

The Time Saving Agency By Christina Engela

Copyright 2019 Christina Engela

PREVIEW

License Notes

This eBook is licensed for your personal enjoyment only. This eBook may not be re-sold or given away to other people. If you would like to share this book with another person, please purchase an additional copy for each recipient. If you're reading this book and did not purchase it, or it was not purchased for your enjoyment only, then please purchase your own copy. Thank you for respecting the hard work of this author.

The Time Saving Agency

Imagine, if you will:

At the highly secretive, largely independent, inter-dimensional and – inevitably – clandestine organization called the Time Saving Agency, there is a saying that goes: “*You can't break an omelet without first making eggs*”. While this may appear to be a rather flippant little idiom, there is – as is usually the case, far more to it than meets the eye.

For starters, that's a rather simple principle of Time Travel right there – and according to the pioneers of time travel, who for the moment shall remain safely anonymous, it's one of the foundation stones of the Theory behind it. It's something of a paradox, you see, a mind-boggling annotation in the ever-puzzling and ever-growing *Annals of History* – and while some might be sniggering into their moustaches about finding a spelling error so early on in this story, the author of this work cannot be blamed for what they may think. While the *Annals of History* are something else entirely, the former applies entirely to the context of the work performed by the Time Saving Agency. Not that the TSA has a reputation for arsing about, you understand – but it's just that well, sometimes things do wind up going down the crapper sideways – but we digress.

Now, this point may be somewhat reminiscent of the age-old “*what came first, the chicken or the egg?*” riddle – in fact, at first sight the two concepts – the chicken and the egg, and the eggs and the omelet might even seem to be the same thing, but no, not really. Once we start digging a little deeper, we realize that in order for the hypothetical omelet to exist or be made (or indeed, be broken up to be eaten) there have to be some suitable eggs lying around first. These naturally, need to come from somewhere and indubitably, this also suggests that something has to get laid first – presumably the – *um*, eggs.

While both these idiomatic statements refer to eggs – specifically chicken eggs, the main difference between these two rather irking statements is this: omelets do not come from chickens – it is *eggs* which come from chickens. Chickens conversely come from eggs, and only *indirectly* from other chickens. Understand? Now, omelets on the other hand, are an entirely Human invention – Humans being here, the middle man as it were.

The conclusion to our brief examination of this rather perplexing conundrum is that while we may not know which came first, chicken or egg – we do know the omelet came after, and regardless of what eggs there are, unless you have an unusually accident prone chicken, they will not turn into omelets by themselves. In other words, there may be eggs and chickens to lay them – but without Humans to *make* omelets from the eggs, there would be no omelets – or in fact, any *need* for omelets.

Finally, nobody seems to know which came first; egg or chicken – except of course for agents of the Time Saving Agency – who can find out anything about, well – anything. The only trouble is, they never seem to say much about things like that – however, you can take it from me – they know. Why do I say that? Well, because it's the nature of the job – as is the need for secrecy. Believe me, the answer to these and other puzzles are kept safe and secure behind fire-walls and thick security doors secured with, er – time-locks, where one could possibly find answers to many other troubling questions, and not all of them necessarily relating to chickens.

Agents of the TSA, who police time-travel and prevent outside forces from mucking up the works and changing History, have to be very careful. One dropped egg and whoops, no omelet – if you follow the metaphor? In essence, to stretch the metaphor, this point links to yet another which is, unfortunately, best illustrated by yet another idiom in use at the TSA: “*A nine in time saves stitches*”. It's difficult to explain in only a few words what exactly is meant by this, but this much understated principle is what generally underlies the entire purpose of the TSA: To save Time.

From what? Well, one might ask. Well, while all of this gibberish about eggs and chickens and omelets – and time – may seem overly philosophical, and even far more theoretical than practical, it all comes down to this: Patterns. Yes, that's right – patterns. If you were to look at History, you'd see it's full of them. Try looking at a calendar – er, no... wait, links in a chain. Um, *oh dear*. No, let's start over – imagine a railway track with switching points in it... and the fleeting moment we understand as “now” is a locomotive on it, travelling forward at a steady pace – and then something happens to throw the switch at the points, and the train is directed down one side of the track ahead instead of the other... at which point the bit of track not travelled on vanishes and never existed at all... Chin up – agents of the TSA tend to get headaches from all this stuff as well, but while all the technical explanations tend to tie their brains in knots at first, they get to be very good at it over – well, time. All that aside, what it really boils down to is this:

Each day shapes the days that follow.

Everything that makes up a day, every event that takes place everywhere – all adds up to what will follow. Everything, no matter how seemingly insignificant, plays a part in making that

day what it was. Sometimes the meaning of every little thing – each individual component of a day – is made clear only by the effect of their absence. Take for example, a man and an apple.

Imagine a beautiful mild sunny day in the year 1666. Somewhere in the Lincolnshire part of Old England, an apple tree stood in the front garden of an old manor house. The grass around it was a lush yet restrained shade of green, and the sky above it was light blue, dotted with little white fluffy clouds. Birds chirped in the hedges and darted in and out of the rose bushes. Beneath its shady canopy, a funny-looking little man with wild-looking hair, who was dressed in the clothing of the period, was exactly where he was supposed to be – seated on an old bench that stood against the trunk, dozing. At more or less the same exact location – a little higher, in fact – in the branches of the tree above him – a blurry shape appeared, then seemed to shimmer slightly before solidifying into a male figure. It silently mouthed the words: ‘*Oh, f**k!*’ – before hurriedly grabbing onto a branch and hanging on tight. The figure below emitted a loud snore, blissfully unaware of the struggling figure above him. His name was Isaac Newton – not quite ‘*Sir*’ yet – and the man who seemed determined to not fall out of the tree this time? His name was Scrooby, Johnathan Scrooby, and he desperately wished to avoid having the same previous awkward exchange with the notoriously cantankerous scientist again!

The TSA believed that certain things happen at a certain time in a certain way, which in a sense, is what it’s all about – “it” being “everything”. If certain specific things didn’t happen, then *everything* else that followed would be completely different, wouldn’t it? I mean, if for instance, the First World War had never happened, would Adolf Hitler still have found fertile ground for his anti-Semitic message and risen to power? Would the Great Depression have taken place at all? To follow, would the Second World War have happened then without the actions of Nazi Germany, which had been fuelled by the crushing defeat of WW1 and the Depression? World War 2 after all, was a direct consequence of World War 1 – and World War 1 spawned a whole new landscape in terms of both history and Human society, with effects being felt – well, in perpetuity.

To continue our theoretical exercise, let’s posit the question that if something had prevented the assassination of the Austrian Arch-duke Franz Ferdinand in 1914, would World War One still have broken out? What if someone – someone *not* at the TSA – had managed to dismantle the chain of fatal alliances and treaties that bound and obligated the European powers to come to each other’s military aid if attacked, and caused the world to plunge into war? What might happen then?

In the hallowed halls of the Time Saving Agency, there were those who believed that the entire structure of what was laughably called “reality” and “the present” depended on something rather like a fateful game of Jenga. Pull one stick out of the tower, and nothing might seem to happen. Jiggle it a little bit, give it a twist, and you might expect the same result – but pull the *right* stick out, and the entire tower might rearrange itself into something completely different! Thus, if something disrupted the flow of historic events, the result could be a completely new and different timeline which would be unique from the original – leading presumably straight to a bottle of headache pills for the unfortunate Time Agent assigned to un-fuck the resulting mess!

For those who might be wondering, this point has already amply been proven in numerous instances – which the TSA, being technically *outside* Time, recorded for – well, for record purposes. For example, because neither World Wars happened, there was the time the Soviets invented the A-bomb first, in 1943, and then proceeded to blow up cities around the world whenever anyone refused to see things their way. In another clear example of how minor and even miniscule changes to the timeline could affect the timeline and contribute to a unique, totally new reality, a certain Mr. John F. Kennedy became a very well-known used car salesman and Baptist faith-healer with a fondness for German confectionery, and steered clear of both military service *and* politics, which put a serious wrinkle in the Kennedy matriarch’s dynastic plans. (For additional examples, those interested should consult the latest version of the *Annals of History* – where available.)

“Damn, that’s what almost happened last time again!” Scrooby thought tensely while maneuvering himself as quietly as possible onto a stronger-looking branch. Details, everything was about the details! Sometimes there was almost too much detail to keep up with!

Beaming into the thick of a tree *without* becoming a lifelong tree-hugger was a tricky business – it was a precision job! Luckily for Scrooby, he had a really whizz-bang operator back in the ...future – wait, *was* it the future? Scrooby dismissed the distracting thought. His job at the Time Saving Agency was a tough one, and no mistake! Billions of lives depended on him not screwing up. Literally *billions and billions*! Perhaps even a few gazillions too. Anyway, once he’d screwed up in only a *very small* way, and people on Earth had worn those little yellow smiley faces on t-shirts for decades afterwards – and that was just a *small* screw up! Scrooby sighed, appreciating his present lot in life. There he sat, in the branches of an apple tree in apple season – and without a single apple in sight! Those damned time terrorists sure didn’t play fair! Below him, a kipping *not* Sir Isaac was waiting to get bonked on the noggin with an apple so that he could fulfill history by toddling off to invent gravity and shape scientific and mathematical principles for generations to come! The only apparent obstacle to closing this glaringly apparent gap in that circle was a complete absence of apples!

Some wise-ass bastard (the Agency preferred to call them Time Terrorists) had apparently slipped back in time illegally, and infected the local trees with a short-lived disease which wiped out the entire crop of apples for this year. Enter at this point, the Time Saving Agency – and *him*. Scrooby reached into his period-correct jacket pocket and removed the lump inside it while clinging tightly to the branch with his other hand and knees. Out came a bright shiny yellow apple – not exactly what grew around these parts (or in these times) – but an apple nonetheless. At any rate, it sure as hell wasn’t the cooking variety known as “Flower of Kent” – which was glaringly absent from this very tree – but it was the best he could come up with at short notice. Aiming carefully, Scrooby let it go and waited a short moment as it dropped – while he dematerialized. *Bonk*, went the apple. Newton awoke, startled – gawped at the strange yellow apple which had rolled a little way off, looked up into the empty branches – and then skipped off to announce his invention of gravity to the scientific world! It only occurred to the man much later to wonder where the blazes that peculiar apple had come from in the first place.

So it was that Agent Scrooby rematerialized roughly a thousand years later, give or take a couple of ticks, on the time-jump platform at the TSA headquarters.

“Did it work this time?” He asked to the room in general.

“Well, gravity’s still working!” Said the voice of someone being a smart-ass from behind a console across the room. “And we’re all still speaking English.”

Scrooby’s shoulders relaxed and he heaved a sigh of relief. He was satisfied with the thought of another job well done – and that he’d just saved the continuum from more funny t-shirts!

“Nice job, Jimmy!” Scrooby complimented his operator at the controls of the Time Jump Motivator – or if you will, time machine. “You’re still the ace!”

“Thanks, J.” Jim Rusche smiled back. “At least you didn’t fall out of the tree this time. Ha-ha.”

That was true – the startled Newton had got very angry with him the other two times that happened! Of course, things went wrong in time policing. They often did. Whenever that happened, a Time Agent could just press a button on their Remotes, return to the TSA, and then go back to Try Again Later.

“Ha-ha.” Scrooby repeated mockingly. “It’s lucky we were able to do it over, or the American War of Independence would’ve happened in Mexico again!” Scrooby sighed.

“Oh yeah, and d’you remember the time the USA became a province of Canada, eh?” Jim Rusche chortled.

“Oh yes – I remember!” Scrooby nodded, giving his colleague a tired disingenuous little smile. “What a shame that had to change back.”

Scrooby sighed, remembering the time before that when – in a breathtaking triumph of nineteenth century engineering – Napoleon, Emperor of Europe, actually managed to dig his famed tunnel across the French Channel and invaded Londres! They all ended up speaking French at the Agency for a while – and sorting that out had been... well, challenging. *Mon dieu.*

“Thank the gods for the Buffer!” Scrooby thought gratefully, and not for the last time. It protected them from unforeseen time events, or UTE’s (in other words, screw-ups) and gave Agents the chance to go back and TAL (Try Again Later). Scrooby sighed. In this line of work, people who made the same mistake twice were usually the lucky ones who killed themselves doing it the first time – and still didn’t learn from it. He’d had enough of it for one day. More than that, he needed a holiday – a *real* holiday!

The TSA liked having fresh agents on the job – fresh agents with a clear mind and a steady hand. Time travel wasn’t for the faint of heart, after all. The pay was good though, as an Agent – but as Scrooby had decided long ago – even if he didn’t get paid for it, the thrill alone was payment enough! Then again, the TSA – having pretty much the gift of both fore and hindsight – had long ago realized they couldn’t afford to have disgruntled employees with too much time on their hands *and* the power of the gods at their fingertips – so the pay was *very, very* good indeed.

Debriefing always made Scrooby groan, but it was necessary, and it was part of the routine – but how he hated routine! People only had on average something like seventy years to live their lives – why would they willingly clutter it up with something as dull and boring as a routine

spent doing unpleasant things? He reported to his supervisor, who was a Senior Agent called Guy Krummeck. That fella was a rather drab, ordinary – routine character who liked his shiny silver suits almost as much as he liked to go over every little detail at least three times as a guaranteed minimum. This last time on today’s assignment, everything had gone alright, so debriefing went quickly. Twenty minutes later, a tired Johnathan Scrooby clocked out and went home to his small “routine” apartment in the accommodation wing. Tomorrow, after all, was another day again.

* * *

It was neither dark nor light here, and yet somehow at the same time it was both. There was no air, but there was a very definite chill of terror and despair in whatever passed for it. The eerie absence of sound was absolutely deafening. It was said that idle hands were the Devil’s instruments, and although this wasn’t Hell – not exactly – this place had many idle hands. Idle minds too. Bodies drifted in the confines of the chrono-spacial anomaly that was the *Limbo Practicale*, bodies that were for all intents and purposes, not dead. Not really alive either, not here – but certainly not dead... which was the rather terrifying point.

Frantic souls lingered here in this place, languishing in this terrible limbo, each tortured in their own private little Hells, living and re-living the same horrible nightmares again and again, ad-infinitum... ad absurdum. After only a short while, most of them would start losing their minds... their sanity would start unraveling just to help them pass the time! If anyone – or anything were able to observe their progress here, the inmates could be seen to twitch occasionally.

The only hope for any variety in their torture the inmates had, would be when they experienced the same time-loop in their lives from another angle or dimension entirely – or perhaps upside down and in purple! Dense smothering silence cocooned the inmates, as though it were slowly draining the sound out of them... Yet on another, very different level – detectable only by the psyche – there was the inaudibly faint sound of slow, backward screams... And, if one held one’s breath and listened even harder, mindless gibbering.

If the inmates had been fully conscious, those imprisoned here would doubtlessly be wide-eyed and screaming! Seeing one’s own life replaying over and over from the inside, and without being able to change anything, was supposed to be something like watching re-runs, again – or re-runs of someone else’s home movies... It was a singularly inventive form of cruel and brutal torture. Most people could withstand physical pain if they tried long enough, or even learned to like it, over time... but what nobody could stand for long, was boredom – and being forced to relive their own lives, their own mistakes and their own triumphs too, over and over again – without being able to change anything, or to *stop!*

Most people, as had been noted before, would be certifiably, window-licking mad after spending just a few days in the *Limbo Practicale!* It was a prison for the mind, body and soul, where perpetrators of Time Crime would, well, *do time*. Like, forever.

Among the inmates, who came from all kinds of backgrounds – there were representatives of several different time-periods across several millennia, from a multitude of worlds, races, and even realities in there – but there was *one* man of particular interest to us in this little bubble of Hellish purgatory. Like the others, this man drifted silent, still – seemingly unconscious in the depths of this infernal plane – only, against all known odds, *Brad Xyl* was smiling. He'd just been through his life again, backwards, and was celebrating the trail of death, destruction and chaos he was leaving ahead of him!

Brad Xyl! Now *this* was a man who stood out from the crowd, a Time Terrorist *extraordinaire!* Xyl was a man who had taken all the resources of the Time Saving Agency – which if you consider the ability to control, manipulate and even bypass TIME, are pretty damned awesome – to capture him. It'd all started, well who knows when – years ago, or in a time still to come? In here, who the hell could ever know? Xyl was a man who wrought chaos and devastation across three millennia of known time and disrupted the time-stream so badly that at one time it resembled a pretzel – simply for the fun of it, just because he *could!*

Rumor had it that Brad Xyl was one of the first Humans to invent time travel – not just the concept of it, as renowned Human scientists like Albert Einstein, Stephen Hawking and Melinda Inkman had – they were more like explorers dreamers by comparison... No, Xyl had always been a *do-er*, and he *did* it – he made it happen. The resounding irony of the whole thing was that this man, who was currently floating weightlessly upside down in this terrible place, was one of the founders of the TSA itself! How he'd ended up here was, needless to say, ironic – and naturally, very, very well-deserved. It was a place of punishment, better than just a rap across the knuckles with a lame warning not to do it again, better than spending ten or twenty years in a prison cell to build up a horrible resentment of the system and people in charge who'd put them there – to come out again hungrier and with more skills than before – and more morally satisfying than just killing someone for messing around with Time...

The *Limbo Practicale* was a life sentence, but it was also a death sentence – because while inmates never died – not ever, they also were never set free, and never got to actually *live* again. Because it was such a final punishment, being sent here was a fate reserved for those who the TSA felt deserved it... the people who abused time travel, and went back in time in order to change it for whatever reason... which was the very reason for the existence of the TSA.

Everyone in the *Limbo Practicale* had got there at the end of what everyone in charge assumed was a one-way trip... But just because the TSA considered being sent to the *Limbo Practicale* to be a one-way trip, didn't mean that it really *was*. After all, a trip between two points, a point of origin and a destination may seem linear in a one-way sense – but time is rather pliable under certain circumstances, and especially if the flow of it is reversed...

Against all odds, and no matter what the tech-wallahs at the TSA's research and development lab said, Time *did* exist there, in small amounts (well, just some of the time). There were faint eddies and currents of time surrounded the inmates, moving this way and that – tugging at them with slow, rhythmic pulses, like waves in the ocean. They were things that were barely tangible, faint forces of the universe they were, nearly indiscernible from the nothingness like a warm breeze on a hot summer night! And Brad Xyl – a man who stood out from the

crowd, felt them! How long he'd been here, he knew not – but he was slowly learning to draw on these barely tangible waves, to attract them, and to master them like a new surfer with one foot on the sandy beach and the other on a shiny new surfboard – a board that had taken shape out of raw Hatred! Revenge splashed around his feet like the cold waves of the ocean of Time, while nearby, two other inmates collided with each other, bounced apart spread-eagled and spiraled off into the distance in infinite slowness... Xyl drew the Wetsuit of Insanity around his spiritual body, and it clung tightly to him, isolating him from the timelessness that seemed to exist here.

A wind of Change blew at him from behind and Brad Xyl pushed off from the beach with iron determination and a mental clarity hitherto before unknown to him! Something in the microcosm that didn't even have a name, went '*bling*' – and against all the laws of probability, the time terrorist, Brad Xyl, opened his eyes.

* * *

In the grand scheme of things, the third-rate Terran colony world called *Deanna* – which had been settled for more or less between half and three-quarters of a century – was pretty much just a footnote in the – er, *Annals of History*.

Deanna was roughly the same size as good old Earth, but unlike that remote place which fewer and fewer Humans were thinking of as *home* with each passing year, Deanna had much more land than ocean. Unlike Earth, which was covered nearly two-thirds by water, Deanna had just a single ocean on Deanna, and lots of lakes and rivers. Ice-caps at the poles – hundreds of meters thick in places – contained most of the planet's other water. The large central ocean was a lot like the Pacific, except that it was landlocked, mostly shallow, and fresh. A multiverse of life-forms teemed in the *Landlocked Ocean*, which was fed by freshwater rivers all around it. *Braking dolphins* – which were perhaps the most visible and well-known of Deanna's sea-life – swam in shoals of hundreds in the warm shallow ocean. The odd, quirky little dolphin-like creatures were air breathers, and because they were marsupials, this tended to cause problems which the local evolutionary process clearly hadn't accounted for. The pouches, which were used to house their young after first birth, tended to generate a little too much hydrodynamic drag which slowed them down, hence their name. Braking dolphins had no natural predators on Deanna, but they could sometimes almost starve to death while trying to catch faster prey! Braking dolphins thrived on Deanna, and darted peacefully in and out of the serene and beautiful coral reefs in the shallower parts of the *Greater Equatorial Fishbowl*, which accounted for the larger part of the *Landlocked Ocean*.

The planet orbited an ordinary medium-sized star listed as *Ramalama* on the Imperial star charts – system 6327B2B. Deanna was smack in the middle of the Goldilocks zone – that is, being near enough to its star to not be too cold, and not too close to be too hot – and which otherwise had sod-all to do with porridge, soup, or any number of bears. It had two small moons in fairly close orbit, and by *small*, I mean virtually asteroid-sized. When the first Human settlers arrived on Deanna several decades ago, they bravely stepped out onto the untamed surface of their prospective new home. Looking up at the night sky, they named these two moons, well, *Ding*... and... er, *Dong*. Seriously. This had been something of a local joke for many years, and

at first, the updated entries sent to the *Encyclopedia Galactica* by the Founders tended to be returned to confirm that it wasn't a mistake, before publication.

Legend and urban myth had it, that this had been some misguided attempt at humor on the part of the Founders of the colony, to make light of the fact that when they arrived on Deanna, they found very little at all to laugh at. Yes, *ha-ha* birds were accident-prone and just hilarious until they crashed through your bedroom window at three AM, and *obsidian crows* seemed harmless until you rode over one with your jeepo and didn't have a spare tire – and crabby-grass might seem very funny indeed, unless you're barefoot and standing on it!

The larger moon, which was *Dong*, lay further away from Deanna, and was around a kilometer in diameter. *Dong* consisted of plain, boring space rock, which had zero commercial value. In contrast, *Ding*, which was much smaller in size – being only fifty feet in diameter, was made up entirely of pure titanium. While the orbits of both small moons around Deanna – and each other – could only be described as somewhat eccentric, *Ding* could normally be found in a much closer orbit around Deanna. Whenever *Ding* became suddenly and mysteriously absent from the night skies – which was a regular occurrence, believe it or not – *Ding* could typically be located by looking in the newest crater somewhere on the surface of the planet.

Deanna had a reputation for being a little –er...off-kilter, becoming known throughout the Terran Empire as the little colony that played ping-pong with one of its own moons! Some ship would come along – usually a loderunner, and it would bump the little moon out of orbit! The moon would plummet to the surface, and if the colonists were really lucky, it would land somewhere between built-up inhabited areas – and if not, well – there was always insurance. In any case, local children even had a little nursery rhyme about *Ding*, and it went as follows:

See the little moon Ding, see how it glows!
- Or not! Whoops, bang! Bumped the ship – and there't goes!
Got a Ding in me fender, oy, watch how it drops!
Down, down, boom! And nobody knows where it stops!

The most recent episode in this little saga of *Ding*, the little moon that got bumped out of orbit on a regular bases, had happened just two months prior, when a Ruminarii warship (that just happened to be invading) accidentally struck the small moon. This wasn't the first time this had happened, nor was it safe to bet that it would be the last. Not that Deanna got invaded every other week, mind you, but *Ding* pretty much got whacked out of orbit once every fortnight – and it took three big space tugs to put *Ding* back into orbit again, after the usual effort spent locating the small moon, polishing it up, and then ferrying it back into place. The Tourism Office played a big role in keeping this odd little cycle going, and even the Governor's office saw keeping *Ding* a permanent fixture in Deanna's night sky as vitally important to the local tourist industry. Well, as permanent as possible. The little moon had become quite famous over the years, and now formed part of the main attractions of the colony – it would deal a crippling blow if *Ding* just stayed in its newest crater, wouldn't it? I mean, who wants to sight-see a lump of titanium in a crater in the arse-end of nowhere with a sign attached to say that "*This used to be Ding, the small moon that fell out of orbit every other day and, after causing lots of mayhem,*

miscellaneous property damage, carnage, death and destruction, used to be cleaned up nicely and put back into orbit again several days later”? No, that just wouldn't do at all!

In wrapping up our brief little tour of Deanna, we sweep over the dry and dusty, but undeniably breathtaking vista that was the plains of central Deanna. There were a few native forests on the planet, that grew wild near the tropics – vast, largely unexplored and almost totally unknown except to a handful of strange men in lab coats and steel-capped safety boots (this was Deanna after all) who insisted on looking for natural cures for strange and exotic diseases – and often discovering a few new ones in the process.

Crabby-grass grew wild on the vast open plains, and terrorized the population of imported livestock being farmed there on vast ranches between the cities of the colony. Unlike regular grass, crabby-grass – which *looked* like ordinary grass and smelled like ordinary grass – except that it was *aware* that it was being looked at and smelled. It mostly lay still, feeding on spores and little bugs and mites in the soil, but in the cities crabby-grass had developed a taste for meat, and subsisted on a steady diet of pigeons – the winged vermin of the galaxy, and sometimes of larger creatures. Some had even taken to scavenging. The creatures preferred to move around at night rather than by day – except when disturbed, to look for – er, greener pastures. They generally objected to being stepped on, nibbled at or even being addressed in a harsh tone of voice, and many a rancher had been surprised to find his missing red-horned wildebeest trying to hide under a *cherebub* bush half its size – or on top of his jeepo, whimpering soft like. Getting bitten *back* by its dinner came as a bit of a shock to most herbivores, and a cow in a state of shock can do amazing things – especially to milk!

Set against the backdrop of this rather unusual background, Gary Beck, a.k.a. Beck the Badfeller, was a nice guy – a *lot* nicer than his professional handle made him sound. Gary worked as a bounty hunter, chasing and apprehending all kinds of criminal types clear across Deanna, and had developed an impressive reputation for always getting his man. ... Well, alright – except for that *other* case a few months ago, where his *man* turned out to be his *woman*. Or was it the other way round? Er – well, anyway, Cindy-Mei Winter was far more than that. She was something rare and special, something that just made him feel good about getting out of bed in the mornings! His thoughts froze. Had he actually just thought that? No, *that* wasn't what he meant! ... He knew fellas who *would* say that about a gal, and then swiftly add “... *and then run like hell!*” to it! No, this was different! Very, very different! Mei made him feel *good* about facing each new day. Yep, that was it!

Not that he didn't come into Atro City often, but he wasn't used to sleeping in a city yet. He was getting there though, but he was still a country boy at heart. He liked the sound of absolute quiet and of nature around him, and to be able to see the horizon without too many artificial stuff in the way. He hadn't seen too many Human cities on his travels, but he appreciated Atro City for what it was – a lot of fairly nice, okayish Humans and other folks living close together for the sake of convenience. Part of him wondered momentarily how convenient getting bombed by the Gimp a couple of months back, was – but he dismissed the thought.

The capital city of Deanna was something like a medium-sized city by current standards, he knew, and which consisted mainly of smaller colony towns that had sprawled into each other as

the number of colonists and settlers increased over the years. This being Deanna, Atr0 City had a character all its own. Lugaluru was one such former town, now a suburb right at the outskirts of Atr0 City – but it was still just as ‘country’ as ever! Somebody once described it as “Little Texas”... and considering its size, Beck mentally dubbed it “Extremely Little Texas” and said no more of it. Still, anybody who was anybody here drove shiny new hydrogen powered SUV’s and wore fancy suits and cowboy hats – which is why Gary Beck wore jeans, sneakers and a blue khaki shirt. The hat unfortunately, was a necessity. Not that Beck considered himself a nobody, but he’d certainly never taken his fame as Lugaluru’s most famous son – being the most famous, successful bounty hunter on Deanna – to his head. He was just a guy, and he liked to think, a good guy.

It was a typically bright sunny morning outside his two bedroom camper in Northern Lugaluru. The blown hover-drive *technically* excluded it from being a *mobile* home, but anyway – that was probably the only reason he’d been able to afford it in the first place. As with most things these days, it was cheaper to buy a new one than to fix it. “That brilliant idea must’ve been thought up by some rich guy who didn’t care that buying a new one wasn’t cheap to begin with!” Gary thought as the garage door whined open and let the sunshine stream in through the gap. The municipal sand-droids had finally finished leveling his camper and filling in the huge crater in his front yard yesterday morning, so he was able to park his electric Jeepo in the garage again. At least, he smiled, he was getting some bang for his tax-buck.

The vacant lots across the drive yawned openly at him where old mister Krugher’s four-bedroom Supercruiser and several other surrounding campers had vanished into the same crater. Krugher had claimed his insurance money and moved to live with his cousin in Texasville, on the other side of town. Gary smiled with amusement. Who’d have thought the Ruminarii were so adept at landscaping? Really, all it took was a few well aimed bombs, and *voila!*

Things had begun to look really serious between Mei and him, and as a life-long bachelor Gary Beck was very much aware of what that meant – shacking up together and being around each other more... becoming what some called “we” people. Gary found himself surprised that unlike in previous relationships – where getting close to someone for longer than a few days or even weeks made him feel a little crowded and even claustrophobic, the idea of actually settling down with this girl was unusually enticing and attractive! He was *in* love with Mei. Yes, he *loved* her! Wow! Two months seemed kinda fast, honestly... he appreciated that – but they were taking it slow, and deliberately so. Besides all that guff about not rushing into things, knowing each other properly first etcetera, they were both mature adults who seemed to know what they wanted in life – so all *he* had to do in order to not lose a wheel, was to make sure he remained comfortable at the steady pace they were moving at.

The subject of the future had been a topic for discussion for several weeks already – their future, and specifically what lay ahead for them. What would happen when their paths began to tug apart and separate? Did each of them desire the other’s company enough to want to stay together? Gary lived on Deanna – in fact, he’d done so for more than a decade already. Mei had never made any secret of the fact that she’d come here on holiday for only a week, and the original plan had been to carry on travelling for a while before returning back home again. For

Mei, “home” was back on Mars. At least, she thought so. For Gary, “home” was a broken-down camper in Lugaluru... at least, it had been since he moved here.

What would happen to them as a couple if Mei couldn't stay here anymore? This was Deanna after all, a small colorful and rustic backwater – far away from the lights and glamor of mainstream civilization – not a long-established First World colony like Mars! Gary was too much of a realist to think their new budding romance could survive over a distance – physical separation would be the end of it. He was also too much of a romantic to want to give up on it either... so he hoped she'd decide to stay on Deanna. If he tried to deny that the possibility she still might leave soon, he called himself a damned liar. Sure, the lady seemed to have her own means of support that didn't seem to require actual working... and no pending deadlines requiring her presence elsewhere... at least any he knew about... but they both seemed to be putting off talking about it, perhaps to the bitter end.

Despite having to vacate her apartment at the resort she'd been staying at since her arrival on Deanna, Mei opted to rent a small apartment in the city rather than move in with him. At least he'd offered – not that he was really pushing to move in together just yet, but when the topic had come up, Mei seemed to prefer having her own place at the moment, and her own space, and just spending time with him when he was available. At least she'd said that instead of talking about going back home. She was afraid to ruin a good thing, she told him. “Otherwise,” he thought, she was probably just too classy to live with him in a mobile home with a blown hover-drive in a trailer park on the cheap side of town! Hell, come to think of it – even *he* was too classy to live with him, but it was the best he could do under his present circumstances! Fame brought him business, but not exactly the kind of wealth he thought people expected it to! Besides, he'd been spending more time at her place lately when he wasn't working... and Beck the Badfeller was in demand, and worked quite a lot! Last night had been only the second night in the past few weeks he'd slept in his own bed!

Gary reversed his electric jeepo smoothly down the ramp, this time without disappearing into a crater, and drove out the trailer park towards town. It seemed a pleasant enough morning – the sky was aquamarine and fluffy white clouds dotted the horizon. A flock of *strato-penguins* soared high overhead in a ‘c’ formation, leaving a vapor-trail as they migrated west.

The buildings in Lugaluru were mostly low, not more than two or four stories high, and modern in design. The city founders had tried to make the place as pleasant as possible by planting grass on the verges and indigenous *ploplar trees* to cast shade from the bright sun. After a short, pleasant and uneventful journey into central Atro City, Gary reached his destination and found an empty parking space. The *Salubrious Café* was a pleasant little street café with sidewalk tables and umbrellas. As street cafes went on Deanna, this one was pretty good. Cindy-Mei was already waiting for him, and sitting at a table when he arrived.

“Morning, love.” He greeted, bending down to give her a good morning kiss.

She smiled at him as he sat down opposite her. She was a sight for sore eyes – which his were by the way – one too many cold ones at the *Shock Diamond* again last night after work. “One?” His subconscious needled him. “Amateur!” He chided it mentally.

“Sleep well?” He asked Mei.

“Peacefully.” She replied softly. His eyes wandered over her body. She wore a little black number today, a short sleeveless dress and shiny black stiletto court shoes. Her make-up was perfect as usual, her blond hair tied back in a neat stylish fashion and adorned with matching understated accessories. Her beautiful hazel eyes were locked onto him and radiated unspoken emotion. It was hard for even him to believe that she had ever been anything other than female.

“Miss me?” She asked.

“Nope.” He grinned. “Ammo is expensive.” It was one of his little jokes, one of his adorable little quirks, she thought adoringly. Mei smiled at him. “I can tell you’re glad to see me.” He said.

“Two days was long enough!” She replied. He’d been on a case and only closed it late yesterday. His ribs still hurt some, and his knuckles. “I missed you.”

At that, Gary smoothly reached across the table and took her hand in his, gazing deeply into her eyes.

“Move in with me?” He asked, trying his luck again. Mei noticed his slightly skinned and bruised knuckles and gently placed pressure on them with her warm hands.

“I have a better idea – come with me instead?” She countered playfully. “Let’s leave this crazy planet and find somewhere nice to live? Somewhere sane? Let’s go to Mars?”

“Mars?” Gary echoed in a mixture of disappointment and disbelief.

“Sure, it’s a nice place. You’ll like it there – no crabby-grass, no obsidian crows.”

“Yeah, you were real happy there, weren’t you?” He replied. “People spat at you in the street. You want to go *back*?”

She shrugged, her smile fading only slightly. She didn’t enjoy the reminder.

“We don’t have to live in Mars City, we could find a place in the countryside, or another town there?”

“I have a job here.” He reminded her. “Last I checked, there’s not much work for bounty hunters on Mars... Look, if I leave, I’ll be dependent on your good graces – and your purse.”

“Your point being?” She grinned, sliding her feet neatly wedge-like between his. “You think I can’t afford it? ... Or you don’t like admitting you’re an old fashioned kind of guy who believes a man should support a woman and not the other way round?”

“Sorry.” Gary smiled, feeling his trust issues were getting a little exposed. “It’s just that I’ve had to carry myself for so long that the thought of being dependent on someone else... well, it’s a little scary. Folks round here might all know my name – but I’m still just one or two bounties ahead of bankruptcy.”

“I like old-fashioned guys.” Mei giggled, before getting more serious and adding: “I can see us being together for the long term – I feel safe with you, Gary.”

“Well... you should.” He said, leaning in close across the table to give her another tender kiss. Her lips were soft and so very kissable. He could keep it up all day.

The waiter arrived to take their order, and hovered politely to the side as though his tip depended on it. The menu still looked interesting, even though it was the same one they’d seen almost every morning since they’d become involved – and it was so interesting because as Humans pushed back the boundaries of unexplored space and discovered strange new worlds – and the new life that grew, flew, hovered, walked, hopped, swam or crawled on them – there were chefs behind the scenes figuring out new and interesting ways to cook and eat it.

Mei believed in trying something new every day. She wanted to catch up on all the living she'd missed in her previous life as Agent Winter, man of interplanetary mystery, danger and mayhem. She'd spent all her life alone, out of necessity, she supposed. Even after the hormones kicked in and she started living as Cindy-Mei around two and a half years ago, she discovered what absolute jerks men could be. Lucky for her, she was able to take care of herself! Quite a few of those jerks had discovered that while they could dish it out, they weren't able to take it quite as well. After starting transition, Mei found herself thrown out of the Colonial Intelligence Agency, and unemployed – and also on everyone she knew's shit-list. But she persevered, and after the gender-reassignment procedure – as part of a holiday road-trip she gave to herself as a way to kick-off her new life, she came to Deanna. It was time to start living! After a brief interruption – caused by a couple of alien invaders who dropped in on Deanna on the night of her arrival – Mei had settled in and stayed a little longer than planned. She was technically still on holiday, and she wanted to see where this was heading. Well, at least she got Gary out of the deal – and although she was nervous, afraid of things going wrong, she'd never been so happy in her entire life. She was in no rush to leave.

Thanks to some wise investments Cindy-Mei Winter made while she still worked for the CIA, she was now independent financially. If asked about it, she would just wink and hint that “*Sometimes diplomacy has its advantages*”, but she never ever went into any detail.

“Ma’am?” The waiter asked, perhaps to remind her that he was still awaiting her pleasure.

“I think I’ll try some stewed ...*Kwarracks*.” She smiled. “With coffee please.”

“Hot or cold milk, ma’am?”

“Yes please.” She smiled, looking at Gary – who seemed to be getting a little frustrated with the vast array of choices available.

“Er... Yes, ma’am.” Said the waiter resignedly, and made a note on his order pad. “And for you, sir?”

“Toasted chicken and mayo – white bread.” Gary said, quickly resorting to his favorite go-to when picking an item on the menu became too much effort that early in the morning. Gary tended to stick with things he knew and trusted... especially early in the morning, when choices required decisions, which in turn required actual effort. Random people walked past the tables on the sidewalk, some chatting on their way to work. Shiny SUV's and slightly less shiny jeeps hummed silently by in the street. “*If only it could always be like this,*” they both thought at the exact same time. It was another ordinary day in their lives, just another ordinary, uneventful, quiet day.

* * *

Meanwhile, sitting cross-legged in the long grass on a hilltop deceptively in the middle of nowhere, a lone figure was slowly and thoughtfully dismembering a small yellow flower.

“Sshe hatess hme,” the figure hissed deep in thought, “Sshe hatess hme hnot.”

The peaceful silence was broken only by the faint sounds of crabby-grass gnawing on bugs in the tall undergrowth. Mark dropped the dismembered flower corpse and put his hat back on – quickly adjusting it so that it didn't fall over his head for his lack of external ears – and gazed out

into the distance. It was a hideously bright sunny day in the dreadfully green grass-lands on the side of Atrio City where the ranches were, and clusters of awful cheerful-looking little white fluffy clouds drifted serenely overhead. Over all, Mark was grateful for being alive, and to those who had made that possible – but deep down, he just wanted to *Hhhiirrl!*

Mark closed the big dark pools that were his dark brown eyes, and breathed in slowly. He drew on the negative energies of the universe to fill his being, to strengthen him and to try and balance himself out. All this cheerfulness, goodness, compassion and ...sheer Humanity was beginning to get to him! Okay – being the only known Ruminarii in Terran space made him into something of an endangered species, right enough – and it also defined him as a wanted *ma – um, person*. At least, he *would* be, if any outsiders got wind of his existence! They hadn't so far.

Although he'd been hiding out in the basement at the Grauffis ranch for several months – and despite being used to living in a ship in the black inky depths of space for months at a time – he'd got something akin to cabin fever occasionally, and just had to get out for a while! Then he could handle going back inside again for a few more weeks... and that's how he'd been living the last two months. That's why he was out in the wild that morning, keeping a low profile while watching the herd for the Grauffis sisters.

“Sure, okay – you're not a prisoner, you can go if you want.” Jenny Grauffis had told him again that very morning, after several days' worth of argument about him risking going outside again. *“Just don't come back hissing to me if someone sees your scaly ass!”*

Mark was a pseudonym. Until recently, he used to be called Marsh'k Kluss'ta – a Half-Lieutenant in the Ruminarii Navy, and the commander of the *Black Sunrise* – the warship that had tried to invade Deanna two months back. It was a long time, it seemed. Due to a strange quirk of fate he'd found this place while fleeing from the spaceport on that fateful morning. Then, while suffering a fairly heavy concussion and the effects of dehydration, he met the ranch owner, Jen. Instead of shooting him or turning him over to the Human authorities, she took pity on him and gave him a canteen of water. A little later he got the chance to repay the debt by saving her and her younger sibling Danielle from the clutches of some thugs who worked for the local mine – who, a little while later, these same mine representatives turned up mysteriously dead and crispy in their melted SUV at the bottom of Hobo's Gorge a hundred miles away. It was a funny, frustrating and confusing time for them all, he reflected, but it was a little odd – he added, enjoying the taste of irony – that nobody had tried to force the Grauffis sisters off their land since. At least not yet.

Mark was a name close to his own that was easier for the Humans to pronounce, and anyway, he was glad to find a safe haven here. He didn't look Human though, being a typical Ruminarii, a biped reptilian alien who could be called *“scaly”* without taking offense. As a result of his status as an enemy alien, Mark tended not to get out much, or to meet any of the locals outside of the Grauffis household, and perhaps that was fortunate. Mark plucked another of the millions of little yellow flowers from the grass and began to dismember it like its predecessor.

“Sshe hatess hme,” he hissed softly, *“Sshe hatess hme hnot...”*

High above, a thin little vapor trail ended abruptly in a small red silent explosion in the upper stratosphere. Another lone *strato-penguin* had misjudged its altitude and strayed too high. The rest of the flock continued on their flight, undeterred by the loss. Mark shook his head at the complete ...*weirdness*... of this planet. Not only that, but the weirdness seemed to permeate into everything else too!

Deep in thought, his dark eyes had glazed over, and as he plucked the last petals from the flower's corpse and twirled the head thoughtfully atop the stalk between his scaly fingers, a rectangular, furry, llama-like creature bleated almost melodically in the distance. The animal took a few awkward steps forward and then sideways on its thin little legs as it almost lost its balance. Red-horned wildebeest were strange animals... well, no – not just “strange”. “Strange” didn't even begin to describe RHWB in Mark's thinking – or generally in the minds of most people who saw them for the first time. These were creatures that really belonged in the lab they were created in, and were really not very well-adjusted to the world outside it! About half an hour ago, another one had overbalanced and fallen over – and it'd taken him about ten minutes of struggling just to get it back on its feet again! Another of his charges ambled over to him, and lowered its funny furry little face to look him in his cold dark eyes, fluttering its long black eyelashes as it did so. Its horns were small, short little things on top of the creatures head, and yes, they were red in color. The cow blinked her big brown eyes at him and gently took the depetalled flower from his cold fingers with her lips and munched it. Gentle creatures, he thought. So un-Ruminarii-like, so weak and vulnerable. So... just like... no, he thought. Jen didn't fall over so easily. “*Wee-eell*,” Mark guessed that depended on how much – what was it called? *Beeher* she'd consumed? There were no corners on her either, that Human female... She was soft and warm – not cold and hard like Ruminarii females, who would arch their backs and hiss when aroused. They were violent creatures that would scratch and bite in the heat of passion, and always looking for a weak spot to stick a knife into, or a way to advance the cause of another, or their own! Humans in general seemed softer and gentler in their approach to life. At least, on the negative side, human females didn't draw blood – well, at least not on purpose – and not much. Well, he didn't know for sure, but he was starting to get that idea. Once he'd mastered reading their language, their local internet was very edutaining. This was definitely a weird planet, even by Ruminarii standards – and he'd chosen it to invade! What the heaven was he thinking?

While he was thinking that, an item right at the top of his list of prime examples of how blessedly weird this place was, popped up: One morning a few weeks ago, while he'd been minding the herd – sitting almost in the same spot – a Human-sized plant had walked past, carrying its own pot. It seemed to be heading across the ranch toward a hilly area over yonder, beyond the borders of the ranch. The fact that it was whistling a tune he didn't recognize and had paused to cheerfully wish him “*Good Morning!*” hadn't helped improve his mood any. He wasn't sure which was more disturbing – *that*, or the fact that it had seemed to completely fail to notice that he obviously wasn't from around here. Had he made a mistake in letting the creature go? Frankly, Mark had been too shocked to even consider silencing it as a potential witness – if that were even possible!

From where Mark now sat, he could keep a bad eye on the herd. No, he corrected himself, *good* eye. The juxtaposition of Good and Evil in this culture was something he'd been trying very hard to get to grips with. “Good” in Human culture meant the same thing as “bad” meant to

Ruminarii, except that to Humans “good” wasn’t “evil” – in that sense it meant the opposite. Oh, it was so confusing! So, Mark thought, feeling like his brain was being wrung out like a wet *mhorrf*o in a mortuary, it was *good* to be here, not *bad*. And somehow, Evil was bad, not *good*! ...But of course it was. *Hmm*.

“*So good to see you,*” he thought, practicing. Yes *bad* was something like when Jen ran over an *obsidian crow* last Wednesday and had to replace the tire on the jeepo.

Ruminarii were the only known culture to adopt evil as their primary value system. That they had survived this long without annihilating themselves was amazing in itself. Mark was rapidly beginning to question his upbringing – after all, Ruminarii advanced themselves by means of assassination, and the fact that – for the first time in years – he no longer had an overeager junior lurking over his shoulder waiting for an opportune moment to remove him from the realm of the living, was a bonus. Out here, as much as he loathed to admit it, he felt at ease. He could *think* out here, really *think*, basking alone in the sunny silence. He plucked another flower, one the grazing wildebeest seemed to have missed. There was a barely audible “*ouch!*” and a clump of *Crabby-grass* separated itself from the other grass and marched away angrily waving its seedpods – and a little green stump – at him. “Good is bad,” he reflected. Right, *that* concept he could handle but *some* things, he mused, would take some more getting used to!

* * *

In the meantime, a considerable distance away – and mostly vertical, Captain Horst van der Ku, current commander of the Imperial Star Ship *Antares*, sat in his office, reviewing sensor logs for that morning. Nothing worth reporting had happened during the night – or for the last two months for that matter. After nearly two months at Deanna, there was still no sign of any impending Ruminarii invasion, nor any sign of an enemy fleet or suspicious movements whatever. Well, never mind, he consoled himself – at least he and the crew had got two months’ worth of periodic shore leave and visits to Deanna, and face it – a lot of free time spent goofing off. The *Antares* had been posted here to watch the colony until further notice – until Space Fleet Command had determined the extent of the potential threat in the sector. They weren’t taking any chances with the Gimp, as the Terrans called the Ruminarii. So there they were, in a high parking orbit over the planet, and doing nothing much except watching and waiting – and relaxing! Van der Ku, whose surname sounded a bit like an expletive or the tail-end of a sneeze, realized that his crew certainly had no qualms about that, apparently – but not him!

Horst was a man who came from a proud and inevitably long line of military men and women, took pride in his career and his personal achievements. As a matter of interest, he’d devoted an entire wall in his office to displaying military memorabilia, including several framed certificates and military class photos from the Academy, which hung in perfect formation on the upper part of the simulated wood paneling. Beneath that, a set of chrome and glass shelves ran along the length of the wall, which strained under the weight of defunct old weapons, keepsakes and other items of interest he’d collected on his travels. Among the bewildering array of curiosities, was a rather well-maintained and heavy-looking antique flintlock pistol. It was once the pride of his collection – but had lost pride of place after it had nearly cost him a fingernail recently, when he accidentally caught his left thumb under the hammer. The *current* pride of his

personal collection was less mundane – a curiosity, a thing that reminded him simultaneously of Human ingenuity and resourcefulness – and at the same time, stupidity. It was a dark gray oval blobby thing made of durastress alloy, which looked like it was shaped to be held by a Human hand. On its top, there was a small color display and a control panel. The company that made it a hundred years ago, had pitched this unique concept to the military, believing it was a perfect compromise between functionality and economy. This item was a combination blaster, sensor and com-link, all in one! “Imagine the time the user would save!” They said. “Imagine the space you’ll save!” They said. “Instead of carrying three bulky pieces of equipment and having to change between them at a moment’s notice – you can hold all three of them at once!” Yes, this innovative little device allowed members of starship mission teams to always have one hand free to operate other devices, or to hold onto things while moving through difficult terrain and so on. It seemed a sound idea, and would probably have worked as well – except for the fact that half the members of the test group accidentally blew their own heads off while answering incoming calls.

Of course, he reminisced, this led to funny jokes including “*your phazor is ringing!*” Very few of these prototypes and early production models survived to the present day, because the proposed model was eventually dropped by the Dept of Acquisitions, who cited poor battery life as the main reason, while Horst suspected it was more likely because the manufacturer got sued into bankruptcy by relatives of the victims. “Ah,” he thought. “*The human entrepreneurial spirit!*” It just went to show that no matter how good an idea may seem, there was always some schmuck who’d find a way to blow his head off with it just to make a quick buck!

The sensor logs dispensed with, Horst moved on to the next item on his list – which as it turned out, was an update to a previous list of discrepancies in the latest stock-take of the ship’s technical stores. The misplaced items, which had eventually been recovered, were all accounted for. Horst smiled with a deep satisfaction – sometimes sleep deprivation helped to get the job done after all, he reflected. After all, he couldn’t afford to have the crew misplace or miscount things like the ones on the list before him!

	Item Control Number	Item Description	Counted Qty
1	18 000 0400	Hyperdrive trigger module, Welles type with inverter coils	27
2	18 000 0460	Interface assembly, multi-frequency, communications, simplex	149
3	18 000 1601	Emitter pod, gravity net, BTS (Bell Techno Systems) Type 8	281
4	18 000 2727	Bioscanner, medical, handheld, Norsk 3422i	18
5	18 020 7100	Body armor, Corbex 92, Grade A	98

One never knew when you might need to cross an ‘i’ or dot a ‘t’ – and Horst was the type who always wanted to be sure he could if the need arose. He liked things to run smoothly, by the book – not like his predecessor, Captain Mykl d’Angelo – a man who was Captain of this ship for so damn long he had no home to go to when he finally retired a year ago! “After almost forty years in the center seat,” Captain Horst van der Ku reflected, “a man *ought* to have a back-up plan!” D’Angelo’s Exo had retired at the same time, but then, the two of them had been married for decades, and she had no desire to stay on without him. Horst wondered how that might work? Being married to your Executive Officer? Working together every living day – and then going home together – on vacations together? He briefly imagined being married to his Exo, and a sudden series of chills did a jig down his spine! *Eek!*

Ripley Jones was a full Commander and had turned down promotion and offers of her own command so many times she’d written a new record! The ship’s escapades under the d’Angelo’s command were the stuff of legend – real legends which now entertained the modern generation of cadets at the Academy – particularly the early period known as the Corsair War, when d’Angelo and the *Antares*, then somewhat distastefully referred to by the crew as the ‘*Ant-arse*’, braved the hostile space pirates and played a key part in bringing about their downfall! Wild times, they were – battle and high adventure! Van der Ku had something akin to chair envy... where he knew his predecessor had left him a very big chair to fill, and he worried he might not be able to live up to the legend... and the enduring legend of their lasting relationship, which survived beyond all of it. Then again, they were happy together. *This ship* was their home. Who was he to judge? Horst put his derailed mental choo-choo back on its tracks and mentally wound it up again.

Next, he reviewed the week’s mustering records. There were three sick reports due to indigestion (must’ve been the new chef), one AWOL (Corporal Glent, Star Marines, listed as missing) and otherwise all present and correct. Charges, AWOL: one (Corporal Glent); unfit for duty (i.e. drunk), one: (Corporal Glent yet again). *Damn!* Corporal Glent had set a similar record for the previous two weeks, and the man seemed to be becoming a bit of a disciplinary concern, he decided, in fact, Glent was a disciplinary menace! Four days ago, Glent had got drunk while on guard duty at the space port in Atro City, and disappeared while Sergeant Eggberry had gone to look for a pot of hot black coffee to sober him up! Trouble was, this wasn’t the first time Glent had just disappeared, or gone AWOL – and he was sure it wouldn’t be the last either! Disciplinary matters were never a pleasant thing to have to deal with, but Horst supposed it was easier than facing a fleet of Ruminarii hammerheads alone in battle, with his stardrive in a sling.

“Something’s got to be done about Corporal Glent!” Captain van der Ku concluded acidly, muttering under his breath. “Something a little more ...*appropriate* than a short stay in the ship’s brig, or a six month holiday in the Stockade! But not just a discharge, no – Corporal Glent won’t get off that easily, not this time – the rotter!”

Horst reached over to the com-link terminal on his desktop and instructed the bridge com officer to connect him with the Planetary Governor’s office below on Deanna.

* * *

Johnathan Scrooby, one of the Time Saving Agency's finest agents, had started the day's work in a good mood. After a fairly good cup of coffee with his supervisor, Mr. Krummeck – which helped him to get over the ringing of his ears from all the alarms that had been going off in the hallways that morning – Scrooby received a briefing on his next assignment. Oddly enough, it had everything to do with those same alarms, and the reason for all the ruckus was not being kept a secret by the higher-ups this time! It was after all, another day again for the TSA – and what an assignment! It was yet another Time Terrorist Strike (TTS) – but this time, no ordinary TTS... this was the mother lode – and unless the TSA acted swiftly, it would end up being permanent! Something really awful and – big... and unexpected had happened, and – although Krummeck didn't say anything to suggest it, Scrooby suspected that if it weren't for the Buffer – they'd all really be in big trouble this time – and he didn't mean just spontaneously speaking archaic languages!

As Scrooby boarded the time-jump platform, wearing an ensemble of ordinary nondescript clothes that could pass for anything between casual and formal (depending on what century you were in) he pondered about the prevailing tendency of employers to refer to those they were about to place in harm's way as "their best agents"? Was it encouragement meant to make him feel better? It really bloody didn't! Honestly, considering what they were up against, Scrooby thought he might really end up biting the big one this time.

Anyway, being the consummate professional Scrooby was, he calmly materialized in a dark alley between two buildings somewhere on a planet he'd often heard about from history, but never visited – Deanna. He eased his way forward towards the street, passing the trash cans stacked up against the one wall, and leaving the safety of the shadows. Late 22nd century nostalgia flooded his senses. It was called the Time Rush, a delayed aftereffect of time travel, and it was something that would catch up to you a few seconds after arriving. He felt euphoric and excited for a moment, like a kid at Saturnalia! It passed quickly, as he knew it would, but it was still enjoyable all the same! The street outside was quiet. It was early morning, around nine thirty, and across the street from him was a street café, something that vaguely reminded him of Paris around 1877, or parts of Berlin in 1922. It struck him that Time Agents were some of the few people who could say things like that and actually *mean* it from experience. "*Salubrious*" didn't strike him as particularly appropriate though – didn't people of this time know what was in the stuff they were eating?

A man arrived at the little cluster on the sidewalk, approached one of them, and kissed the beautiful young woman waiting for him. Hmm, he remembered – more from his own research than from his briefing – Ms. Winter. "*Not bad looking, even now,*" he added mentally. Of course, they still used actual *surgery* back then – *now*, he corrected himself – of course, augmented with hormone and gene therapy! How positively Stone-Age!

The man he recognized as Gary Beck sat down, reached across the table and held her hand in his. It was very sweet, all very lovey-dovey, but an agitated Johnathan Scrooby kept his mind on the assignment. He wasn't letting himself get distracted by thinking about any of his own past relationships – mainly because he hadn't wasted his time on any... at least not since graduating from his training class and finishing his apprenticeship – well, a long time ago.

Out here, there were risks – real risks of dying due to changes in the timeline, or of never even having existed at all – but back at the Agency, people were protected by the Buffer and therefore normal time didn't exist there. An accident due to a lapse in concentration could leave a hole in Time the size of a tram – not to mention a hemorrhoid on the Anals of History, and he'd rather prefer to get it right first time and not have to Try Again Later!

Instead, he side-tracked his thoughts with meanderings around the curious nature of his work – which had the unusual result that he had no idea how long he'd worked for the Agency – or how *old* he really was. One day, perhaps when he retired eventually, he might just suddenly reappear in his own time a few seconds after leaving, a good few decades older. If he was lucky, or really creative, he pondered, Scrooby might fix it so that he arrived before he actually left – and his older self might get the opportunity to try talk his younger self out of it... There were no special awards for 25 or 30 years of service at the TSA – and one day, if he lived long enough to retire, well – let's just say that Scrooby knew there would be no gold watch in it for him. The irony would be just too much to bear!

There were no class reunions at the Agency, either. There were no calendars and no watches there, because technically time didn't exist there – which made scheduling meetings – or in fact *anything* rather complicated. Relationships? Birthdays? He just didn't have the time!

A little while after finishing a sandwich and coffee, Beck the Badfeller rose from his seat at the table, kissed Ms. Winter, and then walked off towards the nearest street corner. “So this is it!” Scrooby thought, leaping into action. He left the alley and started walking, crossing over to the other side of the street. He walked casually but briskly, and quickly passed the tables. Ms. Winter was checking her lipstick in her compact mirror, and performing finishing touches before leaving. He'd caught up to Beck, who was just ahead of him now, and walking casually towards a quaint wheeled vehicle which was parked at the side of the road. Just then, a man of medium build and brown hair turned the corner and walked towards Beck from the front. Scrooby knew he had to move quickly – his mark was heading straight for Beck, who had just slowed up to fish his jeep's keys out of his jeans pocket! Scrooby *just* managed to pass Beck in time to head off the other, just in time before the man would've reached Beck! In one smooth unobtrusive movement, Scrooby pretended to trip just as they drew level to each other, and gave the guy a sharp jab in the ribs.

“*Hmmm!*” The man groaned loudly, and doubled over! So far Scrooby had managed to make it look like an accident, and the unconcerned Beck got into his jeep, shrugging off the whole incident as a wayward pedestrian collision. After all, stranger things happened on Deanna, pretty much on a minute by minute basis. Scrooby quickly picked up the funny looking device the man had dropped on the pavement. “Late 30th century Life Ender,” he thought, mentally filing this little tidbit of information under the “*Where The Heck Did He Come From?*” section of the case file. To his credit, Scrooby resisted the urge to try the fiendish device out, ejected the battery, and put the pieces in his coat pocket. As Beck drove off, he watched a fella in a plain-looking suit help the guy with the brown hair to sit down and catch his breath. Atro City was a city, right enough, Gary was just thinking, but it still had a lot of small-town niceness about it! Maintaining the ruse, Scrooby continued to apologize profusely while going through the man's pockets.

“Let’s see,” Scrooby murmured, quickly taking stock. “A small knife, no identification...” And then loudly as some pedestrians walked by, “Oh gods, I’m so sorry mister... Would you like me to call someone?” Then he continued quietly again, “...No wallet, some loose change and notes appropriate for the location and era...” The man’s head began to loll slightly to one side, and Scrooby quickly righted it with one hand. “That was close!” He thought as Beck’s vehicle vanished around the corner. At least Beck was safe – they’d almost lost a key player there!

“More funny T-shirts again.” Scrooby muttered under his breath.

“Hmm?” His prisoner moaned.

“Nothing, mate.” Scrooby replied briskly, and helped the seemingly winded, moaning man to his feet. Once upright and clearly in danger of falling down again, Scrooby thumped him into the wall behind him in way that favored the appearance that he had simply overbalanced. A few more pedestrians walked past, staring. A couple took a wide berth around the pair, and went on their way looking stiffly ahead of them.

“Oh, I’m so terribly sorry!” Scrooby apologized again, catching his charge just as he started falling over again, and began dusting the semi-conscious figure off. “So *very* clumsy of me! Here, let me help you to the hospital!”

“*Hmm!?* Hospital? Er, no, it’s okay...I don’t need no hospital!” The man started to object, struggling, but there was no getting away from Scrooby, who was skilled and had just surreptitiously jabbed him in the ribs again – hard, seemingly knocking the wind out of him a second time.

“U-*Hmm -!*”

“Oops, sorry my hand slipped!” Scrooby said in a cheerful, friendly tone as he slung the man’s limp left arm over his shoulder and took the weight. They walked two slow steps before Scrooby leaned down to whispered close to the man’s ear: “Better get you to that hospital, chum – *before you open your mouth again*. I don’t think they know how to treat *acrydic solarium* poisoning in the 22nd century? Do you?”

“*Hmmfh.*” The sagging figure hanging around Scrooby’s neck mumbled in resignation

“Well okay then.” Scrooby said firmly, and helped the staggering figure around a corner into another alley, whereupon they both vanished into thin air – and moments later, relatively speaking – rematerialized on the platform back at the TSA.

“Well, that went better than yesterday!” Scrooby congratulated himself, beaming with professional pride. At least this was one mission that went off without a hitch, first time – which was exceedingly rare, even for an experienced professional like Scrooby! There were no repeats, no doing it over – no TAL’s, no UTE’s to spoil his day! He let go of the man’s arm and carelessly allowed the limp, still-groaning figure to fall noisily to the deck plate with an assortment of thumps. Then he tossed the standard issue high pressure injector to his operator, Jim Rusche, who caught it one-handed and smiled at him. “Gentle persuasion”, it was called.

“Good one, J.” Jim Rusche called.

“Thanks Jimmy.” Scrooby sighed, registering that the two big burly men standing at the foot of the platform were there to collect the stricken time terrorist he’d just apprehended.

The larger, more aggressive looking of the pair, wordlessly reached down and grabbed the fading time terrorist by the nearest ankle and began to drag him toward the edge of the platform.

“You’d better get him treated for those *acrydic solarium* shots I gave him right away.” He told them. “I reckon he’s got about twenty minutes left on his clock.”

“Don’t worry,” The bigger one with a shaved head and a crooked smile said, and proceeded to drag the limp semi-conscious figure off the edge of the platform by one foot with a *thumpity-thumpity* noise.

“We’ll clean it for you – and still probably make it in time.” His slightly less burly partner scowled. Scrooby didn’t laugh. No one did, because around here, time jokes just weren’t funny anymore. After the hundredth pun you just wanted to strangle the perpetrator – at least once, before going back to undo it just in case Internal Affairs came knocking on your door.

The figure being dragged behind the burly handlers in dark suits – called Wranglers – just groaned ruefully. After all, there was nothing for him to be cheerful about. After the stomach pump and a stiff regimen of antitoxins that would probably also encourage him to spill all the beans – that is, any he still contained – he faced a life term in the *Limbo Practicale!* Of course, nobody knew what it was actually like – since nobody had ever come back to tell the tale. It was rather like death in that respect – not that this comparison did much to set his mad, racing mind at ease! ...But Time Terrorists generally had an *idea* of what would happen to them if the time cops ever caught up with them, and *Limbo Practicale* or no *Limbo Practicale*, it was bound to be pretty grim! The Agency considered it a just punishment, and an ironically satisfactory one at that – after all, their agents faced the same risks on a daily basis *because* of Time Terrorists!

As Scrooby watched the two agents drag the limp figure away, he sighed happily at the thought of a job well undone – and it was before teatime as well. Well, figuratively speaking. Guy Krummeck was there too, waiting for him at the door and wearing an expression that would, with certainty, wipe the smile off the face of a kid on Saturnalia. Scrooby ran the fingers of the hand in his pocket repetitively across the smooth surface of the captured device, and after entertaining the thought for a moment, put the notion out of his mind.

“Yes, I know.” He muttered demurely. “Debriefing again.”

* * *

The Sheriff’s Office in central Atro City was normally not a very busy place, and today was no exception. Sheriff Peggy-Ann Muller, known to her friends as either ‘Sheriff’, or ‘Peg’, was a hands-on kind of gal – er, cop. She didn’t just run the precinct, she also got her hands dirty doing the job. At that moment, Peg was in the middle of booking a perp at the front desk. Deputy Mike – who was very much used to how things went around there, and generally unfazed – found himself staring just a bit. The perp in question looked like an average sort of Joe, whose most distinguishing characteristic was a massive overbite. He seemed a little rough around the edges, being that he looked bruised and shaken up. He looked half-way undressed, as if he’d been in a scuffle with a football team. Under the slightly battered bright orange hard-hat, which clung stubbornly to his head so tightly that it might actually be stuck, the guy kept giving Peg occasional fearful, wild-eyed looks.

“Put him in cell seven when you’re done!” She told Deputy Mike, just as Gary Beck entered and noticed right away that Peg seemed a little run down – i.e. there were black tire marks all

over her light brown uniform, and she was smeared with dirt, grease and grime from head to toe. There were a few bruises and small cuts and scratches on her arms and face, her usually neatly tied-back hair looked drunk and disorderly, and she smelled a little like burned rubber.

“Seven?” Deputy Mike asked seemingly taken aback.

“Yup.” Peg replied. “You heard me. Seven.”

“But the toilet in seven is still blocked, Peg.” Mike began, “It’s a mess in there – oh, wait...”

“Really?” Peg asked feigning innocence while patting dust and grime from her uniform.

Meanwhile, Mike got on with fingerprinting and genetically profiling the perp. He was still eyeballing Peg in a way that suggested she wouldn’t be invited to his birthday party in a hurry. She paused in her dusting ritual to return his glare in a way that suggested she was thinking “check the worry in my eye, sunshine”, before noticing the new arrival.

“Oh, hi Gary.” She greeted.

“What the sweet Annie Morris happened to *you*?” Gary asked his friend.

“I busted me a shoplifter. Just now, actually.” She smiled at him, brushing away a wisp of errant, slightly frazzled hair out of her face. “All by myself too, no back-up.” She said proudly.

“A *shoplifter* did this to you?” Gary asked incredulously. “Was he seven feet tall, eight hundred pounds, green and prone to emotional outbursts?”

“Oh please!” Peg pshawed. “He was a pip-squeak! No, this was from the forklift he was driving.” She admitted. “He wouldn’t stop. Never thought police work would be a hard-hat kind of job. Helmet maybe, hard-hat no.”

He gave her a perplexed look as a strange mental image flashed through his mind. *Alrighty then.*

“Well, for Pete’s sake, Gary – I had to get him out of the forklift to arrest his ass!” She explained, not really helping Gary’s fog much. “I made him put it back too.” She added.

“He stole the forklift?”

“No, *the shop*, dummy – *Albrecht’s Takeaways* on Lupini Square – you know, the stand he set up in that old shipping container?”

“Ah.” Gary smiled, not seeing the connection at all. “I get it – shoplifter... very funny – yes, I know it – good hotdogs....er, if you don’t mind the occasional hair. Cold cats not too bad either.”

“That’s the one!” Peg beamed. “And thanks to some pretty damn determined police work, you’ll find it exactly where the ads say it’s supposed to be!”

Gary avoided asking *why* anyone would want to hijack a hotdog stand. He really didn’t want to know – anyway, he was sure it wasn’t for the coffee.

“Poor old Albrecht.” Peg went on. “He was a little shaken up – completely lost his accent too for a bit, but he’s okay now. How’re you doing?”

“Oh, good, good. I’m... good.” Gary replied, realizing that they seemed to be talking around things a lot these days. ‘*Things*’ being Cindy-Mei, of course. That is, Cindy-Mei and *him*. Until two months ago, Peggy-Ann had more or less been the center of his social attentions, although nothing ever happened or came of it. Aside from her inviting him along to the occasional bowling night with the other deputies, they never actually socialized much... and somehow Gary knew that even though he’d frequently asked her out, this was going to turn out to be *his* fault! Now things had become a little uncomfortable between them since the news he was going steady

with Mei reached Peg, and suddenly they weren't really saying anything meaningful to each other anymore. Hell, he still wanted to be her friend! C'mon!

"You here for another bounty?" Peg asked as the deputy hauled the perp off to cell number seven and olfactory hell.

"How'd you guess?" Gary smiled.

"You have that hungry kind of look." She said. "The same one you get when you come to collect money."

"*What hungry look?*" He asked indignantly.

"*That* one! Anyway, as it happens, there is one particularly good bounty – just came in this mornin'. Come on in."

Peg led the way to her office, which was a clichéd little wooden partition that stretched from floor to ceiling, with windows and horizontal blinds and a door – which was standing wide open. "Straight out of an old TV cop show!" Gary – who was something of a casual fan, thought. This was where he'd first met Mei around six or seven weeks before, when she was masquerading as a Colonial Intelligence agent, and looking to enlist his help in finding that Gimp who was on the run from the space port. He hadn't been back this far into the SOD station house since. It sure brought back memories! Peg reached into a well-stocked but neat stack-tray on her desk and handed him a bundle of freshly printed thin A4 plastic sheets which was stapled at the top left corner.

"*Space Fleet?*" He read in astonishment. "AWOL?"

"They asked for the best I had, so I told them about you." She explained.

"Well thanks!" Gary grinned.

"Funny enough, they'd never heard of you – the Captain of the starship up there." Peg jibed. "He kept asking me why you were called 'the badfeller' if you were so good?"

"Not surprising." Gary smiled back, losing track and starting to read the warrant from the top again. "He's not from here – a lot of people not from here haven't heard of me before, Peg."

"True." Peg said with mock indignation, "And I sounded like a real idiot because I didn't know what to tell him about that – but if this keeps up, I'll have to start charging a finders' fee!"

"*Two thousand galactic credits* for a deserter?" Gary exclaimed, side-stepping the implied inquiry while still reading. "If you keep finding me bounties like this one, I'll be able to pay you one! What did he do – make a pass at an admiral's daughter?"

"Nope, nuthin' like that – just drunk on duty and AWOL – a repeat offender, apparently. He's from the I.S.S. Antares." Peg explained, pointing up for emphasis. "Seems he disappeared two days ago while on guard duty at the spaceport. Details are in the report – er, addendum B."

"Hmm," the P.I. in Gary Beck wondered as he leafed through the re-read the warrant, "how did they know he was drunk if he disappeared?" "Never mind that!" the bounty hunter in him answered, "let's just find him and let them worry about that little issue. Anyway two thousand is two thousand! Besides, a drunk is easier to carry in than an axe murderer! Now, where to start?"

The spaceport seemed a likely place. Thanking Peggy-Ann and wishing her a speedy recovery, Gary left her sitting at her desk, massaging her temples with her thumbs. She waved him off and sighed. She needed a shower and a change of clothes. And a massage might be nice

too. Scratch that – a visit to a local sports-physiotherapist might be more appropriate – *ouch!* This job was going to make her old and dead before her time! As it was, Peg had just bought her first tube of anti-ageing face cream last week – and the experience of asking an assistant to recommend a product was almost as embarrassing as the first time she had to get the pill as a teenager! No, even more so!

Peg's official mobile phone beeped, interrupting her thoughts. She took it out of her blouse pocket and touched the answer pad.

“Sheriff Muller.” She said gruffly.

An odd, tinny voice, rather strangely distorted, spoke into her ear.

“What am I?” Peg asked the voice irately, “His freakin’ *agent?*”

* * *

Corporal Marius Glent, currently half-naked while absent without leave, awoke just in time to avoid drowning in his own drool. He sat up instantly, coughing and spluttering – noting that it was the third time in the last few hours that had happened. Not that he cared much for keeping record of such mundane things, but it seemed his subconscious did. His pillow – which also happened to be his uniform jacket rolled up, dropped to the floor – which seemed oddly close to the ceiling. Anyway, he yawned, grateful for the dark in the crawl-space he was using as his current hide-out. Any amount of daylight or even artificial light was likely to cause him untold agony with the sort of hangover he'd been working up to!

It was quite a clever place to hide out, Corporal Glent thought, congratulating himself again on his ingenuity, “Let's see ‘em basterds find me this time!”

Glent yawned again and stretched, then tried to rub his eyes with one hand while trying to scratch his ass with the other, but for some reason this didn't... seem to be... working! He risked opening his aching eyes at last, and, squinting in the near total blackness, felt around with his hands and discovered *why*. Handcuffs tended to prevent things like that, in fact that was something of a design feature!

“What the...” Glent stammered, shocked and surprised. Just then, a bright, blinding light flashed ahead of him, and he winced and covered his eyes with his hands – and tried to scream. His head hurt so much from the effort, the best he could manage at the moment was a sort of dehydrated moan.

As soon as the pain subsided sufficiently, Glent risked opening his eyes and looked round his hideout. A man was sitting there, grinning at him from behind a flashlight, at first a sort of shadowy figure, but as his eyes grew accustomed to the light, the shadow became a man with warm eyes and sandy brown hair. The grin he wore was much friendlier than the pistol in his hand.

“*What the hell?*” Glent began, wondering how anyone had discovered his cunning little hideout. Beck the Badfeller just sat there, grinning and enjoying his moment of triumph – Corporal Glent was indeed wily – they were sitting in a dark crawl-space in the ceiling above the

space port bar! It seems Corporal Glent had climbed in there late a few nights ago while on duty, and thinking himself rather clever, stayed there. How did Gary crack the case? Well, in checking out the scene of the crime as it were, Gary found out a few things – such as: the barmen on duty had been having fights in the past two days about stock that seemed to be disappearing under their noses! This, coupled with unexplained events like alarms being mysteriously triggered in the bar while it was closed, made good sense! It seemed quite logical really – as did the greasy fingerprints on the hatch cover in the ceiling over the bar – and the dusty footprints *on* the bar counter which the cleaner had been moaning about. *Not* rowdy customers dancing on the bar, as it turned out! Aside from all these astoundingly obvious clues (that nobody else seemed to add up) it took just one sweep with his perp-scanner to find his man!

Glent seemed right to think himself rather clever – he'd spied a nice place to hide with easy clandestine access to the bar – and its stock room, which was accessible through another hatch! Empty booze bottles – dead soldiers they were often called – went rolling noisily across the inside of the ceiling as Glent scrambled to sit up properly. One dead soldier rolled over the edge and disappeared into the square of light that was the entry hatch, followed a second later by a hollow *clonk* sound and, a moment later, by muffled swearing, and a crash of glass breaking on the floor.

“Corporal Glent, I presume?” Gary taunted. “You’re quite a wanted man!”

“I – I am?” The hung-over NCO asked, squinting from the bad side of a three-alarm hangover and a bright torch. “Who... who wants me?”

“The people who gave you that fine uniform.” Gary hinted, prodding Glent with his flashlight. “Get your shirt and shoes on, mister! It’s time to go!”

“You an MP?” Glent asked, still confuzzled.

“Nope. Now c’mon hurry, get dressed!” Gary instructed. “I can hear credits calling me – listen... all two thousand of them!”

“You’re a bounty hunter?”

“That’s me!” Gary smiled. “Thanks to you, I’ll be waist deep in cold ones for the next few months!”

Glent groaned. He never expected to be some bounty hunter’s payday! It was not an easy day for Corporal Glent – and it was about to get considerably less easy! A big barman called Frank – a heavy-set, tubby guy with bushy black hair and a long gray beard, dressed in black slacks and a black and white striped T-shirt, who reminded Gary of a monochromatic gothic garden gnome – waited below. Frank was supposed to catch the squirming handcuffed figure as Gary dropped him through the ceiling hatch, missed – much to the amusement of the clientele.

“Whoops.” Said Frank with pointed disinterest.

The unfortunate Corporal Glent landed quite hard – and noisily – on the floor! It seemed – aside from the sizeable lump on Frank’s bald head, which might have had something to do with a certain bottle – the barmen held a grudge for all the in-fighting the disappearing booze had caused over the last few days! At least Glent had missed the broken glass shards that lay on the floor, Gary thought as applause from all the regulars filled the bar. Glent groaned on the floor and rolled over, and Frank took a bow. Fortunately, as with most extremely limp, inebriated

people, it seemed Corporal Glent had emerged relatively unharmed! Not trusting Frank or his companion's extended helping hands, Beck waved them aside and landed lightly beside his prisoner.

"Now, now." Beck scolded Frank as he helped the handcuffed Glent unsteadily to his feet. "Let's play nice – there was no call for that, was there?"

Frank just growled at him as Gary led the disheveled man in uniform out from behind the bar.

"Don't forget to give Space Fleet the bill for the shortages that fella drank!" Frank called after him. Yes, that was another matter Captain Horst Van Der Ku would be more than a little unhappy about – but at least that wasn't going to be *his* problem! The two thousand credits for Beck were over and above that.

"Three cheers for Beck the Badfeller!" Someone cried in the throng of quite lively clientele at the bar. "*Hip-hip!*"

Gary escorted the handcuffed, bedraggled, badly hung-over, bruised and possibly concussed Corporal Glent away from the staring, cheering customers at the spaceport bar to the sound of a barrage of "*hooray's*". It was something of a chore, but a rather entertaining one. As they left the bar area of the space port and entered the arrivals lounge, the cheers faded away. Once through the little shopping mall and entry foyer, they emerged back outside. He half-dragged the silent Corporal Glent – who seemed ready to sell his soul for a pair of sunglasses, and had to almost bundle the guy into his jeep. A short drive later, Gary pulled into a parking space outside the main Sheriff's Office in central Atro City. "Sheriff's Office Deputies," Gary smiled, thinking about the name the local law enforcement had chosen for themselves – SODs! Clearly, someone had never thought that all the way through! Gary opened his door and set his foot down on the ground. Something squeaked and he felt vibrations from small powerful blows being delivered to his safety boot as whatever it was promptly tried to eviscerate his foot! He shook it off his boot.

"Freakin' Crabby-grass!" He swore, and watched the small gibbering creature slink away.

It had been an easy day for Gary Beck, so far ...and without any unexpected complications – such as his bounty bolting, which usually meant long, complicated, strenuous chases which often involved a shoot-out or a fist-fight – this one had been unusually easy. After making his delivery and receiving his payment barely three hours after leaving there earlier, Gary Beck decided he was going to skip the cold ones at the 'Shock Diamond' this time, and go straight to Mei's apartment. He was going to spend some quality time with the one he loved!

* * *

The most Reverend Ramsley Valcovar II had graduated, quite a few years before, from the Reformed Puritan College of Theology with honors. Having been born into a wealthy family, he'd always wanted the kind of posting where he could settle into a routine of comfort and class, where he would hold three services every Sunday and be invited round afterwards for opulent

dinners by well-to-do members of his congregation. So far, his time in Atró City had been all that! There were quite a lot of Puritans in the city, which was the largest settlement on Deanna – which wasn't really too surprising since it was the oldest.

Valcovar had always been the consummate Puritan preacher – hellfire and damnation were his staple food, and being utterly and thoroughly conservative, at least to the outside world – he was every inch the pious clergyman! He performed weddings and funerals, and Valcovar enjoyed both really, but at least he wasn't required to actually smile at funerals. There were far more weddings at his parish, than funerals – which was better for the church's coffers, since all the services tended to be one kind of fundraiser, or another. Regardless of whether someone was getting hitched or buried, the collection plate always went around at least once – and twice on Sundays! Some members of his congregation got married more times than he cared to speculate about, whereas most only died once... which was reason enough to charge double for a funeral. Talk about getting enough bang for your buck – but anyway, as far as Ramsley Valcovar II was concerned, most funerals lasted longer than some marriages! As a staunch and robust Puritan, he firmly agreed with and supported the Reformed Puritan Church's views on marriage, the family and morality – er, whatever they happened to be on any particular week.

Weddings and funerals aside, and due to the contentious and frequently traumatic nature of many separations – divorce ceremonies were most often small, private affairs – and believe it or not, there were even more of those! Like banks, churches on Deanna were legally allowed to charge for all services rendered, so by law, Valcovar could charge more for those – and he did. Almost nobody attended the divorce ceremonies, but there was usually a small retinue which normally consisted of at least two lawyers and a pair of big guys and one or two trauma counselors who would hang around in case any brawls broke out. Paramedics would sometimes wait outside in case anyone needed them. At least one mother-in-law would often attend, looking rather pleased and self-satisfied and wearing a smug “*I told you so!*” expression.

Under the RPC's billable services, this week's special was on Salvation, which could be purchased with one simple click on the Church's page on the interweb. The previous week's special was on Absolution, for only ₪100, tax free! The takings on that side of business were rather good, with the RPC really racking up the numbers in terms of saving people!

As a Puritan minister, Ramsley's duties included seeing to the spiritual needs of his congregation. This meant that he spent much of his time visiting widows and orphans and otherwise engaging in spreading the good news of the Reformed Puritan Church – including doing Good Works at several local youth centers. Moderation was the key, Ramsley believed, as in everything. Whether it was eating, drinking or – er, *other things* – anything was okay as long as it was done in moderation – and there were no witnesses... especially anyone from the parish who could ID him!

Be that as it may, it was a pleasant and relatively ordinary late Wednesday morning in Atró City, the Very Reverend Ramsley Valcovar II was officiating over a ritual ceremony at his church, the Chapel of St Lucienne the Prostrate. Unfortunately, the Puritans were very big on their rituals, and equally unfortunately, they were sticklers for traditions – and for sticking to them! At that very moment, Valcovar realized, with ill-concealed embarrassment, that he was

publicly blessing a new doorknob which was to be fitted afterwards to the front doors of his Church! Granted, it had some wiggly-looking artistry in the moldings, and it had been purchased from Church funds and specially manufactured on commission by a well-known local artist, but still it was just a damned door knob – and it was a bit of a bother to be expected to set up a whole ritual consecration of the damnable thing!

The old one had been broken off just recently, and had mysteriously turned up in the collection tray at last Sunday's service! Valcovar felt like a right tit, blessing a doorknob – *this* in itself was a little daft, even for the Puritans – but he consoled himself with the knowledge that the ceremony make him look important and godly and righteous to his parishioners, which was right up his alley!

An angelic young altar boy, who was around twelve and seemed so obviously nervous, was half-way down the aisle carrying the shiny golden object towards him on a small scarlet pillow, which was decorated with gold braid and tassels. Looking down from the podium at the assembled congregation – which on account of the timing of the service consisted mainly of deacons, pensioners, house-wives and house-husbands – Valcovar bathed in the glory of his lofty position, and felt really important! Organ music was playing softly in the background, keeping up with the progress of the altar boy and the door knob as they moved down the aisle. One of the church choirs, called "*Virgin Snow*", had assembled stage center-left and consisted of about twenty sniggering mid-to-late teenage girls dressed somewhat alluringly in lots of frilly white lace. Valcovar smiled approvingly in the lull – that was still true for at least three of them, which accounted for most of the time he'd put into charity work at the local youth center.

"All this fuss and bother for a bloody doorknob, for crying out loud!" Valcovar thought indignantly as the altar boy, who was decked out in a velvet maroon frock and white lace vestments and carrying the knob on its cushion, came to a stop at the bottom of the red-carpeted steps before him. A proud parent in the congregation was standing among the pews, snapping photos with her phone – photos that would no doubt be the cause of much teasing at school later. The inappropriately named choir began to croon an RPC hymn about taking life by the handle and about doors opening and closing. That those little tormenters had done so while keeping perfectly straight faces was to be commended, Valcovar supposed, considering it was all he could do to not laugh at the frivolity and superficiality of the occasion! The sheer facetiousness of it all! Blessing a door knob? But, he chided himself – this was his calling – and religion was a very serious business after all!

Valcovar's stern gaze fell upon a man, who stood a short distance away from him, near the pews of the front row. He wore a shiny black suit and a somber expression, and a tool belt. That was Brother Flannery, the Church janitor, or DIY man. The forefinger of his right hand was thoughtfully stroking the empty loops in his tool belt, which were explained by the screw driver and needle-nose pliers which lay on another velvet cushion, all clean and polished, and awaiting another blessing ("*Lord, Bless These Tools!*"). Brother Flannery was also the Church's undertaker, and because he attended funerals more often than anything else, he'd grown accustomed to looking somber and serious all the time. Oh well, he'd probably figured out that one expression was as good as another at these things – besides, aside from *him*, nobody saw the

faces of the congregation during a service anyway. “After all,” Valcovar reasoned, “everybody needs a hobby!”

Candles burned everywhere around the church hall, and a strong incense filled the air. Everything in Valcovar’s life was ceremony and ritual, and being a Puritan clergyman he could expect nothing less! The Puritans had rituals for every damn conceivable thing! There was a ceremony for lighting candles, one for passing safely under ladders, and another for those fearing they were possibly about to fall down stairs! It bordered on the utterly ridiculous! There was even an absolution ritual for committing adultery in unusual circumstances (which he often secretly used himself) – except in the case of minors (when he would use *another*, most fervently).

Valcovar was about to open the ceremony by saying “Lord, bless this knob!”, but just then, a humming noise just came into hearing range. Valcovar’s eyes bulged, and as he looked around to try and locate the cause of it, it got a little louder! The altar boy holding the pillow with the door knob on top of it, at the bottom of the stairs, gave him a look that reminded him of the other night in the privy. A puzzled and annoyed Valcovar tapped the microphone pick-up on his collar, and sent a sharp, quizzical look at the sound engineer who was sitting behind the media desk three pews deep into the congregation, but no – the man shook his head – it wasn’t the sound system! The buzzing got louder still, and Valcovar, thinking it seemed to be coming from somewhere behind him, turned round. He noticed with some surprise, that blue sparks had started to drip from the gilded light fittings on the wall above. A motion in the air above the stage, between him and the choir – which seemed to be losing concentration – became noticeable. Aside from the annoying buzzing hum, a sudden hush filled the tabernacle. Even the expectant Virgin Snow fell silent. Then the hum rose into a rushing sound that sounded like... like... instruments? Then it turned into... something that sounded like a Strauss piece being played backwards very quickly by very talented musicians! Then, right at the top of a vigorous crescendo, came a bright flash and tendrils of blue lightning – which earthed on metal bits around the building and scored them with loud sizzling noises! The staring, shocked congregation was suddenly and most rudely showered with little blue sparks! Then the big flower arrangement up front burst into flames with a sudden loud ‘woof’!

Nano-seconds later, with awful suddenness and a distinct and almost comical ‘pop’, a figure appeared on the stage, live and unplugged. The apparition stared around, erratic, wild-eyed and somewhat ruffled, and rocked from side to side – legs spread wide, one arm in the air – its body contorted in a way that reminded Valcovar of Elvis on a stage in Vegas! Hate flowed into its eyes – along with generous helpings of anger, agony – and confusion! The mouth was distorted in a horrible grimace, and its fingers clawed the air as though it could physically *climb* it. The thing’s clothes and skin were blackened and charred by the torture of passing through waves of compressed time, and little wisps of smoke rose slowly from short blackened hair, which stood atop its head, on end. The creature’s mad eyes turned upwards like the churning cherries in a slot machine, and veins bulging on his neck and forehead, the apparition finally lifted his head up and screamed out loud.

This was quite enough for the Very Reverend. Ramsley Valcovar II! At that, he said “Fuck this!” and flung his service-book aside, hitched up his robes, and ran down the aisle towards the door at full speed!

The choir, janitor and altar boys and Virgin Snow – who’d been staring at the apparition on stage, looked after the fleeing figure, snapped out of it – and, screaming, followed as quickly as their legs could carry them!

Halfway down the aisle, not daring to look back lest he see the reason for his congregation’s screams, a panicking Valcovar knew he was in over his head! This was way beyond his scope! He was a minister, *damn it* – a man of the cloth, not an exorcist! Give him ceremonies and rituals and long hollow convoluted sermons and prayers any day – but the *supernatural* was another thing altogether! You needed actual *faith* to deal with that sort of thing! “*Yeah,*” he thought, discarding his robes and paraphernalia as he ran – *fanatical* faith! Like, with bombs and stuff! He’d always been taught that faith could move mountains, and send demons out for some exorcise... and knock down tall buildings and... and... *and – make ends meet!* He didn’t know any incantations for this sort of lark! “*Begone ye foul abominiminimination!*” wasn’t likely to cut the mustard! Fire and brimstone (wasn’t that a kind of racing tire?) and the like were way over his head! Using it as a tool to prod his congregation into more frequent attendance and tithing more was one thing – dodging lightning bolts in Church was quite another!

Meanwhile, what was mostly Brad Xyl, give or take a few Jenga sticks, stood at the front of the rapidly emptying building, trying desperately to regain the full use of his faculties. Fingers, hands, arms – check. Toes, feet, legs – check. Eyes, ears, mouth – check. His eyes rolled madly round. Something at the back of his subconscious was saying “*Error, missing brain.exe!*” Xyl needed something to help him wake up, something *strong* and – he stopped – *oh no, a church!*

Xyl watched the last of the fleeing figures reach the exit, some of them looking back at him in terror and falling over each other. “*Sheep!*” he thought, both angry and elated at the same time. Distracted. Where was he? *When* was he? This wasn’t the *Limbo Practicale* anymore – and that was about the only thing he was sure of! *Right, then!* He pulled himself together, straightened up, and – still trying to work out his legs, began lurching unsteadily and eerily zombie-like down the aisle roughly on course for the exit, leaving a trail of smoking black footprints in the plush red carpet behind him.

END OF PREVIEW

###

Thank you for reading my book! If you enjoyed it, won’t you please take a moment to leave me a review at your favorite retailer? I also welcome your thoughts about my book, and you may send these to me at christinaengela@gmail.com

Thanks!

Christina Engela

About the Author



Christina might not be the only writer – or even the only sci-fi writer from South Africa, but she is most certainly the most authentic, eccentric and unique sci-fi/fantasy/horror writer to originate from that country! She now has more than 20 published titles to her name – including a ‘how-to’ book about VW Beetles, a children’s book about bullying, and numerous fiction titles. If you would like to read more about Christina’s life and experiences, please visit <https://christinaengela.com> or <http://christinaengela.net> for more information.

Other books by this author

Please visit your favorite eBook retailer to discover other books by Christina Engela:

The Galaxii Series

Blachart
Demonspawn
Dead Beckoning
Lange’s Legacy

The Quantum Series

Black Sunrise
The Time Saving Agency
Innocent Minds
Dead Man’s Hammer
Loderunner
Prodigal Sun
High Steaks

The Panic! Horror In Space Series

Volume 1
Volume 2
Volume 3

Other

Space Sucks! (A collection of short stories by Christina Engela)
Bugspray
Don’t Get Left In The Dark (How to build your own home UPS system)
The Pink Community: The Facts (Dispelling homophobic and transphobic propaganda)
Other Kids Are Kids Almost Just Like You (Children’s book against bullying)
Ramalama Side Up (a coloring adventure)
The Peed-off Peasant’s Collection Of Awesome Parking Memes (Printable memes)

Connect with Christina Engela

I really appreciate you reading my book! Here are my social media coordinates:

Friend me on Facebook: <http://facebook.com/christina.engela>

Follow me on Twitter: <http://twitter.com/pinkfuzzyninja>

Connect on LinkedIn: <http://www.linkedin.com/in/christinaengela>

Visit my websites: <https://christinaengela.com>

Visit my shop: <http://christinaengela.net>