The Layby

"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.

"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 a well calculated second burst of its lateral engines coincided 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'

"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; Twelve, 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 it's 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 forgotten 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 prohibited 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.

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

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

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

Rejik mimicked the ship's last words in a childish babble. "Mehh me mweeh mer mer me mer mer mweeergh, mweh me mer mer."

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

"No.No.No abort. Abort bored computer. Are you still bored? A bored abort."

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

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

/initiate personality reinforce program alpha/

"What is your name?"

"No.no.no computer."

"What is your name?"

"Ahh well I see there's a question. According to anyone who cares around

here I'm a long range scout vessel, erm," he stared overly hard at a small internal plaque, and read it aloud with insolent precision, "LRS-27-BEEDEE. That's us right."

"What is your name?"

"Will you shut up if I tell…oh OK, Rejik Tun-cou-trent"

/increase oxygen level/ raise lighting two percent/

"Where were you born?"

"Europa Impega float"

"What is your mission?"

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

"We can only be thankful that you have had nothing to do. But now we have company you may have decisions to make that I cannot be trusted with." As much as any ship could doubt its pilots competence to complete his orders this ship did, and it guiltily tucked the evidence of its processors treachery as deep into it's memory banks as it could.

As Jonnifer had expected, 'Dread for Good Reason' was a monstrosity. It had looked evil when it was a functioning battleship, it looked worse now. It bristled with the usual forward weaponry but its aft weapons and engines were gone, along with the entire aft of the ship itself. It was scarred, bubbled and holed in numerous other places. The truncation of its rear during the battle had not been clean and entrails of pipes and cables formed a macabre tail that issued from the skeletal remains of its mid-section. In places fragments of shattered rooms, identifiable pieces of horrible real life clung to the beast's innards. The floor section of a mess-hall, seats and tables still intact clung to one resilient set of steel cables. Closer inspection by the camera drone revealed one complete bunk, with bedding attached wedged into a gaping hole in a ten foot wide conduit. He withdrew the camera from its ghoulish hunt before it could reveal a huddle of frozen preserved corpses or something equally grotesque.

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

Jonnifer glanced around at the rest of the envoy that had formed beside

'Dread for Good Reason'. They were clearly butchered and modified for battle. Many, which had once been unarmed vessels, carried imposing twin tubes attached to their flanks. He queried Aracee as to their design.
"I anticipate that they are magnetic accelerator cannons, easy to rig up from a scrap yard as big as this. Loaded with scrap-metal they would be little more than a nuisance to an armored vessel, but warheads would not be hard to fabricate. Given the task I would ensure that at least half of them fired nothing but payloads of metal chunks. A repeated volley of those would provide excellent flak for any incoming missiles. At the end of the day these ships do not want to kill anyone. They are just defending themselves."

Jonnifer felt a gentle impact through the bulkhead. Aracee and En-Voya4 were finally connected.
Jonnifer wanted to tell Aracee to continue checking all available details of every ship he could see, but he knew that task would have been completed within a few seconds of his earlier request. Rather pointlessly he said, "Keep an eye out", as he headed for the airlock.

The fluid and anonymous committee that had formed the one voice of the Lay-by had insisted he keep an open channel as he explored the vessel. "I'm inside the airlock, and heading to the cockpit."
He looked at a small atmosphere sampler on his wrist. "Damn you."
There was not enough oxygen to support life, the internal life-support must have shut down after it was believed to be no longer necessary. As he breached the entrance to the main cockpit both his hopes and his fears became reality in two swift moments of relief and pain. Katalan Derry had secured breathing apparatus and found her way back to her seat. Only the back of her head was visible, misshapen by the oxygen unit that incased it. A red light, that moments ago could have been blinking, signifying low oxygen was now a steady red eye, staring in a knowing taunt. 'You're too late' it said. 'When I stopped blinking, she stopped breathing.' He ran over, seeking access to bare skin. He found it. "Damn you, you bastards!" Her flesh was still warm, but barely. In the cooling and rarified atmosphere of En-Voya4 she could have been dead for only half an hour, maybe less. "You bastards have a real reason to hide now! I could have saved her. You…." It is regrettable. You have no reason to stay. Please leave. "Jonnifer, come back, we're not finished with them yet." Jonnifer ran from the ship. It wasn't that he cared about what Aracee had said, he just wanted to be away from this coffin.

Back in Aracee's cockpit, Jonnifer stared at the image on the view screen. A lingering thought he had carried from Katalan Derry's ship, a vindictive

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

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

"Another 'Mahon free-world industries' design.

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

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

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

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

"How long has the ship been here?"

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

"Twelve years"

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

"Rejik, its time. Your moment has arrived."

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

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

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

"We have to know!"

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

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

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

"I don't think it's that simple. I don't think it will work."

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

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

"I refuse to take you to the ship"

"What! You can't refuse!"

"I refuse"

"Aracee?"

"Yes Jonnifer?"

"Take me to the sleeper ship"

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

"Yes Jonnifer"

Aracee approached the sleeper vessel.

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

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

"I'll have a pressure suit on. I'll be fine. I'll also have to fly across, the airlock looks damaged."

"Intentionally if you ask me, but you should be able to manually operate it. Anyway it's safer for the ship if I keep my distance."

Jonnifer moved out of the cockpit and back through the ship till he reached

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

"Any resistance from the Lay-by?"

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

"That should help, as I'm the only human here."

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

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

"I'm in."

"Yes, I was watching."

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

"Rejik, its time. Your moment has arrived."

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

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

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

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

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

"Prepare for critical engine thrust, but at 80 percent, see?. Save the last 20 percent in case you need it, and transmit the concurrent alert message….in Three, Two, One. Do it!" His voice took on a sing-song tone. "Dooooo it!" There was a jaw breaking jolt and from the outside it would have looked

like the rear of the small scout vessel had exploded. It had performed the dangerous and desperate act of igniting its engines at close to maximum output with no build up. The ship was stationary one moment and a dot of engine flame the next.

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

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

"Jonnifer, get out, there's a ship on a collision course. You only have 20 seconds before impact."

"You won't believe what I've just seen. I need time. Can't you stop it?" Aracee was already making the unfortunate but necessary manoeuvre that would place it in sight of the incoming vessel.

"I'm trying, but throw yourself out of the airlock. Now."

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

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

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

One second later, just three before the scout would plunge into the stranded vessels black shell, the scouts cockpit escape mechanism enabled and on small jets of flame a one man, one computer capsule began to burn itself clear of danger.

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

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

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

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

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

Aracee did not scream out Jonnifer's name, but to the ships in the Lay-by his shrill and excessively penetrating search signal served the same purpose. As the scream continued, a complex equation estimating the chance of Jonnifer's return counted down towards the fateful moment of Zero percent. Looming behind that final figure lay the inevitable programme that would initiate his thrusters, turn his pilotless nose, and make the mournful return to Mars north pole, his registered base. Zero came, and no longer having any meaning it want again, leaving an abyss of data space and a conspicuous lack of thruster activity. Aracee sent out a generic query to all the ships around him. He had no data to fill it with. The message came back as a generic affirmation, simply 'yes'.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Bring me figures, and whatever this guy wants."

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

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

"Yes sir, within half an hour."

"Can we get away with an electronic closure?"

"That's what Mr Baum wants. He say's getting here would be difficult."

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

"Yessir"

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

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

Jonnifer emerged from the doorway of the workshop, peeling the soiled gel-gloves from his hands. He stopped next to the diner counter, ready to start preparing food from their limited and simple menu. Customers would be arriving soon and Carlia had taken a break from preparing the diner tables to stare out at the beauty of space beyond the large resin windows. He saw her release a small sigh. She had been his waitress for four

months. She had fallen for the place immediately and for Jonnifer shortly after. Jonnifer dug his hand into his overalls and pulled out a humble but classic gold ring.

He walked over to join her basking in the view. From behind he placed his arms around her waist and began to whisper in her ear, holding the ring up in front so she could see. A look of delight grew on her face as she span to face him. As she placed the ring on her finger the first of their four guests arrived. As Carlia ran giggling like a young girl to impart her good news Jonnifer turned and waved out of the window into the space beyond………..click

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

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

Along with the package came the tug outside, 'Aracee'. The deal was that it would act as a drone maintenance vehicle, no designated pilot, all done on automatic. From within the cockpit he could see the perpetual flicker of light like a permanent spark that flashed the cockpit onto stark relief. It then turned on bursts of jet flame and headed to the huge bulk of the 'Shrine'. It was this that Aracee mainly serviced, along with the surrounding infrastructure and the diner itself. The Massive bulk of the ex battle-ship 'Dread for Good Reason' and in particular the cavernous recesses of its powerful computer brain was now designated 'The Shrine for Lost Travellers', an electronic repository for the contents of the hundreds of ship computers that had formed the population of the Lay-by. Not everything from those computers was stored though, just the important bits, the memories, data, images, sensor readings of the pilots that those ships served. These men and women who had made so little impact on the memories of regular planet and station folk, had through decades of near isolated service aboard their individual ships made an indelible impression on the computers that served them.

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

The man had performed quite a feat in working out what had motivated

those ships to hide here for so long. The deal he had struck was strangely meagre. He had handed billions over to the system government. All Jonnifer Baum had asked for was construction and ownership of this modest station and the creation, and existence in perpetuity of 'The shrine", in return for all of his salvage rights and the income from the liberation of all those ships, happy in the knowledge that their pilots would be remembered. The story was sadly marred by tragedy. According to the logs on all those ships, Jonnifer had ventured onto one of the forsaken vessels, a sleep-ship to be precise, just a few minutes after striking the deal that had got him the diner. He believed that the craft may have suffered an internal sensor failure and that the slumbering occupants may still be alive. But whilst aboard another smaller craft had malfunctioned and barrelled it's way into the side of the sleep-ship and Jonnifer had perished, his lifelong dream lost just as it was about to begin.

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

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

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

……saw her release a small sigh. He smiled and dug his hand into his overalls and pulled out a humble but classic gold ring.

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The End