

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Christina Engela lives in the sunny seaside South African city of Port Elizabeth (known as the Windy City, where she enjoys watching birds fly backwards) – a tourist haven with an unhealthy preoccupation with apples and whose mascot symbol is a Jackass Penguin – which should give you some idea. She attributes her weird sense of humor to her strange family and friends and perhaps having too much time to herself as a child.

At school she was known for her quirky poetry and weird sense of humor, which came in handy while directing a school play (which involved, incidentally, 3 toilet rolls, a walkie-talkie and a hammer marked 'exhibit A').

After completing high school in 1991 at the tender age of 18 she enlisted in the Army (ordinary work being scarce at the time) - and spent the next fourteen years wondering what the hell it was all about anyway and why is that fat man with the red badges shouting at me?

In 1999 she qualified as a computer technician (A+) and moved into the network support environment, where she gathered a lot of experience in Conflict Resolution and Self Control - and using Solitaire to teach people How To Use The Mouse without inflicting self injury. Traveling 5km just to push a power cable back into a monitor became a genuinely fulfilling experience. Hiding bodies became a form of creative self-expression. No, really.

She has spent 14 years working for the Military, where she says she finds 90% of her inspiration and also a great deal of story material. She still works there as a multimedia specialist, making corporate videos and other interesting projects - sometimes even stranger than the things she writes. She has always enjoyed writing her stories (and re-writing them till she felt she got it right) until someone shoved a keyboard into her hands and suggested that she try typing them instead... (Which made editing a LOT easier for one thing.) She says she likes to write from personal experience, but doesn't think anyone believes her.

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Titles available from the same author:

White Picket Fences & Other Fairy Tales (poetry)

Blachart

Black Sunrise

The Time Saving Agency

Dead Man's Hammer

Author's Note

I started writing this story in about 1986, when I was 13 (Like me, it was much shorter then). Over the next ten years it evolved, having been re-written several times over until 2003, when it finally became the story you will read now.

I have written quite a few stories over the years, but have only recently started to organize and actually *do* something with them (other than use them to fill gaps on my shelf).

They say writing is 10% inspiration and 90% perspiration. It's true. If I had perspired a bit more it would've been finished a lot sooner, but sometimes I can be a bit of a procrastinator and don't get around to finishing what I

BLACHART

To God, in thanks for His
many blessings.

SPACE

Just think about it.

As frontiers go, this is probably the most final of them all. This finality is not because it may be the last frontier, but because as long as we try to cross it and explore it, we take it with us. No matter how far we go, the frontier will always be just that much ahead of us, tantalizing our curiosities. Thus, we can never really *cross* it in so far as just push it back a little.

The universe is so vast, so immense; we can *never* expect to explore it all. It is in effect, not so much a *final* frontier as an *ultimate* frontier. *The* ultimate frontier. The ultimate frontier is wide as it is deep. Stars shine coldly in the unimaginable blackness. Out of the darkness, a tiny speck catches the distant light of stars -- a tiny gray speck that, as it moves, seems to grow larger, catching the light *just so*, until it reveals itself to be a starship.

Mykl d'Angelo groaned where he sat slumped in his chair. The irritating noise was unsettling his pet dog lying on his lap. The wickerwork garden chair creaked pleasantly under him and some native Earth birds made pleasant sounds above while the cool wind wafted over him as he lazily ...--!

Wait-a-minute!

Reality kicked in after marking its spot 'position vacant' for the short and pleasant while. He groaned mournfully as he found himself staring at the inside of his own eyelids. The first thing that occurred to him was the terrible bone wracking pain running up and down his spine. *Pain?* No, curiously enough. It was the memory of it that seemed to hurt so much. Maybe that's what scared him. Or maybe it was the creaking of the ship around him...

What else? Oh yes – the alarm was blaring. He lifted his head off the hard deck, turning it carefully from side to side just to make sure his neck wasn't broken. The smoke had cleared up, except for the wisps rising from what used to be his engineer. The last thing he remembered was – was... what did he remember? *Bright flash.* There was a noise like... like – someone frying crisps. Weaver had suddenly gone rigid, screaming hideously, then glowed a bright yellow, which alternated with a luminous blue and neon pink. It was a rather nice blue, he remembered. *What the hell was that?* Oh yes. The surge of pure energy that pulsed through the ship. Of course, it did pass through Weaver on the way... Coughing from all the electromagnetic dust in the air, he shook his head, praying that the dull thumping wasn't an indication that it might fall off. He rose slowly to his feet, eyeing the smoking remains rather sadly. Then he

struggled for a decision. He had to contact the bridge. If - he mused, there was still a bridge. The lights were still on. The gravity net was still operating, the communications system seemed to be working, but there was just no answer from the other end. He tried again anyhow.

“Captain to bridge.”

Silence.

“d’Angelo to the bridge! Answer me, Jang!”

Nothing. There seemed to be no other solution but to go there himself. There was nothing he could do here anyway. He couldn’t hope to assess the damage. He realized it must be pretty bad. At least the automatic doors still worked. A walk down the corridor led him to the elevator – and a body. It lay sprawled in an unnatural position on the deck. Turning it over, he recognized it as Fuller, his cargo master. His neck was broken. Had to be, looking the way he did. Swearing, d’Angelo went into the elevator. Fortunately, that was also still in order. When he got to the bridge, everything looked pretty ordinary – except for another body lying spread-eagled on the deck. Jang was dead, although d’Angelo couldn’t see the cause. He was no doctor. He sighed dismally. Now he hadn’t a navigator either. Or a crew for that matter. He slumped down in the command seat and shut off the irritating alarm. He sighed. It seemed to be a wonderful

day for Mykl d'Angelo, captain and owner of the 'tramp' freighter *Pegasus*. As wonderful days went on his personal scale, this one was rated *one of the best*. The last week hadn't been any better, come to think of it. On Monday they arrived at Gorda, just to find that the cargo of electronics he was to ship to Beowulf had been taken by another freighter for a lower fee. It took him until Wednesday before he found another cargo – which had to reach Earth by Saturday. The last straw was when his crew mutinied a day out of the Hermes system and demanded a pay increase. They also wanted more time off and a better cook. He was unable to comply and was forced to stop at Beowulf anyway. That was the last time he saw them. Fortunately for him, Weaver, Fuller and Jang opted to stay with him. Whether it was out of loyalty or perhaps just convenience, he never knew.

"Look where it got them, poor bastards." He muttered. That had been Thursday. Today was Friday and if it was any indication of what the future held in store for him – then he could expect a pretty rotten weekend. *Pegasus* was a good old ship. Particularly the latter. She was moving on forty and prone to breakdowns. Newer ships were more efficient but he couldn't afford one. *Pegasus* wasn't really efficient at anything anymore, except perhaps at breaking down at

awkward times. It was afternoon already and he'd had to try to make up lost time by pushing Pegasus to the limit. He sighed again, easing his weary frame out of the command chair and into the one behind the helm console. That was fine for a while, he mused while checking the computer diagnostics report. Then Weaver reported a minor problem down in engineering and he went down to give him a hand. But Weaver had to go and put his damn electro-wrench in the wrong place and cause a short in a main feed line – a really bright thing for an engineer to do! *Bright pink*, he thought, running his fingers through his sandy brown hair with considerable effort, accompanied by assorted snaps, crackles and pops of residual static electricity.

Now he sat alone on a disabled starship about fifty years from anywhere on conversion drive – assuming he still had that! The highlight of his afternoon was going to be staring at the blinking bridge instrumentation, which just happened to be running on the emergency batteries. Moreover, since his mutinous crew had made off with the *Short Shit*, the ship's only shuttle, he was facing quite a problem. The sensors showed no space traffic. The viewscreen was off. Turning it on only revealed the whirling stars outside, which told him that Pegasus, a cylindrical ship about a kilometer long, was doing somersaults. He brought the _maneuvering thrusters into play, slowing the tumble caused by the explosion to a stop. The stars

stopped whirling. A stable ship helped him to feel better. It was at least at start. A diagnostic scan showed that the damage caused an autoseal of several stern compartments. To say that the engines were all off-line would be an understatement. They didn't even register on the diagnostics inventory.

Truthfully, d'Angelo found himself unsurprised that the engines had finally packed up. Weaver – like his predecessors – had been a kind of starship 'backyard mechanic' and at the time of the explosion, the stardrive was all but held together by bits of wire and duct tape. Weavers mistake had cost him the stardrive – and Fuller and Jang their lives. "Blown up" seemed a little inadequate to describe what really happened, but the engines were now spread over the last light-year or so behind him. Now *that* really made his calendar cycle.

He turned on the emergency beacon. Then, seeing as he had to conserve as much energy as possible, he cut all unnecessary power, shut off the lights and heating equipment in most of the ship. Then he cut power to the gravity net on the other two levels and sat back, to wait. The starscape on the viewscreen did little to inspire him. He couldn't repair the engines. He could imagine himself down in engineering, trying to build a workable stardrive out of the parts of a tumble dryer, a garbage compactor and the cheap Swiss watch on his

wrist. He didn't see it working. There was nothing he could do. Except wait. And pray.

* * *

Many light-years away, another starship was experiencing problems. The I.S.S. Antares was not a new ship. Many of the older ships reaching retirement age were being refitted with more modern equipment to extend their useful lives. Thus, technologically at least, Antares was currently one of the most advanced ships of the Imperial Space Fleet. Unfortunately, she was now also one of the most troubled. This is what the Phoenix refitting program had done to Antares.

For Lt.Commander Ripley Jones, it was becoming more and more troublesome. It had been said that nothing is infallible, Antares apparently being the proof. After hastily recalling all crew and leaving Spacedock 7 thirty hours ago, there had been nothing but problems. Breakdowns in the sensors and telemetry, system failures of a wide variety and finally – the Last Straw. A coupling seal in the stardrive engine failed. Fortunately the cut-out worked, or the whole of engineering would've disappeared in a flaming ball of anti-matter. Five crewmen were seriously injured as it was. Commander Craig Smith, the Chief Entech had the offending unit stripped down and

under repair. They were currently on conversion drive, which could only propel them at sub-light speeds – and Lt.Commander Jones was currently in an elevator with a very pissed Captain Joel Falconer. Normally he was quite benevolent, but the sixty-year-old officer had good reason for his anger. There was some urgency involved. They were on a mission, being kicked out of spacedock during a refit. In the state Antares was in, she could only imagine the nature of the emergency at hand. Antares was suffering the electronic equivalent of an epileptic fit. Falconer was due to retire in just one month. His active duty was to have ended at Spacedock 7, but 'Command saw fit to interrupt the refit and extend Falconers service. It must have been important. Whatever it was.

She cleared her throat.

“Smith says he can have the stardrive back on line within four hours, Captain.” She might've said the wrong thing. Falconer glared at his executive officer.

“Four more hours?” He grunted. “What about the shields? Have they been repaired properly this time?”

“The – uh – generator crystals have been re-cut and recalibrated. They should be running final tests right now.”

“Good. We may need them.” He nodded, “I don’t want them fading out on us again.” The following moments were filled with silence as the elevator carried them towards the bridge. She scratched her chin for lack of anything else to say. Falconer’s hair shone even whiter under the lights in the ceiling of the elevator car. His usually warm brown eyes seemed a cold faded gray, skulking in the map of his tough, wrinkled old face. His features seemed drawn, the wrinkles deeper. She sensed the tension in the air. He grunted.

“Sir?”

“Hmmp. Looks like my holiday on Tarsus is going to have to wait.”

Curiosity got the better of her. Thirty hours and still not a word.

“What’s it about, sir?”

It seemed he became visibly uncomfortable. He hesitated, then plunged in.

“We’ve lost contact with a starbase in the Omegan Quadrant. Command wants to know why. We’re the lucky s-o-bees to draw the short straw.”

“Doesn’t Core Command know what shape we’re in, sir? Why us?”

He grinned. It made him look sick. “Yes they do, Ripley. But we’re the only available cruiser close enough to investigate. – Why’s this damn thing taking so long?”

“Perhaps their transmitters are down, Captain.”

“Hmm? Oh – I don’t know, Ripley. Could be anything. Better leave it for the briefing this afternoon. Doesn’t matter anyway... They’ve just found a way to liven up my last few days in the service.” He grunted. “This is my last show. Ha! My retirement party!” He resumed staring at the gray plastisteel doors. Grunting, he made eye contact with her again. “Smith.” He said, “Did you tell him to check up on those power fluctuations in the weapons circuits?”

“Yessir. Said he couldn’t find the problem. Said the ship’s just being temperamental.”

“Not good enough. Tell him to check again.”

“Yessir.” She nodded, knowing full well how hard it was to tell Smith anything. The man outranked her for a start - a minor oversight, as on a military vessel, the captain and executive officers are supposed to be the highest ranks. Smith was a full commander. He was due to be transferred off at Spacedock 7. They were supposed to get a replacement that conformed to the normal requirements – like saying ‘yessir’ to her orders – not ‘piss-off’ or ‘get out of my engine room’. The post of Chief Entech was for a lieutenant or Lt. commander. She tried to sigh as softly as possible. Everything, it seemed, was meant to have been fixed or straightened out at Spacedock 7. The car

computer spoke, finally. "Bridge." It said in a monotone voice.

"Thank God." Said Falconer. Ripley echoed the sentiment in her thoughts. The doors parted and they went onto the bridge, where something seemed to be happening. The communications officer, Lt Ric Nordyke, aged 21, swiveled round in the command like a bowl of fruit on a display stand to face them.

"Captain!" He said, face aglow with the excitement of a reasonably fresh crewman.

"Yes, uh... Lieutenant?" Falconer dithered, heading towards the command seat. Ripley went to her science desk and observed them from there. Nordyke stood up, vacating the center seat for Falconer.

"We've picked up a distress call from a civilian vessel, sir!"

Falconer looked at him, pausing a moment before sitting down.

"So?" He shrugged at him.

"We – uh..." Nordyke faltered, "We're the closest vessel to the source, Captain."

Falconer was clearly no spring chicken. He knew the course of action to be taken. It was law. Distress signals had to be answered and investigated with all possible haste. The only problem was, Ripley reflected, with the stardrive strewn all over engineering, the conversion drive could propel them at a maximum speed of only

around 100 000 kps – which meant, in interstellar terms – that they might as well stop.

“Who’s in distress?” He asked, making it plain that it was an unwelcome intrusion to their already daunting workload. Like the Last Straw. Ripley thought for a moment the lieutenant’s hesitation meant he was thinking the same as her. What all of them were thinking: ‘*You mean aside from us?*’

“Uh. It’s a freighter, sir. The *Pegasus*. Private owner, name of d’Angelo.” Ripley was shaken up, suddenly tense. She’d been listening. It was *that* name. d’Angelo. She rotated her chair towards Nordyke. She gave him a quizzical look. “What exactly is that mans name, Lt?” He glanced at her matter-of-factly.

“Captain of the *Pegasus*, sir?” She nodded in answer. “Uh. d’Angelo – Michael, I think.”

“*Myk!*” She breathed, almost to herself. Falconer eyed her suspiciously. She was stroking her long fawny brown hair absentmindedly.

“You okay, Commander?” He asked.

“Mm? Oh – yes, sir.” She replied. “I think I know the captain of that ship, that’s all.”

“You think?” Said Falconer, “Or you know?”

Ripley blushed.

“Well, unless there’s more than one Mykl d’Angelo, then I know him, sir.”

“Friend of yours?”

“Uh – no, sir.” She replied in a more level tone. “I knew him while I was at the Academy, sir.”

“Ex ‘Fleet man?”

“He was a full Commander, last I heard, sir.”

“Interesting.” Falconer commented. “Get me all his specs. If I have to let him loose on my ship, I want to know all about him.” She swallowed.

“Yessir.”

Falconer returned his attention to Nordyke.

“What’s their location?”

“They’re about a week outside the Hermes system, Captain.”

“Helm, set a course! Lt. Nordyke – answer the call, get some more details.”

“Yessir!”

“And get me Commander Smith!”

“Yessir!”

“And then,” Falconer continued wryly, “You can get the galley to send me up a cup of coffee.”

* * *

All d’Angelo had done in the meantime was to patch communications through to the galley and go down there to fix himself a reasonably decent meal. Considering the possibility of it being his last meal, he didn’t let the use of a little extra power bother him. A late lunch over with, he was planning on getting some sleep in his quarters. All in all, it seemed an impossibly long while before d’Angelos distress beacon was answered. The wall intercom in the galley started beeping. He sprang up from the table, knocking over a bottle of tomato sauce in his haste to reach it. He opened the channel to hear the voice of a youngish sounding man.

“This is the I.S.S. Antares. We have your position and are on an intercept course. Please acknowledge!”

d’Angelo grimaced, realizing with dismay that his rescuer was an imperial ship. The years he’d spent in the service came back to him with unsettling clarity. He shrugged them off with a relieved sigh. Hell, any port in a storm, right?

“Antares? This is the commercial loderunner Pegasus. I hear you, acknowledged.” He said, a smile breaking the tension in his face muscles. He ran a hand through his longish sandy brown hair again, this time without sound effects.

“Please identify yourself.”

“d’Angelo. Mykl d’Angelo. Owner and captain.” There was a long pause.

“Pegasus, can we establish visual communications?”

“Ship to ship? Uh – negative. I’m uh – down in engineering... putting out fires.” He lied. “If you give me ten minutes, I can get to the bridge and sort it out from there.”

“Okay, Pegasus – ten minutes.”

When he got to the bridge, he took a seat at the comsdesk and worked the appropriate controls. A young officer appeared on the small screen in the console. The background was blurred out of focus, a typical military precaution.

“How’s that?” He asked.

“Fine. Lt. Nordyke – comtech, I.S.S. Antares. What’s your problem?”

“Where’s your captain?” d’Angelo queried. “I suppose I’m not important enough to get his attention?”

“He’s uh – got his hands full right now. We’re running repairs at the moment.”

“Yeah. I know how it is.”

“Okay, what’s the problem?”

“My ship’s had a - um, temporary breakdown.”

“Could you be more specific?”

“Well, the stardrive’s out.” Mykl said sheepishly, “Way, way out. No way I can fix it.”

“Our techs can probably have a go at it when we get there.” Said Nordyke. d’Angelo was a proud man and the inconvenience was an embarrassment to him. Pegasus was a sore point, especially when she needed repairs. Usually he would have to take out a loan or empty out his bank account. Repairs were made when and if finances could allow and, as a result, Pegasus was no longer exactly shipyard specification – in fact, she’d been extensively modified. Civilian corporations insured their ships against deep space breakdowns, but insurance companies would only insure ships that were at least 98% space worthy. So that left him at Gods good mercy and the first ship to answer an S.O.S. He doubted he had enough in the bank to cover repairs. *If* she could be repaired. He pretty much thought this was

the end of the road for Pegasus. She'd gone for that Great Big Refit up yonder. He began tapping his fingers on the console.

"That's very kind, but – um – there's actually not much left to fix."

Nordyke gave him a blank look.

"They blew up." He said. He saw a look of sympathy flash across the kid's face during the awkward silence that followed.

"Anybody hurt?"

d'Angelo swallowed. "No. Fortunately not. Three dead, though." There was another awkward silence.

"Uh, right...um. How many crew have you aboard?"

Now *that* was another sore point with him.

"Hrrm. None. Hrrmm."

"Pardon?" Nordyke asked, unable to make out his muffled reply. d'Angelo felt like cringing.

"None." He said. The other looked perplexed.

"Dead?"

"No, gone." Said d'Angelo flatly. "They left. Didn't like the cooking, I'm told. What about it?"

"So you're alone?" Asked Nordyke, inadvertently prolonging the

agony. Rescue or no rescue, Mykl had had enough.

“Look,” he said, straining politeness to the limit of the word. “I’ve got no crew, no engines and the emergency power will hold out for about nine hours. If you’re not here by then, I’m going to have a really bad day, get it?”

“All right,” Nordyke parried in a civil tone. “Hold your position, we’re on our way.”

“What’s your E.T.A.?” He asked, noting that the Antares was nowhere within sensor range. Nordyke consulted someone off screen. “Eight hours. I’ll keep this channel open in case of further developments.

Till then, good luck!” The screen blinked into the spacefleet communications logo. d’Angelo let himself sag forward.

“Thanks a lot.” He muttered, “Hold my position. Ha-ha. Don’t worry, I’m not going anywhere.” Eight hours. They were cutting things fine. ‘Approximately eight hours’ meant anything from six to ten. When his power ran out, life support would fail. He could hold on a few hours more without lights or gravity – but not long without oxygen. Nine hours. How long he could hold on after that, he didn’t know.

* * *

Commander Smith had pacified Falconer and assured him for the umpteenth time that Antares would be ship shape within the

remaining three hours of the original estimate. Commander Smith had given his word. Commander Smith hoped he wouldn't have to eat his words, but that was his nature because he was a cynical man. This fact could have arisen from many things. An improper upbringing, an unhappy childhood or just one of those lives. He considered his options while remembering, again, that he had been *Commander* Smith for the last thirteen years. He doubted he would still have time to check out the bridge elevator before then. Be that as it may, he had finally reassembled the affected part of the stardrive. He'd re-torqued everything correctly, sealed all the couplings and every piece of electrical equipment was wired up as it should be. It was even cleaner than usual. He could almost make out his features in his reflection on the baffle plates. It even smelled nice. There was just one question that occupied his thoughts: *Why the hell doesn't it work?*

He couldn't understand why. It wasn't like the time when he, as an apprentice, had stripped his father's old methane driven car engine and rebuilt it with enough left over parts to build a respectable motor scooter. It wasn't like that. Parts in a stardrive were fiddly bits, but you couldn't put them in a wrong place. That's how they were designed. They either fit or they don't. It had to be something simple.

“Getting too damn old for this shit.” He muttered. He’d spent the last twenty minutes up to his elbows in fiddly bits. Footsteps approached him from behind. The voice identified the spectator as Ensign Morgan, one of his work crew.

“Any luck, sir?”

“Yes,” Smith grunted back, “All bad.”

He scratched his ear, narrowly avoiding a close encounter between his nose and the screwdriver clenched between his fingers. The space between two hydrocouplings was cramped enough as it was.

“I’ll have to check the feed conduits in this fusion inducer cooling module.” He moaned, again narrowly avoiding a screwdriver inflicted injury. “Better pass me those insulated gloves back there.” Morgan followed the directions given by the chief engineer’s free hand.

“Where, sir?”

“Over there – on the injector ducting manifold.” Said Smith, waving again. “Morgan?”

“Sir?”

“I know when I open this, I’ll find nothing wrong. Any ideas?”

“Sir?”

“I’ll try anything.”

"Weeell...My granddad's always telling me that the simplest ways are the best."

"So? What's your point?"

"Why not give it a kick?" He said, slapping the heavily insulated gloves into Smith's free hand.

"Hmmp." Said Smith, fiddling. "Why not. By all means. Good idea. Go ahead."

Ensign Morgan shrugged. Why not indeed? He'd always longed for a good excuse to abuse millions of credits worth of government property. Maybe it was a subconscious desire to screw the taxman for the screw you got. He chose a likely spot, grinned impishly - and let fly. The metallic clang of his safety boot was soon followed by a panic-stricken squeal from Smith, who was realizing that the insulated gloves weren't working.

"*Aaargh!*" He screamed, his legs flailing from the crawlway opening. There was a comical *puh* sound and Smith was blown across engineering, taking out three plate glass windows, a relay cabinet and a computer terminal. Shards of shattered safety glass were thudding to the deck, making artistic little swirl patterns in the smoke. When the last unidentifiable object that always goes *wonga-wonga-wonga* at the end had done so, a voice called out, "Mister Smith? You okay?"

“Yes, *perfectly* all right, thank you.” Replied a weak voice, bordering on concussion, insanity, or possibly both. “How are you?”

* * *

The briefing room was much like the rest of the ship, grey-blue walled and austere – although it did have a thick cut-pile carpet. The furnishings were more akin to hi-tec office furniture. An oblong table was at the center of the room. Filtered light fell on it from above. Seated around it were the chief medtech, Doctor Jaki Payne; Lt. Rorick Hanson, the chief of security; and Commander Craig Smith – who had only just had some of the good doctors attention and was trying hard not to break into a chorus of “Three German Officers”. Doctor Payne had to give him something for the pain, a sedative and also something to keep him awake. Unfortunately, this left him with a smile on his face, which was somewhat unsettling for the rest of the crew – who had possibly never seen the man and a smile in the same geographic location before. Because this was by way of being a calendar event, it was slightly unnerving. It was hard to tell if he was feeling all right. Silly. Of course he was. The man's as high as a kite. Finally, the briefing room door opened and Falconer strode in, followed by Ripley.

“Afternoon, all – let's get started.” Falconer began.

“Captain.” Greeted the doctor, starting the usual chorus.

“Captain.” Said Lt. Hanson.

“Hee-hee.” Said Cmdr. Smith, losing his grip a little.

Falconer sat down at the oblong head of the table, Ripley sitting to his right. His gaze swept over them.

“Ladies and gentlemen,” he began, “We’ve lost contact with a starbase. This could be serious. Starbase 91 is the major trading center for the Omegan Quadrant colonies. Fifteen percent of the Empires member colonies trade there, which makes it a rather important center in the area.”

“That would be near Tremaine, wouldn’t it, Captain?” Asked Payne.

Falconer nodded agreement.

“And Andronicus, Doctor. And Tegra, Alborahk...” he paused to clear his throat. “...Duhrendahl. This interplanetary trade makes Starbase 91 a target for... certain groups.”

“Like the Corsairs, for instance.” Ripley contributed, referring to the notorious space pirates of uncertain origin who made a regular nuisance of themselves, attacking and plundering small outposts and colonies on an irregular basis.

“Exactly. That’s why the starbase has a squadron of twelve small Phoenix mark three destroyers for security.”

“Twelve?” Said Lt. Hanson incredulously, “A lot of good they’ll do if the Corsairs ever decided to get serious!”

“Quite.” Said Falconer, reasserting himself. “No need for anything bigger has ever arisen, nor have they ever been needed. Also, a military starship passes by there every fourteen days, just to make sure. Even so, the Corsairs have never been bold enough to attack anything on this scale before.”

“Until now, I suppose.” Said Payne. She was eyeing Smith – who was staring at his fingers as though trying to decipher his fingerprints.

“Perhaps. All we do know is, we’ve lost contact with Starbase 91. We don’t know why – perhaps it’s just a down transmitter. Most of the Fleet is out on maneuvers in the Core systems, so it’s up to us. We’re the closest.”

“Don’t any of the local colonies have ships, Captain?” Ripley asked.

“Freighters, ore carriers, lode runners and somesuch. No ships with significant weapons capability. They seem not to want to go near – in case they do find out. They’re colonists, not soldiers.”

"I can understand why." Lt. Hanson added, "Corsair raiders have paid them a few memorable visits – and what with the hits they made on the local colonies last year -"

"Hmm." Falconer concurred. "The Christmas Massacres. They'd be pretty jumpy after that."

Ripley pondered over the subject. Corsairs. Pirates. Like some obscene twist of a children's fantasy, these marauders left Earth decades earlier and made a home for themselves in uncharted, unclaimed space outside the Empire's territory. Of course, there wasn't an Empire then – it was shortly after the Third World War. A few barely intact nation-states clinging to life, trying to rebuild civilization before the devastating Gimp War in the mid 2030's, when Earth had to fight off the invading Gimp. The corsairs made regular forays into Imperial space. Rumors, myths and legends abounded. Their new home was known only as Turtle Island, named after the mythical island colonized by Earth buccaneers in the 17th century. They were bothersome at first, merely prodding at the outskirts of the colonies. Later, they attacked the newer, weaker colonies with poor defenses. They seemed to become more confident with each passing year. As a case in point, last December, raiders descended on several colonies at once, laying them waste. For the colonists who survived, it was one hell of a Christmas. But to attack a starbase!

And win! That took *guts* – and firepower. They were either very confident, or very stupid. If, she concluded, that was what happened.

“What if it is Corsairs, sir?” She asked Falconer. “What do we do then?”

“Notify ‘Command. The Fleet on maneuvers will come out as back-up.” He sighed, looking them all over. “We have to be ready for anything. Lt. Hanson, when we approach the starbase, I want a log buoy recording as we go in and ready to launch in case of emergency.”

“Yessir.”

“Also, I want the ship on full standby during the approach. Weapons, shields, the works.”

“Sir.”

“Doctor, can you do something for Commander Smith. I’m worried about him.”

“Captain?”

“He’s grinning at me. The man never even smiles. Not even last week when that fat ensign fell down a Jeffries tube with a load of Lobian cactus fruit. And got stuck. Twice.” Payne gave a stifled chortle.

“How is he by the way?”

“Not too bad, sir. Still walking with a limp. Took two hours to get all the thorns out – with tweezers. Sorry, sir.” She said, stifling another giggle.

“And this one?”

“It’s the shots I had to give him. Physically there’s not much damage – a couple of bruises, mild concussion, nothing serious. The concussion may last a few days. He should be in sickbay, but you said we’ll need him -”

“I know what I said – and we will almost certainly need him, especially with the ship in the state she’s in. Will he be any use to us in his condition?”

They studied the engineer in silence. He was walking his fingers across the table, unsteadily, humming a tune. Falconer recognized it from his Academy days. The words sprung to mind involuntarily. It involved an innkeeper’s daughter, an axe, a chair, a four-poster bed, some rickety stairs, the devil’s wife and three German officers. It was quite a good song, depending on how much you’d had to drink. He’d sung it himself many a time he couldn’t remember, including the time he put invisible purple marking dye on the ladies toilet seats at the Academy before an inter-frat swimming gala. Made quite an impression - on his record, gated for three months. But that was long

ago. There were seven verses, but somehow you'd always manage to forget one. Anyway, he'd never heard it hummed backwards before. At least, not recognizably.

"Ahem." Said Falconer. Smith looked up at them, grinned lop-sidedly and yawned.

"Doctor?"

"Yes, Captain?"

"Get this man to sick bay. Do something for him. He's driving me crazy."

"Yes, sir." Payne helped Smith up and supported him out the door. Falconer continued. "By a strange coincidence, we're also en route to help a freighter that put out a distress call. Now, I believe their engines are beyond repair, not that we have the time to spare anyway. Due to the urgent nature of our mission, we will simply have to take the crew aboard and continue. How many are there, Ripley?"

"One, sir."

"One?"

"Yes, sir. Just the one. His name's Mykl d'Angelo. He's 26 years old, born on Eden, 2025. He fought in their civil war."

"I was going to ask you if you had any dirt on him, but I see you've already done some research." Said Falconer, wryly.

"Just the basics, sir," she said, shifting some notes in front of her. "He became a sergeant in their Demo army, before becoming a pilot in their air force."

"They had an air force?" Hanson asked, surprised.

"Mostly primitive WW1 type fighters. Anyway, he became something of an 'ace', scoring 85 kills. When the Empire assisted the Demo's in ending the war, he enlisted as a local volunteer pilot. They trained on and flew the Skorpiad aerospace fighters."

"Quite a leap from strings and struts." Falconer commented.

"By the age of nineteen, he was doing just as well as before. By the end of the war, in 2045, he was a Pilot Captain and an 'ace' with 207 kills to his credit. Six years ago, I met him at the Academy. He'd become fascinated with spaceflight and wanted to join the starfleet."

"Did he do well?" Asked Falconer, not unimpressed.

"Yes, sir. He did. Very well - graduated near the top of the class. He started out as a Lieutenant aboard the *Valdek*."

"With Captain Andersen," Falconer mused. "Yes, I know the ship."

"Later, he was a Lt. Commander on the *Santorini*. Then, as

Commander he served as an exec for Captain Akida of the *Liberty*. He received three awards for bravery and several notations for dedication to duty. That's all I could find."

"That's all?" Falconer probed.

"So he's out of the service?" Hanson asked.

"Yes." Ripley replied. "Resigned two years ago, citing personal reasons - but..."

"Yes, Commander?" Falconer asked, seeing the look of puzzlement on her face.

"Sir, when I accessed his file, so much of it was classified and inaccessible."

"Any idea why?"

"No, sir."

"You seem to have known this man reasonably well, Commander."

The Captain noted questioningly.

"If I had any idea why, I would tell you, sir."

Falconer took a deep breath. "Right," He said. "I see this d'Angelo is quite a colorful character. We must be cautious. We're investigating Starbase 91. If Corsairs were involved, then this might be an ambush. On the other hand," he said noting the shock on her face, "It might

not. His life is at risk, so we have to give him the benefit of the doubt.” He gave each of them, especially Ripley, a penetrating stare. “Once he is aboard, I want him confined to quarters, his every move watched – Hanson?”

“I’ll be on him so tight you’ll think he’s me, sir.”

“He can have one of the v.i.p suites. I don’t want him mixing freely with the crew. If he isn’t who he claims to be, the less he sees and learns, the better. If he is, no harm done.”

“Understood, Captain.”

Among the notes she’d brought was a picture. In it were two people, both in lieutenant’s uniforms. Happier times. Perhaps. The world seemed to fade away around her a little as she stared into it. His handsome features were crisp and clean. The smile on his face was warm and genuine. Whatever secrets Mykl d’Angelo had, she hoped they didn’t include being a Corsair.

* * *

Antares reached Pegasus’ location with only 75 minutes to spare. d’Angelos’ voice was filled with relief when Lt. Nordyke contacted him. Pegasus looked a sorry sight on the Antares’ main viewscreen. Her stern engine nacelle had all but disappeared. Bits of debris hung in space, slowly dispersing. Faint starlight glinted on the battered hull.

(Well, okay, at least on the bits where the paint had been blown off.)

Ripley had the ship on her monitor, under orders from Falconer to scan it inside and out for any signs of treachery. Such attention to detail struck her as borderline paranoia, but Falconer was determined to reach Starbase 91 prepared for the worst.

“Lt. Hanson?” Falconer called to the young 2nd lieutenant at the helm.

“Any other ships in the sector?”

“No sir, nothing.” He replied, “Only debris and fuel residue.”

“Hmm.” Falconer pondered. Nothing remotely threatening. “What about the ship?”

Ripley concluded her scans and reported the results. “Minimal energy readings, low power usage...They’re on emergency power. Half the batteries are damaged... Life forms...readings indicate one human, sir.”

“Weapons?”

“A few energy weapons, but nothing on line, sir. Engines look bad. I’d say totally destroyed. Hull integrity is close to 68 percent. Several serious hull breaches on three lower decks.”

“Cargo?” Falconer queried, still not satisfied, “Are they really a lode runner?”

“Confirmed – large bulk store located along the center of the ship, Captain. Uh- inactive electronics, mostly.”

“So,” said Falconer, smiling at her, “Mr d’Angelo appears to be *de facto*.”

Ripley allowed herself a smile, then went back to her scans. He was on the bridge, alone. No other life readings, aside from 17 rats and innumerable cockroaches and some other assorted insect life. His bio-readouts appeared to be good and healthy.

“Nordyke, get him on the comm.” Falconer ordered.

“Aye, sir.”

Seconds later an inset of d’Angelo on his own bridge appeared on the main viewscreen. He was smiling, relaxed.

“Mr d’Angelo, I am Captain Falconer of the ISS Antares.”

“Pleased to meet you,” Mykl replied politely. “Thanks for answering my distress call.”

“That was our duty - however, we’re in a rush and don’t have time to lose. Please prepare to be beamed aboard immediately. Please limit your baggage to minimal personal gear only – and no weapons.”

“W-wait just a moment – what about my ship, my cargo – they’re free salvage out here!”

“Sorry, Mr d’Angelo – but the ‘Fleet isn’t a taxi service. Once our mission has been completed you will be delivered to Spacedock 7, where you will be free to charter a ship to try and salvage yours. In the meantime we will appreciate your full co-operation.”

d’Angelo nodded. He had no say in the matter. Perhaps no-one would notice his ship and his cargo before he got back. It was out of his hands now, but at least he was alive and rescued. Besides, he could use a rest.

“All right.” He conceded. “Just give me 15 minutes to get my kit together.”

It took him just ten minutes to get some things packed into a bag. Once he returned to the bridge, he accessed the ships computer and set a timer to cut all remaining power. In a few minutes, everything except a locator beacon would shut down, but by then he’d have left. The line was still open, although he no longer had a picture on his screen. “Mr. d’Angelo?” Lt Nordyke called. His time was obviously up. He slung his bag over his shoulder and prepared himself.

“Here.” Mykl answered, “Ready and waiting.”

He managed a deep breath as the familiar pins-and-needles effect of the dematerialiser swept over him. The scenery rearranged itself before his eyes as he began to arrive in Antares' transmitter room. It was a familiar feeling, but still somehow terrifying. The hair at the back of his neck was standing on end by the time it was over.

"You all right, sir?" Asked a lieutenant in a security uniform behind a control desk.

"Yeah." He replied, almost hoarsely. "Just haven't been beamed for a while, that's all."

The words 'two years' pounding in his subconscious, he glanced around. There was an operators' desk opposite, with a kind of antechamber adjoining the entrance. The walls were utilitarian, bare and blue-grey, the deck a non-slip surface, the ceiling dotted with lighting equipment and the hidden gravity net. All in all, a pretty typical layout. He adjusted the sling of his bags on his shoulder and moved to step off the platform.

"Just a minute, sir." Said the Lt in the security uniform. "I'll have to check that out first, if I may."

Mykl shrugged. The Lt approached. He recognised the standard security side arm in a holster at the belt. As he reached out for the bag, he read the man's name tag. Hanson.

“Sure.” He said, passing it over. Hanson produced a scanning device and proceeded to search the bag. It didn’t take long. He handed it back to him, unopened. Mykl couldn’t help noticing a familiar expression on his face.

“Disappointed, Lt?” He asked conversationally.

“Not at all.” Hanson replied. “Follow me please.”

Hanson led the way. Another security marine followed up behind, sandwiching him in the middle. He was obviously under guard, which in his experience meant something was going on. The ship was on a mission, he’d been told. Obviously, the presence of an outsider or ‘unknown quantity’ was unwelcome. He was, he concluded, being treated with suspicion. But suspected of *what?* And *what* was going on?

“Are you taking me to Captain Falconer, Lt?”

“No, sir. The Captain will be along to see you later. I’m taking you to your quarters.”

“Ah.”

After a ride in an elevator and a trek down several winding corridors that all looked typically alike, Hanson stopped at a door, entered a code in the panel beside it and motioned him inside as it opened.

"This it?" He asked apprehensively.

"Home sweet home." Hanson replied.

"Am I a prisoner?" He asked bluntly, hoping to jar an involuntary response.

"No, sir." Hanson replied with apparent honesty, "But if you do need to go somewhere, marine Casey here will make sure you don't get lost. Oh – and – uh..." he added almost as an afterthought, "Stay out of the restricted areas."

"Very kind." Mykl muttered, half to himself as he stepped through the door. It slid shut behind him noiselessly. Lt Hanson stood close to Marine Casey, laying a fatherly hand on his shoulder.

"Sir?" Casey asked tensely. It was obvious the kid was nervous. This was his first time out, his first assignment that actually bore any element of risk.

"Relax, kid. Don't be so tense. You'll make out just fine."

"Yessir."

"Watch him. Don't let him leave before the Captain gets here. If he tries any funny stuff, stun him or call for backup. Don't be a hero. Think you can handle it?" Casey nodded.

Inside, Mykl was inspecting his new quarters, slash prison, slash cell.

There was a small lounge, slash reception area. The entrance behind him was probably the only one to the unit. It seemed to be a kind of v.i.p. flatlet. Facing him was a kind of transparent window, slash viewport in the bulkhead. It was made of a metal slash plastic alloy called durastress, and could withstand pretty much anything space could throw at it. Perhaps even a slash or two. Within certain limits, of course. It was rather comforting to see the stars outside. He could, quite ironically, see his ship drifting in the distance. '*Yep, that's my ship*' he thought acidly, '*some assembly required.*' It always looked pretty bad from the inside, but he'd never expected the outside to look that bad. He sighed. He'd never seen his ship looking like that at all. Not floating upside down, anyway. It was going to cost him a lot more than he could afford to fix that mess.

Sighing again, he returned his attention to his immediate surroundings. There was a bedroom adjoining the lounge to the left. He dumped the bag on the durastress coffee table and sidestepped a plush looking armchair on his way through. The bedroom contained a bed (surprise, surprise), a bedside table with regulation lamp, alarm clock and courtesy Bible. Facing the bed was a set of clothing cupboards recessed into the bulkhead. There was a full length dressing mirror to one side. He took off his black denim jacket and, dropping it carelessly on the bed, stretched in his black turtleneck

sweater, and yawned. A look inside the adjoining bathroom revealed nothing more than equipment typical of regulation officers' quarters. Very nice, he concluded finally. Very V.I.P. Very gilded. He settled down to wait in the lounge and lay back in one of the chairs that looked like a cross between a styrofoam sculpture and a lord-knows-what. The heels of his boots made a clink-clink sound as he put his feet up on the coffee table. Pegasus began to recede rapidly as the ship began to move. Presently she disappeared, lost and alone among the stars.

About twenty minutes later, the stars were barely visible as Antares was moving faster than light on a mad rush to somewhere to complete a mission d'Angelo knew nothing about. A semi-pleasant electronic tone, carefully chosen to be inoffensive, came from the door. Mykl slapped the microthin plastic-paged "paperback" crime novel onto the table. *Really*, he thought, *why bother ringing the bell when you're going to come in anyway?* It rang again. He pondered the situation a moment longer. He'd been rescued, fair enough. He was being offered pretty nice accommodation and a ride to a starbase not too far (relatively speaking) from his ship. Now he was under guard, awaiting the stern old Captain Falconer, which by the way was probably only a courtesy, not a mandate. Politeness has its limits. As the bell rang for the third time, he stood up.

“Obviously not the postman.” He muttered under his breath, before calling “Come in!”

The door opened. The uniform was red from the neckline to the top of the black boots. It had several pleasing curves and bulges on the way down. A woman. And a pretty one. She was smiling.

“Hello, Ripley.” He greeted, scarcely able to mask his surprise. The door closed.

“Hello, Mykl.” She said, slowly approaching. “I’m sorry about your ship.”

“Believe me, not as sorry as I am.” He said, looking her over. She looked well. Bright eyed and bushy tailed, so to speak, (i.e. a fox).

“Don’t I get a hug?” She asked, still smiling. He grinned and obliged her. It felt good. Just the feel of the brief contact was a bit of warmth he’d been lacking for – how long now? Damn! All of two years. Double damn! It was a long time without that kind of intimacy. She pulled away from him slowly, looking him in the eye all the while.

“I’m glad you’re all right.” She said. “You look good.”

“You too.” He chuckled. They sat opposite each other.

“Lucky me.” He said finally, “That you should be on the ship that came to my rescue. Thank you.” It was her turn to chuckle.

“My pleasure.”

He nodded to himself, entertaining the irony of it all. Then he grinned at her again.

“So, Lt. Commander Jones,” he asked, “How’re things in the ‘Fleet these days?”

“Good, Mykl. Pretty good. On the whole.”

“So – uh – what’s going on?” Why the big rush? There isn’t a war on, is there?”

“No, not a war. We think a starbase is in trouble. We lost contact five days ago.”

“So, let me guess – your ship’s been sent to check it out?”

“Yeah.”

“Corsairs?” Mykl probed. A funny look flashed across her face, something like worry. No, not quite. Doubt, maybe.

“Funny you should ask,” she breathed. “We don’t know. I hope it’s just a comms failure, but we’re going in ready for anything.”

“So I’ve noticed. Your Captain seems to have his hands full.” He observed. She looked suddenly troubled. He didn’t like the look she seemed to be giving him. It was the kind of look you give the dog when you find a wet patch on the carpet.

“Mykl.” She said, carefully, “I have to ask you this, but as an old friend, I want the truth.”

“Well,” he said weighing up all the sins of his past life to fathom what he could possibly have done that she would ask such a thing. “As an old friend, I’ll certainly try my best.”

She finally brought the words to her lips, forcing the issue as though she could hardly believe she was actually going to ask the question.

“Mykl...*are you a Corsair?*”

He laughed. He laughed and laughed – and laughed some more. Had it not been for the kind of week he’d experienced, he probably wouldn’t have found it quite so funny. He paused to wipe his eyes, saw the bemused expression on her face, then carried on, rocking from side to side in the chair till his sides hurt.

“Mykl, really.” She remarked humorlessly.

When he finally made an effort to stop due to sore sides, he looked at her as seriously as he could and said:

“No, Ripley – I am not a Corsair.”

“Oh. Well. Good.” She said, relieved.

She was glad he wasn’t a Corsair. Well, he wasn’t. He’d had dealings with them, though. You’ll find all sorts at the space ports in

or near the Omegan Quadrant, especially the newer colonies. He'd even got to know a few reasonably well at the bars there. Okay, maybe just one. He didn't like them much, except for old Dud Milligan, who'd become a Corsair in the first place because he thought they got lots of women. The only trouble was, like any traveling man, he ended up trying to remember too many names – or, more to the point – forgetting them, which is why some nasty old whore had emasculated him with a sharp implement. His nickname wasn't 'Dud' for nothing, nor was it short for 'Dudley'. But his feelings for old Dud were more like pity. He had no time for the rest of the breed, like 'Red' Dorn Schultz who used to brag about how many men, women and children he'd killed bare handed (most of them were), nor the likes of 'Strings' Levine, who used to cut off the nipples of women he'd raped and was rumored to string them round his neck. (i.e. He was high strung). Apparently it was a sizable necklace. To say he disliked them would be an understatement. Given the appropriate circumstances, he would love to mete out a little jungle justice.

"Ripley," he said less jovially, "Do you really think they could be responsible?" She was silent for a moment, carefully gauging an answer.

"I think that if the starbase was hit, then they did the hitting. I can't think of anyone else capable enough."

"Listen," He said, arriving at a snap decision, "If it *is* Corsairs, I'd like your Captain to reactivate my commission. I'd like a go at them. Hell, I could use the money too."

She looked him over a moment, a burning question in her eyes.

"Why'd you leave, Myki?" She realized immediately she'd hit a nerve. He sighed, sinking back into the chair. His eyes searched the room in a quest to avoid hers.

"I resigned. Got tired of seeing good people die." He said at last. "Too many good people die in this job." He was right and she knew it. She also knew he'd had plenty of first hand experience, surviving a tough planetary civil war.

"What happened?" She asked gently. He cringed inwardly. It was almost as if she *cared*.

"I was the 1st officer on the Liberty. We were on shore leave on Ahginos two years ago, when the riots broke out."

Realisation dawned on her face. "*That was you?*"

He nodded grimly. "We were held hostage by the revolutionaries for seven days. They tortured five of my men to death before the colonial police and marines took them out."

"What was it all about?"

He gave a sarcastic little laugh. “Drugs.” He said. “Can you believe it? They wanted the Senate to legalize mind altering drugs. It didn’t happen.”

“What made you resign?”

“Like I said, I’d had enough. I lost five of my men. Good men. They died horribly. Shane was one of them.”

“Oh God!” She breathed. She remembered Shane Marcos. He and Mykl had been inseparable at the Academy. Buddies to the end and all that. They were like a matched set of book-ends. They usually did everything together – mostly to other students. It must’ve hurt a lot to lose a friend like that. She began to understand the reasoning behind his leaving the service. Shane had been more than a friend. He was more like a brother.

“I’m sorry. I never knew.”

He nodded. She stood up.

“I have to go now. I’ll speak to the Captain – see what I can do. Hey, if you can get your commission back, security won’t have to waste their time watching you.”

“Now there’s a thought.” He said whimsically. “Thanks. ‘Ppreciate it.”

A while after she’d left, he still hadn’t picked up the book. Somehow

he didn't feel like reading anymore. He just sat and stared out into space.

* * *

Ripley had managed to catch Falconer in his office for a change. He'd been so busy whipping the ship into shape, she'd followed rumors of his whereabouts from one end of Antares to the other. The old man was sitting behind his desk, having a tea break when she arrived.

"Would you mind saying that again?" He asked, looking at her in a funny sort of way.

"I said: can't you reinstate his commission, Captain?"

"Why on Earth would I do that?" Falconer queried. "The man resigned. Clearly he wasn't serious enough about the job. He couldn't cut it."

"He made the request, sir. I'm just passing it on." Ripley said, mentally compiling a list of reasons, "If he were re-commissioned and given something to do, we wouldn't have to worry about him getting in the way, being a security risk..."

"Being a *damned* nuisance!" The captain exclaimed, chucking the teaspoon down on the desk. It made an irritating rattling noise. He took a sip from his mug. There was a picture of a cartoon cat on it doing something romantic, with the words "the galaxy's greatest lo..."

printed at the top. It was, obviously, old and - she prayed, probably not true. He shook his head.

“No, I don’t think so. What if he really is a security risk? No. Forget it.”

“I can vouch for him, sir - ”

“Nice try, but no, Commander. Now drop it, please.”

She sighed.

“Okay, sir.”

The desk-com beeped. Falconer scowled reaching over to answer the call.

“Yes?”

“Lt. Nordyke here, sir. We’re within sensor range of Bernardus.”

“I’ll be right up.”

Back at the bridge, they retook their positions. It was, essentially, the next morning. The night shift had just been relieved minutes earlier by the regular dayshift personnel. Antares approached the star known as Bernardus. Two of the worlds orbiting it were home to the human colonies, Tremaine and Andronicus. There were three other uninhabited worlds. Starbase 91 was in a stellar orbit relatively near

to Tremaine. It was a large station, not overly big, just large in comparison to a starship.

“Begin attempting contact.” Falconer ordered.

“Aye, sir.” Nordyke replied. “Standard frequencies.”

A few minutes passed. A brownish planet hung in the distance on the viewscreen. Andronicus. And in the distance, a smaller sphere, blue-green in color. Tremaine. Some time passed as they eased towards their destination at medium sublight speed. The first spark of suspicion entered the minds of the bridge crew when the starbase first appeared on the viewscreen and nav sensors. Moreover, as anticipated, there was no reply to their calls. The distant outline of the station appeared abnormally fuzzy, like a spreading cloud of debris. Falconer moved the ships status up to double yellow alert. As Antares closed on the station, the realization that something was horribly wrong became more intense with each passing moment.

“In range for hyperzoom, Captain.” Ripley suggested, her mouth suddenly dry.

“Proceed.” Falconer ordered. She keyed in the long range sensors, enhancing the feedback, in seconds bringing up a high-res image of what had been Starbase 91. They stared at the sight in disbelief. The Starbase was a devastated wreck. Black feathery burns mottled the

once pristine white hull. Parts of the docking ring, hell - most of the outboard superstructures were gone, blown away. Exposed sections of struts and framework reached into space from large gaping holes that yawned darkly at them. Some wrecked ships and chunks of the destroyer fleet stationed at the starbase drifted among the debris scattered across the area, dispersing with such infinite slowness. Silence seemed to pervade even the pulsating instruments. It looked like a graveyard.

“Double red alert!” Falconer barked, instantly restoring life to the bridge after the momentary paralysis. “Raise shields, standby all weapons!” 2nd Lt Fylyp Nikolls, aged 23, took the necessary actions.

“Shields up, Captain! All weapons energized and on full standby!”

They drew nearer to the devastated hulk. Falconer gave Ripley a disconcerting look. He was tense. Their worst fears had been confirmed.

“Scan the area for ships. Anything suspicious.” They were looking at a total loss. If there were any survivors, they weren’t on the station. Perhaps they would have gone to the nearest colony. That would be Tremaine. The lifeboats would make it that far. Perhaps Andronicus

at a pinch. Giving him a nod, she performed a sensor sweep of the area.

“A tanker... six destroyers... four loderunners – all dead, sir.”

“The station?”

She ran a scan of the starbase itself. The scanning equipment started flashing data on her monitor. She checked it out. Twice. A tingling sensation ran down her spine.

“Captain! Sensors confirm **one** life reading on the starbase!”

Falconer glanced at her over his shoulder disbelievingly. So did the others. The starbase seemed an unlikely place to find survivors of any kind. Survivors seemed highly unlikely. Even just one.

“You sure?” He asked slowly, no emotion in his voice.

“Yes, sir.”

“Where?”

“Command center, sir, deck 17.”

“Only one?”

“Just the one, sir.”

“Right – Helm.” He said to 2nd Lt Linson, “Bring us to within transmitter range.”

“Aye, sir!”

Antares moved in, entering the fringe of the debris cloud. Their eyes continued to wonder from their consoles to stare at the devastation on the viewscreen. Occasionally Ripley would spot an uneasy movement from one of the other bridge crew. Tension was rising.

“Captain!” Nordyke reported, “I’m picking up a signal from the station. I think it’s the base log, sir.”

“Put it on.”

The battlefield on the screen was replaced by a view of the starbase command center. There seemed to be an atmosphere of general panic and confusion. The base commander, an old man of around 70, was sitting in a command chair in the center of a large floor cluttered with control desks. People were milling about noisily. He was engaged in a heated exchange with several of his officers who were gathered around him. He was obviously agitated. The main viewscreen of the command center was out of the field of view and probably somewhere off to the right. Then the view switched to show only the main screen display. On it was nothing more than stars. At the bottom of the viewscreen the date appeared, superimposed by the log computer. What they were witnessing had taken place five days ago. The voice of a young man, presumably the station comms officer, was superimposed over the chaos on the audio.

“Two hundred forty four ships in battle-formation approaching at sub-warp speed from sector R87-Sigma 11! We have received no answer to our signals. Our calls for assistance are being jammed. The ships have been identified as known obsolete loderunners and utility craft. We believe we are about to be attacked by a strong Corsair fleet!” An alarm sounded somewhere in the background. “The escort squadron has been launched. We’re in full alert status!” The view switched to an external pickup, which showed a random assortment of rag-tag ships, modified freighters, and some unfamiliar looking vessels, all maneuvering in haste.

“They’re surrounding us!... Moving to strategic attack positions! - They’ve begun firing! We’re under attack! – I repeat, we are under attack!” A few flashes of energy weapons fire dotted the screen. The destroyer squadron began vainly engaging the Corsairs, who beat them from the skies with superior firepower and numbers. Then they concentrated their attack on the outlying superstructures of the base. Screams of station personnel were punctuated by loud explosions and pandemonium. Light flooded the viewscreen before static burst onto the audio and the view was blotted out in a snowstorm. A black screen replaced the chaos. There were words printed there. They read: REPEAT IN 20 SECONDS.

“That’s enough.” Said Falconer dryly. “Viewer forward.”

He swiveled round to face Lt Nordyke. He was ashen faced and silent, eyes blinking, stunned.

“Lt.” He called. Nordyke’s eyes found him. “Still no reply from the station?” Nordyke blinked again before confirming.

“No, sir. None.”

“Contact Dr. Payne. Tell her to meet us in transport with her medical kit. We’ve a survivor to rescue. Commander Jones, Lt Nikolls...” he said, rising “With me. – Lt Nordyke?”

“Sir?”

“The bridge is yours.”

“Yes, sir.”

The elevator doors opened and the three of them went in. Ripley’s mind was racing, milling over the shocking destruction of a largely civilian starbase. The devastation. The tragedy. The consequences were far reaching. The sheer scale of the attack itself defied all their expectations. Even a squadron of full warships would’ve had a hard time with such an opponent. Rag-tag as the Corsair ships were, they could still be a formidable foe. This probably added to the cause of the attack in itself. Overconfidence. They didn’t see the Empire as a

threat, militarily speaking. Opportunity presented itself with the few escort warships being away on maneuvers and the remaining small destroyer craft presented little threat. Perhaps the Corsairs *really* had a strong war fleet and weren't quite as overconfident as the Fleet thought. With a sudden chill, she realized what she was thinking. *Perhaps, she thought, we're the overconfident ones.* 'Command would never again be able to relax its guard in the Quadrant, nor allow any similar outposts to be under-defended – even during maneuvers. Falconer seemed to be pondering over the situation too.

"What do we do now, sir?" She asked. He looked up at her, his eyes gray with worry and strain.

"I don't know, Ripley." He said numbly. "We go in, get the survivor, contact Fleet Command and get someone to clean up this mess. One thing's for sure."

"Sir?"

"The ack's gone and hit the fan this time, all right. Confustication all round. Big time."

A few long silent moments passed, confirming Ripley's suspicions that poor old Smith had not been able to attend to the elevator yet after all. *The thing's still slow, she thought. The old man's going to kill me.*

Falconer looked at her seriously a moment.

“Stop at deck seven.” He ordered the car-computer. In a moment it stopped and the door opened.

“Deck 7.” It announced. He nodded out the door.

“Go on.” He said, smiling.

“Captain?” She asked, perplexed.

“Tell Mr. d’Angelo I’m reactivating his commission. You did say he’s had contact with Corsairs. Tell him he’s our...special consultant.”

“Yes, sir!” She breathed and, taking the cue, left. The Old Man was full of surprises lately.

* * *

To say Mykl was surprised would be a classic understatement. He’d made the offer slash request in moment of passion, when his temper was up, thinking of the cruel Corsair bastards he’d had the misfortune to do business with. It was just one of those things. He had, on occasion, taken a haul of goods on a seemingly legit contract, only to discover on delivery that he’d inadvertently traded with Corsairs. It had made his skin crawl. It was general knowledge in the military intelligence community that they were connected to the Terran Mafia and the criminal underground in general. There were even several corrupt officials suspected of dealing with them. Oh, well. He’d made the offer and it had been accepted.

“What the hell.” He said. “Why not? When do I start?”

It was about then she grabbed him by the arm and rushed him to the transmitter chamber. The rest of the boarding party was waiting by the time they arrived. There was Falconer, Lt Nikolls, Lt Hanson and another security marine. Dr Payne had just arrived also, and was talking to Falconer.

“All right, let’s get this over with, Captain.” She said abruptly.

“Problems, Doctor?”

“Problems? – We can expect the first psycho cases to start arriving at sick bay any hour now – some of our people had friends and relatives over there!”

Falconer grunted acknowledgment. She seemed to remember herself and added a muted ‘sir’. Dot the i’s and cross the t’s, he thought, mounting the launch platform. The others followed in close succession. Lt Hanson was handing out the standard issue phazors to the others. He gave Mykls to Ripley, who handed it to him. He took it. It was in an equally standard belt holster. Hanson gave him a funny look and took up a position so as to keep a close eye on him. Mykl returned the look and shrugged to himself impassively.

“You ready, Mr. d’Angelo?” Falconer asked.

“Yes, sir.” He replied, remembering his last encounter with the transmitter process.

“You can get a uniform from supply when we get back – Commander.” He added, before turning his attention to the operator behind the control desk. “Ready.”

“Aye, sir.” Came the operators reply. “Green?”

“Green.”

In a moment the expected shift took place. An uncomfortable moment later they arrived in the trashed command center. Obviously, the gravity net was still operational. It was warm too. Too warm. And humid. Most of the lights still worked, but some had been hit by fire and several were hanging from smashed, sagging sections of ceiling. A bundle of power cables had fallen through and snaked across the floor. One was still jerking sporadically as bursts of intermittent power flowed through it. The place was littered with detritus. A plethora of crap lay scattered all over the floor, like someone had emptied every container or desk drawer. Small personal effects lay underfoot. Corpses lay everywhere, among the carnage of smashed equipment. Pools and trails of blood had dried on the deck and wherever it had sprayed. Flies and cockroaches were abundant. The smell was... was – *indescribable*.

“Ripley.” Falconer called. “Scan?”

She began scanning with her handheld sensor device.

“Life-support is down. Gravity is only 89%. Air flow is... uh – zero. Air recycling zero. Temperature 43.5 degrees... constant.”

“Fan out.” Falconer ordered. “See if you can find anything. Find me a live one!”

Mykl moved away, poking around at the debris. They began to spread out, poking here and there at the chaotic jumble. The place resembled the set of a horror movie. The lights hanging from the ceiling cast weird shadows everywhere. Some of them were brighter, others dimmer. Some were even different colors presumably from the erratic power supply. A naked woman lay sprawled over a blackened control desk. Her eyes were locked into the ceiling above. Her clothing had been torn from her body, shreds of it clinging to her arms. Her legs were wide apart, her breasts ashen and gray. Flies crawled on her, where the thick blood had bubbled from the gash in her side over the desk and onto the floor. There was only a blank horror on her face, masking the truth of how she died and the horrors immediately preceding that. He was sickened. Corsairs were known to rape. They were known for many things. Terrible things, but *this*... The body of a young child lay sprawled at the foot of the desk, face

down. The little body was blackened, burned by some energy weapon, missing an arm and part of one leg. More bodies lay beyond, all showing signs of violent death, all ages, all sexes. Some wore uniforms, others not. Some were naked. All was chaos.

After several long silent sickening minutes of searching, one of the security marines called out. The team gathered around a pile of debris. There was a man there, on the deck, unconscious. His face was covered in blood and grime that had dried as streaks. Sweat glistened on his skin. A control desk had been thrown on top of him, pinning him down. They lifted the heavy object off him as gently as possible. At first it looked to Mykl as though the man were dead, but his chest rose and fell with breathing. Doctor Payne craned over him and examined him with a medical scanning device.

“Doctor?” Falconer asked.

“Broken legs, cracked ribs, internal bruising, severe concussion.” She listed, “Minor lacerations and bruises. Signs of dehydration and several serious infections. I think we’re in time. Better get him to sick bay asap.”

“Do it now. We’ll look round a bit longer.”

She nodded, then called Antares on her comlink and vanished in the glow of transportation.

Another corpse caught Mykl's eye. It was dressed in black. He shoved the body over with his foot. A few startled cockroaches scattered. The man was burly, black-haired and bearded. An explosive bullet or hollow-point had blown his guts out. He wore thick body armor, the kind used by some Corsairs for close combat, complimented by one or two pieces of phazor-resistant starmarine armor.

"I've found one!" He called.

The rest approached, curiosity plain on their faces.

"A Corsair?" Ripley asked on their behalf.

"That's right." Mykl replied curtly. "Bullet in the guts. Security marines use phazors. Must've been hit by one of his buddies."

"Friendly fire?" Asked Lt Nikolls.

"Very friendly."

There was a murmur of general approval from the team.

"Good shot." Said Falconer acidly. Then he turned to Ripley, saying: "Now we really know it was Corsairs. Think we need to look any further?"

"No, sir."

He looked at Mykl. "I realise we haven't had time to talk yet, Commander, but I think now you will appreciate our rush in getting here."

"I understand, sir." He replied, getting back into the swing of things.

"Think there's anything else we need to do here?"

"No, sir." He said truthfully. Starbase 91 was dead. A clean-up party could come out from one of the colonies to dispose of the bodies and start repairs – if that were even possible. "Nothing."

At that, Falconer took out his comlink and called the ship. As soon as they stepped off the platform on Antares, he made for the exit.

"Jones, d'Angelo, Hanson – briefing room – now!"

* * *

Falconer was sitting at the table, opposite him, tapping a stylus on the glassy surface. He felt, Mykl realised, as they all did. Angry. Appalled. Dehumanised. Seeing such atrocities was bad enough. Trying to imagine that *people* had done that was too much to conceive. People like that weren't – *people!* They were monsters. Things that deserved only to be killed themselves. No, *killed* was too plain – too mild. Too *good* for the likes of them. He felt that anyone who took part in that massacre deserved to be dumped naked into a swimming pool full of razor blades and left to their own devices. He

felt pissed off enough to oblige, too. If it weren't for the blood. God, he felt sick. Sick to the stomach. Sick to the soul. That smell. He didn't think he could ever forget it. In his years of service, both in war and peace, he'd never seen anything quite as horrible as that. Falconer looked drawn, old. His right hand quivered slightly as he tapped with his stylus.

"This is a delicate matter. A damn *dangerous* delicate matter." He said. "If the Corsairs struck so close to the capital planet, they must be very confident."

"They're getting bolder, sir." Ripley added. "We can't strike back because we don't know *where* to strike. They get their weapons on the black market, deals are done in cash, so they can't be traced on the Net. Heck, they probably *make* their own weapons."

"But their ships are old relics and converted freighters!" Said Lt Hanson. "They couldn't possibly win a stand-up fight with the fleet, so —"

"Why go looking for one?" Said Mykl, finishing Hanson's sentence. "You'd have to take armaments into account. At least average, I'd say. The damage on the station fits. Nothing short of slam torpedoes would make holes like that."

Falconer nodded. "You're right." He said. Mykl could see a look of indecisiveness on the old mans face. He looked tired. If *he* were the captain, he'd start a search of the surrounding system, do a sensor sweep of the astor belt out beyond the third planet. Corsair raiders were known to be wily enemies. If *he* had perpetrated this atrocity, he would've been interested to know what kind of response it would've provoked. A single ship, sitting in the astor belt for example, could monitor passing traffic unseen. The Corsairs would soon see if a whole squadron of warships responded to an attack. He almost laughed, for the devious brilliance of the mastermind behind the thing amused him. It was a test of strength. With the main fleet away on maneuvers, elsewhere, they were able to attack fairly close to home. If it were up to him, he'd search for a Corsair ship, beat its crew into submission, beat the location of its' base world out of the captain and –

"Got to see what 'Command makes of all this first." Falconer said, derailing his train of thought. He rose. "By the way, Ripley – better have Nordyke record that log transmission – Command will want a look at it."

"Yes, sir." She said, her eyes looking more in Mykls' direction than Falconers.

“And, uh – see if you can get a positive id on any of the attacking ships. Hopeless, I know, but worth a try.”

“Yes, sir.”

He left, followed closely by Hanson, who gave him a curt nod on the way out. The door slid silently shut, leaving him alone with Ripley. He was becoming acutely aware that she was still looking at him. It was making him uncomfortable. *I mean, having a good looking girl looking him over was fine – but this is Ripley, for God’s sake, was the primary thought on his mind.* It brought up all sorts of memories. All bittersweet, painful ones. He was making sporadic eye-contact with her. Her gaze was suggestive, intense. He couldn’t handle it any more. Swallowing nervously, he sprang to his feet and took a step toward the door. He paused to look at her over his shoulder. There was a strange light in her eyes. A strange *life* in them.

“Please.” He said quietly to her surprised quietness, “Don’t look at me like that unless you *mean* it.”

The door closed behind him, leaving her sitting silently by herself. She rubbed her hands nervously together.

“I’m sorry.” She whispered, a barely traceable note of anguish in her voice.

* * *

Captain Joel Falconer's office was located just near his quarters. It was also of necessity, close to the bridge. It was reasonably well appointed for an on-ship office. He sat behind his desk, the lights dimmed, staring into the display of the desk top terminal. He was engaged in a lengthy discussion with Vice Admiral Hobbs of Space Fleet Command, in the HQ complex at Ki Acropolis, Earth.

"When you say 'destroyed'," said the Admiral coldly, "I presume you are, of course, exaggerating?"

"No, Admiral. It's a total wreck. They shot it up, blew off the noncargo superstructures, beamed aboard and butchered everyone onboard. Women, children, staff... everyone. They looted everything. All the trade goods, the lot."

"And only one survivor?"

"Busted up he was too. Badly. I doubt he'll recover much, Jon. At any rate, he'll never be the same again. The log confirms no lifeboats were launched, so that's that."

"Tremaine and Andronicus?"

"No word yet. They're keeping quiet. Probably too afraid to make a noise in case they get the same treatment. Can't say I blame them."

"Anything else?"

“Yes. I’m attaching a copy of the Station log, and our own, to my report. By the way, I’m including a field-commission for a Mykl d’Angelo. He’s a drifter, got in a little trouble on a private ship. We answered his s.o.s. on our way here. Apparently he was a Commander a few years ago. He seems to have some knowledge and experience of Corsairs, so I thought I’d take him on as an adviser.”

“So?” Said Hobbs with apparent indifference.

“My attempts to find out about his past were met with restricted files. I’d like to know a little more about him before I decide to trust him.”

“Done.” Said Hobbs. “Anything else?”

“Yes.” Said Falconer, building a little pyramid with his fingers. “What do we do now?”

“Stay in the area. Check on the colonies. I’m going to recall the Fleet and send a squadron of dromons (heavy cruisers) to join you. These... Corsairs...” he grimaced at his distaste for the word, “We’ve got to put an end to this... once and for all.”

* * *

Mykl spent the rest of the day like a good adviser – at his Captains side, relating all his experiences with Corsairs. It took all of about two and a half hours before the thing degenerated into small talk by which

Falconer obviously intended to find out more about him. When Falconer grew tired of brick walls and evasive answers, he was released to have lunch, after which he was to remain 'available', should Falconer need his services. Thereafter, he spent the afternoon looking round the ship, alone with his thoughts. He stayed away from the bridge because that was where she'd be. He wanted to avoid her now. Perhaps he could deal with her shit later, but... not now. It had been years since he'd seen such a pristine ship from the inside. Compared to Pegasus, Antares was - bugger, well... it was like comparing a Porsche to a bicycle. One will get you there much faster than the other with no trouble, while the other was more work than it was worth. With the coming of the night shift the ship became quieter, run only by perhaps a third its usual crew number. Antares turned her face away from the ugly, eerie shambles that remained of the starbase. The dark star-splattered sky formed a haunting backdrop to life in a starship. They began to move away from the debris cloud, so that clear communications with the two colony worlds could be undertaken. Both planets had off-world communications, but these linked with Starbase 91, whose powerful receiver-transmitter arrays had provided a communications channel directly to Earth. With the destruction of the starbase, this link had been broken and neither colony knew whether the other was still intact – and was too scared to

send a ship out to investigate. The planetary governors, knowing they had no military forces to call on, preferred to wait for the Fleet to do it for them. Both reported that all was in order and that they were very, *very* glad to hear from a friendly starship again.

Mykl had eaten supper in the officers mess/dining room. It was quite good. Better than he remembered it used to be. She wasn't there. *It was probably for the best*, he thought in the deserted passages on the way back to his cabin, *tomorrow he could pretend nothing had happened*. He - she was waiting outside his door, holding a coat hanger with a red uniform on it. She was smiling. He smiled weakly, almost panic-stricken.

"Compliments of the Quartermaster, Commander, sir!" She said, giving him a mock-salute.

"Ripley -" he began, but she held up a hand to stop him.

"Mykl... I'm sorry."

"For what?"

"About today. In the briefing room."

"Oh. Yes...well," he said slowly, his vocabulary deserting him.

"Shouldn't do things like that when you've got a boyfriend."

"Boyfriend?" She asked, taken aback.

“Ed...Edward... something – you know, the guy you dumped me for!”

“You mean Errol.” She sighed, rolling her eyes. “That was *years* ago. Didn’t work out. He had stuff to do. Got posted to a different ship to do them.”

“Couldn’t handle seeing you for a few days every few months, huh?”

“Guess not.” She shrugged. “It was over a long time ago.”

“So were we.” Mykl said tiredly. “Why’re you opening old wounds, Ripley?”

She reached out, touched his hand gently. Her hand was cold. He could sense she was nervous too. “That’s just it. I don’t want to open old wounds – I want to heal them.”

He pulled his hand away, reluctantly, and sighed. He punched the keys beside the door. It opened. The lights flashed on automatically. He gestured her inside. “Lead the way, Dr. Jones.”

She brushed past him on her way in. The sweet scent of her by itself was arousing. He kicked himself mentally as soon as he realized what was happening. Ripley was beautiful. Man, how he’d missed her! By the time the door was closed he was hard and uncomfortable. He kicked himself mentally, again. How he’d resented her after that business with... Errol – back at the Academy. Their entire relationship was a sore point. It had been wonderful – while it lasted.

They first met in their second year in the Academy, in stellar cartography, if memory served. She was pretty, smart, at the top of her first year. She always said she found him attractive because he always seemed a little older and wiser than the rest of them. His reputation as an Edonian war hero also helped a bit. Then along came Errol, after they'd been dating for two months and serious for three. He'd even been considering a ring. Now *that* upset the apple cart. Rich, good looking – maybe almost as good looking as him – and charming too. He was never quite sure which of these factors had swung her over to him, or perhaps it was the fact that he was one of her lecturers. Whatever. It really hurt. It had been kind of like how a smoker or a drinker would change brands. One day she was seen laughing and happy in the company of Mykl d'Angelo – and the next, laughing and happy in the company of Errol Flynn. No, his name wasn't Flynn. It was Jackson, but it might as well have been Flynn. That was what hurt him so much. She sat down on the couch, folded the uniform on its hanger and flopped it down beside her. She was looking him over as he turned from the door, walking over. After that episode, he never saw her quite the same again. In fact, in many ways, his love for her had blinded him to her faults. She tended to use as many 'sirs' or 'captains' as syntax would allow, without really making it obvious how she was sucking up. He suspected her of

being a scheming social climber. God! What a teacher's pet she must've been at school!

He sat down beside her and smiled innocently.

"What did you have in mind?" He asked.

"I'm sorry about everything." She said. "I'm sorry I hurt you. I was wrong. I know I hurt you. I'm sorry."

She shook her head slowly. He could tell she'd been rehearsing this for hours and it just wasn't coming outright. He wasn't falling for it. Not yet.

"Yeah." He breathed. "I like the way you let me off. Real sensitive. Passed a Dear Johnny round the lecture hall." His eyes were locked with hers, returning her gaze. "Real sensitive."

"I'm sorry. What more do you want me to do?" She ejaculated, "Things were moving too fast, in between exams and drills and exercises – things were getting too complicated!"

"So you made them simpler by playing bouncy-bouncy with Lt. Jackson?"

She looked hurt. "That was uncalled for."

"Was it? It's probably not the only thing."

“I’m trying to fix this.”

“After all this time?” He said cynically. “What, five, six years down the line, when it’s convenient for you, you want to fix this?”

She looked away, a strange, worried expression played about her beautiful features. “It’s a big universe, Mykl.” She said softly, “You just dropped into my lap out of nowhere. It’s perfect. I’m single – you’re single-”

“Oh – so you assume I’m single?”

“Aren’t you?”

He sent her a hard look. Damn her! Yes, he was single – and for too damned long, too. Oh yes, he’d missed her too, despite everything. That’s what killed him. But - dammit! He had pride – she’d dumped him. She’d laughed and paraded around in front of him with her new catch, not caring for a millisecond if he was hurting, or how much. Not caring if he objected, nor what he thought. *Now* she wanted him?

“What if I am?” He asked indignantly. She reached over and put her hand on his.

“We could try again.”

Mixed emotions surged in his heart. Her eyes looked into his invitingly. The curves of her body – and her scent – were enough to

sway the argument, threatening to send him over the edge of his pride. Nirvana yawned before him. He was thinking with his dick. His will prevailed. He pushed her hand away, but gently. It was like throwing away money.

“You’re asking me to trust you?”

“Yes.” Was her simple answer. “I am. Do we still have a chance?”

“Maybe,” he answered, trying desperately to tame the animal down below. It was the best answer he could give. “It’ll take a little time.”

He had serious doubts. He wasn’t planning on restarting his career. He was just planning on hanging around long enough to raise the cash he needed to pick up where he left off. It was like tourism. Lots of people going off somewhere just so they could feel better about going home again. That was him. A tourist. Places to go, people to do and perhaps some excitement on the side. Perhaps, he considered after she’d left, a little female company wouldn’t hurt. Back on the couch, his eyes went back to appreciating the starscape outside through the window.

* * *

It was a starscape being continually scanned, for both navigational as well as security reasons. As the ‘night’ wore on, long range sensors picked up an object in motion on a heading that would intersect with

their own course, moving at sublight speed. The computer classified it as a ship, an obsolete type and alerted the duty personnel on the bridge. Its course was back-tracked to somewhere inside the asteroid belt close to the starbase. Furthermore, this ship was armed.

Captain Falconer was already seated in his command chair by the time he could check his watch. The little digits read 02:00 and he was far from being in a good mood. The alarm was still blaring all over the ship and he harbored serious doubts that anyone was still asleep. Mykl stood behind Falconers chair, observing events as they transpired. Only a few minutes had passed since he'd been forced to leave his bed. Ripley was at her post, as were all the regular crew who had retaken their positions somewhat earlier than planned. She was busy, scanning.

"Turn that damn thing off!" Falconer snapped. Someone obliged.

"Commander Jones – can you identify them?"

"It's an old ship, Captain. A loderunner, unidentified. No call sign or id beacon. Their shields are down, weapons off-line."

"Communications?"

"None, sir." Nordyke reported. "They haven't acknowledged us in any way."

"Hmm." Said Falconer. "Running silent."

"Maybe they haven't seen us, sir." Mykl offered. "Maybe they're asleep, no one on watch."

Falconer knew civilian ships were, as a rule, slacker than military ships. It was indeed possible. Even likely.

"Could be." He conceded, but their beacon should be on auto – Lifescan, Cdr Jones?"

"Twelve, sir – all human."

"Helm, plot an intercept course – what's their heading by the way?"

"They're passing B-2 now, sir – they'll pass over into unknown space in about three hours at present speed."

"*The Omegan Quadrant?*" Falconer asked Linson, turning sharply to look at him.

"Aye, sir."

"Nurdyke – signal them to identify themselves!"

Tic – toc.

"No response, Captain!"

"Keep trying, mister! Helm – you got that intercept course ready?"

"Aye, sir!"

"Implement. Ships status to general quarters – Ripley, report any

change in their status.”

Antares tore after the mystery craft. Lt Linson brought her a little to starboard to ensure that their course would intersect a little sooner with the other. The distance between them was decreasing with every passing moment.

“Still no reply, Captain.” Nordyke reported. Falconer thought a moment. On the viewscreen was a magnified image of the other ship. It was small compared to them, dark. It seemed black, with no markings, no running lights. Its engine nacelles were lit up with power.

“Mr. d’Angelo.” Falconer mused, “Opinion?”

“Sir?”

“I’d appreciate any input you may have.”

Mykl had a bad feeling about that ship. It was of a similar type to his own, but perhaps a good deal older. It was a type common enough at any spaceport in large numbers. They were converted to suit all manner of tastes - tramp freight carriers, tourships – millionaires had them converted into yachts even. He imagined they would be favored by Corsairs. They usually were.

“Could well be a Corsair, sir.” He surmised.

“Nordyke?”

“Nothing, sir – not a peep.”

“All right.” Falconer muttered. “So that’s the way they want it...”
Linson- pass that ship and match its course exactly – in the same flight path.” He said, demonstrating to an astonished helmsman with his hands, “Move a little faster to put some extra distance between us. When there’s enough braking distance left for him – *stop dead and face him head-on. Got it?*”

“Sir?” Stammered a bemused Linson.

“Can you handle that, Lt?”

After a moment, Linson nodded grimly. “-Sir.” He muttered.

“Nikolls,” he ordered the weapons officer, “Standby to fire on them at that point – but only on my order.”

Lt Linson booted the thrust and the warship overtook the dark ship. In a few minutes, Antares entered the same flight path ahead of it and opened up the gap. If they stopped too close in front of it, Mykl knew. It would result in one of the more spectacular space smashes in history. As a matter of course, another unpleasant eventuality occurred to him. Supposing the other ship really was a Corsair? If

they were, they would be foolish not to avail themselves of the opportunity. He leaned over the Captains shoulder.

“Sir.” He called in low tones.

“Hmm?” Falconer replied, eyes glued to the viewscreen.

“Shouldn’t we raise our shields, Captain?” Falconer looked at him, blank. He sighed inwardly, leaned closer and whispered. “If they are who we think they are – *getting shot up the ass would be most unpleasant, sir.*”

Falconer straightened up. They were indeed vulnerable. The loderunner was, in fact, armed – and he’d just inadvertently provided them with a perfect target.

“Godamn!” He snapped “Shields up!” .

“Shields up, aye!” Nikolls reported, as though he’d been expecting the order. Just then, Linson’s helm console displays flickered, faded, came back – some bar graphic indicators and lights flashed meaningless data and – for a moment – the ship failed to respond to the control hardware.

“Oh, *frack!*” He spluttered.

“What is it?” Falconer hissed.

“Power surge, Captain... it’s okay...everything seems to be returning

to normal now."

When Linson judged he had about enough room left, he eased off the boost. Antares began to decelerate sharply. "Turning now." He narrated, hands busy on the hardware. Antares turned a sharp 180 degrees, the stars skidding across the viewscreen with the rotation. As yet the pursuing vessel was not visible on the screen.

"Mr. Linson. What's your safety limit?"

"Captain?"

"The minimum range. The amount of time you need to get out of the way if they don't stop?"

"Um. Twenty seconds, sir... Make it three hundred clicks."

Falconer nodded. "Ripley, what's their status?"

"No change, sir ."

"Range One thousand point two-five clicks and closing!" Linson reported. "Bearing zero point zero degrees bowside, coming in hot and red!"

"E.T.A.?"

"Two minutes, thirty seconds, Captain." Ripley replied. "Still no acknowledgment."

"We're in front of them, dammit!" The Captain cursed, "And by thunder, they'll notice us all right!"

"Heading steady... Speed...steady... Range 577.80 clicks...closing!"

"*Brace for impact!*" Falconer ordered. "*Nikolls – at 350 clicks, give him full slam torpedoes – all launchers!*"

"*Aye sir!*" Nikolls replied, busy, "***Slam torpedoes on line – battle status active!***"

"*Range?*"

"*496 and closing!*"

Mykls eyes were momentarily shut in prayer, for help, for getting through it all – to get out of this shit in one piece. Prayer that the other ship had seen them and weren't about to go to warp. In all likelihood, nobody would ever find the black box.

"*386 and closing!*"

"*Ready weapons, ready helm!*"

"*Captain!*" Ripley called, "*They're reducing speed!*"

"*Hold fire!*" Now he had a reaction,, Falconer knew he'd better be ready for anything. If, as he believed, they were Corsairs, he'd better expect a fight. "*Battle stations! Red Alert!*"

The appropriate alarm klaxon went off. The other vessel was still rushing toward them at high speed, with them sitting directly in its way. Although at this point it was still possible for it to veer off course and pass them by narrowly at that range and speed, Antares would still be able to get off a few good, clear shots should any such attempt be made. Mykl swallowed. He knew the other ship couldn't reach warp speed within such a short distance. To turn and run would only give Falconer an excuse to open fire.

"Weapons locked and tracking, sir!" Nikolls reported. The ship appeared on the viewscreen as a distant speck, rapidly growing. It was doing the equivalent of an emergency stop. It only required squealing tires to complete the effect. The speck grew until it became the prow of an average looking cylindrical freighter, slightly blurry from rapid deceleration. It was an ugly ship, Mykl thought. So for that matter was his own – but he'd grown fond of her. This one was unfamiliar and menacing.

"Ship stationary, Captain." Ripley reported. "Full stop, range – five kilometers." There were a few audible sighs of relief.

"What's their status?"

She checked her readouts carefully. She had twelve life readings. She switched to bioscan. Their pulses were up. There was a lot of motion, frantic activity. It looked like chaos. She switched to techno. Engineering was a disaster – power levels barely under control – but after such an emergency stop, she supposed that was understandable.

“Chaotic, sir.” She reported, “I don’t think they saw us till the last moment.”

“Weapons?”

“Shields and energy weapons off-line, sir!”

“Communications?”

“Still no response, Captain.” Nordyke replied. “I’m picking up a lot of shouting though.”

“Keep trying.”

Time ran on, seconds into minutes. Falconer leaned forward in his seat, perplexed.

“I don’t like it.” Mykl said to him. “They’re up to something.”

“*What’s going on over there?*” The old man asked, puzzled. “*What are they doing?*”

There seemed to be no answer. The other ships id-beacon was still off. Theirs on the other hand, was not. They would know who they were dealing with – even if they hadn't before – they'd know by now for certain.

"Perhaps they're wondering whether a thirty year old modified lode runner is a match for a full warship." Mykl speculated.

"Well," said Falconer grimly, growing tired of the waiting game, "If they're not answering, then perhaps they're listening – Nordyke, tell them if they don't answer we'll open fire!"

This got results, for scarcely fifteen seconds later, Nordyke looked away from his console and reported: "*Captain! They're hailing us!*"

Falconer nodded, settling back into his command chair. "On screen."

An inset window appeared on the viewscreen, overlaying the ship and the starfield outside. It showed an interior view of the other vessels bridge. A man dressed in black rushed into view and sat down heavily in what was, presumably, a command chair. He was fairly well built with neatly trimmed black hair and beard. He wore a black turtle neck sweater. He was also very visibly upset. In fact, he seemed livid.

"*What the hell d'you think you're playing at?*" He shouted, "*Who the hell d'you think you are? Playing 'chicken' in deep space! What-*"

Falconer rose, white faced, suddenly angry and held up his hand in a gesture for silence. The man fell silent. Another black clad figure passed behind him, out of focus.

“Surrender your ship to search and seizure immediately, or we will open fire!” He ordered in a level tone. The other man seemed dumb-struck.

“What’s going on?” He asked suspiciously.

“You heard me!” Falconer said, raising his voice. “Surrender your ship!”

When the freighter captain replied, it was with a cold, tempered voice.

“I have but an old lode runner. What chance do I stand against your ship, damn you.”

Falconer nodded. What chance indeed, he thought angrily. “Prepare to be boarded.” He said and signaled to Nordyke to cut the channel. The inset window vanished, restoring their view of the freighter. He looked round at the bridge crew.

“Assessment?” He barked at them all in general.

“They are armed, sir.” Ripley opined. “Perhaps too heavily for just a freighter.”

“What do they have, Ripley?”

“Slam torpedoes, military spec ion cannon, military spec shields and uh – something that looks like a railgun.”

“Captain.” Said Mykl. “In the light of this I can only offer my opinion. They seem to be wearing black – as do Corsairs. Their ship has been extensively modified and is heavily armed – just like a Corsair ship.”

“Your conclusion, Mr. de Angelo?”

“In my opinion, sir – if it walks like a duck and quacks like a duck...”

“They *are* Corsairs.”

* * *

The transmitter chamber on Antares was a hive of activity. It was abuzz with ten starmarines of the security section, kitting up with laser resistant body armor and checking a variety of personal equipment. Weapons were being double checked. Ripley was helping Mykl with his fasteners.

“Thanks.” He grinned at her. “It’s been a while.”

They overheard Captain Falconer talking to Lt Hanson, both occupied with their body armor.

“There are twelve men aboard, Lieutenant,” Falconer was saying, “Think your men’ll be able to handle them?”

“Twelve of them, fifteen of us – yes sir, we’ll handle them.”

Falconer grunted with satisfaction. They were boarding the jump platform now, arranging themselves in a suitable formation for when they arrived. Adrenaline was pumping. They were carrying standard issue Sanjan J-10 phazor pistols. Mykl remembered them well. They fired plasma energy bolts which had an electrical effect on the target. At the lowest setting they could inflict third degree burns at a range of 70 meters. At the highest, they could incinerate, cut or vaporize. The instantaneous high energy transfer effect was similar to a small localized explosion. Endurance was between 1500 and 2000 shots, depending on charge, setting and the type of energy cell.

“Listen up.” Falconer snapped.. “We don’t know for sure that these people are Corsairs, but we’re not taking any chances. Weapons out, keep your eyes open. Don’t do anything until they prove themselves hostile. Remember, the ships weapons will remain locked onto them until we’ve secured the ship.” He glanced round at all of them. “Any questions?” There was a chorus of ‘no sirs’. Fifteen weapons were unholstered. Mykl felt the cool grip of his phazor’s high impact durastress molding. It was reassuring somehow. The dematerialization effect shimmered around them, taking them across space into danger.

The boarding party's eyes swept round them, weapons following. They had arrived in a relatively small room, roughly a third the size of the one they'd left. A tall crewman, also wearing black, sat behind the operator's desk, blatantly ignoring them. Another man stood in front of an entrance to a corridor, hands clasped behind his back. Like a schoolmaster, Mykl thought, recognizing him as the man on the viewscreen. A frozen second passed icily. It was an adrenaline charged eternity. Finally, the man spoke.

"You've no right to do this, you know," he said in a quiet voice, directed at Falconer. "This is a commercial vessel, we know our rights. You're pushing your luck."

The old man stepped forward, outside the ring of marines. He waved a finger, thought better of it, then glowered, "You're pushing yours." He said, "Let's see how *commercial* you really are."

The other shrugged and, perhaps unaware that he was overdoing it, gestured down the corridor with a little too much zeal.

* * *

Meanwhile, back on Antares, Lt Nikolls was being troubled by a suspicion. He had just spent the last few minutes reviewing the log of Starbase 91. Something was wrong and that ship outside had something to do with it. He'd seen it before somewhere. He just had to

find out *where*. Fast forward it a *little.., wait* – stop. Pause it. There...*found it*. He reached out for his comlink.

“Bridge, this is Lt.Nikolls. I was right – that ship was in the log entry – at least it looks just like one of the ships that engaged the destroyer squadron!”

On the bridge, Lt Nordyke was stunned by the news he had just relayed to Commander Smith. Their eyes locked.

“But... if they're Corsairs, that means Captain Falconer and the others - ”

“- Are in a whole lot of *ack* right now!” Smith finished.

* * *

They were following the Captain down the corridor when the man suddenly wheeled round, grabbed Falconers wrist, flicked the phazor away effortlessly and grabbed him in a headlock. Falconer arms flailing helplessly, he gasped for breath. Mykl's weapon had come up instinctively, aimed at the mans' head. Silence had fallen, the marines aiming, but unwilling to fire.

“I can get a clear shot, sir!” He said to Falconer.

“He'll be dead before he hits the floor!” The Corsair growled. A group of his men appeared from around the corner behind him and took up

positions shoulder to shoulder across the corridor.

“Drop your weapons!”

Mykl faltered. Seven or eight men ahead, and a couple behind, all armed with a variety of heavy artillery. They were boxed in. Falconer’s eyes were fixed on him.

“Opinion, mister d’Angelo?”

He swallowed. There was only one way to play it. There was no other way. The alternative was suicide.

“We can’t do it, Captain. They’ll kill us anyway.”

The tension, already high to begin with, was already hitting 25 on his personal scale. Trouble was, his scale only went up to 20.

“You have no choice!” The Corsair went on; tightening his grip on the old mans neck. “Drop your weapons – *now!*”

He really had no choice. Either he gave up and they all died, or he pulled the trigger. No choice at all, really. He fired. The corsairs head exploded with a bang and a sizzling noise. Pandemonium erupted, quite abundantly. Marines and corsairs opened fire simultaneously. Somewhere in the chaos, Mykl dragged Ripley to the deck with him. Someone opened up with a heavy machine gun. In the confined space, the *chop, chop, chop* was deafening. Some of

the casings tinkling to the deck landed on him, still hot. Confident of their victory, the corsairs moved forward. Someone had discharged a phazor into the bulkhead and set it on fire. Smoke and fumes of burning plastic filled the corridor. He saw the chance and seized it.

"Come on!" He cried through clenched teeth and, pulling her to her feet, dragged her after him into the maze of tunnels of the ship. They ran at breakneck speed, coughing in the choking pall, the pounding of their feet not going unnoticed.

"On your feet!" They heard a stern voice bellow, "After them, *move!*"

They burst out of the smoke into the tunnel leading to the transmitter chamber. The tall Nordic blond crewman who had been behind the operator's desk was rushing towards them, laser halfway out of his holster. Two bolts from Ripley and Mykl burst his bubble. The Nordic blond corpse crashed limply to the deck and they ran on. The transmitter chamber was deserted. Suddenly, he stopped. She hit the brakes as the grip strained their wrists.

"Wait!" He panted.

"What is it?" She asked, as he ushered her onto the jump platform, relieving her of her weapon.

"Don't argue," he said tersely, "No time. Get help, bring reinforcements!"

She nodded, pulling him close. Their eyes met. Oh God, he'd loved those eyes, that face, the same face he'd compared others to. The face he still considered to be the most beautiful of all... those lips... Before he realized it, they were kissing. *No time!* The thought pounded inside him. He broke free, ran to the control desk, confirmed the settings; just so he didn't inadvertently send the love of his life into the nearest black hole or a parallel dimension or something like that. The push of a button sent her back to Antares. Meanwhile, a short distance away, Commander Smith stood looking over the shoulder of Lt. Nordyke.

"So they're all aboard that ship?" He had just asked. "How interesting." He remarked.

"Yes, sir. The original count was twelve. We sent over fifteen. The total count immediately increased to - "

"Twenty seven. I can count, ensign."

"No, sir." Said Nordyke, adding under his breath, "And that's Lt, sir."

Commander Smith looked at him askance. "Don't get cocky, Lt. - this isn't the time or the - "

"No, sir - the count went up to thirty nine!"

"Thirty nine?" Smith repeated, perplexed. "Math's hasn't changed into quantum physics since I left school, has it?"

“No sir, but –“

“So where did the others come from then?”

“The corsairs must’ve been hiding them, sir.” Nordyke guessed, “Somehow.” A variety of different possibilities popped up in Smiths analytical engineering mind. Things like scan inhibitors, or densified cross-plyed erronium, which if thick enough could diffuse sensor fields enough to disguise life signals, amongst other things.

“Never mind that now – can you pinpoint the location of our people?”

“Yes, sir.” Nordyke nodded, punching keys for the desired result. Smith paid particular attention to the little dots on the scan-map, multi-level display of the other ship. The dots seemed like enraged ants, rushing about.

“The little dots indicate the position of as life form, sir.”

“What color’s our people?”

“Blue, sir.”

“Hmm.” Smith mused. “Why’s all the blue ones flashing then?”

“Sir!” A replacement ensign at Ripley’s desk called, “I’ve picked up some power discharges – could be phazor fire, sir!”

"Life reading's dropped to twenty nine, sir!" Nordyke added in an urgent tone. When Smith's eyes returned to the screen, the little blue dots had stopped flashing. They had winked out of existence.

Another replacement crewman, an ensign called Kiola Lascoux was spurred into action by an incoming call at her com-station.

"Captain... I mean, Commander – "She stammered, causing Smith to pivot round to her, "Security says someone is trying to shift over."

"From over there?"

"Yes, sir."

"Tell them to follow maximum security protocols."

"They already are, sir. They're holding the pattern and – the entire marine unit is down there, waiting."

"Um. I see." Smith grunted, pondering the facts. "In that case... I... tell them I'm on my way. Lt Nordyke, continue scanning."

When Ripley was finally allowed to materialize on Antares' jump platform, she was confronted by a myriad of sweeplaser muzzled aimed directly at her. She didn't like it. The starmarines, the full compliment of the security squad, apparently, looked trigger-happy. They seemed eager to cut off various bits of her as soon as the order came. Some of them looked disappointed when they recognized her.

Others again, still looked trigger-happy.

"It's Lt. Commander Jones, sir!" A voice called out, a thinly concealed note of anticlimax evident. Commander Smith worked his way up front, squeezing through the ranks surrounding the platform. She heaved a sigh of relief.

"You were expecting someone else, sir?" She managed to quip. Smith looked at her condescendingly.

"Don't try to be smart, Commander – and don't look at me with those doe eyes of yours either – now what the hell's going on over there?"

"They are Corsairs, sir. They attacked us in the corridors, don't know how many dead. The Captain's been taken hostage. Commander d'Angelo and I managed to split away from the fight. I came back for reinforcements."

"Good girl. Where's he now?"

"Who?"

"d'Angelo."

"Still there, fighting, I suppose." She said, realizing that due to a minor glitch in the command structure of the ship, Smith was still in command until the return of Captain Falconer. While she may be the first officer, he still outranked her as well. She knew what she would

do – send every last member of the marine unit over and –

“What are we going to do now, Sir?” She asked tentatively. Smith looked worried. This was considerably more action than the man had seen before, at least from any position of command. He’d always fought his battles in the engine room, usually up to his elbows in fiddly bits.

“Hell,” Smith surmised, “This is going to be one hell of a hostage scene – if any of them are still alive. Hell, if they aren’t, we’ll blow the shit outta them.”

“We’ve got to board them sir, rescue them – send the entire marine squad and –“

“What we’ve *got* to do, Lieutenant Commander, is wait and see how things develop. If we just board them, they’d most likely kill ‘em before you could whistle ‘Dixie’.”

“‘Dixie’?”

“Never mind.” He said, not unkindly, “Come with me to the bridge.”

* * *

Footsteps pounded down the corridor as he ran. His com-link was gone, probably dropped it somewhere along the way. The corsairs weren’t far behind him at all. He reached a corner, turned and took up

a kneeling position and waited. Seconds later, two black clad goons pounded into sight. He pulled the trigger. The Sanjan spat death at them, but they managed to dive out of the line of fire. He sent a few more bolts to keep their heads down then ran for it. Above his labored breathing, he heard them scrambling to their feet, continue the pursuit. He heard two pairs of feet skid to a halt, then a voice roared behind him "*Shoot, fool, shoot!*"

He put his head down and ran still harder. Bolts whined past him, smashing sparks off the blue-grey walls. There was a side corridor up ahead, tantalizingly close, but would he make it? They were after him again, running, shooting wild. *Made it!* He burst around the corner, rushing straight into another corsair. Both writhed on the deck in pain, the others were close behind. Grimacing, he grabbed his phazor, made for the corner, turned and fired a few shots at his pursuers.

Zip-zip-zip-whang! A bolt smacked the corner above him, showering him with sparks. He fired again, keeping his head down. The two corsairs still rushing him. *Zip-zip-slap!* The characteristic sound echoed as one bolt cleaved the one mans leg off below the knee. The corsair, screaming, cartwheeled past him. The severed limb bounced to a standstill nearby, steaming surrealistically. The other one still came on, firing, roaring his battle cry in defiance. Bolts zipped by close, sending sparks leaping off the deck that would've singed his

eyebrows had he not rolled clear. Preparing to get to his knees, he found himself staring down a blaster muzzle. The one he'd collided with was grinning evilly. The man growled, before squeezing the trigger. A bolt ripped into his body armor at chest level, and then another. The shock sent him reeling backwards into the other corridor, where the other pursuer squeezed two more into his lower back. He crashed to the deck, breathing heavily. He was seeing stars, pins and needles numbness washing over him. Then waves of pain tore over him as the crabby looking figure of the last corsair leered over him and sneered: "Y'all have a merry Christmas, now!"

His last conscious memory was to recognize the taunt as a reference to the Christmas Massacres, and just as the lights went out, he thought "Damn him."

"I think I've found them, sir." Said Nordyke, busy as ever.

"Where?" Asked Smith, leaning over him again. Nordyke didn't really like Smith. The man smelled of onions.

"Five readings in what I think could be a brig, sir."

"Only five?"

"Aye, sir. But I think one of them could be a guard."

"So, then four of our people could be prisoners. At least they're alive. Can you identify them?"

Nordykes face seemed to drop. He seemed to want to say ‘what, with this equipment?’, but resisted the urge. “No way, sir.”

“Can’t we shift them out?”

“Uh, no, sir.”

“Why not, man?” Smith asked, pained, “Surely the transmatter can get a fix on them?”

“Not if you want sushi on the jump platform.”

“?” Said Smith.

“They’ve set up a nullifying field, sir. That’s how I knew it was a brig – it’ll scramble any attempt to lock on –“

“Yes, yes – I know.” Smith blustered, attempting to cover up his ignorance of the standard device used in most military brigs and places of detention to prevent the rescue or escape of prisoners by means of outside accomplices. “We’d end up leaving bits of them behind. No, that won’t do at all. Wonder where they got it though.”

Nordykes sensors picked up a change in readings. He checked.

“Sir, you’re not going to believe this – “

“What now?”

“The nullifying field – it’s been extended to include all of the ship – we couldn’t beam in even if we wanted to now.”

He was lying on something soft, almost velvety. He opened his eyes., wondering why he was still alive, let alone in one piece. His chest and back throbbed mercilessly. As he moved experimentally, he heard a voice call out, chiding him.

“Uh – uh.” It said, “lie still.”

He was lying on a padded purple velvet bench, which seemed to run along the walls of the room, except near the video screen and bar. The bar was ornamental, lots of heavy gilding. About ten or so steel ships bells hung from the wall behind it. He was groggy, but the cold shiver that ran down his spine was proof he was still alive.

“Blachart.” He murmured. “Captain Blachart. Blachart the Bloody.”

“I’m flattered.” Said the voice, now evidently coming from the direction of the bar. “How’d you guess?”

“The bells.” Mykl moaned, attempting once more to sit up. “Ships bells. Legend has it that you collect the bells of the ships you’ve destroyed.”

“Legend? My, my.” Said the voice, amidst the clink of glasses.

“Flattery won’t save your life though.”

An object on the thickly carpeted floor caught his attention. His body armor. He tipped it with his foot. The bolts had almost burned through the last layer. He felt for Ripley’s phazor. Last he

remembered, he'd tucked it into his belt. No such luck. Even his service belt had gone. Presently the man himself appeared from behind the bar, carrying a bottle of inky black fluid in one hand and two small glasses in the other. He eyed the dark-haired, bearded man approaching him. Blachart the Corsair was a legend among his own kind, let alone outside Corsair circles. He was a merciless operator, who spared no one.

"Why - " He breathed.

"Are you still alive?" Blachart smiled. The act sent another shiver down his spine. "Corbex 92"

"Huh?"

"The make of your body armor." Blachart continued, passing the dumbfounded Mykl a glass. He took it. "Good ol' Corbex 92. Saved me more than once."

The Corsair poured the inky black stuff into both glasses, not spilling so much as a drop on Mykl's outstretched hand. Blachart lifted it in a mock-salute, then downed it in one smooth movement. Mykl looked at it, sniffed it, and looked at it. To say it was strong stuff would be an understatement. Just the fumes were curling his nose hairs. He supposed the bottle had to be Teflon lined just to store it. The other motioned for him to drink it. He decided the quickest way was the

best, so he downed it, waiting for something horrible to happen.

“If I wanted to kill you,” said Blachart, “You’d be dead. The question is how do you intend to stay alive?” Mykl frowned, the grogginess fading away like clouds retreating from a summer sun.

“What do you mean?”

“Men like you are a breed apart. I like men like you. The rest of my crew are tough, maybe a little smart even – but not like you or I. You knew you couldn’t afford to surrender. How right you were too. Poor Seth never saw it coming.”

“What do you want from me?”

“I can use you. A right hand man like you would be most invaluable.”

Inside Mykl felt like screaming. What was going on? First the Fleet, now the Corsairs! Everybody seemed to want him to join up.

“You want me to join you?” He chuckled. “Man, you’re cracking me up!”

“You’re not a marine.” Blachart continued, unswayed. “You’re a ships officer, but you seem to have picked up some extraordinary talents – now where might that have been?”

Mykl straightened up unsteadily to his feet, aware that the Corsair’s eyes were on him all the way. In a bold, clear voice he stated: “My

name is Mykl d'Angelo, service rank Commander, service number 46979701 and that's all you're getting out of me."

As if sent for, another goon in black entered from an adjoining room, stage left, and poked a blaster into his kidneys. Mykl let himself be guided to the door.

"d'Angelo." Mykl turned to look at his captor. "Think about it while you sit with your friends in my brig, breathing my air, drinking my water."

"What'll you do with us?"

"You're a bright boy. You'll figure it out." Blachart gave him a mock salute and the goon prodded him out the door with the blaster. They were joined by another in the corridor, who grunted at him.

"That way!" He ordered, giving him a shove in the right direction. They marched on in silence, the clop-clop of their footsteps rubbing round the edges of his frayed nerves. What did Blachart mean? He had a warship with enough firepower to blow him to Orion breathing up his nose. Obviously if Antares knew the corsairs had hostages, notably the ships captain, they would be hesitant to open fire. Hostages. Human shields. That's what the man meant. How many were left? How many injured? If they were all in the brig, they were

unlikely to escape, leaving them at Blachart's mercy. There was only one realistic short-term chance of rescue – him. He had to escape before he was locked up too. He would love to let them lead him to the others, but by then any hope of escape might be gone. So he accepted that he would have to take the first opportunity that came along. He thanked God that Ripley was safe on Antares. Presently they reached a small chamber with a wide circular pillar reaching to the deck above. A faceplate blinked its digital eyes at them.

“BUSY.” It said automatically.

“Great,” Mykl commented. “A talking turboshaft.”

“Open up.” Said the other guard. “We’re in a hurry.”

“BUSY.” Said the machine obstinately. This caused the first guard to kick the opaque tube.

“OUCH!” It said, “LIFT NOW ON LEVEL ONE, LIFT NOW IN MOTION, LIFT ARRIVING – DING!” The door slid open silently.

“PLEASE STATE DESTINATION. YOU ARE NOW ON LEVEL TWO.”

“Deck three.” Number One grunted. The door closed.

“So this is the one who got young Nick.” Number Two said coldly.

“Yeah.” Said Number One, “He’ll have a cyber-leg the rest of his life.”

“Yeah,” said Mykl, adding to the conversation, “Maybe while they’re at

it, the doc can fit him with breast implants and a tummy-tuck.”

The two glanced at each other a moment, during which he could hear the adrenaline levels peak. The bigger of the two shoved him hard. In such a confined space he could only go one way – into the other guard. He grappled the mans gun hand, kneed him hard and blasted Number One in the chops. Needless to say, by the time the car arrived on level three, it needed extensive redecoration. He walls also needed sponging down.

* * *

On the viewscreen there was a different man this time, although he looked similar to the first in that he wore black and was fairly dark otherwise.

“Sorry, can’t do that.” Smith was saying.

“I’m not going to play games with you.” Said Blachart, “Turn your ship around and go back where you came from.”

“We’re not leaving our men with you!”

“Your Captain and your men will be delivered safely to one of your colonies if you do as I ask. If not, they will die!”

“Give me one reason why I should.” Said Smith. “Quite frankly I could use a promotion.”

“Don’t talk, just *do!*” Blachart scowled, just as the line went dead.

Ripley understood the Corsairs reasoning, why he chose not to simply back away and leave the area. Because the Corsairs wanted to keep their base location a secret, just by choosing a course, that could tip them off. Instead, if they were to leave the Corsair behind, they wouldn’t be able to see where they were headed. She knew Smith understood at least that much as well. I mean, they *couldn’t* let them out of sensor range or Falconer and the others would be lost. It never even occurred to them to take the Corsair at his word.

“Damn!” Smith cursed, punching the arm of his seat. “Helm lay a course for Tremaine Colony.”

“Commander,” Ripley objected, rushing to the command seat. “We can’t just leave them like this!”

“Get back to your station, Lieutenant!”

“Sir, you are aware as I am, that I am the First Officer and that your continued command is unnecessary. I am asking you to stand down.”

“*What?*”

“You heard me, sir. We both know it is my duty, not yours, to command in the Captains absence.”

“Captain Falconer left me in command and I will not stand down until he returns! Now, sit down – either here or in the brig – your choice!”

She could see one of the security marines on bridge duty edging closer. So be it, she decided. She couldn't do anyone – or Mykl any good from a cell. Satisfied, Smith turned back to the task at hand.

“Helm, ahead slow, sub-warp speed. Maintain shielding - Mister Jones, direct all sensors back on that ship, inform me of any changes.” He thought a moment, then configured his plan. Then to the entire bridge crew, he said: “We're not leaving the Captain and the others. We're going to shadow them, watch and wait.” He smiled wryly at her, saying “They told us to leave. They never said how fast.”

“LEVEL THREE – DING!” Said the car computer. Mykl peeked out carefully, both weapons up, one in each hand. He almost gasped at the sight that greeted him. The ship's cargo deck was huge, stretching all the way from the bow to the engine compartment sternwise. Giving the hold some vertical sides were the other sections of the ship, including presumably the crew quarters etc. Crossing overhead from beam to beam were three sealed corridors, joining the sides of the ship, their latticework supports dividing the hold. He moved away from the turboshaft and the towering latticework that supported the connecting corridors with their central turboshaft foyers above. The

whole thing was quite awesome, very much like the interior of his own ship, just newer. It was so quiet he could hear the silence.

The hold was packed full of wooden crates, of all things. In the age of plastic alloys and meta-carbon compounds, here were wooden crates! Loderunners often used to cut wood from some convenient local world to use for packaging. He could also see some conventional stack-type containers packed to one side in a cluster. There was hardly any open ground, but he saw some established, but random pathways amid the towering stacks of desk-sized crates. His first priority was to survive. As soon as his escape was discovered, they would come looking for him. He needed a plan. Antares was obviously unable to beam them out, or they would already have done so. They couldn't fire at them because of the danger to the hostages. He decided he had to weaken them from the inside, cause enough chaos so that perhaps Antares would see an opportunity to intervene.

Right! Let's see what's in these boxes!

He hoped his youth growing up in the middle of a raging planetary civil war hadn't gone wasted. Depending on how well he could improvise. He would set up a series of booby-traps. He chose a crate at random. It was nailed shut, so he blasted a corner off. When the smoke cleared from the hole, he inserted a hand carefully. He withdrew the melted remains of a portable pc, still bubbling from the heat. Well that

was clearly no good, so he let it drop back on top of the crate. His eyes fell on a nearby container of the standard type used by most commercial ships. A logo on the side read: "Star – Cor : We'll take your lode!" The doors at the end opened easily. Inside he found stacks of plasti-steel packing cases, the type used to transport new weapons, direct from the manufacturer. Inside the first he found grenades, minus detonators. Those were in the next pile. There were also 45mm autoshotguns (with the seal of the Law Enforcement Ministry sunk in the durastress butts, Uzi mark 20's, heavy-duty machine-guns with bipods and ammo-belts. He even found some antipersonnel mines, manufactured on Eden, his home planet. He couldn't help the wicked grin spreading slowly across his face. What next? He spent some quality time setting up booby traps, also checking for good places where he could find cover, hiding a few extra weapons in strategic places as well. Sitting back for a rest, he decided the best way to take on the whole corsair crew would be to get them in one place. The cargo hold would be ideal (!), but to get them here, he'd have to attract their attention. How? All right, I'll tell you.

A case of C-10 plastic explosive is about the size of a large brief case. The content is light and has no detectable scent, so it's perfect for smuggling. It can be shaped or molded to suit the task. An electric

charge delivered by means of the detonator is enough to set it off. Mykl propped a box of junk against the elevator door to keep it open while he worked. The bodies of Numbers One and Two were just where he left them an hour ago. He placed the case in the center of the car, opened it and carefully inserted the det into the explosive. He set the timer for 20 seconds and then pulled the safety pin.

“Take me to level one.” He ordered, clearing the doorway.

“DING!” Said the elevator, closing its door. Mykl was too busy running to care. He took cover behind a stack of nonexplosive crates and waited. There was an almighty bang and the lights flickered. Smoke and dust churned around him. Everything seemed to vibrate and the foyer halfway up exploded, dumping debris everywhere. There was a hell of a lot of noise as part of the latticework collapsed, taking the foyer down with it. When he dared look, flames were blazing from the remaining corridor on the starboard side. The remains of the foyer and other corridor blazing skeletons amongst the stacks of crates. Grinning wickedly, he put on a gasmask and went on to his next project.

* * *

Antares had spent the last hour or so shadowing the Corsair at a range of only about 17000 kilometers, still within sensor range.

Routine had pretty much replaced the tension that had dominated the bridge since the blow-out between her and Smith, but Ripley still harbored a large slice of ill-feeling and resentment. On the other hand, she realized that from a certain point of view, he had acted in a prudent fashion. There really was nothing else to be done, other than to provoke an open battle and risk losing the Captain and the others in the process. Her thoughts dwelled on Mykl, facing only Lord knows what, fighting overwhelming odds. Perhaps he was captured already, maybe even killed... God, please, not that, she prayed. Suddenly her sensor display went berserk.

“Commander Smith.” She called. Smith looked her way without a word. “There’s been a sizable explosion aboard the Corsair. No hull breaches evident.”

“An explosion?” Smith queried. “Can you determine the cause?”

“No, sir – but I guess it could be d’Angelo, sir - he’s still fighting them.”

“Well apparently he’s doing something to upset them, Mister Jones! Let’s hope he gives ‘em hell!”

“Yessir.”

“Nordyke – what’s their status?”

“Slowing to a stop, sir.”

"They're on fire inside, sir." Ripley reported. "Life support is failing."

Surely *this* was the opportunity they were waiting for?

"Helm full speed ahead, lay in an intercept course – weapons on standby – let's give the man a hand!"

* * *

Finally, when he was beginning to suffer hunger pangs, Mykl saw an emergency hatch being opened from outside the cargo deck. A bundle of corsairs bundled in, armed with both fire extinguishers and hand weapons. A few immediately began putting out smaller fires nearby. Then Blachart came out, sending the crewmen scattering, looking as busy as possible. He was furious, barking orders, poking around.

"Spread out! Check the place! You there – you're with me! Max, Ysus, Parker – that way! Miller, Orbit, Sanchez – down the middle – the rest put out the fires!" They began to move around, checking corners. Most of them were spending some time wiping their eyes or coughing from the fumes and smoke. "Shoot to kill!" He roared. "He's here somewhere – I want the bastard dead!"

A pair of them were getting too close for comfort. One decided to check the very crate he was using for cover. He reacted quickly and blasted a neat hole through him with the autoshotgun. The other

behind him fired a wild burst, missed and dive-rolled for cover. The commotion brought the rest running, so Mykl decided it was time to do some running himself.

Zip-zip-zip-crash-ping! Their spray of fire hit nothing but wood and air as the corsairs arrived on the scene. The pathway had too many little turns and corners to get in a clear shot and so he made himself scarce. At the first hidey-hole he'd set up earlier, where he changed the shotgun for an Uzi mark 20. From there he could hear them shuffling about, cursing.

"It's Halyard, Capt'n" a rough, common voice said.

"I can see that, Gorram." Blachart retorted sarcastically. "Now find him and kill him!"

There was a chorus of 'Ayes'. Mykl smiled grimly, tensing his grip on his weapon. He moved silently to the point he'd chosen earlier, hearing footsteps. Two of them. No, three. Definitely three. Bracing himself, he suddenly appeared round the corner and fired a burst. The man right in front danced backwards into his buddies. The sound of the machine pistol still ringing in his ears, he ran down a pathway, the other two fast on his heels. He weaved around the corners created by protruding crated, bolts and bullets zip-zipping into them. Then he dive-rolled into an alcove and waited. One blundered

through a tripwire, setting off two mines with a huge bang, blowing crates into the air, showering the area with wood splinters, dust and burning contents. The fire was spreading now, and from his shelter, Mykl heard the pitter-patter of detritus raining down. And then the shouts and commotion of people coming nearer. Of his victims there was no sign, except perhaps for a piece of smoldering rubbish that might have been a boot.

He ran on, retreating to his next position. The next instant, phazor bolts whined overhead and he ducked for cover, to the sound of wood shattering and burning. The remaining corsairs were closing in. He looked round. In this area the crates were more loosely arranged, single layer, low enough to shoot over. He stuck the Uzi over and squeezed off four rapid burps. They ducked. One was too slow, jerking all the way back into Orbit. More bolts came in reply, thudding into the other side of the crate he was hiding behind. There was another ear shattering explosion as someone set off another booby-trap. He made a break for it. It was time for his surprise, he figured. He was quite pleased with himself for his ingenuity. Finally reaching it, he uncovered the piece of rip cord and unrolled it behind him as he went towards the emergency exit. Almost at his next "bunker" - . He turned to check what he'd backed into. It was the muzzle of a 45mm autoshotgun. At the other end was Blachart, who said, rather

disappointedly: "Well, I guess this means you won't be taking me up on my offer."

Mykl swallowed. He backed away, managing to conceal the rip cord in his hand behind his back.

"Drop it." The Corsair ordered. He dropped the Uzi. "You've been rather busy, killing my men, destroying my cargo - blowing up my ship in installments. Very creative. Killing you will be such a waste of talent."

All the time Mykl thought of the emergency door, wide open, tantalizingly nearby. Only about ten meters away. There was some cover, some drums, a few crates. He thought of what was attached to the other end of the rip cord and broke into a cold sweat.

"And now it's goodbye." Blachart said, breaking into a grin, ready to squeeze the trigger. "Any last words?"

Just then, another explosion among the crates eliminated a few more of Blachart's sidekicks, causing the Corsair to look away at the cloud of dust and smoke. He seized the moment, deflecting the muzzle of the shotgun with a kick. Gripping it, he forced it into Blachart's ribs, wrenched it away from him and applied it to his chest. The man staggered, fell on his back, gasping.

“Actually, I do.” Mykl said, he tossed away the weapon, picked the rip cord up again, giving it a hard, decisive pull. At the other end, something small but significant happened. “Y’all have a merry Christmas, now!”

With that, he ran like hell, the look on Blachart’s face stuck in his mind. He just made it to the emergency door with enough time to close it and hit the deck. It’s not easy to describe what happened next. Imagine a grenade stuck into a case of C-10 plastic explosive – which can be set off by either a small electrical charge or excessive heat - or fire. Imagine in this case a 3m shipping container stacked high with the same stuff. The ship seemed to be bouncing under him, the little armor-plate view port in the door went opaque with light. When all the shaking had died down, he dusted himself off and peeked through it. Flames flickered, rubble was blazing. It looked like Hell. Stacks of crates meters high were falling over, making quite a mess, adding to the inferno. Ammo could be heard popping and zinging. The door was hot to the touch. He decided Blachart was probably busy being rather dead at the moment. He didn’t think anyone in there could have survived. Actually, he thought it rather miraculous that the explosion hadn’t ruptured the hull and blown everything out into space. He was quite relieved it hadn’t, though.

Now all he had to was head for the bridge and capture the ship. All in a days work. No problem.

* * *

Ripley gasped. Her display was giving her details of conditions aboard the enemy vessel. Right now she was sure glad she wasn't there! *Myk!*

"Sir!" She reported, "Massive explosion, their engines are off line, fires everywhere, at least seven minor hull breaches, auto-seal is in progress."

"Confirmed, sir!" Nordyke added, "I'm reading fluctuations in their power grid!"

"Ohh – Myk!" She breathed. "Sir! Life scan shows only seven readings!"

"Are we in beaming range yet?"

"Yes, sir."

"Ready the boarding party!"

"Sir!"

"What is it, Jones?"

"Permission to join the boarding party, sir?" Smith waved her off tiredly.

“Granted.”

* * *

The lights were dim and the air still and pungent. The smell of burning was prevalent. The marines moved quickly down the corridors, in single file, avoiding the occasional electrical fires where power conduits had shorted out. Their weapons were raised penetration-team style, ready for anything. So far the only resistance they'd encountered was the air – it was like soup. Ripley followed close behind the point man, the platoon commander, Sergeant Maguire, sticking close by her side. The bridge was just up ahead, at the end of a short passage. They could see the door. It was half open.

“Hans, Loo-sing!” Maguire ordered, “Stay at the junction!”

The rest moved up to the door. Maguire followed the point man in, followed in turn by Ripley. The bridge was a shambles. A body lay on the deck. The main thought that popped up in her mind since she arrived, popped up again. It had each time she saw a body. *It's not Mykl.* The instruments looked like somebody used a shotgun on them. Repeatedly. The lighting was even dimmer in here than in the corridor. Most of the light was coming from the viewscreen, which showed the stars outside, dazzlingly clear.

“What took you so long?” Asked a familiar voice. Ripley tensed. The center seat swiveled round to the accompaniment of weapons whirling in its direction. The figure seated there looked tired-out and dirty, not exactly pristine.

“Mykl!”

He rose unsteadily to his feet. She went over and greeted him with a hug – and a kiss. It took him by surprise, then he relaxed. He had to admit, it was nice, hell - better even. He was just glad it was all over.

“You’re shaking!” She noted, “Are you okay?” He nodded.

“Yes. Just war-nerve, now that it’s all over.” He grunted tiredly. Their eyes met again, she was making love to him across the distance. Maguire was on the com-link to Lt Lassiter, who was with one of the other teams on the ship.

“The bridge is secured, Lt.” He was saying. “Okay, I’ll tell her. No, hang on – you better tell her.” He handed his com-link to her. “Lt Lassiter for you, ma’m.”

“Jones.” She said.

“This place looks like a war zone, Commander. You say *one* guy did *all this*?”

“Yeah,” she said quietly, eyes focusing on Mykl. “I guess.”

“Well, he just about fought this whole fight single-handedly – and nearly destroyed the ship as well. I wouldn’t want to get on his bad side any day. The man’s a friggin’ hero. The ship’s secure, by the way. You haven’t found the brig yet, have you?”

“No, not yet.” She replied. “Check the lower levels.”

“Roger, we’re on our way there now, but pretty much everything there is on fire or depressurized.”

“Okay – and get a damage control team over here to put out those fires – we may find something useful later.”

She looked at him, a new respect in her eyes. He shrugged. She smiled.

“C’mon, let’s go find the Captain.” He let the shotgun fall onto the seat behind him.

When they found the brig, the other team had already arrived. The prisoners had been freed. The cells to the side of the room were empty. A dead Corsair lay sprawled on the deck. Lt. Hanson and two other battered looking marines were standing around, just looking dazed. A pale figure lay motionless on the dull gray deck. There was a strange ethereal silence, looks of disbelief plainly visible on their faces. Lassiter was there too, looking subdued. Many of the Antares

crew had looked up to Falconer as a kind of father figure. He approached Ripley, sullenly.

“Captain’s dead.” He said simply.

“What happened?” She asked, taken aback

“I... I was in the cell next to his.” Hanson said. “He was complaining about chest pains. The guard over there wouldn’t listen. Said ‘*die then, you old fool!*’. Finally he fell and... uh... that was about two hours ago.”

She eyed the body of the former Captain sadly. He was pale, drawn, not really like he was in his life at all. Still, quiet. Peaceful. It was so unlike him, so unreal. But Joel Falconer’s days were done in this life and she realized the implications for her, for all of them. When they arrived back on Antares jump platform, Commander Smith was waiting for them. He didn’t see the Captain, but noticed a stretcher being carried by marines. It only needed two to carry, but for some reason, four were performing the task. There was a strange silence about them. There was a body bag on it, by its shape he could tell it was occupied. Ripley stepped off the platform, followed by the stretcher. She stopped in front of Smith who had an unreadable expression on his face. She reached over and pulled the zip down part of the way. Falconer’s face was plainly visible.

“Commander Smith,” She said huskily, “You’re relieved.”

* * *

Security team ‘C’ found captain Blachart in the remains of the turboshaft foyer corridor over the cargo hold, still alive. He’d somehow managed to climb up the latticework to get there before collapsing. He was badly burned and had suffered several shrapnel wounds. Tough bastard. He was put under guard in sickbay, still unconscious. Perhaps he’d live to stand trial for his crimes. Mykl wasn’t sure, but he felt the man deserved a trial in a higher court with the power to hand down the kind of punishment he deserved. Nine marines had died during the operation, and their captain. Lt Commander Jones was back in command as the Executive Officer, at least until ‘Command would appoint or transfer in a replacement.

And him? A nice shower in a tired, relieved silence was something he hadn’t enjoyed in a long time. Right now, he and his new/old love lay on the sofa in her quarters, enjoying the peace and quiet. It felt good, lying there in a bathrobe, in her arms, listening to the silence. The issues the had were out of his thoughts now, diminished by what they’d been through in those few hours. Insignificant. They felt numb. The lights were down low. They lay awake, pondering the future. She stirred, placing her right leg over him seductively.

“Hmmm...” she moaned. “What are you thinking about, Mr Special Adviser?”

“Not very much.” He replied, eyes closed. “Think I’ll stay on a while; make enough money to fix my ship...”

“And then?”

He smiled. “Take life as it comes.”

“That your new philosophy on life?”

“It works.”

She squeezed him hard in her arms and once more he became aware of the pressure of her breasts against him. He could feel her erect little nipples right through her bathrobe. She became aware of his involuntary response under her and smiled, opening her eyes. The next morning they showered together before he returned, bedraggled, to his quarters. Then followed breakfast at the mess hall, routine once again. He was starving – no, ravenous after yesterday’s performance. Last nights too, for that matter. As he devoured his bacon and eggs, he pondered over his predicament. Did last night really mean anything, or was it just a fling? Would there be some kind of a permanent arrangement, or was it going to be business as usual for Commander d’Angelo and Lt Commander Jones?

He hoped she wanted him for more than just a sex toy. She said she loved him and he hoped the words weren't just out of passion – on the spur of the moment, so to speak. 'No, face it, man' he chastised himself as he drained his cup of coffee, 'You let her get back under your skin again. You left your shields down and she's going to nail you with a full barrage.'

All those old feelings had resurfaced. He'd loved her once and, despite everything, there'd been many lonely nights he'd thought of her, missing her, cursing her for hurting him so cruelly. Could he love her again? Should he? After the Academy? He shrugged to himself. Perhaps he could. He knew if he walked away now, he'd never know. And he was the kind who *had* to know. He was going to find out. She would be worth the effort. Better be. Besides, he had to stick around to get the money to fix his ship, so he could try to dig himself out of the hole he found himself in.

He was just leaving when an announcement came over the intercom.

"Commander d'Angelo, please report to the Captains office."

Ripley was waiting inside for him, seated behind Falconers desk.

They were alone. He grinned.

"Isn't it a little early in the day for that?" He quipped.

She smiled, remembering the previous nights antics.

"Ahem. No," she said, "This is business" She pointed at the monitor on the wall opposite. "Someone wants to talk to you."

Vice Admiral Hobbs was on the screen, waiting. He straightened up.

"Morning, sir." He greeted. Hobbs went ahead, as formal as Mykl remembered him.

"Commander d'Angelo. Nice to have you back again."

"Thank you, sir. Good to be back." He replied, realizing that up until last night it had been a lie.

"I have the dubious honor of informing you that are herewith appointed Captain of the I.S.S. Antares. This promotion naturally bears full honors and privileges of rank, yadda, yadda, yadda. Congratulations."

Mykl's jaw went slack. He began to see stars without the aid of technology.

"Huh?"

"Something wrong with your hearing, *Captain*?" Hobbs jibed. Trouble with Hobbs was you never really knew... "It's yours if you want it. You do want it, *don't you?* I could always tear it up..."

"No, sir – I mean – thank you sir!"

Hobbs nodded in acknowledgment, then faded from the screen. He turned to Ripley, still dumb-founded.

“What the hell just happened?” He said numbly. She had left the desk and threw her arms around him, giving him a hug. She kissed him tenderly.

“What happened?” She mocked him playfully, “I caught up to you for a whole fifteen minutes, that’s what happened.”

“You –“

“Commander Jones at your service, Captain Sir.” She teased, throwing him a mock salute.

“I always thought mere mortals like me had to try keep up with the Joneses – not the other way round!”

“*Ha!*” She laughed.

“I’d better watch out,” he murmured close to her ear as they drew closer again. “You might dethrone me yet.”

She sank back onto the desk, Mykl leaning over as she pulled him down, laughing. “Isn’t it a bit early for *that*, Captain?” He was looking deep into her lovely eyes when he breathed: “As you were, Commander Jones – Captains orders!”

* * *

From orbit the picture was a pretty one. Tremaine was a lovely colonial world, typical of the older colonies. It was one of Earth's oldest extra solar colonies and, by now almost on a social par with the mother world itself. Its cities, although smaller and further apart, and its population about a quarter of Earth, left much open space and gave the impression of very careful planning. Its skies were blue and clear, the continents smaller, landscapes mostly pristine, untouched. Light winked on the dark side of Tremaine, one of several large cities there. The history of the colony began in 2035 when the first Terran starship to make an interstellar jump discovered it. It started as a farming colony and later a trade world for newer neighboring colonies. Currently its prime exports were gold, platinum and certain chemicals. It was a well known source for medicinal substances derived from the indigenous forests.

Yes, Mykl thought, idly pushing the light desktop pc display further away. From orbit the picture was indeed a pretty one. He'd been captain of Antares for only three days, three *days* and he already knew the burden of command. Being the CO of a military ship was completely different from simply skippering a tramp freighter. There were... *responsibilities*. He was... *accountable*. The chain of command, he remembered. He was once again a link in it. He no longer felt as relaxed as he had become accustomed to. Perhaps he

shouldn't. Things were different now. The burden of command, he thought. COMMAND. Like big, leaden, heavy letters set in Gothic script. He had thirty-four bodies in storage, ten crew - one, his predecessor. All were to be handed over to the authorities on Tremaine. Also in tow was the badly damaged corsair ship, *Undertaker*, also to be left at the orbiting Spacedock facility. Aboard he also had a man by the name of Walter Turlington. Quite a contrast with a name like Blachart the Corsair. It was a name steeped in infamy. Blachart the Bloody was feared by many poor colonists. Indeed, parents would threaten their children to behave or else Blachart would come and get them.

"Hphmm." Mykl grunted to himself. Walter Turlington. Figures. Of course, sometimes Blachart actually *would* get them. Not because they didn't keep quiet or wet their beds or put the cat in the washing machine – but simply because they were there. The Christmas Massacres had been one particularly bad episode in this saga. Four colonies attacked simultaneously by the pirate hordes, and only two years ago. Men, women and children were butchered wholesale. It was this incident which had earned him the tag "the Bloody". Up till then he'd just been 'Blachart'. And yes, he really did collect the ceremonial bells of ships he'd beaten. He'd seen them - and lived to tell the tale. In fact he'd just sent off his full report the previous

morning. The complete breakdown of events since their arrival at Starbase 91, including all pertinent data stripped from *Undertakers* computers. A message flashed across the screen of his desktop. He was expecting the call. He piped it to the big screen on the wall opposite. It was Vice Admiral Hobbs. After the usual terse greetings, he said:

“Listen carefully, Captain. All the data you sent us has proved invaluable. We’ve had intelligence on it all night, especially the data from the corsair ship. We’ve discovered the location of their base-world.”

He took a deep breath. Now *that* was something to write home about. Hobbs continued: “Despite fighting the Corsairs for so long, we’ve never actually known where they were operating from – except for a vague ‘somewhere in the Omegan Quadrant’.”

“Until now,” said Mykl, prompting.

“Yes, until now.” Hobbs agreed. “The data we got has given us an *exact* location, amongst other things – but it’s not enough.”

It never is, Mykl thought. He knew Hobbs from his previous career in the service. Trouble was, Hobbs knew him too.

“What’s on your mind, sir?”

“I need you to do something a little risky and unconventional, Mykl.”

His promotion, it seemed, did not come without a price. Then again, risky and unconventional were his best professional qualities.

“Sir?”

“Pick a crew for that pirate scow you’re towing and go to the corsair base world.”

Kaboom! Went the bomb as it dropped.

“Excuse me, sir, but did you just say what I think I heard you say?”

“That’s right.”

“To Meradinis?”

“Uh-huh.”

“*Meradinis?* The actual Meradinis? Turtle Island? The place where walking the plank is a national sport?”

“Nothing wrong with your hearing then, is there?”

“In that wreck? We’ll be sitting ducks, sir!”

“I know you’ll come up with something, you’re capable enough. Mykl, I wouldn’t ask this of any of my other captains.”

Mykl wanted to say a few things, mostly swearing. Right on top of the list was *‘flattery won’t get you jack shit’*, but he thought better of it.

“Is that supposed to make me feel better, sir?” He said instead, in resignation. “What can we find out that you don’t already know?”

“We need some visuals. Their military, their society, ships, anything to help us evaluate their potential.”

Mykl knew where this was going. All this *strategy* had to be going *somewhere*.

“There’s an invasion being planned, sir, isn’t there?”

“Bright as usual.” Hobbs quipped. “Yes, there is. That’s why we need as much on-the-ground intel we can get. Just a few hours, Mykl. That’s all I’m asking.”

“Right, Admiral. I’ll get a crew together, leave Antares here at Tremaine and go have a look round Meradinis.”

Hobbs face fell. “One other thing.” He said grimly. “The prisoner. It’s a sore point with me. Personally I’d like you to blow him out your air lock, but the War Council wants to cut him a deal.”

“*A deal!*”

Hobbs nodded. “They figure he’s just small fry. They want you to convince him to work with us.”

“Sir – he’s Blachart the Bloody!”

“I know.”

"He got that name for a reason!"

"I *know!*" Said Hobbs, who doubtlessly did. "Mykl – you know as well I do you *will* need a guide. Someone who knows the layout firsthand – somebody who knows how things work there. Otherwise it could be a real short trip"

"Yeah." Mykl admitted. He knew it was true. Going in was dangerous enough. Going in blind was absolute suicide. "I know."

"Offer him a deal. A full pardon, a new identity, a clean slate for his full co-operation."

"Yessir."

"I don't like it either. Just do it."

"Sir."

"And Mykl," Hobbs smiled, just before the screen faded, "Watch your back."

'*Watch your back*', Mykl thought in disgust. Bad enough having to go there. Even worse having to go there with one of *them*. Having that man on his team behind enemy lines was an idea that made his skin crawl. It was like asking Osama Bin Ladin to hold your shotgun while you tied your shoelaces. He pondered his predicament, thought about Blachart. They'd have to be careful with that customer. Might

get their fingers burned. He reached over to the pc, dialed sick bay. Doctor Payne was busy as usual.

“How’s the prisoner?” He asked.

“The Corsair?” She asked acidly, “He’s about the only patient I’ve ever had, the better he gets, the worse I feel.” Mykl nodded in empathy. “His burns’ve been repaired, shrapnel wounds too. He’s stable. Almost ready for a transfer to the brig.”

“Best place for him.” Mykl agreed. “Can he talk yet?”

“You mean to interrogate him, Captain?” She inquired. “Don’t think he’s quite up to that yet. Better wait till he’s in the brig.”

“No, just talk, conversationally I mean. Is he coherent.?”

“Very. Could be the pain killers.” She said. “He likes the nurses. I’ve had to watch him very carefully.”

“Bit of a ladies man, is he?” He chuckled.

“Not really, they’re all men.”

“Oh.” He said, followed by an uncomfortable silence. “I’ll see him later, then.”

* * *

“They want you to do *what?*” Ripley said in disbelief, her voice several octaves higher than usual. The rec-dec was small but pleasant, a

place where the crew could relax between shifts. It was empty, save for them. He understood her reaction, perfectly natural, her being upset. Going to Meradinis undercover was perhaps like going undercover into the Mob. Suicide.

“What for? They want to know if they have guns? – Sure, they’ve got guns! Will they shoot at you? You bet your sweet ass they will!” He held his hand up for her to stop. She ignored it. “Why not just go in those chic little black bags the coroners use - save you the trouble of taking a change of clothes?” He chuckled.

“Are you done?”

She sighed in exasperation and flopped back into the padded couch.

“I just... We’re just getting things back together and... Shit, Mykl – I don’t want to lose you!” He sat down beside her, thinking of what to say next. *‘I don’t want to lose me either’* was right on top of the list.

“I won’t lie to you,” he said. “It’s risky, but at least they won’t be likely to just start shooting at one of their own ships. If we can get that Corsair piece of shit to go along it should increase our chances. It should go a lot smoother.”

He would’ve liked to say that satisfied her, but he knew better. She would have liked him not to go, but she too knew better. They were in the space fleet. They had a duty. This in itself implies a substantial

lack of choice. All they could do was to accept that which they could not change. Live with it, if that was to be.

His next move was to order repairs to the Corsair ship. Commander Smith was hesitant, but accepted the assignment. By noon, Antares had docked with the orbiting Spacedock and all but her repair crew and marine detachment were on shore leave till 20:00 hours, ships time. A clean-up crew was aboard Undertaker, straightening out the mess.

* * *

It was time to have a chat with Walter Turlington, a.k.a. Blachart. The brig aboard Antares was bare, functional. Ten cells to a room, five each side. No typically sci-fi electronic barriers, no force-fields, no means of escaping just because of a convenient power failure. The cells had solid doors. They may have been transparent, but they were made of high strength durastress. It would take an industrial laser an hour to penetrate it. All were empty, save one. Inside the tiny five by seven cell sat Blachart the Bloody. He was on the floor, leaning against the far wall, seemingly asleep. Mykl activated the intercom. The corsairs eyes flicked open as if they had been that way all along.

“Do the accommodations suit you?” He quipped.

“No.” he said, unsurprised. “They do not.”

“You know, there is a bench in there – all you have to do –“

“This may surprise you, but this isn’t the first time I’ve seen the inside of a starship cell.”

“Really? I’m shocked! Been inside before, have you?” He said with mock surprise.

“Yeah. I know where to push for the bench, the water dispenser, the waste chute – in fact the only button I can’t find is the one that opens the door from here.”

“Cute.” Mykl countered. “I have something important to say. A proposal.”

“No proposal you make could make would interest me. Anything more than polite conversation’s going to have to wait till I see a lawyer.”

“All right.” He said, pressing some keys on the cell control panel beside the door.

“What’re you doing?”

“Activating the recorder.” He replied. “Anything you say or do will be recorded on the security log.”

“Why?”

“You wanted a lawyer. Well, there he is.”

Blachart glanced round the cell as if to identify the recording device. He couldn't. The cell surfaces were seamless, another anti-escape device. He shrugged, looking back at him.

“I'm listening.” He said, finally.

“I've been ordered to make this offer to you. It's not something I want to do.” He began. “The War Council is offering you a deal. A pardon in exchange for your full cooperation.”

“What kind of cooperation, *exactly*?”

“A specialist team is leaving on a penetration mission into the Omegan Quadrant. A scouting mission, a few hours, just in and out with time for a quick look-around. We'll need you as a guide.

“A guide?” Blachart repeated slowly. “A *guide to where*?”

“Meradinis.” Mykl said, delivering the punch line. “The Corsair capital planet.”

Blachart chuckled. He seemed to be enjoying the joke.

“Come on, Blachart. Do you really think the Corsairs could hide from us forever? We were bound to find you sooner or later.”

“How do you plan to sneak this ship of yours through our sensor net? How long do you think it'll last against our fleet?”

That's why we're going in your ship." Mykl said, almost smugly. "Your buddies'll think twice about shooting one of their own ships." Blachart was deep in thought. Clearly the offer was appealing. Or at least the threat he was facing was becoming clear. Mykl was getting through. It just needed a finishing touch. "*Whether you're aboard – or not.*" He added, for dramatic effect.

Blachart was silent, staring, miles away. "Do me a favor. Don't take up the offer. I'd really like to see them deep-fry your ass."

"I'll consider it."

"Fine, you do that." He said before he turned and left.

Later he had Lt. Hanson pick a team from the remaining marines, with instructions to rustle up black outfits approximating those worn by their enemies. When Ripley got hold of him, she informed him that the planetary governor had invited the Captain and his officers down for dinner and cocktails. Although he felt tired and still had more preparations to make for the mission, he realized he needed to relax. He was tense enough already, a little r'n'r should help to improve his state of mind. By the time they boarded a surface-bound shuttle on the space dock, he was actually looking forward to it. Ripley sat beside him, looking very radiant in a low-cut black evening gown. Doctor Payne wore a glittering blue evening dress. Lt Hanson looked

rather like the classic James Bond, if a little younger, in a dark blue tuxedo. He tugged at the collar of his own, but in a relaxed manner, not as though it were closing in on him.

The shuttle banked steeply, slowed and gently deposited itself on an expanse of lawn outside a large mansion. When the ramp was down he swore he could see a hedge-maze in the distance, lit up like everything else by spotlights about twenty feet up. A large white marble fountain was splashing nearby and if he strained his hearing, he swore he could hear peacocks. He used to call them distress birds, because they were always calling for 'heyelp!' Looking down he could see evidence of the local shuttle pilots skill – there was a red carpet leading away from the ramps' edge toward a brick path that led all the way up to a gaily lit white marble veranda. People were milling about, being social.

"Well," said Mykl, taking the first step, "Let's get on with it."

He and Ripley set off at the head of the party, followed by Dr Payne, Nordyke, Linson, Nikolls and Hanson. After a few steps, Ripley linked her arm with his and smiled at him. "Just try to enjoy yourself." She appealed.

"I'll try, but all the same I think they're going to fish for info." It was precisely for this reason that he'd instructed everyone going

planetside to plead ignorance of the events of the last week, especially the imminent mission to Meradinis. As they drew nearer they began to hear sedate jazz music. Some of the guests closest to them turned to watch their arrival. Some were smiling, others looked surly. A lanky elderly man met them at the foot of the stairs and introduced himself as the governor's butler, Cyril.

"His Excellency the Governor of Tremaine will receive you momentarily," he said primly, "Please enjoy His Excellency's hospitality until then." With that, Cyril led them up the stairs, halting at the top, before announcing them.

"Ladies and gentlemen, Captain d'Angelo and his Staff."

There was a brief drop in noise level, during which they were scrutinized as if under a microscope, after which the guests went back to their socializing. They were clearly not famous enough to warrant any real interest. They were *only* military personnel, after all.

"Well." Mykl shrugged. "Let's mingle. Where's the drinks?"

"Over there." She indicated a table heavily laden with several large crystal bowls of what must have been fruit punch. "Stay here, I'll go get some."

She vanished into the throng of well-to-do, the cream of Tremaine's society. They all looked fairly stiff, upper-crust types, all thinking

down their noses at everyone else. The young lieutenants had wandered off together and were trying to chat up a small group of apparently single young ladies. He smiled, remembering his own experiences, thinking, *you won't get anywhere, son*. He had no idea where Dr Payne and Hanson had got off to. *Well, let them enjoy themselves*, he thought. For some of them it might be the last opportunity to do so. His thoughts wandered onto Ripley. Sure, it was nice to be together with her again. He just couldn't help wondering if she was being genuine, or if she was just brown-nosing up to the Captain. Considering her track record... -what was it with him that he couldn't trust anybody anymore? Why the hell couldn't he just take people at face value? Stop doubting? Because he didn't want to get hurt again, that's why.

He noticed the Veranda surface, it was a gray slate material. The veranda rose high over the surrounding grounds, which were extensive. It had no rails or sides of any kind, but just dropped away suddenly into a 12 foot drop into a flower bed below. Rolling green foothills fading into the distance, lit by the tall spotlights. There were a few tables by the edge bedecked with appetizing snacks. He sauntered over to pick at them. Then there was a sudden commotion as a guest collided with a waiter. A silver tray clattered on the slate, sending several glasses rolling in all directions, spilling their contents.

The guest was a short middle-aged man, balding, in his forties, apologizing profusely.

“Quite all right, sir.” The waiter replied graciously, picking up the errant glasses. The guest looked sheepish and went after the glass which had rolled away rather faster than the others, just in time to see it drop over the edge. Mykl’s curiosity was tweaked. He watched as the man went to the edge anyway, seemingly eager to normalize matters, let it all die down. He stood at the side, looking over the garden nonchalantly, noting the drop, looking presumably, to see if he could locate the glass? He leaned over, to Mykl’s amazement, too far – and toppled over the side – doing a somersault before crashing into the shrubbery below. His shout echoed away in the classic comic style, causing a distinct pause in the atmosphere. There was not a sound. It seemed to Mykl, the upper-crust had sensed, with some frostiness, that to laugh was simply not the thing one does in polite company. What one did however, was to a) ignore the disturbance and pretend nothing had happened; or b) show moderate interest or perhaps even feign concern. “Oh, poor man!” Someone said from behind. “Is he all right?” He heard another say. Evidently he was, because Mykl saw him stand up among the shrubs, dust himself off and march stiffly to the stairs, not daring to look left or right. He suppressed the almost irresistible urge to laugh and grinned instead

as Ripley returned with two glasses of punch. She handed him one. The noise level had returned to normal.

“What happened?” She asked. Mykl almost choked on the punch. The man had come back up the stairs and rejoined the polite society, trying to look as innocent and inconspicuous as possible, despite the odd looks he was receiving.

“That little chap over there leaned over the edge too far, fell into the garden. It was too precious, it was like a cartoon.” He chortled. Their attention dwelled on the man, who seemed to be finding conversation rather difficult, and had drifted back to the edge, much to Mykl’s surprise, where he stood sipping a glass of punch. The man stood there a bit before risking it to look around. Then he was looking down again, probably to see why he fell over in the first place. With predictable results. No sooner had his cry echoed out of hearing than the whole veranda was reverberating to the sound of laughter. Somewhat uptight laughter, but laughter none the less. Mykl wiped his eyes, still fighting for air when the butler arrived straitlaced as usual.

“His Excellency will see you now, Captain d’Angelo.”

His Excellency the Governor of Tremaine was a grey-haired man in his early fifties. Samuel J. Grant was seated at his desk in his study.

“Captain d’Angelo.” He greeted, rising.

“Governor.” He responded curtly. Grant moved toward him and shook his hand warmly. A younger man seated in an armchair near the fireplace was sipping from a brandy glass, eyeing him with suspicion.

“Captain, may I introduce Mr. Mortimer-Scott, the mayor of Port St. James.”

“Mr. Scott.” Mykl greeted, half expecting a similar greeting. The man just stared at him with apparent indifference.

“Mortimer-Scott, Captain, if you please.” He replied gruffly, following up with a sniff from the snifter. *Charmed, I’m sure*, Mykl thought. Grant, unperturbed, ushered him to another chair by the fire. It was bright and crackling pleasantly. The chair was plush, comfortable.

“A brandy, Captain? – Cyril, a brandy for the Captain.”

Mykl sat back. Cyril returned with the brandy and served it to him. Mortimer-Scott sat surly as before, staring into the fire, stroking his glass absentmindedly. Grant leaned against the mantelpiece in a casual fashion. Mykl felt he was about to be questioned or interrogated. In a gentlemanly fashion, of course.

“Captain.” Grant began. “Tremaine is, as I’m sure you are aware, a rather important trade center. The attacks by the Corsairs are a

disruptive influence on our operations here. I'm sure you will agree this is all bad for business, Captain?"

He did, and not just out of politeness either. Having aggressors on your doorstep is very bad for business.

"It's a vicious circle, in a way. For one thing if they kill our labor force, we can't produce anything. If they steal our products we have nothing to sell, and if they scare our customers away we can't sell our products."

"Vicious circle." Mykl agreed.

"Very vicious, Captain. The Mayor and myself here, were wondering what the mighty Space Fleet are planning to do about it."

"Yes, Captain." This came from Mortimer-Scott. "Please enlighten us. What is the gallant military going to do to keep us safe in our beds at night?"

Mykl sampled the brandy carefully, digesting the concept. His eyes roamed the room. There was a big book on the desk. It was thick and ancient looking. It looked like rather heavy reading.

"Governor," he said after gathering his thoughts, "I am not able to give you any straight answers. I presume 'Command will increase security in your area. An increased military presence, more patrols, bigger

ships – that sort of thing. All I can say is that the Fleet is on top of things and you needn't worry."

This brought a guffaw from Mortimer-Scott, which Mykl ignored.

"Now, now." Grant chided, "I'm sure Captain d'Angelo has matters well in hand. Come gentlemen, let's rejoin the party."

The rest of the evening passed rather pleasantly. He had the company of Ripley, some passable music that superseded the jazz, and a good meal, though eaten rather stiffly around a large table in a cavernous hall whose walls were decorated with passé hunting trophies of indigenous wildlife, suits of armor and a variety of antique weapons. Finally, just before midnight local time, they boarded the shuttle and returned to Antares 2200, ships time. He was too tired to bother with Blachart, the mission, or anything else and decided to let things lie till morning. Ripley was better company anyway.

The next morning he was on the Undertaker, inspecting the handiwork of Smiths repair crew. The cargo hold was pretty much as it was before, although emptier. All the damaged crates and hardware had been removed, including the remains of the one elevator and adjoining corridors, which had been replaced with struts to support the ship's structure in that area. When asked about the battle damage, Smith had replied, "Amazing what a little filler and a coat of paint can

do.” They’d also spent some time boosting the ships armament, just in case. The engines had been tuned up ‘cos you never know when you may need a little more speed or power. Also, to cover their tracks still further, all record of Undertakers encounter with them was erased from the log. The ships systems were back in order and by ten am, while he was still aboard, Smith declared the ship *‘ready as it’ll ever be.’*

But Mykl knew they were not quite ready. Not yet. There was still something missing. Back on Antares, he went down to the brig. Blachart was still sitting, contemplating the universe. He turned on the intercom and the recorder. The Corsair looked up at him.

“Well?” He asked.

“Do you have any idea what they will do to me if I’m caught?”

“Probably something unpleasant. Look, you’re between a rock and hard place, the devil and the deep – see what I’m saying?”

“I get the drift.”

“If you don’t go, you will fry. That’s guaranteed. If you go, you may be caught, you may die – but if we pull it off, you get your pardon and we can all live happily ever after.”

“Okay.” He said. “I’ll do it. But your side of the bargain better be good.”

“It is.” Said Mykl. “Just remember – full co-operation. I got you on disk. You pull out now, you’re as good as dead. And no funny business, you got me?”

“On disk, d’Angelo.” Blachart said, smiling wryly. “When do we leave?”

Mykl smiled, hit another switch. The transparent panel slid open upwards.

“Now?”

* * *

Twenty marines had been chosen to play the parts of the Undertakers crew. Lt Hanson was one of them. Then there was the former captain of the Corsair ship, Walter Turlington, a.k.a. Blachart the bloody. Their ace-in-the-hole, trump card, secret weapon. Their guide through the Omegan Quadrant, through the formidable Corsair sensor-net to the Corsair home world itself. Did Mykl trust Blachart? Well, let’s just say he wasn’t going to ask him to hold his shotgun while he tied his shoelaces.

They wore black outfits that, Blachart assured him, were very passable. They had no specific uniform, as long as it was black, he said. He did insist that bandannas, eye patches and cutlasses would be overkill. At any rate they seemed very life-like to Mykl, which also seemed to make the Corsair even *more* real than *them*.

That brought him to Ripley. Saying goodbye was... painful. He realized how much more time he wanted to spend with her. How nice it would be to hold her when he got back. If they came back at all. He was determined to come back. For both of them. Hearing her say '*I love you*' when they parted was heartbreaking. Her voice was a hoarse whisper. It was so... final. Ripley found the note he'd left for her later. She handled it fondly, like it was fragile. He'd scribbled it on a little post-it and stuck it on the display on his desk where she'd see it. He felt it best described the way they both felt at the time of their parting.

'Gone on suicide mission.' It read. 'Be back later.'

It brought a tear to her eye and a smile to her lips, as he'd hoped it would. When at last it was time to leave, Captain d'Angelo was sitting in the unfamiliar command chair on Undertakers bridge. The tension in the air was almost tangible. Blachart stood at his side, his dark new crew checking their workstations. It was unsettling for Mykl, having a Corsair of such a reputation standing at his side. When you're alone in the dark, a man like Blachart the Bloody could be a very frightening thought indeed. The only chink in his armor Mykl could see was the mans real name. Walter Turlington! Sounds like a computer nerd – not a bloodthirsty space pirate with seventeen bells on his wall! No wonder he went by the other name, the one that sent involuntary

shivers down people's spines. He didn't exactly look like a Walter either. He was well-built, tough. Good instincts. A survivor. He'd have to keep his eyes on him.

Hanson sat at the combined helm and weapons station. Antares loomed large on their viewscreen, still attached to the Spacedock, as were they. Antares would stay there, pending further orders from Hobbs. No message for them. No communications at all, as per his orders.

"Helm, take us out." He commanded.

"Aye, sir." Hanson replied, working his console. "Standby for detachment."

Undertaker separated from the platform and turned slowly away from it to the specified course heading, turning their backs on the scintillating blue globe that was Tremaine. Then they moved out, aimed at a point deep inside the Omegan Quadrant.

"What's our e.t.a., Lt?"

"Um – sixteen hours, forty-three minutes, sir."

He stood up. The mission had begun. He looked at Blachart.

"Walk with me." He said. They left the bridge and walked a way down the corridor.

“What’s on your mind?”

“We need a quiet place to talk. It’s your ship – where do you suggest?”

“My study.” Blachart replied without a moment’s hesitation.

“Fine, lead the way.”

Blachart led him to his quarters, far astern. The hallway at the entrance was small, dark, but paneled in what appeared to be oak. The lounge was in stark contrast, quite large. The entire far wall was part of the ship’s outer hull – and every foot of it was transparent – a giant picture window onto space. An opulent lounge suite in the 17th century style took up some of the floor space. There was an ornamental shelf, a drinks cabinet, even an old Wurlitzer dvd jukebox. A crystal chandelier hung from the molded plaster ceiling. A holographic fire-heater blazed away in the simulated brickwork fireplace. The non-slip deck was hidden by a plush carpet. Blachart led him to one of several oak doors leading off the central lounge. It swung open on hinges. Blachart motioned for him to go first. In the center of Blachart’s study stood an antique desk, built of solid, heavy looking wood. On it stood an old brass and glass lamp. On the walls, at regular intervals were bookshelves laden with ... books, what else? But what was mounted on the walls between the shelves was the

biggest collection of antique weapons he'd ever seen outside a museum. There were weapons ranging from crossbows to 20th century pistols and assault rifles.

"Very smart." Mykl said. "Quite a set up." *Evidently our mister Turlington is a man of good taste.*

"Why, thank you." Came the curt, almost sarcastic reply. He went behind the desk, moving the plush rotary armchair so he could sit.

"Uh-uh." He objected. The Corsair stopped. "No, I don't think so. You might have some nasty surprises in those drawers."

Blachart shrugged and went to sit on the opposite side, the epitome of innocence itself. Mykl shifted into the seat behind the desk, trying it out for comfort.

"Very nice." He muttered. Then he opened a drawer to his left. Nothing. The opposite drawer. Inside, gleaming, lay a small chromed automatic pistol. He took it out, showing it to his adversary, who grinned.

"You don't like surprises?"

"Not your kind, thanks." Mykl sighed, relieved his instinct had been spot-on. Blachart sat there opposite him, the old velvet lined chair creaking as only a wooden chair can. Mykl checked for his weapon. The phazor was where it was supposed to be, in its holster, ready for

use. Another artificial fireplace blazed over to the right, casting weird shadows on the weapons display. Glinting steel. Cold and sharp and shiny. Daggers, swords, guns.

“You buy it – or steal it?” He asked.

“What?”

“Your weapons collection.”

“A little of both, actually.” Blachart chuckled. “You like old things? Antique weapons?”

“Not really. Just from a historical point of view, perhaps.” Mykl admitted. Blachart got up casually, and went over to the nearest panel.

“All these are originals. No fakes here.” He said, running his hands lovingly over a broadsword blade, polished and bright. “They belong in a museum, really.”

“I thought this was your own little private museum.”

“No.” Blachart smiled. “No, no. All these are functional. I use some of them from time to time. All well-oiled and in working order.”

“Hmm.” Mykl quipped. “What shall I wear today? The Uzi or the bazooka?”

“Ha!” Blachart laughed, in a way that was almost frightening. He sauntered over to another display. “Take this one for example – “ he said, lifting a submachine gun from its clips and cocking it in one smooth movement, aiming it at him quite casually. “Like all the others, I keep it loaded.”

Mykl’s blood suddenly ran cold. He hadn’t foreseen that these relics could’ve been loaded – hell, even in working order! He didn’t have a hope in hell of getting his phazor out with time to get a shot off. Blachart had him dead to rights. He’d screwed up, badly, and now his life would be forfeit. And there stood Blachart the Bloody, the muzzle of the ancient weapon aimed unwaveringly at his chest.

“Any guesses what this is?”

“My guess is –“Mykl said, firing a shot in the dark, “It’s a gun.”

“Oh, bravo.” The Corsair quipped. “It’s a German Schmeisser MP40, 1938 model, parachutists’ weapon. Sixty shot magazine, nine millimeter, 180 shots a minute, hair-trigger, collapsible stock and an effective range of 200 meters. The hair-trigger was my own modification, by the way.”

“And now you’re going to kill me with it.” Mykl said, flat. “Or even better, now that you have me as a hostage, you can take your ship back?”

“The thought had occurred to me.” Blachart returned in a voice that was purring like a kitten. It was as if he was talking sport over coffee, not about human lives. He saw the man’s eyes. They were hard and cold. He could never believe eyes that brown could be so cold. He would probably pull the trigger anyway, hostage or not.

“I thought we had a deal.”

Blachart’s gaze penetrated him, body and soul. It seemed a long time before he smiled again.

“We do.” He lowered the weapon, walked over to him and handed it over. Mykl grabbed it, and stared at him, relieved and enraged at the same time. “I just wanted to prove you can trust me.”

“I could think of better ways.” He countered. “More diplomatic ways.”

“Like?”

“Like saying ‘trust me’, for one.”

“Would you?”

“*What?*”

“Would you have trusted me?”

He shrugged. “Probably not.”

“I could’ve killed you, right?” Blachart was saying, “I could’ve killed you *all*.”

“What stopped you?” He found himself asking. Blachart sat down again.

“I’m tired of killing.” He said. “In many ways, being caught was probably the best thing that could’ve happened to me. All my life I’ve been stuck in someone else’s fight. Killing was the natural thing, the only thing. A while ago it occurred to me that my way of life was not... the most rewarding. Call it a midlife crisis if you like. I’ve been looking for a way out. A back door. An escape hatch. I want to pursue a better, more wholesome life – and you’re how I’m going to do it.”

“That was a very nice speech, you steal that too?”

“I meant every word.” He said, candidly. “When this is over, I think I’ll take a holiday.”

“Fine,” said Mykl, his pride still stung, “You do that. I’ll take a risk and trust you – but pull another stunt like that and you’ll be floating home. You got me?”

“On disk, Captain d’Angelo.” Blachart said, “Now – why exactly did you want to see me?”

* * *

With seventeen hours to go, there was still a long ride ahead of them. A lot of thinking, a lot of planning, last minute planning. The perfect

strategic commander always has a back-up plan. That's why they can always say 'right, let's go to plan 'B'. It doesn't always work out that way. Sometimes you end up on plan 'Z' and you still haven't achieved your objectives. He wanted a little advance info from their new guide. What they would expect when they arrived on Meradinis, where would they land, what kind of people could they expect to meet? What possible escape routes would they have if they ran into trouble? Would his improvised Corsair crew be convincing enough to complete the planned 5 hours of surveillance without arousing the suspicion of the local authorities? The threat assessment didn't look too good. They were, after all, outnumbered by about 5 million to one.

To complete their disguise, Blachart specified no Imperial equipment to be carried by the crew on Meradinis. They had the recon team assembled in the hold, arming themselves, apparently for Armageddon. They had been told cartridge firing weapons only, no energy weapons. Halfway through tucking his chosen handgun into his black waist sash, Blachart looked despairingly at Marine Casey, who was trying to look nonchalant about the 'chopper he had slung over his shoulder. Hanson was wearing a battle jacket and had attached a hand grenade to every available strap. Another marine had an m21 assault rifle with about 12 magazines in the appropriate pouches. Noting Blachart's reproachful look, he grinned nervously.

Mykl had chosen an Uzi with a thigh holster and had three magazines in belt pouches.

“You.” Blachart said to the young marine with the ‘chopper. “Yes, you – what’s your story?”

“Just wanted to be prepared, sir.” Casey replied uncertainly.

“What for, the next Gimp War? What is going on here, people?”

He pointed at Hanson. “What’s *with* you people? Hand grenades, heavy machine guns. You’re ready to blow the ack out of half the city!” There was a bit of embarrassed foot shuffling all round. Mykl noticed Hanson seemed to sway a little with each breath.

“It is usual practice to be armed on Meradinis, and in your case I strongly recommend it, but this will be a Friday night on Meradinis... You’re Corsair ships’ crew going on ‘shore leave’, you’re going out there to -” he eyed Hanson’s armament, “*You’re going out there to have fun.*”

He was eyeing them like a drill instructor handling a platoon of wet-behind-the-ears FNG’s. They sort of felt like they had been cast in the appropriate roles. Sort of. Blachart specified hand-weapons only, no grenades, or bazookas allowed. Mykl’s Uzi passed the inspection as it was, technically, a hand-gun, and was in a holster.

Back on the bridge a few hours later, Mykl was contemplating the future. He felt fresh after having had a few hours sleep. He preferred the command chair on Antares, this one squeaked. He was trying to forget the 'conversation' with the Corsair earlier. He had learned a few things. The man was dangerous. No, dammit – that was an understatement – he was *f***ing* dangerous!"

"Time's nearly up, Lt." he said to Hanson with perhaps a little irritation perceptible in his voice, "What's our E.T.A.?"

"We're practically there, sir. Twenty minutes."

"See any traffic?"

"Nothing, sir."

Undertakers' probing long range sensors were locked onto the only star in the area. It had four planets, one of them the Corsair base world. The whole system was surrounded by a vast astorfield. Like a giant fruit, Meradinis was at its rotting core. The two inner worlds were average-sized, the two outer ones surprisingly small. The astorfield seemed to swell towards them as they rushed closer. It threatened to engulf them just before Hanson throttled back out of light speed. They prepared to enter the astorfield. That's the moment Blachart entered the bridge.

"Ah," he said quietly, eyeing the main screen. "Home sweet home."

“Entering astorfield now.” Hanson reported. The ship eased forward at sublight speed, slowly weaving through the maze of floating rock. Fortunately it looked very stable, almost motionless.

“Careful, Lieutenant.” Blachart cautioned, “Do it snailwise. Your monitor won’t flash ‘game over’ if we hit one of those.”

Hanson just turned to give him a ‘screw you’ kind of look before turning back to guiding the old loderunner between the huge lumps of rock. Some were rounded, some jagged and sharp looking. Different sizes, all pebbles in the Creator’s Rock Garden. Blachart was looking – expectant?

“Didn’t you say something about patrol ships?” Mykl asked.

“Yes, they’ll be in here somewhere.”

“*In* the astorfield?”

“That’s right.”

“You mean like, *inside*?”

“Uh-huh.”

Both Blachart and Mykl knew – and doubtlessly Hanson as well – that navigating an astorfield wasn’t a job for just any helmsman – nor was it a trip for the faint of heart. Just cutting through it was difficult

enough, but they knew that to *patrol within* such a place took a special kind of talent and perhaps a certain level of insanity as well.

“*Captain!*” Casey called, clearly startled. “I’m getting a call on a tight-beam comm.-channel! Very close by! It’s an order for identification!”

“How close?”

“Within two hundred meters!”

“Don’t worry.” Blachart said in a calming way. “That’s a patrol ship.”

“*What* patrol ship?” Hanson exclaimed. “There’s nothing on my screen but astors!”

“Of course.” Blachart explained. “They use the astors as camouflage – this ships sensors aren’t as good as your military ships.”

“Right,” Mykl said, vacating the command seat. “Your turn to play captain – put on a good show, or we’re all dead.”

“They’re signaling again – they say they’ll open fire if we don’t respond.” Casey reported. Blachart retook his chair.

”Open the channel.” He ordered.

“Open – uh – Captain.” Said Casey from the comms desk.

“Undertaker to patrol, Captain Blachart here.”

“Undertaker,” came a gruff woman’s voice, “Give the passcode to confirm identification.”

“Standby.” He said, keying in several characters on the small keypad on the chair arm. “There – comms, send that.”

“Aye, sir.” Said Casey, transmitting.”

“Hold please, while we confirm.”

Seconds dragged by while this transpired.

“Undertaker, clearance for final approach granted. Welcome home. Patrol 5 out.”

The channel was abruptly broken off. Mykl heaved a sigh of relief. They seemed to have successfully penetrated the enemy’s outer defense ring. He smiled, giving the ex-Corsair a thumbs up. Blachart just smiled back.

“You ain’t seen nuthin yet.” He said in his quiet voice.

Meradinis turned out to be the first planet from the young sun. It was covered by green-brown continents sprawling fro horizon to horizon. Their coastlines were highlighted by shallow blue freshwater oceans. Much of the continents lay under dense green jungles, teeming with alien pre-sapient life. The planet was an ideal distance from the sun, not too hot, nor too cold. The polar ice caps were small, apparently through all five annual seasons. Must be nice to have two summers a year, Mykl thought. Apparently only two of the continents had been settled in any large numbers. Thin feathery clouds speckled the globe

as Undertaker started its run in for a surface descent. A microwave homing signal locked into the auto-nav. Hanson, assured by Blachart, sat back and allowed the computer to handle the landing procedures. The main spaceport was an immense expanse of thermo concrete, surrounded by a vast expanse of city. It was almost as large as Ki-Acropolis, Earths bustling capital city. All along the fringes of the vast tarmac stood rows and rows of parked ships, similar in size to Undertaker – and beyond, even more. The larger ships, Blachart explained, were in a strategic parking orbit around the second planet.

The sky was just beginning to darken as Undertaker swooped over a part of the city close to the landing point, the stars beginning their night shift. There was no moon, which people from Earth always looked for in a night sky. A magnetic aura played over her hull as they descended. Bright lights lit the area from 50 foot high masts from the edges of the field. It was bright as day, although it was just after sundown. Vague multiple shadows fell everywhere as Undertakers full weight settled onto its landing skids. The sky above the lights had become an inky black, filled with vague looking stars, nearly losing their contest with the lights.

“Okay.” Said Hanson as he killed the drive. “We’re down. Safe.”

“Safe?” Mykl echoed. “We’re sitting *on Meradinis*, for Alf’s sake!

Blachart snapped his fingers at Casey to draw his attention.

“Contact Control Central and tell them we’ve got a load of weapons and ammo.”

Casey glanced at Mykl to get his ok. Mykl was looking at Blachart with raised eyebrows.

“I understand the last thing you want to do is supply your enemies with weapons, but if we don’t give them something, they’ll get suspicious. You don’t want them to get suspicious, do you?”

“Do it.” He said to Casey. Then to Blachart, “How do they collect?”

“Convoy of trucks, forklifts. A negotiator or cargo inspector normally comes along.”

“Great.” Mykl said, activating the intercom over Casey’s shoulder.

“This is Mykl d’Angelo.” He announced, getting the attention of every man on the ship. “As of now this is the procedure we follow. No ranks to be used in conversation. A convoy of trucks will come to offload the goods in the cargo hold. This will be part of our cover and nothing must be done to arouse suspicion. Don’t ask unnecessary questions. Don’t speak to anybody unless you have to. After they have left, the recon team will leave the ship and return before daybreak. That’s – 0500, ships time. Until that time, the rest of you remaining onboard will secure the ship. If the recon team does not

return, your orders are to lay low and wait for rescue. It shouldn't be too many weeks before the Fleet arrives. That's all."

At least, that was the plan. If the recon team, of which he was a part, did not return, it would mean they would be dead, captured, or incapacitated. This would leave the guys left on the ship without a helmsman or crew experienced enough to get them back through the Corsair defenses and to safety. Blachart and Mykl went to wait in a small personnel air lock, the door open and the ramp was extended onto the concrete below. The stars shone dimly above. A convoy of small trucks was winding its way across the tarmac toward them. They watched from the ramp as it drew nearer. Mykl could see the lead vehicle well enough to know he'd never seen one like it before. It was an open, jeep-like affair, but had eight fat wheels, was almost twice as long and wide enough to seat five rather large people across its bench seats. There were two onboard, a driver in front, and a passenger, right at the back. The jeep pulled up at the foot of the ramp, while the four trucks went round to the large nose doors of the ship. The tires screeched softly as it halted. The driver was a grim looking fellow dressed in a black outfit, rather like a chauffer. He was pale and thin, looking rather like death only warmed up. In fact, he made the jeep look like a sports model hearse.

In contrast, the little man sitting out back was fat and somewhat short. He huffed with the effort of hauling his ass out of the vehicle. He wore a white suit, only it was a food and grease stained, wrinkled sloppy remnant of the white 'club' suit favored by successful businessmen. The man obviously had no respect for a 300 credit suit. He shuffled hurriedly round the back of the vehicle toward them, his briefcase swaying with his swaggering waddle.

"Hello, Max." Blachart called to him, using a surprisingly friendly tone. "How's the teeth?"

This had a strange effect on the man, who almost stopped in his tracks. He seemed to force himself to walk all the way up the ramp, where he smiled a greeting – flashing a mouthful of platinum replacements.

"You're a week late, Cap'n." He greeted in a semi-businesslike manner.

"A little detour, Max." Blachart explained. "All work and no play, you know how it is."

Mykl couldn't miss the note of dislike in his voice. He couldn't say he didn't agree. It was something of a shock to realize it was probably the first thing they had in common.

"Shall we git down t'business, Cap'n?"

“Sure, Max.” Said Blachart, turning to lead the way inside the hold.
“Just don’t set off my security system with your teeth.”

Pseudo Corsairs stood around three of the little yellow forklifts found everywhere, ready to start loading. The doors were still closed. There was a resounding *clong* noise, followed by a hollow metallic rumbling as the huge doors began to swing slowly open. Darkness showed through the widening gap between the edges. Another fainter noise indicated that the loading ramp was being extended. Mykl gathered that Max was some kind of inspector, or an official arms dealer, or something in that line. Max ran his right hand through his short, red hair, which was trying valiantly to hold onto that short spiky hairstyle currently in fashion with men about ten years his junior. He’d lost count of how many times he’d done it since entering the ship. It was like a nervous tick. Blachart seemed to be the catalyst. Whenever Max got nervous, his hand went for the hair. The more nervous he got, the more he did it. He mad a mental note never to shake hands with Max.

Max eyed the cargo bay. There were still a lot of crates, left mostly because a) they were evidence and; b) they needed to appear genuine. They showed him a few samples, ammo, grenades, weapons. So far, he seemed satisfied.

“All these full of weapons n’ ammo?” He asked.

“Why, what else would you like?” Blachart quipped.

“Never hurts to diversify a little, Cap’n. Maybe some electronics, maybe industrial ‘quipment.”

Blachart shrugged. “A load’s a load. Loot is loot. They don’t need weapons and ammo anymore?”

“No, that’s fine, Cap’n” he parried. “I’ll send the boys in.”

At Max’s signal, one of the trucks began to reverse up the ramp. The forklifts began to move, the whole affair generating quite a lot of noise. Mykl and Blachart escorted Max back to the small air lock.

“I’ll credit your account as soon as we’ve weighed everything up, Cap’n”

“Sure, Max – you know I trust you.”

Mykl raised an eyebrow at this, mainly because he didn’t think the man trusted anybody.

All this being said, Max waddled down the ramp. The jeep was still there, waiting. From the looks Max gave Blachart at their farewell, it was obvious to Mykl there was no love lost between them. What Blachart thought of Max, he wasn’t sure – but it was probably something unpleasant and involved pain. They watched as the jeep

pulled off. Max was looking rigidly in front of him as it turned and raced away towards distant specks that could've been the spaceport terminal buildings. Blachart consulted his watch, switching it to Meradinis time.

"Perfect time for a bit of fun." He muttered. "Here night time is the best time."

Mykl followed him inside. The forklifts were loading the trucks. At the rate things were going, they would be finished in four hours. They couldn't afford to wait. They would have to leave now, leaving the ship in the hands of the marines who would remain on board. In ten minutes, he had the recon team assembled in the little air lock, waiting for the taxi they'd ordered from the terminal. Blachart was giving them another pep talk.

"- Remember," he was saying just as they heard brakes squealing outside, "You're going out there to have *fun!*"

There was a blast on a decrepit sounding hooter.

"We stick together." Said Mykl. "Until we get outside the terminal – then we separate into teams of two. Mingle with the population, use your portacams – get visuals of anything that seems important. We meet back here by 0500 tomorrow morning – local time. It is now 1800. Check your timepieces. Don't be late. I *will* leave you behind –

and I trust if I don't make it back that whoever's left will do the same. The reason we're here is to gather intel. That's more important than any of us. Okay, let's do it. Good luck."

Their taxi turned out to be another little eight wheeled 'jeep'. This driver looked a bit more ordinary. Ten 'Corsairs' walked down the ramp with the quick jerky motions of people trying extremely hard to look casual. They boarded the taxi. All had made wiser choices regarding side arms. Mykl had hung onto the Uzi, Hanson settled for an automatic and Casey had a holstered sawn-off shotgun at his side. Casey was also the only one who was wearing his portacam. He looked pretty cool – if you consider it was nighttime and he was wearing sunglasses.

Blachart settled down into the seat beside Mykl. The taxi surged forward electrically, leaving the Undertaker behind. The driver was a few rows of seats ahead. They rolled on in silence, looking at the other parked ships, all black, all silent. The only sounds were the slipstream and the hum of the motors. Hanson and Casey were talking casually behind them.

"I hope these forged passes get us through." Mykl said in low tones.

"That's your department." Said Blachart. "Rather hope you don't need them. Otherwise it'll be a real short trip."

“Pleasant thought.” He muttered, wiping his damp palms on his pants. He didn’t imagine the Corsairs would just deport illegal immigrants. Hell, he wasn’t a cop! He’d never had to go undercover before! If they got caught they could count on a painful death

“So what kind of gun did *you* bring, mister expert?” He asked, changing the subject.

“This?” Blachart replied, removing a shiny black object from its lair at his side. Mykl held it, fingers exploring the cool metal.

“Luger.” Mykl read. “Looks pretty old.”

“Navy model, 1908.”

“It’s got a silencer.”

“It’s called a suppressor. It’s for close encounters.”

Blachart reclaimed his toy. They raced across the giant parking lot, past lots of black ships, all huddled together like sardines without the can.

“What’s with you and Max?”

“What do you mean?”

“Don’t like him much, do you?”

“No.” said Blachart pleasantly. “He’s a louse. The kind of guy who’d go to his parents wedding on a bicycle. Last time we met, he tried to

cheat me out of my cut of a load I brought in.”

“What happened?”

“He didn’t try hard enough.” Blachart grinned, as one who is amused by flashbacks of memory.

Even though the idea in principle was objectionable to him, Mykl found himself liking the man more with each word spoken. He had a kind of presence, like he was more *real* than – dare he think it – mere ordinary people like himself. Just his presence seemed to affect people. Most were afraid of him. Others just died. The man’s a pirate, for Alf’s sake! A murderer! He had not doubt that if Blachart wanted someone to fear him, it would happen, just like that. He’d noticed the man’s effect on Antares, after his release from the cell. Any crewman in the man’s way would stand aside. Groups of people chatting loudly in the corridors would fall silent and open up to let him pass. Even the security marines assigned to watch him had seemed to maintain a respectful distance. People tended to avert their eyes from that penetrating gaze. And yet there were times when the man was almost friendly. Like now. He was sitting casually with his arm tucked over the side of the door like he was on a Sunday cruise. A smile played on his lips as the slipstream tousled his short black hair. He could see he had a definable sense of humor. It tasted of

sarcasm. Surprised? No, Mykl decided, not at all. He had a lot of nerve, clearly what made him into a natural leader. He was a good role player. He still didn't trust him. He thought it unwise to *ever* do so. Mykl's first impression of the man was apt and it stuck with him. A man like that is dangerous. People like him are dangerous. They're capable of anything. Inventive, full of surprises. Take Max for instance. It occurred to Mykl that anyone messing with Blachart would soon find out why he was called 'the Bloody.' It would be like using a landmine as a springboard – invariably fatal. There was a *bump-thump* as the taxi went over another uneven joint in the concrete.

"Why did you let him live?" He wondered out loud.

"What?"

"Why didn't you kill him?" He asked again. The smile faded suddenly.

"I told you." He said in a low voice. "I'm tired of killing. *Sick* of it."

Mykl knew the feeling, though he guessed he had far fewer notches on his belt. Blachart had spared his life too, once – before trying to take it again later. He spared him then too.

"Then why do you do it so well?" He asked in a husky voice, the words coming straight from the heart. Blachart turned, fixing his eyes on his. Mykl was surprised by the lifelessness – and yet strangely

enough, he could see pain in there, a lot of pain. There was no penetrating stare to silence the question, nothing to make him wonder why he asked it in the first place.

“When I was young I lost the only one I loved in the most horrible way anyone could imagine.” He said in a voice thick with suppressed emotion. “I lost all I stood for. It turned an innocent kid into a monster. I lived for revenge and I had plenty. I lost myself somewhere along the way. I let myself go... maybe too far.”

Bump-thump.

“You could go back.” Mykl urged. “You could try.”

“You really think so?”

“If we get back alive, you’ll get your pardon. You can get that fresh start you wanted. Not many people get that chance.” *At least*, he added mentally, *not as many as American cop shows would have you believe*. Blachart had realized his faults. Killing people was doubtlessly one of them.

“You know,” Blachart sighed, “I never killed anyone that I didn’t think deserved it. I killed to stay alive and I killed when I thought it was just. My reputation kind of got... inflated a bit.”

“Yeah, sure. The righteous Corsair.” Mykl quipped.

“Sheep in wolf’s clothing, a lot of it.” He said smiling again.

“Bullshit – you earned your reputation!” Mykl argued. Blachart chuckled.

“You know, just for once, it’s nice to be one of the good guys.”

“That-a-fact?”

The terminal building was part of the high wall that surrounded the spaceport. This, needless to say, was a very, very long wall. The building’s smooth glass sides rose to a height of five floors. Large doorways shed light on the already well lit sidewalk. Parked along it was a line of the jeep-like taxis. Theirs pulled in at the back of the line. The plan was to get through the terminal into the city outside, while attracting the minimum of attention. They climbed out of the taxi quite casually. Blachart paid the driver. They made for the nearest entrance. Quite a few people were milling about inside. It looked like a subway station from one of those American cop shows. Some wore suits, carried briefcases, going about their business. Others were black-clad Corsair ships crew, or spaceport staff. They walked right on in, blending with the populace. They weren’t walking long before Blachart gave Mykl a heads up.

“Some of my crew on shore leave coming this way.” He said in a low voice. Two men in black uniforms had changed direction on

recognizing their Captain and were walking toward them. One was tall, blond and skinny, the other short and stocky with brown hair.

“Captain,” they greeted on stopping in front of them. The group bundled up behind.

“How was the trip?” The tall one asked. “Took a bit longer than planned?”

“A joyride, Hesslin.” Blachart replied. “Nothing special.”

“Who’re these guys?” The other asked.

“New crew.” Blachart lied. “Picked them up along the way.”

“Yeah? *Where?*”

“Bree. Mind your own business, Norton – you’ll live longer.”

“How’s this one?” Hesslin jeered, slapping Casey on the shoulder.

“Light too bright for ya?”

“Would you believe a migraine?” Casey offered, feeling sheepish.

“Hey pal,” the other said to Harris, “How’s ol’ Lassiter?”

“Just fine.” Said marine Harris innocently, putting his size 11 foot into his mouth with admirable ease. Blachart cringed inwardly.

“I ain’t never heard of no Lassiter.” Said the short ugly one.

* * *

From a drafty corner in the outside world, a dark shape looked through a plate glass window. After a dull days watch anything could be called interesting. There was a group of twelve men, all in black. Nothing unusual there. One had just shoved another, quite hard. There was a bit of shouting. One tried to punch a tall man with a beard, but was floored by a judo throw, followed by a kick to the head. The one in the window nudged his buddy.. A few moments later four men wearing black (of course), entered the hall. They wore helmets and carried dangerous looking weapons. Hesslin lay sprawled on the floor, bleeding quietly from a cut on the forehead. Norton was holding his jaw, spitting blood.

“Great.” Said Blachart, flexing his aching knuckles. “Cops.”

“Cops?” Mykl asked in genuine surprise. “*Here?*”

“What d’you think controls all this rabble? Harsh language? Little notes to mommy?”

Four men were approaching. They had unpleasant expressions on their faces, as men who have been standing in a windy doorway for hours and been visited by all the stray dogs on their nightly rounds. Imagine one or two well placed scars for dramatic effect. Men like these are designed to be the stereotypical bad guy. Scripts in Hollywood use them in droves. They give them names like *Bad guy*

with knife or *Man with chainsaw*. Occasionally they get numbers like *Bad Guy #1*. The one with the brown mustache and three little white stars on the front of his shiny black helmet appeared to be the leader. At least, the other three had nothing on their helmets. They had shoulder patches displaying the words CITIZEN CONTROL in bold white capitals. The large caliber autorifles said it all. These guys were trouble with a capital *shit*.

“What’s all this then?” Said #1, immediately cliché’ing himself.

“Little misunderstanding.” Blachart offered.

“No.” Norton argued. “No misunderstanding. Something funny going on here. These guys just came planetside with our captain and I just *know* they’re not ship’s crew!”

“You don’t know them?” #1 asked Norton.

“That’s just what I said – never laid eyes on ‘em.”

#1 looked at Blachart sternly. “Your name?” He demanded.

“Captain Blachart.” He answered. “Of the Undertaker. Listen, we’re in a hurry. I don’t have time for this asshole’s bullshit, so – ”

“Not so fast.” Said #1 gruffly. “Nobody’s goin’ nowhere till we sort this lot out.”

The other three ‘cops’ leered behind him as if they’d been practicing

all day. #1 gave a signal. If four men could surround ten, then they were pretty much surrounded. No attempt was made to confiscate their weapons.

“Come this way, all of you.” #1 said in a level tone. It was more of an instruction than an order. Instructions don’t go around shouting at people, they ask people to do things without quite making requests of themselves. It wasn’t a request. They were led away, leaving Hesslin lying on the floor with only his buddy Norton to pick up the pieces. Mykl felt a cold icy feeling, like when he was being led to the principals office the time he put a purple ink lizard in his history teacher’s top drawer in 4th grade. This time there weren’t going to be any letters to his parents, except perhaps the one Hobbs would send home with his medals – awarded posthumously, of course. They were being led to a row of prefab offices against a dull looking gray wall. A sign above the door they stopped outside proclaimed: ARRIVALS I.D. VERIFICATION. *Looks like they were going to need those passes after all*, Mykl cursed.

“Have your passes ready.” #1 instructed, opening the door. They filed in, almost alphabetically, and waited. The door was shut behind them. The creature behind the cluttered counter inside was barely recognizable as a woman. She was built like a tank, broad shoulders, bulging arms as thick as Mykl’s legs. Her green vest was skin tight,

showing hardly any vestige of femininity at all. Every inch was glistening bone-hard muscle. Her white-blond hair was tied back severely. She rose angrily, slapping a magazine down to the counter top. Mykl saw a girl on the cover. A naked girl, doing something amusing with what looked like an asparagus. A big asparagus.

“Dammit!” She cursed in a husky baritone, “Just when I was gettin’ to the good bit!”

Mykl could see, if he looked really carefully, some fine little blond hairs bristling on her top lip. It almost distracted him from the reality that they were in some pretty deep shit.

“They’re here to verify themselves.” Said the three-star goon with an edge to his voice. The dyke flexed muscles, gave him a thumbs up and sat down behind the sprawling computer terminal.

“Just need a minute to log on.” She said, flipping the girlie mag closed, to the other end of the counter. Her fingers were a blur as she worked the multifunction keypad. “What ship you from?”

“The Undertaker.” Said Blachart, as though the name foreshadowed the immediate future. For whom the bells tolled Mykl wasn’t certain, but they were tolling all right. The name might as well have been *Titanic*. Blachart had never been fond of computers, he used them – and was quite good at it too. He just never liked them. They had a terrible

habit of complicating people's lives. In the same way that a computer could save labor, it would also generate at least twice as much paperwork and at least three new posts in the filing department. The one he was looking at now, the one the dyke was using, was one he'd never seen before. There were some interesting bits and pieces, like the shiny red panel that had just lit up on the desk surface, for example. It began to dawn on them that their carefully forged id passes would be as much use to them as water wings to one of Pharaohs soldiers halfway across the Red Sea. Blachart could almost hear their thoughts. They were something on the lines of '*Ohshitohshit*', and '*Wegonnadie*'.

"Who's first?" She asked gruffly. If she even noticed the suddenly worried expressions on their faces, she seemed to be ignoring them. At least one of them was a few steps ahead, with the presence of mind to try and form the beginnings of a plan.

"Me." Said Blachart, stepping forward, more worried than he looked. He placed his id in her outstretched hand. He noticed the leathery masculine appearance. Short nails, no color. Not even plain earrings. He hadn't seen her before. Used to be an old man working here previously, just read newspapers and checked ID cards the old fashioned way. Occasionally took a bribe for some contraband.

Never had a computer. Probably would've stroked trying to power one up.

"What happened to Si?" He asked, trying to sound casual.

"Retired." Was the unpleasant reply. She inserted the card into a slot.

"He wasn't due for another two years!"

"Early retirement, then. He was on the take and didn't pay his subs. I did him myself." She said with a hint of a smile of one who is thinking 'God, I love this job!'

"Ah." Blachart said, genuinely disappointed. "One of security's perks, eh?"

"You got it – hand down there." She instructed, indicating the small red panel. It shone with a brilliant red light, like a window on the wastes of Hell. Mykl swallowed nervously, the fact that they were in twice as much trouble as they thought, pounding on his brain. Blachart was okay because he'd be the only one whose prints and id would match on their mainframe. *Had the man known?* The question ran through his mind like a mad dog, barking. Things were very serious. They were going to have to fight their way out, he thought. Perhaps, if things got bad enough, they'd have to make a run for the ship and skedaddle. Not a bad idea, that. And if Blachart had known before the time... he'd... he'd...do something uncharacteristically

nasty. If he'd known. But he hadn't – had he? As if he'd read his thoughts, Blachart turned to give him a knowing look. He smiled faintly.

"What's all this new stuff?" He asked her innocently enough, his left hand pressed on the panel. "Wasn't here last month."

"New security measures." She said disinterestedly, her eyes on the display. "Big G's worried about infiltration."

If circumstances were otherwise, Mykl would've relaxed. So he hadn't betrayed them.

"Identity confirmed." She read. "*Hmph.* Blachart the Bloody. So this is how you look. Thought you were bigger, maybe." Blachart just shrugged. "*Next!*"

Mykl made the three short steps to the counter. He handed her his card. It had been fabricated by the lab on Antares and, aside from his picture, it was the dead corsairs ID.

"Hand." She ordered.

He hesitated. "Which one?"

"Left one, right one? Why – how many have you got?" She spat, "Put up a foot if you like. Just hurry up."

He cursed her mentally and put his hand down on the panel with all the enthusiasm of a man pressing a lump of hot lava flat with his bare hand. The seconds died slowly, painfully. The computer made an unpleasant beeping sound, indicating that it probably wasn't user friendly. Then in a monotone male voice, it said: "ID/print mismatch! Possible intruder! Arrest/detain for processing!"

"Now!" Blachart shouted. The Luger spat and the three star goon crumpled. They sprang into action. There was the sharp staccato rattle of an Uzi and #2 break-danced into a wall. A shotgun blast turned #3 into a pulp-faced corpse. The dyke went for her pistol. She was a blur of glistening power. Her eyes were on Blachart all the time. They were wild eyes. Hard eyes. They belonged to one who spared no thought for others, except for what she could derive from them. Were they windows to her soul, they would provide a breathtaking view of a brick wall in an alley way. The Luger spat three times, laying her low behind the desk. #4 fell just as the boom of Hanson's Magnum faded. It was suddenly over a lot quicker than it had taken to read. After the noise, you couldn't hear a pin drop for all the silence in there. All his men were still standing, none hurt. Blachart eyed the dead dyke, lying crumpled on the floor. Nobody so obviously in need of a good plastic surgeon could be alive.

"Wherever you are," he said softly, "If you see Si, tell him I sent you."

“What do we do now?” Mykl hissed at Blachart, still holding his Uzi ready.

“You’re the boss, remember?” He replied patronizingly. “Anyway, why’re you whispering? I think your people on my ship heard that noise.”

“Stick to your plan – assuming you have one.”

“Fine, let’s get outta here.”

They left the messy cordite filled room and emerged back in the stale air of the terminal. People could be seen going about other people’s business with slightly increased vigor. There were a few furtive glances cast their way.

“That’s right, you assholes.” Hanson scoffed quietly to Casey at his side. “Run. The Marines are comin’. Run like hell.”

Casey giggled nervously.

“I didn’t like doing that.” Mykl said to Blachart, suppressing the sick feeling in pit of his stomach. “It was almost murder.”

“They would’ve arrested us and interrogated us.” He explained. “In the end they would’ve killed us. There was no choice.”

“So that makes it all right, then, does it?” Mykl hissed, still shaken. He was flooded with relief and panic, almost simultaneously. Blachart

displayed little true emotion, but what little Mykl could see were certainly not the emotions of a man who liked killing.

“No.” he replied calmly. “But they wouldn’t have let us go otherwise.”

People were staring at the group of tensed up men waving weapons around. They looked like ordinary citizens. They looked nervous. Mykl swallowed. They should be.

“Put your weapons away.” He ordered. “Try to blend in again. Let’s go.”

“Don’t worry about them.” Blachart added. “The civvies don’t want to get involved. Mykl nodded.

“Hey, Casey.” He called. The kid was white-faced. It was his first time out. Energy weapons don’t tear bodies up the way projectile weapons do. There was blood everywhere. The kid looked up at him.

“Don’t worry.” He forced himself to say, “It’ll be all right.”

“Sir.” Hanson called. “What the hell do we do now? Our cover’s blown.”

“No it’s not.” Blachart argued. “Nobody’s raised the alarm, or called for backup.”

“He’s right.” Mykl said. “They don’t know who we are, or why we’re here.”

“They won’t figure us out and attack the ship, will they?” Hanson asked.

“I’m sure it’ll take time to do that kind of detective work.” Blachart replied. “This will seem like an isolated incident – a personal dispute. Things like this sometimes happen here.”

“You’ve got to be shitting me!” Mykl said acidly, turning to lead the way outside. They walked on, keeping their eyes open for more security personnel. Not one black uniform other than theirs was to be seen. They exited through an entrance that opened up on a busy sidewalk in the streets of the city. People milled about everywhere around them. There was a line of more conventional yellow taxis parked along the sidewalk. The noise was deafening. They formed a circle to hear Mykl’s instructions. He had to shout.

“We split up here! Two man teams! See the sights! Meet back at the ship!” He looked round at their faces, crowded together. They were good men, risking their lives on a fool’s errand. *No, can’t think of it like that*, he thought. Doing it for the sake of innocent civilians back home. To remove the threat of continued attacks by the Corsair menace.

“And come back alive!” Was his last command. They split up in their twos. His partner was Blachart. Oh, joy, lucky him. Hanson and

Casey went off together, boarding a taxi. Sgt Maguire and marine Jones took another. The last two pairs went their own separate ways. Mykl produced a pair of innocent looking sunglasses from a side pouch and popped them up on top of his head.

“Well,” he said, following Blachart into a taxi, “– let’s get it over with.”

* * *

The expanse of city just seemed to go on forever and the trip in the taxi just made it seem bigger. The city appeared semi-modern and metropolitan; it just seemed to Mykl a little run down. As soon as they left the main roads, they were confronted by decaying buildings and general neglect. Detritus lay scattered on the streets. People were milling about on the sidewalks – scummy, scaly denizens that in nicer cities would be the neighbors.

The battered taxi pulled up in the gutter, killing a large rat that was trying to finish its dinner. The slipstream smelled of hot oil and gas fumes, sweeping up a cloud of dust, plastic bags and papers. The rear doors creaked as they were forced open. Mykl and Blachart got out. Blachart went to the front window, still appreciating the numb expression on Mykl’s face. The simple reason he had to get out to pay off the driver was because a large sheet of armorplate separated the driver’s cab from the passengers. This was not because he was

rather dangerous, had a name that sounded like a Russian railway station and ate things raw and very often, still living. It was because frequently, the passengers were even more dangerous and didn't give money, but instead tried to *take* it.

Mykl was relieved to get out. He'd just been driven around at a very docile pace, at what passed for a civilized speed limit on most colonies – by a seven foot tall maniac who had braces, wore a head band and giggled every time he saw a stop sign. The fact that he'd stopped every time didn't help to make him feel any better.

Blachart grinned. He knew the feeling. It can be unnerving when you expect something to happen and then nothing does. He knew the cab driver hadn't kept the speed limit of 70Kph just out of civic pride. He didn't do it because of the high fines or because the government said most road deaths were caused by speeding maniacs. They did it because highway patrol cops on motorcycles armed with missiles for that specific purpose (which was the main cause of the high death toll on Corsair roads) can enforce a *lot* of civic pride (which resulted from the demise of quite a few innocent bystanders). That and bad aim (Which was okay, because according to an edict passed by the Corsair authorities, there was no such thing as innocent bystanders. This is what they mean when they say 'speed kills'.)

“Where are we?” Mykl asked, both for his benefit, as well as the portacams.

“You wanted to see some Corsair society, so here we are – *Moogies*.”

Moogies was a rough looking night club as rundown as it’s name suggested. It was average for Meradinis, catering for the dregs of the Corsair society, which Mykl estimated at around 88%. Inside they would find kidnapers, murderers, pirates, assassins, gunrunners, smugglers, slavers and just about any disreputable reprobate under the stars (probably lawyers as well). The few street lamps there were dim and apparently on the regular routes of all the stray dogs in the neighborhood. There were a few battered cars parked outside. The entrance was a plain steel door sunk into a dirty brick wall. A neon sign above it proclaimed that this was the place. Wild music thumped and thudded distantly.

There wasn’t a bouncer exactly, but in front of the door there stood a six-foot behemoth who looked like a troll with sacks of cement for biceps. It ignored them as they squeezed past, except to push the battered steel door open for them.

Mykl instantly recognized the music as some of the newest stuff on the top 100. A couple of weirdo’s were slam-dancing each other to pieces on the dance floor. One of the occasional fights was taking

place in the far corner, an offender being dispatched as loudly as possible. The unfortunate was then dragged down the aisle, the current hit by the group Pale Deth thundering an unlikely requiem. A large beer glass sailed overhead and smashed against a steel plated wall. The proprietor, whoever he was (presumably Moogie?), probably congratulated himself on his foresight. Now all he had to worry about was the ugly brown blotches of rust. In the games room beyond some arches in the far wall, some bad loser was about to take potshots at the dartboard with a shotgun.

"Watch yourself." Blachart warned, "This place gets pretty rough."

Mykl nodded. It certainly looked that way. It even made him long for the governor's palace on Tremaine. The other patrons ignored them in the dim lighting. Somewhere to the left someone was trying an interesting experiment with his victim's head and the concrete tiles on the floor. Things were carrying on in Moogies in pretty much the same way as they always did. People came in, people got drunk, people had fights, people left. The less fortunate ones left in plastic bags, sometimes in the plural. In a few moments, Mykl and his companion were sitting at a quiet end of the bar, killing two mugs of the local brew. It was green, had froth like a rabid dog and was strong enough to degrease a thermoplasma injector pump.

In a semi-dark corner there was a large flat screen tv mounted on the wall. In the last few minutes it had showed a lousy whodunit that verged on a who didn't and an advert making cunning use of a cartoon mouse peddling soft drinks. No-one seemed to care, mainly due to the noise density. It was news time again and one old timer, clearly in the terminal stages of old timer's disease, sat cradling his precious bottle. He wasn't being prevented from *watching* the news, but he couldn't *hear* it because of the noise being made by the two degenerates rolling around the floor at his feet. They were taking turns in beating each other over the heads with liquor bottles. It was a very spirited fight.

"Hey!" The old relic shouted. "Keep it down, mm, will yer!"

"I'll teach ya to steal mah gur!" The one top top growled.

"I already know how!" The other countered, flipping them both over.

"Hey!" The oldster yelled, "Knock it orf, mm, yer young –"

They weren't taking any notice of him. Not yet anyway. A shot rang out and one of the two eventually noticed that the other had gone limp and had stopped hitting him. He looked up at the smoking revolver in the old man's hand.

"Aww, Gramps!" He whined, "What'cher go an' shoot Cousin Albert for?"

“Mm, ssh, dagnabbit - I’s’e tryin’ ter, mm, watch the news!”

The news bulletin started. A few people paused in their crap games or whatever to glance fleetingly at pictures of a dark-haired man with a beard alternating with shots of the spaceport. Mykl recognized him. It was Blachart. The sound was a little low, but he could make out something about some dead security men and someone being wanted for questioning. A large reward was being offered for his detainment, preferably alive. His blood ran cold. If they knew Blachart was involved, then they must know his ship was at the spaceport! Blachart drained his glass, as though it were his comment on the matter, and looked at him, almost as if to say ‘I f***ing told you so’.

“Let’s get back to the ship.” Mykl breathed, just as the noise level began to take a sharp nose dive. More and more people were turning to look at the news. The music was turned way down and there was a sudden change in atmosphere, something akin to the calm before the metaphorical storm. They could hear whispering as people directed cautious stares at the pair at the bar, who were starting to notice the growing circle of empty space around them. A few hushed whispers said: “*Hey, that’s them!*”

Another said, “*Hey, those guys look familiar.*”

Another said, "*That's them!*"

Another said, "*Quiet, mm, tryin' ter watch the news!*"

There was a long awkward silence filled with long, penetrating stares. Nobody dared to move. It was like God pushed the pause button on the VCR. Except in the games room beyond the arches, where the customers were unaware of current events. Each group was sizing up the other. It was Blachart & Mykl versus Moogies, and it didn't seem that Moogies had much sizing up to do. If this were a western, a tall gentleman in a black top hat and tails would be measuring them up to get some of his wares ready.

"Hey, Alf – yer canna do that!" A voice boomed from the games room.

"Yer canna use a dagger in darts!"

"Why not? It's a perfec'ly guid dagger – anyway, I like the balance!"

"But it's no' fair – tha's cheating, that is!"

"*Cheatin'?* Me?"

"Luik – it says 'ere in the rules in black an' – *aargh!*"

* * *

In another part of town much like that one, but better lit and mostly red, Lt Hanson and Marine Casey were strolling uneasily along a crowded sidewalk. Vehicles, electric and otherwise, were moving up

and down the road. Most of the others were hookers and drug peddlers and their clientele. They were surrounded by small time casinos, game centers, strip joints, massage parlors, and other places offering a variety of personal services.

They were getting a close up glimpse of Meradinis society. Far too close, for Hanson's liking. The clientele were mostly businessmen and women, all looking for something to take home. The hookers were pretty much the same as everywhere else, except they didn't have to worry about cops harassing them – just their pimps. Hanson used to be a street cop on Faire Goden before he joined the Fleet. This little street scene brought back memories. They were a mixed bunch, women, men too, all making advances on the passing trade.

"Hi, honey – want a good time?" One whorishly attractive concubine called to him.

"Aw, ain't he cute?" Another said, waving at young Casey, who blushed. "Can I take him home?"

"Hello beautiful – how about it?" Said a five foot eight blond stress reliever who, were it any colder, would've been flaunting a *lot* of blue skin. They walked on, trying hard not to be distracted. One brushed close by Hanson and daintily touched his arm.

“Hi Honey,” the concubine said tantalizingly in a slightly masculine voice, “Want a ride?”

It occurred to him with some difficulty that she was actually a *he*. He moved on, tugging his arm free. It took a little more effort to tug his eyes free from the bosom which was threatening to spill over.

“Sorry, honey, left my spurs at home.” He managed in a hoarse voice. They began to walk a little more briskly after that. He saw Casey looking at him, bemused.

“What’s up?” He asked.

“Think there’s enough marines to clean this mess up?” He asked. “I mean, in the entire Space Fleet?”

“I dunno.” Hanson speculated. “I was thinking of a police force would be more appropriate. A *big* police force. With *lots* of paddy wagons.”

* * *

Moogies rear entrance was in a dark, filthy alleyway. An old gray tomcat down to its eighth life dragged itself past a few overturned rubbish bins that younger cats had visited earlier. Perhaps, if he was lucky, they’d left him a few scraps. He started scratching, giving one or two presumptuous rats a swipe, and found a few scraps of pale thin chicken.

There seemed to be some fuss emanating from the nightclub, the cat thought. Or rather maybe it didn't, not in those words anyway. It just sort of noticed that the normal dull thumps of loud music had been replaced by muffled pops and bangs. This was hardly out of the ordinary, this being Meradinis and all. It was a bit more intense, and it sounded, the alley cat thought – or rather didn't – like large amounts of money were involved.

The back door burst open with horrible suddenness as two shadowy figures ran out like their lives depended on it. A mob was in hot pursuit, brandishing firearms and shouting incoherently. (Cats only bother to understand words that have some importance to them, like 'din-dins', 'herekittykittykitty', 'gerroff!' and owgetchernailsoutterme!').

A flurry of wildly aimed shots went zinging off the alley walls. To stop now would be instant death. One of them cried out and stumbled. The other stopped to grab his arm and drag him around the corner onto the pavement outside the alley. The mob ran on, closing on them. The other one, still standing, reached down and took something from his wounded comrade. It was black and shiny. Still they came on, still shooting and apparently missing. The Uzi burped in his hands. It was a long drawn out burp sound. It was apparently, the Burp of Death, because it killed them, to the last one. Silence fell, punctuated by the rain of shell casings as they tinkled on the

concrete. The figure, its face hidden in shadow, eyed the fallen dead lying in crazy looking heaps while it calmly replaced the magazine. Only one other living thing saw the whole thing. It sat meekly in the mouth of an overturned garbage can, watching him from the darkness, its bright eyes glistening. It sensed a great deal of emptiness within the dark figure. There was a kind of mechanical purpose behind it, as though the man who had just dispensed instant death was the kind of man who would use those words as if, somewhere, you could get little paper packets of the stuff in powder form. It sensed, with the primeval sense possessed by cats everywhere that *now* would not be a good time to make a noise.

Elsewhere, Hanson and Casey were walking on, still recording what they saw. They'd even found a corner coffee place and sat there for about an hour. There was a good view of the street. From this vantage point, they witnessed seven muggings, all with the same victim and the same mugger. Why, you may wonder? Because each time a different well-doer intervened, he was beset upon by four maniacs with baseball bats who had been waiting around the corner.

There was a western theme style bar up ahead, with saloon type swing doors with the typical ventilation slots. There was just one difference. They were metal. Hanson noticed several large caliber bullet holes and assorted dents. Before they even drew level with the

doorway, the swing doors parted and two men flew past in a wrestling hold, bounced – and landed in the gutter. Each had a knife. They found themselves staring, although no-one else cared. There were no curious eyes peering from the entrance, the doors slowly swinging open-closed-open-closed... None of the other people stopped to look, just casually went about their business. There was just the sound of laughter and the menacing crash of breaking glass. Finally, one delivered the killing blow. The victim gurgled, coughed blood over the others face and went limp. The victor rolled the corpse of him, struggled to his feet and kicked the limp form several times. He glared at them.

“Wadda ‘yer lookin’ at?” He snarled, drunk and fighting mad. He wiped his hands on his shirt, leaving dark smears. Hanson tugged Casey’s arm.

“C’mon, let’s go.” They walked on.

“*Hey!* I’m talkin’ t’yer!”

Hanson turned when he heard the rapidly approaching – though erratic – footsteps. The drunk was close enough to pounce when he stuck his ninemil up the guys nose. It registered. He hastily backed away, hands away from him.

“*Okayokayokay.*” He said, suddenly more sober. Hanson and the young marine walked away as their aggressor lurched back inside for another drink.

* * *

A few miles away, the former Corsair was supporting the semi-conscious officer, whose right shoulder was wrapped in a field dressing made from his shirt. They were walking fast now, as fast as Blachart could almost carry Mykl. The spaceport was a long way off on foot, some other mode of transport was needed. He grunted with effort. Mykl was no lightweight. Fortunately the bullet had gone right through, leaving only a small hole. He didn't think there were any broken bones or serious damage, but blood loss combined with shock seemed to have knocked Mykl for six.

“So much for not attracting attention!” He grunted, letting his load sag to the ground. Time for a rest. A short one. Bugger surveillance, he thought, removing the portacam from Mykl's cold face. He folded it and put it in a belt pouch. His priority was to get this man back to the ship before he died – and to get off-planet as soon as possible. Everything had gone wrong. He knew he could just leave Mykl, go back to his Corsair masters – claim he was forced into coming with them. He also knew if Mykl died, any chance of getting his pardon

and starting a new life as a free man, would be over. He also knew that no matter how strong the Corsairs thought they were, they would be no match for the highly organized and powerful Space Fleet *if it was brought against them all at once*. Meradinis was doomed. Come to think of it, Meradinis did deserve it. He was a practical man, who always put his own needs first. But there was something else. Mykl had put his trust in him. And Mykl was a smart man. He'd put up a good fight on his ship. Hell, he'd kicked his ass! Then he gave him a new chance at life – and trusted him to keep his word. Not many official types would do that. He respected Mykl for that. And besides, he kinda liked him.

He heaved the half-conscious figure back up again. Mykl groaned.

“Come on, Mister d’Angelo. Time to go.”

Mykl was obviously in a bad way. If muggers saw them in this state, they'd try their luck. He just hoped the uzi was just as obvious. They crossed a few main roads, continuing down a narrow side street. Mykl was out of it, head sagging, arm hanging. Occasionally he would moan at a bad jolt or movement. He was pale and cold and tottering on rubber legs, hardly any help in moving at all. The strong ex-corsair moved on with a step-drag, step-drag. Things looked pretty quiet, but you could never tell. Not here, not on Meradinis.

There was the sound of a powerful combustion engine a long way off. Then there was the screeching sound made by tortured tires being forced to carry something heavy through a tight corner. Then the roaring again, getting closer. Blachart knew what it was. It was the equivalent of a police cruiser crossed with a military battle buggy. He knew it would have stenciled on its sides the words 'CITIZEN CONTROL'. Presumably he was the citizen and they were the control. Suddenly a big black vehicle screeched around a corner behind them. Bright spotlights lit them up, and now they were running – or at least, lurching at high speed. To stop now would be little paper packets of instant death. There was an alleyway ahead – just a little way...

A burst of bullets smacked into the brick wall just moments behind them as they made it around the corner and fell to the ground. As the machine roared past, one of the men on its back fired a few shots at them, missing. There was the sound of screaming rubber and shouting. Blachart scrambled to his feet and pulled Mykl up, groaning. He seemed to be a little more aware now, trying to make an effort. They ran down the dark alley. *'Don't run all the way through'*, he thought. *'Bastards'll send one behind you and the buggy will go round the other end.'* They found some cover behind a large steel dumpster. He allowed Mykl to sag to the ground, slinging the

Uzi over his shoulder. The Luger came out, silencer still on. He listened. Aside from Mykl's breathing, all was quiet. Sure enough, a mans pounding footsteps echoed in the shadows the way they came. From his dark hiding place, he saw the black clad man emerge from the darkness. He stopped, gripping his assault rifle tensely, listening. Mykl groaned, drifting in a nightmare world of screaming bullets and endless alleys... The man jerked his rifle round in their direction and the luger went *tuk – tuk*. His quarry folded up and pitched into the shadows.

'Good shot!' Blachart congratulated himself. 'Now double back while they're expecting us the other side.'

A few precious seconds went into getting the wounded starship captain to his feet and tottering back the way they'd come. The street seemed brighter than before when they left the darkness of the alley. Just as they were halfway across the street, bright headlights shone on them. Blachart went cold, the Uzi came up instantly – but it wasn't the big black pick-up truck – it was a little red sports convertible. It was closing fast, loud music pumping. He fired in an arc over the car. It screeched to a halt with only feet to spare.

"Get out!" He ordered. The occupants were four teenagers, two girls, two boys. The boy and girl in the back were half-naked. *Out for a*

good time, he thought wryly.

“Omigod, my dad’s gonna *kill* me!” The one boy said as they clambered out and backed away from the car. He let them run away.

The engine was still running. He stuffed Mykl in the back, as gently as possible under the circumstances, laying him as low as he could. He relieved him of his last clip of ammo, and tossed it, together with the uzi onto the front passenger seat. The door slammed shut with a solid sound. He tested the gears. He prodded the accelerator and was rewarded with the smooth, powerful *vrooom* of a free-revving engine. Grinning, he shoved it into 1st and put his foot down.

* * *

There was a main road, somewhere in Meradinis capital city. It was quite a straight road, reasonably well lit, considering the crooked nature of the inhabitants. Despite most preconceived ideas of driving in cities on Meradinis, things seemed quite orderly. This is because the Corsair government decreed that most deaths on the road were caused by speeding – and the citizens, like the law-abiding people they were, decided to obey. This is because highway patrol cops on motorcycles firing missiles at speeding motorists in general traffic can generate quite a lot of civic pride. That, as has been said before – and bad aim.

Now, see the little red convertible screaming down the straight? See the way it tears around corners? See how it ignores red lights and flagrantly ignores stop signs? See the big black pickup truck behind it? See the bright flashing lights on its roof? See how it keeps pace with the red one? You must have very good eyesight.

Blachart made a tight turn around an island. The tires did a shrieking act and he turned into the oncoming traffic. A burst of occasional automatic fire cracked overhead. It was a reckless thing to do, but it unnerved the driver of the cruiser. It unnerved him too, but he one consolation – if it didn't work, he wouldn't live to regret it. There were lots of cars and trucks rushing towards him, it seemed, at warp speed. Their lights were blazing, horns blasting. Suddenly there was a lot of pandemonium on the orderly main road. Vehicles of all sizes and descriptions swerved, braked and hooted. There were some amazing collisions, but Blachart didn't let it deter him at all. So far he'd been the cause of two major pile-ups and had probably incurred fines of somewhere near 20 000 galactic credits (And probably a death-sentence from the highway patrol too) and saw no reason to quit just yet. He laughed wickedly. It was the laugh of a man who had no intention to pay any fines whatsoever. Still on the wrong side of the road, he swerved to avoid a large segmented beer truck and bullets fired from behind. The driver swerved, overcorrected and spread his

cargo of barrels across the road. He looked behind. The cruiser was still there, zigzagging through the wake of destruction. Somewhere on the thing's bull bar, if he looked carefully in the rearview mirror, he could see an unfortunate pedestrian who had though red meant stop. Behind him lay Mykl, who was deliriously insisting that he was perfectly okay and was trying to sit up. Blachart reached back between the seats and shoved him down. More bullets cracked past. The traffic was thinning out and the cruiser started gaining on him. Blachart decided this was getting them nowhere fast, so at the next intersection, he braked hard and swung the wheel hard over. The car did a 180 and stopped, along with the now familiar screeching and tire smoke. The cruiser was still coming, guns blazing. He stood up and fired. A full magazine later, the cruiser swerved, mounted an island, went over a motorcycle in the next lane with smoke pouring from the engine. Men in black were spilling off the rear, flapping around as they rolled on the tar. Finally it came to rest against a lamp post.

Mykl sat up in the back seat, bewildered. Blachart turned.

"*You – you...!*" He barked, "*Lie down!*" Mykl smiled an unnatural smile, insisted he was feeling on top of the world – and passed out. *Yeah*, thought Blachart. *The trouble with this guy is he thinks the world is Ripley Jones.* Someday soon he was going to retire. He'd go

off to some distant quiet place and none of this shit would matter anymore!

* * *

Lt Hanson swore as he replaced the clip of his ninemil. The metal trashcans he was using for cover were vibrating under the impact of automatic gunfire. He wiped some errant hair out of his face with a sweaty palm. It was turning out to be a long night. The unfortunate circumstances which brought them here were still fresh in his mind. *So stupid!* They were doing so well up till then. Some of the local cops had approached them and tried to start a conversation. It wasn't long before they became suspicious and insisted on taking them 'downtown' for questioning. Two hours and two dead cops later, they were here, trapped behind a barricade of flimsy trashcans outside a shopping mall. Two black police cruisers had pinned them down, their four man crews spread out, trying to pick them off from different angles. There were no easy escapes, no drain covers or sewers, no beaming up in the nick of time. The vibrating bins behind him and the vicious sound of heavy autorifles didn't leave much room to think anything but survival. Casey squeezed off a few rounds from the autorifle he got off a dead cop, and flopped down beside him. Hanson had his ninemil – oh yes, and the sawn-off shotgun. He'd used most of his ninemil ammo already. He had to make every shot count. He

waited for a definite pause in the assault before sticking his pistol through a gap between bins. A shot sent a cop tumbling off the roof of the left cruiser.

“Hmmpf.” He grunted at Casey, “Didn’t win a gold medal at the Corps shooting contest for nothing.”

Another smartass tried to rush them, firing wild. Since the trashcans were the only cover between them and the cruisers, it was damned hard to miss. Casey scored again. But they knew it was a losing battle. They were outnumbered, outgunned and the enemy were going to get backup any minute. Casey settled back down with him, panting.

“What’re we gonna do, sir?”

“Got to get out. Before it’s too late.” He replied. “But how?”

An impish grin began to spread across his face. He chose a likely looking spot on the flank of the closest cruiser and fired until water-like fluid began splashing onto the tar. One spark was all he needed. Having an energy weapon would’ve helped. It took another three shots before there was a bright flash punctuated by a *whoof!* The fuel was blazing, and in seconds, so was the cruiser. The goon squad using it as cover scattered, just before it turned into a spectacular fireworks display. The force of the explosion knocked them flying.

Hanson felt the heat even behind the cans. He grinned at Casey, who was looking a little terrified again.

“What happened? What was that?”

“Me.” Hanson grinned. “I happened!”

Just then, a little red sports car screeched to a halt a little way behind the intact cruiser, knocking over a black clad man who was just trying to get up. *The man behind the wheel – surely that was - ?*

“You waiting for an invitation?” Hanson growled, nudging Casey.

“C'mon!”

They made a break for the car, piling in hurriedly.

“Make it quick!” Said Blachart, revving the motor. By the time they realized they were sitting on top of the unconscious Mykl, the car was already tearing across the parking lot. There were a lot of sirens in the distance. Hanson clambered over into the front seat.

“How'd you find us?” Hanson asked, leaning across.

“Who could miss the hell you two were raising?” Blachart quipped, changing gears. They sped around a corner - and turned in behind a column of about ten black cruisers with flashing lights and sirens, speeding to back up their buddies at the shopping mall. Blachart

swore, looking for a turnoff. He took one and accelerated. *Vrrrrm – vrrrrm* it went as he switched through the gears. Hanson tapped him on the shoulder and pointed back at the cruiser that had followed them.

“This just gets better all the time!” Blachart cursed.

The car skidded round the next corner, the cruiser in close pursuit. Then, as they warped through a red light there was a big bang behind them, the cruiser seemed to launch into the air. It did a somersault, spilling black figures, bounced and hit the road again in a ball of flames. Blachart looked in the rearview mirror. He grinned as a motorcycle with a flashing blue light hit a piece of debris in the road and wrapped itself around a traffic light. He grinned again, appreciating the value of truly bad aim. When appropriate.

They burst into another road and slotted right into the traffic. In the mirror, he saw something that made his blood freeze – lots and lots of flashing lights. There were sirens too. There was another round of profanity in the little red car as someone recognized them and started shooting at them. He put his foot down, weaving through the traffic. *‘That does it!’* He thought angrily, *‘This time I’m heading for the spaceport!’* This whole episode was turning into one long car chase.

“Check your time?” He asked Hanson. The false dawn was already in

the sky. He checked.

“Less than an hour left!”

Since the good captain had ordered the ship to leave with or without them, it was going to be close. In the back, beside Casey, Mykl sat up, blinking. His shoulder was throbbing as if someone were trying to hammer a chisel through it.

“Sorry I sat on you, sir.” Said Casey apologetically.

“Did you?” Mykl asked, perplexed, as if noticing for the first time that he was sitting in the back of a speeding automobile. He also noticed his shirt had been torn and turned into a rather crude field dressing on his shoulder. And the dried sticky blood smears. “Hadn’t noticed. How long have I been out?”

Then he recognized Blachart in front, driving. Quite dangerously. He looked behind and winced. Then they skidded sideways into another turnoff, the tires chirping as the engine was floored again. Then the spaceport was ahead of them, surrounded by high walls with occasional gates that were too sturdy to try and drive through. Blachart drove on along the outside until they got to the terminal complex. Its facade was all large plate glass windows and an artistic impression of roominess.

“Hold on!” Blachart warned. The sleek little car zipped through a gap between two taxis, ramped over the sidewalk and crashed through a window into the terminal. The car shuddered a little, the tires chirping on the smooth surface as he looked for a way to the other side. The cruisers followed them in, causing even more mayhem. Glass and aluminium framing went hurtling, pedestrians scattered, etc. They rode on, negotiating some clusters of rather heavy looking chairs. They flew through the wide arch that was the doorway onto the tarmac, the car bouncing as it landed. It was a fast ride across the tarmac. The engine, Mykl noticed, had a nice powerful note, thrusting them to freedom and safety. The line of black ships rushed toward them. Bullets cracked past them. Their enemies were on them again. Blachart was having a hard time shaking them. It was a train, a long black body of machines, with a red head, turning as he turned... Hang on, maybe he could use that to his advantage. He aimed the car under the nearest ship, roaring towards it. They heard the sudden roar of reflected sound as they passed under its belly. The driver of the first cruiser realized too late that his machine was too high to go under, and ducked just in time to avoid losing his head. The roof peeled off as the cruiser jammed under the ship, the second cruiser smashed into the back of that one. Number three swerved and got t-

boned by number four. Blachart, feeling inspired, laughed out loud as they sped away, leaving the chaos behind.

Mykl managed a smile. Casey still looked worried. It was far from over. They still had to find the ship. They weaved among the parked black ships, trying to evade their pursuers, who were regrouping.

“Anybody remember where we parked?” Hanson asked wryly.

“Right over there!” Said Blachart, pointing. “They’ve left the front door open!”

Mykl saw the Undertaker. The ramp was still extended. It was nearly the cut-off time already. Blachart steered for the ramp and floored it. The car surged up the ramp and nearly went airborne as it powered over the top into the hold. It was cavernous when empty. He jammed on the brakes and they skidded to a halt. Second Lt McKay, security marine, snapped to attention and though in Corsair disguise, gave Mykl a smart salute.

“Sir, Welcome aboard, sir!”

“*Stop playing at silly buggers and shut the doors, Lt!*” Mykl snapped. The man raced for the control panel in the bulkhead. Hanson, Casey and Blachart were already out. Hanson extended a hand to support him as he climbed out unsteadily. His head felt light, a strong

thumping headache already attacking him. The *clonging* noises indicated the doors were closing. The ramp was retracting.

"Get to the bridge!" He ordered Hanson. "Get us ready to launch."

"Aye, sir." Hanson replied, leaving Blachart to help Mykl stay on his feet. He was short of breath too.

"McKay." He called.

"Sir?"

"Anyone not back yet?"

"No, sir. You were the last. There's still fifteen minutes left, so –"

"Good job, Lt." He sighed, swaying a little. The doors slammed shut, the noise stopping abruptly.

"Doors and ramp secure, sir." McKay reported,

"Fine. Now help me get to the bridge."

The deck began vibrating very subtly as the main engines were fired up. It seemed to Mykl a long, painful journey to the bridge. Relief flooded over him as he was lowered into the command seat.

"Status?" He said tiredly.

"They're firing at us, sir." Hanson reported from the helm. Machine guns so far, all light stuff, but it won't be long before they bring up something bigger!"

“Damage?”

“Nothing yet, sir.”

“Right. Get us the hell off this toast rack, Hanson!”

“Aye, sir!”

There was a powerful hum rising. The vibrations rose through the deck into his pain wracked body. He needed to lie down. Sleep was too much to wish for, rest an unreachable dream... His head sagged.

“d’Angelo.” Blachart called at his side, then more gently “Mykl.”

He lifted his head to look at him. It seemed a surprising effort.

“We’ve still got to clear their warfleet. After that, the astorfield.”

Mykl nodded.

“It’s far from over.”

Nod, nod.

“Lifting off now, Captain.” Hanson reported as Undertaker lurched like an elevator under full power. The ship left the ground with conversion drive at full power, climbing to orbit. A trickle of blood began from the deteriorating field bandage and caught Blachart’s eye.

“Lieutenant.” He called to McKay. “Help me take your captain to sickbay.”

“Sir?” McKay asked, puzzled. Hanson glanced round.

“His wound’s bleeding again. He could die if your doctor doesn’t see to him quickly.”

“We didn’t bring a doctor.” Hanson replied. “All we have is a medic.”

“Belay that!” Mykl snapped. “Staying here. See it through. Men need me here...”

“He’s right, sir.” Said Hanson. “A dead captain won’t do us any good.”

“A medic will have to do then.” Blachart sighed. Mykl gazed thoughtfully at the globe on the viewscreen as they accelerated away from it. They were cold thoughts. Whatever that place got from the Empire, it had it coming.

“Come on, Mykl. Get to sick bay and live to tell the tale.” Blachart argued. “I can hold the fort.”

“No.” Mykl answered slowly, blinking.

“What’s the matter – still don’t trust me?”

“No!” Mykl snapped, irritated. Staying conscious and coherent was a battle. “No, that’s not it.”

“Then what? Stay here till you’re no use to anyone?”

Mykl shook off the urge to thump the man, if that were even possible.

“Fix my bandages.” He ordered. “Try stop the bleeding.”

The big ex-Corsair went to work on the wound. The Undertaker was heading back the way they'd come – to the astorfield. Between Meradinis and the asteroids lay a reasonable stretch of open space. Mykl grunted in pain as Blachart tightened a knot.

“Sorry.”

“Okay. Just get it over with.”

“Captain!” Casey called from the comms desk. “Message from Meradinis – they demand our surrender!”

“Tell them to go to hell!”

“*Yessir!*”

“Got a contact!” Hanson reported, “No call beacon, range fifteen thousand and closing!”

“A ship?”

“Affirmative. Large, warclass and armed. Heavily.”

“Sound battle stations. All weapons on standby.” He glanced at Blachart, who was just finishing a knot.

“?” Said the expression on his face.

“There.” Said Blachart. “All done.” He nodded in gratitude.

“Thanks.” He said, mentally squashing the sharp rhythmic thump in

his shoulder till it subsided. *This is where the shit hits the fan*, he thought.

“Coming up on our stern, sir! Range now twelve thousand.”

“Can you identify?”

“Unknown configuration, power-curve similar to ours.”

“Intensify stern shields.”

After that it was Casey’s turn again.

“Message from the ship, sir – ordering us to surrender!”

“Tell them to go f*** themselves – with compliments! – Helm, maximum possible sub-light speed for the astorfield!”

The Corsair ship’s reply was immediate.

“They’ve fired, sir! Three slamtorpedoes closing rapidly!”

“How are the shields?” He asked the dark angel at his side.

“They’ll handle a few slamtorpedoes.” He replied. The Undertaker gave a triple lurch as the missiles impacted on the shields. A distant rumbling noise made the ship vibrate around them as they absorbed the impact.

“Status!” Mykl barked.

“No damage, shields stable!”

“Can you give us a visual?”

“On screen, sir.” Hanson said, flicking a few switches. A dark shape appeared on an insert on the main screen. It showed the vessel behind them. It was clearly larger and more powerful than Undertaker. Its name was emblazoned across the square anvil shaped bows.

“*The Bloody Mary!*” Mykl breathed. “What a name!” The insert flashed off again.

“Firing again.” Hanson reported, “And I’m picking up a group of signals closing from behind them.”

“More ships?”

“- Seven more!”

“Eta to Astorfield?”

“Dead ahead, sir – one minute forty seconds!”

“Let’s not wait around, shall we?”

They approached the edge of the Astorfield, the Corsair in close pursuit. It seemed long seconds before the first rocks floated by at speed. Bright flashes indicated hits on some of the lumps of rock around them. Mild chaos reigned for a time as chunks of ‘roid bounced off Undertaker’s shields. Slowly but surely, the distance between hunted and hunter began to increase. The larger warships

could not maneuver as easily. Presently, they lost visual contact and the barrage stopped.

“Can’t see them, sir.” Hanson sighed, relieved.

“Don’t relax yet, Lt. They’re still there. They won’t give up so easily – their whole organization is at risk! And don’t forget the patrol ships!”

He sighed. They were almost in the clear. Once on the other side, they could go to warp. The firing had stopped at least, for now, but it was still far from over. An astorfield is a dangerous place to be. It could kill them all on its own, without any help from Corsairs. Undertaker eased through it, under Hanson’s expert hand, slowly navigating the Creator’s Rock Garden.

The captain of patrol ship three had just received news of the escape from Astral Command. The starscanner showed only the rocky debris of the astorfield. No sign of them anywhere. Patrol ship three continued its vigilant probe. Unknown to him, the Undertaker had passed his ship by less than twenty kilometers.

Finally, the last ‘roids dragged by as they broke into clear space. It would’ve been plain sailing - if it weren’t for the three Corsair ships waiting right outside for them. The lead ship fired at them on sight. Four torpedoes streaked at them. They were hijacked, bootlegged military hardware fired from jury-rigged Corsair built launchers, but they worked. Undertaker took the hits, bucking and lurching around

them. The second and third ships were swinging around in a pincer maneuver, firing.

"Evasive maneuvers!" Mykl snapped. But there was no time. The torpedoes were already on them. The problem with energy shields is feedback. When an explosion or some other force comes against the shield, it causes resistance. This causes the shield generator to work harder to maintain its integrity, placing strain on the system. Until such time as the bright sparks at Fleet Engineering developed a way to effectively channel this feedback, shields would continue to fail. As they were likely to soon. Undertaker shook, vibrated and lurched like a car on a very bad road. Blachart held onto the command chair to avoid being thrown across the bridge.

"Shields?" Mykl queried.

"Holding!" Hanson replied tersely, working the helm console. "But only just!"

Undertaker twisted and turned, trying to outmaneuver her pursuers. They were on her tight. More were emerging from the astorfield, turning to join the fray.

"How soon before we can go to warp?"

"Two minutes. Warp core hasn't reached operating temperature yet!"

“Work on it, Hanson – in the meantime-“ the ship lurched again, *“In the meantime, give that asshole a couple of torpedoes up his snout!”*

Hanson worked the weapons controls, auto loading the three torpedo launchers. *“Firing now, sir!”*

Their three torpedoes streaked at the lead ship and impacted on the shields. Another exchange rocked their boat.

“Shields failing, Captain!”

“Warp speed, Hanson?”

“One more minute!”

They were being surrounded, boxed in. The other Corsairs were joining the three in close pursuit, catching up quickly. They needed a chance at clear space to go to warp speed. Failure to keep a clear path would mean their deaths.

“Sir!” Hanson cried, “They’ve got a tractor beam on us! Force three!”

Mykl’s heart jumped. That was the end. *They couldn’t risk going to light speed while held in a tractor lock – the ship would be ripped apart!* Now they had to fight their way out. It was going to be a grim battle with a predictable outcome. All bad. *Perhaps they should’ve packed some of those chic little bags after all.* The Corsairs were using them for target practice, each ship taking a turn to fire at their

smaller prey. Undertaker rocked and bounced, taking punishment. Inevitably, sooner or later, something was going to happen. It did.

“Shields down!” Hanson shouted above the din. “Damage to engineering!”

Pandemonium reigned. The noise was deafening. Loose objects went rolling across the deck.

“Return fire! All weapons!” Mykl shouted. “Hit them back!”

“Hull breach, decks two and three! Deck one now, auto seal in progress!”

“Engines off-line!” Casey added, trying not to be tipped out of his seat by another bad ride. Then, the bridge seemed to disappear in a white frenzy. *Direct hit!* The thought hit him almost as hard as the hammer blow delivered to the crippled ship. The Corsairs clearly did not want prisoners. When the storm passed, he realized he was still alive. Half the instruments on the bridge were dead. It was much darker, that’s for sure – except for the fires that Hanson was trying to beat out with his tunic. Casey was lying on the floor, motionless. Mykl managed to remain in his seat. For whatever that was worth. The ship bucked again, and just as suddenly, the viewscreen came back to life. Through all the snow that was blowing across it, he could make out the bows of the Bloody Mary – about to deliver the coup de

grace'. So near and yet so far. Almost made it. Almost got away clear. *Almost...*

"What are you waiting for?" He cursed, "Get it over with! What're you waiting for?"

He resisted the urge to see his life flashing before his eyes. He'd seen enough reruns lately, after all. Then, suddenly, the Bloody Mary seemed to disappear behind a wall of flame. Dumb-struck, uncertain if it was a malfunction of the damaged viewscreen, it soon became obvious the enemy was on fire! Live and uncut. It was suddenly very quiet.

"Tractor's off." Hanson reported. "We're drifting free."

As they drifted, they began to take in the scene. All the Corsair ships were under fire, taking heavy hits. Starting to run and regroup at the same time. Little red streaks marked the passage of slamtorpedoes as they were hurtled at their targets. Aimed with military precision, the enemy ships were being cut apart. Presently, as they turned, they saw the origin of their reprieve – a large number of Imperial warships had turned up, as if by magic – and like a firing squad, were hurling a wall of destruction at them.

“It’s the cavalry!” Hanson grinned. “Boy, did they ever pull our bacon out of the fire!”

Mykl got to twenty five and then lost count. This must be the task force sent by Hobbsy, he thought. Enroute to Meradinis, but what were they doing here so soon? Surely they would’ve waited till they’d analyzed the data they’d collected? He was tired. Didn’t really mind, didn’t really care. He was just glad they came. He wondered if Antares was with them – and Ripley? *Funny*, he thought. *How good a sudden reprieve can make you feel.* *How alive.* He stood up, swayed unsteadily and grinned at Blachart, who almost reached him before he pitched over into blackness.

* * *

It seemed a long time before he came to, lying on a stretcher in Undertaker’s battered sick bay. The lights were bright, blinding, even from his position close to the floor. The wound on his shoulder had been reduced to a slightly pink patch of healing skin where the hole had been. He didn’t hurt too much – at least, as long as he didn’t try to move.

“*Lie still!*” Came a crisp feminine command. He winced, more from fright than from the pain it caused. Nurse Watts had her back to him, opening a fresh pack of bandages. He felt weak and shaky, but

blissfully calm. Must be the painkillers. Quite pleasant, actually. He worked up the strength to talk.

“So, doc.” He managed to quip, “Will I live?” He was quite unprepared for what followed – she turned on him.

“First of all, mister, I’m not a doctor – I’m a nurse, an overworked nurse – and as far as I can tell from the penetration wound in your shoulder – which I closed, you suffered serious blood loss, which I remedied with a transfusion. A long transfusion. So yes, you’ll live.”

He steeled himself against the pain and lifted his head to look around. Several injured crewmen lay on other stretchers. Another probably more serious case was on the table, under a blanket. No special treatment just for the captain. He liked that. He lifted his sheet. He was naked from the waist up.

“Give yourself a few weeks rest.” She went on. He could’ve sworn he heard her mutter, *‘And us as well.’*

Suddenly the events of the past few days came rushing back to him and he was overcome by an urge to know. What was happening? He *had* to know!

“What’s been going on?” He asked, “How long have I been here?”

“The answers to your questions, sir are: a) I don’t know and b) about three hours. Now please lie down before I have to sedate you.”

“Who’s in command? – Blachart?”

“Yes, we’re being towed back to Tremaine. Don’t worry, Captain – we’re out of danger.”

That he had to see for himself – especially with *him* in charge on the bridge - !

He started to fling the sheet off. “I’ve got to get to the bridge -”

She was suddenly at his side. Her dainty hand somehow flattened him back onto the stretcher. Too weak, must be the blood loss, he thought.

“Captain, are you going to rest willingly, or do I have to persuade you?” The infuser swung before his eyes, dangling from those pretty feminine fingers. There were still blood flecks on them. He would’ve shrugged if he had the strength. Not much choice, was there?

She left with a snort, shaking her head tiredly. About three hours later, he woke up again. This time he was strong enough to persuade the nurse to let him go. He scratched up some clean black clothes and made his slow unsteady way to the bridge. Only Hanson and Blachart were there. Nothing much seemed to be working. Blachart was in his command seat, perhaps for the last time. The display on the viewscreen showed the rear of an Imperial ship, several hundred meters ahead. Being towed, not much of a command, that.

“Status report!” He ordered, causing a stir. Hanson turned, like he just got a fright. Blachart looked at him, clearly taken aback.

“We’re being towed back to Tremaine.” He said. “Your fleet taskforce saved our tails, downloaded or intel and sent us back.”

“Who’s towing us?” Mykl asked, leaning against the door.

“The Lexington.” He replied, “- Are you supposed to be walking around?”

“According to the nurse, I’m supposed to get some exercise.” He lied.

“Let’s go for a walk.” Blachart gave him a doubtful look. “C’mon,” he smiled. “It’ll be good for you.”

Blachart shrugged, got up to join him. They walked pretty far. They ended up in the cargo bay.

“You did a good thing.” He said to him. “You kept your end of the deal. You’ll get your pardon.” Blachart nodded, said nothing. “So what’re you going to do now?”

“Take a holiday.” Smiled the ex-Corsair softly, sauntering up to the battered little red convertible, still where they left it. “Find a home, meet someone special, settle down. Live happily ever after.”

“Fairytale stuff, huh?”

“I think we deserve to have some fairy tales come true, don’t you?”

“Yeah.” He agreed, thinking about Ripley. “I reckon so.”

“The first thing I’m going to do though, is organize a name change.”

“What?” Mykl smiled. “No more Blachart? No more Walter Turlington?”

Blachart laughed. This was almost frightening to witness.

“Blachart the Corsair died on Meradinis today.” He said. “So did Walter Turlington. Always *hated* that name.”

“Was that really your name?” Mykl probed, not seriously expecting an answer. The man smiled.

“I’ll think one up.” He said in a way that suggested it wouldn’t be the first time. He went round the car, casually examining it. It looked fairly old. The paint still gleamed in places, as did some of the chrome. It was a sports car, that was plain from its lines. A good panel beater could still restore it. The few bullet holes wouldn’t need much to repair. Mykl didn’t remember much of his time in it, but he imagined Blachart had worked its case and no mistake. It had served them well.

“Mind if I keep it?” He asked.

“Sure.” He said, reading the nameplate on the rear bonnet. “Why not?”

“Sentimental reasons.” He explained, grinning. “It really f****s off!”

The badge was old and a little corroded, but it still conveyed a feeling of technical excellence that had somehow spanned the hundred or so years since the last one was made.

“Porsche.” He read, smiling. “Somehow you always seem to collect antiques.”

“Only the good things in life.” He said, reaching down to the front seat. He tossed Mykl the Uzi, smiling. He caught it, left-handed. “I think I’ll stick to cars now, instead of guns.”

“Good for you, man.” He smiled back tiredly. “Good for you.”

Pretty soon, he’d be with one of the good things in his life. Perhaps his relationship with Ripley was only temporary, but she was currently the best thing in his life. And it felt good to have someone to go home to for a change, even if home turned out to be just a starship in the depths of lonely space. Considering the way he felt, it would be really good to see her again. She was someone who would care in ways a doctor could not, she was what had kept him going – an anchor to hold on to in the storm of life. He knew they would be together soon and he could make it up to her. Somewhere on the

horizon lay Tremaine, Antares and Ripley Jones. He already knew what she was doing right now. She was waiting. For him.