

Justified Thrift

Chapter One

Why was it the singing which always came to mind first? That beautiful melody which appeared to reverberate around the ship night and day which led him into the nightmare he was now experiencing. He knew that it was no longer real but the sweat and other fluids still flowed from his body as he stood and watched the dreams of billions crumple to space debris. What had they done that was so wrong that the slaughter of thousands was justified?

“For Christ’s sake Calum pull it together, you’ve got the place sticking again. Get it cleaned up.” The Orderly had been nastier about it, but it appeared his hands were full with other patients demanding more of his time.

“Yes Sir.” Calum stripped the bunk and then himself then took himself for a shower with the other patients who were trusted enough to walk down to the shower block. They’d told him this was Earth, but he hadn’t recognised anything when his shuttle had landed. The gravity felt wrong, everything felt wrong. He hadn’t been looking for a hero’s welcome as their project had failed badly and he knew why. And it was this which kept him where he was, yes the nightmares made him piss the bed but that wasn’t reason enough to keep him locked away.

“Step out Patient Donaldson. On the double.” Ordered a security guard standing in the shower area. There was no privacy here, but it was no different to his time on the ship or the training before it. They were going to be living and working together for years, so modesty was the first thing to go along with privacy. The security service had seen to that, there hadn’t been a part of his past or medical history which hadn’t been examined in detail. That had been justified but this, what was it they wanted? “Get

dried and dressed the warder wants to see you before you go therapy.”

“Yes Sir.” Calum didn’t make eye contact with the guard and quickly did as he was told.

“Move out. Cabbage cases should be put down. You’re an unnecessary drain on resources.” Growled The Guard prodding the sleepwalking Calum away from the ward and up the stairs to the admin and therapy floors. “You know what he’s going to tell you today basket case? Course you don’t, well he’s going to tell you that it’s cheaper to space you and do the paperwork than keep you.” Calum didn’t look back and kept his ridiculous trot up until he came to a stop outside the Warder’s office door. “Now remember cabbage you keep your mouth shut until she speaks to you. Move out.”

The Warder’s office was no bigger than the cell which Calum was kept in with five other inmates. Only in this instance The Warder only had to contend with a small desk and a couple of hard plastic chairs. “You can wait outside, Calum has never shown any signs of violence. Have a seat Calum.” The Warder watched Calum warily sit on the edge of the seat and for the guard to step out before remotely closing the door. “That’s better, just us.” Smiled the warder warmly, but Calum knew better than respond to a direct statement. “I do not like the way these people treat some of you. However I have some good news for you. As of eight thirty Earth Standard time, you have been issued with a work permit. The entire wing is to be moved to Earth reclamation Centre Seventy. Scotland Calum. You’ll be sedated for the trip, but when you wake up you’ll be back in Scotland working for the common good. What do you think of that?”

“Good. It is very good Warder.”

“Yes, and maybe in time they’ll reduce you meds so you act like a human being.” The Warder summoned the guard and warned him again that he had to treat the inmates with more care. “Should you think you need retraining then we’ll arrange it on lo.”

“Yes Mam.” The Guard was going to make sure that Calum would fall down the stairs a couple of times before he got back to the medical block. “Better make sure they don’t put too much in the needle Calum. You’re going to love your new job, shit shovelling.”

The medical Officer read the riot act at the guard culminating in a massive row about the shutdown of the whole facility. The truth behind the relocation of the patients who had been hidden from the public for over a decade was resources. The Station which had held them was to be disassembled and dragged to another location where it would be rebuilt as a maximum security facility. The actual where and why wasn’t on any records accessible by any of the pay levels on the station in its current guise.

An ancient ship drew alongside the station and the two hundred and seventeen survivors from the Justified Project were carted on board. Of course losses which had once been acceptable were no longer the case. The Captain of the vessel had simply been told where to show up and where to drop them off. It was a Government job so he didn’t turn it down which all counted towards keeping his ship in the sky. Compulsory orders had been used in the past to take ships and turn them into other things. No one ever knew what and everyone knew better than ask.

“Poor sods.” Commented Co Pilot Alfie Watts standing out of the way as several gurneys were pushed him.

“We take the money and run, we weren’t here, they made that much clear.” Pointed out Captain Barley trying not to notice anything about his passengers; things like all the scars on their hands and feet.

“Ten golden points and cash. This has to be the best job we’ve had since we teamed up. Ten golden points for ferrying passengers who are out cold. Money for nothing.”

Chapter Two

The Columbine slipped away from the station at the regulated speed passing another ship which was waiting for the only working dock. It was a wrecking crew who would live and work on the station until it was fit to be dragged off and upgraded. The original crew who would be removed in the wrecking ship, only three hospital staff travelled with the patients and kept their distance from the crew which gave the journey an added edge. The only thing that was missing was a loyalty inspector. The latter was a myth which was used to encourage loyalty from those officially living and working off world.

“We’ll be entering Earth Orbit in about an hour you might want to get ready for shuttling down. Have you been away for long?” Asked Alfie with an air friendly interest.

“I expect we’ll be ready to disembark when it’s required thank you.”

“No problem. I’ll be at helm if you need anything.”

“We haven’t for the last three weeks, but again thank you.” The member of the medical team smiled weakly then went back to checking her charges.

“I’m starting to think this was a mistake.” Uttered Alfie as he joined the captain in the command pod. “Those medics are just creepy.”

“You’ve said it everyday since we left the station so what’s the harm in saying it now. Twenty minutes until we decompress the pods. Keep an eye out for leakage.”

“Aye Captain.” Alfie collected his charts and started the checks.

“Earth central to Columbine. Make preparation to land at the following location.” Barked an almost automated voice over the intercom.

“My ear, this ship doesn’t touch down anywhere. Columbine to Earth Central that’s a negative. Our orders to despatch pods, not to land.” Growled The Captain just as three fighters drew along side.

“You’ll be escorted in, up loading the landing coordinates, do not deviate. End Trans.”

“I’ll end trans them. I have no choice so don’t look at me like that.”

“They’re obvious worried about lost luggage.”

“Cut the cackle and let’s see if this thing still remembers how to land.”

The lead fighter headed in first then the freighter and the escorting fighters. Orders were barked between the two man crew as they fought control the ship which bucked and buckled under the enormous stresses and pressures put on it as it fell rather than flew through the atmosphere. “They’d better get us down fast or we’ll arrive in bits.”

“I think that was the plan and we’ve just disappointed them.”

“Follow the beacon.” Barked one of the fighter pilots furiously.

“What do you think we’re trying to do?” Demanded The Captain choosing that moment to kick their control panel.

“It might work in vids, but it just makes more work for me when we get land side.” Protested Alfie as they approached the vast site where they had to land. “God it’s worse than they said.”

“Keep those thoughts to yourself. We land and dust off in one.”

“Now who’s dreaming?”

The mighty crunch announced that they had landed in the corner of a huge salvage yard. “We’re not getting out of here. Where’s the charge point, holster up. Don’t look at me like that, you knew it was only a matter of time before they came for Columbine, she’s old and we’ve been working on the fringes for years.”

“But legally or I wouldn’t be on board.”

“Come on we’ll see what they have to say, we’ve kicked up enough dust to be seen for miles, we might be able to slip away.”

“I’ll be the one with his head shot off.”

The ship was boarded by storm troopers, and the two man crew were arrested on the spot. In cuffs and threatened with control bands, they were marched off of the ship and into the dust and debris which has been kicked up by the ship’s arrival. An officer looked them over and took their papers making their escape pointless, as there was bound be a price on their heads and in these times that sort of money was that was all that counted. “Your vessel has been compulsorily purchased. The price is your freedom. This is not up for negotiation. What is your response?” Asked the officer.

“Fine, how do we get out of here?” Asked Captain Barley firmly.

“I didn’t go into detail about the other terms and conditions. If you’ll come with us Warder Schwartz will explain everything in

detail whilst your cargo is unloaded. At least you'll be out of this muck. We have masks so it's all one to us if you want to oversee the unloading in person?"

"God knows what is in this stuff, maybe we should see the warder." Suggested Alfie gesturing as best he could with his hands in cuffs. "Nice place you have here."

"I'm glad you like it, you might be here for a while."

"Call me telepathic, but I thought that might be the case."

"If you were telepathic you'd be in a better ship than that." The officer laughed and marched on leading them a good mile long hike on foot to a large building. The latter looked like it was nothing more than a couple of old hulls pinned together. "It was no palace but you'll be calling it home for a while." Inside there was a couple desks a singular office and row upon row of three high bunks behind thick razor sharp bars. "As you can there's a couple spare bunks."

"Is this the crew?" Asked a guard barely looking up from his vid news which was leading with the prices of recycled metals and plastics. "The Warder says they've both to have control bands on if they're staying. Right you'd better go in."

"Captain and First Officer. From now on you will just be prisoner numbers. It doesn't take a genius to work out why you are here and why you can never leave or until they do."

Chapter Three

The medics were told they might have to remain for an additional few weeks until the patients understood what was to happen to them. "You will not be given any more medication, so your minds will slowly clear, but this is still a secure facility and you will never leave unless you can prove your worth to us your friends and carers, but more importantly to The Warder and The

Government. To be allowed to be reintegrated back into the society you so badly let down, you must work hard, follow every order and pray for forgiveness. A shrine will be made available to you every morning and evening. And one final point which you should all understand. Life is cheap and theft comes at the ultimate price of death. Follow your gangers and they will set you to work." The Ward looked on as the prisoners had to be shepherded into their appropriate groups.

"The gangers were former military people pensioned out and sent here by the employment ministry. I think they'll do an excellent job here. These people will need a firm hand now that their medication and cushioned life is over." The visiting dignitary was a minor secretary from the ministry of reclamation Services. "Never thought they'd be allowed back, but what with unions and rebels this society is crashing behind closed doors."

"As you say minister, we can only contain them. I've heard so many stories especially why they might be better in one of those crushers rather than operating it." The warder led the back to his office as the prisoners continued to shuffle off.

"You and I know that there is no such thing as a free lunch anymore. People like them might have been better left floating in their lifeboats, but the Premier of the time said we needed the truth. Of course they were completely incoherent when they arrived and haven't got any better since. The station they were on is being moved and as they still have Premier protection, they have to live for now. As it was explained to me, there would have to be a parliamentary vote to overrule such protection and that would mean the public would get to know of the problems we're encountering."

"If we know the truth then surely..."

"I have no interest in ifs, just facts and the facts are clear they work for their supper with everyone else."

“I understand and talking of which I had better make my morning report and then take a look at how they’re doing.” The Warder escorted the minor dignitary to the huge security entrance and waved him off. “I want to visit each of the teams.”

“Yes Sir.” In the self styled vehicle, it hummed and whined its way round to where one of the former military men was ripping into a couple of the prisoners. One stood and wept whilst the other was getting a taste of the control collar. Not without cause the Warder ordered an immediate halt to the proceedings and that the two men be sent back to work.

“What caused you to use the collar ganger Two?” Asked The Warder examining the control. “Unless you want to taste a similar fate. You’ll restrain yourself or I’ll see to it that you are wearing one and working alongside them.” The Warder edged to where Calum was sorting through various small pieces of electronics. “How are you finding the work two one two? No need to be shy Prisoner you can stop for a moment.” The Warder reached out for Calum’s hand but he pulled it away. “Well probably for the best. No point in getting to know you if you don’t exist beyond these boundaries. Carry on.”

“Thank you Sir.” Uttered Calum looking up from his task only momentarily.

“Excellent. You Ganger Two remember my words.” The Warder returned to his vehicle and was driven to where the ship’s crew were working and sizing up the opportunities to escape. “You’re welcome to explore the limits of your collars, or perhaps your ship will offer you some form of protection. Sorry, but I believe Ganger Six and his team are preparing its deconstruction.”

“Thank you Warder.” Uttered Alfie like Calum only glancing up from his heavy labour.

“Twenty Three, I will remember that number. And yes there you are twenty one, yes two numbers I’ll be sure to remember. Ganger, make sure these men are worked for their supper. I don’t want them having the energy to be thinking about anything other than sleeping and eating.”

“Understood Sir. You heard The Warder, harder and faster.”

“Let them taste the collars if they need it. How are the others doing?”

“Slowly Sir, need a great deal of showing and the like, but they’ll get it eventually.”

“Be kind with them, they are the lost. No signs of rebellion, or misdeeds? Are you aware of who they are? Are you sure? Not a guess or glimmer in that veteran mind of yours?”

“Not my business Sir, they don’t know they’re ear from their elbows. Might change when the medication wears off. But I know what to look for, I was tasked with guarding the stockade and there’s not a trick which that lot came up with that I didn’t come up with first.” The Ganger puffed out his chest with pride to which the warder nodded with acknowledgement, but little more. “Back to the office and to think I have to do this four times a day whilst preaching from the approved religious readings. I’m thinking something brief at lunchtime. It might even be a task I learn to delegate.”

“You appear to have got off to a good start four hours without a hitch. It certainly means that I am down five hundred credits. I expected the riot team to be called in before the quarter day mark. You were indeed the right man. I’ll be delighted to pass your report up the line.”