

## Courier of Justice – by Kenneth Candler

My name's Mel, short for Marlowe. We don't have last names anymore. I'm a space courier, my rig is a SportFly X-86, pretty standard for entry level couriers, bachelors, and students and the like. She's six or seven years old by now, but still has lots of life in her. She gets me around. The first thing you'll probably notice about me is the scar on my cheek, it's hard to miss. It's the mark of a psychopath. She couldn't have me all to herself, so that was goodbye. The other thing you'll notice is the big, red letter on the left breast panel of my flight jacket, over my heart. It's a scarlet letter, it means I'm a criminal, but this I wear with pride. I'm not actually a criminal, I'm more of a saint. I'm marked as a criminal, and what I do feels far from heroic, but if you ask Ghost Girl, any day of the week, she'll tell you I'm a hero. I'm her hero anyway, because I'm the only one who can tell her story. I'm the only one who can bring her killers to justice. The scarlet letter is just another mark from another monster: a big one, with many teeth.

When you start out as a courier, you don't realize that you're already being stalked and hunted. There is only so much courier work to go around in a given territory, and that work can be covered by a certain number of individuals, and not exceeding that. And by individuals, I mean psychopaths. If you get a job as a courier, it's not because you are needed as a courier, it is because these individuals have all agreed to each give up a little bit of their work so that you can have a job for a few years while they figure you out. These individuals don't mind giving up work at all, because they are being paid fistfuls of cash by the suits, who enjoy watching and wagering on the hunt. That's right: the Syndicate. It all boils down to sadism. It was bad enough on earth, it's worse in space.

Her name was Erin, she had red hair, that's pretty much all I know about her—and that she was nice, and that she didn't deserve what they did to her. We both answered the same job ad. I survived. She didn't. I remember her there on the first day, brand new flight suit, all smiles, ready to go. We shook hands and milled around for a few minutes before we were sent off for our individual training. A few years later, just before I went on the run, I sat down at a bar, waiting for a meet, and there she was, polishing a beer mug. She had big aviator sunglasses on, because she was facing right into the sun, but I recognized her, and she remembered me. We caught up quick, talking about a few of the same people that we knew, people we had worked with, we even had the same dispatcher for a while. It was only a few minutes and I was out of there. What I remember about that interaction was that she couldn't really smile, and that I sure as hell wasn't getting a laugh out of her. She had an iron jaw. Whatever they had done to her, it had broken her. A week after that I heard she was dead. I later learned that when I spoke to her she was under the sway of a local pimp, she was hooked on drugs, and that she had already been assaulted several times.

The Overlords will only negotiate with the Syndicate, so we do have them to thank for that, for preserving some semblance of our way of life, but I will never turn a blind eye to psychopaths who post a job ad to lure in young ladies so they can break them for the pimps. And the Space Cops Patrol? SCP?! They don't even care! The Syndicate has long infiltrated all branches of the justice system, including law enforcement. The cops took their payout and ruled it an overdose. Case closed. But not for me. I took care of the pimp, he's buried in a canyon on a desert moon, but I couldn't get the name from him, the name of the psychopath who did the breaking. I mean, they're all involved, once the trap is sprung they all do the breaking, but in their game there is one key player who earns the victim's trust.

I started feeling Erin's presence beside me in the cab of my sport not long after I was captured and branded with the letter. When the psychopaths can't find a vice to exploit, as in my case, the dispatcher will just load you up with contraband and walk you into a space patrol. It was fudged nonsense. The trick is to get you in the courtroom on trial, then the Syndicate has you, that's the trap. But I was raised on one of those bad colonies, where the teacher was a rogue sadist who secretly wanted to turn the place into a murderous nightmare by corrupting some of the children. All it takes is one bad apple to plant the seeds for a massacre. There are plenty of these empty capsules floating around in deep space, long rumoured to be haunted, no one goes near them. Because of my conditioning in the colony, I knew that the answer was guilty. When the world is upside down, do the opposite. It was when I started bouncing around on the outskirts of society, looking for work on the barren moons, that I started receiving the messages from Erin. First it was just feelings, and I couldn't understand where they were coming from, and why they wouldn't go away. Then the memories and images started coming, and I knew they were not my own. And as these feelings got stronger, the cab got suddenly colder and I could see my breath. After experiencing this a few times, I asked her to show herself to me, if she could, so that I would know she was real, but not to scare me too much. And she did, just once, in one of those half-waking rollovers, when I was trying to catch a few hours. I woke up frozen, shivering, terrified. I knew instantly someone was there, and when I looked up from the bed, I saw her silhouette in the doorway to the cab. All black, but it was her for sure. That was the one time, so I know it's real. I don't know how it works on her side, but I know she can come and go. When she stays too long, I start to feel her too much, her pain seeps into me, and it brings me down and makes me less and less functional. She died in a lot of pain, and that apparently stays with her, but I have my own pain to deal with. By now she knows not to stick around too long, but sometimes she needs to bring me a message, and it sure is comforting when I know she's there. Sometimes she just comes to say hi, I guess, or just to be there, with me, in the loneliness of space.

Erin showed me the faces of her killers, and though I didn't escape unscathed, when I worked as a courier I was able to walk right into the jaws of the monster, and take a good look around, but I still need that one name, so I'm off to see my old dispatcher. Call me the courier of justice.