

“They will find you eventually, you know. You might as well turn yourself in now. If you don’t, they’ll just toss the cost of hunting you down on top of what you already owe, and your debt is bad enough already.”

Merlin shook his head wearily. The minute he’d actually heard the amount he was in the red for, Vipera had calculated for him what it would mean converted to indenture time. It was staggering. His parents had really fucked up their business venture, and he’d fucked up even worse trying to fix their mistakes, trying to make everything right again and buy off their indentures. He was looking at twenty-five years already, five years longer than he’d even been alive. That was assuming the creditors didn’t come up with some extra charges, or that the contractual customs didn’t change, or Extropia didn’t collapse, or TITANs didn’t decide to come back and wipe everybody out for good. Twenty-five years was forever. The world could end several times over in twenty-five years.

Jaynell wasn’t agreeing with him. Ne was leaning in close towards him, nir synthetic voice low, nir smooth and precise body language subdued. Unlike Merlin who was all biological, Jaynell had been sleeved in a synthmorph for as long as Merlin had known nir, and said ne preferred it that way. Even though Jay’s morph was obviously a nice, high-end design piece, Merlin had always found it a little strange for someone to actually prefer being incarnated in metal and plastic instead of flesh. Still, eccentric or not, these days Jay seemed to be the only friend he had left. Huddled in the tiny alcove deep below the surface, at the moment Merlin was glad that ne wasn’t using any oxygen. Down here in the Pits, the abandoned mining tunnels deep beneath the surface of the asteroid 44 Nysa, better known as Extropia, oxygen wasn’t complementary the way it was up where the well-to-do people lived, and Merlin couldn’t afford a lot of it. He had no idea what he’d do about food or water, but he wasn’t planning on staying here long enough for that to become an issue. As for the lack in mesh coverage, he had disconnected himself anyway before starting down, over paranoia of being tracked. The lack of a mesh overlay made him half-blind and Vipera a halfwit, but he felt he didn’t have a choice.

“Seriously, mate, there’s nowhere for you to run! Even if you pawned that retro chic biomorph of yours and found someone to egocast you the fuck out of here, who’d take you in? The Consortium? You’d just end up indentured to an inner system hypercorp, and I hear they make our companies look like fuzzy little kittens. A scum swarm? An ego hunter would find you in a week. Titan? They talk a good game, but everyone in the Alliance has an extradition treaty with everyone else, so you’d just get shipped back... although they just might let a fork of you stay. It could be worth a shot, if you think you could live among the dirty commies.” Jaynell paused. “But even that’s not a real option for you, is it? I don’t get you. Phobias are perfectly treatable, and with the amount of money you spent on other little things, you could easily have had enough pocket change for a bit of psychosurgery. It might not be too late for that even now, come to think of it. I know someone who could find you—”

“Shut up, Jay.” The air felt heavy and smelled foul. Off in the distance Merlin thought he heard a scream, although it could have just been the wind howling through ancient ventilation ducts. Then again, it was just as likely to be a scream. In his all of five hours spent in the depths he’d come to understand first-hand that the Pits was not a happy place.

“This is not where you want to be”, Jay pleaded. “No matter where you might end up doing your time, having your ego and morph end up in the hands of the kind of people crawling around this part of town is much worse.”

“I’m not here for long-term. I have a plan, but I need you to help me with a bit of cover and just a little bit of money. Enough for a one-way ride on a shuttle, short distance.”

“Short distance, where? I’m sorry, I’d love to help you, you know that, but there’s nothing to be gained by trying to slip to another local hab. They’ll track you down easily, and get you back from wherever you go”, Jay protested.

“You’re wrong. I’ve got it figured out. There’s one place they won’t track me, can’t get to me, can never touch me. They’re going to write me right the fuck off. It’s going to be shit, but it’s gotta be better than squatting down here waiting for some psycho asshole to knife me for my implants, or as an infomorph slave to a data-mining

company for a quarter of a century.”

“Sounds like you are planning to step into an incinerator or something”, Jaynell moaned.

“Not quite.”

“What the hell are you planning, Merl?”

Merlin told nir.

The shuttle was hardly more than a tiny cargo container on top of an ancient plasma rocket. It had been the only thing he could afford to hire, considering that he had needed to slip out of Extropia without any of the bounty hunters catching his scent. The craft had no real life support, so Merlin wore a vacsuit that was equally vintage, wishing its systems wouldn't give up the ghost until he got to where he was heading. He didn't need to be strapped in to anything: the acceleration was minimal and the “passenger compartment” was the size and shape of a coffin booth. He was the sole passenger. The ship was piloted by an infomorph, an indenture whose normal job was piloting cargo pods around the spaceport. She'd tried making small talk with Merlin at first, but he'd made it perfectly clear he was completely uninterested. His mesh communication was still shut down, even though out here it was obvious paranoia.

The sixty-or-so hours of monotony were finally interrupted by the pilot's voice. “Sir, the craft along our trajectory has realised we're not going to change course. They're hailing us now. Would you like to talk to them?”

“Yeah”, Merlin said, his throat sore. He was pretty sure there was something wrong with the life support of the vacsuit. If his plan didn't work, he might not even make it back to Extropia with the ship. He had no idea how likely it was. He didn't know of anyone who'd ever even attempted anything like this; not that most sane people would, for any reason. It was idiocy, Jaynell had repeatedly told him. Ne'd offered to run mesh searches for him, to see if this was actually feasible, but Merlin hadn't let nir. He'd claimed a search might alert an ego hunter to what he was up to, but he wasn't sure if that was the real reason, or if he just didn't want to hear that his last hope was no hope at all.

If this gambit failed, he might just as well open the passenger compartment, push himself out and blast his suit open. He'd be damned before he let his morph fall into the greedy hands of his debtors. Even less so, his cortical stack.

A gruff, female voice started speaking Spanish at him. It was a familiar language to him; he didn't even need Vipera to translate.

"Extropian spacecraft, this is the Jovian Space Force corvette *Danse Macabre*. You are heading directly towards our position. You are required to change course immediately."

Merlin cleared his throat. He wished he didn't sound pitiful and scared. He knew he probably did.

"*Danse Macabre*, this is Merlin de Vooght of Extropia, born in Belgium, Earth twenty years ago. I am the sole passenger on this sorry excuse of a spacecraft. I am a human in my original body. I am a victim of persecution on Extropia due to my, um, political beliefs, and I wish to seek asylum in the Jovian Republic."

There was a pause. Then: "Stand by." Merlin imagined the comms operator calling on her superior officer, relaying to her or him what he'd said. There was no particular hurry to respond. Out in the black, you usually have either microseconds or hours. In this case, they had hours. Still, Merlin would have preferred a quick response. He felt cold inside his suit.

Finally the voice came back. "Mr. de Vooght, we are a military vessel, not a diplomatic one. We are not equipped to take refugees. You should contact the Jovian consul on Extropia—"

"I can't do that!" Merlin exclaimed. "Your consulate is in the Bernoulli, smack in the middle of one of the most surveilled section of the city. The security companies would detain me before I got three rungs into the sphere. I cannot use the mesh either — I'd be tracked and arrested. This is the only way I can contact you."

[Their doctrine! Use it against them! Guilt the shit out of those biocon bastards!]
Vipera chimed.

“I thought the Republic stood for humanity, that you wanted to keep what was still left from being replaced by machines! If I go back there, they’ll repossess my body, wipe my mind, put a replica of a human inside my brain while making a caricature of what used to be me to do their bidding! If that happens, there’s one less human being in the universe, and one more artificial thing walking around in human skin. The real me will be dead! Surely that can’t be what you want? Didn’t you want original humans to survive? Hell, haven’t you been suggesting that as many of us as possible immigrate to the Republic?” Merlin sounded like one of their propaganda vids, the kind that had always mercilessly been mocked by everyone he knew. He could imagine Jaynell making sneering clicks at him. He couldn’t bring himself to scream *in the name of Holy Mary, Mother of God, and all the saints above, have pity!* Not even the Jovians would be stupid enough to fall for that. Would they? He kept on ranting and pleading, but there was no response on the channel. He didn’t even know if they were listening any more. He imagined the crew sharing looks, rolling their eyes, wondering if they were being pranked by some stupid transhuman kid in a home-built rust bucket.

Merlin felt a nudge and a twinge of acceleration. The manoeuvring thrusters were firing, giving the shuttle a clockwise spin.

“What are you doing?” Merlin yelled.

“Sir, it’s obvious they aren’t interested in what you’re selling. It shouldn’t be a surprise really — this is the Jovian Junta. Drawing their attention to the shuttle is dangerous and not covered by your insurance.”

[What fucking insurance?] Vipera muttered.

“I’m taking the shuttle back to Extropia. I’m sorry it didn’t work out, but really, what did you expect?”

“Stop it! I don’t want to leave!” Merlin exclaimed. The pilot must have put two and two together and realised that her passenger had a bounty on his head. If she delivered him, she might be able to direct the reward towards paying off her own debts. In her position, he’d probably have done the same thing.

“Sir, there’s nothing more either of us can do. I think the prudent thing to do now is focusing on getting out of here. I cannot risk the shuttle or us.”

“The fuck do you care? You’re backed up and this lemon you’re flying around isn’t

worth a warm beer! They haven't said 'no' to me yet!"

"Sir, the Jovians aren't sociable. They're barely civilised. If you annoy them, they're just as likely to blast you out of the sky as tell you off. As your pilot, I'm still responsible for your safety."

Suddenly a loud, static noise stabbed Merlin's eardrums. The radio receiver of the vacsuit was receiving an overpowered signal. Obviously the pilot had cut off his communication link with the Jovians, and they hadn't liked it, so they'd just decided to blast the shuttle with a signal strong enough to drown the local channel. The voice of the Jovian officer was back.

"Are you changing course?" she demanded.

"No! It's the ship — the infomorph piloting the ship. She heard what I was going to do and wants to take me back." Merlin hoped the Jovians had the capacity to pick up his minuscule suit transmitter. They might have. No one was really certain of their actual capabilities. They were supposed to be primitive Luddites, but even so, they had a reputation for brute-forcing things with frightening efficiency.

"You are being hijacked by a machine intelligence?" came the reply. Obviously they could hear him just fine.

"Well, technically — I mean yes, that's what's happening", Merlin said, hating himself for calling the pilot that. She was merely an infomorph and as far as he could tell, her ego was as human as that of any of the Jovians on the corvette. But they didn't see it like that, and he was not in a position to start lecturing them on biochauvinism, especially since that was the trait he was counting on to save him. Assuming they were prepared to put their money where their mouth was.

"Can you exit the craft?"

"... Yes."

[This is really going to suck.]

"Then do so. Get out and push yourself as far away from it as you can. If your suit has thrusters, use them."

Merlin couldn't hear the pilot but he was certain she was either protesting or pleading as he opened the hatch and slipped outside. The sky was black, littered with

tiny, white dots. The tiny shuttle was the only solid thing anywhere. Earlier times when he'd been outside, his AR overlay had picked out planets, stars, orbits, made everything look a little less empty. Right now the nothingness of it all was crushing. The hull of the shuttle was grey. He kicked against it, and launched himself into a random direction. One of the dots was the Danse Macabre, but he had no idea which one.

The Jovians were a long way from home this deep in the Belt, a mere blink from Extropia, far outside the gravity well of their precious gas giant. But it was no secret that their vast fleet maintained a presence close to certain Autonomist habs. Neither really advertising themselves nor flexing their muscles, the Jovian vessels would just float silently in the darkness a full day's burn away, observing — supposedly watching for signs of TITAN outbreak the half-insane Junta figured could occur at any time. Of course the Extropians knew the Jovians were there, knew exactly what kind of ships they had, knew when there was about to be a changing of the guard. But as long as they kept out of reasonable weapon range, didn't harass anyone and didn't bring in worrying amounts of firepower, it was better just to ignore them than pick a fight. There was no profit in it for anyone.

The shuttle was gently turning from the pulse fired from the manoeuvring thrusters. Then a brilliant white light caused the visor of the vacsuit to black out. The pilot had ignited the plasma rocket and was starting to beeline back to Extropia. Fortunately Merlin hadn't been stupid enough to launch himself into the path of the exhaust. The acceleration was pitifully slow, but the pilot was making a long burn. After a minute the ship was half a klick away, and he wouldn't have seen it if it hadn't been for the glow of its engines.

He half expected the Jovians to blast the shuttle out of the sky, but they didn't. He guessed he was happy about that, even though it was probably just to avoid inconveniencing their consul on Extropia.

An hour later a small, black lump of a short-range craft collected Merlin. A barrage of containment, testing and paranoia commenced. He'd been expecting it, and while a part of him felt relieved over having gotten this far, another part couldn't stop

wondering if he'd just made a tremendous mistake.

SIX MONTHS LATER

The people climbing into the lander with Merlin were ugly. He still hadn't gotten used to how absolutely repulsive the Jovians looked, all patchy skin, lopsided faces, crooked teeth, lazy eyes and bad hair. For most of basic training he'd managed to avoid close contact with them. At the moment he had no choice. The twenty young, homely, loud men and women crowded into the craft, bringing a variety of pungent smells with them. In addition to the natural odour of flats it was obvious at least half of the group was hung over, and the stink of old booze quickly filled every cranny. Merlin strapped himself in to a corner seat, so as to have at least two sides free of olfactory offence.

After having cleared several kinds of quarantine while being slowly shipped from the Belt to the heartland of the Republic, he'd landed in immigration interview hell. The Jovian authorities were suspicious of him, and he could hardly blame them. Even though they wouldn't say as much, he could well be their first immigrant from Extropia ever, and they were at least half-convinced he was some kind of spy. His being sleeved in a splicer morph instead of a flat like God intended wasn't doing him any favours. Fortunately even their primitive instruments had managed to confirm that the morph had been hopping around for actual 20 years, and not been fished out of a vat a couple of months ago. Proving that his ego had inhabited it all that time was more difficult. The Jovians had subjected him to all kinds of psychological and neurological examinations, many of which were probably complete bullshit. Merlin had half expected them to bring out an exorcist.

In addition to the examinations, his saviours had made some adjustments to him. Technically they were consensual procedures, which meant that beforehand he was told what was going to happen, and was made to sign a pad acknowledging that he was informed and willing to proceed. First, they deactivated his mesh inserts, in hardware. Then they purged his blood of several varieties of medicinal nanos, replacing them with local flavours that were probably ten to fifteen generations out of

date. Finally they erased Vipera from his head. That procedure was the one he most fought against. He'd had the muse since he was a child, and the idea of letting Jovians just wipe him out was horrifying — like having a dear pet put to sleep. The Jovians were adamant, however. Their suspicions towards all kinds of artificial intelligence ran deep, and even though Vipera was not really self-aware or intelligent by any reasonable measure, the Jovians still didn't want any of him kind running around.

If the Jovians had led with taking Vipera from him, Merlin might well have abandoned the whole scheme, although he'd no idea how that would have worked or what he'd have done instead — indeed, he didn't know if the Jovians would even let him go. But by the time they'd gotten around to his muse, they were already fairly certain he was no spy, and a kind of rapport had formed between Merlin and his interrogators. They understood Vipera was important to him, and so they allowed him time to come to terms with losing him. And Merlin was coming to understand just what exactly he was going to have to give up in order to escape a quarter century of indenture.

In the end, Vipera himself had told him he would be better off erased. Lacking connectivity to the local mesh he was crippled anyway, becoming more and more predictable, less interesting, less of a companion, less of a friend. But losing him really hurt anyway.

With the last kid on board, the lander hatch closed. The acceleration started gently, but quickly increased to over one G. Merlin sunk into his seat, as a still-drunk quartet two rows ahead whooped and cheered. The blond-haired young man sitting to his left looked miserable in the acceleration. Merlin was pretty sure his name was Astridsdottir. He stank like a toxic waste dumpster and kept swallowing in an effort not to spew his breakfast. He noticed Merlin eyeing him in apprehension, and gave a weak smile.

“I suppose it would have been way too convenient for the biomods they installed to actually make us immune to hangovers like the manufacturers claim”, he said in Scandinavian. Merlin had picked up the language in the couple of months he'd spent among the hundred or so people that were mostly from Gerðr. At least the Jovians hadn't disabled his linguistic implants.

“There's only so much you can do with a flat baseline”, Merlin replied.

“Huh?”

“... Never mind.” *They don't call themselves flats. They call themselves humans. For fuck's sake.* Merlin felt completely out of place. The acceleration didn't bother him, and even though he too had drunk quite a bit last night, *his* biomods had prevented any adverse aftereffects, as usual. Last night he'd sort of tried to get along with a couple of the guys, but they'd made the mistake of trying to keep up with his drinking, with predictable results. He saw one of his buddies from the bar on the other side of the lander, white as an ice crystal.

In ten minutes they'd reached high orbit, and were preparing to dock. Somebody - fortunately, not Astridsdottir - had actually vomited on the way up, and even though she'd mostly hit the bag provided, a couple of droplets of sickly, yellowish ichor were lazily floating around the cabin now that the vessel had reached microgravity. The four loud idiots in front of him had decided to start singing the anthem of their local sport team, off-key of course. There was no mesh connection to escape to, no Vipera to keep him sane, nothing but the noise and stink of his fellow passengers.

It was the fucking Dark Ages. There was not enough booze in the Jovian system to make this bearable. Harder drugs were proving surprisingly difficult to obtain, at least for a stranger like him with no connections. Of course they were also really illegal, so even trying to procure any would probably be unbelievably unwise, all things considered.

The umbilical tube connected, and the airlock opened. A young woman with a crew cut and a face like the asshole of a Bruiser morph swung in. Like them, she was wearing a white uniform. Unlike them, she had the chevrons of a petty officer on her shoulders. “Soldiers, fall in!” she bellowed.

Next to Merlin, Astridsdottir chuckled. “That's my sister Marta. She's also doing her service here. She's going to get me out of doing any of the really nasty stuff, you just watch.” The petty officer's gaze swung over Merlin and her brother, but it didn't soften at all; if anything, she seemed even more pissed off.

What the fuck have I gotten myself into?

The Jovian Republic welcomes every human still in their birth body, who's willing to relocate to the Jovian system. This was the official line, and on Extropia it was thought to be pretty much true. If you were crazy enough to actually want to relocate, the Jovians would probably take you as long as you were genetically and mentally human.

Since Merlin had been born a splicer to wealthy parents, he fit the definition. Of course, he was superior to any non-genfixed human, but there was no question he was the same species, 46 chromosomes having spun a big bunch of cells into the shape of a bipedal, hairless ape, just as the antiquated biology textbooks of the Jovians preached. Even his implants weren't really a problem, since they didn't contain anything the Junta decreed was against God or State. As he had been in the same morph for his entire life, and could kind of prove it to the Jovians' satisfaction, he was deemed mentally and spiritually human as well. One of the psychologists talking to him had also been a Catholic priest, and she had been so overjoyed she'd almost cried when she'd been satisfied that his soul was still intact, even if he was an unbeliever.

Matters of humanity notwithstanding, there was still the question of asylum, residence and citizenship. It was something he'd remotely been aware of, but hadn't really connected the dots, until they were made explicit to him.

Jovian citizenship is something you earn, not something you are born to. To become a citizen you need to serve four years in the Republic military. You can elect not to serve, in which case you remain a civilian, a second-class citizen who cannot vote, or get an education beyond a certain level, or apply for many jobs, or found a company.

Oh, and if you're relocating to the Republic from the decadent transhuman civilisation elsewhere in the system? You need to become a citizen to be allowed to remain. Staying around as a civilian is not an option. If you want to live in the Republic, you need to prove you love it enough to do your tour of duty in the armed service, defending it.

This matter had been made clear to Merlin during his month of internment and interviews. The republic was glad to have him, since he fit their narrow-minded, xenophobic definition of a human, provided that he was willing to earn his citizenship, preferably right away. “Preferably” seemed to mean “unless you have a lot of money or other assets that make you a valuable member of society”. Certain advantages could be bought — apparently the Junta and Extropia had at least that much in common. But Merlin had no money or highly demanded skills, so it was off to boot camp with him.

Through the transparent wall of the umbilical tube Merlin saw their destination. It was a Jovian warship, about a hundred metres in length, painted a dull grey color, hardened against the radiation endemic in the inner Jupiter system, and armed for Armageddon. The JSFV *Saint Sunniva*, of the 9 Patrol Squadron of the Callistan Battle Fleet. Designation: frigate, crew: 55 - 7 professional soldiers, 48 conscripts, twenty of whom had just completed their six months of basic training and were about to start their three-plus remaining years of service aboard her.

The tube lead into another airlock, and then to an arrivals hall of sorts. The petty officers — all conscripts, all seemingly flats — ordered Merlin and the others into formation, small magnets in the soles of their boots making it possible for them to remain assembled in an orderly manner. Since they’d already been in the military for six months, nobody felt the need to try anything stupid. The assembly went smoothly. Everyone stood at attention, as the frigate captain, a worn looking blond flat with a short beard and calm eyes, addressed the troops in Jovian Spanish.

“At ease. Soldiers, welcome aboard the Saint Sunniva. It is a pleasure to see another full complement of humankind’s young heroes step into service on board our ship. You have left basic training, and the specialized training and service now ahead of you will provide you with new challenges — challenges I believe you will meet with distinction.”

“Since coming aboard you have been soldiers of the Republic on a posting. Even though your training will continue, your mission from now on is real; so is the enemy,

and so are the dangers. You will act accordingly. Saint Sunniva is the flagship of the Republic's garrison in Gerðr, so to those of you who are from Gerðr your job has a special significance: you are now directly protecting your home from any and all enemies that could threaten it. The disastrous attack on a civilian target that we suffered last year is still fresh in our memory, and our primary objective is to prevent anything of the sort from happening again."

Merlin saw a soldier one row ahead of him stiffen at this. Acosta, that was her name. She was a curvy teenager with skin darker than that of the ethnic Scandinavians, long hair worn in a thick braid, probably something like 17 years old, not from Gerðr, didn't speak Scandinavisk beyond a couple of phrases, but he didn't really know anything more about her. She didn't appear hung over or depressed. She looked like someone who was planning on taking this soldier business seriously. Not many of the new recruits looked like that.

"Saint Sunniva has been in service for five years, but we have just had a new navigation system and a new fusion reactor installed. Her next tour is planned to last 12 months. These months will teach you a lot about yourselves and your comrades-in-arms. You will find within yourselves strength you had no idea you possessed. You will learn that even though the solar system around us is dangerous and filled with enemies, we are not helpless before them. We will prevent, we will protect, we will pacify, we will rescue — and if it's too late for anything else, we will avenge."

The captain moved on to introduce the officers and non-coms on his crew. The XO, two CIC officers, the bosun, the navigator, the chief engineer. Flat morphs in diverse ethnicities and shapes, hard faces, few smiles. Merlin wondered how many of them were actual fanatics. The CIC gunnery officer certainly looked the part: a thin, tall woman with a rebar posture and eyes that went right through you. The captain himself spoke in soft, measured tones, and he might have sounded like a reasonable man, if you didn't know the crazy, paranoid, hyperconservative philosophy his country followed.

The speech was thankfully fairly short. It ended with the bosun leading everyone

in the Jovian Space Forces fighting song.

Three and a half years of this. After that, life among these people. There's not enough booze in the universe.

When Saint Sunniva was accelerating, the ship had actual gravity of 0.05 G — apparently just above what the Jovian Space Force classified as “microgravity”. The lower decks closer to the stern and the reactor held the quarters for enlisted men and women, and the lowest deck was of course for the new meat. Merlin’s bunk was a cramped cabin he shared with four others. At least with the present crew numbers the ship wasn’t crowded enough to require hot bunking. He probably wouldn’t be able to stand the idea of having to share sheets with the unhygienic natives.