

SOLARIS

By ERRATIC CHEESE

Chapter 1 Mean Streets

Now I ain't big on writing. I wasn't one of those kids who wakes up one morning with a crayon in his hand and decides to spell "DOG" on his bedroom wallpaper. Nah, not me. While most kids were in school, gazing at blackboards and fantasizing 'bout their biology teachers, I was out in the real world, jacking hover-cars and kicking dice with real men.

I was a nobody back then. No future. Total freaking scum. But hell, those were wild times and I loved it. Shine a spotlight down the alleys and you'd find me there, hassling credits and hanging out with high-heels and low-lives. Mixing it up with the rough. Walking the walk and talking the talk. Yeah, that was me.

Like I said though, I ain't one for writing. Much as some folk ain't able to stand the sight of blood, or the smell of freshly polished heat-sinks. You see, writing makes mah' head hurt and like most folk, I don't take too kindly to headaches.

But hell, here I am tellin' this here tale, doing something I wouldn't normally do and putting mah'self through all manners of misery.

Why?

Well heck. . .sometimes a story jus' gotta be told.

Now I'd like to sit here n' say that this here tale revolves around a group of men. But the fact is, this tale doesn't revolve, so much as jump from one place to the next. And come to think of it, this here story wouldn't jump at all, were it not for just one man. Yup. Just one guy. A guy with ideas. A guy with vision. Yeah, this here is a tale about a guy with dreams.

You see, for most folk growing up in West Side Solaris, you were pretty much guaranteed to end up like scum no matter how you played your cards. This place sucked you in and spat you out. Built you up and broke you down. It treated you like scum. But heck, that's Solaris for you. Scum central of the universe.

But my story is different. Me, my life went backwards. Reverse, you know. Call it fate, destiny, Kama-sutra, I don't give a crap. Me though, I call him **Palerider**.

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Chapter 2 The Pale Rider and I

Palerider. Yeah, even after all these years, his name still has a kinda weird echo. Sort of resonates in the back of your mind like a really bad doorbell. They say it's on account of how the vowels are spaced evenly after each consonant. Yeah I know it's corny. I know. But hell, science has been spitting out even crazier theories since the beginning of time.

But the way I see it, in a universe filled with half a billion Tom's, Dick's and Harry's, a guy with a name like Palerider just kinda stands out. Know what I mean? And that's just what ole P.R. does. He stands out like a pole dancer in a church choir. I ain't saying the guy strips for a living, you know, just that. . .ah heck. . . like I say, I ain't big on writing.

Me though, they call me **Crowfoot**. I picked that name up on the streets, on account of how crooked I was. I ain't a hunchback or anything like that. I drink my milk and get my calcium like everyone else. No osteoporosis for me, if you know what I mean. Nah, when I say "crooked" I mean, well you know . . . I wasn't a very nice person back in those days. I guess the name just stuck with me after all these years. It's sorta like my baggage from the past. Reminds me who I was. Keeps me sane.

I don't know why a guy like Palerider hung around with a bum like me in the first place. I never quite understood that. I ain't saying that I'm a screw up. Nah, it's just that I figured a guy like Palerider would have his own clique. His own gang.

But hey, here he was on Solaris and on Solaris everyone is the same. We're all degenerates. Filth. Scum. All of us. There's polite scum. Impolite scum. Scum in rags. Scum in fancy suits. Young scum. Old scum. Ugly scum...and even some of the most damned sweet looking scum possible. The kinda scum that makes you just wanna buy an apron and salivate for hours.

But in the end, we were all just scum.

Anywhere else I'd have been a loser, a bookie, a gambler. But out here on Solaris, I was just a regular guy. For guys like me, Solaris washes away your sins. It does for us what "*Head and Shoulders*" does for dandruff.

But Palerider, nah, he was different. He wouldn't tell me much about his past, but I could tell it was pretty damn dark. You see, he was a Mercenary. A freaking good Merc too. You can still see it in his eyes. He's seen a lot of killing. A lot of pain. And now here he was on Solaris, running from something. No, not running. He ain't the kinda guy who runs. He was trying to forget. And on Solaris, amidst all the crazy hustle and bustle, all the lights and goings on, well hell, there ain't no better place in the universe, designed to make you forget.

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Chapter 3

The Gaming Planet

The heartbeat of Solaris has always drummed the same. You see, at the centre of things, you had the games. The Mech Games. You probably already heard of 'em. Morons strap em'selves up inside big metal robots and beat the hell outta each other. Of course nowadays anyone who wins a tournament becomes a freakin' celebrity overnight. Sponsorship deals and all that crap. But not in the old days. Nah, in the old days it was war and Solaris was the battlefield.

In those days, Solaris was the rear end of the universe. Before the Gaming Commission stepped in and cleaned things up, Solaris was gangster paradise. Down here, you got more casinos, brokers, bookies, gambling joints and arenas per square kilometre, than any two planets combined.

It's a zero sum game. Somebody wins. Somebody loses. Money is transferred back and fourth like a puck on an air hockey board. The richest one percent of Solaris, the real kingpins, Mafiosos and criminals, own half the planet's wealth. That's about six hundred and fifty trillion C's. One third of that comes from hard work, two thirds from inheritance and interest, the rest, hell, the rest floats around from one gambling table to the next. Games are fixed, bets are made, bookies wire money and people die. That's the cycle of Solaris, and it spins any freakin' way it wants to. Gluttony captures the evolutionary spirit, and that's what Solaris was about: Greed.

Today though, Solaris looks like *Disney Land*. Sure, it's still the same filth, the same warped morals and cheap ideals, packaged in glitzy foil paper and snazzy billboards. Only now it's all run with the mechanical precision of off-world Mega-Conglomerates and Super-Businesses.

The big Corporations moved in and took this place over. I guess in the end the Gaming Commission had finally gotten its way. They waltzed in from off world and made this place their own. They cleaned up the streets and pushed the crime out to the fringe. But while the kids played on the vomit coloured bouncy castles, daddy dropped the house payments and junior's college money down the poker slots. Things were different. But somehow, they were also the same.

But guys like me, we all remember the old days. The days when dealers knew your name, what you drank and what you played. Those days were dangerous, but hell, they felt right.

The lights, the noise, the billboards, it's all there to numb your mind. Hell, it drives you crazy sometimes. It breaks you down, makes you vulnerable, sucks away at your brain till the dollar-signs chisel their way into your skull. The Psych guys say holo-subliminal advertising has ceased and been outlawed, but I don't believe them. Cus when you look up at all those lights and all those big flashy billboards. . . that's when Solaris hits you.

About a billion suckers flew in every week on their own nickel and almost 80 percent of them leave broke. People touchdown with a couple thousand credits and end the day bust, with nothing but their name and a couple hours worth of breath mint.

Fortunes and lives were made and lost with the roll of a dice. And that's when things get violent. Broke guys, you see, ain't got nothin' to lose. And when you got nothin'

to lose, you get dangerous. So you can imagine how things are down here. With a couple million pocket-stalkers, roaming about, Solaris is a pretty damn dangerous place.

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Chapter 4 Ricky Bambossa

Take Ricky Bambossa for example. A gangster. A real nut job. Rumour is, this guy has the whole East Side eating out of his stinking palm. I mean the whole freaking East Side! Bambossa's got sticks working every joint from Port Hamilton to the mouth of the Zipper.

He gets his cash by paying off the tipsters at the spaceports. I mean this guy had everyone under his payroll. Spaceport security, managers, even the freaking pit-crews. He patted everyone on the back and they returned the favours.

The spaceports were his, and everyone knows whoever controls the spaceports, controls the arenas and whoever controls the arenas, controls Solaris. It's just how things work.

Ricky you see, had things figured out. It's all a matter of statistics. At the spaceports, a tourist lands on Solaris roughly every quarter of a second. Which means in every minute, you got 'bout two hundred and forty retards clearing through customs. So basically every hour, you got a hundred and forty four thousand morons collecting their suitcases. Add up the figures for an entire week, and its like Biblical scale retardation, condensed and spinning around like crazy inside a rickety slot machine.

Of course every suitcase and piece of luggage filtering through the spaceports has to be pushed through the scanners. And that's where the "*marking*" takes place. You see Ricky has probably 150-200 men under his pay, working those scanners, checking out every suitcase that cycles through customs. As soon as they spot a guy with cash, BAM, the guy is marked. I ain't lying. These goons move fast.

About fifty tourists are *marked* per hour. Ricky only goes after the big fish, you see. Some poor jerk-off tourist touches down with a suitcase full of gold bullion, two hours later he's lying face down in the gutter, naked and broke. Hit 'em hard, hit 'em fast. That's the way things work.

I mean, eventually things got so freakin' bad down at the *ports*, the management had to install these robot/android things to replace the guys working the scanners. You know, like that sissy gold robot thing from *Star Wars*.

Course that was one big mistake. Equal rights riots and robo-hate crimes went up big time. You'd get slicers breaking in and re-programming the droids to dish out obscenities every time a tourist cleared through customs.

“Welcome to Solaris. Kiss my metal hide. Love me! Love me!” - Unknown Customs Unit - 3051

Yeah well, that there was the last time the F.S.C let robots do a man’s job. Nowadays the only robots you find on Solaris are a couple’a hundred tonnes heavy, three stories tall, and packing enough firepower to level a city. Yeah, it’s a strange kinda irony. I guess artificial intelligence ain’t no match for natural stupidity. Makes my knees itch just thinking ‘bout it.

So like I said, at the centre of things you had the games. The ‘Mech Battles, held in giant arenas. Course, there was no honour in those days. Just bloodlust and money. Something about men beating the hell outta each other just seems to awaken the primal crap inside of everyone. Makes me sick.

You see the pilots of these things, they ain’t know nothing. They’re just degenerates with nothing to live for. Bald headed, crack junkies with not an ounce of worth inside of them. In those days, you see, it wasn’t about the jocks. It was about the Mechs.

Behind the machines though, are dangerous men. Crime lords and gangsters, criminals and kingpins, battling it out in front of audiences. Gangsters like Ricky Bambossa, and his arch rival Sonny Gambollio.

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Chapter 5 Sonny Gambollio

Sonny Gambollio, you see, was a real big shot back in the days. The guy had a hundred acre ranch out in the city and followed every single game on his bank of a hundred and twenty five big screen monitors. He had a hard-on for information and had his hand in every freaking tournament that went on. This guy didn’t throw darts at a board. No. He bet on sure things.

Sun-Tzu, The Art of War: Every battle is won before it is ever fought.

Sonny didn’t enter a deal unless he was the one in control. Yeah, Sonny made a career out of fixing fights. You’d see a hundred tonne mech waltzing with a 35 tonner, next thing you know, the heavy’s knees fall off. Just like that! I mean, it boggles the mind, the kinda stunts these guys get away with. You’d see pilots ejecting at the start of a match, for no reason, and always, when you check the boards, Gambollio was the one guy drawing in the cash, placing careful bets with his phoney names and wise-guy handlers.

So Sonny’s methods weren’t scientific, but they worked. When he won, he collected. When he lost, he told the bookies to go fuck themselves. I mean, what were they gonna do? Muscle Sonny Gambollio? Sonny Gambollio was the muscle!

Course, he eventually got caught. Turns out somebody tipped the Commission off on a fix, and they nailed Sonny’s nuts for *“manipulating a gambling licence for personal profit.”*

God knows what that means, end result though, Sonny spends a couple days in the slammer. Nailed and jailed. Joke is, the case went on for about nine months on account of judges kept turning up dead. 22 juries later and Sonny gets out with a pat on the back cus' of "*good behaviour*".

But get this, someone in the Commission then tips out Sonny, telling him that Ricky Bambossa, was the one who spilled the word on Sonny's little operation.

Well that there was the birth of a new era. You see, in those days ain't no gangster ever turned on another gangster. In those days, the blood was thick. You looked out for one another. But what Ricky did, you see, he crossed a line. And since then, everyone's been backstabbing for a living.

Funny thing though, Ricky and Sonny go way back. And I mean *real* way back. Guys used to be best buddies till Sonny caught Rickey smooching with his girl. Things got ugly, and as usual the girl took the bullet in the crossfire. Slug hit the dame and deflated her left breast. But get this. Turns out she had some cheap plastic surgery boob job. Damn doctor filled it up with laughing gas to cut back on the cost of silicone. Next thing you know, Sonny and Ricky are on their knees laughing like hyenas while the poor girl bled to death on the carpet.

Thinking about it makes me sick. Sometimes I think that had Sonny and Ricky blown each other away that day, maybe Solaris wouldn't be the cesspit it is. But I dunno. I ain't no psychic.

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Chapter 6

Life with my buddy Palerider

But anyway, there was me and there was Palerider. Just a couple of guys under the lights, trying to stay clean. We worked around the arenas mostly. Palerider had some kinda 'Mech fetish or something. Nah, that's being a little harsh. The guy liked his 'Mech's, sure, but his real gift was spotting a winner.

We stayed away from the big battles mostly. The big, holo-vised, over-hyped crap that draws in the crowds. That sort of thing. We steered totally away from that stuff like it was the freakin' Manjitzu plague. When you got a couple million people betting on a 'Mech, you know the final payoff just ain't worth it. Half the time, those games are rigged anyway.

So instead, we hit the smaller joints. The games on the outskirts, near Montoya City. Palerider said those games are where the real warriors are born. The players fight in derelict junkyards and unlike the big city games, anything goes. Ain't no stupid rules. No tonnage regulations. Every man for himself. Once you can field a 'Mech, you're good to go.

Sometimes games would last an entire day. You'd get guys straggling about on one leg, mincing it up with an underpowered laser and an empty AC. Hell, one time I seen a guy open his cockpit and start shooting the other guy's canopy with a freaking 15mm Hand-Blaster. Yeah, those were the players that were worth betting on, the kinda jocks who bite the dust but still manage to claw their way outta their own freaking graves. Makes me laugh to think about it all. Those were crazy times.

Palerider and I spent most days checking out the pits and getting to know the pilots. The trick was finding an underdog who really knew his stuff. The kinda jock who no one would bet on, but was good enough to pull off a victory.

Might seem like a rarity, but Palerider had his ways. As soon as he spotted a hot stick, he would get in and start talking to the jock. Smoothen out the edges. You know, giving the guy pointers, tactics and info on the other players. Most pilots get all psycho and tell you to go suck on a heat-sink, but once they hear what Palerider has to say, they mellow out a bit.

There was this one guy down at the pits, damn I gotta tell you about this jock. A guy nicknamed Da BountyHunter. A real flashy hotshot. We made a good bit of C's, betting on this guy. He knew his stuff. Always had a Long Tom cannon. God knows where he found the cash to keep that slug-hose maintained, but hell, it was his trademark. And like Palerider says:

"On Solaris, everyone loves a guy with a trademark."

I used to ask Palerider why he didn't get back in the saddle. You know, fix up a mech and get inside the hoop himself. I mean Palerider had skill, he could easily rake in the wins with decent odds. But every time I asked, he'd just turn to me and say, with his deadpan voice:

"I don't do that anymore."

Well that's how things went. We hung about the fringe arenas, making cash and meeting people. Watching mechs bash chassis like steel gargoyles. Me, I always thought it was a damn waste of C-bills. Remove all the gear and let the pilots beat the hell outta each other with their fists. You know? Just seems like a freaking waste of resources to me, that's all. I ain't no tree hugging hippy, but I got my concerns, you know?

But hell, that's the way things were, and that's the way things went. Up until the Smoking Cock Cafe, that is.

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Chapter 7

The Smoking Cock Cafe

The Smoking Cock Cafe was a big dive nestled up to Zipper River. I don't know why they call it Zipper River, probably on account as it was a river and was shaped all

zipper like. I don't know. Too many weird names and strange things in this universe for me to stop and think about them all. Sometimes I want to, but most times I just let them go by. You know? Stuff like this can drive a guy dizzy.

Anyway, they called Zipper River the veins of Solaris. The blood is spilt on the streets, but the River, that's where it's drained away. Its like that Elton John, *Circle Of Life*, crap.

They say Zipper River and its tributaries glow red with blood during the night. I ain't sure if that's true, but I can damn well believe it.

You see, on any given day an average of 200 dead bodies get dumped into that damned river. It's gotten to the point where its a freaking cliché to dump bodies in there. You got gangsters lining up to dump their corpses, waiting their turn like school kids at a cafeteria. And the cops, hell, the ones brave enough to go down there don't even bother dredging the place anymore. They used to go in there looking for a corpse and instead, pull out fifty different murdered bodies. What they gonna do? Open fifty more case files? Nah, I don't think so. The *suits* ain't got the manpower to handle 200 cases a day. It just ain't feasible.

Now the Smoking Cock Cafe, it wasn't no raunchy place. I guess the kinky name was born on account of the big rooster shaped chimney. I don't know. Like I said, there's just too many weird names rotating around this rock. It numbs the mind to mull over them all. Sometimes I think I should keep a diary. You know, a little book to collect my thoughts. But I guess that would make me a freakin' sissy. Freakin' stereotypes really freakin' piss me off. Ah hell, I digress.

But there was me and there was Palerider and there was the Smoking Cock Cafe, which we were both in. It was a real nice place. Good ambience, clean tables, respectable looking bartender. No Salmonella in sight, if you know what I mean.

Now I ain't no classy guy, but it surprised me that Palerider had brought me here. Musta been our anniversary or something. I don't know, I ain't a believer in calendars and the overall division of time, but considering the places we usually hung out, this little establishment was heaven. I mean it was proper class. You know? When I asked Palerider what we were doing here, he just looked back at me and said:

"We're chasing a rumour."

Hell, if I knew what that meant. Palerider wasn't one for words, much as I ain't one for writing. But when he spoke he always had this confidence about him. He always knew what he was doing and where he was going. That's just how he was. He had confidence.

Yeah, I guess all those years at boot camp and being a Merc really chiselled the life out of him. No. No, that's an unfair thing to say. Yeah, sure, maybe Palerider was cold. Maybe he spoke with monotone monotony, but he had a freaking heart of gold and I really did see that in him. This guy was my buddy. My only friend. He wasn't like the rest of the scum around here. He had dreams. He had places to go. I'm just grateful that he took me along for the ride. You know? Hell, if it weren't for Palerider, I would still be out on the streets, scamming snow-cone money off sweet-toothed old ladies and grafting cash off grocery tills.

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Chapter 8 The Centurion Jockey

So there was me and there was Palerider and we sat at that bar, listening to conversations and eaves dropping on rumours. The grapevine had been whispering tales of a new MechWarrior in town. A real slick jock who had been reeling in the cash at the East Side Junkyard Wars.

“*Guy nailed three tournaments without stopping for a toilet break,*” the people were saying.

“*If this stick takes his skills to the leagues, he might just slide away with the Pride of Solaris,*” others said.

Seeing as hotshot MechWarriors are born about as fast as they die, this would have ordinarily been no big deal. But apparently this guy was fielding a *Centurion*. A real fancy looking BattleMech. Prime condition. Factory fresh. We’re talking a total mint job with the upholstery still hot. In arena circles it’s what the jocks call a “*Virgin ’Mech*”, and every self-respecting tournament pilot out there wanted a crack at it.

So this jock was riding real top-class gear, and with most guys on the *skirts* piloting diseased scout ’Mechs and battered hulks of a bygone era, it was no surprise that he managed to stuff so many victories under his belt.

But Palerider wasn’t convinced that it was all about the gear. The only way a jock like this could afford a minted *Centurion* was if he was a winner. A hotshot who worked his way to the top. A hotshot with skill.

“*It ain’t about the BattleMech.*” Palerider said. “*It’s about the mind inside of it.*”

Well damn, this dude should have been shaved bald and locked inside a monastery. Palerider spewed crazy philosophical talk faster than my trouser belt needed new holes punched in it. Now, I ain’t saying I’m fat. It’s just that I get a bit bloated around the stomach area when I drink too much beer.

And boy, did we drink beer.

Ah. Beer. Well, I guess that’s where things really started out for us. You see, if there was one thing Palerider liked more than ’Mechs, it was beer. No, I ain’t saying he’s an alcoholic. Don’t go misquoting me on that! I’m just saying, you know, the guy loves his freaking beer. That ain’t no freaking crime!

It’s like Palerider’s tongue is extra sensitive or something. When he’s drinking a beer, you look at him and you see that he’s really tasting it. Really working it into his mouth, real slow, you know, really working it down his throat. Almost lovingly. I

ain't ever seen anything like it. It's like he has a separate palette just for appreciating beer.

Sometimes I see him in the shadows with a tall mug of beer, while other guys got their hands wrapped around a fine looking woman. I...ah hell...I ain't know what I'm trying to say. But I guess Palerider knows something that the rest of us don't. I don't know. You'd think the amount of time we spent together, he woulda opened up to me a bit. But nah, that's what chicks in pyjamas do over the phone. Not me n' Palerider

Heck, the girls on Solaris ain't anything special anyway. It's like Palerider always says:

“Beer tends to solve all the problems women create.”

And I guess beer is really what started things out for us in the first place. Really got things moving. Downhill? Uphill? I don't know. Lets just say it got things moving comfortably sideways. Forget the *Centurion* pilot. Forget Ricky Bambossa. Forget Sonny Gambolio. Forget Zipper River and forget the Smoking Cock Cafe. Beer is what it was all about. Beer! Hell, if it weren't for a single mug of beer, God knows where I'd be today.

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Chapter 9

Bar fights and bad beer

You see, there was me and there was Palerider, sitting at the Smoking Cock bar, getting royally stoned. I was on this really nice stool. I guess I remember it on account of the comfy little cushion. Yeah, I'm there, gulping down this beer, leaking brew all over the place, cus' I just don't care. Well yeah, okay, maybe I'm a freaking slob. But hell, what ya gonna do? Buy an apron? Nah, that's what evaporation is for!

But anyway, next to me, yeah, next to me was Palerider, really working his beer down. I mean, really working it across his tongue. Really tasting it. But then, get this, Palerider turns to me and he says:

“This is the worst beer, I've ever tasted.”

What the hell? Well slap me silly and ram an auto cannon up my rear. No lie. I mean, he drinks the entire mug, really seems to be savouring it and then he turns and tells me its the worst freaking beer he's ever tasted? I mean, hell, the guy is nuts, you know? Really nuts. But get this, then he turns to the bartender, a real classy looking middle aged guy, and says:

“Hey fruitcake, I've tasted a lot of beers. But this here, is the worst goddamned brew ever to have been created.”

Palerider didn't say "*I've ever tasted.*" No. He said: "*ever to have been created.*" I don't know why I've always remembered that little detail. I guess I'm dyslexic or something. I don't know. I guess I remembered the little detail, cus' it just shows how passionate Palerider was about this beer being total bellow-par brew.

Needless to say, Palerider's insult didn't go down well. You see, turns out the proprietor of the Smoking Cock Cafe was sitting right beside us. Right there next to us! What are the odds? That's like hard core De-Ja-Vu, mystic voodoo crap, aint it?

Now the proprietor, he was a really fancy looking guy: smart suit, cufflinks, bow tie. Guy was decorated like a Christmas tree on a fourth of July birthday party.

They called him **BeerRunner**, on account of his occupation. But you could tell that this guy was born on the streets. He had a roughness about him. He looked like his mom breast fed him concrete 'till he was about twelve freakin' years old.

The proprietor, he gets up and all of the sudden these two big guys are at his side. Real heavies, you know? Ain't like the proprietor needed any extra muscle, but these guys, man, they were the biggest bodyguards I ever seen. Then this BeerRunner guy, he steps up to us and he says, in a deep, husky sorta voice:

"Listen chestnut, you're roasted!"

Next thing I know, one of the heavies is grabbing a stool and is about to smash it into Palerider's freaking head! But Palerider was too fast. Too clinical. Palerider slipped to the side, and brought his knee up into the guy's face.

I guess that's one of the benefits of being in the special forces. They teach you how to pitch tents and kill people. Palerider had to hold back on his skills just to stop from butchering these thugs.

The other guy, bigger than his fallen comrade but ten times as ugly, sends a fist towards Palerider, but misses completely. Couple seconds later, and PR is doing the tango on the poor guy's face. I mean, this guy needed two nose jobs just to regain his former state of ugly!

I'd been with Palerider for quite some time, but I ain't ever seen him fight before. Never. We'd been in some tight spots, sure, but we never resorted to violence. It's like Palerider used to say:

"Most of the time, people are more scared of your eyes."

I knew what he meant. Palerider had a cold stare that could nail your nuts to the wall from half a mile away. You could sense the dangerous edge simmering beneath him. Really feel the ice underneath. It musta' been on account of the really low lighting inside the Smoking Cock, or maybe those guys just didn't look Palerider in the eyes, but I guess, in hindsight, they probably wished they did.

In the end, it took maybe thirty guys to take Palerider down. Poor BeerRunner had to use his comm-link to constantly ring in re-enforcements. He had guys pouring into the bar while Palerider just stood there, knocking them back out like he was swatting freakin' flies.

But in the end, they brought Palerider down, and ten minutes later, they had us chained up in the basement like a couple'a punks. Then this BeerRunner guy, he comes down and visits us, about five minutes later. He came with, like, fifty heavies this time. You could sense the fear in him, even though he buried it good.

"Listen fella, you think you can just waltz in here and insult my brew? Bad mouth my establishment?" BeerRunner said. "You think you know beer? Is that it?"

Palerider may have taken a beating. But he still had his fire.

"I know beer." Palerider hissed. "That ain't beer. That's torture!"

Well that really nailed this BeerRunner guy like a staple-gun in the nuts. I mean, it really pissed him off like a zoo keeper at a urine convention. Here was Palerider tied to a chair and still with enough nerve to bad mouth this guy's brew. But like I said: PR was passionate about his ethanol.

"You think you can do better?" BeerRunner asked. "I'll make you a deal, fella. You brew me one mug of beer, one full mug of beer that's better than the fine brew served in my establishment, and I'll set you free. You fail, and I'll have my men feed you to the Zipper."

"Easy." Palerider said.

"Not with me as the judge." BeerRunner seethed.

Funny how your life can change in an instant. One minute I'm drinking a beer, the next, I'm helping to make *"the perfect mug"*. This BeerRunner guy gives us access to his brewery. A real nice place, two floors beneath the bar. It's the kinda place Santa's workshop woulda been if ole Saint Nick were an alcoholic.

So there we were, just a couple of guys, trying to make *"the perfect mug"*. And that's just what we did. We made *The Perfect Mug*. Palerider ground the barley himself, mixed the malt, hell, if he coulda freaking controlled the amount of bubbles in that there mug, I damn well bet he woulda' done so.

But you know what? A couple hours later and this BeerRunner guy fires his entire brewery team and hires Palerider as his new Brew Master. No lie! One minute the guy is bashing our brains out, the next, he's sweating to employ us. Turns out, Palerider's little mug of beer had a religious sorta' impact on ole BeerRunner!

BeerRunner widened his eyes, looked at us and said:

"This is the best damned mug of beer I've ever tasted. If you can make every mug taste this good, you got yourself a job."

Turns out, Palerider was able to make every single mug taste that good. And guess what, our new boss was happy. That's when things really started looking up. I mean, things literally lit up. And not just on account of all the extra lava-lamps we had installed. No, we were going places, Palerider and I.

Course, we didn't know what we were getting into at the time. But what Palerider had in mind, would revolutionise the beer industry and stir things up on Solaris like a milk churner on steroids. You see, in those days, no one came to Solaris for beer. This was the gaming planet of the universe. You couldn't gamble when you were drunk. Alcohol made your mind numb and a numb mind couldn't focus on the cash flow. The Gaming Commission had decided long ago to cut back on the booze and narcotics vendors around the arenas. The way they saw it, the less credits people spent on such materials, the more dough they could potentially lose to the slots n' pits. And when you freaking owned all the real estate in town, you could pretty much decide what the hell gets sold on the streets.

Things started out slow for us. Of course all good things start out slow. It's when the Gods really get a chance to see what you're made of. Really watch you the closest. They make you crawl, really take a giant dump on you, but once you stay true to that dream, once you keep the faith, they cut you loose and let you shower off the crap.

So yeah, now there was me, there was Palerider and there was our Brewery. I mean Palerider had it down so cold, that he was practically given the brewery to run. Turns out BeerRunner had a chain of four bars around the outskirts, and with Palerider as the new Brew Master, the boss was looking for profit. Palerider had different ideas, though. It's like he said:

"You want to make money in the beer business, you gotta go all the way."

And that's just what we did. We went all the freaking way, man. We played with the big boys, we brought them down, and we lived to tell the tale.

* * *

Chapter 10

Beer Connoisseur's

You see, selling beer at bars wasn't enough. I mean, only low-lives and real losers hang out on the fringe. There ain't no profit in catering for the minority. No, what we had to do was get the product out on the streets. We had to really market this stuff. We had to pedal our booze hard.

So the first step was mass production. We cut a sweet deal with the TIN MAN bottling company, a cheap place out of town, and got some second-rate tin cans cut for about twenty *creds* per crate.

Now get this, turns out BeerRunner was knocking the wife of the company manager. The poor geriatric sucker walks in on the two of them one day and blows a heat-sink. I mean, the TIN MAN has a heart attack right there, while BeerRunner is banging his wife on an antique grand-piano. Poor guy.

Next thing we know, BeerRunner is a married man and inherits a bottling company. I mean, how's that for luck? It's like sixth sense or transparency, you know. What ever will be, will be. Boggles my mind sometimes.

So here we were now, cutting tin for 2 *creds* a crate. Might seem like a bargain, but when you factor in the price of can-caps and labels, the figure doubles over like a Chinese acrobat. Still though, we were filling maybe a hundred cans of beer for the cost most big-name companies spend on one.

So we flooded the market. And I mean, boy did we flood it. You needed Noah and an Ark just to steer clear of all the booze we were pedalling.

Now let me take you on a quick shopping trip. You see, everything on Solaris is expensive. A can of *Vanilla Gorilla* costs freakin' 4 credits. When the choice is either go broke or go thirsty, all the regular Joe's go for the dehydration option.

Think of it this way. When a tourist touches down after a hot flight and pulls up to a vending machine looking for a freaking icy beer, he ain't looking for brand names. No, he's an off worlder out to spend cash at the arenas and casinos, what the hell does he know about local brand names? Nah, what he's looking at is the price tag. And 9 times out of 10, the cheapest beer gets bought. Fact.

So that was our ploy. Our beer was made fast. It was made cheap. And it was damn good. Not to mention we pumped the first batch full of enough liquid nicotine to really grab the customers.

Pretty soon all the small time shops were filling their coolers with our little cans. We were turning out profits of probably 10 credits per can. That's 240 per case. Almost 2880 per crate. And when you had orders for 500 crates a week, well, you do the math. We're talking a solid 3 and a half million smackers per month. Knock off the shipping and manufacture costs, employee pay and all that crap, and BAM, still leaves us with a cool 2 million in one freaking month.

We had the map to Shangri La in our pockets. I mean we were really going places. You couldn't find a single joint on the fringe, that wasn't stocked to the ceiling with BEER RUNNER cans.

I was happy. Palerider was happy. And most importantly of all, the boss was happy. Sometimes BeerRunner and I would sit around a table, listening to Palerider dream of the future. I mean, the present was pretty damn sweet, but here was Palerider still dreaming of something better. And somehow, when he talked, things seemed so real. We'd listen to him talking and you could just freaking swear he had everything planned out. You know? When he spoke, you just knew things would be alright. He had things all sorted. He had a clear vision of his future. . . and us. . .well, it sounded so damn good, we just wanted to be part of it.

* * *

Chapter 11

The Beer Wars

But the joys of those first three months didn't last long. You see when the big companies, like *Vanilla Gorilla* and *Pepto Bismol Cola*, got their monthly sales

breakdowns, bar graphs and freakin' pie charts, they noticed something different. Suddenly they were losing more than half the market to us. Well, that freaked them out big time. You had company executives pissing nails and barking orders like it was the end of the universe!

But there was only one man to worry about. Dominic Rigano. Yup, Dominic Rigano. Rigano was head of the biggest canned drinks company on Solaris. He played dirty, and he wanted our nuts in a vice. He made a hit with Vanilla Gorilla about ten years ago and since then, has had the market pretty much cornered.

His story goes something like this. Rigano started off working in the black market, selling battlemech parts to guys like Joey Gonzolla and Ricky Bambossa. He could get you pretty much any weapon you wanted, and I mean any weapon. The guy hauls X-pulses and PPC flash-back suppressors in from the Core and passes them through customs like he's ferrying a freaking case of grapefruit. Sure the metal detectors go crazy, but no one ever seems to notice.

Course, when guys like Ricky got the spaceports in their pockets, pretty much anything can pass in and out. People can be paid to look the other way. Cameras can be switched off. You know the way things work here. The scum is tightly knit.

But you see, the Gaming Commission was growing wise to guys like Dominic Rigano. You had the Commission pushing to standardize fights, mechs, tonnage, weps, you name it. They were on a freakin' crusade!

But wise guys like Dominic flooded the black market with any weapon you wanted and this really ticked the Commission off. Those were the real dark-ages of the Solaris Games. Wasn't a contest, so much as a slaughter house. The gangsters and king-pins like Ricky and Sonny had all the connections. So they managed to field real top class gear, every time. Everyone knew what was going on, of course. But what can you do? Go after a guy like Sonny? Nah. The Commission didn't have the balls to do that.

So instead, they hit the pipeline lower down. They went after Dominic Rigano. They squeezed him so hard, Rigano had to set up random companies just to seem legit. He didn't put no thought into it, you know. Just randomly buys over a brewery one day and changes the name to Vanilla Gorilla, cus' his wife has a thing for apes.

Next thing he knows, school kids are going all mental over the stupid name and corny monkey gimmick. Course, his brew is crap, real sugar coated nonsense, but people buy it anyway, cus' they figure it sounds snappy. Turns out, Dominic was making more cash over vanilla flavoured vomit than he was by hauling weapons in from the Sphere.

So this guy, this Dominic Rigano, he was a real player. He had connections and he had muscle. I ain't saying he was a black belt in karate, you know. Hell, the dude was a skinny wimp. But when he decided to put us out of business, he wasted no time.

* * *

Chapter 12 Rigano's Warning

Dominic Rigano summoned BeerRunner to his slick city office, a couple days later. Rigano said he wanted to talk business. To cut a deal. But BeerRunner was scared like a chicken and didn't buy that invitation. He figured Rigano was luring him to the city, with plans of bumping him off. Might sound extreme, but on Solaris assassins get paid for far more trivial deals.

And so Palerider and I got sent instead. I was nervous as hell, but PR looked confident. He always did.

A limousine took us to Rigano's business HQ, a massive skyscraper in down town La Hoya and a couple hours later we were on the top floor, watching Dominic Rigano smile at us, across an expensive looking ivory desk.

Dominic Rigano spoke with a calm, almost serene voice. But the moment he started talking, I knew he was insane:

"You know, Mister Palerider, when I was younger I almost entered the farming business. I saw that there was profit to be made. I saw that there was a constant demand for meat and dairy products. A strong, stable market. And I had ideas, crazy ideas some may say, to revolutionise the farming business. But I guess, in hindsight, I just wanted to satisfy my affection for slaughtering animals.

Now, I once read a story about a 15 pound tumour that was taken out of a woman's stomach. Fifteen pounds! Now this woman, she weighed 155 pounds before and about 140 pounds after, having this...thing removed. That means the cancer was 10 percent of her body weight. Ten percent. Now consider this, Mister Palerider. The average cow weighs 1000 pounds. That's a lot of beef. Am I right? And it's sold for about one and a half credits per pound.

So I started thinking. If a cow's weight were increased by 10 percent, that's an additional 100-150 credits per cow. You see, farmers can boost their profit by giving cancer to cows. Efficient and easy. Cigarettes give tumours. Tumours add weight. Weight increase value. Give cigarettes to livestock. Who cares if they develop lung cancer, they're going to be dead, processed and on the customer's plate in a couple days anyway. Am I right? I make profit, the customer gets more value for his money, the farmers make greater hauls. It's a win-win situation. A fool proof plan. The public wins in the end.

But no. The ignorant Animal Rights departments and their green collared errand boys disagree. The fools! Slaughtering cattle in large scale processing plants, oh, that is quite alright. Society has accepted that. But no, giving cancer to cows....no, no, no. That my friend, that, is crossing the line of decency. You see, we as humans, are constantly struggling to maintain an appearance of civility. We fight with one hand and hand out bandages with the other. The hypocrisy. Oh the hypocrisy.

Society is constantly drawing lines, creating breaking points for itself. It's the only way to define and distinguish between what is morally wrong and what is morally right.

I saw the hypocrisy of it all, of course. Those drawing the lines were fools, and so I set out to draw my own lines. I imported guns and Battlemech parts off the black market. I started this company and sold unhealthy drinks to school children and watered down beer to wife-beating fathers. Yes. I became a criminal, and society

rewarded me. I have mansions and skyscrapers. A wife in every city. Fancy clothes and designer jewellery. Society says I am a bad man. An immoral man. And yet.....look at me. I am rewarded with riches.

Now Mister Palerider, let me cut to the chase. Your boss, this BeerRunner. He is a cunning man. He is a business man and I see now that in the future he may indeed grow to become a nuisance. Every cent of profit he makes, affects me. Do you understand? Every cent he makes is like a blow to my stomach. Do you understand? And now, in light of all that I have told you, I want you to relay to your boss, what I am about to say. Tell him, that if he does not pull out of this business that he has chosen, I will be forced to murder him and his pretty little wife in their sleep. Do I make myself clear?"

But Palerider just blinked twice and said:

"My gynaecologist smells of crotch."

* * *

Chapter 13

Damaged Goods

That's when BeerRunner figured we needed some muscle of our own. Some protection. So he hired a guy called **ToughGuy** to help us out. Yup, that was his name: *ToughGuy*. In a universe filled with corny names and stupid call signs, this one really took the cake. I mean this name took the cake, the cutlery and the freaking table cloth with it.

This ToughGuy walks in one day, wearing a pink netted vest, his muscles bulging underneath, his whole torso oiled in what looked like Vaseline. I mean this guy got more oil on him than Kuwait city. And I ain't no genius, but I figure guys who wear pink netted vests are either fully queer or the most damned vain and conceited punks out there.

But I guess BeerRunner did good to hire this kid. You see, he was tough as nails. ToughGuy lifted weights for breakfast and chewed on bags of cement to pass the time. So he meant business.

In the following month, our beer trucks took maybe twenty hits. Masked guys were cutting us off on the streets and hassling our drivers. We were missing store orders, and falling late on deliveries because our trucks were getting swatted down in the night. Pretty soon, half our staff was scared stiff like they smoked Viagra. We had to hire out our beer transport to armoured car companies. You'd think we were ferrying the freaking President with all the hassle we were getting.

Rigano was really putting the squeeze on us. He wasn't hitting us too hard, but he was hitting us enough times in the right places, to really make a dent. It came to the point where store owners were getting death threats if they so much as purchased a case of BEER RUNNER.

That really hurt us. We came from nowhere, we tangoed with the big boys and we won, fair and square. But now they were bullying us back down and it seemed like we were corked in good.

But we pushed back. You see, what we did next had never been done before. Let Rigano and his gorillas take the fringe. Let them pedal their booze on the outskirts. Nah, we were going in for the kill. The arenas, the casinos, the Mech games, we were gonna bring beer back to the city.

* * *

Chapter 14

Miracle Booze

Over the next two months we had over nine hundred vending machines installed around the casinos and the arenas. Nine hundred. They just sat there, empty, with their big BEER RUNNER logos cheaply stencilled across their plastic fronts.

The Commission, they saw what we were doing. Stuff like that doesn't get past them and pretty soon they were breathing down our necks like poodles in heat. They had the arenas and casinos so tightly controlled, there wasn't a loose credit that didn't wind up in their pockets. And so when they saw beer vending booths lined up like slot machines, it drove them insane.

We had phone calls every minute, reminding us of the law. It came to the point where BeerRunner had to leave the phones off the hook just to get a solid night of sleep.

You see, the sale of alcohol is strictly prohibited in the tournament arenas and the casinos. And the Commission was tough about it. They were on some grand crusade to make gambling clean. The way they saw it, beer severely debilitated people, you know, really messes them up. Like herpes or genital warts. And God forbid players enter a casino in the wrong frame of mind. The Gaming Commission wanted to prevent drunken house wives and depressed loners from getting conned and skiffed outta their creds. Put a beer machine in a casino and it's illegal. Put one outside on the doorstep, and its okay. In short, they wanted to keep their gamblers sober.

Yeah well, it was all a joke to us. I mean, when you're dancing with the big boys, it's best to keep a high profile. Confidence really makes these guys piss their pants. So one Monday morning, when we finally did fill all those vending machines with BEER RUNNER cans, we had agents and spooks knocking on our doors like we had the only toilet in town.

They wanted to arrest us for the illegal sale of beer in over sixty ALCOHOL FREE ZONES. But what they didn't know was that we changed the formula. Those cans were filled with something special. But it wasn't beer.

Palerider called it the "*miracle booze*". It was as close as you could get to beer, without actually being alcohol. I mean, you should try this stuff. It freaking tastes like

beer. Hell, it tastes better than beer. But when you do the tests, feed it to litmus paper and all that, it comes up negative. I mean, it just ain't beer.

So we had a couple million cans of quality beverage floating around the really hot-joints. Brew that ain't quite beer, but that's boldly labelled with the BEER RUNNER logo. . . I mean, what's the average citizen gonna think? Unless they read the fine print and unless they checked the ingredients, they got no idea what they were drinking.

Well this, man, this really pissed off the Commission. I mean they were busting knuckles just thinking about it. But what were they gonna do? Sue us for false advertising? No way! Advertising is the only legal way to lie. This was Solaris, you had a billion billboards and lights everywhere promoting "*instant wealth*" and "*riches*". They knew if they touched us with a false advertising sue, we'd turn around and milk the city for all it was worth. It was like the ultimate blackmail, and it felt good.

We were raking in profits and hooking new customers fast. The following day and the BEER RUNNER story makes front page on all the magazines and newspapers. We were the talk of Solaris and the publicity felt good. But you know how reporters are. Put someone in the spotlight, and immediately they start looking for dirt.

Tabloid papers began running crazy stories with titles like "BEER RUNNER MADE MY BABY BALD" and "MAN STABS GOAT- CLAIMS BEER RUNNER MADE HIM DO IT!" The stories weren't affecting sales, you know, but hell, we had an image to maintain.

So we hired some snazzy big-city writer called **Dave Wainio** to spearhead our anti-smear campaign. This Dave guy walks into our office that day and says, with a big beaming smile:

"I love writing, I love beer, heck, I think I'll do this job for free!"

Course the Gaming Commission, they continued hassling us over the next few months. They really wanted to make an example of us. They had the *suits* monitoring us, they took random beer samples and hired lip readers to spy on our nest. But in the end, they gave up. It was our victory. We'd owned them on a stupid technicality and eventually they had to back down.

So yeah, things felt good. Things felt right. But that's only when things really got started. You see, right about then, was when **Denise** walked into our lives.

* * *

Chapter 14 Hubba Hubba

Yup. Denise.

The first real name I'd seen in probably the past five years. In a world filled with Crow's feet, Pale riders, Tough Guys and Beer Runners, this chick's name bounced around inside my head like a lottery ball.

Denise, man, this woman was proper classy. I mean, she didn't belong here on Solaris. She was above all of this crap. We were all insignificant insects compared to her. She was the fluorescent lamp and we buzzed around her, pathetically hoping to bang her light bulb.

When she walked, she just lit up the place. Forget about all the casino lights. Forget about all the billboards. Denise, she was major voltage.

Full lips, long legs, the most amazing eyes you've ever seen. This chick had more features than a NASA relief map of Argentina.

Apparently Denise was the daughter of an ex-mercenary buddy from Palerider's past. Yup, the past. The times no one talked about. I always knew a day like this would come waltzing by. When a guy lives like Palerider does, you don't just fade away. You stand in the shadows waiting for the next call. And Denise. . .well, she was that call.

Well damn.

Funny how your life can change in an instant. One minute you're running the hottest beer business in town and the next, a stunning woman walks by and decides to turn your whole universe inside out.

I guess looking back on things now, in hindsight, this is really where it all freaking began. Forget about Ricky Bambossa. Forget about Sonny Gambollio. Forget about the Zipper. Forget about the Smoking Cock Cafe. Forget about Dominic Rigano. Forget the beer. Forget the games, the casinos and the Gaming Commission. This, right here, *this* was where it all began. Because when Denise stepped through those doors, my life went flying. And it hasn't stopped since.

You see, Denise's dad, an ex-Merc and close friend of Palerider, got killed on some drop gone sour. Apparently the poor bum was tracking one of those once-in-a-lifetime jackpots when he got his ass nailed by pirate gun runners off in the Magellan Belt.

And Denise, well you guessed it, she wanted our help.

Turns out her dad was tracking the lost Cache of Samson Santana. Now if you ain't heard of Samson Santana, you're either too young, too freaking dumb or in need of some serious chemotherapy. But hey, don't take that as an insult. It's like Dave says:

"Chemotherapy beats a good cigar any day."

* * *

Chapter 15 **Samson Santana**

Everyone knows of Samson Santana. Course, not everyone believes in him. He's sorta like the tooth fairy, Santa Claus or the Ninja Turtles. Some say he's a myth. Hell, some say he's just a stupid story made up by those brain dead long-haul spacers. And some . . .well. . .some say he's the craziest son-ov-a-bitch to ever walk the stars.

His story goes something like this:

Santana started off as some hotshot cruise-ship pilot operating out in the Carver system. The guy had 6 years of piloting under his belt and ran one of those big space liners that shipped out to Giensengberg and Polanski 5. The guy already had the record for fastest cruise time to the Outer Core, on account of how he always hot-docked his ships. He never used the AI computers to link up with the space-rings and apparently that cut half an hour off his flight time, both ways.

Well one day, on a ship called the *Solar Crescent*, ole Santana waits for his co-pilot to go take a dump and then locks the poor guy in the toilet. Then, and this is the crazy part, he punches the *Crescent* to light-speed.

Some people say Santana was bribed to hi-jack that space-liner and haul it to pirate space, others say the poor nutcase just went crazy. I mean, space is a big place, it can drive a guy insane pretty freaking fast.

But whichever theory you subscribe to, the fact is that here was Samson Santana locked in the bridge of this 100-decker space liner, with his co-pilot locked in the toilet with no toilet paper and all the while this ship is shooting across space at the speed of light.

The passengers, hell, they didn't know nothin'. Most were drunk old timers or obnoxious rich kids, wasting themselves away at the glitzy theatres and ballrooms, or getting laid in their honeymoon cabins. They didn't even know they were being hijacked!

A couple hours later though, and Santana drops the *Solar Crescent* out of light-speed and lands right smack in the middle of a giant space battle. I mean, this here was a major fur-ball.

Of course everyone has their own theories, but I like to think that ole Samson Santana was tired of hauling rich folk across the universe. The guy had the heart of a warrior. He was a fighter, and when he picked up word of that big space battle brewing out yonder, he just wanted a piece of the action.

Like I said, the battle in question was one major sized fur-ball. We're talking both cheeks on this baby. Some rag-tag fleet out from the Sphere stumbled across a Clan staging ground. Apparently the Jade Falcon, Ghost Bear's or Puff Daddy's, whoever the hell they were . . .were staging a massive jab at the outer Sphere worlds. They had a fleet of maybe a hundred ships floating in the Magellan asteroid belt.

But unfortunately for them, the good guys came waltzing by and caught the stupid Clan tattoo heads hiding in the rocks. Now this. . . this scared both fleets to hell. I mean there was mass panic on both sides. Sort of like premature ejaculation, military style.

Pretty soon you got both fleets yelling for reinforcements while they bashed one another amongst the asteroids. And Santana...well, he was there as well. Guy was trigger happy as hell, but of course, that dumb space-liner of his didn't have no guns. So this crazy son-ov-a-bitch, hell, get this, he decides to ram the nearest Clan ship!

Now I know what you're thinking. A big 100-decker space liner, ramming another ship, has to do some serious damage. Well yeah. You're right. But what Santana did was ten times more crazy and ten times more gutsy. You see, he lined up his target, really came bearing down on those Clan suckers, and then...he jumped to light-speed! I mean, he freaking rammed them at light-speed! Then, he cuts the engines, turns around, lines up another target, and rams another one.

I mean, its freaking crazy. Here are two fleets trying to have a normal, civilized battle, while some psycho in a 20,000 meter long metal battering ram, slams into them at light speed, over and over again, like a ping pong ball high on sniff-dust.

To avoid Santana, both fleets turned deeper into the Magellan Asteroid Belt for cover. Of course once they got in there, there was no leaving. They were committed to the battle.

Well, that battle didn't last much longer. All that shooting, and all those rocks . . . well you can imagine how things turned out. Everyone was pretty much pulverized or turned slowly into space slag.

Couple weeks later and the salvage ships arrive, but nothing was found. The asteroid belt was now unstable as hell, and all those derelicts and hulks had been sucked too far in to risk a salvage job.

Of course, that was over a hundred and fifty years ago. Nowadays the Magellan Belt is pretty much constantly swamped with freighters and spacers, traders and pirates, all hoping to find a clear path into the belt. All hoping to get rich.

Somewhere in there, there's a couple hundred billion credits worth of military hardware floating about. Some say entire ships are still in there, almost fully intact, save for hull breeches and leaked atmosphere. And everyone knows, whoever finds a safe route into the heart of that asteroid belt, well, they'll come out rich . . .if they come out at all.

As for Samson Santana, well, some say that space liner exploded when it rammed the first warship. Others, they say he never did turn up at that battle in the first place. Hell, no wreckage of the *Solar Crescent* was ever found. And others, well they say if you wait long enough, and look hard enough, sometimes if you're lucky, you'll see a dirty, battered looking cruise-liner, peeking out of those asteroids, every now and then, like a curious badger poking out of some dark n' gloomy hole.

Well heck, make of that what you want. That story might have picked up some discrepancies along the way. You know, gathered a bit of moss. But damn, that there was the bare bones of the tale.

* * *

Chapter 16 New Beginnings

So now there was me, there was Palerider and there was Denise. And we were there, in the Brewery, talking of such things as Samson Santana. Turns out (according to Denise), that someone had found a secret way into the *Magellan Belt*, and had been hauling gear out of it for the past 2 years. The guy was storing all his stuff out in the agro-sector, on some farming moon called *QuakerOat IV*.

This lucky guy, she said, was called Lester O'Malley. Lester "the Jester" O'Malley. Yeah, I've heard of this bum. He's the only stand-up comic I know, to have made it big as a small-time drug lord. He had a minor hit, about twenty years ago, as the host of that tacky holo-comedy show: "*Lester's Funny Bone*". His catchphrase "*so many fools, so few meteorites*" had stenciled its way into Solaris slang and had been etched firmly there for quite some time. But I guess those six words were all that survived from Lester's comedy days.

"*Funny Bone*" ran out of steam, almost as fast as people stopped laughing at Lester's crappy jokes. Turns out, Lester wasn't funny, so much as annoying. When he made a crude gag about old ladies, the "Senior Citizens Board" boycotted his show and picketed his studio for a week. Turns out "*Funny Bone*" was riding a really strange demographic. Viewers were mostly 60-70 years old, and when the grannies and grandpas grew to hate Lester, viewing figures went downhill like a bobsled on the slopes of Mount Couvara. Tabloid news of a depressed Lester hitting the booze and sniff-dust didn't help to win over his leaking fan-base.

Just a couple months later, and a glum Lester is already tangled up in the drug scene. He inherited his granddad's cigarette company and turned it overnight, into a *sniff-dust* factory. He used to claim that his cigarettes were just like everyone else's, only better. Truth was that ole Lester laced those tubes with just enough herbs to really grip you. Last I heard, Lester was still in the business, making a good living off selling *narcs*. Hell, I ain't got no idea what he's up to these days. How he managed to find a way into the heart of Magellan, I ain't got a freaking clue. But if what Denise was telling us was true, then this Lester guy was sitting on a cool fortune.

Now I saw right away where this was going, and frankly, I didn't expect a classy chick like Denise to be dealing in stuff like this. I mean, call me shallow, but I figured her for a simple country gal. Like a ballerina or seamstress or something.

I mean, Palerider and I, we were legit guys. We were running the best, most clean beer business on Solaris and now here Denise was, wanting us to risk our lives hitting some rich guy's dodgy weapons cache.

Hell no! Count me out missy! Ain't no way! I'm a born again coward!

But like I said earlier, from the time I met Denise, things went flying. And Palerider, well, I guess this was the kind of adventure he'd been waiting on. You've got to understand, he's a Mercenary at heart. It's what he loves. It's what he dreams of at night. And this. . .well, this was the start of his grand dream. Who was I to stop him?

* * *

Chapter 17 Connecting the dots

Palerider's plan was simple. We would assemble a team. We would find a transport. And we would raid Lester's cache. The way he spoke, Palerider made it sound as if this was your regular bike ride in the park. Training wheels and earmuffs included. You know how freaking confident this guy is.

So yeah, we set out to assemble a team. We had to find guys fast, so all were picked up locally, right here on Solaris. The dudes Palerider had in mind were all ex mercenary buddies, or hard-back yokel friends of his. Drinking buddies and trigger happy mech-jocks. Nice combo.

Our first stop was a glum looking dive called *The Happy Jugs*, out near Bananarama City. Apparently, a couple of Palerider's buddies were planning to meet us there. So we packed our stuff, and head on out. Took us three hours by magna-tram just to reach this freaking dump.

Now Bananarama ain't the kind of place you tend to see on the Solaris tourist brochures. No way. No fancy lights, billboards, mech-pits and casinos here. This ain't no family spot. When the least glum billboard around, reads "*WE PUT THE 'FUN' IN FUNERAL*" you just know you're in for a depressing time.

Bananarama, you see, was the gutter of Solaris. I mean this place was in need of some serious gentrification. Express abortion clinics, prostitutes, brothels and 24-hour strip clubs were littered about like bad confetti.

"*Come to US, for an aborted FOETUS,*" the signs yelled.

They say Bananarama City, or the *Banana Strip*, as most folk have come to know it, has the highest concentration of people infected with sexual diseases, than anywhere else in the universe. People come here to get laid, and end the day with a couple dozen diseases dancing about on their loins. Everything from HIV, to ISS, AIDS to Crotch-rot, simmers down here, just waiting for a victim. It ain't no surprise that the average life expectancy ain't too high over here. Like the saying goes:

"*Down in the Strip, you're lucky if you live to thirty five.*"

But folk down here, they just treat it all as a normal part of life. They're too busy hassling C-bills and making cash off one-night stands to give a damn. Most of them are too stupid anyway. No education, no cash, and born on the streets, you know how it is. Some of these bums think HIV is some kinda' qualification!

Now *The Happy Jugs* was a big strip mall just a couple minutes walk from the station. The signs outside proclaimed it as being: "*the finest place for adult entertainment.*" I guess down here, that was the equivalent of a doctor's certificate or dentist's wall plaque.

The *Jugs* was a real big place, two stories tall and awash with neon lights. Inside was hell. Smoke n' asbestos fill the air like pregnant rain clouds. Girls suggestively wriggle their naked bodies along polished poles while bar tenders serve watered-down mugs of beer with uneasy smiles and dirty teeth.

The hellish lights, the nudity, the smoke, the alcohol, the laughter, the taunts . . . man it was sickening. I could sense how uneasy Denise was, being in a place like this. And to tell you the truth, despite the boner, I felt the same way. Sure, I was a regular guy, I had my vices. I ain't gonna lie. But there's a limit, you know? There's a line between fun and vulgarity.

Palerider led us through the crowds, trying to avoid the naked bodies being thrust in our faces, and introduced us to two guys. Two guys by the name of **Akula**, and **WolfCross**.

Yup. Akula and WolfCross. Two more crazy names to add to the stockpile. I had no idea what an "*Akula*" was or why this "*Wolf*" guy had a "*Cross*" tagged to his name, and frankly, I didn't give a damn. It's like I said earlier, too many freaking strange things in this universe for me to stop and think about em' all.

Apparently these two bums were ex-MechWarrior jocks, and close pals of Palerider. They were here on Solaris with a few other guys and were working on some big scam. They said that this swindle of theirs would nail them some heavy cash. They sounded convincing, but hell, this was Solaris. Everyone was working on a scam!

Course it all sounded like a buncha fancy talk to me. These guys looked like they were scraping to make a living and so when Palerider told them about Lester's Cache and his little mission, I expected them to jump like crazy at the opportunity. But boy was I wrong.

"It sounds interesting." Akula said blankly. *"But we're not interested."*

"Yeah. We're kinda in the middle of something." WolfCross said. *"Something big."*

That's when Akula pointed to a shaggy looking guy across the bar, sitting on a stool and tending to a king sized beer.

"You see that guy over there, with the handle-bar moustache?"

"Yeah." Palerider shrugged. *"Looks familiar."*

"That's the freaking hotshot Centurion pilot, everyone's been talking about. We've been tailing him for a week. The jock's been staying low, and avoiding publicity like he's allergic to reporters."

Funny how your life can change in an instant. One minute you're selling a shot at fortune to a buncha half-stoned yokels, the next, they're brushing you off cus' they got "*bigger plans*".

But hell, they were right. Akula and WolfCross, these two yokels, they had guts all the way up to their necks. This little plan of theirs was damn bold and damn plucky.

It's the kinda job you expected full time gangsters like Sonny Gambollio or Ricky Bambossa to be swimming in. But hell, Akula and WolfCross, yup, these two hippies, they had guts.

* * *

Chapter 18 The Pride of Solaris

Their plan went something like this. That *Centurion* pilot sitting at the bar, obviously had some major skill. The guy had taken twenty five winnings in the past three months and had hit every junkyard and fringe tournament on Solaris. Those were small games, little duels on the outskirts, but still, the guy was obviously a hot stick.

Apparently this *Cent*-pilot had been changing call signs after each fight. A nice little tactic to keep the bookies and his jug-headed opponents, guessing. But it was only a matter of time before pretty much everyone on the 'skirts had heard of the mysterious "*Hotshot in the Cent.*"

You see, his advantage of anonymity was gone. That Centurion of his was way too easy to spot. It was a marked 'Mech. From now on, the moment his actuators fizzle and his feet set foot in any tournament, he'd have everyone teaming up and slugging him down. They all knew that this guy was dangerous. He was a winner. And it's like every jock says:

"Shoot the winner first!"

So Akula and his boys were planning to fix a fight. And not just any ordinary fight. They were going to fix the *Pride of Solaris*.

Now I don't know if you've heard of this before, but The *Pride of Solaris*, you see, is the biggest one-off 'Mech battle held on Solaris. Ain't no ladders to climb, ain't no major rules, no weapon bans, no tonnage limits. The *Pride of Solaris* was mechanized hell, and it was the most entertaining, most intense, annual match held here on Solaris.

The battle took place out at Centre-point Stadium, a massive domed arena in the heart of the city, with enough space and terrain to comfortably house a seventy-five 'Mech battle.

Heck, this stadium was so big, they had to uproot two cities, a couple thousand acres of rainforest, and a shabby fast-food dive called "*Willy's Watering Hole*" just to fit this arena on the map!

Turns out, Willy wasn't too keen on having to vacate and so the crazy sucker spent a week chained to a post in the middle of the construction site. The Commission grew frustrated and eventually had to hire some zoo keeper from the "*Solaris World of Adventures*" to tranquilize poor Willy. They hit him with twenty ounces of tri-sulphurous-fromadine and then transplanted Willy and his pole to someplace in

Montoya. Some people say Willy is still standing there in Montoya, chained to that post, but hell, I ain't in the position to verify such things.

Anyway, the *Pride of Solaris* was much more than just seventy-five 'Mechs slugging it out like crazy. Yup. It was much more. You see, jocks are released out into that arena, twenty 'Mechs at a time. And a new batch of twenty are released, every time ten 'Mechs have been completely destroyed. Once the arena reaches it's seventy-five 'Mech limit, the guys already in the stadium are left to battle it out until only ten 'Mechs remain, and then a fresh batch of twenty 'Mechs are set loose and the cycle resumes.

All this jiggy might sound unfair for the guys getting released out in the ring first, but the Commission had that sorted. They categorized each 'Mech based on its tonnage, power, and the number/type of weapons it packed. I think the slang they use is "FASH RATING" - Firepower, Armour, Speed, Heat Efficiency. So basically the battle was arranged so that the heaviest, more deadly 'Mechs were released first (good FASH) while the real useless little guys, boating flare guns and no heat-sinks, came last (bad FASH).

Yeah, the *Pride of Solaris* was pretty intense. A couple decades ago, it went on for 3 days, on account of people kept turning up with more 'Mechs. The stream of BattleMechs entering that arena never seemed to die down. You had jocks turning up from all over the Sphere, looking to have a good time. Course the Commission wouldn't let the real big late-comers in, unless they stripped off most of their gear.

So you had these big assault 'Mechs walking about with the same FASH rating as a twenty-five tonner. Was a pretty weird sight. Nowadays you gotta give the G.C at least 2 weeks notice before waltzing into that arena.

And that's what makes the *Pride of Solaris* so damn beautiful. Just about anyone can take part. No matter how big, or how lame your gear is, you're guaranteed a spot. It's all entertainment and the amount of cash the Commission rakes in every year off this one battle, is enough to buy a small moon somewhere off in the Agro-Sector.

Now I know what you're thinking. Ain't no way its possible to fix a fight so insanely massive. With hundreds of 'Mechs cycling through those arena walls, twenty at a time . . . well, it's just crazy.

But Akula's plan was deep. You see he planned to ensure that his 'Mech was the last to enter that battle. And to ensure that, he had to convince the Gaming Commission that there were no other BattleMechs in the tournament that were as completely useless as the one he was entering. I mean, he needed the most totally pathetic BattleMech in existence. Something so ridiculous, that the Commission had no choice but to string us in last. . .

"And that's why we're entering an UrbanMech." Akula said.

Holy crap! An Urbie? I couldn't believe those things were still being classified as 'Mechs. Damn, well this all sounded insane to me, but Akula was convinced. I mean, he needed the most totally worthless BattleMech in existence and he certainly had one. Now all he needed was to find a hotshot pilot good enough to pilot it. A jock

good enough to pull off a win. And yup, you guessed it, that's where the Centurion-pilot came in.

Things were spiralling out of control now. I felt like I was diagonally parked in a parallel universe. The barely germinated "Cache Raid" seemed to have been forgotten, and life at the Brewery existed only as a distant memory. Like black-n-white holo-vids and flared trousers, my old life was out of style. Things were slicing by fast, and I was busting brain-cells just trying to keep up with the trends.

But Palerider just smiled and went with the flow. You know how he is. He likes all this adventure stuff. He had more balls than a fleet of pool tables and all this crazy scheming made him moist. He lives for this and so he wasted no time in agreeing to help out his old buddies.

"Sounds good. Tell us what you want, and we'll help out."

* * *

Chapter 19

Anatomy of a Long Tom

So we left the "*Happy Jugs*" and headed back to Montoya. A couple hours later Akula gave us a call, saying he was able to convince the mysterious Cent-pilot to join our little operation. This was good news. That guy was probably the best jock working the fringe and seemed to have a knack for piloting smaller 'Mechs. So now we had a kick-ass pilot and we had a 'Mech, but something was still missing. We needed gear. We needed weapons.

In order to keep a low FASH rating, we couldn't afford to pack our Urbie with numerous guns. We needed one weapon. One gun. And to ensure that our guy had a fighting chance in hell of surviving more than five minutes in the loop, that one weapon had to be able to kick some major torso. We needed a super-weapon. Some serious BADDA-BING-BADDA-BOOM. Yeah, you guessed it, we needed a Long Tom cannon.

And that's what Palerider and I set out to find.

That's where *Da BountyHunter* came in. I know I mentioned this guy awhile back. Da BountyHunter was that jock working the junkyard games. The guy who made a habit of packing a Tommy-Gun each time he entered an arena. We didn't know where Da BountyHunter managed to find such a rare weapon, let alone how he kept such a slug-thrower stocked with cans, but the guy musta' had his sources and if we were lucky, he'd sell us in on his little secret.

Now a Long Tom cannon, you see, is one hell of a weapon. It shoots a cylindrical slug with enough punch to knock a 'Mech off its feet. The only drawback is that the damn thing takes a genius to aim it. Hell, you probably need a PHD in math just to use this thing. Unlike most weapons, the Tommy lobs its load, you know, like an arch. It's also very ammo specific. You got dozens of different types of Tommy slugs,

each packing a different payload and splash radius. But aiming the damn thing is so dependant on weight, wind velocity, trigonometry, airborne amoeba and stuff like that, that the thing is a damn pain in the ass to aim. Heck, the recoil from this gun is enough to rip your own arms right off if you don't cater for the flinch. But when I pointed that out to Palerider he just shrugged:

"An Urbie's got no arms."

But there was more. We'd have to field this Long-Tom without a targeting computer. I know it sounds crazy, but entering *The Pride* without a C.C targeting computer was the only way to guarantee that the Commission shoved us in last.

The way we saw it, by the time we entered the arena, the remaining 'Mechs would be mostly battered scouts, packing a couple drained lasers and empty chain guns. A super-weapon like the Long-Tom could nail a scout in a couple shots. Heck, the shockwave alone can knock those guys off their freakin' feet. Our 'Mech only had to survive long enough to mop up the surviving dregs of battle.

Yup. So we had this plan pretty much ironed out. But that's not to say that we didn't expect to run into trouble. Oh no. There'd be trouble. Hell, yeah. And we knew just where it would be coming from.

Our main problem, you see, was freakin' Ricky Bambossa. Every year for the past six years, Ricky has had at least one of his sponsored 'Mechs making it to the final ten. His tactic was to have one of his guys entering at each stage of the game in order to heighten his chances of winning. He'd have a really big Assault 'Mech amongst the first to enter the arena, then he'd have a really fancy Medium 'Mech coming in after the first few hours. Usually a forty-five tonner packing the best hardware his goons could pull off the black-market. Then finally, he'd have a souped up scout, coming in to mop off the late-comers.

So you see, it was a threefold attack. Ricky, wasted no C's on getting his 'Mech's up to specs and he bought the finest jocks he could get his hands on.

But we had to have hope. We had to keep the faith. It's like my granny used to say:

"It's not the size of the dog in the fight, it's the size of the fight in the dog."

Course my granny was no prize winning dog breeder. But she did spend half her life on her knees licking poodles behind her mental hospital, and like most folk, she did have her moments of profound wisdom.

* * *

Chapter 20

Acquiring Ordinance

It's a rarity these days, especially in the private sector, for 'Mech jocks to be packing high-class gear like Long Tom cannons. Most folk stay away from ammunition based weapons. The cost to maintain such things, and keeping them fully stocked, sucks

away at your wallet like a hungry baby on a wet nipple. Not to mention the truck load of forms, credentials, and licenses you need just to keep this sort of stuff laying about.

Keeping a crate of mini-warheads in your garage is serious business. One freak detonation and you wipe out half your neighborhood. Ain't nothing funny about that. And if your storage papers ain't up to date, you could easily land a nine-month jail-party for hiding away unregistered ammunition. The suits were hard about stuff like this.

So you see, jocks tend to go for lasers. A simple battery pack, flash-back suppressers. . .you know? They're simple, efficient weapons. Switch 'em off and cork the muzzles. That's all there is to it. And all the flashy colors, well heck, they look pretty in a gay sort of way, and so most guys opted for them.

But Da BountyHunter wasn't like most guys. Or maybe he was. I don't know, I ain't into intimacy. But this guy. . . I won't say he's crazy, 'cus from a certain point of few, I guess we all are a 'lil bit insane in the membrane. But BountyHunter, well heck, let's just say that this guy liked to talk. Here's what he said:

*"I had this friend, got jailed for shop lifting. Turned up with 9 cranes one day and decided to lift up a shopping mall. Turns out the cops spotted him. Course, the dude tried to deny it, but I mean, hell, when you got nine cranes suspending a shopping mall ten meters off the freaking ground, ain't like an alibi gonna do you any good!! Now you see, this crazy friend of mine used to work at one of them big engineering firms out on the fringe. SOLARIS ARMAMENTS I think it's called. I ain't sure though. My memory been kinda hazy since I started sniffing glue. But anyway, SOLARIS ARMAMENTS, you might'a heard of 'em. You know- **"building better weapons for quicker wars"**. They specialise in gun muzzles and small components. Military parts and all that.*

Well now, a couple months ago, before he got jailed for stupidity, this buddy of mine gives me a couple dozen defected Tommy muzzles, cus he knows I'm interested in tubes n' pipes n' stuff. I use to be a plumber, you see.

Now, it took me a while but I managed to fix up those Tommy Guns. Had to become a part time man-whore to raise the cash, but hell, it was worth it. And hey, wouldn't have met my man-wife if I hadn't. So yeah, I raised myself enough cash, downloaded some blueprints off the holonet, bought a couple more parts off E-bay and fixed up those Long Toms pretty good.

And the ammo, well here's the crazy part, I mix those cans up myself. Regular Tommy shells fire upwards and hit the dirt with a big shockwave, you know, spreading outwards. But nah, not my cans. Hee Hee. See I figured if I welded together two slugs I'd be able to get more bang for my buck, know what I mean? So instead of regular 9 and a half inch slugs, I got these big 19 inch suckers packing twice the punch. 19 inches man, that's like super-sized hell, man. Explosion sets up a pretty little vacuum before blowing outwards. You've seen me dancin' in the ring, you know how this thing looks. These little babies pack enough punch to keep an Atlas in a wheelchair for a month. Hell, I'm working on a bigger barrel too, a big 10' mouth on this sucker. Gonna need a tripod and a rivet-gun to mount this baby. She's gonna be so fine. Hee Hee. Makes me wanna jerk off to mah own blueprints. Hee Hee. So uh, now fellas, you say you wanna buy a Long Tom?"

Well we paid the guy and got the hell out of there. This jock had a serious case of vocal diarrhea and we were in no mood to digest his verbal spews.

* * *

Chapter 21 Helping Hands

A couple days went by and gradually more and more guys were being pulled into our little operation. A punk called **Phoenix** was brought in to operate as our handler.

Now I ain't ever met Phoenix before, but I sure as hell knew of his reputation. On the streets, they call him "snake eyes", on account of the fact that he could roll any pair of dice and strike double ones, every time. This guy lived and breathed casinos. He was in tight with every pit boss on Solaris and could clear out a card-house in less than an hour. Yeah, Phoenix was a real smooth operator and thankfully, a close friend of WolfCross.

So this Phoenix guy, he knew his stuff. His job was to hustle the sharks, place all our bets and really get the odds up in our favour. He's also the one that proposed the idea of changing the Cent-Jock's call-sign to "**VERYBAD**".

The Centurion jockey didn't like it at first, he preferred something a little more menacing. Like **DEATH HAMMER**, **BONE CRUSHER**, **MECH VINDICATOR** or **ERRATIC CHEESE**. But we managed to convince him otherwise. You see, it's like Phoenix said:

"Who the heck is gonna bet on an Urbie, driven by a guy called VERYBAD?"

He had a point.

* * *

Chapter 22 Loki

Plans may have been going ahead with the *Pride of Solaris* scam, but Palerider hadn't forgotten about his little "cache raid". That was the real jackpot. The Urbie scam may have been Akula's little operation, but the hit on Lester's cache, that was Palerider's, and not a moment went by that Palerider wasn't mentally planning for it.

Palerider hoped to rent a freighter, or some sort of transport to ferry us out to *QuakerOat IV*, and so he set up a meeting with an old aero-fighter buddy of his. A washed up guy called **Loki**.

Yup "Loki". Now that there wasn't a name I'd willingly self apply. But I guess in a place like Solaris, crazy names sort of spontaneously germinate and dissolve into the jungle of absurdity.

Loki, you see, was struggling to make a living, working at some cheap travel agency, selling rip-off vacation holidays to wide-eyed dreamers. The guy seemed beat up and

depressed. He had the look of a comic book adventurer stuck between pages. An exciting past. Exciting future. But nothing flashy in the now.

I guess us walking into that Travel Agency musta seemed like a real page-turner to Loki, cus' his face lit up like a spot light. His cheeks swelled and he flashed the most honest-to-god smile I'd seen in years. He hugged Palerider and said:

“Well hot-dang! Palerider ole buddy!”

“How ya' been sunshine!?” Palerider smiled.

Heh Heh. Loki. What a great guy.

Little scenes like this played out over the next few weeks. We met up with people, who in turn, introduced us to other people, who in turn introduced us to more people. Those were crazy days. Those were the weeks that really shaped the way things are today. Everyone was connected. Everyone knew someone else. Mention a task and someone was bound to know someone else who'd be able to accomplish it. It was like our own grand network forming before our eyes and the more we planned, the more people we met, the more we grew, the tighter we became. It was lovely.

* * *

Chapter 23

The First Supper

We gathered all the guys together one evening, for a big party. Sort of like a celebration, only we didn't have nothin' to celebrate yet. Yeah, I guess the timing of this little jamboree was a bit weird. The fight was still 2 weeks away and everyone was edgy and nervous. I guess at the time, we were all just happy to have made it this far.

You gotta realise we were mostly all bums, scraping to make a living, chasing dreams and clawing our way around, fighting to stay clean. These little operations, this plan, it's what kept us going. The tiny promises of a better tomorrow, that's what kept us climbing the ladder. Yeah, I guess that's what we were celebrating.

We met up at BeerRunner's Brewery and spent a couple hours gulping down on booze and absorbing some first class Solarian cuisine. Seeing us all cramped together in that brewery, like tall stacks of tightly folded underwear, I guess was the first time it really hit me.

There were a lot of us.

Heck, I didn't know who half these people were. Sure I recognised some faces . . . Akula, WolfCross, Loki, Phoenix . . . but most of these guys I'd never before seen in my life. I guess that's when I decided to put down my bottle of beer and go around the room, introducing myself to everyone. From that day on, everyone of those faces became part of my life.

* * *

Chapter 24 Grounded Urbies

The weeks before the fight, were hectic as hell. Palerider and I took the magna-tram back to the *Banana Strip* and met up with Akula and WolfCross at a suspicious looking joint deep in the city.

This place was next door to an Express Abortion Clinic and was basically a big shed used by the local police force to house their unused batch of Urban Enforcement 'Mechs and other worthless quarantined hardware. These Urbies just sat there, gathering dust, rusting away, unused and wasted.

You see in those days the courts were still wrestling with the idea of turning over BattleMechs to the local law enforcement. The cops, they were real gung-ho kinda guys. You know how it is. Give 'em a baton and they want a gun. Give 'em a gun and they want a semi-automatic. Give 'em a semi-automatic and they want a rocket launcher, a six pack of TNT and enough donuts to last ten stakeouts and a poker game. The funding was getting ridiculous, but the fact was, Solaris was a damn nightmare to supervise. With more crime-lords and criminals than anywhere else in the universe, the *suits* needed the gear. And they needed it bad.

The politicians were getting tired of dishing out dinero and so eventually they decided to put their feet down and end the issue once and for all.

So they set in motion a plan: "*The Constabulary BattleMech Act*". Or ABC backwards, for short. The cops would be licensed to use BattleMechs and crime on Solaris would be banished forever.

Yeah well that plan backfired like an inflatable dart board. The politicians funded a pilot training programme and purchased a fleet of *UrbanMechs*. They then set up the "Municipal BattleMech Law Enforcement Agency" with grand visions of Police 'Mechs patrolling the streets, criminals cringing in fear of their awesome power.

But things went quickly downhill. Turns out their little idea had more holes than a bowl of Cheerio's. You see, the city streets just weren't designed with BattleMechs in mind. On average, it took those things an hour just to cross from down town Langton to the corner of Fifth-Boulevard.

You had Battlemechs causing more accidental real-estate damage than a class three earthquake. The City Council was getting complaints and angry locals were threatening to sue. Insurance companies were going bust. People's vehicles were being crushed by passing 'Mechs, village streets were riddled with footprints and every time a 'Mech walked by, street lamps would fall over, window panes would rattle and fickle old ladies would get heart attacks. Heck, the police pilots spent more time dodging overhead power lines than fighting crime. The whole Police BattleMech plan was a disaster from the start.

The politicians, they knew they had messed up big time, but they wouldn't back down. And like all politicians do, they circled around the real problem and pumped more money into the project, hoping that things would correct themselves. They started funding a big re-development plan whereby special pathways were created solely for use by BattleMechs. Sort of like a sidewalk for 'Mechs. Yeah it sounds stupid, but it really happened.

Two years into the engineering project and the city went almost bankrupt. It took a crazy incident down at the Montoya National Treasury to really convince the politicians that they had screwed up.

You see, a couple punks decided to rob the Solaris Treasury one day, and then made a snazzy getaway in a hijacked ice-cream van. One of those new police 'Mechs just happens to be nearby and fires a missile at the vehicle. Course the damn heat-seeker can't get a hard-lock on the ice-cream van and next thing you know, the LRM is AWOL and smashin' into the freakin' National Treasury, blowing it right up.

Ironic thing is, couple minutes later, some cop on horseback catches the bank robbers refueling at an outer-state fuel station. He handcuffed the goons and feasted on a double-decker chocolate sundae, smiling like a king while he waited on the paddy-wagon.

* * *

Chapter 25

Stealing from the Police

So you see, when Akula said that he had an *Urbie* available for use, he really meant that he had found an unused *UrbanMech* rusting away in that police station storehouse.

Yeah it's stupid. Akula was stealing an *Urbie* from a police station. He used fancy words like "borrowing" and sentences like "they don't use them anymore," but when you get down to ethics, when you boil it down to the bare facts, we were gonna steal a freaking *Urbie* from the freaking cops and in my mind this crazy situation was setting off all kinds of alarm bells.

"Relax. The suits don't come down here anymore. This is all junk to them." Akula insisted. *"Heck, they'll probably pay us to take it away."*

Ah hell. He was right. The place was a dump and the *Urbie* looked dusty and unused. There were no cops in sight and the storehouse was left unlocked 24/7. Apparently Akula had an engineering team visiting the *Urbie* everyday, hustling to get the beast ready for combat. And from the looks of things, they musta been almost done.

That's when Akula introduced us to the engineering duo. Two guys wearing overalls, their faces covered in grease and hydraulic fluid. But without the grime, I wouldn't have been able to recognise them anyway. They hadn't been at the brew-house party.

*"The big guy with the wrench, that there is **Perrin**. And the fella next to him, that's **Shrike**."* Akula said.

"Our engineering duo." WolfCross added.

Shrike and Perrin? Couple more insane names. Lather, rinse, repeat.

At the time, these two yokels looked like a couple of fools out of a really low budget holo-porno. You know? The kinda guys who turn up at the door to fix the washing machine of some testosterone hungry housewife. Little did I know though, that these two yokels would turn out to be my buddies for life. But at the time, heh, they looked like a couple'a bums.

Shrike and Perrin had just finished installing the Long Tom cannon and according to them, the *Urbie* was "ready for action". Palerider and I then got a quick tour of the 'Mech, which amounted to Akula basically indicating where it's knees ended and its head began. With the Long Tom muzzle jutting out of its torso, the stupid *Urbie* looked like a garbage can with an erection. But still, it was in good shape. The chassis was solid, and the armour looked like it would hold up. We were optimistic.

Verybad had about a week and a half to train in the *Urbie*. It wasn't much time, but he was confident and he got the hang of things pretty fast. The only down-side was that we were hesitant to let the *Urbie* out of the Police junkyard. We didn't want to be spotted and it would do us no good if a squad car pulled the *Urbie* over on the streets and slapped us with a speeding ticket.

But Verybad used his space wisely and swivelled the torso, pitching it up and down, getting a feel for the controls. We loaded up some blank canisters into the Long Tom cannon and fired a couple rounds off, just for practise, you know. I remember one morning, Verybad walked the *Urbie* up to the storeroom skylight and fired off a couple blank shots into the morning sky. We read in the newspapers a couple days later that a shell had landed in and blocked some guy's chimney. The smoke backed up and suffocated the poor guy's parrot. That left us feeling a little bad, but Verybad, with his mischievous little self, made a bet, saying that he could do it again. Course we thought he was crazy, but he nailed the shot, plugging the guy's chimney yet again.

It was remarkable, even without a targeting computer, Verybad was able to handle the gun with pin-point precision. You gotta realise, this guy is one ace-pilot. He can drive one of these things blindfolded, upside down and with both hands in a fishbowl.

* * *

Chapter 26 Bets and Bookies

With a week and a half to go, we were busy getting our admittance papers ready and spent much of our time hanging around the book makers and betting booths.

If Verybad did manage to come out as “*Last 'Mech Standing*“, that would earn us a cool jackpot of 10 and a half million credits. But that was nothing compared to the massive haul we could rake in, if we worked the bookies in our favour.

Now lemme’ explain how BattleMech gambling works. Solaris, you see, is the gambling capital of the universe. Around Centre Point Stadium alone, you got maybe a thousand betting centres and book-makers, all hustling for you cash. They range from small-time betting booths nestled on dirty street corners, to massive centres with on-suite bars, flashy computer screens and automated cash dispensers. But big or small, what all these bookmakers had in common, was that they all had to be registered with the Gaming Commission. That’s the law.

With all these bookies linked up, the odds could be carefully monitored and the “spread” could be continuously updated every time someone made a bet. Now the “spread” is basically a term used to indicate how the professionals thought you should be betting. By “professionals” I mean the massive bank of prediction computers sitting up in the Gaming Commission Oversight Room.

Now you could bet against the spread or with the spread. Or negative/positive spread if you wanna get all funky with me. For example, in a game with 10 BattleMechs, each 'Mech would be ranked and given a number from 1 to 10. Their ranking is based on a lot of complex formulas and crazy mathematics, but basically all it amounts to is the skill of the pilot, the tonnage and the FASH rating.

Now most people bet with the spread, selecting the big Atlas with the 5 PPCs and hotshot jock behind the stick. Sure, they would have guessed correctly, but when a couple million people all opt for the same choice, the haul just ain’t worth it. Most times you break even with the cost of a betting ticket, which ran from 20-45 credits depending on the day of the week.

End result: No profit.

Now a smart gambler, the real die-hard guys who chew ticket stubs for breakfast, they’ll never bet on a sure winner. What they do is place “Bracket Bets”. Now a bracket bet is a bet placed on 2 or more 'Mechs. Essentially, when you’re bracketing a bet, you’ve got to predict when a 'Mech is gonna get floored. You gotta select a 'Mech and predict exactly when it’s gonna get knocked out of the game. Now there are all kinds of Brackets. For example, a “Bracket Quinella” is a bet placed on two 'Mechs. A “Bracket Exacta” is when you bet on a first or second finisher. A “Trio” is when you bet on three 'Mechs and correctly predict their falling placements. Then there’s the “Wide Quinella”, which is probably the toughest bet of them all, but without a doubt the most profitable if you nail it correctly. Basically with a “Quinella”, you’ve got to predict precisely, every jock’s falling position. Sure, that was possible in a small 10 man arena. But in a massive 75 'Mech tournament like the *Pride*, well, a “Wide Quinella” would be pretty much down to luck.

So the real essence of BattleMech gambling was not to correctly predict a sure winner, but to ensure that everyone else did. Information was important. The real hard-core gamblers spent hours talking to pilots and checking out weapon-charts and statistics. Often, big time gamblers like Ricky and Sonny, would place fake dummy-bets because they knew everyone was watching them. People assumed that guy's like Ricky had inside information, so what do they do? They stalk 'em and copy their bets.

Course wise-guys like Ricky Bambossa are always one step ahead of the competition. So after they placed their public bets, they then called up their phoney handlers and secretly place another bet on the real winner. The end result is always that guys like Ricky pull in bigger hauls at better odds.

So that's how gambling works, but we were about to take it one step further. We received confirmation from the Commission that our *Urbie* was indeed being entered in last. Rear-pole position is what they called us. We checked the chart listings and saw that the two 'Mechs entering ahead of us were a light scout Stiletto and a Firestarter packing "thunderbolts", a missile that was, until very recently, outlawed in the arenas.

Bookies, gamblers, stub-hands, no one was taking us seriously. An *Urbie* with a Long Tom cannon? Give me a break! A pilot called "VERYBAD"? Hell no! So yeah, our 'Mech was deemed to be cannon fodder. No one had ever heard of our pilot, we had one gun and 10 shots, the prediction computers ranked us as last place and everyone was betting on us getting knocked out easy.

Everything was going as planned.

* * *

Chapter 27

Cops and robbers

The Gaming Commission has a service whereby they provide transport for the contesting BattleMechs to and from the main stadium. They have a specially rigged transport ship that they use to ferry 'Mechs. Now this ship is shaped like a claw and hovers above its cargo, clamping down and grasping with magnetic fingers. The problem was, with its smooth, penis-shaped head, our *Urbie* kept slipping away from the grasping arms!

Now the pilot of this ship, he did his best. I mean, this guy really did try. But these pilots were used to latching onto bigger 'Mechs. Mechs with arms and sharp edges. And though I don't doubt that given time they woulda eventually secured our lil' *Urbie*, the damage and jolting that our Mech was sustaining, was painful on the eyes.

So Palerider decided to send the ship away and called up the Commission asking them to send one of their big Juggernaut Flatbed transports. The Commission rented these beasts out at a cost of 40,000 C-bills, so it ain't exactly cheap.

But when we gave them the address to come pick us up, it caused some concern down at the Gaming Commission HQ. I don't know why they didn't notice it before, but after they double checked our address they were surprised to find that our *Urbie* was stashed away in a Police storehouse. Though we didn't know it at the time, we had made our first mistake.

You see, the investigators down at the Commission then contacted the Bananarama Police Station and inquired as to whether they had entered one of their 'Mechs in the upcoming *Pride of Solaris*. Of course the police chief down at the station had no idea what was going on. Like a nun at a rock concert, the poor guy was befuddled, so he scratched his head n' promised to look into the matter right away.

In the mean time, the Flatbed had arrived. It was basically a large, hovering, slab of steel with a ramp on one end and a cockpit on the other. Thing looked like a giant floating loaf of bread.

But a couple hours later, while our *Urbie* was being flown across Solaris towards Centre Point Stadium, Akula gets a phone call from a Gaming Commission investigator. This investigator guy asks Akula what he's doing entering a quarantined police 'Mech. Akula, of course, was taken by surprise and had to quickly blab a cover-story:

"Police mech? Uh...no, it's a Polish 'Mech. It's from...uh...Poland."

But these investigator guys are like bulldogs. I mean the Commission had them wired up like walking lie-detectors. So ten minutes later we got the Bananarama Police Chief down at the storehouse with a half dozen officers, looking to kick our asses with stun sticks and batons.

Now this Police Chief, a guy called **Chief LouHobbs**, was ready to haul our fanny's back to the jail house. I mean this guy looked like he meant business.

"You punk-ass, jive turkeys think you can break in here, and haul police gear out from under my nose? You don't know who you messing with, son. Chief LouHobbs' the name. Busting wise-guy Caucasian's my game!"

Chief LouHobbs sounded tough, but PaleRider had the guy all figured out. You see, Lou didn't give a crap about the law. He was in this job for the power. The status. Yup, Lou was a first class authority junkie. And so what does PaleRider do? He makes LouHobbs an offer he knows the Chief can't refuse.

"I'll give you a quarter million C-bills to ignore this little thievery and come work for me."

It took LouHobbs about ten minutes to come to a decision. He had one of those minor morality crises. He'd been protecting and serving the community all his life, how could he just turn his back and walk away? The guy was confused. And so he does what every confused grown man does. He calls his mother and asks her for advice.

"Take tha' money! Whatsa matter with you, Lou, you dumb goof! You take tha' money and you buy your mother some fancy shoes! And why you no come visit me no

more? Huh? Whatsa matter with you? You no love your mother no more? When'a you gonna give me some grandkids? Lou? Lou?"

Yeah, you know how mother's are. When they give advice, your ears bleed. It's the body's natural defence. The clotting blood blocks your earlobes and protects your brain from the crazy female wisdom.

* * *

Chapter 28

The Day of the Fight

"The Pride of Solaris!! We'll sell you the entire seat, but we guarantee, you'll only need the EDGE!! Call 1800-SEXYMECHS to book now!!"

Now Centre-Point Stadium is the best arena on Solaris. It's like the Buckingham Palace of arenas. The Taj Mahal of stadiums. I mean, there was nothing like it. Watching a duel at Centre-Point was an event you remembered all your life. It was something you told your kids about.

"I was there. I saw Rocky Omaley take down Kaiser Ironside, live. I breathed their air. I was there. That was me in the stand."

It was something to be proud of. Something you bragged to your neighbours about. It was an important event in your life and according to the doctors, in terms of pleasure, it was the bio-chemical equivalent of one hundred simultaneous orgasms.

So being here, on this day, was a big deal. I mean, it was so big a deal, I polished my shoes and scrubbed my tongue just for the occasion.

By 6 am, all the stands were packed. The camera crews wiped their lenses, the spectators nursed their BEER RUNNERS and the 'Mech jocks said their prayers. One hour later, after an expensive looking pre-show ceremony, the first batch of 'Mechs made their entrance.

Fifteen minutes later and all hell broke loose. I mean, stuff was flying everywhere, man. Metal limbs cascaded in all directions. Laser fire darted back and forth. Missiles ripped through the sky. Within minutes the entire arena was swamped in smoke, dust and slow fading missile contrails.

You could smell the adrenaline in the air. Every time something exploded the crowds would cheer, and every time a freak missile slammed into the audience's deflector shield, they'd cower in fear like a buncha sissy-faced wimps.

For the first few hours, the assault 'Mechs ruled the arena. "Steel gargoyles" is what they called them. Juggernauts! These guys weren't subtle. They just stood there, trading blows, firing massive broadsides at one another. Volley after volley! Torso's blew apart and molten armour splattered outwards from the mechanical wounds. Screw subtlety! Leave the ballet to the 25 tonners!

I remember some guy's torso blew off and spiralled to the ground, kicking up mud everywhere. Next thing you know, some jock in a Jagermech is tripping over the debris, landing face first in the pockmarked marshland, while a *HatchetMan* hacks away at his skull.

By 10 am, most of the assaults were nothing more than smouldering carcasses or limping hulks. Those who survived, prowled along the outskirts, keeping their backs to the audience while their guns combed the interior.

As expected, Ricky Bambossa's Assault 'Mech, driven by a guy called Raphael De Ger'vais, was still in mint condition, having only suffered minor burns and a glancing shot to the left arm. The 'Mech in question was a *Mauler*, the largest 'Mech in the contest and by far the most expensively outfitted. Only a guy like Ricky could afford gear like this. And only a guy like Ricky could afford a classy pilot like Raphael De Ger'vais. And when a guy like Ricky spends so much cash, he damn well expects to win.

At 1 pm, the medium class 'Mechs came out to play. Right away, the tempo picked up. Four *Bushwackers*, sporting the black and crimson markings of Sonny Gambollio stormed into the arena and immediately made a beeline for Ricky's *Mauler*. The audience knew right away what was going on. This was a little turf war. Gangster playtime. Sonny and Ricky hated each other's guts, and this public display of rivalry was expected.

The *Bushwackers* were fast as hell and quickly closed in on the bigger 'Mech. Ger'vais, the *Mauler* jock, spotted them early, and got off a couple well placed alpha strikes. But it wasn't enough. The lead *Bushwacker* took a volley to the leg, and went down hard, but the other three kept coming, and pretty soon they had the *Mauler* tightly wrapped in a circle of death.

Sonny's guys were tearing Ricky up. Their scattershot ACs and LBX shotguns gnawed away at Ger'vais' armour, and ten minutes later they were doing a lap dance on the *Mauler's* face. So what if they spent the rest of the contest with dry guns and no ammo? Their job was done.

* * *

Chapter 29

The Night of the Fight

At 9 pm, Verybad finally set foot in the arena. The contest was winding down, and only a handful of 'Mechs were cruising without a limp.

The largest surviving 'Mechs were a battered looking *Catapult*, an armless *Annihilator* and a half decapitated *Hollander*. At their feet, the little guys ran: a *Locust*, *Stiletto*, a pair of a *Jenners* and a *Raven*.

I guess it's impossible to properly describe how that battle played out. Hell, if you want details check out the holo vids and battle logs. The gaming channels often do

late-night re-runs. I recommend watching those instead. My words can't do the situation justice.

Suffice to say, that this here *Urbie* battle was the most damned bewildering sight, my eyes did ever see.

I mean, when Verybad waddled his wee little *Urbie* out into that arena, you just knew all hell was about to break loose. You could feel Armageddon heavy in the air. The wind stopped. The air felt heavy. God himself seemed to hold his breath. The four horsemen of the apocalypse, all rolled up and in garbage-can form. You could sense the impending doom.

And so when Verybad began to rain Long Tom fire down upon their unholy backs, all covered in fear.

All fell at his feet.

When the smoke finally cleared, the audience gasped. There, standing in the centre of the arena, was an *UrbanMech*, virginal and unscathed. . . doing some kinda weird victory dance.

It was the biggest “*WHAT THE FUCK*” moment in my life.

I remember the long silence more than anything. The banners stopped flapping and the stands fell silent. The commentator's jaw hit the floor. All across the planet, two hundred and fifty million eyes stared dumbfounded at their holo-screens, watching as this *Urbie* half-waddled, half-moonwalked across the arena.

We'd won.

And the message Verybad was sending us, was pretty damn clear.

It was celebration time!

* * *

Chapter 30 **Celebrity**

“URBIE TAKES PRIDE OF SOLARIS!”

“VERYBAD? HELL NO!!”

“BIGGEST UPSET IN SOLARIS HISTORY!”

“URBAN LEGEND!”

“HELL HATH NO FURY LIKE AN URBANMECH”

“MYSTERY MECH STEALS SHOW!”

The headlines belonged to us. We hadn't even collected our winnings, and already sponsorship offers were flooding in. Advertise this! Endorse that! Sign here!

It was all overwhelming. We had to barricade ourselves in the Centre Point lounge to prevent the reporters from mauling us. They wanted photos, interviews, press meetings. . .hell, it was insane.

“Tickle me *Urbies*” and action figures were already hitting the shelves, and big time holo-producers were busy green-lighting the network sitcoms: “Urbie goes bananas” and “My little Urbie tales”.

We were shaking hands with politicians, having our photos taken with the Mayor, signing autographs for little kids, feeding Soya-bean soup intravenously to barnyard animals. . .you name it, we did it.

Yup, funny how your life can change in an instant. One minute you’re a nobody, the next, half the planet is all over you, fighting to kiss your feet and lick the ground you walk on. Forget Ricky Bambossa, forget Sonny Gambollio, forget the Happy Jugs and forget the Smoking Cock. This is where it all began. *This*, right here. B’cus when Verybad won that title. . .when *we* won that title, things changed.

So here we were, a buncha guys from the streets. A bunch of nobodies. A butcher a baker and a candle stick maker. We were bums. All of us. Scum.

And yet...there we were. The princes of Solaris.

You gotta understand, before this day, we had nothin’. We were just guys trapped in that big wheel that is society, spinning around, dizzily watching others go by.

People often come up to me and ask me how we did it. How did we get where we are today? The truth is, I don’t know. Heck, maybe it was destiny. Maybe we just got lucky. Fact is, I ain’t ever gonna know for sure. What I do know, though, is that there ain’t a single damn one of us who can honestly say that we coulda done it alone.

Alone we was nothing. We was nobodies.

Together...together we was family.

* * *

Chapter 31 Celebrations

We spared no expenses on the party. We gathered the guys down at the brewery, rolled out the beer, brought out the food and settled in for some fun. All we needed were a couple Ewoks, some funky jungle music and we woulda been in heaven.

I remember Palerider’s face more than anything. He just stood there, in the corner, watching us feast, that tiny smile glued to his face. Heh, I’d give anything to know what he was thinking. . .what was going on in his mind.

I couldn't shake the feeling that somehow, he saw all of this coming. Couldn't shake the feeling that he had all of this planned. I guess, looking back on things, I see now that he was grooming us. Molding us into his little family. It's actually kinda freaky when I think about it. . . in a sweet, loving way of course. Ah hell, who cares. We got free beer, I ain't complaining.

So anyway, there we were in the brewery, getting drunk and filling our bellies with food. I remember Loki hobbling around the room, vomiting beer in all directions while Akula followed him with a mop. I remember Shrike and Perrin challenging Verybad to a can crushing contest and I remember Denise teasing the guys with her devilish pout.

But the festive mood didn't last long. Because when the clocks hit midnight, someone unexpected walked into the Brewery.

* * *

Chapter 32

Ricky Bambossa

It was Ricky Bambossa, and he wanted our nuts in a vice. His henchmen stormed into the Brewery and made us lie down on the floor, which kinda hurt cus' we'd been stuffing our guts with food for the past five hours.

To tell you the truth, we thought we wuz' gonna die. I mean, we all knew of Ricky's reputation. Ricky kills guys for a living, he ain't no saint. But deep down inside, I understood where the guy was coming from. He'd been humiliated at the tournament. He got royally raped by an *Urbie* and had lost millions of C-bills out to a buncha losers. I mean, the guy was pissed off, and he wanted some vengeance. Who could argue with that?

Yup, so we all figured we were dead. Course we didn't die, cus' right about then was when Palerider saved our lives.

No fancy kung-fu, no big laser fights. Nope, Palerider just stood up, took Ricky to the corner of the room and started talking in whispers.

I don't know what the two of them discussed. Dunno what kinda arrangement they eventually came to. But the fact is, ten minutes later, we were back on our legs and Ricky Bambossa and his goons were out of the Brewery.

Palerider had struck some kinda deal. End Result: we had 2 days to leave Solaris.

* * *

Chapter 33 The Future

So what happened next?

Well, we had to leave. I mean, when Ricky Bambossa puts a gun to your head and says you gotta leave, you gotta leave! No questions asked. Pretty soon every big time gangster on the planet would be out to get us. So we had to pack our luggage and hustle like Forrest Gump on Speed.

With all the cash we landed, we managed to purchase a neat little DropShip. It was nothing fancy, just a ship large enough to squeeze BeerRunner's brewery and our victory *Urbie* inside. We then hired a pilot and a small command crew and set sail the next day. Our plan was to journey to *QuakerOat IV* and hit Lester's Cache. Sure the idea seemed daunting, but after all the drama we'd just been through, we were pretty much confident in our insane abilities.

So yeah, we left Solaris and never looked back. No sad farewells, no long goodbyes. Why should there be? Deep down inside, we never really considered Solaris our home. No, we were orphans. Every one of us, and finally, for the first time in our lives, we had found our family.

So yup, that's it. This here is the end of the story. I don't expect this little chronicle to change your life or inspire some deep philosophical awakening. Heck, I just told it like it happened. Ain't no sugar-coated fancy whisperings, no hidden morals or deeper meanings.

Nope, it's just a story 'bout a buncha regular guys who came together to help one another out. Sure, it sounds kinda gay, but I guess deep down inside, I'm a little bit partial to the whole homosexuality thing.

As for our little brigade, well, what can I say? We're still hanging around. Still cruising the stars like a buncha' yokels. Course nowadays we don't go looking for adventure. But when you got a buncha dudes locked in a DropShip full of booze, adventure pretty much always finds you.

THE BEGINNING

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