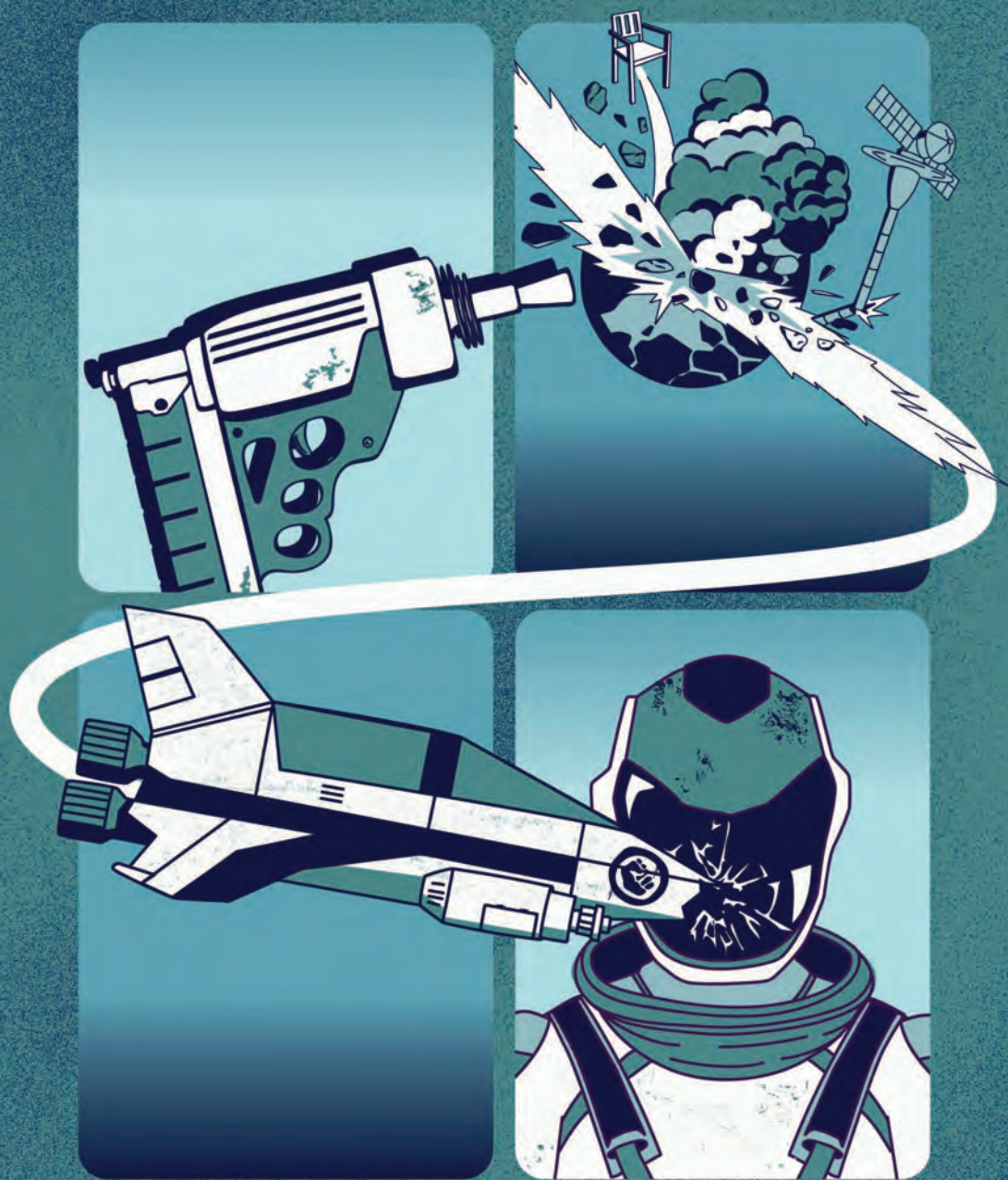


SITUATION NORMAL



Leonard Richardson

Praise for *Situation Normal*

A triumph: madcap and trenchant, dancing on the precise meridian between funny and weird, with a wild, imaginative boldness that reinvents space-opera from the gravity well up.

— Cory Doctorow, author of *Little Brother*,
co-editor of *Boing Boing*, IP activist

A fast-paced romp reminiscent of Kurt Vonnegut channeled through the wild inventiveness of Charles Stross and the irreverent political attitude of Cory Doctorow.

— Don Vicha, *Booklist* (starred review)

Also by Leonard Richardson:

Constellation Games

SITUATION NORMAL

Leonard Richardson



First edition published 2020

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For Mirabai, a connoisseur.

Content Note

Though far from realistic, this adventure story dramatizes many of the terrible features of real war: pain, torture, and death. Its focus on civilians and petty criminals means that the horrors of war, when they arrive, are visited disproportionately on people who would have rather stayed home. In particular, readers who think chapter 24 gets a little heavy should feel free to mentally ‘fade to black’ and skip to the start of chapter 25.

Humanoid sexuality is another pervasive theme. There is no sexual violence in this story, but readers should be prepared for what are euphemistically called ‘adult themes’.

Situation Normal uses the standards for English punctuation set by the Galactic Siblinghood for Interlingual Precision (GSIP). Punctuation appears inside quotation marks when it is part of the quoted dialogue, and outside quotation marks when it is meant as a general pause signal. Example: “The manifest says ‘medical chambers’, but the container is actually full of ‘weapons’.”

Species names like ‘egenu’ and native terms like ‘kelexn’ are rendered using the GSIP anglicization. Timespans are given in imperial (days, years) or metric (shifts, kiloshifts) depending on the speaker’s point of reference. Brand names such as sturdi and Hestin Compliance Systems are mentioned under the principle of fair use.

God speaks to con artists because God is a con artist.

—Egenu saying

The Main Players

The Terran Outreach

Rebecca Twice, a security guard
Myrusit Wectusessin, a woodworker's apprentice
Denweld Xepperxelt, another
Arun Sliver, a hitman

The Outreach Navy

Warrant Officer Hiroko Ingridsdotter
Commander Hetselter Churryhoof
Second Lieutenant Dwap-Jac-Dac
Specialist Chudwhalt Tellpesh
Mrs. Chen, a spy
First Lieutenant Texchiffu Rebtet

The Fist of Joy

The Chief, a smuggler
Kol, a system administrator
Styrqot, a trader
Thaddeus G. Starbottle, a scientist
The Errand Boy, an errand boy

Unaligned

Yip-Goru, a pilot
Tia, a priest
Qued Ethiret, a cosplayer

Part One

Cedar Commons

Chapter 1

Opt Out

Rebecca Twice
Steward station

Wake up, poundcake,” said Hiroko. “We got a bogey.”
Becky rolled away from the senior steward, her nightshirt pressing against the crinkly layers of duct tape that divided the queen-size bed into her side (45%) and Hiroko’s (the rest). “Can it wait until tomorrow?” she said.

“It is tomorrow,” said Hiroko. “Bogey came in on the day side, betting we’d be asleep. Classic poacher move.” Hiroko yanked the covers off the bed. “Up!”

Becky pulled the nightshirt down her legs and followed Hiroko into the lit-up common room, her bare feet searing cold on the stone floor. Hiroko pushed the 3-globe of Cedar Commons across the dining table, and Becky sat down in front of it. Blinking hurt her eyes.

A tiny green light pearly on the 3-globe’s night side. That light was the location of the city-dock, the stewards’ outpost, Becky and Hiroko, and the 3-globe itself with its tiny green light. On the exact opposite point on the globe, the dotted red curve of a trajectory stuck out from the freshwater ocean like a stray hair. Something small had just landed on Cedar Commons. Or

impacted, or taken off. You couldn't tell from a static map, but Hiroko was confident about "landed".

"Get in the hovercar and intercept," said Hiroko. Her finger traced the trajectory from orbit into the ocean. "Wave the shotgun and they'll scatter. Do not try to upsell them. I don't want the paperwork. Get them off planet and we'll forget the whole thing."

"Why does it have to be me?" said Becky.

"Because I got a manicure yesterday," said Hiroko. She flared her nails like a lizard's frill. "And I'm the senior steward, and I don't want to." She stood up and rummaged around in the refrigerator like she wanted to hide in it. "Well, don't be a baby about it! I'll be on comm. My sleep's ruined, too, like you care."

"When I'm the senior steward," said Becky, "I'm going to be nice to my junior."

"That's what I said," said Hiroko. "And then you showed up."

Becky wanted to punch the refrigerator door closed on Hiroko's head. Instead she opened her locker and pulled out her Trellis On-Site Security branded jumpsuit. "What if it's not wood poachers?" she said. "What if it's a ring fragment?" She zipped the jumpsuit over her nightshirt.

Hiroko took a neutral Pepsi out of the fridge and cracked the bottle. "It's not a ring fragment," she said. "This same thing happened five months ago. Something came down in the middle of the night, exactly where my lazy-ass senior didn't want to check it out. It knows where we are and what a pain it'll be to get over there. So it's poachers."

"What if it is a ring fragment?" Becky dropped to one knee to lace up her Proudhon action sneaker. "How do I handle it?"

"You better hope it's not," said Hiroko. "We'll be putting out forest fires for a week, *and* housing the crew we gotta call to fix the defense grid." She slapped her Pepsi onto the planetary comm console. "Yeah, you think the bed's crowded now? Wait until you're sharing it with a fat guy and two rre." Hiroko's eyes glazed over as she coupled her capital terminal to the comm.

Becky's shoes were sealed. She grabbed a sweater and turned to leave the steward station. "I hope it's a ring fragment," she snarled.

“I hope it’s an asteroid made of triple-crème Brie!”

Midnight on Cedar Commons was warm and windy, and it wasn’t far to the garage where the two Tata Devout hovercars were parked. Becky skirted the edge of the concrete city-dock. After three months on Cedar Commons, Becky was sick of trees, but she’d have the rest of her life to appreciate concrete.

Drizzling light through the oak branches were the bright planetary rings, and three of the moons that kept the ring system stable. Becky was a city girl, raised on Earth, and this combination of the familiar and the otherworldly was infuriatingly romantic. A picture similar to this had been on Trellis’s site, and below it had been a very promising bullet point saying

- *5-month placements with sexually compatible partners*

But Trellis On-Site Security was a rre brand, and to its sentient resources department, sex was a perk offered to the humanoid employees. They did not understand that although she and Hiroko had checked the same box on a form, Becky was *not* sexually compatible with the femmiest, most obnoxious lesbian in the universe.

Becky’s sneakers pressed acorns into the dirt all the way to the garage. Goddamn Hiroko with her manicure machine and her Bible thumping and her pretentious jazz and her repetitive Navy stories. Becky entertained herself with a little fantasy about the fallen ring fragment she was about to discover, and the lanky satellite repairwoman who would drop out of orbit and ring Becky’s doorbell once they called it in.

Myrus

Jaketown

Myrus should have been asleep, but Dad was meeting with the mayor in the living room, with Myrus not supposed to be listening, and who can resist that challenge? Unfortunately Mr. Nzeme was saying things he said a lot, “Hard truths”, “We need your vote on this”, “The party has to stick together”, so Myrus had gone back

to his book and was thinking about legitimately going to sleep, but then Mr. Nzeme said “They’ll take your son.” And *wait, what?*

“They’ll take my twins,” the mayor continued. “Every teenager on this ship. They’ll take the *ship*. They’ll train Myrus to be a killer and they’ll put him in a uniform so he’ll look handsome when he comes back in a bag.”

“I fought in the last war, Jiankang,” Dad said with quiet anger. “I was proud to wear that uniform.”

“Sure, sure,” said the human. “And what do we think about that war, now? Was it so wonderful that we need to do it again? What will we say about *this* war in fifteen years?”

“That war you’re dismissing ended slavery in the Fist.”

“Oh, don’t you bloody start with me, Kem,” said the mayor. Dad was silent and *Jaketown’s* fusion generators filled the space, throbbing far below decks. It wasn’t Myrus’s imagination. That sound had definitely gotten louder since yesterday. “Uhaltihaxl aren’t warriors by nature,” said Mr. Nzeme, trying a different approach.

“We are when we have to be,” said Dad.

“Your son doesn’t have to be,” said the human.

“One ship can’t opt out of a war!” said Dad. “It goes against the principles of representative government.”

The heavy sound of a wooden chair scooting across the wooden floor. “It will not be a ship if we land it,” the human said to Dad, and Myrus had to strain to hear him. “It will be a city, with very different legal obligations.”

Landing! Landing meant an end to school, but it meant the beginning of work, which meant finally leaving the men’s deck. On their last planetfall Myrus’s whole body had quivered whenever he’d been in the same room with a girl; basically just Den, the one girl Dad didn’t force Myrus to avoid.

Sometimes the men’s deck made Myrus so frustrated he thought about sneaking up to the women’s deck and...what? What did he think would happen? He’d never actually gone into love; he just *wanted* to, really bad. His body wouldn’t cooperate with his mind.

He had told Dad about this hormonal problem—big mistake. Dad had put his head in his hands and said “You’re barely fifteen, Myrus! Don’t rush it! Your body’s just...considering all the options, you know?” What was Myrus supposed to say to that? His body *had* considered the options and had definitely picked one, and he’d had to sit there—oh, crap.

“—ship in pursuit.” Mr. Nzeme had just said “—decisive action because there’s a ship in pursuit.” Someone was chasing *Jaketown*. Someone wanted to kill them.

“The Fist of Joy,” said Dad. Just the name took him back to the previous war.

“Nuh-uh. An Outreach Light Combat Platform. *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka*.”

“That’s us, Jiankang,” said Dad. “They’re the good guys. Why are we running? This is insane.”

“Who knows what they want,” said the mayor in a tone that was either flat or full of adult emotions Myrus didn’t understand. “They’ve been sending us urgent messages, but the Navy drafted our comm tech last month, so we’re not that good at decrypting.”

“Who made this decision?” said Dad. “Why wasn’t the council consulted before we committed *treason*?”

“The skipper’s priority is protecting the brand’s investment in the ship,” said Mr. Nzeme. “If we want the city council to make these decisions, we need to stop being a spaceship and start being a city. That starts tomorrow, with your vote on planetfall.”

The living room was silent for so long that Myrus wondered if Dad and Mr. Nzeme had fallen asleep themselves. The engines surged beneath Myrus’s bed and his stomach jumped. The ship was skipping almost every hour, now.

“Do we have a candidate planet?” Dad said, finally.

“Cedar Commons,” said the mayor. “Old-growth forest projected onto native biomes, leased by Eserion. It’s exactly the same as the last ten planets we landed on, except the forest’s only twenty years old.”

“That’ll affect the quality of the furniture,” said Dad.

“Do you know what else will affect the quality of the furniture?” said Mr. Nzeme. “When *Jaketown* gets seized to run

cargo for the navy, and your tools get jettisoned into space. And then we all die in a Fist of Joy minefield.”

The chair scooted again. “The skipper’s timing it so we land twenty minutes after the vote,” said Mr. Nzeme. “If Tip-Iye-Nett-Zig decides thon’s gonna make a big speech in opposition, we call it ten. This is going through with or without your vote, so you should stand with the party.”

“I’ll see you tomorrow,” said Dad, not agreeing to anything.

The chair scooted again. “0600,” said Mr. Nzeme. The front door slid open; Myrus pictured his big human thumb in the grasp. “War is insanity, Councilman Wectusessin,” said the mayor of *Jaketown*, in a sweet and gentle tone he never ever used. “Keep your boy out of it.” The door slid closed.

Myrus’s sweaty ear was pressed against the nice wood paneling of the bedroom. He slid his finger down the grain like the flow of a nosebleed. “Nice wood paneling” was what Dad called it, but nice to Dad just meant “made out of wood”.

Myrus had always thought the woodworking tools were nicer than the wood they shaped or the furniture that came out. The worst thing Mr. Nzeme had said, worse than “they’ll take your son”, was the thing about the Navy shooting those tools into space.

In the cafeteria—not the school cafeteria with its generic neutral food, but the uhaltihaxl place he and Dad and Den went to when they were working—was a corkboard covered in old government posters. Most people ignored them but Myrus had read them all: they were a glimpse of the universe outside *Jaketown*. Most memorable was a poster from the Outreach Navy. It showed an uhaltihaxl and a human and a rre in Navy uniforms, all looking in the same direction, and below it in letters that looked carved from stone it said: “SEND US YOUR BOYS*. WE’LL GIVE YOU MEN†.”

Tonight was Myrusit Wectusessin’s first inkling that the Navy of the Terran Outreach might not always deliver on their end of that promise.

A few minutes later Dad quietly opened the bedroom door and looked into the top bunk where Myrus was sound asleep, his

nubby teenage horns pressed into the pillow, his breathing smooth and quiet, because Dad had enough to worry about without also having to worry about his son.

Churryhoof

Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka

The message came encoded in four-character blocks. Commander Hetselter Churryhoof tapped the decryption pencil against her metal desk and sounded out the terse official English.

WARD ECLA RED◆

WAR DECLARED

Tucked beneath *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka*'s one-time pad was an envelope of paper orders to be opened only once WARD ECLA was officially RED. The seal on the envelope was already frayed. Churryhoof had read the orders four days ago, as soon as *Brown* had left spacedock to draft civilian ships for the buildup.

In wartime *Brown* was to escort the fully crewed city-ship *Jaketown* towards a secret fleet rendezvous point. Little problem, though: *Jaketown* had guessed those orders and didn't like them. She'd been ignoring hails, skipping away from *Brown* as fast as she could on a trajectory that took her deep into the galaxy, away from the big Outreach colonies, into the disputed territories, towards the neutral systems and the Fist of Joy itself.

Civilians don't want to fight; that's understandable. Civilians run from a draft; that's illegal. Civilians flee *towards the enemy*; that looks like treason. The war was eight minutes old, and Churryhoof was contemplating having to execute Outreach citizens.

"Commander," said Lieutenant Dwap-Jac-Dac in her terminal. "I'm outside. May I come in, ma'am?"

"Come," said Churryhoof.

The door to Churryhoof's office slid open and a biped shape stepped in and stood silent as a statue. In fact the exobody *was* a statue: a suit of crystalline metamaterial crafted into a human

form and given human features. Kilo for kilo, the most useless piece of gear in the service.

“Ma’am,” said the lieutenant.

By the end of the war, Churryhoof would have given a kill order and seen how Dwap-Jac-Dac carried it out. If they survived, their camaraderie would be unshakeable. If they died, they would die together. But this was now, the war was a newborn, and Dwap-Jac-Dac was an inscrutable rre: a few tangled centimeters of fleshy tubes floating in a cloud of artificial blood, encased in a human form to make the colony more relatable to bipeds.

“We’re at war, lieutenant,” said Churryhoof. She held up the decrypted cable.

“Yes, ma’am,” said Dwap-Jac-Dac. Thon already knew; everyone knew; it was just a matter of getting the signatures on the paperwork. “We’ve triangulated *Jaketown’s* course corrections.”

“Good work,” said Churryhoof, because that’s what a commander says.

“They’re not headed for Fist space.”

“Then where?” said Churryhoof.

“EGS-RC121,” said Dwap-Jac-Dac. “Near the border, but definitely ours. There’s an uninhabited agriculture planet in-system. The leasing brand calls it Cedar Commons.” Just... standing there, no body language at all, like a lucite award honoring twenty years’ service. Dwap-Jac-Dac was a bottle of liquor with a worm in the middle, and Churryhoof had no way of knowing how strong the liquor was.

Churryhoof tapped her pencil against the desk again. “Lieutenant.”

“Ma’am.”

“A ship this small doesn’t rate an executive officer, so when there’s a problem, I like to talk things out with my Master of Drone. Do you want in on this, or would you rather just execute orders?”

Churryhoof thought she could see the bodies of the rre colony twisting around inside the suit with less than military precision. Maybe it was just the way light passed through the metamaterial.

“I’ll serve as needed, ma’am,” said Dwap-Jac-Dac. “Back at sector HQ I frequently offered suggestions.”

Churryhoof held out one hand at the padded couch pushed against one wall of her tiny office. “Take a seat.”

The servos of Dwap-Jac-Dac’s suit hissed in the silence of the commander’s office. The joints bent, the knees shifted forward, the hips extended back over the couch. Every movement was a deliberate decision for the lieutenant. The half-ton suit halted in an awkward squat, the crystalline buttocks poised just over the surface of the couch so as not to pull the upholstery or scratch the metal frame.

“The couch is to put you at ease,” said Churryhoof. “If it doesn’t put you at ease, there’s no point sitting down.”

“It’s all the same to me, ma’am,” said Dwap-Jac-Dac. “I’m just fine. Whatever works for you.”

“Then stand up. I don’t want you breaking the couch.”

“Yes, ma’am.” Lieutenant Dwap-Jac-Dac stood and kept perfectly still once again.

Churryhoof missed Lieutenant Lakshmi Prasad. Her old Master of Drone had put her full weight on that couch and liked it. Prasad could be as aggravating as any other human, but at least she was a normal biped *person*, with a face, and different expressions for happy and sad. She was quick with a joke and could give Churryhoof self-deprecating explanations of the insanities that periodically consumed *Brown’s* human crew members.

Prasad had been promoted during the buildup; she was now comm officer on *None of the Above*, coordinating half a battle wing. No promotion had been more richly deserved, but it meant Churryhoof was going into a war backed by a Master of Drone whose emotions she literally couldn’t read.

“Well, let’s get started,” said Churryhoof, already feeling like this was a waste of time. “Do you have any clue why they’re going hot for this particular planet?”

“If I recall my Terran biology, cedar is a kind of tree,” said Dwap-Jac-Dac. “*Jaketown* is a furniture ship. I think they’re pretending there’s no war. They’ll dock at Cedar Commons and

carry out their normal manufacturing business. When we confront them, they'll say they didn't get the draft order."

Churryhoof's horns went up. "That's the stupidest fucking plan I've ever heard of."

"Not the plan I would have devised, ma'am."

Oh, great. "What plan would you have devised, Lieutenant?"

"Compliance with the draft order, ma'am." It was conceivably a joke. Even if not, it caught Churryhoof off guard in the right way.

"Now that we've triangulated," said Churryhoof, "can we get to Cedar Commons before *Jaketown* docks?"

"I couldn't say, ma'am. It's going to be close."

A new lieutenant, like any source of telemetry, needed calibration. "*You* can't say; what does the projection say?"

"It says we'll miss them by ninety minutes."

Tap tap tap. "I hope they enjoy those ninety minutes," said Commander Churryhoof, "because they are not going to like what happens afterward."

"Probably not, ma'am."

Chapter 2

The Upsell

Rebecca Twice

The bogey

Hovering above the shallow ocean in the *Tata Devout*, Becky could make out the impact site clearly enough. It was a blemish through the water, a cloud of mud and dead carp. The cloud extended a long murky finger that pointed towards the shore. “That doesn’t look like a ring fragment,” she admitted.

“Ya think?” said Hiroko over the comm.

“Okay, so,” said Becky. “I run it to ground, wave the shotgun, they take off, I put out the fire.”

“I’ve hit the panic button,” said Hiroko. “But I think we’re on our own. The midnight news packet just came in. We are at war.”

Becky swallowed hard. “War” was just a word—a few years back she’d lost a cousin in a border skirmish that had been forgotten in a week—but it was a word with a lot of stopping power.

“Look on the bright side,” said Hiroko, who’d misunderstood Becky’s silence. “I’ll get called up and they’ll send some other asshole to keep you company.”

“Moving to intercept,” said Becky. She eased the hovercar towards the shore, staying well to the side of the wake. The ship

that had made the blemish came into view, a lump of space-filthy metal buried under a hasty camouflage of oak branches and mud.

“That’s not good,” said Becky. “Cover means they plan to stay a while, right?”

“Oh my God,” said Hiroko. “That’s a Fist of Joy ship.”

“Are you sure?” said Becky. This didn’t seem like a good topic to joke about.

“The Navy’s pretty insistent we learn this shit,” said Hiroko. “Yeah, it’s a rasme thau design. I could fly it if I had to.”

“Who’s rasme thau?” whispered Becky. She needed some booze.

“They’re a minor Fist power,” said Hiroko. “They have these big cranial fronds. Lots of independent traders, a.k.a. smugglers.”

“What do we do?” said Becky.

“Well don’t panic, poundcake,” said Hiroko. “Pick up the shotgun and get closer. They’ve already seen you.”

“I’m not a soldier!”

“You’re private security, and you’re paid to deal with this shit. Send ‘em back home. You’ll be doing them a favor.”

“I’m gonna try the upsell,” said Becky. “If they’re Fist spies, I play stupid.”

“If they’re spies, you’re already dead.” Hiroko was still being cruel, but she’d stopped enjoying it.

Becky slowly moved the hovercar down below the treetops, forward towards the hill of metal built by a civilization that wanted her dead. From forty meters away she made out orange script below the mud on the hull.

“That’s a Trade Standard, right?” said Becky. “What’s it say?”

“It’s D,” said Hiroko. “Something ‘bad’. Maybe ‘bad sugar’. You want to get closer?”

“No, I’ll do the upsell in D.” Becky dropped the megaphone down from the hovercar chassis and dialed up a sales pitch in her terminal. “I’ll need you to translate the response.”

“I got your back,” said Hiroko. It was the nicest thing she’d ever said to Becky.

The pitch was available in Trade Standard D, D-plus-B, and

eight human languages. It sounded the same in all of them, down to the cadence and the order of the words. Becky flipped it on in her terminal and there it was, the voice of the brand, coming down from on high. She easily followed along with sounds she'd never heard and couldn't understand.

Eserion Natural Resources thanked the intruder for an interest in its products. In hopes of keeping the intruder as a valued long-term customer, Eserion was excited to announce exclusive rates on a one-time, low-volume purchase. To ensure the lowest possible prices, the negotiation would be conducted through Eserion's partner, Trellis On-Site Security. A Trellis representative was on the scene and ready to explain Eserion's rates, at the intruder's convenience.

Becky's employer boasted the lowest shrinkage losses of any Outreach security company because it simply did not believe in theft. What the law labeled robbery, Trellis considered a sale which the customer service representative had been unable to close. Or did not want to, in this case. Becky greatly preferred the idea of hiding under the bed back at the steward station. She sweated out the recorded sales pitch, hoping to be ignored.

No such luck. A man climbed out a hatch in the top of the ship, standing just a little lower than Becky in her hovercar. A *human* man with shaggy hair: an Indian guy wearing antique-looking 2-glasses. He waved at Becky and made a dial-twisting motion.

"The hell?" said Hiroko. Becky turned off the recorded message.

The man cupped his hands to his mouth and shouted "Gnar-harna-harna-harna!" at Becky. Something like that.

"He's asking if you speak Trade Standard D," Hiroko translated.

"Uh, do you speak English?" said Becky into the hovercraft's mic, through the screechy megaphone.

"Oh, raw-ther," said the human in a toffy British accent.

"...Is this your ship?"

"Quite, quite," said the man. "Poaching a bit of wood, don't

you know. Kids' playhouse blew away in a storm. I shan't be long. Your rates are reasonable."

"What the hell is a human doing with a Fist of Joy ship?" said Hiroko over the comm. "Ask to see his crew."

Becky leaned into the mic again but she ended up saying nothing because the man down below was pointing an illegal singularity pistol at her. "You must switch off that comm, mum," he said, his accent instantly shedding six tax brackets and a university degree. "Otherwise it will be difficult to negotiate a deal that leaves you alive."

The shotgun was lying on the passenger's seat. Becky could probably lift it and get a sight before the human down below vaporized her and the hovercar. But he wouldn't shoot her, right?

"Oh, before you switch off the comm, which you must do now," said the man down below, "tell your colleagues not to come after you."

He would shoot her. Becky had to move first. She inched one hand towards the gun. "Don't be a hero," she told Hiroko, loudly.

"No risk of that," said Hiroko.

"The unbearable slowness of your strategy, Mr. Arun Sliver!" shouted a woman's voice from...up in the trees?

The human looked up and to the side. "Chief, please let me handle this! Mum, disengage your terminal and land the car."

"The obvious expedient!"

"Chief, please stay where you are."

"Yaiyaiyai!" came down out of the trees, a battle cry from a purple blur which halted its fall by grabbing onto the footrail of the hovercar. The vehicle tilted sharply to port, and Becky was thrown against her safety harness. The shotgun slapped against her side.

"Chief, you're spoiling my shot!" said the human.

"No such shot! Our need for the vehicle!"

This was the best opening Becky was likely to get. She grabbed the shotgun, ducked down as far as she could and fired blindly over the swaying metal horizon at where she guessed the man with the pistol was.

The mass-energy recoil sent the car spinning around the

motivator bar that ran from nose to tail. Becky went upside down and the shotgun slipped from her grasp. The trigger caught briefly on her index finger and the gun dropped to the forest floor. Becky dangled in the safety straps she had fortunately not unbuckled, her computer-set braids spilling outwards. In her peripheral vision Becky saw a purple squirming, someone trying to hold on to the footrail as the hovercar rocked back and forth. Becky turned her head, prepared to slap ineffectually at this new threat.

Dangling right-side-up from the hovercar's footrail was a woman with olive-green skin. She was wearing a purple cocktail dress. Her eyes and her nose were a weird shape, not that Becky would say that out loud, and instead of hair on her head there were these...cartilage things...

The cartilage things were cranial fronds. The woman was rasme thau. The human had called her "chief". This death machine was her ship.

"Pardon my reach," said the rasme thau woman. It sounded like she'd learned the phrase from human waiters. She reached across Becky's chest, muscles straining in the arm that held her five meters above the ground, and shut off the hardware switch that connected Becky to Hiroko with a precise, deadly *click*.

"I'm going to throw up," Becky said quietly. Being upside down was a reminder of the nauseous moment right before a spaceship skips, when they turn off the gravity.

"Mr. Arun Sliver!" the rasme thau called out. "Gnar harna 'frowup' harna?"

"Harna harna harna," said the human down below. He'd climbed down the ship's ramp to the ground and was collecting Becky's shotgun.

"*Not* to frowup," the rasme thau told Becky quietly, effortlessly shifting her grip on the footrail. "The motivator, your hand touching it. Our motion downwards, together. Your safety, my promise." Becky nodded and put her hand on the motivator and gently lowered the hovercar until the rasme thau woman stepped off the footrail into the mud and Becky's braids dragged spirals in a puddle.

“Your exit,” said the rasme thau. Becky unfastened the safety straps and did a backflip into the mud and wriggled out from beneath the hovercar. Filthy water soaked through her wool sweater and the paper-cotton of the Trellis jumpsuit. She knelt in the puddle and glanced up, unsure if she was allowed to stand.

The human, presumably Mr. Arun Sliver, stood next to the rasme thau woman and held Becky’s shotgun. The ‘chief’ was looking Becky over with a playful cat-and-mouse look, charging and discharging a little home-defense zapper by rubbing it up and down her muddy bare leg. She had caught a stick of oak in her dress on the way down through the trees, and it was tugging her scooped neckline *Jesus, Becky, can we get through one life-threatening situation without thinking about tits?*

The rasme thau noticed where Becky was looking and pulled the stick out of her dress. “Kol!” she barked, as if into a comm, though she wasn’t holding anything but the stick and the zapper. “Gnar harna harna!”

The Indian guy with the various accents yanked Becky to her feet and held her arms behind her back. A man with glistening blue skin climbed down from the ship’s hatch. No, the skin was scales; the man was egnu. Another Fist of Joy race.

Becky had only seen egnu on news shows yelling about treaties, or whacking mooks in Fist crime dramas. This guy was in-person, wearing cargo shorts and an unbuttoned dress shirt and a water bottle, carrying two laser cutters and a duffel bag that gave off a foul fishy smell.

“Harna,” said the egnu. He set down the stuff he was holding, sucked at the valve of his water bottle and cast what he probably thought was an inconspicuous glance at Becky. “Harna gnar?”

There was a little more harna-ing and the upshot was that the egnu and the rasme thau should brace themselves in the muddy ground and try to tip Becky’s floating hovercar right-side-up. The short woman squatted and her legs tensed up and her tennis shoes slipped backwards in the mud and *Oh my God, Becky, look at her butt.*

For someone who’d been stuck on a planet for three months with Hiroko’s bony ass, this was like an alarm clock going off. The

shifting fabric of the smuggler chief's cocktail dress allowed Becky to form not only a detailed topographic map but a density profile revealing an alien but aesthetically pleasing distribution of muscle and fat. The chief combined raw strength with a total lack of self-consciousness in a way that melted Becky. The only drawback was that this woman was likely to murder her; something Hiroko had only threatened playfully.

All too soon the hovercar growled and shifted around its motivator and tipped over. In that last push, Becky caught a tantalizing glimpse of black panty underneath the chief's dress. The machine splashed into the mud puddle Becky had fallen into, rocking back and forth in mid-air, tossing spray around. Becky tried to dodge but Arun just tightened his don't-go-anywhere grip.

The chief wiped her hands on her increasingly dirty cocktail dress. The egnu slid open the hovercar's cargo hold and dropped in the laser cutters and the duffel bag. He got into the passenger seat. The chief strapped herself into the driver's seat, settling that wonderful ass into the warmth Becky had left on the plastic seat cover.

"Our journey into the woods," the chief told Becky. "Its duration, measured in decishifts. Your sojourn in my ship. Our return, your anticipation." In other words, *Get in the ship, hostage.*

"Mr. Arun Sliver," said the chief, still in English for Becky's benefit. "Your hospitality towards our guest! The clothes you lend her. The tea you brew her."

"Fresh out of tea, I'm afraid," said the human. "I don't like to whinge, but..."

"The yriek bush in my quarters," said the rasme thau, losing some patience.

"I wasn't counting the yriek bush," said Arun Sliver, "because it's toxic to humans."

"The exaggerated reports of its toxicity!" said the chief.

"I will make her some tea," said Arun through gritted teeth.

"My satisfaction," said the rasme thau, and nodded at Becky. "Your name," she said. "Ma'am?" A bit of exaggerated politeness, from someone raised on Fist propaganda about humans and their intensely honor-based culture.

“Becky,” said Becky, shivering from the wet and the cold and Arun’s unwelcome grip. “Becky Twice.”

“My anticipation of our next meeting, Miss Becky Twice,” said the rasme thau in a way that sounded flirty if you were not thinking straight and hadn’t gotten laid in four months. The Trellis hovercar shot back into the air and headed north, cropping the treetops. North meant they weren’t off to kill Hiroko, thank God. So where *were* they going? The steward station was the only interesting thing on this planet.

“Into the ship, mum,” said Arun, gesturing with the singularity pistol in a mixture of politeness and threat. He’d settled on a middle-income, technical college sort of accent. “You may borrow m’bathrobe.”

Becky sloshed through the mud at gunpoint towards the promise of dry and warm. The events of the day had come from a completely different genre of lesbian porn than the one she’d been fantasizing about. Instead of the corny satellite repairwoman scenario, she’d been kidnapped by an alien butch in a cocktail dress who’d stolen her car. Some part of Becky wanted to follow this scene through to completion. In the chief’s quarters next to the yriek bush, bound to the poached-wood bedposts while the rasme thau straddled Becky’s chest and smothered her with those big green tits. But, realistically, Becky was willing to settle for getting off this planet alive. That was fantasy enough.

The smuggler ship had a horrible spacebound smell which the crew were trying to dispel by blasting the airlock vents. Arun Sliver escorted Becky to the kitchen area, where she sat on a plastic chair and rested her elbows on a plastic dinner table. Arun unhooked a coffee mug from the restraints that held it during skips, and opened a cupboard where six tea bags dangled from hooks like Victorian criminals.

“Fifth time around for these bags, I’m afraid,” he said.

“It’s okay,” said Becky. “I’m not really in the mood for tea.” What with the nauseating smell and the kidnapping.

Arun misunderstood. “American-descended, are you?” He slid the coffee mug into a cavity in the sink and Becky heard the

hissing of superheated steam.

“I’m real American,” said Becky. “I’m from Los Angeles. And I don’t like tea.”

“Apologies in advance, but the chief has told me to make you tea, and tea you shall have. You don’t have to drink it.”

“Are you gonna kill me?” said Becky.

“Oh,” said Arun, grimacing, as though Becky had farted, or mentioned money. “Not unless you come after me, or Yip-Goru.” He pointed through the kitchen into the bridge, where a rre in a squat suit resembling a Dalek or a municipal garbage can sat at a console.

“I’m not gonna rush a fuckin’ rre,” said Becky.

“Very wise,” said Arun. “Please keep in mind I am a much tougher customer than this particular rre.”

“Shut up,” said Yip-Goru, without moving.

“Guys, we’re at war,” said Becky. “Clearly y’all haven’t heard, because your boss just left a human and a rre with the keys to her ship. I don’t know what your criminal records look like, but if you brought back a Fist of Joy cargo ship, that seems like something we could use.”

“We know there’s a war!” said Yip-Goru. “I predicted the war!”

“We watched it start,” Arun told Becky. “Nukes deployed in orbit over Quennet. Professional noncombatants that we are—”

“He means ‘cowards’,” said Yip-Goru.

“Speak for yourself. We decided to retire for the duration to a quiet forest planet. Where you, the bloody tree coppers, had the poor taste to snitch on your new neighbors. So, please, don’t incite us to mutiny, mum. You’ve done quite enough.” Arun pulled the coffee mug out of the sink and presented it to Becky. The tea inside was the color of piss.

“Miss Becky Twice,” he said in the posh voice he’d used when he first encountered her, “I offer you tea.”

“I don’t want your damn tea,” said Becky.

“Ta very much,” said Arun. He sat down and drew the mug towards himself. Printed on the mug was a drawing of an egenu

woman holding a colorful human beachball. There was text on the mug, and the text used English words, but the words just didn't make any sense. The mug said "THE IF AND!"

"We don't keep hostages for long in this line of work," said Arun. "If you're still alive when the chief comes back, she'll probably invite you to join the crew."

"Why the hell would she do that?" said Becky.

"The chief likes to keep a bed-warmer," said Arun. No, that was Becky's imagination running off again. He actually said: "We're four at the moment. Our engineer was killed in an accident about twenty shifts ago."

Becky swallowed. "Can I have some water?"

"Of course," said Arun. He scooted back his plastic chair and unhooked another cup from beside the sink.

"I'm not an engineer," said Becky. She didn't even know how long a Fist 'shift' was. Their sitcoms ran five centishifts, so ten hours maybe? "I studied marketing."

Arun ran the faucet. "Nonetheless, four is an inconvenient number. We always end up at five."

"How hard is it to smuggle shit?" said Becky. "You need a pilot, you need a...hidey guy."

Arun handed Becky the cup of water without ceremony. It was a big enameled metal thing with a grip like brass knuckles, not designed for human fingers. Becky drank. "Greatly as I respect your knowledge of our field," said Arun, "you should know that our chief is a bit eccentric. Do you ever watch crime shows on the 3-tube?"

"Yeeeeeah," Becky wiped her mouth. "Me and Hiroko watch *Undeclared* and *The Down Under Crew*."

"How many characters make up the titular Down Under Crew?" said Arun. "I'll save you the trouble: it's not four. Four characters sort into stable alliances of two. The drama becomes stale. With five characters you get shifting alliances, or you get two stable alliances with the chief acting as tiebreaker."

"But you guys do real crimes, right?" said Becky. "You're not reenacting a 3-show."

“You’re looking at it as a binary, yeh?” said Arun. “The chief’s not like that; she takes a holistic view of the matter. We’re not your orthodox grey-market shipping company, but I can promise you good pay, fair treatment, and the excitement which has clearly been missing from your life. We often run restricted foodstuffs and recreational drugs, and if you see anything you like, you’re free to skim a little off the top.”

Fair treatment? This guy sounded like a Navy recruiter. *Speaking of which...* “I don’t want excitement,” Becky said. “I want to keep my head down ‘til this war blows over. I work for a security brand, for Christ’s sake. I’m not gonna join a smuggling ring run by the enemy.”

“You *worked* for a security brand,” said Arun. “Until this afternoon, when you left work and never came back. That won’t reflect well on...Trellis, was it?”

“You kidnapped me!” said Becky. “I’m the victim here!”

“By law, perhaps,” said Arun, as if this were an open question. “But from the brand’s perspective, all you’ve done is become a liability.”

“Oh, Jesus,” said Becky. “I can’t get fired! Do you know how hard it is to come back from an employment gap?”

“As a matter of fact, I do,” said Arun. “Fortunately for the both of us, criminals don’t check that paperwork.”

Becky gulped down another slosh of water. She needed something stronger. Trellis had trained her to face down death. Not very effectively, but at least she’d had the training. Nobody trained you how to face unemployment.

“That’s her cup, by the way,” said Arun.

“Whose cup?” said Becky.

“Our late engineer’s,” said Arun. “You may keep it.”

Becky set down the dead woman’s cup and let go of the handle. “That’s a hell of a signing bonus.”

“We wash our own dishes on this crew,” said Arun, as if he hadn’t just said what he’d just said. “All personal items must be strapped down during maneuvers.”

“I haven’t taken the job yet.”

“But the initial screening is going quite well,” said Arun. “You haven’t tried anything and I haven’t killed you. Now, while we wait for the chief’s return, I suggest you gather your thoughts and try to remember everything you can about *The Down Under Crew*.”

“Do you have it on card or something?” said Becky. “All my stuff is back at the steward station.”

“It’s not that complicated, yeah?” said Arun. “The Crew have some mad plan, it all goes wrong, so they come up with an even madder plan to get out of it. That covers most of it.”

“Arun!” Yip-Goru called out.

“Yeh, mate?” said Arun. He jumped out of his chair and leaned into the bridge.

This was Becky’s big chance. She could brain Arun with the dead engineer’s cup and...get torn apart by the rre. *Back to the drawing board, Becky.*

“Something enormous just skipped into orbit,” said Yip-Goru.

The hatch was open. Becky could make a run for it. Cedar Commons wasn’t designed for human habitation, but neither was it a hostile planet. Wouldn’t get far on foot, though.

“Who’s driving?” said the human.

“No one’s driving,” said Yip-Goru. “They’re going for a powered crash. They don’t care who sees them.”

“Well, it’s not mutual, mate.”

“Indeed,” said Yip-Goru. “Motivators are standby, everything else needs to go dark. How long until the chief gets back?”

“I don’t know where they went!” Arun dashed back into the kitchen and flipped switches. The water heater belched, the electrical lights snapped off.

“O-kay, motivators go dark as well,” said Yip-Goru. Lights danced in the darkness: instrument panel displays from the bridge, refracted through Yip-Goru’s metamaterial suit. Then those lights switched off, and there was nothing.

The cargo hold, the crew quarters. The ship wasn’t huge, but it was more than a kitchen and a bridge. She could hide in the darkness and find a weapon. Becky scooted beneath the table and a hand grabbed her shoulder. “Sit tight, mum,” Arun said.

“Where is it?” she said. “Is it gonna hit us?”

“Yeh, what’s its trajectory?” Arun asked.

“As a matter of fact, it’s about to hit your house, Becky,” said Yip-Goru. Becky heard a shuffling sound; the rre was joining them in the dark kitchen. “Good thing you moved to the exact opposite side of the planet, huh?”

“We have to warn Hiroko,” said Becky. “Please, oh my God.”

“I’m afraid that falls under the broad category of ‘squealing to the fuzz’,” said Arun. “Which we don’t do.”

“You’re just going to let her die?” said Becky. She huddled beneath the kitchen table like a kid in an earthquake.

“She’s not going to die, yaar,” said Arun. “If she’s any kind of copper, she’s already headed over to rescue her partner. So, we’ll... sort it out when she gets here.”

Becky unsuccessfully looked up at her invisible captor. “You know we’re not really cops, right?”

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