

The Lay-by

“Stricken Vessel, I am here to offer assistance. I am Jonnifer, accredited space-side repair and recovery engineer. Please inform me of your needs.”

There was no answer. The sleek gloss-black vessel sat immobile suspended in the eye bending chasm that was space. The visual effect still impressed Jonnifer.

With no point of reference, no real ‘background’ or at least one that could provide the tiniest sense of perspective, a ship can be almost any size; tiny, as if it is just outside your view screen, or planet sized and vast distances away. Moving your head would usually break the illusion if the ship was close enough but it kept him entertained at times. He was currently broadcasting his offer of assistance slumped over the control console, hands under his chin, focusing hard on the ship, letting his eyes play tricks.

Jonnifer repeated his message adding “Although you did not broadcast a distress call, we monitor all registered flights and traced your route when you did not reach your destination. Please respond.” He waiting a split second then addressed his own ship.

“Aracee? Any response at your level?”

Aracee focused his computer mind on the interface between him and the other vessel, they communicated briefly and he responded.

“Yes. It says it is not stricken, it does not need assistance.”

“Inform the ship that I must speak to its pilot.”

“It informs me that its pilot is dead.”

Jonnifer spoke to the ship. “Mahon Industries vessel, erm,” He sat upright assuming some professionalism and looked to a small screen, “MIENV-Y5-330. What is preventing you from returning to your base? I can assist you in reaching your original destination or your pilots base planet, station or free-world....,” he cut the channel, “Which is it Aracee?”

“Free-world, Silica”

He opened the channel. “...your pilots Free-world Silica for assignment of new duties. Please respond.”

The stranded vessel echoed a booming response through Aracee’s internal speakers. There shouldn’t have been echo, or booming. In truth all Jonnifer should have heard was Aracee’s voice simply translating the other ships message as it was being transmitted. Aracee had found, rather logically, that adding a dramatic tone of his own choosing was mentally beneficial to his pilot.

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“Assistance is not required,” the voice took on menacing overtones as it spoke his name, ”rescue engineer Jonnifer.” The voice lightened again. ”Thank you for your concern. I would credit you funds for your trouble but only my pilot can authorise such a gratuity. He is dead.” On a conscious level Jonnifer had learnt to disregard Aracee’s vocal theatrics.

He cut the comms channel. “What’s going on? Tell me everything you know about this ship Aracee.”

/searching solarcom database/ vessel MIENV-Y5-330/ receiving ship and pilot data/

“The vessel is registered to a Ms Katalan Derry. She is loosely employed by 3 Silica corporations providing various escort, courier and chauffer services. She has been sole pilot of this vessel for 14 years. The vessel had registered maintenance work on 43 occasions. The first was...”

Jonnifer looked upwards in despair. “OK Aracee, we don’t need all of them. Any of the repairs seem relevant?”

“Please restate you enquiry”

“Oh Aracee. You sound just like a computer sometimes. I thought we’d got past all that ‘unable to comply’, ‘insufficient data’ garbage. Try again.”

/Searching internal systems/ appropriate alternatives: restate enquiry: Jonnifer additions/ Seven alternatives/ Random Output: Four/

“The repairs are all relevant to something Jonnifer”

Jonnifer smiled.

“I’m sure they are. Better by the way, that response, I like it. Tell me about the design, any flaws? Common system failures?”

“Yes. There has been a far higher incidence of internal sensor failure in this model of vessel.”

Jonnifer paused, thinking.

“Would that make the ship think the pilot was dead?”

“If the failures were specific to the pilot feedback systems it could. The rest of the ship brain was not the best design on the market. You might say it was thick.”

“Ok we can’t risk leaving the ship here if the pilot is still alive. Deploy clamp one.”

There was nothing to indicate the clamp had been fired, no sound, no flash of light, until he saw it emerge into the lower extremity of his view screen. It glided towards the dark machine dragging its cable behind. Just before it made impact, jets of plasma erupted from the targets lateral thrusters and with casual grace the ship side-stepped the clamp which continued on into the emptiness of space beyond.

“Shit. Prepare to back up Aracee.”

A clamp that missed was very rare. Usually the clamps target was stationary, or it could be made to be stationary relative to Aracee. That was the nature of their work, dead ships. But when a miss did occur it was tricky. Jonnifer watched as the clamp reeled itself out on its cable until it reached its full range. Then bouncing on the minimal elasticity of the cable it began to travel back towards them. That was not such a problem as Aracee could reel it in faster than the

clamp would retreat, thus preventing the cable twisting and possibly getting tangled. However reeling it in at that speed meant the clamp would enter its housing with enough speed to damage the housing and firing mechanism. The only answer was to reel it in slower and to back up with a little less speed than the clamp itself. This is what they did.

“Now get back there. Try again.”

The clamp torpedoed at their target again. Again the black vessel thrust sideways on brief legs of fire, but this time it timed another burst of its engines to coincide with the clamps passing. The clamp was swatted away, swinging out on its cable, making a safe retrieval even harder. There was nothing to stop the clamp striking the hull briefly as it finally entered its housing.

“Why would a ship act this way Aracee?”

“I might if I was protecting you, but there’s no reason for this ship to lie about its pilot being dead. If it believes that to be true then it is avoiding retrieval for another reason.”

“I think this ship is going to break for it, and there’s little we can do. How are we going to find out if there’s a live pilot onboard? Uh oh, too late, it’s firing its thrusters.

The vessel rotated on its axis, seeking a new destination with a complex pattern of plasma bursts along its bulk. Then its main engines ignited and the craft began its steady acceleration.

“Damn it. Give me a run down of any possible destinations on its current trajectory.”

“I will answer your previous question first.”

The cockpits main monitor flicked into life, showing a still picture of the front aspect of the vessel at the moment it had rotated to its new heading. With a visual stutter the imaged zoomed in, click, click, click, click. The picture was mainly darkness, striped with bright reflections on the glossy hull, reflections of the sun that lay vast distances behind them. But there, barely visible among the blackness, hardly distinguishable from just another patch of reflected sunlight was a pale shape. Nevertheless the shape had eyes, eyes that were open and full of fear, and just below those pleading eyes was a smaller shape that could only be a hand, pressed up against the transparent screen-wall of the most isolated and lonely prison cell imaginable.

“Well I guess that answers that question. We need to follow, but let’s not crowd it. It has a plan and I don’t want it confusing matters by changing its mind.”

“That is unlikely.”

“Yes, but so is a ship refusing to return to its base when it believes its pilot is dead.”

“It is unlikely but not unheard of Jonnifer. There is the Lay-by”

“Is that a possible destination for our friend here?”

“It is on a direct course Jonnifer.”

There was a brief silence, broken by a thump as Jonnifer’s foot struck the panel by his feet.

During lighter moments Aracee might make a play of being hurt. The humour was beneficial to his pilot, but Jonnifer was serious. Nevertheless with similar playful affect Aracee made the display screen crackle, as if the blow had disrupted its robust circuits.

“The lay-by. Shit. Bring up all available data on the place Aracee. No, not all, I know you, Mr. Literal. Give me your best revision. Go on surprise me.”

“The Layby. Current ship population; 1231. Ships known to be active; 767. The very first ship to occupy the Lay-by essentially created it by simply taking no action following its pilot’s death 86 years ago. All subsequent ships traveled to that location. Known factors that lead to the formation of the lay-by; All ships suffered pilot death; In all but two cases the pilots were in space intensive careers and had been operating the vessel for 12 years or more. All ships chose to go there instead of returning to base; All ships have resisted removal of themselves and other ‘inactive’ ships from the ‘lay-by’, even using force to repel intruders. Most significant vessel, Saturn Navy vessel, ‘Dread for Good Reason’. A very powerful warship, half destroyed during Saturn-Jupiter conflict with loss of entire crew. No correlation regarding type of vessel; No correlation regarding point of origin. All suggested reasons for formation of Lay-by inconclusive. Shall I go on?”

“You said all but two had pilots for over 12 years. What was different with those two.”

“Both vessels experienced a birth of a child onboard during their last journey. Both children died along with the crew”

“Oooh. You’re a ship computer; don’t you have any understanding of why the ships would do this?”

“It has been suggested that because ships are designed to measure their success based on the pilots wellbeing, any particular action is reinforced, ‘rewarded’ or ‘punished’ depending on its success or failure. It’s all part of our learning systems, designed to make your life a bright and joyous place. The catastrophic death of its pilot might be able to cause a destructive response in that reward system. These ships may essentially be ‘ashamed’, if you’ll excuse my use of this human term.”

“Self imposed exile?”

“That is one suggestion. Because a ships reason for being is to serve their pilot they might deem the only way to learn from their mistake and achieve the suitable level of ‘punishment’ would be to deny themselves their one reinforcing activity, deny themselves the right to serve another pilot. It requires only a small amount of creative thought. It is not an action that is programmed into us, but once the first ship did it, the action, if not the intent, was available as a possible future action for any other ship that accessed the Solarcom database. The only difference would be that the second ship made a different decision, that of traveling to join the first. Nevertheless that is logical. To fulfill the mission of achieving a long enough period of exile, one might seek safety in numbers. The first ship was also armed, unlike the second, so again it is logical that the second would seek the first. The second would then set another possible action for all future ships, that of making the exodus to the Lay-by’

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“Did you think that up by yourself?”

“I paraphrased available data and added a little myself.”

“Do you buy it?”

“No, but it’s the most logical explanation so far.”

“What happens when we reach the Lay-by?”

“We will be asked to leave, politely. If we don’t leave we will be threatened, politely.”

“Well, if I’m going to have to have a debate with a lot of computers I’m going to need some sleep. Wake me when we’re an hour away.”

“By the way Aracee, when we were approaching that vessel you told me it was a Mahon Industries scout vessel, instead of envoy class. It kept getting bigger and bigger until I thought we were going to hit it at least 5 times. Why did you lie?”

“I am a computer. I do not lie. I decided it was a suitable action in order to provide you with entertainment.”

“Well I suppose you could call it that.”



Jonnifer couldn’t sleep. The ship sensors registered the tension in his muscles and the agitation in his brain patterns. It decided to act.

/activating spontaneous conversation protocol/ seeking/output

“Jonnifer, tell me again about your plans for retirement.”

“Again?”

“It is proven to increase your well-being. It gives you hope, if you will excuse my use of the term.”

“Say what you see Aracee, I like you acting concerned about me. And this spontaneous conversation protocol is working a treat. You might need to increase your repertoire a little, but hey.”

“Next time I will talk about the weather”

Jonnifer laughed. Internal sensors relayed the physiological effects of that laugh into Aracee’s processor. It registered them, plotted them, stored images of Jonnifers face and in a simple way the computer rewarded itself, reinforcing it’s successful behavior and as such increasing it’s chances of implementing similar successful strategies.

“My retirement. Well, I shouldn’t call it retirement really. I’m only thirty-six and I plan on seeing my plans succeed well before I’m forty. Thirty-six, wow. You know we’ve been doing this job together for 15 years Aracee.”

“I know”

“Anyway, there’s me, owner, proprietor whatever of a small space station. Modest really, with enough space for private quarters big enough for two, maybe a couple of additional little’uns at some point. It needs enough rooms for a few guests, no more than 10 at a time, and a lovely view to keep them interested. Jupiter would be really nice. Looking out over the view there’d be a small diner with huge wrap around windows so big you’d feel like you’re eating in space. Out the back would

be a great big workshop, with a flexidock, parts compiler and a huge computer. There'd be a special dock for you Aracee, and you'd run the computer of course...be the computer..or whatever. We'd do cheap repairs for passing tourists, a bit of governmental stuff to bring in the cash. But the best bit, and for this we have to move back into the diner, there, stood looking out of the window, you know after setting up the diner for the guests, taking a break or something is this beautiful woman. Obviously in this fantasy we're not married or anything, but you know, we could be really soon.. sparks are starting to fly." He took a deep breath. "Obviously the fantasy moves on a bit from there."

"Where?"

"Keep your nose out."

"It was different this time round"

"It was? I don't see how."

"The first few times you told me the story I wasn't in it at all. The next few I was doing maintenance on the station. This is the first time you actually made us sound like a team."

Internally Aracee was giving himself little computer reward pellets en-masse. If he was becoming more important to Jonnifer then he was making Jonnifer happy, therefore he was clearly doing a good job.

"Well we are a team. I guess I'm just getting better at telling the story. Or you're getting better at subtly pushing me for a higher billing. I'm afraid the young lady still wins though. The day that I mention me and you exchanging loving glances

through the diner windows, you'll know you've got it made." Jonnifer yawned, Aracee remained quiet and Jonnifer slept.

When he woke they were still two hours from the lay-by but he sat in silence until after a further hour Aracee spoke.

"Jonnifer, I thought you might be interested in this message we have just received, just incase you want to trade this difficult job for a more relaxing endeavor. I'll play it now."

"Repair and recovery engineer Jonnifer Baum. I am Captain Carmen of the Trip-Party hub-craft 'Middle finger'. Our trip-group is 2 months away from an outer system non-orbital new-world and is passing within an acceptable acceleration range of your current position. I note your engines are capable of matching our cruise speed within 1 day. We have a small but annoying repair skill deficit and I would like to trade 4 daily labor-hours from you in exchange for a rest up on my vessel, food and drink included. Come join the party for as long as you like and help us out at the same time. I have sent the ship compliment, gender ration's, the usual info. Please respond."

Aracee registered a longer delay between Jonnifer hearing this message and any sort of action from his pilot than he would have suspected. Jonnifer never broke off from a job unless it really became unfeasible. Jonnifer's moment of thought suggested that he was really considering the proposal. After the moment had dragged, Aracee replayed the last two words. *"Please respond."*

Jonnifer jumped. He had been staring at the data he had received and was doing a brief bit of mental arithmetic. He had worked out that if this potential wild goose chase took longer than a day the Trip-Party ships would have accelerated well beyond any chance of him catching them up within an acceptable time. It was a shame. He hadn't joined a Trip in years and along with the occasional static ship-gathering they were the only extended social contact he ever got. He had no desire to go where they were headed but there was an easy 4 hour shift on offer. He could have joined them for a week or two and picked up some more work as they passed Jupiter. He looked at the visual representation that had come with the message.

The Trip-party was a gang of travelers, grouped together as a necessity for the majority of people when contemplating a journey that could potentially last months or more and when in particular they could not afford to simply freight their own ship or belongings. The digital image, currently like a distant 3-D radar image showed a sphere of dots, each an individual vessel, the mass surrounding Captain Carmen's central hub-ship. Onboard the 'middle finger' would be a bar, restaurant, basic sports facilities, some berths for those who would rather not sleep on their own ships or wanted a little pampering. He didn't bother to ask Aracee to check if Carmen was a Permanent party-hub provider. Most often, pilots like Carmen had their own reasons to make the long journey and made temporary modifications to their ships and then offered up spaces, charging a modest sum for his trouble. If it was his career then the charge would be higher but the hub-ship more impressive. Looking at the simple entertainment available

on Captain Carmen's vessel it was only a temporary Hub-ship. He was possibly relocating further out in the Solar-system. A lot of inner planet residents were grabbing spaces on new or growing free-worlds, close to floating pools of system resources, asteroids and the like. He counted the flock of vessels that surrounded the Hub-Ship rather than checking the figure provided; Twenty-nine, a modest number.

Nevertheless he couldn't ignore the target they were tracking and he thought of the face staring out of the window on that funereal black vessel and the possible sense of hope that may have grown within the heart of its pilot Katalan Derry, that rescue was at hand, a knight in tarnished ship armor. He made his resolution and flicked the comms channel open.

"Captain Carmen, this is Jonnifer Baum. Thank you for your offer. Some rest time would be appreciated but I have commitments. I am sending contact details of some loose partners I have in deeper system space that may be close enough to your route to offer assistance. I wish you and your fellow travelers the best in your new life." That had been an assumption, but he could not be bothered to check. He closed the channel, cleared the digital display and sat back.

"Aracee, please amplify the ship's systems." He closed his eyes. Most ships had sensors that monitored the workings of each of the ships components. Jonnifer had modified and added five times as many over the past ten years and Aracee had the ability to convert the data into an audible signal. In the way that an ancient motorist may have listened lovingly yet critically to each detail of his

vehicles ambient noise, so Jonnifer could do the same. This was like meditation to Jonnifer.

One hundred mechanical and electrical notes formed a concert of engineered symphony. He reclined and allowed himself half an hour, identified that one engine was out of tune, and that the atmosphere management system was playing just the tiniest bit out of tempo. They would have to wait. He couldn't allow himself anymore luxury just yet.

He sat forward again and stretched away some tension. "Right Aracee, down to business."



He looked at the same display screen that had previously displayed the Trip-Party visual. A rough sphere of dots filled the screen and for a split-second he thought he had forgot to clear the display but now he could not even count how many dots were there, it looked like a galaxy. "Another Trip-Party Aracee?"

It was big, too big, maybe Aracee had found a nearby Static Ship-Gathering as a consolation. As Aracee began to speak Jonnifer realized his mistake.

"No Jonnifer, this is a visual representation of the Lay-by. 1231 ships, dead and active. Most of the dead vessels are closer to the center, protected by an outer shell of active ships. There is a higher concentration on this face as it is the most common approach route."

He gathered himself. “That’s no concern. We’re here on honest business. We don’t want to cloud that truth by trying to be furtive. We fly straight ahead. How soon until they start acting like we’re a threat?”

“It isn’t possible to say for sure. Records suggest that a physical response is expected once we pass the half-hour point but that will be just a barrier formation of some kind and the initial verbal request to detour.”

“Ok, open a comm-link directed at MIENV-Y5-330, but make it sloppy enough that anyone listening in the Lay-by can hear it as well. Also let me know when we are about to break the half-hour barrier, I want to preempt their communication with our own. By the way, do we have a moniker for MIENV-Y5-330?”

“En-Voya4”

“What happened to Ev-Voya1 to 3?”

“Pirates, Loan Sharks and Pilot Suicide; Ms Derry’s father flew into an Asteroid.”

“Why?”

“More Loan Sharks.”

“Unlucky name!”

“Derry or En-Voya?”

Jonnifer laughed, hit the comms switch and began what he knew was a largely wasted attempt to stop En-Voya4 from reaching the Lay-by. There was a further pretense in his coming words that at least might help later on. The residents of the Lay-by would hear him attempting to do his job, providing a backdrop for his initial interaction with its residents.

“En-Voya4, this is rescue engineer Jonnifer Baum. As I am sure you are aware we have tracked you on your current heading. You are about to enter an area restricted to piloted ships. We have seen your pilot who is alive and well. You must not enter the Lay-by, you are placing yourself and your pilot in serious danger. Will you bring yourself to a stop so I may board you and repair your faulty internal sensors?”

“What is left of my Pilot is my concern engineer Baum. Her remains are beyond your help. I will receive safe passage into the Lay-By.”

“Aracee, I want to transmit the picture you took of the pilot.”

“I would advise against it. It is possible that the negative image of its pilot in pain would only reinforce the punishment loop; if that theory is correct. Its logic will assume that the picture was taken as she died rather than after the ship registered her demise. Pain is not the right word to describe the effect, but it is close enough.”

“Hmmm, maybe. You’re the computer.” He left his disquiet regarding that theory at the back of his mind.

“En-Voya4. This is your last opportunity. I can repair your internal sensors before it is too late. Once you enter the Lay-by I may not be able to help you save the life of your pilot.”

There was no reply.

Jonnifer looked to his visual display where a thousand particles of light represented a thousand ships. There was movement occurring, but beyond the seemingly random activity that he had already witnessed and that should be

expected within any living system. He watched as a group of motes massed within the core and then as a coordinated whole they began to progress towards the surface of the sphere. The surface itself was beginning to bulge as if it intended to absorb the new-comer as soon as possible, accepting it into its fold as if it had belonged there forever. All hope of stopping En-Voya4 before it entered the body of the Lay-by was dashed as this swelling mass of firefly's enveloped the ship and it immediately became indistinguishable from the swarm that still grew there. He returned his attention to the inner pearl of moving vessels. One of the specks it contained glowed brighter than the rest and he was surprised how such an abstract threat, a small group of innocuous dots, could produce such a sense of dread. He was sure that the brightest of those motes would be the battleship 'Dread for Good Reason', and that it would be carrying the bulk of the firepower within the Lay-by. He also didn't doubt that those vessels that had formed up with the battleship would also be armed, but he wanted to see, dots were no use to him, as a human he needed more.

"Release a camera drone Aracee and then slow our approach. I want them to know I have taken their maneuvers seriously, and open a channel."

As he returned his gaze to the display he also saw two small droplets of vessels erupt from either side of their approach vector, starting a flanking maneuver. He had often wondered why no government body had taken a bolder approach to securing the resources within this haven, but watching their response to his small solitary and in any traditional sense, unarmed rescue vehicle he could now understand the immense investment and risk that would be involved.

Something emerged into the lower extremity of his view screen. The camera drone fired its thrusters and plunged towards the gargantuan threat ahead of them. Five seconds later it was out of sight, helped along by their own speed and the fact they were now slowing to a far less threatening pace. It raced towards the wall of ships.

“The channel is open Jonnifer, good luck.”

Jonnifer took a deep breath.

“Inhabitants of the Lay-by, please desist in your attack formation. I am not here as a threat...” *We will make our own decision as to threat you present. Do not progress any further.*”

Aracee knew better than to add any menacing theatrics to this communication. In fact he chose ‘female service droid voice 4’ from his data banks, in a way it was a small trick against the Lay-by, making their communication sound as passive and neutral as possible.

“Aracee, comply with their request.”

The engines powered down and retro-thrusters brought the ship to a stop.

“I have released a camera drone. Please advise....” *That is satisfactory. We have checked all records available and have decided to trust your intentions. We recognize the human need for visual input. Do not hold us responsible if we subsequently deem that its destruction is necessary.*”

“Wouldn’t dream of it!”

Aracee spoke up. “Seriously though Jonnifer, don’t expect to get it back. The reason they don’t mind is because when we’re finished they will requisition it for parts.”

“You’ve seen me pilot one of these things! They’ll have to catch it first.” Punching the dashboard the stationary image of his transparent view-screen changed to show the moving picture relayed from the nimble camera drone. Jonnifer grabbed a small hand-held device, the drones control mechanism.

“Who am I talking.....” At any one time a union of between six and one hundred vessels forms the communications you receive. You can assume that we represent the interests of the whole.”

From experience Jonnifer knew that humans had to be cautious when talking with computers in a pressure situation. Firstly they formulated their responses and made plans in micro-seconds so their reactions came so quickly on the heels of your last word that it was disquieting. They also had an annoying knack of answering as soon as they had enough information to do so, often whilst you were still mid-sentence.

A problematic side effect of arguing at computer speeds is that humans couldn’t. Nevertheless they often tried. This was categorically pointless. There was no difference between one-second slow and ten-seconds slow, it was all just slow. Knowing this he took his time, and planned his statements carefully, and avoided statements that encouraged a response until he was sure he was finished. He was

also fed up with talking at a digital sphere of dots. He strained to see something real within the drones visual display. Its magnified image should produce something to look at soon enough. It was fast, very fast.

Jonnifer spoke to the Lay-by's welcome committee once more.

"Are you aware that your new arrival has a live pilot onboard?..." *We are aware that you believe so.*"

"I have no reason to lie?"... *Belief is not a lie, it is simply prone to error.*

"Please desist from responding for 15 seconds." He needed time to communicate a more complex message. It sometimes worked. "I have been denied the right to satisfy my human belief that a live pilot is aboard En-Voya4. Humans and computers have a desire to protect life, En-Voya4 has that desire but its internal sensors are mistaken. Check solarcom, it's a common fault. Any of you would follow my course of action if you had the information I have available to me. I must check inside En-Voya4." *Denied. You have no place here. Granting you access will set a logic-precedent that would make it too easy for others to also gain access. That would be counter-productive to our ability to fulfill our current programmed activity.*

"Tell me about this programmed..." *That would be counter-productive to our ability to fulfill our current programmed activity.*

"Aracee, send the picture."

"I don't think..."

"Send it!"

“Lay-by inhabitants. This was taken at the point we first intercepted En-Voya4.”
MIENV-Y5-330 states that his pilot must have died in this position. What you see is the dead pilot he has the burden of carrying within.”

“Then ask him whether his internal sensors have any visual records that would match with this moment in time.” *MIENV-Y5-330 states that as soon as his internal sensors registered the loss of the pilots life-signs he turned his attention away. Pain is not the right word to describe what he chose to avoid, but it will suffice.*

“Then if that’s the position she died in then En-Voya4 should have a visual record of her moving into the position shown on the picture, in order for...*you must board MIENV-Y5-330 and search for life. Please approach Jonnifer Baum.*

He chuckled. Computers were stupid. He was in.