

Loderunner By Christina Engela

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Preview

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Dedication

For my dear friend Kae Colley and her son Michael, to whom I wish much joy and laughter on the other side.

Loderunner

Imagine, if you will:

Somewhere in the dark mysterious depths of space, a somewhat ordinary yellow star cast weird-looking shadow-puppets against the backdrop of the dark interstellar wastes – a portion of which belonged to the Terran Empire. For the time being, anyway.

Nine planets spun around it in suitably eccentric orbits – tiny slivers of matter with stage-fright which had rolled up into little balls and wished the rest of the universe would just bugger off and stop staring. For a very long time, the universe obliged... until one day not too long ago, when the first Human explorers arrived.

They noticed the isolated system's kerb appeal and began poking around. They looked under the furniture and in the cupboards, and decided they rather liked the neighborhood well enough to stay. They settled on one of the inner planets and – in polite company, at least – called it *Deanna*. Like many new frontier worlds where roughing it in the outback was a way of life, there was very little at all to laugh at, so the new settlers tried to find amusement in the context of their often hard, sometimes unbearable daily lives. One way they did this was by giving the more notable characteristics of their new home interesting and often odd names – they called the star *Ramalama* – and named the two tiny moons of their new home *Ding* and *Dong* (this was a local joke). Since that time, the Terran colony had flourished and prospered to become the bustling

third-rate world it was today, which in case anyone is wondering, was a bright February morning sometime in the distant future.

The first colonists to settle on Deanna set up their basic settlements, whose materials were dug from the earth and cut from the wood of the local forests. There were four small settlements at first, set closely together – where the first four groups of settlers made planetfall on Deanna – and each was designated a landing code: Alpha, Tango, Romeo, and Oscar. Over time, each of these landing sites developed into small towns – *Garretville*, *Langley-Town*, *Ebert* and *Sanctimonia* – and over the next few decades, these little settlements spread out with the rapidly growing population, to form a medium-sized city – now called *Atro City*. This was the largest on the planet, and also the capital of the colony.

Deanna's prime business was the mining and export of raw lantillium ore. Lantillium was a rare apolar metal used to line blaster emitter barrels and the cores of warp engines – and to a lesser degree, to line the special coffee cups and jugs used to serve Hot Stuff Blend in. Since the entire basis of trade and commerce in the known universe (other than actual money) was ~~gold or~~ interstellar transport, it was fairly obvious to anybody who saw the vast mine dumps on the equatorial plains of Deanna, that mining was a *very* important activity. Very large loderunner transports – that is, ships over a kilometer long – would arrive to pick up gigatons of ore for shipping to other relatively nearby colonies whose main business was ore processing and materials production. All that industry aside, with a population of over two million people – mostly Human – Deanna had other activities as well, chiefly of which, was tourism.

According to the *Galactic Tourist Guide*, Deanna was a prolific tourist destination – having miles of white sandy beaches, bright clear sunny skies most of the time, with only a gentle breeze and hardly ever a storm. Although Deanna only had one ocean, which was shallow, fresh and landlocked, there were hundreds of rivers that ran across the planet's surface like varicose veins on the head of a bald man. Some fed into the Landlocked Ocean, while others fed the two hundred and thirty-seven small lakes scattered about the planet.

One of Deanna's tourist attractions was game fishing – and for the gaming fisherman, the *Whatoosie River* was available all year round. A particularly unique indigenous species of fish had become vital to the tourist economy of the colony – and was the main reason for the existence of the *Skeggs Valley Dynamite Fishing Club!* *Cocka-snoek* were wily and tough and – well, admittedly rather too bright to be judged as mere fish! It's probably just as well that the fish weren't farmed or caught by trawlers or net, since they weren't a staple food source for Deannans – but more of a very tasty light snack best reserved for weekends away spent around a campfire. All other excuses aside, cocka-snoek were more widely regarded by locals – who knew better than most – as being “far too much trouble” to be commercially viable.

The main reason for this opinion was that traditional methods of fishing such as rods and lures weren't much good while fishing for cocka-snoek! In fact, many inexperienced visitors who persisted in using rods – albeit with the most creative of animated fishing flies and lures, and the best bait they could afford – would be in for a rather rude surprise! As a matter of course, the green-horn fishermen would invariably discover that the bait had been stolen from their hooks, and their lines had somehow got snagged and tangled irretrievably around some

underwater obstruction – sometimes tied together with neat little bows! You may wonder how local Deannans caught cocka-snoek? Ahem – *how* indeed!

The former military types who belonged to the Skeggs Valley Dynamite Fishing Club had become experts at it over the years, and led the way in innovating local fishing techniques – which as their name suggested, involved paddling along the Whatoosie River silently in a canoe and then lobbing explosives over the side. It took a direct hit just to stun the creatures long enough to catch them, and then a couple of strikes with a mallet before they could be gutted and prepared for frying!

The S.V.D.F.C. had a prominent mention in the Galactic Tourist Guide, on Deanna’s page, which listed some of their services offered to tourists – and which could be booked in advance. For a modest fee, tours could be arranged (via the Deannan Tourism booking office) which included an overnight stay on the banks of the river – where tourists could drop off to a great night’s sleep after a satisfying meal of *cocka-snoek* fried over an open fire, and the rattling sound the bits of shrapnel made in their stomachs.

Oh yes, Deanna was a very interesting place to live, and it could be a very pleasant place to live too – if one bore in mind that the word “normal” only meant “statistically prevalent” or even “demographically dominant”. What was *demographically dominant* on Deanna was jeans, boots and plaid shirts. Wide brimmed hats kept the daytime heat of Ramalama off your head if one didn’t want to look like yesterday’s bacon ‘n beans before you turned thirty! Unfortunately, this also created the illusion that the entire planet was some kind of recreation of a really corny futuristic spaghetti Western with laser guns, space ships and aliens.

It was a mild evening inside “*Japp’s Saloon and Speakeasy*” – a small, quiet watering hole in the northwestern corner of the only legal red-light area of Atro City. Timaset Skooch’s aluminum framed chair creaked softly as he leaned back in it, checking his cards carefully while wearing his best poker face. Across the table from him sat Jonn Deire, a large, grumpy older man who was trying very hard to out-poker face him, and who didn’t enjoy jokes about his name much.

Three other men also formed part of the company seated around the table, facing each other, each of their faces dramatically lit by the dim light that hung from a beam in the ceiling above. One of them was called Beck the Badfeller, and the other was a gentleman who went by the handle of Peeping William. Jimmy Skoda, the owner of the fourth face, was tall and lanky – and by his expression as he gazed at the cards in his hands, lost in thought – while Peeping William’s hands weren’t visible at all. *His* cards lay face down on the table, and he wore a rather bored expression on his scarred old face, which had a shadow on his forehead cast from the paint stain on the lamp shade above the table. It was shaped rather like the head of an obsidian crow – and Beck didn’t like obsidian crows much – one had got him killed once, but that was another story. (“The Time Saving Agency”, if you really must know.)

Atro City – or rather more specifically, a smaller northern suburb called *Lugaluru* – was home to Beck the Badfeller, and proudly so because Gary Beck was a legend in his own lifetime – which, given his youth, was quite an impressive achievement to be sure! If Deanna had grown

any folklore over the past century, then Beck the Badfeller was sure to feature! Beck was something of a local hero and urban legend all rolled up in one – and the legend had it that Beck was so good, he could find the missing day in a leap year! Once, so the story goes, he even found a missing sock.

Beck the Badfeller might have been the best bounty hunter on Deanna – or possibly anywhere else – but if you happened to be looking for a private investigator, then *Timaset Skooch* was your man. Up until two years ago, Skooch was a former Sheriff's Office Deputy (SOD for short) in Atro City. Then, after seven years of getting shot at for not much money, he'd decided it was time for a change. As a self-employed PI, Skooch did get paid *better* than when he was a deputy – but not as regularly. Sometimes, he even got shot at for *free*. But, he supposed, that was the tradeoff.

A party of spectators – all regulars at the bar – had gathered around the table to watch the game. The stakes had started out low as they always did, but as the hours had slipped by, the stakes had piled up considerably – and even more so after Beck just happened to be passing by, and had joined in.

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

Will just grumbled something and rolled his eyes with grudging sarcasm.

“C'mon bounty hunter – I ain't got all day!” Deire grunted. “Time's a-wastin'!”

“My turn again?” said Gary, looking surprised. He put down a card. “Sorry.”

Ignoring the apology, the surly Jimmy Skoda plonked down his card and looked over at Deire aggressively.

Jonn Deire paused to think a moment, before picking up eight yellowed and dog-eared cards from the pile, grumbling “*garrn!*” under his breath, while chewing on a frazzled distraught-looking toothpick that whirled around between his masticating teeth. Skooch threw down a card and said nothing. There was an impatient pause as the players waited for Beck to remember – again – that he had to play for Peeping William as well, who was still grumbling softly and rolling his eyes at intervals.

“Sorry, Will.” Gary said again, and dropped a card. This time he remembered his own turn, and threw in one of his own afterwards. Skoda followed with his, and scratched his overgrown chin thoughtfully, eyeing the kitty lying in the middle of the table. There was plenty of money there, as far as small-time casual gamblers were concerned. The kitty got off it, stretched and yawned before lazily dropping off the edge of the table. Unperturbed, the players continued. Jonn Deire began tapping his fingers on the table rather nervously – and stopped as soon as he noticed everyone staring. This was the moment of truth for Timaset Skooch, who wondered how fortune might favor him! There was a small fortune on the table, and it would keep a few wolves at bay for some time, during which Tim could breathe easier... *if only*... Jonn Deire played his card – and there was an almost indefinable *click* as something slotted into place for Skooch, who dropped his card on the pile – and cried out elatedly.

“How about that – *Uno!*”

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

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

“Gentlemen.” Said Jimmy Skoda as politely and calmly as possible, and got up to leave.

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

“Not you, Will!” Gary told him firmly. “I’ll be with you in a minute.”

Peeping William was a wanted man – a *very* wanted man who was very, *very* slippery and very hard to find. Gary Beck – being the best bounty hunter on Deanna – was the lucky man who found him! Beck had arrested Peeping William over an hour earlier, and William had been forced to wait – with his hands cuffed securely behind his back – while Beck finished another game of cards. Well, at least Beck was nice enough to let Peeping William join in – figuratively speaking.

Gary looked directly at Skooch, smiled and nodded and said “Great game, Tim – grats! Still, take it easy – you can’t win ‘em all, eh?”

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

“Sure, and you say hi to Dory, ‘k? ...C’mon Will – let’s get you to the Sheriff, I could use a couple of cold ones!”

“Yippee.” Said Will, not exactly brimming over with enthusiasm.

Skooch resumed sorting his winnings. He packed the notes together first, then he sorted through them to separate them into their different denominations, all the same way up, and then stacked them together again before counting them out. Seven thousand credits! Woohoo! Then he scooped the coins and the (ugh) gold tooth into an empty glass for the waitress. *Seven thousand credits!* ...But wait, that wasn’t all – *what* was the plastic slip under it all? Skooch picked it up and began to look it over.

“What the heck is *this?*” He asked, squinting to read it under the dim light. Jonn Deire still sat across the table from him, his eyes red-rimmed and moist – the big man seemed to be having an emotional meltdown and dissolving from the inside!

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

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

“Ah needed the money!” Deire told him in his heavily accent-laden voice, “Ah had a few debts to pay off!” Deire said, subdued. Skooch put down the sheet and looked intently at Deire.

“You bet a ship on a game of Uno?” He asked slowly, incredulously.

“Well...” Deire shrugged, clarifying. “Ah didn’t think Ah’d really *lose!*”

Timaset Skooch thought about it for a minute. *Yes*, he thought – he was quite right in thinking the man a little off-kilter – the kitty was only around seven thousand give or take a gold tooth and some coinage – minus the ship – which must’ve been worth well, a *lot* more than seven thousand, even in scrap metal! An alarm started going off somewhere at the back of his mind, faintly, as though some cynical part of him had started to frantically wave to get his attention.

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

“*You don’t want mah Celeste?*” Deire glowered, suddenly livid with raw rage! Skooch was by no means slow – and realized awkwardly that he might as well have just called the man’s darling little sister a two-bit counter-clockwise thigh-scrubber from North Lugaluru! “Ah *lost* her to you, Mister Skooch – *fair an’ square!*” Deire insisted.

“*Okaay!*” Skooch sighed, noticing the area of empty space which had started to grow around them. He had unwittingly offended the man’s sense of honor – and Deire was a *big* man! Hurriedly taking the document back, Skooch started looking it over again, from the top. Under the grime and stains of ages past, it read: “*Terran Merchant Fleet Registration Certificate*”. Somewhere in the spaces indicated below were the name of the owner – one *Jonnulass Mc Watt Deire* and the technical specifications of the particular vessel. It was a *Rotanga* Class loderunner, certified to carry cargo and passengers with a total not exceeding blah, blah, blah.

“But it’s a *hundred and twelve years old!*” Skooch protested. “It’s older than *Deanna!*”

Deire glowered silently at him.

“The colony – not the planet – well, you know what I mean!” Skooch parried sullenly.

“She still works pretty good!” Deire maintained. “Stardrive gets a mite twitchy at warp four, but that’s just a dodgy plasma injector!”

Timaset Skooch’s mind raced around in tight little circles, waving its little arms in a mild panic. He didn’t need a ship – especially not a flying museum piece! What was he going to *do* with it? And, as far as he knew, a dodgy plasma injector could drop you smack into a wormhole ending somewhere on the other side of the universe with no way back! Well, he could always sell the damn thing... Couldn’t he? Yes, that was a good idea! He could use the money! Damn, he could *always* use the money! Maybe the crew would want to buy it back from him? “Wait... dildo,” he thought, “The idiot bet it because he needs the money... which means they probably don’t have any money to begin with!”

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

“No catch.” Deire said, sounding strangely genuine. “On mah honor!”

Perhaps it was some kind of blessing in disguise? “*Yeah, right!*” a small imaginary figure with horns and a pitchfork whispered in Tim’s ear.

“Well, all right then.” Timaset Skooch said at last, shrugging. “Thanks. Thanks a lot.”

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

“I’ll come around sometime tomorrow then.” Skooch murmured, feeling numb – and wondering if the dull pain running down his left arm was some kind of warning – as the dejected older man rose and walked out. Well, alright then... Pocketing his winnings for the evening, Skooch rose and waved at the barman on his way to the exit. As he drew level with the doorway, he slowed cautiously and paused a moment to look and listen. Most guys who had just won seven grand in a card game in a dingy low class bar would stand a fairly good chance of getting mugged as soon as they set a foot outside – but not Timaset Skooch! Oh no, his reputation tended to provide him some protection! The denizens of the red-light district in northern Lugaluru usually gave him a wide berth, and were generally unwilling to tangle with him...

And that was possibly the last thought that passed through his mind before the world around him exploded into constellations of stars and other assorted bright lights!

When he finally awoke, lying on the cobbles in a puddle of his own drool, the first – ok, maybe the *second* thing to hit him, was that he was still alive – and that it was probably worse than being dead, but only because being dead probably didn’t hurt quite so much. While pulling himself together and taking stock via the *wallet, spectacles, testicles* method, he discovered that he’d been robbed. Wallet, gone... Money, all gone – the ship’s ownership paper – no, damn – he still had that... so the only thing in Tim’s coat was *him* and the deeds to nothing much! Hmm, thieves with savvy – fancy that! What a great start! He was actually disappointed!

It was enough to convince Tim that the *Celeste* was jinxed! It just had to be! He now had to get another wallet, but then what would be the point? He had nothing to keep in it now anyway! He was broke, *and* he still had a ship to get rid of! Well, maybe he could recoup his losses that way, he wondered? Oh, and he’d acquired a headache on top of everything else! Massaging the lump at the back of his head, he slowly made his way back to his jeepo, now more determined to get rid of Deire’s damn loderunner than ever!

* * *

Dorian Wintermuller was something of an enigma to most people – even to Timaset Skooch. At 27 years, Dorian was still not really what one might call gainfully employed. Dorian was a qualified interior decorator, and did the odd private contract now and again, but thought that being a kind of new-age house-wife was far less stressful. No, gainfully *un*-employed suited him better for now – and it saved *years* on his life not having to fuss and fiddle – to say nothing of the stress involved in getting a client to understand the subtle differences between *cerise* and *lilac*.

Back in the early 21st century there had been something of a second sexual revolution, carrying on where the original one had left off. First it was women’s liberation, followed by the gender equality revolution. A sudden social awakening occurred, in which people became aware

that Humans didn't exist simply between two poles of an imaginary gender binary, but came in fruity flavors of masculine, feminine, heterosexual, homosexual, bisexual, asexual and even omni-sexual – and of course, anything else in between that better suited the individual – not forgetting the transsexual and transgender folk! Even poor oppressed males were suddenly allowed the freedom to be comfortable while dressed in funky styles, to experiment with perfumes, skin care products, make-up and nail varnish and even carry – um, man-bags. Everything was suddenly available for the *liberated* modern man! That in a nut-shell more-or-less describes our friend Dorian – a guy with far too much good taste and style and sensitivity to be content with ordinary blue jeans, a check shirt and 'old leather' after-shave.

Today, Dorian wore a black silk shirt, brown slacks with silver zippers down the front of each trouser leg and a pair of black, thick soled 'puppy squasher' ankle boots in the latest style. Thick gold chains encircled his neck and wrists, highlighting his long brown hair which was straight and cut in an elegant bob. Imagine a few rings too, for effect.

On the balcony where Dorian sat, legs crossed, sipping at a tall thin glass of red wine while reading 'La Femme' magazine, he had a pretty good view of the back of Atro City University from across an alley-way. Soft music played in the background – and he heard the sound of a key turning in the front door.

"Honey, I'm *hom-o*." Came the sound of his partner's voice, heavily laced with irony.

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

Tim disappeared past the open-plan kitchen, dropping his keys and coat on the sofa as he passed through the lounge on his way to the small bathroom.

"Got any band-aids?" He called out. Dorian rose to follow Tim inside the bathroom with a look of concern on his face. Tim had dropped his T-shirt in the laundry basket already, and was standing with his back to him.

"Been playing rough again, darling?" Dorian said, and pointed out the little pack of band-aids in the medicine cupboard that Tim was rummaging in. Tim turned round silently and they embraced, his muscular arms encircling Dory's slim little waist, his slim little arms reaching round Tim's neck. Their closeness highlighted Dorian's petite and feminine build.

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

Tim laughed, and winced suddenly from his headache.

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

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

“I won seven thousand creds in a card game!” Tim explained.

“Really?” Said Dory smiling. “That’s great!”

“Yes, I thought so too – and then I got mugged.”

Tim continued cleaning himself up as best he could, thinking a nice soothing shower and perhaps a nice relaxing evening with Dory over a glass of wine – or two, or three – and some dinner might cheer him up.

“And the money?” Dory asked.

“The money, Dory? What about me? I got my head bashed in.” Tim reacted with annoyance. With Dorian it always came back to the material things – and no matter what, sometimes it was never enough! “The money’s gone! ...But my head’s still here – a little dented, but okay! Not that you’d miss it, huh?”

“Oh, poor baby. Pain makes you grumpy.” Said Dorian, wiping the blood off his hands on a towel before leaving Tim to shower and clean and dress his wound.

“That’s quite alright!” Tim muttered under his breath. “I’ll do it myself!”

The shower was refreshing and it helped him to relax and calm down again. Oh, Dory! Whenever Tim got annoyed by Dory’s materialism, it made him lose perspective! But when he calmed down again – as he always did, he’d be sure he was being unfair towards Dory! A few minutes later, Tim returned to the lounge area to find Dorian relaxing on the sofa watching a local soapie with a fresh glass of wine. Popping some pain pills, Tim downed them with a glass of milk and wordlessly slunk off alone to bed.

Tim slept a dead sleep, and woke up the next morning with Dory’s head on his chest. The soft smooth skin of her face was pressed against him. Her brown locks snaked across his chest, as did one slender arm. Pale morning light filtered through the blinds drawn across the window. She was fast asleep.

Timaset Skooch stared at the ceiling and considered his life as it was. It wasn’t too bad; he made enough to get by on. Okay, he was broke at the moment, but Dory owned the apartment and anyway, he had a credit card to take care of things like groceries and the odd luxury. Every so often he had to work like crazy to make a dent in the debt. He thought back on his earlier life. He had no issues about his gender or sexual orientation – and as far as he could remember, he’d never had any cause to think he had. At least, not until he met Dory.

Tim was comfortable in his life on the whole, and for the most part, he was happy with Dory. They’d been together for two years now – as a gay couple, as the old term went – when that sort of thing had still been socially unacceptable. Back in the Dark Ages, he thought. All through Tim’s life, he’d had girlfriends – *real* girlfriends... Including right up to the week before Dory. Tim sighed. He’d never intentionally fallen for her, but sometimes crazy things just happen, right? One night a guy goes to a club he’s never been to before, has a few drinks, meets a beautiful girl who completely blows his mind, and wakes up in a strange apartment next to her

– and then she gets up to go to the loo, and pees standing up! And on the way out in a great hurry, he trips over her clothes and false boobs lying in a pile on the floor...

What more could he say? Timaset Skooch had fallen head over heels for a guy in drag – and couldn't stop thinking about her – him! Shit happens, right? After days of not being able to get Dory out of his mind – at least, as the woman he thought he'd met that night – Tim had gone back to look for her. Being a private, um – dick, it was easy enough for him track her down – and it was damned hard to tear himself away from her again! Dory asked him to move in with her a little later – and that was two whole years ago! All in all, taking stock, Tim knew he was happy. Poor, dented – but happy.

His thoughts turned to his current situation. He still had the ownership papers of some decrepit old cargo ship in his jacket pocket, and he still didn't have a clue what to do about it. Memories of the previous night's happenings convinced him it heralded bad luck – but very likely only if he *kept* it! An old ship was like an old jeepo, he thought – assuming Tim knew anything at all about either ships or jeepos – that is, any more than where to plug in the charger, or how to hold the steering wheel. If you held onto either of them long enough, you'd end up working just to keep up with the repairs – and then you spent all your dosh on the darned thing and ended up taking a bus or riding a bicycle to work!

He took a deep breath to calm his racing mind again. Perhaps he could turn this thing around? Get rid of it and bank the money? That would be the better option, he thought! Hell, he never spent any money on it – at least not yet – so theoretically, if he sold it for just five cents it would be a profit! There had to be a way he could get rid of it for more than that – a *lot* more than that?

Tim's head throbbed softly as he sat up. Dory moaned softly and slid off him and turned over as he slowly got out of bed. He gave Dory a long tender look. He knew it wasn't perfect – hell, it wasn't even all smooth sailing – but they had something good together! They both had good influence on each other's lives – for a start, Dory had stopped having wild nights on the town and getting beat up by nasty men, and he had someone to go home to for a change – somewhere where he felt loved and wanted and useful – even if he just came home with empty pockets and a hole in his head! At least he came home, and most of the time, she was glad to see him, even when he came home the other way round. It seemed to be working out for them.

Sometimes she would still dress up for him, on special occasions. Then again, Tim considered, most of Dory's wardrobe was so middle-of-the-road; it was sometimes hard to tell if he was a guy or a girl no matter how he was dressed – but then again, Dory liked it that way. When Tim wasn't dealing with another self-loathing episode of internalized homophobia, he did too.

Their problem was the *other* stuff, Tim decided. Money was important to Dory, but he guessed – no, he *knew* he was important to her – *him* too. In his more lucid moments, Tim knew that Dory loved him in his own little way. If he didn't, then he wouldn't be waiting up for him – he'd be out on the town, cheating – and he knew Dory hadn't done that in a long time. It was in Timaset Skooch's line of work to know things like that. In fact, he'd long ago stopped checking

up on her activities and decided to just let it be. A relationship couldn't survive without complete trust, could it? They had trust, and that said *something* vital about whatever it was they had together!

Struggling out of his usual morning gender-confusion downward spiral, Tim shook his head to clear the cobwebs, and regretted it instantly. He groaned, and yawned, as he began dragging on some clean clothes from the laundry basket by the door of the en-suite. The loud cartoon boxer shorts disappeared inside his black jeans, and made the room seem if anything, dimmer.

“Ye gods, I need some coffee!” He groaned in a gravelly morning voice. Hoping for a cuppa java to materialize by his elbow was a pointless exercise. Behind him, Dory stirred, rustling the sheets as he turned over. He smiled. “Morning, hon.”

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

“You going to work?” Dory asked in a soft, far-away morning voice. “Want some breakfast?”

“Yup.” Tim replied, tying his shoe laces. “And nope. It's okay, I'll get something on the way – I've got to check something out, I'll be back later.”

* * *

On his way to Atro City space port, Tim dropped by Lupini Square to pick up a coffee and breakfast to go. For the connoisseur of fast-foods and quaint dining experiences, Albrecht's Takeaways on Lupini Square was guaranteed to hit the spot. The little stall set up in a repurposed shipping container, surrounded by twenty or so little tables under umbrellas – and operated by Johannes Albrecht, was famous for hotdogs and coldcats – and Hot Stuff Blend.

As a rule, Tim avoided Hot Stuff Blend – which Albrecht had billed as “the strongest coffee-like substance in the known universe” – and due to recent unforeseen circumstances (involving an unplanned vacation at the Willow Gardens Resort For The Temporarily Insane) had temporarily removed Hot Stuff Blend from the menu. He ordered a cup of Diabolo, black with two sugars in a recycled paper cup, and a sweet and sour chicken coldcat.

Albrecht, a resident of Deanna for many years now, smiled broadly and made pointless conversation laced with a quasi-Italian accent. As usual, he was dressed in a white and blue pin-stripe shirt and black slacks, with a green apron tied round his generous middle – and tipped his classic “boater” hat at him in thanks.

While Tim waited for his order, he stood idly by and watched his surroundings. Lupini Square was a bustling place, crowded with people walking in many directions at once – and pigeons too, that occupied the otherwise open spaces between them. The winged vermin of the galaxy plodded idly along, pecking at bits of food that fallen into the cracks between the cobbles, like static buzzing on an old TV screen.

In the pale blue morning sky above, the two moons were giving way to Ramalama – the Lord of the Day – and scurrying off to the safety of Deanna’s night side. The smaller of the two moons, known as *Ding*, was only about fifty feet around, consisted of solid titanium, and was a known hazard to shipping – so it tended to get knocked out of orbit fairly frequently. In fact, Deanna was probably the only place in the known universe where Chicken Little would be right at least once a month – all because Deanna had a small moon that occasionally fell out of orbit, usually at awkward moments – like when lots and lots of people happened to be watching.

It was general knowledge that the Tourism Office kept putting it *back*, afterwards – sometimes it would take up to three large space tugs to put it back into its low orbit, at the right altitude, speed and vector – but only *after* they’d spent some quality time polishing the marks and scratches off it! After all, Deanna couldn’t afford to have a shabby moon with *fingerprints* all over it, could they? I mean, what if someone *saw*? Sometimes it seemed that *Ding* was scarcely back in its low orbit, than some careless loderunner pilot would knock it down again!

As he sat at a little table and ate his coldcat and sipped on his coffee, Tim looked thoughtfully up at *Ding*’s larger sibling, *Dong*. The larger moon was about a kilometer in diameter, but because of its greater distance away from Deanna, it looked only slightly larger than *Ding*. He’d heard *Dong* described numerous times as “a piece of nothing much with a flag planted on it”. Fortunately for everyone on Deanna, he thought, *that* moon had never fallen down to the surface!

Atro City Space Port was a rather large facility on the edges of a huge concrete tarmac where smaller and sometimes medium-sized ships would land and park. One side of the ‘mac – the side closest to the highway, where it was visible – was almost always parked up by cargo and small private ships. It looked like a really, really big airport, which in essence it was. The terminal buildings were enormous – an extensive complex of offices, baggage and cargo processing systems, storage areas, passenger waiting areas, and even a hotel! There were also bars, coffee shops and stores of all kinds inside.

Tim parked his jeepo in the huge parking garage basement under the main building, worked his way through security and, once inside the complex fifteen minutes later, got a space port taxi to take him out to Bay 227. Flatbed and container transporters rumbled past them as they conveyed cargo to and fro along the service routes between the ships and the terminal. About five minutes later, he was delivered to where his new acquisition stood parked, one little sardine in the can, a ship amongst hundreds of others, nearly identical in shape color and design.

The *Celeste* turned out to be a rather shiny little ship. Battered and dented, even scratched and scraped here and there, but definitely *shiny*. The tired old hull glinted brightly in the morning *Ramalama*. From the look of her, it seemed she’d run into *Ding* at least once. The skids were shiny new titanium upgrades, quite possibly the loderunner equivalent of a set of shiny new mags on a street rod. Yup, Tim thought. If this was a street rod, they would be spinners. One of them had a ground clamp on, which told Tim a few very important things – firstly, that the space port authority was obviously not too enamored of the *Celeste*, its previous owner or crew, and

secondly, that the ship wasn't going anywhere. At least, not until it was removed – and that cost something – usually that most rarest of things, being actual *money*.

“Lovely!” Tim thought where he stood at the foot of the main ramp at the bow of the ship. He hoped his new acquisition didn't also have neon lighting around the number plates, or those annoying little blue lights on the windscreen washer nozzles – and ultra-violet light tubes on the undercarriage or cooling nacelles were a definite no-no! He suppressed an involuntary shiver as the taxi pulled off, leaving him behind to face this nightmare on his own.

“Mr. Skooch!” A booming voice greeted from up the ramp inside the cargo area of the ship. Jonn Deire was standing there, dressed as before, in a pair of old denims and a plaid shirt. The dark maw of the ship's hold loomed behind him.

“Welcome aboard!” Deire shouted, heading down the ramp towards him. The shape of the man's overgrown and unkempt beard indicated to Tim that he was smiling.

“Thanks.” Said Tim dourly, before adding under his breath, “I think.”

He shook hands with Deire apprehensively, before being led up the ramp and inside, where he saw stacks of crates in the hold, which appeared to run along the length of the ship. One or two corridors crossed the open space above, where they adjoined the two sides of the ship – and where, presumably, all the other places on the ship were. It wasn't very neat or well-packed at all. In fact, there didn't seem to be much if any actual cargo onboard. Even Tim could see that, and he'd never even been aboard one of these things before! All sorts of detritus littered the deck, which prompted him to check the undersides of his shoes.

“Oh – um, sorry 'bout that, Mr. Skooch.” Deire apologized sheepishly. “Sometimes we carries cattle!”

Tim assured Deire that it was all right and his shoes needed a clean anyway, and let the man lead him deeper into the belly of the whale and on to more of the same. The corridor Deire led him down was narrow and grey, the sides were dull and not very clean, and the carpets – where there were any – were frayed and worn. Stuff seemed to have been trodden into them, stuff the autocleaner droids obviously couldn't get out. *They did have autocleaners, didn't they?* Tim wondered. Frankly, saying that the ship seemed to be showing her age would've been a gross understatement. It was flaunting it, in fact.

“Red-horned wildebeest!” Deire continued, “You know, Mr. Skooch, we hafta pack 'em in real tight, or they fall over! Y'know what a mess that would make!”

“You must have a real ace cargo-master.” Tim remarked, tongue-in-cheek.

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

“F.F.B?” Tim repeated, giving him a blank look.

“Florpavian Flame Bird.”

“Oh.” Tim said, getting the picture. “Sounds nasty.”

“It was, Mr. Skooch, it was.” Deire said with obvious sadness. “It killed poor Wang, an' it badly damaged three containers next to the cages too! Nasty business! Took days to collect all

the bits and send ‘em home! You have any idea what it costs to send human remains via courier these days?”

“Not really.” Tim admitted.

“Not to mention how they don’t like doin’ that – if they know, o’course!”

“I’ll bet.”

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

“Yeah, that is kinda funny.” Tim agreed. Very funny indeed.

Tim had seen a Florpavian flamebird once – and they reminded him of the stories he’d heard about dragons as a boy. The head of the thing sort of hinted at one, looking for all the world like a giant lizard on two legs, but covered by bright blue feathers, not scales – which were always a little singed around the nostrils and beak and other more delicate places – which were usually bright pink, like the thing had been grazing on raw chilies all week long. Small scrawny wings sat high up on its back and seemed to do little more than fan the flames than anything else.

The creatures had pretty much what could be called raw acetone for blood, and walked around the surface of their home planet, Florpavia – eating raw chemicals and crapping crude plastic explosive everywhere it went. Their breath was noxious, and their hiccups deadly. Its coughs were feared by even the hardest and most athletic cargo-master or extra-zoologists brave enough to transport or study them! Er, to say nothing of the ...*flatulence*. Once, on a TV documentary, Tim had watched an experienced zoo-keeper run, flat-out too – at the mere hint of it. His young assistant hesitated. Vaporized, poor kid.

At least he got a whole episode dedicated to his memory afterwards, but Tim couldn’t remember his name. That had made Tim’s mind up that if he ever saw a zoo-keeper running he’d try his level best to keep up with him! “Silent and deadly” had nothing on it! When angry, the bird could incinerate a full-grown man in seconds at a range of twenty feet – and sometimes even on purpose! Aim was the thing, you see – and that was just the female of the species! The males just moped around, looking for females and suffering acute indigestion and passing gas. Anyway, it was lucky that the creatures were mostly docile and peaceable. For the most part they did nothing more menacing than sleeping all day and blowing smoke-rings from both ends – but the trouble was, they were far too nervous – and, due to inherent digestive problems, had a dangerous tendency to explode without warning.

“It’s somethin’ to do with the plumbing!” Deire told him. “Heartburn!” He said, and then nearly choked in his own spittle laughing about it. Tim knew very well that Deire wasn’t kidding – he’d heard the male birds could explode with the force equivalent to ten kilograms of C4 plastic explosive! He’d be running too, trying to catch up with the cargo-master and zoo-keeper!

Unbelievably, some ~~people~~ *idiots* got it in their heads that the creatures made good pets! Pets! Imagine! Tim was glad there was no sign of a Florpavian Flamebird anywhere he could see! It’s an image thing, Tim thought, in the same way that other idiots kept lions and leopards as domestic pets – and being in apparent control of such a large powerful creature with an aura of inherent fatality about it! They would invite friends and prospective business partners round to

show off their power and affluence – and then, one morning the maid comes in to work, and finds the big cat lazing on the couch looking well-fed and the only bit that she can find of the boss is something that might be used as an ashtray. Only, in the case of the F.F.B., the maid would be swearing under her breath about the extra-terrestrial bird crap all over the lounge tiles while sweeping what was left of the boss into a dust pan. That, or she would open the front door and fall into the crater that used be the lounge. Flamebirds didn't eat people, but they certainly had a reputation for killing them none the less.

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

“Kinky s...” Tim repeated, his voice trailing off in disbelief. “*What?*”

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

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

A centrally-located elevator connected all three levels of the chambers to the sides of the cargo hold. First impressions, so the saying goes, only come around once. It was worn, dirty inside and outside – and the doors looked like they had been kicked repeatedly from the inside, possibly by a small angry elephant with very bad toothache. The schematic on the left side of the car next to the manual control panel was old and yellowed. After a moment spent squinting, Tim realized it wasn't a schematic layout of the ship, but an old photo of some interstellar beauty pageant winner from ...*many* years ago. It was stuck onto the side panel with bits of tape.

To make matters even worse, the car-computer turned out to be semi-intelligent, apparently – and like a sailor’s parrot, had learned some of the crew’s colorful lingo.

“State your fucking destination please!” A disembodied electronic voice said, sounding if anything, bored – and generally out of fucks to give. “You are now on level one! If you don’t fucking know where the fuck you want to go, I could just tell you where you can fucking go! If you don’t want to go anywhere, then please just fuck off!”

Tim exchanged a shocked glance with Deire, who looked a cross between slightly embarrassed and amused.

“That’s a really unpleasant bot!” Tim said, more disturbed and unsettled than he’d been all day so far. He took being sworn at and abused as a matter of course, an occupational hazard – but somehow being abused by a *computer* was... *unnatural*? Was that the word? *Yes*, he decided – that’s what it was! It was like being sworn at by his shaver!

“Well, fuck you very much!” The car-computer rebuked him, obviously having taken offense. It seemed to simulate anger very well.

“A thousand apologies, Mr. Skooch!” Deire apologized. “Been meanin’ to get that thing fixed – proper-like, but...”

“Fuck you too, tubby – and all the crickets on yer grass!” The car-computer cursed Deire with convincingly simulated vexation. “So much fer loyalty and support! Huh! Lemme tell you something, Jonny-boy...”

“*Garn!*” Deire exclaimed hurriedly. “Quick – let’s take the stairs!”

Tim followed him out again, leaving the manic computer to continue its tirade against Jonn Deire. Well, one thing was for sure, of all the faults he’d seen on this new ship of his, *that* one had to be the worst – surely? Well, he hoped so – and anyway, it was going to have to be... um, *fixed* – if he wasn’t going to be tempted into emptying his blaster into its command interface!

The next stop was the Celeste’s Galley. Timaset was no marine expert or even a space ship enthusiast, and had no idea why anyone would call a kitchen that. Wasn’t that an ancient kind of long canoe with oars? Ship’s terms aside, it looked reasonably clean and serviceable enough, despite the persistent smell of beans and – *sniff, sniff* – cabbage. At least he couldn’t see any cockroaches around. It was small and had a door that led into the little dining hall adjacent that looked like it could accommodate maybe twenty people. The swing door had marks that looked like someone had used it for target practice with a meat cleaver. The dining hall featured a wooden table that lost its veneer years ago, and the top looked like it had been scoured with steel wool to the point where the sharp edges had become all rounded and the center of it had become slightly hollowed out. Words had been carved into its surface, and marks that looked like someone had been sticking knives in it for a long time.

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

A stout-looking older man dressed in black slacks, a yellow golf-shirt and a faded white apron covered (presumably) in food stains, had materialized at Deire’s right shoulder, looking like he was the proprietor of a low-grade diner. He had on his face the sort of expression said proprietor might have when greeting a health inspector, and thinking about giving him a brief tour of the establishment’s basement.

“This is Jimmy.” Deire said by way of introduction. “He’s the cook – and the helmsman – that means he flies the ship.” Deire added a quick imitation of a man holding a steering wheel, which made Tim fervently hope the ship wasn’t actually steered with one.

“I know what a helmsman does.” Said Tim defensively, while thinking “Never trust a skinny cook.” He also knew what an Exo was – Executive Officer, the Captain’s second in command. “I watched lots of *Star Trek* reruns as a kid.” He added.

Jimmy stood about a head taller than Deire, and had an earring and grey stubble, and his hair was shaven convict-style. Over that, he wore a bandana which was tied up at the back of his head. Tim didn’t see a parrot on Bubba’s shoulder, but he did have a sizeable paunch and a well-used cleaver in one hand and another one stuck in his belt. *Hmm*. Tim made yet another mental note never to turn his back on this man in particular.

“Bubba.” He greeted.

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

Next, Deire took him on a brief tour of the engine room. It was small, cramped and the floor and even the control desk surfaces were littered with – well, *stuff*. It looked sort of technical, electronic. The bright lighting just made the place look even smaller. A short, pale little man with thick glasses leered at them from inside an inspection pit inside the warp reactor.

“Hey watch out, man – don’t step on that!” He warned aggressively in a squeaky voice. “Not unless you want to be stuck on this bloody planet, like, forever!”

“That’s Jimmy-Jo Jackson.” Said Deire, practically beaming with pride. “We call him Triple-J. He’s the only mechanic I ever met got thrown out o’ the Space Fleet!”

“Really?” said Tim, almost too afraid to ask why. Surely that was nothing to be proud of? “Why would that be?”

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

“Yeah, well, y’see his assistant y’see, his assistant’d challenged him how fast could he strip the engine. An’ as it turns out he was pretty damn fast – the warp engine y’see, the warp engine was all over the deck, *heh-heh* – kinda like *this!*” Deire grinned, and ducked as a hydro-spanner came whirring past them, making a sound like a helicopter. It clanged into the bulkhead behind them and fell to the deck, leaving chip marks in the paint. Deire chuckled all the way as they beat a hasty retreat back into the corridor, followed by the sound of another warp drive alignment tool crashing to the floor.

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

“Little touchy, ain’t he?” Deire grinned at Tim.

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

Tim thought the bridge of the *Celeste* was small, unimpressive and rather disappointingly so. He expected banks of blinking and flashing lights, but just about the only light aside from the one in the ceiling was the one that told the pilot the handbrake was up, or something equivalent to that. At least there was no sign of a steering wheel anywhere.

The center seat where the captain was supposed to sit, squeaked and wobbled. Even worse, it was worn and shabby. When Tim tried it out and sat in it, it listed a little to one side. A cup-holder had been crudely screwed onto one arm, and there were beer stains on the faded and worn coverings. Thankfully, he couldn’t see a gun-rack anywhere, but he took note of the fact that he’d actually felt compelled to *check*. A large display screen took up much of the front of the small chamber. It was obviously turned off, because it was dark and dull. He tilted his head a little. It seemed a little ...skew. Yes, it definitely was. Deire dutifully informed him that it was to compensate for the chair.

He was about to ask Deire: “Why not just fix the damn chair?”, when intuition smacked him upside the back of his head. “Never mind.” He thought.

There were two small control desks up front, which Deire informed him were for the helmsman (funny imitation of man with steering-wheel again) and the general functions of the ship, including communications and remote control of the loading gear on the cargo deck (which hadn't worked in about sixteen years) and so on. So much for the bridge. There was no Captain's ready-room or anything. Tim felt rather disappointed and let-down, but then it wasn't a military ship after all – it was just a private cargo vessel, a little old loderunner. Also, there was no real *captain* per se, just a *skipper* – a man with a Ticket to fly – which as it turned out, was not *him*. He was the owner, but he couldn't skipper Celeste – unless he got his own ticket, which would mean a couple of months studying and night classes, and school fees. Like that was going to happen! No, to use the ship – that is, for any actual *flying* and not selling tickets so the public could view a relic of two centuries ago – he would have to hire a skipper! Tim's tour continued until it eventually ended in what was still Deire's cabin.

It seemed that Jonn Deire, the former skipper of the Celeste, was a bit keen to leave – though not exactly in a hurry to do so. His stuff had been packed into two large duffel bags lying by the door, and a few dark spots on the walls marked where picture frames had been removed. On closer inspection, Tim noticed that they were darker because there was less dust there. The carpet was still a little plush in places, but had been stomped flat for the most part, and was an ugly brown color which suggested dirt and heavy staining. He could only imagine what Dory, as a decorator, would have to say about it. *Hmm*. Or about the whole ship for that matter! Realizing that he still had to tell her about all this, he started wondering how exactly he was going to go about that task! He could remember one particular incident when Dory threw a hissy-fit that left a pile of broken plates and glasses in its wake! Lucky for him, Dory's aim wasn't too good. Lucky for Dory, Tim was quick on his feet.

Tim sat down with Deire at a small table with a bottle and two glasses on it. He checked the label. It was *Falling Sherry*, a recent addition to the local liquor stores.

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

“I did try.” Said Deire. “But honestly, mister Skooch if you were looking to buy a ship – would *you* buy this one?”

Tim hesitated to reply honestly, considering the last time he tried that.

“There – y'see? There's yer answer! Not a single taker! Not a one!”

“Ahem.” Tim coughed. Deire had a point – a very, very good point. Theoretically Tim wasn't legally bound to actually take ownership of the thing, but one thing was clear – he needed some bucks! All it would take was just one lucky break! Perhaps this could be it? Maybe he could get rid of it somehow, in a way that was profitable? Just one lucky break, that's all he needed! On the other hand, he couldn't shake the feeling he was being conned, just a bit.

”So does this thing actually work?” He asked bluntly.

“Does she *work*?” Deire repeated in a way that reminded him of the prior comment re. his sweet little female sibling from North Lugaluru. “Course she does!” Deire said, and then piped down a little. “Well, if Jackson puts the engines back together, she will!”

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

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

“Okay.”

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

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

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

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

“Oh, jus’ a small disagreement between me an’ the harbor-master.” Said Deire quickly, avoiding his eyes.

“How small?” asked Tim.

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

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

“Got any plans?” asked Tim.

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

“So you’re staying on then?”

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

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

* * *

“Have you gone *completely mad*?”

Timaset had never seen Dory’s nostrils flare quite like that before. Well, okay, maybe he had – but that was in the heat of passion – and *then* he didn’t feel quite as nervous as he did now. Or as threatened.

He’d come home and told Dory about the whole business with the card game, the loderunner and everything. Dory had listened at first, and took it quite well for the first few minutes. At least he was still standing and the cupboard containing the frying pans (and the knife drawer) were still closed, and while he stood between Dory and the knife drawer, he was also keeping a clear path between him and the front door, just in case.

Tim tried to sugar coat his tale with the whole *schpiel* about how much he loved Dory, and how he was going to do this for *them* and how much *they* could make out of just one trip. But

Dory just got mad at him anyway. Not that Dory was possessive or anything, but he just hated being apart from him for long. That, and having their routine disrupted.

Tim sometimes tended to think it was more of the latter than the former, but that was usually just when he was recovering from one of their block-famous fights. Old Mrs. Ransom across the hall from them once boasted she was going to sell tickets – or ‘ring-side seats’ as she put it. Of course the best thing about the fights was when they made up again – which was also something Mrs. Ransom wanted to sell tickets for, but would *never* get the chance.

“I’m getting a little tired of getting my head bashed in every other day, Dory.” Tim explained. “I’ve tried taking more high profile cases, I’ve tried taking cases from the SOD’s, and I’ve even tried card games – betting on the flying frog races – this is the only way... Unless I win the lotto. And I’ve tried the lotto!”

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

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

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

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

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

“Sure we do.” Tim agreed, and sat beside him, and draped one arm around his partner’s shoulders. “But I don’t want to have to keep getting shot at just to make a living – sooner or later they’re going to get lucky!”

“You could get lucky!” Dory added, giving a tired little smirk. “You could be my hubby!”

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

“My hubby, a kept man.” Dory mused. “I’d have you all to myself – you won’t *have* to work. You don’t even have to *now*.”

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

“Good.” Dory said quietly, moving her slender arm slowly out from behind him. He froze, a suspicion forming in his mind – but before he could react, he heard a dull *bong* sound as she lightly tapped him on the head with a large frying pan. He winced.

“Where’d that come from?” Tim asked. Dory smiled and dropped it softly on the carpet at his feet.

“A girl has her secrets!” She smiled, shrugging. “Says so in the rule book!”

“But you’re not a girl, Dory – not exactly.”

Tim regretted his words almost instantly, not because they were technically true, but because of the hurt look he saw in her eyes. Thankfully she'd already discarded her weapon. The illusion of it was important to her. The ambition to make it a reality – well, real, and he wanted her to be happy.

“Someday I will be.” She said, hurt, looking away before adding: “With or without you.”

He was aware of Dory's desires and plans, but the whole thing just perplexed him as it usually did. He often wondered if it wasn't all just some sort of erotic fantasy for Dory – talking about transitioning to female, while never actually making it happen. Life was complicated enough for Tim, just having a meaningful conversation with her about *anything*, let alone *this*!

The he-him-her-she thing always gave him a headache! Perhaps it would be good for their relationship if Dory stopped being a boy and became a girl? An *actual* girl! They were pretty good with things like that nowadays, doctors. He once had a colleague in the SODs who lost an arm in a fire-fight with some bank-robbers – blown right off with a shotgun! The medics just grew him a new one in their clone tanks, and two weeks later the guy was playing ping-pong like nothing like it had ever happened! Imagine what they could do for Dory. He winced, getting a sudden stabbing pain in the nevers from the thought. Tim's mind boggled!

He loved Dory, whether male or female down below, he loved that *person*! A part of him that had still been a little shocked at the boy-bits of Dorian Wintermuller, and sometimes rebelled and caused him to pull away, stood in the spotlight of his mind, shuffling its feet anxiously. What if it *did* happen? He wouldn't have to face complicated pregnant silences when he introduced her at parties anymore, for one thing. Or perhaps he would actually get invited to parties! For another, he could stop having a complex about his sexual orientation and she – well, she could live her life the way she always wanted! It was all just so... *strange* though. He took her hand in his.

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

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

“Of course.”

Then they kissed, passionately. After that, the evening became something of a blur – which is what normally happens when people have fun and time flies. Motion often distorts things, relative to how much fun you have – and wine too, wine sometimes does that sort of thing.

The next morning, Tim left quietly without waking her. He had more business to attend to – some distasteful business, in the rougher side of town. He parked his jeepo outside a run-down office beside a large junkyard. The industrial area of Atro City wasn't the kind of place you went unless you really *had* to. Well, at least that's how Timaset felt about it. Tim disliked dealing with the criminal elements on Deanna. That wasn't to say he didn't mind collaring and busting criminal types – he'd been a career law-enforcer after all, and like most career law-enforcement types, he'd grown up wanting to be the good guy who collared the baddies – but what he really,

really *detested* was to have to ask one of them for a favor! There were still a few who owed him favors.

After being shown into the main office, Tim was confronted by a short, stocky, slightly tubby man with a bull-dog face. Giggling Harry was what some might call a big fish in a little pond, a small-time crime boss – a leader of a small enterprise that dabbled in this and that. Giggling Harry dabbled in shady imports, which co-incidentally, also happened to be the name of his largest business enterprise – Shady Imports Inc. Giggling Harry was called that on account of what he did most of the time, he giggled. It was sort of a nervous tick, one that would suit any self-respecting mad-scientist or any person dilly-dallying on the verge of potential insanity. Harry wasn't particularly educated, but he was far from dumb, and neither was he crazy – and yes, his name really was Harry.

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

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

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

“What can I do fer yez?”

“I've acquired a ship, Harry.” He said. “I need a cargo, just something to start me off, like.”

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

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

Harry gave another short giggle. “Spacer now, eh? Fixin' on doin' a little loderunnin'? Hee hee hee. What you know about space, Skooch?”

“Good point,” Tim conceded silently to himself. Other than video games, movies and the fact that he'd traveled through space to Deanna as a young boy, he didn't know terribly much about space travel – or even about space commerce. When it came to it, he was a layman. *Sure, ask Dory, she'll tell you.*

“I'll try anything... once.” Tim continued, repeating. “I just need a cargo. Just something to start me off.”

“Cargo huh?” Harry said, thoughtfully. Then one ham-shaped fist came crashing down on the desk, and a pile of papers slid over silently. “You t'ink I'm stoopid? What is this – I give youse a cargo an' then you bust me? Get outta here!”

“No, seriously, Harry – I'm on the level!” Tim protested, while doubting how level he really was, in going through with this crazy scheme in the first place. “Look Harry – you needed my help once, remember? And I helped you. I figure one good turn deserves another, right?”

Harry sat quietly chewing on Tim's remark, and his cigar.

“Yeah.” Said Harry slowly. “Yeah! You did – an’ you came t’rough f’me! That you did! Ok kid! Siddown! Now, it jus’ so happens somebody I know needs a little cargo space – I’ll set up a meetin’, be at this place at 2pm today, ‘k?” Said Harry, scribbling a note which he passed over to Tim, following up with another little giggle. “But if yer screw me, ever’body what’s anybuddy on Deanna gonna know what happens ta guys what messes with Harry Uiler!”

Tim read the note carefully before folding it and sticking it in a pocket.

“Thanks, Harry.” He nodded.

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

* * *

A few hours later *Captain* Timaset Skooch sat in a rather dodgy little bar close to Atro City Spaceport, being offered money to transport two people to somewhere off-world, as soon as possible, no questions asked. The arrangements were made by a middleman with no neck and a tendency to smile a lot. Tim didn’t trust middlemen, even more so than men with no necks – it usually meant they were connected in some *other* more sinister way. It also meant they would lose no sleep over having *his* body dumped over a steep cliff in the badlands at midnight – say somewhere outside the city, maybe in Hobo’s Gorge, and probably by someone else on the same payroll.

The two mystery passengers in question arrived, one a young-looking fellow – about eighteen or so, in a sand-cloak – which was rather unusual for Deanna, as most of the locals wore cowboy hats and the like. So, clearly this was not a local. His older companion wore a slightly wrinkled green metallic business suit and had white hair tied back in a neat short pony. The fact that he had not one line or wrinkle on his face was somewhat disconcerting. Perhaps his pony-tail was tied too tight, Tim thought? The middleman grinned again, and introduced them (chronologically) as *Misters* Smith and Jones. *Hmm*. Nothing at all suspicious about that, right? The pair moved in behind the table and sat beside him. The boy, who appeared awkward and withdrawn, sat quietly and timidly observed the other patrons.

“So you’ll transport us to – where we want to go?” Mr. Jones asked, looking around suspiciously.

“So where is that, exactly?” Tim asked. “I still don’t know.”

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

“An asteroid in the ri – *Jupiter has rings*?” Tim asked, perplexed.

“Yes, actually – very faint ones – you have to look *really* careful, like.” Jones grated, keeping his voice down.

“*Really*?”

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

“Oh. I *see*.” Tim said, looking round. “These walls have ears,” He grinned sheepishly. “Got it – so what is it, dude – some kind of local trouble?”

“Let’s just say we’d like to avoid any *Imperial* entanglements.” Said the older one in a silky voice sheathed in innuendo.

“Well that’s the trick, isn’t it?” Tim smiled back, thinking of a ballpark figure, figuring these guys seemed desperate enough to his advantage. “But it’ll cost you something extra – ten thousand, all in advance.”

“D’you think you can do it?” Jones asked modestly.

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

“No questions asked...”

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

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

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

“No,” Said Jones blankly. “Just the two of us. And some hand luggage. Why?”

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

“Yes, I had one too.” Said Jones. “Sort of like someone walking over *your* grave, wasn’t it?” There it was – another implied threat!

“Something like that.” Tim nodded. “Yeah, just more like de-ja-vu... or something.”

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

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

“Okay.” Tim agreed. “You’ve got yourself a ship. Mr. Jones!”

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

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

* * *

With the cash in his pocket and one hand close to the blaster in his belt holster this time, Tim went home to pack. Dory wasn’t there. Disappointed, he went about packing what he thought he would need for about a month away. He left her a brief note which he placed on her pillow. Feeling somewhat homesick already, he made his way to the office of the Harbormaster at Deanna Space Central. By the time he reached it, he was minus his blaster (which had to be handed in at Security) and under a security escort. The Harbormaster him or herself didn’t see

him personally, but his or her PA did, through a foot-thick plate-glass window. At least, he *thought* it was a window. It could've been some kind of fancy display screen and the mousy little man on the other side could be in a secret bunker miles away somewhere else altogether. They communicated via an intercom. Security, security.

The amount required to have the ground clamp released was 1040 credits exactly. Ouch! Luckily, Tim had the money. He leafed the notes off, crisp and clean (and he had no doubt, freshly laundered too) and placed them in the mechanical slot that opened in the counter top. A printout appeared silently from another slot – a receipt with a stylized cartoon obsidian crow giving a thumbs-up, saying “*Thanks, man!*” at the top. “Very cute!” He thought.

Thus, more excited than he remembered being in the last few minutes, Tim left with the assurance that the clamp would be removed forthwith – and with the butterflies in his tummy telling him he was excited about the trip! Ok, maybe the *prospect* of the trip – if the ship really did fly... And if that maniac in the ship's engine room knew his stuff!

Celeste was waiting outside for him – shiny and old, bright, but really scary – it stood there waiting on the tar-mac, promising an unknown future that might hold either riches, or terror – or even possibly, both. A small droid that looked all wheels and thin, tentacular arms was busy removing the grounding clamp from the front landing skid as Tim debarked from the taxi. The clamp was also a semi-intelligent piece of hardware, which didn't seem to want to leave – in fact, it seemed the two devices were arguing. Tim preferred to stay out of it, and walked a wider circle than really necessary around them on his way round to the foot of the ramp. He went up it, consoling himself that at least he had his blaster back and wasn't going in *there* unarmed! Perhaps he would find out how intelligent the elevator computer really was. A grim smile played on his lips – if it was *really* intelligent, it would know when to keep its mouth shut.

Tim's new lodgings – being the Skipper's cabin on Celeste – were roomy but musty smelling, like it hadn't been aired in decades. Considering the lack of windows that could be opened for that purpose, he located the ventilation control panel near the door, and increased the flow to maximum. He was rewarded with a sudden blast of dust from an air vent at the center of the ceiling, and the noisy chirp of rusty fan bearings! After a few moments, the small dust storm cleared, as he watched the airborne dust circulating towards the air intakes in the skirting which ran around the sides of his room. Coughing, Tim went to the bed – which had been thoughtfully made up with fairly clean-looking bedding. The yellow-stained teddy bear was a nice touch, Tim thought. Unnecessary, but nice.

He dropped his bag on the bed. It didn't even bounce, but just landed with a muffled wooden blanketty sound. He pressed on it a few times to test it. The surface under the antique comforter gave a little – but only a little. Anybody hoping for a little bouncy-bouncy *there* was going to be disappointed! Tim presumed it was a good bed for people with back trouble – and if you didn't already have back trouble, after a while, you *would* have! A sound at the still-open door behind him, made him turn. It was Deire, leaning against the doorpost.

“Y'all settling in, Boss?”

Tim shrugged a wordless reply. He couldn't really find words to describe how he felt about... everything.

"How far is that guy – uh, Triple-J? With the engine?" He asked Deire.

"Nearly done," Deire said, shrugging back. "About an hour ago anyways. Why? Are we goin' somewheres?"

"I got us a fare." Tim told him. "Passengers."

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

"*Boner* – I mean, *bona fide* passengers." Said Tim, unzipping his bag and beginning to unpack. "Two. They should be arriving soon."

"Where're they goin'?"

"The rings of Jupiter, apparently."

"*Garn!*" Deire exclaimed. Tim wasn't able to tell if that was because Deire had spotted the glaring error in that statement.

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

"Sounds good t' me, Boss." Said Deire, sounding impressed. "Ah came to tell yer – there's somebuddy outside wantin' to see yers – a lady."

"A lady?" Tim repeated.

"Real pretty, like." Deire said, smiling.

"Don't know many of those. At the ramp? To see *me?*"

"Yup." Deire replied as Tim made for the door. A puzzled sort of look crept over Deire's face and he shook his head. "Jupiter has rings?"

"Apparently." Said Tim going with the flow. "They say you've got to look really hard to see them, like."

"*Garn!*"

"Yes, that's what I thought too."

As Tim left his cabin and turned the corner, he overheard Deire's voice saying with enthusiasm: "See Bubba – Ah told yer gettin' in some new blood would get us outta this mess!"

Part of Tim had been wondering just how unexpected Mr. Deire's bad luck at cards and gambling really was. Oh well, Tim shrugged, and headed back along the corridor to the cargo bay.

Somewhat unexpectedly, Tim recognized the visitor as Dory – and *hell!* She was dressed as Dory this time, a pretty brunette who fooled everybody who saw her and didn't know her! *Really* know her! She wore perfect make-up and a perfect hair-do, and a short black skirt and a pretty floral Spanish top! The fish nets and short boots just did it for him! Then again, she knew that. There was just a tiny *hint* of shadow on her face, he noted as she smiled at him – a coy little smile like the one that made him fall for her in the first place! He couldn't see any carefully concealed frying pans on her person, not even a miniature one – but a figure like hers just demanded frisking! *Down, boy!*

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

“That’s not a good idea!” Tim’s early warning system told him, jabbing him in the ribs with a sharp elbow. But he couldn’t refuse, could he? It wasn’t a good idea, considering the esthetic state of the Celeste and her line of work – and overall, went pretty much as expected. Despite her not actually saying anything negative aloud, Tim was sure she was making notes... about something. Tim managed to make it a rush-tour by cutting out the worst bits, avoiding the elevator altogether – and the cargo bay, the engine room and most of the (ugh) crew. That left the bridge, his untidy cabin and a short stretch of corridor with a remnant of half-decent carpet. Needless to say, she seemed mortified, but said very little, aside from just a comment about how men liked to ‘rough it’.

“Well, I hope you know what you’re doing.” She said at last. “These people look like they could steal you blind and throw your body out an airlock as soon as they break orbit.”

“I never knew were such a cynic.” He remarked, smiling uneasily. She was right – he didn’t know these people – and he trusted them even less than he knew them. “I’m not going to change my mind, Dory.” He said calmly. “I’ve got to do this!”

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

“I’ll be back before you know it.” He smiled back.

Their parting kiss was poignant and filled with longing from both sides. Just as Dory was leaving, the two passengers arrived. As the taxi carrying Dory vanished from sight, Timaset Skooch swallowed the lump in his throat, then turned and walked towards them. A small baggage attendant droid – property of the space port – whirred along ahead of them, carrying their personal effects. Young Smith seemed distracted and Jones virtually gave him a shove to prevent him from tripping over the porter droid. That did seem a little rough, Tim thought at the time – first impressions and all that. Tim didn’t know Smith or Jones either – but something about Jones appealed to his trigger finger. He supposed that spacers who transported passengers had to put up with all sorts of folk – especially the ones they didn’t personally have time for.

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

“*Mr.* Skooch will do.” Tim clarified as they drew up to the ramp. “I’m the owner. Mr. Deire inside is the skipper. Well, let’s get your gear inside. I think it’s best if you avoid the elevator – we all do, use the stairs instead.”

“Faulty?” Jones asked suspiciously, as though eyeing the state of the Celeste from its outside appearance.

“No,” Said Tim honestly. “But it talks way too much.”

* * *

A little while later, in the empty cargo bay, Jonn Deire introduced Tim to the two replacement crew members he’d asked for. Granted, it had been short notice, and most of the interested candidates had turned around at the first sight of the Celeste, and got back on the taxi – and both new recruits were the only ones actually desperate enough to follow through and walk up the ramp to be interviewed, but both vacancies had been filled.

On a deep space voyage a ship's doctor was essential. Or, at the very least, they needed a medic of some sort. Tim had asked for a medic, but Jonn Deire had surpassed his expectations and got him a fully-fledged doctor!

"His name's *Nurse*, Boss." Deire giggled by way of introduction. "Don't you geddit? That's his name – Nurse! *Doctor Nurse*!"

"So what?" Tim replied, a little embarrassed for his new crewman's sake. "You were named after a tractor. What's the big deal?"

Deire beat a sudden retreat, grumbling under his breath as Tim stepped up to meet Doctor Nurse. In all honesty, Barry Nurse wasn't allowed to practice as a doctor anymore – apparently he'd been removed from the Roll by the Terran Medical Council who felt he'd spent enough time practicing and ought to have got it right by now.

A hospital caught him burying a few of his mistakes a couple of years back, and after a brief spell in *Lulu Penitentiary*, he needed a job. But he could work as a medic – and as a medic he wouldn't be required to do more than patch a few cuts or bruises, perhaps treat a bit of nausea or other tummy ailments brought about by Bubba's cooking... No need for limb transplants or open-heart surgery anticipated. Hopefully. Anyway, Barry Nurse was tall, thin and his hands were exceptionally clean, and he looked the part to Tim – who hoped he was. He didn't want the man burying any mistakes around him!

"Welcome aboard, Doctor Nurse." Tim grinned as he carefully shook the man's hand. "You're lucky you weren't a nurse, or perhaps your surname could've been *Doctor*." He joked.

"Nice to meet you too, Captain." Nurse said bluntly in the manner of someone who has already heard all the jokes and stopped thinking it was funny long ago. This just sent Deire into another fit of badly-suppressed hysterics behind him. Yes, Tim thought, Nurse and Deire should get along famously – they already had something in common.

"I'm the owner." Tim explained pointing at Deire. "*He's* the captain."

"Skipper." Deire corrected.

"Okay." Nurse nodded. "Fair enough."

"You have much experience?" In the field I mean?"

"In the field?" Nurse asked uncertainly. "Do you mean in medicine, or working in space... risking my life on this...whatever this is?"

"Both." Tim said candidly.

"Actually I was a GP for ten years, and then a coroner for a while after that." Nurse explained. "All spent here on Deanna – seven years at Fortitude General and five at San Fedora Public."

"How long were you in Lulu?" Tim asked bluntly.

"Five year stretch." Nurse replied matter-of-factly.

"Fair enough." Tim nodded. "If you stick to the rules and keep my crew alive, you'll be treated fairly and receive your fair share of anything we make out there – that good enough for you?"

"Sure, fine." Said Nurse. "Er – what rules?"

"Whatever I say needs doing, gets done." Tim explained. "Green?"

“Green.” Nurse nodded in a way that told Tim the man must *really* have needed the job badly.

“Are you any good at psychiatry?” Tim asked, sounding perhaps a little hopeful.

“Not really,” Tim’s new medic went on dryly. “I never tried my hand at psychiatry – getting into my patient’s heads was always far easier when I was a coroner and did autopsies. There were fewer complaints and come-backs that way, but I know my way around human bodies if you know what I mean, Captain.”

Tim nodded. “Bang, *splat!*” went that idea! If Nurse had been inclined towards shrinking the heads of the crew – and not in the sense of a quaint South American tribe – it might’ve alleviated the levels of blatant idiocy on the ship, or perhaps merely explained it. Nevertheless, *autopsies* might still be an option, especially if there were any more “accidents”. Meanwhile, right at the top of Tim’s personal new list of rules for the Celeste, was “NO FLORPAVIAN FLAMEBIRDS”!

At the same time, it occurred to Tim that his own personal space-going zoo had probably just acquired a new prime specimen of *Lunaticius Absurdicus!* He began to consider looking into a mirror to check if someone had written “*shit magnet*” on his forehead – and if not, why not – because it seemed to be true!

“I’m the owner, not the captain.” Tim explained to Nurse again, pointing at Deire. “*He’s* the skipper.” He turned to the second unfamiliar new face at their small gathering. “And you are –?”

“Victoria Somers.” Said Tim’s new cargo master – a really big lady who was tall and muscular, and didn’t lean very much toward the feminine side. “But call me Vic, ‘k?”

Vic’s hair was short and by the look of her, there was no doubt in Tim’s mind that she could do the job without having to “get a man to do it!” She had a deep voice too, to add to Tim’s confusion – and she insisted on being called Vic. So, smiling and shaking her hand, Tim welcomed Vic aboard. Afterwards, he considered adding an ‘e’ to the end of her handle of choice.

“Thanks, Skipper.” She smiled.

There was a definite pause during which Tim wondered if anybody had heard a word he’d said.

“Deire’s the skipper,” He began, “I’m the – *oh, fuck it!*”

Vic looked at Tim in a way that made him think she was just teasing him. Oh well, he thought sarcastically, he was tired of repeating himself anyway! Yes, it was very funny – ha ha!

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

There were definitely more lights on upstairs in that house, Tim thought, bit of savvy there too.

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

Now there were six crew onboard Celeste – Tim, Deire, Bubba, Nurse, Vic and Triple-J. That meant every profit was to be divided six ways between them. That had been the previous standing arrangement, according to Deire. It suited Tim – heck, he couldn’t afford to pay six salaries otherwise! But – Deire informed him, as the legitimate owner of the ship, *he* could claim

the largest slice of the pie. Tim made up his mind that as soon as his piece of pie got big enough, and he'd amassed as large a small fortune as he could, he was going to get out of this shit hole! He would sell them back their ship, and bail!

Satisfied with his new crew members – who found their lodgings and began settling in – Tim went to the engine room to check on Triple-J's progress. As it turned out, the Celeste's engine was already completely reassembled. All the lights on the control panels were green, so unless the thing was loaded with malfunctions, it seemed everything had been reassembled properly. At least that's what Triple-J told him.

Not that Tim had ever worked on a ship of any kind before – or had any idea of what to actually look for when conducting an inspection of an engine room, but it did reveal a ton of shiny baffle plates, blinking lights and funny little things that quietly went 'beep' occasionally.

Despite all of the above, Timaset Skooch got the distinct impression that if the Imperial Space Fleet still ran ships as old as this one, then *this* is how the engine room would look come inspection time! Even the little chromed nuts and bolts that held on the baffle plates were gleaming! Tim wasn't too clued up on the nuts and bolts of space travel – heck, he just barely knew which end of a starship was the front, and had a twelve-year old's idea of how a stardrive actually worked – in the same way that the average driver knows his car is powered by liquid fuel and not galloping spirits, or the Devil in a tight harness! As it was, Tim barely knew where to fill the hydrogen tank on his SOD cruiser when he was on the force! As far as he was concerned, that's where *technical* people came in – people who knew that sort of stuff, because that's what they did. What was important to him, was to *look* like he knew what he was looking for – and what he was looking at! Bullshit baffles brains, or so the old saying went! Be that as it may, Tim couldn't see any obvious spare parts lying around, and no sparks flying anywhere, and no glaring faults in plain sight that might scream or wave to get his attention. He hoped this thing would run, and get them off the ground, into space and back again. And of course, not blowing up on the tarmac would be a bonus.

Triple-J stood to the side of the main control console, with the reflections from the blinking lights on the control console playing on his mad features – and smiled madly. Like most technician folk, he seemed dead keen to see what would happen when he fired up the thing he'd spent the last week working on in pieces. Tim reminded him that if anything (gods forbid) went wrong, and the engine did blow up or turn into a gravity well inside the engine room – *he* would be the one who had a front row seat.

END OF PREVIEW

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Thanks!

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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.

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