

# FTL 1.0

by Michael P Calligaro

"Come on, Gared, I need you on this one."

Gared stared defiantly at the image of his frequent partner, Hitori Tanaka, and shook his head. "You've got to be kidding, Hitori. You want me to beta test a faster than light ship? I'd kind of like to keep my atoms in this universe."

"Aw, Gared, they've tested it ten times now. And all but the first and third came back. I piloted the last test and I'm fine."

"No, you're obviously insane. Jumping to the end of the solar system is one thing. Jumping across the galaxy is something far different. Besides, those guys never get it right on the first try. Call me when they need some final testing of FTL 3.0."

"Gared, Gared, Gared. It's safe, I swear it. I need you this time, buddy."

A dangerous job away from his comfortable and depressing life at home? The thought did appeal to Gared. But what if he screwed this one up? It'd be tantamount to a death sentence for the two of them. And while that might have been best for him, he couldn't let it happen to his friend. In the "sending image" window Gared could see his face fall into a wry frown. "Hitori, you're contradicting yourself. If it's safe, you don't need a problem solver. If you need me, it's not safe."

Hitori's face became a mask of frustration. He looked ready to say something, then held back. Finally, he blurted, "Don't make me invoke Minerva, Gared."

That stung. Hitori had a lot of nerve bringing her up just twenty-five months after she left him for killing their daughter. Gared's face must have fallen, for Hitori's became extremely concerned.

"I'm sorry, Gared. I shouldn't have mentioned her."

There were achingly few people left in Gared's life who he could let get away with such a statement. With a sigh, he said, "Don't worry about it."

Hitori stared intently at him for a moment before continuing. "Claire's death was not your fault, Gared. And spending the rest of your life taking meaningless assignments isn't going to make anything better. Why don't you come with me?"

How could Hitori know whose fault it was? He wasn't in the room to watch her frail little body turn blue as her heart failed.

"What about Sigrev? He's a good engineer."

Perhaps sensing an opportunity to lighten the conversation, Hitori laughed. "Sigrev? He couldn't code his way out of a paper bag if we gave him a DLL with the functions 'OpenBag' and 'Leave!' No, if I'm going to fly light-years from home, I want the best there to fix whatever breaks."

But was he the best? He might have been, once. But he'd been screwing up a lot in the last two years. "You know my track record. Are you sure you want to trust your life to me?"

Hitori didn't even hesitate. He nodded vigorously and said, "How you act on pointless and boring jobs

that are below you has no bearing on how you'll act on one that really matters. You are the best, you've just let other factors cloud your memory of this simple fact." Hitori looked both ways and leaned in close to the camera. Talking in an awed whisper, he said, "Think about it, my friend. You could be the second man ever to reach another star!"

"Second?"

He leaned back and grinned. "Well, after me. I mean, the pilot goes first, right?"

What an opportunity. Maybe he could be extra careful this time. Maybe he could get back into his old groove. Maybe....

These thoughts must have shown through to Gared's face, for Hitori beamed and said, "You think about it and get back with me tomorrow." They'd been together long enough for Hitori to know he'd planted seeds in fertile soil and that they'd grow on their own now.

Gared nodded and reached up to terminate the connection. He paused and said, "Hitori?"

"Yeah, Gared."

"Thanks."

Hitori bowed his head and smiled.

Gared terminated the connection and sat still for a moment. Taking a deep breath, he addressed his computer, "Claire, give me all data on the new FTL project."

The computer responded in a little girl's voice, "Just a minute, daddy."

\* \* \*

*Ninth jump. Local coordinates: 48319, 89323, 13798. Expected translational displacement: 2145, 2145, 2145. Elapsed time: 372.3 seconds. Return coordinates: 50466, 91466, 15943. Stresses incurred on the craft included--*

Gared pushed his keyboard away and rubbed his eyes. "Claire," he said, "that's enough data."

"Okay, daddy. Do you want me to shut down?"

Gared paused and ran a finger along the edge of the ancient keyboard he refused to give up. "Claire, honey. I'm going away for a while. And there's a chance that I might not come back. Will you be okay?"

"Sure, daddy. I'll just back up my files before you leave."

"But you will be okay?"

"Yes. Everything will be fine."

He smiled wryly. "Okay, goodnight."

"Goodnight, daddy. I love you." The computer shut down.

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Hitori rushed up and pounded him on the back. "I heard you took the first shuttle up. I knew you'd come around."

Gared pointed out the port at the sleek black ship sitting snugly in its space dock, its large clear canopy showing two seats in a line. "Is that our beast?"

Hitori nodded reverently. "Isn't she a beaut?"

"Kind of small."

"Hey, we're not going to live out there. We're just hopping four point three light years and coming back. Besides, there would be something seriously wrong with the universe if the fastest ship around didn't look sporty."

"I think it looks like a coffin."

Hitori shook his head. "I'll bet you tell kids there's no Santa Claus too."

Gared stiffened. He'd always been logical, and thought it prudent to tell Claire where her presents really came from. Minerva had almost killed him over that.

Hitori noticed the tension and, a moment later, his face showed that he'd realized why. He clapped a hand on Gared's shoulder and said somberly, "I'll take you around to meet the crew."

Gared let Hitori lead him, not trusting his space legs in the low gravity of the station. "I want schematics for every bolt on her. I want three copies of every tool needed to adjust every adjustable piece. I want every star map available, in machine-readable form. I want every line of source code running in her computers and three backup machines with compilers for system changes. And damn it, I want vi on those machines."

Hitori stopped dead in his tracks, which on the station meant his body arched forward and he had to grab the wall to catch himself. Turning to Gared, he said slowly, in a tone that implied those two letters should never ever be put together, "Vee eye? I could have gotten you any of those things, but the gearheads will just die if you don't let them put on a code editor written sometime this century."

Warming up, Gared crossed his arms and glared at Hitori. "It's vi, or you're flying alone."

Hitori returned his sneer, and then his face broke into a smile. "Okay you old hacker. I'll see what I can smuggle in." Other than his strange choice in editors, Hitori didn't have much dirt on Gared that was fair game. So he had to rub the vi thing in his face at every opportunity.

Gared ignored the jab and asked, "How are they compensating for the shear forces on transition?"

Hitori shrugged. "Don't ask me. I just fly the thing. Remind me again how the ship works."

This was one of their games. Hitori knew damn well how the ship worked. But he liked to quiz his friend and verify that Gared had prepared as much for this job as he had for their others. Well, all *but that* one--but no one knew about that. Gared felt his face get warm and launched into his explanation to cover it. "Three e eight meters per second is the absolute maximum speed anything in this universe can attain. In fact, it's faster than anything with any mass can possibly do. If we want to go faster, we'd better not try to do it in this universe. So your coffin out there...what are you folks calling it?"

Hitori grinned. "Satan's Fury."

"Touching. You named it, didn't you?"

"Of course!"

"Anyway, so Satan's Fury hops over into a parallel universe in which the speed of light is considerably higher, roughly a hundred billion times faster--"

"Hold it," Hitori interrupted. The speed of light is dependent on other aspects of the universe. What else is different?

"Well, nothing."

Hitori eyed him warily and Gared felt his face flush. "Okay, sorry, I'm too used to speaking to laymen. Of course you know that everything of importance in a universe depends on a single universal constant."

"I'll bet ours is 42!"

Gared grinned and shook his head. "Sure Hitori, you can think of our universe's constant as 42 if you'd like. And we can think of the other universe's constant as 42,000,000."

"So, with those numbers so different, how can we survive over there?"

"Because everything changes together. The universe is larger, but so are atomic radii. Light travels faster to compensate, but as far as anyone there can tell, it's going three e eight meters per second. They just have a different idea of what a meter is than they would while in this universe."

Hitori scratched his sparsely stubbled chin in mock confusion. "So, while we'll be different, we won't be able to tell because all of the rules are intertwined and will have changed together?"

Gared nodded.

"Well, if everything is the same to us, how will we go faster than light?"

"We won't," Gared continued. "But since their universe is so much bigger than ours, travelling a small distance there means travelling a large distance here. In that universe, we'll travel much less than the speed of light, but the distance we'll cover when we pop back here will be much greater than light could have moved in the elapsed time."

"And it's safe?"

Gared grinned. Hitori was such a manipulator. Though it was Gared who worried about their safety, Hitori was now forcing him to make assurances as to the safety of the trip. "Well, besides addling of the brain of one of our pilots--"

"Hey! I resemble that remark."

"--there doesn't seem to be any adverse effect to traveling there. So, we shoot up to a much higher speed than we could here, even though it won't seem fast there, blast over to where we want to go, and pop back into our universe."

Hitori shrugged. "Yeah, sounds about right. So, what's the problem?"

"The forces put on the craft on splitting through the wall of this universe and into another one with different physical laws must be extreme. How are they dealing with them?"

"Oh, you know those gearheads. They've got some gadget that supposedly routes the force around the ship instead of through it. I think they're making it up, though. Splitting through is one wild ride."

Gared coughed. "I see."

"Why? Did you find a problem with that stuff in the plans?"

Gared shook his head. "No. I was just curious."

"Well, you can ask the engs themselves in a second."

\* \* \*

Gared strapped himself into the tight seat. He tapped on Hitori's shoulder, who'd already taken the seat in front of him. "Didn't leave us much room to move around, did they?" He could just make out Hitori's shrug, as the seatback reached his shoulders and a thick headrest rose above it.

"I told you, there's a considerable amount of turbulence on splitting through the universe barrier. We couldn't just use the normal boxy designs of our vacuum ships."

"Yeah, that's what the report says, but I know you better. You just wanted it to look fast."

Hitori raised a suited hand. Gared had left his gloves off so he could type. "Not that I had a lot to do with the design, but guilty as charged. When we hit the barrier, I'll be sure to throw us around to hide the fact that it's actually a smooth transition."

The screen set into the back of Hitori's chair came to life, showing an attractive brunette with a round face and riveting eyes dark enough to be described as black. "Gentlemen, are you ready to make history?"

"That's affirmative, Leslie darling," Hitori said. "Just let my paranoid companion here do one last systems check and come up with another piece of data he thinks he'll need."

Winking at Gared, she replied, "When that last bit of data saves your pilot's hide, let me know and I'll be sure that no one ever lets him live it down."

Gared smiled and typed a few more things on the keyboard he'd required they install. Below Leslie's image more system diagnostics scrolled passed.

"Did you see this?" Hitori chided. "He doesn't like to talk to his systems, and made us put in a Dvorak keyboard! We had to search all over the planet to find such an antique."

Happy with the arrangement of his data, Gared said, "Don't listen to him, Leslie. I brought my own. Okay, everything checks out. Unclamp 'Satan's Coffin' as soon as flyboy gives the signal."

"Satan's Coffin?" Hitori shook his finger over his shoulder at Gared. "Okay dear, I'm ready. Unclamp Satan's *Fury* at will."

She nodded and pressed a button. "Satan's Coffin is away. Good luck gentlemen." Her voice turning stern, she said, "I fully expect to see both of your smiling faces back in this corner of the galaxy within a few hours. So don't stop to do any sightseeing and make me worry about you."

Hitori tapped a maneuvering thruster, and they drifted away from the space dock. Gared, with nothing to do at this stage of the trip, watched the receding station through the canopy. "I'm shutting my systems down," he announced.

"That isn't necessary. Just like us, they won't be able to tell that the other universe has different physics."

"And you tested that how well?"

Hitori held up his hand. "Okay, okay, suit yourself. Hold on, I'm going to pick up the pace a bit."

The acceleration pressed Gared's body into the seat momentarily.

Hitori beamed, "Feel how smooth that was? I tell you, this is the best ship ever."

"Sure, Hitori, whatever you say. How long until we jump?"

"Give me five more minutes to clear the station."

Gared used the time to amuse himself--worrying in alphabetical order about what could go wrong. He'd only reached "gravitational anomalies" when Hitori told him they were about to go. He grabbed his helmet and slid it down over his suit, then donned his gloves and attached them. Clamping his teeth together, he gripped the armrests and shoved his helmet back into the headrest.

He felt the acceleration at the pit of his stomach. It was the most unsettling feeling his body had experienced since weightlessness. Through the canopy above he saw the stars warp and distort, then bend outward around the nose of the ship. A second later, the nose disappeared, followed quickly by the forward hull. When the blackness of space reached Gared, he felt a jerk and a bright light stabbed into his eyes. Though he closed them immediately, it left a glow on his retinas. The ship jerked from side to side, up and down, and forward and back, seemingly all at once. Was it being simultaneously stretched and compressed? Would it break apart? Panic rose from his stomach and into his throat when the ship jerked again and suddenly calmed itself.

He opened his eyes and saw what looked like normal space, just with the stars in the wrong layout. "Are we through?"

"Yes. Congratulations on being only the second human and the eighth living being from our universe to visit this one. Now, sit back and watch what this baby can do." Hitori hammered the main thrust. The force threatened to crush Gared in his seat. A readout by Gared's right hand quickly incremented from 0.00000001 to 1.000000 and continued up from there.

Hitori let out a whoop. "Here we are, going faster than the speed of light!"

Gared wanted to correct him, to say that in this universe, they were hardly moving compared to the speed of light, but the intense force bearing down on him made breathing uncomfortable. He decided against attempting to force air passed his vocal chords just to explain something that Hitori already knew. Damn pilots, he thought. They think anyone can take multiple g's without complaint.

The weight continued for some period of time rendered uncountable by pain. During this time, Gared tried to sit still and imagine something pleasant, like floating underwater in scuba equipment. Suddenly the weight disappeared.

Letting out a tired breath, he said, "Are we there?"

"Come on, Gared, are the g's getting to you? You know we've got to break for as long as we accelerate." The ship spun around and the weight started again. Gared didn't even have time to sigh.

Eventually, it stopped again. "How are you doing back there, Gared?"

"I suppose we'll have to do that again on the way home."

"We will if you'd like to get back sometime in this lifetime. Anyway, hold on. We're going back through to our universe. In seconds you'll be one of the first two humans to ever see Alpha Centauri up close."

Gared's arms and fingers already ached from holding on tight for the last hour. In fact, his whole body ached. His head buzzed too. But as much as he'd tried to keep a healthy skepticism about this whole thing, he found his heart racing in excitement.

The ship went through similar contortions as the last time and then stopped. Gared popped his eyes open, expecting to see the Alpha Centauri group nearby. Instead he saw nothing but distant stars. He looked all around out the canopy but still only saw specks of light. "Where is it? Behind or below us?"

Remaining silent, Hitori spun the ship around in both dimensions. They didn't see a close star anywhere. Gared's heart beat rapidly again, but this time in fear, not anticipation. They both sat silent for a moment, and then Hitori muttered, "Damn. I'm glad I brought the best."

With a frown, Gared started his computers and pulled off his gloves. The buzzing in his head had not subsided. "Are you sure you pointed us in the right direction?"

He saw Hitori's helmet nod. "Check the logs," the pilot replied dejectedly.

"Well, maybe we got out of alignment in the turbulence breaking through?"

"No. We worked out the alignment and targeting algorithms on the previous tests."

The previous tests had checked acceleration in the other universe, just not high acceleration there. But that shouldn't matter. Was something else wrong with the ship? Maybe the adjusted velocity and chronometers were wrong for the universe they'd traveled through. Gared typed a few keys and a program went to work stressing those. He started another job to check the rest of the system. If something was malfunctioning, they might be able to figure out what it had done wrong and then calculate how it affected them. He mentally crossed his fingers for that to be the case. The worst situation would be that everything checked out. That would mean there was something wrong with the theories, and they were too far from the guys who'd developed those theories to get help.

Gared's computer beeped twice. Hitori, who had fallen uncharacteristically quiet, spoke excitedly. "What'd you find out?"

With a sigh, Gared relayed the bad news. "There's nothing wrong with the ship."

\* \* \*

"Aha!"

Hitori jerked up. "What?"

"I think I know where we are."

"Are you going to encrypt the data or just tell me already?"

Gared typed a command. "Look at your screen."

"Oh my God, it's full of stars."

Gared couldn't help but laugh. Here they were, lost somewhere in a gigantic universe, and his friend still managed to quip classic literature to lighten the mood. "That's a star map of the area around Alpha Centauri as seen from Earth."

"Okay."

"Now look ahead."

"Way different, chief."

"Look back at the map." He typed a few things and dots began appearing.

Hitori looked back and forth from the map and the sky out the canopy. "Well, it's coming around, but I see a few prominent stars on the map that aren't out there."

"These two, right?" Gared highlighted two stars on the map.

"Yeah."

"Those are the two stars closest to Alpha Centauri."

For all his pretending to be a brainless flyboy, Hitori was actually quite bright. "We overshot!"

"By a considerable amount."

"Gared, if it weren't so bloody tight in here, I'd crawl back there and kiss you!"

"Why? I haven't gotten us back yet."

"Sure you have. We're dead on, just too far. So the navigation systems are working correctly and we just have to go back the way we came."

"But you don't know why we overshot. We can't be sure it'll do the same in reverse."

"We'll we've got to try."

Gared frowned. "Give me a bit more time to think about it."

Hitori drummed his fingers on his armrest. "Okay, but be quick about it. I'm not going to let your stupid name for my ship come true."

Gared studied the chronometer and all the data for the previous tests. Everything seemed to be correct. Even knowing something had to be wrong, he couldn't find it. And with Hitori begging every few minutes to let him fly back, Gared finally threw up his hands. "Okay, try it. I can't figure out what's going on."

The break through to the other universe and the high acceleration travel went just like before. When they came to a halt again, Hitori hesitated.

"Are you okay up there?" Gared asked.

"Gared? Are we going to see the sun when we hop out?"

"I don't know, Hitori. I really don't know."

"No, I need you to tell me we're going to see it."

Gared shrugged. "Sure, Hitori. We're going to see it."

"Thanks." He sent them through again. Gared knew the result before he opened his eyes. Rather than a whoop of excitement, he got stone silence from Hitori.

"Okay, spin us around and let me look in the direction we came from." Hitori did and Gared was able to



match the view to the star map. "I see the Alpha group, but not the sun. We didn't come far enough back."

Despair creeping into his voice, Hitori said, "Oh, what the hell is going on here? We can't randomly jump back and forth looking for Earth. We'll never find it."

Gared clenched his teeth. He was thinking the same thing. He typed a few commands and Hitori said, "What's this?"

"That's the system source code. I brought it up for you in one of your present century editors. There's a bug in there somewhere. Start reading."

"You know how long it's been since I've looked at any code?"

"If you can't figure something out, ask, and I'll walk you through it."

"There's a lot of code here! This could take forever."

Gared frowned. "You got a date?"

Hitori shut up and started reading.

Something nagged at the back of Gared's mind, but every time he tried to focus on it, it disappeared.

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Gared rubbed his eyes and yawned. Hitori had made plenty of comments about the quality of the code, but chose this moment to say, "Man, if I'd seen this stuff before, I'd never have gotten into this death trap."

"Well, we haven't found anything seriously wrong yet."

"No, nothing wrong. Just bad." Gared nodded and went back to reading. Hitori sat quiet for a few minutes, then said, "Gared?"

"Yeah, Hitori."

"We're not getting out of this, are we?"

With a long sigh, Gared pushed his keyboard away and leaned back. Cupping his hands over his eyes, he replied "I don't know, Hitori. It really doesn't look good." Hitori didn't reply. Frustrated, Gared muttered, "You'd think I would have learned from the last time."

Hitori sat up and looked back. "What's that?"

Gared realized what he'd just said and closed his mouth.

"Gared?"

He frowned. Well, if they were going to die together, he might as well bare his soul. "The last time I went into a job not totally prepared, Claire died." He took Hitori's silence as an invitation for more. "I knew I'd be working near a Fulstrom capacitor. But I didn't know much about them. I certainly didn't know how to treat someone who'd been shocked by one. When I looked back and saw her playing near it, I yelled for her to get away. But she touched it and my heart collapsed as her frail little body got thrown across the room. I panicked. I didn't know what to do. So I tried CPR. That probably killed her." He sobbed.

"You never give CPR to someone shocked by a Fulstrom capacitor. You need to ground the body and let the heart restart on it's own."

Hitori sat quiet for a moment, and then nodded. "I know."

"Of course you know. You weren't so dumb as to go into the job without learning everything about everything."

Hitori shook his head. "No. I knew what happened."

Gared looked at him in shock. "How?"

"You forgot where I was working. I could see the room on a monitor. When I saw you start to give her CPR, I raced back as fast as I could. I was too late."

"Why didn't you say anything? Everyone said it wasn't my fault. That the insulation around the capacitor had worn out and that I couldn't have known."

Hitori nodded. "I didn't see how saying anything would have helped. Would it have?"

Gared frowned. "No, I guess not." He sat quiet for a moment. So all this time he'd known, but he'd kept quiet to cover for Gared. Hitori probably only chose him for this job in an attempt to get his confidence back. Gared couldn't let him down. With a sad smile, he said. "But it helps now. Thanks."

"No problem. Now, explain what you meant."

"What's that?"

"You said this is just like the last time. How?"

Gared's mind raced. He had said that, hadn't he? What had he meant? Suddenly, the thing that had been nagging at him held still long enough for him to shine a light on it. Why hadn't he consciously seen that before? Good thing his subconscious could do simple math better than his conscious. "I wasn't prepared that time. I didn't know everything about everything going into the job."

"Yeah, but since then you've been so overprepared for every job it's gotten you into trouble. What's different this time."

"This time I didn't know why the old tests had a small displacement."

Hitori gasped. "What?!"

Gared brought up the results of the ninth test. "You tell me, my friend. What's 48319 plus 2145?"

Hitori whistled. "It's certainly not, 50466."

Gared nodded. The y coordinate's off too.

"Even if that is a tiny error, this has got to have something to do with it. But why did it happen?"

Gared scratched his chin and stared up into space. "Let me think about it." Hitori immediately shut up.

Why a displacement? What would cause one? Suddenly he grabbed his keyboard. His hands flew over it, issuing the terse, nearly impossible to remember commands that made vi famous amongst twentieth century hackers. He quickly zeroed in on the code segment he was looking for. Once there, he read for a

second, and then leaned back and stared up at the stars.

"Those idiots! Didn't I tell you?"

Hitori's face showed he couldn't tell whether to be excited or worried. "Tell me what?"

"That they never get it right in version one."

"Did you find the bug?"

Gared nodded.

"Are you going to keep me in suspense until the universe collapses back on itself, or what?"

"Naw, current research says it'll die of cold death, not reverse course."

"And so will we if you don't fix this! What did you find?"

Gared smiled. "Let's say you've got two long trains traveling in the same direction on adjacent tracks. You're standing on the slow one and get this crazy idea. You want a free ride up to the front of the train. So you jump onto the fast one, walk forward and jump back onto slow one. Now, to go back, you jump back onto the fast one, walk back the same distance, and jump back. Are you in the same place?"

"Of course not."

"Well, our gearhead friends were so busy focusing on how fast you could go in the other universe, they neglected to take into consideration how fast the universe itself was moving. Ours is expanding, and so is it, but it's expanding a hell of a lot faster than we are."

"Pulling us along with it!"

Gared nodded.

"Can you correct for that?"

With a smile, Gared cracked his knuckles. "I figure it'll take me ten minutes to code it up. Good thing you brought the best."

"Damn good thing I brought the best!"

Using their speeds of light and the displacements from the tests, Gared calculated the relative speeds of the two universe trains. He then wrote a program to take their previous flight data, grind on it, and spit out telemetry for a new jump. Hitori eagerly fed the information into his flight computer and they quickly jumped into the alternate universe. The acceleration was not as hard this time, nor did it last for nearly as long. At the other end, Hitori hesitated. "This is going to work, isn't it Gared?"

Gared nodded. "Yes, it is. But do it soon or we'll drift away from the right spot."

They punched through the wall of the universe and saw the wonderful sight of a bright yellow star. Gared ripped off his gloves and typed. He realized he'd forgotten to turn off his computers this time and noticed with approval that they did still work. At least the gearheads got something right. "Judging from the apparent diameter of the sun, we're just outside of Pluto's orbit."

"Yippee!"

A minute later Leslie's beautiful face graced their screens. "There you are! I swear you boys gave me fifteen gray hairs!" They heard cheering in the background.

"Talk about a sight for sore eyes." Hitori blew kisses at the screen.

She returned the kisses and said, "Get your tails back here and I'll give a real one to whichever of you got you back in one piece."

Hitori said, "That would be my friend, the supergenius, sitting behind me."

She winked at Gared. "Good, he's the cuter one."

Gared felt himself blushing. Hitori's voice giddy, he said, "Leslie, please tell corporate that we found such a doozy of bug that we'll each be expecting a complimentary copy of the hardware when they ship."

She laughed. "Well, we'll see what we can do."

"Sorry to cut you off, dear, but I've gotta chat in private with my buddy." Hitori flipped a switch and her image disappeared. He looked over his shoulder. "Are you going to be all right?"

Gared nodded. "We're back, aren't we?"

"That's not what I'm talking about, and you know it."

With a pause and a sigh, he said, "If you mean, does this make it all better with Claire? No. But I'll survive."

"Good. Because if you weren't going to, I'd have to quit my job."

Gared laughed.

**The End**

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