

## Wanderlust

### Part 1

*Location: Space Highway Entrance 12A*

*Year: 2586*

Earnie adjusted the control wheel of his ship. The nose of his vessel drifted slowly a few degrees north, then east, and came to a stop. He examined the dials, charts, meters, and other instruments helping him plot his course. Perfect, as always. With a little smile, he flipped open the plastic shield hiding the big red button. He'd been doing this for about 15 years now, but it was still a little thrilling to hit a big red button. With a confident click, and a sudden jolt that sent him back into his cushy chair, his cruiser leaped forward into tunnelspace, traveling at a rate just beyond the speed of light. The view in front of him blurred into infinity. Stars became streaks, planets entered and disappeared from the sensory instruments before they could even be logged. His cruiser being a top of the line machine, his trajectory perfectly planned, and his speed as high as physics would currently allow, Earnie settled back into his chair with a relaxed sigh. At his current speed it would take him somewhere in the ballpark of six hours before he would arrive at his destination of Quazark II. It would be quite a while before he would have to touch the controls again.

Earnie sighed again, this time a bit more annoyed than relaxed. He did enjoy his work, but he did sometimes miss actually getting to *pilot* a spacecraft. Earnie got up and stretched, taking one last look at the view of the entire universe whizzing by in an instant. Automated controls or no, it was still a nice view. He pressed the button furthest to the left, and a thin metal panel slid over the view window, cutting off his view. Now for the hard part of the journey. Not the part where he had to navigate a four million pound vessel just right so he didn't turn every other object in his path into a colorful mist, oh no, that was the easy part. Now it was a matter of finding something to do for the next six hours so he didn't get so bored he blew his brains out. First things first, check the engine, life support, and other things that needed checking. He wandered to the various parts of the ship. No small walk considering his vessel was a moderate sized cruiser. In Earth terms, it was the size of nine RVs stacked on top of each other, with about as much room for each compartment and all of its equipment in each. Each compartment was separated by a small sliding doorway. Just like each compartment of a train, except for the part where changing train cars doesn't carry the possibility of being sucked into the endless void of deep space. *Don't worry*, Earnie thought as this crossed his mind *you'll die a hundred different ways in the vacuum of space before distance from the ship becomes a real problem.*

He wandered from compartment to compartment, checking more dials, needles, and data read outs as he went. Engines? Normal. Life support? Normal. Oxygen? Normal. That's to be expected. Doesn't make it any less dull. Earnie let out another sigh. Alright then, all the actually *productive* tasks are done, so it was time to be less productive. A book then? Time to get back to *Helios Angels: A Weird and Unique Tale*. He wandered over to his living compartment, which of course had to act as the living compartment, bedroom compartment, dining compartment, additional storage compartment and in really dire cases, bathroom compartment. Earnie was sure that there was some sort of superstition amongst spaceship manufacturers that if the pilots and crew aboard their ships got too comfortable they would be less productive.

He squeezed into his living compartment and reached for the large cardboard box that held his entertainment materials. Books, pornography, travel board games, more pornography, a deck of cards, and so forth. He had a decent collection of these materials since travelling all across the galaxy in a (mostly) automated spacecraft left him more than a little bored and lonely. But boredom and loneliness are temporary when you've got a good book, especially when some of those books have very nice pictures of attractive women in them.

Earnie placed a hand on the box and had just gotten his fingers under one of the top flaps when the flaps suddenly burst all at once and a figure burst out of box, sending Earnie back over in shock. This shock was made all the worse by the ear piercing noise the figure suddenly made.

“PIPER IS IN THE HOUUUSE!” cried a shrill voice.

Earnie sat back in horror clutching his chest. 52 was far too old to get a shock that bad. The figure that gave him that massive shock was actually a slender young blonde woman, probably in her mid 20s, in a tank top and shorts, currently beaming at him with the biggest smile he had ever seen, hands on her hips. She seemed to be waiting for his response.

What came out of Earnie was “urb, blub, ugh”, which wasn’t all that helpful.

The woman’s eyes grew wide. She hopped out of the box and sped over to him on the floor. Getting far too close for comfort she squealed “Eeee, is that some kind of alien language? That’s so neat!”

“Huh? What? No, it’s not. Help me up, damn it.”

Earnie reached out a hand and the woman helped him to his feet. Considering he was pretty solidly built for his age, and this woman had the build of a lollypop, he did most of the heavy lifting in this regard.

“So who are ya, mister?” said Earnie’s new stowaway.

“Huh? I should be asking *you* that, missy. This is my ship and you are currently- “

“Oooh this is your ship? That’s so cool! That makes you the captain!”

Earnie blinked. “Erm, yes, that it does. As I was saying, you are currently stowing away on my ship and-“

“Do you have a crew? Can I join?”

“What? Huh? No.”

“Which answer was that for?”

This was getting nowhere. This girl was clearly not the kind who was used to... participating in reality.

“Alright little girl, let’s start over. My name is Earnie. Who. The hell. Are you?”

The girl smiled brighter than ever before and did her hands on hips pose again.

“Piper!” she declared and stuck out a hand. “Nice to meet ya, Earnie!”

Earnie shook her hand, though the action more closely resembled a large bear paw grasping some thin graham crackers.

“Alright then. That’s step one. Step two, what the hell are you doing on my ship?”

“I snuck aboard!” said Piper, proudly.

A beat of silence.

“I... can see that. I kinda meant, why?”

At this, Piper put on her most determined expression, planted one foot forward and pointed towards Earnie. While she *was* pointing at him, her expression and demeanor told Earnie she was more gesturing dramatically than pointing *at* him.

“To explore the farthest reaches of space. To see the unseen, to know the unknowable, to run circles around every star in the sky!”

More silence. She was beaming so hard, Earnie wouldn’t be surprised if her face was just preinstalled that way.

“Erm... right.”

Piper returned to her hands on hips pose. “So where are we going?”

“What? *We* aren’t going anywhere. *I* am in the middle of making a delivery, and you’re a stowaway.”

“Oh cool what are we delivering?”

Earnie rolled his eyes. Clearly talking to this woman was a lost cause.

“It’s none of your business. Look, you’re a stowaway. That means I technically have the right to do with you what I please- “

Piper immediately recoiled in horror and covered herself with her hands. “Eww! What are you? Some kind of space pervert?”

Earnie’s face lit bright red. “No! For gods sake, no! I meant, by law, I could throw you out of the airlock if I wanted to!”

“Are you sure you’re not a space pervert? There was a ton of porn in that box before I emptied it to make room.”

Earnie ignored this. “I have the right to do with you what I please, *but* since I’m such a nice guy, I’m going to send your ass back to Earth. I won’t even tell the local Earth cops you snuck aboard if you just stay quiet and don’t annoy me on the trip back.”

Piper pouted. “Lame. You’re lame. This ship is lame.”

“Whatever, I don’t care what you think of me. I guess as long as you’re stuck here you can use the ship but don’t touch anything.”

“Oooh can I explore? I’ve never been on a ship before!”

“You... haven’t?”

“Nope!”

Earnie considered this. He found it odd that an Earthling had never been in a ship before. Even the poorest Earth families can usually afford to take a trip to the moon once in a while. Hell, a trip to the moon these days is about as intensive as a trip to the movies.

For the first time since they met, Earnie grinned. “Alright then, little girl. How about you start exploring... after you’ve seen what space *really* looks like.”

Piper’s grin went even bigger (somehow) and she squealed with delight.

A few minutes later the two were in the cockpit.

“Feast your eyes on *this!*” Earnie said with a smile as he pushed the button farthest to the left. The panel slid up from the view screen slowly. Normally the speed at which the screen slid up made it a real pain in the ass to do things like navigate an asteroid field on short notice, but in this case it gave one hell of a dramatic effect.

The rising of the panel matched the rising of Piper’s eyes. It matched inversely, with the lowering of her jaw, as she gasped at the majesty of the universe blurring before her. Earnie couldn’t even fathom what was going on in her mind. Piper didn’t exactly seem all that bright, but you’d have to truly be a dullard to not appreciate how truly astonishing tunnelspace is, especially if you’re seeing it for the first time. Some folks, he heard, broke down and cried upon seeing it. Some went mad. Others curled into a fetal position and sobbed uncontrollably at the realization of just how *big* the universe truly is, yet how simply and easily a spaceship, something made by mere mortal men, could bend it to its will. Piper, meanwhile, simply took it all in. Her look of astonishment eventually subsided, and her enormous toothy grin returned, only this time it was accompanied by the slightest little sparkle of tears forming in her eyes.

The seconds ticked away, and finally, Earnie decided enough was enough. He pushed the button again, and the panel slid back into place. He turned to Piper, and before he could get a word in she was suddenly in front of him, wrapping her arms around him in a big hug. She buried her face in his jumpsuit and sniffled.

“Thank you.”

Earnie turned red again and awkwardly returned the hug. He eventually pushed her away, albeit gently.

“Alright, alright, enough of that. Like I said, I’m a nice guy. So there’s your space adventure, little girl. Now we’ve got about five more hours before we get to Quazark II. So find something to do, but don’t touch anything.”

Piper smiled brightly again and saluted. "Aye aye, Captain!"  
"Don't call me captain."

## **Part 2**

*Location: Space Highway 12A, North*

*Year: 2586*

“Are we there yeet?” whined Piper for the third time that hour.

“For that last damn time, NO!” barked Earnie for the third time that hour.

A grand total of 30 minutes had passed since Earnie had shown Piper the view from the cockpit. In that time she managed to look around the entire ship, but found herself bored almost immediately. She eventually returned to the cockpit with Earnie, that being the only place on the ship with chairs. She sat down and immediately began her groaning.

“How much longerrr?” she whined again.

This was only the second time she asked this question, so Earnie was a little less annoyed when he responded, “I told you, about five hours.”

Piper pouted and idly kicked her feet in her chair.

“How is traveling through space this boring?”

“Well when I’m bored on a long trip I usually read a book or something.” Here, he eyed Piper. “But unfortunately, I seem to have *misplaced* all the things I use to entertain myself.”

“Is that a euphemism?”

“I didn’t know you knew that word.”

Piper stuck her nose in the air and folded her arms. “Jerk.”

She resumed her kicking and pouting. Though this didn’t last long. “Hey Earnie? What are you delivering?”

“Can’t say, unfortunately. Company policy. I can’t divulge the nature of my cargo. Especially to *stowaways*.”

“Aweee c’mon. Tell me. It’s not like I’m gonna steal it or anything. Plus you’re gonna get rid of me soon enough why not just tell me?”

Earnie considered this. He supposed there wasn’t much risk in letting someone like Piper in on the cargo. Not like she is gonna tell their competitors or anything.

“Alright then, I can break the rules this one time, I guess. I am transporting a shipment of nails from Earth to Quazark II.”

“Nails?”

“That’s right.”

“Like, cyber nails, ion nails, or thermal nails?”

“What? Those aren’t real. No, like nails you use with a hammer.”

“Oh... so not like, something cool?”

“Look,” Earnie sighed. “I thought you were going to explore the ship. Didn’t you say you’ve never been on one? Couldn’t you find something cool in here to occupy yourself for five hours?”

Piper shrugged. “Well, maybe, but I didn’t really know what anything was so I lost interest pretty quickly.”

At this, Earnie slapped his palm to his forehead. Of-fucking-course that’s all it was. Of course the explanation for why this little nuisance was pestering him was something this simple instead of something so obtuse. He clapped his hands and stood up.

“Alright then, if that’s the case. I need something to do too, so why don’t I give you the tour?”

Piper hopped up with glee and pumped a fist in the air. “Hellyeah!”

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The two made their way to the engine compartment. A room with very little walking space, but absolutely cramped with machinery. Organized neatly on either side of the room was six large metal boxes, each adorned with several lights, nodes, and a large round door in the center. Between these large boxes were several smaller boxes that acted as storage shelves for assorted wires and do-dads, though you wouldn't know that just by looking at them, as Earnie took pride in carefully organizing these shelves. When your walking space amounted to a hallway big enough for one person, you learn to give a shit about things like cable management.

The door slid open, and the two squeezed in. Earnie somehow managed to gesture broadly at the room. "The engine room. Where all the space magic happens."

"Woow!" gasped Piper, in genuine awe. "How do they work?"

"Erm... well..."

Earnie did in fact know how a spaceship engine functioned, after all he had to train for several years before he could even set foot on a craft, but it was hard to put into words. Imagine trying to explain how a computer worked to a caveman. Or explaining how the Roman Empire fell to a toddler. Or the basics of empathy to a business major. Sure, you might understand the concept and be knowledgeable about it, but how exactly do you explain it to someone who has never encountered the subject before?

"Well... you see... it's a lot like a typical combustion engine. You know how those generally work, right? You know what a car is?"

Piper nodded intensely. For all it was worth, she really was trying to pay attention.

"Well, spaceships work the same way, they burn fuel to propel the ship forward. Only in this case, it's not fossil fuels, it's matter. Any matter will do. But obviously burning say, a log of wood won't generate enough power to move a ship, so we need lots of matter, in a really small space, which we call a fuel core. A fuel core is an orb the size of a baseball, but through intense matter compression, its so dense you can't even fathom it. A mass of millions of kilograms, burned away little by little as the ship travels. They last a long, long, time but eventually they do run out. Part of my job is keeping spare cores around and replacing them if they run dry. Each one of those big boxes you see is actually a compartment that holds a core, and if the little green light on them turns red, that means it's empty."

"Neatooo." Said Piper. She took a moment to look around the room before returning her gaze to Earnie. "They look like washing machines."

"...yes I suppose they do in fact look like washing machines."

And so the tour went. The two drifted from compartment to compartment, and the same song and dance was repeated as Earnie explained the life support systems (don't touch), oxygen system (REALLY don't touch) and so forth. After about an hour of touring the two returned to the cockpit. Piper was holding her head, overloaded with the knowledge of spaceship mechanics.

"Ugh that's so much to know... how do you learn all this stuff?"

Earnie shrugged. "I went to school for it, just like you go to school to learn how to be a doctor or something. And just like a doctor it's less about memorizing every last little detail and more knowing what to do when the moment comes."

Piper straightened up. "Oh yeah I wanted to ask you something else. I noticed you gave all these complicated explanations of how the parts of the ship work, but your actual job seems to be to replace parts and pull switches when they're needed. Why is that? I would think you would need a huge crew to man a ship like this. Heck, I've never even seen you touch the wheel."

Earnie nodded and let out a sigh. "Well, that's what happens when you automate things. When ships were first introduced you really did need tons of people to man them. The largest ships required crews by the dozens. But sooner or later, technology improves, and all of a sudden the work that used to require 10 people now only requires one. The engine compartment was the first to be improved, I think. Managing an engine so it doesn't blow up is a pretty in-depth task, not to mention expensive. So of

course, every manufacturer's R&D department was dedicated to finding a way to reduce the labor cost needed. Then was probably life support, the cockpit, and so on until we're where we are today."

Piper scrunched her face at this explanation. "That sounds lame. Space seems more fun when you've got people to travel with."

Earnie shrugged again. "Automation is a double edged sword, always has been. Think about when factories were first built and suddenly food production went from requiring 100 people and a week of labor to only needing 10 people and a day. That's really important because now you can feed the same number of people a lot quicker and a lot easier. That kind of change is beneficial for society, I think. But when those 90 people who aren't needed anymore still need to pay their bills or buy food, sooner or later a society is going to have to deal with them."

"Ugh my head is starting to hurt again..." Piper said, grasping her head.

"Don't worry too much about it," Earnie said, patting her shoulder. "That's for the politicians and the other loonies to worry about. All that to say, yeah, it gets kinda boring here when all I'm really expected to do is babysit machines that run themselves."

"You're pretty smart, Earnie."

Earnie allowed himself a look of smugness. "I *am* a space pilot after all."

"Are you really though? When you're mostly babysitting robots?"

"Shut up and take a nap or something, we've got another 3 hrs before we get there."

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Piper was awoken from her nap by the rumbling of the ship. The ride had been so smooth and natural that the slightest rumble caused her to suddenly wake and roll out of Earnie's cot in an instant. Fear gripped her as she realized the rumbling was getting harder and louder. She clambered her way through the living compartment door and started calling out for Earnie as she made her way to the cockpit. There she found Earnie at the controls, in tight focus.

"Earnie, wh-what's happening?" She yelled.

"Hmm?" Earnie said, turning around in his chair. He had only just noticed her.

"So you're finally awake. Did you have a nice nap?"

"WHAT IS HAPPENING?!" She yelled again.

"Cripes, calm down, we're landing. The ship rattles a bit when we take off and land. I honestly didn't think you'd even notice it. It's no worse than a bit of airplane turbulence."

"Turbulence is still scary!"

"Whatever, just sit down and buckle up we'll be at the port in just a few minutes."

Piper did as she was told, taking the seat next to Earnie and buckling herself in. Once finally in something resembling safety, she finally looked up and saw the view window. A large planet, in a lovely shade of blue-green was in view, taking up 80 or so percent of the window by itself, and getting larger as the ship approached. The view for Piper was a bit of a shock. Her heart was beating rapidly as the planet filled her vision. Finally her entire view was filled and she held her breath. For a few seconds the view from the cockpit was a misty blue-green void. Neither her nor Earnie spoke.

Finally the view changed. The misty void was revealed to be thick, fluffy clouds, which finally parted as the ship broke through the atmosphere of the planet, allowing Earnie and Piper to get a view of the world below. Piper's attitude changed in an instant from fear to excitement as her eyes took in all the details. A bustling metropolis, interconnected highways, grasslands, an absolutely uncountable number of lush green biomes overloaded her vision. The rumbling of the ship started to subside but didn't quite leave. Earnie expertly navigated the ship downwards, then leveled out, cruising several thousand feet in the air towards a large metal dome.

“Welcome to Quazark II. Our destination, The Paluba Memorial Space Port.” Earnie said with pride.

Piper unbuckled herself and pressed her face against the glass of the view window. “Woow!” was all she could manage. She said this several dozen more times as Earnie brought the ship closer and closer to the port. The ship finally landed in the hanger of the Paluba Memorial Space Port. As soon as the ship was still Piper bolted for the door.

“I can’t wait to see it!”

A large hand grabbed her shoulder. “Hold it, little girl. You’re not going out there.”

“Why nooot?”

“Not my fault, this time. It’s regulation. Only the pilots are allowed to roam this port. All other passengers are required to stay on the ship. If you break the rules the Quops will be on both of our asses. The Quazark people are really antsy about off-worlders.”

Piper squinted. “Quops?”

“Yeah, Quazark cops. Quops. I could have called them something worse but I was taught not to use fowl language when children are present.”

Piper rolled her eyes. “I’m 26, but fiiine. I want to deal with space cops as much as I want to deal with Earth cops, so I guess I’ll just stay here, BORED.”

“Right then.” Earnie made for the door. “Here’s the deal. I deliver the cargo while you stay here, pick up the next job which just so happens to be back to Earth, and in another six hours you’re back home and off my ship.”

Piper squinted again. “Next job? I thought you were just delivering stuff.”

“Yeah I deliver stuff to ports, then pick up other stuff at those ports and deliver it to the next and so on.”

“Ohhh, so you’re a space trucker. Not just a space delivery boy.”

“I guess you could call it that.”

“Do you poop in shopping bags like Earth truckers do?”

Earnie turned and left.

“You didn’t say nooo!”



### **Part 3**

*Location: Space Highway 12A, South*

*Year: 2586*

Piper was unusually quiet. Ever since Earnie returned to the ship with his new cargo (socks), she had been pouting in the cockpit. Considering this woman hadn't stopped talking the entire time they had known each other, Earnie found this a little concerning, but at the same time, it was kinda relaxing. And so, he chose to ignore her and simply enjoy the silence. This lasted about an hour before she finally spoke up again.

"Earnieeee?" she whined, this time not in a nuisance way, in a 'I'm gonna ask you something you're not gonna want to hear' kind of way.

"Hmm?"

"Could we maybe... stop somewhere?"

"Nope. Absolutely not, don't want to delay."

In an instant Piper was out of her chair and clutching Earnie by his jumpsuit, forcing her eyes as wide as possible to give him her sappiest look.

"Pleeease? Please, please, please, pleeease?" She begged.

Earnie gently pushed her away. "I already said no. We've got a long trip and any delays will delay my cargo as well as you getting off my ship."

Piper was on her knees now, hands clasped together. "Pleeease Earnieeee! I wanted to go on a space adventure and getting to see the port was cool but I didn't even get to leave the ship! I just want to take in some space culture! I want to see an alien, walk around on a different planet, cool stuff like that!"

Earnie sighed. "Look, Piper, I know you're excited but the universe is a pretty big place. What you're asking for is like asking to be dropped in the middle of a country you've never been to. You don't know the rules around here, culturally or legally. You could get yourself in trouble or even hurt. And to be perfectly honest, you're not missing much."

Piper shuffled forward a bit more, maintaining the same pose. "But- but- but- Earnieeee! I won't touch anything and I won't get lost, I promise! Besides you've been in space for a long time you must know of some place we could go were Earthlings won't get hurt!"

Earnie sighed again. *If I keep saying no, we'll just be talking in circles for another six hours and I really don't want that. Even so, where exactly could we go? What's a place en route to Earth that won't get Piper killed?* And suddenly, it came to him. *Hmm... yeah that could work.*

Earnie left Piper on the floor and pulled a large book from under his chair. It was a thick encyclopedia of charted space along Space Highway 12A. He flipped through a few pages, found what he was looking for, then started eyeing the controls, mumbling while doing some mental math. Piper remained where she was, maintaining the same pose, but her expression now more that of curiosity and hope. Finally Earnie snapped the book shut and looked at her.

"Ok. We'll stop somewhere."

Piper sprang up and was about to shout with glee but Earnie put a hand up and she silenced herself immediately. Earnie secretly wished this worked all the time.

"But... you're going to stay by me and do as your told, understand?"

Piper nodded feverishly, her smile full to bursting.

"And we're only staying there for an hour at most. It's a detour, not our destination."

Piper nodded furiously again, turning into a bobble head.

Earnie pulled up the controls and plotted the course...

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Earnie didn't make many stops in his travels. There usually wasn't any need to. His ship was always properly stocked with enough food, equipment, and facilities to last him twice as long as he needed. Still though, there was nothing in the company rule book about what course to take when transporting cargo, so there was technically no rule saying he couldn't take a detour through a star system he thought looked interesting, as long as his shipment arrived on time. This was how he found Bagoda's. A small bar right along Space Highway 12A. Located on a small planetoid just outside of the Rogunda asteroid belt. It wasn't much, but it was small, quiet, and had a good view of the stars which is how Earnie liked his bars.

Earnie explained all this to Piper as they made their way there, and she bounced up and down with glee. "A real space bar. That's so cool! Is it a wretched hive of scum and villainy?"

"Only on Bingo night."

The planetoid came into view. A dull gray rock smaller than a moon, with a shiny translucent dome, planted on the only part of its surface that wasn't a crater. The dome, Earnie eventually explained, provided an actual atmosphere that meant the patrons of the bar didn't have to travel through a tiny tunnel or risk the vacuum of space upon entering or leaving. It was about as large as a city block, but the only contained one building, that being Bagoda's.

The ship finally landed and Earnie unbuckled himself. Piper was already at the door, bouncing from foot to foot.

"C'mon Earnie get a move on! We've got a real space bar to explore!"

"Yeah, yeah settle down."

The door slid open and Earnie made his way down the steps. He took two steps forward before he noticed Piper was not immediately behind him. He turned and saw she was gingerly and dramatically making her way down the steps.

"This is one small step for man... one giant leap for Piperkind!" she shouted, and leaped from the final step onto the planetoid's surface. She took a moment to tap her feet against the ground.

"It's rock!" She declared.

"Uhh... yeah? What did you think planetoids were made out of?"

"Well yeah but it's like... space rock!"

Earnie rolled his eyes and gestured for her to come closer. The two marched their way towards the entrance. They started side by side but a few steps later, Earnie noticed that Piper had started to back away a little, and was trying to hide herself behind Earnie.

"What are you doing?"

"Well it's just... you know... what if this is a scummy bar filled with weirdos? Maybe they'll want to take advantage of a poor, inexperienced Earthling." She shuddered in horror.

Earnie rolled his eyes again. "Listen little girl, this isn't that kind of place. More importantly, don't flatter yourself. You think that just because you got all your squishy bits where they're supposed to be that means space folk want some of that? Nope. Space is pretty damn big, and most people who live out in space have grown beyond the interest in what Earth considers conventionally attractive."

Piper narrowed her eyes. "What's that supposed to mean?"

"It means that you've only got 2 legs and no exoskeleton. Some folks around here consider that more a genetic deformity than attractive."

"I knew you were a space pervert." Piper said, sticking out her tongue.

The two reached the door and pushed it open. Inside were various chairs, booths, and tables that you might see in a typical Earth bar, but there were also several odd looking contraptions that Earnie explained as being chairs for those not blessed with bi-pedal motion. Not to mention chairs supporting legs that bend 90 degrees to the right and left, those with over 4 legs, and one chair with a suspiciously long metal cone in the middle that neither Earnie or Piper could figure out who it was for. Some of these

booths and tables also had large warning labels on them with the phrase "This space reserved for incorporeal beings ONLY".

Piper took a minute to take in the bar's patrons. There were only a handful of beings in the bar, but their appearance made Piper stare in awe. In the back was a person who looked like a rather normal human but had a large bulbous head, as if someone had stuck a globe under his skull. They were currently talking to another being of similar stature, in some language that Piper couldn't understand, while his glass filled with strange liquid hovered in front of him. After a few minutes of observation Piper began to understand that the hovering glass wasn't natural, it was some form of telekinesis the being was using. To her right were beings that seemed to evolve from slugs. They were tall and slender with odd looking mandibles and eye stalks. Though Piper thought their bodies looked too squishy and slimy to be pleasant to touch, their skin tones were wildly colored, with sharp clashing hues. Piper thought they looked like the offspring between a slug and a kaleidoscope.

Piper finally shook herself out of her awestruck state and followed Earnie to the bar. He had already ignored the patrons and was currently talking to another human at the bar. The person had a similar build to Earnie, except his skin was darker and he did not have a beard. He was totally bald, and wearing a leather jacket with jeans. An oddly traditional looking man for such a place, thought Piper. As she approached he overheard them laughing, which was odd to Piper, as she was beginning to think Earnie wasn't capable of such a thing. She walked up to them and sat to Earnie's right.

"Now who's this little lady you got with you?" said the human to Earnie's left.

"I'm Earnie's first mate!"

"She's Earnie's first *stowaway*." Earnie clarified. "I'm helping her get back to Earth."

"Earthling, huh? I'm from Earth too, actually. Haven't been back there in ages, though. Not my scene. The name's Gene. Earnie and I are old buddies from our pilot training days."

"That's short for Eugene, by the way." Smirked Earnie.

Gene smacked Earnie on the back. "You cut that shit out. No one takes a bounty hunter seriously with a name like Eugene. Even in a galaxy filled with names like Trogbor and Curumbo, people still get a giggle when you say your name is Eugene."

Piper was awestruck again. "Woow! You're a space bounty hunter? That's so cool! What's that like?"

Gene shrugged. "Same as being an Earth one, I guess. I get tips on criminals, then go find them and bring them in for money. Better than sitting in an office all day, I guess."

"That's sooo cool. So are you out here looking for a bounty?"

"Nah, I'm actually on my way to collect and I just happened to stop in for a drink." As he said this he jerked a thumb to his left and Piper finally noticed a third being sitting at the bar. Only he wasn't exactly sitting so much as was strapped to the chair with thick metal chains. This being was a fish-like humanoid. He was as proportioned as a normal human, but his skin was covered in blue-green scales, with dark eyes and light pupils. Gills adorned his neck and fins protruded from the sides of his arms. His shackles looked like they were bending them uncomfortably. He was frowning heavily and staring at the bar counter, not really in the mood for conversation.

"This here is Scarro. A fishman from the Daruma galaxy." He kicked Scarro's foot (tailfin?). "Hey Scarro, why don't you tell them why I brought you in, she'll get a kick out of it."

Scarro slid his eyes towards them, then brought them back, his frown heavier than ever. He spoke, in a voice that was halfway between human speech and a gargle. "Parking tickets."

Piper snickered but eventually burst into full on laughter.

"Hahahaaa! No waaay, parking tickets? That's all?"

Earnie wagged a finger in a tut-tut manner. "Don't go bad mouthing parking tickets. You probably aren't aware but in some parts of the universe skipping out on parking tickets is a serious felony."

"Huh? How?"

"It's pretty complicated actually. See when Earth first began to colonize space, every single group organized to try and have some grip over a part of the universe. After all, if you're the first one on a planet there's basically nothing stopping you from having complete control over it, as long as it's uninhabited. So the usual suspects organized and allied themselves to be the first ones to conquer as much of space as possible. These were the politicians, the large nations, the kinds of people you would expect to want to have a grip on an entire planet. But one group that nobody expected ended up taking over a huge chunk of the known universe: a union of meter maids known as the Metrearchs. They were quietly acquiring funds for space travel for basically their entire existence. From what I hear their president at the time was considered a mad man, but hindsight is 20-20 I guess."

"Meter maids? That's insane. Wait a minute why *are* there parking laws in space? I mean who would agree to that?"

Earnie shrugged. "Can't just park a four million pound vehicle wherever you want. Especially if that place is an undiscovered, yet not uninhabited planet. Gotta respect the natural order and all that. Plus the why doesn't really matter when they've got armed meter maids sweeping their territory around the clock. Kinda hard to argue with a cop when he's got a gun in your face before you even find out it's a no parking zone."

"Bahhh enough with the history lesson." Said Gene, waving a hand. "Where's your manners, Earnie? Get the lady a drink, will ya?"

"Alright, but nothing too strong. She's only been off world for something like 16 hours now."

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And so, the trio spent their time drinking, laughing and swapping stories. Piper was given a drink called Pong, which smelled like rum, tasted like bourbon, and was about as thick as a stout. Not to mention, it changed color every time she picked up her glass. Somehow, though, it only managed to be as strong as a typical Earth beer. Regardless of the oddities of her drink, Piper gulped it down with glee. She emptied the glass and let out a satisfied gasp.

"That was great! Better than any drink on Earth."

"That's not a hard bar to clear. Alright then, we better get going."

"Aweeee, ok. Bye Gene!"

Gene gave a little wave. "So long little lady. Next time you're in space legitimately and you feel like an adventure, give me a look up. I could always use the help when I'm on the job."

The two stood up and made their way to the door. Earnie pushed it open, but noticed that Piper did not follow. She was standing halfway between the counter and the door, rubbing her fingertips together. Earnie gestured to the door, but Piper did not move.

She bit her lip and turned around to Gene. "Gene... did you really mean it when you said you could use the help?"

Gene raised an eyebrow and nodded. "Yeah, of course. Never hurts to have another pair of hands around when I'm trying to bring someone in."

Piper was biting her lip even harder. She fidgeted some more and turned around to Earnie. "Earnie... I think... I want to go with Gene."

Earnie shook his head, still holding the door. "No. Absolutely not. You're going home."

Piper backed away. "I don't *want* to go home. I never did. I wanted to go out into space. I wanted to see the sights. Look at it this way, you didn't want me on your ship anyway, and Gene needs the help, so why not just let me off here?"

Earnie let the door close behind him as he walked back into the bar, stepping only a foot or so closer to Piper.

“Piper don’t be ridiculous. You can’t make it out here on your own. I trust Gene but bounty hunting is dangerous.”

Piper took a step back. Her voice took on a more confident tone.

“You barely know me. I can take care of myself- OW! Let go of me!”

Earnie had walked forward, grabbed her by the arm and was leading her towards the door.

“No, you cannot. You don’t know what it’s like out here, you’re better off going home.”

Piper shook her arm out of Earnie’s grip. “You do not get to decide what’s best for me. And you know what I’d rather hang out with a cool bounty hunter who actually explores the universe than with some old robot babysitter moving the worlds most boring cargo from who cares to who gives a shit.”

Earnie got right up in her face. He couldn’t hold back anymore, it was time to let her have it. He jabbed a finger at Piper and yelled, “Fine! Go then! At least babysitting robots is better than babysitting an annoying, empty headed bimbo earthling, who used her last functioning braincell to do nothing but waste my fucking time!”

Silence.

Piper frowned and tears welled in her eyes, but she said nothing. She pushed past Earnie and ran out of the bar, slamming the door behind her. Earnie ground his teeth and whirled around to Gene. He lurched forward and grabbed him by the collar of his jacket and started yelling again.

“What the fuck do you think you’re doing? She’s just a kid she doesn’t know what it’s like out there. She could get beaten, assaulted, killed, all three at once, I don’t know, but if anything were to happen to her I swear to God I’d... I’d... I’ll...”

Earnie trailed off. He let go of Gene and slumped into his chair at the bar. He put his head in his hands and groaned. Throughout his whole rant, Gene hadn’t even so much as flinched. There was a long pause as Earnie stewed in misery. It was Earnie who finally broke the silence.

“I fucked up, didn’t I?”

“... yup.”

“I should go apologize.”

“Yup.”

“Fuck you.”

“Love you too, buddy.”

“Can someone untie me?” gargled Scarro.

Earnie stood up and made his way out the door.

~\*~

Earnie stepped out of Bagoda’s and scanned the horizon for Piper. She hadn’t gotten very far. She was only a few dozen feet away to the north east, sitting with her head on her knees, looking out at the stars. Earnie marched over. When he was close enough he cleared his throat.

“Ahem... mind if I sit?”

Piper said nothing. Earnie sat down next to her. They sat in silence. Piper finally broke it.

“Do you want to know why I left Earth, Earnie?”

Earnie looked at her and nodded.

“I didn’t just leave... I ran away. I didn’t just run away from my home... I ran away from my planet. I ran away from Earth. Why? Because Earth sucks. It’s always sucked. There’s so much awful shit on Earth. And the people, dear god. The people make it all the worse. People still do things like war, racism, homophobia, poverty, all the worst parts of being alive are on Earth all the time. Humans have been on the planet for millions of years, yet we’ve never EVER been able to get along. It ate away at me every day. All the misery in the world, it hurt to even think about all the tragedy that happened every day. But then I learned about space travel. I learned there wasn’t just one planet, there were millions.

Billions, even. And I thought 'one of them has to be less sucky than this'. It had to be, right? So one day I got the courage to leave. I snuck into a space port, found the biggest box I could squeeze into, and off I went. To find a new world where things suck less. And you know what, Earnie? Things suck out here just as much as they suck back there. I mean, c'mon a whole part of the universe is controlled by meter maids? Space truckers still doing boring shit like shipping nails and socks across the universe? Pilots reduced to maintenance workers? It's all the same shit. It's all the same, gray, boring, horrible mush that it's always been. And it's even got the same jerk-ass old men, who think they know better than everyone else."

Piper finally stopped. Earnie let the silence hang just a bit longer.

"Piper... I'm sorry. I shouldn't have said all that. I was angry. And to be honest... I was worried. I was worried about your safety. I know you think my ship is boring and hanging out with Gene would certainly be exciting, but the universe is just so damn big, it's filled with all sorts of scary things that are hard for 52 year old space truckers to deal with, much less someone who just stepped off their planet. But you're right. You're an adult. I won't stand in your way. If you want to go with Gene, I won't stop you."

He paused and let his apology hang in the air.

"But you were wrong about one thing... space doesn't suck like Earth does."

Piper looked at him for the first time since he sat down. She raised an eyebrow. "Kinda seems like it does."

"Ok well, yes, a lot of it does. That's what happens when all the sucky people on Earth colonize everything nearby, they make it suck as much as they do, cause that's all they know. How to suck. But believe me the universe is a vast, vast place. There's lots to see and do, and most importantly, a lot of it isn't controlled by those sucky people. We're bound to find something cool eventually. As long as we keep looking."

Piper stiffened up a bit. "We?"

Earnie rubbed the back of his neck. "I mean... well... you know, if you wanted I suppose you could hang around a bit longer. If you don't want to go with Gene that is."

Piper sniffled and wiped her eyes.

"Do you really mean that?"

Earnie shrugged. "As long as you don't mind travelling with an old robot babysitter."

Piper chuckled and leaned her head against his shoulder. "And you better be ok with travelling with an empty headed bimbo."

They sat in silence and looked up at the stars.

## Epilogue

*Location: JFAC Asteroid Belt, Entrance to Space Highway 35B*

*Year: 2586*

The noise was incredible. On Earth, mufflers exist for a reason. In space, they don't exist at all, as the vacuum of space is more than sufficient at blocking noise. But, on Earth, motorcyclists remove and modify their mufflers to make noise and present themselves in a flashy way. In space, motorcyclists modify their mufflers to the point of breaking the laws of physics in order to achieve this goal. Which is why, even though Earnie's ship was parked several miles away from the action, Piper and Earnie still had to wear earplugs as they watched the Helios Angels rev up their bikes for an afternoon of interstellar drag racing.

"Pretty cool, huh?" Called out Earnie over the noise.

"It's very loud!" Piper called back. "But yeah it's really cool!"

The next racers lined up. From their view, Earnie and Piper could just barely make out the waving limbs of the bikers (different limbs from a variety of species and races), and were certain they were jeering their rivals and praising the ones they placed bets on, but couldn't actually make anything out for sure, due to the roaring of engines.

A being that resembled an enormous mound of jelly took position in between the two racers. And after calling out what was assumed to be numbers, and throwing out a flag, the racers took off, disappearing in an instant as they immediately shotgunned into tunnelspace.

The noise subsided just enough that Piper and Earnie didn't have to shout.

"Whew... so where's the finish line?"

"Hmm... not sure really. They launched into tunnelspace, so the finish line could be anywhere from the next galaxy over to the end of the universe. As long as whatever law enforcement is patrolling the space highway doesn't stop them first. They have a history of hassling the Helios Angels, you know."

Earnie switched on the cockpit radio to a pirate frequency. It was currently broadcasting the live play-by-play of the race they were currently watching. Grognar was in the lead, but only by a few picometers by the sounds of it.

"We should have put money on this." Said Piper.

"Ehh... I dunno if I trust that kind of bookie." Muttered Earnie.

Piper patted him on the hand. "It's ok to admit you're not good at picking racers, Earnie."

"Don't make me eject you out of the airlock."

Earnie checked his watch. "I think we better get a move on, can't let the cargo be late."

"Awwwe. Can't we finish watching the race?"

"We'll just leave the radio on while we travel. Who do you think is gonna win, Grognar or Bathalos?"

"My money is on Bathalos."

"But Grognar is holding the lead."

"I like the longshots."

Earnie rolled his eyes, "Of course you would."

He retracted the landing gear and flipped on the thrusters. He navigated the ship, aligning it just right. A few more degrees north... now a few more degrees west. Perfect. As always.

He flipped open the plastic shield hiding the big red button. He gestured to Piper. "Care to do the honors?"

Piper bounced up and down with glee. "You know it!"

She slammed her fist down on the button and with a mighty CLICK, the two were thrown back in their chairs as the cruiser launched and disappeared into tunnelspace.