

Dual Universe Fanstories

*"Now that was
glorious!"*

Mister Flanders, ODY

THE SHELL GAME

KUROCK

Serious Spaceship Drama

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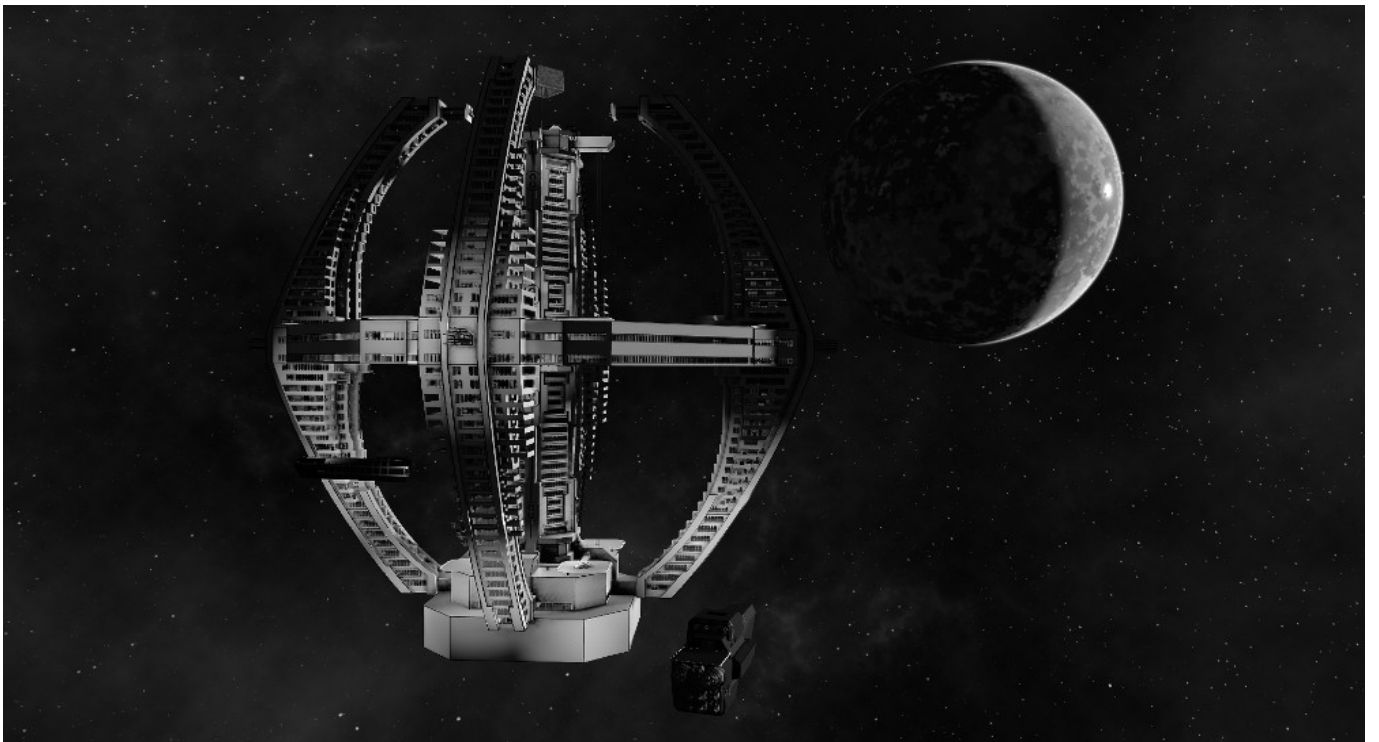
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THE SHELL GAME

by Kurock



“There is a man that doesn't exist. He's a myth. An urban legend. He breaks into your house while you are sleeping and drinks all your milk. He is me! Lupin, master thief! No? Ok, fine. I am actually talking about the Chameleon, a nobody, a ghost. I steal things. So does the Chameleon. But the Chameleon makes it look like an inside job. I do it right. Maybe that is all it is. He isn't an honest thief like me. This story? It's about a dishonest con-artist named Joe and how I, the Great Lupin, was framed for a crime that wasn't even committed.”

Jeff aka Lupin, Master Thief.



Joe rattled the bullet. Again, he jiggled the overturned cup again and rattled the bullet underneath. The red metal cup was one of the three identical ones he shifted deftly on the crate he was using as a makeshift tabletop. A small sign in front of the table proclaimed “Win 400k! Only 9k a go!”. He had attracted a small group of passersby interested in his shouts of “Where’s the bullet?” and “Find the bullet and take home some extra quanta.” The last was accompanied by a loud metallic rattle as he shook the cup with the captured bullet underneath. “Easy money,” he announced. He was technically telling the truth. It was easy money. For him.

One of his enraptured audience members stepped up to his gambling table and, with a gesture, sent him some of that delicious universal currency they

called 'quanta'. The audience member watched intently as Joe revealed the bullet, covered it with a cup and slid the three cups over the table with the bullet clinking along beneath. Joe paused the shuffle and asked, "Where is it?". The audience member pointed at a cup. Joe lifted it and, unsurprisingly, revealed the small bullet.

"We have a winner!" Joe announced to a smattering of applause and a whoop of joy from the victor.

Joe swiped a finger towards the prizewinner who gasped dramatically, "Wow, four hundred thousand quanta!" Looking eager to have another go.

"Hold up there, give other people a chance, " Joe laughed, enjoying the charade.

Emboldened by the win, the sheep flocked in and, one by one, lost their money as the little bullet was miraculously never in the cup they pointed at. While the quanta rolled into Joe's virtual pocket, the previous winner remembered he had something better to do and left inconspicuously. Joe made a mental note to give him his share later. Happy accomplices make for the best accomplices, after all.

There were still a few of the flock left to fleece when Joe noticed an affluent character walking by. Decked in gold and silver, Joe recognized the stylings of a Mycenae Space Trade Federation executive. Not just any executive. *The* executive. Worth multiple billions, it was the top dog Agamemnon himself. If

the audience were minnows, Agamemnon was a whale. A gigantic space whale that had just sauntered into a bar across the street from where Joe was working. Joe had learnt that when opportunity knocked, he would run to kick open that door, and this door was the equivalent of diamond encrusted gates complete with golden light and angelic music.

Making some quick excuses to the disappointed flock, he shoved through the crowd and bumped into a newsstand advertising the latest tabloids of the day. The usual 'celebrity found in bed with another celebrity's robot' kind of drivel that passed for news on the streets of Tortuga. "Oi!" The tabloid seller shouted as he steadied the precariously shaking stand. The screen above the seller's head that had touted the sensationalist headline 'The Chameleon. Man or Myth?' about a mysterious man allegedly taking on spouses' forms and sneaking into their bedrooms, was quickly replaced by another just as ludicrous headline "The Lupin Probe: Actual Account of Abducting Alien!"



"I am not an alien. And I don't do any sort of probing. Stupid tabloids. Why add it into the story then? To show how famous I, the Great Lupin, am, of course. Come back! I'll stick to the story, I promise. Now where were we? Ah yes..."



Muttering insincere apologies, Joe felt almost giddy with anticipation as he crossed the bustling street, dodging the hover cars. He did a quick tally of what he knew of Agamemnon. Born William Gulley, he had changed his name to Agamemnon when he took up the trade game at a young age. He started as a self-proclaimed CEO of a small trading group that primarily moved nuts and bolts. With some savvy maneuvering, he managed to have the group bought out by a larger trade organisation and became that organization's CEO. Two more of what Agamemnon called 'reverse takeovers' later, he was the CEO of Mycenae, not one of the largest organizations, but their high-end products, like anti-gravity drives, definitely put them among the most rich and powerful.

Joe stopped under the bar's neon sign, *'For Fox Sake'*, complete with a small fox downing a large bottle of an unspecified alcoholic beverage. Joe calmed himself. This was a bit like meeting a celebrity. Granted, one that he intended to rob blind but it was still a bit of an honor. Joe muttered his personal code, "You can't con an honest person", which made Agamemnon a perfect target. Steeling himself, he pushed open the door to his future.

Joe walked into the bar like a bad joke. In Tortuga, the city of scum and villainy, you would expect the place to be a dingy dive. Flashy yet drab. Pomp with little substance. This one did not disappoint Joe's low expectations. The bar barely fulfilled the requirement of being a bar: counter, drinks and some tables, chairs, and stools, one of which was occupied by Agamemnon. Agamemnon looked out of place and completely overshadowed the only other

person in the room, the everpresent bartender.

Joe recognised and nodded to the bartender. Good fella. That one can't be conned even out of a night's tips. Joe had tried. Not a dishonest bone in his body. Thinking about it, Joe wondered whether the bartender might be a machine. Joe held up a finger to the bartender who wordlessly started filling a glass with a frothy local beer. Definitely a robot. Maybe.

Now that he was a bit closer, Joe could see that Agamemnon's spacesuit was studded with gems. Opulent bastard. Joe couldn't help but wonder what Agamemnon was doing in this run down bar in an even more run down city. Agamemnon had a fancy whiskey in front of him. Joe knew it was fancy just by the proximity to Agamemnon. Although Joe would have taken Aggie to be the drink-with-the-little-umbrella type. Aggie. Yes, Joe thought, that was a good name for the rich vark.

Joe must have been staring too long as Aggie turned to him with a small grin. "What brought you here?" Aggie asked Joe.

"Vark off, Richie," Joe replied, taking up the beer the bartender had splashed down in front of him. Joe thought to himself; play it calm and cool, look disinterested. Joe knew Aggie wanted something and Aggie was the type to get what he wanted.

As Joe took a swing of the swill, the rich guy swiped at the air in front of him. A small message appeared in Joe's vision informing him that 20 million had been transferred to his personal account, pushing his total to a whopping 21 million quanta. Joe nearly spat out his drink. Still sporting an insufferable grin,

the trade tycoon pointed at the bar stool next to him.

"That's my usual seat anyway," Joe coughed and sat, studying Aggie out of the corner of his eye, "What do you want?"

"A bit of your time."

"I'm listening. You've got until I finish this," he held up his beer and started downing it in long deep gulps. Gulping was the best way to drink it as it both prevented wastage and tastage. Joe made a mental note of his spontaneous bit of wit.

"300 million can be yours."

Joe almost wet the counter, but instead calmly swallowed and turned to Aggie and said, "Now you have my attention."

Aggie started talking, "Just so we are clear, I know who you are Joseph Wheel."

Oh Vark, Joe thought. Aggie knew his name. Alarm bells and red flags were ringing and waving in Joe's head. Either that or the beer was even better than usual. 'Abort Mission' and 'Get Out', his instincts were screaming at him. But it was drowned out by the screams of three hundred million notes. That would go a long way at the casinos and then buy some more time with Mona with

what remained. A whole lot more time.

Aggie continued, "Just like I know you are going to want to take my little job offer."

Joe cleared his throat. "I'm listening," he said, a bit hoarser than intended.

"I need someone with your unique set of skills," Aggie said and unexpectedly brought a fist down on the counter. The loud bang caused Joe to jump slightly as a blue outlined hologram of a ship appeared in the air. The ship looked like a yacht. One of those fancy luxury spaceships with all the trimmings; gold outside, wooden finish inside. In a word: Expensive with a capital 'E'.

"I want it and I want you to..." Aggie paused meaningfully, "...acquire it for me." Aggie said, still holding that insufferable smile.

Joe hesitated slightly, "I am not a thief and also can't you just buy it?"

"As I already said, I need your unique skills. The ship is not for sale." Aggie grinned, "This is a unique luxury yacht, the 'Golden Goose', created by a collaboration between two of the top ship manufacturers: Objective Driveyards and Infinity Corporation. When I say unique, I do mean one of a kind. They made only one and they already sold it to one of my rivals who has started bragging about it. Insufferable. He hasn't even received it yet. And that is where you come in. They are secretly moving the ship in five days."

Five days? Joe's mind buzzed. Usually if he wanted to take a ship or clean out an organisation's pockets or both, he would pull a long con. Be valuable, helpful, and, uncharacteristically for Joe, amiable. He would answer new hires questions, give people rides between planets, speak respectfully to team members and most importantly be humble. No bragging or overt sarcasm. But five days? That wasn't enough time to earn enough trust to gain access to the communal tea room.

"But that is not all," Aggie continued, "they are also transporting the master key to the ship via special courier."

Joe nodded. Couriers are a much better option than putting a carry mission up on some public job board. Joe's eyes glazed over as he remembered missions he created, through a shell organisation, to make some quick bucks. The procedure was simple: Package some dirt, place a huge collateral on the package as well as an even larger reward, then make the delivery box unreachable. Like by burying it a few kilometers underground. And when one shell organization got outed by negative reviews, he would make a new one. Unfortunately all that money is gone now, mostly going towards presents for Mona, and a little to pay off his most insistent and dangerous debtors.

Aggie snapped Joe out of his reminiscing as he continued with his story. "They are so confident in their security, they have already held a private key handover ceremony to the courier who will be carrying the key. Both key and ship will arrive at the same time in five days. Your job is to get the ship to one

of my warehouses and also get the key there by any means you choose. The ship itself is worth an estimated half a billion quanta but due to its uniqueness there are no other buyers. Except me. Three hundred million is yours on job completion."

"Four hundred million with a hundred million advance," Joe bartered, trying his luck.

Aggie's smile disappeared for a moment, only to return the next. Beaming, Aggie replied, "I don't haggle, Joe. This is a take it or leave it offer. You have received your advance already. But I am a businessman. I will give you a bonus if you complete the mission within three days."

Joe eye'd his empty beer as if it held the secrets to the universe, "Don't ask for much, do you?"

"Only the best," Aggie said, still grinning.



A few hours later Joe walked into 'The Hole', the quaint name Objective Driveyards gave their warehouse dug out from a hill that was filled with all their latest designs and experiments. A conspicuous yellow suited individual waved at him. Blake Smith. A disgruntled logistics officer and Joe's contact. It helps to have informants and accomplices in all sorts of places and Joe forked out a few million to get Blake's name from a few of his other contacts. Blake had been overworked and underpaid and passed up for promotion

multiple times. He had simply had enough.

Setting up a quick meeting was simple, once you knew what people wanted. Blake wanted revenge. Joe considered himself a master chef in delivering a cold serving of revenge with a large side of quanta.

"Hello, friend!" Blake sniffed cheerfully at Joe.

Why were these ODY people always so happy? Joe wondered. And this was one of the disgruntled ones too. "You got that info I want?" Joe quizzed Blake.

"Anything for a friend," Blake said merrily punctuated by a wet sniff, "Oh that thing you wanted to know about. No harm in telling you since it's already happened. But promise you won't tell anyone else."

"Not a soul."

"You are right about the ship and key, but there is more to it than that. There are three ships being moved at the same time, each named the same and each to different destinations, only one of which is the correct one. The rest are literal trash. Moving the ships is the easy part. Since I handle the logistics orders, I can make any ships go anywhere. What I have no control over are the keys. You heard correctly, there are three master keys, one for each ship. Without it a ship is just a hunk of metal. It won't even open. Anyway, they were handed over in a glorious ceremony to three couriers and I don't know which key has the real one."

The Shell Game



"This is getting more interesting, do you have the names of the couriers?" asked Joe, mind racing with potential schemes.

"Indeedy I do," Blake sniffed. "But before that, a fair warning. The chatter around the office tells me a thief by the name of Lupin seems interested in the ship. Well, less so the ship and more the keys. They say he is good at making things disappear."

"Thieves are a thing of the past," Joe scoffed, the sniffing starting to grate on his nerves, "Only those with rights to the electronic locks on the boxes have access to them. No way around that. The weakest link are the people that

sometimes forget to set those rights correctly. No. These days, it's far easier to have the people willingly give you what you want. Anyway, tell me about those couriers."

"Oh-diddly-Kay, friend. The first..."



"I was going to let this one slide but 'thieves are a thing of the past'? Ha! I, the Great Lupin, have stolen more from these so called 'impenetrable lockboxes' than Joe can even imagine. What? You want to know about the couriers? Let's just skip ahead to where Joe pays them a visit. Trust me. It's more exciting this way."



The first turned out to be a wealthy businessman by the name of Samwel, not as wealthy as Aggie but then few were. Joe's informants told him Sam frequented the Pussycat Club at one of the Alioth market hubs, which by happy coincidence, was also where Mona worked.

A quick warp from Tortuga to Alioth, Joe entered the club via the backdoor, which was his favourite way of surprising Mona. The well-equipped kitchen always looked small compared to Mona's bulk as she weaved between the

stoves and counters to the music thudding from the club itself. Joe loved how Mona's spacesuit accentuated and lifted her large...

"Joe!" Mona shouted over her shoulder.

"Yes, dear?"

"How many times have I told you the kitchen door is for emergencies only. Don't make me remove you from the list," Mona snapped angrily.

"You said it was also for surprises. Surprise!"

"What do you want?" the corner of her mouth twitching upwards belied her serious tone.

"Can't I just come to see you just to see you?"

"Knowing you, no. What do you want?"

"Samwel's usual booth number."

"I knew it. I told you I would not have you ripping off customers at my workplace. Cindy was inconsolable last time you did that. You never think of the fallout of your little schemes do you? Do you?"

"Sorry, dear," Joe hung his head like a scolded schoolboy, enjoying every word Mona flung at him.

"Your usual seduction ploy won't work on little Sammie anyway. He is here for one thing only and those are my dishes," Mona said proudly. Joe almost felt a twinge of jealousy. Almost. "All the girls love little Sammie. They take turns just to sit with him while he eats."

"You haven't?"

"Don't be silly, I am far too busy minding the kitchen," Mona eyed Joe suspiciously, "You are getting one of those looks. I already said no. And no means no."

A few hours later, Joe was wearing the waiters uniform for the Pussycat Club. Inconspicuous pink to blend in with the surroundings and go unnoticed. Although with the assets on display, he could have been wearing a hat made of fruit and live birds and no one would have noticed. Which is why Joe loved doing jobs in places like this. And this job only cost Joe a Jago holiday with Mona, which was another in for him.

Cindy sat with Sam at a corner booth. Cindy glared at Joe. She really needed to learn to forgive old grudges.

"Good evening, sir." Joe gave a little bow to Sam, "Today's special is the 'Key-To-Your-Heart' catch of the day. It is prepared with one of your own

belongings placed lovingly inside a flounder fillet.”

“I don't know,” Samwel hesitated. Some oohs and aahs could be heard from other booths, though due to privacy concerns only tops of heads were visible from other booths.

“It represents the passion between fish and consumer, all prepared lovingly by our head chef, Mona herself.” Behind Joe, other waiters were carrying whole fish to various other tables, their ‘oohs’ and ‘aahs’ could be heard over the usual clamor of the club.

“Ahem. Yes.” Sam slurped, his mouth visibly watering, “I believe I will have the special. Will a blueprint chip do?”

“It could, though a passcard or master key are what are usually used.”

Sam’s face lit up and deftly handed Joe a master key.

“Very good, sir.” Joe intoned, “Your key will be stuffed into the dinner and in turn you too will enjoy being stuffed.”

Sam eyed Joe suspiciously.

“By the fish,” Joe finished.

Samwel nodded and turned to Cindy, dismissing Joe with a backhanded wave.

Joe returned to the kitchen, gave Mona a specially prepared fake key, a peck on the cheek, and left with the first of the wanted keys in his pocket.

Two couriers remained.



Everyone has a vice. A *want* that can be exploited. Honest people know their own vices and are careful not to have it compromise themselves or others. Self-control is admirable but ultimately not a trait Joe had high regard for in others or himself. Especially in his targets.

Yes, everyone has a vice except his next target, an aged miner named Herbert Boker. The only information that Joe's informants could turn up on this second key courier was a single recent image, signed 'Ol Bert', with Bert standing grumpily on barren, flat, and grey desolation which could, at a push, be called 'land'. Joe laughed. He recognised that the planet is perfect for an old salt like Bert to dig up old salt: Madis.

Joe snooped around the old fashioned way: asking around. But the miners are a tight knit group. It took way too much beer to persuade one to give any information on Bert. And even then the information was sparse.

The Shell Game



"Does he like his booze?"

"Ol' 'Ert? Nope. He don't drink."

"Money?"

"Nope."

"Women?"

"Nope."

"Men?"

"Ha. Nope."

"So what does he like?"

"Dunno."

"What does he do?"

"Dig."

"Thanks for all your help."

"Aight."

Fed up with the absolute lack of information, Joe decided to find out for himself, by talking directly to Bert. Joe rented a hover-truck which was the only kind of cheap vehicle readily available on the arse end of Madis. On a whim he picked up a potted plant at a nearby plant dispenser and drove to find Bert at his latest claim, which another miner had kindly given him the location to.

Joe found Ol' Bert in the center of his claim, lazing on a deck chair next to a hole in the ground.

"Good afternoon," Joe said to Bert as he pulled his borrowed hoverbike next to Bert's chair.

"Yup."

Here we go again, Joe thought to himself. Out loud he said, "Are you out mining?"

"Nope."

Were all these miners so uncommunicative? Joe gritted his teeth and tried again, "Are you George?" Joe knew well there was no George, because he had just made him up.

"Nope." Bert answered curtly.

"You know where I could find him?"

"Nope."

Joe heaved a faked sigh, "What are you doing?"

"Waiting."

"For what?"

"Truck."

"Want to use mine?"

"Nope."

"What's so special about the truck then?"

"Containers."

"For the ore you mine?"

"Yup."

An idea dawned on Joe, "I was looking for one of you miners to test this plant. It's a special bioengineered plant that glows when it's near some minerals. Thought it would be useful as an extra light down in the mines as well as telling you when you are near a particularly large deposit. I am working on a tight deadline. Could you help me out?"

"Maybe."

If Joe could reach the hair under his helmet, he would have been pulling it. "I need a deposit on the plant. It's no bonzai but it's an expensive thing to create. One of a kind."

"Got no money."

Joe almost fell over. Ol' Bert was capable of saying more than one word at a time. Joe continued, "Trade then?"

Herbert seemed to think for a bit and said, "Only got a ship key. Can't give it."

"Why not?"

"Not mine."

"So you are just holding it for someone?"

"Yup."

"How about you take the plant, and I take the key as collateral and after you have tested the plant for a few days you'll get the key back. The plant has a limited lifespan and I have already spent too much of it driving around this wasteland looking for George. If it all goes well, then we can make more and I could get you some for free for helping me out. Help a fellow out here."

Bert seemed to consider the idea for a moment and finally simply said, "Nope."

Joe opened his mouth to protest and then shut it. Can't con an honest man, he thought to himself grimly. But he simply had to have the key. So he did what any sane person would do. He backed up the hover-truck and drove over

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Bert. Joe took the key from the body and dumped it down the mine shaft. The deck chair followed.

This is why you always did your homework before starting a con, Joe thought as he placed the potted plant at the mine entrance and left.

One courier remained.



"I, Lupin, know what you are thinking. What a horrible thing to do! The thing is, Joe is a horrible person. It really shouldn't be a surprise at this point. If it helps, Bert was brought back by his rez-node at his friends base nearby. Unfortunately his friend was off planet for a few days. I asked him what he thought about the whole thing and he just shrugged. That's Ol' Bert for you."



The final courier, the self-proclaimed Countess d'Ville, fancied herself an old-timey debutante and flitted between large space stations, flaunting her parents' money, flirting with the rich and famous, and making a name for herself. Her actual name, as Joe's informants noted, was Barbara Enri and she wasn't a countess at all. Also she definitely didn't have parents with any

kind of money. Other than that tidbit, the informants had no further information. Joe surmised that she must be a fraudster, a charlatan, or a con-artist after Joe's own cold heart.

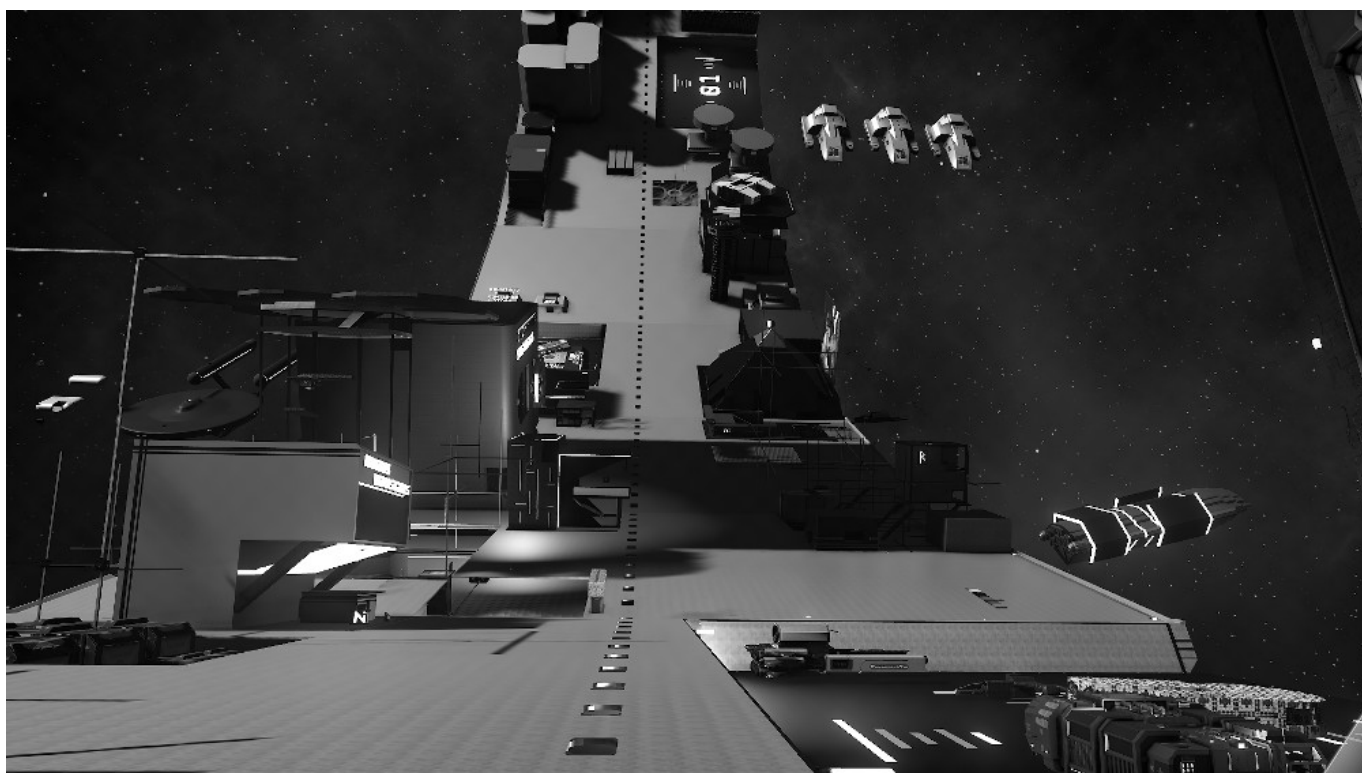
She was last seen around Alioth's orbit, where you couldn't sneeze without hitting a space station. Finding her would be time consuming and time was not on Joe's side. He would manually check the big stations first. Lagrangian? No. Objective Driveyards? No. Nexus? No. Finally he got a hit at Arigold Station, coincidentally owned by Mycenae, Aggies company. The large golden mushroom of a space station was said to have excellent spas and was famous for its high-rolling gambling halls. Space is neutral territory so there were no tax laws out there. There was a rumour that it was meant to be named "Argolid" but Agamemnon misread it once and the name stuck.

The 'Countess' was pulling some scam, Joe felt it, but he didn't quite know what. According to a cleaner (who was slightly richer after meeting Joe), the Countess was chauffeured in a silvered yacht belonging to another one of her stupefied suitors, checked her container into the station's lockbox room, spent some time freshening up in her room, and went to the nearest bar where she proceeded to flirt with everything that walked.

Joe decided to watch her to see what she was scheming, and confirmed for himself that she enjoyed free drinks from those vying for her attention. Joe thought she was good looking but she really didn't hold a candle to his Mona.

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Joe mused to himself. Maybe she was running a blackmail con that involved getting married men into compromising positions, taking pictures, and threatening to have them exposed to their wives. But the Countess didn't move from the bar, no matter how much the men (and some women) tried to get her back to their rooms. Joe continued to watch.



Nothing happened. It was late when she headed to her room alone. Joe, perplexed, could not shake his gut-feeling that she was up to something but he had no idea what it could be. He was starting to doubt his instincts. Maybe she really was looking for the perfect spouse and having a bit of fun during the searching.

The next day she loaded her luggage into yet another bamboozled boyfriend's

sports-ship and was off. Joe took an DUber and used words he had always wanted to say, "Follow that spaceship."

It turned out to be a longer trip as the Countess was taken to Utopia station, a giant 4 km circumference ring with a hodgepodge of mismatching buildings plastered on the inside edge of the ring. She and her luggage were offloaded in front of an opulent-looking hotel. She masterfully got rid of her expectant boyfriend who drove away clearly disappointed. Instead of walking into the hotel, she walked around the back, her luggage container dutifully hovering after her like a large electronic yellow dog.

Behind the hotel, she entered a run down apartment. Joe slipped closer and peered through a crack in the door that didn't shut properly. Inside the room, there was very little furniture or decorations and of the little there was, was as badly maintained as the door. Not the place you would expect to find a Countess. The only decent looking thing in the apartment, besides d'Ville herself, was her luggage container that rested on the middle of the floor.

d'Ville knocked on her luggage in rapid succession. Unexpectedly the container opened and a man stepped out prostrating himself in front of her. She stepped on him and took a look inside the container.

"An excellent haul, Paul," she said to the man she stood on.

"Yes." he moaned.

"Did I say you could talk?"

Paul shut up with a grunt.

d'Ville continued, "You would think the richies would lock their boxes once it's inside the safe room, but no. They are all trusting rich fools. And you know what they say about rich fools and their valuables, Paul?"

Paul kept quiet so d'Ville dug her heel into the small of his back.

"Nooo," Paul gasped.

"They are quickly parted, Paul," she laughed as she dug her heel into Paul again.

Joe had had quite enough and the third day was almost over. He forced open the flimsy door and strode into the single room apartment. Feeling overly dramatic, he struck a bow and said, "Ah, Countess d'Ville, I have been looking for you. It would be a shame if your victims were informed about how you have been pulling off your systematic robbing of the stations throughout the system with your little jack-in-a-box there."

"My name is Paul. Not Jack, " Paul said in a small strained voice.

d'Ville stomped on Paul to shut him up. "What do you want?" the Countess asked curtly.

“Just the key. You know which one.”

The key appeared in her hand and she threw it at Joe. Momentarily distracted, Joe snatched the key out of the air and when he looked back to where the countess stood, she was gone. His eyes were drawn to the movement of a closing hatch where she stood, previously hidden behind Paul. Behind him he heard a swish and heavy click. Joe swore as he turned and saw a heavy reinforced door had closed covering the flimsy door he had entered through.

“Oh no,” he heard Paul moan. “I don’t want to be locked in again.”

Joe knew he could resurrect back at his nearest rez-node, which was Mona's place on Alioth, but then he would lose the key.

“Paul?” Joe asked in a honeyed voice. “Is there a way out?”

“It’s on a timer.” Paul replied while settling himself on the ground, “It will open in 24 hours. She likes punishing me like this when I have been bad. She steps on me when I have been good. Not had a day when she’s done both.”

Joe grasped the key. He would get no bonus, but any reward was better than none.

Paul produced a pack of colourful cards, “Fancy a game?”

"Sure." Joe sat down next to Paul, palming a 'Reverse' card as he sat, "You wouldn't want to invest in a growing company would you?"



The final day dawned. Figuratively. In space the entire concept of a day goes a bit wacky, so most Noveans simply use the twenty four hour clock of old Earth as a kind of universal time. Though many still cannot agree which timezone to use.

The final day dawned. Joe was free from his d'Ville cage and was eager to secure the golden yacht. Blake had diverted the yacht's delivery to a warehouse on Graveyard, the snowy white moon of Alioth. Near enough to the sanctuary moon to fly it over and secure it until Aggie could pick it up and pay him.

Joe walked into the hangar on Graveyard, empty except for three large single angular objects, each covered in large tarps. Joe took the corner of the nearest and pulled. His face fell. But there were still two others. He quickly uncovered the other ships as well. Under each tarp was a battered hull of a ship covered in at least three types of rust. On the final ship there was a note stuck to it that simply read "Lupin was here. So long and thanks for all the fish."

The master thief stole the goods right out from under his nose? Impossible. Joe crushed the note into a little ball. It mattered little where the ship was. He

still had all three keys. None of them worked on any of the ships in front of him, which he took as a good sign. He would just contact Aggie and... That was when he realised he had no way of contacting Agamemnon. He had that sinking feeling that something was horribly wrong.

Joe tried the Mycenae contact number. A secretary answered in a sing-song voice. Joe explained he wanted to speak with Agamemnon. The receptionist or whoever it was just giggled in his face. Giggled! Which was followed by a dismissive, "Agamemnon is very busy and doesn't take calls without an appointment."

"Tell him it's Joe. He will want to speak with me." Joe said quickly.

A moment of silence, "Also he says he has never heard of a 'Joe'. Goodbye." The call ended abruptly.

Vark!

Joe attempted to contact Blake instead. No answer. Joe used his previous contact to get through to Blake.

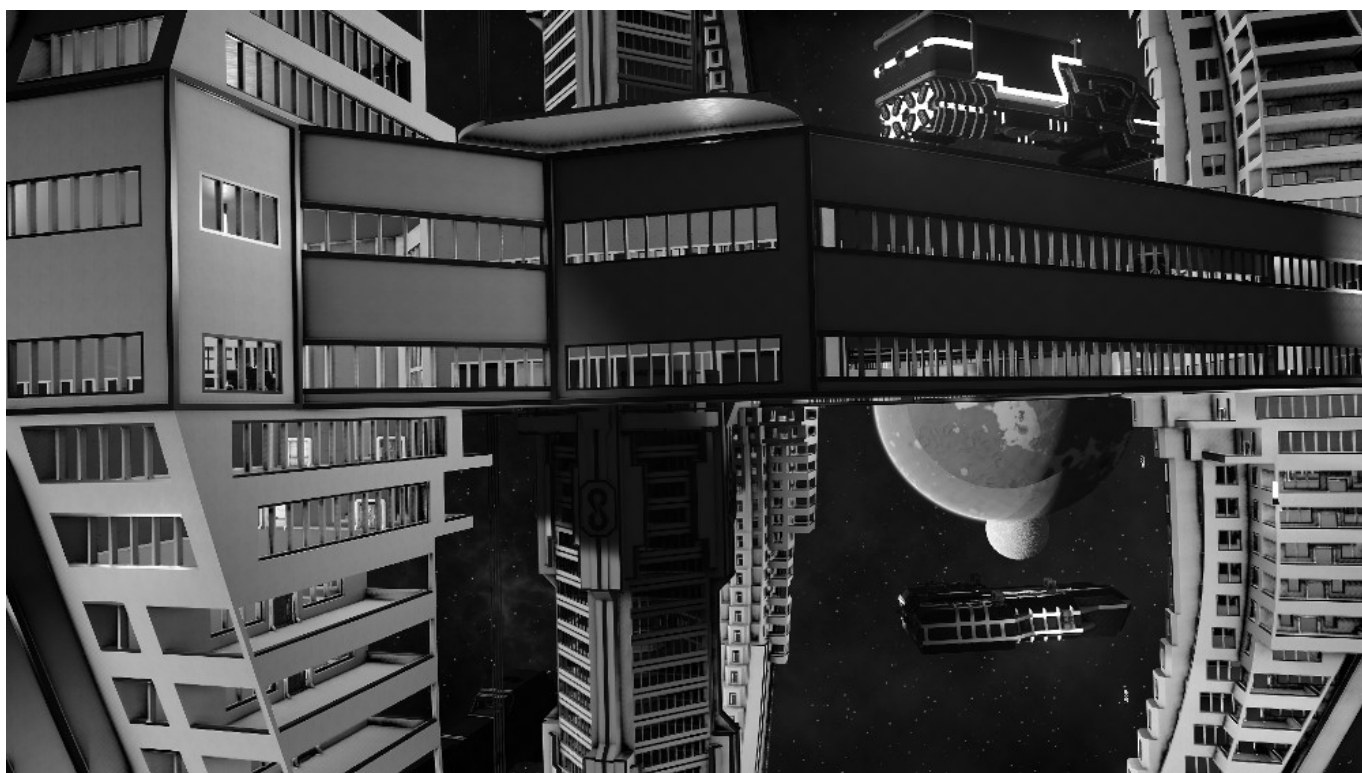
Joe blurted out, "I have your three rust bucket ships in a hangar at the North Pole of Graveyard, but where is the other ship Blake?"

The voice on the other end asked, "Oh-diddly-kay. Who is this?"

The Shell Game

"It's Joe! We spoke earlier?" Joe stopped himself as a slow realisation crept into his straining mind.

"I'm so glad you have found the stolen ships, Joe. In a hangar at the north pole of Graveyard, you say? Stay right there we will come pick you up."



Joe could almost hear the weapons being readied. Joe disconnected, realizing he had just admitted to grand theft spaceship to the organisation it was stolen from. Vark, he thought. He would have to disappear for a while and he so hated disappointing Mona.



In Tortuga, below the dimmed '*For Fox Sake*' sign, a closed sign flashing neon on the locked door. Inside Blake and Agamemnon were clinking glasses with little umbrellas in them. Agamemnon pixelated and the digital mask dispersed revealing a red suited female figure, who sipped from her drink.

Logistics officer Blake smiled, "Once again, a pleasure working with you, Leah," said Blake as he handed Leah Fox the ship master key.

"You were not so bad yourself there, sister." Leah grinned as she pocketed the key, grinning.

Blake sniffed, ignored the complement, and finished his drink in a gulp. He gestured to the bartender for another. To Leah he said, "Anyways, that grin you make while impersonating someone is going to give you away one day."

"Thanks for the concern, but I can handle myself," Leah answered, "Did you leave all the paperwork to point to Joe?"

"Sure did," Blake answered with a sniff, "I think we have been doing this long enough not to miss that detail."

Leah eyed Blake, "Also that bad habit of sniffing for no reason is going to give you away, Maggie."

"I can't help it," Blake sniffed as digital pixelation surrounded Blake to reveal a

green suited female form. "You know dad's disguise gear messes with my allergies. I swear the voxels get in my nose. Anyways, it seems Joe contacted Objective Driveyards directly and effectively confessed he did it all. 'Course, the three couriers will also testify that he took their keys," said Maggie-Fox-previously-Blake, "I'd say that's one scapegoat wrapped up in a neat little bundle."

"And Joe thinks Lupin got the jump on him," Leah added, "And he still doesn't know there was no yacht."

"There is a yacht," Maggie corrected, no longer sniffing.

Leah laughed, "In some hangar somewhere. Who in their right mind would move an expensive ship by mixing it up with some clunkers. But if you had to move some expensive cargo secretly, putting that in a rubbish ship and putting that ship in between other similarly rubbish ships, is a very good way of doing it."

"Sometimes, you are very clever, sister," Maggie hiccuped.

"Only sometimes?"

"Just sometimes." Maggie raised her near empty glass, "Anyway, that cargo is ours now."

"Instant trillionaires," Leah clinked her glass to Maggie's.

A third glass clinked against theirs, one belonging to the bartender. Leah and Maggie eyed the bartender.

"What do you think you are doing?" Leah grinned as she asked the bartender.

"Let your hair down a bit," Maggie chimed in.

The bartender pixelated to reveal a blue feminine spacesuit. Katy Fox rounded the counter and joined her sisters in their celebrations.



Seven days earlier

There was a general hubbub as the few top executives from both Infinity Corporation and Objective Driveyards milled about in the specially prepared meeting hall in Nexus, the Infinity Corporations elegant space station. Security forces, emblazoned with stark white '42', stood at the doors, ensuring the gathering was not disturbed. A clap, silenced the crowd and they reverently formed a half moon to face the CEO of Infinity Corp and the Consuls of Objective Driveyards.

Three couriers stepped out of the gathering to stand in the open space before

the leaders.

Countess d'Ville, in a sleek red dress, grinned smugly and nodded at those she passed before performing an ancient curtsy. Samwel snuffed while twitching his coattails, bouncing through the crowds with a trail of "excuse me's" while eyeing a nearby buffet. Bert pushed through silently and stood to one side in his mining greys.

Each of the couriers were solemnly presented with their key and sworn to diligently deliver the key at the designated place on the sanctuary moon in a week's time.

After the ceremony concluded, with keys in hand, the three couriers stepped into an adjacent meeting hall, their suits pixelating and shifting into Leah, Maggie, and Katy Fox. They nodded at each other and their suits changed to mimic the corporation leaders they had just met.

A few moments later real Countess d'Ville, Samwel, and Bert, summoned by slightly altered invitations, strode into the meeting hall where the transformed Fox sisters were waiting. The sisters gravely reenact the ceremony to a much emptier hall, handing fake keys to the real couriers. Deliver the keys in a week's time to the sanctuary moon and to make no contact with either organisation until then. For extra security.

Five days earlier

Maggie pixelated into Blake as she entered The Hole at Objective Driveyards wielding a clipboard and sporting a foul mood. Maggie, as Blake, barked some orders at a few subordinates about changing delivery destinations of some junk. In the meanwhile, a smiling salesman chatted to a confusing looking Blake outside on the docks. Maggie strode through the base looking for someone, who she spotted a moment later. She waved to Joe.

"Hello, friend!" Blake sniffed cheerfully at Joe.

Yesterday

The combined forces of Objective Driveyards and Infinity Corporation Navy's descended on the warehouse nestled in the white snows of the Alioth moon, some called Graveyard. Gunships circled the perimeter while strike force teams landed in formation and stormed the building, weapons at the ready.

Between the armed forces emblazoned with either a 42 and red objective driveyard symbols, strode a single grinning figure wearing similar gear. Leah couldn't help grinning as she alternated between the two forces emblems at opportune moments. This was far too much fun.

Leah moved with the combined forces as they swarmed into the warehouse and around the three ships. Three ships but no Joe. Leah stifled a laugh as she thought about how hard he must be running right at that moment.

At each of the three rundown ships, Leah used their master keys to open them, emptied them of their contents, and locked them up again. Her nanoformer dutifully moved all the cargo to a nearby gunship parked just outside the warehouse. Her job completed, she turned and left.

As the worried leadership arrived at the warehouse, a rather heavily laden armored vehicle waddled slowly towards the sanctuary moon with three very cheerful sisters inside.

Present

At the bar, the three Fox sisters raised newly filled glasses, and celebrated their Thoramine heist well into the following morning.



“There. You see! That is how I, the great Lupin, was framed for a crime that wasn’t even committed. My Joe personae will have to be retired for a good long while. And the Foxy Chameleon sisters are laughing all the way to the bank. But don’t worry, I will have my revenge one day. What? Where is the Thoramine now? How the hell should I know? This story is over. And that... that is a story for another time.”

About the Author

Kurock is one of the more popular authors writing for Dual Universe. Between juggling his children, he lives behind his keyboard in South Africa and says he doesn't want to go outside. Going outside would mean not playing pen and paper RPGs, boardgames, and most importantly Dual Universe. Two time winner of the NovaWrimo Community Vote, Kurock encourages other authors to enter their stories in the next NovaWrimo: Just DU it. You can find Kurock everywhere in the community, most prominently running the Dual Universe gaming commission DICE and unraveling the mysteries of the game world with the Dual Universe Wayfarers.

Picture Credit

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