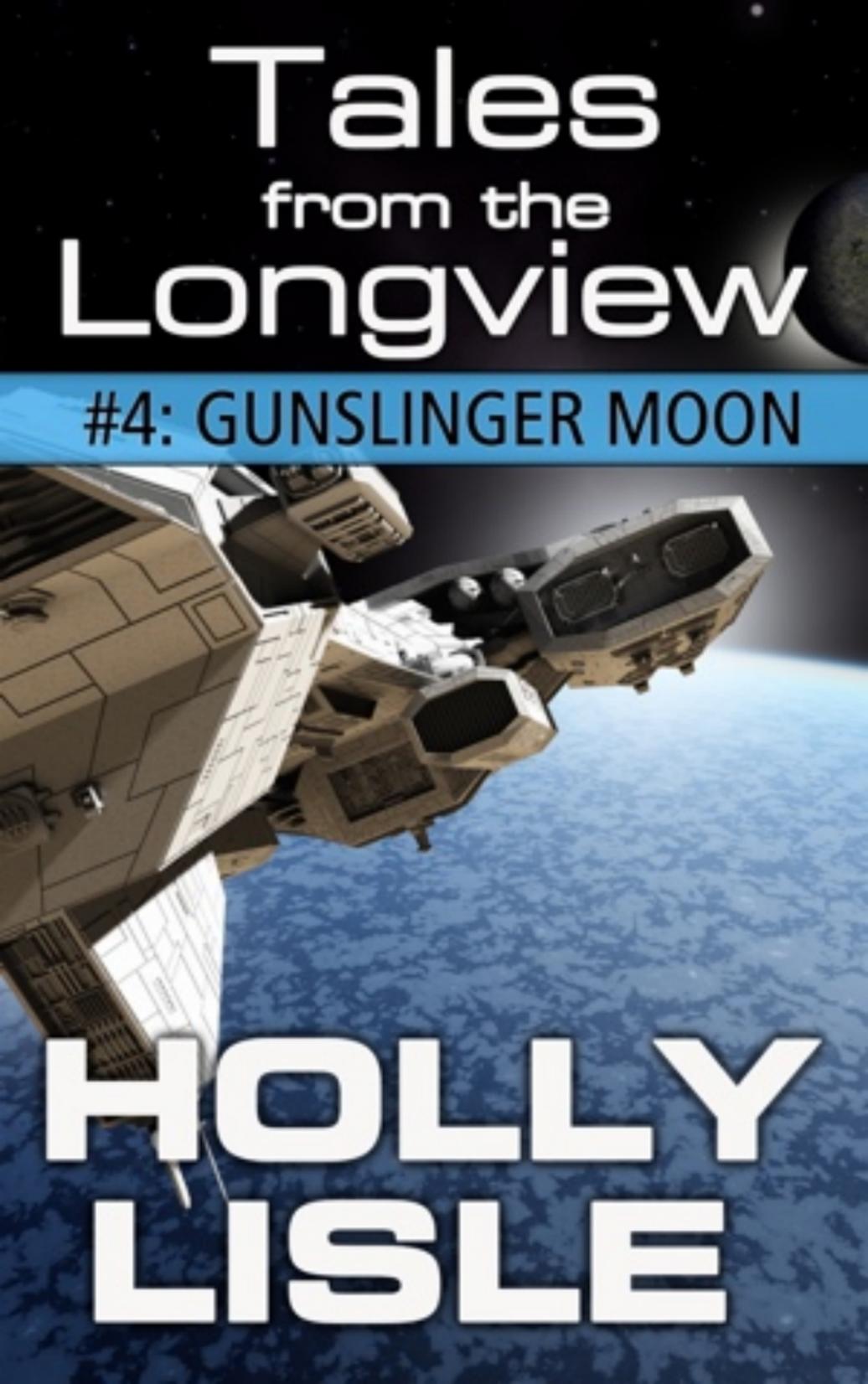


Tales from the Longview

A futuristic spacecraft is shown in space, with the Earth's blue and white horizon visible in the background. The spacecraft has a complex, angular design with various panels and protrusions. The overall scene is set against a dark, starry space background.

#4: GUNSLINGER MOON

**HOLLY
LISLE**

GUNSLINGER MOON

TALES FROM THE LONGVIEW #4

HOLLY LISLE



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Tales from The Longview, Episode 4: Gunslinger Moon

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PUBLISHER'S NOTICE

This is a work of fiction. Seriously. Resemblances to real characters, real solar systems, real spaceships, and real faster-than-light travel are entirely coincidental. Names, characters, places, and tech are products of the author's imagination, and any brilliant guy who appears halfway through the story is not your cousin Bob, no matter how much he insists otherwise.

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For Matthew

*And for Joe,
who introduced me to VR in the real world,
and who loves both games and honor*

CATCHING UP?

The TALES FROM THE LONGVIEW Series Overview

Inhabited by a crew of misfits fleeing nightmare pasts, with a cargo of Condemned slated to die at the hands of the highest bidders, and with a passenger roster made up exclusively of people *not* who they claim to be, *The Longview* serves the hidden agenda of an eccentric recluse bent on playing puppet master to all of Settled Space.

IN EPISODE 1: Born From Fire (originally *Enter the Death Circus*)

When love is crime, who will save the guilty?

After falling in love and fathering a child, a young criminal refuses to voluntarily throw himself into a lake of fire to gain his community's forgiveness. So he's sentenced to death and sold to the owner of a spaceship that buys criminals like him. But the ship and its crew are not quite what they appear to be.

IN EPISODE 2: The Selling of Suzee Delight

When slavery is virtue, who will fight for vice?

When Suzee Delight, famous Cheegoth courtesan, murders the five most powerful Pact Worlds' Administrators during a private summit, the owner of *The Longview* Death Circus struggles against conspiracy to win the bidding for her execution. Meanwhile, Suzee's powerless supporters race to save her, while the leaders of worlds pull strings to guarantee her death.

IN EPISODE 3: The Philosopher Gambit

When the mighty are monsters, what will monsters become?

An exiled philosopher buys a pretty girl a dress for her execution, by doing so becoming a hunted, wanted man with a death sentence on his own head and killers on his trail. The secretive owner of *The Longview* intervenes, putting his crew in harm's way to bring the condemned into his inner circle—but the hunters are close behind.

IN THIS EPISODE: Gunslinger Moon

When freedom is silenced, who speaks for it?

Ex-PHTF slave WE-39R (This Criminal, from *Episode 1*), renamed Jex, is part of a team the Longview's owner has tasked with finding the meaning behind Bashtyk Nokyd's enigmatic final diagram. Drawing the most undesirable assignment, Jex and an unlikely ally fight their way to pieces of the truth.

NEXT IN EPISODE 5: Vipers' Nest

When betrayal comes home, where does home hide?

With no place to run and their complete and utter annihilation the enemy's only objective, Bailey's Irish Station and

the *Longview's* crew stand together against the onslaught of enemies visible and hidden.

CONCLUDING IN EPISODE 6

With the lies revealed, what future remains?

The location of the City of Furies is discovered, Shay has to choose between the owner and Melie, and the path to freeing Settled Space and protecting everything that matters falls on those who never sought the task.

CHAPTER ONE

Shay

Shay closed her eyes and rubbed her temples. She'd been in her office for hours, a "Do Not Disturb" sign on her door, looking for any single tiny piece of new information that might let her believe hope still existed.

That her stupidity had not destroyed Settled Space's last best chance for freedom.

Bashtyk Nokyd, the philosopher she'd risked her life to rescue from a Pact Worlds Alliance death contract, whom she had secured in the *Longview*, and whom she could have gotten to the City of Furies if she hadn't been stupid enough to let him go to dinner with the owners of Bailey's Irish Space Station, was dead because of her.

Her hero. The man who'd been responsible for her own freedom, the man who had written *Simple Rights: The Individual As Universal Core*, was dead, and she might as well have killed him herself.

She pushed the replay button again and once again saw him sitting across the table from her. He had his tablet in hand.

"I have it," he said, drawing, and she could hear his excitement in those few words. His surprise. "The process for freeing the Pact Worlds' captive people." His hand moved steadily, drawing boxes, writing words.

She watched herself say, "You do?" At her desk, her whole body stiffened. Even after seeing the replay so many times, she could not stop the reflex to tense, to get ready to stop the thing she could not stop.

His voice was deep, certain, but still tinged with the elation of discovery. "I can't give them freedom. No one can. The only free people are those who recognize their right to be free, claim it, and then fight to protect that freedom."

Wils Bailey, the owner of Bailey's Irish Space Station, said, "We see that here. Like everyplace else, we're getting refugees who are escaping from Pact Worlds. Some understand that to be here, they have to pay their way. Some..." He shook his head. "They ask where they can sign up for benefits, and where the free rooming houses are, and how to get the free food..."

Shay spotted an expression on the face of Wils' teenage daughter, and wished she had been paying attention to the girl, not to Nokyd. She hadn't noticed it at the time. She'd been too intent on watching Bashtyk Nokyd drawing on his tablet.

The girl stood up and said, "I'll be right back."

Her father smiled, giving her a half-second glance, returning his attention to his guest without any recognition that something was wrong. "We're a space station," he said. "What we can't make or grow here on our own, we have to go out to get or pay to have brought in. We don't have the resource buffer that planets have, with food growing wild that you just find lying around on the ground, or shoot as it walks past."

Nokyd didn't look up. He was busy diagramming. His hand stopped moving for a moment, long enough for him to

study what he'd drawn, and he said, "Most worlds — being terraformed — don't have easy food or other resources either. But I get your meaning. You're dealing with government slaves. Religion slaves. They're different from body slaves — men and women owned by individual masters. Body slaves know that if they don't work, they don't eat. If they resist, they don't eat. If they fight, they'll be chained to a stake without shelter. Their actions all connect — so when they get free, their minds still work.

"Government slaves and religion slaves are different. Their minds have been intentionally broken. They have been taught from birth that work and food are unrelated. That no matter what they do, they will still eat, still have a place to sleep, still have someone to take care of them, because government or God will provide. At the same time, they are taught that their time, their thought, and their work have no value to them. That they must give it away for free, for the benefit of others. That anything they do for themselves is of no use, of no importance. That anything they want for themselves is evil or selfish — even their own lives. Even their own thoughts."

He went back to drawing, and said, "I cannot say the fix for this will be simple, and there will always be people who will choose to be slaves rather than work to be free."

"Here's where we start," he said, and pointed to his diagram.

And the girl placed her hands on either side of his head.

His head imploded before Shay could pause the holo.

She closed her eyes, blinked back tears.

Took a deep breath and straightened her spine.

The diagram was in front of her.

The solution to giving lasting freedom to the people of Settled Space.

She stared at the place on the tablet where his finger rested, to what he'd designated as the starting point.

B or F Principle.

In the week following his death, she'd immersed herself in his work, had brain-imprinted everything he'd published over his long life, as well as every lecture he'd ever given. She'd force-fed seven million written words and almost a thousand hours of holo and audio via high compression into her consciousness.

And there simply was no *B or F Principle* in any of his work.

There was no *B or F Principle* anywhere in any philosophy. As for the rest of the diagram...

*Better Horse or Bigger Gun → NO net! → moon & sun dilemma
→ Shoot on Sight → "Happy Madame"
HARD Restart?*

There was nothing. Nothing that made sense, nothing that connected to any philosophical theory... just nothing. And with the threat of attack by PWA-hired pirate fleets running through the dark channels of space, with rumors of forces being built to come against both the *Longview* and Bailey's Station, she could not afford to throw herself against this wall any longer.

She closed her eyes, rested weary head in hand, and the image of a Medix floated like sweet temptation through her mind.

Reju would feel wonderful...

But that wasn't what the image meant, was it? This was her brain trying to tell her something important. And what she saw hadn't been a regular Medix. It had been one of the modified Sleeper cells.

Right.

Sleepers who had applied to become crew would have

already been tested, would have already received basic crew training, and would have personality profiles on hand.

None of them were doing anything at the moment. They were still in sleep because the *Longview* was docked at Bailey's, and because its Death Circus charter had been cancelled when the Pact Worlds Alliance put a bounty on the ship. Shay didn't see the ship going anywhere for a while.

The most promising of the Sleepers would have been brought up as crew by Melie once she could be announced as captain.

But in the meantime, they were in the Sleeper cells.

Shay could dig through their files, find the potential crew best at lateral thinking, puzzle-solving, and logic-leaping.

The owner would need to present them with the situation and impress them with the importance of the task to him.

Once that was done, though, they could dig through Bashtyk Nokyd's sealed quarters. Perhaps they could find something she'd missed.

CHAPTER TWO

Jex

We sit at a long table, four of us, staring up at a man covered head to toe in what I've learned is an armored deep-space worksuit. His face is hard to see through the shaded moleibond helmet shield, his voice is deep and rasping. He has identified himself to us as Mado Werix Keyr, the owner of this ship.

"Each of you is being drafted as provisional crew. If you provide something from your first objective that proves your resourcefulness and attention to detail, your ability to think creatively, or a provable solution or partial solution to the task I'm giving you, you will receive a permanent universal identity and a crew slot on the *Longview*."

The speaker stares at the four of us — and the shield does not hide the fact that he is... terrible. Terrifying.

I'm taller than he is, broader of shoulder, hardened by a brutal past — but the gleam of his eyes through the shield plate sends ice down my spine.

I've been brought out of storage to find something that

probably doesn't exist, and three other men have been brought out with me.

His voice, muffled by the suit's breathing apparatus, is clear enough to get the danger in our situation across.

"The man who drew this diagram was getting ready to tell a small audience of listeners the process he'd figured out for changing Settled Space to Free Space — for setting up a system of laws, perhaps, or something else that would make the conditions that permit slavery impossible. Before he could explain each of the items on the diagram he drew, he was murdered by a third party, not present in the room, controlling a child who was.

"Everyone present at that meeting submitted to memory scans, and we now know that nothing in what Bashtyk Nokyd said before his death provides clues to what any of this means."

"Others on this ship well-suited to the task are searching for his killer. Meanwhile, the Pact Worlds Alliance has hired an armada of pirates to exterminate everyone on this ship, as well as everyone on the station to which we're docked. And because of treachery and enormous loss of life, the crew of this ship is short-handed. We can spare no active crew to do what must be done in these quarters. Which is why the four of you receive this chance."

He pauses, leans against the table that separates us from him, and breathes heavily. He is looking at each of us in turn, and when his gaze meets mine, I feel myself shrinking, falling into darkness, losing my grasp on who I am.

When he looks to the next man, my mind clears. But I feel shaky and sick. Whatever is wrong with the man across the table from us is beyond the scope of my experience, and it is ugly. Horrifying. Deadly.

"You four have proven yourselves trustworthy while in hibernation. You have each passed the honor test, reading and crew tests, and various problem-solving tests that make you

ideal for the task you've been given. In these quarters you are bound to conduct yourselves by ship rules, and maintain ship discipline. If the answer to the problem before us *can* be found, the four of you will find it.

"Anything in these quarters might offer a key to the solution we seek. Ignore nothing. Assume nothing. No piece of information is too small. If it relates to this, nothing is insignificant.

"When you find something that applies to the words on the diagram I'll give you, press your button on your wrist-com." He points, and I look down to see that a band has been attached to my wrist just under the sleeve of the shipsuit I wear. The band is smaller than the diameter of my hand. It will not come off, will not be possible to lose.

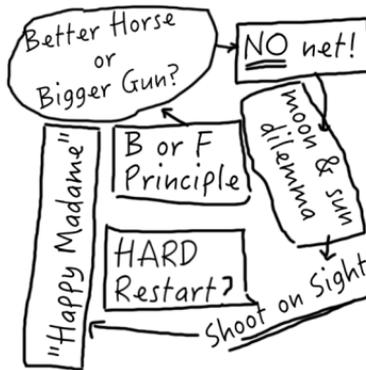
I nod my understanding.

"When you press your com button, you will reach either me or my representative. One of us will come when you call.

And he hands each of us a tablet. I am familiar with the technology. My second parents taught my brothers and sisters and me on such devices.

I stare at the image before me, scrawled by hand in the language I learned following my second birth.

CHAPTER THREE



Jex

B or F Principle → Better Horse or Bigger Gun → NO net! → moon & sun dilemma → Shoot on Sight → "Happy Madame"

HARD Restart?

I can read the individual words. I have no idea what they mean, or how they could relate to the freedom of uncountable billions of enslaved human beings.

But I remember my first life, and know that I have been

given a task of immense importance. Freeing the slaves of Settled Space must be done. If it had been done sooner, the woman I loved and our child might still be alive.

My name is Jex. Now, anyway. This is the name my second parents gave me, with the understanding that I could change it when I grew and became an adult. I kept the name to honor them for giving me a home, for giving me love, for teaching me and raising me and making sure I knew right from wrong, knew the value of being human, knew how to think and knew why thinking mattered. And for giving me a name in the first place — something my first parents, whoever they might have been, never got the chance to do.

I remember being This Criminal in my first life, where I started out as WE-39R, a slave on a People's Home of Truth and Fairness world that required anyone of Willfulness, Blasphemy, or Infidelity to seek Return to Citizenship by volunteering to leap into a lake of fire to prove remorse and repentance.

Once the criminal was dead, the citizens present welcomed it back as a citizen — for all citizens of PHTF worlds are considered acceptable only if they accept the Truth of We, and are right-thinking creatures. And the right-thinking dead are honored, while the wrong-thinking living are not.

"Do you have questions?" the owner asked.

The four of us look at each other, exchanging fearful glances. The other three shook their heads.

I repress a shiver and say, "I have one."

The helmeted head nods. "Ask."

"How are we to know what may be touched?"

The owner says, "You may — you *must* — touch everything in this suite. Nothing is too small, too unimportant, or too strange for your consideration. The man who inhabited these quarters may have had terrible secrets, may have been

other than as he presented himself, or he may have been exactly the man all of Settled Space believed him to be.

“That doesn’t matter.

“What matters is that he may have left clues to his thinking in this room. Neither I nor anyone else who has seen his diagram can understand what it means. And I have presented it to every surviving member of my crew, to my officers, to associates of mine in places far from here, and to the best minds in the City of Furies. No one can unravel its import.”

One of the others says, “Perhaps it was a joke. It looks like it could have been a joke.”

“It does,” the owner agrees. “Unless you knew the man. He was working toward the solution to the most important problem in our society — not to just freeing existing slaves, but to devise a way to protect the individual rights of all people by preventing the creation of new slaves. He was searching for a way to create Free Space and make sure that its freedom is lasting. I personally offered him passage to the City of Furies and assistance in earning citizenship in exchange for helping me solve this problem for which we both desired the answer.

“At dinner, during a discussion he was having with friends, something fell into place for him, and he suddenly knew the solution.

“He drew the diagram, he got ready to explain what it meant, and he was murdered.”

The four of us look at each other. The man to my right asks, “If he was murdered for figuring out this answer, might we not be as well?”

The silence that follows freezes me in place. He’s asked the wrong question. I know it the second I hear it, and have my fear confirmed in the instant that the owner’s head turns slowly toward him.

To the air, the owner says, "Samix, escort T748H-BN Rabon to his unit. His assistance is no longer needed."

One of the guards standing by the door nods and steps forward. The owner turns to Rabon and says, "When Settled Space is *safe*, you can come out of the box again."

I suppress my shudder. The owner looks at each of us in turn. When his gaze lands on me, I swallow fear and say, "I'd like to see a recording of that conversation."

He says, "One exists. It was from an illegal source, and you may not speak of what you see to anyone ever. If you watch it, when you become crew you will be Veridicated each time you return to the ship, and your failure to keep this secret will be one of the things for which you will be tested. If you fail in this test, you will be abandoned wherever you are with nothing but your name and the clothes you wear, to make your way through the universe as best you can."

"I still want to see it," I say.

"You each agree?"

The other two nod. "Veridication requirements were explained during Off-ship Conduct Training," the man on my left says.

I see the faint flicker of a smile inside the helmet.

"Then you three are left to find the truth. It may be anywhere in these quarters, in any form. Whatever bits of Bashtyk Nokyd's discovery exist in here will almost certainly be in pieces. From the form of his notes, they are unlikely to be recognizable as solutions — you are going to have to distill some of the sense of his meaning from what you find to create a path to the truth."

"How long do we have?"

"You have as long as you have, but it is more important that you be thorough than that you be quick. We need the right answer, not the fastest one you can find. The Pact Worlds Alliance is rabidly expansionist — it constantly needs to drag productive worlds under its rule to pay the debts of

its core worlds — and because it bleeds its conquests dry so quickly, changing them into yet more debtor worlds, it cannot escape the expanding rot at its center, or solve the problems the rot causes.

“So you have until you can find and connect Bashtyk Nokyd’s secrets to the meaning of the diagram, or until you exhaust all options and surrender, or until pirates hired by the Pact Worlds Alliance to destroy us come through the origami point to where we’re docked and succeed.”

“I would have led with that last one,” I say, and immediately wish I hadn’t.

The owner laughs, though — an unnerving rasp that ends in a strangled cough. “Work,” he says. “As if your lives depend on it. Because they do.”

THE REST OF THE STORY...

I decided three chapters was better than two. So You can share this ebook with anyone can share this with anyone, and if you like it, you can get the full story here:

Longview 4: Gunslinger Moon

Want to know when I have something new for science fiction and fantasy readers?

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

I'm a commercial novelist who went indie.

Lots of reasons, all good but none easy. In July of 2011 I walked away from commercial publishing to pursue *My Career My Way*, and it's been interesting times ever since.

Now I'm back to writing the *Cadence Drake, Moon & Sun*, and *Longview* series, creating stand-alone fiction, building writing courses, and getting the chance to speak directly to the readers of both my fiction and nonfiction.

If you keep hoping I'll do a particular story, or book, or course, and I haven't yet—let me know.

Cheerfully,
Holly Lisle



P.S. Find me here...

<https://hollylisle.com>

