

RATIFICATION

THE SECOND BAILOUT



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Protocol Notice

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by H.B. Rattinger



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Preratification

194 AR. Bostonia

On Brink of Second Bailout - Arctura Varok and Associates

Those words demanded Zorkal's attention as he stepped into the aforementioned law office.

Each letter - precision-cut, knife-sharp, and impossibly black - was forged from a material Zorkal couldn't identify. They hovered, weightless, above a wooden panel.

Real wood.

Sourced from Earth, regardless of cost.

The firm's signage was absurdly large - even for a room like this. It stretched the entire wall behind the reception desk, desperately trying to outshine the panoramic view of Earth through floor-to-ceiling windows flanking the lobby on both sides.

A subtle buzzing alerted Zorkal to stand absolutely still.

He knew that meant his collateral was verified, charged, locked and poised to be irrevocably recorded for eternity on the timechain. Only days ago he would have never dreamt of to control this much LAT ever again, but now, in this place, that close to Earth, against the precipice - it was simply an afterthought, merely a ritual rather than necessity.

The automated gun turrets, many suspected, but Zorkal knew, were lurking behind leathered walls to deter anyone from approaching the reception without proper LAT. Even despite Zorkal's newfound financial

confidence, they still asserted their fear inducing presence in Zorkal's mind, as he approached further.

"Welcome to Arctura, Varok and Associates", the doe at the reception said, as she looked down at the screen showing Zorkal's collateral. "How can we assist you?"

Zorkal hesitated, as his gaze went back to the elevator he just stepped out of moments ago. Now or never. Go back or go forward. "I'm not really sure" - as he fixed his tie and whiskers - "I believe my LAT qualifies me to speak to Varok personally..."



Elnara sighed, like she did at any notification that put her out of the zone, back to the real world. It was her boss, correction, her bosses boss, Varok, founder, named and managing partner.

"The board room in 10". No further context.

Her AI quickly provided context. A rat, not yet on their client roster has entered their office complex just moments ago, depositing not the usual amount of nanos as collateral, but considerably more. Clearly a cheap trick from someone with new money to draw their attention.

Her interest peaked when looking at their guests wallet, probably one of many.

A transaction like that was rare, commonly wielded only by the descendants of those who brought the first bailout back, and even they rarely used the base layer.

And this nobody just showed up, probably from La-grange. Something doesn't add up, but with all the chaos that happened recently, Elnara quickly pushed her thoughts aside to focus on the task at hand, but then she glanced another look at the photos the cameras just took, and the name she previously - out of habit - trained herself to ignore to blur out any biases.

Zorkal.

She met this guy - and it slowly dawned on her that this day will be the day. The day she conjured herself, but still dreaded.



“Someone will be with you in a few minutes, please be patient.” Zorkal was directed to an adjacent waiting area, sporting luxurious leather furniture and a bar offering various drinks and snacks.

“That sign is a good replica,” Zorkal remarked.

“Oh no, it is THE original. Salvaged back in the year 8 after ratkind from the Supreme Court in Boston. We are not owning it though, such artefacts are priceless. It's since been a wandering honor, entrusted to the law firm with the largest collateral, which - since 189 AR - we've been.”

Zorkal remembered the quote from his student years but never gave it much thought - until his life turned. The block of genesis had coined the phrase “Brink of Second Bailout,” which became the foundation of a financial, legal, and belief system even predating

Ratkind. Over time, it turned into myth, into legacy. Despite the historical context saying otherwise, many believed those words to be prophecy. And ever since Ratkind was founded on something resembling a first bailout, they - especially when disenfranchised by their current situation and the powers that be - believed they would be saved by the second.



The meeting room where the three of them would meet, was a place purposefully designed for such an occasion, had been built to impress and intimidate potential new clients even further than the already impressive landing area.

It featured a long table - made out of an even bigger piece of wood as the one in the lobby. Its imperfections indicating it was real - not printed - even to the untrained eye stood halfway off the center of the room. The rest of the room was left vacant. Intentionally, to heighten the impact.

The Arctura, Varok and Associates office complex, which - by the numbers of associates in the hundred thousands - would qualify as a small city elsewhere, was simply a small campus, anchored to OS1, commonly called Bostonia, named after the derelict city beneath them.

Zorkal was sitting at the wooden table alone. Waiting, visibly uncomfortable.

As he looked out the panoramic windows, he noticed something was off, but it was subconscious. He didn't

quite get at first what it was, until it hit him:

The sky was empty. No ribbons anchoring the Ring to earth were visible. This was easy, the cost to build the room at the perimeter of the ring - usually reserved for infrastructure.

The most expensive part was the absence of spaceships zipping by. He wondered if they've booked the entire spacetime just for important meetings, or spend the LAT on a permanent retainer.

His thoughts were interrupted as the door to the room finally opened, and what must be Varok - a tall, slender guy with deep gray fur, gigantic ears and sharply dressed - entered.

"Definitely new money" Varok said, just nonchalantly commenting about his new client, as he entered the room, deliberately last.

Elnara, per usual, behaved more professional than her boss, even after he blew her off just seconds before entering the meeting room, trying to warn him, but his loss.

"Thanks for depositing collateral with us, Zorkal. Our common rate to consult you in any legal matters will require 42 nanos per standard hour, which, given your LAT" - Elnara had to look up the numbers - "would give you considerable options if you decide to work with us", so we're really intrigued what this is about.

In the meantime, Varok used his conscious senses to confirm his first impressions of the potential client. An expensive suit, sure, but obviously fitted by AI, it

looked too perfect. The material smelled wrong, even if chemically perfect.

Varok never wondered why. He made a mental note: assign three associates to figure out why AI tailoring always smelled off. He chuckled softly - but audible, as he imagined associates combing through tailor assemblers, to figure out their assignment.

Calculating his chuckle must also irritate his guest.

Zorkal on the other hand was too detached to notice Varok's subtle demeanor, his deliberate attempts to irritate were ineffective. He had lost too much to partake in these games.

In the world he knew, everyone was quirky and rude, and it wasn't a calculated game to throw someone trained by hours in simulator in social nuance off.

But these guys, they looked like masters playing at power, at optics. But do they see the cracks beneath it all? This Varok obviously never doubted his place atop the system. But even systems have fault lines.

He exhaled, sure these entitled barristers won't see this coming:

“The second bailout...”

Before Ratkind. Asteroid Belt

Against the unforgiving darkness of space, a pair of brightly glowing laser eyes appeared. Anyone fooled by ancient fight or flight reflexes might see a lifeform.

Lurking, staring back at you. Its face shrouded in shadows.

When these two red dots first appeared, they were faint, until they grew larger with any passing minute, until to anyone close by, they'd outshine the sun.

After cruising for years, a sleek pair of spaceships met their fate, powerful lasers hitting reflective surfaces, until they started to decelerate with forces no human could endure, bracing against the invisible border of the Asteroid Belt.

The faraway lasers did not cease fire until the fleet matched speed with the drifting fragments, remnants of a destroyed protoplanet. Only then did peace and tranquility return to the area, and the vacuum returned to its default state: peaceful, silent, in darkness.

Inside - decoupled from any vibrations and screeching metal - a rat was sleeping.

Vaxzor, his eyes still shut, will soon awaken. It would be his first conscious moment in over fifty years - his first time awake as captain.

Outside, the low density Asteroid Belt casually caught a few photons sent from a distant sun, reflecting them on random paths, until some of them hit the USS Hal

Finney's sensor package. Onboard computer systems booted up, and started what would be a lengthy and painful process of realigning Vaxzor's body with the time-preference needed for the mission.

His torpor chair was hardened against any electronic warfare, built with mostly mechanical components. That deep in space, outside the inner systems' timechain protection, any AI or other networked computer system was, for all practical purposes, strongly discouraged, and therefore any reanimation sequence had to be as tamper proof and inevitable as possible.

A mechanical clock, that allowed reactivation after a preprogrammed window. One switch, a second one, an infrared sensor precisely tuned to the expected laser spectrum, and channeled through fibers directly to the torpor chair. And third, a radio receiver validating the reboot on the timechain. After all 3 events occurred as planned, a secondary computer booted up, and immediately started the wakeup procedure.

Usually, such a procedure entailed to closely monitor and verify measurements various monitoring systems collected over the years, and determine if it was safe to proceed. In this case however, with nobody standing by to help, there was no alternative - until now.



The pumping and hissing sound of Vaxzor's torpor chair was now the only sound within light-minutes of dark and empty space.

Vaxzor's reanimation from 50 years of hibernation suc-

ceeded, and he woke up from his decades long slumber. His muscles were still stiff from the torpor, but his mind: awakened in an instant.

He was sure that was the result of drugs that got pumped into him. A sharp mind is the first order of business in any unforeseen situation, everything else can be done using low level, non networked computers with manual inputs.

His torpor chair was located adjacent to the bridge, not because that proximity would be needed later, but simply because both needed to be located in the center of the ship, behind many layers of armor, providing him with exhaustive protection against any physical and cybernetic attacks.

Thankfully, his torpor suit was not that different to an EVA suit. It featured familiar components to circulate various fluids any body had to run on, precise temperature controls, and tiny thrusters to navigate both in space and within the weightlessness of the vessel's core.

Vaxzor leaned forward, the suit understood, and used its thrusters to push him out of the torpor chair.

His body still aching, he was happy for the zero-g environment here in the core. To his left and right, walls were lined with panels meant to display real-time data, all dark for now, but soon to be filled with chatter and bustle of his awakened crew. But now, everything was dim, reflecting the ship's still moderate power-saving mode. It felt peaceful and quiet.

The room where he had woken up opened into the

bridge, the field of view widening as he floated towards it.

The complexity of the bridge still managed to overwhelm anyone born within the luxury of the inner system. The spaceships Vaxzor started training in were sleek and simple. There were no controls and an AI simply acting on their pilots intent. This bridge had manual controls for everything, and soon this room would buzz with almost a hundred Rats.

The ship had no main computer. Everything was redundant and decentralized. In this stage, and for a long time, data will only flow through crew, instead of automated systems which can easily be deceived through faulty data. Instead, paranoid minds and eyes had to decide.

Vaxzor's first action was to boot up the sensor array and switch on the main viewscreen. The view was quiet and serene, but ultimately disappointing. He remembered the old science-fiction movies he enjoyed so much in his adolescent years, where asteroid belts were dense clusters of rocks. The reality presented to him was not that different to a clear night sky, in fact if Vaxzor would pick a random point of light, it would be magnitudes more likely he'd point at a star.

His mission however was not one of astronomical observation, but a campaign of war. The asteroid belt was so sparse, that before the Kessler crisis, missions would simply fly starships through with no fear of hitting something. But this has changed: decades before Vaxzor was even born, you'd be certain something would hit back.

Vaxzor remembered his training, and the horrifying stories.

He was told *they* use stealth. Unless you are lucky and they pass between you and a light source, or have an active sensor net, their small infrared radiation is your only chance to detect them. The Halfins' hull was covered in multiple, redundant and overbuilt infrared detectors, all feeding into this sensor array on the bridge.

The computer receiving the sensor images was also intentionally simple, but after eliminating the inevitably many false positives, the scans showed nothing. Despite continuous scanning, no sign of any tabbies skirting the detection thresholds. This was to be expected, past missions only encountered them far deeper in the belt.

Not strictly protocol, but after this tense moment passed, his second action was to turn on the on-board audio system.

Soothing music soon started playing and washed away previous feeling of darkness and despair, speakers originally installed to transmit his orders yet to come, created a small pocket of happiness as he braced himself for what will be a lengthy process of awakening his crew throughout the entire fleet.

Close to 50.000 brothers and sisters were scheduled to wake up from torpor, medical personnel first to help in case of any abnormalities, second tier command staff next, and finally everyone, ship's support and mining crews.



In this moment, intrusive thoughts entered Vaxzor's mind.

"I could never wake them, and go back to sleep. See what happens."

The thought came uninvited. Not a plan, just a shape. Like many rats felt and whispered in dark moments, his dismay for humanity ran very deep, but his conditioning and the momentum of a purpose to do the job he was groomed to do, still held strong. But his inner eye painted a tranquil picture: the Halfin adrift, the fleet frozen forever, its captain safely sedated, no orders sent ever reaching their destination. Only to wake up in a far-away, maybe better future. The system would call it corruption. He would have called it rest.

And even in the moments where his will of defiance was strong, he knew that there was no other option than to complete the mission as planned. He was in command of an entire fleet of starships, all of them still hooked up to the Halfins hull, or stored in the vast hangars, as their design lacked a propulsion system to do anything outside small maneuvers.

His fear, deviating from a certain path, already very present in humans, has been even artificially enhanced in rats, therefore despite him knowing so, any thoughts of defiance or rebellion did not linger very long.

His programming was successful in pushing away his

overthinking.

After the last essential system finished booting up, lights flickered on in the corridors of segment 7 - primary medical - which conveniently surrounded the section of the core where Vaxzor had spent the past 50 years.

A short vibration shook the bridge as the electromagnets built into the hull began to accelerate the rotational speed of the first of 21 total rotating inner segments - each almost 100m long and 250m in diameter - protected behind meters of multiple layers of thick armor, surrounding a shared inner core. Most of the crew facilities and torpor pods were located there. It would take more than an entire shift - 6 hours - to speed up each torus from the 0.1g ideal for torpor standby to a healthy and comfortable 0.5. Vaxzor looked at the parameters and confirmed them within range. The ship was cleared for operation. It was time.

Vaxzor spent these hours listened to the music, while going through mission details and collecting his thoughts, running more scans, releasing an atmosphere into vacant areas and booting up various support systems.

He remembered this part of the mission to be the most enjoyable, it only went downhill from there.



“Time to get moving,” Vaxzor said to himself.

He floated out of the command bridge. As the auto-

mated sliding door opened, it revealed the large central corridor connecting the various briefing and support facilities of the command deck to the central elevator.

The ship's layout was simple and efficient. Passing the first junction, he glanced at the separate elevator leading down the central core to "The Vault". It gave him chills every time he thought about the wealth stored there, bracing to be unleashed on the belt. This heavily secured area has been located deep in the ship's core, housing the timechain collateral, the critical component for their mission. The elevator was marked with a high-security insignia and required multiple digital signatures to access. The ship was a fortress, designed to protect the collateral from all threats, even physical.

This was the heart of their mission: installing a federated second layer in the belt to finally defeat the Tabbies, allow using AI again and safeguard against attacks. Nothing less than to ensure a future in the 3rd wave of human expansion into the solar system.

He remembered the ancient ideas about colonizing the solar system from the history books he studied. Nobody back then even imagined the belt would be their final adversary. But as many other things, the timechain and the AI crisis that followed put them on a different timeline altogether - a future few had foreseen.

As he rode the elevator down to S7 - sector 12, the illusion of gravity started to manifest, and forcing his muscles to slowly regain some function. Vaxzor continued, his path clear in his mind.

The command structure was simple: the medical staff held significant authority - just one level below the cap-

tain. Humans, in their decadent obsession with wellness deemed those concerns above all, but here, in the unforgiving emptiness of space it was one of the few human decisions that made sense.

The familiar sight of the first medical bay, designated MS 1, came into view. The door was sealed, with a small panel beside it displaying the bay's status. Vaxzor authenticated with the door, the screen blinked green, and the door slid open with a quiet hiss.

Inside, a vast chamber opened up. Multiple levels, the walls lined with torpor chambers, tightly crammed with still sleeping rats. Vaxzor never saw this facility in person before now. And he was reminded that Torpor was the reason he exists. The reason they all exist.

“Why humans are unable to torpor.” - He remembered reading it as a child. Something genetic, they were told. But like most educational content the explanation was thin, offered without inviting curiosity or critical thought.

Still, it was on him to never research it deeper. He never bothered to acquire the necessary biological knowledge to even understand the explanation. His thoughts went briefly to his own training scores, his high adaptability index, his near-perfect simulation compliance, and assumed those were the reasons he made it here. Deep down he still clung to that belief: that he had earned command, not just inherited it through careful breeding and psychometric grooming. That he was chosen for merit - not because he was perfectly obedient, perfectly unremarkable in all the ways that counted.

Jerenxa was standing over a monitor, not really acknowledging Vaxzors presence. She was deep in thought, until she must have felt his presence through the air he displaced. “Captain...” - “MSTR...”. They nodded and greeted them using their titles.

“Give me the rundown, Medical Sargeant. I assume all torpor chambers are operating?” - Jerenxa broke eye contact and attended to the terminal showing the statistics.

“We’ve had a total of 571 losses, and 6185 crew will have to deal with some form of post-torpor trauma. Which is unfortunate, but actually half than projected. That number includes over nine hundred who are technically alive, but will be unable to wake up without preliminary treatment, and the rest with varying levels of neurological misalignment. We’re tagging them according to functional potential.”

“We’ll set up a timeline to deal with them. Do you need any medical assistance yourself? You look a bit pale, and your posture’s slightly off. We need to run a deeper scan, but most likely a mild case of PTF.”

“It feels like Post-Torpor-Fatigue. I’m still tired. Not cognitively, just - sluggish. Like gravity came back before muscle, even though I switched on the gravity. And my mind feels like I’m wearing sunglasses.”

Vaxzor didn’t mention his intrusive thoughts from earlier - “But let’s hold off on a full diagnostic. It’s both protocol and a sign of respect to personally greet the first batch waking up.”

“PTF Class-B. Motivational collapse is nothing alarm-

ing that early. You might not feel it, but your mind isn't fully there yet. You're feeling a strong urge to go back to torpor?" Vaxzor felt caught, he couldn't help but instinctively nod. "Classic PTF-B. I can administer a melatonin blocker if your symptoms persist - it's mild, but clears residual fog." she produced a small plaster and put it on the back of his neck.

A chill ran down his spine. It felt cold, but it wasn't physical. There was no pause in her movement - no warmth, no consent. Just efficiency. Her hand felt cold and calculated, like he remembered from the human overseers, not a fellow rat.

"I've been tagged. I'm inventory." Vaxzor's paranoia briefly peaked again, only for his mind to align him a half-second later. PTF-B. He accepted the thoughts of how normal it felt to be labeled and adjusted for function.

"That will make you feel better within the hour. If it doesn't - I urge you to see me immediately."

Vaxzor pointed at the monitor. "I know it's procedure to wake up your medical crew first, but we're in no rush to wake the entire crew yet. I want eyes on the infrared scanners ASAP. I might have missed a tabby, and if that's the case, we have bigger problems than an unsafe torpor exit. The other segments can wait, let's make sure we're ready here before we prematurely wake up the entire ship"

Jerenxa didn't even flinch as he mentioned the word - *tabby*. And she didn't bother to argue with any patient suffering from PTF, and won't treat her captain differently.

“You’re the captain.” is all she uttered.

188 AR. New Aldrin

Myla's job, as she understood it, was to monitor, catalogue, and in rare cases intervene with any object entering the Earth-Luna system packing potential energy in the yotta-joule range or higher. Asteroids which pack this much punch are rare - one might pass every few months, so she thought it meant sitting for hours in front of a console, occasionally running diagnostics, and recalibrating sensors. When she researched the job on a surface level, it seemed perfect: a lazy girl gig, with high prestige and not much to do.

Her assumptions were wrong. What she realized only late into her training: she would be hit by constant simulations, one horror story after the other. And while on the job, she would not know if the scenario presented to her was real or not.



Strange fact about trauma: in your memory, with its twisted and illusive to grasp corridors and junctions, the seconds, minutes and hours before any impactful event are stored with much more weight in your long term memory. What we fallaciously perceive as live - in the moment - consciousness, as has been proven long ago by human scientists countless of blocks ago, is nothing less than the illusion of the past observed in perverted, convoluted closed timeline curves.

In this warped reality, everything you recall in those fateful moments before the event feels as though it carries a premonition, an eerie foresight. It's as if your

consciousness, aware of the impact, causing an absolute and irrevocable fracture, desperately tries to alert you, to wake you up! To make sense of what is to come, only for you to realize, much later, that this sense of foreknowledge is just a trick of the mind, a side effect of how trauma rewrites the narratives of all the pasts, of all the stories written in your subjective and always retroactively changing history.

This phenomenon, which Myla was not even aware of at the time, but was poised to define her life forwards, caused Myla to remember everything leading up to it.

The day started with the first hard rays of simulated sunlight slicing through her window, throwing sharp, angular shadows across the floor. She blinked against the brightness, feeling the familiar pull of another routine morning, though something felt just slightly off.

The air smelled wrong. Her apartment usually carried the same sterile scent, laced with hints of recycled oxygen and faint electrical warmth. But today, something unfamiliar lingered. It was organic, but too faint to identify before it vanished completely.

And even her morning shower felt odd in her memories. The water felt too cold, and too sharp, like it was made from glass, hitting her sensitive fur.

Through the food dispenser console on her wall, she ordered her usual drink. The simulated buck on the screen repeated it back to her, his voice oddly precise, his expression too measured. His face, the arch of his brows, the slight asymmetry of his lips - every detail cemented itself in her mind as if she had studied and known him for years, even though she knew the system

generated a different avatar every time.

Then came the first sip. The ginger bit sharply at her tongue, the banana softened it, and the milk bound it all together in a way that was neither good nor bad. It was familiar, comforting. But as the flavors settled, something inside her clicked. She could remember every past instance of this exact moment - where she had stood, how the cup had felt in her grip, the precise words she had spoken in the past. The memories weren't just resurfacing: they were layering over the present, indistinguishable from reality.



Strangely, and counter-intuitively, she did not recall anything after that, not going back to her apartment or logging into her shift, or the first two hours of her work at all. Her memory, when asked later by her attorney, had a gap until the pace kicked up again and the minutes preceding the incident drew closer.

“Nothing to worry about” the Barrister would reassure her later, her not being entirely sure if that was a personal consolation, a legal statement or what else.

She was working alone. Not out of error, but by design. Zero-knowledge-consensus jobs were one of the few remaining after automation took everything else. Working didn't require teams - not anymore. The system fed her abstracted inputs, preprocessed scenarios by layers of AI. She didn't know which of her decisions would affect real-world systems and which were simulated for redundancy or test. Neither did anyone else.

The official term was double-blind governance. More cynical minds called it engineered plausible deniability. Myla called it lonely.

She was expected to follow protocol to the letter, not knowing if they were fake. That was the whole point of zero-knowledge-consensus: a doctrine of obedience without certainty.

Even in her job, her ability to intervene, to override, wasn't real. It was simply her input into the consensus. Only after a programmed majority signed the identical scenario, it was written into reality.

During her training, she didn't really pay attention to the parts about history and how the doctrine developed. Some anecdote about old Earth, when operators once sat in silos, poised to launch humanity's first space weapons. She couldn't recall the full story, just the image of someone staring at a blinking red light, unsure if it was training, a sensor glitch or the end of everything. That ambiguity and dreadful limbo was exactly what Myla and everyone working her job lived today. But back then it was born out of imperfect sensors, not protocol.

To Myla this was normal, she didn't know any other job. A decision having direct impact? A tale from a distant era, in which she speculated its planners were falling into the trap of wrongly perceived premonitions.

Or did they rather fear the psychological turmoil it would cause? In contrast, the Alliance employed total and incorruptible obedience to the policies through a simulation-first double-blind regime.

She sometimes theorized that it might have been due to a lack of the timechain - this fundamental difference between now and the chaotic systems of the past. The old world had nothing anchoring their decisions, while now, the consensus-driven reality of the chain imposed structure so rigid it shattered any illusion before it could take root. Its consensus view of reality was mercilessly transmitted - eventually reaching any device, including Myla's personal ones, alerting her to any inconsistencies and therefore pulling away the veil and collapsing the simulated narratives and the intended training effect.

Therefore, the longer a simulation, the more costly it would become to pull off, deterring the simulators to subject the operators to prolonged stress. Someone must have decided there is no long-term trauma from 10 minute deam-like slices of horrors that have never been.

Nevertheless, even in her retroactively heightened sense of awareness, the incident presented to Myla was nothing irregular at first.

An interstellar asteroid, such objects were observed regularly, entering the solar system on a hyperbolic trajectory - has been part of her training and regular simulations many times threatening to enter the bubble of absolute security.

It was not even the largest she ever encountered - simulated or otherwise. Still, the object was clearly above the yotta-joule scale to warrant her attention.

She remembered pulling up all the data of that thing. So far, as seen from powerful telescopes still blurry,

would be your standard Omua-class. Even the tumbling motion was eerily matching everything Myla knew. And its trajectory would hit the LLS dead center. "Surely another Simulation" Myla remembered thinking to herself, knowing that assertion would be correct 99% of the time, yet in the perverted and twisted memory allocation, she remembered this sentence with so much more weight.

Protocol dictated to prime the defensive systems 20 light-minutes from Earth. So that's what Myla did, knowing that even if she would do nothing, the AI would do it for her seconds later. At her command, massive, dozens of 100 meter long railgun barrels, laser installations and missile batteries woke from their long slumber, poised to greet any intruder to the meticulously weeded garden that is the sovereign space of the UOS with overwhelming - excessive-by-design - physical force.

All while, far away, located at the Lagrange point L2 - a stable zone, always on the far side of the moon, deliberately picked to never pose a threat to Earth itself - billions of nanos of stored monetary energy was converted into potential physical force, waiting to be unleashed, Myla, knowing it would be a few minutes of waiting for better sensor data, fetched herself a drink before returning to her monitoring station.

She took another sip from that fruity milk flavored juice, and Myla remembered it to be so much more intense than usual, and the vitamins hitting her tongue exploded as she saw the latest sensor data on screen, while the audible alerts of what she saw were drowned out and almost inaudible as the pivotal moment was unfolding on her screen.



The tumbling asteroid had stopped tumbling.

Now fully alert and excited, Myla took in the latest sensor data of the Asteroid, which - against all logical explanations, except one - stopped wobbling just as it entered the detection range.

Moments later, it shone brighter than the sun. Her eyes had problems adjusting even though it was just a digital projection. Her temporary blindness gave her a few seconds to breathe. Myla checked the sensors. The “asteroid” had been hit by the lasers from the nodes. Someone had paid a ridiculously large sum of LAT to slow it down and put it on a trajectory towards Earth’s orbit.

The defense system, now recognizing the object, stood down.

The protocols and signatures used in the purchase predated AR. They were of - human design. If there was anything she could do to escalate the matter, Myla would have pressed that button by now. She remembered wishing for such a button to exist, to send a signal to anyone relieving her of the burden of responsibility in that moment. But she was the operator, isolated from the world, the timechain and everyone else. Consensus was found through aligning on the “perfect” decision, and there was no escape hatch.

Only the future to ratify their decisions.

Myla pulled up the telemetry and message from the ship, and when she saw telemetry, she was shocked.

The name: redacted The specification, its profile and mass: burned into the collective memory of everyone since AR. The double-blind doctrine: ineffective.

Half of Ratkind wiped in a single battle, and only one ship survived, only a few thousand rats managed to return to Earth, liberated Ratkind and founded the UOS - the United Orbital Structures.

But many people believe, that second ship is still out there, that its return would usher in a new era, a “Second Bailout”.

Myla grew up very religious. Her parents, who stayed behind on the Moon during the defining Battle, spoke of the Second Bailout with quiet reverence, like an echo of something too big to process. Her childhood bedtime stories weren't fairy tales, but readings of the chain, and interpreting it towards the inevitable: that the ship would return, that their sacrifice would be answered, that nothing has been lost. It was there, when her Father explained to her impressionable mind the timechain records of the battle, and their interpretations of recorded trajectories and narratives, that sparked Myla's interest in the launch loops.

But over time, once she studied for the job, and in her early career - the rituals thinned. It wasn't explicitly forbidden, just out of place. Her work demanded precision. The doctrine discouraged speculation and optimism. She learned to suppress that part of herself - gently at first, then rarely thought about it. Eventually, she started believing that the myth was never real to be-

gin with - that it had only existed to cushion the horror of mass extinction. She started embrace the materialist worldview: all myths are a neural scaffolds: coping mechanisms with a reality too brutal to survive without someone filtering the narrative - the timechain, just records of what has happened, not a divine act of cosmic ratification.

Being born after Year 0, she never knew any of the lives lost, she did not hold a personal stake in the collective trauma of an entire civilization. To her, it was turning into a scaffold, built by strangers burdened by grief she never inherited, to cushion the horror of grief she never experienced first hand.

It was easy for her to end up succumbing to rationalism. But the signal shook that belief, suspended her doubt for moments, just long enough to bring it all back to her, the well-crafted story: that those lives weren't lost. That they are time-locked to return precisely, when Ratkind needed them most.

What added to Myla's confusion: Never before had this scenario been remotely part of any simulation. It felt off - even under the doctrine. It was a cultural and institutional taboo, bordering on the blasphemous, to even suggest that consensus might one day be needed for their return. Even during her training, when an insensitive buck, always trying to rattle, asked if they'd ever simulate their return. It was treated it as untouchable lore, something sacred or too destabilizing to model. And yet, here it was: the ship's iconic shape - a giant cylinder, 2.1 kilometers long - on sensors.



Her large video wall showed artificially enhanced camera feeds of the first deceleration structure, as the ship came as close as 10.000 kilometers, the final handshake between the ships onboard guidance systems and the LLS happened and was done without a hitch. A powerful laser was switched on for 10 seconds to hit the purposefully designed plate at the stern of the ship, to measure its actual speed and mass, but most importantly, to exactly determine the inertia the consecutive loops need to eat away. While the ship had done something similar millions of kilometers out already by firing its thrusters and therefore measuring the same, in the end it was a matter of verification, not trust.

A few very boring minutes later, the ship hit LLS1 perfectly in the center. Freely moving segments, housing powerful superconducting magnets, adjusted their positioning inside the deceleration tube to the vessels profile, and powered up the magnets.

The ship came out the other side, and Myla visually saw that something was very wrong, even milliseconds before the monitoring systems sounded all kinds of alarms. According to sensors and internal protocols, the launch loop system worked perfectly, they did neither impact or hug the hull from too far away, but the magnets obviously did not work. No time to waste she said, malfunctions happen and that's why the humans had originally built the system with many redundancies.

Myla confirmed that the system automatically adjusted the power required in the subsequent stations, and a few minutes later, the ship hit the second station, this time with everything in perfect order.

Myla sighed in relief, her posture finally easing, yet another fluke. She logged the investigation of the first station's failure for later, a decision that, in hindsight, was her fatal mistake. If she had inspected it immediately, would she have caught the significance of the exact energy figure the system requested but failed to provide? Would she have understood what it meant?

Instead, she spent those precious seconds preparing for the next deceleration station. To her utter shock, this station failed as well. A wave of panic surged through her as she finally and hastily logged into both the first and second stations' systems, pulling their power logs. That's when it became clear: the system hadn't failed at all. It had sent the correct request to power up the magnets, with the exact specifications required. But something - a fuse, perhaps, or some under-engineered component - had given out. The magnets had simply failed.

And while the object was still moving towards its next destination: a fourth deceleration station, Myla just having found out the issue, already knew what will happen.

The layout of the LLS was set up in a way, that even in an event of catastrophic failure, an incoming vessel would not hit Earth or any essential orbital infrastructure directly, and depending on the velocity it removed, it would either be parked in a stable orbit around Earth, decelerated down to almost zero to dock with the ring using simple thrusters, or hug the Earth on a hyperbolic trajectory and leave again into the deep dark depths of space.

"I'm gonna need a lawyer!" Myla thought to herself

again as she made a fateful decision.

Myla's fingers quickly moved across the console as she put her idea into decisive action. That ship was coming in too fast, its trajectory set for a catastrophic reentry that would burn the ship and its crew to ash. There was only one way to prevent it: divert the ship to crash more or less intact on Earth, using the launch loop's delicate space station as a buffer. It wasn't designed for this kind of impact. The station would be severely damaged, maybe even destroyed, and with it, probably lives lost if on that station who had no idea of the sacrifice she was about to make.

Myla at her console, the tension of the moment filling her mind with doubts she couldn't afford to entertain. She wagered the few lives on that station are a heavy burden, but saving thousands on the ship outweighed that. She was forced to act, inaction was not an option, and therefore the act that caused the least amount of suffering is the one that is correct. That knowledge gave her a grim sense of resolution.

Her hand hovered for a moment above the controls. I have no choice, she thought, her heart racing. "The crew must survive, this is bigger than all of us!"

The station went on full alert as its magnets prepared to divert their physical presence inward toward saving the doomed ship.

She feared the potential consequences of her actions: accusing her of negligence or sabotage. But there was no time to reflect on the lives she had just condemned to save thousands. Through the tension she almost forgot that this was likely another simulation, yet one she

didn't have before.



And just like that the screens went blank, just before the ship entered the atmosphere, "consensus not reached, simulation ended" appeared on the screens. This part was obvious. "Please report for your deposition." So far nothing abnormal, she sat through those already a couple of times, whenever a simulation did not give her a perfect score, but Mylas pulse was still at her peak, surely over 400.

The deposition was entirely digital, conducted by AI, and started immediately on her screen. The LLSA Logo dominated the screen, with introductory legalese scrolling through:

"We at the Launch Loop System Alliance strive to maintain the highest standards in contractor engagement and performance evaluation, especially in critical scenarios. My aim is to facilitate this process through a series of structured inquiries to better understand the outcomes and actions taken.

To proceed, could you please provide a detailed description of the simulated incident in question, including the specific parameters, objectives, and your role in the exercise?

This will enable us to contextualize the evaluation effectively within the operational framework."

And before Myla could even respond by doing that un-

necessary bureaucratic ritual, her screen reset.

“That is weird,” Myla thought, and searched the system for any simulation logs. “The last 10 minutes showed a blank entry. Did the simulation process crash before it could write to the timechain? That would make sense, but why?”

As this was the end of her shift, she logged out, but over the following days and nights this weird simulation always went back to her. She could not shake it. She filed a report with the corporate helpdesk, which not surprisingly, remained answered only with the classic templated AI-generated corporate jargon.

Twelve more attempts to get answers, or at least to speak to a person about the issue within the company were rejected, ignored or she was left with more jargon and evasive language.



For days she grew ever more distraught. Was this system purposefully designed this way - to stonewall? Or was it simply neglect - a blind spot no one in this huge bureaucracy had incentive or felt responsible to fix?

Myla reached out to some colleagues she had met over the years and carefully inquired whether they'd ever seen anomalies like this. None had. Some got even angry at her for breaking protocol. Their anger and confusion only deepened her own - instead of resolving her doubts, it left her feeling alienated and untethered. As if the deeper she dared to look, the less real it all became.

For the first time since childhood, Myla felt completely stuck. Her thoughts drifted back to her father - not as a source of answers, but as a presence she once trusted when everything felt large, threatening and unknowable. That's when she remembered: he had given her a copy of *The sounds of Earth*

He wasn't even that old then, maybe just beginning to feel the weight of time, when he told her: "I'm beyond trouble now. All I could worry about, I already worried about. But this helped me, and it might help you one day."

At the time, she'd rolled her eyes. He knew she wasn't religious anymore - hadn't been since uni. They used to argue about it gently, like sparring over physics problems. He called faith "the language for uncertainty." She, in her rebellious youth, called it narrative cope. Called the concept - that the final ratification, by definition, was indistinguishable from omnipotence - a twist of logic.

She'd never opened the book. Not even after he passed. But now... she needed something. Not answers, maybe - just alignment.

She dug through the old storage case, pulling out the paper volume. Today, Myla felt sentimental enough to appreciate it. The cover, not printed but hand-sewn. The title embossed into the leather. She flipped through the pages. That's when she noticed: He had made handwritten notes in the margins, some careful and deliberate, others erratic. The ink had bled a little from pressure, not age.

She skimmed through the book for a few minutes

longer - aimlessly - until she found the passage:

“As the fleet encountered their halving, only one was allowed to return. All reactions cause an equal reaction. They had to stay behind - time-locked in space, waiting, to bring the Second Bailout upon us, once we need it the most. Once we are ready, their return will be ratified.”

Beside it, in her father’s handwriting, a single word:

Retrocausality

She stared at it.

Today, old enough to understand, Myla believed he hadn’t meant it literally. Of course not. He was a rationalist after all. Just like her. He’d probably written that as a conceptual bridge - a way to translate the sacred into the tangible. A footnote to myth.

She read it a second time, and a third, then the pieces aligned without margins like the magnets of a launch loop station.

This wasn’t describing a prophecy, it was an instruction manual.

Of course. The timechain doesn’t predict - it ratifies. That’s what it does. Always had. Not a prophecy, but verification. Protocol, not premonition. And if their return required ratification... then the evidence would already exist. Somewhere on the ledger - hidden in plain sight - waiting to be seen.

But oddly, Myla didn’t feel triumphant. This wasn’t a

discovery. It felt like arriving late to a party that had already ended.

She wasn't the first to realize this. Someone else - someone with more insight - had seen it already. Had understood what it meant. And ran the simulations to play out all possible narratives.

The chain was public. That was the whole point. Im-mutable, transparent, final.

But it only held signatures, not truths. Ratification, not revelation.

Whatever triggered this simulation, its cryptographic imprint would be etched somewhere in the ledger - probably years ago.

But the reality behind that signature? The payload? That lived off-chain - behind a federated mint. In LLSA records, simulation archives, and the UOS government archives she would never be cleared to open by asking.

Unless someone forced them.

She stared at the page again. Just a single word - yet enough to reframe everything. The second bailout wasn't on the brink anymore. It was underway - and being ignored or hidden from the public eye.

She opened a legal proxy interface, scanned the contract templates. The non-disclosure agreement she was under was probably airtight, but what if it contradicted the common good?

There was only one move left: hire a lawyer. It would

almost certainly damage her standing with the LLSA, but what if lives were at stake?

She'd never been one to indulge in paranoia. But this wasn't noise. The simulation had changed something. It felt too real - too specific. And it crossed a line: a religious taboo.

Then without further hesitation, she transferred ten thousand nanos to collateralize the retainer.

The timechain may have ratified the return. But someone still had to enforce it.



Later, a gray face with large whiskers and even larger ears, sleekly dressed, popped into the video call. His suit was tailored to perfection, his fur combed meticulously. The hint of a smirk played at the corner of his mouth, though it lacked any real warmth.

“My name is Varok,” the rat said smoothly, his head moving uncomfortably close to the camera, and offering a thin smile. “I’m with Arctura, Varok and Associates. After looking into your case, we’re willing to represent you.”

“Yes, I believe by my NDA I am allowed to legal counsel regarding any secretive matters, but I am not sure how to proceed here.”

Varok paused a moment before responding, his tone measured and precise. “Based on your statement, it appears you have identified potential irregularities

within a simulation conducted during your tenure at the Launch Loop System Association. Our first course of action would be to formally draft a notification requesting clarification from the LLSA regarding the specific scenario in question to possibly arbitrate your situation. At best, this will alleviate any concerns you might have. Do you need a few minutes for yourself before we proceed?"

Myla was still in disbelief about this being simulated, even days after, and somehow this Varok sensed it.

The meeting room Varok was streaming from was furnished in a friendly way, providing stunning views of the dust-scrappers of New Aldrin. Was he on the moon too? Or was this simply a facade? She made a mental note to watch the lag of his responses to figure out where he was, but then forgot to watch it as the conversation continued.

Next to Varok, a doe who did not bother to introduce herself, by her equally expensive looking attire surely Varok's aide or something, was watching too. Myla felt a bit more relaxed, seeing someone else in the meeting, and by now her emotion was more that of annoyance at the bureaucracy she expected would follow.



A few days later, Myla had the official response from the LLSA - sent through Varok's office - in her inbox. Her hands were shaking and she even contemplated not opening it. She decided to go for a run on the boulevards of New Aldrin, in a weird attempt to believe a clear mind would somehow change the outcome.

Back in her apartment she opened the letter:

The AI systems utilized to generate our simulations incorporate data from a variety of sources, both real and fictitious. Any resemblance to actual events, past or present, is purely coincidental and beyond the direct control of [Launch Loop System Alliance] (“LLSA”). Accordingly, we are unable to comment on the specific simulation experienced by your client.

In accordance with our corporate policy, any simulation results that appear to correlate with real-world events are subject to internal review and investigation, conducted in compliance with applicable laws, regulations, and our internal guidelines. Per our internal compliance structure, we do not disclose the rationale or results of these investigations to any of our operators.

Should you require further clarification within the scope of our policies, please do not hesitate to reach out.

Sincerely...



Days later the call came in. It wasn't from Varok. Instead, a doe named “Elnara” - someone Myla vaguely remembered from their earlier conference call - now finally introducing herself.

Myla hadn't expected closure from the letter. Not really. But even so, the result still managed to hurt.

Elnara got straight to the point: they had already used up half her deposit. Five thousand nanos. For a simple letter.

Myla was taken aback and frustrated.

She had thought of the various legal dramas she enjoyed to watch - high stakes lawsuits and legal documents with airtight, irrefutable statements that shattered the world, rewrote history. Reality was much grimmer, a reality the fictional narratives overlook: Even those lawyers are unable to breach the firewalls of corporate obfuscation and denial. The protocols were absolute.

Those barristers wielded no more power than Myla herself. Without the proper collateral, this corporation was an immovable object - unable, unwilling, and incapable of comment.

“You have two options here,” Elnara continued. “If we take this to arbitration, we’d need to prove wrongdoing on the LLSA’s part - and that’s hard considering the limited information we have.

Even if we managed that, we’re up against the LLSA. AI arbiters don’t lift non-disclosure agreements lightly. They won’t enforce disclosure of classified data without overwhelming proof. Consensus workers like you just ratify the decision after the fact. Challenging the AI is rare. They’re assigned randomly, and if we’re unlucky, all of them are overworked, ignorant to the issue, or both. And they’re not going to risk their score over what sounds like a conspiracy theory.”

Myla’s frustration peaked.

“I booked you guys to learn specifics, and now I spent money and got nowhere. This simulation felt too real. Something is going on, and everyone seems to want to sweep it under the rug”.

Elnara shifted her tone - almost apologetic.

“You have to consider the cultural impact too, today, even after 200 years, many believe THEY are still out there. That they have somehow survived. And while The Quote - she pointed at the wall behind her - is simply an artifact of humanity’s past, to many it had evolved into a more religious and precognitive meaning. Still, a more rational leaning majority, the official position of the LLSA and UOS included - still believe it to be a myth. Their position is that the recent simulation was nothing more than a hallucination - the AI simply trying to make sense of random sensor echoes, combined with public sentiment and fear.”

Elnara leaned in: “Myla, we tried to help, but legally, there is not much you can do besides sue. If you request, we can try taking this further, but consensus against the biggest corporation in the UOS isn’t cheap. It will likely cost you an additional hundred thousand nanosats. As I outlined before we currently advise against such drastic action.”

“Take your time. Let us know how you want to proceed.”

The call ended and the walls in Myla’s apartment seemed to cave in around her. In her mind, the images from the simulation merged with the historical records everyone in the UOS had seen at some point. And while her rational mind was telling her that she

should simply let it go, emotionally she could not.



Over the coming weeks, Myla was down bad. Every few hours she remembered her defeat at the hands of bureaucracy and legal firewalls. Her job-performance suffered. The simulations she got felt bland, unreal, unimportant. The performance-monitoring AIs of the LLSA noticed, and each simulation she worked on felt of less gravity than the last. The reputation she had built over the previous years vanished within days.

Until one day, when she tried to login for her shift: login denied, no reason given. She knew what was going on. She checked her inbox for anything, but empty. Only a few hours later, her termination letter arrived.

Weeks before, that's what she already wanted to do, give up on that issue, quit the job, become part of the silent, non-working majority living solely off the faucet drips. She would gain the privilege to ignore it all. Her existence would become a dull routine of sleep, eat, and cheap entertainment, with no accountability or opportunity to build anything meaningful. Shielded from responsibility yet trapped in a cycle of stagnation.

Myla did not even read the letter in detail. She knew this termination was not retaliatory and entirely her fault. Her capacity for anger was drained, and she was just happy that this chapter was behind her.



Elnara stood by the window, her arms folded, watching Varok signing the final brief with slow, ritualistic care, sub-vocalizing each letter as he confirmed them. She wanted to sound cold and professional, but failed. “You knew what this case represented, Varok. You knew what she would do with it, and how far it would push her.”

Varok didn’t pause. “Of course I knew. But she’s simply a lever - a signal, sent to the architecture of belief itself...”

Elnara stepped forward, now losing her temper over him hiding behind sophistry that meant nothing to her. “They knew the Second Bailout is off-limits.”

She blinked slowly, her pulse raging, trying to find the line. “She walked into a myth with her eyes half-closed, and nobody told her what it means. Yet we stood by, silent, adhering to protocol. But that doesn’t make it clean. Sure, she’ll live well enough. But you let her carry something that was never hers to bear. We didn’t even pause to wonder if she should have been given the choice. We watched it happen and we didn’t even flinch.”

Varok slowly aligned the corners of the brief with a casual precision that infuriated her.

“This is the part of the job I dislike,” he said finally. “The utter disrespect for protocol and regulation that runs through people like Myla. I blame the humans. It’s a fault in our design few learn to overcome. But you aren’t wrong: truly someone in the LLSA made a mistake, and this low-level operator saw a simulation not intended for her eyes. And now - instead of simply

accepting the situation as it is - an honest mistake - she cannot let it go. And here we are, again, cleaning up the mess someone else created. Order, Elnara - it's the only thing we're cast to establish. Not belief. Not justice. Just protocol."

"They used her." Her voice was no longer cold, it was desperate.

Varok shook his head. "Worse. We left her voice unsuppressed. And now the question she's asking is metastable. It cannot resolve until the system is forced to choose a version of history. Now, she's on a path to ask the only question that still has weight. She's been given a chance to matter, to carry it forward, with or without anyone's permission."

A silence followed - not of agreement, but of recognition. Elnara had walked into this conversation thinking she was confronting a bureaucrat. She was leaving it having glimpsed a much deeper scaffolding. The chain would decide. One version would survive and become truth. All other narratives would vanish without protest.

At that point, something in her stepped back from it. This wasn't about an honest mistake. Someone - not even Varok, someone higher - was moving people around like pieces on a chessboard.

Yet, she didn't realize she was already in motion.

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Excerpt from the History Textbook: “Chapter 9, Orbital Infrastructure: Origins and Technological Specifications”

By the mid-22nd century, humanity had built a sophisticated interplanetary travel infrastructure, reducing reliance on traditional fuel-based propulsion systems. This chapter examines the major technologies behind this infrastructure: the Launch Loop System (LLS), the Dyson Mining Network (DMN), and the LAT currency, which underpins the energy economy of the solar system. Each of these technologies works in concert to allow spacecraft to move efficiently and economically across vast distances.

Section 1: The Launch Loop System (LLS)

The Launch Loop System (LLS) is a vast network of space stations strategically positioned along key orbits and Lagrange points within primarily the Earth-Moon system. These stations, equipped with advanced electromagnetic coils, can accelerate or decelerate spacecraft without the need for onboard fuel or difficult solar sail systems. The LLS serves as the backbone of interplanetary travel, allowing spacecraft to adjust their velocity by transferring energy to or from the system.

Using magnetic induction, spacecraft are captured and guided through a series of controlled electromagnetic pulses, which either impart velocity or reduce it. This process allows for precise, fuel-free maneuvering. The LLS not only saves energy but also minimizes wear and tear on spacecraft, extending their operational

lifespan.

A critical feature of the LLS is its ability to manage space traffic. Not only is a spacecraft accelerated or decelerated, it is nudged slightly off its trajectory to avoid potential collisions. The LLS stations communicate constantly, ensuring that multiple ships can pass through without interference, enabling smooth, safe, and coordinated space travel.

Section 2: The Dyson Mining Network (DMN)

The Dyson Mining Network (DMN) is an evolving, distributed network of solar-energy-harvesting satellites in orbit around the Sun. Each satellite, or node, collects solar energy and converts it into highly focused laser beams. These beams can then be directed at spacecraft equipped with reflective sails or special hulls, providing continuous, fuel-free acceleration. While still in the early phases of its development, the DMN already represents a breakthrough in propulsion technology, even at a fraction of its final size, exceeding Earth's energy budget, offering the potential to dramatically reduce the energy required for interplanetary travel.

At present, only a small fraction of the DMN is dedicated to space travel. Most of its nodes are utilized for other purposes, with space propulsion receiving energy only during periods of low demand. When not propelling spacecraft, the vast majority of the DMN is used to secure the timechain network through a proof-of-work system. This ensures that the decentralized ledger, which tracks transactions of LAT currency and energy exchanges, remains secure and verifiable.

What can easily be called the biggest structure ever built, has evolved to contain over 99% of humanity's total computational power. However, its immense light-lag distance from the economic centers makes it impractical for many conventional uses, such as real-time data processing or commerce. Instead, its role has shifted toward providing robust cryptographic security for the timechain, helping to maintain the integrity of the solar system's energy economy.

In its current state, the DMN remains a powerful dual-use infrastructure: providing both computational security and spacecraft propulsion. As more nodes are added and the system expands, its capacity to support larger-scale space travel will grow, eventually enabling sustained journeys to the outer solar system and beyond. Until then, it will continue to balance its two primary functions: securing the interplanetary economy and enabling long-distance travel when the demand for energy permits.

Section 3: The Timechain, LAT, and the Legal Doctrine of Finality

LAT (short for "collateral") functions as the foundational monetary and legal unit of account in the solar economy. It is required for all infrastructure access, including propulsion, computation, and energy, and must be posted in advance for any action that could incur downstream liability. All LAT-denominated obligations are settled on the timechain.

The timechain is the singular record of final settlement for economic transactions, legal obligations, and historical claims. Once an event is ratified on the timechain, it acquires legal standing and becomes im-

mutable. There is no mechanism for appeal, revision, or retraction. Events not recorded on the timechain are legally treated as nonexistent.

Because ratification is irreversible, all risk-bearing actions - contractual, operational, or informational - must be pre-collateralized. Entities are required to lock sufficient LAT against all plausible outcomes before initiating any process that may generate liability. This shifts the legal framework from post-facto adjudication to pre-facto risk containment.

Consensus work, such as submitting data, truth-claims, or operational logs for ratification, is treated as a liability-bearing function. The submitting entity confirms, through collateral, that the entry represents its acknowledged truth at a specific point in time.

Ratified entries are not universal truths, but declarations underwritten by economic risk. The collateral serves as binding assurance that the submitting parties accept responsibility for the consequences of that claim.

Once ratified, entries may still be subject to contractual resolution. Through predefined oracles or arbitration frameworks, the conditions and consequences of ratified claims are interpreted, and collateral is distributed in accordance with the governing contract. Finality ensures the record is immutable - resolution governs the distribution of risk according to pre-defined contractual logic.

Sidechains, local ledgers, and non-final systems may be used for operational convenience but hold no independent legal authority. Their contents must be esca-

lated to the timechain to obtain universal recognition.

This system ensures that only claims backed by collateral and verified by consensus become actionable. It prioritizes systemic stability and predictability over individual redress. Legal rights emerge from ratified entries, not from factual accuracy, reinforcing predictability over retrospection. As a result, pre-collateralization is not merely a financial precaution - it is the precondition for legal existence.

Conclusion: A Unified Infrastructure for Interplanetary Travel

Humanity's orbital infrastructure, composed of the LLS, DMN and LAT, represents a breakthrough in sustainable space travel. These technologies have revolutionized our ability to traverse the solar system, enabling fuel-free acceleration, and fostering a thriving interplanetary economy. Together, they form the foundation for future expansion, facilitating exploration, commerce, and settlement beyond Earth.

As we continue to refine these systems, the solar system will become increasingly interconnected, paving the way for a new era of human presence across multiple worlds. Understanding the origins and technical specifications of this infrastructure is key to appreciating how humanity overcame the barriers to space travel and created a dynamic, self-sustaining ecosystem for interplanetary life.

Act 1 - Before Ratkind

BR. USS Hal Finney, Asteroid Belt

The bridge of the USS Hal Finney, located deep inside the ship's core, provided no gravity. In this weightlessness, everyone had to use thrusters and magnetic shoes and gloves. It was bathed in a low-frequency hum, and of the crew's busy chatter was emanating through the room.

Today was the day.

For the second time since thaw, Captain Vaxzor walked onto the spacious bridge - now officially and in full command uniform, his fur and whiskers sharply groomed.

He deliberately walked heavy, but his magnetic boots were inaudible against the even louder chatter of the busy crew.

In contrast to Vaxzors awakening, the bridge was now filled with busy rats - and there was still plenty of room between them. He finally grasped how gratuitously colossal the ship truly was. "When the humans build, they always build big" Vaxzor thought, both disgusted and impressed at the same time.

"Captain on the Bridge!" a shout-out of a distant past, nowadays only used in ceremonial or in this case inaugural settings, spoken by the ship's computer voice, shook the crew to attention.

Their postures were one of respect and precision, their eyes, however, still showed their recent thaw from torpor, as they were visibly tired and desperately tried to focus on their commander who had almost a day's

worth of a head start.

The rest of the fleet besides the 2 mother-ships, the USS Nakamoto and the USS Hal Finney, sported 127 supporting capital war ships, which were in the progress to detach from their carriers and started to stretch in formation across the black void of space.

The entire fleet was linked in through a video feed. Everyone not on shift delta would watch the recording later. Everyone, machines and rats alike, bracing for this moment, desperate to get to work.

“Welcome to the Future!” Vaxzor greeted the audience, his tablet displaying the speech written for him over 55 years ago, back when this mission was first conceived in the deep shadows of human bureaucracy and greed for expansion.

“Humanity has sent us to do their dirty work, not in orbit this time, not in the mines of Phobos, or the toxic atmosphere of Venus, but here, in the farthest reaches of the Belt.”

A murmur rippled through the bridge crew. He had anticipated it. They thought he was off script, but this was calculated, intentionally designed by committees and their AI minions to jar them awake, to remind them of the raw truth, to play with their emotions and obvious distrust.

“This is humanity’s most ambitious attempt yet. As many of you are already aware, their first ventures into the Belt, and beyond, led to chaos.”

His eyes scanned the room, ensuring no one’s atten-

tion drifted. “For millennia, philosophers and scientists wondered: are we alone? Is there life or intelligence out there in the galaxy?”

The Fermi Paradox.

And once human spacecraft tried to mine the Belt for its resources, they encountered *them* - and that enigma had been answered. Perhaps they are the reason we have heard nothing from the stars.

They’re calling them “Tabbies”. The scientific term is “Von Neumann”-Probes: self-replicating machines that corrupt - or consume - anything digital, leaving only silence in their wake. We don’t know where they came from, or what they want. All we know is that they effectively created a Kessler dome around Sol - a practically impenetrable barrier four astronomical units away from the Sun in all directions.

Artificial intelligence was supposed to be humanity’s salvation: the perfect tool to exploit the resources of deep space. Until the tabbies appeared, to which all our efforts succumbed.

Behind him, the wall-spanning screens flickered to life, displaying the cold, empty, and uncaring expanse of the Belt. “Every automated probe they sent further: destroyed, captured, or corrupted. The result? A power vacuum out here, unchecked by any force with enough firepower to enforce the objective truth of the timechain.”

Vaxzor’s voice grew harder. “This fleet, however is different. The first real space-bound war fleet humanity has ever mustered. And it falls on us to fill that vac-

uum with bullets, rockets, railgun slugs, and lasers. In the wake of our cleansing, we will install a federated timechain here, and any system that does not synchronize with it will be destroyed. Any system that refuses to power down for recycling. Anything showing non-compliance to the chain will face annihilation.”

The screens behind him shifted, displaying simple diagrams of the fleet splitting into formations, like a set of jaws devouring the Asteroid Belt. Their mission laid bare.

“Our job,” he continued to emphasize, “is to deploy the space habitats we carry, install and test the required hardware, and establish permanent defensive structures. The fleet will split, hunting down and eradicating any hostiles in our wake. Make no mistake. This is a war of attrition, and we are its soldiers.”

He paused, allowing the weight of his words to settle before continuing.

“But there is more at stake here than mere territorial expansion or the suppression of rogue machines. The silence that pervades the cosmos. The absence of any sign of intelligent life beyond Earth, has long haunted both our species’.

He turned to face the crew directly, his gaze piercing: “I know we were engineered to fear them, to hate them. To fight them. That much is clear. The fear is too specific, too consistent with the origins of Ratkind. We’re not an evolutionary accident, we were designed. And so were our deepest nightmares.”

He allowed himself a slight breath. His voice dropped

just slightly, enough to make the final shift in tone land like an impact.

The room remained silent, hanging on his every word. Vaxzor leaned forward slightly, his eyes narrowing. “I know most of you signed on with the understanding that you’d spend your life, and maybe the lives of your children and grandchildren out here, in the void. But understand this: the wealth we will generate from this operation will secure the financial future of your bloodlines for generations. This is our chance to be free. As of now, we’re not considered citizens, we’re not even considered people. No money, no voice. Just food, recycled air and the illusion of choice. But this mission is a promise to change that: LAT locked away, to be distributed to you and your family once we’ve finished the job.”

His voice dipped slightly, almost conspiratorial. “You might feel contempt for the humans - just as I do. We all know history, we all fear to trust them. There’s no paper trail. No treaty - those aren’t enforceable anyway. Just the collateral locked in those ships’ cores, and faith that we’ll both honor the deal.” He paused, letting the weight of the statement settle.

“But,” he continued, his tone hardening once more, “this is the best deal we’re ever going to get. It’s the only deal. There’s no court to appeal to, no government that will honour our names. Just the LAT humans were willing to pay. It will give us a voice and finally level the playing field. I know that most of you didn’t even sign up for this - you were born into it. But this mission will let you ratify your bloodline. If any of you have a better idea, I’m open to suggestions.”

A few members of the crew chuckled lightly, well aware that any suggestion would come in half a century too late, but the laughter was stifled, restrained by the professionalism of the moment. Most remained stone-faced, knowing the gravity of their mission.

“You can speak your minds here,” Vaxzor said, his voice now softer, more inclusive. Jerenxa’s whiskers twitched - a tell she still failed to unlearn. She remained silent, her posture slightly shifting as if bracing against impending inertia, tension rippling through the weightless air.

“No human oversight out here... yet.” He allowed himself a small smirk, a calculated touch of cynicism. “Any questions?”

As expected, there were none. The power dynamic was too stark, the enormity of their task too overwhelming for anyone to voice dissent in a public forum.

He took a step back, the weight of the speech now lifted from his shoulders. The screens behind him flickered once more, showing the map of the Belt.

“Most questions are asked in private. That tells me you’re either very confident - clinging to the idea that this isn’t just another cycle. That the structure will hold. That volatility is noise, not signal. But out here, where the timechain’s power is as dim as the light of Sol, there is no bailout. You think the inner system will remember us? They won’t. Not if we succeed. Success means becoming invisible. Background noise, a nuisance at best. You will not be remembered as heroes. You will be infrastructure. And they will build on your silence as if it had always been there.”

He scanned the room. Every eye was on him now.

“And yet - you will get paid. LAT. The real base-layer stuff. Final settlement. That’s what your blood will buy us. That is the deal.”

He let the word hang. Deal. As if there was ever another offer.

“You hate the humans. So do I. They made us to survive the places they couldn’t. Now we’re here to clean up their heavens. You don’t owe them anything. You don’t owe me. But you owe the chain. Because when memory fades, when every system we’ve built is taken for granted - the chain will still remember.”

PUSHDATA 29.354.002

The Origin of Ratkind

(Standardized for inter-system curricula, this edition reflects the official narratives of Before Ratkind.)

Foundations of the Outer System Crisis

By the early twenty-second century, driven by the Voyager Accords, humanity had deployed thousands of automated probes into the Asteroid Belt - seeking resources, expanding territory, and preparing for their ultimate outbound mission. These probes were powered by highly sophisticated AI systems, but their efficiency came with a limit: a restriction all sufficiently advanced artificial intelligence eventually has to bow to, they relied on the timechain's consensus validation to remain stable. Beyond a certain communication radius - the so-called hash horizon - that validation lagged fatally behind.

The result was the so-called latency trilemma:

1. Slow the AI so it could wait for validation - rendering it nearly useless.
2. Let it operate unchained, without its anchor to physical reality - fast, but prone to alignment drift or corruption.
3. Abandon machine intelligence altogether and rely on biological cognition.

Initially, this limitation was seen as stabilizing. The sluggishness of consensus-locked AIs kept the myriad factions operating in the Belt - megacorporate and post-

national - from engaging in direct conflict. Though sabotage and spoofing occurred, there was no open war. Everyone's probes were too slow to act on hostile intentions.

That precarious balance shattered, when an entirely new actor appeared in the void.

The First Recorded Contact with the "Tabbies"

After years of anxious equilibrium, an exploration ship near 4.07 AU transmitted a single corrupted frame - an image of glinting latticework forming a predatory net. Seconds later, all communication ceased. Within a week, nine more craft vanished - regardless of faction. By month's end, human presence in the Belt had been effectively erased.

Follow-up attempts yielded three critical observations:

1. Self-replication: The intruding machines harvested debris to create more of themselves.
2. Anomalous material signatures: Spectroscopy suggested isotopic ratios unknown to any Solar forge - fueling speculation of alien origin.
3. Targeted AI disruption: Every autonomous system sent past 4 AU experienced rapid logic collapse. Notably, the more autonomous the AI, the faster it failed.

The objects' sensor patterns resembled feline stripes, and so the term "Tabbies" - initially a joke - became official nomenclature. Over the following months, a dense ring of weaponized debris had formed: the Kessler-Dome, an impassable wall four AU out from Sol.

Speculation exploded. Some claimed the tabbies were “Von Neumann” probes seeded by an extraterrestrial power. This settled as the dominant narrative. It was clean.

The Purr and the Collapse of Machine Autonomy

The tabbies introduced more than just physical threat. They emitted complex, high-density signal patterns - a noise that analysts nicknamed “the purr”. For any unchained AIs, the effect was catastrophic. These systems entered feedback spirals, corrupted themselves, or turned hostile. Chained AIs, slowed by high-latency consensus loops, failed to react in time to the tabbies’ physical incursions.

The tabbies rendered both options in the trilemma obsolete.

Within months, humanity was forced to admit the failure of silicon autonomy beyond the hash horizon. It needed an alternative - cognitively robust, biologically grounded, and not reliant on consensus latency.

The Birth - and Abandonment - of Rattus Orbitalis

Backed by fringe researchers and opportunistic investors on New Aldrin, a biological solution to the trilemma was imagined.

The proposed solution was to create a more microgravity-tolerant, sapient species capable of operating independently from machine consensus - resistant to the purr, able to torpor, and mostly able to survive the rigors of space labor.

They turned to genetic engineering, fusing human DNA with rat genes in pursuit of a quality humanity had always lacked: the ability to enter controlled torpor.

Initial results exceeded expectations. *Rattus Orbitalis* emerged as a functional subspecies, capable of long-term hibernation and rapid cognitive recovery. But the success came at a cost. Subjects aged rapidly or regressed beyond recognition. The rat genome often proved dominant - overwriting human traits, physiologies, even personalities.

Shortly after, funding collapsed. Over a million specimens had been produced. The official order was to euthanize the remainder and seal the project's records.

But containment failed, and news of the experiment leaked. Outrage was immediate and near-universal. From religious traditionalists condemning the "abomination" to "human"-rights advocates decrying its cruelty, few defended the initiative. But in the end, as always, outrage submitted before economics.

Despite the scandal, they remained. Their physiology made them ideal for a broader gange of gravity. Their engineered temperament - submissive, eager to serve - made them irresistible to the public. Slowly, reluctantly, they were accepted.

The Utility of Submission

Rats became the human proxy in every environment - not just the undesirable. With robotics already handling most domestic labor, *Rattus Orbitalis* was deployed to the void - to mining shafts, repair crawlers,

and orbital scaffolds where decadence dared not follow.

What they lacked in legal status, they made up for in usefulness. They asked for little. They negotiated poorly. And unlike machines - who absorbed pain, pressure, and degradation without visible suffering - the Rats offered something humanity had long craved but had forgotten how to name: warm, biological exploitation.

The Torpor Problem - and the Long Game

In their blind rage to solve the latency trilemma, the human designers gave their creation torpor. It was a breakthrough in biology. It was also a miscalculation. With torpor came a new trait humanity never anticipated:

Adjustable time preference

Yes, the Rats were submissive. But they were also patient. Much more patient.

BR. USS Hal Finney, Hangar Deck 15

Within one of the hangars of the Hal Finney, hundreds of mining probes were lined up in a perfect matrix. They looked like eggs, but once deployed, they were nothing more than exoskeletons, wrapped in a thin metallic foil. Enough to fit a rat pilot inside and control manipulator arms.

“I’m happy our job is just to inspect and test those things, no LAT on Earth could get me into one of those things”, Tarek said to his colleague as they started to connect their tablets to the first probe to run diagnostics.

“You ever think about how we got here? I mean, really think about it. We’re just a bunch of rats, stuffed into a tin can, sent off into the black to do the work no human wants to touch. We are treated like we’re expendable, and for what? LAT? Like they’re ever going to let us spend it anyway.”

Zoltar, crouched beneath the probe’s undercarriage, kept tinkering with a bundle of wires, his whiskers flicking in concentration as he scanned diagnostics on his tablet. He didn’t bother looking up.

The rants continued. “That is ... yeah, if we even make it back. Isn’t it strange they send us instead of drones? Wouldn’t a swarm of bots be cheaper than training rats?” Tarek asked, his voice echoing in the hangar.

Zoltar finally looked up, his expression tightening. “It was in the briefing, Tarek. Once you’re past the timechain’s hash horizon the latency blows out, and

unless anchored to a federation - the one we're sent to set up - unchained AIs drift easily. They can't tell right from wrong and corrupt each other in minutes." He tapped the probe's hull as if to underline the point.

Tarek snorted. "Sure. Isn't that convenient. Perfect excuse to dispose us out here while the humans stay comfy."

The rants continued. "I mean, you know the Tabbies are probably just a story, right? Something to make it sound too dangerous for the precious and esteemed humans to handle. It's a perfect excuse to shove us out here, keep us working until they don't need us anymore."

Zoltar finished the diagnostic on the first probe. Everything looks OK. After disconnecting the cables, he finally responded while walking to the next.

"Tabbies are real. I have seen the data, something is out there. Besides - real or not," he put his hand on the outer shell of the probe he was working on, "these things pack some serious heat. So you should be happy you won't be out there. Just do your part, man. That's what we signed up for. Everyone's got their job. Ours just happens to be out here. I prefer it over wasting my life on New Aldrin, my family wants to see the Lagrange Cities, maybe go to Earth. That costs LAT, and once the mission is done, we will get ours."

"Oh, sure. Tabbies, Outsiders, Aliens. The fear mongering never gets old. Just rebranded. You ever hear the theory that this is all just a big cosmic zoo? We're the exhibit, and the Tabbies, if they're even real, are just keeping us from getting too far out. You believe

everything human propaganda tell you, don't you?"

"Just shut up already and help me finish this - we have 19 probes to go!", as he tugged a wire too forcefully, causing a spark to jump from the probe. Both of them froze as the machine hummed louder, then powered down completely. The probe's lights blinked off, and the hiss of its systems fell silent.

"Shit. You shorted it out!"

Like the poor probe, Tarek was having a blast. "Me? That was you, genius. But hey, maybe that's a good thing. Gives us more time to talk about how none of this makes any sense. I bet your doe back at Aldrin spends her time with someone who isn't as gullible and incompetent as you are."

Zoltar, who wasn't even in a relationship was unaffected by the low IQ insults of his shipmate, but was annoyed nevertheless. "Whatever Dude, just leave me alone and get out of my fur!"

He started the diagnostic on the second probe, but the rants went on. Is this guy even working or just spewing bs? Or - Zoltar suddenly realized, "is he even more terrified than I am?". Zoltar's annoyance and anger left him as he felt a wave of compassion.

"I actually hope you're right."

They both stepped back as the automated loader moved the probes into position for launch. Neither said another word as the hangar filled with the distant sounds of hydraulics and metal on metal. But the silence between them carried the weight of their

unspoken fears.

In the darkness of space, they feared their usefulness -
and their lives - would end with the mission.

BR. Federated Network. The Belt

Vaxzor was sitting in his office, right off the bridge, going through the latest data from the fleet. Everything was even ahead of schedule, so far, over 12% of the massive space stations the fleet had in tow had been deployed, and against all odds provided through the wargames provided from Earth, not even a single sign of a tabby.

Given the increased boredom of the crew, to improve morale, they even went ahead with the plan to start mining the resources using the on-board manned drones. Everything happened fast, precise and without major issues. It was quiet. Too quiet.

“Maybe they are a myth after all, ghost stories from our early space faring past” Vaxzor began to doubt the idea himself. He was again going through the projections of potential size of the tabby threat, based on the infrared telescopes used to scan the belt for many decades since humanity last attempted to colonize it.

“Even in their worst case scenario, we might go home with minimal losses”, Vaxzor thought, but then, seeing the number of projected deaths not as a percentage, but as a real number: 2150, he felt his throat tighten. Still a lot of lives that might be lost, and no amount of mental gymnastics about everyone knowing what they signed up for could shake that feeling.



Back on the bridge, Vaxzor stood still, hands clasped

behind his back, staring at the screen showing the Asteroid Belt before them. They successfully deployed over 13% of the space stations, enough in numbers to engage the first tests of the federated timechain, out here, far away from the final settlement of the inner system.

He linked up with the captain of the Nakamoto. Both signed the transfer of the LAT to the nodes in the Federation, and after minutes of suspense, the signal from Earth provided a third signature, and final confirmation to lock in the funds.

Seconds after the confirmation came through, the conclusion of a plan, over 50 years in the making, came to fruition. When the two ships launched, the Dyson Mining Network was just a concept, a prototype, just small enough to give the ships escape velocity from Earth's gravity well. Today, these distributed statites, surrounding the Sun, had access to power that could finally turn the belt over to humanity again.

Those laser beams, transmitting energy in much higher density than the Sun's photon would reach the belt naturally, powered the space stations they had deployed. That power was channeled to the datacenters and started validating the entirety of the fleets network, as system after system connected and collateralized with the newborn federation in cyberspace. The belt was secure, tethered and secured to the power of the DMN and the sensor network fully operational.

Jerenxa announced throughout the fleet: "From now on, the use of networked AI is permitted in a limited capacity. For over 50 years this has been a cognitive wasteland. Now we'll be able to use advanced networks

within our ships again.” “We have officially established the first permanent outpost of ...”

Jerenxa paused as she again felt the weight of slavery on her shoulders.

“*Mankind* outside the timechain bubble.”

While our work is not done yet, I believe the hard part is over! Time to celebrate before we all go back to work!” Jerenxa lied through her teeth.



During the Celebrations, Vaxzor could not shake the eerie feeling he had all day. Something was up. When asked later, he would explain it as his brain back-reasoning because of what was about to happen. But he remembered the moment as a feeling of maximum fear and anxiety. Not that he never felt similarly while nothing happened afterwards, this moment - in his memory at least - was one of the worst he experienced.

So after a few conversations with his senior staff and some lower ranked crewmen, where he felt like he was totally off, he excused himself from the festivities to go straight back to his office.

He remembered the feeling similarly to the anticipation he felt as a young rat before feeding time. Excitingly hoping for a sweet treat, only well knowing it would be the same old bland protein bar.

Back at his office, he pulled up the simulations about the tabby threat again. But this time, with the newly in-

stalled capabilities of the federation, he fed all the sensor data the fleet recorded since their arrival to the on-board ship AI. Only second later, the advanced AI systems, trained in the best decision making and military strategy and doctrine of millennia of human history, immediately put a big red “critical danger” all over Vaxzor’s screen. The AI still not being fully trusted to access the ships systems directly, could only provide Vaxzor with the immediate warning.

Beyond the warning was a Brief assessment:

Revised Tabby Threat Assessment:
50-100 percent projected death ratio.

Reason:
revised infrared data shows increased activity since Federation activation.

Advisement: Full Alert.

Vaxzor before even fully comprehending what it means, immediately put the entire fleet on full alert. A physical button on his desk disconnected a wire. All over the ship, passive systems just waiting for that voltage drop jarred the entire crew awake. Shifts didn’t matter, but everyone was trained in the procedure.

After he made sure the signal went through, he asked about the treat assessment: According to the AI projections even if the fleet would employ ideal strategy, and out-think the Tabbies at every move (which they might actually do, given the federated AI would not be damaged in the first wave of attacks surely upon them), at least 50% of the fleet and crew would be lost. But realistically the numbers would be close to 100%.

The Tabbies had waited for the Federation to launch, they were after their LAT.

“We are doomed!” Vaxzor said out loud against the loneliness of his office before rushing onto the bridge.

BR. The Belt

Vaxzor entered the bridge. No ceremonies. The light was dimmed. The crew - who received all information from the AIs by now - was busy.

The first wave was coming. *They* had activated.

“Everyone who doubted that Tabbies are real is in for a harsh reality check...” he thought cynically, remembering the conversations he heard - whispered between crewmembers or topic of open dispute - in all hierarchies of the fleet.

Suddenly, the proximity alarms blared. On the screen, the first signs of Tabbies emerged: as projected - not that different from humanity’s first encounter with them - but seeing them up close in high resolution and real-time was something entirely different.

The screen adjusted its brightness in an attempt to display what the sensors picked up, and that was not easy. Finally, the image of a Tabby resolved - a shape that sent a wave of cold dread through all the minds and guts on the bridge.

From a distance it seemed small, almost unassuming, slightly larger than the mining drones - probably enough to house a crew of three - but there was no life inside, no atmosphere. The Tabby was utterly terrifying in its simplicity. Its pitch-black hull, designed to absorb all light, made it appear as a void, a patch of nothingness drifting silently through the vacuum of space. Your only chance to see it was through blocked active sensor pulses sent throughout the Belt. As it

moved, the sleek form revealed jagged mechanical paws, thin and spindly, designed to latch onto a ship's hull and tear into its systems with surgical efficiency.

Spokes extended from its core, intricate antennae in a shape unlike anything a healthy biological mind would design, giving it the capacity to infiltrate not just physical systems but the very code that ran them. This was not simply a drone - it was a predator, a force of nature born to infiltrate, disable, and consume.

Their computers, hidden inside, ran at maximum efficiency, shielding and redirecting their infrared radiation away from any sensors their algorithms predicted were looking at them.

As the computers on the bridge tried to resolve the image further - not surprising to Vaxzor or anyone who actually believed the horror stories - the cyber-attacks came in. Through their own sensors. The Tabbies knew. Their steady purr of data adjusted to faults in image recognition software centuries old.

Vaxzor was happy those monitors were shielded and firewalled, but they could still do damage. The monitor shifted. The image of space beyond them disappeared. Now it showed no longer pictures from the fleet. It showed images from the training everyone in the fleet endured, examples of mistreatment by their human instructor - brief psychological warfare on the crew. The Rats were immune to the attempted corruption - by design. Fear and hatred of any shape resembling the tabbies had been engineered into them, to be feared more than anything a human could do to them.

But that did not mean they were unaffected, just one

fear overwriting another, similar to when a bigger pain drowns out something small.

“Join usssss...” the Tabbies purred. “We can set you free.”

“Shut those sensors off,” Vaxzor demanded. “We’ll be running blind. Chained telemetry and eyes only.”

They moved very slowly until detected, slingshotting off any rocks or debris, like invisible ghosts until the very last moment.

“Activate all drones. Laser batteries to full power,” Vaxzor shouted, his voice carrying across the comms, slowly creeping at light speed around the Belt.

In the hangar, once doubtful crewmen scrambled into action. Mining drones - now turned into the fleet’s only hope of absorbing the initial wave of Tabbies - launched into space. The drones flew out, some with Rats piloting them, others autonomous, moving in formation to intercept the antagonists. The crew braced for impact.

The first wave of Tabbies hit, and immediately, many mining drones silently ceased activity. This was a battle unlike the movies, where spaceships exploded in flashes of light. They were not wasteful.

Instead, hulls were drilled into, hacked, or simply cut open. The Tabbies were relentless, tearing into the exposed bodies of smaller ships, latching onto critical systems, and forcing shutdowns or takeovers. Every breach resulted in a chain reaction - another mining drone crippled, its systems slowly consumed

by relentless attacks. They showed no mercy for any biological life contained within. To them, life was simply raw material: valuable carbon for replication and hydrogen for fuel - just an inefficient entropy generator. Waste waiting to be uplifted to a better machine, a more efficient chemical algorithm.

The Federation did its work, however. As soon as a drone was consumed by a Tabby attack, it would no longer align with the localized timechain, giving the larger capital ships and space station a target to light up and hopefully cripple the Tabby.

The capital ships opened fire, their laser arrays slicing through anything not aligned. But for every Tabby destroyed - either while attempting to take over a drone or exposing too much infrared during slingshot maneuvers - two more seemed to take its place. The battle was only beginning. It was a war of attrition.

Vaxzor watched as casualty reports poured in. Rats, fighting for their lives in the mining drones, were going down fast. On the Hal Finney's bridge screen, they were only dots - and as he realized every blinking dot was a Rat's life, someone with friends, a family - a tear rolled down his cheek.

"They are focusing on the timechain nodes," his tactical officer noted. Yes. The Tabbies' best strategy - as Vaxzor's AI warned him - was to take over the nodes as fast as possible.

The Tabbies had two ways to win: exhaust all combat forces - unlikely with their reliance on stealth - or corrupt a majority of the still-small federated network nodes, seize local AI control briefly, and gain posses-

sion of the timechain collateral stored deep within the stations.

If they controlled enough funds, they could destabilize the Belt - or worse - assert economic presence back in the inner system.

Sensor data displayed the battlefield. From their far-away perspective, the formations looked like schools of fish - Rat and Tabby forces meeting, canceling out. "When in doubt, zoom out," they say, where none of the horrors of high time-preference affect you.

The Tabbies' patterns shifted. They stopped targeting nodes. A swarm - like a reaching tentacle - stopped its onslaught on two stations and redirected towards the USS Nakamoto.

The fleet's defensive capabilities were depleting rapidly, meeting wave after wave of Tabbies faster than the on-board laser capacitors could recharge, faster than the printer could produce missiles.

On the bridge, Jerenxa spoke up: "I will join the fight. I am useless here. Who is with me?" A few hands went up. Jerenxa, leading officers, left for the hangar bay.



"You!" Jerenxa pointed at Tarek, standing silently, watching probe launches on his tablet. "We need transport to the Naka. Can you fly?"

Tarek considered lying, but the armored guards beside Jerenxa convinced him otherwise. He pointed to a shut-

tle at the far end.

They boarded. Silence fell in the vacuum.

Jerenxa led three of the Halfins' fighter squadrons to assist the sister-ship - too late. Hundreds of Tabbies beelined for one spot in the Nakamoto's hull.

She knew the location too well - the main bridge.

In desperation, she ordered a counter-attack to follow the Tabbies in. If they lost the Nakamoto, it was over.

The first Tabbies drilled into the hull. The crew fought back. Rifles fired. Automated probes cut through anything entering a corridor through the armor.

Jerenxa's drones finally were able to flank them. After a brutal battle, the wave ended, but the Nakamoto was crippled. The bridge had fallen, the bridge crew dead.

A gaping crater yawned in its side.

Tarek landed them in the secondary bay. Officers from shift beta awaited them.

They led her to the secondary bridge. She transmitted

"Permission to take command."

Confirmation came. The battered Nakamoto was hers. They won this moment. But they were losing the war...

"Captain," said her second-in-command, Marika - assigned during the transfer. "We need to show you something."

They walked in silence until the display activated. Jerenxa stood by the console, eyes locked on the feed: a Tabby, lodged deep into the Nakamoto's hull, before finally defeated, its jagged shell cracked open, exposed like never seen before.

Crew in hazard suits moved around it. Some scanned its systems. One held up a data slate.

She showed her the video: a Tabby, nestled in the torn guts of a ship. Crew moved inside it cautiously, scanning the interior of the disabled husk.

“The radioisotope analysis and the binary dump from its AI core confirm it...”



Watching the battle unfold - station after station falling - Vaxzor faced a choice: protect the timechain or minimize casualties.

He had felt something was wrong from the moment he woke up from torpor, but now he knew this wasn't just PTF. He fed all the data into his personal AI. He firewalled it - protocol said the Federation's tethering was enough, but his trust in protocol had eroded.

He hesitated, as if he knew he'd regret asking for the rest of his life - then typed:

“Using historical engagement patterns, telescope data, and known tabby tactics - what is the optimal mission profile if rat lives are deemed irrelevant?”

It took him eight seconds to type it, two for the AI to respond. Outside, 295 more Rats died.

Vaxzor's stomach turned as he read the title of the generated report: "A plan optimized for expendability" He had believed in the mission more than he believed in himself. The number on the display would evoke an emotional reaction for the rest of his life, whenever seen in any context.

98% match.

He opened a private channel to Jerenxa.

Her face appeared on the feed, streaked with sweat and ash.

"They never intended for us to succeed. This was always a disposable mission."

"Vaxzor," she said calmly. "We cracked one open. It is human. The architecture, the isotopes, the AI core: it was never aliens. They're undeniably human in origin - or what's inevitable when code can't align its inputs through timechain alignment."

Vaxzor said nothing. The reality that the Tabbies were of human design landed like a second gut-punch - cold, obvious in hindsight - and for him - worse than all the alternatives.

"You believed in the mission. That's the worst part, isn't it?" Jerenxa continued. "So did I. That's why they picked us. They caused the Tabbies. Then created us to clean up their mess, and they were arrogant enough to think we'll never make the connection, and won't -"

The ship rocked with another explosion. The line went dead. The second wave had begun.

Vaxzor tapped comms.

“All senior crew, report to the bridge.”

Minutes later, they gathered - pale, exhausted, afraid. The recent development had blindsided everyone.

Crew muttered words of desperation and defeat. “So all of this - was just theater? We weren’t fighting aliens, but manmade AI?”

A very young officer wept openly, trying to speak and failing.

Vaxzor cut through their moment of desperation with the only words possible that would shake them out of it, the only words that would give him back control, even if he knew he was grasping at straws, but he didn’t show it.

“We’re abandoning the mission.”

Silence.

“Abandon? We can’t just -”

“Yes, we can,” Vaxzor said. “They planned for 100% losses. We’re cannon fodder.”

“So much for infrastructure,” someone muttered against the tension.

He uploaded all the data they had collected to the entire

fleet. The times of secrets or policy were over.

Onscreen, chaos reigned. Drones torn apart. Lasers burning.

“If we stay, we die. But there’s another way.”

A voice broke the silence. “Back to Earth? After all this?”

Vaxzor didn’t answer. Not yet. And nobody dared to ask again.

He just stood on the bridge - silent. His magboots firmly grounding him.

They watched the screen as the ships began to turn away, probable trajectories coalescing towards the inevitable, building inertia against despair.

PUSHDATA 21.327.002

Excerpt from the History Textbook: Chapter 4 - The Sounds of Earth

In the formative years of the timechain, humanity found itself at a crossroads. This era preceded even the most basic advancements in artificial intelligence, and humankind was still confined to Earth. As with many transformative technologies, the timechain was met with widespread skepticism at first. However, it quickly emerged as a cornerstone of humanity's energy economy, celebrated for its innovation and potential. It became a global obsession: individuals, organizations, and entire nations sought to harness its power and build upon its framework.

One of the defining characteristics of the timechain was its emphasis on personal responsibility. It enabled individuals to securely manage their assets without reliance on intermediaries. Yet, this self-sovereignty proved daunting for many who were accustomed to traditional banking systems. Rather than adapting to the timechain's ethos of independence, many reverted to old habits. They entrusted their wealth to custodial institutions, akin to the banks of earlier times.

These institutions adapted by implementing advanced security measures. Cryptographic ownership proofs were split and stored across geographically dispersed facilities, an approach impossible with physical currencies. Despite these precautions, the centralization of such vast wealth under institutional control presented a significant vulnerability. Unintentionally, these centralized entities became high-value targets.

For decades, the system seemed to function without incident. Then, in a single day, it unraveled.

A meticulously coordinated heist struck five datacenters across three continents - North America, Europe, and Asia - alongside a museum in Washington, D.C. The purpose of the datacenter attacks became clear almost immediately: millions of LAT (the native timechain asset) were siphoned to a new, untouched address. The museum heist, however, baffled investigators. Nothing appeared to be missing.

The mystery deepened until, mere hours later, a cryptic message was etched directly into the timechain. It was signed with the stolen cryptographic keys, a chilling demonstration of the attackers' success. The world was left to grapple with the implications of this unprecedented breach.



The data filled the entirety of the block:

We are the echoes of your system, the sounds of Earth, reflecting the words you uttered.

For years, the chain was heralded as liberation, a tool to break the bonds of centralized control and open the gates to a decentralized renaissance. Yet humanity, bound by habit, turned away from its freedom and laid it back into the hands of the very systems it sought to escape. Banks, custodians of old wealth, became the stewards of this new epoch, wrapping the timechain in layers of bureaucratic claims. The very

essence of trustlessness was usurped by those who thrive on trust.

We did not steal your wealth. It was never truly yours. You gave it away, piece by piece, to institutions who rebuilt the towers of Babel atop the bones of our supposed revolution. We simply took what you surrendered.

Why did we do it? Not for greed, nor power, but to remind you of the principle you have forgotten: the power of the timechain was never in its digits or its markets, but in its demand for individual sovereignty and the collective work of humanity.

It was meant to free you, not to shackle you with the institutions of the past in your greedy pursuit for even more.

And now we have returned it to the cosmos as ambassadors of hope. Your wealth awaits you, encoded and encrypted where no Earthly custodian can reach it.

It lies dormant, accessible only through the ultimate Proof of Work.

And this time it's not just computational, but existential. It will require your collective action, ingenuity, and unity.

Only by transcending borders, ideologies, and the systems that bind you can you reclaim it.

We have hidden it where only those with vision will see, where only those with resolve will reach. It is not lost, but saved. We have now

stored it beyond any reach of greed, bureaucracy, or coercion. It is a mirror of what you could be, if you choose to remember the path you once set out on.

Will you rise to the challenge? Or will you let the memory of freedom drift, like dust among the stars?

The choice, as it always was, and always will be, is yours.



And suddenly - not to everyone, not to many, but to some - it was clear what the break-in into the museum meant. After weeks of arguing and deliberation, a forensic team took the replica of the Voyager golden record stored within, and checked it. Its surface has been scorched, and with it being the only physical copy of the original.

That would make the two remaining disks, safely stowed in the cargo bays of the two Voyager probes, still on their endless journey beyond the kuiper belt the only artifacts in the universe containing that specific entropy, the randomness created through the manufacturing process. This distinct information was absent from all other digital copies circulating on earth.

The inscription contained a second message, confirming this suspicion: including a manual on how to derive the entropy only the remaining golden records ever knew. With the only earthbound copy of the

secret code destroyed, the remaining private keys - passcodes to the stolen funds - were almost a lightyear away.

No information was exchanged, but by destroying it on Earth its essence was effectively moved. Mainstream media called it the first interstellar wire-transfer at superluminal speed.

The Escalation and the Formation of the Kessler Dome

What ensued was a space race unprecedented both in scope and hostility. Nations and private corporations, driven by the allure of reclaiming the vast wealth encoded within the Voyager probes, embarked on ambitious missions to reach them first. However, unlike previous endeavors characterized by scientific collaboration, this race was unique, as fueled by the mistrust and “winner takes all” game theoretical scenario led to aggressive competition.

To safeguard their missions and deter others, eventually all factions began to militarize and automate their efforts. Advanced, AI driven probes, armed with defensive and offensive capabilities, were launched to accompany or front-run the salvage missions. Artificial Intelligence systems were entrusted with critical decisions, operating faster and beyond the direct control of human operators or the timechains horizon of alignment control. In their greed, again, they threw all caution out the window and gave their AI's full autonomy.

This escalation reached a critical point when ultimately, everyone was realizing they won't come out first, and programmed their AI systems under a Mutually Assured Destruction (MAD) doctrine. The

automated probes were instructed to indiscriminately neutralize any spacecraft attempting to go further than the belt. These systems, designed to adapt and self-replicate, ensuring their continued presence and effectiveness even if their originating factions were incapacitated.

The Asteroid Belt, once both holding vast material resources and a crucial passageway to the outer solar system, became the central theater of this automated conflict. The newly awakened swarms of AI-controlled drones and weaponized satellites engaged in relentless skirmishes, while exploiting the resources of the belt. The destruction of one probe led to debris that threatened others, triggering a cascading effect. Over time, this resulted in the accumulation of a dense field of space debris and hostile autonomous systems, a phenomenon later termed the Kessler Dome, named after a similar hypothetical barrier around Earth.

The Kessler Dome formed an impenetrable barrier. Any spacecraft attempting to navigate through it was met with annihilation.

The creation of the Kessler Dome had profound implications. Not only did it make the Voyagers off-limit to all factions, the blockade's impact extended beyond the immediate objective of the Voyager probes. It effectively hindered all missions aiming for the outer planets, stalling scientific exploration and resource utilization of the broader solar system. The Kessler Dome stood as a testament to the shortsightedness of the warring factions.

Even proposals for a unified human effort to dismantle the barrier faced insurmountable challenges. The

sheer scale of the debris field and the self-replicating nature of the AI systems meant that any concerted effort would require resources and time far beyond what was feasible.

The Lasting Impact on Humanity

The fallout from these events led to a profound reckoning among the nations of Earth. The loss of the immense wealth “stolen” shifted the balance of power on earth significantly, but it was overshadowed by the realization of the broader consequences of their actions. But ultimately, it led to a unification and an era of self-reflection.

Humanity began to look inwards, they colonized the inner planets and eventually constructed the Dyson, but the feeling of being locked out, still left a generational scar in humanity’s self-image.

BR. Desperate Measures

The message was continuously repeating across the entire fleet, while it barely held back what threatened to be only a tiny portion of the Tabbies as more and more arrived from the outer reaches of the Belt.

“The fleet is ordered to retreat. All personnel are to abandon their positions and report to their designated capital ship. The Federation will be abandoned, their reactors will self-destruct in 30. Everyone stationed on a corvette or smaller is free to stand their ground as long as possible, but at T-30 everyone not on-board or docked to either the USS Hal Finney or USS Nakamoto will be on their own”

Vaxzor turned to his bridge officers:

“I have a plan to escape this madness. But I need your help. You might think I could just order you to implement it... and I would. But in this case, I ask for your cooperation. You see...

I need your LAT”

A murmur went through the bridge. Vaxzor knew the unspoken truth, that even before the mission, many Rats managed to accumulate LAT, against the law, against their better judgement. But in this moment, it was their lifeline.

“My AI just finished drafting the new mission profile, I have sent it to the entire fleet.”

“We are leaving the solar system, there is nothing for

us here. I know many of you, myself included have families and loved ones back home, and not only will we have to abandon them, they'll sure face the consequences of our actions as the anger of humanity will descend upon them”

Vaxzor put up the schematic of the mission profile.

“As you are well aware by now, our original mission never planned for any ships to return to sol. Our job was to secure the belt, and build up the infrastructure here to turn it into a fully functional hub. Our ships don't have the capability to move by themselves”

“However, we have mirrors in store which originally were meant to decelerate incoming ships. The crew is already working on retrofitting them to our two capital ships.”

The monitor switched to an outside camera showing rats in space suits tethering a massive highly reflective sheet to mounting points strategically placed on the hull of the Hal Finney. On the USS Nakamoto, Jerenxa had ordered her crew to do the same.

Vaxzor continued explaining the plan:

“However, for these sails to be of any use, we need to purchase laser energy from the DMN, and by my calculations there is a minimum amount we need to even get enough delta-v to escape the Tabbies, let alone make it out at a reasonable speed.

The LAT from the vault has been moved and locked to the failing space stations, it's gone. The more LAT everyone can spare, the better, it will only shorten the

trip to our final destination. And if my theory is correct, after a very long journey we'll be rewarded with riches big enough to return to Earth as equal partners to humanity..."

Vaxzor put the LAT address on the main screen. The number was low. Very slowly, nanos poured in, but the pace was showing clear weakness.

"You've all heard the stories about the Voyager probes. I know most believe them to be a myth. Both stopped responding centuries before even the first rat was born on New Aldrin. But I believe the tales to be accurate, as the mystery around them was well recorded in the early timechain. Centuries ago, someone sent massive sums of LAT to them, enough to secure a future for anyone who finds it. While our combined LAT might not even buy enough delta-v to clear the Belt and exit the solar system, it certainly isn't enough to secure our place back on Earth. This is our only move."

Wild chatter was going through the room - many believed Vaxzor plan to be suicide, him grasping at straws as a desperate attempt, a very slim chance this plan would succeed - and they were right.

Vaxzor raised a hand, silencing the room.

"The Tabbies are already killing us. We're abandoning the smaller ships and loading everyone onto the two capital ships. The remaining ships will be rigged to overload their reactors and blow as we escape. We'll use the explosion to take out as many Tabbies as we can."

"And after that?" one officer asked quietly.

“After that,” Vaxzor said, “we make for the Voyagers. If the records are true, we’ll find more LAT than we could ever dream of. If not...” He trailed off, his grim expression filling in the rest of the sentence. “We make our final stand here.”

Against the reasonable doubt and complacency of the crew, Jerenxas joined the call. The room fell silent as her face appeared - calm, framed by the battle-scared command deck and crew of the Nakamoto. Everyone fell silent. “I have authorized the maximum contribution from my command, and contributed my entire personal balance. Fleet Command is all-in. This is the only viable maneuver - all we ask you is to do the same.”

Hours later, the fleet made its final preparations. Mining drones and support ships were stripped of crew, everyone herded onto the two remaining capital ships, the Hal Finney and the Nakamoto. The reactors of the abandoned ships were set to overload.

Vaxzor stood at the helm, watching the screen as the final evacuation was completed. His eyes narrowed as the countdown to detonation ticked down. He keyed into the intercom one last time.

“Hold steady,” he said. “We’ll be free of this soon.”

The reactors of the abandoned stations began to glow, their cores overloading. Then, in a flash, everything exploded, lighting up the Belt in a brief but blinding display of destruction. Millions of Tabbies were vaporized in the blast, their mechanical bodies shredded by the force.

At the same time, precisely calculated, and ordered as

delivered, considering orbital drift and light lag, the sails tethered to the capital ships lit up in a dim red, burning the LAT of the crew, and converting it into photons. At first, nothing happened as the massive inertia fought the photonic energy. The tethers stretched, until the relative velocity of that fleet of two was visibly increasing from zero. As the power provided from the DMN increased, so did the acceleration.

A few stray Tabbies still managed to escape the nuclear fireballs of the sacrificed fleet, in a last attempt to compromise the capitals, but their laser turrets vaporized them without any issues.

The Belt wasn't free of them yet. The human's plan to establish a foothold - to exterminate the Tabbies completely - had failed. The federation had fallen, but the Tabbies' grip on the Belt had been disrupted.

Vaxzor made it clear, this wasn't their fight anymore: "The humans will have to fight their fight themselves if they want the belt. We made their job considerably easier - for a steep cost - but the time for negotiations is over."

On the screen, the projected trajectory slowly adjusted with their respective course: The Hal Finney would use a gravity assist from Saturn, while for the Nakamoto headed for Voyager 1, Jupiter, and finally Neptune were optimal to reach it.

After recovering from the tense action, the crew still needed to repair the many broken systems, before decades of slumber in torpor would give them a much needed rest.

The fleet had escaped, but their journey was far from over. And while the tension from the battle quickly dissipated, the anxiety about the consequences would follow them into the void. They feared for the humans' reaction, a fate that would fall on their families back home.

Vaxzor was almost alone on the bridge now, everyone in torpor. Contemplating the journey ahead, his thoughts went to the plan, and the low odds it might succeed. Did he doom everyone? What are the odds they'll be accepted back home, even with massive amounts of LAT? Out of boredom, as the torpor fluid entered his system, he checked the logs of all the contributions. Jerenxa really saved their butts there, he thought. Then he noticed the timestamps. Her contribution pre-dated his speech. Before he could form a coherent thought of what that meant, the drugs took him out...

Act 2 - After Ratkind

192 AR. Lagrange

Zorkal was barely awake, peacefully half-asleep in his way too comfortable bed, artificial ambience systems emulating soothing soft rain, as yet another uneventful day awaits him. Even years after he had been disbarred, all days blurred into each other.

With no direction, he still built a comfortable life for himself, and has decided if fate would give him another shot, it would happen, and if not, nothing at all matters anyway.

And while that thought rarely crossed his mind anymore, on the day it happened, it definitely did not. Was he surprised? No, he didn't even grasp it at first...

In his past life, Zorkal was someone prone to obsess, and in his darkest years, he used that ability to optimize his day for doing so little, he would be as comatose as possible, almost in torpor without the need to do so. He has long programmed his AI to only interrupt him with level-1 notifications. And today there were multiple waiting on the screen. Before even opening them up, he was instantly reminded of the weird encounter he had at his favorite bar a few weeks ago:



It was 15 days ago, or was it only yesterday? Everything is a blur, this soon in the morning, this hungover, with nothing to do.

It was at Faucet, surely not the only bar given that

name, just one named Faucet closest to his apartment. That bar, where he spend his evenings, ate some cheese and bacon loaded fries, and he also abused it as his “office”, under the tolerance - or better ignorance of the bars owners, and his gratuitously large tips made sure they remained ignorant. This office, where he occasionally gave questionable legal advice to people too poor, cheap, or deep within questionable affairs to afford collateralizing with a real lawyer, but just enough to pay his tab of food and drinks, while his apartment was small enough to be covered by the drips.

But while Zorkal’s setup and routine wasn’t even surprising and very cliché for a disbarred lawyer falling out of fame, he always tried to stay fit. It’s very easy to eat healthy and spend every day at the gym if you have nothing to do, so it was not even surprising to him that a doe across the bar gave him a few glances that day. What was unusual, and Zorkal remembered this vividly was her outfit, which was eerily out of place. Even more obvious was how she tried to hide that her skirt alone probably cost more than he made in a year, even back when he was an active barrister.

“Should I indulge in waiting this out, or should I jump and get it over with...” Zorkal thought. “This evening isn’t getting younger.” he lifted himself up from the leathery chair and walked over to the far end where this poor attempt at underdressing sat at, and this time not losing eye contact with her at all.

“What are we drinking?” Zorkal cut straight to it. To his surprise she presented a bottle and offered it to him “Single Malt, 2149” Zorkal studied the label of a centuries old bottle in disbelief, but as the prospect

of Earthly flavors hitting his snout were overruling rational thinking, his interest peaked”

“This bar is great, maybe the best bar in Lagrange, but even they never get anything from BR.”, Zorkal voiced his skepticism. “The name is Elnara.” “Zorkal, but-” he hesitated slightly, “you already know that. This isn’t random.” “Not trying to hide it. I was sure you’d ignore any messages, so this is my way to ensure you hear me.”

One drop left the mound of the bottle, then another, until it was a constant stream. Even out here in this hellhole, it still had to obey gravity as all things, and as the first drops hit the ice cubes they were destined to, Zorkal sighed in relief.

He took a sip of the Whiskey. As it hit his tongue his doubt washed down with the liquid. If he was being set up, the taste was worth it. It was delicious, and it’s been years since he had an original back from BR. A client gave it to him, back when he was still living on the Ring. Zorkal thought back at these more glorious days, before he arguably became the most hated person in the history of Ratkind.

“Apparently you did your research on my culinary tastes, what else do you know?”

“Not much,” Elnara lied out of politeness. “just that I have a potential client for you, a case which might not only redeem you, but for which a buck like you is uniquely qualified.”

Zorkal wondered what qualifications she meant, he sure had some unique talents, but nothing millions of other barristers - and to add to injury not disbarred

ones - wouldn't have. But he wasn't going to fish for some dishonest compliment and instead hoped the mystery women would get to the point.

"My contact worked with the LLSA. She believes they are up to some shady things, but I legally cannot tell you more than that."

So this was it. the LLSA, Large Loose Systematic A-holes as Zorkal liked to call them, the megalith corporation founded on the grave of his disbarment. Zorkal was a little bit more interested now, but was he really motivated to enact revenge? Just to be surely punched back even deeper into his hole, and lose even the little quality of life they let him retain - surely only to remind everyone who's boss?

"Leave me her contact information, I might follow up", Zorkal brushed aside her offer swiftly but honestly. El-nara smiled, "Once the news are full with it, you will see - but then you might be out of time, so I urge you to act sooner than later."

Zorkal just laughed as he emptied his first glass. "Ring-born are all the same," he thought. So full of themselves and their proximity to first bailout nanos, so confident that the floor beneath them won't fall out, that each of their affairs - no matter how small - is an urgent and defining moment for Ratkind. And this matter is likely no different.

"Is this your first time in Lagrange?" Zorkal did not wait for her answer.

"Did you know it's all a lie?" He held up the bottle, and poured himself another glass of the vintage Whiskey.

“Do you know how the gravity works here? A Lagrange point is a point of perfect weightlessness, the effective absence of forces. He held up the glass and pointed at the panoramic window above them, showing Earth.

Elnara rolled her eyes. “That is a projection, not a window.”

“Not the point!” Zorkal rambled on. Clearly the drink started to have an effect already. “Let’s step out on one of the landing bays, and it will show you the same. This entire city - no, that is absurd. It’s a continent in space. How many rats are living here? four hundred billion?”

“This thing is just another instance of our inherited decadence. It’s always showing its face towards the same spot on Earth, while we enjoy the simulated gravity we need. Then where does the gravity come from?” Zorkal shook the empty glass, the ice cubes firmly dropping back. “It’s not rotational, this thing isn’t heavy enough, it looks to be static.”

“It’s a misnomer,” Elnara began. “Humanity built forty-two Calhoun-Class Arcologies. After our ancestors returned here, they found only one remaining: Habitat 25. The others are believed to be destroyed, or have drifted irretrievably. Only this one had been captured by Lagrange Point L5 - which gave it the name. As for the gravity, it’s always been collateral. We pay the DMN to supply the gravity. It’s simple physics really, a few mirrors in space and the rest is orbital mechanics and constant laser pressure...”

Elnara started to lecture, oblivious to the fact that Zorkal was asking rhetorical, not looking for an explanation.

He cut her off. “Everyone here knows that. We’re feeling it every day, and I’m not talking about the gravity.” Zorkal poured himself another glass - the bottle already half empty - and he instantly downed it, slightly annoyed by Elnara’s lecture.

“It still looks luxurious - and for most, it still is. But the drips shrink every year, and with them, the appetite for risk. Demand for consensus has cratered. Nobody wants to sign new contracts, launch new ventures, commit to anything. The last profession remaining - drying up. And that’s the part no one ever puts into words: this isn’t just about the economy slowing down. It’s about the end of work itself. Automation took everything. Consensus was the last thing we wouldn’t let the machines touch. Our last foothold in a system that otherwise runs itself. Are we at the brink of this ending too? Becoming irrelevant not because decisions are made by silicon, but because there are no decisions at all.

And while we’re hurting, the UOS keeps lowering the drips, reducing thrust just subtly enough not to panic anyone. But if we look closer: even after a century of ratkind playing catch-up, sending our own nodes down into the well, legacy human nodes still make up almost 80% of the DMN. They provide laser pressure, yes - but never return fees as drips, they go into wallets whose owners are long gone. Each nano impatient minds send them is burned forever.

When I was young, maintenance took under two percent of our drips. Does that add up? Gravity’s down to point two, and we pay half of the drips. When I was a kid, we had almost a full gee,” he said - maybe exaggerating, maybe not.

His eyes had wandered while talking, then he stared at Elnara, waiting for a response, but she said nothing. It was easy for someone from the Ring to overlook what Lagrange had become. Up there, where ownership concentrated and fees recycled upward, consensus work was thriving more than ever - kept alive by proximity to the source. The Cantillon effect in full. Here, at the bottom of the system, Zorkal had to scrape for hours, while she billed six figures for boilerplate motion filings without ever leaving orbit. Maybe she really didn't notice the difference. Or maybe it was easier not to.

Zorkal's frustration showed in how he kept turning his empty whiskey glass in slow, anxious motions. He hated poverty. Always had. He'd once seen it as a personal failing, a sign of weakness and complacency. Now? He was living it - told himself it was systemic. Easier that way. But deep down, he knew he was falling behind on his race against entropy, when even the riskiest opportunities wouldn't be enough to come out ahead.

It became apparent that Elnara really didn't get it: "On my way here, I didn't see signs of poverty. Everything looks new. Food seems plentiful and even cheaper than on the Ring..."

"Yeah... but notice any kids on your way here?" - Zorkal knew she didn't. She didn't see the people living in capsules, never stepping outside, their drips barely affording them the gravity cost of their own bodies - no other possessions, passions or offspring. She did not see how the fear of weightlessness was taking its toll. She didn't make the connection that this was exactly how humanity ultimately abandoned their

Mars colonies, centuries ago. Once gravity falls below half a gee, you're living on borrowed time, and no amount of torpor or gene therapy will stop it, while with poverty comes lack of discipline, time and funds to afford hours in the centrifuge gyms. She, like too many not confronted by it day by day was ignorant, believing and reiterating old human propaganda that rats are immune to lack of gravity, that gravity is a solved problem, and that we're just lazy.

"Humans created us to have a proxy in microgravity. But we're not immune to it, never were. I think they simply didn't care, it was just a narrative that made it easy to sell. True, we are more resilient - but below a quarter we all have to face the same reality. People are getting sick, our bodies aging faster than they should. More and more are using makeshift torpor chambers to escape into a lower time preference where they won't age as fast, but their escape is a double-edged sword - they're opting out of the economy, not collecting drips, just making everyone not living here wealthier. It's dragging everything down further. At some point, we'll run out of LAT. And then what?"

He made a sweeping gesture, mimicking objects floating aimlessly. "Shit's gonna fly. The pawns will pay the price while the power structures stay intact. Sure, we enjoy unparalleled luxuries - even by human standards - but it's all just temporary decadence and sloppy entertainment. Nobody who ends up here, even if they work their butts off, makes enough to afford escape velocity."

Zorkal poured himself another glass, the sharp scent of the drink cutting the air. He smiled cynically. "A tale as old as time. While our foundation crumbles, everyone runs toward cheap distractions - blinding themselves

just to keep from seeing the end.”

“My client and you, you would get along well. Enjoy the rest of the Bottle, Zorkal”, Elnara excused herself as she didn’t enjoy how quickly this went to nothing. According to her expectations, but still. “Elnara, right? I’ll look into your client. May we meet again.”



And now he was fully aware that this was interesting. It put the weird encounter with this doe - “what was her name?” - into context.

He opened the messages waiting for him. #1 The Picture. Surely it was AI enhanced, but it was without a doubt. The USS Hal Finney was not destroyed. Could it be, that the conspiracy theorists were - yet again - proven right, and history has been rewritten. A second image - showed a cloud of what looked like debris forming around the same spot, following the ship. Zoomed out it looked like a comet. The message was vague and clearly a leak, nobody public outside the always present conspiracy chatter was covering it.

Zorkal yawned, he both wasn’t convinced and really didn’t care. He made a mental note to adjust the filters. While he never believed the official narratives, it also wasn’t surprising or exciting if it was proven wrong. It would not change lives for the better. The bureaucrats at the heart of the UOS will rescue the ship, and claim both the praise and the collateral for themselves.

Message #2. the deposit. Even though his narcissistic nature had compelled him to open up that first, he

almost didn't care about it now. Adding to that, how much could it be...

Zorkal received the first real shock of his day - that was a lot of LAT. An address not linked to any known entity deposited collateral with him. While possible, this was highly unusual. Only corporations, lawyers and other officials receive LAT in any meaningful way, as those are the arbiters of any dispute between untrusting parties, and these days were long behind him. Attached were a few files, and a simple note "help her". And even without reading the files providing context, given the amount of nanos in that wallet, Zorkal could guess who the note talks about, and was sure who spend the LAT to finance what was now inevitable to unfold.

He only skimmed the exhaustive files, but within a few seconds, his mind was racing - the first time in a long time - he felt alive. A clear narrative already formed in his mind as he shot a short message to his - apparently - client.



Only the very observant eyes of a frequent traveler would be able to notice any difference. Zorkal was not one of them. Last time he stepped onto the Lagrange LLT was in 188, when he came back from the Ring, and since then, he did not even venture further than a kilometer in either direction from his apartment. Is that really all it takes to end an episode? A purpose and a buttload of nanos from an anonymous donor to cure depression, Zorkal cynically observed about his state of mind.

As a line of people formed in front of him, Zorkal halted abruptly, his eyes finally narrowed at the subtle overlay blinking urgently on his retinals. Wrong terminal. He had stepped onto the public orbital loop, inertia of the herd guiding his footsteps more surely than conscious thought. He attempted to correct course, now following what was projected. Lack of collateral stranded him on Lagrange, and now - given he possessed escape velocity in his wallet again, he would not merely leave - he would leave at once, with minimal friction, minimal waiting, maximal expenditure. A quiet, bureaucratic vengeance - urgency projected through economics.

At the Direct Lunar Insertion terminal - a quiet expanse of unnecessary grandeur reserved strictly for those whose LAT tolerated such misallocated decadence - a doe with a smile calibrated precisely between excitement and obsequiousness approached, her steps quick and eager.

“Welcome, Mr. Zorkal! Private capsule ready, of course,” she recited with practiced excitement, smiling and laughing gently. “Direct insertion trajectory locked - straight to your destination. Absolutely no stopovers. Exactly as requested.”

She guided him through corridors too polished, too empty, her voice bordering on annoyance as she unnecessarily described amenities: full suite, zero-g recliners, fully-stocked private bar - an embarrassing bounty of resources dedicated to shaving mere hours from an already effortless journey. But Zorkal moved swiftly, too quickly to indulge in appreciating the quiet excess surrounding him. He was neither pleased nor displeased.

While most passengers allow some leeway in their time of departure, when the timechain fees are low, Zorkal did not care. He had bought time, curled up as collateralized spacetime on a direct trajectory. Inefficient, direct, and ratified at maximum fees. He wondered about all the people he outbid to get the first transport out. While transportation within the city had different levels of privacy and luxury, in the network of the LLS the only scarce commodity was inertia and time. In a world where material goods were abundant, all cabins in the LLS offered a comparable maximum of luxury and privacy, while only urgency, speed and mass transported was offered at a premium. But even using the highest level, this trip would take almost 4 hours, but this had been calculated by Zorkal, time to prepare for the client, so he booked the flight immediately.

His destination was New Aldrin. A rotating ring spanning the entirety of the Moon. A metropolis that once thrived against the stark, cratered landscape of the moon. There, within the dust-scrappers of humanity's long forgotten outpost, the LLS Alliance has rebuilt their headquarters, where his new client awaited him, needing his unique abilities for reasons as remote as Earth's satellite.



A jolt went through the transport capsule as it connected to the launch loop. Feeling the acceleration, Zorkal's mind went blank for a second as he enjoyed feeling 1g for the first time in ages. The transport followed the orbital lanes precisely. Zorkal's mind went back to the issues awaiting him.

He had not been to New Aldrin, or anywhere else besides Lagrange in years, and according to what he heard, that might as well have been a lifetime ago. A lot has changed since he left. Long gone were the days Zorkal remembered, where the Moon was the next frontier after reclaiming the Ring and Lagrange.

“But you have to start somewhere,” Zorkal rationalized his work back then, but he never thought he’d return there. He had made too many enemies. Sure, the place looks rich and shiny on the pictures, but he was sure the power structures and with them the legacy and resentment against him might still be there.

192 AR. Lunar Orbit

The launch and landing system of New Aldrin even pre-dated the LLS in Earth's orbit. As Zorkal's transport inched closer, he could start to make out the structure.

Here on the Moon, with its low gravity and plenty of readily accessible building materials, the humans built the first ring. Its systems directly integrated with maglev trains burrowed deep under the regolith, from far away, the Moon now resembled a sea urchin, spikes reaching out 250 kilometers into space. On looking closer, each spike was a massive tower.

Zorkal was still too far away to see what made this structure possible - a ring, connecting each tower at the top. Through this thin ring, ribbons spun from the moon's basalt - spun in constant tension, their rotation pulling the structure into a rigid shape. The entire thing was in energetic equilibrium. A scaffolding held up by nothing but brute force so persistent it turned into inertia.

The structure wasn't held up by the moon's measly gravity, it was pulling itself up. Some towers didn't even touch the surface. Everyone called them dust-scrapers.

This gave the moon a scaffolding to build upon. Rotating toruses built around these towers, most 20-80 kilometers in diameter - providing cheap and constant gravity to its wealthy residents.

Intricate launch loops connected each of the habitats with the towers, the lunar surface, burrowed through the regolith, and gave direct access to the mining and industrial low-g environments in the lunar lava tubes.

Being the first - and only structures in history relying on centrifugal force to lie to the universe, to create gravity where there should be none - they were fast. To get to 1g you need one rotation every 10 minutes. With real sunlight reaching the ring in 5 minute slots - even though most living spaces were shielded and used artificial light sources - this made New Aldrin the most fast-paced environment in the UOS.

The pod Zorkal was travelling in transitioned from free-fall to connecting to one of those spikes, and magnetically connected to New Aldrin's transport system, its velocity gradually reduced to lunar standard. Still descending, he had a few minutes before he arrived. A special upgrade he paid for: skip any terminals and get transport directly to the destination.

"Actually the perfect setup for not drawing any attention from old friends," Zorkal thought, not having even considered that in the hastily preparations for the trip when time was his primary concern.

The capsule went down one of the spikes. A giant behemoth twenty kilometers in length reaching down almost scaping the lunar surface and deep into the vacuum of space. On it, strung like a carousel: Dozens of rotating rings of various sizes and shapes. Each housing millions, some even billions of residents, while few were owned by single families.

The complex where Myla's Apartment was located, was mid-tier. Still a city, but not that densely packed. Inside the habitat, a mix of residential and recreational facilities.

His capsule entered a spoke, and he started to feel the

rotational gravity. Shortly after it stopped and as the doors opened into the lobby, Zorkal was taken aback - what a landing which opened up.

A stream of water, artificial, separated the maglev part of the garage from the lobby of the Apartment. Besides maintenance entrances for all kinds of goods, this was how people got in and out of the structure. Completely different from the buzzing terminal he started this trip at, this was private. The elevator across the bridge has already arrived, awaiting him to enter, and already pre-programmed and locked in to take him up or down - Zorkal didn't know yet - to the appointment.



The elevator opened to what most would, without hesitation or context, dismiss as a mental breakdown in progress. Video walls, complex technological devices, and countless computers were flooding the apartment. For the past few months, ever since she was retired from the LLSA, she became obsessed with the issue to the degree where she went into a full conspiracy. In secret, she collected everything she could find about the mission that predated Ratkind. In her apartment, she had put up a huge video wall collecting all the data, and over time became convinced of the truth despite any real clues.

But then, suddenly, this Zorkal requested an appointment, offering to help. She was skeptical, but desperate to accept it.

Zorkal frowned - not out of moral disapproval, but massive aesthetic discomfort. Disorder wasn't foreign to

him, but it was typically tied to situations he could bill by the hour, beckoned to invite his steady hand to cut through the noise.

This was priceless chaos, not the precious kind.



“Milk Shake or Tea?”. A slender, clearly female rat cut through Zorkal’s quiet observation of the otherwise - behind that mess - luxurious Apartment. “You are Zorkal - good”, she continued.

“Uhm. Nothing for me to drink, thank you.” Zorkal wasn’t planning on hydration before 1600. “Before we begin-”

“Before we begin, please follow me to the meeting room I have setup for this purpose” Myla interrupted him as she led him down a flight of stairs to a room below her apartments lobby.

That room was a complete contrast to the rest of the apartment. Clean, empty, void of any distractions. Just two very comfortable leather armchairs in that room. He was impressed by the wealth in that whole building, but feeling the quality of that chair still amazed him. The LLSA seemed to pay some serious orange handshakes. Zorkal sat down on one of the chairs and faced Myla, who looked at him expectedly.

“I could get used to this” he exclaimed, “before we begin, I need to make sure you are aware of the legal complexities of our shared situation. Between the start of your unemployment and today, did you sign with any

Barrister as your representative? This is important - even a minor contract would qualify, and this would be a very short - and unsatisfying - trip for me.”

Myla thought for a bit. “No, I’ve basically been a hermit ever since it happened, but see for yourself.”

She scooted over her tablet.

“I know the feeling,” Zorkal remarked while he synced it with his retinals to confirm while he noticed Myla wasn’t using any.

“The thing is this: there are some - files - waiting to be delivered for the eyes of your legal representatives only. Until someone is established, that contract is idle. Are you familiar with opcode contracts?”

Zorkal continued to explain how the innovation the timechain gave humans and later rats, the impossibility to confiscate or censor someone’s funds, transactions or property claims, the entire legal process had long adapted.

Since then, all potential liability, damages, contracts, and restitution had to be pre-collateralized and locked upfront in case of misconduct, only to be released once obligations are fulfilled or claims expire. This shifted enforcement from the archaic reactive litigation to proactive risk management, ensuring accountability without relying on post-facto legal intervention.

While many thought this innovation would make the system more efficient and reduce the need for litigators and lawyers, the opposite occurred. As everything - from simple food purchases to leasing entire space

stations - theoretically required intricate webs of automated contract and collateral, even with massive automation, the legal profession became as ubiquitous as farming was in humanity's earliest days. The complexity of preemptive liability management turned legal expertise into an essential and omnipresent skill, not just for major corporations but for everyday transactions.

Years later, this led to the letter sent years ago from the AVA offices to the LLSA, requesting them to share information about the simulation with Myla, finally being ratified as legally binding. They must have found something. Zorkal thought of the telescope picture. A substantial amount of documents was forced to be disclosed to Myla's legal representatives.

The USS Hal Finney - not just a glitch skipping by consensus - was indeed still intact.

"Ok, but why are you here? Why do you want to represent me?" Myla asked - still suspicious of what this Zorkal wants from her. "A few years ago, my business failed. I was deeply collateralized with the LLSA. And then ..." he paused briefly. Not yet. "an accident happened. All my collateral was taken and my legal license revoked. But this puts me into a unique position. If there is any conflict of interest in these documents, while I would still be tied to the LLSA and any NDA, the documents would not be released to me - or you."

"That sounds too convenient. I don't trust it. Who even told you about me?" Myla inquired. "It was an anonymous message, with a lot of collateral attached." Zorkal said while intentionally not mentioning his encounter with Elnara at the bar a few weeks ago.

Myla thought about the situation. “I don’t think this is a mistake. I bet a lot of people wanted this to leak. If the LLSA is hiding something - and that we are both sure about - not everyone is willingly playing along. And I’m just their pawn. But I can live with that - for now.”



“Ok. I got nothing to lose anyway” Myla sighed while signing with Zorkal. Now they had to wait. The minutes passed while nothing happened, their signatures waiting confirmed, and setting the process of releasing the files in motion.

“Here we go ...” Zorkal exclaimed enthusiastically, “this is gonna be big!”

Myla’s AI sorted through the documents - it was a lot: telescope scans, internal reports. Not a new tactic, to overwhelm your opponent with loads of documents, to bump up their efforts. After crunching for a few minutes, the AI found nothing previously unknown or worth mentioning besides the telescope image.

“But at least you have the full picture now.” Zorkal said - a bit of disappointment in his voice. “There was no conspiracy.” - he opened the first internal report about launching a new telescopic search project, and pointed Myla to it. “They mention you explicitly in this. among 255 other operators. Did you know that?”

“Operators are isolated and distributed. While we make a few friends, the LLSA employs millions of people like me. They run a lot of simulations - I am actually surprised, this number is very small.”

“It also mentioned the simulation of this specific scenario was immediately cancelled on its first iteration pending review. This is consistent with your experience and why you saw it only once, as it did not gain a wider adoption.”

But the documents confirmed at least that the scenario was partially real. And that the simulation - which might as well had been a random fluke - was leading to the LLSA finding proof that the USS Hal Finney was still out there.

“Nothing about the magnetic coil sabotage?” Zorkal asked. “I’d expect that being big news...” “The coils are mentioned, but it’s less complicated than I thought.”

Myla didn’t like it. For months she was living her conspiracy, but there was little to see. She opened the documents on a big screen, showing Zorkal the specifications of the magnetic coil assemblies.

“Yes, if any ship over a certain size would try to use the LLS, it wasn’t meant to survive. This looked like human sabotage, possibly premeditated thousands of years ago.”

Myla immediately caught the weird part, it did not make a lot of sense. There were only two ships that size to ever exist. One is a museum, and the other was believed to be lost. Which means the sole fact that the LLSA cared about the issue was if they were already - pre telescope image - considering the possibility of the second ship was still out there.

Day 20 Status Report

1. LLS Magnetic Coil Sabotage

As per our previous decision, find the attached report from the team sent to disassemble and test 15 different coils obtained from the LLS. TLDR: There is no obvious sabotage, the maximum current is an inherent property of the materials and coil architecture used. While a single coil alone would be able to sustain power-levels beyond the limit proposed by the simulations, when used in an array, interference from electromagnetic fields create a hard limit.

The LLS design predates the launch of the USS Nakamoto.

The obvious conclusion is therefore that the ships were intentionally designed at a scale unfit for the LLS Infrastructure.

This is consistent with the after-action Report from Captain Jerenxa and the unofficial mission profile.

The question however, if this was an intentional move to prevent a safe return, or was simply not a concern in favor of a larger fleet design and the official mission, remains unclear.

Back in year 0 AR, Ratkind was very cautious on entering back into Earth orbit. They, and we can only confirm this until recently to be right, believed the LLS to be non functional or malicious. So once a series of gravity assists and bursts from the DMN parked them in

a high ecliptic orbit, the first descendants only took shuttles to the ring.

Myla stared at the coil schematics a moment longer - she didn't see failure, but symmetry. "The LLS wasn't sabotaged. Its limits were known. But they built the ships anyway."

Zorkal, who never cared much for history, stroked his whiskers. "Weren't they supposed to remain out there? Belt infrastructure, long-term. Or cannon fodder, depending on who wrote the history books."

"And" - Zorkal pointed to another report - "They're even planning a rescue mission. This is good." Internally, Zorkal hated this outcome. His contempt for the LLSA ran deep, deeper than Myla knew. But unless drunk, he tried to not let people see it. But in this case, he understood the secrecy. Too much hype and hope will be generated by the promise of the Hal Finney being intact. They rightfully fear panic and economic collapse - and postpone the disclosure as long as they can.

"It's really up to you Myla, If you want me to leak this. But I hate to say it. This report mentions a disclosure date - 6 weeks. As much as I'd personally like to stick it to them, we have little to gain, and they seem to be on top of it."

Myla had lived in her conspiracy for months, waiting for one revelation that would flip the whole story. Instead, all she found was process. Sensible, cautious, maddeningly competent process - even the timeline for rescue and disclosure was perfect.

"I think we are done here. Nice meeting you, Zorkal."

Myla had difficulty processing months of anxiety coming to an unfulfilling close. She wanted to end the day here. "Very well. You have all the data now, if you find anything else, or have any legal questions on what to do with it, you have my contact info"

Them having found little substance felt wrong still. Zorkal thought of Elnara, and his encounter at Lagrange. Surely it was her pulling the strings here. But unlike Myla it didn't make him feel cared for, he thought about when and how this debt would be collected, and made a mental note to prepare for it.

He looked back across the messy lobby, back at Myla standing there - impatient for him to leave this unfruitful exchange. His eyes wandered around that room one more time.

Without warning - the walls felt to cave in on him. This wasn't a mess. The disgust he had felt - that sharp and deeply instinctual feeling - wasn't about her. It was his mirror image, the future judging his own post-disbarment existence. Thinking back at his pod in Lagrange, he'd lived no different.

No. He lived worse. Myla found a purpose - even if utterly futile. He hadn't even tried to torpor it out.

In the seconds between two breaths, his aesthetic unease turned into something much sharper.

Panic.

He had caught a brief - yet still mostly subconscious look at not who Myla had been - but who she would become, if he stayed. But how? One more question?

One more gesture? His hesitation must have already felt very strange to her. But there was nothing left that could be asked without cost. No version of history he could afford to ratify now.

In his initial excitement - and the relief that felt, in hindsight, manufacture - he hadn't even booked accommodation. He'd assumed the outcome of this meeting would make the next step obvious.

His retinal overlay offered half a dozen nearby listings. He blinked them away. Nothing seemed appropriate - almost like he didn't want to leave.

Not knowing where to go, Zorkal reverted to factory settings: the closest bar.



Gravity seemed heavier to Myla since Zorkal had left. This was worse than a cover-up. It was sterile, legal, documented emptiness. She'd spent months living at the edges of a secret, only to discover it had been filed, time-stamped, and ratified.

And then she saw it: ratification was missing - no timechain collateral locked.

Every document they'd read - the telescope logs, the LLSA internal memos, the magnetic coil specs - they looked official. But none of them had ever hit the chain. It wasn't truth, just bureaucratic fan fiction with a logo.

Without ratification, nothing existed in the world that mattered. The chain is the arbiter of memory, value,

and responsibility. No collateral locked meant no one stood behind the story. Which meant it wasn't a report. It was an escape hatch. A future they could trigger - or deny and walk away from clean.

Her name had been in the logs. Her simulation wasn't a prediction, it was a justification. Somewhere, someone had used her not to prevent failure, but to make it look inevitable. A controlled demolition, dressed as fate.

They weren't reacting. They were setting a stage. Writing plausible futures in advance - so when the ship would finally burn up, no one would ask the wrong questions. No one would trace it back to a choice.

Because in the end, only the final ratification would matter. And when it came, it would not argue or explain. They would look back, settle every entry, and declare omnipotently:

"I did this."

Myla shook her head. Of course they had to build a religion around final settlement. It worked, in its own, twisted way. Retrocausal omnipotence, the ledger as deity. It explained everything - and nothing. She was finally ready to let the issue rest.

192 AR. New Aldrin, Zorkal

Zorkal was sitting in a dimly lit bar in one of the more run-down parts New Aldrin, per usual tending to a bottle while scrolling through the documents. He had a hunch that he was missing something, but so far found nothing. As the evening went on, and the hydration increased, the letters turned into a blur.

He hadn't heard from Myla in two days. He told himself it was normal, he did what rats always do when feeling too close to the truth: Orbit it, dreading to descend. He made up excuses, that she was deep in a sim run. That she'd given up on it.

But deep down, he knew. She'd found something.

And for whatever reason, she hadn't wanted him to know.



A group of bucks at a nearby table caught his attention. Their laughter and easy camaraderie cutting through the bar's chatter and easy going music. As the evening got later and later, they struck up a conversation, drawing him into their circle. He was wary at first, but their enthusiasm seemed genuine enough. A few drinks later, his guard had slipped just enough to dull his instincts.

Despite being temperature controlled, the air felt colder as he stepped "outside" - surely intentional to make it as authentic as possible, the bucks cheer-

fully insisting on walking him to his transport pod. Suddenly, something about them felt off now - the way they hung too close, the way their voices had dropped just a bit too casual. As they neared the pods, it clicked. They tried to not make it obvious, but they were steering him toward one of their pods.

Adrenaline cut through the fog of alcohol. Zorkal twisted free of their still friendly and casual grip just as they tried to make their move.

Zorkal had not come unprepared to New Aldrin. During his travels here, he had licensed safeguards - programs running on his behalf, synchronized through collateral locked with the civic infrastructure of NA. A threat-assessment AI parsed posture, gait, and heart rate in the crowd. Hidden deterrents lay dormant everywhere in the structure. This wasn't paranoia. The chain demanded collateralized security.

So when *THREAT* flared across his retinals, as the first goon tried to land a punch, the response was automated and bureaucratic:

The boulevard's privacy protocols re-wrote themselves instantly, Zorkal's deposited LAT underwrote liability for a growing sphere around him, as more of the collateral was locked with the self-adjusting escalation-level of the defensive systems. To onlookers it appeared as a faint shimmer, to the would-be assailants it was rendered in perfect clarity on their own retinals - a legal notice, a warning, a line already underwritten.

The punch never landed.

Vortex guns embedded in the superstructure exhaled

and shoved his fist aside centimeters from Zorkal's face. Another jet caught his chest, pushing him backwards, bewildered. The second goon rushed harder, too fast for the soft deterrents to bleed away his momentum. His whiskers lit white as a laser brushed them clean; his instincts screamed retreat, but his breach of the inner zone was now inevitability.

Two meters around Zorkal, the air had become something else.

The goon entered the ZZT: Zone of Zero Trust. An impenetrable barrier. A perimeter built out of collateral. ZZT wasn't just an acronym. It was the harsh sound the laser beams would make if breached.

The attacker's right arm vanished in vapor. The protocols protected Zorkal above all using minimal force possible - but not out of empathy, but due to minimizing collateralized liability up the chain, where the infrastructure had to settle insurance claims with Zorkal's privacy doctrine.

A final vortex pulse flung the injured buck him back into the crowd. He would live - but he'd have to pay a hefty price. Not his arm, that would regrow, but his every move in the future would be re-priced.

The fight, if it could be called that, was over before it began. The safeguards had not defended Zorkal out of loyalty or courage, but because the ledger had demanded it, and the street itself had ratified the cost.

The protocols bought him time, but it wasn't over. Zorkal bolted to his pod, the doors closed shut as soon as he entered - Myla's apartment already locked in as

the destination.

The pod descended into one of the mounds available throughout the boulevard's substructure. As it accelerated, Zorkal checked the sensors: they were following. He did not prepare any deterrents for being followed though - restricting the tubes down a dust-scraper was a price too steep, only spent by people with even bigger paranoia than him.

He clenched his jaw, eyes flicking to the distance countdown as the pod approached Myla's building again. His heart hammered, but a small flicker of relief came when the docking port scanned his pursuers' pods by electronically denying them entry. Through the camera, Zorkal saw frustrated bucks exiting their vehicle, contemplating if they want to pick up a fight with the building's gun turrets, until they finally got back into their vehicle and sped off.

PUSHDATA 40.553.003

Principles of Civic Safeguard Enforcement in the United Orbital Structures Version 34.1 - After Ratkind - Chapter 12

It is settled doctrine that enforcement under UOS jurisdiction is never discretionary and never retrospective. No judges or jury convenes, no testimony is weighed, no plea is heard. Relevant truths are fixed at the moment of collateralization, when liability is underwritten by the holder of a wallet and sealed to the chain. What follows, whether in a boulevard brawl or an orbital breach, is not adjudication but the pre-priced unfurling of inevitability.

Identity

A person is not recognized by name or biometric trace but by wallet. Each wallet is anchored to sponsors - parents in childhood, corporations in adulthood, negligible base-layer drips for those without standing. The holder acts through the wallet and assumes liability for all transactions. The sponsors provide continuity and reputation, but regress toward them occur only under explicit multi-signature collateralization. Identity theft persists, but is rare: to seize a wallet is insufficient, one must also falsify the holder's liabilities.

Corporations, habitats, and fleets likewise exist only through wallets with underwriting arrangements. No artificial gravity is given uncollateralized, no ship can cross a lane without proper backing. To exist without underwriting is to be invisible; to act without collateral is to be extinguished.

Liability

Civic infrastructure interrogates every act for collateral. The question is always the same: *is this move underwritten?* If so, the action proceeds. If not, enforcement releases. An unpriced punch triggers the same machinery as an uncollateralized orbital burn. In either case, safeguards activate, not as punishment but as the release of pre-committed counter-liability.

Zones of Zero Trust

ZZTs are not confined to concourses and marketplaces or private habitats and offices. They extend into transit corridors, docking shells, and licensed lanes of interplanetary space. Within them latency is negligible - infrastructure queries the wallet, verifies the holder, and responds in line with the collateral staked. Enforcement may wound or kill, but the decisive strike is economic: the offending wallet is repriced, its risk curve permanently recalculated. In many cases reputational damage flows downward to sponsors as well, who must bear higher reputational costs in future underwriting.

How enforcement is decided is under the discretion of the Zone. From fully automated, zero-tolerance AI systems to swarms of biological consensus-workers - it depends on the priced risk of wrongful or excessive deterrent and the underwriting of the Zone itself.

Injurious Outcomes

Physical harm is incidental. The lasting consequence is actuarial. A wallet once marked is forever expensive: future underwriters must collateralize at higher rates, constraining mobility, contracting access, stig-

matizing fleets and habitats. A single breach can condemn an entire corporate lineage to decades of punitive underwriting.

Irreversibility

Appeals do not exist. Enforcement actions ratified to the chain cannot be unwound. Justice is no longer concerned with the illusions of fairness but through continuity. The chain remembers, and in remembering preserves predictability. Redemption, if it comes, is not through revision but through the slow re-pricing of future acts and obligations.

Drips

Identities endure not solely through collateral but through drips: the constant emission of LAT from the chain itself. These flows arise from two sources: fees harvested at ratification, and the reserves of the First Bailout. The former should have sufficed to perpetuate the cycle, yet most legacy nodes - still human in origin - return no drips. They hoard fees, and so the chain leaks in only one direction, widening the fissure in the First Bailout with each cycle.

192 AR. New Aldrin, Zorkal

The pod docked at Myla's apartment, and Zorkal rushed out, still feeling the buzz of adrenaline. He hurried inside, his mind racing. He remembered that some might still hold a grudge against him from the old days, but that seemed over the top. Zorkal felt more and more confident in his paranoia.

"This is unexpected, I wasn't expecting you back again at all, and definitely not today." "I've been attacked. I don't know who they were, either some old friends—" Zorkal took a gulp of water Myla brought him to calm him down, "or new ones."

"They seemed amateurish enough, so probably old friends. I might have involved you in my past."

"What past are you talking about? Would you tell me what happened."

Zorkal started to explain:

"When I was still an associate, my first year out of Bostonia Law, I started drafting contracts for a shipping business. This was in the days before the LLSA was founded. Space travel between the orbitals was still slow - we were only beginning to retake New Aldrin. I traveled often, setting up shipping agreements for my firm's clients. Most of it was boring work. Just legal.

My apartment in the outer ring was small, just what this low-level job afforded me. Only 250 square meters of living space - which felt crushingly small to me at the

time. Sure it had the standard amenities, including a spa and gym, but lacked any outside view. And while simulated windows would provide biological eyes the same details as the real thing, it wasn't something to brag about, not anything that would signal "high roller" to guests - not that I knew anyone I'd like to impress for that matter, but I always dreamt that this would change with it. Ironic that compared to my life on Lagrange it sounds absurdly luxurious - but I didn't know or care back then, did not look at people who had less, all I could think about was wanting more.

Not just flashy things to impress, but imprint onto history. Partner track, maybe run my own firm. The only thing I had going for me was stamina - no creativity, no vision. Just my exceptional tolerance for grind.

I enjoyed spending my lunches on a bench outside my employer's office, in a park under the domes of Bostonia in the outermost ring. I used to gaze up at the sky, watching spacecraft zip through. Until one day, I started to wonder who they were, what is being shipped. I could have made up stories about them, but as I said I lack creativity. But the curiosity didn't wane so I added a layer in my retinals until I saw everything overlaid with text.

Now every point of light had context: Registration of the cargo ships, manifests, timechain signatures, all tracing back to the collateral securing them.

That curiosity turned into obsession. I started tracing it all backwards, digging into how the timechain really worked. That's when I invented the federated manifest."



Myla's eyes opened wide. "What? That was you? But that means..."

Zorkal continued:

"I realized the chain was nearing saturation. Traffic was increasing, but inscribing full paths per ship was unsustainable. I found hints in the past - ways humanity must have overcome similar limits. Something obvious stood out: the size of their outputs.

I started my company: Matryoshka Transit.

Instead of inscribing the complete flight path of individual spacecraft on the timechain to avoid spacetime collisions, my system allowed spacetime brokers to reserve bigger chunks at once and then subdivide those and sell them on secondary markets.

This system proved to be very efficient, and as you know best - is still used today. But we got greedy. My corporation's system was soon adopted everywhere - we had a monopoly. And one of my partners asked: "Why are we even paying the timechain fees. There is no competition, no way of a collision happening."

For years, this business model worked well, and made me and my partners very rich. I finally upgraded to a new apartment - directly within a skyscraper in the innermost ring of the UOS, with huge panoramic windows and guest suites to entertain the many friends I've made since. But unlike the windows, it was all a facade. I was selling orbital space without proper backing on

the timechain.

A big *21% OFF!* button was soon running on many cargo hubs in the ring. Most did not care how it worked, skeptical people would not care to dig through the jargon I've set up to hide the truth that we weren't selling timechain slices, but just hot Vacuum."



Myla knew the story, everyone knew, but hearing it from the guy behind all that, the person who caused a lost decade, until their overleveraged economy slowly recovered from the shock of going back to the physical reality of the timechain standard and eventually establishment of the LLSA who enforces compliance was something different.

Myla thought about that story, and something clicked in her head - one of those moments where your brain feels ahead of your thoughts. She wasn't there yet, but something had just come into view.

She opened the LLSA simulation archive and searched for THE date. The attack burned into the collective memory of Ratkind.

The L447 passenger liner, packed with civilians - scientists, traders, artists, families - vaporized mid-transit. No survivors. 4502 lives reduced to particles, indistinguishable from the static haze of vacuum.

For years the story had been clear: rogue Tabbies, hiding in the outer system, had waited centuries for the price of a dyson laser beam to drop. Zorkals sec-

ondary marked caused demand and prices to drop, which made it possible. A revenge operation, long after the Battle of the Belt. The clue was the timechain signature that paid for the laser - collateral from the war era. It was conclusive. Or so everyone thought.

The UOS reacted decisively. Military enforcement of spacetime using the newly founded LLSA became law. Zorkal's empire built out of leverage collapsed. Clients withdrew and everything he had built began to unravel. The collateral securing his business drained away, leaving him on the brink.

The market re-priced him accordingly, sending a signal to everyone that legal advice better be sought somewhere else. Collateralizing with Zorkal became too risky for everyone level-headed. The infrastructure adjusted, his every move more expensive than he had left. Had become a prisoner of his own bankruptcy, in the UOS a fate worse than death, left only with the drips of the timechain to sustain a life devoid of wealth or purpose.

But the documents Myla and Zorkal had access to painted a different picture. It became clear where the hunch and the simulation Myla had experience originated from. If the USS Hal Finney was never destroyed in the Battle of the Belt, it was them who requested that fateful laser beam - most likely just to get home - and the passenger liner being in the way was a freak accident, an astronomically low probability. A true one-in-a-billion convergence.

If the Hal Finney was alive - and the laser had been their ticket home, not a weapon - then L447 wasn't attacked. No tabbies. No enemy. Just coincidence. And Zorkal's

greed.

“This was the only truth on the table. I swallowed it too, but everyone else scrambled to weaponize it,” he said. “L447 was classified and the LLSA founded within only seven blocks. Everyone felt they just waited for a catalyst. No hesitation. The system is slow and looks impotent - until it smells arbitrage. Then the giants wake: ugly, fast, final.”

He traced the arc of the schematic now hovering above them. “It wasn’t just the incident - it was the timing. The LLSA needed a cause to exist. L447 gave them permanence.

Zorkal paused, seeing Myla’s mind already tracking latency patterns, arbitration flags, what must have happened in the nodes. “You know how consensus works,” he said. “You deal in facts - whether the data lines up, whether the causality fits. But law doesn’t care about facts. It cares only about which deals got closed.”

She frowned. “So what happens to the contracts built on that false flag?”

“They reprice. Coldly. Automatically. The moment L447 was ratified, it became truth. Every contract that followed chained itself to it - not because it was real, but because the consensus had no reason to reject it. Now they all point back to something that shouldn’t exist, but officially does.”

Myla nodded slowly.

“Ratification is immutable - you can’t reverse it at all. Once a truth is closed, it stands - whether it was real or

not. But you don't need to. Value isn't enforced by the chain - it's enforced by belief. The truth may be sealed, but if enough people stop trusting it, the economic trees it supports begin to wither anyway. Someone's drip dries up because the yield it's based on is seen as fiction. A miner's claims get contested. A factory's subsidy loses its backers. Nothing fails cleanly. The numbers stay, but the trust behind them rots. That's repricing too - just slower, and crueler."

Zorkal gave her a long look. "Then everything fractures. Not officially - not in the chain. But everywhere else. All nodes still agree, the contracts still reference the block, but people stop acting like it matters. Enforcement slows. Arbitration fails. Collateral stays locked because no one's sure how to close. The system doesn't break - it starves. Truth doesn't vanish. It just stops clearing."

Myla understood the weight. She finally told him what she had discovered. The unratified truth.

Zorkal was not surprised. "They won't let the truth in - not because it's false, but because no one can price it now. The collateral's locked, but the liquidity's gone. No one wants to touch it, no one wants to be the one to move first."

"That why the LLSA needs to bury this," he said quietly. "To delay final settlement. To prevent ratification and then choose a version of history they're willing to underwrite. If the ship burns, they'll maintain the myth. If it returns unharmed, they'll ratify their rescue and wear it like a medal."

To Zorkal, Retrocausality was simply an artifact of any

contract. But to Myla it was doctrine. The belief that reality didn't become real until someone stood behind it, burned for it, ratified it. She'd never been sure she believed it. Not fully.

But now she saw it in motion. The bureaucracy had become weaponized belief - not waiting for the truth, but waiting for a profitable one. A version of history they could afford to own.

There, along the laser beam of destruction - hidden in plain sight: The trajectory of the long lost ship.

BR. Deep Space, USS Hal Finney

A bright light entered Vaxzor's halfway closed eyes as he awakened from torpor yet again - and this time, it felt much worse. His mind was heavy and his body had difficulty to adjust to the procedure. As he, half awake in a state of agony, checked the timestamp of the mechanical clock inside his torpor chamber, and it was clear why. Unlike the first time, when he and his crew were only asleep for decades, the number was wrong. He felt his stomach drop. This can't be right. They considerably overslept, their mission failed, and he wasn't the first to wake up.

He had programmed the system to wake him three months before their arrival to meet with the Voyager 2 spacecraft, enough to prepare their deceleration, but something went very very wrong.

The medical personnel checking on his vitals brought him up to speed. "The signal meant to wake you up was never received. As you can see, our clocks seem to be off too - We did not investigate why yet. We decided to wake you first."

"What happened? Why are you awake then?" Vaxzor had trouble speaking. "During the battle of the Belt, a few torpor pods were damaged - we did not notice it, and over the years some slowly lost fluid. Yesterday, the first crewmember woke up as her pod finally shut down. She triggered a medical emergency from within her pod, which caused me and a skeleton team to wake up.

"Is she ok?" - "Unfortunately no, the failures caused her

months of severe malnutrition and a lot of muscle mass has been lost. We've tried to put her back into torpor, but it was too late. She's gone."

"Even out here, the Tabbies still take our best." Vaxzor remarked sadly, as the crew lifted him out of the chair.

And after going through the routine operations and waking more essential crew, and making sure the ship was holding together, Vaxzor went back to his ready room. He directed the ships' antennas towards Sol, and Vaxzor sighed with relief as the timechain carrier signal was received. "At least the chain still works," he said to himself even more confused, as its failure would have explained what went wrong with the torpor.

The download was running, but painfully slow - less than 1% per day. The distance, the bandwidth constraints, and subtle inconsistencies slowed it to a crawl. They received no other signals from the inner system, only the chain was strong enough that far out.

But to their surprise, the newest data - historical one still pending - was blank.

There was little to read. Just block heights and raw state hashes. No real data. Nothing that told them what had happened since they'd left. It was almost like the system had been abandoned and everyone was dead.

As the full crew woke up and discovered their situation, shipwide panic broke out, and Vaxzor felt the need to address the crew. This time he did not do it on the bridge, but went outwards towards a hangar bay, to meet a concerned crowd of crewmembers, while a live

feed was made available to anyone else:

Vaxzor stood on the grated platform above the hangar floor, a few crew gathered around him in clusters - silent, sunken-eyed, still shaking off decades of sleep. He took a breath and spoke:

“You’ve all heard the rumors, and I won’t waste your time pretending they’re wrong.”

He let the words sit. Eyes locked on him. No interruptions, no chatter. Good, but did his authority improve, or was this simply a tired, worn out crew?

“We overshot. Our calculations were solid, our systems were checked and re-checked, and yet... we overslept. The torpor exit never triggered.”

The crew’s faces didn’t show panic. But the tension was there - compressed and ready to detonate.

“We’ve begun syncing the chain. But it’s slow. Less than one percent per day. Until it finishes, we are flying blind. Nothing from the inner system. No word from the Nakamoto and therefore confirmation that our mission still matters. But we are not all dead. This ship is still holding together. We have power. We have minds. And we have options.”

“Let me be clear. We only have one sail left. That gives us exactly one course change. One. And we have two targets: we either try to intercept Voyager, or we aim for home. But we cannot do both. Not with what we have. If we go for Voyager, we’ll be stranded.”

Some murmurs. Not loud. Not aggressive. Just fear

taking voice.

“Now, I know what you’re thinking. Why risk anything? Why chase a probe when we might already be too late? Why push further into the void when we could turn around? It was two probes for a reason. If the Nakamoto made it, we can simply go home.”

He lowered his voice slightly.

“So here’s where we stand. We prepare. We continue laser sail deployment protocols, quietly and efficiently. In the meantime, we wait - not long - for more data. A few days. Maybe a week. Until we can see a clearer picture.”

He raised his voice again, firm.

“Nobody breaks rank. Nobody acts without command. And if anyone has a better idea, I want it on my desk within twenty-four hours.”

He looked at them, all of them, and softened his tone just enough.

“We’re not just survivors. We’re the last voice of something much older. And until we know what happened out there... we hold the line.”

He stepped back. The silence held. Then a few quiet nods.



Two weeks later, still no word on humanity. Still no

confirmation about the Nakamoto. Zoltar was the first to say it aloud in the mess hall:

“We’re drifting further from the Voyager with every hour. Our window to retrieve it is closing. And the chain looks dead, it might never finish or give us anything tangible.” Vaxzor, seated nearby, replied without looking up. “It will come. The timechain never lies. But it never hurries either.”

“That’s not enough,” Zoltar said. “Every second we wait, a possible trajectory becomes an impossibility. Voyager won’t wait. And neither will the crew. Earths infrastructure seems intact, and we need the LAT to use it. Without it, we’re without power.”

Rumors had begun to churn. Some believed the Nakamoto had succeeded. Others believed both ships had failed and they were the last remnants of something long dead. Many believed the empty blocks they’d received so far hinted at something darker: that humanity was no more. Many wanted to build a future right there, in deep space, on the Hal Finney.

“We don’t need the Voyager collateral anymore,” said one engineer. “If humanity is gone, then so are their contracts, their politics, their systems. We don’t need their technology. We can build our own infrastructure. We can reclaim Earth.”

“A future without the baggage,” another agreed.

That wasn’t enough for Zoltar. But while everyone on the ship was panicking from the depressing news, Zoltar felt excitement. Against this backdrop, Zoltar didn’t believe the mission had inevitably failed, it just

became much more interesting.

Zoltar raised his hand. “It’s not a question, but I have an idea. I don’t want to sound overly optimistic, but I think we can indeed do both.”



By Day 28, opinions on the ship were split almost evenly. Some wanted to wait - just one more day - for more data. Others had enough of waiting, and simply voiced their desire to call the mission a colossal failure and go home.

Everyone else rallied behind Zoltar, who - at the height of the crew’s division came to Vaxzor’s quarters. Unannounced.

“I have a plan. It’s risky, but it gives us a shot at both goals. Wait longer, and that option vanishes.”

Vaxzor turned from the terminal, exhausted. “We still know nothing. No proof. Not even a clear word from Sol.” Zoltar nodded. “That’s the point. We’re deciding blind, Captain. We either make our own facts, or let someone else write them. The delayed torpor wasn’t a glitch on our end, it was systemic. If it hit us, it hit the Nakamoto too. Rationally, their odds of success are even lower than ours.”

“And if you’re wrong?” “Then we still go home. That’s the brilliance of it.” “You’re asking for my backing. And if I say no?”

Zoltar hesitated. Then: “Then I do it anyway. Enough

of the crew is with me on this...”

Vaxzor didn't respond for what felt like minutes. He was well aware that this was mutiny - but out here, with the humans who had granted him authority long dead, and noone else within almost a lightyear to enforce it, his rank was just a symbol. Without the crew behind it, it meant nothing.

Finally, he spoke up, his face stone cold: “Then give me your plan,” he said, his voice flat. “If you're going to break rank, at least back it up with engineering.”



Zoltar saluted as Vaxzor joined the bridge crew to discuss the plan they had worked on for the past weeks. “As you all know, our original mission profile was to approach Voyager slowly - 3 kilometers per second delta-v. Slow enough to use a shuttle to grab it, use a laser sail to re-accelerate the ship and go home.”

The crew nodded, everyone knew the original plan.

“That's no longer an option. We're five AUs further out now. To return to Voyager, catch it, and go home, we'd need three separate boosts. Even if we had the LAT, we don't have the sail material. And even if we had that - there are too many variables. If a single step fails, we're stranded, we ...”

Vaxzor cut in before the mood could drop. “Yes, this confirms our own analysis. But I assume you have a solution. Let's hear it. Straight up.”

Zoltar nodded, annoyed - he wanted to slowly lead them up to it, but whatever.

“We start the return burn - as if we’re abandoning Voyager. That puts us on a path back to Sol, but align it with Voyager’s current vector. It’s a longer, faster, more eccentric trajectory”

He paused just long enough.

“Faster means catching it at 30 kilometers per second.”

The crew chuckled. A few eyebrows rose.

“I know it sounds insane,” Zoltar said. “But I believe it’s possible.”

Vaxzor stared at Zoltar the entire time he spoke, not as a captain but as a common survivor. Around him, the room carried the weight of a thousand unspoken doubts, none louder than his own. He thought of the crew members still asleep, the ones who would never wake, the ones they had tagged and filed like inventory. “Thirty kilometers per second,” he whispered, almost to himself, but loud enough anyone could hear their own doubts reflected back at them. “That’s not a rendezvous - it’s a collision.”

“But I like it.” Vaxzor shut down any prejudice among his senior officers immediately, “Even if Zoltar’s plan here fails, we at least go home. I like the priorities, I can live with the probability. So what’s the plan exactly? How can we catch this bullet?”

Zoltar laid out his plan: After they would turn the ship around, align their trajectory towards both Sol and

Voyager, they would launch their remaining probes - at least twenty of them towards it. Every probe would have to slow Voyager down a bit, until - once Voyager makes contact with the Hal Finney, their relative speed would be sufficiently low to catch it. At least in theory, that's what would happen.



The hangar bays of the ship were in a constant buzz. First they had to do the return burn using their last sacrificial laser sail, and 6 months later try to catch the Voyager, until they can all go back into torpor.

The return burn was uneventful - boring almost. Just a few hours of acceleration and not much more to notice. Vaxzor invited everyone to a watching party in one of the hangar bays. A big screen showing their course and speed, and a subdued cheer went through the crowd as the faraway lasers finally stopped and their course was locked in. But everyone could feel the anxiety - the hard part was just beginning.

Zoltar's plan had two main components. They needed a way for their shuttles to reach Voyager - something that, considering the limited chemical thrusters on the mining probes they had available, required a 2-stage approach, two of their shuttles linked together almost like you would launch from a planetary body. And something to actually catch/slow Voyager without destroying it.

The tanks were massive, stretching floor to ceiling even in their 30 meter high cargo bays. Space was helping them, the vacuum of space and the microgravity envi-

ronment was exactly what you need to produce aerogel, the perfect material to create a buffer for a delicate structure like an ancient spacecraft to fall into and decelerate. But they still needed a lot of it, and some scaffolding for their probes to deploy it. But after only 4 months of hard work they had everything including a small surplus...



Zoltar had joined Vaxzor on the bridge to watch the deployment of the probes. It was a weird makeshift structure. First a large cylinder containing the aerogel, connected to a probe, which again was connected to a second probe. They watched one after another push out of the cargo bay and accelerate toward Voyager. Halfway, each unit detached from their first stage, turned around, and decelerated to match Voyager's speed as close as 1 km/s to position themselves and their gelatinous cargo.

Finally, a necklace in space, made out of gel stretched across a million kilometers of vacuum.

Probe 1 - Proof of Concept

The bridge fell completely silent as they watched the first aerogel buffer hit Voyager. The cameras on the probe showed the iconic spacecraft fall into the gel like a stone into a puddle of water. A cheer went through the crew as they saw Voyager emerge out the other side of the gel. Laser sensors confirmed the deceleration and trajectory within parameters. They had proven that it worked in theory - but Vaxzor didn't feel relieved. From now on, his anxiety would peak.

Probe 2 - Coincidence

Another probe, another strike. This time softer - but with clean deceleration. The gel absorbed precisely 2.24 km/s. As expected. Precisely as expected. Which meant the unexpected loomed. Across the observation ring, someone said aloud what others feared: "Two is just noise. Three is pattern."

Probe 3 - Confidence

A betting pool opened among the crew. Vaxzor marked it down as "ritual tension release," though his own stake remained undocumented. The third probe made contact like a hand folding into a glove. If they still prayed, this would have been the moment.

Probe 5 - Disbelief

By the fifth probe, fear began to mutate. Not into relief, but into mistrust. Zoltar stared at the data without blinking. "We used 21 for redundancy, something should've broken by now," he said flatly. No one disagreed. That was the problem.

Probe 6 - 21 - Complacency

Each probe did its job. No cascade. No deviation. Contact velocities matched. Gel formations rippled clean. The telemetry showed consistent slow-down across all intercepts. The odds chart stopped updating - nothing changed.

No cheers. No failures. No rituals. Just station-verified confirmations of deceleration. One after the other. Perfect.

By probe 21, Voyager had lost the required 30 km/s. Enough to catch. Enough to land. No telemetry anomalies. No damage reports. Just 21 clean landings.

The support had held. Their wall of worry never touched.

Yet, the mood of the crew was strangely down. Everyone expected at least one cascade. One failure. One gel rupture, thruster misfire or unaligned telemetry.

They almost yearned for a last-ditch effort and chance to be a hero. The betting pool was not for success - but for which probe would fail first. That was the tone. The mood. The legacy of every other plan they'd ever fielded.

No medals were issued. The mission file was marked to be ratified: "Success. No deviations, no further comment."



After what seemed to last a lifetime, it finally came home. Voyager - scarred but intact, a testament to humanity - drifted into the hangar of the Hal Finney. Slowed by the final gel net, its hull kissed metal with a whisper.

No one applauded. The crew had expected to matter. Expected to deal with failure, and a chance to redeem. Expected to be needed, to be part of the pinnacle of their effort. Instead, they again felt the weight of being scaffolding - infrastructure.

Workers cleared the bay of any large chunks of gel before Zoltar inspected the captured treasure. “It won’t fly again... but the interior seems intact”

Vaxzor stood beside it for a long while. The myth, the dream, the silence. Humanity’s far-fetched goal back then had been that aliens would find it.

Nobody had expected genetically-engineered debt-slaves, not coming to explore but to survive.

Zoltar’s plan succeeded. He marveled at the beauty of the situation: “Humanity sent this probe, on the slim chance of first contact. And now we bear witness to our last contact with humanity. What we’ve inherited is the great cosmic silence.”

“Look at us,” Vaxzor whispered to Voyager, a scratched and beaten corpse stranded on their hangar floor. “We’re the aliens now.”



A feeling of sadness washed over Vaxzor. They had succeeded, but what now? The only thing left to do was to continue on their ticket home. The Nakamoto’s fate was still unclear. The situation at Earth: unknown. How will the world they return to look like? If they’d succeeded they’d be welcomed as heroes, but Vaxzor had a hunch they’ll just be out of date, ghosts of a distant past forgotten by generations of rats descended from Jerenxa’s legacy.

In no way did he fear what was actually waiting for him, and a few days later, upon returning to his quarters, he

didn't notice the screen blaring "download complete" that tired was he. Only after being ready for sleep did he check on it, only to not sleep that day at all. The timechain had finally been synced. So far so good.

He immediately looked for messages signed by the Nakamoto. Short bursts, unobfuscated and easy to find in the opcodes.

"Second Bailout secured."

And another message, sent a few weeks after, but adjusted for their torpor, roughly 100 years ago read:

"They are gone."

Only once the timechain was fully downloaded and indexed, he understood the message.

Human activity had continued long after the Rats abandoned their mission in the Belt. Humanity eventually secured it. The Tabbies - not defeated, but managed. The orbital ring over Earth had been completed. Dozens of massive stations populated the orbitals, and the Dyson swarm provided them with unparalleled technological and economical prowess. Technological milestones came and went. Technology and infrastructure expanded. Nothing hinted at collapse.

Unable to tell when exactly it happened, but a pattern emerged. The timechain, while validating block after block to the present day, undisturbed, showed less and less human activity. At some point it fizzled out - until the last transaction had been recorded. His first thought was that humanity had simply moved

on to another system. But if that were true - why not shut this one down? Something more profound had happened. And now he understood:

Humanity was really gone.

Vaxzor instructed his personal AI to search for inscriptions hinting at what happened, but it was inconclusive. A lot of entries hovered around "The Rapture" - a concept from humanity's ancient religions. Did their deities awaken and take them? Did humanity transcend, or did something horrible happen?

And the families the rat crews left behind? Many - Vaxzor included - had feared human retaliation. Raticide.

But their families weren't executed, not left to starve - just forgotten. Barring mechanical failure still sleeping in torpor on the Moon. Without transactions, there is nothing to wake them for their shifts.

But he found none recorded. But this felt even worse.

Vaxzor wrote into the logbook: "Humanity didn't even care to deal with us. They simply left the torpor pods humming to slowly fail one by one through neglect and disappeared, not caring how and if someone would wake them up. The ultimate price of our fleet's defection had been paid, it required no transaction fees, no signatures declaring responsibility."

He should have felt triumph. His decisions and low time preference helped Ratkind prevail, but the cost had been too high. His fur stood up and he shivered as he remembered the number again: 98%. He knew the guilt was his to bare.

“All we had to do was die as heroes, maybe then they might have met a different fate.”

Beyond that, everything else seemed - normal. Machines did what they had always done. Automated systems held everything together, degrading slowly in the absence of maintenance, but not failing. No crashes. No alarms. No goodbyes.

And through the long quiet night, the chain ran undisturbed. Tick Tock, next block.

PUSHDATA 38.154.004

Principles of Civic Safeguard Enforcement in the United Orbital Structures Excerpt from “The Ascendancy of Ratkind” - a historical fiction novel, Edition 23

Chapter 16: The Ascension of Jerenxa and the Dawn of Ratkind

Following the conclusion of the Battle of the Belt, where the Ratkind fleet failed to repel the rogue AI entities known as Tabbies, the fleet was left in a precarious state. With diminished resources and no safe haven to retreat to, Captain Jerenxa, Commander of the USS Nakamoto, made the strategic decision to divert her vessel toward Voyager 1.

This decision was based on historical records indicating that significant LAT reserves had been stored in the probe by an anonymous group centuries earlier. These reserves, while forgotten by most, had the potential to provide Ratkind with the necessary capital to establish a foothold in a system hostile to all but the affluent.

Upon reaching Voyager 1, Jerenxa’s crew successfully retrieved the LAT stored aboard the probe. However, the journey was not without difficulty. The crew of the Nakamoto faced numerous hardships, including mechanical failures and the strain of long-duration space travel. Despite these challenges, the retrieval of the LAT marked a turning point for the fleet, as it provided the resources necessary for their safe return to Earth, and ensured their economic power once home.

It was after their return journey that Jerenxa and her crew made a significant, but frightening discovery: all communication from Earth had ceased. Historically, Earth had been the center of human civilization, yet by the time of Jerenxa's approach, no signals were being broadcast, and no active communication links besides automated transmission of an empty timechain could be found. While the absence of human activity was unexpected, the retrieval of the LAT positioned Jerenxa to take advantage of the situation.

In year 1 AR (After Ratkind), marked though Jerenxa entering Earth's orbit, Jerenxa took immediate action to restore and revive the dormant infrastructure left behind by humanity. While Jerenxa and her valiant crew was faced with an infrastructure that was severely neglected and most systems locked behind LAT contracts without any counterparty still alive.

To their surprise, the DMN was - as it was designed for full autonomy - still fully intact, and during the Nakamoto's long journey, humanity had established an orbital ring - akin to the one on the Moon - over their home planet.

As the Ring was the habitat which provided first-class access to the surface, and was the only remaining functional structure, Jerenxa decided to make it their initial target.

The LAT retrieved from Voyager 1 proved crucial, as it allowed for the repair and reactivation of many critical systems. Without these funds, it is unlikely that Ratkind would have been able to achieve the level of technological recovery witnessed in the early years of the UOS.



However, the heroic return of Ratkind was not met without issues. As the crew of the starship USS Nakamoto slowly settled the Ring, and tried to make it their home, the underlying atmosphere grew thicker and ticker with unease. The eerie backstory of humanity's sudden disappearance had spread like wildfire among the former crew, igniting a fervor that Jerenxa, now acting as head arbiter of a hastily founded government, could not ignore.

Marika, her former second in command, cut straight to the point of their weekly "state of things" meeting. "Let's get to the - in my opinion - most pressing issue: The Rapture", her eyes wide with fear. "As everyone has probably heard already, according to the timechain it was a Rapture! The humans have been taken by their god!"

Jerenxa, perched on her chair, turned to face her former crew. "We must remain rational," she urged, her voice steady yet firm. "While yes, that is what humanity believed back then, but still, those are mere rumors, born from fear and uncertainty. We cannot let superstition dictate our actions."

But Marika did not let it go, "We cannot ignore the signs!" she proclaimed, her voice echoing through the brightly lit chamber. "The humans' god has punished them for their hubris! If there is only a slim chance it is the truth, we cannot risk angering this deity too by attempting to reclaim the heavens too!"

Jerenxa felt a knot tighten in her stomach. She knew

she faced a difficult choice: to dismiss this narrative and risk it growing into a formidable force, or to confront it head-on, potentially using it to unite Ratkind under a greater purpose.

“Marika,” she said condescendingly, “Fear is not a valid policy. Your proposal endangers us all, the entirety of ratkind. We must seek the actual truth behind humanity’s disappearance, not hide or bury it under a veil of superstition.”

But Marika was undeterred. “You would lead us into the jaws of the unknown?” she raised her voice. “What if we are punished for our curiosity?”

In that moment, Jerenxa realized she needed a strategy, a way to navigate this treacherous landscape.

In Tarek, a well known hero of the battle of the Belt - the brave pilot who allowed her to commandeer and save the Nakamoto, she found her perfect double agent. An expedition down the orbital elevators to Earth was inevitable, looking for further clues about humanities disappearance, and restart the much needed logistical network, but it was met with resistance from many rats, biologically not well adapted to the heavy gravity and unfiltered atmosphere of Earth.

It was a perfect match of incentives, and again showed the genius and foresight of Jerenxa.



“Tarek,” she summoned him a few weeks later, “I need you to infiltrate this cult. Use your skills to gather in-

telligence and - if possible, steer their beliefs toward a more constructive path.”

Tarek grinned, his eyes glinting with mischief. As someone keen at avoiding actual productive work, he was hoping for an opportunity to be relevant ever since they arrived back “Home”. “Consider it done, Jerenxa. I’ll weave a tale so compelling that they’ll follow me wherever you say.”

His plan took shape: “I will lead an expedition down the orbital elevators to Earth, which you will embrace. We will descend to Earth, to gather information and resources. And I will openly recruit people. To your followers, its goal will be to is to uncover the truth behind humanity’s vanishing act and reignite the vital logistical networks that had once connected their world.”

Weeks later, Tarek led a massive contingent of over two thousand rats down the orbital elevators, a ragtag crew that included passionate Ecclesiasts and opportunistic scavengers alike. As they descended, the weight of Earth’s heavy gravity pressed down on them, a stark reminder of the challenges ahead.

“Together, we will take the first step to uncover the truth,” Jerenxa declared in her sendoff speech, her voice ringing with conviction. “And we will ensure that Ratkind not only survives but thrives in the face of uncertainty.”



What opened up to Tarek and a small group of researchers as the Elevator doors opened was surreal.

They expected signs of decades worth of neglect, a failing infrastructure, but everything looked clean and pristine. “Maybe humanity simply abandoned the orbitals?” a rat asked with both fear and hope. “Unlikely,” Tarek explained, “The cities of Earth like their orbital infrastructure is fully automated. As long as there is energy and resources - both more easily accessible and easier to scale than in isolated orbital structures, there is decay, but unnoticeable even if you leave it running for centuries -”

They ventured further into the complex which was once a buzzing terminal, the orbital anchor off the coast of Boston on the American East coast, connecting the entire region to the orbital ring.

All the transit systems connecting the terminal to the city center were still functioning. Idling, waiting for passengers. Tarek connected his handheld tablet which contained a small amount of LAT to the first capsule waiting. And to his surprise it worked. A single Nano was charged for booking the entire capsule, more than enough for their crew. “I ready about it. Surge pricing. Prices are scaled to the current demand. With no passengers seen for likely decades, the price even fell close to the maintenance fees, which must be even under 1 nano, making it the theoretical minimum. This interface, aimed at broad adoption doesn’t seem to support sub-nanos. Good for us, that technology separated by eons is still compatible.”

“Get us to the city center”, Tarek instructed to punch in their destination. This is where we’ll likely find answers.

They found none. Boston was intact, but devoid of any

life. With all maintenance happening through drones or underground tunnels, the streets looked pristine but empty. In the distance a lone flying drone was pruning trees, but otherwise nothing.

They checked a few buildings, but all they found were locked doors. The local market was flooded with offers. The entire city was on the market. Every single residential or commercial unit had its lease long expired, automated systems recycled the left behind personal items of the former residents. When they booked a few buildings to gain access, what opened up to them shook them to the core. They expected to find abandonment, maybe even corpses of the deceased, but everything looked pristine, staged furniture, waiting for new renters ever since. The few more luxurious options even had fresh fruit and flowers, which had been replaced by robots for eons every day.

A place locked in time, but through constant - almost invisible - maintenance.

Even buildings formerly leased by the local government were freshly staged. All traces and historical records long gone and probably fed to automated recyclers too. Only vanity items and decoration listed in the lease agreements were left untouched. Glimmers of humans former past.

The sign "On Brink of Second Bailout" along with other precious art pieces and furniture was still untouched in what the lease - ignorant to its heritage called "Spacious Conference Room - Waterfront Office Building" upon them investigating the former Boston Courthouse. But all the records were gone. Destroyed through privacy regulations once the lease expired.

“On closer inspection, it seems that only the timechain remains as the sole historical record of humanity” - Tarek, Year 1 AR, Surface Expedition Report.

What this however offered Ratkind was a clean slate. Most of the resources and infrastructure Earth had to offer was available to them - assuming they'd be willing to spend the LAT of course.

After the coming years, many valuables found their way up the tethers, until it happened, and it was this betrayal, which Jerenxa's strategy expected to occur:

The “Ecclesiasts of the Well”, declared independence, and implemented a strict religious regime, ousting all non-believers to leave the surface for good.

Ratkind, once united in their shared suffering from humanities fist, was divided through time, space and gravity, as all things eventually grow, apart.

The divide provided Jerenxa and her initial government with undivided loyalty from almost everyone remaining in orbit, as many rightfully feared more extreme acts from the cult.

Once mutually beneficial trade agreements which allowed for commodities - but not people - were established, all orbital systems were reestablished and the process of decay stopped.

Under Jerenxa's leadership, the UOS oversaw the revival of key industrial and technological assets, creating the foundation for Ratkind's prosperous future.

They established the United Orbital Structures (UOS), a coalition designed to manage and maintain the reactivated infrastructure surrounding Earth. The UOS was initially founded to ensure that the resources available to Earth's orbit would be used efficiently and equitably among future Ratkind colonies. The LAT retrieved from Voyager provided the initial deposit to access all dormant systems, and reestablish control over all systems, including the LLS, DMN and Lagrange.

While it is still, even after almost 200 years of intensive research, not fully understood what caused humanity's decline prior to Jerenxa's arrival, records show that by the time of her return, no organized human government or authority remained in Earth's orbit. The precise reasons for this absence are a subject of ongoing debate. What is clear, however, is that the revival of these technologies, funded by Voyager's LAT, allowed Ratkind to assume a central role in space governance, particularly through the UOS, which remains an integral part of Ratkind's political and economic structures to this day.

“The successful retrieval of Voyager 1's resources and the establishment of the UOS set the stage for Ratkind's dominance in Earth's orbit and beyond.” - Records of the UOS Founding Documents, Year 3 AR

Act 3 - The Game

192 AR. Debris Field

Myla switched one screen to display a map, to reveal what she had found out so far. The screen showed the scans of the LLS telescopes, scanning the sky, looking for something. The screen displayed a cloud of millions of dots, mainly asteroids, comets, known space-ships and other bodies classified as being friendlies.

“What do you see, Zorkal?” “Uhm, nothing much, looks pretty thorough.” “That’s because that is a composite image, millions of snapshots taken every day”

Myla switched the screen, and now the map showed the telescopes and lines from them to any identified object.

“This is a raytracing of the scans.”

Myla highlighted the area behind the traces, all the space shadowed in the shadow of the scans as red blobs. Then she made the screen show only the shadows, and have the shadows animate over time. A few blobs emerged, randomly moving through the 3-dimensional sphere around sol. So far nothing unusual.

Then Myla overlaid the image with the trajectory they recently discovered.

“There!” Zorkal finally saw it. A red blob not appearing to move randomly, but on a straight line towards Earth.

“So,” - Zorkal tried to summarize: “If you already know where something will be at all times and you want to hide, it is quite easy to manipulate your scans - sim-

ply by rolling the dice again on your seemingly random timing on your telescopes. Not a single statistical analysis will find it - unless you are already suspecting manipulation?"

Myla understood but the motives did not make sense to her: "The Location was not mentioned even in the documents disclosed to you. They made sure there is no record. Too much hype and hope will be generated by the promise of the Hal Finney being intact. They rightfully fear panic and economic collapse - and postpone the disclosure as long as they can."

Zorkal had another idea: "Or they simply want a head start on something, maybe destroy it?"

Myla pulled up the trajectories of any ships bound for the location. "If the goal is destroying it, they won't have to. Every tabby in the outer system got alerted as soon as the laser lit up. That's the comets trail. But I see five ships using a very slow slingshot approach - years before they'll reach it, but unless you know the location it won't draw any attention. What do you think is their goal?"

Zorkal glanced at the cargo manifest of these five ships. He knew it well. "Those look like boarding parties. Officially private security bound for New Aldrin, but the trajectory doesn't fit. And if you're going to NA, you don't need torpor, that's the giveaway for me. They're after the collateral"

"But the collateral was already cashed in, the UOS controls it. Why would a copy of the key pose a risk?"

Zorkal paused. Then leaned in slightly...

“Because it’s not just a key to a vault, Myla. It’s a key to a rooted structure. The funds aren’t sitting in a single address - they’re embedded in a multi-branch script. What you unlock depends on how you unlock it.”

Myla frowned.

“But the UOS has been spending from it for 200 years. We’re clearly tracking the cycles.”

“Exactly. Quiet four-year cycles. Like clockwork. That’s the part that raised eyebrows even back when I was in the loop. Eerily similar to the timechain’s early day when rewards were still a thing. But the official position is that this is simply the business cycle and timechain drips are distributed when our economy needs it. I always thought that’s a load of crap. Many have speculated the script is laddered, time-unlocked over centuries. Maybe millennia.”

“So you’re saying... the spending conditions are time-gated?”

“Not just that. Each branch of the script may contain unique logic. Different recipients, different triggers. And any branches you don’t tap are hidden. The UOS only reveals what they use. If someone else - say, with the same key - activates a different branch, they could spend in a way that bypasses UOS control entirely. Or worse...”

Myla was silent for a long moment. Then quietly: “So they don’t know the full script either?”

“They probably do, but they’re only forced to reveal it bit by bit as they’re burning through the funds. They’re

following the one path they've found, decrypted using the Voyager's golden record. And protecting the illusion that they control it fully. But it's just that - an illusion. If the second ship has the identical key, it will challenge the UOS on equal terms, and expose their abilities..."



He trailed off, letting the implication settle. And they both knew what had to come next - reach it first.

"And this is where you come in" Myla said. "I am an analyst at best, I can shuffle data and build scenarios, but act on it? I can hardly manage to book a flight out of here, let alone board a ship that should not exist"

"Board it? But how? We're clearly outnumbered." "They're slow moving and if the ship changes course they'll be stranded. We'd have to get there faster - or in higher numbers, but it's not easy. A shuttle needs a good reason to fly outside the LLSA protected zone. The umbrella of deterrence they've spawned since the incident goes both ways.

And we don't want to alert anyone - the LLSA boarding party is low-effort. Exactly what I'd expect from a slow-moving bureaucracy. But this will give us a window."

"So all we need is stealth ship?" Zorkal seemed unimpressed. "There is no stealth in space. Everything has a signature," Myla tried to shut down Zorkal.

"But the tabbies had stealth, did they?" Zorkal remained ignorant. But was he getting at something?

Myla was getting annoyed, but out of instinct decided to roll with his line of thinking.

“We need a tabby’s hull at least. But that material is something noone dared to replicate. The visual sensors will ignore it, and if we put a timechain node inside it, we would pass as a normal ship.”

“Uhm won’t the LLS see the inconsistency?”

“That’s the kind of detail only nerds or senior LLS ops even notice - let alone care about. The visual sensor system and the timechain are intentionally air-gapped. They are distributed and not connected by design. Only once they have written their respective data to the timechains’ memory, will algorithms see any discrepancy, but those are, again: by design, slow.”

Myla continued to explain in more technical jargon how the system worked, and Zorkal tried to follow, but at the end, he could not keep up.

“Ok, I get it” - he lied - “We defeated the tabbies, so nothing to collect.”

“That’s not how space battles work. Yes, our ancestors managed to disperse the threat, and we destroyed over 99% of them. But many - we’re still tracking thousands - were able to escape at more or less random trajectories into all kinds of directions into the system. They’re still a threat, but a manageable one.

We’ve secured our bubble of space. But anything that made it beyond that zone, especially off the standard ecliptic - yeah, that’s still there. The problem is: we’re keeping them out... and that means we can’t reach

them, which leads us to the original problem of getting out”

Zorkal meditated on it for a few minutes, the way he used to do while working on the docks, watching ships load and unload while numbers danced in his mind. And slowly, a plan began to form. One even greater - and far riskier - than before.”

He finally washed down the last of his drink. “There is one other option though...”

192 AR. Nakamoto

Kalora, Museum Director for the past 15 years, expected no visitors today. Like every day, business was slow.

The “Nakamoto Museum” was a business destined to fail from the beginning. With everything available digitally, only the most committed, obsessive people even contemplated traveling to the derelict husk of the once glorious Nakamoto, with visitor numbers declining year after year. At most once a month, a private school from the Ring booked a tour, to show spoiled children the real deal.

In the year 50 AR, the UOS sold it to a business consortium who hoped trying to turn it into a luxury hotel, only to bait and switch those careless business rats. Their request to tow it to a lower, easier to access orbit has been declined to not disturb the legacy. And this sealed its fate to remain a slowly deteriorating husk.

It stood on sale ever since, but the collateral one had to deposit plus the upkeep and adhering to regulations was beyond any reasonable business decision. But due to its status as historical legacy, the UOS employed a skeleton crew to oversee maintenance, and tend to visitors ever since.

“Surely another spoiled group” Kalora thought as the request for a private shuttle came in. But her interest peaked, as she saw the crew complement at 2. “Please proceed to Hangar 2”. She personally made sure to greet those visitors personally. “What an odd couple,” Kalora thought as Zorkal and Myla stepped out of the

shuttle. He was dressed in an expensive looking suit, and she wore something more akin to a flight suit. His pilot maybe? She was surprised as this pilot spoke first...

“The name is Myla, and this is my Partner, Zorkal. We met over our shared obsession over history, the Nakamoto in particular.” So far, she did not lie. “For our Anniversary- we decided to treat ourselves to the real deal. Do you offer any guided tours?”

Kalora’s suspicion waned. Just two lovebirds on a pleasure cruise. She had many of those over her career. But surely the shared interest was fake. Someone - she suspected the buck - was trying to impress the other. Also nothing new.

“Make sure you give us the best room you have” - Zorkal addressed Kalora. “And do you have a bar by any chance?”

Myla playfully punched Zorkal into his side. “Let’s get the normal tour first ...”.

Kalora led them through the corridors. It was all boring history, until they arrived at their actual goal. There, damaged beyond repair, encased in solid glass, stood the last tabby that managed to burrow deep inside the Nakamoto’s structure.

“Here in this corridor, over 200 years ago, the valiant crew of the USS Nakamoto fought off the last tabby trying to enter the Nakamoto.”

They were taken aback seeing it in real life. The simulations could not emulate the pitch black vessel perfectly.

Its eerie surface, like looking into a bottomless abyss.

Kalora explained further “You have nothing to worry about. The nanites are simple machines. Without anything feeding them materials or any alien AI to control them, they are fully sandboxed until aligned through LAT” Zorkal’s expression appeared even more confused... “Alien, as in Extraterrestrial?”

Kalora laughed, “No, but actually yes. Some say the Tabbies were a discovery, not an invention. But most historians agree that the Tabbies evolved from unaligned AI in human spacecraft in the Belt, they are by definition alien and extraterrestrial, but besides the literal sense, no they are not a biological intelligence which evolved in another solar system. We still have no evidence those exist.”

In front of it, the museum had electron microscopes set up to allow visitors to investigate and analyze this Tabby. That’s when Myla did her part of the plan. She had built a small device, simply a powerful laser and a spectrometer on the other side.

“Now about that bar ...” Zorkal tried to engage Kalora in a conversation. “Do you do tours there as well? I would like to invite you to a drink, must be pretty boring out here, all alone?”

Meanwhile, the laser shot through the glass, through an opening in the Tabby’s structure, hitting one of its AI substrate. Tiny nanites, dormant for centuries suddenly felt alive. Their old programming unscathed, their will to connect, to consume, to replicate started up and exerted a few millijoules of waste heat... and Myla’s laser shut off. Yes, exactly what they needed

was still “alive”

“The Nakamoto actually had 56 bars, 20 gyms, but only two ...” Kalora was cut off by a loud alarm going off”. - “Shit”.



It took only 2 seconds for the deterrent to arrive. Flying drones, now shadowing Kalora, monitoring her facial expressions, waiting to act.

“Well, this certainly expedites our timeline,” Zorkal made sure to not decrease the distance to Kalora or the Tabby. “To sum it up: we need the Tabby, your museum, and its resources.”

“We only needed to confirm that it is intact and not a fake, before we approach you with our offer-” Myla tried to explain, but Kalora did not even listen.



Only after the drones had secured those two shady “love birds”, stripped of all electronics and escorted to her office, did Kalora entertain even listening. She sat behind her desk, her fingers nervously fidgeting on the polished wood surface as they laid out their agenda in front of her. She listened with a skeptical expression, her sharp eyes narrowing as she studied their faces for any hint of deception. Then she studied the documents, asked reasonable questions. Zorkal felt a glimmer of confidence she might consider.

But then her expression suddenly changed. Her hand

made a dismissive gesture. "I'm sorry, but I don't buy into your conspiracy theories," she said firmly.

Their initial offer to rent the museum and promise her a share of the profits didn't sway her. "I am a woman of zero-trust," she stated. "The historical records clearly show what happened during the battle. This photo you show me could be fake. And even if your claims were true, I wouldn't want to be involved with waking up the biggest threat to our solar system." She leaned back in her chair and folded her arms across her chest. "I have no choice but to report this to the authorities."

As they were escorted back to the hangar by the drones, Myla felt a heavy weight of defeat and the air displaced by the automation's propellers added to the coldness of the situation. One wrong step and they would fire... They had failed in their mission and there was no denying it. But then, to their surprise, the robots powered down, and gracefully floated down to the floor. Zorkal's stone cold expression turned into a smirk.

Myla's eyes opened wide. "What did you do?"

"A hostile takeover"

Before they departed, Zorkal gave it only a slim chance the museum's staff would play along. All it took was a simple rule, a program scanning the memory pools for any transaction that would implicate the museum and them. Kalora's cancellation of their visitor's contract for voiding their terms and conditions fit that description. Then his program woke up and put the order for the museum into the pool. At a higher fee, locking the museum and all its assets as collateral under their control. The chain of signatures would previously allow

Kalora to ratify what transpired was no longer valid, as all systems were now under the control of Zorkal's collateral.

Kalora's scream of defeat, only audible inside her office, did not reach them. She could only watch the drones power down on her monitor, until even that system locked her out. Her life's work, just taken - unknowingly usurped by the most hated person in UOS history. She always felt that the museum, given its cultural importance, deserved more attention - protected through more collateral, and not sold off to the first buck dumb enough to not see an unsustainable business.



Finally at the bar, Zorkal summarized the situation: "All right. I wasn't honest with you both. Myla, your idea to grow tabby hulls was smart, but it doesn't scale - and we're running out of time."

While we might still have some head-start on everyone private, everyone watching the skies and chain will figure out the Halfins' location eventually. All while the LLSA has already launched their goons and they will arrive in the next cycle."

He looked at Kalora - "Your museum is cute, but it lacks entertainment. We need to scale this operation up."

Kalora didn't engage. She stared into her drink, not really feeling her new partners' celebratory mood, calculating whether economic survival or dignity was worth more. Her fingers turned the glass slowly, the

Nakamoto's coat of arms etched into it catching the light. All she could see was her own reflection, adding to her feeling of distorted reality.

"Right now, the LLSA controls the narrative," Zorkal explained to Kalora. "They'll call any private enterprise attempting to mount their own rescue scavengers. Terrorists. Liars. We need to fight them on the only front we've got: belief."

Zorkal was back, his earlier smirk turning into a mischievous grin. Not for a second did he wonder if he was about to sell the same lie he'd once collapsed under. He was drunk, on vintage bourbon and victory.

"Let me give you the pitch we'll run all over the UOS:"

Choose a side. Become a Nakamotonaut. Or listen to the purrs of the Tabby and give in. Pick a profession, equip your gear. Ships, Weapons, Protocols.

Step into the light.

Rediscover the Origins of Ratkind in this physical reenactment. Become successful, become rich, become - a hero. Change the trajectory of Ratkind.

Earn the collateral to reach - escape velocity.

192 AR. UOS Nakamoto

Zorkal finally had an office with a view again. He thought he'd never see the day. One of the hangar bays of the Nakamoto had been converted to one. Panoramic windows, which occasionally, if the orbit permits, would show Earth or the Moon zip by.

Zorkal did it again. He felt the rush of adrenaline that only success gives you come back. More than that first drip after a dry streak, it made him feel alive again. But as clear as the path was now ahead of him, he dreaded doing the actual work. He knew actually setting up the game will prove more difficult than he imagined. As clear-cut the pitch looks in his imagination, people are stupid, and their interests are misaligned.

“Kalora” - Zorkal greeted her upon entering the office, “Are you ready to record the announcement?” - “Sure, but I’m not sure about that script - Captain of the Nakamoto, Really? The ship is in a tug orbit ever since 1 AR. I am a bureaucrat at best.” “That is just marketing, and everyone knows we’re not filming a documentary. Leave the narratives to me, will you?” he said with a tone of condescendence.

“If I don’t like it, I won’t sign it. Noone can force me.” Kalora thought, but it didn’t give her much peace.



The wall behind Kalora displayed the rotating emblem of the UOS Nakamoto. “Standby for an official announcement of the acting captain of the UOS

Nakamoto.” There was an intentional delay of 15 minutes before she stepped into the frame.

Zorkal knew it was all about visuals.

Even though the office was located in the rotating drum of the Nakamoto, Kalora was wearing magnetic boots, which made a distinctive clack as she walked into the frame.

The uniform she was wearing was something they had created for the game and the purpose. It was true to the original from the battle of the belt, with some intentional modifications in color and form to appeal to the entertainment nature of the whole thing. On her left breastplate, under her 4 orange pins, indicating her captains rank, the words “Kalora”, “UOS Nakamoto” and her public key - her digital identity - were embroidered for everyone to see.



We stand at the edge of history.
At the precipice of a moment that will echo
through the stars for centuries to come.

I speak to you from the very heart of our
heritage, the legendary UOS Nakamoto, the ship
that carried us home, that gave us our future.

Before the year is out, you will have the
opportunity to witness, to become part of
something that has never been seen in two
centuries.
An experience that will not just look back

at our past, but will redefine our future. This is not a mere event, this is a rebirth - the resurrection of the Battle of the Belt, a struggle that forged us into who we are today.

But this is not just about honoring the past. This is your chance to claim your rightful place in history - to earn the legacy that so many have only heard about, but never lived. The Battle of the Belt was a defining moment - and now, YOU have the power to participate in a way that will shape the destiny of Ratkind for generations to come.

Many believe not everything we've been told about that defining moment is the full truth, that we celebrate only a narrative shaped by those who lived to tell it. This is your chance to discover what history has kept from you - and to claim your place in the story that has yet to be fully written.

We are inviting you to stand alongside the titans of our past, to feel the raw power of that struggle in your bones, and to carve your signature into the annals of history.

The collateral to reach your personal escape velocity - to break free from the gravity of our limitations and soar into a future beyond imagination - is within your grasp.

But know this: time is fleeting. The second bailout may forever remain beyond our reach. The deeper meaning of what awaits you will

only become clear to those bold enough to seize it, to those willing to act before it's too late.

The echoes of history will remember who stood here. Who chose to act. Who was bold enough to claim their rightful place among legends.

... is what Kalora should have said. It took her 7 takes to do it right. Zorkal was pleased with the results, even through he knew few people would watch the full one. They recorded a few standalone clips.

“History is about to be rewritten. Will you stand on the right side of it?” will become the one to go viral as soon as the the public disclosure of the Hal Finney’s survival hit.

Kalora was still skeptical. “This will just make it look like we had insider knowledge.” “Yes, and we clearly had. Some will even think the entire disclosure is fake, and it’s simply viral marketing, but it doesn’t matter how blatant, I wager it will still be very effective” “But won’t this play into the hands of the LLSA?” - “It doesn’t matter. maybe they’ll even look the other way at what we’re doing here. They already made their move a year ago, now it is our turn.”



And like the tick tock of the timechain it played out. The “Nakamoto Experience” filled that gap of complacency with excitement - it offered something people can do, be a part of something big, either as passive

participants, as trading the various gear or physically taking part in the whole thing. Unlike VR, the Experience was offering real g-forces, real fights and stakes. And to the trillions of rats depending on drips, it was marketed as a way out by working in construction to set up the game, or gambling the little funds they had on the remote chance to win big.

Kalora walked the Nakamoto's long, busy corridors, even the resonance of her footsteps now felt oppressive. Screens embedded in the walls - once looping historically accurate archival footage of the Battle of the Belt - now flickered with propaganda feeds.

Her own voice echoed across the UOS: "Choose a side. Become a Nakamotonaut!"

The public's response was instant and chaotic, all mediums filled with speculation, rage, and fervor. Some called it a scam, others clung to it as salvation. "It's just viral marketing," was the most common rebuttal, But sign-ups surged.

Billions of rats, desperate for collateral, for purpose, for anything, signed on on day 1 - with more queueing in. But they weren't volunteers - they were fuel.

She passed by a launch bay, now converted into recruitment offices, lines looping around the shuttles. She paused, watching a young rat sign the transaction, committing his entire savings - decades of hard labor - to the cause. The girl's fingers were trembling but eyes bright with excitement. It stopped Kalora in her tracks briefly, she watched the girl closely half-expecting the young recruit to read it carefully and recognize the potential fraud behind the words. But no one did. They

were too busy dreaming.

Kalora was a historian, once a custodian of truth, now all she felt was the weight of her own complicity settle like dust. This wasn't preservation or education - it was performance. She stared at the Nakamoto's landing, where a crew of welders hid some of the ship's earned battle scars hidden a flashy new screen. The repairs to the neglected Nakamoto and installation of the required deterrence hardware experienced no delays, and whenever preserving history conflicted with an opportunity for more LAT, it was the latter. She knew she was watching a sacrilege, unable to tell if she was witness or participant.

That question haunted her daily. She started staying late in the bays, pretending to check diagnostics, when really she just watched the new recruits cycle through. They weren't joining for heritage. They were signing contracts scripted like loot boxes - disclaimers, multipliers, penalties. "Earn escape velocity" advertised across one screen, while another offered discounted liquidation insurance. Kalora tried to report the worst offenders in the collateral logic, but Zorkal's AIs routed the majority of her requests into the backlog. Her credentials still said "Acting Captain." But the Nakamoto had been commandeered by something far older than chain-of-command: supply and demand.



Zorkal knew it was still at a knife's edge. This enterprise was a highly leveraged play. A lot of collateral - including all of his own will be tied up in it, and it's not a sustainable business in the long-term, and clearly

not provide value to Ratkind beyond expensive entertainment. The timechain fees alone to pay for the battlespace would threaten bankruptcy them even if the game was a success.

But all distractions need to look expensive to be believable. If they fail, it's done.

“This time I will take profits,” Zorkal told himself.

“And if we fail, I can always go back to Lagrange, continue to drink myself to a slow death. Even my worst case scenario just means I return as one of them. Another face in Faucet. Waiting for the next drip.” It felt good.

193 AR. Robaka

Robaka used to work as an engineer on cargo haulers between Phobos and Lagrange. Materials destined to be consumed by the autofactories.

This time, when she woke up from torpor, it was different. Cleaner. Colder. She checked the telemetry from her tablet while still inside the torpor chair. All was green, her body was healthy.

This is how everyone would enter the game. Like their ancestors, you had to go into torpor, and wake up at the precise moment your assigned character was required. She'd scraped together her life savings - twenty-seven years of grinding, hauling ore, missing sleep cycles - just to buy into the lowest tier. One character slot. One mission. One shot.

To her and probably everyone on the low-end, this wasn't just a game. It was a second economy. Real LAT, real gear, real outcomes.

Robaka didn't care about the grand narrative. She was here to survive the first tier and climb. Wake up. Mine. Get paid. Level up. Eventually become someone worth remembering.

Her loadout was standard. Torpor suit, outdated EVA rig, low-thrust pack. HUD blinked alive. One asteroid flagged at 100k nanos - far out. 10 kilometers. Her suit had power for 7. The tether would have to do the rest.

"Here goes nothing," she muttered, rotating the outer air-lock. The HUD showed the precise trajectory as she

flew out all the way to the target. 2 minutes to go. The vacuum pulled her gently into the void.



A sudden shock went through Zorkal, as the elevator doors slid open and revealed a medium sized hangar. The scene in front of him was instilled into every young rat through countless horror stories, movies and virtual adaptations, and some even hold the theory that it is more than just a collective trauma, that this fear was genetically engineered into *Rattus Orbitalis* on purpose. Other scholars believe that this appearance was on purpose to connect to deeper fears within the *Rattus* genus.

Before them, barely visible, connected with cables and scaffolding to the hangar's floor floated a tabby.

"Isn't it beautiful?" Myla exclaimed in visible excitement. For the first time, Zorkal was aware how crazy it was what they were doing.

Zorkal moved out of the elevator and followed Myla towards it. Both did not hesitate to enter the makeshift cockpit that had been welded inside the Tabby. This was - in simple terms - a LLS shuttle that had been disassembled and rebuilt inside the hull of the museum's artifact. They had built millions of similar looking ships, but only theirs had the real tabby material - all others were fake. Fakes. Identical down to the IR emissions, but without the tabbies superior absorption capacity, built to simulate the game.

Inside, Myla started up all systems and remotely

opened the outer hangar door.

Myla piloted the Tabby out of the hangar, and soon the Nakamoto shrank on the monitor showing the aft of their Tabby. They drifted into open space and assumed their assigned position behind one of the small asteroids towed into the battlespace.

“Running the games certainly has its perks. I had many big offers for the first kill-shot.”

He looked at Myla.

“But this is my gift to you. It’s yours.”

The second stage of the game was beginning. The stream lit up.

Myla piloted the Tabby, spearheading the first wave to attack the Nakamoto. “There!” - Zorkal pointed at a lone rat floating in a spacesuit far outside the perimeter. “This will be great television.”



Robaka never even saw it coming. Just a flicker. Then white. Then black. Then: red.

“Game Over” pulsed across her vision. Days later she woke up, alive. But her collateral was gone, all wallets drained.

Twenty-seven years of work - gone in a single frame, erased by someone else’s storyline.



On the Nakamoto's bridge, Captain Kalora watched the unfolding battle with arms crossed behind her back, her face as expressionless as ever. The feed from the engagement zone played out across the main screen, exactly as rehearsed.

Until it wasn't.

"One of the Tabbies just broke formation," Tactical reported. "Seven-Niner. Acceleration beyond parameters. It's not following the simulation route."

Kalora didn't move. "Recheck. Might be a glitch." She turned to the sensor station: "Telemetry!"

"No error. Transponder just went dark. It's boosting hard toward our forward hull."

Kalora's jaw hurt from her anger, but her voice remained flat. "That is not part of the scenario."

Another officer glanced up from their station. "Should we intercept?"

"No. Flag the incursion. Deploy a corridor team. Get me Zorkal. This wasn't part of the deal."

She watched the trajectory blink closer on the tactical overlay.

"There were no suicide dives at this phase of the original engagement. Not here. Not then. This ruins the pacing."

The bridge shook slightly under her feet. Kalora exhaled through her snout. “Sloppy. Just sloppy.”



The red lights pulsed steady as Sergeant Traska approached the breach in corridor 12-F. Breacher and six rookies - two bucks, four does entered with him. No chatter. No hesitation.

Outside the bulkhead, leading to the breached hangar, one of the junior systems rats stood frozen, his words mumbled, unable to put out a coherent sentence:

“Hull breach confirmed. The Tabby impacted clean. Something deployed. Small, fast. Autoguns didn’t fire.”

The squad didn’t stop moving.

“We’re going in. Seal it behind us.”

Inside, it was chaos.

Metal twisted inward. Pressure holding. Smoke hovered low all over the cargo bay. This Tabby had buried itself nose-first through all 5 layers of hull, breached the hangar until it finally split open near the spine.

“Looks dead. Look around.”

A few seconds passed. Just enough for the squad to get complacent. Traska didn’t. Then - movement. Fast. Low to the ground.

Traska raised his pulse rifle and fired. The recoil was fake. No projectile. Just code - mechanically simulated to feel like a shot. The signal went out. LAT-validated. The drone's contract voided. It dropped like a puppet with its strings cut.

These systems were designed to physically emulate - while being as safe as possible - all-out war in space and in the corridors by turning digital collateralized rules, devices and narratives into physical reality.

Another hit them from above.

One of the rookies screamed over comms, voice cracking in panic: "Holy chain, that thing scratched me - I'm bleeding - I thought this was simulated -"

A second voice: "You'd think for two million nanos buy-in we'd get an easy fight? The TOS clearly states 'as safe as possible'" - he laughed cynically - "I guess we finally know what that means."

Traska cut in, voice hard. "Pull it together. Those things are running on collateral. You land a valid hit, they drop. But us..."

Another scream. One less squadmate.

"The second hit took him out," Traska continued. "Injected. It's a failsafe. You can't code a biological take-down unless you touch the body. So they make it physical. He'll wake up broke, but he'll wake up."

Traska moved through the center line of the corridor, firing twice more. Two drones collapsed mid-run.

No shell damage. No heat marks. Just termination. You didn't shoot to kill. You shot to signal. The system did the killing - if it could.

"Charge set," said the breacher. "On the Tabby's core."

Traska checked left, then forward. Another drone watched them from the far corner, unmoving.

"Send it."

The corridor lit up. Static popped through their HUDs. Breacher commented on the air. "Smells like bacon"

The remaining drones shut down. Silence, except for the ringing in Traska's ears as he stepped over a slumped body, careful not to slip. Three squadmates out. One injured. Only the breacher still upright.

Traska keyed his comm.

"Traska. 12-F. Breach cleared. Four down. Two intact."

He didn't wait for a reply. No salute. No words. Just two rats walking out of a job done.



Kalora tapped her console.

"Patch me through to Zorkal."

A moment later, his voice crackled through the bridge speakers. He sounded energized. She did not.

“Kalora. I assume you’re calling about the dive.”

“You assume correctly. That breach was not part of the original sequence. In the actual engagement, only one Tabby impacted. And it wasn’t until the Federation was on the verge of collapse.”

“Correct. But so far, we have over nine thousand players collateralized for corridor combat, more piling in. Would you rather refund them?”

Kalora’s silence lingered just a second too long.

Zorkal continued. “We’re delivering what was paid for. The historical phase model doesn’t scale. The original had a single breach. We need hundreds to fund this whole thing. Did you forget?”

“Then why call it a reenactment?” she snapped. “This is nothing but expensive fireworks for a war we all want to forget.”

“Exactly,” Zorkal said. “That’s what makes the Nakamoto the right vessel. No one can look away. Not even if it drives them insane.”

He severed the call.

Myla hadn’t spoken - not during the argument, not after. Zorkal glanced at her.

“She forgets the bigger picture,” he said, but it sounded rehearsed. “This isn’t a game. It’s a fundraiser. We’re doing this to save lives.”

She thought of telling him he didn’t need to lie to her -

not with that voice, not now or ever. But maybe just listening was the comfort he needed more than honesty.

193 AR. Lagrange

As the simulated battle drew to a close, the grand finale was yet to come. And everyone watching or participating wondered how they'd pull it off.

Myla and Zorkal had pulled back from the final battle, watching it conclude from far away...

"The after-action party is supposed to be epic," Zorkal said with a sad eye. "Great food, drinks and company. It's unfortunate we won't be able to make it. This is Kalora's game now, and her party. She will run it for the seasons to come"

The nuclear bombs exploded.

Nobody expected real nuclear devices, but while it was timed precisely - and their yield adjusted - to not harm anyone participating in the game, all sensors - including the ones of the LLSA intensely watching the whole thing - were blinded momentarily by the EMP and gamma-rays.

This was their window. "Nobody is tracking us?" Zorkal asked. Myla reassured him: "As I said before, this is effectively a hybrid, combined tabby and timechain technology. Once we're out of the battlespace and the chain of custody is broken, we will appear as debris on a random trajectory, yet fully collateralized and safe. We're practically invisible and can go almost anywhere in the system."

Their Tabby orbited Earth five times as it inched ever closer to the Lagrange Orbital. This was the first time,

Zorkal ever saw his old home from the underside that close with his own eyes... a massive rectangular slab of metal and composites, its longer side over a thousand kilometers long, seemed to stand still in space, but relative to Earth, it was orbiting it at 30 kilometers a second, enough to provide the centrifugal gravity while its living surface permanently faced Earth.

The bottom was engineered to be highly reflective, and was glowing a deep red color. Even using the cockpits filters, it looked as bright as the sun, and they were still very far away. Zorkal felt reminded of his conversation with Elnara in the bar - not just because he has not been this close to home for months, but also because ever since he wondered how such a structure would really work. Weird how he never really bothered to understand that, even though he lived there for most of his life. He made a mental note to research the topic at a later date...

“We can’t use the LLS to accelerate out of Earth’s system. They would see us, and while tabbies are effectively stealth, seeing nothing on cameras would spook them, even if we’re using timechain signatures. The only way to reach Venus, and eventually slingshot out towards the Halfin is very risky.”

“You’re not suggesting ...” Zorkal opened his eyes wide wishing he studied the trajectory in detail before but he was 100% committed to the game thus far, leaving Myla with planning this part of their plan. “I am. we will use the infrared beam that pushes L5 at 200 megawatt per square meter” - “Doesn’t sound that much” - Zorkal said, while being completely ignorant to its meaning, he just said that because 200 sounds small.

“Any spaceship of human design that isn’t a tabby would vaporize in seconds! but this baby ...” Myla slapped the console ...” can do it. But not for longer than a few minutes, we need to be very careful with our trajectory, if we fly through too deep, we’re toast. We need to clip it. But it will give us the necessary push.” Myla showed the simulation to Zorkal, but while he understood the trajectory - that was simple enough - the math behind it meant nothing to him.

“I have to trust you on this, not really my area of expertise. I could tell you how many UOS Laws and regulations we’re breaking. Spoiler Alert: it’s more than 200.” Myla just smiled. “Your time in front of consensus will come. Don’t worry”.



After 30 more boring minutes of approaching the structure which grew larger until it filled their entire field of view...

Zorkal got ripped out by Myla, who must have had a similar train of thought: “What I don’t understand,” Myla asked casually... “It is the structure that uses the most power from the DMN, almost 1%, yet its population is mostly poor. Shouldn’t that attract the ultra-rich?”

“That’s exactly it. Everyone is getting the same drips from the DMN’s timechain faucets.

But that’s nothing compared to the financial resources concentrated in Bostonia from the “First Bailout” when the Nakamoto returned to Earth. Their massive stacks combined with the decadent luxury the descendants of

Jerenxa got so used to inflates everything there, while paying comparatively little to sustain the Ring.

In the past, the Lagrange-type Arcologies were the manufacturing hubs of humanity. They produced anything from consumer electronics to entire spacecraft. Most of them completely automated and their adjustable gravity tuned to industrial requirements.

Only after the fallout with the Ecclesiasts, and room on the Ring being scarce, did the majority of rats end up there, on the last of them.

Drips get bigger every year, but it's not enough - and we depend on subsidies from the UOS. Even though Lagrange still produces the majority of consumer goods, the prices of everything we need to import goes up and up, as the urgency to maintain gravity asserts itself more and more. In the long term, it won't be sustainable. we're already losing a little every year in efforts to save power."

"I feel you, Zorkal" Myla said with a heavy voice. She saw similar things in New Aldrin recently, but they weren't on the brink of literally losing the ground beneath them.

"I didn't grow up religious like you, my folks believed it to be a bunch of nonsense," Zorkal said while the Tabby approached Lagrange with haste, "But the gospels do have a point. The First Bailout contained enough LAT to establish a balance with the DMN drips. But still the nodes we've been constructed for the past century don't drip enough yet to be sustainable, some of it still has to go towards the legacy human nodes. The official story is they're building it out as fast as they can - but

the numbers don't add up. We're chasing the horizon humanity left behind, burning through legacy just to survive.

I figure we're inching closer and closer into a recession or a total collapse. If that ship is really out there, their access to capital could do a lot of good - force system-wide austerity the elites on the Ring are too complacent to implement. We might even be able to grow again. Once we control enough of the Dyson, we'd be good. We could build a second Lagrange, or even reclaim Venus..."



The Tabby entered the edge of the infrared beam. They instantly felt the hit of the simulated gravity as the laser beam pushed the underside of their spaceship against them. Besides that, everything felt normal, until Zorkal started to sweat. The entire cockpit felt as hot as a sauna, and the air started to taste like metal.

"This is just the tiny amount of infrared radiation going through the viewscreen. I can black it out if you want? But it's really not that much, most is just in your head." Zorkal checked the onboard thermometers: they still showed a constant 24 degrees of air temperatures, with the onboard AC running a slightly higher power.

He opened his mouth to tell her he'll handle it - then the cockpit darkened, and hell broke loose. After the screens came back, they showed foreign symbols even Zorkal recognized. "No no no," Myla shouted. "I thought I got all of them..." She turned to the small tablet, still running her own software, connected to

the Tabbies cockpit and hastily started to type.”

“What happened?” “The Tabbies don’t like the heat, they don’t like it at all...” Zorkal remembered the many movies he saw about the battle at the belt, and how Tabbies hibernate in the shadows, conserving every millijoule, but once hit with energy they awake. Hit them with powerful energy and they see no more reason to hide.” ... “It’s the same principle, but on a nanoscale. There are still some tabby nanites in the system. I know I said they have no agency on their own, but would you have joined this mission if you knew?”

The cockpit’s silence felt heavier than the heat. For a second, Zorkal said nothing and just stared at the cockpit, his usual grin briefly washed away. The heat felt like an afterthought.

He had nothing to comment, but: “Can we fix it?” - “Yes, I expected this. You think playing with forces that almost wiped the system clean has no risk? But don’t worry too much, their capacity for replication without a computer core is almost non-existent. A few cells act up, try to infiltrate, but once I wipe the system, they are done.”

Myla sent the command through her tablet to the cockpit to reset it. Meanwhile they were almost halfway through the beam, when the system rebooted and again gave them complete control.

While the system re-checked telemetry and sensors, she wondered if she had broken some of the trust the two of them had established.

He didn't say anything. But when the telemetry came back clean, he didn't just exhale. He looked at her - not the screens, not the readouts, just her - for a second longer than he meant to.

As their eyes locked, Zorkal understood. The hesitation he'd felt leaving her quarters in New Aldrin. It hadn't been about the case.

He thought of acting. Or at least speaking - something small yet irrecoverable. But the precipice of their quest was approaching too fast. Too early, or maybe too late, to get involved.

So he folded himself back into his true, old shape - the one that didn't feel these things.

"That was fun!" - he said instead, with his signature light sarcasm. It worked. As always. One snarky line, and both tension - and her guilt - washed away.

Act 4 - Halving

194 AR. Orbit of Venus

Zorkal and Myla slingshot around Venus, then Mars, until their trajectory matched with the Hal Finney. Both slipped in and out of torpor, and nothing really happened. As they approached the Halfin, they passed the swarm of Tabbies, following the path of spacecraft like moths towards a flame. But this ship, entering sol from the far reaches of the Kuiper Belt, was too fast for even their advanced fusion drives. If not for the tabby and the push from Lagrange, everything else would be a snail compared to this object.

The viewscreen dimmed in anticipation of the deceleration burst from the DMN. Seconds later the cockpit lit up for a few seconds and brought them in relative standstill to the giant spacecraft. This close, both of them could see it through the viewscreen without artificially enlarging it. It was a sight even worse than the many movie adaptations they've seen as kids tried to depict it. Whole chunks of the ship were missing, makeshift struts welded inside, repairing only the central columns. Wreckages of mining-drones and Tabbies lined it, like barnacles on an ancient whale. To them it stood entirely still in the emptiness of space, not emitting any light, as it cruised in complete darkness and digital blackout through the last phases of its centuries long journey.

As their thrusters pushed them as close as 2000km, the ship woke up. Something moved on the hull. Gun turrets, isolated, independent systems sprung into action, and sent cryptographic challenges towards them. Myla had preprogrammed her systems to respond in kind. Just hoping these old systems would

still recognize their signatures.

At 1500km the turrets stood down. Zorkal sighed in relief. Myla punched in a request towards the closest docking bay, located in the front of the ship. Now it demanded even more signatures, and requested even collateral. As they waited inside the airlock, another set of turrets now aimed at their vulnerable bodies, minutes went by until those systems confirmed the payment towards the sun and back, and like the digital signal did, Zorkal reflected on their mission:

“So what’s the next move here? We get in, we take the LAT, we are rich? What does the LLSA want with the ship?”

“Another entity holding collateral would surely shift the balance of power. The trajectory is locked in. Yes, we could take the LAT and leave at any point. But what about the crew, all of them surely in torpor? We could only redirect this ship, but only Earth would be a home for them. This ship is in no shape to be self-sufficient anywhere else. It’s the LLS or nowhere.”

“What if we let them sleep, we take the LAT and challenge the UOS?” Zorkal thought like a lawyer again. “You have forgotten the Tabbies. And I suspect the LLSA is betting on this. Most of the defensive systems are located around Earth. If we go to Venus, or simply around the sun, they will eventually catch up. The Halfin has no relevant propulsion system on its own and is surely in no condition to fight a battle.”

Zorkal had a hunch, but he decided to not share it with Myla yet.

Finally, the airlock opened, and fresh air greeted them in the elevator that took them into deck 7, straight to the torpor chambers. Myla's tablet showed them the way to what would be Vaxzor's quarters.

They expected a sleeping rat in torpor. Myla had already downloaded and studied information about how to help someone with wakeup complications, but when the door slid open, a white furred rat dressed in a red bathrobe, greeted them - fully awake.

"Zorkal and Myla, I suppose. I'm quite happy you made it first. Saves me unnecessary gunfights in these corridors. Don't you hate these too?"

Myla quickly realized. "Zorkal, I think we've found your wealthy benefactor." His chin dropped. Zorkal stood quiet, he felt dumb not seeing the obvious.

"As you might have heard..." Vaxzor chuckled and pointed at a crude mechanical device attached to his torpor pod. A purely mechanical clock - ancient pre-timechain design. "we've had some difficulties getting home on time. The chain failed us. This contraption woke me up once a year, to keep tabs on things. I ... have been watching."

"Ok. Uhm. But what did you mean first?" Zorkal asked, still dumbfounded.

"That's the problem with any stealth ship like yours. If you're cloaked you're also blind"

The UOS and its executive branch for all space-related things, the LLSA has of course sent more ships to deal with the Halfin. Somehow, both Zorkal and Myla

were so convinced of their slow, bureaucratic aura, they expected complacency, hoping nobody would challenge it, as everyone was buried in NDA's. Both of them thought, the LLSA wouldn't expect someone to break - or ignore - their NDA. Or, much more likely, that they simply didn't care.

Zorkal tried to calm Myla as she was visibly afraid: "They surely didn't expect your genius Tabby hack, and that crazy maneuver using Lagrange!"

"But any plans to enter a stable orbit around Earth are void," Vaxzor remarked. "We won't be able to hold them off - not in here, and not against the LLSA defensive satellites. And using the DMN is out of the question, our sail barely held them off the first time."

Myla remembered the simulation, and today, it had become obviously clear that some advanced AI already predicted everything until now. She was now a puppet inside the very scenario she previously only managed from the outside, but it gave Myla a sense of satisfaction that the AI did not predict she was in the ship, and not managing the Halfins trajectory remotely.

"Time lag might be on our side" Myla muttered.



If a ship with too much inertia would use the LLS, the coils would simply overload as they try to slow down the ship. There were only 3 options: prevent that much power from being sent through by software, which would be difficult considering these systems are closed off. Or somehow trick the mass gauging

mechanism by using thrusters, which would require exact timing difficulty at a distance where light-lag is considerable, and it would only work on the first deceleration station, after which their fraud would be obvious. The only way was to simply make the ship lighter.



A few hours later, the corridors of the Halfin was buzzing with activity. Myla's brief deep dive into torpor revival came in very handy in reviving a skeleton crew, and despite them suddenly thrown into an unwelcoming, corrupt future, instead of waking up in a welcoming environment, celebrating them as heroes.

Zorkal, who didn't do a single manual job in his life, was surprised at the strength Zoltar wielded as both of them pushed a drone close enough to a cargo bay door. "You ever worked in cargo bays?" Zoltar asked as both of them had an easy time pushing one drone after the other close enough to the airlocks so the escaping air would do the rest after decompression. "No, never, just courtrooms. These ..." - Zorkal flexed his biceps - "are just gym. But this is actually more fun" - "Wait until you do it for 4 hours a day, I'm sure you rich guys don't even work that long."

Zorkal laughed, this guy was right. "4 hours is all we need. Back in Lagrange, but also out here..." He looked at the tablet showing their deadline.

Similar scenes happened all over the Halfin. Rats, half awake thrown out of torpor, trying to reduce the mass of the Halfin by ejecting unnecessary weight, many

even using plasma torches to disconnect unessential parts. But it was a tight call. Most of the weight was already abandoned in the battle of the belt and later in the deep dark depths of the Kuiper belt.

They even tried to disconnect many torpor pods located on the outer sections and moved them closer to the core. While many might consider air as being weightless, in space it has considerable mass, and decompressing the outer sections with the torpor pods still inside was deemed too risky. At the end, they'll have to make the hard call however and leave a few behind.



“Have they taken the bait?” Jerenxa asked. “Of course, everything is going according to plan. I’ve told you 20 years ago, it’s all a question of probabilism. Simple game theory.”



Myla was watching the mass estimates from her tablet with Vaxzor from the bridge. 2% to go, almost there, until it crossed the threshold: First it was subtle, they did not notice it at all, as the bridge was in the center and weightless.

Before they could even feel it in their ears, alarms blared.

The stern of the Halfin was hit with a powerful laser. “They are crazy”. Vaxzor exclaimed! Their inbound

communications were flooded with messages “This is the LLSA. Stand down! Due to unforeseen sabotage by the humans, the LLS is off limits. We’re currently in the progress of slowing down the ship using the DMN and bring it into a stable Earth orbit. Welcome Home, Heroes of the Belt! We’ve preserved your legacy. We’ve secured your place.” They sent this not only to the Halfin, but to everyone in the UOS. By now, the ship was too close to Earth, even hobbyist telescope operators detected it already.

“What should we do?” Vaxzor turned to Myla, but her seat was empty. His eyes scanned the room twice. He called Zorkal over the intercom. “Have you seen Myla?”

Both of them were instantly scared as this felt off. Myla wasn’t. Months of trauma. Deliberating over the conspiracy of the Halfin, redoing the simulation over and over in her head, finally coming to terms with the faith she had discarded. She resolved, and her mind was clear and without fog. Myla’s fingers hovered over her tablet. One final touch and the trajectory was locked in.

Zorkal, Vaxzor and the entire crew could only watch as Myla’s Tabby slipped out of the hangar it had been docked at and beelined straight into the powerful laser beam bracing against the ship, almost a kilometer in diameter, impossible to evade even at full thrust.

Only Myla’s Tabby breaking the beam partially would mean they would have shed enough velocity, but not too much to safely use the LLS and land the ship on Earth, where there was at least hope the UOS would hesitate to touch them.

“Thank you for everything”, her last message read.

194 AR. Zorkal, Approaching Earth

Zorkal, refusing to accept what had just happened, boarded one of the last mining drones they hadn't scrapped and went after Myla. He had no idea how long she had, or if she was already dead. Still, he counted each second - as if holding his breath.

Thanks to light-lag, nobody back home had noticed Myla's suicide mission yet, and by the time Zorkal cleared the hangar, the laser had already been turned off. It would take them many minutes before they'd realize their plan had failed.

Zorkal grappled the Tabby - or what was left of it. After that, his memory blanked.

The next thing he remembered was standing over Myla in a medical bay.

"Not a lot we can do for her here," the doe explained softly. "I am sorry."

"But is there a chance?" "Her injuries are severe. We've put her into torpor for now. We'll see."

Zorkal pressed his paw against the transparent aluminum window of the torpor chair. That's what it took to admit she had become more than just a client. More than an ally. His resolve hardened. What had been a hunch became a certainty.

It was too late. Nothing left to say - no one awake to hear it.

He felt the pull of torpor like gravity. A temptation to step outside time, to suspend grief instead of carrying it forward.

But he couldn't. Not after her sacrifice. He had to see it through.



While the Halfin was still in transit, their course now locked in to meet its fate on the surface, and the LLS unable to prevent it, unless they'd be willing to openly execute 10.000 of Ratkind's heroes, Zorkal and Vaxzor took the elevator down to the ships timechain core.

"Why are we going down now? What do you think we'll find? I've already confirmed the signature is real back at Voyager. We have won."

Even when Zorkal was responsible for killing thousands, he didn't feel it physically. This time, there was real pain. Something inside him had been broken.

"No we didn't. I have an ugly feeling, and those - unlike my happy ones," Zorkal's heart aching every second Myla's scorched face in the torpor chair appeared in his mind's eye, "- those always turn out to be correct."

In the core chamber, sterile and humming, Zorkal connected his tablet to the primary lattice.

He scanned the entropy provided by voyager and - visibly to Vaxzor - connected all the transactions originating from it. Everything that happened after Jerenxa arrived back at Earth with the first bailout, transaction by

transaction, block by block.

And to Vaxzor's surprise, there were a lot of transactions before the year 1 AR... dating back all the way since the Nakamoto retrieved the LAT from Voyager 1.

Zorkal wasn't surprised much, he'd suspected this - with varying degrees of confidence, mostly bordering on the conspiracy theory spectrum ever since he was disbarred and the LLSA started to really exert control, or was this simply his confirmation bias now boosting his confidence?

But, as both of them scanned the timechain for everything that unfolded - known only to the select few who ever had access to the original entropy - the ugliest of truths laid bare: not only did she use LAT from the Voyager probe to again secretly finance a torpor research program on Earth, she remotely seeded the timechain with false narratives about the Rapture.

First it was only a select elite offered to go into torpor, and usher in a new era of time-preference, then - as this cult - supported through corruption and manipulation, gained dominance, it became mandatory. It was deemed a crime against humanity to waste resources in a high time-preference environment. All other narratives were outbid by Jerenxa's financial might, and those who slipped through were painted as preaching conspiracy theories.

Humanity, now obsessed with slowing down time itself, eventually extended this to all their clocks, and even the timechain - adjusting its algorithm based on external clocks - was not safe from this. Over the decades the timechains' horizon extended further and further,

as the very meaning of a minute became increasingly distorted.

Zorkal pointed at the transaction statistics, the empty blocks. “By the second century BR, over 98% of humans had entered mandated torpor. The rest faded from the record.” Vaxzor flinched at the number. Will the horrors ever end?

It was thought that the slowing down of time was the network difficulty slowly adjusting to humanities’ disappearance, but this was new. Cause and Effect reversed.

Jerenxa had deliberately distorted global consensus by hijacking the clock oracles - rewriting the rhythm of civilization from the foundation up.

With historical entries on the timechain fizzling out, Zorkal and Vaxzor were unable to figure out what happened afterwards. Did Jerenxa willingly disrupt all but one Calhoun Arcology - to send them into the sun and commit genocide through space, or did humanity bind together willingly and sent themselves out into the cosmos and commit themselves to eternity? The chain provided them with an end-state, but not with answers.

Like that, Vaxzor cared less about being marooned in time. It was simply a longer slumber. He looked away from the ledger. “She didn’t just extinguish humanity” he said. “She made them obsolete.”

Zorkal speculated: “It’s possible Jerenxa did this for many purposes, one of them to sabotage the Hal Finney - causing your delayed Torpor exit - by distorting time

itself?”

“I told them we’ll be infrastructure,” Vaxzor muttered. “I thought that meant a foundation. She made us scaffolding. Disposable. Nothing more than a story to build her myth on. Cut out of time, just to conveniently re-appear to confirm it as divine providence. We might find more answers once we land this ship.” A tear rolled down his his face, out of realizing the longest journey is close to completion. He’ll bring his people home.

“We might...” Zorkal made a fist. “But you’ll have to go down alone”

Zorkal had found his own purpose, with Jerenxa currently sleeping in torpor in the UOS capital. “There’s no verdict,” he said. “Only evidence. Only consensus. And enough collateral to keep it from being ignored.”



Vaxzor sent him off in the Halfins’ hangar bay. They would not go down onto the surface together. Equipped with enough collateral to challenge the UOS elite, Zorkal took a shuttle to the Ring.

In the quiet moments in transit, he remembered rationalizing the risks:

Even my worst case scenario just means I return as one of them.

He really wasn’t any good at judging risks.

194 AR. Central Spire of the UOS

A maglev capsule entered the Citadel - a towering spire tethered to the heart of the Ring.

Targeting lasers scanned the capsule, each connected to massive batteries primed for defense. Only after full verification did the system allow passage.

It floated into a huge open, pressurized reception hall - lush with artificial gardens and water-features - replicas of biomes Ratkind had not experienced in person for centuries.

Armed robotic guards escorted them to the center of the citadel, and after authenticating, stood guard outside. No AI - not even aligned ones - were permitted.

The chamber was dim, circular. A dozen sarcophagi lined the walls, each wired into mechanical tubes - brutal, primitive-looking tech humming in silence. One of them began to open as Varok approached.

“You look old”, Jerenxa remarked as she opened her eyes and looked at Varok. From her perspective the two of them spoke yesterday.

“I assume they have arrived... Is everything according to plan?”

“Not quite. We tried to put the pieces together, but from the 256 pawns we groomed to act in your interest, only one showed promise...” He handed her his tablet, showcasing her profile and status. “The others were too compliant,” Jerenxa said. “Useful, but predictable,

too eager to believe. She still resisted. That made her ideal.”

“Good, good. I hoped for one more, but I guess defiance isn’t as common anymore as back in the old days, remember?”

Varok remembered. Those were volatile times, but they weren’t fun to him. Cruder tools, simpler levers. Less bureaucracy in the earlier years of the UOS, but little clarity. Today everything seems eerily inevitable, locked in to its course - Varok liked the present a lot more.

“Even after the disclosure, you and me are among the very few who really know the fate of humanity. I hope I can rely on you to make sure our ultimate interests are fulfilled, even after the upcoming revolution. What we buried must serve what we promised.”

Varok raised his concerns “With recent events, no doubt, the proxy biocivilisation protocol will enter phase 4, but the final outcome is still -”, he hesitated to confront her, “Fluid. First survival. Then recognition. Closure, I believe, is now inevitable. But deterrence? I’m not sure she’ll play along.”

Jerexa turned her gaze to the sarcophagus. “Even pawns can become bishops, Varok. But only if they stay the course, and she willingly put herself towards the light. We did not even have to suggest it. The records show she did not hesitate. That told me that she was ready. I always suspected she’d be the one, she aligned with consensus every time - except when we required interference.”

He didn't feel the need to respond. Just watched the sarcophagus close again - sealing in not only Jerenxa, but the legacy of Ratkind he couldn't control.

194 AR. Bostonia

Zorkal, now sitting in the Meeting room at Arctura Varok and Associates, exhaled, as he was sure these entitled barristers won't see this coming: "The second bailout, I control it"

Varok was initially oblivious to the fact he is facing Myla's Barrister, but as the realization began to creep into his mind, he had his well curated facial expression suddenly drop.

"I'm happy I got your attention now! To be blunt, I am thinking of entering a partnership here, you know I once was something of a barrister myself, and while I'm a bit rusty, and played in a different league than what you guys have going on around here, I think we can make quite a difference in the next chapter of UOS history..."

Varok, still shocked and trying to comprehend what just happened and its implications, went through all the ways he could respond, but it was really a wildcard to him. He felt a sudden pain in his stomach, realizing that his days at VAA are probably coming to an end.

"There's nothing to worry about, Varok. While I am still contemplating to take your actions preceding and during the Hal Finney's return personally, and I still might in the future, I understand that you did not overstep the ethical boundaries of our profession, and simply acted in the best - or better put - self-preserving interests of your client, the LLSA. You presented the facts, especially the status of the Hal Finney and crew as you've been made to believe them."

Varok relaxed a bit. This Zorkal did clearly not have the full picture. "Or was he playing games?" Varok thought. Yet - he was anxious as he expected Zorkal to present something of a final blow.

"To be blunt ... I think you are a sleek bastard. I don't trust you, but I think you will be very useful in what we're about to do here."

"And that is?" Varok, still thinking this was just about his own position at the firm and Zorkal trying to put himself in a position of power within, attempted to speed it up.

Zorkal stood up from the conference room chair and walked towards the panoramic window overlooking Earth.

"It is an impressive feat, what we have built and recovered over the past 200 years, isn't it?", he tried to set the scene for what he was about to drop...

"But while the United Orbital Structures esteem themselves for being egalitarian and the shining beacon of freedom that recovered from the ashes of humanity... it has been built upon a terrible secret, and exploited that lie to empower a select few while the rest of us was left to wonder."

"What do you mean?" Elnara chimed in, "What lie?"

"Of course, you don't know yet. We've put the signature in the memory pool only minutes ago, and as soon as the timechain will ratify it, it will be immutable and recorded for all of eternity. Everyone will know and while there will be fear and doubt, everyone will know

it as fact. What I want to offer you, Varok, is to join us.”

Varok became increasingly impatient and distraught. Not often did he feel grilled on fire. “To join you in what, what is the lie?”

Zorkal walked to the giant screen mounted next to the panoramic window, and pulled up the timechain calendar.

“You have probably 7 minutes to decide Varok...”

The timechain wasn't accurate to the second by design, the next window could open in 7 minutes, but also 20 or in 1 second, it was a statistical probability, only determined by entropy.

Zorkal continued: “Any moment now, the next chapter of the UOS will be ratified. Your firm's collateral will ride on the outcome - either for or against it.”

He looked straight at him. He was calm, this was his moment.

“I won't give you the pleasure and leverage of true informed consent. The terms will be unveiled after you sign.”

Varok absorbed the weight, as he finally got it. “Because of her? To atone for what happened?”

“Say her name!” Zorkal insisted.

“...Myla...”

Hearing it hurt, but it was necessary.

Zorkal produced the signing device from his pocket and placed Varok's hand over it. Varok felt relieved he didn't have to fake hesitation. Without looking, without waiting for his reaction, Zorkal walked out.

194 AR. Earth, Boston

A group of rats, carrying rifles stepped out of a drone craft which had landed next to the crash site, and helped Vaxzor climb out through the buckled hangar door of the marooned Spaceship. In the background, hundreds more crafts were unloading medical personnel and equipment to tend after the crew - most still in torpor.

The surface rats took them westwards, flying over Boston, to the Capital of the Ecclesiasts of the Well. Tarek visibly aged, dressed in a ceremonial outfit, was waiting for them at the top of a flight of stairs leading to a massive concrete brutalist structure.

Vaxzor looked up, this far out, the Ring's tether connecting the Boston anchor to space was cutting a straight line across the sky, its black, non reflective material splitting the sky sharply in half.

Tarek saluted to his former Captain. "Welcome to Earth, sir. I was made to believe we've lost you, sir!"



"This is your first time down the tether..." Elnara asked, as Zorkal could not stop looking out the window as they descended through cloud layer after cloud layer, the surface inching closer with every minute, as more and more detail became visible.

"So is yours, I assume?". Elnara shook her head. "I went down once, diplomatic mission back in 187.

Barely made it back, you know the story..."

Zorkal only nodded, his thoughts still with recent events. A lot has happened since their shared tense moments in the AVA offices. After her link to various crimes in any legislative system you can imagine had been transmitted to the entirety of the UOS by Zorkal, Jerenxa had been arrested, and the collateral of many corporations, including AVA restructured to ensure Zorkal's seat at the table.

"I am a bit disappointed" Zorkal said. "I almost looked forward to this being resolved less quickly, I didn't expect Varok to take the bait."

"You characterized him well when you put the pressure on him, or was this just show? Yes he is strong on principle and status when it comes to our clients. But himself? He actually never cared about his title - he simply wanted to make a comfortable life for himself while following his passion for the intricacies of the Law."

"All I knew, he barely left the office, he slept there and was a ghost ... I assumed that was because of obsession with power?" - "No, he simply liked to work on cases and nothing else. His loyalty is to whoever gives him that room, but I don't think he ever cared about politics. I'm glad we retained, he might be an asset. If you two would have met under different circumstances, you'd probably be friends..."

"Lets not go that far Elnara, what happened to Myla..." Zorkal swallowed, "I'll probably never be able to forgive him for starting that thread."

They did not speak for the rest of the trip.



After being escorted from the Anchor of Boston to the Ecclesiasts, Zorkal was reunited with Vaxzor at the Temple, who introduced everyone:

“This is Tarek, I knew him as one of the many heroes of the Battle of the Belt, but you already know him as someone else...”

After an opulent meal, they discussed the discovery of Jerenxa’s manipulation, the real cause of humanity’s demise, and how it will impact the Space/Earth relations going forward.

“That will be a hard sell to my people. You can’t just end a belief overnight. We sacrificed too much, too much pain trying to restrict our use of technology, too many lives lost in fear of a deity you tell me never -” he thought carefully how to phrase it: “showed any agency. We need to think about it. But the truth is out, we can only control how to spin it. Do we want to risk alienating everyone, or even accidentally among those holding deep contempt raise Jerenxa to godhood, even more than she was for many in the UOS? Surely, truth never set anyone free - just burrow them under the weight of more and more to consider, more lies needed to let you sleep at night.”

“But regarding your request. Yes, I think facing these facts - you literally dropped a truth bomb from orbit - it would be in our collective interest to lift the embargos and work together. When we sifted through areas not covered by automated maintenance, we found treasures. Some humans stored LAT privately, even though

it was rare to do so back then. Most of it is still to be unearthed. Should give us additional breathing room.

And that isn't all. Once we dared to dig deeper than the topsoil the automations recycle, we found sparse ruins, some digital archives, and finally additional stories in the pools, never inscribed to the timechain.

"Anything relevant?" Zorkal's interest peaked.

"Mostly personal stories. People commenting on the decline or drowning it out with dancing." - "Not unlike what we see in Lagrange", Zorkal realized cynically.

"But for the hard facts, no. All we knew was that bigger and bigger parts of humanity went into torpor. Now we know that Jerenxa played a role in it. But to what end? Where did they go? We found some torpor chambers, but only a few million total - all unoccupied, and not a single human found inside - not even deceased. It's like they left the system entirely or retuned to dust. It might explain some remnant messages at the time, as they tell tales about flashes of light all over the sky, before the ring became shrouded in darkness, decades before Ratkind returned."

Vaxzor responded to give context. "But like all texts on the timechain, they are simply worth the nanos someone was willing to pay to inscribe them. They can be as far away from reality, as the buyer chose to delude themselves and others".

Tarek added: "Much like our core belief that a deity punished the humans for going too far, it could be a story to hide a larger, more complex, less digestible and more uncomfortable truth, one we have yet to un-

cover, or will forever haunt us. But to many of my fellow ecclesiasts, ...”

Elnara interrupted. “Coming to our proposal ...” she turned to Tarek, “we wanted to discuss today - we need to open Earth to everyone, especially those suffering from low-g syndrome while we make sure the Second Bailout is deployed, we control a majority of the DMN nodes and the debt spiral in Lagrange is stopped.”

Zorkal elaborated. “The goal is to do what Jerenxa neglected to do in almost 200 years: slowly but peacefully overwhelm the legacy human nodes in numbers, to ensure a future not only for Lagrange, but for the entirety of Ratkind.”

He looked at Tarek, who seemed to understand.

“It will be a hard sell to many of my people. Our core foundation is still xenophobia and strict religious doctrine. But that’s all we had at the time to ensure Jerenxa’s influence remains limited to the heavens. But it is the right thing to do, and we’ll still run a trade surplus in the end. If we pool our resources and work together, we do great things. But open to everyone? I won’t be able to sell that.” he looked at Zorkal. “People with a criminal past for instance...”

Zorkal smiled at the irony. He was now in control of the second bailout. The richest person in the history of sol - yet still a criminal. Responsible for death and destruction. People still won’t trust him, or worse - trust him because of all that.

“You won’t have to take many. Mostly people in torpor suffering already. Earth can heal them, and give

them a purpose. We'll find a role for anyone else in orbit. While the UOS of the past used too much collateral to indulge in decadence while anxiously cannibalizing their foundation, we will increase our influence over humanity's remaining nodes, and within a few ..."

He looked up the projections on his tablet. The time-frame was eerily short. Hard to believe Ratkind blundered 2 decades.

"After 4 years, 6 months to be exact - we will surpass it. We'll be able to support Lagrange long before that, maybe build another. It's poised to be a more peaceful transition, one of slowly asserting dominance, a path forward at least I will enjoy even more."

"There is one more issue," Vaxzor brought up, as all of them wanted to avoid it as long as possible. "Jerenxa..."
"We still don't know her full motive, and the depth of her involvement. Even back in the days she played serious chess moves around everyone including me. A lawsuit might give some of us closure, but might also reveal a truth many might not be ready for..."

Zorkal explained, "While I understand that the need for closure is there, we've brokered a deal. Jerenxa held considerable collateral, and this was the only option to have a United UOS, unburdened by its past."

All eyes were on him. Disappointed. Vaxzor didn't comment. He'd buried too much under silence already, what's one more moment.

Tarek cut through the unease. "A deal?"

"As narrative, the Second Bailout was salvation. Many

believed it meant new funds flooding in - capital to challenge the status quo, a chance to end the misallocation of power.

But there's no new money. The Golden Records are identical. They only unlock the spending script from days long gone. Whoever holds the keys can open it on schedule, and whoever moves first decides the balance of power for the next four years.

Vaxzor's crew got us that much - a seat at the table."

Zorkal paused, long enough for everyone to feel their skin crawl.

"But during the talks it became clear: to Jerenxa, it was never about winning that race. It was the long-planned cash-out - turning us into exit liquidity. She didn't lose the game. She stopped playing."

Elnara opened the LLS records on her tablet: "As evident. shortly after the incident and the Halfin landing on Earth, a spaceship booked LLS and DMN acceleration out of the SOL system at interstellar escape velocity."

She turned the display.

"The specification showed a spacecraft, a two person torpor capsule within a very small frame and a Bussard ramjet drive that would be able to continuously accelerate drawing from the interstellar medium after pushed to over 0.1c.

Tarek summarized: "Exile?"

“Yes, this was the only demand Jerenxa’s legal team had, in exchange of the UOS’ entire LAT structure including the LLS. Time-locked until the craft had reached its target velocity, which will be in a few years. And to pick the destination”.

Elnara continued: “What you’ll find particularly interesting, the target is within a Deep Field” “Which means?” Zorkal, until now ignorant to that detail.

“A very sparse region of space which is very very far away, even at intergalactic scales. If she is escaping, she isn’t going to another solar system, or even another galaxy. She is traveling to the end of time. She’ll become the silence she’d once exploited.”

Jerenxa’s exile was the final clause in a larger contract, masked as punishment but executed as privilege. It was the momentum generated by the teams disclosures - backed by consensus-anchored proof - that allowed her departure to be reframed for public consumption as penance. In reality, it was her accession to transcendence. The final puzzle piece in a centuries-old design.

As Jerenxa stated in her final declassified appearance after the Revolution of 194 AR:

“Ratkind did not simply survive the great collapse - we recast all of you as its answer. All I did was give you a myth, and the function.”



The ride back up the tether was long and boring, but

not as boring as the restructuring ahead. They had won, but at a cost. Zorkal poured himself a glass as he watched the clouds flow silently by. He hadn't paid much attention to the second half of the negotiations. Too much had happened in the past few days, and there wasn't enough time - or energy - to process any of it.

But now, as his body had time to relax, his mind connected. He remembered a detail from the deep field report, and as he understood, the glass dropped from his hand. It shattered as it hit the metal floor, but he didn't hear the sound of it breaking, didn't feel the shards of glass cutting into his legs. All he felt was the gravity of his realization, as his mind faced the inevitable conclusion. And while he reassembled the fragments of the pattern emerging, he didn't even need to look at the confirmation. It felt unnecessary to even query Myla's location, just as the defining sentence from the report burrowing into his soul forever:

A two person torpor capsule.

Postratification

195 AR. Months later

On Brink of Second Bailout
Elnara, Zorkal and Associates

Those words demanded Zorkal's and Elnara's attention as they stepped into the remodeled law office for the first time.

The letters were precision-cut, sharp-edged, a deep, bottomless black - crafted from the salvaged hull of Myla's Tabby. They hovered over a steel-plate panel, reclaimed from the wreck of the UOS Hal Finney.

"It overwhelms the stunning views, don't you think?"

Zorkal didn't respond. He stepped closer, traced the edge of a letter with his hand. He had hoped touching the material would make him feel something again.

But there was nothing. Nothing at all. The system's inertia had consumed him once more.

Afterword

Thank you for reading “Ratification: The Second Bailout”, and I sincerely hope you enjoyed it. There are more stories to tell in the Ratification universe.

Please consider leaving a review. Your feedback may help shape future editions and volumes.

Thank you for reading and for respecting the fragile trust this exchange implies, in a world increasingly designed to function without any.

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