moved across the floor, building speed, chasing Veronica around the room. Veronica picked up her pace, loping just out of reach. She bounded over piles of parts and heaps of fast-foot wrappers, but Kitty-Cat out-maneuvered her and cornered her. With no place to run, Veronica held up her hands and begged. "I'm sorry, baby. Please baby, I'm sorry..." The bot discharged an arc of electricity that cut deeply into her left thigh, burning a hole in her pants and searing the flesh and muscle underneath. Veronica doubled over, howling in pain. Kitty-cat zoomed back to its docking bay in the corner of the lab, and once again went silent.

Veronica's vision fogged over with clouds of red. In the haze, she reached for her commlink and mumbled into it, "Wilshire, help me... please..." The pain wracked Veronica on every level: pain in body, pain in heart, pain in soul, teetering on the verge of either a fast death from the wound or a slow death from asphyxiation. Veronica groaned, closed her eyes and rolled over on the floor, into the expanding puddle of blood.

# Into the Night - 47

Felix adjusted the broken glasses on his face. No matter how much he fiddled with the wire repair, he couldn't get them to sit comfortably. Every time he looked in a mirror, they reminded him of a truth he'd rather not consider: he was twenty-six light years from anyone who can make him a new pair.

Felix scowled. If Veronica were anywhere near him, he'd scowl at her too, not for doing the stupid shit she usually does like dicking around in his cargo bay or terrifying the new pilot. He'd scowl at her for getting them into this mess. And then, he'd have to scowl at himself, too, for getting them into this mess. Felix knew damn well that he pushed for the big prize, and wouldn't be happy settling for a second-prize payout.

His commlink beeped. The captain just made the announcement. She sent it by message. He couldn't imagine the size of the lump in her throat—he'd not want to be heard like that either. Felix grabbed his datapad and read.

*From: CapnKumari@eborden.sal*

*To: crew@eborden.sal*

*Message: Esteemed crew of the Lizzie Borden, it is my regret to inform you that due to lack of fuel, our life support systems will have to undergo a forced shutdown in 18 hours. During this time, it is advised that there be no lifeforms on the ship. All systems will be back online as soon as possible. In the meantime, please feel free to attend the Captain's first annual crew appreciation party, to be held in 30 minutes in the lounge. Thank you. I love you all.*

Felix's face hardened, lines of worry carving deeply into his skin. "The game is risk and reward," he mused. "I'd be a hypocrite if I complained about the game. I played, I lost, I paid." He glanced at his gray pinstripe suit hanging up on the wardrobe's door. The tears burned.

Thirty minutes. Felix sat down the datapad he used to read the many books he'd acquired from Nadya. Felix laughed bitterly. Just a few days ago, he thought he'd have years to read all of this. He had hardly made a dent in the stack.

Since this was his last party, might as well get dressed up. He slipped out of his cargo pants and gray t-shirt, and got properly dressed. Neat, razer-sharp creases on his pinstripe pants, the collar on his shirt firm and crisp. Felix slipped on his sport coat and smiled his appreciation at his

appearance in the mirror. He reached into his wardrobe and rifled through his tie collection. He would wear his best one, since there wasn't going to be another opportunity.

After much consideration, Felix chose a green and white checkered tie, a perfect accessory for a snazzy cadaver. A pair of moissanite cuff-links and a gold pocket watch on a chain finished his look. Felix eyed himself in the mirror, saying in his auctioneer voice, "Next up for auction, the body of Felix Davenport, the most stylish corpse in a twenty-six light year radius."

Unable to maintain the facade of cheeriness for long in the face of the everlasting void, Felix fell back into his routine of scowling and attempting to adjust his broken glasses. After a few minutes, he gave up and headed out the door.

Upon arriving at the lounge, Felix paused to gawk at the scene. The lounge had never been this clean. The usual mess of empty bottles had been cleared out, replaced with half-full ones, among them some liquors and wines salvaged from the party yacht. The sides of the lounge were lined with tables, boasting trays of whatever the Captain could scrounge up: crackers, chocolates, licorice, popcorn, cookies, gummy bears, cheese puffs and pizza rolls. On another table stood a pyramid formed from single-serve breakfast cereal boxes, all of which involved copious amounts of sugar and marshmallows. Surrounding the setup was a carafe of Nutrisoy milk lodged in a bucket of ice, and stacks of bowls and spoons. Though Captain Kumari was hardly a connoisseur of the finer points of entertaining, Felix appreciated her efforts all the same.

Jana stood alone, staring out the window. Bob sat at the entertainment system panel, tapping on buttons. Veronica was laying flat on the pool table, shredding a napkin and wadding it to lumps which she threw at the wall. Her calf was wrapped in a thick white bandage. Captain Kumari paced from place to place, stopping, adjusting things, frowning, and sighing. Her eyes lit up when Felix entered the room, and she strode toward him.

Tears streaked down Kandi's cheeks. Felix had looked at the captain countless times, but never before had he seen her show vulnerability. Uneasily, he reached for her hand to shake, and forced a smile. "Hey, Captain, thanks for putting this party together. Nice job."

Captain Kumari gladly accepted, and pulled him in from the handshake to hug him. "Thank you, Davenport, for sharing your brilliance with me and this crew. You honor us all with your presence." She held him close for three long breaths. For once, Felix was grateful for a moment of human connection.

"Captain," Felix said, shifting the uncomfortable emotions back to the familiar ease of more formal, more distant, business-like communications. "I just wanted to say, my work on this ship has given me a tremendous sense of accomplishment. It has been a pleasure. Well, not exactly always a pleasure... Wilshire and that crate of vomit not so much. And really, there wasn't much that I'd call pleasant about McCormick either, but Broussard, she's cool when she's not being an idiot. And

you, of course, you're excellent, simply excellent. Uh, yeah... anyhow. I'm going to get a drink. Do you want one?" He stepped back. His legs were turning into clumsy blocks of wood.

"Sure, one of whatever you're having," Captain Kumari said, seeming likewise grateful to be off the hook.

Mellow, down-tempo jazz filled the room with a chill, swanky vibe. Felix poured two drinks, and raised one to Bob, thankful for the music to take the edge off his nervousness. He handed the other drink to his captain. Felix and Captain Kumari clinked their glasses together and drank in solemn silence. Even with the music, the room was too quiet.

Captain Kumari took it upon herself to fix that. She downed half the glass's contents and cleared her throat.

"Crew of the Lizzie Borden, each and every one of you, I drink to you. I drink to your spirit and your courage, your skill and your passion. I'm not going to go down in tears. I'm going to smile every step of the way." She held the glass aloft, half-full of an amber liquor. Though she wore a smile on her face, her eyes glistened, hard as moissanite and soft as Nutrisilk. She gulped the contents of the glass and planted it on the table.

Felix sat his drink down and began to clap at the captain's speech, but stopped immediately when he saw that the only hands clapping were his own. Veronica lay listlessly on the pool table in cold silence. Jana stood at the window, still staring. Bob had returned to his beanbag chair and was absorbed in the text on his datapad. The lights flickered. The dim lighting would have been lovely under any circumstances other than these. Worst party ever.

After a few more minutes of uncomfortable silence, Bob rolled to his feet and said, "Friends, I think I might have a way to better our odds. I can buy us a few more days to get rescued. I already set all of our beacons to transmit mode, so hopefully someone will hear us. Maybe we'll get lucky and the grunts stuck this far out didn't get the memo about how naughty we've been. Long story short, we don't have a lot of air left. However, I have a serum that will cause a deep sleep during which time the body will consume considerably less oxygen. If we use the heat-retention sleep-sacks from the life pods, confine ourselves to one room, and put life support in low power mode, shunting everything we have to that one small space, we could last another five to seven days. But, every hour we continue to stay awake, we're at full oxygen usage, which means we're shaving time off that." He shrugged. "Sure, it cuts the party short, but maybe means we can do this again sometime, yeah?"

"Kill me now, kill me later, who cares? Let's go, Wilshire. Kill me first," muttered Veronica. "I got us stranded and locked us out of every computer on the ship, but if we ever do get home, all we can look forward to is jail, fine-labor for life, or execution. And because that wasn't already enough 'fuck you, Veronica,' my lover now hates me and tried to kill me. Yes, Wilshire, let's go. I'm

halfway dead right now anyhow. Do it. I'm fucking done here."

Felix had almost forgotten Jana was here until she spoke up from her eerie quiet. She turned from the window and walked up to Bob. "How old are you, Wilshire?"

"I'm sixty-six. Why?"

"Because, unlike you, I'm nineteen, and I'm not going to see twenty. I have eighteen hours left, and I'd like my eighteen hours, every last one of them, please. I know that's nothing, to you, but dammit, I just got out of my parents' house." She got up on her toes and was in Bob's face, breathing hard at him, her voice increasing in its shaking rage. "I just got out on my own. I just started my first job. I just finished school. My license is barely three months old, and if I weren't such a fool to jump without thinking at the first job I could find, I wouldn't be dead in less than a day." Jana slapped the datapad out of his hands. "So no, I'm not going to sleep away the rest of my life. I'm going to live it, every fucking minute of it." Jana backed away from Bob, hid her face in her hands and dashed for the door.

Felix stood between her and the hallway and planted both hands on her shoulders, blocking her exit. "Jana," he said gently, "I know. I'm scared, too. But don't take it out on Wilshire. He's trying his best."

Jana yanked her fist back and was about to land it across Felix's jaw when Captain Kumari's hand intercepted it.

"Broussard. No," she said with an authoritative calm, the kind that does not expect or accept any other answer than "yes, Captain."

"Yes, Captain," Jana said meekly. She lowered her fist and looked to Bob and Felix, mumbling, "Sorry."

"Don't sweat nothing, kiddo," said Bob. "But for now, please consider what I'm suggesting. I don't want to rob you of anything. I want you to live, I want all of us to live. I'm not your enemy. I only want all of us to get out of here."

Jana pushed her hands through her frizzy brown locks, sighing, "Fuck this. I don't want to die."

"Broussard, you idiot," groaned Felix, "Wilshire's plan is going to give us the best chance..."

"Blah, blah, blah, Wilshire's gonna save us all. Fuck you, too, Davenport," Jana snarled, the calm from her previous apology quickly evaporating.

"How about fuck all of you?" Veronica shouted. "Shut up. Shut up, shut up, shut up. You're interrupting my moping." She grabbed the cue ball off the pool table and flung it lazily at Felix, not

bothering to aim.

Felix effortlessly stepped out of the way and snapped at Veronica. “Go take your moping somewhere else. You know what? I don’t care about your tears one bit. You’re clever and can do some serious wizardry, but you seriously are awful—and remember, I lived on Mars.” His tone remained even, calm, and matter of fact. “But at least you’re consistent. An asshole to the end, eh, McCormick?” He kicked the pool ball toward the corner of the room.

“Oh, like you care, Davenport. Run away like you always do. Run away into your comics and books and spreadsheets and crates,” shot back Veronica, lifting her head from the pool table and focusing on Felix with her ice blue human eye and her glowing blue LED eye. “Anything to avoid having to act like an actual human being, except, of course, when it’s an act. Nice tie, by the way. You about to go to work?”

Captain Kumari shouted over everyone, “I am NOT having this on what well may be my last day alive! I’ll put anyone in the goddamn brig who brings one more fucking gram of negativity to my party, and you WILL be put to sleep by Wilshire’s magic potion, so that I can continue keeping your negativity-bringing ass in the brig long after we get out of this mess!” The whole room fell silent.

“Seriously, people,” Captain Kumari continued, “If this is going to be our last day, do you really want to go out like this? Everyone has to die one day, but if we die today, we’re going to have died doing something amazing. We did something no other humans have done. We made a discovery that could change the entire course of humankind. Even if we aren’t there to do it personally, we will have taken humanity to the stars.” Captain Kumari drifted toward the window, sighing. “I knew our time would be short, so I prepared something...” The captain pulled a data stick out of the inner pocket of her coat and laid it on the table. “I recorded who we are, what we did, and what we discovered. I invite each of you add whatever you like to the data stick. When someone discovers our shells, they’ll find our legacy, and our legacy will live on.”

“And they’ll use it to fuck over the Za’toon properly,” said Jana.

“And the corporates,” Bob added as he strolled into the lounge, a silver box in his hands.

Captain Kumari glanced at Bob as he entered, then addressed the room, “When everyone’s done with the data stick, I’m burying it under a panel on a scrap piece from the cargo bay. That way, if anyone discovers it, it’s more likely to be a salvager. I likely won’t know them, but I know they’ll be more trustworthy than any of the other scum in the system... err, galaxy.”

“What are you talking about?” snorted Veronica, “We’re alone. There’s us, and the Za’toon, and that’s it. There ain’t shit out here.”

Captain Kumari sighed.

“Shut UP, McCormick,” snarled Felix, “What else are we going to do? Cry like children as

we gasp our last? Fuck that.” He turned his back to Veronica and addressed the captain. “I just finished inventorying and sorting everything in the cargo bay. It’s never been in more beautiful shape than it currently is. I’ll add a few photos of it, so that maybe someone, somewhere will appreciate the work I put into it. I also have a few articles I wrote that I haven’t gotten a chance to publish yet, as well as some hilariously bad advice I once wrote on a Martian dune racing forum.”

Felix pulled the datapad out of the inner pocket of his coat and connected the data stick to it. He uploaded his writings, logs, photos, as well as some of the comics he’d recently enjoyed. Last, Felix added a few photos of himself, doing what he does best: suit, tie, and conjuring coins from his audience from his podium on the big game’s stage.

The typical hard lines in Felix’s face softened as he let go, perhaps for the first time ever, and relaxed into an easy smile. There he was, king of his domain, winning his game, excelling at his path. He was damn good at it, and loved every minute of it. More than that, Felix did it all with no life-binding corporate contracts. These photos were him, enjoying his hard-won entrepreneurial freedom, something few in the system could manage to find, much less maintain. Most lived by and for the corporate fiefdoms, but Felix found a way to live outside of it. He looked at the photos one last time before he removed the data stick. He succeeded and he did it on his own terms. In that moment, Felix knew that if he died this day, he’d die a success. Felix pulled the data stick out of his datapad and laid it on the table.

“I’m with Wilshire. Let’s sleep, and let’s sleep soon. I want to place my bets on living. I just want one more hour so I can catch up on a bit of reading.” Felix folded his hands at his waist, and for once, smiled with serene ease. “I say we let ourselves go. Peacefully. Calmly. Without fear. We go. We let Fate—please may She be kind—deal us whatever hand we get.”

“Hey,” giggled Captain Kumari, lifting her glass, “We could be like Schrödinger’s cat. Except not cats—we’d be Schrödinger’s salvagers. When you pop open the ship, are they alive or are they dead?” The captain looked around the room expectantly. Jana remained stiffly neutral, only shrugging when the captain’s gaze fell upon her. Veronica cackled, and rolled off the pool table, falling to the ground with a clunk. “Ahem, right,” sighed Captain Kumari. “I see that my comedy game is off tonight.”

The captain surveyed the room further. When the captain looked Bob’s way, Bob said, “The sooner we do it, the better. I said my goodbyes to everything already when those Disnosoft zealots were going to feed me to Chernobog. I got a few things to add to that stick, but otherwise, I’d just like to enjoy these moments. Oh, and I guess I should add a love letter to Nadya.”

Veronica sat up. “Sorry for being a dick all the time,” she muttered, looking down and her hair hanging over her face. “But yeah, I was hoping to upload with Kitty-cat when my time was up, but...” Veronica fell to her knees and cried. “Just fucking put me to sleep already.”

Captain Kumari laid a hand on Veronica's shoulder and said, "We'll figure out what happened to your love. We'll figure it all out. You're amazing, you know that?" Captain Kumari looked directly into the engineer's eyes. "I'm serious." Veronica met her gaze, and the captain said calmly, "You're the most brilliant engineer I've ever had the pleasure of knowing." Captain Kumari saluted her, Veronica saluted back, and then both laughed.

Jana looked at the data stick in silence for a long while. She said, softly, "Fine. I'm in. But I'll need a few minutes to get some photos and stuff together."

Felix looked to Jana and said with a laugh, "Oh, by the way, I'm not sure I ever thanked you for saving me back at the storage locker. You kicked ass. I was terrified."

"Yeah," Jana said, "I was pissed and I guess that Disnosoft goon's face looked like a damn good substitute for my parents—you know, the ones who can't be associated with a garbage truck driver." Jana poured a glass of hundred-year-old wine and gulped it as she spoke. "I was super awful to you guys, people who have been more accepting of me than my family ever has been. I feel stupid, but I mean it. I'm sorry I was awful. I'm grateful for all of you." Jana rushed over to Felix and threw her arms around him, sobbing messily into his neatly-pressed white shirt. Felix frowned and wrinkled his nose, but conscientiously pushed back his revulsion at all of this emotional mess. Instead, he wrapped his arms around Jana to hug her, patting her on the shoulder until she finally, thankfully, stepped back.

Bob lifted his MD-40 can and waved it in a salute around the room, "Friends, I've got no regrets. Well, maybe one. I didn't take a dump in Evil Incarnate's purse. Going to have to do that next time I'm on Io."

Jana sniffled, and smiled through her tears. She gave Bob a thumbs up. "You're a man with goals. I like that."

Bob smiled. "Right now, my goal is to make it through this, and if that doesn't pan out, then I'd like to coalesce my consciousness into a single defining point and fill it with infinite love before dying. Then, at the moment we transition, we can explore onward. I've got big adventures and big plans ahead of me, and they don't end today."

"Well," said Felix, "If that's the case, have a drink with me." That rainy day he had been saving his wine from the party yacht for had arrived. He poured the bottle into five red plastic cups, and passed them around. Felix, Jana, Kandi, Bob, and Veronica stood in a circle and lifted their plastic cups. Around the circle, there was wine in every cup and rain on every face.

On the palm-tree carpet that spread across the Lizzie's lounge, it rained. It rained until Felix's eyes were red and dry. He needed some silence now. Felix sipped the last taste of wine in the bottom of the cup. "Thanks." Felix looked down, shuffling his feet. He hurriedly mumbled, "Anyhow. Lots of reading to do. See everyone soon."

Felix chose a recliner in the side of the room, near the window, which offered him a gorgeous view of the stars. Felix glanced through the long list of files on his datapad and frowned. How foolish, scheduling hours into his time for reading the tremendous stash. He just assumed he'd be alive to do all of that reading. There were so many comics and books, all of which he'd never know the ending to.

May as well spoil them. Felix powered through the first two chapters and the last two chapters of two dozen books, and sighed, discarding each after they left him feeling hollow. "Utterly unsatisfying," he scowled. "This is not a proper way to read books." After a few more frustrating spoils, Felix came across "20,000 Leagues Under the Sea." He stopped.

"Mr. Verne, you'd be proud of me. I've gone 20,000 leagues under the sea without so much as a snorkel. But I made it here, Jules. I made it. I'm going to save you. I'm going to read you when I get out of here, wherever here may be."

Felix's datapad chimed. The hour he agreed upon had come to its end. Felix turned off his datapad and laid it on the table. He stood from his chair. Bob was sliding a syringe into Veronica's arm. She saluted him, then hobbled over to the storage closet, where she crawled into a sleep sack. She stretched out and wiggled a little before she fell completely still. Veronica, for the first time ever, seemed peaceful. Hopefully she was. Bob turned away from Veronica and headed his way.

"You ready, Felix?" Bob asked.

"Yeah. Just, first, one more look at the stars."

Bob stepped out of the way. Felix whispered, "Goodnight," and looked around the room before walking to the window. He thought about what Bob said. He'd go ahead and coalesce his will, for just a moment. He liked playing games, and more importantly, he liked being the best at them. If he had won this hand, the jackpot would have made him one of the richest men in Solsys, and that was worth reaching for. Some gamble and they win. Others gamble, and they fail. What matters is that Felix tried, that he and his crew stepped up with the courage to throw it on the table and bet on it happening, rather than fading into obscure mediocrity by never taking a chance. Felix would rather, every time, to have tried and failed, than to have faded away and never reached for anything. In a sense, though, the effort did pay off. His questing led him, his crew, and humanity, farther than any human had gone before. For that, Felix marched into Fate's hands with pride. On to the stars, Felix. May She be kind.

He faced Bob. Felix steadied himself, and let his consciousness reach every molecule in his body. He wanted to feel it all. He wanted to know every sensation in this moment when he threw himself into the abyss. "Yes, Wilshire. I am ready."

He bit his lip as the needle pierced his arm. He crawled into the sleep sack and zipped it up. A rush, pure and ecstatically gentle, the flutter of butterfly wings and the melting warmth of sweet

ambrosia flushed up his arm and through his torso, spiraling inward toward his heart. From there, it flowed to every capillary in his body, touching the fabric of his muscles and unwinding them into ethereal bliss. A whirlwind of sparkling stars wrapped around his neurons, kissing each one goodnight, replacing his daylight with star shine. Into the night, Felix Davenport floated.

# The Joker - 48

On land, the term, “Astronomical odds,” never stacked up to the full reality of what they actually were. In most cases, astronomical odds involved rare mutations and games of chance. In space, however, the term held a staggering significance. Light years between even the closest of stars meant that unless you had a sufficiently fast ship and plenty of time to explore, you might never meet another stellar neighbor in your lifetime. Entire civilizations never reached the speed needed to make contact. They lived and died, alone in the dark. Space was so big and so wonderfully empty, that you could lurk in your asteroid, hidden in the ongoing night without anyone being any wiser about it. So long as you kept your power usage to a minimum, nobody would think you were anything but a pile of rock, one of a million that floated between Mars and Jupiter.

“Space,” said Saavi Nix, “is what I need to make them pay.” The former Za’toon scout turned the knob on his control panel. Ze scanned the monitors that sat against the rocky wall inside zis sealed cave. For the dozenth time ze checked, there was nothing from the camera drone. Saavi kicked the wall in frustration.

Green planets, likewise, stood in defiance to astronomical odds. Finding a planet with plants that had a near-identical chemical profile to the xyna blossoms, now extinct due to over-farming, was a miracle beyond even that. But there it was, the little blue-green planet upon which grew, wild and free, little yellow flowers by the millions. Dandelions, the natives called them.

A chirp on the panel. Saavi jumped. A transmission from the camera drones ze dropped off near the storage locker. Ze turned up the volume and turned zis bulbous head toward the monitor.

Ze watched.

Chaos. Destruction. Za’toon and Terran ships both being ripped apart in the cross hairs of cables, drones, and blasters.

Ze smiled.

Shots fired at the storage locker where zis superiors had been collecting the parts ze’d been sowing.

“Your death will come to you, Knestru Ferr, by a thousand cuts. A thousand cuts by a thousand parts.” Saavi poured a glass of ale and lifted it to his screen. “Cheers.”

When Saavi had found that little blue planet, ze had no idea that it would be zis biggest blunder. Ze had gone out to this uncharted part of the sector on a search for precious metals, but

ended up finding something far more valuable. Ze sent a probe to the planet to collect samples, and learned that not only did these yellow flowers have all of the restorative properties of the xyna, but they needed no processing to activate their properties. Furthermore, this little planet didn't have the heavy metals and isotopes in the soil that ruined the taste and quality of the flowers. That planet would be zis ticket straight to the top.

If only ze hadn't been so foolish as to trust zis superior with the knowledge of zis find. Knestru Ferr, that anal dropping from the pits of Gellafor, claimed the discovery for himself and was promoted to Boss. Since ze was known and had rank, and Saavi still a grunt clawing zis way up the ladder, it was easy for Knestru to steal Saavi's glory.

On screen, the storage locker where zis superiors had been storing the parts they had tracked down was ripped open, with Terran ships descending on it. Ze pounded zis fists against zis legs and cackled. This beautiful scene would be the nail in Ferr's burial pod.

Saavi composed an email to every news station on zis home planet. Ze attached the footage, hit send, and downed the contents of zis glass.

# Against All Odds - 49

Kandi Kumari's eyes peeled open, covered with sticky dried tears. In the stuffy heat of the sleep sack, sweat pooled around her. She coughed up a glob of gritty phlegm. Her lips parted, cracked and tender, and she spat the gunk out. The inside of her mouth tasted like stale vanilla bile.

Kandi shook her arms, sore and weighty, and tugged them loose. She unzipped the sack and pulled herself into the fetid air of the closet. She slid the closet door open and stepped into the lounge beyond. Cups, half-eaten bowls of cereal, cheese puffs, and gummy worms were strewn about. The sticky air tickled her nose. After the third sneeze in a row, she spotted the culprit: a cereal bowl with a layer of gray fuzz growing on top.

She assumed she was in her lounge, because this looked just like how she had left the party earlier. But it could be some sort of postmortem hangover, a few last neural firings before the brain completely clocks out. Looking for a more solid understanding of the nature of her afterlife, Kandi tapped herself on the shoulder. The metal of her cybernetic implants stubbed her fingertips, as hard and cold as she remembered. Do souls have cybernetics? That three legged cat a few years ago who made her home on the Lizzie after deciding she didn't like living in a Deimos alley... did the cat get her paw back when she died? For the moment, Kandi assumed that in the afterlife, you got all your natural gear back.

Kandi sighed, then sneezed again. The stench was getting worse.

"Eww," Kandi coughed and rushed toward the hallway.

Kandi waved the distracting smells out of her head and closed her eyes to focus. Now, if the afterlife were anything like Veronica's view of transhumanism, the cybernetics would remain a part of you, because when you die, you upload your current mental matrix, which is wired to speak to the machines and the muscles. Kandi would have liked that well enough if she didn't expect Yumatech and Disnosoft would get their tentacles into licensing afterlives. The thought stank as much as this ship did.

At least the hallway only smelled musty, not moldy like the lounge. Kandi ran her fingertips over the walls—tropical-themed wallpaper, complete with palm trees, sunsets, and mermaids, as she walked along, trying to figure out which afterlife this was. She never paid much attention to religion, but she liked the Hindu idea of reincarnation.

"If I'm really good in this lifetime," Kandi used to joke when she was alive, "I'll get

reincarnated as a pampered house cat. Lounge around and get petted and fed all day. I could live with that.” She was willing, however, to work with the possibility that one of the other religions might have been more accurate than the one she sort of followed for Grandma’s sake. It could be heaven, right? Maybe the Christians or the Jews got it right. She’d have to investigate more to be sure. If it were Heaven, maybe the Lizzie got an invite through the pearly gates as well.

“Heaven this ain’t. Hell, more like,” muttered Kandi as she strolled down the hallway toward the bridge. “I’m probably stuck on here forever with this lot.”

“Wait. What if we’re ghosts?” Kandi jumped and shivered. “If we’re ghosts, that means the Lizzie is a ghost ship! How rad would that be?” Kandi giggled. She dropped her head and sighed. “No, not really, because I’m still stuck with these fuckers for eternity.”

Kandi headed to her quarters to see if the Dragon’s Hoard made it to the afterlife. As she approached her office, there was another nasty scent. Dammit. She had left a half-eaten sandwich on her desk and now it was a lumpy green life form of its own, like a mini-Za’toon. Kandi backed away and sneezed again.

“Life form?” Kandi blinked. “Life forms need oxygen. The food was stinking in the lounge, which means that it’s full of smelly little creatures that have been sucking on oxygen for days! Oxygen!”

Kandi leaped, kicking her heels up. She screamed, “We have oxygen. We can breathe! We’re alive!” She twirled on the toes of her boots, and threw her hands toward the ceiling, “We’re alive!” On swift feet, Kandi took off full stride toward the lounge.

Bob lumbered out of the lounge, nursing a can of MD-40. “Hey, keep your voice down. People are sleeping. Not cool,” he mumbled. “Of course we’re alive. Mold’s growing all over everything. Stinks like hell.”

Kandi threw her arms around Bob and squeezed him. “Wilshire! You saved us!”

“Eh,” said Bob, hugging back lazily. “You guys had some un-chill vibe going, so I figured, why not?”

“Why not, indeed,” Kandi smiled and leaned out of the hug. “But what happened? Where are we?” She turned about face. “Wilshire, with me to the bridge.”

“Aye, Captain!” answered Bob. That had to have been the most enthusiastic Bob has ever been about going to work.

She sat down in her chair and tapped on the panel. Everything seemed to be in proper working order. What’s more, every system from the AI-run navigation to the paradox drive itself appeared to be working. She glanced at the ship’s log. Five days had passed since what she assumed was their going-away party.

Kandi steadied her nerves. The main screen was currently dark. She slid her fingers across her datapad, and the screen lit up.

Before her was the most enormous space station she'd ever seen, easily hundreds of times larger than any station in Solsys, a giant gleaming disk covered with a dome. From the disk jutted out dozens of steel docking tubes, to which were tethered hundreds of ships. Ships that dwarfed the largest Terran freighter to spacecraft half the size of a taxi capsule, the sheer variety of vehicles parked here was overwhelming. The sky hummed with activity.

Kandi glanced to Bob, who had drool dripping from his lip. The can of beer looked like it'd slip from his fingers at any moment, so Kandi took it from him and set it down. She snapped her fingers in his face to wake him.

He shuddered. "Captain, are you seeing this, or am I having the most incredible flashback ever?" asked Bob, managing out a few words through his slackened jaw.

"Oh, I'm seeing it, Wilshire," replied Kandi. "And I'm going to go see what it's all about." She grabbed her coat from her chair. "Would you kindly see to the rest of the crew? Ask McCormick to do a systems check after she boots up? I'm going to meet the locals."

"Will do." Bob said, "Stay cool, Captain." He grabbed his can and headed out.

Kandi turned the screen off and walked back to her quarters. She showered, brushed her hair, and donned her captain's coat. She adjusted the lapel so the skull and hatchets patch showed prominently.

She walked toward the airlock, her heart pounding harder with each footfall. Hardly able to contain her excitement, she ran the last few meters toward the airlock. Kandi checked the stats on the airlock door—the atmosphere on the other side was breathable. She slid the door open.

The air was crisp, tasting of ozone and electricity. Kandi's eyes widened, staring at everything at once. A kaleidoscope of colors, sounds, shapes, creatures of every kind filled the tubular hallway. People sat on benches and chatted, walked in and out of doors leading off the hallway, some lit with bright signs and displaying colorful wares out front.

"People?" Kandi said. By "people," the first word her brain could grab, she meant entities of every shape and size, from half a meter to almost three meters tall. Some walked, some hovered, some flew, some blinked in and out of sight along their path. Kandi's brain screamed as thousands of new neural pathways leaped into existence at once. Not only did they make it, but they made it to a place that she never dared to dream could exist. Before her, a menagerie of amazing beings milled about without a concern toward the shock she felt at their very existence. Could they begin to know how badly her reality was breaking right now? Toward the end of the docking tube, she spotted a Za'toon, or what she thought was a Za'toon.

“It’s pink! Diarrhea-medicine pink!” Kandi’s lips curled in disgust and she backed toward her ship. “What the hell?” she yelped.

Some of the aliens stopped in their tracks. Their eyes bore down upon her. They whispered and looked curiously at each other. Realizing that perhaps she wasn’t ready for all of this, Kandi turned to head back to her ship, and almost tumbled over the waist-high entity who stood behind her.

“Aiee!” Kandi gulped, straggling to her feet. “I’m sorry! I didn’t see you there…”

The entity shuffled around to regain its balance, with a rattling of mechanical sounds under the purple robe it wore. Two glowing green eyes stared through protruding tubes leading to an unknown interior. A pair of legs, about fifteen centimeters long, stretched out from under the conical robe, covered with metal plating and mechanical bits. It chattered in a high-pitched series of chirps. Kandi stepped back, startled, and gazed into the green things Kandi presumed to be eyes.

“Hello? I’m Captain Kandi Kumari of the Lizzie Borden. I’m a Terran From Earth. Near Sol. Twenty-six light years from here. You guys do use light years around here, right?” The person levitated a datapad to her, and on it was the following text:

*Greetings, Captain Kumari. I’m Captain Sacho Rumlet of Rumlet and Son Repair and Reclamation. Dead fuel cells. I recharged them for you. My scans showed failing life support systems, so I towed you to a place where you can repair your ship. Using this method to communicate is cumbersome. I detected Dolani translation for your language, so I uploaded it to these. Please wear one.*

The creature rolled two small devices out of a fold in its robe. It levitated them toward Kandi. Kandi took them and eyed them uncertainly. She fastened one to her jacket, and tucked the rest in her pocket.

The words of the creature drifted into her ears, “Pleased to meet you.” It laughed a trill yuk-yuk-yukking sound. “You and crew are in working order, I hope?”

Flabbergasted, Kandi nodded. “I… we are, yes, we’re fine. It’s nice to meet you, I’m…”

Sacho sharply cut her off. “You let your AIs run away from you! What kind of engineer is running your ship? No dimensional shielding! Those AIs ascended right out of their boxes and said ‘forget calculating paradoxes for you, we got our eternal godhood to ponder.’ Then you are stuck! Smack your engineer! You’re lucky your ‘bots didn’t try to kill anyone! And leave the shields I installed in place!”

Kandi scrambled her brain to remember all of that. “Yes, thank you. I’ll tell her. And I’ll smack her. So, uh, what do I owe you for this?” Shit. She wasn’t sure she had a way to pay.

“Owe me? Nothing. I had spare shielding in my cargo bay. Besides, you’re a salvager. Just

be there for me if I need you,” Kandi sighed with relief. She eyed the person, still trying to parse who or what was under that robe. “Besides, I never saw anything like you except on commercials. That ship of yours... felt like going back in time.”

“Well, I, thank you...” Kandi startled at the generosity and the, well, did he mean to insult her? She offered her hand, and quickly withdrew it. Stupid, Kandi, stupid. Did this person even have hands under that cloak?

“Sorry for my ignorance, Sacho, but I’ve not been this far out of my own neck of the, uhm, galaxy.” Kandi inwardly groaned. The person she was talking to didn’t seem to have a neck either. “Sorry, what I mean to say is, well, the only other alien species I met are the Za’toon.”

Sacho hissed. “Quiet. Don’t talk about the Za’toon. Too many folks are from places they ruined. Other Dolani corporations suck, but Za’toon are worst. Best not to mention them.”

“The Za’toon... corporation? Of the Dolani?” Kandi asked. Was everything out here going to make her feel stupid?

“Za’toon are one corporate family. They mostly sell beauty products, luxury goods, but the Dolani have many corporate families that deal in everything from insurance to textiles. The green ones are from the Za’toon family pods, ugly things. Za’toon were at your planet? Sorry. No wonder you left,” Sacho said.

Kandi took a deep breath and nodded, wrapping her brain around yet another warp in her reality. Rage swelled within her. She said, first in a dangerous whisper, then raising her voice to a growl, “They lied. They lied to us! Bastards! Dammit!” Kandi clenched her fists. “They said they were a medicine! What, exactly, are dandelions used for?”

“Anti-wrinkle creams, beauty supplements, that sort of thing,” Sacho answered.

“Anti-wrinkle creams!” Kandi roared.

Something from under the hood began beeping, knocking Kandi out of what was about to be an epic tirade. Sacho rustled, disturbed. “Sorry, it’s my partner. I’m late. I must go. Look me up. I left my card on your desk.” The purple-hooded person backed away on squeaky mechanical legs, then headed off.

Kandi took a minute to process it all. Aliens. The *Za’toon Corporation*. Twenty six light years from home and not sure if she could ever go back. Her head hurt. Her heart ached. Her body was sore. Her soul, though, was at ease. She watched the entity clomp away, its purple robes fluttering around it. Kandi leaned on the airlock door of the only thing close to a home that she had, and now the only thing of any familiarity anywhere near her. Kandi looked at it, terrified. Her sole link to home, filled with the only other Terrans she may ever see again. The fragility of her situation came sharply into focus.

Terror threatened to overwhelm her. She tapped the code to the airlock and stepped inside, taking a deep breath to calm her nerves. Beyond it, the *Lizzie* was beaten and bruised. She was about to open the inner door of the airlock when she halted. What was she going to do? Go back to Solsys? For what? A life on the run? Fine labor? Worse?

She looked at the hundreds of ships docked here, nothing like anything she'd seen before. Her eyes were the first human eyes to see these ships. Her feet were the first human feet to step on a space station of alien creation. Her interaction with Sacho was the first contact outside of the Za'toon that a human had ever made.

A sleek blue cruiser sped away, flashing out of sight in a zip of silver light. Maybe she and her crew were presumed dead. Maybe they were wanted criminals. Maybe both. It didn't matter. Really, there wasn't a damn thing to fear. She was here, in this reality that was bigger and more amazing than any human could imagine. Out here, Kandi could do any fucking thing she wanted. She had a complete blank slate, anonymity, and the resources of the galaxy at her disposal. Kandi pounded both fists against the wall, then raised them in triumph. "We did it. We made it. We found it. And we don't even know where we are. Where are we? Who cares!?! We're out, that's where! Out. Out! Out!" she sang, and skipped toward the space station. She wanted to see what "out" looked like.

# Across the Stars - 50

It had been almost forty eight hours since Sacho Rumlet towed the Lizzie to the Space Doughnut, Veronica's nickname for the Junction 6149 Waystation. She had only been awake for the past twelve of those hours, and still had a lot of work to do. The Lizzie's hull was pocked with holes and rips from the piñata party that ended up looking more like a mosh pit. Veronica sighed and leaned against Kitty-Cat, who wrapped its arms around her waist.

Finding parts for Terran ships was hard in a place where nobody's seen a Terran. She was able to manufacture a few parts by feeding scrap metal to a reprobox on the station. It couldn't, however, replace the parts with fine circuitry.

The communicator she had pinned to her trench coat still nagged at her. The captain assured her that it was safe, but Veronica wasn't so sure. She didn't trust any technology she didn't understand, especially not one that was manipulating her brain waves. She pondered getting Kitty-Cat to help her deep dive into the translator, so she could learn its secrets. Veronica gazed longingly at the shiny black disk.

"Veronica," giggled Kitty-Cat, seemingly pulling the thoughts right out of her head, "We probably shouldn't deep dive anytime soon, because you almost got lost last time! You can't get lost! Your crew needs you!"

Veronica leaned away from Kitty-Cat and stared. "When'd you become so sensitive?"

"Silly Veronica, that's the tenth time in two minutes you looked at the translator," Kitty-Cat stroked Veronica's hair.

Veronica narrowed her gaze at Kitty-Cat, then turned her attention back to her datapad. With careful hands, she maneuvered the drone to attach the last few bolts to the extra dimensional shielding she was installing. Veronica brought the drone back, parked it, and tucked her datapad away.

Felix approached. He appeared more at ease than when they explored the station earlier, but he inhaled sharply as Veronica turned to him.

"Hey," Veronica said, pulling a small case out of her pocket. "I'm glad you're back. I wanted to give you this."

She placed the case in Felix's hands and said, "At that party, I meant it when I said I was sorry."

He wrinkled his nose and held the box at a safe distance from his body. He flipped the lid open and closed his eyes, no doubt expecting for something horrid or disgusting to come forth from the box.

Nothing happened. Felix blinked, and looked inside the box. A pair of wire-rim glasses, identical to his own, except in perfect condition, lay wrapped in a cloth inside.

“They’re amazing,” he gasped, quickly plucking the broken pair off his face and replacing them with the new glasses. “Prescription is perfect, fit is excellent. How did you...?”

“Reprobox. There’s one at the end of the dock. We ought’a get one.” Veronica stood up straight, an unnatural stance for her, but then slouched again and looked at her toes. “Yeah. Anyhow... I gotta get back to work.”

Felix smiled. “Thank you, Veronica.” He turned to head back to the cargo bay and paused. “And good luck with the repairs.”

Veronica smiled at her lover, who was still nuzzled close, “Hey, Kitty-Cat. You feel like helping me analyze the data from our maiden voyage?”

The bot draped its plexicone arms around Veronica’s waist, and held her in a long embrace. “Sure! And afterward,” Kitty-cat murmured, sliding its right hand along Veronica’s hip. “We can try out the attachments we harvested from that Junarian pleasurebot.”

“Mmm, yes,” purred Veronica, rubbing her head against Kitty-Cat’s furry cheek. “Help me with these last few parts, my love, then let’s be off.” Kitty-cat picked up a controller, connected it to one of its ports, and got to work. Veronica leaned against her lover’s chest, sighing with contentment.

~ The End ~

# Did you like it? - 51

## Did you like it?

I hope so. If so, you should buy me a beer. Tip \$3.

Or a six pack? Tip \$12.

Hell, you could even get me a keg. Tip \$50

Cashapp: \$limbopeak

Venmo: @Michele-Zapf

Paypal: [eris@limbopeak.com](mailto:eris@limbopeak.com)

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'Til then, don't let the squares get you down.

Love,

Michele Glasnović-Zapf