

-----note, err... in case the chat isn't working. If I don't answer, I'm asleep or otherwise AFK. Doc's free to edit for all comers.

Friday's on 77 Frigga were a day of rest, a chance for people to relax and pursue their own interests after a week's work. Well, for everyone else.

Anika sighed to herself, and got back to tapping away at the keyboard.

Somebody had to keep the rock running. She cycled through the monitors, CRT's flickering in her vision. Jet was at her daily practice down in the gym, while singing something about 'down in Frigga rock'.. Daryl was alternating between doting on the Aeritalia F104 in the hangar bay, and kicking the Italian jet to death. Kotonno was busy rounding up stray exocomps for her own infernal purposes.

And she herself was there, alone in the darkened control room. Monitors projected their data across her face in a harsh mixture of greens, yellows, reds and blues. Keyboards and switchgear were backlit a electric green.

It was all very techno.

Most of it was barely ticking over at idle. TITANIC wasn't doing much if anything, while she was busy with exercises from the underspace. Anika didn't know whether she was actually tired, or just bored.

Staring at the screen.

She downed a slug of cold water, allowing herself to cool off for a few seconds. These were tough. Test the system, find the vulnerability. How do you get access here? Defend yourself. Sneak through the barrier. Use a hardware lock. Write a script to automate....

She sighed again.

It had sounded like a good idea at the time. Nobody had told her how much work it would actually be. She finished up and fired it off to be checked and graded, and then to be told what she'd done wrong. And do the same over again.

Well, she agreed to it. She asked to do it... to be the hacker AI elite on Frigga. It was her own fault. This was her choice. She had to learn how to do her job.

The system chirruped as a message came back. Gina'd finished grading her work worryingly quick. She could feel herself heating up, her mind racing with the anticipation as she opened the

mail.

*"Hi, Anika.*

*You've improved a great deal the last six months. Are you sure you're Beta level? :) Three blue marks on your self defence, but it is still good enough for a pass. Kick Jet in the arse to get you a proper interface for yourself and you'd be dangerous. Full details attached. A little more practice without that hardsuit wouldn't hurt either.*

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Anika slouched down in her chair, relieved. There was no elation... no pride... just relief that her exercises were over for the day. She'd look through the report form later, after sending a quick 'thank you' in return. There was a lemon meringue in the fridge.... she'd treat herself to that. Nice and sweet and cold and satisfying with a wonderful tang.

TITANIC beeped to itself as it pushed an update out to all the systems incorporated inside it. She checked it up in the logs. A networking update, nothing special. It did that once a day. Push an update, analyse it's performance and compare with the previous, make some automatic edits driven by an expert system, update again and compare. Automated evolution according to some coded factors..

Some indicators started to chirp to themselves as parts of the system ramped up to full load for a few minutes, testing the stability of the update. Some exocomps were busying themselves on general maintenance, while another two had disappeared off down the mines again. Just a navigation glitch. They'd be back whenever they finished whatever mysterious rituals the things got up to down there..

They just ran around for a few hours in the dark parts doing nothing, then popped up and got back to work as if nothing had happened.

Maybe they just needed a break occasionally. She sure as hell did.

The next exercise arrived from the underspace a few moments later. Good luck! It was followed by a quick news article about a liquid-helium overclocking of a quantum processor. She blew out a sigh of hot air.

If only...

And worse, her meringue had been mysteriously been finished in the meantime. Only crumbs and sugary cream remained.

Dare she lick?

Well... she was alone in there. And it was so sweet and tasty.

The door squeaked as it opened, throwing bright fluorescent light across the room. Her eyes adjusted in an instant, a dark silhouette coalescing into the familiar form of Ford Sierra. Who looked completely un-shocked by the sight of a golden-haired computer operator lapping cream of a plate.

"There's some on your nose," Ford said, matter-of-factly.

Anika slurped it off with her tongue, then set the plate beside the keyboard. "Thanks," she said, feeling her cheeks warm up.

"I was expecting a message, but I think it got caught in the spam filter again. Could you fish it out?"

It took Anika a few clicks to release the post. The console chirped, as it always did. It was a quirk. It had to beep and chirp and cheep to let you know it was doing something, and it refused to let you turn it off.

"Done,"

"Thanks."

Ford leant into the monitor at the other end of the console... zooming in. Rivers of electric light reflected off the metal on her arm, while lines of green text scrolled across her face. Anika had no trouble reading it, despite her not really wanting to.

It was bounty hunter stuff. Ford's smile deepened into a lupine smirk as she spotted her prey among the file. Anika could see a pair of projected photographs, and a twinkle in Ford's eye.

Ford pushed a bright button on the panel, the turned red under her finger.

"Hey Jet. I just got a really hot lead on a nice bounty nearby - a pair of dickheads using a stolen Blackbird to knock over transports. I'm taking the new wagon; it might take a couple of days,"

Why did that sound like an offer to Anika's ears? She began to imagine herself free of this cyberpunk pit.

"Uhh...sorry," the comm panel answered in Jet's voice, "I need to bring Mackie's box to Kandor tomorrow, remember? "

“Shit,” Ford breathed. “Can you take the old truck?”

A beat.

“Chigusho.... alright,”

“Great!”

A beat.

“Can I come along?” Anika said.

Ford blinked, and seemed to stare at her.... momentarily stunned. “Uh...” The mechanic’s mind seemed to be in spinlock “This isn’t a Knight Saber mission,” Ford told her after a few minutes, “You won’t have your hardsuit. I don’t really know what you can do,”

“It’s boring as hell in here. I just want to get out for a few days,” She sounded almost like she was pleading for rescue. “And Gina told me I need more practical experience without the suit anyway.”

Ford seemed to be thinking it over. Way too slow. These humans took far too long.

“Alright,” she shrugged her shoulder. “Meet me on the Wagon in a half-hour. If you’re not there, I’m leaving without you,”

The next thing Ford knew, she was being hugged by an android rapidly squeeing

“ThankyouThankyouThankyou...”

“Stop!” Ford barked, shoving her off.

Anika stumbled, and blushed a bright pink. “Sorry... I’m just excited,”

And riding high up on a sugar rush.

“Well try do your best to get there on time,”

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Anika scrounged around in the armoury for something that could fit. Body armour, helmet... a big assault rifle that felt huge in her hands and a pistol that seemed oddly harmless except for the dangerous black void on its nose. She lugged it all down to the landing bay, along with a backpack full of dessert mixes and about a week’s worth of clothes.

She lugged it all with the help of a pair of exocomps who she could swear were looking at her funny and snickering between themselves. She was forced to go past some of the workshop areas in the lower bay, beside what used to be the worker's canteen. A pair of windows allowed her to see what was inside.

An Mi24 helicopter sat alongside the powertrain from one of its deceased counterparts and a brand new bare-metal spaceframe that was in the process becoming something real special. The armour was centimetres thick in places. A pair of hurricane engines were still in shipping crates from Atalante, waiting to be used. A desert-camo Su-22 jet fighter airframe that'd already been imaginatively christened 'Fitter K' watched over its rotor-wing comrades. Along with the Dragon Wagon, they were going to make up a nice unique fleet for attack and defense training scenarios.

... whenever they were finished.

They'd been there longer than she had. They were supposed to be ready for the next Convention.

Kotono's Bolitho, *Zuikaku*, was parked up and waiting in its dock. Daryl's Starfighter lived down there too. A brilliant, silver-metal machine that looked like a high speed dart capable of punching a hole straight through the universe itself.. She could hear the pair arguing from inside.

"Look, I just need another two,"

Kotono was pleading.

"Well I'm, using 'em!" Daryl was annoyed. She always had an odd harshness to her voice that Anika just didn't like.

"For what?"

"Stuff!"

The pair emerged, Daryl in greased overalls with her blond hair dirtied by engine oil. Kotono's jet black hair matched the oily palmprint on an otherwise pristine white blouse. The pair looked at her, emerald and hazel eyes taking long moments to scan all the hardware she was carrying.

"What are you doing with all *that*?" they chorused

Anika did her best to inflate her body. "I'm going Bounty Hunting," she declared

The two women shared another momentary glance.

Then starting laughing. It was deep, raucous laughter that seemed to ring against the walls, and mock from all sides at once. Kotonu had her hand over her mouth, while Daryl was doubled over like she was trying to laugh her guts up.

"I am!" Anika shrieked, feeling herself beginning to heat up. "I'm going with Ford,"

Daryl slapped a heavy hand into her back, before drawing her close and tight. Anika struggled weakly for a moment before giving up. "Little Miss Cyberpunk, a bounty hunter. What do you think Kotonu?"

"It think she's just making a run to pick up a fridge full of Bountys."

Anika wore an angry pout for a few moments, shoving Daryl off her. She was stronger than she looked. Time to bring out the big guns.

"Quit ganging up on me," Anika whined, giving them the teary-eyes.

The pair grinned in unison, big, toothy grins that were a mockery of friendship, "It's what we do!"

"Boing!" Kotonu added.

Anika sighed and dropped her shoulders. She'd just have to rig the exocomps to dump a load of old gear in their quarters, or trip the fire suppression systems. Or itching powder in the innerwear. It wasn't just a one-way street.

She brushed passed the pair of them.

"Hey.... are you going to be using those two exo's?" Kotonu called after her.

She spun on her heel and stuck out her tongue at them. "Nyaaa!"

Feeling mature she strode confidently forward towards the freight lift that would take her down to the main landing bay. Echoes of laughter chased after her, and she ran into the lift cage, nearly outrunning to two exocomps.

The blocky machines hovered in front of her. Marker lights stared.

"Oh shut up!"

She slammed the safety gate shut, flaking off more decade old yellow paint, before switching the level selector over to the main bay. Electric motors howled as the lift began to dive, dry cold air rushing by.

Anika was starting to get sick with excitement.

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The *Dragon Wagon II* hung from the BIG BEA crane, fresh green paint gleaming in the overhead lights. The new ship seemed to bring a whole breath of fresh air to the vast cavern... even if it didn't even come near close to filling it. The bay made a big ship look small.

But it did still fit in a way.

Four big engine nacelles mounted in a cruciform layout pushed a sleek body that reminded her of an ancient spear. Grappler arms folded snug against the cargo bays. It was still less than a week old. It was sleeping and cold, waiting to be brought to life once again.

"Wow," she breathed.

Like most BAT-tech, it looked like it was blasting through the limit standing still. A ladder led up to the crane, which led down to the ship. Being a machine had its advantages she mused. She didn't get tired on the climb, while the two exo's didn't seem to mind much either. They just hummed dutifully along all the way up.

Ford was waiting on the control deck, a dizzying height up. Most of the equipment had been stripped, the windows were gone and the skeletons of control consoles were beginning to rust in places, but the important equipment was still there, wired up to be remote controlled from the ship below.

"Oh, you made it," Ford said, with mild surprise. She was still focused on the console, punching old switches.

"Of course I did," Anika beamed, feeling a giddy rush rise up inside her and envelope her body.

This was going to be fun.

Ford glanced up at her, opening her mouth to say something, before finally comprehending just what she was seeing.

"Why are you bringing all that crap?" she asked, mildly.

"I thought we were supposed to bring weapons and stuff," Anika defended. It was logical. It fit what she'd read on the web.

Ford's eyes narrowed. "We're not assaulting a Boskone base single-handed."

It still startled Anika to hear the word 'Boskone.' It was a dark word that lurked in the shadows of the past, which threatened to jump out at the unwary and snatch them back into the black. She pondered on Ford and Jet having been there for the Boskone War.... and how nine years seemed to be an impossible length of time for someone who was less than three years old.

It was ancient history.

"Well" She glanced out a missing window frame, leaning against the metal for a moment. The ladder down was long, the lift ride up was longer.... "I could bring it back,"

"No time," Ford said. "Just stick the gear aboard in whatever cabin you want for yourself. Y'never know. might come in handy."

Anika practically bounded down the boarding steps like a flame-haired kangaroo, the frame of the stairway buckling a little under each successive impact. It really didn't occur to her that a fall from that height wouldn't have been healthy.

Aboard the ship was... well it didn't really feel like a spaceship to her. The KnightWing was so cramped for three women, a cyber, a puppet and an android. Flint's own craft had been a waved Hilux.... so this thing felt huge inside. It felt clean and fresh and new with that strange fruity scent still in the air. The paint on the main passageways was still fresh and clean and glossy. It seemed to be begging her not to touch and mar the gloss.

She picked cabin 5. It was her lucky number. The cabin inside was the same size as the KnightWing's living compartment, with an individual bed, some storage space underneath it, a one-piece lightweight workdesk and chair set and an elegant shower/WC combo. She set up her terminal system on the desk, before slinging some of her stuffed animals onto the bed, and stuffing the battle gear under it. Next, she slung herself onto the fresh bedding.

These sheets had never even been slept in. Clean, crisp and as comfortable as her own quarters. A laminated card told her that this particular ship had been specifically fitted with a luxury cabin. Well it had been ordered for business reasons.

A knock on the door shocked her back into the real world.

"Don't go asleep," Ford said, with a smile on her face "We're departing in five minutes,"

"It's my first time on a new ship," she admitted, a little ashamed.

"Don't worry," the bounty hunter reassured, "It was my first time a week ago picking her up. I'll see you in the cockpit."

She waited for a minute or so after Ford had disappeared, before leaving herself and stashing



her desserts in the fridge in the galley. It was cleaner than her own kitchen. And better equipped. Something about that was deeply annoying, and she couldn't pinpoint what exactly.

Oh well.

She made her way up forward to the cockpit, feeling a momentary buzz through her body as the gravity fields switched over. Power conduits began to thrum. The lights flickered just once as power systems switched over to internal. The ship was waking up.

The bridge door slid open, revealing something wildly different from what she was used to. Flat-panel displays, holographic projections... it was so much cleaner the control room on Frigga. It was sleek.

Ford was busy in the forward pilot's seat, prodding at the controls, brushing her fingers across glass screens.

"Take the second seat," she ordered. "There's an interface for you there if you need it."

She slipped into a faux-leather G-recliner. Her panels came online immediately, showing engine and comm's status at a glance.

"This is awesome," she whimpered.

"Yeah, well it's about to get awesomer."

The engines throttled up with a high cold wail ringing through the frame. Anika could feel herself shaking as she glanced out at the rock walls. Far ahead, the main door seemed to be slowly giving way to black as it hinged up and in towards the ceiling. An outside counterweight allowed it to be driven by lightweight motors.

The ship shook as the mooring clamps came undone.

"And we are outta here,"

Ford punched the throttles, and the walls went backwards at a terrifying rate, giving way to a vast open blackness that seemed to thump her in the chest. The immediacy of the transition was stunning. It left her standing agape, unable to breath for a few moments.

"Wow,"

Ford glanced back at her, "You never did that before?"

"My station's in the back part of the cockpit on the 'Wing. There're no windows back there,"

“You could’ve asked to come up-front, nobody would’ve said no,”

Anika pondered on that for a few moments. Then pondered how she was probably just going to be a passenger for the trip. Then turned her thoughts back to the word ‘Boskone’....

What was it like?

She glanced at Ford, banking the Dragon Wagon over onto a new course.

“Hey Anika, make yourself useful. Contact GreenHaven and reserve a docking bay for us. We’ll be there inside four hours.”

“Aye-aye!” she beamed.

How do I do that?

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Ford was telling a story, but Anika wasn’t exactly paying her full attention to it. She was busy puzzling her way through the new comm’s while trying to remember what she’d been taught.

“This was way back when Jet was still insistent about the whole gynoid thing... and this was going way beyond what Jet expected - remember she was still getting used to the special functions the puppet had at the time - so she yells at me over the comm to initiate plan F, for Fire.”

Ford inserted the dramatic pause herself, turning round wearing a cheese-eating grin. She was delighting in the story. She was getting animated.

“Thirty seconds later, the fire alarms and suppression system go off, flooding the penthouse with water, and about twenty puppets either in lingerie or nothing at all come running out into heavy rain and a crowded street, before the owners remember that they themselves are actually still inside what’s supposed to be a burning building. Twenty half-dressed men follow a few minutes later, right into the camera lenses of the waiting press. Including two Australian politicians, and one American Christian Conservative.”

Woops. Anika allowed herself chuckle. “Hehe. Perverts,”

“Nah, Anika.” Ford shook her head. “They were richer than us. Rich people are eccentric.”

“Heh,” She checked a few settings, brushing at the controls with her fingertips. Sensors showed a clear run through. Gil was quietly running away in the background, keeping an eye on things.

She gave a soft, bashful smile... "I'm afraid I don't have any stories like that,"

"You're still young," said Ford, riding the wave of experience. "What, you spent most the last three years locked up by Flint?"

"Unh," Anika nodded, feeling an uneasy shudder rise through her. "And I'd rather not talk about that,"

"That I can understand completely,"

An indicator chirped somewhere on the bridge.

"Main engines have completed their run-in period," a mild, monotone voice announced from an overhead speaker. "I have updated the service logs to show this. Maximum performance is now available."

Gil. It was easy to forget he could speak sometimes. Ford glanced up at it, then down at her own indicators.

"Alright Gil, give me full power. Increase speed to maximum,". Ford grinned. "Let's stretch your legs,"

The only sign of a speed increase was a deepening hum rising through the deckplates, and the instantaneous ETA calculation steadily decreasing.

"Engine output at maximum," Gil intoned.

"Flight Status report," Ford demanded.

"Current velocity; nine-point-eight-six percent lightspeed, heading zero-two-zero, relative to point of origin. Expected arrival time at Greenhaven, three-one-eight-seven seconds at current velocity."

"And isn't that sweet," Ford finished.

The ship was solid as a rock. No vibrations. No little shudders. No little squeaking panels. It was all brand new and shiny. Even Gil hadn't developed a personality yet. It didn't make conversation to fill the silence.

"Y'know, years ago I used to do a lot of these with Jet," Ford carried on.

"Oh?"

“Yeah,” she sighed. “I kinda miss that. It was fun. But we’re both so busy with keeping Survival Shot going... and other things... ,” Being the Sabers, “that it’s getting harder and harder to get out together.”

“I’m just glad I could get out for a few days,”

“Jeez Anika, don’t make it sound like we’re keeping you prisoner,”

“That wasn’t what I meant,” she said in a small voice. “It was my choice. It’s just my weekday work is in the control room, and my Fridays too. I wanted a break is all. The last time I was off Frigga without a hardsuit on was that trip to Stellvia.”

She could see Ford doing the math in her head. Anika could tell her exactly how many seconds it had been.

“The one right before we got that first contract?”

“Unh,” Anika nodded.

“Damn, you really do need to get out more often,”

Ford busied herself. Even with AI support it was still a very manual job keeping the ship flying. Gil still hadn’t fully broken through and developed his natural personality.

A spark flashed through Anika’s mind. A recollection.

“Wait!” she yelped, sending Ford almost through.

“What?” the mechanic snapped back, not appreciating the shock.

“I have a story,” Anika said, in a mild voice.

Ford spun around to face her in the swivel chair, kicking her feet up onto the console beside her as she folded her arms. “Alright Ani’... shoot,”

“Alright ummm.....” The words just seemed to dissolve in her mouth. Truthfully, she hadn’t expected Ford to actually let her tell one.

When we went to Stellvia, to make that pitch to Scott,” ‘That pitch’ being the one that got Survival Shot its first big contract, “I met uh...their ATC head... uh,” Great, the connection between memory and processor was broken. “...Miyuri Akisato in Meg’s at the soda fountain while Jet was with Scott. I was supposed to tell her about our procedures. Daryl was with ahh....

Kagome Mishima and I don't remember what Kotonno was doing. "

She concluded that this wasn't going well. It had seemed so much funnier in her mind, but the words coming out of her mouth were like lumpy custard instead of the smooth creamy verbal dessert she'd imagined. Ford was still listening politely.

"Miyuri bought me a chocolate cheesecake. Cheesecake, I asked her? You'll see, she warned me. The two of us went through the entire dessert menu together."

She shrunk down into the seat, staring at Ford with the eyes of a frightened puppy.

"So that's how it happened," said Ford, mildly.

"That's not the story. Tomorrow. Just Jet and me were summoned to Scott's office, and Jet knows it's out of order because she asks me if I did anything weird but I say no and both of us have to sit outside and I'm getting so nervous and my mind is going so fast I start to get hot but there's no water to drink and when we're finally allowed in Noah's looking right at me and he says my name which is right when my whole system takes a thermal trip and I faint right onto the floor of his office."

Deep breath. Expel the hot air. Intake the cold. Don't overheat.

"I come back online and they're both standing over me. 'Jet, it might've been a good idea to ask A.C. for help when you built her.' Scott said."

And done with a forced giggle. Ford was staring at her, waiting for the commercial break to end.

"Is that it?"

"Well. He found out I was an AI because I ate more deserts than a human being could handle, and Jet had to pay for it all... but..." She deflated down, seeming somehow to look up at Ford, despite being higher up on the bridge. "It wasn't funny, was it?"

Ford shook her head slowly. "No. It wasn't." A beat. "But it was a good effort. Your timing was just off. And you didn't tell it right. Jet being stuck with the bill would've made a much better punchline for start,"

Anika was working it over in her mind, trying to arrange things in a way that ended with "And I expect you'll pay for all the dessert" in the best imitation of Noah Scott's accent.

"Maybe if I had another example?" she suggested with the hopeful intent that Ford'd give her another funny one.

“Okay, let me put on my school-teacher hat. Now pay attention class.”

Anika was rubbing her hands. She glanced down at something flashing, but it was nothing important.

“Three years ago, me and Jet were doing fit-out work. We’d set up the main transponder, but with no codes yet so it was just broadcasting an empty ping that signalled something alive was ‘there’, but not who or what it was.”

Anika nodded, showing she was paying attention. A new story.

“A few hours later, Jet’s monitoring comms while I’m doing some fine soldering in the relay box her fingers won’t get into, when a radio message comes over on a public channel:

This is Grand Moff Tarkin of the Imperial Star Destroyer Emperor’s Justice, hailing unidentified ship. We order you to change course immediately,”

She did her best to match the officious accent. The gruff, self-absorbed voice told Anika everything she needed to know about this Moff Tarkin.

“Naturally, Jet responds with ‘Negative, change your vector Moff,”

And she could match her partner’s accent with little trouble. She could picture Jet leant over a half-finished comm-panel with a smirk on her face. Ford continued;

“A few moments later, The Moff responds. ‘I say again. This is *Grand* Moff Tarkin. Change course immediately,”

He sounds like he’s getting pissed. He’s the sort of dope who’s used to getting his way on foot of being a warsie BNF, who hasn’t been told ‘no’ in a long time. We can hear his chest inflating. He speaks like his title alone is reason enough for the Earth to move out of his way to let him pass.

Jet just picks up the mic: ‘Negative, I say Negative Moff Tarkin. We’re not moving,’

We can hear him blustering and huffing through the comm-link.”

Ford tried to inflate her body, drawing in a deep breath as she puffed out her cheeks. The image of Moff Tarkin was complete and clear in Anika’s mind. An officious, arrogant man... probably grown fat and comfortable in his position.

““This is *Grand Moff* Tarkin. I am in Command of the Gagarin-Class Imperial Star Destroyer Emperor’s Justice, being escorted by two Peacemaker Class frigates and Five Tie fighter wings.

I say again, you change your course immediately or we will defend ourselves.'

"Now. Jet waits for a few moments, letting him sit before keying open the channel. She says this, absolutely deadpan;

'Moff, check your radar. We're a 69 kilometre wide asteroid. Your call.'"

Anika found herself laughing heartily.

"See?" Ford questioned, wearing an amused smile that seemed to touch her ears. "That story works much better because it builds towards the punchline, and because the victim clearly deserves to be made to look like the idiot he is."

"Yeah," Anika nodded.

"Don't sweat though. It's something that comes with practice. The right teller can make anything funny,"

Anika nodded again.

"You can think about it when you're prepping cabin 8 for our prisoners. You're not just a passenger, and I'd like to have somewhere to keep them ready before we get to Greenhaven. Strip everything out, and put two mattresses in there; that should hold them."

"Aye Aye Captain!" she chirruped, standing up into a salute.

She dived back out of the bridge to get to work. By her own reckoning, she had 45 minutes to get it done.

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Greenhaven was neither green, nor a haven.

"Greenhaven calls itself a free asteroid. They don't recognise the Space Patrol, or Great Justice authority there, just their own. It's an outlaw town in space. The vast majority of people here aren't violating the Convention. And not wanting to live with the Space Patrol's protection isn't a crime in itself so they mostly get left alone. That means you get all sorts here, from Blakes and those who just don't like some of the prime-movers behind the Space Patrol or think that GJ has become too political, up to the real Boskone picking up or fencing supplies,"

A cool chill bolted through Anika's body. ZwiIniks were one thing. ZwiIniks were criminals. The Boskone were something else beyond. They were the stories told to keep children quiet. She scanned around, hoping to spot them among the crowd before they found her.

It was hot and dirty and steamy, and was making Anika feel just a little bit overheated just walking around. She could feel herself being leered at by anyone and everyone. One of these things is not like the other, and the others knew which one it was. It was an immune response by the locals, clustering around the invading cell.

And with her brilliant flame-hair, yellow jacket and red knee-length skirt, she shone out like a beacon.

A grey-furred dog-taur seemed to glare at her, before adjusting all the backpack of equipment strapped to his back and padding on away into a side passage.

The air was heavy and smokey, and it seemed to her to be almost the exact opposite of Frigga. They both had that same industrial flavour, but Greenhaven turned it up to 11. Where Frigga always felt like an abandoned factory, this place was oppressively overcrowded, rock and steel walls looming in out of the smoke and steam. A neon sign over a dead-end bar buzzed a warning at her to stay away.

“Sorry about locking myself in,” she said, trying to get her mind off it.

“No problemo.” Ford said. Her mind was obviously elsewhere. She was carving her way through the crowd while Anika struggled to keep up. Behind every pair of eyes was another Flint who’d treat her like a tool if they knew the truth.

Or worse.

Ford paused outside a bar that was thumping with music. It stank of stale smoke and whiskey. A neon sign gave it the simple name ‘Baos’.

“Hmmm....They fixed it up after that android maid went nuts,” she remarked. “He’ll be in here. Stick close,”

“I was afraid you’d say that,”

Some tattooed woman with what she’d heard Senshi call ‘a lot of talent’ was in the middle of a drinking contest with a beansprout of a man in an office shirt and slacks. There was a cardgame at one of the tables. And worst, the whole place stank of alcohol and cigarette smoke. This really wasn’t going to do her heat sinks any good.

This was beyond being just the fish out of water. This was being the fish flopping about on the floor, while surrounded by a pack of hungry cats all ready to rip her to shreds. Every single eye was staring hungrily.



Ford led her to an almost vacant table in the corner, away from the activity. A blond man in a hawaiian t-shirt sat waiting, nursing a glass of milk. At least, she thought it was milk. He smiled a warm, unshaven smile at the pair of them.

“Hey Ford, nice to see you again,”

He had a British accent, she thought?

“Andrew,” she smiled back, taking a seat opposite him, “You’ve got the information I asked.”

“If your new partner has a name I sure do,”

He fixed Anika with a terrifyingly soothing stare... Slip into my parlour said the spider to the fly.

“Her name’s Anika. Anika Daini. She’s new.”

“Well, hello there Anika. I’m Andrew Jackson, the New Hickory around here even though I’m not even one of you yankees,”

The reference naturally went flying straight over Anika’s head. She heard it flying with a whoosh. Ford slid a chair back, the obvious intent for her to sit down.

“Hi,” she said in a voice so small it was swallowed by the smash of a beer bottle over a skull.

She sat down and did her best not to draw attention to herself by speaking.

“So, where’s Jet got to?” Jackson asked, popping a peanut into his mouth. “You call me up asking for a meeting and I’m all expecting to see my favourite white devil again and...”

“She’s busy.” Ford slammed the door on him. Anika could taste her irritation. The metal fingers on her cyber arm were drumming on the table, making it obvious what would happen if he pressed it further. A metal fist was far more painful than a flesh one.

“Too bad.” A Crush, Anika wondered. “So what is it you wanted to know?” He paused, the expression on his face mutilating into a smile that belonged to a Great White Shark. “Let me guess, it’s about a little Blackbird,”

“And if it is?”

Ford had her poker face on.

“Well, that’s a hot little scoop. You’re not the first to come looking for it. And the price is naturally set by the demand,”

Ford made a show of sighing, "I'll give you an extra thousand on top of the usual,"

"Make it two..."

"One and a half,"

"Throw in some pics of Jet with that..."

Ford glared at him, "One and a half, dead."

"Worth a shot," he shrugged. "Well bargained and done."

They shook on it, and he immediately handed over a flash drive. "What I know's all on there. Name, transponder codes, sightings, suspected and known ports and routes. Good hunting Ford, there's at least five others after the same bird."

"Shit,"

"Better get going. You can wire me the cash when you verify the information's good."

"Yeah, yeah. I'll get on it when I get back to the Wagon." She tapped Anika on the shoulder.

"Come on, let's get out of here before someone shoots it up again,"

They left just as the fight began with a shattering glass.

Ford was half running back to the Wagon.

"If one of the other five gets the 'bird..." Anika called after her.

"Then we don't get paid. Then I'm going to have to find a way to pay him a couple of grand, or I lose a good contact and my good name."

The Dragon Wagon was still waiting at dock where it'd been left. Something about that surprised Anika... she'd half expected it to get stolen while they were away. The boarding tube seemed longer heading back, each step loaded with the anxiety that she'd get to see the Wagon slip away from it's moorings without them aboard.

It was a relief to be back aboard in that wonderful fresh atmosphere. The hatch shut behind her - with the push of a button no less - locking itself shut. It was helpfully, right beside the main bridge. Ford had already managed to begin preflight checks.

"Gill!" Ford barked. "Rig for an immediate departure. I want to be out of here within five minutes."

Anika. Get us clearance,”

“I understand,” the AI answered back.

“Right, I’m on it,” Anika near dived into the second seat, fumbling with the headset for a few moments before finally slipping it over her head. “Greenhaven Control, Greenhaven Control, this is Dragon Wagon, request clearance for immediate departure.

“Main reactors are at operating power. Full engine performance is available,” Gil intoned.

“And that’s why I love combat rated propulsion systems,” Ford commented with a smirk.

A voice Anika’s headset tickled her ears. “Dragon Wagon, Clear for departure and good hunting,”

“We’ve got clearance,” she called out.

“Releasing mooring clamps,” She stabbed at the touchscreens with her fingers. Distant thumps seemed to bounce off the hull.

“Mooring clamps release. We are free and clear to navigate,” Gil announced in the usual dispassionate monotone.

“We are out of here,” Ford pushed the throttles forward. The engines roared. The dock structure in the windows seemed to rocket backwards, as if the whole station had been punched backwards around them by an unseen force. “Now lets see where to,”

It took a few moments for Ford to get the jumpdrive inserted. It was flash scanned for malicious files, before the contents popped up on the displays in front of her. She took a deep breath.

“Looks like Hickory was on the level.”

“Which means we have to pay him?”

“Yup,”

Anika had an idea. Some way she could possibly be actually helpful rather than just a hanger on..

“I’m friends with Miyuri Akisato, maybe I could ask her for a loan, if money’s tight?”

The eager grin on her face dissolved as Ford shook her head. “First, if I get a loan from Miyuri, I’m really getting a loan from Noah Scott and we’re only acquainted with each other - Jet knows

Scott better than I do, and she doesn't know him well enough to borrow money from him either. Second,"

And she held up two fingers as if Anika couldn't count.

"I overheard him say that if somebody wanted to be paid for bringing in criminals on Stellvia, they should join the Space Patrol, so I don't think he really likes us bounty hunters anyway. But there's something even more important than either of those reasons."

Anika thought for a moment. She remembered something, an argument over independence. "You don't want him to own a piece of you, even in the short term?"

"I wouldn't have put it so politely, but you're right. I need to do this on my own. "

She stopped. Anika stared a little, wondering for a moment. "But Miyuri is my friend, and we've loaned things to each other before,"

"Well," Ford shrugged laconically, "If you trust her." Ford's expression shifted to a comfortable smile, "But I still don't need a loan from you or anyone, I can handle it. But Thanks."

Ford was just being a little paranoid, Anika figured. Maybe a little too much.

"I'll start scanning for the 'bird,'" she offered.

"Sure. Sensor patterns should be loaded into the system already. " Ford pitched the ship over and around onto its new heading. The hunt was on.

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Three days had gone by. There were leads, but it was always a case 'Your Princess is in another castle'. They were on the trail, so were 5 other hunters.

What had once been a pristine and fresh smelling cabin now smelled of pizza, chinese food, and sweet fruit. Anika was sitting with her bare feet pressed against the console, wearing nothing but a nightshirt she'd borrowed from Ford.

She wished she needed to sleep too. Just for the break. A quick shower had been refreshing, but it just hadn't been enough. Her little surprise had long been finished, and now there was nothing left to waste away the hours but scan after scan.

*Fenspace's Got Talent* was doing it's best to send her to sleep anyway. It was funny at first, but now it was just getting boring and a tad ridiculous.

Gil was quietly and efficiently following waypoints while she ran scans every few minutes. Scanning was easy. Analysing scans, that was tough. The Blackbird was hiding. Thermal spikes could be probes, they could be shuttlecraft, they could be the 'bird itself. Cross reference heat output with electromagnetic signatures and radar cross sectional information. If there's a transponder, compare with any registered data and see how they matched.

If there wasn't any, see how close it was to a standard Blackbird signature. Or if it looked in any way suspicious. There didn't seem to be much out there today; they were in a darker part of the belt.

It seemed kind of stupid to hide out there. Anything alive stuck out like a hot sore thumb. It was much easier to hide in a crowd.

That was how they usually did it themselves. It was easier to look themselves like another unremarkable fencraft beneath notice, than it was to disappear entirely.

She checked this Blackbird's reported signature once more. It didn't seem like the ZwiIniks flying it were even good enough to consider altering it. Eight recordings. Eight equal signatures.

Bored beyond belief, she changed over to another feed. *The Worlds at War*. Episode 20: Jusenkyou.

What started as a quick fascination on her part about the real Boskone, quickly mutated into a far deeper unease as a part of her mind began to rail against the idea that what she was seeing onscreen was even possible in the real world. Flint.... Flint had nothing on these. She tried to compare her Saber work, the missions the Knight Sabers took on, but even the worst of it came nowhere close.

The dispassionate narration isolated her even further as digitally generated diagrams depersonalised the people involved, reducing them down to little more than computerised icons. It all seemed strangely fake. It wasn't real.

That little comfort shattered when she found herself recognising one of the faces onscreen.

There was Jet, explaining something to a Senshi. She paused and reverse the feed just to be sure. Yes! There she was. Blades fitted, bloodied and dirty, with her armour smashed open on her leg to reveal the framing underneath but still unmistakable. She looked right at the camera for a moment and smiled, as if the person behind the lens had been someone she recognised, before returning to her conversation with a Senshi in battle dress uniform.

Whatever she was explaining was lost beneath the voice of the narrator.

Jet's very existence made it real in a way that couldn't be denied. Anika shut it off a moment

later. On quick reflection, she was glad she could make it go away with a quick press on the keypad.

Reruns of *Catgirl Bebop* were far less disturbing.

Another sensor sweep turned up nothing once more. There were a few settlements out there. A space shuttle was on the edge of sensor range, broadcasting a high-powered radio signal. *Melchizedek* was out and about. She sighed loudly.... maybe another bounty hunter had already caught them.

There were noises from the back of the ship. Her onboard clock told her that Ford'd been asleep for only four hours. The aft hatch opened a moment later, Ford entering, scratching herself under her cybernetic arm while yawning wide.

She was still in her underwear, just a black sports-bra and cotton panties. Dark tendrils of metal seemed to radiate out from her cybernetics, crawling under her tanned skin.

"Any luck Anika?"

She made a show of glancing at the screen beside her. "Nope,"

Ford looked right at her, chocolate eyes seeming to read her very mind. "Something up?"

"Nope,"

Anika's voice cracked just a little. She shrunk down into her chair as Ford began to loom over her.

"What happened?"

"There was a program on the Boskone War on and I saw Jetonit and I thought it was a little bit weird and creepy what happened because it was all real rather than just TV."

It just sort of blurted out before she could stop herself, or even think about putting the brakes on her mouth. The buffer had been filled, and it had to purge itself as fast as possible. Ford stared a moment, giving her a perplexed look that seemed to ask 'Is that all?'

"The Worlds at War?"

"Yeah,"

"I think she's seen in three of them; Turning Points, Jusenkyou and she was interviewed for Downfall if I'm right." Ford softened her expression in a way that made it almost unreadable.

“Both of us are in Turning Points together, when we both met up on Gnarlycurl.”

Curiosity warred with the polite intention to avoid bring up something that she knew had to be uncomfortable for them. If it was bothering her just knowing it existed?

Ford padded across the deck sitting into the pilots seat. Anika watched her for a moment, a question starting to burn its way into the back of her mind.

“Ford,” she tried, tentatively.

“Yeah?”

“Are there real Boskone on Greenhaven...or the bounty we’re chasing?”

“No,” Ford said. “Only ordinary ZwiIniks really. I just call them all Boskone out of habit,” She smiled self-deprecatingly, “I guess I’m getting old,”

Anika felt herself relax just a little. “It’s hard to imagine what it was like,” she said.

“I’m glad it is,” Ford responded. “And I’m glad you have to imagine it.” she added after a moment’s thought.

Anika thought about Flint. She thought about the Saber missions, about how scared she’d been on her first, about what happened to Daryl’s partner. Pirates and ZwiIniks were no match.

She near shot out of her chair when her panel started to beep happily to itself. What, what? What’s happening here? She scanned her instruments. Sensor target, edge of range. Pattern match. There it was... there’s the Blackbird. It was passing in front of them heading sunward at eight percent lightspeed.

“I got it!” she announced, already congratulating herself, “I found the Blackbird,”

“Gimme a course,”

“Forwarding sensor data.” With a sweep of her fingers, the data flowed to Ford’s console. Another glance. “And it looks like they’re alone.”

Ford grinned like a fox who’d sighted an open chicken coop. “So nobody’s caught up with them yet,”

“And I can’t see anything on an intercept course,”

Ford hauled the Dragon Wagon around onto a new course, pushing the engines up to full

power. A strange energy was rising up inside Anika, a thrill that seemed to fill her body as she plotted their course out on the sensor display, intersecting with the 'birds and promising a big exciting payout.

"Time to intercept," Ford demanded.

"One hour, fifteen minutes," Anika chirruped. "If they don't change course,"

"Great. Time enough to get dressed,"

Anika giggled at the thought of a high speed space chase in her underwear.

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Brilliant!

"I got it!" Anika called out. It was a triumph.

"What?" Ford demanded.

"I figured out how to shut down the 'bird's engines remotely!" she announced. Her chest seemed to swell the pride of it. It was brilliant.

"Oh do enlighten me, Miss cyberpunk,"

"You told me how it was going so slow, because of the old engine firmware, right?"

Ford nodded.

"Well, I figured that if they haven't updated their engine systems, they wouldn't be able to update any other software system either. They don't have the access keys to the repositories."

"And you think they might be running out of date software that you can hack?"

"Yup!" Anika chirruped. "Don't just think, know I can hack. By checking the details about what was updated I figured out what the original vulnerability was and then how to exploit it and force their engines to shut down."

"Nice work," said Ford. It sent a hot flush through Anika's body. "How close do we have to be to use it, and how long will the engines be down for?"

"As soon as we can pick up their onboard network, and it depends on how good they are and how long it'll take them to reboot the system."



“Best guess?”

“If they’re good, about a minute,”

Ford grinned at her. “Perfect. I want you to have it ready to go exactly when I tell you. Not a moment after. When they’ve stopped, I’ll park us up above them, and you grapple them before they get going again.”

Anika rode a giddy wave. This was going to be so much fun and she’d finally have something she could actually brag about to the underspace, rather than keeping quiet. It would be one notch of respect, a little mote of kudos.

That’d put her at notch one.

“Alright boys this is Ford Sierra... Bounty Hunter, authorised and licensed. Why don’t you save everyone here some trouble and cut your engines?” She glanced back at Anika “Anything.”

A single word crackled across the radio “*Nuts.*”

“Nuts?” Anika wondered. She glanced down at the radar readouts. “They’re accelerating.”

“Shit,” snarled Ford. “Looks like we do this the fun way. Get the grappler arms ready. Lets see if they were worth keeping.”

Hydraulic servomotors whined as a pair of spindly arms unfolded from the belly of the cruiser. Grasping claws gaped open, searchlights mounted on the arms scanning for a target. Tracking and docking cameras showed exactly what the arms were each about the grasp.

“Last chance.” Ford broadcast “Stop or we’ll stop you.”

Anika glanced “They’re not stopping.”

“Alright Anika, hit ‘em with your surprise.”

She drew her fingers across the keypad, firing a finely honed burst of data at the Blackbird. A malformed packet of data tweaked a variable... a dangling pointer stuffing a whole block of code chasing into operating memory, where it went on to wreak havoc. It didn’t even offer her control... it didn’t need to.

The Blackbird stopped dead in space as its engines went into emergency shutdown.

“It worked!”

Anika jumped out of her seat.

The Wagon stopped a moment afterwards, “Great, now grab ‘em before they fix it!”

“They’re going to love this...” Anika giggled.

“Now then. You can tear your ship apart trying to get away.... and still get caught. Or you can just come on over here quietly. Your call.”

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“We’d just figured out that what was going on between us was more than friendship, right before Jet left to begin an orbital display flight with the rest of her Gruppe. I was below checking out a panel when the attack began. Jet got caught right in the first salvo. They intercepted the missiles by ramming them. ”

Anika gaped. That was *insane*.

“They stayed up there, acting as point defences taking out transports and missiles as best they could, shielding some of the civilian craft. Jet says she only did it because she couldn’t think what else to do.”

“What I did, was join in the evacuation. I loaded up the Dragon Wagon... the first... with as many people who'd fit then punched for orbit to Gnarlycurl. Then back down for another run. We dodged missiles and wrecked craft. I made 3 runs. All the time I was convinced the Jet had been killed in the first salvo, or soon after. I arrived on Gnarlycurl for the third time, and there she was.... all battered and looking like she'd been ramming Boskone dropships feet first.”

“The footage of her grabbing me, and both of us hugging each other to the point where she came close to breaking my ribs, was what made it into the program. I told her I had to keep making runs, and she offered to protect me with what was left of her squad. We both gathered up a bunch of other ships to make a convoy because there was no way we could've justified that escort for just my truck. We then made three more runs.

That's how Jet got a Zig medal. Not for conspicuous heroism, but because she'd never have forgiven herself if she stayed aboard Gnarlycurl and I got hurt

“Did you get a medal?”

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“...so there she was, with the puppet dressed only in some pretty damned sexy lingerie, skin slick with sweat and flushed with heat. I knew exactly what she'd been doing. Both of them turn to face and say in stereo.... ‘Now this isn't the weirdest thing you've caught me doing’ “

So be careful and stay close to me

“That's the same reason you didn't want the Halcyon node installed?” Anika questioned.

“Yeah,” Ford nodded “Until we cleared up the misunderstanding, and it’s why we try so hard to have such a diversity of customers. Noah’s a businessman, first and foremost. You’ve got to remember that. He’s out to make money. StellviaCorp is out for profit. They’re always going to be working towards some angle to improve their side of their deals with us.”

But Miyuri.....

“Don’t get me wrong... it’s good to have such a big customer, but we don’t want to have to rely on the good will of StellviaCorp for anything. Because once it starts becoming a necessity for us to have Stellvia’s good will to survive, that gives them the power to dictate terms to us, terms that will only ever favour StellviaCorp. In the end, while we might nominally be independent, we effectively end up being Stellvian employees without the benefits package. And it’s not just Stellvians who could do this to us.”

Ford was in full swing. She’d gotten up the momentum of a bulk ore carrier behind this. As usual.

“So long as we can afford the loss from saying ‘No’, we can still bargain in our own favour. We don’t rely on any single supplier, or on any individual customer...so...” Ford stopped herself, throwing Anika a slightly embarrassed smile. “Sorry.....I’ve known a few people who had their dreams of independence swallowed by bigger business. My point is, you should be more careful about selling chunks of yourself

“Well, there’s a reason Jet always spends three hours a day on meditation and her own personal exercises.

In a se

Ford Goes out with Dragon Wagon to catch them. Anika begs to come too  
They first meet a contact in some better den.... before roaring out after the stolen bird  
Hey, It's good karma to bring in a stolen Blackbird too

Catch up with the wounded bird. It's not really capable of getting up to speed. Grapple it. Crew taken aboard DW...Under threat of being blown apart by missile. (But our missiles aren't real. They don't know that!"

why is it not getting up to speed ?  
<Dartz\_\_> It's damaged..... been without maintenance for a while.... enough to let it get caught by the DW

Ford goes over to see if she can get it moving under it's own power after being grappled.... and try do something for the AI. Anika is left behind to guard the two prisoners  
The prisoners demand feeding, and Anika..... being Naive, fetches them something and gets her butt kicked  
Ford gets to enjoy the sight of her own ship being stolen

Cue chase scene..... the Blackbird giving its all to save DW from the same fate  
DW swoops around, ZwiIniks arming missiles.Not realising they're just sims....

Sounds a little bit strange... first the Blackbird is slow enough to be graped... then its fast enough to chase the DW?

Blackbird's trying it's hardest (It does have an AI). It's properly motivated... and Ford knows a it about getting them going

<BlackAeronaut> Here's something. We can say that most maintenance on Quad Helix engines is managed by firmware. As a safety precaution, if the firmware is not updated regularly, it shuts down on its own. If it's tampered with it self-deletes. Some people have written their own home-brew versions, but they can only barely grasp the concepts, or they're so mad that the code comes out as being inefficient or barely coherent. End result: crappy engine output with an easy fix (the fix being to log into the BAT service and support mainframes for the newest

firmware updates).

<BlackAeronaut> In turn, the AI on the DW can mess up the engine systems firmwares before shutting down to protect itself. This will make catching the DW even easier (Blackbird at .12c vs. Outlaw at .06c?)

“Well guys, I got some good news for you,” said Ben cheerfully. “The company that Blackbird got lifted from was a small courier outfit. They figured that bird to be done for and just made the insurance claim - quicker to get a replacement bird that way instead of waiting for recovery. So, since we provide our own insurance on the things (just another nifty way to make a buck and it makes the process so much smoother) we’re awarding you guys the salvage rights.

“This means you got two options. If that bird takes a shine to you guys you can keep her. If not, just bring her back in and you’ll get the salvage pay, which is damn close to the cost of a new Blackbird.”

“Anika, you’ve got to think, what sort of life would you be giving it? These aren’t inert hardware, they have their own needs and requirements, they have their own right to be happy. If you take ownership of a ship like this, you have a duty to it to keep it happy and give it the life it deserves.

These Blackbirds like being out, they like to fly and to be doing things. Would you be able to give it that? Or would it spend most of its time parked up in the main-bay waiting for the once-in-a-blue moon occasion when you want to use it. Besides, a half-share of the salvage pay should still be enough to pick up something comfortable for yourself

Some quick fakery by Ford and Anika fools them into thinking the Blackbird has been destroyed.... while it's actually keeping pace

<Dartz\_\_> Eventually.... the Zwiiniks are beaten.

<Dartz\_\_> And turned over to the Atalante authorities who know exactly what to do with them

<Dartz\_\_> Anika is a little bit embarrassed

<Dartz\_\_> They get paid.... Ford assures her, lesson learned. Don't think too much of it

<Dartz\_\_> That works for a story

<Henning> has Anika wireless radio built in?

<Dartz\_\_> No

<Dartz\_\_> She might have a wrist-com

<Henning> hmm

<Dartz\_\_> Enough for Ford to track the ship

<Dartz\_\_> And neither of them to Tell anyone how close they came to screwing up

<Dartz\_\_> Could work alright

<Dartz\_\_> Thoughts?

<Warringer> Stretching a little on the damaged BB catching the DW2...

<Dartz\_\_> Hmmmm

<Dartz\_\_> Maybe they have trouble running the DW without Anika.... since it doesn't have it's own AI to regulate

<Dartz\_\_> And they don't realise she's an infomorph

<Henning> yes... so maybe they loose drive efficiency without noticing it... so the DW gets slower while still saying "full speed"

<Dartz\_\_> That works.

<Warringer> Sounds good.

<Dartz\_\_> Indeed. An damned fine Cowboy Bebop-style story

Anika. Custom A-wing. Options: Delete weaponry. Luxury cabin. Second seat. Improved comm's.