

This is another story I wrote ages ago but couldn't be released due to its previous stories not being completed.

## **[Warring era arc] [2] [Lawful runaway] [9672]**

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9672 Day 122

A group of sixteen shuttles were being chased by a small group of patrol frigates. The shuttles were carrying civilians from Moon. They were attempting to escape to Venus after having fed up with high taxes and little assurance of public order for years.

"Stop your engines, or we will open fire." The patrol ships sent out an initial warning. However, the shuttles showed no sign of complying and kept on going at full speed.

"I repeat. Stop your engines. This is your last warning."

The shuttles showed no sign of stopping still, and the patrol vessels opened fire at last. There were six patrol frigates, and fortunately, due to them being frigate class vessels, their firepower wasn't strong enough to take down shuttles fast enough.

The shuttles spread out to divert attention after the initial firing.

A man named Kevin was piloting one of the shuttles. His shuttle was carrying eight people, including himself.

"Keep spreading out! There are only six! We can do this!" He shouted out. "Let's do this!"

9672 Day 67

It had been roughly two years since Moon was acquired by Jupiter assault station administrator, Emuel. Life has been hard for Moon inhabitants since then.

Tax rate of 50% was employed on everything that was taxable, including wages, daily products, and even medical service & goods.

My name is Kevin. I work for a retail company.

I was one of luckier ones who had their careers on Moon. Those who had their jobs on Earth lost their jobs automatically as Earth was bombarded and the Bau was wiped out. To make the whole situation even worse, after Emuel took over Moon, he froze any planetary shuttle services, so we were basically confined on Moon, unable to leave even if we wanted.

Even though I was luckier ones who did not lose their jobs, I couldn't call myself lucky really. 50% tax was simply too much for me. In fact, it was too much for

everyone. My wage was 15,600c a season. After Emuel's administration took its charge, my wage suddenly became 7,200c a season after new tax. To make matters worse, daily products had 50% tax on it as well. My rent fee was also increased substantially along with everything else.

Those who had lost their jobs were in far worse situation however. They had to live off on their savings while they sought new jobs. However, new jobs weren't even available at all. Moon was not a self-efficient planet. It relied on Earth for over half of its total income. Now that Earth was out of control, over half of Moon inhabitants had no way of earning income.

Of course, I didn't even mention of Moon's deep recession that had been going on for approximately 50 years. The Ark did absolutely nothing to aid or erase the pain but at least they did not put absurd tax on us.

We, the citizens, petitioned in a way we could to inform Emuel that we could not live with 50% tax. What we needed was an aid more than anything else. We tried to explain him that Moon economy was failing, but he refused to listen to us. Instead, what he did was surpass us with military force AKA martial law.

Police started to carry high-powered weapons suddenly. Some of us still went on strong, only to be shot down later. With ENN gone, the media was powerless. Small local studios on Moon did not have any means to oppose Jupiter.

That was one year and three seasons ago. Life had become somewhat stable since the turbulence started. Things had cooled down - on surface - at least. Life wasn't

getting any better however. I broke up with my girlfriend to focus on living. After she moved out of my apartment, I relocated to a one-room apartment. I was shocked to have been charged 50% tax on my deposit when I canceled my rent.

I wasn't thinking of an escape until one of my co-workers brought the topic up during a poker night.

We were playing a poker. We would normally bet credit on the table, but we weren't in a condition to do so. Instead, so we were betting snacks.

"Hey, guys. Wanna hear me out?"

His name was Rilther. He was a close co-worker of mine. I had known him ever since I entered my company. He was a tricky guy who never liked doing things the way it should be. If there were any shortcuts, he would do it regardless of circumstances.

No one answered him, but he continued anyway.

"I have a contact outside."

Everyone, including me, raised their eyebrows. We immediately knew what he was talking about. He was talking about an escape route. It's been almost two years since the absurd tax came into effect. Since then, the residents of Moon had been seeking ways to get out of here. I, too, wanted to get out of here, but I wasn't desperate. I wasn't certainly desperate enough to risk my life. Granted, my income was reduced to half and living expenses were increased by 50%, but I had

a large savings. I could do fine for next five years as long as I kept my expenses down to minimal.

Granted, such a life didn't sound very charming, but I wasn't desperate in running away which would clearly risk my life.

"All we have to do is bribe someone in charge to get us a shuttle or two."

"Don't say 'we' here. None of us has agreed with this," I told him.

"Come on, man. Everyone wants to get the hell out of here," Rilther said, and I couldn't disagree with him, but I wasn't going to risk my life for it.

We continued playing games, and Rilther would continue telling us his "plans". He claimed that he had someone outside to take him, or "us", to either Venus or Mars. What he, or "we", needed to do was bribe a right guy to let us enter space undetected.

To me, it seemed as if he had no idea who to bribe, and that sounded too risky, though everyone else in the room seemed to be definitely interested.

I didn't know why exactly, but I felt that Rilther was going to fail, or was it that I wanted him to fail? Regardless, I left the poker game early and headed straight to home on that night.

He continued going at me about his plans. While I wasn't paying attention fully, I did catch some useful information from him. It was day 71 when he phoned me in evening to a pub. When I went there, Rilther was awfully cautious.

"Were you followed?" was what he asked me when we met.

"What do you mean followed? Are you in a trouble?"

He laughed nervously. "Of course not, I was just checking, that is all."

I could tell that he was lying. He was acting very distracted. He was constantly looking over whenever someone entered the pub. It was almost as if he was expecting a company other than me.

"So, what's up?" I dared to ask.

"I, uh," As someone entered the pub, he quickly looked around. "Need you to do me a favor."

I did not like the sound of that.

"What favor?"

He looked around again, twice this time. He then gestured to come closer.

"I need you to pick up a key card from someone," He whispered carefully.

"No." I shook my head at once. "I ain't gonna do that."

"Come on. Help me out this once."

"Listen, I am not going to help you and place myself in danger," I raised my voice. For God's sake, I didn't even know the guy well. He was a co-worker and that was as far as the friendship went.

"Shhhh!" He attempted to cover my mouth, but I violently shook his hand off me

"I am out of here." Having said so, I got off a stool and rushed to leave the pub.

Rilther attempted to stop me by grabbing my jacket, but I rushed off. Thankfully, he didn't follow me. Otherwise, it could have gotten ugly and might have caused a scene.

When I arrived at work next day, I sensed that something was going on. The workplace was uncomfortably quiet. The workers weren't conversing as usual. I placed my bag on my desk while looking around. They avoided eye contacts.

"Kevin."

It was my boss who called me from an exit.

"Yes?"

He gestured me to come over, and I complied. I left the office and was in a hallway. Boss was with three armed policemen.

"You are Kevin?"

I instantly realized what was going on. My friend had failed, and they were investigating the company. Three of them were present in the hallway. One of

them seemed to be an officer who was about to question me. The other two were armed with plasma files and had body armors on them.

They were willing to fire, I could tell.

"Yes, I am Kevin."

The officer nodded and brought up his tablet.

"On night of day 71, yesterday, you met someone," He read out loud.

The "someone" must have been Rilther. I could tell his fate was not pretty.

"Yes, I did," I answered him firmly. The last thing I should in this situation is stammer and panic, I thought.

"What did you do last night?" He looked at me when he asked me. Perhaps, they didn't know what we did exactly last night. I had to assume that they didn't know and I had to act accordingly.

"He asked me to loan him some money," I told him, firmly might I add. I must not feel that I am lying.

"How much money?"

"A lot actually," I replied. "I couldn't loan him money he asked, so we drank for a bit and left."

"And where did you two go?"

I shrugged and told him, "He said he had somewhere else to go, and I went home."

He nodded along while I was telling him. He wrote down what I was telling him as well. I glanced at my boss who gave me a silent nod. It seemed that he was writing up a report. It took him a few, uncomfortable, minutes while he finished. The two other guards had their rifles aimed at me the whole time.

"Do you know why he asked you to moan money?"

"Well," I shrugged and replied sarcastically. "Everyone needs money on this planet."

I wasn't sure how he would react to my sarcasm.

"Very well, mister," The officer said indifferently. "That will be all."

And they let me go along with my boss. When we were back in the office, the boss made sure that the policemen in hallway were gone. After making absolutely sure, he turned to me and said, "He failed and was shot to death."

I figured as much. "When? Last night?"

"This dawn, he attempted to steal a shuttle." He tapped my shoulder. "Good job on covering up by the way. I didn't know you had such gut in you."

"Suck to be him, I guess," I replied.

Day 81 day came, this day finally came. Today was when the company would report its earnings previous season.

I came to work to find everyone so quiet. They were waiting for our boss to return from a conference.

Boss' face looked grim today after he returned from a conference. We all knew that sales hadn't been strong. In fact, sales were too weak to even pay rent for our own offices.

He gathered us at our office. Clearing his throat, he told us, "We are not declaring bankruptcy just yet."

Many of us showed signs of relief.

"However," He continued. "We may have to do so soon."

"How bad is it?" I asked him.

"Bad, very bad, our net revenue has been negative red for last two seasons."

My company operated several department stores across the planet. Ever since Moon was taken over by Emuel, all trade routes were terminated. Moon was forced to become self-efficient which it could not be. Eventually, the company's production lines came to halt. We were lacking goods to sell, not that people could afford stuff in this situation...

The only goods that Moon was capable of producing on its own were basic electronics and basic food. Moon imported everything else.

Normally, mere two seasons of negative income would have been bearable, but the situation was different now. There was the dreaded 50% tax on every earnings, and because of that, a company's operation cost became tripled or even more than that. I didn't want to imagine the nightmare that accounting had to go through.

"We do not plan to can anyone until the end," Boss declared.

It seemed clear that the company had decided to hold on as long as they can while feeding every employee with their paychecks. In other words, the company was sacrificing itself for the sake of its employees. I assumed that there was no way to save the company which was why they decided to sacrifice.

When I got back home, I decided to finally send my jacket for laundry. I had been wearing it for three seasons. I figured it was time for cleaning. Before going down to a laundromat, I was cleaning out its pockets.

"Huh...?"

A folded piece of paper was in a pocket. I opened it to find some sort of contact information, and it was someone I had no idea of. Then, it came to me that Rilther

might have left this paper at the pub. The paper had a name, a contact number, and an address.

I groaned. I wanted to throw it away, but it could prove to be useful. After all, I was going to lose my job relatively soon. I placed the paper in my personal value behind a TV screen. I had no need for it, yet.

On day 86, my ex called me to a pub tonight. I broke up with her as soon as that absurd 50% taxes came in effect, so we broke up more than a year ago. I needed to reduce living costs and breaking up with her was my first step. We were living together until then.

It wasn't a hard breakup. She and I both knew that we weren't breaking up because we hated each other. We both knew that we needed to break up and went on our own ways for survival. It was a mutual agreement between her and me.

I was at the pub. Of course, I ordered nothing. I could afford a drink or two though. The pub was pretty much empty. The master of the pub had known me for a few years, so he didn't bother me even when I didn't make any orders. I hadn't been coming here lately though.

Then a woman entered. I didn't recognize her at first. I glanced at the woman and turned back to look at time. Only then I realized something was amiss. I turned

around to see the woman again. She was approaching me with a pale grin on her face.

It was my ex who seemed to have lost God knows how many pounds.

"Oh, my God, what happened?!" I exclaimed. I ran off from a stool and grabbed her hands. They were stone cold.

"Hi..., Kevin," She said with a fragile voice. "How ... are you doing?"

"My God, don't act tough now, girl. Are you ill?"

She beamed a fragile smile at me. "No, I am not ill ... I just ... haven't eaten anything for ... fourteen days now..."

I looked at the bartender. He was the owner of the pub. He knew my ex as well and he was shocked to see her in such a distress.

"Master," I called him out urgently. "Get her some nutritious food," I added. "I am paying of course."

She swallowed two plates of food literally in a blink of an eye. She almost choked herself to death in progress. Only after then, she was regaining her skin tone, and her pale face was returning to a healthy color.

I waited until she calmed down to talk.

"What happened?" I dared to ask even though I could guess pretty much what happened.

She started to sob and got hiccups. "I lost my job a season and \*hic\* half ago ... The company I was wo - \*hic\* working for went under ..."

She told me that she had been living off on her savings, but that ran out three weeks ago. She asked her friends to loan some money, but none of her friends were in a condition to help out. She canceled her apartment in order to get back a deposit she made on the apartment. However, 50% tax was charged on the deposit, and she was left with very little money. She had been living off what little she had left, and she became completely penniless fourteen days ago.

I presumed that she was asking around for a loan for past days without any luck. I was her last hope most likely. She had no place to go. She had no money. She was completely impoverished. If I did let her go, she would probably end up dead on streets in the near future. No matter how piss-poor I was, I was not going to let that happen.

I paid the pub owner and grabbed her arm.

"Let's go to my place. You can stay there," I told her.

She had seized her sobbing when she finished telling me her story, but when she heard me; she started to cry out again.

"I am sorry... I am sorry...", She told me repeatedly while crying. When we were about to leave, the pub owner stopped me.

"Kevin, I am closing this pub," He told me.

I beamed a smile at him. "I see," I replied and left.

Estaough was her name.

"I am sorry, Estaough..., we shouldn't have broken up..."

She laughed weakly. "You were my last hope. I have ... no one else to rely on ..."

This was the first time I felt truly, from bottom of my heart, felt bitter. I wasn't thinking of escaping seriously until this moment. I brought her home and she went asleep soon. I relocated her to my bed and came to a living room. I was staring at a TV screen. I approached it slowly and accessed my vault.

The paper was in my hand. I memorized what was written and quickly burned it away just in case.

Garban was the name of the contact. I had to do extremely cautious. I wasn't going to follow Rilther's footsteps. I went out and took a transportation to reach the other side of Moon and went for a public phone that would accept pre-paid cash cards. I made sure that they could not trace me. I had no way of modifying my voice, but their chances of locating me with just a voice was slim. I had to take my chances.

Having gulped, I dialed the number.

"Hello, this is Garban. Who is this?"

"Hello, do you know Rilther?"

He hung up right away.

I called him again, but his time he would not even answer. I continued calling until he finally answered.

"Fucking bastard! Leave me be!" He shouted and cursed at me as soon as he answered.

"Listen, I mean no harm. I was his friend, and I need a way out."

"And I am supposed to trust you just like that?"

"Well, I could have just ratted you out, couldn't I? But I did not. That counts for something certainly, doesn't it?"

He became silent. For a moment, I thought he hung up again.

"Fine, you want a way out?"

"Yes, what must I do?"

"I am not going to talk about that over a phone. We are going to have to meet in person."

He gave me directions for a place. It wasn't far away from Moon shuttle port. When I got there, what I saw was storage warehouses which were connected to the shuttle port. Ever since the port was shut down, the port had been abandoned, so there wasn't a soul hanging around the area. This also made me easy to spot supposedly Garban who looked like he was collecting garbage.

I wasn't sure if that was him, but he was the only one in the vicinity.

I approached him. "Hello, Garban?"

He didn't look at me and continued doing his own stuff.

"You knew Rilther?" He asked me.

"He was my co-worker."

"How did you know about me?"

I told him the night I was with Rilther, and that I ran out on him.

"He must have put your contact number in my pocket without me knowing," I added.

"You were wise that you rat out on him. He had a loud mouth. They were on him before he knew what was happening."

"Who are you?"

"I can't say. If you really want to know, I can tell you but I won't be able to help you after then."

"Fine, I won't ask. Help me."

"What you need first is a keycard to initiate shuttles."

I recalled vaguely that Rilther was asking me to get some sort of a keycard for him.

"Fortunately, all shuttles on Moon use the same keycard, and even more fortunately I have one. It was supposed to be for Rilther, but you know where he is now."

"Can I have the keycard?"

"I will be glad to get rid of it. It's a risk to carry this thing around anyway. I am already paid for the card. I could ask you some credit for the card, but being greedy gets you killed fast in this shady business."

He wasn't wearing rags, but his clothes weren't certainly in the best condition. He also smelled pretty bad. He resembled a beggar or ... a vagabond? Then, it hit me.

"Are you a gypsy?"

He was silent. It looks like I was right.

"Well, you are pretty sharp, aren't you," He told me with sarcasm. "But you aren't sharp enough." He turned away from me. "If you were, you wouldn't have told me your assumption. You are not getting the card. I am out of here."

I tried to stop him, but he was quite fast. Before even I could catch him, he disappeared into a series of dark alleys.

"Damn...," I said to myself. I went to a public phone nearby and called him. The number was unavailable. He apparently terminated his phone already.

I didn't know what to do at this point.

Day 97, for weeks, I could not locate Garban. It seemed too safe to assume that I blew my chance.

Meanwhile, Moon economy was pretty in a bad shape. Companies were going under left and right. Although there was no official figure from the media which was shut down by Emuel, local newspaper indicated that unemployment rate was over 60%. Unemployment was the deadliest fear all Moon inhabitants had in this situation. Although I had been pretty lucky that I kept my job for so long, my lady luck was about to abandon me.

On day 98, boss came to our office and informed us that the company was about to file for bankruptcy. Apparently, someone in boards of directors ran away with remaining company fund. Good news was that our last paychecks were secured prior the runaway. We'd get our last paycheck and that'd be the end.

"The payday is on day 105, but we are paying you now," Boss added. "I wish you luck..., everyone."

When I returned home, I told Estaough that my company went under. It was an expected outcome, still she was shocked.

"What should we do now?" She asked me in fear. Imagining that she might starve like before, it unsettled her greatly.

"We can probably last about a year with my savings, but ...."

I... had no idea what to say next.

There was only one option in my mind. We needed to escape from Moon. How, I didn't know. I could not locate Garban. All I found out about him was that he was a gypsy. Perhaps, I should try contacting the gypsies.

Yes, I've heard about a few gossips regarding the gypsies and how powerful they were. I heard that they roam around dark alleys around a food source such as a restaurant.

I told Estaough not to worry and left the apartment. I was a little tired, but that wasn't a priority at the moment. Moon was turning into Hell.

All restaurants in my area had closed. I checked alleys between buildings just in case, but not a soul was found. I searched around as long as I could. It was slightly past midnight. Interestingly enough, I did not find much people. Granted, they may be in their homes, hoping for some sort of savior, but I felt that the area felt simply too abandoned.

On day 98, well, I became unemployed officially. Estaough and I had a simple breakfast together. It's been a while since we had a meal together. We had an egg and a piece of roasted ham together. I told her of my plan to seek out the gypsies. There didn't appear to be any other way, therefore, she bid me good luck when I left home. I knew she was doing her part by eating only one meal a day.

Yes, she was consuming only breakfast each day. I repeatedly told her that she could eat freely, but she never pushed herself to eat more than just one meal. She simply told me, "I am sorry."

I was absolutely certain that hunger was consuming her, but I supposed that little food was better than no food.

It was an hour before Noon. There were some traffics and people on streets. I went ahead and checked out alleys I went last night. I did not find a soul again. It was time to find an active restaurant, and it proved to be quite a challenge. Though I did manage to find a few after searching one third of the city. As I went into an alley by a restaurant...

*Bingo.*

I spotted a few vagabonds by trash cans. I approached one of them quickly.

"Excuse me, sir."

He didn't respond.

"Excuse me, could you help me?"

He still did not respond. I went ahead and told him of my objective anyway.

"I seek an escape route from this planet."

He was silent. He wasn't even moving.

I asked another one with the same result.

"Please help me out, darn it!" I raised my voice.

There wasn't any reaction from them.

On day 99, I did pretty much the same thing I did yesterday. The only difference was that I was looking at other area. However, the result was the same.

For the next four days, I did the same thing without a result. I was becoming frustrated, but to be completely honest, I had nothing better to do. I was unemployed after all. I was skeptical that the unemployment rate was 60%. I felt it was much higher than that.

I was merely wandering around alleys I used to go. It was the same as every other day. The streets were pretty much empty. Shops were closed, banks were closed, and recreation places were shut down. Occasionally, a car would pass above me. A ghost town was the perfect word to describe the scenery.

Then a voice resounded before me.

"You looking for a way out?"

I froze on spot. It was a dark alley. I could barely make out anything in such darkness. The voice seemed to have originated from somewhere ahead of me.

"Yes, I am." I tried to remain calm despite of my heart racing.

"I've heard words that you are seeking a way out."

This time, I was able to pinpoint origin of the voice. It came from a garbage dump on left side ahead. Someone was apparently inside of the garbage dump.

"You did...?"

"At least you have a will to make a change. You have no idea how passive people are in general."

A man slowly crawled out of the garbage dump. The gypsy was wearing rags, but he was obviously an educated man from the way he spoke.

"Uh, my name is ..." I tried to introduce myself, but he cut me off.

"Do not reveal your identity," He said to me. He shoved his pinky finger into one of his ears and cleaned it out. Something dark ... and big came out of his ear, and he blew it away. Then he added, "Trust no one."

I didn't know what to say next. As if he read my mind, he went on.

"Do you want to escape?"

I gave him a firm nod.

"Are you alone?"

I assumed that he meant if I was escaping alone, so I answered him, "There is another, so two."

"The price isn't going to be cheap," He said.

I assumed that he was asking for money. "How much?" I asked.

He shook his head in disgust. "We are the gypsies. We never ask for money."

But I thought Garban was a gypsy as well? And it seemed that he was after credit.

I told him about Garban, and he sneered. His attitude wasn't very pleasing. I was in no position to make any judgment though.

"Just because he was wearing rags like I do, that doesn't make him a gypsy," He remarked.

Fair enough, he had a point.

"The price I am asking you is responsibility. Are you willing to take on it?"

What responsibility, I wondered. I could not answer him for I did not know what he was asking. He seemed to have grasped what was going on in my head.

"Your life will be at risk. If you get caught, death will sound sweet to you," He said.

I thought of such a possibility, but it didn't feel real.

"They can do whatever they want and they will," He said to me. It seemed he read my mind again.

We conversed for a while. I found him very knowledgeable. He was obviously highly educated man who, by the way, had an appearance of a common

homeless. In the end, he gave me a day to think it over and told me another location and time to meet him. I returned home and talked to Estaough about it.

"What do you mean you are not going?"

It was sudden, and I laughed weakly. At first, I thought that she was making a joke. She had to be.

Estaough looked at me with grim eyes. She was not joking.

"But why...?"

She looked down. "I don't want to die... I think this is too risky. I mean, you are betting your life on the gypsies."

My mind was already made up. Even though it was indeed risky, I was willing to give everything I had for a change. Apparently..., Estaough had another thought.

Sighing, I grumbled, "You've got to be kidding me...."

"I don't want to go, Kevin," she assured.

The gypsy told me that people were afraid of changes unless there were clear advantages for them. Perhaps, he was right. I was doing this because I believed that it would benefit me in long term. Estaough was against this likely because "the price" outweighed possible advantages for her.

Each to their own, though this was not the outcome I hoped. I told her to reconsider, and our conversation ended shortly after. I had known her for many years. We were in a relationship for some years. I knew her well enough that she was a stubborn girl. I had a strong feeling that she would not change her mind.

We were about to part our ways. Having various thoughts, I closed my eyes on my bed.

The next day, I visited the gypsy at a location which he gave me yesterday. This time he was much easier to find. Although at first it appeared to be just another dark alley that I had visited hundreds of times while I was seeking for the gypsies, it turned out to be a small hub for the gypsies. I spotted various gypsies as I made my way into the dark alley. I proceeded deeper until I was called out by a familiar voice.

"Hey."

It was him. He was casually sitting against a wall. He took out something from his rags.

"A disc?"

"It's a shuttle operation manual. It also has a tutorial program. You are to master it as fast as possible, preferably in a few days."

His clothes were dirty. And that was quite an understatement. Still, the disc was clean, it was even shining.

"Is it still two?" He asked suddenly.

Even though his question was sudden, I knew what he meant, but I played a fool.

"Pardon?"

"You said there was another who wanted to go. Is the other one still going?"

I hesitated to answer, and that was good enough for him. "You don't need to answer," He told me. "But, for your own sake as well as sake of others involved in this runaway, no one who is not involved in this should know what is going on."

I had a dreadful feeling about his intention. "What do you mean? What are you suggesting?" Still I dared to ask.

"Get rid of the other person."

There, he said it.

I froze. I was uncertain what kind of face I made, but I saw him laugh at me.

"I wasn't joking, but don't take it too seriously. By your reaction, it must be someone you truly care, so be it then."

I left the alley with a lot to think about.

"Getting rid of" Estaough was certainly not, never in thousands years, an option. I did want to take her with me though.

When I got back home, I saw Estaough watching TV on a sofa. There haven't been new programs for past two years. Most of TV programs were reruns. News was strictly controlled to ensure that it had nothing to do with political affairs.

I sat next to her casually. I watched TV with for a while before I spoke to her.

"I've decided that I am going," I said to her quietly. "And I want you to come with me."

I was demanding and I knew I was demanding.

"I am sorry," She answered me. "I don't want to go."

I realized there was no point in talking further. Both of our minds were firm on our own decisions.

A few days passed. It was day 107. I was mysteriously contacted by a gypsy when I was outside taking a walk in a park. I didn't know how they found out where I lived. Nevertheless, I didn't care much.

He handed me a folded paper which had a following message written.

*Day 122 is the day. Come to the spot where we met for the first time.*

Day 122 was the day apparently, the day to flee this hellhole. I closed my eyes for a moment after I read the message. Surprisingly, I didn't feel nervous at all. Rather I felt excited.

I laid low until the day. Meanwhile, I transferred my bank account to Estaough, giving her enough money to last over a year since she'd be alone.

"You are really going," She told me as I transferred my bank account to her at a bank. It was one of few banks that were still open.

"Yes, I am, and it's not too late for you to change your mind."

She didn't answer me.

*Damn it...*

The day came. It was dawn.

I packed nothing. I prepared nothing. All I memorized was how to control a shuttle. Estaough was sleeping on my sofa.

I had no intention to wake her up and proceeded to exit quietly.

"Phew -"

I inhaled a deep breath. For the first time in my life, dawn air felt refreshing although there was no sun rise or anything that reminded one of Earth-like dawn.

The streets were dead quiet. Not a soul was around. Understandably, with such a bad economy status, hanging out outside was not an option.

I headed straight to the place I was supposed to meet. There were few people gathered in the dark narrow alley. The gypsy was present as well.

“We’ve been waiting for you,” He told me as he guided us into deeper. “The shuttles are ready. There will be more people joining on this runaway.”

I counted more than twenty people around me. I didn’t know any of them personally.

Where the gypsy led us was an abandoned six story building. The abandoned building didn’t seem to be out of ordinary, but when we entered inside, it was a whole lot different. The building had been modified to be a shuttle sport. The floors had been taken out and the roof had been replaced with two sliding lids.

It was apparent that some serious money was involved in this.

“Geez, this is a lot of people,” I remarked. The place was packed with people like me who were wanting to escape from this hellhole.

“There are about two hundred people here,” The gypsy replied me. “We have just enough shuttles.”

“Who’s funding this? Someone has to pay for all these equipment and the shuttles.”

“A word of advice, don’t ask about things that you know you won’t get answers for.”

Perhaps, he is right. I mean I did blow my first chance by asking speaking too much, so I decided to keep my mouth shut from this point. I didn’t want to blow this chance as well. I was so close to getting out of this hellhole.

Gypsies organized and divided us into groups. Each group had approximately ten members, give or take a few. I just happened to be a group leader who would pilot a shuttle carrying seven people.

I sat in the pilot’s chair and activated the shuttle’s main frame. Shuttle control was easy since all major functions were computerized. It would be like a playing game except my life, and others’ also, was depended on it, but it was hard to feel the responsibility. It was happening too fast. I would have believed it if the whole saga was a long dream. It certainly felt that way.

“To all group leaders, once we give you a green light, you are to take off in a sequence. We will signal you when you need to take off. Once you exit orbit, you will encounter patrol fleets, but they won’t detect you on their radar for few minutes. If luck is on our side, they might not detect you visually, either.

Accelerate at once and set your course to Venus. Do whatever you can to shake off their hunt. We've done what we can do to maximize your odds for success. We've disabled orbital batteries temporarily; we've muted their radar temporarily. We've bribed few offices on higher-up to ignore your shuttles for a short moment."

A moment of silence later, the same voice sent a message again.

"This will be the last transmission, so listen carefully. I doubt all of you will succeed, and I will tell you honestly that, if you fail, death might sound sweeter than capture."

The seven people behind me murmured as they heard it.

"But if you succeed, a whole new life awaits you. Venus is not what ENN describes. Venus is a refined country. Granted, Venus is autocracy, but it is a very good place to live. You will know what I mean – if – you can get there. I wish you luck."

### ***A whole new life***

Yes, that was what I wanted, and I was risking my very own life to get that. I glanced behind. The seven people behind me, I didn't know any of them. But I could tell that four of them were a family; two parents and two kids.

### ***Responsibility and price***

My palms started to sweat. Failure would mean death and death of seven people behind me.

A lot of thoughts were going in my head. I lost track of time when I saw the green light and I saw the signal. I was the first one to take off.

“Let’s go!” I shouted as I pulled a trigger to launch my shuttle.

It took the shuttle less than a minute to be out of Moon’s orbit, and I saw the patrol fleets I was warned about. There weren’t many, less than a hundred, but that was certainly enough to hunt all of us down. No patrol vessel reacted to my shuttle and others beneath me. I immediately set a course to Venus. It was as easy as pressing few buttons. It was all pre-programmed.

My shuttle and fifteen others were at about fifteen minutes away from Moon. At this point, my radar indicated that the patrol vessels were moving to chase us.

“Shit,” I blurted.

"Stop your engines, or we will open fire."

I had no intention of stopping.

"I repeat. Stop your engines. This is your last warning."

The patrol vessels opened fire soon after. There were six patrol ships, and fortunately they were all frigate class vessels. Their firepower wasn't strong enough to take down shuttles fast enough.

The shuttles spread out to divert attention.

"Keep spreading out! There are only six! We can do this!" I shouted desperately,  
"Let's do this!"

Finally, they responded via the existing channel opened by me.

"We are just following orders. No hard feelings."

"Oh, yeah?" I replied him with great sarcasm. "Why don't you follow your own orders for once?"

I meant something like following one's heart. Of course, I was uncertain whether he'd get the message. A moment of silence passed and the patrol vessel was still on the tail, but he was keeping a certain distance. Even I, who didn't have deep knowledge in space vessel technology, knew that shuttle was the slowest space craft available.

I spoke no more words and kept my silence for my own sake.

Time passed. For exactly how long, I could not tell. I was nervous along with everyone else in the shuttle. It seemed though that he was willing to let me go because he could have easily caught me if he wanted to.

"Uh..."

Then I saw large signatures on a sensor. I didn't understand any of its readings though. All I could tell was that something big was approaching fast.

The patrol ship must have noticed as well and it was turning around. I didn't know what was exactly happening until I saw countless ships in visual range.

It was a Venusian fleet.

"This is Commodore Karveel. You are safe now, civilians."

Karveel, I knew that name. Everyone on Moon knew that name. He was the administrator of Moon until he ran off to some place. We didn't know where he ran off to. Now it seemed apparent that he went to join Venus.

Our shuttle was soon tugged into a ship. Everyone in the shuttle was relieved that they were safe. As we were instructed to exit the shuttle through a comm. channel, we were greeted by the ship's crew, and I saw Karveel himself dressed finely in his commodore uniform.

To be honest, I wasn't exactly pleased to see him. He abandoned everyone on Moon. Though seeing how the snake treated us past few years, I couldn't blame him. He must have known what was going to happen on Moon.

"Welcome, everyone!" Karveel greeted us cheerfully. "You are safe now. You will be escorted to guest quarters for time being until we take you to Venus outpost."

“It’s Karveel!” A refugee from the shuttle shouted. His voice was filled with anger. “You abandoned us in that hellhole!” He attempted to run toward to him only to be stopped by ship crews.

He spoke out what was in my mind as well, but I could see Karveel’s point of view. He made the right choice for himself.

“Yes, I fled,” Karveel said gravely. “I won’t deny that. However, even if I stayed, I would have not been able to prevent what is happening on Moon right now.”

Yes, he was right.

The refugee didn’t talk back and we were soon escorted to quest rooms. Each of us was given a dedicated quarter which was very convenient. I took a quick shower. Then I had nothing to do. This was my first time being on a space ship; I had no idea what else was there. While idling in my quarter, I wondered if any other runaway shuttles made it through.

A voice sounded through my quarter at one point.

“Refugees, you are free to roam around the ship. If you wish to enter the cafeteria, simply call for a guide light and state your destination.”

“Guide light. Cafeteria,” I said. Then a floating ball of yellow light appeared right in front of me and started to move at walking pace. When it led me to a cafeteria, I had a change of mind.

“Guide light, the bridge,” I said. This time, the guide ball turned into red told me, “You do not have necessary security clearance.”

Figured so.

I saw those who were aboard the shuttle in the cafeteria. I walked to them.

“Hey, there,” One of them noticed and greeted me.

After conversing them, I found out that Karveel’s fleet was looking for other shuttles. I found it a little ironic that he was placed in charge of this task. I had a hunch that him being in charge of this operation was intentional.

Karveel’s fleet did locate two other shuttles within the same day. The other seven shuttles were lost unfortunately to say. The fleet headed reached Venus outpost soon after.

The thirty of us were being escorted out of the ship. Karveel was overseeing the operation from a distance. This would be the last time I’d ever see him in my life.

My first impression of Venus outpost was that it was lively. There were a lot of civilians or at least they were a ton of people in casual clothes. I saw some sort of sports right outside of the outpost. It seemed almost as if they were riding solar wind. I heard few people rode solar winds for space surfing, but this was my first time seeing people do it in action.

The outpost seemed well looked after. It was clean and organized and actual human guards were present which would be a rare sight on Moon where pretty much every security jobs had been replaced by machines.

“Welcome to Venus.”

A group of five women in uniform greeted the thirty of us. They were hot.

“We are here to proceed with your express immigration,” They told us kindly.

We were given an envelope which contained necessary documents for express immigration. Express immigration was a very expensive method. In fact, this was the first time for me to see the documents.

“Are we going to get charged for this?” I asked them.

“No, it’s been paid by the government.”

As far as I knew, there was no such a thing as “government” on Venus. After all, Venus was a dictatorship. Still, I wasn’t going to argue.

I looked over the documents. It was surprisingly simple. All it required was very basic information about myself; I needed to write down my full name, date of place and birth, which career I used to have, and so on. They didn’t even ask me for proof, so I could write down fake information if I wanted.

“Write down fake info if you like,” They told us as if they read my mind. “You are about to start a new life. Start how you want.”

Amazingly flexible, I thought. At the same time, I became a little suspicious.

As I wrote down necessary info, I suddenly came to realize the weight of these few papers. I could write down fake info if I wanted, but would that really how I want to start a new life?

In the end, I wrote down truthfully. After taking a picture, my new citizenship ID was completed. The whole process took roughly an hour which was breezing fast compared to a normal immigration procedure which would normally take one season at least with a lot more required supplement documents.

“We are going to take you down to surface now. Please follow us.”

At last, I was about to see Venus for real. I’ve seen how the media had portrayed Venus. They portrayed Venus was a savage, poor, chaotic place to live. Still, I, including the twenty nine of us, figured that it’d be better here than Moon. Besides we knew ENN was falsely telling us Venus’ situation. From what I heard, Venus was a much better place. How much better, I have no clue of. I was about to see.

We were divided and eight of us were aboard a luxury shuttle. As my shuttle descended down into Venus atmosphere, I was starting to see Venus for the first time.

I knew that Venus’ capitol was called The Fallen Crater. Often, it was just called the Crater. It was supposed to be a city built inside of a giant decayed crater.

“No, shit!” I exclaimed in awe.

I saw a city packed with skyscrapers which were beautifully interconnected with tunnels. Those skyscrapers appeared to be insanely tall, at least a few hundred floors. They were beautifully constructed to match the city’s overall feel and look. The shuttle maneuvered skillfully through the skyscrapers. As it was approaching surface level, I saw lots of greens along with individual homes laid-out finely.

“This is not what I was told...,” I mumbled.

Savage and poor? Yeah, right. It was complete opposite. The city was lively. It was clean. It was well engineered. The city was light years ahead of Moon where I lived my entire life.

“We are here. Please exit through the door I am opening,” The pilot told us. “And welcome to Venus.”

Warm breeze welcomed me as I exited the shuttle. Moon was a dark place with no greens and chilly breeze. Compared to the Fallen Crater, Moon was slums. There was no doubt about it.

I looked around curiously as I walked toward the shuttle port lobby. The whole place reeked of high tech goodies.

“This is Venus? No way!” One of the refugees blurted out.

“This is totally unexpected,” Another said.

This time, two male officers were waiting for us. They congratulated us and welcomed us, and then they gave each of us a business card with a phone number on it along with a bank account with 50,000c.

“That should last you for a month,” They told us. “And should also get you a place to live. When you calm down and ready to enter Venusian society, just call that number to arrange a meeting.”

They gave us another business card and told us, “This number will get you a cab.”

It was too simple. They asked no questions at all. I found it hard to believe that this was real, thus I just had to pinch myself.

Ouch, right, this wasn't a dream.

I left the refugees and freely roamed around for a while. I visited a park nearby where I saw some people idling. I approached one of them and greeted.

“Hey, how are you doing today?”

He glanced at me and beamed a grin at me. “The same as usual. I haven't seen you around though. New to this block?”

I beamed a grin back at him.

“Yeah, I've just moved to this block.”

“Yeah? Luck guy, you are.”

“Why is that?”

“This is the most exquisite area. Everyone wants to move to here. I wish I could also.”

I didn’t know real estate market on Venus, so I had to play along.

“Yeah, it was expensive,” I lied.

He snickered. “You are new to Venus, aren’t you? A new refugee perhaps? I saw on VNN that some people on Moon were planning to escape. Are you one of them?”

For some reason, he caught me lying. I had to tell him the truth.

“Yeah, figured so. This block is exquisite, but real estate is not expensive. I can afford to move to here – if – I could find a home for sale in this area.”

He told me that real estate was strictly controlled by the government and that price was heavily moderated. And I had to ask him a question that had been lingering in my mind.

“How do you feel about the dictatorship?”

“Well, any dictatorship is bad, I suppose. But when a dictatorship makes my living painless like this, I am just gonna go with the flow.”

He told me that he was a garbage collector who was paid 23,000c a season. It was a day-off for him today. I found extremely hard to believe that a mere garbage

collector would be paid whopping 23,000c. A garbage collector on Moon would be paid less than 10,000c a season.

“A doc earns like 28,000c a season, but I am not complaining. I get to save more than 5,000c every season anyway. I’ve got more than enough money in my savings account to last me years.”

I was unsure how to understand the whole situation. How about inflation then? Venus apparently had “Do not get involved in politics” rule, and anyone who bothered with politics was silently assassinated. It wasn’t hard to find out such a ridiculous rule because I was able to read that by just browsing the Net. Such info was freely available to the public. I assumed that there was quite serious uproar in the early strange of Venus dictatorship.

There were a lot of controversies against Venus government. All of them were clearly visible to the public. I would assume a dictatorship would try to censor, but apparently this dictatorship didn’t bother.

Venus turned out to be a planet I had absolutely no idea of. However, it seemed that I made the right choice of running away. Whatever was going on Venus appeared certainly better than the everlasting dark future of Moon.

I called a cab and told the driver my situation, and he referred me to a real estate agent who got me a small one room apartment for 2,000c a season. It was located on 192<sup>nd</sup> floor. I also rented a car and obtained a map for the city.

After 2 days, I got to know my ways around my place and was able to buy daily products on my own. The apartment building I was living was breathtaking. I had a pool two floors above my place and there was a gym 5 floor below. The whole structure was composed of transparent materials where sunlight was free to penetrate. The place was also dust free. By just looking on surface of how everything was going on, Venus was certainly “a paradise”.

It seemed that everything here was working like clockwork. Although I was unsure how I'd like the planet, for the time being, I was relieved that it wasn't as bad as I imagined.

I chose to continue to work for a retail store just as I did so back on Moon. I would occasionally see someone being assassinated here and there on VNN. I was certainly disturbed by such news, but as I understood the justice system on Venus, it made some sense.

Venus government did not allocate much fund to the justice system. In fact, they seemed to hate spending any money on anything, so rather than dealing with millions of court cases, they chose to deal it by assassinating. It was simply wrong, but I wasn't going to get myself killed when I had just risked my life for a better life. As long as I did not bother with politics, it seemed that I'd have a much better life here, though I kept on wondering how they'd recruit people into their system if they prohibited anyone from interfering with their policies, but that wasn't my concern.

I wish Estaough were with me right now. It'd have been so much better then... But it was her choice and this was mine.

From this experience, I learned that no place was perfect. Each had its advantages and disadvantages, but Venus' dictatorship was certainly unique in a sense that It was refreshing.

- Fin