

The Pilot's Tale

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A work of fiction, meant for adults. Read something else if you are not an adult, or are offended by stories with sexual content. Then again, if all you're looking for is in-out, in-out, in-out, you should probably read something else. I welcome constructive comments. Enjoy.

You may have walked past me on hundreds of orbitals, or on dozens of planets. Maybe even made eye contact, or smiled, wondering what it was like.

Along with the a ship's jumpsuit, the crown embedded in my head identifies me not only as ship's crew, but part of the bridge crew, one of the few wearing the crown which weds us body and soul not only to our ship, but to the Void -- that romantic image of captain, navigator, something like that.

No, not something like that. I'm the one nobody talks about, at least not out loud, not in public.

I'm the pilot.

Even reading this, mere glowing marks on a reader screen, I know some have turned away. You've seen, read the stories of early pilots. Or maybe you haven't, and that's why you're still reading.

It doesn't matter. Long gone are the days when the ship's crew chased down the pilot, and dragged her (most of those early pilots were female) screaming and fighting to the pilot's chamber, where she was strapped in, connected to the ships drive, and jumped the ship between the stars. Those horrors are gone.

I think.

I'm a pilot, male, and in my late 30's, old for our guild. Most pilots start their careers in their teens, and last half a decade at most. Many go on to be navigators; the best navigators were once pilots. A few are selected early and become captains of singleships. My path will lead to the navigator's seat on the bridge, but not yet. I've many, many jumps left in me. I've made at least an order of magnitude more jumps than any of my guild brothers and sisters, and every additional jump adds to that total. I do it, willingly. I enter the pilot's chamber willingly, connecting myself to the drive...

And...

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You haven't thought it through; most haven't. Most think of the romance of the singleship, where one being is at once captain, navigator, and pilot, throwing their small ship through the Void, focusing the immense power of the drive through their will to cross the Void.

How romantic. How quaint.

And how illusory. For most ships, one person can't do it all. A navigator looks into the Void, steering the ship between the stars. The captain governs all, decides all.

But it's the pilot, coupled to the drive, who takes the ship between the stars, who takes the ship and all aboard her on the path chosen by the navigator and agreed by the captain. The pilot channels the enormous energies of the drive to carry the ship through the Void.

I will speak the unspeakable, the history of our guild, and of flight between the stars. For those early pilots, it was truly *flight*. The how and why are lost to us, perhaps for the best, but somehow man discovered that if a talented individual was tied to those immense energies and given sufficient motivation, they would flee through the Void, taking the ship with them.

Flee from what? From pain, from torture, from threat of death and worse. For those early pilots, jumping the ship was their only escape from the unspeakable, the unbearable. Jump, or die. Flee, or die. Primitive survival instincts coupled to high technology. Screaming in terror and pain, what's left of a mind flees in the only way it can, taking the ship with it through the Void.

The talents were identified, and individuals sought out. Some volunteered, some did not.

Those early tales are true; our guild has preserved the records. Chasing the pilot through the ship, capturing her, dragging her to the pilot's chamber and strapping her in, subjecting her to torture and torment until she escapes by taking the ship through the Void.

What kind of person volunteered for this? What kind of person did it more than once?

Not many!

I laugh; we've come so far, so civilized now. Like the difference between prehistoric hunters bashing in the skulls of their prey, and "modern" meat processing methods. A matter of degree, and personal distance. Unless you've been to an outpost world, or searched out the information, you probably think that meat comes into existence in small packages, right? Have you ever spoken to your dinner, looked him or her in the eye? Have you ever looked a pilot in the eye?

My treatment is far more humane. I'm also extremely well paid for my work. Some would wonder what deep psychological disturbance I have that keeps me doing this if I'm so wealthy. It's a good question, and one I ask myself every so often.

But I do it. And I've seen so many star systems, so many planets. I want to see more.

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There are other reasons, but it's too early to speak of those.

No, now I'll speak of a member of the ship's crew who receives even less publicity, yet is as vital as the pilot. An officer, yes. Skilled and trained, yes. Vital to the ship, yes.

Part of the pilot, really -- the cat.

Why "cat?" I don't know. Some say it's short for "catalyst," as that's what the cat does, acts as the catalyst to get the pilot to jump. Others say it's short for "cat o' nine tails," a form of whip, or lash, which was used all too frequently in the early decades of our guild to "encourage" the pilot to jump.

Some pilots never see their cat outside the pilot's chamber. Some never want to. Certainly that was the rule in earlier times.

I'm different; always have been. I've forged my own path. I've always known my cat.

I've been working with Denise for a number of years, close to a thousand jumps? We're close, working together for so long. Oh, far closer than man and wife. As with Caroline before her, we'll work together until she decides we can't work together any more. It will be her choice.

In some sense, the job is harder on her than it is on me.

The early days of the guild, it was a horrible game, catching and torturing the pilot until they couldn't take any more and jumped the ship.

It took skill to know how much the pilot could take, how to get them to jump, and to be able to jump again. The position of cat evolved. A skilled torturer? A sadist's dream job?

Torturing the pilot until they can't take any more, and jump the ship. Or die.

Pity the cat who gave his pilot more than she could take -- the traditional end such a cat faced was to be strapped in the pilot's cradle and subjected to whatever it took to get the ship and crew home.

Sick, yes? If not sick, at the very least psychologically disturbing, and disturbed. Neither position was one for the stable and sane.

But modern cats, such as Caroline and Denise, are professionals. They're the equivalent of psychiatrists, having studied anatomy, medicine, and the workings of the mind.

And the process -- from the beginning for me, it's been voluntary. When I was interviewed and tested as a preteen, and as an adult, it was voluntarily. I volunteered to be a pilot. I underwent further testing, which included deep psychological analysis, culminating with

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offering me the position. With my training, I'd trained as, and was a skilled physicist, if I didn't make it as a pilot, I had more than the skills and talents to be a navigator.

In the early days of our guild, a pilot's first introduction to what was in store for them was to have the crown, the complex set of electrodes which connects our brains to the computers which interface with the drive, which wed us to the Void, those electrodes were implanted without benefit of anesthesia. Or consent.

For me, as for my guild cousins and the other crown-bearing crew, the procedure was explained to me, and the crown was implanted as a surgical procedure with anesthesia and pain control afterwards.

When our ship is to jump, Denise makes sure I'm healthy. We go to the pilot's chamber. I disrobe. We hug. I get into the pilot's cradle, verifying the connections.

Then she gives me a set of drugs which induce a trance, heighten my sensitivity, and most important, induce short-term amnesia. Denise understands -- the sequence she uses isn't the official one. She lets me experience the wonder and majesty of the Void first. Often, I converse with the navigator, verifying. She asks if I'm ready to proceed.

What if I were to say, "No." What would she do? Continue anyway? It hasn't happened, so I don't know. Perhaps it will happen some day. More likely, I think, is I'll ask her if *she* is ready to proceed, and she will be the one saying, "No."

We proceed, and for me, the only memory I have is of the Void.

When I wake up, we're in orbit around a different star. She spends hours making it up to me. Some times I wake up and she holds me, crying for a while; I'm the one who needs to comfort her. Yes, it's a job, and one we perform professionally. But it's more than that, far more.

She knows me so well. I know that for many jumps, she teases me sexually, bringing me to the edge, not letting me have her nipples, holding me back until I jump the ship for her. Those are the jumps where I wake up to her smothering me to a breast and riding both of us senseless.

I like to think that's what she does most of the time, and she doesn't do anything to dissuade me of that fantasy. But we both know... When I have to hold her after, hold her as she sobs, telling me she's sorry...

There have been some really bad ones for her, and for me as well, where I've been unable to jump for a while, or she's been unwilling to take me there. It's one of those situations a captain is wise not to force, and one of the reasons big ships sometimes carry a backup pilot and cat, a pair in training.

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And I've helped along those lines, letting Denise train other cats with me, and acting as navigator for an in-training pilot/cat pair. Captain Paul tells me I'm a superb navigator, and he'd like to have me on the bridge. Some day, yes, but not yet.

Maybe sooner than I think, or hope. Some jumps, I've made between twenty and thirty, Denise could check my records to be sure, but I've made many jumps as both navigator and pilot. For those, I have full memories. I have to, as I need to connect with the nav systems, and through them, the captain. Thankfully for the captain, those systems filter out much of what I go through.

The last few of those have been easy jumps, thankfully.

The second to last jump I made as navigator-pilot, I told Denise I wanted to try something different. I had her administer the drugs in our usual sequence.

And I jumped the ship, voluntarily, on will alone. And it was a deep jump, a long jump. Captain Paul was astounded. So was our guild.

But the next time, it didn't work for some reason. I turned to Denise and asked for her help.

As to why I've had to do that, be both navigator and pilot, things happen. The navigator is under a lot of stress, stress of a different kind. Some times they just walk away. That's one of the captain's burdens, knowing (or not knowing) if any of his crew are going to leave at the next port.

The first time I did it was the jump from Marduk. Yes, that one, if you heard about it. And that gets us into the other reason pilots are so welcomed and revered...

In a word, we're witches. Oh, Denise throws a fit when I use that word, and so do my parents (both of them were pilots, and retired as navigators), but as a shorthand it's well understood. It's a shorthand for a set of talents, psychic and otherwise, including a degree of prescience, a touch of telekinesis, and above all, the ability to see through the veil that separates the worlds, to see into the Void. Why navigators and singleship captains are tolerated, even revered, and pilots aren't, I don't know. Navigators especially need the ability to see into the Void, and that bit of prescience, to take us somewhere safe, and not the heart of a star.

Those talents are so rare -- one in five hundred million unsorted. But genetic components have been identified, and talent can breed. But as in so many other cases, genetics is just one component -- environment plays such an important role in deciding what genetic traits are expressed, and develop.

Let's just say that a peaceful, happy childhood isn't conducive to expressing the talents needed for pilots, navigators, and the like.

On some worlds, these talents are prized, sought out, and developed.

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On other worlds, like Marduk...

We'd finished a cargo run, literally delivering a load of shit. Marduk was a farming world, and the quickest and easiest way to push aside native species and help the takeover of foreign invading species (crops for export) was to seed with bacteria and such.

One of those quirky match-made-in-heaven things; for the cost of transport and a little overhead, a broker agreed to sell Marduk a few million tons of not-too-processed biological waste (mostly human) from another world.

As the cargo transport, we attach our ship to a huge field-web enclosing the "cargo" in spherical force shields. We jump it to Marduk, take it to the surface, and selectively bleed the shields as we contaminate (fertilize) large parts of a continent which has been prepared for farming.

So far, so good, except that Marduk is not a planet which values our talents. Note that I was very careful not to call them "civilized," either.

We were to take a small (for us and our cargo capability) amount of harvested grain back; we had to wait a few days for the shipment to be ready. Unfortunately for us, Marduk didn't have an orbital where we could hang out with other spacefaring (and tolerant) folks, so down the well it was.

Our navigator, Teri, was visiting a museum in their capital (won't call it a "city.") She supposedly looked at someone, who tripped and bumped into a wall.

She was arrested, charged with "felony psychic assault and battery," and beaten into a coma.

The overlords of Marduk learned quickly that you do not mess with starships. When it was clear that mere diplomacy wasn't going to work, and Teri's biosensors told us she was close to death at the same time to the so-called leaders of that hole were telling us she was either fine or they didn't know what we were talking about, and we knew they were lying to us -- we were intercepting, decrypting, and recording their comms... We extracted Teri, flattening that jail and everything for a kilometer around it, without injuring a soul.

But we were without a navigator. We could use our metric drive to get us out of the system, taking us out at a velocity asymptotic to the speed of light, but without a navigator, we couldn't jump.

I could do it. It had been done before, someone being both pilot and navigator; we had the records, and I had the training and experience as a navigator. Hell, as a physicist, I had far more training than most navigators on the physics and mathematics portions of the task. I've even served as drive engineer.

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And we had to -- we didn't know how long Teri would live, and the natives were getting restless.

My cat, Patricia, didn't have to do anything. In my pilot's cradle, I listened to the screaming and cursing bombarding our comms, all the threats, and Klaus, our captain calmly telling them that lobbing thermonuclear warheads at us would only pollute their atmosphere and not bother us one damn bit. He moved the ship over their so-called capital to make their decision more pointed.

I jumped us right from there to orbit around Eden, a safe system.

We turned over our records of the incident to the guild, the authorities, and the press. Teri lived, but never left the surface of Eden.

No starship landed on the surface of Marduk for twelve years.

The memories still bring a bitter taste to my mouth.

But Esther was a different story, right? We were welcome there, and could walk on the surface without worries. Oh, I wouldn't introduce Denise as my cat, not in public at least. We were crew members, and it was evident I was bridge crew, and she wore officer's stripes when we wore what passes for ship's dress, which was a lot of the time, as it's comfortable for us, and accepted.

We'd delivered a large mixed-cargo load to Esther, and were taking some down-time. My parents had retired there, so Denise and I were visiting. Even with them, it was uncomfortable at times; things had changed so much since they were pilots. The thought of wanting to be with your cat, holding hands with her, snuggling and making love -- while intellectually they could understand it, emotionally it caused problems, even though their own talents showed them how we felt for each other.

Talents. Witches. It comes back to that.

Talents and tools -- are they good, or bad? Is a hammer good or bad? What does the nail think? Silly questions. It's how you use them, and the nail's role is to be pounded.

My parents were well known on-planet, as was their history. They were wealthy by local standards, but not overly so. Their lives were a mix of keeping to themselves and helping others.

As the oldest pilot, and for misadventures such as Marduk, I had some notoriety as well. We did some interviews, and spoke to some groups, talking about what we did, what it involved. It was much harder on Denise than on me, although I shared her pain.

One small group we spoke to, a few psych students and researchers, one of them, a young woman, asked Denise simply, "What do you do?"

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I looked at Denise and saw her eyes fill with tears, saw her breath catch. I held her hands, then her.

I answered for her. "She helps me do my best." Was that a good answer? Did it help her? I don't know.

When we visit planets, we go sightseeing if we can, spending time walking together silently, holding hands. One world I remember, standing with her, taking in huge thundering waterfalls. Such an experience! And yet ... it focuses what we have in common, and what separates us. As majestic as that experience was, it fades in comparison to what I experience in the Void, an experience she will never share.

We also spoke, one on one and to small groups, to candidates. Denise telling one person flat out, "If you want to be a cat, you shouldn't." That's the dissonance she carries within, the burden she lives with.

The candidates, particularly pilot candidates -- so young! How could someone so young possibly make such decisions? I've told the guild, we've put together the data from guild records and made presentations -- each year you let them grow, ripen, increases their effective jump distance, by an order of magnitude for each of the first few years! My first jumps were hundreds and thousands of times longer than the first jumps of these children! Let them live, let them live normal lives for a bit longer, please! And the later in life they start, the longer they last! I keep making the same plea, and get the same response -- interesting, perhaps when we don't need pilots as bad as we do now. My god, they are children! Let them be children, for a while longer!

The problem on Esther started before we got there. You might say the problem started decades before we got there.

Those talents, they are a double-edged sword. Not all who have them...

My parents were both pilots, starting in their teens, becoming navigators in their early twenties, meeting, marrying, and retiring to have a family by thirty. They'd survived, and prospered in very risky professions. It was expected that their child would have all the genetic makeup for a pilot/navigator. But there's a big difference between presence of genes and their expression, expression into talent.

The first tortuous decision: what do we want of our child? To follow our path, or one of their own choosing?

They knew, the guild knew, after eight or nine generations, that certain "challenges" seemed to be common in the expression of the talent. So, my parents, still keeping an open mind, first settled on a world where those challenges were present. We weren't hounded, threatened, or beaten, but we never were completely welcome, either.

When I was tested as a preteen, the results were wildly inconclusive. Some days, I showed an incredibly strong talent. Other days, little or nothing. So I went on and built my

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career (on another world, we moved shortly after those tests) as a physicist, seeking to broaden our understanding, and to teach others of the wonder surrounding us.

It wasn't until my late twenties, as I was settling into the life of a researcher and teacher, that other researchers came upon my earlier test results and came to see me.

They gave me a more modern set of tests, administered in a much more controlled manner, and I topped out on them all. I'll always remember one of them, the combination of a non-invasive link and one set of drugs that opened me to experience, partially at that time, the wonder of the Void. They didn't have to ask; I wanted to be a pilot.

I didn't tell my parents until my training was complete, I wore a crown, and I'd completed ten jumps. Only then did I feel qualified to call myself a pilot.

They still won't tell me what all they did when they received that message from me. I can imagine, the wonder and the horror, the joy and sadness...

But others... Let's say they don't adapt well to the talents, and especially when they blossom. The guild's goal, and the goal of most worlds, is to seek out talented individuals, to identify them before puberty, so that they can be assisted through the difficult times, to develop their talent, or to take other paths.

That is a difficult decision; tools are not formed gently. In a sense, it is unfair to ask such a young person (child) to make such a decision. In another sense, it is a tremendous waste to let such a rare talent go untapped. And they get stronger as they mature, and have longer and more productive careers. How do we find the balance?

Others, through mistake, misadventure, or just by chance, don't fare as well. Talent blossoms in a troubled youth, and trouble compounds. Yes, the stories of mystics, seers, and of wizards good and evil come to pass once more.

One of these troubled cases ended up on Esther. He'd been born on another world, and his troubles developed and multiplied with his talent, and by the time our guild became involved, he was beyond their ability to help. They transported him to Esther, where he could be treated.

Another age-old debate -- do you defang and declaw an alleycat? Certainly you neuter the poor bugged. And so it was with Peter. He wouldn't pass on flawed (but strong) genes, not without technological intervention; even his neutering was reversible (and from their point of view, compassionate).

And dammit, they had, and have chemical agents to render the talent inert. They're well known; all guild members have special plugs in our spleens and livers to detect and neutralize these agents before they neutralize us. We also carry sensors to detect them, and the guild considers the use of such agents a severe act of aggression, one which triggers a complete quarantine of the offending system.

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But the other side of the debate, he can be treated, and saved -- his talents can be brought under control and used for good, or at least no longer used for harm. He represents such a rare find; let's treat and heal him, study him, help him. We can help him lead the best life he can have.

That's what they did. And part of what they did helped. He brought his talents under control.

One of the other aspects of the talent -- we're extremely intelligent. And that includes emotional intelligence, not just intellectual capability.

Simply put, after a number of years Peter learned to control his talent.

He also learned to control his environment. He learned the system, and gamed it.

They thought he was cured, or at least safe. They offered to let him go.

But Peter was shrewd; at first he refused. He stayed another two and a half years, learning, practicing, perfecting.

At no time in this process was he interviewed by another Talent, a pilot, navigator, captain, or even a professional cat! Idiots! Caring, compassionate idiots!

They let him out, and away he walked, smiling, waving, thanking them all so profusely.

And in a technologically sophisticated society, he disappeared!

No dummy, remember? They only started piecing things together when it was essentially too late. He knew how things worked.

And he had talent, talent yoked to a warped mind.

What were his goals? What did he want? We can't be sure, we'll never be sure. Some people complain our analysis must be incorrect, as it has so many conflicts in it. Hey, study psychology -- that's the way people are, bundles of conflicting drives and desires!

I think, Denise and I think, he wanted to show he had the talent to be a pilot, or a captain. Perhaps he was trying to build his own ship, not that he really knew how; he wasn't *that* bright.

But he did have enough talent to get certain supplies, subassemblies, and drugs. There are quite a few drugs that amplify aspects of the talent, particular talents. They have to be used carefully, and are most often under the control of the cat, as self-administration is too damn tempting and dangerous.

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He gave hints, he left hints. Perhaps there was a part of him that wanted to be found out, to be discovered early on. Some of those early stunts were so audacious. But at the time, nobody figured it was him doing it -- his talent working.

It was only later, in the recent few years, that he started interfering with others, causing damage. Potential talent would be identified, and they'd disappear, or something would happen to them. Some were raped mentally. A few were.

That's when my parents got involved, working with some of those injured individuals. My mom and her sister pieced things together first.

My mom, Dora, has a twin sister, Dina. They're not identical twins, even though they look quite similar. Dina doesn't have the talent. She is sharp as a tack, though. She works as a sociologist, a researcher. It took them a while, but they convinced the authorities that the attacks fit a pattern, and indeed traced that pattern back a few years.

Shortly after somebody figured out Peter was probably behind this, the attacks included my parents, Dina, and some of the authorities. Those first attacks, at least the ones on my family, failed. A dramatic increase in the sales of personal and home shields followed.

They thought the attacks subsided. They thought.

Then our ship arrived, and we started talking, giving interviews.

Denise, and I were talking to some researchers, answering questions about growing up, discovering our talents, making the decision to take the paths we did.

Something we don't hide, but we don't exactly advertise, either -- particularly after incidents such as Marduk, ship's crew, particularly bridge crew, always, and I mean *always*, remain linked to ship systems. We're also trained, and learn to respond to hunches, to those feelings, and to respond fast, practically without thought. There's a name for people with that talent -- *survivors*.

And so while we were sitting in a nice little room, nine of us, able to look out of the big windows pretty much covering one wall, look out on a very scenic campus...

Suddenly I threw up a defensive shield between us and those windows, pulling the field closer, pulling everyone away from those windows, also initiating high-speed recording of the scene.

Before anyone could respond, the shield was impacted by an explosion. The shield prevented direct passage of any sound, but we felt some passed vibration through the ground and structure.

Still before anyone could utter a sound, someone launched a psychic attack on one of the researchers.

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We study many kinds of psychic attacks, and defending from them. The attack was for the most part highly unskilled, but what it lacked in skill and refined training it made up for in venom, in a mix of very strong emotions, including a lot of hate.

In retrospect, I screwed up. I swatted away the attack. It stopped, no damage done.

I should have struck with the full power of the ship, which would have left a singed grease stain in place of our attacker.

But as so often the case, our strengths are also our weaknesses. I let the bastard live.

By the time the alarms started sounding, our captain and ship's special services team had linked in. Special services had analyzed the event.

Denise, bless her, grabbed me and did something, heightening my awareness. I blurted out so much detail, his hatred for women and adoration for a few, the nature of the explosive and the three others like it on campus, views of where they were placed, views I held in my mind so special services could lift the images and run with them, how his initial attack hadn't been located precisely; part of what had saved that woman had been that he was off by half a meter or so, and by the time he started to correct, I'd used a shield to fling her away, and was swatting him away. There had been so much detail carried on the fringes of his attack -- detail which showed his lack of training, but also his self-taught and self-developed drive.

Authorities arrived a few minutes later. By that time special services had located and disarmed the three additional explosive devices nearby, and were using the pattern they'd generated to search for more.

When we're linked, we work in an accelerated frame. We'd learned and deduced so much in the first minutes after the attack.

That's when the dance started getting interesting. Once we were safe, the authorities started demanding information.

And that's when Denise, and I pulled back. I threw a hard shield around us, keeping ship and the special services crew linked in. We'd notified my family and put shields around them as well, putting them under ship's protection.

Special services, spec, fed me details from the files they had on Peter -- fitting much of what I felt on the fringes of the attack.

More than one crewmember chided me for not greasing him when I had the chance. But another, Angela, told them I couldn't, not on the first bounce, and that's one of the reasons everyone loved me.

After a few minutes, Captain Paul told me I could drop the hard field.

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Captain Paul appeared *en holo* in our midst. He was also present before their superiors. Our ship had the status of a sovereign nation, he reminded them. We had been attacked by one Peter so-and-so. We reserved our rights to defend ourselves, and were tracking down the attacker.

Well, that wouldn't do at all -- they had process, procedures. We were interfering with...

Fine, he informed them. If you wish, we will withdraw from the planet and wait for you to hand him over. Of course the entire system will be under quarantine until that occurs. And so far, our *interference* has saved a number of lives.

We're a small guild, but a very powerful one. Attack one of us, and you'll find yourself cut off. Like Marduk, and many others.

The locals backpedaled so fast they redshifted... We gave them their own records on Peter and the incidents Dora, Dina, and now our team identified with him. One clown started to protest, but another quieted him.

We did give them the pattern for the explosive devices he'd planted -- ship had discovered half a dozen more and disarmed them.

I had the feeling -- not an urgent one, but a feeling nonetheless, that we should head back to my family's place. Captain offered to use ship to move us. No, that didn't feel right. We'd taken the train out here, and we'd take it back. That would take us about three hours, and we'd stay linked tight.

A little more discussion, and we agreed that Denise should keep me in a slightly accelerated and sensitized state. I'd pay for it later, but I agreed it was the thing to do. We already had two members of our spec team fully cranked up and wired. Sorry to interfere with your downtime, I told them. One of them laughed -- this was a lot more fun than training sims!

The locals had no objections to our leaving; I think some of them were glad to see us go. They even helped get us a private compartment on the next high-speed train out. As I said, glad to see us go.

Once onboard and underway, we had ship secure the area.

"What's he going to do next?" I asked Denise. She was our best psychological resource.

She shook her head. "He'll do something, something personal and violent. We're the center of it, your family and me, ship. One thing I don't understand -- why did he attack that woman instead of one of us?"

I nodded. "The mental attack? He's not trained, but he has a lot of talent, warped talent. To attack someone, you need to be close to them -- a few meters to a few tens of meters, or you

need to have met them before, have a pattern for them. He wasn't close, and he hasn't met the two of us, which means he must have met that woman in the past, or at least gotten close enough to her to pattern her. Sound good?"

"Yeah..." She glanced up, pushing links through ship. "She was on one of his eval committees." She sighed. "And she was one of the ones recommending his release. This is one sick puppy. We're tracking the other committee members, other contacts. Spec is running contacts, looking for events. What's the matter?"

I shook my head. "A bad feeling -- I've missed something. There's something I've missed." I looked into her eyes. "Dig for it, please. ... Please."

In the early days of the guild, when they were learning to use drugs with (on, really) pilots, they were administered by injection. Our archives have a darting gun used on one ship, part of the game...

In modern times, so clean and clinical, I have implanted reservoirs with multiply redundant safety systems. Ship can activate them under Denise's command.

She smiled and held my head in her hands. "Take a deep breath..."

I felt the rush as I did...

Coming back, looking in her eyes... "Your eyes are so pretty -- I love being lost in your eyes."

She smiled and frowned at the same time. "There may be something, but you don't know what it is. Spec and I dug for it. We turned up more loose ends than a half-woven Kanzii rug, but they're off running them down. I ordered lunch. Eat."

I ate, quite a bit, as I was burning calories at an accelerated pace. Something still bugged me, and it didn't matter that she couldn't dig it out. I was overlooking something.

"Coriolis force," I said out loud. I twigged spec to make sure they had what I hoped was a clue.

Incoming from Dina and spec -- I looked at the linked data. Peter's first eval committee, the one that recommended he be treated (confined). They'd all died, within a few days of each other, a few years after Peter disappeared. Even though they were geographically quite dispersed, they died within a few days of each other, and from a very bizarre, rare, and somewhat macabre parasitic invasion -- a known but rare parasite that breeds in the cerebrospinal fluid, reaches a critical population density, and suddenly turns to feed on the host's brain. It's way too late when first symptoms show.

"What fun," I told Denise, assuming spec was listening as well. "Any others?"

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She shrugged. "Some records are in offline storage, so they take a little longer to pilfer. I suggested running down early classmates and teachers."

I almost laughed; spec liked challenges, particularly the challenge of walking through other people's so-called security systems.

We got more just before we arrived. It wasn't healthy to be a schoolmate or teacher of dear Peter. A few poisonings clearly represented cases of non-natural deaths. A lot of others died much earlier than nominal life expectancies would suggest, but with no autopsy information, they didn't leave much to go on, other than the clear pattern. Spec had even run cohorts -- individuals of the same age group in different schools lived nominal lifespans, the vast majority of them still around. Hindsight is always clearer.

But even hindsight didn't help. "Do we invite my family to spend a few days on ship, enjoying our superb hospitality and cuisine?" I suggested.

Denise frowned. "We've already offered, but they've decided to stay put for a while. They've a good shield around their residence. You think he'll move against them?"

I nodded. "Them and us -- me. It's from the fringes I picked up. We're about the same age; I'm a successful pilot, whatever that means, so there's that animosity, plus the maternal and female aspects with my mom and Dina."

She gave me a half smile. "Crudely put, but accurate."

"And your professional evaluation is?" I asked.

"One sick puppy," she told me.

"And a vicious one," I whispered.

We spent the rest of the day, and that night with my family. We had a conference call just before dinner, giving the authorities most of what we'd unearthed, clearly distinguishing between fact and suppositions - conclusions. Captain Paul made it clear we weren't blaming anyone, we just wanted to find him before he hurt more people. They grumbled but didn't have much to say.

My mom told me once that she knew the first time I jumped a ship through the Void; she felt it. Did she feel me jump, or did she feel what preceeded the jump? It's not so surprising that the connection between mother and child is strengthened by the talent. The guild has talked to her about it. She keeps records, making a note if she feels me jumping, sending that information along to the guild.

That special bond woke me at three in the morning.

The Pilot's Tale

I felt her pain and heard her screams as she was stabbed in the heart. I felt the bastard rush at her mind.

But how? I overrode my internal systems, accelerating and sharpening. I started to engage his mind.

I was still accelerating, the drugs taking hold, and I felt it -- the missing piece.

He had a small spacedrive, and was linked to it! He was using his talent and the drive to reach through space -- that's why we didn't feel him present! He wasn't!

Through my mom he had my pattern. I felt him reaching for me, refocusing the drive. That's what I'd spotted in that psychic attack -- he'd been working at a greater distance, and coriolis forces threw him off!

But this time, he was close. I breathed into the Void, and could feel the opening form, an opening inches from my chest. I had no place to run, to move. I couldn't bring up a field that would make any difference.

But I could use my talent... I could feel the hate, the desire, all the twisted emotions driving the blade of the knife into the opening...

As I reached into the Void, turning space, twisting it, taking the opening he'd formed and moving it.

I had a rough mental link as well, hearing and feeling his screams hoarse and raw in his throat, his grip on the handle of the knife as he plunged it with all his force into the shimmering before him...

And into his own chest...

Powered by rage untethered from reason, he gripped the knife handle with both hands as he twisted and pushed it, the pain only magnifying his fury.

His final fury.

He dropped. The link dropped. The portal vanished.

I scanned quickly. Ship had popped a stasis field around my mother, suspending time. It would be tricky, but she could be saved. We would move her in the stasis field directly to a medical facility.

Spec had tracked down the drive he'd used. He'd stolen the drive and converter assembly destined for an escape pod. They tracked the records -- it had been reported stolen, and nothing more had been done.

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That answered so much; placing the explosives, the parasites, the poisonings, so many of the deaths. He did as we did, as spec did -- reaching through space, through the Void. Walls? Nothing short of a full battleshield could stop him.

Denise shook me.

"It's all right; it's over," I told her, letting my systems reverse the effects of the drugs. I was going to crash, and bad.

I fell into her arms. "It's over," I whispered.

She held me and cried.

Fin.
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