



Tales from LM-27

"Base Runner"

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Based on Blackbird Interactive's "HardWare"

The TA-32C Base Runner was designed for a staffing requirement of six people. In rank order this roughly meant commander, Driver, sensor operator, and the three tech-hands of varying specialties, depending on the herd leader and Base Runner commander demands.

Rosen's Base Runner had three technicians who were all cyberneticists. In terms of the larger herd, whenever a specific find was dug up it was brought to Rosen's BR for special examination. Rosen himself knew enough about the market to appraise an artifact for sale on whatever market Rosen could recommend. Sometimes though, some of these 'artifacts' ended up misplaced from the Herd's roster, and the compensation went into Rosen's pockets.

Keith was trying to reconcile that knowledge and still keep a straight face on the Base Runner. It certainly fit an interpretation of 'interesting' he had reported to his folks back on Earth. But then, they were probably likely to be pleased with anything so long as he was off and away doing something productive... even if it was piracy and looting. Keith scoffed.

He rolled in his bunk, unable to sleep. Finally after another moment of a restless mind he decided to get up and try to do something productive until weariness set in. He was able to see in the dim light of his PersiComp's sleep-mode light and started to climb from the bunk.

One had to have a description to know how close-quarters these things were. The standard-model TA-32 series came with built-in quarters for long-term habitation for the crew. In physical terms, each crewman was provided with a cabin a little over two meters wide and three meters deep. It was tall though, and occupants could choose how high they wanted their bunk and where they wanted the cabin space. Keith had chosen the 'top bunk', so now climbed out of it and to the floor of the cramped space. He sighed and pushed the door release to open it.

As advanced as the BR was, it was not entirely soundproof. Fortunate at least that the hydraulic door only hissed softly, but he had to keep quiet as everyone else was getting the sleep he was missing out on. The door hissed closed behind him and he stepped through the small walkway on the left side of the Base Runner's always-lit habitation section.

He stepped into the main artery corridor that ran the length of the vehicle. Placed slightly to the right when seen from above, it was put there to make room for the habitat and engine on the left side of the vehicle while the space to the right held lockers and the mess. At the head of the corridor was an entry into the command cabin, along with a door into the maintenance catwalk running along the engine. Both of which would be locked at this time of night. A BR was much like a small business in that regard, opening and closing had a shift manager, and in this case it was Rosen.

Keith headed for the mess to make himself a late night snack. Unlike the A model Base Runner, the C Model had a little more accommodation for dining and entertainment. Instead of a spartan octagonal chamber, it was a small rectangular room with standing space for a microwave, freezer unit, and liquid dispenser. Opposite of that was the booth with the table just barely big enough to fit six. On the wall above the booth was a cabinet with games and other entertainment items, though nothing Keith wanted to utilize at the moment.

Only the light over the table was on at this time of night, making the atmosphere cold and moody. He shuffled across the laminate tile floor to the liquid dispenser and looked at the illuminated options. Picking one of the plastic Readycups he put it under the nozzle for water and pressed the on button. A soft humm accommodated his request, and cold water filled the cup. He tried to ignore the fact that it had been recycled

countless times as he left the mess hall and started back up the artery.

Between the mess and the equipment locker was a ladder that went up to the topside of the Base Runner. Usually used for maintenance or guiding aircraft, it was hardly used at night and usually locked. He had mild surprise at seeing a green UNLOCK light at the top of the ladder. He made his way up.

The night was oppressively cold, and he would have ducked back into the Base Runner immediately if he didn't see another form sitting on the deck. It was enough pause to make him blink and look at the figure.

It was Emily, one of the other technicians, looking over at him.

"Em?" He asked, sleep choking his voice into a squeak, "What are you doing up here?"

"I can't sleep most nights." Her quiet voice replied, "You can't sleep either?"

"No." Keith answered and stepped out of the ladder. He lightly closed the hatch and made sure it was still unlocked, then made his way to sit next to Emily. She was huddled on the deck under a very thick vinyl LMI-branded winter survival blanket, with a small portable stove set up beside her and a vintage stainless-steel kettle on top of it. A small wooden box with other things was beside it, as well as a glazed porcelain mug decorated with fish scales.

It was a rather interesting insight into her character, he would recall later. Up until then all he knew about Emily was that she had been one of the other two cyberneticists who had been actually certified for their field. Keith was only a beginner. They hadn't spoken much, or at all, until now. She even skipped out on dinners.

Keith knelt down beside her and started to shiver in the cold, when she lifted part of the very large blanket. He hesitated, but she gestured with her arm. He took the blanket and folded it over his back, scooting next to her as he did.

"I haven't been able to sleep well since my aunt died when I was six." She said. She poured herself a little more hot water into her mug, "She was murdered when I was in the same house. For months we lived in terror because the evidence said it could have been someone in the lodge. Someone related to my own family...." She exhaled a breath, "I didn't sleep well that whole summer. I still can't sleep knowing that someone I knew personally did that."

"They never caught him?"

"...no." Emily replied, "And it still wakes me up at night wondering who it was. The whole family kind of came apart after that. I got out when I did and shipped out to Earth to practice cybernetics. At least when Machines try to kill you, you can blame a coding error." She looked at him.

Keith could see the outline of her compact, girlish face from the light of the stars. Her sea-green eyes seemed alight with a glow of their own as well, framed with little flicks of orange from her oven. She looked down as she sipped her mug, frowned a little, and then pulled a tea bag out of it and threw it off the Base Runner. Keith watched it go, puzzled over the wastefulness, when he turned back and saw her produce another packet out of the wooden box. "Want one?"

"What is it?"

"Tea," She replied, "Though if that's from ship stores, I'd dump it." She nodded to his mug.

He looked down. "It's water.."

"I know the regs, and I know how much Rosen breaks them. It'll be fine." She nodded again to accent the action.

Glancing down, he took another swig of the cold water and then pitched the dregs across the hull. She gave him a look, shook her head a little, and said, "After this you'll never want shipwater straight up again."

Shipwater... another term he would have to get accustomed to. There were no seas on LM-27. How could one equate a wheeled vehicle with a boat?

She set his Readycup on the deck and poured some of her hot water into it. Steam curled out of it as she replaced her kettle, then added a tea packet into it. Keith watched her pull out a wooden chopstick, stir the water some, then take out the stick and handed him the cup. "Careful, it's hot."

Keith had to take a tenuous grasp on the readycup's handle, and even then he felt the heat. He set it on the deck, shivered a little at the cold and asked, "Where did you get this stuff?"

"I bonded with a roommate in university and we shared the same tea. She sends me stuff now and again through the mail... I'm surprised routing allows it through. Maybe someone on the Plum has a heart after all."

Keith smirked. Fortune Plum was a distribution and oversight barge of LMI operations high over LM-27. In addition to their other functions they routed mail and supplies to the various outposts on LM-27, where they could be picked up by traveling Herds. Keith had heard of an amateur mail service being run by some Herd to carry mail from outposts to on-station herds, but he hadn't seen any of it personally.

"So," Emily asked, "What's your story? You've been really mousy since you've come onboard."

That was the first time anyone on the Base Runner seemed interested in his background. Uncommon as it was with him, Keith couldn't help but cough nervously before speaking. "That's kind of a long story in itself. I guess the short version is that I couldn't find a job, my parents waved this in front of my face and to kind of stick it to them, I accepted. Hard to believe that Seattle didn't have any jobs in robotics."

"You're kidding."

Keith grunted and rubbed a hand through his scalp. "Recession hit. Four years after I graduated with my aptitudes in Robotics, I still couldn't find anything. Went back to University to take their sub-courses in cybernetics, hoped it could increase by hire-ability. That's when I jumped on to come here." He looked out across the night-touched dunes. "Not like I imagined at all."

"Everyone says that here one time or another." Emily said and raised her mug to her lips, "Longmarch did a pretty good number on hyping up the adventure and excitement. I guess word about conditions here hasn't really sunk in."

"Heh, yeah." Keith finally sipped his tea. The fruity taste danced across his tongue, followed by a touch of cinnamon. He looked into it.

"It's called Kelsei. From Artanan apparently."

"It's pretty good." Keith sighed as he took another deep sip. The warm liquid swept down his throat. He hesitated a moment and asked, "Tell me something... are other BRs run like this one?"

"You mean with a patriarchal commander building his own harem to serve him?" She finished speaking softly, then looked at him. Keith couldn't help the expression on his face- she read his mind. She softened a little. "It depends on where you go. Base Runners are like store fronts owned under a larger business. Think of Rosen like a store manager. Our Herd leader, Kaffan, is like the CEO. Unless Rosen's been hurting the business he'll stay in charge."

Keith sighed and looked down into his cup. "I was beginning to think that I wasn't liking it here after all. Wanted to ask him for a transfer."

"I wouldn't do that." Emily said, "If you ask for a way out Rosen might find a way to bump you off conveniently to open up a slot on his BR for another woman to fill. You're pulling in cash... keep it up. It's keeping you on-board and probably alive too."

Keith felt the adrenaline spike start to recede in his blood, and he couldn't help but sigh angrily. He sipped at his tea. Oddly enough, it relaxed his nerves. He took in a breath and grunted in resignation. "Wonderful."

He felt Emily shift beside him and he turned his head to look at her.

"Don't worry, we'll make sure nothing will happen to you."

Keith blinked.

She winked at him. "Just because Rosen's on some mighty throne flaunting his masculinity doesn't necessarily mean he's in control of everything that goes on. Especially when Mosella's concerned."

Keith blinked. Mosella Duvall was the very tall, very suave, very [i]shapely[/i] sensor operator of Rosen's Base Runner. She was such that it was almost like she stepped out of a neo-noir entertainment vid. Whenever she appeared, heads turned. "What, does she have him around her little finger or something?"

"Oh yes, very much so. Well, part of him anyway." Emily smiled at an inside joke. "In any case, you're fine. Just keep doing what it is you're doing. We all think you're a nice guy, and it's good to have another man around who isn't lecherously eyeing you every hour of every day." She sipped her tea.

Keith sighed and looked across the dunes again. Then he felt Emily move her hand away from his shoulder. Had it been there the whole time?

"Oh," Emily said, "I never caught your name by the way."

"I'm Keith..." The man answered, "Keith Heinlen."

"Emily LeGuin." She smiled at him and raised her mug. "Welcome to LM-27."

