

With accuracy down to millimeters, the hover cab zipped in and out of heavy traffic around the spaceport on Gliese Major, one of the main home worlds of the descendants of Earth. The vehicle's artificial intelligence life-form, or AI for short, allowed it to maneuver better than any humanoid could. Brian Thorngood looked at the air above the palm of his hand. The implanted data pad projected up from his hand, giving him a virtual screen in the air to read. Not everyone decided to have such implants, but he found it convenient with all the traveling he did.

Unfortunately, as always, the morning headlines were about the plague ravishing the human settlements. With just a thought from Brian, the pages of the virtual morning newspaper turned with ease. He had finally found the advertisement from the other day, dated June 4, 50,000. It was an advertisement for an auction of old ships and cargo.

Brian Thorngood was the owner and operator of Ye Olde Earth Antiquities in downtown Gliese City Prime. He was a large middle-aged man with slicked-down brown hair. His hands were weathered from years of archeology digs. He had since retired to concentrate on old-Earth antiques. That was where the money was. It had been thousands of centuries since the evacuation of Earth. Any relic would fetch considerable money.

Some of the salvage stuff was advertised as still sealed and very, very old. He had heard that before, but he had a good feeling he would score something of value this time, as long as he could actually win something at the auction. He had a good stash of credits on hand, but there were other well-funded antiquity shops that almost always outbid him.

The cab came to a stop and hovered down to the drop-off platform. The door slid into the shell of the car.

"That will be twenty credits," said the automated voice as a small device lowered from the ceiling.

Brian sighed. “I remember when it was only ten credits for a cab ride.” He leaned forward a little and reached out, allowing the device to scan the chip embedded in his hand.

Brian exited the cab and buttoned his long coat. He knew it was out of style for this era, but a few thousand centuries ago, it would have been quite fashionable. He looked around to see various transports entering and leaving the spaceport. Some military ships were also departing, along with many medical ships.

“That damn plague. I wish we could end it,” said a female voice from Brian’s right.

Brian turned to see Dr. Katalina Winslow—Dr. Kat, as everyone called her, or just Kat, if you knew her well. She was a young doctor of medical science and archeology with the OTKE Corporation. She had black shoulder-length curly hair with blue streaks. He recalled them being red the last time he had seen her. Her left hand was gloved past her elbow. It was also blue. He had never had the stomach to ask why she always wore a glove, but it always matched her hair. Her dress was long on one side and high up on her hip on the other, revealing more of her leg than she should be showing, but the tactical boots she wore at least covered her up to her knees.

“Kat, I’m glad you could make it and see what I have to go through to get the good stuff.”

Kat smiled at Brian and hugged him back.

“It was about time I find out how much you overcharge me,” she said with a wink.

“Bah. Overcharge my you-know-what. You are lucky we are friends, or else.”

“Or else what?”

“Or else...nothing. With a smile like yours, you would always get a discount.”

Kat and Brian laughed at their little teasing, but Kat always won in the end.

Brian held out his right arm. “Shall we?”

Kat looked at him for a second, and he jumped around and held out his left arm. Kat smiled and hooked her nongloved right arm in his. “We shall.”

They walked toward the entrance to the spaceport. The place was busy with people and cargo AIs moving about like ants. Everyone seemed to be on some sort of mission. Troops and scanners were stationed at every docking entrance. The human world leadership figured if they could catch plague victims early, the virus might not spread. Brian and Kat followed the signs to a closed docking bay where today’s auction was being held.

Brian quickly scanned in at the entrance to cargo bay 7186 to get his bidding pad, and the two made their way to the item-viewing area.

“Wow. Look at all the stuff,” said Kat. There were old ships, satellites, and cargo containers. Her mind raced, thinking about what some of the items had been designed for and what stories they could tell if they could speak.

Kat was already drooling over an old fighter from the early days of Earth’s star travel. “Can we bid on this thing?”

“We can, but they would probably laugh at me if they saw my credit account totals.”

The two kept walking and eyeing up the merchandise. Brian had to keep pulling Kat away from items they could not afford. “This way, Kat. Cargo containers are what we’re after. Most of them are sealed, so it’s like a birthday surprise. You never know what’s going to be in them.”

They wandered among the containers, ignoring the ones that were visibly tampered with or looked too new. Brian was inspecting some of the Caladin containers as Kat looked at some old-Earth ones. She seemed to be drawn to one container in particular. It was a rather large one with no visible markings on it. It was scorched and weathered from what looked like centuries.

“I’m guessing you find this one interesting?” asked Brian.

“You could say that. It looks like it’s been through a lot.”

Kat continued to walk around the container, her gloved hand slowly caressing it as she walked. A symbol on the other end caught her eye. She rubbed some of the grime off to reveal a spade.

“Hey, Brian, come over here and take a look at this.”

Brian peered over Kat’s shoulder to look at the symbol of the spade. “Hmm, never seen that symbol before. Very interesting. I’ll tell you what. Since you seem to like this container’s character, and it seems to have some odd markings, I will bid on this one when it comes up.”

“Don’t bid on something because of me,” replied Kat, shaking her head.

“It can’t be any worse than ones I have been getting lately. You never know, this could be a turning point—”

Brian’s words were cut off as the announcement AI blared through cargo bay 7186. “All bidders, please make your way to the central area. The auction will begin in fifteen minutes.”

“Well, let’s get a move on so we can get a good view,” said Brian.

The cargo bay was massive. The center was open so that cargo AIs and lifts could move the items into the center quickly and everyone could get a good view of the items up for auction. Kat was in awe of the place. There must have been ten thousand people there. Most were in the bleacher area and were your average people looking to see if they could get a good deal on an item. As she moved closer, she saw the more serious bidders standing with an intense look on their faces. Box seating was at the edge of the center area. These were the seats reserved for big-time bidders. Brian knew a few people, and he was able to get himself and Kat a standing view just behind the last row of reserved seats.

Shuttle and transport craft were the first to go on the auction block. These were the big-ticket items. Some of them would be used for parts, and others looked to be in good shape.

Kat tapped Brian on the shoulder as the next item was brought in by a hover AI truck.

“An old-Earth fighter. I think that would look cool over your shop.”

Brian put his head down and sighed. “I am not putting a fighter over my shop. It would be a good theft deterrent, but no.”

“Bah. You have no sense of style.”

Two hours of ships and satellites had gone by. Credits were rolling like water, which Brian knew was a bad sign. Finally the storage containers were up. The one they had picked earlier was the third of five. Kat cringed as the first container went for sixty-five thousand credits, about five thousand more than Brian could afford.

“I didn’t think they would be that much,” said Kat.

“You never know what the bidding is going to be like. The one we like is dirtier and older than the others. Either it will be ignored, or its age may increase the value. Just keep your fingers crossed.”

The second container went for sixty-eight thousand credits. Both Brian and Kat cringed when the hammer fell to close that auction. The container they were interested in was finally moved into position.

The auctioneer started his pitch. “What we have here is an old cargo container that may date back to the final days of the home world Earth.”

The crowd oohed at that statement.

“It has seen better days, but it is still in one piece with no apparent breaches to the environmental chamber. Let the bidding begin. Do I have ten thousand credits?”

A person in the back tapped their data pad, and ten thousand credits appeared and echoed above his head to start the bidding. Brian tapped his pad to increase it to fifteen thousand credits. The bid went to twenty, twenty-five, and thirty thousand, and Brian went to forty. Kat's head went back and forth, following the different bidders.

The bidding came to a halt as fifty thousand credits was announced. Kat turned quickly to see a fifty thousand credit sign appear above an Asian woman. Her hair was pulled back, and she wore what looked like a traditional Japanese geisha outfit, but from the waist down, the dress was slit into many pieces that seemed to sway in all directions as she moved. She had bright-red eye shadow and black lipstick. Two large combat AIs stood off to the side. Kat guessed they were some sort of bodyguards. After this lady bid, most of the hot bidders sat back down and were quiet.

“Who is she?” asked Kat.

“I'm not sure of her name, but she works for an underground artifact market. I believe it is run out of that night club built in the old Woland battle station. I forget its name.”

“You mean the Little Lamb?” replied Kat.

“Yup. That's the name. Please tell me you don't frequent it.”

“Uh, no. However, I'm somewhat aware of the owner. Let's leave it at that.”

Brian just gave her a concerned look and tapped his data pad. Sixty thousand credits appeared above his head.

There was a murmur in the crowd, and anyone else who was standing was now sitting.

Seventy thousand was announced from the Asian lady.

“Well, sixty thousand was all I had. Let's—”

Brian was cut off as Kat ripped the data pad from Brian's hand. A bid of eighty thousand credits was announced above their heads.

"Kat! What the hell are you doing!"

"I'm not letting that bitch intimidate us."

The Asian lady gave them a dirty look as she had ninety thousand credits announced.

The two of them paused and stared at the lady and the cargo container.

"Kat, can we go now? I can't afford it anyway. Please."

Kat smiled at Brian as she tapped the pad, and one hundred thousand credits was announced. Brian fell to one knee as he started to hyperventilate.

The Asian lady tapped the side of her neck and started speaking frantically. The announcer waited a few seconds and then said, "Going once?" The Asian lady's hands were now moving in an angry manner as she talked and paced. "Going twice?" She was about to tap the pad but then looked up at the sky and put her hands down. "Sold!"

The data pad in Kat's hand cheered as "Congratulations on your purchase" appeared on the screen. Kat jumped up and down, screaming in excitement. She stopped when she realized Brian was now lying on the ground as some stranger splashed water in his face.