

The Wild Wild West (in Space!): Working Title

Chapter 1

It started out as any other night—the air crisp and the stars out in bloom across the sky with a moon as full as full can be. It was another quiet, fairly dull night for Deputy Chief Joe. The town was far enough from the border and anything of value that it experienced a quietness unknown to most on the frontier. He put his feet up on his desk, folding his fingers together on his lap and tipped his hat down. The only visitor in the sheriff's small office and three rows of jail cells was the town drunk, a half-elf with a life hard enough to be drowned out only by liquor.

“Hey, kid,” Fren called from his cell, clacking an empty bottle against the metal bars. “What do you want to be when you grow up?” He asked, cackling wheezily under his breath. Joe didn't reply right away. He closed his eyes to the drunk as if that would block out his dry crackling voice. It didn't, he kept talking and asking the same question over and over again with a rising sing-songy volume. He pressed his right thumb and forefinger to the bridge of his nose. He was too young to be having this bad of a headache but he'd had a long night and plans to finish his chores and etcetera the next day.

“I don't know, mate, what do you *think* am I doing with my life?” He finally snapped, his eyes darting up under his tall gallon hat. “I'm going to continue what I'm doing and that's it, I don't have any other ideas. Do you have any great ones, with how well your life is going?”

Fren laughed again; incessant laughter. He pulled at one long ear. “What do you *think*?”

Joe frowned. That wasn't really his problem or his place to comment. He shrugged his shoulders and, once again, closed his eyes until sleep took over.

Some time later a large and calloused finger prodded his shoulder until he awoke. Joe looked up, bleary-eyed, briefly thinking that maybe Fren had somehow gotten out of his cell—with the long-ear's propensity for magic, he wouldn't be at all surprised if that were the

case. But no, his father, the Sheriff of Littleton, stood over him. He wore an amused smile under a thick tuft of mustache.

“Sleeping on the job, I see,” he said in a gruff yet somehow warm voice—so deep it bellowed even at the softest decibel. “I might have to rescind the job offer, you know.” Joe smirked up at him, tipped his hat and once again closed his eyes and nodded off. His father sat at his age-worn desk at the other side of the room and also put his feet up, crossing them in the way his son had picked up on over the years. He used to nod off like Joe, when his grandpa John had been the town’s Sheriff before him (Grandpa John had thought up the clever idea to name him Dillan with the surname of Dillard, and Grandma Mae reluctantly agreed to it). It was hard not to, with it being so boring and all. But he’d traveled with the army corps years ago and seen enough to keep him awake most nights and days.

A transformative experience, an adventure, all the women in every town will fall at your feet, if you don’t mind orders to shoot down *dangerous* elfen upstarts (so be it if they were civilians—their mysteries *could* turn dark, after all) and those pesky friendly fire mishaps. Cover up after cover up. It does wear down on a person.

The other day Joe told him to get some shut-eye. He’d keep watch over the empty office and, at the time, clean vacant jail cells. He’d managed to fall asleep for a bit, but was startled awake by Joe placing the silver carafe, heavy with darkly roasted coffee, on the table. Noises like that tended to do that to him. He’d learned to sleep with his ears and eyes open and nothing would change it. Only Fren’s mystery eased some of the tension, but not all of it. Dillan wondered if Fren stumbled openly in public on purpose, resulting in his overnight jail cell holds. He’d been lonely since his wife died and his son was one of few words. His brother, who he didn’t get along with so well anyway, was never around. Fren might have recognized his need of a friend, a conversation buddy. He didn’t have too many on hand himself. Dillan dismissed the thought as soon as it came.

“Do you think that boy will stay, Dillan?” Fren asked, his eyes sharp for a man who hadn’t been sober for who knows how long. Functioning alcoholic, as one of the unnervingly intuitive Solarian aliens had described it.

Occasional traveling bands of Solarian merchants would pass through town two or three times a year, selling their rare and bizarre wares at usually unattainable prices. But their secret words of past present and future held infinitely more value. These effervescent words entrapped the Solarian’s more well-to-do customers in a vice grip. The few frontier families of wealth could go flat broke in their quest to know them. A gamble it was, to know where to strike their wells and dig their mines. But the secrets were never exact, never clear. It could lead one on a lifelong chase of dashed dreams, or an immense immeasurable fortune.

Dillan spit into the trash can beside his desk and pursed his lips. He didn’t know, didn’t care to think of a day when he’d have to pass on his responsibilities to his vagabond brother. Who knew where that man was at any given time? He sure didn’t.

“No...no, I don’t reckon he will,” he answered Fren with an honest frankness that marked him as a respectable man around town.

“Shame, really, with your brother miles away,” Fren lamented. “It’d be a right shame, I say, shame, shame for you to go to pasture and him to take up the reigns.”

“I suppose it would be, but he isn’t a bad man, deep down,” Dillan said.

“*Deep* down, no one’s a bad person,” Fren said. “There’s a right reason behind every bad action a man takes, even if it’s a reason that may not align with common moral code.”

“A drunk you are, but you speak as if you’re not,” Dillan said, grinning. He didn’t truly suspect Fren to be anything other than what he was, what he wore on his sleeve, but the townsfolk did. They were, at times, suspicious of his eloquence working in tandem with his intertwining, inebriated gate. Even so, they tolerated him for his handy mystery: precise predictions of weather and harvest, which he shared when his words weren’t slurred beyond recognition.

“A small town, unassuming sheriff *you are*, yet you don’t speak so plain like the rest, and you don’t look down on me with their pity,” Fren said. Dillan started to protest, but Fren put his hands up and Dillan closed his lips. “Please, don’t deny it. I don’t need your kind if somewhat misplaced platitudes.”

“They seem to work just fine for everyone else,” Dillan grumbled, a little hurt.