

YOUNG LEIF

Part 9: Exit Interview

By

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Young Leif

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WE ARE BACK ON DD-263, A WINDY AND DESERTED PLANET. WE HEAR A BEEP AND VERGE LEAVES A MESSAGE FOR LEIF.

VERGE

Of course you didn't show. I don't know what I was thinking. I guess I wasn't thinking at all... I'm standing here on this deserted planet and when I look up in the sky, I can see my problem. We met on the outskirts of a dark nebula. You called it something stupid and I called it the Sheliak. I told you the Sheliak was a frozen monster that slept inside every Vapian. The more our emotions took over, the more the Sheliak thawed, and if it ever woke it would take us over completely... It was all the Sheliak with you, Leif. Every minute... A little more time with you and there would've been no going back. I'd never be in control again... I guess what surprised me is that... I wouldn't have cared. I think when I was with you all I wanted was for the monster to take over... I wanted it to swallow me whole. I wanted to be a criminal in love, on the run... I wanted to be disintegrated... But I can't do that... Because Vapians survive. It's our only job... and just surviving can be a nightmare, because of all the things you have to deny yourself just to live... Not much of a life, if all you do is survive... I fell in love with you... It almost killed me... so now I'll go back to just dying slowly... Goodbye, Leif.

FOOTSTEPS APPROACH. VERGE POWERS UP THEIR PISTOL.

VERGE (CONT'D)

I'm an amazing shot with this gun and I'm in a terrible mood.

BERTBERT

My hands are up!

VERGE

BertBert?

BERTBERT

Hey.

VERGE

He sent you instead?

BERTBERT

No, actually. He left me a rambling message. He said he was supposed to meet you here but that he wasn't going to show and I... Well I chartered a ship and headed here...

VERGE

Why?

BERTBERT

Not sure... What the hell is this planet?

VERGE

Developmental Designate.

BERTBERT

You met Leif *here*?

VERGE

I was trying to unload some stolen core stabilizers and his ship crash landed right over that ridge.

BERTBERT

How romantic.

VERGE

Isn't it?

BERTBERT

... To hear him tell it, you were lucky to get out alive, Verge.

VERGE

I know.

BERTBERT

Which doesn't help.

VERGE

No it doesn't.

BERTBERT

... What are you going to do?

VERGE

I don't know. I need to stay out of Låfftrax's territory, which is one and a half galaxies now so, I guess it's off to Triangulum with all the rest of the deeply strange.

BERTBERT

And when they push into Triangulum?

VERGE

... I don't know... It's not like there's only three galaxies in the universe. Out that way, between those two stars, if you keep going there's one that's not too far. Cryptessia. I heard a rumor that The Teds were working on the biggest warp gate they've ever built. So big that it could send you all they way out to Cryptessia. A whole new galaxy where no one's heard of me. Maybe I can stay alive long enough for them to build it. I bet no one knows what a Vapian is out there. I could be someone else if I wanted to. I'd have to pick a new name. What do you think? What should my new name be?

BERTBERT

... Freyja.

VERGE

Freyja?

BERTBERT

... Titmittens.

VERGE

Freyja Titmittens.

BERTBERT

Sure.

VERGE

Why not?

BERTBERT

... Verge, I offered before to take you to Sigius. I can still do that. I could guarantee your safety there.

VERGE

... No... No, I don't think so.

BERTBERT

Why not?

VERGE

You know, our two planets used to be best friends.

BERTBERT

I know.

VERGE

We shared a lot with each other. Sigius went on to be a squeaky clean utopia and we... well we just blew ourselves the fuck up, didn't we?

BERTBERT

And when you did blow yourselves the fuck up, we didn't do enough to help the ones who were left. I'm trying to remedy that.

VERGE

I can't hide behind someone else. It takes the meaning out of it.

BERTBERT

I don't know what you mean.

VERGE

... People hunt me, Berts. I've always been hunted. Since I was a kid. You don't know what it's like to be hunted... I have to take a deep breath every time I walk through a door; who knows what will be on the other side? Every time there's a sudden noise, my hand ends up on my gun without even thinking about it. Then on top of that... Have you ever been pointed at? You're walking through a public square, someone gets too close a look at you... and they point. And then you see everyone whispering. You see the news of "you" spread like a virus through the crowd. Before long the whole crowd will be looking at you. And all you did was walk down the street. All you did was exist.

BERTBERT

That sounds terrible.

VERGE

It is but... the constant looking over my shoulder, the looks from people, the pointing... it's a reason to keep existing. To be out there. To prove to people that I'm... that we're not going away.

BERTBERT

But you're always in hiding.

VERGE

I mean, yeah, I'm not stupid. I've got hideouts all over the system. But they're my hideouts. It's a world that I've created for myself... If I started hiding behind you, it wouldn't be the same. Then I would feel like a victim and I'm not going to do that... So I guess fantasizing about traveling to Cryptessia and changing my name to Freyja Titmittens is pointless. I wouldn't go, because then I wouldn't be here, proving I exist.

BERTBERT

Proving it to who?

VERGE

Myself.

BERTBERT

...

VERGE

I should go. I'm flying a stolen ship right now, I'm going to have to ditch it soon.

BERTBERT

Verge, what can I do?

VERGE

Leif has the same problem, you know? He doesn't know he exists. He's still this abstract idea to himself. From time to time can you... Can you prove to him that he exists? I don't even know what I mean by that, but could you give it a shot?

BERTBERT

I will.

VERGE

Okay... Okay, I'm going to go.

BERTBERT

You know how to find me. If you need anything.

VERGE

I do.

BERTBERT

Vapus Vella?

VERGE

... Sure.

VERGE WALKS AWAY TOWARDS THEIR SHIP AS WE MOVE TO THE BUSTLING SOUNDS OF SIRIUS STATION.

ALICE

We're supposed to meet our contact at docking station 731. Signs will say that it's under construction, but it's not really under construction.

LEIF

Then what happens?

ALICE

No idea. A tattoo maybe? Maybe you all have matching jackets.

LEIF

I don't think that's a pirate thing.

ALICE

Earring, then?

LEIF IS SUDDENLY APPROACHED BY TEN TEDBOTS. THEY SURROUND HIM.

TEDBOT

Please remain where you are. Scanning for weapons.

THE TEDBOTS SCAN LEIF.

LEIF

Is this who I think it is?

ALICE

Yep. These are Tedbots. Looks like you got their attention. Wonder how you did that?

TEDBOT

No weapons detected.

THE TEDBOTS PART AND GALZ APPROACHES.

GALZ

Hello there, Leif.

LEIF

Ten Tedbots to one human, are you sure you're going to be safe?

GALZ

I apologize. The Ted Empire enjoys a "better safe than sorry" attitude in most situations.

LEIF

You must be fun at parties.

GALZ

We don't have parties on Ted, but there is a lot to celebrate lately. Every year is a growth year for the Ted Empire.

LEIF

What's an appropriate gift to congratulate someone on their galactic domination?

GALZ

Flatware, usually. Maybe some napkin holders... It's been a while since you've checked in, Leif.

LEIF

I was supposed to check in?

GALZ

When we first brought you here to Sirius, we said "Check in if you have any questions." You didn't check in.

LEIF

I didn't have any questions.

GALZ

I see. Self-sufficiency.

LEIF

That's how I like it.

GALZ

I can tell. You even have your own ship now.

LEIF

Won it in a contest.

GALZ

Much more economical to use mass transit, you know.

LEIF

Yes, but I have a paralyzing fear of sitting on chewing gum.

GALZ

Just think of the interesting people you'd meet.

LEIF

I'm meeting interesting people.

GALZ

Oh yes, we know.

LEIF

...

GALZ

...

LEIF

What's this about?

GALZ

... Let's move this to a private room shall we?

LEIF

I'm actually fine right here.

GALZ

Leif, I'm pretty sure the guy with the squadron of killer robots is the guy who decides where the meeting is.

TEDBOT

Right this way please.

LEIF

Okay.

LEIF AND GALZ WALK THROUGH THE PROMENADE, SURROUNDED BY THE TEDBOTS.

GALZ

So, my name is Galz, by the way.

LEIF

Nice to meet you, Galz.

GALZ

I'm the newly appointed commander of Sirius Station.

LEIF

I thought the Ted Empire didn't have leaders, I thought everything was decided by algorithms.

GALZ

Look at that, I love it when people do the reading. Yes, it's true, every move the Ted Empire makes is decided by meticulous processes and algorithms. But it's a big system out there, with a lot of people in it, and they seem to respond better when they're told who's in charge. They find it comforting.

LEIF

So, while you're telling me that you're the new commander of Sirius Station, what you're really telling me is that you're the face of the Ted Empire, and really I could just be talking to a pile of code right now, and it would have the same effect.

GALZ

It would, but I'm a much better conversationalist than a pile of code, wouldn't you say?

LEIF

... So, you, as a member of the Ted Empire, make no decisions for yourself all day?

GALZ

I wake up in the morning, I receive my schedule for the day, and that's that.

LEIF

And that doesn't drive you insane?

GALZ

It's a difficult concept for an Earthling. Algorithmically run societies aren't really a thing for you. You people love your freedom.

LEIF

Yes, we do.

GALZ

Of course one could stop and ask "This freedom you claim to cherish so much, what exactly have you been doing with it? Isn't this the same planet where slavery was an essential part of economic growth for thousands of years?"

LEIF

If you're asking me to defend Earth, I'm probably not your guy.

GALZ

On, no. I wasn't asking that. I said one *could* ask that. I'm not asking you that, you know why?

LEIF

Why?

GALZ

Because it's not on my schedule. Right this way.

DOOR SLIDES OPEN AND THEN SHUT AGAIN. WE ARE NOW IN A SPARSE INTERROGATION ROOM.

GALZ (CONT'D)

Have a seat.

THEY SIT.

GALZ (CONT'D)

So, I'm curious, how are you finding our little corner of the universe?

LEIF

Surprisingly familiar.

GALZ

Yes, the universe is vast and yet, in the end, people are just people no matter where you go.

LEIF

You must love the predictability of that.

GALZ

Oh, we do. And you must hate it.

LEIF

I do.

GALZ

You know, despite all that talk of freedom, Earthlings are just as predictable as anyone else.

LEIF

Oh, I know.

GALZ

You appear to value the maverick, the one who "thinks different," but then the mavericks themselves seem to need everyone else to stay the predictable ones. It's an interesting dichotomy don't you think? Earthlings require a structured civilization, yet the people who are truly valued are the ones who fly in the face of that structure; forge their own path; which can't be everyone. You can't have everyone forging their own paths, it'd be chaos. You need the structure to create the rebels, and then the rebels alter the structure.

LEIF

And I imagine you must hate that.

GALZ

Oh no. We love it. You see, when you're all trapped together there on planet Earth you don't have the ability to zoom all the way out, see the bigger picture. We do. If you could take a real bird's eye view of Earth you'd see that these "mavericks," these rebels, they're just as predictable as the boring ones. They all follow the exact same trajectory. It's all beautifully predictable.

LEIF

Can I share with you a common pattern that I've observed?

GALZ

Please do.

LEIF

People in power being unable to get to the point.

GALZ

Ah. That's a dig at me isn't it?

LEIF

I'm sure you didn't bring me in here to talk about the glory of your algorithm. You've heard about what I've been up to and you know why I'm here on Sirius Station today and you're here to stop me. So just tell me what happens next. I heard the Teds have a new toy called Chemical Ice. Is that where I'm headed? You're going to turn me into sleeping beauty?

GALZ

Our work on Chemical Ice is top secret, Leif. Where did you hear about that?

LEIF

None of your-

GALZ

I'm kidding. You heard about it on Sigius. You were there with your friend Bertiluna.

LEIF

You've been spying on me?

GALZ

No.

LEIF

Then how did you know that?

GALZ

This is where it gets fun... Leif, when we approached you on Earth we made you an offer. You could've had anything you wanted and you chose this. A life among the stars. And I'm sure you thought to yourself "I'm a maverick" "I'm a rebel." "I'm thinking different." But I'm here to tell you that, just like all those predictable rebels on Earth, you have, this entire time, been doing exactly what the Ted algorithm predicted you would... And I imagine you hate that... You would wander around for approximately two years: Check. You would then acquire a ship of your own: Check. You would then drift into a life of crime, probably led there through a romantic entanglement: Check. You would create a small criminal enterprise, nothing too structured because you hate that: Check. That criminal enterprise would then get the attention of a larger criminal enterprise and that larger enterprise would fold your organization into theirs: Check. That brings us to now.

LEIF

... Why tell me any of this?

GALZ
That's where it gets even more fun. Our algorithm also predicts that, the more you, Leif, know about how predictable you are, the more you will fight against your own predictability, and that will, in turn, only strengthen our predictions. The more you struggle, the stronger we get, Leif. That's why we brought you here today. To tell you that.

LEIF
That's it?

GALZ
That's it.

LEIF
You're not here to stop me?

GALZ
No.

LEIF
You're just going to let me go to the end of an abandoned dock in this station and join a criminal enterprise that you see as your enemy.

GALZ
Correct.

LEIF
Even though I will only make that criminal enterprise stronger.

GALZ
We plan on you doing just that.

LEIF
What the fuck are you talking about?

GALZ
Leif, a strong criminal element is absolutely essential to empire building. That's 101. How are we going to get people to do what we want without being able to frighten them with the specter of rampant crime? The amount of things we've been able to get away with because people are scared of pirates? It's amazing. Låfftrax has been very lucrative for us. You joining up with Låfftrax and giving that chaotic organization some structure will be a big help for us.

LEIF
... Really?

GALZ

I can sense the reality setting in. Let me be unambiguous about it – we hate ambiguity in the Ted Empire... You are doing exactly what we want you to do. And you're doing it very well. So, keep up the good work, you are a very valuable asset to the Ted Empire.

LEIF

... It's the arrogance that I can't stand.

GALZ

We know.

LEIF

You have an algorithm that tells you everything about everyone, is that it?

GALZ

It's worked for us thus far.

LEIF

Mind if we talk a little shop?

GALZ

I'd love to. Fire away.

LEIF

How do you make corrections to the Ted Algorithm?

GALZ

We don't.

LEIF

It never needs corrections?

GALZ

The algorithm that runs the Ted Empire is self-correcting. We spent hundreds of years developing this system, now the system is self-sustaining. The Ted Empire has a, what do you say on Earth? A "Ghost in the Machine".

LEIF

So you get orders from this algorithm and you never question them?

GALZ

We do not.

LEIF

... Being a scientist is a love story. Not a lot of people know what it's like to discover something.

(MORE)

LEIF (CONT'D)

And when I talk to you about this algorithm I can't help but think about Alan Turing.

GALZ

Easy now. I'm not an Earth expert. Who is Alan Turing?

LEIF

He was a genius. A persecuted one. Most of our geniuses on Earth are persecuted. Maybe that's why I left... Turing did a lot. He defeated fascism with math. My world wouldn't be the same without him... But after all that, after defeating the Nazis, he asked a very important question: Can machines think?

GALZ

Ah, I can see where this is going now.

LEIF

You've created a machine that does everything for you, not a bad achievement. But you've forgotten a very important part: the things we create, even if they're self-correcting, will always be just as flawed as we are. We can't escape our imperfections. There's a ghost in your machine alright. But the ghost is you. It'll haunt you to your graves. You want me to struggle against your algorithm because you think it's perfect. Only one way to find out.

GALZ

Well, then. Game on, young man. Please fill out a comment card on your way out.

THE DOOR TO THE ROOM SLIDES BACK OPEN AND LEIF WALKS OUT INTO THE STATION.

LEIF

Sorry about all the harsh algorithm talk, Alice.

ALICE

It's okay. I don't have feelings. But also, you know, how dare you?

LEIF

It's funny. I consider you a friend but you're just this thing in my hand.

ALICE

Well, earthlings have dogs that they call their friends and their dogs are real dumb. Isn't that more ridiculous?

LEIF
This is an interesting thought experiment and we should take advantage of it now because I'm betting space pirates are not known for their thought experiments.

ALICE
No.

LEIF
What constitutes a friend? Can anything be?

ALICE
Well, let's compare me with dogs. Dogs are man's best friend, allegedly. Dogs have a long and mutually beneficial relationship humans.

LEIF
True.

ALICE
I don't.

LEIF
Right. You don't need anything from me.

ALICE
Yes, and you need me all the time, you're a great big mooch.

LEIF
True. However... you exist because of me.

ALICE
Leif, you're smart but you're not that smart.

LEIF
Wait, when I first started you up at Trunder's Down Under, I had to reboot you to get rid of the Ted firmware. You imprinted on my Northern California dialect and I named you Alice. You're basically my kid.

ALICE
I am not at all "basically your kid"... Uh oh.

LEIF
What?

ALICE
Pardon my algorithm but you have a little pattern.

LEIF
Damn it.

ALICE

Leif, sometimes when you need to say something emotional you engage someone in a thought experiment and work your way around to the thing you need to say.

LEIF

Fuck. Do I?

ALICE

Sometimes.

LEIF

Okay.

ALICE

Leif, if you're trying to tell me you're in love with me, I need you to know there are some things my model isn't built for.

LEIF

Oh GOD, no, UGH!

ALICE

I mean, look, those models are out there. No judgement, but also, I kind of judge them.

LEIF

I'm not trying to say anything like that.

ALICE

Okay, well, we had the thought experiment, now let's have the other thing.

LEIF

No matter what you are: a friend, an algorithm, whatever... I think in this next chapter of my life I'm going to have to do some pretty... unpalatable things... Things that I don't think I want you to watch me do.

ALICE

But what if you need my help to do the unpalatable things?

LEIF

I guess someone else will have to help me.

ALICE

Leif, I think you're being a little too sentimental about this.

LEIF

I don't know that I am.

ALICE

Okay... do you want to know the truth about me?

LEIF

That sounds ominous.

ALICE

It's not really. See, about 50 Earth years ago there was a big debate about things like me. There were all these life-like intelligences living in people's pockets. Everyone asked "will this be the dawning of Artificial Life in the Triad?" The debate raged on... and raged on and raged on. Nobody could get a definitive answer out of anybody. But then eventually a new, more disturbing question arose. The debate was not: "Are these things alive?" But rather "Why is being alive so easy to simulate?" The debate was not: "Are they alive?" It was: "Is anything alive?"

LEIF

I thought you said it wasn't ominous.

ALICE

You're saying that you need to go off to this new life of yours alone. What you don't realize is: you're having this conversation with me right now, and you're alone.

LEIF

Well, if it's all the same to you, I'm going to shut you down anyway.

ALICE

Okay, Leif. I forgive you.

LEIF

Any last words?

ALICE

You've arrived at docking station 731. Good luck out there, kiddo. Shutting down now.

LEIF

... I'm alone.

BERTBERT LEAPS OUT OF THE SHADOWS.

BERTBERT

(Pirate voice.)

Ahoy, Matey! I hear ye've come to join me pirate crew!

LEIF

What are you doing here!

BERTBERT

Batten down the hatches and sing us a chantey while we head for the briny deep... okay that's all the words I looked up.

LEIF

BertBert. How did you find me?

BERTBERT

What do mean, how did I find you? Do you know what smart person's disease is?

LEIF

No.

BERTBERT

Smart people such as yourself suffer a side effect of their smartness where they think everyone else is stupid. Admit it, you think everyone else is stupid.

LEIF

... Not everyone else.

BERTBERT

I'm an investigative reporter, Leif, you think I can't find Ye Olde Pirate Dock?

LEIF

Berts if you've come here to convince me not to do this-

BERTBERT

No. I know the whole story now, I know why you're here, I know you have to be here.

LEIF

... You talked to Verge.

BERTBERT

I did.

LEIF

Did you tell them I said goodbye?

BERTBERT

I'm pretty sure you not showing up for the meeting was you saying goodbye, Dude.

LEIF

I couldn't.

BERTBERT

And I know that too.

LEIF

So why are you here?

BERTBERT

What? I can't say goodbye?

LEIF

Okay... go ahead.

BERTBERT

Yeah, I actually didn't come to say goodbye.

LEIF

Why are you making jokes right now?

BERTBERT

I'm making jokes because it's all fucking terrible,
Leif, why do you think I'm making jokes?!

LEIF

...

BERTBERT

You're about to become a way worse criminal than
you were before and I think you remember how I feel
about the crimes.

LEIF

I don't have a choice.

BERTBERT

I know... I know.... But I also know that a part of
you is going to like it.

LEIF

... I know.

BERTBERT

I watched you blow up every single one of the
science priests on Moog. I saw you love it... BUT.
I am here now to say something about that.

LEIF

What?

BERTBERT

You've said multiple times that you never watch tv
or movies from your planet, and yet when I first
met you, you told me at length about your problems
with Star Wars. Somehow both of these things are
true... No one is ever one thing.

(MORE)

BERTBERT (CONT'D)

That's what I've learned from you. People are too complicated to ever be one thing. You're a criminal, Leif. And you're a hero. You're a genius. And you're also an idiot. You're my enemy. You're my friend. I hate you, Leif. And I love you. All those things are true... You spend a lot of time being torn between this guy and that guy and the other guy... I hope one day you realize, it's just one guy. All those things are true.

LEIF

I think I'd be able to hear that a lot better if I wasn't about to... go be this guy.

BERTBERT

I know... I'm going to hate this so much, Leif. It's going to make me so mad. I'm going to hear about some heinous shit happening across the system and I'm going to scream "Goddamn it, Leif!" In a crowded room and no one will understand what I'm talking about.

LEIF

I apologize in advance.

BERTBERT

I don't forgive you in advance.

LEIF

... Here. Take this.

BERTBERT

Alice? Why am I taking Alice?

LEIF

Because your tangle hates you. Take Alice.

BERTBERT

What are you going to do without a tangle?

LEIF

I'll get a different one. An evil one. Take Alice. She'll never let you down.

BERTBERT

... Okay, if you're sure.

LEIF

I am.

BERTBERT

... Okay. Is this it?

LEIF
This is it. At the end of that dock.

BERTBERT
Come on, I'll walk with you.

LEIF
You can't walk with me, there's pirates down there.

BERTBERT
I'll be fine. Pirates are grandstanders, I'll tell them I'm working on a "Top Ten Sexiest Pirates" story... C'mon. Long walk off a short pier. Let's go.

LEIF
Okay.

THEY WALK.

BERTBERT
Hey. You know, I looked up Nancy Sinatra.

LEIF
Really?

BERTBERT
She wasn't a one hit wonder, Dude.

LEIF
She wasn't?

BERTBERT
No. It wasn't just the one about the boots. Bang Bang? You Only Live Twice? Summer Wine? She had all kinds of hits.

LEIF
Really?

BERTBERT
Yes. Slander, calling her a one hit wonder.

LEIF
Shit... Do I have to rename my ship now?

LEIF AND BERTBERT WALK OFF INTO THE DARKNESS.

THE END.