

The Investigator

by
Robert Hackney

Melbourne, Australia
rob@solarstorm.net.au

INT. SINGAPORE AIRPORT HOTEL ROOM - DAWN

FELIX PRYCE lays awake atop the still-made single bed of a Singapore Airport capsule hotel, fully-clothed except for his suit jacket, which hangs over a chair by the narrow floor-to-ceiling window.

A small holographic panel lights up above the bedside table, blinking blue, displaying "11.29.2109.04.45".

Felix takes a moment to sit up, flicking the panel to silence it as it degausses then disappears.

FELIX

Feed. Any network besides War.

A FEED DISPLAY fades in to become a glowing flat panel, projected above the minibar. The two-dimensional display tilts and pans around the room to follow Felix as he gets to his feet and moves about, packing neatly-arranged items into a small travel case.

FEED ANCHOR

(on feed)

--may be yet another reason for shareholders to stay with Arc. A slow-down in energy commodities will see Lavacost upgrading its production facilities to comply with recent changes to...

INT. SINGAPORE AIRPORT HOTEL LOBBY - DAWN

Felix carries his modest, shoulder-slung travel case and a glass panel PDA through the hotel lobby, to a wall of feed displays, all streaming various genres and networks, projected on windows overlooking one of twelve sectioned airport tarmacs that stretch to the horizon in back of frame.

Tier one low orbit and tier two supraorbital transplanet ships come and go, vertical takeoffs, in the foggy distance while Felix taps a display, the screen shimmering as it reads, '**Checking out? Please present your PDA.**'

Felix holds up his PDA, showing it to the screen.

Onscreen: '**Thank you for staying at Hodges, Singapore Airport. Have a safe trip, Felix!**'

INT. SINGAPORE AIRPORT - DAWN

Felix browses at a news stand, scanning shelves of glass-sealed book covers, oblivious to the cathedral-like glass and chrome airport ceiling sprawling into background.

He strikes us as a man who has been here too many times before. Who is willfully tuning out his impressive surroundings in lieu of small distractions.

INT. SINGAPORE AIRPORT - DAWN

Felix rides an automated light rail system to his terminal, checking a bank of arrival/departure displays on the far window against his mechanical wristwatch.

INT. SINGAPORE AIRPORT DEPARTURE LOUNGE - DAWN

Felix stands at big exterior windows, watching a BOEING 777 taxi to the nearest skywalk.

He moves quickly to the desk CLERK, ignoring the PASSENGERS in line.

PASSENGER

Hey there's a line.

FELIX

Why is there a jet pulling into the gate?

CLERK

Sir, you'll have t--

FELIX

The ticket says I'll be flying on a brand new Clipper.

CLERK

We switched the planes. It happens sometimes. Please wait your--

Felix walks away.

EXT. SINGAPORE AIRPORT CARPARK - MORNING

Felix sits on his travel bag smoking a cigarette, the PDA in his other hand.

FELIX

Call Charles.

The glass lights up, displaying an animated telephone.

CHARLES replaces the graphic, streaming video from his office in New Delhi.

CHARLES

(on PDA)

What happened? Where are you?

Felix stabs out the butt.

FELIX
They wanted to put me on a jet.

CHARLES
Felix, come on. It's been more than thirty years. Unclench.

FELIX
Aren't we about due?

CHARLES
I don't even know what we've got in the area...

FELIX
Just send me something from this century. Please.

CHARLES
I've got a tier one helo sitting idle over the Sea of Japan.

FELIX
Better than a tin can. How long?

CHARLES
Give it forty. Singapore airspace is kind of a bitch.

FELIX
Alright, thanks.

CHARLES
Hey Felix...

FELIX
Yeah?

CHARLES
Did you see what happened last night?

FELIX
Happened?

CHARLES
Over there.

FELIX
I try to avoid all that.

On PDA: **'Call ended by you**

01:17/4.85CY'

He pockets the PDA.

EXT. PEPSI COLA DESERT - EVENING

Felix and two local SHERIFFS stand at the impact point of a downed PLEASURE CRAFT--a kit-built space-faring craft designed to seat two to four.

SHERIFF #1
We think it's home-made.

SHERIFF #2
Definitely a kit job at least.

Felix squints against the setting sun, peering out across the barren landscape, where pieces of the craft are smeared over a good four miles.

FELIX
Where's the box?

SHERIFF #1
Black box?

Felix shoots a glance at the Sheriff.

FELIX
The cabin. Where's the control box?

The Sheriffs look at each other.

SHERIFF #1
We only call 'em in. You're the investigator.

Felix sighs, walking along the crash line.

INT. SHERIFF'S CRUISER - NIGHT

Felix rides in back of a low-orbit Sheriff's Department CRUISER, face leaned against the window.

Sheriff #2 operates a touch screen on the centre console.

SHERIFF #2
Gonna have to apply for clearance. What's your code?

FELIX
We don't need clearance. Just broadcast Ombudsman.

Sheriff #2 turns in his seat to look at Felix.

SHERIFF #2
I thought you guys were privatized.

FELIX

Nope.

Sheriff #1 turns the panel toward him.

SHERIFF #1

They're not clearing us.

Felix sits up.

FELIX

Really? Set it down at the main gate.

EXT. GOOGLE ELEVEN DISTRICT - MAIN GATE - NIGHT

The cruiser touches down on parking space outside the main gated entry to Google's Eleven district. A Google Peace Enforcement OFFICER exits the guard post, pulling on his hat while reading a PDA.

Felix exits the cruiser, walking briskly toward the cop.

FELIX

What's your name, company cop?

GOOGLE COP

What?

Felix walks right past him, to a window in the big gate.

FELIX

Panel.

A holographic display appears in front of the glass.
Onscreen: **'Please login.'**

FELIX

Aerospace. Eleven-eleven-FP.
Signature.

Onscreen: **'Welcome, Felix Pryce.'**

GOOGLE COP

Hey what the hell? Get away from that.

The cop reaches for his sidearm, resting a hand on it, beginning to tense up.

FELIX

Give me a warrant. Google, Peace Enforcement. Officer...
(to cop)
What's your name?

The cop looks from Felix to the display.

GOOGLE COP
 Look, I don't have you on my
 schedule.

FELIX
 What's your fucking name?

GOOGLE COP
 Buchanan.

FELIX
 Warrant. Google Officer
 Buchanan. Obstructing an
 investigation.

Onscreen: '**Issuing...**'

Onscreen: '**Warrant successful!**'

Green lights on the cop's belt holster and name badge blink
 red while his PDA shuts down.

FELIX
 (to Sheriff)
 Put him in the car.

Felix unpockets his own PDA, walking past the Sheriffs as
 they arrest Officer Buchanan.

FELIX
 I need flight clearance for
 Google's Eleven Neighborhood. I'm
 in a Sheriff's Department
 Cruiser, coming over gate one.

Onscreen: '**Issuing...**'

Onscreen: '**Clearance successful!**'

EXT. GOOGLE ELEVEN DISTRICT, EMPLOYEE HOUSING - NIGHT

The cruiser touches down on the landing pad atop a tall
 apartment complex, one of four apartment towers connected
 by skywalks at every seventy floors.

INT. APARTMENT COMPLEX HALLWAY - NIGHT

Felix and the Sheriffs walk to a door numbered C-12,477.

Felix knocks, looking around awkwardly as they wait.

A muffled voice from inside...

MOONEY (V.O.)
 Who is it?

SHERIFF #1
 Sheriff's department. Open up,
 please.

MOONEY (V.O.)
 Um... no thanks.

FELIX
 Sir if you're having difficulty
 opening your door, we can do it
 from out here.

A pause, then the door's internal mechanisms can be heard
 unlocking. It swings open slowly, an injured and bleeding
 DAN MOONEY stands sheepishly behind it.

FELIX
 Do you need medical attention,
 Mr. Mooney?

MOONEY
 Yeah I probably should.

EXT. EARTH SOVEREIGN SPACE - NIGHT

The sun sets behind Earth as a behemoth PASSENGER SHIP
 exits the planet's nearest HYPERSPACE GATE, phase-shifting
 down the physical spectrum to become solid mass again when
 its engines clear the alloy rings.

INT. PASSENGER SHIP - ECONOMY COMPARTMENT - NIGHT

Inside, flight attendants serve orange juice and coffee to
 seated economy class passengers, most just now waking up.

CAPTAIN (V.O.)
 (through P.A.)
 Ladies and gentlemen this is
 Captain Elwood, we anticipate a
 touchdown on Earth in the next
 thirty minutes... the day is
 Monday and local time in the
 Americas is coming up on twenty-
 one hundred hours. If you look
 out to the right on our approach
 you should be able to make out
 the southern-most battery of
 Peruvian mining rigs. We thank
 you for flying Mongolia
 Transport, and appreciate your
 continued business.

INT. PASSENGER SHIP - COCKPIT - NIGHT

Up in the cockpit, a FOUR MAN CREW preps the ship for landing. CAPTAIN ELWOOD, an older moustached man, toggles off the PA system on his secondary touch screen.

CAPTAIN

Okay six hours, we drink for five then an hour to sober up before Mars. Who's coming out?

CREWMAN #1

Captain, Brazilian air control is broadcasting clearance, we're aiming for pad five-nine-D in the northern airport sprawl.

CAPTAIN

That takes us over the Atlantic?

CREWMAN #1

Right.

The Captain switches his P.A. back to 'on'.

CAPTAIN

Ladies and gentlemen, your Captain again, don't strain your eyes looking for those rigs, as we'll be coming in from the othe--

A loud BOOM from the rear stops him short, shaking the cockpit violently.

They all look at each other for an instant, perplexed.

The two crewmen scan their instrument banks anxiously.

CAPTAIN

What the hell was that?

CREWMAN #1

It seems like there's been... some sort of explosion.

CAPTAIN

Explosion? What? That's not good!

Muted SCREAMING from the passengers in back.

CAPTAIN

Whoops...

He swipes the P.A. back to 'off'.

CO-PILOT

(calm)

What kind of damage?

The crewman shakes his head slowly, still looking at the screen.

CREWMAN #1
Oddly... none.

CREWMAN #2
That can't be right.

CREWMAN #1
Diag the blast in cargo bay seven, no impact on flight systems. Fire control has kicked in, and... hang on... hull reinforcements are sealed.

A long silence in the cabin while crewman #1 looks up from his screen.

CREWMAN #1
I think we're clear?

CO-PILOT
Let's hope so, Carl.
(into earpiece)
Brazil, Mongolia three-oh-three heavy... declaring emergency. I say again, we are declaring an onboard emergency. Please expedite ground-based response crews.

EXT. MOD AEROSPACE BUILDING - NIGHT

Establishing shot, the towering Ombudsman Aerospace building, nestled amongst a metropolis of other nondescript administrative glass towers.

INT. MOD AEROSPACE BUILDING - INTERROGATION ROOM - NIGHT

Felix sits opposite Mooney--now heavily bandaged--in a small interrogation room, a stainless steel table between them.

FELIX
Mr. Mooney do you know it's a felony to not report an Aerospace incident?

MOONEY
Yes.

FELIX
So why didn't you?

MOONEY

I was scared of going to jail.

FELIX

The irony being that if you'd simply reported the crash, we would have only suspended your license until an investigation was completed.

MOONEY

Well that's the thing... I don't have a license... at this current time.

FELIX

You're unlicensed?

MOONEY

Well no, I mean I *had* one... but then I forgot to renew it.

FELIX

So you're unlicensed.

MOONEY

Well... yeah.

FELIX

Huh.

MOONEY

You didn't... know that already?

FELIX

I kind of stopped paying attention in this job about three years back.

MOONEY

Why? What happened?

FELIX

Nothing. At all.

MOONEY

Oh.

FELIX

Anyway long story short, you're probably going to prison for a long time.

MOONEY

How long?

FELIX

Ten, maybe twelve years.

Mooney begins to sob.

MOONEY

I didn't think it was hurting anyone...

FELIX

Right, until you take out a tanker or passenger hauler on re-entry and kill not only yourself, but hundreds of people who were legitimately flying.

Felix stares off, out the small window, as if picturing it.

MOONEY

Please, isn't there something you can do? I'll never go near a ship again if you can somehow find it in your heart to let me off with a warning.

Felix stands, gathering his things from the table.

FELIX

You really think I have any juice around here? I'm just an investigator, Mr. Mooney.

INT. OMBUDSMAN AEROSPACE BUILDING - CORRIDOR - NIGHT

Felix pulls the interrogation room door closed behind him, joining the Sheriffs and an Ombudsman Aerospace MARSHALL in the corridor.

FELIX

Okay guys, you can probably take him home.

(to Marshall)

I recommend a suspended twelve month sentence and subdermal tag. He's unlikely to re-offend, but that may not be the case next time he wants to go somewhere in a hurry.

EXT. EARTH SOVEREIGN SPACE - NIGHT

Approaching high Earth orbit, a pair of Brazilian Raven JUMPSHIPS (small, fighter-sized tier one ships designed for low-orbit flights) fly steady along either side of the passenger ship Mongolia 303, their pilots inspecting the hull for damage.

BRAZILIAN PILOT #1 (V.O.)
 (on radio)
 Tower, Steward Nine reads no
 damage to three-oh-three heavy's
 port side.

INT. PASSENGER SHIP - COCKPIT - NIGHT

The crew all listen intently to the radio, on speaker.

BRAZILIAN PILOT #2 (V.O.)
 (on radio)
 Ahh... tower, this is Steward
 Two, there appears to be... *some*
 structural damage to the
 starboard hull.

A long pause while it sinks in, only static on the radio.

CAPTAIN
 Steward Two this is Captain York
 aboard Mongolia three-oh-three
 heavy, can you be more specific
 on the nature of that damage?

BRAZILIAN PILOT #2 (V.O.)
 (on radio)
 Captain it's hard to tell without
 getting any closer, but it
 appears as if your cargo bay door
 tore away a sizeable chunk of the
 thermal shielding around its
 hinge mechanism.

The Captain looks at his co-pilot.

CAPTAIN
 Will it hold up to re-entry?

Another long moment of silence.

BRAZILIAN PILOT #2 (V.O.)
 (on radio)
 I honestly don't know.

CREWMAN #1
 Captain, we'll cross our
 green/red point in six minutes.
 We hit atmo in seven.

CAPTAIN
 (to co-pilot)
 Biggest orbital rescue mission
 ever performed was eight-hundred
 and twelve souls. Fifty-two were
 lost in the process.

(MORE)

CAPTAIN (cont'd)
 (to crewman #1)
 How many are we carrying?

CREWMAN #1
 Four thousand and change.

CAPTAIN
 (to co-pilot)
 We ditch in space and we may be
 condemning most of those people
 to death.

CO-PILOT
 Most is better than all.

The Captain begins to tap various holographic instrument panels, strapping himself into the chair. The others follow suit.

CAPTAIN
 Tower, be advised Mongolia three-
 oh-three heavy is attempting re-
 entry. I sure hope you folks have
 response crews on standby.

INT. MOD AEROSPACE HEADQUARTERS - FELIX'S OFFICE - NIGHT

Felix enters his eightieth floor office, closing the door behind him before laying down on the small couch.

The PDA chimes in his coat pocket. He looks at the caller ID briefly.

FELIX
 Answer.

Onscreen, Charles appears.

FELIX
 What's going on, Charles?

CHARLES
 How did the Phoenix thing go?

FELIX
 Good, I just wrapped things up
 here. Trying to catch a nap.

CHARLES
 That might have to wait. We've
 got something developing over
 South America. There's a cruise
 ship in trouble on return from
 Mars. We'll know for sure in
 about four minutes, but you might
 have to jump on a plane in the
 next half hour.

FELIX

Wow. Brazil? Fuck it, I'll drive.

CHARLES

We'd need you there sooner. Be ready to head for the roof if things go south. I'll be in touch.

Onscreen: **'Call ended by Charles
00:56/CALLER PAYS CHARGES'**

Felix lays back again, closing his eyes.

EXT. HIGH EARTH ORBIT - NIGHT

Small stabilizing thrusters make minute adjustments to the passenger ship's course as it approaches the upper atmosphere. The jumpships still escort it in, but have moved out on either side to a safe distance.

INT. PASSENGER SHIP - NIGHT

The Captain and co-pilot adjust vector and nav controls, using a display on the main windshield to match their predicted course with that plotted by the navigation systems.

CO-PILOT

This is getting sketchier by the second.

CREWMAN #1

Doesn't matter now, we're well and truly committed.

INT. MOD AEROSPACE HEADQUARTERS - NIGHT

Felix wakes to his ringing PDA, not moving to pick it up.

He closes his eyes again.

FELIX

Answer it. Audio only.

CHARLES (V.O.)

Felix?

FELIX

Yeah, so we're on for Brazil?

CHARLES (V.O.)

Brazil's been reassigned.

Felix sits up, snatching the PDA from the table.

FELIX
Feed, world news.

A holographic feed display flickers to life in the near corner, tilting toward Felix.

It depicts flight 303's timid re-entry, tracked by long-range cameras. Smoke flares from its starboard side.

CHARLES (V.O.)
We have something else for you.

FELIX
We're a minute away from the biggest disaster in the history of flying machines and you want to give me another joyrider on Mars? If you think you're going to tell me there's anything in the system bigger than what I'm watching, *fuck* Aerospace.

Charles is silent for a long time.

CHARLES (V.O.)
Felix, chill. I'm sending you to Aloha Anchorage--

FELIX
Europa? Fuck off, Charles. You're not hearing me--

CHARLES (V.O.)
This is related. Three-oh-three left Mars nine hours ago light one passenger. The guy was just arrested at Aloha.

Felix squints, reading 'Mongolia 303' on the feed.

FELIX
You're thinking this is political or something?

CHARLES (V.O.)
Go to Europa tonight, interview this guy they're holding at the airport, catch the morning shuttle and you're back by lunchtime. Fire and rescue are not gonna get you near that thing any sooner than tomorrow afternoon.

Felix thinks it over.

FELIX

If I do this thing for you, this favor, I want your word that I have lead on three-oh-three.

CHARLES (V.O.)

Done.

FELIX

They don't set foot within a mile of the crash site until I'm on the ground.

CHARLES (V.O.)

You got it, okay?

FELIX

So who's the guy?

CHARLES (V.O.)

I just sent you the brief.

Felix looks at his PDA, thumbing the panel. Its projected display shows an Ombudsman naval dossier.

FELIX

(reads)

Gunnery Sergeant Ethan Stemglein.

CHARLES (V.O.)

Keep that under your hat, he's active navy.

FELIX

I'll be on the roof in ten.

CHARLES (V.O.)

Keep me in the loop.

Felix tosses the PDA back on the table, stretching. He stands closer to the feed display, watching the plight of 303 unfold.

He stands there a moment longer before going behind the desk, laying items from his pockets on its varnished mahogany.

EXT. SAO PAULO CITY - NIGHT

Rain beats down on floating skyway markers that turn from red to green, massive holographic arrow signs marking a detour around the crowded CBD.

Wide as air traffic dries up over Sao Paulo.

High above, a light streaks across the sky, smoke pluming behind it.

EXT. 40,000 FEET ABOVE SAO PAULO - NIGHT

Flight 303's starboard tail section breaks up a small piece at a time, the ship beginning to struggle with flight stability.

INT. PASSENGER LINER - ECONOMY COMPARTMENT - NIGHT

PASSENGERS watch fire lick at the portals. A cold silence fills the cabin.

INT. PASSENGER LINER - COCKPIT - NIGHT

The pilots strain to hold their course.

CO-PILOT
You feel that?

CAPTAIN
Hydraulics are gone.

The ship shudders again, harder.

CO-PILOT
We're losing pieces.

CAPTAIN
They want us to come around and
land at Sao Paulo.

The co-pilot checks flashing alerts, shaking his head.

CO-PILOT
Not gonna happen. Sao Paulo's too
small. Too dense on every side.
We can barely steer.

CAPTAIN
Yeah.

A moment of silence between them, the distant roar of fire outside evident, cabin alarms all drowning each other out, fading to background.

CAPTAIN
I'm thinking we overshoot the
continent and put her down in the
Gulf of Mexico.

CO-PILOT
Okay.

EXT. 30,000 FEET ABOVE SOUTH AMERICA - NIGHT

We follow Mongolia 303 as it crosses South America, the Gulf of Mexico rolling over the horizon out ahead, glistening under a full moon, pockmarked by floating tankers and gas rigs.

The flames have stopped now, but smoke still plumes from the initial wound in 303's hull.

A moment of calm, almost gliding, then suddenly, violently, the rear of the ship twists away, tearing, spilling debris and passengers into the open sky.

INT. PASSENGER LINER - COCKPIT

Both pilots continue to struggle with the controls, on the verge of losing it, when the ship shudders once more.

PILOT #1 (V.O.)
(on radio)
Three-oh-three, you just lost
your entire rear section.

The co-pilot checks his inventory screen, turning pale.

CO-PILOT
Eight hundred twenty people just
disappeared from internals.

INT. OMBUDSMAN HELO - NIGHT

Riding shotgun in a UH-60 Bluebird helo, the HELO PILOT taking them to 40,000 feet, preparing to break entry, Felix watches a series of explosions streak across the distant sky.

FELIX
There she goes.

EXT. 40,000 FEET ABOVE BOGATA - NIGHT

The helo's internal magnetic discs spool faster, thrusting it skyward in an effortless orbital arc.

INT. OMBUDSMAN HELO - NIGHT

The pilot takes them up smoothly, achieving orbit within a minute, before bringing it around to face the quarantine gates.

Close on Felix as he sinks back into his headrest, putting in wireless earbuds, slowly closing his eyes as calming, classical music rises to fill audio.

His point of view of the helo pilot, mindlessly setting toggles, piloting them into the glowing, shimmering mouth of a Europa-bound hyperspace gate.

FADE TO WHITE.