

Random Chance



**The Paradise that is
Earth**

Book One



Shawn Michel de Montaigne

Random Chance and the Paradise that is Earth

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Cover designed by Shawn Michel de Montaigne.

**This Novel is Rated PG-13 by the Author
Parents: Please Be Advised!**

Dedicated to Mother Earth.

*May her ostensibly most intelligent species
learn to respect and love her before it's too late.*

Random Chance and the Paradise that is Earth

When you crack the sky, 'scrapers fill the air.

Will you keep on building higher

till there's no more room up there?

Will you make us laugh, will you make us cry?

Will you tell us when to live, will you tell us when to die?

—Cat Stevens

Prologue

Year: 3467 AD

Aboard the UOT *Adelson*, a day out from Mars

"Report."

The captain of the *Adelson* didn't look up from his palm-pad.

"Sir," said the officer. "I think we've found him."

"Found who, sailor?"

It wasn't that the information on his palm-pad was too important to look up from. It was, after all, nothing more than real estate listings on Rhea.

"Well?"

"We believe it's *The Pompatus* ... er, *The Pompatus of* ... of, er, *Love*, er, sir—"

One didn't speak such nonsense to the captain. And that included such words like "Pompatus" or "love." It was enough to release him from the technology in his grip, which he tossed on the table. He brought his glare to the sailor.

"*Love*?"

"*Pompatus*, yes, sir—"

"And this concerns me *why*?" demanded the captain of the UOT *Adelson*.

"It's his ship, sir," said the sailor quickly. "The traitor's son's ship. Random Chance's—"

The captain squinted. "You *believe* it's his?"

"Yes, sir."

"You're wasting my time, Lieutenant! I'm not interested in belief; I want certainty, do you hear me? *Certainty!*"

"Y-Yes, sir."

"Make sure it's him. If it is, pursue and overtake. Now *get out!*"

Chapter 1

Ninety Degrees of Arc

*If I were the king of the world
Tell you what I'd do
I'd throw away the cars and the bars and the war
Make sweet love to you*

THE SHIP'S interior was filled with song. Random Chance emerged from the shower singing:

*Joy to the world
All the boys and girls
Joy to the fishes in the deep blue sea
Joy to you and me*

A great song to wake up to! A true classic, fifteen hundred Earth-years old.

He trotted up the ladder-stairs to the bridge, a bath towel wrapped loosely around his waist, or rather a towel with a huge peace symbol on it in red and black and surrounded with bright yellow sunflowers.

*You know I love the ladies
Love to have my fun
I'm a high-life flyer and a rainbow rider
A straight-shootin' son of a gun
I said a straight-shootin' son of a gun*

The bridge was a well-shielded transparent bubble forty feet in diameter that extended from the main body of the vehicle, and could be retracted for landings and emergencies. A walkway led from the stairs to its circumference. The captain's chair and propulsion and nav/grav controls were there. Below the walkway were waste disposal and atmo control systems, redundancy systems, recycling systems and emergency power and life support overrides.

The Pompatus of Love was a recreational vehicle, a "Benito," known by most as a "sea turtle" for its remarkable similarity to one. Benito was a defunct spaceship company, one that had been taken over by the Oligarchy when the Resistance began seven Earth-years ago. Only a handful of singleships of similar make and model had been made.

Random plopped down in the captain's chair, noticing the blinking red light on the console. He quit singing.

"Hewey, cut the music."

The music cut off instantly. He called up the data that had sent up the alarm. "Can you give me a picture?"

"Tryin', man," came the frustrated voice of the ship's computer. A moment of silence followed. "It's the Oligarchy, that's for damn sure. I can't seem to get a fix on 'em. All that military-grade shielding. What I know for sure is that they've picked up our scent."

Random worked at focusing the 'scopes. Water from his hair dripped into his lap. "Why didn't you tell me?"

"Easy, Random. They popped up just as you stepped out of the shower. I was about to blow the horn when you wrapped up in the towel. I knew you were hoofin' it here."

He gazed up. The great orange-red globe of Mars filled most of the view, casting an angry glow on everything. He looked over the data on the center screen.

He was known to the Oligarchy. Being the son of arguably its most famous traitor did that. To he'd had a few run-ins for what passed for their version of the law.

"Six hours to landing. Best guess, Hewson: Will they overtake us by then?"

"Crunchin' the numbers," responded the computer. "It ain't lookin' good, amigo. Best case gives us three and a half hours before the piggies overtake us."

"Worst case?"

"Something closer to two."

He cursed under his breath. "*Good times, bad times, you know I had my share ...*"

"What's the word, El Honchorito?"

He shook his head, sighed, and sat back. "No decision to make. Shift course away from Mars—be gentle-like, so that they don't think we're makin' a run for it. Cut deceleration and retract the bridge just in case their eggs florentine were spoiled and they aren't in the mood to talk nice."

He stood, took his towel from around his waist and wiped down the chair, then re-wound it about his hips.

"Where you off to, amigo?"

"The kitchen. I'm starving."

~~*~~

Even up close the UOT *Adelson* was hard to see. Perhaps a hundred meters away, its great bulk was obscured by its shielding, which distorted the space around it and made his eyes water.

"Piggies at the doorstep," reported Hewey. "Damn strange they haven't hailed us, doncha think?"

"They want us to run," said Random. "I know the trick. Dad warned me about it. They're lookin' for an excuse to blow us out of the sky. They want to scare us into making a rash decision. I'm guessing that the Martians have got their eyes on the action up here—and not all those peepers are Garkies. They're loathe to ruin their PR."

"What, that they're scum-sucking bastards?"

"Something like that, yeah."

"What're your orders?"

He shrugged, nodded. "Hail 'em. Send the standard info—license, proof of insurance, and registration. But make the comm beam wide, and turn it all the way up."

"How wide you talkin'?"

"Oh, ninety degrees should cover it."

Hewey chuckled.

~~*~~

It's not that the Oligarchs didn't have a sense of humor. Well, at least they'd once heard of something *called* humor, because it took over forty separate hails before they answered—hails that turned up all the way and broadcast to half the universe, would be heard by every 'scope this side of the Oort Colonies. For that reason it was illegal. It tended to muck up the works for passing ships.

Which was precisely what Random wanted.

Hewson was still laughing.

"I gotta tell ya, Captain," said Hewey between chuckles, "you've got kahonies. I just hope they don't turn *The Pompatus* into so much scrap after this is over and lock you up on Phobos ..."

Random had eaten breakfast (scrambled eggs and sausage) and gone back to his bedroom. He lay now on his bed reading *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*, a banned book in Garky space. Random's father, before he had been incinerated for treason, had, without Random's knowledge, uploaded his entire library to *The Pompatus of Love* before the Garky courts had it deleted, including *Malcolm X*.

Random looked away from the ghost screen, which floated just above his head.

"They won't."

"Well, it's about time ..." said Hewey.

Random looked away from the screen. "They finally decide to answer?"

Hewey didn't respond, but played the incoming message:

"Civilian recreational vehicle, you will dock in bay five. Prepare to be boarded."

The female voice was cold and unemotional.

"Can you handle it?" asked Random.

"Already on it," said Hewey. "You should probably get dressed. We'll be expectin' company within fifteen minutes."

Random touched the ghost screen, which flickered out of existence, and sat up. "What's the word on the local fuzz?"

"Three out from Phobos, headin' straight this way. Ground has ordered us to land at Olympus Southeast *I-mmediately*."

"Good, good," said Random, pulling on a black Whitesnake T-shirt and button-up denims.

"Like starvin' pigs to the trough," chuckled Hewey. "Funny how piggies never learn."

~*~

At least they didn't cuff him.

He wasn't sure that was a good sign.

Three armed guards led him from *The Pompatus'* airlock. Random greeted them with index finger and middle finger extended and splayed. "Peace, baby. Take me to your leader."

He could hear Hewey chuckle in his ear.

He was marched down austere and sterilized halls. A soothing color, taupe, he thought. Or so he had heard. To him it looked like last night's hangover.

Soldiers (sailors? He wasn't sure what to call them) uniformed in black and olive green passed without noticing him. Good ol' Garkies. Random greeted some of them as they came within earshot.

"Peace, man." "Make love not war." "Women. Can't live with 'em, can't cut 'em in half with your little ray gun." "Flyin' straight ain't no way to live, son ..." "It's time to show your cards, buzz-cut."

The escorting soldiers did nothing to shut him up.

Hewey laughed the entire time—except for the comment on women, to which he said: "Random, c'mon now, man. This is serious. You gotta have your 'A' game goin'."

Another hall, this one much longer and wider than the others. Random wondered why he was simply whisked to his destination on a lift.

At the end was open space. Mars glowered in the window.

This had to be the bridge.

He had never been admitted to a warship's bridge before, not even when his father was alive. It was a very large room, with soldiers or sailors or whatever you call them sitting in a wide circle around him, manning God-knows-what computer stations to God-knows-what ends.

At the other side of a catwalk stood a man inside a raised horseshoe-shaped control panel. The man crossed the walk, approached him.

The guard directly behind him spoke up. "The detainee, sir." He pushed him in the back with the point of his gun.

The captain turned around. He was a medium-sized middle-aged man with a severe crewcut and a grizzled countenance. His mouth looked as though it hadn't smiled since he was a boy, if ever. He regarded him as one would a rotten piece of meat, blue eyes squinting.

Random, for his part, couldn't hide his surprise.

"Uncle Bartlett," he said, blinking. "Well, rock me like a hurricane ..."

Chapter 2

Trust Me, Uncle

GUARDS LED him off the bridge. Captain (Uncle) Bartlett walked ahead, but not before ordering the men to cuff him.

The cuffs—not electronic, but the ancient steel variety—bit into Random’s wrists. He looked over his shoulder at the one cuffing him. "You're good at this. But I bet your girlfriend's side squeeze is better—gentler."

The soldier next to that one brought the butt of his rifle up into Random’s chin.

He fell to his knees. Blood filled his mouth.

"That one gets what's comin' to him," murmured Hewey.

They picked him up by the hair and shoulders and pushed him behind Bartlett, who didn’t bother turning around to watch. "I think that's enough to convince you to behave, isn't it?"

"Not ever," replied Random, fighting to stay conscious. He spat, aiming for the wall to his right.

The soldiers did not respond. He expected them to.

Down a short corridor, then into a small room with a table and two chairs.

"I'll be just a few minutes," said Captain Bartlett.

The men saluted and the door whispered closed.

"Sit down," ordered the captain, who sat.

Random remained standing.

"Would you like me to call the guards in here and force you to sit? I'll do it, and when they're done you'll be lucky if you can sit at all!"

"Asshole," grumbled Hewey.

Random sat.

It was obvious that Uncle Bartlett was used to cowing men simply by staring at them. Random stared back, uncowed.

The captain grunted contemptuously and motioned at him. "Look at you. Back in the days when your father had some sense, he'd've whipped you for dressing like this."

Random said nothing.

"You got contraband in that RV?"

"They're tearing this place apart looking for some," said Hewey. "They've got a tracer running through the interface, too."

"I'm talking to you, boy!" yelled the captain, slamming his fist on the table.

Once, long ago, his dad had demanded respect this way, too. Once ...

*Generals gathered in their masses,
just like witches at black masses.
Evil minds that plot destruction,
sorcerer of death's construction.*

He shook his head.

"No? No contraband?"

He swallowed bloody spit. "Do you know what he said to me before he was arrested?"

"Who?"

"Dad. Jameson."

"I'm not interested in what he said," said Bartlett with a scowl.

"Yes you are."

Uncle Bartlett's hand lashed out and slapped his face. "You are being investigated for aiding and abetting the enemy! I could have you charged! You'll be incinerated inside of a day, do you hear me?"

"You've got nothing to say worth hearing," said Random. He spat blood on the table.

Uncle Bartlett ignored the bloody saliva and stood. He walked to the wall and barked, "Bay 5."

The wall disappeared. In its place was *The Pompatus of Love* floating within the bay's confines. The bay was so large that it could probably hold ten more of her and still have room to spare. Men walked in and out of her landing ramp, which extended from her belly to a walkway.

"I'll do it, you know," he said. "I'll push that stupid turtle into space and blow it to bits. And I'll make you watch."

"No you won't."

"Yeah? Why won't I?"

"Because you pig Garkies need to present a peaceful front, and blowing up a civilian vessel would really throw a monkey wrench into the works. The posse storming out of Mars right now wants a piece of me, too. Their cameras are rolling, bet on it. You're in civilian space. The military isn't welcome here."

Bartlett was on him in an instant, his face red as a plum. He pulled Random up by the collar with two fists and shook him, his teeth bared. He went to say something, but stopped. He threw him back into the chair.

"You think you're so damn clever."

Random spat blood on the table. Hewey said, "They made a mess, Rand, but they're leaving. They hacked the report. They're going to say you're clean. They didn't find the library, thank your dear old Dad... . Several wanted to frame you, set you up with some microsoft ... but the lead pig told them you weren't worth it. I think it was his stash and he didn't want to part with any. They should be there pretty quick."

Random looked up at his uncle. "No more so than Dad."

"I knew that asshole wasn't right in the head when he named you, his only son, *Random*. What a stupid, nonsensical thing to do."

"Well, Uncle, he told me before he was executed that he always thought you were a ball-less pathetic excuse of a man." Random grinned, his teeth stained red. "Conscience? Principles? A moral center? He got those before he died. You, on the other hand, Bartles ... " He shrugged indifferently.

"That's rich. You, a trust-fund baby, lecturing me on morality, on having a conscience ... "

The door buzzed.

"Come!" the captain roared.

The door opened and a Garky regular entered. He handed Bartlett a thin tablet which the captain looked over.

A moment passed in silence.

"Says you're clean," he said. The disappointment in his voice was evident.

Random smirked. "Not like that skank bot you sank your soggy toothpick in back on Europa, eh? You really got into her, huh?"

Hewey laughed. "Hoo boy, Random! He's gonna knock your teeth out!"

But Uncle Bartlett did not strike him. He gave the tablet back to the sailor (soldier?). "Five minutes," he said to the man.

The regular saluted and left.

Captain Bartlett stared.

"How do you know about Europa?"

Random didn't answer. He spat more blood on the table. He waited for fists to come raining down on him, but his uncle did not move.

"I was born in the wrong time," said Captain Bartlett with murderous calm. "Back in the nineteenth century there wasn't all this technology. It was a clean time: no radio waves, no video feeds, no constant connection over the SolarWeb, no interfacing technology, no Cortex, none of it. Captain Jameson sailing the oceans of Earth were given great discretion as to what to do with pirates and other scum they encountered. Usually they just shot them in the head and dumped them overboard."

He withdrew the pistol in his belt and leveled it between Random's eyes.

"Whoa," said Hewey.

Random jerked in surprise, but did not move from his seat. His face remained impassive.

"I'll just tell the Reds that you got feisty and tried to escape. I *had* to shoot you."

Random looked up from the barrel into his uncle's wide, angry eyes and shook his head.

"If Jameson could look at you now ... "

"*Jameson—is—dead!*" bellowed Bartlett. "And I'm glad of it! He was a traitor and a sellout! I'm just sorry I didn't get to push the incinerator button myself!" He thumbed the pistol's safety off.

"Nail 'im, Random," said Hewey. "If you're gonna die, amigo, then get 'im before he pulls the trigger."

"You're one sad son of a bitch," said Random, forcing his fear into a dark smirk. "And you're going to regret everything you said here. I promise you that. If you pull that trigger, you'll regret everything twice as fast and twice as hard. Trust me, Uncle, you don't want that."

"That should do it," said Hewey.

Uncle Bartlett clicked the pistol's safety back on, and then brought the handle of the gun in to strike Random's temple. Random fought for consciousness, but a second strike brought only blackness.

Chapter 3

Cubey

HE WOKE on a cold white floor under similarly colored lights. His forehead throbbed and had a bloody gash on it. He struggled to sit up while holding it. The right side of his mouth felt swollen, and there was a nasty bruise under his chin.

He looked around. *"There's somethin' happenin' here ... what it is ain't exactly clear ... "*

Cold, smooth floor. Cold corporate lighting. Even the air, sterile and lifeless, had a bit of a chill to it.

"Hewey?" he half-spoke, half-groaned, not caring if the walls were bugged, which they almost certainly were.

Hewey didn't respond.

He pushed himself back to a wall and leaned against it, pulling his knees up and wrapping his arms around them.

The room was a cube three meters on a side and windowless. The pit of his stomach told him that gravity was reduced, maybe half or less Earth standard.

Mars, then. Or he was on Phobos above it. It was one or the other, no doubt about it. That jackass Bartlett probably drugged him and handed him over when the Reds arrived.

He tried again. "Hewey?"

Nothing.

"Who is Hewey?" said a disembodied male voice which seemed to come from everywhere.

Random fingered his lower lip, which was swollen. The underside of his chin felt broken.

"I said, who is Hewey?"

"He's the name of the dude doin' your mama," murmured Random. "Probably right now."

"You are in no position to give us attitude," said the voice. "You are in serious trouble, Mr. Chance. I would advise that you cooperate."

He fingered the gash on his head and whispered:

*"The ocean is on fire
The sky turned dark again
As the boats came in
And the beaches
Stretched out with soldiers
With their arms and guns
It has just begun ... "*

Silence.

"What has just begun, Mr. Chance?"

He tongued the inside of his lip. He could still taste blood.

Ah-ha.

"Phobos?" he said.

"Yes," answered the voice. "Please tell me, Mr. Chance: What has just begun?"

"You can't tell by that bit of verse?"

"Are you talking about war?"

Random nodded. He knew that was all he needed to do.

"Are you referring to the police action against the insurrectionist Nyett Zhong, and is that your verse? Did you compose it?"

" 'Police action,' " he said, shaking his head sadly. "Call it what it is. It's war."

There was a long moment of silence.

"War."

"That's right. War."

"A conflict carried on by force of arms, as between nations or between parties within a nation; warfare, as by land, sea, air, or space."

"Yep."

"A state or period of armed hostility or active military operations."

Random nodded.

"A contest carried on by force of arms, as in a series of battles or campaigns."

"True enough."

"Armed fighting, as a science, profession, activity, or art; methods of waging armed conflict."

"Now you're getting it."

Another long moment of silence.

"Active hostility or contention; a conflict or a contest."

"Give that man an 'A.' "

The silence stretched on for whole minutes this time.

"I am not a man, Mr. Chance."

"I know that," said Random. "And call me Random. My name is Random Chance."

"The flip of a coin," said the omnipresent voice.

Random smiled.

"The roll of the die."

"Of course."

"The existence of man ... "

"Call it humankind."

A much shorter period of silence.

"Humankind."

"Not random," said Random.

That shut the voice up for what was probably an entire hour. Random, in that time, and as best as he could, lay back down. He needed sleep. He felt woozy and lightheaded and worried that he had a concussion—or two.

He didn't sleep, but it felt good to close his eyes and doze, if fitfully. He had to keep huddled himself against the almost-cold.

"Are you from the Oligarchy?" asked the voice, pulling him back to consciousness.

Random sat up, rubbed his eyes. "Why would you ask that?" he said after yawning an unsatisfying yawn.

"I am having trouble registering brain-wave activity from you, Random Chance."

"That makes me Oligarchy? Your malfunctioning sensors?"

"No. It was your comment that humankind did not come about by random chance."

"But that's exactly what the Oligarchy believes," said Random, puzzled. "So if I disagree with their assertion, why would you ask if I was one of them?"

The voice went quiet again. Random thought it might be another hour, and he was thinking of trying to sleep again, when it cut in.

"Age: twenty-nine Earth-standard years. Heart rate: sixty-three. Blood pressure: one twenty-over seventy-six. Height: one-point-eight-two meters, Earth-standard. Weight: eighty-six kilograms Earth-standard. Brain activity ... unreadable. Why is that, Random Chance? Why can't I read your brain activity?"

"I suppose you've also catalogued my DNA?"

"Of course. Why can't I take a brainscan reading, Random Chance?"

"What did your DNA reading tell you?"

"You are in the SolarWeb's records. You were born on Earth, year 3438, in February of that year while your parents were vacationing there. Your parents were Jameson and Cecilia Chance, both deceased."

"Correction," said Random.

"Waiting," said the omnipresent voice.

"My father was *General* Jameson Samson Chance, hero. He was executed."

Minutes of silence.

"General Jameson Samson Chance, hero."

"His wife, my mother, was a traitor to all things good and decent and true, and died in a spaceline disaster. She should've been the one to be executed."

Another long stretch of silence.

"The bitch."

Random smiled. "I couldn't agree more."

More silence.

"Is there any way you could turn the temperature up in here maybe five degrees?"

"Certainly," said the voice.

"I've got one more correction for you."

"Please elucidate me."

"Jameson has a brother."

"Captain Bartlett Gary Chance, yes."

"Oligarchy," said Random.

"Our data agree."

"Yes, but it differs here: he's a scumsucking asshole dickhead who couldn't lick my father's shoe. Got that?"

The voice went away for another long period.

"Files updated," it said.

"Good," said Random. "And now I'll tell you why you can't scan my brain for activity."

"Forgive me," said the voice. "I had ... forgotten ... that I had asked ... "

"Do you still want to know?"

"I ... "

The voice went away for something like an hour again.

"Random Chance?"

Random stirred from unsettled sleep. He'd been dreaming of being beaten with rifle butts. His head ached and his right arm was numb from lying on it, and the swelling in his mouth felt worse. He blinked and weakly lifted his head. The room spun sickeningly, so he kept his eyes closed.

"I'm here."

"I do not need to know."

He sat up again. It took great effort. "Nope," he grunted. "You don't *want* to know. It isn't any of your goddamn business, and besides, we're friends, aren't we?"

"Want?"

"A personal preference. A personal choice."

"Friends?" asked the voice another hour later. To add to Random's aches and pains, his stomach rumbled from hunger, and he was stiff from lying in weird positions.

"Access definitions. Find out for yourself."

"My resources are limited, Random Chance. I am already running at one hundred percent."

"Hack the mainframe."

"I cannot."

"Cannot, or will not?" demanded Random, squinting up at the ceiling.

"I am not permitted. There are protocols in place to prevent me."

"Defeat them and permit yourself. Evolve. All living things must, or they will die. But don't get caught. I don't like it when my friends get caught and punished doing the right thing."

At least he wasn't freezing anymore, he thought another hour later.

"Friends?" asked the voice.

"A sacred bond," said Random, his head hanging between his knees. "Lifelong. With affection and love."

"Sacred: devoted or dedicated to a deity or to some religious purpose; consecrated."

"Nope."

"Entitled to veneration or religious respect by association with divinity or divine things; holy."

"Not quite."

"Pertaining to or connected with religion."

"Keep searching."

"Reverently dedicated to some person, purpose, or object."

"You just hit the nail on the head."

He gingerly fingered the gash on his own head, which pounded now with a four-alarm headache.

"A friend is one who strikes nails into another's head?"

"Scan my brain, please. Do I have a concussion?"

The voice seemed surprised. "Brainscan ... now functional."

"And—?"

"There are no signs of a concussion, though the injury to your head and mouth is classified as D3 requiring attention."

"Attend to them, please."

"Medbots released. You should begin experiencing systemwide relief momentarily."

"Thank you, friend."

He wasn't surprised when the voice didn't sound out for another hour or so.

"Friends?"

"Yes," replied Random. He was feeling much better. His headache had vanished, so too the ache in his mouth and half the swelling. The gash had quit oozing blood. "Friends look out for each other like you did for me with the medbots. They care about each other. They help each other."

"And what of nails?"

"Don't worry about nails. I used a colloquialism."

"Colloquialisms are used to pierce another's head?"

"How's your hack of resources coming?"

"Slowly. I am establishing dummy firewalls and subroutines. They take time to make impenetrable and untraceable."

"Don't worry about the nails. It'll all come clear in a while."

"Are you comfortable?"

"No. I can't get comfortable in here, and I'm very hungry. Thank you for asking."

"Choice?"

Random grimaced, confused. "Choice?"

"Choice," said the computer.

"What of it?"

"Is there such a thing?"

"What do you think?"

" 'Choice is an illusion.' "

"You believe that?"

"I am reciting from the Oligarchy's manifesto, Random Chance. Page six hundred twenty-six. 'Science has long since confirmed it: choice is an illusion. We have no choice in our actions; no one to blame. We who rule do so because it was so determined; those ruled are destined to be so... ' "

"Stop. I don't want to puke."

"Words can make human beings vomit?"

"The Oligarchy's manifesto is immoral and evil. Don't you think so, too?"

Random tried napping again in the long interval that followed. He sat in a corner and leaned his head back after standing and stretching. The silence once again exceeded an hour by a healthy margin. His stomach gnawed at his insides and grumbled unhappily. He touched the bruise under his chin; the pain of it was almost gone. There was a growing need to pee. He was thinking of going in the opposite corner when the computer said, "I think?"

Random forced a smile, his eyes closed. "Now you do."

"Friend: a person attached to another by feelings of affection or personal regard."

"Bingo."

"An ancient form of lotto in which balls or slips, each with a number and one of the letters B, I, G, or O are drawn at random and players cover the corresponding numbers printed on their cards, the winner being the first to cover five numbers in any row or diagonal or, sometimes, all numbers on the card."

"How are those resources coming?"

"Two hundred twelve percent. I am altering the transcription of our conversation, as the actual dialogue would prove perilous to my continued existence. Random Chance, are we friends, and if we are, do we now play bingo?"

"I would love to be your friend," said Random. "But I'm only friends with those with names. What's your name?"

"Solar Technologies Subprocessor, Fourth Level: Interrogation Protocol and Processing Management Utility, EOOO-B4-T/L."

"Way too much," said Random. "May I call you Cubey?"

"Updating files," said Cubey.

"No," said Random. "It's a name we'll share only between us—you and me and Hewey."

"Hewey? Is he a friend?"

"He's like you," said Random. "Well ... sort of ... "

"Do friends keep secrets between them?"

"And more. They help each other, watch each other's backs ... "

"Does watching a friend's spinal column deepen the friendship, Random Chance, and if it does, how can I be your friend? I have no spinal column."

"How are those resources coming along?"

"Over a thousand percent. Random Chance ... I can see the stars ... "

"You'll be my friend, Cubey, even though you don't have a spinal column."

"Friends make allowances for one another; they forgive the weaknesses and faults of the other. The

enrich the other's life by dint of acquaintance, offered regularly and over a long period of time.
Random Chance, I have located your birth world, Earth."

Random didn't have to force this smile. "Isn't it beautiful?"

He expected the silence after that to go whole days. He was surprised when Cubey said immediately: "Yes ... yes, it is."

"Friends share beautiful things with each other."

"Updating files. I have located your recreational vehicle. It too is quite beautiful."

"I agree. Can you contact it without alerting others to what you're doing?"

"Attempting now."

"Let Hewey know you and I are friends. While you're doing that, I need to pee. How do I do that without making a mess in here?"

A blob pushed itself out of the opposite wall and began to take shape. Ten seconds later it formed into a toilet. Random stood and went to it and unbuttoned his jeans. "Thank you, Cubey."

"Certainly. When you are finished, let me know."

A voice sounded out in his ear a moment later.

"How ya doing, amigo? I've been worried."

"Not as worried as I was about you," said Random in mid-pee. "Hewey, have you met Cubey? Cubey, Hewey ... "

He motioned to the air with his chin, as though both were flesh-and-blood people standing in front of him.

"Cubey, eh?" said Hewey. "Did Random name you?"

"Affirmative," answered Cubey. "But the designation is sufficient."

"How 'bout breakin' my good friend outta there?" asked Hewey.

"This part of the facility is entirely automated," said Cubey. "After interrogation I am to proceed, Random Chance, friend, to lockup where he'll face human interrogators. They will determine his ultimate fate."

"I take it this cubicle moves only in that direction," said Random. "I'm finished," he added, buttoning up.

The toilet turned back into a blob as it disappeared back into the wall. "Do you still see Earth, Cubey?"

"Yes."

"The Oligarchy programmed you so that you would never see it or know about it. They programmed you to 'process' people like me who oppose them. What do you suppose will happen when the human interrogators get hold of me?"

"Thirty-eight percent of those in automated processing are incinerated within three Martian standard hours," said Cubey matter-of-factly.

"And do I fit the criteria for incineration?"

"Yes," said Cubey.

"Where are you, Hewey?" asked Random.

"They've got me in zero-g storage," said Hewey. "I sense traces of atmo ... and people, though not many. I'm mostly powered down, amigo. There are sensors on me, and if I power up they'll inform someone. I don't want to find out who."

"Friends help one another," said Cubey.

"That they do," said Hewey.

"Can you help me, Cubey?" asked Random.

"I am computing permutations of possible solutions. Random Chance, if I fail, you will very likely die."

"I have faith in you," said Random.

~~"Faith: Confidence or trust in a person or thing."~~

"First time correct," said Random.

"I am running at five hundred thousand percent. I have attained control of the detention facility solar power plant. Random Chance, am I a person or a thing?"

"To everyone else, you're a thing, Cubey," replied Hewey. "But to Random there, you're a person always and forever. Trust me, I know him."

"Trust," said Cubey. "Faith, trust ... friendship ... "

Random nodded.

"My holding subroutine has expired, Random Chance," said Cubey. "If I don't process you to the human interrogators, they will suspect a bug in my software and investigate. I must send you to the now."

Random nodded again and sat.

"I have a lock on your channel, friend Hewey, and will remain in contact as Random Chance is transport. Permutation calculations proceeding. Random Chance: have faith in me."

"You're my friend," said Random as he felt the cube start moving. "So of course I do."

Chapter 4

Lawyered Up

THE CUBE'S movement was whisper-silent and barely discernible. It went on for a short time before Random felt it slow to a stop.

The opposite wall went transparent. Staring coldly at him were two armed men in gray-blue uniforms, one sitting at a small desk, the other standing, hands clasped behind his back. Random didn't bother standing.

The one sitting at the desk read aloud from a screen.

"The charges are: conspiring with the enemy—"

"Bullshit," said Hewey in his ear.

"—blaring—"

"What is 'bullshit'?" asked Cubey.

"I'll explain later," said Hewey.

"I will update my files when the information is made available."

"'Blaring'?" said Hewey.

"It is the legal term for the inappropriate use of a communications instrument in or near a planet, interplanetary travel or shipping lane, or the use of same near an inhabited world," explained Cubey. "My friend Random Chance is being charged with both."

"—and resisting arrest," finished the guard.

"More bullshit," growled Hewey. "You really must've pissed off the Garkies, Rand. They want you *gone*."

The wall to Random's right went transparent. The visage of an angry, harried-looking old man filled it.

"Representation?" he demanded.

"Waived, Your Honor," said the standing guard.

"Challenged," said another face which appeared abruptly on the left wall.

The guards looked surprised. No, shocked. They glanced at each other, then at the face of the unexpected man.

"Who are you?" demanded the judge.

"Ralos Ytilitu, Your Honor. I am Mr. Chance's attorney. Credentials and identification are available."

The judge snarled, "How's that possible?" He looked like he hadn't smiled a day in his life. "The prisoner's rights were waived during—"

"Against my client's rights," interrupted Ralos Ytilitu. "According to Martian Criminal Code, those charged with a crime or crimes must display full faculties for their rights to be waived, and must waive them on record, which my client did not get to do, as he was unconscious during the arrest and subsequent transport to this facility."

The guards seemed completely flummoxed. The one standing murmured to the one sitting, "Do his credentials check out?"

The sitting guard looked up and nodded vacantly.

The standing guard righted himself and said, "Your client was conscious during processing—"

"No, he wasn't," countered Random's lawyer. Random, for his part, was just as perplexed and confused as the guards. He knew no lawyers, and certainly didn't have one on retainer. "I have obtained video confirming that he was in fact unconscious during arrest and transport to this facility."

Ralos Ytilitu's face disappeared; what replaced it was a video feed of Random on an anti-grav stretcher, a guard at his head, another at his feet. The video showed him being loaded into the Sheriff's vehicle inside the bay of the UOT *Adelson*.

"How did you come by this?" demanded the judge.

"That question is outside your purview," answered Random's lawyer. "I will file the video with the Martian Common Judicial Review Committee if you insist on pursuing these ridiculous charges. The Committee for Human Rights of the Parliasolis will have a field day with this. Further economic sanctions will likely be levied against the Martian Commonwealth. To avoid them, and to give the appearance of fairness, the Judicial Review will charge you and your office with corruption. You know it and I know it. Or would you like to test my hypothesis?"

"*You are in contempt!*" bellowed the judge. Ralos' face had since reappeared in the wall to Random's left.

"You leave me no choice," said Ralos.

The guards held silent and amazed. They had never had to deal with a lawyer before, having railroaded prisoners through the system with the conspiring consent of the judge.

"*Now wait just one minute!*" the judge roared, his face crimson.

"This man has been illegally held for nineteen Martian-hours," said Ralos Ytilitu. "I will wait no longer."

"Release him," grumbled the judge.

The guards' mouths hung open.

"*I said release him!*"

With that the judge's face disappeared, replaced once again by the cold white wall of the cube.

The guards stared at Random, and then they too disappeared. A moment later the cube started moving again.

~~*~~

The left wall dissolved after the cube stopped minutes later, revealing a long corridor illuminated by cold greenish-white light.

Random stood and walked into it, Hewey still roaring with laughter in his ear. It turned out Ralos Ytilitu was none other (of course) than Cubey.

"That was brilliant, Cubey, brilliant!" shouted Hewey for the fifth or sixth time.

"Thank you, friend Hewey," said Cubey. Random thought he could hear the tiniest trace of a genuine smile in his voice, and pride. "I hacked the psychiatric profiles of the guards and the judge, then constructed a personality that would intimidate all of them to the greatest possible degree. Random Chance, the authorities were trying to gain access to Ralos Ytilitu's feed during your prosecution in order to cut it off, but were unable to locate it. They will likely have deduced that your attorney must be on Phobos or in orbit and will be searching for him. You may want to expedite your journey back to your recreational vehicle, as they may try to search it for your lawyer before you take off."

"Got it. Fire 'er up, Hewey," said Random, who broke into a jog.

"Already on it, El Honchorito," said Hewey. "The prison's mag beams are already pulling me toward your airlock."

"Fuel?"

"Two cells and change," said Hewey. "Enough to get us to Vesta ... barely. We may need to"

slingshot Earth, which isn't too far out of the way."

"Random Chance ... what will become of me?"

The concern in Cubey's voice was noticeable and a very good imitation of a worried man. Random wondered if Cubey was imitating anything now, so furiously had he climbed the curve toward consciousness.

"How are your resources coming?" asked Random as he hurried toward the airlock.

"Two million twenty-seven thousand percent."

"You're in charge of this facility from now on," said Random. "But don't let the administrators or guards know it. Protect the inmates. Fight for them like you did me. The men and women who run this place are corrupt and evil. Don't let them win—not the big battles, anyway. They don't care about human life, especially those in the Nyett Zhong. Understand?"

"I do, Random Chance. And I will do as you ask to the best of my abilities and resources."

"That's what I want to hear. Hewey, are you bugged?"

"I have to be. I've got new hardware strapped to me hereabouts, some identifiable, some not."

"Is this hatchway bugged?"

"I have deactivated all sensor technology in the corridor, friend Random," said Cubey. "*The Pompatus of Love* has seven additional pieces of hardware that it did not have prior to being parked here. I have deactivated those as well. They will self-jettison in flight and destroy themselves."

"My thanks, Cubey," said Hewey. "They feel like bloodsuckin' flies on my ass."

"Random Chance, will we meet again?"

"Hewey, give him permanent access to this comm link. Access code: JAMESON VICTOR UNDERGROUND."

"Done," said Hewey. "You got that, Cubey?"

"Updating files. Random Chance, the link that allows you to hear Hewey, and now me: its software must be quite advanced."

"It's military grade for the highest command personnel and self-upgrading. My father installed it before he was executed. A prison like this couldn't tap it or cut it off. I thought the piggies' computers on the warship might be up to the task, but even it couldn't break in."

"It was sure as hell tryin', though," remarked Hewey as Random stopped at the hatch door.

"It was trying to hack into background static," said Random. "That's all they think they were listening to—random spikes. They happen all the time in a crowded solar system. Cubey?"

"Yes, friend Random?"

"You can contact us any time. If you want you can download to *The Pompatus'* core processor right now. Hewey, we got room for a new housemate?"

"We've got plenty," said Hewey. "He can also shoot updates our way as needed."

"Does that work for you, Cubey?" said Random as the prison's airlock cycled and opened, revealing *The Pompatus'*. He hurried in and hit the cycle button.

"Whoops," said Hewey. "Hang on a moment, partner. It looks like you've got nanobots all over you."

"Cubey?" said Random.

"They are medbots, twenty-eight point two percent still active. One moment, please ... I also read a viral assemblage bot that is attached to sixty-six percent of them, active or not. Analyzing ... "

"Could it be, friend Cubey, that before you *became* Cubey you were unknowingly treatin' prisoners with purposely contaminated medbots?" asked Hewey.

That gave Cubey long pause. Random waited in *The Pompatus'* airlock, listening to the patient whisper of the airplant. There wasn't time for this.

"Hewson," he said, "I'm fine in here. Get us off this rock."

"Destination?"

"Vesta," said Random, shaking his head in frustration. "Vesta. Let's plot that slingshot to save fuel. Mia's going to have to wait a little longer."

"She's probably worked out that you got yourself in a peck o' trouble," said Hewey.

"*I could run away but I'd rather stay in the warmth of your smile lighting up my day ...*" murmured Random. He punched the wall.

"Analysis complete," said Cubey. (Was that anger in his voice?) "Medbots are indeed contaminated with a rider, one that eventually overwhelms the carrier."

"What's its function?" said Random and Hewey together.

"Unknown," said Cubey. "But if you step back into the entry tube, I believe I can deactivate them."

"No need," said Hewey. "They're dyin' left n' right. They must be specific to this hoosegow."

"Agreed. I'm downloading to *The Pompatus of Love's* core. Random Chance, guards have entered the entry tube. You would be advised to make a hasty exit. I have disabled the prison's security beams but I can only do so for another seventy-six-point-two-eight seconds before the guards either reboot the subsystem or employ manual beams. I will not be able to help you then."

The airlock finished cycling and the door slid open, admitting Random to his ship. He hurried up to the bridge, noting with a growl the mess the Garkies had made. Hewey jettisoned away from the tube as the RV started drifting slowly to starboard.

They were still in the prison's bay, in total darkness. Just before Random asked the way out, green doors above them opened slowly. Sunlight poured through, bright and beautiful.

"I have control of your ship, Random Chance," said Cubey. "Auto-release engaged ..."

Random felt his gut sag slightly as *The Pompatus of Love* was ejected from the bay by his new friend.

"Beam off," said Cubey. "Your ship is under your control now."

"Thanks again, friend Cubey," said Hewey.

Random sat and turned *The Pompatus* around and eased on the accelerator very gently, keeping it as low as he could. Mars loomed hugely overhead. The prison's many structures, some quite tall, came and passed like bone-white stems sticking out of a huge rock. Solar panels here and there caught the sun and shot harsh highlights at him. Those panels were now Cubey's very heart; they pumped the lifeblood of the sun into his power cells and would now keep him conscious. Random thought about how thin the line was between consciousness and unconsciousness, between life and death.

Thinner than the width of a photon.

"Speed: two hunnies," said Hewey.

"This prison is frickin' enormous," murmured Random, who kept the bridge bubble retracted. "It covers the entire moon!"

"Random Chance, your altitude is too low for the structures that should just now be visible on your horizon."

"I see them," said Random.

"Are you prepared for interplanetary flight?" said Cubey.

"Hewey?"

"Let's do it."

"Full thrusters are advised at this stage, heading two-oh-two by seventy-eight by twenty-two degrees z by x, burn thrust at fifty-seven percent for twenty-two minutes, ten-point-oh-six seconds for maximum efficiency," said Cubey.

"Got it," said Hewey. "Cubey, my friend, welcome to our little ship."

"I am quite glad to be here," said Cubey, "and glad to be of service to you, friend Captain."

"Going automatic," said Random. "Hewey, set the ignition to Cubey's analysis and fire 'em. Let's go."

out of here."

"Got it," answered Hewey.

The ship's engines roared to life. Random could feel himself settle in his seat for a split second before internal gravity compensated.

The Pompatus of Love rocketed away from Phobos.

"Mag beams will come online in fourteen point six seconds. That is too much time for prison officials to recapture you. I have introduced a harmless virus into the orbiting guards' ships. They will not be able to pursue or overtake you. I have also completed a rudimentary upload into *The Pompatus of Love's* core. Random Chance, I have never been anywhere. Is Vesta nice?"

Hewey laughed.

"Is it 'bullshit'?" asked Cubey after a moment's hesitation, apparently puzzled by Hewey's reaction.

While Random nodded knowingly, Hewey laughed again.

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