

The Cargo

December 20, 2012

an Elite short story

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The ventilation system could be heard whirring, straining to cope with the thick atmosphere inside Rick's Cafe. Coffee was the one thing that wasn't really on the menu, but came free along with a hydrosnot when the disenchanted jocks and traders had to fly, still half-drunk and always weary. Mostly passed out on their tables, few of the regulars had ever caught the archaic name reference of the bar, even if the scanty decor reeked of early 20th century Earth.

That's because frankly, nobody in Casablanca gives a damn about Del. Nobody in Anayel, for that matter.

No one except Sam of course, the bartender and owner, whose nostalgia was limited only by the credits in his account. It had been a quite night; a few sullen traders, regulars mostly, had kept to themselves, favoring the cheap synthetic stuff to the point of passing out.

A couple of braggards had tried to bore him to death with their ludicrous stories, but after so many years, Sam would just smile congenially, nod, and pour. Sam had always been more than happy to serve drinks, keep his mouth shut and his ears open. Which was why even after having closed up for the night, he was still behind the bar, having a drink with Nate, one of the rare few people that Sam was happy to keep company whenever Nate happened to dock in Casablanca.

"Say, is this Old Gold?" wondered Nate, after downing a mouthful and nearly cringing to death. The rattle of real ice floating in his drink was a perk reserved for friends.

"You'd wish, wouldn't you? That's some Blackell Reserve, right there," replied Sam with a slight grin. He took a sip himself, and shivered slightly as the liquor ran down his stomach like fire. Nate shook his head and looked at his drink again.

"Had me fooled. You didn't have this last time I was here, did you?"

"No, I didn't. First batch since the founding; real Beta Hydri oak casks. Almost the real thing," replied Sam with a proud, gleaming smile. Nate knew the look on Sam's face. He decided to indulge him:

"Almost?" he asked, his gaze drifting out of focus as Bush's Reward came into view once more - Sam liked to project the real view outside, even if it made most of the folks dizzy. "What makes it real, Sam?" Nate added with a dull monotone. Sam though, seemed keen on talking Nate's head off.

"I could go on for days about the sun being just the right spectrum, the atmosphere just the right mix, and the soil just the right kind. But in the end, there's nothing like a bottle of some real scotch."

"What's that?" asked Nate as he downed another mouthful of Blackelk. The water in the ice was supposed to mellow it down, but it was still some very strong liquor. Sam replied with a sad, wisdomed look on his face and the voice of a grumpy, old man:

"A bottle from before the space age, Nate. From Old Earth."

Nate couldn't help but throw Sam a scoff and an absurd smile. "That's just a myth," he said shaking his head slightly, and added: "Look at these ancient-looking posters you keep around the place. What's that, really?"

"That's paper, Nate. Real paper, from real wood pulp," replied Sam with a feeling of holiness.

"This place has cost you a fortune, and what's there to show for it? Dead trees on a plasteel wall," said Nate, his hands pointing all over Rick's Cafe dejectedly, and once more turned to his drink. Sam shook his head from shoulder to shoulder, saddened and almost hurt.

"You don't get it do you? You'll never will. Those were simpler times. Our world is just so..." He struggled with the words for a moment or so, when Nate pitched in, looking at him sideways: "Dull?"

"Exactly!" said Sam, pointing his finger at Nate, who finished the last of his drink without savouring it. He turned his back on Sam and ventured another look at Rick's cafe. He simply couldn't feel whatever it was Sam felt. He told him rather playfully though:

"Whatever those poor customers of yours have, I think you're catching it as well. The galaxy is a big, wonderful place. I've seen it, Sam."

The bartender reached for the bottle of Blackelk and poured Nate the last of it; the golden-hued liquor rushed to fill Nate's glass, filling the crisp, sanitized air with a murky, heavy and sweet aroma. Nate turned around and took the glass in his hands. He held it up and marvelled at its colour, magnificent even in the dim, antique neon light that hugged them softly from every wall.

"It's not the world around us, Nate. It's the people. Wish I could just sell out and leave but..." said Sam, and his eyes wandered somewhere beyond Bush's reward, in a very particular corner of the display wall, where a certain star shone fretfully. Nate knew that spot and what it meant to Sam.

"But you can't afford Earth, Sam. I haven't met anyone who can, and I've been places, I've met people," said Nate.

Sam nodded vigorously, and then sat in silence for a few moments. He then smiled a bit awkwardly, and said with some relief, as if he had been trying to for some time.

"Still, there's this thing I'm thinking about, and you might be just the man."

Nate grinned and sat upright; he gave Sam a grinning look. He didn't seem all that surprised.

"So that's what the special reserve was for. I'm all ears."

Sam hunched closer, like sharing a secret, even though it was just them in there. Even the cleaning robot stood deactivated in a sad, little recess in one wall.

"You know me, I'm not the prying type, but it comes with the job; when you learn to filter out all the have-beens, the fresh jocks and the daydreamers, you can make out the really interesting stuff from light years away."

There was this gleam in Sam's eye, a veracity in his voice. He couldn't help but give away the impression that this was important.

"And what is it that you just happened to overhear that's got you so excited?"

"There were these folks, three of them. Never stepped foot in here before. They sat back near that corner, and had the kind of spurious face on that simply cried they were uncomfortable to be seen in public," said Sam, his eyes squinting mischievously, nodding to himself knowingly. Nate asked with a that didn't seem fitting:

"Drunk people and you count as public?"

Sam shook his head and clicked his tongue before telling Nate:

"Jokes aside, they were waiting for a strange-looking fellow to appear."

"What's 24th century lingo for strange-looking Sam?" asked Nate with a raised brow, and Sam replied without skipping a beat:

"Someone too young to be reeking of so many credits, accompanied by a couple of cyborg geeks." It wasn't the kind of answer Nate had been expecting.

"That's too strange for a place like yours; too strange for a station like Casablanca really," said Nate nodding to himself and Sam added ruefully:

"I know. The guy bought them my last bottle of Old Gold."

"You sold it?" asked Nate, wide-eyed with disbelief. He knew Sam only got liquor shipments every six months or so.

"For 80 credits, wouldn't you?" said Sam with an apologetic shrug. Nate furrowed his brow before making a gesture for Sam to go on.

"Go on. What was it they were saying?"

"They were trying to be careful, but I overheard two words and a grid reference," said Sam gleefully, the grin on his face wide enough to fit through a standard docking bay. Nate could smell it involved something illegal. He asked in flat, grave tones:

"Battle weapons?"

"Better. Alien artifacts," said Sam, making a show of the word 'alien' with his finger writing in the air.

"Are you sure you didn't drink that last bottle of Old Gold yourself?" asked Nate, about ready to believe this was the end of their discussion.

"I know what I heard, Nate. What do you say?" said Sam and offered his hand. Nate had trouble keeping up with Sam.

"I'm not following you," he said and Sam replied heartily:

"Come on now, Nate, don't act so ccy. You've got a faster ship. One of the fastest, really."

Nate was beginning to ride Sam's train of thought, but it didn't feel safe at all. "I think I won't like what you're about to suggest," he told Sam.

"Where do alien artifacts come from? Haven't you wondered?" asked Sam craning his neck, his face inches away from Nate's.

"Do they even exist?" asked Nate with a calm, gentle smile. Sam erupted with enthusiasm:

"Salvages! People have killed to get some on their hands."

Nate was seeing where the talk was leading to and he didn't share Sam's giddy feeling. "That right there is something that makes me feel uncomfortable, Sam. Getting killed," he said and decided to accept the invitation of the house's last round. The Black Elk reserve promised sweetness unending with its fragrant arema, but the fire that coursed down his stomach felt real enough to know it could damage a grex's liver.

"When he said anything about dying? Look, I locked up those guys; they're a mostly harmless mining crew. Their ship's a God-awful Lanner," said Sam with disdain, but Nate didn't seem easily convinced.

"You're trying to say it will be easy. Just jump, salvage what I can, and get back with the cargo."

"That's what I'm saying, Nate."

"What then?" asked Ned and shrugged in a neutral fashion.

"I have contacts. There always are certain interested parties," said Sam with a thin, calculated grin.

"Isn't this like stealing? Or smuggling? Isn't it illegal Sam?" asked Nate, his temper turning sour. Sam saw he was taking this the wrong way and almost pleaded with him:

"Come on now, Nate! It's just a gray area, that's all! It's not like they're selling the stuff ten a ton on Gateway, but it's not what the police are looking for either!"

"Nah, I think I'll skip this one, Sam," said Nate and shook his head.

"They can fetch quite a price, Nate. A serious price," said Sam scombrelly. Nate asked him:

"What's 20th century for serious, then?"

"Eight thousand credits per ten. Maybe even ten," said Sam as if those numbers were merely tiny motes of dust. Nate looked at Sam for a moment frowning, and then smiled widely.

"You're pulling my leg, that's all there is to it," he said with relieved conviction, but Sam shot down his hopes quickly.

"Where do you think I get the money to decorate the place with all this? Watering down synthetic liquor? That's a real movie poster right there, Nate. Cost me a couple of thousand, that poster alone," explained the bartender, coming clean.

"You've done this before, haven't you?" Nate said, more than asked and Sam looked at him straight in the eyes:

"I've done it before, and now's my chance to do it again. And I'll be fair to you: we'll split it seventy-thirty, your way."

"It sounds too good to be true, Sam."

"It's just the way luck works, Nate. You've got to grab it by the horns before it can smile, you know."

Nate stood there for what felt like ages, while in fact it was a few moments. He thought about it, and felt a pang of fear. Then he saw Bush's Reward heave into view once more. Another look at how derelict Rick's Cafe seemed convinced him.

"Alright. But just this once. If everything works out, I'll be able to pay off the Asp," said Nate and Sam offered his hand.

"That's the way of looking at things!"

They shook hands firmly and Nate got right down to business. "What system?" he asked.

"Veurve. That's at Sector 0-3," replied Sam. Nate brought up a picture of the galactic map from memory. He knew the sector, he'd seen the system.

"That's federation space. But Veurve, that's..."

"System explored. No registered settlements," added Sam and Nate nodded.

"I'll need some extra fuel then."

"But you can always dump the radiaactives in peace..." said Sam with a note of mischief.

"I hope that's the least of my worries," said Nate and fearlessly downed the rest of the Blackelk in one fiery gulp. Sam took his glass and tossed it in the cleaning unit without effort. He looked at Del once more, in that special corner of the visor wall, smiled and said mostly to himself:

"Trust me, Nate. It'll be beautiful. What could possibly go wrong?"

- to be continued -