



Morningstar
Lengths Will Go
Boman Modine

It costs approximately two thousand cubits for every gallon of water on board a starship. That's what you need to survive a single day in transit. Those dehydrated food squares, known by anyone in space as "tak," are on par with shaved paint chips but the space they take up is still worth hundreds of cubits so I can feed my crew. I like to remind myself of these facts whenever I argue prices with a local baron or some grounder who's never even flown beyond their own atmosphere, never mind broken the orbital boundary.

There's a cockiness all of them have, the grounders that is. We orbiters believe this is born out of the confidence that the ground they're walking on won't suddenly explode for any number of reasons or the air won't suddenly shut down. They always push for discounts when they don't even understand the cost.

That's why not just anyone can become a *caeliner*. Most are born to it. After all it took a special breed of human being crazy enough to ride a fission bomb into a black hole and call it a living. Sometimes it had taken generations of living on orbitals or the ancient generation ships that still plied the Frontier to make just the right person psychologically but also physically, sound to the job.

Ships are each unique, unique as their crew, but they're all made for the average sized individual which was determined by people, thousands of cycles ago, that likely never had to live in space. As such, that average effected orbiter evolution. Too tall and we'll take bets as to when you brain yourself on a bulkhead or a hatch frame. Too small and you'd better be a cap above the rest to be able to afford a custom vacc suit you'll need yo treat like a second skin.

And get used to the stink. You won't see that on the venture programs showing the glorious Corpo initiatives sending thousands of people into the black. Sure, there's a fortune to be made, why else would anyone do it, but spend some time near an open sewage if you want to start training. Believe you me.

That was my life and the life of my crew. All fifty of us crammed aboard my ship; the *Twinstar XP*. I had earned it, fair as fair ever is, and she was mine now. No debt, all profit. That's another thing about grounders, barely any of them own anything. It's all just leases from the local government or a rental from a Corpo which is usually just an extension of a MacroCorp that probably owns the system through a piece of paper the Hegemon' Summit Council guaranteed.

All this and more is why you can't trust a grounder. They think they know how to stand still but don't get that everything is moving. They don't even know how to count their breathing because they think it'll never run out. They think they know up and down but they can't grasp how relative that concept is.

I didn't learn to walk upright in a gravity well 'til I was ten. And I still hate it. Give me the freedom of that place that holds the sky and that's where you'll find me and my crew.

That's why every single square inch of the *Twinstar* is accounted for with the highest possible percentage chance of sale on the other end. We don't leave port unless there's a chit that balances the journey and then covers the risk. After that it's profit for us all and I'm fair to the exchange.

I say this so that you sympathize with why I have my hole-punch slug thrower aimed at the oversized, bejeweled face, of a man named Asaggio.

"What in the balance-sheet are you doing, Tyllia?" He's too big to have gotten up, just rolled back on against the chair, swollen hands that have never needed to work a lever or fit between power couplings, spread out as if they'll dissuade the thumb sized ballistic slug I've offered him.

"I'm aiming a gun at your head, Asaggio." I had always liked the commodities merchant. He's a relatively good man, as honest as a man that charges starving people for food can be. But he doesn't cheat after you've called him out on it and he throws work my way whenever I'm in his part of Civil Space. He's freelance, like me and my crew, so we're business partners out of necessity, hard to operate in Corpo space without a Patron.

That doesn't mean he's beyond cashing it out on my ledger.

He's made a lot of enemies, which is why his two up-armored thugs are trying to catch-up to my seemingly drastic decision to counter his negotiations with a multi-barrel pistol. They get their own repeaters out eventually and point at me as I prime the hammer with a satisfying *click*.

He had already been sweating, the tavern's thick atmosphere almost a fog with the humidity but now he's all but dripping. Sweat is pearling around precious stones framed and pierced through the folds of his lamp browned skin in a random assortment that, I'm sure, means something impressive to the locals. They make for a convenient target.

Someone in the tavern, which has gone very quiet, gasps and dives for cover. The rest watch and I'm sure a few of them start creeping for their own weapons. We're in the bad part of town, under the formacrete canopy of the kosmodrome above. On-leave caeliner crews from the other freightliners parked along the skyhook transorbit lift meeting local merchants and near-do-wells to conduct business in the shadows.

"Tell your staff I have an auto-spring in my index finger," I flex it against my hole-punch so they know the right one, "It'll yank this trigger even if they get lucky with a headshot." I check both of them and see all the signs of "cheap."

Asaggio must know this, he'd paid for them after all. They'd spray the booth with tungsten but he'd be dead.

"Stop! All of you, this is no way to settle a deal!" He raises his hands and pats the repeaters down and away. For a moment I get lost in the flourish of his silkspin petty coat. Swirls and patterns and mythological beasts all woven in astonishing detail and ever so subtly moving. It's a Grade 1 luxury item if I've ever seen one. I almost salivate despite the stakes I've set. Asaggio might skim on his own security but the man knew how to dress.

I also notice the wafting breeze off of Asaggio's body as he moves. The man's been tampering with his own genetics, some kind of orgoid that alters his sweat to smell like perfume.

"Okay, alright, *jyiad-saalaam*, we're fine." I'm not sure what the word means, I've never stayed very long on Postuma 3 to pick up the lingo. Both bodyguards stand down.

I get comfortable, flexing my hand around the grip of the hole-punch. The weapon is a favorite of caeliners. Compressed gas cartridges accelerate flat nosed wedges that hit with enough force to break bones and internally rupture organs but will keep skin and vacu-suits relatively intact. Good for killing in zero gravity where you don't want to risk a puncture.

"You're buying the Exogen, Asaggio, plain as dawnrise. You contracted us and we delivered on time, at no small risk."

"I'm sorry, Tyllia but the deal is off. Mitigating circumstances, a change in the economy, I realize you might not understand these things as you've likely not seen the recent bulletin, but—" the merchant splutters in a waft of ripened pears. I abuse my imagination by wondering what the rest of his bodily functions smell like and immediately hate my Self for violating my inner eye with a burst of images and sordid nightmares of what this man looks like naked.

"Captain Roark, we're not friends, Asaggio, friends don't prock each other up the arse without invitation or stick guns in each other's faces. Do they Ganz?" I don't bother looking at my bosun behind me. I know he's opened that orgoid replacement of an arm and is showing off the arc-welder he's installed that can cut through a bulkhead never mind skin and bone.

"Nah, Cap, no'a fren'ta us'n. B'low it'alla t'scrap, sez'ai" His heavy orbiter accent is barely interlex but the threat of conflagration helps make his point. Both guards take one step back.

Asaggio pleads, "I can't buy the Exogen, because no one can buy them anymore! Trade's been cut on Postuma, Naeva, Ipsulan, the whole system!"

I grimace, "Why?"

Some of that healthy color goes out of Asaggio's face and he actually leans closer toward my puncher, a bead of sweat rolling off his nose and flecking the table between us.

"The *Audit's* come." Asaggio whispers.

My arm retracts before I can really register it, de-priming the hole-punch. Just the name of the Hegemon's oversight agency is enough to make anyone want to overspend and get far away as away can get. I realize I'm sweating myself some, now.

Ganz does the same, his artificial arm folding back together and suddenly scanning the tavern as if an Auditor might materialize at the mention of their office.

And who knew, maybe they could? Never say *Barakan* in the Outside, after all.

"The prock didn't you say so." I holster my weapon and sit, grabbing my cup of mixed ethanyl and downing it hoping it fortifies me. My adrenaline ebbs and the real problems of the universe hammer into me. I might have a mutiny to look forward to on the *Twinstar XP*. Maybe even a takeover. If a captain couldn't deliver it didn't matter, a caeliner needed to be paid first and foremost.

What that life could be as simple as a gunfight.

"I would have! Profits, woman, I was just explaining—"

"Saying you aren't paying and that your assurance subscription won't cover damages and that you intend to blame me for this cock up isn't an explanation."

"I... was getting to it." He said, pouting his ringed lips.

I could already hear the profits hissing out the airlock. The Audit often froze all dealings whenever they moved publicly. Any currency exchange would need approval and an unlicensed FreeTrader like myself would be under additional scrutiny. We had more than a few nearly-legal modifications that wouldn't be taken to kindly.

Nevermind the Exogen they'd smuggled from the *Vela Frontier*.

I could still be mad though. "Claiming you sent a cancellation before we made descent in the Belcam system is enough of a reason to threaten you. It's suit-shit and you know it. Now, what in the black happened?"

The merchant shrugs, deflating and sipping from his own drink. The other denizens of the tavern had turned away, the momentary excitement dissolving.

"I spent almost seventy five thousand ducats to send a quickship to deliver the message to you. It's not my business to make a FreeTrader's life harder and I appreciate the arrangement we have *Captain Roark*."

"Well then they either died in the Outside, are broadcasting that message to empty space fifty light cycles from here or they were lazy. It's not me or my crew's problem. What happened?"

"Fivehands Panceuticals."

My insides twist. The MacroCorp was a major player on The Market and across Known Space. Whether the Audit was here to curtail them, help them, or wreck some poor local government it didn't matter and I didn't need to know and I wouldn't ask but Asaggio clearly needed someone to vent to.

"They came in before the end of the last quat as part of a convoy Mylbruk out in the Yaltair system in the ExeCor. Rumors planetside said that one of their Matriarchs is traveling with them."

"That their word for Magnate?"

"No, worse, one of their founders. Top tier executive type."

I look back at Gaz and he's as shocked as I am. Fivehands had been around for centuries. There weren't many immortals in the Hegemon of a Thousand Empires but a founder was one of them. That meant a lot of tape. If I were legit it would mean a bumper crop of work but since we were FreeTraders we'd need to buy a license. No money there, specially if the Exogen was now just dead weight.

Asaggio continued, appreciating his story's effect. "The Pakandi nation, said no to selling their grow lands down in the Jadepor sub-continent. Seems as though Fivehands wants to open a new operation for some reason. They wanted to bring seeds from offworld but our farmers won't risk contamination and lose ownership of their own plants. Then the Audit came."

"Well. Shit." I mutter, more to myself. My crew and I will take the hit. No way around it. The Lex was always a kind of legal guideline for the nations of the Hegemon, but not when the Audit was around. Their word *became* law and to defy it was to resist The Market and the Hegemon itself."

"What do you think'll happen?" I ask but we all know the answer. My growing unease is making me as wasteful with the air as a grounder.

"The Pakandi royals are trying to convince the Jadepor farmers but they aren't having it. There have been protests, curfews... bad times ahead."

"Unionists?" Gaz pipes up.

"That's the rumor," Asaggio nods, "We've been hearing of terrorists smuggling themselves in-system and breaching patrols to land in Pakandi. What's more, there's proof they're getting help from inside the government. If that's true it'll only be a matter of time before the Directorate comes." He shakes his head.

I stand, almost knocking my chair over, "We're gone."

We need to get out of here and fast before an interdiction gets slapped onto interstellar travel and every ship in the system gets examined. There were more than a few illegal parts on the *Twinstar XP*, nevermind several of my people having warrants on a few worlds. There'd be fines. Steep. Maybe even time debt. "Best grab tail then, aye Gaz."

"Aye, Cap'n." I stand only to have Asaggio move, a little too fast for his corpulence should be able to handle hinting at further augmentation.

"I've lost a fortune as well! The Exogen was meant to be sent to the Hotel Abraxia for RevShare Day celebrations next quat!"

"Your stomach and mine are exactly that, Asaggio. Hands off."

Asaggio sighs. A menthol breeze hits me and Gaz.

"I've another idea."

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Travel beyond the kosmodrome was done by personal cable car suspended by wire. Thousands of them branched out to various stations all over the city like a weaverweb.

Since we were traveling with cargo we were allowed to use Assagio's lifter, a multi purpose rotar that had a luxury cabin me and Assagio sat in while Gaz, three of my crew and the merchant's people stayed with what we had brought to this planet.

We didn't talk anymore. I read from the Manual on my reader while Asaggio made calls preparing our arrival. He had been excited after convincing me to do this, but then, we were both about to make up for this whole debacle together.

Change is the one constant in all pursuits of Profit, adapt nimbly and you will arrive at a place of unprecedented wealth. Fall behind or lose your way and your fortune will fail.

The words of Dumno-Ualos were ever a comfort. I looked out the window, closing the reader. The rotar was moving fast for an in-atmo transport, clearing the cities and the outlying slurbs and already flying over a desert of rust colored sands.

I'd taken a tab of stimm to counter the vertigo and settle some of the agoraphobia that always came with planetary travel. It was beautiful, but too big. Too much.

"We're almost there, Captain." Asaggio said from the full length couch he sat on, surrounded by a mix of screens and choice delicacies that he popped into his mouth. "I promise you this will reverse our dilemma!"

"I'm fine." I corrected him, I didn't need his pity. "It's just been a while since..." I look at the endless spires and habblocs, the *millions* of people that must live here, working, eating, living, dying just to be buried in *dirt*– "I'm fine."

"It occurred to me that in our last three fiscal cycles, you have never been beyond the Minalmali Kosmodrome. Which, if I might say with respect, Captain, is a crime to your senses." He pops a bulb looking... thing, into his mouth causing his eyes to roll back into the back of his head luxuriously.

"There was never a need." I say, with some reproach. The *Twinstar XP* is my world. "I prefer to focus on the job, profit, then onto the next mudball. *Even a minute spent to idle is to waste the most vital currency in the universe.*"

Asaggio returns to us mere mortals and dabs his mouth which is overly salivating. "*Time!* Indeed, I know the Third Edition of the Manual as well. But; *If you do not invest in the moment, you can never plan accordingly on what matters.*"

I wrinkle my nose. "I never liked the Seventh. It's too... liberal with it's assumptions about what Dumno-Ualos meant."

"Agree to disagree. The latter, improved, editions serve to fulfill whereas the earlier provided the wisdom to rightfully claim the stars. Postuma is a beautiful world with many delights. I would bring you, and your crew, to my villa in Dehab so you can enjoy what our collaborations have produced. I would show you the Veil of Ish during the Festival of Idulifitr so you might taste and smell the wonders of our world."

I let him prattle on with descriptions and explanations of how his mote of dust is somehow better or more tantalizing than all the others in the universe. The only thing I imbibe is his water which I heat and mix with granular kahvic from my own stores on my ship.

I've heard it all before. The singing Chionoeci of the purple sands on Arktur that are eaten uncooked or the engineering wonder that were the artificial forests of Kauntar. I'd heard grounders from all over try to win my opinion over.

Something about us orbiters, we know the beauty of the black and we don't need to talk about it. The Shoals of Cygnus, the Hand of Orion, the luster of the Kudak Anomaly.

"--We are an ancient people, our world one of pedigree, settled over three thousand cycles ago, if you can believe it!"

This bothers me, "Why wouldn't I?" I say with a smirk, "I can trace the Roark name, unbroken, for *five* thousand cycles. We practically made the Orion-Cygnus mercator spectrum. I'll bet that in my family's Portolan Chart is a mention of your people's first colonial attempts of this place."

Asaggio made an overly polite clapping sound with his palms, "Impressive, yet..." He nods at what I can only assume is judgement on my attire.

I wear a parted down vacuu suit underneath a trench coat cut from synthskin. All of it is a patchwork of Grade 3 and sub materials. I don't let his wealth intimidate me. My ship, alone, is worth more than entire districts of the city out there. I can go wherever I damned well choose. I can... He's just trying to get at me.

I reach over and pluck a morsel, some kind of miniature fauna choked in oil, "If this plan works, you introduce me to your tailor and get me the discount, then, deal?"

He chortles with laughter, caressing his Grade 1 coat, "Deal!"

I pop the thing in my mouth and ignore the shocking amounts of salt and riot of textures.

The most important ritual that persists throughout the many branches of Old Humanity and New Mankind is the breaking of bread and the sharing of water. Once partaken, true joy in commerce can begin.

To be continued...