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# Foreword

*Bulldogs!* is a strange project. It started over 20 years ago as a shared universe among a group of role-players, and has evolved since then with many different groups collaborating and adding to it as they come in contact with the shared setting. This eventually culminated in the publication of the *Bulldogs!* role-playing game, allowing many, many more people to put their own stamp on the setting and add new extra details. There is a lot of new details out there that even I don't know about.

What I do know is that I wanted some of the most talented authors around to play in this shared setting, and that's what inspired *Have Blaster, Will Travel*. Each author was handed the same setting and basic premise: the Bulldogs, rough-and-tumble types stuck in a terrible and dangerous job, delivering hazardous cargo between the stars in a strange galaxy that is not our own. A vague premise, but one that seemed to create some vivid scenarios. Seeing what each of our different authors came up with based on these guidelines has been a great pleasure.

Every story in this collection features the Bulldogs one way or another, but every story has a unique perspective on both the Bulldogs and the galaxy as a whole. All of these different perspectives added together create a deeper, more detailed picture of these imaginary places than could be conceived by a single mind.

I want to thank each of these authors for coming to this project and putting a their individual creative sparks into it. This was a special project for me. I got to see some greatly talented authors write within a setting I presented. I'm proud to be part of this. I think as a reader you will find these stories just as interesting as I did, and even if you don't know the Bulldogs, by the end of this anthology you certainly will.

# Motherlode

by Sarah Newton

It was a starport bar. It could have been anywhere, but it was nowhere. Or, more specifically, it was on the blasted iceball called Ozymandias, the last inhabited place on the furthest edge of the Nebelorn Polypolity. Beyond it the Strix Nebula gave way to the endless suffocating blackness of the Kardisharn Dust Clouds, haunted by ghost ships and the decaying bones of dead planets, the cold embers of dying stars.

“The motherlode...”

From above, seen through the rime-encrusted plass of the star-deck, the Old Timer lay splayed like a starfish, gasping out his life into the uncaring, smoke-filled air. A clearing had appeared around him, as people edged away, turned on barstools and cast glances of mock-concern his way.

“Tanagra!”

From his chest, the knife protruded like a sundial gnomon; the hour before darkness settled over the Old Timer’s eyes. Next to him kneeled a man in the black and maroon uniform of a Bulldog, the high-risk shipping agents of TransGalaxy PgC. His graying hair was shaven in a bullet-like crew cut, his steely eyes and strong expression betraying him as a hardened soldier, and yet he cradled the Old Timer’s head, staring bleakly into his eyes. The Old Timer’s scuffed and faded jacket was the same black and maroon, but older, at the end of its life.

Flecks of blood spattered the Old Timer’s lips. “The motherlode, Bulldog! Tanagra! You gotta protect the motherlode...! Don’t let—those bastards—take it...”

Gnarled knuckles clutched at the man’s lapels; the Old Timer heaved his head upwards as he gasped out his last words. Then—nothing. His eyes went out, a long hoarse rattle escaped from his

throat, and his head fell back, lifeless.

§ § §

“Say, Sarge, we really gonna do that? A crazy-ass goose chase ‘cos of some old dead guy in a bar?”

Tasha Del Vayne broke into a run to keep up with the Sarge, who punched the primary airlock in the Ozymandias docking bay and thundered onto the *Fireamber’s* bridge.

“Captain on deck!” With a startled expression, a huge bear of a man in a light chain vest and pilot’s fatigues jumped to his feet, standing to attention and looking directly ahead with his one good eye. Lief “Gunner” Gunnarsson’s other eye socket, studded with nav-implants, was a mass of wiring which blended seamlessly with his long blond dreadlocks and ample beard.

The rest of the bridge was empty. Even at the best of times, the Sarge had never been able to fill its multiple crew stations, and its well-maintained but clearly aging interior rattled with echoes of former greatness.

“That wasn’t just any crazy old man, Del Vayne,” snapped the Sarge, mashing his cigar into the side of his mouth and advancing to the center of the oversized semi-circular bridge, clearly built for a crew of a larger stature. “That old timer was a Bulldog, and that means something, kid. We look after our own.”

Del Vayne blinked enthusiastically, hauling herself up to her short but svelte five-five. She had the ruddy and wide-eyed innocence of any of a million farm girls from the backwater agri-worlds, and the youth on her skin was so new it was transparent. She was pert, too, with dark hair and dark eyes that not even the Sarge could grouch at for long. Even now, seeing her hanging on his every word, his anger began to subside.

“Where the hell is everyone, anyhow?”

The pilot twitched visibly, half observing the Sarge, half the display scrolling through his nav-implant. “Gorgo’s down in engineer-

ing, sir. We were trying to get those thruster cut-outs locked down...”

“And that’s it? No fresh meat? No one answered?”

Gunnarsson screwed up his face. “Sorry, Sarge... Since that last meat-job, no one’s answering our ads. We lost Lom, Trask, and Stromfal on that mission... word like that gets around.”

“God-dammit!” yelled the Sarge, fury flaring again, whirling from the pilot and waving his arms like he didn’t want to hear. He punched the comm on the nearby bulkhead. “Gorgo? Get your god-damn three-legged ass up here, stat!”

§ § §

Truth was, they always got the meat-jobs. Any contract with a greater than even chance of seeing bodies hit the floor seemed to come their way. Same as the thrusters always cut out when you needed them, Del Vayne asked dumb-ass questions, and the Sarge woke up shouting with horror in his bunk at night. The universe was just made that way.

Dolom engineer Gorgomallius Champoç frowned, blinking his three eyes as he scrutinized the datascreen in two of his hands. With the third, he scrolled through the display. His huge bulk stood in the center of the bridge like a towering tripod of blue flesh, clad in the dull orange of an engineering coverall; his three trunk-like legs rested immovably on the studded metal deck, his massive bald head brushing the bulkhead ceiling ten feet above. He seemed oblivious to everything but the device before him.

“The primary reference for the term ‘Tanagra’ is a legendary battle on prehistoric Arsubar,” he said, in a calm even voice. “That doesn’t seem applicable, Captain Falco.”

The Sarge winced. Even the new kid Del Vayne had twigged that using his real name bugged the hell out of him quicker than this quarter-ton blue-ball. “Ya think?” he grimaced, pulling the cigar from his teeth and spitting. “What the hell else is there?”

“Tanagra: recreational sex drug for the Copulympic Marathon