

Bounty

By Benjamin Elliott

The bounty hunter had been told the details, but not the big picture, as always. The Argevinian spaceport (a large space station off of Argevin IV) had been compromised by some sort of parasitic infection, and it was her job to clear it out. Rescue any survivors, eradicate the pathogen, and clear out of there. She had been paid half already, and the other half was waiting for her on her successful return. So, routine.

— It had started when an odd amount of odd behavior was noticed by the government's supercomputers. In their panic, the spaceport had been quarantined. No ships were allowed to leave, though ships could still land. Nobody was excited to land their ships, except for the few foolishly selfless medical personnel, and the bounty hunter's own. Yet despite the odd canceling of every outgoing flight, and most incoming flights, the people on the ground were being fed another story entirely. Apparently the bounty hunter's employers had enough media outlets in their grasp to convince the grounded passengers that a state of extreme insurgency had struck the surrounding space, and that any unescorted ships would be blown to bits by pirates. The bounty hunter always found it amazing how easily stories like that were believed, all while the medics were landing in droves on the surface (alone, at that), and ordered people come by their tents for screening.

— Still, that kind of caution was warranted. Some parasites would notice attempts to extinct them, and respond violently. It would be best if they could avoid another Nestor, and so every incoming ship was given strict instructions by the law to keep the population of the spaceport in the dark. The bounty hunter had been on Nestor, and had later watched as the planet was nuked from orbit. It was absolutely a worst case scenario. To avoid similar scenarios, the bounty hunter had left almost every tool at her disposal on her ship: her weapons, identification, and armor. Anything and everything that could be used to identify her. Anyone who had heard of her reputation would know why she was on the space station, and anyone who was on the space station could be infected. Taking chances was a mistake. Even her ship had remained cloaked several miles from the surface of the station- she had hitched a ride on an incoming medical craft for the price of a biometric scanner.

— The craft was owned by a man named Rothwert. A short, round man covered in stubble, he had no professionalism, no worries, and no formality whatsoever. He had agreed to bring in the medics (members of the Angels of Mercy) for a small fortune, but complained about it the whole way down.

— “You stuffed shirts think you're so brave, landing in a quarantine zone! You're not brave, you're stupid, 's what you are. Stupid stupid stupid... and to think I'm landing there too. Can't just leave when I want to either, 'cause then the heavy bronzers up north 'll blow me out of the sky. Dunno why I even agreed to this.”

“The thirty million not enough for you?” a senior medic named Driss noted.

“Not until I leave this hunk of metal, no. Not going to go spending it in the middle of the Black Death, that's for sure.”

— On docking, Rothwert wanted to stay inside. He gave the medics and the bounty hunter enough time to pull themselves and the medical equipment out into the docking bay, and shut the door behind them. Driss stopped the bounty hunter as she made to walk off

"I've no idea what you think you're doing here. Maybe looking for family, maybe studying the disease like we are. But what I do know is, not just anyone has a fully-featured biometric scanner lying around on a cloaked ship."

The bounty hunter was silent.

"That's what I thought. You're here for reasons you don't want to talk about."

"Wrong. I *can't* talk about them."

"Same thing. You've told me why you're here regardless. A piece of advice- sometimes it's better to let a disease run its course in a quarantined environment. When all is said and done, the survivors have immune systems that can stand up to even tougher germs. And believe me, the germs are getting stronger. But we aren't. Think on that."

"Some diseases leave no survivors. For them, I am the immune system."

Driss carried a look of disappointment, fiddling with one of the equipment crates.

"Suit yourself."

The bounty hunter turned and walked away.

—
A black cat paused with a fish in its mouth, one almost as large as it was. Its ears were pointed back slightly, but in what appeared to be less annoyance than nervousness, as if it was afraid that everything around it wanted the fish as badly as it did. The bounty hunter couldn't help but wonder where the cat could have found the fish... but then again, this was a large space station. That cat hurried away down an alleyway.

—
First things first. The bounty hunter would need to obtain some kind of local weaponry, see if she could determine what kind of organism she was up against, and suit up with various other tools. Residences were down one tunnel, but another branched off towards the operating spaceport. That would be the first place to look- the spaceport used a lot of power, and that meant greater odds of finding both weapons (for security) and the infestation itself. The hunter was inoculated against most parasitic or bacterial infections she could come across, and could get antivirals if it came to that. She doubted it was anything so small though... more likely, it was some kind of intelligent vermin. Considering the amount of trade coming through here, most of it local, something could have found its way on.

—
She stepped towards the spaceport, across a large flat metal platform. It seemed to simply sit in open space, but the atmosphere was held in by some fields perhaps a hundred meters above and below. The effect was impressive- the night sky in all of its glory stood in all directions, day round. The platform ended at some connected shops and escalators, leading to various terminals. Spaceport shops were as a whole tacky, specialized, and overpriced, but if you knew where to look, you could find some gems. The bounty hunter passed by three or four such shops before seeing one that would have what she needed.

—
In the back of the shop was a door, out of the view of any cameras or employees. These doors led to the "staff only" hallways, which in turn would lead to the underbelly, infrastructure, the guts of the spaceport. One never found anything good on the skin of the beast; the choicest cuts were inside. She slipped behind the store, and traveled backstage. Sometimes smugglers or quartermasters would set up side businesses in the spaceports; finding one of those would be ideal. Otherwise, she'd simply have to lift something out of the security offices. After a short walk, she saw some runes scrawled faintly onto the wall... it read "P☒☒". A black market fence was around. The markings around the tag seemed to indicate a shop three doors ahead, a floor above.

—
The shop entrance up front was closed, but the hunter didn't need to use the usual entrance. The backdoor served well enough. The interior was a bit dark, but a man with thin glasses was working at the

monitor by the cash register, lamp light illuminating his immediate area.

—
“Hello?” the hunter asked. The man at the counter jumped up surprised.

“Who are you?”

“A customer. I understand you deal in products for interested parties? Pam sent me?” A rough phonetic pronunciation of the runes, but it should be enough if this was the place. The man looked uncertain, but not confused.

“I’ll need to see some kind of proof that you’re an interested party,” the man said.

Well, she didn’t have any identification. Not that this man was likely infected, but still, Nestor. Couldn’t have another one of those.

“I’m afraid I’m all out of that,” she said shrugging.

“Then I’m *afraid* I have to call security. We’re closed.” The man reached under the counter, presumably for an alarm.

“Don’t! Yama, don’t,” a voice called from the doorway. Yama- a local word for father. The bounty hunter turned to see a boy, probably about twelve years of age, in the corner. She hadn’t even noticed him there.

“I’ve been following her. She’s with the medical teams.”

“Is this true?” the man asked, eyebrow raised. She nodded, figuring the bluff would be enough. She had arrived on Rothwert’s ship, after all.

“So you’re here to maintain the quarantine, then.”

“How do you know about the quarantine?”

“Please. You’re trying much too hard to convince us a civil war is going on out there. I’ve had my son Jacobi following any medical teams that land. They’re screening people and cordoning the exits. That sure seems to me like a quarantine. Why do you think my shop is closed?”

“Fair enough. So, can we do business?”

“Business implies a trade,” the man said. “What are you interested in?”

“A weapon would be nice. Something that could put down a bear, something that doesn’t need to be reloaded. Something with stopping power.”

“Fine. Then I want information. Tell me what we’re being quarantined for.”

“I honestly don’t know what it is. I just know it hasn’t spread very far yet, and the teams are trying to keep it that way. My team,” (thinking back to Driss’s contingent), “is trying to identify the contagion. We had a biometric scanner brought in for the purpose.” The father looked to his son, who nodded that the information matched his own.

“So you want a weapon in case your scans come up positive.”

“Something like that, yes.”

“Well, that’s not enough to give you a weapon on. Maybe…”

“Hmm?”

“If you could find us a way off this station, safely, we could provide you with our best armaments, tech, yadda, et cetera. Put us through the scans if you have to, but we’ve been taking precautions. If one of us isn’t clean, leave us, but don’t let us rot here while you kill us slowly.”

“Nobody can leave the station until the quarantine lifts. The nobs are making sure of that.”

“Well, there has to be a way.”

“Can you get me a pilot’s computer?” Her ship could cloak, and she could call it in.

“Not a problem.”

“Then I can get you and your son off this station. What do you have?”

—
“Here.” The man pulled one of his cabinets aside to reveal refurbished closet space. Inside was an eclectic collection of weapons, armor, scanners, the works.

“Impressive. You come by this kind of hardware by working in a spaceport shop?”

“I used to be in the military. Didn't stick, but some of their equipment did. That started me off. What you see before you is just scratching the surface- I have a lot more, if you want it.”

“I might,” she said, eyeing a telescoping carbon plasma rifle. Easy to hide. “But then again, I might not.”

“Maybe some infogoggles?” the kid asked, holding up a pair. The bounty hunter pulled them on, and was greeted by a graphical display. Zoom functions, infrared, auditory. Not bad.

“This rifle, some infogoggles, some armor, and a jackets to hide them in will do.”

“It's a deal.”

The hunter quickly gathered her new gear. Nothing like her usual loadout, but it would do a lot better than she expected.

“I'll take care of the infestation, and then come back for the rest of you,” she said.

“Hold up. How do I know you're not just walking out of here with the gear?”

“You don't.”

“That's not good enough.”

“Well, do you have a better idea?” the bounty hunter asked. The man looked confused, but then brightened up.

“Jacobi will keep an eye on you while I scrounge up a computer and forge a pilot ID for you. I assume you don't have one of your own?”

“Not that I can use here, no. Do you really think it's a good idea to send the kid with me? I'll be going through some dangerous areas.”

“Yama, she's right...I”

“My son knows this station well,” the father said firmly, grimly. “I trust that you will keep him safe.”

“If you insist. Come on... Jacobi?” The kid nodded. “Right then.”

—
Jacobi followed the bounty hunter timidly out to the hallways, as someone who was in the midst of introducing a stranger to their home.

“First place to look will be the generators. Lots of infestations gravitate to all the warmth.”

“There's a way to the power tunnels a few floors down,” Jacobi said. “I never go there anymore, but they're nothing special. Come on.”

On the way, Jacobi asked “What's with seeking the infestation out? You're not a very safe medic.”

“Some medics are trained to repair things. Others, like me, are the immune system. We seek out the disease at its source and cut it out.”

“With plasma?”

“Yeah, sometimes a well placed shot of plasma is just what the doctor ordered.”

“I've never met a medic like you.”

“I've never been here before. That explains it.”

The two made it to an access panel. Jacobi opened it, pushing it aside. A rush of hot air rose out of the vent.

“Guess I wont be needing this for a while,” the bounty hunter said, hanging the jacket on the wall. She set up the rifle, put on the goggles, and stepped down the ladder, with Jacobi following close behind.

—
It was dark in the tunnels. Some pale light came in from the access panel, but otherwise, it was pitch black. The hunter turned on the night vision. The heat was like that of a sauna. The bounty hunter began to sweat.

“Stay close, behind me. Let me know if you hear or see anything.” She glanced at the kid, who had brought some infogoggles for himself. Good, the boy had a head on his shoulders.

“Which way to the nearest generator?”

“Over here.” A tunnel, not the main tunnel, led forward. She began to walk towards it, but stopped upon seeing what was covering all the walls, floors and ceilings of the tube.

“---,” she said.

“What?”

“I know what the infestation is. A fungus, not uncommon, but when it hits a certain population, it spread like wildfire. Can cause respiratory problems, paranoia, and eventually permanent brain damage. Not pretty stuff.”

“So what do we do?”

“We can't shoot it, that's for sure. Let's head back up. If we can get the generators to run a little hotter than usual, that should kill the whole batch.”

“You say it like it's easy.”

“We probably don't have access ourselves, but I know who will.”

“Who?”

“My boss.”

—
Driss was not her boss, nor was anyone really, but the deception was one that was proving to be useful. If he would listen to her, her job would be done, and she'd collect the easiest bounty she'd ever found. If not... well, things would become quite a bit more hands on.

The two reached the medic's camp, still situated right outside the residential docking bay. The camp was tented over, sterile, full of humming equipment.

“I... I might just stay here,” Jacobi said nervously.

“That's fine.”

The bounty hunter walked into the camp to find a medic hunched over a washbasin, cleaning some field tools.

“Where's Driss?”

“Huh? Oh, in the main tent. Right over there.”

“Thanks.” The hunter walked over to the tent. Driss was watching a scanner run, when he turned to see her.

“You? What's happened?”

“It's what might happen that worries me. Tell your superiors, the administration, or whoever has the authority to manage the engines that this station is full of Laordecepta.”

“Laordecepta? Where?”

“The power tunnels. I don't think the spores have spread out of the tunnels in anything but small numbers yet- enough to tick off the sensors, but not much more.”

“Good catch.” He looked at her quizzically. “I thought your kind usually wasn't fond of delegating.”

“Usually I'm not. People are an untrustworthy lot.”

“So I hear. So what do you want me to do?”

“Roast the tunnels. Run the generator hot for a little while.”

“I'll pass the word along. Believe me, we want this thing dealt with as much as you.”

Driss was awfully cavalier about the whole thing.

“So, how long until the quarantine lifts?”

“It'll be at least a week or two after the sensors stop responding. Frankly, from the sound of it, I expected something a lot worse.”

“Laordecepta is nothing to scoff at,” she said.

“No, but... never mind. I'm sure you'll stick around to make sure the job is done?”

“I'll be gone for a bit. Have some business to take care of.”

“You mean, out in the spaceport, or off the station?”

“I've been out in the spaceport already. I'm ready to leave.”

“Well, you can't. I don't tell Rothwert we leave until the officials give me the go ahead.”

“Oh, I'm not leaving on Rothwert's bucket.”

“Who would give you a ride?”

“I would.”

“Your ship isn't exactly docked, if you haven't noticed.”

“No, it's not.”

“Look, I don't care what you're planning. Just know, if you do try to break quarantine, as a medical official, I'm obligated to stop you.”

“I doubt you could.”

“Why are you telling me this?”

“Because if I hear that the Laordecepta isn't gone, I'm holding you responsible, and I'm telling you that I know how to come and go as I please. If you try to weasel your way out of dealing with it, it's your head, not mine.”

Driss looked angry. Justifiably so, she supposed, but that was part of the territory. Now she knew she would be paid, one way or another.

The scanner finished, and the man inside poked his head out. It was Jacobi's Yama.

Driss glanced at the scanner and added a tally to a clipboard surreptitiously.

“What's the tally for?”

“I don't respond kindly to people who threaten me.”

“Why don't I hold an actual gun to your head?” The bounty hunter pulled out the plasma rifle, unextended. Not that that would matter much at this range. Driss's eyes widened.

“Number of people with respiratory ailments related to fungal infection.”

“So you knew about the infection, and didn't try to stop it.”

“Trust me, it wasn't my decision. We are making notable strides in research on the subject.”

“Typical. Why did they send me in, if they just wanted to test some lab rats?”

“Beats me. Maybe you were here for something else.”

The boy's Yama raised his head up, coughing somewhat.

“I want you to fulfill your deal. Even if I'm not part of it, make sure Jacobi reaches the nearest station.”

The bounty hunter looked around, before grabbing a hand scanner. Not as accurate as the box the Yama was in, but still workable.

“Only if the kid passes. And you,” the hunter said to Driss, who was leaning petulantly on a table. “You don't get any ideas. The nobs owe me a lot more than they owe you. Get rid of the fungus, and treat the infected. Then I get paid.”

—

The hunter left the camp, and found Jacobi waiting by some crates.

“Hey- ah, hey!” Jacobi said as the hunter grabbed his arm.

“Open wide.” She peered into his mouth, holding the hand scanner carefully. It came up green, after some whirring. She let go of the kid and tested herself, also green.

“Where's the pilot's computer?”

“My Yama will know. To the shop?”

“Your Yama is in there, he's got the fungus. Don't worry, they'll take care of him, he'll be fine in a month or so.” The boy turned pale.

“Come on. He wanted me to take you to the nearest station. Only a few pecks out, name of Hanlet, it's even in the same system. Do you know where he might have left the computer?”

“Ok, ok. In the shop- probably in one of the storage boxes.”

—

Upon arriving to the shop again, the boy was proven right. It was in a storage box, certainly. A

quick login, and she had access to her ship. She told it to dock at the spaceport itself- nobody would question an incoming flight there, and nobody would ever see it leave. This bounty was as good as finished- and she even ended it with a few extra toys at her disposal.

The ship came in, on time. The hunter and Jacobi were waiting for it, and before anyone could argue, they were on it, cloaked and undocked. Most cloaks were detectable by government grade scans, but the bounty hunter had customized her own ship. It would be totally invisible to the blockade. Soon, the Argevinian spaceport was a blip on the radar, and then gone.

“So, tell me Jacobi. What is it that you've got?” she asked, after setting the autopilot. She turned in her pilot's seat, gripping her own favorite pistol, to face the boy.

“What?”

“Please. You didn't want to go anywhere near that medical tent, and the nobs didn't send me to that platform just to round up some bits of fungus. The medical teams knew about it, and had all that they needed to get rid of it. I didn't need to be there. Unless, of course, I was there for an infestation only a hunter could deal with. An infestation that could hunt me back. A parasite, perhaps.”

Jacobi sat silently for a moment.

“The boy doesn't know. He's asleep,” Jacobi, or the being controlling Jacobi, said.

“I wouldn't have guessed that 'Yama' would be as eager as he was to leave most of his gear behind, unless someone convinced him otherwise. Someone who convinced him the quarantine was more dangerous than it really was. Someone who had seen the fungus, and realized its potential for escaping government agents.”

“You couldn't have known I had seen the fungus before.”

“No, you just told me. Clichéd, I know. You knew your way around the tunnels well enough. And, besides, anyone stepping into tunnels with those many spores without inoculation to them would be infected. I had the foresight to get protection. You didn't show any signs whatsoever. So what are you? Lamprey cell? Indigenous Argevinian hydra?”

“I think your people call me an encephalic grout.”

“A grout scandy! It's been a while.”

“Thanks to people like you and yours. There are hardly any of us left.”

“Well, if you keep playing the game as badly as you did, there won't be any soon enough.”

“So, are you going to talk me to death, or just shoot me out of the airlock?”

“I'm not interested in killing you.”

“What? Why?” the grout said. Visibly confused, as if seeing a wolf who preferred their sheep alive.

“I'll get paid for ridding that station of a grout scandy, as the nobs wanted. They knew there was one, but not where, or you'd be dead. Now there isn't one on the station, and sensors don't really pick up grout scandies very well, so the next station shouldn't have one either. Just don't send out a mating call there, and you'll be fine. ”

“Sure. Didn't know they could do that,” the grout grumbled.

“Always nice to work with professionals. Say, would you like a meal? Finest nutrition pastes in twenty pecks.”

“Yeah, thanks.”

The rest of the flight went off without a hitch.