

JO BUYS A PLANET

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Daniel Crow

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ABOUT THIS PIECE

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CHAPTER ONE

JO BUYS A PLANET

“Welcome to Bob’s free mining colony! You may still be experiencing the side effects of wormhole travel, but soon, your new life as an off-world miner will—”

The speaker coughed and died off, leaving the overly enthusiastic welcome unfinished. Johanna didn’t mind, as every word burrowed into her brain like a gimlet.

Her capsule remained locked. She wished she could get a sense of where she was — still in the screened hull of the transport, or



maybe at the orbital station already? Either way, after a whole load of nothingness around, it would have been comforting to see there was something, anything beyond the capsule.

She tried to raise her hand, but her muscles felt hopelessly out of sync with her brain. Another side effect from spending three days where no human should ever be and the drug-induced, sanity-preserving artificial coma. Oh, the wonders of deep-space travel.

The metal top of the capsule floated off with a hiss, letting in the blinding light. Johanna gasped and closed her eyes.

"Hey, sleeping beauty," she heard a woman say. "Welcome back from Neverland. You hear me alright?"

"Yeah... Ugh... Water please."

The woman handed her a plastic tube. The water left a metallic aftertaste. "Johanna Smithson, right? The new engineer."

"Yes... Yes, ma'am."

"Great. I am doctor Hartman, Bob's senior medical officer. Your vitals look good, so we'll head for the planet soon. First off-world job, huh?"

"Yes," Johanna finally opened her eyes. The relay station's medical bay was as ascetic as it gets, but she liked Doctor Hartman. The woman looked old and rough, with her tired white lab coat covering a miner's fat sweater and old jeans. But she was the right kind of old and rough.

"Well, then, hope you're prepared to fight off the nostalgia," the doctor said. "Three years is a long time. And you don't look like you can afford to pay for a trip back yourself."

Jo asked if it was this way on all of these jobs.

Doctor Hartman nodded. “All private ops like ours get the same relay deal. At least we’ve got proper internet.”

“Is it good? I really hope it’s good.”

The doctor shrugged. “Satellite coverage on the planet and direct wormhole link with the Earth. There’s almost no lag. Information travels faster than people. It’s a good place to go through the movie backlog.”

Johanna shook her head and closed her eyes, listening into her space-concussed body.

“No sleeping. We gotta wake your muscles up.”

After a torturous physiotherapy session, they both followed the handrails to the transit shuttle. Doctor Hartman stopped at one of the omnipresent Foodie vending stations, which looked more like a bank vault. The machine handed her a soda after recognizing her face. “Hope you like their stock,” Hartman grinned. She said Foodie was the colony’s exclusive food supplier. “Another damn contract milking us little guys.”

“Don’t they take bitcoin?” Johanna asked. “I think they announced they were accepting payments in satoshis, about a month ago.”

“Don’t care, frankly.” The doctor made a paying gesture and said, “I use the good ol’ digital greenback. But you can talk to Willie, he’s their local manager, if that’s your thing. A word of warning, though — he’s really into redheads.”

★ ★ ★

“Jo to HQ, do you copy?” She watched the harvester, a massive hulking machine on heavy-duty tracks, pull through the desert. Bob’s planet had a Mars-like atmosphere, mostly carbon dioxide, and held a host of rare earths, which Bob’s crew had been shipping to Earth through the wormhole relay. The harvesters came a bit later, with the help of Rania, who got a sub-license from Bob to collect some rare isotopes in the desert and occasionally contracted Bob’s engineers to do the maintenance.

“Hear you loud and clear, Jo. Willie’s been asking about you. Said he got the rig, wants to start mining.”

“Cool,” Johanna sighed. “I am done with the harvester, Iwai, Rania better get ready to decommission it.”

“Heading home now, Jo?”

“Nah, will check up on my farm, while I’m out here.”

She stretched out in her seat — a privilege she never had in the claustrophobic living pod she was renting back home — and set the rover’s course for the unnamed rocky flatland where she set up her array of solar panels and the computer crunching the numbers. The idea was a gamble, but she had run the math and figured it was worth a shot — and so far, it seemed so.

The dispatcher asked if she’d come all the way here just for this bitcoin thing. Surely, she could just mine back on Earth?

“Nope. Long story short, power’s too expensive.”

A shadow cast on the desert around — the ringed silhouette of the wormhole relay station eclipsed the sun, its own solar panels gulping on every bit of sunlight they could get. Jo didn’t mind. The thing was their main and only connection with Earth, after all. It deserved some love.

“So is it paying off?” Iwai asked.

“Not crazy money, but I’ll take it.”

She looked at the relay station again and blew it a kiss. Coming here, Johanna doubted whether the wormhole connection would be fast enough for her to compete for blocks with other miners, but it was almost as fast as your regular connection on Earth. So while the bigger fish snatched the prize most often, she still had lucky pickups every now and then.

“Should I get one? How do you set it up?”

“Up to you.” She shrugged. “But I’ll help you if you give me more of your home-grown veggies. Honestly, so cool that everyone here has their own thing going. I want one too.”

“You got your mining.”

“That’s the means, not the end.” Jo exhaled. “Aight, gonna go quiet for a bit. Jo out.”

“HQ out, Jo. Safe travels.”

About an hour later, her terminal went off, alerting her that Rania sent a few hundred bucks her way. Bob took a cut, of course, and froze more of her digital greenbacks, all sitting safely on Earth servers, because of her travel through the desert. It was his rover, after all. At least he didn’t turn the seat warmer into a subscription service, like they did with the cars she rented on Earth.

★ ★ ★

“Guess what the worm-shuttle brought this time, Jo?” Willie asked with a wide grin.

“Foodie stuff that actually doesn’t taste like vomit?”

Maddie, the home-brew maker, cackled. Technically, she wasn't supposed to share her product with anybody, or even brew it, to begin with. The Foodie contract banned any non-Foodie foods on the colony, but Bob's pirate miner crew was lax with such things. Willie included. The corporation was light years out from here, but Bob and his fists were here, in the kind of proximity that was pretty intimate by the universe's standards.

"It brought the bitcoin terminals!" Willie declared. He said he'd already set them on all of the machines.

Maddie laughed in disbelief. "It's not like Foodie would ever let you tinker with their machinery."

Jo beamed, too, imagining Willie trying to do literally anything to the armored beast with Foodie's mascot (a burger so happy as if it had been drugged) that stood in their cantina. Restocks and upgrades were automated, done by the company's service robots. She really had no clue why Foodie even had Willie around, probably just for the anti-automation tax cuts.

"Who cares about details?" Willie hunched his shoulders. "What matters is we can now all pay with our bitcoin. You got your third rig up and running, right, Jo?"

"Yup. It's so much cheaper to mine here than back home."

Maddie sipped her beer. She wondered aloud about trying the whole mining thing. "Dad's brewery's still bleeding, and whatever I can send helps."

"I'll help you for a case," Jo promised. "I actually thought of opening a bar too... Couldn't get a loan."

Willie grinned, imagining Jo behind a bar.

“Bar, repairs shop, robotics company, whatever,” Jo sighed. “I just want to have something that’s mine, you know? Everything’s a fucking subscription, everything’s for rent... Like, I don’t want the whole pie, you know? Just a tiny piece to munch on. Big guys can have the rest.”

“Damned be my old eyes,” Bob’s coarse voice thundered over the cantina. “Is it illegal beverages they see? Here, in the heart of hearts of my motherbase?!”

Despite his young age of forty-three, Bob looked as if he was at least eighty. He had a long scruffy beard, an antique prosthetic for right arm, which looked too old to be a relic of the augmentation hype era, and his voice was as loud as a C4 blast.

“Jesus Christ, Bob,” Maddie rolled her eyes to the laughs from Jeremy and Khaled, who sat at the table across. “You got your cut, don’t be a drama queen!”

“My old eyes will no longer see it once it’s in me,” Bob said, allowing himself a chug from Maddie’s bottle. He burped and looked around the cantina, where about a dozen people were gathered, which was pretty much as busy as it usually got. “Tell you what, folks,” he thundered on. “I have a report from our outer surveillance satellite. Damn thing’s expecting a meteor shower. Says it’s not gonna hit us or the station, but keep an eye out and don’t get caught unprepared.”

★ ★ ★

Jo didn’t quite catch the meteor shower herself — she was too exhausted after the trip to Bob’s automated mine, where she had to

calibrate a digger bot. She only woke up to the sound of the buzzer alerting her to an emergency meeting in the situation room. On her way there, she got a can of Moxy, Foodie's certified energy drink that tasted like pure, concentrated suffering. The damn vending vault didn't want to recognize her face, so she caved and paid in bitcoin.

The round situation room, which was locked most of the time, was now packed with people. Everyone was agitated, talking at the same time over the beeps and boops of a dozen consoles, with white noise filling most of the screens. The main one, hanging right over Bob's throne-like seat adorned with more consoles and displays, displayed some grainy mess.

"I'm sleeping, right?" someone whispered next to her. "Please tell me this is just a nightmare..."

"We're so, so *fucked*," said a voice with a confidence that sent chills down Jo's spine.

She squinted, trying to figure out what the grainy mess was. It looked like a mangled-up donut that one of those tiny dogs gnawed the life out of, leaving it maimed and battered.

Then, it hit her. It wasn't just a regular donut, it was the worm-hole relay station.

Their only connection with Earth was gone.

"Holy shit," she whispered, her eyes widening.

"Okay, everybody, enough with the panic." Bob's comforting tone thundered through the distressed voices. "Panic's not gonna help, 'cause we're on a timer here. Oxygen converters are crucial — Maddie, Thor, I want you guys to check them now. We'll have

to ration water, our generators won't be enough. Willie, any luck getting the damn Foodie shit open?"

"No, Bob," Willie bleated. He was pale and didn't know what to do with his gangly self. "It's gone into lockdown; it thinks we're trying to hack it."

"Damn corporates," Bob growled. "If it doesn't open, we'll blow up a damn hole in it!"

"I'd like to warn against anything so dramatic," Doctor Hartman said coldly. "Bob, it's only a few centimeters of steel, carbon, and wiring between us and all the damn CO₂ in the world. Let's be smart about it."

Bob asked if they could drill a hole in it.

"Guys, guys," Jo raised her can of liquid disaster like Lady Liberty. "Bitcoin payments still work. The damn thing just charged me a bit more, but I bought this just minutes ago."

For a few seconds, the room fell silent. Then, Bob nodded and grinned. "Well, that improves our food situation a bit," he said grumpily. "I know a lot of you got into this bitcoin thing, so I reckon you can shop. But the vaults won't be resupplied, cause the wormhole's gone."

"They have some extra supplies," Willie said. "Basically, in case re-stocking fails. So they're gonna last us at least about a month, if we're cautious."

"Well, that helps." Bob looked skywards. "I've already fired off a distress signal, but it's gonna take years to reach Earth, unless someone close by picks it off and passes on. But don't get comfortable, people. Let's not assume help's coming tomorrow."

Let's not assume help's coming at all is what Jo heard and it made her shiver.

★ ★ ★

For the first few days after the relay station went down, Jo was so slammed with work that she barely had the opportunity to think of anything else. She spent hours and hours checking their oxygen converter arrays, and when that was done, she rewarded herself with a tiny veggie salad she'd bought for bitcoin from Iwai. The next earthly day found her pondering over the videos that Bob's crew brought from the relay station. Bob said the damn thing was so battered the shuttle could barely dock in.

Then, one of the water generators broke down — perfect timing — so Jo and Maddie worked their asses off until there were finally more small droplets in the machine's condenser chamber. Maddie sold her a pack of beers, and Jo was too tired to even count the satoshis. She just wanted to crack a cold one open and store the rest for a better day.

About a week after the incident, the drama lost some of its punch. They had brought everything dealing with life-support into the best shape it has ever been. Now there was little else for them to do. Another shuttle trip to the station confirmed the amount of damage was beyond what they could fix, and they didn't have much fuel for the flight anyways. The mining operation slowed to a grind, because Bob's storage capacity was built around the idea he'd be able to ship stuff to Earth every two weeks on a wormhole transport, and expanding it would have been a struggle.

So everyone just ended up gravitating to whatever rocked their boat. Iwai and Said worked on expanding the garden. Maddie ramped up her beer operation, renting two water generators from Bob. And Jo went to check up on her mining rigs — and found herself to be crazy rich.

With the connection with Earth severed, all that was left was the local network of a few rigs still carrying on. Jo had the most hashpower there, and so, most of the rewards went to her. And given that most tokens on the network sat back on earthly wallets, the real supply on Bob's planet was very thin. And she, again, had most of it. With Foodie's vaults, impervious to everything they threw at them other than bitcoin, it stood as the bulwark of her fortune.

Best of all, she grew richer by the day, with every passing hour expanding her lead. At first, she'd spend her bitcoin just on Iwai's salads, but then, bought herself a stake in his farm. She bought a stake in Maddie's brewery too. A share in Rania's business was acquired almost randomly, for one bitcoin and a pack of beers. And then, one night when they both got bored and drunk, Jo bought half of the stupid planet from Bob.

"Why the hell would you ever buy it?" Bob asked. "I mean, I'm fine, I'll get fat on the Foodie shit. But, like, why? It's just a piece of rock in deep space. Not even that profitable. Why?"

"Cause like..." The alcohol in her blood filled her with a pleasant warmth. "What if nobody's, like, ever gonna show up? What if, I dunno, Earth's been destroyed by some aliens, and we're now the new humanity, huh? I buy 51 percent of this planet from you, and here we go, my kids will be kings and queens."

“Kids? With whom, Willie?”

“Eh,” Jo made a vague gesture. “I’ll figure it out. You’re my VP now, how dare you question me?!”

“Easy there, your majesty,” Bob laughed. “We’ll buy you a crown when they fix the relay. So you’re gonna have one in what, a century?”

★ ★ ★

They didn’t have to wait a century — just three earthly months from there, the comms center at their HQ temporarily went offline because of the absolute storm that an uncontained wormhole opening too close to the planet caused across the entire radio spectrum. After Said and Kamran brought the system back online, they saw the ugly, bulky hull of a Dolphin-class rescue burrower on their long-range visors. Within a few minutes, the first transmission came in.

“Slow approach velocity. Let the engines cool off. ETA — 147 earthly hours. Bob’s free mining colony, do you copy?”

“Hear you loud and clear, dolphin,” Jo said into the mic. “You came in fast! How come?”

“An explorer drone picked your distress signal and beamed it to its relay. Honestly, you were on our radars for a long time, it just took a while to get a sign-off on the rescue mission.”

“Well, dolphin, you’re a joy for our sore eyes at any approach velocity,” Jo smiled. “Just one small update for you, though.”

“What is it?”

“It’s Jo and Bob’s free mining colony now.”

“Yeah, Jo, I wouldn’t be so sure,” Bob said. He looked relieved, but also tense, like a boxer before his biggest fight.

“How come, Mr. Vice-President?”

“What do you think happens when the dolphin reconnects us to the main time chain?”

SOURCE

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