

# The General

By Robotech\_Master

I reckon I always liked exploring, getting into where I wasn't supposed to be. Ma and Pa had a story they liked to tell, about when they dropped me off at kindergarten and then I disappeared when the teacher's back was turned. Whole damn school turned out in a panic to look for me, and a couple hours later they ended up finding me all the way at the other end of the school'plex, in one of the chem labs at the high school science wing. No idea how I got past the door locks with the biometric card readers. And of course *I* don't remember any of it. Weren't that it fits the pattern of my later life too well, I'd halfway reckon they made the whole damn thing up.

It's not that I didn't fit in at school. If anything, I fit in too well. Just another "long tall Texan" boy, in a room full of boys and girls all talking in the same nasal twang. (Well, the half or third or so of us who didn't have Mexican accents, anyway.) The schoolwork was plumb easy. It bored me. I read a lot, and even figured out a way to hack my school I-specs to show fiction books when I shoulda been working. (I tried screening vids and VR, once, but the problem is that the school 'specs mirror what you're watching on the outside. Books, you can get away with—they can't see *what* you're reading from that far away—but if the teacher catches that flicker of video motion on your lens when you're supposed to be reading chapter whatsit of whichever, you're up a creek.)

I hung out with other kids more out of boredom than anything else I reckon. The old herd instinct, you feel safer in a crowd. I never really talked much to the other kids, but that was okay. You don't say anything, that means you don't say anything *dumb*, right? And that's how I found the place.

Some of the kids in the crowd were always looking for new places to hide where they could guzzle the bottle of booze or toke up on the weed they scored from somewhere they shouldn't have, and most places in this particular section of the arco were scoped and monitored to a fare-you-well. Except one day one of the kids found an old blocked-off vent shaft that led to the Underneath.

Thing you gotta understand about DalWorth is that back in the twenty-first, during all the crap that was going on, the place took a stray nuke or two. Was still called "Dallas-Fort Worth" back then. Really screwed the place up. Changed the course of the Trinity River, pulverized a big chunk of the downtown metroplex and screwed up a lot of the rest. Some areas hardly even got touched.

Anyway, when it came time to rebuild, they pretty much just shoved the rubble on top of the places that weren't rubble so as to even the place out, and put the foundation for the arco on top of it. Which meant that there was a whole town, or chunks of one, buried whole right under our feet. You weren't supposed to be able to get down to the old stuff below, but they had to sink the ventilator shafts somewhere.

So anyway, this smart guy dropped a rope ladder down the shaft and we all went down there with battery-powered lanterns and some inflatable furniture to make it

kinda homely. It wasn't a huge chamber, but it was big enough for a half-dozen kids to get loopy on mary-jane without worrying anyone might notice.

There were a couple of tunnels leading off the place, but one of them was only waist-high and the other seemed to end in a solid wall, so nobody really bothered poking around in 'em. They just wanted their secret place for enjoying their joints. We all swore we wouldn't tell anyone about it, and that was that.

This was back in the fall of '16, I reckon. I'd have been about sixteen myself. Sophomore in high school. Anyway, one weekend I was hanging around home, bored, nothing to do. Experience tells me that's when most kids get in trouble. I need to remember that for if and when I ever have any of my own. Anyway, I just got to thinking about our little den, and those little holes that led off of it. Far as I recalled, nobody had even tried looking into where they went before.

So I did what, in retrospect, is probably a damn fool thing. I got a headlamp, put on some old clothes, and went on down there to have a look-see.

It was a little slow going crawling through that waist-high tunnel. There was a lot of rubble on the ground. At one point, the ceiling dipped to where there were just a couple feet of clearance. But after a hundred yards or so, I was able to stand up again. And I was plumb amazed at what I saw in the headlamp's beam. And now I was *sure* no one had bothered to come this far, because if they had they couldn't have kept their mouths shut.

It was like a little section of street. Somehow two big chunks of rubble had made like a tent above it, kept it

from getting smushed with everything else. There was a burned-out car or two, even a couple of houses...well, parts of houses. The front parts. The back of them had been pretty well crushed in, so all you could see was rubble through them. Still and all, it was a pretty awesome sight. I don't mind saying I snapped a bunch of photos through my 'specs. Didn't upload them anywhere, though. I might have been a damn fool, but I ain't *stupid*.

And there were a couple of other dark holes in the other walls that could be other tunnel leading off other places. I started forward...then I stopped and thought about what I was doing for the first time. This was a lot bigger than what I'd expected to find when I came down here. Honestly, I wasn't even *sure* what I'd expected to find, but it sure wasn't this. And I was starting to realize that this place could be so big I could end up getting lost in it without anyone ever knowing where I'd gone, and that was scary. If I was gonna explore this place, I was gonna have to do it up right. Get the right equipment and make a plan. Maps, too. So instead of going any further, I turned my ass around and crawled right back out the way I came in.

Over the course of the next week, I made a plan—and a lot of orders from online spelunking catalogs. Kept the multilathe printer busy, too, making the things I didn't have to order. I got reliable lights, candles and flares, rescue beacons, and an inertial mapping app for my 'specs. Got inflatable tunnel braces. Neatest little things you ever saw. They come in a package the size of your fist, including the air tank, but once you inflate them and trigger the built-in polymer to solidify them, they can keep tons of

rock and dirt from coming down on your head. Got a hundred yards or so of good strong climbing rope, and pitons and such to go with it. Got a couple of oxy tanks and masks, just in case. Even got a couple weeks' supply of concentrated emergency food bars—you never know. (Though one thing I *do* know, after I tried one, is that it would *have* to be an emergency before I wanted to eat another.)

Any old how, the next weekend I headed back down, and started the first of many expeditions into the Great Unknown. Had myself a grand old time, exploring and mapping out the place—though if I'm honest, I didn't really find much other than more tunnels. Oh, there were a couple of places like that first chamber, bubbles where bits of house or suchlike had been preserved, but nothing really special. There were also a couple of big open chambers where there was a drop off into empty space, farther than my lights would reach. When I dropped flares in, it looked like they went down a couple of hundred feet before splashing into water. I didn't want to take any chances with underground rivers or lakes, so left those places alone.

You might think I was asking for trouble, going urban caving alone. And yeah, I wouldn't recommend it to anyone else. But none of my friends really cared about that kind of thing—when I felt them out about it, the answer was uniformly, “Are you out of your ever-lovin' mind?” Or words to that effect. And on the other hand, I did always leave a time-delayed SOS packet containing all the info and all the maps I'd made up about where I'd been so far, and where I planned to go that trip. Always got back in

time to defuse it.

But anyhow, it was kinda by accident that I made my biggest find. And that was after I'd figured the waist-high tunnel was played out, and there was nowhere else in it I could get to that I hadn't already gotten. One day I went up the other path, the one that dead-ended in a solid wall after a hundred yards or so. Just to poke around and see if there was anything we'd missed up that way.

As I was feeling around the edges of the big concrete slab that walled it off, I felt a cool breeze on my fingertips. Brushing a little rubble away, I could see there was a seam there, just a crack but open space, sure enough. So I fitted a prybar into it and pried, and damn if the slab didn't budge. It took an hour or two and a lot of elbow grease, but I was finally able to shift the thing enough to slip behind. And there was another passage there, with a good solid breeze blowing out of it. Not a great surprise there, given that it was at the bottom of a ventilator shaft. The air had to come from somewhere. So anyway, I made my way through and started looking around.

These passages seemed to be in better shape than the other ones. Not a big surprise when I looked at the sides of it. They were honest to God *walls*, not bits of rubble heap. I was actually *inside* an old building. The slab blocking off the tunnel must have been part of its outside wall. Looking up, I saw long-dead light fixtures in the ceiling—just these glass rectangles. A few of them had broke or fallen out, and behind them were those long and skinny kinda lights they used to have, if you've ever seen the pictures.

And there were *doors* in the walls, and *rooms* behind them. With *stuff* in them. Officey stuff, looked like. Those

haven't changed much. Desks are still desks, computers are still computers. Just a lot smaller now. I reckon they didn't really have much time to pack up and evacuate when the nukes hit and the rad warnings went off. (The rads weren't a problem almost four hundred years later, of course. My 'specs had a geiger counter that would go off if I hit a hot pocket, but they never once even blipped).

One of the desks still had someone's old ceramic coffee mug sitting there, a dark brown residue at the bottom where the coffee had dried up. "It is by caffeine alone I set my mind in motion," the mug read. Cute. I picked it up, wrapped it in one of my spare shirts, and stuck it in my knapsack. Still have it even now, in fact. Sipping some French roast out of it as I write this, all these years later.

Through poking around, sooner or later I found a stairwell, and I was able to start down. The place seemed to be about three storeys tall—leastways, that's how many flights I had to go down to get down to street level. And I had another surprise waiting when I got there.

The building I'd been inside of was so tall, it kind of acted like a tentpole to hold up the fill around it. So there was a whole little chunk of almost-whole buildings. It wasn't pristine exactly, there was still rubble everywhere and it was a little hard to get around some of it, but this was still the biggest thing I'd ever found. I just stood there in the doorway, trying to catch my breath at the amazingness of it all. It was a little creepy in my headlamp's light, but that was okay. For all I knew, I was the first human to see this place in hundreds of years.

That was when I checked the time on my 'specs. I had

to be home in an hour, or the parents would wonder where I was. And probably climbing back up and heading back out would take up most of that time. Dammit. Just found the most amazing thing, and it was gonna have to wait for another day to explore. Well, I reckoned I had time enough to poke into one more building, if I hurried. So I chose the closest one and shoved open the door.

The first thing I noticed inside was all the shelves. Shelves and shelves and shelves, filled with...*something*. I wasn't sure what they were at first, then I remembered the old pictures I'd seen. They were books. Honest-to-God old *paper* books. I'd seen them before, of course—people had their autolathe printers whip 'em out one if they wanted to read on the beach or somewhere they weren't allowed personal electronics—but never so many all in one place before.

I stepped up to one of the shelves, and my light fell on the placard at the top. “WESTERNS,” it said. And there were row after row of dusty old books by names I'd never heard of: Louis L'Amour, Zane Grey, Larry McMurry, and so on.

I reached out to take one from the shelf, and it pretty much crumbled into dust the moment I pulled on it. “Aw, shee-it,” I said. Yeah, after four hundred years down here, the books were gonna be a no-go. Maybe an advanced scanner rig could read and make sense of 'em without screwing 'em up, or a restoration lab could peel 'em apart carefully, but I wasn't packing either one of those in my pocket. And it was getting close to time for me to start heading back.

Then my eye fell on the big sort of square counter



thing in the middle of the room. This place wasn't any neater than the office had been—stuff left lying around everywhere, like the people had been in a big ol' hurry to be gone. And my light was reflecting off something shiny and round sitting on the counter. So I went over and picked it up. It was some kinda disk thing—all shiny on one side, with a label on the other. "*The General*," it said. "Buster Keaton, Marion Mack. 1926."

I had no idea what any of that meant. Did it have something to do with the military? But I knew one thing for sure—if that 1926 was a date, it was just a decade short of five hundred years old. Of course, the coffee mug was almost that old, too, but it hadn't had a date on it. Holding something with one, I'll admit my hands were kinda shaky. I *very* carefully wrapped that disc up in another shirt and put it in the knapsack with the mug. I didn't know what it was, but I thought I might know how to find some answers. I headed back upstairs and out the hole in the wall.

As I left, I did my best to push the slab back the way I'd found it. I didn't want anyone else noticing and getting in. After all, this was *my* secret, and I reckoned I'd keep it for a while.

When I got back up to the surface where there was good 'net, I searched everything I could about shiny discs with labels on 'em. Didn't take me long to find out what I had was a "DVD." The 'pedias weren't real clear on what that stood for—was it "Digital Video Disc," "Digital Versatile Disc," or nothing at all?—but the upshot of it was, it was how they used to toss movies around to other

people. Digital data, encoded in shiny bits right there on the bottom of the thing. And the specs for the player were on file.

Well, since the specs were on file, that meant I could make one. I pulled up my multilathe printer's design app and speced out a portable one. Thinking about the place with all the books and the shiny disc—I hadn't twigged to that it was a "library" yet, just 'cuz libraries were so very different in the here-and-now—I figured where there was one, there might be more. And if there was one movie, there could be more movies. I was actually kind of excited about that.

See, the thing about twencen movies, books, and other stuff is we don't have many of 'em left anymore. Toward the end of the twencen, this one company, Mickey Mouse or Dizzy or something, went kinda off its rocker, afraid that the copyright on its first stuff was gonna run out and people could do whatever they wanted to with it. That just didn't sit well with them, so they bought themselves some lawmakers and kept extending copyright. Went on for 'bout a hundred years before they finally went bankrupt and got bought out by someone who didn't care 'bout that sort of thing.

At about the same time, just after the early twenty-first, the digital rights management crowd went kinda nuts. Quantum encryption, one-time pads, anything they could do to make sure people didn't rip off their crap. And people gradually stopped using the old formats, and they disappeared as they wore out, got thrown away, or got lost, and people stopped being able to find players for 'em. (This was before multilathes were big so they couldn't just

*make* them.) So we lost a lot of that stuff. So much of our old culture was just *gone*.

And most people these days didn't give a rip. I blame the government, really. They're always going on about how good life is now, we should live in the present, and so on and so forth. I bought into that, myself, 'til I started my exploring and doing some actual research into the past so I could make sense of what I ran into down there.

Damnedest thing is that you saw a lot of the same crap happening over and over through the years.

So anyway, when I built the player I added the ability to rip stuff to a yottabyte memory chip. Added the ability to do Blu-rays and audio CDs and minidisks and data disks and every other shiny-disc format I could find out about, too. (Except for laserdiscs. That would have made my "portable" player the size of a pizza box!) After all, I might as well. I could take it with me when I went back down there. Might be useful for playing any other stuff I came across.

The funny thing is, I found out later if I'd just searched on *The General*, I'd have found it was out there on the 'net, at the 'tube and archival sites. It was one of the titles that was pubdom by the end of the twencen, so it didn't vanish down the memory hole. I could have watched it on my 'specs at any time. Just as well I didn't know that, though. The anticipation waiting for the multilathe to get done building my thing was delicious. Tingly shivers up and down my back, and all that. What was I gonna see when I played it?

Well, I soon got to find out. I threw it up on the media wall in my room and sat back and watched. A grainy,

sepia-toned screen reading “Joseph M. Schenk presents Buster Keaton in *The General*, a United Artists Production” popped up as music started to play. A few more screens of credits, then a card that said, “The Western and Atlantic Flyer speeding into Marietta, Ga., in the Spring of 1861.”

So this was a historical movie? I reckon that wasn't surprising, considering what I saw next. Sepia-toned monochrome of a train—named “General,” so that's where the name of the movie came from, reckon it's not a military movie after all—speeding along the tracks, and a guy in engineer's cap climbing down, checking his watch, shaking hands with a couple of kids, and walking off through a town. “There were two loves in his life,” the title card told me. “His engine, and—” And there was a picture of his girlfriend he took down from the cab. Who he then went off to see.

I wasn't too impressed at first. I mean, black and white, just music with no actual sound effects. Then I caught myself. This was *five hundred years old*. A piece of history. Something I'd brought out of a buried underground building where it had sat for centuries. And I was annoyed it didn't look all *modern*?

Once I got over myself, I was able to enjoy it properly. And as I did, I realized something. This was a *comedy*. And it was really pretty good. The guy goes in to visit his girlfriend, and the kids come in with him...so he pretends he's leaving again, the kids go out, then he shuts the door behind them. And when he gives his girlfriend a picture of himself...it's a landscape with a tiny little head and shoulders of him poking up in front of his full-length

locomotive engine. Yeaaaah.

Then the girlfriend's Dad and brother come in, and it turns out Fort Sumter just got fired on. Seemed familiar, but I had to search it—oh yeah, the American Civil War. So the guy goes off to sign up for the Confederate army to impress his girlfriend, and he's so eager to do it he takes a shortcut through an alley to beat the girl's Dad and brother (and the rest of the line) to the office. So this is a military movie?

Within about five minutes I was laughing fit to bust a gut, because it was so hilarious what happened. He's not smart enough to lie about his occupation, and they tell him as an engineer he's too valuable to the war effort as he is. He tries to disguise himself and get in a couple more different ways, but they kick him out just before the Dad and brother come up. They don't even know he went in, and so his girlfriend doesn't believe him when he says they turned him down, says she doesn't ever want to see him again 'less he's in uniform.

So anyway, some time later, the girlfriend is riding on the schmuck's very train, when a bunch of Union spies steal his train—with her on it. Seeing the two great loves of his life being stolen at the same time, he goes chasing after to get them back.

Make a long story short, the spies, bad luck, the weather, the wildlife throw damn near everything they can at this guy, but he keeps on plugging and never gives up, rescues his girlfriend *and* his train, fights in a battle, and ends up getting the girl. After I finished watching it, I went back through and watched the whole thing over again.

And as I did, I realized something. I was being

*entertained*. I started watching this thing just out of curiosity, to see what it was like. I honestly hadn't thought something so old and grainy and black and white would be any *good*. I thought it would be "interesting," one of those things I'd be glad to have watched just to know what it was like and wouldn't ever want to see again. But here I was watching it all over again just because it was so damn *funny*.

The Earth government said the past didn't have anything useful for us, we should focus on the future. It was right about then that I had the first real inklings that the government wasn't just "misguided." It was outright full of *shit*.

So anyway, the next chance I had, I got one of my friends to say I was staying the weekend with him, and I skinned back down the rope ladder, pulled the slab away, and went down the stairs to that one place where I'd found the shiny disc. This time I paid more attention to the surroundings, and I saw the sign that said "Library" on it.

*A library!* So that was what this was! I shoulda figured, I reckon, but it was tough to twig to it when libraries today were so different—not so many shelves, but a lot of info terminals and multilathe printers. But libraries in the old days were were they actually kept...well, *stuff*. And they actually *lent it out* to people, trusting they'd would bring it back in one piece. (I reckon they had a lot of trust about things back then.)

Before now, I'd just been kind of curious, but watching *The General* had, I dunno, lit a fire in my belly somehow. There was *more* stuff down here. Lost stuff. For

all I knew, stuff that would blow me away even more than *The General*. And now I wanted it all. I'd even gone back and had my printer pop out four more players to take with me, so I could rip several discs at once.

As I walked past the bookshelves, I felt kinda sad that there was all that other old stuff I couldn't do anything with. I'd have to look and see if the multilathe could do anything like a three-dimensional scanning rig that could read the words out without having to mess around with the crumbling paper. I hadn't been into that sort of thing much, so I didn't know if it could or not. But later for that. Right now I had a date with a lot of shiny discs.

Didn't take me long to find where they kept 'em. And wow, did they have a lot of 'em. Several hundred, looked like. Maybe thousand. The sad thing was that I knew this had to be only a fraction of the total number they'd made—this must have been just a small branch library. But no use crying for what I didn't have when I still had a lot more now than I used to. I set up my players and real carefully got to work.

I figured out later that being stored underground like this at a constant temperature was the best thing that coulda happened to these discs. Without the expansion from warming and cooling, they kept better. Even so I still ran across a lot of discs that were just no good anymore. The shiny stuff inside had just kind of rotted away. A couple of the discs were outright peeling apart, which was how I realized they were actually made of two thin plastic discs with shiny stuff in the middle. But the lucky thing is, most of them were okay, or at least readable. I did my best to put them back in order the way I found 'em. Had to be

careful, though. The plastic of the discs and the cases they were in were brittle after all this time. I accidentally ruined more than one disc myself by being a little overzealous in how I snapped ‘em out.

And wow, was there ever a lot of stuff there. Music, movies, vidy shows—TV shows, they were called back then. When was I gonna find the time to watch all this? I could at least listen to the music while I worked, though. And I did, picking tracks at random for a while.

It was pretty hit or miss—some of it was nice, some of it was so unlistenable I wondered if something had gone wrong ripping it. It was either that, or there’d been a lot of tone-deaf musicians back then. But then, there was still a lot of music these days that didn’t appeal to me either. I finally ran a pandoralyzer on all of it and started thumbing tracks up or down with my ‘specs, and pretty soon it was consistently finding me stuff I liked.

It took me pretty much the whole weekend, but I got everything ripped and packed away. And I also had time to look around a little. There were all these buildings, perfectly preserved. All this stuff left behind in ‘em. Not just books and things, but gadgets, utensils, clothing, furniture. All the random junk of life, like we still had today. I reckoned archaeologists would probably go nuts over it. (Probably wouldn’t be too happy with me having messed with all those discs and stuff, either.) But then, there weren’t so many archaeologists these days. The government was suspicious of anyone who liked to poke too much into the past. And I wasn’t exactly inclined to share my find with anyone else.

I was kinda curious about if there might be any more



media stuff locked up on the memory drives of the old computers in the library, but I didn't really have any way to get them power. Maybe I could gimmick something up from the multilathe, but twencen tech was never my strong suit. I reckoned I could study up on it some and come back, but it didn't really seem like a priority—after all, I had hundreds of hours of stuff I could go through now. Later for that.

So the weekend ended, and I went back to school. And *man* was I mad I couldn't watch vids on my school specs now. I had so many I wanted to see! But it occurred to me that if old movies were good, then old books might just be good, too. And there were still plenty of those out on the 'net. So I downloaded all the public domain stuff I could find and read on some of that.

A lot of the older stuff was dry going at first, but I kept plugging and found that some of it was better than I'd expected, too. Sherlock Holmes—now there was a character with some years to him. They were still making Holmes movies and viddies to this day, but I'd never read the real stuff. Jules Verne. Mark Twain. I had to be careful what I read sometimes, because the teachers would look at me funny if I bust out laughing in the middle of class.

Upshot of that was, by the end of the week I'd got interested enough in reading to do some serious searchifying on how to deal with those rotting paper books. Didn't take long before the multilathe was ready to turn out an x-ray rig that should be able to plot the locations of all the ink on all the paper in those books, and then I could have a computer plug away at it and give me pictures of what was on all the pages.

That didn't take as much time. I just had to run the wand along each shelf until it went ping, and it was done. The really time-consuming part would be letting the computer cook it all down, and I could do that back home.

I reckon it was a good thing I got it all done when I did, 'cuz the week after that the DalWorth powers that be noticed what the tokers were doing, and the whole school got a stern warning about poking around in dangerous places we had no right to be. And all the shafts got locked shut and scoped so they'd see if we went down there anymore. Never did get around to seeing if there was anything worthwhile in those computers, which was annoying. But I got the rest of the stuff. And leastways if they kept us kids from going down there, that meant I wouldn't have to worry about any other kid stumbling onto my trove by accident and mucking it up.

And hey, I'd gotten about all the good I could out of the place. It'd given me days of adventures and months worth of stuff to read, watch, and listen to. At least I got off better than the other kids, who didn't have anything except the need to find another place to take up.

Still, I'll admit my schoolwork suffered after that. Except for the history part, and English Lit. Got great grades on those. Was too busy reading and watching to do much studying. And also, I was always looking around for new places to explore and other ways down into the Underneath. Who knew, maybe there were more libraries down there.

Never did find another way back down, but I found something maybe better. From all my reading up on exploring, I happened across mention of the star scouts.

They were the people who took starships out into the unknown, exploring all the systems with earth-like worlds to see if any of them would be fit for people to live in. Thinking about it, that kind of appealed to me. Being out on my own, finding new places, seeing things no human being had ever seen before? Sign me up.

Of course, to get in you had to have good grades, and a college education helped. So I put all the media aside for then, and applied myself to bringing those grades back up.

And yeah, I did end up keeping all that stuff to myself. Maybe I shoulda shared it with the world. Woulda been a grand gesture. But far's I could see, the world didn't really want it. All that look-forward-not-back horse pucky meant that if I did pop up with all that stuff, not only would nobody want it but they'd all look at me funny, too. And that might even risk me not getting into the scouts like I wanted.

So, fast-forward a few years. In-between my studies, I made a dent in the stuff, but not more than that. You'd really need a lifetime of free time to watch it all. I wondered how those people back in the twencen ever managed it. I got into the University of Texas at DalWorth, and they actually had a scout prep curriculum—kind of a mashup of astrophysics, biology, cartography, and starship tech. I added in some history electives, and plumb ate the whole thing up.

Then after that, it was off to scout grad school. My grades were good enough to get me in, and more than that—I seemed to have the kind of attitude they wanted. I was really pumped, now. I made some friends—for the first

time *real* friends, who shared my same interests and everything. My best friend was a guy name of Mick Steader. Yeah, one of *those* Steaders, the ones who're richer than dirt and paid for all the colonies back in the day? "What's a Steader doing learning to work for a living?" I asked him when I met him.

"Hey, don't look at me," he said. "I'm one of the country cousins, all I ever got was my name. The last rich ones left the planet fifty years ago, and this is the only way I'm likely to be able to get out there and join them." He gave me that goofy grin of his. "Gonna go up to one and say, 'Hey, bro, my check got lost in the mail. Can you spare a cool mil or so to see me through to next payday?'"

"Yeah, sure you are," I said. "If it works, ask 'em for a million for me, too."

"Sure, why not?" Mick said. And we were friends from then on out.

As we went through the school, we learned more about what we were going to be doing. Flying out on our ownsome, spending months all alone between the stars. We'd have to find ways to fill the time, or else we could freeze ourselves up in the cryotubes. I can't say as getting frozen really appealed to me, but I realized I already had the perfect way to fill that time.

Mick wasn't quite so lucky, and I could tell the prospect of that kind of boredom kind of gnawed at him. So I made up a packet of all the stuff I'd scanned and found and offered it to him. "Don't open this 'til you're in deep space, but I promise you, it'll have *plenty* for you to do in your down time."

"Really? Thanks!" he said. "Can I share this with some

of the other guys?”

I was inclined to say no, but then I thought about how long and boring it would be between the stars without it. “Hey, sure, why not.” I started passing it on to the others myself. I reckon that was where the tradition got started that I heard about in later years, scouts digging up whatever old media stuff they found wherever they could and sharing it with each other. I even ended up benefiting from it a few times myself, when scout meets or drops down the road yielded stuff I didn’t have yet.

Anyway, we graduated, and as one of the top five percent of the class, I got a pretty substantial budget to blow on equipment—enough to buy a brand new top-of-the-line scout ship, with the latest jump drives and everything. And I thought about it, I really did, but my finds down in the Underneath had made me appreciate the value of *old* stuff, too. And I could make the money go farther that way.

So I picked up an older ship from a scout who was looking to settle down. Didn’t buy it as a pig in a poke, but went over every inch of it with the old guy. He seemed to appreciate the attention, and he regaled me with stories of his adventures—every scar or pit on the hull, every dent in a bulkhead seemed to bring back more memories. I reckon I learned almost as much from that old feller as I did in scout school, so I reckoned it a double bargain.

One thing he told me was that I needed to rename it when I bought it. He had a kind of superstition that it might be unlucky to fly in a ship with someone else’s name on it. Nothing odd about that; we scouts are a bundle of superstitions, ‘cuz who knows what exactly keeps us alive

out there? And I couldn't say I was really inclined to want to fly on a ship named the *Zarathustra* anyway.

It didn't take me too long to think of a name, so when I broke that bottle of champagne against the hull, it was right under a shiny new name plate reading *General*.

I still had a chunk of change left over after the ship—even after I bought more-than-good-enough equipment to replace the bits that were getting worn or used-up. I wasn't rightly sure what to do with it, 'til I happened across a notice in the local scout rag that the North American Army had a consignment of IDEs it was seconding to the scouts, and I could use my budget surplus toward one of them if I wanted. We were one of few Earth groups entitled to buy military hardware, since we'd be taking it away into deep space, and anyway, who knows what exactly keeps us alive out there?

And that was when I saw him. Well, all right, technically “it,” but he always seemed like a “he” to me. Sitting there in the storage warehouse, glittering forlornly under the lights. Big gleaming metal monstrosity of an IDE tank mech—pulse beam cannon mounted along one arm, big mag-pinch fusion reactor nestled between the jump jets on his back, front canopy open to reveal a cluttered little cockpit where it seemed like there wasn't barely even room to squeeze one person in.

It was the damndest thing they were getting rid of them now; they were only about ten years old, but they'd come up with a tech advance since that dropped the size of the reactors by 30%, and for the best efficiency they needed to rejigger everything so their new units could be smaller and lighter and faster. It wouldn'ta mattered so

much if they were going to use them on Earth, but most of the Earth wars had petered out a century ago, and the whole size/weight thing was important for space transport. Seemed like the Martian colonies were getting uppity again. They did that every few years.

Anyhow, the *General* was more than big enough for a monster that size—since it was of an older design, the star drive engines had to be huge, so there was more vacant space in the rest of the ship that got built around them. I ended up with a cargo bay the size of half a football field.

So anyway, I snagged him before anyone else could and had him sent to my ship, along with all his tech manuals and all the spare parts I could lay my hands on. I reckoned I was going to have more than just old movies to tide me over on the long hauls between the stars now. He looked like he'd be fun to tinker with, and I bet I could even stick one of my disc players in him for some onboard entertainment. I decided I'd call him Chauncey. He just *looked* like a Chauncey.

So, that was just about that. Like the old song went, Chauncey and I “climbed aboard our starship and headed for the sky.” Not directly out into the Great Unknown yet, of course. There were still a few colonies between us and the sector of space with the promising stars, and I had a flexible schedule. Plenty of time to stop and play tourist. In fact, they *wanted* us to poke around the colonized worlds first, learn more about what other worlds are like before we hit the field.

And I reckoned there might be some other stuff there for me to find. Back when the first of the colony ships left, they hadn't lost as much of the old media as we had on

Earth. Maybe some of their datastores of old movies and suchlike were still around. It was worth a shot. I'd poke around some on Proxima before heading on.

As it happens, I did find some more good stuff on Proxima. And just like Johnnie Gray from the movie *The General*, I also found the *second* love of my life there.

But that's another story.

My last stop in the Terra system was the scout office at the top of the Amazon Beanstalk. I swung the *General* into dock pretty as you please, and went aboard station to sign the ledger. It was an old scout tradition, Earthside anyway, that before you left you went in and signed your name, so if you never came back at least there'd be some record of you. Never mind that there'd be electronic records regardless, there was something reassuringly solid about pen and ink. Some scouts skipped it anymore, but I'd been looking forward to it; it appealed to the atavist in me. Mick had beat me there by twelve hours and was already gone by the time I made it, the rat. I hoped he enjoyed the stuff I'd packaged up for him.

The Commandant of the Scout Corps and his staff were waiting there to see us off, as they did for all the scouts. They congratulated me, wished me luck and all that, but there weren't any long speeches. Given that we come in one at a time, they'd have been hoarse if they tried. We had the whole little ceremony where they presented the ledger, and I scribbled my John Hancock in it. Then it was time to move on.

I expect if you ever stop by the scout museum on Zharus, where they moved it in the last few years, you can still flip back through the pages of that ledger and find my



name, right there in ink that's only faded a little over the years. (Kind of like the man who signed it.) And maybe my handwriting's gotten a little shakier, but the name should still look just about the same as the one I'm signing right here.

That's my story, and I'm sticking to it.

Clint Brubeck  
Nextus, Zharus  
2470 AD/120 AL

**THE END**