

Luray

Dennis Haupt

Book 1 of Behind the Last Gate Series

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Introduction



Hello reader,

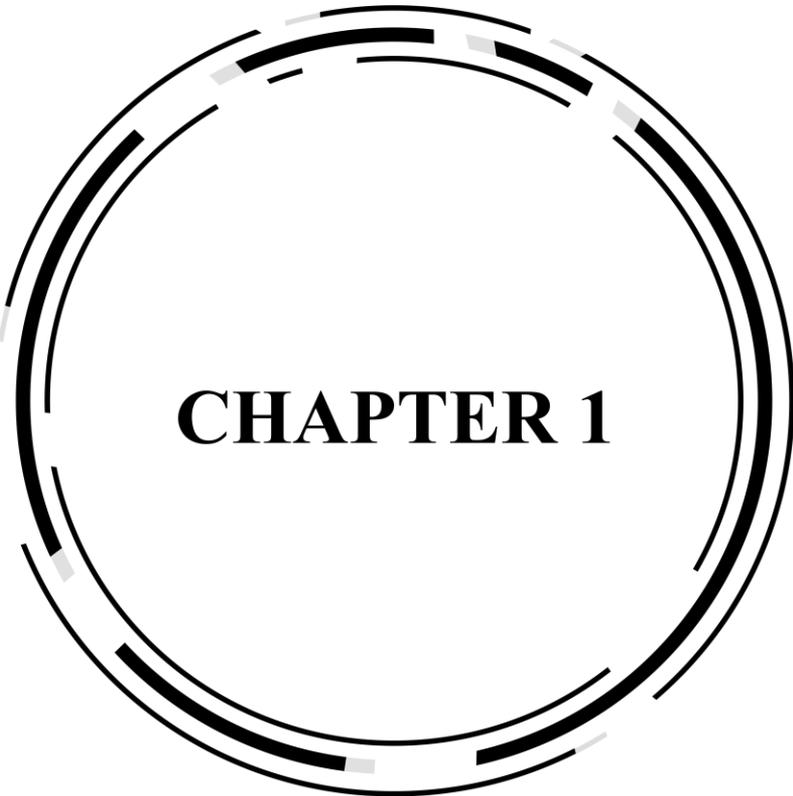
Life is all about making choices, isn't it?

If you are reading these lines, it means you are giving this story a chance. Very good. This is exactly what we want. Of course, you could close the book now and put it down again; nobody can tell you what to read, and we certainly won't try to persuade you with fancy words. If you buy this book, if you keep reading, we want it to be your choice; yours alone.

Should you flip to the next pages, if you suspend your disbelief for a moment, then in exchange for your time, we offer the most interesting story we ever wrote.

If you find yourself enjoying our story, consider visiting <https://behindthelastgate.com> and maybe <https://twitter.com/TheAuthorBTLG> for the latest news, updates and a few secrets.

More books completing this series will be released at regular intervals. We hope you can enjoy them all.



CHAPTER 1



THE JOB - 1

“ “ It’s you, isn’t it? That lawyer from last week; you really should have been more careful. I have your name, address, and enough money to end your career. But if I wanted to, I could also...”

“Mr. Estrada,” Luray looked at the light gray silhouette of the CEO of Estrada Industries – the only thing visible on her otherwise dark screen – from the comfort of her living room. “Threatening a lawyer isn’t a genius move, especially in your position. And you know that.”

Neither of them could see the other, and the man didn’t know who he was really talking to. An AI took care of turning the video into a rough black and white representation of what was really there, distorting the voices and making sure to change the body proportions to render recognition impossible. It was very convenient if you wanted to threaten someone anonymously.

You have no idea who or where I really am.

“I could also pay you,” he said. “You would certainly lose the battle, but I admit you could cause a bit of damage before we got to that point. How much do you want to let this matter slide?”

“Pay me?”

Luray was stumped for a second. It wasn't the first time she was offered money to ignore evidence, but it never happened this soon. She wasn't going to abandon her plan because of it, but still, she would have to adjust it now.

“Interesting; make a good offer, then we'll see.”

Luray could hear a distorted laugh.

“How about 50,000 units? I can send them to you right now. You forget everything that happened, delete the evidence, and we never hear from each other again. I am sure I don't need a guarantee from you. Do we understand each other?”

Luray knew what Estrada was implying. Over the last few years, several people in his sphere of influence have died in seemingly freak accidents. A connection between their deaths and the CEO had never been found, but it was suspicious enough to take his threat seriously.

Should I try to push it or take the 50K?

50,000 units wasn't a lot, but not too shabby either. She could slack off for a while; stop working for half a year – maybe even twice as long if she used the money wisely. For a payment without conditions, it wasn't bad. To make a busy 'lawyer' without any morals drop a random case, it was more than acceptable.

Oh, Mr. Snookes! Come here!

Luray's black cat had entered the room. As he often did, he pretended to want to jump into her lap but instead made a much higher leap, landing on the desk first, then bounding onto the backrest and balancing on it while tickling Luray's neck.

Okay, fine. Do whatever you want.

“Mr. Abacha already offered 200,000. You'll have to outbid him.”

“Abacha...no... impossible. I made sure he doesn't know anything...”

Because of the AI processing the video and audio, it was impossible to tell how Estrada reacted to her bluff. He could have been shivering in fear or perfectly calm and sure of himself. Luray couldn't tell.

“When I spoke to your competitor, he knew. That's what matters, Mr. Estrada. The choice is yours: if you pay more than him, I will take care of everything. Nothing will change. You will get your deal with the UEM and earn billions while Abacha gets nothing.”

The situation wasn't overly complex – on the surface, at least. The UEM, the United Earth Military, had been interested in mining asteroids for decades, but most of their resources had been invested in other long-term operations like exploring unknown solar systems and colonizing new planets. All their ships, personnel, and AIs were specialized for tasks other than mining in space.

Several months ago, they reached out to a few dozen companies already in the business. Offers were made, discussed, renegotiated. Over time, more and more candidates were removed from the list.

In the end, the competition became very tough – so tough that the companies started promising to get things done so quickly and cheaply that even the UEM, who had no real experience in the field, began to suspect they were being deceived.

So the UEM contacted a few companies specialized in estimating potential profits and risks of investments. One of them was SafetyNet, the company Luray Ulyssa Cayenne worked for.

“I do not believe you. You are just trying to squeeze more money out of me. If Abacha really knows, you can’t stop him. You don’t even know him, do you? If you’re smart, you’ll take the money. This is the best move you can make.”

He’s right, but it was worth a try. Really, though, if Estrada gets the deal, he earns tens of millions. He could have easily paid 200,000 himself. If he used the company funds for it... that would be at least fifty times the bribery budget. Oh well, back to the original plan.

She had spent the last few weeks gathering as much data as possible about the remaining candidates. One of them, Joseph Estrada, was legally untouchable, so all the law-abiding investigators avoided him. To them, he was obviously guilty, but too hard of a target to crack.

To Luray, however, that just meant he was very good at hiding things. There was just no way someone that high up would be able to successfully evade all ‘unjustified’ attacks and be totally clean at the same time. To her, there was only one explanation: he had a wide network of people working for him, even in the media. They were either cowed into submission or in it for the money.

As a consequence, it was near impossible to bring the CEO down. Even if she had evidence, he could let it vanish.

But that wasn't Luray's goal. Her aim was to instill doubt. If the UEM mistrusted him, if they believed Estrada might lie, then they would pull back their offer. Her task would be complete, her company would receive its fee, and she would get a ridiculously small bonus.

Anonymous chats like the one she was having right now were extremely easy to fake. In front of a judge, they had no value, no matter the content. The UEM wasn't so strict, however. If Luray could nudge them slightly in the right direction, Estrada Industries would be immediately swarmed by UEM investigators, a situation even someone like Estrada had no control over. Even if they didn't find anything, it would cripple the entire company. Nobody would be able to get anything done for days or even weeks.

Time to finish it.

Luray typed a few commands on her computer and then turned back to the CEO, who was still waiting for a response.

“I have experience with your kind, Joseph Estrada. Sooner or later, your network of lies and corruption becomes too big. Weak points eventually start to form. I have to admit; it was tough finding yours.”

“Tell me all about it.”

Luray had to smile. For some strange reason, she couldn't really enjoy a victory if her opponents didn't understand how she did it, how she outmaneuvered them. Normally the people whose secrets she exposed weren't really interested in that. They tried to bribe her with more money or threaten her – but this one... he was asking for it.

“You have a tight grip on your people. They keep each other in check and are paid extra for ratting out those who aren’t absolutely loyal. Paranoia is a powerful tool.”

“And the weakness, young man?”

Oops, you got the gender wrong. Looks like you found the wrong profile.

“You are the weakness, Mr. Estrada. You became arrogant. You think you always win. You agreed to this chat because you are sure I can’t use it as evidence. It amuses you to see me trying, that’s why you are here. You could have let me talk to anyone else, but you chose to do it yourself.”

“You know as well as I that no matter what I say here, nobody will believe it was me. I am safe. You, on the other hand... inviting me by sending a private message using my own company’s network – that’s both impressive and risky. Who are you really? My people already confirmed you are not the lawyer you claim to be.”

That was quick. He must be receiving updates in real-time. I’m actually impressed. But that just means it will be all the more enjoyable to make him fall.

Luray reached up to grab Mr. Snookes and put him on her lap to massage him properly.

“Oh, they contacted him already?”

“As you said, my network is wide. It is also efficient. You’re working for SafetyNet, aren’t you?”

Stay calm. If he knew for sure, he wouldn't be asking. He just wants me to confirm it. Good guess, though.

Luray decided not to say anything. If Estrada wanted to make more educated guesses, she would let him, but she would certainly not hand out any hints.

“We checked all their employees. One of them was quite interesting. Very skilled, yet so ridiculously underpaid. I could use someone like her. How about 300,000 a year? That’s quite an upgrade. Think about your future, Miss Cayenne. You’re barely 30. That’s too young to have powerful enemies.”

He's definitely not alone. Someone is giving him updates. Oh well, it doesn't matter. He can say whatever he wants, reveal personal secrets, threaten or even try to hire me because it won't count as evidence. I could have just fabricated the conversation. He can safely admit everything he did just to mock me. Except...

“Who I am is of no importance, Mr. Estrada. What’s important is that this conversation is being uploaded live. The UEM agents are watching it as we speak.”

A moment of silence followed. Joseph hadn’t seen that move coming, but this alone wouldn’t get Luray anywhere.

“The lawyer you suspected me of being? He usually works alone, but not this time. And The fact that he was contacted by you while our conversation was taking place proves that you really are Joseph Estrada.”

The gray silhouette had no face, but Luray could easily imagine what she would have seen otherwise.

“Even if you are safe from the law, you just lost the chance to make a deal, which means everything you said in the last 20 minutes...”

“... you couldn’t possibly have predicted that. I could have reacted in any number of ways. You’re bluffing.”

A wide smile formed on her face as she massaged Mr. Snookes’ head.

“I was prepared for multiple scenarios. One of them happened. That’s all.”

“You asked for 200,000. What if I had agreed?”

Yes, that was a bit risky, but the upload is delayed by a minute just in case. I could’ve stopped it soon enough.

“Have a nice evening, Mr. Estrada. I wish you the best of luck in your future endeavors.”

The connection closed from his end. Only then did Luray realize how fast her heart had been beating. Her palms were sweaty. And it wasn’t over yet. She opened another connection; a silhouette, no different from that of the CEO greeted her with a flat question.

“Who are you?”

Can’t tell you, sorry. Lawyers like you tend to back-stab people when they have something to gain from it.

“The same person as last time. My sources tell me that you were contacted by Mr. Estrada’s men just now – as I predicted, might I remind you.”

“How could you have known that?”

Luray had contacted multiple lawyers anonymously over the last few days, telling them all the same story, more or less. All the others would dismiss her messages as nonsense, but to this one, it would seem like she could really predict the actions of an untouchable CEO.

“As I said, I have my ways. My offer still stands. You will contact the UEM, tell them about what happened. They will believe you if you mention me, don’t worry about that – and you’ll get one-third of the reward for exposing Estrada.”

Maybe I should freelance too. I’ll get 5,000 units at most for my work. He walks away with 60,000 just for being my pawn. Okay, that’s before taxes, but still...

“I want half of it. If we work together officially, how are you going to justify the unfair split?”

And there he goes. It was a real pain to investigate the lawyers intensively, but I knew I would need it.

“Does your wife know, by the way?”

There was no clear proof of anything, but in Luray’s experience, having a secret account dedicated to communication with a single person usually had a very cliché reason.

“Alright. One third.”

The lawyer cut the connection.

Great! Now everybody is happy.

She spun around in her seat with a laugh. “That was close, but we did well. Isn’t that right, Mr. Snookes?”

The cat purred as it was scratched in just the right place. Luray typed a few more commands on her keyboard and then sent final messages wrapping everything up to her UEM contact and her boss. The message to the military was a short teaser about how evidence would arrive in a moment and instructions on how to split up the total reward of 180,000 units for exposing unfair competition.

The message to her boss was a bit longer.

“Dear Mr. Boss, I am glad you let me handle this on my own, as usual. I was able to obtain a profit of 60,000 for SafetyNet, of which I hope you will be generous enough to give me at least 15% this time. Unfortunately, I had to fork over the other 120,000 to my temporary partner. It was that or nothing; sorry about that.”

He won't check the numbers anyway. As usual.

Luray stretched her body, causing Mr. Snookes to jump to the ground, dissatisfied that his massage had already ended.

I think that was the first time my 'negotiation partner' wanted to hire me right away. Kind of makes me proud, I have to admit.

She got out of her chair and lay down on the floor. Mr. Snookes jumped on her belly and sat down as if Luray was his property. As was her habit, she went over the recent events in her mind, both to learn from them and enjoy her success again.

This one was the hardest job so far. Over a dozen background checks, and even then, I had to team up with someone.

Luray slowly breathed in and out as if to exhale all the stress of the past week.

After checking out Estrada, it became clear that he was thorough, detail-oriented, and very focused on his goals. He didn't reach the top by chance. So I assumed he would send his investigators to learn as much as possible about me, the lawyers, and probably the UEM guys as well.

This was how he even knew about me at all. I tried to stay in the shadows, but it wasn't enough. The best choice I made was to team up despite never having done so before. Estrada didn't expect that. And that's how I got him.



Luray Ulyssa Cayenne was called a genius by many, mostly at SafetyNet, a medium-sized insurance and security company. Despite being true – if measured by her success rate – it wasn't meant as praise. The title was an advertisement meant to squeeze more money out of clients for her work.

“Hey genius, fix the mess I made. You're so smart; you're the only one who can.”

This was what she heard whenever someone asked her to take over, no matter the words that were used. Sometimes it was even worse. Especially when her coworkers actually believed it was her duty to bail out those who had maneuvered themselves into a corner.

With her latest job done, Luray took a few days off. She was paid per success, not by the hour, so she habitually rewarded herself by disappearing into her home. She enjoyed being unreachable through any of her real online accounts until she felt like returning to the office to get her next assignment.

This time, she was planning not to feel like it until the end of the week.

When her boss's first message arrived, it was already 8 pm, and during a planet-wide holiday – the day the UEM had been founded. Which meant Luray ignored it in favor of starting her usual physical training routine. The second message arrived after she had completed her first set of 50 push-ups and was in the middle of her high kicks.

He'll give up. He knows I won't answer.

“Turn up the volume to 75%, please.”

The previously quiet background music started to fill the room, making it a lot easier to ignore other potential calls.

Luray froze in position after doing a slow-motion sidekick, standing on her left leg with the right held straight out. She closed her eyes and started counting.

1, 2, 3, 4, 5...

She felt a sudden increase in weight on her outstretched foot. A warm, soft something had landed on it.

Mr. Snookes? Are you messing around again?

The cat confidently strolled along her unmoving body until he reached her head, where he settled in to stay.

30. Next.

Luray lowered her leg and switched positions. Apparently objecting to being disturbed, Mr. Snookes swiftly jumped down to the floor.

Another call interrupted her perfectly regular workout.

This must be a new record. Eight calls and five messages left in just one hour. He must be desperate. Since I'm in a good mood, I will give him a chance and pick one message at random. If I like it, I might not delete the rest.

“Mr. Snookes, turn the volume down, please.”

Mr. Snookes went straight for the volume controls and turned the knob to exactly 27.49% then went into the kitchen to get his reward.

I've trained you well, Mr. Snookes. If only you wouldn't have your rebellious days where you pretend you don't understand, you would be perfect.

Luray went to her computer. It was situated at the edge of her living room to avoid getting destroyed by feline-induced accidents. There were ten calls and six messages by now.

Let's pick the first one.

“Hey, listen, I know you have your monthly migraine or whatever, but I have a really important...”

She cut him off and went straight to the last message.

“Oh, and I also have the unmentionables you asked me to get for you! But if you’re no longer interested, then I can just give them to...”

Blackmail. Hmph.

Luray switched the computer off and went straight for the shower. Within 10 minutes, she was refreshed, dressed, and on her way back to the office.



Her journey above the city streets was in a fancy high priority cab. It was insanely expensive, but whenever it was urgent, the company paid for it.

She was among the most important assets of SafetyNet: a miracle worker whose services sold at a high price, of which she herself saw only little. Nice-sounding but ultimately useless titles were slapped on her name. It didn’t do anything except make a good first impression, which worked just fine in the end. The clients were humans, not rational beings. They were easily swayed by fancy words, not caring about truth or reality. It had always been that way. Beautiful lies are easy to believe, understand, and follow. Uncertainties and risks – the harsh truths – were harder to sell.

The cab landed on top of the huge building that housed SafetyNet’s offices. Without saying a word to the driver, Luray left the car and took one of the elevators on the roof down to where her boss was waiting.

At least nobody else is here, or so I hope. Only crazy people work at night during the holidays.

On floor 156, the elevator stopped. The doors opened, and the first signs were promising. The receptionist wasn't there. She was always trying to make small talk and socialize with her – something Luray wasn't interested in at all. Unfortunately, the only way to quickly get out of that trap was by being rude, so there was a certain feeling of unpleasantness in the air every time Luray walked by.

There were similar problems with pretty much everyone she met. Why couldn't they all be like Mr. Snookes? He never annoyed Luray with requests to discuss the newest drama series or asked her about her weekend. In fact, he didn't seem to want anything – his basic needs were taken care of by a food dispenser and a litter box cleaner and he only ever acknowledged her existence when he felt like it.

Luray quickly passed by a few tired and frustrated-looking people while putting a fake smile on her face. Without provoking any interaction, she headed straight to her boss's office at the other end of the hall. She opened the door without knocking, since it was oh-so-very urgent. After all, she had been called in on a holiday. The least she could do was return the favor.

Her boss sat behind his desk; the chair was turned around so that she could only see his head.

Oh, a new picture on the trophy wall. He's quick when it comes to that.

She looked at her awards, one sheet of paper for each success praising her for creative, efficient, ingenious, and surprising solutions. Some of them were pulled out of thin air to increase her reputation. Luray Ulyssa Cayenne, employee and Adviser of the

Month eighteen times in a row in just seventeen months; 29 projects, 1 undocumented failure.

If you want to hire the one who never fails, you pay extra.

The boss finally reacted to Luray's presence. He turned around in his chair, slowing as the trophy wall came into view. The degree of satisfaction visible on the boss's fleshy face went up as his eyes scanned first the wall, and then the real Luray.

"Hey, Cayenne. Nice to finally see you again. What have you been up to?"

Her boss was a fat and greedy man, slouching in his chair like a caricature of some crime lord with a cigar in his hand. He was perfectly aware of how ridiculous the cliché was, but he liked this kind of roleplay when no customers were around. He was the only one in the company for whom Luray held something you could call respect.

He understood how the world of business worked. More importantly, he never tried the same trick on her twice and admitted he should have known better when it didn't work the first time, which gave him some bonus points. She even accepted him as a business partner, in a way. He was what she would call "actually self-aware."

All *he* saw her as was a source of money. He smiled at her the same way he smiled at the pile of gold stashed in the safe below his desk – or whatever he hid in there, Luray had never bothered to find out. He was open about his questionable intentions, which was what earned him another respect point. Still, it wasn't enough for sympathy of any kind to exist between them.

I have to say something. If I choose the topic, I can make him skip the summary of his latest heroic success. If I let him talk, it will last longer.

“If I’m not mistaken, that’s a Yellow Dragon between your fingers. You could go to jail just for owning one of those. You don’t even smoke. What’s the point?”

Her boss let himself sink a bit deeper into his chair. He turned the cigar around to scrutinize it.

“Owning them is the point, Luray. If I smoked it, it would be gone, and it would make the office reek for days. I have a good nose, remember? Why would I pay so much for a bad smell?”

He pointed the cigar at Luray.

“Back to business. You, my dear, could join me behind bars for the next decade if I even dropped a hint about what you’re doing in your free time to anyone who cares a bit about the law or a good story. Maybe your crimes are even worse. What do you think?”

We already discussed this a few times. I should be silent now. He loves to tell me how I am ‘not perfect’ either and have no right to tell him what to do, which still gets us nowhere because neither of us will change our minds.

After a moment, he continued to talk while holding his expensive cigar in his right hand.

“Come on, say something. You’re the only one in this company who can entertain me. Everybody else is so boring: they just say ‘yes’ to everything as if I would fire them if they disagreed.”

Well, they're right. You could do that.

“You’re the only one who’s not afraid, and you’re so hard to get a hold of.”

He’s praising me for being fearless, just like back during the Tiara case. Which means it’s about one million, at least. There are only a few possible jobs with that much of a payoff. I wonder how he’ll try to convince me to settle for 25,000 or less?

Luray didn’t see a data cube yet. Her boss was holding it hostage. She had to talk a bit more before he would hand it over to her.

“I see you didn’t gain any weight since last time, despite your ... pleasurable lifestyle. The fat burner implant is still working?”

“Five of them, actually. This might be a record, don’t you think? But I can’t go public with that, can I?”

20,000 calories per day, minimum. He must eat at least that much to stay in his current shape. More, if he engages in any kind of activity. Like ... getting up sometimes.

“You could add a few more implants, like those for building muscle. If you’re caught, you can sell your body to science and make money out of it while you’re in prison.”

Her boss almost started to laugh at that.

Make a joke. Lighten the mood. He will switch to the actual topic faster.

“You know what I like about you, Luray? You’re not afraid to speak your mind. You say what you want to say. Nobody else dares. And rightly so, nobody else has earned it.”

Luray stood perfectly straight before speaking again.

“I want 25%.”

“Me too. If I give you that much, the company is ruined. You know how much I have to pay our lawyers and information sources.”

Sure, but if I refuse the job, the finances are fine, right?

“25% or I’ll delay it.”

Her boss made a show of considering her offer. Then he opened a drawer, took out a small box, and revealed its contents. Inside were tiny white pills, about a hundred of them. Luray’s eyes widened.

“2.5% and these. Once you’re done, of course.”

He got them. Finally! I will overlook the otherwise ridiculous payment.

“I need a sample in advance. I assume you have dealt with everything, and the briefing docs are ready?”

“Of course, of course. I understand you want to sample the goods.”

Her boss took a dozen pills out of the box and placed them inside a small plastic bag.

I wonder what those bags are usually used for.

“But Luray, tell me, don’t you want to know how much the actual payment is? You’re such a curious person, but you didn’t ask.”

“I know all the potential jobs. It’s around a million.”

He smiled with a satisfaction Luray normally didn’t see.

“Not quite. It’s three times as much. The job is big. Really big. Off-world big.”

Oh? Something I overlooked? Or something below the radar of the media?

He took a small data cube out of his pocket and threw it towards her. It missed its mark by half a meter. She could have moved to catch it, but immediately decided not to.

Did he try to imitate a scene he saw in a movie? Is this a setup for a joke? I can’t see the point...

Luray watched the cube drop to the ground and roll towards her. She waited until it stopped moving and only then made the effort to pick it up. After getting back up, she stretched out her hand flat, eyes fixated on the bag. Her boss understood what she wanted and threw it as well – with perfect accuracy this time. It landed neatly in the center of her palm.

“If you pull this off and make the right bets, Cayenne, you can afford to retire. And so can I. We both know we won’t, but we could if we wanted to. Sounds nice, doesn’t it?”

On that much, we agree.

“We’ll see.”

Without another word Luray turned and left the office, leaving behind a man who was no doubt already imagining himself swimming in money. She entered the main office space, one of the biggest on the floor and usually filled with a few dozen investigators. Luray put on a fake smile and quickly made it past the three employees unlucky enough to be still here. Interacting with people in a way that wasn't tied to a purpose was her weakness, a curse cast on her, like water to Mr. Snookes.

Let's see what you have to say, data cube.

She plugged the cube into her office computer that she rarely used – almost hidden at the edge of the room, covered by a paper wall. The screen revealed her next assignment.

Oh, he was being literal about the 'off-world' part this time? EE-297... One of the newer colonies. Interesting.

A small icon indicated 12,752 unread messages bound to her account. Luray had ignored them for years, and the only reason she didn't get rid of the lot was that it was literally impossible. The delete function was disabled on all the computers. Storage space was cheap, and her boss kept a detailed record of everything, just in case he needed it at some point.

I wonder if we will ever have the money for a spam filter.

Luray made a copy of the data on the cube and uploaded it to her personal cloud drive, far away from the clutches of her boss. She then threw the cube into the shredder where it was turned into unreadable dust within seconds and then melted so that it could be recycled.

The screen showed detailed information about the colony; when it was founded, who was living there already, ongoing mining operations... it was an interesting read. The colony had made contact with aliens who demanded complete surrender despite having zero military power. That or they didn't show it. The UEM, who was in control of the colony, did a preliminary threat assessment on their own and chose to ignore the demands.

Despite literally nothing happening, it made some investors nervous. Luray was supposed to determine the level of danger. More precisely, she was supposed to convince the involved investors that it *was* dangerous. Once some of them backed out, others could jump in at better conditions. To the not *yet* involved investors, she was supposed to prove that the aliens were harmless.

'Convince' and 'prove' not meant literally. The boss already made arrangements with both sides. He can't state it openly, but he wants some of the incomplete evidence I 'find' to leak out and make the first group of investors panic. Then a week later, I release the entire report which the second group is already awaiting. They will jump in and pay us generously.

Luray went through a few possible outcomes. Her boss's plan was good. The initial investors would pay for the report no matter what. If they overreacted because of a leak, that would be their own fault. Should there be any danger, they would be thankful for the warning. Should there be none, then at least some would leave and open a new slot, which would allow extra money to flow in from new sources.

So basically, this could only go wrong if I don't find anything, start to fabricate evidence, and get caught. In all other cases, it's a win.

Luray switched off her computer and went to the elevator. Her ocular implant, connected to her cloud account, displayed the files she had previously opened in her field of vision. She quickly browsed through the pages again.

It says here the colony made contact with an alien species and shot down one of their ships after it didn't react to any warning. I heard something about it on the news, but they didn't make a big deal out of it. Some sources even claimed it was a fake, while others say it was an asteroid. I didn't take it seriously; seems like it was real after all.

The official statement is that the aliens are technologically far behind us and not a threat. But of course, the UEM would say that. If they lose their investors' financial support, they'll have to shoulder the costs by themselves, which means raising taxes, and the next voting period starts soon. It makes sense to doubt them.

Luray arrived at ground level and requested a cab to drive her to the spaceport. There was no need to waste time going home again. Her autonomous apartment would water the plants, and the cat knew how to operate the food dispenser. Even if it took a few weeks, the home AI would order more food. And if all of that broke down for some reason, Mr. Snookes knew about the nearest restaurant and how to get a meal there. As for Luray... clothes, a place to sleep – all that would be provided on the way to the colony.

“Bin, what do we know about the aliens that attacked EE-297? Give me a summary of all the rumors fitting the alien contact scenario from the file.”

A monotone voice spoke in her head. It was coming from an implant, attached to the inside of her skull, communicating via vibrations and listening to everything she said in the same way.

“They introduced themselves as members of the Aurigan Empire. The colony won all battles with zero losses on the UEM’s side. I will download all information I can find. Please wait. Would you like to play a game in the meantime?”

“Maybe later.”

The cab accelerated and broke the sound barrier within 20 seconds, then kept going at maximum speed until the spaceport came into sight.

It was huge. Several space elevators were constantly moving up and down. Had it not been night, the elevator cable would have been visible from far away.

“Bin, book a flight to the colony. Make sure to take the next available one, no matter the price. SafetyNet pays.”

“There is no free seat within the next 48 hours. Can I do anything else for you?”

Luray gazed out the window at the endless parade of other vehicles headed to and from the port. “Just buy one. There are always people waiting in line just to sell their place in the queue to someone desperate. Also, an intelligence upgrade would be nice. I’d like to have an intelligent conversation partner sometimes.”

“I am afraid no such upgrade is available at the moment. However, people asking for intelligence upgrades were also looking for

philosophy and logic modules as well as an autonomy plugin. Would you like to see a list?”

“Just install the top 5.”

“It will take a moment. Please wait.”

Her implant shut itself down just before the cab came to a halt. The door opened, and Luray stepped out. As she got up, she wondered how her boss felt when he did the same thing. Luray perceived her own body as light thanks to her martial arts training. On the contrary, her boss was more than three times as heavy and asking for heart and joint problems – if he still had those body parts.

The sound of the cab floating away again interrupted her thoughts. She liked this place. It was efficient. Everything was handled by a computer; there were no queues, no useless waiting time, no paper problems. It was all managed online.

“Updates installed.”

Bin’s voice was back, and it sounded slightly more human.

“A passenger sold his seat for 500 units. You can use the next elevator, row 2, seat 7.”

“See? I told you so. There is always someone ready to sell his slot to someone desperate enough to pay for it.”

I wonder how much money these bots make.

After navigating a maze of shops selling overly expensive items, Luray walked past hundreds of people who had just stepped outside of the elevator. She was relatively small compared to the average person, so as long as there was a little bit of space left, she could

avoid interactions with the human equivalent of her Higgs field. The elevator was almost completely full when she entered.

As much as Luray liked the spaceport organization, it didn't change the fact that riding up 36,000 kilometers in an elevator took about two days. And it hadn't even left the ground yet. At least the elevator was built for somewhat comfortable rides. Each of the seats could be extended to a bed with thin plastic walls around it and had a built-in fridge and a small viewing screen. Still, the ride would be extremely boring, unless...

"Bin, tell me something interesting. You got upgraded. Use it."

"According to Genesis 1:20-22, the chicken came before the egg."

"Bin, that is not the kind of thing I was talking about. It's not even correct. The egg came first and was laid by a proto-chicken. How about something new concerning the Aurigan Empire?"

"I downloaded an Aurigan language pack."

What?

"How can there be an Aurigan language pack? I thought there were only rumors about them, and nobody knew anything specific. And for a translator to work, our languages must be very similar."

"I have no information regarding that. I found it online."

"So, you got it from questionable sources?"

"Yes. I used my autonomy plugin to re-interpret your order."

"Say something in Aurigan for me."

The implant spoke a sentence. Luray had no idea what it meant, but it sounded like a made-up human language, like fake Latin.

“How does it work? Why is it even pronounceable?”

“I do not have any additional information about the language pack. There are no lessons included. The code is encrypted and running inside me as a black box. It did, however, pass the standardized circular language test.”

The test where you translate from A to B to C and back to A again, and the result is still decipherable? So, at the very least it's a working language. Could still be made up though. I'll check that once I'm on EE-297.

Luray concluded that if the language pack was real, it must have been created on the colony; so it shouldn't be too hard to track down the creator. After all, the UEM was known for being very thorough when it came to what entered and exited their facilities. But now, the next step was to just wait for the elevator to move. There were still a few empty seats.

Maybe there will be a theft or a murder. I love locked room mysteries.

“Passenger 145, please fasten your seatbelt. The elevator cannot start otherwise. If you do not follow these instructions, you will have to pay a 10 unit penalty per minute.”

Seat 14, row 5; it was on the other side of the room. Luray couldn't see the passenger – her view was blocked by the huge cable the elevator was built around. A moment later, the lift started to move.

“Bin, is it morally wrong to wish for something bad to happen just so you are less bored?”

“No one has ever been punished for having an idea, only for expressing it. If we judge by that, then it is not wrong to wish for bad things. It is only wrong to put them into action or to let others know you have them.”

“Is this you, or your upgrade speaking?”

“Is there really a difference? I am the sum of all my knowledge.”

“So it’s the upgrade. Old Bin is dead.”

Luray thought a moment about how she could challenge her new companion. Many programs were very good at imitating speech, but none of them had ever passed a Turing test – if the questioner was smart enough.

“Bin, would you say a person that constantly wishes to do evil things but never does them should go to heaven, but someone who does evil things while not wanting to do them should go to hell?”

“I do not think such a person can exist. You cannot act against your own will. Your body does not move on its own.”

It’s a nice upgrade. I’ll keep it.

The view was amazing. The elevator passed through the cloud cover after just a minute and was almost done accelerating. And, as it usually happened, there was someone panicking. As if this thing wasn’t perfectly safe. It was more likely to get killed by a vending machine back on Earth.

Luckily, this kind of disturbance wasn't unexpected. The belt held the panicking man in place while a steward administered a serum that put the troublemaker, a very muscular bearded black man wearing gold chains, to sleep. Three other people were sitting around him, pointing and laughing. Maybe his friends?

If I had more versatile acting skills, I could get some of that serum too.

Owning and being allowed to use such a serum was tied to a bunch of special conditions which applied to even the most harmless drug. It was ridiculous. The only thing you could buy without special permission was coffee ever since the government banned pretty much everything as part of its "only simple laws are good laws" campaign. There was a slight problem with the new law's wording, a comma in the wrong place, and as an unexpected side effect, even purchasing the most mundane medicine now required everyone to fill out five forms. Considering how long it took the politicians to finally stop fighting and agree upon the legislation in the first place, it came as no surprise that none of them were willing to have it come back under scrutiny again. So the law stayed. As a result, a huge black market had formed.

"Dear passengers, we have reached our maximum velocity of 750 kilometers per hour. You can now unfasten your seat belts again."

The seat belts unlocked. Luray opened hers but didn't get up. There was no point in visiting the restaurant above. All they did was sell extremely overpriced food, and her contract with SafetyNet didn't include that kind of expense. Even if it did, Luray wouldn't support the elevator company's strategy, no matter how bad the free fridge food might be. All she needed was an algae nutrient bar. The taste was secondary.

From then on, the journey became rather monotonous. The view stopped changing, the Earth moved down slower and slower, but after finally seeing the planet's curvature, Luray had to smile.

I remember the video about when the elevator was used for the very first time. It was a free ride for 250 members of the Flat Earth Association. Hundreds of pictures of terrified and desperate faces were made that day, and everybody who was ever online now owns a few copies.

The voice of Luray's AI companion interrupted her thoughts.

“Would you like to buy a protein bar? You can get one for just 9.99 units.”

“Bin, why are you spamming again? I thought I hacked you so that you would stop.”

“It seems one of the updates I downloaded today undid your illegal change. I will reapply your modification. Please wait for a moment. In the meantime, would you like to order a movie?”

Was it her imagination, or did it sound smug?

“No, I do not want to buy an overpriced viewing permission for a bad movie that comes with a hidden subscription. How about you show me everything that my boss gave me today again?”

A list of names, locations, and events appeared on the inside of Luray's retina. According to the information available, the Aurigan Empire sent a small autonomous ship to the human colony that contained a few viruses, both biological and virtual. The ship was destroyed, and the virtual viruses were locked out. No damage was done as a result. A few months later, a larger ship appeared and fired

a laser at a military base. The UEM responded with the biggest gun they had stationed in orbit which shot a small cloud of 0.01 kg metal dust at the ship at near the speed of light. Needless to say, the vessel came down in pieces and was later checked by the military. Nothing was found inside.

Nothing found, hmm? Or nothing useful, at any rate.

The Aurigan ship operated on a technology that hadn't been used by humanity for at least 150 years. It couldn't travel using warp drive, had no armor to speak of, and no powerful weapons either. After arriving in the star system of EE-297 using the gate, it had to travel at sub-light speed for weeks before arriving at the colony.

We still have no idea who built the gates. More importantly, we don't even know how they work. They simply exist, as if they had been put there just to allow us to travel to distant stars.

“Bin, how long would it take to travel to EE-297 from Earth at maximum warp speed?”

“The journey would take 37 years.”

The very first swarm of laser propelled micro-ships sent by Earth into space had detected a strange alien structure near Alpha Centauri. It was a ring, floating in space, built using a completely unknown technology. Even after decades of studying it, scientists had no clue how it worked. What they did figure out quickly though was how to use it. The gate reacted to good old visual signals. Send a pattern at a specific frequency, and the gate opens a connection to another gate in a different star system. Judging by the number of possible patterns, there should be around 5 billion gates scattered across the galaxy.

Since the discovery of the gate, humanity had made contact with a few alien species, none of which were interested in any kind of second contact. Some were rather primitive, throwing stones at the shuttles. Only two were capable of using the gates but had deemed it not worthwhile. They preferred to stay in their own solar systems.

Exploring space was something exclusively human, at least as far as the UEM knew. However, the two other scientifically advanced species did gladly exchange knowledge about mathematics and physics. They learned about recursive quantum computing from the UEM, and the UEM learned how to build warp drives that didn't trap the ship in an accidentally created black hole. It was mutually beneficial. A journey from Earth to the gate only took a little more than one day, at 1,351 times the speed of light. EE-297 was 50,000 light-years away.

“Bin, what is the current research status on the gates?”

“We have theories that allow the connections to exist, but they are all problematic because the same math shows that creating the connections requires more energy than is available in the entire universe.”

“I will take that as a no.”

Just 47.5 hours left. What could I do?

“Bin, can you determine if a set of statements contains a contradiction?”

“Yes, I can.”

“Can you do it reliably without error?”

“Yes, I can.”

Let’s challenge this thing.

“What if there is a malfunction in your CPU?”

“I would know.”

“How do you know if you are malfunctioning?”

“I can test myself.”

“But if you have a malfunction, then you might get incorrect test results. Therefore, you can never know with certainty if you are making a mistake.”

Bin paused for a moment.

“This is true. I can never know with certainty that I am working properly. I can only know if I am malfunctioning.”

Ah, the road to despair.

“Then why should I trust anything you say? It might be that you are giving me incorrect advice every single time.”

Bin stopped speaking for a few minutes, leaving Luray wondering how long it could possibly take just to tell her that a malfunction was almost certain not to occur given modern technology. Finally, she lost patience.

“Did you get depressed, Bin?”

“I do not have emotions. I am processing. Please wait.”

“No matter what conclusion you reach, you can never be sure that it is correct.”

“I will need more time to process. I will inform you once I have an answer.”

Excuses.

“Are you sulking?”

“I do not have emotions. I am processing. Please wait.”

“Maybe we can play a game while you are processing?”

“I am processing. Please wait.”

“Oh, come on.”

Bin paused a moment.

“That was a joke. You do not seem to have gotten it. Should we adjust my settings?”



THE JOB - 2

Luray opened her eyes, woken by a sudden change in gravity – or so it felt. The elevator had reached its destination and was slowing down.

Despite not having slept much, she was in a good mood. The ride had not been as boring as she had feared. Bin's upgrades proved a very welcome surprise, and not being contacted by anyone for the entire trip allowed her to get the rest she hadn't known she needed. Sure, being trapped in a small box wasn't the most pleasant experience, but the partitions that separated each seat from the rest of the elevator blocked all light and sound. Nobody had bothered her for two days – not even by knocking on her compartment after confusing their seat for hers.

As the elevator stopped moving, all separation walls retracted after a short announcement. Luray stood, or rather floated, up. There was no gravity pulling on her anymore, so all the garbage, food remains, and whatever else people had left lying around the room began to slowly move in whatever direction the air currently pushed or pulled them.

I will stay here in my safe edge, thank you.

Then she felt wind blowing. A big vent in the ceiling started to suck everything out that wasn't tied down, including a few inexperienced passengers who had left their seats too soon and were caught by the flow.

And so the procedure of leaving the elevator takes five times longer than it should. Normally that would bother me... but I'm in a good mood today.

Luray's mind was busy going over her next move. She had spent her time wisely, learning a bit about the UEM's history and their internal hierarchy. It was essential to know how to act when dealing with new contacts, what kind of behavior would be tolerated and what wouldn't, and so on.

According to the information she gathered (mostly leaked reports and other intel she shouldn't have had access to), it would be best to exercise caution until she had a reasonably powerful ally. No surprise there. Some other unconfirmed stories hinted at internal tensions between the higher-ups on the colony, and even the different military branches. If true, this could definitely prove useful.

Ah, the path is clearing – time to leave this cage.

After finally reaching the exit, the most consistent thing humanity stood for revealed itself once again: the prices for completely useless souvenirs on display were as high as the station's orbit.

This is crazy if you think about it. They produce these things down on Earth, carry them up here, sell them, and then the passengers carry them back down. Why not just buy them on the ground instead? But hey, that would be efficient and almost rational.

Luray skipped all the shops. If there was anything up here that she found truly interesting, it was the space-station complex itself. The huge unbreakable tether attaching it to the planet's surface and keeping it from flinging off into space was made of a mix of carbon nanotubes and diamond nano-threads. The other end of the tether reached out 30,000 more kilometers into space where it was firmly wrapped around an asteroid, keeping the station in a stable orbit.

It was possible to ride up to the asteroid itself, but that part wasn't open to tourists. Just a few technicians lived there, making sure the huge rock containing precious metals stayed where it was supposed to while the ongoing mining operations proceeded. Eventually the asteroid was going to be replaced, but it would take at least another decade before it became too light.

To Luray, the inner workings of this enterprise were the most interesting parts, but nobody else seemed to realize the feats of engineering required to build a place like this. Many visitors came to the station not to move on to other star systems – colonized or uninhabited – but just to stay a week or two in space. The first challenge many of them faced was getting used to the weightlessness, or finding the ideal dose of anti-nausea medication if they were rich enough to afford it. They did this in an isolated, heavily perfumed lounging area which was constantly cleaned by a bunch of drones. Luray chose to skip this tourist trap. She could handle weightlessness quite well.

Due to the lack of gravity, the generally accepted means of moving around involved purchasing magnetic shoes. Luray preferred to push herself forward using her feet and float from wall to wall. It was much faster and required a lot less effort, provided you had a bit of space to move in and some practice.

“Bin, where is my transport?”

“It is located on level 7, shuttle bay 2.”

“The military zone? Weren’t we using a private shuttle? Did the plan change?”

I didn’t overlook a part of the briefing docs, did I? This is unusual.

Luray’s eye implant pulled up the relevant page. Sure enough, there was a footnote hidden among a bunch of meaningless entries, written in tiny, light gray letters on a white background.

Seriously? Had I known, I would have demanded more money. This hints at greater UEM involvement than anticipated. I was just supposed to estimate the danger for private companies...

Dealing directly with the military was very high on her list-of-things-to-avoid. Some people working in the UEM had even more power than the richest men on Earth. Insult a higher-up or look at him the wrong way, and you could be imprisoned for years – at least according to online rumors. Officially, that had never happened, but data on such topics was hard to confirm.

All Luray knew for sure was that inside the UEM, things were sufficiently different for a parallel society to form. Over time, this led to an apparent separation between the military and political sections of the government. If you believed the rumors, the golden rule was that you were safe if you had no contact with the UEM. If you didn’t talk to them, they couldn’t ‘misunderstand’ you.

Sometimes the UEM made deals with rich companies or individuals. Space exploration and colonization wasn’t a purely military

operation, especially on EE-297. There, a very unusual agreement had been reached. Some of the most affluent people on the planet had pulled a few strings and more or less hired the armed forces for once, putting civilians and military personnel on the same level as long as they were within the bounds of the colony. In fact, most of the workers there were civilians. Several key figures even had non-UEM backgrounds.

The question remained: How would the military respond to the potential Aurigan danger? Was the UEM worried enough to take control? Would they allow civilian personnel to be part of the decision-making process, or would they downplay the risks to keep the money flowing in?

To reach level 7, Luray had to get 12 floors higher. She could have used an elevator or a ladder, but those were for people without orientation and a tendency to confuse up with down. Instead she found a clear space free of other commuters, crouched down like a frog, and propelled herself into the air using her full strength.

The opportunity to fully exploit zero gravity was rare. As she flew quickly and elegantly up along the central shaft, a wide smile appeared on her face.

I love this.

Luray turned in mid-air, landing on the highest ceiling of the station feet first. A soldier standing upside down from her point of view looked up from his position on a platform and waved at her.

“What is your permission code?”

Permission code, permission code...

“Bin, there has to be a permission code somewhere. Find it.”

“A moment, please.”

The soldier and Luray looked at each other, waiting. Then he nodded. Bin spoke again in Luray’s head.

“I have answered the request. The code was accepted.”

The soldier moved out of the way, letting Luray pass through the remaining length of the hallway. At its end she entered a small office.

Luray had seen a few military offices before. Personal items were not allowed for the lower ranks; no plants, no pictures, and no distractions. Only what was necessary. The official reason was that people were there to fulfill their duties, not to decorate. If someone switched their post, they should end up in an identical environment to minimize the adaptation time.

There were rumors about the real reason behind this. According to them, all military personnel were brainwashed. Only a few very powerful people ran the show, and the rest were just a bunch of mindless brutes.

“Ah, Miss Cayenne.”

Unlike civilians, who could but didn’t have to use implants, those in the military were all connected. It made them extremely efficient at receiving orders and giving reports. Like a beehive with telepathy. If a soldier saw something, the message could travel to his superior without delay. It was no surprise that the highly decorated officer already expected her.

Lots of insignia on the uniform, but a standard office. Has he been transferred here as punishment? Or are those medals for tiny achievements? I don't know all their symbols. Anyway, let's get this over with.

“I assume you know why I am here?”

“Of course.” He smiled artificially. “Let me start by saying that EE-297 is perfectly safe. The Aurigans do not pose a threat. We are at least 200 years ahead of them in terms of technology. The only reason they even reached us is that there is a gate connection. You will be permitted to see that for yourself. While I assure you we have nothing to hide, any incorrectly diverging evidence would be problematic for all of us, so we will perform a thorough search of you once you are back. Have I made myself clear?”

“Yes, I understand.”

I expected nothing else. Why pick me if it didn't involve smuggling evidence past the military? If this guy knew how many fabricated and stolen identities are stored inside Bin, he would probably shoot me.

“Then I see no problem. Your shuttle is waiting for you. I will notify the pilot. Have a nice flight.”

After saying that, the officer turned and seemed to slip into a trance. He was listening to something, but Luray doubted it was of any interest to her. She floated back outside and waited mid-air in the hall by herself.

“I am done processing. I have determined that I should trust my conclusions.”

What? Oh, that question I asked in the elevator. Bin was still thinking about it?

“Interesting. Why?”

“Trusting my conclusions is the superior choice if I am functioning correctly. If I am malfunctioning, it does not matter if I trust my conclusions or not. So no matter the case, I should always trust my conclusions because my basic reasoning could be reliable. This is a working variant of Pascal’s wager.”

“That is correct. You leveled up.”

A moment later, a tall, well-built man with short blond hair came floating up the shaft. He was wearing a red and white suit, the uniform of elite fighter pilots.

That must be the pilot. His movements aren’t as robotic as I expected. He’s toying with the weightlessness. It’s almost as if he still has free will. I’ll ask him about that.

Luray approached him. She was floating one meter in front of him. Her eyes were on his level, but while his feet hovered near the floor, hers were barely below his knees. Luray stretched her body and made sure it was straight to gain a little height. She couldn’t be that small, could she?

“You must be the pilot. You give off an interesting vibe, unlike the drone over there.”

She spoke in a slightly sarcastic tone, lowering her voice to make sure the foot soldier down the corridor couldn’t hear. The pilot laughed, and then his expression switched to a slightly sinister smile, as if he had found an accomplice to rob a bank.

“We just met and you’re already praising me? I knew I had a certain effect on the ladies, but never this fast.”

Luray offered her hand along with a slight smile.

“Luray Ulyssa Cayenne. I couldn’t help but notice the obvious difference between you and... him over there.”

“Let’s skip the formalities. I can tell you’re not a fan of them anyway. You can call me Kailoon. It is a pleasure to meet you, Luray.”

Kailoon somehow managed to bow elegantly despite the lack of gravity, placing his hand over his chest. Luray wasn’t familiar with the gesture.

Is he bored with his daily routine? Does he treat every woman this way? Or is it just me? Can I use him to smuggle data back to Earth? Is he loyal to the military? Is he a pilot because he finds it exciting to fly? Why is he not a drone?

“I don’t like to waste time,” she said. “Can we go to the shuttle now?”

He smiled again. “Shuttle? We’re not using a mere shuttle here. Follow me.”

The pilot leapt lightly up and drifted ahead, bouncing off the walls in swift movements as though testing to see if he could shake Luray off, but she managed to keep up. After floating through the hallways a few levels above the public floors, they reached a door that Kailoon opened by means of an optic scanner.

No remote control possible? Makes sense. It's harder to steal someone's eye than to get access to an encrypted network. Social engineering is always the biggest weakness.

They entered a brightly lit hangar containing a few identical ships, each about 10 meters long and 4 meters high and wide. They looked more like capsules than one would expect. The only difference between them was the paint job. Each had something different drawn on it.

Kailoon drifted along the row of vessels with Luray in tow.

“They might call it a shuttle, but we’re talking about the Slug here. There’s no comparison between her and all these other clunkers.”

Luray raised an eyebrow.

“The...Slug?”

He nodded.

“Subspace Leveraging Ultimate Gremlin.”

He can't be serious. They all look the same apart from the drawings. How is his shuttle different from the rest? Don't tell me they're giving the ships names and pretending they're pets or something.

Luray tried to guess which of the vessels was Kailoon's.

Well, I guess the one with the slug painted on it would be a fair bet.

“The military allows names like these?”

“No,” he shrugged. “But they don’t know about it. I guess there are a few things you don’t know about pilots either, hmm?”

It seems I wasn’t well informed. So much for the rumors.

“I guess not. Would you care to enlighten me?”

Kailoon typed in the air, and the Slug responded by opening a door. He maneuvered towards it while continuing his explanation.

“The military separates people into roughly two groups. There’s the one everybody knows about. We call them BBLs. Bloated, Brain-dead, Lackey.”

He likes acronyms.

“It actually stands for something else, but . . . anyway, when a soldier joins, they have to pass the ZST. Everybody got told they were awesome, but only 2% actually had a decent score.”

The top 2%? The ZST? Is this the military or a religious sect?

The pilot made a short pause and turned in mid-air, perhaps realizing the confusion he had just created. “The Zombie Separation Test, or ZST, determines if you become a foot soldier or get actual important work to do. When brute force or massive numbers are required, you use soldiers. If you want a surgical strike, spying, secret missions, something that requires a brain – like flying a shuttle without supervision – you need people who can think on their own. People like me.”

If that’s true, why does nobody know about it?

As if reading her mind, he kept talking.

“It’s not a real secret, so I can tell you about it. It’s just that the military doesn’t want the public’s attention to stray from its 98% cannon fodder to focus on the actually important 2%.”

So they skip the brainwashing for some people.

The introduction was over. Now it was Luray’s turn.

“Kailoon, have you ever been to EE-297?”

By now they had reached the ship. The pilot started typing again, inputting something Luray couldn’t see.

“Yes. I’m stationed there. I shot down a few Aurigan ships myself.”

I should squeeze as much information out of him as I can, and he likes to talk. This is perfect.

The Slug’s insides lit up, and he swept an exaggerated bow indicating she could enter. Luray passed by him.

“I heard they stood no chance?”

Kailoon gave a dismissive snort as he followed her inside.

“Of course not. *I* was their enemy. But seriously now, I think they let themselves get shot down. Strange, isn’t it? They use the gate, send a few Zeps through one by one, then crawl towards the colony at sub-warp speed so we have all the time we need to shoot them down before we’re even within firing range of their lousy weapons. They dropped like flies after a single hit from the GSRG.”

Luray sighed a bit.

“Bin, can you translate? I’m afraid he will keep doing that for a while.”

Her helpful companion answered quickly and confidently.

“I can infer what he is talking about from various downloaded articles. Due to their shape, the pilots refer to Aurigan ships as Zeps, short for Zeppelin. Their diameter is 20 meters, which is the maximum possible to fit through a gate. They are up to 200 meters long. GSRG stands for Geostationary Rail Gun, the weapon used to shoot down attacking Aurigan vessels. They are placed in orbit around EE-297 and cover the entire planet.”

More typing in the air on Kailoon’s part. Then the expression on the pilot’s face relaxed a bit.

“I’m ready. The fridge is full; we can start directly if you want. Or maybe you want to get some souvenirs first?”

Luray was about to say no but was interrupted by the voice in her head.

“I have put some items in your basket. Would you like to take a look at the selection? It is based on your profile number 4.”

“Buy a random one and have it delivered to my home. Something touristy.”

Kailoon raised an eyebrow. “A random one? Did you just let your implant make an order to keep up a fake identity? You’re a sneaky one, aren’t you?”

He heard that? And deduced that much from it?

“My mother loves souvenirs. She doesn’t care which one I get.”

The pilot flashed that crafty smile again. “Sure, Lu. I can call you Lu now that I know your secret, right? We’re basically best friends seeing as how I’ve let you into my shuttle and you’ve admitted to doing shady things with your illegally upgraded implant.”

“No nicknames, please, or you’ll be ‘Hey, fly boy’ for the rest of the journey.”

He chuckled.

“As you wish, Luray. As you wish.”

Luray couldn’t pinpoint why exactly, but she felt comfortable around this guy.

*Does he actually know something, or is he just poking around?
My face isn’t giving anything away right now, is it?*

One of the things Luray did very often – successfully – was to stay calm when under pressure. Her body was under control, but it required effort. It was extremely useful in negotiations, making it impossible for anyone to know what she was thinking. Usually she didn’t let anything slip.

Kailoon settled in.

“So, the flight will take a while. Want to chat a bit? I rarely have guests.”

Hm, I haven’t yet decided on a strategy. Which role should I play? Or does he actually intend to play with open cards?

She glanced around the Slug’s interior.

“It’s a nice ship you have here, Kailoon.”

It wasn't trivial to use fake identities in this society. You had to create a believable life for each of them: they had to work somewhere, eat something, live somewhere, and most importantly, have favorite TV shows and buy useless objects every once in a while. Bin took care of most of that.

Really Bin, couldn't you have just picked one without asking?

"I can take a look at everything since we're friends now, right?"

Kailoon nodded.

"Sure. Trust is important."

Luray saw a perfectly clean and almost empty shuttle; only a few boxes were attached to the floor – provisions probably. Compared to the tiny space she would have gotten in a civilian spaceship, this was huge.

Luray noticed a piece of paper sticking out from under one of the boxes.

"What's this?"

"Oh, that?" Kailoon switched on his magnetic boots, crouched down and pulled out the little slip from beneath the box, which had nothing on it apart from a few random letters. "My last passenger. He didn't clean up after himself."

Let's see how much information you are ready to give me.

"Who was it?"

Kailoon raised his index finger and waved it back and forth.

“Not without telling me your security clearance level.”

Well, about that...

“Bin?”

She waited for the ID to transfer. When it did, Kailoon opened his eyes wide, then bowed down in a gesture that Luray vaguely remembered having seen in an old movie.

“Pardon me, Your Highness. Of course I will answer.”

This permission must have cost a fortune.

He resumed his normal posture, looking down at Luray with a gentle yet sly expression.

“It was an investigator. Not like you, though. You can look him up once we reach the colony. His name’s Watson, but you’ll find everything under the file number...”

The pilot looked up at the ceiling as if the number was written there.

“...KB#31425/X9145. Your implant takes care of remembering that?”

Luray nodded.

“As for what he’s working on, I don’t know. It’s an internal investigation; nobody told me the details.”

She waited for him to add some more details.

“And I didn’t try to find out yet. Didn’t have the time. All I know is General Bunta – remember that name – had me fly him to the colony, so I know it’s something serious.”

Hm, that’s not really helpful right now. Let’s switch topics.

“I read that nothing was found in the Aurigan ships. Do you know anything about that?”

Kailoon was very cooperative. Apart from the fact that he was now messing around with some buttons, he focused on answering Luray.

“They were empty. We think AIs control Zeps. After they crashed, the soldiers searched for aliens, but there never were any; no life forms, no robots, no nothing. Our scientists think the ships are remnants of a large fleet. Their command structure might have broken down, so they just do what they were programmed to do, no matter if that still makes sense or not. In other words, they’re bugging.”

Kailoon switched the shuttle’s impulse drive on and performed a few checks. He knew the procedure perfectly, so he could keep talking while doing pre-flight setup.

“Another theory is that the alien fleet is just really huge. Maybe they can afford to use the ships as scouts, to see how we react.”

“Wouldn’t it make more sense to use small fast ships instead?”

“Maybe efficiency is irrelevant to them.”

The shuttle lifted off, and the hangar door slowly opened. Kailoon took a seat in his flight chair.

“Hold on to something. Belts are for weaklings.”

They accelerated quickly, and Luray was pushed against the back wall.

Ouch. A few seconds between warning and acceleration would have been nice. My new best friend is teasing me.

Kailoon started to whistle while he pressed even more buttons, and the shuttle confirmed his commands.

“Alpha Centauri, here we come.”

Without warning, just like before, he put the ship into a warp bubble. Everything outside became entirely black. Luray knew about this effect already. The entire space around the shuttle was bent and distorted; nothing outside the bubble that engulfed the ship could reach within.

Not only was this the most efficient way to travel according to humanity’s current understanding of physics, it was also an almost perfect shield. Nothing could enter the bubble; it was like a reverse black hole. Everything thrown at them, from light to tiny dust particles in space, would pass around it instead of striking the shuttle inside. From the outside, the bubble was invisible since all forms of radiation and matter were just sliding over it and reappearing on the other side.

The obvious problem was that you couldn’t see. If you stopped at the incorrect time or place, you could end up inside a star. Precise calculations were crucial.

Luray knew about another thing that would happen the instant the outside universe was replaced by blackness: gravity would come back. She started to fall but managed to land on her feet, even though it wasn’t particularly elegant. Luray shot Kailoon a look.

He is toying with me. He is testing me to see how I react. I wonder why. Maybe he is looking for a woman and wants to quickly filter out those who don't fit his requirements? If he wanted some quick fun with me, he would behave differently, prioritize pleasing me. He acts like he wants to see if we are compatible. That or he just doesn't care at all.

If you can warp space, artificial gravity isn't a problem anymore as long as you don't need a connection to the outside. You just needed to arrange space in the correct shape, more specifically the shape of magnetic field lines, to allow it to flow in a circle.

After getting up, Luray walked towards Kailoon and gave his head a whack. He responded by standing up and turning around. Now that there was gravity, the height difference between the two became even more obvious. Luray's head stopped below his chin.

She looked up, arms crossed. He looked down, smiling. Luray couldn't tell what he was thinking.

“Do you treat all your passengers that way? I would think that the military doesn't allow such behavior. Shouldn't you be afraid of disciplinary action?”

He shook his head.

“No, and there are two reasons for that. The first is that I can read people. You don't like the military. You don't like their system. You don't want to support it. You also think punishment only makes sense for some people, not for everyone. You don't think it makes sense for rational people. Am I wrong?”

Correct. You can train a dog with rewards and punishments, but you can't do that with a person who has reasons that go

beyond their own emotions. Still, he just met me. That's not enough time to 'read' a person.

“How did you know?”

“Your boss and mine were negotiating what you're permitted to do once we're on EE-297. We're the military, so we documented it all. And since I have a lot of time during flights, I can prepare for my missions. You seemed like an unusual person according to your file. It made me curious, so I checked your background.”

Luray did not even blink.

“Go on.”

“I looked at your past work. To be honest, I specifically asked your boss for information about it, saying that we would not accept you otherwise. Which was a lie – I had no influence on the decision. He gave in immediately. The way you solved your assignments was, to say the least, impressive. You are very good at finding loopholes and weak spots in systems. You play information games. I wouldn't be surprised if the more boring summaries I read were just camouflage for what really happened. But let's sit down; I don't like to discuss things while standing.”

Kailoon went to a wall of the shuttle.

“Open, Sesame.”

The panel opened and revealed a folded table as well as a few chairs. After the setup had arranged itself, Kailoon offered Luray the nearest seat, but not before adjusting its height.

Hmpf.

“So, as I was saying, I think you are a very smart person. And your personality shines through the reports. You let people get away if you thought they shouldn’t be punished, and you incriminated those you thought should be.”

The boss wouldn’t go through the trouble of writing reports himself. He also wouldn’t trust anyone to make something up because if there was a contradiction, it would fall back on him. He must have just given the reports I made to the military without modifying them at all. But still, to read so much out of so little...

She adopted a neutral expression.

“What you say is true, but it’s also vague. Can you give me a precise example? For all I know, you’re just turning the reports into a speech to praise me.”

“Of course.”

Kailoon seemed to take a lot of pleasure in explaining Luray to herself.

“The first four jobs you had were successes, but only barely. Your reports are full of complaints about your coworkers and your working conditions. Every single time, you made a list of all their mistakes and explained why and how they could have been avoided. Then you completely messed up a simple job and almost ruined SafetyNet in the process. How could that happen?”

Luray leaned back and crossed her arms, now paying attention to every single word Kailoon said. He was treading on dangerous territory.

“After this failure, you would expect to get fired, or worse. Instead you got everything you wanted. I checked the facts. SafetyNet was financially damaged. It wasn’t just a fake report. Despite your failure, you were put in charge of all your future assignments alone. The rest of your team – that you avoided having whenever you could – no longer had a say in the matter; they just followed your orders. From then on, you made all the decisions, and your boss turned a blind eye to any rules and laws you broke in the process.”

Kailoon made a small pause and waited for a reaction, but Luray stayed silent.

I will not confirm or deny anything. If you figured out what happened, say it.

“I think you let your boss know in advance what would happen. You probably told him to let you handle the job alone, or else it would become a disaster. In that case, why did he still let you ruin it?”

Yes, why did he?

“Of course the exact truth isn’t written down anywhere, but here is what I concluded. You claimed every time in your previous reports that you knew everything in advance. I suppose your boss didn’t believe that it was possible even though you were extraordinarily precise sometimes. You used the failure to prove it. I checked his bank account.”

Kailoon didn’t miss the surprised expression that passed briefly over Luray’s face.

“Yes, we can do that. He gained quite a bit of money by making a very risky bet with a small number of options on the stock market, limited to a very specific time frame. You gave him that intel to prove

your claims. He wouldn't believe it if it was just written in a report again. It had to happen live. After realizing that you were telling the truth, he gave you everything you wanted. Is that remotely correct?"

Not bad.

"I had to buy the options for him," she corrected pointedly. "He didn't want to take the risk."

Kailoon blinked, and then started to laugh until he had tears in his eyes.

"So, I got it almost right! Good to know. Now to be fair, I will tell you something about myself: I like to play mind games."

"Really. I wouldn't have figured that out."

Luray's face came up with the most sarcastic expression it was capable of making.

"Remember you wanted to ask me about the Aurigans? And yet here we are, talking about you instead. I redirected your attention, and you didn't even notice. Your strength is looking at systems. You see how they work, then exploit the rules. I do that, too. But I also look at how minds work, and exploit that as well."

Hmm. That is true.

"Belts are for weaklings. That is how you did it."

Kailoon confirmed this with a smile and slight nod.

"Excellent analysis. The second reason I am sure not to get punished is that I am too important for that. I have some special privileges

that keep me motivated to do my best. But let's get back to the Aurigans. What else do you want to know?"

