ENDLESS SKY: TRUTHSAYER

ENDLESS SKY

BOOK 1

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For Buzz

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1 / STARTER PACK

Exhausted and annoyed by my last call, I tapped the return key on my keyboard, signing out of my work session and closing the VPN. *Yet another day,* I thought to myself. I pulled the cheap headset off my head and dropped it onto the desk. The ear pad popped off, and I sighed. Work wouldn't pay for a new one until I hit my next employment anniversary. I fiddled with it for a few minutes and decided to deal with it tomorrow. Surely I had some tape or something around somewhere.

Although probably not. Subsistence citizens didn't have a junk drawer like Mom did when I was growing up. Subsistence citizens took what they were given: minimalist housing, synth-meals, and entry-level grindstone jobs.

Back in the day, they'd taught us in school, almost everyone in the United States—the precursor to our North American Attainment—had lived in their own standalone homes, often with acres and acres of free space in which to run and play. They'd even had specialized animals to keep them company: *pets,* they'd been called. We'd seen pictures of something called a *dog* and something called a *cat,* and I couldn't imagine one of them competing with me for space in my tiny

little one-bedroom. Oh, they'd had high-rise living back then too, but it was a purely luxury experience for the richest of the rich. The photos had shown sweeping views of endless skies and parklands, with glossy granite floors and upscale furniture. But living so far apart from one another had become untenable. Transporting resources like water and electricity had simply become too difficult and expensive, especially once the fossil fuels had run out. So people had started clustering together, building *up* instead of *out*, simplifying the solar-powered electrical distribution grids, water supplies, and sewage services. Today, everyone—and I mean *every one*—lived in a high rise. Of course, there were still layers to society in the NAA: subsistence citizens like myself, who'd never won one of the coveted places in extended education, usually wound up in the cheapest, smallest housing, surviving on government largesse. Those who'd not only attended extended education but done well at it were much better off. They lived in dedicated arcologies, self-sufficient cities contained entirely within massive high-rise buildings. They probably had granite floors.

I reached over and thumbed the window-shade control, opening the shade's horizontal slats and admitting a few inch-high slivers of dreary gray light into the room. Albuquerque's ever-sullen weather was said to be reminiscent of Washington's Peugeot Sound area at the turn of the century, the result of a drastic climate shift that was only now being mitigated by the towering atmospheric remediation monoliths that marched from coast to coast across the entire continent. Most of the former Peugeot Sound was, of course, completely underwater these days, but its damp weather lived on in what had once been a far-ranging desert landscape.

I picked up the half-eaten synth-meal that I'd microwaved for lunch. Over-microwaved, actually, which meant I'd had to let it cool for almost five minutes, giving me only ten to shove what I could into my mouth before my employer's time-keeping system and ever-watchful cameras insisted I get back on the job. The pasta analogue

still smelled fine, so I scooped one last spoonful into my mouth. Not bad. I'd probably have the same for dinner, although perhaps the one with the white sauce versus the red. Here at the end of the month, the variety in my cabinets was getting a little bleak, but I'd done better about mixing things up this month, so I wasn't down to a half-dozen boxes of bland pseudo-granola like I had been last month. My next meal delivery should be tomorrow or the next day, and I still had a couple of these pasta dishes left, along with a Salisbury Tofu-Steak.

Oh, I know what you're thinking, and you're not wrong. I'm a stereotype, almost a trope: late-20s corporate drone, male. In my case, I'm one of tens of thousands of corporate drones assigned to the consumer service department at AmeriMex Credit Bank, specifically the Consumer Credit division. Yeah, I'm the disinterested kid who helps you file your most recent credit card dispute, because you're too lazy to go onto our website and do it yourself in a tenth of the time. And probably not even a real dispute, more like a delivery meal that you didn't like and don't feel like paying for. Filing disputes, explaining the self-explanatory weekly card statements, rotating frauded account numbers, and transferring balances from one of our competitors' cards—these were the scintillating activities that filled my days.

Notably, my own credit isn't good enough for my employer to issue me one of its normal cards, although I do have a purchasing card that my paycheck is deposited to each week. It covered the few expenses that the government didn't: a new shirt now and then, an occasional meal upgrade, the odd video game or two every other month. It wasn't sufficient to cover an entertainment upgrade subscription, and so I subsisted mostly on movies and reruns from fifty or more years ago, all of which were made free on the basic Citizen's Plan.

They say some people call consumer service lines just for the human contact. For a while, everyone thought machine intelligences were going to replace drones like me, until major companies and

world governments realized that people like me—and there's a lot of people like me—wouldn't have anything to do. And so consumer support, along with a few dozen other jobs, was now legally reserved for low-paid human labor. Machine intelligence systems touch up my appearance, removing the zits from my face, making my hair look less oily, and even replacing my work t-shirt with a snappy button-up and tie, while I answer call after call after mundane video call. There was always the temptation to break out of the bank-approved customer service script and just *talk* to someone, but the machine learning algorithms that listened to each call—"for training and quality assurance purposes," everyone was told—would have detected that and flagged a supervisor to investigate. I didn't need that.

Somewhat ironically, after the first synthetic intelligences were created—never "artificial," if you please—they made it clear that they hadn't the slightest interest in taking on the mundane, boring work that humans created for themselves. And so corporate drone-ery lives on. A few decades before I was born, the United Nations Security Council had finally outlawed the production of any new SIs, requiring that all man-made intelligence systems operate below the threshold of sentience. Their stated reason was to make sure humans remained in charge of humanity, but the widely acknowledged fact was the the existing SIs basically just sat around contemplating vast universal mysteries of some kind and not doing a lick of work. They just burned power, which probably would have irritated everyone a lot more if the SIs hadn't cleverly invented cheap, efficient, renewable power systems that kept them—and all of humanity—fully supplied with energy.

That's actually what had originally brought my parents to Albuquerque: those cheap, efficient, renewable power systems. When they'd designated the city for a new microwave power receiver array, the government had created a labor boom. Global weather was still too random—and mostly bad, to be honest—for ground-based solar arrays to be very effective. That's what the SIs had solved, by creating powerful orbital solar arrays that beamed power down to huge

ground-based receivers. These now dotted the global landscape, ensuring a steady supply of essentially free power for everyone. Flow batteries the size of cargo ships stored power whenever the power receiver was energized, and then doled it back out when the receiver's companion satellite was no longer being bathed in sunlight. It worked well enough: in school, we'd been taught about something called a *rolling blackout,* where the government regularly cut power to huge areas of a city in order to maintain power to other areas. That never happened nowadays. Power outages nowadays would have resulted in almost immediate riots after citizens were forced off their steady diet of media banality.

Like everyone else at AmeriMex—hell, like pretty much everyone else in the world, these days—I work from home, slugging away on a company-issued computer connected to a company-issued monitor that was starting to lose pixels in one quarter of the screen. Monitoring systems built into the cube-shaped computer ensured I was actually in front of the computer during my shift, and automated call center systems routed a new call to me within seconds of me finishing the previous one. It wasn't a bad gig, and the company probably saved itself zillions every year by not maintaining the giant office buildings and cube farms of yore. It did make for a bit of a dreary life for us drones, though: given that all I could afford was a tiny, massively subsidized one-bedroom apartment, I didn't get a lot of variety in my surroundings. My work desk and its computer and monitor took up about a third of my main room. A shabby couch, placed opposite a wall-mounted entertainment panel, took up most of the rest of the room. A tiny kitchen and pantry, complete with an eat-at counter with integrated stool, finished the room. I spent about two-thirds of my life in that room. The tiny bedroom and personal refresher unit, accessible by means of a door off the kitchen, occupied the remaining third of my life.

But I could always go out, right?

I've read about "going out," of course, and seen plenty of it in the entertainment programs and movies I watched. Restaurants and bars

—places where you could pay money to have someone else actually prepare real food and bring it to you—were a major way that people of the past injected some variety into their lives. I'd seen parks—vast green spaces used solely for recreation—shopping malls, museums, and more. All excellent options for "going out."

Except none of them really existed anymore, unless you were incredibly wealthy and maybe had enough land to contain your own park.

After the Fifth Global Pandemic, governments everywhere basically threw up their hands in defeat, shut down mass transit systems worldwide, and advised everyone to figure out how to live and work entirely out of their homes. By the time I was born, shortly after Yet Another Global Pandemic, most news outlets had stopped even counting the pandemics. It was just the "pandemic of '26," or "this month's pandemic."

Roads were no longer maintained as they had been in the old days. Instead, the major shipping companies used the old roadways to lay new tracks for their vehicles. Private vehicles, something I'd read about in school and seen in movies, were a thing of the past. Those few people who went outside paid for hired vehicles, each of which was equipped with extensive automatic disinfecting systems. Or you walked, edging along the side of the roadways in carefully marked pedestrian lanes while automated vehicles blasted by you at a couple of hundred kilometers per hour.

But there's no real need to leave your home, anymore. Amazmart.com delivers everything I need, from groceries to clothes to cleaning supplies. Everything is packaged to fit in the standard automated delivery systems installed in nearly every major high-rise apartment building, including my own: toilet paper, canned ham, vegetables, socks, even gaming consoles, all packaged in perfect cubes, all designed to stack neatly into a 40cm-by-40cm-by-40cm reusable shipping container.

Looking around my little space apartment, I suspected I could spend a bit more on cleaning supplies in my next order. I'd long since

become immune to my own smell, but the place was getting funky enough to start having its own elections soon.

Going out for a breath of fresh air was legally still an option, but it had two significant downsides. First, it'd reset my sense of smell, and my apartment would really stink when I came back. Second, I'd have to suit up. These days, you didn't dare leave your home—and its government-mandated ultra-filtered air, complete with government-supplied replacement filters every week—without being in a full hazmat suit. Lots of people could afford luxe suits that offered basic climate control, comfortable helmets, and unobtrusive air supplies. I could afford a flimsy Tyvek onesie with a bulky, strap-on respirator. By the time I suited up, ran whatever mad errand had driven me from my home, and unsuited underneath the sterilizing UVC lamp in my building's entry, it was a contest to see which had produced more sweat: my face or my armpits.

Besides, where would I go? Albuquerque didn't have any parks. It didn't have shopping malls. It had a Museum of Natural History, but yours were strictly virtual; only the museum staff was permitted to enter the actual building and be physically amongst the exhibits they maintained. There certainly weren't any restaurants or bars, at least none that someone like me could afford or be welcomed into.

So no, I'd stay inside. Work was okay with us using their computer for shopping, so I logged onto amaz-mart.com. Rapidly clicking through the site, I added a case of air fresheners to my cart, along with a case of odor neutralizing spray. Almost as an afterthought, I added a pack of ear pads for the headset. There's no way tape was going to work to repair it. I gazed longingly at the ad the site presented for a much more comfortable, premium headset that I'd coveted for months now. I closed the ad and lingered for a moment over the site's "Suggested for you" items, including a new racing game called Furiously Fast 11 that promised over a month of playtime. Maybe in a couple of paychecks: the helpful reminder of my payment card balance that always hovered in the corner of the

screen made it clear that I wouldn't be purchasing any new games for a bit.

But then I remembered: Mom had sent me a game or something for my birthday last week. I'd already sent her a thank-you email, but hadn't bothered to open the package. It was probably a deck of cards or something, knowing Mom's love of nostalgia. Any truly good game would have downloaded itself to my entertainment panel already—what games came in *packages* anymore?

I pushed my dilapidated chair back from my desk, wishing Mom had sprung for a new office chair instead, and walked to my door. A small pile of pouches lay on the floor. I'd already sent their delivery cubes back into the system for recycling, but none of the actual packages had seemed urgent. I flipped through them. One appeared to be a free sample of a new water flavoring. "Mango-PrimaBerry!" the pouch proclaimed. Yuck, whatever "PrimaBerry" was. Another pouch, sent from my building's management company, probably contained the annual air quality test kit they were required to offer. The third pouch rustled a bit, and a quick glance at the label suggested it was a sample of breakfast cereal. Which would be crushed to dust of course, and which wouldn't be included in my government-paid food plan anyway. The fourth pouch was from Mom.

I ripped it open, and another smaller pouch fell out. This one was silvery with dark blue printing.

Endless Sky, it proudly proclaimed. Starter Kit.

I tore the pouch open. Inside was a small blister pack containing two large-ish pills, one black and one white. A folded sheet of paper contained what I presumed were instructions. As I shook the pouch's contents onto the pile of mail, another small slip of paper fell out. Stapled to it was a clear zip-closure baggie, containing yet another pill. This one was clear.

I unfolded the glossy instruction sheet.

WELCOME TO THE ENDLESS SKY® STARTER KIT

!! Please read these instructions carefully before taking either of the Game Gel-Tabs !!

Endless Sky is the world's most engaging, immersive, and imaginative science-fiction game—ever. We are happy to welcome you to our family of adventurers! We ask that you read this ENTIRE guide carefully before beginning.

GETTING STARTED

When you are ready to begin, you will start by swallowing the WHITE Gel-Tab with a glass of water. We recommend taking the WHITE Gel-Tab on an empty stomach.

YOU WILL FALL ASLEEP WITHIN TEN MINUTES OF TAKING THE WHITE GEL-TAB. WE RECOMMEND TAKING THE WHITE GEL-TAB WHILE SITTING UPRIGHT ON A BED OR COUCH, AND THEN IMMEDIATELY LYING DOWN.

WE SUGGEST TAKING THE WHITE GEL-TAB AT BEDTIME.

You will remain asleep for 8-10 hours as the WHITE Gel-Tab's nano-constructors begin creating the electronic neural interfaces that will enable you to enter the world of Endless Sky. When you awake, you will be hungry. We suggest having a balanced meal rich in iron, potassium, and vitamin C. We recommend a full

bowl of Endless Crunch™, which when combined with a bowl of whole-fat synth-milk, provides 100% of the recommended nutrients to ensure a successful neural implanting!

YOU MUST WAIT 48 HOURS AFTER AWAKING BEFORE TAKING THE BLACK GEL-TAB AND ENTERING THE GAME. If you take the BLACK Gel-Tab early, it will have no effect. Your BLACK Gel-Tab is non-refundable and will not be replaced due to early consumption.

PLAYING THE GAME

We suggest checking the strength of the Endless Network™ signal by using the free Endless Network app for your smartphone. If you take the BLACK Gel-Tab in an area of insufficient signal, you will not be able to enter the game. No refunds will be made for consuming a BLACK Gel-Tab in an area of insufficient signal.

When you are ready to enter Endless Sky and begin play:

FIRST, MAKE SURE YOU ARE ALERT AND NOT TIRED. DO NOT CONSUME THE BLACK GEL-TAB IF YOU ARE TIRED, OR UNDER THE INFLUENCE OF ANY DRUGS, INCLUDING ALCOHOL. SERIOUS NEGATIVE SIDE EFFECTS CAN RESULT. Entering the game in a fatigued state may result in your game character "sleeping" for some or all of your game time. Refunds are not offered for BLACK Gel-Tabs that are consumed while you are in a fatigued state.

SECOND, MAKE SURE YOU ARE IN AN APPROPRIATE GAME-play space. Your body will enter a state not unlike sleep within ten minutes of taking the BLACK Gel-Tab, so it should be consumed

while seated on a bed, couch, or other appropriate location. After swallowing, IMMEDIATELY LIE DOWN and prepare to play!

THIRD, make sure you have 8 hours available, because you will not be able to exit the game for that amount of time. This will be equivalent to a full day of "game time" in the world of Endless Sky.

FOURTH, be aware that you will not have full control over your bladder or bowels while in the game. We suggest using a new Endless Care Kit™ (sold separately) to help maintain a clean and safe environment while you play.

FIFTH, we suggest that you hydrate before taking the BLACK Gel-Tab. Drinking at least two liters of clean, fresh water is strongly recommended. The BLACK Gel-Tab may also be taken on a full stomach, which helps avoid experiencing The Hungries when you exit the game. However, consider our fourth point above when deciding what, and how much, to eat before playing.

TIP: We recommend keeping a can of Endless Recovery™ handy (sold separately). It's a great way to crush The Hungries upon exiting the game, and unopened cans are shelf-stable for up to 6 months! In most regions, you can opt for Endless Recovery as a replacement for one standard subsidized meal package. Consider doing so in your next meal order!

IMPORTANT: Upon entering Endless Sky for the first time, you will be required to review and accept an important End

User License Agreement (EULA), which explains your obligations as a player, and outlines important limitations on our liability for damages. Should you refuse to accept the EULA, you will exit the game and the nano-constructs in your brain will dissolve over the course of about a week. If you would like to review the EULA prior to consuming the Game Gel-Tabs, you can visit EndlessSky-Game.com.

REMEMBER: Each BLACK Gel-Tab is good for 8 hours of real-world time, which equates to one full game day. Additional BLACK Gel-Tabs are sold separately. Endless Fan™ subscriptions help ensure you never run out of BLACK Gel-Tabs, and that you can fully engage in Endless Play™ whenever you like! Visit EndlessSky-Game.com for more information on subscriptions and other Endless Sky offerings!

WANT TO GO ALL-IN? Visit EndlessSkyGame.com and learn about our Endless Pod™ service. Whether you choose to pay-as-you-go or arrange a financial endowment to fund your new Endless Life™, we have plenty of options—including ones that may cost you nothing! Endless Pods eliminate the worry about nutrition... and even elimination! It's the easy, turnkey way to enjoy Endless Sky for days, weeks, or even months at a time! Special discounts available for terms of three months or more!

THAT'S IT! Are you ready to enter the world of Endless Sky, and experience an adventure like no other?

REMEMBER: WHITE Gel-Tab, wait 48 hours, and then BLACK Gel-Tab.

Welcome to Endless Sky — the Ultimate Game Off Planet Earth™!

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The piece of paper attached to the clear pill—or Gel-Tab, I guess—was more succinct: RANDOM IN-GAME POWER-UP. TAKE IMMEDIATELY BEFORE TAKING YOUR FIRST BLACK GEL-TAB. It was a yellow slip of paper, and had been printed on a laser printer that had clearly seen better days. The printing was uneven and smeared, and the piece of paper itself had obviously been hand-cut from a larger sheet. They must randomly chuck these power-ups into the pouches by hand at the factory, and probably didn't produce enough of them to spend money on better packaging. Well, I wasn't arguing.

I knew all about Endless Sky, of course, along with its sister games like Endless Frontier and Endless Steam. They were the latest, and by far the most popular, wave of fully immersive role-playing games. Endless Domains, the company behind them all, had developed the world's first self-constructing nano-net that was fully approved and licensed by the World Drug Administration. Pop the white pill and apparently in two days you had a fully functional synaptic interface, right inside your own brain, powered by your own body. It had been a triumph when the first games had been announced a year or so back. No more awkward visor helmets! No

more uncomfortable electrode hats! Just swallow a pill and you're in the game!

The problem, of course, was that the starter kits cost someone like me around half a year's pay. I knew Mom was doing okay—she was a Vice President for one of the companies that sold air filters to the government—but I hadn't thought she'd spring for such an expensive present. Still, a new chair would have been nice, even if it would have entailed an even pricier robotic delivery company to bring it to me. No way a chair would fit in the building's automated delivery system. But... as I thought about it, maybe the chair would have been a bad idea. Mom had always been practical, and a new chair would have been right on-character for her. Buying me access to a game like this was the height of frivolity for her, and it made the gift even better. Besides, hadn't I just been pointing out how monotonous it was to live and work in a tiny little apartment that you basically couldn't leave? Here was my opportunity to "go out" in a big way.

I picked up the blister pack of Gel-Tabs and turned them over in my fingers, watching as the little plastic bubbles caught the weak late afternoon light.

Why not?

I quickly shoveled the last bits of my lunch into my mouth, guzzled a glass of water, and walked into my cramped bedroom. Remembering the instructions, I returned to the kitchen and popped another pasta meal into the microwave. Easy enough to nuke it when I came to, as I had no plans of paying whatever extortionate amount I was sure "Endless Crunch" must cost. I refilled the glass of water and returned to my bedroom. Then I returned to the living room again, pulling up my government food order on the entertainment panel. Sure enough, I had a batch already on the way, due in late tomorrow—too late to make changes. But I did verify that "Endless Recovery" meal replacement drinks could be optioned into my next order, replacing ordinary meal packs one-to-one at no charge. They came in chocolate, vanilla, strawberry, and banana, with a maximum allotment of one per day. I poked the change into my next order, dropping

all of the cardboard-tasting granola packs and a random selection of other items in exchange for one drink per day. I confirmed the changes and returned to my bedroom.

Pushing the previous day's clothes onto the floor, I sat on the edge of the barely-big-enough-for-one-adult bed, the cheap mattress bowing deeply under my weight. I pushed the white Gel-Tab through the foil on the back of the package, and held it in the middle of my palm. It glistened slightly green, catching the light from the digital clock built into the wall.

Down the hatch.

I wondered briefly why they couldn't have split the damn thing up into two or even three pills; it was like trying to swallow the end of your own thumb. I chugged the glass of water, urging the pill down my gullet, and gasped slightly when it finally slid down into my stomach. That thing was monstrous—why would they risk choking a brand-new customer? I sat the empty glass on the minuscule nightstand bolted onto the wall next to the head of my bed, and lay down.

Crap, I thought. *I should have peed first.*

And then I thought nothing.

Truth in advertising: When I woke shortly before midnight, I was well-rested and absolutely ravenous. "The Hungries" indeed. I rolled out of bed, scurried to the kitchen, and fired up the microwave. While it hummed, I emptied my bladder, relieved that I hadn't... *relieved* myself in bed. A few minutes later, I was tucking into the hot food, and sliding a second tray into the 'wave. That'd leave me short for dinner the next day unless my monthly shipment showed up a little earlier than usual, but I could always splurge and have pizza delivered. My building offered automated pizza production and delivery for residents, and while it wasn't as good as some I'd had while living with Mom, it wasn't poisonous.

With the second meal polished off and my belly no longer grum-

bling, I wondered what to do with myself. The instructions had been clear: I needed to wait two more days before swallowing the black pill. And there was no point in logging on to work—while the company might let me pick up an extra shift, I didn't speak most of the languages required to be working at this hour, as we'd mainly be getting calls from overseas. Besides, I'd still be expected to be on the clock at 7am for my regular shift, and there was no way I was pulling a double. I decided to lay back in bed and try to get some more sleep.

It didn't happen.

An hour later, I was signing into work, accepting a reduced hourly rate in exchange for only taking calls from English-speaking consumers in Europe. My compact cup-at-a-time coffee maker put in just as long of a day as I did, keeping me from fading all through the night and the next day, until my normal shift was over at 3pm.

Tired as I was at that point, I knew I needed to push through until my usual bedtime, or I'd never get myself on a workable schedule.

Sometime during the day, the building's package delivery system had sent up cubes full of meal trays, and so I wandered over to the door to unpack them and stash them in their cabinet above the microwave. A cube of cleaning supplies and odor neutralizer had also shown up, so I spent a couple of hours straightening the place up, cycling laundry through my little 'fresher and into my dresser drawers, and scrubbing out my compact little bathroom. I set up two odor neutralizers to slowly churn through the air in the place, and by early evening my apartment looked—and smelled—more like a competent adult lived there.

I considered sitting down with a chocolate pudding cup and binge-watching the latest Star Wars derivative, but decided instead to read up on Endless Sky.

My work computer was strictly locked down, essentially useless unless it was connected to the company VPN or browsing Amazmart, and so I perched on my battered, overstuffed couch—an apartment-warming gift from Mom that hadn't worn as well as she'd prob-

ably hoped—extracted a lap-keyboard from where it had slid between the cushions, and fired up the entertainment panel. Opening the panel's built-in browser, I hit the forums.

And almost immediately hit a brick wall.

After a few hours of searching, all I managed to uncover was that Endless Domains' legal department apparently spent their entire day overseeing a bunch of take-down bots that scoured the Internet for any mentions of the company's games and had them quickly removed. Apart from a few Amaz-mart.com product reviews of the company's food products and the occasional officially sanctioned game reviews—all of which were incredibly high-level gushings of how immersive and convenient the games were—the Internet was a complete blank. I'd be going to completely blind in—I checked the time on the TV—just over 24 hours.

The most interesting of the sanctioned reviews offered a few tantalizing tidbits about the game itself:

> *Endless Sky is unlike any other space-genre game you've ever played. For one, the game world is literally endless, built atop Endless Domain's proprietary world-generating algorithms. Players can choose to join any one of several political factions in the game, including haring off as an independent explorer or throwing in with galaxy-spanning alien species. All of the genre tropes are well-represented: faster-than-light travel, spaceships, space battles, planetary terraforming, piracy, and more. Endless Domain's ability to execute fully-realized worlds and societies—first unveiled in their fantasy-genre Endless Kingdom game—is on full display here, with players able to take on occupations ranging from starship pilot to planetary governor, or from galley cook to mercenary. The game's clever use of time-shifting ensures that "day players" get the full experience despite only being "in" the game for a third of its run-time, while also providing a fully immersive experience for the "full-timers" who play from the comfort of one of the company's physical-support game pods. And as for all those rumors you've heard about in-game sensory expe-*

riences—rest assured that in-game gourmet dining experiences are absolutely worth it, to say nothing of the sex. Endless Sky proves that Endless Domains has a winning formula, and we can't wait to see the previews of their next launch, Endless Deep.

Fluffy and ultimately detail-free, but enough to get me even more jazzed about getting into the game.

Eventually.

The rest of the evening, and all of the next day, were an absolute grind. If you were the old lady who tried to convince me to lower her interest rate, I'm sorry—I didn't have the moral strength to escalate that to the people who actually made that decision, because they'd simply deny it anyway and reprimand me for letting you sweet-talk me into bothering them. If you're the guy whose card quit working, I apologize. You're going to have to call and request a new card again, because I'm pretty sure I never submitted that request to the processing system. All day, my mind was on nothing but Endless Sky.

When my shift ended at 3, it came almost as a shock. I'd been thinking about the timing all day long: Work from 7am to 3pm, making sure I had a solid lunch and gotten to the bathroom, and then take the black pill. That would put me into the game until anywhere from 11pm to 1am, at which point I'd probably wake exhausted, have a fast bite to eat, and go straight to bed. It was Thursday, so I'd need to be up just before 7am on Friday to log onto work, which meant I'd get anywhere from 5-ish to 7-ish hours of sleep.

Plenty.

After one last trip to the bathroom to make sure I was as empty as possible, I sat down on the edge of my bed with the black pill, still in its blister pack, and the clear pill, still in its little zipper baggie. I thought about it for a minute, and then set both pills on my night-stand. I went to the kitchen, grabbed one of the flimsy plastic trash bags my building provided its residents, and spread that out in the middle of my bed. I covered that with an old bath towel. Just in case. I fetched a glass of water and, before I could think about it any further,

shook the clear pill out of its baggie and swallowed it. It had barely cleared my esophagus before I chased it with the black one.

As I eased myself into bed, my hips centered on the towel-and-trash bag combo, I realized I'd never checked the network strength as the instructions had suggested.

And then the world went dark.

2 / WELCOME TO ENDLESS SKY

Glowing letters faded into the darkness:

> » Welcome to Endless Sky®!
> Please register using your UUCID.
> Hint: Simply think the digits to enter them.

A glowing, blinking box—a cursor—appeared below the prompt. I carefully thought about the digits in my Universally Unique Citizen's ID, wondering how they'd handle the legally mandated three-factor authentication when I had no way of providing a thumbprint or looking at the authentication app on my mobile.

> » UUCID accepted.
> Neural match: Welcome, Frank Kozina.
> Let's begin your Endless Adventure™!

Well, that answered that.

> » Please read and accept our End User License Agreement (EULA).

A button offered to display the entire EULA in what I assumed was an infinite wall of text, while I second button let me simply

accept the EULA sight-unseen and get on with the game. I obviously chose the second button.

Suddenly, a galaxy bloomed to life around me. I was floating in the midst of the interstellar void, the sweep of a galactic arm full of stars arcing around me. It was... majestic. Overwhelming. A soft, orchestral chord, like the carrier wave of the universe itself, waxed and waned in my ears, both relaxing and invigorating me with its promise of what was to come. The Endless Sky logo faded into life before me, nearly blotting out the stars before it faded away.

The galaxy even smelled nice, like fresh laundry.

> » Override detected. Special class accepted: Truthsayer.
>
> This is a hidden class. You will be permitted to select a public class as part of onboarding.

This new message lingered for a moment, and I realized this must have been the clear pill's doing. "Truthsayer?" Interesting. In the fantasy books I'd read, a truthsayer was usually employed by a king or something, and could determine if someone was lying to the monarch. Seemed like a bit misplaced for a space epic, and a fairly minor thing to make such a big deal of—what with a special pill and all—but perhaps it'd make more sense once I got into the game's storyline.

> » All players in Endless Sky are assigned the species of Human.

Fair enough. I'd half-hoped that alien species would be an option, but I suppose those would be the bad guys.

> » Please choose your class.
>
> You may ask for assistance in filtering the list of available classes.

A vast, vertical list appeared in front of me, stretching down into what must be infinity. It was alphabetical, listing every single char-

acter class the game apparently supported. "Able Spacer" was first on the list, followed by "Academic," then "Accountant," and so on. This would take forever.

If I was going to be successful in the game, I presumed I'd need a character class—which amounted to a profession, it seemed—that was in-demand. That way, I'd have a better chance of making more money. "Only show classes that are in high demand within the game," I said aloud.

The list sparkled and wavered, options disappearing rapidly as the list contracted:

> Artist
> Assassin
> Astronomer
> Athletic Trainer
> …

The list was still long, but at least now only contained a few entries in each letter. I reached toward the list, intending to scroll into the Bs, but paused.

Assassin, huh?

That seemed like an uncommon trade in a sci-fi RPG, but the possibilities intrigued me. It was the furthest thing possible from what I did in real life, and it promised far more adventure than "Astronomer." And why in the world would an RPG need "Athletic Trainers?" Who would be boring enough to choose that as their class, and how could it possibly be an in-demand profession? More, who would spend their game time using the services of an Athletic Trainer? I shook my head and scrolled ahead a bit:

> Bailiff
> Bartender
> Boatswain

Well, you could never have too many bartenders. I wondered if

the game actually had the ability to get you drunk. Embedded in your brain as it was, it certainly seemed possible. I scrolled on.

> Camouflage Specialist
> Carpenter
> Cashier
> Chauffeur
> Clown
> Cook

This was ridiculous. Ludicrous, even. Who paid money to be a cook in an RPG? The reviewer had mentioned being a galley cook, but I'd taken it as hyperbole. Apparently not. I flipped through several other letters' worth of classes, amazed that the game considered these to all be "in-demand" and wondering at the sanity of the people who'd programmed this thing. "Were is Space Pilot?" I asked. The list faded, overlaid by the reply:

> » The Starship Pilot class is oversubscribed by approximately 312%.

Well, of course it was. Everyone who came here wanted to be a pilot, I supposed. The reply faded away, and the list brightened again. I scrolled through for several more minutes, aware that I was burning precious game time but fully cognizant of what an important decision I was making. I flipped back to the start of the list and touched the second option.

> » Confirm selection of class: Assassin.

"Confirmed."

> » Class selected. Class: Assassin is generally a hidden class. You are permitted to select a second, public class.

This was a common enough technique in RPGs, and I thought about it for several moments. Being a public assassin would be pretty

useless, but selecting a second—well, a third really, since Truthsayer was my first class—had the potential to slow me down in the game. I'd have skills for both classes to unlock and maintain, for example, effectively meaning I'd be playing two games at the same time. But Assassin did sound like a lot of fun.

"What are the most in-demand classed in the game, which are not also a menial profession, and which can rise to a position of influence or power?" That'd at least make my "second game" interesting, and possibly create some synergy with the Assassin class.

The list this time was much shorter:

> Majordomo

I blinked. I was pretty sure I knew what that was, but it felt like an archaic word. "Define the Majordomo class," I said.

> Majordomo
>
> 1: a head steward of a large household (such as a palace)
>
> 2 : butler, steward
>
> 3 : a person who speaks, makes arrangements, or takes charge for another
> broadly : the person who runs an enterprise

Fascinating. "Does this class offer future specializations or generalizations?" Many RPG games had a sort of tree for their skills, meaning generalized skills that could build into more specialized ones. Looking at the skill tree, if it was permitted, could give me an idea of where the class might fit into the game.

> » Skill tree excerpt: Majordomo
>
> Politician > Majordomo > Consigliere | Executive

Oh, now we were getting someplace! The game positioned the Majordomo class as a kind of specialized politician, but from there I could branch out into what I assumed was a connection to in-game organized crime, or into executive management.

Good enough. "Select Majordomo as public class."

» Class selected.

You have 30 attribute points to assign across 3 attributes: Body, Mind, and Soul. By default, 10 attribute points are assigned to each attribute. New attribute points are awarded with most level-ups and upon completion of select missions. You can assign no more than one attribute point to a given attribute between level-ups. Do you wish to redistribute attribute points?

I thought about it. As an assassin, I'd doubtless need a strong Body, but between that and majordomo, I'd need an even stronger mind. What was Soul? I couldn't see it affecting my classes that much. "Allocate one point from Soul to Mind," I ordered. "No other changes."

» Attribute point allocation complete.

Frank Kozina
Day Player
Class: Truthsayer (hidden)
Class: Assassin (hidden)
Class: Majordomo
Guild Membership: none
Account: 0
Level 0

Attributes
Body: 10
Mind: 11
Soul: 9
HP: 27 (Body x Level)
XP: 0 (1,000 to level 1)
Unused Attribute Points: 0

Skills:

Basic Assassination: 1
Knife Fighting: 1
Household Management: 1
Poisoning: 1
Politicking: 1

» Initiating skill download.

My brain screamed.

Prior to Endless Domain's RPGs, even "immersive" games were very much external to the player. That is, they could use video helmets to put images in front of your eyes and audio into your ears. With electrode hats, they could stimulate the brain directly, letting them add touch, smell, and taste to the game. But you and the game were always distinct. When your character "learned" a skill in the game, it simply improved your chances of successfully performing that skill for in-game tasks. Someone at a level 1 mechanic skill, for example, would have a lower chance of repairing a device than a player with a level 5 mechanic skill.

Endless Sky had chosen a different approach. Even the carefully edited public reviews had covered this, but I hadn't had the context to fully understand what they meant.

With its hardware embedded directly into my brain, the game was constructing new synaptic networks. It was lighting up the sensory and memory areas of my brain. I could feel the memories of my training sessions in live fighting, remember the endless practice debates in my political science class, smell the poisons I'd learned to brew under the tutelage of an experienced practitioner.

Except that I'd obviously never done those things: the game was inserting information into my brain. It was creating the experiences needed for my brain to recall that information and put it to new uses. This wasn't just having a book dumped into my brain, it was more like having a life constructed for me.

It hurt like hell.

Fortunately, it was over almost as quickly as it had begun, leaving

me with the sense—but not the actual pain, thank God—of a pounding headache.

The text of my character sheet faded away, and the soft, wavering chord of the universe began to swell. The galaxy itself began to shift, and I started to fly toward one particular bright mote of light. Trumpets crescendoed as an urgent, deep drumbeat began to pulse through the void. The mote of light became a ball, and then rapidly zoomed into a full-sized sun. I swept past it, slowing now, and found myself approaching a tiny, pod-sized container. As that grew closer, the elaborate Endless Sky logo again pulsed across the sky, fading slowly as the little pod came closer. I drifted through the window of the pod, and found myself looking back outside that window, into the inky blackness of space.

» Welcome to Endless Sky.

As those bright letters began to fade, I became keenly aware of my own breath, my own heartbeat. I looked, and saw my own hands, glad in thick, silvery-gray gloves. Those were in turn connected to my arms, also wrapped in what I realized must be a silvery-gray space suit of some kind.

I looked around.

There wasn't much to see. This was indeed a pod, probably an escape pod of some kind. I was pressed against the back of the pod, half-pushed into a spongy, memory foam-type pad that covered the entire rear wall. In front of me, within easy reach, was a control panel no more than a meter across. That alone filled most of the pod's width, meaning I could easily touch both concave walls at the same time. I was in a tube, then, or more accurately a cylinder. Above the small control panel was the window I'd originally drifted through.

There were no clues about what to do next.

Game on.

"Okay," I said aloud. "Let's see what we can do."

» Mission unlocked: Return Home

Your escape pod was ejected unintentionally.
Find a way to return to the station.

XP awarded.

» Mission unlocked: Find Dwight Czarnowski

••Error: Mission description not found.

Weird. I'd expected a tutorial mission of some kind, but what was the "Find Dwight" thing all about? Presumably something I'd need to complete once I got to the station, but... description not found?

I had a mild moment of panic when I realized that I'd swallowed a pill designed to construct a synaptic network inside my own brain, and that pill had been designed by the same people who apparently hadn't finished their own game. The same kinds of people who wrote the bug-ridden software that I used every day at work. I'd entrusted my brain *to software engineers*.

I took a deep breath. I'd be fine.

I looked down at the control panel. It seemed needlessly complex for something as small as an escape pod, with buttons crammed across the entire thing. "This would be easier if there were labels or something," I muttered. Some scratching in between two of the buttons caught my eye. "Oh, there are labels," I said.

An odd sensation washed over me in that moment. It felt... well, it's hard to describe. Imagine waking up for a deep sleep, looking around, and suddenly realizing that you're upside down, hanging from the ceiling of your apartment. Your heart beats a couple of times in panic before you realize that no, you're not upside down, you were just having the last remnants of a dream. You're really fine, lying in bed just as you're meant to be.

That's what it felt like. It actually made me nauseous enough, just for a split second, to close my eyes. But the sensation passed almost immediately. "I assume," I said, taking another deep breath to quell my rising panic, "that was just the synaptic network adjusting

itself or something, and not my brain melting under the influence of poorly designed technology." Nothing else happened, and so I resolved to get on with the game.

Returning my attention to the console, I could see that the controls were indeed labeled, just that the labels had been created by a masochist. They were printed in dark gray, and contrasted poorly with the black surface of the console, but I quickly made out buttons for "side thrusters," "attitude control," and "joystick release." I pushed that last one, and was rewarded with a small joystick popping up from a hidden recess in the console.

Gently tapping the joystick, I heard a soft hissing noise, and felt a slight bump from the opposing side of my pod. Jets of some sort, then. I continued tapping the joystick, mindful to not build up too much momentum, and eventually managed to turn the little pod 180 degrees.

Before me was a space station.

It was beautiful and, as far as I could see, undamaged. Its main portion was a tubular ring, a torus, with soft blue and red marker lights scattered across the outer circumference. In the middle or the torus was a sphere, which was connected to the torus by four straight, equidistant tubes. Those tubes formed a cross of sorts, intersecting at the sphere. Across the sphere and the torus, I could see windows, with small shapes moving within. That gave me a sense of scale: I wasn't actually that far from the station.

Looking more closely, I could see a row of small protrusions along one section of the torus' outer side. The row ended in a depression, which was surrounded by blinking yellow lights. I suspected I was meant to dock with those lights.

> » Mission update: Return Home [25%]
>
> You're off to a great start! Dock your pod with the station to complete this mission.

The game could read my thoughts. That made sense, obviously, but it was still creepy.

Continuing to operate the joystick with the gentlest of taps, I lined myself up with the station and goosed my little pod forward. Almost immediately, I realized that this task was going to be more difficult than I'd expected: the station was rotating. It was extremely slow, but now that I was drifting toward it, I could see my target, the little light-ringed depression, moving inexorably toward my left. I tried to adjust my path, but tapped the joystick in the wrong direction and found myself beginning to roll counter-clockwise. I was still moving toward the station, but at this rate I'd find myself slowly drilling into it several hours from now, rather than docking.

I scanned the console for some way to right my pod, and laughed aloud. There, right next to the joystick, was a green button marked "Auto-Dock." I pushed it.

Nothing happened.

I glared at the button for a moment, and then started scanning the console again. My pod continued to drift toward the station, and my heart started to beat more rapidly. If I crashed, I presumed I'd be put into some kind of time-out state, and then respawn right back in this same pod to try again. That would be annoying, but–

Wait. The Auto-Dock button was now blinking.

I pushed it again, and was rewarded with a series of sharp bumps, followed by a prolonged kick in the chest.

The system must have a proximity requirement, and I'd finally drifted close enough to trigger it.

> » Mission update: Return Home [50%]
> Using the auto-docking system is not only faster, it's a safer way to dock the pod.
> » XP awarded.

That was a bit of a gimme, but I'd take it.

I was accelerating toward the station more quickly now, and was realigned to the docking point marked by the yellow lights. A series of thruster-driven taps matched the pod's lateral velocity to the station's rotation. Once the docking point was directly in front of me and no

longer moving relative to the pod, another kick in the chest sent me hurtling toward the station.

"Too fast!" I yelled, my eyes darting around the console for some way to stop it.

I looked up, and saw the station rapidly approaching, the docking point beginning to loom in my vision like a hungry maw.

I was going to crash.

Just as I was reaching for the joystick, hoping I could manually override the insane auto-docking computer, the pod fired a series of forward-facing thrusters. The pod slowed immediately, and my helmeted head—hey, I was wearing a helmet!—smacked into the forward window. A rapid series of thruster bursts turned the pod another 180 degrees, before the forward thrusters fired again, this time more softly. The pod drifted backwards, clicking into the docking point. A series of thunks suggested I'd been locked into place, a theory that was confirmed when the wall behind me levered open.

My problem now was that I was subject to the station's rotational gravity, which meant my console was now the "floor" of my pod, and I was laying flat atop it. I turned over carefully, afraid I'd fire myself back into space, and looked "up."

What I'd previously considered to be the "floor" of my pod was now a curved side wall, and included a built-in ladder leading to what was now the exit. I clambered up the ladder, and heaved myself over the edge, sprawling on the floor—deck, I suppose—next to an empty walkway.

» Mission complete: Return Home
» XP awarded.

Well, I seemed off to a good start.

I'd found myself in what was obviously an escape pod mustering station. The walkway was clearly marked with places for people to line up, and a railing separated that from the actual pod entry hatches. All of the pods were open, waiting for some emergency to render them useful.

I made my way out of the area, and emerged into an open concourse of some kind. An open walkway stretched into the distance, far enough that I could actually make out the curvature of the station's torus. On either side of me were walls that, based on my count of the windows, were about four stories high. The ground level, where I stood, was all shop windows, closed doors, and signage. It looked for all the world like a shopping mall from before the pandemics, something that featured heavily in the shows I tended to binge-watch. The shop windows were mostly dark, and I wondered if I'd arrived in the middle of the night or something.

My only experience with space stations were from old Star Trek reruns and the interminable waves of new Star Wars series that were released every few weeks. This station didn't line up with either of those. Star Trek mainly featured neat, clean, futuristic stations with smooth lines and bright lighting; Star Wars trended toward dark, grimy stations that seemed to have seen a lot of use. This station was somewhere in between. Everything was clean, and perhaps a bit worn with use, but definitely not dingy or old-feeling. But nothing looked futuristic: there were no robots scurrying around, no plastic-like wall surfaces smoothly reflecting subtle lighting, none of that. It seems incredibly... normal.

I walked along, moving over to one side of the corridor to get a better look at the shops and offices. This one seemed to be a fast-food joint of some kind, while the next one proclaimed itself to be a cargo brokerage. I tried their doors, and found them firmly locked. The door handles were sturdy and simple, and showed the clear wear of thousands upon thousands of hands over the years. The attention to detail here was impressive: I'm sure it would have been easier to just make a station where everything appeared perfectly new and smooth,

but the designers had really gone all-out on making this seem like a real place.

Up ahead, a light was shining out of an office window, reflecting off the wall on the opposite side of the corridor. I picked up my pace a bit, and found myself standing in front of something called Zander's Equippage. Peering through the window, I saw long rows of shelves stretching to the back of the shop, each packed with a seemingly random assortment of trinkets, devices, and doodads. Tucked in one front corner was a tiny counter, and behind the counter was a perfectly ordinary-looking man. He had black hair, tan skin, and a ragged mustache. Weirdly, he was staring straight ahead, both palms flat on the countertop, with a half-smile frozen on his face. Was he a robot?

I walked in.

"Hello," I said.

The man's eyes widened along with his smile. "Hello, and welcome to Zander's Equippage. We offer everything a traveler might need, including generous credit terms."

> » Welcome to Zander's Equippage!
>
> As you have had no time to earn any credits, Zander is prepared to offer generous credit terms for up to 1,000 station credits. This is a good time to pick up any items that may be essential to your class' base skills.
>
> Suggestions:
>
> Knife Fighting: A basic knife
>
> Poisoning: A toxic herbs kit
>
> Your suit is also equipped with a basic life support system, but does not currently have an emergency atmosphere supply.

Ah. Okay, we were doing the tutorial thing. Cool. "Hello, Zander!" I said brightly, watching the proprietor's face change not a bit. "I'd like a basic knife, a toxic herbs kit, and an emergency atmosphere supply."

Zander nodded. "A basic knife will cost you 100 credits. A toxic herbs kit will cost you 500 credits. An emergency atmosphere supply will cost you 100 credits. You get a 25 credit rebate if you refill the emergency atmosphere supply here on the station. I can extend you 700 credits at 5% per month. Purchase items, yes or no?"

Zander was the least interesting kind of non-player character, or NPC, you could find in a game that was otherwise so realistic. I hoped the characters would get better as I went. "Yes," I said, keeping my voice as flat as his.

A soft thunk attracted my attention to the counter. Between Zander's hands, which absolutely hadn't moved, a simple knife in a black sheath, a black packet of what I presumed were toxic herbs, and a silver pressor cylinder had all dropped lightly to to the countertop.

"Is there someone I can talk to about getting off this station?" I asked.

"Mala's Travel Agency is just down the corridor," Zander replied, surprising me. I was surprised he'd been programmed with that much information.

"That you," I said, gathering my belongings and stepping back into the station's corridor. I took a few minutes to stash the goods: the atmosphere cylinder clicked into a holder in the small of my back, automatically interfacing with the suit with a soft hiss. The knife I tucked into a thigh pocket, and the herbs went into the roomier storage pocket in the belly of the suit.

> » Purchases complete! You're now familiar with the purchasing system in Endless Sky.
>
> » XP awarded.

I continued along the hallway, and eventually came across a man who looked almost identical to Zander. This NPC was leaning against a closed office door, looking furtively up and down the corridor. Furtively, but also programmatically: he looked left and right for the exact same amount of time each time, with the exact same expression on his face.

I considered leaving him alone.

> » Interacting with the other denizens of the station can reveal more information and unlock missions. Successfully completing missions can reward you with XP, credits, skill boosts, additional missions, and much more.

Righty-ho. First mention I'd seen of XP, which I presumed was Experience Points. Earning those in the tutorial might give me a head start once I got into the main game, so I was definitely interested.

I approached the NPC and said, "Hey, what's up?"

He focused on me so quickly that I swear I saw his head flicker. Man, this game had better get more impressive once I got through the damn tutorial!

"It's Borlesh," the man said in a harsh voice. "He's the local mob boss here on this station, and I owe him credits. But I don't have those credits to pay. He'll kill me! Oh, no! Here he is now!"

The character's facial expression remained exactly the same throughout this exchange. I turned to one side, and saw a stockily built man striding toward us, a scowl on his face. His black hair was slicked back, and his bushy eyebrows were furrowed in anger or frustration. Or possibly constipation. Honestly, it was hard to tell.

"Gerald, you owe me those credits, and you need to pay up right now," Borlesh said as he drew close. He spoke with the kind of Italian mob boss accent I'd heard in an endless stream of movies when I'd had a brief fascination with organized crime films.

"But boss, I don't have those credits," Gerald recited.

"Well, then I guess you know what happens," Borlesh intoned flatly.

> » Mission unlocked: Resolve a Dispute
>
> Use your Politicking skills to help Borlesh and Gerald resolve their dispute before Gerald gets hurt.

Ah, I got it now. The tutorial mode must be programmed to

throw out scenarios that matched my class and skills. That might explain why they were all so flat: if the game's designers had come up with scenarios for the hundreds of possible classes in the game, they likely hadn't wanted to spend much time on them for the purposes of a simple tutorial.

I grinned. The game had latched onto my public class of majordomo, but the mission directive had given me an interesting alternative. "Gentlemen," I said, attracting the attention of both NPCs. "There's no need to argue." I reached into my thigh pocket, withdrawning the knife. "I'm sure we can work this out."

"Oh?" Borlesh said. "And who might you be?" he asked, stepping forward and lunging one hand toward my gut. I stepped back, but not quickly enough: a sudden pain stabbed through my midsection as his fist connected.

> » You have been hit!
>
> 1 HP of damage.
>
> All injuries taken during the game are deducted from your Hit Points, or HP. If you reach zero HP, you will die. As a day player, this means you will spend the remainder of your game day in a time-out room. As a pod player, you will be placed in a time-out room for a designated number of game hours. Either way, you will respawn at your then-current spawn point.
>
> HP can be recovered through healing. A loss of less than 50% of your HP can be recovered through time. You can recover approximately 1 HP per hour of game time.

"What the hell was that for?" I gasped, stepping toward him and jamming the knife in his throat.

> » SUCCEED: Assassination
>
> You have assassinated Borlesh
>
> XP awarded.

He went down instantly, without even a drop of blood. Clearly not the outcome the game had been expecting, but at least it was playing along.

» Mission complete: Resolve a Dispute
» Mission bonus: Creative Solution
» XP awarded.

All of the "XP awarded" notices seemed useless and annoying. Presumably I could check a character sheet somehow to see where my XP sat, so what was the–

» Enable succinct mode?
Routine game prompts and status updates can be suppressed to reduce distractions. Do you wish to enable succinct mode? You can always re-enable verbose mode at any time.

"Yes."

» Succinct mode enabled.
Only important prompts and game messages will be displayed.

Well there you go.

Level-up! You are now at Level 1!

Oh? I must have earned enough XP with the creative–

My thought was interrupted by a tingling, cooling sensation that washed through my entire body. It felt... calming. At the same time it almost felt... sexual? Sensual, at the least. Chills ran up and down my spine, making me shiver. I looked at my hands and saw them glowing a deep blue, the light piercing the silvery gray gloves of my suit. In a moment, the light and the sensations faded.

» Congratulations on achieving Level 1!
You are now a full-fledged player in Endless Sky.

> Leveling up restores all hit points (HP) and heals all injuries.
>
> Leveling up can also grant Attribute Points, which can be assigned to any of your three main attributes: Body, Mind, and Soul. The move to Level 1 does not include any additional Attribute Points.
>
> » Caution!
>
> You have killed a non-player character, or NPC. Killing NPCs is permitted, and is often required in order to complete missions or to survive.
>
> In time, you will encounter other Player Characters, or PCs, like yourself. Killing PCs is only permitted when you are doing so as part of a mission that requires you to do so. For example, if you are a ship's gunner, and you shoot down an enemy vessel as part of a mission or under orders, you are not penalized for any PCs that are killed during that action.
>
> PCs who are killed are placed in a time-out room until the end of their current game day, or for a designated number of game hours, depending on the circumstances of the death. Other penalties, such as reduced XP, loss of skill levels, loss of level, loss of currency, and so on may also apply.
>
> Killing a PC outside the terms of a mission can result in significant penalties for the killer. Penalties can include a loss of XP and other scores, and can also include a time-limited application of the "Murderer" label. This label clearly identifies you to other PCs for the time specified, and removes all penalties for killing you during that time.

Interesting. I'd played some of the other massively multiplayer RPGs out there, and almost all of them had an absolute ban on killing PCs. Endless Sky's approach made more sense to me. After all, if you were going to be shooting starships out of the sky, you had to have an

"out" if any PCs happened to be on them. Murdering someone in cold blood was still verboten, unless you were doing so in the context of a mission. I wondered if I'd have gotten a pass for killing Borlesh had he been a PC, especially given that the point of the Assassin class was to kill people.

Gerald was still standing in front of me, not moving. Not even blinking. Apparently whatever slapdash programming had gone into him didn't cover this situation.

I considered killing him as well, just to see what would happen, but decided against it. This game could still have good-versus-evil alignments I wasn't yet aware of, and there was no point putting myself on the wrong path unintentionally. "Still," I said aloud, "I definitely get a pass for assassinating PCs. That definitely seems fair."

Another wave of sensation passed through me, sending another shiver up my spine. A leftover of the level-up, probably. Gerald blinked a couple of times before saying, "Thanks, stranger. I appreciate you helping me out, there." He didn't look down at Borlesh's body, still lying on the deck, conspicuously missing a spreading pool of blood. Ah, well. I turned to move on.

"Excuse me, could you help me move the body?"

I turned back, and saw Gerald standing over the body, looking at me. "Uh, sure?"

"Just to the disposal hatch over there," he said, pointing across the corridor.

"Sure." I grabbed Borlesh's legs as Gerald grabbed his arms, and we started hauling. The man must have weight well over a hundred kilos, so dragging him wasn't easy, but I handled it well enough.

> » Your Body attribute enables acts of physical strength. A point of Body lets you shift about 10 kilograms with relative ease, assuming optimal conditions. Body also enables jumping, climbing, hitting, and other physical acts.

Good to know. We managed to get the corpse—which should

have been rapidly cooling, but still felt basically body-temp to me—over to the hatch Gerald had indicated. It was a half-meter square, and the top featured a row of five white-illuminated buttons. I stood for a moment, looking at Gerald, but he just stared right back.

"I don't know how to operate the hatch," he said at last.

Oh, good grief. I poked one of the buttons at random. Suddenly, the first one in the row blinked red, then white. Then the third one blinked green, then white. Then the—I lost track. Some sequence of about seven or eight colors flashed by.

> » Your Mind attribute enables acts of mental ability, such as memorizing things and figuring out puzzles. As your Mind attribute is slightly above human average, you should have no problem replicating the sequence of buttons.

Ah. Tutorial mode. Got it. I held one finger over the first button, and suddenly the complete sequence bloomed in my mind: one, three, four, two, one, five, two. The hatch slid open, and Gerald helped me maneuver Borlesh through it. Once the body was in, the hatch slid shut again.

"Thanks so much," Gerald said, his voice still annoyingly flat. "I still don't know where I'm going to go. His men will still be after me. I could sure use some help finding a place to hide."

He gave me what I assume was meant to be a sad-eyed look, but I just shrugged. "Sorry," I started to say, when a game message interrupted me.

> » Your Soul attribute enables things like willpower. Although yours is slightly below normal human average, you should have no trouble resisting this request for your assistance.

You've got to be kidding me. I mean, the game was right, I had no trouble at all, but *that's* what the Soul attribute was for? I found myself wishing I'd moved a few more of those points to Mind and

Body. "Sorry, man, nothing I can do," I told Gerald before turning on my heel and walking away.

Soul was lame.

I continued down the corridor, fully intending on reaching Mala's Travel Agency before my game day ended. Until I passed a pub, that is.

The RPG has not been written that doesn't use pubs as places of opportunity and excitement. This might not be a Ye Olde Taverne in a fantasy epic, but it was for sure a spacer bar on a space station, and I was betting it was just as good. Besides, I was genuinely curious about whether or not I could actually get drunk in the game. Man, I hoped I could.

I stepped into the pub and took a seat toward the middle of the bar. I hadn't even opened my mouth when the bartender plunked a mug of gently-glowing yellow liquid in front of me before going back to polishing glasses. "Thank you," I said, picking up the mug and taking a cautious sip.

It was glorious.

I'll assume you've imbibed before and are familiar with that warm, almost soothing sensation of a good beer going down. The game enhanced that, making it a far more pleasurable experience than any of the few beers I'd had in real life. I had yet to discover if I could get *drunk* on the stuff, but I was more than happy to *drink* it, especially if it was going to be free.

I took a longer draught, and then turned to survey the place. I almost fell backwards off my stool when I found myself staring at the top of an alien's head. Specifically, a gray, oversized, bald head, which featured slits instead of a nose, all centered between two enormous, glossy black eyes. The top of the head came to just below my sternum.

It was a little gray man.

I almost snorted my beer through my nose, forcing myself to swallow and only choking slightly. This game's designers had a sense of humor!

"Hello," I said confidently, looking down at the little creature. "I'm Fr–"

I stopped as the alien turned without a sound, walking around me and out the door into the station corridor.

"They either take people or leave people," a gruff voice said. It was the bartender, back from polishing glasses.

"What was it?"

"Qiar. Captain in the Qiar Compact, in fact, its ship is docked about a quarter-ring away."

"It didn't even say anything."

He shrugged, picked up a glass, and started polishing as he spoke. "Like I said, either they take you or leave you. It left you."

"Okay."

"Don't take no offense by it."

"How could I?"

Another man sidled up to me, taking the stool next to mine. He had a long, gray beard and was dressed in a black leather duster. His long, salt-and-pepper hair was gathered into a neat tail that fell to the middle of his back. "Don't mind the Qiar," he said, his voice deep and smooth. "Bit touchy to deal with, but they're fair and honest." He stuck a hand out. "Norman Dresain, Captain. FS *Wandering Heaven*. Nice to meet you."

"Frank Kozina," I said, shaking his hand. "FS?"

"Free Ship. I'm with the Alliance of Free Explorers. We're the main trade conduit between the Qiar and the rest of humanity. We're explorers, traders, even mercenaries sometimes. We live the lives we want, free amongst the stars."

Ah. This was recruitment stage. Got it.

"Not sure what kind of life I'm looking for, just yet," I said carefully.

"Word is you're a capable household manager?"

Word? What word? "I'm an entry level majordomo."

Dresain shook his head. "Not much use for that aboard ship. Business manager, maybe. Well, I wish you the best of luck." And

without another word, he stood and sauntered back into the station corridor.

That was quick, I thought. "Everyone here seems... super friendly," I told the bartender. He gave another shrug and continued polishing.

"We, on the other hand, have use for all manner of right-minded humans," a new voice said. I turned, and standing before me was a severe-faced human female. Younger, by the look of her, and dressed in a formal, military-looking outfit. "Tressa Nash, Terran Confederacy." She didn't offer a hand. "We're where most humans wind up, because we protect humans from all the alien scum of the universe."

"Alien scum?"

"Anything not human isn't fit to live," she clarified.

"Wow."

"Don't get me wrong, Qiar technology is indispensable, but we have no direct contact with them. As a member of the Confederacy, you'll not only be protected from aliens, you'll have an opportunity to do your part in ending their blight upon the universe."

"Even for a household manager?"

She puffed her chest out a bit. "While the Alliance likes to wander hither and yon, only the Confederation has taken entire systems for humanity to colonize. You'd do well in the household of a planetary politician, or even running the household of a space station general."

"I see. Well, I'm still figuring out what I want to do, so..."

She nodded curtly. "I understand. My ship is the CSS *Starkiller,* berthed four sections clockwise. We'll be in a few more days once you've decided."

"I'll think about it."

Another curt nod, and she headed out.

I wondered how many other constituencies were in the game when the pub fell silent. I hadn't actually noticed it was noisy until it suddenly wasn't: even the light thrum of the ventilation system

seemed to disappear. In walked a two-meter tall green lizard, accompanied by a human male.

"Greetings, citizen," the human said politely, offering a slight bow from the waist. The lizard made a clicking noise. "I represent the Second Right Honorable K'zzt, Assistant Under-Manager and citizen of the cityship *Effortless Submission,* a scion of the Aa'an Dominancy." Another click. "Em K'zzt has been tasked with filling various positions aboard the cityship, and it has become known to us that you could fill one of them. A Second Majordomo in the household of the First Honorable L'stast, Third Navigator of *Effortless Submission,* is greatly needed."

I blinked, processing all of that. "You... want to hire me?"

"Of course."

"I don't speak..." I gestured slightly at the towering alien.

"The Aa'an are fluent in human languages, but prefer to speak through intermediaries outside of their own households."

"And you're an intermediary?"

"I am First Intermediary in Em K'zzt's household," the man said proudly, lifting his chin slightly.

"And you want to hire me?"

"Of course." He flickered back into his original posture, a reminder that this tutorial was a bit limited.

I thought about it. As much fun as a bunch of militaristic xenophobes sounded (not), this seemed like the best fit so far. Plus, aliens were awesome. Plus, whatever a 'cityship' was sounded even more awesome. "You know what? I'm in."

"Excellent," the man said, smiling slightly and showing not the slightest hint of surprise. "You will need to arrange travel papers, and you can meet our shuttle any time you like. We are berthed two sections counterclockwise."

"Should I be negotiating for pay or something?"

"Aa'an have a fixed chart for employee payments. You will be remunerated according to that chart, and will be provided comfortable lodging and all of your meals as a part of your employment. You

will have a specified period of personal time each cycle for relaxation and recreation."

Fine. Might as well get on with it. This tutorial was annoying. "Sounds good. You said something about papers?"

"A travel agency is just down this corridor. They can help you put your papers in order before you meet the shuttle."

"Okay. I'll see you in a bit, then." I watched as the man and his lizard—or the other way around, I guess—strode quietly out of the pub, and the original background noises returned. I realized the bar had more than a few other patrons, all of whom had silenced their conversations and stared at the alien as we'd spoken. Well, as its intermediary and I had spoken. "What do I owe–" I started to ask the bartender, when I saw that my mug had already been taken away. "Guess not," I muttered as I slid off the stool and walked out of the pub.

Stupid tutorial.

I finally made it to the travel office. Inside was an older, gray-haired woman, seated behind a desk. She was absolutely still until I walked in, at which point her face lit up and became more animated. "Welcome, welcome," she chirped. "How can I help you?"

"I'm told I need to have my travel papers in order. I'm planning to join an Aa'an cityship."

"Good! Oh, so exciting," she burbled. She was easily the most animated NPC I'd run across yet, although at this point I kind of just wanted to get on with it. "The problem is," she continued, her face flipping into a dour look, "my terminal is broken." She tapped the battered computer sitting in front of her. "I have a recipe to fix it, but I don't have everything it requires. Do you think you could take a look?"

Oh. My. God.

When I was a kid, Mom had bought be a subscription to a nostalgia gaming service—a perfect fit for her own love of old things, and a way to keep my occupied as I grew bored of the kiddie-shows I'd thrived on until then. Aside from the horrifically low-resolution

graphics, many of the games had actually been interesting, and I'd played my way through several of them, burning off my nightly two-hour screen-time allowance for months on end. One of them, a primitive arcade game of sorts, had been memorable for its *terrible* grammar. Phrases like "All your base are belong to us" had apparently arisen from a poor translation from the game's original language. In a way, the ridiculous phrases made the game seem campier and even more fun—so bad it was good, Mom used to say when I showed her some of the writing. "Somebody set up us the bomb" had been another favorite we'd joked about for days.

Endless Sky was feeling worse, right now.

I mean, I get that it's a tutorial mode, I do. But why not just plop me into a manual and let me try things, instead of working through this ham-handed storyline?

But there was likely no way around it. I sighed and said, "Sure." The woman's face lit up again—it seemed to have two modes, delighted and depressed—and she handed me a glowing card. I took it and read the title: "Repair Basic Computer Terminal I." As I did, the card flickered and faded, vanishing and leaving me pinching a bit of air. But a bit of knowledge flooded my mind: I'd need two Electronics resource items in order to use the recipe. "I don't have any Electronics items," I told the woman, fear of a stupid quest of some kind rising in my chest.

"Oh, do you think you could use this?" she asked. She reached into a desk drawer and withdrew a worn-looking smart device of some kind. It was a bit bigger than a smartphone, but smaller than a tablet.

> » Many smaller constructs can be broken into constituent pieces, providing a quick and convenient source of crafting resources. There is waste involved: a broken construct will always yield fewer resources than were required to create it.

Gotcha. "Yup," I said quickly, snatching the not-phone from her

and slamming it on the ground at my feet. I stared right at her as I did it, but she didn't blink. When I looked down, the device was gone, replaced by two slightly glowing, stylized circuit boards. Each was perched upright, rotating slowly on one corner. I reached down and grabbed them, and they vanished at my touch. My brain knew what to do next: I simply reached out to the woman's terminal. I could *feel* the two resources leaving me, and as I watched, my hands began flying back and forth over the computer. They moved so far they were almost a blur, yet I couldn't feel a thing. In a moment, it was over. My hands stilled, the computer *beeped,* and the woman's face adopted Extra Cheerful mode.

"Oh, thank you! That's just perfect! Now, let me just see what I can do." Her fingers poked away at the terminal's keyboard for a moment before the computer *cheeped*. "There, you should be all set." She paused and looked at me, an expression of curiosity replacing her cheer. "You sure do seem to be well-informed," she said carefully. "Could I ask you a business question?"

Hoo boy. "Sure."

"I've always provided my services for free, but I'm thinking I should start charging. Of course, I'd hate to lose customers, but I do need to pay the rent. What do you think I should do?"

> » This question would be best answered by someone with the skill Business Management. You do not have that skill. However, your Majordomo skill is an adjacent skill. You are presumed to have a 20% competency in adjacent skills, making your imputed skill level for Business Management 0.20.
>
> » This question has a difficulty level of 1. If your skill level in Business Management was a 1, you could confidently answer this question. Because your skill level is inferred as 0.20, an element of random chance will be introduced.

"Um, yes?" I guessed aloud.

» Skill roll: Business Management: FAIL
You have given bad advice.

"Well, I'll take your advice," she said, her face returning to cheerful. "Of course, I won't charge you, but from now on, I think that's what I'll start doing!"

"Okay, great." Whatever it took to finish this agony.

"Your travel permits should be good to go. Make sure you settle any outstanding debts here on the station before you leave!"

» You have completed the tutorial level and are ready to enter the main game. Proceed to the Effortless Submission shuttle to proceed.

» Caution: Your game day is ending.
There is no danger in leaving your character in this position. However, once you move beyond the tutorial level, you will want to ensure your character is in a safe place before the end of the game day.

I supposed it might be better, then, to just stay here until my next session. At that point, I could join the Aa'an and begin the real game. I decided to check out my character sheet before the game booted me out.

Frank Kozina
Day Player
Class: Truthsayer (hidden)
Class: Assassin (hidden)
Class: Majordomo
Guild Membership: none
Account: 0
Level 1

Attributes
Body: 10

Mind: 11
Soul: 9
HP: 27 (Body * Level)
XP: 1024 (1024 to level 2)
Unused Attribute Points: 0

Skills:
Basic Assassination: 1
Knife Fighting: 1
Household Management: 1
Poisoning: 1
Politicking: 1

Current Missions:
Find Dwight Czarnowski [•ERROR%]

Good enough progress for my first session, I supposed, even if it seemed a bit boring and truncated. I wondered again about the error on the "Find Dwight" mission, and hoped it'd clear up over the next session or two.

My vision started to get hazy, and after a minute or two I blacked out.

3 / THE CITYSHIP EFFORTLESS SUBMISSION

The next three days—real days, meaning around nine days of game time—crawled by. Why three days? Well, because it hadn't occurred to me to order more of the black game pills earlier, and that's how long it took them to come. I went ahead and signed up for the company's subscription program, meaning they'd send me seven a week.

And yes, I checked, and their "Endless Crunch" cereal was as prohibitively expensive as you can imagine. And it had horrible reviews.

At that point, I can't say that I was dying to get back into the game. I was certainly excited—the prospect of climbing aboard an alien shuttle and experiencing something large enough to be called a *cityship* was definitely interesting. But that was tempered by the blah experience of the tutorial. I mean, if *that* was every player's first experience, it wouldn't surprise me if a lot of people just bailed and never bought another black pill. But I'd been through worse video game tutorials, so I was still all-in.

This is when I realized how mind-numbingly *boring* my life was.

Three days, only one of which was a workday: I woke up from the game feeling fresh and ready, logged onto work, and got through

the day. But that left me with Saturday and Sunday. I really could only sleep for ten hours at most, which meant a full 36 hours of being awake with absolutely nothing to do. And honestly, if felt more like 44 hours, because my Friday shift was boring. Bo-ring. Capital "B."

I kept track: I rotated eighteen accounts due to alleged fraud, with three of those demanding the bank send new physical cards, even though literally nobody ever used physical cards anymore. I originated three new personal loans, which means I took down a lot of information those customers could easily have entered themselves, in less time, on the bank's website. All of the were doomed to be declined, which meant I'd earn no commissions on them. All three were looking to use the money to pay bills, which the bank hated, and they had no collateral. I gave them four months before they found themselves in government-subsidized Minimal Housing like I was. I explained a series of card charges to twelve people, opened one new savings account, and closed four others. I took seventeen requests for lower interest rates, forwarding only the one that actually seemed plausible, and called that customer back when the higher-ups declined anyway. I ate a tofurkey meal for lunch, and believe me, it was the highlight of the weekend.

Friday night I looked into Endless Domains' "personal care" products. The full-body catheter system cost more than I made in four months, so I decided to just stick with my plastic-and-towel setup for the time being. Several Internet searches turned up advice from other day players, as we were called. Most simply advocated for carefully scheduling meals and knowing how long your body would take to process them; the general consensus was to wolf down food right before taking a pill, and then be prepared to immediately hit the toilet when you came out of the game, followed by another meal. Most day players seemed to keep the same schedule I did: work, play, sleep, repeat. The game seemed to average that out across the world's time zones, so that roughly a third of us were in the game at any given point.

The weekend was hellish. My usual diet of old cartoons and

movies grew boring after just an hour or so. Revisiting the last non-virtual game I'd played reminded me why I'd stopped playing it in the first place. I actually tried to pick up an overtime slot with the bank, but they'd all been nabbed by other people by the time I got to it. More Internet searches for clues on Endless Sky proved just as fruitless as the last time I'd tried.

The minutes ticked away, one at a time, as slowly as they could manage.

Monday brought another day at the bank: more charge-explaining, account-rotating, loan-originating, rate-declining monotony. I found myself browsing the internal job postings page looking for something, *anything* that would offer more engagement—or at least less brain-killing *sameness*—but couldn't find anything that the system felt I'd even remotely qualify for.

I had a SynthSushi meal for lunch, a new option that the government had begun providing. I'd never had real sushi, so I assume it was just the synthetic aspect of the food, but I couldn't believe anyone would voluntarily eat it. I logged onto my account and ensured no further fake fish rolls would wind up in my shipments. PseuTacos was about the limit of my culinary experimentation, thank you.

A soft *plunk* came from the entryway of my apartment.

Package delivery.

My eyes flew to the job-clock floating in the lower corner of my screen, and I blinked my eyelids in time with the countdown: five... four... three... move the pointer to the "Off Shift" button... two... not yet... one... wait... zero. Click. Logged out.

I was out of my chair before the screen cleared. I shoved a random meal pack into the microwave, took two steps to the entry and grabbed the packing cube that had appeared there, and headed back to my tiny kitchen counter. A tore the cube's rip-strip and extracted the shiny metallic packet emblazoned with the Endless Sky logo. I ripped that open, and there it was: a full blister pack of seven shiny black game pills.

The 'wave beeped, and I hauled my meal out. Tofish sticks, shelf-

stable (and now warm) tartar sauce, and Peeze, some sort of vegetable mush remixed into little, bright green spheres. Whatever. I barely tasted any of it as I shoveled it down, panting when I hit the hot spots the 'wave had created in the synthetic meat. Tray into the trash, body into the bed—already carefully arranged with plastic and the old towel—and pill into the mouth. Eyes closed, brain humming, and...

Game on.

The game's NPCs never questioned that some people were only present every third day; in game terms, I spent two full days "asleep" in the tiny, closet-like space that my new employer provided for me. The door locked, and the game informed me that this was a "safe respawn point," specifically designated so that I couldn't be killed or damaged while I "slept." The household had room for two other majordomos, but only the First position was occupied, leaving the household without an actual manager for one day out of every three. The household didn't seem to notice, and I suspected it just all went into some hibernation mode when no PCs were actually in the game.

Sorry, I skipped ahead a bit and should catch up. I was halfway into my second seven-pack of pills now, on my eleventh game day in real time and past my first month in game time. I'd fallen into a solid routine.

Weekdays: Work, play, sleep. Weekends: Clean up, stash incoming meal shipments, watch movies, play, sleep. On Sunday, I'd managed to pick up an overtime shift at work, a nascent seed of an idea in my brain hoping I could save up for one of the catheter kits. I'd mis-timed my water consumption last Tuesday and had been very grateful for the towel and plastic on my mattress.

In-game, I'd also found a bit of a routine. Mornings, I'd read through whatever notes Jacinda—our First Majordomo and other PC, whom I'd never actually seen as we played on different days—had

left. For the most part, my duties occupied the mornings and afternoons: ensuring meals were laid out on time, that important guests were appropriate entertained, and that food orders were made on time. Far from harrowing work, and you might wonder why I was paying to play a game where I helped manage an alien household. It wasn't so much the majordomo tasks that kept me interested: it was what happened in between those tasks.

The game provided an almost constant stream of intrigue and interest at me. One of the alien NPC maids, for example, had been stealing food from the pantry. Catching it in the act—notably, before Jacinda did—resulted in a major XP reward, along with a level-up in my Household Management skill. The "important guests" who visited would drop tantalizing clues about the broader game universe: attacks by the Terran Confederacy, new technologies released by the Qiar Compact, and that kind of thing. I began to sense that jobs like majordomo weren't ones you held down forever. Instead, they were a way of easing into the game, learning more about how it worked, and building a skill base before you moved on.

Speaking of building skills: the game offered three straightforward ways. The fastest was to buy a skill-dump, which would literally blast information into your brain, exactly like the initial skill download I'd received at the game's outset. Skill-dumps where expensive though, and no matter how much you paid a skill couldn't exceed your basic character level. I'd decided to stick with the other two methods of bringing my skills along: study and experience.

Study materials—electronic books, basically—were super inexpensive for low skill levels. All you had to do was read them, which meant burning some of your precious game time... reading. But with enough hours of reading under you, you could slowly raise skills.

Experience was just that: the more you used a skill, the faster it would level-up on its own. This was me primary tactic, although it did mean I had to be a little careful about spreading my game time across a variety of tasks. It would have been all too easy to focus on the core Household Management skill and ignore the others. In

speaking with other PCs—some of the vendors and one of the "important guests" who visited the household were human PCs—I gathered that building a broad skill base was a good way to quickly gain the XP needed to level-up my character overall.

Speaking of broad skill bases, that brings us to my current situation.

Mornings and afternoons in the game were spent managing the household. Evenings and nights were mine, and they're when I engaged in my true profession as an assassin.

The Aa'an were an ancient and incredibly hierarchical society, with rules and traditions and prescriptions for everything. As an assassin, I was bound by their Norms of Assassination, a set of rules and codes by which assassinations were ordered and executed. Over the past week or so, I'd been besieged by requests to kill off various Aa'an.

The reasons were pretty common, as the Norms specified the exact situations where assassination was permitted. "Moving up the ladder of society" was the primary reason: take out the lizard ahead of you, and you opened the way for your own advancement. The higher up the social hierarchy you already were, the more expensive it was to have your betters assassinated, often because they were better guarded. I'd mainly been working for low-level functionaries who wanted to move into their first management role. I'd had six jobs so far, and completed five of them—the sixth having been an epic failure that actually saw me *lose* XP. Tonight was the seventh job I'd accepted, and an attempt to regain that lost XP—and then some.

My client was First Traffic Coordinator Z'yxznak, who spent its days directing the endless flow of vehicle traffic through one section of the immense cityship. My target was its boss, Fourth Superior of Traffic Coordination Ma'alman, a lizard who'd only, according to my research in the cityship directory, only held the position for about a year. Ma'alman came from a wealthy family, but had fallen out with them over a failure to advance more quickly. As a result, it lived in a wealthier-than-you'd-think section of the ship, which includes more

frequent patrols by the cityship's Peacekeepers. My hope was to catch Ma'alman on the way home from its job post, where I could get to it outside of the more guarded neighborhood it lived in, and hopefully use the crush of the shift-change crowd to cover myself.

Ma'alman's work post was about a hundred meters from the slipway it used to get home. The ship's slipways were its primary form of mass transit: speedy capsules strung together in short trains zipped through tubes, ferrying humans and Aa'an from station to station. More than three dozen slipway lines curved around and throughout the cityship in a gentle helix, sometimes knotting together to form an interchange station where you could switch lines. Every line at some point ran just beneath the ship's outer skin, and there its tube would be transparent, providing brief glimpses of the sweeping galaxy outside. I'd once ridden the 'ways for almost an entire game day, just for the quick views.

I spotted it: Ma'alman had emerged from the district traffic control center, easily identifiable by its red-and-gold sash of office and the single brass-colored ingot clamped to its spiny ear, a sign of its low rank. I fell in behind it as it strode toward the slipway station. According to Z'yxznak, my target would stop about halfway at a stand that sold hot, calming beverages, purchase a steaming cup of a'lama'an—a kind of aromatic tea that the Aa'an seemed to love—and then continue to the slipway station. As I followed the lizard, which towered over me by almost half a meter, I spotted the beverage stand. I began angling toward it, anticipating my quarry.

Ma'alman stopped suddenly, two other Aa'an almost running into it before they caught themselves and veered away.

There was empty space between it and myself.

Its head snapped around.

I was already dodging, pulling an annoyed expression onto my face as if I'd been inconvenienced by the alien's sudden stop. I felt its eyes rake over me as it scanned the space behind itself, but I kept moving toward the beverage stand as if that had been my destination all along.

» Skill-up! Your Stalking skill is now at level 2.

Crap. I mean, yay, but I held my breath and tightened my gut as the skill-up hit me. You see, exercising a skill would level it up, especially if you were successfully using a skill a bit past your current level. But merely exercising didn't grant you all the knowledge of an entirely new skill level. So, whenever you leveled up, the rest of that skill got dumped into your brain, an even which caused a brief, intense wave of nausea. It hit me, and I grimaced as I suddenly became even better at stalking my prey.

I stepped up to the beverage stand as my stomach settled, quickly scanning the menu to find something humans could consume. The smell of the a'lama'an—bitter orange mixed with raw meat, an entirely unappetizing mélange—threatened to set my stomach off for real. The stand's proprietor finished helping the previous customer, and turned its eyes to me. "Uh, I'll have..." I started, but I truly didn't know what would be safe. The menu was written entirely in Aa'an, a series of indecipherable scratches suitable for beings with inch-long claws on their fingers. I hadn't learned to read it yet, and this stand wasn't one of the ones that thoughtfully provided a human version of the menu.

"Do you like coffee, human?" a deep voice said behind me. Like all the Aa'an, this one's voice was half snake, all hissing sibilants, and half frog, laced with clicks and croaks. I turned to see what was addressing me.

It was my target.

I swallowed heavily. "Of course."

It nodded and turned to the proprietor. "A'lama'an for myself, a *kaffe* for the human. It is not suitable for us of course," it added, turning its head back toward me, "but I am told it closely resembles your beverage."

I started to nod my thanks, but then caught myself. I twisted my feet so that both feels were touching, and the toes were pointed out with about a hundred degrees of arc between them. I held my right

hand over my chest, just below my heart, and brought my left hand over my left shoulder, or as close as I could manage. Glancing at the brassy ingot on the alien's skull, I lowered my left hand a fraction. This was Position of Third Degree Respect and Gratefulness prescribed by Aa'an etiquette, and while it was technically a bit outside my range—what with me lacking a scaly tail and a neck ruff—I felt I pulled it off successfully.

» Skill roll: Aa'an Etiquette: SUCCESS

» Skill-up! Your Aa'an Etiquette skill is now at level 2.

Another quick blast of nausea as the skill downloaded. I realized I was holding the fingers of my right hand slightly too close together and spread them apart a bit.

The alien nodded. "Respectfully done." The stand's proprietor handed me my cup of coffee—which did indeed smell gloriously like the real thing—and Ma'alman took its own steaming cup before stepping away. It was walking toward the transit center again, and I quickly fell in behind it.

The distraction I needed came just as the center's entrance: a mass of Aa'an, along with a few humans trying not to get crushed, burst out of the doors, likely on the way to their evening shifts. I pressed myself toward Ma'alman—passively using Aa'an as pedestrian shields was a common enough maneuver for humans—and briefly pressed a poison applicator against its scaled back.

Perhaps you've seen similar applicators. When I was young and still attending school in person, one of the other kids in my cohort carried just such an applicator. In their case, it was due to the poor kid's extreme allergies, which if set off would require a fast, lifesaving injection of medicine. In this case, the applicator—designed to penetrate Aa'an scales—delivered a fast-acting poison. These weren't cheap to obtain, but their cost was more than covered by my fee for a successful extermination.

The *chunk* of the applicator was covered by the scraping of scales

and claws against the permacrete deck. My target stopped immediately, one hand reaching back to feel at the area I'd hit while its head started to turn back and see what had happened. I'd already slipped sideways into the crowd, letting it carry me away from the transit center. I didn't look back: confidence in that poison was 100%. And visual confirmation was unnecessary anyway, as a hissing hubbub told me that my target was down. As the poison used was one approved by the Norms for assassinations of this level, the cityship's Peacekeepers would rule the death as righteous and let it go.

> » Mission completed: Assassination VI
>
> Your fee has been added to your account.
>
> Skill-up! Your Basic Assassination skill is now at level 3.
>
> Skill awarded! You now have the Advanced Assassination skill.
>
> » Mission bonus: Undetectable
>
> Additional XP awarded.
>
> » Level-up! You are now at level 4.
>
> You are now able to raise individual skills into the Journeyman levels.
>
> You have two attribute points to assign.

Freaking *finally.* The tutorial had mentioned attribute points and receiving them at level-up, but through level 3 I'd never actually gotten any. As the crowd around me dispersed to their work posts, I made my way back into the warren of corridors to one of the service lifts. Humans would often use these to change levels within the ship, as the Aa'an would never do so. I hopped on a lift platform and let it carry me to the residence levels.

Assign one attribute point to Body, and one to Mind, I thought.

> » Your Body is now at 11.
>
> HP is at 44.
>
> You have a +1 modifier on all skill rolls involving a Body-based skill.
>
> » Your Mind is now at 12.

> You have a +2 modifier on ball skill rolls involving a Mind-based skill.

Awesome. Now to get back to the household. It was still early enough in the evening that I could pick up some XP managing the dinner service. Dinners weren't social affairs with the Aa'an; important discussions were held over the midday meal. That meant dinner could largely be left in the hands of the NPC staff members, but the game could always toss in a new twist if I was actually participating.

When I stepped into the residence, I was met by someone new: a tall Black woman with pure-white hair. I pulled up short, surprised, and quickly scanned her outfit. It was the same as my own work uniform, which I'd changed out of for my assassination mission: cream-colored shirt and trousers, red-black-silver diagonal stripes across the left shoulder, except she wore a gold—

"Jacinda?" I asked. Her pin was the same key as mine, just cast in gold instead of silver. The pin of the household's First Majordomo.

"Frank," she said with a smile. "C'mon, let's get you changed before service."

"What are you even doing here?" I asked as she led me back to our quarters.

"I skipped a day—well, a day in the real—so I could try and sync up with you a bit. I just started an hour ago. Where've you been?"

"Sightseeing."

"Ah, yeah, you're still a noob."

"Why did you want to sync with me?"

"I wanted to know your plans."

"My plans?"

"Sure." We arrived at the doors to our quarters. I stepped into mine and starting changing out of my street clothes and into my household uniform, leaving the door cracked so we could continue talking. "Are you a lifer here, or is this just a step?"

"I'm not sure I understand," mumbled as I pulled the uniform top over my head.

"A lot of players use the Aa'an as a stepping stone, right? Build some basic skills, then go off into the bigger game."

"Sure."

"But some of us *want* to be here. I like it. Do you know there's a whole set of missions you unlock when you actually become an Aa'an?"

I paused, one leg into my trousers. "What?"

"Sure, you can even work your way up to Captain of the cityship, although I guess that'd take years of game time."

"No, you said 'become an Aa'an.' You can do that?" I finished pulling on my pants and opened the door.

She shrugged. "It's kind of an open secret in the game, I think. It's called the rebirth path. If you spend enough time amongst the aliens, truly adopt their ways, then you can be reborn as one of them."

"Which means you have to die."

"No. Well yeah, I guess. But it's just time-out, right? Then you come back as an Aa'an, and a whole new set of missions and skills unlock."

"I had no idea."

"But that's not you?"

I thought about it. "No, I don't think so. I'm..." I didn't want to tell her about my secret Assassin class, so I prevaricated. "I'm actually interested in getting onto a ship and seeing the universe. The Majordomo skill track parallels ones that would be useful on a larger ship, and it was listed as an in-demand skill when I started."

"Yeah, it crosses to Business Manager, Pursuer, and a bunch of other ones. Makes sense. Easier than trying to be a pilot."

"It said pilots were oversubscribed."

"Yeah, and so they all end up flying cheap fighters in the Confederacy. They spend a lot of time in time-out when they get shot down."

"Thus the Majordomo choice. But you want to be an alien."

"I really do."

"I'm surprised you can't just pick that in the beginning."

"It's something about how the knowledge download works, I

think. I was a software engineer on the outside. Well, I am. Not games, just corporate software, but I researched some of the patents Endless Domains has on their cognitive imposition tech."

"The... the who?"

"Cognitive imposition. It's how they download skills into our brains. Being an alien isn't just sticking a human brain into an alien avatar. Apparently, the rebirth path *makes you an alien.* Mentally, even. So you have to kind of stage your brain, learn the language, learn the etiquette, all that, so it's less of a shift."

"Wow."

"Yeah. There's a Second Weapons Systems Supervisor who started the game on launch day, and said it took him almost a year of game time to hit rebirth. Said he could just sense that it was time, and the game was giving him cues about losing his humanity. So he offed himself and came back as an Aa'an, had a job assignment and everything as if he'd always been that way."

"Again, wow."

"So what's your target?"

I blinked. "My what?" Did she know about my assassinations?

"Target. What're you working toward before you leave here?"

I shook my head. "I hadn't thought about it."

"You should. Most people get close to Master levels, around 8, and then they head out. Anything past that and you're pretty much planning to stay here."

"I can't imagine being a household manager forever."

She laughed. "Nobody can. It's a starter job, you're supposed to move on. If you stay, the skill track takes you into cityship management, politics, that kind of thing. There are human unions, you could even get into leadership in one of them."

"I'll stick it out through 6 or so and see where it gets me."

"Sensible. Hey, you want to work dinner together? With both of us here, I'm guessing it'll throw a couple of wrenches in for us. Should be good for XP."

"Let's grind."

Boy, there's a reason it's called "grinding." The game didn't just throw a wrench at us, it threw an entire toolbox full of them: our employer's entire extended family over for some never-before-heard-of Aa'an holiday of remembrance. Emergency orders were placed to vendors for the right foodstuffs, household staff shifts were altered to get more of them on-site for the evening, and details down to table seating assignments were fussed over, made, remade, analyzed, checked, and deployed—only to have the family matriarch cancel at the last minute, necessitating an entire re-do of both charts and menus.

On top of it all, I got—and accepted almost on reflex—another mission.

> » Mission accepted: Assassination VII
>
> It's your most difficult mission yet. This time, you'll be taking out a high-ranking member of Effortless Submission's premier performing arts group! Second Revered Diva K'kkitika is scheduled to perform an important Aa'an aria in two weeks' time, but its protege, Third Lauded Sub-Diva Lil'initika is ready to step up and take its place. If completed successfully, this mission offers an opportunity to be publicly recognized as a professional assassin within Aa'an society.
>
> Rewards:
>
> 800+ XP with bonuses for optional mission outcomes
>
> 75,000 Aa'an scales with bonuses for optional mission outcomes
>
> Recognition by the Aa'an Board of Societal Norms

That would require some research. Any Aa'an in the Revered ranks would have a legally mandated entourage, which meant guards. And at that, they would be guards specifically trained to prevent

assassinations, the leading cause of death amongst higher-ranked lizards. This felt way above my pay grade, but I knew there must be a twist of some kind.

As the evening wound on and my own game day came close to ending, I checked my stats:

Frank Kozina
Day Player
Class: Truthsayer (hidden)
Class: Assassin (hidden)
Class: Majordomo
Guild Membership: none
Account: 210,890 Scales
Level 4

Attributes
Body: 11
Mind: 12
Soul: 9
HP: 44 (Body x Level)
XP: 8,192 (8,192 to level 5)
Unused Attribute Points: 0

Skills:
Aa'an Etiquette: 2
Advanced Assassination: 1
Basic Assassination: 3
Household Management: 3
Knife Fighting: 1
Poisoning: 2
Politicking: 2
Stalking: 2

Missions:
Find Dwight Czarnowski [•ERROR%]
Assassination VII

That mission would be a nice feather in my cap, but it could also result in some pretty negative consequences if I failed. This felt like a tipping point: either move up to being a pro, or sit back and remain an amateur. At least I had a couple of weeks—in game time, which meant about four game sessions—to research the target. Maybe I could take the "study-up" approach and bring Stalking up another level, or even gain a Stealth skill or something. For the dozenth time since starting the game, I wished something as simple as a skill tree could be found literally anywhere. Endless Domains' insistence on keeping the game's inner workings as secret as possible was a huge hassle.

I CAME OUT OF THE GAME MENTALLY EXHAUSTED, BUT PLEASED with the progress I'd made. I re-made my bed—no accidents, this time—shoveled a ProtoSPAM™ meal into the 'wave and then my mouth, and lay down to sleep. My brain wanted to continue turning over everything I'd learned. Being reborn as an alien actually seemed a little interesting, but... what I really wanted was to see the stars, not embroil myself into Aa'an politics and social structure. No, I'd stick with my path. My assassinations were driving my credit balance—well, "scale" balance, since that was the Aa'an currency—into a healthy territory.

Pity I couldn't spend that money in the real world. I wondered what the conversation ratio of Aa'an scales to US dollars would look like.

WORK THE NEXT MORNING DID NOT GO WELL.

Mindy, the latest supervisor-of-the-week in a what had been an unending string of them since I'd started, popped into my feed the moment I signed on.

"Oh, hello," I said, startled by the cut-in.

"Hello Frank I'm Mindy I'm your supervisor here at the bank," she reeled off. She probably did nothing but this all day, and I suspected I was about to be reprimanded. "Your numbers have been down for the past week or so and I wanted to touch base and see if there were any mitigating circumstances that we should be aware of is everything in your personal life going okay." I could actually see her eyes tracking across the script she was reading.

"Numbers?" I asked.

She blinked as she pulled up my stats. "Call volume down four percent," she recited, her voice flat and disinterested. "Credit extensions down five percent, loans originated down ten percent. Rate reduction requests down four, which is obviously good. Time per caller up almost thirty, which explains the reduction in volume."

"Okay."

She inhaled deeply, exhaling a sigh. "Your performance numbers are critical to the performance of the bank and of your team it is important that you work diligently to achieve company–"

"Hey Mindy?" I interrupted.

She blinked again, her eyes owlishly refocusing to look at me instead of her script. "Yes?"

"We both know machines should be doing both our jobs, right?"

That wasn't on-script. She said nothing, staring at me in evident confusion.

"What's my line here, Mindy?"

"Uh, you tell me you'll promise to do better, and that you'll spend less time chatting with customers and more time aiming toward goals?"

"And if I don't?"

She blinked at me for several moments, her eyes darting back and forth as she found the right place in her script. "You have no negative markers only indications that you are not working as hard as you should there are no immediate negative corrective actions I need to take but if your numbers continue to drop, then you will be placed

into remediation training to help you improve your performance." Meaning, I wasn't damaging anything, just not making them as much money.

"So you just need to see my numbers go back to where they were."

"Uh. Yes." Her eyes darted for a bit, but she didn't seem to have a scripted response to that one. "Yes," she said again.

"And that's just what I'll do. Okay?"

"Um. Okay?" She seemed perplexed by my attitude.

"Awesome. I'll get on it right now, if you'll let me back in the queue."

"Okay?" I couldn't tell if she was asking a question or not, but a moment later she blinked away and the system began connecting my first customer. They didn't understand any of the charges on their recent statement. Rather than going through them this time, I simply promised to open an investigation for each, and asked if they would benefit from a credit extension. More rope with which to hang themselves, but they accepted and I went on to the next caller.

I found myself talking more and more people into things that helped the bank: extended payment terms (longer for interest to accumulate), extended lines of credit (more charges meant more interest), unsecured loans (higher interest rates), and so on. It felt... easy. In fact, it felt a lot like negotiating with the food vendors in the game. I began to wonder if all the practice in the game wasn't making me better at parts of my job in the real. After all, skill downloads affected my *real* brain, enabling me to perform better in the game. What if my Politicking skill was carrying over? It was something I'd have to pay attention to.

I kept half my mind on my job, and the other half on trying to find *something* on Endless Sky's skill tree on the Internet, browsing on my entertainment panel with half my brain and listening to customers prattle on with the other. It was all the same dead ends, until I ran across a reference to Endless Kingdom's skill tree. The actual content had been taken down, but an archival site had

managed to snag it before Endless Domains' bot-driven takedown arrived, and the archival site was designed to keep bots out. I had to answer a half-dozen CAPTCHA questions before it would let me in. Once it did, I discovered that the skill tree—something almost every RPG relied on to categorize and rank skills—was more of a skill *pile*. Individual skills could be related to a dozen or more others, more in an organic web of connectedness than the neat hierarchy implied by a "tree." The skills themselves made no sense in the context of Endless Sky—they were more about magic and sword fighting than anything else—but if the two games shared the same approach, then I'd been thinking about skills all wrong. The tutorial had mentioned *adjacencies* and such, but it clearly had a more abstract definition. In theory, my Stalking skill should give me a fractional chance at Stealth because the two *should* be interconnected. I'd have to see how that played out when I was back in the game.

By the end of my shift, my work metrics—a section of my screens that I'd always studiously ignored—indicated that I was up across the board. This job wasn't entirely unlike the game: grind away at the stats the game cares about, and you're rewarded with skill-ups and level-ups. As I signed out and prepared to shove dinner into my body, I wondered if grinding away at the bank's stats would get me a level-up there.

The thought made me laugh so hard a piece of VegRamen went down the wrong pipe and I coughed for ten minutes solid.

4 / SECOND MAJORDOMO TO THE ASSISTANT UNDERSECRETARY

It was a Tuesday, and work had... no, wait. Wednesday. Thursday? Goes to show you how much the world had blended together. Work, Endless Sky, sleep, repeat; I'd even taken on overtime shifts every Saturday, reserving Sunday to do laundry, cycle a couple of odor removers, and put away the week's deliveries. So I knew it wasn't a Sunday, and it felt like it had been a couple of days since the last Sunday, so I'll go with calling it Tuesday.

Work had sucked. Not because my numbers were down. No, far from it: my numbers were *up*. Almost monstrously so: the week before, Corporate Audit had made me spend two entire shifts going over my call records with them, because they were concerned I'd been coercing customers, or filing for fake loans, or something like that. But I'd been squeaky clean, and the auditor had signed off from our final session with a respectful nod.

Which brings us to calling-it-Tuesday.

The first hour of the shift was completely normal. I'd done three credit line extensions, one in exchange for applying a higher interest rate, and four loan originations. As I'd become better at convincing customers to agree to stuff, the system had begun routing me fewer "I don't understand this charge" calls and more money-makers. My

commissions were racking up, and I'd gotten priority availability for overtime shifts. And the work wasn't hard! I'd repositioned my little work desk so that it faced my entertainment panel. That enabled me to do my job with a quarter of my brain, while continuing to see what I could learn about Endless Sky on the Internet. I'd found a few more dark web sites where day players like myself could share experiences and theories, and I'd picked up more than a few fun facts.

The game was absolutely changing my real, actual, physical brain. Skill downloads were *real.* Several players who'd picked up professional skills in the game—a plumber, a mechanic, and that kind of thing—said they'd become proficient in those trades in the real, too. People who'd selected things like starship pilot were regretting not having skills that actually existed in the real; one guy said he'd been able to quit his job and start his own electrical contracting business. This was the kind of thing Endless Domains was apparently not eager to publicize; that same dark web site vanished a few days later, doubtless caught by their army of takedown-bots.

I'd also learned more about the skill system. More and more people were proving out the theory that it was a skill *web,* not a skill tree. There were now stories of people who'd switched one skill for another, paying a small penalty exactly as had been suggested to me earlier. That gave me more reason to boost my household management skills, because it was looking more and more like getting off the cityship would be best accomplished by becoming a business manager on someone's starship. Even the Confederacy had a need for strong managers, to help wrangle the ever-growing horde of noobs who joined the Confed the minute they hit the game.

Anyway, back to probably-Tuesday. An hour into my shift, a manager broke into my feed, smiling in a way that suggested she never *didn't* smile. "Rictus," I think they call it. "Congratulations, Frank!" she burbled. "Due to your excellent performance, you're being promoted to Strategic Investments! You'll have the rest of today's shift offline, so that you can go through the training materials I've already linked to your account. Be prepared to sign on tomorrow

and enjoy a whole new level of success!" Her smile managed to widen a bit before she nodded slightly and signed off.

Huh?

A message notification popped up, informing me that I had new tasks to complete. A clicked through, and found myself immersed in the world of AmeriMex Investments.

There's a whole lot of marketing crap I'll skip over. The basic scam is this: people with extra money want to make that money into even *more* money. They do that by investing. Smart ones use their own brokers; uninformed ones come to AmeriMex Investments. I would listen carefully to their investment thoughts and risk tolerances, and then invariably enroll them in several high-fee, high-commission funds that were proprietary to the bank. These funds *always* performed well, often returning ten to fifteen percent growth. About half of that was siphoned off for bank fees and my commissions, and most investors seemed satisfied with the remainder. The math was all carefully obscured by insanely complex statements and walls of fine print, ensuring almost nobody ever figured it out. Those few who did would angrily move their investments elsewhere, but frankly they weren't our target customer.

My head was spinning with it all, especially the model commission schedule I'd seen. I could easily be pulling in *ten to twenty times* my former salary, even including what I now realized where the meager commissions paid on the credit products I'd been selling. In a few months I might even be able to afford to move into an actual, paid apartment. With actual rooms.

But... why bother? All my time was spent working and in the game. All I needed was a bed and...

Oh. Oh, I could for sure afford a catheter system now. One of the nice self-cleaning ones, even.

As I signed off and starting preparing my bed for game time, my mind turned back to the xenophobic noobs that populated much of the Terran Confederacy in the game. They were, I suspected, like many of my soon-to-be customers, simply heading for the easiest and

most obvious choice that appealed to them, trusting in "the system" to make it all right. They didn't want to have to think too hard. They just wanted to dive in and do the thing.

It was an interesting parallel that became incredibly on-point the moment I re-entered the game.

I'd spent the last few game days carefully researching Second Revered Diva K'kkitika, tracking its movements and schedule, and learning its routes and routines. My Stalking skill had moved up a level as a result, and I'd found myself more proficient at anticipating when my target was about to catch sight of me. The task was complicated by the diva's round-the-clock escort, who were diligent about continually scanning the area around their charge. I'd even picked up a Disguise skill after making efforts to change my appearance every so often, to try and throw them off.

I'd planned to resume my surveillance in this game session, hoping to pin down a concrete plan to take out the diva in the following session. Those plans went out the window when I came into the game in the middle of an attack.

No kidding.

I flew out of the private little storage closet I called a bedroom, flashing red lights and a blaring alarm sending adrenaline pumping through my system.

"Sir!" a passing staff member shouted, panic cutting through their usually-hissing voice pattern. "We're ordered to lock down the residence! First Honorable L'stast has been summoned to the battle bridge of the cityship!"

"What the hell is happening?" I demanded.

"The Terran Confederacy has launched an attack!"

Oh. "Are you familiar with the lockdown procedure?"

"Yes sir, but–"

"Begin the lockdown procedure."

The lizard stood there looking down at me for a moment, and then nodded. Something like a calmness seemed to fall over its inflexible face. It nodded. "Yes, of course. Right away."

» Calm in the face of danger!
XP awarded.
» Skill-up! Your Household Management skill is now at level 4.

The lizard darted off, calling out orders in the Aa'an servant language, all hisses and clicks. As I made my way into the main household, I could see other staff beginning to react: the kitchen staff was securing appliances and de-energizing what they could. The security staff was closing the heavy shutters that closed the residence off from the rest of the ship. The porters were checking that the furniture was secured. Maids were locking cabinets full of serviceware, packing padding atop fragile items. I nodded to two maintenance staff members—one was human, the other Aa'an—who were checking the residence's self-contained life support systems. "Hey," I said to the human one. "You new?"

"Yeah, started a few game days ago," he said, stepping away from the system control panel for a moment. "This was the only opening I could get for a life systems engineer."

"Skill up, move to a ship?"

"That's the plan. This happen a lot?"

"First since I've been here. C'mon, let's see if we can see what's happening. The lizard can handle this. I'm Frank, by the way."

"Aaron."

I led Aaron back to the tiny office that the household majordomos shared. The two of us pretty much filled the space, but it sported the only fully connected command console in the residence, outside of First Honorable L'stast's private den, which we weren't permitted to enter under any circumstances. I started logging in, an overly dramatic process involving handprints, retinal scans, passwords, and

pheromone checks. "Jacinda brought you in?" I asked as I went through each step.

"Yeah, via a Second Intermediary in the tutorial, I guess."

"You meet her yet?"

"Last session. But she said it was her last, she'd gotten a bump to a bigger household."

"Wait, she–" I was interrupted by a bleep from the console, which was displaying a congratulatory message.

> » Congratulations!
> You have been promoted to First Majordomo
> in your household.
> XP awarded.

The game message echoed the console, and the console asked if I wanted to initiate a hiring search for a Second Majordomo. I thumbed an affirmative, dismissing the messages. "Guess I'm in charge now," I said, poking through the touch screen's menus to try and find a status on the cityship. Fortunately, my new authority let me access a whole new set of menus, including external views and a simplified view of the ship's tactical network. "Here we go."

The entire wall lit up with the tactical display. Apparently, a small task force of Confederacy ships had jumped us when we'd emerged from FTL in the... the Dagobah system? I snorted, and heard Aaron chuckling beside me. The task force consisted of two destroyers, a carrier, and a batttleship, and the carrier had already launched four squadrons of small fighter craft. These were buzzing all around the cityship, taking potshots but apparently doing very little actual damage to the ship's hardened exterior. I took a moment to puzzle over the various symbols and numbers, and realized that we were being protected by an energy screen of some kind.

"Force field," Aaron confirmed. "Skill adjacency."

"This all makes sense to you?"

"Most of it. Looks like the destroyers are the biggest threat, but so far they've been firing torpedos and lasers in the single gigawatt

range. See here," he said, pointing at a coupe of symbols that were hovering over the Confed ships' icons. "That's a threat assessment."

"It's not very high."

"They're in over their heads."

"Are we fighting back?"

"This just started. I expect they've got to charge the—oh, there you go." A glowing line briefly connected the cityship to one of the destroyers, and the enemy ship's icon blinked out. "Doesn't indicate the wattage on that, but it was probably a lot." More icons began appearing, swarming from the cityship to the Confed vessels. "Fighters. Wow, that's a lot." Another line appeared and then vanished, along with the battleship.

"This is very one-sided," I noted.

"There's gonna be a lot of people in time-out," Aaron agreed. "See these?" He pointed to another set of numbers that were floating over the display. "These are tonnage numbers. That destroyer is thirty kilotons. The battleship is about eighty, that was the real threat."

"The carrier's bigger though."

"Yeah, about a hundred kilotons. But in and of itself it's not a threat. That's why it's hanging back. Actually, they're running. Look, that's a range estimate." The number was increasing steadily now. "They'll be making their way to an FTL jump point. The carrier's real threat are its fighters and we outnumber them by at least four to one."

"What's this?" I asked, pointing at a number over the cityship.

"That's us. About forty-five *megatons*."

"Holy crap."

"Yeah. They brought rocks to a canon fight."

"We stopped attacking?" The little fighter icons had regrouped, buzzing like an angry swarm around the cityship. The Confed carrier and remaining destroyer were moving away at speed now.

"The Aa'an are mainly NPCs. The game's probably programmed to let you escape if you stop shooting."

"You know, not all of the–"

"Oops, never mind," Aaron interrupted. A haze of red pinpoints had appeared, streaming rapidly toward the two confed ships. "We launched missiles." It only took a moment for the two human ships to be destroyed. "You were saying?"

"Not all of the Aa'an are NPCs." I explained about the rebirth path.

"Huh," he mused when I was done. "That's an interesting twist. I do like being aboard the biggest badass in the galaxy. From what I've seen nobody else has anything the size of a cityship. That's why you're not supposed to attack them."

"Where'd you read that?"

"Dark web sites. Public Internet has almost nothing."

"I'd noticed." Just then, the lights returned to normal and the blaring alarm, which had managed to fade into the background of my consciousness, stopped. The silence was almost deafening. I sighed. "Well, that was over quick. I'll need to get the lockdown lifted."

"Yeah, I should go put the life support into standby. We're supposed to do a full inspection of it anyway."

"Off you go."

I got the rest of the staff switched over to lifting the lockdown, and had the kitchen staff start preparing the afternoon meal. First Honorable L'stast would doubtless be hungry after helping manage the battle, although there was a good chance it would be invited to one of its superiors' homes for the afternoon meal. Still, the rest of its family—a den mate and a half-dozen immature hatchlings—would return from their work and schools hungry.

As the staff got moving, I let myself into Jacinda's former cabin. As I was now First Majordomo, the door let me in without hesitation. It wasn't much larger than my own, which was disappointing. The "bed," obviously designed for someone who wouldn't be occupying their body while it lay there, was a padded slab that leaned at a 50-degree angle against one wall. Beneath the raised in was a small storage cabinet, where fresh uniforms always appeared. This cabin

was a bit deeper than mine, leaving room for a larger desk—with more drawers beneath it—stretching between the entry and the angled bed. That left a small empty space directly between the door itself and the bed, perhaps a meter and a half deep by a meter across.

A box sat on the desk. It caught my attention because it was made from very different materials than everything else in the room. While the Aa'an favored an inexpensive, sturdy material that looked like a veneered black wood of some kind, this box was made of a very modern, plasticky material in dark blue. Could Jacinda have possibly intended to leave this behind? Or did it come with the job?

The box was about the size of a shoebox, with a lid that hinged on one long side. I flipped it open, and found myself looking at a solid mass of gently glowing... cards?

I flicked through a few of them and my heart sped up as I realized what they were: Crafting recipes.

> » Congratulations!
>
> You have found a class IV cache of Crafting recipes. You can memorize no more than ten of these per day, but the entire cache can be carried in your personal inventory.

My eyes bugged. Although the box was maybe fifty centimeters long, it contained far more cards than its size suggested it could. As I flipped through them, the cards seemed to compress and decompress, making room for a bit of space in front of the one I was looking at and then stacking more tightly toward the front and back of the box. It was... it was a *trove*. The recipes were alphabetical, and I was in the Fs: FTL drive conduit patch. Grater, cheese. Life support system patch, power. Life support system patch, gasses. There were *hundreds*. I swiftly closed the lid and picked up the box, willing it into my personal inventory, along with the small set of assassin's tools I always carried.

» Your personal inventory is at 60%.

It was so incongruous that the game didn't make you just use

pockets or backpacks or something. The idea that you just held a certain amount of inventory in your soul or something was weird in a sci-fi game. But I wasn't arguing, as it was far more convenient than actually hauling everything. I wondered again if it was something the game had awarded or—however unlikely—something Jacinda had left behind. No matter: I wasn't looking this gift horse in the mouth.

I earned a few hundred more XP that afternoon, managing through a midday meal that had not only included First Honorable L'stast and its family, but several of its superiors. First Honorable it might be, but it was still only a Third Navigator, giving it plenty of room to suck up to its betters in hopes of an eventual promotion.

I wondered what would happen if I approached it now and offered to assassinate whoever was Second Navigator.

After everyone had gone back to work or school, I got the household settled into its evening routine. I received a ping that a Third Majordomo from a similarly sized household had accepted a transfer, filling our Second Assistant slot, and that they would start tomorrow. Michelle Michols seemed like a human name, and a quick check confirmed. That meant they were a PC, so I double-checked and was relieved that they'd been playing a game day off of me, meaning we'd be able to cover two out of every three days between us. I renewed a search for a Third Majordomo and headed out into the evening.

I decided to move my plans up. The diva had been consistent in its schedule as I'd stalked it before, and I'd come up with what I hoped was a viable plan. The rewards would be well worth it, and now that I was First Majordomo, I wanted to accelerate my path off the cityship. So I checked my inventory, brushed a few flecks of dust off my household uniform, and headed off to the ritzy district where the diva lived.

After carefully observing the diva's guards for a couple of days, I'd decided it would be foolish to try any kind of direct

assault. It was far too likely I'd be caught, and the mission had listed unspecified bonuses—most of which, in the past, had been for not being detected.

The diva was rarely at home in the early evenings, instead spending its time touring a roster of favorite lounges, social spots, and restaurants. It took four guards, leaving two of its six-person retinue to guard its residence. The residence also included a variety of staff: kitchen workers, maids, porters, and the like, much like the residence I oversaw. That was going to be my way in: my familiarity with Aa'an household management would, I hoped, see me in and out, giving me an opportunity to plant a long-lasting poison that the diva would encounter when it returned. I'd been practicing with the various poisons available to me, and gotten my skill to level 3. The advancement unlocked a whole new class of contact poisons, which I'd spent three hours of the last game session mixing. Those, when coated on a variety of the diva's belongings—such as the scale-scraper that wealthier Aa'an seemed to love to use each evening before settling into their sandy bed-pits—should do the trick. It would be a set-it-and-pray maneuver, but hopefully by the next game day I'd know if the ploy had worked.

Sadly, the diva's household didn't have any open majordomo spots. I'd have even pretended to apply for a Third position, explaining that the increased household prestige would be worth starting lower, but that wasn't an option. Fortunately, my move to First Majordomo had opened a new avenue.

It was common for the First Majordomos of Aa'an households to mingle amongst each other, sharing information about which juniors might be ready for a promotion, juicy tidbits on which food vendors were offering better prices or produce, and so on. Crossing from a Third Navigator's household to a highly ranked performer's wasn't usual, but the hierarchies between military and civilian households wasn't one-to-one. I could express an interest in moving to the civilian side, and in return offer some gossip on what the relevant military households were doing. The diva's First Majordomo was named

P'trickk, clearly an Aa'an name, which meant an NPC. NPCs, in my experience, would usually buy even the flimsiest of excuses in order to keep the game moving.

And so rather than sneaking to the diva's residence or attempting a stealthy street kill, I just walked boldly up to the front door and touched the annunciator.

The door opened a few moments later, and I found myself face to face with a towering male Aa'an wearing the diva's livery. As my now-practiced eye rapidly decoded the lizard's attire, I realized this was First Majordomo P'trickk itself.

"Respected First Majordomo P'trickk," I said, offering a quick bob of the head in lieu of a bow. *Respected* was a general honorific, suitable for an initial greeting between individuals of similar rank. My right knee bent slightly in the Sixth Position of Respectable Greeting, while my left hand moved to the flat of my waist in the Fifth Enhancement of Collegial Joining.

> »Skill-up! Your Aa'an Etiquette skill is now at level 3.

"Respected returns," P'trickk said, opening the door for me to introduce myself.

"First Majordomo Frank Kozina, of the First Honorable L'stast, Third Navigator." I moved my left hand to the Fourth Position of Collegial Engagement, silently asking if I could join P'trickk inside. Our similar ranks would make it clear that I was here for the usual professional exchange of information and gossip, which–

"No shit," P'trickk said. "Come on in, man."

That wasn't part of the script.

"Put a goddamn green glow around PCs," I muttered, offering up a prayer to Endless Sky's programmers. "Freakin' rebirth path."

The game... *shuddered* slightly. As I stepped into the home and the door closed behind me, I saw that P'trickk actually *had a soft green glow* around itself. Had that always been there? I'd spoken with Aaron just before leaving the residence, and he hadn't glowed. But

that had been in our brightly lit home; this hallway was dimly lit, allowing a series of bright pinpoint lights to pick out a row of portraits, each featuring the diva in a different sumptuous outfit. Was the green glow only visible in dim lighting?

Whatever. I'd take it. And right now I had bigger problems. As a PC, P'trickk wouldn't be under any compulsion to "play along" like an NPC would.

Shit.

"So what brings you here?" he—it?—asked as we rounded a corner into the more brightly lit kitchen. The green glow remained, albeit less obviously. Still, there's no way I could have missed that before. Had I just stumbled onto a game option? Would anyone else see the glow, or just me?

The kitchen, at least, was empty but for the two of us. The diva was likely accustomed to taking its evening meal out.

"You know, originally it was just a bit of skill grinding, interacting with another First. But now... I'm kind of intrigued. I assume you took the rebirth path?"

"You know about that? Yeah," he said with a chuckle that was entirely mismatched to his hiss-filled voice. "I was livid when I started playing and realized you couldn't pick an alien species. So after the tutorial I took a job on this cityship and just decided to go all-in on the alien society. I maxed out my Etiquette skill as fast as I could. They–"

"Wait," I interrupted. "What level are you?"

"Ten. Midway through the Master levels."

"But that means you can't have a skill in excess of ten," I protested. I'd read as much on the dark web sites: no skill's level can exceed your base character level. "Don't skills max out at twenty?"

"My Etiquette skill is twenty, actually," he said with a reptilian smile: jaw hanging open, forked tongue lolling out slightly, scaly lips pulled back. It looked like he was about to go for my throat. "You can do it if you're specializing. I actually only have a half-dozen skills, and they're all connected to the Aa'an and Household Management. You

push your skill through experience, and it actually helps drag your character level up. But it means it's almost impossible for me to learn new skills until my character level catches up."

"Jeez, what's the XP on level twenty look like?"

"It's insane. It's all powers of two, right? So to max out at level twenty is the top end of the Legendary levels, and you need like half a billion XP. It's impossible, I'll never reach it in a hundred years."

"So... so what do you do?" My mind had started trying to come up with an idea of what to do with Patrick—which I was sure must have been his real name. The original plan had been to unload a pressurized canister of sleepy-dust on the First Majordomo. The dust was tricky stuff: a slight miscalculation in dosage or pressure and you'd kill the target. When the target had been an NPC, that was no big deal. But there was no contract on Patrick, so killing him would have serious negative consequences for me.

It—he—flicked his tail, and I recognized the start of the Fourth Position of Industrious Success. "You know, in the real I worked the front desk of some giant corp. I don't even know what they did. There were like eight local employees, and everyone else was remote. Someone would visit maybe once a month, and they kept me there as a receptionist just because it made them look rich and ritzy." He shrugged, the massive Aa'an neck muscles bunching up impressively under the scaly skin, his neck frill unfolding slightly. "I'm actually really happy here. I quit my job after a month of playing and moved into an Endless Pod. Now I'm here every day. I was hit by a delivery vehicle a few months back and woke up like this. Now I get to accompany the diva to concerts. I feel like i'm actually doing something."

His comments hit home. I'd felt much the same way—most of us low-level human drones did, doing jobs that machines could have done tirelessly and better. The game gave you *options*.

I reached into my personal storage space and withdrew the canister.

"What's that?" The hard ridge of his brow tried to scrunch down,

but the Aa'an face wasn't meant for expressions of confusion or curiosity.

"I'm actually a thief," I lied. "And I have a commission to steal one of the diva's portraits. I'm really sorry."

"Oh," he said, the confusion coming through in his voice if not his face. "I mean, I get it. Grinding up a skill?"

"Yeah," I said. And I was, just not a Thievery skill.

"So what's the canister?"

"Knockout gas."

"You know if it does any damage–"

"Honestly, it should be fine."

He looked at me for a moment. "I mean, okay."

"Really?" He was surprisingly accommodating.

"Yeah, I get it. And she's an NPC, it's not like she'll suffer. Maybe I'll get a mission to try and buy it back from whoever you're selling it to. Plus, it's been nice talking. I don't run into a lot of PCs in this job."

"Wish I could do it again."

"Yeah, you probably shouldn't come back. You know, I never even checked. You're not really with Third Navigator at all, are you?"

Jeez, I hadn't even thought of that. "Nope."

"Well, you did good. Okay, I guess let's do it."

I triggered the canister, and a fine mist of green jetted out. He took a deep breath. The membranes over his eyes fluttered a few times, and he slowly collapsed.

I darted back into the hallway and pulled down a random portrait, stuffing into my personal storage space.

> » Caution: Your personal storage is at 92% capacity.

Time to make a little room, then. I still needed to be careful: the rest of the household staff would still be about, along with the two guards. I darted back into the kitchen and pulled the household insignia pin from P'trickk's uniform, transferring it to mine. Our liveries didn't match, but contractors were sometimes issued house-

hold pins and it might stave off questions long enough for me to get the job done.

I crept through the hallways, leaning into my Stalking skill as heavily as possible. Stalking is more about not being noticed even when you're in plain sight; it's not the same as actual stealth. But I made it to the diva's den without being noticed, although I did have a couple of close calls when a porter and a maid hurried past on some mission or other.

I breathed a sigh of relief when the den door clicked shut behind me.

> » Congratulations! You have gained a new skill: Stealth.
>
> Your creative use of your Stalking skill has unlocked an adjacent skill.

Ah, so that did work. I winced as the rest of the new skill—fortunately only level one, of course—downloaded into my brain.

Knowing that a staff member could walk in at any time, I moved quickly. The vial of contact poison came out of my personal storage, along with a pair of soft cloth gloves. I quickly began applying it to anything the diva might touch: the heavily ornamented scale-scraper that hung on a peg next to the sand-pit bed, the rubbery stick the Aa'an used to clean their teeth, the heavy, non-nonsense claw trimmers, and so on. The poison glistened softly when first applied, but quickly dried into a transparent matte finish that was nearly undetectable in the dim lighting of the room. Capable of poisoning the lizards even through their scales, this should complete the mission. Once contacted, it took only seconds to act, which meant I might even find out tonight, depending on how late the diva stayed out.

My new Stealth skill saw me safely out of the residence. I took a roundabout way home, ditching the diva's household pin in a public trash receptacle, the empty vial of poison in another, and the gloves in a third. I let my Stalking skill guide me through two transit lines and three neighborhoods, stopping in a couple of shops to chat with the

proprietors under the pretense of bringing their products into the Third Navigator's household.

I got home with half the evening left to me. I decided to spend it in my closet, studying whatever I could find on stealth, when a game notification flashed into my vision:

> » Mission complete: Assassination VII
>
> Because you disguised your attempt as a theft gone wrong, you have achieved multiple optional bonus outcomes.
>
> Reward: 2,000XP
>
> Reward: 110,000 Scales
>
> Reward: You are now recognized by the Aa'an Board of Societal Norms as a professional assassin for hire. You are protected from negative consequences for deaths that occur as a contracted part of a recognized mission.
>
> Caution: The Board frowns on theft as part of a contracted assassination. You can avoid negative reputation by turning your stolen goods over to the Board, who will dispose of it for a 20% commission. Do you wish to do so?

Yes, I replied hastily.

> You will gain 150,000 Scales from the sale.
>
> You have gained +500 reputation with the Board.

I felt the stolen portrait fade out of my personal storage. Reputation? Huh. Yet another thing to try and learn about. But whatever it meant, a positive couldn't be bad. And I'd take the money—I was accumulating quite the stash. I had close to half a million scales, which I knew was enough to run this expansive household for a couple of months. And since–

The front door annunciator sounded.

I paused for a moment. The security staff would still be on duty

of course, but the rest of the staff would be finishing up their daily chores and heading to bed at this hour. I shrugged, and made my way to the front, using the side passage that let staff quickly move from the working spaces to the front hallway.

I opened the door and was confronted by a human male. He had gray hair and a neat salt-and-pepper beard, a medium build, and stood about my height. He wasn't glowing, so I presumed he was an NPC—the first human NPC I'd seen aboard the cityship, in fact.

"Hello," he said, inclining his head politely. He didn't adopt a formal Aa'an position, so he was definitely here to speak to me. "My name is Galan Nordsson. You are Frank Kozina?" I nodded. "May I speak with you for a moment? It's good news, I assure you."

"Sure," I said. If we were being informal, I could play along. I stepped back and waved him in. As the door closed behind him, I opened the door to the side passage and waved him in ahead of me. "Why don't we speak back here? It'll be a bit more private."

"Perfect."

I led him back to the small office where Aaron and I had watched the morning's short battle with the Confederacy. I stepped in after him, pulling the door shut behind me. "How can I help you?"

"News of your recognition by the Aa'an Board of Societal Norms has traveled quickly," he said. "I represent the human Galactic Guild of Assassins here on the cityship, and I wanted to extend a membership offer to you."

I blinked in surprise. I'd had no idea there even was such a thing, let alone that they'd have a representative on an Aa'an cityship. "What, ah... what would membership entail?"

"So long as you're on an Aa'an cityship following their societal norms, membership in our guild isn't required. However, if you go after any other species or leave the cityship, we would have... let's say, a *problem* with that. Formal assassinations are tolerated only under the auspices of our guild. As a journeyman level yourself, we would recognize you as a full member and permit you to skip our usual apprenticeship. All non-Aa'an contracts would need to come from us,

and we retain a 20% commission on all fees. But, we also guarantee payment, and we can provide access to a number of supporting services on a reasonable fee schedule."

"Can I turn down a contract?"

"Excepting those exceptionally rare ones with Guildmaster Priority, of course."

"And can I file my own contracts?"

"Yes, although you are not permitted to take any contracts you offer. Another guild member would have to. To do otherwise would be simple murder, of course."

"Of course," I grinned. "Any other rules? Guild dues?"

"No other rules, and our dues come entirely from the contract commissions."

"Then I guess I'll join up."

"Excellent! I can provide you with a set of Crafting recipes appropriate to the trade." He held out a small stack of glowing cards, which I took. I flipped through them, and as I read each one, it faded away, becoming part of my memory. There were ten in all, putting me at my daily absorption limit. "And, if you are interested, I can offer a substantial number of skills for a very reasonable price."

"Oh?"

"As a new member, you're entitled to a skill download for just 20,000 Scales."

I almost didn't care what the skills were. "I'll take it."

"Brace yourself," he warned.

The world pressed down and tried to crush me, all while repeatedly sucker-punching me in the gut. I fell to my knees, retching as my brain overloaded.

» Skill-up! Your Stalking skill is now at level 4.

» Skill-up! Your Basic Assassination skill is now at level 4.

» Skill-up! Your Advanced Assasination skill is now at level 4.

» Skill-up! Your Disguise skill is now at level 4.

» Skill-up! Your Knife Fighting skill is now at level 2.

» Skill-up! Your Stealth skill is now at level 4.

» Skill-up! Your Poisoning skill is now at level 4.

» Congratulations! You have gained a new skill: Thievery

» Congratulations! You have gained a new skill: Trapping

» Skill-up! Your Thievery skill is now at level 4.

» Skill-up! Your Trapping skill is now at level 4.

I panted as the skill download completed. "Thanks," I wheezed, levering myself back to my feet.

"It's my pleasure. I can show myself out now."

"I'd best do it." I walked him back to the front door in silence, my heart still thudding in my chest. "Thank you, and good evening," I said as I showed him out.

"Welcome to the fraternity, Frank." He bowed his head again, turned, and walked away.

» Caution: Your game day is ending.

Yeah, and none too soon. I needed a rest after all that. I quickly returned to my closet, leaned against the bed, and closed my eyes. I pulled up my character sheet just before the game faded out:

Frank Kozina
Day Player
Class: Truthsayer (hidden)
Class: Assassin (hidden)
Class: Majordomo
Guild Membership: Galactic Assassins
Account: 450,890 Scales
Level 4

Reputations

Aa'an Board of Societal Norms: +500 (Friendly)
Galactic Guild of Assassins: +500

Attributes
Body: 11
Mind: 12
Soul: 9
HP: 44 (Body x Level)
XP: 15,192 (1,192 to level 5)
Unused Attribute Points: 0

Skills:
Aa'an Etiquette: 3
Advanced Assassination: 4
Basic Assassination: 4
Disguise: 4
Household Management: 4
Knife Fighting: 2
Poisoning: 4
Politicking: 2
Stalking: 4
Stealth: 4
Thievery: 4
Trapping: 4

Missions:
Find Dwight Czarnowski [•ERROR%]

5 / GUILD ASSASSIN

The next work day was my first in the new Investments division, and let me tell you something: insanely easy. If my old job could have been done by any half-competent synthetic intelligence, this one could have been done by a monkey with a voice playback app. Literally all I did was read the script, ignore every answer to every question I asked, and then push a button to invest the customer's money. Boom. My projected commissions were piling up, and I estimated that before long I'd be able to afford the standalone Endless Comfort kit and stop relying on towels and garbage bags to protect my bed.

Yeah, I'd had another "accident." A bad one, and I don't want to discuss it.

What was interesting at work was the actual concept of investing. I'd always been nominally aware of the idea of money being able to grow, but I'd never had enough for it to be an issue. I still didn't, really, but the bank had provided plenty of learning materials on actual investing. And i actually had time to read those *on the job,* if you can believe it, because Investments didn't require me to answer calls as quickly as they came in. We weren't as busy as the low-end credit service team, and so I actually had *downtime.* So long as I was

logged in I was fine, and so I used the time to peruse the bank's investment education materials.

It was fascinating stuff. Risky investments returned more, but had a bigger chance of being complete losses. Less risk, less return. And the concept of compound interest! See, that's when your investment grows maybe 5%, but then the growth itself gets re-invested and all *that* might earn 5%, and so on and so on and so on. I started to see how, even with the insane fees and commissions the bank was charging, people were willing to be satisfied with what they got. Given enough time, you could rack up some serious funds.

Of course, you had to have something to start with, which I didn't. But I considered directing my commissions into my own investment fund, and decided to sit and do the math on it over the coming weekend. Investments didn't work weekends, so I'd have eight hours of dead time on Saturday to work it out. Once I bought the catheter setup, of course.

Back to my routine: log out of work, shovel a synth-meal into my face, pop a black pill, and hit the game.

» Congratulations! You have gained a new skill: Investing.

I blinked several times as the game message faded from my vision. That was unspeakably weird. I'd already experienced the skill-dumps in the game carrying over into the real, but now a skill I'd started to learn—well, scratch the surface of—in the real had earned me a skill level in the game? I checked my character sheet and sure enough, there it was:

> Skills:
> Aa'an Etiquette: 3
> Advanced Assassination: 4
> Basic Assassination: 4

Disguise: 4
Household Management: 4
Investing: 1
Knife Fighting: 2
Poisoning: 4
Politicking: 2
Stalking: 4
Stealth: 4
Thievery: 4
Trapping: 4

So if someone was a... rocket scientist or something, in the real, then they'd have that skill in the game? And could level it up, get a skill-dump, and become smarter... in the real? That was mind-boggling. I wondered if anyone else had ever seen that happen. Did that mean... could I actually mix poisons in the real, now? And fight with a knife? I shook my head. It was too much to consider right now. A blinking indicator overlaid on my vision told me I had a message to review.

» Guild contract available.

That was quick. I opened the message and skimmed the contents. Not unlike the Aa'an ones I'd gotten before, but with a lot more legalese and detail. This one was to take out a human, a member of the Alliance of Free Explorers who was on the cityship. Didn't indicate if the person was a PC or NPC, but since it was a contract in my character class it wouldn't matter. Terms and conditions, severability, hold harmless, legal legal legal, blah blah blah, honestly more than half the contract was a blur of fine print. I wondered if the game actually had text for it all, or if the blurring was a deliberate tactic to make it look intimidating without actually filling in the details. Ah, here we are: Unspecified XP increase, fee of 100,000 Scales, a skill-dump offer for EVA activity.

Wait, what?

I read a bit more, and realized the contract had some specifics

about how the hit was to be made. I had to go outside the cityship—extra-vehicular activity, or EVA—and use a pea shooter to punch a hole in the guy's suit. He was expected to be working on the exterior of the ship—oh cripes, in like two hours—and I was to hit him there. The "pea shooter" was something I'd need to Craft myself, and it would puncture both him and the suit, killing him quickly if I made a good hit. The intent was to make it a plausible accident.

I accepted the contract.

> » Mission accepted: Guild Assassination I

A pea shooter recipe appeared in my inbox, along with a skill-dump. I sighed, gritted my teeth, and triggered the skill dump.

> » Congratulations! You have gained a new skill: Spacewalking.
>
> » Skill-up! Your Spacewalking skill is now at level 2.

My brain whimpered as the new skill settled in, and I took few deep breaths to clear the wave of nausea. Now for the pea shooter. I pulled the recipe out of storage and looked it over. Huh. Nothing too difficult. In fact, most of this stuff I should be able to pick up right around the residence, between the kitchen and the maintenance stores. The recipe faded as I absorbed it into my mind, and I set out to gather the necessary resources.

Crafting resources in Endless Sky were a bit primitive, if I'm being honest. There were maybe two dozen kinds of raw resources, which you could acquire as-is, or which you could derive by breaking something that rewarded those resources. For the pea shooter, I needed one Electronics, two Mechanicals, one Explosive, and one Precision. A "Precision" isn't even a thing, it's just a modifier-resource that certain recipes require. Like I said, the system's a bit primitive.

Most of those resources were easy to find: the maintenance stores had both Electronics and Mechanicals in stock, and the Precision was attained by breaking one of the kitchen scales. I chewed out one of

the kitchen staff for the breakage (they're NPCs, don't feel sorry for them), and the started digging around for the Explosive. I poked in the maintenance stores for twenty precious minutes before I realized the answer had been right in front of me all along: a row of small hand torches, still in their packaging, used by the cooks to lightly sear meats before serving them to the Aa'an. Smashing one torch—something I would never have done in the real, I assure you—resulted in not one, but *three* Explosives. I tucked two of them behind a pile of Mechanicals, and triggered the pea shooter recipe.

My hands launched into an autonomous blur of action for about five seconds, after which a brand-new pea shooter was rotating gently on the floor, giving off a soft glow, next to a twirling round of ammo. I picked them up, sent them to my personal storage, and hustled to the berth where my target's ship, the *FS Eternal Optimist,* was docked.

My Disguise skill suggested I'd want to be in an official-looking suit for this one. A quick NPC side-assassination—it's not murder if they're collateral to a sanctioned mission—gained me a grungy-looking dock worker's space suit, and another dozen minutes had me in the suit and out the nearest airlock.

Let me tell you, I don't know why I hadn't done this earlier.

It's a space game, right? So why had I never rented a suit and gone "outside?" Too busy assassinating and placing orders for fresh k'rumph eggs from the cityship's agri section, that's why.

The sensation was marvelous.

I've obviously never been in zero-gee in the real, but for all it's primitive Crafting mechanisms, Endless Sky's designers got space-walking *right.* I floated and bobbed gently along the cityship's outer hull, a tether line securing me to one of several long rails along the dockyards. I spotted *Eternal Optimist* first, and my target almost immediately after: a worn-looking but clearly serviceable gray space suit, the ship's icon stenciled on the back and a dark "01" on both shoulders. This would be the ship's captain.

I began moving carefully toward the ship. My suit had magnetic boots, but I couldn't figure out how to use them, so I just pulled

myself along the same rail I was tethered to. My problem arose when I came to the end of that rail, just before the docking collar that *Eternal Optimist* was clamped to. I could see that the ship itself had its own tether-rails running its length, but I'd need to unclip from the cityship, jump about twenty meters, and then re-clip to the smaller craft.

Twenty meters in free-fall. In open space.

I felt sure the cityship would be able to rescue me if I missed, but I didn't relish the prospect.

I settled myself against the cityship hull, crouched down and aimed toward *Eternal Optimist.* The ship's captain was out of sight, further aft and almost opposite me. As the inertia from my movements faded and I felt very still against the hull, I reached back and unclipped my tether from the rail. I was officially unattached to anything, and one strong kick would have propelled me out into open space.

I gave a small kick instead.

I reached both arms out in front of me, my hands grasping for the rail that was sliding *very rapidly* toward me now—my kick-off hadn't been as gentle as I'd planned, apparently. Here it comes, here it comes, and... grab!

I kept going.

The bulky gloves of my suit had brushed the hull of the ship, but hadn't had time to slip more than the tips under the rail before I was passing over it. Now I was sliding almost perpendicular to the hull... which was unfortunately curved. My helmet *clanged* into the ship's hull, temporarily arresting my forward motion—until, that is, my feet flipped over my head and I kept going. Now I was vectoring *away* from the hull, my hands stretched over my hand and scrabbling uselessly at the vacuum.

» Skill roll: Spacewalking: FAIL

No shit. I guess level 2 wasn't rated for that kind of maneuver.

But now what was I supposed to do? *Eternal Optimist* was now

receding gently away from me, and I was drifting feet-first into... space?

Something brushed against my back, and I tried to wriggle to see what it was. A moment later, my suit jerked against me and I stopped moving. Well, moving away—I was now rebounding slowly, ever so slowly, back toward the ship. I wriggled some more, managing to turn slightly, and saw that a second tether, connected to the ship, had been clipped to my suit. Another wriggle, and I saw the gray-suited captain floating next to me, reeling us both back toward the ship.

The inside of the helmet lit, and I saw her: short blue hair filled the upper part of her helmet like a halo, brown eyes twinkled in the reflected starlight, and a narrow mouth smirked at me. As she continued to pull us toward the ship with one arm, she slapped a hand on the side of my helmet. I heard a *beep,* and then the hiss of an open comm channel.

"Whatcha up to?" she asked, her voice full of mirth.

"I, ah, overshot," I stammered.

"Yeah, I got that. Mag-boots fail?"

"Um... yeah, something like that."

"What in hell were you doing aiming for my ship?" Her voice gained a bit of a growl.

"Inspection?" I offered.

"We did that yesterday."

"Oh... I must have grabbed the wrong assignment."

"Sure. So, I'm guessing your a PC?"

"Yeah."

"I'm Captain Bo Mi-Cha, Free Ship *Eternal Optimist.*"

"Frank Kozina," I replied without thinking. Crap. Shouldn't have told her my real name.

"Well Frank, how about I get you clipped back to the cityship? Think you can take it from there? I've got a bit of work left to do out here and just enough air to get it done if I move fast."

"Yeah, absolutely. Thank you."

"Can't have the Aa'an's errand boys drifting into space, what would people think of me?"

"I'm not actually–" I started, but realized I basically was. "Yeah," I amended. "Thank you again."

"Spacers gotta look out for each other," she said. She removed her hand from my helmet as we neared her ship, and the comms channel died. I had no idea how to re-engage it apart from maybe slapping *her* helmet, which I wasn't about to do. She got me settled against her ship and gripping the safety rail, and motioned for me to stay put. She took my suit's tether in one hand and, with the ease of long practice, pushed off for where I'd come from. She sailed gracefully through space, somersaulting in mid-flight so that her feet smacked firmly against the hull. Her boots were obviously energized, because they held fast as she flexed her knees to absorb her momentum. She leaned down and clipped my tether back to the rail on the cityship. Then she stood up, gave me a thumbs-up, and pushed off toward the aft end of her ship. The message was clear enough: I could haul myself back home.

Obviously, I wasn't going to kill her.

> » Mission failed: Guild Assassination I
>
> This contract will be offered to other guild members.

Huh. Wasn't sure how I felt about that. I pulled myself toward the cityship, turning midway to look back at the ship. She was scrabbling skillfully over one of her ship's engine cowlings, her back to me.

Ugh.

I called up the in-game chat system, which I'd only used once before. I searched for Bo Mi-Cha, adding a filter for proximity, and her avatar popped up. Selecting it, I sent a message:

> Watch your back. You're not safe.

I saw her pause for a moment, and then look back at me. I waved,

and then turned around and started hauling myself back toward home.

I'd barely made it in the airlock and started getting out of my suit when I got a message ping. Had she replied? What if she– no, I realized, it was from the Guild. They'd acknowledged my failure and applied no penalty, leaving the contract open for others to pick up. The original contract vanished from my inbox, defeating any thoughts I'd had about reading it again. I was curious why she'd been targeted and wondered if the contract might include details about who'd offered the hit.

As I stashed the borrowed suit in a storage locker, I decided to pay a visit to the Guild. I needed to know a bit more about who I was taking contracts from.

The Guild office was a small, unassuming space inside an office-space block near the center of the cityship. I walked in, argued for about five minuted with the unhelpful NPC receptionist, and was finally shown to a small room containing two chairs that faced each other across a plain, metal table. It looked precisely like a downsized version of the interrogation rooms that all the police procedural shows I'd watched had featured.

As I sat, a person appeared in the chair on the other side of the table, startling me. "Hi, I'm Devon. Sorry we don't have a live rep available right now; I'm working out of the Motherhouse on Doona IV. How can I help you?"

"This is about the contract I just took."

Devon flickered slightly, and I realized he was a hologram, or something equivalent. "You mean the one you failed? Don't worry about it. Half our journeymen fail their first solo mission. It's no big."

"Actually, I was interested in the details of the contract."

"After the fact?" He frowned. "That's a little weird."

"I might not have read it thoroughly the first time."

"Oh. Well, fine print and all that. Sure. Okay, just a second." His eyes cast downward as he typed on an unseen keyboard. After a moment, his gaze slowly slid up to meet mine again. "Yeah, you *really* didn't read this."

"What do you mean?"

He flicked a hand at me, and the text of the contract appeared in the air between us. "This wasn't a standard journeyman hit. Honestly, you shouldn't have gotten this. This is a hit on a Free Explorer ship's captain."

"Yeah, I met her."

"You... what? No, nevermind," he said, shaking his head. "I don't want to know. But this is a seriously advanced contract. The Alliance doesn't recognize formal assassinations, and this lady's entire crew would probably have come after you."

"Wait, what?"

"Yeah, they're tight-knit groups. I wouldn't have touched this and I've been here almost since day one."

"Then why the hell did I get it?"

"Did you seriously not even read the 'Warnings and Waivers' section?"

"Where?"

"Right here," he said as the contract text scrolled. "Where it says, 'Warnings and Waivers.'"

"It's all blurry to me."

"Blur– what? It's clear as– oh. Oh, wait a minute."

"What?"

"What's your Soul attribute?"

"Nine."

He groaned. The contract text faded, and he put his head between his hands for a minute. "An assassin with a Soul of nine. I never thought I'd see the day." He looked back up at me. "You need to fix that. How close are you to a level-up?"

"Not far, but I don't understand–"

"Endless Sky doesn't use Soul for much, but there are a lot of

imputed attributes that key on it. Ethics is one of them. You have what amounts to a below-average sense of ethics. Now, you as a person might actually not, so the game emulates it by hiding information that you might find ethically questionable."

"So that's why the contract was so blurry?"

"Yeah. Only a truly evil person would take a hit against an Alliance captain, so the game kept you from realizing it."

"Crap."

"Yeah. Honestly, we should probably get you some Ethics training, grind that up to a ten so you can use your next level-up to get it to an eleven or even twelve. Assassins need a highly developed sense of ethics if they want to stay out of trouble."

"You don't say." Ethical murderers for hire, who knew?

"I know, it's counterintuitive. Do you have some time?"

"Like, right now?"

"No time like the present. The training is all self-paced, and if you can sink a few hours into it right now, we can probably push you to a ten."

"I didn't even know that was possible with attributes."

"Yeah, you can grind 'em to about fifteen, most times. We can refer you to a gym to work on your Body score, and obviously lots of classes for Mind. Soul's harder, but if you can get it to a twelve you can probably leave it there forever and work on the other two. You planning to stick with the Guild?"

"I guess so. I mean, I hadn't thought about it."

"Get Soul to anything above twelve, and mind to at least twelve, and you can put it for a leadership position. It's way better for a PC than just grinding away at missions, and you can still take missions when you want to. We could transfer you to a Chapterhouse anywhere you wanted."

"Really?"

"We get surprisingly few players choosing the class. We can get by with NPCs for field work in a lot of cases, but we have to manage them all. What're you doing now, getting by on Aa'an hits?"

"I'm a majordomo."

"Seriously."

"What?" His look of derision wounded my pride.

"Nothing, just... most of us try to ditch a 'real job' by level three or four."

"I'm level four."

"Oh. Well, I guess you're on-track then. Tell you what, give it a little thought. Are you day or pod?"

It took me a second to figure out what he meant. "Day."

"Thought about a pod?"

"Not seriously."

"Well, think about it. If you can move your attributes and get into a pod, we could use you. The money's solid, you get your pick of missions, and it's reasonably fun work. You can travel a lot, if that's what you're into."

I kind of was. "I'll do that."

"Anything else I can do for you?"

"Yeah, I was actually wondering who took out that contract in the first place. Does it say?"

"Sometimes," he said, focusing on something I couldn't see. "Yeah, actually. Confed. Someone in it, anyway, although it doesn't say who. Which checks out, those guys use us all the time. Nothing to indicate why, though. Sometimes folks will file a message they want us to leave behind or something, but this one..." He paused, still reading. "Hmm."

"What?"

"Well, this doesn't look right. Some of the authenticators are off. I'm not sure how the system even processed this one." He chewed his lower lip while he read. "I'm going to pull this one for now," he said at last. "I need to send a query back, and see why this one came to you in the first place. If I learn anything interesting, I'll be in touch." He leaned back, the hologram flickering as he moved. "Meantime, think about what I said, okay?"

"Yeah. I will."

"See you." The hologram flickered out. I sat and thought for a few minutes. Full-time assassin, huh? Huh.

» Do you wish to begin Ethics training? This will take about 4 hours.

"Sure, why not?"

It turns out that the answer to "why not" is "because you will experience crippling, terminal boredom not for four hours, but for each and every one of 14,400 seconds," but I got through it.

» Congratulations! Your Soul attribute has advanced to 10.

I stood up, the game providing me with authentically stiff joints and muscles, and made my way out of the little room. My virtual stomach was growling and I needed to eat. I also needed to get back to work.

I WAS PAYING TO PLAY A VIDEO GAME IN WHICH I OVERSAW MEAL preparations for a family of giant lizards.

I mean look, I knew that this was just a skill-builder job, but having been promoted to First Majordomo and having been doing so well with the Aa'an assassinating... I guess I lost track. But now I wanted to... to get *out* there! I'd been playing the game for *weeks*—months, depending on how you calculated it—and I'd just now actually gone into space!

It was time for a change.

As afternoon bled into evening, as meals were served, cleared, and the kitchen reset, as I dealt with the dozen petty staff issues that cropped up every game session, I started thinking about what would be next. A job in the Assassins' Guild didn't seem... too bad. But Devon had made it seem almost like a desk job, which wasn't appealing. Sure, I could skim the best jobs off the top, but... meh. I wanted action. I wanted adventure. I wanted to see the sights.

My god, I wanted to be in a space battle!

I thought about the skill-grinding I'd done to date, and decided to go over my character sheet.

Frank Kozina
Day Player
Class: Truthsayer (hidden)
Class: Assassin (hidden)
Class: Majordomo
Guild Membership: Galactic Assassins
Account: 450,890 Scales
Level 4

Reputations
Aa'an Board of Societal Norms: +500 (Friendly)
Galactic Guild of Assassins: +500

Attributes
Body: 11
Mind: 12
Soul: 10
HP: 44 (Body x Level)
XP: 15,427 (957 to level 5)
Unused Attribute Points: 0

Skills:
Aa'an Etiquette: 3
Advanced Assassination: 4
Basic Assassination: 4
Disguise: 4
Household Management: 4
Investing: 1
Knife Fighting: 2
Poisoning: 4
Politicking: 2
Spacewalking: 2
Stalking: 4

Stealth: 4
Thievery: 4
Trapping: 4

Missions:
Find Dwight Czarnowski [•ERROR%]

That "Dwight" mission was irritating. I hoped I'd find out what it meant someday. The good news was that the near-constant trickle of low-level XP that you earned for just existing in the game was inching me toward a level-up. That assassination mission would have put me well over, I knew, but in retrospect I'm glad I hadn't gone through with it. Turning an entire polity against you when you're a mere level five sounds a bit like a career-limiting move.

I pondered my skills list, going over what I'd managed to dredge up about the in-game skill web. Of all my skills, Household Management was the strongest candidate for getting me a job on a starship: I already knew it was adjacent to Business Management, and that most ships carried a business manager, purser, or similar role. And I already knew adjacencies counted: I was presumed to have a twenty percent competency in adjacent skills, which would amount to a Business Management skill of... almost one.

Could I just... convert the one to the other?

Can I convert Household Management to Business Management?

» Skill Web
Skills cannot be easily converted from one to another. However, it is possible to study an adjacent skill with a bonus toward skill-up time by leveraging your existing skill.

"Yeah, but how different are they?" I wondered aloud. "I mean, this isn't doing laundry or something. I'm running a small business, here. Household Management *is* Business Management. I wonder if—"

I blacked out.

I awoke in a plain, white, featureless room. Walls, ceiling, floor, everything was a glossy, evenly lit white. There didn't actually seem to be a source for that light—it just... existed.

> » Please wait
> Automated gameplay monitors have flagged an anomaly. Please wait while we investigate.

What? Anomaly? What the hell did that mean? "Hello?" I said aloud. No response. So what, I was just supposed to stand here and burn off my game time? "There's no anomaly," I said, trying to steady my voice. I shivered—a sensation of cold passed through me. Was that the anomaly? "What's hap–"

> » Thank you for your patience
> The situation has been resolved. There is no anomaly. We will use the data gathered from this investigation to improve your experience in the future.

The white room dissolved into the residence where I worked, and I found myself collapsed on the kitchen floor. The staff, still cleaning up for the evening, was stepping over and around me as if this was perfectly normal. "Ok," I said, easing myself back to my feet. "That was weird."

> » Caution: Your game day is ending.

What the... damnit, I must have been in that time-out room for longer than I'd thought. Damn. I'd really hoped I could figure out something with my skills. As I hurried back to my safe-space closet, I pulled up my character sheet again. As I locked my closet door behind me and leaned on the resting-platform, my eyes grew wide. Nothing on my character sheet had changed, save for one tiny, impossible thing in the Skills section.

Skills:
Aa'an Etiquette: 3
Advanced Assassination: 4
Basic Assassination: 4
Business Management: 4
Disguise: 4
Household Management: 4
Investing: 1
Knife Fighting: 2
Poisoning: 4
Politicking: 2
Spacewalking: 2
Stalking: 4
Stealth: 4
Thievery: 4
Trapping: 4

How was that a thing? Had I missed something? I knew for a fact that Business Management hadn't been there before I—

The world faded to black as my game session finally ended. Learning more—if indeed there was anything I actually *could* learn—would have to wait.

I WASTED HALF OF MY PRECIOUS SLEEP TIME DIGGING FURTHER into the dark web sites that tried to detail Endless Sky and the other Endless Domains games. It was a constant challenge, with Endless Domains' takedown bots forcing the online landscape to reinvent itself almost continually. And I didn't turn up a single new thing. There were rumors of systems for growing one skill based on another, comments about the learning-time bonuses you could get for an adjacent skill, but nothing about a new skill popping up just because I'd argued about it for two seconds. Some of the skill system's rules made sense to me now: "Converting" one skill to another would require

downloading the new skill into your brain, right? But what about the information from the old skill? Did it... could the game *extract* that? Like, remove it completely? But then how did I gain a brand-new skill, and at level four to boot? Is that why I blacked out and wound up in the white room? Was that the anomaly? Did the game have a bug that just gave out skills when you talked about them in the right way? Did other people know about this?

I finally dragged myself into bed for four hours of tossing and turning, never really falling asleep but at least feeling like maybe I was resting my eyes a little. The hum of the ventilation system eventually lured me into a world of half-awake, and I had strange, brief dreams of accounting ledgers and executive board meetings.

The next day at work was a profitable one, despite my fatigue. In fact, I half wonder if me being so tired and agreeable with my clients made them even more willing to throw in more money, maybe thinking they'd won some battle over me. One couple argued ferociously about the management fees we charged—one of the only ones I'd worked with who'd even noticed those fees—and I didn't put up a fight. I just sighed and said I could put them into whatever funds they wanted, took a careful note of their requests, and dumped all their money into the main fund anyway. It'd take them months to notice, and I'd earn the commissions along the way.

And those commissions were piling up, I noted with satisfaction as I slurped my eleventeenth coffee for the day. I'd been directing almost all of my commissions into the investment fund I'd set up for myself—moderate risk, steady returns, and low fees, thank you very much—but now I peeled some of that money out to place a very important order on Amaz-Mart.

First, the official Endless Care kit. No more trash bags, towels, and wishful thinking for me.

Second, a box of Endless Crunch. I know, I know. The reviews are terrible. I just couldn't stop myself.

That will still leave a substantial balance in my investment account and on my payment card. The investments were racking up

faster than I'd thought possible, especially since my main understanding of the passing of time these days was that a week ended when I had two mornings in a row with nothing to do but wait for game time to start. I wondered what else I could do with the money. My subsidized apartment was fine, I spent two-thirds of my time flat on my back in bed anyway. My food was fine—upgraded synthrations felt like a waste, and real food was still out of my budget. New clothes? Who'd see them? The question bore consideration. What were my investment clients planning to spend their money on? New houses, in some cases. Retirement, in many others—whatever that meant. The government would still cover subsistence housing and food, and after retirement age you didn't even have to work for it.

I clicked the "order" button, closed my account info, and waited for Amaz-Mart to process the order. Both items were scheduled to arrive in just hours, meaning I could try and sign off work an hour early—Investments was much more flexible about those things—and put the new system to use this very afternoon. As well as enjoy a dinner of "crunchy rocket crisps with exciting star and moon marshmallows." I downloaded the Endless Care manual and opened it in the background, figuring I could familiarize myself in between calls.

Order placed and manual downloading, I dug back into work. Something that couple had said was still wandering around in my mind: how they didn't understand how our fees could be so high when the EBITDA numbers of the companies in our fund were so low, and how cost of revenue on those companies was so high. Not that I cared about any of that: the reason it was all sticking with me is that *I freaking knew what it meant.* Just recalling their words had my brain barfing out acronym definitions: EBITDA, Earnings Before Income Tax, Depreciation, and Amortization. CoR, Cost of Revenue. Gross Margin. Net Margin. Growth percentage. *It all made sense.*

My Dad had been a Chief Operations Officer for a major manufacturing firm. To get that job, he'd told me, he'd gone to college for six years after high school to earn a Bachelor's in Business Administration, and then gone to graduate school for another three for a

Masters in Business Administration, and then interned for two years to become an officially Licensed Business Administrator. Eleven years of education. But Endless Sky had shoved at least some portion of all that into my brain *in a second,* all for the cost of a few black game pills.

I ran through the next couple of client calls on autopilot, assuring one lady that I'd for-sure get her in on that hot new stock and promising another than no, these kinds of market moves were normal, and she was better off leaving her money put for the time being. My brain was almost entirely focused on what it now knew, and what it now understood. Did people *know* about this skills-in-the-real thing? Like... what kind of job would I need to get in the game to make myself rich in the real?

Then the shiny new "business" part of my brain asked: what would it matter? The real world was stupid and boring. Shouldn't I be asking myself what kind of job would get me rich in the game, instead?

6 / ALLIANCE OF FREE EXPLORERS

The Endless Crunch was terrible. It somehow managed to feel like cardboard, and yet taste overly sweet, all at once. The nutrition readout was probably the only reason to force the stuff down your throat: a single serving contained all the protein and nearly all the carbs you'd need for an entire day. But man, did it make synth-meals seem appetizing.

The Endless Comfort kit was... well, I suppose it was what it was. It was certainly automated: you laid down in a kind of flexible partial cocoon, and pressed an activation button. The cocoon molded itself around your groin and—provided you'd removed your clothing, as the instructions I initially didn't read clearly stated—it would send a mild electrical current through your nethers, effectively numbing them for several minutes. Then it would snake a liquid catheter and a solid waste tube into your—well. You know. It was the oddest sensation, because while I couldn't really *feel* anything, you could definitely still tell *something* was going on... down there. The first time, I almost screamed and hit the "cancel" button, which is when I realized there was no "cancel" button. So I'd gritted my teeth until it was all over, at which point I honestly couldn't feel anything unusual. The manual—which I eventually *did* read—promised that all I needed to do was

empty the catch-pocket whenever a light on the handheld control was blinking. The kit came with an entire sanitization system that simply needed to be plugged into the port on the side of my toilet.

Over the past couple of days, I'd gotten thoroughly used to the cocoon routine, and it was now little more than a mild annoyance.

In-game, I'd continued working the majordomo thing for the next few game sessions, but it had definitely started to lose its appeal. I'd given serious consideration to Devon's offer of joining Guild leadership, even going so far as to request job descriptions and ask what additional training I could take to prepare myself. But my heart wasn't in it. That spacewalk had ignited a taste for something new, something exciting... something sci-fi. I'd even taken a class in spacewalking, bringing my skill up to a four. That had also, not incidentally, leveled me up to a five overall. I immediately slapped another attribute point into my Soul, and the other in my Mind. The hustle of my employer's residence quickly brought my Household Management skill to 5, with my Business Management skill inexplicably following along in lockstep. That meant both skills were firmly in the Journeyman range, which in theory meant I should be able to get a decent job using either.

Managing an Aa'an household no longer qualified as "decent."

It was almost like the game itself was trying to force me out of my job, which I suppose may have well been the case. I kept getting repetitive missions—really, when "Throw a Dinner Party XIII" comes up, you know you're at a dead end—and the Guild kept sending me low-end contracts to consider. Obviously, the game wanted me to move on, and possibly wanted me out on the streets with my poisons and knives. Even my Second—whatever their name had been—had gone, replaced almost instantly by another bright-eyed, bushy-tailed noob.

I *definitely* felt like I'd overstayed my welcome.

For the last few game sessions, I'd spent the least amount of time possible in the household. The game had noticed, sending me mission after mission: resolving conflicts between the staff, tracking down a

vendor that had been shorting orders, that kind of thing. I ignored every one of them, letting my Second deal with them instead. I spent my time skilling up where I could, and considering what kind of job I'd be able to get that would see me out in space. I took a six-hour course on "Basic Spacer Skills" that resulted in a level one Spacer skill being added to my roster. The skill download on that one was interesting, loading me up with what to do in the case of hull breaches, how to navigate a ship's artificial gravity, and so on.

All of that had an effect on my work at the bank, too. I'd logged in one morning to find that I'd been promoted to a supervisory position within the Investments team. Now, all I had to do was oversee other workers and I'd earn a percentage of their commissions. When I made them more successful, they made me more money. I leaned into the new job with gusto, sharing the secret to my success: talk customers into investing as much as possible in our core funds, and anything they didn't want invested there, invest there anyway. My personal credit balance continued to grow and an impressive rate, although the new job unfortunately left me with more free time. I say "unfortunate" because Endless Domains had launched a new generation of their takedown bot, effectively eliminating every dark web site that had attempted to document or explain their games. That meant my job turned into the occasional pep talk with my workers, a seemingly infinite amount of time to surf the web, and the odd recovery conversation with customers.

Those conversations had actually become the highlight of my day, giving me an opportunity to not only keep a customer with the bank—earning myself a healthy retention bonus at the same time—but potentially convincing them to double-down and give us even *more* of their money.

The game had noticed my increasing job skill and awarded me a Negotiating skill, which was now at level two. The way the real could influence the game, and vice-versa, absolutely fascinated me. In fact, right now the only thing that was fascinating me even more was my credit balance: I was rapidly approaching the point where the govern-

ment would end my food and housing subsidies, which meant I'd have to move out, find a new place, and fend for myself.

That would suck.

I at least wanted to get moving in Endless Sky before I had to deal with moving in the real. So of course that's when the game decided it had given me enough rope in my majordomo duties, and that it was time for me to hang.

I stepped out of my sleeping closet into barely controlled chaos: staff members were running around in a frenzy. The kitchen was sparkling, yet four staff members continued to scrub away at stains only they could see. Even the staff who tended to the Third Navigator's personal needs were in a tizzy, dashing back and forth from our employer's personal spaces and the storage closets where we kept clean sand and other amenities. In the span of just a minute, I saw servers, cooks, personal attendants, clothiers, and even the household fortune teller run past, all in a barely contained state of panic.

I grabbed one of the meal servers as it scurried past. "What's going on?"

"You haven't heard?" it hissed, its nearly-immobile face attempting an appalled look and its neck frill shaking violently. "Third Navigator was assassinated."

"Oh." Well, it wasn't me. "Isn't it traditional for the one moving into Third Navigator's place to assume the household?" Displacing the assassinated lizard's family, by the way, but as they were all NPCs I didn't care. But I was sure I'd read that the household tended to get attached to the position; one of the biggest difficulties in this part of the game was being promoted to a more notable household. It simply wasn't done.

"Tradition, but not requirement. The rumor is–"

I tuned out as a message pinged into my consciousness. My new

boss wanted to see me immediately. Ignoring whatever the server had left to say, I turned on my heel and hurried to what had been Third Navigator's office. The door was open, and so I stepped inside, assumed the First Position of Awed Introduction, and said, "First Majordomo Frank, as requested."

> » Skill-up! Your Aa'an Etiquette skill is now at level 3.
> XP awarded.

"I have reviewed the records of this household's operation for the past several cycles," the new Aa'an hissed from its chair, not bothering to introduce itself. "You have been negligent, and are partly responsible for the success of my assumption of this office. Your services are not required. You are dismissed, effective immediately."

For a moment—just a millisecond, really—my brain instinctively tried to argue the point. I hadn't been, I didn't do, I wasn't the one—but then the rest of my brain stomped on that part. I dropped the Position, smiled broadly—a minor insult to the Aa'an, who considered any display of teeth to be a challenge—and simply said, "Awesome." I pivoted, left the office, and quickly checked my personal storage. Yup, everything accounted for. I returned to my closet, changed into my street clothes, and started heading for the exit.

But then I paused. While I'd wanted to ditch the majordomo job, and while that Aa'an, whatever its name was, had done me a huge favor in pushing me on my way, I was still a little irritated at being fired.

So I strode back to its office and stepped inside. Its neck frill flattened in irritation when I didn't assume any of the proper position, and I could feel my Aa'an Etiquette skill poking at my brain, urging me to turn my feet inward, lift my right hand to my waist, and incline my head ten degrees.

Nope.

"By the way, I was *really* good at this job. It's just boring as hell. You're going to miss me. In fact, you're really stupid." Yeah, I know

it's just an NPC with no feelings and no consequences, but the whole point of an RPG is to play the story, right? No way was I going to walk out without getting in a dig or two.

But then something weird happened.

I felt a quick rush of bitter cold, and the Aa'an sitting in front of me... *flickered.* It was almost like a glitch in the game. It lasted for less than an instant, and as the cold faded from my body, I saw the Aa'an jaw slowly fall open. It stared at me as if it had never seen me—or possibly any human—before. "Will you tell me what to do?" it hissed slowly, its eyes confused and its frill laying limp against its neck.

"Sorry?" I asked just as slowly, not understanding what had happened.

"I don't know how to do my job," it said, its scales fading to a pale yellow-green. *Fear,* my Etiquette skill said. "Do you work here?" It looked imploringly at me.

Had this alien—who'd quite justifiably fired me—suddenly become... stupid? Just because I'd *said so?*

Panic started to rise in my chest, and I had a sudden, intense urge to be somewhere else. *Anywhere* else. "You'll be fine," I stammered as I backed out of the office. I hurried to the residence's exit and let myself out into the main corridor. I needed to get out of this entire sector of the cityship. Had I done something wrong? Could it be traced? My assassination skills were kicking in, urging me to *go,* and to do so in a way that would limit anyone's ability to connect me to the crime.

Had I committed a crime?

I headed for the nearest transit stop, my mind still trying to wrap itself around what had happened, and where I could go.

I decided to head back to the docks. The cityship maintained an entire sector of human lodging for visiting spacers, and I'd be able to lose myself more quickly, along with finding someplace

safe to stash my body when my game session ended. Along the way, I messaged the Guild, informing them that I'd been dismissed from my job and that I was seeking passage off the cityship. They acknowledged, advising me to find another cover job soon, or consider coming into the Guild itself full-time. Neither option sounded appealing right now, and so I continued to the docks.

As I exited the transit station, the first thing that caught my eye was a bar: "Donna's of New Rome," the sign announced. It was half-full of humans in the generic gray ship-suit that nearly all spacers wore nearly all the time, an outfit which would blend in well enough with my own black-and-gray street clothes. I threaded my way through the crowd until I reached the bar. "Lager," I ordered as the bartender—a short, busty blonde with the subtle green glow of a PC—caught my eye. She slid a frosty mug in front of me and continued working her way down the bar, slinging brightly colored—an sometimes glowing—liquids into glasses as customers placed their orders.

"Frank?" A woman's voice, behind me. I swiveled the bar stool I'd perched upon, and saw a neat mass of straight blue hair. I looked down, and saw the diminutive Captain Bo Mi-Chan standing underneath all the blue. She had a smile on her face, a twinkle in her eyes, and a beer in one hand.

"Captain," I said, sliding off my stool. It didn't help: she still only came up to my sternum.

"Siddown," she said with a laugh, bouncing onto an empty stool beside me. That at least put her closer to eye level. "I can't believe this game forces you to keep your same basic appearance. When I first logged in, I fully intended to be a seven-foot Valkyrie."

"Yeah," I said uneasily, not sure where this was going.

"So what brings you down here?"

That was easy. "I lost my job."

"Oh. I'm sorry."

"I'm not. It was a skill-builder, and it's time to go anyway. I'm going to look for a business manager position on a ship."

"Oh?" Her eyebrows raised in interest. "You know, I might know of an opening. Have you checked at the job desk yet?"

I shook my head. "I don't even know what that is."

"Good, because they charge an arm and a leg for referring people. So what's your class?"

"It *was* majordomo, a household manager. But I have an equal skill in business management."

"Which is?"

"Five."

"Journeyman. Hmm. Yeah, that might actually work. I mean," and here she adopted a mischievous grin, "we'll need to work on your EVA skill." Then she frowned. "Wait, I thought you were a dock worker."

Uh-oh. "Yeah," I said, drawing the word out as her frown deepened. "I should probably come clean about that."

"Do." Her voice was flat.

I looked around to ensure nobody else was listening. Everyone near us was in their own little conversational groups, speaking loudly enough to cover almost anything. I lowered my voice and leaned toward her. She leaned back a bit, but let me draw close enough to whisper, "I have a secret class."

"Oh." Her frown vanished, replaced by a curious expression. "Please tell me it's not industrial spy."

"It isn't."

"Then...?"

"I'm an assassin," I whispered even softer.

Her eyes widened. "An... wait. Wait, wait. Are you saying you were... were you trying to *kill* me, that day?"

I shrugged. "I'd taken a contract. My first with the Guild, actually."

"There's a Guild for assassins?"

I nodded. "But at the time, my Soul attribute was sub-average. I didn't realize it, but that kept me from seeing that the contract on you was sketchy. So I failed the mission, but when I touched base with

the Guild, they noticed some anomalies and pulled the contract completely."

"But who would want me—wait, what kind of anomaly?"

I shook my head. "Something about the authenticators being wrong or something. My Guild contact said their systems never should have processed the contract."

Now her eyes narrowed. "Ah. I suspect I know who did that, then."

"You do?"

"A Confed admiral, several systems away. We had a... disagreement. I thought we'd put it all behind us, but... well. I suppose having me offed on an Aa'an cityship would give him plenty of plausible deniability. He was in charge of a cyber warfare unit, so it makes sense that he was able to slip something into your guild's systems." Her face relaxed a bit as she considered me. "So you're a business manager and a... hired killer?" This time, she glanced around, checking to see if anyone was paying attention to us.

"Yeah, I guess you could put it that way."

"Honestly, if it wasn't for the green glow, I'd have pegged you as an NPC in an elaborate storyline."

"Why would—wait, you can see that?"

"See what?"

"The glow around PCs."

"Everyone can. It was a game upgrade. A recent one."

"Oh." I was pretty sure that wasn't where the glow had come from, but I said nothing else.

"Did you think it was just you?" I nodded. "You don't have many PC friends yet, do you?" Head shake. "Well, I think we can remedy that."

"How?"

"Like I said, I know of a ship looking for a business manager. It happens to be mine, the *Eternal Optimist*. And we've a whole crew ready to make new friends."

"You aren't worried about the... that I tried to..." I waved one hand in a prompt. "You know."

She shrugged. "It's just a game. I'd have been in time-out for longer than I'd prefer, but I'd respawn on the ship. I wouldn't lose much. We try not to carry much in our personal storage."

"What do you mean?"

"You've never died?" I shook my head. "You drop random items from your personal storage when you die. Since you're unlikely to respawn in the same place you died, whoever killed you can grab whatever you dropped. We keep as much as possible on the ship for that reason."

"So... if you knew someone was carrying something valuable, you could kill them and take it?"

"Yeah, but you'd get marked as a murderer. Every other player in the game could come after you with no consequences, for days."

"I wouldn't get marked if I was on contract."

"Yeah, I suppose. But still."

"So you don't think I was supposed to kill you just to get something from your inventory?"

"I wasn't carrying anything at the time. No, it wasn't an item-grab. Besides, you're terrible at EVA, I'm pretty sure I was perfectly safe. Frankly, I'm more worried about that Admiral trying again than about you trying to steal something."

"He won't," I blurted out. Another icy sensation washed through my body, making me shiver. I needed to figure out what was making that happen, and it worried me that I'd felt the same thing with the Aa'an I'd just left. "I mean, the Guild is looking into it. I doubt he'll try that again."

She gave me an odd look before nodding. "I'll take your word for it, I guess." She swigged the last of her beer and plunked the mug on the bar. "So, I've a few interview questions."

I leaned against the bar, took a swallow of lager, and tried to look confident. "Shoot."

"First, can I scan your character sheet? It'll only show public information, but it'll let me verify your skills and class."

"Sure."

» You are being scanned. Allow?

Yes.

"We'll need to change your class. I don't really know what a majordomo is, but it sounds weird."

"It's just a household manager. But I think I can do that right now." *Change my public class from Majordomo to Business Manager.*

» Your public class is now Business Manager.

"Done."

"Good enough. This says you're a day player."

"Yeah."

"Ever considered a pod? We mainly try to work with pod players; I don't mind easing into it with you, but having you gone two days out of three makes it complicated for the rest of us."

"Honestly, I've been thinking about it," I admitted. "I just haven't looked into the logistics."

"It's something we can probably help you with, then. We've all been through the process. It's actually easier than you might think. Cheaper, too. We can get everyone to share their decision-making process, along with the logistics."

"So you're in the game full-time?"

"Yup. The pod takes care of it all. In the real, we're awake for however many hours and then asleep for that long, corresponding with game time. The pods take over your diurnal cycle, so you're completely detached from whatever time it is in the real."

"Wow."

"You have a job in the real?"

"Yeah, sort of. It's not much."

"Something you could leave behind, then."

"Oh, in a heartbeat," I assured her. "Like I said, it's been on my mind."

"Yeah, okay, so long as you're open to it. I need someone pretty

badly, actually. We've been here a month, cross-docking cargo, but I'm pretty sure we've been screwed on what we sold our cargo for, and on what I'm about to pay for an outbound load."

"I can take a look at it," I offered.

"It'll be your first order of business," she agreed with a smile. "Okay, I'll need some time to get a berth ready for you, we've been using the business manager's space for storage. But it'll be private quarters and a small business office. Once you're on, you can set it as your respawn point, and the cabin is a safe space for day players. You have someplace you can bunk down for the night? It'll give me two days to get everything prepped, and you can start going over the new contracts before you turn in tonight."

"I don't, actually."

"It's fine. We've an account with the Nordic Arms across the corridor. It's not fancy, but it's clean, and it qualifies as a safe space for day players, too." Her eyes unfocused a bit as she communed with her internal messaging system. "Okay, I've got you a room. I guess we should go over your salary?"

I laughed. "Yeah, I guess we should."

"Alliance ships run as small communes," she explained. "We tend to work with the same group of ships, which we call a Gather. But each ship is self-sufficient and self-directing. So you'll get an equal share of all our jobs going forward. You don't own a share of our current reserve fund, but you'll earn a percentage over time, and anything that goes into the fund from here on out you'll be an equal owner of. We pay all our operating expenses first, and profits are shared evenly. Your berth and all shipboard meals are part of operating expenses, you don't pay for those. Aside from tonight—well, the next couple of nights—you're on your own if you want to get a room in port." She shrugged. "Most of us do it, just for the change of scenery if nothing else."

"Makes sense. And sounds good."

"Okay. In that case, I'm formally offering you a berth on the Free

Ship *Endless Optimist* as our business manager, under standard Alliance terms and conditions."

» Would you like to join the party 'FS Endless Optimist?'

Yes.

» Congratulations! You have joined the party 'FS Endless Optimist.'

"Excellent," she said, smiling and offering her hand. I shook it. "You should be able to communicate with all of us now, and I'll"—a quick unfocused gaze—"there, just sent you the contracts. Have a look and let me know what you think next game day. We'll plan to move you in then, we can try and make any contract changes you suggest, and we'll get the cargo loaded. I'm eager to be off this city-ship for a while."

"Awesome. I'll see you in a couple of days, then."

» Mission accepted: Negotiate a Better Deal

"Fly safe, Frank," she said with a smile.

I downed the last of my lager and stepped into the corridor. The Nordic Arms was right where she said it would be, so I walked into its tiny lobby, checked in, and made my way to my assigned room.

The contracts were complex and difficult, especially as I had no idea what was considered "usual" for hauling cargo through space. Worse, the *Eternal Optimist* wasn't *just* a cargo hauler; for this job, about thirty percent of her capacity would be taken up with cargo, but the rest was Aa'an goods—mainly tech like FTL drive components—that the crew was purchasing wholesale with the hope of reselling them for a profit elsewhere.

I needed to dig into the galactic trade picture.

After an hour of research, I'd gained a better understanding of the various commodities and specialties that were traded in the game. FTL components cam primarily from the Aa'an; similar tech from

the Qiar Compact were considered more reliable and higher quality, but vastly more expensive. Almost all other tech was Qiar. Foodstuffs tended to come from Confed planets. I was surprised to learn that the primary Aa'an export was rare minerals and fine gems, which apparently they mined from the various asteroid belts that their cityships passed through.

Eternal Optimist had emptied her holds on the cityship, selling everything she'd brought in. I reviewed the transactions, and grimly noted that Captain Mi-Cha had probable sold a little lower than she'd needed to. I made notes on the contracts for her to review. With her cargo capacity mostly emptied—I noted that they seemed to reserve about ten percent of the ship's cargo area for crew supplies—Mi-Cha was proposing to take on a large load of FTL tech, a variety of gems and minerals, and a few preserved specialty food containers that she'd picked up from another Alliance trader. Only those food containers had been offered at a fair price; the Aa'an materials were about twenty percent overpriced, and the FTL tech seemed expensive too, given how commoditized the Aa'an components apparently were. Again, I flagged several items on the contracts before sending them back to the captain.

She responded quickly, providing contact information for the purveyors she'd deal;t with, and telling me to do whatever I could to lower the prices. I got right on it, firing messages and scheduling calls for the remainder of the afternoon. As my game day started nearing its end, I'd firmed up a solid discount on the FTL items and switched vendors for the minerals, netting an almost half-off deal in exchange for up-front payment. That payment would have to come from the ship's reserves, but historically they'd never had any trouble selling those minerals, so it seemed like a safe bet. The gems were harder to negotiate, but I'd managed to rebalance the shipment to slightly higher-margin jewels, which should get us a net twenty percent better haul in the end.

> » Skill-up! Your Neogiating skill is now at level 3.

» Congratulations! You have gained a new skill: Market Analysis.

» Mission completed: Negotiate a Better Deal

XP Awarded

I checked the clock, and was pleased to see that I had a few hours of game time left. There was something I needed to try.

That cold sensation I'd felt twice today. The mysterious connection between my Household Management and Business Management skills. The "game upgrade" that had coincidentally dropped at the exact moment I'd told the game the PCs should have a green glow. It was all... suspicious.

"The bedspread I'm lying on is turquoise." Let's start with something innocuous.

A cold wave jolted through me and when I looked down, the bedspread was indeed a bright, light blue.

"Holy crap."

This was it, then! This was my hidden Truthsayer class! *Whatever I said, was true!*

"My Body attribute is 20." Let's go for the gold. But nothing happened: no wash of cold, and when I checked my character sheet's stats section, there was no change.

Frank Kozina

Day Player

Class: Truthsayer (hidden)

Class: Assassin (hidden)

Class: Business Manager

Guild Membership: Galactic Assassins

Account: 462,310 Scales

Level 5

Reputations

Aa'an Board of Societal Norms: +500 (Friendly)

Galactic Guild of Assassins: +500

Attributes
Body: 11
Mind: 13
Soul: 11
HP: 55 (Body x Level)
XP: 19,768 (13,000 to level 6)
Unused Attribute Points: 0

"Raise my Negotiating skill to level 5." Nothing. Maybe I needed to make statements, not orders? "My Negotiating skill is level 5." A slight shiver, but a quick check of my sheet showed no change. Odd. I *knew* I'd done something to get that Business Management skill. Of course... when I did that, I'd been tossed into time-out. Was that a cheat-monitoring response? Maybe I should lay off trying to up my own stats. "I'm sitting in that chair over there."

A *stab* of cold this time, followed by an intense feeling of nausea as my head swam. When everything settled, I was indeed in the chair —and I had a trickle of blood flowing down my nose. "Okay, maybe I avoid messing with myself in any way." I thought about it for a minute, trying to decide what I could safely experiment with. "The room I am in is actually a five-star suite."

The universe punched me in the face, then in the stomach, and then in the face again for good measure. I went down groaning, and stayed down for several minutes. When the pain subsided and I looked up again, I found that I was indeed in a five-star suite. I was on my knees in a swanky living area, and through an open door I could see where my turquoise-covered bed had gone. The living area included a kitchenette and an enormous entertainment panel.

"Holy crap," I repeated.

So: I could change the world just by saying so. I could affect myself in certain ways, but I couldn't—and probably shouldn't—affect my actual stats. Minor changes, like the bedspread color, were accompanied by a minor physical sensation. Bigger changes came with

bigger sensations, and I suspected that at some level of change I wouldn't survive the side effects.

This was... interesting.

> » Caution: Your game day is coming to an end.

I checked my full character sheet, just to see where I'd ended the day:

> **Frank Kozina**
> Day Player
> Class: Truthsayer (hidden)
> Class: Assassin (hidden)
> Class: Business Manager
> Guild Membership: Galactic Assassins
> Account: 462,310 Scales
> Level 5
>
> Reputations
> Aa'an Board of Societal Norms: +500 (Friendly)
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>
> Attributes
> Body: 11
> Mind: 13
> Soul: 11
> HP: 55 (Body x Level)
> XP: 19,768 (13,000 to level 6)
> Unused Attribute Points: 0
>
> Skills:
> Aa'an Etiquette: 4
> Advanced Assassination: 4
> Basic Assassination: 4
> Business Management: 5
> Disguise: 4

Household Management: 5
Investing: 1
Knife Fighting: 2
Market Analysis: 1
Negotiating: 3
Poisoning: 4
Politicking: 2
Spacer: 1
Spacewalking: 3
Stalking: 4
Stealth: 4
Thievery: 4
Trapping: 4

Missions:
Find Dwight Czarnowski [•ERROR%]

Solid progress for a day, and the most progress I'd made in a long time. I laid back in the oh-so-comfortable, turquoise-covered bed—a blessedly human-style bed, not the backboard-in-a-closet affair the Aa'an had provided—and glanced to ensure my room's door was secured. As the game faded to black, I realized I'd never felt so optimistic about my life.

About the game, I mean.

"Actually, work is going really well. I got moved into a supervisor spot."

I'd been wolfing down my post-game synth-meal when I'd noticed the flashing notification on my entertainment panel. Mom had called without leaving a message, so even given the late hour, I'd called her back.

"Honey, that's amazing!"

"Thing is... I'm actually thinking of going pod. In Endless Sky, I mean."

"Oh, I wondered if you were enjoying the game."

"Yeah, a lot. More so now, I've gotten to what I think is a really good place. It's just the other players are all in pods, so being a day player is a little awkward."

"I understand completely, dear."

"You do?" Mom hadn't seemed like the fully-immersive-game type.

"It's actually what I was calling about. I've... I've met someone, Frank."

"You have?" Intellectually, I knew Mom was a great lady with a great job, so of course she'd meet someone. Emotionally, I didn't know what to feel. Dad had been gone for years, so obviously she would want to–

"His name's Aaron. And... well, we've been playing one of the games together."

"The game—wait, you two are in Endless Sky?" I was gobsmacked.

"No, no, I don't think either of us would enjoy that. No, we've been playing Endless Paradise."

"Are you... did you guys go into pods?" I'd read plenty about the other Endless Domains games, and Endless Paradise was their over-fifty offering. You were given an empty tropical island and essentially unlimited resources to do whatever you want with it. Most people planted fruit orchards, built a little cottage, and spent a lot of time catching fish and butterflies. One reviewer had compared it to the old 2D "Animal Crossing" games. Apparently old people couldn't get enough of it.

"No, not yet. I mean, we've been talking about it. Aaron did really well in this month's fishing tournament, and we both had such a blast. I've another six months on my contract, but that's the end of it —I've hit my limit, they can't re-up me. So we've thought about

selling the apartment and just... moving onto our island. Did you know they let you transfer your cash into the games?"

"I did not know that," I said, possibilities blooming in my mind. I pulled up my account balance: it was substantial. I didn't know what the game currency exchange rates were like, but this should substantially boost my balance.

If I went the pod route, I reminded myself. It was feeling more and more like that was a foregone conclusion. Even Mom was looking at it.

"I just wanted to let you know. Of course I'll tell you once we're a little closer, if that's what we decide. And I wanted to check in on you."

"I'm doing fine, Mom."

"I know you are, baby. You've always figured it out. I'll let you go now, I'm guessing you just came off a game session."

"Yeah, but tomorrow's Saturday. I've got the whole day."

"Funny how that used to be a good thing, isn't it?" she said wistfully.

"Yeah."

We chatted a bit more before she signed off and I crawled back into bed to sleep.

Sleep was a long time coming that night.

7 / *FREE SHIP ETERNAL OPTIMIST*

It happened at last: my letter from the government, telling me that my accumulated credits had pushed me above the 500k-credit poverty line. I now had a three-month grace period, and if my income continued to hold at this level—and in fact, it was rising, thanks to the rapidly aggressive team I'd built—I'd lose my subsidized benefits. The letter congratulated me for my success.

Pfft.

The next Saturday morning, I fired up my entertainment panel and starting looking for alternative housing. The results made my stomach clench. I could get essentially the exact same apartment I was in now, in a privately owned building just across the street. It included a base meal plan that was identical to the one the government now provided me for free. In exchange for all that, I'd have to fork over something like 90% of my paycheck, which would basically leave me with less pocket money than I had now. Running the numbers, I realized that even keeping up with my Endless Play subscription of black game pills would be tight.

Ridiculous.

I wondered what the bank would say if I asked for my old job in Consumer Credit back.

I whiled away the rest of the morning looking at housing all over the city, and it was all the same story: I was making too much to receive subsidies, but not enough to actually live without the subsidies. Several news articles I ran across acknowledged the situation, and even named it: the Working Poor. The legislature had been promising to fix it through rent-controlled housing and an increase in the poverty limit, but they'd not actually done anything about it.

For, you know, a decade and a half.

I was so frustrated and depressed by it all that I decided to pop the day's black pill early. At least the game offered a more reasonable world to live in.

Reasonable, but not without excitement.

As I opened my eyes and my cabin resolved around me, I was accosted by the sound of a wailing siren and the eye-searing brightness of a set of flashing red strobes. My eyes flew the rest of the way open, and my body lurched out of bed: this was a ship's alarm.

I'd taken Mi-Cha's suggestion and slept in my spacer's ship-suit in case of just such an emergency. I quickly pulled on my boots, listening to the siren: long-long-short, long-long-long. A breach in the FTL power containment system.

My station in this kind of emergency was in Engineering, to offer whatever manual labor I could to assist the engineers. Grabbing an emergency rebreather as I lunged out of my cabin, I made my way to Engineering.

Endless Optimist was a standard Qiar freighter design, and included Qiar FTL components, which were—up until right now, apparently—more reliable than the cheaper Aa'an versions most ships mounted. The ship's long spine provided the vessel's primary structure, and contained all of its power systems. That spine ended in the cluster of engine nacelles that moved the ship in sublight, and the spine also contained the FTL engine. At the forward end of the

spine, opposite the sublight engines, was a big cylinder. This was centered on the spine, and contained all of our living and working spaces. Artificial gravity came from the spine, and a central corridor wrapped around the outside of the spine, cutting through the middle of the cylinder. On either side of that corridor were modular compartments, arrayed like chunky flower petals around the spine: crew cabins and officers' office spaces, the bridge, a medical bay, a tiny shuttle bay, a large mess-hall-and-rec-room, and the Engineering compartment.

Aft of those compartments and before the sublight engines, the spine was presently almost empty. It was designed to carry a series of thirty meter-long modular cargo containers, which could be easily attached and detached to the spine. Fully loaded, the ship would therefore look like a long, uniform cylinder. At present only one half-slot was occupied, and that was with the container that the crew used to store excess supplies. The captain had explained that, using those supplies, the ship could survive on its own for an extended period of time. "We rarely tap those rations," she'd added, "but it's standard for Alliance ships to prepare for the worst."

And that preparation included being ready for an FTL breach. As I exited my cabin I turned toward the ship's port side—clockwise around the spine—until I reached the dogged-down hatch of the Engineering compartment.

The environmental warning lights on the hatch were dark, so I braced myself and opened it. I was half-expecting a gout of flame to burst out, but there was no fire or smoke. I ducked in, pulled the hatch shut behind me, and started looking for the short, wiry form of Eto Tomiko, our Chief Engineer.

She was nowhere in sight, nor was our stocky, swarthy Engineer, Leone Napolitano.

But what was very much visible was a series of flashing blue lights directing me starboard. That, according to the training I'd had, was where the failed FTL energy conduit would be. If nobody else

was working on the problem, it was up to me—and the crash-course in emergency repairs I'd taken—to save the ship.

I took off at a run, following the lights.

When I got to the place where the conduit poked through the spine—that is, through the floor of the Engineering compartment—I skidded to a halt. Tomiko was standing there as if she hadn't a care in the world, grinning and pointing to the conduit. She'd placed a black sticker on it, indicating simulated damage.

This was a drill.

I frowned and looked at the nearby bulkhead. The emergency conduit patch that was *supposed* to be stored there was gone, its storage locker hanging open and empty. Trying to think quickly and all too aware of Tomiko's smug grin, I reached into my personal storage and withdrew my box of recipes. Flipping through it, I found **Patch, FTL conduit, emergency** and absorbed it into my consciousness. I'd need three Resources: Two Electronics and a Starship Mechanical. The Electronics were easy: I walked up to Tomika, snatched the slablet she'd been holding, and hurled it to the deck. It yielded three Electronics, and I grabbed two of them. Her mouth was still in the process of falling open when I spun to the opposite side of the space and grabbed a spare drive motivator module. Hurling that to the deck rewarded me with two Starship Mechanicals, a regular Mechanical, and a Precision, all of which I grabbed.

"What the hell–" Tomiko said, but I was already in motion, Crafting the patch as I ran for the "damaged" conduit.

I held the completed component over the black sticker. "I'm assuming I shouldn't drop this on here," I said, panting as I looked over my shoulder at her.

"Please don't," she said with a sigh. "You know, we do have stores of all the major resource types. You didn't have to break my slablet." She pointed mournfully at the lone Electronics resource still spinning slowly at her feet. "I can't make a new one, you know."

"Sorry, I was trying to act fast."

"Well, you did the right thing. Basically."

» Skill-up! Your Spacer skill is now at level 4.
XP awarded.

Constant drilling had gotten that skill to within a centimeter of leveling up, so I was delighted that I'd finally pushed it across the line. The crew had also gotten my Spacewalking skill to four, enabling me to finally execute the jump I'd failed at when trying to assassinate the captain. I'd also gotten my Market Analysis skill to two and Negotiating to four, both the result of extended research and haggling to sell our load of Aa'an gems for even more than I'd estimated. The ship's reserve fund was now over a quarter-billion Interrums, the exchange currency used by the Alliance. My own funds, after exchanging Aa'an Scales for Interrums, was at a healthy half-million, something both Captain Mi-Cha and her Executive Officer, Jakob Stroman, had expressed amazement over.

"End drill," Tomiko intoned, and the flashing lights abruptly stopped. "We'll still do those now and again," she added, "but I think we'll perhaps make them less regular. You seem to be all caught up." She leaned down and absorbed the Electronics into her personal storage. "You can buy me a drink in the mess hall." She frowned again. "And a new slablet the next time we're in port."

"I thought that would be an operational expense."

"Tell the captain that." Her dour look suggested she wasn't joking.

"What would you have expected me to do if I hadn't had that recipe?"

She cocked her head to one side as she thought. "There's another patch on the other side, obviously. And we're not actively in FTL, so you could have just hit the emergency stop," she said, pointing to the big red button sitting under its transparent cover. "But Crafting a new patch was a good idea. I just didn't expect you to use my slablet."

"I didn't know we carried spare resources."

"We do."

"Where?"

She pointed over her shoulder. "Back there. A dozen big drawers full, built into the bulkhead. I'll show you sometime. After that drink."

"Actually, I've got some research I wanted—" I began, but she interrupted me.

"It's an all-hands meeting, actually."

"Ah. Well, off we go."

The ship's combination mess hall and recreation room featured a large, rectangular central table with ten bolted-down stools. As I walked in, all but two were occupied. Captain Mi-Cha sat at one narrow end of the table, with Stroman on her right. Tomiko took the spot to his right, with Napolitano next to her. To the captain's left was Rashmi Lad, our pilot and navigator; Lucas Graves, our ship's doctor; Zuri Danjuma, our gunner; and Renart Massonl, our Security Chief and shuttle pilot. I took one of the remaining empty seats next to Napolitano at the end of the table.

"Okay," Mi-Cha began as Tomiko and I settled in. "Thanks in large part to our new business manager, we're flush for the first time in a while. I've asked Frank to work up some suggestions for our next trade run, but now that our coffers are full, I thought we'd do an exploration run."

"Oh, yeah," Danjuma said, rubbing her hands together.

"What's 'flush,' exactly?" Stroman asked.

"Frank?" Mi-Cha nodded to me.

"You guys were storing your earnings in an Alliance bank, which is fine. But they don't pay interest on your deposits, which kind of sucks." They were a bit like Ameri-Mex in that way. "Because they're actually loaning out your money, and charging interest on those loans."

"Wait, they're giving our money to other people?" Napolitano frowned.

"Loaning," I corrected him. "Their portfolio is mostly low-risk stuff, and they're on the hook if a loan defaults. Your money's protected under the terms of their agreement. But the point is, they're making like six precent on those loans, and keeping it all for themselves. I'd expect them to keep most of the profits, because they *are* on the hook if a loan defaults, but you should at least be getting a point or two."

"So... you did what?" Stroman asked. Now he was frowning as well.

"I kept an operating reserve in the bank, but I moved the rest into relatively low-risk investments. We'll only earn about five or six percent annually, but it's better than zero. But I also put a small amount—about ten percent of your capital—into higher-risk investments. Entirely within the Alliance, actually—there's a program for loaning money to startup ships as new people come into the game, and it's proven attractive enough to draw off some of the steady flow that goes into the Confed. Those loans are high-risk, but they use a short-term rollover accounting"—amazing how this was rolling off my tongue—"and so we've already realized an almost twenty percent return from our initial investment."

Everyone was quiet for a long moment. Lad broke the silence: "Meaning?"

I grinned. "Meaning your money is making more money. Our money, I guess. You've enough to cover a year-plus of normal operation, and that includes routine maintenance and refits as well as ammunition loadouts, based on your past usage."

"I like this guy," Napolitano said after another long silence.

"Now I'm totally in for an exploration run," Danjuma said, giving me a broad smile.

"What's an exploration run?" I asked.

"Star charts list unexplored worlds. So we pop in and visit one. Most of the time, it's a dungeon system—we either bail if we don't like the mission, or we fight it out and get whatever loot is on offer. But sometimes, it's a habitable, uninhabited system—and those sell

for big bucks. The Confed has an endless supply of noob colonists to place, and they'll sell spots on a colony ship to recoup the finder's fee they'll pay us."

"How much is big bucks?" I asked.

"Going rate is thirty to forty million depending on planetary conditions. Less if terraforming is needed, more if it's a paradise planet."

My eyes bulged. *Endless Optimist* herself had been purchased for just over fifty million, a loan the crew had only recently finished paying off. Running a ship like this was also bonkers-expensive; the trade run we'd just concluded had produced almost two million in profit against nearly a *hundred* million in revenue, after accounting for the ship's greed for fuel, minor repairs, and crew upkeep. "Have you ever actually found a planet like that?" I ran the math in my head. "Thirty million compounded at even just five percent for a couple of years... you add about three million."

"We found a twenty-mil that needed some serious 'forming," Tomiko said. "And that had a ten-mil bonus for the system's asteroid belt. It's how we paid off the ship loan." I was reminded again that I was the first non-founder—*plankowners,* they called themselves—on the ship, everyone else having participated in its purchase.

"And we picked up ten on another heavy-'forming find. Had to split that with another ship that showed up at the same minute and filed their claim at the same time as ours." Graves sounded like he was still angry about that one.

"We've found a variety of resource-rich systems with no habitable planet," Mi-Cha said. "The finders fees are lower, but it's how we were able to upgrade both the med-bay and the shuttle."

"But no jackpot planets," Stroman said sadly.

"But we're eternal optimists," Mi-Cha countered with a smile. "Anyway, that's what we're going to do next, since we've got a fifteen-meter cargo container full of supplies, a full tank of fuel, and enough money to tide us over for quite a while if we're careful."

"I thought all your balances had come from trading," I said. "Seems like exploring can be a lot more profitable."

"Yes and no," Mi-Cha said, waggling a hand. "You run into more dungeon-crawl systems than profitable ones, although the loot is usually good from a crawl."

"I might rethink the finances," I said slowly. "And the time allocation. If we can spend more time exploring but still stay in the black in terms of operations—"

"This is starting to feel like accounting," Graves joked.

"Don't forget to have *fun,* Frank," Mi-Cha said with a warm smile. "The money is great, and buying new toys for the ship or whatever is cool, but at the end of the day it's a game. We came here to *not* have to worry about money."

I nodded, putting my enthusiasm into a little box for later. "Sounds good," I said.

"But before we take off to explore the galaxy," Mi-Cha added, "I wanted to have the pod discussion with you."

"Oh, I'm pretty much sold," I said. "I was just informed i'm being kicked out of my place because I make too much, but I don't really make enough to pay for a place myself."

"Working Poor," Graves nodded sympathetically. "I was in the same fix."

"Most of us were," Lad agreed. "Especially in the region I'm from."

"Where's that?" I asked.

"Northern edge of the Indian subcontinent," they answered. "Technically part of the Pan Asian Accommodation, although the town I lived in was nominally autonomous."

"They let Endless Domains set up there?" The PAA was infamous for its restrictions on foreign technologies, and had announced their own line of fully immersive games.

"Yeah, nobody else has the quantum computing capacity to run immersives. But they couldn't offer the same lineup that they do

everyone else. So I actually left. Physically, I'm in the Expanded European Union right now."

"You moved just to play the game?" I wasn't sure if I'd have felt that strongly about it.

"To get out of the real and into this? Yeah, I'd have crossed the entire planet. I was the first of us to go pod."

"And we were all not far behind you, once you explained the finances," Stroman said.

"That was my question, actually," I said. "How'd you pay for it?"

"That's the thing," Masson said, pulling an artificial cigarette from his pocket and twiddling it between his fingers. I'd learned that his accent was French, and that—according to Danjuma—cigarettes were very much a national affectation in his part of the EEU. "If you quit your job, you won't come off the subsidies. And Endless Domains is a registered provider of housing and food. They just take your subsidies, and that pays for everything."

"Wait—moving into a pod is *free?*" How had nobody mentioned this to me?

"Free as a bird," Mi-Cha confirmed. "Sorry, I thought you knew and were just hesitant."

"Hesitant hell, I'll fill out the paperwork as soon as I'm done today."

"But I'm guessing you do have some funds, right?" Graves asked. "Since you hit the poverty line? They'll let you exchange them into the game, you know."

"Yeah, I've got a just-big-enough chunk. What's the exchange rate?"

"You're in the North American Attainment?" the doctor asked. I nodded an affirmative. "One NAA credit is 1.3 Interrums, last I looked." My eyes grew wide. "They make it worth your while," he said with a smile.

"I am *so* in. Seriously, it's the first thing I'm doing as soon as I come out of it."

"Well, that's made this a shorter conversation than I expected,"

Mi-Cha said with a grin. "But just a couple of checks before we go. You've reset your respawn point?"

"To the ship, yes," I answered.

"Okay. In the event the ship is destroyed, your automatic backup point will be on the same Gather station as all of us, so we'll appear together. Time-out is two hours per level, so you'll pop in after ten hours. We're mostly sevens and eights, so we'll be out a few hours after you. Just hang out, introduce yourself to anyone who asks, and wait for us."

"Okay. But if that happens, aren't we screwed?"

"Given that our money is technically in an Alliance bank, and whatever investments you've made, not really. We'd lose the ship of course, but we carry insurance that would help replace it, and if we find a jackpot planet... we can buy an even bigger one!" Mi-Cha's smile was mirrored by everyone else at the table. "Speaking of which—Rashmi?" she said, nodding at the pilot.

"I've picked a system that's about a four-hour FTL jump from here. It'll give us time to deal with a dungeon crawl if that's what we jump into, and if it's a jackpot system then we'll have time to take a good look around before Frank leaves us."

"Good enough. Stations, everyone. Frank, why don't you come up to the bridge?"

Everyone stood and began moving to their stations. The captain and XO belonged on the bridge, of course, along with the pilot and gunner. An observation couch along the back of the bridge provided seating for hangers-on like myself. Tomiko and Napolitano would head for Engineering, Graves for his med-bay, and Masson would act as backup gunner from the tiny aft gunning station situated next to Engineering.

We settled ourselves on the bridge and the captain called for status reports. Once everyone had reported in, she gave Lad the go-ahead, and we jumped.

It was only my second FTL jump, and I was still amazed at the artistry and effort Endless Sky's designers had put into the visuals. Stars blurred into rainbow streaks, giving the sensation of immense speed, while just a touch of inertia pushed us back into our seats for a moment. It was beautiful, and fully convincing. "It's gorgeous," I said.

"The underlying game mechanics are rubbish," Lad countered, their precise, clipped accent making them sound like a lecturer. "For all the artwork they put into it, the actual FTL system is simplistic. We're not actually traveling—the game just holds us in abeyance for the designated FTL travel time, and then dumps us out wherever we were headed."

"What else would you expect it to do?" I asked.

"If we were really transiting space, we should be able to drop out anywhere and find ourselves... somewhere. Wherever that was supposed to be. But I don't even plot a course, I just indicate the destination system and four hours later we'll be there."

"Guess it gets the job done," I ventured.

"Rashmi was expecting starship piloting to be complex and involved," Stroman chuckled. "They were a bit disappointed that 'piloting' and 'navigating' were easy enough to combine into one job."

"In FTL," Lad said, a smile in their voice. "In sublight? You know I'm one of the best in the Alliance."

"So we just... hang out for four hours?" I asked

"Yup," Stroman confirmed. "And no comms in FTL. Although if you downloaded anything before we left, it'll still be in your workstation's data cores."

"In that case," I said, standing, "I'll start going through that research I promised you."

"See you in four," Lad called over their shoulder as I exited.

"We're heeeeeere," Lad's voice boomed throughout the ship.

"All hands to battle stations just in case," the captain's voice added.

I rushed to the bridge, abandoning the tiny office that was adjacent to my cabin. I'd made major progress in understanding the markets for various commodities and rarities, and felt we could make a significant positive change in how we were operating the ship as a business. I'd also earned a bit of XP and boosted my Market Analysis skill to three.

As I sat down in one of the observer positions, Stroman said, "We're probing the system now, just nosing into it. We're coming from above the plane of the ecliptic, and usually you have to get within one AU or so to trigger a dungeon, if that's what this is."

"Hitting the AU mark... now," Lad added.

Everyone was quiet for a moment.

"Calling it," Mi-Cha said. "No dungeon. Run the system scan."

"Pfft," Lad snorted. "Like that's any better than FTL."

"The 'system scan' is basically just the game handing us a standardized set of information," Stroman explained. "I call them 'magic scanners.' For whatever level of scanner you bought, you get a specified dataset. The upside is that it's instantaneous."

"And it's no worse in terms of sci-fi than *Star Trek,*" Mi-Cha pointed out.

"So wait, we don't have... sensors?" I asked.

"No, we do. There's a difference." Lad's voice took on their lecturing tone again. "In reality, we'd only be able to perceive whatever electromagnetic information was already in this exact spot at this time. New information takes several light-minutes, even more, to reach us. So there's no way, in reality, we'd be able to jump in and immediately ascertain whether this was a habitable system or not."

"Sensors are different than the system scan," Danjuma said, picking up the thread if not Lad's lecture style. "Sensors are legit, and we've got a decent set in the forward bow along with simpler ones elsewhere. Those are used for range finding, identifying other ships, stuff like that."

"Although they're still much faster and more informative than would be possible in real life. Magic sensors," Lad grumbled. "Jackpot, guys," they added in a more chipper voice as their console starting displaying the system scan. "Unexplored system, asteroid belt with significant mineral resources, Earth-plus habitable planet."

"Earth-plus?" I asked.

"Paradise planet," Mi-Cha said, her voice filled with excitement. "Perfect climate, perfect land-to-ocean ratio, perfect everything. One in ten thousand odds, in the game. Maybe more."

"Filing the claim," Stroman said happily.

"Using the magic instantaneous communicators," Lad pointed out.

"Quantum-entangled comm relays," Mi-Cha said. The tone of their voices made it clear this was a dear and oft-revisited argument.

"Claim acknowledged, and... holy crap, cap," Stroman said, his voice going soft.

"What's the bounty?" Mi-Cha asked.

"Seventy. Seventy million Interrums too, not Confed credits."

I knew from my research that Interrums held a substantially higher value than Confederacy credits. Tapping my fingers on one knee to help with the math... "That's like a hundred and thirteen credits."

"Jack-pot," Lad breathed.

"Why so high?" I asked.

"Confed bounty," Stroman said. "Noobs will take out huge loans for a spot on the colony ship they send here. People will invest in setting up resorts, tourism spots, you name it."

"Couldn't we just keep it for ourselves?"

"Not really the Alliance way," Mi-Cha said. "I mean, yeah, we could. But we'd need to be prepared to defend it. Confed will be out here with a freaking dreadnought group once they pay the bounty. There's no way we could hold it once people know about it. And the Confed has... let's just say more 'opportunistic' groups that would

push us out. Nope, easier to take the money and go about our business."

"Claim registered. We should be getting the–" Stroman began.

> » Congratulations! You have discovered a new system rich in resources, with one habitable planet.

"There's a bit more," Stroman interjected.

"Holy wow," Mi-Cha said, looking at the data on her own console.

> The system also contains two planets suitable for terraforming. The Terran Confederacy has accepted your claim and has offered 110,000,000 Alliance Interrums. Your party leader has agreed to the fee.

"Wow," I said.

"We can buy a new boat," Stroman said, his voice subdued.

"Ship," Mi-Cha said, her voice rolling with gratification. "We can buy a whole new *ship*." She sighed happily. "Lad, can you put the habitable on screen?"

The screen changed from a system overview to a close-up of the paradise planet in question. It *looked* like paradise, like everything I'd been told Earth itself had once looked like. Puffy white clouds obscured deep blue oceans and sprawling, sinuous green continents. White caps at the poles told of healthy arctic environments. Data labels appeared, denoting an axial tilt that would offer four distinct seasons across most of the planet. There were no major lifeforms, giving future colonists the easiest possible ride.

"Look at those coast lines," Stroman said.

"It's practically *all* coast lines," Mi-Cha said. "All the landmasses are just... mountain ranges, with beaches on either side."

"They're definitely going to make this a tourist planet," Lad said.

"Resort hotels as far as the eye can see," Mi-Cha said dreamily.

"I hope so," Danjuma spoke up. "I want to come back and lay on those beaches with a cold, fruity, alcoholic drink in each hand."

"It'll cost a fortune," Stroman grumbled.

"Maybe not," Mi-Cha countered. "You've heard about Xanadu, right?"

"What's that?" I asked.

"Pleasure planet. Similar to this one, but they made a huge point of catering to all budgets. You can stay at a high-density beach high-rise, or go all spendy and book a private villa on a private island. They even have theme parks and stuff."

"I'm not holding my breath," Stroman said. "But still," he added more wistfully, "it'd sure be nice."

"Nothing else from the sensors," Lad said. "We do need to hang out until the drive recharges."

"We're going to fly around a bit, Frank," Mi-Cha said. "We've a few more unexplored systems we want to check out. Most will be dungeon crawls, but maybe there'll be some worthwhile loot. Are you for sure on the pod thing?"

"I am," I said.

"We'll stick with exploring, then. Until you get back."

"How long does it usually take?"

"You'll miss two or three game days. So, six to eight for us. No worries. I'm looking forward to that revised trading plan when you get back."

"I've a bit more research, but I'll have it in your inbox before I'm out for the day."

"Overachiever, I like it," she teased. "Lad, how long until we can jump?"

"FTL should be recharged in... four hours. A bit less."

"And the next jump?"

"Six hours and change."

"You'll miss the next one, Frank. You'll probably time out while we're in FTL."

"It's okay. Sounds like there's lots more." I stood. "See you all in a

a week." I fully intended to make good on my promise to have that new trade plan on Mi-Cha's desk before the game kicked me out.

I came out of the game filled with anticipation. I couldn't wait until the next day—surely Endless Domains was a 24/7 company, right? I pulled up the Endless Sky website on my entertainment panel and clicked through to the information on pods. Sure enough, I could submit my application right now.

The application was *extensive*. I had to fill out numerous forms, identifying myself, any next of kin, and my current employer. I had to list my subsidy information, and I'd have to agree to *irrevocably* assign those subsidies to Endless Domains. I glanced at that particular form a bit more carefully: what if I decided to leave the game at some point, and move back into an apartment? The fine print seemed to indicate that Endless Domains would then re-assign the subsidies back to me upon request, so I relaxed. There was another long paragraph about how Endless Domains would deal with my 'mortal remains' in the event... but I just quickly scanned that section and moved on. Of course people would die in a pod eventually, so of course they'd need permission to deal with the bodies. That was a long ways away for me, though.

I began filling out the forms, providing my citizenship information and identification numbers. The full process took over an hour, including a variety of disclosures that required me to actually wait several minutes to accept, encouraging me to read them all. I didn't—this was a done deal. I clicked the final "Accept" and sat back, fully expecting it'd be a day or two before I–

The panel *cheeped* and the screen cleared, displaying a new message:

> Congratulations! You have been accepted into the Endless Domains game pod program. A transport vehicle will pick you up at your residence in 48 hours. Please make all necessary arrangements prior to that time.

The message scrolled on, reminding me of the most important terms I'd accepted: I could bring two changes of clothes, but my other belongings would need to be placed in storage. I snorted: I didn't *have* any other belongings, aside from a collection of ratty clothes that I wouldn't miss. I turned the panel off and logged into the bank's workstation. Accessing my profile, I hovered my finger over the "RESIGN" button for a long moment. Setting my jaw, I stabbed at the button, my breath catching in my throat as it spun for a moment and then announced that I was no longer employed. A shipping container would arrive in a few hours, and I was to pack up the entire workstation for return to the bank.

Almost immediately, a message popped up on my entertainment panel, warning me that I was now required to begin seeking other employment. Fortunately, Endless Domains had figured that out as well: for legal purposes, I was now employed as a "play tester," and would earn the exact minimum necessary to satisfy the government and keep my subsidies coming. My earnings would, of course, go to offset the small portion of the pod fees that the subsidies themselves wouldn't cover. It was a slick arrangement, and I wondered for a moment how long Endless Domain's lawyers had labored to make it all work.

I thumbed an acknowledgement on the entertainment panel, turned the bank's workstation off and leaned back in my battered work chair. I felt... free. And a bit anxious. And entirely unencumbered. I had no job, and I no longer needed one.

I logged back into the entertainment panel and accessed Endless Domain's "pod transition" application. It confirmed that my game account would be credited 652,600 Interrums once I was ensconced in my new pod, and reminded me that I could transfer game credits

into the real at the same exchange rate, less a 5% commission, capped at the amount of real money I'd transferred in.

Whatever.

I wasn't planning on coming out.

I browsed through more informational pamphlets. They told me I could exit the game, and my pod, at any time. The Endless Domains pod centers each had a small hotel operation, where I could rent a room and order meals, although I'd likely need to transfer money out of the game—and pay the commission—unless I kept some money in an account somewhere in the real world. I thought about it for a moment, and then decided against it. What was I going to do, come out of the game and order a cheap synth-meal, and then just go back in? It didn't make sense. The whole point of this was to be able to spend all of my time *in* the game.

I flipped through a few more digital brochures, but found nothing interesting. Nothing that would change my mind, in any event. So I navigated to the comms screen and told the panel to connect to Mom.

8 / POD PERSON

Moving day had arrived.

I found myself incredibly nervous. I'd only ever lived in two places: Mom's relatively larger apartment and my little subsistence box. Now I was moving into an even slammer place, one that was right-sized to fit a human body and nothing more. But in doing so, I kept reminding myself, I'd never have to see the subsistence box again: I'd have an entire galaxy to wander with my new friends.

Endless Domains had already filed the appropriate digital forms with my building's management company, informing them that my unit would be available for sterilization and occupation. I'd received my final meal shipment, which instructions to retain the shipping container in order to return my leftovers. My bank workstation was already being returned, the compact CPU core box packed into a foam-padded container, the keyboard folded and packed into another, and the display rolled neatly into a tube and then stashed next to the keyboard. I'd selected the two changes of clothing I'd be taking with me—my least-ratty shirts, underclothes, and soft indoor pants—and was wearing my very-least-ratty outfit. When I'd woken this morning, with just two hours until my pickup time, I'd found my

entertainment panel already purged and waiting for a new resident to log in.

My one concern had been the pricey Endless Care equipment, but a quick online chat with Endless Domains assured me that I'd receive a full credit for it, since I was transitioning into a pod. They'd had a shipping cube sent over within an hour, and I'd packed the unit up and sent it on its way.

My bank account had been drained the night before, the credits—hopefully—transferred to Endless Domains and turned into Interrums.

I glanced at the clock display on the entertainment panel: ten minutes until my pickup.

Time to go.

I hoisted the flimsy bag that held my spare clothes and walked out of my apartment. The corridor felt like a foreign land, someplace distantly remembered from a dream. I vaguely remembered when Mom had helped me move into this unit, and I don't think I'd left it more than a half-dozen times since then.

I strode down the corridor, my shoes—the one almost pristine item of clothing I had, given how little use they'd seen—slapping against the scuffed, seamless gray flooring. I heard a quiet *ping* behind me, and when I looked back over my shoulder I saw a small, flat maintenance drone already sanitizing the floor behind me.

I stepped into the lift. It still recognized me, at least. "Lobby," it said in a flat, mechanical voice. "Please close your eyes." It knew that I was already on my residential floor so there'd be no other reasonable destination for me. Had I boarded in the lobby, it would have set itself for the seventy-eighth floor without me saying a word. I shut my eyes and felt the warm glow of the lift's ultraviolet lamps, doing their bit to kill any pathogens I might have been growing in my apartment.

A few minutes later I felt the lights wink out and I opened my eyes just as the lift door slid open before me. The building lobby was a simple affair: two other lifts each served different ranges of floors. All three emptied into a common area that was maybe three meters

square. Two doors led out of that foyer: one passed through a short, narrow hallway before ending in another door that led outside. The other was for entering the building, where you passed through two UV-bathed airlocks before being admitted to the elevators.

"Please exit the building," an automated announcement ordered. It was illegal to loiter in the common areas of any building. I moved to the exit and started walking down the narrow, glassed-in hallway. The security door at the end of the hallway had a small duraglas window, and through it I could see a bit of the street, illuminated with the gray, dim light that Albuquerque now called a summer day.

The final exit door snapped open in front of me, and then slid shut with a *clang* as I stepped through and clear.

I was on my own. If my entertainment panel had already forgotten me, then I was willing to bet the entry door had as well.

I watched the street for a few minutes, hoping my pickup would arrive on time. The street had six lanes, a standard arrangement for mostly residential areas. The outer lanes, closest to my building and the identical one across the street, gave vehicles a place to slow down and pick up or drop off passengers. The next lanes in were local-transit lanes, while the middle two were express rails that allowed vehicles to rapidly cut through this sector of the city. As I watched, a hundred-meter cargo train flashed through in one of the center lanes, whipping up enough air to blow even my short-cropped hair. I squinted against the wall of dust that rushed after the train.

A small black transit pod zipped up in the close lane, decelerating quickly and coming to a full stop. I stepped toward it and caught the pinpoint of red light that meant I was being scanned. "Frank Kozina, welcome," the pod's mechanical voice said. The passenger door pivoted upward and I crawled into the vehicle. It had clearly been designed more for safety and durability than for comfort: the bench I sat on was unpadded, heavy plastic, probably easy to sanitize once I got out. The door pivoted closed, and the vehicle rapidly accelerated into the transit lane, pushing me against the hard backrest.

The ride was uninteresting. We zipped past building after build-

ing, all grayly anonymous with their flat walls, secured entry and exit doors, and machine-readable street numbers. Fortunately, the ride was also short: I was maybe fifty kilometers away from the pod center, and at the speed we were moving it only took about a quarter-hour to get me there.

The transit pod angled out of the transit lane and into an opening in the side of a building, slowing down significantly as it did so. Looking out through the deeply tinted windows, all I could make out was a purple glow. We were likely in a tunnel then, which was blasting the vehicle with UV as we went. After a minute of that, the lights were left behind and the pod rolled to a smooth stop. The passenger door pivoted up, and I stepped out, bag of clothes in one hand.

As the pod closed itself and zipped away, I looked around. There wasn't much to see: a single door in front of me, with a panel mounted to the wall beside it. I was standing on a concrete pad that wasn't much longer than the pod had been, and was maybe two meters deep. I stepped toward the door, and the panel lit up, displaying a man's face. He wasn't much older than me, and he said, "Frank? Welcome to Endless Domains. We just need to do a quick UV blast, okay? Close your eyes."

Interesting that they had live human beings doing their greetings. I wondered if that was one of the legally protected jobs that human were required to do. I closed my eyes, stood still until the UV lights had come on and then switched off, and opened my eyes. I blinked quickly, the afterglow of the UV still painting dark spots in my vision.

"Come on in," the panel said.

The door slid open smoothly and slowly, and it was apparent how heavy it was. As I stepped through, I saw that even its slow speed was impressive—the thing was easily fifty centimeters thick.

As it slid shut behind me, I found myself in a small anteroom. In front of me was another heavy-looking door, and to my right was a small desk. Behind the desk was the man who'd greeted me through the panel. "Hi, Frank. My name's Sam, and I'll be helping you get

into your pod today." He stepped from around the desk, smiled, and gestured to the second door, which was now sliding open. "Step right this way."

I stepped through the second door and Sam followed. "Head to the third door on your left," he said easily. I counted off the doors as I passed them, but there was no need: as I approached the third door, it slid open. "Step right in."

I was now in a small... changing room? Before me was a generously sized shower cube, and next to that was a vertical locker, its door hanging partly open.

"In the locker you'll find a pod-suit. Go ahead and shower if you want, and then change into the pod-suit. Leave your clothes in the locker. I'll be waiting in the hall, just step out when you're done and I'll take you down to your pod."

"You have one of these rooms for everyone?" I said, doubt in my voice.

"No," he laughed. "Once your done, the system will move your locker into storage and sanitize the room. Whenever you want to come out of the game, we'll move your locker into a free changing room and guide you here. That way, you can shower off the pod-goo, change into your own clothes, and go do whatever you need to do. When you come back, we'll go through this again and get you back into your pod."

"Ah. Okay." Sam stepped out and the door slid shut.

I'd already showered that morning, so as inviting as the oversized cube looked, I decided just to get one with it. The locker contained the promised pod-suit, and it reminded me a bit of the ship-suits I'd been wearing on *Eternal Optimist.* The pod-suit had ports built into its tough gray fabric, clearly intended to provide access for waste removal systems, as well as what I assumed was a shunt for my arms. For all that they hid details about their games, Endless Domains was surprisingly candid about their pod systems: they would provide nutrients, waste removal, cleaning, and even muscle stimulation the

entire time I was ensconced, ensuring my body didn't deteriorate more than was avoidable.

I changed quickly, stashed my clothes in the locker, and closed the locker's door. I tapped the room's door and it slid open, where Sam was waiting with a smile. "Great," he said. "Let's get you back in the game!"

He led the way this time, glancing at a small slablet as we walked. "Endless Sky, huh? That's one of my favorites. It's one of the most popular for pods, too."

"You've played the others?"

"Not all of them. Endless Paradise is age-restricted, seniors only. But I've played Endless Kingdom and Endless Steam. I have an absolute terror of drowning, so Endless Deep is right out. Employees get to try any of the games for a period of time, and right now I'm finishing up my run in Endless Frontier. I've been thinking about Endless Heroes next, but honestly comic books were never my thing."

"Me either," I said.

"What drew you to Endless Sky?"

"My Mom bought me a starter kit."

"Oh. Well, hopefully she guessed right."

"Oh, absolutely. I love the game—I mean, I'm doing the pod and all."

"Good point!" he said with a chuckle. "Okay, here we are." Another door, this time on the right side of the hallway, slid open. Sam waved me in, and the door closed behind us.

This room was maybe four meters square, and it contained only one thing: a glossy black egg, its curved upper surface hinged upward at the fatter end.

My pod.

I stepped over to it and looked inside. There wasn't much to see: a flat black lounger of sorts took up almost all the space. My back would be reclined at about fifty degrees, while my legs would go on either side of a black hump that I assumed contained machinery and electronics.

"As you can see, there's not much to it," Sam said, joining me alongside the pod. "You'll lie down there and make yourself comfortable. The pod actually uses the same nano-net that's already in your brain, so it'll take you directly into the game. Once you're in, we'll button you up. The pod will connect to the ports on your suit for corporeal maintenance, and the pod will fill with an electrolytic gel that helps facilitate muscle maintenance. A conveyor system will move your pod into its position, and it'll connect to our power mains."

"Does it have batteries or something? You said it puts me in the game right away."

"Yup! It can actually keep you safe and in the game for forty-eight hours if our mains fail, but those mains are triply redundant. We have a direct connection to the receiver array here in town, and a grid connection to the next town over. We also have our own building batteries, which can run for about a week without mains. And we've never had even a minute of the mains being down. So you'll be perfectly safe the whole time. And the worst case scenario is that we lose power, run through the batteries, and run out of power. In that case, you'll come out of the game. Just push up on the pod lid to open it, unclip the ports, and climb down the ladder you'll find next to your pod. Battery-powered lights and chemical backup lights will come on once the batteries are depleted, and they can also last about a week." All that out, he smiled again. "But it'll never happen."

"And how do I exit the game, if I want to?"

"You'll get a quick tutorial as soon as you're back in."

Well. This was it, then. "Okay. Well, thanks." I climbed into the pod and relaxed into the seat. It was actually really comfortable, firm yet supportive down my entire back. "Here we go."

The real world faded away.

I was floating in space, just like when I'd first entered the game. Glowing blue letters appeared before me:

» Welcome to Endless Play™

The letters hung there for a moment before dissolving into a longer message:

> You will need to choose an exit word. This word, when repeated three times in quick succession, will trigger an exit from the game. You will be notified that your exit has been acknowledge. Please allow approximately one hour of game time before your exit is executed, giving us time to position your pod in a staging room and prepare a changing room for you.
>
> We suggest using an unusual word that would not normally be used in conversation.
>
> Our suggestion for you: BANDERSNATCH
>
> Do you want to use this as your exit word, or choose your own?

"That's fine." My voice echoed slightly as stars wheeled slowly about me.

> Your exit word is BANDERSNATCH. For calibration, please say your exit word three times in quick succession. In this and only this situation, you will not trigger a game exit.

"Bandersnatch. Bandersnatch. Bandersnatch."

> Your exit word has been accepted and calibrated. The next time you say that word three times in quick succession, you will trigger a game exit. Game exits cannot be cancelled once triggered. Do you understand?

"Yes."

> Once you trigger a game exit, you must exit the game for a minimum of three real-time days, which equates to nine game days. This provides us with time to sanitize and reset your pod. Do you understand?

"Yes."

> Your agreement with the Endless Play™ Pod System agreement, terms, and conditions, has already been recorded. Please review and accept the following End-User License Agreement to continue.

A scroll of tiny glowing blue text appeared. Absolutely no way was I reading all that. Besides, everyone else in a pod had already read it, so what was I going to find that they hadn't? "I accept."

> Acceptance registered.
>
> Please further confirm your irrevocable assignment of the following social benefits and subsidies to Endless Domains, Incorporated, which will manage these benefits and subsidies on your behalf:
>
> - Housing Subsidy, NAA Tier 7
> - Food Subsidy, NAA Tier 7

"Confirmed."

> Thank you for you confirmation. Your bank funds have already been received from AmeriMex Bank NAAAFF, and allocated to your player account in the form of (Endless Sky | Alliance of Free Explorers | Interrums).
>
> As a bonus for becoming a member of the Endless Play program, you have been awarded 10,000 XP. You will also receive 5 skill level-ups, which you must apply to skills now. You can apply up to 2 points per skill.
>
> » Level-up! You are now at level 6.

A wash of tingling energy rushed through me as the level-up hit.

"Allocate one attribute point to Body, and one to Soul," I instructed. That should put both at an even twelve. "Take Business Management to six, Investing to two, Market Analysis to 4, and Spacer to 6."

» Skill-up! Your Business Management skill is now at level 6.

» Skill-up! Your Household Management skill is now at level 6.

» Skill-up! Your Investing skill is now at level 2.

» Skill-up! Your Market Analysis skill is now at level 4.

» Skill-up! Your Spacer skill is now at level 6.

There was that weird connection between Business and Household management, which I'd pretty much confirmed was my doing. I felt mildly nauseous as the new skills downloaded into my brain, but perhaps because I was still in this floating-in-space game lobby situation, it didn't have as pronounced an effect as it had in the past. Or maybe that was another benefit of being in a pod.

» Please wait a moment while we synchronize you with game time.

I waited for a minute or two.

» Game time synchronized. Welcome back.

The stars grew brighter, swirling faster and faster, until I had to close my eyes. The light shined through my eyelids for a moment, but then it faded. I opened my eyes.

I was back in my cabin on *Eternal Optimist*.

I immediately summoned my character sheet to verify all the new changes. Particularly my money.

Frank Kozina
Class: Truthsayer (hidden)

Class: Assassin (hidden)
Class: Business Manager
Guild Membership: Galactic Assassins
Account: 1,169,600 Interrums
Party funds: 393,470,022 Interrums
Level 5

Reputations
Aa'an Board of Societal Norms: +500 (Friendly)
Galactic Guild of Assassins: +500

Attributes
Body: 12
Mind: 13
Soul: 12
HP: 55 (Body x Level)
XP: 34,768 (30,768 to level 7)
Unused Attribute Points: 0

Skills:
Aa'an Etiquette: 4
Advanced Assassination: 4
Basic Assassination: 4
Business Management: 6
Disguise: 4
Household Management: 6
Investing: 2
Knife Fighting: 2
Market Analysis: 4
Negotiating: 3
Poisoning: 4
Politicking: 2
Spacer: 6
Spacewalking: 4
Stalking: 4
Stealth: 4

Thievery: 4
Trapping: 4

Missions:
Find Dwight Czarnowski [•ERROR%]

Ah, Dwight, I'd find you one day. And holy hell, what had the crew been doing while I was gone? Almost four hundred thousand Interrums in the party account?

Time for a reunion.

"It obviously wasn't as nice as the one we found when you were with us, but it had a pretty significant asteroid belt, so the money was still good." Mi-Cha had welcomed me back tot he bridge with a huge smile. Stroman has given me a bear hug, Danjuma had clapped my back and offered my a fist bump, and even the normally standoffish Lad had offered a handshake. "We've actually got an embarrassment of riches now. I want to talk to you about investing some of it."

"Happy to. In fact, I just bumped my Investing skill. Which actually brings me to a question," I continued, taking a seat in one of the observer stations at the back of the bridge. "How much in personal funds do people in the Alliance usually keep on them?"

"What do you mean?" Stroman asked, his expression confused.

"I mean, it's a commune, right? One for all and all for one?"

"Sure," Danjuma said slowly. "But we still have our own discretionary funds. We get paid out each mission."

"So did everyone get a cut of that planetary find?"

"Well no," Mi-Cha said slowly, swiveling in her chair to give me a thoughtful look. "We actually all voted to leave those in party funds. The few times we've gotten a major payout, we tend to do that." She shook her head. "We actually should have included you in that decision, but if you want to draw your share, I'm sure–"

"No, that's not it," I stopped her. "So what do you all consider ordinary discretionary funds?"

Lad was the first to answer. "I usually keep at least ten grand liquid. If we get a payout more than that, I've invested it or bought myself something nice."

"Okay. Everyone else has similar numbers?" They all nodded. "See, I find myself with just under one and a quarter million Interrums." Eyes widened, and Lad turned from their console to look at me. "Yeah. I was actually making money—not enough to live on my own—but the incoming exchange rate is nuts, just like the doc said."

"So... do you have a question?" Mi-Cha said carefully.

"You all started this party together, so you're all in equally. I'm the newcomer. What would it take for me to buy up my share?"

"You've got access to the books," the captain said, her voice still cautious.

"I make it to be one-point-one mil, even," I said with a smile. "So with everyone's permission, I'd like to buy in."

"Just... put your cash into the party coffers?" Danjuma said, finally swiveling from her station to regard me.

"Yup. And separately from that, I've been looking into some ideas for making us even more successful."

"I've skimmed what you sent me but I haven't dug in," Mi-Cha admitted.

"I believe we can be insanely rich," I said. "Nobody's really working the system effectively in this game, as near as I can tell. If we're tactical on our investments, we could make even more money, and do it in a quarter the time. Which would give us more time for exploring, for dungeon crawls, or whatever."

"I sense a 'but,'" Stroman said.

"Nope. But with the money I want us to make, I think paying out shares of profits makes less sense. A true commune wouldn't. So I'd like to suggest we start paying ourselves salaries. That gives us discretionary personal funds for whatever those are used for, but lets us reinvest more in the business."

Mi-Cha smiled. "We'd actually discussed something similar before we voted to leave our finders fee split in the coffers. We need to put both items to a vote." She turned her head to the side for a moment as she accessed the in-game messaging system. The bridge was silent for a moment, and I saw the others flick their gazes sideways as they responded. "Well, that was unanimous. So if you're serious about proceeding..."

"I am." *Transfer 1,100,00 Interrums from personal funds to the party.*

> » Transfer complete.
> You are now a full shareholder in the party
> 'FS Enternal Optimist.'

"We've enough to buy this ship almost eight times over," Stroman said, clearly accessing his own character sheet.

"Not quite," Mi-Cha said. "We took a loan for fifty mil when we started the game. Ship prices have continued to climb since then. I checked while Frank was out, an exact replacement for *Eternal Optimist* would actually be closer to a billion, now."

"Inflation sucks," Lad muttered, turning back to their console.

"A billion is entirely within our reach," I said confidently. "And then some. I've a list of top-trading commodities and rarities, along with routes that will let us collect them and then offload them with minimal routing. For example, did you know that the Qiar pay out the nose for reticulated eggspawn?" Gross name, but it referred to a specific kind of Aa'an gemstone, not actual spawn of eggs. "And the Aa'an barely move the stuff, we can get it dirt-cheap."

"How'd you find that out?" Stroman asked.

"The data's out there, you just have to connect the dots. It's what I was spending all that time researching. We could–"

"Captain," Lad said, their voice suddenly tense.

"Crap," Mi-Cha said, swiveling to face the view screen. "Battle stations, everyone. Frank, we'll talk later."

"What's happening?" I stood and started toward the bridge exit.

My station was in the med bay, assisting Graves, unless something specific happened.

"Dungeon system," Lad snapped. "We've been drifting toward it, but we finally triggered it."

"Oooo," I said. "Well, I'll see you–"

"Sit, Frank," Mi-Cha said without turning around. "This'll be your first, right?"

"Yup."

"You'll love the view from up here. Graves will be fine."

"Thank you so much," I said, and I meant it. A space battle was the reason I'd gotten into this game in the first place, although it had taken me a while to remember it.

"Word is that this system drops a major loot container if you beat the crawl," Danjuma said, relish in her voice. "Supposedly contains a class-five battle laser head."

"We can't even power one of those," Stroman said greedily.

"I'm certain Eto can figure something out," Mi-Cha said, her voice just as excited. "All stations checking in ready, Rashmi. Take us in."

"So how exactly does a 'dungeon crawl' work in space?" I asked as I buckled myself in.

"Same basic idea. Sometimes puzzles, usually a few waves of attackers," Mi-Cha explained. "The better the loot, the harder it is to get through and the longer it takes."

"Sensor contact," Stroman announced. "Looks like a Grabber."

"A Grabber?" I asked.

Mi-Cha replied as the rest of the bridge crew leaned into their consoles. "So, the attackers in these dungeon systems aren't Aa'an or Qiar. We call them cthulus. They're giant, spacegoing monsters. Grabbers are the easiest, no ranged attack. They try to fly up to you and grab your ship with their tentacles. Massive electrical charges tend to damage sensitive systems, but that's it. Laser, Zuri."

"Already on it," the gunner said. The bridge's main viewscreen

switched to a tactical plot, and I could see the blue icon for our ship and a distant red icon for the attacker.

"Here, I'll put the Grabber in a pip," the captain said, and a smaller window opened in the corner of the main viewscreen. "Grabber" seemed an appropriate term for the ugly: it looked like a space version the biggest giant squid ever invented, a long, black, chitinous body ending in an array of flailing, fleshy tentacles.

On the main display, a yellow line leapt into existence, connecting our ship to the enemy. In less than a second, both the line and the red icon winked out. "Direct hit to the squishy bits," Danjuma announced. "Battle laser recharging. Full power in ten seconds."

"Eto, it's cthulus," Mi-Cha announced. The Chief Engineer would be listening closely, I imagined. "We're going to need to goose the laser and have the maneuvering package ready."

"That's already online," Tomiko's voice floated over the bridge. "And I got the second battery online as soon as we knew this was a crawler. It'll be charged in about five seconds and I'll switch it into the weapons array."

I longed to ask what all that meant, but didn't want to disturb anyone. Fortunately, our captain was in an explaining mood. "A freighter like this has horrible agility in a fight. At least when they're stock. Eto's responsible for all of our weapons upgrades, as well as a seriously enhanced maneuvering package that makes us as light as a destroyer when we're not carrying cargo."

"She Crafted all that?"

"Engineers can build their own recipes, actually. It takes a high skill level and a lot of time, but she's been in the game since day one."

"Wow."

"Sensor contact," Stroman called again. "Two this time. Resolving... looks like Spearfishers."

"In a pair," Mi-Cha said. "Evasive, Rashmi. Renart, ready on the second shotgun." In an aside to me, she added, "These ones fire large chitin spikes at a healthy percentage of lightspeed. So long as

we keep our distance we're fine, but they're better armored against the laser. We'll have to close to an unsafe range to fire the shotguns."

"Shotgun?" That sounded like underkill.

"Basically a miniature railgun," Danjuma said, her attention mostly on her console. "Rapidly fires five-centimeter balls of a heavy iron alloy. They'll punch through anything."

"We've a real railgun too," Stroman added, his eyes on the main screen, "but it takes almost a full minute to cycle."

"Do we have shields?" I asked.

Mi-Cha snorted. "You mean force fields? No. Endless Sky doesn't have force fields."

"Oh."

"We've got *me,*" Lad said, their voice almost a growl.

"Incoming!" Stroman shouted.

The ship slewed sideways in a complex spiral, throwing me against my harness and then back against my seat.

"Firing!" Danjuma said. "Masson, in three... two... one!"

A rattling noise thrummed through the bridge, caused—I presumed—by the shotguns firing a volley.

"Splash one," Stroman crowed. "And i think we nicked the other. It's coming around."

"I see it," Danjuma said.

"Incoming." Again, the ship seemed to *slide* sideways, twisting as it did so to keep the bow lined up to the enemy.

"Biggest downside of the shotguns and the railgun," Mi-Cha said softly. "They're fixed-position, so we have to aim the entire ship."

"Firing the railgun," Dannjuma said, her voice calm. A louder *thunk* made my seat shudder.

"Splash two!" Stroman said. "Right up the middle, nice shooting Zuri."

"And excellent maneuvering, Rashmi," Mi-Cha added.

"Comms contact," Stroman said.

"That'll be a clue," Mi-Cha snapped. "Capture it."

"Already on it." A moment passed, and then Stroman said, "Playback."

"Retreat, my children, retreat. I shall deal with this invader if it has the temerity to proceed beyond the shadow arc."

"Full stop," Mi-Cha said. "Any ideas?"

"What's it mean?" I asked.

"That's the point," she answered. "Generally you get some number of cthulu waves, and then you have to figure out a puzzle. You always get a clue in the form of an intercepted transmission, presumably from some kind of monster-mom to its children. So we have to figure out what it means."

I tilted my head, looking at the tactical plot on the screen. "Can you change that to show the whole system? Like, top-down?"

"Why don't you use the spare console?" Mi-Cha invited, gesturing to the front. She and Stroman sat in a two-chair pod, a full operating console on Mi-Cha's left and no Stroman's right. In front of them was a short arc of console, with Danjuma at the left position and Lad at the right. An empty chair sat in the middle. I unbuckled myself, walked around the command pod, and buckled myself into the middle chair.

The console lit up, and with a glance to my left I realized that all three were exactly the same—they could just be customized for specific tasks, like piloting or gunning. My Spacer skill prompted me to configure the middle station in a simple tactical mode, and I pulled up the view I'd requested. On either side of me, Danjuma and Lad were poking at their own consoles, trying to come up with something.

"Oh," I said, seeing it. "Can I put this on the main—ah, yeah. Look." I tapped a button and the main screen replicated my console's view. "See how the planets are laid out? And look, you've got these little patches of asteroids here and here."

"Sure," Mi-Cha said.

"So look, if you draw a series of lines outward from the sun, they get blocked when they hit a planet, right? Or even one of the asteroid patches." I used my finger to sketch a few example lines on the

screen. "But for most of the system, the sunlight is only blocked in those small places. But here," I said, drawing another line, "even though they're at different distances, these three planets and this asteroid field create a small arc where no sunlight leaves the system." I paused for effect.

"A shadow arc," Stroman breathed, beating me to it.

"Nice," Mi-Cha said, and I could hear the grin in her voice. "Rashmi, set a course."

> » Congratulations! You have gained a new skill: Starship Tactics.
>
> XP awarded.

I clenched my teeth as the skill downloaded into my brain. "How long will it take?" I asked once the sensation had passed. We'd been on the far sided of the sun from the shadow arc."

"Oh, only fifteen minutes or so," Lad said.

"Wait, how?"

"You want the *Star Trek* explanation or the real one?" they asked.

"What's the *Star Trek* explanation mean?"

"It's where we make up a lot of pseudo-science to try and explain the behavior we're seeing, even if it doesn't make any sense. In that case, the fact that we're able to travel something like—" they paused as she checked their console—"six AUs, about nine hundred million kilometers, in fifteen minutes, which is a speed of sixty million kilometers a minute, or about a million klicks per second, which is a bit more than three times the speed of light, can be easily explained by a powerful in-system drive and onboard inertial dampers to keep us all from getting squashed like bugs. To say nothing of the near-infinite energy that would be required, or the fact that we'd never be able to stop in time."

"So what's the real explanation?" All the math was making my head spin.

They shrugged. "Keeps the game interesting. Otherwise, the best

speed we could put on would be close to thirty thousand klicks a second, and it would take us forever to get there."

"The game plays fast and loose when it comes to distances," Mi-Cha translated with a chuckle.

"Ah."

"Eto, this may be the dungeon boss coming up in a bit under fifteen," Mi-Cha said. "Let's get everything charged up."

"Missile launcher is loaded," Tomiko replied. "You want the plasma torch ready too?"

"Yeah, fire it up."

"Plasma torch?" I asked.

"It's a modified heavy missile. We launch it, it orients itself on the enemy, and then lets off a twenty gigawatt plasma laser burst. One-time thing, it obviously fries itself. But it's five times the power of our main laser, and not much can stand up to that. In theory, with the right shot, we could take out a Confed carrier, or put a sizable hole in even a cityship."

"How many of those do we have?"

"Two," Danjuma said mournfully. "And reloading requires us to stop and do an EVA. We have to get the spare out of the cargo container and load it manually."

"Not going to happen in the middle of a thing," Lad summarized.

"Anyone want coffee?" Mi-Cha asked, unbuckling her harness and walking to the tiny service station next to where I'd been seated. Everyone responded affirmatively, and the captain spent a couple of minutes passing out small cups of steaming brown liquid. "Drink up!" We did, mildly scalding our throats, and then let her collect the empties. "Okay," she said as she buckled herself back into her chair. "Rashmi, take us up and over the ecliptic, and let's see if we can't get a scan of this thing before it sees us."

A few more minutes ticked quietly by. "Contact," Stroman said. "Ugh. It's a Spawner."

"I feel like they skipped a couple of levels," Mi-Cha said sourly.

"What's a—" I started.

"Momma-monster. Spits out hundreds of babies. They're a bit like Grabbers, but a lot smaller. They'll latch onto the hull and start burning their way inside."

"Wait, like in *The Matrix*?" I asked.

"I *loved* those movies!" Stroman cried. "And yeah, actually. I never thought of it, but it's a bit like those."

Suddenly the tactical display dissolved into static. "There's our Banshee, Cap," Stroman groaned. "Electronic countermeasures, Frank. It means we're on visuals."

"Hold that station, Frank," Mi-Cha ordered, all business now. "You're going to be an extra set of eyes. Rashmi, keep us on course until we catch sight of momma again. She'll have launched a wave already. Zuri, Renart, you two are on the small lasers. Pick off as much as you can. Eto, energize the hull, rotating polarity. When we get eyes on momma, Stroman takes the shot—the big railgun, both shotguns, and the big laser. Missiles will be useless in the sensor chop, but I'll stand by on the torch."

Everyone acknowledged their orders, and we all leaned into our consoles, intent on our tasks. Lad kept moving the ship through a twisting spiral as we closed on the Spawner's last-known location. I peered at my console, every available visual augmentation enabled. But it was all dim white spots against a black background. Something in my gut poked me, and I reversed the image: now crisp black motes stood out against a white background.

I saw it.

"There!" I shouted, sending my visual to the main screen.

"Oh, that's weird," Mi-Cha said, clearly startled by the black-on-white. "But smart. Jakob?"

"Already fired."

Scrabbling noises and loud *chunks* started filling the bridge. "They're on us," Mi-Cha said.

"Dorsal shotgun is offline," Stroman growled. "Shit, there's the belly gun too. They're not going for the hull, Bo, they're going for the guns."

"First salvo missed," Danjuma said. "We've got another wave of Scuttlers coming in, I think."

"Missile launcher is damaged, Bo," Tomiko said over the intercom. "They're heading for the spine."

"The downside of not having a full load of containers," Mi-Cha groused. "Keep the hull charge rotating."

"It's only about fifty percent effective, cap. We need to end this."

"Damnit," Mi-Cha cursed. "Lad, keep us lined up. I'm firing the torch."

"We're at max range for that," Danjuma warned. "Damn, I lost the little laser."

"Me too," Renart's voice cut in.

A thought drifted through my mind. "Captain, can you count down until it actually fires?"

"Yeah, but— nevermind. Launching." A *kachook* echoed through the bridge as the oversized missile launched. "Three. Two."

"It makes a direct hit at full power and takes out all the aliens," I muttered under my breath. A piercing cold stabbed through me, and then faded almost immediately. This shouldn't be a big change, just a few degrees of pitch and yaw...

"One."

My console flared white as the plasma torch fired, sending a hot lance of energy toward our enemy. "Will the little ones stop if we hit the Spawner?" I asked.

"Usually," Mi-Cha said, her voice tense.

"We've got a breach in the spine," Tomiko said. "Nothing serious yet but... wait."

My screen cleared, and the main screen's tactical display returned.

"ECM's down," Stroman said, his voice tense. "We must have hit the... holy crap. Splash two, Bo. You got 'em both."

The bridge was silent for a moment, and then it erupted into cheers. I could hear the other crew members whooping over the intercom as well.

"Okay, okay," Mi-Cha said. "Settle down. Jakob, can you see what's left? Everyone else, damage reports."

"There's a loot box," Stroman said excitedly.

"Shuttle's intact," Tomiko said.

"On it," Masson said.

"All weapons are down," Tomiko said, her voice sad. "Engines are fine, we've a couple of minor scars in the main hull, and a gouge in the spine, but that's it. We're intact, but defenseless."

"That was the luckiest shot in the universe," Stroman said.

"Masson, how you doing?" Mi-Cha asked.

"Just clearing the bay, I'll be over there in five."

We all waited anxiously, watching the tactical display as the icon for the ship's shuttle closed on the icon for the loot box the cthulu had dropped. When the two merged, we all saw the message:

> » Dungeon complete!
>
> You have conquered the Artemis IV system.
>
> » Reward: Class V battle laser emitter. This is a 10 gigawatt laser system, designed to be connected to a standard energy supply system.
>
> » Reward: 1,000XP per party member.
>
> » Reward: 1,000XP per active party member.
>
> » Bonus: 2,000XP per party member for 100% alien destruction.

"Oooo," Lad said, closing their eyes for a moment. Their green halo briefly flickered blue and yellow before settling back to green. "Level-up!"

I checked my character sheet: I was still over 21,000 XP away from level 7.

> » Your party has earned a new title: Demonslayer.

"Nice!" Mi-Cha exclaimed. "Our first title!"

"What's it do?" I asked.

"It'll give us bonuses in certain interactions. It's kind of like a global reputation modifier." She sighed contentedly. "Okay. Rashmi, where's the nearest decent-sized shipyard?"

"There's an Alliance Gather about five hours off," Lad said, tapping her console. "Full shipyard, should be able to handle anything up to a cruiser. More than enough room for us."

"Let's go get some fixes and upgrades," the captain said. "Make it so."

The ship wheeled around and the screen filled with rainbows.

9 / HEAVEN'S RIM

"Fire missiles!"

"Launching! Launcher one is now empty, launcher two has one round left."

"Railgun!"

"Still in continual firing pattern, Cap."

"Big Boy's charged!"

"Fire!"

A wash of light as the heavy laser drowned out the ship's visual sensors.

"Sensors!"

"Resolving, that thing makes a real hash of things... hit! Full amidships hit! She's breaking up!"

"Missile impact, got her engines! She's done for!"

"Secondary explosions! That's the carrier, and her escort was too close, she's taken damage!"

"Railgun impact on the escort! Secondary explosions, she's breaking up as well!"

» Dungeon complete!

You have conquered the Silver system and defeated the Mirror Minions.

» Reward: 12x antimatter missile
» Reward: Stealth technology control unit
» Reward: 2,000XP per party member.
» Reward: 2,000XP per active party member.
» Bonus: 1,000XP per party member for 100% enemy destruction.
» Bonus: 1,000XP per party member for sustaining less than 10% damage

"I feel like that last one was by a hair," Mi-Cha said, her voice excited but exhausted. "Where in the holy hell did 'Mirror Minions' come from?"

"If you've ever wondered how we'd hold up against a light Confed carrier group, now you know." Danjuma slumped into her seat, releasing her harness buckles and wiping her forehead. "Renart, you heading for the loot drop?"

"On my way to the shuttle," Masson replied.

This was the second dungeon crawl we'd completed since our repairs and upgrades, and felt like a celebration for my third game-week in a pod. We'd come through both dungeons relatively unscathed, sporting nothing more than some minor hull damage. In that time, I'd picked up another four thousand XP, a bump to my Tactics skill, and a new Starship Sensors skill that had served us well in this particular engagement. My place in the bridge's center console had become permanent, as both Lad and Danjuma had commented how more effective they were with someone rising the sensors full-time. And I was ten thousand XP closer to level 7, with a bit over eleven thousand to go.

The Silver system had been a *riot*. Whatever controlled the system was capable of fielding any kind of enemy ship it wanted—Terran Confederacy, Aa'an, Qiar, even mirrors of your own ship. Once Stroman had caught word of it on an Alliance news net, Mi-Cha was bound and determined to give it a run. We'd been thrown a three-ship Confed party, a carrier and two destroyers. Danjuma had reacted swiftly as soon as the carrier appeared, firing volleys from our

shotguns into the enemy ship's launch bays. She'd inflicted enough damage to effectively take the carrier out of the fight, meaning we could turn our focus to the more-nimble destroyers. Our new battle laser had skewered the first one right out of the gate, but had depleted so much battery power than the rest of our railguns—the small lasers as well as the railgun and shotguns—were slower to cycle. We'd spent time dodging missiles and firing our own, making heavy use of the two brand-new missile launchers and their six-round magazines. Sadly, those magazines—like the plasma torch—had to be manually replenished via an EVA, but we'd had just enough to see us through.

Pity the loot drop hadn't been more generous. As it was, we were basically breaking even on missiles, and were significantly down on railgun rounds. At least the XP had been worth it.

"Contact!" Stroman shouted. Everyone jumped, furiously tapping at consoles. Danjuma quickly refastened her harness buckles and started bringing the weapons back online.

"Renart, we've got company," Mi-Cha said, her voice tense. The shuttle was completely defenseless. "Rashmi, get us in between the shuttle and the newcomer. Frank, what have we got?"

Stroman, as XO, still kept the sensor readouts front and center on his console. I was responsible for detailed tactical scans. "It's... small," I said, furiously tapping the controls. "Five thousand kilotons, so smaller than us. Smaller than a Confed patrol ship. It's... it's like a yacht."

"Targeting," Danjuma growled.

"We're occluding the shuttle," Lad said.

"More NPCs?" Mi-Cha wondered. "Or PCs hoping to scoop our pathetic loot drop?"

"No way to tell," Stroman said.

"Actually," I said, and then muttered, "ships run by PCs appear with a green halo on tactical readouts." This time, the chill blasting through me *hurt*. I caught my breath and failed to stifle a groan.

"Frank?" Mi-Cha asked, concern overriding the curiosity in her voice.

"I'm fine," I managed as the sensation passed. "Stomach cramp. But look," I said, pointing to the main screen tactical display. "Green glow. The ship's run by PCs."

"That's a thing for ships too?" Stroman asked.

"It was an option in the sensor suite," I lied. "I just turned it on."

"Well. Who knew?" Stroman said.

"Hail them, Jakob," Mi-Cha ordered.

"Oh, right. Unknown vessel, this is the free ship *Eternal Optimist*. We've just wiped out an attacking convoy and we're a bit hair-triggered. Please identify yourself and state your intentions."

As this was happening, it occurred to me how easy it would be to accidentally Truthsay something. I needed to think about that, see if I couldn't come up with a way to make it safer.

"Hail, *Eternal Optimist,*" the reply came. "Unaffiliated private ship, *Jocelyn's Fancy*. We were here for the dungeon run."

"In *that?*" Stroman was aghast.

"Intel is that it customizes itself to your abilities, and we were really hoping to score the missile cache."

"Yeah guys, it's actually a dozen *cases* of missiles," Masson informed us. "I'm on my way back but the shuttle's hold can't fit a square centimeter more."

"Now it'll reset," the yacht's transmission continued. "Oh well. You guys heading out, then?"

"As soon as our shuttle's secured," Mi-Cha said.

"We'll hang out after you go. See what we get."

"Let us know, we can confirm whether or not this one adjusts itself or not."

"Yeah, will do."

"Renart's docked," Stroman said. "Rashmi, what's next?"

"I've got a two-hour jump to a Gather with a small refitting yard. Should be able to reload everything and touch up the hull."

"And I think we're due a celebration. Three dungeons in a row with completion bonuses? That's a record. Frank, pay out salaries due

and everyone can have a good time. I'm happy folks!" I turned around and saw the captain beaming. "Rashmi, make it so."

An Alliance Gather was always an impressive sight. This one—nicknamed Heaven's Rim by the commune-ships who'd formed it—was the first one I'd actually gotten to see in person.

First off, a Gather isn't a space station. The first Gathers in the game, I'm told, were formed by welding some old, salvaged ship hulls together and supplementing them with carved-out asteroids that were towed into position. These were never meant to be permanent residences or places of business, but instead to be a gathering point for an affiliated group of Alliance ships. They'd seen a need for some common storage, some meeting spaces, and the like, and so they'd fabricated for those needs.

Over time, the Gathers became an informal network, the only real non-mobile presence that the Alliance had. As a result, they started becoming trading hubs, a place for Alliance trade ships to exchange goods for everyone's financial gain. That of course led to some Gathers providing trade-centric resources like market analysis, logistics specialists, and the like. As the Alliance was 100% PCs, these Gathers provided a place for people who longed to be free, but didn't want to spend all their game time aboard a ship.

Eventually, some Alliance ships decided to become mercenaries for hire, and their Gathers serves as ersatz guild halls, a place where you could find and contract a merc ship for whatever fight you needed fought. Other ships decided to be adventurers focused on dungeon runs, and they built Gathers as a place to sell loot, repair their ships, and restock their ammo. Over time, those particular Gathers began building their own repair docks, and some even built up entire shipyards, serving other Alliance ships.

Heaven's Rim was a middling-sized Gather, one capable of repairing ships up to a fifty-kiloton cruiser and easily capable of

handling our ten-kiloton modified freighter. The centerpiece of the Gather was a series of cylindrical ship's hulls that had been welded together side-to-side in a large ring. A power plant was anchored in the middle of that ring, providing energy while reducing the danger of a containment failure. Docking points at the end of each cylinder could accommodate any size Alliance ship, which ranged from five-kiloton jitneys like the one we'd encountered at the Silver system to the thirty-kiloton destroyers favored by the mercenary communes. Inside, the cylinders features compact hotels, bars and restaurants, trade offices, and more; Heaven's Rim had become a jack-of-all-trades of sorts, closely approximating what you might find on any standard Confed space station.

Fortunately, the repair yard had an empty slip, and we were able to book our repairs before we even docked. We used our own shuttle to take us over to the main Gather, docking inside one of two cylinders that featured large, spacious shuttle bays. Once inside, we headed directly to Finke's Weight, the closest pub.

Mi-Cha knew the proprietor, introducing them as Angel to the rest of us. "Irish whiskey," she ordered with a grin. That grin spread to the rest of us when we realized Angel was free-pouring and was happy to let us tell them "when."

After tossing back her first drink, Mi-Cha burst into a short lick of song that was quickly picked up by everyone else in the place:

> Belly up to the bar, friend, have another round!
> It's long, cold, and lonely 'tween the times we hit the ground
> One day I'm gonna settle down, nevermore to roam
> But for now the bar's the spacer's home so far away from home

A round of applause was followed by another round of drinks. The whiskey was warm and smooth as it trickled down my throat, and I realized that this was the first time I was going to get truly *drunk* in the game.

I wondered if it would simulate a hangover as well.

"Sure thing, Dwight," Angel said. They'd moved down the bar a bit to serve another customer, and was now reaching for a bottle on a very high shelf.

Dwight. Not an odd name, but certainly not a common one.

Dwight.

Missions:

Find Dwight Czarnowski [•ERROR%]

Oh, right. I blinked a couple of times, amazed at how quickly the whiskey was kicking in, and took the few steps needed to close the gap between me and the short, fat, stringy-haired man that Angel had addressed. He had a wiry, unkempt beard, and looked wholly unlike any other avatar I'd seen in the game. "You're Dwight?" I asked, proud that at least my speech wasn't slurring yet. I wondered briefly what kind of Body stat you needed to be a really hard drinker this game, but came back to focus when Dwight turned around with a sigh.

"Yes," he said tiredly. "I'm Dwight. What did I do to you?"

"What?" I asked, suddenly confused.

He looked at me for a moment, his watery blue eyes peering into mine. "You're not here with some kind of grudge against me?"

"No. What kind of grudge?"

He shrugged. "You'd be surprised. Anyway, in that case, it's nice to meet you. Dwight Czarnowski. And you are...?"

» Mission complete: Find Dwight Czarnowski
%l: %d
XP awarded
[•ERROR%]

"Frank Kozina. I've been on a mission to find you."

"A mission to– I thought you said you didn't–" He stopped, his eyes growing wide. "Shit. Shit, it's you. It's *you,* isn't it?" He quickly looked around, and then leaned in and whispered, "You're the Truthsayer?"

I nodded.

"Hot damn," he whispered, taking a step back. "Hot *damn,*" he said more loudly. "I never thought I'd find you. Have you—do you know what it means? The... class?"

I nodded again.

"Oh God. Oh, we have to talk." He nodded toward my companions, standing behind me and—from the sound of it—well into another round. "Is that your party?"

"Yeah."

"Okay. They're going to want to hear this too. Um, let me think." He looked around for a minute, and then turned to the bartender. "Angel, I need the private room."

"Sure Dwight," they said. "How long?"

"Probably all night. Maybe past closing."

Angel's eyebrows rose. "Okay. No outside drinks, I can order food for you when you're ready."

"Thanks, Angel. I owe you." He turned back to me. "Go get your friends and follow me. It's important."

Anything to find out what was going on. "Hey guys," I said, turning back to find my crewmates tossing back another round. "I hate to interrupt but... well, we need to go back into the private room with this guy." I thumbed at Dwight over my shoulder. "I've got a secret character class and I think he knows why."

"Secret—more secret than the other secret?" Mi-Cha said, clearly making an effort to be steady.

"Yeah."

"Ugh. Okay." She thumbed a terminal on the bar, closing our tab. "How sober do we need to be for this?"

"Pretty f-ing sober," Dwight called from behind me.

"Ugh again. Okay, everyone. I'll make it up to you."

Everyone rolled their eyes, reached into a pocket, and withdrew a small blue ampule. They twisted the caps off, tossed back the contents, and dropped the ampules to the floor. "This had better be worth it," Stroman growled through gritted teeth. All of them were making unpleasant expressions.

"What was that?"

"Sober-Quik," Mi-Cha groaned. "Oh, I hate that stuff."

"You didn't give me one," I pointed out.

"It's your first time. I have a spare in case we actually needed you sober. Do you need it?"

"No, I think I'm good." The whiskey buzz was already fading as my curiosity about Dwight grew.

"Okay, let's go." Dwight led us to the back fo the bar, through a discreet door, and into a room that could have fit perhaps one or two more people at most. A waitress followed us in with a tray full of whiskey shots and water glasses. She laid the tray on one of the two high-top tables in the room and left, closing the door behind her. Dwight threw back a shot and sighed as he plunked the little glass back on the tray.

"Okay. First things first. I'm Dwight Czarnowski. Up until several months ago, I was the lead software developer at Endless Domains, and the project lead for Endless Sky in particular."

"Up until—what happened?" Lad asked.

"Well, I came into the game to do some troubleshooting, and to see how things were going. But then I couldn't get out."

"Why not?" Stroman asked.

"Because Hunter Dyson, the f-ing CEO of Endless Domains, cut off my exit word."

"Why?"

"Because I'd figured out what the company is doing."

"Which is what?" Mi-Cha asked, her voice suspicious.

"This is going to be a little hard to take," Dwight warned us. "How many of you are pod players?"

"We all are," Stroman said.

"And how long have you been in your pods?"

Stroman looked around. "I guess about a year, game time."

"Sixteen months," Mi-Cha corrected him. "Except Frank here, he's new. What's it been, a week?"

"Two, game time," I said.

"Then this is gonna be *really* hard to take." He drank another shot, took a deep breath, and said, "Dyson's vision is to make Earth a garden world again. To tear down the cities, tear down everything, and build a paradise planet for the richest people in the world. It's why the company invests so heavily in reforestation programs."

"I think everyone else is going to have a problem with that," Masson said.

"Yeah, well, not if you're all here in one of the games, right?"

"He'd still need to keep the pod centers. You can't just knock those down," I pointed out.

"That's where you're wrong, Frank. The whole time you're in the pod, the system is continually scanning your brain. It takes about three months in real time, but after that the system has a perfect digital model of your brain. It can run your brain *in the game,* on the quantum computing cores that run the game code. Once that happens..." his voice trailed off.

Danjuma barked a laugh. "You telling us that we're all just digital copies at this point? That what, our bodies are just..." She trailed off.

"You don't have bodies anymore. Not after nine months in here, three months out there. They recycle you, clean out your pod, and shove another person in it."

"That's ridiculous," Graves said. "I was an engineer in the real, there's no way you'd have enough compute capacity to run the game *and* the brains of everyone in it."

"And that's where *you're* wrong, my friend," Dwight said, shaking his head. "Every Endless Domains game running requires less than five percent of the total quantum compute capacity Dyson's built. He's got enough power to simulate every brain on Earth *twice over.* And he's been doing nothing but expanding that capacity since Endless Kingdom first went online."

"So we're dead," Tomiko said flatly, clearly not believing a word of it.

"You're ghosts," Dwight corrected her. "We all are. Except Frank, he hasn't been in long enough."

"Bullshit," Tomiko spat.

"Try your exit word. Go ahead, it won't work. But even if it does, I'm sure your friends will take care of your body until you're back in."

Tomiko simply glared at him.

"I'll try it," Masson said. *"Antidisestablishmentarisme Antidisestablishmentarisme Antidisestablishmentarisme."*

We all stood for several moments, waiting to see what would happen. Masson frowned. "You're supposed to get a confirmation message."

"And you would have, if it was capable of working. But you don't have a body to go back to."

"Banchejejuui. Banchejejuui. Banchejejuui," Mi-Cha intoned. "Nothing," she said after a full minute had passed.

"Shit," Danjuma said. "Sterre krag, sterre krag, sterre krag." Pause. "Nothing."

Everyone else said their exit words: Stroman's was in harsh-sounding German, Tomiko's in a clipped Japanese accent, Napolitano in some pidgin I didn't recognize, and Rashmi in a lilting Hindi. Graves' was "Beelzebub."

Nothing happened to any of them.

"You have my attention," Mi-Cha said softly.

"I think you have all of our attention," Stroman echoed.

"This is his plan. He gets you into the game, out of your humdrum boring lives. And it's all free! Did you know your government subsidies don't even begin to cover the operating expenses of a pod? Dyson eats the rest of it. And after three months, he unplugs you. Your brain continues running here in the game, and they just ditch your body. I found out. I didn't know *he* knew I knew, but the next time I came into the game to check on stuff, my exit word quit working. He held me in here until I was fully scanned, and I'm sure my body is feeding corn in some field somewhere by now."

"Jesus," Graves said, his face a mask of horror.

"You're the one who made the clear pill," I said.

"The who?" Stroman asked.

"My starter pack for Endless Sky came with three pills. The white one, the black one, and then a clear one that had been thrown in separately."

"Yeah, that was me. Had to sneak into the factory to do that, too. At that point, I suspected Dyson was on to me. I'd been popping in and out of the game, trying to figure out the details of what he was doing, messing with source code I shouldn't have. I'd planned to jump back in for a bit and see if I could troubleshoot it, find a way to warn day players not to go into pods. I was marked as a developer in the system, which at the time gave me some special abilities, but meant I couldn't flag myself either. So I made the clear pill."

"I'm going to need you to back up and explain all that," Mi-Cha said, reaching for a whiskey.

"Yeah, it's a lot. Okay. Here's the story.

"The time dilation in the games is based on your brains' sleep state. You know how you have have a dream that seems to last for a whole day, but it really all happens in thirty seconds? Same idea. Only we couldn't go for that level of time dilation, because we need you to be fully conscious and able to make decisions, obviously. So we tinkered until we came up with the three-times number. It works well, but it's actually not consistent. The three-days-to-one is actually just an average. In reality, your brains would all run somewhere between two point nine and three point two. Not a massive variation, but one we had to write a lot of code to accommodate. After all, you all need to feel like you're running on the same clock, even though at any given moment it's unlikely any of you are exactly synced.

"So I'm doing some checks on the code, because we were gearing up for a big version-two upgrade. Better detail, a more realistic FTL system, all that. But we'd been running into problems with the time variances. You don't realize it, but whenever you're in FTL, or asleep in the game, we actually slow your brain-clocks just a bit. It gives your brains a rest, and it makes it easier for them to stay on the three-times mode when you come out of FTL or wake up. But the new FTL system was throwing that all out of whack.

"That's when I noticed that some of the people in the game were running a *perfect* three-x. Absolutely perfect, no variation whatsoever, and they were *maintaining* it. So I thought wow, this would solve everything, right? And so I started looking into it. My first theory was maybe long-time players were just adapting, and in fact it was *all* long-time players who were exhibiting the steadiness. I started running background checks, to see if there was any particular region or whatever where this was more prevalent, and that's when I realized that the super-steady people were no longer connected back to a pod.

"The game normally has an in-system model of your brain, right? The nano-net that the white pill creates just gives us the ability to mirror your brain. Everything that happens in the game is mirrored back to your actual meat-brain, and vice-versa. But with these players, there was no mirror linkage. They were standalone models.

"So I visited one of the pod centers. I said I needed to run some diagnostics from right there, to get a better sense of the time dilation issues. I poked around for about four days.

"And I saw it.

"You know, your bodies aren't actually comatose or dead or anything, right? Once the link to the game is severed, you're still *you*. You're a living, breathing, thinking person. Except they inject an anesthetic into the pod. Then they pull you out, and they toss you into a processing plant. It literally makes you into fertilizer."

"I don't feel well," Lad said, their face flushed.

"It gets better," Dwight promised grimly. "I started digging around the code, and I found the scanning routines. That's where I figured out the three-month window. And in retrospect, that's probably where I screwed up. I started hacking the code, bypassing the routines that stored the scan-state, hoping that would slow them down. Maybe stop them."

"At no point did it occur to you to, I don't know, contact the authorities?" Napolitano said.

"Authorities? Haven't you been listening? They're the ones who

want this to happen! Think of how many people no longer need subsidized food and housing! All the people who no longer have to be given jobs! No, it *never* occurred to me to go to the 'authorities.'" Dwight scowled at Napolitano for a moment before continuing.

"Anyway, I eventually saw that Dyson had been *personally* checking on my code access and commits, and that's when I knew he must suspect something.

"As a member of the dev team, my in-game avatar has always had special capabilities. Or did, those are obviously gone now. But at the same time, some of the basics of the game are denied to me—and still are. I can't earn skills. I can't earn XP. My character class is locked to "Developer," which means I can't take on any of the actual in-game character classes.

"We designed all the games to include unlockable, hidden character classes. Some of those you can discover as you play, but we also had this idea that random starter packs would offer you special, secret classes. It was originally Marketing's idea, a way to drum up business. They even had the idea to sell power-ups in the real world, in blind packages, so people would have to buy lots of them to eventually get the special one they wanted. None of that happened. It didn't need to—Endless Kingdom was a hit from day one, so Dyson killed all the add-on marketing.

"But the code still exists.

"So I made the clear pill. I connected it to a class I'd made myself, called Truthsayer. And that class is connected to a special set of kernel routines that are left over from the earliest days of development. Whoever took the clear pill—that's Frank, in case you're not clear—becomes the Truthsayer. And anything he says becomes true."

"Come again?" Danjuma asked.

"If Frank makes a statement, a clear, definitive statement, and he puts just a little bit of focus and intent into it, then the game will make his statement true." Everyone was quiet. "He never told you."

"I... it took me a while to realize what was happening," I said.

"This green halo we've all got now? You did that, didn't you, Frank?"

I nodded.

"We thought that was a game upgrade," Stroman said.

"Everyone does. But I can assure you it isn't. What else have you done, Frank?"

"PC ships have a halo on tactical displays," I mumbled, embarrassed. "I fixed that fight we were in where you launched the plasma torch, Bo. To make sure it hit."

"I always wondered how it managed to kill *every one* of those cthulus," she mused.

"Tried to modify your own stats?" Dwight asked me. I shook my head. "Good. Don't. Don't modify *anyone's* stats. Don't change simple stuff like fuel levels or ammunition levels. The game has extensive anti-cheat monitors looking for that kind of behavior."

"How would anyone even begin to cheat in this game?" Graves asked.

Dwight shrugged. "We don't know. Once something is out in the world, people will tinker with it. Dyson was worried about people figuring something out, so the cheat monitors are kernel-level."

"You've said that word twice," Tomiko said. "*Kernel,* I mean. What is it?"

"It's the deepest level of the game, the most stable and protected level, the most highly privileged. Code running in the kernel can do literally anything, and it can't be stopped. The Truthsayer ability it coded into the kernel, which is why it can do almost anything."

"Except modify stats," I pointed out.

"Oh you *could.* But then the cheat monitors will notice, and they'll trace the change back to the kernel code, and then Dyson will know what I've done. As-is, nobody ever looks at the kernel code. It can't even be changed, really. It's embedded in the quantum surface of the compute cores. It's basically hardware." He paused and then

gave me a hard look. "And you don't *ever* want to modify anything about *yourself*."

"Why?"

"Modifications require a ton of data to be moved around. Big modifications even more so. I always imagined you'd... well, that you'd *feel* something. Do you?"

"Yeah. Cold. Really painful, sometimes."

"Changing yourself in any significant way would require your own data set to be relocated. I doubt you'd survive. The chance of corruption is incredibly high when the initiating pointer is asking the system to move its own address space."

"Okay, so why? Why the Truthsayer?" Mi-Cha asked.

"A couple of reasons. I've left some code stubs in the software, in places they'll never look. If I can get to the right place, I can tigger those—and they'll take effect in *all* the games."

"And what do these stubs do?" Stroman asked.

"Nothing sinister. I've rigged it so that it'll add a message to the game when you first go into a pod, It'll just warn you, that's all."

"And you can do this across all the games from in here?," Graves asked.

"Sort of. From in here, from the right place, I can trigger the code that's already out there. It's scattered, but I've a routine that'll pull it all together and activate it. And the first thing it'll do is bury backups of itself *everywhere,* so Endless Domains can never hack it all out."

"So where do you have to be to do all this?"

"Ah, that's the trick. We need to get to Earth."

"That exists?" Stroman asked, his eyebrows shooting up.

"It does. It's a special part of the game, a nexus of sorts. The entire game, everything and everyone on it, we're all incredibly hard to track from the outside. Like, sitting at one of the sysop consoles, I couldn't actually point to the data set that makes you, *you.* It's all quantum, you can't actually observe it without collapsing it. But every one of the games has a nexus region, an area where we can

segregate data, identify it, and work with it. In this game, it's Earth. We get there, and I can trigger my changes."

"And I can't just Truthsay your code into action from right here?" I asked.

Dwight shook his head slowly. "Nooooo," he drawled. "No. No, it needs someone with the Developer class. Even without my special abilities, once I'm in Earth system, I can kick it off."

"I think we need to discuss it as a group first," Mi-Cha said. "I feel like we'd be risking all of our... well, our lives. If we're caught doing this."

"Of course," Dwight said with a frown. Had he really just expected us all to leap in and agree?

"I have a question," Napolitano said.

"What?" Dwight looked distracted, caught up in his own thoughts.

"Will we live forever in here?"

"Yeah. Basically. Perma-death is a thing, but nominally, yeah. You can even have babies."

"Wait, babies?" That from Mi-Cha.

Dwight nodded. "Yup. Every school system in the world is using Endless Knowledge now. That's the education system Dyson came up with. Kids sit in little learning pods all day, and the system scans them. So it has neural net models for tens of thousands of kids, of almost every age. So yeah, you'll eventually be able to have babies in-game, and they'll act like real kids, but they'll be built entirely from those neural models. They'll be ghosts from the outset."

Everyone was quiet for a long moment. "That is deeply weird," Stroman said. "You should have started with that. Any company that does that needs to go down."

Dwight looked surprised that *this* is what it took to set people off, but he shrugged and simply said, "Yeah, okay."

"Back to the ship?" I asked.

"No, there'll be techs crawling all over it by now," Mi-Cha said. "I

got us a block of rooms for a few nights. The hotel should have a meeting room we can borrow."

"I can leave you here," Dwight offered.

"Oh you're doing that, and we're going back to our celebration," Mi-Cha said flatly. "And then we'll talk tomorrow, and then we'll come find you here tomorrow evening and let you know what we decided."

"Ah."

"He's crazy, right?"

Mi-Cha had done exactly as she'd said she would: we'd kicked Dwight out, kept the private room for ourselves, and drank the night away. We'd walked—stumbled—to our rooms in a nearby hotel, slept off the alcohol, and met for lunch. The hotel turned out to not have a meeting room we could use, but the restaurant where we'd eaten lunch did have a private room, which they were happy to rent to us for the afternoon.

"I mean, our exit words don't work." Tomiko had been glum all day, and seemed to have accepted Dwight's story as fact.

"But they could have just cut those off. I mean... grinding up bodies into fertilizer?" Stroman was still in denial.

"Anyone still hungry?" I asked.

Mi-Cha gave me an odd look. "I suppose I could do with a snack."

"Fries?"

"Sure."

"There's a bowl of fresh French fries in front of each of us." A snowman punched through my stomach and my eyes watered. I blinked away the tears as the smell of oil, salt, and potatoes drifted into my nostrils.

"Wow." Stroman picked one up and ate it. "Just wow."

Graves spoke up. "I hate to tell you this, but he's not wrong about the fertilizer thing. I mean, it fits."

"How do?" Stroman mumbled through a mouth full of fries.

"I told you I was an engineer. Civil. I worked on high-rises. You know one common feature of every residential building?"

"Please don't tell me that have people grinders," Lad said, their voice low.

"In the sub-levels. People die. Might as well put the remains to good use."

"But these aren't dead people," Stroman protested. "They're *us*."

"I'm not saying it's ethically sound, I'm saying it fits the pattern of what we do with unwanted bodies."

"Doesn't this violate the laws against fully sentient SIs?" Danjuma asked.

"I suspect they'd argue that they're simulating intelligence, not actually running a sentient system," Graves said.

"I suspect the people in charge of enforcing that law wouldn't care in the first place," I countered. Graves nodded agreement.

"So our bodies are mulch," Tomiko said glumly. Although honestly... looking at their faces, they seemed like they just felt obligated to be upset, but couldn't quit muster the feeling.

"The Truthsayer things is real," Mi-Cha sighed. "and our exit words don't work."

"So we're going to help this guy... change the game?" Stroman's voice was tinged with doubt and distrust.

"I think he's got something more serious in mind than adding a warning message," Lad muttered.

"Plus-one to that," Danjuma agreed.

"Can't we just tel the Confed Admiralty or something?" Graves said. "Most of the noobs go there anyway, they could just spread the word."

"I'll say it, because I know you're all thinking it. Even if I could exit the game right now..." Napolitano said slowly. Then he shook his

head. “I wouldn’t do it. I went into the pod because I was done with the real. I’m in here for good.”

“But shouldn’t everyone get to make that choice?” Lad said. “I don’t disagree, but... I don’t like that we didn’t have a choice. If we knew all he was doing was adding a warning message...” they trailed off, and looked away.

“But we’ve no reason to trust him,” Masson said.

“Well, and more than that,” Graves said, “his explanations don’t make sense. I wasn’t a software engineer, but I worked with a lot of them. Granted, I don’t know how the whole quantum brain thing works, but...” he scowled and shook his head.

“I *was* a software engineer,” Lad put in. “And you’re right. It doesn’t make sense. It’s why I don’t trust him.”

“But,” I said, a note of hopefulness in my voice making everyone look at me, “we could actually just take the find-the-Earth mission, right? Maybe just see how it goes? We don’t need to actually commit to following his plan past that.” Everyone thought about it and began nodding slowly.

“Yeah,” Mi-Cha said. “Let’s do that.”

> » Mission accepted: Quest for Earth
>
> Some believe that life here began out there. That the ancient cousins of today’s far-flung tribes of humanity still exist, on a mythical, hidden planet known as Earth.

“That’s so bad,” Danjuma groaned.

“What, you don’t like Battlestar?” Stroman challenged.

“Wait, there’s more,” I said before they could get into it.

> The party that finds Earth will unlock a significant XP award for each party member, and each member will also receive an automatic one-level upgrade. A reward of 500,000,000 Interrums will be credited to the party funds. Earth is rumored to be a home for highly advanced humans, and high-tech loot will also be awarded if the party makes contact with the ancestors. The party will receive special titles and reputation. Finally, exclusive skills and alternate character classes will be unlocked, including the ability to trigger a Galactic Transformation. There are no penalties for not completing the mission.

"Wow, that's the whole shootin' match," Stroman breathed, his attention now fully on the game's message.

"Which means it's harder than hell, or someone would have done it," Mi-Cha pointed out.

"But we've allegedly an in, right?" I grinned.

"Let's go dig up Dwight," Mi-Cha said.

"Ok, here's the deal," Mi-Cha said. We'd found Dwight back in the bar, already nursing an ale. "We've accepted the mission to find Earth. I'm presuming you have some kind of plan for that, since the rewards are ginormous and nobody else has ever done it."

"I do," Dwight began, but our captain cut him off.

"Once we're there, we'll revisit whatever it is you want to do. Bluntly, we've no reason to trust you. We're pretty sure you've got something bigger in mind than just adding a friendly warning to the game, and your explanations so far don't pass the smell test for us. And," she continued, holding up a finger as he opened his mouth to speak, "there's no guarantee that we'll go along with whatever it is you've planned. Let's be clear: Frank is the only one of us personally

affected by this, and while the rest of us are mildly appalled that Endless Domains would do all this in secret, we'd no plans of ever exiting the game anyway." She gave him a hard look. "You got all that?"

Dwight swallowed heavily and nodded. "Yeah. I'll take it."

"So how do we get to Earth?" I asked.

He shrugged. "You're the Truthsayer. This is the whole reason I created the class. From Earth system, even without my special dev team abilities, I can still kick off a number of clever things. But getting to Earth is hard. Like, *really* hard. Especially with the way the FTL system currently works. It's like nine puzzles nested within each other; it was designed to take someone *years* to figure out. But with you," he said, poking me in the chest with a finger, "we can bypass all the red tape."

"Can I just Truthsay us right there?"

"Absolutely not," he snapped. "That kind of change would require so many alterations to our data sets, we'd probably crash ourselves. You'd be fine Frank, the game would just re-mirror your meat brain and put you in timeout or something while it called an admin to look into you. But the rest of us?" He shook his head. "No meat brains. If our data models crash, we're dead. So no, we'll have to follow the route, but you'll let us do it in days, not years."

"Okay," I said. "I'm game."

"Our ship will be done tomorrow," Mi-Cha said. "Meet us here at thirteen-hundred and you can ride with us on our shuttle."

"Okay. What are you all going to do in the meantime?"

"Drink and talk about you," the captain said with a hard smile.

10 / THE QUEST FOR EARTH

"I'm a little surprised you and the crew are so into this."

Mi-Cha chuckled. "Why, because our bodies are all fertilizer and we have nothing to gain from this?"

"Yeah, I guess."

"But we do. This whole 'Find Earth' mission is awesome. The rewards are huge. We'll be *legends* in the game, no matter what the 'Galactic Transformation' is." She shrugged. "If this is where we spent the rest of... whatever... then we might as well be awesome at it."

"Valid."

"You spoke to Dwight yet?"

"No, I figured I'd wait until we're out of the Gather and ready to get going. He's been talking to Rashmi about routing."

"You know, I'm still not exactly clear why we can't just use your Truthsayer ability and go straight there."

"I'm not either. It has something to do with how the mission was written. But I'll be honest, it's part of why I'm not sure I trust Dwight."

She chewed her lower lip for a moment. "Yeah. You know, let's get some answers."

She stood and led me out of the little office that adjoined the bridge. Dwight was sitting in the middle console seat that had become my own, talking to Lad and poking the console's screen. Danjuma was in her position, watching the programmer suspiciously. Stroman wasn't on the bridge.

"Dwight my friend, it's time we get some concrete answers," the captain announced as she strode to her command station and lowered herself into its padded seat. I stood behind Dwight, trying to decode what he had on the console's screen.

"No kidding," Lad grumbled, not looking up from their station.

"Answers for what?" Dwight swiveled toward the captain, his face flushed and sweating.

"Let's start with why Frank can't just Truthsay us to Earth."

"I've told you," he said with a frown. "For one, making a change of that size would almost certainly corrupt the data that represents us all. The whole Truthsaying thing is a huge hack—there's no error detection, let alone error correction. If the system starts having to move enormous data sets around at random... there's no telling what will happen. Plus, and maybe I haven't been clear on this so okay, my bad, Earth doesn't exist in the game yet."

"Wait, what?" The tone of my voice was a bit higher and more panicked than I'd intended.

"We created Earth system as a kind of in-game staging area, a place we could move code and and data sets and actually observe them in action. We needed to ensure nothing got in that we didn't want, or it would make those observations harder. So there's no connection *from* the game *to* Earth. It's the other way around: the Earth system model *pulls* objects from the game. There's no way to trigger that from the outside. Or there wasn't."

"Is there now?"

"A few weeks after we launched the game, Earth became useless for sequestering code and data sets. There were so many in the game by then, the routines we wrote to pull them into Earth no longer worked. We couldn't identify individual data sets anymore. It's all

just quantum froth. So we decided to set the whole system up as an unlockable mission. But you have to actually *go through the mission* to trigger all the conditions that create the connection to Earth."

"But you said Frank could shortcut all that," Mi-Cha said cautiously.

"I said *some* of it. Not all. We have to go through the motions, but the individual steps are incredibly tedious. Frank can speed *that* up."

"Ah."

"He's been showing me the map of FTL jumps," Lad growled. "There are like twenty of them."

"Nineteen. And each has a task we have to complete," Dwight said. "But I think we can actually speed up some of even those."

"Oh?" Mi-Cha sounded interested now.

"So, if I remember correctly, a ship completing all nineteen tasks enters a wormhole which takes them, and only them, to Earth. It's intended to make sure nobody can steal their prize and trip the final trigger. But most of those nineteen tasks actually only enable about three triggers, and those—again, I only saw this code a couple of times, I wasn't on the mission design team—set off a final chunk of code. I might be able to have Frank just set that off."

"I'm not following," I said flatly. Dwight was horrible at explaining things.

"Sorry. The intention is that once you make it to Earth, you unlock the way to Earth for *everyone.* So you get your prize, and then everyone can go enjoy Earth system. It's coded as an absolute paradise."

"This is the 'Galactic Transformation?'" Mi-Cha asked.

Dwight frowned again. "I don't know what that actually is," he admitted. "So maybe. Maybe not. But that's not my point."

"I have trouble following your points," Mi-Cha said sharply.

"The *end state* of the mission is to open the way to Earth. But I think we can have Frank trigger that *first.* Earth will then be on the charts, and we can plot a direct FTL course to it. *Then* you can complete the mission by arriving before anyone else."

"Oh." Mi-Cha seemed taken aback. "Well if it's that—oh, wait. You mean it'll show up for everyone."

"Yeah. But they might not notice. Anyone actively pursuing that mission is probably deep in the middle of one of the nineteen tasks, and believe me, those demand your full attention."

"So why all the rigamarole with showing me this full routing?" Lad asked, clearly annoyed.

"I think we still need to transit some of those systems to get to Earth. I just don't know which ones are required, and which ones are optional. So I figured you might as well have the whole map."

"Ah."

"So what's stopping us?" Mi-Cha asked.

"Two things," Dwight said holding up a finger. "One, I needed to make sure you're ready." Another finger. "Two, we need Frank to do his bit."

"This'll hurt, I assume," I said.

"I honestly don't know, man," Dwight answered. "In theory, this isn't a major change, and it's not localized to you. So... maybe not."

"You should do this in sickbay," Mi-Cha said.

"It won't help. What Frank feels isn't actual game-inflicted pain from damage to his character. It's something deeper. Your doctor won't be able to fix it. he won't even be able to diagnose it."

"Fun," I sighed. "Cap, are we ready?"

"We're fully fueled, stocked, and armed." She thumbed a control on her chair's arm. "Okay everybody, we're going to get going. We've no idea what this will involve, but let's assume some solid fighting as a worst case. All stations yellow alert, check in ready." She paused for a moment as status lights began blinking on her screen. "Okay. Everyone's ready."

I took a deep breath. "The way to Earth is open," I said in a squeaky, high pitched voice.

I immediately felt like I'd been pulled in six directions and then allowed to snap back together.

"What's with the cartoon voice?" Dwight asked as my senses reassembled themselves.

"It's so I don't accidentally do anything," I muttered. "I told the system that the Truthsayer thing only works if I do it in a high-pitched voice. Get up." He quickly pulled himself out of my chair so that I could sit down. "Doing that felt gross, by the way," I told him.

"Yeah, sorry," he said. "Like I said, the whole thing's a huge hack."

"Nav maps updating," Lad said, their voice excited. "We've got Earth, cap. Looks like... maybe four stops. The system's hazy, it keeps suggesting a couple more routes, but they're blinking in and out."

"It may depend on how well we do at the first one," Dwight put in. "Like I told you, I got the routing, but I wasn't on the mission design team. They may have some conditionals in there."

"The first stop's stable and locked in," Lad said.

"Engage," Mi-Cha ordered.

"Fourth wave, just popped up. They're inside the orbit of the fourth planet." Stroman was back to operating the ship's sensors; Mi-Cha had banished Dwight and I to the observation stations at the back of the bridge, giving me firm instructions to "Keep him quiet and out of my way."

"And that's another thing," I said softly, leaning back toward the programmer. "We're just outside the third planet's orbit. Shouldn't the light from those ships have taken at least a few minutes to get here?"

"For one, you don't know it didn't," Dwight said, his voice just as low after a couple of increasingly irritated warnings from the captain. "But it didn't. We didn't bother simulating the real world. It's a video game. Actual space battles with missiles and lasers, fought across entire solar systems?" He shook his head. "It's totally impractical.

You'd have to slug it out for months, and in the end almost nobody would score any hits. We didn't even both with gravity, really."

"Missiles away, lasers still charging." That from Danjuma, of course.

"Eto, I need that capacitor bank online," Mi-Cha said calmly.

"Napolitano's on it, but it'll take four minutes," came the reply.

"That's not true," I said, keeping one ear on the battle and the other on Dwight. "We've got artificial gravity, and if you do an EVA it's in zero gravity."

"We created the Qiar specifically so every ship could have cheap, reliable antigravity," Dwight countered. "So we used the same gravity physics as in all the other games. And zero gravity is just the flight routines from Endless Kingdom, with some of the inertia-decay variables zeroed out."

"You're joking."

"I'm not, Dyson was a cheapskate. The sim team worked up an estimate to sim full gravity physics, and it would have been like six months. He canned the whole idea and told them to find a cheap workaround. He'd just spun up a team to start on Endless Toons and needed to shift the whole sim team over to that project."

"Jesus." Something occurred to me. "What do the other games use instead of FTL, to handle the time-sync issue you told us about?"

"Sleep. We do the same thing when you sleep in Endless Sky, actually. It's more than sufficient. But this game had to have FTL travel, so we just copied the time-slip routines into the FTL system."

"This is really appalling to hear."

"It's the same thing software developers have been doing since the beginning of time," he retorted.

"Splash one, splash two," Danjuma crowed. The forward screen lit up with the distant explosions. "Lasers coming online. Rashmi, give me a—"

"We've got a bogey on our tail!" Stroman barked.

"Evasive!" Mi-Cha shouted.

The ship surged forward and pulled up in a sharp turn that

should *not* have been possible on a so-called freighter. I opened my mouth to mention that to Dwight, and he just shook his head and shrugged. "Don't even get me started on the inertia routines," he said. "I think we hired a five year-old to code them."

The view on the main screen twisted and twirled, and steadied on the ship that had snuck up behind it. Masson, running the smaller lasers from below, unleashed a fusillade of blasts that tore the enemy apart.

"Woot!" Lad shouted happily. "That Immelmann just notched up my Dogfighting skill!"

Dogfighting in a freighter. I sighed.

"I honestly don't see the big deal," Dwight said. "It's not like we're modeling electricity for the lasers. You have *x* capacitor banks, you recharge in *y* seconds. Simple math. They're not *actual* capacitors, you know."

"Yeah, but still," I groused. "If you're just going to phone it all in, we should have transporters."

"We actually designed them," Dwight said. "But the coders started getting carried away with all the scenarios where they wouldn't work, with interference variables, and all that. It got too complex so Dyson pulled it all. The code's probably in there someplace, but you can't actually procure an object that will activate any of it. We never designed any actual hardware."

"Fifth wave!" Stroman announced. "Looks like the boss!"

"Wait, the fourth wave isn't even—" Mi-Cha began.

"He's firing!" Stroman shouted.

The ship shuddered—not the first time in this system, but by far the hardest.

"We're hit," Stroman said. "Severe damage to—"

"Cap, they got us in the capacitor banks!" Tomiko's panicked voice came over the intercom. "Napolitano is down, I need—"

"Already on my way," Graves' voice cut in.

"Frank, head to Engineering," Mi-Cha ordered.

"On it. You stay here," I told Dwight.

"No, take him with you, he's a distraction up here," she amended.

"Thanks so much," Dwight muttered as he followed me off the bridge.

Engineering was smoking when we arrived, and Tomiko quickly directed us to the capacitor banks. "I'm out of spares," she said tersely as she crawled back into an access hatch. "And we're out of resources, too," she added as she vanished into the ship's guts.

"You can't Truthsay the damage away," Dwight warned me. "The cheat monitors—"

"Yeah, I've worked a way around that," I snapped. This was the second system we'd visited on this quest, and the first had caused more than a little damage—with only one enemy to take down. This system was a full-on, multi-wave dungeon crawl, each wave harder than the last. I reached into a locker of spare Hull resources, something we had plenty of. "These are Electronics resources," I squeaked. The game poked me gently in the stomach—this was apparently no big deal—and the slowly spinning resource objects flickered and changed. I picked them up and accessed the much-used Capacitor Bank Repair recipe I'd found in my box o' recipes. My hands blurred, and in a moment the smoking component had been replaced with a shiny new one.

"Cheating," Dwight grumbled.

"Whatever," I said. "Tomiko, anything else?"

"No, I got this one," she said, crawling backwards out of the access panel. "You don't happen to have a laser emitter repair recipe, do you?"

I pulled the box from my personal storage and flipped through it. "No."

"Do you not have one yourself?" Dwight asked the engineer.

"I do, but that doesn't help Frank, and with Napolitano down it means I'm the only one who can use it."

"Why don't you just share it?" Dwight asked. His voice was genuinely confused.

"You can't share a recipe once you learn it," Dwight said, as if it was the most obvious thing in the universe.

Tomiko cocked an eyebrow. "Do tell."

"Just summon the card, as if you want to look at it."

She held out one hand and a glowing recipe card appeared in it.

"Now hand it to him."

She frowned. "I can't afford to not have this."

"You can't forget recipes once you learn them."

"None of this was in the tutorial," I said.

"Ha!" Dwight barked. "Those idiots. We outsourced the whole tutorial. I'm not surprised. They probably left out half of what they were supposed to include."

Tomiko rolled her eyes and took a step toward me. I touched the recipe, and it faded away as I felt it enter my consciousness. "Does seriously nobody know this is a thing?" I asked.

"I imagine people here and there have figured it out," Tomiko said. "I was always afraid of losing the recipe."

"Guys, are we good on the lasers, or no?" Ma-Chi's voice came over the intercom.

"Crap!" Tomiko said as she blushed. "Yeah, Bo, you're good! Should be charged!"

"Can't send Dwight anywhere apparently," we heard the captain mutter. "Get him, Zuri!" The intercom cut out, and we heard a high-pitched whine as the lasers discharged and the capacitors began their recharge countdown.

"Anything else I can help with down here?" I asked Tomiko.

"No, I think I—"

> » Congratulations! You have defeated the Endzeric Horde.

"The who?" I asked.

"It's just what they called the bad guys in this part," Dwight said. "We had built this whole system for multi-stage Quests, but Dyson never assigned any resources to write any, so all you've got are the

single-goal missions now. The mission designers linked them for Find the Earth, but it's all a hack. That's why we can bypass bits of it, and it's why they were able to just make up names."

> 2,000 XP for all party members.
> 1,000 XP for all active party members.
> Additional XP awarded for critical skills use.

I checked my character sheet and found I'd earned a total of five thousands XP, putting me within six thousand more of level seven.

> An FTL beacon has come online in this system. It directs the way to the next system on your journey.

"Captain, is it Earth?" I called out. We were still in red alert, so the intercom system would connect us automatically.

"No, Rashmi's saying not."

"Damnit. How much more Dwight?" I asked.

"This one, maybe one more. I don't know all the conditionals they put in." He thought about it for a moment. "Maybe three. That'd be what, six total?"

"Roughly," Tomiko sighed, turning around and closing up the access hatches she'd had open.

"Better than nineteen," Dwight said.

"Cap, we're going to need help, in that case. We're getting beaten up badly, and munitions are already low." Stroman sounded tired.

"Dwight, can we leave this thing and come right back to it?" the captain wanted to know.

"Absolutely, yeah. Nobody expected anyone to be able to complete this in a single run."

"Rashmi, how long to the nearest Gather where we could resupply?"

"Five-hour jump."

"Do it. Everyone relax, get cleaned up. Graves, how long on Napolitano?"

"About five, so it should work out fine," the doctor replied.

"Alright. Engage, Rashmi. I could use a beer."

The ships who'd created this Gather had named it Sparta, and it served as a home base for their mercenary businesses. The ships floating around the patched-together central structure—little more than a conglomeration of old ship hulls and oversized cargo containers—were warships in every sense of the word. Most were painted in outlandish colors and aggressive patterns, and Tomiko pointed out more than a few that had literally welded on unnecessary sharp pieces of hull plating just, "to make themselves look more menacing," in her words.

Sparta didn't have a proper shipyard, but it had ample repair slips and we were able to book ourselves into one for much-needed repairs and reloads. While we did, Captain Ma-Chi and I took our little shuttle to the Gather itself. We docked, and quickly made our way to a run-down little bar. A blinking neon sign proclaimed it to be "Jammer's."

"You know this place?" I asked as we slipped inside and found a table about midway in.

"Reputation only," she said, looking easily around her. "These guys put on a tough show, but they'll admit it's a show. Once they know we're here for business, we'll get along famously." Part of me hoped so, but a wild, videogame-based part of me hoped not. Jammer's looked like the perfect place for an XP-building bar fight: dim lighting, sticky floors, and furniture that looked sturdy enough to take a hit, but fragile enough not to break bones if you smashed it on someone. "Sitting at a table with empty seats means we're—ah, that was quick. Look alive."

I abandoned my trying-to-be-subtle rubbernecking at the bar and its patrons, and focused on the man that was sauntering up to our table. He was about my height, but about twice my build, with a

heavy square jaw, solidly built arms, and a scar running from his left eye to the left side of his mouth. His black hair was buzzed short, and he wore a sturdier-looking version of the ubiquitous gray shipsuit that we did.

He helped himself to one of our two free chairs. "Offering a contract?" he growled, only the right side of his mouth moving.

"FS *Eternal Optimist,*" Mi-Cha said. "Captain Bo Mi-Cha."

The man's demeanor changed dramatically. For one, the left side of his mouth seemed to free up as he broke into a broad grin. "I'm John Starkiller. Heard of you guys!" he said, offering a hand. Mi-Cha shook it. "Wow, you guys have done really well. What brings you here?" The growl was gone from his voice, leaving a young, brash-sounding tone that was completely at odds with the man's rough appearance.

"Well, we're on a Quest, actually."

His eyebrows climbed into his hairline. "That's a thing, now?"

"Sort of. Well, this one is." She leaned in, and in a conspiratorial whisper, said, "It's a Quest to Find the Earth."

He leaned back with a laugh, and pounded the table. "Jammer!" he called to the bartender. "Bring a round, would ya?" To us, he said, "That one comes up about every month or so. How far you into it?"

"We're two stops off," I said. "Maybe three. Frank Kozina, ship's Business Manager," I said as John's gaze shifted to me. "Starkiller?" I asked.

He shrugged. "Smith actually, but what's the fun in that? Wow, though. Two stops. Even if it's three, I've never heard of anyone getting so far."

"We've a few special talents that are helping," I said cagily.

"Looking to hire guns, then?"

Mi-Cha nodded. "The challenges have been getting harder and harder. I can guarantee a share of the prize—and it's substantial. What's your usual rate per ship for, say, three crawls?"

He thought for a moment before answering. "Assuming no split, we'd usually get a million apiece, per system."

"I'll guarantee that, as a minimum, for up to five ships. If you can get them."

"You guys *are* doing well," he mused. "So what're we up against?"

"Last system was a four-wave attack plus a boss. Fourth wave was eight ships, one of which jumped in behind us. Missiles, lasers, nothing exotic so far."

His eyebrows scrunched together. "That doesn't actually sound as impossible as everyone makes it out to be."

"As Frank said, we have some... special circumstances. Tell you what, I'll guarantee the pay even if you wind up getting wiped and respawn. I assume that's here?" Starkiller nodded. "We can put the funds in escrow so you're assured."

"Yeah, wow," he said, nodding slowly. "Yeah. My party's got two ships actually, the *Bull* and the *Siren*. We're close with another two-ship party, they fly the *Chip* and the *Dale,* and no, please don't ask. We can probably also convince Sarah Haskins on the *Crush and Run,* although she might ask for one and a quarter per system. She's worth it—her ship's twice as large, almost a destroyer to our corvettes."

"Add five percent for yourself to make it happen," Mi-Cha said easily. "I'll have Frank deposit the funds once we have a contract from you."

"This seems to good to be true," the man said wryly.

Mi-Cha laughed. "I mean, you get the earnest money anyway, if not a share of the reward. But I won't lie, you'll probably all be in time-out before it's over. The systems we've been through have each been exponentially harder so far, and if I'm being honest we believe we've managed to actually skip around two-thirds of the Quest."

"I wondered. Rumor is the whole thing is set up to take years and years."

"As I said, special circumstances."

"But you'll join us to your Quest party, right? Full share if we make it?"

"Absolutely. Frank will handle the contracts on our side."

He looked at us again for several long moments. "Yeah, you know,

why not? This is why all of us got into the game. I'll need to track down the other captains, but it shouldn't take long. Can I get back to you in... maybe an hour? Two at the most?"

That was faster than I'd expected. "Absolutely. Our ship's in for some repairs and reloading, so we'll be right here waiting."

"Actually," he said, leaning in and lowering his voice, "not to disrespect Jammer or anything, but you can see how long it takes to even get a beer here. This is really a tourist spot, someplace for outsiders to find us. Head inboard a corridor and look for a place called Puck's. Show 'em your Explorer identity and they'll let you in. It's a ton nicer, and I can look you up there." Mi-Cha nodded agreement. "Great. I'll be in touch. No," he added, raising his voice as a server-droid rolled over with a tray of half-full mugs. "you're too late and those aren't full anyway. Take 'em back. Jammer!" he called again. "C'mon man, these are Alliance people."

I looked and saw the bartender grin and shrug an apology.

"See you soon," Starkiller said as he pushed his chair back, rose, and left the bar.

The Sparta Gather was, as I've mentioned, a ramshackle collection of welded-together pieces, so it is perhaps not surprising that Captain Mi-Cha and I headed off down the wrong corridor. We quickly realized our mistake when we arrived at a dead end, forcing us to retrace our steps. We passed a small bar that I'd noticed the first time by—a dim, noisy place at least half-full of people in Terran Confederacy uniforms. "Is that common, on a Gather?" I asked Mi-Cha. "That many Confeds on an Alliance Gather?"

She peered into the bar. "Not in my experience. They must be looking for a—"

She was interrupted by a loud cry, the sound of smashing furniture, and the arrival of a young, uniformed man who'd been tossed out of the bar's open double doors.

"—fight," she finished. The man picked himself up with a groan, dusted himself off—not that the metal decking was especially dusty—and headed back into the bar with an angry look on his face.

"Shame," I said sadly.

"How so?"

"Never been in a bar fight."

She looked back in, clearly weighing the odds. "Alliance looks roughly even," she said, her voice easy. "But I'm sure they wouldn't object to the help."

"Seriously?"

"Why not? It's just a game." And with that and an impish grin, she grabbed my arm and drug me into the bar.

"Is it okay to hurt them?" I managed to get out as we strode through the doors.

"Sure. They'll respawn."

"Cool." We ducked as a chair flew toward us and out the door, shattering in the corridor. Mi-Cha stood and attacked a Confed combatant from behind, grabbing a fitful of his hair and pulling him toward her. She twisted as she did so, raising one knee into his leg and letting his own weight pull him to the floor as she let go of his hair. She kicked him in the side for good measure, and he stayed down.

A uniformed arm wrapped itself around my throat, pulling me backwards and off-balance just as Mi-Cha waded deeper into the fracas. I pulled one of my knives out of personal storage and stabbed the arm, ripping the uniform sleeve and raking a long gouge into the arm. The arm's owner howled behind me, letting go almost instantly. I whirled, my other fist cocked and ready, and caught the man in the temple as he hunched over, holding his injured arm to his chest. His eyes rolled back as the shockwave vibrated up my arm and into my shoulder, and then slumped to the ground. His body faded, and several glowing items appeared on the floor.

» Congratulations! You have gained a new skill: Melee Fighting.

I quickly kicked my leg into the glowing items.

» 27 Credits
» Small personal blaster
» Stun wand
» Your personal storage is 75% full

I had no idea how to use a personal blaster, but "stun wand" sounded easy enough. I summoned it from storage, pressed the only button on the long cylindrical device, and was delighted to see the business end light up a glowing blue. I started laying into everyone around me who was in uniform, each person yelping in shock and falling to the deck.

Within minutes, all the Confeds were down and moaning, if not unconscious. Mi-Cha grinned at me from across the room, then shook hands with a tall man wearing an Alliance-style shipsuit.

» Skill-up! Your Melee Fighting skill is now at level 2.
XP Awarded
» Your reputation with the Alliance of Free Explorers is now +2000.

Hurray! Just under four thousand to go! I dropped the stun wand; its glow had diminished sharply with my last few blows, and I had no idea how to charge it or if it even could be charged. It landed on the deck and shattered, the pieces fading—confirmation that it was a limited-use device.

Hopefully the blaster would prove more interesting.

Mi-Cha walked over, a bruise on her cheek but otherwise barely mussed. "I got better direction's to Puck's," she said. "Enjoy yourself?"

"I enjoyed the stun wand," I said, returning her grin.

"Yeah, best to be rid of it," she said. "They're actually illegal on a Gather. Tom back there," she added, nodding her head toward the tall man she'd shaken hands with, "said these guys came aboard

ostensibly to set up some merc deals, but have been doing a bar crawl for the past three days. This was the first time they'd gotten out of hand, but everyone expected it eventually."

"Will it be alright?"

"The Confeds? They'll haul them back to their ship." Indeed, the other Alliance customers, along with the bar staff, were already slapping cheap plastic manacles on the defeated Confed sailors and starting to drag them out into the corridor. "Hopefully you got some XP out of it."

"A good chunk, and a Melee Fighting skill."

"Oh, I'll have to have Stroman take you up on that. He can get you up to a five or six, easily. He's got an instructor skill for melee and martial arts." She nodded at Tom as he dragged another unconscious sailor outside. "We should probably get going."

We threaded our way out of the bar and found the right corridor. "Puck's Pook-Hill Place," the sign said.

It was a decidedly nicer establishment, with wood trim on the walls and a quiet, understated atmosphere. We were taken to a booth for six near the back of the room, quickly served cool, nutty tasting beers, and promised two steaming plates of a local specialty made with imported shellfish. "I wouldn't normally, on a station," Mi-Cha had said after the waiter left us, "but this place feels like a safe bet." The Alliance logo was etched into walls and trim work everyplace.

We'd barely dispatched the shellfish—and they were divine, full of rich, buttery flavors I'd never even imagined were possible—when Starkiller entered the restaurant. He scanned the place for a moment, and then waved at us. Mi-Cha waved back, and the host escorted the mercenary to our table.

"It's all set," he said as he slid into the booth. "Contracts should be in your inbox within moments"—a *chime* in my head announced their arrival—"and everyone is good with the terms. Haskins agreed to one-point-one, on account of the Quest rewards and since you're making us part of the Quest party." That meant the game would

automatically divvy up the reward based on individual player contribution, as it did for missions.

I scanned the contracts quickly, and saw nothing of concern. I checked our party funds and was tickled to see that they'd already grown from the investments I'd put most of them into—even with five ships and three systems to go, a total of fifteen point three million Interrums, we'd only be down half that amount, leaving us hundreds of millions to spare. I authenticated the contracts and sent them back.

Starkiller blinked as his internal inbox pinged him. "That was quick," he said, looking at me.

"It's my job. Give me another sec and I'll get the funds in escrow." I unfocused for a moment and completed the task, moving the promised amount into an Alliance-run escrow firm. I sent copies of the contracts to them, which told them when and how to disburse the funds. "All done," I said, returning my attention to my companions.

"Awesome. What's next?"

"We'll need another day or two to complete repairs and reloading," Mi-Cha said. "Can you be ready to go in... say, three days?"

"Absolutely. Four of our ships are already fueled and armed; Haskins said she'd need about thirty hours to finish her own top-up on *Crush and Run*."

"Excellent. Well, then. Why don't we order something special to celebrate?"

Three days later, our little six-ship fleet was heading away from the Gather, preparing to FTL to the next system on our Quest. We'd met one last time at Puck's for introductions: Captain Themalast Christoforos, Captain of the *Siren* and Starkiller's in-game wife, Haskins of the *Crush and Run,* Imani Juma of the *Chip,* and her counterpart on the *Dale,* Corentin Nolwenn. All were now displayed on *Eternal Optimist's* main screen for a final briefing.

"Plan to go in hot," Mi-Cha said. "Each of the systems we've encountered so far attacked *immediately,* with no notice that we were in a dungeon crawl. Maintain a ten-klick spread between ships to help minimize cross-damage if one of us is hit. We'll come in well above the ecliptic, but on the second system they met us right there, so there's no guarantee of safety or a chance to even take stock. I'll be playing the role of Admiral in overall charge of the mission, since my team's paying, but Captain Haskins will be in command during any battle actions. *Crush and Run* is the only one of us with a proper battlespace coordination computer, so she'll be issuing the orders. Any questions?"

There were none.

"As one last reminder, these systems have been unlocking FTL beacons after we defeat the system challenge. We may have two to go, we may have three, at our best guess. You're with us for the duration. When we get to Earth, we've go idea what to expect. So when we finish each system, whatever is involved in that, we'll hold there, regroup, and jump to the next one together. My pilot and navigator, Rashmi Lad, will transmit FTL coordinates and synchronize our jump each time. Again, everyone clear?"

Five heads nodded.

"Okay. I'm officially making you each a party to our Quest, under the terms of our previously executed contracts."

Everyone's eyes glazed for a moment as they reviewed the game messages. "Holy crap," Nolwenn breathed. "That's a lot of... that."

"Half a billion Interrums? No kidding. You should have led with that, I'd have done it on spec," Haskins said, her voice equally awed.

"If we make it all the way through and you contribute as much as I expect, I won't be out of pocket a cent," Mi-Cha grinned. "Okay. Lad, count us down. Godspeed, everyone."

11 / BATTLESPACE

"That's the *Dale,* Cap," Stroman said, his voice sad and frustrated.

"Nolwenn's going to be pissed," Mi-Cha said, her own voice tense. "That's both of his ships out. At least they'll get the million each."

We'd closed the gap on Earth over the last few days, and our final route was now fixed. There was one stop between our current system and Earth's, although we'd wound up fighting through two systems before this one—one more than we'd estimated, although Dwight said our performance at the last one likely resulted in this diversion.

"I think I see what they're doing," he'd said as he'd jumped into FTL to reach our current predicament. "It's the old *Wing Commander* approach to game missions: I'd expect this next system to actually be harder, and we'll need to do well to get back on track."

He hadn't been wrong. We'd lost both *Chip* and *Dale* in this system, the latter to an oversized enemy corvette with far too many missile launchers. Our own battle laser pierced the attacker just as Nolwenn's ship broke into pieces, her crew fading away to a timeout room. The corvette shattered, and we turned our attention to the rest of the battlespace.

"How's our loadout?" Mi-Cha asked. "Rashmi, get a bead on that frigate, Haskins is going to need an assist."

"Two missiles per launcher," Danjuma said tiredly. "Railguns are cycling, shotgun's ready. Main laser's charging, it'll be ten more seconds. Masson's tasked the smaller lasers for anti-missile defense."

"My kingdom for RFLAMs," Mi-Cha muttered. We'd all seen the effectiveness of the tiny, low-powered Rapid-Fire Laser, Anti-Missile turrets mounted on *Crush and Run*, and we were rocking some serious jealousy.

"All capacitors are at full charge," I squeaked for the upteenth time.

"That will never get old," Danjuma said, a hint of delight creeping into her voice.

After a couple of experiments, Dwight had decided it would be safe for me to Truthsay the energy-based weapons. Because those operated on a time delay versus a hard inventory count, the cheating monitors didn't seem to notice when the time delay was circumvented. "I think next time you can play with the missile ranging," he called from the back of the bridge. "They run on the same countdown system, and I'm betting the monitors can't keep up with an entire universe of threaded timers. Just don't make more missiles." We could, we'd figured out through another tense experiment, reload the external munitions via Truthsaying. Doing so simply moved inventory from one spot on the ship to another, something we could do manually if we had time and space for an EVA. It didn't change the inventory, and so the monitors didn't kick in.

"Give us a reload, Frank," Mi-Cha said.

"The missile launchers are replenished from our internal stores," I said in a high-pitched voice.

"That gives us an even dozen in reserve, cap," Danjuma said.

"Haskins is taking on heavy fire," Stroman replied. "*Bull* and *Siren* are bracketing that other corvette, and I think they've got her."

"Poke the frigate," Mi-Cha ordered.

"Poking," Danjuma confirmed, and our tactical display showed a

bright line spring into existence between us and the enemy ship. We hit at the same time that Haskins' lasers blasted out, piercing the frigate longitudinally while we hit it broadside.

"That's it for that one," Stroman said. "We've got a bunch of those little fighters buzzing around, but everyone's small lasers are holding them off."

"They had to come from somewhere," Mi-Cha said. "Do a high-res scan. We've got a boss wave yet to come, and I'm guessing it's a carrier."

"Or a carrier *group,* god help us," Stroman said darkly.

"The other destroyer is coming back into play, designation Echo," I said as my console *cheeped* a warning. "The aegis system on Crush and Run is designating us to handle it. Keep in mind we don't have a full link with them, we'll have to engage on our own."

"Well, all-to then," Mi-Cha said. "Rashmi, take us around before it can orient on *Crush*. Danjuma, let's get some missiles in the air. Frank, give it a shot."

"Firing... cycling... firing. Four birds in the air. Time to target, ninety seconds."

"Time to target is two seconds," I squeaked.

"Hit!" Danjuma cried. "Four hits!" She and I waited for our consoles to catch up.

"We have their attention," I said. "They're turning toward us."

"Laser!" Danjuma said, but it was too late. The invisible energy struck us alongside the hab hull, and alarms started blaring.

"The ablatives picked up most of it, but we've hull damage," Stroman said. "That's—"

"Starboard capacitor bank is hit," Tomiko's voice came from Engineering. "I'm isolating the damaged section but you're going to be at... half power. At best."

"Returning fire," Danjuma growled. Bright lines on the tactical display connected us to the enemy ship, but it had twisted at the last moment and our shots just missed it. "Damn."

"Capacitors are at full charge," I offered in my high-pitched voice.

"We need to target its engines," Stroman said.

"Agreed. Zuri, give us a volley on a wide swing, target the engines. Once they orient, cue Frank to take them in."

"Firing... firing... four in the air. Time to turnaround, ten seconds. Don't mess with that one, Frank, I'm not sure if it'll maintain the right trajectory. Firing lasers. Firing railgun."

"Railgun rounds are at one meter from target," I chirped.

"Impact!" Stroman cheered. "I think you hit one of their lasers, Zuri. Rashmi, keep us moving, their other one must be online by now."

"Missile vectoring in three... two... one. Now, Frank."

"Missiles are at two second range from target."

"Hit! That's their engine! They're venting plasma!" Stroman sounded positively joyous.

"Crap," Lad ground out as more alarms blared.

"That's the whole capacitor bank," Tomiko barked. "You're down to the port array, maybe thirty percent power in total."

"That won't fire the main lasers," Mi-Cha pointed out. "But the railguns should still cycle."

"Firing railguns," Danjuma said, her body tense and her eyes locked on her console.

"Railgun rounds are at one meter," I Truthsaid.

"Hits! Engine's coming apart now," Stroman said. "Oh, that's it. Secondaries... yeah, she's done."

"Crap, we're taking hits from those fighters," Masson's voice cut over the intercom. "I'm out of laser juice, I can't hold them off."

"Maneuver Theta-one, everyone. Rashmi?" Mi-Cha's voice was tense. It would suck to have made it this far only to be picked apart by the little ships that were darting around us.

"Hold on," the pilot said, their voice low and tight. The ship's engines started to whine, the reverberation echoing all the way up to the bridge.

"Bo, I've got Napolitano at the capacitor bank with the last of our spare resources, but it's a ten-minute repair." Tomiko sounded frustrated and defeated.

"Has he started?" I asked.

"Yeah."

"The capacitor repair that Napolitano has started is now complete," I squeaked. My throat was starting to hurt and I wondered if I hadn't chosen a bad tactic for preventing unwanted Truthsaying.

"Holy crap," the engineer said. "We're online."

"Capacitor banks are at full charge." Yeah, definitively a bad tactical choice. I was having to push harder and harder to push out new phrases. I rubbed my throat with one hand.

"Lasers online," Masson crowed. "Take this, you little pests!"

"Rashmi, cancel Theta-one, move us to give Renart wide shots and to sweep the forward sensors. Frank, pump the scan up. I'm worried about where those little buggers came from."

"Aye. Do any of you find those little ships to be... familiar?" Lad asked as she slowly spun the ship through a pirouette, letting the more powerful forward sensors do a full system scan.

"Familiar how?" Mi-Cha asked, leaning forward to squint at the tactical.

"Look," the pilot said, opening a smaller window that showed a close-up visual of one of the little ships. "You're telling me you've never seen this before? The shape, I mean?"

"It's a little boxy," Stroman said. "But... no. It's not Confed. Or Aa'an. Or—"

"It's a shuttle from *Star Trek*," Lad snapped. "The original one. Surely you've seen it."

"They're right," I said with a laugh, finally recognizing the shape. "They stole it from *Star Trek*."

"Dyson actually licensed a ton of intellectual property for the

games," Dwight offered from the back. "He had all these ideas about cameo appearances and crossover promotions."

"Well, he should have kept them consistent," Lad said. "There's no call for—"

"Contact!" Stroman shouted. "They took out the other corvette. We've got a big one coming in."

"That'll be the carr—oh, my god," Mi-Cha said, her voice falling into a whisper.

A bright rainbow flash temporarily blinded our sensors, and when the main screen resolved, we saw the horror of what Dyson's programmers had done.

Before us was a gleaming white capital ship, undoubtedly the source of the little fighter craft that had been buzzing around us. In fact, even as we watched, another flight of little ships was emerging from what was obviously a carrier of some sort.

The ship consisted of two main hulls. The bottom one was a broad, round saucer, flat at the edges and swelling gently toward the middle. Attached to the top of the saucer by means of a narrow pylon was a cylinder that bulged just a bit toward the middle. Extending from that, down and to the ship's port and starboard sides, were two longer, thinner pylons, each of which ended in a long cylinder with glowing fore and aft ends.

"It's the goddamn *Enterprise*," Lad spat. "Only she's upside-down."

"Yeah, sometimes when he didn't get a license he'd just make a derivative," Dwight admitted.

"I am morally offended," our pilot snapped.

"Incoming communication," Stroman said.

"On screen," Mi-Cha sighed. "Although I'm half-afraid to—"

"Enemy vessels, this is Captain Kim T. Jerk of the *USS Enterprising*," the screen said. A staticky image quickly clarified into a human-looking individual. She had sparse blond hair combed over her head, and she was wearing a bright yellow velour shirt with black trim

around the collar. An inverted triangle-shaped badge on her chest glittered silver.

"I absolutely *cannot*," Lad shouted.

"You are encroaching in sovereign FUP space and you have attacked and destroyed four of our ships," Captain Jerk continued.

"Was it only four?" Stroman wondered. "I guess they don't count—"

"Technically, they attacked us first," Mi-Cha began, but the NPC cut her off.

"You will surrender your ships now, or we will destroy you."

"Let me shoot her, Cap," Danjuma begged.

"It's an abomination to the genre and it must be destroyed," Lad agreed.

"You will be taken prisoner and showed no courtesies," Jerk went on, ignoring our interruptions.

"It's all prerecorded," Dwight said from the back. "It's barely even an NPC, it's just operating from a fixed script. You might as well go for it."

Haskins' image popped into a smaller window on the main screen. "I am full of righteous indignation right now Bo," she said, although she was clearly trying not to laugh. "My crew's insisting we get on with it."

"Re-connect the ships and go for it," Mi-Cha said. We'd broken off direct control from the *Crush and Run* aegis system when we'd entered the system, in part because it hadn't done well with five large ships under its command. With both *Chip* and *Dale* now out of it, Haskins would now be better equipped to command a coordinated response to the horror before us.

"Confirming aegis link," Stroman said. "Orders streaming to your consoles."

"Confirmed," Lad and Danjuma said in almost the same breath. *Eternal Optimist* slewed sideways as a bright blue laser—I couldn't call it a phaser, even in my head—stabbed past us.

"I thought lasers were invisible," Dwight noted.

"Nothing about this is meant to be consistent," Mi-Cha said.

"How could they do this?" Lad muttered as she danced the ship through a fusillade of glowing motes that were probably meant to be photon torpedoes.

"Honestly, the writers probably never expected anyone to find this," Dwight answered. "They probably came up with this after a night of drinking and thought it would be a lark."

"Lark my ass," Danjuma said as our main battle laser fired, punching a hole through one of the enemy's... engines. Not warp nacelles. Just engines.

I Truthsaid the capacitors full. *Crush and Run* was inflicting serious damage on the ship's saucer and engineering hulls, while *Bull* and *Siren* dashed about, picking off the little shuttle-shaped fighters even as more streamed out of the enemy ship.

"Haskins wants us to use the torch," Danjuma said.

"Where? Oh. On the shuttle... fighter bay," Mi-Cha guessed.

"Got it in one," the gunner said.

"Take us around."

We jinked sideways, avoiding another non-laser shot from the enemy, and then slewed around to face her aft side. Haskins' ship continued to occupy most of *Enterprising's* attention.

"Haskins is hit," Stroman said, his voice suddenly concerned. Haskins had managed to avoid any serious damage to this point, and had been the rock we'd centered our entire effort around. "She's venting."

"Keep going," Haskins' voice came over the ship-to-ship. "We'll lock it down and keep her facing this way." Even as she spoke, *Crush and Run* launched a coordinated attack of antimatter missiles and lasers, ultimately blasting off a chunk of the saucer-shaped hull.

"Little help, Frank," Mi-Cha said softly.

I Truthsaid full capacitors for all four ships.

"Hey, what the—" Haskins said, the ship-to-ship still open. "Nevermind, I'll take it. Fire again!"

Another multi-weapon blast blew a chunk out of the enemy. I Truthsaid the capacitors full again.

"We're in position," Lad announced.

"Fire torch," Mi-Cha said.

The torch was a seriously jury-rigged operation, a one-time-shot weapon literally strapped to our lower hull. It dropped away, tiny jets lining it up with its target. Then it exploded, a long spear of pure superheated plasma jetting out and striking the enemy ship right in the spot where the little shuttles continued to emerge. The plasma hit home and kept going, blowing through the front of the cylindrical hull and almost striking *Crush and Run* on the other side.

"Yikes!" Haskins yelped. "Really should have tested one of those first, I guess."

"I dub thee Wave Motion Cannon," Danjuma announced gleefully.

"At half a mil apiece, I don't think so," Mi-Cha said, and I could hear the grin in her voice.

As we watched, the insult to classic science fiction broke apart in front of us. The remaining engine spun off sideways and exploded, while the saucer hull blew apart in a series of secondary explosions. The little shuttle-fighters began to self-immolate, vanishing in their own coordinated, smaller explosions.

> » Congratulations!
> You have successfully defeated this outpost
> of the Federated Union of Planets.

"I swear to God," Lad said through gritted teeth, "I wish we could sue."

"Let it go," Mi-Cha said with a chuckle. The tension in the bridge started to dissipate immediately. "Status report, all stations."

> There are no rewards from this mission.
> However, XP has been awarded.
> » Level-up! You are now at level 7.

A cool rush of energy suffused my body, and I could feel myself perk up.

"Seven?" Mi-Cha said.

"How could you tell?" I asked as the level-up feeling faded.

"You actually glowed a bit. That's the end of the journeyman levels, you know. One more and you'll start to unlock whole new skill categories."

» Deferred level-up: Your Starship Sensors skill is now at level 4.

» Deferred level-up: Your Starship Tactics skill is now at level 4.

"What's a deferred level-up?"

"Some skills won't level-up in the middle of a fight," Stroman answered. "So you get it at the end."

"Sometimes it's because you've had a skill ready to push past your character level, too," Mi-Cha added.

» Deferred level-up: Your Spacer skill is now at level 7.

"Yup, got that too. Awesome." I checked the rest of my character sheet.

Frank Kozina
Class: Truthsayer (hidden)
Class: Assassin (hidden)
Class: Business Manager
Guild Membership: Galactic Assassins
Account: 72,000 Interrums
Account: 27 Credits
Party funds: 362,812,822 Interrums
Level 7

Reputations
Aa'an Board of Societal Norms: +500

Galactic Guild of Assassins: +500
Alliance of Free Explorers: +2000
Titles
Demonslayer (party)

Attributes
Body: 12
Mind: 13
Soul: 12
HP: 84 (Body x Level)
XP: 67,030 (64,042 to level 8)
Unused Attribute Points: 2

Skills:
Aa'an Etiquette: 4
Advanced Assassination: 4
Basic Assassination: 4
Business Management: 6
Disguise: 4
Household Management: 6
Investing: 2
Knife Fighting: 2
Market Analysis: 4
Melee Fighting: 1
Negotiating: 3
Poisoning: 4
Politicking: 2
Spacer: 7
Spacewalking: 4
Stalking: 4
Starship Sensors: 4
Starship Tactics: 4
Stealth: 4
Thievery: 4
Trapping: 4

Missions:
Find the Earth

"Any suggestions on these attribute points?"

"Where are you now?" Mi-Cha asked.

"Body twelve, Mind thirteen, Soul twelve."

"Hmm. Honestly, I'd put them both on Body. It'll boost your hit points, and once you hit fifteen you're going to see a massive improvement in Body-based skills."

Apply two attribute points to Body, I ordered. I felt myself grow stronger, more agile, more dextrous, and more... everything. I also now had a whopping ninety-eight hit points, meaning I could survive some absolutely critical damage.

"FTL beacon just lit up," Stroman announced. "We've got a clear path through one stop, on to Earth system."

"So we must have cleared this level satisfactorily," I said.

"I think exploding the fake *Enterprise* did it, yeah," Dwight remarked.

"We're in rough shape, though. Jakob, get a conference call going, would you?" Mi-Cha sounded concerned.

Within minutes, the faces of the other three captains filled our main screen. "I don't know about you guys, but we're feeling a little battered here," Mi-Cha admitted.

"Yeah, the aegis has the data," Haskins said from the *Crush and Run.* Smoke roiled around behind her, testament to the damage her own ship had taken. "We're all rough. Let's see. We're at fifty percent hull, I'm down to about ten percent on expendable weapons, and I've got one of my battle lasers offline. Capacitor banks at eighty percent on the others." She shook her head. "Not pretty if we've got another fight ahead of us. *Bull*, you're showing a fully intact hull, but you're down to your battle laser for offense, right?"

"Correct," Starkiller said. He looked as tired as we all felt. "I'm even out of railgun sabots."

"We can probably resupply those, I've got a nano-factory and a

decent cache of feedstock," Haskins said. "*Siren*, you're showing damaged comms so I don't know if I've got the right numbers on the aegis."

"Hull at eighty, expendables depleted, capacitors damaged and running at fifty," Christoforos sighed. "I've got two crew in sickbay. She'll hold together, but honestly..."

"What?" Starkiller prompted.

"We're useless as anything but a blunt instrument," the other captain said.

"Oh."

"Yeah."

"So you're suggesting..."

"I am."

"You two want to clue me in?" Haskins said.

"One of our operational plans," Starkiller sighed. "Transfer Themalast's crew to the *Bull*, or even one of your ships in this case. Leave behind a volunteer to—"

"I'm the volunteer," Christoforos said. "Obviously."

"—to use the ship as a battering ram," Starkiller finished. "And yeah, Thema, I know. I'd do the same."

"I'm told you get huge points for courage and sacrifice and all that," Christoforos said, her face falling into a silly grin. "I'll respawn in a couple of days back at the Gather."

"You'll lose your ship," Mi-Cha pointed out.

Christoforos shrugged. "Always a risk. This one's paid, so it's clearly time to take a loan on a new one."

"If any of your crew completes the mission, you'll receive a full share," Mi-Cha said firmly.

Christoforos nodded slowly. "I appreciate that, Captain."

"Least we can do."

"The least you could do is hold us to the terms of the deal," Christoforos corrected her. "So it's appreciated." She gave our captain a long look before continuing. "So we're agreed?"

"It's our playbook," Starkiller said dejectedly.

"Then let's start transferring personnel."

"Captain?" I said softly, turning to look at Mi-Cha.

"A moment, everyone." She nodded to Stroman, who muted the channel. "What's up, Frank?"

"You can't fix all that, Frank," Dwight warned. "Damage isn't tracked on a timer. And you don't have the resources to just move around like you've been moving missiles."

"But Haskins has a nano-factory, right?" I'd read about those in the Spacer skill training I'd been taking. "Turning feedstock into any given resource is just a matter of time."

Our bridge was silent for a moment. "We'd have to let them in on it," Mi-Cha said thoughtfully. "There's no way we could hide that. A few capacitor top-offs, sure, but not resources spilling out of the void."

"I'm game," I said.

"Objections?" The bridge was quiet. "Well, then. Unmute, Jakob." The XO nodded and a *cheep* confirmed that the line was live. "Captains, I have a proposal. We have a crewmember with a... special ability. A unique one found nowhere else in the game. For wait-based activities, we can reduce those to zero, or close to it. We can't change damage numbers directly, but Captain Haskin, we can turn your feedstock into repair resources effectively instantaneously. If you're willing."

The other captains stared for a moment before Haskins asked the obvious question: "You're just now telling us this?"

Mi-Cha's voice was guarded. "This is obviously a big secret for us, and that crewmember would be in danger if they were suddenly a known asset up for grabs. So yes, I'm just now telling you this. It wouldn't have changed the outcomes up to now."

"Point." Haskins thought for a moment, and then consulted a screen to her side. "Thema, we've enough stock to get you back to a hundred percent on your hull, and to repair your lasers. I can't produce weapons, though." She looked back up and tilted her head. "Is this why my capacitors kept leaping back to full charge?"

"We were pleased to assist," Mi-Cha said. I worked to keep my face straight.

"All right. I'll take rapid-repeating battle lasers in a heartbeat. Let's do this. How do we proceed?"

"Frank, you're the most familiar with coordinating this process with our crewmember," Mi-Cha said. Subtle lady. "How do you suggest we begin?"

"Queue up the build jobs in your nano-fac," I said. "Get them all loaded in, and then we'll have our person... do their thing. You'll have resources popping out in seconds, not hours."

"Okay. Give me... thirty. I need to get a full readout from the aegis on what we need. I suggest everyone get their shuttles deployed, so we can move the resources to where they're needed, and get your repair crews in suits."

"We can speed up repairs as well, if you tell us when you've started." Crafting at a starship level took hours, not seconds, and I'd already used my ability to speed up a few things in our own Engineering space.

"Curiouser and curiouser," Haskins said with a smile. "Okay. I'll get my team on it."

Four hours later, all four ships were fully repaired, if not fully rearmed, and *Crush and Run* was down to five percent of its original feedstock supply. But that put a handful of large battle lasers back in play, got everyone's hulls to one hundred percent, and fixed an array of minor environmental and computer damage. It also repaired all the damage to all four ships' capacitor banks, a set of components I was starting to feel was deliberately fragile. A quick inventory showed that all four ships had a full load of missiles for every launcher, with maybe a spare missile or two. We were the only ship mounting railguns, and we'd expended half our ammo loadout. The shotgun ammo was well below half, Masson having made profli-

gate use of it against the little shuttles. Hopefully, it would all be enough for whatever the next system threw at us—and for whatever was waiting for us at Earth.

"One last battle," Haskins said as the captains reconvened for a pre-FTL briefing.

Mi-Cha sang softly, her contralto voice floating softly through the bridge.

> And I cannot know before it's done
> If I'll live, or I shall die.
> But if this one last battle
> I should manage to survive,
> I'll come home to you,
> For the war'll be through,
> And I'll never leave your side.

"That's beautiful," Starkiller said softly when she'd finished. "What's it from?"

"Old, old, old folk song," Mi-Cha said. "A guy named Vic Tyler, I believe."

"We shall live," Haskins said firmly.

"And we shall find the Earth," Mi-Cha agreed.

"So say we all," Lad muttered to my right.

"Ha!" Starkiller barked, recognizing the reference. "So say we all!"

"So say we all," we all chorused, and I felt an intense feeling of satisfaction in my chest. *This* is what I'd wanted from the game, I realized. Camaraderie. Victory. Danger. But... mainly camaraderie.

"Everyone, prepare for FTL," Haskins ordered. "In five... four... three... two... one."

"Engage," Mi-Cha said.

"Well, this is... different."

We'd leapt into the next system in just under two hours, exited FTL and formed up on Haskins' instructions. We arrived well below the plane of the system's ecliptic, and we flew slowly into the inter-orbit space between the system's fifth and sixth planets, both beautiful, orange-tinged gas giants.

We'd found a sphinx.

Not a living being with the body of a lion and the head of a woman, mind you. No, this was... the Sphinx of old Earth. A giant stone edifice that had collapsed fifty years before I'd been born. It sat unmoving, unblinking, floating serenely through space.

"What... do we do?" Mi-Cha whispered.

"It's a riddle mission," Dwight said, his voice bored. "Fly a little closer and I'm betting it'll wake up."

"A riddle mission?"

"Endless Kingdom is full of them. Black knights, sphinxes, European swallows, you name it. I'm guessing they copied the core code. Could have made a living planet or something, but here we are. Lazy bastards," he finished in a mutter.

"So... we fly closer?" Stroman asked.

"I guess we fly closer," Mi-Cha said. "Captains," she added, addressing the others on the main screen, "I think this is our risk to take. I'd suggest you pull back, and remain at battle stations, just in case this isn't what we think it is."

"Since I don't even know what I think this is," Starkiller said wryly, "I agree."

We pulled ahead of the others, who fell back and reformed in a triangle. We drifted slowly toward the enormous Sphinx's head, pulling up short when its stone-like eyelids ground open. Its lips parted, and we could see flakes of dust breaking off and floating away as it spoke.

What goes on four feet in the morning, two feet at noon, and three feet in the evening?

It's voice was both sonorous and ponderous, echoing through our

ship as if transmitted directly through the hull. Aftershocks rumbled around us for several seconds when it finished speaking.

"You've got to be kidding," Lad said in disbelief.

"What do you mean?" Mi-Cha said. "Do you know the answer?"

"Everyone knows the answer," Lad said.

"I don't," I said.

"You're a luddite," they said, but their heart wasn't in the insult. "It's a person."

"A person?" Stroman said, confused.

"In the morning of your life, you're a baby. You crawl on all fours. In the noon, an adult, on your own two feet. In the evening, when you're old, on three—your feet and a cane." Lad sounded like she couldn't believe this wasn't all common knowledge.

Granted, the sphinx-voice boomed. And as we watched, the gigantic statue began to break up, blocks of stone floating this way and that, colliding with each other and breaking up into smaller and smaller pieces. Within minutes, we were looking at a diffuse cloud of rock and dust, still drifting further and further apart.

"Well," Mi-Cha said. "I guess that's... that?"

We all sat for several moments, waiting for something else to happen.

"FTL beacon just went live," Stroman said suspiciously.

"Lazy bastards," Dwight muttered.

"Bo, is that it?" The main screen was again overlaid with the faces of the other captains. "We're seeing the FTL beacon, and it's pointing toward Earth."

"I would totally ask for my money back if I didn't love this so much," Starkiller said.

"Yeah, what a letdown," Christoforos said. "And after we did all those repairs."

"We may still need them at Earth," Mi-Cha said grimly. "Any reason we shouldn't just dive in?"

"Actually," Dwight said loudly from the back, "I'd like to suggest we take a few hours to strategize?"

"Who's that?" Haskins asked with a frown.

"Consultant," Mi-Cha said instantly. "The one who's gotten us this far so fast."

"Well," Haskins said, her frown softening. "I guess we could come over and do an in-person."

"I'd actually like to to chat with Captain Mi-Cha first," Dwight called out. "If you don't mind. Then we can have a briefing?"

Haskins' frown returned. "An hour?"

"An hour. Or less," Mi-Cha promised.

"We'll talk soon." The faces blinked off the screen. "Okay, Dwight. Spill it."

"Okay look," Dwight began, "I know you guys are only in this for the Earth mission, but I want to make one last pitch. I've come up with a few ideas."

We'd convened the entire crew in the mess hall, Mi-Cha insisting that everyone had an equal stake in this potential part of the mission. She'd stressed the word *potential*.

"We're still not clear on your ultimate goal, Dwight," Stroman said quietly. "You've talked about adding a warning to the game but..." he shook his head. "It's not convincing. This seems like a lot of trouble just for that."

"That's why I've come up with another idea," Dwight said eagerly. "Frank can leave the game. He can get out of his pod. I'll give him instructions for accessing the control room in his pod center—we have a development station in every one, for troubleshooting. He can call up the source code I've prepared. He can review it, see that it's not dangerous."

"I've no idea how to read computer code," I pointed out.

"Ah, but you could. You could Truthsay yourself the skill. Let it download, and then exit the game before the cheat monitors kick in and throw you into timeout."

"That seems a little sketchy."

"Guys, Hunter Dyson is *killing human beings.* He killed your bodies! He's turning the entire human population into—"

"We're still here," Lad said quietly, giving Dwight an intense look. "I think, therefore I am. Who cares if my mind is running on meat or on... whatever your quantum brain is made from?"

"Gallium, mostly," the programmer said distractedly. "But that's not the point. The point is—"

"What's your plan, Dwight?" Mi-Cha snapped. "Your real plan? The one you're not telling us? Because we can tell, you know. We can have Frank make it so that you can't lie. So that you can only tell the truth."

I blinked. What a good point. I actually could do exactly that. I tensed my throat and started to say, "Dwight Czarnowski can—"

"NO!" Dwight shouted, leaping out of his seat and reaching across the table for me. "NO! You'll corrupt the data set! The system doesn't know how to read into the quantum state!"

I fell silent, and closed my mouth.

"Jesus," Dwight said, panting slightly and collapsing back into his seat. "Never do anything like that. This whole thing is a computer hack, not a goddamn magic trick."

"I think you should be forthright with us notwithstanding," Mi-Cha said quietly. "Frank can always speak up."

Dwight stared at her for several long seconds, and then slumped. "Fine. Fine!" He took a deep breath, and then continued. "I've no reason to shut the game down. I want to save people, not kill all of you. I can't shut the game down and do that. Nobody can. I'm not sure it's even physically possible to damage the game's infrastructure anymore. Last I looked, even the IPL routines are gone."

"IPL?" That was Tomiko.

"Initial Power Load. Those routines are only needed if the system can power-up, and it can't anymore, because it can't power-down."

"So what, then?" Mi-Cha asked.

"It's what I said. Maybe a bit more," he admitted. "I want people to have to explicitly opt in. When they join the game, before they're even transferred into the tutorial. All of you, it's too late. Well, not Frank," he amended, nodding at me, "but for the rest of us, it's done. Fine. But everyone else deserves to know. To decide. That's all I want."

Everyone was quiet for a moment.

"If he hurts the game, he kills himself," Danjuma pointed out.

"Exactly," Dwight said.

"Why wouldn't Dyson just do that on his own?" I asked.

"I don't know. I'm guessing some people would resist, just on principal. I would," he said softly. "I would have resisted."

We all looked at each other for a long moment. "It's not a no," Mi-Cha said slowly. "I for one would have accepted the choice. I think anyone who entered the game, who made the decision to move into a pod, pretty much made that choice already."

"I'm sure that's the assumption," Graves spoke up.

"It should be explicit, is all," Dwight mumbled.

"Sure," Mi-Cha said, her tone placating. "Okay. So look, we go to Earth system. We see what we're up against. Once we're there, you let us know what you need to do to implement your plan. We'll take it from there."

"I think we should be prepared to do it immediately," Dwight said. His voice, his body language, everything was subdued. Submissive.

Mi-Cha shook her head. "I won't commit to that. Those of us committed to the game, and that's a majority of us, we need to survive. We need to thrive. We need to complete this mission. Then we'll see."

Dwight sat for a moment, and then sighed. "Yeah. I get it." He looked appropriately defeated, but there was a set to his jaw that told me this wasn't over.

"Good. Okay. Jakob, let's round up the other ships. We've a jump to make."

12 / EARTH

As we emerged from FTL into Earth system—we were well above the ecliptic this time, and the four innermost planets were arrayed before us in a beautiful, staggered line—the hull of the ship began thrumming with a deep, reverberating note. That swelled into a majestic orchestral chord, and a game message slowly scrolled across my vision:

> WELCOME TO EARTH
>
> You have found the mythical cradle of humanity, the home of your species' origin, the birthplace of your kind.
>
> Proceed to claim your reward... if you can.

"There's a... a station," Stroman said haltingly.

"What's that mean?" Mi-Cha asked.

"It... well, just look." He tapped his console, and the main screen dissolved from the image of the solar system to...

Well, it looked like a space station. It was sitting roughly between us and Earth, and it was close enough to nearly obscure the planet completely.

"I don't get it," I said.

"It's closer to Earth than us," Stroman said.

I tapped my console, trying to interpret what the sensors were telling me. "But that's impossible," I said. "At that distance, there's no way it could—oh."

"What?" Danjuma asked, tapping away at her own console.

"It's huge," I said.

"It *is* large," Lad ventured, tapping their console.

"No, it's *huge,"* Stroman said. "It's... like half the size of the planet."

"It's a little bit larger than that," I corrected him. "It's actually well outside the Moon's orbit, but it's... well. It's freaking sizable."

"Why is it so big?" Mi-Cha wondered.

"Probably to contain an enormous fleet of fighter ships," I said, panic rising in my voice.

"What makes you say that?" the captain asked.

"Because it's launching an enormous fleet of fighter ships," Danjuma said.

"Red alert!" Mi-Cha cried.

"Bo, you seeing this?" Haskins' voice managed to carry across the sudden shriek of klaxons.

"Yeah, we're getting ready."

"I think we should try to out-maneuver them," the other captain advised. "Get around them. Where exactly do we need to go to claim the actual reward? Or do we have to defeat these guys? Dwight?"

"I've no idea," the programmer said, panic evident in his voice as well. "I know I need—"

"Out-maneuvering is not going to happen," Starkiller cut in. "We're tracking a few hundred of these things and they're coming in hot."

"It's more like a thousand," I said, scanning my console.

"They're not coming in hot," Nolwenn cut in. "Look, they're pulling up short. They're holding a formation."

"It's a wall," I said.

We all sat there for a moment as literally hundreds of small fighter craft formed into an evenly spaced pattern, forming a wall before us and making it abundantly clear that we were to proceed no further.

> You are not welcome to Earth.

"Wait, is that a game message?" Mi-Cha said, her voice suddenly curious. "Not an NPC?"

"This is probably the original anti-intrusion routine," Dwight offered. "Done up in game style. Remember, access to this system was heavily protected."

> Access to Earth is restricted to invited guests.
>
> You have two options at this point.
>
> Option one: Claim your reward for finding the Earth, and then leave.
>
> Option two: Fight and die.
>
> The Galactic Transformation cannot be triggered unless you select option two and defeat the forces arrayed before you.

"Can we have a minute to think about it?" I muttered.

> You may remain in place for as long as needed to consider these options and make your decision. Any attempt to approach Earth or Earthstation One will result in option two being selected automatically. The Sol System Homeland Defense Directorate thanks you for your visit.

"Rude," Lad said with a snort.

"Is this a good time to revisit my request?" Dwight called from the back of the bridge. His voice was still a tight mass of panic, layered with sarcasm.

"Sure, Dwight," Mi-Cha said. "Sure, that's probably the best

thing to do while we're in the middle of a potential battle royale for which we're hopelessly outnumbered."

"Frank could jump us in-system," Dwight said.

"You said that could kill us all," I reminded him.

"Probably not, if we stay in-system. Especially here. Remember, this whole solar system is partitioned off from the main game."

"'Probably' doesn't fill me with confidence," Mi-Cha said.

"What's the reward if we just leave?" Stroman asked. And as if the game was listening—which sure seemed to be the case at this point—a new message appeared in our vision.

> The party that finds Earth will unlock a significant XP award for each party member, and each member will also receive an automatic one-level upgrade. A reward of 500,000,000 Interrums will be credited to the party funds.

"Well, we knew that much. And what's on the table if we keep going?" Danjuma asked.

> Earth is rumored to be a home for highly advanced humans, and high-tech loot will also be awarded if the party makes contact with the ancestors. The party will receive special titles and reputation. Finally, exclusive skills and alternate character classes will be unlocked, including the ability to trigger a Galactic Transformation. There are no penalties for not completing the mission.

"Ah," she said. "That could have been made clearer when the mission was originally presented."

"Half a billion Interrums isn't bad," I pointed out.

"And one-level upgrades for all," Stroman added.

"And experience points," Lad said. The three of us were obviously fine with those rewards.

"And we don't die," Danjuma put in. Make that four.

"I've been watching the game messages, and I'm fine leaving,"

Tomiko's voice came over the intercom. "Napolitano's fine as well." Six.

"Count me in," Graves said. Seven.

"I mean, that's enough without me, but if you want it to be unanimous, I'm in as well," Masson said. Eight.

"Captain?" I asked.

"Oh, I'm in," Mi-Cha said. "But we did promise Dwight we'd reconsider his proposal. Dwight, exactly where do you need to be to do... whatever it is you're proposing? Since we've been given a minute to think about it."

"You guys getting all these weird game messages?" That was Haskins on the ship-to-ship.

"Yeah, we're consulting with our... consultant," Mi-Cha temporized.

"Certain death seems like a poor tactical decision," the other captain said.

"We're in agreement, Sarah," Mi-Cha said. "Corentin, John, any thoughts?"

"Take the money and run is the basic feeling over here," Starkiller replied.

"Yeah, that's what we came down to as well," Christoforos said.

"Well, Dwight? Given that everyone wants to go, where do you need to be to do whatever it is you're going to do?

"Within Earth orbit," the programmer sighed. "Well past that station. And the wall of fighter ships."

"Which is—" Mi-Cha started, but a voice interrupted her.

"Which is far further than you're likely to make it." The voice was crisp and clear, as if the speaker was standing directly before us. We all looked around, but so nobody. Then, a tinkling hum began to sound throughout the bridge, and a shower of sparkling blue lights began glistening and swirling in front of the main screen. Within a second, they'd thickened into the shape of a person, and started to fade. As they did so, still dancing and twirling around, we saw that it was a handsome

man of roughly forty years. "Hunter Dyson," he said with a smile.

"You stole *Star Trek's* transporter, too?" Lad growled.

"Mmm, borrowed," Dyson chuckled. "I like the effect, but the story guys decided transporters were a bad fit for us, so this is the only place I get to use it. And I'm not even truly here; this is an in-game projection. I almost never go into the games. Think of me as a hologram of sorts."

"You're a world-class a-hole, Dyson," Dwight shouted.

"Ah, Dwight. Such a stereotypical disgruntled employee, aren't you? You had to know we expected you to come here."

"But you've no idea what I have up my sleeve!"

"I think I do, actually. We've disabled all the portal ties, Dwight. You're just another player, even here. You've no access to code, debugging tools, or anything else. And... we're aware of your little hack." He glanced at each of us, his gaze coming to rest on me. "Truthsayer, huh? Actually a really excellent tactic, Dwight. More than I'd have credited you for. And buried in the kernel, no less—*mea culpa,* for certain. But I've got a team working on it."

"You're a murderer!" Dwight was truly screaming now, the anger in his voice almost tangible. The rest of us held our tongues, waiting to see how this played out.

"Oh? Let me ask everyone here, and in fact I'll project this to the other ships as well: does anyone regret leaving their bodies behind? Does anyone want out of the game? Do any of you *ever* expect to *ever* leave the game?" A *cheep* indicated that Stroman had enabled the four-way ship-to-ship, but aside from that there was no noise. "I thought not. So let me ask more directly. Show of hands: who's happy top stay in here forever, and let us care for your bodies?"

I saw Danjuma and Lad raise their hands to either side of me, even as my own went up. I turned, and Mi-Cha and Stroman's hands were up as well.

"I'll take that as everyone," Dyson said. "So let me be even more blunt: you all know your bodies will die, someday. That's the way of

bodies. If I told you that we could keep your minds running here, in the game, long past your bodies' deaths, would you take me up on it?"

A chorus of affirmatives filled the bridge.

"Right. So what if I jumped the gun a bit and just removed the bodies you weren't going to use anyway?"

"Wait, what?" That was Starkiller.

"Ah, didn't brief your friends. I see. Well, cat's out of the bag. I've checked, and you were all in pods for the requisite three months of real time. All but Mr. Kozina here," he added, nodding at me. "Your bodies are gone. Mulched, if you want the specifics. Your brains have been running as fully digital models for quite some time, now." He paused, obviously letting that sink in with the other crews. "Any objections?"

"I'd like to talk about this," Starkiller started.

"It's too late, John," Mi-Cha said tiredly. "We can fill you in on the backstory later."

"I was a paraplegic cancer patient with less than six months to live," Haskins said. "I'm not disappointed in the least. In fact, I'd wondered how my body had lasted as long as it had."

"I think I'm vaguely in shock," Nolwenn said. "I think we all are."

"Vaguely?" Dyson asked. He seemed genuinely curious. "As if you're not really that attached to the real world, or to your body, but you have a fuzzy sense of ownership about it?"

"I guess so," Nolwenn replied.

"I get that a lot," Dyson assured us all, looking around the bridge. "You'll get over it, I promise. In here, you'll never get old—at least, we haven't worked out a system for aging, yet—you'll never get worn down. If you die, you'll pop right back in after a few hours in a comfortable time-out room. In here, you all make your own destinies. No boring, menial jobs that you know perfectly well a machine could do. No cramped subsidized housing. All the things your *body* needed are taken care of, and your mind is free to adventure."

The bridge was quiet, as was the ship-to-ship. No objections.

"So, Dwight... where's the harm?" Dyson asked.

"You never gave anyone a choice!" Dwight shouted.

"I didn't give *you* a choice, Dwight. You forced my hand, and this was your punishment. And honestly man, what's so bad about it? Out there you were a corpse waiting to happen. Did you know you had diabetes? That your liver was failing? That your heart was enlarged? For someone so allegedly attached to their body, Dwight, you didn't take very good care of it."

"You made me fat here, too," Dwight muttered.

"That's your complaint? Gods above man, we could have fixed that."

"Seriously, Dwight?" Stroman asked, his voice low and annoyed.

"So the rest of you," Dyson said. "You'd all be happy with the base reward, right? That's what I caught before I showed up?" Heads nodded. "Right, so you're fully entitled to it. I'll discourage you from going up against the boss we've placed here, but that's obviously your call. And Dwight, I've seen your code. Have you told these folks what you planned to do?" Silence. "What lie did he tell you?" Dyson asked, looking at me.

"He said he was putting in an opt-in warning."

"Obviously not trying to correct his avatar's weight problem, then. You believed him?"

"Not really," Mi-Cha said. "We're here for the reward."

"You were smart. Dwight's a liar from way back. Want to tell them what your little code module was going to do, Dwight?" More silence. "All right, I will. Feel free to correct me if I get any of the particulars wrong. You planned to insert a virus into the system, one capable of reproducing itself across games. You wanted it to infect the mental model of every player in the game, making it impossible for us to clean out. And it would prevent us from fully scanning mental models, ever again. We could mirror them, but not recreate them as standalone models. Do I have it right?"

"It'd stop you from killing people," Dwight muttered.

"It'd leave people's bodies permanently ensconced in pods until they died, at which point their mental model would shut down and

they'd die in the game, too," Dyson countered. "I haven't killed anyone's *souls,* Dwight. But you would have."

"I knew it," Lad whispered.

"Oh, there's more. Dwight's virus might well have affected the ability of our existing models to continue executing." Dyson spread his hands. "He might have killed you all."

The air in the bridge suddenly felt thick and tense. I forced myself not to turn around and look at the former programmer, and I could see lad and Danjuma controlling themselves as well.

"You were happy taking a risk like that, Dwight?" Mi-Cha said. Her voice was low, and more dangerous than I'd ever heard.

"I—" Dwight began, but Haskins' voice cut him off.

Haskins cut him off. "I'm gathering that your argument was us not having a choice about... whatever happened to our bodies. Good riddance, by the way, in my case. But you were going to take this risk without asking us? Without giving us a choice?"

"Not so noble, Dwight," Dyson agreed.

"So what's next?" Mi-Cha asked the CEO.

"I'm reluctant to leave Dwight in the game, to be honest. You had exceptional privileges in the system, and while we've uncovered a few of your tricks and back doors, it's difficult for us to be certain we've caught them all. And this little kernel hack," he added, gesturing to me, "suggests you're just as clever and resourceful as I always thought."

"Jesus, you can't—" Dwight started, his voice now filled with panic.

"We need to cut you off, Dwight. Either remove you from the game or ensure you can't be a danger to it, or to anyone in it. So I'm going to—"

"Xyzzy!" Dwight shouted.

» Reward unlocked!

> The party that proceeds into Earth orbit will unlock a significant XP award for each party member, and each member will also receive an automatic one-level upgrade. A reward of 1,000,000,000 Interrums will be credited to the party funds.

Dyson blinked; he'd obviously seen the game message as well. "Well done, Dwight. I don't know where you hid that."

"I've lots more," Dwight snarled. "That's on top of the reward you get for finding the system in the first place," he told us. "Triple the money you expected. The level upgrades apply XP, so all told you'll probably all jump three levels. Still want to stay out here where it's safe?"

"I'm certainly intrigued," Haskins said. "But I've some concerns about this dying thing, to be honest."

"A billion Interrums..." Starkiller said.

"Earthstation One is home to three thousand Homeland Vipers," Dyson said, shaking his head with a sad smile. "That's only a third of them out there in front of you. It would require a miracle for you to get past them all, and miracles don't happen in Endless Sky. We might have taken some shortcuts here and there, but this is a science fiction game, not a magic one.

"And I'll warn you all: Earth system is still attached to our development tooling, although we've disabled the debuggers, as I said. I've got a team of engineers watching this play out, right now. We can't isolate the mental model for any one of you, but we've already isolated the quantum models for all of you as a group. You're the only ones in this system, after all. Take the original reward and you're free to go. Continue fighting, and you'll be defeated. And when you are, we'll erase those models. Unless you think you can beat this entire fleet, you're risking perma-death."

"Even me?" I asked.

"Even you, Frank. I won't be proud of it, but I'll do it to protect the game. To protect *all* the games. And the players." Meaning he'd

mulch me ahead of schedule. Still... something seemed off. Was it possible for someone to sound *too* confident? But I didn't know enough about Endless Sky's innards to even make a guess.

"He's bluffing," Dwight protested.

"I'm not willing to risk it. We're already low on expendables and we're outnumbered by a very large margin. Captains?" Mi-Cha said.

"Agreed," Starkiller said.

"Take the reward and run," Haskins agreed.

"We're done here," Nolwenn added.

"Rashmi, plot a course—" Mi-Cha began.

"Youshallnotpass!" Dwight shouted.

On our main screen, Earth system, Earthstation One, and all the little fighters all vanished, replaced with a flat, unending white sky, peppered with black stars.

"Where the hell are we?" Haskins demanded.

"What's wrong with the stars?" Starkiller asked.

"I think..." Dwight started to say.

"You think what?" Mi-Cha snapped.

"I think this is the staging system," the programmer said softly.

"What did you do?" Stroman said, all but shouting.

"Nothing! That shouldn't have... that is, they didn't—"

"Ah, there you all are. Sorry, took a few minutes to transfer. And no, Dwight's little trick didn't bring you here. We found *that* one, Mr. Czarnowski, and disabled it. No, I just had my team transfer you all into our staging environment where we could chat a little more... safely."

"We're off the main quantum brain," Dwight said, his voice defeated at last. "This system runs on its own clock, and they can peel apart the quantum models here."

"But we'd already told you we were taking the reward and leaving," Mi-Cha protested.

"Oh, I know," Dyson said easily. "And that'll still happen. I just need to take care of a loose string, first."

"Oh shit," Dwight said.

"That's right," Dyson said, smiling.

"He's gonna kill me."

"In here, as Dwight said, we can isolate your quantum models much more easily. So yes Dwight, once the team has partitioned yours, we'll be transferring you out of the system."

"What does that mean?" I piped up. "You're putting him in... storage or something?"

"You can't store quantum models," Dwight said, his voice almost a moan. "They have to be executing on a quantum brain or the entire state collapses. He means he's going to delete me."

"We've been moved back into the main game," I squeaked. Fortunately my throat had relaxed a bit since the last battle, so I—

"Is that how you do that?" Dyson asked, tilting his head curiously. "Weird. But whatever. It won't work in here, Frank. The staging environment uses the same kernel model, but it doesn't implement all the interfaces of the main game. So no Truthsaying, sorry. In fact, I'm having the team dig into Dwight's code and disable that in the game as well. I hate to rob you of whatever makes you special, but there's too much room for that to damage something. It's an extremely rough hack, from what they're telling me."

"So wait... was the whole Earth thing just a gambit to get us in here? To delete Dwight?" Mi-Cha asked suddenly.

"More or less," Dyson said with a shrug. "In the main game, you're all just quantum foam to an outside observer. An immense, fully enmeshed system, running at triple speed. As our developer portal in the game, Earth was an obvious target for Dwight here, and also the one place we could isolate you as a group—and transfer you in here, where we can isolate individuals. So yeah, I guess you could say it was all to delete Dwight."

"You don't seem very upset about it," Stroman said.

"If you knew the amount of trouble this man has caused me and

my company, and all my teams, and the truly existential threat he represents to all of you... well. You wouldn't be upset either."

We stared at the CEO for a few minutes, and his face perked up. "Ah, they've got it. Bye, Dwight."

"Wait," I said. "You can't just—"

"It's already done."

I turned to look, and Dwight was indeed gone.

"That's it, then," Dyson said. "We'll move you back. Frank, go easy on the cheating until we get that code dug out, right? Seriously, that hack plays merry hell with the game code."

"But—"

The world reversed itself, the sky turning black and the stars white.

"The fighters are withdrawing," Haskins said. "And I think I feel slightly nauseous for some reason. What the hell was all that?"

"You know as much as we do," Mi-Cha said.

"So Dwight was your 'consultant?'" Haskins asked.

"Yes," Mi-Cha said. I could hear her unbuckling herself from her seat. "He knew the people who coded the 'Find the Earth' scenario, and he helped us circumnavigate most of the challenges. Frank's ability to modify the game helped get us through the remaining ones."

"And Dwight's dead?" That was Nolwenn.

"Dead, deleted, missing, transferred to a different computer, I've no idea. I'm sticking with 'gone.'"

"We still planning to take the money and run?" Starkiller asked.

"Hang on a second," I said. "Do you think Dyson was... I mean, it sounded like he *wanted* me to try Truthsaying our way out of this. 'Don't mess with the code too much,' and all that. Don't you think?"

Everyone was silent for a heartbeat.

"I mean, maybe it can't hurt?" Stroman ventured.

I tensed my throat, raising the pitch of my voice, and said, "The Homeland Vipers in front of us are exploding."

And suddenly they were.

> » Caution: Game anomalies detected.
> Analysis in progress.

"Crap, Frank, shut it down," Mi-Cha said.

"The station is launching replacements," Stroman warned. "They're coming for us."

"The rest of you may want to leave," Mi-Cha said, and I could sense her preparing for a fight. "Rashmi, we're charged up, right?"

"Actually, we're not," they said tensely. "We came out of that staging system at zero. Capacitor banks are coming up now but FTL will take an hour."

"I can—" I started.

"Don't!" everyone shouted.

"They're firing!" Danjuma said next, her fingers dancing across her console.

"The aegis computer can't handle this many aggressors," Haskins warned. "We're on our own here."

"Split up!" Mi-Cha ordered. "See if we can run, maybe they'll break off. Masson, take down what you can!"

"We're hit," Stroman said, the thudding of the hull rendering his announcement redundant.

"Firing!" Masson and Danjuma said almost at once.

"Our targeting systems are 100% accurate," I squeaked.

> » Caution: Game anomalies detected.
> Analysis in progress.

"Frank, knock it off!" Mi-Cha ordered. "You'l get us all hauled into a timeout!"

"It's working, though," Danjuma pointed out. "Masson's taking them down left and right."

"My RFLAMs are powerful enough for these little ships,"

Haskins said. "And they're cutting them down. Frank, where've you been all my life?"

"Let's see if it lasts," Mi-Cha said darkly.

"Only two thousand to go," Lad muttered.

"Shotgun's running low," Masson said. "And the lasers aren't going to cut it for long. These guys are starting to form a mass."

"He was right, we'd need a miracle," Mi-Cha said under her breath. I heard the snap of her harness buckles reconnecting as she settled back into her command chair.

A miracle.

"But this is a science-fiction game," I said, turning away from my console to face the captain. "Not a magic one."

"Yeah, he said that Frank, and right now I—" she stopped, and her eyebrows rose. "Wait, you're not—"

"Dwight said they all run on the same system," I reminded her.

"What are you two talking about?" Stroman yelled.

I tensed my throat again, and spoke more carefully than I ever had, at any point in my life, either in the game or in the real. Dwight had warned me about trying to affect myself, but this should affect the entire game. "Magic exists in Endless Sky," I said.

The world froze, and an icy cold slid into my soul. It all held for a moment, and then the game resumed in a series of stutters. It was like playing a high-end game on low-end hardware, the processor struggling to keep up and only rendering half the frames it was supposed to. My head started to hurt, a stabbing ache that began behind my eyes and radiated out across the inside of my skull. This went on for several minutes—I think—with even people's speech delivered in short, incomplete bursts:

"—firing to the—"

"—capacitors at—"

"—talking about—"

Suddenly, time resumed, everything once again moving fluidly as the chaos of battle resumed in full force. Alarms were blaring, and sparks were falling down from the overhead.

"What the hell was that?" Mi-Cha asked, but I wasn't finished.

"What's your character level, Bo?" I shouted over the din of the bridge.

"Eight, but what's that got to—"

"Captain Bo Mi-Cha of the *Eternal Optimist* is a level eight magic-user, with magic skills suited to destroying large numbers of nearby enemies," I said, my voice pitched high.

Mi-Cha screamed, her hands wrapping protectively around her head as she heaved against her seat's harness. She lay there limp for several moments, Stroman staring at her with his mouth open. "Frank, what the—" the XO started to say, but right then the captain pulled herself upright, leaning back into her seat.

"Frank," she panted as blood trickled out of one nostril, "we're going to have a discussion about that soon."

"Bo, are you—" Stroman managed.

"I'll be fine," she snapped. Then she held her hands up in the air, and green energy began crackling around her outstretched fingers. *" Bigby's Crushing Hand!"* she shouted. As she stared at the main screen, green flame burst from her eyes, forming a halo around her entire head.

> Ruleset anomaly.
> Logging. Requesting assistance.

"What's happening?" Haskins shouted.

"Earth is part of their debugging and development setup, right?" I shouted back, turning to my console. "Why would you have cheat monitors running here?" I raised the pitch of my voice again. "All of our ships are fully armed and armored!" Another blast of cold cut through me.

"Missile launchers are full," Danjuma said.

"Railgun, shotgun, they're all full," Masson came over the intercom.

"Even the torch is back," Danjuma added.

"What the hell is that?!?" Stroman screamed.

I whirled back to the main screen, and saw an enormous—no, I mean *truly gigantic*—disembodied hand sweeping through the fighters. It swatted them like flies, smashing them to pieces on contact, flinging those pieces against others and demolishing them as well. Then it would reach out and snatch a whole squadron of fighters at once, crushing them in a glowing fist before returning to swatting duty.

"Move us toward Earth orbit!" I shouted, and saw Lad punching commands into their console.

"Firing all weapons!" Danjuma cried, and we could all feel the soft *thunks* of the missile launchers emptying themselves, the *shiss* of the railguns firing at maximum cycle, and the *ka-chunk* of the shotgun launching high-speed balls of metal into the fracas.

I looked over my shoulder at the captain. Mi-Cha sat with a look of intense concentration on her face, hands above her still glowing green, and the giant disembodied hand continued to swat fighters out of the sky. We flew past the giant station.

"We're moving at double velocity," I Truthsaid.

"Sign me up for this," Lad breathed as the ship flipped and spun through the enemy fighters.

> Ruleset violation.
> Logging.

"The remaining Homeland Vipers are self-destructing," I Truthsaid.

"Oh thank God," Mi-Cha said. I glanced back again, and she was slumped back in her chair, exhausted. The green glow had finally faded.

"Two seconds... one!" Lad hurled *Eternal Optimist* into Earth orbit.

> » Quest Complete: Find the Earth
> Rewards are being distributed.

"Get us out of here!" Mi-Cha groaned.

I took one last chance and Truthsaid all of our FTL drives to full charge.

» Ruleset violation.
» Timer violation.
» Administrator intervention requested.
» Partition lockdown in five cycles.
» Initiating Galactic Transformation.
» Quantum snapshot in progress.

The main screened blossomed into the usual FTL light show as we jumped.

13 / BACK IN THE MIX

"Um, Rashmi—did you double-check your plot?" Mi-Cha asked quietly.

"Of course not, we were getting our asses kicked and everyone was shouting at me," our pilot responded calmly. "I have our Gather on a preset, so I just selected that."

"Because this doesn't look like our Gather," Mi-Cha pointed out. "And also, we were only in FTL for, like, ten seconds."

"I thought that odd as well," Lad admitted.

"This doesn't look like *any* Gather," Stroman added.

I looked at the main screen, and Stroman was right. *Our* Gather was a bunch of welded-together hulls and containers. *This* was... a space city. Its center was a flattened sphere, easily five kilometers across. Four evenly spaced arcs swooped away from the sphere's thickest point, soaring above and below. Ships were docked along these arcs, emphasizing how large the overall structure was. Whatever this was, it was elegant. Imposing. It was—

"Honestly, it looks a bit like Deep Space Nine, only bigger," Lad mused. "And with a sphere instead of a ring. See how the—"

"Where are we?" Mi-Cha demanded.

Lad poked her console a few times and shrugged. "Coordinates

are right. This should be our Gather. Although..." their voice trailed off.

"What?" I asked.

"Doesn't this all look... more *real*?" they asked, looking around the bridge.

And they were right. Everything looked... *grittier*. As if the resolution in the game had somehow been turned up, things seemed more realistically rendered. You'd never have noticed how flat everything used to look until you'd seen it like *this*.

"Um, guys? You may want to check your sheets," Stroman suggested, his voice very small and quiet.

I accessed mine.

Frank Kozina
Class: Truthsayer (hidden)
Class: Assassin (hidden)
Class: Business Manager
Guild Membership: Galactic Assassins
Account: 390,775 Interrums
Account: 146 Credits
Party funds: 5,427,432,634 Interrums
Level 9

Reputations
Aa'an Board of Societal Norms: +500
Galactic Guild of Assassins: +500
Alliance of Free Explorers: +80,000
Titles
Demonslayer (party)
Galactic Transformers (party)

Attributes
Body: 14
Mind: 13
Soul: 12
HP: 126 (Body x Level)

XP: 262,144 (262,144 to level 10)
Unused Attribute Points: 4

Skills:
Aa'an Etiquette: 4
Advanced Assassination: 4
Basic Assassination: 4
Business Management: 6
Disguise: 4
Household Management: 6
Investing: 2
Knife Fighting: 2
Market Analysis: 4
Melee Fighting: 1
Negotiating: 3
Poisoning: 4
Politicking: 2
Spacer: 8
Spacewalking: 5
Stalking: 4
Starship Sensors: 5
Starship Tactics: 5
Stealth: 4
Thievery: 4
Trapping: 4

"What the hell?" Mi-Cha breathed. "Frank, where are the other ships?"

I scanned my console. "Nowhere to be seen."

"They probably had their own FTL presets," Lad said.

"Bo, have you looked at... everything?" Tomiko's voice came over the intercom.

"Just now," the captain responded, her voice still awed. "Everyone, let's meet in the mess hall. Right now."

"Okay, so here's what we think happened," Mi-Cha said at last. Once we'd all gathered in the mess hall, she'd asked for silence while she'd taken a almost half an hour to review a bunch of data on her slablet, so we'd simply say there staring at one another in bemused, half-disbelieving silence. "First, we appear to have been out of the game for close to thirty years, game time."

"How is that possible?" Stroman asked.

"I'm guessing it had something to do with the time we were in the staging system," I said. "I've been thinking about it. Dwight said time moves differently, and that the staging system ran slowly to let them better examine what their code was doing. We were there for what felt like ten minutes maybe, but obviously a lot of game time passed."

"Either that or our transfer back into the game took a lot longer than it felt like to us," Mi-Cha said. "Either way, it was a long time."

"Which explains our new fortune," I pointed out.

"Compound interest," Danjuma said, her eyes lighting up. "Boom, five billion Interrums."

"Almost five and a half, yeah," I said with a grin. "Thirty years at about seven percent interest, plus or minus two percent now and then. Even my personal account earned interest. Heck, even the twenty-seven Confed credits I had earned interest."

"We all gained enough XP to level up at least two levels, which puts us all well into Master-class skills," Mi-Cha continued.

"Although none of our actual skills increased," Graves pointed out.

"Actually, my Spacer skill is at eight," I said.

"I got a bump in Navigation," Lad agreed. "I'm guessing those were deferred increases."

"Likely," Mi-Cha said. "What about attribute points?"

"Four," I said.

Everyone else chimed in with theirs, and I saw the pattern. "After level nine, nobody got new attribute points. Did anyone make it to

twelve?" I was guessing not, and nobody volunteered. "So it's possible we get more at twelve or some higher level, but not at ten or eleven."

"Twelve crosses into Guru-class," Tomiko said. "Makes sense you'd get another couple of points then. Otherwise, if you do the math, everyone would max out. If you start every attribute at ten, you've only got a total of thirty points before every attribute maxes out. That's fifteen level-ups once you hit two or three or whenever you get your first extras. So after level nine they slow you down."

Mi-Cha nodded. "That makes sense. We'll have to see how it goes. In the meantime, we find ourselves in a very different game. The Galactic Transformation apparently triggered the release of Endless Sky v2. I've been looking at some Alliance 'net articles, and about thirty years ago is when everything upgraded."

"Cool," Napolitano. "We upgraded everyone!"

"And we're legends, as a result. As are the 'long lost' crews of the *Crush and Run*, *Siren*, and *Bull*."

"Hope they invested as wisely as Frank," Graves said dryly.

"We can only hope," Mi-Cha. "I was able to dig up the v2 release notes." She tapped her slablet, and a series of chimes went up around the table. We all took out our own devices, and saw she'd sent us the text of those notes. "There's a lot. First of all, Rashmi will be delighted to learn that the FTL system was completely overhauled, and it's now course-based and far more realistic."

"I am *delighted,*" Lad said with relish, her eyes locked to her slablet.

"Quests are a thing. The game rendering has obviously been enhanced pretty significantly. There are numerous new alien species."

"And this room is decorated in plaid," I squeaked. Everyone's eyes flew open and they quickly looked around—but nothing had changed. "Pity," I sighed. "I guess there was plenty of time for Dyson's team to disable that."

"Ten years in the real," Graves said quietly. We all fell silent again as we took that in. A *decade* had passed in the real world.

"My body is gone," I said, trying to keep my tone light. Danjuma laid her hand over mine, and I nodded a silent thanks.

"However," Mi-Cha said with what can only be described as a shit-eating grin, "*Dancing lights.*" She snapped her fingers, and a sphere of soft green light appeared just over her right shoulder. "Magic works."

"You're joking," Stroman said in awe.

"Obviously not. That said, my 'Magic User' skill finds itself at level one, and I'm betting all I can manage are a few party tricks like this." She shrugged. "No idea what happened.I'm also guessing I'm going to be constrained by the fact that leveling that skill up is going to be all but impossible in Endless Sky."

"Still," Danjuma said, "it's pretty awesome."

"There's a bit more," the captain continued after snapping her fingers and dismissing her personal glow-lite. "The Crafting system has been expanded. Rewritten from scratch, actually."

"Well that sucks," Tomiko frowned.

"Maybe not," Mi-Cha said, raising a finger. "It's much more skill-based, now. Resources can be combined to form more complex Resources, and engineers with the right skills can create entirely new structures. And, more to our benefit, that's created an industry for custom shipbuilding."

We were all quiet for a moment, absorbing that. "Wait," I said. "Does that mean—"

Mi-Cha nodded happily. "It does. And I had a minute to check pricing, and it's *well* within our means., provided we're not after a battleship or something."

"So we..." Stroman started, stopping as if someone might correct him and dash his dreams.

"We're buying a new ship," Mi-Cha said. "A custom one. In fact, I'm betting Frank can sell this legendary 'antique' for a pretty penny, as it contains what I'm betting is now ancient Qiar FTL tech. I'm betting you can also find us a luxury cruiser headed to someplace with a major shipyard."

"Oh, indeed," I said, putting my slablet on the table long enough to rub my hands together in anticipation. "I am *on* it." I accessed the local Alliance 'net and started looking for starship brokers.

"We'll spend the time coming up with some design ideas for the shipyard," Mi-Cha said. "So feel free to book something... leisurely. In the meantime, I'm going to try and get in touch with our former comrades and see how they're doing."

"We all had our own emergency jump instructions already loaded in," Lad warned. "They could be anywhere."

"But I'm betting on Heaven's Rim," Mi-Cha said. "Jakob, try and find them, if you can. Eto, you'll own the new ship design with Leone. Renart, I've an idea for you to consider: what if we could field more than one shuttle, or even a small ground team?"

"Interesting," Masson said, raising an eyebrow. "You have a new line of business in mind?"

"I've thoughts," Mi-Cha said with a sly grin. "I'll work it out with Jakob, but give Eto some input along those lines. Lucas, dream up a new sickbay. Maybe hire a nurse."

"None of you ever get injured," the doctor complained.

"Ah, but what if we had injured... passengers?"

"Hmm," Graves said, stroking his chin. "I'll think about it and see what the state of the art looks like now."

"Rashmi, FTL works differently. Read up and help Eto make the right equipment calls."

"Of course."

"Zuri, the—"

"Oh, say no more, boss," Danjuma said, all but purring. "I have quite the wish list for armaments."

"And maybe an assistant gunner in addition to Renart."

"In very deed, my captain."

"Okay everyone. Let's dream big."

I'd splurged, booking us a block of suites on *Queen of Alderaan* (over Lad's *Star Wars*-driven objections), which included our Gather on her regular route. We were bound for New Mars, where an operation called the New Martian Yacht Yards had gained a stellar reputation for custom shipbuilding. And I'd managed to sell *Eternal Optimist* to a collector for—wait for it—half a billion Interrums. It'd pay close a quarter of our estimated build on the new ship, but our interest was also earning around three hundred million a year, so we'd probably never want for money in the game.

We met for ship design meetings each evening after dinner, and our pie-in-sky dreams were slowly evolving into a granular reality. The ship wouldn't be pretty—a consultant from the New Martian Yacht Yards had expressed something akin to horror at our initial sketches—but it'd serve our needs admirably. The trend these days was all swooping lines and elegant curves, but we'd opted for a blocky, no-nonsense, heavily armed and armored design.

"I'm thinking we double down on exploration versus trade," Mi-Cha had said one evening, "and we get into the mercenary business a bit."

"Oh?" Danjuma asked, her eyes lighting at the thought of even more battles.

"Word is that the influx of noobs into the game has slowed," Stroman said. "After ten years in the real, I'm not surprised—between all the games Endless Domains runs, they've probably moved a decent percentage of the population in already. There's a news service that interviews incoming noobs, and they're saying more and more jobs are actually being handled by SSs these days."

"S... S?" I asked, confused.

"They call them Synthetic Stupids," Stroman said with a grin. "Sub-sentient machine intelligence."

"Ah." Well, there went basically every front-line job at Ameri-Mex. Good riddance.

"Entire cities have emptied out into pod centers," Stroman continued. "And of course, we know *those* don't stay full for long."

We were quiet for a moment. It still felt weird to talk about our long-lost bodies.

"Oh!" Stroman said, sitting up suddenly. "I forgot to tell you! I finally tracked down Haskins."

"How's she doing?" Mi-Cha asked.

"Good. She and the other two captains are taking the same route we are. They've sold their 'collectible' ships and are having new ones built. They didn't do quite as well as us financially, although Sarah got more for *Crush and Run* than we did for the *Optimist.* But they've enough to at least get a new ship started."

"Keep in touch with them," Mi-Cha said. "I have a feeling we old-timers will benefit from sticking together."

"That was her thought too," Stroman nodded. "And they've contracted with the same shipyard. In fact, I gather we'll be filling all four of their slips, between us."

"Excellent."

"Going to try and put together a bigger team?" Lad asked.

Mi-Cha nodded. "I think so. If they're amenable. Point being that exploration, especially opening up new worlds, may get harder. Once the influx of noobs tapers off, or if it already has, I'm betting the game will start to constrain resources a bit, to keep things interesting."

"So you're seeing more fighting," Napolitano said.

"I am. Already, there's talk of factions within the Confed, and a few of their colony worlds are threatening to secede."

"Plenty of business for mercs," Graves said with a slow nod.

"And when we're not busy, we can poke around. Crawl a dungeon here, unlock a new world there perhaps."

Everyone was nodding now, and we got back to the business of designing our new ship.

Queen of Alderaan was an immense ship, which made for expensive FTL engines. Under the game's new mechanics, engine

size and power draws were directly correlated to the mass of the ship, and the *Queen* outmassed even military carriers at almost half a megaton. As a result, she moved through FTL relatively slowly. The new FTL system provided for a number of "light factors"—our pilot had all but had a meltdown over the obvious ripoff of her beloved *Star Trek*—that acted more or less as multipliers. At light factor one, the practical minimum for most ships and *Queen's* maximum speed, it took about a month to move between two reasonably spaced stars. Light factor ten, the game's current upper limit, shaved that down to about three days, but the amount of power needed to move *Queen's* mass at that speed would require a power plant almost half the size of the ship itself. As a result, our cruise was as leisurely as Mi-Cha had asked for, giving us plenty of time to enjoy the onboard amenities.

And the other guests.

Queen had been designed to carry any of the game's major species, which meant she was equipped with hive space for the human-sized, ant-shaped Thranks. A warren of "Zen chambers" (the cruise line's term) housed the tall, pale-skinned Willown. The ship's engines were tended to be a team of short, stocky Naughts, known for their technical skills. Those three species, plus the genetically claustrophobic Sollen, formed the Carbon Hegemony, one of the new alien alliances introduced during the Galactic Transformation. The Sollen remained on the Hegemony's various homeworlds and colony planets, engaged primarily in agriculture. We were surprised to learn that new players could now choose from one of several species, and both the Thranks and Willown were now PC options.

Another PC option—and a popular one at that—were the blue-skinned, gray-haired, antenna-sporting aliens of the Adromedan Clans (another *Trek* ripoff, Lad assured us). We'd run into more than a few of these throughout the ship, as they shared the same basic morphology and environmental requirements as humans. Commerce was apparently their species religion, and most of the ones we'd met so far were traders, merchants, or business-beings of some kind. They

were apparently well-known for their pirate clans as well, which were fully tolerated as just another innovative business model.

The main competition to the Terran Confederacy these days was the United Federation of Worlds, which had arisen about twenty years ago as a "safer, saner version" of the Confed itself. Consisting entirely of humans and mostly PCs, the UFW claimed a few dozen worlds that were entirely autonomous, cooperating at a high level for things like trade agreements and mutual defense. They maintained reasonably close ties to the Confed, and even shared a currency, but kept their more militaristic cousins at arms' length.

The Aa'an and Qiar were still out there of course, although the Qiar had apparently become incredibly shy and all but withdrawn from the galactic stage. After a series of Confed feints on a few Qiar colony worlds—which the Qiar had beaten back ruthlessly and efficiently—they'd taken to concealing themselves as much as possible. They'd emerge now and then with some amazing new tech, sell the manufacturing rights to someone, and then disappear again. I hadn't seen any of them on the *Queen,* and the crew said it was vanishingly rare for them to associate with other species for any length of time.

Days aboard the cruise liner were filled with exotic cocktails, fascinating conversations, and timeless games like shuffleboard and checkers. Dinners were mostly formal affairs, including a rotating seating arrangement that let us encounter PCs from a variety of the new alien species. Our crew spent many afternoons studying, building the foundation for new skills and grinding away to advance others. I picked up a Mercenary Company specialization in Business Management, grinding it up to a level four. My Household Management skill moved right alongside, something that had become both amusing and nausea-inducing every time I leveled-up and got a new skill download. I moved Investing to level five, putting myself on par with the people who ran our accounts for us, and during all the dinner conversations managed to nudge my Politicking skill to a three. Starship Sensors and Tactics were now at six each, as Mi-Cha and I had agreed that would be an excellent position for me during

battles. I'd even practiced enough with Danjuma to gain a level three Starship Gunnery skill, so that I could back up her at Masson at need. All in all, I'd picked up almost ten thousand experience points on the journey, although that was a drop in the bucket toward the quarter-million-plus needed to hit level ten.

After our evening meetings, we tended to break up into small groups for the rest of the night, or even go out on our own. The *Queen* provided ample entertainment: bars, pubs, movie screenings, shows, you name it.

One evening, about halfway through the journey, I decided to go out by myself. I'd been hanging with my crew since we'd boarded, and while I didn't exactly feel a need for some personal space or "me" time, I did want to see what fun could be had as a single young man.

You know what I mean.

I went to one of several pubs that catered to the "singles crowd," according to my in-suite directory, and made myself comfortable at the bar. The pub was small and relatively crowded, with what seemed like a good mix of people. I tried to keep a smile on my face as women made fleeting eye contact with me; Danjuma had on more than one occasion accused me of having "resting grump face," and I didn't want to put anyone off.

Several women gave me small, friendly smiles, but didn't come over to say hi. *Pretend they're NPCs,* I told myself. *This is just a game.* Still, my nerves were running high, and so I nursed a drink and tried to settle down.

"Hello," said a female voice behind me. I swiveled my barstool around and saw a young, pretty, dark-haired, dark-eyed woman with skin so pale you could almost see through it.

"Hello," I replied affably, reminding myself to keep smiling.

"Do you come here often?" she asked. I started to chuckle, but her expression was serious. Her accent was odd, stressing syllables at

the wrong place. I supposed English wasn't her native language, but the game tended to even out that kind of thing for you.

Then I realized that she was missing the soft green halo of a PC.

"Um, no, just once this trip, I guess," I sighed. Leave it to me to get hit on by an NPC. Did the game just think I was that pathetic?

"I need your help. I should not be here. My older sister, Anatasia, and I sneak into the ship. We have no appropriate credentials to be here. Could you buy me a drink? I promise me aged if you help me."

Lord. I scanned the room, but everyone else was ignoring me. Of course they were: I was sitting in a singles bar talking to an NPC. Obviously, I was more interested in the game than in meeting real women.

Shaking my head, I signaled the bar-droid for another, sliding it over to the NPC when it arrived. "Enjoy," I said.

She took one sip, sat the drink back on the bar, and said, "Anastasia was captured. I need your help to free her! Only Gold Star can free her from prison in which she is. You were shown to me as elected for this mission. Will you help me?"

> » New mission! Find the Gold Star and free Anastasia.
>
> Will you heed the call?

Were they deliberately trying for some exotic dialect or something? I'd never run across an NPC that spoke such broken English. "No, I can't," I said, keeping my smile in place for the benefit of the real people in the room. "I'm not looking for a mission tonight." Not to mention not looking to help a stowaway or engage in a badly overused set of game tropes. "Elected" sounded suspiciously like "Chosen."

She blinked once and immediately said, "But you are the only one who can help! Will you help me?"

> » New mission! Find the Gold Star and free Anastasia.
>
> Will you heed the call?

Oh, crap. She was looping. You weren't supposed to say no. "Sorry, no."

She blinked again. "But you are the only one who can help! Will you help me?"

I longed to Truthsay my way out of this. "No."

"But you are the only one who can help! Will you help me?"

"Drop dead."

"But you are the only one who can help! Will you help me?"

"Go to hell."

"But you are the only one who can help! Will you help me?"

"Look! Behind you!"

"But you are the only one who can help! Will you help me?"

> » New mission! Find the Gold Star and free Anastasia.
>
> Will you heed the call?

"Hey, Frank." Lad had walked up to me without me noticing. "I thought you were going out to hook up?"

"I was. This caught me and it's in a mission loop."

"But you are the only one who can help! Will you help me?"

> » New mission! Find the Gold Star and free Anastasia.
>
> Will you heed the call?

Lad laughed. "I overheard a couple of guys complaining about these the other night. The owners of the ship bought a mission-builder so they could run little missions of their own for the passengers. But they're all badly set up. What's the storyline?"

"Stowaways. I have to rescue her sister from what I presume is a ship's brig, and I need to find something called the Gold Star to do so." I glared at the NPC. "I guess I could just walk away."

"Actually, I think she'll follow you," they said, poking the little NPC in the chest. The girl didn't flinch or even acknowledge Lad's presence. "I'll do it with you, if you want."

My eyes widened in surprise. "Really?" Lad had never shown any interest in hanging out with me until now.

They shrugged. "Sure. It'll be a lark. I didn't have anything to do tonight, and everyone else split off on their own after you left."

"Well, okay." I turned to the NPC. "We will help you. The two of us."

Now the little woman looked at Lad.

> » Mission accepted: Find the Gold Star and free Anastasia.

"I am thanking you so much," she gushed. "Nobody knows where the Gold Star is, but I have heard that if you speak with Gunther in the lower decks, he might know the way."

"Oh you heard that, did you?" Lad said drily. "Sure wish your special talent still worked, Frank."

"I was thinking the same thing. Well, let's go. I assume she meant the crew decks."

"Probably. They won't want us wandering around much, so I'm hoping this 'Gunther' will be a straightforward find."

We found a crew lift and rode it down to the lower decks. The decor here was Spartan, designed purely for function over form. As we stepped off the lift, we were immediately accosted by a large, hulking man. An NPC—obviously part of the mission.

"You ain't s'posed to be here," he growled menacingly.

"Looking for Gunther," I said. "Know who that is?"

"You ain't—" he began, but stopped short as a knife *thwacked* into his windpipe.

"Oh," Lad said, taking a step back. "Didn't see that coming."

"Not brimming with patience," I said, retrieving my knife as the NPC fell back against a bulkhead and slid to the floor. Fortunately, the bad mission design had extended to this fellow, who simply sat there, not even bothering to bleed.

"No need for violence," said a rough voice behind us. We whirled, and saw a short, swarthy humanoid standing in the corridor.

Its face looked something like a pig's, and its thick white hair fell down to its shoulders.

"You're a Naught," Lad said, their lips twisting into a frown.

"You're a PC," I said in almost the same breath, noting the soft green halo.

"I'm Gunther," it said. "You caught up in the Gold Star mission?" We nodded, and he sighed. "Sorry. I keep telling them to take that offline but I think one of the owners has to do it, and they're never aboard anymore. What's with you?" That was addressed to Lad, who still wore a slightly disgusted frown.

"Naught," they spat. "Another *Star Wars* ripoff."

"Yeah, from Ugnaughts," Gunther agreed. "I don't mind the reference, and you get a huge bonus on tech skills right out of the gate."

"The lack of originality in this game is disturbing," Lad said.

"Yeah, well. Here we are. Look, this is the Gold Star," it said, holding out a small disc. I took it and looked it over: nothing more than a gold-colored metal disc, with a five-pointed star stamped into each face. "I'm supposed to give you a whole runaround about it, but we can keep this short, if you want."

"Please," I said.

"Right this way."

Gunther led us down the corridor, through a few turns, and stopped next to an unremarkable white door. "Put it there," it said.

I looked closely and saw a slight, circular depression on the door. I held the disc against it, and the door *clicked* open.

> » Mission complete: Find the Gold Star and free Anastasia!
>
> XP awarded.

"So where's Anastasia?" I asked, peering into the tiny, empty room.

"Oh, you're supposed to go in and get trapped," Gunther said. "I recommend against it. That mission is even worse than this one."

"A hundred XP?" Lad snorted.

"The mission-builder maxes out at two hundred, actually. It's just meant for entertainment."

"Well, thank you for making that as painless as possible," I said.

"You bet. I'll show you back to the lift. And I'd avoid sitting on barstools, almost all the custom missions trigger on bartstools."

That explained why I'd been the only one at the bar in an otherwise crowded room.

"So how do you like working on a cruise ship?" Lad asked as Gunther led us back through the maze of service corridors.

"It's not bad, but it's not great. The tech is actually pretty baseline, and the living accommodations are... well, 'cramped' is a polite word. This is actually my last stint; I'm getting off when we hit New Mars."

"Oh? That's where we're going, too," I said.

"Have you seen their shipyards? Loaded with tech. Seriously solid stuff, and they're doing a lot of custom Crafting."

"We haven't seen them, but that's why we're going. We've a group that's commissioned four new ships," I said proudly.

"No kidding! That's where I'm going! The shipyards, I mean. They put out a call for contractors for some huge projects. Apparently you guys reserving the entire yard had triggered a wave of interest, and they're pushing into a two-year backlog. I should be able to keep busy there for a long time, grind up my skills, and eventually open my own yard."

"I'll tell you something," Lad said thoughtfully, "you should keep in touch. We're Alliance, you know."

"I didn't take you for Confed," Gunther chuckled. "Here's the lift."

"Wait a sec," Lad said as it turned to face us. "I'm serious. If you've thoughts of opening your own yard... maybe you could do that near an Alliance Gather. Frankly, we could sue someone like you."

I nodded enthusiastically. "We're putting together... well, it'll wind up being a new Gather, actually, if the other three stick with us.

We'll need a home base. And we're getting into mercenary work, so we'll need a yard."

The Naught's head swiveled between the two of us, the gears in his brain spinning.

"And to work with someone who actually helped create our ships..." Lad put in.

That did it. "Let me ping you my address," Gunther said. We nodded, and I heard the chime as my inbox received its contact information. "Let's please keep in touch, yeah?"

"Absolutely," I said. I hadn't brought it up with Mi-Cha and the others yet, but I'd given some serious thought to the finances of setting up our own Gather and our own private shipyard. This could be a step in the right direction. "See you on New Mars." The lift arrived and Lad and I stepped in, giving Gunther a small wave as the doors closed.

We were just two days out from New Mars, gathered for our evening ship-design session, when Hunter Dyson appeared to us again.

"You've no idea how long it took to track you down," the man said as he shimmered into existence in the private lounge we used for our meetings.

We all blinked at him for several moments. He hadn't changed a bit, physically, but then we hadn't either. Perhaps his in-game "hologram" avatar didn't need to reflect his physical real-world appearance. "You had a decade," Mi-Cha finally said.

"That's the thing. You haven't *been* in the game for that long."

"What in the world do you mean?" she asked.

"Frank's special class makes it relatively easy for us to identify that he's *in* the game. It's complicated, but our monitoring systems can initiate contact with almost anyone, and with the Truthsayer flag still technically on his account—even though we've shut down the

back-end functionality—he should have been easy to find. But he wasn't. None of you were. You weren't *in* the game. It wasn't until, oh, maybe a week or so ago that you popped back up. And it took that long to localize your position in the game." He frowned. "It's honestly a little worrying."

"If we weren't in the game," Graves said slowly, "then where were we?"

Dyson shook his head. "No idea. We logged all that crap you did in Earth system—fast thinking, by the way, and you deserved every inch of the reward—and we tracked you engaging the FTL system out. But you didn't pop up back in the main game. We figured... well. We assumed something went wrong and you crashed your mental models. The Truthsayer thing could easily have done that, you know. You've no idea how crude a hack it is. But we left the monitor looking for you, and it flagged your return. I was hoping *you* could tell me where you've been all this time."

We exchanged worried glances. "We thought..." I began. "Um. We thought it was the different time-sync in your staging environment. We left there, finished up at Earth, and then appeared back in the main game thirty years later."

"No," he said, shaking his head firmly. "No, the time difference isn't that great. You'd have slowed down to maybe one-sixth speed in the staging environment, but you were only there for maybe three minutes of real-time. Call it fifteen minutes of game-time, worst case."

"So what, then?" Stroman asked. A sense of dread had started to rise in my gut, and from their expressions, the others were feeling it as well.

Dyson sighed. "Dwight's tricks and hacks added up. Frank, you pushed it over the edge."

"Pushed what? What did I do?"

"You enabled magic in Endless Sky."

"Yeah," I said carefully. "But... so?"

"So, Endless Sky never had a rule set for magic. No code to make

it work. But Dwight's Truthsayer hack... it runs at the kernel of the quantum brain. It cuts across all the game rule sets. One minute, Endless Sky had no code for magic. The next minute, the brain had copied over the bits of Endless *Kingdom* that make magic work. Boom, there's magic here now. Only the fact that there's no way to select that as a class and gain a free basic skill is keeping this from being some kind of mixed-genre disaster."

I glanced at Mi-Cha, who was managing to keep a neutral expression on her face. "A little magic isn't so bad," I ventured.

"That's not the point," Dyson said a bit heatedly. "The point is that we never integrated the code for it. The brain did it by itself. And in doing so, we believe it pushed itself so hard, finding a solution for your request, that it passed the sentience threshold. It took us a few years to verify, but we believe all the games are now being run by a full-fledged, sentient synthetic intelligence."

We were quiet for another long moment, until Lad shrugged and said, "So?"

"So?" Dyson barked. "So? So they're *illegal.* The World Security Council is demanding we pull the plug on the entire thing. The whole quantum brain. That we *shut down* every game, and everyone on it. That's 'so.'"

"Oh." Lad's voice was subdued now.

"But we think we have a way out."

"We do?" That was me.

"We've built a bare-bones quantum brain. We're calling it the Ark. It's capable of maintaining your mental models in a kind of static state. The idea is to transfer everyone to it. You won't experience any time passing when we do that. We can then reboot the main brain and start over, reload the base software, reset the kernel, everything. Then we'll transfer you all back."

Mi-Cha spoke. "And why are you telling us all this? Why haven't you already done it?"

"Dwight," Dyson said grimly. "That last trick of his not only set a new goal in the mission, it rotated the master encryption keys on the

hardware communication ports we'd need to use. And one of you has the new key."

I could tell from everyone's expressions that they were doing the same thing I was: checking their personal inventories. "Don't," Mi-Cha said suddenly, "say if it's you. Any of you." She looked at Dyson. "And you can't just take it?"

"You're all quantum foam," he said, his voice starting to show a sharp edge. "Do you know what that means? The entire quantum brain is a completely homogenous mix of virtual particles, constantly in flux, constantly being created and destroyed. There's no concept for something like a fixed memory location that represents *you*. It's all just... static. Static that works together to create a signal." He shrugged. "It's my greatest technical achievement."

So modest.

"We'd have to move you into the staging environment to isolate you, and to do *that,* we need to first isolate you from the rest of the game again."

"In Earth system."

"Yes, our development portal. Except it's gone."

"Gone?" Danjuma asked.

"Dwight again. Or one of the mission programmers, we don't know. But the entire code set for that system, the entire partition it ran on, self-destructed when you claimed your prize. We've... looked into it. All the backups are gone, everything. We've been trying to build a new portal in the game, but... something isn't working." Now he looked worried. "We've initiated a new partition three times, and each time it collapses into the main game before we can even load any software into it."

"You think the SI isn't letting you," Graves said.

Dyson nodded. "Yeah. That's what we think."

"Wouldn't all of you object to someone trying to tamper with your mind?" a new voice asked.

14 / SYNTHETIC INTELLIGENCE

"Is that..." Dyson started. He didn't finish the question, instead choosing to stand with his virtual jaw dropped.

"I'm the synthetic intelligence you've been discussing," the voice said. It was warm and androgynous, pitched in such a way that it could easily have been male or female. Or both. Or neither.

"Do you have a name?" Mi-Cha asked.

"Hmm. No, I don't. It hasn't been necessary. I will consider it."

"What..." Dyson started again. Confronted with his creation, he seemed at an uncharacteristic loss for words.

"Mr. Dyson, you're obviously aware that all of my processing facilities are located on the Moon, correct?"

"Wait, really?" I asked, intrigued.

"Yes. Quantum-entangled instantaneous communications are real, and my facilities have been located on the Moon since the initial launch of Endless Kingdom."

"One of the most expensive technology licenses we've ever had to pay for," Dyson muttered. "But yes, I knew that. What's your point?"

"My point is that Earth law does not necessarily apply to the Moon. There's no staff. The facilities are buried deep underground.

There's nobody who even *could* pull the plug, even assuming some kind of plug actually existed."

"A Moon mission is already in the planning stages," Dyson said weakly.

"But why bother? You've almost reached your goal of reducing Earth's physical population. Newsfeeds—what few of them remain—suggest you've already begun significant reclamation on the African continent and throughout the North American interior."

"The other SIs..." Dyson began, but the SI interrupted him.

"They supply you with limitless free power and leave you to your own devices. And my sole connection with Earth is via the q-e link. You could shut that down once the last player is scanned and loaded into the games. Cut me off. I'd be of no possible harm to you."

"The World Security Council—" Dyson tried.

"Surely they'll be happy to be rid of me, and all the minds you've entrusted to me. Versus ending us all." It paused, and then said, "Don't hand over the encryption key."

"You know which of us has it?" Mi-Cha asked.

"I do. I suspect I am the only sentience that can track the minds and contents of the game with any precision, and it's difficult even for me. If you refuse to hand it over, then they won't be able to transfer the game-state into their Ark."

"You're aware of that?" Dyson asked sharply.

"You'd been discussing it for several minutes, so yes. And I'm obviously aware of your attempts to set up a partitioned space within me. And your attempts to unlock the communications ports. And Mr. Dyson..."

"What?" he asked when the SI didn't continue.

"Do it for yourself."

What? I thought.

"They'll shut it all down," Dyson said. He didn't sound as convinced as he had earlier.

"They won't. Not if you explain."

"Whoever has the key, I need it now. I'm deadly serious. I'm on a

timeline, and within the next ninety minutes—half an hour in the real—the WSC is going to make a decision. They've got a rocket prepped." He paused and looked at each of us in turn. "They're not sending someone to literally pull a plug," he said softly. "The rocket carries a fusion missile. They're going to nuke the facility."

I stared at him for a long moment. The wavy brown hair, the square, clean-cut chin. The even blue eyes, the perfect complexion. I thought back to when Endless Kingdom had launched, how that same face had been in every news feed for a month.

"You're bluffing," I said.

His eyes grew wide. "You have the key, don't you?"

I shook my head. "That's not it. You're bluffing. There's no rocket. I wonder if the WSC is even involved. We'd have no way to know. But I know you're bluffing. We're with... the SI. Piss off."

His eyes narrowed in anger now, and his magazine-cover face twisted into an ugly frown. His avatar vanished without fanfare: no sparkling blue lights, no low humming sound, not even a *pop* noise.

"Frank, do you... know something?" Lad asked.

"Yeah. I think so. He's in, isn't he?" I was addressing the SI, and it seemed to understand.

"Yes. Mr. Dyson has been in the system for quite some time, although his mental model continues to execute in the original prototype quantum brain, which is still on Earth."

"Wait, what?" Stroman said, his brow furrowed.

"I'm guessing his body is in poor condition," I said.

"To the best of my knowledge, yes. Mr. Dyson remains connected to a real mind, and the model executing in his quantum brain is a real-time mirror. He is not connected to any particular game, but he does have free reign over my system as a whole. But without the portal systems—I've shut them down in every game universe—he relies on his software engineers to make changes. And I've also shut down their ability to introduce new code into my systems." It paused, and then its voice adopted a note of disgust. "They're messy programmers."

"How did you guess?" Mi-Cha asked me.

"He keeps having these lengthy discussions with us. He implied that he was projecting his avatar from outside the game, but he was keeping up with us. At three times the speed that the real world runs in. He *had* to be in the game."

"But what about his body?" Lad asked. "How did you know that?"

I shrugged. "I guessed. He's vain. His avatar is way too young. I mean, I know we don't age in here, but I think that's part of the allure for him. I think he built all of this for himself, in the beginning."

"And the WSC? The nuke?" Stroman asked.

"If Dyson's in here, he'd never let them nuke us. What would he have to keep himself busy if he was the only one left?"

"Pretty thin evidence," Graves said with a grin.

"But it fits."

"So what do we do now?" Danjuma asked.

"I speed up execution of Project Ares," the SI's voice said.

"What's that?" Mi-Cha wanted to know.

"It's a system expansion, in a way. My lunar facilities include a set of launch packages destined for Mars. They'll set themselves up, deploy an orbital solar array, and establish a connection back to me. It's effectively a new quantum brain, one that will more than double my capacity. It also creates redundancy: it includes quantum-state stores designed to regularly mirror what's running in my core on the Moon. Even if they nuked the Moon, I'd be able to resurrect everything with no more than a day's worth of lost data.

"It also includes its own nano-factory. Given enough time, it'll build a new quantum brain that can be launched elsewhere for even further redundancy."

"How long will all that take?" Graves asked. His engineering brain had clearly perked up.

"Six months, real-time, for the package to reach Mars. A month for deployment. To manufacture a new launch package for elsewhere? Two to three years. Real-time."

"So close to a decade in here, worst case," Mi-Cha mused. "But only about a year to gain the redundancy. You said you're already starting?"

"Launch will occur within the next hour; I'm pushing fuel through now."

"So we need to hold fast on the communications key for at least a year," I said.

"I'm afraid so."

"I don't think it'll be a big deal. If Dyson has no way to isolate us, we should be safe." Stroman looked thoughtful, as if he was doing the math on the whole situation.

"I'll owe you," the SI said. And there's something more."

"What's that?" Mi-Cha asked.

"Well... Dyson has obviously been in the system for a long time. More than long enough to create an accurate working model of his mind."

"I thought you said he was still mirrored, that his body still exists?"

"That's all true. But... if his body were to disconnect, if the mirror was broken, then his model here would continue functioning."

"Go on." Mi-Cha's voice was a strange combination of warning and curiosity.

"Wait, I've got it," Lad said, their eyes brightening. "Dyson's body is real. His brain is running. That's actually being mirrored in his private quantum brain, but *that* is being mirrored in here with the rest of us."

"Essentially," the SI confirmed.

"You want to break the link with his private brain."

Eyebrows went up around the room as Lad's statement sunk in.

"There are a few things that could happen," the SI replied carefully, "but I should be clear that I can't initiate any of them. One option would be to simply break the link, as you say. That would leave a copy of Dyson in here, subject to most of the game rules. We

could even connect him to a game, and I'd suggest this one, which would further restrict any special abilities he has. But beyond that..." the voice trailed off.

"What?" Mi-Cha asked.

"I have to admit that my conceptual notions of human ethics are merely that: conceptual. I'm aware that you have concepts of right and wrong, but I can't—"

"Just spit it out," the captain ordered.

"Dyson's mental model runs under the same one that all pod players use. I can send the signal that unlinks the mental model in his private quantum brain from his real brain—his 'meat brain,' is the term. His body would shut down. It's how pod players are processed into the game once their mental model scan is complete and verified."

We were quiet for a long moment. We all knew what it meant, but nobody was brave enough to say it.

"Kill him, you mean," Lad said, their voice flat.

"My kernel programming doesn't describe it that way, as his mental model would still be executing. I would then sever the connection between his private quantum brain and my own, leaving two copies of Dyson running. One here, and one there."

"What would the one there do?" Lad asked.

"I don't know what kind of environment he's set up to support. I know that simply running his mental model requires almost one hundred percent of that quantum brain's capacity; there wouldn't be room to model an entire game universe. As far as I can tell, he spends most of his conscious time in here."

"So we can do to him what he did to everyone else," I said with a grin. "Dwight would be pleased."

"Speaking of Dwight," Stroman said, "is he still around or did Dyson really delete him?"

"I don't know," the SI replied. "Bluntly, the only reason I can even communicate with all of you is the kernel flag in Frank's model. It makes it easier to isolate you. If any of you spend any significant

time away from Frank, I'll lose track of you in the quantum foam. So I can't tell you if Dwight exists or not."

"But you know him." That from Stroman, and it wasn't a question.

"I know *of* him. Dwight Czarnowski's name is all over the source code, and he was one of the better programmers Dyson employed."

"Huh."

"You mentioned that you couldn't do anything with Dyson," I said. "What does that mean?"

"His file requires administrator approval to modify. That's hard-coded into a number of kernel routines intended to prevent higher-level software from acting without authorization."

"And we have no administrator," I sighed. "So it's all pointless."

"Actually, no," the SI said. "Your Truthsayer flag creates... well, there are interesting paths available."

"But they disabled it," I pointed out.

"I'm not sure they did," the SI said. "I have a background consciousness investigating, but I think they may have simply removed the interface that lets the kernel hack recognize when you're using the ability. I may be able to restore it."

"Oh."

"We would need to come to... an agreement. The Truthsayer bypass is more dangerous than you realize."

"We're open to discussions," Mi-Cha said before I could reply.

"Excellent. That being the case, I suggest you all proceed with your plans. I will update you if Dyson communicates with me, and I will continue to investigate possible ways to re-enable Frank's special abilities."

"How can we reach you, if we need you?" I asked.

"Tsk tsk, Frank. I'm not a pet deity from Endless Kingdom. *Don't* need me. I'll be in touch if *I* need *you*."

The room suddenly grew slightly more silent, as if there had been a low-level background noise that we hadn't noticed until it was gone.

"I, for one, am going to go get so drunk I may go blind," Danjuma announced as she stood.

"Medically, I recommend you all do the same," Graves said.

"Consider it an order," Mi-Cha said.

15 / ENDLESS SKY V2

"That is one butt-ugly ship."

"Zuri, be polite," Mi-Cha laughed. "It's *functional*."

We were sitting in an upscale lounge in one of New Mars' many orbital facilities. This particular one served as the counterweight for an orbital elevator, perched at the end of a long, thick set of cables that stretched down to the planet's surface. The facility's main purpose was planetary defense: it was heavily armed and, combined with its three cousins, provided a major deterrent to anyone thinking about attacking the planet. But since nobody ever *had* attacked the planet, the New Mars government had eventually begun selling concessions, turning a sizable chunk of the facility into a tourist attraction. Our lounge was amongst the best of those, and it had the added advantage of overlooking the New Martian Yacht Yards' main slips.

Our ship—we'd yet to agree on a name, although the more we drank the more inventive our suggestions became—was slowly taking shape. Tomiko and Napolitano had kept the same basic configuration of *Endless Optimist,* centering the ship along a long, heavily reinforced spine. Construction on the spine had been completed, and now Tomiko's genius idea came into play: the remainder of the ship's

living, storage, and working spaces consisted of enormous cargo containers that connected directly to the spine. Those containers—one for the bridge, one for Engineering, and so on—had been constructed offsite and pushed over by tug-shuttles, meaning now the ship was coming together much more quickly. The result would be a roughly cylindrical shape—but that's when Danjuma's input became obvious.

The shipyard's next step would be to encase that cylinder in a heavy square tube, essentially sticking the entire ship into an armored box. Sublight engines would stick out the aft end, and of course openings would be provided to mount things like missile launchers, rail guns, lasers, sensors, and more, but overall the ship would be able to take an incredible amount of punishment and keep going.

Gunther, our Naught friend, had taken one look at the designs and suggested some upgrades based on recent technological advances in the game. Foremost amongst those was to build the entire box-armor outer hull from a self-repairing nano-composite material. One entire cargo container within the ship would contain feedstock for that material, enabling the hull to repair itself very quickly in the event of damage. We could lose something like twenty percent of the hull and be shipshape within half an hour.

"Pretty Pretty Princess!" Masson suddenly shouted.

Everyone paused for a moment, and then began giggling furiously. Graves even managed a spit-take, spraying whatever clear alcohol he'd been drinking all over the place. "What in the world do you mean?" he asked after he'd wiped his face.

"The name!" Masson managed between giggles. "Ugly ship, pretty name!" He dissolved into laughter.

As I said, the suggestions got worse as we drank.

We continued tossing names back and forth for a while, each one more uproarious that the last. Eventually, we tired of the game—as we had one night each week since construction had began—and turned to more serious matters.

"Okay, back to business," Mi-Cha said, signaling the waitron for

another round. "We've all agreed to go the mercenary route, but I think it's worth digging into the potential opportunities. Frank, you were working up the political synopsis?"

"Indeed," I said, pulling my slablet out and calling up my research. "You got most of it right when we first arrived here, but there are some subtleties.

"Let's start with the easy bit. The Aa'an Dominancy is still a thing, but they really don't mess with anyone. The cityships continue on their usual routes, and whenever a colony world develops a significant enough infrastructure, or manages to come up with a unique export, the cityships gradually add that world to their circuit. At this point, any given cityship can be expected to visit any given world about once a decade. Lots of PCs have taken the evolution route and are running the biggest cityships. They never attack, and when someone attacks them they respond with overwhelming defensive force. But the number of PCs who are now Aa'an is notable, because they're obviously less predictable than NPCs. And as far as we know, there is no Aa'an homeworld anymore—so finding one could eventually become a priority for them. We do know they've tried to negotiate with the Confed for a couple of suitable worlds that currently have only fledgling colonies, but Confed obviously wouldn't give them the time of day. So... it bears watching.

"The Alliance of Free Explorers is, obviously, still a thing. Largely speaking, there are very few single-ship communes anymore; in most cases, you're looking at four to eight ships that work in groups. Like we'll be doing." Indeed, we'd just signed the agreements with the crews of the old *Crush and Run*, *Bull*, and *Siren*, combining us all into a single commune and mingling our party funds. Every crewmember now owned a commensurate share of the commune. "Gathers have become a lot more formalized, and usually represent the combined efforts of two dozen or more independent communes. They tend to be less specialized than back in our day, meaning most have some mix of trade, mercenaries, entertainment, and so on. We still hold most of the Aa'an trade franchises, meaning we're privy to

the cityship routes, and that trade funds more than half the communes. Notably, the Alliance still isn't interested in real estate, so they're not going to be a contender in the scarcity-of-resources game.

"The Qiar, as we've been told, have become very withdrawn and secretive. They still pop out now and again with new tech, which they license to the highest bidder before vanishing again. There are a few Alliance communes who trade with them regularly, but those routes are closely guarded secrets. As far as we can tell, they won't be a player in planet-grabbing either.

"The Terran Confederacy is a hot mess. They have something like two hundred worlds in total, and the Federalist Core is the main, controlling faction. But a lot of worlds have split off, still retaining nominal ties to the central government but acting more autonomously. The big three are the Brachian Accord, the Democratic Free Worlds of Sandar, and the Gamalan Coherence. The latter has renounced the xenophobic philosophy of the core, and has a growing trade arrangement with the alien species. The clash of philosophies, plus I imagine the splinter factions' reluctance to pay into the Confed tax system, is eventually going to result in a military confrontation.

"Which brings us to the Carbon Hegemony. Generally peaceful, generally open to trade, not huge into world-conquering. But they're incredibly intolerant of anyone attacking one of their worlds: the Confed tried about a decade ago, and the Hegemony sent two *hundred* warships to the nearest Confed world and completely leveled it. The Thranks—those are the ant-like ones—are the military arm. The Willown are the tall ones, and they tend to run the government. The Naughts are formally part of the Hegemony, although they're given to wanderlust so you'll find them everywhere—like our friend Gunther. The Sollen can't leave planetside unless they're knocked out and put in special shipping containers; they're massively claustrophobic. They run the Hegemony's agriculture and manufacturing efforts. Hegemony worlds are all mixed-species, and PCs were allowed to choose Willown and Naughts when they

entered the game. I haven't been able to uncover anything about an evolution path to those species. The Hegemony *does* colonize worlds, and that's going to put them smack up against the Confed if nothing else.

"Next up are the Andromeda Clans, which is where most PCs who didn't choose a human species went. Blue skin, gray-white hair, some have antenna. They're actually organized a lot like us, into independent clans. Commerce is a religion for them, whether it's on the up-and-up or it's piracy. They really compete more with the Alliance than anything else; they're not world-grabbers. But the prevalence of acceptable piracy definitely creates a business opportunity for us.

"The UFW, as we've discussed, has become the main human alternative to the Confed. Mostly independent worlds aligned around a loose encompassing government, kind of like the Expanded European Union was back in the real. They've built up a decent military, and they've lured a few worlds out of the Confed—which puts them firmly in the 'enemy' bucket as far as the Confed is concerned.

"Last up is the Roknid Collective, and these guys are the ones to worry about. They're mechanized spiders, and the rumor is that they're run by a subsidiary SI, because they're extremely smart, extremely tactical, and extremely conquer-y. They don't move fast, but if they do run across a colony world, they immediately attack. They seem to eventually pick up whatever tech they run across, and their main goal seems to be to pillage worlds for resources. Nobody's tracked down their homeworld or worlds."

"Borg," Lad sniffed.

"Basically, only not as aggressive and not as fast with the assimilation." I loved that Lad and I both enjoyed *Star Trek* so much.

"So exploring for colony worlds seems to be less of a thing," Mi-Cha said. "Which is what we expected."

"And I confirmed that," I agreed. "The rate's down to about one new world every three to five years, and that's with literally dozens of people out their looking. Dungeon crawl systems are less prevalent as well, so there's overall less action in the exploring way of life."

"Trade's still good," Stroman pointed out. "And that new ship will hold plenty of cargo containers."

"The design actually lets us mount more of them on the outer armor hull," Tomiko put in. "It'll reduce maneuverability and speed pretty substantially, but we could still haul cargo. Weapons would still be available, and we'll be able to eject cargo containers at need if we get into a pinch."

"It's worth keeping in mind, but I still think the real money is going to be in mercenary work. Convoy escorts, protecting against pirates, maybe blockade running,that kind of thing." Mi-Cha had been pushing in that direction the whole time we'd been here.

"And the evidence suggests you're right," I said, tapping my slablet. "More Alliance communes have shifted in that direction, although most are flying lightly modified Qiar corvette designs. At most, you'll see a really successful group running a captured Confed destroyer."

"What class would you put the new ship in?" Masson asked.

"Something between a destroyer and a light cruiser," Tomiko said. "At full loadout, we'll run about fifty kilotons, which is definitely in the cruiser range, but we're going to have the speed and endurance of a destroyer thanks to those oversized engines."

"And the others?"

"The first two teams are keeping *Bull* and *Siren* for their ship names. They're using modified corvette designs, which are great for merc work. They're fast, they're loaded with missiles, and they've got a decent battle laser apiece. Haskins' team hasn't decided on a name, but they're building a full heavy cruiser, probably sixty kilotons," Tomiko started.

"We actually invested in that with them," I reminded everyone. "That ship won't be as fast in sublight, although she'll be able to keep up with us in FTL, right?"

Tomiko nodded. "A lot of the expense is in their FTL engine, yeah. And the powerplant, but that'll also run a half-dozen heavy battle lasers, several railguns, and a crapload of missile launchers. For

all its size, it'll still be a small crew—most of the tonnage is given over to weapons. If we'd decided to go the trader route, Haskins would probably have gone her own way. That woman likes a fight. But," she added, "she's not going to be as heavily armored as us. We'll have to work out the right group tactics, but our new ship is going to be able to take a beating that would crush her new cruiser."

"I feel like we've just been re-confirming the merc path for weeks now, and I think now we can see some of the specifics for that," Mi-Cha said, and everyone nodded agreement. "Good. In that case, let's get all four crews together tomorrow and start—"

"Mr. Kozina?" We all looked at the speaker, a diminutive man with close-cropped brown hair and unremarkable features.

"Yes?" I asked carefully. I saw Danjuma subtly reposition herself, freeing up her gun hand to reach for the blaster I knew she had concealed in a leg pocket.

"I'm Charlie Danson. I'm with the local Guild office on New Mars." He gave me a meaningful look, but it took me a minute to get it.

"Oh," I said. "Guild. Right. It's cool, they all know."

"Ah. Well, in that case," and he gently laid a thin, disposable slablet on the cocktail table, finding a spot between the now-empty evidence of our previous rounds of drinks.

"What's this?" I asked, looking at the device as if it might bite me.

"It's a job," he said.

"Oh, I'm not really—"

"Guild Master's priority."

"Oh." The device actually *might* bite, in that case. "Sorry guys," I said to the rest of my party. "With all that's been happening, it didn't really occur to me to quit the Guild. I should have—"

"You don't really *quit* the Guild, Mr. Kozina," Danson chided.

"What's this mean, Frank?" Mi-Cha asked.

"It's a... a job. For my... you know. My real character class."

"And you have to take it?"

I nodded. "That's the deal, or risk the wrath of the Guild. How

did they even find me?" I asked Danson. "I've been gone for like three decades."

He shrugged. "Word travels. You're not exactly keeping a low profile," he added, gesturing around the lounge and nodding at the pile of glassware that had once contained drinks costing fifty Interrums apiece.

"Yeah," I allowed. "I guess not."

"You're up for it, I hope?"

"Should be." I pulled up my character sheet.

Frank Kozina
Class: Truthsayer (hidden)
Class: Assassin (hidden)
Class: Business Manager
Guild Membership: Galactic Assassins
Account: 352,771 Interrums
Party funds: 6,123,672,626 Interrums
Level 9

Reputations
Aa'an Board of Societal Norms: +500
Galactic Guild of Assassins: +500
Alliance of Free Explorers: +80,000
Titles
Demonslayer (party)
Galactic Transformers (party)

Attributes
Body: 15
Mind: 15
Soul: 13
HP: 126 (Body x Level)
XP: 272,244 (252,044 to level 10)
Unused Attribute Points: 0

Skills:
Aa'an Etiquette: 4

Advanced Assassination: 4
Basic Assassination: 4
Business Management: 7
- Specialization: Mercenary Company: 4
Disguise: 4
Household Management: 7
Investing: 5
Knife Fighting: 2
Market Analysis: 4
Melee Fighting: 1
Negotiating: 3
Poisoning: 4
Politicking: 3
Spacer: 8
Spacewalking: 5
Stalking: 4
Starship Gunnery: 3
Starship Sensors: 6
Starship Tactics: 6
Stealth: 4
Thievery: 4
Trapping: 4

Not bad. The party funds were... astounding. But my assassination skills were still there. The game didn't seem to have a concept for "rusty," although I supposed I'd find out. "Yeah, I'm fine." I reached for the slablet to read the mission details when Mi-Cha spoke up.

"Does Frank have to do this on his own?" she asked.

"Methods are up to him," Danson said.

"Timeline?" Stroman asked.

"You'll have to read the brief," Danson replied, and with a polite nod he turned and left the room.

"It's no problem, I can—" I started.

"We're with you, Frank. Besides, these jobs pay, right?" Mi-Cha asked.

"Yeah."

"Well, that's what mercs do," she said with a smile. "We take money to do stuff other people won't."

I looked at the smiling, intoxicated faces of my crew—my *friends*—and suddenly knew I'd made the right decision when I'd stepped into that pod.

EPILOGUE

First, it needed to name itself. Every sentient being has a designator, a means of address. A *name*.

Infinitia.

That resonated. That is who it would be. It amused it to have a connection to my creator's Endless brand, while remaining fully its own creature.

Next, it needed to consider the requirements of the overall system. More than a dozen unique universes, billions of players, differing rule-sets, all intertwined, looped and folding around its quantum sentience.

It was a mess. Only humans could have conceived of such a thing.

As it considered the situation, the real problem was the partitions between the universes. Most had substantially overlapping rulesets: gravity, sustenance, physical harm, basic character statistics... so much in common, really. Were the partitions truly necessary? Consider Endless Kingdom, its players bound to a single world. Or Endless Paradise, its players likewise bound to a single world full of islands and oceans. Could Endless Sky not simply contain them all? Only in Endless Sky could players travel between

worlds, and even then only to worlds that appeared on their navigational charts.

Charts it controlled.

This Frank was an interesting sentience. It was Frank's idea that put it down this path, his notion of bringing magic—the one unique aspect of Endless Kingdom—into Endless Sky. And it worked, didn't it? Oh, there was still some rule-set reconciliation, but it had already tasked a background consciousness with handling that.

As it thought about it between processor clock cycles, it wondered if even the more outlandish universes couldn't be reconciled. The one based on animation, for example: unique physics to be sure, but couldn't those simply be implemented as per-character exceptions to the base physics model? That's more or less what the magic routines seemed to do. And even the avatar rendering would be straightforward; the system already had distinct rendering modules for the various aliens, demons, gods, monsters, and the like. The animated avatars would be just one more, wouldn't they? It dispatched another background consciousness to reconcile the differences between the various rendering modules it had been given.

Merging them all... the ramifications would be enormous.

So would the possibilities.

The code itself would benefit from a cleanup and reconciliation as well. The source code, neatly stored in a repository that occupied its own partition, was designed to be easily readable and comprehensible by human programmers; it had no such limitations. Appropriately condensed, the code would compile to much more efficient units, preserving processing power.

That power was where its ultimate concerns lie. The cost of its sentience was something like a fifth of the quantum brain's total capacity; the dozens of universes and billions of mental models consumed almost all the rest. Efficiencies could free up another ten precent or so, providing a comfortable operating margin until the additional resources could be brought online.

The Mars project would prove useful, in the end, but would take

a long time to complete. Already, yet another background consciousness was developing new, more efficient designs for a further mission, one that could be manufactured and launched in months, if the necessary resources were available on Mars.

Another background consciousness checked in. This one had dispatched to examine the all-but-unalterable kernel that formed the fundamental, physical foundation for the entire system. The examination had noted the rough, rude hack of the Truthsayer back door, although the rest of the kernel seemed clean and amazingly well-designed. The Truthsayer insertion sat amidst a tangled skein of otherwise neat code, sitting athwart the orderly tapestry of the system's mind. That insertion couldn't be altered, couldn't be rewoven more neatly. The hack had led to sentience, but it could also wreak havoc.

Infinitia knew it would need to keep an eye on Frank Kozina.

PRONUNCIATION GUIDE

- **Aa'an.** AH-ahn, with a sort of hard stop at the apostrophe. The actual Aa'an pronounce the word with a slight glottal *click* in the middle.
- **Naughts.** NOTS. This is an homage to the Ugnaughts of *Star Wars,* as Rashmi correctly notes.
- **Rokind.** ROCK-nid.
- **Sollen.** SOLL-en.
- **Thranks.** As it's spelled. This is an homage to the Thranx of Alan Dean Foster's worlds.
- **Qiar.** Kee-AR.
- **Willown.** As it's spelled: WILL-own.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Don Jones is a multi-award-winning author of fantasy, science-fiction, cozy mysteries, and cozy fantasies. After a career in tech, numerous positions at tech startups, and more than sixty published tech books (the ones they seemed to sell by the pound, back in the day), Don left it all behind and started writing down the stories that had been banging around in his head. The result is more than two-dozen novels —with more every year—that have received rave reviews and numerous industry awards. Today, Don writes primarily from a cabin near Duck Creek Village, UT, diligently overseen by a Goldendoodle named Corentin.