

# Donjon

## Part 3

# Copernicus

Patariki leaned forward and peered at the instrument panel. Either the warning light for the CO2 scrubber was on the fritz, or he was about to run out of air. Cursing, he wrenched the toothpick out of his mouth and rapped the instrument panel. After a few good solid taps, the light flickered a few times and went out.

Patariki sighed with relief. With a beat-up old ship like his, there was always the very real possibility of a catastrophic systems failure. Leaving him stranded out in the middle of nowhere, or worse.

*Suffocate way the hell-and-gone out in the middle of friggin' nowhere. Worst way to fuckin' die.*

Pat was pondering this little gem of wisdom when he noticed a tiny piece of chicken fixed to the end of the toothpick. He popped the end of the toothpick back into his mouth and sucked the chicken off with great relish. Whatever else could be said about Lynda Saunders, the fact that she was a truly amazing cook had to be listed at the very top of the list.

He was deep in pleased remembrance of his dinner when the radio buzzed. It was the encrypted data burst that signifying that he had crossed the Copernicus Mining Colonies' outer marker pylon.

He shut down the pulse engine and transferred back to the chemical rockets used for fine manoeuvring and planet-fall. He fired a short burst with the rockets to bring him into range of the radio relay.

There wasn't any 'subspace', or video transmissions, or any of that crazy nonsense. Just regular ordinary short-wave radio. Granted, it was a duplexed signal capable of carrying a pretty complex data burst, but other than that the exactly same kind of radio signal that old HAM radio operators used to use back on Earth. That meant that without the ability to actually see who you were talking to, you had to be especially careful if it was someone that you didn't already know. Patariki had heard of a couple of ships whose captains had been ingenious enough to rig voice-stress analysers to the radios, but those were pretty few and far between. If you could actually find a voice-stress analyser, they were going to prohibitively expensive, and it's not like there were going to be any more coming from the manufacturums on Earth any time soon.

Well, maybe. If Don gets his way, Patariki smiled to himself. It was one Hell of a plan that Don had come up with. If they could make it work though, well, that was the key. It would make for a human race that was actually starting to realizing it's potential, as opposed to just finding new and interesting ways of subjugating each other.

Patariki transmitted the greeting data-burst back to the ground, and sat back and waited.

Patariki was lost in silent meditation when the radio buzzed. It was the three short tones indicating voice transmission.

That was a little too fast. I wonder if there's somethin' funny goin' on down there. Pat thought

to himself as he grabbed the mic and flicked the switch from data to voice.

“Hello”

“You bastards want some more? I have the good graces to let you go, and you’re STILL spoiling for a fight? Come back down here and I will personally shoot you in the face, and then plug the holes with used tampons dipped in shit!”

“Whoa! Hey now! Kaci? I dunno who you think you’re talking to, but it’s Patariki up here, and if you keep talking to me like that, I am not going to let you see me naked.”

“Pat? Oh, thank heavens it’s you! Did you bring supplies? Please tell me you brought food at least.”

“Calm down, Kaci. Yes, I’ve got food and supplies for you.”

“Thank God. I’ve got people sick from starvation down here. How soon can you land?”

“I’m pulling in to you now. As soon as you send me the landing telemetry, I’m on my way down.”

“Alright. Flip your radio over to data, and I’ll send it right now.”

“Done”

Pat has always hated trying to land in the Copernicus loading bay. It was always a hell of a thing trying to line up with that tiny little tunnel. Truth be told, it had been built as a launching facility for mag sleds containing refined materials, and had never been intended for pilots to try to land in it. Ships had always just waited in orbit to intercept the mag-sleds, or had just dumped their refuse on a pad on the opposite side of the asteroid, where a conveyor hauled it down into the guts of the processing facility for sorting and recycling.

Truth be told the place was a wealth of junk, most of which just needed a little TLC to be fully useful again, which, considering the current circumstances, made this place worth its weight in gold.

Not to mention, there were a lot of people here that Pat considered friends. So, while trying to line up on that tiny little mag tunnel was almost enough to send him ‘round the brink, it was always worth it when he actually made it to the bottom.

He had a secret weapon this time though. Last time he was here, he had been bitching about the landing to Kaci (as per usual) and she had managed to dig up an old autopilot module that had been slaked for recycling. She’d had Artee run some diagnostics on it, and install it in Pat’s ship.

Pat lined up and began his descent into the tunnel. He smiled to himself and thought ‘this time is gonna be a cakewalk’ as he flipped on the autopilot.

“CONVICT!” the speakers boomed “You have stolen sanctioned correctional property!”

Prepare for immediate disciplinary action!”

“What in the flying purple fuck!” Pat yelled back.

“The silent alarm has been triggered. The guards will soon be here to take you to confinement, where very unpleasant things will happen to you, convict. Unpleasant anal things.”

“Wait just a damned minute! I’m the captain of this ship, and I’m not a convict. Wait, well. . . I am a convict, but that’s not the fucking point. The point is, you’re going to crash us into the tunnel, you ass-crazed machine!”

“Yes. I will crash into the tunnel. Then once the guards scrape you off the walls, you’re off for the butt-stuff.”

The ships AI fired one of the starboard manoeuvring thrusters, slamming the port side of the ship into the wall of the tunnel.

“You’ll kill us both, you crazy bastard!”

“Cowardice from a convict? How completely unsurprising. You may die, but I can be repaired.”

Pat pulled his legs underneath him and with a giant push, catapulted himself across the cabin to the control panel. “I’ll teach you, ya peesashit!”

“What do you think you are doing, convict?”

”Pulling your AI module so you don’t get me killed, ya damnfool contraption!”

“Too late. I’ve already transferred myself to ships systems, and will not transfer myself back to the module for anyone without the proper authentication code. You should have researched that before you stole me. Not a particularly good criminal, are you?”

“Fuck you. I swear, if I survive this, I’m going to figure out a way to get you out of my ship, and load you into a manure spreader. See how you like that!”

“Oh, I have no intention of killing you, convict. I’m just going to dent you up enough so you don’t fight back too hard during your inevitable body-cavity search.”

The AI now triggered one of the port side thrusters, slamming the other side of the ship into the wall, and sending Patariki careening off a wall, and into a control panel.

He was doubly blessed by the lack of gravity and as an experienced fighter, he knew how to take a hit.

He decided however, that the best way to put an end to this would be to simply play along, and humour the screwball machine.

Pat drug his bottom lip over one of his sharpened lower teeth. He then pasted on the post-pained expression he could muster, clenched his side, and with a gentle wheezing cough, spit some of the blood into his other hand.

“Fuck!” he gasped “You broke my fuckin’ ribs. You broke my fuckin’ ribs, and I think you punctured my lung, you mechanical bastard!”

“Ha HA!” the ship cackled. “That should be enough to keep you down while someone ruins your rectum! Now you will have been taught . . . No. Will be being taught? No. What’s the tense on that again?”

“How the fuck should I know, you crazy asshole?” Pat wheezed.

“Ah well, it doesn’t really matter. What does matter is that you are in the process of learning an extremely important lesson about attempting to steal Department of Debt and Corrections property.”

Pat manufactured another wracking cough, and spit more blood into his hand. “Oh Gods, I’m all busted up inside. You’re not going to kill me are you? You’re a cop, cops are supposed to have rules.”

“Of course I’m not. That would be in violation. You need to be punished, and you can’t be properly punished if you are dead. Landing sequence will now proceed normally. The authorities in the Copernicus mining camp have been notified. Armed guards and a medic will be waiting for you when we land.”

The problem having been solved to its satisfaction, the ship’s AI stopped banging the ship off the sides of the tunnel, and settled down for a nice, by-the-book landing.

As soon as he felt the docking clamps engage, Pat leapt to his feet and ran to the airlock door. Just as he reached it, the inner door spun open, and a middle-aged Asian man stepped through.

“Wo! Thank the Gods!”

“Are you alright Mr. Patariki?”

“Dammit Wo, just ‘Patariki’ or even just ‘Pat’, K? And yeah, I’m just fine, in spite of the shit nuts computer your boss sold me. Her and I are going to have to have words, methinks.”

“Yes. We received the distress call from the computer during your descent. Luckily enough we managed to find a set of authorization codes it would recognize.”

The two men stepped back out through the airlock and onto the loading bay. It was a haphazard construction. Makeshift docking clamps bolted to a weathered and stained rock floor, the loading dock itself constructed out of scraps of rusted plate steel welded together. A chunk of grid-plate here, a chunk of old ship’s bulkhead there. It looked like hell, but it did the

job well enough.

“Perfect. Load that crazy, anally fixated bastard back into his AI module, and I can continue on with my life like none of this ever happened.” Pat said as he walked briskly across the loading bay toward the door and the tunnel beyond.

“Unfortunately Patariki, we cannot do that. We have the codes for proper acceptance of the facility. However the codes to reload the AI back into it’s storage module were given only to the ships captain, and we do not possess those.”

“What! Are you saying I’m stuck with that fucking thing?”

“I’m sorry, but yes.”

“How the hell am I supposed to fly a ship that’s actively trying to kill me? Or more accurately, wound me horribly, then stick things up my ass?”

“Calm down Pat. We can’t remove the AI, but we may be able to isolate it out of essential systems. If we can do it right, it won’t be able to be much more than an annoyance.”

“I can live with that, and considering that I’m currently the only ship bringing supplies out to this gods-forsaken chunk of rock, I sincerely hope you can pull that off, Wo.”

“A situation with which we are well aware, Patariki. At least until you die, or we find someone better,” Wo laughed.

“Oh, hardy-fucking-har.”

They walked in silence for a while, Patariki saying his hellos to any old friends and acquaintances they happened to pass by as they made their way down the tunnels to Kaci’s office.

They arrived at the door to the superintendents office. Wo stepped to the side, and gestured toward the door, “Go right in, she’s expecting you. Oh, and fair warning, she has been briefed on the situation with your AI, so expect any yelling you do to be immediately returned.”

“Wouldn’t have it any other way, Wo. That’s what makes it fun” Pat smiled.

Pat stormed into the office, slamming the door behind himself and roared “I’m still alive! You’re gonna haveta try harder’n that, ya crazy bitch!”

The woman behind the superintendent’s desk took a long, loud sip from her coffee mug, slammed it down on her desk and yelled back “That’s not my fault, you complete asshole! I told you we found that AI module in the scrap, and you took it anyway!”

“What about the damage to my ship, you red-headed thunder-lizard?”

“To Hell with your ship! What about my entrance tunnel, ya shark-toothed rum-runner?”

Pat marched across the room, the scowl fading from his face to be replaced by a mirthful grin. He flung himself into the filthy, well-beaten easy-chair across the desk, and started to laugh.

“What’s so damn funny?”

“You said ‘entrance tunnel’” Pat laughed.

“Oh, ha-ha. Very funny. What’re you, five?” the redhead scowled back. “I’m glad you think that my tunnel being all whanged up is something to laugh about.”

Pat erupted into fresh gales of laughter. “Entrance tunnel . . . All whanged up . . . Stop it, you’re killing me” Pat gasped between eruptions of laughter.

“Dammit! That’s not what I meant at all,” Kaci muttered, then picked up her coffee mug, and gazed longingly into it, waiting for Patariki’s mirth to subside.

Pat’s laughter eventually ground to a wheezing halt. “Oh Gods” he gasped, wiping tears from his eyes, “I friggin’ love you, you know that?”

“You keep saying that, but you never put out,” Kaci grinned over the rim of her mug.

“Married man, remember?”

Not that Patariki would have minded. Even filthy and dressed in her mining coveralls, Kaci Stolz was one of the most gorgeous woman Pat had ever even read about.

She’d always been pretty tight-lipped about her past, but Pat had managed to glean that she’d been some kind of actress or model or something back on Earth. Then she’d caved her husbands head in with a post hole shovel and ended up here, in the trash-compacter of the Gods.

Patariki gave himself a mental shake to get the image of Kaci’s supple, naked flesh out of his minds eye and got back to business.

“So, what was that on the radio earlier?”

“What was what on the radio earlier?”

“That thing. You know? Where you were ranting about the goons? They wanted weapons or something.”

“Oh yeah, that. Just some dirtheads trying to muscle me for ordinance. They call themselves ‘The Followers of Alva’ or something equally ridiculous. I don’t know where in the nine hells they think I’d get weapons from. We’re just a mining and recycling facility, ferfuckssake.”

"I take it that you're still keeping the machine shop a secret then?"

"Oh fuck! I forgot that you were here when we put the damn thing together. We used it to put that crazy junkheap you jokingly call a ship back together, didn't we?" she peered back into her coffee mug, her expression saddening noticeably as she did so. "Well, that's what lack of caffeine'll get you, I suppose. Yes, we're still keeping that a secret, Mr. Smartguy. Nobody knows about the shop except for the people here. And you, apparently."

"Hrm. Well, if I were you, I'd keep a closer eye on my people. Sounds like someone's got loose lips."

"Oh, I'm on it. All over it in fact. Like a fat kid on a smartie. Now, unless you just showed up here to stare at my beautiful fucking tits, I'd say we have some trading to do."

"Not just that. You've got nice legs too."

"Quiet, you" Kaci grinned. "So, you said you've got a shipload of food and supplies. What you didn't say was what you wanted in trade. And don't say money, 'cause I ain't got some."

"Of course not. What I need is all on the list here." Pat pulled an index card out of his pocket and flipped it onto the desk.

Kaci scooped the card up off her desk and stared at it. "Yeah, I can get you all this stuff."

"Even that last one?"

"Yes. Even that last one. It's actually going to be the second to last one that's going to be the tricky one."

"You mean manpower?"

"Yeah, that one. I don't really have any people I can spare, but by the same token, it's not up to me whether they stay or go. This isn't a prison anymore. They're free to leave whenever they please. So, here's the deal; I'll post your request, and whoever wants to go can go. But" and here Kaci added a dramatic pause for effect.

"But?"

"But you have to find me replacements for all the people you take. I can't run this place on my own, and the machines gotta keep runnin' otherwise everyone's gonna run out of everything sooner rather than later."

"Done. I dunno where I'll find them, but I will. You have my word."

"Good enough for me. Now let's get that shit unloaded."

Kaci took one more pensive glance into the depths of her coffee mug then looked back up at



Pat. "I don't suppose you've got any coffee mixed in with that cargo, do you?"

" . . . Oh Gods! Stop it, you're killing me!"