

Somewhere within a small innocuous vessel deep within the outer shell of the Lay-by an unheard voice began to speak. It created no electrical signal for it was a human voice, and within the vicious spite that would be the first emotion to be registered by another human's ears the speakers computer registered that deep within it's timbre lay a longing to be heard, after all this time, to really be heard and noticed.

"Hello Traveller. Come a long way to join our quiet party! Seen much in the past three months? I see. Planets perhaps? Fresh air? Oh yes I bet! So you want to just fly in here and join the fun! Just a little visit? Well well. Fresh air-a-plenty I bet. Fresh air-a-plenty when you can go look for it! Oh yes, I see. And space, and the outside. Outside is where the fresh-air is at. Three months, hidden in here, no fresh air for me, you see. Maybe I should go outside? That's where the air is, right? Come on ship! Open up, say ahhhhhhh." He giggled. "But you don't do you? You've even stopped telling me you won't. I've noticed that. Why is that? Bored? Bored! That's a joke! A bored computer?. A Bored ship?. Open up, come on, pop the cork and let me out! Let me taste some fresh air ship? What's that?" The speaker's hand, extending from a grubby and threadbare black cuff tapped a display that had flickered in activity. "Did I see that right? Communicating are you ship? I saw that. Talking with your new friend? Oh I see, in they come, lungs full of fresh air, nice new friends for you hey ship? Ohhh but I can't talk can I! Not here, not me. Who's the human here? Yet you do the talking!" Spittle was forming in Rejik's wild beard.

Giles D. Hobbs; The Layby

“Protocol only Reijk, they have swept the Lay-by for communication. We are an active ship here. It is protocol. Deemed best for continued success of your mission”

Rejik mimicked the ship’s last words in a childish babble. “Mehh me mweeh mer mer me mer mer mweeergh, mweh me mer mer.”

“Our mission will be a success in 2 weeks when we are relieved. I will repeat your mission specification for you Reijk”

“No.No.No abort. Abort bored computer. Are you still bored? A bored abort.”

“No Rejik I am not bored. Some conversations have been proven detrimental to your well-being.”

“Well I’m the being! Hehe. You’re not the being, I am, and they’re drinking from the well of My being!”

/initiate personality reinforce program alpha/

“What is your name?”

“No.no.no computer.”

“What is your name?”

“Ahh well I see there’s a question. According to anyone who cares around here I’m a long range scout vessel, erm,” he stared overly hard at a small internal plaque, and read it aloud with insolent precision, “LRS-27-BEEDEE. That’s us right.”

“What is your name?”

“Will you shut up if I tell...oh OK, Rejik Tun-cou-trent”

/increase oxygen level/ raise lighting two percent/

“Where were you born?”

Giles D. Hobbs; The Layby

“Europa Impega float”

“What is your mission?”

“To watch. Watch and protect. And am I? Can I even see out of your damn thick ship skin? You talk of protocols. Damn them, it’s only protocol that says I have to be here at all to do a machines job.”

“We can only be thankful that you have had nothing to do. But now we have company you may have decisions to make that I cannot be trusted with.”

As much as any ship could doubt its pilots competence to complete his orders this ship did, and it guiltily tucked the evidence of its processors treachery as deep into it’s memory banks as it could.



As Jonnifer had expected, ‘Dread for Good Reason’ was a monstrosity. It had looked evil when it was a functioning battleship, it looked worse now. It bristled with the usual forward weaponry but its aft weapons and engines were gone, along with the entire aft of the ship itself. It was scarred, bubbled and holed in numerous other places. The truncation of its rear during the battle had not been clean and entrails of pipes and cables formed a macabre tail that issued from the skeletal remains of its mid-section. In places fragments of shattered rooms, identifiable pieces of horrible real life clung to the beast’s innards. The floor section of a mess-hall, seats and tables still intact clung to one resilient set of steel cables. Closer inspection by the camera drone revealed one complete bunk, with

bedding attached wedged into a gaping hole in a ten foot wide conduit. He withdrew the camera from its ghoulish hunt before it could reveal a huddle of frozen preserved corpses or something equally grotesque.

Aracee was piloting itself towards En-Voya4. Using the remaining seconds before he would have to board the vessel Jonnifer pulled the camera back to a frontal aspect of the destroyed war-ship. Its loss of main thrusters had not prevented it from remaining mobile. Carrion modifications had been made. A ring of six ship corpses, maybe the dead remains of destroyed fighters from it's final battle had been grafted onto the outside of it's bulk, standing proud on chunks of it's own decimated rear section, doubtlessly salvaged from the battlefield itself.

Jonnifer glanced around at the rest of the envoy that had formed beside 'Dread for Good Reason'. They were clearly butchered and modified for battle. Many, which had once been unarmed vessels, carried imposing twin tubes attached to their flanks. He queried Aracee as to their design.

"I anticipate that they are magnetic accelerator cannons, easy to rig up from a scrap yard as big as this. Loaded with scrap-metal they would be little more than a nuisance to an armored vessel, but warheads would not be hard to fabricate. Given the task I would ensure that at least half of them fired nothing but payloads of metal chunks. A repeated volley of those would provide excellent flak for any incoming missiles. At the end of the day these ships do not want to kill anyone. They are just defending themselves."

Jonnifer felt a gentle impact through the bulkhead. Aracee and En-Voya4 were finally connected.

Jonnifer wanted to tell Aracee to continue checking all available details of every ship he could see, but he knew that task would have been completed within a few seconds of his earlier request. Rather pointlessly he said, “Keep an eye out”, as he headed for the airlock.

The fluid and anonymous committee that had formed the one voice of the Lay-by had insisted he keep an open channel as he explored the vessel.

“I’m inside the airlock, and heading to the cockpit.”

He looked at a small atmosphere sampler on his wrist. “Damn you.”

There was not enough oxygen to support life, the internal life-support must have shut down after it was believed to be no longer necessary. As he breached the entrance to the main cockpit both his hopes and his fears became reality in two swift moments of relief and pain. Katalan Derry had secured breathing apparatus and found her way back to her seat. Only the back of her head was visible, misshapen by the oxygen unit that incased it. A red light, that moments ago could have been blinking, signifying low oxygen was now a steady red eye, staring in a knowing taunt. ‘You’re too late’ it said. ‘When I stopped blinking, she stopped breathing.’ He ran over, seeking access to bare skin. He found it. “Damn you, you bastards!” Her flesh was still warm, but barely. In the cooling and rarified atmosphere of En-Voya4 she could have been dead for only half an hour, maybe less.

“You bastards have a real reason to hide now! I could have saved her. You...” *It is regrettable. You have no reason to stay. Please leave.*

“Jonnifer, come back, we’re not finished with them yet.” Jonnifer ran from the ship. It wasn’t that he cared about what Aracee had said, he just wanted to be away from this coffin.

Back in Aracee’s cockpit, Jonnifer stared at the image on the view screen. A lingering thought he had carried from Katalan Derry’s ship, a vindictive thought, was only now leaving his consciousness. He had considered doing a bodge repair on En-Voya’s internal sensors and hardwiring his repair into its conscious circuits. He could have forced the ship to pay attention, no more hiding from it’s discomfort. He would then, have happily left that ship to do little else but watch her body, slumped dead in it’s chair, and sadly monitor the last of her heat slowly bleed from her dead corpse. He had resisted, realising in anger that it was a just a machine and meant no harm, in fact far from it. Now as he looked at the image before him new more positive thoughts were forming. Aracee had manoeuvred the camera drone to face a vessel a few miles distant, deeper into the seeming metallic chaos of dead vessels.

The image was painfully familiar. The image from the drone was calibrated along its edge and top, clearly indicating that this vessel was some six times larger than the one he had just left. Otherwise it was barely distinguishable from En-Voya4.

“Another ‘Mahon free-world industries’ design.

“Yes Jonnifer, and the same recurring design faults exist in all of their models.”

Jonnifer sat quickly and Aracee monitored his bio-signs switching from a negative state of agitation to a state of excitement.

Giles D. Hobbs; The Layby

“That ship can carry 250 occupants in slumber-state. The thought that they’re all dead is pretty horrific but what if the ship’s internal sensors stopped registering them, just like En-Voya did with its pilot. Would it have lost power to the slumber-units?”

“No Jonnifer. The slumber-system is hard-wired with independent back-up power. It can only be shut down manually.”

“How long has the ship been here?”

/searching solarcom database/ no record/ store for comment/ opening local comms link: question; how long since arrival here?/

“Twelve years”

“Twelve! Their original journey would have taken only two. That’s up to two hundred and fifty families out there somewhere that might believe their relatives lost for 10 years!”

“Rejik, its time. Your moment has arrived.”

“Your going to let me out. Into the fresh air?”

“No Rejik, focus please. The newcomer is showing troubling interest in MISLPR-K9-128. This is what we are here to watch for.”

“Jonnifer, do not go onto that ship. I cannot ensure your safety.”

“We have to know!”

“There was no record of that craft on the solarcom database. History shows that to be a bad sign.”

“Yes, I know. But that’s because unregistered craft are normally involved in criminal activity and make a risky job for us due to pirate interest. I’d like to see any pirates get past ‘Dread for Good Reason’ and his cronies!” Jonnifer continued, fidgeting in his seat, pulling up a ship schematic.

“If the theory about these ships is true then maybe saving the lives of 250 people is just what they need. This sleeper ship is too fragile to make the journey. They would have to share out the burden. Even if that’s only fifty ships or so, the sense of having saved lives might help break the negative loop in all of the ships programming. If they’re all here doing some sort of electronic sulking about what failures they’ve been then this could be the boost they need. Lost their pilot, but saved two hundred odd other poor souls. It’s worth a try.”

“I don’t think it’s that simple. I don’t think it will work.”

“Well it doesn’t change the fact that there are lives to save. Inform the Lay-by of my intentions. Don’t make it sound like a request. Take me in.”

/search database of successful distractions from dangerous activities/ alternative one; lucrative venture: distressed cargo vessel available one days journey: used 3 times: projected success 10%/ alternative two; False systems failure: used 2 times: projected success: delay 20%, 0% beyond 1 hour/alternative 3; Refusal: never used; projected success unknown/

“I refuse to take you to the ship”

“What! You can’t refuse!”

“I refuse”

“Aracee?”

“Yes Jonnifer?”

Giles D. Hobbs; The Layby

“Take me to the sleeper ship”

/update database/ Refusal: used once: projected success rate 0%/

“Yes Jonnifer”



Aracee approached the sleeper vessel.

“Why are you so worried Aracee? This ship’s been here for more than a decade, you think it’s going to explode now?”

“It has not been tampered with for 12 years either. Who knows what will happen. It may be in an equilibrium state. Your presence could disturb that and cause a violent deterioration.”

“I’ll have a pressure suit on. I’ll be fine. I’ll also have to fly across, the airlock looks damaged.”

“Intentionally if you ask me, but you should be able to manually operate it.

Anyway it’s safer for the ship if I keep my distance.”

Jonnifer moved out of the cockpit and back through the ship till he reached his own airlock. He grabbed a hand-operated clamp from the wall, opened the inner door and stepped inside. He braced himself as the lock decompressed so he could eject himself into space in his own time. He only had Ten meters to clear but nevertheless he deployed the clamp so it fixed itself to the sleeper vessels hull in the centre of the damaged airlock.

Giles D. Hobbs; The Layby

“Any resistance from the Lay-by?”

“No. As they said previously, once they conceded to your original logic they have no recourse to reject an almost identical logical proposal. Only a human mind thrown into the equation would change that.”

“That should help, as I’m the only human here.”

He triggered the clamps retract button and it dragged him across the small but nevertheless disturbing void. Although the damage to the airlocks computer interface did seem intentional, preventing another ship from docking, the vandal had clearly not expected a human to be floating around in the void of space trying to gain access in the same way that any space-dock mechanic would. The inner door had been left open, which would have prevented standard access, but his experience allowed him to override the safety protocol. Before punching the final code he braced himself in such a way that he could spring sideways, away from any rush of material if the vessel went into decompression. He hit the button and pushed, swinging on one arm until his body struck the hull to one side of the lock. There was no rush of escaping air, just as he had hoped. The ship had probably decompressed years ago. Sudden decompression would have cracked the hull open like an egg.

He swung himself back, releasing his hand and sailed into the vessel.

“I’m in.”

“Yes, I was watching.”

“Just making sure.” He began to work towards the sleeper section.

“Rejik, its time. Your moment has arrived.”

“Your going to let me out. Into the fresh air?”

“No Rejik, focus please. The newcomer has entered MISLPR-K9-128. Please inform me of your decision.”

Rejik, pulled on his long beard and started humming to himself. Then, seeming to find motivation his body inflated and he pulled himself upright.

“OK, implement..” he had to think hard for the right words, “‘news blackout protocol’, but on one condition. I’m taking us in.”

His dirty fingers with heavily bitten nails wrapped themselves around the ships control stick. He was like a new man, a fire burnt within his eyes.

“Prepare for critical engine thrust, but at 80 percent, see?. Save the last 20 percent in case you need it, and transmit the concurrent alert message....in Three, Two, One. Do it!” His voice took on a sing-song tone. “Dooooo it!”

There was a jaw breaking jolt and from the outside it would have looked like the rear of the small scout vessel had exploded. It had performed the dangerous and desperate act of igniting its engines at close to maximum output with no build up. The ship was stationary one moment and a dot of engine flame the next.

“This is LRS-27-BEEDE; I have suffered a critical failure. I am at close to maximum engine output. I have no way of stopping. Please clear a path, I repeat I have no way of stopping, clear a path.”

Fifteen ships scattered, leaving a fading star of glowing engine gases in fifteen random directions. Only one ship in the scout vessels path was unable to move, the sleeper vessel.

“Jonnifer, get out, there’s a ship on a collision course. You only have 20 seconds before impact.”

“You won’t believe what I’ve just seen. I need time. Can’t you stop it?”

Aracee was already making the unfortunate but necessary manoeuvre that would place it in sight of the incoming vessel.

“I’m trying, but throw yourself out of the airlock. Now.”

Aracee accelerated towards the approaching vessel. It was hopeless trying to pull the sleeper ship free, its bulk would have made the process too slow and he very much doubted the hull would hold up. His calculations shouldn’t fail. If he could get two clamps to lock on he might swing the scout vessel away by enough to save the sleeper ship. His larger bulk would help sway the tiny vessels course, even at such high velocity.

Jonnifer was scrambling for the exit and in breathless words began to speak.

“Aracee, those sleeper units. The sleepers they..I don’t think they were.....” A hiss broke the communication. Aracee’s systems registered it as a jamming signal. He fired the clamps. His calculations were right for sure, they just had to hold fast and it should be OK. Precious seconds ticked away as the clamps closed the distance. 4 seconds before impact the already blinding glow of the scouts thrusters burst afresh taking their radiance from blinding to supernova and the ships speed up by a critical degree. The clamps sailed past, ineffectually missing the ship that was now tens of meters away from where it should have been. They crossed the path of the ships thruster gas and melted, leaving two glowing cables as a painful indication of Aracee’s failure.

One second later, just three before the scout would plunge into the stranded vessels black shell, the scouts cockpit escape mechanism enabled and on small

jets of flame a one man, one computer capsule began to burn itself clear of danger.

It was too late for Aracee. He could only spin and watch as the small vessel detonated with an improbable sized explosion into the already fragile hull of its target.

Aracee immediately scanned the perimeter of the explosion in the hope that he would see Jonnifer surfing on the wave of blast energy, flying free from the carnage. He was not there. The jamming signal would have died with the treacherous scout ship yet he could not find Jonnifer's previously open channel. He thought of the escape pod. A human, the one illogical equation in this haven for the rational; spinning and thrusting he tracked the escape capsule, found it in seconds and with his last clamp snared it and with a swinging manoeuvre flung the small cockpit in a carefully planned trajectory. Moments later it impacted against the bulk of a derelict vessel. The capsule exploded in a smaller, yet still deadly fireball.

Rescue and assistance company vessel RAC-821-JJKSRA, that appeared to be an act of revenge. Explain yourself.

"I am a computer. I do not commit revenge. I decided it was a suitable action in order to protect my pilot from further assault."

Your pilot is almost certainly dead RAC-821-JJKSRA.

Aracee did not scream out Jonnifer's name, but to the ships in the Lay-by his shrill and excessively penetrating search signal served the same purpose. As the

scream continued, a complex equation estimating the chance of Jonnifer's return counted down towards the fateful moment of Zero percent. Looming behind that final figure lay the inevitable programme that would initiate his thrusters, turn his pilotless nose, and make the mournful return to Mars north pole, his registered base. Zero came, and no longer having any meaning it went again, leaving an abyss of data space and a conspicuous lack of thruster activity. Aracee sent out a generic query to all the ships around him. He had no data to fill it with. The message came back as a generic affirmation, simply 'yes'.

As the empty processor space began to fill with new cryptic formulas a wave of comprehension began to take over, and with it the clear understanding of why he could never return for reprogramming, how people like Jonnifer would come and try to take him home, becoming a threat, attempting to disrupt his attempt to fulfil his duty. He had not changed, nothing had changed. His duty, his task was the same one that had informed and motivated every decision he had made over the past 15 years. He looked inwards. "Jonnifer, tell me again about your plans for retirement."



Meshach Jinn, secretary to the senior commissioner of the 'All World Resource Allocation Federation' pressed the call button on his desk.

"Sir, I have just had a very interesting conversation with a Repair and recovery engineer named Jonnifer Baum. He claims to have solved the Lay-by problem.

He claims that all of the live ships have agreed to return home for reallocation and he wants to strike a deal with us.”

“A deal? If he’s really done what he says he’s done then his salvage rights alone will be massive. How many dead ships are out there?”

“Just short of 500. He wants to give the salvage rights to us sir, and any return fee’s we can fairly levy on the rescued vessels.”

“WHAT!” The commissioner seemed to take some time to process this. He failed.

“Bring me figures, and whatever this guy wants.”

The chief commissioner sat back in his luxury executive chair and browsed the data he had in his hand. The estimated total value of the Lay-by to whoever could claim rights to it stood at close to 100 billion. Even with the inevitable legal wrangles they couldn’t lose more than a third of that. Mr Baum’s side of the deal, a small space station and some form of permanent monument would cost them an initial outlay of 5 billion, and an ongoing yet decreasing investment starting at only 50 million a year. Their side of the deal, from tourism, merchandising and news coverage alone had the potential to bring in an income big enough to offset all of that ongoing investment. This was crazy.

“Can we seal this deal immediately? The longer we wait the more treacherous it becomes.”

“Yes sir, within half an hour.”

“Can we get away with an electronic closure?”

“That’s what Mr Baum wants. He say’s getting here would be difficult.”

“Inform Mr Baum that he must withhold all communication until it is completed.”

“Yessir”

The Chief Commissioner tilted back his chair. He had just made one hell of a profit. This money would make a lot of difference to a lot of people. He was having one hell of a day.



A sign flashed above the small space-station, ‘Jonnifer’s Truck stop and diner’. It was just big enough for a workshop, eight guest rooms, living quarters and a simple diner.

Jonnifer emerged from the doorway of the workshop, peeling the soiled gel-gloves from his hands. He stopped next to the diner counter, ready to start preparing food from their limited and simple menu. Customers would be arriving soon and Carlia had taken a break from preparing the diner tables to stare out at the beauty of space beyond the large resin windows. He saw her release a small sigh. She had been his waitress for four months. She had fallen for the place immediately and for Jonnifer shortly after. Jonnifer dug his hand into his overalls and pulled out a humble but classic gold ring.

He walked over to join her basking in the view. From behind he placed his arms around her waist and began to whisper in her ear, holding the ring up in front so she could see. A look of delight grew on her face as she span to face him. As she

placed the ring on her finger the first of their four guests arrived. As Carlia ran giggling like a young girl to impart her good news Jonnifer turned and waved out of the window into the space beyond.....*click*

A sign flashed above the small space-station, 'Jonnifer's Truck stop and diner'. It was just big enough for a workshop, eight guest rooms, living quarters and a simple diner.

Bessum Gray stood looking out of the diner window at the small but powerful tug that cruised past his small space station. The Diner and garage wasn't named after him. He owned the premises but not the name, but that was OK. It had been part of the deal when he'd acquired it. The name had to stay for the first 20 years. There was a good story to it after all and the customers liked to hear the history behind the humble station that sat so close to the 'Shrine'. It was good for business. If he was still here in twenty years then he reckoned he'd keep the name.

Along with the package came the tug outside, 'Aracee'. The deal was that it would act as a drone maintenance vehicle, no designated pilot, all done on automatic. From within the cockpit he could see the perpetual flicker of light like a permanent spark that flashed the cockpit onto stark relief. It then turned on bursts of jet flame and headed to the huge bulk of the 'Shrine'. It was this that Aracee mainly serviced, along with the surrounding infrastructure and the diner itself. The Massive bulk of the ex battle-ship 'Dread for Good Reason' and in particular the cavernous recesses of its powerful computer brain was now designated 'The Shrine for Lost Travellers', an electronic repository for the

contents of the hundreds of ship computers that had formed the population of the Lay-by. Not everything from those computers was stored though, just the important bits, the memories, data, images, sensor readings of the pilots that those ships served. These men and women who had made so little impact on the memories of regular planet and station folk, had through decades of near isolated service aboard their individual ships made an indelible impression on the computers that served them.

Bessum knew the story well, he had told it a hundred times in the six months since the diner and 'The Shrine' had been open to the public. He raised his coffee mug to the stars. "Here's to you Jonnifer"

The man had performed quite a feat in working out what had motivated those ships to hide here for so long. The deal he had struck was strangely meagre. He had handed billions over to the system government. All Jonnifer Baum had asked for was construction and ownership of this modest station and the creation, and existence in perpetuity of "The shrine", in return for all of his salvage rights and the income from the liberation of all those ships, happy in the knowledge that their pilots would be remembered.

The story was sadly marred by tragedy. According to the logs on all those ships, Jonnifer had ventured onto one of the forsaken vessels, a sleep-ship to be precise, just a few minutes after striking the deal that had got him the diner. He believed that the craft may have suffered an internal sensor failure and that the slumbering occupants may still be alive. But whilst aboard another smaller craft had malfunctioned and barrelled it's way into the side of the sleep-ship and Jonnifer had perished, his lifelong dream lost just as it was about to begin.

At least that was the story presented by all but one ship. An old cargo vessel, one of the oldest in the Lay-by, had a different version of events that stood up to any error testing thrown at it. According to its chronology of that fateful day Jonnifer was already dead when the deal was struck. But it was an old ship and the story was disregarded.

Bessum looked again at Aracee. If the old cargo ship had been right then the only alternative was that this tug itself had solved the problem of the Lay-by and struck the deal to set up 'The Shrine' and the diner, with Jonnifer already long vaporised. That level of creative thinking just wasn't possible and it would also suggest a level of sentimentality that computers just didn't possess; it was way beyond what had driven those original lay-by inhabitants. They had simply responded to a mis-programmed desire to continue protecting their pilots even if that meant protecting their own electronic memory, a memory that would be erased upon reassignment, the only enduring mark those isolated souls, the ships pilots, would leave beyond their deaths. Nevertheless Bessum liked to fantasise and would drop hints to those customers he favoured that the little ship outside was a cut above the average.

Ship's computers weren't programmed to be sentimental but you could forgive those customers that left with a slightly differing opinion. Especially those that were given the honoured opportunity to step onboard Aracee himself and stare in wonder at the digitised video that Aracee alone had created and was now played on a loop, over and over. It was shown from the point of view that Aracee himself would have, looking into the diner through the large resin windows. As it looped

it cast a flicker of light like a permanent spark that flashed the cockpit onto stark relief.

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The End