

— A FISTFUL OF —

*Short
Stories*

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CN-22



You know what they say about vendors with four hands? It's the same thing they say about customers with none, but beggars can't be choosers. If I didn't come back with something from the trip, I'd look even poorer than the Johns that couldn't afford to go off-world, and as anyone from the third ring knows, that's not an option.

He swaggered up to the cabin as the porter lights cycled down. Big, mean-looking Vendo with his head stoved in. Thought it best not to ask what got to him first – boredom, or dissatisfied customers. He told me to call him Skuhz, which didn't surprise me in the least. No idea what his real name was, but that day, it was Skuhz. 'Pleasure to make your mild and well-mannered acquaintanceship, Mr...?'

'Just buying,' I replied.

'Funny name. Last guy that touched down here said the exact same thing. Must be popular where you're from...'

His dominant arms were flexed, the fingers loosely pretzelled behind his dented head, but it was all just for show. At that size, they should have been stripping treads from sandwalkers, and yet judging from the

rust stains around the pits, they hadn't been moving much of anything for decades. The subordinate pair, which had been groping for a handshake, likely saw more action in a typical afternoon. After spotting my repeater, they swiftly detached themselves and got busy sweeping. No point being in the line of fire if things got heated. If only more Vendors were as intelligent as their lower limbs.



The stranger's emporium was a blight on the horizon, a twisted orbital dome of cracked freightglass and reclaimed steel. In other words, it was perfect. There's an honesty to poverty that wealth can only covet. One could scarcely imagine the generations of Vhenal slogworkers buried within the obsidian foundations of the towers behind us. Money only gleams that way because blood is very, very difficult to polish out. If anybody died under a Vendo roof, not only would you know about it, but given half the chance, they'd have their polished chromes on full display, complete with a price tag between the teeth. The repeater was my insurance against joining them.

The Vendo waited until we were a comfortable mile away from the nearest transport station before asking about it. Nothing but sand and tungsten drains as far as the eye could see, while his subordinate arms scouted dunes in the distance. 'That's a nice boomer you've got there,' he said, picking at his dent with a wire toothpick. *Clink, clink, clink.* 'Enforcement grade?'

'Are you asking me if I've got a badge under my coat?'

'Would you tell me if you did?'

Enforcers, even retired ones, are more trouble than they're worth. If he suspected my visit of ulterior motives, he might have considered a ditch in the desert a more suitable destination for me than his garrison of ill-gotten goods. Already, I could see his dominant arms twitching. Either a servo had broken loose, or he was calculating how fast he'd

need to throw three metric tons of fist to beat a bolt blast between the eyes. In truth, I'd be paste before I could take the safety off, but he didn't need to know that.

'Relax,' I said. 'Would a bluetop do this?' And I tossed him my repeater, holster, spare batteries and all. The Vendo was dumbfounded. He stopped, stared at the tiny, pinky-sized shooter dangling from his tramcrusher hands, and then, slowly but surely, he started to laugh. The slap on the back that followed almost certainly broke a rib or two, but it was a small price to pay for being alive.

Better to be hard of breath than bereft of it entirely. I wouldn't be coming back to this moon again.



'Carnage! Terror! Destruction! Wild howling wastelands watered with the still-warm tears of wailing widows! If you're in a mood for war, and I've never met an upstanding member of the male persuasion that isn't, then I've got just the scratch for your itchy trigger finger, my munitionally challenged friend. Behold! Before you ask, yes, it's an original, and no, I won't be accepting anything other than cash up front. Touching, holding and stroking are all strictly prohibited, but you can fawn over it behind the freightglass as much as you want.'

'An AF-90 Starduster. That's an outer ring weapon...'

'Beauty, isn't she? Septuple action style, with a thorite finish and a reach that puts even my Ranger cousins to shame. Of course, you didn't hear that from me...'

'Where's the side launcher? I thought they were standard issue.'

'Ha! If you ask me, half the issue was making it standard in the first place. That's what you get when you hand out explosives to a bunch of drafted flesh mooks whose biggest qualification, at least at the time, was owning a single pair of arms. How do you think I ended up with it?'

'What about the trigger?'

‘What trigger?’

‘Exactly. There isn’t one.’

‘Look, we’re talking about a legacy piece here. If you want to quibble over minor details like side launchers and missing trigger mechanisms, then maybe warfare just isn’t for you. Don’t worry, it’s nothing to be ashamed of. I’m sure we can find something less deleterious to your discerning sensibilities. How about a Tetric terraformer, first generation? What could be more satisfying than destroying life? How about creating it, and possibly destroying it later on down the line? Virtually unused and virally negligible, or your money back!’

‘That wouldn’t happen to be a Tetric N-1 now, would it?’

‘The very same! What a pleasure it is to conversate with a fellow purveyor of horticultural finery. Finally, someone who knows his Tetrics from his Nomads.’

‘They went into recall shortly after deployment, didn’t they?’

‘Wouldn’t be much of a collector’s item if they didn’t. The wet dreams of connoisseurs are often watered on the nightmares of manufacturers. If a battalion of suits haven’t lost sleep over it, I’m not interested.’

‘Even if it doesn’t work?’

‘Begging your pardon, stranger? I think one of my receivers must be acting up.’

‘The N-1’s biodamp burns through iron too quickly. Only way to do a planetwide pre-wet is to find an extant planet and liquidise whoever’s living there, and even then, all you’ll get is creeproot.’

‘Creeproot? I love creeproot! Who wouldn’t want to live on a planet teeming with creeproot?’

‘Anybody with a nervous system?’

‘Wouldn’t know about that, my fleshy friend. Not exactly my area of expertise.’

This was the final straw for the Vendo’s subordinate arms. Up until that point, they’d been doing a spirited job modelling the merchandise, but either patience, the power bar, or both, had run too low. Skittering

along the freightglass counter, they snapped back onto his torso and lit themselves a cigarette, slapping the dominant arms aside every time they tried reaching for it. The Vendo could only watch as it slowly burned to a nub before his eyes.

It was time to change tactic. 'How about you tell me exactly what you want, so I can get back to my busy schedule of doing sweet N/A?' he said, waving shafts of smoke away from his visor. 'I know you're not local. Must have a mighty fine need if you're hopping this far out of the Ned. You're not from the colonies, are you?'

I shook my head.

'Damn. The colonies of the colonies then. My condolences.'

'I didn't ask for your condolences.'

'Didn't need to. It's the only thing in this place you're going to get for free. But enough about that. What are you in the market for?'

'Oh, this and that.'

'No worries, got plenty of those in stock. But what do you need?'

'I don't need anything.'

'Ha! Now I know you're lying. Everybody needs something, especially the folks that think they've got everything. If you're in need of something to need, I'm sure we can rustle up something for that too.'

'Don't mind me. I'm just passing through. Not sure what I'm looking for, but I'll know it when I see it. Relics, fragments, bones from the distant past. Remnants of a time when things really mattered.'

'Really? Well, uh... good luck with that one, buddy!' Leaning back, the Vendo extinguished the cigarette on his forehead plate. He propped his leg pods up over the counter, one hefty thunk at a time. 'Wish I could do more to help, I really do, but you know how it is. The arms have spoken.'

A crack of the knuckles from the dominant hands told me everything. They sorely regretted not pummeling me into putty when they had the chance. If I didn't buy something before I left, maybe they'd still get the order of outsider mincemeat soup they were hankering for.

Provided they didn't fall off their hinges first.



I found myself in a smuggler's paradise. From porter engine fluid to pickled kernod tails in jars, if you could imagine somebody wanting it, you'd be hard-pressed not to find it sooner or later, be it sitting under freightglass, lining a twisted kaleidoscope of shelves, or even dripping from the ceiling. Something told me to keep away from the live hucknet's nest, though I wouldn't have been surprised to learn that the Vendo kept ampoules of antiserum under the counter. Available for the right price, of course.

No, the biggest surprise was that the majority of items on display actually appeared to be what they claimed to be. The null helmet was a dud, obviously. At that size, a fully operational zero-point device would have knocked the entire shop off its orbit, instead of merely levitating a boot's worth of dust and debris into a semi-elliptical ring around the visor, and the grypnel skull fared little better. One didn't need to be a paleontologist to spot the missing eye holes, not to mention the extra jaw, but as prices plummeted, standards rose. There were enough platinum hubnuts and diamond ballcaps to construct your own dirtdrifter from scratch, and the Vendo's excellent de-euclidifier collection was difficult to walk away from.

Buried deep within this Skuhz bucket of an emporium was a humble, if unassuming, trove of treasures, if only you knew where to look. Bathed in cross hatches of coral light from the moon's twin suns, it was easy to look past the dust screens and scavenged rebar walls to see the truth. People had died here. Ships had crashed, armies had clashed, and entire civilisations had sunk beneath the sands, so there was bound to be some smattering of gold amid the gristle.

How else does a merchant survive on a moon with no tourism?

The only downside is that you don't get to pick whose civilisation

it is that gets scavenged by the vultures. Bargains don't taste nearly as sweet when it's your history they're hawking.

'Hang on a minute. I'd know that coffin anywhere...'



'So let me get this straight. You're absolutely sure you want this one?'

'Absolutely.'

'Model CN-22, origins unknown? Rust up the chassis, with a back panel that even my coin-counting fingers could poke a hole in?'

'The very same.'

The Vendo scratched his forehead dent. For quite possibly the first time since his construction, the pre-programmed prerogative to make money was being overridden by something even stronger. 'Look, I know I like to say I couldn't put a price on most of my wares, but in this case, I mean it. I don't think there's a denomination low enough.'

'Is that a problem?'

The Vendo chuckled. 'Only for those of us trying to make a living,' he said. His subordinate arms treated me to a playful obscenity of gestures, several of which I had the pleasure of learning on the spot, before they detached themselves to take a closer look at the article in question. 'Why don't you tell me why you're so interested in it, so I can tell you just how much it'll set you back?'

'When you put it that way, I suppose I could take it or leave it.'

'Very funny. Now if you'll humour me...'

I looked up at the old, battered pod and sighed. It was showing its age, the same way I was showing mine after nearly thirty years of freelancing, but it was undoubtedly the same. A closed, cylindrical chamber wide enough for one person, provided they kept their elbows pinned at their sides. The roof, upon which the Vendo's subordinate arms were busy scanning shipping codes, was home to a most unusual nest of wires and tubes, which protruded not unlike fat maggots up and

round the back, disappearing into a dribblesome hump of an exhaust port that leached raw copper like pus.

‘My uncle owned one,’ I told the Vendo, hoping that would suffice for explanation. ‘It’s a novelty.’

‘Ha! You can say that again, my sentimental friend. I can’t believe you bleeders used to use these things. There’s primitive, and then there’s knuckle-dragging, dirt-gargling lunacy. Why else, in a world where black holes exist, would anybody think this was a good idea?’

Seemingly satisfied, the Vendo clasped the pod with his dominant arms and hauled it up to the magnetised guidance rail over our heads. The subordinate pair jumped off just in time to avoid being crushed by the magnet lock. After taking a moment to brush themselves down, they flipped the Vendo off, picked his pockets for cigarettes and stormed off to take their smoke break. If they couldn’t enjoy themselves, they were going to make damn well sure that the Vendo couldn’t either. He chuckled, but I knew exactly what was going through his head. If he wasn’t more careful, his coin-counting hands were going to find a more intimate place to stub his smokes out when he went to bed that night.

In the meantime, the Vendo escorted me back to the counter. With a click of his tombstone fingers, the pod followed close behind, leaving a smouldering, gangrenous trail in its wake.

‘How much do I owe you?’

‘For the merchandise, or for my trouble?’

‘The merchandise. I wasn’t aware that I was being charged for your trouble.’

‘Me neither, but if this is all you want, I might have to charge you for the door on the way out. Twenty-six marks is as good as you’re gonna get, thirty if you want it delivered to your cabin.’

‘Twenty-six marks sounds reasonable, but I don’t like the look of that leak. Nor the smell. How amenable are you to negotiation?’

‘Depends. How amenable are you to an eighty-mark haggling surcharge?’

My billfold never snapped open so quickly. ‘Let’s get you your thirty marks.’



‘Pleasure doing business with you!’

‘I’m sure you say that to all the off-worlders.’

‘Only the ones that get to leave. You enjoy your death box now! Don’t hurry back...’

I was all but ready to go. The pod was wrapped up neatly by the door, with a thermal drain pan installed to stymy the leak, but something stopped me short of charting my course to the surface. ‘What do you mean death box?’

The Vendo shrugged. ‘You know, the idiot tube. The sucker slammer, coward’s coffin, huckster’s high roller. That’s what we used to call it all the time. Suicide for indecisive people.’

‘Suicide?’

His subordinate arms reached up to cover his mouth panel, but this time, he managed to hold them at bay with a finger. They crossed themselves haughtily, smouldering at his waist. ‘Relax, relax,’ he told them. ‘I’m not saying anything that isn’t in the instruction manual. Besides, it’s not like he’s looking for a refund. Right?’

Turning to me, he flexed with such uncoordinated enthusiasm that he knocked a hole in the back wall. I decided to agree, before he could think of a way to charge me for it. ‘Excellent!’ he said, rubbing his knuckles under the counter. ‘Now I assume, given your history in the colonies, that you have a rudimentary understanding of quantum mechanics.’

‘I might have taken a lesson or two between shifts on the heap.’ A little white lie never hurt anyone.

‘Then you know how white point generators work. Before black hole compression, the only way to shorten the travel time between two distant points was to get there faster. That’s where the CN-22 comes in.

Course, if the only way for me to see the stars was to dice my delicate self up into petapoints, shoot the digital slurry across space like greasy offal spores and reassemble on the other side, I'd say I was better off sticking to the underside of my proverbial rock, but that's just me. Maybe I lack the imagination of the species that names every natural satellite after the first one they saw.'

'It's still more imagination than we used to name you.'

'Touché, stranger. Touché.'

'Just tell me what any of this has to do with dying. It's a teleport, not a damn mincer. You get put back together at the end, don't you?'

'Ha! You wish. The reality is, nobody knows, and if you think you do, I've got a six-syllable antidote to your antediluvian absolutism. "Un-fal-si-fi-a-ble." Sure, someone stumbles out of the pod, but if the continuity of consciousness is broken, who's to say whether it's the same bleeder that went in, or just another bleeder lugging around the same memories, genes and male-pattern baldness? The only bleeder that knows for sure is the bleeder slamming the lever. Either they disappear in an instant, shortening the revelatory window considerably, or they wake up bright and breezy on the other side, at which point you couldn't trust their opinion even if they gave it to you. It's a matter transporter. No reason to suggest that it does souls too. If you've got more than guts living in your guts, that's gone the moment you get spat out into the cloud.'

My uncle used to call it commuting by coffin. I was starting to see why. 'If that's the case,' I said, 'then why would anybody use them? Why take the risk?'

'Because they don't know? Because they don't care? Because in the colonies of the colonies, it's still cheaper than fuel? Take your pick, buddy. Fact of the matter is, they were never much used for transportation outside the colonies anyway.'

'Why not?'

'Wasn't profitable. Too many people were using them with ulterior motives. Bleeders bored with life going on round trips to nowhere.'

Moribund woebegottens waiting their whole lives to flip a coin. Do you see what I'm getting at here? It's just like I said. Suicide for indecisive people. Say,' the Vendo added, this time with a peculiar tone. 'You never stepped in one yourself, did you?'

I shook my head. 'Not me. Never. At least, I don't think so. But my uncle did. He helped out around the heap. Never asked for anything in return.'

'He travel a lot, your uncle?'

'Yeah.'

'Let me guess. He used them at least once a week, as often as his handlers would allow, even though other methods of transportation were available. Never mentioned where he was going, almost like the destination didn't matter, but it was never long distance. Nothing expensive like that. Wherever he went, he was happier coming back than he was going out. You knew it wasn't a vice from the money he left you after he died.'

'How could you possibly know that?'

'Because he wasn't alone. Like I said, it's a well-documented pattern of behaviour, especially among bleeders living under jackboots. Probably thought he was doing the right thing. Think about it. A lifetime in chains can drive men mad. If he thought it only lasted a week, maybe it wouldn't be so bad. At least this way, he got to leave a version of himself behind to take care of you. How many of us without a dedicated cloning bed can say that?'

'Why are you telling me this?'

'Do I look like I need a reason?'

'You do if you want to keep my thirty marks.'

'Let's call it curiosity then. Failing that, boredom, and failing that, the Category C sandstorm currently raging on outside. Every second we spend in here is a second I'm not lugging that confounded hunk of junk across the desert in low visibility. Say, you're looking a little green around the gills. Maybe I broke more ribs than I thought.'

‘I’m fine.’

‘Your breathing says otherwise. There’s a soft tissue splint in the back. Basalt gel solution. Six marks, and it’s yours.’

‘I told you, I’m fine.’

‘Suit yourself. Course, if you gave the old CN-22 a spin, I’d probably let you have it for free.’

‘For free, huh?’



To this day, I couldn’t tell you why I did it. It’s not like I needed the money.

We unwrapped the pod, changed the filter, checked the waste, and tested it twice using a jar of hucknets. Both trips passed with flying colours. Since the pod wasn’t hooked up to a network, the jar returned to its point of origin an attosecond after it left. Pressure was stable throughout, and the inert matter printed just as well as the organic. It was impeccable. The hucknets didn’t know what hit them.

When it came time to climb into the machine, I locked my holster to the counter. You probably think I’m insane, trusting the machine with my life when I didn’t even trust it with my repeater, but something told me to leave it behind. Even if the pod claimed to put every single atom back into place, I knew I’d be able to tell the difference. It may have been identical, but it wouldn’t be the same.

When the Vendo asked if I was ready, I lied. I doubt he was convinced, but he believed me enough to close the door behind me. I wasn’t sure what he got out of the whole arrangement, though I had my suspicions. Vendors can’t die. Their internal tape decks, resistant to abrasion, wear and oxidation, will keep rolling and rolling until the feed mechanism slows down, but even then, as long as they have access to light, they’ll never stop. In emergencies, they can re-roll their final seconds on permanent loop until the necessary repairs are made, which is exactly as nightmarish

as it sounds. You never forget your first trip through a Vendo scrapyard.

It makes you wonder what they think of their creators. If a Vendo were to step into the pod, it would reconstruct them perfectly, pip by pip. After all, for all the talk of technological advancements, they were, as far as the CN-22 was concerned, luggage. No more complicated to reproduce than a suitcase. I was the only one within a hundred square miles who stood to lose anything, and we both knew it.

On the count of three, the Vendo depressed the lever. There was a brief flash of light...



And then the door swung open, and I stepped out again.

‘How do you feel?’ the Vendo asked.

‘Like I could really use that splint.’

The Vendo grinned. ‘Let’s get you on your way.’

Once the splint had been applied, I thanked the Vendo for his services, and then it was time to head back to the porter. It was going to be a long journey home.



I looked the same. I know that wasn’t in dispute, but I wasn’t taking any chances now that I had access to a wall-length mirror. Closer inspection revealed that every freckle, mole and callus was exactly where it should have been. My only regret was not memorising a more comprehensive map of my body before I left. Eye colour was the same. Hair colour was the same. There was no suggestion that some of my base salts had been replaced with osmium, which was nice.

I also felt the same, in so much as I hadn’t felt this lousy in months. The basalt gel could only do so much to numb the pain. The next time the porter touched down, I was going to have to find a body shop before

my broken ribs punctured a lung.

My cabin smelled just the way I remembered it. Water tasted as bland as ever. My fingertips still stung when I pricked them with a spent repeater shell. There was nothing about my sense of temperature, balance or orientation to suggest that anything had changed, and yet I would have been a fool to believe it. One doesn't have to understand a change to recognise when it takes place, like the first time you see your home planet from the outside. For better or worse, something was different now that could never be made undifferent. I wasn't the same person I was before.

Even if I was.



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Until next time, stay safe, stay kind, and as always, especially during these difficult times, remember to stay hydrated!