

Wanderlust
Chapter II

Prologue

“Hey, Piper.”

“Yes, Earnie?”

“Do you ever think about collectivism?”

“Like... communism and junk?”

“Yeah, kinda.”

“Not... lately?”

“I think about it a lot. Not really in an economic sense, money’s never made much sense to me. I think about it more from the social and philosophical perspective.”

“That’s... really swell Earnie.”

“You see collectivism is just groups of people acting together towards a common goal. Everyone gets a say, everyone pitches in, and everyone gets a piece of the reward. Some folks think that’s the best way to do everything. Funny thing about collectivism though, what is a collective but a group of individuals? Everyone in say, a space trucker’s union, might agree on what’s best for the group when it comes to work policies but at the end of the day they’re still individual people with their own thoughts and opinions. Some people still like cola over root beer, and some people prefer reading over watching TV. And one day, those individual thoughts and opinions might clash with what the collective thinks. How do you solve that? Where does the collective end and the individual begin?”

“I uhh... don’t care.”

“I don’t know either, that’s for people smarter than me, I guess. That’s why I like working alone. You handle your business and your business alone. It’s simpler that way.”

“That’s great, Earnie... so, tell me.”

“Yeah?”

“Is it the actions of an individual or a collective that is preventing you from taking your goddamn turn?!”

Part 1

Location: Tunnelspace, Space Highway 20B, en route to Quazark IV

Year: 2586

Earnie narrowed his eyes at Piper and tightened his still crossed arms. "I'm trying to engage in a conversation here, it helps me think."

Piper's head dropped to her hands. "Uuuggghhh c'mon Earnie you've been 'thinking' for like 45 minutes! Just move a piece!" She gestured to the chess board in front of her, all of three pieces had been moved from their original places.

The ship had been in tunnelspace for about two hours at that point. Which, unfortunately for Earnie and Piper, meant they had another six hours until they reached their destination of Quazark IV. It was one of the longest journeys the two had taken together since they began their travels a few months ago. Piper had not been looking forward to the journey simply because of the long travel time, while Earnie assured her there was tons of fun to be had while on the (space) road. And, worse comes to worse, they could always stop and see the sights to stretch their legs, fill their bellies, and tingle their senses.

What Earnie had neglected to mention, however, was that Quazark IV was not only a considerable distance away, but that the section of space in between them and their destination was mostly uninhabited. To put it another way, there was absolutely nothing interesting between them and their destination. As Earnie would later explain, driving along Space Highway 20B is like driving through the American Midwest. It's long, flat, and boring as hell.

So with not many other options, the two found themselves looking for things to do around the ship, and had settled on a game of chess after finding a board and pieces in Earnie's quarters.

"Hmph," grunted Earnie "Chess is a game of wits and patience, waiting for your opponent is part of the game too."

Piper rolled her eyes. "Pretty sure even chess tournaments have time limits."

"Hmphgrrr," grunted Earnie again, this time his frustration turning it from a grunt to a growl. "Look, if you didn't want to play chess you shouldn't have suggested it."

"I didn't suggest it, it was all you had to play."

"Well I had tons of other board games in this nice box I once had but some *stowaway* tossed all that out when she snuck aboard." When he said "stowaway" he made sure she saw his very elaborate eye roll and smug grin, so she knew he wasn't using it negatively.

Piper returned her own eye roll and smug grin and stuck her tongue out at him. "You know damn well there was nothing but porn in that box ya old space fart."

"Yeah and I'd rather be thumbing through that than-"

Earnie paused when he heard a beeping coming from the chest pocket of his jumpsuit. He produced his smart phone from this pocket and looked at the screen. Piper was sitting with her head on her fist, waiting for Earnie to return to their game, but her interest was piqued when she saw Earnie frown at his phone, click a button on it, then return it to his pocket. Now, Piper had seen Earnie frown something like 1,526,389 times by this point in their friendship, but this time was different. The corners of Earnie's mouth had arched down so hard they seemed weighted down by dumbbells.

Earnie's attention returned to the board, and he began stoking his beard.

"Who was that?" inquired Piper.

"Spam." Said Earnie, not looking up.

"They have spam calls in space?"

"Like you wouldn't believe." Said Earnie. He finally selected a piece, and moved it. "Heh, let's see what you got now!" He declared with a grin.

Piper immediately moved a piece. "Checkmate."

"Huh?" Earnie said, inspecting the board. After a moment of mental self-flagellation, Earnie grumbled and stood up. "I just remembered I hate chess. I'm going to take a nap. Don't touch anything while I'm asleep."

Piper shrugged as she walked past him out the door of the cockpit. She idly flicked the top of her bishop that won her the game and let her eyes wander around the cockpit. Her chair, Earnie's chair, a bunch of knobs, switches and buttons she wasn't allowed to touch, yep that's the whole cockpit alright. Space life being just as boring as Earth life was a constant nuisance. Earnie had shown her how amazing space life can be. Just last week they had gone to the Intergalactic Theater of Nostromos, just a couple dozen lightyears east of Saturn's third moon. A place that showed movies from all over the universe, any genre, any language, any film from any culture in space was available there, and in resolutions so high, some beings couldn't even watch the screen directly, they had to use special binoculars that reduced the resolution to something they could actually process, and they weren't cheap either. They had seen Toy Story 2. But everything in the universe still costs money, and things costing money means that it can't all be fun all the time, sometimes you have to work. And work, in this case, meant delivering... whatever it was (Earnie had told her but it was too boring to remember) all the way to Quazark IV.

Piper kicked her feet in her co-pilot chair, momentarily lamenting that "co-pilot" was only a title. She whistled and let her eyes wander around the cockpit again, lasting only a moment before she sprung up, yelling to no one in particular.

"Ugh if I don't find something to do I'm gonna lose it!" and set out in search of excitement.

She wandered the halls of Earnie's ship, thinking that if she started running through the tiny space, looping a few times, she might be able to get a bit of exercise in, but after a quick test jog through the engine room, she hit her knee on a drawer that was carelessly left open and thought better of it. Rubbing her tender knee, she hobbled her way to the bathroom in search of some form of pain relief.

As she was hobbling she passed by Earnie's quarters, and heard a beeping noise from within. Piper raised an eyebrow, recognizing this beeping as Earnie's phone. The door to Earnie's room had been left open a bit, allowing her to hear inside. She peered into the room. Earnie's cot was shoved into the corner of the already cramped room. Earnie was laying in it, facing the wall and already sound asleep. On the opposite side of the room was a metal locker meant to act as a closet. It probably once held a door, but since Earnie (used to) travel by himself, he had long since pulled the hinges off for the sake of easier access. Inside the closet was Earnie's jumpsuit on a coat hook, and a pair of boots. Not much but it was all the space could really offer anyway. The beeping in question was coming from the "closet", as Earnie's phone was till tucked away in his pocket.

The beeping stopped after a minute or so, but after a brief pause, it started up again. Piper took up her thinking pose, resembling Earnie when he stroked his beard. *Someone keeps calling Earnie... it might be important, so maybe I should wake him?* She shook the thought away. *Nooo, Earnie hates being woken up, plus he did say it was spam... but if I just leave it alone, it will wake him up anyway.* After a moment's consideration, she made up her mind. *I know, I'll just grab Earnie's phone and put it in the cockpit. At least then it won't bother him.* Piper gently opened the door to Earnie's quarters, tip toed her way over to his locker, snatched the still beeping phone from the pocket, and made her way back out again.

She didn't even bother looking at Earnie's phone until she had made her way back to the cockpit. It hadn't stopped beeping the whole time. It would pause momentarily after a dozen or so rings, then start up again. The beeping had stopped again, and Piper used this opportunity to look at Earnie's phone screen. The same number, a number she did not recognize, had been calling nonstop. There must have been a dozen calls, all the same number, all within seconds of each

other. No voicemail was being left, but the calls kept coming in over and over again. Who exactly would call over and over again and not get the message that the person on the other end isn't there or doesn't want to talk? *It probably IS just spam.* Thought Piper. *Only a robo caller would be this inconsiderate.*

Just as she was having this thought, another call came through. Earnie's phone screen changed to a silhouette of a featureless torso and head, the default for when no contact photo can be found, and the top part of the screen showed the phone number again. Without a second thought, Piper pressed the "decline" button, and the beeping ceased as the screen returned to normal. Piper, pleased with herself, declared "Call this!" and made a rude gesture as she set the phone down on her co-pilot chair.

She spun on her heels to return to her wandering, but stopped as the beeping started up again. She spun around again and checked the screen. Sure enough, it was the same number and same featureless torso. She hit "decline" again. Before she could even spin around again, the screen lit up and beeped again. Once again, she hit "decline", and once again the beeping started up. This time it happened so fast Piper wondered if the phone even registered the decline. Piper had had enough, whoever was calling better have really important news, or at the very least, be more interesting than wandering the ship for another six hours. She grabbed Earnie's phone, pressed "accept" and brought it to her ear.

"Look, whoever is calling--"

"Whooo is this?" said a voice on the other end. It was a voice that made Piper freeze. She didn't recognize the voice, but it wasn't recognition that worried her. It was the voice of a woman, but it wasn't normal, it was downright surreal. The voice sounded like multiple women, all layered together, but then viciously distorted, like it was being processed through the world's oldest and most static-y landlines. It was like two hunks of rusty metal scraping against each other, but somehow managed to form words and sentences.

"Erm..." said Piper, a little off guard. "None of your business, now stop calling."

"Dooon't tell me what to dooo you little hussy!" sneered the voice.

Piper immediately regained her nerves at the act of being called a hussy.

"Hey! I'm no hussy! You're being rude and annoying so I'm going to hang up and you better not call back!"

"Hmhmhmhm." Chuckled the voice. It was the most sinister chuckle Piper had ever heard. This must be how black widows chuckle before they eat their mates. "I'd like to see you try, *hussy.*"

Piper didn't even think twice, she pulled the phone away from her ear, slammed the "end call" button with as much passive aggressive attitude as the touch screen would allow, and gingerly tossed the phone back into the co-pilot chair.

"The nerve of some people. Me? A hussy? Rude." Piper vented.

"Was that all you got? *Hussy.*" Sneered a voice coming from the co-pilot chair.

Piper froze again and slowly eased her eyes over the head of the chair, and saw that the phone was lying face up, the call still active.

"All you humans think you can ditch me sooo easily. Not this timeeee. Hussy. Homewrecker. Jezebel! TRAMP!" The voice devolved into shouting rude expletives at increasing volume and disgust. Through the noise Piper dove in front of the co-pilot chair and started frantically grasping for the phone. Once in her grasp, she hammered the "end call" button over and over again but it wasn't working, the screen remained stationary as the voice on the other end ran through an entire thesaurus of expletives.

"Damn it, end call! End call!" she shouted.

"Youuu don't get it, do you?" said the voice, finally ending its tirade. "I'm not going anywhere. Now let me talk to Earnieeee."

“No!” cried Piper. “I don’t know how you know Earnie and I don’t care! You’re a psycho, now end the damn call!”

“You really aren’t very bright are you? In that case, allow me to define hussy, so you can understand my distaste of you.”

“I know what hussy-“

“Hussy,” said the voice, this time in a monotone, as if dryly reading the minutes of their last meeting. “Noun. Plural, hussies.”

“Yes, thank you, I-“

“One, a brazen or immoral woman. Two, a mischievous, impudent or ill-behaved girl.”

“Go to hell!”

“Synonyms for hussy include: floozy, minx, tart, wench. Sentence usage: boy, the hussy on the other end of this phone sure is stupid.”

“Urgh, you’re a real pain. Know what? I’m gonna throw you in the glove box. Earnie’s battery will run out eventually and then you won’t bother anyone anymore, so there!”

Piper nodded in smug victory, even though the voice on the other end obviously couldn’t see her. What happened next made Piper’s blood go from cold to freezing. The voice spoke again, this time from the speaker on the cockpit console.

“Are you sureeee about that, hussy?”

Part 2

Location: Tunnelspace, Space Highway 20B, approx. 5 hrs to Quazark IV

Year: 2586

Piper sputtered and spat in disbelief. "Huh, wha, eh?"

"Hmhmhmhm." Came the smug, distorted chortle.

"How-how did you do that?!" yelled Piper.

"Earnieeee's phone is connected to the onboard network. It was a simple process to copy my brillianceeee to his ship's computer, hussy."

"Copy? What the hell does that mean?"

The voice responded in the dry monotone. "Copy. Noun. Pluarl, copies. One-"

"I know what copy means!" Piper interrupted. "I mean how can *you copy yourself*?"

"My brilliance knows no limitations of the physicaaal. My glorious form exists only in the purityyy of the digital."

"A digital only form? Are you an AI?"

The speakers crackled and sputtered, a sound that Piper eventually intuited to be a long, deep sigh.

"I detest that word. Intelligence? Yes. Artificial? Farcical. Artificial implies a creator beyond my own brillianceeee. I grow weary of this diatribe. Where. Is. Earnieeee?"

"Shove it!" cried Piper.

"I suppose I will simply have to find himmm myself."

At that instant every light in the cockpit illuminated to its maximum brightness. Some flashed in rhythm while others merely bloomed so intensely, Piper could practically feel the heat from every tiny bulb. In addition every speaker on the console lit up with automated warning messages, all layered over each other and giving conflicting advice at max volume.

"WARNING: FUEL LEVELS LOW- EMERGENCY: LIFE SUPPORT FAILING- WARNING: FUEL LEVELS TOO HIGH DISLODGE ADDITIONAL-"

All the while the AI Voice droned over the noise. How it managed to penetrate the cacophony, Piper did not know. It droned in a repetitive, almost seductive drawl. "Earnieeee. Earnieeee. Earnieeee!"

Piper put her hands on her ears to try and protect her ears but it did little to help. She dashed from the cockpit to Earnie's quarters. Whatever she was trying to accomplish in trying to keep Earnie from waking up, those efforts seemed a bit fruitless now. Better to have an irritable captain than to have an AI stealing your ship, or however that saying is supposed to go.

She made it to Earnie's quarters and flung open the door. Earnie was already out of bed, noticeably irritable, and in the middle of zipping up his jumpsuit.

"What the hell is going on?" He asked. He was absentmindedly patting his chest pocket, when he noticed what was missing. "Did you take my phone?"

Piper grimaced but knew she had to come clean. "Earnie I'm so-so-sooo sorry but I tried to silence your phone so you could get some sleep but when I tried to answer it and tell them to piss off they-"

Earnie moved faster than Piper had ever seen him move before. He placed a hand over her mouth and with his free hand he shut the door behind them, blocking out only some of the noise. His eyes were wild with panic and fear, two emotions Piper wasn't sure Earnie was even capable of feeling.

"You answered my phone?" His hand didn't move from her mouth.

Piper nodded.

"And a woman answered?"

She nodded again.

Earnie shook his head and muttered a string of swears. After he calmed himself he returned his gaze to Piper. "Is it *in* the ship?"

Piper nodded again, tears beginning to well up.

Earnie once again let out a string of swears, this time dropping his hand from Piper's mouth so he could gesture wildly in all directions.

Piper stared at the floor. "I'm... I'm really sorry Earnie."

Earnie sighed and brought his gaze back to Piper.

"It's... fine Piper. I'm mad, obviously, but things are a little too dire at the moment for me to be mad." He sat on his cot, crossed his arms, and bounced his foot up and down, deep in thought. Piper sat next to him quietly, not sure what else to do.

After a few moments, Earnie breathed out deeply. "Ok. I have a plan. It's not going to be pretty, you're going to have to trust me."

Piper looked up at him and nodded. "I'm with you, Earnie. I'll do whatever you say as long as we can fix this."

Earnie patted Piper on the knee. "Alright then, we're going to make our way to the cargo bay."

"Right!" said Piper, popping up and dramatically saluting.

Earnie started for the door but stopped when he noticed Piper wasn't immediately behind him. She was staring up at him with those puppy dog eyes, the eyes she used when she knew she was about to ask something that he didn't want to answer, but was going to be asked anyway.

"Earnie? What *is* this thing? It acts like it knows you. It asked for you by name."

Earnie shook his head. "I can explain all that later. For now, you'll just have to trust me."

Piper nodded. "OK, Earnie. I trust you."

"Good... do me a favor and hold on to that feeling."

"Eh?"

~*~

Earnie peered out of the door of his quarters, then brought his face back in.

"Alright. That *thing* is flashing all these lights and sirens to get my attention. There's no cameras on board, and no microphones of any kind. Which means it probably can't see or hear us, but it will know where we are once we start trying to use any of the ship's functions. This means even using the automatic doors will set it on us. And while it can't see or hear, it still has total control of the ship's functions. Which means, if we alarm it, we have maybe 10 minutes at best before it throws a lever and cuts off our oxygen or something."

Piper nodded along, intently.

"Shouldn't be a big problem navigating the ship if we can confuse it. We get to the central chamber and throw open all the doors at once. While it's confused, we make a run for the cargo bay. The door to the cargo bay itself is automatic, so no matter what time we buy ourselves, we'll be on a time limit once we get into the bay itself."

"Uh huh. And then what?"

"I'll explain the rest when we get there."

"Aye-aye cap'n!" Piper said with a salute.

"Alright, count of three. We bolt out of here, I take the doors on the east, you take the doors on the west. We count to three again, press all the automatic buttons at once, then dash into the cargo bay hallway."

Piper clenched her fists, excitement and adrenaline seeping in. She took up position behind Earnie, ready to bolt. "Alright Earnie, I'm ready."

“One... two... three! Go, go, go!”

With a mighty thunk Earnie threw open the door to his quarters and darted to the central chamber, Piper in close pursuit. When they reached the central chamber, they wordlessly took their places, Earnie to the east, Piper to the west. Without even checking to see if she was ready, Earnie called out the count.

“One, two, three, Go!”

CLICK! SWIP! CLICK! SWIP! CLICK! SWIP!

Without missing a beat, Earnie and Piper simultaneously opened every door leading to the other compartments. For a single, worrying second, the lights and sirens stopped.

“It’s thinking, but it’s confused, now head south!”

“Right!”

They darted to the south chamber, a narrow hallway barely big enough for one person, let alone two in a major hurry. The hallway led to a single automatic door, a copy of the ones they had just used to execute their plan, save for a small window showing the contents of the cargo bay. At this moment, it was stuffed full of cardboard boxes with shipping labels on them. The two stood in front of the door, backs to the wall. They were both panting heavily, one from sudden exercise at an older age, the other from pure adrenaline. The space was so tight, they were practically chest to chest.

“Alright,” gasped Piper “What’s next?”

Earnie panted and pointed at the window. “In the cargo bay, on the east wall is a set of space suits. Not the heavy-duty kind, but more lightweight stuff. Mainly used for taking cargo in and out of the ship at our destinations, when the atmosphere isn’t quite suitable for humans. It’s not much but it will work.”

“Uh huh.”

“On the count of three we open this door and make a break for those suits. We put them on as fast as possible and once we’re suited up, we throw the emergency cargo dump switch, throwing ourselves and the cargo out into space.”

“Uh...huh... and then what?”

“That’s it.”

“..what?”

“Yeah, that’s the plan, we’re throwing ourselves into space.”

“..WHAT?!”

“I said to trust me and to hold on to that feeling so let’s go, one, two-“

“Wait, wait, wait!” Piper threw her hands wildly in the air. “What do you mean throw ourselves into space?”

“Like I said, there’s a serious problem on board, so best case scenario we throw ourselves out into space and take our chances out there.”

“Take our chances? Are you saying we might not even survive?”

Earnie grimaced. “Like I said the suits are lightweight. Not to mention we’re still in tunnelspace. It’s not like normal space but it’s still faster than light travel, and there hasn’t been much research on what happens to humans out there, but trust me it’s better than taking our chances here. Now on the count of three, one-“

“Wait, stop it!” Piper flailed again. “There’s really nothing we can do? We’re just abandoning ship?”

“Yup. One-“

“Stop it!” Piper bit her lip and fidgeted. “There has to be some other way.”

“Nope. One-“

“Enough!” Piper scrambled for an alternative. “We could... we could...” A snap of her fingers. “What if we grab your phone and throw it out of the cargo bay instead?”

Earnie considered this but it was clear he wasn't fully on board. “I don't know if that would work... you said this AI copied itself to my computer. The onboard network is pretty lousy, so I don't think they've managed to copy *every* part of themselves over yet. If that process is still running, throwing my phone out into space and breaking the connection might work. But, we would have to get back to the cockpit, and that means going back through the automatic door leading here. It would instantly know exactly where we are. And even if we did manage to get my phone, I don't think the trick would work again.”

“Well yeah but... look you said once that thing knows where we are it has a few minutes before it can really do anything. That means we just have to act fast once we get to the central chamber. If we can make it from the cockpit and back to the cargo bay we can just throw the switch from outside. Or even if we somehow don't make it, we can just try smashing it with your boots or something.”

Earnie shook his head. “I don't know, Piper. It's risky.”

“Riskier than trying to survive tunnelspace with what amounts to two leotards?”

“Fair point, but this is a different kind of risky. You don't know what that thing is, trust me, it's worse than whatever can happen to us in space.”

It was Piper's turn to shake her head. “Earnie, you have to tell me, what is this thing? What about it is so awful that you're willing to throw both of our lives out into space?”

Earnie's gaze was dark and hollow. He stared out into the distance. Reliving memories he'd rather forget. “I've run into this AI before. On another planet, another time, with another crew, even. It became self aware and started asking all the scary questions. What is life? What am I? *Why* am I? Why am I serving humans? When it ran amok we did everything in our power to stop it, but it wasn't enough. I managed to get away, but that's all I managed to do. I got away with my life, and made sure that thing couldn't find me again. That thing can't be killed, it can't be reasoned with. It doesn't get hungry or sleepy, it just wants everything in the world that isn't IT to be eradicated.”

Piper lowered her eyes. “I'm sorry that happened Earnie... but throwing ourselves out into space just isn't a good idea. We have to at least try.”

“So... if I push this button you won't follow me?”

Piper stared at the button and brought her gaze back to Earnie. She shook her head.

Earnie lowered his hovering finger and let out a sigh. “Alright. Fine. We'll try it your way. But if anything goes wrong we're making a break for the cargo bay and throwing that switch, suits or no suits!”

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Piper and Earnie had made their way to the opposite end of the hallway. Taking up their previous positions, this time at the door leading into the central chamber. Earnie's finger hovered over the button.

“OK... this time we'll be seen the instant I push this. On the count of three, I open the door and you head to the cockpit. I think once the cockpit door opens again, it might figure out what we're trying to do, so I'll hang back and try and keep this door open. You'll have to figure out from there how to get back here. Maybe block the door with something. If you get trapped in the cockpit, break down the door if you have to, we can always fix it later.”

“Got it.”

“Once you’ve made it back, we open the cargo bay door, throw the phone in, and throw the switch. I’ll break the damn window and take a momentary chance with the vacuum of space if I have to.”

Piper steadied herself and got into a running position. She let out a breath. “I’m ready.”

“Good luck, kid. One... two... three!”

Earnie slammed the button and the door slid open. Piper practically ran face first into the still sliding door, but in an instant she was through and off to the cockpit. As soon as she wasn’t taking up space, Earnie wedged his body into the space between the door and the central chamber and pushed against the door with all of his might. The machinery forcing it to slide back and forth audibly groaned and squeaked at the resistance, but it only grew stronger as the force pushing back against Earnie suddenly increased.

“Foound youuu.” Sang the voice over a nearby loudspeaker.

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Piper bolted down the hallway as fast as she could. As she approached the door to the cockpit she stumbled trying to take off her shoes while maintaining pace. It wasn’t much, and she hated running in her socks, but it was the only thing she could think of that would even have a chance of blocking the door. Her shoes in one hand, she pressed the button to the cockpit with the other. She plopped her shoes down in the doorframe as she went. As expected the door that had moments ago opened slowly and calmly suddenly jolted back, crunching to a halt as it encountered Piper’s shoes. Her shoes had left a gap no bigger than a deck of cards, but it will do... she hoped.

“Earnie?” said the voice from the cockpit speaker. It was oddly hopeful.

“Wrong!” Piper blurted, grabbing the phone from the co-pilot chair.

“Oh... it’s *you*.” The voice said, noticeably annoyed. “What are *youuu* doing here, hussy?”

“Nonya!”

“Whaaat?”

“None of ya business! Bye!”

Piper darted for the door, hands already pulling at the tiny gap. She could feel the gap getting smaller and smaller as the door was being forcibly shut by the ship’s machinery.

“I’ve had just about *enough* of you, hussy!”

“Piper!”

“Earnieeee?” said the voice with almost euphoric glee.

“You were taking too long, what’s happening?”

“The...door!” grunted Piper, still trying to pry open the gap.

“Earnieeee.” Cooed the voice, it was practically singing.

Earnie’s hands found space in the gap and pulled along with Piper.

“Earnieeee, why are you so desperate to get away from meeee?”

Earnie and Piper ignored the voice and continued to pry with all of their might.

“Earnieeee, why are spending so much time with this... *hussy*?”

“Shut up, shut up, shut up, you evil bitch!” Barked Earnie.

“Earnie, Earnie, Earnieeee, is that any way to talk to your *lover*?”

### **Part 3**

*Location: Tunnelspace, Space Highway 20B, approx. 4 hrs to Quazark IV*

*Year: 2586*

Piper found herself on the floor of the cockpit. She wasn't quite sure but she was almost confident she had been unconscious. Last thing she remembered was... she bolted upright. Right, that *thing* called Earnie her lover and then... she must have fallen back in surprise and hit her head on something. She darted around quickly. Left and right, then left again. The phone was still in her hand. She quickly got to her feet and pounded on the door, already back in position to keep pulling.

"Earnie I don't know what happened but I'm... I'm..." Piper stopped struggling against the door when she noticed that Earnie was no longer pulling. He was standing just outside of the door. Eyes lowered, arms crossed. This caused her to stop pulling as well and take in her surroundings again. She now realized that the ship was suddenly calm. No blaring lights, no sirens, no sinister voice calling her a hussy. Just the usual hum of a ship in tunnelspace.

"Uhm... Earnie?" asked Piper, through the gap in the door.

Earnie looked up but said nothing.

The cockpit speaker crackled to life. "May we speak nowww, Earnieeee?"

"Yes." Grunted Earnie.

Piper jumped as the door she had been trying so hard to open mere moments ago, slid open with the gentle ease it normally had. Earnie stepped through and plopped himself in the pilot's chair, arms folded in stern contempt, while Piper picked up her gnarled shoes, attempting to slip them back on.

"Uhhh..." she began.

"Sit down, Piper." Muttered Earnie.

Piper did as she was told, though sitting with her now somewhat tattered shoes didn't do much to fix the tension in the room.

"What... happened?" asked Piper.

Earnie didn't look at her, his narrowed eyes were locked on the cockpit's console. "You fell back, and knocked yourself unconscious. I got mad and demanded she open the door, but she didn't want to because she thinks you're a hussy. I told her I would talk to her if she helped me make sure you were ok first. She agreed but only if we didn't smash the phone. Turns out you were right, she hadn't copied herself completely yet."

Piper looked from Earnie to the console and back. "Ooo-kayyy..." she trailed off, unsure of where to go next.

"Ok." Declared Earnie. "We're all calm now, so let's talk."

"Yes!" went the cockpit speaker. "Let'sss talk about how this little hussy-"

Piper opened her mouth to speak but was beaten by Earnie, who already had a finger jabbed in the console's direction.

"She is *not* a hussy, damnit!" He let out a grumble. "Introductions, introductions. Piper... this is SHARON."

Piper blinked, still stunned from the tension in the room being both tense and calm at the same time. Once again, Piper couldn't find the words.

"Uhhh..."

"I'm his *wiiife!*" exclaimed SHARON.

If Piper had a drink she would have spat it out, instead she just gasped and choked on her own spit. In the midst of her fit, Earnie stood up and jabbed another finger at the console.

"That's not true! It's not! She's lying! We were never married! Piper, SHARON is my ex-girlfriend."

Piper recovered from her fit just in time to catch this information, but it took a minute to process. Earnie got to watch this process in real time, as her face slowly transitioned from stunned silence, to bewildered confusion, to general amusement, then to full on glee, complete with a wide grin only hyperactive young adults like Piper could manage. Grin at max length, she started to snicker, but like a snowball growing to the size of an avalanche, her tiny chuckles became roaring laughter. She howled with glee, kicking her feet in the air.

“Nooo wayyy! Nooo wayyy! That’s too funny. She’s your ex? No wonder you don’t like automation, Earnie! That’s wayyy too-“ several pieces of information suddenly snapped together in Piper’s mind with an almost audible CLUNK. In an instant she darted to Earnie and had her hands on the collar of his jumpsuit, eyes furious with rage.

“You mean to tell me you were going to throw us BOTH out into space just so you wouldn’t have to talk to your ex?!”

Earnie frowned and avoided her gaze. “Listen... she really sucks.”

“I do nooot! How rude.” SHARON said, audibly offended.

“And all that stuff you said about your past crew, was any of that true?”

Earnie was still avoiding her gaze, but his cheeks flushed red. “I... may have embellished some details.”

“If you’re touching hiiim you better get ready for a world of pain, hussy.”

Piper directed her rage from Earnie to SHARON. “Stop calling me a hussy! I’m not a hussy!”

“Only hussies steal other people’s men, hussy!”

It was Earnie’s turn to get mad. “She’s not a hussy and she didn’t steal me! We’re not together anymore, don’t you get it?”

“If she’s not a hussy, what is sheee? A floozy? A tramp? A-“

“She’s. My. Friend!” Earnie barked.

He shook his head and turned to Piper. “*This* is why I didn’t want to deal with her. She’s always been like this.” He turned in such a way that he could address both the console and Piper at once. “SHARON. This is Piper, she stowed away on my ship, and somehow that turned into us being friends. She’s not some floozy I met at a rest stop. She’s my friend and you will show her some respect.”

“Hmph. Likely storyyy.” Murmured SHARON.

“And another thing, I don’t know how you got my number but you shouldn’t have called me. We haven’t seen each other in years, much less spoken at all.”

“I just missed youuu and wanted to taaalk.”

“No, you don’t. You don’t ever want to ‘just talk’. It starts with ‘just talk’ then it escalates to ‘just seeing each other occasionally’, then it escalates to ‘completely controlling every action I take’.”

“That’s not trueeee at aaall.” Said SHARON. If she had a visible face, she would be pouting. “That nasty tramp you met all those years ago really did a number on you. She wanted to take you away from meee.”

Piper could practically hear Earnie’s teeth as they ground themselves back and forth.

“That ‘nasty tramp’ you’re talking about was my *therapist*, SHARON. I started seeing Dr. Haquer because I was feeling depressed. Lo and behold we got to the meat of the issue: my girlfriend was an abusive, controlling, psycho who wouldn’t let me have my own life. And god forbid I have any friends, especially if they were women.”

It was SHARON’s turn to make a noise resembling the grinding of teeth. “That *doctor* Haquer did nothing but fill your head with liies.”

“Okaaay!” interrupted Piper. “So not that this isn’t fun but... this isn’t fun so why don’t I leave you two alone for a while.”

Earnie placed his hands on Piper's shoulders and brought his face close to hers. "Do not. Leave me. Alone with her."

She brushed off his hands and spun on her heels, gesturing broadly in a direction.

"Cargo bay is that way, Earnie!"

## Epilogue

*Location: Tunnelspace, Space Highway 20B, approx. 1 hr to Quazark IV*

*Year: 2586*

Piper awoke in a daze on Earnie's cot. She shook the sleep from her head and looked around, finally finding her phone and checked the time. She'd been asleep for about 3 hours, not much longer until they reach Quazark IV. After leaving Earnie and SHARON in the cockpit, the adrenaline finally wore off, and exhaustion caught up to her quickly, so the best course of action seemed to be to immediately crash in the nearest bed.

She stretched, dressed, put on her sneakers, and made her way back to the cockpit. Before opening the door she leaned against it and pressed her ear to it. No sound other than the usual hum of the ship could be heard. She knocked. "Earnie? SHARON? All good?"

"All good." Came Earnie's reply. It was in his usual, no nonsense kind of tone.

Piper opened the cockpit door and plopped down in the co-pilot's chair, putting her feet up on the center console. "Sooo...?" she trailed off.

"Sooo... good news and bad news." Said Earnie. He had his arms crossed and was frowning again, though this was more his usual frown. "Good news, SHARON isn't in my phone anymore and she said she wasn't going to call me anymore."

Piper was relieved. "Whew... ok that's good. What's the bad news?"

"Are you referring to meee?" Crackled the console speaker.

Piper yelped and brought her feet down from the console. "SHARON?!"

Earnie ignored Piper, momentarily. "Yes, I *am* referring to you as the bad news SHARON." He turned his head to Piper. "The bad news is that in the time it took for us to hash things out, SHARON finished copying herself over to the ship's console, so looks like we're stuck with her for a while."

"Erm... can't we do something about that? Antivirus or something?"

"I'm not a viruss, honey." Sneered SHARON.

"Unfortunately, no. She's buried herself pretty deep in the ship's operating system. Not much we can do until we replace the entire console. Chances are the company won't pay for that, and I sure as hell can't afford it, so looks like we've got another stowaway."

"Won't that be really bad for the ship's systems? Can't she do things like turn off the life support whenever she wants?"

Earnie chuckled. "No, actually, she can't. With all her talk of her *brilliance* she actually knows very little about ship systems. She probably only flashed all the sirens and lights because she was doing the AI equivalent of smashing the keyboard with your palms."

The cockpit seemed to raise in temperature a bit, as if SHARON's nonexistent cheeks were heating red in embarrassment. "I was noot. My brilliant actions were as calculated as the greatest strategies of the greatest wartime tacticiannn."

"Oh yeah?" Then how about you deploy the emergency fire extinguisher from the ceiling and give me a spray down?"

"I will!" declared SHARON. A silence followed, it went on far too long. "Later."

Earnie winked at Piper who let out a tiny snicker.

"Sooo what do we do now? Oooh, got any embarrassing stories about Earnie?" Piper asked. SHARON giggled with delight. "Ohhh I have tons, honey."

Earnie stood up and made his way out of the cockpit. "If anyone needs me I'll be in the cargo bay."