

NEVER ERR WITH ONE'S AIR

by

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As an envirosuit salesman, Charlie Manus knew he was the best without having to be told. It was an excellent profession for the times, since most life forms preferred survival in good health versus a gruesome death from atmospheric pollutants or hard vac. Only a close, grubby, social group known as the Destitutes—of all the known species on a thousand inhabited worlds, planetary constructs, asteroids, and space stations—felt the need to do without. It was against their religion, and for that they paid an unholy price—but not to Charlie. Perhaps he could change their minds this trip. There had to be an angle he could use to loosen their purses. There always was.

As the commuter shuttle swung into low orbit of that hunk-of-rock-in-empty-void known as Port Nowhere, Charlie forced himself to remember that, for the next few cykes at least, he would be treated like a god. Despite his royal status though, he hated this particular armpit of the galaxy. After all, Port Nowhere, locally referred to as The Rock, didn't get its name from a cereal box. Unfortunately, his employer, Protectaire, Inc., required him to make this semiannual visit to oblivion.

Ah well, at least his first sales call would be the proprietor of his favorite watering hole, not that the simian Modajai was anyone to befriend. The food and drink at Dhamu's Place on LevSev were simply great, even if the locale was more than a little precarious for an offworlder. Just because Charlie's omnipass granted him access to all domes and levels—except the few private domes—he wasn't looking for trouble. It's just that Dhamu's Place was about the only reasonable dive this chunk of grey feek had going for it.

A few owerz later, Charlie found himself in front of that grey-scaled, fish-smelling bulk. Dhamu filled the aisle behind his bar like an oversized wine cork. Despite a few broken teeth and the looks of a wimmerbat's nightmare, the Modajai fairly oozed conceit. Charlie had always found that odd, especially considering where the guy lived.

"You're talking like a bov-brain, Manus," rumbled Dhamu. "Nobody gets skin cancer no more! Besides, I got scales!" He slapped a grimy towel on the bar for emphasis. "You're just trying to jack the price. My old suit's got plenty of life yet, I tell ya!"

Charlie eyed him with a "sure it has," thinking that at least the big dope needed a big suit too. With a cajoling timbre, he said, "Dhamu...ah, Dhamu. Surely you are aware of the statutes handed down by the Boss Families? *No one goes outside the domes without protective gear—*"

"—*'cause your life's worth credits to us,*" completed the Modajai grimly. "I still say you're just tryin' to rip me off."

"Look," Charlie said with exasperation, "your suit counter is already at nineteen seventy-nine hours and I won't be back this way for another two quintenz." *And hopefully never,* he

added silently. “Dhamu, you have to change it out at two thousand anyway. That’s also the rule. Are you planning to buy it from somebody else?”

Dhamu’s scales flushed a dusky yellow. He fidgeted with the wet bar towel and let his bloodshot eyes rove his establishment absently. In a burst of fetid breath, he confessed, “I’ve bought my last five suits from you, Charlie. I...er...just want a change is all. Nykee came out with a whole new sports line this season.”

There it was. A competitor had finally broken into the Rock. Charlie scrambled to pull out the big boys. “You know, Dhamu? You’re absolutely right! It is time for you to make a change. You need to get rid of the good ‘ole tried and true. What’s the use of reliable protection when what you really want is something different? Who needs the comfort of guaranteed defense against the harmful rays of a sun, hard vac, beryllium dust from the very rock of the Rock, or even a proper air mix? It’ll be years before the first signs of cancer shows—maybe on the nose or the forearm. Perhaps a blemish on a lung? Besides, the Boss Families will love to provide medical treatment for you, I’m sure. Your hard-earned credits of a lifetime will go to them!”

Charlie Manus took a deep breath for concerned effect, continued, “But, Dhamu, the worst of it is that the damage is done. The cancer will eat at you like ka’frindi fungus on bov-feek!” *Now, give him the Piercing Eye close*, thought Charlie. “Dhamu, you’re my customer, and my customers are my friends. If you got cancer, Beryl forbid, I’d feel responsible because I would know in my heart that I hadn’t done my best to keep you protected, that I had let you go to a competitor offering an inferior ‘virosuit. I’d never forgive myself.” Charlie stopped talking. Now was the time to shut up, the crux. The first to speak would be the loser.

The overstuffed Modajai squirmed under Charlie Manus’s sincere gaze. Doubt flashed in his amber eyes. After a few more bleeding seconds, he grouched, “Okay...okay! Send me the same old feekin’ ‘virosuit! But just for the record—*friend*—Modajai don’t get skin cancer ‘cause we’ve got scales!”

Charlie smiled genuinely while pumping Dhamu’s thick hand. “Thank you very much. I appreciate your continued business. One last thing, though—how about some spare carbon filters? You know how fast you burn through them, Dhamu....”

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