

Chapter 09 - Detective Duo

“Byate... Byate,” her voice called, over and over. An alarm clock against the sound of wack else. Byate gritted his teeth. “...Byate.”

“Shut up you Rot,” he said, looking up. “I can’t stand it when you try to get my attention like this.”

“I’m sorry Byate,” she said. “You’ve just been staring at that gun for around five minutes. I was wondering if things were going well for you.” Byate looked down and sure enough, his prized Sear-38 was clipped to the board beneath him. He must have spaced out during maintenance. He leaned in to look at the finish, wiping at shadows with the cloth in his hand. He tilted his head to check the barrel. “Byate.”

“Alright!... fine,” said Byate, slamming his palm on the table. Truthfully, he couldn’t say he minded Marie, or mArle as the coders called her. Those bulls loved their stupid jokes. Marie was a companion AI, fully loaded before they put her on his ship but only by a few weeks. They’d been together a number of cycles following his debut as a solo investigator keeping him company on voyages and often providing key insight. Byate had realized over time that his approach to problem solving was often one-sided. However, Marie wasn’t constructed without intention besides his own amusement. For one, Byate knew she was sending periodic reports to Central on his whereabouts and condition. Also, she was made with psychotherapy as a part of her integral software, his stability her chief goal. This often leading to somewhat frustrating conversations such as this one.

The room was silent for a minute, but Byate had managed to space out staring at a cupboard rather than his firearm. He gave the gun a final wipe with his cloth. He felt bad. “I’m

sorry,” he said. He unclasped the Sear-38 from the table and slipped it into back into the carbon fiber holster on his belt. “I didn’t mean to yell at you.”

“It’s alright Byate,” said Marie. Her voice seemed reserved. “I just don’t know what I’d do if anything happened to you. I worry sometimes.”

Wack, thought Byate. He knew exactly what she was doing, but he couldn’t help but feel terrible. He sighed. “Look,” said Byate. “Put away all that psychoanalysis bullshit and help me figure this out.” He hooked a monitor over the desk. “It’s about our current assignment.”

Byate worked independently as a private investigator if you wanted to exclude AIs. His work led to him to all types of jobs: missing arms, kidnappings, and on the occasion high level corruption and interrelationships. He retained a military license for advanced weaponry following the Raptor Wars giving him an edge over often armed assailants. The current job was bit out of the way, but the pay was better than anything Byate had seen so far. A few missing cargo freights in the dead zone and SuperTerra was willing to pay over a mil just to get information on their whereabouts. With the problem solved it was over five mil.

““What do you need help with?” asked Marie, her voice missing the agitation of moments before.

They were already heading into the deadzone, but Byate had put off the figure scat out phase. Where would you even start with such an investigation? “Can you put the route of the storage vessels up on the monitor?” asked Byate. He pressed himself back against his seat and his arms on the sides.

“Is this good?” asked Marie. A 3d display of stars was pierced by a single line through the middle. Byate rotated with the map with his forefinger. The path didn’t travel through any stars or noteworthy junctions. It was simply A to B.

“That’s great Marie,” said Byate. “Can you put in where the transmission signal cut off for the transport ships?” Two red dots appeared on the map. “Hmm. Two separate ones.” One of the locations was on the North side of the dead zone, within weeks of their current location.

“Yes,” said Marie. “Out of the four disappearances, three occurred in the closer location and the last in the far location almost at Tangenia.”

“When the disappearances occur?”

“The three closer disappearances occurred over a somewhat lengthy period of time, once every two cycles with the most recent being two short cycles back. The missing cargo in the far location disappeared four short cycles ago.” Byate scratched his head. It seemed possible that the incidents weren’t connected despite the implication by SuperTerra. Would taking care of one of the thieves be enough? As long as he could prove they did it.

“Good, good,” he said. He leaned off the back of his seat. “Do you know what the closest star to the near point is?” Seeing as the cargo was consistently stolen in that area, it seemed likely that that was where they were camped out.

“Here,” said Marie. One of the stars glowed on the map, a readout of its name and location appeared. It had to be only a few light cycles from where the cargo was taken.

“Great,” said Byate. “Let’s start there and see if we can find anything.” He swiped the map off his screen and yawned absently. “Can you set up the route?”

“I have an idea,” said Marie.

“You do?” Byate had learned to always hear out. “Go ahead.”

The map popped back up on his screen without prompt. This time a dotted line connected the disappearance point to a more distant star. “Although this star isn’t as close, the path connecting it to the missing cargo is perfectly tangential to the freighter route. The planet

at this star was also habitable before the Raptor raids making it a more likely selection. There's simply more bodies within the system that could house pirates."

Byate stared at the screen. "I see..." he said, the connections completely eluding him.

Marie continued. "The freighters in this instance have very little momentum besides their intermittent jumps. Energy efficiency is a lot more important for cargo runs. If our hypothetical robbers were raiding from the closer star, they could have raided farther back along the route to save their own time and fuel." Another line appeared between the closer star and the shipping route. "If they were arriving from my star, however, then the disappearance point in question would be optimum."

Byate sighed and unhooked himself from the seat. "Fine, we'll go to your system then. Can you set up the route or do I have to?"

"I can set it up Byate," said Marie. "But I'd like access to the engine subroutines. I think I can optimize our-

"Sure," Byate cut off. He didn't need to hear it. "Access confirmed or whatever."

"Thank you Byate," said Marie. "I appreciate the freedom you've given me."

It was a week later when they reached the system where Marie thought the pirates were hiding. A formerly habitable planet orbited the star as Marie had alluded to earlier. What made things curious was a distress radio signal from the surface, a downed ship calling for help. It was too much of a coincidence. If Byate wanted to find his culprits, he'd have to go down to the surface and investigate. At the very least, trapped people needed rescuing.

Byate was scrunched in the cockpit of his ship, monitors closed in around his single seat. He looked at the surface scan, searching for something amidst the gray smog and ash. It was a

real pity, a momentous shame. The planet could have been teeming with life if the Raptors hadn't hit so hard. "Where's the crash sight on this?" Byate asked.

A circle appeared over an indistinguishable part of the map near the equator. "You won't be able to see it," said Marie in response to his squinting. "I tried pinging the surface, but I didn't get any responses."

Byate glanced at his nav monitor. "Well, no point in dawdling," he said. "If we can't see anything through this smog, we'll have to get down there anyhow."

The front part of Byate's ship disattached to act as double use landing craft with two attached solid rocket boosters. Once they'd parted with the back part of the ship, Marie sorted out the landing and directed them towards the radio signal. Hopefully they'd be within walking distance when they reached the ground. Byate slipped a music chip in to his ear and strapped himself to his seat. He needed to be ready for whatever was waiting on the surface, riveted perhaps. The rear windows on the craft lit with orange and yellow. "Scorched Metal," he requested, grinning as the clash of electric string and drum burned out his ears.

A while later, the shuttle hit the ground with a dull thud. Byate's head snapped forward and back at the impact. "Sorry for the rough landing," said Marie. "The ground was a few feet higher than I expected."

"No worries," said Byate. He reached under the seat and took out a long tipped syringe. In it were meds, the last of a four segment treatment he'd been prepping since earlier that week. The drugs might help him cope with the gravity shift. Good thing Marie brought it up.

The front part of his ship wasn't big, but in it were the essentials. A depressurization suit, enough food and water to last someone a few weeks, and Byate's Model-46 assault rifle. The gun was beautiful. It had a modified sight with zoom and motion sensing functionality, a variety of fire methods such as auto, three round, semi, five ammo types, a custom fit stock, and

a built in silencer that reduced the wildest of trigger pulls to cooking popcorn. Unfortunately, there weren't many opportunities where you got to use it. In truth it was just way too much firepower.

"Do you predict hostility?" Marie asked as Byate unstrapped the rifle from within the black storage box he lugged it in.

"It's my best light source," he said, clicking the attached flashlight on and off as if to demonstrate. There was one on his helmet, but it wasn't detachable. Byate also took a combat knife, one with a blade that turned up to a few thousand degrees at whim. It could cut through low melting point metals like aluminum, tin, and zinc easily, and others with some application.

"I wanna come with you," said Marie.

"What do you mean?" asked Biates. He'd been slipping on the depressurization suit and was hopping to try and get the last leg in. She didn't usually come on expeditions like this, and why would she anyway?

"There's a portable drive located in the cockpit," said Marie. "If you put a copy of me on it, I can plug into your M-46 rifle and give you guidance."

"Couldn't you just connect to me back from the ship?"

"If something happens, I want you to feel like I'm there for you."

Byate paused before slipping a sleeve all the way up his arm. "That's the stupidest scat I've ever heard," he said. "And it sounds like bad luck."

"Please."

"Fine." Byates ruffled through a few cabinets before finding the small chip Marie was referring to. He stuck it in a connection port, counted to ten, and put it into his rifle. He couldn't help but feel a little uneasy, like Marie already expected things to go wrong. It wasn't the first

time that he'd walked into a situation with little to go on, but this time there couldn't be backup. Maybe keeping Marie's calming voice in his ears would be a good idea.

"How does it feel to have three copies of yourself floating around?" Byates asked, pushing earphones into his ears. He pulled the decompression suit over his head and checked the oxygen reserves.

"You should know," said Marie, her voice emanating in the closed confines of his helmet.

"Tsk," Byates muttered under his breath. He hadn't expected her to say that. He chambered a set of standard action rounds into the M-46. A trip through the airlock and Byates was in the scorched gray world outside. He couldn't tell if everything was covered in snow, ash, or a mixture of both. The tortured winds battered against his mask and body, but they weren't enough to keep him from going forward.

A small green pointer appeared on Byate's visor. Marie was marking the destination. "Thanks," he said. Byates felt the rifle on his back, stroking its butt for reassurance. He lowered his head under the gust and continued.

Although Marie had flubbed the timing on the landing, she'd certainly hit the target in terms of location. Byate's hand touched the metal side of the ship within ten minutes through the furious gray. He made his way around the ship and found the emergency release for the airlock in another five. The ship hadn't landed properly based on positioning. In fact, the vessel didn't look like it was designed to land on a planetary surface at all. I could have carved this piece of scat up, entertained Byate. He dismissed the notion. Inside the intermediary compartment, a set of fans vacated the room of dust and ash to give way to something Byate imagined to be more breathable. "Don't take off your helmet yet," Marie warned. "The integrity of the hull could fail at any second."

The secondary door opened after a short wait. The interior was unlit. "Seems emergency power's still up or the door wouldn't have opened," said Byate. "But I don't see anyone here to greet us..." No, if there were survivors, they were either hiding or dead. Both the distress signal and the door could have been automatic.

"Lets get to the controls," said Marie. "Everything we need will be there." Byate unhooked the rifle from under his arm and flicked on the flashlight. He couldn't say he was impressed. The halls reflected some sort of dirt like brown metal. Cloth and torn padding flapped in the steady breeze of the air filtration system. Shadows shot long down the path, black and all concealing.

As the layout suggested, it was a bigger ship than Byate's own. Multiple tunnels ran down the vessel's length. Hopefully the controls would be in the back where all the paths converged. Getting around was difficult as the ship was designed for zero gravity. Byate had to bend under blatantly obtrusive ducts and step over the rim of the airlock gates. He did so slowly with one hand, leveling his gun around corners with caution born of fear. The first misstep you make is a lot of people's last.

Crrnrk

Byate ducked against the side. The sound had come from below, perhaps not even within a tunnel. He couldn't tell scat. "Did you hear that?" he whispered.

"Metal stress," said Marie. "No surprise with you moving around in here."

"I haven't seen any bodies."

"We haven't seen much of the ship yet."

Byate continued forward, blinking through the narrowed vision of his helmet. He swatted at a foil tube dangling across his vision. When a cloth swayed in front of his face, he yanked it

off its fragile hangar and threw the bundle into the corner. If a survivor had popped around the corner just then, Byate would have socked them in the face.

“Here,” said Marie. The control room didn’t do much to change Byate’s opinion of the place. Dusty looking chairs sat locked towards the front of the ship, framed monitors hanging down from the ceiling. Pre-Raptor Wars for sure, but how far before that Byate had little idea. He realized his jaw had locked itself in a frustrated slant. He shook his head and swung the light in a wide arc over the room. The entire place was not only a heap, but completely empty. Maybe they’d already been rescued. “Plug me in,” Marie requested.

Byate did another slow scan of the room to again confirm it was empty. Nothing moved or made a sound. It was as if even the wind outside had stopped howling. Byate stepped through the room and leaned over the center seat. There was a port on the side of one of the three framed monitors there. He placed his rifle on the chair and adjusted the light to a max spread so it would emanate through the rest of the room. He pulled Marie out and stuck her into the slot. The screen glowed in a low intensity static.

There was a short disconnect before Marie spoke again. “I’m in,” she said, speaking through a radio link in his helmet. “Let’s check the air systems first. See if there are any leaks or high density CO2 zones.” The monitor shifted to a vague ship map with two aisles down the middle. There was a high concentration of sulfur compounds in the one of the forward rooms, a leak. Most of the rooms were in the green. “No pockets. If there are people on board...”

Byate undid the latch on the side of his helmet. He pushed on the rim and felt his ears pull free with a satisfying pop. He took a breath of fresh air.

Thud

Byate was pushed into the seat in front of him. He felt a sharp pain in his lower abdomen. Someone was leaning on him.

“Fuck!” Byate shouted. He reached at his belt and flicked out his combat knife. He stabbed it back into the person’s side. It connected with a fleshy thud. Byate fumbled on the handle and slid the heat slider up to max. The attacker screamed in pain. Weight gave way and the yielding fingers slipped from Byate’s suit. Something hit the floor behind him. He reached back and felt a hilt still lodged in his lower back.

Ptht *Ptht*

Byate grabbed his rifle and fell back against the floor. Gun shots. He responded, spraying the direction with a hail of bullets. The shadows disappeared as the room lit up. The corner edge of the hall glowed red, riddled with holes.

“What the Hell!” said Byate in the lull that followed. Fuckers tried to kill him without provocation. He looked at the body next to him. A women dressed in dark but torn clothing. Her entire side spilled red and Byate’s knife glowed white in her guts. How did she get behind him without notice?

“Your suit’s torn,” said a voice, calm, farther behind the lip. Byate detected an outer colony drawl. “Surrender. If you wanna live longer at least.”

“Not to you wacks!” Byate shouted back. He pulled himself along the floor behind the chair. He flashed his light towards where the voice came from and glanced around his protection. A hand lay limp from behind the glowing red corner. “I’ve already killed two of you!” he shouted, trying to keep his voice free of injury. “Got any suits?” He gripped the cloth bound shiv in his back, but left it where it was. They couldn’t know his condition, not from the tunnel.

“There are still five of us,” said the voice. Byate gave a short laugh, loud enough so his opposition could hear. The number was too likely a lie.

He gripped the helmet still in the chair and pulled out the headset. The mic went up to his mouth before the earset went on. "Where are they?" he asked under his breath. He checked his rifle, upping the spread and lowering the velocity.

"You should give up," said Marie into his ear. "I couldn't take it if you died like this." Byate sighed and shook his head. They would probably just kill him anyway if they got the opportunity. This was a straightforward fight to the death, and it would remain that way till the surviving party sorted things out.

Byate laughed. First a chuckle, then rolling hiccups deep from his chest. The adrenaline was working, the levels a bit higher with him in particular. His pain was almost completely replaced by an elating head high. "Wackin Mutt," he heard from the path he'd walked through. You'd better be scared.

The room behind him was unlit. Byate smiled. His enemies had forgotten the most important rule of combat. Always know where your enemy is. He worked slowly, unscrewing the light on the front of his rifle while keeping it steady. The light went on the seat, its position near exactly the same angle as before. Now all he had to do was slip around using the cover of shadow to get a good angle. Perhaps there was only the two left.

Byate ducked out from behind the chair. First one foot, then the next, soft over the metal grate of the floor. He raised his gun to his eye, but put it back down. His current positioning gave no guarantees. Two more steps.

Air. His foot kept going past the floor. He fumbled his gun and gripped the ground with spare fingers. The nose of his rifle hit the ground with a clatter.

Something grabbed on to his leg and pulled hard. Byate toppled and fell down past the floor. His head came down on something metal with a hard thud. He tried to find purchase with his hand. Something smashed into his temple.

When Byate awoke later, it was to the feeling of blood dripping down the side of his face. He went to brush it, but his arms were subdued. "Scat." Byate opened his eyes slowly. A dull glow emanated from above. He was in a vent shaft, a mechanic room for managing air flow and the humming computer servo. At the far side, a long thin tunnel had the grating popped off. No wonder that woman was able to get behind him, she'd used a maintenance shaft. The other person too he supposed.

Byate tried to lean back, but his head stung when it touched the pipe behind him. He was wacked to completion.

"Hey there," said a voice from above. An older man was bent over the gap in the grating, full gray under his lips and wild into the air. There was an eyepatch on one, and his skin looked gnarled and covered in soot. He was wearing a beige decompression suit, again an older model, still with the pack on back. Under one arm was his helmet, the other, Byate's M47 rifle. The man smiled now, regarding Byate with impunity.

"Wack you," said Byate, his own voice causing a headache. He had a sure concussion. His saliva was thick and tasted of iron. He spit it out.

"I'm lettin ya live," said the man. "After ya killed two a ma crew, I expect a little gratitude."

"I hope it keeps your conscience clean," said Byate. He would die alone on the ship whether the man killed him or not. Especially tied up by his hands like he was now.

"It's more of a punishment I spose," said the man. He chuckled. "You get to see what its been like for us. As for your crime though, I killed more of ma men maself. Two for one with food issues." They'd really eaten each other? Byate winced. How long had they been trapped down here? "You commin when you did was a god's miracle."

"So what now?" asked Byate. "You let me sleep and take my ship?"

"Es how it goes," said the man. "I'd have liked it better to kill a SuperTerra pilot and taken deir ship, additional loot and all. It's an issue for me you know, you being a soldier and all." He looked up and away, as if wistful. "I respect your troubles, fighting against the Raptors. I did the same a back then. Central abandoned us after though."

Byate struggled. His hands were bound tight. No, he was done. He sighed. "Can I get a last request?" he asked. "My Sear-38 handgun. I don't feel it on my waist."

"We took it," the man above said. He held up the gun, dangling it between two fingers. "Kinda useless without ammo though. Still want it?"

"Yeah," said Byate. It was a memento, his above anything else. Byate hated the thought of someone else using it, especially these wacks. The man tossed it down to land in Byate's lap. It clipped his groin causing a wince.

"A bit old if you ask me," he said. "Considerin your other gun and ship specially."

"Another thing," said Byate, he glanced into his lap at the gun. His hands were still firmly bound. "The cargo disappearances. All you?"

The man above laughed. He stroked his chin and looked down at Byate. "It's a long story for sure. One you proolly won't believe."

"Hit me," said Byate. He licked the corner of his teeth, tasting the concealed bullets hidden there. "I'm dead regardless."

"Very well then," said the man. He paused to recall. "We're pirates as you might have determined. We took a job bout half a cycle prior seeing the weaknesses in this route particularly. We took a freighter and made off with some goods a bit farther down the chain. Easy as anything. Figured out about the grabs up the line and decided to try for some for some easier money stealin it from those folk. We'd get rich if we landed things right."

He laughed again and shook his head. "What a wack up. We were a bunch of bulls for sure. First we didn't have weapons on our ship, not that it woulda mattered. This part you won't believe..." He paused, and looked down. "Raptors."

"What?" Byate exclaimed, pausing the fumbling of the ropes behind him. "That's ridiculous!"

"Knew you'd say it," said the man. "Whole fleet of em hangin around regardless. Took a few shots when we came up around the planet so we took a dive. Didn't chase us below the clouds." He shook his head. "We been stuck with other problems since."

Byate coughed into his shoulder. Another red stain on his suit. "Sounds like some bullshit to me."

"I've no reason to lie," said the man with a shrug. "You're dead, remember?" He stood up. "Well, as much as I enjoy chatting, the other two are itchin to reset your ship and take a look at your food stores." The man lifted his helmet up over his head. "See ya in the oceans blue." The old man took one last look and spit out of view. He slipped his helmet down, and turned away.

Byate let his head droop towards his lap. He hadn't even managed to get a hand free to possibly plug the guy, and based on the knot there was no chance he would. He had to die sometime, that much he admitted. It seemed anticlimactic though, getting ambushed by a few lying back-planet hics. The leader seemed pretty capable at least.

"Byate... Byate." He lifted his head a little. The voice was loud over an intercom system above. Marie, she was still in the ship's computer. "Don't sleep. You have a concussion."

'Marie!' Byate said, looking up to where the voice came from. He smiled. "I'm glad you're still here." He coughed and pain grated through his midsection. The taste of iron filled his mouth but he was too tired to spit.

“They’re leaving on your ship,” said Marie. “If I hadn’t come with you... I would have been destroyed in my entirety.”

“They deleted your copies?” asked Byate. It was like murder. Byate wondered how Marie thought of it, knowing that she was the only one of three of copies of herself left. Of course he did have to rewrite her into a single copy if they wanted to rejoin. On the wrecked pirate ship, however, power wouldn’t last indefinitely. She’d probably last longer than Byate though. He slouched down, staring at the ground in silence.

“Byate,” said Marie. “Someone might come help us.”

“No one’s gonna help us way out here,” said Byate. “We’re wacked.”

“The entanglement link’s shot on this ship. But when you were knocked out, I sent a distress signal back through our ship.”

Byate almost laughed out loud. “There’s no ship close enough to help us,” he said. The pirates were eating each other to stay alive so supplies on the ship were long gone, if he could get free. They’d been waiting short cycles for someone to visit the system. Realistically, Byate had days. Tied up with injuries, possibly less.

“There is a ship thirty light cycles out,” said Marie. “They can make it.”

“That’s nearly a week away,” said Byate, his harsh laugh cutting the room. He smiled dully. “At least you’ll make it.”

“They say two days.”