

Owner Operator
A Care Givers Tale
By Straycat
(edited by Holly Logan)

Preamble:

Casey Maxwell is the Owner Operator of an over the event-horizon Space Train in the 22nd century. Hired on to the CareGivers, and family to them as well. Casey's wife is Rebecca St. Charles, formerly NASA Space Shuttle Astronaut turned CareGiver after the PWA. Tracey Chadwich-Robins-Waco, Casey's daughter and a CareGiver. This is Casey's Story. It's a story of Adventure. It's a story of Love. It's a story of Family. It's a story of War, and most importantly, it's the story of a man coming to terms with who he really is.

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Chapter 1

Here is the basic layout of the geo-political landscape in the solar system in the 22nd century. You have the Terrans with their Inter Solar System Police and United Nations trying to put a stranglehold on everybody's freedom. "For the greater good" they always say. And then you have the Independent Spacers Movement, XX Flight, Apollo Freight, CareGivers Company, the Independent Spacers Guild, and a whole host of others trying to make out a living in the most hazardous environment imaginable. Just trying to 'Live and Be Free.' That's not a whole lot to ask, you might think, till you see what the Terrans have been doing to us for years.

I am going to say the war started with the Protection of Women Act enacted by the United Nations, which banned fertile females from serving in 'hostile environments' but the wording made it clear they were only banned from space beyond the reach of the moons orbit around Terra.

That is usually seen as the opening shot in the war. A war of independence no less. I am a spacer, so I guess that tells you which side I am on, right?

With the crushing foot of the ISP and the U.N. on the neck of the spacers we had no choice but to fight. A malicious man once said that the trouble with Scotland was there were too many Scotts. And he also said that since they could not drive them out, that they would breed them out.

The U.N. had the same idea, only coming from the opposite direction. If we can not breed, we'd die off. Literally die off eventually. Terra can just wait us out, or we would have to return to Earth. If we have to do that, then we would have to be under Terran control.

So you stick me floating around the solar system in my ship just trying to live and be free, meanwhile titanic forces set the stage for the first interplanetary war. Sure, I did business with both sides, and if push came to shove (which it had several times) I took sides. I always sided with the spacers, but I still took money from Earth when I had a chance to make some profit.

But how far back should I start my story? Childhood? Hell, I don't remember enough of it to make even a few pages of very disjointed text. All I remember really, is it was not worth remembering at the time, and now it's been too long ago for me to really remember much of anything.

School? Well, maybe as a side note. I decided I wanted to go into space almost from the get go, and tailored everything in my life to get there. Here, you do the math: I am somewhere close to 72 years of age. I have been in space 45 years. I have owned the Backasswards for 30 of those years. That means I spent the first 27 years of my life on Earth. At the very least I that means I spent 16 some odd years

actively trying to get into space.

I do not, in any way whatsoever, regret a single second of all that time.

I once met a Tibetan monk who spent 15 years contemplating the breeze. He told me about it over a fifth of gin in a disreputable bar once. He was on a bender. He did not regret the time he spent there, he just appreciated the time drinking, more. Kind of puts it into perspective, doesn't it?

I guess the best way I could start my life story would be to pull a couple pages out of my own diary from when I met Tracey, and how we figured out how we were related.

It will also help me figure out where I am in my life right now, and what I am going to be doing from now on.

As I am sure you are going to discover that I do not take change very well, and my most recent change is as drastic as anything I have ever done in my entire life.

Casey Maxwell's Diary, March, 31st, 2104

Kids these days, no respect for their elders. I've been a Spacer ever since I first shipped out on the Teenage Wasteland 15 years ago. Sure, I've had those days. More than I can count. But I'm not complaining none. Who'd listen? I did good on my hitch, saved my pesos, invested wisely, and got lucky in a card game or two. That's how I got the Backasswards about 10 years ago, doubled down on a royal flush when facing off against a dead-mans hand. Neither of us drew down like in the spaghetti-westerns of the 1960's and 1970's. Nah, RubberDuck was a good ol' bird, only shed one tear when I offered him a job till he could afford to head off again. He was a good first mate the two times I launched with him. His heart gave out halfway back on the triangle run. Buried him at sea as per his wishes ... I never even knew his real name, but that ten reams of paperwork I had to do to register his orbit will always remind me of him. That was almost depressing; I kinda thought he'd have just kept going into the great unknown forever. The Corpsicle Explorer. Yeah, I welded him into an old footlocker and scribed that onto the door along with those immortal words "To boldly go where no one has gone before" and "Rest in peace, My Captain."

Anyway, I was telling you about kids. Never found a girl to settle down with and make a few of my own. Too busy, and now I'm too old. Never bothered with chemicals. Figured when my time came I'd check out like Ol' RubberDuck did. As far as family is concerned, men outnumber women like 4 to one on Terra now, and it's worse than that in space, like 7-2 was the last numbers I saw. Sure, sure, you get a few surgicals like the DSC once in a while. Aggressive lays, not the hardest things on the eyes, but dammed close. You spend two years in space working 18 out of 24 hours every single day and you'd stick it in the first thing that opened it's thighs, too. Had more than a couple natural gals too, Few pretty nice. Oh, and I'll never forget my first and only cherry. Penny Wise. God, what a girl. Her father, Miguel, was an asno. But Brazilians normally are to Uruguayans. He threatened to cut my bolas off, and I threatened to drop a rock on his happy ass. Punta.

Well, those were the good ol' days and now things are rough. Being an Owner Operator ain't as easy as I thought, nor is the pay as good anymore. Apollo Freight, and a handful of others are running me out of business. They can move stuff cheaper than I can buy parts anymore, thanks to Space Train Systems discontinuing the 2050-b model a couple years back, that is. RubberDuck had upgraded the engines back when you could still afford that kind of thing. The nav systems, life support, and pretty much everything else were original. Being just shy of the start of the 22nd century C.E., that put it all about 50 years out of date. It worked ... mostly. The engines were Grumman Ironworks M.O.P. D-47's, all four of them. Damn, I couldn't count the number of ships that had used the D-47's at one time in the

past. Things change, or rather, engineers change things.

Anyway, where was I? Ah, yeah... Kids. I was dirtside looking for a new hand or two to make the triangle run with me. Had one already, he was out getting his martillo wet or whatever. Could always use another hand or two. I was coming out of a bar to head back to the space lift and start looking for some new crewmembers, when this kid runs into me, literally that is. He apologizes, which is unusual enough, then he noticed my tour patches from the Teenage Wasteland and gets all wide eyed on me, asks me if I'm a Spacer.

I told him yeah, I'm an Owner Operator. He begs me to hire him, he's always wanted to go into space and he'd make it worth my while ... Like I said, kids these days. I'm not gonna ship out with a wet behind the ears brat just cause he's gonna offer his milk money. For me to take him up, show him the ropes, teach him a millions of peso's worth of skills, then have him ditch me dirtside and run get a better job. Ain't gonna happen. He did have an air about him though ... looked rather familiar for some reason that I couldn't put my finger on. Eh, not important.

I polled the staffing agencies during the cab trip back to Launch Control South America (basically NASA Southern Command, but they hate it when you call them that) outta Port Shepard, and found a guy that looked qualified to do the job and was going for cheap. Cheap is good, qualified is better. He was both, according to the listing.

I placed a bid on it and waited for the call to connect. He answered and we talked. Small talk. Yes, it was his listing: Yes, he was still available; Sure, he could ship out on short notice. He'd meet me at the pad for the orbit trip back to my ship.

Now, I don't exactly travel heavy, but I'm known to pack a bag or two for a trip to Mars wandering around New Atlanta, or dirtside Terra for a week or two of visiting the houses of ill repute and some of the better known bars too. The point is, the guy showed up with the clothing on his back, and a daypack with one change of clothes. I should have told him to bugger off right then and there. I didn't, because of the call I got right before he showed. Carlos, who was my right hand on the last flight I'd made, called me. He'd got a kid on the way and a manufacturing job at her daddy's biz. Talk about a set up!

I guess those arranged marriages are handy for something. So I took this guy. His paperwork spec'd out. No general alarms in my head. I needed the help. Oh, I coulda run the ship solo, that's not the question. But being alone in space is one sure way to breathe vacuum. Not something you ever wanna do. Not since Gordo Cooper or Space Ship One, had any one gone into space alone willingly, for very good reasons.

Getting the launch going was a cakewalk. It had already been programmed by Carlos. A parting gift, I guess. He could do that math in his head, he was that good. Then again, he was gone, and the punk was running the right seat. He seemed to know what he was doing. He had a few questions because the layout was different than he was used to, which is not so unusual considering the age of my bird. This was a contract load for New Atlanta. Emergency food packs. Nothing hot, or expensive unfortunately. Cause if it had been, I might have been able to get a few more things fixed and or upgraded.

Percentage of the load, half up front, other half on delivery, plus broker fees and taxes etc, etc, etc. Standard fare, really. But things were breaking faster then I could afford to fix them. We launched. Like getting kicked in the asno by a mule. Half way to Mars I finally got the idea this jerk had lied to me. He couldn't read a radar screen, couldn't fix a zero-gee john, didn't know the first thing about astro-navigation or propulsion systems. He almost breathed vacuum because he'd never worn an EVA suit before, and if I hadn't checked him, I'd been down a suit and a hand.

When I finally cornered him, he confessed. He'd never had any formal training in anything. Read a bunch online and had a vague idea on actual workings. Three months in space and I find out I'd been

babysitting an invalid. I stranded his anso on Mars and let some one else worry about him. No coin, no nothing. I figure the on the job training he got made up for the mistakes he made that I had to correct. I got better things to do than baby-sit some pounder (ground-pounder is an insult to a spacer) while my ship and my anso is on the line.

I pulled a load heading to the belts solo. Like I said before, NOT something you really wanna do solo. Dropped and pulled an ingot load back to Terra for some peso's and hope to find a hand that has a clue. Things broke, they always do on this ship. Nothing life threatening, fortunately. But the four days I had to have the G-ring stopped and working on the plumbing was something I could only hope to forget. I hate sleeping in zero-G on my own ship unless I'm strapped into the command console, which I've also done before.

I pulled into Terra Shipping Authority and dropped off my load after a year alone in space. Stir crazy comes to mind, but I didn't have all that much time to sit idly with nothing to do. I took an orbiter down to dirtside for a little R&R&R. Rest, Recuperation, and Repairs. I also made sure I hit up NASA, ESA, and ARTA for a new hand to help on the Backasswards. Unfortunately they had upped their rates in the last two years and I couldn't afford them on the last paycheck I'd gotten. That on top of more repairs, and maybe I could afford at least one upgrade.

I got the bird ready to fly and made another solo Mars run. Again, nothing expensive, as Apollo was winning all the bids they could cover... lucky bastardos. Must be nice. I know Apollo started off as a small time O/O just like me, but he got of couple lucky contracts early on and grew from there. Hell, I even passed the Atlas once or twice in the last couple of years, which was Apollo Freight's first ship. I know The Fred of Apollo Freight (Fred Hastings) doesn't take anything out of service. And he can afford to keep them up ... a couple more years and I won't have a choice but to sign on with one of them guys. Maybe, but orgullo won't let me till I've given my all and my bird's falling apart ... of course I know it'd be too late then ... but hey.

I hit dirtside again to do my business while I waited for freight. Found out that Grumman Ironworks had not only discontinued the D-47 line, but were offering the last update for them as a parting gift. Well, not gift, and not cheap either. But it was needed. About a 1% boost in efficiency and about 2.5% decrease in maintenance. But the labor to install it was too expensive for me to bother paying some one else to do. I have almost as much time on them engines as any of the company reps do. I also looked into a nav board update, and a general parts order.

Not surprising, things are getting hard to find, and more and more stuff is coming from "Bob's Discount World of Spacer Junk" also known as salvage yards. Salvaged from what? Give you three guesses, and the first two don't count. Wrecked, broken, or hulled ships.

Okay, now here is where things start to get interesting. You know as well as I do that NASA, ESA, and ARTA don't go cheap, and getting more expensive as times go on. That's when I decided to call CareGivers. Oh, sure, I'd heard of them before. All women spacer staffing agency. Hot pink flight suits. Total Babes. Makes my martillo hard just thinking about them. But I had not considered calling them for a hand to help on the ship till now. And amigo, my wallet was dreading that call.

I got a hold of Miss Sandra Chandris, CareGivers Corp Recruiting South America, first try. I explained very carefully that I was not looking to join, but looking to hire a spacer as long as they were fully qualified and not too horribly expensive. She told me that she'd have a look and call me back. Amigo, when a hot babe like that tells you she's gonna call back, you take her word for it and thank her!

Two days I waited, not idly mind you. I got a ship to prep and cargo to find. But as always, all the good stuff was taken even when I tried to underbid. Dedicated accounts must be nice. That's when I got the call back from Sister Tracey Chadwick-Robins of CareGivers Corporation.

“Hola” I answered

“Hola, is this Casey Maxwell?” her voice all but purred, and her picture matched the voice. And that picture took my breath away. I gasped

“Something wrong, señor?” she asked

“No, no. Nothing’s wrong. You just remind me of some one I knew many years ago, senora.”

She smiled “Yes, I have heard that a time or two. I am told that I favor my grandmother on my mother’s side quite a lot.”

I was almost breathless. Women, as I believe that I have pointed out, are few and far between these days, thanks to the wonders of modern science. Making studs of most men and causing a surge in male offspring because nearly every swinging martillo wanted to have a son to carry on the family business.

“I hope that now is a good time to call. I can try back later if that would be more convenient for you, señor...”

“No, no, now is just fine. I take it you’re calling about the job, si?” I asked while trying to get the right head running again

She smiled that award winning smile again “Si, señor. I hope it is still available.”

“Yes, of course it is!” I’d have held that job open for years for her, just this moment if she asked ... but it looked like I wouldn’t have to wait that long.

“Good. I take it that you are still on the planet, correct? Would you like to meet someplace to discuss my qualifications?”

“Yes I am. Are you here in Montevideo?” I asked. I didn’t want her to have to travel too far on my account.

“Si, señor. Is there a place you would like to meet?”

I thought about this ... I figured I could probably use a drink about now anyway “Have you ever heard of the bar called ‘Senoritas Y Toros?’” Ladies and Bulls Bar because it wouldn’t hurt to offer this lovely young lady a drink.

She smiled again “Si, I can be there in about 45 minutes if you would like.”

I’d be there in about 30 myself anyway, so that worked. “That would be fine. I’ll be the grizzled ol’ space dog hiding in the back corner as long as I can shovel my booth open again.”

She actually laughed at that “Ok, I will see you then, adiós.”

“Adiós.” And I signed off. And this thought crossed my mind ... I Need A Shower, ... Bad.

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That phone call was twenty-two years ago. It is funny how perspective changes over that period of time. I recall things now that I completely overlooked at the time. One of the things that I had overlooked was the genetic signature line across the bottom of the screen. It was not on the screen for long, and I was distracted by the young lady who was on the other side of the screen to notice it at the time, but now I recall it almost perfectly.

Of course it helps that her and I talk on a semi-regular basis and I can tell when she calls by that signature line. One would expect a parent to know their child’s G.I.D. line over the vid-phone.

In any case, that signature line so closely resembles my own that I should not have been surprised to discover we were a little bit later on that we were related.

But I will get to that in another diary entry. For now I will continue where I left off.

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I hurried back to the deluxe coffin hotel that I was staying in, hit the rain locker and dragged out a clean flight suit along with my leather jacket, (real leather, a gift from my last hitch on T.W.), with all the patches on it. What's a leather jacket without patches? And boots. Dirtsides I always wear boots. In space I could get away with Velcro slippers, but dirtside you'd pick up a whole hell of a lot more crap than you'd ever want, so boots it was.

I got to the bar in about 35 minutes, after a quick shower, as my coffin was not that far away anyway, walking distance. And sure enough, my table was taken. I saddled up to the table and leaned over to the three gringos' there.

"Excuse me, but I believe you're at my table ..." I said rather more politely than I felt.

The ugly one looked up at me sneering, "Piss off punta, Dis be our table now!"

I leaned forward putting my hands flat on the table, which also allowed my jacket to hang open revealing the snub nosed revolver I always kept there, and never let the cops know about.

"I'm sorry, I don't think you heard me. I asked you to leave. Nicely." I was really trying to hold my temper. A fist fight right before meeting a lovely young lady was NOT the best way to hire a spacer.

Gringo number two and gringo three saw the gun, and decided that cowardice was the better part of staying alive. Gringo number one needed a bit of convincing yet.

"Jefe, we can go, there are other tables, mano." number two said

"Yeah, Jefe, another table. Right. We were just leaving ..." number three piped up.

"I ain't leaving for this washed up Punta. He wants 'is table he can fight me for it!" Jefe was obviously not noted for his brains, and blowing them out would have been hard, as they were a very small target.

Time check, 6 minutes to go. I needed to end this without a fight. Or cops. I pulled the pistol out and stuck it up under his chin, smiled, and said, "Please?."

He swallowed. "Well ... Since you asked so nicely ..." He smiled weakly, "How about a drink? He he he ..."

I smiled again, "Sure, I'll buy you a drink to move. Now."

They moved while I re-holstered the six-gun. I took a seat facing the door and flagged the barman, who sent a waiter over. I ordered my usual and hoped I'd not get pined before she showed up... you know how women like to be late for no damned reason except they can.

She wasn't. Actually she walked in just as my drink made it to the table. I'm glad I hadn't been drinking it, or I'd have spit it out. It was like being visited by a dream. I knew her. But that couldn't have been, that was twenty-two years ago. Every curve, every hair. You never forget a virgin, it's said. And right now I was seeing her again, walking towards me. I took a drink, I needed it now. Finished it and waved for another. She even walked the same, same swing, same pace. Life was in slow motion, and I was drinking her in. I couldn't talk. I just ... Wow.

And it's not like she had that much work to find me. The way the place was laid out there really only was one corner with a table in it, which was part of the reason I chose it. Easy to find. There was a bar in two corners, and a stage in the other.

As she closed on my table, my brain tried to reassert itself again, noting differences that were not obvious from afar in bad lighting. Her eyes were the wrong color for one. They were brown like most

South Americans, not blue like Penny's. Her hair was straight, shoulders a bit broader, and the mouth a bit different too. I stood as she got about 5 steps from the table, and as if I'd admit it, I was smiling despite myself... And that's when I also noted Jefe coming up behind her with a rather unfriendly smile on his face.

She must have noted my frown cause she slowed her pace a step before his hand landed on her shoulder. That, *mano*, is just something you do NOT do to a woman, or a Spacer. And you absolutely do not do it to a Spacer woman. Walking him out an airlock would be the best course ... but as we were on Terra, there weren't too many airlocks handy.

"Hey there little *senora*. Ignore this *punta* and come play with me. He owes me drinks for sparing his life ..." was about all he could get out before she moved. She took a step forward, and spun in place bringing her right foot up to connect to his jaw. He staggered back holding his jaw and staring his bloodshot eyes back at her. He spit blood and a few teeth and cursed.

"Perra! You's gonna pay fer dat!" and he lunged, I tried to move around the table, but she moved faster. she dropkicked any chance of him having offspring right outta orbit. Every man in the joint cringed in sympathetic pain. She double fist punched him to the solar plexus, twisted his arm almost outta it's socket, put it over her shoulder and threw him farther than I could have on a good day. He landed with muffled harrumph, heels over head, and slowly fell over.

She dusted her hands off, moved a stray lock of hair out of her eyes, and turned to face me, smiling again.

"Nice place you chose. Usual hang out I take it?" There was laughter and applause from the rest of the bar. I tried to stop gaping at her and managed to close my mouth again. She extended her hand to me and introduced herself. "Sister Tracey Chadwick-Robins. You must be ..."

"Casey Maxwell." I took her hand and shook it twice. From somewhere in the bar I could just hear a question, inquiring if nuns took ninja training like the Shao-Lin Monks did. And the rejoinder that ninjas are Japanese, and the Shao-Lin are Chinese, not Catholic.

She laughed, and the bar started up with its usual noises that I only just noticed had stopped completely.

"Combat training I see."

She laughed "Capoeira, actually, but there wasn't enough room to really get going." A Brazilian martial art that started when the populous was denied martial arts hand to hand training back during the days of the British Empire, if memory serves, but I could be wrong, (that's been know to happen once or twice a millennia). Not uncommon south of the Panama Canal.

I chuckled. "I can see that. Well, shall we sit?" I pulled a chair out for her, keeping my seat in the only real corner of the room and waving the bar tender again for a drink order. She picked up the briefcase I hadn't had time to notice she'd dropped. Honestly, I'd been busy noticing other things, like the way she tossed Jefe against the wall.

"I presume that you would like to review my credentials and training docket." She took out a binder with a ream of paperwork in it and handed it to me

I took a minute to glance at the overview, list of qualifications, references, and certifications. That was a small chapter in and of itself. While I was reading, her green tea made its way to the table. She sipped on it while I read.

Jefe's two friends picked him up and half dragged him out of the bar. I had a nasty feeling that they, or at least he, would be back.

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Owner Operator
A Care Givers Tale
By Straycat

Chapter 3

Tracey definitely made an impression that day ... In the wall with Jefe. I still chuckle when I think of the completely perplexed look on his face as he collapsed into a heap on the floor.

If the truth is to be told, the gun was unloaded, so if Jefe or his friends had bothered to notice and take offense, I would have definitely have gotten my anso kicked at the very least.

You might ask what I was doing with an unloaded firearm on my person with all the restrictions those days. It is simple: The Uruguayan Government actually thought about the safety of their people. Uruguay only had a population of approximately 6 million people then, and a very bare fraction of those were spacers. It was not completely unheard of for some criminal to hold up an astronaut on his way home from 2 years in space with a pocket full of credit vouchers. So the government forced an accord through with Brazil International Spaceport: Allow our citizens to carry "protection devices" and receive a minor stipend of a kickback ... or something to that degree. I never bothered to look into it really. All I cared about at the time was being allowed to carry for personal defense.

Of course the space-line decided that any and or all such devices had to be unloaded and the ammo placed in checked luggage which was completely inaccessible until after you were well outside of the terminal. Oh, and the terminal would not allow you to load the 'device' until you were 100 yards off their property. And then, let's not forget that Uruguay still does not have a Carry permit instituted for just such a 'device'. All of these rules were, of course, unwritten. Which means that if you carry, do not ask, and they will not arrest you for it.

So what did all of those things accomplish for the average Uruguayan Spacer? Not a Dios dammed thing.

But I am getting away from the story again. I do that, you might have noticed.

* * *

Dear Diary, April, 4th, 2104

We caught a Pan-Am orbital, which she insisted on paying for, up to Tripp Station. As I expected she didn't travel too heavy, but had enough to make life comfy for her, and she had her own suit. Hot Pink. Go Figure. Nice comset, latest tech, beats the unit I got hands down, and then some. Clothes and more in reserve I bet, and a Guitar. Not a cheap one either. Fender Stratocaster with the built in amp/synth.

We got a couple of odd looks and more than a few frowns of disapproval from the other passengers, because we were suited up and they were in normal wear. My usual explanation if anybody ever bothered to ask, and a couple people have over the years, is thus, "I live in space, I know exactly what can go wrong ..." It's not always received in the best light, but at least once it cause the person to think about it and go buy their very own suit... not that they would use it more than once in their life more than likely, but ...

"Maybe I should you introduce the Backasswards now." I said, "She's 100 meters in length. About 25 meters diameter but not really round. More squarish with rounded off edges, like an octagon. Her grav deck is 15 meters back from the forward bulkhead, and can almost comfortably house 8 people for around 2 years, plus a couple months for safety, of course. Her systems are packed in every crevice and

crack imaginable, there isn't more than a square meter of uncluttered wall space in the entire ship... and that meter is the Boob Tube, dry erase board, and backdrop for my dart board. Ok, the TV is projected on the wall. A crew's gotta have movies out there once in a while."

Tracey smiled as I continued.

"She has a docking collar that also serves as an airlock on the bow of the boat, that's where we'll be entering. It's zero-gee to aid in loading. She's got another airlock port side, just aft the grav deck about midships, and another dorsal airlock between the engines where you can easily stick your head out and eyeball the 5th wheel docking collar for the cargo pods. That one is very small, not something I like to use often, but I've been known to have a peek once or twice in my time. Her engines come off the corners at 45, 135, 225, and 315 degrees. Looks like an "X" with a fat center, really." I made a hand gesture crossing my hands in the form of an X.

"Oh, let me not forget to mention that those engines, even before the upgrade we have to do, could generate enough thrust to kill you if you're stupid enough not to turn the Duke/Brannick Box Gravity Wave Generator on. She's designed to pull a million tons of cargo a very long way in not all that much time. Bobtailing, I once did a 30 gee boost with the Duke/Brannick Box up to match ... Oh. My. GOD!"

I took a breath, Tracey was listening intently. "Never again." I swore. "It was like lighting a Saturn 5 that was tucked between your anso cheeks. The cold jets were going rapid fire just to keep her straight, that much thrust and no weight behind her to keep her pointed in one direction. I coulda been all over the sky... Now I know how Jim Lovell and Fred Haise felt when they fired the booster on the L.E.M. on Apollo 13 to get back to Earth. I only let her run a few seconds, but it was more than enough ..."

She chuckled, "Must have been one hell of a ride."

I nodded and continued describing my ship. "The interior is a bit cramped compared to most of the larger craft floating out there these days. Corridors just wide enough to grab both sides to help move yourself around in Zero Gee, lots of hand holds, that kinda thing. The grav-deck has a running track in it... Very 2001, but needed as well as the weight room. There is something about zero gee that affects the bones., If they aren't under gravity, your bones start to wither and become brittle. Makes it very had to get any work done if you pick up a back pack or your EVA suit and you break your arm because the bones aren't strong enough to overcome the pack's inertia. But I'm sure you know more about this than I do from what your docket says."

it was Tracey's turn to nod, not wanting to interrupt my description. I guess I get passionate when I talk about my baby and she could tell.

"My cabin is first cabin inside the grav deck, closest to the bridge. Just in case, and by long tradition too. A bit bigger than the coffin hotel I normally check into on Terra. Queen sized bed, just in case the Captain has a female that sleeps with him or her as the case could be," I fumbled not wanting to imply anything.

"The other cabins are double bunked, which fold away for single sleepers. All have a refresher in them, zero-gee commode, and sink. The galley is fairly basic, but has aspirations as the most comfortable room in the ship. That's where the projector TV, my dartboard, and the food are. It's the largest open room on board. Has the ability to prepare food under 'Normal' spin gravity and in zero-gee. Oh, there's a refresher off the galley, too, and that is where the crew shower is. Pull handle type, not Hollywood shower like the captain's. Saves on water. Figuring there could be as many as 4 women onboard for a 50/50 split of the crew, there has to be a couple extra refreshers ... Just in case."

Again Tracey chuckled as I fumbled along again to try and cover my nervousness being this close to a woman after that many years in space alone.

“None of the propulsion areas are accessible from inside. No need to waste pressure on them. There are access panels on the outside that get you into those spaces. Now the power systems are in pressure, the fuel cells and backup batteries. That sorta thing. The Nuke Pack is in there someplace. I’ve never played with it and I don’t wanna. I’ll let some one with less reason to live play with that thing. I don’t like glowing in the dark.” I smiled “I had to take the Backasswards in for a Nuke Pack check 6 years ago, and it’ll be due in another 4 years.” She looked at me quizzically, as if she didn’t already know that. Or more like why am I telling her this. “Yeah, every 10 years. It’s that whole Nuclear Regulatory Commission B.S. makes sure we don’t irradiate space by having a leak... Go figure. I keep wondering if they’re gonna start down checking the sun for its rad leak ... Burrow-crats. Yeah, I know it’s spelled the other way, but I say it the way they act.”

This earned me another chuckle from Tracey. That kind of sound could get addictive. “How about the Bridge and control set?” she asked

“The bridge is utilitarian at best. Spartan would be a kind why to describe it. The windows are short but wide, multi-segment, almost panoramic in their view. I can look over my shoulder and out the window. Blast shields are just inside and outside the windows. The inner ones keep pressure in if there is a blow out, and the outer ones keep stuff from poking holes in the windows. The outer ones are basically and literally, just armor plating that slap down if the radar reports anything inbound that might hit the ship, or by manual control on the board. The inner blast shields are C-4 powered and fired if the window integrity is compromised. They have an air tight seal and LOCK into position when the shit hits the fan. I’d have to read the manual to figure out how to unlock them ... but I’d be in no hurry to do that.” She nodded.

“Safety and backups are always desired when you live in space.” I nodded.

“Commander’s and co-pilot’s seat are right next to each other. Ok, I fly left seat. Old habit. I also do the piloting unless I really trust who I’m flying with, then I act as commander instead of pilot. I might let you take her out since you have all the paperwork in order, just to see how you handle her.”

Tracey suppressed a beaming smile. Either because of the honor, or because I was doing my best not to insult her.

“Controls are NASA/ FASA standard. Cyclic, and Collective. You being pilot qualified you’ll have no trouble.” NASA, National Aeronautics and Space Administration. FASA Federal Aeronautics and Space Administration, run by the U.N. As basically intergovernmental oversight comity.

“Navigator and engineer’s stations are right behind the two pilots, and like the other two, are captain’s chairs and lock forward during boost. Against the rear bulkhead is the down ladder to the rest of the bridge, and where the other crew must be for boost.” Here again I smiled, cause the next part is kinda funny to see the look on peoples faces when I describe it.

“Now, it trips people out that the floor of the flight deck and the floor of the lower bridge is the same piece of decking. That’s where the Duke/Brannick box works. Covers the most area for the least amount of equipment. It’s also the backup bridge, and has all the same stuff... well, it did when it was new. The upper deck’s been upgraded, and lower has not. It all works. I’m not stupid. But I always fly upper deck. Again, Habit.” Not even a grin, Tracey just nodded.

“Keep it simple, stupid. I approve.” Was all she said

“Thanks.” I almost frowned. “Now the docking collar/airlock runs in a tube between the two bridge decks, and is wide enough to get most of the equipment inside the ship thru it. Only the nuke pack has to go out the side door... or the outer access panel. Oh, the tube is zero-gee. How they managed that with all the artificial gravity equipment around it is beyond me ... Any questions so far?”

“What about backup systems? Emergency controls?”

All business. Good.

“Ah yes, let me not forget the Emergency Back-Up Computer. Well, the ship has a main computer, and a backup comp. They run parallel 24/7. The emergency backup is a laptop stored on the lower bridge, in an armored padded EMP-hardened case in a locker right next to the second pilot’s seat. Plugs in right in the middle of the dash. It’s rude, crude, and absolutely guaranteed to keep you alive if the worst happens ... or you get a nice ‘we’re sorry’ card from the folks that made it. I’ve tested it about every launch, and it always seems to work, so I put it right back where it goes and don’t mess with it. It was new with the ship, and still goes, so I’m not gonna touch it beyond the checklist requirements. There is also the fact that it uses almost the exact same interface that one of the popular video games used to have. ‘L.E.M. Commander’ I think it was. I played it when I was a kid. Come to think of it, I think it was the exact same system ... Never mind, I don’t wanna know.” I shook my head.

“Now, the cargo pods. Them are easy. They are unpowered except for running lights, usually unpressurized, standardized boxes that hook to the 5th wheel on the rear bulkhead of my ship. Standardized cargo pods. You can daisy-chain as many as you want back there. The limit is what my fuel reserve can get moving. Now the first pod is always a fuel pod, and the last one. The reason for this, is my engines are not articulated So instead of turning the train around, I detach the ship, turn around and fly to the end of the train. There I re-hook on to fire my engines to slow down ...” I made hand gestures again to show the ship maneuvering. “So for a while there, I’m flying with my ass pointed the way I’m headed... Back Ass Wards. Ok, bad joke. But it stuck.” Tracey had the good graces to at least chuckle at that one.

“I once had a load of pure lead. The whole load was lead. And that took 4 fuel pods, two each direction, to get back to earth. Ya know ... if they ever do come up with hyper-sleep chambers, I’m thinking of getting one. So instead of two years being bored outta my skull, I only have to worry about the first, and last week of each leg. That’d keep supplies to a minimum and be interesting, I think. Two years later and I’d have aged only a month total ... probably would age at that rate. Yeah, I think I could live with that.” From the disapproving look on Tracey’s face I tried to cover my rear.

“But till Buck Rogers Inc. makes good, there’s no sense in waiting with my thumbs lodged.” She nodded.

We hopped a puddle jumper over to Port Shepard, in honor of Alan B. Shepard Jr., from Tripp Station. As we approached Port Shepard, we looked out the window, and there she was. Right where I had left her, nosed in to the airlock.

I pointed her out. “Well, that’s the ship. She’s not much to look at, kid, but she’s got it where it counts, as the old saying goes.” Invoking the words from the most holy of Trilogies. I could see by the reflection in the plexi that Tracey was studying her from here.

Ok, next time in port I gotta get her painted. She’s showing a couple surface rust spots, and more than a few sun faded areas. Her registration numbers were still nice and bold, as was the name emblazoned across the bow. ISP Regs. At least they don’t make me account for my time in 15 minute intervals anymore.

* * *

Just a quick note, I never did get around to having my ship repainted. I keep putting it off for a slower day or when I get bored enough to do something about it. Well, maybe next month...

* * *

“Parts I have on order should be up any time now. We’re gonna have to do an upgrade to the engines before we go. It’s the last one available, so no problems, I hope. Got some other gear coming, too. Repairs, mostly. The reclamation system needs hosing out ...”

“Fun. How’s the air system?” she asked

“Needs a booster, or a flush. It’s about due for either, but I can’t afford a flush. Maybe next time I’m in dock.”

She looked at me funny, which can be hard to do in a suit. “Who is the system manufacturer?”

“Natur-Aire Chile, why?” I didn’t get a reply, she switched her channel. Like I said, my comset is old. I have to manually set the frequency on the side of my helm. Wrist switch is, and has been broke for a while. I’ll get around to it when everything else works. Right now, what I have will do.

She was off channel for a few minutes thru the puddle jumper’s comm link. “How long are we staying in port? When you planning to boost?”

I shrugged, not easy to convey in a suit, so I added “Not sure yet. Still looking for cargo. Have a sniff or two, but I’m not finding the rates I like yet.”

She switched off again but was only a moment before she was back “No Problem then. I have some stuff on order and I’ll log into CGC-NET and see if they have anything heading that way ...”

“Now hold just a darn minute. I can’t afford any more parts, I’m about tapped as it is, not to mention I STILL have no idea how I’m going to pay your salary ... Not that I even have a clue yet what you were planning to ask for pay!”

She turned, looked right in my face screen with a neutral expression. “Have I asked for money?”

“Uh. No. I figured it’d come up as soon as s...” but I got cut off

“Then don’t bring it up again. I’m not using your account for the parts. I’m using mine. If I’m going to ship out on this rust bucket, then she’s going to be up to my minimum specifications. I have standards. I like breathing, and 45 day old must is not what I wish to smell two days after boost.”

I couldn’t argue that one. “But still, this is my ship, and ...”

“No argument there. I’m sure you won’t object if I fix a few things to make myself feel more comfortable on the next few runs. I can have them un-fixed when we get back, if it bothers you too much ...” She smiled. She had me, and she knew it. I knew it. She knew I knew she knew ... Hmmm. Maybe this is why I never married. I’d be getting steered around by my ears and be happy I was getting my way, but I wouldn’t be... I’d be getting her way and liking it..

I tried another tack that I knew was doomed as the thought hit my array, but maldición del dios él, I had to try. “And just how do you expect me to pay you back for all this? I’m not made of money, and my contracts have been rather slim lately ...”

“And I told you not to bring up money again. I will explain it this nice and slow. I. Am. Filthy. Stinking. Rich. I do not need your money. My allowance earns more per month than you can make on that thing in a year. I could buy this ship three times over with the interest I earn alone. I own everything I could ever want at the moment, and still have money to burn. I do not even have to take the money CareGivers Company would pay me. I do. I am not stupid. But I Do Not Need It.”

She turned away and took a breath letting it out slowly. “Besides, I am heavily invested in CGC. So if the company is doing well, so am I.” She looked back at me. I could see the fire in her eyes, the passion that she was doin’ what she loved because she loved it. You can’t pay for that kind of dedication.

* * *

The fire I saw in her eyes that day still smolders today, just as hot today as it did the day we jumped an orbital up to Tripp. Tracey is not the only young lady I have met that has that fire in her eyes. Nearly every CareGiver is that passionate about their chosen vocation. I am honored and privileged to know them, and ever more so to work with them on a regular basis for the last 30 years.

But again I am side tripping from the story.

* * *

Dear Diary, April, 5th, 2104

We did a hull inspection, part of the pre-flight checklist. Pits, scrapes, a gouge or two in the outer armor plating. Nothing I would have worried about, some of them had been there as long as I'd had the ship. We were on the Buddy System, mag boots, safety lines, the whole nine yards. Saved more than one spacers life, mine included, but that's another story. Checked the running lights, visual inspection of the engines, door seals, ETC ETC ETC. We were gonna have to work on the engines anyway, but I don't take shortcuts unless a life depends on it. Taking risks like that more often puts your life in jeopardy. Even checked to make sure the 5th wheel had enough grease on it and enough in reserve.

Inside, we went over every system onboard, including the backup bridge, repeating the entire bridge sequence from thing one to last item. Then continued from there back, through the galley, weight room, and suite of cabins, and into the shop areas behind the grav deck. This area has a Duke/Brannick Box as well, but it's offline unless work is being done, same as the bridge. We triple checked the airlocks, with suits on, and went back in the battery compartment, water reclamation, and the finally the access tube to the 5th wheel dorsal airlock.

That done, we hit the net. Me, the brokers, and Tracey on CGC-Net. We had a bit of time till all the parts showed up. I was not looking forward to the engine overhaul. That'd be 3 working days worth of work, and that is with a minimum crew of 4. We were gonna do it with 2. Then there was scrubbing, flushing, and hosing out the water reclamation system. Restocking the stores, turning the sheets and fluffing the pillows ... you get the idea.

Let's just say another day didn't make the load options any better on my brokers' site. The one or two I might have taken got nabbed ... and stuff I wouldn't give a second look at was all that was left... ok, Time to cut Mikey off and get a new broker.

I went to the galley to get a cup of coffee and found Tracey there ahead of me. "Coffee pot needs cleaning too," she smirked. I harrumphed and grabbed a cup ... ok, she was right ... don't rub it in.

"Any luck with the broker?" I flopped down in a chair and moaned a bit. "That good, eh?"

"Nothing I'd let my dog fly ... if I had a dog that is."

"Good."

When she said that, I lowered my cup. "I beg your pardon?"

She smiled behind her cup. "I found a load on CGC-Net that will be preloaded a few days from now. I signed you up for it. It's a pretty hot ticket, but employees get first pick. And this one was right up your alley. It's a few meters short on one container, but for what it is worth I think you will do OK on it."

"Signed me up for, eh? And a couple meters short? Space is money in this line of work. I'll have to find something to take up that space, make another percentage. I might be able to get things fixed next time I'm in dock!"

She took a sip and shook her head. "I already took care of that."

Exasperated I set my cup down and looked at her. “Ok, little lady ... out with it. My shields are down and hull patch crews standing by. You can’t deflate my ego any more than it already is ... Spill ‘em.”

She chuckled. “I changed the work orders, added a few things, and picked up the whole tab. Even got a call from my bank wondering if some one had hacked my account or if I had picked up a new hobby ...”

“Hobby, huh?” I chimed in

“Shush, I’m not done yet. The repair crews will be here in the morning, station time.” Which is GMT if no one ever told you. “The gentleman from Grumman was very nice. He’s looking forward to working on the engines. He’s never had the privilege to work on M.O.P. D-47’s. He is looking forward to working on about the last remaining flightworthy D-47’s. He’s even knocking off the cost of the upgrade, doing it for only the labor ... and that is not counting his labor.”

She smiled like she was looking forward to something that I shouldn’t even be thinking about at my age. “Natur-Aire Chile, will be here about lunch time for a complete flush and fill. Oh, and I found out they also support the water reclamation system too, so they will take care of that as well.”

I was going to sigh, but as I took the breath, she continued, so I let it go with out the show ... “Batteries 3, 4, 12, and 37 need replacing as we noted in the pre-flight. So I have the boys over in ISP maintenance coming with replacements and tools.”

“That’s against Regs. You and they know that!”

She all but purred. “You do not have the right kind of voice to convince men to do your bidding...” When she batted her eyelashes at me suggestively,. it took a second for me to remember to breathe.

There is that “being lead around by my ears” thing again ... Why was I getting used to it? Never mind ...

She chuckled again. “I also faxed the ship’s registration info into CGC. They are sub-contracting you until further notice. Better rates and better cargo. You will need to stop by Yotori Station for your physical. it’s due anyway, you know, and then all will be ready.”

“Yes Mother,” I piped up in flippant response. It was sarcasm, but she got this wide-eyed look and said something in what sounded like Japanese as she bowed her head to the table.

“Huh? What’d I say? Better yet, what’d you say?”

“I said ‘The honor is mine for your thoughtfulness. Thank you very much.’ I did not mean to offend you in using a language you are unfamiliar with,” she said in a very solemn voice.

I began to realize CGC was a bit more than just a tech school. I pushed my coffee cup aside and whipped out the best manners I had available to me. “No offense was taken. It’s my fault for implying such.” I bowed, not quite to the table, but it was definitely a bow. She smiled; as an awkward moment passed in silence.

“So...” I broke the silence “How did I honor you exactly? I was trying to be sarcastic.”

“When you called me Mother. The head CareGiver on a ship is called the Ship Mother. It is a rank that few obtain, and is a life’s ambition of many CareGivers to achieve.”

Understanding broke upon my brow like a 2x4. I looked down and fumbled with my coffee cup a second. “Well, I guess I understand now. I, uh ... I need a First Officer. I haven’t had a competent first officer since Rubber Duck died and Carlos left. Maybe you’d know a young lady that might fill the post I have vacant ... ?”

She smiled, and bowed again. "I might indeed, if you would find her worthy of such a position and honor."

"I would." I told her, returning the bow. We shared a smile. I didn't want to ruin the moment, but, well ... I'm a guy, it comes naturally. "We'll need to get you a sword befit a first officer of my flag ship ..." OK, that sounded just as lame out loud as it did in my head ...

"Got one; wakizashi and tanto, actually. The katana is too long for the tight confines on board ship, but I have one of those as well. They were made in the 1600's. It is my honor to carry them as your first officer." She bowed again, and I returned it.

If I did too much more bowing my back was gonna hate me in the morning. That's when I remembered something not on the checklist. I told her to follow me and led her to the armory. No, I won't tell you where it is.

"Handy place for it. Easy to get to. Shotguns, pistols, machetes, hand axes. What is this ammo?" she asked taking inventory in a glance.

"That's scatter-gun shot for the pistols. Solid slug might penetrate the hull, the scatter gun shot will shred a guy and put more holes in his suit than he can patch. In vacuum that's pretty much all you need." I took the pistol from my armpit, swung it open and showed her the empty cylinder I had carried up from Terra.

"Thirty-eight caliber. These five shells right here go for it." I pointed to five lined up in foam right up front. "And there are more in this box, if it's needed. I hope I never have to use it, but..." I latched the cylinder and holstered the .38 snub-nose under my armpit.

"Sure, there is nothing more useless than an unloaded handgun. In space there are fewer things safer than an unloaded pistol. Ok, the scatter gun loads help a lot. Personally I'd rather not chance it. If some one tries to board me I think I'd see them coming. I got a military grade radar set, salvaged and not on record, of course, and I can see a long way off or really small things closer up. Either way ... it's good to know where this is."

I secured the armory again.

* * *

Dear Diary, April, 8th, 2104

All of the work is done. For the last couple days I've had nothing better to do than sit in the lounge outside my ship and watch as over a dozen or so techs came and went for more than a couple of hours, then it was just the engine crew. At least twice that I know of Tracey disappeared inside to talk with the chief tech from Grumman ... I stood guard at the door. Just to make sure they were not... Disturbed. Yeah, that's a good word to use.

That was also the time when the most disturbing thing happened. 20 goons in armor with combat shotguns and drum mags showed up at my airlock. The smallest of them could have been a linebacker, Easy. Tracey fielded this one too. Only I noted with a bit of pride that her charms had little to no effect on him. Yay, for my gender striking back. He got his way, and took 12 men inside my ship, while the rest stood guard outside the airlock.

When they came back out he sent a short comm message. All I heard was static. Then 50 more showed up marching in step. They parted like the Red Sea and up came a bean counter if I ever laid eyes on one before. He was pushing a sort of cart. And there were 3 more behind him also being pushed by bean counters and a security guy carrying tools. An hour later they were back out of my ship and most of the goons departed. 10 stayed behind to guard the chief bean-counter. I invited him in, he accepted ... two

of the goons followed him like a 150 kilo shadows, and closed the lock behind him shutting us inside.

“I am Percival Steinberg, Captain. Your First officer here graciously offered your services to my employers.” He did not offer his hand.

“Happy to be of service, Mr. Steinberg. I hope your employers are as pleased with their service as I am with my First Officer.” I gave a bit of an eye to Tracey, but turned quickly back to the bean counter, who gave a forced smile. Protocol demanded it of him or I don’t think he could have managed.

“Yes. I am sure they will. Now. Let me show you what was done and get you to sign for it.” He led us back to one of the cabins. Ok, this burns my biscuit. Being led by a bean-counter around My Own Ship. I clenched my fists when I could and clenched my jaw so as to keep from biting my tongue, literally.

There in the middle of the floor were the carts. Bolted and welded to the floor. I almost lost it. I was drawing in a breath to let loose with a tirade that would have made mama proud, when Tracey pushed me out of her way and started inspecting the welds and padlocks.

“All seems to be in order here Mr. Steinberg. Are you satisfied with the installation, Sir?” I guess I missed that this was directed at me.

“Yes. I double checked it several times during the installation. It will do.” He turned to me while his shadows stood outside the door, blocking it quite a lot. The bean counter presented a clipboard he seemed to have drawn out of thin air and a silver pen. “If all is suitable, Captain, please sign on the dotted line.” I looked at him, the clipboard, then him again and decided it’d be far more trouble to undo all this than to swallow more pride and sign. Hell, I threw in the towel completely and managed a smile too. I signed and presented the clipboard back to him. He flipped a couple pages and pulled the quadruplicates out of the original and handed them back to me.

“The green copy is for your manifest. The orange is the client’s copy. The blue is to be returned to me upon return to Earth space for future reference, and the Yellow is for ISP when they demand a copy ... which they probably won’t, but will have a fit if you don’t have it. So, all seems to be in order here. This door will be locked by my security chief, and is not to be opened until you arrive at New Atlanta on Mars. My company’s representative will have the keys and everything needed to remove the cases. You will, of course, not mention that any of this happened to anyone between now, when you leave Mars space, and return this paper to my office. You are bound by contract to exactly that. Any questions?”

Again Tracey got there first. “No, Mr. Steinberg, no questions.” He actually managed almost a real smile.

How does she do it? First me, then the Grumman rep, now the bean counter ... Never mind, I don’t wanna know.

“Good. My lady, if you would be as so kind as to show me the door?” I’m almost flapping now, unnoticed of course. Tracey smiled. He offered his arm. What in the Heavens is going to happen next? She took his arm and they left the room. After about 3 seconds my feet caught the message my brain had been sending and caught up with them. The two security guys stayed behind for a moment to lock the door. In the lounge the bean counter took her hand in his, bid her a good eve, then left with the 9 goons in close tow.

I looked at the paperwork in hand, and finally bothered to read it ... My eyes bugged out. I looked at Tracey, she pointed at the ship and in we went. With the hatch secure again I blurted it out finally.

“Bearer Bonds? Where en infierno did you get a load of bearer bonds to buy spacer currency?” I asked. She looked at me archly and chuckled

"I told you I'd find you something to fill that extra couple of meters in the cargo that you were lacking. Besides, the rest of it, while not horridly expensive, it is still a good load. And this just fills in the crannies ..."

"And more than triples my take this run, which you forgot to mention ..."

Again she flashed her pearly whites "There is that. On top of the other cargo, too." We exchanged a look. I lost. Ok, maybe lost is too harsh a word. Just with what I have welded to the deck I'd make more in one trip than in the last 4 trips out, easy. Add in the cargo we had yet to maneuver to go get, and an almost complete overhaul of everything that's been wrong for the last 10 years.

Oh yes. More work than I was told about was done. I was not always outside the door, and I didn't see what all was going on outside. I was "reading" and watching who all came and went from my ship. Anyway the load waiting on us was worth three times any of my last 4 loads combined. This was gonna be a Good Run.

Owner Operator
A Care Givers Tale
By Straycat

Chapter 4

Dear Diary, April, 9th, 2104

We maneuvered. I was pilot, as was my custom, and Tracey Nav'd, ran radio, and was a good hand all around. Ol' pro if I didn't know better, but she was too crisp, too perfect. Well, no complaints. We got coupled to the train first shot, with the help of remote camera's in all the right places. Cleared the paperwork with the harbor pilot, let the computer plot the course, we also did it by hand. Computers fail. Paper usually doesn't. Not to my surprise, Tracey finished before the computer, I came in third.

"Ever pilot a ship out of space dock?" I had to ... it was too easy, too perfect to pass up. I'm a history buff, and movies is good history. Especially if they have to do with space.

"No Sir." She looked at me. Ok, now I know I'm being read like a book. Her eyes went wide again.

I waved a hand toward the window. "Take her out, Mr. Saavik." Ah, yes ... The Christmas Tree Effect. That's when a woman's face lights up so bright you can hear the electric meter spinning from around the corner of the house.

Ok, I'll spare ya the boring details of the next two hours. We were almost aligned as it was. That's done on purpose. When you have 48 containers attached to your anso you try to keep maneuvering down to an absolute minimum. Getting them straight again takes far more effort than it's worth some times. Now, add in the fact that the first and last container in the train is your life's blood ... also explosive if you cogida up completely.

"How many boosts does this make for you?"

"38 ... simulated," was the answer I got.

"How many live boosts have you done?"

"Uh ... one ... Including this one." We still had a while before we could burn. Slow boating away from dock on cold gas and only the slightest hint of thrust to get it all going at the required departure rate. That gave me enough time for my tale.

"Ok, Boosting at 5 gee's is an experience you won't soon forget, or wish to relive if the Duke/Brannick box ain't working ..." I figured talking would ease the tension I could see in the set of her jaw. Locked. "Mainly, because by the time 24 hours have passed, so have you. It's been calculated that an Olympic

athlete might survive, a 48 kilometer marathon runner has a slim chance, and that your average Joe has none. Your heart would either explode or fail after about 6 to 8 hours.”

“After this much time in space I’d have to guess that I’m about an average Joe. But I can’t afford to run the DB at 5g’s for 24 hours, I don’t have the batteries for that. I can get away with running it at 3g, and living through the other 2g for 24 hours.” Oops ...

“You do now.” She smiled briefly. Hey, at least my plan was working

“Yeah, I guess I do. Things always go through my mind during boost, and not just check lists, flight plans, checking scopes and the computer. No. History goes thru my mind. The Gasconader Folie accident for one. You hear of that one?” I looked over and saw a quick shake of her head. “Don’t they teach you kids anything these days?”

“Back in February, 2036, the Gasconader Folie was launched on her maiden voyage. She was loaded with highly overpriced tourists. Some time during boost communication was lost. The ship never returned, and all hands on board were declared dead about 2 years later. What you probably won’t hear about is the tidbit on the emergency beacon. Every ship I have ever heard of leaving atmosphere has had a beacon on it, that when all else fails, sends a transmission back to Terra letting the folks on the ground know how you bought it. Or at least they used to, anyway. There is also the sheer enormity of the insurance scandal that followed too.”

“Seems that the folks that were to ride as passengers didn’t like looking at the door tracks for the air tight seals ...” She rolled her eyes. Pounders. I bet you a nickel that was the thought that went through her mind. “So they had them covered with wood. Real Wood. Carved and inlaid with designs like trim around a window or fireplace. The Air tight doors can cut a man unfortunate enough to be laying across the threshold in half. But that amount of thick hard wood would just jam it.” I sighed.

“There was a problem. What, no one will ever know until human kind develops FTL, faster the light travel, and catches up with the G’n F to return her to earth. OK, there would be billions of peso’s worth of historical salvage there. I could, with WAY too much time on my hands, plot her course and speed, figure out where she’d be If I could ever catch up with her ... but that’ll never happen in my life time, or yours.”

“The Emergency beacon reported an explosive decompression, engine status which was still under one gravity burn, course, and flight plan. We know from her track that she never slowed down. Half way to Mars she was supposed to cut power, pull a 180 for the slowdown burn and do a flyby of Mars, then slingshot back to Earth, passing Luna both ways. That’s it. No stops, no freight, no cargo. Just rich passengers on a holiday trip around the solar system.” I could see Tracey was relaxed now, or at least as relaxed as she was gonna get

“A couple years later she was the third man made object to leave the solar system, and incidentally the fastest man-made object ever built. Yeah, things like that occupy a small piece of my mind while boosting. Now I guess you can see why.”

She looked over at me with a smile. “Let me guess. You got that story on your first boost, right?” I let my grin answer her question

Tracey acquitted herself well during her first live boost. Took the 2g-actual ride in stride, and made a point of sitting up a bit against the force every so often. Ok ... I ran it that way because you need to feel the thrust to remind you of what happens if something fails. Also if something does, you’re not hit with 5 gees right in the face. You only gotta deal with 3 more, and that gives you time to do something.

* * *

Dear Diary, April, 15th, 2104

Now I'm not exactly a monk, and having a woman like Tracey on board reminded me of that about every other thought, but I'm not a playboy either. I never took those drugs that make a man a Stud-muffin of the week. I still work, and I take my time. Suits me just fine. I decided I need to get to know Tracey before I even think of doing anything to attract attention, if you know what I mean. So we talked.

We've been en-route for at least a week, exchanged a few mails with Terra, mostly from Tracey's little brother Reggie. Reg is his father's son; I can tell from the way Tracey describes him ... "Just Like Dad."

Ok ... I'm not supposed to admit this, but I get lonely out here. I ain't got no family no more. Last of them died off a while ago. Don't remember when. Don't really care to either. What little I can actually remember of my family is not really worth remembering. I need some one to talk to once in a while. Don't tell any one that I said this ... but the last couple hookers I was with, we spent more time just talking, and drinking coffee ... My treat, of course. Covered their time, and afterwards we'd... well. Business is business, and I'll leave it at that.

We were sitting up on the bridge drinking coffee and I was poking my nose in to about every part of her life I could get her to talk about. That's when things started to get odd. I noticed things about her family, things long buried in the back of my mind. Things I thought long forgotten. That's when I asked ... I had to. I needed to know.

"Tracey, what is your mother's maiden name?" She blinked, then looked at me.

"Penny, Penny Wise. Why do you ask?"

I started laughing, and didn't stop for what seemed like an hour. I was gasping for breath and having to suck on an O2 tap before I could get myself under control enough for further conversation.

"Are you OK?" I waved her back into her seat. And tried to decide if I should tell her ... Why the hell not?

"Here's how it fits together in my head. I had a fling with a girl named Penny Wise 22 years ago, right before she got married, it turns out. From what you've told me, if she's the same gal, she got pregnant Very quickly, like on her wedding night. Delivered a couple weeks early, a nice standard baby boy, that'd be you. No chemicals at all till you joined CGC. Her husband, your father, has been on the Mano stud-muffin drugs most of his life. There is a chance, about a 1 percent of 1 percent, that some of his sperm were unaffected ... It could happen. I mean, you are 21, and when you showed me pictures of your family ... and lemme tell you, you look nothing like your father, even before CareGivers."

"My mother told me I looked more like my grandmother's side of the family."

Now I happen to have a photo album floating 'round the bridge (not literally, that's bad house keeping, and we spacers never let stuff float. Could cause accidents). It's been all but unused for a while. I keep it because ... well, I'm not sure. Anyway we compared her family pictures with mine. Set a picture of her right before she went in to CGC and a pic of me and my dad when I was 20ish next to each other. That is when I started my laughing fit again.

"Those perras! They knew!" I all but stopped laughing at her words

"What? What did they know?" I noticed a tear running down her cheek.

"They knew we were related ... that is why they instructed me not to sleep with you under any circumstances."

"What!?" a bit angrier than I actually felt

“They wouldn’t give me a reason, beyond it was something undesirable in your genetics that wouldn’t be compatible with mine ... Those perras!”

Now I am truly in uncharted territory. I’ve never had a female in my employ start crying around me before...

Being halfway to Mars, it’s kind of hard to get into a fight with the people who did what’s right by you and your unknown family in a rather underhanded and sneaky way ... but if Tracey could have done it, she would have, bawling the entire time, I think. Personally, I’d a been happy dropping a rock on their anso ... well, maybe not on, but close by. Just close enough to be a warning. There are not enough women in the world, no sense in killing any. Ok, maybe just a very strongly worded letter. Yeah. That’d do it.

Oh, If someone ever figures out how we fell asleep, her in my lap and her head on my shoulder while I’m still strapped in to the pilots seat ... please, let me know, okay?

* * *

Ok, I guess now is the time to relate some pertinent information I learned several years later and general suspected at this time in my life.

Caregivers Company is heavily into nanotechnology, so heavy as to actually be using it to genetically modify their employees.

Remember those 'stud-muffin' drugs I keep mentioning? They make he-men of the guys that take them down dirtside. It causes most of their offspring to be males as well, that's the main reason the planet is running 4-1 male-female. China has been doing it for decades, and you can see how that's effecting their society.

CareGivers has found a way to alter DNA from XY chromosomes, to XX while completely rebuilding the person into a genetic female.

It's Strictly voluntary, and requires a 20 year contract with draconian penalty clauses if you try back out. It also allows you to only ever have ONE male offspring, but as many female offspring as you can stand to put up with in a lifetime.

This gives CareGivers two things. First it locks their employees lives, fortunes, and sacred honor to the company for the long term, and second it gives CareGivers the single most precious and rare thing in space: Fertile Females.

Now, before I got involved with CareGivers I Never would have understood Why a guy would give up his manhood and become a girl, a woman. It's just something I never would have considered before, especially being from South America where the 'Cult Of Manhood' runs rampant.

Sure, sure, I'd heard of Gender Dysphoria, seen shows on Deep Space Comfort (DSC) and how they 'help' transgendered make the transition to 'female', but remain genetic males so they can bypass the PWA and go into space while serving as little more than deep space whores... not that I'm judging mind you... I've used their services before, remember?

But CareGivers has the perfect solution. Take the same gender dysphoric people, and use this nanite thing they have to genetically convert them to Actual Females.

And remember, Space is running 7 to 2 male-female

also remember that Tracey is a Caregiver. Born male, now genetic female.

She's also my kid... I never did ask Tracey why she did it... not that it's any of my business anyway.

Dear Diary, April, 18th, 2104

Tracey was in the shower, and we were way on the far side of Luna. I opened the Com-log for a return number to Tracey's folk's place. Speed of light delay was growing daily, up to about 2 minutes now. I canned a message to Tracey's mother, and transmitted it to earth. Basically I was just introducing myself to the mother of my First Officer. I tried not to leave anything overtly implied in the message, just in case her husband got a hold of it. Also to not leave out the fact I knew about Tracey, to her mother. Just a short 30 second message. She must have been home, because I got a reply about 5 minutes later.

"Madre de Maria del dios! Casey!" Her smile lit up my screen. She was every bit as beautiful as I remembered, and even more so with time. "I have not heard from you in 22 years! You've aged. I can see the worry in your face, and the same old smile in your eyes."

She looked over her shoulder, then back at the screen. "Jonathan is home right now, but in another room." She took a deep breath "He doesn't know, but I can tell from your message that you do. Please, let me explain this to you. Jonathan is not to know, if he did ... I am not sure what he would do. I hope you understand."

Behind her I saw Reggie was walking in, "Papá wants to know who it is, Madre. Is it Sis?" he asked as he approached the terminal.

"No, dear. It is the Capitán of your sisters' ship. Capitán Casey Maxwell. Do you wish to say hello to the Capitán?"

He smiled and stepped a bit closer, gave a rough salute and spoke his greeting. "El Capitán Maxwell, Space Cadet Reggie Chadwick-Robins reporting for duty, Sir!"

He dropped the salute, his mother smiled and gave him a hug, then ran him out of the room.

She sighed. "Well, I had better send this before it gets too long to transmit." The screen blanked and the words End Transmission appeared. I took a minute to compose myself. Looked back over my shoulder across the galley toward Tracey's stateroom. The door was still closed.

I looked back at the terminal, and tried to word my message. "Greetings from the Spaceship Backasswards, Mrs. Chadwick-Robins. You have a fine son there, and a very fine daughter here. She's better at these systems than even I am, and I've had this ship 10 years. She'll make you proud, Ma'am. I'll pass her your message, and look forward to the day when your son is ready to follow her into space. I'll try to keep a berth open for him." I smiled and cut the recording for transmission.

As I sent it, I heard a door open and bare feet coming closer. "I thought I heard you talking, getting mail traffic?" I looked back over my shoulder. Tracey was drying her hair with a towel, and had another towel wrapped around her. I tried not to notice too much and turned back to the terminal.

"I sent your mother a short greeting from the Captain. She replied. She remembers me ... That's almost a surprise. She said your Dad doesn't know, and she don't want him to know. Also, Reggie came in and said hi. Cute kid."

I grabbed my coffee cup and took a sip. Damn, coffee tastes good when the coffe pot is actually clean. "You can play back the message log if you like."

I got up, turned my back on her to leave the room. "Did you take your vitamins this morning?" she asked before I got to the door. I looked back across the curved floor of the galley to Tracey still rubbing the water out of her hair.

"Never took the things before, never needed them ... but yes, I took them."

She smiled and turned her back to get herself a cup of coffee. I turned again for the door. I stopped when the question started to nag at me. Eh, probably not important right now.

* * *

I'd forgotten to mention the visit I'd made to Yatori Station for my physical. For the most part it was strictly routine, filing out forms, signing a contract for service, blood work, body cavity search, elector-shock therapy but only for amusements sake. Oh, and a new 'diet'. I have to agree with Garfield, Diet is just DIE with a 't' at the end.

This diet also came with a set of vitamins I was supposed to take, prepackaged, and more than enough to last this trip and the next two or so. I have to take the damned things every day.

It's my own fault for not checking them out before I started taking them, that might have spared me at least one argument... but what else are you going to do a billion miles from home, right?

Dear Diary, May, 4th, 2104

I've been spending a lot of time talking with Tracey. You'd think that as an ol' space hermit I'd get tired of talking after a few days, maybe even a few weeks. Well, it ain't working out that way. Seems like not a day goes by that we don't find something new to talk about. I find her insights to just about everything in the news to be, well, insightful. We've talked about her childhood extensively. I know just about everything there is to know about her life.

Her grades in school. Which girls she liked when she was still male, which was way before she joined the Care Givers Company and took the DeCorvin Process, which genetically altered her to female.

"Have you ever noticed that your musical tastes are as diverse as my own?" I asked one day. She nodded, whether with the music, or to my question, I'm not sure. But we did hardly ever agreed on what kind of music to listen to at any given moment.

"That is because musical preference is mainly subjective to ones emotional state," she stated. "As philosophers have been pointing out for hundreds of years, males and females live on different emotional planes. Ones moods are hardily if ever in sync with the others."

"Which just goes to prove that I spend more time with headphones on than you do," I said, and she smiled.

"It is called courtesy. You might want to look it up one day, to figure out exactly what it means." She hummed a catchy tune and turned her back on me.

“I mean, I’d be in a merry metal mood, and you’d be playing the entire collection of Mozart, cranked up loud. The next day I’d be all for Blues, and you’d have the Techno thunder-beat going. Yet the other day I had 2080’s pop going, and you wouldn’t let me change the channel when they started playing all those sucky love songs.”

“They are not sucky. They are sentimental, there is a difference.”

I frowned. “About the only time I don’t have to use my head phones is when I’m on watch and you’re sleeping.” She smiled again, and said nothing. Go Figure.

* * *

Dear Diary, June, 2nd, 2104

At the midway point we disconnected from the head of the train, turned around, flew to the end of the train, and reattached. This way we’d be in the right place for the slow down burn for Mars orbital insertion. I let Tracey pilot this time. She did it by the book, and perfect. We also recalculated the flight plan by hand and on the computer... just to double check. Not only did I not make my usual mistakes and have to correct, but I finished before the computer did, something I’ve not done in at least the last four years.

Ok, quick recap. Ever since I started taking those vitamins I’ve been feeling better. Tracey insisted I work out a bit more, and run. I’m in better shape now than I have been since I was in my 20’s. I read faster, and I had to stop using my reading glasses.

Honestly I hadn’t thought about it. The coffee got better every day, or so it seemed. So did the food. The air smelled sweeter than it did right after the flush and fill. I actually slept soundly most nights and my back stopped hurting too.

I got up one morning and was about to pop my vitamins in my mouth when I happened to notice one had a label.... So I looked. “Fountain” it said. I clenched my fist around it and went up to the bridge where Tracey was on watch.

“How long have you been feeding me these things?”

She turned and looked at me standing in the hatchway. “Since before we boosted, why?”

I tossed her the Fountain pill “And this?” I said, with all the accusation I could put in my voice.

It floated over to her in zero-gee, she caught it and looked at it seeing the label. “The whole time. Why is it a problem?” she looked right back at me, right in my eyes and didn’t even try to hide it. No shame there at all.

“Couldn’t you have told me that’s what I was taking?” I grabbed one of the rungs to keep from floating away. She tossed it back and I caught it.

“It is part of your contract, had you bothered to read it. You have to be in perfect health, and you needed Fountain to get there.”

My mind went blank. I’d worked up quite a yelling match in my head, and now it was out the airlock. She did have a point. All that hard work, the vitamins, and the running ... it should not have had as much effect as I’d seen in these last few months.

Again with 'being led around by the ear' thing ... I looked down at the pills in my hand.

“Tell me before you do something like this next time. I’m not a kid anymore, I can handle the truth.” As I floated back down the hatch, I thought I caught a grin on her face as she turned around to watch

the monitors.

Ok, I took it, along with the rest of them once I got back to my coffee. I'd already been on them awhile, and it'd not hurt to keep on them. I made it a point not to talk to her for a couple hours however ... Pride is a horrid animal, and mine had been hurt.

In case you've been living in a cave for the last 83 years, I'll explain what the heck Fountain is. Fountain is an anti-geriatric. The chemical works by repairing the frayed ends of DNA strains, giving the DNA a longer replicating cycle. A one-year tour of Fountain is calculated to double the life expectancy of the average human. Or so the brochures say. I had to look them up on the net to get that info.

I'm no genetics guru. All I know is The Fred, Fred Hastings of Apollo Freight, has been on the stuff since shortly after it went public. That was back in 2022. He was born in 1984. Its 2104 now.

You do the math.

* * *

Dear Diary, June, 20th, 2104

Have you ever had a knock-down, drag-out argument? The kind where both people involved were screaming and yelling at the top of their lungs and throwing things, hurling insults back and forth like a Frisbee or Racquetball? Not actually hitting each other, but trying to hurt the other as much as possible with words? Throwing things against the wall and slamming things like chairs out of the way?

Yeah, it was one of those kind of days. Truth is I can't for the life of me remember how it all got started. I'd been a bit testy since I learned about the Fountain pills she'd been feeding me since we boosted, and the underhanded way she steered me around by my ears all the time. It just kinda built up to it. Then it kind of got away from us.

We're Latin, and passion runs strong through us. It finally got to the point I couldn't think of anything else to hurl at her so I yelled at the top of my lungs pointing out of the galley. "You Go To Your Room!"

She stopped, stunned by what I had just said. Her eyes went wide, then began to water. I took a couple of deep breaths and lost most of my fire. She covered her mouth with her hand and I could see her shoulders beginning to shake.

I had just really started to feel bad about that when she burst out laughing. It took a minute to sink in just how absurd it was before I joined her.

After a moment we both collapsed in chairs unable to stop laughing. Then we hugged.

"Stop treating me like a little girl." She giggled.

"Spoiled brat."

"Crotchety old fart," She retorted.

I looked her in the eyes still smiling. "What am I ever going to do with you?"

"Well, if you ever try to spank me, you're going to get the same treatment that the louse in the bar got

"I think I'll pass on that." ." We hugged again.

* * *

I keep forgetting, she's not the one that got me on Fountain, but that's a long time in the past now.

* * *

Dear Diary, August, 10th, 2104

You have no idea what it's like to hear such a lovely voice growling and almost yelling while singing. Tracey had her guitar out at least once a week and spent a few hours belting out tunes that must have had Ted Nugent dancing in his grave. Mainly, cause they were mostly his tunes.

It's not like she was playing solo, nah, she had built in backup in that synth-amp built into her guitar.

We'd pass a ship heading the other way and she'd fire up the guitar to inspire and motivate the gents on the other boat. She was always a hit. She'd had to tone back a bit so it wasn't over distorted on the comm-set, but she played regularly for a couple days, took requests, ran her impromptu concerts on her off hours between shifts, except when she was sleeping.

Had a couple guys threaten to jump ship and board us by force once, jokingly. At least I hope it was a joke. Wouldn'ta worked. Backasswards is a small target to hit, and there was an awful LOT of space around us. I think they were on the Baby Tigron Samil.

We kept our shifts even. 6 on, 6 off, rinse repeat et al. So any 24-hour period looked something like this on the watch list:

0:00-06:00 Casey on watch, Tracey asleep (Third Dog Watch)

06:00-1200 Tracey on watch, Casey off duty (Day Watch)

12:00-18:00 Casey on watch, Tracey off duty (First Dog Watch)

18:00-0:00 Tracey on watch, Casey asleep (Second Dog Watch)

Would have worked a little bit better with more people, but it worked.

* * *

I learned about five years later that the Baby Tigron Samil was "lost at sea due to pirate actions" in the early days of the 'war'. The reports I read lead me to believe the ISP was involved, but nothing official ever confirmed it. Having seen what one of those ISP corvettes are capable of in a ship to ship battle against an unarmed and unarmored vessel, I have no doubts at all.

All hands were reportedly lost.

* * *

Dear Diary, September, 9th, 2104

"Mars Control, this is Independent Spacers Guild freight hauler Backasswards coming into parking orbit twelve klicks from nominal. Requesting harbor pilot beacon for delivery, please." Tracey called in. I rode left seat but let her do the work.

"Backasswards, Mars Control. Vector 7.34, angels 4, freq 285 for parking station theta one four actual. Confirm."

"Confirmed, Mars Control. Vector 7.34, angels 4, freq 285 for parking station theta one four actual." She punched the coordinates into the computer.

"Welcome to Mars, Backasswards." Control replied

"Good to be home, Mars Control. Backasswards Out," she replied with a smile.

Tracey parked the load, the tugs came to get the cargo pods and fuel tanks. The latter would be refilled over the course of a couple days for the next boost, the former would be divvied up and shipped to where it needed to go.

The B.A.W. could technically land on Mars. Not something I'd ever done, but since Mars only has 1/3rd gee and no atmosphere worth speaking of, I could do it if I had to. For the load still in the stateroom we'd have to touchdown for delivery so they could get that stuff outta my ship. Tracey sent a coded signal to the agents of Percival Steinberg in New Atlanta, and got a coded message back where to land and when.

Tracey and I both plotted the course and beat the computer, again. "No disservice to your piloting, but I'll take her in. I've never done this before either, OK?"

"Aye, Sir." It took a tense long while, but we hit the mark in one. I don't like standing her on her ass like this, but it's about all we can do without help, and there ain't a cradle on Mars made for the Backasswards to lay down in.

It also makes it really hard to move around her. She's not meant for gravity. And I had to stop the G-ring with that stateroom closest to pressure, so the floor would actually be easier to get to.

I'll hand it to whoever was running this side of the show. They had the docking port extended as soon as I shut her down and locked my board.

The same kind of security crew was waiting on us as showed up to install the load. And the same kinda bean counter as well. Actually it looked like his twin, Identical Twin.

"I am Galahad Steinberg, Captain. Your First officer contacted my employers." He did not offer his hand. I guess it runs in the family.

"Your cargo is this way, Mr. Steinberg." I led the way to the stateroom and the boxes wielded to my deck as best I could.

Galahad unlocked padlock on the door and opened it ... and dammed if there wasn't the 150 kilo shadow sitting on the bunk all strapped in with shotgun leveled at us and LOTS of MRE wrappers all over the wall. As soon as he saw Mr. Steinberg he safed the shotgun and pointed it in a neutral direction.

"What the hell is this!? No one mentioned a Rider? He could have been killed!"

Mr. Steinberg raised a hand. "Jerry has made 9 trips like this, with never a problem, Captain. His armor is actually an EVA suit, and he's never bored."

I grabbed the bean counter and pulled him to within an inch of my nose. "I don't care what you do with your employees, chuck 'em out the lock for all I care. But when they are on MY Ship! I need to know these things. This ship has to be balanced to the gram or it could kill every person on board. It's my anso, Mr. Steinberg. My Duty. Next time you decide to pull some fucking stunt like this I will throw your anso out the fucking lock myself!"

That's about the time I noticed the shotgun next to my temple. I dropped the bean counter to the deck. He straightened his glasses and tie. Jerry took a step back with his shotgun.

"I understand your outrage, Captain. We made sure this stateroom had a refresher before we attached the cargo here. It was the deciding factor, actually, to ensure Jerry's safe arrival with the cargo. As for the mess, it will be cleaned up before we leave. The weld marks will still be visible, until we reinstall the carpeting."

I turned and stormed out. I never argue with a shotgun. I went into the galley and tried to get a squeeze bulb of coffee. Hard to do when you're walking on the walls and your hands are shaking with rage.

"Captain?" Tracey called me from the doorway.

"I'm not happy right now." I growled back.

"I know. I am not very happy either. But Mr. Steinberg needs us to leave the ship while the cases are removed." She was lying on the bulkhead and hanging her head in the doorway. I tossed my coffee bulb back toward the counter and braced my feet against the wall for the jump to the doorway. 1/3rd gee makes the leap possible, and all that exercise didn't hurt, either. Tracey stuck out an arm and I took her hand. She pulled me through the door, and we exited the ship. We were met by a CGC rep who hugged Tracey, and me. Better than a hand shake if you ask me.

"I am Kimi Kleman, Grandmother with CGC." She was a Germanic beauty if I've ever seen one.

"My pleasure, Mrs. Kleman." I smiled.

"I hope Tracey performed to your satisfaction, Captain?"

I looked to Tracey, then back. "Save for a misunderstanding or two, she performed well above my expectations, Mrs. Kleman."

She looked serious for a moment. "Yes, I was informed. We do not normally staff ships with offspring, but Rei Yotori cleared this special case personally. I hope it did not cause any problems with you Captain Maxwell."

"There was a shortage of cold water for the showers there for a while, but we made the best of the situation, Mrs. Kleman." Kleman nodded and looked to Tracey.

"My mother's husband does not know, Grandmother, but my mother is aware of the relationship between us." Kleman nodded.

"Well, you two had to have time to work out your relationship and get to know each other. It was a long trip, and you undoubtedly need some down time. I will make arrangements to have your ship refueled, Captain Maxwell. Until then, Welcome to Mars. I would be honored if you would accept the hospitality of my household for your stay." She bowed. I returned it.

"I could not refuse such a generous offer. It'd be my honor to stay with your household, Mrs. Kleman." My manners were improving, and I wouldn't give the credit to the Fountain pills I'd been taking for the last 6 months either.

She chuckled. "You don't have to call me Mrs. Kleman, Kimi will do." We shared a smile, which is very easy to do in such company

About an hour later the bean counter returned with his 150 kilo shadow and 9 other guards, who were carrying the cases out.

"Captain. The ship has been returned to its' original condition. Do you have the paperwork?" I removed the bill of lading from a pocket and handed it to him. He initialed the receipts and handed back my three copies. "I would like to apologize for the misunderstanding Captain. Your reaction was understandable, and quite moderate compared to some. This will not exempt you from further contracts, of course." When he offered his hand, I looked at it a second, then took it.

"Pleasure doing business with you Mr. Steinberg. Please warn me next time, and there'll be no problems. I would prefer that Jerry, or his replacement, ride on the bridge where the Duke/Brannick box would ease the ride for him a bit. Also, it might aide my journey to have another soul to talk to."

Galahad Steinberg smiled "I doubt it. Jerry does not talk, except for sign language." He turned and led the goon squad off.

We watched them leave, then I turned to secure my ship. "One thing before you dog down the hatch, Captain Maxwell." I looked over my shoulder and saw a most unbecoming frown on Kimi's face.

"Yes?"

“Firearms are not permitted inside the dome for safety reasons. I am going to have to ask you to secure it onboard, please.” in the tone of her voice that made it clear that I would not only NOT be asked a second time, and would regret it if I refused. I was also a little annoyed that my little secret was out.

When I glanced at Tracey who was a step behind Mrs. Kleman, she gave a slight wide eyed “Not Me” shake of her head. I looked back at Mrs. Kleman.

“Of course. One moment, please.” I said with a smile, stepped in and dogged the hatch.

Moving around a ship that is meant for zero-gee, not really meant to land, and orientated the wrong way to, makes getting around a little difficult. But I got to the armory, stowed the .38 and secured it. I also removed the holster, but I wasn’t gonna walk around naked. No, I grabbed the Bowie Knife, looped in onto my belt, and strapped it to my leg. It’s a big one. One of my grand parents, or great grand parents I’m not sure, was into the whole “Mountain Man” thing. The knife had been handed down basically to anyone living in the family that wanted it. I got it cause knives are always loaded.

Anyway, I headed back out and secured the hatch, not bothering to lock it. Not a glance was spared for the knife, or they looked at it while I was clambering out of the hatch. I offered my arm to Mrs. Kleman

“Shall we?” She smiled and took my arm.

“Oh no you don’t!” Tracey took my other arm “You are not going to drag me behind like a kite.”

We all smiled and like we were off to see the Wizard. We started to stroll down the yellow brick road... Well, yellow lighted corridor.

Owner Operator

A Care Givers Tale

By Straycat

Chapter 5

Dear Diary, September, 16th, 2104

Mrs. Kleman was changed to Grandmother, which quickly yielded to Kimi for me while I was with her household. She was an excellent hostess, I wanted for nothing ... and boy do I mean nothing. She had several younger CareGivers in her household as well as a couple of men. I could tell at first glance they were just dying for attention ... yeah right. A man’s lap would stay empty of a female for only as long as he wished, and there were more than a couple of ladies that would keep it warm for you if you asked nicely.

Now, I’m not gonna say that every female in the household was willing. Most were not. But they were very pleasant to be around, and just sitting in your lap and talking was a popular past time with the ladies when they were not working. Ekaterina was probably my favorite. Russian job, green eyes, red hair and a temper to match. I won’t go into too much detail. It’s not polite to kiss and tell. Let me just say that I spent a couple days getting to know her Biblically, and enjoyed every second of it. Tracey didn’t spend too much time in the household. She had duties on station while “visiting”, out in the working parts of the dome.

Oh, yeah. In case you didn’t know, New Atlanta is on the Cydonia Mesa, between the pyramids and the Face On Mars. They, CareGivers that is, got a building out there that they do a lot of studying in. research and stuff ... I was not allowed inside, but I did get the nickel tour by rolligon. Had to suit up for that. But it was worth it, I guess. For over a century MAN has wanted to find out what the Face On Mars was. Looked like a rock to me. Big friggin’ rock, but rock none the less.

Oh, another thing before I forget to mention it again. My comset was fixed too, so everything was back

to factory spec or better. Since I had to wear it for the tour I thought I'd mention it. There were also a couple new coded channels installed, but I hadn't got around to asking about these yet.

We ended up staying on Mars about two weeks before I decided I needed to find a load going out to the belts. I already knew what I'd be hauling back from there. Same thing every body else does. Ingots. Semi refined ingots of various metals. And this time around it looked like I'd be going to the Wango-Tango refinery instead of The Jules Vern like last time.

Despite what most people think, there is a LOT of room in the asteroid belt. Thousands of miles between rocks is the rule, not the exception. Some of them are the size of a small car, others the size of a small country. The refineries float around out there crunching up the rocks and getting anything and everything usable out of them, then ship it all back to earth.

I hadn't been thinking a lot about Tracey, but I did notice she'd been gone a while. When I inquired, Kimi told me "She's around," with a little smile. I used my imagination, and then went for a walk. I found her; oh boy did I find her. I nudged a couple elbows and got the short version. She'd been walking by the bar when a guy asked her if she was alone. Another jumped in and tried to make her a better offer. A fight almost broke out. She stopped it and decided to have a spot of fun. Oh, they were competing for her alright ... a Poetry Contest.

Rocket Jocks, hammer brains, foundry flunkies, atom smashers, and zero-gee monkeys ... all taking turns trying to impress her with what little wit, or half of one, they could come up with. Here are a couple of the better ones...

"Hair of darkest black, framing such a lovely rack ..." He was shouted down and thrown out...

"God's gift to all is love ...I wish I had the receipt."

"The shadow dissipates as the sun illuminates, leaving only wondrous shades of knowledge"

"Hair dark as space, on a lovely head, So much there, got to be good in Bed!" He was also thrown out
Then a thirtyish man stepped forward. Broad shouldered, brown bearded. Composed himself for a few seconds before he spoke.

"Lodged by Robert Frost
The rain to the wind said, 'You push and I'll pelt.'
They so smote the garden bed, that the flowers actually knelt,
And lay lodged -- though not dead. I know how the flowers felt."

Tracey applauded, and so did some of the others. I gathered he won, cause about a half hour later when I got back from getting a coffee, they were alone and talking at the bar, the crowd had dispersed. I'm not sure what they were talking about, they stopped as soon as I got in earshot and Tracey looked to me with a smile.

"Captain Maxwell, I would like you to meet Jorge Waco, freelance Belt miner." I stuck out my hand and his paw engulfed mine. Firm grip too.

"My pleasure, Capitán Maxwell. Tracey here was just telling me about the boat."

I frowned slightly and corrected him. "Ship you mean." He didn't even blink.

"Of course, Sir. She told me the lengths you went through to keep her flying. I must say I'm right impressed."

I smiled, "Flattery will get you everywhere Mr. Waco."

"Call me 'Psycho Joe', everybody does, or just Joe." I looked at him weird. "'Psycho, not stupid' I

picked that up somewhere long ago and it stuck.”

I didn't spend too much time getting to know Jorge right then. I figured Tracey would get him outta her system quick enough, then back to business. I guess I was wrong. He moved in with Kimi and the gals about two days later, and was an instant hit, but seemed off limits. I wasn't, so I didn't bother saying anything.

* * *

Dear Diary, September, 20th, 2104

It's amazing what engineers can get done in a short amount of time when a woman of Kimi's standing asks them to do something as a "Personal Favor". The B.A.W. got a "Custom" built cradle for Mars surface landings. Not much more than an I-beam skeleton that could level the ship after landing, and a ramp to the main airlock. Main engines are a bit too powerful to be too close to pressure, but an armature was in the planning stages. For now we could walk out and climb in without too much trouble. I was also told that it was going to be remote controllable from the ship when it was done. I guess they expect me on this contract for a while if I was getting my own designated parking place.

Turns out Joe and Tracey got along fairly well as I noted during his stay with Kimi. He stuck around quite a bit, actually. He'd taken a puddle jumper to the surface as his belt-runner was not able to handle atmo. So, like a proud father that I guess I was, in an off-hand kinda way, I offered him a lift back upstairs. Joe's not the kind you instantly like, ya gotta kinda warm up to him. But there was nothing to hate right off the bat, save for he was making eyes on my little girl, and that was enough to keep me trying to find something to loath ... Not sure I'm happy I didn't find anything.

Of course he was headed back out to the belts, same as we. And Of course wouldn't it be great if he could tag along with us. He apparently had couplers on his belt-runner for just that, and had got "Lifts" back out there more than once. He could piggy back between the engines during boost, then attach to the nose airlock till mid-route maneuvering, then again till braking time for Terran orbit. Meanwhile he could enjoy the luxuries of space, the kind inside where the pressure was, instead of being cooped up in his "Briar Patch" for the flight. It was only really big enough for 2-4 people to run around the belts a bit. And no more than two to make a Mars run and back out except in emerganices.

What's the Briar Patch? Hell if I know. Looks like an old pickup truck or like it was built from legos or something. Had one standard size airlock right in the nose between the pilot seats to the lower deck. Took a look around it once. Too small for my tastes. It almost reminds me of those runabouts I saw while the Robert A. Heinlein was being built, that's Atlas Freights newest flagship. The Heinlein's supposed to take another flight sometime next year while I'm heading back into Terra from the belts. I guess I'll find out when I get back there.

This time I logged into CGC-net and found something I liked. The Prices. Oh, and the loads weren't too bad either. Turns out the Wango-Tango was short on some stuff and had already had loaded it into standardized cargo pods I could haul. Very nice of them, if you ask me. I tried to get one of the ladies in Kimi's household to come with us for the company, and an extra hand of course, but they were all spoken for. Contract-wise that is. I knew what you were thinking. Ekaterina wanted to, but she also wanted to "Stay where the action is" as she put it. I guess she was into something fascinating out at The Face. Science nut from what I gathered, but of course she wouldn't talk about work too much. I guess I'm not cleared for it yet.

* * *

I have since learned about a few of the lesser things going on out there. Fascinating, really. I am, of course, not going to talk about it to anyone. You wouldn't believe me if I told you, and that's just the

minor stuff I've been let in on.

Hell, I'm involved in it and I'm not sure I even believe it.

* * *

Dear Diary, March, 28th, 2105

We boosted with a good load and made for the belts. Tracey and Jorge spent a lot of time together. Kids, can't blame them too much. I did put him to work while he was on board. He took the third dog watch and I got me a bit more sleep. One more person and it'd be almost perfect shift rotation. 4 on, eight off was what we settled on. He did ok. Once we were coasting, there wasn't really all that much to do but watch the screens and follow intercept radio traffic and relay. Plenty of time to relax, routine maintenance, cleaning, that sorta thing. We did do one sit-down together meal once a day, for jokes and smokes, as they say back dirtside.

Most of my food stores were the freeze dried, just add hot water and wait a few minutes, variety. Not bad, better than some choke-and-pukes back dirtside. But we also had fresh-frozen stores that required actual preparation. Once a week we had steaks for instance, all the trimmings of course. Chicken, fried or BBQ'd. It's that kinda cooking that reminds every one why we're out here. Every body pitches in on that kinda meal, and the bridge runs on automatic with remote alarms.

Of course it was during the steaks that the alarms went off one day on the backwards leg of the trip, about a week or more out from the refinery. We were in the middle of our meal and some very raunchy jokes when all hell broke loose, alarms everywhere. I'm pretty sure the only reason I was the first one to the bridge was, it's My Ship.

Anyway, it was a distress call. "Mayday, Mayday, Mayday! This is the Merlin's Prank! We've been hulled by an unknown object! Half our crew down, two souls remaining! We are adrift and spinning, controls not responsive. I think, I think we've been knocked off course. Computers shorted and the backup's older than Moses. Our suits have limited air. Can some one help us?"

Three heads started plotting their beacon, then I remembered to have the computer work on it too. Didn't need to have bothered, Joe's was the only one that differed, and then only by about 2 meters relative our position.

"Merlin's Prank, This is the Backasswards on GUARD. We copy your mayday and read you at position ..." I checked my notes and read off the coordinates "Confirmed, Two souls on board, hulled and spinning. We are ..." I checked the position, distance and read that off too "Copy and confirm, please." GUARD is the international emergency channel, kinda like CB channel 9 used to be. All ships are required to monitor it 24/7.

"Copy and Confirmed, Backasswards." was the shaky reply. That crew was on the edge of panic. I kept to official procedures to help knock him back into his emergency training. Panic does nobody any good when the shit hits the fan. Cool heads save lives.

"Backasswards, this is Danny Boy. Copy your position. You are closer by at least 4 hours than us. We have medical team on board for assist if needed."

"Copy that, Danny Boy."

"Backasswards, this is the ISP Corvette Sierra Zulu 711, Lieutenant Thurston Maddox commanding on GUARD. I plot you in best intercept position. Copy and Confirm."

I grumbled. I'd have helped them anyway, this stuffed shirt didn't need to stick his nose into it and make it Official And Mandatory. Bastardos. "Copy and Confirm, Sierra Zulu. WILCO. Merlin's Prank, Backasswards on GUARD. We have a runabout standing by and will launch for intercept ASAP. Be

ready to bug-out. Runabout does not have power enough to tow your ship, but we can take four souls onboard. Copy and confirm." I took one look at Jorge, who nodded and headed down the hatch to the airlock to get prepped for intercept.

No, I didn't ask him. I didn't have to. And if you don't understand it, then you're not a Spacer. I'd heard once that people dirtside wouldn't even help a woman with a flat tire on the side of the road if it was raining. Considering the rain they get ... well, no. I'd always help a woman. Rain, or shine. Or that white stuff ... you know, cold. Snow, yeah, that's it. Been more than a few years since I seen it. Remember having fun in it when I was a kid, now it just gives me nasty colds.

"Copy, Backasswards. Hurry please."

Had to keep his mind working. "No Worries, Merlin's Prank. What's your atmo status?" The more he sat idle, the more worried he'd get. He was suited up, so he was in no immediate danger ... I hoped.

"Reading 14 pounds on the flight deck, Zero in the main gangway. No reading from other stations. Only got those readings from idiot boxes next to the door. Gravity generator's out also."

"Copy. 14, zero and zero-gee. When we get out there you're going to have to bleed off the bridge pressure so we can get the door open, But. Don't. Do. Anything. Yet! The controls should be right next to the idiot boxes on the bulkhead next to the door. Double check your EVA suit, and check your buddy. Do you have an O2 tap for bottles on the bridge?"

"Ok. Um ... I don't know. Byron's suit doesn't have a radio. Mine's only got 4 channels. I'm jacked into the radio on the dash."

"What's yer name, son?"

"Vilhelm, Sir. Vilhelm Dyson."

"OK, Dyson. Here's what I want you to do. Have Byron touch the side of his helmet to yours. Tell him that we are on our way. Tell him you both need to double check your suits and look for an O2 tap and spare bottles. When my runabout docks with you, she's gonna have to depressurize the bridge to get that hatch open. That means you're going to have to stay in your suits till we get you back to the Backasswards. I have a really nice looking lady here that'll have dinner waiting for you, so just relax."

While I was talking, Tracey leaned over and whispered in my ear, "Jorge has finished his emergency preflight, and dogged both hatches. He'll be separating in a moment. He's on channel 1307." I nodded. Dyson and Byron didn't need to hear weird noises over the radio from my ship while they were this close to panic. I dialed a second line to 1307.

"Briar Patch, Backasswards. Say status?"

"Backasswards, Briar Patch. Ready to detach. Vector plotted and burn dialed in. I've used no fuel really, yet, so I'm gonna burn her a bit harder. Get them boys to pressure ASAP."

"Copy that. Stay within safety limits, Briar Patch. My little girl wouldn't wanna sleep alone tonight, so you get you and them back here, got me?"

He chuckled, "Really Backasswards, you been listening at keyholes again?"

"Them are my key holes to listen at. Besides, neither one of you are exactly quiet when you forget to latch the door and think I'm too stupid or old to know that you're not playing Pinochle in there. Get going you..."

He detached "And God Speed."

"Back in a jiff. Briar Patch free and clear." I switched back over to the GUARD again. Hadn't turned it

off while I was on the other set. I guess I'd kept the kid busy enough to keep his mind off it for a bit. Joe's intercept was 12 hours. As long as they could refill their bottles or not lose pressure and breath atmo a bit they'd be ok ... providing of course, their beacon wasn't sending a false signal.

"Sierra Zulu 711, Backasswards on GUARD."

"Go Ahead, Backasswards." arrogant anso.

"Sierra Zulu, please confirm position and track to Merlin's Prank for triangulation confirmation for intercept." Even if he wasn't going to stick to the rules of emergency radio protocol, I would. And shove it right back in his face.

"My position is none of your business, Backasswards. Triangulation plots Merlin's Prank exactly where his beacon says he is." Anso.

"Copy that, Sierra Zulu. I'll remind you that it's my runabout doing the rescue and my people on the line. By the rules of International Space Regulatory Commission you are REQUIRED to forward any requested information to assist a rescue."

"I confirmed his location!" Stuffed shirt was getting hot under the collar.

"And I will include that information along with these transcripts to the ISRC as required by Law."

"How Dare you ..."

"Sign off, Sierra Zulu. This channel is conducting emergency rescue operations at this time and your chatter is disrupting them." I smiled a cold smile "Merlin's Prank, Backasswards do you still copy?"

"Backasswards, Merlin's Prank. I Copy. Byron found two spare bottles, and we have a tap. Water's a bit of a problem, but we can rough it for a while as long as you bring along drinks and an in-flight movie. What's on the menu tonight?"

I chuckled. He was settling down and regaining his sense of humor, that was a good sign. Or a very bad one. Mortality can do funny things to people. I hoped for the best and left it at that.

"Well, if you like, I have freeze dried peas, dehydrated ice cream, and soymilk latte powder ... Or when you get here we can fire up the grill and you can help cook some Kansas City Steaks. Frozen, unfortunately. Ol' Bessy took a walk outside and forgot to change out her air bottle."

He chuckled, "If your flight attendant is cute, I'll take anything she feeds me, but until then I think I'll look forward to your unfortunate Ol' Bessy. Umm ... Bessy was a cow, right?"

I chuckled, "Yeah, she was. I hope medium is OK for you two."

We kept up the banter 15 minutes at a time every hour on the hour. Plotted drift and sent corrections to Jorge. He confirmed and informed me he was right on the money. He'd triple checked beacon coordinates and guessed about right on the drift rate. He must have goosed her hard cause he had made rendezvous in 11 hours, topped the extra bottles off the O2 tap and got the guys out after depressurizing the bridge.

Once snug in the Briar Patch, Jorge took a complete visual recording of the vessel. What was left of the Merlin's Prank would do for a good fixer-upper... if you had a dry-dock handy. The two stiffs were never found I'm told. The captain and engineer were MIA. Funny thing was, they had to have been in exactly the wrong spots on different decks, or ... Well, the Captain's cabin is where the hit occurred. Use your imagination. Not my thing, but some people go that way after years out here. I hope they were happy, or are happy wherever they are.

I called the SZ711 and got the Jg on watch. He confirmed two souls recovered and sent a dispatch for a

hull recovery team. Non-salvage of course. There had been people alive on it when it was found so the company would get the scrap back, and either strip it or patch it. Joe goosed it back as well. 11 hours and 2 minutes. I called the SZ711 again and got the same Jg. He again confirmed safe recovery of two souls, thanked us, and signed off.

We got our guests situated in separate rooms, it's not like I didn't have the room for them, then got them fed. After a day or two the nightmares eased off them both ... Of course their sleeping in the same bunk helped, I think, but that's not my business. They were good boys. At least pretended to stay in their separate rooms for a night or two before they gave it up and just stayed together for comfort's sake. Byron turned out to be a half-decent cook once he stopped trying to use dehydrated stuff and used real food. Dyson was assistant engineer, third flight out. Tried to keep them busy, but not overload them. Of course Tracey was a hit. She and Byron chatted gaily every chance they got. Byron's lisp got a little unnerving though.

We made the slow down burn for the Wango-Tango refinery and made our drop. That done, we offloaded Byron and Vilhelm Dyson. Never did learn Byron's last name. Should have, for paperwork's sake. Anyway, two souls saved, and that ain't nothin' as they say.

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Dear Diary, April, 5th, 2105

Most Pounders will never spend any time in free fall, let alone zero-gee. Wango-Tango's artificial gravity generators, i.e. the Duke/Brannick Box, were on the fritz ... that's some of the parts I brought. Some luxury items, and the most important piece of paperwork to a plant like this. Toilet Paper. Don't laugh, it's worth more than gold when you start running low. Don't believe me? Try using plastic next time. And that last statement goes for them tree-hugging hippie freaks as well.

We dumped our load off, and they reloaded us with Ingots. Everybody that comes out here goes back with the same thing. Semi-refined metals. As much as you can haul. The pay is usually not open to much negotiation ... but when you have a CareGiver on your arm and introduce her as your First Officer, well ... I won't say that I used her to get a better price. I just frowned at him till he started making better offers. Tracey just smiled. Jorge stayed back, out of the office like a good boy. I wish I'd got these rates all along ... but then I'd probably not have had to go to CareGivers. It's a circular argument.

"Captain Maxwell, you heard the news from Dirtside?" the fat Paymaster asked

"No, anything interesting?" I asked

"Remember that Argonaut incident last year?"

"Yeah, I think I heard something about it. Pilot got out didn't he?"

"Barely, but yeah. They forced him out on a medical, and looks like he joined CareGivers. Instructor or something I guess. Lord knows they could use a guy with that much space time under his belt."

"That so? Anything else? Anything we should know about?" Tracey squeezed my arm slightly, since she was still holding it, but didn't say anything.

"Yeah, them Idiots back home passed the PWA, and I'm going on rotation next month." When I looked puzzled, he sighed "The Protection Of Women Act. It prohibits females of childbearing age to undertake dangerous professions, including being in space. Means next month when I head home to Indiana for a couple weeks I'm not gonna be able to get any nookie on the way, except maybe from DSC. Six months one way and no women to ease the journey." He shook his head

I put on my most profound smile "That sounds terrible."

He snorted “You North Americans should stop passing stupid laws like that.” He gave me an arch look. I shook my head . “The PWA is in the U.N. for debate this month.”.

“And I’m sure it’ll die there. The world is not as silly as you North Americans. They can’t expect us Spacers to keep at these jobs with no women. Didn’t they learn anything from the Discovery incident back in 2019? And that was you North Americans lost, too.” He nodded, sighed, then shrugged.

“Optimal fuel return window is 01:45 tomorrow and stays open for a few days. You’ll be loaded within 48 hours from the top of this hour, so you’ll have the whole shot going back.” I nodded, glanced at Tracey, who also nodded.

“Thank you for your time, Sir.”

At that, he smiled. “Little lady, if you keep coming here with him, I might lose my closely guarded reputation as a penny pinching scrooge.”

As they both smiled, I piped in said as we left , “I’ll have to remember that.”

On the way back to the dock there was a gravitational alarm notice. everybody grabbed a handhold and hoped they were not wrong side up while they tested the Duke/Brannick Box.

It kicked, sputtered, reversed for a second, and then quit. “Feels like the regulator is gone, too.” Tracey was still holding onto her hand hold, feet firmly planted on the ceiling.

I’d found a doorway and wedged myself in. “Yeah, and that’s one of the daily check items too. They shoulda had half a dozen replacements for it in stores. Who ever lost them will have hell to pay.”

“Or vacuum to breath,” she concluded as she maneuvered her way back down the hall pulling herself along the various hand holds with me and Jorge in tow behind her.

* * *

Dear Diary, April, 15th, 2105

Load was ready on time and we launched. Jorge rode in the Briar Patch piggy backed onto the Backasswards. He wouldn’t use thrust unless he had to break away from some reason. He was loaded for bear and extra fuel bladders too.

Why the hell was he heading to Earth after we got him all the way back out to the belts you ask? Why do you think?

Not much to say about the next week or so, except the increase in noise about the PWA. Looked like common sense was gonna break out in the U.N. for a change, or at least we hoped so. There were a lotta fence sitters in the news, and most of them North Americans making all the “Pro-PWA” noise. Who listens to them Americans anyway? I mean, really. Look at their history. Noisy, loud mouthed, aggressive antagonists. Ok, they won two world wars, and a bunch of little ones when their own politicians weren’t giving away what the soldiers died for.

I should have given them yammerheads a bit more credit. I’ll never forget it. It was April 15th of 2105. All stations reported it. I couldn’t speak, nor Tracey or Joe.

The U.N. passed the Protection of Women Act. All women currently operating in space would be “Recalled” to Earth on a permanent basis. Never again further than Orbit, or maybe the Moon. That basically shuts down CareGivers and XX-Flight, their only real serious rival. CareGivers Corp covers most everything including morale, XX-Flight only employs Pilots and Astrogaters. Female of course, but the morale of the crew is not their concern. They are all naturals who are on Fountain if they choose, ... I think. Never looked into them really, must have slipped my mind. They’d have been

cheaper if I'd had to pay for my CareGiver, so I guess it worked out better in the long run.

To say that dinner that night was subdued.

At least till Tracey had an idea. "Jorge honey, what is the thrust capability and fuel limit on the Briar Patch?" He thought a while and offered to go get the manual to double check it.

Tracey and I shared a look. "It'd be awfully cramped in there with the extra food and fuel." I commented, knowing what she had in mind already.

Her eyes burned. Almost in tears. "If I go back to Earth ... then everything I've done will have been for nothing."

I shook my head. "Not everything, baby. You gave me my life back, and more. When we left Terra, all I had was a ship and a prayer. Now I have a daughter I couldn't be more proud of, and a ship that'll last at least as long as I will with a little bit of maintenance. Not to mention a longer life because of that low down despicable dirty trick you pulled on me." We shared a slight smile for a moment.

Jorge returned with the spec manual and we poured over it. I used the computer and we all used pen and paper to double check everything.

"We'd be arriving on fumes, and only enough to stop, maybe maneuver a little bit, that's all." Jorge noted clinically.

I looked him in the eye. "Well, they don't call you 'Psycho Joe' for nothing. And this would definitely put that beyond dispute."

I looked to Tracey, and then back to Jorge. "Mister Waco, I'm about to trust you with the single most precious thing I have ever had. My Daughter. Is there a single thing in your mind that says 'I can't do this'? If so, say so right now."

He thought about it, looking back over the numbers. Tracey kept quite. He shook his head. "It'll be cramped, uncomfortable, and stuffy. But, no Sir. I can't think of a single thing that says 'No Joy' on this. We plotted a launch to Mars 4 days from now. With fuel bladders and extra food stuffs, max safety rated burn, then a lot of coasting ..." He looked up into my eyes. "We can do this, with your permission, Sir."

We both looked to Tracey, who was crying softly.

I took her hand. "Your idea. You say it's a 'Go Mission' or 'No Joy'."

She took a long time to answer, considering all the factors. When she answered, it was a Spacers Answer. My heart broke with pride, it also just broke.

"Go Mission."

* * *

Here we are again. Back to that stupid law mucking with everybody's rights, lives, and freedoms. Why can't they not just leave us alone? It must have something to do with the Puritans and why they got kicked out of England. Such a repressive regime, I cannot fathom how or why anyone would NEED to control other peoples lives such as that. Live and Let Live. And Yee Harm None, Do As Thou Wilt. To Each Their Own. Any way you put it, it still comes out the same way. "The Government that Governs Least, Governs best" and that is a direct quote from Thomas Jefferson, the guy that wrote the Constitution for the United States.

My life has been turned on its head because someone cannot stand seeing other people minding their own business and doing it well.

I would be the first one to lend a hand to a friend, and I would not be averse to helping a complete stranger in time of need, either, as I think I showed with the Merlin's Prank incident. I could not even imagine the desire to control other people the way this was set up to do.

Oh, sure, I am the Captain of my ship. My Word is Law on my ship. As long as things are done my way I have no issue. You stand your watch or you have it covered, works for me. But what a person does in their bedroom, as long as it does not endanger myself, my ship, or my crew is truly none of my business.

So, here I sit typing out a journal entree in the recovery ward on the Charles Sheffield and trying to figure out what to do next with my life. But then again, I still have not finished the tale as far as it has gone, either. I might as well finish that up a bit more.

* * *

Dear Diary, April, 19th, 2105

The next three days were very busy getting the Briar Patch ready to sail. Checking and rechecking everything. One person stayed on the bridge and two did EVA on the fuel tanks. We recycled the air system through a jerry-rig attachment, and same with the water reclamation systems on the Briar Patch. Not that she needed it too badly, but just to be on the safe side. Backasswards had just been flushed and filled, both sides, and she had plenty of extra for one old cobbler to get back to Terra. I don't have a full machine shop behind the grav deck for nothing, OK? And once something's been made, I won't have to make it again for the same situation. Jorge proved rather handy back there, I knew I kept him around for a reason. We swapped out all their foodstuffs for the brand new kit I had, and restocked the toilet paper, just in case.

The day of the escape came. The ship was very quiet. We all knew what would happen, and no one wanted to talk about it much. Jorge took watch while Tracey and I got breakfast. Well, just coffee for me. I couldn't eat. Tracey either, for that matter. We must have sat at the table for over an hour with out saying anything or looking each other in the eyes. I guess we both were a bit teary.

When the silence was finally broken it was in a formal manner. Tracey straightened before speaking. I did as well. "Captain, I wish to thank you for the opportunity to serve on your ship. It was an honor and a privilege, Sir." She bowed.

I returned the bow. "The Privilege was all mine, Ms. Chadwick-Robins-sama. It was an honor to have you as my First Officer." I bowed again, she returned it.

We sat in silence again for a long time. Finally she broke down crying, and threw herself into my arms. I held her close, patting the back of her head, a gesture that seemed to come naturally to me.

We both had a good cry.

Yeah, I cried. Wanna make something of it, Mano?

When she finally spoke again she was all choked up and barely audible. "Daddy, I'm scared."

My reply was in the same tone as hers. "Me too, Baby. Me too."

"I finally find you after all these years, and I'm about to lose you again."

"You'll never lose me again, baby. I'll always be in your heart, when I'm not around Mars, anyway."

She looked up into my tear filled eyes. "I do get by there once in a while you know." I almost managed a smile. She did too. We sat there, her in my lap, for a while ... my coffee got cold, but it was more than worth it.

* * *

“Briar Patch, Backasswards. You are free and clear to navigate.”

“Backasswards, Briar Patch. Copy free and clear.” Tracey flew, and Jorge ran radio. “We’ll nudge a bit out of your lane and wait till you’re well past to boost, as per flight plan.”

“Roger that. You take care of my little girl now.”

“Affirmative, Backasswards. WILCO.”

“God bless, and God Speed, Joe.”

“You too, Dad.” I chuckled, he did too.

I watched them maneuver out of my line of sight, then watched on the low power radar as they lined up for launch. It’s not easy doing this while you’re moving, planning a launch that is. Normally you’re as stationary as things get in space. Actually I can’t think of one dammed thing that doesn’t move to one degree or another. But the basic idea was to aim for where Mars was gonna be when you and it finally get there. Hopefully at the same time.

“You fly him right, Tracey.”

“WILCO, Backasswards.”

“I’ll see ya next Mars run. You’ll prolly find me out at Kimi’s.”

“Looking forward to it.” She paused, then spoke, all broken up, “I love you, Daddy.”

“I love you too, Baby. I’ll miss you.” I wiped a tear from my eye. “Goodbye, for now.”

“Good bye.” We broke contact with that.

It came time for the burn and my screens lit up with static. I shut them down. And I sat there. Backasswards was more of a home then I had ever really known back dirtside. Now she felt emptier than ever. I had at least 4 months to get back to Terra. Jorge and Tracey had at least that long or longer to get back to Mars. I couldn’t really think of it just then. My head hurt from all the crying.

I went back to my “normal” routine for solo flight. It kept me busy, but didn’t help much. I could smell her perfume. I could smell the lingering scent of her hair after a good washing. I could hear her giggling at my jokes. I could hear Jorge raucous baritone rumbling up from the decks.

After a couple days I wrote and encrypted a letter for CareGivers. I’d had codes for just that, which I wasn’t supposed to use for any reason short of the reason I was using them that day. Or something like it. I tucked it into a “routine” message for CGC Yatori Station. I also beamed a copy of it back at New Atlanta, Mars. Either way, CareGivers would know Tracey was on her way back and why.

Then I settled in for the long lonesome road back to Earth.

Owner Operator

A Care Givers Tale

By Straycat

Chapter 6

One of the things I did on that long lonesome trip back to Terra was change all the log entries to match with the bogus names I had come up with. I did not want someone getting on Jorge or Tracey after I had got back to Port Shepard and was given the third degree from by ISP.

I also logged into CGC-net to see if I could get a preloaded run back out to Mars.

Much to my surprise I got a “Load Contract information on hold temporarily” from the site. Well, I just figured that with all the P.W.A. crap going on there was something gumming up the works. I put an inquiry in on it and waited till I got back into orbit to worry about it.

I hate to interrupt this, but it is time for me to take my medications, I’ll get back to this after my afternoon nap I guess. The nurse is quite insistent on that.

* * *

Dear Diary, August, 12th, 2105

“Port Shepard Control, this is Independent Spacers Guild freight hauler Backasswards coming into parking orbit. Requesting harbor pilot beacon for docking, please.”

“Backasswards, Port Shepard Control. Vector 4.11, angels 2, freq 11827 for docking port 36 alpha. Confirm.”

“Confirmed, Port Shepard Control.” I maneuvered towards the dock.

“Welcome Home, Backasswards.” Control replied.

“Yeah. Home.” I said as I plugged into the dock and locked in. Then I sighed, and tossed the mike up on the dash. As I turned to walk off the bridge, a very irritated voice came over the squawk box.

“ISP calling Backasswards, acknowledge!”

I groaned. I’d known this was going to happen, and now it was time to face the firing squad. I turned and picked the mike back up. “ISP, this is the Backasswards. Transmission acknowledged, go ahead.”

“Backasswards, you are ordered to heave to and prepare to be boarded!”

“Uh, ISP, I’m already plugged into docking port 36 Alpha, so I am unable to comply at this time. I suggest you dock beside me and walk over.”

“Backasswards, you are suspected of being in violation of the Protection of Women Act.” I grunted.

“ISP, I’d like to report a high jacking and kidnapping. The female personnel you are looking for was taken from my ship by force shortly after I left the Wango-Tango. Please send investigators at once.”

“I demand that you ... Um... Say again Backasswards?”

I chuckled to myself while shaking my head before keying up the mike again. “The female crew member I hired at extreme expense when last I was at Terra was kidnapped, ISP. Please send investigators to airlock 36 alpha.”

“Um... Copy Backasswards. Investigators are enroute. Please wait by the lock for them so they can investigate the crime scene.”

“WILCO, ISP.”

I waited about an hour for the investigations team to show up. When they did the ISP investigators went over the entire ship with a fine toothed comb, read every piece of paper they could find ... which just goes to say I didn’t let them find anything I didn’t want them to.

They went over my logs, my consumables report, my fuel expenditures, Waste Log. I got the whole nine meters checked out while they were there.

And the sons of pera’s drank the last of my coffee too.

Tracey had left a few personal items around and I had moved them into my bunk to make it look as if something were happening between myself and the “Female crewmember” just before I arrived back at

Terra. I had also cleaned up Joe's room so it looked unused, so as to better sell the story I had cooked up.

The story was similar to the Merlin's Prank incident. Just after leaving the Wango Tango I received a distress call. Space junk had punctured the water and air tanks on an Yvonne class runabout and had vented most of the atmo. The pilot had managed to weld the tanks closed again, but he didn't have anything to refill them with, nor did he have enough for the long trip back to Terra.

I called over and had him plug into my airlock where the service connections are. We spent a day manufacturing adapters to hook the two systems together, (I showed ISP the connectors Joe and I had made for refilling the Briar Patch), so I could top him off.

He spent a day with us just to alleviate the loneliness. He got to know my babe. Then late one night he attacked her while she was on watch, bound and gagged her, dragged her into his ship. Snuck into my room and got a few changes of her clothing and got out while I was sleeping.

I told them that the thing that woke me up was the ship disconnecting. And the reason I didn't go after them, was the cargo. Having nearly a million tons of iron ore heading towards Terra without control, was not something I was going to be held responsible for.

My duty to a couple Billion people on Terra as compared to one person kidnapped from my ship.

I'm not sure they bought it, but they had no proof that I was outright lying, which I was of course.

I logged the departure of the Chienne Dans La Chaleur in my logbook. I also complained a lot that 'Douglas MacNamera' kidnapped my female crewmember. I kinda failed to mention the proper names for the ship, the guy, and the chick that I had named 'Marilyn West'.

But what they didn't need to know, and that the ISP probably wouldn't notice was the names were nom de plumes, let alone actors from the early 20th century.

* * *

I'd already had a long day fucking around with the ISP investigations people, so I did what I had to do without bothering to go planet side. I ordered provisions, consumables, toilet paper (two-ply this time), and an additional set of bed linens for the spare rooms, that I had been putting off.

I also had maintenance come out to refill the cold-gas for my maneuvering thrusters. Last thing I did was to make sure I put in a double order of coffee, freeze-dried, vacuum-sealed, Columbian in pouches.

Once all that was done I decided to stop in and see Percival Steinberg so I could deliver his paperwork in person.

"Greetings Captain Maxwell, I trust you had a safe flight?" He still did not offer his hand in greeting. I guess some things do not change.

"Heading out to the refinery got a little interesting, but everyone was ok." I answered

"I trust there were no problems on the flight out then, Captain Maxwell?" He asked.

"I had a little trouble finding personnel in a locked bunk room that I was completely unaware of." I frowned at him.

"Yes." He nodded "My apologies for that. It is a security precaution my company prefers during the transfer of large quantities of investor's money. I hope it did not cause too many problems for you."

"Investment capital aside, Mr. Steinberg, I would prefer if next time you would not lock the room. The reason is if something were to happen; the hull gets punched by a meteorite, life support fails, or any number of unforeseen possibilities. I would prefer Jerry was able to get out, or more importantly, that I

was able to get in without having to cut the door out of its frame.”

He nodded again. “I completely understand Captain Maxwell.” He took an envelope from his desk. “I have here a letter from the CareGivers Company. It is a letter of recommendation for further business transactions. They request a certain percentage of our business with them to go thru you and your ship after the excellent service given upon this last transfer you performed for us.”

That took me a little by surprise, and I guess it showed on my face because for the first time without Tracey’s direct intervention, I saw him smile.

“Yes, Captain Maxwell. Mrs. Yatori was suitable impressed with your quality of service that she personally quote ‘suggested’ end quote you for further transactions. While I would normally immediately follow this up with another transfer, I have yet to have the next one authorized from my Board of Directors.”

I decided to sit down about then.

“The initial payment was made to your account as per the request of your First Officer, however she did not specify how the final payment was to be made. Would you prefer direct deposit, as with the initial payment, check, or currency, Captain Maxwell.”

That snapped me out of my reverie. “Um, another direct deposit would be acceptable, Mr. Steinberg. I would not wish to be wandering around the station with that much gold on me.”

He smiled and made a note on some paperwork, then entered more data into his computer. “Done, Captain Maxwell. The transfer of funds should be complete in the next few minutes. It was a pleasure doing business with you.”

He stood and I stood as well, extending my hand. He hesitated only a second before he took it and gave one firm shake before letting go.

“The pleasure was mine, Mr. Steinberg. I look forward to working with you in the future.” He smiled again.

“By the way, where is your First Officer, Captain Maxwell?” I swallowed.

“She was required to return to Mars before we could return to Terra, Mr. Steinberg. Unforeseen circumstances. I am not aware of all the details as of yet.”

He smiled wryly and nodded. “The Protection of Women Act, no doubt.” Then he frowned. “My personal political views hold that to be genocidal in its scope and tyrannical in nature.”

He gave me a sly look over his glasses. “That is one of the reasons my Company is up to its collective eyeballs in backing the Independent Spacers Movement, you see.”

We shared a sly smile for a moment then I decided I had a few other things to handle that day.

“I must see to a few more items today, Mr. Steinberg. Mayhaps when next I return we could have a cup of coffee and discuss our political views.” He nodded.

“Another time, Captain Maxwell.” As I turned for the door I snapped my fingers and turned back toward him.

“Oh, before I forget... Your brother asked me to convey his best regards to you, Mr. Steinberg.” He smiled and sat down. His face had a glow about it I had not seen before.

“Thank you. Please deliver the same to him when next you have occasion to speak to him.” I smiled, waved, and walked out the door heading back to my ship.

* * *

I normally don't use the locks on the airlock, but something in the back of my mind had suggested it to me before leaving that day. I had also turned the silent alarm system on before I closed up. I am glad I did. I was not quite halfway back to the Backasswards when my keyfob started vibrating, letting me know the alarm had been triggered.

I stopped at a communications booth on the way back and dialed the Emergency Services number to report the attempted break in. "Airlock 36 alpha, remote airlock unauthorized entry attempt alarm, request Security investigate Stat!"

"Acknowledged, airlock 36 Alpha. Security personnel enroute. May I have your name for the records please Caller?"

"Maxwell, Casey. Captain of the Backasswards."

"Thank you Captain Maxwell. Security personnel ETA 3 minutes, Mark."

I hung up the vid-phone and ran for my ship. It would also take me about 3 minutes to get there. A lot of things could happen in three minutes.

As I ran I checked the pistol under my arm. I had loaded it with buckshot before I left the ship. Then I returned it to its holster so I could shove a few people out of my way. I normally don't do that, but I hope you understand that I was in a little bit of a hurry.

I got to the airlock first, with security hot on my heels as they say. They secured the area and double-checked my identification. They also checked for finger prints on the locking mechanism. There were, of course, no prints at all. Not even mine from where I had locked it.

They gave me a bit of a hassle over the pistol, but the sergeant that seemed to be in charge on scene decided that my fears were well founded since some one had in fact tried to break into my ship.

"You just leave that thing in your ship next time you're here."

"Of course, Officer.". I had no intention of doing so, and he knew it too. But it had to be said for the record.

There were signs of tampering, but no one actually got through. I had two sets of codes for the alarm. The long drawn out code, which was a 48 digit part number that I won't tell you, and my emergency 'have to get in quick' code. I'm not saying anything about that one either, not at all.

After the initial investigation was complete and security had left I opened the airlock, climbed in, and redogged the hatch. Security was going to review the video from the security cameras that always cover ship docking ports and airlocks.

I didn't expect them to find anything. I found out about a week later that I was right. Station security sent me a text follow up message explaining that they were sorry they were unable to help me; the signal feed for that camera was interrupted 4 minutes before I called, and was not restored again for 24 hours till a technician could find the fault. Some one had cut the wire.

After getting back in my ship I went to read my mail. I am glad I did.

I had an encrypted message, CGC Priority One. Load info to follow. Flight plan: Bobtail to set coordinates, in-flight correction on preset date at preset time. No further details. CGC personnel will inform you of particulars as needed. Message ends.

That was bloody odd. Well, it was a Priority One message, so I went.

Right time, right coords, right channel, and I got another message with my in-flight course correction.

I'd had to log my orbit flight plan as far as I knew it with Port Shepard. The deviation would get me in trouble if anybody bothered to notice. I also remembered the coordinates that I was traveling to.

It was the second, and as it turns out, the last time I was at Yatori Station. I plugged into the dock number I was given, and was intrigued to see four fuel pods standing by. Heck, I normally only use two, and only use four for very heavy loads or when I am returning to Earth from the refineries with an ingot load.

I climbed out of the airlock and beheld a most exquisite beauty in a formal Geisha outfit. I bowed deeply, and she returned the bow.

"Greetings Captain Maxwell, welcome back to Yatori Station."

"It is my pleasure to return here."

"Captain Maxwell, I have a very important run for you to make. I was assured that you were the right man for the job."

I smiled, "Anything nice said about me, Ma'am, is probably a lie But I am the right man for the job, whatever it may be."

"Very well. I have an emergency load to be delivered to Mars as soon as possible. The load is light, but time critical. You are you use all possible haste in its delivery."

I thought about this for a moment and rubbed my chin. "With all of the repairs on my ship recently I should have no trouble maintaining a 30g acceleration for as long as my fuel reserves hold out."

She nodded. "Here are all the details you will require, including payment arrangements and passenger list." She handed me a folder she had been holding onto.

"Passengers, eh? How about the cargo?"

"The passengers are the cargo, Captain Maxwell." I looked up. Seven passengers, all fully qualified Spacers. It was to be a max thrust burn to Mars all for seven people. Bobtailing. 30gee Boost, Bobtailing.

My jaw dropped. I looked at the loadmaster. "You're kidding, right?"

She shook her head. "I am very serious, Captain Maxwell."

"Double pay, better than that, really. All for seven people?"

She nodded, her dark hair remained perfect. "These are very special people Captain Maxwell. They are needed on Mars as soon as humanly possible. I was assured that your vessel was capable of this journey, or I would not have brought you here at this late hour."

I waved a hand in dismissal of her concern. "It's ok, I keep weird hours anyway."

She shook her head. "Local time is not what I was referring to. You are aware of the Protection of Women Act are you not?"

I nodded. "Yes I am. That's the reason Tracey had to return to Mars with Jorge Waco instead of continuing to fly with me. I'm a little put out by that," I said with a bit of a frown.

"Do you realize what the PWA will do to my company if allowed to proceed unopposed? What it is intended to do to the Spacers? What it would do to humankind? These individuals must get to Mars before it is too late for them to get to Mars."

I looked her right in her bright eyes, then nodded once.

"Thank you Captain Maxwell. I will inform the passengers to get ready for departure." She appeared

much relieved.

“My pleasure, Momma-chan. Such is the contract I have with the company, and I could do no less than this for the people who reunited me with my daughter.”

She smiled. “Yes, I was a little worried about how you would take it when I agreed to allow her on your ship. We normally do not delve so deeply into personal situations.”

Her eyes sparkled, and once again my jaw dropped. This was no simple loadmaster.

I bowed deeply and spoke with awe. “Mrs. Yatori-sama, please forgive my rudeness. I was unaware of who you were.” She placed a hand on my shoulder.

“For the service to my company, and for all of humankind, you have no need to apologize, Captain Maxwell. Get these people to Mars before it is too late, that will be enough.”

I smirked. “Oh, this is gonna be the most relaxing flight I have ever made ...”

* * *

Dear Diary, August, 13th, 2105

There were seven names on the list. First initial, and last name. Nothing more. As they came through the compartment towards the airlock I gave them the once over and knew. I’d thought I had known before, but seeing was believing. First off, either they’d painted the suits, or they’d had them ordered beforehand. They were not pink, at least not any more.

They, meaning the people inside the suits, didn’t move like men. Trust me. I can tell. Guys hips don’t sway like that even with 50 kilos of EVA suit on them. They had their sun shields mostly down so you couldn’t see their faces. Just in case. I gave them the 30-second entry speech and told them to take whichever rooms they wanted, but the senior would have to alternate with me for my bunk. One stuck out it’s ... I mean, her hand, and I shook it. The hand in the glove was either rather small for a man’s or it was female. They were Spacers and traveled light. Most only had to make one trip, a couple needed two trips to get all their stuff in.

I filed a flight plan with Port Shepard, as required yet again, once we were all loaded and strapped in. For the sake of appearances, they kept their suits on with visors down. Technicality, but it could be argued that “I didn’t know them was women!” It wouldn’t fly really well back down that gravity well, but it’s what I had to work with.

I’d expected ISP to have a problem, and they did. About too late to do anything about it ... Again. I’d found out that the Heinlein had boosted right out from underneath their noses a while before and the anso’s were still burned by it. Well, I had every intention to do it to them as well.

The figure riding right seat removed her helmet and secured it, and gave me a wink. Like I hadn’t had enough shocks today, add in meeting and having on my ship a Living Legend. About oldest living and still active female NASA astronaut. When ISP called for a launch halt order she took the mike from me.

“This is the ISP calling the Backasswards. Stand down from launch and prepare to be boarded.”

“ISP, this is Backasswards. Piss off you yokels, you managed to ground me once, and I ain’t about to let ya do it to me a second time.”

“Backasswards, how dare you! Identify yourself!”

“As if you can’t tell already, I’ll hint ya. I’m Rebecca St. Charles, and if you ain’t read your history already, I ain’t gonna let you catch me sleeping now.”

A different voice came on the box. "Rebecca St. Charles? The Rebecca St. Charles? Bek is that really you out there?"

"You got me, honey, but I ain't waiting for the kiss."

"Bek! It's Jimmy Henderson! Heya gal, whatcha doing out there?"

"Little Jimmy? Well I'll be darned. Ain't spoke atcha in a coon's age. They still got you making milk runs up to Trippe?"

"Naw, they kicked me upstairs a couple years ago. I hardly get outta orbit anymore."

"I'm sorry to hear that, kid. Well, I'd love ta stick 'round and chat, but ISP's trying to delay my flight. I gotta hot date and I ain't gonna be late."

"You stealing that thing, Bek?"

"Yep, this ol' rust bucket and me go good together. I figure if I gotta go Pirate to get back in space that's what it'll take, kid."

"That ol' space dog still livin,' or'd you space him? I'd miss Casey if you kicked him out. He owes me a Fiver."

"Naw, I didn't space him, he's kinda cute in his own way. I'll give him the fiver once we get over to Red's. I'll probably untie him by then, too."

I could hear the wink in her voice, and the chuckle on the box. "Gotcha Bek. Traffic's clear for launch, since you ain't gonna wait for the ISP to put the kabosh on it. Listen, I'm not OKing you or anything, but I can't stop you with anything but words, and you ain't never listened to nobody you didn't want to, anyhow. So, God Speed and God Bless, Bek. You be good, girl."

"If I can't be good, I'll be good at it. You be good, too, Jimmy. Tell them assholes back at NASA I told them to kiss it!" And thirty gravities kicked us in the anso.

* * *

Dear Diary, August, 20th, 2105

Quick run down, OK. One male, Me. The most notorious female NASA pilot of all time, 6 other Caregivers, and 5 and a half months to get to Mars. After boost finished, we were cooking along pretty dammed fast. Not much woulda caught up with us. But, I still insisted on doing something special for the first real sit down dinner.

Yep. Steaks. Not frozen, they were so fresh they were still warm. And all the sides I could have asked for. someone, I won't say who, snuck a bottle of red wine up for a dinner toast. I almost forgot it in my room. Anyhow, I got through the intros and proposed a toast to the galley full of women.

"Ladies, Welcome to the Babe Runner!"

No shit, there I was. Sitting in bed wondering just how does one come to grips making a change like this in the middle of my life? Oh the doctors had all kinds of good advice ... If you are twenty. I am a little bit beyond twenty years of age. As a matter of fact I am on the close order of 72, but don't tell anybody. Taking Fountain for the last twenty years, daily exercise and a very healthy sex life has keep me going pretty well. It was recently estimated that had I not been violently decompressed a few months ago, I would have probably reached 210 years old or slightly more.

Oh yes, I was almost killed. It has had a bit of a calming effect on me, not so much the nearly dying part, but the loss I would have suffered after having survived such an event.

You see, I am an astronaut. I am an owner operator of a transport ship. Flying in space is my life. Piloting my craft is all I have to look forward to every morning. Well, not really, but it sounds better that way. I do have family, and I love them almost as much as I do flying in space. My ship is not the biggest, nor is it the fastest, and it is most defiantly not the nicest thing to fly in. It is mine, however, and that's all it needs to make it special, to me anyway.

Since the accident I have undergone more than a few changes, and not just mentally. Due to the extent of my injuries I would have been down-checked for my spacer's rating. I would have lost my pilots license. I would have become a liability to any and all around me in space.

In short, I would have been grounded, or worse made a simple passenger on my own ship. I would rather have died than to have that which I love so much taken from me like that.

With everything else going on, the plight of one man in the grand scheme of things, doesn't really matter all that much. I do have to say, however, I am at least as smart as the next person, as long as that next person is a rocket scientist with a 200+ I.Q.

This is the way it was the day I almost died. My memories of the event are a bit fuzzy, what with with the pain and all, so I will pull a page out of my wife's diary and you can see it from her perspective...

* * *

Dear Diary, August, 31st, 2125

Casey, my love, has been hurt; almost terminally.

We were on possum for The Fred. Admiral Hastings had us tugging along what was billed as "propulsion parts, miscellaneous", as bait for the ISP. We had IFF squawking a faked code, fresh paint job over the reg numbers, and the whole nine meters. In the pipe, five-by-five, right on profile for our flight plan. ISP fell for it, just like we wanted.

"Tug Flowers for Algernon, heave to and prepare to be boarded! This is the ISP Corvette Yankee Omega Four Two Niner."

"ISP YO429, this is the tug Flowers for Algernon, WILCO. May I ask what we've done for you to grace us with your presence?" Casey asked over the squawk box.

"Tug Flowers for Algernon, you are suspected of violating the Protection of Women Act. Heave to and prepare to be boarded. Have all female personnel ready to be transferred to YO429 upon coupling, and transfer your manifest immediately."

Casey grinned over at me from his pilots' seat on the left. "This is where the fun begins, babes." He gave me a wink, then keyed the microphone again. "Roger Wilco, ISP YO429. Transferring manifest now. We will begin killing forward momentum in 30 seconds." He clicked the One MC. "Johnson, they took the bait. Get your boys ready." Then he tossed the microphone up on the dash.

"Are you enjoying this, lover?" I asked. His response was a chuckle and an evil smile. We made ready for guests, unwelcome guests of course. The assault team finished their touch ups, double checked their night vision gear, and went back into the cabins.

The idea was to lull the ISP crewmen into a false sense of security, then spring the trap; taking the boarding crew first, then the ship. We were hoping to do it without casualties on either side, but we were taking no chances. The assault crew had full weapons load out. Oh, yeah, sure; we had done this a

time or two in the past, but it would only work so many times before something bad happened. Well, we were hoping for just one more time.

Once we came to a stop, they crossed our bow, and maneuvered for docking. The ship completely blocked our view screen forward. It was big; lots of armor, and massive engines.

Casey and I took up our post at the end of the entrance tunnel, which happens to be convenient to the armory. Casey loaded the pistol and stored it away in the armory. No sense in spooking the fish.

Bastards used a gravity lasso on us, to “aide” in their docking procedures. Right, like this old heap couldn’t just drag them along with us if we decided to run for it.

“So, babe, wanna bet it is another wet behind the ears gringo?” Casey asked. I chuckled and shrugged; running gag and a long story. Maybe I will tell you some day.

We heard the thumps of the docking clamps engaging, then listened to the airlock cycle and the door swung open.

“Idiots” I muttered. They’d left both sets of doors open. That’s a no-no, and a violation of our breathing air. If anything happened to their air seals, or if they got hulled, we would be breathing vacuum because of their idiocy. They also came loaded for bear. No less than 6 guys with a mixed combination of shotguns and automatic rifles. At least one guy in the second rank had a teargas launcher. And right out in front of all of them, the Lieutenant. Classic ‘carrot and stick’ routine, talk to the nice officer, or deal with the not-so-nice guys with weapons. Smart looking chap; he looked like an intelligence officer and the asshole was smiling. His eyes took us in at a glance, also seeing we were parallel to the plane of his gravity generators. Zero-Gee can be so much fun.

“Capitaine David Keys of the Flowers for Algernon, I presume?” His voice sounded reasonably intelligent.

“Aye, that’s me;” Casey piped up. He waved a hand in my general direction “And this is my First Officer, Carlotta Fagina. She happens to be the only female on board at this time, and well beyond the restraints of the PWA, Sir, being beyond childbearing age ...” I jabbed him in the ribs for that. “She’s lean, she’s clean, she’s built, she looks thirty-two, and she knows Nixon jokes from the first time that they made the rounds.” The Lieutenant continued to smile and stepped on board, taking a handhold to assert a little pressure on his feet.

“One would hope that you might have a fresh brewed cup of coffee on board, while we discuss your crew and cargo, Mon Capitaine?” He got within a meter of us and halted, still with that smile on his face, his hand on the bulkhead railing, and his goons on his six.

“Of course, Sir, this way.” The Lieutenant made a gesture and the six-man team lowered their weapons, but kept them ready. Casey led the way to the galley, the Lieutenant. and I in tow. Behind us crept the goon squad, still ready for action.

Casey took a seat at the table, and so did the Lieutenant. I got the coffee. Don’t ask; some kind of very old and outdated formality. The Lieutenant took his with real milk and sugar, not substitutes like most people these days. Casey took his the normal way, two cubes of Splenda and a non-dairy cube. I had to retrieve a milk cube out of the freezer for him, then I looked into getting my own coffee. Black, if you must know.

Anyhow, where was I? Ah, yes, coffee.

The glance at my timepiece told me we had about ninety more seconds till the fun would start. The Lieutenant did not start drinking his coffee, instead he began talking. “Capitaine, I do not know what kind of game you’re playing here, but I want it to stop.”

Casey should play poker for money with a face he returned to the Lieutenant. “What games? You ordered us to heave to and be boarded, you’re the law out here, and we complied.”

The Lieutenant smiled and leaned forward slightly. “You are not the only history buff in space, Capitaine Maxwell.”

“Who? I’m sorry, I think you are mistaken.”

“Flowers for Algernon, written by David Keys in 1958. I have read the book before, and I also ran your reg numbers. This ship is not listed under those numbers, Capitaine Maxwell.” He looked around. “I never thought I would actually catch the infamous Backasswards.” He leveled a gaze directly at me; “And you must be Rebecca St. Charles. Charmed, I’m sure. That other name does not suit you very well at all.”

I glanced at the goon squad as they shouldered their weapons. The sound of safeties being taken off chilled my bones.

That’s about the time all hell broke loose. As the lights shut off, I ducked behind the counter, and Casey came diving over it about a second later. The stink of cordite and the report of firearms filled the room, along with shouts of anger and pain as the assault crew burst from the cabins with their night vision gear and firearms taking down the unwelcome guests.

Casey and I held each other close for a long couple of seconds while it passed. When the room lights came back on we took queue our cue and got up. Peeking over the counter revealed just how bad it was. The Lieutenant was wounded, but all his goons were dead. So were a few of our guys. A med tech was putting a slap patch in the Lieutenant so we could keep him for questioning.

Johnson’s second in command was ripped in half; his head missing most of the back, his night vision gear hanging loosely from his face. The fighting was headed into the ISP corvette, and from the sounds of it, it was brutal.

Casey took off for the bridge and shouted over his shoulder at our guys, “Get that hatch closed. Someone pokes a hole in either ship and we are all gonna breath vacuum!” He closed the bridge hatch once he was inside. I headed for the lower bridge, just in case, dogging it behind me.

Then I got on the comset and called my lover. “What’s it look like up there?”

“Nothing on radar, babe, but I’m getting a weird echo. Try it your side.” I dialed the radar screen on the MFD, (Multi-Function Display). There was the echo alright, but Casey hadn’t been trained on these things; I was. Again, my blood ran cold.

“Damn it! They got a shadow! There is another ship out there hiding in their radar shadow!”

Half a second passed. “Is that what it means? Johnson! Get your men and get back to the ship! We are being ambushed! There’s another ship out there!”

“Negative, Captain. They still have the lasso on you. We gotta shut that down or we ain’t going anywhere. Give us a minute to get that taken care of it, then get the hell out of here, got it?” I got the startup sequence going, and checked my board. All lights green, we were airtight. I could hear orders being shouted over the com, and gun fire.

“What about your boys?” Casey asked

“We knew the risks when we signed on. Your ship can’t be replaced. Get going, Captain!” he replied.

“Babe, as soon as they cut us loose I am gonna release the cargo pods and go for the rendezvous point.” We were both working on the numbers for that.

“Copy, Lover. Hope Johnson and the boys have the best of luck over there.”

“Johnson can handle things, he’s a smart chap. We did our job getting them on board; time to run like good little non-combatants.”

“I heard that Captain,” Johnson’s voice came over the com. “Good, we’re mopping up the engine room crew now. I think the command crew is trashing the bridge, but I have men already rerouting the controls so we should be able to move this cast iron beast once it’s completely in our control.”

“Vaya con dios, mi amigo. See you back at Red’s. Now cut us loose. There is another ship coming in. Make sure the com is jammed, will ya?” Static descended on the channel, all channels as a matter of fact, although the intercom worked.

“Looks like some one beat us to the punch on that one, babe.” The ship shuddered a bit. “That would be Johnson deactivating the gravity lasso. OK, I’ll get us get outta here.”

Casey tapped the cold gas and backed us up at a couple meters per second. Once we were about a twelve hundred yards away, he dropped the cargo pods and hit the cold gas to reduce our departure rate, added a bit of vertical movement, and then I heard him gasp.

“El dios contuvo a hijo de mierda del asno del las perras!” I looked up from my screens just in time to see the flash from the muzzles. The radar shadow was another corvette, and it was firing on the corvette Johnson and his boys had captured. Blowing holes through it was more the word. Then we must have caught their eye, because some of the smaller weapons started firing on us.

My heart stopped when I felt the chuff. I checked environmental. Just as I feared, the main bridge had depressurized. About twenty seconds later I felt a thump and slam. The main bridge was building pressure again.

“CASEY!” I screamed into the com. Until the room was sealed again, he would not have heard me.

“Alive ... get us ... out of ... here,” came the gasping reply. Training instinct took over, and I overrode the main bridge controls.

* * *

As you can see , it had become a pretty crummy day. A well-laid trap foiled by another well-laid trap. It is funny how things like that can happen when you are not paying attention. Or rather not paying attention to the things you should have been. They always say that hindsight is 20/20.

During those horrible seconds while I was being broiled alive in pure vacuum, my mind went into overdrive. It was almost as if time had slowed to nothing. I could feel the vacuum that was trying to take my life. I could see that the pressure shields inside the window had not deployed, and training took over.

I screamed. I screamed like my life depended on it. If you try to hold your breath in a blow out, your lungs will explode. I knew the only way to save my ship and myself was to get those decompression shields closed. The bridge hatch may be good, but protracted vacuum might overcome the seal. The emergency deployment trigger is located on the center console over the window . I had to undo the harness that was holding me in the pilot’s seat, which had fortunately kept me from being blasted out of the ship when the window shattered. I stood, flipped up the spring loaded cover that prevented the switch from being activated accidentally, flipped the arming switch, waited for the green light and then depressed the trigger.

I collapsed into the pilot’s seat as the charges went off. When the bridge started to pressurize again, I could hear Rebecca yelling for me. I gulped air and replied. Then the pain descended on me like a blanket. I don’t remember too much for the next few days except pain. I was informed afterwards that

I'd had morphine and a saline drip while we were in transit back to our contact ... but I guess I should allow Rebecca's words to tell the story as I don't remember too many details about that time.

* * *

Rebecca's tale continues:

"Hang on to something," I called out on the One MC. I rolled us and kicked the throttle a touch to get forward momentum. Backasswards is not a war ship. She has no guns ... but that does not mean that she is unarmed. I had four of the biggest and most powerful weapons ever created by man at my fingertips, and they were going to make me proud today.

M.O.P. D-47's were fusion drives, probably second generation as they were large enough for a ship three times the mass they were attached to. That figure being with a full load of cargo.

I slued the ship around in front of the ISP corvette on cold gas, doing what on Earth would be called a Boot-leggers turn, while rolling like a coke can on a hot Georgia highway. We ended up only a couple meters away from the ship, pointing my engines directly at the offending corvette.

"Eat this, you mother fuckers!" I yelled, and hit the throttle again. Fusion power flared behind us. Corkscrewing like a bottle rocket, we took off, slicing the corvette like a fish with the power of the fusion engines. I kept it there for an extra 10 seconds longer than I really intended, then checked our position and angle, punched the numbers into the computer and corrected for the rendezvous point, then called up the preprogrammed burn.

I had to sit through the burn, and that was a long time to wait when your best friend and lover is hurt and you can't get to them. You see, the access hatches for both bridges open up into the zero-gee corridor from the airlock. The Duke/Brannick gravity wave generator works only on certain planes, depending on how it's built. This one was pointed up relative to the decks of each bridge. Since the bridges are 180 degrees out from each other, that makes the floor of one the floor of the other as well. Double redundancy; two bridges. As soon as the engines shut off I was out of the seat and heading for the hatch leading to the other bridge.

I yanked the med kit off the wall as I passed it, undogged the hatch and pulled myself in. First glance told me that the blast shields were down. No, not the blast shields, the decompression shields, which are armor plates inside the windows. I rushed over to Casey and gasped in horror. About every vein in his face had broken, his eyes were completely red from blood, his joints were swollen, and blood was coming out of his nose. Massive pressure trauma, I am sure some quack would call it. When I hit him with a morphine ampoule from the med kit, he groaned. I checked his pulse, thready and a bit weak.

I looked around and found the control for the gravity ring, hit the override and stopped it. It would be easier to move him in zero-gee, and easier on him, too. I also shut off the Duke/Brannick box, and lifted him out of his seat as his harness was already unbuckled. I cradled him close as I moved him slowly toward the down ladder. I had to move slowly or the Velcro slippers would come off, or loose. I floated Casey over the hole, wormed my way below him, then gently tugged him after me thru the hatch, into the corridor. Then still holding him close, I maneuvered him into our cabin.

Again I set him floating in the middle of the room as I went to the galley for the emergency kit. This was a lot bigger than the med kit, and had one item that I needed immediately; the Pressure Bag.

The medic and the Lieutenant were both still there in the galley. Both looked a little worse for wear, having gone through a boost without the Duke/Brannick box to cushion the gee-force. They were both alive. That is really all that mattered to me at that second; I went back to our cabin.

The Pressure Bag was developed on Earth back in the 20th century for mountain climbers over a

certain altitude. I don't recall the exact medical terminology for the condition, but I know adding pressure helps. And I know when you take the person back out, you have to do so very slowly, or they will develop the Bends, then Nitrogen gas builds up in the joints.

I opened the bag, drew it around him, and sealed it, then cracked open the valve on the oxygen bottle. The bag inflated. I allowed the pressure to rise slowly up to two bars, which is twice ambient pressure at sea level on earth. Two-bar is a little more than twice internal pressure of the Backasswards.

I had seen this thing in use once on TV when I was a kid. Some climbers up on Mount Everest had given a demonstration of it. Personally, this was the second time I'd had to use it on someone. Last time had been back in 2006 on my last space shuttle ride.

I went back to the galley for a bulb of coffee, and to check on the medic, Byron Dyson.

"How is our guest?" I asked as I floated over to the coffee. He lisped heavily the way queers did back when I was a kid. I thought that most people had out grown that fad.

"He's not going anywhere. I'd be a lot better with gravity." Yeah, that lisp was going get on my nerves.

"Captain had a blowout on the bridge. The shields engaged too slowly; he has massive barometric trauma. I got him in the bag right now. Gravity would only add to his discomfort."

The priss actually sighed at me. "Well, I guess that's for the best then." I frowned at him, then went back to our room and floated where I could see Casey's face.

The Endeavor was one of the last three original Space Shuttles. It was retired way back in July of 2011. I had been EVA with Donaldson when he caught a piece of space junk in the leg and had trouble sealing it. I had the EMU, Extra-vehicular Mobility Unit, and it took me a several seconds to get over to him. I had to do an emergency patch job on his leg to keep the pressure in, then got him into the airlock as fast as I could.

Yeah, orbit was still loaded with junk way back then.

Donaldson was not hurt as bad as Casey was; after all, and Donaldson was in a suit designed for redundancy; it had sealed his leg off when the pressure dropped, minimizing the damage. Donaldson still lost the leg, however, but that was after we got back to Kennedy Space Center. The return trip was, shall we say ... Interesting. As in the old Chinese curse "May you live in interesting times."

Computers have come a long way in the last 100 years or so. I would almost actually trust my life to one nowadays, and that is saying a lot about my trust in computers. Just before we hit reentry interface all of the computers went down. The old shuttles had four backup systems, the most reliable of them were the pilots.

The Endeavor started to tumble while I was riding left seat. I'm surprised the old bird didn't disintegrate on us. It got awfully warm before I got her straightened out. That's the short version. The long version would take up more pages than I care to dedicate to that Endeavor. Besides, it is all on file in my official report with NASA.

Ya know. I never tried crying in zero-gee before. I do not recommend it. The tears have no place to stream to.

Casey came around the next morning, feeling only marginally better. Personally, I think he was humoring me. I administered another dose of morphine thru the bag, and got him some broth and passed it thru the airlock built into the bag. Byron told me he had checked in on Casey while I was sleeping. I guess I was so tired that I didn't hear him. I am normally a light sleeper.

From that morning on, we took turns keeping an eye on the wounded, not that either Byron or I could have done anything if either had gotten worse.

It was a long flight back to the rendezvous point. Not long as in time, but long in worry. Byron was a competent medic, but he was no doctor. I found out the Lieutenant was named Jacques Auteuil. I also got his service number, but I don't need to write that here. The Fred will want it however, and he will get it. The Lieutenant would not say anything else.

Jack, as I had taken to calling him, had caught a bullet in the shoulder and another in the leg. So sad for him. Bryon cleaned him up, removed the lead, and stuck a plug in him; then handcuffed his ass to a pipe away from anything he could fuck with.

We let him off his leash only long enough to use the head. (That is the bathroom. Old navy term.) Back in the days of wind powered sailing ships, the crapper was off the bow, because the wind was coming from the stern of the ship.

What can a gal say; I was Blue Water Navy before NASA, and old habits die hard. I was a pilot of course. I drove me an F-14 Tomcat back before they retired them all for the F-22 Raptor and F-35 Joint Strike Fighter.

Damn it girl, you are showing your age talking about those things.

Anyway, I put a post it note on the main bridge "Out Of Service", and flew from the lower bridge. There is really not much of a difference, except tradition, and the fact the lower bridge still had all of its windows; the upper bridge lost one, and they were all blocked off now.

Bryon was neither a tech nor a mechanic. I wandered into the shop, back of the grav-ring, found a couple spare windows. I found the right one and the bolts to replace the window, and the tool kit, suited up and made an EVA, or Space Walk, as some call it, solo. Not something I like doing, but I followed all the safety rules, and kept radio contact with Byron inside, not that that he could have done anything if the shit hit the fan while I was outside, but that is SOP. (Standard Operating Procedure.)

It took longer than I would have liked, but we were far enough from Sol so I did not catch too many rads. I had mostly depressurized the main bridge before working on the window. I did not want a pressure leak blasting me off into space. When I was done I had Byron repressurize the bridge; talking him through it while I watched for leaks. It held. Once I was sure it would hold I came back inside and unsuited, then climbed up into the main bridge and looked thru the manual to figure out how to release the armor plating that had saved Casey's life. It was not easy. In fact, it took another couple hours. Byron checked up on both Casey and the Lieutenant while I kept busy, and took over bridge duty while I slept near Casey.

According to the manual, the shields should have fired immediately upon loss of pressure; they had not. With all the modifications to the ship over the last 30 years, it seems it had never been hooked back up to fire remotely by the new computer control system. I found the manual-override. The pin had been pulled, arming switch thrown, and firing button pushed.

Casey had managed that while being boiled alive by the lack of pressure. That's my man for you. Even when he was dying he was saving his ship. There really was no reason to open the shields till the charges had been replaced, so I left them closed and shut the outer armor shields as well. Then went to the other bridge and flew from there.

You don't really need to see outside in space, but it helps. I prefer being able to see outside. Knowing and seeing your environment keeps you from getting claustrophobic. That is not something I suffer from, but I like looking at the stars.

We made the rendezvous in about a week. Casey did not improve much, and our guest was given very good reason to behave. If Casey died, I was going to space him. Or at least that is what I had told him.

Fortunately the rendezvous ship had a full medical bay. CGC outfits their ships very well. I radioed ahead.

“Charles Sheffield, this is the Backasswards on encrypted 37 alpha. Over.”

“Backasswards, this is the Charles Sheffield, we copy on channel 37 alpha encrypted. Say status,.” a crisp British accent replied.

“Sheffield, Backasswards, Pilot Code one. Medic code one. Visitor code two. Captain code three. Boarding party MIA presumed 10-7. Confirm.”

“Confirmed. Two souls code one, one soul code two, one soul code three. Boarding party Missing and presumed dead. What happened out there, Backasswards?”

“The rats laid a trap for us. More in person, Sheffield.”

“Copy that Backasswards. Dock port 2-4-left. Medical team standing by.”

“Sheffield, I have a request. My Captain is badly beat up. Took at least 20 seconds of pure vacuum. I have him in a pressure bag. Can you give him zero-gee till we get him in the med-bay?”

“I’ll get it approved by the OOD, and inform the Captain. We’ll take good care of him, Backasswards.”

“Roger that. And you better, or I’ll kick your scrawny butt, ya hear?”

He chuckled, “Right oh. I will endeavor to keep that in mind.”

I plugged the Backasswards into port 2-4-left, cycled the lock, and sure enough the medical team was waiting there in zero-gee. I led them into my cabin where Casey was still floating. Byron had him on a saline drip, hooked up inside the pressure bag. How, I’m not sure. I would have to remember to ask him about that later.

The medical team worked Casey out the hatch and out of the ship. They dragged him into the med-bay where they worked the decompression routine, and I had to report.

Oh, the joys of command. Zero-gee, I found, was only in the route to and from the Backasswards to the med-bay, and gravity had been turned back on after we had passed. Ain’t science wonderful? A full guard had taken our guest to the brig, and took Byron to another debriefing room, which is also where I was headed.

I walked into debriefing to see a David Niven rip off if I’d ever seen one. Right down to the pencil mustache. He smiled when I entered and stood.

“Ah, Mrs. Saint Charles. Please have a seat.” He spoke with the same crisp British accent I had spoken with over the radio. His nametag said ‘Commander Richard Rayner’. I frowned.

“Commander Rayner, about that ass-kicking comment ...” he waved it off, and I took a seat.

“I understand, Mrs. Saint Charles. Nothing to worry yourself over.” He took a seat himself on the other side of his table, where lots of paperwork was laid out, and a writing tablet. “First thing I would like is a report; we will worry about the status of my arse later.” He smiled again. “Would you care for a coffee or tea? Maybe a fag?” I stared at him. “Cigarette, Mrs. Saint Charles.”

“Sure, and a coffee. Black and strong enough to pour itself.”

He waved to an orderly over in the corner. “Then if you would, in your own words, describe the events as you witnessed them?” He picked up his stylus.

I spent the next three hours going over the events of the last few weeks. The intercept, the trap, and the counter-trap. Radar shadow and why we didn’t see it before. “The Backasswards does have a military

grade radar set, salvaged and not on file. If we had used it sooner, it would have tipped the ISP off that we knew of the counter trap.” He nodded and constantly made notes. Cross referencing questions, going back and forth covering all the angles.

When he finally stopped writing he took a deep breath and looked up. “Everything seems in order here, all things considered.”

He set his stylus down. “I do believe that you have a wounded man in the med-bay. Why don’t you go see him, and if I have any more questions I will contact you. I must send this information back to Command.”

“Sounds like we have a mole in our midst.”

He shook his head. “Possible, but more than likely the ISP is finally beginning to learn from their mistakes. They sacrificed a corvette, two, actually, and their crews, by the sounds of it, in order to catch us ‘pirates’ it would seem. To catch you and your ship, more specifically.”

I nodded and took my leave.

Owner Operator
A Care Givers Tale
By Straycat

Chapter 2

Rebecca’s tale continues:

I found myself back in the med-bay. Full gravity was back on by now. Casey was finally out of the bag, and on the table. I had to wait outside in the observation lounge.

There was a doctor was five foot nothing, raven haired, green-eyed oriental beauty. She was also a CareGiver, which helped a bit. “Ah, Mrs. Maxwell.”

I shook my head. “No, it’s Mrs. St. Charles. That is my husband, but I kept my name.”

“I am sorry, I meant no offense.” She gave a short bow.

“None taken.” I returned the bow, then we both turned to look in the window to what little we could see of the operation.

“He is a tough old bird, I will give him that,” she said, and I nodded. “I am going to be direct about this, Mrs. St. Charles. Initial diagnosis is not good. He will live, but I doubt he will be fit for much. He will never again hold a spacers rating. He will no longer be able to pilot, let alone command a ship again.”

I looked her dead in the eyes. After a second she lowered her eyes. “I am sorry.”

Tears welled up in my eyes, and Casey’s image floated through my mind. All the times I had seen him at the command consol, in the pilots’ chair, his smirk and chuckle ringing in my ears.

The Doc had not moved, and while there was a tear in the corner of her eye, she seemed to have something on her mind. “I didn’t catch your name, Doctor.”

“Doctor Timberlane, but please call me Wendy.”

“Well, Wendy. You have the look of some one with Plan B in mind. Care to spill it before I get too sentimental about all this?”

“Plan B, as you call it, is the same plan I underwent when I joined CareGivers.”

I looked her up and down, then in the eye. “My name used to be William.” I nodded.

I thought about that for a second “Wendy is a better name for you.” We turned back towards the window. “I took the same stuff when I signed up. I’m a natural, but it helped my reflexes and boosted my mind a bit. Not too much, but enough that I still notice it twenty years later.”

She nodded. “I know. I remember reading about you during my time in training. The way you saved Donaldson-san during the Endeavor incident.”

After a moment I lifted my chin towards Casey and asked, “Does he know yet?”

She shook her head. “We are not positive yet. Once we are, then he will have to be told.” She looked at me again. “One would presume that you would wish to tell him yourself?”

I nodded. “Yes. Crotchety ol’ fart he might be, but he’s mine.” I shook out my red tangles a bit and started pacing around.

Wendy took a walk, ending up in the operating room a few minutes later in full scrubs. I could only really tell it was her from her green oriental eyes and coal black hair.

I made dinner for one later that night on board the Backasswards. I sat in the G-ring, which was spinning again. I had started it up when I came back on board. We were deep in space, and I was docked to a ship I knew to be friendly, so I’d left the airlock unlocked. I guess I should have expected guests. Somehow I couldn’t even think about it, but Byron let himself in, got a cup of coffee and sat opposite me at the table, while I poked ineffectually at my food.

He didn’t say anything at first, looked like he was trying to work up the nerve to speak. Started a couple times, but remained silent. “I’m not an old maid, Byron. You helped my husband. He’s alive because of your actions. For that, I can’t thank you enough. So, if you have something to say, please do.”

He smiled sheepishly, took a sip of his coffee, and then set the cup down. “He saved my life once, many years ago.” I was almost shocked. He wasn’t lisping. “That’s why I volunteered for this mission.”

He paused again, and took another sip of coffee. “Several years ago I was riding out to the Wango-Tango with my lover, Villhelm Dyson; he was an assistant engineer at that time. We were on this puddle jumper of a ship called the Merlin’s Prank.” He lowered his eyes for a bit before continuing. “It wasn’t much of a ship. After it got hulled by a piece of space junk, it was even less. The Captain and his engineer had taken turns with us to ... ‘Pay for the ride’ as they put it. I didn’t mind so much, but I prefer to be willing for that sort of thing.”

He sniffed. “Villhelm and I were on the bridge so the Captain and his engineer could be alone for a while. Villhelm was standing watch and had dogged the hatch, as per regulations, so I was told. I wasn’t much of a spacer at that point in my life. Matter of fact, I wasn’t much of anything. I was just keeping my Villhelm company.” He looked around the galley.

“Captain Maxwell was nearest when Villhelm sent out the distress call. Captain Maxwell sent Jorge Waco in the Briar Patch to come get us.”

He took a sip again. “We ended up spending a little more than a week on this ship.” He smiled. “I can still remember chatting with Tracey. She was such a nice girl. She told me about the CareGivers. A bit about the DeCorvin process and what it really meant to be a CareGiver.”

He drank a bit more coffee, and I found that I didn’t have anymore food to poke at... I must have eaten it while he was talking. Truth be told, I hadn’t noticed.

I got myself more coffee, and got Byron a refill while I was at it.. “Thanks.” He smiled. “I tried applying for the CareGivers when I finally got back to Mars. I failed horribly. No skills to speak of.” He sighed “That’s when I decided to change my life. I started taking medical studies. I’m not much of a

hostess, but I could learn something.” He laughed a bit and then drank some more coffee. “It took me four years to pass the basic stuff. I wouldn’t let my Villhelm help me. He’s smart. Full engineer now, and still as lovable as ever.” He smiled. He really had a nice smile.

“When I finally made Medic rating I made sure to get posting where Villhelm was. He’s the Chief Engineer on the Charles Sheffield now. When Sheffield was slotted as the rendezvous ship, I learned the Backasswards was involved. I felt it was necessary to repay Captain Maxwell for his hospitality, and for saving my life.” He looked up into my eyes. We shared a sad smile.

“Well, kid. I guess you managed to make it even, then. He saved your bacon, you saved his.” He nodded, then took another sip of coffee. Then as if remembering something, he took his wallet out, and removed a picture. He lingered over it a moment, then passed it on to me. The picture was of two strapping young men, one of them was Byron, and a lovely black girl. All three were holding hands, and holding them out showing the rings of marriage in their fingers that must have been taken on their wedding day. All three of them were smiling like it was the happiest day of their lives. And I guess it was. I know mine was.

Oh, mine and Casey’s marriage was nothing special as far as ceremony is concerned. The Captain of the ship married us. Ok, Casey was the Captain. But it was still the happiest day of my life when I finally tricked that ol’ codger into marrying me.

“Her name is Delilah, and no, she’s not a Philistine.” Byron told me, and we chuckled.

It ended up taking a couple more days for them to complete examinations on Casey. Fixing what they could, mending as best they could what they could not. They were not rushing anything. He was past the critical hour, as they say.

I found out that they had raised the pressure in the operating room, which is how they got Casey outta the bag so fast. Meant the Doc’s would have to depressurize slowly, but it saved Casey’s eyes, so no complaints there.

When everybody was back in normal pressure, and I was given the okay, I went in to see him.

* * *

When Bek came in to see me I was still a bit sore. Ok, a lot sore. But I was alive, and that was all that mattered at the moment. That moment was about to pass. She waltzed in and smiled down at me. She always had the most graceful way of walking.

“How you feeling today, lover?” I rolled my eyes at her.

“Like I’ve been coger en el asno por una mula the size of a world war two aircraft carrier. How do you think I feel?”

“Grouchy, would be my guess.” She leaned over and kissed my forehead. “They give you the good news?”

“Nope. Just the bad news.”

“Which is?” She took a seat on the stool next to my hospital bed.

“That I’ll have to live through this ...”

That’s when she looked down at her hands in her lap. “Lover, I’ve known you took long to even try to sugar coat this, so I am just going to say it. I think you would rather have it that way.” She looked up as I arched an eyebrow.

“Ok. I gathered there was something being left unsaid around here. Say it, then.”

“They saved your life, and your eyes. But you will be crippled the rest of your life from your injuries. If they had been right there when it happened, they mighta coulda done something. With all the time that passed getting you back here ... most of the damage was already done.”

She took a deep breath. “You won’t be spacer qualified anymore.”

I swallowed. She could tell I was taking this hard. The thought of losing my home, my ship, my way of life. All because of Terra’s need to control everybody. I was about to get angry at the loss. “Options?” I asked tightly.

“Limited.” I nodded. “Either accept it, and we live out our lives with it. Or ...”

“Spit it out, Bek.”

“Care Givers. DeCorvin Process.” My eyes opened a bit wider. “Wendy says it’d heal most of your injuries, but the major side effect would be that you would be changed into a genetic female.”

I stared at the ceiling a while, weighing my options, considering the possibilities. There were not many to consider. “I’d get my qualifications back?”

“More than likely.”

I thought a bit more. “Meloney would get two Grandmothers. She might like that.” She playfully slapped my arm, I winced in pain anyway.

“Don’t even try to take the high road on this, Casey Maxwell, my husband. You and I both know it’s about the ship, and your need to fly her.”

I gave her my best sheepish grin. “How’d you ever talk me in to marrying you?”

“Easy. I got you drunk, then gave you the best sex of your life.”

“Ah, is that it?” It was an old joke of ours. We both chuckled, but I held my ribs in pain for a bit.

* * *

That is how I almost died. Meloney is my grand daughter. Her mother is Tracey my only daughter... at least, that I know of anyway. I was not married to Tracey’s mother, Penny, but in many ways I am glad that I did not.

You see, if I had wed Penny Wise and made her Mrs. Casey Maxwell, I never would have gone back into space. I never would have won the Backasswards in a card game and never would have truly LIVED. I have never been so alive as I have been in space. If you’ve never been there, you will never understand.

Being a Spacer is the best ‘Get-rich-quick’ scheme there is. If you live, you make the money. It’s that simple. The more in demand your particular field is, the more money than that you make. Being an Owner Operator is just a bit different. You cannot just pocket all that money. You have to reinvest it into the ship. You have to pay your crew, the broker, port fees, benefits, taxes, tariffs, and licensing fees. It is very easy to dump all of your money back into the ship and forget to buy food. Well, that is a mistake you only make once. Then again, almost any mistake you make in space you will only ever make once. Mainly because 99.999% of all mistakes end up being fatal, and the other 0.001% don’t matter enough to worry about.

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