

THE SCHOOL OF HARD KNOCKS



BY OLIVER STRONG

The School of Hard Knocks

By Oliver Strong

Copyright © 2018 Oliver Strong. All rights reserved.

No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system or transmitted in any form by any means electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recorded or otherwise, without the prior permission of the author. 🏠

ISBN: 978-0-9955188-2-7

Word Count: 86,462

Smashwords Edition

Contents

[Chapter One](#)

[Chapter Two](#)

[Chapter Three](#)

[Chapter Four](#)

[Chapter Five](#)

[Chapter Six](#)

[Chapter Seven](#)

[Chapter Eight](#)

[Chapter Nine](#)

[Chapter Ten](#)

[Chapter Eleven](#)

[Chapter Twelve](#)

[Chapter Thirteen](#)

[Chapter Fourteen](#)

[Chapter Fifteen](#)

[Chapter Sixteen](#)

[Chapter Seventeen](#)

Chapter one

Inside Sonnet's cockpit a murky broth of yellow tobacco smoke vibrated to the squeal of psychedelic guitars. A man reclined into his seat, foot tapping dashboard, rolled up cigarette in one hand, gentleman's magazine in the other.

Five foot ten, grey eyes under chestnut brows with prominent nose, mouth hardened like the business he was in. Flowing brown hair combed down the rear of his skull while stubble surrounded his chin and mouth. About 100lbs more than God intended, the chair ground beneath an oversized backside while his belly moved side to side. Years of calorie laden food washed down with double strength brachian bitter and little to no exercise had taken its toll not only on his body but his face. He had one of those pudgy faces, without examining the rest of his physique you could easily surmise he carried extra ballast.

Guitars howled as the singer cried,

“Come on,

Let the spirit inside you,

Don't wait to be found,

Come along with my sound,

Let the spirit move you.”

He puffed a cigarette, rolled by yellow fingers into a twisted silver birch. To his front the ship's viewscreen broke up Sonnet's grey hull, a dark sheet pock marked by tiny white spots, no more than a foot in height. A window into the void of space, it stretched six feet horizontally ending its journey to the side of each forward chair.

This wasn't some swanky liner or a military ship with thousands of credits invested in toilet paper alone but a private vessel, one of many strippers docked at Templeton's.

A Hendrix-esque rock solo detonated above his head causing nicotine broth to shake in its shockwave. The burgeoning fellow tapped his foot harder and harder before slamming down an alert button. A whining klaxon erupted and three scruffy men bundled in. One dressed in jeans another short pants, the guy at tactical wore a grey flight suit similar to his Captain their colours impossible to differentiate in this red light.

Once music ceased the crew reported in, 'What's up Rick?'

Rick brushed ash off his blue suit, 'False alarm.'

'You what?'

'It was an accident,' he placed his magazine on the dashboard.

The navigation officer sighed, 'You been jacking off to that shit again?'

'Fuck off!' Rick replied in a South Yorkshire accent.

Two men could be heard stomping back from the engine room when a message came in, 'Hey I got something,' said a man in short jeans, t-shirt and trainers.

'Gonorrhoea?'

'They hit Sigma 9.'

Rick drew on his rollup while yellow fingers combed back greasy hair, 'What's on Sigma 9?'

'Population, seven thousand, it's a farming colony.'

'How much for the journey?'

'Three pounds of urillium.'

'Fuck it.'

Rick was in his mid-forties as was his waistline thanks to many nights on duty waiting for information from the front. He and his crew scavenged anything they could fit into the cargo bay and haul back to civilized space.

His tactical officer, Sam, tapped away, 'It could be worth it.'

'Neggs won't hit a farming colony.'

'Depends on what they're farming.'

Rick leant over to see a leaved plant similar to bamboo, 'What's that?'

'Zaj Zavsar.'

'And?'

'It's the active ingredient in Split. People pay a lot of cash for this stuff.'

'How much is a lot?'

'Three to five hundred credits a pound.'

The cockpit went silent for a minute.

'Anyone else headed there?'

A man stationed behind Rick's left shoulder scrutinized his scanner display, 'No-one's moved.'

Many ships hung close to a jump gate, monitoring fleet movements. After a large battle they'd enter hyperspace like vultures launching from tree tops, the smell of carrion upon the savannah impossible to resist.

‘Let’s blow this shithole.’

Everyone resumed positions, an atmosphere scrubber removed tobacco smoke as the ship came off silent running. Sonnet broke free from docking links. A guy behind Rick’s right shoulder plotted course. Rick flicked a switch sending his request to the jump gate.

After credits had been transferred the gate warmed up forming an event horizon. A shimmering lake of ice beckoned as Rick activated Sonnet’s computer. Sonnet moved in on automatic her long smooth body possessed a dolphin’s snout stretching back into a sperm whale’s body.

Engines seared space, burning expensive urillium fuel, granting enough leverage to cruise the waves of hyperspace and journey great distances in a relatively short time.

Sonnet was a temple to masculinity, a place where the single male might worship his household Gods and his Gods were many, rising and falling in popularity as time went on yet a few remained, for without them the temple would crumble.

First was Apollo the God of loud and obnoxious music. Next came Dionysus the God of empty beer cans and hangovers. Third Poseidon God of trash and urine stained toilets, finally his brother, the greatest God to inhabit this shrine ... Zeus God of pornography and bad personal hygiene.

These Gods were worshipped fervently each day. Tenets observed without fail lest Hera, Goddess of marriage and “relationships” duped them into a life of clean living and keeping up with the Joneses.

Provided they remained within the temple they were safe for no woman entering this place could possibly stand her ground more than two minutes before asphyxiating.

Sonnet rode the waves of hyperspace, its shade depended on your destination yet its colour remained, blue. Rick imagined he was a surfer riding waves on a beach which is essentially what Sonnet did. Ordinarily hyperspace would crush any matter, Sonnet should have been pancaked into energy and spread thinly across its realm. But an enveloping energy field allowed her to slip through, riding its currents to their destination before opening a crack and exiting. This process cost dearly in energy and but one fuel contained enough energy units to sustain her journey and open a portal back into normal space.

In the past only the largest of vessels might explore hyperspace due to energy requirements until urillium solved that problem, leading to the current war ... but that's for later.

Rick put his feet up while Sonnet's crew cleared cans and clutter from their stations. They and others waited around Piraxis monitoring the war before traveling in packs to prey upon the remnants of battle. This strike was a low priority farming colony, not much in it for strippers. Strippers were after rare super alloys used in space ship construction, precious metals, technology, weapons and most of all urillium. A farming colony would put up no resistance, they had no weapons or technology and certainly no urillium. However, they did have a crop of Zaj Zavsar, used in the production of split, a class A narcotic. The trouble wasn't so much getting your hands on the stuff it was finding a place to sell it without being murdered first, but Rick had been in this game for twenty years, he had contacts.

'Reaching exit point,' said Dyson.

'Alright lads hold onto your wage packets!' replied Rick as the men strapped themselves in.

Fore of Sonnet space-time revealed itself through a thin slit, she jolted back in an act of defiance, currents of hyperspace rushed in one direction while Sonnet pushed the other.

They were buffeted back and forth and with a kick ejected like a barking dog from its master's backdoor. Dyson went over navigation as Peters scanned the system confirming they were where they should be.

Sigma 9 was a system of twelve planets its fourth resembled Mars, a breathable atmosphere with parched soil. Colonists had built a dome and using machinery to melt permafrost grew cash crops of Zaj. Every year nefarious characters appeared from hyperspace to bid on the evil weed. This year negz came early blasting them into the stone age. Negz took a harsh view of these people, so much so they were willing to commit warships to destroy cultivation of any Zaj Zavsar. No trial, no jury, only a slit in hyperspace, a scan and orbital bombardment. Then they'd set about destruction of the farmers means to further cultivate it ... execution in other words.

'What's the situation?'

Peters scanned the surface searching the radiation spectrum, 'Negg-heads fucked them from orbit.'

'Anyone left?'

'I dunno but here's the dome co-ordinates, well where it was.'

'Set a course, out the way this time.'

'Sure, co-ordinates set.'

'Let's do it.'

Sonnet descended through atmosphere slicing its high clouds, the planet's surface unfolded by degrees. Buffeting caused a little rough and tumble but Dyson watched over navigation as the ship's computer compensated.

Sonnet's hull heated, her silver sleek body turning deep to bright red as atmospheric friction intensified. Moby Dick descended from the skies using its wide belly as a braking mechanism. Cloud shot past the cockpit's strip, blocking Rick's view, then poof the planet below bared herself. At first a mountainous range displayed white caps, it quickly smoothed out as Sonnet traversed the heavens to reveal dusty plains. Finally their destination could be seen, a burnt out pit in the middle of an alien dust bowl. A shattered dome wrecked by orbital bombardment. Smoke rose before turning off, pulled by drafts in the upper atmosphere Sonnet had battled just moments ago.

The will of nature cannot be changed for she is the most determined of creatures in the universe. Yet a man may go against her desire even take advantage but only if he understands who is superior. Man yields when he must but always with an eye towards the goal and that is the process of navigation. For he who forgets Mother Nature's superiority will end up cast upon rocks, hanging by his fingernails blood soaking his salt caked arms, or worse, bloated and deformed on a beach, a message to all who dare test Mother Nature's will.

Rick pushed his feet onto the hull beneath his station. He shook back and forth for a minute until the ship had slowed, moving through atmosphere at a speed not so distasteful to this planet.

'I've found a small valley, taking her down,' stated Dyson as he tapped his station.

Sonnet broke off to Port, mighty thrusters encompassing her body burned fuel at full pelt. Rick was pulled by G-forces as Sonnet tore from her previous flight path onto a new one. It was nothing more than a rollercoaster might create yet he traversed the atmosphere of an uncharted alien planet after a negz attack, not tightly fixed to rails in an amusement park on Earth where one might sue if it went bad. Out here if it hit the fan it didn't matter how many lawyers you had on speed dial, you were alone.

She slowed to hover above a surface of fine dust broken up by rocks. Thrusters heaved with stress as Sonnet, about the same size as a 20th century submarine, let out her landing claws descending ten centimetres a second, five centimetres a second, two, one, six claws touched down.

Stanchions squealed under her immense bulk. Thrusters eased off transferring mass to hydraulics, it wasn't pretty or graceful but it worked. Externally the experience was nerve wracking, internally the sounds of a creaking hull and pressure valves blowing off nature's titanic stress was enough to make any man consider a change of underwear. Sonnet's crew were used to the experience, sure they were scared stiff the first time but that was Rick's initiation test. Rick got a perverse pleasure on the rare occasions a fresh crewman went through his first landing. Many were ex-military or served on merchant craft, vessels kept to Earth Corps regulations. Those babies flew like a dream, you'd need to look out the window to know if you'd landed. On their introductory landing, far beneath Earth Corps' high standards, they usually filled their pants. Of course, they didn't actually soil themselves ... not until the part Rick pulled an expression of tortured horror and screamed "OH MY GOD! WE'RE GONNA DIE!" then wailed and rolled around the floor ... it was tradition.

Some quit there and then, others waited until they returned to Templeton's, those who remained were the present crew. It was tough to find a replacement after someone left, it was even tougher keeping them, but one thing's for sure Sonnet's crew held their nerve.

Creaking subsided as the last valves fired, 'Landing complete.'

Rick pushed his ample frame out the Captain's chair, 'Sam, Allenby you're with me. The rest of you arseholes stay here, no wandering off this time, got it?'

'Yeh, yeh,' huffed Dyson.

Rick, Sam and Allenby walked across an alien desert. Breather masks a barrier between dusty atmosphere and lungs. Sand clogged their alien surroundings turning midday to dusk.

They pressed against high winds. A tall American fellow named Sam was hardest hit. He'd been tactical officer for three years now. Ever since the war commenced Rick needed a man who could interpret the negz language fluently, it was a stroke of luck when they crossed paths.

Sam studied for years to get his PhD in alien linguistics. His Masters was in a common dialect of Hemzih Negz, a most difficult language for any creature to master. He'd left university with the hope of an ambassadorial position unfortunately war broke out and before he could blink draft papers hit his mail box.

Rick didn't understand why he'd turned the position down. A desk job, good pay, short hours, all he need do was translate communications on the rare occasion enemy transmissions were decrypted, that was before it turned into a hot war.

Sam refused to take the job, his first reason being: it's immoral to draft a man. Second: he'd spent years studying these aliens and their culture so they could understand one another not so men of violence might soak their hands in blood. Before they came for him Sam skipped Earth taking the only job where he might use his skills without a licence or identity papers from the government.

Rick hired people based on ability but what mattered most was if he trusted their face. Sam was a young impressionable man straight out of university, back then, today he was Rick's young protégé and one day he'd make a fine Captain. As for Allenby he was in his fifties, he'd worked for reputable companies most of his career, salvaging vessels on a legal basis. He worked government contracts carrying official papers and permits, until his wife discovered a nest egg put away for old age and lawyered up. While hauling the broken superstructure of a crashed mining ship 10,000 light years from home Allenby was informed she was taking him for 70%. By the time he returned he'd not only missed the court date but he'd missed a month of alimony payments.

Allenby was a portly Cetian of merry character yet his ex-wife brought out a mean streak in him that day. He quit his job and disappeared, signing on with Rick, no government licence meant no permits, no taxes, no alimony and no harassment every time he missed half a credit in payment for two kids that weren't even his. I guess that was the kicker, he'd hired a lawyer with what little she hadn't taken and had a D.N.A. It turned out he wasn't the father and after a match was run through the Tau Ceti database, Bob Sutton, his next-door neighbour and bowling buddy, was found to be the father! Unfortunately he was on the birth certificate and according to his lawyer Allenby had to pay unless he contested it in court. Well, Allenby was all for contesting until the lawyer produced his fee. Allenby was skint, he couldn't afford that and if he didn't get a job soon he'd be locked up and sent to a forced labour camp for delinquent fathers, so he got out of Dodge.

As for Rick, his story wasn't nearly so dramatic, he was just a guy who'd drifted from place to place trying to find himself. He left school and hitched around the solar system staying under the radar until one day he got a job aboard the Sonnet. Its Captain took him under his wing, maybe he saw potential or maybe he just felt sorry for a hobo that needed a decent job to set him straight.

Rick began work on anything that didn't require fore knowledge of stripping. He made tea and coffee, cleaned the dishes, did all the odd jobs for what was a fair amount of pay. Since they often spent months alone in space Rick couldn't quit and move on as the mood took him. Time in space allowed Rick to contemplate life, where it was going and what he wanted to do with it.

Rick hadn't noticed the years pass yet he learned every aspect of Sonnet and its business. He'd seen crewmen come and go yet he and Max remained. After a few years Rick was on the tactical position, he doesn't remember the day he was promoted he just worked positions when needed and never got out of tactical.

When Max died he left the Sonnet to Rick, by that time he could run her in his sleep. Rick was unsure why Max left him Sonnet maybe he was the son Max never had and always wanted? Perhaps in a toss-up between Rick and the state he chose Rick?

But enough of the past, these three marched toward remnants of a habitation dome. Sam and Allenby carried small metal cases. Rick held a location device in his palm while all three bore pistols strapped to their waists, this was the wild west of the galaxy.

Its foundations remained, crooked glass jutting out to pierce ground. Inside burnt cinders blackened the sun choking its atmosphere, scorched earth crunched beneath their boots. A charred pyre of bodies filled the bottom of a pit created by a negz surgical strike. A tragic mauve flower resting on a bleak landscape.

Negz had outlawed Zaj Zavsar centuries ago, long before mankind reached another star. Its production punishable by death, commonly they landed troops gathered farmers and carried out executions but during war, time came at a premium. The premium being they couldn't be certain Earth Corps ships weren't waiting in hyperspace, ready to ambush while they meted out justice planet side. Instead they emerged from hyperspace hit their target and slipped away before Earth might respond. The colony was in tatters yet Rick felt no pity for they knew what they were doing and its consequences.

A voice called from its mauve mist, 'Who are you?'

'Traders,' replied Rick.

'What you trading?'

'Credits.'

'For what?'

'All the Zaj you got left.'

The fellow coughed, 'Follow me.'

Rick, Sam and Allenby pulled torches from their pockets. A thin man, handkerchief over his mouth and nose, squinted through burnt flakes of his former home. He beckoned and Rick followed to a set of steps leading underground.

Ten feet below colonists huddled together as cold chipped away their spirit and hunger gnawed their bones. They were a sorry sight, quite an irony since one hundred feet away Rick's torch fell upon a massive stash of Zaj Zavsar, worth a small fortune in human space.

'How much?'

A tall burly man with a Texan accent replied, '500 pounds o' prime split.'

'I'll take it.'

'What you tradin'?'

'Food, medical supplies, blankets, heaters.'

'Mother fuckin' strippers, tryin' to steal it all for a few food bars!'

'I could trade gold, and when you've all starved or frozen to death I'll come back for it.'

The tall Texan dressed in blackened work clothes spat on Rick's boot, 'Piece o' shit!'

'I've got that too.'

The Texan pulled out a shotgun, 'Maybe I'll just take your shit?'

Rick sat down on a nearby rock peering into the eyes of shivering women and children, 'It looks like I've been out smarted, what do you reckon?'

Allenby began to chuckle his protruding belly jiggled up and down in its flight suit, 'I bet he even remembered to load it!'

'What's so funny?' sneered the Texan, puzzled by their response to his threat.

'This ain't me first rodeo partner.'

'Listen boy, you hand over the supplies or I blow your mother fuckin' head off!'

'And after you've done that me crew'll gas these fucking tunnels with zyklon and take your Zaj.'

'How they gonna find us asshole?'

Rick looked up and sighed, 'Dyson you getting this?'

A voice came out of Rick's collar, 'I hear you Gov.'

The Texan looked up then back down at Rick, 'They don't know where we are.'

'2.18 by 22.47, ten feet below ground,' replied Dyson.

'Shit,' snapped the Texan.

'How much for the split?' stated Rick.

'We'll wait.'

'No-one's coming.'

'Bullshit.'

A baby screamed from the shadows, its mother removed her jumper wrapping the child in another layer. Trading her resistance to Boreas, the

god of the winter wind, to keep the Keres, the fates of death, at bay from her child.

'I hope they arrive soon,' said Rick ascending from a cold rock, 'looks like this has been a blowout lads.'

The strippers made for steps leading out the tunnels when the Texan snapped, '100 pounds for a month's supplies and a distress beacon.'

'Four hundred pounds.'

'FUCK YOU!'

'I'll take the four hundred pounds thanks.'

'Two months supplies for one fifty.'

'I'll do three hundred pounds for two months supplies and I'll chuck in some holo-vids.'

'Fuckin' stripper I oughta shoot ya fuckin' face off.'

Rick moved close speaking in a hushed tone, 'You've got a lot of repressed anger. I'll throw in a Doctor Phil holo, the man's a fucking genius you know?'

Allenby sniggered in the shadows while the Texan's mind filled with smoke and fire.

Allenby returned to Sonnet the underside of her rear hull released on a hinge forming a cargo ramp. He moved inside to meet Graham, 'How are the locals?'

'A bunch of fucking muppets.'

'Tried to take Rick hostage?'

'Yup,' Allenby looked around the cargo hold. Supplies were stacked upon palletes, food, medicine, heaters and shelters. Similar supplies occupied half Sonnet's hold for they were the primary currency on stricken worlds, credits, gold and urillium were of little use but food and bandages changed hands at a high premium.

The hold was about the size of an Olympic swimming pool. Allenby pulled his frame into a forklift and loaded the correct quantity of supplies, carefully converting their weight to Earth measurements. Since not every planet is 1G a computer would make the proper calculations converting weight in their present environment to that of Earth.

He hit the tiny forklift into gear, trundling up a ramp into the cargo bay.

'I'll never forget that bloke who offered his wife for a chocolate bar,' laughed Graham.

'Yeh,' chuckled Allenby, 'that cow was rough as bear's arse. I nearly shit me-self when Rick handed it over out of pity!'

They both laughed as Graham checked Allenby's supplies were strapped down securely.

There's an old negz proverb: fools must be changed often or the entertainment wears thin. Well out here in the wild west of space there was never a shortage.

In the tunnels Sam examined their merchandise.

'Good?'

'Good enough,' replied Sam.

Rick turned toward the Texan, 'After we've taken off I'll transmit the co-ordinates of your supplies.'

'How do I know you ain't lying?'

'I always keep me word.'

He looked at his shivering wife and starving child then back at Rick, 'Fine.'

Rick addressed Sam, 'Load her up,' they moved toward the Zaj Zavsar. Already tied into bundles they were easy to place inside large backpacks provided by colonist. Soon they carried 150 pounds each. Rick handed the Texan a communicator, 'You'll get a message in about an hour, don't miss it.'

Rick and Sam walked up the cargo ramp to meet Allenby, 'I got the split,' he passed Allenby his backpack as did Sam.

Allenby sat down in his forklift loaded with the colonists' supplies, 'I'll drop this lot off.'

'Just make sure it's outside Sonnet's blast radius.'

Allenby chuckled, his belly shifting in and out as he manoeuvred the small truck, 'That was pretty funny wasn't it?'

'Just don't do it again,' said Rick exiting Sonnet's cargo bay into an airlock. He paused for a decontamination scan before entering Sonnet's habitation area. Rick climbed a ladder into the ship's mid-section. To the left and right were exits leading to crew quarters and the galley, fore and

aft were exits to control and engineering, on the floor beneath him a multi-purpose airlock.

He and Sam spread alien dust throughout the mid-section while making their way to the cockpit. Rick sat down front and left. After letting out a huff he pulled a bent rollup from behind his ear. He placed it between his lips then raked through surrounding trash until he came across a book of matches. On the front the word "Shaniqua's" was etched in gold with the picture of a half-naked black woman. Rick remembered the good times he had there, the good times he always had there, until Dyson snapped him out of it, 'You'll be seeing her in a few days.'

Rick grinned, took out a match and lit his smoke. He was looking forward to spending his money but first he had to get off this crap hole and sell that split.

There were plenty of stations run by drug lords and slavers, most too risky for Sonnet. Docking wasn't a problem, undocking ... now that was the question. There were several stripper stations but they wouldn't touch split. Drugs were way off their radar, super alloys, technology, metals, machinery and of course urillium being their business.

Smugglers were a good bet for selling split. Smugglers avoided violence and coercion yet if it weren't for violence and coercion they'd be out of work, pretty ironic when you think about it.

Half an hour later Rick heard Sonnet's cargo ramp heave and connect with the hull, fitting perfectly into place.

'Supplies delivered,' came Allenby's voice out of Rick's headset.

'Okay lads, let's blow this shithole,' said Rick tapping his console.

Sam took his seat at Rick's right, Dyson behind Sam on the wall console, 'Allenby, Graham?'

'Ready,' came their voices through his thin headset.

Rick sent the co-ordinates before hitting auto take off. Sonnet's mighty thrusters began to warm, her body quivered as tremors coursed her frame, each thruster like an instrument in an orchestra all out of tune then suddenly they found one another and blasted in concert. After ten seconds thrusters fired with enough pounds per square inch that upon peering through her forward screen Rick saw but a dusty dervish whirl about the ship.

He couldn't tell whether they were stationary until his gut shifted or his body moved leaving his gut to catch up, he wasn't sure.

Slowly inch by inch Sonnet roared skywards pushing with everything she possessed. Stanchions heaved, metal ground on metal as Sonnet struggled with gravity, the limited resources of man's creation fighting the unlimited resources of Mother Nature's will.

Rick couldn't tell how far they'd risen for he didn't look at readouts, it was one of his odd habits. Eventually dust diminished, able to pursue only so far into the atmosphere. Landing claws retracted while stanchions collapsed telescopically within Sonnet. Thrusters heaved as a woman giving birth, screeching with pain, pushing harder whilst trying to breath within an alien environment. Sonnet's engines kicked in pressing each man into his chair, thrusters subsided bequeathing main engines her rudder. Like a giant whale on Earth leaping from the ocean Sonnet punched forth from Sigma 9's atmosphere heading off the elliptical plane.

'Destination?' asked Dyson.

'Let's try Deneb.'

'Deneb?'

'What're you the ship's fucking parrot?'

'I hope you know what you're doing.'

'Have I ever let you down?'

Dyson didn't reply.

'We're going to Deneb unless you've got a better idea?'

'Deneb it is,' said Dyson as he sent co-ordinates to the jump drive.

Sam leant over and whispered, 'There's a lot of bad people in the Deneb system.'

'The Galaxy's full of bad people,' replied Rick, 'in fact there's a chronic oversupply of the bastards, something that sitting on a university campus being wanked off by a bunch of communist professors won't teach you.'

Sam moved back into his seat for he always felt naked under Rick's ruthless scrutiny, Dyson and Peters smiled.

Sonnet reached a safe distance above the system's elliptical plane before spooling up her jump drive. The amount of energy required to open a crack in space-time and enter the next dimension could be met only with urillium. Back in engineering Graham monitored his stations with eagle eyes as readouts sent information on the reactor core. Burn too much too

quickly and she goes into melt down creating an explosion to put the largest thermo-nuclear device to shame.

In the past, when humans first employed urillium based technology, explosions had manifested rips in space-time resulting in micro black holes therefore jump gates were quickly constructed. Ships would pay a toll, reducing costs when entering hyperspace while system inhabitants drastically diminish the chance of a singularity tearing their planet apart.

The tokamak held atoms of urillium suspended in an electromagnetic field whilst they clashed with anti-matter particles. The energy produced powered a quantum field generator.

A quantum field isn't as complicated as it sounds it's a term used by engineers when they want a pay rise or shore leave. You tell your Captain there's trouble with the quantum generator, he asks: how much and how long?

The generator is a bunch of magnets creating a charge. Magnetic fields are an example of quantum mechanics, a massless wave that has a strong effect on the universe.

Quantum mechanics is a unique set of laws. Think of these laws as banking. Under classical laws you aren't permitted an overdraft but under quantum theory you're permitted not one but several overdrafts. What does that mean? It means that no longer does there have to be a positive deposit of particles but there can be a deficit instead.

For instance, instead of every employee having to turn up to work wearing the same uniform evenly spread amongst the work force, if you have a job with Quantum Bank you can turn up in uniform or butt naked ... provided someone else in the company is wearing your uniform as well as his that day.

The quantum generator doesn't generate or remove particles it shifts them about, like at Quantum Bank it moves uniforms from all the hot women and onto ... well you know what I mean.

Graham moved axions, the fabric of space, to create a deficit, a deficit just big enough to slip Sonnet through.

An extremely powerful magnetic wave flooded Graham's target area decaying axions into photons, light particles, another quantum wave form. A long beam of light surrounded a crack in space. Inside the crack Rick

made out the deep blue of hyperspace beckoning as the sea seduced mariners centuries ago on Earth.

‘Got it,’ said Dyson as he fixed on the crack.

‘Let’s blow this shithole,’ replied Rick.

Sonnet moved in as fast as possible, she couldn’t hang about since the cost of maintaining this portal to the next dimension was inordinate and urillium limited.

The ship slipped smoothly into hyperspace and the crack closed behind them. Dyson measured Mother Nature’s push and pull for she occupied hyperspace too, unyielding, without pity or mercy. Many a sailor had lost his way in her great uncharted expanse before now.

‘A week before we reach Deneb provided the weather doesn’t change.’

‘Let me know if anything happens.’

‘You gonna spend some time with Shaniqua?’ chuckled Dyson.

Rick stepped over a trash lain floor, ‘Bloody right, I paid a fucking mint for that holo.’

Chapter Two

Gravity coerced minor subjects herding them within invisible pens, suns lords of each system, planet barons commanding satellites. Off the elliptical plane a grey construct of super alloy extracted tribute from travellers. One of the galaxy's many toll booths, this door to destiny empowered passage from system to system.

The gate's edge lit up, blinding light burst from its ring as axions decayed into photons. A rip in space-time consumed its grey crown with deep blue until Sonnet was unceremoniously spat into normal space. ID confirmed, Dyson transferred a fee, kinetic cannons dropped lock and the gate powered down.

Deneb possesses fourteen planets, none habitable, one of which a gas giant with over fifty moons. On the third moon was situated Muon City, a place where men could make commerce without Earth Corps infringing their interests.

'Hey Rick!' shouted Dyson.

A groaning noise came from within Rick's cabin as the beast woke from a night of hard drinking and debauchery, well, holographic debauchery but what's a boy in hyperspace supposed to do?

'Rick get the fuck up!'

A cabin door opened to reveal Sonnet's oldest exhibit, Rick's beer belly. A hairy blob swayed back and forth as a demented farm animal. His flight suit dragged on metal floor teasing the crack of his backside to pop out. Rick possessed but two sets of clothing, he selected his daily attire based upon the least filthy.

The only time Rick wore a clean flight suit was if his current pair was so pock marked that tobacco embers burnt his skin, discomfort cajoling a fresh purchase. Then there was that time he caught his scrotum in a zip forcing Allenby to cut him free with salvage tools.

As for shirts and pants Rick kept one set in reserve for when they made dock and went on the hunt for women. He thought a clean shirt would deflect a woman's eyes from his belly and nose from body odour. This is why the crew spent so much time in strip bars, those girls' only concern was cash.

Rick stumbled from his quarters holding an amphora bottle of Metaxa 7 star, though little of the brandy remained. The stench of unwashed bed linen followed him like an old Egyptian curse. He staggered into the fore section past Dyson and broke wind, the cheeks of his buttocks slapped together as a seal's flippers. Dyson covered his nose while Rick took a swig on his bottle, 'Better out than in!' cackled the drunken Captain.

Sam and Peters didn't bat an eyelid for this was a common event during long hauls in hyperspace. To be fair most of the crew lived like pigs, reeking of body odour and beer, it's just that Rick had many years on them. No man could match his level of flatulence ... and trust me they'd tried.

Rick flopped into his flight chair, 'Fuck me, you know what that smells like?'

There was no answer for he spoke rhetorically, 'That smells just like that chicken masala I had last night and you know what?'

Again, no answer given since Rick's rhetorical intent didn't require one.

'I bet that curry comes out me arse just like it went in! All yellow, sloppy with meaty chunks,' Rick cackled again.

'We're approaching Muon city,' stated Sam.

Rick reeled, 'Alright, you don't have to shout your fucking head off!'

'I didn't shout.'

'Oh,' Rick sloshed back the last of his metaxa, 'Ahhh, hair of the dog, that'll set me right.'

'I don't know why you drink so much considering the damage it does to every organ in the human body.'

'Who are you me mother?'

Dyson and Peters smiled in synchrony.

Sam went on, 'What if you were to have organ failure or alcohol poisoning in hyperspace?'

'I'd be fucked!' Rick released a burp transmitting the stench of last night's chicken masala to Sam's face.

Sam grimaced while the others laughed.

'Jesus Christ, imagine if you'd have been drafted. Those fucking neggs would've eaten you alive!'

'I doubt my Captain would've been a curry eating, cigarette smoking drunkard.'

Rick raised his leg and farted again *PAAAARRRPPP*, 'You mean a puffer?'

Sam turned to his console, this conversation had but a single destination, the gutter, 'We'll be arriving at Muon city in four hours.'

'Maybe when we get there you can finally get laid?'

Sam monitored his station while disregarding Rick's drunken jibes. Unlike Rick he was young and believed that without Earth Corps supervision civilised behaviour could not take place. When Rick pointed out thousands of years of civilization preceding Earth Corps Sam became frustrated much to the amusement of the crew.

Sam was a young man fresh out of university, the rest aged between their mid-thirties and mid-fifties. Sam just needed time to grow up and reach his age of reason yet they tormented him while he walked that path, what are friends for?

Sonnet drifted gracefully alongside an orbital dock which stretched for miles, paid for by the smuggler's guild, a gargantuan private venture. The plan was to build a ring around the moon in a similar vein to the Earth Ring but funds had fallen short. Two thirds of the ring unfinished, a mere skeleton, yet the guild pushed ahead for one day it would be complete. Until then they collected tariffs at the gate and took fees from guild members.

It might seem odd a smuggler would have a guild with fees but the guild protected its members providing free use of the gate and Muon's facilities. If you were a career smuggler membership worked to your benefit in the long term.

Sonnet moved close, engines silent, inertia coasting forward. One of many lengthy docking arms extended from the ring, aligned itself with three small ports on her side, clamps protruded from the arm and latched onto metal braces halting Sonnet in her tracks. Inside the crew shifted fore then aft, their mass slowing a second after Sonnet's. The arm guided Sonnet to an interior slip.

'Docking complete welcome to Muon City.' stated Sonnet's computer.

Rick dumped his empty bottle, zipped up his suit, lit a rollup from behind his ear and made for the airlock.

'You're not going aboard like that?' asked Sam.

‘Why don’t you come, you might learn something.’

An airlock stretched from Sonnet’s hull through a docking claw into Muon city. Muon city didn’t look much at first glance. In Sam’s opinion it was little more than a glorified back alley with puddles of dank liquid and piles of trash. Men and women hung about muttering to one another in a stale yellow gloom. He noted a lack of any customs check on this station.

‘This way,’ said Rick leading his young friend.

‘I’ve heard stories about this place, somehow I imagined it to be, well, grandiose.’

‘What did you expect? A red carpet, trumpets and an interview with Rob Spanky?’

‘No, but you have to admit it doesn’t look like much.’

‘It’s not the place it’s the people, remember that.’

Rick stepped off main street into an alley surrounded by broken metal plating, steaming hot pipes and greasy valves. Sam was worried he might be scorched at any point. Rick turned left pushing open a doorway, inside were several tables and chairs with a wall sofa on one side of the room. A bar stood on the right offering drinks of differing legality, the establishment went quiet for a moment.

‘Do you have reservations?’ asked a waiter dressed in black trousers, red waist coat, white shirt speaking with a fake French accent.

‘Yeh, but I came anyway.’

‘I see ... is there anyone you wish to speak with?’

‘I’m looking for a guild representative.’

‘You desire membership?’

‘I’m here to trade.’

‘You do not require a guild representative ...’

‘I’ve got split.’

The room fell so silent you could hear a mouse fart.

‘How much?’

‘Three hundred pounds of Zaj Zavsar.’

‘Please take a seat,’ he motioned toward a walled off corner designed so men may conduct commerce in privacy.

Rick and Sam sat down, a waitress came to the table, ‘Are you ready to order?’

'Metaxa.'

'I'm sorry?'

'Brandy.'

'Certainly, we have a range of Cognacs, Armagnacs'

'I'll take the cheapest.'

'Very good,' the young lady noted it down on her eye interface, 'and for the young man,' she smiled at Sam.

'I'll have a cranberry juice please.'

'I'll be right back,' grinned a plucky young waitress.

'You're in there,' whispered Rick.

Sam shook his head, embarrassed by Rick's behaviour, 'You've got no class you know that?'

After being served the pair waited another ten minutes before a business suit appeared, an odd look for a smuggler, polite pinstripe jacket, matching trousers, shiny black shoes and white shirt. He had short side parted hair and carried a leather briefcase. Sam eyed a gold pin on his lapel, a woman held a torch in one hand and pistol in the other, the mark of the smugglers guild.

'My name's Jerry, I represent the guild, you have some merchandise you need taking off your hands?'

'Three hundred pounds of Zaj Zavsar,' replied Rick with a stone cold face ... it was business time.

Jerry looked Sam up and down, 'What about him?'

'He's alright.'

'The fixed price for Zaj Zavsar, at least first grade and that's what I suppose we're talking about here?'

'Fresh.'

'I'm sure you won't mind the Guild clarifying that claim?'

'Certainly not.'

'Assuming it is first grade the fix today is three hundred and twenty seven credits a pound netting you seventy five thousand credits.'

Before Rick might respond Sam cut in, 'You mean ninety eight thousand credits.'

The representative, a man in his late twenties and slick as Sinatra on stage made an uncomfortable face accompanied by a nervous chuckle, 'Funny.'

'I wasn't being funny.'

Jerry looked at Rick, 'Are you sure he isn't Corps?'

'What's that supposed to mean?'

'This is Guild space if you don't like our fees go sell somewhere else ... if you're feeling really lucky you can try the neggs.'

'Fees?'

Jerry scowled at Sam's naivety, 'Duty on illegal narcotics is ten percent then there's a transaction tariff.'

Sam replied in an incredulous tone, 'Fees and tariffs! You guys are no different than Earth Corps!'

'Sell THEM your split and see what happens.'

Rick put a hand on Sam's shoulder, 'Sorry about the kid it's his first time outside a Corps system.'

Jerry nodded his head, 'Do we have an agreement?'

Rick offered his hand and Jerry shook, 'Done.'

'Thank you Mr Katusa I'll have my people visit your vessel in half an hour, berth C 9 is it not?'

Rick nodded as Jerry picked up his briefcase and walked out the establishment.

'Katusa, he knows your surname name?'

'So?'

'How did he ...'

'This ain't me first rodeo kid.'

On the Sonnet men in uniforms with the same gold pin stood around while Jerry inspected her cargo, 'Hmm, I'm afraid it's not all first grade.'

'I just got that off the colony!' protested Rick.

'Did you pick it yourself?'

'Well, no.'

'Exactly, I know Zaj like you know the back of your hand. Some of it's been spoiled see for yourself.'

Jerry stood aside as Rick peered into one of the small plastic crates, 'It looks fine to me.'

'Of course, but it's last year's crop. Desperate farmers mix spoilt and fresh to subsidise losses or pad profits. Either way, you've been stiffed Mr Katusa.'

'Is any of it ...'

'I'll pay five thousand for top grade, you can keep the spoilt.'

'That cost me three grand in urillium!'

'Not my problem.'

'I'll take it.'

'Excellent.'

'And when I find that Texan cunt I'll make him pay, one way or another.'

Jerry waved his men on as they carefully moved crates under armed guard, 'A vendetta? I could get you a good discount on murder. Here, show him my card and we'll all be happy ... besides the victim of course,' Jerry smiled business card extended between his fingers.

'I settle me own scores.'

'Well keep my card, if he has any Zaj tucked away you'll know where to get a fair deal.'

Rick took the card, 'Thanks.'

'Have a nice day,' Jerry followed his men out the cargo bay through an airlock and onto Muon city.

Sonnet's crew congregated around Rick, 'It looks like we're taking a pay cut. Three grand for urillium, a ton for thruster fuel another ton for food, water and oxygen it looks like you're getting 288 credits a piece.'

The crew became somewhat downcast for their takings had been drastically reduced. After costs and Rick's twenty percent were removed, net profit was divided amongst them. Yet 288 credits was a tidy sum considering the average working man on Earth might take home 50 credits a month.

Sonnet remained at Muon city monitoring news reports from the galactic front. A single engagement might easily net the crew a year's pay for the average Earth worker, fortunately the war provided more than enough to go around. It could be dangerous of course, unexploded mines, fuel tank detonations but Earth Corps needed super alloys to manufacture more ships, demand by far outweighed supply. Certain parts went for quite a price since the Corps fleet was either in battle or repair dock.

Strippers were generally looked down upon, parasites of dignity as the negz described them, for wherever fallen warriors could be found strippers were present. Thieves and scum rummaging through a noblemen's corpse

after a medieval battle, stripping the honourable of dignity for auction. As far as Rick was concerned these “noblemen” were dead and wouldn’t be missing anything he took.

Earth Corps treated his kind as a necessary evil for without them Earth had no means to replace and rebuild ships. In turn Rick viewed Earth Corps as a bunch of hired killers no doubt responsible for this war. But whatever the reason for this shit storm Earth Corps was desperate.

News reports amounted to propaganda describing an embattled enemy on the back foot ... but Rick saw it first-hand.

In the initial months he got a lot of work stripping negz merchant vessels even a few civilian stations, then it turned the other way. He hadn’t stripped a negz vessel in more than a year but Earth Corps ships came thick and fast. The news didn’t report battles he’d witnessed with his own eyes, Corps destroyers and cruisers floating in space, wrecks abandoned to Mother Nature’s mercy. Meanwhile demand for alloy, parts and supplies rocketed. In the last year the men of Sonnet had made enough to retire.

Sam was concerned by the course of the war. Rick attempted to enlighten him on the virtue of selfishness but Sam was an idealist. One of a generation of young bright-eyed boys who left university in search of utopia, convinced he’d make it happen not just for him but everyone else. What Sam failed to realise, as all young men do, is that utopia can only be reached over a sea of blood ... and you never get there. For to reach utopia’s shores one must compromise sooner or later, certain people removed from the equation in order to get the balance correct. One day you stop and look back to witness a trail of misery and death then you look forward and utopia’s sandy shores are no closer.

One day Sam would understand the truth, he’d reach the age of reason, hopefully before he got hurt.

A psychedelic band played on a nightclub stage.

“I must be going insane,
I called the doctor so he can relieve my pain,
He’s got a pill for me,
Just a little luxury,
Help me through my day, yeh.”

Rick nursed a drink, alone at his barstool hoping for a lady's smile or maybe a call from Dyson, either way he'd have something to do other than get drunk. He looked around the gloom to witness people talking to one another, even on this dump companionship existed, men and women taking warmth in one another's proximity.

Rick had thought of starting a family, that fantasy lasted about two and a half minutes. The legal channel had a divorce court, it was about as bitter as two people could get and he wasn't going to risk it since the guy usually met financial annihilation at the hands of her lawyers, under Corps jurisdiction anyway.

No, he didn't have time for that bullshit, besides he was living the dream, get up when you want, wash your clothes when you want, no need to tidy up, eat what you like when you like and go out with your mates as you please.

In reality the dream had worn thin a long time ago, he lived like an animal indulging in booze and empty sex with prostitutes. Sure, most married men were green with envy despite repeatedly denying it for fear of a whipping. But they hadn't spent years drifting bar to bar only to hear the same barren words roll off every woman's lips.

Well, he still had booze, she never lied to him, always made him feel better, usually, and best of all she was cheap. Her name was Metaxa, a smooth Greek brandy made from a muscat wine he'd discovered as a child, hidden in his grandmother's drinks closet. Her initial chemical bite was balanced with a smooth musky finish, if he sought comfort she was always there.

Fuck the world, fuck Earth Corps, fuck the negg-heads and fuck the universe, all he needed was a good drink and everything fell into place ... until he fell unconscious.

'Wanna buy me a drink sailor?' came a soft female voice.

Rick turned to his right, an attractive lady about twenty years his junior in a tight black mini dress with a plume of spiked blonde hair and far too much make up greeted him.

'I was just leaving.'

Her smile disappeared as she moved off, 'Asshole.'

The barman furrowed his brow, 'Dude! She wanted it!'

Rick polished off his shot, 'She wanted a man twice her age that hasn't worn a clean pair of underpants in two months or she saw a wallet?'

'Who gives a shit? Pussy's pussy, right?'

Rick climbed off his bar stool, 'See you later kid.'

The next day Rick slid out a trash laden stink hole filled with pre-cooked curry wrappers and more grease than half Sonnet's engineering section.

Visit: <http://www.smashwords.com/books/view/814280> to purchase this book to continue reading. Show the author you appreciate their work!