

# The Old Railroad

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# Chapter 1

Above the skyline of the planet Orbis 3, rush hour was in full swing. At the Transport Level, horns, sirens, and all manner of traffic noise littered the artificial planet's equally artificial atmosphere a hundred miles above the City Level.

An orange and violet sunset lined thousands of shimmering vehicles, each crawling imperceptibly along the planet's light-beam rails. All planet-wide travel occurred by way of the rails, giant energy spirals that reached into the atmosphere from the surface and gently sloped into arcs. From space, the light-beams appeared as faint blue rings around the planet, which was a medium-class seeded Trade State. Most planets in the Union were seeded, as very few organic planets were habitable.

At the Transport Level, vehicle collisions were rare due to automated merging, but a half-mile wide invisible energy net ran parallel beneath each light-beam in the event of emergencies. One such emergency was in progress over Sector D as an orange metro bus snapped loose from the light-beam. A cacophonous warning noise erupted as the vehicle lurched sideways, drifting into an adjacent lane of traffic. The nearest light-beams switched color from blue to flashing red.

Onboard the metro bus, two dozen passengers were in a panic. Multi-colored gas masks designed for three base species dropped down and bounced around like piñatas.

"Stay calm!" chirped the driver, a purple humanoid mantis. The translation system instantaneously relayed his voice throughout the whole vehicle in a series of warm, multilingual tones that did nothing to calm the passengers. He punched a button to engage manual controls. Outside, bursts of green light fired from the bus' rear thrusters. Those in the front failed and sputtered, causing the vehicle to fishtail. Its new momentum brought the bus hurtling toward an industrial freighter.

"Seat belts! Brace for impact!"

Boom!

The right corner of the bus compacted and the whole vehicle bounced off. Not actually wearing a seatbelt himself, the driver was thrown from his seat and crumpled against the door. Shrill voices drowned out the sound of a siren as the bus rolled on its side and began to flip vertically. Without its driver to stabilize it, the bus would drop out of the Transport Level, enter free-fall, and plummet to the city below. The rails were responsible for more than regulating traffic; they made all atmospheric travel possible. No commercial or civilian vehicles possessed independent flight capabilities. At best, vehicles like the bus could slow their descent with hover thrusters.

Another violent impact shook the passengers as the bus became paralyzed upside-down in the energy net, an otherwise invisible canvas that pulsed blue like ripples on a lake where it had been intersected by the bus.

One of the passengers, a crustacean humanoid with beady black eyes, peered out the bus window to see a giant Federal State Transportation & Revenue (FST&R) vehicle glide into view.

"We're gonna be OK!" she encouraged, but no one understood her bobbing antennae. Visually a mix between a luxury yacht and a battle cruiser, the FST&R Interceptor appeared ready to pounce. Its hull bore the white and blue insignia of the Civil Union with a laureate of gold. The Interceptor was classified not as a vehicle but as a vessel, and as such it was capable of intergalactic flight. A bright cone of white light fired from one of six side cannons, engulfing the metro bus. With incredible ease, the light rotated the bus into a level position relative to the energy net.

Inside the bus, where the back corner had been crumpled, sparks flew. A metal section was torn away by dexterous silver hands, revealing a platoon of FST&R robot soldiers. Their faces were oval and featureless save for mouth-shaped slits covered in a wire mesh. Silver, blue, and white, the robot soldiers infiltrated the bus with only the sound of their Union-issued metal soles. Union logos were stamped on their barrel-chests along with numerical designations, but apart from their firearms, they were otherwise nondescript.

The robots shoved their firearms into the faces of the alarmed passengers. These were Prime Soldiers by their branding, a cut above the regular policing drones. The Prime were unique in that they learned from experience and developed personalities, but moreover, they were shepherded by a human master.

“Vehicle secure,” Prime One intoned. Even though the bus could retain its atmospheric pressure at the Transport Level, the passengers had made use of the gas masks, which were understood to contain a mild sedative. The robots, however, did not need to breathe. A new figure emerged through the incision point. Silver pistol drawn, he was attired in a white body suit with a high blue collar and buttoned vest. He wore a trim breathing helmet with a narrow visor.

“Atmosphere contained,” Prime One added. With a subtle nod, the new figure removed his helmet, revealing rich brown skin, close-cropped curly gold hair, and bright hazel eyes. This was First Officer Damond Richter. An impressive specimen of a man, he was tall, agile, and muscled. His eyes scanned the passengers for injuries and spotted the driver at the far end.

“Status?” asked Richter, his voice deep but level.

“No major injuries,” Prime One reported, “but the driver appears to be incapacitated.”

Richter nodded.

“Listen up,” he announced in English. “This vehicle is now under FST&R jurisdiction.” His voice was measured. “Remain calm. Ready your passports and insurance. We’ll begin transferring passengers momentarily.”

Richter strode to where the driver had collapsed. He holstered his pistol and lifted the purple Mantar back into the seat. Richter detached a small vial from a pouch at his belt and injected the driver in the neck. The driver’s eyelids opened and fluttered several times.

“Don’t worry, your vehicle is secure,” Richter intoned. “Can you tell me your name? Do you know what happened?”

“Uh... grapple box came loose, I think. Fell out of the beam and collided with—”

“A freighter. No one was hurt, but as the driver you’re culpable. I’d like to see your insurance.”

Throughout the bus, robots were scanning the insurance and passport documents of various passengers. Routine procedure. Those who checked out were being ushered through the back end of the bus into a transport tube.

“Master Richter,” said Prime One. “This Sterling’s passport expired two days ago.”

Richter glanced over his shoulder and drew his pistol, taking aim at the crustacean humanoid

“Traveling with an expired passport is prohibited. You’ll be stunned and processed.”

The female shrieked as the weapon discharged with a narrow blue beam, striking her in the head. She collapsed in the middle of the aisle.

“What’s your name?” Richter asked, addressing the bus driver.

“Selbat Dar,” the driver gasped, eye glued to the unconscious female.

“When piloting a Union vehicle, please speak standard English. No exceptions. What is your legal name?”

“S-s-sorry,” the driver managed. “Max. Max Williams.”

Richter gave him a hard look.

“Consider this a warning, Max. Was your vehicle serviced within the last three cycles?”

“Yes, I believe so.”

“Were you cleared for active duty following a clinical evaluation by at least two peer-reviewed physicians?”

“I have.”

“And your passport is licensed?”

“Yes.”

“May I see it, please?”

Max reached an arm inside his uniform and withdrew a laminated ID card. Richter examined its likeness against that of the Mantar. He smiled and handed it back.

“Good. You’ll still need to file a report with Prime One, and the time is not billable.”

“I understand.”

“You’re free to go.”

Visibly shaken, the driver pulled himself to his feet and began to shuffle past Richter. As the driver passed him, Richter depressed the Union emblem on his vest with an audible click.

“Run the plate,” he ordered. “Determine where the vehicle was last serviced and investigate the repair crew. If they’re culpable, I want to know about it.”

“Yes, sir.”

Richter’s eyes settled on the driver’s seat.

“Max.”

The purple Mantar had paused where the female lay collapsed. He glanced back at the First Officer.

“Your seatbelt. Were you buckled in during the failure?”

Max chirped nervously in his native language before catching himself. “I... I don’t believe so.”

“You’re a Union service worker, Max.” Richter moved down the aisle while replacing his breathing helmet. The helmet filtered his voice to sound like that of the other robots.

“You took an oath to upload the Articles of the Law when you were hired.”

He drew his pistol.

“Wait, please. My record is flawless. Look me up! We only just merged onto the rail when it happened. A few seconds earlier and it would have been fine.”

“Except it wasn’t. Sorry, Max. No exceptions.”

“No, please!”

Richter took aim and fired.

## Chapter 2

Cheers erupted as Miles Hopper slammed a tankard of frothy, carbonated green melon mincer on the table. He laughed, drawing his earnings toward himself, stacks of chips and discs clattering through his thick grubby fingers and spilling over his hairy forearms. With sleeves rolled up and a white fedora tipped over his brow, Miles was comfortably soaking in the adoration of three spotted leopard sisters who had found his good fortune desirable. Before the evening began, Miles hadn't known them from Adam, but now they were getting frisky.

Laetitia, a gray-coated female whose neckline plunged to her navel, licked Miles' ear and slipped a paw down his shirt.

"Yeeeah!" Miles yelped, tipping over his chair and landing with a crash. Laetitia skittered back, as did Paloma and Brandy, but all three were quick to pocket handfuls of chips as Miles flailed on the dirty bar floor.

"File your nails, woman," Miles cried, clutching his chest in pain. Droplets of blood seeped through his charcoal shirt.

"Sorry, Hopscotch," Laetitia purred, retracting her claws to caress Miles' bloated, stubbled face. "I got excited."

"Name's Hopper," Miles belched, not in full possession of his faculties. "Hopscotch is my... something or another. Vehicle?"

"Help him up," Laetitia purred to her sisters. White-furred and brown-furred respectively, Paloma and Brandy helped Miles to his feet, which was no small task due to his stocky frame and round belly. Laetitia picked up Miles' fedora and used it to gather the rest of his earnings from the table. She stuck her snout over the brim of Miles' tankard and drew a whiff.

"Ugh," she winced.

"This guy weighs more than all of us combined," Brandy hissed, struggling to keep Miles from falling over. He tried to steal a kiss but she slapped him with an open paw.

"Meow!" he laughed.

"Move him to the bar," Laetitia ordered. "A fresh drink for the king of heartbreakers," she added to the barkeep. "Something less pungent, maybe."

The ladies plopped Miles in a stool with a backrest and filled his hands with a fresh drink. As their inebriated benefactor blew bubbles in his tankard, they began divvying the chips among themselves.

"Mink's gonna be mad," Miles said to himself. His words came slowly but were surprisingly clear. "Hope she didn't... double-park. Can't afford no more... fines."

"Hopscotch, honey," Laetitia gestured, "these are yours." She dropped a few chips into his drink. "They'll cover your tab for the night. Unless you'd like to spend more time with us in the loft?"

Miles grunted his disinterest.

“That won’t cover Hopper’s tab,” grinned the barkeep, a scaly reptile in an apron named Manny. Using his prehensile tale, he wiped the counter of his own spittle with a rag. “He already owes me his first, second, and third-born kids.” Manny wiped the counter again, seemingly incapable of speaking without spitting.

“That true, Hopscotch?” Laetitia asked.

“Hopper. Don’t... remember having any kids.”

“He’s a mess, but he’s kind of cute,” Paloma said to Brandy, running a paw through Miles’ greasy mop of thick black hair. He winked at her through blurry eyes.

“He’s a slob and he stinks,” Brandy complained, wrinkling her nose in distaste. Laetitia regarded their benefactor for a moment. She jostled the fedora and its contents.

“You’ve got enough for one night with the cats, Hopscotch. Hopper. One night, one cat. What do you say?”

“No-o-o,” Miles burped. “Oops. Sorry. You... you ladies keep it,” he gestured gallantly. In so doing, he slipped off the seat and landed on the floor again. “Don’t feel so good,” he wheezed.

“Hey, listen.” Brandy crouched beside him and smacked his face. “You don’t get our company for nothing.”

“Brandy,” Laetitia warned. “Don’t rough up the client, at least not before he’s paid.”

“Haha!” Manny laughed.

“Shut up, spit-face,” Brandy barked. She turned her attention to Miles and stuck her snout in his face. Anyone watching would have thought she was coming on to him.

“Listen, fatso,” she whispered. “You won your games ‘cause nobody was paying attention to the cards. We’re your good luck charms, but if you don’t accept my sister’s offer, your luck’s going to run out real fast.” She bared her incisors in a pretend smile.

Miles’ eyes looked like they were about to pop.

“Beg your pardon,” he managed before vomiting.

“Ahh!” Brandy shrieked, springing back. “He barfed! Lae! My coat’s gonna reek of this guy!”

“Poor Hop,” Manny laughed, still spitting. “Always orders the same drink and forgets that it doesn’t agree with him.”

“His breath smells like urine,” Brandy said, disgusted. “And now so do I.”

“Urine and dribble droppings,” Paloma sniffed, making a face.

“Same as usual,” Manny shrugged. “Melon mincer.”

“That... should be illegal,” Miles muttered before passing out.

“Your breath should be illegal,” the barkeep spat back.

“Come on,” Laetitia waved to her sisters. “Let’s get ‘Hop’ over to the loft. The gentleman’s money is burning a hole in my pocket.”

As Brandy and Paloma attempted to raise Miles from the floor, Laetitia bent over to help them. Manny shook his head.

“Wish I could be in your pocket,” he muttered to himself, but not quietly enough to escape the pert ears of a leopard woman.

“What did you say?”

Manny stepped backward and nearly fell over. His scaly hands tore into the top of the bar as he caught himself.

“What? Huh? I didn’t say anything.”

Laetitia leaped from where her sisters were struggling with Miles and landed a foot from where Manny stood paralyzed. Snarling, she flashed her claws and slashed his face.

When Miles’ eyes opened again, his ears were met with the sound of a blood-curdling cry from across the street at the Honky Tonk Bar. He found himself staring at the nighttime sky as his body was being dragged up a flight of narrow stairs. Under the weight of his legs, the heels of Miles’ boots caught on the edge of each step. His unbalanced body swayed like a hammock anchored at the shoulders by the soft, furry arms of Brandy and Paloma.

“Where we going?” Miles rasped. They weren’t talking, but a cool breeze passed over him as they reached the top of an open stairwell. Miles craned his head sideways to see a draped entrance lined with garish neon lights. The establishment appeared to be little more than an expansive tent stretched out over a second-story balcony. Brandy and Paloma lugged him into a dark lounge and dropped him face-first into a feathered blanket. The smell of rank body fluids flooded his nostrils, but he was too apathetic to roll over. Disgusted and exhausted, Brandy shoved Paloma onto Miles and hissed at her sister in their own tongue.

“It’s your night. Keep him company until the morning. We’ll pick you up at the bar.”

“Where you going?”

“To see what our sister did to the lizard guy. If Lae’s temper gets us fined again, I swear—”

“Worry about your own temper,” Paloma snorted. “You almost ate Hop’s face back there.”

“Hop?” Brandy asked. Her body language wasn’t hard to read. “Don’t go soft on the clients.”

“I’m not going soft.”

“You’re pudding,” she scoffed, slinking away. Paloma simmered quietly as her sister slipped through the draped entrance and disappeared. Turning to Miles, she put her best smile on and cuddled up, pulling his shoulder toward her in an effort to roll him off his face.

“Hey, Hop,” she heaved. “Help me out, will ya?”

“Go away,” Miles moaned. “Ain’t no place... for a lady.”

“I’m not a lady,” Paloma laughed in surprise. “I’m not even half human. But this is definitely the place for, well, you know.”

“How long you been doing this?”

“Does it matter?”

In the surrounding darkness, hisses and gurgles emanated from huddled shapes. Miles was suddenly thankful for the darkness. With a grunt, Paloma managed to get him on his side before slumping into the blanket.

“Sheesh, you’re one heavy guy.” After a moment, she propped herself up with an elbow and pressed herself against his back. She began to caress his face with her free paw.

“Please don’t,” Miles muttered. His eyelids were drooping again, but he could make out Paloma’s reflection in the cracked pane of a gaudy chandelier. He tried to ignore the writhing tentacle of another patron a few feet from his head. Paloma was silhouetted by fragments of the neon glow from the entrance. Her eyes sparkled—were they green?—and her wet snout glistened. She looked somewhat perturbed, but in a different context Miles would have found her general appearance becoming.

“You don’t have to worry about any droid patrols. My sisters and I are respectable.”

“Respectable?”

“We’re licensed.”

“Why won’t you leave me alone,” Miles whispered. His gravelly voice caught in his throat as he coughed up blood. Paloma’s instinct was to recoil, but she steadied herself.

“Wow, you’re just one big barrel of fun tonight. You runnin’ from something bad?”

“No disrespect,” Miles replied, “but I don’t buy art.”

“What?”

“Art. I admire it... from a distance, but I don’t buy any.”

“We had an understanding,” Paloma replied, the warmth dropping from her voice. “My sisters took your money. I’m legally yours for the night whether you want me or not.”

“A woman’s body is a temple.”

Paloma laughed again, but this time it was hollow.

“Is that why men worship us? For the architecture?”

“Men use you.”

“No,” Paloma stiffened. “We use men. That’s the difference. We’re not victims, we’re not weaker, and we’re not beneath you.”

“I don’t want you beneath me. Or on top of me, for that matter.”

Paloma pushed herself away and sat up.

“Brandy’s right. You are disgusting, but not for the reasons she thought.” Paloma sprang to her hind feet and stepped over him. Miles’ gaze drifted back to the cracked chandelier, but instead of Paloma’s lithe reflection, he saw his bloated carcass.

“God in heaven,” he wheezed, coughing more blood.

Paloma slowed to look back. He was pathetic, sure, but she felt sorry for him. She couldn’t remember when she had seen an emptier pair of eyes, and she had seen a few.

“Hey,” she whispered. “We’ve all got problems. But we pick ourselves up and keep moving.”

“Even my problems have problems.”

Paloma lingered, unsure of whether or not to leave. Miles had never expressly accepted Laetitia’s offer. She didn’t have to stay if she didn’t want to. So why wasn’t she gone?

Careful to avoid the random tentacles, she made her way back. Her feet were so soft that Miles couldn’t hear her approach until she knelt beside him.

“I’m not going to sleep with you, but I’ll stay ’til morning if you’d like some company. I think you need it.” She leaned forward and licked his lips with her tongue. “That’s how we say goodnight in my culture.”

“Wow,” Miles gasped. “Your culture has a way with words.”

Paloma gave him a playful shove and moved closer to him. Her natural coat was warm and smelled faintly of cinnamon. It could have smelled like dead fish and still been more pleasant than Miles’ odor.

“Paloma?” he asked after several minutes. “Don’t you have like super smelling abilities or something?”

“Yes, and you reek worse than anything else in this place, which is saying a lot.”

“I see. So... what keeps you moving?”

“How do you mean?”

“You said ‘we pick ourselves up and keep moving.’ Moving toward what? Why?”

“If you’re going to talk all night, maybe I should tear your throat out,” she mused, nuzzling his unshaven neck.

“That’s the melon mincer talking. Leaves my brain starved for new neural connections since it fries the old ones. Taste, sight, hearing... the senses come alive again. It’s like I’m using them for the first time.

“It severs what?”

“Neural connections. The stuff that connects one idea in your brain to another. Like bridges, or light-beams.”

“Why on Orbis would you drink that?”

“Haven’t a clue,” Miles smiled blissfully. He was on his back now, peering up through the tatters in the lounge’s fabric ceiling. He could only make out a few stars beyond the haze of the light-beams that criss-crossed the heavens.

“My sisters and I can’t afford to stay in one place too long. Either everybody wants us or nobody does.”

“Supply and demand,” Miles muttered.

“Are you always this glib?” Paloma shook her head.

“You’d have to ask Minks.”

“Who’s Minks?”

“I think she’s my steward, although that would imply I have money to pay her with, which is a joke.”

“So you have a job? I thought you were a card shark. You did play well tonight even without the benefit of eye candy.”

“I’ve got a vehicle if that counts as a job.”

“Does it fly?”

“How long have you been on Orbis 3? Only vessels fly. Hopscotch is a cargo vehicle. That’s what I do, haul stuff from one place to another. This guy’s irrigation engines, that guy’s data cores. If people ever figured out where they wanted to be and stayed put, I’d be out of a job.”

“You take passengers as well?”

“Only cargo. The license for passengers is twice as expensive. Those fancy light-beams don’t pay for themselves, you know.”

“So it’s good that people like me keep moving,” she purred, kissing him on the cheek. He didn’t resist, but he didn’t kiss her in return.

“Guess so.”

“I’ve been on Orbis less than a cycle.” After a moment, she asked, “Are you married, Hop?”

“Not anymore.”

“Oh.”

“Look,” Miles sighed, “I appreciate your dedication to your trade, but I’m trying not to remember stuff, remember? All I really want is to wallow in self-pity and despair for a night.”

"I'm beginning to wonder if there's anything you haven't wallowed in," she snorted. "How does your steward put up with your charming aroma?"

"I'm going through a rough patch."

"Well you'd better get a new patch because this one is leaking urine and smells like barf."

"You're a real ray of sunshine, Paloma."

"You too, Hop."

"Paloma," Miles whispered.

"What now?"

"Your name is Spanish for dove."

"What's Spanish?"

Miles swallowed a lump in his throat.

"It's what I'm trying to forget."

## Chapter 3

First Officer Damond Richter picked lint from the collar of his uniform before slipping a metal hanger into its neck. He placed the hanger on a rod in his narrow closet beside two older uniforms and closed the door. Consisting of a bathroom, kitchenette, and sleeping area, his quarters were square, small, and spartan. No photographs, no paintings, no decorum. Richter wore a gray denim night-shirt and pajamas as he carried a thin tablet computer to his bed and pulled back the sheets. The shades were drawn along the east window, which overlooked the heart of the city below. Richter and the droids under his command not only operated on the FST&R Interceptor but dwelled there as well. Five of his six droids patrolled their districts at all times; the sixth stood watch outside his quarters. While the Union ran a tight, efficient ship, she was not without those wishing her harm.

Richter reclined on his bed with the tablet in his right hand. He had a few details to attend before he could turn in for the night. On the nightstand beside his bed was a glass of blue liquid. He tapped the screen of his tablet a few times, waited for a call to go through, and set it aside. He produced a pill bottle from the nightstand drawer, uncapped it, and dropped a white capsule into the blue liquid. The capsule dissolved quickly and made the contents of the glass become clear. As Richter sipped it, his call went through. The voice of an educated, distinguished woman answered.

“First Officer Richter? I must say I’m rather surprised. This isn’t standard protocol.”

“This is not a standard call. Good evening, Madam Secretary.” Richter picked up the tablet, which displayed an older woman with tan skin and smooth features. The Madam Secretary was similarly dressed down in the comfort of her own quarters.

“Do forgive me for calling so late,” Richter continued. “I’ll keep this as brief as possible.”

“What’s so important that it couldn’t wait until morning?”

“Diana, who are you talking to?” asked the secretary’s husband, leaning into view of the camera.

Richter smiled.

“And good evening to you, sir. My apologies for the inconvenience, but I couldn’t rest until I spoke with you. What’s that old earth saying? Justice never sleeps.”

“I’m beginning to think that neither do you,” Diana laughed lightly. “I gather this isn’t a social call. How can I help you?” The secretary’s straight black hair was beginning to gray at the temples, and her narrow eyes were creased above her cheekbones. Still, she was a regal-looking woman with exquisite posture even as she reclined.

“Madam Secretary,” Richter began. “Earlier this evening my unit and I investigated a traffic accident over the Briar region. It was a metro bus driven by a Union worker, who we’ve subsequently charged and processed for negligence.”

“If you’re hinting at more manpower—excuse me, droid power—you are welcome to submit a cost benefit analysis document to the regional office like everyone else. Until then, I ask that you don’t call me on my personal line for petty State matters.”

“Madam, sedition is no petty matter,” Richter replied, taking another sip of his drink.

“I beg your pardon?”

“Tell whoever it is to bugger off,” her husband grunted from offscreen.

“Be quiet, Darrel. Officer Richter, you have my attention.”

“Good.” He took a deep breath, drink in hand. “The bus had been serviced within the last cycle as per regulation, but not by an accredited repair shop.”

“That’s not illegal, is it?” she asked. “I mean I’m not as well versed in the FST&R rulebook as you are. Sometimes I worry that the political realm operates inside its own little bubble.”

“Not illegal by our ‘rulebook,’ madam, but still highly irregular. Due diligence revealed the repairs were made by a one Gonderlust Gibbons of Gibbons’ Gears and Grease, located in the Goshawk district.”

“The man should be arrested for gross alliteration, I heartily agree. Well done, Office Richter. But I distinctly recall you using the word ‘sedition’ earlier.”

Richter smiled politely.

“I spoke with Gibbons personally this evening. A charming man, surprisingly chatty. You may recall that the Goshawk district has been the catalyst for three of the last five anti-Union demonstrations.”

“Each more violent than the last,” Diana added.

“The breadcrumbs only grow more salient from this point.” Richter took another sip and set the glass on his nightstand. “Gibbons was paid to sabotage the grapple box, which he did at the request of Simon Moss, a known alias of Elliot Carver. Up until now, we’ve permitted Carver to operate under surveillance because—”

“Dee, I’m trying to sleep. Tell Officer what’s-his-name to leave us alone!”

“I’m sorry Mr. Callows, but this concerns you especially. I think you know where this is leading.”

Diana’s face grew concerned.

“Nick, what’s he talking about?”

“How should I know?”

“Madam Secretary, funds were covertly transferred from your husband’s accounts that I traced back to Carver personally. I wanted to be absolutely certain before bringing this to your attention.”

“What are you saying?”

“That’s enough, Diana,” Mr. Callows yelled. The image of the secretary blurred as her husband took the tablet from her hand and addressed Richter heatedly.

“Listen, you soulless Eftard. I’m gonna have you thrown into the darkest pit on this planet! Do you have any idea how serious the nature of your accusations are?”

“Indeed I do. Alpha One, Mr. Callows’ voice print is analyzed, matched, and confirmed with our sample. Move in.”

Richter tossed his tablet onto the bed and got up, walking over to the bathroom.

“Nicholas!” the secretary’s voice rang out from the tablet.

Richter turned a sink handle and began running water through his golden curls, rinsing out the dye. An audible scuffle issued from the tablet, followed by the sound of doors breaking in. The voice of Alpha One boomed from within the secretary’s bedroom.

“Nicholas Callows, you are hereby charged with aiding and abetting known terrorists of the State. You are under arrest and will be processed with all due expediency.”

Diana screamed as a stunning shot was fired.

“No! My husband is innocent! Wait!”

More scuffling noises and pleas as the secretary pleaded with the droid. When he had finished rinsing his hair, Richter towed off. He returned to his bed and picked up the tablet amidst droid chatter and Diana’s pitiful wailing.

“Madam Secretary, are you still there?” he asked. She could be heard crying offscreen. “I understand if you would like to cancel tomorrow’s meeting at the precinct. My condolences. I’m as surprised as you are by these turn of events.”

Shuffling noises and a few contained sobs. The image on Richter’s tablet swam again. Now visible, Diana wiped tears from her eyes and took a deep breath.

“Office Richter,” she began, her shoulders shaking. “Your dedication to your duty goes above and beyond the call. Forgive me, but I will need time to process what’s happened.”

“Of course. Rest—”

Diana ended the call.

Richter regarded the blank tablet for a moment before reaching to finish his drink. He sat the glass on the nightstand, wiped his lips with a sleeve, then reached to switch off the light. In the darkness, he breathed deeply and smiled. Tonight he would sleep well.

## Chapter 4

Night came and went. Like clockwork, morning rose on Orbis 3, and with it arrived a soothing orange glow, albeit not from the planet's nearest star. By popular vote, sunlight in the north western quadrant of the State had been modified by atmospheric filters. Here it was orange, but elsewhere it was purple, red, or whatever color the citizens of that region fancied.

Filtered orange sunlight bathed the vomit-covered, urine-stained form of Miles Hopper as he lay half-naked among a bed of industrial gray and green garbage bags.

With no pretense of eloquence, he grunted and stretched his arms. His shirt was gone, revealing a flabby, bronze-colored chest with sparse bits of black hair and dried blood from Laetitia's over-eager embrace at the bar. Using his elbows, he propped himself into a sitting position and surveyed his surroundings. Where was the lounge on the balcony? Where was Paloma? He ran a hand through his greasy hair. Forget the leopard lady—when did he lose his fedora?

Pushing through a killer hangover, he forced himself to look around. He sat like a deposed king on a small mountain of garbage bags, one of many such deposits in the waste processing region of the Green Gate. He surveyed similar mountains in every direction.

"What the...?" he managed, completely at a loss. After a few moments of racking his brain, Miles gave up and made an effort to navigate the bags. This proved trickier than anticipated as he splash-landed into a mud puddle.

After a few grunts and several expletives, Miles got to his feet—which were missing their boots—and headed to the nearest facility exit. The waste plant was enclosed by metal-plated fences tagged with various anti-Union messages and obscene graffiti.

"Hell's bells," Miles grimaced. He didn't know how he'd wound up here, so far removed from the Blue Gate, but he was grateful that he didn't have anywhere else to be. At least now when he got back to his vehicle, he would only have to wash his underpants.

"Leopard women," he half-laughed. "They really are animals." The morning was still young, and the Green Gate certainly wasn't a tourist attraction, but even so Miles found it odd that the main thoroughfare was unusually quiet. The first order of business was to find a place where he could get a shower and some clean clothes. Thankfully it wasn't too cold out.

Miles dug into his pocket, finding three currency discs. He should at least be able to get an overcoat. "Paloma, you darling," he smirked.

He walked for most of the morning. Several transport vehicles passed him along the way. More than a few drivers gawked at his disheveled appearance. He waved to some of them and mooned others. Miles had wrestled, punched, and KO'd his dignity a long time ago. By noon, his feet were numb from walking on the hard pavement. He sat down on a metal bench and shivered. As he was contemplating what to do next, the familiar hum of a patrol droid reached his ears.

Unlike the traffic droids, the patrol droid was shaped like a motorcycle with two broad wheels. Its head was a wide dome in the center of its frame and featured a wraparound visor. A beam of white light switched on and scanned Miles from head to toe.

"Greetings, citizen," said the droid.

“Afternoon.”

The droid’s head detached vertically and hovered closer to Miles, inspecting him from behind.

“Miles Hopper, licensed owner of Hopscotch II, a Union-owned cargo transport vehicle. You are hereby fined for public indecency in a State-zoned lot of Green Gate 18.”

“Oh, great,” he sighed.

“Please wait. Receiving updated information. Miles Hopper, you are hereby charged with double-parking your vehicle in a State-zoned lot of Blue Gate 2. How do you plead to these charges?”

“I don’t plead. Pleading’s not in my nature.”

“Please answer yes or no. Do you plead guilty to these charges?”

“Actually,” he answered, suppressing his headache, “I’d like to inspect my vehicle myself. I have that right.”

“Affirmative.” The droid’s domed head hovered back to the motorcycle frame and recessed completely. A saddle-like seat reappeared in its place. “Please secure yourself for transport to the Blue Gate and buckle up. It’s the law.”

Miles gingerly mounted the droid and took hold of two recessed handles.

“Wait.”

“Wait?” Miles repeated.

“You are still indecent. Please clothe yourself before using this droid as transport or plead guilty to your charge.”

“I haven’t got any clothes but the ones I’m wearing!” he shouted. “You think I normally walk around half-naked?”

“Please clothe yourself.”

“Ugh,” he sighed. “How about a safety blanket? You’re equipped with safety blankets, right?”

“Affirmative.”

“Then give me one. Problem solved.”

“Negative. You are not at risk of harm due to exposure. Scans indicate you are naturally well-insulated.”

Miles’ mouth dropped open.

“Excuse me? Give me a stupid blanket or I’ll throw myself into oncoming traffic.”

The droid fell silent.

"I'll do it," Miles threatened. "I'm a crazy double-parking naked man!" He walked into the street and stretched out his arms. "Next vehicle coming around that turn's gonna mow me down!"

"Step back from the street," the droid issued. A whir and a click and a small compartment popped open. Inside was a yellow safety blanket. "Clothe your nakedness."

"That's more like it," Miles huffed. He returned to the sidewalk and proudly claimed the blanket. It didn't cover much of him, but it would suffice.

"Please secure yourself for transport."

Miles obliged and climbed onto the droid. He gave it a good-natured kick with his bare foot.

"Giddyup!" The words had scarcely left his lips when the patrol droid fired up its engines and careened down the street in a blur.

"Yahoo!" Miles cheered, gripping the handles until his knuckles turned white. They were moving so fast that he couldn't keep his eyes open, but thankfully he didn't have to steer.

Overhead, light-beams stretched all across the sky as midday traffic grew heavier. City Level traffic was less common because the roads were reserved for commercial services such as taxis or tourist buses, service workers, maintenance crews, and members of the news media. A Union-provided ride to any location was a rare example of taxpayer credits at work—even if the courtesy was a precursor to a hefty fine. In minutes, Miles found himself outside the industrial parking zone designated as Blue Gate 2. Because sky transport was automated by light-beam, parking was also heavily regulated.

Miles swung his thick legs off the transport droid and approached the eponymous gate. The gate was broad and featured multiple rows of revolving doors leading to different areas, much like an airport terminal. Access in was thankfully unrestricted, but access out required verification—something Miles would have found difficult at present. He knew Minks would be angry when she saw him, so Miles stopped at a mini mart and used his remaining discs to buy a cheap pair of sweat pants and bunny slippers. The transport droid waited patiently outside; once Miles returned, the droid's seat depressed and was replaced by the visor from earlier. Miles gestured to it like a matador.

"Lead on."

Miles followed the droid beyond the concessions area into the parking zone. Humanoid drivers off all difference races milled about their vehicles. It was like a giant block party. Bay doors descended, cargo was either being loaded or unloaded. Standard police droids intermingled with the assorted personnel, checking passports and inspecting cargo. Miles and the droid continued down several rows of parked vehicles before approaching Hopscotch II.

"She's beautiful, right?" Miles beamed. Parked on hydraulic feet with her bay door open sat his ship. It was a squat, boxy, two-storied transport vehicle built for moving cargo and not much else. Her one redeeming quality was that she was a Valos-class vehicle, meaning her core systems were compatible with over several hundred types of engines, thrusters, data cores, and various upgrades.

Standing on the ramp with her arms crossed stood Noralee Minks, steward. Minks was generally humanoid except that she possessed two sets of arms—one set on either side of her torso—and a small pair of mandibles. She was a turquoise color over most of her body, save her forehead, which consisted of several white ridges. The top of her head was pointed like a crown, and the points were white also. Her gray uniform concealed an enlarged abdomen common to her insect-like species. She

had long eyelashes, yellow eyes with red pupils, and no discernible lips. For a Thrangar female, she was modestly attractive.

Miles threw his arms open wide, dropping his blanket.

“Oops. Hey, I’m back!”

Arms crossed, Minks was too angry to speak. Instead, she turned around and stormed into the ship.

“Your vehicle is double-parked,” the droid droned.

“She does that when she needs to get my attention. Well, now she’s got it,” he huffed, “and I’ve got a fine I can’t pay. Wonderful.”

“Your fine is eleven-hundred credits.”

“Sweet Moses. How am I supposed to come up with that? Tell you what, let me get a proper change of clothes on and see what I can do. Is that OK?”

“Your fine is eleven-hundred credits.”

“Yes, I got that. I’m going to slip inside and put on something more comfortable. Stay right there. Don’t go anywhere!”

The droid watched as Miles scurried up the bay ramp holding the blanket in place and disappeared inside. Beyond the watchful gaze of the droid, Miles leaned against the interior of the loading area. Minks had been busy. The bay was nearly filled to capacity, meaning she had secured enough work to justify double-parking.

“Thank God,” he muttered. “Minks? Where’d you go?”

The vehicle’s interior was not especially charming. The paneling had never been finished, so three out of four walls had exposed wiring. The flooring was a ribbed black tread that had been worn almost completely smooth from use, but parts of it had been replaced with different thicknesses, resulting in an uneven surface. Miles tripped on a section and heard his toe snap. He nearly wiped out on the floor but caught himself on a handrail.

“Ow, ow, ow,” he winced, hopping on one foot while cradling his toes in his hands.

“Look at you, hoppin’ around half-naked while I’m trying to get us some honest work,” Minks sighed. She sat in one of two high-backed seats in front of the dashboard, arms crossed.

“Were you drinking again?”

“I... may have been. I can’t remember.”

“That sounds like a resounding ‘yes’ to the melon mincer. Saints preserve us—you’re going to forget how to drive the ship if you keep killing your brain cells. Those don’t grow back!”

Miles shrugged.

“Wasn’t using ‘em anyway.”

“Now that I believe,” Minks laughed. “Did you win anything at heartbreakers? Or did you lose your clothes in a bet?”

Miles let go of his toe and hobbled to the seat opposite Minks. He plopped down and let out a weary sigh.

“I’m not sure, honestly. Where’s the cargo headed? We’ve got a droid outside looking for eleven-hundred credits. I don’t suppose we have eleven-hundred credits lying around somewhere?”

“Hop, you have to stop doing this. Promise me? This job’s all I’ve got and if you wind up dead in some alley somewhere with your brains melted, it’s over. Back to Straan, back to five hungry mouths that I can’t afford to feed. If you can’t pull yourself together for your own sake, think about my family, at least.”

“I’m sorry, Minks,” Miles sighed. “There were these leopard women, everyone was laughing... they took me for a ride, then they took my money.”

Minks raised an eyebrow.

“Did you get their names at least?”

“Yeah, but...”

“But what?” Minks pressed. “Hop, I’m mad enough to kill you myself except that you’re my livelihood. We have a vehicle. You know the rails. It’s not complicated, so why do you keep doing this? Jeopardizing your health and leaving me to pick up the pieces? Your problems shouldn’t have to be my problems.”

“You’re right,” he whispered. “I’m being selfish.”

“You’re not being selfish, you’re being stupid.”

“Ouch.”

“You think that hurts? Ask your brain how it likes what you’ve been feeding it. At Dranew 5, mind mummies; at Kelvin’s Keep, cerebellum busters. Pretty soon you won’t even recognize me anymore.”

Miles pushed back in the chair, agitated.

“I know. It’s a sickness. I can’t stop myself. But why should I? We’re stuck in a giant crapshoot. Deliver cargo, get paid, pay our debtors, deliver more cargo. When does it stop?”

“It stops when we find cargo worth keeping.” Minks leaned forward and planted two arms on Miles’ chair, turning him around to face her. “We both know it’s true.”

“That’s illegal,” Miles growled.

“So are half the drinks you’ve consumed in the last cycle! Listen, I know a guy—”

“Gibbons.”

“Yes, Gibbons.” Minks tilted her head back, slipping the discs of her segmented neck with a terrible crack. With a satisfied grunt, she resumed speaking as if nothing had happened. “He’s got access to cargo scanners, lid openers and sealants, the works. And he’s willing to barter, unlike the droid outside.”

“Thanks for reminding me,” Miles huffed, getting out of the seat and heading down the corridor. “I’ve gotta head back out there and negotiate a loan.”

“We’re heading to New Zanzibar. We could stop off at Goshawk on the way, pick up a scanner—”

Miles spun in the corridor and gestured determinedly with his index finger. “No Gibbons, no cargo scanners. We can’t afford to get marked as anti-Union sympathizers.”

“Gibbons does business, that’s all.”

“Business for whom? Nobody that sleazy stays in business without someone keeping him afloat. He’s a patsy, Minks. Pure and simple. We trade with him, we get marked. We get marked, we lose our reputation and then our jobs.”

“What reputation are you talking about? The reputation I’ve been trying to build as steward or the one you’ve been trashing at every bar from here to Dozer?”

“That’s enough!” Miles shouted. “No Goshawk. We move this cargo and we pay our debts. If you don’t like it, you can buy back your contract.”

Minks leaped out of her chair.

“With with? You haven’t paid me in two cycles!”

“I haven’t paid anyone in two cycles!” he snapped. “You think I don’t know that? You think I can’t see the Eftards are bleeding us dry? Every port, every onramp, every step of the way! And you have to go and double-park just to send a message. I don’t know if I should shoot you or shoot myself for hiring you.”

Minks bristled but kept her cool.

“Don’t stop now, you’re on a roll.”

“I’m going to put some pants on!” he shouted.

“Uh... OK?” she replied, confused.

“I... that’s not what I meant to say.” Miles squeezed his eyes shut and massaged his temples. “Pull it together, Hop.”

“Let me handle the droid. If it’s a city model, I know a logic loop that will fry his processor.”

“You do?” Miles asked, surprised. Minks passed him in the corridor and headed out toward the cargo area.

“That’s why you pay me the big bucks.”

## Chapter 5

In the bustling heart of Goshawk, a miniature mecca of trade and merchants, Gonderlust Gibbons was sweating bullets. The lunch hour crowd had mostly peaked, but two Alpha droids were still loitering on the street corner outside Gibbons' shop. Officer Richter's arrest of the Madam Secretary's husband had made headlines throughout half the region, and by midday, most of Orbis 3 would know that Nicholas Callows had a connection to the Goshawk area. Names would be kept private for only so long, given the expedient nature of FST&R's criminal processing. If only the Union was as good at solving light-beam congestion.

A blast of smoke billowed out from the shop's third garage as Gibbons approached with a clipboard. He was a round, short, balding man with olive skin and a gray hair. His glasses were square and thick with smudges all over, and his overalls were stained with all manner of grease and sealants. Being the boss didn't mean you couldn't get your hands dirty.

"Vosselchuck!" Gibbons hollered, waving away clouds of smoke. "How many times do I gotta tell you? Disengage the grapple before you test the brakes!"

"Sorry, chief," came a muffled reply. A brute of a being, Vosselchuck was halfway concealed inside the engine box of a Ground Level civilian transport vehicle. Wearing a welding mask, he leaned out of the box and flipped up his visor. Big, dopey teeth filled a broad smile. His skin was stone gray and tattooed with Eastern Chinese dragons.

"You need something?" he asked.

"We've still got Alpha droids outside. They come in here, you don't say a word, understand? Nothing. You get me and I'll do the talking. I already told Dent and Fritz the same thing."

"You got it."

"Good. Now listen to me and that disengage that grapple!"

Gibbons headed back down the hall, passing the other two garages and returning to the reception area. Behind the desk was May, a pale Floran with the appearance of a tree. She nodded her head in deference to Gibbons but did not speak. Hers was a race with no spoken language or natural ability to make sound, so she wore a thought digitizer around her neck.

"Mr. Gibbons, there's a patron who would like to speak with you. I sent her to wait inside your office."

"Why'd you do that? We have a reception room for a reason. Nobody should be in my office if I'm not there. You do this again and I'm gonna dock your pay."

"My apologies, sir."

He walked over to the window and peered through the blinds. One of the Alpha droids was gone, but the second was moving closer in the direction of the shop.

"Oh boy, here they come. May, if they ask for me, tell 'em I'm with a client. OK?"

May nodded.

"Good. Let me know when they're gone, too."

Gibbons opened the door to his office and entered, closing it with a lock. His office was chintzy and filled with photographs of various awards his shop had won over the years. A dusty bookshelf, a counter with a coffee pot, and a plastic pot of flowers. His desk was moderately clean, but he'd left a sandwich out on a plate and a cigar smoldering in the ash tray. Seated with her back to the office door was a woman in black robes that covered her body from head to toe.

"Ma'am," he started, stepping beside the desk and taking his seat. "What can I do for you?"

From the front, the woman's face was mostly hidden by her robes, save for a bit of pale skin around her mouth. Her lips were a pale pink. The rest of her face was hidden behind a mask of white surgical bandages, the kind usually reserved for burn victims. She wore a narrow black visor with a red lens over her eyes.

"I am need of a recommendation." Her voice was deep and measured. "What kind of vehicle could transport myself and two Valos cargo containers?"

"I'm... not sure off the top of my head. You do realize we're an auto shop, right? We don't rent freighters here."

As she spoke, the woman remained uncannily motionless and her voice betrayed nothing. Gibbons couldn't even detect a regional accent.

"I was informed that to truly know justice, one must first know freedom. Do you agree?" she asked.

Gibbons squinted, trying to make out who and what this woman was. He removed his glasses, folded them, and took a deep breath.

"I've been asked that question a few times recently. The answer I usually give is that knowledge is power, ma'am, and power belongs to the people."

The woman nodded gracefully.

"Let us speak candidly."

"All right, where you headed?"

"Orbis Prime."

"Off-world?" Gibbons asked. Had he been been smoking his cigar, it would have fallen out of his mouth. "Wow. OK. Well, for Valos containers, you'll need a vehicle that can keep 'em charged, of course. So magnetic coil engines are a good bet. They're really your only bet. But then you'll have to transfer your cargo to a Union vessel if you're going off-world, so an unloading crew is a good idea. They aren't too pricey. Of course, you could eliminate the middleman if the vehicle already has a mechanized loader. Those are a little more rare."

"That would be preferable. Do you have a list of drivers? If at all possible, I would appreciate drivers who are sympathetic to our cause. In the unfortunate event that my cargo is seized—"

"Hey, that's all I need to know. Plausible deniability, right? I don't have a list of drivers per se, as they tend to play by the book. The Union really puts a squeeze on anyone they catch bending the rules. That

and drivers don't stand to benefit much either way the tide turns. But enough blabbing! I do know a good steward, two in fact. They're both darlings. Give me a second."

Gibbons opened a drawer at his desk and rummaged around for a moment. He paused, knitting his brows as he withdrew a lump of tin foil. Peeling a bit of it open, he took a whiff.

"Yikes. Well, I found that missing lasagna from the last cycle."

The woman said nothing, so Gibbons forced a smile and resumed scouring the drawer. A moment passed before he found a brass key that opened his desk's top drawer. From inside that, he withdrew a manilla folder.

"As you likely heard, I run a secondary business," he told the woman, lowering his voice. "One that could see a lot of positive change if the right people get onboard. No pun intended."

Not so much as a smile from the woman.

"Right. Well, Noralee Minks is your lady. I mean Thrangar. You know what I mean," he laughed nervously. "She's a steward on the Hopscotch II. The driver's a little sketchy, though. Nice enough guy but not completely reliable. So... I'd make Minks option number two. As for option number one, that'd be Joxus Rendell."

"And who is the driver of Rendell's vehicle?"

"Um," Gibbons mumbled. "Joxus, I think. Her driver recently got caught in a lift turbine. What a mess. My boys had to work overtime for a whole week. Anyhow, I'd say hit up Joxus. Tell her you got the recommendation from me. Maybe she'll give you a discount, maybe she won't. The ship's named Widowmaker."

"Fitting," the woman mused.

"Um, yeah. Kind of a morbid observation, but yes."

The com unit on Gibbons' desktop clicked on.

"Mr. Gibbons?" It was his receptionist.

"Yes, May?"

"Alpha Three from the vessel Interceptor would like to speak with you, sir. I told him you would be available shortly."

"OK. Thanks." Gibbons switched off the com. His eyes met the woman's visor. "I think my business may be temporarily compromised. We've been crawling with increased drone activity since the demonstrations."

"I cannot be found here," the woman said bluntly, rising and making for the door.

"Wait!" Gibbons interjected, hands out. He quickly got up and moved in front of her, blocking the path to the reception area. "He's right outside. Use the other door into the garage. Hurry! If he's after you, I'll stall him."

“Thank you,” she replied, her voice finally betraying anxiety. She reached and placed a gloved hand on his shoulder. “You are a good man. My people will honor your kindness.”

“My pleasure,” Gibbons nodded. “Now go. Vosselchuck will help keep you safe. He’s the gray lump with the teeth.”

The woman opened the entrance to the garage and closed the door behind her. Seeing her go, Gibbons drew a deep breath. He glanced at the desk and spied the open folder. Moving quickly, he flipped it closed and returned it to the top draw, removing the key. Then he opened his office door and headed into the reception area with an irritable demeanor.