

Wouldn't it be great if there was always a warning,
something simple like a red sky in the morning.
– 'Red Sky'-Mark Chadwick

Prologue

Sgt. Adil Singh watched the plethora of blinking lights on her dashboard flash on and off in a kind of serene rhythm. This was her fourth tour in orbit around the blue planet and as always she found it extremely relaxing. Most of her buddies in her platoon detested patrol duty and thought it most tedious, but it was the only time she could really settle down and be with her own thoughts. Maybe it was because she was out of reach from her family, back at base they would contact her several times a week asking for reports on if she had met a nice young army man to possibly wed, or how long she thought she was going to stay in the military. Her parents couldn't reach her out here; communication with the public was strictly prohibited. It was nice and quiet and the only human interaction she had was in three hour intervals when she would check in with closets Commonwealth starport: Thatcher.

'Observation Pod Elvis Costello, this is the S/S Jeff Lynne you should have us on visual in fifteen' her radio barked and woke from her meditation.

'Roger that S/S Jeff Lynne,' she replied. 'This is Sgt. Singh aboard O/P Elvis Costello, nice to see you again.' She never understood why the Commonwealth always named their vessels after old classical musicians.

'Always a pleasure Sgt. Singh, that time of year again' said Captain Kennedy, whom Adil had communicated with every year around this time.

'Field trip time again I see' she said flirtatiously.

'The older kids always find this part a drag, but the young ones always love seeing the Birthplace.'

'It's important to remember where we came from Captain' she truly believed it. These kids were privileged to come this close to the once blue planet. Most people had only seen pictures of it pre-Exodus and had no idea what it looked like.

'I will keep an eye out for you' she continued. 'Until then Captain,'

'It's a living thing!' Kennedy answered back before the static from the radio went silent.

Adil had never understood the unwritten rule that Commonwealth Captains had when it came to quoting the namesakes of their ships. She had never once signed off or on for that matter by saying *Radio*, *Radio* or *Veronica*, but her colleagues always did. Sighing she turned around and looked back at her blinking dials. She thought back to when she was at boarding school, the advantage of having wealthy parents, combined with being puro had given her all the advantages in life.

Those memories had always stayed with her as a very happy time. At home she had been under the constant watchful gaze of her father and there had always been a sense of decency and propriety. At St. Odo of Canterbury there had been rules and mentors to enforce them, but there had also been some freedom. It was an unspoken rule that the students policed themselves to some extent and this led to many of them being able to experience or learn things that was prohibited at home. Adil had kissed her first boy at the age of ten, had she lived at home she would mostly likely still be unknissed. His name had been Geoffrey McIntosh from a rich Irish family, who had made their fortune in beer. He might have thought that they were going to be a couple their remaining time at school, but she was only in it for the experience.

She turned from her dials, showing both her vitals and those of the Observation Pod, and swiveled her command chair to the large window overlooking Terra. Some days she would catch herself just staring at it, fixating on a spot and trying to imagine what it had been like all those years ago. The sun was behind it now giving it a halo like some ancient patron saint in one of those stained glass windows her parents had installed in their receiving room. It was her patron saint; it felt odd to think along those lines. Her family still followed the ancient traditions of Hinduism, but true to form, once the Commonwealth had been declared the religion had begun incorporating both Christian and Muslim doctrine and figures. It was an ever changing melting pot, like the old Indus Valley had been.

Now the S/S Jeff Lynne was coming into view. The school vessel was huge, it carried hundreds or privileged students on a voyage that took just about a month and still needed to entertain and teach all forms during that time so it had a full crew consisting of caterers, tutors maintenance. She had been on that ship once every year from age six to 18, sure it had been dull as she approached graduation, but it was always something to look forward to, more than going home during the holidays when she had to live under her parents' watchful eye again.

The ship became larger as it came closer to her position and as it did a light became brighter and brighter. At first she didn't think anything of it and blinked a few times since she couldn't focus anymore. She shielded her eyes by placing her hand above them, but whatever the source of the light was would not be abated. She let her gaze leave the ship to wherever it was coming from, suddenly and without warning her entire field of vision was blinded by white, intense light. It was so painful that she was forced to look away and close her eyes, it didn't help. The light seemed to bounce off the walls inside her little station and she cried out in pain as it continued to bathe her whole existence.

PS9

*Being the beginning of our tale, we are introduced to Hoffman
Hoffman is introduced to Doran and is given an offer
Children go missing*

Hoffman looked up from his glass and surveyed the surroundings. He must have been lost in his own head for hours or time had ceased to have any meaning to him. The bar, quite ironically named Pleasure Station 9, was well lit by brightly colored neon lights and the air filled with electronic melodies. There were stripper poles mounted on catwalks haphazardly thrown about the place. The poles were made of some form of durable glass or plastic and were also filled with neon lights, lighting up the slick bodies of the girls using them to ply their trade. To Hoffman it all looked like some thirteen year old boy's fantasy of what a futuristic strip club might look like. It was horrible, not really the place one sought out if one wanted to drink in private, but he had little choice. This particular port had only one locale with the permit to serve what passed for alcohol out here. He spun his chair round and came back to the clear plastic bar that had been filled with blue and red rope lights, *classy*.

He examined his glass and found it to be empty and lifted his eyes to the barman, a surly thin mouthed rudo, possibly Slavic and Scandinavian it was always difficult to tell, and nodded slightly; indicating the need for a refill. The thin mouthed man brought out a non-descript brown bottle and poured most of the liquid on the bar, but eventually the glass was filled. He put a thin crystal rectangle on in front of him, Hoffman placed his thumb on it and it made a 'blip' sound indicating that a sum of money had been taken from his account.

He grabbed the glass and carefully swiveled back around to face the rest of the club. It wasn't packed, but not completely deserted either. This was a minor port and controlled by the teetotalers, so having 'a good time' was frowned upon by most of the inhabitants. PS9 was allowed to exist on the outskirts of society so that there would be some repeat business from the rougher merchants in the area. A port without a venue to serve alcohol or other mind altering substances was a port that died. At that not many stayed at Taze Starport for any amount of time; the people living here were just too weird. Hoffman liked it, he could remain incognito and those who did recognize him were always only passing through and didn't bother him for more than a couple of hours. He had gotten himself a little cube close to the club, that he only used for sleeping, food and drink was provided by various barmen and entertainment came from the girls or whatever fights would break out over the same.

He was vaguely aware of somebody watching him, but he kept his eyes focused on the center stage where one of the girls was hanging upside down with her legs wrapped around a green flashing pole. Suddenly the same somebody bumped into him as he sat down on the chair to the right. Hoffman didn't moved and kept his gaze, even though the routine was one he had seen many times before.

‘Nice moves’ a raspy voice said to him. ‘Now I understand why you spend all your days here.’

Hoffman shot a look to his side to see if the voice indeed belonged to who he thought it did.

‘Doran, fancy meeting you here’ he managed and noticed that his speech had taken on quite a slurred facet. He swiveled towards the man and raised his glass. ‘It must be, like four years since I saw you last.’

Javier Doran’s face was split into a wide grin and revealed rows of rotten teeth. Like Hoffman he was rudo, a Commonwealth/Azteca mix from some Starport close to Venus. He wore his black hair long and greasy and dressed in a soiled striped dress shirt and cargo pants. He gave the barman a nod and held up to fingers.

‘I believe it was three and a half my friend’ he replied. ‘We had just delivered a package of some note to this very place.’ Hoffman nodded. ‘Never did understand why you chose to stay, but when I see the girls in this place I have an idea.’ Doran laughed and downed the first of the two shots.

‘These theocrats never learned how to make booze’ he said and wiped his mouth with a disgusted look on his face.

‘One learns to bear it’ Hoffman laughed.

It was nice to see Doran, they had been very close at one time. They met while enlisted and had saved each other’s lives more than they could remember. Of course most of the drinking since then had ensured that Hoffman wouldn’t remember.

‘Damn, that girl must be Puro,’ Doran pointed to the girl who had previously been upside down. ‘I didn’t think they got into this line of business.’

It was true, traditionally occupations such as stripping, prostitution and services along those lines were left to rudos, people of mixed background. Puros often got higher profile jobs just because, unfair, but after Exodus it had become the natural order. This was also the reason people like Javier Doran and Alessandro Hoffman, a Germanic/Roman mix, had two choices in life; enlisting or crime, or in their case both.

‘What do you need Doran?’ Hoffman emptied his glass and eyed his old friend. ‘If you were so interested in my company you could have swung by any time during these past four years. Makes me think you have a hidden agenda.’

Doran looked at the barman for a minute and then leaned towards Hoffman. ‘I’ve got a delicate matter needs looking into, brother. Let’s move to a more private table though.’ He rose and nodded his head towards a table situated in a nicely anonymous spot with as much darkness as was possible in the place. Hoffman turned around to find a filled glass waiting for him on the counter; he grabbed it and raised his eyebrows at the barman, indicating his thanks.

‘Here’ Doran placed a ten inch long white tube on the table. ‘Check this out.’

Hoffman grabbed it and pressed at one end with his thumb. The tube made an electronic sound, as if it was trying to imitate the sound of an organic click, but couldn't quite fake it. The tube opened and he could pull it apart, revealing a clear plastic film, very much like a scroll. When he had pulled it as far as it would allow the plastic blinked and lit up like a computer screen. It was a newspaper article from a month ago, the heading read:

ST. ODO OF CANTERBURY CHILDREN ON ANNUAL SCHOOL TRIP

There was a picture of a mass of children ranging from possibly six to more than likely eighteen. They were standing in front of a yellow ship with its name clearly visible; S/S Jeff Lynne. He tried to scroll down by turning a small gear on the side, but it seemed to be the only content on the roll.

'So what is this? A field trip, looking for chaperons?'

Doran leaned back in his chair and chuckled. He fished a metal pipe from his pants pocket and stuck it in his mouth. He pressed something underneath the bowl and vapor billowed from the chamber. 'I don't know if I could trust you being around such young and impressionable minds, brother.'

'So what's the deal?' Hoffman closed the tube.

'The kids in the picture all belong to the St. Francis boarding school, a station in its own right located near Mars. It is part of the Commonwealth and all the important families have kids that go there. It's a family thing, you know. Go to the same school as my father/mother did, just like their father/mother. It builds character and creates wonderful connections for the future. If there is one thing the Anglicans refused to leave behind during Exodus it was tradition.'

'I know, I've hauled enough of their tea across this part of the galaxy in my day. So get to the point.'

'Every year the students, all levels from first to last, go on a field trip. A space journey if you will. Gives the mentors a chance to bond with the students, the students a chance to get to know one another outside the classroom and it also gives the cleaning crew an opportunity to clean out the station while everyone is out. They usually circle around Venus, go past Mars and pass Gaia at a respectable distance. The same route every year and they have fun and games aboard.'

'Very well and I'm guessing something didn't go according to plans this time around' Hoffman said with a smirk. 'Somebody needed a job done in secrecy, something that couldn't make waves politically or financially. 'What's the job?'

‘You’re right, brother. Something did happen, but not what you think’ Doran took a long drag from his pipe and let vapor slowly sneak out from his nostrils, the cloud smelled of fruit. Ironic since fruit was long extinct on most stations, the only thing left was the essence or idea of fruit. Hoffman had seen images of fruit, or truth be told, pictures of paintings of fruit; still lifes they were called.

‘So what is it then?’ Hoffman leaned over the table to get closer to Doran, knocked over his glass so that his liquor spilled and spoke in a low voice as if anyone inside the club was even remotely interested in them.

‘Well you see’ Doran did the same. ‘About a week into the voyage the St. Odo of Canterbury lost contact with the ship.’

‘What do you mean?’

‘It vanished,’ Doran leaned back in the booth and put his hands behind his head as if the secrets were over. ‘All communication lost in the blink of an eye. One minute it was there and then the next it was gone.’

‘Yeah, but...’

‘But ships drop contact all the time, right?’ Doran interrupted. ‘This voyage usually takes a month from the school, past Terra and then back. It’s been a little over a month and still no contact.’

‘Why not check in with the S/Ps and O/Ps along the way, or even Luna? Surely one of those places must have some information. A ship that size doesn’t just vanish,’ bringing up Luna sounded weird to Hoffman as he said it.

‘Well, that’s just the thing, brother’ a sly smile crossed Doran’s unkempt face, showing rows of teeth stained brown. ‘This is a very sensitive case when it comes to the Commonwealth. If they start asking around at the different ports or bases it will come out that they have lost the ship. This would of course wreak havoc on their credibility as a trade nation. The situation at the moment is volatile, don’t you watch the reports?’

Hoffman shrugged, he might have watched some broadcast in the past year, but was most likely too inebriated to understand what was going on. ‘With The Union ready to pounce at any flaw that The Commonwealth might show it is not the time to announce the loss of this particular vessel. If they can’t keep track of their own children, then how are they going to ensure the safety of trade goods?’

‘So it needs to be below the radar?’

‘It needs to be so below the radar that it’s subterranean. Not even independent, rudo investigators are enough. That kind of information is so important that it can easily be sold

and included in that price would be a cover so deep that no one would be able to catch the rat.’

‘Okay, so this is where I...or we, come in’ Hoffman said hesitantly.

‘Exactly, brother,’ Doran’s smile became even wider, how this was even possible was a mystery to Hoffman. ‘To be more precise, where you come in. I am too familiar in amongst certain people and if I started asking questions it would raise suspicions. You on the other hand have been holed up in this God-fearing place for so long that you might as well be dead.’

Hoffman tried to rest his head in his hand, but his elbow slipped in the puddle of booze and almost slammed his chin on the table. He tried to gain some semblance of composure, but ended up looking like the drunk he was. A million thoughts passed through his head. What could he do? He had been a soldier, a runner, a smuggler; he didn’t know the first thing about solving mysteries.

‘What’s in it for me?’

‘Freedom, a way back into civilized society, riches’ Doran began fiddling with his pipe, as if he wasn’t quite sure what he was going to say. ‘A way from this miserable existence you call your life, brother.’

‘As if your life is so much better’ Hoffman snorted and liquid shot out of his nose, he didn’t bother wiping it away.

Doran rose from the table and placed a hand on Hoffman’s shoulder. ‘All you would have to do is find out what happened to the kids, after that the Cavaliers would step in and sort out the rest. I am sure that if you beat the odds and do find out any valuable information I am sure you would have it made, and if you want to drink yourself to death this would be provided to you.’ Hoffman waved his hand off and tried to say something about him being a condescending shit, but all that came out was an unintelligible garble. ‘I have a cube in sector 312, if you are interested, come see me there.’

Doran took his digital scroll and walked, on unsteady legs, towards the exit of the club. He chanced a glance over his shoulder in time to see Hoffman’s head hit the table.