

Chapter One

I am a peanut.

Ethereal in nature and infinitely pliable. The universe is my playground and all is revealed unto me. I traverse time and space, with stars as my footstools and a myriad of wondrous planets as my pillow. The heavens obey my whims and all bow to my desires. For I am both infinite and immortal.

Slowly, he became aware of his surroundings. The quiet hum of the ventilation fans. The hiss of the air moving through ducts. The soft drone of the computers munching on their numbers.

It was always a little surreal to rise out of the grip of the sleepers and return once more to the land of the living. If you could call a small metal cylinder coasting through space “land”. There was always that little nagging feeling at the back of the mind. A dream barely remembered, a half-heard message that you could never really tell if you wanted to remember or not.

After taking a few moments to mull over his sluggish thoughts, Johnny decided that he had better get up. Looking around the small compartment, he could see the other crew slowly coming round. Since everyone was being awakened normally, it was obviously not an emergency. There was time to grab a snack before starting his shift. Quietly, so as to not attract undue attention, Johnny sauntered off to the mess.

Elsewhere on the Celiker, Guiora was trying to shake the cobwebs from his head. Navigation was fun and all, but he needed to be able to think clearly to do it. Pulling on some comfy shoes, he moved down the central hallway to the navroom where the main displays were showing their current position. They were about two days out from their destination, Balga.

“How are we looking?” asked Powell.

“Pretty good, Captain,” replied Guiora. “We’re two days out, right in the pipe with no obstacles to be seen. Two contacts, one thirty forward and the other eighty aft. Plenty of clearance.”

“Excellent” said Powell. Turning to his second, he continued. “Isacus, set the first watch and send the lads round on an inspection. If there are any holes, I want to know about them. Have Papo make sure all our invoices are in order for when we unload. Oh, and make sure that Mari has something to do.”

“Yessir!” replied Isacus. Fortunately for him, there would be plenty of time to get adjusted to the shipboard routine before they docked at Balga. On some trips, the distance between the set emergence point and the destination was pretty short and it always made him grumpy to have to go without enough sleep.

Watching Isacus leave, Powell considered how lucky he was to have him as a Second. There was always a delicate balance for the Second to maintain between being commandeering enough to keep everyone else in line but subordinate enough to follow the Captains orders when given. There were precious few people capable of consistently maintaining that balance.

Most guys (or gals now that he thought about it) were too busy pushing themselves forward for their own command or too apathetic as they fell from their previous command. The pushers who wanted to be captains would spend too much time making sure the Captain knew how good they were – and if they didn't get the recommendations, they'd move on to another ship. Those on the fall from having previously been a captain but having lost their ship or been demoted for whatever reason were normally quite good at the job since they already knew what to do but also dragged down the moral of the rest of the crew.

And they were also exceptionally rare, since a captain who lost his ship would normally go with it. Be it lost in the void, blown to bits of orbiting rubble or lost to poor maintenance, the Captain would invariably go with the ship. Not out of some long forgotten sense of duty but from the simple reason that when a ship fails, it fails quickly. And spectacularly, should there be anyone around to see.

A chance comment by his navigator snapped his attention back to present.

“What was that?”

“I was just wondering if Kasia was going to be at the Frantelle Bar still” mused Guiora. “She was certainly a very fine lady, if you know what I mean.”

“Actually, no” replied Powell with a quiet smirk on his face. “I wouldn't know what you mean. After all, I'm not Voislaving, am I?”

There was a quite laugh amongst the other crew present. The captain was talking about a small legal curiosity on the planet Paaveli that required a man perform a long and bizarre ritual prior to engaging in sexual acts with their partner. In practice, nobody actually performed said ritual but it was a convenient loophole to catch those who decided to take their amorous adventures out in public. There was a lengthy debate to remove that law after a group of University students performed a “protest” in the streets that conformed to the law *exactly* but like all contentious issues, the politicians of the day put it to a committee until the public lost interest.

Meanwhile, down in the engineering spaces of the ship, two of the four mechanics that maintained the ship were busy suiting up a third. One person could actually suit themselves up with relative ease, but three were always required when there was a standard EVA action. The two main reasons being that nobody wanted to discover they had neglected to do a catch or seal when the airlock depressurized (or worse, after they'd

stepped outside) and the company made it a requirement because it was cheaper to expend some labour triple-checking than to buy a new suit. Since nobody wanted to wear a suit that a fellow crew member had exploded in.

(And even that was a misnomer since several studies of dubious nature with notorious criminals had conclusively proven that an exposed body did not ‘explode’ in hard vacuum. But the myth persists.)

“Looking good?” asked Kyomori.

“Looking good” said Michael. “You’re all set Deva.”

“About time” said Deva, her voice muffled from inside the suit. “You know how damned stuffy it gets in here before the scrubbers kick in.”

“Yeah, yeah” said Kyomori. “You know we don’t want you to lose a seal while you’re out there.”

“Yeah” chipped in Michael. “We like to be thorough.”

“I’ll give you thorough, you two. And next time you try to cop a feel, I’m dragging you out there with me,” she said.

The two guys laughed as Deva moved into the airlock. Watching the displays as the atmosphere cycled, Michael called Deva on the comm.

“You all good in there?”

“All greens, good to go.”

“Copy that, all green. You confirm, Kyo?”

“Yup, confirm. Pop the cork Mike.”

“Right, opening the outer door.”

Silently, the external door slid to one side. Deva always anticipated hearing the door actuators, or the rush of air, or *something* when the outer door opened. Even after all her years of going out of ships, it still seemed weird. And the silence always got to her. Normally she would have had her player going on in the background with whatever had been popular at the last stop, but that had been put to a stop after some loon on another ship didn’t notice that his payload had come adrift and didn’t hear the other crewmembers yelling at him down the comm.

The view was a spectacular letdown. This far out from the nearest primary, the starlight was insufficient to actually illuminate anything. Even with her polarized visor up, there

were just the stars in the infinite distance and the blackness of where the stars weren't to tell her where the ship was.

With a quiet sigh, she dropped her maintenance overlay visor into place and turned on her suit's lights. Moving out from the airlock, Deva attached the safety line to a locking pin. Her maneuvering suit had enough energy stored in it to move her to the nearest planet, but company policy was that all external walkers needed a line. Most walkers just assumed that it was so that the expensive maneuvering pack could be recovered if the walker fell unconscious or died whilst on a walk, though the company reps would never admit to it.

Carefully, she made her way to the nose of the ship. Celiker was not the most elegant or streamlined ship in the company fleet, but then again – she didn't need to be. There isn't much point in making a ship streamlined if there isn't any wind to push against, and there's no point spending money on making it look pretty when nobody was ever going to look at it.

Except Deva. She saw Celiker at least two or three times on each flight. The outside was fairly drab, with lots of little marks everywhere where everything from micrometeorites to inattentive load handlers had scuffed the hull. She was intimately familiar with what it looked like.

Having reached what passed for a nose, she started her scan. The main task on a scan was to look for leaks. The shipboard computers could sense the smallest pressure shifts, but sometimes it would constantly adjust for a small leak until the low oxygen alarms started screaming. Since the crews tended to be fond of their oxygen, frequent external checks were required. That, and it gave the crew something to do. There were no freeloaders on a company ship.

“Hmm, that's some good Fogey” said Johnny. He was in the mess “helping” the ships cook and the two kitchen hands, though in reality it was an excuse to appear busy and at the same time snag a bit of free grub.

“I don't know why the Captain sent yer down here” said Skourpa. “Yer never too good at helpin' and yer always swipin' me foods.”

“I never steal food!” exclaimed Johnny as he chewed on some more Fogey. “I'm insulted. ‘Sides, what the Captain says, Johnny does. It's that simple.”

“Well, maybe I best be having a little chatty with the ole' Captain then, shan't I?”

“Oh – well if I'm bugging you that much, then I'd best be off to make some mischief elsewhere, shouldn't I.?”

“Yar, that would be grand.”

“And then when the ‘ole Captain as you say finds out, he’ll be reaching for the nearest bit of cable for a good old flogging of the dear old Cook, aye Steppy?”

“Gnyah - maybe yer can stay a little longer. There’s a nice bag of potato’s that needs peelin’ right behind yer.” Skourpa was always a little miffed when the other crewmembers called him ‘Steppy’. His last name was Stepanov, and it irked him that they couldn’t be bothered to get his name right. On the other hand, there were worse nicknames to get lumped with. Some of the crew called still Johnny “little stinky” after a notorious incident with the head.

“Potato peeling? If you wanted me out of here that badly you should have just said so!” Johnny sauntered out of the mess, looking for a new place to lie low until he was needed. He actually had a very important role aboard the ship. He was the qualified PD rod technician, which meant that if the PD rods that the ship needed to make its trips possible needed adjusting or repair then he was the man to do it.

As these things turn out, the PD rods almost never needed adjusting. On average, Johnny needed to actually work only once during any five trips and that was mainly preventative maintenance. As a result, he appeared to spend most of his time loafing around doing nothing. So the other crewmembers were always trying to palm off odd jobs onto him. It was frustrating that he was seen to be a lazy lay about when in reality, if the rods failed and needed repair then he would be the only one aboard who knew enough to get them going again.

And since it was such a specialized job (not to mention an important one) he had had to spend an inordinate amount of time studying and learning the craft. He even ended up spending most of his shore leave catching up and running exercises in order to keep his skills up. But that was the lot of a PD Rod Technician.

As Johnny left, Paxton and Doris looked up at him. They were the two kitchen hands on this trip. It was normal for the kitchen hands to have fairly short spans on a given ship. Since there had to be three or four meals prepped every day, round the clock, the role of kitchen hand was a demanding one. And since they normally only saw four or five rooms in the entire ship during a trip, kitchen hands tended to have fairly short careers. Most tended to be young people looking for a spot of quick cash and / or a ride to another planet.

As it happened, on this trip both Paxton and Doris were new to the crew. And as these things happened (and since they normally only saw just each other and Steppy) they had fallen in love. Nobody else knew (or cared so long as the food was ready on time), but they were happy on this trip, even if they were a little tired during their shifts on occasion.

Of course, any ship could use prepackaged meals as food for the crew, but they tended to be cheap and nasty, tasting mainly of cardboard and stainless steel. And a grumpy crew

was an unproductive crew, so most companies sprang for the cost of some proper cooks. Some things may change, but nobody ever liked the triple lie.

Down in the holds, Papo Rodriguez was carefully going over all the invoices and checking them off against the actual cargo. Annoyingly, the vast majority ended up in the category “miscellaneous”. It had all been checked carefully prior to loading, and then checked again after loading. Re-checking and triple checking were par for the course, and there was always the chance that a crewmember might have been tempted to swipe something but that hardly ever happened. For starters, the crew was asleep for most of the trip. And on this trip, most of the goods they carried were too big to put into a pocket. Too big to put into a Runabout come to that.

But if there was one thing the company didn’t like, it was people not doing anything. So Papo went about his rounds, checking everything for the umpteenth time and marking off all the right boxes so that when the manifest was handed over to customs and the invoices thumbed off to the receivers at Balga, nobody would complain that he hadn’t done his job.

Technically, he could have done his job from his office in about seven and a half seconds with a simple cut and paste operation, but since his name was on the line he figured he would do his job properly. Plus, it’s not like there was anything else to do. A two day approach meant that he could either do his day’s worth of work and stretch it out into two days, or he could sit around bored for a day.

What was this? A missing box! Papo carefully looked over his notes. Box HBF-32145, then HBF-32147 but no HBF-32146 between them. Not even a gap. Every box on either side had been shifted over slightly so that from a glance it looked like all the boxes were in position.

This was bad.

This was very bad.

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Balga Station. Or as it should be properly known: Maantus Primary Station Balga. But that was too long, and too clumsy to say. Balga Station was short and rolled off the tongue with ease. And of course, just Balga was even shorter.

Balga was named (as large structures often are) after a person of note from a time long forgotten. But since nobody remembered them, even fewer knew what they had done. It had probably been one of the people that discovered Maantus. Maantus of course, was the name of the local star. That wasn’t the original name. The original name was a long assortment of letters and numbers that meant nothing to nobody, except maybe a filing clerk in the astronomy office.

But once people decided to settle on one of the planets (as tends to happen when a terra compatible planet is found) then people decided that the local star needed a nice, easy to pronounce name. Thus, it was named “Maantus”. Obviously, these people were idiots, or had perpetual colds.

The planets were “named” (as planets often are) in ascending numerical order, starting from the one closest to the star. So the nearest planet was named Maantus One, the next one Maantus Two and so on all the way up to Maantus Five (a small, piddly little planetoid only barely capable of being ascribed as a planet).

But since the afore mentioned people where reluctant to name things by numbers, they re-named Maantus Two (where they lived) as Maantus Prime. Because (as everyone knows), naming something “Prime” makes it sound important, and less likely to be on the receiving end of an orbital bombardment (or more likely, depending on who you speak to). And nobody enjoys those. Unless they’re on the giving end, in which case the pretty lights make for a marvelous display to watch whilst you dine.

And this is where Balga comes into the picture. Many long tales ago, an unfriendly chap from a neighboring system decided that Maantus would make an excellent principality and wedding gift for his son. An invasion force was dully organized and the stalwart men (and women) marched in and made all sorts of silly demands.

To this, the proud, non-number-naming people of Maantus Prime replied by building Balga, a military defense station with which to block the invading fleet. And since everyone (else) knows that building static fortifications in space is a stupid idea, the invading fleet promptly went around Balga and reduced the presidential palace to softly glowing lava.

The fifth person down in the chain of command (having been excluded from the planning meeting because he was not important enough, since the meeting with the first through fourth people in command was to be held at the governors palace) decided that discretion was the better part of valor and sent the lawyers in to negotiate.

One quick treaty later and a taxation system was imposed and everyone was happy.

Skip forwards a few hundred years and Balga has been converted from a military defense station to one of many orbiting receiving stations. Goods, materials, people and information flow through these stations, either on their way down to Maantus Prime or off to other places in the known universe. Orbital factories convert and process, produce and distribute goods off all shapes and types since they are easier on the eyes and leave the countryside free to do it’s beauty tricks. Not to mention allowing the planet to be relatively free of the nasty by-products that primary manufacturing leaves behind.

It is to this scene that the space ship Celiker gently coasts towards.

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“Define ‘missing’” said Powell.

“Well,” said Papo, visibly shaken. “It was there when we were docked at Condell. Then it was there when we loaded it onto the ship. It was still there during the recount after the second jump. And ... it’s not there now.”

A deep furrow creased the old captain’s brow. Box HBF-32146 did not appear to have anything important in it. Hell, most of what it contained was the second half of box HBF-32145! There didn’t seem to be any practical reason for one of the crew to want to steal it. And for all the other boxes to have been moved, some several feet, some a few inches to cover the hole implied a lot of effort.

“Have you told anyone else?”

“No,” replied Papo. “I have told nobody, only yourself. I checked the door logs, and nobody is listed as having gone into any of the cargo areas after the loading was finished, except myself during the second jump recount.”

“Could the logs have been altered?”

“Only yourself, myself and possibly Guiora would have the necessary clearance to alter the logs without leaving any records. And I checked the change logs as well. No changes listed, and you need the master passkeys to alter those. This is the first time I’ve ever heard of anything like this happening.”

“Damn!” cursed Powell. “There isn’t a whole lot that we can do about it from here if it’s missing. If it’s still on this ship, then I want it found. Top priority goes to this,”

Even though they tried to keep it quiet, it was pretty hard to run a ship wide search without everyone finding out about what was going on. The ship wasn’t that large, and the crew totaled at twenty.

Every deck was searched, doors opened, ducts crawled into and every possible nook and cranny was poked into. But of the box, nary a sign was to be seen. It was as if it had disappeared into thin air.

This made everyone unhappy. Not because they suspected each other or because it would cut into their profits come payday. But the company tended to want to make examples of ships that lost cargo in order to discourage discrepancies. And nobody wanted to be made into an example, since an example normally entailed adding lots of energy into an entity that was not designed to hold such energy, said entity being the offending ship and said energy usually being in the form of anti-matter missiles.

The only person who was not aware of the unfortunate proceedings was Deva, who was just finishing up the external check of the ship’s hull.

“Why the long face chaps?” she asked as she emerged from the airlock.

“Got a missing bit of cargo,” replied Kyomori. “You didn’t happen to see it strapped to the hull, did you?”

“Damn. What’s the Captain going to do?”

“He hasn’t said anything yet” chipped in Michael. “Officially, nobody is meant to know about it. But Isacus and Papo are tearing the ship apart looking for it and not being too subtle about it.”

A dreary silence descended on the trio as they unsuited Deva.

Chapter Two

From about fifty thousand kilometers out, the ship could barely be seen. It was just a dark patch between the dark places between stars. No lights emerged from it to show its location, no light fell on it to illuminate it.

From a mere thousand kilometers away, which was really close in astronomical terms, the ship was no clearer or easier to distinguish. Although basic sensors from half a solar system away could locate it, the eye simply didn’t have enough detail to distinguish the ship from the background.

From five hundred meters away (which is so close in proximity that it’s the equivalent of rubbing your nose on someone else’s whilst standing in an open field) the ship could finally be distinguished. A dull gray, with a few less dull gray highlights. A slight speckling of light on one edge where a local primary shone slightly less feebly than the other background stars.

But without points of reference, it was impossible to distinguish size. A projection of metalwork on one side could have been an antenna or a gantry or a docking station. As things turned out, this ship happened to be just over two hundred and fifty meters long along the long axis. A tadpole as ships went. Consisting of mostly engines, this looked for all the world like a courier ship, one of millions that flew the galaxy conveying messages from one planet to another. Although the PD Rods made faster than light travel possible, sending information without having to physically carry it was still an elusive goal.

This was the Immonen, a ship whose sole purpose was to travel.

But appearances can be deceptive. For the Immonen was not a courier. It was, as it turns out, what is known as a ‘blind jumper’. Back in the early days of interstellar travel, there were no maps. Like the sailing ships of a long forgotten era that sailed the seas before them, the new travelers had to find their own way and create their own maps. But unlike

the sailors of yore, the star travelers did not have the luxury of easy to use navigation points such as stars, the sun and the magnetic poles.

Well, they still had the stars, but they were next to useless when even a short jump would make all but the nearest stars indistinguishable from each other.

And here is where the blind jumpers came into the picture. As star travel became possible, everyone realized that they would need to know where they were going and where other people had gone before. And more importantly, where the good rest stops were.

So everyone pooled his or her knowledge. All exploratory ships, upon their return (assuming that they did) would download all their astronomical information to the distributed repositories. Over time, the galactic map was built up and travel became so easy that it was commonplace.

But there was always the insatiable demand for new territories. To see what was there. To go places where nobody had been before. So there were always a few people willing to make blind jumps into the unknown. Most used older or second hand ships massaged back to just legal operating conditions by eager hands. Nobody had used a new ship for blind jumping in the last five thousand years.

And blind jumpers needed to have at least a little something wrong with their personalities. Blind jumps could end up in any number of astronomical hazards. A short jump could almost guarantee that the navigator would be able to avoid any visible obstacles. But it's a long way from one place to another. An exceptionally long way. And getting anywhere involved making lots of very long way jumps. So long in fact that you could aim for a spot that looked empty from where you started only to find that it was now home to an inconvenient black hole when you arrived.

This was the type of ship that was the Immonen. And the past tense was a perfect tense to use, for the Immonen is a derelict.

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“Got something on the screen Captain” said Ken.

“What is it?” asked Captain West.

“Inert, range fifty thou, moving at thirty. Too fast for an asteroid, too slow for a ship.”

“Well, that’s interesting. It’s right on the edge of our scanning range. What do you say Ox, want to go in for a closer look?”

“You don’t pay me to think Captain,” replied Oxley, the Second on Kilkka. “It’s your ship but if Ken mentioned it, it’s probably worth a look.”

West quietly mulled over this new object. They had been about to make their next jump when Ken announced the new contact. It was close enough that they wouldn't lose much by going in to have a look. They were in a hurry, but a contact in deep space was normally worth looking at. It might be something, or it might be nothing. "Let's go in and have a look."

"Yes Captain" replied Ken. He plotted in the new heading to the nav computer and aligned for the small jump. A jump of fifty thou was barely a blink and consumed a lot of energy, but to make the same trip on thrusters (and throwing out remass all the way) would be quite a waste of resources. And out here, there weren't many convenient gas stations advertising "Reaction Mass available here!"

Half an instant later, with most of the laws of physics thoroughly broken, the Kilkka appeared a scant five thousand kilometers from the object.

"Full scan, please" said Oxley.

"I know the drill" shot back Ken. "I've been navigating longer than you've been piloting."

"Just like to help" smirked Oxley. "You can never be too careful with these close encounters. And I've had more than my share of things jumping out at me from the dark, thank you very much."

"Cut it out you two" injected the Captain. "What do we have?"

"Let's see" mulled Ken as the computer started feeding him the information as it was gathered. "No emissions of energy, radio or thermal, flat trajectory with no spin, no replies on standard hails, medium mass and hollow. It's a ship."

"Derelict?"

"Ooh, salvage rights" chimed Oxley.

"Looks like she's dead in the water. Constant velocity and trajectory, no reaction to any scans. If there's anyone aboard, then they are extremely uncomfortable."

"Dead is more like it," said the Captain. "Okay, first things first. Do a complete wide-band scan and see if there is anyone nearby. I don't want to fall into some first-rate pirates' trap nor do I want some trigger-happy novice wanting to claim that we're stepping on his mark. Ox, inform the boarders that they may have some action soon, and get some fingers on our triggers. If a shootout evolves, I want violence to be our first resort, not out last."

The news of this new ship spread quickly throughout the ship. The Kilkka had a standing crew of just ten, but carried a group of thirty boarders on this trip. A boarder was somewhere between a commando, a private and a wingman. The skills required were many and varied but most tended to just bring gusto and a good aim. No ship has ever been happy to be on the receiving end of boarders. Because when they are there to help, they aren't called boarders, they are called the rescue team.

With every sensor, antenna and dish on the Kilkka deployed, local space was awash with pulsing waves of energy. Probing far and wide, everything that was nearby was seen, assessed and categorized. But there were no nasty surprises. They were currently in a region of space that was far from any systems, inhabited or otherwise. There was, literally, nothing to hide behind. Even a cloaked ship running at full stealth conditions with minimal emissions would have been spotted.

“Okay,” announced Ken. “We are about as free and clear of contacts as we're likely to be. If there is anyone out here watching us, then they have far better technology than we do and we're outclassed anyway.”

“That makes me feel a whole lot better,” muttered Oxley.

“I just like to hedge my bets,” replied Ken. “I'd say that there was definitely nobody out here except us, but you never know when some new and fancy alien species is going to come along and change your perception of what is and isn't possible.”

“Yeah, yeah.”

“Knock it off you two,” said Captain West for the thousandth time. “Let's see if this is going to be worth our time. Take us in.”

The Kilkka moved in closer. Carefully matching velocities, the two ships seemed to be standing absolutely still, despite the non-obvious fact they were both traveling faster than any bullet ever had.

“We're in position,” said Ken. “Final scans of the ship show no external damage, dead zero emissions from the interior. Internal temp holding at just above ambient.”

“Atmosphere?”

“Possible, but not likely. It depends on what happened and how long it's been out here. Hang on, sensors found the nameplate. She's the Immonen.”

The computers clicked over as the database of known ships was searched. With no immediate results, it clicked over to the registry of lost ships. After a few moments, the results came back.

“Wow, she's an oldie,” exclaimed Ken.

“Whatcha got?”

“The Immonen – built by the Egorov Starship Consortium, Explorer Class. Used by the Ikushko Mail and Data corporation as a general courier for a standard ship’s lifetime, then sold on to an independent blind jumper. Used on and off by different blinders for a dozen cycles or so with no major finds. Decommissioned eighty eight years ago.”

“And then?” asked West.

“And then nothing. She wasn’t re-registered with any major shipping company or planetary government. Comparing the scans to the last known specs she seems to have had an engine upgrade but no major modifications. No visible weapons systems added, no battle damage. She’s a non-ship.”

“What do you think?” asked Oxley. “She a contraband runner?”

“Possibly,” replied West. “She was decommissioned so someone went to the effort of getting her worthy to fly again. That same someone then went and upgraded the engines, so she could travel further and faster but has no offensive capacity. It really does seem like she would have been used as a runner.”

“Could be a different ship but with faked identifiers. That’s happened more than once.”

“Again, possible, but not enough information to know for sure.”

“Still want to go in?”

“Hell yes. Send in the boarders.”

Down in the grunt space, five boarders had finished suiting up. These suits were slightly different to the simple type that Deva used. These were military surplus suits, consisting of a basic EVA suit underneath, a military grade maneuvering pack on the back and full body armour all around. Most of the boarders customized their suits with additional holsters, extra lights and little personal touches so that they could tell each other apart visually as well as through their HUD’s.

“Good to go?” asked Saer.

“Good to go!” came back four replies. Saer was the Lieutenant in charge of this complement of boarders. He’d picked four of his most experienced team members to accompany him on this trip. Normally, a team of ten would be used to navigate a new and unknown ship in order to be able to relay comms through each other if there was a lot of interference on the unknown ship.

The reason for taking a team of five instead of the usual ten was that on the previous shift it had been Oligana's birthday, so a celebration had been in order. Since it was mid-trip and their main task had already been performed, sobriety had been deemed unnecessary. So by saying he was taking the four most experienced team members, what he really meant was that he was taking the four least hung over.

The prep bay was large enough to accommodate all thirty boarders at once, so having only five of them in there meant that the space seemed cavernous in the normally claustrophobic ship's crew areas.

"Leave the guns behind," said Captain West over the comms. "I don't want any holes in my new ship."

"Yes boss," replied Saer as he firmly pushed his sidearm into its holster. Taking note of his lead, the other four made sure they had their weapons. Boarders may have been homicidal, psychotic and borderline insane but they would never leave their own ship unarmed. That fell into the category of "suicidal", which was what separated boarders from blind jumpers.

As the large doors with the big "Outer Door" warnings opened, five dark shapes moved out into the hard vacuum of space. The gap between their own ship and the Immonen was small, and easily traversed. Having reached the Immonen, Saer and his men set about looking for a hatch.

"This bird has zero energy" called Saer across the comm back to the bridge of the Kilkka. "You want us to cut or force?"

"See if you can find the emergency access point," said West. "As I said, no holes in my new ship, please."

"It should be about eighty meters aft of your current position," said Ken. "I've added it as Point One on your HUD."

"I see it," said Saer. "Move up."

Looking like some barnacles scuttling along the side of the ship, the five Boarders moved towards the indicated position. The emergency access point turned out to be a rectangular hatch, slightly taller than a man with a manual override to open the door from the outside.

"There is some vacuum ablation of the material, but it looks solid. There might still be some atmosphere in there, assuming that there aren't any holes anywhere else."

"Copy that Saer. You want me to squirt you the info on the hatch mechanics?"

"Nah, this baby is pretty standard. Hell, this design was old when my grandpa was young."

Working quickly, one of the boarders used an impulse tool to turn the gears holding the hatch closed. As it swung open, a faint trace of particles could be seen to float out the opening and to drift away into space.

“Looks intact,” reported Saer. “Hull integrity seems good. We have a bit of dust flying out the door.”

“Sweet,” exclaimed West, turning to Ken. “This boat may actually be worth something.”

“I don’t know. Even if we tow it, I doubt that we’ll be able to cover the costs from the money from the salvage. She’s a pretty old ship, not to mention that she shouldn’t even be out here.”

“Maybe there’ll be something interesting inside. Someone was using her for something and maybe it’s still aboard. Or we might even be able to sell her to a museum.”

“If a curator is dumb enough to buy this hunk of junk then the rest of the museum won’t be worth visiting,” said Oxley.

“You never know,” replied Ken. “Be optimistic.”

Back at the Immonen, Saer sent his team in. Knox had point, looking around inside the ship, followed by Magdala and Ubba. Lincon stayed at the hatch to make sure that their return trip wouldn’t be obstructed and to relay comms if there was any interference from the hull.

The interior of the ship was absolute black. There wasn’t even the faint light of the stars to look at. Everyone had their HUD’s displaying an overlay to supplement what little visual information the suit’s lights exposed. Wherever the lights didn’t shine, only the artificial overlay showed where the corners and edges were. The visual returned a flat black.

Another door blocked their way into the ship’s interior proper. The outer hull on most ships was fairly thick as standard to help block the worst of stellar radiation, and that had been the norm for a long, long time. This door was also opened easily, and this time there was a slightly larger flurry of particles, dust and small debris flying out the door.

“Definitely still has good hull integrity,” said Saer. “How’s the reception?”

“Good,” called Ken. “Visual is clear, audio is good and telemetry is stable. Looks like this one is going to be a cakewalk.”

“Damn, he jinxed us,” muttered Lincon.

The boarders made their way into the Immonen. A ship's layout was a fairly standard across almost all types, since there were certain practicalities that needed to be followed. The logical first place to look was in the crew areas, and this was where they headed.

"First mummy," said Knox.

"Male or female?"

"Not sure. Most of the flesh flaked off long ago, mostly bones in a ship's tunic."

"See if you can get any ID off the tunic," said Ken.

"Checking." Knox moved in close to the corpse. The atmosphere would have slowly dried out the deceased body after they died. Decomposition would have been minimal, with the scrubbers keeping the air clean and free of bacteria. It would take several years for a corpse to reach the mummified stage normally found when derelict ships were found. "No markings, no badge work – not even a name."

"Definitely something illegal," said Oxley. "What are the odds that the first person we find just happened to be having a laundry day?"

"Okay, finished computing trajectory," said Ken. "Assuming zero deviation from last stop, there are three systems that she could have originated from. Assuming standard transit deviations, the number jumps up to around twenty, depending on where it came from and who they were trying to avoid. And if we assume evasive maneuvers, then it blows out to about three hundred possible previous last stops. Looks like she was in a normal travel lane and then just kept right on going."

"Suggestions?" asked West.

"Nobody is coming now, she's not due to reach anyplace where she's likely to be spotted for another thousand years. Even if we left right now, we know where she is and where she's going to be if we want to come back at a later stage."

"I concur," said Oxley. "We may as well take a look around and see if whatever they were carrying is still here and if it's likely to be worth anything. If it is, we can take it and leave the ship and if it isn't we can ask around and see if anyone is interested in her and pick her up later."

"Saer, proceed with your sweep. Let me know if you need additional boarders."

"Copy, Captain."

Saer assigned his team different areas of the ship to explore independently. In this type of ship there was normally very little cargo space, so searching that only took a few minutes. The crew areas were larger, but still quite small and easily explored. The

maintenance areas comprised the largest volume of the ship and took longer to scour through.

“Hey Ken!” called Saer. “How many crew are there meant to be aboard this thing?”

“Checking. Standard crew when she was active was sixteen, but a skeleton crew of five could fly her for short trips, assuming nothing broke down or needed fixing. Hell, you could set the auto and send her on her own if you didn’t care if she arrived at her destination or not.”

“Well, other than that first one, there doesn’t seem to be anyone else aboard. Or at least not anymore.”

“If everyone else left,” said Oxley, “Wouldn’t they have taken their friend with them?”

“Not if he wasn’t their friend,” replied West.

“Found some more!” called Magdala. “Looks like there’s around nine or ten in one of the access points by the top engine.”

“You can’t be bothered counting properly?” asked Saer.

“Looks like someone opened a window,” replied Magdala. “The room is sealed off from the rest of the ship, but the external door is ajar. It was messy and violent in there until long after the poor fools died.”

“Send someone over there and see if any of them have any ID on them,” instructed West.

“Lincon, go around the outside and see if you can seal the outer door. Can you get a fix from Mag’s position?”

“Got it Saer,” replied Lincon. “Moving now.”

“Mags, see if you can open the inside door from where you are. Ubba, get up there and help her.”

Quickly and efficiently, the team closed in on the room from different directions. It took Lincon a moment to locate the external door since it was only very slightly open, but once in position he could see into the room. The bodies were in similar condition to the first one, but had continued to bounce and bump each other after they dried out and had fallen apart rather badly.

Rather than spend time trying to close the un-powered door, Lincon simply filled the gap with expanding hull foam. Good for quickly sealing holes in the hull; it would be easy to remove at a later time. From the inside, Magdala opened the inner door.

“Oyo, it’s a mess in here,” she said. “It’s going to be pretty hard to sort everyone out.”

“We’re not here to identify the remains,” said West. “Nobody was meant to be on this ship, which means that they probably didn’t want to be found. Ken, have a search on the database and see if we get any missing persons listed for around the time the Immonen was decommissioned.”

“Sure, but I doubt that we’ll be carrying enough information to cover that kind of a search. We’d need a planetary database for a search like that. And we don’t know how long it was between the Immonen being decommissioned and going out on its final flight.”

“Humor me,” he replied dryly. “Any luck Mags?”

“I’m going through pockets and seeing if anyone happened to be carrying anything useful, but it’s not looking good so far. Someone should start looking through the crew compartments and see if there is anything useful in there.”

“Good point,” said Saer. “That room is too small for an effective search with more than one person. Mags, you going to be right on your own?”

“Oh, yeah – no worries boss. Desecrating the dead was just what I signed up for.”

While Magdala went about searching the grisly room for any signs of who the crew had been, the other four boarders set about searching again through the crew rooms that had been occupied, this time more thoroughly. Most of the rooms had few personal effects in them.

Even so, there was always something that people carried that would identify them. Being able to prove you were who you said you were was half the battle in a society where cosmetic surgery was as easy as changing clothes. And nobody would want to be trying to get past the usually over-zealous customs on a planet or station without any form of ID at all, not even some fake ID.

Normally it would have been a lot easier to simply access the ship’s logs and get the information from there, such as the last logged flight plan. But with the entire ship powered down, getting any meaningful data from the computer would be a weeklong event, and that was time that they didn’t have to spare.

“I found something!” said Ubba.

“What do you have?” asked Saer.

“Looks like one of the crew was just a passenger,” replied Ubba. “There’s a carry bag with some personal effects, some receipts from a shop called ‘Elements’, a personal A/V player and discs and a whole bunch of data discs. Shit!”

“What is it?” asked Ken, picking up on the alarm in Ubba’s voice.

“Got a Judges seal.”

Silence fell over the comms. Although there wasn’t really one cohesive government to rule all the known planets, most people suspected that there was some organization that held everything together in the background. Although there was no evidence to make this obvious, the Judges stood out like a hand full of broken fingers.

The Judges were, as the name suggests, enforcers of the law. The curious thing about them was that they had power and authority in any district, on any planet and on any station. One would have assumed that they would be barred in at least a couple of systems by governors who didn’t want them messing around in their backyard. But everyone obeyed their orders. Everyone.

Generally, the Judges didn’t interfere at the lowest levels where individuals were concerned or in petty crime. Nor did they get involved at the top, with planetary governments or intergalactic business conglomerates. Their normal fare was the notorious criminals, the drug lords and the illegal transporters. Thus the black market was kept in check and the vast majority of people lived in a fairly comfortable middle class.

And across all the planets, across all the systems, even on the most remote stations and settlements, one unwritten law was paramount and was known over and above all others. Nobody, absolutely *nobody* impersonated a Judge.

“We’re out of here,” said Captain West. “Everyone, get back aboard. Ken – wipe the logs, we were never here. Oxley, make a copy of the trajectory and velocity of the ship and store it in a data chip. Stash it in our off-line data safe.”

“Yessir,” came the chorus back from everyone. It took about two minutes for the boarders to move from the Immonen back to the Kilkka, and about ten seconds after that for them to get under way.

“How come we left in such a hurry?” asked Oligana as she helped Saer out of his suit.

“Dead Judge aboard, or there was a Judge aboard and he left his seal behind, in which case he was probably dead or some nutcase killed a Judge and kept the seal as a trophy. Either way, I don’t want to have someone asking me why we were there.”

“So tell me this then,” whispered Oligana fiercely. “Why the hell did the Captain keep a copy of the ship’s path if he doesn’t want anyone to know we were here?”

“Because,” replied Saer, “If the time ever comes that some Judge is raking him over the coals or he finally gets caught for some of his shadier deals then he can use the location of a deceased Judge as leverage to try and get a reduced sentence.”

Chapter Three

“Where are they?”

“They’ll be here.”

“When?”

“When they get here.”

“Don’t be smart.”

“They have a mid-flight rendezvous and then a long set of jumps to get here.”

“Yeah, but-”

“And when they get here, they have a three day approach, followed by who knows how long to get through the traffic and then nobody knows how the hell long after that to get through customs and immigration. And that always takes the longest, even when everything on you is legal. How long did it take us to get through?”

“Yeah, but-”

“And it was just us two. They’ve got a full ship to be scanned and searched, so they’ll be jumping through every hoop and dotting every i exactly, in order to not attract attention.

“Yeah, but when are they going to get here?”

“When they get here. Technically, they got here a week ago.”

“Don’t give me that relativity BS - you know I can’t get my head around faster than light travel.”

“Then think about how much of a headache the clerks at the trading floors have keeping the time consistent across a dozen systems.”

“What?”

“Never mind, just enjoy the view.”

*

Elli was a lush, green and tropical world. Yes, it *was*. Now it is a polluted, ugly rock with scars across the landscape and very little of the original plants and animals left alive. The

majority of the inhabitants were now just the three great survivors: rats, cockroaches and humans.

Most of the planet had once been lush and green, which was what had attracted the humans to begin with. It would have made a glorious and spectacular holiday destination with pristine beaches, unspoilt countryside and a variety of different climates to cater for the different tastes. From the freezing poles to the baking deserts and the temperate zones in-between, vast oceans of water made it an ideal planet for vacationing. Or even as a habitat. With ample space and plenty of investment opportunities, Elli was prime for the picking.

And picked it was. Due to some fabulous ore or mineral or some other such trinket, Elli caught the attention of the mining conglomerates and the planet was strip mined to the bedrock and below. Millions of tones of rock flew away into space, to be processed into whatever the ore or mineral had been needed for at the time. Entire mountains were moved in order to get at the precious stuff that lay below.

Now, all of the ore or mineral was gone, and the need for it had waned as science moved on to other new and shiny ores and minerals and crystals and whatever else could be plundered from the undefended planets.

Then Elli had a chance to rest, forgotten and ignored. But not for long. Despite the damage done to the ecosystem, the planet still supported life. The green slowly came back, the skies started to clear and once more it started looking like it might be a worthwhile place to live. Since it was good, but not quite good enough, some nearby bored bureaucrat or planetary governor looking to win an election decided that Elli would make a most excellent penal planet – a place to send the unwanted criminals on a one-way trip and effectively remove them from the home planet.

And thus it would stay for many years, with generations of prisoners sent to their new home. But time passed, governments changed and budgets needed adjusting. So the fleets that guarded the planet and ensured that nobody came or went were sent elsewhere. Pirates and buccaneers, malcontents and other nefarious ne'er-do-wells found that Elli was a perfect place to recruit new members and later that it would make an excellent base of operations.

Thousands came and went, coffers were emptied and all manner of wealth was injected into Elli. It became quite the planet, with all manner of vice and sin able to be performed. Huge cities started to be built up, with millions of permanent settlers and even more regular visitors coming and going.

Business flowed, trade and tourists flourished and it's reputation spread far and wide. Of course, by this stage it was way too late to shut down such a successful, independent entity. But when House Vigneaux learned of this corruption, they felt it their duty to cleanse it from the galaxy.

A brief war erupted between House Vigneaux and the settlers of Elli. It was brief in the way that dropping planet-buster anti-matter bombs on an unprepared population always is. Maybe even the term 'War' is a bit of a misnomer, since it was more of an 'Extermination'. But the proper papers were filed, the forms filled out and a War was indeed declared. Of course, family and friends who were not on Elli at the time launched all manner of legal actions against House Vigneaux, but since anyone who submitted such things was basically admitting that they were involved in illegal activities, they were automatically deported, ironically, to a penal planet.

The great thing about antimatter is that since there were none of the pesky side effects of nuclear explosions, it wasn't long before Elli was deemed habitable again. Of course, who wanted to live on a planet with millions of angry ghosts? Well, obviously people who don't believe in ghosts. And so a new population moved in. Not as high a quality of citizen as once might have been possible but not as low as the recently evicted occupants.

That was four hundred and thirty years earlier. Now, Elli was once again returning to its green roots, though there were still large smears of black and gray to be seen from orbit. And, as things turned out, orbit was where most of the action now occurred. Because Elli was at a crossroads, so to speak. There were several large systems nearby and Elli happened to lie in the middle, making it an excellent place to stop and refuel and give the crews a chance to stretch their legs.

One of the larger (and newest) stations in orbit around Elli was Kuparinen, named after the son of the owner. Here, on one of the many observation decks, Higuel and Tyrell enjoyed the view.

Chapter Four

Our friends will all make fun of us but then again, we're here and they are not.

Such was the message engraved on the plaque above the main entry to the Ishikawa Hotel on Balga. Always popular, the tourists and staff teemed around in waves and surges. Specializing in 'theme holidays' there were all sorts of people dressed in all manner of styles, ranging from the quaint to the old through to the just plain bizarre. People laughed and people screamed and security had a hell of a time telling the difference between genuine problems and some of the games.

On the 53rd floor, one of the private suites played host to a gathering, but not the regular kind.

"So," asked Georgi, "what news do you have?"

"Well, it's like this," explained Bamey. "What you are looking for has not been seen in some time. The people who last saw it have not been seen in some time. In fact, it's been so long since the people were around, that the station that they originally left from is no longer around either."

“What happened to the station?” asked Selinin.

“I should explain this to you, because?”

“Please,” said Georgi. “Mr Zhuravlev has as much of an interest in our deal as I do.”

“Fine, then. Mr Zhurcha ... Churav ... Zerola ...”

“Call me Sel,” said Selinin.

“Okay then Sel, here’s what I managed to dig up. Some time ago, a certain Miss Asoye Terakado, thief extraordinaire, happened upon the find of a lifetime. In her eagerness to get rich, she managed to take the Narjus as well as the trade certificates she was stealing. Whether she knew what she had or not is not known. She fled aboard the tramp ship ‘Takas Kitchen’ and went from Moret where the Narjus was kept to Belousov. IowComm Security made an appeal for assistance and the planetary governing body dispatched Judge Jordi Leshem after her. On Belousov she led him a merry chase but through tenacity or dumb luck, he managed to find and arrest her. The final report from Judge Lesham indicated that he was intending to take Miss Asoye back to Moret but there are no records that he actually left.”

“So the Narjus is still on Belousov?” asked Georgi.

“It would appear so.”

“Very well then. Here is your payment.” Selinin handed Bamey a small silvery disc. Bamey took it, briefly examined it and handed it to Albano, his bodyguard. “One last thing Georgi. There was one little detail that all my snooping failed to turn up. Just what is the Narjus?”

“Simple,” explained Georgi. “The Narjus, is what we are seeking.”

Bamey waited to see if there was any more information forthcoming, and when it became apparent that there wasn’t, he scowled, stood and left the suite with Albano.

“Tell me again why we need to deal with him?” asked Selinin.

“He may seem like a whelpy little nerd, but he is a very *smart* whelpy little nerd. There isn’t a database available that he can’t get into. What pleases me is that we finally have confirmation that the Narjus actually left Moret. And even better, we know where it is: Belousov.”

“You mean we know where it was. Judge Lesham probably took it back to their evidence vaults.”

“No, he didn’t. If he had, the Judge’s database would have shown it as logged in.”

“How do you know what the Judge’s database says?” asked Selenin in surprise.

“Where do you think dear Mr Bamey got the information from?”

*

Meanwhile, down in the lobby, Mr Bamey and Albano exited the elevator.

“Was it worth it?” asked Albano.

“Oh yeah!” exclaimed Bamey. “This little data chip has just the right information for me to get my dirty little fingers very dirty indeed!”

“How do you know what’s on it?”

“My dear Albano Vega, cast your mind back to three weeks ago when I hired you. Do you recall the long clause in your contract that stipulated all the comm systems that you needed to have expertise with?”

“I didn’t read the contract.”

“And why not?”

“Because I can’t read. You know that.”

“That’s right. But can you lift heavy things?”

“Oh yes, very heavy,” said Albano with pride.

“Can you beat people up?”

“Oh yes, very beaten,” said Albano with a glint in his eye.

“Then obviously I hired you for your muscles, not your brains.”

“I do what I can,” replied Albano with an edge in his voice. “Life is rough for some people.”

“Oh, I do apologize if I have offended you,” gushed Bamey. “Allow me to lead you further down the path of knowledge. You see that sign over the door?” Bamey pointed at a sign marked ‘Exit’ in three different languages above them as they walked out of the lobby. “Well, that sign is not just a sign. It has inside it little cameras and computers that look at everyone as they walk in and out of the hotel. It compares them to what the other

signs have seen and keeps tabs on people who are in the hotel. And more importantly, on who should not be there. With me so far?"

"Yes, I'm with you," said Albano as they got into their vehicle.

"Okay. Now, as we are carried along by this lovely conveyance, how many little machines do you think are in this big machine to guide it along so efficiently?"

"Um ... one?"

"Close. There are over two hundred. Okay, so I added a whole mess of them for additional features that aren't standard, but it came with forty-seven from the factory. There are some in the lights out the front to think about what is ahead. There are some at the back to make sure there's nothing too close behind us. There are more on the roof and underneath to talk to the other little thinking machines in the corridor and in the signs on the roof so that it knows where its going and what is coming up ahead of us. There are even itty bitty little ones in the seats to adjust the weight distribution and make the passengers comfy. Still with me?"

"Yes..."

"Okay then," continued Bamey as the vehicle swiftly moved through the station. "Some of these thinking machines are tiny, Really, really tiny. So small that you can't even see them, at least not with your eyes. Now, if we put all these tiny little thinking machines into a simple metal box to carry people, where else do you think we can put them?"

"Ur ... somewhere really small?"

"Yes! See, you aren't as dumb as people might say you are."

"Who says I'm dumb?"

"Stay with me, Albano. Now, if the greasy snot Sel gave me the disc and I held it in my hand for a moment and then I gave it to you, where would I need a teeny little thinking machine?"

"In ... your hand?" asked Albano incredulously.

"Yes! And..."

"And? And, um ... oh! And in your head! You would need to be able to talk to the machine in your hand!"

"Yes! See Albano, you bring pride and glory to the great Vega name! These things are obvious to the people who know, but not as obvious to the people who spend their lives so busy with their useless little jobs that they never stop to think. You, my dear Mr. Vega,

stopped for a moment, thought about the evidence before you and realized something that you had never known you knew!”

Albano blushed with pride. It was rare for such praise to be said to him. His last several jobs (actually, all his jobs as far back as he could remember) could be boiled down to the simple description of “hurting people and breaking things”. It took a while for the vehicle to navigate its way through the busy traffic corridors through the station, but eventually they returned to Bamey’s office.

Located on the twenty-third floor of a semi-rundown ex-apartment structure converted to low-density office cubicles, it was the perfect place for running small or barely legitimate businesses. Bamey had been operating out of this office for just over three weeks. In his line of work, he constantly needed to move. His actual physical location wasn’t really that important, just as long as he had access to some high speed data lines.

Having parked and secured the vehicle, Bamey and Albano rode the elevator up to the twenty third floor. A quick wipe of his hand over the security plate and Bamey entered the small office. It was dim, with a few tables and couches in the main reception area. Not that many visitors came here. Truth be told, it was mainly being used as his bedroom when Albano went home for the night. Bamey activated the light and then a thunderous explosion knocked him to the floor.

Bamey thought he was dead, but then realized that he was still alive. His vision was blurry and there was a most annoying ringing in his ears. Rolling over, he looked over at Albano. Albano’s headless corpse lay on the ground, just a smoking stump where his neck should have been.

Something grabbed Bamey from behind and dragged him by the collar into the internal office. Lifting him up, he was unceremoniously dumped into one of the chairs by a huge man. No, not a man, a mechanoid or mechanical construct of some type built to look like a man. Another man, a vicious and evil-looking man stood in front of him. He seemed upset, and appeared to be insistently asking him something. But Bamey couldn’t hear a thing over the ringing in his ears.

The man knelt in front of Bamey and started mouthing something at him, slowly and insistently but Bamey couldn’t make out what he was being asked. He shook his head and pointed to his ears. The evil looking man slapped a small box onto the back of Bamey’s hand, waited a moment and then removed it and stepped back, nodding in satisfaction. The man machine thing swept everything off a nearby table then picked up Bamey and dumped him onto the table.

After a while, Bamey recovered enough that he could make out what the man was saying, and realized that there were other people in the room as well.

“Confirm. That’s the target.”

“And the mess?”

“Just a bodyguard. An expendable thug.”

“Noise?”

“Minimal attention attracted. Contained to this floor, two calls to IntPol and both intercepted. Locals are not a problem.”

“Good. Ah, looks like our guest is awake.”

Bamey was pulled up into a sitting position and handed a glass of some dark-looking fluid. Anxiously, he sipped a bit and found it both flavorsome and comforting. He drank more.

“Can you hear me?” asked someone.

“Yes, I hear you,” replied Bamey.

“Good. Don’t talk - just listen. You are Bamey Schultz, a petty criminal with few convictions. Most of your crimes involve data theft and identity fraud. You arrived in this building three weeks ago, hired Mr. Dead out in the other room and have been busy dumping data from various civic cores to your machines here.”

Bamey had been worried, but now he realized that it was a standard sweep. President Whatshisname was up against some stiff competition in the upcoming elections and was clamping down on the crimes that could make the population the most afraid but the easiest to police and prosecute. He’d been afraid that it was some rival taking him out, or worse, a Judge bringing him in for ‘questioning’. A simple sweep he could take care of by the end of the day.

“Right now, your facing five to ten for illegally obtaining restricted data. You applied for and obtained a license to operate a business here but used an alias. You hired staff without getting appropriate approval or submitting the proper forms for taxation of income. And then you made things worse by failing to lodge your Business Activity or Business Affairs forms.”

Pfft. This was all paltry stuff. Bamey’s strength and confidence were returning as he casually finished his drink. He looked at the tall, steely-haired man that was talking to him. Not much to look at, probably spent most of his time behind a desk or plugged into a console. Bamey would be able to squirm his way out of this one easily. Maybe even get some compensation for the loss of Albano.

“All of which pales in comparison with having arrived on the station without passing through customs or registering with the Bureau of Persons. That alone is going to get you a one-way trip to the nearest penal planet.”

Where was the guy going with this? It would take him barely an extra day to either bribe a clerk or 'correct' some data to show that he actually had gone through all the stupid paperwork and that it was all somehow their fault that he wasn't on their records. This was going to be easier than he'd first thought.

"And then there's this," said the steely haired man, pulling something out of his pocket and showing it to Bamey. "You gained access to our data cores and extracted information."

Bamey was looking at a Judges Seal.

"Information that we want back."

Bamey thought the same thing that hundreds of guys had thought before him. Guys who had been on top of it all and then in a split second realized that it was all going to come crashing down on him, or that he was about to come crashing down on it. Either way, he was crashing, and the only thing he could think was the popular cry of the falling: I'm fucked.

Chapter Five

"Balga Central Control, this is the Celiker, on high orbit approach requesting clearance," said Guiora.

"Copy you Celiker, this is Balga control. Name your protocol."

"Jonix 10.4 – Galactic version."

"Copy you, Jonix 10.4 please stand by."

Turning to Isacus. Guiora said "I hope these guys have these protocols in their system."

"Relax," replied Isacus, "Jonix is as stable as it is popular. Plus everyone uses it."

"Yeah, well I still get the creeps when we have to hand control of the ship over to some damn desk jockey."

"You know full well that they don't fly us at all – they get their precious computers to do it. Besides, how many ships do you think there are around here?"

"I still don't like it."

"Would you let ships come screaming into your house at full speed? I know I'd be happier with a way to keep them in control. Besides, when was the last time you heard of a -"

Isacus was interrupted by the voice from Balga Control. “Okay Celiker, we have interface ready to go. Send your access codes.”

“Copy that Balga, sending now.” One could almost hear the data being squirted back and forth from the little ship and the giant space station. Every ship approaching a major station had to give the station access to their main computers. The station’s computers would then interrogate the ships computers for maintenance issues, environmental anomalies to see if there were more people aboard than were supposed to be and dozens of other routine details. Some of it was for the paranoid customs officials who didn’t want unwanted or angry visitors. Some if was for the benefit of the local repair and maintenance companies so they could know in advance what services approaching ships would need.

“Balga to Celiker, you check out 511. Handing you over to Flight Control. Enjoy your stay.”

“Thank you Balga Control. ETA?”

“Traffic is good, no major hold ups. You’ll be docked and locked in about five hours.”

“Thank you Balga Control, Celiker out.”

“Smooth as always,” said Captain Powell.

“That’s why you hired me,” replied Guiora with a grin.

“So,” asked Isacus. “What are we going to be doing about Box HBF-32146?”

“Tell the truth,” replied Powell. “The loaders on Balga will know that it’s meant to be there but isn’t, if they don’t already know from the analysis that control just did. And if they don’t notice and we successfully unload then the receiver will know when they do their checks and it’ll get back to us anyway.”

“Stop trying to cheer me up,” moaned Papo.

“We’ll keep everyone aboard after the customs inspections to show that nobody has taken anything off the ship and then advise the steward on Balga about the discrepancy. Hopefully they won’t rip the ship apart too much and we’ll get away with just a fine.”

“No, please. Stop cheering me up already.”

A morbid gloom settled over the bridge.

*

Adrenaline coursed through his veins. This was the night before his big performance. Ricky “The Rocker” Raylene was nervous. And excited. And angry. Too many conflicting emotions. The rehearsal was going fine, for the most part, but he wanted, no, demanded the best from his performers. His band. His family. They had been on tour for eight hundred and thirty seven days straight. Or something like that.

“It’s F sharp dammit, SHARP! Not F flat!”

Renegade and Rabid were screaming at each other again. It was driving Ricky mad. And which asinine, thesaurus-challenged manager had talked them all into changing their names to names starting with R? It was stupid. The whole universe was stupid.

“It was sharp, you’re just damned tone deaf you ratus!”

The bickering was getting worse. Any minute, they would throw down their screamers and jump on each other. The show was tomorrow night. One night only. The place had been sold out for weeks in anticipation of their arrival. The publicity wagon had been through, hyped them to hell and back and now Rabid and Renegade were in danger of beating each other senseless.

“Who you calling a ratus you lazaro?”

Ricky watched the ruckus. The other band members and the backup singers looked around nervously, not sure whether to step in or ignore them and achieving nothing. It would take too much effort and too little reward to pull those two meers apart. One day, they would start beating each other on stage.

“No, I called you a *tone deaf* ratus. You freaking stacker!”

Actually, mused Ricky, a fight on stage might not be a bad thing. Create a bit of controversy, sell a few more tickets and might even end the show early. Now, how to engineer it so that they would stay mad at each other until the start of the show without going at each before hand, but not get distracted by the performance. Wouldn’t be that hard, surely?

“Hey! Settle down you two!” yelled Ordovus. He was the band’s manager, promoter and generally ran everything. “If you two don’t stop bickering like this then it’s going to end up interfering with the show. You guys want to put on a bad show?”

“Like I really care right now,” said Rabid.

“Sod that – I can go home if the shows a stinker,” said Renegade.

“Okay then, it’s settled. We’ll cancel tomorrow’s show, and end the tour ten days early. That way, everyone can go home.”

“Great,” chorused Rabid and Renegade together.

“You’ll be able to rest and relax and not worry about performing. You won’t have to worry about traveling from system to system and checking in to the best hotels. You won’t have to worry about not being able to sleep because of all the screaming fans chanting your names.”

Rabid and Renegade looked at each other.

“Actually, you’ll probably be able to get really into the relaxation groove, since the label won’t pick up a band that’s quit before a tour is over. You won’t have to get onto the stage in front of thousands of people again for a long, long time. You’ll be able to spend all your time relaxing, getting fat and spending your money. And when the money runs out, you can go on talk shows on backwater asteroids talking about how you were in a famous band once.”

Rabid and Renegade looked at the ground. Like all the performers who reached this level, there were massive demands to perform over and over again. They had to in order to stay popular. But it wasn’t that they didn’t like what they did, and they were certainly addicted to the publicity. It was the attention of the screaming fans that they craved more than any drug. But the constant pressure was enough to wear anybody out.

Ordovus looked around. He’d managed to diffuse the situation. “Okay, we only have ten more days of this tour, with three more shows. I know it’s been long and hard, but we’re nearly there.” Looking around, he addressed everybody. “Right, everyone take an hour for lunch. Be back on this stage in one hour precisely. Anyone who’s late gets left behind when we leave.”

Everyone on the stage drifted away, glad of the chance to take a break. Ordovus drove them hard, but they needed to. Very few performers were able to rise above being popular in their home system and actually make it into intergalactic stardom. And once you got there, the only way to stay ahead of the bootleggers was to tour constantly. A performer who couldn’t tour was a performer who wouldn’t be able to sell merchandise. And if they weren’t selling, the label promoting them dropped them like a rotten cantaloupe.

*

“It’s not on this manifest. That’s why you don’t have it.”

“Excuse m?” asked Papo.

“Right here, see?” Merl handed his tablet to Papo and indicated the spot where the expected cargo was listed. “Box HBF-32144, HBF-32145, HBF-32147, HBF-32148 but no Box HBF-32146. You’re data work is screwy.”

“But it was on our manifests when it was loaded. It’s on our invoice!”

“Look mayo, I look at this list and see the shipment I’m supposed to get. I look at what is actually coming off the ship. I compare the two. If they don’t match, all hell breaks loose and lots of angry men with lots of angry paperwork show up. I have to fill in forms, sign all sorts of useless garbage and I end up missing dinner. On the other hand, if they do match, then everyone is happy.”

“But...”

“Now, if you *want* the company to haul you over the exhaust manifold for losing a box that doesn’t exist, then I can make one quick call and make everyone grumpy very quickly. But let’s call that Plan B, okay?”

Papo looked at the portly man. He certainly seemed on the level. There could be all sorts of reasons for the stock receivers tablet not showing the box. And admittedly, Papo hadn’t actually seen Box HBF-32146 with his own eyes, but it had to have been there. He’d checked everything carefully when it was being loaded.

Seeing the confusion in the other man, Merl continued. “Now look, you seem like a reasonable chap. I’ve been loading and unloading cargo on this station for longer than your daddy was shaving. I’ve seen all sorts of things and I’ve seen all the scams under the suns. But this is the first time I’ve seen a crew trying to confess to stealing something that wasn’t there.”

“So... that’s it then?”

“Oh yes, no problems at all. I’ll thumb it.” Merl pressed his thumb against the tablet, and then against Papo’s tablet, formally ending the transaction. “Look, all the data work is in order, everyone is happy except you. Let it go and move on to your next delivery.”

“But what the hell happened to that box?” mused Papo.

“Eh, who knows, who cares? Maybe the space fairies came in the night and stole it while you were sleeping.”

“Impossible. The proximity sensors would have alerted us before a ship could get within a thou of us.”

“Not pirates,” corrected Merl. “Fairies. Just put down that fairies stole a box and changed all the data work in your report to your boss.”

“I can’t do that!”

“Then don’t put down anything at all. After all, you never told me anything about a missing box. I already thumbed it all as having arrived and since it was all here, that’s the

end of it as far as I'm concerned. Now, I have other loads to see to. So I bid thee a good day, and have a nice flight."

Merl moved off to see to the next ship that was arriving. The rest of the crew from the Celiker stood around silently. Powell might be the captain, but when it came to matters about the cargo, Papo was the one who had final responsibility.

"So, where does this leave us?" asked Guiora.

"Since the receiver wasn't expecting it, then nobody is asking questions. Since we haven't filed our final reports, nobody else knows about the missing box. So we can either send a message back to Condell and let them know what's going on or we can say nothing and get on with it."

"You know my policy," said Isacus. "It's easier to remember the truth than to remember which lies to you told to which people."

"Withholding information isn't lying," said Guiora.

"Prisoners have been saying that for millennia, but they're still in prison," replied Isacus.

"All right. Everyone file the report you deem you should be filing," said Powell. "I'll be reporting everything as I saw it. I'll go see our Rep and find out what we're carrying next and where we are going. Tell the others they are free to leave the ship and everyone is on shore leave. Be back here in about ten hours local when we should be ready to leave."

Isacus and Guiora went back aboard to tell everyone else the good news. Papo and Powell left to go see the Rep. The company representative was the local man on the ground. He would have received their flight plan and capacity and would have already sorted out what their next load would be.

Most everyone was glad of the chance to have something other than the same small maze of corridors to look at. There were all sorts of things to be organized while the ship was docked, ranging from fresh consumables such as oxygen to replacing all the filters and scrubbers to loading the next block of cargo. Most of that had already been set up, since the crew had had very little else to do on the flight in.

Even as the crew was disembarking, the cleaning teams were on their way aboard to scrub the ship down and clean it up. Out of sight, various hoses were connected to pump things in, or pump them out depending on what they were carrying.

Chapter Six

Elsewhere, on Balga. A blinking cursor sat in front of a struggling writer. He had a final submission to make before the magazine was published, and his mind was a total blank.

Finding it impossible to focus on a blank screen, he got up and wandered down a hallway.

A wave and a quick hello to the girl three cubicles down and then on to the water dispenser. Even the familiar gurgling of the water through the pipes failed to provide any comfort. The last submission had barely been up to the standards of his editor, and that was after a dozen re-writes. Now, he had even less.

What he needed was inspiration. A germ of an idea. Something to start on and for his mind to be able to chew on. He was sure that once he got started, he'd be able to get the creative juices flowing again. What he needed was an idea.

A small sound bite on the radio caught his attention. A moment, and then it was gone. The fools on the radio were appealing to the lowest common denominator, by slagging off popular people and making silly noises with their studio equipment. Back in his college days he could have started with a single word and stretched it out to cover fifty pages. Now, fifty years and a hundred lifetimes later, he was starting to run out of steam.

Steam? What an odd phrase to use.

*

Far below the struggling writer, two figures moved amongst the machinery.

“Boy or a girl?” asked Corbyn.

“She had a boy,” replied Toku. “Pretty ugly, in that newborn baby way. Maybe in another month it'll be pretty, but when I saw it – eww.”

“Bit harsh. Don't you want a baby of your own?”

“No. Well ... no.”

“Why not?”

“Why would I want one? They make a mess, their ungrateful, they demand everything and before you know it, they run off and leave you on your own.”

“Ha, ha, you sound like my step-sister.”

“Is she smart?”

“She has four kids!”

“Hey!” Toku threw a wrench at Corbyn, but without really trying. It sailed over his head and clattered on the walkway.

“That’s not nice, that nearly hit me!”

“It wasn’t anywhere near you!”

“It grazed my hair. I could feel the wind as it rushed past me,” said Corbyn as he picked up the wrench.

“Yeah, yeah, yeah. If I’d been really aiming at you, it would have smacked you right on your big nose.”

“My nose isn’t big!” said Corbyn, rubbing his nose self-consciously. His nose wasn’t any larger than anyone else’s; Toku’s delicate feminine features would make anyone’s nose look large by comparison. And Corbyn was rather sensitive about his looks.

“Aw, you know I’m just teasing,” said Toku. “You need a good woman to settle you down and make you feel sure of yourself.”

“How do you know I don’t have a woman?”

“I said a good woman, not just any woman. And besides, if you did, you wouldn’t be down here with me crawling through the ducts and checking fluid pressures.”

“Now it’s my turn to say yeah, yeah. Anyway, were are we up to?”

“Junction 34PGH-I. It’s just ahead.”

Carefully stepping over snaking cabling, the two made their way to a large box set into the wall. On a station such as Balga, everything had to be regulated. Air, water, sewage, oil, oxygen – everything. Toku and Corbyn had the fun job of manually verifying the results that the computers reported. It was an essential job, especially when sensors failed but for the most part it was plain boring.

“Oh yay,” said Corbyn. “We got another tri-blade box.”

“Want to replace the bolts or just re-use them?”

“May as well replace them. It’ll help justify our pay.”

The two set to work removing bolts. On a totally artificial environment like Balga, it was critical that absolutely everything was done as it was supposed to be done, when it was supposed to be done. But human nature being what it was, there were always shortcuts, jury-rigs, temporary patches that were never replaced and so on. After five hundred years of constant love and abuse, there was very little that was actually still within original specs. For the most part it worked, but there was still the occasional mishap.

“Okay, that’s all of them.”

“On two. One, two!” They lifted the cover off and put it down on one side so that they could get access to the working components inside.

“Okay, what do we have today?”

“You say that every time. You seriously need to get some new lines.”

“It’s this stimulating environment that I work in. There’s so much constant change that I can’t keep up. In order to compensate, I use the same lines over and over in order to achieve stability in my life.”

“And again – yeah, yeah.”

Quickly and efficiently, they checked and crosschecked the flows and levels, pressures and gauges. With everything in order, they lifted the cover back into place and fitted the replacement bolts.

“You ever wanted a better job?” asked Toku.

“Sure, haven’t you?”

“Sorry, wrong question. If you could have any job, what would it be?”

“Hmm, any job?” mulled Corbyn. “Something important. Where my decisions actually made a difference. You know, be important.”

“So ... what if you decide to add a high pressure air line to one of the black water lines? That decision would affect a few people!”

“Yeah, but I don’t want people covered in crap chasing me!” laughed Corbyn.

“I know what you want.”

“What?”

“You want to be a big military leader, ordering your men in to attack the enemy positions.”

“Nah, too boring. Besides, most wars are fought with robots nowadays. I was thinking more along the line of starship captain.”

“Really?”

“Really. I’d fly around the different stars, visit as many places as I could, different gal in every port – the whole deal.”

Toku stifled a giggle. “You don’t really think that that’s what captains do, do you?”

“What do you mean?”

“Well, of all the captains that I’ve known, every single one grumbles about having to spend all their time aboard the ship. They have to sail by the shortest route possible and once they get somewhere, it’s all busy, busy, busy as they unload and then load and leave in the shortest amount possible. They never get to look around the places they visit.”

“Man, that sounds like it would suck. Why do they do that?”

“No choice. Like all things, it’s a job. The company that owns the ship will tell them where to go and when to get there. And if the ship is docked at a station or floating in orbit, then it’s not making money. So if the captain gets delayed getting the cargo on or off, then they get fined or something.”

“What about the independents?”

“There’s a couple around, but not as many as you’d think. And they’re under even more pressure to not stop, especially if they haven’t paid their ship off. If they’re lucky, then they own the ship outright, but they still have to pay for all the consumables like oxygen, fuel and food. They have to pay landing fees at stations and pay import taxes for what they’re bringing in and export taxes for what they’re taking away. Plus the crew has to be paid and so on and so forth. It gets real expensive, real quick.”

“Way to make me depressed, Toku.”

“Sorry Corby baby. But that’s life. Everyone always looks at everyone else and thinks ‘they must have such a good life’ but that’s because you only see a part of what they do. You know about every single thing that’s bad about your job. But you don’t see the bad parts about theirs.”

Yeah, that’s true. I had someone tell me that they wished that they had my job. I thought they were nuts.”

“Oh yeah? What did they do?”

“Cleaned the inside of the sewage tanks.”

They both burst out laughing.

*

Three hours till show time. The promised punch up between Rabid and Renegade hadn't come to be, much to Ricky's disappointment. He had a great life; he wouldn't want to trade with anyone else for all the silicon in the galaxy. But every now and then he would get bored. No, not bored, more like running out of steam. He'd heard that expression somewhere. It had something to do with making beverages and not being able to foam them up or something. But the idea seemed to fit. Like a robot that had run out of power, or an animated painting that had run out of colours.

He liked the guys, but this was his twenty third tour. He'd spent more time traveling in the companies little spaceship than any of their top executives. Only the promoters traveled more, since they had to leapfrog the performers, laying groundwork and getting the masses hyped up for the incoming juggernaut.

Chronologically, he was about twenty-eight. It had been fifty six years since he'd been born and he'd been traveling the galaxy for a hundred and forty two, or a hundred and fifty one depending on which calendar one used. And the fact of the matter was that he was tired. Different shows, different songs, different tours on different planets with different cities - but it was all the same.

The same empty people, waiting for him to perform. The same empty girls, wanting to idolize him or love him or hate him or use him. The same songs sung in different ways. He'd seen so many great and wonderful and bizarre and sensual things that he was desensitized to it all. Done all the girls. Done all the drugs. Seen all the aliens. Seen all the stars.

Maybe after this tour was over he'd retire. It'd been a long time coming. Briefly he toyed with the idea of quitting in the middle of the set and walking off the stage and not coming back. If he'd been on a planet, he probably would have, but this was a small station in a nowhere system. This was the far leg of the tour, with the outlying systems that had been the longest without a major tour coming through and therefore the most willing to pay.

Sullenly he sat, on a soft sofa thinking silly thoughts.

"Where's Ricky?" asked a voice down the corridor.

"He's busy. What's up?" That was the voice of Ordovus, keeping the talent shielded from disturbances.

"There's a journo here from one of the local rags wanting to hook up an interview."

"Sorry. Like I said, he's busy right now, maybe after the show. Anything else?"

Good on you, Ordovus thought Ricky. Journalists were great for the business and always needed for the publicity they generated, good and bad. But not right before a show. Especially if they were the kind to ask annoying questions over and over again in slightly different ways.

“Got a couple of girls wanting to hook up with their idol.”

“Sorry, busy. But tell them to hang around, they might be needed after the show to help the guys unwind.”

Yep, good call thought Ricky. He'd been with more than his share of girls but they'd have to be something pretty damned special to make him want to give up his valuable relaxation time these days. They'd been rehearsing pretty hard for several hours and now they all needed to recharge before the show. He'd been hoping to get in a nap, but it wasn't happening. And he hated having to use pills to sleep. They always made him feel like he'd just had a really long blink without getting any rest at all.

“And we got a guy wants an autograph or something. Says he's crew on a ship that flies out before the concert starts so he's not gonna get to see the show. Tell him to buzz off?”

“Yeah,” said Ordovus. “If Rick's too busy for the girls, he's not gonna have time for some shipper deadbeat.”

“Send him in,” called Ricky. He didn't know why he did it. It was a whim. Maybe the guy would be so boring he'd be able to get some sleep. Or maybe he'd be some psycho who'd attack him and make him cancel the rest of the tour. Even if the guy just jumped on him and punched him a little, at least he'd feel something.

“Oh,” said Ordovus, startled. He hadn't known that Ricky was awake or that he'd been able to hear them from the next room. After all the concerts, he'd figured that Ricky would be deaf, or close enough to it that it didn't matter. “You heard the man, bring our friend in.”

Ricky rested his head back and closed his eyes. A moment later he heard several people enter the room. He heard the measured, easy steps that were reliably solid. That would be Ordovus. He heard the stiff, proper walk of the guy that came in earlier. He was some assistant or other who showed up every third stop. He was part of the liaison team that set things up with the hotels or something. Ricky couldn't remember the poor guy's name. It was probably a bad thing about Ricky, but the staff stretched into the hundreds, some of whom he only met once every few stops so he could never remember everyone.

The third steps where interesting. For some reason, as far back as he remembered, Ricky had been listening to the way people walked. The way they walked said a lot about them, especially about what they thought about themselves and the mood they were in. These steps sounded familiar, in a vague kind of way. It wasn't like he could tell an individual from their footsteps, but it was the way this person walked that was familiar.

The tread was measured, the balance carefully weighed, rolling on the heel and softly lowering the toes to the ground. It was the step of someone accustomed to having to be careful of their momentum. Now he knew why the steps sounded familiar. It was the way

that someone who spends a lot of time in low gravity walks. It sounded familiar because the ship's crew always walked that way when they first set foot in a proper gravity well again.

Ricky opened his eyes. As expected, there was Ordovus and whasisname. The third fellow looked interesting. He was about average build and height, wearing a ship's one-piece suit. He had light stubble on his chin and a mane of shaggy hair. He looked relatively young, but the eyes were old; like someone who's seen too much but still wants to see more.

"Good day Ricky," said whasisname. "This is Johnny Huser, from the Celiker."

*

"Who's the dork?" asked Renegade as Ryder walked in.

"Oh, that's some guy that managed to get himself invited," replied Ordovus. "Ricky's been talking to him for about an hour now."

"Great. So who is he?" asked Ryder, one of two percussionists in the band.

"From what I've heard so far, they were born on the same planet or something, so that makes them mystical blood brothers or something. He's a pretty good screamer player; they were having a jam earlier on. At first I was a little worried about him but he seems genuine and he came out clear on Jocilyn's background check."

"Well, tell him to ride off. Ricky needs to rest and the show starts in two hours."

"Leave him alone," said Ordovus as Renegade started walking towards the other room where Ricky and Johnny were talking. "Ricky seems relaxed and happy and that's good enough for me. That guy managed to snap him out of his melancholy and I'm mighty happy about that."

Grumbling, Renegade wandered off to raid the fridge. Other members of the band had been drifting in over the last few minutes. In another half hour or so, Ordovus would have to break up the party and start moving everyone down to the auditorium. Reports from his staff said that the audience was already starting to file in, people hoping to get good spots. For some, that would be up in the seats with the good views. For others, it would be down in the pit where they could get up close and personal with each other while the band played. So long as not too much blood was spilt, the bouncers would let them throw themselves at each other all night long.

A few minutes later, Ricky and Johnny walked into the room.

"Wow, it's been so great to meet you," said Johnny enthusiastically.

“I’m just blown away by how well you play,” replied Ricky with equal enthusiasm. “You totally nailed that riff in ‘Blood Smack Cannon’ and most people can’t do it.”

“Not a lot to do on a ship between stops except practice,” said Johnny. “And speaking of which, I’ve really got to get going or I’m going to miss my boat. Have a great gig tonight!”

“Look after yourself, man.”

After a hearty handshake, Johnny walked out of the suite.

“How you feeling?” asked Ordovus.

“Pretty good. Looking forward to the show. How much longer till we go on?”

“About two hours. We’ll start making our way down to the auditorium soon. The first pre-show band will be going on around now.”

“Sweet. I’m going to have a quick lie down. Send someone in to wake me up if I fall asleep.”

Ordovus was very relaxed now. It had been a while since Ricky had been looking forward to a show. He might even let him sleep in a little. If the show started a few minutes late, then that would just make the fans want them more.

Rabid was the last of the band members to show up.

“Who’s the rabbit I just saw walking out?” he asked.

Ordovus gave him basically the same speech he’d given Renegade. Like Renegade, Rabid sauntered off to where the fridge and the drinks were. As soon as he’d walked out of the room, Ordovus realized his mistake. Rabid and Renegade had been on each other’s back for the last few days. He jumped up and sprinted for the door, but even as he was moving he could hear the two start shouting at each other. Just as he entered the room, there was a loud slam followed by a hollow scream.

“What the hell happened?” demanded Ordovus. Rabid was on the floor clutching his right hand and Renegade was standing over him.

“It was an accident!” cried Renegade. “I went to shut the fridge but he was reaching inside for something. The door slammed right on his hand.”

“Raggin fraggin little smuck! You did that on purpose!” wailed Rabid.

“I’m sorry!” said Renegade.

“Call a medic” called Ordovus into the other room. He could hear the panicked scuffles of the others suddenly realizing that something was wrong. Ryder came in.

“What happened?”

“Renegade smashed my hand!” wailed Rabid.

“I’m sorry!”

Ordovus looked at Rabid’s hand and tried to guess the damage. There wasn’t any bleeding, so the skin wasn’t broken. Already he could see some swelling starting to occur. Hopefully it was just the impact and the shock causing the pain.

“Give me a hand,” said Ordovus. Renegade, Ryder and Ricky helped Rabid up and gently lowered him onto a seat. “You want a drink?”

“Yeah, a shot would be great.”

Having settled him down, Rabid calmed down, but still gave the occasional whimper. A few minutes later, two medics showed up. One of them slapped a general pain suppressor on Rabid’s neck while the other examined his hand.

“Looks like there’s a couple of bones broken,” he said.

“Can you fix it in time?” asked Ordovus.

“What, for the show? When does it start?”

“In just over an hour.”

“No way. There are at least two, possibly three broken bones in there. It’ll take at least four hours before he’s back to normal. Three if we get lucky.”

Cursing, Ordovus glared at Renegade who managed to look sheepish. Not an easy feat for a man that was almost seven feet tall, covered in tattoos and piercings and topped with wild black hair. Canceling the show was an option, but not one to be taken lightly. He wondered if postponing the show for a few hours was feasible. Would the fans, which were already packing into the auditorium, go more feral with having to stand around for a few hours or with having the show cancelled altogether?

“What are we going to do, boss?” asked Ryder.

“Weighing the options, I think we might need to cancel the show tonight. We’re scheduled to have you guys and all your gear aboard our transport pretty quick after the show and if we leave late, we’ll miss our window on our jump to the next gig.”

“We can do the show without him,” said Renegade. “No offense Rabid.”

“Not really,” replied Ordovus. “We need the sync of the three screamers together. Just two sounds pretty flat and awkward, especially with your type of music.”

“Get Johnny,” said Ricky.

“Who?”

“Johnny. The guy that was here earlier.”

“Hasn’t he left already?”

“Not yet. If you’re quick, you might be able to pull him off his ship. And we can pay him a whole lot more than what his regular shift would pay him.”

“Is he any good?” asked Ryder.

“Yeah, he was pretty good. Knows most of our songs as well.”

Looking around, Ordovus weighed up his options. The medics were already starting to work on Rabid. He’d be fine almost before the show was over, but not before it started. He might even be able to play in the last part. This Johnny fellow was an unknown quantity. Would he be good, or would he freeze on the stage? Full refunds were an option, but the bosses would be screaming murder for about a year. It might just be a band, but it was still a business.

“I’ll go get him. Everyone else get down to the green room and start getting ready. Rabid, you stay here and get fixed up. Get down to the backstage as soon as you can, but not before the medics give you the all clear, got it?”

“Yeah,” sighed Rabid through a haze of pain suppressors. “I got it.”

“I mean it. Not one second before.”

Chapter Seven

“So,” said Powell, “tell me again why I can see my cargo sitting quietly in the cradles instead of being loaded onto my ship?”

“First,” replied Olaf, “there was an accident earlier on. One of the guys had his leg crushed in a loader. With an accident like that, you can’t just push him aside and keep working. Second, it’s the fifth such accident this quarter and the boys ain’t happy. Third, the boys ain’t happy, so there’s a lot of muttering about going on strike.”

“Strike?” said Papo incredulously. “They can’t go on strike.”

“Sure they can. Happened twice last year, and three times the year before.”

“What do they want, better medical?”

“Medical? Oh no, medical is about as covered as it’s ever going to get. Most of the boys who get hurt, even the really bad ones are back at work the next day. But there’s the whole pain and mental anguish thing, the forms to fill out - it goes on and on. The boys aren’t worried about getting fixed up; they’re worried about not getting hurt in the first place. Admins seem to think that because they can be fixed so easily that they can just tell everyone to hurry up and just *let* accidents happen.”

“But we have got to get our load on!” said Powell. “We’re supposed to be leaving in twenty minutes!”

“Cool your jets, bayou,” said Olaf. “You got problems? I got problems. Let me tell you, I’ve got thirty ships inbound from half the galaxy and they’re queued up all the way to the emergence zone. I’ve already got ten ships sitting in my locks waiting to be unloaded with lord knows what in the holds. I’ve got five other ships sitting and waiting to be loaded ahead of you and another three behind you. And the last lock is sitting empty because it’s being investigated by the OHS boys and probably won’t be available for use for another four hours. And behind all them, I’ve got another fifty ships scheduled to arrive before the end of the shift!”

“Okay, okay, we get it,” said Papo, backing away from the tirade. “Do you have an estimate on when we’ll be loaded?”

“Estimate? No, but as a guesstimate, I’d say you’ll probably be here for at least another five hours.”

“Great,” moaned Powell. So much for the on-time bonus. On the plus side, it was only the freight and cargo vessels that were being affected. The regular message couriers were still running, so he’d be able to send word that he was running late. And more importantly – why.

“So what’s the plan, Captain?” asked Isacus.

“Tell everyone they can head back out into Balga. No point in sitting cooped up in the ship longer than we need to.”

“Yes sir,” said Isacus as he started to leave.

“Oh, and tell them to make sure that they have their comms active. We may need to recall them at short notice.”

“Yes sir.”

Powell watched the man go. Papo continued to stand next to his captain and they surveyed the scene together. A strike wasn't the most convenient thing, but it wasn't the worst. The ship was cleaned and fully restocked, the crew was happy with only the two kitchen hands not coming back. They were fairly easy to replace. He hadn't seen much of them, but from what he had seen and from what the other crewmembers had said, those two were pretty into each other. Powell tried to recall when he'd been that young and in love and was disappointed to find that he couldn't.

"Excuse me, are you the captain of the Celiker?"

Powell turned around. A man he had never seen before was standing next to them. He seemed anxious, and was dressed like a cross between a businessman and a neon pimp.

"Yes, I'm the captain. Captain Powell."

"Pleasure to meet you Captain Powell. I'm Ordovus Cleverly. May I have a word with you?"

*

Kuparinen was very similar to many other stations of its type. Having a base structure that had been expanded and upgraded several times during its lifetime, there was now more matter that was not in the original design than there had been when it was new. However, unlike most other stations, Kuparinen was alone. The normal pattern was for there to be an original station, many other stations in different orbits and dozens of orbital factories ranging from consumer pharmaceuticals manufacture to ship maintenance and construction depending on the planet and its industrial base.

However, Elli didn't warrant any more stations since the variety of traffic was so low. It's not that the volume of traffic was low; just that almost every ship that came to Kuparinen was either passing through or not stopping at all. But since it was at a major crossroads of sorts there were enough ships coming and going to keep the station viable.

It was here that Kilkka had docked. The Kilkka was not strictly a cargo ship, but it was carrying cargo on this trip, and a secret.

"Any problems?" asked Tyrell.

"None whatsoever," replied Captain West. "It all went off without a hitch."

"Very good," said Higuél. "So you have what we asked?"

"Of course," said Oxley. "Like we said – without a hitch."

The four men were seated at the Raving Monkey, a strange bar that tried to blend old and new styles and failed to pull off either. Gathered around a table in a dark corner, they looked like an odd sort of conglomerate. Two in impeccable business attire, two in slightly scruffy ships suits. Or at least, it would have looked odd in any other bar. These sorts of under the table deals were quite commonplace here at the Raving Monkey.

“Well,” continued Tyrell, “since it went without a hitch then you have what we want.”

“That depends.”

“On what?” asked Higuel suspiciously, his eyes narrowing.

“On whether or not you have what we want.”

“Of course, of course,” purred Tyrell. “You assure us that you have what we want, and I assure you that we have what you want.”

A pause.

“We’re waiting.”

“So are we.”

The two groups glared at each other across the table. They both wanted what the other had; they were just both trying to see if they could get any last minute advantage over the other. Generally, that was how these deals went. It was always easier with properly documented contracts, but nobody wanted records for these types of transactions.

“Very well,” said Tyrell, blinking. “We shall meet at a neutral third place. We’ll bring ours, you’ll bring yours and we can go home with each other’s.”

“Seems fine to me,” said West. “Where do you suggest?”

“Since you are the ones with the most to lose, I suggest that you suggest the location, if that will assuage your fears.”

“I suggest the main airlock of the Kilkka.”

Tyrell and Higuel looked at Captain West for a moment. Then it clicked as to what he was referring to. “Ah, your ship. Of course. Say, in one hour?”

“How about ten minutes? I’d like to leave at my earliest possible convenience.”

“Done. Which lock are you in?”

“Twelve.”

“Very well Captain, lock twelve in ten minutes.”

With that, the four men got up simultaneously. A terse nod to each other and they left in separate directions.

“What do you think, Captain?”

“They don’t seem the type to go in for this type of deal. It could go either way so I want the engines hot and ready to leave as soon as the exchange is done. I want a hack on the cams in the approach corridors so we have visual on their approach. I want Glodi and Lasho out in the corridor beyond their approach so they can close in from behind. And I want everyone armed.”

In the opposite corridor, heading for one of the suites, Tyrell and Huigel moved at a fast trot.

“What do you think, Ty?” asked Huigel.

“They look like the type for it. They’re rough as guts and would probably kill us in a second if they thought they could benefit from it.”

“Mierda.”

“On the plus side, it’s to their advantage to not harm us until the deal is finished. I don’t want to be stuck carrying a heavy box, so organize two muscles from some local agency. Make sure that they are unarmed.”

“On it.”

“And I want to make sure that the Narjus is in that box before the handover.”

*

“Call on the comm,” said Ken.

“Put it through,” replied West.

“Hello Captain,” said Tyrell. “I’m calling ahead to let you know that we are bringing two large men with us. We can’t carry a box with just us, so we hired some locals to give us a lift.”

“Why didn’t you hire a mech lift?”

Silence for a moment. “That is a good point you make. I should have thought of that.”

“Yes, you should.”

“Did you want to wait until we requisition one before proceeding?”

“No, come on down.”

“See you soon.”

“Jackass,” muttered West. “Send another four Boarders out to join Glodi and Lasho. I don’t want them getting the jump on us. All comms go encrypted.”

“Yessir,” came the chorus from a variety of people. It was a tense few moments, and then Knox started speaking.

“Have them on visual, main corridor. Five people, assessing now. Tyrell and Higuél on point, two unknown heavies behind. Female in the middle. Confirm, female is Kasia.”

“Good,” said Oligana.

“They’re past our boys, lid is shut. Contact in approx ten seconds.”

Captain West watched in apprehension as the party approached the airlock. He stood just inside the airlock doors. On either side of the door lounged Oligana and Saer, apparently relaxed. Two more boarders stood behind each of them, but behind the doors and out of sight from the main corridor. He could see past the five approaching people to see his other boarders fall into step behind the Tyrell’s group walking casually, apparently indifferent.

“Why hello, my dear Captain Westcott Heifner,” said Tyrell.

“Say my name again,” replied Captain West,” and it’ll be the last thing you ever say.”

Tyrell looked around and decided to change tack. “I don’t see our package...”

“Oh, excuse my lapse,” said Captain West. Calling over his shoulder, he shouted “Gustavus!”

The biggest, meanest, strongest Boarder they had on the team walked into the airlock carrying Box HBF-32146 casually under one arm. He placed it on the deck and straightened up, folding his arms across his chest. He looked straight at Tyrell’s eyes, and never blinked.

“Would you mind if we inspected the box before the deal is finalized?”

“Knock yourself out,” said Captain West through gritted teeth.

“Check the box, Higual.”

“Me?”

Turning to Higual, Tyrell hissed some unmentionable words. Higual walked forwards and stood in Gustavus’ shadow. He examined the box and noted that it still had its customs seal from when it was shut on Condell. Pulling out a key, he opened the box. Carefully rummaging around the inside, he had a sinking feeling in his stomach. Either these guys had removed the Narjus from the box, or it had never been loaded on Condell. And neither aspect was particularly appealing.

“It’s not here,” he whispered.

“What?” asked Tyrell.

“I said,” hissed Higual, raising his voice slightly, “it’s not here.”

“What do you mean it’s not there? Where is it?”

Instantly the sound of weapons being readied resounded throughout the chamber. The two guys that had been hired looked over their shoulders and realized that this was not going to be the super-easy job they had been promised.

“Is there a problem?” growled West.

“Could ... um ... could your guys put their weapons away?” stammered Tyrell.

“Let Kasia aboard and we’ll put the toys away.”

“Of course, of course,” said Tyrell. With a slight wave of his hand, he motioned for Kasia to walk forward. She walked past the people in the airlock and entered the ship. A small nod from West and everyone else quietly put the weapons away as efficiently as they had been drawn. Nervously, Tyrell asked: “Have you opened this box, Captain?”

“No.”

“Oh,” continued Tyrell nervously. “Well then, maybe our supplier failed us on Condell.”

“You’re welcome to come aboard and have a look around,” offered West in an almost genial fashion.

“That’s okay, Captain, I believe you. Um, I guess we’ll be taking what’s ours and going on our way then, shall we?” Tyrell motioned for his two heavies to fetch the box. Higual closed it and stepped back, glad that he had been able to clench tight enough to not mess himself. The two strongmen picked up the heavy box between them and walked off the

ship followed by Higuél, under the glare of Gustavus. “Well, it’s been a pleasure. Kasia will explain, I’m sure. Goodbye Captain Wes- uh, Captain.”

With that, the four men left and Saer closed the airlock. Puzzled, West turned away from the door and headed towards the main lounge. “Ken – let’s go.”

The ship eased out of the lock that it sat in. Up on the bridge, Ken gave Kuparinen traffic control access to the ships systems for the flight out. With everyone safely aboard, West found Kasia being examined by Akie, the Boarder’s medic.

“How is she, Doc?”

“I’m fine,” said Kasia before Akie could reply. “I don’t see what the big deal is with all the guns though.”

“Don’t see the big deal?” spluttered West, flabbergasted. “They kidnapped you!”

“Kidnapped! I wasn’t kidnapped!”

“What the hell is going on?” asked Saer as he entered.

“We got a ransom demand. Well, we didn’t, Cyrienne did.”

“Sis is aboard?”

“Yeah, she’s one of our mechanics on this trip. She got a ransom demand and told to intercept a package on a ship in transit in order to get you back. She came straight to me and we worked it out. We thought those guys were real pros since they gave us access codes to the target ship in order to let us board her without detection and loaded a Trojan on Condell before she left. Well, I thought they were pros until I met them.”

“Yeah, that guy who checked the box looked like he was about to drop a load in his pants or something,” giggled Knox.

“No, I wasn’t kidnapped. I was working on Balga when I was offered a transfer to Kuparinen. It was a hole so I asked to be transferred back and said that they could keep their extra money. Those two guys I came with said they’d organize a trip back with you. It wasn’t until we reached the ship that I noticed something was wrong from the way everyone was acting the two beefy boys that joined us.”

“Okay, so did anyone get screwed?” asked Saer.

“I don’t know,” said Oligana. “It looks like whatever they wanted, it wasn’t in the box. What did they want?”

“Something called a ‘Narjas’ or something,” said Gustavus. “Couldn’t hear too well over the little guy’s knees knocking together.”

Half the people in the room laughed.

“It’s a moot point, but she checks out fine. Nothing wrong with her,” said Akie. Although an accomplished medic, Akie was pretty bored with this job. From the actions that the boarders engaged in, there were generally only two conditions – perfectly fine and dead. There were very few occasions when someone was actually injured in a treatable way. She’d spent more time patching up the mechanics than the boarders.

“Thanks Akie,” said West. “Okay, so where are we heading?”

“Can I hitch a lift to Balga?” asked Kasia.

“Seems like as good a place as any,” said Saer. “It’s a fairly big place and we should be able to pick up some contracts there. Maybe even some legit ones.”

“Agreed,” said West. “You get that Ken?”

“Copy, Captain. I’ll set the wheels in motion.”

“I guess that’s that then. Kasia, you may as well go see Cyrienne, I’ll bet she’s anxious to see you. Ox, see if you can dig up any data on this ‘Narjas’ thing before we’re out of range of Kuparinen.”

“I’m on it, sir,” replied Oxley as Kasia left the room.

Chapter Eight

Leaning on the balcony, the writer took in the view. This had inspired him before, but not this time. A cup of cold coffee sat on the sill by his elbow. He’d wandered around most of the office looking for an idea and eventually made his way out here onto the balcony. It was five odd floors down to the pavilion below. There weren’t too many large open spaces on Balga, but the offices fronted onto one of them.

He casually wondered if there had once been a forest in this space. Most of the early stations had had large quantities of plants and biological material to act as natural oxygen supplies and CO2 scrubbers. And that was when the idea struck him. He figured people were miserable because they hardly ever saw anything green. It was all bland metals and alloys, unless they happened to live on a terra compatible planet. Turning to re-enter the office, he casually threw the cup of coffee off the balcony.

*

The waves crashed onto the shore. This was certainly one of the galaxies best-kept secrets. Here was a large atoll out in the middle of a vast ocean. It rose out of the deep seabed but had a long flat table fifty odd feet below the surface that stretched several kilometers out from the beaches. The result was that the ocean swell created these massive waves that would flow all the way to the distant shore.

Here, a brave soul could go way out to sea, where the surge began and ride a wave the size of a building for almost twenty minutes before it reached land. Stable, reliable and (relatively) safe, this was Captain Jeannette's bread and butter.

"Oh man, check this out dude!" yelled Thursten as he ran out onto the beach. The flight down from orbit took about two hours, and the guests had been antsy and couldn't wait to get down to do some serious surfing. Captain Jeannette had (repeatedly) explained that the trip had to be done at a safe velocity and would take a fair amount of time – but if they really wanted, it could be done in just five minutes. But that would fall into the category of "crash" instead of "landing".

"Woah," said Mevan as he looked out at the queue of vast waves stretching out to the horizon. "Oh man, this is gonna be so sweet!"

"Okay Karl," said Jeannette to one of her crew. "Get the runabout ready."

"No problem," replied Karl.

There were six guests on this trip, mostly rich young spoilt types out looking for a good time. This little uncharted world was a godsend. About ten years earlier, she had been near bankruptcy and was about to have to sell her ship when a chance conversation had led her to find this world. It was mostly water, but it had a wide zone of algal growth or plants or something across almost the entire equator. It was this swath of primitive plant life that made the planet habitable, although the oxygen content was a little higher than was comfortable.

However, that same algal bloom that was so beneficial also gave a very ugly green / brown smear across the planet that made it unpleasing to look at from orbit. It was probably that small detail that made it unattractive to colonization or other major developers.

Since so few explorers had actually come down to do a proper survey, the bulk of the planet was uncharted. But what most people that came here did not realize was that there were several small landmasses scattered across the planet, mostly in the temperate zones. Most of these were fine for basic tourism, but were generally rather boring without many interesting features.

It was this one atoll, with its massive undersea shelf that made the whole planet worthwhile. From her younger days, Jeannette knew a surfers paradise when she saw it. She was pushing sixty now (or a hundred and eight, depending on how you counted) and

this little enterprise was her retirement fund. She'd already placed markers on both poles to claim the planet as being hers, should anyone want to develop it or buy it off her later.

Behind her, her crew was split into two basic teams. One group were the hostesses and entertainers, there to keep the guests happy during the trip and to provide food and shelter once on the atoll. The other half were her ship's crew and did all the real work on the surface, such as taking the brave "explorers" out to the waves.

"Excuse me Captain," said Renea. "We have the dropship properly secured and set up, the facilities are all good to go and Karl says that the runabout will be ready in a few minutes for the first trip."

"Excellent," replied Jeanette. "See which of our guests want to go out first. And make sure that they have their locators with them."

"Yes ma'am. One last thing – Denise wanted to know what you wanted for lunch."

"Just the usual, thanks."

"Yes ma'am."

As Renea walked away, Jeanette could hear the runabout doing its preliminary warm-up run on its engines.

The Runabout was a fairly small atmospheric craft. It was primarily designed as a single person transport, but had been upgraded to carry two passengers and the driver, plus two surfboards. The reason that this particular craft was chosen over others was that it was powerful enough to fly above the waves and provide support for the guests but small enough to bring down in the shuttle and be set up and packed away by hand. It was also fairly common to see them available to rent as transports from resorts on various planets and as rescue craft in developed areas.

The added bonus of using an open frame vehicle was that it added a thrill of flying low over the tops of the waves in a seemingly dangerous manner whilst still being perfectly safe. It could even be partially submerged, which made it perfect for recovering surfers from the waves.

The landing site had been upgraded and made more comfortable several years earlier. The first few trips had been much more rustic, but there were certain little luxuries that people really wanted available, especially if they were handing over large quantities of credit. Running water was near the top of the list, along with power.

One of the first things that had been built was a large landing pad for the shuttle. In theory, it could land almost anywhere, but the entire weight being focused on the relatively small area of the landing struts would quickly turn the ground to un-traversable

mush. The pad was made out of standard plascrete, easily poured and shaped and it would last for millennia, especially in this benign climate.

Now there were several buildings, which dotted the atoll including a small power station located a discrete distance from everything else. Construction was important, because it reinforced your claim. The markers could be removed or deactivated or stolen, but physical buildings were harder to get rid of. And the bigger they were, the stronger your claim would become. Because glowing craters on a newly discovered planet suggested that the planet was less “newly discovered” and more “recently stolen”.

“Okay, Alex and Thor are going on the first run, and when they come in Doleboy and Libbie will go out,” said Karl.

“Wahoo!” exclaimed Thor. His name wasn’t really ‘Thor’, but it sounded good and it was pretty close to his real name – Thursten. He and Alex jumped up onto the runabout next to Karl as Renea and Laurana secured their boards to the sides. Karl lifted up into the air and took off over the waves, heading out to where the waves started and giving the riders a spectacular view over the waves.

Turning, she saw two of the girls walking over to her, Margaret and Valerie. On this trip, there were six guests in total. Three boys and their girlfriends. She could almost have picked the cliché’s as they had come aboard when she first met them. But she was delighted to find that they weren’t the usual self-absorbed spoilt rich kids. They had some good ideas of what they wanted to do and how to get there, and this trip was just a fun diversion.

“Is there any danger out there?” said Margaret to Jeannette.

“Not really,” replied the Captain. “There are a few large predators under the water, but we’ve never seen one come in near the shore. They stay mainly out in the deep water where their food is. The biggest danger is if they ride the wave too far in to shore and get pounded on the beach. But we told them enough times and Karl can pull them out of the water before they reach shore.”

“So it’s not dangerous?” insisted Margaret, who was secretly afraid of the water and wouldn’t be surfing on this trip, preferring to work on her tan and enjoy the view.

“Not at all, but don’t tell the boys that,” said Jeanette with a smile. She knew just what they wanted. These young kids wanted the thrill of going somewhere new and dangerous, but didn’t want the real danger of going to an unexplored world on their own nor the sanitized pseudo danger of an adventure park. This place and the service she offered was perfect, not to mention rare. And she charged accordingly.

Satisfied, Margaret and Valerie walked away, quietly giggling to themselves. There hadn’t been any problems in all the trips that she had made to this planet, both with

guests and without. And if something went wrong, she had Willard, a trained medic on retainer.

Watching the local primary rising high into the sky, the thought occurred to her that she'd never given anything a name around here. Not the primary, not the planet and not the atoll. Oh well, it was something to work on during the relaxed hours of the evening after dark.

*

“Okay, what do the sensors say?” asked Raktu.

“Getting results back now,” replied Svelte. “Okay, standard primary / planet set up, looks like six major planets. Scanning for target on passive only, no contact yet.”

This was always the trickiest part of an ambush. When arriving in a system, the energy signatures would be quite obvious to anyone who was actively looking for them, but an unsuspecting target would miss them. Once in stealth mode, a ship would be quite difficult to spot. But the first few seconds were the most important.

“Scans complete. Target pinged in a parking orbit around the third planet. No other contacts yet.”

“Looks good,” growled Lothar. They were on the bridge of the Bloodbath. A mean looking ship, all black and spikes, it was built to inspire fear in anyone who saw her. These were not the sorts of people that one would want to meet in a dark alley. They were here in this system tracking their prey. And so far, it looked like the target had no idea they were being followed.

“Full stealth,” barked Raktu. “Take us in, nice and slow. I want to be on them before they lose sight of the stars behind us.”

Menacingly, the ship moved in towards the third planet.

*

The pre show band walked off the stage.

The house lights went down and in that dark half-light, The Rockers made their way out onto the stage. That is, The Rockers plus One. Rabid was still up in the hotel room being tended to by the medics. In his place was Johnny Huser, general mechanic and PD Rod technician for the ship Celiker. The stamping of the crowd filled the air with a heavy pulse that reverberated throughout the auditorium.

“How you holding up?” asked Renegade.

“Little nervous, but doing good,” replied Johnny.

“I remember my first time – you’ll never forget this.”

A single beam of light came down from the ceiling and illuminated Ricky, center stage. The crowd went absolutely nuts. Screaming and chanting, chairs thrown in the air, the noise was enormous and drowned out everything else.

After a moment of Ricky just standing there, the audience caught wind that there was something out of the ordinary happening. The noise abated, though not totally.

“Good evening ladies and gentlemen,” started Ricky. This was a radical departure from the normal start of a show. On this tour, the show was being started with Rabid pulling a hard solo on his screamer, which was the intro to the title track of this tour’s album. A polite introduction by the normally rambunctious lead singer was so far from what the audience was expecting that the auditorium became quiet.

“It is with deep regret that I have to inform you that Rabid has been injured and is unable to play tonight.”

A deafening silence fell over the auditorium. You could almost sense the indrawn breath as the audience awaited the announcement of a cancelled show, and the frustrated screaming that would follow.

“However, we have managed to find a replacement to play in his stead.”

A murmur swept through the crowd. Some boos, some cheers and lots of indecipherable muttering. Some were happy to have the show go on, others were not so keen on an unknown screamer player. A screamer was not an easy instrument to play. When played well, they sounded good, but when played badly, the sound was awful. Worse than nails on a chalkboard being accompanied by bagpipes.

“I now introduce our replacement player, Johnny Huser!” exclaimed Ricky.

Right on his cue, the stage lights came on, focused on Johnny and bathing him in a rich blue and burgundy glow. Almost like a born expert, his fingers flew across Rabid’s screamer and out flowed the opening riff to ‘Broken Diamond’, the track that had been the start of every other show on this tour.

The audience’s response was immediate and overpowering. Over twelve thousand voices in a room built for ten screamed in unison in appreciation of the music that was thundering out over the speakers.

The rest of the band fired up, hitting their cues perfectly. The song was strong and loud with Ricky belting out the lyrics with a gusto not heard for a long time. Almost like a

living organism, the band and the audience breathed and moved as one as the show fired up.

*

Hartz Mendoza was having a swell time. Lazily lounging on the bridge of the Heart of Stone, he gazed over the various different displays. Far below on the surface of the planet, his captain, Jeanette was entertaining the six guests and taking them on the surfing trip of a lifetime.

It might seem to be a bad thing to have been left on the ship while everyone else went down to the surface, but he and Karl would swap every third trip so that he could go down. They could both do each other's jobs quite easily and the ship was a lot more relaxed and roomy with just him aboard.

Hartz was quite content when a new contact came up on his screen. At the same time an indicator lit up to let him know that there was an incoming transmission. It was odd for a ship to be out here, but it could be anyone. He opened a channel to the visitor.

"This is the Heart of Stone, who are you?" he asked.

"Well, you have a real purty voice there, young fella," came a gruff voice over the channel. "It'd be a right royal shame to have to blow you outta the sky, now wouldn't it just?"

Hartz was too shocked to respond. The voice continued. "So you know, we have multiple breachers locked and aimed right at you, so any attempt to make any transmissions to the surface will be met with a penalty. Do I make myself clear?"

It took a moment for Hartz to process what he was hearing. Not only was there a ship here in the same system, it was threatening him! The odds of another ship showing up on an off chance were too low for it to be coincidence. This ship was here specifically looking for them.

"I await your reply, if you don't mind. My trigger finger gets kinda itchy when I'm ignored."

"Uh, this is the ... um ... Heart of Stone. What ... um ... business do you have here?"

"I really don't like to repeat myself," said the voice, this time with an angry edge. "So I'll say it another way. Acknowledge that you won't make any transmissions or we'll blow you to teeny little pieces. Is that clear?"

"Yeah, uh, acknowledged. No transmissions."

"Atta boy! Now we're playin' by tha rules. You sit right there and don't bat an eyelid."

Hartz could now clearly see what was going on. On his displays he could see that a ship had approached on stealth and come right up behind him. It was fairly large, probably a hunter class battleship. Bigger than the Heart of Stone and probably carrying more missiles than crewmembers. He saw a drop ship separate from the invader and start heading down to the surface.

There had to be some way for him to warn Jeanette and the guests, but he couldn't think of a way. Any transmission and they would blow him up. And if he were blown up, the people on the surface would not have any way to leave the system. Their shuttle could get them off the planet, but after that, it was a dozen light-years to the nearest habitation. Nervously, Hartz watched the displays and hoped against hope.

*

It was late in the evening and a large bonfire burned merrily on the beach. The local wood burned with a strange, sweetish smell – not unlike a mixture between bubblegum and chocolate. The weather was balmy and the evening sky was still slightly tinged a faint rose colour from the primaries' light. The guests and two of her crew sat around the fire telling jokes and comfortably resting after the evening meal. Life was good.

A strange noise was heard softly on the breeze. Instantly, Jeanette and her crew were on alert, followed soon by the guests. The noise was definitely not natural and considering where they were, totally unexpected.

A large dropship came down over the site, hovering over the beach a hundred feet or so from them and then settling down. Ten or so large angry and mean-looking men jumped out the doors, weapons drawn and advanced on the camp.

Jeanette cursed her trusting nature. It had never even occurred to her that she might need to bring weapons to this paradise. It just wasn't in her nature to think that way.

“Where is my dear Captain McCracker?” asked the man at the front as he reached the group.

“Here I am,” replied Jeanette. “And who might you be?”

The six guests knew that this was not part of the tour. They huddled together by the fire, doing their best to remain motionless and not attract attention, nervously watching the events unfold.

“I am Lothar Saenger, Lord of war and killer of whom I chose to kill.” Lothar did a theatrical little flourish and bowed deeply. “I will be your gangster for the evening.”

“What do you want with me?” asked Jeanette.

“With you? Nothing,” replied Lothar.

“Then why do you ask for me?”

Lothar walked right up to Jeanette and stood over her. “I seek the one called Valerie Opatz.”

Several startled gasps could be heard from the guests. They looked at Valerie, who tried to hide behind Alex.

“And there we go,” said Lothar, waving a hand in the general direction of the guests.

“You can’t have her,” said Jeanette as she moved to stand between Lothar and the guests.

You can’t stop me,” said Lothar. “Right now, my ship, the Bloodbath, is in orbit ready to blow your precious Heart into a shower of debris. I have more seasoned fighters here than you have crew and civilians. We have guns and you don’t. Face it lady, you’re outclassed and outmatched in every way. Hell, I could kill everyone and just take Miss Opatz. I could take her and blow up your ship leaving you stranded here. I could board your ship, throw whomever you left behind out the airlock and take your ship and the girl and leave you here to rot. Do you have any way of stopping me from doing any of that?”

Jeanette clenched her fists. Never before had she felt so utterly helpless. The girl was her charge, her responsibility and anything she tried would do absolutely nothing to help her, and most probably get everyone else killed.

“No,” whispered Jeanette. “I can’t stop you.”

Lothar laughed heartily. “Good to see that you know how things work. Now, I’m going to take little miss sunshine here,” he pointed at Valerie, “and I’m not going to kill anyone or take your ship. Do you want to know why?”

“Why?” asked Jeanette.

“Two reasons. First, we’re not going to harm her because people pay more money for kidnap victims when they know the kidnaped hasn’t been harmed. Second, we need you alive and able to travel so you can take our ransom demand back to civilization. Sound like a good plan?”

Jeanette looked around. The guests were huddled in a tight group, scared out of their minds but trying to keep Valerie in the middle. Her crew was standing behind her, defiant but unarmed and therefore helpless. Very few people knew where they were and they wouldn’t be reported as missing for several weeks. It might be three months or more before anyone came looking for them, and they didn’t have enough food to last that long.

“Or I could, you know – just kill a few random people for the hell of it while you make up your mind,” said Lothar as he aimed his weapon at Laurana.

“Fine,” said Jeanette, defeated. “Do what you want.”

“Ooh, sounds like an invitation, eh boys?” A smatter of laughter came from the other men. “But, we’re on a bit of a schedule. Fetch.” He pointed at Valerie and three of his men advanced on her and picked her up. Alex tried to pull her back but just earned a punch in the face, which knocked him to the ground. Lothar tossed a data disc at Jeanette. “Here, give this to someone with a lot of cash that likes Miss Opatx. Okay boys, we’re leaving.”

Laughing, the men returned to the drop ship and climbed back aboard. A moment later, the drop ship launched into the air and headed up towards the clouds. Jeanette decided to wait about half an hour for the kidnappers to leave before trying to contact Hartz on her ship. During this gap, they stowed all their gear in the shuttle and had everyone aboard, ready to leave.

“Oh boy, am I glad to hear from you!” exclaimed Hartz over the comm. “Anyone hurt?”

“No, but they took Valerie with them. Where’s the nearest inhabited system, preferably one that’s friendly?”

“Checking now. Got it, Maantus system. Has a load of inhabitants as well.”

“We’re on our way up to you. Plot a course there and we’ll leave as soon as we dock.”

The shuttle streaked into the sky, leaving behind a dark, deserted beach and a forlorn bonfire that burned quietly and warmed nobody.

*

“What do you want to do?” asked Paxton.

I don’t know, what do you want to do?” asked Doris.

“I just want to do what you want to do.”

“I don’t want to do anything. What do you want to do?”

They were casually walking hand in hand down one of the many corridors running through Balga. Most everyone else was busy rushing towards something, or rushing away from something. There were very few people on a station that didn’t have something to do. Paxton and Doris were amongst those few people.

When they had left the Celiker, they were sick of spending all their time washing up and prepping meals. It was pretty good money, but there wasn't much fun in it. Leaving had seemed like a good idea. Now they were freely roaming around the station, exploring the quiet little nooks and crannies that few other people ever bothered with.

Initially it had been great. Not a care in the world, nobody to answer to and free to do as they pleased. The other, older members of the populace alternated between ignoring them and giving them lots of attention depending on where they were and the time of the day. Mostly, they kept to themselves.

Now, having burned through a large percentage of their savings, they were starting to realize that a drifting lifestyle aboard a space station wasn't going to be a financially viable option for long. They had spent the last few days wandering around trying to see if they could get a job somewhere. But the fact was, most jobs aboard a space station needed a lot of very specialized skills. There were almost no jobs available for unskilled, basically homeless youths. There were a few niche jobs in the service and entertainment areas (some paying more than others) but all of those were taken by other unskilled youths who had been on the station longer.

"Feel like going and looking for work down on the locks again?" asked Doris.

"Nah, we tried all them places already," replied Paxton. "Maybe we should widen our search to other types of jobs."

"I don't think we'll be able to stay on Balga," sighed Doris. "If we don't have a good income, everything is too artificial and expensive for us. We need to get down to a planet where things are easier and less specialized."

Paxton didn't reply. Meeting Doris had been a dream come true, but truth be told, he didn't really feel like working. But then again, who did? The more he thought about it, the more he thought that Doris was right. He missed having a horizon and being able to see further than a few dozen meters. He missed the air that hadn't been breathed a million times before. Most of all, he missed the ability to just run.

Not that he couldn't run, just that there wasn't the space to do it in. And someone running on a station would attract attention. People were always in a hurry, but nobody ever ran. Only criminals ran. Proper people ran and jogged and lifted heavy things in a gymnasium, but he couldn't afford the rates.

"I do believe you're right. But between us we don't have the money for one ticket to anywhere decent, let alone both of us."

"We don't have to pay if they're paying us," she replied.

"Who in their right mind would pay us to ride on their ship?"

“Oh come on, you’re not that dense!”

“Yeah, I know. I was hoping that my cooking days were over.”

“Well, at least if we’re together then it won’t be so bad,” she said as she nuzzled his neck. “I’m sure that we’ll think of something to pass the time.”

“Yeah – wash dishes. Owe!” Doris had jabbed him in the side with her elbow. It wasn’t a serious blow, just a friendly prod.

“We’ll go look for a ship. Doesn’t matter where it’s going, so long as it’s headed towards a planet. Where it lands, we’ll settle there.”

“Sounds good to me,” said Paxton as they changed direction and headed towards where the ship’s crews generally hung out. “There are plenty of ships coming and going all the time. One of them is bound to take both of us, together.”

“Yeah. And once we get down to a planet, we’ll be able to get decent jobs, find a place to live and raise a family.”

“Family?” said Paxton, with a startled expression on his face.

Chapter Nine

Urban landscape as far as the eye could see. Giant towers of plascrete and glass, carbonsteel and titanemuim. Marvelous wonders that made the mountains look small and with millions upon millions of people living in, on and under them. With the setting sun, the shadows of some of the taller buildings stretched all the way to the horizon.

This was a developed world. This was what civilization was meant to be. All the advantages of a strong developed scientific base without any of the pollution or cancer that getting to that stage would normally cause. This was Belousov.

High over the city, a skycab carried two passengers. They had traveled far and long to reach this planet and once here they had spent even longer getting to this particular part of the city. The skycab descended amongst the buildings, falling into shadow as it went lower and lower. After a few minutes, it landed gently on a rooftop. The side opened, and the passengers stepped out onto the roof.

“Finally, we are so close,” said Georgi. “After all this time and all this money that we’ve spent on snoops and informants, we’re so close I can almost touch it.”

“Don’t count your missiles until they hit,” said Selinin. He was almost naturally always a dour fellow, but travel seemed to make him even less agreeable.

“Just think,” said Georgi excitedly. “Soon, we’ll be fabulously rich beyond our wildest dreams.”

“I’ve had some pretty wild dreams. And after all we’ve been through and all the money that I’ve spent on this little quest of yours, I’ll be happy to just break even.”

“Fine by me. I’ll pay you back for everything that you’ve spent and I’ll use the change to buy myself a planet or three.”

“You don’t think small, do you?” said Selinin as they started to walk down the stairs from the roof down to the sky lobby.

“Like I said, fabulously rich.”

“I’ve heard all this before. Personally, I’m starting to think that agreeing to finance your project was a bad idea. We’ve collected lots of hearsay, lots of ideas but no concrete leads.”

“We’re here on Belousov, aren’t we? We have the information that Bamey gave us, which was the big break we needed. And it took us all of three days to find this building. I’m telling you, the Narjus is here, in this building.”

The two entered an elevator.

“Well, since we’re so close, maybe now you can let me in on just what this Narjus thing really is.”

“The Narjus is what we’re seeking,” said Georgi with a wry smile.

The elevator doors closed and Selinin turned to face Georgi, a serious expression on his face. “When this elevator stops, I’m either going to get out with you or I’m going to go back to the roof and go home. I’ve expended a great deal of funds helping you chase your white whale, but I’m seriously considering cutting my losses and calling it a day. Now, what am I going to do?”

“What’s a white whale?”

“Don’t avoid the issue.”

Georgi looked at Selinin and weighed his options. Finding another backer when he was this close would be hard, but not impossible. But Selinin had shown faith and had helped him out enormously. It would be the height of folly to burn this bridge now.

“Okay, I’ll level with you. I have no idea.”

“What?”

“I’ve been following this for half my life. I was dumping some old data cores from an old station that was being refurbished and I happened across this little excerpt. I followed the information and ended up finding out that the Narjus was a clue or a key to a fabulous treasure. I haven’t found out what it is, but I do know that several planets have gone to war in order to try and get this thing. It’s been in and out of the spotlight for who knows how long and has changed hands over a dozen times, usually at the point of a knife. The last bit of data that I had led me to the Judges’ archives but I couldn’t get into that. That’s where Mr Bamey came into the picture.”

“And that, along with the information that we got from Natalene led us here, to this building?”

“Yes. And planetary governments don’t unleash the army for anything less than a few billion. So if several planets were willing to slam each other around in order to get this thing, it’s got to be worth a fortune.”

“And just what is this building?” asked Selinin as the elevator came to a stop.

“This is the hall of records,” said Georgi as he stepped out of the elevator. “You’ve come this far. Will you come a few steps further?”

Selinin hesitated a moment. He already had all the money he would ever need, so this wasn’t something that he was desperately in need of. But for all his wealth, his life was boring. He hadn’t even left his spacious mansion in over a decade before Georgi came along and pleaded for his patronage. And Georgi provided something his money couldn’t – a reason to go on living. With an overly elaborate sigh, Selinin stepped out of the elevator.

“Okay then, let’s go.”

As they walked into the reception for the Belousov Hall of Records, Georgi asked, “Seriously, what’s a white whale?”

*

“Anything to declare?” asked a bored looking official.

“Yeah, don’t go to Kuperinen, it’s a hole,” said Captain West. Unamused, the official gave Captain West a level gaze that normally made people break into a nervous sweat. West had been intimidating people since before the official was born and didn’t flinch.

“Okay, so you have no cargo, no paying passengers and no data chips to transfer. You also have what looks like a private army, a mess of apparently legal weapons and enough guns mounted on your hull to keep the King of Haapasalo from even thinking of sending a tax application in your general direction.”

“As I said, the weapons have been verified and we have all our documentation in order.”

“So, do you have anything to declare?” Someone could be transporting big vats of Gray Goo and as long as it was declared and they had the right forms it was all perfectly legal. By asking (repeatedly) if they had anything to declare, the official was giving Captain West the opportunity to legalize any suspicious cargo that might be borderline legal. Or to be more specific, the official was fishing for a bribe in order to look the other way.

“No. Nothing to declare.”

Sighing, the official continued. “Very well, nothing to declare. Your entire crew will need to remain here in the quarantine zone whilst customs goes over your ship and searches it for any contraband, proscribed flora and fauna or any other items listed on the register of barred items. Before the team goes aboard, I give you a final chance to declare anything that the teams might uncover that you may have neglected to mention.”

West was practically fuming. The official was basically doing everything except placing out a sign saying ‘bribe me’. Normally (as in: when he *was* carrying something illegal) he would have just paid him off and been done with it. But for once, everything on the ship was above board and legal. Plus, with the expense of mounting the rescue mission that wasn’t a rescue mission, he barely had enough money to make payroll, let alone be bribing low-level idiots here at Balga customs.

“Of course we have no problem with the fine men and women of your customs inspection teams going aboard my ship. But one of my men will go with your inspectors to ensure that they don’t try and plant anything on us, nor that they are tempted to remove any of our property.”

“You can’t obstruct us from performing our duties!”

“Who said anything about obstructing? We’ll be escorting. We’ll be more than happy to take any of your staff to any part of the ship, inside or out, that they wish to see. As I said, we have nothing to hide. But they will not be allowed to roam on my ship unescorted. Plus all my staff are qualified and licensed bodyguards and are all carrying state of the art weaponry.”

“Are you threatening me?”

“Of course not. I’m merely pointing out the obvious. You’re annoying and antagonizing a group of bored, armed fighters who are legally allowed to acquire and eliminate targets should they be deemed to be disruptive of the common good.”

The official had to concede the point. If they were carrying anything that they weren’t meant to, then the captain was either pulling a very dangerous bluff or he was the

dumbest captain traveling the galaxy. And none of these guys looked like they'd follow a dumb captain.

In the end, he had only two options. To send them away without letting them enter Balga, or let them in. Finally he decided to just send one inspector aboard, the youngest and the most gun-crazy. The lad ended up spending more time asking the Boarders about their equipment than inspecting the ship for contraband.

After about three hours, the Kilkka and her crew were given clearance and allowed to enter Balga proper.

"Finally!" said Ken. "I thought that was going to drag on for ever!"

"Well, we may be in, but we're still up the creek. Oxley, you see to getting our ship refueled and restocked. Ken, you see what you can dig up by way of contracts. Preferably something soft that pays a lot."

Ken had a good laugh at that one. "Sure Capt'n, that'll be easy to find."

"Saer and Oligana, make sure you have all the ammo you need and that your gear is up to spec. If we look good, we should be able to get a good contract. If not, we may end up cutting you guys loose, so you may as well get some decent gear while I'm still picking up the tab."

"Yessir. If we do part ways, it's been good working with you. But I'm hoping that we can work together a bit longer. You're a good captain," said Saer.

"Thanks, that means a lot to me," said West with a smile. He shook hands with both Boarders who then walked off looking for the nearest military surplus store.

"So where does that leave us?" asked Cyrienne. She and her sister, Kasia were getting ready to say goodbye as Kasia would leave the ship but Cyrienne would remain.

"It all depends on what Ken can find. We only need one halfway decent job in order to get us back on top. At the moment, we have enough cash left to pay everyone and remain docked for another four days. After that, it's either permanent orbit or sell the Kilkka."

"Ouch," said Kasia. "I know how much the ship means to you. Thanks for coming for me, even if it looks like you didn't need to." She gave West a quick kiss.

"I want to thank you as well," said Cyrienne. "But I won't be kissing you since you're still my Captain."

"What are you going to do?" he asked Kasia.

“I’m going back to my old job at the bar. Technically I never left, but we’ll see what Antonio says. Good luck Captain,” said Kasia, and with that she walked away.

Cyrienne and West watched her go. A few moments later, Yoshi and Franco came out as well.

“Sorry Captain, but we’ll be leaving you at this port,” said Franco.

“No problems guys. Did you collect your pay?”

“Yes,” said Yoshi. “Peter settled with us a few minutes ago.”

“Will you be signing up with another ship?”

“No,” said Franco. “I need to get back to my studies. It was fun riding with you guys, but I can’t do this for the rest of my life.”

“And my dad lives here. I was mainly just looking for a ride home,” said Yoshi.

“Okay guys, look after yourselves,” said West as he shook hands with both of them. “If you need references, just list my name, in case I’m in the area.”

“Thanks Captain,” they said, and walked off the ship.

“And now we’ll need to hire some new kitchen hands,” said Cyrienne.

“Only if Ken gets us a contract,” replied West.

*

The pain was incredible, yet exquisite.

Johnny was on his back, breathing deeply. He was back in the hotel room with the rest of the band in post-show languor. He could barely hear over the ringing in his ears, his hands hurt from playing like he’d never played before and his left ankle hurt from a miss-timed jump that had landed badly. At the time he’d barely felt it, but he was feeling it now.

Most everyone was just lying where they had landed. They had done three encores, which had been unheard of on this tour. Rabid had managed to come down before the end of the show and had been able to take over again for the last few songs, much to the delight of the audience.

Johnny was a little miffed at that, but it was only in passing. He was majorly euphoric from the experience, and having been able to play on the stage to a packed house had been the greatest experience of his life.

“How are my boys and girls?” asked Ordovus, beaming from ear to ear. The reviews were being sent out and the show was already an unmitigated success by any standard. He was greeted with a faint chorus of appreciative cries from the exhausted band members. “You’ll have about half an hour to lie still and recuperate, then we’ll move you onto our transport where you’ll be able to get some proper sleep.”

“Oh no, the ship,” said Johnny as he sat up. He checked his comm – no new messages, no missed calls. “Oh good, they aren’t ready yet. It’s been an absolute blast, but I have to go.”

“Thanks for stepping up,” said Rabid. “Ricky was right, you are a great screamer player.”

“Thank you,” replied Johnny, honored at being praised by the man he’d been replacing himself. “But there’s no way I could do this for a living. You sir, are a god.”

“You really rocked man,” said Ricky. “Look after yourself, we might meet up again somewhere.”

“You guys are awesome,” gushed Johnny. “Thank you for asking me, Ordovus.”

“It was Ricky that wanted you,” said Ordovus, maneuvering Johnny towards the door. “Captain West will be starting to think that we kidnapped you if you don’t get going. Please make sure to give him my thanks for letting you stay.”

With that, Johnny walked out the door, still calling praise and thanks as he walked away. Ordovus went back to organizing the pack up. The second stage crew would pick up the stage and most of the scenery in a few days. The first stage crew was already busy setting up the other stage at their next stop. On this end, all he had to do was make sure that all the band members and their various instruments were on the ship before they left. The earlier threat of leaving people behind was an idle one, since all of them were accomplished musicians and would be hard to replace.

Looking around, Ordovus decided that he’d let them rest only fifteen minutes. If they got too relaxed here, he’d have difficulty getting them onto the ship. In the meantime, he went looking for the girls that were here earlier. Maybe they’d want to join the band for the next leg of the tour.

*

Bamey slowly regained consciousness. He knew that he didn’t want to, but couldn’t remember why. Through a haze of furry thoughts, the pain returned. He almost fell unconscious again, but was brought to full consciousness again by an infusion of fresh drugs.

“Do you remember where you are?” asked the man with the steely gray hair.

“No.”

“Do you remember who you are?”

“Jackson. Jackson Myers.”

“No, that was the alias you used when you arrived. Do you remember your real name?”

Bamey thought for a moment. He was wide awake, but couldn't think straight. He tried rubbing his head but was annoyed to find that his arms were tied down. “Schultz. Bamey Schultz.”

“Better. Do you remember where you are?”

“My office.”

“That's where you were. Do you remember where you are now?”

Bamey looked around. It was a dull gray room that he hadn't seen before. A large mirror dominated one wall and there were four or five other people in the room. He was in an interrogation room of some type. There wasn't any blood on the floor that he could see, so he was pretty sure that he wasn't being tortured, at least not physically. Then he saw the judge's seal on the steely haired man's chest and some it came back to him.

“Police. Station. Balga. Police station on Balga.”

“Very good. Do you remember who I am?”

Bamey looked at the steely haired man. He was a Judge; of that there was no doubt. He vaguely recalled having been told the Judges' name at some point, but he couldn't recall what it was. He shook his head and instantly regretted it.

“Do you remember what happened?”

“Killed Albano. You. Killed him.”

“That was an accident. The troops were under orders to take you alive, but someone didn't think that that included your staff.”

“Dead. He's dead. So am I.”

“No Mr. Schultz, we are not going to kill you. We want information from you, that's all.”

“Why are you torturing me?”

“We’re not. You tripped on the way in and hit your head. The medic sedated you and fixed a fracture in your skull. That’s why your head hurts. And you’re on some rather powerful painkillers, that’s why you can’t think straight.”

Bamey tried to process what he was being told. The Judge could be telling the truth, or he could be telling a barefaced lie. And if he’d tripped, what had he tripped on? They could easily have beaten him up and then had the medic fix him up so they could beat him again.

“Why are my arms tied?”

“Look at your arms.”

Bamey looked down. His arms were not tied down; he just had a lot of difficulty moving them. He was looking right at his hand and telling it to move, but his fingers barely wiggled.

“What do you want to know?”

“Better. Do you remember who I am?”

“Not important. What do you want to know?”

“I want to know if you remember who I am.”

Bamey’s head was starting to clear. He looked at the Judge again. The man wasn’t familiar on any level and he didn’t recall having met him anytime before. There was a name though, but the name didn’t match. The name belonged to someone else and he was getting them confused. Now he was pretty sure that he remembered the Judge’s name, but it didn’t seem right and he didn’t know why.

“I don’t know. What is your name?”

“You know my name.”

“Judge ... Leshem,” said Bamey, saying the name of the only Judge’s name that he could recall. Even as he said it, it felt right but wrong at the same time.

“That’s right. I’m Judge Lesham. Why were you investigating my grandfather?”

“Your what?”

“My grandfather, who was also named Leshem and was also a Judge, why were you investigating him?”

It all came back to Bamey now. Judge Leshem, or more accurately, Judge Jordi Leshem had been the one that had tracked and probably captured Asoye. This Judge Leshem must have been alerted when he had downloaded the data on his grandfather.

“I wasn’t. I was tracking the Narjus.”

“The what?”

“The Narjus. The last case that Judge Leshem was working on when he disappeared was a missing artifact called the Narjus. Allegedly, a thief named Asoye Terekado had stolen it along with some other stuff and your grandfather was either about to arrest her or had already done so when something went wrong.”

Judge Leshem looked at the other men in the room. A few glances passed between them.

“Who else have you told this information?”

“Gerogi Karpov and Selinin Zhurvolova, Zhuronomo ... Zhur something.”

“And where are they now?”

“Gone.”

“Gone where?” asked Judge Leshem, leaning in close to Bamey.

“Probably to Belousov.”

“Why would they go to Belousov?”

“That was the last known location of the Narjus, of Asoye and of Leshem. There are no other records anywhere after his final report. Maybe she killed him and went underground. Maybe he married her and they settled down somewhere. Maybe he arrested her and their ship crashed somewhere. Maybe they were both killed in a regular street mugging.”

Leshem straightened up. He looked worried but determined. Bamey could almost see the gears working away in his head. He briefly wondered what the Judge was thinking about when Judge Leshem nodded to the man standing behind Bamey.

Chapter Ten

“This is the Heart of Stone calling Balga Control. Requesting priority access.”

“Copy you Heart of Stone. State the nature of your emergency.”

“We don’t have an emergency as such, we have an urgency.”

“Sorry Heart of Stone, we have almost a hundred ships lined up waiting to be unloaded. You’ll have to join the queue.”

“We don’t have any cargo to unload. We are carrying a ransom demand.”

“Say again?”

“One of our passengers was kidnapped and we are carrying a ransom demand. We request priority access in order to get in contact with the local judiciary.”

“Copy that Heart of Stone, your request is being processed.”

“This is why I hate bureaucracy,” said Karl. “It’s the annoying bastards that ride roughshod over the rules that get anything done. Everyone who follows the rules like they’re supposed to just ends up tied down with red tape.”

“Settle down Karl,” said Captain Jeanette. “Hartz, you ever heard of a station having over a hundred ships parked at once?”

“Sure, but not too often. The loaders must be on strike or something.”

“That’d do it,” said Karl.

“Heart of Stone, this is Balga Control. You are authorized on a provisional priority approach. What is your protocol.”

“Jonix 9.0”

“Ooh, an oldie. You should upgrade to the ten version.”

“Yeah, but this ship doesn’t have the bandwidth for it. She’s too old.”

“Bummer. Sucks to be you.”

Turning to Jeanette, Karl whispered “What a cheeky bastard!”

“Okay, we have you set. We’ll bring you in hard and high. You’ll be docked at the Quarantine Lock topside in about two hours. Make sure everyone is strapped in for the final deceleration. We’ll call you again prior to engaging the maneuver.”

“Copy that Balga Control. Can you patch us through to the Judiciary?”

“Putting you through now.”

*

“And how are you doing today, my good Captain?” asked Erycka. She was the local representative for the company that owned the Celiker. Her job was to organize which loads were going to which destinations on which ships. Not an easy task since it was often difficult to know which ships would be showing up and which ones were diverted elsewhere. It was more art than science with a few big helpings of guesswork thrown in, and she was rather good at it. Some even whispered that she might be clairvoyant.

“I’ve had better,” replied Captain Powell. “Did you notice that there is no cargo being loaded or unloaded at the moment?”

“Yes, we have some people in with the discussions. The current sticking point seems to be the lubrication maintenance schedule for some load pins, but it should be sorted soon.”

“The lubrication what?”

“These strike negotiations have been going on for years, Captain. The main sticking points are never the main problem. It’s up to the stevedores and negotiators to distract everyone with pointless bickering over inconsequential details whilst the real negotiations take place elsewhere, behind closed doors.”

“Oh. Well, that’s not particularly comforting.”

“It’s quite the well oiled machine, if you’ll pardon the pun. I have it on good authority that the strike will be over in about another twenty minutes.”

“Ah good, so my cargo will loaded soon.”

“Actually; no, it won’t. Since this strike has delayed a few shipments, the next load has caught up with the one you were going to take. It’ll be more economical to send the entire load on one ship, probably the Labour of Love, which is currently waiting to be unloaded. I believe you know Captain Baraby?”

“Sonia? Yeah, she’s good. Good ship too. So where does that leave me?”

“I’ve secured a new load. Good job too, it’ll be a milk run.”

“Milk?”

“Sorry, old expression. It’ll be easy. You’re taking all of three boxes of optical equipment for some university study or something. Small load, easy run and a sweet on-time bonus.”

“I thought everyone was running late?”

“All the loads that were here yesterday or are meant to leave today are running late. This load wasn’t due to leave until tomorrow but it was brought forward. And I picked it up for you.”

“Where’s it going?”

“Kuparinen Station, in orbit over Elli.”

“So where’s the catch?”

“Sadly, I don’t get to say anything about spending the night in a haunted house; however there is one tricky part. You’ll need to undock and rendezvous directly with the Fallen Angel and do an open-air transfer. Since it’s only three boxes, it should be fairly easy. And since you’ll be able to leave the lock without waiting to be loaded, you can leave pretty much right now, which gives you an early departure bonus. And since you’ll be clearing a spot for one of the waiting ships, I also managed to negotiate a nice little bonus for that as well, of which you get twenty five percent.”

“I thought we were running late.”

“The load that the Labour of Love will be taking is leaving late, or rather it *was* since it is now the new load combined. The optical stuff is a fresh load that’s meant to leave tomorrow.”

“Will the load be damaged from being exposed to vacuum?”

“Nope, it’s all sealed up tight. Everybody wins.”

Powell breathed out heavily. “You’re a miracle worker, Erycka.”

“Damn straight I am. Next time you’re in town, you owe me dinner.”

“It’s a deal. I’ll go round up my crew,” said Powell as he got up.

*

Judge Welton Leshem was a man on a mission. From his earliest days, he had wanted to be Judge like his father, and his father before him and so on back for around ten generations. It was both a great honour and great burden to carry. As he was growing up, he had heard the tales, the legends, and the myths. He’d even heard the old tale of his grandfather who had simply vanished some years before he was born.

He’d never really thought too much about the missing relative, until he had become a Judge some twenty odd years earlier. Judges were rarely young, since they needed the temperament and restraint that only came with experience. And they were rarely required to perform any great physical tasks since that was what the local judiciary was for.

Shortly after becoming a Judge, he had looked up his grandfather and namesake and found very little information. There had been a detailed description of his career and the cases that he had worked on, but as to what had actually happened to him, almost nothing was to be read anywhere.

He'd been assigned the case of a simple break-in, which would not normally warrant the involvement of a Judge. However, in this case the location that was broken into was the main office of a very influential businessman and Ambassador. As a personal favour, the Governor of Moret had requested a Judge investigate the incident.

His grandfather had lodged a report that he'd been able to identify the perpetrator and had followed her to where she had fled. Unfortunately, the report had failed to mention where she had gone or where he was going.

It wasn't until about a year later that he was officially declared missing. There was very little information to go on since the trail had gone cold. His movements were tracked all the way to his arrival on Belousov and his first few days there, but after that he'd stepped off the grid.

And that was where it had ended. For years the case niggled at the back of Welton's mind, but there was nothing to do. Anyone who might have seen him would have died years earlier. There was plenty of data floating around or sitting in old archives but without points of reference, there was no way to find meaningful information on what had happened to him.

And then, a few weeks earlier a group of flags had gone up. Someone was fishing the data streams for information related to the last case and then came the big break – someone had had the temerity to hack into the secure data cores that the Judges used for their internal networks.

Now that Bamey had given him some solid intel, he could justify going personally to Belousov. He had dropped everything and jumped at this chance to locate the remains of his grandfather, and maybe close a case that had been open for almost a hundred years. Confidently, he strode out of the building and into the open pavilion, when something struck him on the head.

*

“Odeny yokel, what's the big deal?” asked Tatiana.

“This is the big deal,” said Tyrell as he gestured to Box HBF-32146.

Tatiana looked at Tyrell, then looked at Higuel then looked back at Tyrell.

“Don’t stand there looking all dumb and innocent. You said that the Narjus would be in this box, and it clearly isn’t. There’s just a bunch of bits and pieces of a Ripshodder – not even enough to make one full working unit.”

Tatiana looked at Higuel again. “Is he serious?”

Higuel looked at Tyrell, then looked back at Tatiana uncomfortably. “Well, yes. The box is empty.”

“MORONS!” screamed Tatiana. “You’re both useless, incompetent imbeciles! I should never have gotten involved with you! You couldn’t sneak your way out of a ship with the airlock open.”

More than slightly taken aback, Higuel and Tyrell looked at each other as Tatiana continued her tirade.

“What the hell was I thinking when I got involved with you two! I’m going to have to start screening idiots since obviously just having a fat wad of cash isn’t enough to get you a decent education! I can’t believe I flew all the way out here from Moret. I should just slap you both but I’d be worried about getting stupid on my hands!”

“Where’s the Narjus!” demanded Tyrell.

Tatiana bent over the open box, ripped the inside of the lid off and pulled out a sealed satchel. She threw it into Tyrell’s chest with such force that he fell backwards onto one of the sofas.

“How much clearer does a message have to be? I said ‘*it’s inside the box*’ not ‘it’s in the box’. You want me to send you restricted information and you don’t expect it to be hidden from casual inspection? Aargh, how retarded do you have to be to expect the contraband to be sitting in the middle of the box where anyone who opens it would see it straight away!”

“How was I supposed to know?” cried Tyrell. “You said it would be inside the box and it wasn’t. We looked! How were we supposed to know that we had to tear the box to pieces first?”

“Tell me, you pathetic excuse for a criminal. When you send a shipment of Black Lace across national borders, do you list ‘illegal drugs’ on the manifest? When you send guns down to embargoed planets, do you write ‘do not open, live ammunition’ on the box?”

Tyrell and Higuel looked at each other sheepishly. “Um, sorry?”

“Sorry? Sorry! How about you pay me for my fare for the flight out here to show you lunkheads how to do your jobs! Would you like me to go down to the library and rent a

book on How to be a Successful Criminal for you? And for the flight back while we're at it."

Tyrell sat up on the couch and opened the satchel. Inside was a square, clear data disc and a handful of printed sheets with some handwritten notes on them. "What's this?"

"What, you want me to read it to you as well? Hey, I did *my* job. It's up to you what you do with the information you bought. And speaking of payment, you still owe me for this flight." Tatiana pulled a credit disc from her pocket and waved it at Tyrell.

Tyrell started reading the sheets and looked up. He gave a brief nod to Higuel who pulled out his credit disc and thumbed some money over to Tatiana's. She inspected the result of the transaction, smiled in satisfaction and went to leave the room.

"Hey!" said Tyrell. "This says that this disc is an old Frinkahedron model. Those have been out of date since before I was born! Where the hell am I going to find a working one to read the data?"

Tatiana stopped at the door. "Oh for the love of – okay, tell you what. I know where there is a working Frinkahedron station that is not only active but it is also publicly accessible. I'll sell you that information, for a hundred thousand."

"A hundred thousand!" exclaimed Higuel. "That's double of what we've paid you so far!"

"Or you could, you know – do a little research and find out where it is yourselves." Said Tatiana with a playful smile on her face.

"No way lady, you're out of your mind!" said Higuel.

"Pay her," said Tyrell in a defeated tone.

"What? No way! For that kind of money we could hire a ship and go looking for a machine from planet to planet."

"Whatever. I can afford it."

Higuel fumed for a moment, looking back and forth between the sulking Tyrell and the smiling Tatiana. "Fine," he said. Again, the two credit discs were pulled out and more money was transferred from one to the other.

"Oh wow," exclaimed Tatiana as she saw her new balance.

"Okay miss, the information please," said Tyrell.

“Okay. All you need to do is go to the Duck on Inn hotel, right here on Kuparinen. From the lobby, go down the stairs on the right hand side and you’ll find a few old data terminals that are on display in a little touch and see museum. All you need to do is put the disc in and you’ll be able to transfer the data to the device of your choice.”

Tyrell glared at Tatiana. “You are some piece of work lady.”

“No problem honey, it’s been a pleasure working with you. A deal’s a deal and you guys have been just swell. Oh, and if you missed any of that information I just gave you, give me a call. I’d be more than happy to *write it down for you.*”

With that, Tatiana walked out the door.

“Write it down?” Tyrell looked through the stack of sheets that he had in his hands. On the last page was written the exact same information that Tatiana had just said to them.

Chapter Eleven

“Did you say ‘Opatz?’” asked the young officer that was taking their statements.

“Yes,” replied Jeanette. “Miss Valerie Opatz.”

“Any relation to Ryder Opatz?” asked the officer.

Jeanette looked at Libbie and Margaret, who both nodded.

“Ryder is her dad,” said Alex.

“*The* Ryder Opatz?” insisted the officer.

“Yes dammit! Ryder Opatz. The Ryder Opatz, as in Ryder Opatz. Have you got it yet?”

“What’s so special about her dad?” asked Jeanette.

“He’s a percussionist for a band,” said Margaret.

“A band?” asked the officer. “You mean *the* band. He’s part of The Rockers. They played to a packed house here last night.”

“Last night? Have they left yet?” asked Alex hopefully.

“They should have, but I don’t know for sure. I’ll have to look it up.”

“Please do,” said Jeanette. Everything had been in a bit of a mess since they’d arrived. Once they’d convinced Balga Control that they weren’t a threat or trying to smuggle anything into the station, they had had to contend with an under staffed and under trained

constabulary. They were more accustomed to handling drunks and bar fights than any proper organized criminal activity.

Most of the crew of the Heart of Stone was here in the makeshift legal department that had been quickly set up inside the quarantine section to take their statements. After a few minutes of wrestling with the console, the officer continued speaking.

“The band has left. Since the loaders are on strike, the stage and instruments are still waiting to be loaded and their manager stayed behind to oversee everything.”

“Is his name Ordovus Cleverly?” asked Alex.

“Um ... yes, that’s him.”

“Can you let us see him, or ask him to come here?” interjected Jeanette.

“Yeah, that shouldn’t be a problem.”

*

“Range?” asked Guiora.

“Three hundred meters and closing slowly. Everything stable,” replied Isacus.

“How close do you want to get, Captain?” asked Guiora.

“Twenty meters,” replied Powell. “I don’t want to run the risk of one of these boxes getting away from us.”

“You know,” continued Guiora, “five hundred meters is normally considered quite close when transferring from ship to ship, even in a gravity well.”

“No risks,” said the Captain tersely.

“What about the risk of the ships colliding?”

“You’re too good to let that happen. I know you won’t put any scuff marks on my hull.”

“Thanks Captain. That’s just swell.” Under his breath, Guiora muttered, “Some windows would be nice right about now.”

The displays showed only the Fallen Angel totally dominating one side of the sky. They weren’t designed to show ships so close to each other, and judging the exact distance was an absolute nightmare. Not to mention that even the tiniest amount of momentum, if left unchecked, would cause the ships to either drift apart or collide with each other. Or worse, crush the workers who would be between the ships transferring the cargo.

“How close did you want to get?” came a voice from the comm.

“Don’t worry Captain Tetrault, we won’t damage your ship,” said Powell.

Aboard the Fallen Angel, Captain Tetrault exchanged worried glances with his navigator and his second. The Celiker was a lot closer to his ship than any other ship had ever been during his time flying her. To say that he was nervous was an understatement.

“You do know that if you push something out here, it keeps going? Getting closer won’t make it any easier,” he said over the comm to the Celiker.

“I don’t want to risk the cargo getting away from us,” replied the other Captain.

“Try this on,” said Captain Tetrault sweating visibly. “This is a formal request that you not bring your ship any closer to ours. There’s barely a hundred meters between us now!”

“Fine. Hold position here,” said Powell. “The two airlocks are pretty much lined up. We’ll come aboard and collect the cargo now.”

Captain Tetrault let out a deep sigh. Docking with a station was one thing, since the station would out-mass the ship by several orders of magnitude. That made it a relatively stable object to dock with and even then, the computers would do all the piloting and bring the ship in on a laser straight line. Bringing two ships together like this – and piloting by hand! It was madness.

In the open main airlock of the Celiker, Jed and Deva were suited up and ready to fetch the cargo out from the Fallen Angel.

“Birds clear to leave the nest,” said Papo over the comm. Jed and Deva drifted slowly across the gap between the two ships. It was an awesome spectacle to see. There were dozens of ships visible in the area, plus the station creating a massive backdrop on one side. The two ships were so close that their lights illuminated each other, making every little detail stand out in bright contrast. The space below them was open to the void of space and fell away forever.

Reaching the airlock of the Fallen Angel, they could see three of the crew suited up and waiting for them. Strapped down to the deck were three larger than normal boxes. Working together, the five of them quickly freed the first box. Jed and Deva both strapped leads onto the box to make sure that there was no chance of it slipping and drifting away.

A short puff from their maneuvering packs and they set out on the short trip back to the Celiker. Deva even took the time to look around as they crossed the gap once more. There were ships in almost every direction she looked. Every so often one would fire some thrusters to stabilize its position, showing as a bright spark of light. All of the ships

had navigation lights and strobes going. With all that light pouring out from every direction, there wasn't a star to be seen anywhere. The contrast was simply too great for them to show up.

Once back inside the airlock of the Celiker, the outer door was closed. Working quickly, Deva and Jed undid themselves from the box and lashed it down to their own deck. Once it was secure and tested, the outer door was opened again and they headed back across for the next box.

Originally the plan had been to have the crew from the Fallen Angel bring the first box while Deva and Jed went to fetch the second and then have the crew bring the third. Captain Powell had vetoed that idea in favour of just fetching the cargo themselves. The reasoning was that with fewer people moving around there would be less risk of a mishap and they were ahead of schedule anyway, so there was no need to rush.

*

Zavil sat in apparent meditation. His eyes were closed, his hands rested in his lap. There were two signs that he was not meditating. The first was that his eyes darted around under his closed eyelids, showing that he was actively thinking. The second was a rather conspicuous cable that was attached at the side of his head and was connected to a large processing station.

Gerogi watched Zavil in a state of apparent boredom. He and Selinin had been watching Zavil trawl through literally billions of records for the last few hours. Every so often he would ask Zavil a new question or Zavil would provide the information he had found. It was a fairly simple process, but he was hampered by not knowing the right questions to ask.

From the outside, the Hall of Records seemed to be an ordinary building. Quite large in its own right, but dwarfed by its neighbours, there was nothing to make it stand out from the thousands of other buildings that made up the biggest city on Belousov.

What the average person did not realize was that almost the entire building was a data core. The Hall of Records should really have been called the Tower of All Records. Almost every transaction, every message, every document that passed through the large public service networks was stored here.

However, such an enormous volume of information was virtually useless unless something productive could be done with it. This was where the ministers came in. Ministers such as Zavil were upgraded and trained to be able to scan through all the information looking for data as it was requested. Or to be more accurate, they were used when obscure information was being sought, or when connections between apparently unconnected bits of information were needed.

The vast bulk of the requests came from the judicial system and the taxation systems. Some people went to great lengths to hide their money, or hide themselves when they had been naughty. But the ministers were able to make connections between the most trivial scraps of information and pull apparent miracles of deductive reasoning.

“Nope, can’t find it,” proclaimed Zavil as he opened his eyes.

“Auwagh, this is impossible!” exclaimed Selinin and threw his arms in the air. “This must be where the Judges gave up in frustration.”

“We just need to ask the right questions,” muttered Georgi.

“There are a variety of ways to search through the fountain of knowledge. If you give me better context, I may be able to divine that which you seek.”

Georgi sighed inwardly. This was why they were called ministers. They spent so much time with their brains plugged into their damned machines that they started getting screwy in the head. It wasn’t in human nature to be plugged in for so long. But this was where his search had led him and he wasn’t about to give up now.

“Can you get all the records that you have for movements of the Judges during the ten years we are looking at?”

Zavil closed his eyes for a few seconds and then opened them. “I have the knowledge in my palm.”

Selinin glanced at Georgi.

“Do you have any records for Judge Jordi Leshem?”

“Yes, there are one hundred and seventy six documents that mention him within the time period specified.”

“Are the documents spread out or concentrated in a specific window?”

“Almost every document related to Judge Jordi Leshem is clustered around a ten day window, starting from his arrival to his departure.”

Selinin sat up, suddenly interested. Now they were starting to make some headway. Previously they had been asking about Asoye, of whom there had been no trace.

“Where did he go?” asked Georgi excitedly.

Zavil went back into his deep-think mode. And then continued. After a moment, his brow furled and then he opened his eyes again. “It is not clear. He arrived at Zakharina Spaceport aboard a ground transport. Three other people accompanied him. He then

entered the Spaceport and the ground transport left, driven by a fifth person. Once inside the Spaceport, he purchased several items from various shops, namely Krystalynn, Elements and Nextworld Studios. The final data with his name is when he had a meal with his group at The Elephant and Wheelbarrow.”

“He never left the Spaceport?”

“There are no records that he did.”

“It couldn’t be that easy, surely,” said Selinin. “The space port is the first place the follow-up team would have arrived and odds are the staff would have reported something smelly in the back rooms if he died there.”

“He wouldn’t have stayed at the space port. There’s no reason to – it’s a connection point, not a destination.” Gerogi turned to face Zavil again. “How many ships departed during the following twenty hours after the last contact.”

“Seven.”

“Ah-ha!” said Georgi. “I was worried that it would be something horrible like seven hundred.” He paused for a moment and looked back at Zavil, fully expecting him to say ‘hundred’ or ‘thousand’. When he didn’t, Georgi continued talking with Selinin. “I bet you anything you want that Jordi was aboard one of those seven ships.”

“Who were the other people that were with him? One would have been Asoye, but who were the other two?”

“Who were the other members of the group?”

“There is no record. Judge Jordi Leshem was the one who thumbed for everything. The other three did not buy anything or call anyone.”

“Are the video feeds still available?”

Zavil gave a little chuckle. “After almost a hundred years? No, the video feeds are only kept for twenty years. And even then many people consider that to be excessive and a waste of valuable storage space.”

Gerogi sat back and thought for a moment. He almost felt like jumping on top of Zavil and prizing his skull open to try and get at the information himself, but that was not only an inherently stupid thing to do, it wouldn’t get him anywhere except jail.

“The ground vehicle, is the registration available?”

“Checking.” Georgi was now accustomed to the long pauses that Zavil made. He didn’t really agree with the idea of people doing a job that an AI could have done, but AI’s were

illegal to grow. It was considered slavery to have a sentient being perform work without reward, and AI's invariably only wanted to watch television, starting from the beginning. Nobody knew why, and people had grown bored of trying to fix that long ago. "There are no longer any records of the vehicle. The toll check records are only maintained for seven years. No other data is available to link Leshem with the ground vehicle."

"Bummer," said Georgi.

"We are not interested in where he came from," said Selinin, shifting in his seat. "We want to know where he went."

"Good point. Was Leshem aboard one of the seven ships that left?"

"Unknown."

"Did Leshem leave the space port via another means?"

"Unknown."

"Are there any other means of leaving the space port?"

"Yes. At the time there were two train services that carried passengers going to and from the spaceport. There are seven major roads for service vehicles and there were provisions for light flyers to land on the western edge. And thirteen paths available for pedestrians."

"That's a lot of ways for a small group to leave. They could have arrived with Leshem thumbing everything so there would be a record of him arriving at the spaceport and then have one of the others thumb a cab as they left. They could even have just walked out into the countryside."

"Possible," conceded Georgi. "But why would they?"

"Maybe to start a commune, I don't know," exclaimed Selinin. "He has a perfectly nice single female with him, has the Narjus in his pocket which you assure me is enough of a liquid asset to buy a planet – do the math's!"

"So who were the other two people?"

"I don't know, maybe he discovered how great swinging was. Maybe he was being forced. Maybe he just couldn't be bothered being a Judge any more. Face it, it's a dead end." Selinin ended his tirade and settled back down in his chair. It wasn't very comfortable and that was making him irritable. He vaguely wandered if a good thump to the side of the head would make Zavil work better. It certainly helped his old holovid at home.

"During the ten days that Leshem was here, did he check into any hotels or residences?"

“Yes. On his first night he stayed at the Apostle, a hotel next to the spaceport. Afterwards, he stayed at The Mount Olympus Hotel next to the judiciary building downtown. He wasn’t registered at any hotel or residence on the last night that he was here.”

“Do you have access to the judiciary logs?”

“No. Old judiciary logs are available upon request from the judiciary archival repository, but requests have to be made in person. And you need to know the specific records that you are after.”

Georgi thought a bit longer. He was close, but this was going around in circles. He could probably pump poor Zavil for information until the end of time and still not come up with anything useful. What he needed was to ask the right questions.

“Ready to go home yet?” asked Selinin.

“Just a little longer,” replied Georgi. “We’re here. If we have to, we can check in somewhere and come back tomorrow.”

“And the next day and the next day,” said Selinin. “I’m sore, tired and cranky. You stay here and talk to data boy, but I’m going for a walk to stretch my legs. If you want me, I’ll be over at that nice cafeteria we saw on the way in getting something to eat.”

Selinin got up and stretched elaborately. “White whale, I tell you.”

Georgi watched him walk away. Zavil just sat with a placid smile on his face.

“Were any of the seven ships reported missing?”

Zavil blinked for a long time and then said “No.”

“Did any of the ships return to Belousov after they departed?”

“Yes. Of the seven ships, five made subsequent return trips. Four were regular traders and returned many times. The other was an executive ship that had made a stop for repairs before continuing on its voyage.”

“Was anyone matching Leshem’s description on any of those ships?”

“Unknown.”

This was getting nowhere. What he needed was another hard bit of data to cross reference with the information that he already had. The problem being that this was the only

remaining source of data that still had any meaningful information. Most other planets only stored such records for a dozen years or so, and that was normally on hard copy.

“What were the two other ships that didn’t return?”

“One was a small courier named Swift. The other was the Hammer of Iron, a warship that was destroyed in the Battle of The False King in the Okimoto system.”

“Could Leshem have been aboard the Hammer of Iron?”

Zavil gave another long blink. “Possible, but highly unlikely. It was a military ship and would not be likely to carry passengers. As a Judge, he could have commandeered the ship and had them take him anywhere in the galaxy, but not without the Hammer leaving a report or record as to what had happened.”

“Oh, I give up,” said Georgi. “Selinin was right, I’m wasting my time. Thank you for your services Zavil,”

“No problem,” replied Zavil. “Enjoy your stay.”

Georgi wandered down the hallway looking for Selinin. Briefly he considered what time the waitresses finished their shifts at the cafeteria.

Chapter Twelve

“What will it be, strangers?” asked Kasia.

“Gimme something that’ll eat a hole in my stomach,” said Corbyn. “I have a load of bitter memories to erase.”

“I’ll just have a glass of water,” said Toku. “Leave the bottle – I’m parched!”

“No problems,” said Kasia.

“Urgh, what a day,” moaned Corbyn. “If I have to turn another bolt, I’m going to slam a wrench into the bosses head!”

“I know, I was right there next to you,” said Toku. They’d come up to a bar in order to drown their sorrows. It had been a long, grueling shift. Normally things weren’t too bad, but today the replacement team had had problems so they had to work an extra four hours.

“Want to come over to my place and shag like rabbits?” asked Corbyn.

“Not worth the trip. You’ll be asleep before you reach your bunk.”

“Yeah, that’s true. I can barely sit up straight as it is.”

Kasia brought their drinks. A rather funky-looking bottle that looked like a twisted pillar and glistening with condensation was placed in front of Toku with an empty glass next to it. A rather garish looking concoction was placed before Corbyn in a rather thick glass. And it was on fire.

“Looks like you won’t be able to see straight either if you drink that.”

“Better drink it quick before it blows up, big man,” said Kasia.

Corbyn looked beleagueredly at the burning glass. “Can I change my mind?”

“Sure thing little man,” said Kasia. She picked up the glass, blew out the flame and sculled it in one go, then did a little quiver and slapped the bar. “Wow, damn that’s good! Thanks for the drink.” She put another empty glass in front of Corbyn.

“What’s that for? Am I buying you more drinks?”

“Nah, it’s so you can share the water with your lady friend there. You look like you need it.” With that, Kasia walked off to tend to other customers.

“Maybe we should start seeing other people,” said Toku. “I see you every day and we spend about twelve hours together tightening and un-tightening bolts.”

“Is that a euphemism?” asked Corbyn. He was putting on a brave face, but he was fading fast and he knew it.

“Cut it out. It wasn’t funny five years ago and it’s not funny now.”

“I know. I have to get some-”

“-new lines,” finished Toku. “Definitely need to start seeing new people. See you tomorrow.”

Corbyn watched Toku thumb the bar to pay for the drinks, pick up the bottle and walk away. He thought about going after her but decided against it. It would be too much effort. Maybe if he fell asleep here against the bar a nice bouncer would throw him onto some comfortable steel decking to sleep on. There was always the risk that he would be mugged, but he didn’t have anything worth stealing. He waved his hand and got Kasia’s attention.

“Can I get something alcoholic in this empty glass? Not too strong, not too weak.”

“Sure thing Hun. Sweet or sour?”

“Ooh, sour please. It’ll make a perfect ending to my day.” He watched her pour something green into the glass. For a moment he thought his eyes were playing tricks on him, but then he realized that the liquid was turning red as it swirled within the glass.

“Want me to drink that one for you too?”

“Nah, I think I can handle this one,” murmured Corbyn. “Just give me an hour or two to fight it down.”

“At least this one won’t blow up on you. And don’t fall asleep there.”

“Why, someone going to hurt me?”

“No, you’re taking up the spot of a paying customer.”

Blearily, Corbyn looked around the bar. There were a lot of people around, but the bar was still at under half of its capacity. “Okay, whatever.”

“Well now, don’t you just look like the type of person who could use a little pick-me-up.”

Corbyn looked around to see who was talking. A thinish man was standing next to him. He was dressed in a strange outfit that had gone out of style a couple of decades earlier but looked quite snappy on the man. He carried a thin cane and was casually leaning against the bar regarding Corbyn with a lopsided little smile. He was of an indeterminate age, but if asked Corbyn would have said that he was over fifty but under a hundred. Probably a hustler of some type or other.

“Sorry, I don’t have any money. You might be the smoothest talker ever, but you can’t take what I don’t have.”

The strange man chuckled. “Oh, I’m not here to steal your money. I have plenty of my own. And you look like just the type of fellow I’m looking to spend some money on.”

Corbyn looked the man up and down again. “Sorry, I don’t swing that way, so you’re out of luck on that point as well. You might have better luck down the other end of the bar.”

“Here, take this and put it in your pocket,” said the strange man, still chuckling to himself. He handed Corbyn an infocard. “I’m a philanthropist. I made a huge stack of cash who knows how long ago. A few years ago I realized something, an epiphany of sorts. I had all this money, but it was making me miserable. Then I noticed that other people were miserable because they didn’t have any money. So now I travel around and look for unhappy people such as yourself and offer to set them up.”

Oh great, a crackpot. “Sure thing dad. I think you need to get back on your meds.”

Still quite happy, the man continued. “Ah, I love how people never believe me at first. But you’ll see, if you accept my offer. I won’t force you to do anything you don’t want to. But hang onto my card and drop me a line if you’re interested. But the offer is only open for twenty-four hours. Plenty of sad people I could be helping instead. Allow me.”

With that, the strange man thumbed the bar and paid for Corbyn’s drink, then walked away. Corbyn looked at the infocard. On it was written a number and a name: Merchion Zanardi.

“Yeah right,” said Corbyn. “And I’m the King of Haapasalo.”

*

The smell of coffee.

That was the first thing that Welton became aware of. It was a curious thing to find, because although he was quite familiar with the smell, he didn’t drink the stuff.

A pain in his skull.

That was the second thing that he became aware of. Briefly he wondered if the two were related. Probably not, since it was the other types of drink that normally gave you a headache. Coffee was used to get rid of that type; it didn’t give it to you.

He was lying on his back, on something cold and hard.

Slowly, he started to become aware of other things around him. He could hear the murmur of voices. Someone was calling for a judge, which was weird because a judge was normally called when legal matters needed attending, not headaches. Then it dawned on him that *he* was a judge.

“Judge Leshem, are you alright?” asked a voice.

Welton opened his eyes. Now it came back to him. He was Judge Welton Leshem and he had just been interviewing Bamey Schultz. He’d walked out of the station when something had hit him on the head. Sitting up, he looked around. A small crowd had gathered around him. His hair was damp with coffee and blood and there were small bits of something that had shattered all around him and in his clothes.

“Sir, are you alright?” asked Tateo. Tateo was one of his deputies that looked after the day-to-day mundane things at the station.

“My head hurts like hell. What happened?”

“Looks like someone threw a cup of coffee onto you, probably from one of the upstairs offices.”

Welton rubbed his head with his free hand. He pulled shards of broken sealco from his hair and felt a definite lump rising up.

“Get me a medic and help me inside if you would.”

“Yes sir,” said Tateo. With another person helping, they lifted Welton to his feet. The crowd parted and he was helped back into the station and eased into one of the chairs in the lobby. “We already have five officers upstairs seeing if they can find where it came from, and ten more in the other structures around the pavilion to see if anyone saw something.”

“Good man,” said Welton. “Get someone to check the video feeds and see if any of the cams are facing in this direction. We might get lucky.”

“Of course sir.” Tateo gave a curt nod to one of the other officers in the room who promptly left in the general direction of the local security block. He was somewhat embarrassed to not have thought of it before. But it wasn’t everyday that one walked outside and found one’s boss knocked out cold on the floor.

*

“Hello again sir,” said Zavil.

“Hello Zavil,” said Georgi. It was morning, and he was back at the Hall of Records. During the night he had thought of more lines of questions that might be worth asking. Selinin had declined the invitation to attend this session. “Can you pull up the data that we were looking at yesterday?”

“Certainly. Done.”

“Okay then,” said Georgi as he rubbed his hands. “Tell me this. Did Judge Jordi Leshem arrive alone?”

“No, he brought Deputy Walden Haskell with him.”

“Okay, I was hoping that he brought two with him. Do you have any records for Haskell within the same ten day period?”

“Searching. Yes, there are fifty eight records, mostly clustered around The Mount Olympus Hotel.”

“Was Haskell with Leshem when he reached the space port?”

“Unknown.”

“Do you have any records of Haskell after Leshem disappeared.”

Another long blink. “No, the two sets start and end at the same times. The logical conclusion is that Deputy Haskell left with Judge Leshem.”

“Okay then. So if Leshem brought Haskell with him and picked up Asoye here, then the fourth person must have been someone with Asoye.”

“I’m sorry, I don’t understand the question.”

“Sorry, I was thinking out loud. Here’s a hard one for you: are there any persons who have no records after Leshem left but should have.”

A broad smile lit up Zavid’s face. “Now, that is a challenge the likes of which I have not had in a long time.” He settled down into his meditation pose again and went deep into the computer.

Sighing, Georgi got up. A clerk happened to be walking past. “Excuse me, where is the nearest restroom?”

“This way, sir,” said the clerk, leading the way.

*

When Georgi returned, Zavid was still deep in thought. There was no way of knowing how long he was going to be under. He wasn’t even sure what would happen if he wasn’t here when Zavid woke up. It would be a big pain if he’d forget the information and Georgi was forced to ask again.

Georgi was about to get up again when Zavid opened his eyes.

“That was a most interesting challenge. I feel greatly refreshed.”

Georgi resisted the urge to put his hands around Zavid’s throat and strange the answer out of him.

“There are sixteen persons planet wide who fit the criteria. Of those, only three were near the Zakharina Spaceport and only one is of interest.”

“Why is that one special?”

“Three reasons. He was a local enforcer who worked on both sides of the law. He had been hired on occasion by local police as a bounty hunter and for both those reasons would be the sort of person that Leshem would hire if he wanted a local guide. And thirdly, he owned a ground transport that was found abandoned three days later.”

Zavil did another long blink. Georgi realized that this was the missing piece. This was what the initial investigation had overlooked. Zavil opened his eyes again; this time smiling so widely that it seemed that his head would fall off his shoulders.

“What is it?” asked Georgi.

“The person of interest is named Peter Lehrer. He has an uncle named Kurt Lehrer who owns Inkwel Transport and had recently bought the courier ship Swift.”

“I’ll be damned,” said Georgi. Leshem, Haskell and Peter had taken Asoye aboard his uncle’s ship, the Swift and left in that without telling anyone. That was why there were no records - it was a private charter. Not even that, they had just jumped onto a regular courier run. “Where did the Swift go?”

“Checking.”

“Can you pull up all the records of the Swift?”

“Certainly.” A moment later, a frown crossed Zavil’s face. “There are no records for the Swift.”

“Excuse me? How is that possible?”

“The Swift was a new ship. No, it was a re-fitted ship. It was originally an Explorer Class ship, but had been overhauled by Inkwel Transport. Oh!”

Alarmed by the sudden exclamation, Georgi was startled.

“The Swift was a repatch.”

“What’s that?” asked Georgi.

“It is when an old or stolen ship is re-worked and sold as a new ship. Highly illegal and very dangerous for the new owner. Looks like Uncle Kurt didn’t like Peter that much after all. The Swift was really an extremely old ship, previously flying under the name of Immonen.”

Chapter Thirteen

“Sorry ma’am, the band has already left,” said Jocilyn in a terse voice.

“I’m not here to see the band,” replied Jeanette, equally tersely. “I have an appointment to see Ordovus.”

“Oh, you must be Captain McCracker.”

“Call me Jeanette.”

Jocilyn led Jeanette through a few corridors into what had yesterday been the green room for the band. There was mild pandemonium as workers struggled back and forth pulling down the stage and lighting systems and packing it all away, ready for its trip to another show.

“Mr. Cleverly, this is Captain Jeanette.”

“Ah, hello Captain. Glad to see that you didn’t send a second. Captains that take a personal interest are so rare these days.”

“Excuse me?” said Jeanette.

“We’ll have everything packed down and ready to be picked up in about another hour. It may look like a giant mess now, but it all gets packed rather quickly. It’s setting up that takes a long time and-”

“Mr. Cleverly!” interrupted Jeanette. “I’m not here to transport anything. I’m here because Valerie Opatz was kidnapped.”

Being very frazzled and having had precious little sleep, it took Ordovus a moment to process what Jeanette had said. It then took him a moment longer to realize why the name sounded vaguely familiar and yet one more moment after that to make the final connection.

“Oh! This is bad, we must inform Ryder at once!”

“Is the band still here?”

“No, but they had long delays getting departure clearance. Something about exporting prohibited substances or some such nonsense. They’re still on the way out to the jump point. Come, come.”

Ordovus led the way amongst the myriad of frantic workers and into a side corridor. They took an elevator up to the communications level of the hotel. A guard at the door recognized Ordovus and waved them in.

“Hello Mr. Celverly, I wasn’t expecting to see you again,” said Gus. He was the Head Communications Officer for the hotel.

“I need to contact the Radman before they get out of range.”

“Certainly, just a moment.” Gus’ fingers flew across his console as he located the right channels to connect to the distant ship and then secured a private, encrypted line. “Open or closed?”

“Open please, these people need to talk as well,” replied Ordovus, gesturing to Jeanette. She looked around and wondered if she counted as three people since she represented both Valerie and the kidnappers. She assumed that he was just getting his pronouns mixed up due to tiredness.

“This is Balga Station Hotel Polyakov calling Radman.”

“This is Radman, copy you Balga Station.”

“I have Ordovus Cleverly waiting to speak to you.”

“Put him through.”

Gus nodded to Ordovus.

“Hey Gosi, sorry, no time for idle chat – can you get Ryder on the comm? It’s rather urgent.”

“Sure thing, just a moment.” There was an interminable silence for a moment and then Ryder’s voice came over the comm, bleary and a little sluggish.

“Yeah?”

“Ryder, this Ordovus. I have with me Captain Jeanette of the Heart of Stone.”

“Heart of Stone?” said Ryder almost instantly snapping to attention. “What happened to Valerie?”

“She was kidnapped Mr. Opatz. I was given a ransom demand for ten million and a location to take the money to.”

“Pay it!” said Ryder. “I’ll pay it out of my own funds, just get my daughter back.”

“The Heart of Stone is no ship to go chasing after these people, but I’ve spoken to a legal team here and her recovery is covered by the Victims of Crime Fund. But we needed to get authorization from ... from you in order to proceed.” Jeanette had been about to say ‘next of kin’ but that would give Ryder the impression that Valerie was already dead, and she had no way of knowing that.

“Yes! Authorize, yes! Go, go, go!” said Ryder.

“Don’t worry Ryder, I’ll get the best people on this. I already know the remainder of your tour schedule so I’ll keep you posted on how things develop. You just focus on the show and let us worry about Valerie.”

Ordovus gave a few more instructions and then ended the call.

*

Selinin was quietly munching on some local fruit of some type when a data disc landed on the table in front of him. Looking up, he saw Georgi standing next to him, looking extraordinarily pleased with himself.

“What’s that?” asked Selinin as Georgi dropped into a seat next to him.

“That, my dear friend, is the exact course and heading of the Immonen.”

“Great, so what?”

“The Immonen was one of the ships that launched the day that Judge Jordi Leshem disappeared, and in all probability was carrying both Jordi and Asoye, plus the Narjus.”

Selinin looked incredulously at Georgi. “How on earth did you manage to get that? No, more to the point, how is that useful?”

“The Immonen launched as The Swift, but she was an old decommissioned ship called the Immonen that had been patched up. After her first jump, she sent back a tighbeam message saying that there had been a problem with the PD Rods and they would need to fix it before they could jump again. The message took seven months to reach here, but arrived with the signature of the Immonen, not the Swift. Since there was no record of the Immonen having departed and since there were no follow up messages requesting help, the message was filed away.”

“So they made the first jump with a dodgy old ship and then got stuck out there? What if they tried a second jump and scattered themselves over half the galaxy?”

“Oh, Selimnin, always the pessimist. Look, we have her last reported course and heading. All we need to do is extrapolate that out to compensate for a hundred years or so of coasting and she’ll be right there, waiting for us to pick her up.”

“Do you have any idea how much a search like that would cost? Even if she only deviated by half of a percent, the sheer volume of space that would need searching is enormous.”

At this Georgi smiled even wider and spread his arms wide. “This, my beloved friend is where providence has smiled down upon us. The good ship New Dawn is currently sitting in orbit. Why is this important? Because the New Dawn has been fitted, at great expense, with a whole load of very nice, very new survey and mapping equipment. “How does this help us? The group that was financing the trip lost their backer and now this lovely ship that is dressed up and ready to dance has no partner to dance with. This couldn’t have worked out better if we’d planned it!”

Selinin thought this over. Searching through a large volume of space for a missing space ship was extremely hard, nigh on impossible for a standard ship. But a ship that was specifically set up for mapping local space would be able to assess huge swaths in very short order. Even if the Immonen had deviated severely from its original course, the speed would have remained somewhat constant and she'd be sitting on a fairly thin plane.

“And since the ship is all set to go, all we have to do is pay for the fuel and we can take her anywhere we want. Even better if we want to go somewhere that not too many people have gone before, which as it turns out, we do.”

“Tell me again why we're just sitting here?” asked Selinin.

*

“Oh yes indeedy, this is most pleasing,” said Pauli. He was standing over three largish boxes that contained his optical equipment. “We have been waiting for these for quite some time.”

“No problems,” said Papo. “All you need to do is thumb here and we'll be all settled.”

“Patience, patience,” said Pauli. “First we must be checking the contents of the boxes.”

Eagerly, Pauli started opening the seals on the boxes. All of them opened easily and Pauli spent a few moments looking over the contents. He was a professor and a bit of an eccentric one at that. There were some very interesting features on Elli, far below them that couldn't really be studied on the ground. With this new equipment, he'd be able to observe it to his hearts content from orbit. He shut the boxes and clapped his hands together eagerly.

“Oh, yesyesyes, this is very exciting.”

Papo pointed at the tablet he was holding. Pauli thumbed the tablet and then practically skipped away to get a loader to move the boxes for him.

“Quite the character, isn't he?” said Powell.

“As long as we get paid, he can be fruitier than a nut cake for all I care,” said Papo. “This puts us well ahead for the quarter, but the downside is that now that we're here, we don't have a load. We may end up traveling empty on the next run.”

Powell gave a deep, depressed sigh. Transport was fine most of the time, but every so often they would reach a destination to find that there was no load that they could take. Balga was good because it was always busy and even if they had to wait a day or two, there was always something that needed moving. Kuperinen on the other hand, was a little backwater place that had very little traffic.

They didn't even have a company rep stationed here, which meant that he'd have to organize his own load. And that was always a pain. He preferred to let Isacus handle things like that, but he was currently feeling ill and was laid up on his bunk. Well, there were worse places to be. At least it hadn't been a delivery to a military base. Here there was always the chance that something interesting would come up.

*

"So why does it look like that?" asked Guiora. He was standing at one of the large windows along one wall of this bar. Kupaerinen was one of the few stations that had gone to the trouble of installing exterior windows to give the visitors a view. It was also the only one that probably shouldn't have bothered.

"You don't know the history of Elli?" asked Deva. About half the crew of the Celiker was currently lounging around the bar whilst the captain settled their previous delivery. "I thought everyone knew about it."

"Only people who have been here know about it. Guiora wasn't with us the last time we came out this way," said Jed.

"Ah, yes," said Deva.

"Oh, let me tell this story," said Kyomori. "I never get to tell the good ones."

"Go for you life," replied Deva. "If you consider this sad tale to one of the good ones."

"You know how PD Rods work, right?" asked Kyomori.

"Basically, yeah," replied Guiora/

"Okay, so the stuff they make them out of wasn't always available. Originally they used to use Kelven's Compound but you could only jump a few light years and they never lasted too long. Well, when they found Elli, it wasn't that great a planet but it had a whole heap of Gronon, which could be refined into Chauvin which they found to be a much better material to make PD Rods out of. Jumps of dozens of light years were easy."

"Yeah, and?"

"And? What do you mean 'and'? That's the whole point."

"Sorry Kyo, pretend you're talking to someone who isn't a tactical genius," injected Deva.

"Oh, right. Well, think of it this way. You have this one planet with a whole load of Gronon, which everybody wants. The planet gets turned into one giant mine and they rip

up every last scrap of it. It was pretty much sought after by every single ship building company in the galaxy.”

“So it’s the mines that make it look like that?” asked Guiora, gesturing out the window.

“Mines? Oh no, the whole place was mined out a long time ago. Once the supply ran out, they had to look for other things and not long after that New Jakarta brought out those new PD Rods that were even better than the ones made of Gronon. It was the planetary bombing that made it look like that.”

“Why would anyone bomb an exhausted mine site?” asked Guiora in bewilderment.

“You forgot part of the story,” said Deva.

“What part?”

“The part about Elli being turned into a penal colony, the colony becoming a pirate base and House Vigneaux bombing the whole lot back to the stone age.”

“Ah, that would explain it.”

“Oh yeah, I forgot about that bit,” said Kyomori.

“That’s why we don’t let you tell the good stories,” said Deva. Everyone had a good laugh, and Kyomori sat in the sofa with her arms crossed and sulked.

Chapter Fourteen

“Now, you definitely said something soft that pays a lot, right?” asked Ken.

Captain West turned around. He was in the lounge assigned to the lock the Kilka was docked in and Ken had just walked in with another man. The other man was smartly dressed, but looked very, very stressed. Ken looked so happy that could easily eat an onion without getting a tear in his eye, which was either a very good sign, or a very dangerous sign.

“Captain West?” asked the man.

“Yes, I’m Captain West.”

“My name is Ordovus Cleverly, I manage a band called The Rockers. Perhaps you’ve heard of them?”

Ken’s smile became impossibly bigger and he gave a big thumbs up.

“I have.”

“One of our band members has a daughter and she has been kidnapped. We want to hire your ship to get her back safe and sound.”

West looked at Ken to see if this was on the level. Ken was nodding emphatically.

“Oh,” said Captain West. “Well, certainly. Please, sit. What are the conditions?”

Ordovus sat in the lounges that Captain West indicated. “We have been given a ransom demand. In it, it specifies to take payment of ten million in transferable funds to a remote location where there is a repeater beacon waiting. In the demand we were also given some access codes to transmit and the repeater will pick up on that and provide further information.”

“Sounds fairly straightforward. We’ve done jobs like this in the past, so we know how this works. Did you want to send a representative or will you authorize one of my crew to act on your behalf?” West kept quiet about the small detail that on some occasions the Kilkka had been the kidnaper, as well as having been the rescue vessel.

“I don’t know,” said Ordovus. “I want to go myself but I have too many responsibilities here. I want to send someone but if something goes wrong I don’t want to have been the one to have sent them into harms way.”

“The Kilkka is more than capable of defending herself, Mr. Cleverly. My main concern would be getting the girl aboard unharmed. That’s the tricky part. What do we know about the kidnapers?”

“She was taken by a man who called himself Lothar. The ransom demand identified the ship as the Bloodbath and Captain Jeanette’s navigator confirmed the identification.”

West looked at Ken.

“Give me a few minutes and I’ll see what information I can pull up on the Bloodbath,” said Ken as he jumped up and went to a console.

“Do you have any other information?”

“No,” replied Ordovus. He handed West the data disc that Jeanette had given him. “Here’s the ransom demand with the instructions and the access codes.” Ordovus gave West a credit disc. “Here is an unlocked credit disc with eleven million loaded in. The ten is for paying the ransom, the other million is your retainer for taking on the mission. There’s another million waiting here as payment for the safe return of Valerie. And the Balga judiciary has also asked me to inform you that there is a bounty of fifty thousand for any crew of the Bloodbath that are captured alive. And the band has posted a bounty of another million for the destruction of that ship - assuming that Valerie is not on it, of course.”

Captain West felt himself being crushed under the weight of all that money. As a Captain, he was accustomed to handling large transactions but a retainer of a million was serious business. With an unlocked credit disc he could just transfer the money to his own account and fly away, but he'd never be able to live with himself. He could also fly out to meet the Bloodbath, blow it kingdom come without talking to it and then claim that they'd blown themselves up, but that was unacceptable as well. If he accepted the mission, he'd do his best to do it right and get the girl back.

“We'll need to prep a few things, but we're basically ready to leave now. Did you want to come or send a representative?”

Ordovus thought about it. He really did want to go himself, but it wasn't really practical for him to do so. And he didn't really have a spare staff member who was either important enough to warrant sending or experienced enough to remain cool under pressure.

“No. I'd like to appoint you as our representative.”

“Very well. Anything else before we leave?”

“She may be Ryder's third daughter and she has five siblings, but she is irreplaceable. We do want her back safe and sound.”

With that Ordovus got up and walked away. West got up as well and was heading back towards the Kilka when Ordovus stopped and called out from the door.

“Once you have Valerie aboard, feel free to blow the Bloodbath into billions of tiny pieces, if the desire takes you.” And with that, he left.

*

“Well I'll be damned!”

Tyrell was standing in front of one of the old data terminals in the Duck on Inn. He'd put the old data disc in and he and Higuél were looking at the information that was contained in the Narjus.

“I don't get it,” said Higuél. “It just looks like a bunch of stars.”

“It is a bunch of stars,” replied Tyrell. “Or more accurately, it's a map.”

“A map of the stars? I can get that from any terminal in the station.”

“Not this map. It’ll need some slight adjusting for the changes that have happened since this was drawn up, but it’s pretty accurate. This is where we want to go.” Tyrell pointed at a seemingly blank space in-between several stars that had a green flashing ‘X’ on it.

“An empty spot? What’s there?”

“According to the notes that have been added, it’s a damned treasure trove. It’s right there, just lying there waiting to be picked up.”

“Treasure? What is it, gold? Platinum?”

“It doesn’t say, just the location. Presumably the person that made the map figured that they didn’t need to remind themselves of what they had.”

Tyrell transferred the data into a newer disc and pulled both out of the terminal. He smashed the old one and dropped the pieces into a bin.

“Right then, let’s go find ourselves a ship.”

*

He hated it already.

Welton Leshem was accustomed to life aboard stations. That was where he’d been born, that was where he had spent most of his life. He was standing on the roof of the Burdex Building, which housed the A550 Judicial building. It served as the Judges base on Belousov, and he was surveying the view. In every direction he looked there were spires and towers and skyscrapers and starscrapers. It was all jagged edges and noise and glass.

And he could see forever. Well, truth be told he could see much, much greater distances in space, but that was normally represented by a holo-vid display or some type of tactical projection. To be able to see to the far horizon with the naked eye seemed troubling in some fundamental way.

Far below, his people were hot on the trail of Georgi and Selinin. It hadn’t taken much after he’d arrived and gone through all the proper channels to start the gears turning. His people were using some of the most sophisticated programs available to trawl through the sum total of data available in order to track where they were, what they did and whom they spoke to.

He was just trying to decide how long it would take for the busy people below to work out what was going on and send someone up with some kind of progress report when sure enough, someone came up the stairs onto the roof.

“Judge Leshem?”

“Yes Sallie,” replied Leshem, happy to have remembered her name. “What news do you bring?”

“Lamentably, the two suspects left Belousov three days ago,” said Sallie. “However, we have managed to track all their movements from point of arrival to departure. They spent a long time at the Hall of Records and departed immediately after leaving there.”

“Do you have a fix on where they went?”

“They filled a flight plan before leaving, but we’re still trying to verify if they actually went that way or not. They chartered an exploration vessel named New Dawn and the given destination is consistent with an exploratory mission.”

“Okay, we’ll assume they went where they said for now. Do we know who they spoke to at the Hall of Records?”

“Oh yes,” beamed Sallie. “We have him on the way here for questioning right now.”

“Well done Sallie, very well done.”

*

“Okay Captain, what’s the big rush?”

Guiora and Jed were the last to come aboard. A few minutes earlier, Powell had sent a message out on the comms for all the crew to return to the ship immediately. Guiora could already feel the pull as the Celiker moved away from the station. He was somewhat startled to find two strange men in the main lounge with Powell and Papo.

“Hello chaps, welcome back,” said Captain Powell, altogether a little too happily. “Jed, can you go down to the mess and help Skourpa and the two new kitchen hands put away the provisions?”

Jed looked around at the other people in the room. There was obviously something strange going on and it was equally obvious that the captain didn’t want him to know about it. Or to be more specific, he wanted the two strangers to think that he didn’t want him to know about it since the captain inevitably shared everything with the crew anyway.

As soon as Jed had left, Guiora piped up. “Like I said, what’s up?”

“We have just left Kuparinen where there was no load to take anywhere. As per the company regulations, I took initiative and when opportunity knocked, I answered. In this case, opportunity took the form of Mistery Higuell Nuttall and Tyrell Huntingdon here who have taken it upon themselves to charter us for a little trip.”

“Oh really?” said Guiora. “And just where might we be heading?”

“It’s a simple salvage operation,” said Tyrell. “We have a location where something that we are interested in is, we just have to go in and pick it up.”

“Sounds a bit too easy,” said Papo. “What exactly are we picking up?”

“To be honest,” said Higuél, “we’re not sure.”

“Something which is apparently rather valuable,” said Powell. “Since they provided the location and we provided the ship we got a forty five percent share.”

“Forty five? Why not fifty-fifty?”

“Because they paid for fuel, food and consumables on this trip. Apparently what we are picking up is of such great value that a five percent stake will vastly outweigh the costs of running the ship. So even if there is nothing there, we still end up ahead.”

Guiora gave the captain a searching stare. He knew Powell quite well by now. He wasn’t the type to suffer fools, so the two guests had either had some type of collateral or had done quite a number on the captain. But it was obvious that Powell didn’t think that there was going to be nothing there or that he wasn’t getting paid, otherwise he would have paid out of his own pocket.

“So we have a destination?”

“Right here,” said Tyrell, offering Guiora a data disc. “We had agreed to leave the station and then provide the destination. There was always the small risk of the information being leaked or picked up by Kuparinen control before we left.”

“There’s also the slight chance that since we now know where we are going and that there is going to be something valuable there, we could just kill you and throw your body out the airlock,” said Papo.

Higuél turned a shade paler.

“I am kidding of course,” said Papo.

“Oh,” said Higuél.

“And if you had wanted to do that it wouldn’t have helped. Where we are going there is a marker that will only be activated by feeding it a specific code, which we have. And you don’t.”

“And thus everybody’s happy,” said Powell. “We still have another day before we are out from Kuparinen control. We’ll make the first jump just as indicated on our flight plan, but then we’ll be free to head off to this destination of ours.”

Guiora gave Powell a hard look. Going off to some unknown destination with a couple of strangers was bad enough. But to do so without telling anyone was just plain stupid.

*

“We have a contact!” shouted Waldemar. He was one of five members of the observation team sitting at the banks of monitors and displays connected to all the deployed antennas.

“What do we have?” asked Georgi.

“Processing now,” replied Westby. “But it’s right on the line you said that it would be, so that should be the Swift.”

“I concur,” said Waldemar. “The mass is right for a courier ship, it’s moving on a flat trajectory and there’s nothing else within an eight hundred thousand sphere of us. If that’s not it, it’s well off course.”

“Excellent,” said Georgi. “Notify the Captain, I’d like to go in for a closer look.”

The New Dawn made short work of the jump to be next to the Immonen. The two ships sailed as one, with the two being quite markedly different from each other. The Immonen was a rather small ship with few frills and a snub nose. If there had been any light around to illuminate it, it would have been a dull gray as most of the exterior layer had ablated away in the vacuum.

The bigger ship, bigger by a fairly large margin, was obviously a much newer type of ship. Seemingly sleeker yet broader at the same time, the New Dawn was covered with antennas and observation dishes giving it a definite porcupine-like appearance. If the same light that had been hypothetically landing the Immonen were to also shine on the New Dawn, it would have shown up as being primarily blue, with some red highlights around the edges.

Captain Rosalie Vargas carefully scrutinized the ship that was alongside the New Dawn. It hardly seemed worth the effort, but if this was what Georgi and Selinin wanted to see, then this was what the New Dawn would look at. She looked up as Selinin entered the bridge.

“Okay Captain, who are you sending across?”

“Excuse me?”

“We need to get someone aboard that ship.”

“We have four EVA suits aboard, two which are used primarily by the engineers when they inspect the exterior of the ship and two leftovers from the fitting of the new equipment which weren’t unloaded before we left.”

Georgi came onto the bridge.

“Our engineers have their null-gee time limited by their contracts,” continued the captain. “So from where I’m sitting, we can look at and scan the ship as long as you want, but if you wanted to put someone aboard then you should have mentioned that before we left.”

Georgi and Selinin were both crestfallen. To be so close and yet so far.

“And none of our suits are equipped with hull cutters, so if you want to get aboard, you’d better find a door you can open.”

“Well,” said Selinin. “There’s your white whale. Go get it.”

“I’ve never done EVA work!” replied Georgi.

“What, you expect me to do it?” retorted Selinin. “Fancy that, sending out an old man to do his dirty work. I tell you, these young people think they can do anything.”

Georgi looked at the displays. They were a relatively close distance to the other ship. There were no large bodies around to exert a gravitational pull, so it wasn’t like he could drift away. “Do you have any lifelines?”

“Sure,” replied Rosalie. “A couple thousand meters if you link them up together. Head down to the main airlock and Frank will help you suit up.” Secretly, Rosalie wouldn’t be particularly worried if Georgi did himself an injury. There was something wrong with these two and she couldn’t quite put her finger on what it was.

About an hour later, the outer door on the airlock swung open. Georgi’s heart thumped in his chest as he saw a vast empty blackness beyond the door. His suit lights were on, but there was nothing to illuminate except the distant stars – and the light from his suit wouldn’t reach them for many years.

“Hey Georgi,” said Selinin on the comm. “We have your vitals here on the display. You’ll need to calm yourself down just a tiny bit.”

“Sure thing boss,” said Georgi through clenched teeth. He reached to his waist and felt that the line was secure. The other end was attached to a winch that could pull him back if something happened to him. The Immonen wasn’t in his view; he’d need to step out before he could see her.

“Okay, we’ve added a map overlay on your HUD so you can keep your bearings. We’ve also pulled up a schematic of the same type of ship as the Swift so we can guide you around.”

Some lines and arrows appeared on his HUD, which went out the door and down to the left. It took all his nerve to take the first step, but after that it got easier. Then he reached the door and froze. The vista was as awe inspiring as it was terrifying. There was almost literally nothing in every direction he looked except towards the Immonen.

“Oh, gort!” said Selinin. “Your vitals just did a massive spike. Settle down before you give yourself a coronary.”

“Sure. Thing. Boss” Georgi’s clenched teeth made him a little hard to understand, but those on the bridge got the message easily enough.

“Hey Georgi, it’s Frank. You remember how to work the controls on your maneuvering pack? Nice and easy, just like I showed you.”

The hardest thing in the world for Georgi was letting go of the New Dawn. He felt like if he let go, he’d fall for all eternity. But once he let go, he had a moment of panic as he could barely feel the lifeline and had to look to make sure that it was still attached.

“Okay, nice and easy on the throttle. Make sure that you’re facing in the direction that you want to go”

Georgi faced the Immonen as best as he could. He gave the throttle a small nudge and he felt himself propelled forwards. A few tweaks with the stabilization thrusters and he was headed in the right direction.

“Nice and easy. Don’t give it any more stick because otherwise you’ll be moving too fast. That’s good, just hold that speed.” Frank looked at the others on the bridge. “He’ll be right.”

As Georgi approached the Immonen he could see the lines on his HUD change to indicate a point on the side of the ship.

“Okay, I’ve added the emergency access door on the Swift to your HUD. Head towards that.”

Georgi and Selinin had agreed to tell the crew of the New Dawn that the ship was the Swift, since that was the name that she had left Belousov with. That way, if they decided to check them up, they’d see that it was exactly as their cover story had said – a stricken courier ship.

“Will you be recovering the bodies on this trip?” asked Rosalie.

“No,” said Selinin. “We’ve now confirmed where she is and we can come back for it with a properly set up ship to take them home. At the moment we’re just doing data recovery.”

“The door is open,” said Georgi.

“What?” asked several people at once.

“I’m at the emergency door and it’s wide open. Can’t tell how recently though.”

“Is this good or bad?” asked Rosalie.

“It totally depends on when the door was opened. They may have opened it when they were trying to do repairs, but that seems unlikely. More likely it was opened at some stage after she was lost, which means that someone else knows where she is.”

“Do you want me to go in?” asked Georgi.

“You’re call,” replied Selinin.

After a pause, Georgi replied, “I’m going in.”

Selinin and the others could see what was going on with the telemetry displays. The suit Georgi was wearing had several cameras and there was a lot of data being fed back to the New Dawn.

“How did you want to do this?” asked Georgi. “This is a small ship, but it’s going to take a long time for me to search it on my own.”

“We’ll just search the rooms one by one. Most likely the data disc will be either in a locker or someone’s pocket.”

“Great,” replied Georgi. The eerie sensation of entering a tomb was palpable. That there would be bodies aboard was almost a given, but what condition they were in was anybody’s guess. Georgi had to swallow his heart several times.

He entered the main room and saw the first body, the one that Knox had called ‘the first mummy’. Georgi paused for a moment to survey the scene, and the others on the New Dawn watched on in silence.

“Use the scanner on your left ankle, remember the one I showed you? Most data discs will have a fairly obvious signature and will let you search without disturbing the body,” said Frank.

Carefully, Georgi removed the scanner Frank indicated from his ankle. It fed the information straight into his HUD, and he swept it over the body. Almost instantly he got a response, a pocket on the left thigh.

“Wow, wasn’t expecting that,” said Georgi. Using excessive care, he slowly reached into the pocket and withdrew a small gray disc. It had a stylized letter ‘N’ on one side and a coat of arms on the other, one he didn’t recognize. “I think that this is it.”

“Could it have been planted there?” asked Rosalie. “I mean, the door was open and if someone else came here, wouldn’t they have been looking for this as well?”

“Not likely,” said Selinin. “There were very few people that knew about this data disc, so whoever was here may have been looking for the main data cores which are further inside the ship. Georgi – if that’s what we’re after, then you may as well come back aboard.

“I guess this is Asoye,” said Georgi quietly. He looked at the desiccated corpse and tried to work out how she had looked when she was alive. The body was too small to be Leshem and it was unlikely that anyone else would have had the Narjus on them. It felt wrong to just leave her alone and abandoned here on her own. There didn’t seem to be anyone else aboard. If they made their fortune, Georgi vowed to himself to come back and return her to her home to be buried properly.

He turned away and followed the safety line back out of the Immonon. As he was getting out of the ship, he looked out at the New Dawn. It really was a large ship but he hadn’t realized just how big when they had gone aboard. There were no windows to look out of when they gone in and they hadn’t had time to go exploring. As he was crossing the void between the two ships, he wondered what the New Dawn normally did.

About half an hour later, unsuited and back on the bridge Georgi and Selinin assessed the Narjus. It was basically a fairly standard type of data disc, or at least it had been a hundred years earlier. Fortunately, they were expecting this and had brought a variety of old data readers to get the information from it. Another half hour and they had managed to coax the reluctant information from the Narjus.

“There we have it, that’s where we want to go,” said Georgi, pointing at an empty gap between several stars. Rosalie and Kimetz the navigator studied the map.

“Well?” asked the Captain.

“Easy,” replied Kimetz. “We can be there in a day and a half. Maybe two.”

Chapter Fifteen

“Oh wow, this is going to be fun,” said Guiora.

“What do we have?” asked Powell.

“Let me put it this way, I’m glad we jumped short to see what was there,” replied Guiora. “I can see debris and rocks and boulders in a fairly high density over an area about thirty

six thou across. There are boulders bigger than stations out there, some a lot bigger. And that's just what I can see from here. I can't even begin to tell you what's inside there."

"Scanners won't penetrate?" asked Isacus who was feeling much better and had returned to his post.

"Impossible. There's too much chaff. You could hide an entire battalion or a hundred capital ships in there, if anyone was insane enough to go in there. If I didn't know any better, I'd say that someone shattered a planet."

"Impossible," said Papo. "You can't put that much energy into a planet without cooking yourself first."

"Any ideas, Captain?" asked Tyrell.

Powell studied the displays. According to the information that Tyrell had provided him with, they were looking for a marker that would respond to a given code when broadcast. But with this many obstacles, even the most powerful signal wouldn't penetrate very far. The best equipment they had would have difficulty penetrating more than a few thousand meters into the debris.

"How much activity?" he asked Guiora.

"Hard to say. It mostly seems stable. If there were any bits with any decent amount of momentum in them, they would have drifted away a long time ago. From here, there doesn't seem to be a lot of movement, but I wouldn't want to take the ship in there."

Powell wholeheartedly agreed. Taking a soft ship such as the Celiker would be very foolish without an exceptionally good reason. A lot of money was a pretty good reason, but was it good enough?

"What exactly are we looking for?" asked Powell, addressing Tyrell. "You've been a little vague over that during this trip."

"Sorry about that captain." Replied Tyrell. "To be honest, I'm not entirely sure. But I do know that it is worth a great deal because several planets have gone to war to get it."

"War?" asked Guiora. "You suppose that someone blew up a planet?"

"No," said Powell. "If anyone had that kind of power, we'd know about it. Assuming that they didn't blow themselves up during testing. But that's unlikely because there's no primary around here. It would have been a pretty dark and cold planet indeed."

"What do you suppose happened here?" asked Tyrell. "I know that there are asteroid fields all over the place, but this seems slightly out of the normal."

“Unknown and unknowable,” said Papo. “We can sit here and think of theories all day and even come up with something that sounds really good, but we’d have no way of knowing if we were right or not.”

“Good point. Orders?”

Powell looked at the displays again. What he really wanted was to go home and get a bigger ship, preferably a combat one with heavy armour. And some decent scanners. There could be anything hiding in that mess and he didn’t like surprises.

“The only thing that we really can do is to skim around the surface and broadcast the code to see if we get a response. Although if I wanted to hide something in there, I’d bury it down inside, not near the outside.”

The crew looked around sullenly. They didn’t want to give this late in the game, especially Tyrell, but it was fairly obvious to them that the captain wouldn’t be taking the ship into the debris.

“Take us in. Mr. Tyrell, put in the access code and set it to broadcast every twenty seconds”

Isacus made the small jump to the edge of the field. The view would have been quite terrifying, if there had been windows to look out of. They gently traversed across the edge of the field, or just above it depending on your angle of view. From their original vantage point, the field had looked practically solid. From closer inspection it could be seen on the displays that there were large gaps between the larger pieces. It was just that there were so many that it looked denser than it really was.

An indicator lit up on the console.

“A response?” asked Tyrell hopefully.

“No,” said Powell, slightly worried. “Someone is hailing us.”

Guiora locked onto the signal and put it on the comms.

“Well, hello there little fella. Glad ya could make it.”

Guiora and Powell looked at each other, then at Tyrell. Tyrell just shook his head and shrugged his shoulders to indicate that he had no idea what was going on.

“Although I am curious as to why ya didn’t use the code we gave ya.”

Tyrell was even more dumbfounded than anyone else. He had been expecting a vault or a derelict spacecraft or an abandoned station or *something*. Not a stranger to be waiting here for them.

“But since yer here, I guess we oughta get on with things. Ya ready for the transfer?”

“This Captain Powell of the Celiker. Can you please identify yourself?”

“Aw, tha little girly didn’t wanna come play herself, did she? Too bad. But as long as ya got my money, ya’ll can call me anythin’ ya like darlin.”

Powell looked at the others. This was obviously not what Tyrell was expecting. And he had a nagging suspicion that they were not who the resident was expecting either.

“I’m sorry sir, but we seem to be getting confused. We’re here on a ... survey mission. I think that you were expecting someone else.”

“Ah, now things are a little clearer. Tell me ma good man, does the name ‘Valerie Opatz’ hold any meanin’ for ya?”

Powell looked at the others, who were shaking their heads. “No, doesn’t seem familiar to anyone here.”

“Aw, such a shame. We’ll be sayin’ goodbye then.”

The connection was cut.

“What the hell was that?” asked Higuel, speaking for the first time.

“More to the point, is our treasure still here,” said Tyrell. “He seemed to be expecting us to bring money to him.”

“New contact, moving fast,” said Guiora. “It’s ... oh dark, it’s a damned missile!”

“Everyone strap down! Gimme control,” yelled Powell. Deftly he maneuvered the ship straight towards the debris field. The missile was coming at them fast, but not from directly below. There was no way that they could outrace a missile, but if he could put some solid material between him and it, they might have a chance.

The Celiker raced past the smaller outer bits and did a hard right behind the first large piece they came across. The missile followed, closely passing over the surface of the obstacle. As it came around the edge, it found another large boulder and no sign of the Celiker. Having lost its target, the missile impacted against a boulder.

Further along the debris field, the Bloodbath rose up out of its hiding place.

“Whaddya reckon, did we get im?” asked Raktu.

“Probably not,” said Lothar. “If I don’t see shiny bits of metal, we didn’t get it.”

“Why do ya think they was out here?” asked Svelte. “Ya think they was lookin’ for us?”

“Nah. Musta been coincidence.”

“No,” said Lothar. “But something isn’t right. They claimed they were on a survey mission but they were transmitting a code. That means that they were looking for something.”

“Oh looky, they’re hailing us,” smirked Raktu. “They are alive. Le’see what they want.”

“What the hell was that for?” demanded Powell across the comms. There was a bit of background static from the debris blocking the path of the signal.

“Don’t take it personally,” said Lothar. “We were just trying to kill you.”

“We didn’t even know you were here! We don’t know why you’re here and we don’t even know who you are. Why would you try to kill us?”

“Because we can. Oh, and thanks for giving away your position.” The Bloodbath launched another two missiles.

“Deeper!” said Isacus. The Celiker flew further into the debris field, with the two missiles hard in pursuit. Dodging tightly around as many large obstacles as he could find, Powell managed to shake one and then the other missile.

The Bloodbath followed them in, ducking around and following their trail as best they could. “Now this is what I calls fun!” shouted Raktu. “Haven’t had sport like this in a loong time!”

“What do you want?” asked Powell over the comms, with a lot of background noise on the signal from the intervening debris.

“Duh, to kill you,” replied Raktu. “Thought tha was obvious.”

The Celiker was maneuvering on remass engines which meant that it was leaving a fairly easy to follow trail amongst the debris. They could stop using the engines and leave no trace, but then they’d be coasting in a straight line. Powell was busy trying to stay ahead of the pursuing ship and not slam into one of the bits of debris either.

“How long can we keep this up?” asked Powell.

“About six hours,” replied Guiora. “But after that, we won’t be able to dock with anything without slamming into it.”

“Can we jump from in here?”

“Possible, but I’d really, really like you to not try. Minimum clearance for us would be six hundred meters and at the moment you’re getting within twenty meters of some of those bigger ones.” Just as Guiora finished speaking, a dull thud reverberated throughout the ship.

“Closer than that,” muttered Isacus.

“How are we going to get out of this?” asked Tyrell.

“Our best bet is to try and shake them loose and get clear of the debris and make a jump. But if we get ready for a jump, we’ll be vulnerable for about twenty seconds.”

“Can we clamp onto one of the bigger rocks?” asked Higuél. “I saw that on a movie once.”

“No chance,” replied Papo. “We don’t have the gear to do it and if we did, we’d have to slow down and match velocities first in order to do that.”

“Can we drop a bomb and let them fly into it?” asked Tyrell.

“Sure we could,” said Isacus. “If we had one. The only thing we could really throw out the back is cargo, and we don’t have any of that on this trip.”

A deep, resonating moan could be heard as the stresses started to affect the ship. The Celiker was built as a cargo ship, not a combat ship. The dance that Powell was making her perform was well beyond what she had been designed for.

“What are our odds of the ship breaking up?” asked Higuél. Nobody even bothered to answer. Not that they found the question to be pointless or that they were rude, but the gee forces that were pushing them around were starting to make it hard to breath. That, and nobody really wanted to think of those particular odds.

Meanwhile, on the Bloodbath, the captain and the navigator were busy arguing over the best method to destroy the annoying ship. Raktu had been incapable of closing the gap between the two ships, which should have been quite easy. Raktu wanted to maintain the pursuit, while Lother wanted to move out of the debris field and wait them out.

Back on the Celiker, Guiora and Powell were both surprised by a sudden surge of wide-band energy across almost the entire location band. They were blinded for a moment and needed to pull some fairly harsh gee’s to bring the ship to a halt.

“What the hell was that?” shouted Guiora.

“No idea,” said Powell. “But it might be the break we need.”

“Why have we stopped moving?” asked Tyrell.

“That energy pulse blinded us, so it must have also blinded them. If we sit tight, they’ll fly right past us.”

Everyone on the bridge sat in perfect silence. There wasn’t much point since the odds of detecting the other ship passing by listening was nil, but everyone had their attention focused on the scanners. Set to passive sweep only, they made a strange and unsettling cacophony which was barely audible over the environmental systems.

The ship gave a slight lurch and picked up a small rotation, which was only just detectable by the inner ear.

“She passed us,” whispered Powell. Guiora quickly stabilized the ship while they were still in the other ship’s blind spot. The hailing light started blinking on the console again.

“Are they hailing us again?” asked Tyrell quietly.

“No, it’s a wide band transmission. It’s another ship.”

“Are they hailing us or them?”

“Not sure, but if they respond on an open band we’ll be able to listen in.”

There was silence once more on the bridge as the crew sat in anticipation. Isacus put the hail on speaker but there was nothing to hear yet, it was just a hail.

“What do you think?” asked Lothar on the Bloodbath. “Do we answer?”

Raktu was angry. No, he was way past angry. This should have been a simple grab and swap. They took the girl, a representative from the band showed up with the cash, they swapped and everyone went home happy. Instead this chatty twerp had shown up who had no idea what was going on. He’d had to waste three perfectly good missiles, who knew how much remass and now some new ship with some damn-awful powerful transmitters had shown up and made him lose the target. And this location had been chosen so carefully.

“Answer ‘em,” said Raktu. “Switch and use.”

Lothar smiled. Raktu was the boss and everyone knew it, but Lothar was the better educated one, so he was the one to do the talking. Switch and use meant pretend to be the good guys and lure the new ship into helping them destroy the other ship.

“This is the Righteous Might responding to an open hail,” said Lothar with a wide grin on his face.

“Copy you Righteous Might, this is the New Dawn. We saw some fairly strong energy emissions in there. Do you require assistance?”

“Mighty glad to hear from you New Dawn. We have two Judges aboard and are currently tracking some known fugitives. We’d be mighty appreciative of any assistance that you can offer.”

Powell and Guiora looked at each other. “Judges?”

“Well, there isn’t that much that we can do, but we do have some mighty powerful survey equipment here with us. We can tell you exactly where the fugitives are,” said Rosalie.

“Uh oh,” said Isacus.

“This is Captain Powell Blakely of The Celiker here. We arrived in this system a few minutes ago and these guys fired on us for no reason.”

“They’re lying,” said Lothar. “They’ve killed dozens of people trying to evade the law and have already blown up our escort ship.” As Lothar spoke, Raktu maneuvered the ship trying to get a lock on where the Celiker was.

Aboard the New Dawn, Rosalie and Frank looked at each other.

“Who do we believe?” asked Kimetz.

“I’m not going up against a Judge,” said Frank. “And why the hell are these people here? Is it anything to do with us?”

“It may just be coincidence,” suggested Georgi. “The map that led us here was over a hundred years old, and nobody had seen it in the last eighty seven or so. So either one of these ships is the one that reached the Im ... ah ... the Swift first, or they just happen to be here for another reason.”

At that moment, the Bloodbath fired on the Celiker again, five missiles this time. Powell didn’t even waste breath on cursing; he just fired the engines and dived in deeper amongst the debris field.

“They fired on us,” said Lothar as one of the missiles exploded. “Help us, tell us where these bastards are hiding.”

“That’s odd,” whispered Kimetz. “The Judge says that the Celiker fired on them, but the signal source came from the ship that fired.”

“Can we contact the two ships separately on encrypted signals?” asked Rosalie.

“No problem,” said Frank. A blue and a green light came on in the display in front of the captain. “When you want to speak to one, press the green button, the blue for the other. I’ll leave both on speaker so you can hear what they are both saying at the same time as well as the open frequency.”

“Well done,” said Rosalie. “Green ship first. Do you read me?”

“We read you, New Dawn,” said Powell. “Good idea to chat on encrypted lines, even if I don’t have a lot of spare time to talk right now.” Even across the comm Rosalie could hear the distinctive noise of something impacting against a hull. That was not a noise a captain wanted to hear. “If you’re talking to that manic as well, ask him for access to his ship’s computers. We’d be more than happy to provide you with access to ours, so long as that nutjob stops firing at us.”

“He has a point,” said Selinin. “Nothing says trust like giving someone else control of your oxygen supply.”

Rosalie pressed the blue button. “Do you read me, Captain?”

“Loud and clear,” said Lothar.

“Can you provide us with access codes to your ship’s computers?”

Raktu and Lothar looked at each other. This was a new trick. He didn’t even know that giving one ship control of another ship was even possible. That was something that he’d need to remember for the next time they did a spot of pirating.

“Sorry New Dawn, our reception is really bad in here. We’re moving out of the rubbish into clear space to improve the reception. I don’t need to remind you of the penalty for firing upon a ship that has declared itself to have Judges aboard, do I?”

Everyone aboard the New Dawn looked at each other. That wasn’t the expected response, and it made them hesitate. As soon as the Bloodbath was clear of the debris, it fired a missile at the New Dawn. The distance between the two ships was quite small, and the missile covered the distance in just seventeen seconds. Captain Rosalie had plenty of time to react, but not enough time to get the New Dawn to do anything due to the inertia of the large ship.

It’s sheer size made the New Dawn a sitting duck, but the same size gave it a certain amount of protection, plus with all the excess equipment and antennas that were projecting from it afforded it even more protection.

The missile impacted one of the sensor towers and the resultant explosion only made a moderate amount of damage to the New Dawn. Two hull breaches, but nothing major.

“Close all compartments,” screamed Frank.

“Got ‘em,” shouted Raktu triumphantly.

“But not fatally,” replied Lother.

“What do we do?” asked Higuél. “We have to help them!”

“How?” asked Powell. “A minute ago we couldn’t save ourselves.”

“We should dive deeper and cling onto one of the larger rocks,” said Tyrell. “We’ll be able to hide until they leave.”

“We should get clear and make a jump while they’re still distracted with the New Dawn,” said Guiora. “It sounds callous, but we can’t help them. Another two minutes and they’ll have blown them to bits. Then they’ll come looking for us again.”

“No, don’t fire,” said Lother. “If we disable her, we can capture the ship, sell off the crew and then strip it for parts.”

“Good point,” replied Raktu. “And they haven’t fired back, which means they probably aren’t armed.”

The Bloodbath approached the New Dawn menacingly. It had all weapons deployed and ready to fire. A laser strafed across the Bloodbath, destroying sensors and blowing several hull breaches across the upper decks.

“Hold right there,” said Captain West on the open frequency. “This is captain Westcott of the Kilkka, deputized ship under license from the Judiciary of Balga Station.”

“How dare ya fire on us!” screamed Raktu. “Do ya have any idea how much trouble ya’ll be in fer firing on a judge?”

“Yes, but since Judges don’t use words like “ya’ll” then I think I’m fairly safe,” said West dryly. “You are the Bloodbath, rogue ship and kidnapper. You currently have Miss Valerie Opatz aboard as a reluctant guest. Inform me immediately that she is safe and well or I’ll open fire and blast you to pieces.”

“She’s alive and well,” said Lother before Raktu could scream any obscenities.

“You’ve bought yourself sixty seconds to prove it,” said West.

“She’s not aboard,” said Lother. “We’ll have to go get her from our base.”

“Then that’s too bad for you, since that means I get to blast you to pieces right now.”

“If you kill us, you’ll never find her. You need us alive so we can take you to our base.”

“You don’t have a base. But you do have forty seconds.”

Aboard the New Dawn, everyone held his or her breath. A moment ago, they had been about to die. Now they were about to be saved. Or blown to pieces, there was still no certainty either way.

During this exchange, the Celiker had risen up to the edge of the debris field in order to be ready to run. The sudden arrival of the Kilkka was a welcome distraction, and Powell was deciding whether to try and jump or stay and see how it turned out.

On the Kilkka, everyone was looking at West. They knew full well that they had very little information about the Bloodbath or it’s crew, so West was bluffing when he said he knew that they didn’t have a base.

“Um ... hello?” said a trembling female voice.

“Identify yourself,” said West.

“I’m Valerie,” said Valerie.

“Tell me the name of your teddy bear,” said West. He had been hoping that the Opatz family had some secret way of passing information to each other but they hadn’t. This was the closest thing that they had been able to come up with just before leaving Balga. Valerie hated things that were cute and fluffy, and she particularly detested teddy bears, considering them obnoxious. If the person who was speaking didn’t know, they would waste time trying to guess a name or stall for time.

“I don’t have one,” said Valerie.

Aboard the Kilkka, everyone breathed a sigh of relief. Now that they had found her alive and well, things were looking a lot better.

“Okay sunny jim,” said Raktu. “Here’s how it’s gonna go down. We’re gonna jump away now, an’ if ya try an’ stop us, we’ll throw little miss starshine out tha airlock.”

“Blast their PD Rods,” said West. Oxley fired one of the secondary lasers and blasted a precision hole in the side of the Bloodbath, destroying her capacity to go anywhere. “Or we can do it this way. We’ll send a shuttle down to dock with you, collect Miss Opatz and any of your crew that wish to surrender and then leave. That sounds good?”

“You keep blasting holes in us and you’re likely to kill the girl,” said Lother.

“Don’t care,” said West. Everyone aboard the Kilkka looked at him sharply. “I’ve already been paid to come out here and attempt a rescue, so if we get her or not is irrelevant to

me. The question is, how badly do you want to live? Because it'd be rather sad if you decided that you wanted to kill yourselves just out of spite."

"None of ma crew will evar surrender!" said Raktu.

"Fine, don't care," said West. "We just came for the girl. And just to sweeten the deal I've also been authorized to pay you the ransom of ten mil. That should help you get your boat patched up."

Lother and Raktu looked at each other. They really weren't expecting to get paid. But their position was untenable at best. They still had over fifty missiles left, but the Kilkka could shoot them down as fast as they could launch them. Getting the ransom was the whole point – and ten million would go a long way towards fixing up the Bloodbath.

"Sounds good ta me," said Raktu. "Transfer tha money over."

"Not until I we see the girl," replied West.

"Send your shuttle over," said Lother. "Your crew can see her and confirm that she's fine. Then you transfer the money and undock the shuttle."

"Agreed. Launching shuttle now." A small shuttle launched from the Kilkka. "The other ships here, how are you guys holding up?"

"We're fine," said Powell aboard the Celiker. "Pulse is a bit high, but we'll survive."

"Some damage and hull breaches," said Rosalie on the New Dawn. "No casualties or major problems. I have my crew putting up a few patches right now."

"Excellent," said West. "Bloodbath, my shuttle will be docking at your secondary airlock in one minute. Please have Miss Opatz there ready and waiting. Oh, and if you get any last minute ideas about trying to take more hostages, that shuttle has a load of NiPox explosive aboard. That'll reduce most of your ship to monatomic vapour."

"But you'll kill your own crew members if you do that," said Lother.

"True, but I'll be saving them by killing them," said West. "Remember, I've read your file."

The small shuttle docked with the Bloodbath. It took a moment for the two airlocks to sync up with each other and then the doors opened. In the Bloodbath's airlock was Valerie and two of Raktu's men, weapons drawn. In the shuttle was Lincon in a ship's suit and Glodi and Lasho, both in full EVA combat armour, also with weapons ready.

"Good morning," said Lincon in an entirely too happy manner. "Do you fancy a ride?"

Valerie moved from the Bloodbath into the shuttle. Addressing the two crew, Lincon said “We’ll be waiting on the other side of this door while the funds are transferred. Toodloo!”

With that cheerful goodbye over, the door on the shuttle swung shut. As soon as it was, Lincon grabbed Valerie and the four of them moved deeper into the shuttle.

“Sorry miss, but we have to be quick,” said Lincon. “We’re going to jump into an emergency pod and the two big chaps will tow us back to the Kilkka while the shuttle remains here.”

Almost before he had finished speaking, they had reached the back of the shuttle. Lincon unceremoniously picked up Valerie and dumped her into the emergency pod, a small ovoid about two meters long. Glodi and Lasho strapped on some maneuvering packs on in one swift motion and cycled the airlock almost before Lincon had jumped into the pod and closed the lid. The rear door on the shuttle opened and the two suited men pulled the pod out into space.

“Sorry about the cramped quarters miss,” said Lincon. “It’ll only be for a few minutes.”

Valerie just gave him an angry glare. She was upset about having been thrown around, but the look didn’t have the right effect since her nose was up against his ear.

“Encrypted banking line open, transferring the funds to you now,” said West. The money flowed from the Kilkka to the Bloodbath faster than you can say ‘we’re rich!’

The Celiker fully rose up out of the debris into clear space, but was careful to stay behind the Bloodbath.

“New Dawn, will you be okay to jump?” asked West.

“Sure,” replied Rosalie. “We’ll stay here a bit longer and make some repairs before we do though.”

“Celiker, how are you doing?”

“We’re fine,” said Powell. “We’ll stay and see if the New Dawn requires assistance. We have several excellent mechanics aboard.”

“What about us?” said Lothar. “You crippled our ship!”

“We’d be more than happy to give you a tow,” purred West. “The charge is a little steep though, ten mil to take you anywhere you want to go.”

“That’s piracy!” screamed Raktu. “You can’t do that!”

“That’s the game you signed up for,” replied West in a cold voice.

“How about five mil?” asked Lother. “A fifty-fifty split is fairly reasonable, isn’t it?”

“Well, for five mil I can tow you direct to Balga, where the judiciary have a bounty for live prisoners. That would make up the shortfall. For the full ten mil, I’d be more than happy to take you to any system you wanted to go to.”

“How about seven and a half?” asked Lother. “That will cover you for your expenses and be more than whatever the bounty is.”

Ken was carefully checking the displays and then looked up at West and gave him the pre-arranged “she’s safely aboard” signal to let him know they had Valerie.

“Sounds like a sweet deal to me,” said West. “Eject all your remaining missiles and we’ll pop those party favours. After that, we’ll position ourselves ready and lock you in and you can nominate the system that you want to go to.”

With the money transferred back, the missiles destroyed and both ships in position, the Kilkka made the jump, taking the Bloodbath with it.

Chapter Fifteen

“Are you sure you don’t need a hand?” Powell asked Rosalie.

“No, we have the manpower to make our own repairs. Feel free to leave anytime you’re ready,” replied Rosalie.

“Something isn’t right,” said Frank. They said they’d just arrived right before we did. Now they’re waiting for us to leave. I’ll bet you any money they are here for the same reason we are and don’t want anyone watching while they snoop around.”

“What are the odds of four ships appearing in the same place at the same time?” mused Kimetz.

On the Celiker, a very similar conversation was taking place.

“Look at this map,” said Guiora. “You look at it casually and the eye is drawn to these star clusters here and here. You look at this area here and all these inhabited stars near each other over here. But, if you’re looking for a quiet place to hide, you see three empty spots. This one here, which is fairly well documented and known to be practically empty. This other one here, which is circled by about a dozen, inhabited systems. And this one, which is where we are. It’s perfect, so lots of people using the same place are almost a certainty.”

Papo and Isacus nodded in agreement. “And then when you get here, you find this dirty great slab of mush that we don’t have a chance of searching through. If that transmitter that Tyrell says will be here isn’t working then we have no chance of finding whatever is in there, no matter how big it is.”

“Why wouldn’t it be working?” asked Higuel.

“Obvious, now that I think about it,” said Tyrell. “If it’s in amongst all those rocks, it could easily have been crushed or knocked. And even if it is in perfect condition, it probably ran on batteries and the best batteries that you can buy today will only hold their charge for sixty, maybe seventy years. This one has been sitting here for over a century.”

Meanwhile, on the New Dawn.

“So if this place is going to end up so popular for hiding stuff, would what we’re looking for still be here?” asked Frank.

“I don’t see why not,” said Georgi. “If it’s hidden here, then it must be pretty big. And there’s no signs of any major operations.”

“Can we use our survey gear to have a look inside that mess?” asked Rosalie.

“That wouldn’t be a problem,” said Waldemar. “It was practically designed for this type of work. We could have the entire place mapped out and scanned in a few hours.”

“Not to be the eternal pessimist,” said Selinin. “But can the New Dawn even get in there to pick something up, if we do find something?”

“He has a point,” said Rosalie. “We are too big and can’t maneuver properly to get in there amongst all that rubbish without taking some serious damage. That chap on the Kilikka could have made short work of it with all those guns and armour he had.”

“There is the Celiker,” said Westby. “She’s small enough to get in there and has already done so.”

“Maybe you should call the New Dawn,” said Isacus on the Celiker. “With all that gear they’re packing, they should be able to poke around in here quite easily.”

“Yeah, I suppose I can call them,” said both Captains.

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“There she is, right where Zavil said she’d be,” said Captain Rison.

Judge Welton looked at the displays. “Yep, that looks like the Immonen. There’s nothing else around here. Take us in, nice and close.”

The Valiant Soul had been commandeered by Judge Welton specifically to come searching for the Immonen. She had a load of long-range sensors, not that they had actually needed them. They also had six deputies aboard who were trained for EVA and body recovery. If Judge Jordi Leshem was on the Immonen, then Welton was going to take him home.

“Range is four hundred meters,” said Annette, navigator on the Valiant Soul. “We’re right alongside the Immonen, trajectories matched.”

“You have the schematics for the Explorer class loaded?” asked Welton.

“Got it,” replied Zach.

“Okay Zach, you and your team are cleared to go.”

The secondary airlock on the Valiant Soul opened and six figures came out. Like the Boarders of the Kilkka, they were clad in EVA suits, light armour and pushed along by maneuvering packs.

They quickly made the short crossing to the Immonen and crawled across it. Like the others before them, they made their way to the emergency hatch, reported its being open and were instructed to enter - with caution.

Entering the main lounge, the lead Deputy found Asoye.

“Contact. We have a deceased, no identification,” said Alvin.

“Copy you. Status?” said Zach.

“Looks like a starvation or dehydration case. The body is stationary in the center of the room so environmental must have failed before death.”

On the bridge of the Valiant Soul, the other crew listened on.

“What do you think?” asked Rison. “Simple ship failure?”

“Possible,” replied Welton. “The last message she sent that was received stated that she’d had PD Rod trouble and was just coasting. If they couldn’t fix those then they’d have just kept right on going until they hit the edge of the universe. I wonder why they didn’t send a distress call?”

“They might have had multiple failures,” offered Nyles. “I’ve studied a lot of case histories and the old Explorer class were a fairly solid ship when they were new. But some of the materials they made them out of didn’t have a good lifespan, so nobody in their right mind would buy an old second-hand one.”

“Someone did. They bought the decommissioned Immonen, re-patched her as the Swift and sent these poor fools to their deaths.”

On the Immonen, the Deputies had finished placing the body in a body bag for transportation back to the Valiant Soul. Before handling, dozens of scans had been made and a sample taken from the body for analysis.

“We have a genetic match,” said Alvin. “She’s Asoye Terekado. No toxins, narcotics or obvious drugs come up on the preliminary exam.”

“There should be at least three others, probably more aboard. Spread out and find them,” instructed Welton. “And send someone to get the main data cores from the ship’s central computer. If they had any logs, I want a copy of them.”

With six trained and experienced Deputies searching the ship, it didn’t take long for the small room with the other deceased to be found.

“What do you think?” asked Alvin.

“Hard to say for sure,” said Zach. “But it looks like there was a falling out in the crew and someone killed everyone else. But Asoye was too slight of frame to have forced everyone in here, unless she had a weapon of some type.”

Two deputies set to work collecting evidence and securing the bodies. The evidence collection was more so that the history of the Immonen and her ill-fated passengers could be recorded. After all this time, there would be few family members who would look for the missing people and nobody to prosecute.

In the meantime, the other four deputies set about methodically exploring the ship. The central data cores were found and removed, personal effects were collected and everything imaged. It was about two hours later that someone looked in the cold store by the galley and found another body.

“Any idea on who it is?” asked Welton when the news came through.

“Not specifically, but it must be one of the crew,” replied Zach from aboard the Immonen. “We’ve already identified Judge Jordi and Deputy Weldon’s remains. We also have a probable match for Peter Lehrer, but we’ll need to confirm that when we return to Balga Station. That’s all four of the initial suspects accounted for. There were a total of eight people in the open room, plus Asoye in the main lounge and the unsub in the freezer.”

“I’m really hoping that there is some useful information on that data core.”

“Any theories so far?” asked Nyles.

“Well, on the face of the evidence it would seem that the unsub put or forced everyone into the top room and opened the outer door. Then Asoye locked him in the cold store where he froze to death leaving her alone on a broken ship full of dead bodies.”

“That’s really, really depressing,” said Nyles.

“Most crime scenes are,” replied Weston.

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“Well, it’s not like there is a lot to haggle over,” said Powell. “We can’t find it without you, you can’t reach it without us. Both of us could do it independently if we leave and come back with another ship, but then it’s a race between us, plus the Bloodbath and the Kilkka.”

“So simple,” said Rosalie. “A fifty-fifty split is the only equitable way to do it. Agreed?”

“Agreed.”

On the Celiker, Guiora turned down all their scanning and sensing equipment so that it wouldn’t be overpowered by the sweeps of the New Dawn’s antennas. The New Dawn powered up and made several high-powered scans of the local sections of the debris field. The Celiker had already tried making several passes whilst transmitting the access codes provided by Tyrell, but had not had any response. As had been discussed earlier – that system was most likely either broken or had died long ago.

“Anything?” asked Isacus.

“Nothing yet,” replied Waldemar. “We’ll probably need to scan the entire field and then search through the data for inconsistencies. There is still the strong possibility that what we are looking for is quite small, or buried within one of the larger pieces.”

Those aboard the Celiker could only wait for their turn. The New Dawn made several long passes around the debris field, and an entire sweep ended up taking over three hours. After carefully scrutinizing the data, there were no results of any major interest. There was no machinery, no dense materials and no other signs of their being anything other than rocks within the entire group.

“This can’t be it!” cried Tyrell. “There has to be something here!”

“Told you it was a damned wild goose chase,” muttered Selinin. “But noooo, you wouldn’t listen.” Georgi just sat in glum silence. After all they’d been through, all the distance they’d come and nearly being killed, it seemed so unfair.

“There is a pretty good possibility that whatever was here was taken long ago,” said Frank. “After all, it’s not like this place is hard to miss.”

“I don’t suppose those rocks have any value?” muttered Papo.

On both ships, people turned to look at each other. Could it be that obvious? The ‘treasure’ was all over the place and they couldn’t see it because there was so much of it?

“Analyze the nearest piece you can find,” said Rosalie. The New Dawn was able to catch a small piece and ripped it apart for assessment to see just what it was. It took about ten excruciating minutes, but then the results came back.

“Mostly basalt, with some iron ore,” said Westby, disappointed.

“Here’s something interesting though,” said Waldemar. “Near the center there are five large pieces, and all five of them are almost perfectly spherical.”

“That *is* interesting,” said Powell. “Squirt us the co-ordinates and we’ll go in and have a look.”

The New Dawn made one final pulse as it mapped out as much of the intervening debris between the Celiker and their target and fed the information to her navigation computer. With such an accurate map, Powell was able to easily maneuver through the field. It was still fairly slow going, and it took them about thirty minutes to reach their destination.

“We found the marker,” said Powell. “Looks like it was crushed between the surface and some other large rock at some stage. Which means that these five babies are what we came for.”

“Any ideas on what it is?” asked Rosalie.

“Our gear isn’t as good as yours. We can tell that it’s pretty similar in density to everything else, but not what it’s made of.”

“Can you analyze in there?”

“Annoyingly, no. We’ll have to grab a chunk and bring it back out to you. And even if we wanted to take this stuff right now, just one of these spheres has about ten times the mass that we do. We’re going to need a bigger ship to pull them out, probably several.”

The mood aboard both ships was apprehensive. The individual crewmembers were either optimistic and thinking that they’d made a fortune or pessimistic and thinking that they’d wasted their time. It took Deva about twenty minutes to secure a sample and return, and then it took the Celiker another half hour to return to the New Dawn. Captain Powell, Isacus and Guiora transferred to the New Dawn with the sample.

“Hello Captain,” said Powell. “Pleasure to finally meet you in person.”

“Hello Captain,” said Rosalie, shaking Powell’s hand. “Welcome aboard the New Dawn.”

Isacus handed the sample, which was about the size of a man’s head to Waldemar. The two crews made idle talk while the sample was analyzed. Soon, Waldemar returned to the main lounge where everyone was waiting.

“We now know the truth,” said Waldemar with excessive theatrics.

“Which is?” asked Rosalie icily.

“We have wasted our time.”

Groans rose up from the crews. A curse or two could be heard and Powell stood up.

“Care to enlighten us?” he said.

“Certainly,” said Waldemar. “The sample is refined Gronon, more commonly known as Chauvin.”

More groans, more cursing.

“Oh, that’s just wonderful,” said Isacus. “So we have just located some seventeen odd million tons of PD Rod material that nobody uses any more?”

“It would seem that way,” said Waldemar apologetically. “At a wild guess, I’d say that someone created a stockpile when the mines on Elli started to run low. They probably assumed that when the mines were exhausted, they could sell it off at an inflated price. That would also explain why planetary governments would go to war to get this stuff, especially before New Jakarta bought their new versions to the market. And since the market for this commodity crashed long ago, that would also explain why there hasn’t been a nigger effort to locate it since then.”

“Okay, can we sell this stuff to anyone?” asked Frank.

“Sure,” said Powell. “There are plenty of history nuts around who like to restore old ships. Won’t get anywhere near the price of transporting the stuff.”

A dull melancholy settled over the lounge. Everyone was depressed by this bit of news.

“So where does that leave us?” asked Guiora.

“We both get fifty percent of nothing,” said Rosalie.

“But we get to go home,” said Powell. “I think we’ve all earned some decent shore leave.”

The crews said their goodbyes and Powell and his men returned to the Celiker. Both ships jumped out of the area and once again it was dark and quiet, as it had been for untold millennia.

Chapter Sixteen

“All right, cut them loose,” said Captain West.

The Kilka released its hold on the Bloodbath and the two ships drifted apart. They were deep in uncharted space, without any other ships, stations or planets within several light years.

“What’s going on?” demanded Lothar.

“We’ve spoken to Miss Opatz and she has informed us that, contrary to popular expectation, you did not harm her in any way while she was in your clutches. As such, we are giving you a chance to surrender.”

“Surrender? What about our deal!”

“That was just for the benefit of the other two ships. You didn’t really expect that we would set you free to continue your murderous ways, did you?”

Raktu and Lothar looked at each other. They had no weapons, no missiles and their ship was severely crippled. They were powerless.

“We need to get our guest back to her family pretty soon, so if anyone feels like being taken into custody, they should mention it about now.”

Lothar held out his fist to Raktu, who gently punched it on the knuckles.

West pushed a button and the hundred and ten kilos of NiPox in the shuttle attached to the side of the Bloodbath detonated. There was an intense cascade of photons and the Bloodbath ceased to be.

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“What do you think?” asked Doris. “Nice view?”

She and Paxton were on the balcony of their tenth floor apartment. They had ended up on Moret, and settled in a small town. There were green trees as far as they eye could see and birds sung a strange tune. Paxton had his arm slung casually around Doris’ waist and held her close.

“It’s a very nice view,” said Paxton as he kissed her.

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The rain fell heavily on the distant rooftops. The streets of Zakharina were slick with water, but it was normally that way this time of year on Belousov. In one of the quiet little side streets, two friends were sitting at a bar sipping some drinks.

“So,” said Westby. “What do we do now?”

“Well,” said Waldemar. “Since the New Dawn has gone back to carrying basic cargo and the University has deemed that our services are no longer needed, we are pretty much free to do what we will.”

“Yeah. Pity that whole trip didn’t pay out.”

“True, true. On the plus side, I did manage to save a very detailed survey of that area and have a good map on how to get there.”

Westby snorted in derision. “That’s all fine and good, but what does that do for us? You going to arrange history tours?”

“You remember that whole speech I gave about how the sample was supposed to be Gronon and being practically worthless?”

“*Supposed to be?*” exclaimed Westby.

“Well, I may have made a teensy little misdiagnosis when I said it was Gronon. It’s actually worth a bit more. A *whole lot* more. And I know a place where we can hire a ship to do a spot of salvage work.”

The End