

The Orbital Livestock Company

“The cows on deck nine need feeding,” Annika announced as I entered the control room. I looked at my watch; it was 19:55 station time. My duty didn’t start till 20:00; if anyone else but her had said it, or even if she had asked me nicely, I’d have done it without thinking. Annika could be a bitch though, moody and difficult. More often than not she was late to take over the watch. She was sloppy at paperwork, all things considered she was no-one's favourite but she didn’t seem to care. And neither did anyone in authority.

We had all complained about her, at one time or another. Yet she was still here; perhaps she knew where the bodies were buried. Whenever I took over the watch from her she tried to leave me a lot of the work that she should have done. She might have only been small but she had a presence, she was intense and acted like someone twice her size.

She was always dressed in shapeless overalls and wore a cap pulled down over her features; it was hard to get any visual clues about her, we had to assume she really was a stropic teenager who hadn’t grown up.

“So?” I answered, “I’m on watch in five, they can wait or you can push the damn button.” It wasn’t like she had to walk around with a bucket of pellets; the auto feeders would drop a measured amount into a trough in each pen. I glanced up at the banks of screens over the duty controller’s desk, the cows knew as well as we did when they were due for a feed and they had all lined up in anticipation. They say that animals don’t show emotion, this lot had hunger, puzzlement and anticipation in spades. Most of them watched the feeders while some looked pleadingly at the cameras.

“Don’t try and make it my problem,” I told her, not that it would do me much good; she had the hide of a buffalo.

“What is it with you?” she asked. “Always the smart arse comment.” I sighed, why couldn’t we have a conversation without the points-scoring?

“When you do something for me,” I said in what I thought was a reasonable tone, “or for anyone come to that, then people might help you out, the feed was due at 19:30.”

“The feeders were down,” she announced. If that was true, why hadn’t she said so at the start? Unless she was deliberately trying to wind me up.

“They’ve just come back online, check the log,” she said with a founce, picking up her papers and moving towards the exit. Unfortunately, she chose that moment to walk into the chief wrangler. Lors Thores was a senior man, an OLC man, and he stopped her progress through the narrow airlock. “Going somewhere, Annika?” he asked.

“My watch is over,” she said, trying to dodge past him, “and I’m outta here.”

“Ahh,” he answered, moving to block her until he had said his piece. “But I was stood by the doorway and I never heard you hand over the watch. Perhaps I’m going deaf.” He had the knack of sarcasm down pat. He didn’t like her much either.

She looked back at me, her face a dark hole under the brim of her cap, still standing with the sulky, defiant posture. She wouldn’t plead, that much was plain. Would I bail her out or would I drop her in it? I pushed buttons and the cows were fed. “It’s fine, Lors, the feeders were down, I’ve got it.”

He shrugged and finally let Annika past, she disappeared, the sound of her feet clicking on the deck, gradually fading.

“She owes you one for that,” he said with a little disappointment, “and no-one will thank you for it. That could have been the last straw; you could have got her sacked.”

“She owes most people now,” I admitted, “but maybe it’ll come in handy one day, anyway, you never know who OLC will send up to replace her.”

“That’s true,” he said, “and I guess it’s better the devil you know, at least I don’t have to work with her.”

I settled into the chair and started checking things. For the next twelve hours, I was in charge of Charlie station. I briefly wondered why Annika chose to make her life so difficult; this job was the best one I had ever had. It was a crazy way to behave.

Charlie station of the Orbital Livestock Company floated in orbit high above Earth, rotating gently to give us and our cargo gravity. It was a new concept, the result of overpopulation, too much methane in the planet’s atmosphere and the need to feed everyone. Animals were living in space, on the Company’s four stations. Here on Charlie station we had the cows, Alpha had the sheep, Bravo the pigs and Delta had the poultry.

We had around twenty thousand cows, a whole ten decks of pasture growing with the help of all the free fertiliser and limitless solar powered lighting. The methane that the cows produced powered our life support and electrical systems and there was a twice daily automatic milking regime. Then there was the steady stream of ships docking, the meat ship, the milk and cheese ship, the spare methane tanker and almost as an afterthought the occasional load of supplies for the human contingent. The ones that didn’t eat beef always got jumpy if it was late.

I rarely bothered looking out of the port, but today we were passing over the north Pacific, a huge tropical storm was covering most of the view; with its swirl of cloud and the eye clearly

visible. I contrasted the turbulence below with the calm on the station, at least when Annika was out of the way.

I'd have to give Annika her due though, she had been awkward at handover but for once she had meticulously recorded her watch. And to be fair the feeding was a bit of a pain, a holdover from the early days when there was only a small staff. Now we had farmers and stockmen and all sorts of other workers but we were still feeding the cows from the control room. I got fed up with doing it, so did everyone else. The stockmen were agitating for it to be removed from our control and given to them. There were no trades-unions on the station, the management wouldn't allow them, sometimes I wondered if maybe they had a point.

~~~~~

My watch passed quickly, it might have officially been night time but in the artificial environment it was academic. It did mean that there was less to do though, most of the humans were out of the way and unless there was an emergency requiring the duty vet or one of the engineers you were left alone. Tonight was quiet; I caught up on the never ending paperwork and even managed to snooze in the chair for a couple of hours. At 0800 on the dot, my relief appeared, looking like he had been up drinking and partying all night. He probably hadn't, Charlie could go for an inspection in the data room and come out looking in need of decontamination.

“Morning, Tim,” he said, yawning and scratching. “Much happening?”

I filled him in on the events of the last twelve hours and he signed to accept the watch. He updated the on-call list, noted the duty vet and did all the other things that we all did. Except for Annika, she performed the job entirely to her own satisfaction.

“So, Tim,” Charlie said, “I hear that you bailed the lovely lady out again last night.”

“Yeah, I was feeling generous.”

“Well it’s not gone down well, I’d keep out of the way for a while, Griffith is going crazy.”

Griffith was the senior of my fellow watch-keepers; the five of us worked a cushy little system, fourteen twelve hour watches in a five-week rotation. We had loads of time off and a good social scene; there were a couple of hundred people on the station and plenty of entertainment. We could take a trip earth-side by covering each other whenever we wanted and there were wages as well. And the food; well as long as you liked beef it was OK. This all made Annika’s attitude strange. If she didn’t want to be here, why didn’t she just resign?

“I’ll bear it in mind,” I said. “If you’re happy, I’m off.” Charlie waved his hand; he was already immersed in his list of tasks.

Leaving the control room I went to get some breakfast. And found Annika sitting in the mess, still in the same bland overalls, the cap still obscuring her face. She was eating from a plate of something vegetarian. I still liked meat but a lot of people were put off. “Come and sit with me, Tim,” she said. I sensed trouble.

“If it’s about last night,” I started.

“Thank you,” she said, sounding really sincere. We had been here before though, I wasn’t necessarily falling for it.

“I mean it,” she continued. “I know I’m an awkward bitch but I pushed it too far, I’m sorry.”

“Tell me,” I said, “why do you behave like you do?”

“I took a load of crap once before; I’m not having that again!” She jabbed at the things on her tray and chewed them as if it were them that had done her harm.

I persisted. “Don’t you think it’s too much sometimes, everyone hates you on here, don’t you think that if you were even vaguely likeable you’d get on a lot better?”

“What do you mean?” she said, an edge in her voice as she continued to attack her meal. I paused, did I really want to push this conversation; her mood could easily change.

“Well, just think for a minute, you might be able to cope on your own now, but if you get any major hassle, who’s on your side? Not Lors, not Griffith and they’re the ones you need.”

“How about you, Tim, you stuck up for me yesterday.”

“Yes and I’m suffering for it, everyone wants me to drop you in it, and I’m not even important in the hierarchy. How much notice will OLC take of me, compared to them?”

She digested that for a moment and came to a decision, “You’re right,” she said with surprising sincerity. “Can you meet me tonight, down on the observation platform, I’ll explain everything.”

I thought about it. “As long as you’re not going to use me for some crazy scheme that’s going to cause me even more grief.”

She laughed, her teeth flashing white in the shadow cast by her cap’s brim. “I’ll tell you at 2000.” She got up and left me sitting and wondering.

I looked around at the occupants of the mess, the officers tended to keep to the outer end while the farmers were in the middle. Down at the inner end, furthest from the ports, the unskilled labourers huddled together. They tended to form groups by trade and were thought to be better paid than some of the artisans. I wasn’t bothered; no amount of wages could get me doing some of the more unpleasant jobs that all those cows demanded.

~~~~~

After I had eaten I went to my cabin and tried to sleep. I couldn't settle. I kept thinking about what Annika had said and if I was getting into more trouble by allying myself with her. I knew little about her, she had been here less than a year whereas I had worked with Charlie and the rest of them for more than four; since there had only been one platform in fact. They were all solid and dependable and we had been through a lot together.

In the end, I got up and went for a walk, the station was fully accessible to me because of my job as a duty controller and although it was all logged I could go where I wanted.

The pasture decks were rotated to allow the grass to recover and there was always one available for recreation, a couple were under cultivation and the rest available for grazing. The animals were spread out between the pasture and holding pens, with the stockmen in charge of everything. Except for the feeding.

Now, as I walked on the short grass, seeing people picnicking and families playing games in the artificial sunlight I wondered what Annika would tell me. I wondered if I wanted to lose this life and return to polluted, crowded Earth. Because I knew that's what would happen if I got things wrong. It was still a mystery why Annika hadn't been sacked; with her disruptive manner she was leading a charmed life. I didn't want to get sucked into her problems.

I left the sward and went up a level, to the observation deck. It was a huge glass-walled walkway, extending all around the station. On the outside, the Sun and the Earth could be seen through polarised panels as we all rotated and on the inside you could see the throng of animals grazing contentedly, unaware that they were in orbit. At least I hoped they were.

I was surprised to see McLean, the owner of the stations and boss of OLC, sitting on a bench, gazing out at the storm on Earth. He was rarely seen in public, preferring to live alone on the top deck that all the stations had, getting his minions to do all the work. We lesser workers

usually didn't even know which station he was on at any time. He had some illness that prevented him returning to the ground so he lived his life up here.

I had only seen him a handful of times, I had been introduced when I had started working here and maybe once a year since then. He looked up as I passed, just before I was about to say hello.

"Come and sit with me for a minute, Tim," he offered. I didn't think it was an offer.

"Hello, sir," I replied. "I'd be delighted."

"Funny that I should bump into you," he said, I doubted that, if he had wanted to see me he could have arranged it easily; he must have been tracking me. I said nothing.

"It's so less formal here," he carried on, so that was it, off the record. "I hear that you have a meeting this evening," he said softly.

I wanted to say 'how did you know?' but I shouldn't have been surprised. He might never venture out into his domain but he kept his finger firmly on the pulse. I knew by reputation that he said little but that every word he said meant something, it was important to concentrate on what he said and not be fooled by his lazy manner.

Travis McLean was a legend; he had started OLC by buying an old research station from the Russians. Using money crowdfunded when no government would help he proved the concept of farming in space until they were embarrassed into supporting him. The rising population of the planet, reducing the land available for agriculture, had helped his cause and as well as the four livestock stations, a whole fleet of arable growing platforms was planned. McLean had got very rich and consequentially was very well attuned to any potential trouble in his empire.

He looked at me a smile playing on his face. "Look down there." He gestured towards the Earth; the storm raged silently, life in Japan must have been bad underneath all that. "Up here it's always calm," he said. "It was calm in Japan not long ago. Now it's very unpleasant."

Was he drawing a parallel to what might happen here?

"Storms can affect us all," he continued, "even in this calm place. I have heard mutterings, Tim, complaints. People love to tell me what I should do in regard to the people on my stations." He shook his head. "It annoys me, all that presumption. As if I didn't know what was going on. I take more than a passing interest, I always have. I hope you understand what you're getting into."

I didn't but I wasn't going to tell him that. Was it a threat? Did he mean that if I allied myself with Annika we would both be for the chop? Should I keep my nose out, follow the herd and be safe.

"Good luck with your meeting," he said, rising from the bench. "I trust you get my meaning, that you'll make the correct choice. Get it right and you'll find that everything works out. The storm will pass."

He wandered off, anonymous in his rumpled clothes, ignored by the other people walking on the deck. He had left me no wiser. I would just have to see what she said.

After lunch I managed to sleep, I wouldn't be working again until the next morning but fancied a later than usual night, there was a new supply of beer to sample once I had seen Annika.

Promptly at 2000, I was sitting on the same bench as I had been on with McLean when Annika showed up. She glanced all around her before sitting, there were a few folk around but no-one was taking any notice of us.

“Hi,” she said, sitting close to me. Out of the shapeless uniform we all wore she was a lot more interesting, I realised that I had never seen her without a cap. The short auburn hair suited her, it framed a sharp but pretty face and her brown eyes shone as she looked at the Earth. And out of the boiler suit, in jeans and a shirt, she had an interesting figure.

We sat in silence for a while, the planet had rotated and the Americas were in sight, clothed in darkness, the coasts were lit up by the cities lights visible through the clouds.

“Thank you for coming,” she said, not turning her head. “I know that Travis has seen you. Before I tell you more, I need to know, are you with me or not?”

“If I say no, what does that mean?” I answered.

“Then you’ll be escorted off the station, right now.” She waved her hand; I looked up and saw two of the station's security guards loitering twenty feet away. “Now that I’ve revealed myself; if you’re not in you can’t stay. Didn’t Travis tell you?”

“How did you know I saw Travis?” Suddenly, in a flash, it all started to make sense. Annika led a charmed life; she must be working for Travis. And now I could be working for Annika.

“Well?” she asked, urgently. The two moved closer. “It’s decision time.”

“OK, I’m in.” She relaxed and waved at the guards, who backed off and resumed their study of the cattle, grazing peacefully on the pasture below.

“Good,” she nodded decisively, I was seeing a different Annika, this one was calm; I preferred her to the bolshie one.

“Let me explain, I’m an investigator, not official like the police but licensed and regulated. Travis and I have studied you,” she said, “in detail; and we’ve decided that you’re the best one to help us.”

“Help you how?”

“For some time, Travis has been concerned that there are things going on, on all the stations. People are taking liberties; lining their pockets. There’re protection rackets. The staff are all split into cliques. There’s a web of rottenness in OLC. A Mafia if you like. Travis is worried that they might try and take control. And I’ve been employed to identify the ringleaders and sort it out.”

“So why me? And how can I help?”

She smiled. “You can’t help but notice that I’ve set myself up as a bloody nuisance. And what’s better than a nuisance in a position of power, I’m in charge of the station sometimes; I can turn things on and off. I don’t fit in and I fight authority. I’ve hinted around the place that I’m not a fan of the system and I might be interested in extra cash. The idea was that I would be attractive to the undesirable elements. We don’t think they’ve got anyone in senior positions yet, I could be a useful recruit for them.”

It sounded logical and just the sort of crafty operation that Travis would organise.

“So who else knows?”

“On the station?” she said “You, me and Travis.”

I suddenly knew what was coming next. “I suppose it’s not working? And you need me to help.”

She smiled. “Sort of. You’re right I haven’t had any advances yet and Travis is getting impatient. He’s heard whispers, there’s something in the wind. So we’re changing tack, you and I are going to become an item.”

“What, you mean like I’m a recruit to the cause, your new partner in crime?”

She nodded, "Exactly."

"So we can be bolshie together."

She moved closer, putting her arm around my shoulder. Her body was warm against me.

"Lucky you! You get to spend time with me while we start our own rebellion, then we wait and see who joins in!"