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"Policy is the best honesty."

vacuum

Riding the tail end of exit trajectory—Mars sovereign space.

When gravity's pull has weakened to the point that loose items drift about the flight deck Umberto engages autopilot and unbuckles his harness, returning to the rear cabin.

The woman sits up on one of two med-station beds, strapped to it, sipping electrolytes.

"You should lay down," Umberto tells her, taking the bottle.

"I'm okay."

"Umberto!" yells his dispatch comms guy, on speaker. "Is she aboard?"

"Comms down." He sits on the other bed, bracing himself, their knees almost touching.

The woman takes a moment to study his face now, the shock beginning to wear off.

"Umberto..? That's you?"

"Yeah. You?"

"Monique."

"Monique who?"

She breaks his eye contact, looking around the small med-station.

"This ship, it's Military?"

"No, not a ship."

She shrugs. "What would you call it?"

"A ship uses chemical energy for thrust. Helos have magnets. Big, spinning magnets."

"Okay so is it Military?"

"Used to be. St. Martin's Ambulance buy them at auction. We lease their surplus fleet."

"And who are 'we'?"

"Medevac Asiatic."

"So you guys are like a private ambulance?"

"All ambulances are private."

"Not on Mars."

Umberto snorts. "Well Mars doesn't count."

"Oh jeez," she throws her head back, "Don't even get me started." A brief silence, then she asks, "What's the plan here?"

"I pretty much plan to take you to my dispatch building, call you a cab, then go home and sleep. Why, what's yours?"

Panic flashes on her face. "Earth?"

"Yeah."

"We can't go in through Quarantine gates."

Umberto laughs. “Avoid Quarantine? The fine is fucking ridiculous. Like, give me the prison time ridiculous.”

She leans forward, placing a hand on his elbow.

“Umberto... I’m not kidding around, if my DNA goes on file at the gates these people looking for me will find and kill us both.”

“How can I believe any of this? Who are you?”

Monique takes a moment to consider her options.

“Okay,” she says at last, “it’s Zenith. Monique Zenith.”

“Zenith?”

“Yeah, as in the insurance guy.”

“I was thinking of the artist.”

“Ah, my mom.”

“How exactly does someone from your stock end up on Mars?”

“That takes longer to tell.”

“How about over dinner?”

She frowns. “Are you hitting on me or something?”

Umberto peels the lid from a ration kit, handing it to her.

“I’m not allowed to hit on clients. It’s one of the main rules.” He points to a charter taped to the dividing wall. “It says I’m not allowed to touch you inappropriately while unconscious so no need to worry about that either.”

#### sovereign borders

Quarantine Gate GE-12, Intercorporate shipping space—near-Earth orbit.

Bolton O’Hare returns from the smoking room deep in thought, finding a queued call at his desk.

“Answer,” he says before coughing into his sleeve. “GE-12, you’re speaking with Bolton.”

On speaker, the caller says, “I need to speak with your manager.”

“I’m the manager. This is he.”

“They make you answer calls?”

“Quarantine’s spread a little thin these days. How can I help you, sir?”

“Well that brings me to my point, Mr...?”

“O’Hare.”

“Mr. O’Hare I’ll be brief. An unlicensed EMT flying medevac hardware will soon attempt to circumvent inbound Earth Quarantine with a woman considered by several members of the Healthcom Alliance as a class one contamination risk.”

“Wait, what’s a class one? Is that the highest or the lowest?”

“The highest, Mr. O’Hare. It’s shit creek without a ladder.”

“Paddle.”

“Right.”

Searching the desk for his PDA, “Okay, uh, when is this supposed to be happening?”

“You have roughly ninety minutes.”

Bolton O’Hare coughs again. “That’s not a lot of time.”

“No,” says the caller, “not at all.”

“Can you tell me where?”

“Flight path is predicted to hit your boundaries somewhere between GE-12 and FD-10. The firm I represent were tracking him out of Mars, but the pilot slipped surveillance on the biways.”

“Wow, this is pretty full-on. Is there anything else I should know?”

“If they reach Earth the virus will spread faster than any outbreak you read about in high school.”

“I didn’t really go to—”

“It will spread very fast.”

“I should probably call someone.”

“Probably.”

“What did you say your name was?”

The display reads, ‘Call ended by caller’.

“Classy,” says Bolton, then “call Navy.”

#### dogfight

Umberto’s first inkling that something has gone wrong is the formation of jumpships showing up on long-range recon just a few clicks beyond the hyperspace biway’s exit gate.

He turns to Monique, strapped into the co-pilot’s chair.

“Thoughts?”

She shakes her head.

“Is that accurate? There can’t be more than fifty.”

“Fifty-nine,” he says. “The data comes from three relays. So, yeah, it’s about ninety-eight per cent accurate.”

“Can we run?”

“This thing was built as troop transport. It doesn’t do anything fancy.”

“Shit.”

“Maybe it’s not about us.”

“It’s always going to be about us now.”

“Comms up,” says Umberto, cycling through the feed stations for news.

“Umberto? What happened?” asks the comms guy.

“Hey Steve what’s the deal with Quarantine Enforcement? I’m seeing their entire fleet spread out between GE-13 and FD-09.”

“It’s up on the industry ticker dude, some unlicensed medico is trying to slip quarantine with an Ebola patient or something.”

“Ebola?” Umberto throws a glance at Monique, who shakes her head. “Did they say who the guy is?”

“If they knew that, they’d probably just go straight to his firm.”

“Right...”

“So what happened with the Mars chick? Was she hot? I’m still waiting for the check-in from Isidis. Did you hear about Carlos’s burn victim at Elysium Med, took them four days to send the check-in, guy was dead by the time we billed him.”

“Yeah... fuck those guys. Listen comms has been in and out since I took off, might want to book this bird for service.”

Umberto shuts off comms via the lightpad.

“I’m the unlicensed pilot,” he tells Monique. “It’s me they’re looking for.”

“Well yeah.”

“Then you’re an Ebola patient.”

“When an employee turns whistleblower they tell Press and Quarantine that the rogue worker contracted something hazardous from a biotech lab and needs to be returned to specialty isolation—within company territories of course. The sham virus always seems to get the better of them in the end. Never an autopsy. Never an enquiry. It’s all sealed.”

Umberto frowns, unsure. “What kind of twisted-ass company pulls shit like that?”

“The biggest on Earth.”

“Next to McPherson maybe.”

Monique says nothing.

“You’re saying it’s *McPherson*?”

“I’m not *not* saying it.”

“Balls.” Umberto shrugs, tossing up his hands. “Game over.”

“Yeah.”

“Okay... okay...” his eyes dart about the cabin, checking timeline and course projections. “Here’s what we do... they’re looking for a Medevac helo *avoiding* Quarantine, right?”

“Uh huh.”

He licks his lips, brow furrowed. “Going back and forth over the years... you figure out which gates are older. Which ones have the sketchier equipment. We sneak the occasional liquor stash through Quarantine, but never people, so... yeah, this could be interesting. You

might want to go in back and start making a little fort out of anything carbon.”

a straight line

Quarantine Gate AA-02. Intercorporate shipping space—near-Earth orbit.

The UH-60 medevac helo rolls lazily through the gate’s three inner rings, which rotate as they scan the ship from nose to tail.

“Anything to declare?” comes the Quarantine guy on comms.

Umberto leans forward and smiles at the man in the window. “Sorry, no, I don’t have any witty statements like ‘don’t go to space’ or ‘yeah, my wife is a bitch’ for you today. Maybe next time, guy.”

Barn doors swing open on the third ring, revealing blinding sunlight for the instant it takes the windshield to adjust.

The helo lurches forward as its internal magnets spool up.

It exits the station and sets course for Asia, glowing orange with the first sniff of atmosphere.