

Donjon

Part One:

Horsetrading

"Mordecai! Can you come here for a minute, please?"

Mordecai cautiously approached his father's side. He didn't like the look of this stranger, not one bit. His head looked like a bruised Easter egg, shaven and covered in tattoos. When he smiled down at Mordecai, it was with teeth that had been filed down to points. He looked savage; scary even, but when he smiled down at Mordecai, there was no malice nor ferocity there, and his eyes were kind, and filled with intelligence.

"Well hello there, young fella" he said, through his shark's mouth.

"Hi"

The shark man turned his eyes back to tall, lanky man standing before him.

"OK Don. I can see why you're so interested in what I've got."

"So it's a deal?"

"Of course. Even if you didn't have anything to trade, I'd still hook you up on this one."

"Thank you, Patariki. I'll fire up the tractor and haul the goods over to your ship. Boy, go load Mule into the tractor."

"Sure thing, Dad." With one more furtive glance, Mordecai took off running to go find Mule.

"Last I seen him, he was heading out to feed the chickens!" Don yelled after his son.

"OK, dad!" Mordecai yelled back, and made a beeline for the chicken coops.

"That's a fine looking son you've got there, Mr. Saunders. He takes after you a mite, I think."

"He takes after his mother more'n me, but I'm happy about that. He should never have to lead the life we did." Don flipped open a worn leather tobacco pouch and deftly rolled a cigarette before lighting it with an old silver Zippo.

"You got another of those?"

"Sure, help yourself. You know, we've got a pretty rare opportunity here. No more Earth, no more rules. We can re-do pretty much everything. Maybe we can even get it right this time."

"I think you're trying to take advantage of my good nature, Don. If you're trying to get me to give you the goods for free, it ain't gonna work. You're not the only one's got mouths to feed, y'know."

"You're not tellin' me ol' Pat went and got hisself all settled down, did he?"

Patariki sighed. "Yeah. Was about a year or so ago, just after I got the ship. I was out trading for supplies, just like I am now, and I met the prettiest little russian lady I ever did see. Did you ever see that old TV show... ah hell, I can't remember the name of it. The once with Alice in Wonderland. Only Alice is all grown up, and in love with a genie and all that?"

Don took a drag off his smoke “Yup. Used to watch reruns of it all the time when I was a kid.”

“Well, Magdalena looks just like the Red Queen, only without the duck-lips.”

“Shee-it! Well, you've done well for yourself, haven'tcha?” Don laughed.

Pat clapped Don on the shoulder. “Brother, you have no idea. Got one daughter, and another kid on the way.” Patariki laughed. “Settled down, though? Not so much. The wife wouldn't have it. Said I have a 'singular talent' whatever the hell that means.”

“Means you can't farm worth a shit.” Don chuckled “And she wants to make sure her and the kids are gonna eat on a regular basis. But that's what I'm saying though. We've got the opportunity here. There's enough farm-moons and mining camps. Get us a coupla good sized manufacturing plants going, and nobody'll ever need to go without ever again.”

“Bullshit. Didn't work in Russia back in the day, what in the flying blue hell makes you think it'll work now?”

“Ain't no 'Government in Transition' to screw things up this time. Fair an' equitable trade across the board. Take me for example. I farm a little land, sure. But I fix and maintain all the other farmers' equipment, and they appreciate that enough to make sure that I've got not only enough to feed me and mine, but that I've also got enough to do this trade with you.”

“Well that's just grand for you, and it does alright by me, but how are you gonna convince the nasties that your idea is better'n them just holding you at gunpoint and taking all your shit?”

“Ha! Well that's where the trick is, now isn't it? I got a plan for that too. Now listen close, and I'll give you the jist of it...”

Mordecai broke through the cornfield and into the pasture, his feet kicking up the smell of sweet crushed grasses and clean loamy earth. The whole of Anubis III was farmland of different variations. There were no signs of the indigenous habitat, because there had never been an indigenous habitat. The entire moon had been terraformed and seeded with genetically engineered plants and livestock. Everything engineered for maximum usability. The giant Shelk, Elk / Sheep crossbreeds who produced vast quantities of wool, meat and a rich flavourful milk fit for drinking. The short and stubby Bizoats whose fur rivalled the most luxurious cashmere, with rich and tender meat and a milk more suited for cheesemaking than drinking. Even the pasture grasses had been engineered for maximum nutritional value. The flavourful crops and livestock had been intended to be shipped back for the rich Earthers who could afford them. The slave-farmers (they had been called "Indentured Labourers" in the paperwork back on Earth) had been intended to eat the grasses, just like the livestock they tended.

Then the wormhole had closed. The farmers were free. Free to enjoy the fruits of their own labours.

Dodging agilely between a pair of bizoats and a big male shelk, he raced pell-mell toward the last place he remembered seeing Mule.

Mule was the farms AI, in addition to being Mordecai's favourite person in the whole world, and the closest thing he had to a friend. Mule wasn't the smartest thing in all creation. Then again, he hadn't been built for raw processing power. He was slow and methodical, but also friendly and goodhearted.

Mordecai put on a burst of speed, vaulted the watering trough, and flew toward the chicken coop.

Mule was inside, feeding the chickens and gathering their eggs. "Well, hello Mordecai. Did your Mom send you to come get a chicken for dinner?"

"I don't think so, Mule" Mordecai gasped "she said something about a shelk roast for tonight. Dad sent me to take and load you into the tractor so you can help us load a bunch of stuff into his friends ship."

"Well, I suppose you'd better take me to the tractor then, double-quick." With a pop and hiss the hatch on Mule's back opened, and Mordecai reached in and grabbed Mule's AI core. As always, Mordecai was surprised by how heavy Mule's core was. It was a silvery ball, about the size of an apple, shot through with copper veins and studs. From the weight of it though, it felt more like an apple made of lead. Core in hand, Mordecai took off toward the barn. He raced around back to where Mule's tractor body was parked. He slid to a halt, still gasping for breath after all his recent exertions, and flipped open the protective hatch door. He carefully socketed Mule's core into its cradle, and with a reciprocal hiss and thud the protective door slid shut. A few seconds more, and the tractors lights flared to life. "Well hop on, big fella" Mule droned "and let's go load up that shit for your Dad."

Mordecai clambered up the side of the track and dropped unceremoniously into the jump seat. A small, sweet cloud smelling of fresh cut grass and lemons billowed up around him as he settled into the cushion. There wasn't any engine noise, as the tractor was run by electric motors powered by a series of high-capacity batteries recharged by solar cell paint that covered it. There was simply the dull hum of the motors, and the squeak of the tracks as the tractor trundled away.

"Man, that is one hell of a long shot..." Patariki muttered.

"True enough. But d'you know what's gonna happen if we don't at least try?" Don asked.

"What's that?"

"Not a damn thing whatsoever." Don grasped Pat's shoulders, and gazed coolly into his eyes. "Have I ever misled you before?"

"No. Well, at least not on purpose, but I still think you might be a little crazy in the brain-pan."

"Fair enough" Don chuckled "but believe you me, this is going to be the most important thing we're ever going to do."

"Alright, I'm in, but rounding up the shit you need is going to take more than a little work."

"Oh, I have no doubt in my mind whatsoever about that. But if anyone can track this shit down, it'd be you. You've got a 'singular talent' remember?" Don chuckled.

"Oh har-de-har. Yuk it up, fuzz-nuts." Pat smiled back, "yeah, I suppose I could go check with Kaci. She's probably got at least a good chunk of what you need. Most of it'll probably need some serious futzing with though."

"Oh, more'n likely. To be fair, it's kind of what I expected anyhow. How's Kaci doing these days anyway?"

"Pretty good. She's running things out there now."

"Good for her. They could do a lot worse, she's always been a decent person."

"That's easy for you to say. She never tried to stab you with a fish-fork. Not to mention what she did to my ship." Pat grumbled.

"The fish-fork incident was pretty damn funny though, you have to admit" Don grinned "and the ship thing is your own damn fault as much as hers. She warned you didn't she?"

"Yeah, you're right." Pat muttered. "Kaci always was pretty easy on the eyes though, isn't she?"

"Watch out, or you're going to go and get yourself stabbed again. By two women this time."

"Oooo! That's a good point. I'd better watch my p's and q's i suppose." Pat grinned his sharks grin.

Don stubbed his cigarette out on a fencepost, and dropped the butt back into his tobacco pouch before clapping his hand solidly on Patariki's back.

"Good. Then let's get those supplies loaded."

It was a battered, beaten-up shell of a ship. Scratched and rusty steel plates welded with zigzag patterns patching holes in the hull. The makeshift cargo hold was lit with strings of white LEDs epoxied to the walls and ceiling.

They'd been loading food and supplies all day. Mordecai realized that there was way more here than could have come from his farm, or even the dozen or so neighbouring farms. Whatever his Dad had on the go, it was big. Big enough to get backing from the whole of Anubis III. There were vegetable and animal products from here, tropical fruits and cacao from the north, honey from the apiaries to the east, and coffee and tobacco from the south. Food and spices from the all over the agricultural moon. Enough to fill the cargo hold to bursting.

Mule had just dropped off a pallet of smoked Bizoat meat and Mordecai figured that since he'd seen his dad and Pat do it enough times by this point, he could climb up the side and secure the tie-downs by himself. He'd wedged himself in between the stacked pallets and the wall and was about halfway up when the climb suddenly became a lot more difficult. He was steadying himself against a particularly slippery patch of bagged spices when he noticed the wire dangling from the ceiling not an arms reach away. Mule must have knocked it loose when he'd been loading one of the pallets higher up. It looked solid enough, and if he could just get a hold of it, it would make his climb a hell of a lot easier. He was reaching out to grab a hold of it, when a plum, like an arc of sweet purple lightning, streaked out of the darkness and slapped his hand away from the wire.

"SWEET ZOMBIE JESUS, BOY!" Patariki yelled "Keep the hell away from that! That cord'll smoke you clean outta your damn boots!"

"You didn't have to..."

"Bullcheese! I fucking well DID have to! If you'd have touched that, it would've fricasseed you somethin' awful, and there are two very good damned reasons why I couldn't let that come to be."

"What would those be?"

"Well, firstly, and don't get a swelled head or nothin', but I kinda like you kid. You annoy me a hell of a lot less than most people do. Secondly, well... I've seen the way you look at me. So, I'm gonna ask you a question, and I want a straight answer, OK?"

"OK."

"Are you afraid of me, boy?"

"Ummmm, well, yeah.. Kinda.. I suppose."

"Well, if I'd have let you get hurt, your dad would've been some pissed. Now see, I've known your dad a long time, and I've seen him pissed off before. And you ain't near as scared of me as I am of him when he's got his blood up. Not by half. He may not say it much, but he thinks the world of you, and if you got yourself killed he'd probably burn half this planet down."

"What's going on in here?" Don's voice came from the cargo deck's ramp.

"Not too much. Mordecai here just knocked a piece of fruit off climbing up to tighten up that strap."

“Oh? Is that so?” Don smiled “Mordecai, I appreciate you trying to help, but you be careful climbin' around in here, OK? I don't want you to slip and get hurt or somethin'. Your mother would never let me hear the end of it.”

“Yessir.”

“Alright then. Well, we're about all done here anyway, so why don't you take Mule, run back to the house and see if you mom has that stuff she was working on all done up?”

“OK.” Mordecai took off out of the cargo hold to go catch a ride back to the main house with Mule.

“Nice shot” Don said, stooping to pick up the ruined plum. “But you don't want to leave this here. You might slip on it, accidentally grab a wire, and 'fricassee yourself something awful.” Don held out the plum to Pat and slowly, deliberately, winked.

“So, you heard all that, huh?”

“Yup. And I appreciate you looking out for my son like that, I truly do. Maybe one day I'll be able to return the favour. That, and it's nice to see you're still a deadeye with a piece of fruit” Don smiled.

Patariki laughed “Well, it's a special talent. So, what's this the missus is 'working on'?”

“Breakfast, lunch and dinner for you for the next week or so. I hope you've got a decent fridge on that tub.”

“Holy hell! She didn't have to do that! And watch what you call my ship.” Pat leaned over and whispered “It can hear you...”

“I know. But she wasn't too keen on the idea of you living on ration packs. She's a total prize, she is” Don laughed.

“Aye, that she is! Mags has got competition, I guess.”

“Hey now! Let's not start getting any ideas, here! So, how long you figger it'll be before your return trip?”

“I figger around six standard months, give or take a week or so.”

“Good. That should be more than enough time to get things set up here.”

Mordecai's mom had made good on her promise of a sherk roast for dinner. After his formative years of eating nothing but grass, Mordecai was always amazed by the wealth of different flavours and textures that real food had. He was also of the impression that his mother had to be the best chef in the history of everything. The truly astounding scent, flavour, and textures of the meat, the honey-glazed sweet potatoes and carrots, the ever present grass salad, and the huge carafe of fruit juice.

Mordecai was lost in the joy of eating all this wonderful food when his dad leaned over and whacked him across the knuckles with a honey-glazed carrot.

“So, that hurt more or less than a plum?” his dad smiled.

Mordecai looked up at his father with an expression of pure shock, and mumbled “excuse me?” around a mouthful of potatoes.

“The plum. The one Pat whipped at you to keep you from grabbing that wire. I heard the whole thing, son. And I bet that smarted more than a little.”

“Ummm, yeah. It hurt a little.”

“Well, you learned a pretty valuable lesson though, I think.”

“If it's about grabbing a hold of random wires, I'm way ahead of you...”

“Well, while that is a pretty good rule to live by, it's not exactly the lesson I was thinking about.”

“Then what do you mean?”

“Well, when Pat first got here, you took one look at him and decided you didn't like the look of him one little bit, didn't you? To be fair, I think his appearance scared you more'n a little, no?”

“Yeah, I guess so. I mean, I've never seen anyone like him before. He looks like a savage.”

“Well, to be honest, He kind of is. The tattoos are because he's Maori, and he's fiercely proud of that. The teeth he had done when he was a young fella. Just cause he figgered it'd be badass. But even though you were scared and didn't want anything to do with him, he still went to the boards for you. Helped you out, even though he didn't have to, and with no gain for himself to be had, right?”

“Yes, I suppose he did.”

“So, you learned that he's a pretty decent person. In fact, I don't mind telling you that he is one of the singularly best, most stand up fellas I've ever known. That's the lesson I was talking about. Son, in this life you are going to meet a lot of people. Some of them are going to look like monsters, and be decent, honourable folk. Others are going to look like saints, all spit 'n' polish but with hearts black as the Devil's own. Always, always judge a person by what's inside them, and never by what they look like. Appearances can be, and often are, deceiving.”

“I'll remember that. You've got a good point, dad.”

“Damn straight I do. Now just wait right here, I've got something for you.”

Mordecai's dad disappeared into the pantry, and came back a moment later, and tossed a beaten up old eReader onto the table in front of Mordecai.

“Holy crap! Dad! Where did you get this?”

“It's one of the things Pat brought. Now, I figger you got two hours of good reading in you before it's time for bed. We've got a lot of work to do in the next few weeks, so you'd best get plenty of rest while you can.”

“Work doing what?”

“You'll find out soon enough.” Mordecai's mom said, and smiling, patted his shoulder. “Now do what your father tells you, dear.”