

The Fly and Die Ticket by Jay Lake

Slow down, buddy. You're all right. Here, have a drink. It's a Spican ringstinger. You'll love it. If you don't, no matter—by the time you've choked it down you'll be too drunk to care.

Don't get any in your eye, though.

Trust me on that one.

Of course I know you're new here. How many customers you think a place like this gets? Yeah, every one of us came in on the same ticket.

Me? Ah heck. Can't hurt to tell it again. Probably about the same as your story. I got the bad news from a blind-doc on Tremayne Station. Everybody knows the drill. You come off a run a little space sick. Somebody on your shore leave rotation says, "hey, get your med clearance on the way," so you find a med terminal before you head down to Fat Jake's or The Spooky Action or whatever the local supra crew bar of choice might be. One of the self-serve ones, where you slip bearer credits in and there's no one standing around with one eye on the monitors.

Just in case.

In goes your arm, swallowed by that little rubber sleeve lined with antiseptic nanogoop. There's a deep tissue scan, which is like getting tickled by a sighting laser. It beeps. Sometimes there's a needle, depending on tech-gen and what the terminal thinks it finds and the rules the local healthfare types have laid on. Then you get a green chit, and you go drinking.

That day on Tremayne, I didn't get a green chit. Instead the sleeve closed tight and I got a red chit. The damned med terminal called healthfare on me and left me to choose between the end of my world or shooting my arm off.

I thought hard, but I couldn't see it was worth the trouble of blowing away my own elbow.

Not with me going lepto.

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There's a law out there, with some name like the Space Assets Redevelopment Act of 2457. Who the hell knows? Everybody calls it Fly and Die.

The benefits of the Rajamurtha drive are obvious enough. If you want to leave any solar system without having your great-great-great-grandkids waiting for you when you get back, you have to go supraluminal. Einstein's c is not the working man's friend. So you fire up the Rajamurtha, watch the pretty sparkles as a measurable percentage of the observable universe turns to glowing tapioca, then shake the shingles out of your ears at the other end of the ride and tend to business. Everybody gets something out of the process, except strict causalists, who have been sucking lemons since Bohr and Heisenberg's 1941 Copenhagen cage match.

On the downside, r -drives emit quantum packets which have no business existing outside of a very strong magnetic containment field, which means they play their own strange games with the baryonic matter in the vicinity, inciting leptogenesis in otherwise normal objects through what may be sphaleronic effects. In simpler terms, normal matter acquires dangerously unpredictable behaviors. You now know as much as any Ph.D. in human space about what actually happens during the tapioca phase, as supraluminal crew types call the r -drive transition.

It is a statistical certainty that Rajamurtha-equipped ships will eventually undergo leptogenic transformations which effectively end their service life, and incidentally render them rather strange, physically unstable, and in certain cases extremely dangerous. The short-life record is held by the *Willem de Wurts*, which was cooked on its first r-drive transition leaving the yards at Corona-VI. The long-life record is held by the Vostokian freighter *Cantal 355b*, with over two centuries in continuous service.

It is an equal statistical certainty that supraluminal crew who do not resign their posts in a timely manner in order to collect their exorbitant pensions in peace and safety at the bottom of some boring gravity well will eventually undergo leptogenic transformations which effectively end their service life, and incidentally render them rather strange, physically unstable, and in certain cases extremely dangerous. This is called getting your Fly and Die ticket.

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“I’m sorry, Manny,” said RuDoLph. They were a trifrontal, with three separate skill loads and sets of emotional and logical responses sitting on top of a single subconscious *Weltanschauung*. They were pretty, morphologically male with hair the color of polished mahogany and skin pale as an oxygen pond lily. They served as Second Officer on *Marlowe’s Epigone*—until very recently my own ship as well. Most importantly, they were also on the other side of a one-inch energy-reinforced plexi barrier separating me from the rest of the universe. They continued: “I mean, everybody knows what’s happened. That’s how it is.”

It was Ru talking to me right now. Their side of the barrier was a grubby cubicle with faded graffiti on the walls and a strange stain just above the hatch which I’d already memorized. My side of the barrier was an antiseptic chamber three meters square which contained me, a flowmetal table with a reasonably comfortable chair, twenty-four degree climate control, a decent menu selection, and the end of my world.

“It wasn’t supposed to be me.” My gut twisted with the stupidity of it all. I’d heard this damned speech a dozen times in my career, from other supra crew I’d known sitting on the wrong side of a virtually identical barrier—it was required by law. There had been two lovers, three mortal enemies, and a captain among them. Now I was making the same idiot speech I’d heard over and over. “Get me out of here.” I slapped the barrier, which stung my hand as if it were a big, flat scorpion. “You can have all of it, everything I got. Just get me out, *please*.”

Ru hung their head. “I can’t.”

“I’m sorry,” I said. “I shouldn’t do this to you. Damn it, though. I could have quit any time I wanted.” Everybody says they’re going to stop while the money’s good, before their time runs out.

RuDoLph’s voice shifted, the Lph persona sliding forward. “Rivas and Dinagabbie both surrendered their papers after you got red-chitted. Captain’s pissed.”

I laughed, which sounded forced even to me. “*She’s* pissed. She can come sit in here if she wants and see how pissed she gets. Tell her I’ll trade problems.”

RuDoLph laughed, all three personas at once, which made them sound like a tenor waterfall. “You signed your assets away yet?”

“Nah.” I slumped in the reasonably comfortable chair. “I don’t know...thought maybe somebody’d listen to the money, get me out.” Not that I could even talk to anyone. This was deep isolation, except for whoever wandered into the visitor’s cubicle to face me through the glass.

“You know better.” Still Lph.

“Yes.” I’d been begged, bribed, browbeaten, and never did anything when I was sitting on the good side. I knew the rules, I knew the risks. “I was thinking Crew Benevolent Fund.” Higher ed scholarships for kids whose progenitors died out in the deep dark and didn’t leave anything behind. A bit difficult to go dead broke on a supra crew salary, but it was achievable with sufficient dedication to dissolution.

“Good. They’ll put your name on a piece of the fund.”

Someone would remember me. “RuDoLph...” I didn’t know what else I wanted. To make a difference, maybe. To make it easier for someone else. To keep them away from their own stupidity. Not that *I’d* ever listened. “Just tell anybody who...who wants to know. I got no regrets.”

“You always were a bad liar, Manny,” said Do, who’d been my lover for a while.

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It’s difficult to dispose of leptogenically transformed ships. Can’t break them down for salvage, because you’re likely to get carnivorous roses spewing out of the air ducts of whatever vessel is unlucky enough to take on the resulting parts. Can’t blow them to smaller pieces because that just spreads the bizarre bits further, eventually infecting normal matter wherever the trajectories and subsequent vectors take the blast debris. Can’t park them in cold orbit in an inhabited system because there’s always some clown thinks he’s immune or too smart for the authorities who will come along looking for a quick score on whatever could be plundered.

All these have been tried.

So the other half of the Space Assets Redevelopment Act is what happens to the ships. Every now and then a survey mission finds one of those weird, worthless systems. Maybe there’s a swarm of pinpoint black holes in eccentric orbit around the primary, or the system is a close-contact binary with starstuff being slung around a little too freely, or the dark matter density is so high that even the rockball planets have orbital wakes.

The boffins look a place like that over, record everything they see up, down and sideways, leave a blank spot on the map, and turn the coordinates and relevant data over to Rajamurtha Resolution Commission. Those boys decide where the r-drive graveyards are—far enough away from other systems or any rational attractor of human activity, but still accessible to those on a need-to-know. And when a ship cooks, gets *its* Fly and Die ticket, off it goes to fall forever down that stellar gravity well.

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“Your lucky day, Lepto Boy.” Tremayne Station’s healthfare outprocessor possessed a sense of humor I would have cheerfully killed to extinguish. She was two meters tall and nearly as wide, a sort of low-gee muscle ball, who apparently watched far too much virteo comedy in her off-hours. That she was utterly devoid of hair follicles and had one of those roving dermal maintenance colonies currently coloring the left half of her face bright orange did little to further endear her to me.

“I’ve been luckier.” I tried to figure out if the stain over the hatch in the visitor’s cubicle might somehow be related to the mess on her face. She certainly wasn’t bribable. Nobody held her job with those kinds of fault lines in their psych profile.

“Well, yes, but this one’s good. You *were* going to be shipped in low temp hibernation to the drop point at Marantha, but portmaster tells me we’ve got a cooked r-drive insystem needs to be sent on through

there. So you get to con your own Fly and Die instead of making the big trip on ice.”

Marantha being a Rajamurtha Resolution Commission processing station for the too-secret-to-exist r-drive graveyard at Penny’s Floodgate. Not that you’d find Penny’s on any map, but supra crew talk.

“Am I riding her in all the way?”

“Don’t see why not.” The outprocessor’s shrug was a sight best not to behold. “There’s probably a few crewcicles on ice at Marantha need taking on, but you’d already be checked out on the boards. She’s a sweet fly, too, fast cutter for the Pelletonic Navy.”

“I’m riding a *warship* down?”

Another frightening shrug. “They pull the combat stuff, even on an r-drive pop. I think it all gets stuck in sealed holds, under booby-traps in case someone gets clever.”

A leptogenic weapons system sounded like a whole new class of Bad Idea. I appreciated the vigilance. “Well, she’ll be a fast hull, at any rate.”

“You’ll go down in style.”

“Just what I always dreamed of.”

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One thing the Rajamurtha Resolution Commission does, they load the drops well. It’s a one-way trip, nothing comes back out, but the goodies are sent in just in case there’s supra crew still alive down there. Not every leptogenic transformation kills. Some of them might even be immortal. You just don’t want to be around them, catching their colds.

So my fly, the *Double Needle*, acquired several metric tons of provisions. As captain and sole crew, I demanded a manifest, which my outprocessor finally taped to the other side of the isolation barrier. No infotech for me, not even the hardware in my head—too much weird had flowed out the input channel in the past. There had been leptos who could twist code into Lobachevskian pasta. One had broken more than a dozen interlocking, redundant security overrides and fatally gassed seven thousand people on Cheng Du Station. Another reason for all the barrier control.

On inspections, I saw that the manifest seemed to lean heavily toward hard liquor and recreational chemicals. I supposed I had RuDoLph to thank for that, and maybe some of my other buddies off *Marlowe’s Epigone*. I’d starve years before I ran out of booze.

Which led me to a long funk of wondering exactly what kind of lepto I was becoming. A red chit just meant the markers were in my system. It didn’t say much about what they signified for my future. So far I’d exhibited all the leptogenic tendencies of a stale breadcrust. Not that this affected the Fly and Die rules, nor indeed should it have.

But this time, it was *me*.

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Double Needle looked like sex and flew like sin. Just the way military hardware ought to. No point in submitting to the sort of mind-locks soldier boys had welded into their Jungian templates without them at least getting the real E-ticket ride in the bargain. Her former proprietors had lobotomized the AI when they decommed the rest of the scary stuff. Even so, in addition to doing the hard work of flying, the

bridge brain could still kick me stupid seven ways to Saturday playing either chess or go.

It was a hot fly, as advertised, and me with a pilot's rating, but I never trained on Naval gear so mostly I got to sit around and have my two-*dan* ass handed to me. Between games I ran training simulations, which given where I was sitting made for the galaxy's best virteo simulation, but there's only so much bushwhacking one man can do.

The ship might have been sex and sin, but it wasn't my rocks she was meant to get off. Still, flying upright and conscious beat the hot photons out of making the trip as a crewcicle. I was pretty sure if I got out of line the AI had some antipersonnel routines saved up for troublesome leptos.

The alternative would have been to send *Double Needle* to Marantha with a volunteer master. For good and proper reasons dating back to the beginning of space travel, no one ever sent a vessel out under AI control without a human being on board. I had my own big red button, that would have dropped the AI to retarded puppy sentience probably about as fast as its boarding charges would have shredded my sternum.

Thankfully the issue never came up. We had our games of go to while away the empty hours to and from the Rajamurtha transition point, and tapioca mindfog during the transition itself.

At Marantha, I never saw another human being. They've got some vacuum-sealed protocols there. Everything was text messaging or symbolics. This orbit here, please sir. Stand to, please sir. Disable surveillance and boarding control systems, please sir—as a military vessel *Double Needle* apparently had required some serious hotwiring for that to even be possible. Open the number six and eight cargo locks, please sir. Remain on the bridge, please sir. Be advised that as of now you are legally dead, please sir. Course to decommissioning point laid in for you, please sir.

No chance to make a break or buy someone off. And they didn't even wish me a nice day. No manifest, either, the canny bastards.

Double Needle made the final shift to Penny's Floodgate without any input from me. I just rode her down, out of my little place in history and into the sweet hereafter.

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Penny's was the strangest place I'd ever been in person. Best as I could tell, somewhere in its evolution the system had made a game attempt at a natural-born version of a Dyson sphere. Inherent instabilities doomed that to failure, but the result was a solar system which didn't keep to the ecliptic like any decent galactic denizen should—specifically a lot of strange, attenuated dust clouds and rocky chunks orbiting in a rough sphere just outside the Goldilocks zone. Imagine a dense Oort cloud at planetary distances.

The system couldn't possibly be stable, not on a long term basis, but it was here right now. Scary as hell, too, for any pilot who wished to live to fly another day.

Which, come to think of it, was something of a technicality on my part.

As *Double Needle* moved in-system at a dead-slow velocity which would have gratified a shuttle full of widows and orphans, I did find that I had developed an ability to spot the big chunks *before* the military-grade sensor suite did. With leptogenic power like that, who needed to be permanently exiled? It would have been a godsend in life.

Nonetheless, the ship had a destination in mind, one I worked out before the AI saw fit to tell me. There were over two hundred hulls tucked up close to a continent-size sheet of rock big enough to have its own

g-field that swept all the system junk out of its way. The ships were oriented on a hot point down on the surface—thermal energy, visible light, electronic emissions, the works. There was a port down there, a little slice of home. *Double Needle* knew where she was still wanted.

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Up close, things were a little less homey. Some of the ships had gone strange, with bone ribs and leather wings, or puffy cancers that glowed in shadow and showed black in direct light. Others had spun cocoons for themselves, or faded to a sort of gelid translucency that turned my gut queasy. Several were difficult to look at, as if they had acquired dimensions beyond the usual assortment the human eye was designed to evaluate.

They all hung low in the sky over a few hundred square miles of mountain, field and forest with a little spaceport in the middle of it. Which was every bit as improbable as the whole system was in the first place. For one, I couldn't even begin to work out the mechanics of that many ships in long term stable orbits that didn't, well, orbit. For another, it was obvious from a hundred kilometers up that the landscape below me was lit to a warm, yellow Terran-standard, though the primary was bluer and sharper than old Sol or any of his G2-class brethren. Not to mention largely obscured by the incredible clouds of crap cluttering up the system.

No present like the time. The Rajamurtha Resolution boys had left me a landing boat, some cheapo screw obviously requisitioned off a fourth-tier broker back on Tremayne Station. This was presumably in case I wanted to die somewhere other than on board *Double Needle*. Instead I broke out a military-grade cargo loader and packed the boat to the gills with the booze and drugs. I know supra crew, after all. I decided not to worry yet about whatever Marantha had loaded in through the number six and number eight hatches. If they were supra crew, *Double Needle* would either wake them up, or I could come back for them if they weren't sleeping the long sleep already. Anything besides crew, I didn't really care.

Down I went, comm channels open in case someone wanted to talk, following the visuals to the radial landing grid at the center of the impossible little port.

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I'd like to say I got a hero's welcome. I'd like to say somebody tried to gun me down and I fought my way to freedom. I'd like to say a lot of things, but very few of them would be true.

Thirty degrees centigrade on the surface with a light wind and an apparently sunny sky, though the blue of the heavens was a bit oddly textured and there was no stellar-grade light source. Just light.

I walked along streets that looked like the collective overmind of the planning boards on a dozen worlds had succumbed to schizophrenia. Some buildings were solid, some were wireframe or beams, some were just pieces floating in place—a window here, an eave there, three steps about the height of my face.

But *this* place, this was the one real place in the whole town. I knew there would be a bar. Supra crew always have a bar. I call Manny's. Scary traditional, ain't it? I think this counter is walnut, hand-carved from a microgravity burl. Look at that crazy wood grain.

No, of course it's not real. No more than you and I. No less, either. Copies of memories of things, maybe. I don't know.

But I know this. I got a ship up there stuffed with enough sauce to keep Manny's open until I go totally lept and fade to black. In the mean time, I'm thawing you guys out one at a time and bringing you down.

Sometimes new chums show up from Marantha on their own drops. See her, in the corner?

Yeah, taller than a tentpole, ain't she?

That's Spadeface McGillicuddy. Chief engineer off the *Queen of Barstow*. She knew Lord Mbele back when he was smuggling hot powerpacks past the blockade on Islandwana. She's got stories could curl your hair.

Same with those boys shooting billiards in the back. Don't mind the wings on Tolberto. We think he's heading on soon.

Yeah. That's right. Stay a while. Add something to the town if it suits you. Lepto keeps changing you, but that's all right. It's who we are.

Me, far as I can tell leptogenesis is turning me into a permanent part of this bar. No matter, I'm here to help you if you want it. I'm either Charon or John the Baptist for a whole generation of Fly and Die tickets. Take your pick.

Want another Spican ringstinger? On the house. They always are, here at Manny's.