

# **Nothing like the** **Prodigal**

by Ben Peake

## About this story

This is a short story about how coming home isn't always as easy as it's made out to be in all those cute morality plays.

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## Acknowledgements

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Praise for this story is both welcome and necessary. Suggestions about this story are welcome. Criticism is less welcome, but no less necessary.

[0] Ho ho. Ha Ha. He He.

"DE-013 to Lomasport, has a landing berth opened up?"

"Negative, DE-013... oh... wait a minute..."

Silence reigned in the cabin as my co-pilot and I waited eagerly. We'd been waiting for a berth to open up for nearly twenty four hours and we were getting very frustrated.

"Commander, couldn't we just –"

"No." Pradesh had been asking for the last six hours whether we *had* to land at Lomasport and couldn't just land at one of the other three starports on the planet. Unmoved, I'd decided that we needed to land on my home turf and was going to wait as long as was damn well necessary.

"Sorry, DE-013, false alarm. Hold your position until a berth opens up."

I groaned and kicked the underside of the panel, while Pradesh smiled nervously.

I'd picked Pradesh up on Achenar, shortly after my last co-pilot had left me for a glamorous Imperial Navy Career and a glamorous Imperial Navy Officer boyfriend. Unreasonably, she seemed to prefer excitement, prestige and pots of money to mooching around the universe doing bounty hunting, fulfilling dodgy contracts and trying desperately to stay on the right side of the law and the black ink of the books. I couldn't see why.

Pradesh seemed a decent sort, though not particularly experienced, in either the ways of the universe or in piloting a spacecraft. I'd given him the weaponry console and told him to watch the way I handled the ship. He was a round-faced, smiling man from what is euphemistically known as 'a good family'. He balanced this with a good work ethic and an amazing ability to soak up failure and bounce back. We'd come through a couple of combat encounters without getting *too* close to death. He was rounding out nicely. His optimism was being tested severely, however, by his Commander's bullish insistence on landing on home soil.

Finally we got clearance, and began our descent. As the landmasses and terrain became more distinct, a shadow of a smile began to steal over my face. I hadn't been back here in nearly six years. It hadn't changed. It had no *right* not to have changed. There should have been earthquakes, droughts, floods, salinity, anything to change the texture and shade of the landscape.

"Are you glad to be home, Commander?" I turned and saw Pradesh grinning back at me.

"Maybe. Tell you when we leave." My lips twisted. There were a lot of things I was coming back to, some of which wouldn't be all vodka and chocolate.

As the city swam into view beneath us, nostalgia swelled like a pain in my chest. The Basin, Darke's Reserve with it's winding stream, the City of the Valley with jungle encroaching at the edges, the imposing mass of the Three Straws in the centre of the city. All of these places were memories, each vivid and rich with colour, scent and the slick, everpresent feeling of Coopersworld moisture on the skin. This place had been my nursery, my play yard, my school and my testing ground. Memories ached in my bones.

"DE-013, you are cleared to land on platform five, it's –"

"On the north side, furthest from the tower, I know. Thanks control."

There was a moment, then the woman on the other end of the tower replied suspiciously. She was a local fixture, this traffic controller, a woman of legendary unfriendliness. "You local?"

"Born and bred."

"Hmph... well... happy homecoming then. Control out."

The Constrictor touched down with a bit of a thud, as I abandoned caution for speed. I was suddenly eager to be out there. It was dusk, when the heat lessened to the point that it became worth doing

things again. The siesta on Coopersworld lasts six hours, and at the end, things fired up for the remainder of the night. Bedtime was around two (Midnight for children) as humans can't totally escape their diurnal habits. Then back up at six or seven and rocking on until it became too hot to breathe. The routine drove off-worlders insane, but it bred the natives both tough and smart.

The auto-taxi took hold of us and dragged us into the hangar. As the shutdown sequence completed, I turned to my companion.

"Right. Now here's some health and safety tips for you, Pradesh. Coopersworld is hot as hell at the best of times, so drink a lot of fluid. Avoid the water. Try to disguise that Imperial accent a bit, there are dumb bigots about. Also," I said, thumbing off the artificial gravity button, "don't try running or jumping. You're on a high-G world now, you'll fall hard."

I flicked the switch to turn off the internal gravity and watched Pradesh's face sag downwards as Coopersworld gravity asserted itself. With a bit of an effort, I raised myself from the chair and started to walk around a bit. It was hard work, as I'd been working to 1.1 G in the cockpit for my copilots' sake. The full 1.7 G had the poor bugger pinned to the chair. Sweat beading on his brow, I saw him raise an arm and wave at me. He'd get used to the sweat. I smiled at him and opened the hatch. A blast of hot, humid air engulfed me. Moisture coalesced on my skin as if a brush had painted my body in one sweeping stroke of sweat. I stripped off my flight jacket and hung it by a hook by the hatch. I wouldn't need that here.

I walked out into the hangar and stood for a second, inhaling the heat. It filled my lungs and entered my blood. Over in the distance, a couple of techs worked on an ageing Krait. Their accents cut into me, familiarity opening old memories like half-healed wounds. A clanging sound echoed from behind me. I looked back to see Pradesh staggering down the gangplank. He was walking with quite a bit of difficulty, getting used to the higher Gs. As I watched, he stumbled and grabbed for the rail, straining not to fall.

"You're on Coopersworld now," I called out, "step carefully."

Pradesh looked up at me and nodded. I hoped he'd caught my double-meaning.

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The undercity looked familiar in the dusk, with the vendors returning from their siestas to set up again. I vaguely remembered some of the stallholders, but after six years, I didn't trust myself with conversation. The glowbulbs flickered into life along the side of each canvas stall, palely illuminating the trays and cooktops. All manner of item was sold above the benches, with even more exotic varieties available below eye-level, if you knew the way to approach them.

"Alien Artefacts, direct from the Northern Reaches. Alien Artefacts, *genuine* Alien Artefacts!"

"From genuine aliens?" I inquired innocently. The red-faced, black-haired hawker paused to give me a suspicious glare.

"Move along or buy something, sonny. Don't take up space reserved for legitimate customers." she snapped.

"What about illegitimate ones?" I replied, leaning closer. "My friend over there has newly arrived on the planet and is having some problems... adjusting."

The woman's eyebrows rose slightly. She bit her lip, and unlocked one of the glass cases (filled, of course, with highly genuine Alien Artefacts).

"In which case, I'd recommend this Thargoid-fashioned bead necklace. The *third* and *eighth* beads might be a bit dodgy, but the rest of it are absolutely genuine Alien Artefacts."

"Ah yes, the *third* and *eighth*." I nodded sagely and handed over the credits.

High-G adaption drugs are essential if you're going to be on Coopersworld for any length of time. I didn't need stress fractures and dehydration to ruin Pradesh's week in my home town. He looked doubtfully at the large brown pills in his hand. The many, subtle changes they worked on his physiognomy and metabolism would make his life a hell of a lot easier. Probably.

"Are these safe, Commander?" he asked.

"No." I said sadly, " but the Government overlooks them ... oh... safe! Sorry... I thought you said *legal*." I grinned uneasily. The rumours of side-effects were unsubstantiated, but persistent. I mean, I'd never seen anyone hideously deformed by them, but there was always that cousin of a friend's brother who was standing right next to one of them in a lift. Of such folklore is a culture made.

"Anyway, unless you want your knees to end up bone-rubbing on bone, I'd suggest you take them." I thrust the water bottle at him. Looking very unhappy, he popped the pills on his tongue and washed them down. He coughed and choked a bit, but I was watching to make sure he didn't spit them out, voluntarily or involuntarily.

"There. Give it a day or two, and you'll be dashing around like a native."

"I can't wait, Commander." Pradesh said, looking vaguely nauseous.

"Look, Pradesh, we're on the surface now, could you stop calling me Commander?"

"As you wish, Commander. Where are we going now?"

"To find someone."

"Can you contact them on the comm?" Pradesh asked the logical question.

"Yes. But I'd prefer to surprise them." I grinned, giving the illogical answer. "Probably working at the moment, so it'll be a bit of guesswork catching them. Look, tomorrow I'll take you out on the tiles. Lomasport has a great nightlife scene."

If anything, Pradesh looked more apprehensive, shuffling his feet nervously. I clapped him on the shoulder and began to move through the undercity.

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The central "straw" in the Three Straws is the most prestigious of the towers. Unlike the office space or manufacturing that takes up much of the space in the other Straws, Tower One was a hundred and two stories of retail, hospitality and entertainment.

The top ten stories were the casinos, luxury hotels and playgrounds of the seriously rich. Just below that were the top restaurants, below that the bars and nightclubs. It was where the law-abiding citizens of Lomasport went for a good time. The *other* citizens went to the three sub-basements of the same building, which were indeed a 'wretched hive of scum and villainy'. They were also my old workplace, and a hell of a lot of fun.

There's an old saying in Lomasport that there are a hundred floors between heaven and hell, but if you know which buttons to press, the elevator will take you there within thirty seconds.

The things I'd seen there and the things I'd done there should have been enough to satisfy me. The money was good, the work alternately violent, fulfilling and dull. The people had been good, if dodgy and I'd been happy. At least I'd thought I had been. Nostalgia has a way of ironing out all the creases in your past, and you run your hand over the surface without encountering imperfection. Then you go back to the original material and act all surprised when you snag your hand.

We entered at ground level of the straw. Once we passed the threshold, Pradesh looked around in surprise and disappointment.

"This building does not appear to be climate controlled. Is it poorly maintained or..." Pradesh hesitated as he saw my expression. "... am I displaying my ignorance?"

"Easy way to place stress on the human body is to have extreme temperature fluctuations. The building IS climate controlled, but it's a staggered change. As we get further in, you'll understand."

"Level ninety." I said to the wall sensor. Obliging, the doors closed and the lift hummed, moving upwards.

"Did you frequent this place?" Pradesh asked, conversationally.

"Not up here. Up here is for quality folk." I said, drizzling my words with a bit of sarcastic acid. Whilst the gap between rich and poor in the Federation was not as great as in the Alliance, or for that matter the Empire, there was still enough social distance to put a chip on my shoulder.

"Level Ninety." The elevator announced our arrival. The door opened to a large plaza, ringed with restaurants and bars. Water tricked through an intricate system of fountains and glass covered channels, bubbling over ridges and miniature waterfalls. As it passed certain points, dyes were released, making it iridescent with colour; as it passed others it cleared to a sparkling clear brilliance. An engineering masterpiece, constructed entirely for the momentary amusement of the wealthy. Tinted windows allowed a spectacular view of the last rays of the sun setting over Cooper's Ridge, and the lights and holo-displays were beginning to light up outside the restaurants. The scent of perfume licked our nostrils, exotic scents from far off systems reminding us how expensive they were, and how much it would cost for one of us to go there. Oh, but I'd been there, and I knew how little they were missing. Since it was still relatively early, it wasn't too crowded, and you could still see waiters and chefs hurrying to work.

We walked slowly across the plaza, looking every inch the pair of crows in the Birds of Paradise enclosure. Bounty hunters such as ourselves weren't totally foreign to this area though, so we didn't attract too much attention as we slouched around (though in Pradesh's case, the slouching was because he was still adjusting to the G's).

Pradesh looked around. "It *is* getting cooler in here, isn't it?"

I grinned indulgently. Pradesh may have been slow on the uptake, but he was in no way stupid.

"As I said, Pradesh, it's a graduated change."

"Could you tell me who we're looking for, Commander?" Pradesh asked, sipping on the cocktail I'd bought him from a kiosk. It was 90% fruitjuice, and the rest was 100% proof, and I could see the warmth begin to suffuse his dark skin.

"A couple." I said tersely. I was beginning to regret my impulsiveness. I'd naively thought that the person I was looking for would conform to old habits. The short time I'd been here had reminded me that six years was a long time. The universe has an infinite number of infinitely variable factors, and it was totally unreasonable to expect for people to remain...

"There." I said, moving off through the crowd. Slower in the heavier gravity, Pradesh almost dropped his drink as he lurched after me.

It was the *same* dress. Six years and still that *same* damn red dress. An infinite number of infinitely variable factors and she was still wearing the bloody same outfit. Her hair was still ash blonde, and the figure hadn't thickened or softened. She still treated her body like the priceless asset it had always been, and the low-cut crimson dress showed as much of it off as was decent (perhaps even crossing the line). She was beautifully made up, and I wondered if she still used the same cosmetics robot. I'd watched her submit to it so many times in the past before going out, I'd almost forgotten how magical its work was, how millimetre-perfect its lines and how graduated its shades.

The red-faced, middle-aged sot on her arm was pawing her behind, attention that she ignored, smiling and chiding him gently. Then she saw me. Her eyes widened and her lips formed a M-Type Star coloured 'O' of shock. Breaking free of her companion she dashed over towards me, running

unerringly on high-heels. We threw our arms around each other and she began to plant large rosettes of lipstick on my cheeks. For mine, I just held her, and said her name over and over. She'd been the most important thing in my life for so long, I found it hard to imagine that we'd been apart.

I became aware that we'd attracted a small crowd, among them, Pradesh and the red-faced sot. Pradesh looked embarrassed, whilst the sot was furious.

"Goddamit Kristia! I paid for you for the *entire* night and we're barely out and you're throwing yourself at this shnot-nosed little..." His voice was deep and raspy, with a pronounced lisp.

"Oh Brett, don't get like that... I'm still yours for tonight. I provide value for money, darling!" Kristia half-released me and turned back to simper at her client. Pradesh's eyes were wide. I *did* mention he came from a 'good' family. "I just haven't seen my son for nearly six years, and you won't begrudge me a few minutes, will you snookums?"

Pradesh's eyes opened wider, along with those of 'Brett' as my mother turned back to further deface my cheek with expensive cosmetics. My mother certainly has aged well, I have to say, which I'm sure Brett and Pradesh will attest to (granted, from entirely different perspectives).

At least Pradesh now knew why I hadn't flinched when that Riedquat drunk had called me a son of a whore...

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"So, how's the love life, darling?" my mother said, forking a mouthful of salad off her plate.

I raised my eyebrows and shrugged.

My mother had arrived home, showered and dragged me off her couch. I'd protested, at which she'd snorted in a most unladylike way and said that if she could do without sleep after a hard night's work, so could I. I'd groaned and pulled the blanket over my head.

We'd emerged into the early morning sun and my mother had set off at an energetic trot towards the edge of The Basin. That sparkling expanse of water was blinding in the early morning, and the row of white-daubed adobe cafes along the shore seemed almost spotlit by the reflected glare. I shaded my eyes with my hand, I hadn't remembered it being this bright.

So here we were at a standard Coopersworld shade-cloth cafe, consuming a standard Coopersworld breakfast of a light salad and some Zeladan Miniature Ice Sardines (which overhung the plate, the Zeladans have a warped sense of humour).

"Oh come on, Harvey, if anyone knows a man's needs it's me. Or occasionally a woman's." My mother added, for completeness. She took her profession seriously.

"Nothing serious. A few broken hearts, but they've been in my head rather than in my bed." I slurped my coffee. Given the temperature, hot drinks were not exactly popular on Coopersworld, but I was enough of a spacer to need hot coffee. An hour after dawn, it was already about thirty degrees. I wondered if Pradesh had been woken by the heat yet. This cafe faced Darke's Reserve over the lake, and I could see the birds of prey wheel over the canopy, and with a bit I could even imagine the sharp-teethed face of a Rigellan Vine Monkey looking out from the jungle, resentful of these invaders clearing their jungles and scaring off their game.

"Oh Harvey, I hope you're not ignoring your natural urges. You're looking peaky."

"No mum." I said patiently. "No spacer is interested in sex when they're mortally scared, that's all. It's been a bit hairy the past couple of months."

My mother hmmmmed sceptically.

"Why you couldn't just start up a trading business between here and Gateway or Anlave or something, I'll never know. Then you could have settled and... all right, calm down!" my mother

paused as my outraged squawk made the other diners look round. "It's just that all this bounty hunting and seems to attract such rough types. Mind you, that Pradesh person seems a decent enough sort... for one of those Impies." my mother finished with breathtaking xenophobia. Out here in the provinces, they tended to be a bit provincial.

Back on Level 90 the previous night, Pradesh had been allowed a minute or so of horrified primness before I'd told him to get over it. Then he'd gone very red and looked at his shoes a lot. I'd allowed him a minute or so of horrified embarrassment before I'd told him to get over it. I'd then sent him off to a hotel I knew in sub-basement two. It was in one of the scungiest, corrupted and most criminally active sections of the level, although I hadn't told Pradesh that. I was interested to see how Pradesh would handle it. It would test his resourcefulness, his open-mindedness, and quite probably his survival reflexes.

"You never seemed to mind when I was risking my life being a hired goon in the subbasement." I said tartly, squeezing a lemon over my sardine.

"Yes, but that was different. At least down there there's some sort of order." (Of course, she wasn't talking about the Law) "In space however, there's no order. I was just saying to Bobo the other day..." I began to tune out. Bobo was my mother's 'agent', which is the new-fashioned way of saying pimp. An elderly, agreeable sort, he'd been like a mildly depraved uncle to me. Granted, he had a hell of a lot of my mother's 'sisters' on the payroll. "... and he said that if Harvey ever returns, he'd be the sort I'd want to take over."

I tuned back in damn quickly. "I don't think so. Running an Escort Agency sounds too much like an honest trade. Besides, he won't be retiring any time soon, will he?"

"Harvey!" my mother said, her fork falling to her plate "I knew you weren't listening. He's dying."

I bit my lip. Whoops. No huge surprise. He'd been about a hundred and forty when I'd been born, so by now he'd be getting on, even with the best of medical treatment.

"A full-body clone?" I said, swirling my salad around on my plate. It wasn't the kind of news I'd really wanted to come home to.

My mother laughed. "I don't know what circles *you've* been moving in, but mortals like us can't afford that. The ladies have talked about clubbing together for him, but we'd still be four or five hundred thousand credits short."

I sighed. Things had changed. Six years. I had no right to expect them not to have changed. My mental list of friends and acquaintances was probably too long for the reality that existed on the ground. Some had doubtless moved off-planet. Doubtless, some had died.

"Harvey Ravens." the policeman said. I looked up, startled. "The boss would like a word."

Surprisingly, one acquaintance had become a policeman. Lester Walker. A snivelling satellite of a man, he'd been a constant fixture hovering around our crew. We'd all known he'd been a snitch, and had treated him as such. Now he'd was standing before me in a blue and grey policeman's uniform. Well, well, well. How the worm turns (into a pig).

"Hiyas Lester. And which boss is this, pray?" I said calmly. Lester looked at me with suppressed hatred. The thing about Lester was that he'd cheerfully sold information to all sides. Whilst he now drew a paycheck from the police, he probably drew greater revenue from serving other masters along the way.

"You know who." He hissed at me, confirming my surmise. My mother looked across the table, distaste and genuine concern mixed in her expression. Around us, the young and the beautiful were turning around in their seats. The cafe` hushed as conversations ceased. Lester began to go red.

"Look, tell him I'll be along later in the day. I've got sardines to finish and co-pilots to recover." I



said unconcernedly. The use of a crooked cop to try and bring me in was a message in itself: 'Don't even think of running, I still own this town'. The use of Lester specifically was another message: 'Gone soft while you've been in space?'

A hand buried itself in my shirt and tried to drag me to my feet. It failed, and I remained seated. Lester had always been a bit of a weedy little shyte, whilst I'd bulked up, if anything, since I'd left Coopersworld.

"Later in the day, I said." I looked him square in the eye. Incensed, Lester made to draw his stun-baton from his belt. My mother stood up and pointed an accusatory finger at him, magnificent in a pale green sari and jade jewellery, thundering at him like a pagan goddess.

"You even dream of drawing that on my son, and you'll face an official protest to your Chief Commissioner from the local branch of the LHSU, specifically naming *you!*"

That brought him up short. The Liquor, Hospitality and Sex Workers Union was one of the most powerful in Lomasport. Without it, the tourist and casino industries would collapse. My mother had been an organiser for at least a decade and apparently favoured militant action!

"He's... he's not a member..." Lester whined. His hand fell from his stun-baton and began shaking. A simple, quiet retrieval job had turned into a very public shit-fight.

"Actually, he is! Paid up to date." my mother spat, "You don't think I'd let my son's membership lapse just because he was off-planet on business!"

I grinned uneasily. I'd originally joined whilst working as a hired goon (apparently because I worked at a club I nominally qualified!). My mother had apparently paid my subs while I'd been away. Membership was having unexpected fringe benefits.

"Lester. Tell him I'll be there after siesta." I said calmly.

"There we go." My mother said, sitting down and making shooing motions with her hands. "Off you go, Officer."

For a moment, Lester regarded us both with a look of primaeval loathing. I saw his hand lower to hover above his stun-baton, but I remained relaxed. Lester had neither the guts to draw it or the intelligence to get out of the consequences of drawing it.

We waited until he'd vanished down the stairs before my mother sent me a 'look'.

"Don't worry about it, mum. Just a minor financial issue."

"Oh *Harvey*, don't tell me you haven't been paying your debts, you know how these sort of things work!" My mother chided me, taking a big sip of her juice. She knew very well that at one point I'd been working on the *creditor* side of the loan-sharking business, and didn't want someone like me coming round to extort money from the actual me.

"I've been paying the interest." I protested, pulling on a pair of sunglasses. The sun wasn't yet high on the horizon, but the heat was already close to stifling, and the light close to blinding. "I'll attend to it a bit later, okay? Don't worry... Lester's just the equivalent of a red electricity bill. I pay my debts."

"Not all of them, Harvey. Have you talked to -"

"No, I haven't." I said quickly, having read very accurately who and what she was about to bring up. "Not that I won't, but..."

"Hmph..." my mother was sceptical of my protestations. Rightly so.

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Pradesh met me on sub-basement one, next to the lift, about an hour after I finished lunch with

mum. He had a black eye, a torn shipsuit and a big smile on his face. As it turned out, these were the results of a fight (which he'd won), and a visit to the subbasement's premium brothel. I was a trifle disbelieving. I hadn't been under the impression I'd been paying him enough for him to buy service at that place.

"Yes, I rather enjoyed the establishment you recommended, once I settled an argument with one of the patrons."

"It was over...?" I just had to ask.

"Originally it was over his advances to one of the waitresses, then it moved onto the honour of the Empire."

I tried to stop the groan in my heart coming out of my mouth. The easiest way to pick a fight with an Imperial citizen (*any* Imperial citizen) was to make a disparaging remark, however mild, about the honour of the Empire.

"And you fell for that? Help me with this, will you?"

Pradesh sighed regretfully, as he grabbed the other end of the plasteel crate. "I'm afraid so, Commander. But since the Imperial issue only arose after his first punch had been thrown, I do not believe it was a genuine point of disagreement." My opinion of my co-pilot rose a notch. Oh well, it had plenty of room. "He was also persuaded to retract both points of view once he was lying on the floor." he said, with a bit more satisfaction in his voice.

We wandered over to the gleaming silver doors of the basement's premiere club-cum-casino. The Sensualist's Quest, with a gleaming bas-relief of the namesake ship up above the door. It even had the velvet ropes from last night's queue. I was overwhelmed by reverie. This had been my patch many years ago. Here my paycheck had been signed (figuratively, since I was paid in bullion), and the majority of my scars and skills had been earned. The main part of my job had been being unpleasant to customers. My replacement had obviously drunk deeply from the well of tradition.

"The bar's closed. We'll open in a couple of hours. Piss off."

"Hang on, I'm not here for a drink."

"OK then, why didn't you say? The bar's closed. Piss off."

I looked on the black suited goon on the door with a fond and nostalgic eye. Ten years ago, this had been me, all spiky aggression and filled with my own cleverness and brute physical power.

"I've got some biz with The Man." I said breezily. The goon extracted a datapad from his belt and tapped on it briefly. He looked down his nose at us both. He had the concentrated musculature of a typical Coopersworld specimen, but stood more than a tad over a metre eighty five, which made him either an average off-worlder or a very tall native. Hair shaped into sharp metallic spikes complemented the real metal spikes protruding out of his cheek and jutting out of his earlobes.

"No you haven't. 'The Man' isn't seeing anyone. You call his secretary and make an appointment like anyone else. And before that, take your little box and take your little Impie friend and piss off." he smirked. He could afford to, cocky bastard. He was feeling the power of a large criminal organisation at his back, facing a shabby looking local boy and a puny looking off-worlder.

I tried wheedling my way through, I moved closer to this grinning, skinhead, tree-sized thug. He looked down at me as if I was a Sirrian Centipede crawled into his wardrobe. I glanced quickly at his feet and sure enough one boot was twitching as if to squash me. I quickly looked back upwards and flashed a quick smile. He returned it, and I noticed his teeth had been surgically altered into (you guessed it) sharp metallic points. Heh. The fashion of these kids today, eh?

"Now look, I'm sure if you'd just call through and -"

“No.” he said evenly, “I will not call through. I am paid by the hour, not by the day. And what I will not do is let you take up any more of my valuable time.” He laid a heavy hand on my shoulder, squeezing lightly to emphasise his power and my powerlessness. Now piss off or-”

Pradesh looked in horror as the bouncer crumpled to the floor, face in a rictus of agony. Calmly, I restored my knee to its normal place (next to my other knee). The goon's hands were clutched over his groin and his silent groan of agony was beginning to ascend into the audible scale.

“Commander, shouldn't we...” Pradesh's hand snaked towards me. I turned and looked levelly at my co-pilot. Pradesh got the hint and his hand stopped dead, en route to my arm.

I sighed and leant against the rail. The goon groped towards his wrist chrono and clawed at it.

Pradesh looked on in increasing anxiety as the goon pressed the stud which triggered the panic alarm. When the bar was open on a Saturday or Friday night, the pressing of this stud would have instantly summoned a small army of enforcers and heavies to help the door staff to 'remove' any troublemakers. I yawned and looked at my own watch. At this time of day though, the army would be a bit slower off their bunks.

“Forty five seconds!” I barked, as the door crashed open. By this time, the door goon had graduated to a pained crouch, watching me, waiting with a sort of powerless hate. He looked on the approaching phalanx of about six fellow goons with a sense of imminent vindication

“Shit, that is AWFUL.” I shouted at them, as they stood blinking in the harsh floodlights of the main basement plaza. “You know how much damage I could have done while you took your sweet time getting here?”

I knew the tone to use, and the stance to take, stalking towards them with the sort of menace that could see them sacked and back out on the street mugging old ladies. A couple of the younger ones started mumbling apologies, while the veterans just fixed me with a wary eye and said nothing. I might be the real deal, or I might just be a con artist with a death wish. Either way, if I wasn't an immediate threat, they wouldn't act. I didn't recognise any of them, which wasn't unusual. This sort of security work tends to have a high turnover.

“And as for THIS.” I snarled and aimed a half-hearted kick at the door guard, whose expression had shifted to shock and dismay. “I took him EASY. Where's the Sec Chief? Who's Lieutenant, today? Is there ANYONE here who knows what they're talking about?”

I stared at their faces, and knew that no one was suicidal enough to answer that question. I was feeling it. These guys were amateurs. I'd been intimidated and bullied by experts, all over known space, and knew exactly what buttons to press and what responses would be keyed. I was on top of the world.

“I am, I am, and I do. The man will see you now.” A low female voice said. I turned in shock. A short, dark-skinned woman had just emerged from the silver doors, speaking quietly and authoritatively. At the sight of her, the guards stood unconsciously that little bit taller and that little bit straighter. Pradesh looked confused, which was hardly confusing.

“Claire?” I said in disbelief.

My only response was a hard-eyed glare.

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“Sooo... you have come back to pay off the principal, finally.”

Physically, he hadn't aged too badly from when last time I'd seen him. He was approaching his century, but still looked young and vital. Part of that WAS cosmetic surgery, of course. Even the youngest of men wouldn't have skin on their scalp that tight and gleaming. However, the glint in his

eye and the sharpness of his gesture and expression was naturally his own. His eyebrows were sculpted into dark tick marks on his brow, and his neat goatee still pointed downwards like an arrow. The shapeless metallic robe might as well have been exactly the same one he'd inhabited six years ago. He always reminded me of a snake in that, a long, thin snake poised behind that big desk. He never seemed ready to strike, but experience had taught me that you never see the final strike coming.

His office was relatively unchanged. The black, textured walls and blue-tinted skylight still shone onto the same bare room. A lot of deals had been clinched in this office. I'd been witness to many, but participant in only two. One really, with one meeting at each end. Six years apart. This was the end of the deal.

"I've been making progress on the principal." I said diffidently. It would be foolish to act either smart or submissive with this man. I knew him well, and knew how ruthlessly he would exploit any weakness and how he could afford to have a prickly sense of pride.

Johann cackled at this, and removed the narcostick from his mouth. He pointed it at me and grinned.

"I see a red mark upon your cheek. I hope your... replacements haven't been too rough with you."

"No," I said, "That was Claire. A private matter."

Johann never roared with laughter, but his quiet chuckle swelled to gently fill the corners of the room. Although I couldn't see it, I could feel Claire go red behind me. Fortunately, the place where she'd whacked me made it difficult to tell if I was blushing. I wasn't quite on top of the world, now.

"A private matter indeed. So measured and so restrained. Where is that foolish young man who used to speak before he thought and who acted before he considered the consequences?"

"You should know. You helped kill him." I said, shrugging. "My apprenticeship was his doom."

"Ah, only a part, only a part. You already... but that's a conversation for another time. You didn't come here to reminisce. This is biz."

"This is biz." I agreed. I clicked my fingers. A silence settled over the room. Sighing, I turned around and motioned to Pradesh. I wiggled my eyebrows, and finally understanding bloomed in his face.

"Oh... I am sorry, Commander." Grunting with the effort, Pradesh maneuvered the box around. Claire and the other security guard present watched with interest, leather boots creaking as they leaned forwards. I popped the catches on the crate and levered off the lid. Inside were tightly rolled sheets of plastic, fabric, leather and paper. I unrolled a clear sheet of plastic, daubed with irregular shapes and fine hairline streaks of colour and held it up in front of Johann.

"An early example of Kit-09-L. He was a Series 4 Imperial Academy Art-droid, and I'm reliably informed that his stuff sells for a sodding packet. This isn't a major work, but it's still significant enough that a collector would raise his eyebrows. Valued at eight point six kay."

"By...?" Johann raised one eyebrow. A tiny voice in my head reminded me that snakes didn't have eyebrows, but I ignored it.

"Two reputable dealers. I have the official valuations here." I took out my datapad and placed it flat on the desk. Johann regarded it as if I'd placed an uninvited plate of biscuits in front of him, and he didn't know whether to decline politely or impolitely. Undeterred, I unrolled a short pencil etching on yellowing paper of a naked woman looking off to the side submissively.

"Count Victor D'Ambray. A preliminary sketch for his later work 'Reclining slave at midday'. THAT is a famous one. This is a sketch for the figure in the lower right corner."

"I recognise it." Johann said, settling back in his chair and smoothing out his shirt.

“Valued at three point three, it's considered an excellent-”

“I think I get the basic point of this.” Johann interrupted me. He tapped a button on his desk and the skylight above us darkened, plunging the office into gloom. Show and tell was over. This was biz. “What's the total valuation, which I will of course, check myself?”

“Thirty seven thousand, eight hundred and twelve credits.” I said evenly. “Give or take seventeen percent. A good dealer or cellaring them until an artist dies would also benefit you.”

“Why art?” asked Claire from behind me. Johann's expression didn't change. Interesting, I thought. Claire was permitted to ask questions when the boss was present. Normally, such impertinence would be knocked down, physically as much as socially. But Claire had the privilege to speak in his presence. Very interesting. I directed my reply to Johann.

“I thought you might appreciate a gift, rather than messing about with credit transfers and taxable income. Also, I know you like nice things.” I said, trying to keep my voice from wheedling flattery. It had the predicted effect, which is to say – not.

“Nothing is nicer than money. Besides, the amount you quoted is incomplete...”

“Hang on...” I said, fishing at the bottom of the crate. Johann's eyes fixed on the bright object I brought out of it. With a flourish, I tossed it in front of him. The knife clattered onto the desk.

I heard Pradesh's footsteps shuffle behind me, whilst I heard the soft beep of a Kychima Tri-Beamer's safety go off in front of me. I looked up to see Johann pointing the ugly three-barrelled weapon at me. The smile seemed to have vanished from his face. In its place was the calm, unemotional stare of the snake. Hmm... maybe a bit melodramatic on my part. I raised my hands.

A gasp from behind me indicated that Pradesh was being covered, too. Calmness, calmness was the only way to proceed. Johannes was *never* amused, but if possible, he looked even less so than usual.

“The knife I got for you is an Imperial family blade. It was owned by Monroe, the third son of the twelfth emperor. It is solid, polished duralium with a titanium coating and a monofilament edge. The jewels in the hilt have been crafted by the Imperial Jewellers on Achenar. Apart from its intrinsic worth, it has immense kitsch value. If you'll have a look at the manifest I provided you with....”

“Claire.” The gun remained unerringly pointing at my head, curing me of any wild plans. Not that I had any wild plans in the offing. Strangely, this was all within predictable parameters.

Claire lifted my datapad from the table and tapped the screen.

“If you have a squizz under the RIG classifieds I've clipped out, you'll see that similar items sell for many, tens of thousands of -”

“Stupid Imps.” Claire sneered.

“Not really.” I corrected her tartly, “The most ardent fans of the Royals are generally Feds. Something about wanting what you don't have.”

The silence continued for a little while. Eventually, Johann sat down and the Kychima disappeared back into his robe. The snake settled back on its rock. I lowered my hands, and picked up the knife, handing it over to Johann with sarcastically exaggerated care. He took it and turned it over in his hands thoughtfully. He gestured for the Datapad, and Claire handed it over.

“Total value of the collection?” he sighed.

“Exactly what I owe. This month's pro-rata interest payment, the entire principal, along with the compounded penalty rate for late repayments and the administration fee.”

I'd written the system he used for loan sharking, so I knew every nook and cranny where further

stings might come from. I caught Johann's gaze and held it, challenging him to find a flaw in my calculations. He didn't so much match my gaze as ignore it.

"I believe, Mister Ravens, that our biz is concluded. Claire, please see him out." Claire was suddenly standing in front of me, her hand gesturing towards the door. I smiled at her reflexively. With a similar reflexive motion, her hand snapped out and slapped me on the non-marked cheek. I rocked back slightly from the contact, and looked at her in hurt shock. The top of the world had developed an incline, and I could feel myself slipping down the face of it.

"It appears not all your biz here is concluded, however." Johann observed dryly.

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"Why didn't you write, after the first six months?" Claire said, suddenly sitting up in bed. I looked at her in muzzy incomprehension. It was siesta, the middle of the day. Outside, the mercury had climbed to the high forties, and most of the city had shut down. Claire and I, however, had still been doing business, so to speak.

"You didn't reply, so I didn't think you wanted to hear from me." I said, shaking my head to clear the afterglow.

It hadn't been too surprising what had happened. Claire and I had always had a relationship which started in hot words and ended in hot... er... other stuff. After we'd emerged from the club, we'd had a ten minute shouting match encompassing half-a-dozen of the old battlegrounds, and had ended it sucking face and greedily clawing at each other. Pradesh and the other security guard had apparently had the good sense to abandon us to it after at least the first five minutes. Then back to Claire's place and back to the old habits. This was one of the things I'd dreaded about coming back.

"I was mad as hell, and for a damn good reason." Claire crossed her arms, her shoulders set in sullen martyrdom. Her hair was blacker than I remembered, and she'd changed the colour of her eyes to a deep, smouldering green. She'd bulked up a bit, and muscles corrugated her darkly tanned arms.

"Are you still?" I asked, levering myself up on one elbow.

Claire looked down at me from, and the set of her shoulders disintegrated. Sighing, she lay back down and put a hand on my side. Her face came close, and her legs intertwined in mine.

"I always knew we'd lose you to space. I just hadn't thought it would be so soon, or so suddenly. When Cuong died..."

"It was a strange time." I said evasively. Bad drug craziness had claimed my best friend, and that craziness was explicitly linked to the club, Johannes and even Claire.

"...something in you died, too. Maybe... tolerance for us. It was a bad way for anyone to die..."

"I really don't want to talk about it." I said tightly. Her words had triggered some bad memories, and choice scenes of my best friend's last days and hours played through my mind. She was right. It was a bad way for anyone to die. "But I was always going to go. I had... wanted you to come with me."

"It's not as though you asked." Claire rolled onto her back and closed her eyes.

"And if I had?" I asked provocatively. I brought a hand up to stroke Claire's shoulder. Claire mmmmed in response, stretching like a cat under my ministrations.

"I'm too old now to play 'what if?'. You've obviously never grown out of it."

"I haven't grown out of you, obviously." I said. "It's the old mathematician in me. Check your calculations from all angles, testing all variables"

“Smooth, smooth.” Claire chuckled bitterly, “always so smooth. Maybe that was why I was so angry when you left. It’s the one time you didn’t sugar coat it.”

Replies both contrite, tart and evasive played through my mind, but I banished them all. Silence ensued, lasted and reverberated between us. A silence that contained ambiguity, rather than peace.

Later, as we dressed, it got a bit more normal. The sunset outside painted the clouds in a thousand shades of pink and silver, the Vine Hawks screaming as they returned to their nests at dusk, either with prey in their claws or still hungering. Claire’s apartment had a lovely view, and was probably quite expensive. Johann also probably paid the bills. If he liked you, he made your life a lot easier.

“You with anyone at the moment?” I asked, drying myself with a towel. It was getting cool enough that the layer of sweat would not be instantly replaced.

“Concentrating on my career.” Claire said shortly. She set her hands inside a set of holes built into her desk and held them still whilst polish was applied. “You?”

“A while back there was something... a freighter pilot out on the western edge. We’d meet, talk, mate like randy armourfiends and then depart again.”

“Sounds satisfying.” Claire said neutrally. It was one of the most attractive things about her. The ambiguity. The way her eyebrows remained level and her eyes stared at you guilelessly. It drove me crazy. In all senses of the word.

“For maybe the first eight weeks. After that... well, weeks turn to fortnights turn to months. You can only contrive so many times when you’re spending overnight at the same port in the same part of space at exactly the same time. You jump into a system that little bit too far out or get delayed that little bit too long in clinching a trade deal and the window is gone. Space is big. Lovers are either travelling companions or casual flings.” I mused. “So no, I’m not with anyone. Not for a long time now.” I said, giving a self-conscious chuckle.

Claire gave me a piercing sideways look, without her hands twisting in their slots.

“So that’s love in space?” she said.

“Stellar Scout’s honour!” I grinned, holding up three fingers. Claire’s expression did not lighten.

“As I recall, you were thrown out of scouts for brawling.”

I paused, trying to remember my (typically misspent) youth.

“No. I was only suspended for that. It was the gambling ring I got expelled for.” I said, pulling on a bright coloured shirt. Claire had bought it for me during the afternoon, my black bounty hunter shirt discarded on the floor across the room. It was... a planetside shirt, a shirt liberating me from space.

“That’s right.” Claire withdrew her hands from the holes, and inspected the polish critically. Another silence descended over the room. Claire was dressing for work, and her plain grey business suit shimmered metallically as she buttoned it up. Of course it shimmered – I remembered – body armour. Neither of us had what could be called office jobs.

Every time she arrived at the Sensualist’s Quest, and every time I lifted out of dock there was a probability we wouldn’t come back. It worked on a bell curve. At the beginning of our careers, it was lucky we were breathing at the end of each day. As we rapidly grew more experienced, survival became the background of all our thoughts - Is that man carrying a knife? Does that Viper hold a 1MW Beamer or a s 30MW Mining Laser? - and the risk became manageable. Avoidable, to a degree. But there was never a morning in which the thought didn’t occur: Is this the day?

“You look lovely tonight.” I said, swept up with foreboding.

“Thanks.” she said, walking over and draping her arms around me. “I’m off shift at three.” She kissed me long and hard, then placed a hand on my chest, as my own hands sought to undo her

buttons.

“Will you wait?” I asked, in my best come hither voice.

“I’ll be waiting for you. Hah... waiting for you.” Claire’s smile dropped, and her eyes became hooded. “It’s what I feel like I’ve been doing half my life.” she said, anger suddenly surfacing. The hand on my chest shoved me away and I staggered backwards. Her gaze was no longer ambiguous, but ablaze with anger. She started to shake, and instinctively, I started to move into a ‘defence’ position. Claire knew enough of the arts of war to really injure me if she were of an inclination. Deliberately, I resumed a non-threatening stance.

“Claire... I was wondering whether for once we couldn’t...” I trailed off. I didn’t know what it was for once we couldn’t do.

“Get out.” Claire said levelly.

Without any further attempts at discussion, I ran.

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Pradesh had never been here, but was adapting to Coopersworld very well. I was a native, and wasn’t coping well with it at all.

We’d met a half-hour or so after sunset, when the enervating warmth day had burnt itself off, but the walls of the buildings were still radiating heat. Pradesh was bright and moved with a spring in his step. Gloomily, I assumed this meant the black-market drugs had kicked in and Pradesh’s body was now operating more to the specs of a heavy-worlder. He would have been severely mashing his knee cartilage otherwise.

He’d also shed his bounty hunters attire, but unlike me, he’d done some serious shopping. The Imperial style goes a bit further towards peacock than I’m comfortable with, but Pradesh appeared quite at home in them.

We met in a re-creation-Raj bar, with mock bamboo everything and mechanical punkahs waving slightly cooler air in our faces with every beat. I ordered us a couple of rums from the bored looking waiter in a pith helmet. He placed the bottle on the table and wandered off to where the robotic tiger was idly licking its synthetic fur.

“So,” Pradesh said, giving me a knowing wink. “your afternoon went well?”

“Mike Yankee October Bravo.” I snapped. I saw Pradesh’s lips moving silently as he translated my abbreviation. I saw recognition dawn in his face. It was like watching a puppy being kicked.

“I’m sorry Red, you are quite right, it is none of my business.”

“Sorry Pradesh.” I relented. “Claire and I had... have somewhat of a fiery relationship.”

Pradesh wisely didn’t probe, and we finished our rum in silence. Everywhere, lights were flickering on as the solar batteries charging throughout the day began to release their charge. I signalled to the waiter, and ordered Gin and Tonics.

Pradesh’s face twisted as he tasted the drink.

“CanI ask a question?”

“Of course.” I said. “Just don’t necessarily believe that an answer will follow..”

“Commander, have the ingredients in this drink somehow gone off or-”

“You’ve got to understand, where we came from.” I cut across Pradesh’s query, leaning forwards unhappily. He’d asked a question, and I was damn well going to give him an answer, regardless of whether the two met in the middle. “Claire and I met at that club, we rose through the organisation



together. Johann took an interest in us, we were his... proteges I suppose. The next generation he wanted to leave his empire to. Or to one of us, anyway. We didn't get special treatment though... I still worked on the door and she still worked behind the bar. But we had OTHER duties."

"Other..." Pradesh began, but gave up. I was unstoppable.

"She collected the word on the street and I ran the numbers. Together we sort of had the keys to the kingdom."

"A work relationship..." Pradesh said, trying to go with the flow. He picked up the Gin and Tonic and set his face as he took a sip. I saw his lips begin to purse.

"Yeah." I said, finishing mine in a gulp. I reached for the rum bottle. I felt like getting drunk, stinking drunk. I stopped talking. Pradesh really didn't need to hear all this.

"We had... a certain chemistry." I said haltingly. "But we always had different... outlooks."

"We are all of us in the gutter, but some of us are looking at the stars." Pradesh quoted softly. It was unusually perceptive for him. It also sailed a bit close to the wind for my liking.

"We weren't in the gutter." I said coolly, "and I was looking TO the stars."

"You had the keys to the kingdom, but you were looking to the sea." Pradesh said, then shook his head, as if to shake the mood. I was only too glad to escape it.

"There was... a death." I sighed, "that made me think a lot about where I was going with my life. I could have risen under Johann, got to where Claire is now... I might have survived, or I might have ended up dead like my friend. The law of averages. Of every hundred lieutenants, how many become bosses?"

"Well although I don't have your inside knowledge..." Pradesh began.

"It was a rhetorical question."

"Oh, I'm sorry."

I leaned back and stretched, until I heard my neck crack.

"Space is dangerous, but you get to choose your battles. In the subbasement, if someone wants you dead, you're easily cornered. Here, everything is boundaries, territory, vendettas, protection and snitches. Boundaries divided by territory minus vendettas is not equal to protection. Everything is calculated to the Nth degree, and there aren't many variables."

Pradesh looked at me oddly. I wasn't surprised.

"It might be a strange way to describe it, but it boiled down to the fact that I was scared of dyin' for something that didn't matter to me much."

"Without wanting to be rude, Commander-"

"Which means you're about to be rude. Go on. And don't call me Commander."

"Without wanting to be rude, Commander," Pradesh repeated with a slightly hurt tone in his voice, arms waving as he tried to pull arguments from the muggy air. "From what I have seen of our work, it has no real purpose. How is potential death rendered more meaningful by your work being less so?"

"By being on my own terms." I said shortly. "I might be dying for my own survival, but I won't have to die because someone impinged one millimetre into someone else's territory, or because someone, somewhere decided that they wanted my position, or Claire's position, or Johannes' empire. I don't want to die for anyone but myself."

"By deliberately being small time." Pradesh said, fascinated. He hadn't been trying to be rude, so I

let it pass. “And Claire is not small time?”

I talked to Pradesh of history. Of how a thuggish great lump of a whore's son met a streetkid fence with a quicksilver mind. Claire had been a scrawny kid of fifteen who had wandered into my Stellar Scouts gambling ring and made herself at home. Even then she had those ambiguous eyes. She was cagey enough that I didn't notice her for the first week. She didn't gamble anything, just bought and sold things around us. Trinkets, drugs of the slightly-illegal kind and designer merchandise. We bought and sold and paid little attention to the waif that steadily creamed off a percentage of our hard-gambled money.

Then things changed. Claire was sleeping on our couch at home, and my mother had a new piece of jewellery here, a new dinner plate there. Then it wasn't the couch and there wasn't enough space in my drawers. And then... Johannes.

He'd headhunted us from the street, knowing we had potential, and Johannes loved to invest in potential. That was the main reason I'd given him art. His only temptation is strategic thinking. He wouldn't sell any of the pieces now, but keep them until he could use to devastating effect, and congratulate himself on his cleverness.

He'd used us to best effect. Claire running the bar and the snitches. Me running the door and concealing the money trail. Johannes had hooked me up with a dodgy accountant to teach me about double-entry-with-a-half-pike bookkeeping. He'd also drummed into me the importance of not being seen and not having mercy. Claire hadn't needed to learn these lessons. She'd lived them.

I told Pradesh of how Johannes ran us, like his hunting dogs.

“We were prodigious for our age. Claire knew about police crackdowns before the cops left the briefing room. I worked out twelve interlocking corporations and benevolent associations just to minimise our liquor license fees. And one of them was an icecream van with a turnover of ten thousand a day!”

Pradesh's eyes had glazed over slightly about halfway through my narrative, but he refocused on my face and wiped a glaze of sweat from his forehead. It reformed almost instantly. He cracked a small smile at my elaborate fee-avoidance scheme.

“It sounds like a great game.”

“Oh, it was. But for me, space was always the bigger game. I don't think Claire's even been off-planet.” I'd considered asking Claire to come with me, I really had. But it would have been cruel. She would have either refused me, or worse, come with me.

In Lomasport, Claire knew everyone and everything. The city was her web and she knew every strand, every drop of dew that formed upon it. She traversed it daily, enquiring and interrogating everyone on it. It was her gift, a memory of people and a mastery of intelligence data. She could sense bad news like a dog predicts an earthquake, through sheer instinct. To take her from that rich life into a place where you saw someone other than your crewmate once or twice a week would have been an act of genuine cruelty. People were her life.

“So you left, and she stayed.” Pradesh sighed. “How tragically romantic.”

My eyebrows rose. There was a small 'clink' as my glass came down onto the table. I measured Pradesh with a keen stare. I had to be careful, as Pradesh was beginning to know me well enough to try taking the piss.

“Romance implies that there's some sort of happy ending, doesn't it?” I said, playing along.

“Of course!” he said indignantly. Then, after a pause... “Not *always* on this side of death, but a happy ending, yes.”

“Oh good.” I said dryly. The rum was having little effect, so I poured myself a double, then doubled it. “Anyway, I borrowed the money from Johannes and bought a clapped out old Eagle II and got the frell out of here.”

“And *how* long has it taken you to pay it back?” Pradesh's eyebrows rose.

“Shit, it's not like you can go to a bank manager and say 'Hey, I want to borrow a huge amount of money to go out and do something low-pay, high-risk with a high chance I won't survive to make my first mortgage payment!' And the unofficial lenders aren't exactly low-interest. I needed to leave the planet in a hurry. I knew Johannes, and knew he'd give me the money. I also knew how much it would cost. Hell, I wrote the Loan Sharking Manual. And,” I added, as Pradesh started to look prim again, “it's not as though I'm the only one who got their start that way. You'd be surprised at the massive gap between most bounty hunters Elite Ratings and their Credit Ratings. 'Dangerous' indeed! Drink up, anyway.”

“Ah yes, Red, you were going to show me the famous Lomasoprt nightlife, weren't you!”

I squirmed uncomfortably in my chair.

“In a manner of speaking, Pradesh, in a manner of speaking.”

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“Oh Mrs...”

“Miss.”

“Miss Ravens, you shouldn't have!” Pradesh recovered himself without missing a beat. He regarded the huge bowl of salad before him with equanimity. I recognised it. It was a Bickerstaff Salad with Eta Cass Walnuts. Eight vegetables, two types of crouton and rum-pickled walnuts. It took hours to prepare, and here it was, served on Mum's best pink china with Mum's best chianti. In my current mood, my favourite meal was wasted on me.

I valiantly tried to jack up my smile to an acceptable level. Enjoyment was almost impossible, though, regardless of how jewel-like the cherry tomatoes shone in the green sea of salad. My mother's apartment was a reminder of my life before space, and a lot of that life had been with Claire. I'm not usually one to moon over affairs of the heart, but Claire's anger at me had reminded me of the jungle-creeper complexity of home. Of how much I loved the place and how much I didn't want to be here. Knowledge of that made me even more depressed, because it made me realise that I'd not just left, I'd run!

I chewed, swallowed and made conversation with cool, businesslike efficiency. Conversation meandered around from Mum's union work to the soon-to-be-dear-departed Bobo to the (cliched) 'funny cultural differences' between Imperial and Federation. I'd seen hundreds of worlds (well... hundreds of spaceports if you want to be technical about it), and cultural differences are things you accept and work around, not laugh at.

Pradesh, on the other hand, was green enough to still find it fascinating and as for Mum, she'd never been off planet. I let myself drift off.

“So by your stubborn refusal to eat my cooking, I'm assuming you and Claire aren't -”

“No, Mum. Dead right, Mum. We're not, Mum.” I said mechanically, then made a face.

“The two of you were such a *nice* couple, once.”

Pradesh smiled nervously, and dropped his fork. In the heavier gravity of Coopersworld, it slammed onto the plate with a belling clang. I pushed back my chair and stood up, reaching back to massage the small of my back. My mother looked at me with concern, mixed in with a bit of exasperation.

“Well I know what she's wants, but I don't quite know what *you* expect.” she said, reaching down

for a dripping forkful of salad, heavy with vinaigrette. I walked over to my mother's balcony.

She lived on the edge of Darke's Reserve, and had a decent view of the city, her apartment perched like an eagle on the edge. I looked out and tried to overlay the grid of lights with my memory. Tried to match each cluster of lights a place. That I knew. That I had known.

I failed. Nothing was where it should. Lindner Street had the sparkling lights of a club scene, whilst the Piazza del Progresso was dim and dark, a parody of its high-flying heyday. Or was that spot actually Lindner Street? Had I mistaken it for another street? I gazed from the window and tried to remember where here was and where there had been.

"Nice couple? Mum, I don't know which couple you've been watching. Claire and I have never been a 'nice couple'."

My mother sighed. She still finished savouring her mouthful before replying.

"Look, I've heard every reason for relationship failure under the stars. She won't touch me. He never makes me feel special. She's always away on business. He left me for space. Relationships are like diseases. Each one has its own pathology."

"Mum, do you have to make it so... clinical!" I said, exasperated.

"Well you have to get it from somewhere!" was my mother's response. I heard a suspiciously snigger-like sound from Pradesh.

"Right, where's your vodka." I snapped, and walked out of the main room into the kitchen, heading for the coolbox.

"Red, are you sure you want..."

"Harvey!" came the chorus of concern from both Pradesh and my mother. Pradesh had watched me drinking throughout the evening, and perhaps had some reason to be concerned. My mother was just reacting to my foul mood.

"As I was saying." my mother said imperturbably, "each relationship has its symptoms, its progression and sometimes even a cure."

I walked back into the room and plonked both myself and the bottle down. I was having one of those horrible drunks where no matter how toxic you get, you never feel truly intoxicated.

"Does a cure mean it gets better, or does it mean that it goes away?" I said brightly, sloshing the colourless liquid into my glass. The glass was designed for wine, but seemed to be holding vodka quite adequately. And it had one great advantage over a shot glass. Specifically, that it held more than a shots worth of vodka.

"It *means*, Harvey, that there are always remedies. Some of them mean it gets better, others mean it goes away. Now if you've quite finished being childish, I'll go get desert."

"Cheers!" I said, bathing my throat in liquid fire.

My mother gave me a mildly disgusted look and went into the kitchen. Pradesh cleared his throat and rose.

"Commander, I think I'll just go and see... go and help."

"You do that." I said levelly. I stared into my suddenly empty glass. The shot hadn't helped. The two desired effects had not occurred. a) I was still fully conscious and upright; and, b) I was without the rosy alcoholic glow of self-satisfaction. As my ex-copilot Bec had once commented, I was an expensive man to get drunk, but an even *more* expensive man to get happily drunk.

"Mum." I called out.

“A minute, Harvey... no, I'll take that, young man.”

“You and Claire keep up, don't you?”

“What? Yes, Harvey. We do brunch sometimes... look, you take the plates if you *must* take something, Pradesh...”

I leaned forward and poured more fermented liquid potato into the glass. But after pouring a shot worth, I stopped.

“Have you ever asked her why... well... why she's still angry at me?”

In the kitchen, something heavy fell to the floor. It didn't shatter, though. High-G worlds tend to bake tougher crockery than other worlds. There was an pause, the embarrassment of which, I could feel from the dining room. I reached for the glass, but my hand paused as it was just about to grasp the stem. The distant thudding of a far-off dance party wafted across the heavy, still evening, cutting across the light classical muzak my mother had chosen for dinner. The universe paused with me in waiting for an answer. Pradesh nervously cleared his throat. My mother was silent.

Then there was a clink of plates and the universe resumed.

“After you, Pradesh.” My mother said, her voice perfectly modulated. A good actor, my mum.

A clearly terrified Pradesh emerged, holding plates and spoons. He shot me a quick look and then returned his eyes to a position straight ahead, middle distance.

My mother followed, carrying a plate heavy with Pavlova. Her face was unlined by any stress or emotion, and she even had a gentle smile upon her face. Oh all ye merciful Gods of Space! This meant trouble of the worst kind. I reached forward and took a fortifying slug of vodka.

“Harvey, I'd love to think,” she began, setting the plate upon the table, “that any child of my genes would have some form of empathy. I'd love it even more to think that a son of mine, who had been brought up by me would have some degree of self-awareness and emotional intelligence.”

She reached over with a serving spoon and began to neatly section desert.

“So it pains me to say...” I mouthed silently in anticipation.

“So it pains me to say that you are a true insensitive idiot when it comes to intimate relations. ”

“Me leaving had nothing to do with her...” I said weakly.

“*Harvey*, what you actually said was 'it's not about you'. That's an incredibly hurtful thing to say.” my mother scolded, scooping a large spoonful of meringue into a bowl and handed it to Pradesh. I couldn't stop a reflexive flash of hurt that he got served first. I felt helplessly reduced in age. I'd been a tough, hardened bounty hunter for what... four years? ...five? My mother was reducing me to a callow teenager again. Making me feel like I knew nothing about the way that people felt, about how the world of men and women worked. She passed me a plate.

“So? It wasn't her fault!” I said bullishly. I stirred the Pavlova on my plate, grinding the hard crust into powder.

“When someone says 'it's not you', what they really mean is 'you're powerless, you've got no stake in it, you can't help me!'” my mother translated.

“Well could she help me?”

“No. No one could. God knows I tried. Claire tried. Even Johannes, bless his blackened soul, tried very hard. You know, this is very good, if I *do* say so myself.” my mother happily spooned some more into her mouth. “Isn't it good, Pradesh?”

“Very nice.” said Pradesh carefully, the soul of politeness. He watched the two of us like a hawk, not sure whether to be amused or concerned.

“Space was the only thing that could help you. You might be a small fish out there, but you're happier with that than you would have being a big fish here. You would have ripped yourself to shreds swimming in our little pond. You're not one of life's big fish, except by accident.”

“Thanks mum. If ever I need someone to deliver hammer blows to my ego, you'll be the first person I'll call.” I said, drizzling my words lightly with scorn. The scorn welled from a deep spring inside me, leaving a feeling of hollowness in the cavity left in its rising. When it came to me and my life, Mum was far more usually right than wrong. “*Why* did I come back here?” I whinged, to the universe at large.

“Possibly because you hope we'll all have become open-minded cosmopolitan citizens of the universe whilst you've been away, and that we'll finally appreciate you.” my mother said relentlessly. “I know you're a nice, patriotic Coopersworld boy, but you do consider us a bunch of ignorant rubes compared to yourself.”

A denial began in my throat, but died by the time it had reached my lips. She wasn't quite right, but she wasn't far wrong either. I'd hated the small time world of a small time world. I'd hated Johannes, Claire, even Mum. And for no other reason than they weren't part of this larger world. Pradesh (bless his obsequious soul) was more kin to me than my own mother would ever be. The knowledge of this filled me with a profound sadness, right up to the lip of the glass of my soul. Yes, it was alcohol-fueled sadness, but real nonetheless.

My mother would as likely never know the beauty of seeing the swirling storms and frozen rings of gas-giants. Never know the tingling pleasure of touching down on a new world or inhale the spicy tang of an unknown alien atmosphere.

To reverse the principle, this very possibly meant that I would never know the simple happiness of love, neither romantic nor familial. That regardless of whichever companions I would accrue, I would always be alone.

In silence, we finished the truly magnificent Pavlova, and said stiff goodbyes, each going our separate ways. Pradesh returned to the accommodating bosom (so to speak) of his many-breasted accommodations. I went out into the street. Mum waved me goodbye, without a scintilla of concern radiating from her face.

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“He don't live here any more, mate. Sorry.”

“But you must have some idea-”

“No, sorry. Gotta go, mate. Me wife needs me.”

The door closed on both the occupant of the house and the sound of a baby crying. I cursed quietly. This was the third black chemist's lab I'd looked for and the third time I'd come up empty. Another denizen of the naked city who had no *right* to have changed while I'd been gone. In this case changed address. Surely the need for illegal drugs hadn't changed that much in the last six years? Besides, it wasn't as though I was going there for reasons of recreation. I was going for re-creation.

Amnesia is easy nowadays. Drugs are available for absolutely everything, and memory is no longer something beyond our control.

In my highly smashed state, I was as focussed as a laser and as determined as a robot. The idea had entered my head and had refused to leave. If they were still in business, I knew dark holes in this town where I could walk in and walk out with no memories of the past six years absence. Johannes would welcome me back into his organisation, Claire would welcome me back to her bed, and all

would be as it was. No evidence would remain to connect the suave, poised tiger of a successful career criminal with the dirty, ragged, barely surviving alley cat of a bounty hunter. It was all there. It was all mapped out. I took a step forward, across the street, away from the glow of the street lights.

Lonely, drunk and bereft, I'd wandered the streets of what had been my own town. But now the streets were all strange and the faces were all those of strangers. Darting out of alleyways and pools of streetlight, they leered at me, their very own departed fool. Someone who'd given up wealth, comfort and banal certainty on this world for poverty, danger and a fool's chance of happiness in the next.

It was as cool as it gets on Coopersworld, the mid-twenties, and around me people were putting on shawls and light jackets. For my ship-conditioned tolerances, it was nearly normal. Normal for me, not for Coopersworlders. The high-Gs suddenly had suddenly weighed me down. I'd slumped, my knees creaking from the weight. I'd given Pradesh adjustment drugs, but hadn't thought I'd have to make any adjustments myself.

I'd collapsed against a wall and looked up at the Three Straws. In all their spotlit glory they mocked my self-pity, and my limited vision. My vision drifted down to the base of the straws, and mentally continued downwards through concrete, duralium and earth. Somewhere down there was Claire, and the life that had been mine for the taking. I could have been something. Instead, I'd chosen nothing. I'd chosen to be a small fish. I'd chosen a barren, lonely heaven over a bountiful, hell holding all my friends. I'd looked up at the beautiful silver tower of hell and wished I was there. For a wonderful, poised moment, all had been clear.

It would take more than adjustment drugs. I needed to regress six years and forget the fact that I'd ever seen my homeworld from space. Forget that I'd ever seen the coruscating beauty of a Witchspace tunnel and emerging at the other end into a new, faraway place. Forget that I'd ever exulted in the savage joy of surviving a deepspace duel. Forget that I'd realised that Claire wasn't enough of a reason to stay. Fortunately, the pharmacopoeia existed to grant my desires, although it was rare, illegal and expensive.

So here I was, scouring the city for those few men and women mad enough to grant my wish, to erase my Elite Federation of Pilots rating and nomadic tendencies and let me settle down to a life of organised crime and simple pleasures. Even this was denied me. All the people I'd known were gone, or out of business, or not accepting new customers. Or... or... or...

Erasing six years of wandering wouldn't replace it with six years knowledge of changes at home. The city was seething with birth and death, alive with departures, arrivals and changes. Love, alliances and enmities were dissolving and reforming around me as I walked the streets, and I was powerless to observe the changes, let alone stop them. Each change had unforeseen consequences, cascading down and down and down, until everything within sight was unrecognisable from what it was. And I'd missed six *years* of changes. Like a volcanic planet, the surface of the city was reborn anew every few years, the old features covered by the new, buried by unstoppable change. Sadly, I realised that even the metaphor was drawn from my space experience, from rubbernecking whilst passing planets.

Finally, I staggered to a park and collapsed onto the lush grass, staring up at the sky. Around me, couples and groups were walking through the park. I'd been to places and seen things that most of them couldn't conceive of, but each of them they were leading a life that I could only dream of.

The stars were bright above me, but they weren't calling. They were catcalling, warning me off, telling me to stay where I belonged. Hayne's Wreck, Coopersworld's tiny moon, twinkled its agreement. I laughed softly. Here I was, caught between a homelife I no longer fitted and a hunger for belonging that was unable to be sated. The alcohol had burned out of my body by now, leaving

me cold and weak. My plan now seemed folly, my desires futile. I couldn't go back. The grass beneath me was soft and welcoming, but the planet itself was hard with uncomfortable truths.

The chrono on my wrist vibrated. I brought it round to eye level. 2:45 hours. On it's face a single word was printed. Claire.

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I shut the door of Claire's place carefully. I'd left Claire sleeping peacefully. Or if she hadn't been, then at least she hadn't reacted as I got up, dressed and left. Last night had fit the template for our relationship. Caution, hostility, rage, passion, release, forgiveness. And then abandonment.

I descended the stair and pulled out my communicator. I dialled up Pradesh's callcode and let it ring. And ring. And ring. His messagebank cut in, and I disconnected abruptly. I redialed, and let it ring. And ring. And ring.

Eventually, Pradesh's huskier-than-usual voice answered the phone.

“Yes... Commander... could you call back, this is possibly not the best time?”

“You've got an hour and a half. Meet me at the bottom of Straw One. Finish up whoever you're doing and get yourself ready. That's all.” I disconnected, and slipped the communicator back into my pocket. I emerged out of Claire's building into the early-morning air. It was still dark as full-night, and only the palest lightening of the eastern sky to indicate that the searing sun was getting ready to bake this side of the planet again. The streets were not empty, though. Party goers wended their way home in quiet couples and threes, whilst shift-workers strode to work, each day bringing certainty and belonging. Their voices sounded so ordinary, their pleasures so everyday that each snatch of carefree conversation felt like it drew blood.

Would saying goodbye to her have really been that awkward and that harmful? Would a few words really have been enough to doom me to misery? The answer came as a light, tropical shower came rushing over the predawn suburbs, running its swampy fingers over me, darkening the bright shirt she'd bought for me with moisture, adhering it to my body like a burial wrapping. I stood staring up at Claire's window as it had its way with me and moved on, leaving me shivering. Not from cold, but from how the planet had cried its judgement on me. I turned away from my love, heading to Straw One to meet my copilot, who was nearer to a soulmate than she.

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“Yeah, they are carnivorous, but as long as we're careful, they won't give us too much trouble.”

Pradesh shuddered, gripping tightly onto the chairlift's rail. He'd quickly overcome his grumpiness at his *coitus interruptus*, and it had been replaced by a combination of white-knuckled terror and childlike wonder.

We'd taken the Darke's Reserve Canopy Trail, a low-strung chairlift only a few metres above the rainforest canopy. Occasionally we'd have to kick away a frond that had poked itself above the rest. Otherwise, the early morning vista was a gorgeous one of emerald upon jade upon dark green velvet. Soon, the sunrise would paint the silvery expanse of The Basin with rays of pink and gold, where Stuka birds dived for fish, their wings folding flat against their body as they entered the water with barely a splash. A softly whistling wind cooled us, while below us the rainforest rustled and hooted with a variety of lifeforms, both wonderful and mundane, harmless and lethal. Naturalists could get happily lost for a lifetime in a small segment of rainforest. If they weren't careful, though, that lifetime could turn into a fairly brief period.



I'd been describing one particularly lethal variety to Pradesh. The famous Rigelian Vinemonkey, one of the purest expressions of nonhuman bipedal belligerence in known space. Yes, they were only a metre high, but they made up for it in treachery and hatred for the hordes of *Homo Sapiens* violating their planet.

“Yeah, they're dangerous because they're so damn clever. The scientists reckon they're ten to twenty-thousand years off true sentience. They use nooses to catch prey (hence the name), and some have even been seen using poisoned spears. Some of them venture into the cities, but in our environment it's just another gang of juvenile delinquents to deal with. On their own territory, in deep forest, they're the most lethal pack of predators on the planet. In the rainforest they're almost invisible. Twenty of them could be within touching distance and you'd never know it.. At least a dozen people every year just venture that little too far on their own, feel a vine slipping around their throat and... KSSSHHCCT!”

I drew my finger across my throat melodramatically. Horror stories about Rigelian Vinemonkeys were a longstanding tradition among Coopersworld residents, used to frighten the living suitcase out of tourists. I felt a guilty sense of pleasure in teasing my copilot. The stories were more or less true, although their frequency was a bit less than I'd perhaps mentioned. The chairlift creaked gently on it's cable, and I saw Pradesh look down into the greenery and swallow heavily. I didn't bother telling him that from this height and in this gravity, if the cable broke, we'd be well dead once we reached the ground, never mind the Vinemonkeys.

“By the Emperor's Grace, why haven't they been exterminated!” Pradesh said in horror.

My nose wrinkled in mild disgust. The Empire of Achenar had been founded on an act of Genocide, and their descendants hadn't really 'got it' since then.

“A sentient species? Pull the other one.” I said. Pradesh's eyes narrowed, but he held his tongue.

“The jungle we're passing over is one of the most competitive terrain types in space. There's plenty of food and water, there's an abundance of all kinds of life, both flora and fauna. The only things in short supply are safety and light. There's an abundance of food. And you're it.”

There was silence for a while, as we passed over gully and stream, rocky rise and lush hollow. Birds emerged from the canopy and wheeled away from us, squawking their outraged surprise at our presence here this early in the morning. Pradesh marvelled at their splendour, whilst I just watched them with the faintest hint of sadness. Moaning Sloths hooted their slow, sad song up at us as we passed. The unearthly tones thrummed through us, and I shivered.

My companion eventually noticed my ambivalence.

“You've probably seen this many times, Commander, are you bored?” he said timidly.

“Yes. Many times. I used to come up here after work at night with Claire or my mate Cuong. I'd be up here every week, and no... it's still as wonderful as it ever was. Chaotic, violent and gorgeous. Same as she ever was...”

“She?”

“It, Pradesh, IT!” I said, with some heat.

We travelled on for a while, and then the sun burst over the horizon. Pradesh cursed briefly, before we both reached for our shades. We'd have to take a sunscreen pill soon, or we'd begin to burn. The fetid smells of morning began to rise from the jungle. Flowers heady as narcotics opened and breathed out the morning temptation of nectar, and furry mouths yawned toothy yawns as they cocked a leg off a branch to void their bladders. As the forest warmed, the smell of rotting organic matter rose like a sickly smoke. Or was that the rich, sweet smell of life and growth? The two always got confused in my mind, as the one always followed the other.

“We appear to be curving back around...” Pradesh said presently.

“Yes.” I said. Pradesh subsided again, thinking that his boss was being incredibly surly. In fact, I was thinking hard, about a lot of things. I'd planned to write Claire a lovely, long letter when I got into space, and could think without my emotions crashing about in my head, demanding this and that in simultaneous and contradictory ways. I'd planned to make it a very good letter. Now I knew it would have to be a perfect one. I was at a rubicon. I could either cross it, and burn every emotional bridge that I had, or I could hover by the threshold, and wait for water to flow uphill. Many bounty hunters I'd talked to had a cordial relationship with their homeworld and family. They'd winter there for three months six months, nine months of the year. They took pleasure and strength from loved ones and families, then returned to space to be who they really were, safe in the knowledge that they'd always have a home to return to.

As far as I could see, the bounty hunters who told those stories were talking a load of shit.

Looking out over the slowly brightening rainforest, I realised that I couldn't live with only half of this. Half of mum, half of Claire, half a career (either honest or not). There's no such thing as a little bit of rainforest. It's either there and you're in it, being smacked in the face with the variety, richness, opportunity and danger or it's somewhere else, and it's a Dreamware VR suite.

We rose towards the end point of the journey, Cooper's Ridge. We stepped off the chair and watched it rattle down the other cable and out of sight. The station at the other end was small, with a viewing platform and dilapidated autoshuttle for our return to the city.

I led Pradesh up a set of stairs cut into the rock to the viewing platform. He was already sweating like a pig, and I realised that just like yesterday and the day before that, it was going to be an absolute stinker. The adaption drugs I'd given him also appeared to be wearing off. I saw him wince as his feet hit the stairs with a 1.7g thud, and he gripped the stair rail like an old and frail man. We emerged over the top of the stairs, and Pradesh could do nothing for a few seconds other than lean heavily on the wall and suck in the rapidly warming air. Finally, he recovered enough to look at what I'd brought him to see. He looked with a sort of bemused disappointment.

“Yes, Red?”

“It's the city, Pradesh.”

“Yes, Red. The view's very nice.” Pradesh sighed, and lowered himself onto one of the rainforest timber benches. I leaned against the railing and looked down.

The lights of the evening were winking out, one by one, as a new day beckoned in Lomasport. Unlike us, when they woke up each morning, they weren't lightyears distant from when they'd woken the previous morning. They woke up to the same city, slipped it on like a worn jacket and went about their day, confronted by the same people, the same places and the same challenges.

There was Claire's place, there was Mum's... there were the Three Straws, with the Johannes the Serpent curled up in his burrow.

Cooper's Ridge was the highest point in at least a hundred kilometre radius, and about ten K east, a sheer cliff dropped all the way down to The Basin. At the bottom, couples swam and played, families came to picnic on the shores of the lake. Was that really the life that I wanted for myself? Directly below, however...

From beneath, a rumble arose. Pradesh started on the bench and, with difficulty, levered himself to his feet. He tottered over to the bench and propped next to me.

“Commander, what is...” he began, and then was silent as radiance blossomed below us.

A bright light rose from the spaceport directly below our position, dwarfing the dawn. A big ship, maybe a Python or a Griffin, rising from the spaceport towards space. The flightpath was only a

klick or three from the edge of the ridge, and we got a good view as it rose past our position on the way to the magical height of twelve thousand metres. There, they could engage their Hyperspace drive and within minutes be parsecs away from this world. A hot, dry wind bathed our faces for a moment as the outermost edges of the wash from the thrusters shivered over the ridge. I nudged Pradesh and pointed to the ship.

“On that ship are hundreds of tons of cargo, bound for distant systems, or maybe a hundred people, each departing this world for their own reasons, either temporarily or for good. Cuong and I used to come up here, after doing whatever nasty shit we'd done for Johannes and get as drunk as an Imperial Officer. Then we'd sit here and watch the ships take off from the spaceport. We'd fantasise about leaving home, making our fortune, the way teenagers do. I'd find myself wishing harder than I'd ever wished for anything in my life that I was on that ship, right now. Rising above this city, this past and life.”

We watched until a blaze of colour announced the ship's departure into Witchspace. The huge rose of plasma hung in the sky like a promise, as powerful a temptation as it had been all those years ago.

“We'd get on that chairlift after we'd done awful things in the city. Bashings and intimidation and payback and extortion. All in a night's work. But over the jungle, just before dawn, there's a sort of forgiveness. Over that place, where things die and are reborn every second of the day, we'd realise that what we were doing was survival, that we didn't need to apologise for being who we were in the place that we are. And then we'd be up here and watch the ships take off. A stairway to heaven, with all the trimmings.”

Pradesh looked at me strangely, and seemed surprised when I looked back levelly. He'd perhaps expected a dreamy glow. I wasn't lost in reverie, these ramblings weren't part of some long-distant past that I longed for.

“I got to take that magic stairway and well.. you know what I found. The same jungle as that I'd passed over on all those early mornings, just with more species and taking place in vacuum rather than rainforest. ”

“No different?” Pradesh asked. He was beginning to get my drift, scrambled as it was. He rested his chin on his hand and turned his black-eyed gaze on me. “So you gave all this up, left home and... people, and it wasn't for any great new life, but for more of the same.”

“It's the same everywhere.”

“Only if you look at it that way, Commander.” Pradesh said thoughtfully. His voice sparked up as he warmed to his theme. “It's different everywhere. Everywhere has it's own variations, it's own uniqueness, it's own -”

“Pradesh. It's all the same jungle. Believe me.” I added softly.

“Are we leaving today?” Pradesh asked.

I looked up to where the pulsing light of the Hyperspace entry cloud shone down on the surface of my birth-planet like an invitation. The decision had been made.

“Yes Pradesh.” I said, “We're going home.”

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“Long Range Active?”

“Check.”

“Water Recyc?”

“Check.”

Pradesh and I were going through the standard preflight checks. Pradesh seemed uncomfortably cheerful. The cabin temperature was down to a manageable 27 degrees centigrade, and the gravity was back to its usual 1.1G, even though we hadn't taken off yet. The ship's nonflight systems hummed around us comfortingly. We were already isolated from the humidity, heat, gravity, smell; sound and sensation of the planet outside. We might as well already be in flight.

"Ignition coils." I recited mechanically off the list. Better to be bored doing checks on the ground than excited with disaster in flight, as my first flight instructor had drilled me.

"Your mother!"

"I *beg* your pardon?" I turned around to stare at my co-pilot. Personal insults were not a particularly appropriate response to a preflight checklist.

I then looked up at the external scanner and saw the familiar figure striding her way across thruster-blackened tarmac. She was dressed casually (for mum), but the sight of an exquisitely dressed courtesan on a spaceport runway was incongruous enough to make me smile.

"You stay here and finish up the preflight." I said, rising from my seat.

"But Commander..." Pradesh said, in protest.

"Stay *here*." I reiterated. "I'll pass on your regards, don't worry."

I walked down to the main airlock and opened the hatch. A blast of hot, humid air engulfed me. This planet was all memories, each vivid and rich with colour, scent and the slick, everpresent feeling of Coopersworld moisture on the skin. This planet was all memories, and that was the way it was going to stay. I stepped outside the ship's gravity field, and anything loose on my body *sagged* as the G force exerted itself. My mother was waiting at the base of the stairs, looking up at me with a very unimpressed air.

"Going to leave without saying a word to your mother, hmmm?" was Mum's opening sally. "Or to Claire for that matter. Love 'em and leave 'em and never apologise, eh?"

"Well... yes.... uh... no, actually." I said, nonplussed.

"So *this* is your ship then?" came the non-sequitur, Mum turning to look at it with an appraising air. The teenage spectre of my perpetually unclean room resurrected itself in my subconscious and began to jeer.

"This is filthy, can't you clean it?" Mum's hand gestured at the blackened underside.

"Not without replacing that section of hull plate. That's actually laser scarring." I said carefully.

Mum turned to me, and I saw there were tears in her eyes. Her mascara was running down the side of her face in an expensive cosmetic stream. I was glad I wasn't wearing any, as my face would have looked damn silly with streams of makeup running down my face too.

"Look Harvey, I love you like a son, which is fortunate for both of us, as that's what you are to me." Mum sniffled. "But know that one day you're going to stay away a little bit too long and come back dead."

"How can I come back if...?" I focused on the logical inconsistency.

"In a bloody urn for God's sake!" Mum snapped at me as the wind from a nearby takeoff whipped her sungold dress around her ankles. "Shut up and listen." she shouted, as the roar from the freighter's engines grew.

I shut up, and I listened, whilst the other ship took off and rumbled out of sight. Only then did my mother begin.

"I'm not going to stop loving you, and I'm not going to stop putting up with you, regardless of how

much you shit me to tears, son. Claire loves you too, but *she might change her mind*. What the two of you have may not be the best love possible, but it's the best that you're ever likely to get. Or deserve, for that matter. If you're going to love her, love her, if you're going to leave her then leave her. Don't keep trying to do both."

"I... I..." Words wouldn't come. Mum looked up at me with teary innocence. I felt hot all over, and it had nothing to do with the hot sun beating down. "Mum... you... this is..." I tried again. Mum's eyes still peered up at me with warm maternal concern. But at the corner of her mouth, I saw the tiniest of upturnings, like a hairline fracture in a gemstone. I filled with emotion of a different sort.

"This is... this is... *emotional blackmail!*" I roared. My protests were futile, though. When it came to emotional blackmail, my mother had the goods on me every day of the week.

"Harvey," my mother's voice was suddenly dust dry, all histrionic tears gone. "I may be a manipulative old tart, but you can't blame me for trying, can you?"

In sudden fury, I grabbed her by the shoulders.

"You just couldn't let me leave in peace, could you?" I raged. "You just had to get in that last little emotional jab to make sure I knew how disappointed you all are."

"Of course I couldn't let you leave in peace. I'm your mother." Mum said, untroubled and absolutely in control of herself. "And we're not disappointed. We always knew we'd lose you to space. We just never knew how completely, or how much we'd miss you."

And then we were in each other's arms, and I was hugging my mother tight enough that I could feel her breathe. At length, we parted, and my mother turned around and started walking back to the stairwell, her arms wrapped tightly around herself. Just before the exit, Mum turned around. Seeing me still waiting by the airlock, she shouted out to me

"Sooner than six years this time, Harvey. And don't forget to write your mother. And Claire."

And she was gone. I watched her go and felt the ache grow. An ache for everything home meant to me. An ache for how it would never be enough. I'd have to learn to desensitise myself to it. I'd have to.

I turned and pounded up the steps, to where the cool, dry recycled air of my ship welcomed me back. The humidity of my second home had already begun to dry from my skin as I buckled myself into the pilot's seat and asked the control tower for permission to return to my first.

"Permission granted, DE-013." said the controller, once again our unfriendly friend. She grunted as she recalled us from the previous landing. "Hmph... you're the local, aren't you? Enjoy your stay, I suppose?"

Pradesh looked at me curiously as I fired the thrusters and the ship rose, creaking and shuddering, until the nose was pointed up into the early morning sky. I glanced at the ship's cameras, at the vistas surrounding us and nostalgia swelled like a pain in my chest. The Basin, Darke's Reserve with its winding stream, the City of the Valley with jungle encroaching at the edges, the imposing mass of the Three Straws in the centre of the city, and the pair of dark, ambiguous eyes that overlaid them all. All of this was a memory, vivid and rich with colour, scent and the slick, everpresent feeling of Coopersworld moisture on the skin. All of this was a memory.

"I'm not a local. I'm a stranger here." I said, and pumped the throttle.