

# Punchline Vendetta

BY: JESSICA YEHLER

I

The fourth blockade clocks us in at 1000 km/h, but really we're going so much faster.

"N-nearing l-limits of blockade r-range," Rotgut sputters. Her voicebox chatters and whirls with feedback like it's playing third chair slide whistle in a symphony called "The Dirge of the Dying Toaster."

"If we get through this and you feel the need to kiss me out of joy, I'll allow it," Dietrich says.

"Don't hold your breath," I say, but we both do. We're still a little on edge after what happened at blockade two. A mage, a fugitive, and a hazard for national health; we're flying the ship like we stole her, because we did. By their standards, the Federation has every reason to fire on us. It's impossible to tell whether or not they have until we're either out of range or we're dead.

It's a miracle, but we get through. We all let out a sigh of relief, except for Rotgut, who makes a noise like a cup of rusty screws stuck in a blender instead.

"T-ten days t-to Amnesty if we ch-change c-course n-now," she reports. Amnesty is the last star system that the long arm of the Federation has yet to reach. Destination: Freedom.

Rotgut is a slutty, virus-infected navbot shaped like a rubbish bin that's been set on fire and kicked down a sand dune. Her circuits are faulty, her memory is fried, and the plastic around her USB ports is scratched and chipped from a lifetime of careless hookups. She picked up the stutter from a security droid. There's no getting rid of it—we've tried.

"Can't," I sigh. "The navs are shot."

The navs have been shot since we had the run-in with Orc raiders on the surface of a far-off moon. Federation Orcs are mercenaries; free Orcs are just assholes. We stopped for fuel; they stopped to pick a fight. I had to scrap the whole navigation system for enough power to knock them off our tail. Now we're floating onward with rough estimations of trajectory, and the raiders are headed to wherever it is that dead Orcs go after they've lived bad lives.

"You could wiggle your fingers and magic them back online," Dietrich says from the helm, because while Dietrich is something like 200 pounds of solid muscle, sometimes I forget that the muscle in

question is usually a sphincter.

"If I had ten extra fuel cells and a hot meal I could," I tell him.

Most ships nowadays are powered by antimatter and good engineering; the Punchline Vendetta runs on magic and death threats. I've got one tendril of magic making her fly faster than light and another making it look like she isn't. Another still changes the look of her hull—she used to be a Fed raider; now, she's a getaway ship. What the blockades see is a Trinity Church missionary vessel, but there are enough nuclear warheads sitting in her weapons bay to blow blockades one through five four times over, if we only had enough excess power to launch them—which we don't.

I give a frustrated tug to the strands of magic that connect me to my illusions like a beleaguered puppeteer stringing along too many marionettes. Once, there was a time the Federation thought they could use the mages to their advantage, but now, as far as they're concerned, magic is nothing more than a bad joke. Every illusion comes with a price tag attached, and the Federation has never been good at balancing a budget.

"Besides," I say, "I'm running too many illusions already."

"I can tell," Dietrich says. "You look like shit."

I know I do. Can't sleep, nothing to eat but some instant coffee and a diminishing stash of amphetamines. My hair is getting thin, bones are getting brittle, and I've got a cold sore in the corner of my mouth that just won't heal. I wasn't all that good looking to begin with. I've long since abandoned hopes of winning any beauty contests.

Dietrich isn't all that easy on the eyes anymore either, but I don't mention it. Looking at Dietrich is like being knocked out by the butt of a blaster—cinematic in theory, but in reality it just hurts. He's the kind of man whose five o'clock shadow needs to get a watch; there's more scar tissue on his body than there is skin. I used to crawl in bed with him, on the lonelier nights when neither of us could bear the empty spaces in our bunks. I try not to look at him all that much anymore. Now, we mostly just banter and cuss and try not to brush hands by accident while reaching for the same controls.

"You wanna hear a joke?" Dietrich asks.

His words are slow and slurred like he's been drinking, but the nicotine patches up and down both his arms say otherwise. We're not the kind of

people can who afford more than one vice.

“Hit me with it,” I say back.

Dee smirks like he thinks he’s clever. “Why did the Federation start the war?” he asks.

“I dunno,” I say. “Why?” I’m left waiting for the payoff, but it never comes.

“Because they could,” Dietrich says. No rim shot, no applause. Rotten tomatoes all around. We both laugh, but it’s not really funny, just true.

## II

Rotgut rolls into the mess hall at 0400 reeking of motor oil and overheating processors. She’s gotten herself stuck in an infinite calculation loop again. All of her higher functions have been lost to the exercise in futility that is computing the square root of two. She picked this glitch up from a couple of graphing calculators the last time we stopped for supplies.

Dietrich holds her still while I power her down, then we set about making enough coffee to last us a few more hours. We’ll reboot her come morning, once her hardware has had time to cool off and the mysteries of mathematics no longer hold such precise wonder.

“Should’ve scrapped her for engine power weeks ago,” Dietrich says, and I hate him a little for it, because I know it’s true.

I just can’t bring myself to do it.

“We can’t,” I tell him. “She’s a constant.”

When you can manipulate the world around you with a nod and a flourish of your hand, constants start to matter. For some mages, there’s the speed of light, the speed of sound, the force of gravity on any number of different worlds.

My constants are everywhere, scattered about the ship like the playthings of a spoiled child. The rough non-slip of the walkway under my socked feet; the vapors from the insta-boil water packet when I open it after shaking; the buzz of uppers under my optic nerves, keeping my eyes peeled and my pupils wide.

Dietrich sits down in a chair so hard it looks more like he’s collapsing. He swings his feet up onto the table stiffly, one leg at a time. The boots on his feet are massive, battle worn. The aglets on them have been frayed to uselessness. They look like the ends of the wires poking out of

the empty space that the transporter used to occupy before we sold it for bribe money at blockade three.

“And what about me,” he asks. His words are still all slurred together like a half-mixed cup of instant coffee. “Am I a constant?”

Dietrich has been a constant since he busted me and Rotgut out of a holding cell on a jury planet like he had every right to do such a thing, despite the panicked alarms and flurry of guards insisting that no, he didn’t.

But it’s dangerous, keeping people as constants; human lives are always so subject to change. Losing a constant breaks a lot of mages down, drives a lot more mad; sometimes, they kill themselves, if the Federation doesn’t get them first. I’d lose it without Dietrich, but I don’t tell him that. A mage maintains her constants at all costs.

“Wanna hear a joke?” I ask instead of answering.

“Hit me with it,” Dietrich says.

From the galley portholes, I can see two more ships approaching blockade four. They don’t know it yet, but men in uniforms inside the blockade warship have already fired a missile for each of them.

“How does a ship go out?” I ask.

“How?”

We don’t hear the missiles hit, but they make tiny ringed ripples in the lukewarm coffee slop. I hand Dietrich a mug.

## III

The ship loses steam as we approach blockade five. We slow down so much, we might actually be going the speed that the Fed radars say we are. I don’t realize why until it’s too late: more Orcs. Mercenaries, this time.

They’ve got a tractor beam on us, holding us steady. There’s not a doubt in my mind that there’s a big, ugly sonofabitch with jowls and an underbite barking orders to lock on and fire away.

“Dee, what do we have in the way of divertible power?” I ask.

He checks our stats, but I already know the answer.

“Not much.”

I pop an amphetamine and grope around for any stray bits of magic. At

the moment, I'm running four illusions; I drop the three of them that I can bear to let go of, but it's still not enough.

"Options?" Dietrich asks me. His words are all slurred around the edges now, like his tongue is too heavy for his mouth. His voice sounds like a memory.

Behind us, Rotgut's reboot finishes and she whirrs to life.

"Just one," I say.

We both look to her with regret.

"What d-did I m-miss?" she chatters, but by the time the retinal displays on her battered trashcan exterior power up, I've already got my hand on her power box and the plug in hand. She makes this pleased chirping noise as I hook her up; it reminds me that now the ship probably has seven different kinds of mechanical syphilis.

We suck the power clean out of her. A lifebox that would have lasted our useless navbot seventy years gives us about thirty seconds to get the weapons systems online and ready to fire, and even then it's barely enough.

"Wanna hear a joke?" Dietrich says. His thumb is on the trigger. His face looks ashy. Dead.

"No," I tell him. Rotgut's lifeless chassis sits between us, silent. Her stutter is finally fixed.

"What were the Orcs' last words?" Dietrich asks anyway.

"I don't know," I say. My words catch in my throat like my vocal cords are trying to hold them back.

"Me either," Dietrich says. His thumb presses down on the trigger like he's squashing a bug. "I don't speak Orc."

## IV

My bunk is next to the engine room, where I can hear the whirr of the thrusters and feel the ship's pulse. The Punchline Vendetta has character to her, like a war-hardened vet back for one last mission before she hangs up her blaster for good. By now, every nonessential function she once had has been cannibalized just to keep her going. What's not held together with duct tape is loosely secured by hopes that it won't fall apart.

There are a few things on the walls of my bunk, but not many: a map of the universe, as far as we know it and as far as it matters; a cheat-sheet

of spell runes; a vintage hologif of a sandy-haired actor in a black vest and white shirt. In the midst of it all is a picture of my parents—both dead now, both probably for the best. Dad still has both his eyes in the picture, though his hair is already going silver; Mom's left hand has been replaced by a hook already, but her smile hasn't yet faded to ghosts of flashing teeth.

"You have his nose," Dietrich says. He's a big, dark shape blocking the light from the hallway from coming through my doorway. Dietrich's own nose is bleeding. He doesn't seem to have noticed yet, but it's trickling down the rough beginnings of a moustache on his upper lip, the blood running black when it should be red.

I don't mention it.

"Her eyes, though," I tell him. "And her magic." Dad had been plain old human, but Mom taught me everything she knew.

I scoot over to make room for Dietrich on the bed. Dietrich hasn't been in my bunk since before the blockade two incident. We were all starving back then, bad enough that when he moved against me we could hardly afford to make anything but the gentlest of rocking motions for fear of expending too many precious calories. It's strange to think of that time as the good old days, but they were. Now we're still starving, but there's no rocking anymore.

"You ought to be asleep," Dee says.

"Can't," I tell him. I motion to the empty cup of coffee sitting on my nightstand, but really it's the amphetamines and the draining force of my magic that's keeping me up.

No one chooses to be a mage, any more than anyone chooses their laugh lines or the color of their skin or who they fall in love with. Dad was Mom's only constant; when he caught two slugs to the head from a Federation blaster, she waltzed circles around our living room with his body for weeks.

"Let me help," Dietrich says. The sound of his voice makes my skin crawl like there are maggots underneath. His voice is starting to sound more like mine than it is his own.

Dietrich moves to kiss me. His body jerks forward like a manual hovercar piloted by someone who only knows automatics. I almost forget to turn my head in time; his mouth misses mine by fractions of a degree, and now his blood is staining my face.

"Let me hold you," he says.

"No," I tell him.

## V

He lays his hands on mine. They're cold and alien to me, like his skin is just a clever human suit, like the flesh over his bones is only a thick, rubbery glove. There's an unsettling stiffness to his fingers. There's an unfamiliar distance to his touch.

"I can order you to let me," he says.

"You're not the captain of this ship anymore, Dee," I tell him.

His hands move up to his mouth and he coughs. The blood that's pooled in his lungs comes up red. He holds it in his cupped palms like he's just received Eucharist, his shoulders hunched forward like he's bowing and I'm the altar.

When I look him in the eyes, my final illusion slips. All of the muddy green of his irises has been taken over by painfully dilated pupils. The windows to his soul have gone all dark.

"I'm sorry, Dee," I say, because what else is there? I let my gaze wander down to his chest where stray shrapnel from the second blockade has cut singed holes into his jumpsuit. If I were to brush his hair behind his ear, I'd feel the soft spot, sticky with uselessly clotted blood, where the Feds stuck him with a bayonet that went straight to the underside of his brain.

I can work all the magic I like, but it doesn't change the fact that Dietrich has been dead for weeks.

"It's not your fault," he says, but the more I think on it the more that his voice sounds like a distant echo, strained memories of syllables pieced together from things that he's said long ago, once, and will never say again. I've turned his mouth into a sock puppet. The only words that come out of it anymore are the ones that I put into it.

"You're only saying that because I want you to," I tell him. I tug on the last strand of my magic, the one that's holding Dee together. It pulls him against me, and I let my head rest on his shoulder one last time.

He doesn't reply. I don't need him to.

"I used to love you, you know," I tell him quietly. I'm using the tone reserved for pillow talk and sentiments exchanged during the applause following wedding vows.

And I make Dietrich sit and listen, but I don't make him say it back.

"Do you wanna hear a joke?" he coughs through the blood instead, but I'm already gone, out the door of my bunk and down the hall.

I take my magic with me. If there's a punchline this time, I'm not there to hear it.

The bridge is quiet and I'm alone. Empty spaceship, dead space.

Somewhere out on that endless horizon is Amnesty. I'm not even sure it's worth the tolls I've had to pay to get there anymore.

An approaching vessel hails me on the comms, and I expend a spare bit of magic to turn them back on. It's a missionary vessel, not all that different from the one we were charading as just one blockade back. With the illusions dropped, we look like a Federation ship now.

"Alms for the Trinity?" Three voices sound over the comms, speaking together in unison.

"I don't have anything to give," I tell them. It's mostly true. Everything good I've had is already gone.

"Surely you have something," the voices insist. That's the universe for you: takes all you have to give, bleeds you dry, and then asks for more.

Suddenly that emptiness inside of me fills with rage.

I reach out with my last fingers of magic, drawing the ship toward me like a fish on a line. Once it's in range, I leech onto it and start drawing out their resources. My body is so starved for energy that the sudden influx makes me pant and sweat, but I divert it all into the Punchline Vendetta's mainframe, serving only as a conduit for the raw power surging through me.

The comms erupt in confusion, then outrage. I tune them out. There's not anything they could tell me to change my mind.

"Do you wanna hear a joke?" I ask them. The nail on my index finger falls off as I switch the navs on and select the fastest course to the fifth blockade. It looks nasty, a ragged bloody thing resting there on the controls. I flick it away, out of sight.

"Three hells await you for your transgressions, infidel," the comms from the Trinity ship swear. They sound pissed; I've just drained their life support systems, so I suppose they should be.

"How many warheads does it take to bring down the Federation?" I ask. I feel better than I have in months; there's even energy to spare.

The Trinity ship doesn't give a reply; they've given up trying to communicate and diverted their power.

"Three hours t-to b-blockade five," Rotgut stutters, coming to life as I reach out to her with a tendril of magic. Dietrich's heavy footfalls sound from behind me, animated by my illusions like a marionette as he enters

the bridge and lowers himself into his pilot's chair.

"Weapons system engaged," he says. His ugly green eyes give me a wink.

"All of them," I say, mostly to myself. It's still not all that funny. Most of my jokes aren't. But this time, there's a punchline—a hundred punchlines, all sitting pretty in our weapons bay, enough to blow blockades one through five four times over.

The other ship goes dark as mine roars to life.

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