



Replay

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A short story based on the space trading game Oolite.

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Author's Note

Another four hour story. I was re-reading a piece of rejected material from 'Mutabilis' and just had to explore it, you know how it is! :)

Three and a half sides of A4 probably counts as 'short' I would say, and it is fun having a 'ready built' sci-fi universe as provided by Oolite.

Replay

The world around him appeared through a flash of chromatic light. Consciousness returned. He panicked, trying to remember where he was and what he'd been doing.

Laser fire flashed around him; collimated energy striking dangerously close by.

Where am I?

Knowledge seemed to flood back into his brain, as if being downloaded from somewhere: memories, impressions, skills. It was accompanied by a vague sense of familiarity.

This has happened before...

There was no time to think. He was strapped into a flight chair, a dizzying array of instruments and controls before and around him. Instinctively he knew what to do, he was an Elite Combateer after all.

How did I know that? I can't even remember my name...

He spun his ship around. A length of dark hull panel flashed past the viewer, followed by a cyan exhaust plume.

'Jax! What are you doing? Are you hurt?' a voice demanded from the narrow-band comms, 'Jax!'

That's me, I'm Jax. Yet...

A pirate attack! He must have been knocked unconscious for a moment, perhaps a missile impact or a collision with another ship. More memories returned as they were required - yes a missile. They had been attempting a trade run through a feudal system. Three pirate vessels had intercepted them. A desperate fight.

He triggered the laser. The ship before him spun, losing control and abruptly disintegrating.

One hit? Was that all?

‘Nice shot! Thought you’d bought it there for a moment!’

The voice belonged to his partner in crime. Both tagged as ‘offenders’ for some minor smuggling offences. It had been a mistake. Anyone could shoot down an offender without fear of retribution, honest traders, pirates, police, anyone. It sure made life interesting.

We were travelling from... (a pause) ... from Rexebe. Carrying a cargo of ... (a pause again) narcotics... what? No, can't be - we wouldn't! (pause) Textiles. That was it.

The scanner showed only two ships. One belonged to his compatriot, the other was the single remaining pirate. Those cowards had bitten off more than they could chew! The pirate vessel was attempting to flee.

Jax opened the narrow-band and hesitated.

I must have been hit harder than I thought! I can't even remember her name! Funny how my head doesn't hurt or anything, I better get myself checked out station-side. I can't afford to black out in the midst of a fight!

The name came to him moments after he thought about it.

‘Fion! Let them go. They’ve learnt their lesson.’

‘No way, they cost us three missiles and a ton of cargo. That’s coming out of their hides!’ was the immediate response.

He saw Fion’s ship fire its injectors, thrusting forward in pursuit of the fleeing pirate.

‘Wait!’

The pirate vessel turned, attempting to escape, veering onto a different trajectory. Laser fire flashed in the depths of space.

A plaintive cry echoed across the wide-band.

‘Please, we’re sorry! We surrender! Don’t kill us! We’re desperate, we didn’t mean any harm, you don’t know how it is, we’re broke, we needed the

money....!’

‘Fion! Don’t, it’s not worth it!’

There was a distant flash of light, the signature of a dying ship. One of the indicators on the scanner flickered and disappeared.

‘Got the ‘stards!’ came the cry of triumph, ‘Twenty credits! Yay!’

Fion’s ship came blazing back towards him, neatly sliding into formation alongside his own vessel.

‘Hey, where’s the ‘right on, commander?’ Fion’s voice demanded across the narrow-band, ‘Are you sure you’re ok?’

‘I’m fine.’ he replied, ‘You didn’t need to kill them.’

‘They had it coming.’

‘So do we. A bit of mercy today might payback in our favour.’

‘Fluxwash!’ came the rejoinder. He could see her in his mind’s eye, a pouting face, framed by flaming red hair, ‘Kill or be killed. They attacked us, remember?’

‘Sync your...’ he paused again, the familiar word not immediately being recalled, ‘Torus drive with me. Let’s get station-side.’

The cargo was sold, fees and transfers paid, permits checked, licenses renewed. The business was complete. Fion and Jax sat sipping an Anlian gin in the station bar.

‘What is the matter?’ Fion asked, looking at him, trying to hide some concern.

‘No.’ Jax replied, ‘I don’t feel right at all. What happened in that fight? Did I take a hit? There’s no damage to the ship. I can’t remember things properly.’

‘The fight?’ Fion paused, as if trying to recall herself, ‘They attacked us, two Sidewinders and a Python. We took a Sidewinder apiece. I didn’t see a missile hit you.’

‘Must have been something. My mind feels like mush.’

‘You’ve been working too hard.’ She leant forward and gave him a suggestive kiss, ‘You need to relax.’

‘I think I should see a medic.’ he said seriously, ‘I passed out in that fight!’

She pouted, ‘Do the drugs if you need to, I’ll be waiting!’

He grinned at her, and took a deep slug of the Anlian gin, ‘I’ll be there. Just you...’

The Gin must have been stronger than he thought. There was a flash of multicoloured light and he felt himself slipping away.

Not again!

‘He’s fine.’ the medic said, looking over the instrumentation one more time, ‘Overwork, stress. The usual combination. Lay over for a few days and recuperate.’

‘Are you sure?’ Jax replied, he felt uneasy, as if he was missing something.

‘You fly the ships buddy, leave the fleshware to me.’ the medic replied, ‘You flew a long stint, had a firefight, traded for hours non-stop and then consumed nothing but intoxicant and you wonder why you passed out. You’re exhausted.’

‘There’s nothing else wrong with me?’

The medic seemed very relaxed, ‘Nothing that some bed rest won’t cure.’

‘You’re coming to bed then.’ Fion scolded him, ‘Now!’

‘I said ‘rest’!’ the medic said with a grin, ‘Or at least, let her do all the work!’

‘Better now?’ Fion asked, smiling coyly from beside him. The warmth of her body was intoxicating, the heat of their lovemaking slowly fading. She was still draped across him, holding him closely.

He looked at her as if for the first time. Her bright red hair and cat-like eyes, the result of genetic experimentation from centuries ago; the curve of her neck, her

dusky complexion and the smooth skin he'd enjoyed. She was gorgeous, a talented lover, though she never said where she'd learnt some of her techniques. There were some aspects of her past she didn't wish to revisit.

They had been through a lot together, the memories were there with perfect clarity. He'd rescued her from a slaver's barge a decade before, freeing her from what would have been a brutal short existence. She had pledged to work for him in return, despite his protestations. Over the following months and years she'd become his loyal sidekick, partner in trade, and eventual lover. They had no other ties, no other family. It was the two of them against the universe. They needed nothing else.

He tried to smile reassuringly at her, but part of him was still turning over the last few days in his mind. Events seemed disjointed, as if he was remembering them out of sequence. It was disturbing, unsettling.

I have a wonderful girl, a life, enough credits to live on. Maybe I'm just worrying too much. Overstressed and overworked. The medic is probably right.

'How long have we known each other?' he asked.

She looked blankly at him for a moment and then paused, hesitating, as if trying to work it out.

Now she's doing it - what's happening?

'I don't know, ten years? Twelve? Why?'

There was a dull thump at the hotel room door. Both of them looked up. Fion rolled aside as the door suddenly snapped open. A youngster stood in the doorway, he couldn't have been more than fifteen years of age. Jax had a brief impression of a stocky build and short, closely cropped hair. But it was the blaster the boy was holding that really drew their attention.

The door was locked! How in...

'Frak!' Fion cried, lunging for her own weapon, oblivious to her nakedness. She had dropped it on the floor carelessly amidst a pile of scanty clothing. Jax rolled in the other direction, his own weapon hanging on a nearby cupboard.

Both heard the hum of a charger. The gun was ready to fire.

‘Fion Ridex?’

‘Who wants to know?’ she snapped back, stalling for time.

‘You killed my parents!’ the boy yelled. The gun was trained on Fion, ‘They’d surrendered!’

Jax and Fion both had their own guns poised ready. Jax could almost sense her thoughts buzzing.

Shoot first!

He’s just a boy! A kid!

Kill or be killed!

He’s got a gun!

Laser fire flickered across the room, blinding him. Jax lowered his weapon as the boy collapsed. Swiftly he moved to the fallen youth.

Stupid kid, trying to be brave...

‘See what happens when you pursue vendettas?’ he snapped at Fion, ‘You should have let that pirate go, who knows who else will be after us!’

Fion didn’t respond.

Jax turned abruptly. Fion lay crumpled on the floor, her own weapon dropped from her lifeless fingers.

No...

She was still, unmoving. Her eyes wide open with shock and astonishment. The boy’s laser had drilled a hole straight through her heart.

Grief, fury and anger enveloped him like a whirlwind. His fists clenched as he embraced her still warm but immobile body. Pulling her close to him as if in a desperate attempt to make contact with all that she had been just moments

before, his vibrant partner, friend and lover...

This can't be happening...

'No! Fion! No! He was just a kid! Fion, Oh God! Fion!...'

The terrifying loneliness of the universe began to overwhelm him. It was totally indifferent to his insignificant existence. He'd lost the only companion he'd ever had.

He felt suddenly dizzy. The world around him seemed to vanish, fading to grey through a series of chromatic phases. Consciousness drifted away, replaced by an absence of thought, presence and dreams, as if the universe itself had stopped existing...

No not again...!

The irregular guttural clicking sound of communication would have been incomprehensible to a human, and even closely related insectoid species would have struggled. As yet, there was no protocol established for direct communication with humankind, and political agendas had seen to it that such a breakthrough was unlikely to be opportune any time soon.

The Thargoid scientists were not inconvenienced at all. To them, their communication was straightforward and succinct. They were debating the results of their last experiment.

'Results of mating instinct defensive test?'

'Strong emotions are indicated!'

'Not sufficiently exploitable.'

'We had a number of continuity glitches, the simulation overloaded with procedural generation of background information at several intervals.'

'Ensure the simulation is programmed with a wider selection of possible scenarios in advance so as not to invalidate test conditions.'

'Agreed. File under phase 2, sub category B?'

‘Agreed. Baseline and proceed with next simulation.’

They both turned and regarded the subject of their tests. It was a small medical device, constructed of transparent materials for the most part. Complex tracteries, wires and connecting mechanisms filled the interior, which was awash with a slightly milky looking liquid. In the very centre was a lump of grey organic matter, composed of two matching halves, its surface a maze of twisting convoluted undulations. It was wired into the rest of the mechanism at multiple points. Tiny iridescent lights travelled up and down the wires and connectors, as if transferring information.

One Thargoid manipulated the controller interface with his mandibles,
‘Simulated extreme physical distress?’

‘Acceptable.’

‘Parameters to include heat tolerance, pressure, nerve interruption and peripheral organ failure?’

‘Confirmed. Reset memory engrams and commence with simulated heat tolerance sequence F.’

The Thargoid carrying out the instructions of his senior manipulated the controls once more.

‘Subject Human, test eighteen, extreme physical distress. Commencing.’