

# THE SANDMAN, THE TINMAN, AND THE BETTYB

*C. J. Cherryh*

*an alliance-union story*

...from the DAW 30th Anniversary Sci-fi Anthology, #06

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**C.J.Cherryh**

In 1975, something rather incredible happened at DAW Books. My father received two unsolicited manuscripts from an unpublished writer whom he knew, almost at once, was destined to become one of the great voices in science fiction. The writer was a young Oklahoma teacher of classics, and her name was Carolyn Janice Cherry.

Carolyn Janice Cherry.

In 1975, science fiction was still a male-dominated genre. Would a boy buy a science fiction book by a writer with such a feminine name? Would a man, for that matter? This young writer's name was really more suited to an author of romances (perish the thought!) Even the veteran author Alice Norton had had to use the androgynous pen name Andre throughout her career. But how would Ms. Cherry react if a publisher called her from out of the blue and said, "We like your books, but your name—it just won't work!" Don thought it over. What if, rather than asking her to completely change her name, he just proposed a slight alteration. Many female authors had dropped their given names in favor of their initials, so proposing that the author use C. J. rather than Carolyn, would be obvious. But what about Cherry? It was really a very nice name, bringing to mind not only images of sweet fruit, but of lovely blossoms as well, but it just wouldn't sell in SF—no way. What if one were to put a silent 'h' on the end, making it Cherryh? C.J. Cherryh—it would still be pronounced the same way, was still essentially the same name—*her name*—but now it looked rather exotic, almost alien. How perfect!

Luckily, Carolyn liked the idea.

And so C. J. Cherryh was born. . . .

And she went on to become, just as Don had predicted, one of the greatest voices our field has ever heard. An author with more than fifty books to her credit, who has won three Hugo Awards (so far], and been the inspiration for numerous hard science fiction writers of both genders. Her vision of the far future, of life in space, her depiction of humans living among alien races is unparalleled because it is so *real*. When I read her books, I can truly believe that's *how it could be*.

Her fans call her C.J., her family calls her Janice, but to me she'll always be Carolyn.

—**BW**

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The Sandman, The Tinman, and the *BettyB*  
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CRAZYCHARLIE: *Got your message, Unicorn. Meet for lunch?*

DUTCHMAN: *Charlie, what year?*

CRAZYCHARLIE: *Not you, Dutchman. Talking to the pretty lady.*

T\_REX: *Unicorn's not a lady.*

CRAZYCHARLIE: *Shut up. Pay no attention to them, Unicorn. They're all jealous.*

T\_REX: *Unicorn's not answering. Must be asleep.*

CRAZYCHARLIE: *Beauty sleep.*

UNICORN: *Just watching you guys. Having lunch.*

LOVER18: *What's for lunch, pretty baby?*

UNICORN: *Chocolate. Loads of chocolate.*

T\_REX: *Don't do that to us. You haven't got chocolate.*

UNICORN: *I'm eating it now. Dark chocolate. Mmmm.*

T\_REX: *Cruel.*

CRAZYCHARLIE: *Told you she'd show for lunch. Fudge icing, Unicorn...*

CRAZYCHARLIE: ... *With ice cream.*

DUTCHMAN: *I remember ice cream.*

T\_REX: *Chocolate ice cream.*

FROGPRINCE: *Stuff like they've got on B-dock. There's this little shop...*

T\_REX: *With poofy white stuff.*

DUTCHMAN: *Strawberry ice cream.*

FROGPRINCE: *that serves five different flavors.*

CRAZYCHARLIE: *Unicorn in chocolate syrup.*

UNICORN: *You wish.*

HAWK29: *With poofy white stuff.*

UNICORN: *Shut up, you guys.*

LOVER18: *Yeah, shut up, you guys. Unicorn and I are going to go off somewhere.*

CRAZYCHARLIE: *In a thousand years, guy.*

*Ping. Ping-ping. Ping.*

Sandwich was done. Sandman snagged it out of the cooker, everted the bag, and put it in for a clean. Tuna san and a coffee fizz, ersatz. He couldn't afford the true stuff, which, by the time the freight ran clear out here, ran a guy clean out of profit— which Sandman still hoped to make but it wasn't the be-all and end-all. Being out here was.

He had a name. It was on the records of his little two-man op, which was down to one, since Alfie'd had enough and gone in for food. Which was the first time little *BettyB* had ever made a profit. No mining. Just running the buoy. Took a damn long time running in, a damn long time running out, alternate with *Penny-Girl*. Which was how the unmanned buoys that told everybody in the solar system where they were kept themselves going. Dozens of buoys, dozens of little tenders making lonely runs out and back, endless cycle. The buoy was a robot. For all practical purposes *BettyB* was a robot, too, but the tenders needed a human eye, a human brain, and Sandman was that. Half a year running out and back, half a year in the robot-tended, drop-a-credit pleasures of Beta Station, half the guys promising themselves they'd quit the job in a couple more runs,

occasionally somebody doing the deed and going in. But most didn't. Most grew old doing it. Sandman wasn't old yet, but he wasn't young. He'd done all there was to do at Beta, and did his favorites and didn't think about going in permanently, because when he was going in and had Beta in *BettyB's* sights, he'd always swear he was going to stay, and by the time six months rolled around and he'd seen every vid and drunk himself stupid and broke, hell, he was ready to go back to the solitude and the quiet.

He was up on three months now, two days out from Buoy 17, and the sound of a human voice—his own—had gotten odder and more welcome to him. He'd memorized all the verses to *Matty Groves* and sang them to himself at odd moments. He was working on St. Mark and the complete works of Jeffrey Farnol. He'd downloaded Tennyson and Kipling and decided to learn French on the return trip—not that any of the Outsiders ever did a damn thing with what they learned and he didn't know why French and not Italian, except he thought his last name, Ives, was French, and that was reason enough in a spacescape void of reasons and a spacetime hours remote from actual civilization.

He settled in with his sandwich and his coffee fizz and watched the screen go.

He lurked, today. He usually lurked. The cyber-voices came and went. He hadn't heard a thing from BigAl or Tinman, who'd been in the local neighborhood the last several years. He'd asked around, but nobody knew, and nobody'd seen them at Beta. Which was depressing. He supposed BigAl might have gone off to another route. He'd been a hauler, and sometimes they got switched without notice, but there'd been nothing on the boards. Tinman might've changed handles. He was a spooky sort, and some guys did, or had three or four. He wasn't sure Tinman was sane—some weren't, that plied the system fringes. And some ran afoul of the law, and weren't anxious to be tracked. Debts, maybe. You could get new ID on Beta, if you knew where to look, and the old hands knew better than the young ones, who sometimes fell into bodacious difficulties. Station hounds had broken up a big ring a few months back, forging bank creds as well as ID—just never trust an operation without bald old guys in it, that was what Sandman said, and the Lenny Wick ring hadn't, just all young blood and big promises.

Which meant coffee fizz was now pricey and scarce, since the Lenny Wick bunch had padded the imports and siphoned off the credits, which was how they got caught.

Sandman took personal exception to that situation: anything that got between an Outsider and his caffeine ought to get the long, cold walk in the big dark, so far as that went. So Lenny Wick hadn't got a bit of sympathy, but meanwhile Sandman wasn't too surprised if a few handles out in the deep dark changed for good and all.

Nasty trick, though, if Tinman was Unicorn. No notion why anybody ever assumed Unicorn was a she. They just always had.

FROGPRINCE: *So what are you doing today, Sandman? I see you...*

Sandman ate a bite of sandwich. Input:

SANDMAN: *Just thinking about Tinman. Miss him.*

FROGPRINCE: *lurking out there.*

SANDMAN: *Wonder if he got hot ID. If he's lurking, he can leave me word.*

T\_REX: *Haven't heard, Sandman, sorry.*

UNICORN: *Won't I do, Sandman?*

SANDMAN: *Sorry, Unicorn. Your voice is too high.*

UNICORN: *You female, Sandman?*

T\_REX: *LMAO.*

FROGPRINCE: *LL&L.*

SANDMAN: *No.*

DUTCHMAN: *Sandman is a guy.*

UNICORN: *You don't like women, Sandman?*

T\_REX: *Shut up, Unicorn.*

SANDMAN: *Going back to my sandwich now.*

UNICORN: *What are you having, Sandman?*

SANDMAN: *Steak and eggs with coffee. Byebye.*

He ate his tuna sandwich and lurked, sipped the over-budget coffee fizz. They were mostly young. Well, FrogPrince wasn't. But mostly young and on the outs for money. They were all going to get rich out here at the far side of

the useful planets and go back to the easy life at Pell. The cyberchat mostly bored him, obsessive food and sex. Occasionally he and FrogPrince got on and talked mechanics or, well-coded, what the news was out of Beta, what miners had made a find, what contracts were going ahead or falling through.

Tame, nowadays. Way tame. Unicorn played her games. Dutchman laid his big plans on the stock market. They were all going to eat steak and eggs every meal, in the fanciest restaurant on Pell.

Same as when the war ended, the War to end all wars, well, ended at least for the next year or so, before the peace heated up. Everybody was going to live high and wide and business was just going to take off like the proverbial bat out of the hot place.

Well, it might take off for some, and it had, but Dutchman's guesses were dependably wrong, and what mattered to them out here was the politics that occasionally flared through Beta, this or that company deciding to private-enterprise the old guys out of business. They'd privatized mining. That was no big surprise.

But—Sandman finished the coffee fizz and cycled the container—they didn't privatize the buoys. Every time they tried, the big haulers threatened no-show at Pell, because they knew the rates would go sky-high. More, the privatizers also knew they'd come under work-and-safety rules, which meant they'd actually have to provide quality services to the tenders, and bring a tender-ship like *BettyB* up to standard—or replace her with a robot, which hadn't worked the last time they'd tried it, and which, to do the job a human could, cost way more than the privatizers wanted to hear about.

So Sandman and *BettyB* had their job, hell and away more secure than, say, Unicorn, who was probably a kid, probably signed on with one of the private companies, probably going to lose her shirt and her job the next time a sector didn't pan out as rich with floating junk as the company hoped.

But the Unicorns of the great deep were replaceable. There were always more. They'd assign them out where the pickings were supposed to be rich and the kids, after doing the mapping, would get out of the job with just about enough to keep them fed and bunked until the next big shiny deal... the next time the companies found themselves a field of war junk.

Just last year the companies had had a damn shooting war, for God's sake,

over the back end of a wrecked warship. They'd had Allied and Paris Metals hiring on young fools who'd go in there armed and stupid, each with a district court order that had somehow, between Beta and Gamma sectors, ended up in the Supreme Court way back on Pell—but not before several young fools had shot each other. Then Hazards had ruled the whole thing was too hot to work.

Another bubble burst. Another of Dutchman's hot stock tips gone to hell.

And a raft of young idiots got themselves stranded at Beta willing to work cheap, no safety questions asked.

So the system rolled on.

T\_REX: *Gotta go now. Hot date.*

FROGPRINCE: *Yeah. In your dreams, T\_Rex.*

You made the long run out from Beta, you passed through several cyberworlds—well, transited. Blended through them. You traveled, and the cyberflow from various members of the net just got slower and slower in certain threads of the converse. He could key up the full list of participants and get some conversations that would play out over hours. He'd rather not. Murphy's law said the really vital, really interesting conversations were always on the edges, and they mutated faster than your input could reach them. It just made you crazy, wishing you could say something timely and knowing you'd be preempted by some dim-brain smartass a little closer. So you held cyberchats of the mind, imagining all the clever things you could have said to all the threads you could have maintained, and then you got to thinking how far out and lonely you really were.

He'd rather not. Even if the local chat all swirled about silly Unicorn. Even if he didn't know most of them: space was bigger, out here. Like dots on an inflated balloon, the available number of people was just stretched thin, and the ones willing to do survey and mine out here weren't necessarily the sanest.

Like buoy-tenders, who played chess with ghost-threads out of the dark and read antique books.

Last of the coffee fizz. He keyed up the French lessons. *Comment allez-vous, mademoiselle?* And listened and sketched, a Teach Yourself Art course, correspondence school, that wanted him to draw eggs and put faces on them: he multitasked. He filled his screen with eggs and turned them into people he knew, some he liked, some he didn't, while he

muttered French. It was the way to stay sane and happy out here, while *BettyB* danced her way along the prescribed—

Alarm blipped. Usually the racket was the buoy noting an arrival, but this being an ecliptic buoy, it didn't get action itself, just relayed from the network, time-bound, just part of the fabric of knowledge—a freighter arrived at zenith. Somebody left at nadir.

Arrival, it said. Arrival within its range and coming—

God, coming fast. He scrambled to bring systems up and listen to Number 17. Number 17, so far as a robot could be, was in a state of panic, sending out a warning. *Collision, collision, collision.*

There was an object out there. Something Number 17 had heard, as it waited to hear—but Number 17 didn't expect trouble anymore. Peacetime ships didn't switch off their squeal. Long-range scan on the remote buoys didn't operate, wasn't switched on these days—power-saving measure, saving the corporations maintenance and upkeep. Whatever it picked up was close. Damned close.

Maintenance keys. Maintenance could test it. He keyed, a long, long way from it receiving: turn on, wake up longscan, Number 17, Number 17.

He relayed Number 17's warning on, system-wide, hear and relay, hear and relay.

He sent into the cyberstream:

SANDMAN: *Collision alert from Number 17. Heads up.*

But it was a web of time-stretch. A long time for the nearest authority to hear his warning. Double that to answer.

Number 17 sent an image, at least part of one. Then stopped sending.

Wasn't talking now. Wasn't talking, wasn't talking.

Hours until Beta Station even noticed. Until Pell noticed. Until the whole buoy network accounted that Number 17 wasn't transmitting, and that that section of the system chart had frozen. Stopped.

The image was shadowy. Near-black on black.

“Damn.” An Outsider didn't talk much, didn't use voice, just the key-taps that filled the digital edges of the vast communications web. And he keyed.



SANDMAN: *Number 17 stopped transmitting. Nature of object...*

SANDMAN: *... unknown. Vectors from impact unknown...*

SANDMAN: *... Impact one hour fifteen minutes before my location.*

The informational wavefront, that was. The instant of space-time with 17's warning had rolled past him and headed past Frog-Prince and Unicorn and the rest, before it could possibly reach Beta. They lived in a spacetime of subsequent events that widened like ripples in a tank, until scatter randomized the information into a universal noise.

And *BettyB* was hurtling toward Number 17, and suddenly wasn't going anywhere useful. She might get the order to go look-see, in which case braking wasn't a good idea. She might get the order to return, but he doubted it would come for hours. Decision-making took time in boardrooms. Decision-making had to happen hell and away faster out here, with what might be pieces loose.

He shifted colors on the image, near-black for green. Nearer black for blue. Black stayed black.

Ball with an inward or outward dimple and a whole bunch of planar surfaces. He didn't like what he saw. He transmitted his raw effort as he built it. Cigar-shape. Gray scale down one side of the image, magnification in the top line. Scan showed a flock of tiny blips in the same location. Scan was foxed. Totally.

"God."

SANDMAN: *Transmitting image. Big mother.*

A keystroke switched modes. A button-click rotated the colorized image. Not a ball. Cigar-shape head-on. Cigar-shape with deflecting planes all over it.

SANDMAN: *It's an inert. An old inert missile, inbound. It's blown Buoy 17 ...*

SANDMAN: *... Trying to determine  $v$ . Don't know class or mass. Cylindrical.*

SANDMAN: *Buoy gone silent. May have lost antenna. May have lost orientation...*

SANDMAN: *... May have been destroyed. Warn traffic of possible buoy*

*fragments...*

SANDMAN: ... *originating at buoy at 1924h, fragments including...*

SANDMAN: ... *high-mass power plant and fuel.*

Best he could do. The wavefront hadn't near reached Beta. And the buoy that could have given him longscan wasn't talking—or no longer existed. The visual out here in the dark, where the sun was a star among other stars, gave him a few scattered flashes of gray that might be buoy fragments. He went on capturing images.

BettyB went hurtling on toward the impact-point. Whatever was out there might have clipped the buoy, or might have plowed through the low-mass girder-structures like a bullet through a snowball, sending solid pieces of the buoy flying in all directions, themselves dangerous to small craft. The inert, the bullet coming their way, was high-v and high-mass, a solid chunk of metal that might have been traveling for fifty years and more, an iron slug fired by a long-lost warship in a decades-ago war. Didn't need a warhead. Inerts tended to be far longer than wide because the fire mechanism in the old carriers stored them in bundles and fired them in swarms, but no matter how it was oriented when it hit, it was a killer—and if it tumbled, it was that much harder to predict, cutting that much wider a path of destruction. Mass and velocity were its destructive power. An arrow out of a crossbow that, at starship speeds, could take out another ship, wreck a space station, cheap and sure, nothing fragile about it.

After the war, they'd swept the lanes—Pell system had been a battle zone. Ordnance had flown every which way. They'd worked for years. And the last decade—they'd thought they had the lanes clear.

Clearly not. He had a small scattering of flashes. He thought they might be debris out of the buoy, maybe the power plant, or one of the several big dishes. He ran calculations, trying to figure what was coming, where the pieces were going, and he could use help—God, he could use help. He transmitted what he had. He kept transmitting.

FROGPRINCE: *Sandman, I copy. Are you all right?*

SANDMAN: *FrogPrince, spread it out. I need some help here...*

UNICORN: *Is this a joke, Sandman?*

SANDMAN: *I'm sending raw feed, all the data I've got. Help. Mayday.*

LOVER18: *Sandman, what's up?*

SANDMAN: *Unicorn, this is serious.*

DUTCHMAN: *I copy, Sandman. My numbers man is on it.*

Didn't even know Dutchman had a partner. A miner's numbers man was damned welcome on the case. Desperately welcome.

Meanwhile Sandman had his onboard encyclopedia. He had his histories. He hunted, paged, ferreted, trying to find a concrete answer on the mass of the antique inerts—which was only part of the equation. Velocity and vector depended on the ship that, somewhere out there, fifty and more years ago, had fired what might be one, or a dozen inerts. There could be a whole swarm inbound, a decades-old broadside that wouldn't decay, or slow, or stop, forever, until it found a rock to hit or a ship full of people, or a space station, or a planet.

Pell usually had one or another of the big merchanters in.

Sandman searched his news files, trying to figure. The big ships had guns. Guns could deal with an inert, at least deflecting it— *if* they had an armed ship in the system. A big ship could chase it down, even grab it and decelerate it. He fed numbers into what was becoming a jumbled thread of inputs, speculations, calculations.

Hell of it was—there was one thing that would shift an inert's course. One thing that lay at the heart of a star system, one thing that anchored planets, that anchored moons and stations: that gravity well that led straight to the system's nuclear heart— the sun itself. A star collected the thickest population of planets, and people, and vulnerable real estate to the same place as it collected stray missiles. And no question, the old inert was infalling toward the sun, increasing in  $v$  as it went, a man-made comet with a comet-sized punch, that could crack planetary crust, once it gathered all the  $v$  the sun's pull could give it.

T\_REX: *Sandman, possible that thing's even knocked about the Oort Cloud.*

T\_REX: *Perturbed out of orbit.*

UNICORN: *Perturbing us.*

LOVER18: *I've got a trajectory on that buoy debris chunk...*

LOVER18: *... no danger to us.*

Alarm went off. *BettyB* fired her automated avoidance system. Sandman hooked a foot and both arms and clung to the counter, stylus punching a hole in his hand as his spare styluses hit the bulkhead. The bedding bunched up in the end of the hammock. It was usually a short burst. It wasn't. Sandman clung and watched the camera display, as something occluded the stars for a long few seconds.

"Hell!" he said aloud, alone in the dark. Desperately, watching a juggernaut go by him. "Hell!" One human mote like a grain of dust.

Then he saw stars. It was past him. What had hit the buoy was past him and now—now, damn, he and the buoy were two points on a straight line: he had the vector; and he had the camera and with that, God, yes, he could calculate the velocity.

He calculated. He transmitted both, drawing a simple straight line in the universe, calamity or deliverance reduced to its simplest form.

He extended the line toward the sun.

Calamity. Plane of the ecliptic, with Pell Station and its heavy traffic on the same side of the sun as Beta. The straight line extended, bending at the last, velocity accelerating, faster, faster, faster onto the slope of a star's deep well.

DUTCHMAN: *That doesn't look good, Sandman.*

UNICORN: :(

DUTCHMAN: *Missing Pell. Maybe not missing me...*

DUTCHMAN: *... Braking. Stand by.*

UNICORN: *Dutchman, take care.*

LOVER18: *Letting those damn things loose in the first place...*

T\_REX: *Not liking your calculations, Sandman.*

LOVER18: *... what were they thinking?*

FROGPRINCE: *I'm awake. Sandman, Dutchman, you all right out there?*

DUTCHMAN: *I can see it...*

UNICORN: *Dutchman, be all right.*

DUTCHMAN: *I'm all right...*

DUTCHMAN: ... *it's going past now. It's huge.*

HAWK29: *What's going on?*

LOVER18: *Read your damn transcript, Hawkboy.*

CRAZYCHARLIE: *Lurking and running numbers.*

DUTCHMAN: *It's clear. It's not that fast.*

SANDMAN: *Not that fast \*yet.\**

DUTCHMAN: *We're running numbers, too. Not good.*

SANDMAN: *Everybody crosscheck calculations. Not sure...*

SANDMAN: *about gravity slope...*

CRAZYCHARLIE: *Could infall the sun.*

UNICORN: *We're glad you're alright, Dutchman.*

SANDMAN: *if it infalls, not sure how close to Pell.*

WILLWISP: *Lurking and listening. Relaying to my local net.*

T\_REX: *That baby's going to come close.*

Sandman reached, punched a button for the fragile long-range dish. On *BettyB's* hull, the arm made a racket, extending, working the metal tendons, pulling the silver fan into a metal flower, already aimed at Beta.

"Warning, warning, warning. This is tender *BettyB* calling all craft in line between Pell and Buoy 17. A rogue inert has taken out Buoy 17 and passed my location, 08185 on system schematic. Looks like it's infalling the sun. Calculations incomplete. Buoy 17 destroyed, trajectory of fragments including power plant all uncertain, generally toward Beta. Mass and velocity sufficient to damage. Relay, relay, relay and repeat to all craft in system. Transmission of raw data follows."

He uploaded the images and data he had. He repeated it three times. He tried to figure the power plant's course. It came up headed through empty space.

CRAZYCHARLIE: *It's going to come damn close to Pell...*

CRAZYCHARLIE: ... *at least within shipping lanes and insystem hazard.*

DUTCHMAN: *I figure same. Sandman?*

UNICORN: *I'm transmitting to Beta.*

WILLWISP: *Still relaying your flow.*

HAWK29: *Warn everybody.*

UNICORN: *It's months out for them.*

DUTCHMAN: *Those tilings have a stealth coating. Dark...*

DUTCHMAN: *... Hard to find. Easy to lose.*

UNICORN: *Lot of metal. Pity we can't grab it...*

FROGPRINCE: *Don't try it, Unicorn. You and your engines...*

UNICORN: *... But it's bigger than I am.*

FROGPRINCE: *... couldn't mass big enough.*

UNICORN: *I copy that, Froggy...*

DUTCHMAN: *It's going to be beyond us. All well and good if it goes...*

UNICORN: *... Thanks for caring.*

DUTCHMAN: *... without hitting anything. Little course change here...*

DUTCHMAN: *... and Pell's going to have real trouble tracking it.*

HAWK29: *I feel a real need for a sandwich and a nap...*

UNICORN: *Hawk, that doesn't make sense.*

HAWK29: *... We've sent our warning. Months down, Pell will fix it...*

HAWK29: *... All we can do. It's relayed. Passing out of our chat soon.*

T\_REX: *Sandman, how sure your decimals?*

FROGPRINCE: *We can keep transmitting, Hawk. We can tell Sandman...*

FROGPRINCE: *... we're sorry he's off his run. His buoy's destroyed...*

FROGPRINCE: *... He's got to find a new job...*

UNICORN: *They'll be running construction and supply out. I'll apply, too.*

FROGPRINCE: *Use a little damn compassion.*

SANDMAN: *T\_Rex, I'm sure. I was damned careful.*

T\_REX: *You braked.*

DUTCHMAN: *We both braked.*

SANDMAN: *I've got those figures in. Even braking, I'm sure of the numbers.*

T\_REX: *That's real interesting from where I sit.*

FROGPRINCE: *T\_Rex, where are you?*

T\_REX: *About an hour from impact.*

UNICORN: *Brake, T\_Rex!*

SANDMAN: *T\_Rex, it's 5 meters wide, no tumble.*

T\_REX: *Sandman, did I ever pay you that 52 credits?*

Tinman?

Damn. *Damn!* Fifty-two cred in a Beta downside bar. Fifty-two cred on a tab for dinner and drinks, the last time they'd met. Tinman had said, at the end, that things had gone bad. Crazy Tinman. Big wide grin hadn't been with them that supper. He'd known something was wrong.

He'd paid the tab when Tinman's bank account turned up not answering.

The Lenny Wick business. The big crunch that took down no few that had thought Beta was a place to get rich, and it wasn't, and never would be.

SANDMAN: *Dutchman, you copy that? T\_Rex owes me 52c.*

DUTCHMAN: *Sandman, we meet on dockside, I owe you a drink...*

DUTCHMAN: *for the warning.*

Dutchman didn't pick up on it. Or didn't want to, having fingers anywhere on the Lenny Wick account not being popular with the cops. Easy for Pell to say it was all illegal. Pell residents didn't have a clue how it was on Beta Station payroll. Didn't know how rare jobs were, that weren't.

The big score. The way out. Unicorns by the shipload fell into that well. And a few canny Tinmen got caught trying to skirt it just close enough to catch a few of the bennies before it all imploded.

SANDMAN: *I copy that, T\_Rex. If you owe me money...*

SANDMAN: *... get out of there.*

T\_REX: *Going to be busy for a few minutes.*

UNICORN: *T\_Rex, we love you.*

T\_REX: *Flattery, flattery, Unicorn. I know your heart's...*

DUTCHMAN: *You take care, T\_Rex.*

T\_REX: *... for FrogPrince. (((Poof.)))*

UNICORN: *He's vanished.*

LOVER18: *This isn't a damn sim, Unicorn.*

UNICORN: *:(*

FROGPRINCE: *T\_Rex, can we help you?*

UNICORN: *Don't distract him, Froggy. He's figuring.*

Good guess, that was. Sandman called up the system chart— the buoys produced it, together, constantly talking, over a time lag of hours; but theirs wasn't accurate anymore. The whole Pell System chart was out of date now, because their buoy wasn't talking anymore. The other buoys hadn't missed it yet, and Pell wouldn't know it for hours, but the information wasn't updating, and the source he had right now wasn't Buoy 17 anymore.

They all had numbers on that chart. But the cyberchat never admitted who was Sandman and who was Unicorn. It never had mattered.

They all knew who Sandman was, now. He'd transmitted his chart number. He could look down the line and figure that Dutchman, most recently near that juggernaut's path, was 80018.

He drew his line on the flat-chart and knew where T\_Rex was, and saw what his azimuth was, and saw the arrow that was his flatchart heading and rate.

He made the chart advance.

Tick.

Tick.

Tick.

SANDMAN: *I've run the chart, T\_Rex. Brake to nadir...*



SANDMAN: ... *Best bet.*

The cyberflow had stopped for a moment. Utterly stopped. Then:

UNICORN: *I've run the chart, too, T\_Rex. If you can brake now, please do it.*

SANDMAN: *I second Unicorn.*

What the hell size operations had Tinman signed on to? A little light miner that could skitter to a new heading?

Some fat company supply ship, like *BettyB*, that would slog its 7 lower only over half a critical hour?

SANDMAN: *T\_Rex, Dutchman, I'm dumping my cargo...*

SANDMAN: ... *I'm going after him.*

HAWK29: *BetaControl's going to have a cat.*

UNICORN: *Shut up, Hawk. I'm going, too.*

SANDMAN: *T\_Rex, if you can't brake in time, have you got a pod?...*

SANDMAN: ... *I'm coming after you. Go to the pod if you've got one...*

SANDMAN: ... *Use a suit if not. Never mind the ETA...*

SANDMAN: ... *I'll get there in time.*

FROGPRINCE: *Sandman, go.*

SANDMAN: *I'm going to full burn, hard as I can...*

SANDMAN: ... *Right down that line.*

Button pushes. One after the other. Hatches open, all down *BettyB*'s side. Shove to starboard. Shove to port. Shove to nadir. Sandman held to the counter, then buckled in fast as the scope erupted with little blips.

T\_REX: *It's coming. I've got it on the scope. Going to full burn...*

T\_REX: ... *It's not getting past me.*

FROGPRINCE: *T\_Rex, that thing's a ship-killer. You can't...*

FROGPRINCE: ... *deflect it. Get away from the console.*

FROGPRINCE: *T\_Rex, time to ditch! Listen to Sandman.*

T\_REX: *Accelerating to 2.3. Intercept.*

UNICORN: *T\_Rex, you're crazy.*

T\_REX: *I'm not crazy, lady. I'm a friggin ore-hauler...*

T\_REX: *... with a full bay.*

FROGPRINCE: *You'll scatter like a can of marbles.*

T\_REX: *Nope. She's coming too close and she's cloaked...*

T\_REX: *... If station can't spot her, she can take out a freighter...*

T\_REX: *... Going to burn that surface off so they can see...*

T\_REX: *... that mother coming.*

T\_REX: *((Poof))*

UNICORN: *Not funny, T\_Rex.*

Sandman pushed the button. *BettyB* shoved hard, hard, hard.

SANDMAN: *I'm on my way, T\_Rex. Get out of there.*

WILLWISP: *I'm still here. Relaying.*

CRAZYCHARLIE: *I'm coming after you, Sandman, you and him.*

SANDMAN: *By the time I get there, I'll be much less mass...*

SANDMAN: *... T\_Rex, you better get yourself to a pod.*

SANDMAN: *... I'm going to be damn mad if I come out there...*

SANDMAN: *... and you didn't.*

Faster and faster. Faster than *BettyB* ever had gone. Calculations changed. Sandman kept figuring, kept putting it into nav.

The cyberflow kept going, talk in the dark. Eyes and ears that took in a vast, vast tract of space.

UNICORN: *I know you're busy, Sandman. But we're here.*

LOVER18: *I've run the numbers. Angle of impact...*

LOVER18: *... will shove the main mass outsystem to nadir.*

FROGPRINCE: *Fireball will strip stealth coat...*

FROGPRINCE: *T\_Rex, you're right.*

HAWK29: *T\_Rex, Sandman and Charlie are coming...*

HAWK29: *... fast as they can.*

Nothing to do but sit and figure, sit and figure, with an eye to the cameras. Forward now. Forward as they bore.

*"APIS19 BettyB, this is Beta Control. We copy re damage to Buoy 17. Can you provide more details?"*

The wavefront had gotten to Beta. They were way behind the times.

*"Beta Control, this is APIS19 BettyB, on rescue. Orehauler on chart as 80912 imminent for impact. Inert stealth coating prevents easy intercept if it clears our district. Local neighborhood has a real good fix on it right now. May be our last chance to grab it, so the orehauler's trying, BetaControl. We're hoping he's going to survive impact. Right now I'm running calculations. Don't want to lose track of it. BettyB will go silent now. Ending send."*

FROGPRINCE: *I'll talk to them for you, Sandman...*

FROGPRINCE: *I'll keep them posted.*

Numbers came closer. Closer. Sandman punched buttons, folded and retracted the big dish.

Numbers... numbers... coincided.

Fireball. New, brief star in the deep dark.

Only the camera caught it. Streaks, incandescent, visible light shooting off from that star, most to nadir, red-hot slag.

The wavefront of that explosion was coming. *BettyB* was a shell, a structure of girders without her containers. Girders and one small cabin. Everything that could tuck down, she'd tucked. Life within her was a small kernel in a web of girders.

Wavefront hit, static noise. Light. Heat.

*BettyB* waited. Plowed ahead on inertia. Lost a little, disoriented.

Her hull whined. Groaned.

Sandman looked at his readouts, holding his breath.

The whine stopped. Sandman checked his orientation, trimmed up on gentle, precise puffs, kicked the throttle up.

Bang! Something hit, rattled down the frame. Bang! Another.

Then a time of quiet. Sandman braked, braked hard, harder.

Then touched switches, brought the whip antennae up. Uncapped lenses and sensors.

In all that dark, he heard a faint, high-pitched ping-ping-ping.

“Tinman?” Sandman transmitted on low output, strictly local. Search and rescue band. “Tinman, this is *BettyB*. This is Sandman. You hear me? I’m coming after that fifty-two credits.”

“*Bastard*,” came back to him, not time-lagged. “*I’ll pay, I’ll pay. Get your ass out here. And don’t use that name.*”

Took a while. Took a considerable while, tracking down that blip, maneuvering close, shielding the pickup from any stray bits and pieces that might be in the area.

Hatch opened, however. Sandman had his clipline attached, sole lifesaving precaution. He flung out a line and a wrench that served as a miniature missile, a visible guide that flashed in the searchlight.

Tinman flashed, too, white on one side, sooted non-reflective black on the other, like half a man.

Sandman was ever so relieved when a white glove reached out and snagged that line. They were three hours down on Tinman’s life-support. And Sandman was oh, so tired.

He hauled at the line. Hauled Tinman in. Grabbed Tinman in his arms and hugged him suit and all into the safety of the little air lock.

Then he shut the hatch. Cycled it.

Tinman fumbled after the polarizing switch on the faceplate shield. It cleared, and Tinman looked at him, a graying, much thinner Tinman.

Lips moved. “Hey, man,” came through static. “Hate to tell you. My funds were all on my ship.”

“The hell,” Sandman said. “The hell.” Then: “I owe you, man. Some freighter next month or so—owes you their necks.”

“Tell that to Beta Ore,” the Tinman said. “It was their hauler I put in its path.”

CRAZYCHARLIE: *I’ve got you spotted, Sandman.*

SANDMAN: *Charlie, thanks. Got a real chancy reading...*

SANDMAN: *... on the number three pipe...*

SANDMAN: *... think it got dinged. I really don’t want...*

SANDMAN: *... to fire that engine again...*

SANDMAN: *... I think we’re going to need a tow.*

CRAZYCHARLIE: *Sandman, I’ll tow you from here to hell and back...*

CRAZYCHARLIE: *... How’s T\_Rex?*

SANDMAN: *This is T\_Rex, on Sandman’s board.*

UNICORN: *Yay! T\_Rex is talking.*

FROGPRINCE: *Tracking that stuff...*

FROGPRINCE: *... nadir right now. Clear as clear, T\_Rex...*

FROGPRINCE: *... You know you \*bent\* that bastard?*

SANDMAN: *T\_Rex here. Can you see it, FrogPrince?*

FROGPRINCE: *T\_Rex, I can see it clear.*

WILLWISP: *Word’s going out. Pell should know soon what they missed.*

UNICORN: *Or what missed \*them\*. :)*

SANDMAN: *This is Sandman. Thanks, guys...*

SANDMAN: *... Yon tell Pell the story, WillWisp, Unicorn. Gotta go...*

SANDMAN: *... I’m hooking up with Charlie...*

SANDMAN: *... Talk tomorrow.*

UNICORN: *You’re the best, Sandman. T\_Rex, you are so beautiful.*

SANDMAN: *... going to get a tow.*

CRAZYCHARLIE: *You can come aboard my cabin, Sandman.*

CRAZYCHARLIE: ... *Got a bottle waiting for you.*

CRAZYCHARLIE ... *A warm nook by the heater.*

SANDMAN: *Deal, Charlie. Me and my partner...*

SANDMAN: ... *somewhere warm.*

FROGPRINCE: *Didn't know you had a partner, Sandman...*

FROGPRINCE: ... *Thought you were all alone out here.*

SANDMAN: *I'm not, now, am I?*

SANDMAN: *T\_Rex speaking again. T\_Rex says...*

SANDMAN: ... *This is one tired T\_Rex. ((Bowing.)) Thanks, all...*

SANDMAN: ... *Thanks, Sandman. Thanks, Charlie.*

SANDMAN: ... *((Poof))*

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